Preface

Despite many years of dedicated effort, including basic, translational and clinical research, public education, and health care policy, lung cancer remains the number one cause of death by malignancy in the world, and it is responsible for as many deaths as colon, breast, pancreas and prostate cancers combined in the US. Thus, successful efforts to better understand and better treat lung cancer will have long lasting ramifications, for patient care specifically and for public health globally, as well.

This volume, Lung Cancer, is just such an effort. Comprised of contributions by the most accomplished scientists and clinicians internationally, Lung Cancer thoroughly examines the spectrum of topics related to better understanding and better treating the world’s most lethal malignancy. From the basic science of lung cancer to the most advanced therapeutic techniques, this text provides the reader—student or professional—with a most comprehensive analysis.

It is hoped that in the future the concepts of prevention (tobacco cessation) and screening will dramatically reduce the frequency and mortality of lung cancer. Until then, the efforts of the authors of this text are the best weapons against lung cancer.

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Lung Cancer
(FIRST EDITION)

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Introduction

The molecular basis of lung cancer is complex and heterogeneous. Improvements in our understanding of molecular alterations at multiple levels (genetic, epigenetic, protein expression) and their functional significance have the potential to impact lung cancer diagnosis, prognostication and treatment. Lung cancers develop through a multistep process involving development of multiple genetic and epigenetic alterations, particularly activation of growth promoting pathways and inhibition of tumour suppressor pathways. Greater understanding of the multiple biochemical pathways involved in the molecular pathogenesis of lung cancer is crucial to the development of treatment strategies that can target molecular aberrations and their downstream activated pathways (1). Specific molecular alterations that drive tumour growth and
provide targets for therapy have been best defined in adenocarcinomas (ADC) but there is increasing interest in the molecular landscape of squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) highlighting new potential therapeutic targets. In lung cancer as in other malignancies, tumourigenesis relates to activation of growth promoting proteins [e.g., v-Ki-ras2 Kirsten rat sarcoma viral oncogene homolog (KRAS), epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), BRAF, MEK-1, HER2, MET, ALK and rearranged during transfection (RET)] as well as inactivation of tumour suppressor genes [e.g., P53, phosphatase with tensin homology (PTEN), LKB-1] (1). Activation of growth promoting oncogenes can occur by gene amplification or other genetic alterations including point mutations and structural rearrangements leading to uncontrolled signalling through oncogenic pathways. “Oncogene addiction” results when cell survival depends on continued activation of the aberrant signalling (2,3) making them ideal candidates for targeted therapies. Oncogenic driver mutations have been identified in over 50% of lung ADC and are almost always exclusive of other driver mutations (4,5). Signalling pathways regulated by oncogenes and tumour suppressor genes are often interconnected with cross-talk between pathways involved in carcinogenesis. Added to the complexity is the occurrence of mutational evolution of tumours over time during the natural course of disease progression and in response to selection pressure exerted by therapy.

There is great genetic diversity in lung cancer and they harbour among the greatest numbers of genetic aberrations of all tumours (1). Understanding of the molecular biology of lung cancer has been revolutionised by next-generation sequencing technologies that provide a comprehensive means of identifying somatic alterations in entire cancer genomes or exomes. Lung cancers have highly complex genomes with a recent large-scale exome sequencing study of 31 non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) identifying 727 mutated genes not previously reported in the literature or in the COSMIC database (6). Genomic studies have confirmed previously well known alterations in lung cancer such as KRAS, EGFR and BRAF and have also identified low frequency but recurrent mutations that are novel in lung cancer (6-8) including potentially targetable alterations in JAK2, ERBB4 (8), RET (9-11), fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1) (12) and discoidin domain receptor 2 (DDR2) (13). While these studies provide a comprehensive portrait of genetic alterations in lung cancers, the challenge remains of identifying biologically relevant driver mutations from the vast majority of passenger mutations. The relative paucity of high frequency recurrent mutations highlights the heterogeneity and complexity of the molecular biology of lung cancer with common pathways affected by a range of different genetic alterations that poses a challenge for providing personalised medicine.

In this review, we discuss the most commonly altered and most clinically relevant oncogenes and tumour suppressor genes in lung cancer as improved understanding of the molecular pathology of lung cancer is crucial for advancements in treatment strategies.

**KRAS**

KRAS is part of the RAS family of proto-oncogenes (KRAS, NRAS and HRAS occurring in humans) and encodes a G-protein with a critical role in controlling signal transduction pathways which regulate cell proliferation, differentiation and survival (14). Ras proteins are guanosine diphosphate (GDP) bound and inactive in normal quiescent cells. There is a switch to the activated guanosine triphosphate (GTP) bound form following activation of upstream growth factor receptors. The activated Ras-GTP subsequently binds and activates a number of downstream pathways including mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK), RAS/RAF/MEK/MAPK pathway and the PI3-K [PI3K/AKT/mammalian target of rapamycin (mTOR)] pathways (15). KRAS plays a critical role in downstream signal transduction induced by a variety of growth factor receptors including EGFR and constitutive activation of the protein circumvents the need for growth factor mediated signalling. Activating mutations alter the GTPase activity of the protein hindering inactivation of the active RAS-GTP to GDP leading to increased signalling through multiple downstream growth promoting pathways (15). The RAS/RAF/MEK/MAPK signal transduction cascade plays a central role in many lung cancers with at least one mutation in the pathway identified in 132 of 188 tumours (7), of which the most common are mutations in KRAS.

Activating mutations in the KRAS oncogene are the commonest oncogenic alteration in lung ADC occurring in about 25-40% of cases (4,5,7,16-18) while HRAS and NRAS mutations are very rare (17). Differences in the prevalence of KRAS mutations in lung ADC most likely relate to different patient populations as KRAS mutations are more common in Western populations compared to Asian populations (19-22) and are more frequent in males and smokers (7,18,22). ADC in never smokers have been
reported to harbour \textit{KRAS} mutations in between 0-15\% of cases (16,23). In addition, \textit{KRAS} mutations are very rare or absent in SCCs and small cell cancer (17,24). Comprehensive genomic analysis of 188 SCCs identified only 1 \textit{KRAS} mutation in codon 61 (12). \textit{KRAS} mutations in lung adenocarcinoma consist of single amino acid substitutions in hotspots located mostly in codon 12 but also more rarely in codons 13 and 61 (14,17). The commonest mutations in \textit{KRAS} are G to T transversions (~84\%) in smokers while never smokers are more likely to harbour G to A transitions (16).

In keeping with the role of \textit{KRAS} alterations as driver mutations, they do not occur in association with \textit{EGFR} mutations (5,7,21,22), although rare exceptions do occur (18). A meta-analysis has shown \textit{KRAS} mutant tumours are resistant to \textit{EGFR} tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) (25), as \textit{KRAS} mutations lead to constitutive activation of pathways downstream of \textit{EGFR}. There is evidence that different \textit{KRAS} mutant proteins have differing clinical significance. Interestingly, using data from the BATTLE trial (prospective phase II Biomarker-integrated Approaches of Targeted Therapy for Lung cancer Elimination), either G12C or G12V mutant \textit{KRAS} predicted shorter progression free survival compared to other \textit{KRAS} mutations or wild type \textit{KRAS} (26). Furthermore, different amino acid substitutions were associated with activation of different pathways (PI3-K and MEK with Gly12Asp and Ral with Gly12Cys or mutant Gly12Val) resulting from divergent protein conformations from specific mutations leading to altered ability to associate with downstream protein mediators (26). This highlights that appropriate use of targeted therapies and clinical trial design needs to carefully evaluate the clinical and therapeutic significance of specific genetic alterations in lung cancer. The high frequency of \textit{KRAS} mutations in lung cancer makes it an ideal therapeutic target but unfortunately clinical trials of targeted agents have generally been disappointing.

\textbf{EGFR}

Alterations of \textit{EGFR} are involved in the pathogenesis of many tumours including NSCLC. \textit{EGFR} encodes a transmembrane tyrosine kinase with an extracellular ligand-binding domain and an intracellular component including a tyrosine kinase domain (27). Binding of the ligand epidermal growth factor leads to receptor homo or heterodimerisation with other members of the \textit{EGFR} family and activation of the tyrosine kinase domain (28,29). Signal transduction stimulated by \textit{EGFR} occurs through the PI3K/AKT/mTOR, RAS/Raf/MAPK and JAK/STAT signalling pathways (28-30). \textit{EGFR} is involved in regulation of numerous oncogenic functions such as cell proliferation, survival, differentiation, neovascularisation, invasion and metastasis (29,30). Activating mutations in \textit{EGFR} lead to constitutive tyrosine kinase activation (30,31) and oncogenic transformation of lung epithelial cells \textit{in vitro} (31). A transgenic mouse model with inducible expression of the commonest \textit{EGFR} mutations showed development of multiple lung ADC that were sensitive to small molecule inhibition (32). Other mechanisms of increased \textit{EGFR} signalling include increased protein expression or increased gene copy number (33,34).

Activating mutations of \textit{EGFR} have been reported in 10-15\% of unselected Western patients (5,21,35,36) and 30-40\% of Asian populations (19,37,38). Differences in the reported prevalence rates of various mutations may in part relate to different patient populations but also depends on the sensitivity of mutation analysis techniques utilised in different studies. In NSCLC, \textit{EGFR} mutations occur in the first four exons of the intracellular tyrosine kinase domain, most commonly exon 19 in frame deletions (~45\%), of which there are over 20 variants, the commonest being delE746-A750. The next commonest \textit{EGFR} mutations are missense mutations, particularly L858R, a single nucleotide point mutation in exon 21 leading to a single amino acid change from leucine to arginine at codon 858 (~40\%). However, we found in an Australian population that exon 18 activating mutations constituted 14\% of \textit{EGFR} mutations in patients with early stage lung cancer and L858R mutations comprised only 29\% of \textit{EGFR} mutations present in this cohort (5). There are also a range of less common mutations including in frame duplications or insertions in exon 20 (~5-10\%), of which there are many variants that are often associated with resistance to \textit{EGFR} TKIs (22,39).

In lung cancer, almost all \textit{EGFR} mutations occur in ADC (19,21,40,41) although they may also be seen in adenosquamous carcinomas. Mutations in \textit{EGFR} are more commonly but not exclusively found in patients who are female, younger and with no history of smoking (7,19,21,22,37,40). \textit{EGFR} mutations occur only very rarely, in histologically well sampled pure SCCs (24,42). However, comprehensive genomic analysis of 188 SCCs identified \textit{EGFR} mutations in 2 cases, both with L861G mutations (12). While \textit{EGFR} mutations are very rare in SCCs, variant-III mutations involving the extracellular domain of \textit{EGFR}, copy-number gains and protein overexpression are more common in SCCs than in ADCs (43).
Secondary mutations in EGFR develop or are clonally selected in patients that develop resistance to EGFR TKIs, the commonest being the T790M activating point mutation in exon 20 which substitutes a “bulkier” methionine for threonine (44) that interferes with binding of reversible TKIs. T790M is found in about 50% of tumours from patients who develop acquired TKI resistance (41,44). Intriguingly, we observed that exon 20 mutations including T790M mutations associated with therapeutic resistance to EGFR TKI were seen in 29% of patients with EGFR mutations in a therapy naïve cohort (5). Activation of downstream pathways that bypass EGFR inhibition can also contribute to EGFR-TKI resistance including activation of PI3K pathway through amplification of MET (45).

**BRAF**

BRAF encodes a serine/threonine protein kinase that is the downstream effector protein of KRAS and activates the MAPK signal transduction pathway involved in regulation of cell proliferation and survival (46). Upon activation, BRAF phosphorylates downstream mediators MEK1 and MEK2 which subsequently activate ERK1 and ERK2, involved in regulation of growth regulating proteins such as c-JUN and ELK1 (14). Activating mutations in BRAF lead to increased kinase activity that exhibit transforming activity in vitro (46).

While activating BRAF mutations are common in melanoma (46), they occur in only about 3% of NSCLC (18,46-50). The mutations in NSCLC differ to those in melanoma and colorectal carcinoma with a lower proportion of V600E mutations that affect the kinase domain of the protein. In lung ADC, V600E mutations in exon 15 account for up to about 50% of BRAF mutations followed by G469A in exon 11 and D594G in exon 15 (48,50). Some of the BRAF mutations in NSCLC occur in the kinase domain (such as V600E, D594G and L596R) while others occur in the G-loop of the activation domain of the gene (such as G465V and G468A) (46). As BRAF and KRAS genes are part of the signalling pathway mediated by EGFR, it is not surprising that mutations in these genes are almost always mutually exclusive, in keeping with a common downstream pathway to transformation. BRAF mutations in lung cancer occur almost always in ADC (48). Non-V600E BRAF mutations have been associated with current or former smokers while V600E mutations appear to be more common in female never smokers (48,50). While uncommon, BRAF mutations represent an important therapeutic target due to the availability of targeted therapies already in clinical use for melanoma although there is only limited data about the clinical response to this approach in NSCLC (51).

**MEK**

MEK1 (also known as MAPK1) is a serine-threonine kinase that has an important function as a downstream target of RAS activation. MEK1 activates MAPK2 and MAPK3 downstream of BRAF (14). Rare cases of somatic mutations of MEKI have been reported in NSCLC with 2 of 107 lung ADC found to have an activating mutation in exon 2 that did not involve the kinase domain (52). The mutations were exclusive of other driver mutations and were associated with gain of function in vitro (52).

**MET**

The proto-oncogene MET located on chromosome 7q21-q31 encodes a membrane tyrosine kinase receptor that is also known as hepatocyte growth factor receptor (53). Upon binding of its ligand hepatocyte growth factor, there is receptor homodimerisation, kinase activation and signalling through downstream pathways including RAS/RAF/MAPK, PI3K/AKT and c-SRC kinase pathways (53). In NSCLC, MET is altered by gene amplification in about 1-7% of treatment naive patients (54-57) but in one study amplification was found in 21% of patients (58). Increased MET copy number may be more common in SCC than ADC (57) and is mutually exclusive with KRAS mutations (56,58). MET amplification results in overexpression of MET protein and activation of downstream signal transduction pathways. The oncogenic activity of MET has been demonstrated in vitro with evidence of gene amplification associated with constitutive receptor phosphorylation, activation of the PI3K/AKT pathway and sensitivity to MET inhibition (45,59). Amplification of MET is a known mechanism of secondary EGFR-TKI resistance with this kinase switch occurring in approximately 20% of patients with acquired resistance (45,54,55). In this scenario, MET amplification drives and maintains the PI3K/AKT pathway bypassing EGFR blockade by TKIs (45), suggesting concomitant MET inhibition may be a means of overcoming TKI resistance. Mutations of MET also occur uncommonly in about 3-5% of ADC (7,56).

**HER2**

The human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 (HER2/
The PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway is an important signal transduction pathway involved in regulation of cell proliferation, survival, differentiation adhesion and motility (67,68). Alterations of this pathway have been implicated in both NSCLC and small cell carcinoma (69,70). The pathway is activated through activation of a variety of membrane tyrosine kinase receptors including EGFR, HER2, insulin-like growth factor receptor, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor and platelet derived growth factor receptor (71,72). Activated receptor tyrosine kinases recruit PI3K to the cell membrane where it phosphorylates PIP2 to PIP3 [phosphatidylinositol 4,5-bisphosphate (PIP2) to phosphatidylinositol 3,4,5-triphosphate]. PIP3 in turn recruits the serine threonine kinase AKT to the membrane where it is phosphorylated by 3-phosphoinositide-dependent kinase 1 (PI3 kinase) and mTOR. mTOR is a serine/threonine kinase that is a downstream target of AKT (72). Activated AKT in turn activates multiple targets including tuberous sclerosis 2 and Bcl-2 associated death promotor leasing to cell proliferation and survival [reviewed in (71)]. There is also interaction with other pathways including RAS/RAF/MEK (Rat sarcoma/rapidly accelerated fibrosarcoma/ MAPK or Erk kinase) with RAS having the capacity to directly activate PI3K (72).

The PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway is frequently deregulated in many tumours including 50-70% of NSCLC (7,71). Significant alterations involving the PI3K pathway were identified in 47% of SCCs in the Cancer Genome Atlas project (12). Pathway activation in lung carcinogenesis occurs through a variety of mechanisms including activating mutations in EGFR, KRAS, PI3K or AKT (68,71) as well as PIK3CA amplification, or loss of negative regulation by the tumour suppressor gene PTEN (72).

The PI3K protein family (phosphatidylinositol 3-kinases) are intracellular lipid kinases and the main catalytic subunit, the p110alpha isoform, is encoded by the PIK3CA gene (71). Activating mutations and amplification of PIK3CA cause constitutive ligand-independent pathway activation (73,74). PIK3CA mutations mostly involve the catalytic domain and have been identified in approximately 1-3% of NSCLCs (7,73,75) and are more common in SCC than ADCs (4,75). Unlike most oncogenic driver mutations, PIK3CA mutations may occur in association with EGFR or KRAS mutations (5,73,75) suggesting they may not represent true driver mutations. However, in vitro studies of lung cancer cell lines with PIK3CA mutations or copy number gains show increased PI3 kinase activity sensitive to small molecule inhibition (73) and in vivo mouse models with PIK3CA mutation expression develop numerous ADC, suggesting oncogenic activity (74). PIK3CA may also be amplified in NSCLC, especially in SCCs (73,76) and increased copy number of PIK3CA has been reported in ~5% of small cell carcinoma cell lines (73). Although rare, PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway activation can also occur through AKT mutations which have been reported in 0.5-2% of NSCLC (5,7,77), particularly SCCs (77).

**ALK**

Rearrangements of the receptor tyrosine kinase ALK resulting most commonly in fusions of the intracellular kinase domain with the amino terminal end of echinoderm microtubule associated protein-like 4 (EML4) occur in a subset of lung cancers (78-80). The rearrangement results from a short inversion in chromosome 2p, whereby in the commonest variant, intron 13 of EML4 is fused to intron 19 of ALK (ALK [inv (2) (p21; p23)]) (79). Numerous variants of EML4-ALK fusions have been identified due to differing lengths of EML4, the commonest being exons 1-13 of EML4 joining to exons 20-29 of ALK (78,81,82).
More recently, different partner genes have been identified in a small subset of ALK rearrangements (<1% of cases) including KIF5B (kinesin family member 5b), TFG (TRK fused gene) and KLC-1 (kinesin light chain1) (83,84). The oncogenic EML4-ALK fusion protein has a constitutively activated kinase and has gain of function activity in vitro (80) and in vivo mouse models expressing EML4-ALK develop multiple lung ADC that are susceptible to pharmacologic ALK inhibition (85). Activation of ALK is linked to cell proliferation and inhibition of apoptosis mediated through the RAS/RAF/MAPK, PI3K/AKT and JAK3-STAT3 signalling pathways (82).

ALK rearrangements have been identified in approximately 4% of unselected NSCLC (86) although some studies have found a slightly lower prevalence (5,87). They are more commonly found in ADC from younger patients who are never smokers or light smokers (78,87-91) and almost always occur in ADCs (90). While ALK rearrangements are usually mutually exclusive with EGFR and KRAS mutations (5,87,91,92) cases of coexistent EGFR mutations have been reported and provide a mechanism for TKI resistance (85). Interestingly, mutations have been reported and provide a mechanism for TKI resistance (85).

ROS1

ROS1 is a proto-oncogene located on chromosome 6q22 which encodes a transmembrane tyrosine kinase receptor that has high homology with ALK in its protein kinase domain (96). ROS1 activation leads to signalling through the PI3K/AKT/mTOR, STAT3 and RAS/MAPK/ERK pathways (96). In 2007, a large scale phosphoproteomic screen for tyrosine kinase activity in lung cancer identified ROS1 fusion in a NSCLC cell line (1 of 41) and a patient sample (1 of 150) (SLC34A2-ROS1 and CD74-ROS1 respectively) (83). Subsequently, a novel KDEL2-ROS1 in-frame fusion was identified in an adenocarcinoma from a non-smoker using whole genome and transcriptome sequencing (8). In 2 large studies using FISH, ROS1 rearrangements were found in 18 of 694 ADCs (2.6%) (97) and 13 of 1,116 ADCs (1.2%) (98). A variety of 5’ fusion partners have been identified in ROS1 gene rearrangements (including FIG, KDEL2, TPM3, SDC4, LRG3, EZR, SLC34A2 and CD74) and it is uncertain what role, if any, the partner plays in the oncogenic function of the fusion kinase (8,83,98). Interestingly, ROS1 rearrangements appear to be more common in patients who are younger, never smokers or of Asian ethnicity (97) similar to ALK rearrangements (90). Furthermore, there is in vitro and early clinical evidence that lung cancers with ROS1 rearrangements are sensitive to kinase inhibitors including the ALK/MET inhibitor crizotinib (97).

RET

RET is located on chromosome 10q11.2 and encodes a receptor tyrosine kinase involved in neural crest development. Alterations of RET have long been known to play a role in papillary and medullary thyroid carcinoma (99) but it was not until recently that activation of RET through chromosomal rearrangement has been identified in a small proportion of lung cancers (9-11). The translocation fuses the functional RET kinase domain from exons 12-20 to KIF5B (kinesin family 5B gene), that is 10Mb from RET on chromosome 10 and encodes a coiled coil domain involved in organelle trafficking (9,10). KIF5B-RET fusions have been identified in 1-2% of lung ADC using massively parallel sequencing technologies (10,11) and to date have been found to be mutually exclusive of other driver mutations involving EGFR, KRAS or ALK. In a highly selected cohort of lung ADC from never smokers or light smokers known to be wild type for other driver mutations (EGFR, KRAS, ALK, HER2, BRAF and ROS1), 10 of 159 (6.3%) harboured RET rearrangements (11). Similar to ALK and ROS1, rearrangements of RET also appear to be associated with ADC from never smokers (9-11). Importantly, there are several multi-kinase inhibitors that are effective against RET and there is in vitro evidence that cell lines expressing KIF5B-RET fusions are sensitive to RET inhibition (10,11).

FGFR1

Somatic gene amplifications have been found in SCCs in a number of genes including SOX, PDGFRα (12) and FGFR1 (12,100). FGFR1 is a membrane receptor tyrosine kinase that regulates cell proliferation through activation of the MAPK and PI3K pathways (101). Amplification of FGFR1 has an oncogenic effect on NSCLC cell lines in vitro that is sensitive to small molecule inhibition (102). About 20% of SCCs have been shown to harbour FGFR1 amplifications but the abnormality is uncommon in ADCs (100,102).
**DDR2**

Recently, a sequencing screen including the entire tyrosine kinome was undertaken in SCCs and mutations were identified in DDR2 in 3.8% of cases (13). DDR2 encodes a membrane-bound receptor tyrosine kinase that binds collagen and is involved in regulation of cell proliferation and survival (103). Mutations of DDR2 are associated with oncogenic activity in vitro that is sensitive to inhibition with dasatinib (13).

**Tumour suppressor genes**

Tumour suppressor genes are crucial negative regulators of normal cell growth. Loss of tumour suppressor gene (TSG) function is an important mechanism of carcinogenesis and requires inactivation of both gene alleles, as outlined in Knudson’s two hit hypothesis (104). In one allele, the individual gene is often inactivated by mutation, epigenetic silencing or other aberrations, while the second allele is often inactivated through loss of heterozygosity (LOH) whereby a region of the chromosome is lost by deletion, nonreciprocal translocation or mitotic recombination. In lung cancer, TSGs that are frequently inactivated include TP53, retinoblastoma 1 (RB1), serine-threonine kinase 11 (STK11), CDKN2A, FHIT, RASSF1A and PTEN (1,7,105) and these genes map to chromosomal regions commonly identified in LOH studies. For example, regions frequently exhibiting allelic loss in lung cancer involve known TSGs such as TP53 (17p13), RB (13q12), p16 (9p21), and PTEN (10q22) (105). In a study by Ding et al. (7), mutations were identified in several TSGs not previously known to play a significant role in lung adenocarcinoma including the TSG NF1 (involved in neurofibromatosis type 1), that was mutated in 13 tumours and the TP53 regulator ATM in 13 patients.

**TP53**

TP53 located on chromosome 17p13 encodes a nuclear phosphoprotein of 53 kDa that identifies and binds to regions of damaged DNA (106) and acts as a transcription factor controlling the expression of a multitude of different genes. Damaged DNA or carcinogenic stress induces TP53 leading to cell cycle arrest by inducing expression of cyclin dependent kinase inhibitors to enable DNA repair or apoptosis. TP53 inactivation is one of the most significant genetic abnormalities in lung cancer with hemizygous deletion of 17p13, containing the locus of TP53, occurring in 90% of small cell carcinomas and about 65% of NSCLC (107). Inactivating mutations in TP53 (mostly missense mutations within the DNA-binding domain) have been reported in 80-100% of small cell lung carcinomas (108). By contrast, a meta-analysis of TP53 in over 4,000 NSCLC found alterations by mutation or protein accumulation in only 46.8% of cases (109), more commonly in SCC than ADC and associated with higher tumour stage, grade and male gender. Mutations of TP53 were found in at least 81% of SCCs that underwent comprehensive genomic analysis as part of The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) project (12). Ding et al. (7) found TP53 mutations in 85 of 188 ADC (45%). In NSCLC, TP53 mutations are associated with a positive smoking history or exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (19,110). The mutational spectrum of different types of TP53 mutations also differs between smokers and non-smokers with smoking related cancers having a significantly higher frequency of G to T transversions compared to G to C transversions (thought to be induced by polycyclin aromatic hydrocarbons in tobacco smoke) and G to A transitions at CpG dinucleotides more commonly seen in never smokers (110,111). A meta-analysis of 74 studies showed that aberrant p53 detected by protein expression or mutational analysis is an unfavourable prognostic factor in lung NSCLC (112). Genetic alterations of TP53 have also been associated with treatment resistance (106). TP53 gene mutations can occur in association with EGFR and KRAS mutations (19).

**PTEN**

PTEN encodes a lipid and protein phosphatase on chromosome 10 that inhibits the PI3K/AKT/mTOR signalling pathway by dephosphorylating PI-(3,4,5)-triphosphate (68). Inactivation of the TSG function of PTEN leads to unrestricted activation of AKT/protein kinase B independent of ligand binding (68). Mutations of PTEN occur only rarely in about 5% of NSCLC (113) being more common in SCC than ADC (10.2% vs. 1.7%) and associated with a history of smoking. By contrast, reduced protein expression has been reported in about 75% of NSCLC (114).

**LKB1 (STK11)**

LKB1 (also known as STK11) is a TSG located on chromosome 19p13 that encodes a serine-threonine kinase
that inhibits mTOR and has been implicated in a range of biological processes including regulation of the cell cycle, chromatin remodelling, cell polarity, and energy metabolism (115,116). Deregulation of mTOR pathway components (not including KRAS mutations) has been reported in 30% of ADCs (7). Germline mutations of LKB1/STK11 occur in patients with Peutz-Jeghers syndrome (115). In lung cancer, LKB1 may be inhibited by a variety of somatic mutations or deletions that produce truncated proteins with inactivation of LKB1 occurring in about 11-30% of lung ADC (7,117-119), making it the third commonest genetic aberration in lung ADC after TP53 and KRAS. LKB1 inactivation is more common in lung ADC compared to SCCs (117,119). There is some evidence of an association between LKB1 mutations and a history of smoking (117) in men (118,120) and a correlation with KRAS mutations has also been reported (117,118).

**The p16INK4a-cyclin D1-CDK4-RB pathway**

The p16\(^{INK4a}\)/RB pathway regulates cell cycle progression from G1 to S phase. RB1 is a tumour suppressor gene that encodes RB protein which regulates cell cycle G1/S transition by binding the transcription factor E2F1. RB1 was the first TSG described in lung cancer (121) and is inactivated in about 90% of small cell lung carcinomas but only about 10-15% of NSCLC (1). In NSCLC, the pathway is mostly switched off through alterations of cyclin D1, CDK4 and the cyclin dependent kinase inhibitor p16 (CDKN2A) (105). p16\(^{INK4a}\) inhibits cyclin D1 dependent phosphorylation of RB protein, thereby preventing cell cycle transition through the G1/S checkpoint (122). p16\(^{INK4a}\) is inactivated in about 80% of NSCLC (123,124) and was altered in 72% of lung SCCs examined by TCGA, mostly through homozygous deletion, methylation or inactivating mutations (12). In addition, there is overexpression of cyclin D1 through gene amplification or other mechanisms in about 40% of NSCLC (123).

**Molecular targeting in NSCLC**

The presence of these molecular targets as described above now defines the characteristics of NSCLC, with *EGFR* mutation and *ALK* rearrangements being the most clinically relevant at present (125). The prevalence of these mutations varies in lung cancer arising from patient in different regions (126). Activating *EGFR* mutations were found in up to 20% of Caucasians while in the Asian populations these *EGFR* mutations can be present in up to 40% of patients with NSCLC (127). These ethnic difference in NSCLC properties appears to be not limited to the presence of activating *EGFR* mutations but is also evident in other driver oncogenic mutation profiles (including *ALK, KRAS, MET* etc.), histology and hence tumour response to targeted therapy treatment (63,126,128). The presence of these driver mutations is generally found to be mutually exclusive to others in the same tumour (126). In lung ADC among Asians, *ALK* rearrangement is seen in up to 7% of patients with lung ADC (79). Lung tumours bearing *EML4-ALK* rearrangement are non-responsive to conventional chemotherapy or EGFR-tyrosine kinase inhibitors but are sensitive to a specific tyrosine kinase inhibitor named crizotinib (129). Based on our current understanding of therapeutic molecular targets of *EGFR* mutation and *ALK* gene rearrangement in NSCLC and the availability of corresponding targeted agents, an algorithm of testing for molecular targets in NSCLC is proposed as in Figure 1, which represents a stepwise approach to testing for individual targets, beginning with *EGFR* then, if negative, *ALK* fusion gene or other potential targets if appropriate.

Among NSCLC, adenocarcinoma accounts for up to 80% of histological subtypes (130). There are previous reports of correlations between histological subtypes of ADC demonstrating micropapillary features with presence of activating *EGFR* mutations, leading to the suggestions that the presence of specific mutations in NSCLC actually represent heterogeneity in cancer biology and also response to therapy (131). Given the heterogeneity of lung cancer histology, however, histological subtypes are difficult to be used as the sole reliable marker for guidance to molecular phenotyping and selection of targeted therapy (132,133).

Targeting therapeutic oncogenic mutations like *EGFR* and *ALK* can give dramatic initial treatment response or at least an initial stable clinical disease. The response rate is up to 70% in lung ADC bearing favourable activating *EGFR* mutations (134). The median progression free survival is usually quoted as 9-11 months with different tyrosine kinase inhibitors (135,136), after which most patients with *EGFR* mutations will experience disease progression and drug resistance. A proportion of such drug resistance is attributed to the development of a second mutation, usually T790M at exon 20 (137). It is hard to explain the eventual loss of drug sensitivity in tumours bearing those favourable *EGFR* mutations (exon
Biomarker-based personalized therapy for lung cancer

19 deletions and L858R) even without the acquisition of secondary mutations like T790M or the presence of other uncommon or less favourable EGFR mutations. This could reflect suboptimal therapeutic targeting and better understanding on the biology of EGFR-related tumour signalling and other oncogenic mutations will improve drug targeting and give patients better prediction of therapeutic response and prognostication.

Conclusions

The identification of driver mutations in EGFR and ALK heralded a new era of targeted therapy in lung adenocarcinoma and advanced sequencing technologies are providing even more sophisticated insights into the molecular aberrations in oncogenes and tumour suppressor genes underlying lung cancer (12,138-142). These studies have identified a range of potentially targetable genetic aberrations in lung cancer but have also highlighted a troubling complexity and heterogeneity which poses significant challenges for molecular diagnosis and targeted treatment. Greater knowledge of the molecular biology and genomic landscape of lung cancer offers promise for the future. Improvements in outcome from lung cancer will almost certainly require the identification of increasing numbers of ever rarer driver mutations, and diagnostic approaches that can identify multiple therapeutic targets offer significant advantages. However, the identification of driver genomic aberrations also requires the parallel development of effective targeted therapies and for many of these changes (such as KRAS) such therapies are not yet available. Resistance to targeted therapeutics is an increasingly recognised issue into which genomic analyses may provide important mechanistic insights underlying future rational therapeutic approaches.

Acknowledgements

Funding sources: Sydney Foundation for Medical Research; Hong Kong SK Yee Medical Foundation; Cancer Institute
NSW Clinical Research Fellowship 10/1/07; Sydney Breast Cancer Foundation; Lifehouse at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital Grant; Lung Cancer SPORE P50CA70907.

Disclosure: WC has received honoraria from Pfizer Oncology. SOT is a member of the Roche Australia Molecular Pathology Advisory Board. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest.

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Introduction

Lung cancer remains one of the leading causes of cancer mortality worldwide (1). In Australia in 2009, cancer accounted for 29.8% of all deaths, second only to diseases of the circulatory system, with malignancies of the trachea, bronchus and lungs being the leading cause of cancer related deaths in males (20.1%) and surpassing breast cancer in females (16.5%) (2). Currently, surgical resection with curative intent is the primary treatment for lung cancer, however the vast majority of patients present at an advanced disease stage where medical therapy is the only therapeutic option available. The prognosis for patients diagnosed with lung cancer is poor, with overall five year survival remaining below 15% (3-7). This is partly attributable to relatively ineffective methods for early detection and lack of curative treatment for advanced disease.

However, the last decade has seen rapid development of advanced molecular biology techniques for the study of lung and other cancers, and our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of tumour biology has increased exponentially. It is well established that lung cancer is the result of multiple complex combinations of morphological, molecular and genetic alterations, ultimately leading to a malignant mass of cells bearing the phenotypic ‘hallmarks’ of cancer (8). Accumulation of multiple molecular transformations ultimately results in an imbalance between tumour suppressor genes (TSG) and tumour promoting oncogenes, providing a cell with the potential to become malignant (9). In particular, the acquisition of somatic mutations in critical oncogenes has emerged as potential ‘driver’ events in lung carcinogenesis, and has led to the concept of ‘oncogene addiction’ (10,11). Identification and characterization of such ‘driver’ events has contributed to
the development of targeted therapies specific to particular subtypes of lung cancer. Improved patient outcomes as a result of these advances requires multidisciplinary planning of diagnosis and treatment and has significantly expanded the role of the surgical pathologist who must not only confirm the diagnosis of malignancy, but also accurately subtype the tumour based on its histology and molecular profile. As the majority of lung cancer is diagnosed on small biopsies or cytology specimens, often obtained by increasingly sophisticated diagnostic procedures, the pathologist must obtain maximal diagnostic yield from these small and valuable tissue samples.

This review will present an overview of recent developments in the histological classification of lung cancer, and address the challenges facing the surgical pathologist in the era of personalized treatment for lung cancer.

**Classification of lung cancer**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classification applies to surgically resected malignant tumours of the lung and pleura (12). Primary carcinomas of the lung are traditionally classified as either small cell lung cancer (SCLC) or non small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). NSCLC constitutes approximately 80% of all primary lung cancers with adenocarcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and large cell carcinoma constituting the major histological types (13,14). The recent revision of the lung adenocarcinoma classification by IASLC/ATS/ERS reflects not only histology, but also pathogenesis (preneoplasia) and clinical behaviour, and refines the classification for application to lung cancer diagnosis in small biopsies and cytology specimens.

**Preneoplasia**

The development and progression of preneoplastic lesions of the lung continue to generate research interest not only to develop methods for early detection but also to increase our understanding of tumour biology. It is well known that lung cancer is the result of multiple complex combinations of morphological, molecular and genetic alterations. Co-localisation of genetic changes within morphologically abnormal epithelial regions has been convincingly demonstrated and there is evidence that a series of key genetic alterations results in progression through increasingly abnormal morphology, eventually leading to invasive lung carcinoma (15-20).

Pulmonary SCC, which typically arises from the bronchial epithelium of the larger, more central airways, progresses through a series of preinvasive neoplastic lesions, from squamous metaplasia, to squamous dysplasia (mild, moderate and severe) and finally carcinoma in situ (CIS) (12,21) (Figure 1A-C). Multiple molecular alterations contribute to this multistage progression, including loss of heterozygosity at 3p21 (an early event), 9p21, 8p22-24, 5q22 and 17p, deregulation of telomerase activity, p53 mutation and deregulation of cell proliferation (cyclin D1 and E) and apoptosis (Bcl-2) (reviewed by Wistuba and Gazdar 2006; Lantuejoul et al. 2009) (22,23).

Conversely, lung adenocarcinomas are predominantly more peripheral tumours, thought to arise from the alveolar or bronchiolar epithelium (pneumocytes or Clara cells) (22). The new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification recognises preinvasive adenocarcinoma lesions to include atypical adenomatous hyperplasia (AAH) and adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS) (21) (Figure 2). The molecular alterations in these lesions are not as well characterised as their counterparts in squamous carcinogenesis, but it is thought that non-smokers progress through alterations in epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) signalling whilst smokers progress through alterations in v-Ki-ras2 Kirsten Rat Sarcoma viral oncogene (KRAS) signalling pathways (reviewed by Wistuba and Gazdar 2006) (22). Reflecting
the fact that AIS is a preinvasive lesion, complete resection results in 100% 5-year survival (24-30).

For other tumours of the lung, the preneoplastic processes leading to the development of an invasive tumour are not well defined. Diffuse idiopathic pulmonary neuroendocrine cell hyperplasia (DIPNECH) is thought to be a precursor lesion for carcinoid tumours (12,21,22,31). This is a rare lesion of the distal airways characterised histologically by generalised proliferation of neuroendocrine cells as single cells, small nodules or linear proliferations, either confined to the luminal epithelium or forming extraluminal tumorlets and may be associated with fibrosis (12,22). A definite preneoplastic lesion has not been identified for other neuroendocrine tumours of the lung. However, it has been shown that bronchial epithelium adjacent to SCLC demonstrates genetic alterations, even if morphologically normal (22,32). Therefore it has been proposed that SCLC bypasses the traditional multistage preneoplastic sequence and arises directly from epithelium that demonstrates none or only minimal atypia (22,32).

Why subtype non-small cell lung cancer?

Specific subtypes of NSCLC display varying responses to different chemotherapeutic agents. Key oncogenic ‘driver’ events in lung adenocarcinomas include mutually exclusive activating mutations of KRAS and EGFR (33). The discovery of activating mutations in EGFR (exons 18-21) led to subsequent development of EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (EGFR-TKIs), such as gefitinib and erlotinib, revolutionizing the management of patients whose tumours harbor these mutations (33-36). Of note, KRAS mutations occur almost exclusively in smokers with adenocarcinoma histology, whilst EGFR mutations are associated with never smoking, adenocarcinoma histology, female gender, and Asian ethnicity, with smoking status possibly the strongest clinical predictor of response to EGFR-TKIs (37-40). This is largely a reflection of the major clinicopathological and molecular differences in lung tumours arising in never smokers compared to smokers, supporting the current theory that they are unique diseases (reviewed by Sun et al., 2007) (40).

A proportion of lung adenocarcinomas show translocations involving the ALK gene (encoding a tyrosine kinase) and a number of partners (most often EML4), resulting in overexpression of the oncogenic ALK protein (41-44). EGFR-TKIs (gefitinib and erlotinib) and ALK-TKIs (crizotinib) are now recommended as first line therapy for patients with EGFR mutations and ALK translocations respectively (45). The IASLC in conjunction with the College of American Pathologists (CAP) and Association for Molecular Pathology (AMP) have published guidelines for EGFR mutation and ALK translocation testing, recommending that all lung adenocarcinomas, regardless of clinical characteristics, undergo validation molecular testing for EGFR mutation and ALK translocation (46). Other potential driver ‘events’ in NSCLC include mutations in KRAS, BRAF, HER2 and FGFR1 (33,47-52). Targeted inhibitors of many of these genes are in various stages of clinical development and may become available in the future as targeted therapies for which additional molecular testing will be required in the diagnostic workup of NSCLC patients.

Not only can molecular biomarkers be used to identify patients that are most likely to benefit from specific targeted molecular therapy, but they can also assist in predicting response to therapeutic agents. Initial studies have shown that levels of thymidylate synthase (TS), the principal enzymatic target of pemetrexed, are high in SCLC and SCC but low in adenocarcinoma (53-55). The observed reduced efficacy of pemetrexed in SCLC and lung SCC compared to adenocarcinoma in clinical trials is likely to be the result of the higher levels of TS (56) and thus it has been suggested...
that levels of TS expression may be useful as a predictor of response to pemetrexed (55). Similarly, preliminary studies have indicated that ERCC1 protein expression may be a useful biomarker of clinical response to platinum-based chemotherapy (57,58). Despite their potential to assist in personalised targeted therapy for lung cancer patients, the majority of these biomarkers are still at an early stage of development.

Tumour histology of itself may predict response to therapy. Treatment with the vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) inhibitor, bevacizumab, has been reported to precipitate life-threatening pulmonary haemorrhage in patients with SCC (59). This has resulted in exclusion of patients whose tumours show squamous differentiation from being treated with this drug or with pemetrexed.

**Squamous cell carcinoma**

In recent decades the proportion of NSCLC represented by SCC has declined, with current reports estimating that it accounts for approximately 33% worldwide (13). This change is thought to be partly attributable to changes in smoking behaviours. Classically, SCC is a central lung tumour (Figure 3A), however, a significant proportion is identified in the periphery (30). The characteristic morphological features of squamous differentiation include intercellular bridges, individual cell keratinisation and squamous pearl formation (14) (Figure 3B-D). The current WHO classification includes papillary, clear cell, small cell and basaloid subtypes of SCC (12). Apart from basaloid SCC, these subtypes are descriptive only with no proven clinical or prognostic utility.

Several publications have suggested alternate approaches to the subclassification of SCC. Maeshima et al. [2006] found that tumours showing single cell infiltration had worse prognosis than those with large (>6 cells) or small (2-5 cells) invasive tumour cell nests (60). A recent review by Travis [2011] proposed abolition of the small cell descriptor because of confusion with true SCLC, and noted overlap of the small cell variant with the basaloid variant (61). Future subclassification of SCC will require meaningful clinicopathological collaboration to establish relevant predictors of treatment response and prognosis.

**Adenocarcinoma**

Adenocarcinoma now represents the dominant histological subtype of all lung cancers, and in particular is the most
common lung tumour in non-smokers, females and Asian patients (62,63). They predominantly arise peripherally (Figure 4A) and are histologically characterised by the presence of glandular differentiation and/or mucin production (12,21). In 2011, the collaborative efforts of the IASLC/ATS/ERS proposed a new subclassification for surgically resected lung adenocarcinoma (21). Of note, the confusing term, bronchioloalveolar carcinoma (BAC), is discarded. The classification introduces the terms AIS (previously BAC) and minimally invasive adenocarcinoma (MIA), both having 5-year survival rates approaching 100% if completely resected (24-30). MIA is defined as a lepidic predominant tumour of less than 3 cm diameter with 5 mm or less of an invasive component (21). Histologically these lesions can be non-mucinous or rarely mucinous and have characteristic radiological appearances (21).

For surgically resected invasive adenocarcinoma, the new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification introduces some important changes reflecting the heterogeneous nature of these tumours. Because the great majority displays mixed histological patterns, it is recommended that the predominant pattern (lepidic, acinar, papillary, micropapillary or solid—see Figure 4B-F) be recorded, with all other subpatterns listed in the pathology report with estimated percentages in 5% increments (21) (Figure 4G). The micropapillary pattern is included for the first time due to multiple studies reporting an association with poor prognosis in early stage lung adenocarcinoma (21,61,64-66). Clear cell and signet ring are no longer included as histological subtypes of adenocarcinoma, but instead are considered as cytological variants seen in many subtypes of lung cancer; their presence may still be reported (21,61). This algorithm for reporting of lung adenocarcinoma allows for inclusion of small components that may hold prognostic implications (e.g., micropapillary) and may lead toward architectural grading of lung adenocarcinoma (21,61,67).

The IASLC/ATS/ERS classification recognises four adenocarcinoma variants: invasive mucinous (formerly mucinous BAC), colloid, fetal (low or high grade) and enteric (21). Invasive mucinous adenocarcinomas have been classified as an adenocarcinoma variant, distinct from non-mucinous adenocarcinomas, due to the strong association of these tumours with KRAS mutations, lack of expression of TTF-1 and frequent multicentricity (21,61). Like their non-mucinous counterparts, mucinous adenocarcinomas can display varying amounts of lepidic, acinar, papillary or micropapillary architectural patterns with abundant mucin production (21,61).

Initial findings from a handful of studies employing the new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification indicate that the proposed histological subtypes may assist in the stratification and identification of patients at risk of poor clinical outcomes. As discussed previously, AIS and MIA have been associated with excellent prognosis (24-30,64,68-70). Intermediate prognosis is associated with the histological subtypes where papillary and acinar patterns predominate, whilst invasive mucinous or colloid variants or presence of predominant solid or micropapillary growth has been associated with poor prognosis (64,68,69).

**Large cell carcinoma**

LCC represents approximately 3% of all lung cancers (71-73) and is essentially a diagnosis of exclusion, where the
Lung cancer

Figure 5 Large cell carcinoma is often large and partially necrotic (A) and comprises patternless sheets of large polygonal cells showing no obvious evidence of histological differentiation (B).

tumour demonstrates no morphological features diagnostic of adenocarcinoma, SCC or SCLC (12,61). These tend to be large, partially necrotic tumours (Figure 5A) composed of sheets and nests of large polygonal cells with vesicular nuclei and prominent nucleoli (12) (Figure 5B). Although the current WHO classification is based purely on histological appearance, many of these undifferentiated tumours actually show evidence of glandular, squamous or NED when their ultrastructural (electron microscopy), immunophenotypic (IHC) or molecular features are examined (61). A recent review by Travis [2011] suggests that the diagnostic criteria for LCC should remain unchanged, but that pathology reports should comment if the tumour demonstrates evidence of squamous or adenocarcinomatous differentiation with modalities other routine histology (61).

Since LCC is a diagnosis of exclusion, it can only be made on surgical resection specimens as histological assessment of the entire tumour is required to exclude focal differentiation. Therefore, a diagnosis of LCC cannot be made on small biopsies or cytology specimens, and in accordance with the new IASLC/ATS/ERS recommendations, these cases should be classified as NSCLC, not otherwise specified (discussed below) (21,61). Subtypes of LCC recognised by the 2004 WHO classification include large cell neuroendocrine carcinoma (LCNEC), basaloid carcinoma, lymphoepithelioma-like carcinoma, clear cell carcinoma and LCC with rhabdoid phenotype (12). LCNEC is discussed in further detail below.

Neuroendocrine tumours

Neuroendocrine tumours represent approximately 20-25% of all lung cancers (74,75) and form a subset of tumours with common morphological, molecular, immunohistochemical (IHC) and ultrastructural features that distinguish them from other lung tumours (12). The 2004 WHO classification separates neuroendocrine tumours of the lung into four categories: SCLC, LCNEC, typical carcinoid (TC) and atypical carcinoid (AC) tumours (12). Histologically, these tumours demonstrate varying degrees of neuroendocrine morphology, including organoid nesting, pallisading, trabecular growth and rosette-like structures. The major histological features differentiating the four types of neuroendocrine tumours are the presence or absence of necrosis and the mitotic rate (12).

Small cell lung carcinoma

SCLC is a highly aggressive neuroendocrine malignancy that accounts for approximately 12-14% of all lung cancers (71,76). The vast majority of patients have metastatic disease at the time of diagnosis, so surgical resection is rarely an option. Survival rates remain dismal, with only 5-8% of patients surviving 5 years after diagnosis (74,76).

SCLC is an epithelial malignancy comprising small tumour cells (less than the diameter of 3 resting lymphocytes) with distinct cytological features including ill-defined cell borders, scant cytoplasm and finely granular nuclear chromatin without obvious nucleoli (Figure 6A; see also Table 1) (12). The presence of crush artefact (smearing of nuclear chromatin) and nuclear moulding are common but can be seen with other malignancies (e.g., crush artefact is common in lymphoid infiltrates). The mitotic rate is high (≥11 mitoses per 10 HPF) and there is often extensive necrosis (12). The distinctive histological appearance of SCLC allows for reliable diagnosis in small biopsy and cytology specimens, but for small specimens with significant crush artefact, use of a panel of IHC markers such as a pancytokeratin, neuroendocrine markers (chromogranin, synaptophysin and CD56) and/or TTF-1 and Ki-67 will confirm suspected SCLC (61,77) (Figure 6B-D). In cases where cytokeratin stains are negative, it is important to
Figure 6 Small cell lung carcinoma in a core biopsy (A,B) showing positive immunoperoxidase staining for synaptophysin (C) and CD56 (D).

Table 1 Summary of histological features differentiating SCLC and LCNEC (12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Histological feature</th>
<th>SCLC</th>
<th>LCNEC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cytological features</td>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Small cells (&lt;3 resting lymphocytes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/C ratio</td>
<td>High (scant cytoplasm)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear chromatin</td>
<td>Finely granular nuclear chromatin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nucleoli</td>
<td>Absent or inconspicuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear moulding</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear smearing</td>
<td>Often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cell borders</td>
<td>Indistinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitotic rate</td>
<td>≥11 per 10 HPF</td>
<td>≥11 per 10 HPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necrosis</td>
<td>Present (large zones)</td>
<td>Present (large zones)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IHC</td>
<td>Can be diagnosed without IHC</td>
<td>Positive staining for ≥1 neuroendocrine marker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SCLC, Small cell lung cancer; LCNEC, Large cell neuroendocrine carcinoma; N/C ratio, nuclear/cytoplasmic ratio; HPF, high power field; IHC, immunohistochemistry.

consider and exclude other diagnoses such as lymphoma, chronic inflammation, small round cell tumour or primitive neuroectodermal tumour (21, 61, 78).

The 2004 WHO classification recognises two subtypes of SCLC: pure and combined (12). Combined small cell carcinoma is defined as a classical SCLC with a component showing features of any subtype of NSCLC, most often SCC, adenocarcinoma or LCC (12, 61). A threshold for the proportion of non-small cell component is not required when this comprises adenocarcinoma or SCC, but for combined small cell and large cell tumours (SCLC-LC), at least 10% of the tumour must comprise a large cell component (12, 61).

Large cell neuroendocrine carcinoma

LCNEC is another highly aggressive neuroendocrine malignancy, where tumour cells demonstrate cytological
features of NSCLC (Table 1) but with neuroendocrine architecture (organoid nesting, pallisading, trabecular growth and rosette-like structures) and positive IHC stains for at least one neuroendocrine marker (chromogranin, synaptophysin or CD56) (12). Like SCLC, these tumours often show necrosis and have a high mitotic rate (≥11 mitoses per 10 HPF) (12). They may be pure LCNEC or combined with other types of NSCLC (12).

Making the diagnosis of LCNEC is often challenging due to significant overlap amongst the diagnostic groups (61,77). The differentiation between SCLC and LCNEC is particularly problematic, especially in cytology specimens, since there is overlap in nuclear size and some LCNEC do not contain prominent nucleoli. Currently there is no IHC stain for discrimination between SCLC and LCNEC and the distinction is based solely on cytological features (detailed in Table 1). Differentiating a LCNEC tumour from other NSCLC is based on the presence of neuroendocrine morphology and positive IHC for at least one neuroendocrine marker (12). However, up to 20% of NSCLC (adenocarcinoma, SCC and LCC) with no obvious neuroendocrine morphology demonstrate positive IHC staining for neuroendocrine markers (12,61). Currently, these tumours are classified as their NSCLC subtype but with neuroendocrine differentiation (NED) (i.e., NSCLC-NED) (12). The clinical significance of IHC evidence of NED without neuroendocrine morphology in NSCLC remains unclear and further research is required.

Carcinoid tumours

Carcinoid tumours comprise 1-2% of all lung tumours (74,75) and represent the most common lung tumour in children (79). Two subtypes of carcinoid tumour are recognised: typical carcinoid (TC) and AC (12). Both demonstrate morphological growth patterns indicative of NED (organoid, trabecular, insular, pallisading, ribbon, rosette-like structures) (12). The diagnostic criteria for differentiating TC and AC are mitotic rate and the presence or absence of necrosis. TC has <2 mitoses per 10 HPF and no necrosis. Conversely, AC show necrosis (usually focal or punctate) and/or 2-10 mitoses per 10 HPF (12).

Other NSCLC subtypes

Adenosquamous carcinoma

Adenosquamous carcinoma accounts for less than 5% of all lung cancers (80-82) and is defined as a NSCLC comprising at least 10% of both squamous and glandular differentiation (12). Similar to LCC, this diagnosis should be based on histology and not immunophenotype. However, further guidelines and definitions for characterisation using immunohistochemistry are likely in upcoming revisions of lung cancer classification. Adenosquamous carcinoma can only be diagnosed with certainty on surgical resections, however the diagnosis can be suspected in small biopsy or cytology specimens showing features of both squamous and glandular differentiation (21).

Sarcomatoid carcinoma

Sarcomatoid carcinoma is a poorly differentiated NSCLC that demonstrates morphological features of sarcoma or sarcoma-like (spindle and/or giant cells) differentiation, and represents approximately 1% of all lung cancers (12). The 2004 WHO classification recognises five subtypes, including pleomorphic carcinoma, spindle cell carcinoma, giant cell carcinoma, carcinosarcoma and pulmonary blastoma (12). These highly aggressive tumours are believed to represent epithelial malignancies that have undergone divergent differentiation (12,83-87). Because of the heterogeneity of these tumours, they should not be diagnosed on small biopsy or cytology. Instead, the IASLC/ATS/ERS classification recommends using the diagnosis “poorly differentiated NSCLC with spindle and/or giant cell carcinoma” (21). Of note, the new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification now recognises fetal adenocarcinoma as a adenocarcinoma variant and not as an epithelial pattern of pulmonary blastoma (21,61,88).

Carcinomas of salivary gland type

Salivary gland tumours arising from bronchial glands are rare, representing less than 1% of all lung cancers (21). The 2004 WHO classification recognises three subtypes, including mucoepidermoid carcinoma, adenoid cystic carcinoma and epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma (12).

Other primary tumours of the lung

As in any organ or tissue, primary tumours of the lung can arise from any cell type and are not purely derived from epithelial cells. Amongst the “non-epithelial” lung tumours, the 2004 WHO classification identifies broad groups including mesenchymal, lymphoproliferative and miscellaneous tumours (e.g., melanoma, germ cell
Due to the heterogeneity of lung tumours, areas of more features with colorectal adenocarcinoma (21,94). However, lung adenocarcinoma which shares morphologic and IHC from metastatic disease, such as enteric differentiation in Specific subtypes of lung cancer can be difficult to distinguish of the specimen does not clearly indicate a primary lung cytology specimens. When initial histological examination and metastatic lung cancers may be impossible (89,90,93). To aid in diagnosis of adenocarcinomas notes the importance of not just reporting the predominant pattern of adenocarcinoma, but of detailed reporting of percentages of the various histological patterns in 5% increments (21). This allows for better comparison of subsequent adenocarcinomas, particularly if slides from the original primary tumour are not available for review (21).

Comprehensive histological and cytological examination of multiple tumours can distinguish primary from metastatic lung cancers in the majority of cases (92). But despite careful histological examination and IHC profiling, for a proportion of cases with multiple lung tumours, definitive distinction between multiple primary lung cancers and metastatic lung cancer may be impossible (89,90,93). Detailed clinical history and multidisciplinary case review is imperative to assist diagnosis. Genetic studies have demonstrated unique molecular phenotypes for multiple tumours with similar histology, suggesting that in the future molecular analysis of these tumours may provide greater diagnostic accuracy (90,91).

Differentiating metastases to the lung from primary lung cancers poses another diagnostic challenge for surgical pathologists, especially in small biopsy and cytology specimens. When initial histological examination of the specimen does not clearly indicate a primary lung malignancy, metastatic disease must be considered (61). Specific subtypes of lung cancer can be difficult to distinguish from metastatic disease, such as enteric differentiation in lung adenocarcinoma which shares morphologic and IHC features with colorectal adenocarcinoma (21,94). However, due to the heterogeneity of lung tumours, areas of more typical pulmonary differentiation should be evident (21). For example, lepidic growth favours primary adenocarcinoma (21) but rare cases of metastatic adenocarcinoma may show this pattern of spread (personal observation).

Differentiation of pulmonary SCC from metastatic head and neck SCC (HNSCC) presents a unique diagnostic challenge, as they demonstrate similar morphology and can occur in the same patient (95,96) due to similar aetiologies and risk factors (97,98). Recently, p16 has been investigated as a potential IHC marker for differentiating lung SCC from HNSCC with negative staining favouring lung SCC and positive staining favouring extrapulmonary SCC (99). However, a proportion of primary lung SCC stains positively for p16 (100) and may reflect the limited association of HPV infection with the development of lung cancer, with reports of HPV prevalence ranging from 5-22% (101,102). Currently, there is no reliable IHC marker for differentiating lung SCC from HNSCC (99,103,104). In cases where a metastatic lesion may be suspected, provision of detailed clinical history (i.e., history of previous malignancy and site) cannot be over emphasised, as it will guide detailed morphological and IHC assessment, and avoid wastage of valuable tissue on multiple IHC stains.

Small biopsies and cytology—the reality of non-small cell lung cancer diagnosis

The WHO classification of lung tumours was developed and designed for histological diagnosis and staging of surgically resected lung tumours. However, the vast majority of patients present with either locally advanced or metastatic disease and do not proceed to surgical resection, so the diagnosis of lung cancer is confirmed using small biopsies and/or cytology. With the advent of subtype-specific and targeted molecular therapies for lung cancer, the need for accurate histological classification and guided molecular characterisation is placing increasing demands on the surgical pathologist to do more with less tissue.

The recently published IASLC/ATS/ERS classification has, for the first time, provided a clinically focused and relevant classification applicable to small biopsies and cytology specimens. Of particular clinical importance is the necessity to differentiate between adenocarcinoma and SCC as this will guide subsequent molecular testing and therapeutic management. If a tumour demonstrates distinct histological features of adenocarcinoma or SCC then the standard diagnostic terms should be used (21,61). For poorly differentiated carcinomas, the IASLC/ATS/ERS advise the
use of a limited IHC panel (discussed below) to differentiate adenocarcinoma and SCC, effectively reducing the use of the term NSCLC-NOS (not otherwise specified) whilst preserving tissue for molecular testing.

Of course, alternative diagnoses must be considered in the assessment of small biopsies/cytology specimens and provision of relevant clinical history from treating clinicians is essential in this process. Not only potentially benign conditions but other malignancies of the lung, both primary and metastatic, need to be considered. Both pathologists and treating clinicians need to be aware of inherent tumour heterogeneity and recognise that small biopsies/cytology specimens represent only a small sampling of the entire tumour; indeed, definitive diagnosis can only be made on surgical resection specimens for a subset of NSCLC (MIA, LCC, adenosquamous carcinoma). For small biopsy/cytology specimens, the IASLC/ATS/ERS suggests classification as NSCLC, with a description of the morphological features seen and whether a particular diagnosis is favoured, e.g., NSCLC with neuroendocrine morphology (positive neuroendocrine markers)—possible LCNEC (21).

### Limiting use of NSCLC-NOS

No longer can tumours of the lung be simply classified as NSCLC or SCLC. There are now strong clinical indications driving the need for surgical pathologists to further subtype NSCLC, in particular to differentiate adenocarcinoma from SCC even on small biopsies/cytology specimens. In contrast to previous WHO classifications, the IASLC/ATS/ERS now recommend limiting use of the term NSCLC-NOS. All available clinical material must be utilised, and correlation carried out between cytology and histology specimens (21). Indeed, Sigel et al. [2011] reported a NSCLC-NOS diagnosis rate of 4% when cytology and small biopsies were correlated, reduced from 11% for cytology alone and 6% for biopsies alone (105).

For tumours in which differentiation is not evident on histological or cytological examination, a limited panel of histochemical and IHC markers is required (Figure 7A-D). The most widely used adenocarcinoma markers include mucin (periodic acid Schiff with diastase or mucicarmine), TTF-1 (thyroid transcription factor 1) and napsin-A, and for SCC the favoured markers are p63 and CK5/6. Of these, TTF-1 and p63 demonstrate the greatest sensitivity for their respective NSCLC subtypes (21,106-111). Alternative IHC markers such as CK7 (adenocarcinoma) and 34βE12 (squamous cell carcinoma) can be considered for indeterminate cases but have less sensitivity and specificity and tend not to be included in routine IHC panels (108,110-113). There has been recent interest in p40 (ΔNp63), a relatively new IHC marker for SCC. Current IHC stains for p63 detect all isoforms of the p63 gene, while p40 specifically detects non-transactivating or truncated forms of p63, resulting in increased specificity for SCC regardless of organ site (107,114-120).

Numerous diagnostic IHC algorithms for differentiating lung adenocarcinoma and SCC have been discussed in the literature, most including TTF-1 and p63 with or without a third or fourth stain. For example, Rekhtman and colleagues [2011] recently reported 100% accuracy in small biopsy specimens (diagnosis confirmed at surgical resection) with use of TTF-1 and p63 as a first line panel and addition of CK5/6 for equivocal cases (106). The IASLC/ATS/ERS advise the use of a single adenocarcinoma marker (TTF-1) and SCC marker (p63) with or without mucin stain, which should allow for differentiation of the majority of NSCLC (Table 2) (21,61). Where the IHC profile favours adenocarcinoma (TTF-1 positive and/or mucin positive, p63 negative), the tumour should be classified: “NSCLC, favour adenocarcinoma” (21,61). When the IHC profile favours SCC (p63 positive, TTF-1 negative, mucin negative), the tumour should be classified: “NSCLC, favour squamous cell carcinoma” (21,61). Only when there is no morphological or IHC evidence of clear lineage differentiation should the tumour be classified as NSCLC-NOS. In the hands of experienced pathologists and cytopathologists and judicial use of IHC stains, the IASLC/ATS/ERS estimate that less than 5% of NSCLC cases should be classified as NSCLC-NOS (21,61).

### Molecular testing in NSCLC

The development of targeted molecular therapy for pulmonary adenocarcinoma has not only driven review of the classification and guidelines for NSCLC diagnosis, but also brought significant implications with regards to tissue sampling and processing. These increasingly small diagnostic biopsy and cytology specimens are no longer required purely for confirmation of malignancy and tumour subtyping, but there must be sufficient tumour tissue available for molecular testing to complete the pathological diagnostic assessment. Factors that need to be considered range from specimen collection, tissue processing in the laboratory, requests for molecular testing, provision of sufficient samples and accurate tissue processing.
to the molecular laboratory and timely communication of results to the treating clinicians. Therefore the surgical pathologist must engage with the multidisciplinary team to develop strategic guidelines that will ensure that a complete histological and molecular diagnosis is provided for the patient (61).

In order to maximise diagnostic yield, it is crucial to optimise not only the amount but also the adequacy of the tissue sampled. Although the choice of procedure and sampling method will largely be guided by the lesion itself (i.e., size, location), patient factors (e.g., comorbidities) and available resources, pathologists should encourage collection of both cytology and biopsy specimens (if possible) as this can aid in diagnostic accuracy. Initially developed for non-ultrasound guided needle aspirates, rapid on site evaluation (ROSE) of specimen adequacy can be performed by trained

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**Figure 7** Immunohistochemistry on an undifferentiated non-small cell carcinoma in a bronchial biopsy (A,B) favours a diagnosis of adenocarcinoma. Staining for p63 (C) is negative (note the positive internal control comprising benign basal bronchial epithelial cells) while there is strong TTF-1 positivity (D).

**Table 2** Summary of immunohistochemical stains for small biopsy/cytology diagnosis (21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Small biopsy/cytology diagnosis</th>
<th>Adenocarcinoma markers</th>
<th>Squamous cell carcinoma markers</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TTF-1</td>
<td>+/- Mucin</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSCLC — favour adenocarcinoma</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>NSCLC — NOS</td>
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NSCLC, Non small cell lung cancer; NOS, not otherwise specified.
cytopathologists and cytotechnologists, not only to confirm sampling of the target lesion but to ensure sufficient sample is collected (121,122). For various reasons, ROSE is not currently available in every institution (123). Interestingly, Alsharif et al. [2010] have shown that telepathology can be successfully used to assess adequacy of FNA (fine needle aspiration) specimens (120).

Once the specimen is collected, it is imperative that adequate clinical history is provided to ensure that the specimen is processed in a manner which will provide adequate diagnostic sections as well as preserving tissue for molecular testing. The IASLC/ATS/ERS guidelines strongly encourage surgical pathologists to minimise that amount of tissue used for diagnosis, in particular by limiting the number of first line IHC stains (discussed above) (21). Another suggested strategy is “reflex cutting” of paraffin blocks and preservation of unstained sections in order to avoid unnecessary loss of tissue during facing, although there is a small risk that DNA or epitope quality may degrade if not used shortly after sectioning (124,125).

Currently, activating mutations of EGFR are the best established and most widely used molecular biomarker in NSCLC. Additional molecular biomarkers are available, but with the exception of ALK translocations, are not recommended by the IASLC/CAP/AMP for routine testing (46). Fluorescence in situ hybridisation (FISH) remains the recommended method for clinical testing of ALK translocations, however the IASLC/CAP/AMP suggest that ALK IHC could be considered as a method for screening patients prior to formal ALK FISH testing (46).

Evolution of rapid and accurate EGFR mutation testing provides important data for clinical application. Traditionally the gold standard for EGFR mutation testing required direct sequencing of extracted tumour DNA, a time consuming methodology with low sensitivity (high levels of tumour DNA required). Newer validated methods for EGFR mutation testing provide increased sensitivity (fewer tumour cells required), improved turnaround times and allow for testing on a greater variety of clinical samples. Current techniques for EGFR mutation testing can be screening (detect all mutations including novel mutations, i.e., sequencing) or targeted methods (detect known mutations only). Of course, both approaches have their unique advantages and disadvantages (reviewed by Ellison et al., 2013) (126), and the available tests will vary amongst institutions. Therefore surgical pathologists must be aware of the available tests and specific tissue requirements for their local molecular laboratory.

Once a diagnosis of lung adenocarcinoma has been made, a decision must be made as to who is required to order the appropriate molecular testing. Implementation of “reflex” molecular testing initiated by the surgical pathologist (analogous to HER2 testing of invasive breast carcinoma) is a topic of debate and varies across institutions and government jurisdictions. The surgical pathologist may not be aware if the patient is a surgical candidate and that a more representative tissue specimen may follow. Conversely, delaying molecular testing may potentially contribute to delays in initiation of therapy. For patients diagnosed as NSCLC-NOS on small biopsy/cytology, the IASLC/ATS/ERS recommend biomarker testing (EGFR and ALK) (21) with discussion at multidisciplinary meetings to plan further testing and management.

Evolving role of the surgical pathologist

No longer is making a tissue diagnosis of pulmonary malignancy and the distinction between SCLC and NSCLC the only role of the surgical pathologist. Their contribution to lung cancer diagnosis, management and research is dynamic and continually evolving. The advent of personalised medicine for lung cancer has brought with it novel challenges and driven significant change. Of note is the first structured classification of lung cancer in small biopsy and cytology specimens developed by the IASLC/ATS/ERS, and a new classification of lung adenocarcinoma. Both have enhanced the clinical relevance of pathological diagnosis, allowing surgical pathologists to interact closely with clinicians to ensure that new concepts are understood and applied in the clinical setting.

With personalised medicine has come the development and clinical application of molecular testing in lung cancer. As the majority of patients never progress to surgical resection, the diagnostic small biopsy or cytology specimen has become a precious resource from which the surgical pathologist must aim to maximise diagnostic yield. Surgical pathologists have become the guardian for these limited precious samples, evaluating specimen adequacy, ensuring that appropriate processing techniques are applied, selecting suitable slides or blocks, enriching the tumour proportion by microdissection if required, and interpreting and providing timely results to the multidisciplinary team.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly important that surgical pathologists be involved in clinical trials and
basic research to assist in the attainment of pathologically and clinically meaningful data. Where feasible, the surgical pathologist can also assist in the collection for research (with patient consent) tissue that is not required for clinical decision making. In this way, the modern surgical pathologist becomes an integral member of the multidisciplinary team, playing a crucial role in clinical trials and determining appropriate and timely management for patients with lung cancer.

Conclusions

During the last decade, through significant advances in our understanding of the complexity of lung tumour biology, we have finally entered the era of personalised medicine for lung cancer. No longer is basic tissue diagnosis and cancer staging alone central to determining treatment options for lung cancer, but histological subtyping and molecular testing have become of paramount importance. The surgical pathologist has become the guardian of the small biopsy/cytology specimen, a limited and precious resource from which diagnostic yield must be maximised.

Acknowledgements

Partial funding support for this work came from SPORE (P50CA70907) grant from the NCI, USA (AFG).

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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31 Lung cancer


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Cite this article as: Davidson MR, Gazdar AF, Clarke BE. The pivotal role of pathology in the management of lung cancer. J Thorac Dis 2013;5(S5):S463-S478. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.43
Towards optimal pathologic staging of resectable non-small cell lung cancer

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Abstract: Pathologic nodal staging is the most accurate means of determining prognosis of patients with resectable non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), but confusion prevails about the optimal pre-operative and surgical lymph node examination procedures for candidates of curative-intent resection. The landmark American College of Surgeons Oncology Group Z0030 trial revealed no difference in the survival of patients with clinical T1 or T2, N0 or N1 (hilar node-negative), M0 NSCLC who either had a fastidious, pre-defined systematic hilar and mediastinal lymph node sampling procedure, or who received a complete mediastinal lymph node dissection. We place the results of this major trial into a contemporary clinical practice context, and discuss problems associated with apparent misunderstanding of the lessons from this trial, especially in light of evidence of prevailing sub-optimal nodal examination practices. We also discuss evolving knowledge about the origin of the quality gap in pathologic nodal staging and the emerging literature on corrective interventions.

Keywords: Lymph node examination; quality improvement; surgery; survival

Submitted Jun 21, 2013. Accepted for publication Oct 10, 2013.

Accurate staging is essential to the appropriate treatment of cancer. After histologic confirmation of a diagnosis of lung cancer come the questions: ‘what is the prognosis?’, ‘what are the best treatment options?’, ‘how likely is treatment to be successful?’ ‘will chemotherapy be necessary?’ The answer to each of these questions requires knowledge of the stage of the cancer. The tumor, node, and metastasis (TNM) system, our current means of staging lung cancer, serves many functions. It is the language with which we communicate the extent of a patient’s cancer across time and space, provides prognostic information, guides selection among treatment alternatives, and is a key aspect in selecting patients for clinical trials.

Advances in technology have improved the accuracy of clinical staging. Clinical staging incorporates all non-invasive radiologic tests such as computerized tomography (CT), positron emission tomography (PET), magnetic resonance imaging, and bone scans (1,2). In the surgical resection population, in which distant metastasis has usually been ruled out, the most difficult staging problem is the accurate determination of nodal metastasis status. Radiologic determination of the size and extent of the primary tumor is fairly accurate, although delineating the T3-T4 border, i.e., determining whether a tumor that seems to extend to major mediastinal structures is actually invasive (T4) or merely abutting (T3), can sometimes only be resolved at thoracotomy. However, nodal status is the most important determinant of survival in the lung cancer patient who does not have distant metastatic disease, and the question of lymph node metastasis is less easily resolved by radiologic tests (1,3). Invasive clinical staging of mediastinal lymph nodes may be accomplished by
transbronchial needle aspiration, endobronchial ultrasound guidance, endoscopic ultrasound guidance, mediastinoscopy, video-assisted mediastinal lymphadenectomy, transcervical extended mediastinal lymphadenectomy or video-assisted thoracoscopy (2,4,5).

However, clinical staging tests have their sensitivity, specificity and accuracy limitations. The positive predictive value (PPV) for CT ranges from 0.16 to 0.88 and the negative predictive value (NPV) ranges from 0.54-0.83 (1). Specifically, normal sized lymph nodes by CT criteria may harbor metastatic disease and enlarged lymph nodes may be enlarged because of benign processes such as postobstructive pneumonia, histoplasmosis, and sarcoidosis. The likelihood of an enlarged mediastinal node being histologically positive is only 60% whereas 20% of normal sized nodes may harbor metastasis (6). Similarly, PET-positive nodes may have increased metabolic activity because of an inflammatory process whereas histologically positive nodes may be negative on PET because of low metabolic activity or low burden of disease. Although PET performs better than CT, with a PPV ranging from 0.40 to 1.00 and a NPV ranging from 0.71-1.00, the false-negative rate is approximately 20% for normal sized nodes. Conversely, enlarged nodes that are PET positive are falsely positive 15-25% of the time (1). Invasive tests have limits imposed by the reach of the instrument and the degree of effort applied by the operator, or what Frank Detterbeck has described as the ‘thoroughness of execution’ (7).

Recent studies have demonstrated the value of combining clinical staging tests in the pre-operative work up of patients (8,9). For this reason current staging guidelines, including Cancer Care Ontario’s Program in Evidence Based Care Practice Guidelines, recommend invasive mediastinal staging in the presence of either enlarged nodes on CT or “hot” nodes on PET to rule out false-positive imaging tests. These guidelines also recommend invasive mediastinal staging even with a negative CT and PET for high risk tumors (defined as central, large, T3/T4, or adenocarcinoma) (10).

For all the advances in clinical staging options, the most accurate determination of stage in patients who are able to undergo surgical resection comes from examination of the resection material obtained at thoracotomy (pathologic staging) (11). Comparison of the 5-year survival rates in groups of patients who are staged by clinical and pathologic means reveals a 5-23% higher survival in patients with pathologic stage I, II, and IIIA over those with the identical clinical stage (Table 1) (12). This difference is independent of the combination of descriptors used to assign aggregate stage, and is probably partly explained by the ‘Will Rogers phenomenon’, in which improved staging accuracy leads to more accurate assignment of low risk patients into low risk groups and upstaging of seemingly low risk patients with subtle metastatic disease into higher risk categories, thereby improving the aggregate outcomes of the higher risk cohorts (13). Pathologic staging is therefore our most accurate prognostic tool in lung cancer.

However, current pathologic staging of lung cancer remains insufficiently discriminatory of future patient outcomes. For example, the 5-year survival of patients with resected stage IA non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is 73%, meaning the mortality rate of the lowest risk cohort is 27% (Table 1) (12). Although lymph node metastasis is our most powerful prognostic determinant in the surgical resection population, the 5-year survival of patients with pathologic N0 NSCLC is 56%, meaning that 44% of patients with apparently low risk disease die within 5 years (14). Are these poor results solely due to the biologic aggressiveness of lung cancer (or the frailty of the lung cancer patient), or do they reflect other problems such as limitations of the TNM staging system as a prognostic tool, or, very importantly—because of the opportunity for corrective intervention-poor application of the prognostic tool?

<table>
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<th>Table 1 Comparison of 5-year survival rates by clinical and pathologic staging in the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer staging project cohort. Modified from ref (12)</th>
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<td>5-year survival rate (%)</td>
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Determining the stage-relevant characteristics of the primary tumor (its size and extent of direct invasion) is relatively straightforward for the pathologist. In the surgical resection population, distant metastasis usually being inevident, the most important pathologic staging problem is determining lymph node metastasis status. This requires the collaborative efforts of the surgeon (to retrieve the hilar and mediastinal lymph nodes, and to accurately communicate the provenance of all lymph node specimens to the pathologist for accurate mapping) and the pathologist (to examine all lymph nodes in the resection specimen, both those directly provided by the surgeon and those indirectly provided within the lung resection material). There is compelling evidence that this collaborative effort frequently breaks down, to the detriment of patients.

At one extreme, 13% of all curative-intent resections (and 18% of resections for ‘node-negative disease’) have no lymph nodes examined (15). The survival of patients with pathologically ambiguous nodal stage (pNX) approximates very closely to that of patients with pN1, not pN0 disease (when pN0 is defined as actually having at least one examined lymph node), suggesting that a significant proportion have missed lymph node metastasis (15). Secondly, 40-50% of all curative lung cancer resections in large North American databases have no mediastinal lymph nodes examined (16,17). Indeed, 63% of resections for mediastinal node negative (pN0 or pN1) disease in the US Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) database from 1998 to 2009 had no mediastinal lymph nodes examined, leading to a 14% survival deficit (17). To put this survival impact in perspective, the estimated absolute survival benefit of post-operative adjuvant chemotherapy is about 5.4% (18). This problem is not unique to the US (19).

Furthermore, and more subtly, most patients with pathologic N0 disease cluster at the low end of the total lymph node number spectrum, with a median lymph node count of 6 in the US (Figure 1) (20). Patients with fewer than 6 lymph nodes have a significantly worse survival than matched patients with greater than 6 lymph nodes despite ostensibly having the same pathologic stage (21,22). Hence the recommendation in the 7th edition of the AJCC/UICC staging guidelines for examination of at least 6 lymph nodes and 3 nodal stations (23). However, this recommendation is probably insufficiently stringent because of evidence of sequential improvement in survival of patients with pathologic N0 disease with increasing number of lymph nodes examined, with the optimal number being ‘greater than 10’ and possibly as high as 18 to 21 (20,24-26). It is therefore unsettling that fewer than 15% of all pN0 lung cancer resections in large US databases have examination of greater than 10 lymph nodes. Even in patients with lymph node metastasis, there is prognostic value to the number of lymph nodes examined, both in helping determine the absolute number of lymph nodes with metastasis and in determining the ratio of positive and negative lymph nodes (27-32).

The etiology of suboptimal nodal examination has been the subject of recent investigation. Conceptually, it appears reasonable to separate the origin of the problem into three sites: events during the surgical operation (such as the hilar and mediastinal lymph node harvest), events during the transfer of specimens from the operating room to the pathology laboratory, and events during the pathology examination. Clearly, when surgeons do not harvest hilar and mediastinal lymph nodes, pathologists have no access to material for a thorough staging examination. Therefore, the solution to the problem of non-examination of mediastinal lymph nodes might be best achieved by focusing on intraoperative events. However, surgeons frequently complain that the specimens they submit are not completely examined. This assertion may be supported by ‘before and after’ intervention studies in which use of pre-labeled specimen collection kits improves the quality of pathologic staging, with a reversion to pre-intervention levels during the intervention phase in cases when the kit is inadvertently unavailable (33).
It therefore seems plausible that the communication between surgeons and pathologists during the transfer of specimens needs to be improved. Solutions might range from prevention of specimen loss in transit (34), to improved labeling of specimens in order to improve the ability of pathologists to determine the source and nature of submitted materials (35). Both of these factors (loss of specimens in transit, and inadequate specimen labeling) may impair the pathologic examination and lymph node mapping. The foregoing notwithstanding, the gross dissection of lung resection specimens for intrapulmonary lymph nodes may be an opportunity for pathology-centered quality improvement (36). For example, 10% of patients with one or more lymph nodes examined have no N1 lymph nodes, meaning that but for the mediastinal lymph nodes provided by the surgeon, there would have been no nodes examined in the resection specimen (37). Pathologists not infrequently omit the pathologic nodal stage in the report summary, or make errors in stage attribution, such as labeling N1 disease as N2 and vice-versa. This combination occurred in 33% of pathology reports in one city-wide audit of lung resection pathology reports (38). The very existence of the 12-18% pNX population is the clearest illustration of the possibility of concurrent glitches in intraoperative and pathology processes.

All of this naturally raises the question: what is the optimal surgical resection and pathologic staging procedure? We shall not engage the debate about the extent of resection and whether, or not, sublobar resection is oncologically sound in lobectomy candidates, a topic that remains the subject of ongoing clinical trials in North America (Cancer and Leukemia Group B 140503, clinicaltrials.gov #00499330) and Japan (Japan Clinical Oncology Group 0802/West Japan Oncology Group 4607L); Nor shall we address the looming controversy about the appropriateness of lobar resection in patients with low grade lesions such as adenocarcinoma in-situ, minimally invasive adenocarcinoma and ground glass opacity (39); Nor shall we discuss the definition of an oncologically complete resection for lung cancer, a topic of much interest which has been provocatively addressed in the recent past (40). Our focus is primarily on the lymph node staging problem.

The optimal surgical lymph node staging procedure has been partially clarified by the landmark American College of Surgery Oncology Group Z0030 trial which compared the long-term survival of patients with clinical T1-2, N0-1 NSCLC who underwent a fastidious, prespecified systematic sampling procedure versus a more extensive mediastinal nodal dissection (41). Although 4% of patients in the extensive dissection arm had lymph node metastasis that had been missed by the systematic sampling procedure, there was no difference in recurrence free- or overall survival between the two groups. Early data analyses from this trial established the safety of mediastinal lymph node dissection in both academic and community care settings (42). It also revealed that surgeons’ attention to the mediastinal lymph node harvest procedure provides a much higher lymph node yield than usually obtained—a median of 18 additional lymph nodes were collected in the mediastinal lymph node dissection arm (two-thirds of which were N2 lymph nodes), 6 or more nodes were examined from a minimum of 3 nodal stations in >99% of patients, and a minimum of 10 lymph nodes were examined from at least 3 nodal stations in 90% of patients (43). Most importantly, ACOSOG Z0030 definitively established the adequacy of systematic sampling as an oncologically sound mediastinal lymph node staging procedure in patients with relatively low risk early stage NSCLC and is now oft-cited in support of a pathologic staging strategy short of formal mediastinal nodal dissection (44).

However, it is important that we interpret Z0030 in the right context. First, the eligibility criteria specifically excluded patients with cT3 and T4 tumors, and those with hilar or mediastinal lymph node metastasis on frozen section analysis of the lymph nodes collected after the rigorous systematic nodal sampling procedure. Therefore, the results of this trial must not be misinterpreted as proof of equivalency between the two nodal dissection procedures in higher risk patients, such as those with clinically more advanced disease, because the results may be dissimilar in these patients. Secondly, this trial cannot be cited in support of the idea that noninvasive staging (with CT and PET) is a substitute for surgical mediastinal lymph node staging. It must be emphasized that all patients in Z0030 received a fastidious nodal sampling procedure, which included sampling of lymph nodes from stations 2R, 4R, 7 and 10R for right-sided tumors and stations 5, 6, 7 and 10L for left sided tumors regardless of lymph node size or metabolic activity. The randomization to cessation of further nodal dissection versus complete mediastinal lymph node dissection was performed only after establishment of histologic node negativity in stations 2-10, and the survival analysis included only patients who met the stringent quality criteria for the nodal sampling procedure. Z0030 cannot be used to justify a strategy of either no mediastinal nodal sampling (which is the experience of a large proportion of
patients who undergo resection in US databases) (16,17) or random sampling (the experience of the vast majority of all others) (45).

A prior study by Wu et al. corroborates the veracity of the above observations (46). In this study, 532 patients with clinical stage I, II or III NSCLC were randomized to either mediastinal lymph node dissection or to a nodal sampling procedure that was much less thorough than Z0030, requiring hilar nodal dissection, routine harvesting of station 7 and inspection of stations 1-9 with only removal of ‘nodes with suspected cancer metastasis (diameter >1 cm or hard)’. They reported improved survival in favor of node dissection with a median survival of 43 months compared to 32 months for sampling (P=0.0001). In contrast to Z0030, patients had no cytological or histological assessment of lymph nodes prior to randomization and resection, suggesting that if pre-resection systematic lymph node sampling has not been performed, survival is improved by mediastinal lymph node dissection (46).

In one community-based series, only 8% of patients who had lung resection over the course of a 4-year time span met criteria for a less stringent definition of systematic sampling than was performed in Z0030 (45). This study highlighted the loose use of terminology by surgeons: in the 45% of resections in which the surgeon reported having performed a ‘mediastinal lymph node dissection’, objective review of the pathology report suggested that none met the Z0030 mediastinal nodal dissection criteria, 9% were better classified as systematic sampling, 50% had random sampling and 42% had no mediastinal lymph nodes examined. It would be an unfortunate misunderstanding of the state of the evidence for the results of Z0030 to be used to justify such practice.

A less obvious side-bar to the discordance between surgeon procedure claims and the results of pathology report-based audits of the quality of nodal examination is the contribution of pathology practice. Despite the consensus statement that pathologists should ‘examine all lymph nodes in the lung resection specimen’ (47), re-examination of lung resection specimens after completion of routine pathology examination reveals that 137% more intrapulmonary lymph nodes (and 165% more lymph nodes with metastasis) can be retrieved from discarded lung specimens than the number retrieved during the routine examination (36). Indeed, up to 12% of patients said to have pN0 disease on routine examination, had identifiable lymph node metastasis by hematoxylin and eosin staining of discarded lymph nodes. Using fastidious intrapulmonary nodal retrieval procedures, a median of 11 N1 lymph nodes were retrieved from lobar lung resection specimens, up from a pre-intervention median of 3 N1 nodes (36). Interestingly, this is greater than the median of 5 to 6 N1 lymph nodes examined in the ACOSOG Z0030 trial, even though per study protocol surgeons helped retrieve nodes from stations 10-13 (43). This suggests that the opportunity for quality improvement in routine pathology examination of lung resection specimens exists across different types of institutions. This opportunity might be greater in routine practice because of the expectation most surgeons have that nodes within the resection specimen would be retrieved by gross dissection in the pathology laboratory.

It is incumbent on the surgeon to provide adequate N2 nodes through systematic sampling or mediastinal lymph node dissection, but also to harvest N1 nodes including stations 10 and 11. Recent data demonstrated significant upstaging with respect to N1 nodes in open compared to VATS lobectomy suggesting that surgeons were not harvesting the hilar zone nodes when performing VATS lobectomy (48). Clearly, the pathologist cannot examine nodes that are left in the chest. Optimal pathologic nodal staging requires the collaborative actions of surgeons, members of the operating room team, specimen handlers, the pathology laboratory team and the pathologist. A chain of actions is required for optimal pathologic staging of curatively resected lung cancer. Like all chains, it is only as strong as its weakest link. Effective interventions to correct the prevailing quality deficit in staging must encompass the full spectrum of potential sites of quality breakdown, from the surgical operation to the posting of the final pathology report.

Interventions in which pre-labeled specimen collection kits have been combined with fastidious gross dissection of the lung resection specimen demonstrate early promise in rectifying the quality deficit. Studies of these interventions suggest that the proportion of patients found to have nodal metastasis increases significantly, with strong trends towards significant upward aggregate stage migration (49). Unfortunately, these studies do not yet provide data on the survival impact of these quality improvement measures (50-52). Despite the paucity of data on survival impact and cost-effectiveness of these corrective interventions, it seems prudent to narrow or eliminate the quality gap in pathologic nodal staging, given its well-documented adverse impact on patient survival.

It is also important to emphasize that the results of Z0030 should be applied to patients with relatively early
clinical stage NSCLC. These results cannot automatically be extrapolated to patients with more advanced disease. In addition, we propose that systematic sampling must be performed at least as rigorously as in Z0030 in order to provide sufficient quality pathologic staging for patients who undergo staging by that strategy. Calling a procedure ‘systematic sampling’ or ‘mediastinal lymph node dissection’ does not necessarily make it so. The definitions must be based on the actual lymph nodes retrieved from specific stations, all of which must be clearly labeled for, and examined by, the pathologist.

In conclusion, there is a great need to heighten general awareness of the prevalence and severity of the quality gap between optimal, recommended, nodal staging of resectable lung cancer, and actual practice. This awareness campaign must be sponsored and supported by all the clinical professional groups with influence over the problem, including associations of surgeons, pathologists, medical oncologists and radiation oncologists, and their various guidelines-making bodies. Research into the evaluation and implementation of corrective solutions must be supported by funding agencies, in order to provide clear evidence with which healthcare policymakers can develop incentives that will ultimately facilitate the elimination of this major quality of care deficit.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: Dr. Osarogiagbon has filed a patent application for a surgical lymph node specimen collection kit; Dr. Darling has declared no conflict of interest.

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Introduction to lung cancer and CNS metastasis

In 2013, lung cancer is expected to affect 246,000 people and result in 164,000 deaths in the USA (1). Worldwide, lung cancer kills close to 1.5 million people per year (2). The five-year survival rate for advanced stage lung cancer is less than 10% (3). Advanced stage lung tumors are the most likely tumor type to disseminate to the central nervous system (CNS). There have been estimates that 50% of the patients diagnosed with either small cell lung cancer (SCLC) or non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), the two major histological types of lung cancer, will develop metastatic brain lesions. Interestingly, the differing histological subtypes of lung cancer disseminate to the CNS at different rates (Table 1). For SCLC, more than 10% of patients present clinically with CNS involvement (10). The overall survival for patients diagnosed with metastatic CNS involvement is dismal, usually ranging from 3-6 months. Thus, improved clinical management of advanced lung cancer patients necessitates an understanding and therapeutic interventions towards metastatic disease, particularly in the brain.

Metastatic brain lesions outnumber primary brain tumors more than 10:1, with 50% of all CNS metastases arising from lung cancer (11,12). CNS metastases carry a clinical burden of morbidity and mortality, but also acute neurological deficits, cognitive impairment and seizures (12,13). Strikingly, the incidence of CNS metastases...
appears to be on the rise, due to factors ranging from an aging population, increased CNS screening after cognitive warning signs, and improvements in treatment of systemic disease (12). The brain presents a unique challenge to therapeutic interventions given that the blood brain barrier (BBB) restricts access to many therapeutic compounds, especially bulky antibodies. Therapeutic interventions derived from understanding the molecular processes of CNS metastases will have to overcome hurdles not faced in many of the other disseminated tumor sites.

Clinical management of primary lung cancer with CNS metastasis

Clinical management of metastatic lung cancer continues to be a significant challenge. Specifically, the majority of lung cancer patients (~50%) are diagnosed with local and/or distant metastasis, which has a median survival of 7-11 months (14-16). The brain is a common site for metastasis in NSCLC patients, present in 25-30% of patients at diagnosis and the majority (40-50%) of patients will develop brain metastases during the course of their disease (14-16). The presence of brain metastases comes with a dismal patient outcome; overall survival for these patients is 2 months with palliative steroid treatment (14-16). While platinum-based therapies have positive benefits for metastatic NSCLC at other sites, application of these therapies for metastatic NSCLC brain lesions is limited, due to the inefficient transport of therapeutics across the BBB (16). Instead, radiation is the treatment of choice for metastatic NSCLC brain lesions, provided radiation therapy is compatible with the chosen systemic therapy. However, even with radiation, survival remains poor, with median survival at 7.6 months (16). Alternatively, a small subset of metastatic NSCLC patients (7%) is found to have a solitary brain lesion either at initial diagnosis or at recurrence (14,15,17). The course of treatment differs for these patients, with primary treatment focused on the brain metastases. Evidence indicates that localized therapy for the brain lesion, in the form of surgical resection of the brain metastasis with whole brain radiation, followed by standard treatment of the primary NSCLC lesion (surgery, surgery with adjuvant chemo/radiation), can improve survival for these patients, increasing median survival time from 2 to 7-27 months (14,15,17). More recently, targeted therapy for adenocarcinoma patients with epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations has been shown to control metastatic NSCLC within the brain (16,18), suggesting that targeted therapies may have value in combating CNS metastasis. With such a severe mortality rate, there is an urgent clinical need to understand the mechanisms that govern lung cancer metastasis to the brain so we can identify therapeutic vulnerabilities.

Genetic mechanisms associated with CNS metastasis from the lung

Hanahan and Weinberg characterized genomic instability and mutations as one of the enabling characteristics of cells that facilitates the acquisition of hallmarks of cancer (19). In the course of carcinogenesis, cells acquire several genetic alterations, such as mutations, gene deletions, copy-number aberrations or chromosomal rearrangements, that are associated with the transition from a pre-neoplastic lesion to an invasive tumor and finally progression to the metastatic state (20,21). Even though lung cancer is the most frequent primary site that metastasizes to brain (22), very little is known about the genetic aberrations associated with CNS metastasis from the lung. The next section summarizes the available data on genetic aberrations of matched primary and CNS metastatic lung cancer specimens, and these findings are summarized in Table 2.

Somatic gene mutations and CNS metastasis

In the majority of the lung cancer studies, somatic mutations (including EGFR, KRAS, TP53, and many others) were identified on primary lung tumors to understand the genetic basis of the disease (35-41). The genetic landscapes of lung tumor subtypes are now being surveyed by next-generation sequencing towards understanding driver mutations (42-45). However, very few studies have interrogated matched primary and metastatic tumor specimens to correlate the metastatic potential of tumors with somatic mutations.

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Additionally, investigations of matched primary and metastatic tumor specimens have focused primarily on the mutational status of only EGFR or KRAS. In regard to the EGFR studies, a recent review by Burel-Vandenbos et al. thoroughly summarized EGFR mutation status in lung cancer brain metastasis (23). In East Asian cohorts, known to have a higher prevalence of EGFR mutations, activating mutations were found in 44-63% of brain metastases. In Caucasian cohorts, with a low overall prevalence of EGFR mutations, activating mutations were found 0-2% of brain metastases. Eichler and colleagues demonstrated that patients with brain metastasis were more likely to have primary tumors with EGFR mutations (24). Few patient-matched primary and brain metastatic tumor sets have been explored for EGFR mutation status. Four studies with small sample sizes have suggested a discordant EGFR mutation rate between primary and brain metastatic tumors between 0 and 32% (23). There are reported instances of EGFR mutations in CNS metastatic tumors not seen in the patient-matched primary tumor (25), however the impact of technical detection limits of the mutations remains a question.

There is very little data available on the mutation status of KRAS in primary lung cancer with corresponding brain metastasis. Cortot et al. reported that 2 out of 13 patients with brain metastasis demonstrated KRAS mutation at codon 12 (G12S) (27). Of the two patients with KRAS mutation, one patient demonstrated KRAS mutation in both primary and corresponding brain metastasis while the other patient demonstrated gain of KRAS mutation in metastatic lesions. However, they were not able to verify the gain of mutation determined using direct sequencing in one patient, using mutant-enriched PCR. In a similar study, Kalikaki et al. showed gain of KRAS mutation at codon 12 (G12S) in one metastatic brain tumor sample as compared to corresponding primary lung tumor sample out of two analyzed matched specimens (25). Matsumoto et al. found a KRAS mutation in 2 out of 19 metastatic tumors at codon 12 (G12C) (28). However, they didn’t have matched primary lung tumor available for KRAS mutation analysis. Finally, a recent study by Munfsus-McCray and co-workers found that 23.5% of analyzed metastatic lung tumors with KRAS mutation metastasize to brain (29).

In summary, available data do not establish any clear correlation between EGFR and KRAS mutation status of primary lung tumors and their propensity to metastasize to the CNS. Additional studies are needed to further investigate the link between gene mutations in primary tumors and their potential for CNS dissemination.

**Chromosomal imbalances associated with CNS metastasis**

Despite the advent of next-generation sequencing and array-based comparative genomic hybridization (aCGH), few studies have been conducted examining genomic aberrations associated with brain metastasis from the lung. In one of the first studies of its kind Shiseki et al. investigated 22 brain metastases and 23 early-stage, primary lung tumors from 43 patients (10 matched primary and brain metastasis samples) for allelic losses at 40 loci in 10 chromosomes using restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) (30,31). They demonstrated that in brain metastasis, a significant (P<0.05) incidence of allelic losses (>60%) was observed at loci on chromosomes 2q, 18q, and 22q. Takahashi et al. investigated 8 primary lung tumors, their 14 corresponding metastases and 8 corresponding normal lung tissues using SNP array analysis (34). In 5 primary lung tumors and their 7 corresponding brain metastasis, a majority (≥81%) of allelic imbalances were similar between primary and matched metastasis. Allelic imbalance at 11p15 was most frequently observed when the genetic imbalance only occurred in the metastatic lesion. In a recent study, Lee and co-workers investigated 18 primary NSCLC and their corresponding brain metastasis for copy number alterations using molecular inversion probe (MIP) technology (33). Using comparative MIP analysis they found that amplification of chromosomal regions 5q35, 10q23, and 17q23-24 in primary lung adenocarcinomas was significantly associated with development of early brain metastases.
metastasis.

Sun et al. investigated EGFR copy number variations in NSCLC primary tumors and corresponding brain metastasis using fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) analysis and demonstrated high frequency of gain in EGFR copy number was present in NSCLC primary (62%) and brain metastases (64%) (26). Further, a relatively high level of concordance (84%) for EGFR copy number status was observed between primary tumor and corresponding brain metastasis. Conversely, 9 cases (16% of total) demonstrated discordance between EGFR copy number status between primary tumor and corresponding brain metastasis; in 6 of these, brain metastasis sites had a gain in copy number.

Wrage et al. discovered that lung cancer patients in a bone marrow positive group (patients tested positive for disseminated tumor cells in bone marrow) show loss in 4q12-q32 as compared to lung cancer patients in a bone marrow negative group using aCGH, signifying a role of 4q deletion in metastasis (32). Additionally, they performed FISH analysis for 4q21 on tissue microarray with 36 brain metastases and demonstrated that 39% of samples show one allele loss of 4q, whereas gains were only found in 6% of tumors (32). Their comprehensive FISH analysis on 43 primary lung tumor and 35 brain metastasis tumors showed significant loss of 4q21 in brain metastases as compared to primary lung tumors. This data would suggest that a metastasis suppressor gene(s) for lung cancer metastasis to brain could be present on chromosome 4q.

In summary, while multiple genomic aberrations have been reported for lung cancer metastasis to the brain, there is little concordance and few data sets. Next-generation sequencing projects employing larger sample sizes of patient-matched primary and brain metastasis may identify new genomic aberrations driving brain metastasis that can be exploited both for patient prognosis and to guide treatment options.

**Molecular mechanisms associated with CNS metastasis**

Despite the frequency of CNS metastasis from primary lung tumors, the molecular mechanisms governing this complex process are not well understood. Here we will discuss genes and/or signatures that have been associated with CNS metastases from studies using human clinical samples or mouse models of tumor growth and metastasis.

**Identification of genes associated with CNS metastasis using clinical specimens**

Kargi et al. examined 30 NSCLC cases, including 15 excised brain metastases and determined that CD44 protein was significantly inversely related to metastatic potential (46). CD44 isoforms play a role in cell adhesion and are dysregulated in a number of tumor types (47). Kikuchi and colleagues performed expression profiles on 16 metastatic brain foci compared to 37 primary NSCLC tumors and 244 genes showed significantly differential expression between brain metastasis and primary lung tumors (48). Several cytoskeletal protein genes and genes associated with cell movement were differentially up-regulation in the metastases including metallothionein 2A (MT2A), fascin homolog 3 (FSCN3), microtubule-associated protein 7 (MAP7) and CXCL13. Grinberg-Rashi et al. analyzed 142 NSCLC tumors and found that N-cadherin, kinesin family member C1 (KIFC1) and bromodomain PHD finger transcription factor (BPTF/FALZ) expression was predictive of brain metastasis (49). N-Cadherin was over-expressed in brain metastasis. This protein has been associated with cells undergoing epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition, and cell invasiveness (50). In addition, a recent report showed that loss of E-cadherin expression was significantly associated with brain metastasis (51). NSCLC patients who developed brain metastasis during follow-up compared to NSCLC patients with no evidence of brain metastasis displayed low E-cadherin expression. Finally, KIF1C, a kinesin family member known to be associated with cell movement (52), was also over-expressed in brain metastasis, while FALZ, a transcription factor with chromatin remodeling properties (53), was under-expressed in brain metastasis.

Another family of genes with strong associations to tumor cell migration and invasion are the chemokine receptors. Chemokine receptors and their cognate ligands are up-regulated in a number of cancers and have been demonstrated to play vital, non-redundant roles in cancer metastasis from multiple primary tumors [reviewed in (54)]. Thus, chemokine receptors have been examined for a role in lung metastasis to the CNS. In 32 patients with solitary brain metastasis from NSCLC, 90% of primary tumors and 100% of brain metastases expressed CXCR4, significantly higher than NSCLC without distant metastases or primary brain tumors (55). Another chemokine receptor associated with lung cancer and metastatic spread is CX3CR1. Protein expression of CX3CR1 was elevated in NSCLC compared
to SCLC (56). While CX3CR1 positivity was significantly associated with number of metastatic sites, paradoxically CX3CR1-negative lung adenocarcinomas were more likely to have disseminated to the brain. The studies summarized above indicate that metastatic colonization of the CNS from lung is a complex process that employs dysregulation of a number of genes known to play a role in cell migration and invasion.

The role of constitutive receptor tyrosine kinase activation in cancer biology is well established. A significant amount of research in lung cancer has focused on the ERBB family members, especially EGFR. The dysregulation of this receptor through mutation or amplification is a known driver of some lung cancers, and serves as a frontline therapeutic target. The role of the ERBB receptors in brain metastasis is less appreciated. It is known the ERBB2 expression in breast cancer is associated with worse prognosis and brain metastasis (57-59). A report by Sun and colleagues examined the protein expression patterns of EGFR, ERBB2, ERBB3, and their ligands in 50 NSCLC primary tumors and corresponding brain metastases (26). The metastases displayed significantly higher protein expression of EGF and amphiregulin in the nucleus. The phosphorylation of EGFR and ERBB3 was elevated in the membrane of the brain metastases compared to primary tumors. In contrast, transforming growth factor-alpha and neuregulin demonstrated significantly higher expression in primary tumors compared to brain metastases. Thus, ERBB family members and ligands are differentially expressed in primary tumors versus brain metastases. In another study, the phosphorylation status of 128 signaling proteins was examined in 42 brain metastases from breast and NSCLC patients by reverse phase protein microarray. The NSCLC metastases exhibited elevated relative levels of the EGFR/ERK network (60). The breast cancer metastases showed higher activation of the ERBB2/IGF-Akt network compared to lung cancer metastases. Thus, there appears to be a role for EGFR in the brain metastatic phenotype of lung tumors, and this pathway is under investigation as a therapeutic target.

Another receptor tyrosine kinase associated with tumor cell invasion and metastasis is the hepatocyte growth factor receptor (c-MET). c-MET and its ligand, hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), have been associated with tumor progression and metastasis in many solid tumor types (61). The protein expression of c-MET was observed in ~30% of adenocarcinomas and c-MET gene amplification is seen in 10% of adenocarcinomas (62). Increased activity of c-MET can occur via oncogenic activation of KRAS (63), while gene amplification of c-MET is often related to resistance to EGFR-tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs). The expression of c-MET and/or HGF has been associated with therapeutic resistance against EGFR-TKIs (64-66), cisplatin (67), and radiation (68). Expression of c-MET was more common in poorly differentiated adenocarcinomas compared to well-differentiated tumors (62). Benedettini et al. demonstrated that c-MET expression and phosphorylation were associated with the development of brain metastasis, and enriched in brain metastases compared to patient-matched primary tumors (69). Thus, the HGF/c-MET pathway may offer unique therapeutic vulnerabilities against brain metastases.

In SCLC, the most highly aggressive lung cancer subtype with strong predilection for metastasis to the brain, placental growth factor (PLGF) and vascular endothelial growth factor receptor 1 (VEGFR1) expression levels were recently associated with brain metastasis (70). Elevated serum levels of PLGF were detected in SCLC patients with brain metastasis compared to SCLC patients without brain metastasis. This elevated expression of PLGF was also seen in the brain metastasis tissue. PLGF triggered VEGFR1 signaling and promoted SCLC cell trans-endothelial migration in vitro. Depletion of PLGF via shRNA technology inhibited brain metastasis in an in vivo model system. Thus, the VEGF member PLGF may play a role in the invasive nature of SCLC.

**Identification of genes associated with CNS metastasis using mouse models**

Transgenic mouse technology has become a powerful tool for investigating the contribution of a gene or genes in development and disease pathology, particularly cancer. Manipulating expression of genes involved in human NSCLC with conditional alleles or transgenes has led to a variety of genetically-engineered mouse models (GEMM) (71). Several GEMMs have been developed carrying reported mutated oncogenes of NSCLC (e.g., EGFR<sup>L858R</sup>, T790M, ERBB2<sup>YVMA</sup>, EML4-ALK chimera, PIK3CA<sup>H1047R</sup>, KRAS<sup>G12V</sup>, c-MET), in the presence or absence of deletion of tumor suppressors such as TP53, P16 or LKB1 (71). Several of these models have shown the capacity for metastatic spread into lymph nodes, the surrounding chest cavity and even into distal organs such as bone (72). Despite these aggressive model systems, metastatic colonization of the CNS has remained elusive.
The lack of CNS metastasis may be accounted for by the shortened survival times of these aggressive models, or the lack of SCLC models, the lung histologic subtype most likely to present with CNS metastasis. It will be interesting to see whether expression of SCC- or SCLC-specific oncogene mutations will result in GEMMs of lung cancer cell dissemination to the brain.

While the development of GEMMs with reproducible brain metastasis has proven elusive to date as outlined above, a number of cell line models (both syngeneic and xenograft) have been generated with resultant CNS metastatic features. These models have used multiple injection routes including inter-cardiac injection and lung orthotopic injection. Two groups have reported the ability of A549 lung cancer cells to colonize the brain when injected in the bloodstream or orthotopically implanted into the lungs of immune-deficient mice (73,74). Another cell line with reported brain metastatic phenotype is NCI-H250, a SCLC model (70). H250 cells injected into the internal carotid artery presented with brain metastasis in 5 of 18 mice, with a suppression of PLGF activity completely abrogating brain metastasis. One drawback of using human cell lines in the mouse model is the lack of complete immune response. To overcome this challenge, syngeneic models have been generated using Lewis lung carcinoma (LLC) cells. These cells have the ability to produce metastatic tumors from orthotopic injection to multiple organs, including a low incidence of brain metastasis (75). Injection of the LLC cells into the internal carotid artery could also produce brain metastatic lesions (76).

Multiple labs have generated a number of site-specific metastatic models across multiple cancer types. In vivo selection of lung tumor cells with brain colonizing potential, followed by extraction/expansion in culture, and re-introduction in vivo has the ability to produce cell subclones with enhanced ‘brain seeking’ potential. In 2004, Yoshimasu et al. described an in vivo model of CNS metastasis using the SCC cell line EBC-1 (77). Ventricular injection of parental EBC-1 cells produced low incidence of both brain and bone metastasis. Extraction of these metastatic cells and repeated in vivo selection produced EBC-1 subclones with enhanced potential to colonize the brain or bone. The highly brain metastatic subclone of EBC-1 cells expressed significantly higher expression of integrin alpha-3 compared to EBC-1 parental cells or EBC-1 cells metastatic to the bone (77). Suppression of integrin alpha-3/beta-1 significantly diminished brain metastasis using the in vivo model. ADAM9, a member of the “a disintegrin and metalloprotease” family has also been associated with brain metastasis from NSCLC. The ADAM family members regulate cell-cell and cell-matrix interactions (78,79). ADAM9 mRNA was highly expressed in EBC-1 brain metastatic lines compared to EBC-1 parental and bone metastatic lines (73).

Over-expression of ADAM9 in A549 cells enhanced micro-metastatic foci in the brain. Another SCC cell line capable of brain metastasis in vivo is HARA (80). Again, in vivo selection after cardiac injection resulting in brain lesions produced a subclone with enhanced brain metastatic potential. This in vivo model has been used to begin to understand the recruitment and interplay between astrocytes and metastatic cells in metastatic growth (81).

The Massague lab has generated a number of site-specific metastatic models across multiple cancer types. In H2030 and PC9 cells (adenocarcinoma cell lines driven by KRAS and EGFR mutations, respectively), inter-cardiac injection of these cells, extraction and expansion in culture of brain lesions, and multiple rounds of in vivo selection produced cells that seeded the brain 100% of the time (82). One feature of this model is the ability to orthotopically implant cells into the lungs with resultant brain metastasis. The brain seeker lines compared to the parental cell lines displayed enriched activity of the WNT/TCF pathway. Genes in this pathway associated with metastasis were lymphoid enhancer-binding factor 1 (LEF1), homeobox B9 (HOXB9), and bone morphogenetic protein 4 (BMP4). The knockdown of LEF1 or HOXB9 significantly decreased the ability of the brain seeker lines to form metastases. Huang and colleagues used the PC9 brain seeker line to test a toxin directed at EGFR and urokinase receptor (uPAR) (83). They found that immunotoxin administration prolonged mouse survival.

Role of microRNAs in brain metastasis

miRNA biomarkers associated with CNS metastasis

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are noncoding endogenous RNA species that regulate gene expression at the post-transcriptional level [reviewed in (84)]. Dysregulation of miRNAs has been linked to the development and progression of multiple cancer types, but the role of miRNAs in CNS metastasis remains an emerging area of research. The stability of miRNAs in tissues and fluids makes them attractive candidates for use in predictive and prognostic markers (85,86). Multiple groups have explored
miRNA expression as biomarkers to stratify patients or identify CNS metastasis. Lu et al. (87) profiled miRNAs extracted from surgically resected Stage I lung tumors in search of signatures predictive of recurrence and relapse-free survival. Ten miRNAs were found to be differentially expressed in samples from patients who subsequently developed brain metastases: miR-1, -29c, -30d, -145*, -148a*, -187, -218, -375, -450b-3p, and -708*. Teplyuk et al. explored miRNA signatures in cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) to detect and distinguish CNS malignancies (88). Members of the miR-200 family (including miR-141 and miR-200a/b/c) were highly expressed in the CSF of patients with metastases from breast or lung but not in other pathologic conditions. Recently, Arora et al. demonstrated that miR-328 and miR-330-3p expression significantly distinguished seven patients with brain metastasis from six patients without brain metastasis (89). Thus, miRNA profiles may help to identify lung cancers more likely to metastasize to the brain.

**CNS metastasis mechanisms associated with miRNA function**

There are now efforts towards understanding the mechanistic role(s) of miRNAs in the brain metastatic phenotype. For instance, miR-378 has been reported to promote survival, invasion and migration in A549 cells through MMP2, MMP9 and VEGF (90). Arora et al. showed that overexpression of miR-328 increases NSCLC migration via regulation of PRKCA, a member of the VEGF-IL1 family (89). Cheng et al. have elucidated a PRKCA-dependent mechanism through which IL1-beta induces uPA expression and cellular migration in A549 NSCLC cells (91). Others report that miR-146a exerts a mechanistically similar metastasis-suppressing function (92). Overexpression of miR-146a inhibits the degradation of β-catenin and acts to suppress hnRNPC, which in turn reduces expression of uPA, uPAR, MT1-MMP and MMP1. Both increased expression of β-catenin and suppression of hnRNPC served to inhibit invasion and migration. The role of miRNAs in lung cancer metastasis to the CNS is just beginning to be understood, and may offer novel therapeutic targets against advanced lung cancer.

### Therapeutic opportunities against CNS metastasis

There is an urgent need to improve the clinical outcomes for patients who present with or develop CNS metastasis from primary lung tumors. With improved systemic treatment of primary lung lesions and enhanced imaging modalities, the incidence or detection of CNS metastasis will continue to increase. Current clinical regimens of surgery plus radiation (for solitary brain lesion) or radiation for multi-focal lesion have demonstrated infrequent clinical success. Selected targets that have been associated with CNS metastasis with known pharmacologic inhibitors are listed in Table 3. Demonstrated clinical benefits using EGFR-targeted therapies towards mutant EGFR expressing CNS lesions (97) gives credence to improved therapeutics with enhanced understanding of the genetics and molecular mechanisms of the CNS phenotype. The targeting of other ERBB family members may also prove to be a viable strategy for combating CNS metastases from lung or breast primary tumors (26). CNS lesions arising from mutant KRAS-expressing primary lesions may be susceptible to combined targeting of MAPK and PI3K signaling or SRC inhibitors. The demonstration that c-MET expression is associated with CNS metastatic events opens the possibility of exploiting c-MET inhibitors (98,99) in this setting. It is therefore crucial to further understand the driver events of CNS metastasis through the collection of patient-

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**Table 3 Selected molecular targets with potential therapeutic agents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Drugs</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EGFR</td>
<td>Cetuximab, erlotinib, gefitinib, afatinib, dacomitinib</td>
<td>(93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERBB2</td>
<td>Afatinib, dacomitinib, lapatinib</td>
<td>(93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N-cadherin</td>
<td>ADH-1</td>
<td>(94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEGFR1</td>
<td>Vandetanib, sorafenib, sunitinib, axitinib, cabozantinib, pazopanib</td>
<td>(95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CX3CR1</td>
<td>F1 hCX3CL1 analog</td>
<td>(96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MET</td>
<td>Onartuzumab, tivantinib</td>
<td>(93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CXCR4</td>
<td>Plerixafor</td>
<td>(95)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
matched primary and metastatic lesions for investigation as well as continued development of in vivo models capable of faithfully recapitulating the CNS metastatic phenotype from primary lung tumors. It will also be critical to test the ability of these agents to cross the BBB to affect the desired target.

Conclusions

Lung cancer continues to be a leading cause of cancer-related mortality throughout the world. The five-year survival rate for advanced, especially metastatic, disease is dismal. The colonization of the brain as a metastatic site contributes to the mortality of this disease, resulting in a dramatically reduced survival expectation. A thorough understanding of the genetics and molecular mechanisms that govern CNS metastasis from the lung are far from complete at this time. The emergence of next-generation sequencing along with the collection of patient-matched primary and CNS metastatic lesions offers a path forward towards a more complete understanding of the metastatic process and novel therapeutic avenues. Targeted approaches as seen with EGFR-targeted therapeutics positively affecting patient outcome with CNS metastasis offers hope that a full understanding of the CNS metastatic process will lead to better therapeutics and improved patient survival.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Genetic susceptibility to lung cancer and co-morbidities

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Abstract: Lung cancer is a leading cause of cancer death and disease burden in many countries. Understanding of the biological pathways involved in lung cancer aetiology is required to identify key biomolecules that could be of significant clinical value, either as predictive, prognostic or diagnostic markers, or as targets for the development of novel therapies to treat this disease, in addition to smoking avoidance strategies. Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have enabled significant progress in the past 5 years in investigating genetic susceptibility to lung cancer. Large scale, multi-cohort GWAS of mainly Caucasian, smoking, populations have identified strong associations for lung cancer mapped to chromosomal regions 15q [nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (nAChR) subunits: CHRNA3, CHRNA5], 5p (TERT-CLPTM1L locus) and 6p (BAT3-MSH5). Some studies in Asian populations of smokers have found similar risk loci, whereas GWAS in never smoking Asian females have identified associations in other chromosomal regions, e.g., 3q (TP63), that are distinct from smoking-related lung cancer risk loci. GWAS of smoking behaviour have identified risk loci for smoking quantity at 15q (similar genes to lung cancer susceptibility: CHRNA3, CHRNA5) and 19q (CYP2A6). Other genes have been mapped for smoking initiation and smoking cessation.

In chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which is a known risk factor for lung cancer, GWAS in large cohorts have also found CHRNA3 and CHRNA5 single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) mapping at 15q as risk loci, as well as other regions at 4q31 (HHIP), 4q24 (FAM13A) and 5q (HTR4). The overlap in risk loci between lung cancer, smoking behaviour and COPD may be due to the effects of nicotine addiction; however, more work needs to be undertaken to explore the potential direct effects of nicotine and its metabolites in gene-environment interaction in these phenotypes. Goals of future genetic susceptibility studies of lung cancer should focus on refining the strongest risk loci in a wide range of populations with lung cancer, and integrating other clinical and biomarker information, in order to achieve the aim of personalised therapy for lung cancer.

Keywords: Lung cancer; genetics; pulmonary disease; chronic obstructive; genome-wide association study (GWAS)

Submitted Aug 01, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 02, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.06
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.06

Introduction

Lung cancer is a leading cause of cancer death and disease burden in many countries (1,2). Despite the great progress made in several areas of oncology, the treatment and outcome of lung cancer has not improved significantly. Understanding of the biological pathways involved in lung cancer aetiology is required to identify key biomolecules that could be of significant clinical value, either as predictive, prognostic or diagnostic markers, or as targets for the development of novel therapies to treat this disease, in addition to smoking avoidance strategies.

Lung cancers, like all human tumours, are caused by abnormalities in DNA sequence or expression. Lung cancer is comprised of two main histologic subtypes: non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and small cell lung cancer (SCLC).

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NSCLC can now be classified by ‘driver’ mutations that occur in multiple oncogenes (3-5). However, much interest remains in the genetic susceptibility to lung cancer related to single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the germline (6,7), independent of somatic mutations that develop in the tumour.

This review will explore the latest concepts of genetic susceptibility to lung cancer. First, principles of study designs for genetic susceptibility will be outlined, particularly genome-wide association studies (GWAS), which have provided significant progress in the past 5 or more years in the field of lung cancer genetics. Next, GWAS reported for lung cancer will be described, together with candidate susceptibility genes discovered to date. Finally, GWAS for susceptibility to cigarette smoking behaviour and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) will be summarised, as related genetic markers for the most common cause of lung cancer (cigarette smoking) and a chronic disease risk factor for lung cancer (COPD).

Genetic susceptibility to lung cancer—study designs

The heritability of lung cancer susceptibility has been clearly established in numerous studies, including analyses of familial risk (8) and segregation analyses (9). However, genetic influence on lung cancer is moderate at best. For example, using the 9.6 million subject Swedish Family-Cancer database, Czene et al. estimated heritability at 8% (10) and in twin studies and a higher concordance for monozygotic than for dizygotic twins has been noted (11). With tobacco smoking being by far the strongest environmental cause, it is possible that the heritable effects of genes governing smoking behaviour, [given the high heritability of smoking habits, ~0.5 in twin studies (12)], rather those determining individual susceptibility to carcinogenesis may play a more important role. However, Lorenzo Bermejo et al. estimated the relative risk of lung cancer attributable to smoking according to the extent to which smokers transmit their smoking habits to the offspring (heritability of smoking), the prevalence of smoking in the general population, and the risk of lung cancer for smokers compared with non-smokers (13). They showed that the relative risk of lung cancer for the offspring of lung cancer patients attributable to smoking was 1.19 when published data on smoking practice were modelled suggesting familial cases of lung cancer cannot be attributed to shared smoking habits.

Given that there are apparent genetic determinants of lung cancer, there are a number of alternative study approaches that can be utilised to determine the genetic determinants of disease susceptibility.

Linkage analysis involves proposing a model to explain the inheritance pattern of phenotypes and genotypes observed in a pedigree (14). Linkage is evident when a gene that produces a phenotypic trait and its surrounding markers are coinherited. In contrast, those markers not associated with the anomalous phenotype of interest will be randomly distributed among affected family members as a result of the independent assortment of chromosomes and crossing over during meiosis. Association studies do not examine inheritance patterns of alleles; rather, they are case-control studies based on a comparison of allele frequencies between groups of affected and unaffected individuals from a population. A particular allele is said to be associated with the trait if it occurs at a significantly higher frequency among affected individuals as compared with those in the control group. The odds ratio of the trait in individuals is then assessed as the ratio of the frequency of the allele in the affected population compared with the unaffected population. The greatest problem in association studies is the selection of a suitable control group to compare with the affected population group. Genome-wide linkage analysis in family cohorts resulted in the identification of highly penetrant, low-frequency susceptibility genes for cancers, such as BRCA1 and BRCA2 for breast cancer and APC for colorectal cancer.

For lung cancer, several studies have attempted to identify susceptibility loci using a genome-wide linkage approach. However, while a few genetic loci that potentially harbour susceptibility genes have been identified, e.g., linkage of lung, laryngeal, and pharyngeal cancer in families to a region on chromosome 6q23-25 (15), no causal gene has been identified and, as with subsequent GWAS (see below), there is considerable overlap between the result for lung cancer and those for COPD, and lung function (16).

GWAS

Advances in array-based SNP genotyping technologies and haplotype mapping of the human genome (17) have presented the possibility of simultaneously determining millions of SNPs throughout the genome of an individual and this has allowed extension of association study design to allow hypothesis independent assessment of association across the genome. GWAS have revolutionized the study of genetic factors in complex common disease (18,19).
For more than 200 phenotypes, from common diseases to physiological measurements such as height and BMI and biological measurements such as circulating lipid levels, GWAS have provided compelling statistical associations for over hundreds of different loci in the human genome (www.gwascentral.org/). There are now clearly established approaches for GWAS including stringent genotype calling, quality control, population stratification (genomic controls) and statistical techniques (20). Due to the large number of statistical tests undertaken, carefully controlling for multiple testing using Bonferroni or false discovery rate (FDR) corrections is essential. A cluster of P-values below the 1% FDR from SNPs in one chromosomal location is defined as the region of ‘maximal association’ and is the first candidate gene region to examine further with analysis of secondary outcome measures, gene database searches, fine mapping to find the causal locus and replication in other cohorts/populations. It is unlikely that the SNP showing the strongest association will be the causal locus, as SNPs are chosen to provide maximal coverage of other variation in that region of the genome and not on biological function. Once a candidate region or gene is identified, gene expression can be compared between a selection of cases and controls and within individuals of different genotypes to provide further evidence for the genes involvement in disease. If linkage disequilibrium prevents the identification of a specific gene in a haplotype block then it may be necessary to utilize different racial and ethnic populations to hone in on the causative candidate gene that accounts for the genetic signal in GWAS (21).

Valuable insights into lung cancer susceptibility genes have been identified using the GWAS approach; however, the loci identified account for an extremely small proportion of the familial risk. The finding that loci identified through GWAS studies for common disease fail to account for all heritability of these conditions (termed missing heritability) is a subject of much discussion. There are a number of possible reasons that may account for this observation. These include gene–gene interaction, gene–environment interaction, and other types of genetic variation such as rare variants and structural variation and epigenetic heritability. In the future, the analysis of genome-wide copy number variation and/or rare variants through exome- or whole-genome sequencing, as is being applied to other complex diseases, may identify further loci responsible for inherited susceptibility to lung cancer (22). However one approach is to utilise novel analytical approaches to identify weakly associated variants whose effect may be lost in the GWAS approach due to the stringent significance level after multiple comparison correction. For example, utilisation of a less stringent multiple correction followed by gene pathway analysis can highlight genes involved in common biological pathways in the ‘grey area’ of SNPs whose association with disease status lies below the conventional level of genome-wide significance. Using a similar approach Zhang et al. performed a two-stage pathway analysis in GWAS of lung cancer in Han Chinese using gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) method. Four pathways (achPathway, metPathway, At1rPathway and rac1Pathway) were consistently significant and may provide new insights into the etiology of lung cancer (23).

GWAS of lung cancer

GWAS of susceptibility to lung cancer in smokers

A number of GWAS have now been performed in a range of populations, to test genetic influences in susceptibility to lung cancer (Table 1).

An initial, relatively small GWAS was reported in an Italian population, showing association with SNPs in the KLF6 gene, but not in replication cohorts (24). Another relatively small study of patients with familial lung cancer found associations with SNPs at chromosomal region 15q (27). Larger scale GWAS have since been performed in Caucasian populations, with replication cohorts (25,26,28-30,32) and meta-analyses (31,32,42). These GWAS have found statistically significant associations with SNPs, particularly in chromosomal regions 15q, 5p and 6p (Table 1). GWAS have also been undertaken in Asian populations with lung cancer (35-37,39,41), identifying some similar SNPs as detected in the studies of Caucasian populations, but also finding other SNPs conferring lung cancer risk distinctly in Asian populations (44).

In many of these studies, the observed associations with key SNPs were independent of smoking status or smoking history (25,26,29,32), although in some studies, SNPs (e.g., on 15q) were related to smoking behaviour (28). In studies of smokers, population attributable risk (PAR) for lung cancer for these SNPs, where calculated, were modest, ranging between 14% (26) and 18% (28), compared to the overwhelming PAR of >80% from tobacco smoking.

GWAS in specific lung cancer populations

GWAS have also been undertaken in never smokers,
Table 1 GWAS of lung cancer vs. controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Lung cancer cases (discovery set)*</th>
<th>Controls (discovery set)</th>
<th>Arrays [nos. of SNPs]</th>
<th>Chromosomal regions and main associated genes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spinola 2007 (24)</td>
<td>335 smokers</td>
<td>338 smokers</td>
<td>Affymetrix [116,204]</td>
<td>10p KLF6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amos 2008 (25)</td>
<td>1,154 smokers</td>
<td>1,137 smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [317,498]</td>
<td>15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hung 2008 (26)</td>
<td>1,989 smokers</td>
<td>2,625 smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [317,139]</td>
<td>15q CHRNA3, CHRNA5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu 2008 (27)</td>
<td>194 with familial lung cancer</td>
<td>219 smokers and non-smokers</td>
<td>Affymetrix [500,568 and 906,703]</td>
<td>15q various genes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorgeirsson 2008 (28)</td>
<td>1,024 smokers</td>
<td>32,244 controls</td>
<td>Illumina [306,207]</td>
<td>15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKay 2008 (29)</td>
<td>3,259 smokers</td>
<td>4,159 smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [315,194]</td>
<td>5p TERT-CLPTM1L, 15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang 2008 (30)</td>
<td>1,952 smokers</td>
<td>1,438 smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [511,919]</td>
<td>5p CLPTM1L, 6p BAT3-MSH5, 15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broderick 2009 (31)</td>
<td>1,978 smokers, and meta-analysis</td>
<td>1,438 smokers, and meta-analysis</td>
<td>Meta-analysis</td>
<td>5p TERT-CLPTM1L, 6p BAT3-MSH5, TNXB, 15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landi 2009 (32)</td>
<td>5,739 smokers</td>
<td>5,848 smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [515,922]</td>
<td>5p TERT-CLPTM1L, 15q CHRNA3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hsiung 2010 (33)</td>
<td>584 cases (never smoking females with lung adenocarcinoma)</td>
<td>585 controls (never smoking females)</td>
<td>Illumina [610,901]</td>
<td>5p15 TERT-CLPTM1L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li 2010 (34)</td>
<td>377 never smokers</td>
<td>377 never smokers</td>
<td>Illumina [373,397 and 592,532]</td>
<td>13q31.3 GPC5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miki 2010 (35)</td>
<td>1,004 with lung adenocarcinoma</td>
<td>1,900 controls</td>
<td>Illumina [610,901]</td>
<td>3q28 TP63, 5p15 TERT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoon 2010 (36)</td>
<td>621 cases (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>1,541 controls (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>Affymetrix [500,568]</td>
<td>3q29 C3orf21, 5p TERT-CLPTM1L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu 2011 (37)</td>
<td>2,331 cases (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>3,077 controls (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>Affymetrix [906,703]</td>
<td>3q28 TP63, 5p15 TERT-CLPTM1L, 13q12 MIPEP-TNFRSF19, 22q12 MTMR3-HORMAD2-LIF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahn 2012 (38)</td>
<td>446 never smokers</td>
<td>497 healthy controls</td>
<td>Affymetrix [906,703]</td>
<td>18p11 FAM38B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong 2012 (39)</td>
<td>833 cases with SCC</td>
<td>3,094 controls</td>
<td>Affymetrix [906,703]</td>
<td>12q23 SLC17A8-NR1H4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lan 2012 (40)</td>
<td>5,510 never-smoking female lung cancer cases</td>
<td>4,544 controls</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>3q28 TP63, 5p15, 6p21 HLA, 6q22 ROS1, DCBLD1, 10q25 VIT1A, 17q24 BPTF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiraishi 2012 (41)</td>
<td>1,722 cases (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>5,846 controls (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>Illumina [709,857]</td>
<td>3q28 TP63, 5p15 TERT, 6p21 BTNL2, 17q24 BPTF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timofoeva 2012 (42)</td>
<td>Meta-analysis: 14,900 cases (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>29,485 controls (smokers and never smokers)</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>5p15, 6p21, 15q25 for NSCLC; 9p21 for SCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim 2013 (43)</td>
<td>285 female never smokers with lung cancer</td>
<td>1,455 controls</td>
<td>Affymetrix [440,794]</td>
<td>2p16 NRXN1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In Tables 1 to 3, discovery study details have been included, and replication study samples sizes have not been included. For details, see http://www.genome.gov/gwastudies.
and also to address other lung cancer-related questions. A GWAS of lung cancer in never smokers in the USA, with replication cohorts, identified an association with SNPs at the 13q region, in the GPC5 gene (34). Studies have also examined genome-wide association in never smokers in Asian populations (38,40,43), finding new susceptibility loci that were different to the loci found for Caucasian populations. SNPs in the TERT gene on 5p15 were associated with lung adenocarcinoma as a specific lung cancer histology (32), whereas SNPs at 9p21 are associated with risk for lung squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) (42). Genome-environment interaction was tested in a GWAS of lung cancer risk and self-reported asbestos exposure (45). Whilst this pilot study was not sufficiently powered to find significant differences, a suggested gene-asbestos exposure interaction was seen for SNPs in C7orf54 on 7q32. In addition, a number of GWAS have identified SNPs that predict response to chemotherapy in patients with SCLC (46) and NSCLC (47), and other GWAS have explored SNPs related to prognosis and survival in patients with lung cancer [e.g., (48)].

Candidate genes for lung cancer susceptibility from GWAS

The discovery and replication studies from the GWAS (Table 1), and other replication studies since, have identified emerging patterns in candidate genes for lung cancer susceptibility [reviewed in (6,7,42)]. Consistent candidate genes for Caucasian smoking populations have been the neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (nAChR) subunits (cholinergic receptor, nicotinic, alpha 3 and 5: CHRNA3 and CHRNA5) at 15q25. Neuronal nAChRs are activated by acetylcholine or nicotine, and comprise subunits (pentamers) of α and β subunits. In the lungs, nAChRs are expressed in neurones, and also non-neuronal cells, including bronchial epithelial cells and lung cancer cells. Whilst SNPs in nAChRs may alter risk of lung cancer through smoking behaviour, these SNPs could also regulate direct effects of nicotine, through anti-apoptotic and proliferative effects, or effects of nicotine-derived carcinogens in tobacco smoke (6,7,49-51).

On the 5p15 locus, SNPs in the TERT and CLPTM1L genes have been associated in a number of GWAS of lung cancer and other cancers (52). The TERT gene encodes human telomerase reverse transcriptase, which is important in the maintenance of telomere length. CLPTM1L (cleft lip and palate transmembrane protein 1-like protein) may induce apoptosis in lung cells (29). The identified SNPs in TERT have generally been intronic, and in linkage disequilibrium with SNPs in CLPTM1L. On 6p21, BAT3 and MSH5 have emerged as signals in a number of GWAS. BAT3 (renamed BAG6, BCL2-associated athanogene 6) encodes a nuclear protein involved in DNA damage-induced apoptosis and modulation of p53 in response to genotoxic stress (7). The MSH5 [mutS homolog 5 (E. coli)] gene is involved in DNA mismatch repair.

Whilst the 5p15 SNPs have demonstrated replication in both Caucasian and Asian populations, this has not been the case for the 15q SNPs (40,53). This discordance may represent differences in lung cancer aetiology between smoking and never smoking populations (particularly where indoor air pollution from biomass fuels may be the predominant carcinogen). In the never smokers, especially in Asian female populations, other candidate genes emerge, for example, that are involved in receptor tyrosine kinase activity [ROS1, c-ros oncogene 1, receptor tyrosine kinase (40)], vesicle transport [VTI1A, vesicle transport through interaction with t-SNAREs 1A (40)] and cell adhesion [NRXN1, neurexin 1 (43)]. Unexpectedly, the transcription factor TP63 (tumor protein p63) is also a candidate marker in the never smoking populations. TP63 encodes a protein which is often used as an immunohistochemical marker of squamous cell carcinoma, a cancer strongly associated with tobacco smoking (54,55).

Many of these associations are novel for lung cancer susceptibility, and were not detected in previous candidate gene studies of lung cancer, which focused on metabolising enzymes [e.g., CYP1A1 (56-58)], oxidative stress pathways and other DNA repair mechanisms (7).

GWAS and lung cancer pharmacogenetics

The GWAS approach is now being extended to examine other related phenotypes in lung cancer. For example, Han et al. recently undertook a GWAS of survival in small-cell lung cancer patients treated with irinotecan plus cisplatin chemotherapy, and identified candidate SNPs that may be predictive of the clinical outcome (59).

GWAS of smoking behaviour

Of relevance to lung cancer aetiology, GWAS of smoking behaviour have been performed in large population cohorts (Table 2), and have focused on smoking initiation, smoking quantity (cigarettes per day) and success of smoking cessation. The interest for lung cancer susceptibility is not
only for causation from smoking, but also for SNPs that are common to both smoking behaviour and lung cancer, that could have direct biological effects.

**Smoking onset**

Onset of smoking has been associated with the 11p region, with BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), a neurotropin, identified as a possible candidate gene (61). Other regions identified with age of smoking initiation in a study of patients with COPD were 6p21 (HLA) and 2q21 (intergenic region) (63).

**Smoking quantity**

The intensity of smoking (smoking quantity) has been consistently associated in GWAS with SNPs in the 15q25 region (60-65), at the loci of nAChR genes (especially CHRNA3 and CHRNA5). Other loci include 19q (CYP2A6, a cytochrome P450 nicotine metabolising enzyme) (61-63, 66) and 8p (CHRNB3, a nAChR subunit) (62).

**Smoking cessation**

A range of biopsychosocial factors influence an individual’s ability to abstain from smoking (67). Genetic factors for smoking cessation identified from GWAS have centred around SNPs in the 9q region, including DBH (dopamine beta-hydroxylase) (61,63), which is involved in the metabolism of dopamine.

### GWAS of COPD

Lung cancer and COPD frequent coexist in at-risk smokers. Epidemiological evidence supports an association between the presence of COPD and increased risk of developing lung cancer. Common mechanisms for susceptibility to lung cancer and COPD, in addition to tobacco smoke, may involve biological processes such as inflammation, epithelial-mesenchymal transition, abnormal repair, oxidative stress, and cell proliferation. In addition, genomic and epigenomic changes are likely to alter biological pathways, leading to susceptibility to lung cancer and COPD (68,69). Therefore, studying genetic influences in COPD could yield greater insight into the shared pathogenesis of lung cancer and COPD. Importantly, genetic epidemiological principles should be considered when designing and interpreting studies of COPD and lung cancer, because of the shared aetiological and possibly genetic factors (70).

### GWAS of susceptibility to COPD

A number of GWAS have been performed for COPD (Table 3), albeit a smaller number of studies than the lung cancer GWAS to date.

GWAS have so far been undertaken in the Framingham cohort (71); Bergen (Norway) COPD Cohort (with replication in other cohorts) (72); combined Bergen cohort with National Emphysema Treatment Trial (NETT) and Evaluation of COPD Longitudinally to Identify Predictive Surrogate Endpoints (ECLIPSE) study subjects (73); combined four cohorts [ECLIPSE, Normative Aging Study, Bergen (Norway) COPD Cohort and COPD Gene] (74); and a combination of 15 cohorts (75).

### Candidate genes for COPD from GWAS

Several regions significantly associated with COPD have

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**Table 2** GWAS of smoking behaviour (selected studies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Arrays (nos. of SNPs)</th>
<th>Chromosomal regions and main associated genes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liu 2010 (60)</td>
<td>41,150 from 20 cohorts</td>
<td>Various (&gt;500,000)</td>
<td>15q CHRNA3 and CHRNA5 with smoking quantity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco and Genetics</td>
<td>74,053 from 16 cohorts</td>
<td>Various (&gt;500,000)</td>
<td>10q25 various genes, 15q CHRNA3, 19q EGLN2 with smoking quantity; 11p BDNF with smoking initiation; 9q DBH with smoking cessation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorgeirsson 2010 (62)</td>
<td>31,266 and 46,481 subjects from cohorts</td>
<td>Various (&gt;500,000)</td>
<td>8p CHRN3, 15q CHRNA3 and CHRNA5, 19q CYP2A6 with smoking quantity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siedlinski 2011 (63)</td>
<td>3,441 ever-smoking patients with COPD</td>
<td>Illumina (&gt;500,000)</td>
<td>15q CHRNA3 and CHRNA5, 19q CYP2A6 with smoking quantity; 2q21 intergenic region, 6p21 HLA with smoking initiation; 9q DBH with smoking cessation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
emerged from the COPD GWAS to date (Table 3). At the 15q locus (similar to the GWAS for lung cancer and for smoking behaviour), SNPs in the nAChR subunit genes (CHRNA5, CHRNA3) were associated with COPD (72,75), possibly indicating a link with smoking intensity as an aetiological factor, although direct effects should also be considered (76). Similarly, association at 19q13 may be related to smoking behaviour [e.g., CYP2A6 (74)].

Other novel associations have been found for COPD in these GWAS. At 4q31, hedgehog interacting protein (HHIP) has been identified as a candidate in two studies (71,72). HHIP encodes a membrane glycoprotein that is an inhibitor of hedgehog signalling, which is involved in development processes. Gene expression studies in BEAS-2B bronchial epithelial cell lines implicate HHIP in extracellular matrix and cell proliferation (77). At 4q24, FAM13A (family with sequence similarity 13, member A) has been detected in two GWAS (73,74), and also in a genetic association in which SNPs were related to both COPD and lung cancer, indicating a possible shared genetic pathway (78). FAM13A contains a Rho GTPase-activating protein-binding domain, inhibits signal transduction and responds to hypoxia; however, its full function in the lung remains to be determined. At the 5q region, HTR4 [5-hydroxytryptamine (serotonin) receptor 4] was associated with COPD in smokers; its function in airways disease may involve regulation of cytokine release (75).

Summary and clinical implications

Main findings to date from GWAS

Whilst lung cancer is predominantly caused by cigarette smoking, a genetic component to susceptibility is well-recognised in epidemiological studies. GWAS have now been completed in lung cancer and the related phenotypes of smoking behaviour and COPD. Large scale, multi-cohort GWAS of lung cancer in mainly Caucasian, smoking populations have identified strong associations for lung cancer mapped to chromosomal regions 15q (CHRNA3, CHRNA5), 5p (TERT-CLPTM1L locus) and 6p (BAT3-MSH5). Some studies in Asian populations of smokers have found similar risk loci, whereas other GWAS, particularly in never smoking Asian females, have identified associations in other chromosomal regions that are distinct from the smoking-related genetic loci. GWAS of smoking behaviour have identified risk loci for smoking quantity at 15q (similar genes to lung cancer susceptibility: CHRNA3, CHRNA5) and also at 19q (CYP2A6). Other genes have been mapped for smoking initiation and smoking cessation. In COPD, GWAS in large cohorts have also found NACHr SNPs mapping at 15q as risk loci, as well as other regions at 4q31 (HHIP), 4q24 (FAM13A) and 5q (HTR4). The overlap in risk loci between lung cancer, smoking behaviour and COPD may be due to the effects of nicotine addiction; however, more work needs to be undertaken to explore the potential direct effects of nicotine and its metabolites in gene-environment interaction in these phenotypes.

Applications and future directions

From the evidence presented to date, GWAS have been useful not only in addressing genetic influences in lung cancer susceptibility, but also gene-environment interaction in terms of smoking as causation, as well as COPD as a risk factor for lung cancer. The translation of findings from the lung cancer and related GWAS could in the future enable profiling of an individual's risk of lung cancer, biomarkers for diagnosis, and markers for prognosis and therapy.
The challenge now will be to combine genomics (79), epigenomics (80), transcriptomics (81-83) and proteomics profiling to improve the management of patients with lung cancer and related comorbidities (68). Future studies should include DNA sequencing of lung tumours and lung tissue, and network analysis of genomic information and clinical phenotypes (3,84,85). Goals of future genetic susceptibility studies of lung cancer should now be focused on refining the strongest risk loci in a wide range of populations with lung cancer, and integrating other clinical and biomarker information, in order to achieve the aim of personalised therapy for lung cancer (4), through enhanced diagnosis, prognosis, prevention and management.

Acknowledgements
This work was supported by Asthma, Allergy & Inflammation Research (AAIR) (JWH), NHMRC Career Development Fellowship (IV), NHMRC Practitioner Fellowship (KF), and project grants from NHMRC, Queensland Health and Medical Research, The Prince Charles Hospital Foundation, and Cancer Council Queensland.

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Yang IA, Holloway JW, Fong KM. Genetic susceptibility to lung cancer and co-morbidities. J Thorac Dis 2013;5(S5):S454-S462. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.06
Non-neuronal cholinergic system in airways and lung cancer susceptibility

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Abstract: In the airway tract acetylcholine (ACh) is known to be the mediator of the parasympathetic nervous system. However ACh is also synthesized by a large variety of non-neuronal cells. Strongest expression is documented in neuroendocrine and in epithelial cells (ciliated, basal and secretory elements). Growing evidence suggests that a cell-type specific ACh expression and release do exist and act with local autoparacrine loop in the non-neuronal airway compartment. Here we review the molecular mechanism by which ACh is involved in regulating various aspects of innate mucosal defense, including mucociliary clearance, regulation of macrophage activation as well as in promoting epithelial cells proliferation and conferring susceptibility to lung carcinoma onset. Importantly this non-neuronal cholinergic machinery is differently regulated than the neuronal one and could be specifically therapeutically targeted.

Keywords: Cholinergic system; non-neuronal compartment; innate defense; cancer susceptibility; actionable target

Submitted Jun 04, 2013. Accepted for publication Jun 05, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.06.01

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.06.01

Introduction

Acetylcholine (ACh) is one of the main regulators of airway function and one of the most powerful known bronchoconstrictors and stimulators of secretion. However it is also involved in regulating less acute mechanisms, such as airways remodeling which takes place in pathologic settings and in response to immunomodulation (1). As a consequence, pharmacological manipulation of cholinergic signaling—mostly inhibitory—is a key option among treatments of common lung diseases, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma. On the other hand, it is now well documented that various non-neuronal cells are capable of ACh synthesis and release (e.g., keratinocytes, lymphocytes, placental trophoblast and endothelial cells) and that non-neuronal ACh is also present in the airway epithelium where it is believed to regulate cell proliferation (2) (Table 1).

On the airway surface, at least twelve types of epithelial cells can be identified whereas other five types can be found in the airway glands; among them differentiating or intermediate elements can be identified too. The most important function of the respiratory epithelium is mediated by the ciliated cells which provide the driving force for mucociliary clearance, namely the cleaning of the airway surface from inhaled particles by transporting a mucous layer towards the larynx. Ciliated cells constitute form 32% to 55% of tracheal epithelial cells (3). They feature columnar structure in the trachea and large bronchi (approximately 20 μm long and 7 μm wide) whereas decrease in height towards small bronchi and bronchioli. They also structure microvilli that protrude into the lumen. Notably on their surface compartment is located the cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) protein, which—when structurally altered in consequence to point mutations affecting the corresponding coding gene—is
causally linked to cystic fibrosis onset. Submucosal glands producing the carbohydrate-rich glycoproteins ('mucins') and lipids of the mucous layer are known as 'non-ciliated cells'. Classical goblet cells account for 9% in the human trachea and are almost absent from human distal bronchioli (3). Smaller airways contain cells with protruding apical region harboring few microvilli, abundant smooth or rough endoplasmic reticulum, and secretory granules smaller than those found in goblet cells: in distal airways they identified the Clara cells. Basal cells account approximately for 30% of tracheal epithelial cells and are found in larger airways only. Finally, there are—rather infrequent—specialized epithelial cells that are capable of producing conspicuous amounts of acetylcholine; among these there are neuroendocrine cells that origin from different precursors from those of other epithelial cells. They generally occur solitary in the airway epithelium, or clustered as neuroepithelial bodies (NEBs) preferentially located at bronchial branching (4). They contain, in their basal compartment, dense core granules, mainly composed by bioactive amines and neuropeptides. NEBs prevail in embryo and during the neonatal period and, by functioning as oxygen sensors, are correlated with lung maturation (5). The oxygen sensor function, however, has not been completely established yet; however more recent evidence suggests that NEBs are myelinated vagal afferents belonging to the subpopulation of the myelinated mechano-sensitive vagal airway receptors (6). The role of solitary pulmonary neuroendocrine cells is still partially unclear, probably they are involved in fetal and newborn lung development including regulation of branching morphogenesis, cellular growth and maturation. It has been demonstrated that, in adult mice, they are associated with stem cell niches in proximal and distal airways, and it has been proposed that they contribute to the protection of stem cells from environmental agents thus promoting stem cell renewal (7). Finally, an equally infrequent cell type is represented by the so-called 'brush cells' (characterized by an apical brush of microvilli) (8). Tracheobronchial brush cells express components of the taste-signaling cascade and are hence considered chemosensory cells. It has also been proposed that they may sense bacterial colonization and are useful to initiate defense mechanisms (9).

**ACh synthesis and recycling**

**Cholinergic nerve fibers**

Acetylcholine is synthesized in the axoplasm by choline...
acetyltransferase (ChAT) from choline—taken up from the extracellular space—and acetyl coenzyme A (acetyl-CoA) which is produced in mitochondria. This uptake represents the rate-limiting step in neuronal ACh synthesis and it is realized through a high-affinity choline transporter (CHT1) (10). Once generated in the axoplasm, the ACh is stocked into small synaptic vesicles. The process is mediated by the vesicular acetylcholine transporter (VACHT), a twelve transmembrane domain protein which acts as a H+/ACh exchanger. Inside each vesicle there are up to 10,000 molecules of ACh bound in a matrix enriched with proteoglycan SV2. The depolarization of the nerve terminal triggers exocytotic release of ACh from the vesicles into the extracellular space; once there, ACh is able to interact with two classes of cholinergic receptors: (I) metabotropic muscarinic receptors (MR): G protein-coupled receptors with seven transmembrane domains, having five different isoforms (M1-M5); (II) ionotropic nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChR) which are cationic channels having two ACh binding sites and structured as hetero- or homopentamers (11,12). The action of ACh terminates quite rapidly being spatially limited by cleavage into acetate and choline via the acetylcholine-esterase (AChE). This efficient enzyme is synthesized by cholinergic neurons themselves and guarantees equilibrium between ACh production and its degrading capacity. Choline is thus taken up again at the nerve terminal via CHT1, and a new cycle of ACh synthesis and release is to begin (1).

**Non-neuronal cells**

Non-neuronal ACh synthesis system identifies a philogenetically old process which is detectable also in bacteria and plants (1,13). Indeed some of the enzymes and transporters of cholinergic neurons have evolved relatively recently and cannot be found in the non-neuronal cholinergic system. Each cell includes an uptake mechanism for choline which represents a necessary element for the synthesis of plasma membrane lipids, in particular phosphatidylcholine. There are a number of plasma membrane choline transporters, but only few cholinergic non-neuronal cells are capable of expressing the high-affinity choline transporter CHT1. An alternative way for ACh synthesis is provided by carnitine acetyltransferase (CarAT) which, although in principle less efficient than ChAT, plays a key role in ACh synthesis in skeletal muscle fibres (14). VACHT and vesicular storage mechanisms for ACh, in non-neuronal cholinergic cells, are still unclear, but it is widely accepted that they do not imply exocytosis. In fact, there is evidence of ACh release via plasma membrane-bound polyspecific organic cation transporters (OCTs) (15). These electrogenic transporters are bidirectional and their driving forces are represented by substrate concentration and membrane potential. A proteolipid known as ‘mediatophore’ is also involved in the release of ACh, either directly from the cytoplasm or by forming the fusion pore between the synaptic vesicle and the plasma membrane. It is part of the vacuolar H+-ATPase (V-ATPase, V₀ subunit c) that is predominantly targeted to acidic organelles such as lysosomes, endosomes and secretory vesicles (16,17). V-ATPase complex is localized to the plasma membrane in human lung microvascular endothelial cells, so that ‘mediatophore’ could mediate ACh release from these cells (18). Once released, ACh can be cleaved by esterases which are less specific than AChE; among them the most important is butyrylcholinesterase (BChE) (19).

**Choline transporters in the airway epithelium**

It has been demonstrated that several systems of choline uptake and transport can be detected, featuring a cell-specific distribution. For instance, the high-affinity choline transporter CHT1, known from the nervous system, is localized to the apical membrane of the ciliated cells in the rat trachea (20). This finding has been validated by in situ-hybridization, Western blotting of abraded tracheal epithelium, and RT-PCR of tracheal epithelium obtained by laser-assisted microdissection which have led to the identification of a molecule featuring the same biochemical properties and immunophenotype of CHT1. Overall these data put in evidence the existence of high affinity uptake of choline from the airway lining fluid into ciliated cells via a transport system that has been originally thought to be specific for neurons; nevertheless it remains still unclear how other epithelial cholinergic cells, lacking CHT1, are capable of ACh synthesis. In fact, airway epithelial cells express additional choline transport systems, which can work alone or in parallel with CHT1 in specific cell types. For example, A549 cells (human lung adenocarcinoma cells) co-express, in addition to CHT1, a sodium-independent choline transport system, that relies on a transmembrane H+ gradient and which is sensitive to amiloride (21).

Apart from CHT1, choline transporters can be classified into two large families: choline-specific transporter-like proteins (CTL family) and polyspecific organic cation transporters (OCT family); members of both families are
expressed in the lung. CTL1, the most relevant member of the CTL family, detectable by Western blotting in human lung extracts, is expressed in A549 cells and participates predominantly to choline uptake in this cell line (22). Among the polyspecific OCT family members, OCT1 and OCT2 (but not OCT3) do transport choline: OCT1 is expressed in the mouse, rat and human bronchial epithelium, and immunohistochemical stain has showed a predominant localization in the apical membrane of ciliated cells (23). OCT1 expression, in the airway epithelium, is cell type-specific: rat studies confirmed that OCT1-immunoreactivity is selective for ciliated cells but absent in secretory, brush and basal cells (23).

On the other side, OCT2 is expressed in human, but not in mouse, bronchial epithelium. In human bronchi, OCT2-immunoreactivity is predominant in the luminal membrane of ciliated cells, rarely found in basal cell membranes, and absent from goblet cells (23). In OCT1/OCT2 double-knockout mice, tracheal epithelial ACh content is quite elevated instead of being, as expected, reduced; thus, despite OCT1 and OCT2 are capable of choline translocation across the plasma membrane, they are not crucial for providing choline for epithelial ACh synthesis (23). In conclusion, there is a multiplicity of choline uptake systems in airway epithelial cells with a cell type-specific distribution and a distinct apical vs. basolateral polarization.

**ACh synthesis in the airway epithelium**

Notwithstanding the presence of choline acetyltransferase enzyme (ChAT—responsible for the production of Ach—has been undoubtedly documented), the real identity of the ACh synthesizing enzyme in the individual airway epithelial cell types is nowadays not completely known. First, it is important to underline that there is a great diversity among ChAT variants, although they are all encoded by the same gene. These differences are so marked that the various ChAT variants react with different antisera. The mammalian ChAT gene contains three non-coding exons (termed R-, M- and N-exon in mouse and rat models) and, depending on species, 15-16 coding exons. The sequence encoding for VACht is inserted between the two not transduced exons R- and N-. This peculiar gene structure codifying for ChAT and VACht is known as ‘cholinergic gene locus’ (24). Multiple transcripts derive from alternative splicing processes; a numbers of these variants can be found in mouse and rat models, and at least six are known in humans. In the central nervous system, all of these variants are expressed with the M-type ChAT-mRNA usually dominating, while in the bronchial epithelium, expression of non-coding exons M- (in rat), N- and S- (in monkey) has been identified. Different ChAT protein variants can also result from alternative splicing in the coding region. For example, in central nervous system, in addition to the 69 kDa (cChAT), a protein deriving from the removal of 6-9 coding exons can be identified: this form is prevalent in peripheral autonomic neurons (pChAT); whereas, in the rat tracheal epithelium, only the complete form of the enzyme has been detected. These findings have been confirmed by immunohistochemistry studies, that have documented the presence of cChAT in all epithelial cell types of trachea; in more distal airways, cChAT-immunolabelling of ciliated and secretory cells was generally less intense than in the trachea, whereas endocrine cells and brush cells were particularly cChAT-immunolabelled (25,26). Within tracheal ciliated cells, a more intense labeling of the apical cytoplasmatic region was registered: this evidence suggests an earlier ACh synthesis in trachea then in distal bronchi. In these cells cChAT is located close to the high-affinity uptake system for choline CHT1. The latter allows the concentration of the entire ACh synthesizing machinery at the apical side of the ciliated cell thus suggesting its luminal release. These data altogether point to a rather homogenous expression of a single variant of ChAT (ChAT translated from M-type ChAT m-RNA) in various airway epithelial cell types. There are, however, several data on protein level that indicate a more complicated situation. In particular, in bronchial epithelial extracts, ChAT-labeling of human bronchial epithelium with an antibody that recognized 54 and 41 kDa proteins has been reported (27). These controversial findings cannot be entirely justified through a possible cross reaction with a closely related or even unrelated protein, but, in this regard, several detailed studies are still in progress.

**Mechanisms of ACh release in the airway epithelium**

In neurons, VACht shuffles Ach from the axoplasm into synaptic vesicles. The particular ‘cholinergic gene locus’ plays a key role in orchestrating the coordinate expression of ChAT and VACht thus balancing production and release of ACh. In the airway epithelium, VACht labeling has been demonstrated by immunohistochemistry in trachea and bronchial neuroepithelial and secretory cells, as well. Human small cell lung carcinoma cell lines, derived
from airway neuroendocrine cells, express VACHT along with ChAT, and ACh release from these cells is sensitive to vesamicol (a VACHT inhibitor) (28). Ciliated cells, however, seem to utilize a non-vesicular ACh release mechanism. OCT1 and OCT2 are localized at the apical membrane of ciliated airway epithelial cells while OCT3 is concentrated at the basolateral membrane of several cell types. This distribution permit to hypothesize that direction (release or uptake) of ACh is determined by concentration gradient and membrane potential. The apical localization of OCT1 and OCT2 in airway ciliated cell suggests a complete cycle of ACh synthesis, release and reuptake of choline between the ciliated cell and the luminal airway lining fluid.

On the other hand, the role of OCT3 is less clear: probably, OCT3 requires expression of additional proteins to serve as an ACh transporter (23). These polyspecific transporters are the target of a number of drugs which either compete with transport of other cations or block transport without being transported themselves. Very important for airway pharmacology, nicotine and corticosteroids (corticosterone, fluticasone, and budesonide) could block ACh release by OCT1 and OCT2 in vitro. Consequently, inhibition of non-neuronal ACh release is a non-genomic effect of corticosteroids that clearly discriminates non-neuronal from neuronal cholinergic mechanisms in the airways (29).

As discussed above, in the nervous system the cholinergic signaling finishes at short distances from the site of ACh release since ACh is divided into acetate and choline through the action of the AChE. A number of other esterases, among which BChE, also coexist. The high speed of AChE effect allows some considerations. First it should be noted that the amount of the ACh generated in the airways is much less than that one produced at nervous system level and that the intraluminal ACh release takes place mainly through transmembrane mechanisms and not by exocytosis.

As a consequence several doubt emerged regarding the real extracellular effect of that ACh which is released by the non-neuronal cholinergic system localized in the airways. Besides it is conceivable that ACh could display intracellular effects, mainly mediated by intracytoplasmic receptors. On the other hand, ACh degradation capacity in the airways is lower than that in the nervous system, since it is mainly mediated by the BChE enzyme. These data are coherent with a potential paracrine/autocrine loop of ACh on epithelial cells (1,30). Indeed immunohistochemical studies confirm that ACh activity prevails in the nervous fibers among smooth muscles, whereas BChE is directly detectable into smooth muscle cells. Thus, although the mechanisms of ACh degradation in the airways has not been yet completely elucidated, preliminary data allow to hypothesize that, in this setting, lower concentration of released ACh might act through a reverberating loop on cells themselves.

**Targets and functions of non-neuronal cholinergic system**

The effects of the ACh released through the non-neuronal system can be divided on the bases of the site of release itself, luminal or basal, thus displaying specific effects on the target cells.

**Luminal side**

When released on the luminal side, ACh can reach a limited number of cells, among which epithelial cells, macrophages and many elements of the immunitary system. Both epithelial cells and macrophages present muscarinic and nicotinic receptors that could interact with the released ACh. In particular the epithelial cells express M1 and M3 receptors and the α and β subunits of the nAChR receptor (31). Through the binding of these receptors, the ACh regulates proliferation of epithelial cells, mucous secretion, and the release of GM-CSF and IL-8, which stimulates ciliary beat. Macrophages express the isoform 3 of the muscarinic receptor and several subunits of the nicotinic one, among which the α9/α10 units (32). M3 receptor activation induces in vitro the release of pro-inflammatory mediators, whereas the stimulation of the nAChR suppresses macrophages activation with a more general anti-inflammatory effect. It should be noted that, due to their localization, macrophages cannot be reached by the ACh produced by the neuronal cholinergic system.
and thus identify a specific target of the ACh derived from non-neuronal system and released from the luminal side of epithelial cells.

**Latero-basal side**

A clear distinction among neuronal and non-neuronal derived ACh is really difficult at cellular basal side. In mouse models, epithelial cells at tracheal level can release ACh following serotonin stimulation thus directly inducing bronchoconstriction; this effect is susceptible to atropine, an inhibitor of muscarinic receptors (33). Few data are currently available on the effect of non-neuronal ACh on smooth muscle cells. It is conceivable that ACh could reach structures close to the epithelium or could be caught by the epithelium itself. Fibroblasts localized in the sub-epithelial lining represent a selective and specific ACh target (34). Below the basal lamina, several immune system and nervous cells can be found. Sensitive and vagal neurons express several nAChR subunits and are so connected to the epithelial cells to be sensitive to inhaled nicotine (35). Their stimulation induces local release of neuropeptides that, by activating local defense response, causes local irritation and provoke cough reflex.

**Relevance of non-neuronal cholinergic system in pathogenesis and therapy of airways diseases**

Deregulation of muscarinic receptors is a frequent feature of airway diseases such as asthma and COPD, and the use of muscarinic antagonists represents an important strategy in pharmacological treatment of COPD. The contribution of non-neuronal ACh in patho-mechanisms is still partially unclear. A number of data, however, suggests that epithelial ACh may be increased in airway inflammatory diseases, thus contributing to activation of immune cells and to bronchoconstriction. On the contrary, total airway ACh content is reduced in patients affected by cystic fibrosis, and expression of the non-neuronal ACh synthesis and release machinery is down-regulated in acute allergic airway inflammation. The stimulatory effect of ACh on epithelial cell proliferation, the presence of nAChR on airway epithelial cells and the association between use of tobacco and lung cancer clearly suggest the presence of a possible association of the intrinsic epithelial cholinergic system with the development of lung cancer. Small cell lung cancer cells (originating from neuroendocrine cells of the epithelium) and squamous carcinoma cells synthesize and release ACh, and this acts as an autocrine growth factor, operating both via muscarinic M3 and nAChR receptors. Most recently, it has been demonstrated that a variation in a region of 15q25.1 containing nAChR genes coding for subunits α3, α5, β4 is correlated with an increase in lung cancer risk. Nicotinic effects on cell proliferation are summarized in Figure 1. In summary, non-neuronal ACh release is involved in plastic changes and in the activation of the immune response, in ongoing chronic inflammatory airways disease. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that disturbances of this system directly contribute to the development of lung cancer, through stimulation of pro-mitotic activity. In light of the aforementioned evidences, it is reasonable to consider airways non-neuronal cholinergic system as a potential pharmacological target in the treatment of inflammatory and proliferative lung diseases.

**Cholinergic system and lung cancer**

Lung cancer is the number one cause of death for solid tumors in Western world and smoking habit is associated to its development in the vast majority of cases. Although the primary mechanism of smoking-induced carcinogenesis is related to smoke’s carcinogens, recent data show that nicotine and nitrosamines bind to nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (nAChR) on lung cancer cells to stimulate tumor growth and inhibit apoptotic death program. Mechanisms of cholinergic signal activation in lung cancer are represented in Figure 2. These experimental observations are consequent to the demonstration that cholinergic system is not only confined in nervous system but, as demonstrated above, is ubiquitous and specifically, present in airways epithelial cells and lung cancer cells. Thus the stimulatory effect of ACh on epithelial cell proliferation, the presence of nACh on airway epithelial cells as well as the exposure to tobacco smoking create a strong rationale to deeper investigate the possible link between non neuronal cholinergic system and susceptibility to lung cancer development. For instance it is well known that small cell lung cancer (SCLC) (36)—which originates from neural crest—and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) are able to synthesize and produce ACh, which in turn acts as autocrine growth factor, by linking both M3 and nACh receptors (37). nAChR subunit α3β2 mediates smoking related toxic effects through the activation p21, Bcl-2, NF-κB e STAT-1 signaling; the 7α subunit nAChR is involved in damage on keratinocytes on the oral cavity through the activation of MAP kinases and JAK/STAT pathway (38). Gene expression
Figure 1 Nicotine: activation of cell proliferation. In quiescent cell there is the absence of the association between \( \beta \)-annexin, src and nAchR. Rb is dephosphorylated and binds the transcription factor E2F which, as a consequence, cannot be active on cell proliferation. The binding of nicotine to its receptor nAcR induces formation of a holigomeric complex between \( \beta \)-annexin, src and nAchR. The latter activates MAPKs activation and in detail the binding of BRAF and the complex RB-E2F. Undetermined mitogenic stimuli (e.g., cyclins) can enable the E2F transcription factor to act on gene promoters and lead the cell to the phase S of the cell cycle. The increase of intracellular calcium levels which is consequent to nicotine binding to the nAchR promote the activation of ERK signaling. As a consequence EKK1 activates the transcription factor NFkB which sustains cell proliferation.

Profiling analyses have been thus addressed to evaluate how tobacco and nicotine can affect receptor expression: in both cases a 7\( \alpha \) nAChR-mediated over regulation of cell growth factor and proliferation can be found.

It should be remembered that several allelic variant exist for the vast majority of genes (about 80% of human genome). Genetic polymorphism can be defined as a genetic variation that occurs in more than 1% of a population, whereas a genetic mutation identifies a variation which occur in less than 0.1% of a population. Several types of polymorphisms do exist: the more frequent are single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) which are classified based on their position in the context of the genes: (I) cSNP which are localized in codifying exons and are thus able to induce a variation in the aminocacidd sequence of the protein; (II) pSNPs or peripheral polymorphisms which affect regulatory regions (e.g., promoters, enhancers), introns (splicing regions) and could determine interference which the expression levels and the structure of the proteins; (III) rSNPs or random polymorphisms, which are detected in intergenic regions (which represent 98.5% of the whole genome) and which have no direct effect on gene expression but could be relevant due to their diagnostic potential according to linkage disequilibrium phenomenon. Indeed SNPs analysis is becoming of great relevance in predictive oncology with the aim to stratify patients based on their risk of cancer onset based on the presence of certain SNPs.

From this perspective, recent studies on lung cancer susceptibility have drawn researchers’ attention on the SNPs of the gene encoding for the nAChR. Interestingly genome-wide sequencing analyses have provided evidences

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of a significant association between NSCLC risk, smoking behavior and polymorphisms on 15q21 locus, containing genes encoding for α3, α5 (CHRNA5, CHRNA3 genes) and β4 (CHRNB4 gene) subunits (39-41). In particular a non-synonymous substitution (D398N, substitution of aspartic acid with asparagine in position 398) encoding for a highly conserved region of the receptor (M2 domain) represents one of the most powerful markers of disease risk. That haplotype has been identified among Europeans and Nord Americans, whereas it is really rare among Asiatic and African populations (data from HapMap database, website at www.hapmap.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The high SNPs frequency in the 15q21 gene (the rs8034191 e rs1051730 SNPs are detectable in about 50% of Europe population) makes the study of the genes localized in that locus very relevant also in a public health perspective and identifies CHRNA3 e CHRNA5 very promising actionable targets. It has been also documented that SNPs in that genetic regions are related to nicotine dependence; consequently the correlation between lung cancer onset and smoking habit has been also investigated. As expected the risk for disease onset is higher among smokers than in never smokers whereas no correlation has been found within respect to neoplastic histotypes. It is conceivable that 15q21 polymorphisms although not playing a causal role in inducing tumor development (no direct pathogenetic role), might be related to the induction of smoking habit, which, in turn, is the most relevant risk factor for lung cancer. Thus, genetic variability of the long arm of chromosome 15 is directly related to nicotine dependence and consequently, might expose to the risk of smoke-related disease, among which the most important is lung cancer (39).

Overall these findings show how genetic interindividual variability plays a central role in the pathogenesis of complex or polygenic diseases, among which cancer, by modulating the mechanisms by which each subject reacts to external stimuli (e.g., nicotine exposure by regulating ligand-receptor affinity) and by affecting inclination towards given environmental stimuli (e.g., persistence of smoking habit despite its predictable consequences). From this perspective, nAChRs are becoming interesting targets both in lung cancer screening and in molecular tailored therapy. It has been demonstrated that in SCC the cholinergic signaling is up-regulated and in this scenario, nicotine exposure can activate different oncogenic pathways, being responsible for tumor spread and neoplastic angiogenesis. Thus pharmacological inhibition of cholinergic receptors—both nicotinic and muscarinic—might be a promising tool to limit basal and nicotine-stimulated tumor growth.

**Molecular mechanisms of cholinergic signal in lung cancer**

According to what has been previously described, correlation between lung cancer onset and nicotine depends on two different mechanisms: (I) inter-individual genetic variability (polymorphisms in the locus 15q21) which is responsible for a higher susceptibility or predisposition to the onset of lung cancer, mainly due to an increased nicotine dependence; (II) the proliferative and anti-apoptotic effect on neoplastic cells played directly by nicotine through cholinergic receptors activation. Historically the first study which has shown a nicotine effect different from neuronal signaling is that of Schuller and coll (42). The authors demonstrated a proliferative effect mediated by nicotine.
in a series of lung cancer cell lines, through the increased release of growth factors (VEGF, HGF, TGF-β, PDGF, TGF-α) and their receptors (VEGFR, MET, EGFR). In detail, nicotine induced EGFR transactivation through the increase of intacellular calcium which is responsible for the activation of several kinases downstream EGFR. It has been reported that in gastric cancer nicotine is able to induced the overexpression of VEGFR through the activation of COX-2; the latter induce an increase in neoplastic angiogenic and invasion capacity which involves some elements of extracellular matrix, such as metalloproteases (MMP2 and MMP-9) and enzymes responsible for plasminogen activation cascade. In lung adenocarcinoma cell line A549 the exposure to nicotine promotes inhibition of phosphorylation of the protein phosphatase 1 (PP1) which in turn, induces the deregulation of protein p27 Kip1. The latter plays inhibitory effects on the cyclin-dependent kinase 1 which determines cell cycle progression. Moreover nicotine is responsible for an increased NSCLC cell proliferation through the expression of fibronectin and α5β1-integrin and the activation of ERK and PI3K-mTOR signaling. More recent studies have demonstrated that the nAChR is the main mediator of proliferative effects of nicotine of transformed cells. Consequently the 7α subunit identifies a novel druggable target of NSCLC therapeutic approach. Growing evidence demonstrates similar effects of the subunit 7α nAChR in SCLC and mesothelioma as well. The activation of the nicotinic receptor induces an increase in cell proliferation and survival mediated by the MEKK-1, ERK1/2 e p90RSK kinases; notably in A549 cells the nicotine-induced activation of the MAPks occurs in a 7α nAChR-mediated manner (43). Moreover biological effects of nicotine on transformed cells involves other mediators and transcription factors such as, NF-κB, Src, Akt, HIF-1 and the lipo-oxygenase cascade, as well (44). Nicotine improves cancer (NSCLC, SCLC, breast and ovary cancer) cells survival by inducing avoidance of apoptosis mediated by a number of stimuli (e.g., radiation, chemotherapy agents, oxidative stress). Besides nicotine promotes tumor progression and spreading since it can induce angiogenesis and arteriogenesis; tissue hypoxia and ischemia themselves induce overexpression and sensitization of endothelial cells to the 7α subunit of nAChR (45). Thus the nAChR plays a crucial role in the complex molecular network which is responsible for tumor progression orchestrated by angiogenic processes.

It has been recently reported in lung tumor samples (SCC) the presence of high levels of α5 e β3 nAChR mRNA, in association to high levels of ACh consequent to an increase of ChAT due to low expression of the cholinesterase enzyme. These findings demonstrate that in lung cancer the cholinergic signal is aberrantly activated, with increased receptors levels and lower levels of their inhibitors. Similar results have been reported in vitro through the exposure to nicotine of lung cancer cell line (H520) and by measuring the receptor activity levels. The results demonstrated that NSCLC expresses the ACh signaling and that both ACh and nicotine may activate the cascade thus promoting tumor growth. In such setting, cell exposure to cigarette smoking represents on one hand a relevant stimulus to cancer cell proliferation and on the other a novel actionable target. From this perspective it has been shown that pharmacologic block of M3 muscarinic receptor with darifenacin can inhibits in vitro MAPks-mediated cell proliferation induced by activation of muscarinic and nicotinic receptors (46) MAPks activation is the key point of the signaling cascade activated by the two receptor families and the blockade of the M3 receptors could represent ideally a novel potentially targetable axis in lung cancer therapy platform.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide. Overall 5-year survival is poor at 15% with little improvement over the last twenty years (1). Lung cancer presenting at a late stage is largely responsible for this poor survival; only 20% are potentially curative with surgical resection. Anti-smoking campaigns and government legislation will reduce lung cancer burden in younger generations but a significant proportion of the older generation who have smoked in the past remain at risk.

Innovative bronchoscopic techniques diagnose lung cancer earlier and more accurately to improve patient outcomes. Narrow band imaging (NBI) and autofluorescence bronchoscopy (AFB) detect pre-invasive malignancy. Endobronchial ultrasound (EBUS) and Electromagnetic Navigation Bronchoscopy (ENB) are safer alternatives to mediastinoscopy and computed tomography guided transthoracic needle aspiration (CT-TTNA). Emerging technologies such as optical coherence tomography (OCT) and confocal microscopy (CM) allow lesional assessment on a cellular level.

This article describes these new bronchoscopic techniques and explains how they enhance lung cancer diagnosis and staging.

Standard bronchoscopy

Gustav Killian invented the rigid bronchoscope in 1898. In 1967 Ikeda pioneered the flexible bronchoscope, and video bronchoscopes became mainstream in the early 1980’s. Despite quickly becoming the cornerstone of lung cancer diagnosis, the shortcomings of white light bronchoscopy (WLB) are immediately obvious. Due to the
branching nature of the bronchial tree, the airway diameter rapidly reduces the more distal one advances towards lung periphery. A standard 5.9 mm bronchoscope can only access the 4–5th generation bronchi with visualization of the next 1–2 generations, covering only 1/3 of the approximately 23-generation bronchial tree. The majority of lesions visualized on CT are therefore beyond direct bronchoscopic vision. Aberrations in bronchial mucosa, such as angiogenic squamous dysplasia (ASD) or squamous cell carcinoma (SqCC) in situ (CIS) are indistinct and easily missed when lit by white light (2). Similarly extra-bronchial structures such as mediastinal lymph nodes cannot be visualized, and blind needle aspiration (cTBNA) is possible for a limited number of nodal stations (3).

Meta-analysis by Rivera from studies between 1970-2001 found the sensitivity and specificity for bronchoscopically visible lesions was 88% and 100% respectively (4). Diagnostic accuracy for bronchoscopically invisible lesions under fluoroscopic guidance varied from 36% to 88%, dependent on biopsy method (transbronchial biopsy vs. cytology brush vs. bronchoalveolar lavage), the number of samples taken, and lesion size. Yield was most affected by lesion size-sensitivity for peripheral pulmonary lesions (PPLs) >2 cm was 63%, decreasing to 34% for PPLs <2 cm. Whilst CT-TTNA is undoubtably more accurate than WLB (pooled sensitivity 0.9; 95% confidence interval 0.88-0.91) its complication rate is higher (5).

Thus, WLB is effective at diagnosing bronchoscopically visible lesions, but is limited in diagnosing bronchoscopically invisible lesions, in situ tumours, and for mediastinal staging of lung cancer.

Endobronchial/mucosal lesions

AFB

AFB takes advantage of endogenous fluorophores in bronchial tissue to inform about metabolic state and biochemical composition of tissues. Normal bronchial tissue fluoresces strongly in green when illuminated by violet or blue light, however as the epithelium becomes dysplastic, progresses to in-situ carcinoma and finally to invasive cancer, the amount of green autofluorescence decreases and red fluorescence also decreases although to a lesser degree. These abnormal areas contrast sharply with normal mucosa.

Two meta-analyses have studied the value of AFB combined with WLB versus WLB alone for detection of intraepithelial neoplasia and invasive lung cancer. The first (14 studies, n=1,358) demonstrated a pooled sensitivity and specificity of AFB + WLB of 0.9 and 0.56, compared to 0.66 and 0.69 for WLB alone (6). The second (21 studies, n=2,666) showed the relative sensitivity on a per lesion basis of AFB + WLB versus WLB alone to detect CIS and invasive cancer was 2.04 and 1.15 respectively (2). AFB + WLB is less specific than WLB alone because false positives are common with AFB due to inflammation, mucous gland hyperplasia and inter-observer error, however specificity and inter- and intra-observer variation can be improved to 80% by combining the quantitative red/green fluorescence ratio (R/G) with bronchoscopic findings (7).

NBI

NBI visualizes bronchial mucosa with blue light (415 nanometers) and green light (540 nanometers) to accentuate superficial capillaries and deeper submucosal vessels respectively, while at the same time reducing light scatter from other wavelengths seen with white light. NBI detects the characteristic abnormal angiogenesis associated with dysplastic lesions. Most of the data detailing the benefits of NBI are from gastroenterological studies and head and neck cancers, however pulmonologists are increasingly using NBI to detect early stage bronchial mucosal lesions.

In 2003 Shibuya et al. studied 48 patients with sputum cytology suspicious or positive for malignancy (8). These patients underwent WLB and AFB, with suspicious areas subsequently interrogated with NBI of differing wavelengths and biopsied for histology. Dotted vessel diameter seen on NBI-B1 (400-430 nm) most closely agreed with pathological examination of ASD vessel diameter. Shibuya et al. also studied differing NBI characteristics of ASD, CIS, micro-invasive tumour, and invasive SqCC (9). By identifying tortuous vessel networks, dotted vessels, and spiral and screw type vessels, the authors could confidently differentiate between the different stages of multistep carcinogenesis of SqCC.

NBI has a higher specificity and equivalent sensitivity to AFB. Herth et al. evaluated diagnostic yields of NBI alone, and combined with AFB and WLB, in 62 patients referred for airway cancer screening (10). All abnormal lesions underwent forceps biopsy. NBI was less sensitive but more specific than AFB, when compared to WLB. There was no benefit in combining AFB and NBI, a finding confirmed in a more recent study (11). NBI detects dysplasia or malignancy in 23% of patients with normal WLB (12). NBI after WLB
led to a change in therapeutic decisions in approximately 10% of patients (13). It is uncertain how NBI compares to high definition WLB (which provides substantially higher resolution images than conventional WLB) for detection of early bronchial mucosal abnormalities.

The natural history of pre-invasive malignancy remains uncertain and treatment at this early stage has not been shown to improve survival however it is likely that at least some of these lesions, if left untreated, will progress to invasive carcinoma. AFB and NBI have higher sensitivity and specificity for detecting mucosal lesions compared to WLB, and diagnostic bronchoscopists should be familiar with their use.

**OCT**

OCT provides cellular imaging at and below the tissue surface (14-16). It was developed in the 1990’s for ophthalmic applications but has since been used to assess vessel structure, atherosclerotic plaque, and more recently, bronchial wall structure.

Light is emitted by an imaging catheter and the interference pattern between reflected light and light backscattered from the tissue at different depths is collected and analyzed by an interferometer. These patterns are then recombined and decoded, forming a high resolution cross-sectional image. Contact between instrument and tissue is unnecessary and intravenous contrast, dyes or radiation are not needed. OCT resolution is 20 times higher than ultrasound and can be displayed on a monitor in real time. OCT imaging depth is 2-3 mm, and axial and lateral resolution varies between 5-30 micrometers depending on the scanning conditions.

Tsuboi et al. compared OCT images to histological findings of bronchial lesions (14) and found that on OCT, normal bronchial mucosa appears homogeneous whereas the submucosal layer is reflective due to extracellular matrix; a gap is visible between the submucosa and smooth muscle layer, and underlying cartilage shows much scattering. Alveoli have a uniform bronchial wall appearance and air-containing alveoli can be clearly differentiated. Infiltrating cancers, on the other hand, show unevenly distributed high backscattering areas and loss of layer structure and glandular tissue. Lam et al. demonstrated that quantitative measurement of epithelial thickness could differentiate between invasive carcinoma and CIS (P=0.004), and also between dysplasia and metaplasia or hyperplasia (P=0.002). Basement membrane remained intact with CIS, but became disrupted with invasive cancer (15). Certain OCT characteristics can potentially differentiate SqCC from adenocarcinoma without the need for biopsy (17).

Despite these promising pilot studies, it remains to be seen if and how OCT will add value to our current diagnostic approaches. Possible uses for OCT include: distinguishing benign from malignant central and peripheral lesions, differentiating CIS from minor-invasive cancer; and improving bronchoscopic sampling of PPLs. The performance characteristics and limitations of OCT need to be defined before the technique becomes mainstream.

**PPLs**

**EBUS radial probe (RP-EBUS)**

Advances in electronic miniaturization allow a 360-degree viewing ultrasound to fit into a 1.4 mm probe that can be passed through the working channel of a standard bronchoscope. This so-called RP-EBUS allows localization of peripheral lesions and depth assessment of endobronchial lesions. At standard frequency of 20 MHz, the spatial resolution is less than 1 mm and penetration depth is 4-5 cm.

RP-EBUS has two main uses.

**Localisation of PPLs**

By placing the ultrasound probe into lung periphery one can characterize the tissue densities surrounding the probe. Normal air-filled alveoli have a homogeneous “snow-storm” appearance. If the probe is within a solid lesion however the interface between the mass and surrounding aerated lung is represented by a bright line, confirming the probe is within the target.

The use of a guide sheath (GS) in combination with RP-EBUS was introduced in 2004 (18). The GS is a catheter that fits over the RP-EBUS, leaving only the distal ultrasound probe exposed. The RP-EBUS/GS are advanced together through the working channel into the target subsegment until the lesion of interest is localized. Advancing and retracting the RP-EBUS/GS defines the lesion’s proximal and distal extents. Once the desired biopsy site is established, the GS is left in situ and the RP-EBUS is removed and replaced by pre-measured biopsy tools, ensuring samples are taken from the desired location. An additional theoretical benefit of GS is tamponade of biopsy-related bleeding (Figure 1).

Perhaps the best evidence favouring RP-EBUS/GS over fluoroscopy guided transbronchial lung biopsy
(TBLBx) for PPLs was published in 2005 by Paone (19).
221 patients with PPLs were randomly assigned to either procedure (97 RP-EBUS/GS, 124 TBLBx) and those without a diagnosis underwent more invasive investigation. Sensitivity for lung cancer was 0.79 and 0.55 (P=0.004), and accuracy was 0.85 and 0.69 (P=0.007) in RP-EBUS/GS and TBLBx groups respectively, with the majority of the benefit evident in lesions <3 cm [sensitivity of RP-EBUS/GS vs. TBLBx for <3 cm, 71% (47-95%) vs. 23% (3-43%), P value <0.001].

A systematic review and meta-analysis of RP-EBUS/GS for PPL diagnosis (16 studies n=1,420 patients) showed point sensitivity for diagnosis of lung cancer was 0.73, however there was significant study heterogeneity. Complication rates varied between 0-7.4%, with the most common being minor bleeding. Pooled pneumothorax rate was 1.0%, and rate of intercostal drainage was only 0.4% (20).

Most RP-EBUS/GS data originate from centres with bronchoscopic expertise and hence may not reflect “real-world” results. Roth et al. performed a prospective randomised cohort study of RP-EBUS/GS for PPLs by 29 different physicians practicing at community hospitals in Western Norway between June 2005 and January 2008 (21). With a cancer prevalence of 71.5%, the sensitivity for malignancy in the RP-EBUS/GS group was 36% compared with 43.7% in the non-EBUS group. If there was a bronchus leading directly to the lesion, the diagnostic sensitivity was considerably higher (62.2%). This study may provide a more realistic view of what is achievable with RP-EBUS/GS in a community hospital and demonstrates that EBUS is useful in confirming lesion location, but not in guiding the bronchoscopist to the lesion.

The only consistent predictor of success is probe location in relation to the lesion; If the probe is surrounded by tumour (concentric ultrasound image) the diagnostic yield is much higher than if the probe is adjacent to (eccentric image) or not associated with the target lesion (18,22-24). Although Kurimoto found yield was independent of lesion size (18), subsequent studies recognise that higher diagnostic yields are achieved from larger lesions (20).

Few studies have compared RP-EBUS/GS to the non-invasive gold standard of CT-TTNA. In 2008 Fielding described a prospective series of RP-EBUS/GS and compared this to a retrospective review of CT-TTNA during the same period. Diagnostic sensitivity for RP-EBUS/GS was only 35% for lesions touching the visceral pleura, compared to 74% for lesions not touching the visceral pleural. While overall pneumothorax rates were 1% and 28% in EBUS GS and CT groups respectively, the CT-TTNA pneumothorax rate was only 2.6% for lesions in contact with the visceral pleura (25). These results suggest that CT-TTNA rather than RP-EBUS/GS should be the first line investigation for pleural-based lesions.
Depth of invasion of endobronchial lesions
RP-EBUS with a surrounding inflatable balloon can clearly define tracheal and bronchial wall layers, making it an excellent tool to assess tumour invasion. Ultrasonographic assessment of tumour depth correlates well with histopathologic findings (26) and this measurement determines appropriate therapy; Tumours that invade through the cartilage layer require radiotherapy or surgery, whereas those with an intact cartilage layer can be treated endoscopically.

RP-EBUS can also determine whether centrally located tumours adjacent to the trachea are invading the trachea (clinical T4 stage) or simply adjacent to and compressing but not invading the trachea (clinical T1a-3 depending on lesion size). Herth et al. studied 131 consecutive patients with central thoracic malignancies potentially involving the central airways (27). All patients underwent chest CT followed by WLB and RP-EBUS, with subsequent surgical evaluation and radiology results blinded from the bronchoscopists and surgeons. CT reported 77% of lesions were invading airways, but RP-EBUS showed invasion in only 47% of cases. When using surgical assessment as the gold standard, RP-EBUS had a specificity of 100%, sensitivity of 89%, and accuracy of 94%, for assessing tumour invasion.

ENB
ENB is a relatively new bronchoscopic technique with both diagnostic and therapeutic applications. ENB is a two-stage process: pre-procedure planning, and the actual procedure itself. DICOM data is uploaded to a planning computer via network or compact disk. The planning screen consists of four windows, each of which can display axial, sagittal or coronal views, as well as a virtual bronchoscopic animation and three-dimensional bronchial tree. The bronchoscopist outlines the target and then places waypoints along bronchi that lead to this lesion. The planned path can then be viewed via virtual bronchoscopic animation, allowing the operator to see precisely which sequence of airways lead to the lesion.

Selective cannulation of bronchi is possible with a specialized cannula housed in an extended working channel (EWC), passed together through the working channel. The proximal end houses a “steering wheel” that allows deflection of the distal tip in one of eight directions; the distal end contains a “locatable guide” (LG), whose position is tracked through an electromagnetic field encompassing the patient’s chest with the assistance of three location pads placed on the patient’s chest. The computer provides instructions on how and when to turn the “steering wheel” and advance the catheter to reach each waypoint and finally the target lesion (Figure 2). Once the LG is in close proximity and aligned to the target lesion, the EWC is left in place and the LG is removed and replaced with biopsy instruments.

Most of the published ENB literature is case series of patients with PPLs. The overall diagnostic yield for ENB alone is highly variable and ranges from 59% to 77.3% (28-34). The only randomised controlled trial compared (31) EBUS RP, ENB, or a combined approach (ENB to navigate to the lesion and RP-EBUS to confirm lesion localization) to diagnose one hundred and twenty PPLs. Diagnostic yield was 69%, 59% and 88% for RP-EBUS, ENB, and combined ENB/ RP-EBUS groups respectively, suggesting that highest diagnostic yield may be achieved via combined procedures that utilize the strengths of each modality.

The majority of ENB publications are non-consecutive cohorts that do not describe selection/inclusion criteria, and (apart from Eberhardt et al.) do not randomize patients to competing modalities. ENB has never been compared to CT-TTNA and thus it is uncertain where ENB fits into the diagnostic algorithm. Due to its high cost and considerable pre-procedure planning (both to obtain DICOM images of recommended parameters, as well as pathway planning) ENB is only likely to become mainstream if consumable prices fall and high level evidence demonstrates diagnostic equivalence to CT-TTNA and/or additional benefit above RP-EBUS. Based on Eberhardt’s study, ENB and RP-EBUS may have complimentary roles, however this combined approach would likely increase cost and procedure time.

Virtual bronchoscopy (VB)/ultrathin bronchoscopy (UB)
VB aims to address the inability of RP-EBUS to guide the bronchoscopist to the target lesion. Traditionally, the bronchoscopist views two-dimensional axial, coronal, and sagittal CT views, and mentally reconstructs a three-dimensional image of the bronchial tree before plotting a path to the target lesion. VB allows CT reconstruction of the bronchial tree allowing “virtual” bronchoscopic animation enabling more accurate procedure planning. An example of this was shown in Figure 3.

For maximum utility, VB should be coupled with pathway planning software (for example, “Lungpoint”, Broncus Medical Inc, CA, USA) and UB; Newer scopes
have external diameters of only 2.8 mm (35), and allow
direct visualization up to the 9th generation bronchus. A
direct consequence of UB however is a smaller working
channel and hence smaller biopsy samples.

UB was initially used by Asano to perform barium
marking before thoracoscopic surgery for PPLs (36). The
UB could be guided under direct vision to a median sixth
generation bronchi (range 4th-9th generation) and markers
could be placed to a median distance of 4 mm from the
lesion (within 10 mm in 27 of 31 lesions). A separate study
whereby patients underwent both WLB and UB in the
same procedure demonstrated diagnostic rates of 54.3%
and 60% respectively, and when both were combined
the yield increased further to 62.8% (37). UB was able to
obtain diagnostic material in 59.3% of the patients who had
negative rapid cytology on WLB.

Asahina et al. assessed the utility of combining VB with
RP-EBUS/GS in 29 patients with PPLs ≤30 mm. 80% of

Figure 2. ENB procedure screen showing 6 viewports. Top right = dynamic 3D map; bottom right = tip view (green sphere = target); bottom
centre-local view; top centre = maximal image projection view.

Figure 3. An example of virtual bronchoscopy. (A) Lesion in right upper lobe; (B) Real time virtual image overlay to guide the pathway to
the tumour; (C) Virtual bronchoscopic image.
lesions were visualized ultrasonographically and diagnostic sensitivities were 44.4% for lesions <20 mm, and 91.7% for lesions ≥20 mm (38). In a randomised trial of 199 patients with PPLs ≤30 mm undergoing RP-EBUS/GS with and without VB (VBNA vs. non-VBNA groups) the VBNA group demonstrated higher diagnostic yield (80.4% vs. 67%, P=0.032), shorter procedure time (24.0 vs. 26.2 mins, P=0.016), and shorter navigation time (8.1 vs. 9.8 mins, P=0.045) (39).

Recently though a randomised controlled multicentre trial of UB with and without VB for PPLs found no difference in diagnostic yield. 350 patients were randomised and yields were 67.1% vs. 59.9% for VNBA vs. non-VBNA groups respectively. Subgroup analysis showed improved yield in the VBNA group for right upper lobe lesions, lesions invisible on CXR, and lesions in the peripheral third of the lung field. It could be argued that VB is of little benefit to highly experienced operators, however it still may be of significant assistance in those less familiar with bronchial anatomy (40).

UB/VB has three major shortcomings. Firstly, the ability to obtain sufficient tissue for molecular analysis with UB is unknown but presumably reduced as biopsy forceps size may affect biopsy size and quality. Secondly, VB quality is dependent on CT source data and recommended DICOM parameters may be unavailable. Thirdly, VB systems rely on a skilled second operator to manipulate the VB image to the same orientation as the real-time bronchoscopic image; without this, the risk of disorientation is high (41).

Complications of guided bronchoscopic techniques

The biggest advantage of bronchoscopic methods over CT-TTNA for biopsy of PPLs is the lower complication rate. In a meta-analysis of RP-EBUS (16 studies, n=1,420), complication rates varied between 0-7.4%. The pooled pneumothorax rate was 1.0% and the pooled rate of intercostal catheter drainage was 0.4%. No patients had bleeding requiring intervention, and no deaths were reported.

In contrast, data from 15,865 adults who underwent CT-TTNA from the 2006 Healthcare Cost and Utilisation Project's State Ambulatory Surgery Databases and State Inpatient Databases for California, Florida, Michigan and New York, demonstrated significantly higher complication rates: pneumothorax rate was 15% (95% CI: 14.0-16.0%) and 6.6% of all biopsies (95% CI: 6-7.2%) required chest tube insertion. Furthermore, the population most likely to have a PPL requiring investigation (60-69 years old smokers, those with COPD) was also the most likely to suffer from procedural complications. 1% of procedures were associated with hemorrhage with 17.8% of this required blood transfusion.

Conclusion: PPLs

Guided bronchoscopic methods (EBUS GS/RP, ENB, VB/UB) have higher diagnostic sensitivity than TBLBx, but slightly lower sensitivity than CT-TTNA, the biggest advantage with a bronchoscopic approach is the lower complication rate; the diagnostic yield of each guided bronchoscopic technique is similar (42). Each technique has advantages and disadvantages and will ultimately depend on availability, local expertise, and lesion location. Only a large scale multicentre randomised trial directly comparing guided bronchoscopy to CT-TTNA will verify the merits of each procedure and determine when each procedure should be used. The weakness of contemporary data is that they are case series of non-consecutive patients where the selection criteria are not explicitly outlined and comparator groups are not used. Even when comparator studies are performed, the results are dependent on operator expertise so that data are not necessarily generalisable.

Peribronchial/peritracheal/mediastinal lesions

Convex probe EBUS guided transbronchial needle aspiration (CP-EBUS TBNA)

Peribronchial and mediastinal lesions are accessible by conventional TBNA (cTBNA) however intimate anatomical knowledge is required to ensure safety and adequate diagnostic yield. Accurate assessment of an abnormal mediastinum is vital in lung cancer staging to guide best treatment. For several years, the gold standard for mediastinal staging has been surgical mediastinoscopy however this requires significant cost including hospital admission, general anaesthesia, and has associated morbidity and mortality (43). CP-EBUS TBNA addresses many of the shortcomings of cTBNA and surgical mediastinoscopy. Its rapid widespread adoption is due to its excellent utility, ease of use, ability to perform as a day case under light anaesthesia, and excellent patient satisfaction (44). Furthermore, the most recent American College of Chest Physician guidelines regarding staging of lung cancer recommend using EBUS TBNA, EUS FNA, or a combined approach over surgical staging as the best first test for
investigating radiologically suspicious mediastinal lymph nodes (grade 1C) (45).

An integrated CP-EBUS TBNA scope/aspiring needle combination allows ultrasonic, real-time visualization of the needle inside the target lesion. The dedicated scope has a 6.9 mm outer diameter and 2 mm instrument channel whose distal end houses a CP-EBUS with flex of 120 degrees upward to 90 degrees downward. An inflatable balloon is sometimes applied over the probe to improve ultrasound signal, particularly in regions where the probe cannot be flexed against the bronchus wall. Vision is through a 30 degree oblique forward viewing fibre-optic lens with an 80 degree viewing angle. The dedicated 21 or 22 G needle is advanced to the distal end of the working channel and secured proximally onto the bronchoscope. Once the target is identified ultrasonically and doppler excludes overlying vessels, the needle is plunged into the lesion. The central stylet is moved back and forth to clear bronchial debris, and 8 to 10 aspirations are taken.

Several studies have proven the utility of CP-EBUS TBNA for mediastinal staging of lung cancer. In one study 163 lymph nodes were sampled in 105 patients. CP-EBUS TBNA correctly predicted lymph node stage with a sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and diagnostic accuracy of 94.6%, 100%, 100%, 89.5%, and 96.3% respectively (46). A series of CP-EBUS TBNA of 572 lymph nodes from 502 patients demonstrated a sensitivity, specificity, and PPV were 94%, 100%, and 100% respectively with surgical staging as the gold standard (47). The same group performed CP-EBUS TBNA on NSCLC patients with a radiologically normal mediastinum, before undergoing surgical staging. For the detection of malignancy, sensitivity, specificity, and NPV was 92.3%, 100%, and 96.3% respectively, with no complications; performing CP-EBUS TBNA on NSCLC patients with a radiologically normal mediastinum avoided unnecessary surgical exploration in one of six patients (48).

Two large systematic reviews/meta-analyses confirm these findings and cement the utility of CP-EBUS TBNA in the staging of lung cancer. In the first (20 studies), sensitivity ranged between 85-100% and NPV ranged from 11-97.4%, with no serious complications reported (49). In the second (11 studies, P=1,299), sensitivity and specificity was 0.93 and 1.00 respectively; For the subgroup selected based on CT or PET findings sensitivity increased to 0.94 compared to only 0.76 without CT or PET. Only two patients had complications (0.15%) (50).

Yasufuku et al. performed one of the few prospective studies directly comparing CP-EBUS TBNA to mediastinoscopy for staging of lung cancer (51). Patients with confirmed or suspected NSCLC requiring mediastinoscopy as part of their staging investigations were eligible for inclusion. 153 patients underwent CP-EBUS TBNA followed by mediastinoscopy, with the operator blinded to the rapid on-site examination results; If lymph node involvement was present, patients proceeded onto surgical resection and these results were used as gold standard. Sensitivity, NPV and diagnostic accuracy for CP-EBUS TBNA and mediastinoscopy was 81%, 91%, 93% and 79%, 90%, 93% respectively, with no significant differences between the two in yielding true pathologic N stage (P=0.78).

Combined mediastinal staging with CP-EBUS TBNA and EUS-FNA (so called “medical staging”) provides more complete staging allowing additional access to stations 8 and 9. Medical staging seems superior to either staging method alone (52-54). A randomized controlled study showed that medical staging had a higher sensitivity for nodal metastases and was associated with fewer unnecessary thoracotomies when compared to mediastinoscopy (55). Both EUS-FNA and CP-EBUS TBNA can be performed in the one sitting using a single bronchoscope without compromising efficacy, and presumably saving time and money (56,57).

CP-EBUS TBNA equipment, technique and specimen preparation are critical. Diagnostic yield does not differ between 21 and 22 G aspirating needles, but the former results in fewer needle passes (58), better preserves histological structure, with the trade-off being more blood contamination (59). Although suction is traditionally applied to aspirate samples, a randomised controlled trial found no difference in specimen adequacy, quality or diagnosis between specimens with and without suction (60). Three aspiration passes per lymph node is diagnostically optimal with additional passes offering minimal benefit when no rapid onsite evaluation (ROSE) is available (61). The “tissue coagulum clot” method, which involves pushing the specimen onto a pre-cut piece of filter paper with the needle moved in a circular motion to build a cone shaped coagulum of clot and tissue, may increase amounts of diagnostic material when compared to conventional saline needle rinse (62). The use of mini-forceps-transbronchial needle forceps with a beveled end to facilitate penetration through the bronchus wall and jaws that can be opened under ultrasound guidance-is an alternate method to achieve larger volume samples and pilot studies confirm its
safety and efficacy (63).

Histological subtyping from CP-EBUS TBNA reflects true histology. In one retrospective study, 88 patients who underwent CP-EBUS TBNA had these results compared to core biopsies and/or follow up surgery. Sensitivity, specificity, PPV, and NPV for CP-EBUS TBNA were 85%, 100%, 100%, and 89.7% respectively (64). A more recent study of 92 patients with NSCLC demonstrated a 76% agreement between needle aspirate and biopsy for subtyping (kappa =0.52), with agreement increasing if cell blocks were available (96%, kappa 0.91 vs. 69%, kappa 0.39 respectively) (65).

Mutational analysis is also possible from CP-EBUS TBNA samples. 154 out of 156 cases were successfully analysed (98.7%) for EGFR mutations using the PCR clamp technique on cell-pellets derived from needle-washed solution (66). Garcia-Olive and colleagues showed EGFR analysis was possible in 72.2% of patients undergoing CP-EBUS TBNA with metastatic nodal specimens (67). In a different study analysis for EGFR and KRAS sequences using COLD-PCR was achieved in 95.5% and 98.4% respectively of samples (68). A UK group found that 88% of their CP-EBUS TBNA samples were adequate for mutational analysis using the Scorpion ARMS kit (69).

The actual false negative rate for CP-EBUS TBNA is a matter of debate; whilst specificity is unequivocally acceptable, sensitivity and NPV is more important when staging cancer. In 109 patients who underwent CP-EBUS TBNA of PET-avid N2 and N3 lymph nodes, 32 patients were tumour negative by CP-EBUS TBNA but subsequent biopsy in 19 showed malignancy in 7, four due to sampling error, and three due to detection error (70). Thus, in the setting of a high pre-test probability of nodal metastasis and no malignant cells on CP-EBUS TBNA, surgical biopsy should be used for confirmation (71).

Aside from mediastinal staging for NSCLC, CP-EBUS TBNA can diagnose central parenchymal lesions not visible on WLB, avoiding procedures associated with higher complication rates such as CT guided TTNA or mediastinoscopy (72-74).

Sarcoidosis can be reliably detected on CP-EBUS TBNA specimens. The combination of CP-EBUS TBNA and ROSE has high diagnostic accuracy, good interobserver agreement, and can inform the bronchoscopist of whether additional passes are necessary (75). Diagnostic accuracy of CP-EBUS TBNA is significantly higher than transbronchial biopsy or bronchoalveolar lavage (91.4% CP-EBUS TBNA, 65.7% BAL, 40% TBLBx) in Stage I sarcoid disease, although the three modalities have equivalent diagnostic rates in Stage II sarcoid disease (76). A systematic review and meta-analysis of CP-EBUS TBNA for sarcoidosis (15 studies, n=533) found a pooled diagnostic accuracy of 79% with only five minor complications reported, however significant study heterogeneity and publication bias were identified (77).

The diagnosis of sarcoidosis on CP-EBUS TBNA, however, should be tempered by the patient’s pre-test probability of having this condition; in a case series of 1,275 patients undergoing CP-EBUS TBNA, granulomatous inflammation was found in 154 (12.1%) patients of whom 12 (7.8%) had a concurrent diagnosis of cancer, although no patient had both granulomatous inflammation and malignancy within the same lymph node (78). Patients with a high pre-test probability of malignancy but only granulomatous inflammation from CP-EBUS TBNA samples should be considered for additional sampling or close radiological follow up to ensure a benignity (79).

Cost effectiveness
Economic analyses validate the economic viability of CP-EBUS TBNA compared to cTBNA and mediastinoscopic staging. In a retrospective cohort of 294 patients with thoracic lymphadenopathy from a University Hospital, 37 patients underwent cTBNA and 257 had CP-EBUS TBNA. 90% of the CP-EBUS TBNA group was diagnostic compared to 62.2% of the cTBNA group; a higher proportion in the cTBNA group needed additional surgical procedures such as mediastinoscopy, video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS), or an open thoracotomy. The mean savings with CP-EBUS TBNA was $1,071.09 per patient (80). Improved cost efficacy was also found in a health technology assessment involving hospitals from the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands (81). Study patients were randomized to either surgical staging alone, or CP-EBUS TBNA/EUS-FNA followed by surgical staging if negative. The 6-month cost of the former group was £10,459 per patient compared to £9,713 per patient with the latter approach, a saving of £746 per patient mainly through reducing mediastinoscopies and unnecessary thoracotomies.

Learning curve/training
Proficiency in CP-EBUS TBNA improves with experience, however the number of procedures required for proficiency is uncertain (82,83). A cusum (cumulative sum control chart) analysis determined that learning curve duration was highly variable, even for experienced bronchoscopists, with one
operator almost immediately gaining competence, whilst another still on the learning curve after 100 procedures (84).

Trainees performing CP-EBUS TBNA increase procedure time, amount of sedation used, and complication rates (85). Obtaining proficiency using an CP-EBUS TBNA simulator before performing real procedures may address some of these issues; In one study, simulator training was equivalent to 15-25 “on-the-job” procedures in terms of procedure time and percentage of lymph nodes successfully identified (86,87). With the number of trainees wanting to acquire this new skill, coupled with the increasing focus on efficiency and reduction in complications, the EBUS simulator may become an increasingly valuable asset.

ROSE
ROSE of needle aspirates is thought to be beneficial in CP-EBUS TBNA but results have been varied. Potential advantages of ROSE for CP-EBUS TBNA include: quicker diagnosis, shorter procedure time, fewer needle passes per lymph node, and as a consequence reduction in complications.

In a prospective study, 120 patients suspected of having lung cancer with mediastinal adenopathy ≥10 mm were randomized to CP-EBUS TBNA with or without ROSE. In the ROSE group, the decision to make additional passes/procedures was based on ROSE findings at the operator’s discretion; In the non-ROSE group, the target lesion underwent a minimum of three punctures, and additional punctures or bronchoscopic procedures were performed if the examiner deemed it necessary. There were significantly fewer punctures of the target lesion in the ROSE group (mean 2.2 punctures vs. 3.1 punctures, P<0.001) and significantly greater additional procedures in the non-ROSE group (57% non-ROSE vs. 11% ROSE). The mean bronchoscopy time, sensitivity and diagnostic accuracy did not differ between the groups.

ROSE results, however, need to be interpreted with caution as false negatives can occur (88) and concordance between staging and final pathological diagnosis is not perfect. On-site adequacy criteria have been proposed to reduce the risk of false negative specimens (89) but have not been prospectively validated.

**CP-EBUS TBNA complications**

CP-EBUS TBNA is a very safe procedure. Data from the prospectively enrolled American College of Chest Physicians Quality Improvement Registry, Evaluation, and Education (AQuIRE database) included 1,317 patients from 6 hospitals who underwent CP-EBUS TBNA for lymph node sampling (90). 19 patients (1.44%) had a complication with one patient dying from bleeding. Only TBLBx was associated with increased risk on multivariate analysis. Pneumothorax occurred in seven patients and TBLBx was the only variable associated with increased risk; [2.7% TBLBx had pneumothorax vs. 0.2% of those who did not (P=0.001)]. Factors associated with escalation in care included age >70, deep sedation or general anaesthesia, and inpatient status. There were no differences in complication rates between hospitals and outcomes were not associated with procedural volume. ROSE reduced the rate of subsequent TBLBx (P=0.006).

A questionnaire about CP-EBUS TBNA sent to 520 Japan Society for Respiratory Endoscopy-accredited facilities aimed to determine the rate of complications in Japan (40). Of 7,345 CP-EBUS TBNA performed in 210 facilities, 90 complications occurred (1.23%) with hemorrhage being the most frequent complication (0.68%), followed by infection (0.19%) and pneumothorax (0.03%). Only one death occurred (0.01%), the cause of which was cerebral infarction. Equipment related complications were common, with breakage of the ultrasound bronchoscope and puncture needle in 1.33% and 0.2% respectively. These rates are slightly greater than those reported in two meta-analyses (0% and 0.15%) (49,50). Individual case reports detail infectious complications (91-96), needle breakage (97), intramural hematoma (98), and pneumothorax.

**Conclusion: peribronchial/peritracheal lesions including mediastinal lymphadenopathy**

CP-EBUS TBNA has revolutionised mediastinal staging of lung cancer with sensitivity approaching mediastinoscopy associated with few complications. The widespread adoption of CP-EBUS TBNA internationally by surgeons and physicians is a tribute to its utility, usefulness, simplicity and safety; It is one of the few diagnostic techniques that has truly revolutionized lung cancer diagnostics.

**Conclusions**

Innovative bronchoscopic techniques are allowing lung cancer to be diagnosed earlier and more accurately in an increasingly non-invasive fashion. Peripheral lesions are targeted by RP-EBUS/GS, ENB, and UB/
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VB; mucosal lesions can be identified with NBI and AFB; OCT allows cellular analysis without the need for biopsy; and central peribronchial lesions can be accurately localized and sampled with EBUS TBNA. Whilst the role of established techniques like RP-EBUS/GS, CP-EBUS TBNA, NBI and AFB are well established, data regarding emerging techniques such as ENB and OCT are immature and require further study to establish their utility.

The field of interventional diagnostic pulmonology is rapidly advancing, with the aim of safer, less invasive and more accurate modalities to identify and diagnose lung cancer earlier. Coupled with newer therapeutics such as stereotactic body radiation and targeted therapeutic agents, it is hoped that lung cancer mortality will no longer be the most common cause of cancer related mortality worldwide.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Modern diagnostic and therapeutic interventional radiology in lung cancer

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Abstract: Imaging has an important role in the multidisciplinary management of primary lung cancer. This article reviews the current state-of-the-art imaging modalities used for the evaluation, staging and post-treatment follow-up and surveillance of lung cancers, and image-guided percutaneous techniques for biopsy to confirm the diagnosis and for local therapy in non-surgical candidates.

Keywords: Lung neoplasms; computed tomography (CT); positron emission tomography (PET)/CT; magnetic resonance (MR); biopsy; ablation

Introduction

Imaging has an important role in the multidisciplinary management of primary lung cancer, and is necessary to establish the diagnosis; localise, characterise and stage the tumour; map relevant nodal, vascular and bronchial anatomy for treatment planning; and for surveillance of treatment efficacy and development of metachronous tumours. Image-guided treatment of primary lung cancers can be performed in select cases. This article reviews the imaging modalities currently used for the evaluation of lung cancers, and discusses image-guided percutaneous interventional techniques for histopathologic diagnosis and local tumour treatment. Lung cancer screening is beyond the scope of this article.

Imaging modalities

Computed tomography (CT) is the imaging modality of choice for the initial evaluation of suspected or proven lung cancers. Positron emission tomography (PET)/CT is the most accurate imaging modality for the staging of primary lung cancers. Magnetic resonance (MR) imaging is useful for evaluation of superior sulcus (Pancoast) tumours and suspected malignant invasion of the chest wall, mediastinum or spine. The current recommended imaging required for lung cancer staging is CT scan of the thorax and PET/CT from skull base to mid-thigh (1).

Computed tomography

Advanced CT scanners permit a high-resolution, comprehensive evaluation of the entire chest in a single breath-hold lasting several seconds with an improved radiation dose profile to generate an isotropic dataset that allows detailed anatomical assessment as well as functional assessment of lung cancers. Radiation dose reduction is achieved by utilising automatic tube current modulation and iterative reconstruction techniques, which enable a CT examination to be performed either at a reduced dose with a similar image quality or at the same dose with improved image quality (2,3). Improved detection of small lung tumours is achieved by rapid acquisition and new visualisation...
techniques. Rapid acquisition reduces respiratory and cardiac motion artefacts that allow more accurate depiction of lung nodules, especially in the lung bases and in the para-cardiac lung. New visualisation techniques, such as maximum intensity projection, volume rendering, stereographic display and computer-aided detection, enhance lung cancer detection and enable the reader to differentiate small lung nodules from vessels (4). Isotropic dataset acquisition permits easy multiplanar reconstructions, including high-resolution angiograms and three-dimensional reconstruction of vascular and bronchial anatomy, for surgical or percutaneous interventional planning.

**Staging**

Despite recent advances in CT technology, lung cancer staging with CT remains suboptimal but is routinely performed because it remains excellent for local staging of T1 and T2 tumours, is able to delineate T3 and T4 tumours, guides selection of the most appropriate lymph nodes and the invasive technique for nodal sampling, and allows triage of patients to non-surgical therapy when unequivocal distant metastases are present. Limitations of CT for staging include accurate detection of early mediastinal and chest wall invasion, mediastinal staging and detection of small extrathoracic metastases. With regards to local tumour extent, differentiation between absent, minimal and gross T3 and T4 disease is of critical clinical significance as it determines whether the tumour is completely resectable and the surgical approach (5). The utility of thin-section CT has not significantly improved the detection of malignant invasion of the parietal pleura. One study of 90 patients using a 4-detector CT showed sensitivity, specificity and accuracy of 42%, 100% and 83%, respectively, for the detection of chest wall invasion (6). Another small study using a 4-detector CT showed the use of multiplanar reconstructions can improve the sensitivity, specificity and accuracy of CT to 86%, 96% and 95%, respectively, for the detection of chest wall invasion (7). With regards to malignant nodal involvement, a recent meta-analysis showed a pooled sensitivity and specificity of 55% and 81%, respectively, for the detection of malignant mediastinal lymph nodes when a widely accepted definition of normal-sized lymph nodes of a short-axis diameter of \( \leq 1 \) cm on a transverse CT scan image is used to differentiate benign from malignant lymph nodes (8). These results show that nodal size criterion alone is insufficient for the accurate detection of nodal metastases because metastases to normal-sized lymph nodes are missed and enlarged lymph nodes can be reactive or hyperplastic in aetiology. Recent studies suggest that evaluation of nodal morphology and CT enhancement pattern can improve the accuracy of CT for the detection of nodal metastases in lung cancer (9,10). With regards to distant metastases, CT is inferior to PET/CT for detection of extrapulmonary metastases with an accuracy of 88% compared to 97% with PET/CT (11). To our knowledge, there has been no study that examined the accuracy of CT for lung cancer staging using CT scanners with more than 16-detector rows.

**Post-treatment evaluation and surveillance**

There is currently no consensus on the optimal follow-up and surveillance programme for patients with proven lung cancers. CT has been recommended for the routine evaluation and surveillance of patients who have undergone therapy with curative-intent for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), but routine imaging surveillance is not recommended in asymptomatic patients with advanced lung cancer who are not undergoing therapy (12-14). CT evaluation of response to treatment is usually dependent on morphologic changes in tumour and nodes. However, morphology is not a good indicator of early response to treatment and a positive response can be manifested as a delayed reduction in size or paradoxical increase in size (15). CT can be effective for post-treatment surveillance with one study showing CT detected 93% of new lung cancers and 61% of recurrences in a cohort of over 1,000 patients after resection of early-stage NSCLC (16).

**New developments**

Recent advances in CT technology have allowed investigation of novel methods for the evaluation of lung cancers including nodule volumetry, nodule perfusion analysis, dual-energy applications and computer-aided detection. Quantitative analysis of lung nodules by assessment of a nodule's volume can be performed using semi-automated or automated segmentation tools that allow assessment of nodule stability or progression over time. The rate of growth of a nodule is a predictor of the likelihood of malignancy, and volumetric analysis can be used to predict tumour response to treatment (17). CT perfusion analysis of nodules may allow better characterisation of the nodule in order to determine likelihood of malignancy as well as earlier determination of treatment response compared...
to morphologic change in size (18,19). The likelihood of malignancy is considered low when contrast uptake is below 30 Hounsfield units (HU) (20). Dual-energy CT is a technique that allows differentiation of iodine from other materials, such as soft tissue and bone, due to iodine’s stronger photoelectric absorption (21). This method allows visualisation of the degree and pattern of enhancement within a mass following contrast-enhanced CT. One study showed that the degree of enhancement within a pulmonary nodule can be used to differentiate benign from malignant tumours with a sensitivity, specificity and accuracy of 92%, 70% and 82%, respectively (22). In another study, moderate correlation was found between the maximum iodine attenuation and SUV\text{max} in thoracic nodes in patients with NSCLC, but poor correlation in those patients with small cell lung cancer (23). The authors suggest that moderate correlation in NSCLC could be explained by moderate specificity of PET for determination of malignant nodes, and the difference in correlation seen with NSCLC compared to SCLC due to differing tumour biology such as angiogenic ability.

**Positron emission tomography**

**Solitary pulmonary nodule**

PET with F-18 deoxyglucose (FDG) is a useful technique for the characterisation of pulmonary nodules to distinguish between benign and malignant lesions. Two meta-analyses showed the sensitivity and specificity of FDG-PET for the diagnosis of malignant pulmonary nodules were about 96% and 80%, respectively (24,25). The significance of a PET-positive result is dependent on the clinical context and the prevalence of granulomatous and infectious disease, which are recognised causes of false positive PET results. False negative results can occur in small (<10 mm) nodules due to partial volume effect or the effect of respiratory blurring, or in some subtypes of lung malignancy with a low intrinsic FDG avidity, such as adenocarcinoma in situ. On a practical level, a PET-positive study often implies that biopsy or intervention is warranted to obtain pathological confirmation (26), while a PET-negative study may allow conservative approach and avoidance of unnecessary invasive procedures (27). There is evidence that the use of FDG-PET is cost-effective in the management of solitary pulmonary nodules (28,29).

**Staging**

PET is the most accurate imaging modality for the assessment of nodal and distant metastases from lung cancer, which is vital for treatment planning. PET has been found to be more accurate than CT in the staging of mediastinal nodal disease in many clinicopathological studies, including two meta-analyses that showed the sensitivity and specificity of PET was 79-85% and 90-91%, respectively, compared to 60-61% and 77-79% for CT (30,31). The accuracy of nodal assessment is further increased with PET/CT, which has an excellent negative predictive value of 91% in the mediastinal assessment of early-stage disease (32,33). Despite the high accuracy of PET/CT in nodal staging, there remains a significant false positive rate that is more common with larger (>1 cm) nodes, which is often due to reactive or granulomatous nodal disease (34). With the increased availability of minimally invasive mediastinal nodal sampling procedures, such as endobronchial ultrasound and endoscopic ultrasound, it is imperative to obtain pathological confirmation of PET-positive nodes before denying surgery to patients with potentially curable disease (35,36). PET is the imaging modality of choice in the assessment for distant metastases of lung cancer due to its whole body imaging capability and high tumour to background contrast which allows superior detection of both osseous and soft tissue metastases (37-39). There is a significant incidence of unrecongnised distant metastatic disease when staging with conventional CT and bone scintigraphy. One study showed distant metastases were only identified with PET in 7.5%, 18% and 24% of stage I, stage II and stage III disease, respectively (40). Up to 20% of patients who are thought to be operable when staged with conventional imaging are found to be inoperable following PET and, therefore, PET is considered essential prior to curative treatment to avoid unnecessary futile surgical intervention (41,42). PET/CT has been shown to be superior to standalone PET or CT in the detection of distant disease mainly due to the ability of PET/CT to obtain anatomical correlation to reduce false positive PET interpretation of physiologic uptake in normal structures (43). A recent meta-analysis showed PET/CT was significantly superior to PET, MR imaging and bone scintigraphy for the detection of bony metastases with a pooled PET/CT sensitivity and specificity of 92% and 98%, respectively (44). Given the high background FDG uptake in the brain, FDG-PET is not the optimal imaging modality for the exclusion of cerebral metastases, which should be evaluated by MR imaging when clinically indicated (45). The availability of both functional and structural information on PET/CT also facilitates the selection of stage critical lesions for biopsy to allow pathological confirmation. The use of
PET and PET/CT is cost-effective in the staging of NSCLC (46-48) with a recent randomised clinical trial showing cost savings of 899 Euro per patient and 4,495 Euro per avoided thoracotomy (49). There is also a strong correlation between PET-stage and survival in both surgical and radical radiotherapy candidates which suggests that PET provides prognostically significant information (50,51).

**Radiotherapy planning**

FDG-PET and PET/CT have been found to have a critical role in patient selection and target volume definition in patients with locoregionally advanced NSCLC considered for curative or radical radiotherapy. Radical radiotherapy is given with curative intent to non-surgical patients with gross locoregional tumour that can be encompassed by high-dose radiation in the absence of distant disease (52). A number of prospective studies investigating the utility of PET in the staging of potential candidates for radical radiotherapy found 25-30% of the patients were unsuitable for radical treatment owing to the presence of more advanced disease that was not shown on conventional imaging (53-55). PET-assisted radiotherapy treatment volume contouring has been found to be more accurate and significantly different from conventional treatment volumes, and a change in radiation volume was found in more than 30% of the patients (53,56,57). Survival benefit has also been shown with PET/CT-assisted radical radiotherapy. In one study, the 4-year survival of stage IIIA patients managed with PET/CT-assisted radical radiotherapy is 32%, which is superior to outcome with CT-assisted radical radiotherapy (58).

**Post-treatment evaluation**

A prospective study of 73 patients comparing FDG-PET with CT for the assessment of response following radical radiotherapy and chemoradiation of NSCLC showed significantly more complete responders on PET (34 patients) than CT (10 patients). PET response was more predictive of survival duration than CT response, and is the only prognostic factor associated with survival duration on multifactor analysis (59). A more recent paper also reported a high metabolic tumour volume post definitive treatment for NSCLC was an independent poor prognostic factor (60). FDG-PET has also been found to provide prognostically significant response assessment in NSCLC patients undergoing induction chemotherapy. In a prospective study involving 31 patients with stage III unresectable disease, complete response on PET was more accurate than response on CT, and PET showed superior correlation with longer time to progression and overall survival (61). The ability of FDG-PET to provide superior prognostic information has also been reported in the setting of induction chemotherapy prior to surgical resection or chemoradiation, and there may be a role of PET in treatment selection and planning (62,63).

**Magnetic resonance imaging**

Modern MR techniques have overcome the principal problem of magnetic field inhomogeneities due to the numerous air-soft tissue interfaces when imaging the lung as well as artefacts associated with cardiac and respiratory movement to produce diagnostic images. The utility of MR for the diagnosis, staging, radiotherapy planning and post-treatment evaluation in lung tumours is under-utilised and has been investigated at only a few centres. The sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value and negative predictive value of MR for the detection of lung carcinoma and non-calcified lesions greater than 5 mm are close to 100% (64). Therefore, MR can potentially be used for lung cancer screening, but to our knowledge, there are no prospective trials investigating the utility of MR for this purpose (65,66). MR imaging with diffusion-weighted imaging (DWI) can be used to predict benignity of pulmonary lesions. One prospective study of 66 patients showed DWI had a sensitivity, specificity and positive predictive value of 95%, 73% and 87%, respectively, for the diagnosis of a malignant lesion (67).

In current clinical practice, MR imaging is primarily used for the assessment of suspected chest wall or mediastinal invasion by lung cancer due to the superior soft tissue contrast resolution of MR. Comparative studies between MR and FDG-PET/CT have shown the two techniques to be equivalent for staging NSCLC (68-70). The strength of MR is in the detection of cerebral and hepatic metastases, while PET/CT is better at nodal staging. A recent prospective study showed MR imaging with DWI was superior to PET/CT for the detection and nodal assessment of NSCLC (71). MR also allows differentiation of viable tumour from necrotic tumour and atelectasis, and is helpful in radiotherapy planning (72). Post-treatment tumour response has been investigated using MR techniques such as magnetization transfer, blood oxygen level dependent MR, and perfusion and diffusion imaging. Dynamic contrast-enhanced perfusion allows
assessment of tumour angiogenesis, which has the potential to predict chemotherapy response in NSCLC patients, but its use is unproven for monitoring of anti-angiogenic therapy (73). MR perfusion can also be used for prediction of postoperative lung function (74). With regards to DWI, the apparent diffusion coefficient (ADC) measures the magnitude of diffusion of water molecules within tissue. Cell swelling or shrinkage is reflected in changes in ADC values. In general, an initial decrease in tumour ADC measurement performed within 30 days of treatment (Figure 1), and an increase in tumour ADC measurement 30 days following treatment were found to be predictive of a positive outcome, and our own unpublished data support similar findings (75,76).

Image-guided percutaneous interventions

Image-guided percutaneous biopsy can be performed for confirmation of diagnosis and treatment planning. In non-surgical candidates, image-guided percutaneous therapy can be performed with curative-intent or for palliation, and these techniques include cryoablation, radiofrequency ablation and microwave ablation.

Percutaneous biopsy

Percutaneous needle core biopsy is a minimally invasive procedure that can be used to confirm the diagnosis of lung malignancy. The most common complications are pneumothorax and bleeding. A higher risk of pneumothorax has been reported to occur with biopsy of smaller lesions and deeper lesions. Biopsy of lesions less than 2 cm in size is associated with an 11 times greater risk of pneumothorax than lesions greater than 4 cm, and this may be explained by the prolonged procedure time required to successfully biopsy smaller lesions (77). This study also showed that the risk of a pneumothorax is negligible for lesions abutting the pleura because the needle does not need to cross aerated lung, but there is a seven-fold increase in the rate of pneumothorax for biopsy of lesions less than 2 cm from pleura and a four-fold rate for lesions greater than 2 cm (77). Hence, the authors advocated a longer oblique needle path for biopsy of sub-pleural nodules to minimise pneumothorax risk, but a different study suggested that a smaller needle-to-pleura angle increases the risk of a pneumothorax (78). Other potential factors for the higher risk of a pneumothorax when lesions less than 2 cm from the pleura are biopsied include multiple punctures and difficulty anchoring a heavy hub cutting needle. A higher risk of pneumothorax following biopsy in patients with obstructive pulmonary disease has been reported in some studies (78,79), but other studies did not find this association (77,80,81). Factors that were not associated with an increased risk of pneumothorax include biopsy of cavitary lesions, biopsy needle size and patient positioning following biopsy (77). Bleeding is the second most common complication of percutaneous lung biopsy, and the two main predisposing factors were lesion size and distance of lesion from the pleural surface. A six-fold increase in bleeding was shown for lesions less than 2 cm in size compared to those greater than 4 cm in size, and lesions greater than 2 cm from the pleura have a ten-fold bleeding risk compared to those abutting the pleural surface.

Figure 1 A 71-year-old man with Stage III NSCLC in the right upper lobe. (A) Axial T2-weighted MR image shows a heterogeneous T2 hyperintense mass with surrounding atelectasis; (B,C) axial ADC diffusion images before (B) and 24 hours after (C) starting chemotherapy show reduced ADC signal intensity in tumour following treatment.
The presence of a pleural effusion on the side of the biopsy was associated with a decreased risk of bleeding and was found to be an independent risk factor for bleeding following biopsy (77).

**Cryoablation**

Cryoablation is a percutaneous minimally invasive technique used for the treatment of lung tumours in non-surgical candidates. Cryoablation causes coagulative necrosis of tumour cells and its vasculature. During cryoablation, a 2 to 3 cm rim of normal tissue surrounding the lesion should be ablated to achieve a margin of safety. The cryoablation probe is introduced into the tumour and cooled to −40 °C for about 10 minutes, then thawed for 8 minutes and then cooled once again for a further 10 minutes. Ice formation around the probe disrupts cell membrane function and enzymes, and creates a relative hypertonic extracellular environment causing intracellular dehydration by osmosis. The rapid return of water into the cell during the thawing process causes cell lysis. Direct damage to small (<3 mm) vessel walls and vessel stasis supplying the tumour may also play a role in tumour destruction (83). There is limited long-term outcome data for lung tumours treated with cryoablation. A Japanese series of 20 patients with 35 treated lesions followed for a median of 28 months showed a local recurrence rate of 20% (84). Another study investigated patients with stage I NSCLC who were unsuitable for standard surgical resection, and showed a 3-year survival rate of 77%, 88% and 87% when treated with cryoablation, radiofrequency ablation (RFA) or sublobar resection, respectively (85). Although cryoablation is comparable to other ablative techniques for the management of non-surgical candidates with lung cancer, longer term follow-up data are required to determine its role in the management of lung cancers.

**Radiofrequency ablation**

RFA is a technique that involves the placement of an electrode into tissue to cause focal destruction with thermal energy, which is generated by friction secondary to oscillating tissue ions that occur when an alternating electric current in the frequency of 460-500 kHz (radio waves) is applied. Heating tissue to 50 °C for at least 5 minutes causes cells to undergo coagulative necrosis. Therapeutic RFA aims to heat tissues to 60-100 °C, which leads to near instant cell death through protein denaturation (86). Pulmonary lesions are ideal for RFA because air in lung parenchyma surrounding the lesion provides thermal insulation to allow concentration of the applied radiofrequency (RF) energy within the lesion. Non-surgical candidates or patients who refuse surgery are potential candidates for RFA and the decision to treat with RFA should ideally be made in consultation with the interdisciplinary pulmonary tumour board. The most suitable lesions for RFA are less than 3 cm in size, and patients with stage I NSCLC are ideal candidates. Reported long-term survival rates after RFA of stage I NSCLC at 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 years are 78%, 57%, 36%, 27% and 27%, respectively (87). RFA in combination with conventional radiotherapy has been used to treat inoperable lung tumours because hypoxic cells in the centre of the tumour respond poorly to radiotherapy alone. A study showed cumulative survival rates of 50% and 39% at 2 and 5 years, respectively, following combined RFA and conventional radiotherapy for stage I NSCLC (88), and dual therapy achieves better local tumour control and patient survival compared to radiotherapy alone (89). Furthermore, RFA can be used to treat small slow growing pulmonary metastases (90) and to palliate patients with larger tumours that cause chest pain, dyspnoea, cough or haemoptysis (87). RFA of larger tumours often requires multiple overlapping ablations to ensure satisfactory tumour coverage, and recurrence rates tend to be higher in larger tumours than with smaller tumours (87,89).

**Microwave ablation**

Microwave ablation (MWA) represents the most recent addition to the growing armamentarium of minimally invasive thermal ablation therapies for the nonsurgical treatment of lung malignancies (91). Microwaves are electromagnetic waves with a frequency range that extends from 300 MHz to 300 GHz. However, microwave generators for clinical use operate at frequencies of 915 MHz or 2.45 GHz (92). Microwaves agitate water molecules, which are small electric dipoles, in the target tissue, and they spin between 2 and 5 billion times per second in an attempt to follow the rapidly alternating electric field (92,93). This leads to heat generation through friction. Conduction and convection allow further tissue heating beyond the directly agitated water molecules (94). Temperatures thus generated, usually in excess of 100 °C, lead to almost instantaneous irreversible cell damage. The centrifugally growing coagulation necrosis around the active tip of the microwave antenna is spherically shaped. It should ideally encompass the target tumour and
a circumferentially surrounding safety margin (Figure 2). This safety margin, ideally at least 6 mm in thickness, is necessary to destroy tumour cell nests and satellite foci in the immediate periphery of the tumour not perceivable on cross-sectional imaging. A smaller safety margin carries a higher risk for local recurrence (95).

Advantages of MWA over RFA

There are several advantages of microwave over RF energy. RF heating requires an electrical conduction path and is, therefore, less effective in areas of low electrical conductivity and high baseline impedance, such as lung parenchyma. This results in heating of the target tissue only immediately adjacent to the RF electrode (96,97). Microwaves are capable of propagating through many types of tissue and effectively heating them, even those with low electrical conductivity, high impedance or low thermal conductivity (98). Unlike RF and laser, microwaves can penetrate through the charred or desiccated tissues that build up around all hyperthermic ablation applicators which result in limited power delivery for non-microwave energy systems (99). Multiple microwave antennae can be simultaneously powered to maximise the ablation volume when placed in close proximity to each other, or when widely spaced, to simultaneously ablate several tumours, such as multiple pulmonary metastases (95). Larger and more homogeneous ablation volumes can be achieved with MWA because the rapid heating with MWA results in less susceptibility to heat sink effect (92). Further advantages

Figure 2 A 70-year-old man with cardiomyopathy and new solitary melanoma metastasis to the right lower lobe. (A) Prone axial CT image shows a lobulated 1.6 cm tumour; (B) the feed point of the microwave antenna is positioned within the centre of the tumour; (C,D) at 5 minutes following the start of ablation (C), there is ground glass opacity forming mainly on the far edge of the tumour, and at 10 minutes (D), a 3-10 mm circumferential rim of ground glass opacity has formed around the tumour; (E) at 3 hours following ablation, there is marked (>1 cm) circumferential ground glass opacity around the tumour; (F) axial FDG-PET/CT image 6 months following MWA shows complete lack of FDG uptake at the site of tumour, indicating eradication of tumour. New cardiac-related pleural effusion is present.
of MWA over RFA include no requirement for grounding pads which avoids potential pad site burns, and implanted cardiac devices are less prone to malfunction (100,101).

Detailed histopathological assessment of microwave ablated lesions has confirmed the concentric layered ablation zones post RFA described by Clasen et al. (102). The central inner necrosis is surrounded by an intermediate zone of equally irreversibly destroyed tissue corresponding to the safety margin strived for. The outer zone of ground glass opacity encompasses a haemorrhagic ring, which in turn is surrounded by oedema and a lymphocytic infiltrate (103). In these outermost layers, there was only partial thermal cell destruction seen with RFA (102). Vital histochemical nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide staining of resected lung tumours which have undergone intra-operative MWA immediately prior to resection confirmed cellular death (because of a lack of mitochondrial enzymatic activity) in a much larger ablation zone (104). No viable cells could be detected within five of the six ablation zones; uniform cellular death was shown to extend through sharp well-demarcated transition zones separating viable and nonviable ablated cells (104).

**Patient selection and method**

Patients selected for MWA are usually deemed medically inoperable. Exclusion criteria for MWA include uncontrolled primary tumour, radiologic evidence of lymph node metastases, extrathoracic spread, infiltration of the chest wall, mediastinal structures, main bronchi or main pulmonary arteries, sepsis and irreversible coagulopathy (94,105). Patients who have undergone prior surgery (including pneumonectomy), chemotherapy or radiotherapy are usually not excluded. Some patients may have resectable tumours, but have declined surgery. The patient is positioned in the CT scanner that allows the shortest and safest access route to the tumour. Crossing of fissures should be avoided whenever possible. The skin is prepped and draped as usual, and local anaesthetic is infiltrated along the needle tract. A short cut into the skin allows for a smooth passage of the antenna. Under visual guidance, preferably CT fluoroscopy, the antenna is advanced in a stepwise manner into the tumour. Calcified pleural plaques and cartilage should be avoided because the fragile microwave antenna is at risk of fracture if forced through rigid tissue (106). Conscious sedation or general anaesthesia can be used with no difference in complications and outcome between the two modalities (107). Single ablation duration depends on tumour size, location and power capacity of the generator, but usually does not exceed 20 minutes. It is advisable to perform a limited CT scan during the ablation cycle to identify any displacement of the antenna from its original position or early complications. Only a few centres routinely administer prophylactic antibiotics for the procedure (108). Immediate post-procedural recovery includes continuous monitoring for pulse and oxygen saturation, and blood pressure measurements taken every 15-20 minutes. Other observations are performed as per the hospital’s policy. A baseline chest radiograph is performed 3 to 4 hours following the ablation. In most centres, patients are hospitalised after the procedure and discharged the following day provided no complications have occurred. In principle, the procedure can be performed on an outpatient basis, but it is recommended to observe them overnight because of the potential for delayed complications.

**Complications**

Complications resulting from ablation procedures should be classified in accordance with the Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events (CTCAE) (109). The complication rate from MWA varies and can be expected to be higher in patients who have poor underlying pulmonary reserve. Pneumothorax is the most common immediate complication with a reported incidence of up to 43% (110), but less than one-third of these patients require a chest tube (105,110,111). Post-ablation syndrome, defined as a constellation of productive cough with or without minor haemoptysis, residual soreness in the treated area, and fever occurring several days after ablation, is reported in 2% of cases (105). Small pleural effusions not requiring thoracentesis occur in around a quarter of ablations. Cavitary changes are reported in up to 43% of ablated tumours, 14% of which display air-fluid levels that usually involute spontaneously (105). Infective complications (abscess, pneumonia) are rare (105,110). Chest wall emphysema occurs in approximately 20% of cases (unpublished author's experience) and is usually concurrent with a pneumothorax (Figure 3). Ablated tumours abutting the visceral pleura result in pleural thickening in over one-third of cases (105), and prolonged pleural retractions occur in a small proportion of these cases. Up to 15% of patients require hospitalisation after MWA primarily due to pneumothoraces (105).

There is scarce comparable long-term outcome data for the effectiveness of MWA in lung cancer owing to the relatively
recent addition of MWA to the armamentarium of minimally invasive hyperthermal treatment modalities; different MWA protocols that use different ablation systems operating at different frequencies with different shaft cooling mechanisms, different antennae size and different active tip lengths; and heterogeneous patient population treated, including treatment-naïve primary lung cancer, locally recurrent primary lung cancer following prior therapy, synchronous or metachronous lung cancers, and pulmonary metastases. Two recent publications using the same MWA device and with similar protocols showed promising short to mid-term results. In a homogeneous patient population of early stage NSCLC, the local control rate was 88% and 75% at a median follow-up of 6 months and 1 year, respectively (110,111).

**Post-treatment evaluation**

CT is the imaging modality of choice for follow-up despite additional radiation exposure. A common post-ablation surveillance protocol is to perform a CT study the day following ablation to assess for complications, and this study can be used as a reference for comparison with subsequent studies, which are performed at 3, 6 and 12 months during the first year, and at 6-monthly intervals thereafter (110). A thin (<5 mm) symmetric circumferential rim of peripheral enhancement is seen up to 6 months following ablation and is considered a sign of benign reactive enhancement. Irregular focal soft-tissue enhancement of >15 HU is, however, considered to be a sign of residual or recurrent disease (105). The initial size of the ablation zone is supposed to be much larger than the treated tumour as it encompasses the surrounding safety margin. Continuous shrinkage thereafter should occur and this usually leaves a small focus of atelectasis (Figure 4) or scar. FDG-PET imaging is considered to be more sensitive for detecting early tumour recurrence. The specificity, however, is low in the early post-ablation period. Performing FDG-PET scans sooner than 6 months following ablation should be discouraged to ensure a low false-positive rate (112,113). In addition to the FDG uptake values, the pattern of FDG uptake is also indicative of ablation success or failure (113). Modified response evaluation criteria in solid tumours (RECIST) criteria, which incorporate both the CT and FDG-PET appearances of the lesion following ablation, are considered the most appropriate tool for follow-up assessment (114).

**Conclusions**

The current challenge for imaging is to exploit the advantages of each imaging modality and integrate them into a clinically useful algorithm. At present, CT and PET/CT are recommended for lung cancer staging, and MR imaging is used for evaluation of suspected T3 and T4 disease. A few recent studies suggest that MR is equivalent to FDG-
PET/CT for staging NSCLC. New developments in CT, PET/CT and MR have the potential to provide improved anatomical and functional assessment of lung cancers that result in more individualized and targeted therapy. Cryoablation, RFA and MWA are promising powerful percutaneous techniques for curative-intent therapy or localised palliation of lung cancer, but available short-to mid-term data suggest MWA to be superior to RFA. However, more mid- and long-term data are required to assess for survival and cancer-free outcome following such therapies.

**Figure 4** A 75-year-old ex-smoker with prior RFA of biopsy-proven left upper lobe NSCLC. FDG-PET 3 months following RFA was equivocal for residual tumour and repeat treatment with CT-guided MWA was performed. (A) Axial CT image shows a 3 cm left upper lobe mass; (B) axial CT shows microwave antenna is positioned within the centre of the mass; (C) axial CT 24 hours following MWA shows ablation site encompasses target lesion. There is a focal pleural effusion with small cavity, and surrounding atelectasis and ground glass opacity changes; (D,E) axial CT (D) and axial fused FDG-PET/CT (E) 6 months following ablation show resolution of the ground glass opacity and shrinking of the ablation volume, but a residual broad-based pleural contact remain. FDG-PET/CT shows lack of FDG-avidity of the ablated lesion but mild sub-pleural FDG uptake, likely inflammatory; (F,G) axial CT 12 months (F) and 24 months (G) following ablation show further gradual shrinking of the ablation volume and narrowing of the pleural contact.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure:* The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

The rationale for lung cancer screening

Lung cancer caused an estimated 1.4 million deaths in 2008 (1), and is the leading cause of cancer death worldwide. Incidence and mortality closely follow smoking trends with a time-lag of twenty years. This explains why death rates are falling or plateauing in countries such as the US, yet rising in others such as China (2,3). Lung cancer carries a poor prognosis with reported overall five year survival between 8 and 16% in Europe and the USA, and between 6% and 32% in China (4-6).

Currently 25-30% of patients present with localised, potentially curable disease. Five year survival for those with pathological stage IA non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is 73% whereas metastatic disease has a dismal prognosis (13% 5-year survival) (7,8).

Given that lung cancer has a detectable pre-clinical phase, effective treatment, especially surgery, with effective and potentially cost-effective applicable screening methods, it would seem to fulfil the criteria for screening first described by Wilson and Jungner (9) (Box 1). Although early screening studies using plain chest radiography (CXR) had methodological drawbacks (11), it is generally accepted that CXR screening does not confer a mortality benefit, a conclusion reinforced by the Prostate, Lung, Colorectal and Ovarian (PLCO) Cancer Screening Trial (12). In contrast, computed tomography (CT) is a far more sensitive imaging modality which has been studied for its potential utility in lung cancer screening over the past 25 years. Recently, the National Lung Screening Trial (13) showed that low-dose CT (LDCT) screening reduced lung cancer mortality by 20% compared with CXR screening. This was the first demonstration in a randomized clinical trial of a mortality reduction with screening. In response to these findings several expert bodies in the USA issued guidelines for screening high-risk populations and the US Preventive Services Task Force has awarded a Grade B draft recommendation (14-17).
Condition
- The condition should be an important health problem.
- There should be a recognisable latent or early symptomatic stage.
- The natural history of the condition, including development from latent to declared disease should be adequately understood.

Test
- There should be a suitable test or examination.
- The test should be acceptable to the population.

Treatment
- There should be an accepted treatment for patients with recognised disease.

Screening program
- There should be an agreed policy on whom to treat as patients.
- Facilities for diagnosis and treatment should be available.
- The cost of case-findings (including diagnosis and treatment of patients diagnosed) should be economically balanced in relation to possible expenditure on medical care as a whole.
- Case-findings should be a continuing process and not a ‘once and for all’ project.

Box 1 Principles of early disease detection [adapted from Wilson and Jungner (9)].

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<td>Case-findings should be a continuing process and not a ‘once and for all’ project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Figure 1 Nodule size correlates to risk of malignancy*. LSS, Lung Screening Study; Mayo, Mayo Clinic Study; ELCAP, Early Lung Cancer Action Project. *Cut-off sizes were slightly different between studies (29-31).

**LDCT screening--practical issues and technical considerations**

One of the most important issues confronting those who wish to consider implementation of LDCT screening in high-risk populations is the problem of the high rate of positive examinations, primarily pulmonary nodules.

**Nodule detection**

Pulmonary nodules can be defined as rounded or irregular opacities, well or poorly defined, measuring up to 3 cm in diameter (18). There is inherent subjectivity in identifying nodules, reflected in inter- and intra-reader variability, even amongst experienced radiologists (19,20).

A considerable proportion of nodules may be missed at first reading and identified retrospectively at later scans (21). Nodule detection may be increased by using a second reader (22), image formatting, e.g., to maximum intensity projections (MIPs) (23-25) or by using computer aided detection (CAD) software as a “second reader” (26-28).

**Nodule assessment**

Nodules are best classified in four important ways: size, attenuation, presence/absence of calcification and, once a follow-up scan has been obtained, interval growth rate.

**Size**

Nodule size is the most important predictor for malignancy (Figure 1) (29-31). Detailed analysis of baseline NLST results found the positive predictive values (PPV) for malignancy increased significantly from 1.7% for nodules 7-10 mm in diameter to 11.9%, 29.7% and 41.3% for those 11-20, 21-30 and >30 mm diameter respectively (32). However even very small nodules (micronodules) have some risk of malignancy, e.g., 3 of 230 nodules <5 mm diameter (1.3%) at baseline scan followed for one year (33).

**Attenuation**

Certain calcification patterns and intra-nodular fat reliably
indicate benignity (34), however, many nodules are too small to resolve internal features and are simply classified as ‘non-calcified’ nodules (NCNs). NCNs are common and detected in 25-50% of LDCT scans.

The majority of NCNs are of ‘solid’ (soft-tissue) radiological attenuation. The remainder are classified as non-solid nodules (NSNs) and subdivided into pure ground-glass (pGGO) or mixed (part-solid) attenuation nodules (solid and ground-glass components; psGGO). Synonyms vary between studies (Figure 2). The significance of GGOs is contentious as discussed below.

Ground glass opacities
The ELCAP study reported positive findings in 233/1,000 baseline scans. 19% of lesions were pGGO or psGGO (prevalence 4.4%; slice thickness 10 mm). Twenty-seven cancers were detected. After adjusting for size, the malignancy rate was 63% for psGGO, 32% for solid nodules and 13% for pGGOs (35). Other studies highlight the importance of a new or increasing solid component within NSNs, a finding highly suggestive of lung cancer (36-38). More recent studies demonstrate many NSNs spontaneously resolve. Felix (39) reported 75 GGOs in 37/280 patients (prevalence 13%; slice thickness 0.75 mm). The population was atypical for screening studies as over half had a history of lung or head and neck cancer. Approximately half the GGOs were present at baseline and half disappeared over a median 29 months follow-up. No morphological features allowed reliable discrimination between resolving and non-resolving GGOs. Kwon (40) reported 69 pGGO and 117 psGGO mostly detected by screening in 186 patients (total screenees not reported; slice thickness 5 mm). After 3 months, 45% regressed or disappeared. Malignant and benign lesions were similar in size (average 15-16 mm). Only 27% (33/122) were malignant but this may reflect a short follow-up time (mean 8.6 months; 64 lesions were still under active follow-up at publication). A second Korean study (41) identified 126 NSNs >5 mm diameter in 93 of 16,777 (0.5%) asymptomatic screenees. Forty-four had never smoked. 70% of NSNs were transient. Younger age, detection at a follow-up scan, blood eosinophilia, multiple lesions, larger solid component and ill-defined border independently predicted transiency. Mario (42) reported 76 NSNs retrospectively identified in 56/1,866 baseline screening.

Figure 2 Classification of nodules detected by LDCT screening.
scans in a high-risk screening cohort (prevalence 3%; slice thickness 0.75 mm) and followed for 50±7.3 months. Only 13 nodules were prospectively identified. 40 of 48 pGGOs (83%) resolved, decreased in size or remained stable. 16 of 28 psGGOs (57%) resolved or remained stable. Overall, 74% NSNs resolved, decreased in size or remained stable and 26% progressed. One psGGO (2%) was confirmed as lung adenocarcinoma.

In summary, perhaps as many as 50-70% of NSNs detected on modern thin-slice CT scans are transient but predicting which will persist is currently beyond our ability. The data suggest that a substantial difference in NSN prevalence between Western and Asian populations is unlikely. In view of slower growth rates for non-solid tumours (37,43) active surveillance for >2 years may be prudent for non-resolving NSNs (44).

Growth rate
Once a follow-up scan is obtained, assessment of growth can be made. Generally, absence of growth in a solid nodule over a 2 year period makes malignancy unlikely (45), although a contemporary review found the underpinning data (based on CXR studies from the 1950s) less than compelling (46).

Growth is best assessed by CT. For example, assuming exponential growth, a 5 mm diameter nodule with a volume doubling time (VDT) of 460 days will only increase to 6 mm diameter after one year and 7.2 mm after two years-changes which may not be measurable on CXR but which can be appreciated on CT. However, reproducible measurement is difficult: the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for inter-reader measurements of nodules with a mean diameter of 8.5 mm were ± 1.73 mm in one study (47). Semi-automated volumetric measurement using computer software may be more reproducible and accurate (48,49) and is the basis of nodule management in the NELSON trial (47-50). However even this is subject to error, e.g., with smaller nodules, in the presence of motion artefact (51), nodules attached to other structures and NSNs (52).

There are limited long-term data supporting the two year stability guideline for sub-centimetre NCNs; In an Irish study (53) 83 subjects with NCNs ≤10 mm stable over two years were imaged again at seven years. Virtually all nodules remained unchanged at the seven-year CT, however one 3 mm GGO grew to 15 mm in four years and was subsequently diagnosed as (what was previously called) bronchioalveolar cell carcinoma. Thus ideally, the two year stability guideline suggested by CXR studies should be validated in larger, contemporary CT datasets.

The importance of baseline size and interval growth is shown in data from the NELSON study (54). 891 solid nodules 5-10 mm diameter were followed for one year. 743 nodules, all with smooth margins and/or attached to fissures, pleura, or vessels (contact length ≥50% of nodule diameter) were benign and excluded from multivariate analysis. Spiculated, irregular or lobulated nodules were analysed further. 10 of 69 (14.5%) nodules with spiculated or irregular margins and 6 of 168 (3.6%) nodules with lobulated margins were malignant. At baseline the only characteristic that predicted malignancy was volume ≥130 mm³ (OR 6.3; 95% CI: 1.7 to 23.0). At 3-months, baseline volume and VDT <400 days were significant (OR 4.9; 95% CI: 1.2 to 20.1 and OR 15.6; 95% CI: 4.5 to 53.5, respectively); At one year only VDT was predictive (OR 213.3; 95% CI: 18.7 to 2,430.9). Very few nodules showed change in margin or shape over 12 months, so these features were unable to distinguish malignant from benign nodules (55).

Other morphological features
Diederich (56), in a study of 133 consecutive resolving nodules, found the demographic and morphologic features of resolving and non-resolving nodules overlapped so greatly that none could be used to predict outcome over two years' follow-up.

Features of benignity noted by Takashima after two years follow-up (72 nodules ≤10 mm diameter including 25 cancers) were polygonal shape, subpleural location, solid attenuation and elongation (higher long-axis-to-short-axis diameter ratio) (57). Long-term analysis of 234 similar nodules (perifissural with any of the following features: polygonal shape, long-axis-to-short-axis diameter ratio >1.78, peripheral location, vascular attachment) detected in 98/146 consecutive screenees found the nodules were multiple in half the subjects, ranged from 1-13 mm diameter, were mostly triangular or oval (86%), inferior to the carina (84%) and had a septal connection (73%) (58). 139 screenees were accounted for after 7.5 years, and none of the perifissural nodules had developed into cancers. These types of nodules most probably represent intrapulmonary lymph nodes, however histopathologic confirmation was not performed in either study (57,58).

The difficulty in predicting which nodules might be malignant is highlighted by low PPV in screening studies; with a cancer prevalence of 1-2% the PPV of a nodule designated by the radiologist as ‘suspicious’ or large in size or with VDT <400 days actually being malignant was only
around 35% in two studies (50,59).

**Nodule management protocols**

LDCT nodule management protocols reflect the association of size and growth with malignancy. The protocols from the three largest studies, NLST, NELSON and I-ELCAP are summarized in Table 1 (52,60,61). These protocols have been applied to 26,722, 7,557 and 31,567 LDCT screenes respectively although I-ELCAP has no control arm. Size category definitions vary slightly, but in general terms ‘micronodules’ (usually less than 4-5 mm diameter) are followed after 12 months, large

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodule characteristics (attenuation, diameter, volume)</th>
<th>Recommended action</th>
<th>Interval findings</th>
<th>Recommended action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLST</td>
<td>&lt;4 mm d&lt;sub&gt;max&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>12 m LDCT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEL</td>
<td>&lt;50 mm&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt; without benign characteristics</td>
<td>12 m LDCT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>Solid/ part-solid &lt;5 mm d&lt;sub&gt;mean&lt;/sub&gt;; non-solid: any size</td>
<td>12 m LDCT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intermediate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLST</td>
<td>Solid 4-10 mm d&lt;sub&gt;max&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>3-6 m LDCT (may vary up to 24 m according to level of suspicion)</td>
<td>No growth†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pure GGO 4-10 mm d&lt;sub&gt;max&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>6-12 m LDCT</td>
<td>As per solid 4-10 mm nodules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solid: 50-500 mm&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;; Solid, pleural based: 5-10 mm Mixed: GGO component: ≥8 mm d&lt;sub&gt;mean&lt;/sub&gt; or solid component: 50-500 mm&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3 m LDCT</td>
<td>Growth††</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pure GGO: ≥8 mm d&lt;sub&gt;mean&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>3 m LDCT (preferred option) or Antibiotics &amp; 3 m LDCT if infection possible or PET scan if solid/solid component &gt;10 mm</td>
<td>Growth†††</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IE</td>
<td>Solid/ part-solid 5-15 mm d&lt;sub&gt;mean&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>Growth†††</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Large</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLST</td>
<td>Solid &gt;10 mm d&lt;sub&gt;max&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEL</td>
<td>Solid: &gt;500 mm&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;; Solid, pleural based: &gt;10 mm Mixed, solid component: &gt;500 mm&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Refer to pulmonologist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>Solid/ Mixed &gt;15 mm d&lt;sub&gt;mean&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>Refer to pulmonologist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: NLST-NLST, NEL-NELSON, IE-I-ELCAP; m, month; d<sub>mean</sub>, mean of maximal diameter and width viewed on same CT slice; d<sub>max</sub>, maximal diameter on axial CT slice; PET, Positron-emission tomography; GGO, ground glass opacity attenuation nodule; Definitions of growth minimum significant change: †, >10% increase in diameter; ††, ≥25% increase in volume after at least a 3 months interval; †††, Minimum change in nodule diameter/solid component of part-solid nodules to define significant growth: for nodules <5 mm in diameter, ≥50%; for nodules 5-9 mm in diameter ≥30%; for nodules >10 mm in diameter ≥20%. Adapted from NLST (60) NELSON (52), I-ELCAP (61).
nodules (>10-15 mm diameter) are sent for immediate investigation and medium size nodules are followed-up to determine growth. Most studies use linear measurements of nodule size but the NELSON study uses volumetric measurement (50). Retrospective analysis of I-ELCAP data suggested the threshold to define a ‘positive’ baseline scan may be too inclusive; increasing the threshold to 7-8 mm (mean of maximal diameter and width) may reduce the false positive rate and subsequent work-up by 50-68% but at the cost of diagnostic delay for 5-6% of true positive cases (62). To date, only the NLST protocol has been proven to reduce lung cancer mortality.

Non-nodule (incidental) findings (IFs)

Non-cancer IFs such as coronary artery calcification (CAC), emphysema, and thyroid nodules are common but rates vary widely depending on study definitions and recording protocols. A NELSON substudy (n=1,929) found an IF rate of 81%. Six percent of participants received follow-up but only 1% had clinically important findings arguing against systematically searching for IFs (63). A Canadian study (n=4,073) found IFs in 19%; Approximately half would have required follow-up and 0.8% immediate action (64).

LDCT screening may be an opportunity to screen for other conditions which can be detected on chest CT such as CAC, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and osteoporosis (65,66). This may increase cost-effectiveness and provide better global outcomes but is currently untested. Radiologist-detected emphysema on CT scans appears to confer an independent increased risk of lung cancer (OR 2.1) (67) and may have the potential to help determine screening frequency following baseline scan (68) (i.e., more frequent screening for those with visually-detected emphysema), but this hypothesis remains to be tested.

CAC, a risk marker for cardiac events (69) is potentially the most important IF. Worldwide, smoking is estimated to cause 0.8 million deaths from acute heart attacks annually (70). The ELCAP investigators found varying degrees of CAC in 64% of 4,250 screenees (71). They developed a simple visual scoring system which was able to stratify cardiovascular death risk in a second cohort of 8,782 screenees followed for a median of six years (72). The NELSON study reported higher hazard ratios for all-cause mortality with increasing CAC in 958 participants followed for 21 months (73). However these findings do not appear to be reflected in NLST data where approximately 75% of all deaths were from non-lung cancer causes (13). Cardiovascular illness accounted for 486/1,865 (26.1%) deaths in the LDCT group and 470/1,991 (23.6%) in the CXR group. The 6.7% reduction in all-cause mortality in the LDCT group lost statistical significance when lung cancer deaths were removed from the comparison (3.2%, P=0.28) indicating that reduced lung cancer mortality was largely responsible for the reduction in all-cause mortality (13). Clinically significant IFs were identified in 7.5% of all scans and although details of CAC prevalence and follow-up are not yet reported, it seems unlikely that identification of CAC on LDCT screening made a significant impact on cardiovascular mortality in this study.

Thus IFs are common but mostly of little significance. Exhaustive investigation of IFs will increase the costs of screening through downstream investigation and follow-up, and should be accounted for in cost analyses. Further analysis of CAC and possibly other conditions in screening studies is warranted.

Screening by LDCT-effectiveness

Observational studies

The earliest LDCT screening studies were observational cohort studies from the USA and Japan (Table 2). CT appeared to be 3-4 times more sensitive than CXR in the ELCAP study, and the majority of tumours were stage I. Entry criteria were varied. Studies recruiting younger participants (<50 years old) and never-smokers had lower prevalence and/or incidence rates. For example, in a Japanese study (75) in which the majority of screenees had never smoked, cancer prevalence was only 0.4% compared to ELCAP 2.7% (31). These results underline the importance of recruiting a high-risk population. Subsequently, most studies follow the ELCAP strategy recruiting older persons with extensive smoking histories. Risk stratification is an area of current research interest and is discussed later.

Although very promising, these studies lacked control groups to allow estimation of mortality benefit. Survival, as a surrogate endpoint of effectiveness, is subject to several biases and cannot therefore be used to prove screening efficacy (Box 2). To add to the debate, studies modelling mortality benefit markedly diverged in their conclusions (78-80).

Randomised controlled trials

The randomised control trials of LDCT screening are summarized in Table 3. Two trials, the NLST (USA) and NELSON (Holland/Belgium), have adequate statistical
Bias in screening studies

- This box describes the three most important survival biases in screening studies. Survival cannot be used as a robust endpoint as, without a control group, there is no way of determining the relative contribution of each bias. Relative mortality between the intervention (screened) and control group is the best endpoint to use.

Lead-time bias

- Survival is measured from time of diagnosis to time of death. CT is more sensitive than CXR and will therefore detect smaller tumours earlier. Even though there may be no benefit in terms of reducing mortality, survival will appear longer for CT detected tumours as the diagnosis was simply made earlier.

Length bias

- Screening tends to detect slower-growing tumours and miss more aggressive ones. Rapidly-growing and aggressive tumours are more likely to grow and metastasise in the between-scan interval, and thus be missed whereas slowly growing tumours have a longer preclinical phase and are more likely to be detected by screening. As screening selects for less aggressive tumours, outcomes are more favourable thus survival may appear better in the screened group.

Overdiagnosis bias (pseudodisease)

- The detection of tumours which are never destined to cause morbidity; the patient dies from competing causes ‘with’ the cancer rather than ‘from’ it. In the absence of screening the cancer would never have been diagnosed in the lifetime of the person. Most of these tumours will be slow-growing or indolent. People at risk of lung cancer have a high risk of dying from other causes because of the shared risk factors of smoking and older age. Overdiagnosis bias makes screening appear to be more successful than it really is but essentially has detected non-lethal disease. This is a major problem in prostate cancer screening where, for example, as many as 60% of cases detected by prostate-specific antigen screening may be overdiagnosed (10). Individuals with overdiagnosed cancer undergo investigation and treatment with no hope of living longer. This futile management exposes patients to unnecessary harms and diverts finite health resources from other areas. Overdiagnosis in lung cancer screening has yet to be quantified (see text).

Box 2 Survival bias in screening studies.
### Table 3 Randomized clinical trials of lung cancer screening using low-dose computed tomography; Target group and screening schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Smoking history</th>
<th>Participants (baseline), n</th>
<th>Screening schedule (years)**</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Total period of follow up</th>
<th>Years of recruitment</th>
<th>Completion/expected completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NLST, USA (13,81)</td>
<td>55-74</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;30 PY, quit &lt;15 yr</td>
<td>26,722</td>
<td>26,732</td>
<td>53,454</td>
<td>0,1,2</td>
<td>CXR</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSS, USA (pilot study) (82)</td>
<td>55-74</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;30 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>1,660</td>
<td>1,658</td>
<td>3,318</td>
<td>CXR</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DANTE, Italy (83)</td>
<td>60-74 (men only)</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;20 PY</td>
<td>1,276</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>2,4720,1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Annual clinic review†</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dépiscan, France (pilot study) (84)</td>
<td>50-75</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;15 PY, quit &lt;15 yr</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>7650,1,2,3</td>
<td>CXR</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NELSON, The Netherlands and Belgium (50,85,86)</td>
<td>50-74</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;15 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>7,915</td>
<td>7,907</td>
<td>15,8220,1,3</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DLCST, Denmark (87)</td>
<td>50-70</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;20 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>2,052</td>
<td>2,052</td>
<td>4,1040,1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALUNG, Italy (88)</td>
<td>55-69</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;20 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>1,613</td>
<td>1,593</td>
<td>3,2060,1,2,3</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILD, Italy (89)</td>
<td>49-75</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;20 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>1,190</td>
<td>1,723</td>
<td>4,099 Annual or biennial for 10 years</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>LUSI, Germany (90)</td>
<td>50-69</td>
<td>Current or ex-smokers &gt;15 PY, quit &lt;10 yr</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>2,023</td>
<td>4,0520,1,2,3,4</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKLS (pilot study), United Kingdom (91,92)</td>
<td>50-75</td>
<td>5% risk of developing lung cancer in 5 years (Liverpool Lung Project risk model)</td>
<td>2,000*</td>
<td>2,000*</td>
<td>4,0000</td>
<td>Usual care (no intervention)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Planned recruitment; PY, Pack years (cigarettes per day/20× duration of smoking in years); CXR, chest radiograph; **Screening schedule indicates which year the scans are performed with ‘0’ indicating baseline scan; †, all participants received CXR + sputum cytology at baseline.
power to detect a reduction in lung cancer mortality. The smaller European studies are planning a meta-analysis (93). All European studies (except for Depiscan and DANTE) randomised LDCT screening against no screening, the current standard of care.

The most important RCT result to date is from the NLST study (13). This landmark study randomised 53,454 high risk volunteers to three rounds of screening by CXR or LDCT (baseline, year 1 and year 2) and followed up for a median of 6.5 years. Eligibility criteria included: current or former smokers with ≥30 pack year smoking history (quit no more than 15 years previously); No history of lung or other cancer in the past five years; No current symptoms suggesting lung cancer; No chest CT in the previous 18 months. The study demonstrated a relative reduction in lung cancer-specific mortality of 20.0% in the LDCT arm (95% CI: 6.8 to 26.7; P=0.004).

Despite this positive result, several issues remain particularly generalizability and cost-effectiveness. The NLST authors stated their data alone are ‘insufficient’ to fully inform lung-cancer screening recommendations (13) and the Position Statement from the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC) Task Force on CT Screening reminds us that screening benefit, costs and potential harms must be defined in a ‘cultural context’, i.e., positive results seen in USA studies may not translate directly to other countries or healthcare systems (94). Additionally, the negative effects of screening and knowledge gaps, discussed below, must be considered.

### Screening adherence

Good adherence is important to the success of mass screening. NLST reported 95% adherence across all three screening scans and NELSON reported 97% at year two. Long-term observational studies report 80% adherence at year five and 86% at year seven (76,95). How this will translate to the ‘real world’ is not known.

### Downstream healthcare use

Positive scans and incidental findings require clinical and radiological follow-up. Healthcare use may rise in the first six months following screening but return to baseline levels 6-12 months after screening and appears independent of result (i.e., negative, indeterminate or suspicious findings) (96). Although this study found doctor visits increased by 50%, in absolute terms this only meant one extra visit per participant (96).

### Cost-effectiveness

Cost-effectiveness, a fundamental requirement of screening implementation, remains to be addressed. It depends on a complex mix of factors which vary from program to program and country to country (Table 4). Estimates vary

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**Table 4** Factors affecting screening cost-effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Screening intervention</th>
<th>Nodule management</th>
<th>Clinical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disease prevalence in the target population (determined by risk, e.g., age, smoking history)</td>
<td>True-positive rate</td>
<td>Definition and rate of ‘positive’ scan results</td>
<td>Stage distribution of detected disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uptake of screening</td>
<td>False-positive rate</td>
<td>Nodule follow-up algorithm</td>
<td>Treatment costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adherence to screening</td>
<td>Over-diagnosis rate</td>
<td>Invasive diagnostic procedure rate</td>
<td>Investigation and treatment of incidental findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Screening frequency (interval between scans)</td>
<td>Adverse event rate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Screening duration (years)</td>
<td>Cost of diagnostic work-up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lung cancer mortality reduction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectiveness of smoking cessation program</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Radiation exposure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost of screening scan</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
widely depending on the underlying assumptions and models used, making conclusions difficult to draw (97). Using NLST data, Goulart estimated that if 75% of the eligible US population underwent screening, the cost to avoid one lung cancer death would be $240,000 (98). McMahon’s analysis paid particular attention to a model combining screening and smoking-cessation (99). The estimated cost per Quality Adjusted Life Year (QALY) in a cohort of 50 years old could be below $75,000/QALY if quit rates could be doubled from the background rate. From a health insurance perspective cost estimates were highly favourable (100); screening high-risk 50-64 years old would cost $1 per insured member per month, and the cost per life-year saved would be below $19,000.

To date, heterogeneous modelling methodologies and underlying assumptions have led to highly conflicting cost-effectiveness estimates. The final analysis from NLST has yet to be reported in a peer-reviewed format and is eagerly awaited. Preliminary data (101) suggest that it will be cost-effective with an Incremental Cost Effectiveness Ratio (ICER) of $72,900 US per QALY.

**Negative effects of screening**

Screening for any disease has risks and benefits. The balance helps determine overall effectiveness and acceptability of the screening program. The main negative effects are discussed below.

**Radiation**

It is generally accepted that ionising radiation is a cause of cancer without a lower “dose” threshold, although the absolute level of risk is debated (102,103). Minimising radiation dose according to the ALARA principle (‘as low as reasonably acceptable’) (104) is particularly important when screening asymptomatic, healthy subjects. CT radiation dose is determined by many factors including tube current, tube voltage, the use of filters and scan length (Z-axis). In screening studies, the most common way to limit dose is to adjust tube current (milliamperes, mA) (105) according to patient weight. This can degrade image quality as image noise (grainy mottling) is inversely proportional to the square root of the radiation dose. Fortunately the inherently high contrast between air-filled lung parenchyma and soft tissue lesions means pulmonary nodules are well-visualised. The mean effective dose from screening CT scans can be reduced from 8 mSv (standard CT chest) to approximately 1.5 mSv without significant deterioration in resolution or image quality (13,106,107). Although the lower radiation dose results in more noise it has been shown to provide adequate diagnostic pictures and is thus the current standard for screening (108-110). Total radiation dose can be further limited by restricting the scope of follow-up CTs to a region of interest surrounding the nodule(s) in question rather than covering the entire chest, so-called ‘limited’ LDCT (111).

Smoking appears to interact synergistically with ionising radiation. In absolute terms the risk of cancer from LDCT is small, perhaps only an excess lifetime risk of 0.85% (95% CI: 0.28% to 2.2%) for the worst case scenario of a 50-year-old female smoker receiving 25 annual LDCT scans. This compares to a 17% risk of developing lung cancer (112). Berrington de Gonzalez estimated the cumulative risk of excess death from lung cancer from LDCT screening in 50-year-old smokers to be 2 per 10,000 men screened and 5 per 10,000 women screened. Additionally an estimated 3 cases of breast cancer per 10,000 women screened may occur (113). The NLST estimated the number needed to screen (NNS) to prevent one death from lung cancer was 320, equating to a rate of 30 fewer deaths per 10,000 screenees (13) a larger benefit than the radiation harm particularly as the cancers induced occur after a delay of many years and the lives saved are over the short term. Estimates from the ITALUNG RCT reached similar conclusions with an estimated 1.1 excess deaths per 10,000 screenees compared to approximately 15-100 lives saved per 10,000 screenees (women and men respectively) assuming a 20% mortality reduction from screening (114). Thus the radiation risk-benefit ratio of LDCT screening appears quite favourable in older populations of smokers.

**Adverse events**

Adverse events may result from investigation of LDCT findings. As 25-50% of screenees may have one or more nodules detected, a potentially large reservoir of patients at risk exists. In the NLST the cumulative chance of a positive screening scan was 39.1%.

Despite guidelines (115), significant variation in pulmonary nodule biopsy rates (14.7 to 36.2 per 100,000 adults) and complication rates have been found between hospitals in the USA (116). The risk of haemorrhage and pneumothorax requiring intercostal catheter drainage (ICC) were 1.0% and 6.6% respectively. Complications were associated with an increased length of stay and risk
of respiratory failure. Those at highest risk were smokers, persons aged 60 to 69 years, and those with COPD, i.e., the types of patients targeted for screening. LDCT screening study adverse event rates may be slightly higher than the above study but this probably reflects more rigorous, prospective reporting. There appears to be no standard way of defining or reporting adverse event data which makes some studies difficult to compare directly. 'Number of events per 10,000 scans' may be a useful metric to allow cross-study comparison.

A study of 4,782 participants (117) screened using the I-ELCAP protocol reported a biopsy rate of 2.6% (n=127) including 110 percutaneous CT-guided fine-needle aspiration biopsies (CT-FNA). 13% of CT-FNAs were complicated by a moderate-to-large pneumothorax requiring ICC or hospitalization. Overall 16% of biopsies were for benign disease (117). Using a volumetric-based protocol, NELSON reported the surgical diagnostic procedure rate as 1.2% in round one and 0.8% in round two; 32/92 (35%) and 13/61 (21%) procedures in each round were for benign disease. Very few CT-FNAs were performed: 5/13 CT-FNA in round one and 3/3 FNA in round 2 showed benign disease. Across both rounds bronchoscopy diagnosed cancer in 111/247 (45%) procedures-a lower than expected figure likely reflecting peripheral tumour location. Complication rates were not reported (50).

The PLuSS study (118) screened 3,642 participants using an in-house protocol. 82 (2.3%) underwent surgical procedures (thoracotomy or VATS), twenty-eight of whom (34%) had benign disease. The study investigators cited “an apparent community bias toward aggressive intervention” for indeterminate lung nodules.

At baseline, 27.3% in the NLST LDCT group had a positive scan result (13). 155/7,191 participants had a percutaneous diagnostic procedure (CT-FNA in 120) and 297 (4.1% of positive scans) had a diagnostic surgical procedure (thoracotomy or VATS), twenty-eight of whom (34%) had benign disease. The study investigators cited “an apparent community bias toward aggressive intervention” for indeterminate lung nodules.

CT-FNA appears safe with a complication rate of 13-14% and good concordance of biopsy result with resected pathological specimens histology (119). Bronchoscopy on the other hand, although safe, may have a lower yield for small, peripheral cancers detected by screening, although newer techniques such as endobronchial ultrasound and electromagnetic navigation may be able to improve yield (120,121). Surgical procedures have major complication rates of 12% but around 20-35% of cases are ultimately diagnosed with benign disease. This has an impact on cost-effectiveness.

Although ultimately the decision to resect an indeterminate nodule is a clinical one, given the high proportion of reported benign disease detected by screening, a positive tissue diagnosis prior to surgical resection is desirable. As demonstrated by the NELSON study, definite growth over a three month interval was due to benign disease in up to one third of cases. To date most studies have been run from expert tertiary centres where CT-FNA is available as the initial diagnostic procedure for small peripheral lesions. It is likely that strict governance and quality assurance will be needed to keep unnecessary biopsies and resections to a minimum.

**Lung-preserving surgery**

As reviewed by Blasburg et al., evolving surgical technique, the recognition of good prognosis for small tumours, especially with a high GGO component, and the on-going risk of subsequent tumours, has turned attention to ‘lung preserving’ surgery (anatomical segmentectomy and wedge resection) as an alternative to lobar resection for small tumours (122). Two randomized controlled trials which will hopefully be able to answer this important question are currently recruiting [CALGB 140503 and JCOG0802/WJOG4607L (123)].
Quality of life (QoL)

Three studies have reported generic health-related QoL (HRQoL), anxiety and lung-cancer specific distress data from approximately 2,500 screening participants (124-126). All found some transient negative psychological effects for participants who received an indeterminate or suspicious screening result. These effects subsided fairly rapidly such that there were no significant differences in HRQoL between baseline and 12-24 months follow-up. The NELSON study reported that half the participants found waiting for their baseline CT scan results ‘discomforting’, but that an indeterminate result at the second round of screening had no impact on HRQoL. This suggests that minimizing the waiting time for test results is beneficial and that participants soon accept that an indeterminate scan result does not necessarily warrant high anxiety (124,127).

Smoking cessation

Smoking cessation is important not only for future risk reduction in participants without cancer, but may also improve the prognosis of those diagnosed with early stage lung cancer (128). Screening for lung cancer may be a “teachable moment” increasing motivation to quit, particularly if the participant receives an abnormal CT scan report (129-131). As successful smoking cessation programs may also make screening more cost-effective (99), and smoking cessation assistance ‘adds value’ to screening in several ways, it should be a core component of any lung cancer screening program.

Knowledge gaps

Despite the positive result from NLST, screening outside of a research trial should be conducted in a controlled environment with careful risk assessment prior to recommending screening and careful analysis of all outcomes to ensure quality. Two international workshops have considered the current state of evidence and future directions for research. Areas that need addressing were highlighted including: (I) how to optimise identification of high-risk individuals; (II) Screening protocols (e.g., screen interval, number of screening rounds); (III) Definition of a positive screen result; (IV) Management of indeterminate nodules; (V) Diagnostic and therapeutic interventions for suspicious nodules; (VI) Integrated smoking cessation programs; (VII) The role of early detection biomarkers in individual lung cancer risk assessment; (VIII) The rate of overdiagnosis. Important steps will be to standardise equipment and image quality, nodule analysis and interpretation, and participant follow-up and outcome reporting (93,132). Some of these areas are discussed below.

Overdiagnosis

Overdiagnosis is difficult to ascertain (see Box 2 for definition). It was estimated at 13% in the NLST-the relative difference between 1,060 cancers detected in LDCT arm and 941 cancers detected in control arm (13). However this figure has been criticised as an underestimate (133) on the basis that the appropriate denominator should be the number of lung cancers detected in the control group during the screening period (n=470), not at the end of follow-up (n=941), making overdiagnosis closer to 25%, a figure similar to that estimated by the Mayo LDCT study on the basis of VDT (37). However even this figure may be an underestimate if the CXR screening arm is also subject to overdiagnosis (133). Against this, subset analysis of the PLCO cohort who met NLST eligibility criteria (n=30,321) found similar numbers of lung cancer cases in the CXR and the non-screened arms (518 vs. 520 cancers respectively after 6 years’ follow-up) (12). It is likely that only the European trials comparing screening to usual care (i.e., no screening) will be able to give a true estimate of overdiagnosis (90). This question therefore remains unanswered at present.

Screening interval and length of follow-up

The appropriate screening interval should provide a favourable ratio between disease control and screening costs (134). The MILD trial recently published their findings from a three-arm RCT of observation vs. annual vs. biennial screening in 4,099 participants (89). Stage distribution and resection rates were similar in the two LDCT arms. The cumulative 5-year lung cancer incidence was highest in the annual LDCT group compared to biennial and control groups (620/100,000 vs. 457 and 311 respectively, P=0.036). Adherence to the screening protocol was >95% in each LDCT arm but median duration of follow-up was only 4.4 years. Recruitment fell significantly short of the planned 10,000 participants meaning the study was underpowered to detect mortality differences. Also, differences in characteristics of screened and non-screened groups (such as smoking status, smoking intensity and lung function) raise doubts about the adequacy of randomization (135). Long-term follow-up results
from this study may be more informative. The NELSON study, in which participants are screened at Year 1 (baseline), Year 2 and Year 4, i.e., a two-year gap between the second and third scan, could also inform on optimal screen interval when Year 4 results are reported. As previously mentioned, data gathered at baseline scan (i.e., presence of radiographic emphysema) may be useful in determining risk and thus optimal screening interval (68). Regarding duration of screening, the NLST LDCT arm detected 649 cancers after a positive screening test (270 at baseline and 168 and 211 at years 1 and 2 respectively) and 367 in participants who either missed the screening or were diagnosed after completing the trial screening phase (median follow-up 6.5 years). This suggests that cancer detection rates (i.e., cancer risk) do not drop significantly over time and that on-going screening may be required. Accordingly, current guidelines suggest annual screening until the age of 74 (14,16) or 79 (15).

Recruitment

Recruitment strategies have varied between studies, most commonly direct mailing and/or media releases, but some used general practitioner referral (84,88). Smokers, by definition are less risk averse than non-smokers, at least in terms of their health. The decision to enter a screening trial is a complex balance of factors including acceptability of screening methods, risk perception, altruism, and self-interest (136). Inevitably, volunteers in any trial are self-selected and contribute to the ‘healthy volunteer’ effect. This may result in overly optimistic outcomes (e.g., better screening compliance, higher smoking cessation rates) or overly pessimistic outcomes (e.g., lower effectiveness as lower-risk individuals benefit less from screening).

Both the NLST and NELSON studies found some differences between their study populations and eligible general population; Participants were younger and less likely to be current smokers and had higher education levels (a proxy for socio-economic status). These differences were considered minor, meaning that a significant healthy volunteer effect was unlikely (81,137).

Risk stratification

Risk stratification has been applied at a basic level with most studies adopting the ELCAP strategy of screening older persons with a smoking history. Although age and tobacco smoke exposure account for the vast majority of lung cancer risk it is well recognised that other risk factors such as family history, socioeconomic status, occupational exposure and COPD contribute (138). Further risk stratification using other readily available information may be able to improve screening efficiency by excluding lower risk participants (139). Various models have been proposed, the largest derived from PLCO Trial data and recently updated (140,141). A retrospective analysis of this model applied to the PLCO dataset found that it was more efficient in comparison to the standard age- and smoking-based NLST entry criteria improving sensitivity from 71% to 83% (P<0.001), positive predictive value from 3.4% to 4.0% (P=0.01), and maintaining specificity (63% each). Use of the risk model to select screenees would have missed 41.3% fewer lung cancers (141). Prospective evaluation of another risk model is being undertaken by the UK Lung Cancer Screening Trial (142). Risk stratification may enhance screening effectiveness and cost-effectiveness by increasing lung cancer prevalence and incidence and reducing false-positive scan results. Although risk stratification makes intuitive sense it has not been proven experimentally, thus screening guideline recommendations diverge [recommend use of published risk model (15), informal risk assessment (14), no recommendation (16)].

Screening implementation

Generalization of findings from tightly controlled trial situations to large-scale mass screening programs require uniform standards and high quality control in order to be able to accurately track and assess nodules over time (132). Lung cancer screening is more than simple provision of a CT service; It is as a long-term commitment requiring extensive infrastructure to allow for invitation and recruitment; quality improvement; workforce/facility capacity for screening, diagnosis and treatment; health professional training; participant information and support. On-going evaluation and monitoring of the program is essential to ensure high standards of care are met and delivered in a consistent and acceptable way (134,143).

Future research

Minimally invasive, inexpensive tests to identify individuals at highest risk of lung cancer most likely to benefit from screening or to distinguish benign from malignant screen-detected nodules would represent major advances in lung cancer screening. Promising new technologies in this regard include analysis of blood for circulating microRNAs and
exhaled breath for volatile organic compounds (144-146). Most recent LDCT screening studies included biomarker collection in their protocols, so we can expect exciting new insights into these areas in the near future.

Conclusions

The results of the landmark NLST have proven the long-held belief that screening for lung cancer can save lives. Understandably, as a new intervention, many questions remain making generalizability to non-US settings difficult. Over the next few years, further analysis of NLST data and maturation of other important trials will be able to fill these knowledge gaps allowing the lung cancer community to evolve and refine the way we screen.

Acknowledgements

We thank the study volunteers and staff of The Prince Charles Hospital for their involvement in our research program and the Queensland Lung Cancer Screening Study research team.

Funding: This work was supported by National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) project grants, NHMRC Practitioner Fellowship (KF), NHMRC Career Development Award (IV), Cancer Council Queensland Senior Research Fellowship (KF), Cancer Council Queensland project grants, Queensland Smart State project grants, Office of Health and Medical Research (OHMR) project grants, The Prince Charles Hospital Foundation, NHMRC Postgraduate Medical Scholarship (HM), University of Queensland PhD Scholarship (HM).

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer deaths worldwide, accounting for 1.37 million deaths in 2008 (1,2). Early diagnosis (Stage I) is associated with far better survival (67% 5-year survival rate) than later stage disease (Stage III, 23% 5-year survival rate) (3). Symptoms alone cannot be relied upon to indicate the presence of lung cancer as they often do not appear until the cancer is relatively advanced. New techniques to detect disease earlier in high risk populations of asymptomatic individuals would be expected to significantly improve survival. The aim of this review was to examine the scientific evidence relating result of the analyses of exhaled breath and exhaled breath condensate (EBC) to the presence of lung cancer.

**Background**

As early as Roman times, the smell of a person's breath has assisted physicians with the diagnosis of a disease, e.g., uncontrolled diabetes was associated with a sweet, acetone odour; liver failure produced a fish-like smell; and renal failure was identified by a urine-like smell (4).

McCulloch (5) demonstrated that dogs could be trained to detect lung cancer and breast cancer in subjects with various stages of disease with almost 100% accuracy, merely by smelling the subject's breath. These observations suggest that there are biomarkers in exhaled breath that are potentially useful for diagnosing disease.
Over the last 40 years there have been many studies aiming to characterise these biomarkers. In 1971, Pauling et al. (6), using a gas chromatograph (GC), measured 250 different compounds in human breath samples. Since then Phillips measured 1,259 compounds in normal subjects in 1997 (7), and over 3,000 compounds in 1999 (8).

Analysis of exhaled breath

The compounds in exhaled breath may be useful indicators of a disease process in the lung. They have been classified as:

I Inorganic compounds, e.g., carbon dioxide, oxygen, and nitric oxide;
II Non-volatile compounds measured in EBC, e.g., isoprostanes, cytokines, leukotrienes and hydrogen peroxide (4).
III Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) which can be divided into different classes, e.g., saturated hydrocarbons (ethane, pentane, aldehydes), unsaturated hydrocarbons (isoprene), oxygen containing (acetone), sulphur containing (ethyl mercaptane, dimethylsulfide) and nitrogen containing (dimethylamine, ammonia) (9). The most commonly identified VOCs are isoprene, acetone, ethanol, methanol, other alcohols and alkanes (8).

VOCs

Little is known about the genesis of exhaled breath VOCs. Some are thought to be endogenous, that is produced by the body as end-products of metabolic pathways, e.g., isoprene, an unsaturated hydrocarbon, formed along the mevalonic acid pathway of cholesterol synthesis (10); acetone, an oxygen containing compound produced from glucose metabolism; And saturated hydrocarbons or alkanes such as ethane and pentane produced from oxygen free radical-mediated lipid peroxidation of fatty acid components of cell membranes (11). The latter compounds are thought to be markers of oxidative stress. VOCs are also components of exogenous contaminants from the external environment that have been inhaled and absorbed through the lungs or skin. Apart from lung excretion, VOCs can be catabolized and excreted through the liver or kidney (12).

There have been studies published on the VOCs detected and measured in various respiratory disease states including asthma, COPD, cystic fibrosis, and lung cancer. Table 1 summarizes the VOCs detected in the different lung diseases. It appears that there is not one VOC that is diagnostic for a condition but rather a combination of VOCs (15,22).

Exhaled breath VOC analysers

GC and mass spectrometry (GC-MS)

Because of the low concentrations of VOCs (parts per billion, ppb) (14,16) in exhaled breath, sensitive and highly accurate GCs and mass spectrometers have been utilized. Table 2 summarizes some of the published results of GC/ mass spectrometric analysis of VOCs in exhaled breath. GCs and mass spectrometers have limited application in a clinical setting because of their expense, difficulty of use, and the need for highly experienced analysts to operate them and interpret the results.

Portable/inexpensive devices

Several technologies, more portable and relatively inexpensive, have been developed and adapted to analyze exhaled breath samples. These include ion mobility spectrometers, and electronic nose instruments such as the Cyranose 320, the quartz microbalance, colorimeters, and gold particle nanosensors. Table 3 summarises published sensitivity and specificity results of electronic nose devices in the analysis of VOCs in exhaled breath of control and lung cancer subjects.

Ion mobility spectrometry (IMS)

The principle of the IMS system is a 550 MBq $^{63}$Ni β-radiation ionising source (Ni) which breaks down analytes from exhaled breath into ions. The ions separate and travel down a chamber at speeds that are related to their size, mass and geometry hitting a Faraday plate at the end of the chamber. As each ion hits the plate an electrical signal is generated which, when combined, produce an ion spectrum which is a fingerprint for the exhaled breath. Westhoff et al. (31) in 2009 was able to discriminate between 32 patients with lung cancer and 54 healthy subjects including both non-smokers and smokers in the group with 100% accuracy.

Electronic noses

Advances in technology have produced small, portable
array type devices to detect and identify chemicals in gaseous samples. They are designed to respond to the mix of compounds in the sample rather than identify individual compounds. The principle behind the devices is that the VOCs adsorb onto a sensor producing a change in conductivity, color or oscillation of a crystal. Output is usually a pattern representing the mix of VOCs.

**Quartz microbalance**
The quartz microbalance is an 8 sensor array of oscillating quartz crystals coated with varied metalloporphyrins to which VOCs adsorb, changing the mass of the sensors and their oscillation frequency. The change in the oscillation frequency is recorded for each sensor.

Di Natale *et al.* (32) used the quartz microbalance to demonstrate a 90.3% accuracy in discriminating between subjects with lung cancer (n=42), healthy volunteers (n=18) and post-surgery lung cancer patients (n=9, two tested pre and post-surgery). All lung cancer subjects were correctly identified, and overlap was reported between the healthy control group and the post-surgery group. In 2009 D’Amico *et al.* (29) demonstrated 85% sensitivity and 100% specificity in discriminating lung cancer from healthy non-smokers and 93% sensitivity and 79% specificity when compared to subjects with other lung diseases.

**Cyranose 320**
The Cyranose 320 is a portable analyzer with 32 built-in carbon-black polymer composite chemiresistors in an array format. The polymer matrix adsorbs VOCs in exhaled breath, and swells causing an increase in electrical resistance. Each polymer chemoresistor has different properties which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Significant VOCs identified</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phillips 2003</td>
<td>Lung Cancer</td>
<td>butane; 3-methyl tridecane; 7-methyl tridecane; 4-methyl octane; 3-methyl hexane; heptane; 2-methyl hexane, pentane; 5-methyl decane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machado 2005</td>
<td>Lung Cancer</td>
<td>isobutane; methanol; ethanol; acetone; pentane; isoprene; isopropanol; dimethylsulfide; carbon disulfide; benzene; toluene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poli 2005</td>
<td>Lung Cancer (NSCLC)</td>
<td>2-methyl pentane; pentane; ethyl benzene; xylenes (total); trimethyl benzene; toluene; benzene; decane; octane; penta methyl heptane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker 2006</td>
<td>Cystic Fibrosis</td>
<td>ethane; propane; pentane**; methanol*; ethanol; 2-propanol*; acetone; isoprene*; benzene; toluene; dimethyl sulfide*; limonene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragonieri 2007</td>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>4 methyl octane; 2,4-dimethyl heptane; isopropanol; toluene; isoprene; alkane; acetic acid; acetone; 2,6,11-trimethyl dodecane; 3,7-dimethyl undecane; 2,3-dimethyl heptane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen 2007</td>
<td>Lung cancer</td>
<td>styrene; decane; isoprene; benzene; undecane; 1-hexene; hexanol; propyl benzene; 1,2,4-trimethyl benzene; heptanal; methyl cyclopentane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng 2010</td>
<td>Lung, breast, colon, prostate cancer</td>
<td>16 compounds identified that varied in abundance between healthy groups and cancer groups-1-methyl-4-(1-methyl)benzene; toluene; dodecane; 3,3-dimethyl pentane; 2,3,4-trimethyl hexane; 1,1’-(1-butenylidene) bis benzene; 1,3-dimethyl benzene; 1-iodo nonane; (1,1-dimethylethyl thio) acetic acid; 4-(4-propylcyclohexyl)-4’-cyano[1,1’-biphenyl]4-yl ester benzoic acid; 2 amino-5-isopropyl-8-methyl-1-azuleneboronitrile; 5-(2-methylpropyl) nonane; 2,3,4-trimethyl decane; 6-ethyl-3-ocyt ester 2 trifluromethyl benzoic acid; p-xylene; and 2,2-dimethyldicane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuchs 2010</td>
<td>Lung cancer</td>
<td>Aldehydes-butanal; formaldehyde; acetaldehyde; pentanal; hexanal; octanal; nonanal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang 2012</td>
<td>Lung cancer</td>
<td>Adenocarcinoma-2,4,6-trimethyloctane; 2-methyl dodecane; 2-tridecanone; 2-pentadecanone; 8-methyl heptadecane; 2-heptadecanone; nonadecane; eicosane; squamous-methanoic acid; 2-nonanone; 2-pentadecanone; nonadecane; eicosane; SCC-2-decanone; 2-hendecanone; 2-methyl naphthalene; 2-tridecanone; 2-pentadecanone; 2,6-dimethylnaphthalene; 1-heptadecanol; 2-heptadecanone; nonadecane; eicosane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VOCs, volatile organic compounds. * sig diff from control group; * difference with antibiotics, body mass, Pseudomonas infection; θ difference with diabetics.
Table 2 Summary of gas chromatograph/mass spectrometry studies on VOCs in exhaled breath

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Analysis method</th>
<th>Patient numbers</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gordon 1985 (23)</td>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>Lung cancer 12; controls 17</td>
<td>Acetone; methyl ethyl ketone; n-propanol major difference between cancer and controls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips 2003 (13)</td>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>Primary lung cancer 67; metastatic lung cancer 15; no evidence of lung cancer 91; healthy volunteers 41</td>
<td>Sensitivity 90% (60/67), specificity 83% (34/41); Cross validation using one-out-jacknife procedure yielded sensitivity 85% (57/67) and specificity 81% (33/41); In patients with metastatic cancer- sensitivity =67% (10/15); smokers/ex-smokers did not affect sensitivity histology and TNM staging showed no affects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poli 2005 (15)</td>
<td>GC-MS Biovac sampler</td>
<td>NSCLC (pre + post-surgery) 36 (24); healthy smoker 35; healthy non-smoker 50; COPD (mild to moderate) 25</td>
<td>NSCLC vs. COPD-increased 2 methyl pentane + isoprene; NSCLC vs. control smokers-decreased benzene, heptane, toluene; control vs. COPD-decreased 2 methyl pentane, benzene, and toluene and increased styrene; control smokers-increased in almost all VOCs; NSCLC vs. COPD-sig diff in isoprene, 2 methyl pentane, ethyl benzene; styrene smokers vs. COPD-sig diff; NSCLC vs. controls-sig diff in most VOCs; only isoprene and decane decreased post-surgery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barker 2006 (16)</td>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>CF (stable) 15; CF (in hospital IV) 5; controls 20</td>
<td>CF: increased pentane output, decreased dimethyl sulphide (DMS) prod, increased 2-propanol uptake; Δ pentane higher in IV vs. stable, malnutrition, or pseudomonas, DMS lower in CF. Diabetic showed increased isoprene, less DMS and methanol, FEV1%Pred correlated with toluene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips 2007 (22)</td>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>Lung cancer 193 (128 pred set, 65 test set); control 211 (141 pred set, 70 test set); post-surgery 80</td>
<td>Prediction of lung cancer: sensitivity 85%, specificity 80%, NS diff between stages; Test module: +ve for primary lung cancer (45/45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen 2007 (18)</td>
<td>Solid phase microextraction (SPME), GC on cell culture and exhaled breath</td>
<td>Lung cancer 29; control 13; chronic bronchitis 7</td>
<td>Lung cancer sensitivity 86%; Control specificity 69%, chronic bronchitis specificity 71%, PPV 80.6 and NPV 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bajtarevic 2009 (25) PTR-MS + SPME GC-MS</td>
<td>Lung cancer 220 (68 smokers/129 ex-smokers/23 never smokers); healthy volunteers 441 (84 smokers/86 ex-smokers/221 never smokers)</td>
<td>Isoprene, acetone, methanol lower in lung cancer compared to healthy controls (PTR-MS), 100% specificity, Sensitivity Set A: 52% for 2-butanone; benzaldehyde. 2,3-butanedione; 1-propanol. Add. compounds for set B: Sensitivity =71% 3-hydroxy- 2-butanone; 3-butyln-2-ol; 2-methyl-butan; 2-methyl-2-buten; acetonaphone; 1-cyclopentene; methyl propyl sulphide; tetramethyl-urea; n-pentanal; 1-methyl-1,3-cyclopentadiene; 2,3-dimethyl-2-butanol. Add. compounds for set C: sensitivity =80% 1,2,3,4-tetrahydro-isoquinoline; 3,7-dimethyl-undecane; cyclobutyl-benzene; butyl acetate; ethylenimine; n-undecane (80% sensitivity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuchs 2010 (20)</td>
<td>SPME + GC-MS</td>
<td>Lung cancer 12; healthy smokers 12; healthy never smokers 12</td>
<td>Pentanal; hexanal; octanal and nonanal conc higher in lung cancer than controls; NS diff between SCLC and NSCLC; hexanal higher in SCLC than NSCLC; pentanal—sensitivity 75%, specificity 95.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Analysis method</th>
<th>Patient numbers</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wang 2012 (21)</td>
<td>SPME, GC on cell culture and exhaled breath</td>
<td>Lung cancer 85; lung benign disease 70 (including pulmonitis, pulmonary tuberculosis, asthma and so on); healthy people 88</td>
<td>Sig diff with AUC &gt;0.6 and P&lt;0.01 in 8-hexylpentadecane; 3,7-dimethylpentadecane; 8-methylheptadecane; 2-pentadecanone; 5-(1-methyl)-propylnonane between adenocarcinoma and squamous. 96.5% of lung cancer patients were correctly classified with lung cancer; 34.3% benign incorrectly classified as healthy; 33.3% late stage lung cancer classified as early stage lung cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peled 2012 (26)</td>
<td>SPME + GC-MS</td>
<td>72 subjects with pulmonary nodules--19 benign + 53 cancer</td>
<td>1-octene sig diff (P=0.0486) between benign and cancer. No sig diff between early and late stage disease and histology subtypes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GC-MS, gas chromatograph and mass spectrometry; SPME, solid phase microextraction; PTR-MS, proton transfer reaction mass spectrometry; NSCLC, non-small cell lung carcinoma; SCLC, small cell lung cancer; COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; CF, cystic fibrosis; FEV1 % Pred, forced expiratory volume in one second, percent predicted; NS diff, no significant difference; Sig difference, significant difference; +ve, positive; pred, predicted; AUC, Area Under the Curve (AUC) of the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC).

## Table 3 Electronic nose results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Analysis method</th>
<th>Lung cancer subjects (n)</th>
<th>Control subjects (n)</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Machado 2005 (14)</td>
<td>Cyranose 320</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19 alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency, 6 chronic pulmonary beryllium disease, 20 healthy</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazzone 2007 (27)</td>
<td>Colorimetric</td>
<td>49 NSCLC</td>
<td>18 COPD, 15 IPF, 20 PAH, 20 sarcoidosis, 21 healthy controls</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>72.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragonieri 2008 (28)</td>
<td>Cyranose 320</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 COPD, 10 healthy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng 2010 (19)</td>
<td>Nanosensor array with gold nano-particles</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26 colon cancer, 22 breast cancer, 18 prostate, 22 healthy controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’Amico 2010 (29)</td>
<td>Quartz Microbalance</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>36 control, 29 other lung diseases</td>
<td>85, 92.8</td>
<td>100, 78.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazzone 2012 (30)</td>
<td>Colorimetric</td>
<td>92 NSCLC</td>
<td>67 lung cancer screening group, 70 indeterminate nodules (mean diameter 11 mm)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peled 2012 (26)</td>
<td>Nanosensor array with single wall carbon nanotubes + gold nano-particles</td>
<td>53 malignant nodules</td>
<td>19 benign nodules</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NSCLC, non-small cell lung carcinoma; COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; IPF, idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis; PAH, pulmonary arterial hypertension.
absorb VOCs to varying degrees producing a differential response across the array. The combined results from the sensors produce a sample ‘smellprint’.

The statistical algorithms for the analysis of patterns include Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to reduce the initial data set from the 32 sensors to a set of 4 principal components that capture the greatest variance of the data. Canonical Discriminate Analysis (CDA) using the factors that demonstrated a significant difference between the patients groups is used to create a model that maximizes the ratio of between-group distance to within-group distance. Wilks’ lambda with a P value <0.05 is utilized to demonstrate a statistically significant difference between patient groups. The distance between group means is quantified with a number called Mahalanobis distance (M-distance). M-distance >3 indicates a high probability of difference between groups (P<0.1). Accuracy or capacity of the prediction model to completely distinguish all members of a clinical group is assessed using the “leave one-out method”. The cross validated value (CVV) is the percentage of participants that were correctly classified to a particular participant group.

Machado et al. (14) demonstrated a difference between the exhaled breath VOC profile of a lung cancer group (n=14) and a control group (n=20) with M-distance of 3.25 and cross validated accuracy (CVA) of 71.6%. However there was no difference between stages or between histopathology subtypes of the lung cancer. When the model created from the training set was validated with a new group of lung cancer subjects (n=14) and control subjects (n=62) the electronic nose was able to discriminate between the two groups with sensitivity 71.4% and specificity 91.9%.

In 2008 Dragonieri et al. (28) also found that it was possible to use the Cyranose 320 to distinguish patients with lung cancer (n=10) and COPD (n=10) with accuracy of 85% (M-distance 3.73), and healthy control subjects (n=10), 90%, (M-distance 2.96).

Colorimetry
The colorimetric analyzer has dots impregnated with chemically sensitive compounds, e.g., metalloporphyrins on a cartridge. Each dot is sensitive to a broad range of VOCs but with varying sensitivity. Adsorption of VOCs to the dots causes them to change color. The cartridges are scanned before and after exposure to the sample, and the change in color of the spots is measured and converted to a number.

Two studies published by Mazzone et al. (27,30) used a colorimetric analyzer to compare the exhaled breath VOCs of subjects with lung cancer and control groups. The first, in 2007, (27) described a model discriminating between VOCs of subjects with lung cancer and control subjects [IPF, PAH, COPD, sarcoidosis, healthy subjects (smokers and non-smokers)] with an error rate of 14.1%. Using an independent validation set of subjects the sensitivity of the model in diagnosing lung cancer was 73.3% and specificity 72.4%. These results were not influenced by the patients’ smoking history (P=0.87), histology (P=0.49), cancer stage (P=0.79) or size of the tumour (P=0.69). In 2012, Mazzone et al. (30) found that a combination of the breath profile and clinical risk factors including age, sex, smoking status and COPD improved the accuracy of the model in discriminating between patients with and without lung cancer [Area Under the Curve (AUC) of the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC) 0.811]. The same model showed a difference between exhaled breath of subjects with squamous and adenocarcinomas (AUC =0.864), early (I and II) and late stage disease (III and IV) (AUC 0.784) and survival <12 months compared to survival >12 months (AUC 0.770).

Gold particle nanosensor
Peng et al. (19) developed a nanosensor array with 14 gold nanoparticle electrodes overlaid with a mixture of compounds including dodecanethiol, 4-methoxytoluenethiol, hexanethiol, 11-mercaptop-1-undecanethiol, decanethiol, octadecanethiol, tert-dodecanethiol, 1-butanethiol, 2-ethyl-hexanethiol, 3-methyl-1-butanethiol, 2-mercaptobenzoxazole, 11-mercaptop-1-undecanol, 2-mercaptop-Benzyl alcohol, and 3-methyl-1-butanethiol. When exposed to a breath sample the 14 sensors undergo a reversible change in resistance and are analyzed using principal component and cluster analysis. The 2010 study demonstrated a difference between patterns of healthy subjects and patients with lung, colon and breast cancers, but an overlap was found with patients with prostate cancer. Distinct patient groups were identified in one plot when patient groups were analyzed together.

The study also investigated the VOC composition of exhaled breath for each patient group using a GC-MS. They identified a total of 16 VOCs that varied in concentration between healthy and patient groups; six for lung cancer, six for colon cancer, five for breast cancer, and four in prostate cancer. However, there was overlap in abundance of compounds for each of the cancer groups. Peled et al. (26) used a tailor-made chemical nanoarray of 18 cross-reactive sensors, 2 based
on random networks of single-wall carbon nanotubes, and 16 based on spherical gold nanoparticles. The accuracy of the nanoarray in discriminating between malignant and benign disease was 88% with an AUC of 0.986. It was also able to discriminate between early and late disease (accuracy 88% AUC 0.961) and adenocarcinoma and squamous (accuracy 88% AUC 0.974).

**Canine detection**

Dogs have a highly developed sense of smell with a detection threshold at several parts per trillion. *Table 4* summarizes the findings of canine detection of cancer.

The premise that dogs may be able to detect cancer by smell was first described in 1989 by Williams (33) who reported the case of a patient’s dog showing an interest in one mole (later identified as melanoma) but not others. In 2001, Church (34) also described the case of a dog sniffing a skin lesion later identified as a basal cell carcinoma. In each case the dogs showed no further interest after the lesions were excised.

The first published research study in 2004 by Willis *et al.* (35) demonstrated that dogs were able to be trained to detect bladder cancer (1 positive sample in 7) by smelling urine samples. Dogs were successful in 22 out 54 cases (41%) compared with 14% expected by chance. Sonoda *et al.* (39) trained a dog to detect colorectal cancer in exhaled breath of 33 patients with sensitivity and specificity of 91% and 99%. In 2010 Horvath *et al.* (38) demonstrated that dogs were able to detect ovarian cancer from tissue and plasma with sensitivity and specificity of 100% and 95%, and 100% and 98% respectively. The dogs were also able to detect early cancer and discriminate between ovarian and other gynaecological malignancies such as endometrial, cervical and vulvar carcinomas. The first study to use dogs to detect lung cancer was by McCulloch *et al.* (5) in 2006. He trained five dogs to identify exhaled breath samples of subjects with lung cancer and breast cancer. The sensitivity of the canine detection technique for biopsy-confirmed lung cancer (n=55) was 99%, with 99% specificity, while in breast cancer (n=31) the sensitivity was 88% and specificity 98%, with equal accuracy scored by all dogs. The results were different to those of Ehmann *et al.* (40) who showed that dogs were able to identify lung cancer with sensitivity 71% and specificity 93%. Buszewski *et al.* (42) compared the chromatographic VOC content of exhaled breath samples of lung cancer subjects (n=29) with canine recognition of lung cancer, and found positive correlations of r=0.85 and 0.97 for ethyl acetate and 2-pentanone while acetonitrile, propanal and 1-propanol were negatively correlated with the dogs’ response to breath samples (r=–0.78, –0.87 and –0.98). He concluded that dogs are probably discriminating between breath samples based on a specific breath odour but it is still unknown what odour or mix of compounds dogs detect.

Although canine scent detection by trained dogs seemed relatively simple and inexpensive, apart from high quality studies performed (43), relatively few published data in general or lung cancer in particular have been reported.

**EBC analysis**

EBC consists of approximately 99% water vapor (44)
as well as a small fraction of respiratory airway lining fluid droplets (45). EBC collection is a simple, safe, non-invasive technique for investigating inflammation and oxidative stress. The EBC can be collected by the subject breathing through a tube inserted in either a metal tube cooled to 0 degrees (R Tube) or through a condenser (Ecoscreen). They breathe tidally for 10-20 minutes through the system and at the end of the time the condensate is collected and analyzed. Studies have shown elevated levels of inflammatory and oxidative stress biomarkers such as hydrogen peroxide, leukotrienes, isoprostanes, hydrogen ions, prostaglandins, and nitrogen oxides (46) in EBC of patients with asthma, COPD, bronchiectasis and cystic fibrosis (47). Studies by Carpagnano et al. (48-53) and Gessner et al. (54) demonstrated they were able to detect human DNA in EBC. A p53 gene mutation (54) was found in 36% of NSCLC subjects while none of the control subjects showed the mutation. Carpagnano et al. (51) demonstrated that microsatellite alterations in EBC-DNA were more frequent in subjects with NSCLC (89%) compared with healthy control subjects (35%). A recent publication from Carpagnano et al. (48) demonstrated a significant difference (P<0.001) in EBC matrix metalloproteinase 9 (MMP-9) concentrations between NSCLC and control subjects with transudative pleural effusion (25 vs. 2.6 ng/mL). The authors also described positive correlations between MMP-9 concentration and pack years smoking history (r=0.8, P<0.0001) and stage of lung cancer (r=0.6, P<0.01). However there was no correlation with the histopathological type of lung cancer.

Methodological limitations

The main limitation of exhaled breath analysis is the lack of recommended guidelines in the sampling of exhaled breath. As seen in Table 5 there have been many techniques used. The methods vary on whether the inhaled room air is filtered (14,19), or unfiltered (5,27-30,40); the period of tidal breathing prior to collecting breath samples (0-12 minutes); the technique used to collect the breath sample, e.g., tidal breath sample (27,29,30,40), vital capacity (5,14,28), or alveolar breath sample (19); and what system was used to collect the sample, one (14,27-30), two bag sampling system (19) or cylindrical polypropylene sampling tubes (5,40). There are also many variations on the statistical analysis. Finally, there has been no comparison between different equipment.

### Applying VOCs analysis in lung cancer

#### Post lung cancer resection results

Phillips et al. (22) used GC-MS to analyze the exhaled breath of untreated lung cancer subjects and healthy controls from which he developed a mathematical model to discriminate between the two subject groups. The model was tested on 80 post-surgical patients and found that it was positive in 77/80 subjects indicating that the VOC profile was unchanged post-surgical resection. These findings suggested that the VOCs do not come from the tumor itself but rather from other tissues. Poli et al. (15) selected thirteen VOCs using GC-MS that discriminated between lung cancer subjects and control groups. He retested 26 subjects 15-30 days post-surgery and found that two of the thirteen previously identified VOCs, isoprene and decane, altered significantly. When retested at 1 month (n=21), Poli et al. (55) showed that isoprene continued to be significantly decreased from pre-surgery levels while at 3 years (n=10), 5 VOCs were significantly different; isoprene and benzene were decreased while pentane, toluene and ethylene benzene levels were increased. When compared to control subjects, post-surgical subjects at three years had no significant difference in levels of benzene, heptanes and octanes. These findings again suggest that the exhaled breath VOCs measured in lung cancer subjects are not produced by the tumor.

#### Validation studies

Machado (14), Phillips (22), and Mazzone (27) have performed validation studies using an independent group of subjects to test the model developed from their training set of subjects. See Table 6 for summary of results. Machado et al. (14) tested the exhaled breath of lung cancer subjects, healthy control subjects and subjects with other respiratory conditions including asthma, COPD and pulmonary hypertension with the Cyranose 320 analyzer. He used support vector machine (SVM) analysis, a learning algorithm, to discriminate between exhaled breath samples of different subject groups. The developed model was accurate in 85% of the subjects. The analyzer had a sensitivity of 71.4%, a specificity of 91.9%, a positive predicted value (PPV) for lung cancer of 66.6% and a 93.4% negative predictive value (NPV). In 2007, Phillips (22) published a study using fuzzy logic to develop a model of breath biomarkers for lung cancer. He tested this model using GC-MS on the exhaled breath of 135 subjects, 65 lung cancer subjects and 70 healthy control subjects.
Table 5 Summary of methodological and statistical differences between different techniques of VOC analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Analysis method</th>
<th>Filtered/unfiltered</th>
<th>Tidal breathing time prior to sample collection (minutes)</th>
<th>Breath collection tidal/VC/ alveolar</th>
<th>Sample collection system</th>
<th>Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Machado 2005</td>
<td>Cyranose 320 Filtered</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 EVC</td>
<td>1 bag</td>
<td>PCA, CDA, SVM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McCulloch 2006</td>
<td>Canine Unfiltered</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3-5 full exhalations</td>
<td>Cylindrical polypropylene organic vapor sampling tubes</td>
<td>Sensitivity/specificity Fisher 2-sided exact test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazzone 2007</td>
<td>Colorimetric Unfiltered</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Tidal breath sample</td>
<td>1 bag</td>
<td>Random forest method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragonieri 2008</td>
<td>Cyranose 320 Unfiltered</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 EVC</td>
<td>1 bag</td>
<td>PCA, CDA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peng 2010</td>
<td>Nano-sensor array with gold nanoparticles Filtered</td>
<td>3-5 min TLC breathing</td>
<td>Alveolar</td>
<td>2 bags</td>
<td>PCA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’Amico 2010</td>
<td>Quartz Micro-balance 2 bag system collecting end-tidal breath</td>
<td>Deep breaths to fill 4 L bag</td>
<td>Tidal</td>
<td>1 bag</td>
<td>Partial least squares discriminate analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazzone 2012</td>
<td>Colorimetric Unfiltered</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tidal breathing</td>
<td>1 bag</td>
<td>Logistic regression model with backwards step down variable selection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ehmann 2012</td>
<td>Canine Unfiltered 5 full exhaled breaths Tidal</td>
<td>Cylindrical glass tubes with polypropylene fleece and silicone oil</td>
<td>Fishers exact test, Wilcoxon’s test, Kruskal-Wallis, Holm’s method</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peled 2012</td>
<td>Nano-sensor array with single wall carbon nanotubes + gold nanoparticles Filtered</td>
<td>3-5 min TLC breathing</td>
<td>Alveolar</td>
<td>2 bags</td>
<td>Wilcoxon test, discriminate factor analysis, leave one out cross validation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VC, vital capacity; EVC, exhaled vital capacity; TLC, total lung capacity; L, litre; min, minute; PCA, principal component analysis; CDA, canonical discriminant analysis; SVM, support vector machine analysis.

Table 6 Validation of developed test models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Device</th>
<th>Sensitivity (%)</th>
<th>Specificity (%)</th>
<th>PPV</th>
<th>NPV</th>
<th>AUC</th>
<th>Accuracy (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Machado(14)</td>
<td>Cyranose</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips (22)</td>
<td>GC-MS</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazzone (27)</td>
<td>Colorimetric</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PPV, positive predictive value; NPV, negative predictive value; AUC, Area Under the Curve (AUC) of the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC).
It had 84.6% sensitivity, 80% specificity and 0.88 AUC. Mazzone (27) when using the colorimetric analyzer produced lower sensitivity and specificity values (73.3%, 72.4%) when testing his model on an independent group of subjects with lung cancer, sarcoidosis, IPF, PAH, COPD and healthy subjects. However, the sensitivity was 100% and specificity 60% when a group of subjects (n=29) with indeterminate pulmonary nodules <30 mm was tested.

**Factors which may confound VOC analysis results**

**Age**

Using GC-MS Phillips et al. in 2000 (56) investigated the effect of age on alkane contours in 102 normal subjects. He found that there was a statistical significant difference between age groups 9-31 and 46-89. This was different to Dragonieri et al. (17), Mazzone et al. (27), and Wehinger et al’s. (57) findings who used Cyranose 320, colorimetry and proton transfer reaction MS. Dragonieri et al. demonstrated that there was no significant difference in smellprints between age groups <45 and >45 years in 20 normal subjects. Mazzone et al. also demonstrated no difference in results (27) with age (P=0.96). Wehinger et al. using PTR-MS for VOC 31 (believed to be formaldehyde) and 43 (believed to be isopropanol) showed no differences with age. Peng et al. (19) again found no difference with age using the gold particle nanosensor.

**Airway calibre**

Lazar et al. (58) found with the Cyranose 320 that the exhaled breath profile in 10 asthmatics was altered by nebulisation of methacholine and isotonic saline but was not altered by the airway calibre.

**Smoking**

Gordon et al. (59) demonstrated with GC-MS in 5 smokers and 5 non-smokers that cigarette smoke affected the volatile organic composition of their exhaled breath. However, the level of the measured VOCs returned to an approximate baseline after 15 minutes. As part of a study of lung cancer and healthy controls using the Cyranose 320, the exhaled breath profiles of current and non-smokers in both healthy subjects and those with disease were found by Machado et al. (14) not to be different and he concluded that the difference between the subject groups was most likely due to the disease process and not to smoking. This was supported by Mazzone et al. (27) whose colorimetry results were not affected by the patients’ smoking history, (current, former or non-smoker) (P=0.87). Peng et al. (19) also found that the subjects’ smoking habits did not affect the results using the gold particle nanosensor. Phillips et al. (22,60) used GC-MS to analyze the exhaled breath of subjects with lung cancer and subjects with a smoking history and a negative CT for lung cancer and developed a model to discriminate between the two patient groups. The accuracy of the model was tested on an independent group of subjects. On evaluating the ROC curves for current and former smokers he found no difference between the two groups. Fens et al. (61) findings in a COPD and asthma study using the Cyranose 320 also showed no difference in breathprints between current and ex-smokers (P=0.16).

**Lung function severity**

Machado et al. (14) used the Cyranose 320 in his breath analysis and indicated that the severity of lung dysfunction did not affect the clustering of samples.

**Gender**

Several studies have showed that gender has no effect on the profile (19,27,57).

**Conclusions**

This review has demonstrated a consistent association between patterns of VOCs in exhaled breath, and genetic markers in EBC, and the presence of lung cancer. Historically, canine detection of lung cancer was reported to be highly sensitive and specific but it still requires further validation and replication in larger trials to establish its accuracy. Studies examining exhaled breath using GC and mass spectrometers have identified individual chemical compounds associated with lung cancer and confirmed that there is not one VOC but rather a combination of VOCs that are either increased or decreased in concentration. These techniques have limited applicability in the clinical setting because of their expense, difficulty of use, and the need for highly experienced analysts to operate and interpret the results. Electronic noses and related instruments are simpler, cheaper and easier to use, facilitating their utilization in the clinical setting. These instruments employ different technologies to identify VOC patterns. Studies
using a variety of these instruments, sampling techniques, and different statistical analyses have consistently discriminated between groups of patients with lung cancer and control subjects. No combination of the instruments, methodologies or statistical analysis has yet been shown to reliably predict which patients in an at risk population are likely to have lung cancer. There will obviously need to be some consensus regarding the most appropriate instruments, collection techniques and statistical methods to optimise the accuracy of the identification of at risk patients for lung cancer. Further validation of the models developed to discriminate between lung cancer and control groups will also be required to determine the sensitivity and specificity of the techniques. With these limitations, exhaled breath analysis does hold great promise because of its simplicity and low cost as a new screening and diagnostic technique in lung cancer.

EBC, a technique which can allow quantification of genetic markers, also shows promise, but does not at this stage have an established place in the screening of lung cancer primarily because it requires a sophisticated genetics laboratory to analyze the samples.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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gene mutations in exhaled breath condensate of non-small
non small cell lung cancer patients after surgical tumour
age on the breath methylated alkane contour, a display of
apparent new markers of oxidative stress. J Lab Clin Med
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reaction mass-spectrometric analysis of human breath gas.

breathprints are independent of acute changes in airway
organic compounds as breath biomarkers for active and
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lung cancer using weighted digital analysis of breath
Exhaled breath profiling enables discrimination of chronic
obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma. Am J Respir Crit
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Cite this article as: Dent AG, Sutedja TG, Zimmerman
PV. Exhaled breath analysis for lung cancer. J Thorac Dis
Interventional pulmonology approaches in the diagnosis and treatment of early stage non small cell lung cancer

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Abstract: Lung cancer management is complex and requires a multi-disciplinary approach to provide comprehensive care. Interventional pulmonology (IP) is an evolving field that utilizes minimally invasive modalities for the initial diagnosis and staging of suspected lung cancers. Endobronchial ultrasound guided sampling of mediastinal lymph nodes for staging and detection of driver mutations is instrumental for prognosis and treatment of early and later stage lung cancers. Advances in navigational bronchoscopy allow for histological sampling of suspicious peripheral lesions with minimal complication rates, as well as assisting with fiducial marker placements for stereotactic radiation therapy. Furthermore, IP can also offer palliation for inoperable cancers and those with late stage diseases. As the trend towards early lung cancer detection with low dose computed tomography is developing, it is paramount for the pulmonary physician with expertise in lung nodule management, minimally invasive sampling and staging to integrate into the paradigm of multi-specialty care.

Keywords: Bronchoscopy; gene expression profiling; interdisciplinary communication; TNM staging; radial probe-EBUS (RP-EBUS); virtual bronchoscopic navigation (VBN); electromagnetic navigational bronchoscopy (ENB™)


View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.11

Background of interventional pulmonology (IP)

At the dawn of the 20th century, respiratory physicians largely provided medical care in sanatoriums tending to patients infected with tuberculosis. TB was the second leading cause of death in that era behind pneumonias and influenza infections (1,2). Advances in antimicrobials, including isoniazid and penicillin, led to significant improvement in outcomes. During the subsequent decades, tobacco smoking became widespread in the United States. It was not until the mid-20th century that lung cancer was strongly linked to smoking with epidemiological data (3). Since then, pulmonologists have managed the myriad of lung ailments consequent to tobacco addiction, such as emphysema. As lung cancer became the leading cause of cancer deaths in both men and women, the pulmonologist’s role in lung cancer care has evolved. Smoking cessation remains the most important role a pulmonologist assumes to prevent lung cancers; as one fifth of U.S. population are smokers, and among the economically disadvantaged, the number increases to about forty percent (4). On the other hand, the management role of pulmonologists in lung cancer has also evolved from diagnosis of late stage lung cancers and risk stratification for surgery, to management of early stage disease with personalized approach in a multidisciplinary setting.

Interventional pulmonology concentrates on the use and development of diagnostic and therapeutic endobronchial techniques (5-7). The IP armatorium consists of (and is not limited to) rigid bronchoscopy, endobronchial laser
therapy, electrocautery, cryotherapy brachytherapy and endobronchial or tracheal stent placement and the advanced diagnostic techniques available to pulmonologists such as endobronchial ultrasound (EBUS) and navigational bronchoscopy (NB) (Table 1).

It is important to bear in mind that the field of IP depends on close-working and complementary relationships with the thoracic radiologist, radiation oncologist, and the thoracic surgeon as part of a multidisciplinary team. This review will cover diagnostic and therapeutic techniques that are being used in the management of early stage lung cancer.

### Table 1: Current interventional and advanced diagnostic modalities for managing malignant neoplasia of the lung

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Endobronchial US</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radial probe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBUS-TBNA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow band imaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Electromagnetic navigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Navigational bronchoscopy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confocal microendoscopy</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Therapeutic:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic compression:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic obstruction:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microdebrideument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid bronchoscopy coring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argon plasma coagulation (APC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laser (Nd:YAG, CO₂)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrocautery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cryotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photodynamic therapy (PDT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDR-brachytherapy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Peripheral tumor:               |
| Fiducial marker placement to assist stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) for inoperable patients with resectable stage I lung CA |
| Fiducial marker placement for localization for surgical management |

Abbreviations: EBUS, Endobronchial ultrasound; TBNA, Transbronchial needle aspiration; Nd:YAG, neodymium-doped yttrium aluminum garnet; CO₂, Carbon Dioxide

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**Bronchoscopic early detection of malignancy**

Lung cancer is the most lethal of solid tumors. Up to 85% are attributed largely to heavy smoking. Furthermore, despite smoking cessation many are still at risk for several years since their last cigarette (8). In the last decade evidence in favor of lung cancer screening with low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) has shown to be superior to chest X-ray (CXR) (8).

Henscke et al. demonstrated in a prospective observational study of 31,567 asymptomatic patients, low dose CT screening resulted in the diagnosis of lung cancer in 484 patients, 85% of whom had Stage I disease, and who after treatment had a 10-year survival rate of 88% (95% CI, 88-95%) (9). The National Cancer Institute-Sponsored Lung Screening Trial that followed supported its findings. The NSLT was a randomized control trial in which 53,454 patients were randomized to three years of annual low dose CT screening versus plain chest X-ray (8). After three years the NSLT investigators had achieved their primary objective, which was a 20% relative reduction in mortality from lung cancer. The corresponding number needed to screen (NNS) to prevent 1 death after 1 year of screening is 320. Although questions remain about trial design, generalizability, applicability and cost-effectiveness of LDCT in the community, the goal of detecting early stage lung cancer with concomitant reduction in cancer specific mortality has become achievable.

As a result of NSLT, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has recently updated its original 2004 recommendations regarding lung cancer screening. Its main recommendation, based on the NSLT, provides LDCT screening to high risk individuals with at least a 30 pack-year smoking history between the ages of 55-79 years. The prospective efficacy of these recommendations will depend on the ability of the pulmonologist to meet the demands of accurate and timely diagnosis, proper risk stratifications, tissue sampling when appropriate, and familiarity thoracic oncologists’ needs beyond tumor types, i.e., molecular profiling.

Early detection of malignancies arising from the central airways by bronchoscopy has also been evaluated over the past decade. Squamous cell carcinomas of the central airways have shown to develop through several stages from metaplasia, dysplasia, carcinoma in-situ (CIS) and advanced invasion (10). The cellular transformation of bronchial carcinomas has been described as a spectrum of lesions from basal layer hyperplasia, metaplasia, dysplasia, and CIS (11).
CIS is characterized by involvement of the entire epithelium with marked cytologic atypia. Bronchoscopic follow-up by autofluorescence bronchoscopy (AFB) and biopsy data among patients with high suspicion for lung cancer either from positive sputum cytology or prior upper respiratory cancers has shown that severe dysplastic lesions were more likely to progress towards CIS and further invasive cancer (12,13). Furthermore, Bota et al. showed 75% of CIS lesions, which persisted at 3 months required therapy (13). Currently the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) recommendations regarding known CIS and high-grade dysplastic lesions suggest performing follow-up white-light bronchoscopy (WLB) to rule out endobronchial lesions with use of AFB if available (14). However, relatively higher false-positive rates and suboptimal specificity of AFB, likely due to failure to distinguish inflammatory airways from dysplasia, limit its potential to preclude the need for unnecessary biopsies (15).

**Narrow band imaging (NBI)**

NBI utilizes narrow wavelengths of blue (400-430 & 420-470 nm; B1 & B2, respectively) and green (560-590 nm) light to enhance visualization of abnormal collections of submucosal capillaries (16,17). This strategy has been shown to be highly effective in differentiating normal mucosa from highly vascular precancerous lesions such as angiogenic squamous dysplasia (ASD). ASD is characterized by abnormal collections of microvessels projecting into dysplastic cells within the bronchial mucosa (18). NBI has shown improved sensitivity in detecting ASD not readily seen with WLB or AFB (19-21). Diagnostic yield was similar between NBI and AFB without any increased false-positives suggesting that NBI may serve as an alternative tool in early lung cancer detection. NBI's unique ability to detect early angiogenesis undetectable by AFB with high specificity (85-90%) and negative predictive value (>90%) has the potential for influencing therapeutic decision-making (22). Currently, the ACCP recommends NBI or AFB, when available, to be used to delineate tumor margins in patients who are candidates for early lung cancer resection (23).

**Lung cancer diagnosis and staging**

**The solitary pulmonary nodule (SPN)**

The solitary pulmonary nodule, commonly detected incidentally, is among the top reasons for referral to a pulmonologist. Concurrently, as the work on early lung cancer screening evolves, it behooves the pulmonary specialist to become an expert in the management of the solitary lung nodule.

The current ACCP guidelines recommend, depending on patient and SPN features, observation, tissue biopsy and direct surgical excision. The role for pulmonologists for biopsies will be expanding with advancing bronchoscopic techniques. Currently, with more peripheral lesions where tissue biopsy is indicated, the guidelines recommend trans-thoracic needle biopsy (TTNB) as the preferred modality as the diagnostic yield is slightly below 90% (23-25). Traditional transbronchial biopsy with bronchoscopy has a diagnostic yield of only 14-63% (26). In 2012, Wang et al. published a meta-analysis of 39 pooled studies (n=patients >3,000) of all available guided-techniques (discussed below) that demonstrated a pooled diagnostic yield of 70% (25). While this is improved compared to standard bronchoscopy, it still remains below the diagnostic yield of TTNB. Concurrently, Wang reported a pneumothorax rate in TTNB of 25% (15% requiring a chest tube) versus less than 2% (less than 1% requiring a chest tube) in bronchoscopic techniques. The three main techniques used in this field of specialized bronchoscopy are radial probe-EBUS (RP-EBUS), virtual bronchoscopic navigation (VBN) and electromagnetic navigational bronchoscopy (ENB™) (5).

**Radial probe EBUS (RP-EBUS)**

RP-EBUS uses ultrasound to take samples sequentially. It allows excellent visualization of the bronchial walls and a tumor in situ. It is also the only technology that allows for real-time confirmation that the target lesion has been reached which translates to improved yield over conventional transbronchial biopsy with or without fluoroscopy (27-31). In a prospective cohort study of 131 patients, RP-EBUS demonstrated better sensitivity and accuracy (89% and 100%, respectively) at detecting bronchial wall invasion over CT (75% and 51%, respectively) (32). RP-EBUS uses a flexible bronchoscope to access the bronchiole closest to the nodule, and then a miniaturized radial probe and sheath are passed through the working channel until the nodule is visualized. The probe is removed leaving the sheath in position, then biopsy forceps is inserted through the guide sheath and the nodule sampled (Figure 1). Steinfort et al. showed in a meta-analysis of 13 studies and 1,090 patients, that RP-EBUS in SPNs...
had a point specificity of 1.00 (95% CI, 0.99-1.0) and point sensitivity of 0.73 (95% CI, 0.70-0.76) (33). Eberhardt et al. in a randomized control trial showed that RP-EBUS with a guide sheath alone had a diagnostic yield of 69% (34). This increased to 88% when combined with electromagnetic navigational bronchoscopy (ENB™); a diagnostic yield comparable to TTNB and SPNs with a mean diameter of 25 mm.

Electromagnetic navigational bronchoscopy (ENB™)

ENB™ is a technology developed for access to peripheral nodules beyond the reach of conventional bronchoscopes. Akin to global positioning systems (GPS), ENB™ is able to provide real-time orientation of a proprietary sensor probe by utilizing an electromagnetic field generated by a board underneath the patient (16,35). Pre-procedural planning involves importing the patient’s CT data and assigning anatomical landmarks including the target lesion. The sensor probe (1 mm diameter × 8 mm long) is loaded into a flexible catheter, and then passed through the working channel of a standard bronchoscope. Guidance is provided by a matched virtual bronchoscopy image aside the real-time video bronchoscopy overlain with pre-determined pathway markers. Once the bronchoscope is wedged into the segment of interest the flexible catheter with the sensor probe is advanced until the target lesion is reached. At this point the sensor probe is retracted leaving the flexible catheter in place to act as an extended working channel (Figure 2). The diagnostic yield of ENB™ alone is reported to range from 59-74% (36-38). While early studies postulated that target lesion size might be significant, recently it is believed that CT-body divergence (a measure of image data registration accuracy) may determine navigational success (36,38). Other factors related to local anatomy and distance influence overall success (39,40). The presence of a bronchus sign significantly improved success to 79% in series of 51 patients by Seijo and colleagues (39).

Recently, a randomized-controlled trial by Asano and colleagues demonstrated virtual bronchoscopy navigational guidance (VBN, a computerized guidance system without electromagnetic correlation) with an ultrathin scope significantly improves diagnostic yield in the right upper lobe, peripheral third and lesions invisible on chest X-ray (41). However, the main limitation of this technique is the lack of real-time confirmation that a nodule has been reached. Addition of radial EBUS has shown to overcome this by increasing diagnostic yield to 88-93% (42).

Lung cancer staging with convex-EBUS (EBUS-TBNA)

Staging and confirmation of nodal status is central to the diagnosis and management of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (Figure 3). The treatment of choice of stage I and II disease is surgical resection in operable candidates, whereas combined chemo and radiotherapy is indicated for patients with Stage III disease and above (43). In academic settings, a multimodality approach can be considered for functional IIIA patients to undergo surgical resection after neoadjuvant therapy (23). Mediastinal nodal metastases are detected non-invasively with CT and/or positron emission
Figure 2 (A) Electromagnetic Navigation Bronchoscopy (reproduced with permission from SuperDimension® ENB™); (B) screen capture of a procedure in process. The route (pink line) to the lesion is predetermined by analysis of CT chest images. The target (green sphere) is represented and distance to target is continuously updated. (courtesy Joe Cicenia, M.D., Cleveland Clinic Foundation).
tomography (PET) scanning followed by tissue sampling of any pathologic nodes. Depending on population prevalence, non-invasive imaging alone is inadequate as histological staging is obligatory to prognosticate and stratify management options (44,45). For example, in geographic regions where histoplasmosis infection is endemic, granulomatous infection can lead to PET-avidity in the mediastinum and lung lesions. Conversely, Altorki et al. conducted a retrospective review of 224 patients identified with clinical stage I NSCLC by CT and PET scan. At resection they found that 6.5% of clinical T1 patients had occult N2 disease (46).

Surgical mediastinoscopy is the gold standard for confirming CT/PET negative mediastinal metastases with a sensitivity of 78%. However, it has some limitations. Convex EBUS is a bronchoscopic technique that compliments mediastinoscopy (23) (Table 2). EBUS is minimally invasive, performed under conscious sedation or with general anesthesia in the outpatient setting. Lymph node sampling occurs under direct real-time ultrasound guidance with the convex probe EBUS (CP-EBUS) allowing a much greater diagnostic yield over blind sampling (47,48) (Figure 4). In a prospective cohort study of 108 patients, CP-EBUS-TBNA successfully sampled 163 mediastinal lymph nodes and demonstrated sensitivity and specificity of 94.6% and 100%, respectively, and a diagnostic accuracy of 96% (49). Several systematic reviews confirm equivalent sensitivity for EBUS-TBNA to Mediastinoscopy (23,50-52). Yasufuku performed a prospective controlled comparison of EBUS-TBNA and mediastinoscopy in 153 patients with potentially resectable NSCLC (prevalence of N2/N3 disease 35%). They found sensitivities for mediastinoscopy and EBUS-TBNA were
79% and 85%, respectively, with comparable specificity (100%) and no significant differences in detecting true pathological N stage (McNemar test P=0.78) (53). In most community hospitals surgical mediastinoscopy remains the only available mediastinal staging technique. Many of the aforementioned studies were conducted at tertiary referral centers and it is uncertain how generalizable the results are.

### Table 2 Accessibility of lymph node stations with the various biopsying techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lymph node station</th>
<th>Mediastinoscopy</th>
<th>EBUS†</th>
<th>EUS‡</th>
<th>EUS-EBUS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-2: Highest mediastinal</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Prevascular + retrotracheal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Upper paratracheal</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Lower paratracheal</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Subaortic (AP window)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-6: Para-aortic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Subcarinal (anterior)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Subcarinal (posterior)</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: Paraesophageal</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: Pulmonary ligament</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Hilar</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Interlobular</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: Lobular</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: Segmental</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14: Subsegmental</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EBUS†, convex probe endobronchial ultrasound; EUS‡, esophageal ultrasound.

**Figure 4** EBUS TBNA—Ultrasound image of real-time needle aspiration of homogenous echogenic lymph node measuring 1.5 cm.

**EBUS combined with EUS/with mediastinoscopy**

EBUS-TBNA has the ability to access most of the mediastinum (the anterior and superior), however the presence of paraesophageal, inferior and posterior mediastinal lymph nodes may require combined EBUS with endoscopic ultrasound guided fine needle aspiration (EUS-FNA) (Table 2). The combination improves the diagnostic yield compared to either procedure alone (48,54). Annema et al. in 2010 performed a multi-center randomized control trial in 241 patients with resectable NSCLC comparing mediastinoscopy alone with combined endosonography (EBUS-TBNA and/or EUS-FNA) approach followed by mediastinoscopy if no nodal metastases were found (55). The sensitivities of surgical staging compared to endosonography alone were 79% and 85%, respectively (P=0.47). Sensitivity improved to 94% if endosonography was followed by mediastinoscopy (P=0.02). This combined endosonographic and surgical approach resulted in greater sensitivity and fewer unnecessary thoracotomies.

**Adequacy and techniques for molecular profiling**

There have been dramatic advances in our understanding of the molecular makeup of NSCLCs, particularly in non-smokers or smokers with lower cumulative dose. Driver
mutations in NSCLC that can be targeted have caused a shift away from a uniform therapeutic approach to a more personalized approach (56-60). In this era of personalized medicine, there is a need to provide high quality biopsy samples not only for pathologic diagnosis but also for the detailed molecular analyses that are becoming important to patient care. Initial studies in small populations suggested that EBUS-TBNA samples can be used for molecular analysis; EGFR, K-ras, p53 and EML4-ALK mutations (61,62). Navani et al. conducted a large multicenter study of 774 patients and confirmed these results. While the appropriate triaging of small biopsy specimens for cytologic, pathologic, and molecular analysis is vital there are as yet no guidelines for managing EBUS-TBNA samples. It is extremely important that the bronchoscopist obtaining samples do so in a manner that optimizes the diagnostic yield from molecular analyses (63,64). Rapid on-site cytologic evaluation (ROSE) of EBUS-TBNA has been shown to increase sensitivity from 80-88% without any added time to the procedure. Where available, ROSE allows repeated sampling of confirmed high-yield sites for triaging of specimens to cytologic diagnosis, immunohistochemistry or molecular analysis with clear communication of these goals to pathologist (61,65-68). In addition to ROSE, a few specialist centers are examining what additional procedural steps can be taken to maximize yield from small biopsy samples. This is crucial as more emerging genes are being identified that affect NSCLC carcinogenesis, such as ROS (crizotinib sensitive), Met, PI3K, etc. (61,64). As minimally invasive diagnosis and staging, as well as therapeutic modalities with driver mutations now becoming available there is increasing need to maximize and refine the technology and processes for tissue sampling (i.e., multiplex sampling, to afford our patients the best treatment options).

Re-biopsy
The European Respiratory Society (ERS) has published a statement that at biopsy it is desirable to obtain as much useful tissue as possible to avoid time consuming delays (dead time) due to molecular analysis or having to re-biopsy (69) (Figure 5). In order to avoid a molecular analysis delay, many
facilities have introduced reflex testing, for example any biopsy sample identified as an adenocarcinoma and as primary lung origin is automatically sent for EGFR analysis (along with other chosen molecular markers) without requiring a release from the physician. Sampling techniques, such as ROSE ensure that there is sufficient sample for these various molecular techniques, which also translates to avoiding any associated procedural delays with re-biopsy.

This does not mean however, that patients should never be re-biopsied. There is a growing realization that in patients in whom a driver mutation has been discovered there is tumor heterogeneity and dynamism. An EGFR mutant does not remain static, especially under the selective forces of EGFR-Tyrosine kinase inhibition (TKI). Although initially demonstrating a dramatic response to TKIs most patients will eventually experience treatment failure usually through acquired resistance to EGFR TKI.

Arcila et al. re-biopsied 121 patients with known EGFR mutations and tumor progression and discovered the T790M mutation in 70% with persistence of the original EGFR mutation in all patients (70). Similar results have been found in studies by Sequist, Oxnam and Ohashi et al., including other axonal additions, deletions, SCLC conversions, BRAF mutations and many more. It is clear that identification of the molecular mechanisms will be vital to overcoming EGFR TKI resistance. It is growing apparent that a static biopsy is inadequate to guide therapeutic decision-making during a patient’s treatment course. Re-biopsy at the time of disease progression is becoming standard. Pulmonologists must be available to re-biopsy at progression to assess mutational status (71-76).

**Therapeutic endobronchial tumor management**

**Navigational bronchoscopy/RP-EBUS in fiducial placement for SBRT**

Navigational bronchoscopy has been utilized to assist the radiation oncologist for stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT). Small peripheral lung lesions that were previously inaccessible can be sampled and fiducial markers can be placed in the same procedure in anticipation for SBRT (77,78). Standard therapy for early stage (I and II) NSCLC is a lobectomy with ipsilateral hilar lymph node dissection. While parenchyma-preserving surgeries such as sublobar resection (wedge resection & segmentectomy) have advanced over the years with improved outcomes, there is still a significant subgroup of patients with poor lung function or other comorbidities that cannot tolerate surgery (79,80). Radiation therapy for this inoperable group of patients with potentially curable disease is an attractive option. SBRT has the ability to deliver high doses of radiation with fidelity to generate margins of 1 cm. SBRT trials consistently report loco-regional and 3-year overall survival rates of 78-87% and 55-88% respectively, both comparable to surgery (81,82). Continuous tracking of respiratory motion using fiducials improves the fidelity of SBRT even further, allowing it to deliver beams with tumor margins of 5 mm. To date, there are three ways to deliver fiducials to or near the target lesion: transthoracic, intravascular and bronchoscopically. Currently, CT-guided transthoracic placement has been generally used, but it has a high pneumothorax rate. CT guided lung biopsy has a pneumothorax rate of 15%, while in some studies this is as high as 38%. This is certainly deleterious in a population of patients selected by their marginal pulmonary health (25,83). Intravascular placement also has its problems too. Intravascular fiducial placement cause pleurisy (13-33%), pulmonary infarcts (5%) and groin hematomas (3%) (78,84,85). ENB placement of fiducials has the advantages of successful delivery of markers with great fidelity and with the low complication rates of bronchoscopy (Figure 6).

Several studies have looked at the use of radial EBUS and ENB use for fiducial placement, and have found a high success rate (Anatham found that 88% were able to be delivered to within the tumor itself) with very minimal migration of fiducials (78). Indeed, the 10% migration rate seen in studies using linear fiducials was greatly reduced if coil-spring fiducials were employed. Schroeder reported a pneumothorax complication rate of 5.3% (86). A meta-analysis by Wang et al. of over 3,000 bronchoscopies reports a much lower pneumothorax rate (25,87). Larger comparison studies need to confirm the role of ENB and fiducials for inoperable, early stage cancer patients. Currently, results are pending from an interventional trial—RTOG 0618—in comparing tumor control between SBRT and surgery among operable stage I/II patients.

**Fiducial markers for localization for surgical biopsy**

Navigational bronchoscopy can assist the thoracic surgeon with biopsy of small lesions that are difficult to palpate during video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) or thoracotomy, particularly ground glass nodules that warrant
histological confirmation of malignancy prior to anatomical resection or parenchymal sparing surgeries. CT-guidance can place fiducial markers with precision around the lesion prior to surgery with confirmation of position (Figure 7). Larger observational and interventional trials are needed to evaluate the efficacy of this complementary approach.

**Palliative management in nonsurgical candidates**

**High dose rate brachytherapy**

Henschke introduced the concept and technique of endobronchial brachytherapy in the 1960s as a method of introducing a radioactive source via a thin catheter (afterloader) intraluminally to targeted malignant tissue within the airways (16,88,89). A computerized, remote, ‘afterloading’ technique allows for safe delivery of radioactive material to endobronchial lesions at high doses in short periods of time while greatly minimizing radioactive exposure to staff. The most common radioisotope used is iridium-192 manufactured as a thin, flexible wire. The highly localized field of radiation around the flexible catheter allows for sparing of the surrounding tissue. High-dose rate endobronchial brachytherapy (HDREB) involves delivery of high-energy radiation over short periods (16). Although the available evidence for optimal radiation dosing is currently limited, the American Brachytherapy Society recommends 3 weekly fractions of 7.5 Gy each, 2 fractions of 10 Gy each, or 4 fractions of 6 Gy prescribed at 1 cm (16,90). These outpatient sessions are often well...
tolerated and rapid with a response to therapy within 4-6 weeks (91). HDREB has shown to benefit patients with hemoptysis, dyspnea, post-obstructive pneumonia, and cough with centrally located lesions typically providing the best outcomes (16,90,91). Symptom control has been shown to be durable up to 6 months. Other potential indications for HDREB include patients who are poor surgical candidates; those who have maximized external beam radiation (EBR) doses; sole treatment for localized bronchial carcinomas; and carcinoma in-situ or pre-cancerous lesions (16,89,90,92). Although overall EBR alone has been more effective than HDREB in terms of durable palliation, combination of EBR with HDREB has also been shown to provide significant symptomatic control especially among patients with inoperable tumors or endobronchial obstruction causing atelectasis (89,91,93).

**Photodynamic therapy**

The targeted strategy of using photodynamic therapy (PDT) against malignant tissue has been in practice since the 1980s (16,94-96). It is an alternative treatment for cancer that involves administration of a systemic photosensitizing agent that preferentially accumulates in tumor cells. Palliative PDT for obstructive endobronchial tumors have been shown to be an effective strategy for patients experience persistent cough, progressive dyspnea, atelectasis and post-obstructive pneumonia (16,97-99). Results are optimal if the obstructive lesion is found in the segmental and subsegmental airways (100). PDT is generally well tolerated and can be administered regardless of prior chemotherapy, radiation or surgery. The most common photosensitizing agents used in lung cancer are hematoporphyrin derivatives, porfimer sodium (Photofrin®) and talaporfin sodium (Laserphyrin®). These agents are administered intravenously and peak extravascular concentration in tissues is achieved in 24 hours. While concentrations of the photosensitizing agent within peripheral organs decline over the next 2-3 days, tumors have been shown to selectively retain the chemical for much longer periods (16,101). For this reason the next stage of photoactivation typically does not occur until 24-72 hours when the tumor-normal tissue concentration ratio is optimal. During photosensitization a diode laser source emitting red or near-infrared light from a quartz catheter is delivered via flexible bronchoscopy to the endoluminal tumor cells. Currently the FDA recommended light dose is 200 J/cm with a total exposure time of 300 s (16,95,97,101). In addition PDT induces a thrombotic state within tumor microvessels leading to ischemic damage (16,96). As tumor cell death progresses necrotic tissue and debris accumulate in the airways in the next 48 hours after photoactivation. Repeat bronchoscopy is recommended at this point for debridement and prevention of obstruction (16,95,100). Further PDT sessions can be administered up to a maximum of 3 sessions within a 30-day period for residual tumor cells. Although PDT is generally well tolerated photosensitivety reaction in the form of sunburns can persist for up to 6 weeks after injection (16,96,101). The major disadvantage of PDT similar to brachytherapy is a delayed response after photoactivation. Thus this is not a feasible modality if rapid resolution of airway obstruction is needed (16,96,97,101).

**Cryotherapy**

Cryotherapy is an alternative method of controlling and debulking malignant endobronchial lesions by utilizing extreme cold energy to induce a cascade of events leading to tumor cell death (102,103). The principle of cryotherapy is the delivery of focused extreme cold energy via rapid expansion of compressed liquid nitrogen (the Joule-Thompson effect) at the tip of a cryoprobe. The high vascularity and water content of tumor tissue make it exceptionally vulnerable to extreme cold energy (16,102,104,105).

Endobronchial cryotherapy can be performed either via rigid or flexible bronchoscopy. It is considered a very safe procedure and is generally well tolerated. Patients who may be candidates for this procedure have advanced stage cancers and are poor surgical candidates. Similar to indications for photodynamic or brachytherapy, these patients require alleviation of symptoms attributed to endobronchial obstruction such as hemoptysis, atelectasis, intractable cough or post-obstructive pneumonia.

A recent systematic review noted mean response rates of 80% with minimal complications (0-11%) (106). In a series of 476 patients by Maiwand and colleagues, palliative cryotherapy has shown to provide significant alleviation of hemoptysis, cough, dyspnea and chest pain (76.4%, 69%, 59.2%, and 42.6%, respectively) in addition to improvements in Karnofsky performance scores (59.6 to 75.2) (103,106). Although the available data have shown variable survival rates, median survival time has not shown to be worse than other palliative-focuses endobronchial therapies (102,104-106). The major disadvantage of cryotherapy is its delayed response time and need for
repeat treatments relative to other palliative endobronchial procedures such as Nd:YAG laser, electrocautery and microdebridement. Tumor necrosis may continue for days after the initial treatment. Therefore cryotherapy is not optimal for patients experiencing massive hemoptysis or extensive endobronchial tumor involvement (16).

**Rigid bronchoscopy and stenting**

Nearly one-third of lung cancer patients experience some form of central airway obstruction (CAO) due to external compression, endoluminal disease or bulky lymphadenopathy (107-110). The quality of life and performance status of patients with CAO is significantly compromised due to dyspnea, stridor, hemorrhage and/or obstructive pneumonias. These airway-related symptoms may preclude the operability of a patient with early lung cancer. Endobronchial stenting has been shown to significantly relieve symptoms and improve quality of life among patients with malignant obstruction (107,111). While this technique has largely been used in advanced lung cancers it is, however, a palliative method that can be utilized in early lung cancer patients with poor functional status. Furthermore early stenting in this patient population may provide an additional survival advantage in addition to symptom relief (112). This will allow those who cannot tolerate surgery to undergo other definitive treatments such as brachytherapy or external radiation.

**Conclusions**

The last decade has seen many advances in lung cancer diagnosis and management options. Improvements in surgical techniques such as VATS, video mediastinoscopy and parenchymal sparing surgeries; discoveries of new targeted therapies for specific gene mutations in lung adenocarcinomas; and stereotactic radiotherapy for early stage lung cancers all contribute to improvement of quality of life and outcomes for patients with variable performance status. Furthermore, low-dose CT screening for early detection of lung cancers will inevitably revolutionize how lung cancer will be approached. It is paramount that the interventional pulmonologist integrate the armamentarium of minimally invasive approaches described in this review, coupled with sound clinical judgments to collaborate with all specialists of the lung cancer multidisciplinary team.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

Lung cancer comprises almost 25% of the total cancer deaths worldwide (1). Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounts for 85% of all lung cancers (2).

Although surgical resection remains the optimal treatment for early stage NSCLC, approximately 40% of patients with stage I and 60% of patients with stage II NSCLC relapse and die within 5 years after curative resection (3).

Timely and accurate detection of recurrence in patients with NSCLC plays a crucial role with regard to the initiation of salvage therapies with the overall goal of increasing survival.

Positron emission tomography (PET) has shown superior sensitivity and specificity in detecting NSCLC lymph node metastasis compared to standard CT alone (4). PET scans have widely replaced bone scintigraphy for detection of bone metastasis and PET is superior to all other clinically available imaging techniques for the detection of distant metastasis, except for cerebral metastasis (5).

The implementation of integrated positron emission tomography/computed tomography (PET/CT) systems, matching detailed morphological information of CT and
metabolic information of structures provided by PET, has further improved accuracy compared to PET or CT alone and has therefore already become an integral imaging modality for diagnosis, staging and response assessment in NSCLC patients (6-9). PET/CT is now emerging as a follow-up imaging modality in these patients. In a study in 2004, reported overall sensitivities, specificities and positive and negative predictive values of integrated PET/CT for diagnosis of NSCLC recurrence were 96%, 82%, 89% and 93%, respectively, compared to 96%, 53%, 75% and 90%, respectively, for PET alone in patients with suspected recurrence who had previously undergone surgical therapy, surgery combined with chemo- or radiotherapy or combined chemo-radiotherapy alone (10).

This review focuses on the value of integrated PET/CT as a state-of-the-art technique in the detection of recurrence of NSCLC after curative surgery, (chemo-) radiotherapy as well as radiofrequency ablation and discusses the cost-effectiveness of PET/CT for recurrence detection.

**NSCLC recurrence patterns**

Recurrence of NSCLC may be classified as loco-regional recurrence or distant metastasis (Figure 1). Distant metastases are the most common form of NSCLC recurrence. Depending on the stage of disease at primary diagnosis and treatment administered, metastatic recurrence comprises 39% to 65.5% of all recurrences (11). About 30% of NSCLC recurrences are reported to be loco-regional. Loco-regional recurrence is located within the treated hemithorax and usually presents with nodules involving the resection staple line or the area that was treated with radiotherapy or RFA, as well as the bronchial stump, pleura, chest wall and lymph nodes (2).

In addition to recurrences, new primary lung cancer is also reported in 1% to 2% of NSCLC patients per year following initial radical therapy (12).**

**Technical aspects**

Performing an integrated PET/CT scan, CT can either be run as low-dose CT, used predominantly for attenuation correction and solely approximate anatomical mapping, or CT is used for both attenuation correction and diagnostic purposes, being then performed with a standard radiation dose and i.v. and oral contrast material (13).

The two main advantages gained with the use of integrated PET/CT are on the one hand detection of lesions initially not seen on CT or PET alone, and on the other hand a more precise allocation of metabolic activity to an anatomic structure resulting in a better characterization of the lesion as benign or malignant (7,14). However, sensitivity of PET is decreased in tumors <1 cm, partly due to respiratory motion which can be reduced by respiratory triggered acquisitions at the expense of longer scan times and lower signal-to-noise-ratio (7). Furthermore, PET sensitivity is decreased in the brain. As the most common tracer used for PET scans is 2-deoxy-2-(18F)fluoro-D-glucose (FDG), a radioactively labeled glucose molecule, and the naturally high avidity of brain parenchyma for glucose leads to the problem that cerebral metastases can be obscured (5).

FDG uptake has been observed to vary between different NSCLC histologies, with adenocarcinomas generally being less FDG-avid than squamous cell carcinomas (15). Thus, detection of recurrence is extremely challenging for adenocarcinoma-in situ, minimally invasive adenocarcinoma and lepidic predominant adenocarcinoma since these tumors are often not FDG-avid and false-negative PET

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**Figure 1** A 57-year-old asymptomatic patient that underwent annual PET/CT examinations for surveillance of recurrence. Between 2008 and 2009 PET/CT demonstrated stable disease with stable right hilar lymph node metastasis. One year later, PET/CT diagnosed loco-regional recurrence within the right lower lobe as well as distant lymph node metastasis.
findings have been reported for bronchioloalveolar carcinoma recurrence in 40% of cases (16).

Iatrogenic causes of focal or diffuse FDG parenchymal uptake include: talc deposits after pleurodesis, percutaneous needle biopsy, mediastinoscopy and FDG microembolism (17).

**PET/CT in current follow-up guidelines and in clinical practice**

Current recommendations for follow-up imaging after NSCLC treatment are based on the knowledge about the high incidence of recurrence during the first 2 years following therapy. The National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) guidelines from 2010 suggest for patients at all stages of NSCLC routine history and physical examinations every 4 to 6 months in the first 2 years and then annually (18). In patients treated with curative intent in good performance an additional contrast-enhanced chest CT scan is recommended every 4 to 6 months postoperatively for 2 years, followed by a non-contrast-enhanced chest CT annually thereafter. Routinely screening with chest CT alone should be omitted, because many recurrences are extrathoracic (11). PET or brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is currently not recommended for routine follow-up (18).

Yumuk et al. performed a survey and interviewed physicians from 38 centres of 12 different countries on which tests they were performing on asymptomatic patients during their post-treatment follow-up. Contradictory to the guidelines, the most commonly used test was a chest CT scan as well as a CT scan of the abdomen at 3 months post treatment (19). PET/CT and contrast enhanced MRI of the brain were done solely in symptomatic patients. These results suggest that a CT scan at 3 months after the end of radical treatment has become a standard in clinical practice with little high quality evidence.

**PET/CT for follow-up after surgery**

Lung cancer recurs after surgery in 30% to 75% of patients (20). Differentiation of recurrence from postsurgical changes is challenging with CT alone since many benign conditions, including atelectasis, consolidations, and radiation induced fibrosis, are difficult to distinguish from loco-regional recurrence (2).

PET/CT on the other hand, can yield false-positive results from active inflammation, particularly in the acute post-operative phase (21).

False-positive PET/CT results can be explained by an increase in glycolysis due to macrophage infiltration where inflammation is present, and a subsequently higher glucose demand and FDG uptake. In 2008, a British study retrospectively assessed FDG uptake in post-thoracotomy scars of NSCLC patients (22). Increased uptake was seen in 100% of the cases at 1-3 months, in 92% at 3-12 months, and still in 40% of the studies more than one year after surgery all in patients with no evidence of disease on follow-up. FDG uptake was observed to be diffuse in 67% of cases. Tumor recurrence in the scar was found in three cases, with focally increased uptake at 3-8 months after thoracotomy. The authors concluded that increased FDG uptake in post-thoracotomy scars is mainly diffuse, and decreases in incidence and intensity with time, with 60% of studies showing no scar uptake more than one year after surgery. Focally intense scar uptake was suggested to prompt biopsy for suspected recurrence.

These results contradict the usefulness of early post-surgical follow-up with PET/CT within the first three months, whereas usefulness of PET/CT in follow-up as from three months on is supported by these data.

A large prospective study by Choi et al., published in 2011, further evaluated the usefulness of PET/CT first performed one year after curative surgery (23). 358 patients having undergone complete resection of NSCLC were prospectively followed-up with PET/CT and conventional methods for recurrence of NSCLC at 3-month intervals for 2 years and after this at 6 month intervals for the next 3 years. Conventional methods comprised clinical, biochemical and radiographic assessment. Contrast-enhanced chest CT was done every 6 months whereas PET/CT was performed annually for 5 years after resection. Recurrence occurred in 31% of patients. In half of these patients, recurrence was detected with conventional methods. Concerning the other patients, recurrence was detected with both chest CT and PET/CT in 51% and solely with PET/CT in 37%. However, because PET/CT failed to detect 6 small or hypometabolic recurrent lesions, Choi et al. recommended as a screening algorithm annual PET/CT scans in combination with low-dose chest CT.

Besides the question of optimal timing of the first follow-up scan, the controversy whether to screen NSCLC patients after potentially curative treatment regardless of clinically suspected recurrence or whether to perform PET/CT only in symptomatic patients is still debated (Figure 2).

In this context, a Japanese study published in 2012 retrospectively evaluated the diagnostic accuracy of routinely
performed PET/CT scans in post-operative asymptomatic NSCLC patients without suspicion of recurrence (24). A total of 101 NSCLC patients were followed-up for 5 years with a surveillance algorithm consisting of physical examination, chest radiograph, tumor marker, chest CT, PET/CT and brain MRI. Chest CT and PET/CT were performed in alternation every 6 months for the first 3 years. PET/CT was then performed every 12 months for the next 2 years. A total of 233 studies were acquired. The sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, negative predictive value and accuracy of PET/CT in recurrence evaluation were 94.4%, 97.6%, 89.5%, 98.8% and 97.0%, respectively. Recurrence rate in this asymptomatic patient cohort was 18%.

Another study with PET/CT in asymptomatic patients being performed at around 1 year after curative resection of NSCLC was conducted by the group of Cho et al. (25). The study enrolled 86 patients who had no suspicion of recurrence at the time of the PET/CT scan. 31.4% of the patients had recurrent disease in this cohort and 2 patients had extrathoracic double primary cancer. Six patients had extrathoracic recurrence without intrathoracic recurrence, contradicting the use of chest CT scans alone.

Jimenez-Bonilla et al. prospectively evaluated the contribution of PET/CT in patients with all stages of NSCLC with suspicion of recurrence in terms of sensitivity, specificity, impact on therapy and on survival (26). 59 suspicious lesions in 55 patients were investigated. PET/CT showed an overall sensitivity of 100% and 83% specificity. In 27 suspicious lesions where CT results were inconclusive, PET/CT showed 100% sensitivity and 78% specificity. PET/CT had an impact on patients’ treatment in 42 of all 59 cases of suspected recurrence. Overall survival of PET/CT diagnosed recurrence at 20 months and 5 years was 44% and 11%, respectively.

In comparison, a large retrospective study from 2009 analyzed post-recurrence survival rates in 123 stage I NSCLC patients who had received curative surgery between 1980 and 2000 (27). Patients either had local recurrence only or both local recurrence and distant metastases. The overall 1 and 2 year post-recurrence survival rates were 48.0% and 18.7%, respectively (27).

Comparing the survival rate observed in the PET/CT study by Jimenez-Bonilla at 20 months (44%) to the survival rate of the Hung study after 2 years (18.7%) especially when further taking into consideration, that Jimenez-Bonilla’s group also included patients at more advanced stages of NSCLC and not only stage I patients, these results are very encouraging: The outcome data of the study by Jimenez-Bonilla are suggesting a positive impact on survival using PET/CT for follow-up in the subgroup of symptomatic patients, with the limitation of the small number of patients enrolled.

Besides the high accuracy of PET/CT and its impact on treatment decisions and survival, another interesting issue—also with regard to cost-effectiveness—is the performance of PET/CT in detecting NSCLC recurrence compared to standard radiological examinations: two recent PET/CT studies prospectively enrolled patients that underwent NSCLC resection and assessed the accuracy of whole body PET/CT in recurrence detection in comparison to standard radiological examinations.

Takenaka et al. prospectively compared whole-body PET/CT and standard radiological follow-up examinations in the assessment of recurrence in post-operative NSCLC patients (28). A total of 92 consecutive patients with complete resection were enrolled. The standard radiological examination for distant metastasis assessment performed during the initial and the follow-up examinations and for local recurrence after surgery included contrast-enhanced MRI of the brain, contrast-enhanced whole-body CT.
and bone scintigraphy. Final diagnosis of recurrence was based on the results of more than 1 year of follow-up and/or pathological examinations. ROC curves were used to compare the diagnostic capability of the two methods for assessment of post-operative recurrence on a per-patient basis. Sensitivity, specificity and accuracy were determined as well. There were no statistically significant differences in the area under the curve of sensitivity, specificity and accuracy between PET/CT and standard radiological examinations (P>0.05). Hence, the authors concluded that PET/CT can be used for assessment of post-operative recurrence in NSCLC patients with an accuracy as good as that of standard radiological examinations; yet, with the non-negligible advantage of only one examination for the patient instead of three. This factor might play a crucial role for an efficient workflow of large departments that follow-up large patient cohorts.

Onishi et al. investigated in a prospective study in 2011 the value of qualitative as well as of quantitative PET/CT for the assessment of post-operative intra- and extrathoracic recurrence in NSCLC patients compared to standard radiological examinations (29). 121 patients who had undergone complete resection were followed-up. Again, ROC analysis was used to compare the methods in their assessment of post-operative recurrence on a per-patient basis. Additionally, optimal cut-off values for FDG uptake measurement at a suspicious site detected on the basis of qualitative PET/CT were determined. Analogous to Takenaka's results, areas under the curve for accuracy of qualitative PET/CT and standard radiological examinations showed no significant differences (P>0.05). At an optimal cut-off value of 2.5, specificity and accuracy of combined quantitative and qualitative PET/CT were significantly higher than of qualitative PET/CT and standard radiological examinations alone (P<0.05). Accuracy in the evaluation of post-operative intra- and extrathoracic recurrence in NSCLC patients by qualitative and/or quantitative PET/CT was consequently rated equivalent to or higher than that of standard radiological examinations.

Kanzaki et al. retrospectively examined the clinical value of PET/CT in a large cohort of 241 patients with NSCLC after potentially curative surgery and even proposed that conventional imaging for the detection of extrathoracic metastases in patients who underwent potentially curative surgery for NSCLC can be completely omitted (with the exception of brain MRI) if PET/CT performed at least 6 months after surgery is negative, due to its high negative predictive value (30). 490 PET/CT studies were evaluated in this study. PET/CT correctly diagnosed recurrence in 34 of 35 patients and provided true negative findings in 198 of 206 patients who had no evidence of recurrence (sensitivity, specificity, accuracy, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value of 97%, 96%, 96%, 81%, and 99%, respectively), indicating a high diagnostic performance in this patient group.

Follow-up of NSCLC after non-surgical treatment

The field of non-surgical therapies of primary lung cancer has grown rapidly in recent years. The use of external beam radiotherapy alone as a curative approach to therapy has been abandoned due to the high local recurrence rate of up to 70% (31). In contrary, minimally invasive image-guided therapies using thermal energies such as radiofrequency ablation, microwave ablation or cryoablation, and as the most common one stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) have emerged as non-surgical treatment options (32). Yet, as the tumor is not resected, surveillance of recurrence and especially of tumor margins is crucial and challenging due to post-interventional parenchymal changes.

PET/CT in NSCLC follow-up after (chemo-) radiotherapy

SBRT has become the standard therapeutic approach for inoperable stage I NSCLC. SBRT induces parenchymal damage leading to fibrosis. It can be difficult to differentiate local recurrence from radiation-induced lung opacity. Radiation-induced fibrosis can appear more than 1 year after the end of therapy (33). Furthermore, secondary radiation-induced pneumonitis has been reported within 9 months after SBRT (32).

A small study by Hoopes et al. observed on PET scans in a patient cohort of inoperable stage I NSCLC after SBRT treatment a moderately hypermetabolic activity up to 2 years after SBRT (34). This persistent uptake is being attributed to a more persistent inflammation and fibrosis after SBRT compared to fractionated radiotherapy (7).

Takeda et al. retrospectively assessed the additional value of dual-time-point maximum standardized uptake values (SUVmax) in PET/CT for detection of local recurrence after SBRT of NSCLC in 214 scans of 154 patients (33). Tri-monthly follow-up CT scans were acquired and PET/CT scans were done one year after SBRT or when recurrence was clinically suspected. On early and late images, optimal SUVmax thresholds were identified as 3.2 and 4.2. Using these thresholds, sensitivity and specificity.
were 100% and 96-98%, respectively. The authors therefore stated that SUV<sub>max</sub> on PET/CT could predict local recurrence after SBRT for localized NSCLC. In a similar study, Zhang et al. also investigated whether the additional assessment of SUV<sub>max</sub> on PET/CT after SBRT could help to predict local recurrence in 128 patients with stage I NSCLC or isolated recurrent/secondary parenchymal NSCLC patients (35). The authors found a SUV<sub>max</sub> greater than 5, especially more than 6 months after SBRT to be associated with a higher local recurrence rate, whereas SUV<sub>max</sub> from PET/CT scans performed within 6 months of treatment were not correlated with local recurrence. With the cutoff SUV<sub>max</sub> of 5, sensitivity for correct prediction of local recurrence was calculated as 100%, specificity was 91%, positive predictive value was 50% and a negative predictive value of 100% was observed. The authors concluded that quantitative PET/CT was helpful for distinguishing SBRT-induced consolidation from local recurrence.

In contrast, van Loon et al. hypothesized that early PET/CT scans 3 months after curative-intended (chemo-)radiotherapy could lead to early detection of progressive disease (PD) amenable for radical treatment (36). Therefore, 100 patients with NSCLC were prospectively evaluated. All patients underwent a planned PET/CT scan 3 months after the start of radiotherapy. 24 patients had PD 3 months post-treatment of whom 16 patients were symptomatic. Yet, no curative treatment could be offered to any of these patients, which limits the impact of PET/CT on treatment decisions in the specific population of symptomatic patients. To 3/8 asymptomatic patients who were diagnosed PD, radical treatment could be offered. Progression—according to the EORTC criteria for PET and the RECIST criteria for CT—potentially amenable for radical therapy was in this study solely detected with PET/CT, but not with CT alone (37,38). Thus, van Loon suggested that asymptomatic patients would profit the most from an early PET/CT scan. However, it has still to be proven that the detection and therapy of early recurrence or PD leads to an overall higher survival in this patient cohort.

PET/CT in NSCLC follow-up after radiofrequency ablation (RFA)

Patients with stage I NSCLC who do not undergo surgical treatment are—besides SBRT—predominantly treated with RFA. The most common pattern of recurrence after RFA is loco-regional recurrence (39). As for SRBT, RFA causes focal changes in the lung parenchyma such as ground glass opacities around the treated tumor site (40). So far, there is no consensus existing on a standard protocol for post-RFA follow up. However, after RFA, continuous follow-up imaging seems to be beneficial to the patients because recurrence has been reported to occur throughout the first 2 years post-treatment (39).

Eradat et al. proposes an algorithm of CT follow-up 1-2 months after RFA followed by a PET/CT scan at 3 months thereafter alternated by contrast-enhanced CT every 3 months for 2 years (32). Similarly, the group by Beland is proposing contrast-enhanced CT at 3 weeks and 3 months followed by PET/CT at 6 months; alternating CT and PET/CT examinations then performed every 3 months (39).

Cost effectiveness

In spite of the experiences of PET/CT as a helpful staging imaging modality in the treatment of NSCLC and encouraging results concerning the accuracy of PET/CT in detecting recurrence reported in the few follow-up studies performed so far, and mostly enrolling patients with follow-up after surgical therapy, the 2nd edition of the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) evidence-based guidelines on the follow-up and surveillance of lung cancer patients did not recommend PET/CT for standard surveillance. The reason given for this decision was a lack of evidence that follow-up PET/CT improves either survival rates or quality of life of NSCLC patients (11).

In the only cost-effectiveness study of NSCLC follow-up so far with 100 patients, van Loon et al. prospectively compared long-term cost-effectiveness of 3 different follow-up strategies, all starting 3 months after therapy. The authors either performed a PET/CT scan, a chest CT scan or conventional follow-up with a chest radiograph (41). Cost-effectiveness was expressed in incremental cost-effectiveness ratios (ICERs), calculating the incremental costs per quality adjusted life year (QALY) gained. Both PET/CT- and CT-based follow-up were calculated to be more costly but at the same time also more effective than a chest radiograph follow-up. CT-based follow-up resulted in an incremental cost-effectiveness ratio (ICER) of euro 264.033 per QALY gained compared to a chest radiograph, whereas for PET/CT-based follow-up, the ICER was euro 69.086 per QALY gained. A subgroup analysis of asymptomatic patients undergoing PET/CT resulted in an ICER of euro 42.265 per QALY gained compared to...
chest radiograph follow-up. Assuming a ceiling ratio of euro 80,000, PET/CT-based follow-up was calculated to have the highest probability of being cost-effective (73%). The authors therefore concluded that a PET/CT scan 3 months after curative-intended (chemo-) radiotherapy is a potentially cost-effective follow-up method, and is more cost-effective than CT alone. Performing PET/CT scans only in asymptomatic patients seems to be equally effective and even more cost-effective.

Conclusions

Current guidelines do not recommend the use of PET/CT for assessment of NSCLC recurrence. Recommendations of different authors concerning the initiation and frequency of follow-up with PET/CT scans are largely varying between post-surgical NSCLC follow-up and surveillance of patients treated with radiotherapy and radiofrequency ablation. Most studies on NSCLC follow-up were conducted in post-surgical stage I NSCLC patients and PET/CT was mostly performed annually, starting one year after surgical treatment.

Concerning follow-up after non-surgical potentially curative treatment of NSCLC patients, controversial results have been published on the optimal timing of the first PET/CT scans. Different algorithms from different working groups schedule the first PET/CT scan from 3 months on to one year in this patient cohort. Concerning follow-up after RFA, very few studies on follow-up of these patients have been published so far. In two existing follow-up algorithms, PET/CT is performed for the first time 3 months and 6 months after treatment, respectively.

The additional value of quantitative PET measurements in prediction of recurrence has been suggested in the evaluation of thoracotomy scars as well as in the surveillance of patients treated with SBRT.

Despite encouraging results of high accuracy of PET/CT for the assessment of NSCLC recurrence and reports of impact on changes in patient management, controversy exists about whether to follow-up symptom-based or whether to screen on a routinely basis independently of symptoms and clinical findings (10,36).

Currently, PET/CT is rather used in symptomatic patients with suspicion of recurrence. However, impact on therapeutic management was mainly reported for asymptomatic patients with regard to salvage therapies. Nevertheless, high quality evidence is still lacking that intensive surveillance programs and earlier detection of recurrence leads to a survival benefit and despite of one encouraging cost-effectiveness study, incremental costs of integrated PET/CT scanners might probably play a role in decisions for or against surveillance guidelines including PET/CT to come up (41-43).

In the future, large-scale randomized trials should predominantly focus on the impact of PET/CT on treatment outcome. Furthermore, optimal starting point and frequency of follow-up PET/CT scans should be determined, especially in patients treated with the emerging minimally-invasive image-guided therapies and lastly the utility of quantitative PET/CT measurements for recurrence detection has to be clarified.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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New TNM classification: achievements and hurdles

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Abstract: The 7th edition of TNM for Lung Cancer represented a major advance from previous editions, in the process of revision, the size and breadth of the data base used, its international character, the intensity of the analysis and the critical nature of the internal and external validation undertaken before its launch in January 2010. This all came about by the involvement of the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC), which assumed the role previously performed by Dr. Mountain, of developing data-driven revisions for the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) and the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC). In taking on this task the IASLC made the global lung cancer community aware of the limitations of previous revisions and now stand accountable and subject to the same scrutiny. In this article we describe the achievements of the IASLC TNM and Prognostic Factors Committee, but also the shortcomings of the 7th edition, as an essential step towards rectifying deficiencies and further improving the classification in future revisions.

Keywords: Lung cancer; prognostic factors; staging

Submitted Jul 22, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 24, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.07.02

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.07.02

Introduction

To properly understand the achievements of the 7th edition of TNM for Lung Cancer it is necessary to give a brief history of the TNM Classification itself. A more detailed history of this topic is available elsewhere (1).

A system to describe the anatomical extent of a cancer using the “T”, “N” and “M” descriptors was developed by Dr. Pierre Denoix, a surgical oncologist at the Institut Gustave-Roussy in Paris, and evolved over a series of articles in the 1940s and early 50s (2). The first international classification of malignant disease based on TNM was published in 1968 by the Union Internationale Contre le Cancer (UICC), which now prefers to be known by the English version of its title, Union for International Cancer Control (3), lung cancer being included under the section for “other sites”. This initial attempt at classification was arrived at by discussion and consensus, there being no data available. The American Joint Committee for Cancer Staging and End Results Reporting, now the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC), orchestrated the collection of data through its Task Force on Lung Cancer. The analysis of a data base of 2,155 lung cancer cases resulted in “A system for the clinical staging of lung cancer” reported by Drs. Mountain, Carr and Anderson in 1973 (4). This formed the basis of the 2nd edition of the UICC TNM Classification of Malignant Disease published in 1975 (5) and the 1st edition of the AJCC Manual for Cancer Staging published in 1977 (6). Thereafter Dr. Mountain developed his own data base which informed future revisions up to and including the 5th edition published in 1997 (7,8), by which time the data base had accumulated 5,319 cases. There were no changes in the lung cancer classification in the 6th edition (9,10).

At a workshop sponsored by the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC) and held at the Brompton Hospital in London in 1996 Dr. Mountain presented his revisions for the 5th edition of TNM which had been approved by the UICC and AJCC and were due to
come into force within a few weeks. The deficiencies of the underlying data were discussed: a relatively small number of cases, accumulated over 20 years, predominantly cases referred for surgical consideration and mostly derived from a single institution. The workshop attendees recommended "the establishment by the IASLC of a staging committee" to "represent the IASLC in negotiations with UICC and AJCC with regard to future revisions of classification" (11).

Achievements

With this introduction the achievements of the IASLC Staging and Prognostic Factors Committee can be put into perspective and enumerated.

In 1998, using the membership of the IASLC and pump-priming funding from the IASLC, a committee was established with members from all specialties involved in the treatment of lung cancer and from across the globe. The commitment of these early members was such that they largely self-funded their involvement for the first 2 years of the project (12).

High level support from the officers and head office of the IASLC secured long-term funding from philanthropic partners in the pharmaceutical industry. This provided administrative support for the committee and allowed us to contract with a not-for-profit data centre in Seattle, Cancer Research And Biostatistics (CRAB) with expertise in oncology and the collection and analysis of data from multi-centre, international studies.

Members of the lung cancer community supported this ambitious project by donating over 100,000 cases of lung cancer collected between 1990 and 2000. This data originated from 46 centres in over 20 countries around the globe and included cases treated by all modalities of care, including bi-modality and multi-modality regimens. Such a large data base allowed intensive internal and external validation, unprecedented in any previous revision (12).

As the proposals of each sub-committee were developed the data, analysis and proposals were published in the official journal of the IASLC, the Journal of Thoracic Oncology (JTO). These discussion articles were made available without subscription so that members and non-members were aware of the proposals and to enable an informed debate within national TNM committees. Once approved by the UICC and AJCC the IASLC produced site-specific educational materials (13) which were available at the 13th World Conference on Lung Cancer in September 2009. These contained precise figures illustrating each T, N and M descriptor. Never before had the global lung cancer community been so well informed of the pending changes for a new edition of TNM in lung cancer or been better prepared for its introduction.

The 7th edition of TNM for lung cancer was delivered, fully developed, on time and on budget to the UICC and AJCC. It complied with the requirements of both organisations with regard to process and timelines and was adopted in its entirety and without change. It came in to force on the 1st of January 2010 (14,15). The new edition retained the previous size cut-point of 3 cm separating T1 from T2 tumors. New size cut-points were introduced; 2 cm to separate T1a from T1b, 5 cm to separate T2a from T2b and 7 cm to separate T2b from T3 tumors. Size therefore became a T3 descriptor for the first time. There were changes to other T (16) and M categories (17). Cancers associated with additional tumor nodules (metastases) in the same lobe as the primary became T3, whilst those in other ipsilateral lobes became T4. Cancers associated with malignant pleural or pericardial effusions or nodules were moved from the T to an M category, linked with cases in which there were metastases in the opposite lung, as M1a. Distant haematogenous and nodal metastases became M1b. The N categories remained unchanged but for the first time these had been validated in an international data base of cases treated by all modalities of care (18). Some changes were also made in the resultant stage groupings (19).

All of these changes were data driven and validated (20), aligning stage with prognosis more accurately than ever before. The use of TNM was shown to have prognostic value in the 13,000 cases of small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) within the database, in cases clinically staged (21) and the smaller number of surgically treated cases of SCLC in which pathological stage was available (22). Clinicians and pathologists were shown to have been correct in using the TNM classification for carcinoid tumors, although this was never previously sanctioned, and bronchopulmonary carcinoid tumors were included within the 7th edition of the TNM classification for the first time (23).

Additional issues, raised in discussions within the committee and in the literature review undertaken by the UICC, were addressed by consensus and, where available, by study of the available literature. The previous features used to distinguish pulmonary metastases from synchronous primary tumors were thought to have lagged behind developments in morphology, immunohistochemistry and molecular studies. The definition was therefore expanded and the role of the pathologist and these technological improvements
were emphasised. An internationally agreed definition of “visceral pleural invasion” (VPI) was developed (24) adapting a system long in use by the Japan Lung Cancer Society (25) and also espoused by Hammar (26). The inconsistencies between the nodal map developed by Naruke and the Japan Lung Cancer Society (27) and that of Mountain and Dresler (28) were reconciled by international agreement and defined by precise anatomical boundaries (29). This led to the UICC and AJCC recognising the IASLC nodal map and its accompanying table of definitions as the recommended means to describe regional lymph node spread for lung cancer. It then became possible to re-introduce minimum requirements for lymph node evaluation at surgery and subsequent pathological examination as part of the expanded definition of a complete, R0, resection (30). The concept of nodal “zones” was developed, covering larger anatomical areas than individual “stations” in the hope that this would assist oncologists, treating patients with bulky nodal disease which could encompass more than one station, and widen the relevance of nodal mapping beyond mere surgeons. A version of the IASLC nodal map is shown in Figure 1 and the table of definitions in Table 1.

So much for the achievements. What “hurdles” were encountered and which are left for the next phase of the IASLC TNM and Prognostic Factors Committee?

Hurdles

During the evolution of the IASLC proposals for the revision of the 6th edition we were aware of some limitations of our database and had to make difficult decisions. The solutions we settled upon and the retrospective nature of the data base have created some issues for those now using the 7th edition of the TNM Classification for Lung Cancer.

A dilemma was encountered as we sought to accommodate sub-groups of T or M cases that had been identified to have a prognosis that differed significantly from the rest of the cases within that category. If we kept the group within the original category and identified it by new alphabetical subscripts retrospective compatibility would be feasible and cases within existing data bases could be translated from the TNM version by which they were originally classified to the new edition of TNM. This had been managed with all previous revisions. Unfortunately it soon became apparent that the number of sub-categories required to accommodate all of the changes would exceed 20 and the number of resultant stage groupings would be in the region of 180 (19). This was clearly impractical with the technologies available globally at that time. For this reason it was reluctantly decided to move these sub-groups to other T and M categories which shared a similar prognosis, keeping the numbers of categories manageable but sacrificing backward compatibility for existing data bases, including our data donors!

A major limitation of our data was its retrospective nature. We chose to accept the short-coming of such data as the only way we could collect sufficient cases to inform revisions of the classification within the timelines dictated by the UICC and AJCC. However, the limitations of retrospective data collection brought with it several frustrations. Whilst in all cases we knew which category of T, N and M formed the basis of the clinical or pathological stage grouping, in only a minority did we know the descriptor which resulted in the case being assigned to that category and in few did we know that all other descriptors in that category were absent. For example, we would know that the case was assigned to T2, but only in a minority would we be told that this was because the tumor was 3 cm or larger. If this was so, we were rarely given information about the presence or absence of VPI or the proximity of the tumor to established anatomical levels on bronchoscopy. In addition we were not always told how was the size was measured, whether on chest radiography or CT, and in which dimension, a single reading or more, and in which axis? Similarly with no international guidance as to a definition of VPI we were unsure how this was assessed by individual pathologists at that time, and whether an elastic stain had been utilized to clarify this involvement? We had to accept that such cases were recorded in the data base as “VPI present”. In accepting these limitations we should at least recognize that the same issues almost certainly applied to the data that informed all previous revisions. Although the 7th edition placed added emphasis on size, by including additional size cut-points and making size >7 cm a T3 descriptor, the problem of how best to measure size was just as pertinent for the 3 cm cut-point which had divided T1 and T2 tumors since the mid 1970s (4). In the prospective data set established by the IASLC Staging and Prognostic Factors Committee (31) to help inform future revisions of TNM we are collecting data on the largest dimension and the imaging modality used to measure size. In addition we ask for the status of all descriptors within each T and M category. Such data will allow us to investigate issues such as the interaction of VPI and size on prognosis.

A new category, T1a, has been created for very small
Figure 1 The IASLC Nodal Map, reconciling the discrepancies between the Mountain/Dressler and Naruke maps. Each nodal station is colour-coded and listed. Those within a distinct nodal “zone” are grouped within the box. Reprinted courtesy of the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer and with permission of Aletta Frazier, MD. Copyright ©2009, 2010 Aletta Ann Frazier, MD.
### Table 1: The table of definitions for the nodal stations in the IASLC nodal map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodal station</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 (left/right)</td>
<td>Low cervical, supraclavicular and sternal notch nodes</td>
<td>Upper border: lower margin of cricoid cartilage Lower border: clavicles bilaterally and, in the midline, the upper border of the manubrium, 1R designates right-sided nodes, 1L, left-sided nodes in this region #L1 and #R1 limited by the midline of the trachea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2 (left/right)</td>
<td>Upper paratracheal nodes</td>
<td>2R: Upper border, apex of the right lung and pleural space and, in the midline, the upper border of the manubrium; Lower border, intersection of caudal margin of innominate vein with the trachea 2L: Upper border, apex of the left lung and pleural space and, in the midline, the upper border of the manubrium; Lower border, superior border of the aortic arch As for #4, in #2 the oncologic midline is along the left lateral border of the trachea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 (left/right)</td>
<td>Lower paratracheal nodes</td>
<td>4R: includes right paratracheal nodes, and pretracheal nodes extending to the left lateral border of trachea Upper border: intersection of caudal margin of innominate vein with the trachea Lower border: lower border of azygos vein 4L: includes nodes to the left of the left lateral border of the trachea, medial to the ligamentum arteriosum Upper border: upper margin of the aortic arch Lower border: upper rim of the left main pulmonary artery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Subaortic (aorto-pulmonary window)</td>
<td>Subaortic lymph nodes lateral to the ligamentum arteriosum Upper border: the lower border of the aortic arch Lower border: upper rim of the left main pulmonary artery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>Para-aortic nodes (ascending aorta or phrenic)</td>
<td>Lymph nodes anterior and lateral to the ascending aorta and aortic arch Upper border: a line tangential to the upper border of the aortic arch Lower border: the lower border of the aortic arch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>Subcarinal nodes</td>
<td>Upper border: the carina of the trachea Lower border: the upper border of the lower lobe bronchus on the left; the lower border of the bronchus intermedius on the right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodal station (left/right)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>Para-esophageal nodes (below carina)</td>
<td>Nodes lying adjacent to the wall of the esophagus and to the right or left of the midline, excluding subcarinal nodes. Upper border: the upper border of the lower lobe bronchus on the left; the lower border of the bronchus intermedius on the right. Lower border: the diaphragm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>Pulmonary ligament nodes</td>
<td>Nodes lying within the pulmonary ligament. Upper border: the inferior pulmonary vein. Lower border: the diaphragm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>Hilar nodes</td>
<td>Includes nodes immediately adjacent to the mainstem bronchus and hilar vessels including the proximal portions of the pulmonary veins and main pulmonary artery. Upper border: the lower rim of the azygos vein on the right; upper rim of the pulmonary artery on the left. Lower border: interlobar region bilaterally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11</td>
<td>Interlobar nodes</td>
<td>Between the origin of the lobar bronchi. #11s: between the upper lobe bronchus and bronchus intermedius on the right. #11i: between the middle and lower lobe bronchi on the right. Optional sub-categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#12</td>
<td>Lobar nodes</td>
<td>Adjacent to the lobar bronchi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#13</td>
<td>Segmental nodes</td>
<td>Adjacent to the segmental bronchi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#14</td>
<td>Sub-segmental nodes</td>
<td>Adjacent to the subsegmental bronchi.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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tumors, those no larger than 2 cm. The prognosis of these cases when associated with N0 disease is statistically more favorable than tumors greater than 2 cm but no larger than 3 cm, T1b. Does this have implications for structured observation in Low-Dose CT (LDCT) screening programmes? Does it suggest that sub-lobar resection may be sufficient for such cases? There are many shortcomings in such assumptions. The proportion of such cases in our data base which were screen-detected is unknown, but this will be clarified within the prospective data base. The issue regarding sub-lobar resection has become more topical with the increasing use of LDCT screening. Many of the cancers discovered with such screening are adenocarcinomas often with a proportion of ground-glass opacity (GGO). The classification of such lesions has been clarified in the new IASLC/ATS/ERS Classification for adenocarcinoma (32). The present role of sub-lobar resection has been summarized in a consensus report from the IASLC Strategic Screening Advisory Committee (33), which clearly favors anatomical segmentectomy over wedge resection and sets out the specific situation in which this is appropriate as an alternative to lobectomy, with carefully crafted caveats.

“It is recommended that anatomical segmentectomy be reserved for the CT screening detected pure GGO lesions or part-solid lesions below 2 cm located in the peripheral third of the lung, after frozen section of N1 and N2 lymph nodes have confirmed the T1aN0M0 status. In addition frozen section or cytological evaluation of resection margins is recommended.”

There are 2 ongoing trials assessing the role of sub-lobar resection in small peripheral cancers, one in the United States, CALGB 140503, and another in Japan, JCOG 0802. These should provide definitive advice when the results become available (34).

In some situations we have moved descriptors between T and M categories which may result in a case being assigned to a different stage grouping from that of earlier editions of TNM. One such area concerned the classification of cancers associated with “additional tumor nodules” in the lobe of
the primary, moved from T4 to T3 in the 7th edition, and in other ipsilateral lobes, moved from M1 to T4. Could we be sure that such changes were appropriate for all such cases? The answer is almost certainly not, but does it only apply to cases with a single additional nodule, or those with several or many? Does it only apply to so called “satellite” nodules adjacent to the primary tumor? Can we be sure that none of these cases in our data base were actually synchronous primary tumors? Clarification of these questions will have to await an analysis of from prospective data bases such as the one the IASLC has established. However we have now clarified that “additional tumor nodules” are “pulmonary metastases”, and improved the definition of “synchronous primary tumors”. If the management of a cases hinges on the distinction between additional nodules being metastases or synchronous primary tumors then biopsy of more than just the main lesion may be necessary.

Stage does not dictate treatment, it is only one factor in this decision, acting to “aid the clinician in the planning of treatment” (14). Inevitably however when stage grouping change there is an understandable question as to whether this should influence treatment algorithms. Several such changes occurred in the 7th edition:

(I) Tumors larger than 5 cm have been re-classified as T2b, and those >7 cm as T3. These cases, when associated with the N0 category were previously stage IB but are now upstaged to IIA and IIB respectively. Clinical trials have now established that adjuvant chemotherapy is beneficial after complete resection of stage II cases (35). Should these “new” stage II cases, large tumors which are N0, be treated along these lines? We should remind ourselves that these trials were conducted on stage II cases associated with N1 disease and must await the results of appropriate trials addressing the issue of adjuvant chemotherapy in large, node negative tumors, stratifying by size using the 7th edition cut-points (36);

(II) The classification of T4 tumors associated with invasion of adjacent structures has not changed but the stage grouping assigned to such cases when T4 is associated with the N0 and N1 categories has been down-staged to stage IIIA. Should all such cases now be considered for multimodality regimens which include surgery? One has to be cautious about such sweeping statements. Most surgical series of “resectable” T4 cases have been small, with highly selected cases collected over decades. Many such cases did not go to theatre with a classification of T4 but were thought to be less extensive and only found to be “T4”, “resectable” and node negative at surgery. The pre-operative assessment of “resectability” is always difficult, especially after induction chemotherapy and even more so after induction chemo-radiotherapy. It is also a very personal decision and one which cannot easily be conveyed by objective criteria. Until more data is accrued one can only advise that such advanced cases be assessed at specialist centres with experience in making these difficult decisions;

(III) The new descriptors appropriate for the classification of cases with additional tumor nodules in the lobe of the primary, and other ipsilateral lobes have already been alluded to and the reservations concerning this assignment mentioned. However, these changes have also resulted in down-staging in some circumstances. Those cases with additional tumor nodules in the lobe of the primary, classified as T3, when associated with the N0 category have been down-staged to stage IIB. One would expect that these cases would indeed be treated by surgery in patients who are sufficiently fit to withstand lobectomy as the additional lesions do not extend the extent of resection and subsequent pathological classification may show one (or more) to be synchronous primaries. The role of adjuvant chemotherapy will arise but at present there is no data to inform this decision. Such T3 cases associated with N1 and N2 categories, and the T4 lesions due to additional tumor nodules in other ipsilateral lobes associated with N0 and N1 categories have been down-staged to stage IIIA. Once again this stage has traditionally been the middle ground where most discussion at multi-disciplinary meetings is concentrated. One can only suggest that these cases now be subjected to the same deliberations and that treatment options include a discussion of surgery as part of the multimodality care in appropriate cases. It is unlikely that trials will prove feasible in these cases and once again data from prospectively collected data with comprehensive data sets may help these decisions in future.

Conclusions

The 7th edition of TNM for lung cancer was an enormous improvement when compared to earlier editions. The process of revision has been dramatically altered and colleagues with data from around the globe have been able to influence the classification we all use in everyday practice. The new edition is based upon international data, on patients treated by all modalities of care and accrued over a relatively short period, during which time treatment and investigative algorithms were relatively stable. Stage has been aligned with prognosis more closely than ever
before. However, as outlined in this article, it is far from perfect. We responded to criticisms of earlier revisions and have taken a giant step forwards with the 7th edition. The IASLC is now committed, on behalf of its members and the global lung cancer community, to the long-term financial and scientific burden of improving future revisions and expanding our activities to cover other thoracic malignancies, including mesothelioma and thymic tumors. The 8th edition of the TNM Classification of Malignant Tumors is scheduled to be enacted in September 2015. The IASLC Staging and Prognostic Factors Committee is well advanced in its preparation and has accumulated an even larger data base than that previously used for the 7th edition. Once our proposals have been identified and validated they will again be released for scrutiny in discussion articles in JTO. Readers are encouraged to become members of the IASLC to assist in this endeavor, ensure they are kept abreast of impending changes and be in a position to obtain the educational materials the IASLC plans to launch at the 16th World Conference on Lung Cancer in Denver, September 2015.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References


A review of clinical practice guidelines for lung cancer

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Abstract: Clinical practice guidelines are important evidence-based resources to guide complex clinical decision making. However, it is challenging for health professionals to keep abreast available guidelines and to know how and where to access relevant guidelines. This review examines currently available guidelines for lung cancer published in the English language. Important key features are listed for each identified guideline. The methodology, approaches to dissemination and implementation, and associated resources are summarised. General challenges in the area of guideline development are highlighted. The potential to collaborate more widely across lung cancer guideline developers by sharing literature searches and assessments is discussed.

Keywords: Clinical practice guidelines; clinical practice guideline development; evidence-based medicine; lung neoplasms; non-small cell lung carcinoma; small cell lung carcinoma

Submitted Jul 15, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 29, 2013.

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.37

Introduction

A challenge for health professionals managing patients with lung cancer is to keep abreast with the rapidly growing evidence base in diagnosis, staging and treatment. Clinical practice guidelines for lung cancer provide a useful tool of synthesised evidence to guide complex clinical decision making. They have the potential to enhance the healthcare decisions of clinicians and patients, and to lead to better quality care and improved outcomes for patients when they are of high quality, accessible and successfully implemented (1).

Numerous guidelines have been developed for lung cancer across the world. With a vast number of lung cancer guidelines developed in different countries by different organisations and listed across numerous guideline databases, this review article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of available guidelines for lung cancer available in English language. Key features such as developing organisation(s), publication date, geographic context and access details are listed for each guideline. More detailed information in regards to the methodology, the dissemination and implementation approach, important background information and any associated resources are briefly summarised in the results section.

Methods

Clinical practice guidelines are defined as “statements that include recommendations intended to optimize patient care that are informed by a systematic review of evidence and an assessment of the benefits and harms of alternative care options” (1). This definition has been used to identify clinical practice guidelines for lung cancer to be included in this review article. A comprehensive literature search consisting of searching the Guidelines International Network (GIN) International Guideline Library, National Guideline Clearinghouse, Standards and Guidelines Evidence (SAGE) portal, Australia’s Clinical Practice Guideline Portal, PubMed as well as Scottish International Guidelines Network’s (SIGN) and National Institute for Health and Care Excellence’s (NICE) databases was completed. In addition, snowballing was used to identify any further relevant guidelines that were missed in the database searches. The results were then screened and included if the following criteria were met (Table 1).
Guidelines addressing malignant pleural mesothelioma, thymoma, specific symptom management topics and other secondary topics were out of scope for this review article and therefore not considered. Clinical practice guidelines that met all criteria, but were based on a non-systematic literature review, were excluded from this review as the systematic review requirement according to the clinical practice guideline definition was not met (Table 2). Other forms of clinical guidance such as general consensus statements on clinical topics, expert advice, task force reports, health technology appraisal and appropriate use criteria were also excluded.

**Results**

In total 22 lung cancer guideline documents developed by 12 different organisations were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria (Table 3).

Table 3 shows that there is wide variation in nearly every aspect of guideline development between each of the guidelines. As Table 3 indicates, the scope varied across the identified guidelines. Some guideline developers, such as NICE (37) or American College of Chest Physicians.

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**Table 1 Inclusion criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinical practice guideline as per Institute of Medicine’s definition (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published in English language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published between 2008 and 2013*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addresses prevention, screening, diagnosis, staging, treatment and management of small cell and non-small cell lung cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*The date range is based on the maximum guideline validity period of five years according to National Health and Medical Research Council (2).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Excluded lung cancer guidelines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guideline developer</th>
<th>Guideline title</th>
<th>Reason for exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS)</td>
<td>The American Association for Thoracic Surgery guidelines for lung cancer screening using low-dose computed tomography scans for lung cancer survivors and other high-risk groups (3)</td>
<td>No explicit information in regards to literature search and review methods included (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central European Cooperative Oncology Group (CECOG)</td>
<td>Third CECOG Consensus on the systemic treatment of non-small-cell lung cancer (4)</td>
<td>Not clear if systematic review was performed (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO)</td>
<td>Early stage and locally advanced (non-metastatic) non-small-cell lung cancer: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up (5)</td>
<td>Based on a narrative literature search (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metastatic non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC): ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small-cell lung cancer: ESMO Clinical Practice Guidelines for diagnosis, treatment and follow-up (7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Respiratory Society (ERS), European Society of Thoracic Surgeons (ESTS)</td>
<td>ERS/ESTS clinical guidelines on fitness for radical therapy in lung cancer patients (surgery and chemo-radiotherapy) (9)</td>
<td>Based on a non-systematic literature review and expert panel consensus (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Association of Thoracic Oncology (AIOT)</td>
<td>Treatment of advanced non-small-cell lung cancer: Italian Association of Thoracic Oncology (AIOT) clinical practice guidelines (10)</td>
<td>Based on a non-systematic literature review and expert panel consensus (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN)</td>
<td>Lung cancer screening Version 1.2013 (11)</td>
<td>No information included in regards to literature search and review methods (11-13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-small cell lung cancer Version 2.2013 (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small cell lung cancer Version 2.2013 (13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Society for Medical Oncology (SEOM)</td>
<td>SEOM clinical guidelines for the treatment of non-small cell lung cancer: an updated edition (14)</td>
<td>Methodology not included (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline Developer</td>
<td>Guideline Title</td>
<td>Year of publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberta Health Services</td>
<td>Non small cell lung cancer stage I (15)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non small cell lung cancer stage II (16)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non small cell lung cancer stage IV (18)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP)</td>
<td>Diagnosis and Management of Lung Cancer, 3rd ed: Evidence-Based Clinical Practice Guidelines (21)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline Developer</td>
<td>Guideline Title</td>
<td>Year of publication</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)</td>
<td>Palliative thoracic radiotherapy in lung cancer: An American Society for Radiation Oncology evidence-based clinical practice guideline (22)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline Developer</td>
<td>Guideline Title</td>
<td>Year of publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer Care Ontario</td>
<td>First-line systemic chemotherapy in the treatment of advanced non-small cell lung cancer (26)</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positron emission tomography in radiation treatment planning for lung cancer (27)</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postoperative adjuvant radiation therapy in stage II or IIA completely resected non-small cell lung cancer (28)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of preoperative chemotherapy with or without postoperative radiotherapy in technically resectable stage IIA non-small cell lung cancer (29)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Altered fractionation of radical radiation therapy in the management of unresectable non-small cell lung cancer (30)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-line or subsequent systemic therapy for recurrent or progressive non-small cell lung cancer (31)</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline Developer</td>
<td>Guideline Title</td>
<td>Year of publication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Role of Combination Chemotherapy in the Initial Management of Limited-Stage Small-Cell Lung Cancer (32)</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chemotherapy for relapsed small cell lung cancer (33)</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography in the diagnosis and staging of lung cancer (34)</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer Council Australia (CCA)</td>
<td>Clinical practice guidelines for the treatment of lung cancer (35)</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guideline Developer</td>
<td>Guideline Title</td>
<td>Year of publication</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Example: "ALK molecular testing should be used to select patients for ALK-targeted TKI therapy, and patients with lung adenocarcinoma should not be excluded from testing on the basis of clinical characteristics. Evidence Grade: EGFR: A ALK: B...." (36)
(ACCP) (21), published their lung cancer guideline as one large document covering all areas of lung cancer from epidemiology, screening, diagnosis, treatment, follow-up to end-of-life care. Others, such as Alberta Health Services (15-20) and College of American Pathologists (CAP), International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC) and Association for Molecular Pathology (AMP) (36), developed more focused guidelines addressing specific area(s) of lung cancer. For example, Alberta Health Services released their lung cancer guidelines as separate discrete publications and published a guideline for each stage (15-20). Cancer Care Ontario’s guidelines are even more specific and address only one or a few closely related clinical questions (26-34).

The guideline development approach also varied between organisations. All included clinical practice guidelines are based on formal systematic reviews to generate evidence-based recommendations. However, the evidence assessment tools, recommendation format and recommendation grading schemes vary (Table 3). A few developers even have a procedure in place to evaluate if recommendations from existing guidelines could be formally adopted (38) as opposed to developing de novo guidelines/recommendations.

Whereas all identified guidelines are disseminated and accessible online, the presentation varied from documents available for download, web-based clinical practice guidelines, guidelines available as published journal articles or a combination of approaches (Table 3). Many developers offer printed guideline copies or printed summaries of the recommendations available upon request.

The subsequent section summarises background information in regards to the relevant guideline(s), composition of guideline development group, conflict of interest (COI) management, guideline funding, the methodological as well as dissemination and implementation approach, planned update and any associated resources for the guideline(s) in narrative form under each guideline developer or collaboration of guideline developers. Together with Table 3, the summarised information covers the subject areas of the standards identified by the Institute of Medicine for developing trustworthy clinical practice guidelines (establishing transparency, management of COI, guideline development group composition, systematic review, evidence foundations and evidence level ratings, recommendation formulation, external review and updating) (1). Dissemination and implementation approach and any associated guideline resources were added for each guideline as these are key to achieve successful guideline uptake (39).

Alberta Health Services

Introduction

Alberta Health Services is a Canadian health authority that delivers health services in the Canadian province Alberta and develops clinical practice guidelines in oncology. For each stage in non-small cell and small cell lung cancer a separate lung cancer guideline document was produced. They are published as separate PDF publications on Alberta Health Services’ website (Table 3) (15-20).

Guideline development methodology

Guideline development at Alberta Health Services follows a systematic guideline development approach as detailed in the Guideline Utilization Resource Unit Handbook (40). For each lung guideline, a multidisciplinary working group was recruited. The guideline scope was defined and clinical questions developed. The literature searches were carried out by an in-house knowledge management specialist. All retrieved literature results were screened, assessed and synthesised. Existing guidelines were also searched for in order to evaluate if an existing guideline could be formally adopted. Any retrieved existing guidelines were formally assessed with the AGREE II instrument to ensure minimum requirements for a good quality guideline were met, before considering the formal adoption or adaption of existing recommendation(s). Guideline recommendations were developed and formulated by the guideline working group members based on the evidence tables and expert clinical interpretation or, if applicable, an existing guideline. Recommendations were formulated in the form of action statements and the reasoning behind the recommendation, including the quality and level of evidence, was added in narrative form. Alberta Health Services did not use a formal grading scheme to assign specific grades to recommendations. The draft guidelines were then open for comment and reviewed by all members of the Provincial Tumour Team. Once the guideline documents were finalised, they were formally endorsed by Alberta Health Services.

COI management

COI statements are included in each lung cancer guideline as well as an overall statement from the developer that each guideline was satisfactorily developed in an unbiased manner (40).
Funding
Each lung cancer guideline document states that there was no direct industry involvement in the production or dissemination of the guideline (40).

Dissemination and implementation approach
The guidelines are published on the Alberta Health Services website. All members are notified when a guideline has been updated or added. Guidelines are presented at the local and provincial tumour team meeting as well as weekly hospital rounds to facilitate uptake (40).

Planned update
Alberta Health Services clinical practice guidelines are reviewed and updated every one to two years (40).

Associated resources
Treatment algorithms for each lung cancer guideline are available from http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/1755.asp.

American College of Chest Physicians

Introduction
The ACCP produces guidelines in chest medicine and has developed guidelines for lung cancer since 2003. The third edition of the ACCP lung cancer guidelines has been published in 2013 and is included in this review (Table 3) (21).

Guideline development methodology
ACCP used a formalised, systematic approach to develop the third edition of the lung cancer guidelines. A selected expert lung cancer guideline panel developed research questions in PICO [The acronym PICO refers to the 4 elements that should be included in a structured clinical question to govern systematic searches: patient, intervention, comparison and outcome. A framework commonly used in evidence-based medicine (41).] format and literature searches were designed and completed. The literature results were then screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria and formally assessed using standard quality assessment tools. If applicable, good quality meta-analysis (already published or performed by the authors specifically for the guideline) were used to inform the recommendations. Evidence summary tables and profiles were compiled for most PICO questions. Based on the evidence tables, recommendations were formulated and then graded according to the ACCP recommendation grading system. The whole guideline panel reviewed the guideline content, including formal anonymous voting to approve recommendations during face-to-face and virtual meetings. The draft guideline was then submitted through an internal and external review process before the guideline was finalised and published (42).

COI management
Each nominated guideline panel member had to submit a COI statement before the start of the guideline project. The COI statements were reviewed by the Guidelines Oversight Committee. All panellists were required to submit an updated COI statement before each meeting. COI management included strategies such as not drafting or voting on recommendations that were related to a particular conflict (42).

Funding
The majority of the guideline was funded by the ACCP. One private foundation and one pharmaceutical company financially supported the development and dissemination of the guideline. Those sponsoring companies were not allowed to participate in the guideline development process (42).

Dissemination and implementation approach
The ACCP lung guidelines are disseminated through the College’s website (www.chestnet.org), the CHEST journal publication, National Guidelines Clearinghouse and GIN Library (42).

Planned update
The start of ongoing review is planned 1 year after publication unless the content experts, who continue to monitor the literature, suggest that recommendations need to be updated (42).

Associated resources
Additional clinical resources will be accessible in Chest Evidence. Associated patient guides will be available from www.onebreath.org (42).

American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO)

Introduction
The Guidelines Subcommittee of the ASTRO identified a need for an evidence-based guideline on the use of palliative radiotherapy to lung cancer patients. The project proposal to develop this guideline was submitted and approved by the ASTRO Board of Directors in 2009 (22).
Guideline development methodology
A task force was established and assigned to review and synthesize the current available evidence to develop this guideline. The task force was divided into three topic groups and a systematic literature review was completed for each area. Evidence assessment, including the creation of evidence tables, and the formulation of the guideline content were completed and then revised by the complete expert group. The final draft was then circulated to three expert reviewers, the ASTRO legal counsel and also published on the ASTRO website for public comment. The feedback was reviewed and incorporated before the guideline was finally reviewed and approved by the ASTRO Board of Directors (22).

COI management
At the beginning of the guideline project, all members submitted COI declarations. The task group chairs reviewed all COI statements and determined that the disclosures would have no impact upon the content of the guideline manuscript (22).

Funding
Details in regards to the funding of the guidelines were not specified in the guideline document.

Dissemination and implementation approach
The guideline was formally published in the journal Practical Radiation Oncology (22) and the link to the article is listed on ASTRO's website.

Planned update
The ASTRO Guidelines Subcommittee will monitor this guideline and initiate an update when appropriate (22).

Associated resources
Not identified.

American Society for Clinical Oncology

Introduction
The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) has been developing clinical practice guidelines for lung cancer since 1997 and has published an update on chemotherapy for stage IV non-small lung cancer in 2011 that was eligible for inclusion in this review (23).

Guideline development methodology
The 2011 update on chemotherapy treatment for stage IV non-small-cell lung cancer is based on ASCO's 2009 lung cancer guideline update and addressed the clinical question, “What is the optimal duration of first-line chemotherapy for stage IV NSCLC?” from the previous guideline. The literature search for this guideline included an update of the original 2009 literature search and a systematic assessment of the updated evidence. ASCO's Guideline Procedures Manual provides details about ASCO's methodology for guideline development (24). The 2011 focused update was drafted by the co-chairs of the 2009 guideline as well as ASCO staff and was then circulated to the entire update committee for approval. The final document was reviewed and approved by ASCO's Clinical Practice Guideline Committee and Board of Directors Executive Committee. It was then submitted to Journal of Clinical Oncology for peer review before being finalized and published (23).

COI management
All members of the update committee completed the ASCO disclosure form prior to commencing the work on this guideline project. Further details about ASCO's COI management are published in ASCO's COI management procedures summary (43).

Funding
Details in regards to guideline funding were not specified in the guideline publication (23).

Dissemination and implementation approach
The guideline was published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology (23) and is listed on ASCO's website in the clinical guideline section (Table 3).

Planned update
Not specified in guideline document.

Associated resources

British Thoracic Society (BTS) and Society for Cardiothoracic Surgery (SCTS) in Great Britain and Ireland

Introduction
The BTS and the SCTS in Great Britain and Ireland had developed a guideline on the radical management of patients with lung cancer.
with lung cancer in 2001 and decided to conduct an update of this guideline to provide comprehensive guidance on selection and risk assessment of suitable patients (Table 3) (25).

**Guideline development methodology**

The guideline development group determined the guideline scope based on the previous guideline and in consultation with members from both societies. A comprehensive literature search was performed and the evidence was assessed using the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network’s (SIGN) methodology. Recommendations were developed based on the evidence tables and graded according to SIGN. Research recommendations were also incorporated. The draft document was distributed amongst BTS and SCTS members and presented at society meetings for consultation and review. All feedback was assessed and reviewed by the guideline committee before the guideline was finalised, approved and published (25).

**COI management**

COI statements are included in the guideline publication (25).

**Funding**

The BTS funded all committee meetings (25).

**Dissemination and implementation approach**

The guideline was published in the *Thorax* journal (25) and is also disseminated through a link on the BTS website (Table 3).

**Planned update**

2013 (44).

**Associated resources**


**Cancer Care Ontario**

**Introduction**

Cancer Care Ontario, a Canadian health government agency, has published nine clinical practice guidelines for lung cancer between 2008 and 2013 (Table 3) covering specific clinical questions in the area of non-small cell and small cell lung cancer management (26-34).

**Guideline development methodology**

At Cancer Ontario, working groups consisting of two to six clinicians or content experts and one Research Coordinator were established to produce each lung cancer guideline. The working groups determined the overall guideline topic, the individual clinical questions for each topic as well as the overall scope of each lung cancer guideline. The literature review process, that formed the basis of each guideline document, consisted of two stages: first, existing lung cancer guidelines were identified to see if an existing guideline could be formally adapted. If not, a systematic review of the evidence considering the highest level evidence was conducted. After the evidence was assessed and synthesised, the working groups developed the initial recommendations. The reasoning behind each recommendation and the degree of how much it is evidence-based versus expert consensus is explicitly stated in the recommendations. All draft guideline documents went through an internal and external review process. The external review process consisted of targeted peer review and professional consultation. The draft guideline documents were then revised by the individual working groups to assess and incorporate the feedback. The process and results that arose from the consultation review are documented in the final guideline documents. Cancer Care Ontario’s guideline development methodology is described in detail in the “Program in Evidence-Based Care Handbook” published by Cancer Care Ontario (45).

**COI management**

Working group authors had to declare COI as soon as they started on a guideline project and provide an update when the guideline was completed. The guideline chair and research coordinator were responsible to collate the declarations and updates and manage any conflicting interest according to Cancer Care Ontario’s COI policy (46). Reviewers also had to declare any competing interests.

**Funding**

Guideline development is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-term Care through Cancer Care Ontario and editorially independent from its funding source (26-34).

**Dissemination and implementation approach**

The guidelines are published on Cancer Care Ontario’s website (Table 3) and indexed at National Guidelines Clearinghouse and CMA Infobase. In addition, the results of several systematic reviews are published in peer-reviewed journals (47-52).
Planned update
Each year the lung cancer guidelines are assessed with a document assessment tool developed by the Program in Evidence-Based Care at Cancer Ontario to determine if any guidelines are in need of an update (45).

Associated resources
Not identified.

Cancer Council Australia (CCA)

Introduction
CCA, a not for profit cancer charity, produces evidence-based clinical practice guidelines in oncology for the Australian health care context. In 2010, CCA was commissioned by Cancer Australia (an agency of the Australian Government) to update the lung guidelines originally published in 2004. The new web-based guideline covers treatment of non-small cell and small cell lung cancer, symptom management, supportive and palliative care (35).

Guideline development methodology
A multidisciplinary working group was established and the guideline objectives and scope were defined. Clinical questions according to PICO format were developed and systematic literature searches were carried out. The literature results were screened for relevance and formally assessed. The evidence was synthesised and analysed by the assigned working group members. Each question lead author developed the initial clinical question content, including formulation of evidence statements and draft recommendations and assigning the recommendation grades according to the NHMRC grading system (53). All draft content, including the recommendations and associated grades, was then internally reviewed and approved by all members of the working party before the draft guideline was released for public consultation. All externally received comments were considered by the working party and, where necessary, changes were made to the guideline. A formal response to each comment was documented. Once the guideline was finalized, it was published on CCA’s Cancer Guidelines Wiki (35). CCA’s Guideline Development Handbook provides a detailed description of the applied guideline development methodology (54).

COI management
COI statements were collected from each working group member at the start of the project. The management committee had the responsibility to collect and evaluate COI statements from all nominees. All working party members are responsible to provide updated COI statements if new interests arise (35).

Funding
Co-funding to develop these guidelines was received from Cancer Australia (35).

Dissemination and implementation approach
CCA’s clinical practice guidelines are available online via the CCA Cancer Guidelines Wiki (35). The link to the guidelines was distributed directly to relevant professional and other interested groups via email, print and social media campaigns as well as through meetings, national conferences and other CME events. By allowing guideline stakeholders to comment on guidelines content and submit new evidence on an ongoing basis, CCA is encouraging its stakeholders to engage with the guideline content on a long-term basis (54).

CCA is developing online learning modules to reinforce content knowledge for participants and support guideline uptake. CCA is going to pilot the development of a lung cancer QStream module originally developed by Harvard Medical School (54).

Planned update
Ongoing (54).

Associated resources
Online QStream module is in development (54).

CAP, IASLC and AMP

Introduction
Three professional societies, CAP, IASLC, and AMP, systematically reviewed the literature to develop an evidence-based guideline for selection of lung cancer patients for EGFR mutation and ALK rearrangement testing. The guideline addresses which patients and samples should be tested and when and how testing should be performed (36).

Guideline development methodology
A systematic literature review, including blinded screening for relevant studies, was performed. A formal quality assessment and data extraction was completed for all selected studies. Evidence tables were created. Based on the evidence assessment, content and evidence-based
recommendations were formulated, evidence levels assigned and recommendation grades determined. In addition, recommendations based on formal expert consensus were added where appropriate and marked as such. The draft guideline then went through an extensive review process before it was finalised and published (36). The detailed methodological report is available from http://links.lww.com/JTO/A430 (55).

**COI management**
Before acceptance on the expert panel, all potential authors completed COI statements as per CAP’ procedures and were required to disclose new conflicts at each conference call. They had to submit a general updated COI form on a yearly basis (55). The COI statements are published with the guidelines.

**Funding**
The guideline development was jointly funded by CAP, IASLC and AMP (36).

**Dissemination and implementation approach**
The guideline is disseminated through the organisations’ websites and was released in Archives of Pathology & Laboratory Medicine, the Journal of Thoracic Oncology, and the Journal of Molecular Diagnostics (36).

**Planned update**
This guideline will be reviewed regularly, as mandated by publication of substantive and high-quality medical evidence that could potentially alter the original guideline recommendations (36).

**Associated resources**

**National Institute for Health and Care Excellence**

**Introduction**
NICE is a UK-based health authority that provides national guidance and advice to improve health and social care. In 2011, NICE published a revision of the clinical practice guideline for lung cancer titled “Lung cancer. The diagnosis and treatment of lung cancer” (37).

**Guideline development methodology**
The methods that were used to develop the lung cancer guideline are in accordance with those set out by NICE in The guidelines manual (56). After the decision was made to update the lung cancer guideline, the guideline scope was defined and a lung cancer guideline development group was established. The group formulated clinical questions using the PICO framework where applicable. Comprehensive, systematic literature searches were carried out for each question and the evidence critically appraised and assessed. Health economic evidence was also included, assessed and synthesized. Based on the evidence synthesis, recommendations were developed and agreed upon by the working group. Qualifying statements about the strength of evidence, about the benefits and harms for the intervention being considered, the degree of consensus within the GDG and the costs and cost-effectiveness of an intervention were added. The guideline draft went through a consultation process, which was documented and published as a separate report on the NICE website. Based on the stakeholder comments, the guideline content was revised and went through a pre-publication check process, before the final guideline version was published (37).

**COI management**
At the start of the guideline development process, all COI statements from each guideline development group member were recorded. At each subsequent meeting, members declared any new, arising interests. For group members, that declared any conflicting interests, an evaluation took place and a management plan was implemented (37). The code of practice for declaring and dealing with conflicts of interest outlines the COI management procedures in further detail (57).

**Funding**
NICE commissioned the National Collaborating Centre for Cancer to develop this guideline. The health economic analysis was conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and funded by the National Collaborating Centre for Cancer (37).

**Dissemination and implementation approach**
This guideline is disseminated as web-based and short and long PDF versions on the NICE website. Numerous implementation tools have been developed to facilitate
planned update (see under associated resources). The NICE guidelines manual outlines the guideline dissemination and implementation approach for NICE guidelines in detail (56).

**Planned update**

After three years, the guideline will be formally evaluated to assess if an update is required (37).

**Associated resources**

A short version of this guideline, containing the key priorities, key research recommendations and all other recommendations, and a Quick Reference Guide (QRG) are available from http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=byID&o=13465.

The following implementation tools are available from http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/index.jsp?action=byID&o=13465: baseline assessment tool, clinical audit tool, costing report, costing template, multiple guidance audit tool, slide set, online educational tool about referral in case of suspected lung cancer.

**Discussion**

Considerable resources have been spent internationally on the development of lung cancer guidelines. This review article highlights that health professionals specialising in the treatment of lung cancer, patients and other stakeholders have access to numerous clinical practice guidelines developed for different local contexts. As the major concern around clinical practice guidelines is around quality, especially rigour of development, validity of recommendations and editorial independence, guideline users are encouraged to formally assess the quality of any identified lung cancer guideline (58). The guideline quality assessment instrument Agree II provides a validated tool to complete such quality assessments (59).

It was not part of this review to analyse and compare recommendations across guidelines addressing the same areas, nevertheless we are aware that variation does exist. For example, in patients with stage I non-small cell lung cancer who cannot tolerate surgery, the ACCP recommends stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT) (21), whereas NICE recommends patients should be offered continuous hyperfractionated accelerated radiotherapy (CHART) (37). ACCP does not mention CHART at all (21); NICE offers no guideline on SBRT, but recommends that further research should be undertaken (37). Undertaking a detailed content comparison across the identified lung cancer guidelines and investigating any variations, may be a worthwhile project to emerge from this initial review. It would be of interest to know if the reasons for any variations are resource related (for example Alberta Health Services does not recommend CHART because it is unavailable there), or a result of regional/cultural preferences in practice (for example the level of therapeutic aggression or nihilism). An example of the latter is the ACCP guideline for patients who have undergone resection of an isolated brain or adrenal metastasis, that adjuvant chemotherapy is suggested (21), whereas NICE only recommends adjuvant chemotherapy for patients without metastatic disease (37). The international variation in cultural attitudes to what are reasonable levels of medical intervention (as suggested by this example) could present an obstacle to the ultimate development of truly universal guidelines.

Compiling an overview of available lung cancer guidelines also pinpoints general challenges in the area of guideline development. Lung cancer guidelines, that follow an international standard, are presented in a validated, uniform format and are published together with the results of independently performed quality assessments, are still a vision of the future, even though significant efforts have been made to provide standards, methodologies and presentation guidelines (1,60-62).

Successful dissemination and implementation of lung cancer guidelines is another challenging area (39,63,64). Even if high quality evidence-based guidelines are available, it does not guarantee successful uptake by health professionals. Guideline developers, health care organisations, and governments need to put adequate resources into guideline dissemination and implementation and follow multiple implementation strategies to maximise uptake (39). Further there are many competing sources of information on lung cancer management besides guidelines which are readily available to health professionals and consumers. Although they may lack the endorsement of respected learned societies, these other sources, usually web-based, having avoided a lengthy development process, may provide more up-to-date information than traditional guidelines, and so become the first port of call for the information seeker. Conversely, without the rigour under which the guidelines are produced, use of that approach might lead to acceptance of faulty information.

It is therefore critical to keep the guidelines current if they are to be relevant and well used. Collaborating on lung cancer guidelines internationally by sharing literature
searches and assessments is considered an effective approach to reduce duplication of effort and help developers keep the existing guidelines current (65). We hope this review provides an information starting point to bring together potential future collaborators with a view to developing integrated, dynamic, so called “living guidelines”, which can then be adapted to suit the different cultural and organisational contexts.

Summary

The aim of this review article was to provide a comprehensive overview of available clinical practice guidelines in the areas of small cell and non-small cell lung cancer. 22 clinical practice guidelines produced by 12 organisations with varying scopes and developed for different regions were identified and key features summarised. Health professionals in the area of lung cancer have no shortage of guidelines to assist the clinical decision making process. Future research needs to focus more on dissemination, implementation, guideline adherence and their effect on disease outcome. It is hoped this article will be a useful resource for clinicians and other stakeholders to easily access these different guidelines and assess relevance to their own practice. We also hope it may lead to organisations to pool their resources to develop consistent, internationally relevant guidelines for what is, after all, a global disease.

Acknowledgements

Jutta Johanna von Dincklage and David Ball are members of Cancer Council Australia’s Lung Cancer Guidelines Working Party that developed Cancer Council Australia’s Clinical practice guidelines for the treatment of lung cancer (35). Gerard Silvestri serves as American College of Chest Physicians’ lung cancer panellist that developed the third edition of ACCP Lung Cancer Guidelines (21). In the last 12 months, David Ball has sat on advisory boards for Boehringer-Ingelheim and Lilly Oncology, and given a lecture at a Pfizer sponsored symposium. In all cases the honoraria for these services have been paid directly to his employing institution, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Customized chemotherapy in metastatic non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)

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Abstract: Metastatic non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) unfortunately remains a lethal disease, despite recent genetic characterization of subclasses of NSCLC, mainly adenocarcinoma, which has led to the development of targeted therapies that improve progression-free survival (PFS). Ultimately, however, patients fatally relapse. In this review we will focus on the search to improve survival for NSCLC patients deemed to be pan-negative for the common driver alterations susceptible to targeted therapy, above all those with EGFR mutations or ALK, ROS or RET translocations. Other uncommon driver mutations such as HER2 and BRAF mutations should be tested in order to rule out targeted treatment before assigning patients to chemotherapy. Chemotherapy yields short lived response with median survival still less than one year. Customized chemotherapy represents one way to attempt to prolong survival, although to date no prospective randomized customized studies have reported sufficient evidence to support this. In one attempt to demonstrate the role of tailoring chemotherapy, the Spanish Lung Cancer Group (SLCG) phase II customized chemotherapy trial (NCT00883480) showed that RAP80, a component of the BRCA1-A complex, influenced outcome in patients with low BRCA1 expression treated with cisplatin/gemcitabine, and in patients with intermediate/high BRCA1 levels receiving cisplatin/docetaxel or docetaxel alone. We are currently performing a prospective, randomized phase III trial comparing non-customized cisplatin/docetaxel with customized therapy in metastatic NSCLC patients (NCT00617656/GECP-BREC) and a parallel phase II study (ChiCTR-TRC-12001860) is being carried out in China (BREC-China) under the auspices of the SLCG.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer; customized chemotherapy; BRCA1 and RAP80 expression customized (BREC); BRCA1; RAP80; RING finger protein 8 (RNF8)

Submitted Jan 18, 2013. Accepted for publication Feb 19, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.03
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.03

Introduction

Growing evidence points to the need for molecular characterization of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), especially in adenocarcinomas and never smokers, for adequate identification of driver mutations or translocations that can be properly treated with targeted therapy. However, there is still a large proportion of NSCLCs for which genetic information to inform therapeutic intervention is still lacking. The benefit of chemotherapy is rather limited and almost all advanced NSCLC cases have poor prognosis with median survival of less than
one year. Previous studies comparing chemotherapy with best supported care showed median survivals of between 8 and 4 months, respectively (1). Different studies of chemotherapy with cetuximab or pemetrexed as maintenance therapy have not significantly improved overall survival (2-4). In this review we will describe the significant components in DNA repair pathways that warrant investigation, with the aim of identifying a predictive model for optimal customization of chemotherapy which could translate to a meaningful improvement in survival. A BRCA1 and RAP80 Expression Customized (BREC) phase III trial (NCT00617656/GECP-BREC) and a parallel phase II study in China (BREC China, ChiCTR-TRC-12001860) are currently being performed based on the biological information available in 2007. Since then, great progress has been made in further defining DNA repair mechanisms. In this review we will summarize this important progress that has occurred whilst awaiting the results of the above mentioned trials. Figure 1 shows the design of the randomized BREC trial.

**Figure 1** BREC trial design.

**Figure 2**

The BREC studies were constructed based on a Spanish Lung Cancer Group (SLGC) phase II customized trial (NCT00883480) and information that was discovered in 2007 regarding the BRCA1-A complex (BRCA1, RAP80, ABRAXAS). As commented, information which has since been reported, during the accrual of the BREC, provides the rationale for exploring the mRNA levels of other genes in the BREC patients - above all, RNF8 could play a decisive role, since, when BRCA1 and RAP80 are low, if RNF8 is still expressed this will neutralize the predictive model. Other interesting genes and associations are explained below.

**Double-strand breaks (DSBs) induced by chemotherapy lead to DNA damage response (DDR): ATMediated or tyrosine kinase-driven**

DNA DSBs caused by chemotherapy are repaired by two major systems: non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) and homologous recombination (HR). Upon DNA DSB introduction, the following processes occur: the histone H2AX is phosphorylated by ataxia telangiectasia mutated (ATM); the mediator of DNA damage checkpoint 1 (MDC1) binds to the phosphorylated H2AX (H2AX); ATM phosphorylates MDC1 at the region surrounding the DSB. The E3 ubiquitin ligase RING finger protein 8 (RNF8) binds to phosphorylated MDC1 at DSB sites and promotes recruitment of another E3 ubiquitin ligase RNF168; RNF8 and RNF168 conjugate Lys 63-linked ubiquitin chains onto histone H2A with their cognate E2 ubiquitin-conjugating enzyme UBC13 and induce chromatin remodeling. UBC13-RNF8/RNF168-dependent ubiquitination promotes recruitment of BRCA1 and p53-binding protein 1 (53BP1) to DSBs (5) (Figure 2). Importantly, a large proportion
of BRCA1 that localizes to DSB sites is a component of the BRCA1-A complex, consisting of a BRCA1/BARD1 heterodimer, ubiquitin interacting motif (UIM)-containing protein RAP80, and adaptor protein ABRAXAS (6-9).

Based on this information, we performed an exploratory analysis of RAP80 and ABRAXAS mRNA levels in our previous customized phase II trial. Although the information provided by ABRAXAS was similar to that provided by RAP80, RAP80 was more significant (10). Mechanistically, loss of RAP80 suppresses recruitment of the BRCA1 complex to DNA damage sites and abrogates the DNA damage repair process at DSBs (11). It has since been discovered that the BRCA1-A complex also includes the deubiquitinating enzyme BRCC36, as well as BRCC45/ BRE and MERIT40/NBA1 (5). Other groups have also demonstrated that, BRCA1 forms biochemically distinct complexes with certain other DNA damage response proteins [BRCA1-B and BRCA1-C complexes; Figure 3 (6)] in response to DSBs. The simultaneous presence of multiple distinct BRCA1 complexes at DSBs suggests a crosstalk between complexes and increases the level of complexity; for example, the BRCA1/RAP80 complex can mitigate excessive resection by CtIP (12). Although a large proportion of BRCA1 fails to be retained at DSBs upon loss of RAP80, it is possible that relocation of a small amount of BRCA1 to the DSBs via the association with other protein

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**Figure 2** Ubiquitin modification activity of BRCA1 in homologous recombination repair. Reprinted from FEBS Letters 585, Ohta T, Sato K, Wu W. “The BRCA1 ubiquitin ligase and homologous recombination repair”, pg 2836-44, Copyright 2011, with permission from Elsevier.
complexes could occur.

In addition, BRCA1 can be recruited to DSBs through direct binding to phosphorylated CtIP, forming the BRCA1-C complex (6) [Figure 3 (6)]. Importantly, CtIP is capable of generating limited DSB end resection without BRCA1 to promote altered NHEJ, an error-prone repair in G1 phase of the cell cycle [Figure 2 (5)]. Interestingly, the DSB end resection promoted by CtIP is inhibited by 53BP1, and BRCA1 overwhelms 53BP1 to execute the resection (13,14). In addition, 53BP1 blocks HR and sustains the growth arrest induced by BRCA1 depletion. One major function of BRCA1 and BRCA1-C complex is the suppression of 53BP1 and prolongation of the CtIP activity for DSB end resection to generate ssDNA length long enough for HR [Figure 2 (5)].

RAP80 interacts with Lys63-linked chain that is generated by UBC13-RNF8/RNF168 and brings BRCA1 to DSB sites. The overexpression of the deubiquitinating enzyme OUT domain, ubiquitin aldehyde binding 1 (OTUB1) suppresses DNA damage-dependent chromatin ubiquitination through inhibition of UBC13 activity, thus suppressing HR (15) [Figure 2 (5)].

RNF8 displays dual non-catalytic and catalytic activities responsible for chromatin decondensation and histone ubiquitylation, respectively. An RNF8 dimer is recruited to a DSB by binding to phosphorylated MDC1. The recruited RNF8 dimer binds to the chromodomain helicase DNA-binding protein 4 (CHD4) in a phospho-independent manner, resulting in local chromatin decondensation, which permits enhanced ubiquitin conjugation at DSBs and association of RNF168 and BRCA1 (18). In addition, the ubiquitin-selective valosin-containing protein (VCP) is recruited by RNF8 and plays a critical role in mediating the recruitment of downstream repair factors. VCP stimulates 53BP1 recruitment (18).

The function of RNF8 could be vital to chemoresistance. The HECT type E3 ligase (HERC2), a large 4834-amino acid protein, interacts with the FHA domain of RNF8 in a phosphorylation-dependent manner, facilitating assembly of the RNF8/UBC13 complex (19) [Figure 2 (5)].

RNF8 is required for resistance to both irradiation and cytotoxic drugs (16). RNF8 can promote RAD51 assembly at DSB sites in BRCA1/53BP1-depleted cells (17). The model shows that in normal cells, an ubiquitin chain of RAP80, BRCA1, 53BP1 and RAD51 assembles at DSB sites. In BRCA1-depleted cells, RAP80 and 53BP1, but not RAD51, assemble at DSB sites. In RAP80-depleted cells, a small subset of BRCA1 protein, 53BP1 and RAD51 assemble at DSB sites. However, in RNF8/BRCA1-depleted cells or in RNF8/BRCA1/53BP1-depleted cells, RAD51 and RAP80 do not assemble at DSB sites (17) (Figure 4).

The function of RNF8 could be vital to chemoresistance. The HECT type E3 ligase (HERC2), a large 4834-amino acid protein, interacts with the FHA domain of RNF8 in a phosphorylation-dependent manner, facilitating assembly of the RNF8/UBC13 complex (19) [Figure 2 (5)].
Therefore, analysis of HERC2 and RNF8 could be of potential relevance in interpreting the results of the BREC. Interestingly, HERC2 can degrade BRCA1 (19). Also, nucleophosmin (NPM1) is recruited to DSBs in a manner dependent on the RNF8/RNF168-mediated ubiquitin conjugates (20).

PIAS1 and PIAS4 are recruited to DSBs. Depletion of PIAS1 or PIAS4 reduces the proportion of cells displaying BRCA1 accumulation and increase BRCA1 staining intensity at DSBs, increasing sensitivity to irradiation or cisplatin (21,22). Recruitment of RNF168 is impaired only in PIAS4− but not in PIAS1-depleted cells. 53BP1 recruitment does not require BRCA1 or PIAS1 but does require PIAS4 (21,22) [Figure 2 (5)]. This important finding indicates the importance of examining BRCA1 levels together with those of PIAS1, as well as 53BP1 together with PIAS4 levels. High levels of PIAS4, PP2A/C and BRCA1mRNA were all independent markers of shorter PFS in EGFR-mutant non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients treated with erlotinib (23). Along the same lines, low levels of BRCA1, PIAS1 and PIAS4 were independent markers of poor survival in gastric cancer patients receiving docetaxel as second-line treatment (24). BRCA1 was found to be a differential modulator of chemosensitivity, inducing a 10-1000-fold increase in resistance to several DNA-damaging agents, especially those that give rise to DSBs. In contrast, BRCA1 induced a more than 1000-fold increase in sensitivity to paclitaxel, docetaxel and vinorelbine (25,26).

RNF8 could establish a bridge between HR and the NHEJ repair. RNF8 regulates the abundance of the NHEJ repair protein KU80 at sites of DNA damage. RNF8 depletion results in prolonged retention of KU80 at damage sites and impaired NHEJ (27) [Figure 2 (5)]. Therefore, we can assume that RNF8 depletion is important not only in enhancing the cytotoxic effect of chemotherapy, as described above, but also in impairing repair by NHEJ. On the other hand, NHEJ can function well in the presence of normal RNF8, which may contribute to the failure to predict outcome in the customized model of the BREC. Therefore, analysis of the BREC study can be re-interpreted according to expression of RNF8. In tumors with adequate RNF8 function, expression of Ligase IV could be a major determinant of shorter PFS. DNA Ligase IV is responsible for sealing of DSBs during NHEJ, which is one of the primary mechanisms of DSB repair and is active throughout the cell cycle. During NHEJ, KU70/KU80 heterodimer binds to the DNA ends and recruits proteins, such as DNA-PKcs, Artemis, and Pol, to the repair site, resulting in end-processing followed by Ligase IV, XRCC4 and XLF complex-mediated ligation (28). NHEJ plays a major role in resistance to chemotherapy and radiotherapy. DNA PKcs have been associated with radiosensitivity in lung cancer cell lines (29). Metnase is a recently described fusion protein composed of a SET
histone methylase domain and Transposase nuclease domain. Metnase enhances NHEJ. Both the SET histone methylase domain and the Transposase nuclease domain are essential for the enhancement of DSB repair (30). Metnase is overexpressed in acute leukemia (31), causing resistance to chemotherapy. Decreasing metnase enhanced cisplatin sensitivity in a lung cancer A549 xenograft (32).

PPP2R2A is also a critical effector of HR through modulation of ATM phosphorylation. PPP2R2A-depleted cells dramatically increase sensitivity to PARP inhibitors. Interestingly, PPP2R2A mRNA is commonly downregulated in NSCLC (33). We have previously observed that in EGFR-mutant NSCLC patients treated with erlotinib, high levels of PP2A/C mRNA significantly increased the hazard ratio for PFS in a multivariate model (23).

Modulator of apoptosis protein 1 (MOAP-1) is a Bax-interacting protein whose knockdown inhibits apoptosis. MOAP-1 association with Bax promotes Bax mitochondrial translocation and activation. The BH3-only proteins, like BIM or BID, serve as sentinels for the initiation of apoptosis by modulating the functions of multi-domain pro-survival (Bcl-2, Mcl-1, and others) or pro-apoptotic members like Bax, involved in regulating the mitochondrial outer membrane permeability (MOMP). MOAP-1 is highly enriched in mitochondria and is considered to act as an effector to facilitate apoptotic signaling of Bax in mitochondria. The intrinsic or mitochondrial programmed cell death pathway leads to the activation of caspase-9 and then caspase-3 (34). MOAP-1 degradation is inhibited by Trim39, a member of the tripartite motif (TRIM) family. Trim39 overexpression enhances etoposide-induced, Bax-mediated apoptosis through stabilization of MOAP-1 (35). Trim39 mRNA is highly expressed in the testis. The Trim39 gene is located in the MHC class I region of genes within chromosome 6p21-23 (36). There is a mechanistic reason for this finding, since caspase-3 cleaves MDC1, separating the BRCT and FHA domains of MDC1, thus abrogating DNA damage repair (37). These observations prompt us to speculate that BIM mRNA levels could be crucial in inducing apoptosis and that downstream effectors, such as MOAP-1, Trim39 and caspase-3, could play an important role.

**DNA damage checkpoint (DDC) signaling on DNA replication**

In addition to homologous recombination and NHEJ, the genotoxic stress induced by chemotherapy also causes replication stress (38). This DDC pathway is less well known. The DNA repair scaffolding proteins Slx4 and Rtt107 prevent aberrant activation of DDC signaling by lesions generated during DNA replication. On replication stress, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* cells lacking Slx4 and Rtt107 show hyperactivation of the downstream DDC kinase Rad53. The Slx4 or Rtt107 complex counteracts the checkpoint adaptor Rad9 by physically interacting with Dpb11 and phosphorylated histone H2A (39). It is hypothesized that modulation of Rad53 activation occurs by a DAMP (dampens checkpoint adaptor-mediated phosphorylation) (39).

It has recently been described that RNF126 is highly expressed in a subset of breast cancer cell lines and negatively correlates with p21 expression levels. RNF126 targets p21 for ubiquitin-mediated degradation (40).

**DNA damage response (DDR) independent of ATM**

Phosphoproteomic analysis have found that several kinases can be involved in DDR, with extensive crosstalk between them. One of the most important could be c-ABL. c-ABL is a non-receptor tyrosine kinase that is upregulated following irradiation, cisplatin and other drugs. c-ABL interacts with ATM and DNA-PK. c-ABL activated by irradiation mediates phosphorylation of PI3K and mTOR, leading to the inhibition of kinase activity (41).

c-ABL is a transducer in the process of apoptosis in response to DNA damage. It is a member of the Src family of non-receptor tyrosine kinases. Under normal conditions, c-ABL is inactive and sequestered into the cytoplasm by binding to the 14-3-3 protein. Upon DNA damage, c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) is activated, phosphorylating 14-3-3 at the binding site to c-ABL, which releases c-ABL, which is localized in the nucleus and is activated by phosphorylation by ATM. Of great interest is that YAP1 is a direct substrate of c-ABL, and DNA damage stabilizes YAP1 in a c-ABL kinase-dependent manner. Then, the phosphorylated YAP1 binds to p73 and is selectively recruited onto the Bax promoter to induce apoptosis (42). The Hippo signaling pathway is a novel tumor suppressor pathway, and the downstream effect of the Hippo signaling cascade is to phosphorylate and inactivate YAP1 and its paralog TAZ. YAP1 and TAZ overexpression has been observed in NSCLC, conferring poor prognosis (43,44). It is interesting that YAP1 can induce apoptosis (Bax) via c-ABL.

Intriguingly, reinforcing the role of c-ABL, it has recently
been reported that overexpression of AXL causes resistance to cisplatin by inhibiting c-ABL/p73 signal (45). This allows us to reason that, since AXL is an effector of the YAP-TAZ pathway (when HIPPO is off) and can induce abrogation of c-ABL, disrupting the association with p73β (45).

However, the previous work has demonstrated that c-ABL enhances apoptosis via activating YAP1 (42). This apparent contradiction can only be explained by requiring the Wnt pathway to be active since beta-catenin is then linked to YAP1 and may hamper YAP’s transcriptional program, including activation of AXL. On these grounds, also recently, YAP1 and TAZ have been observed to be coupled with beta-catenin, and the degradation of YAP1 and TAZ is avoided when the Wnt pathway is active, which abrogates the beta-catenin destruction complex (AXIN1, GSK3, APC) (46,47). Binding of the Wnts to their receptors inactivates this complex, leading to accumulation and nuclear translocation of beta-catenin (48). Also, paradoxically, in melanomas with BRCA1 V600E, the efficacy of the BRAF inhibitor PLX4720 is increased when beta-catenin is present, and this is achieved by eliminating AXIN1 (49).

**Beta-catenin-independent signaling pathways**

In addition to the FZD receptors, the Wnt receptors ROR1 and ROR2 also contribute to cancer proliferation (48). Wnt5A is the ligand for ROR1 (50). ROR1 repression inhibits lung adenocarcinoma regardless of EGFR status. ROR1 abrogates ASK1, which can lead to abrogation of BIM (51). In the EURTAC study, higher levels of ROR1 mRNA correlated significantly with poor survival.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure:* The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**References**

Management of elderly patients

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Background: Elderly patients are often excluded from clinical trials, yet more than two-thirds of patients diagnosed with lung cancer are over 65 years old. It is therefore important to develop specific tools and trials for this specific patient population.

Methods: This chapter first examines the management specificities of elderly patients. Randomized trials specifically involving elderly patients are then described, and likely future developments are considered.

Results: Older people have several specificities. In addition to traditional criteria such as age and performance status, other important factors include the number of comorbidities and age-related changes such as cognitive deficits and depression. Specific indices taking these factors into account have been published and validated. Single-agent therapy has been widely used to treat metastatic lung cancer in the elderly, following publication of negative results from randomized phase III trials of combination chemotherapy. Recently, however, a trial of doublet therapy gave positive results, in a subgroup of independent older patients. The benefit of patient selection based on a combination of these indices has been demonstrated in open-label and randomized trials. These results must now be confirmed in phase III trials including the use of tyrosine kinase inhibitors combined with chemotherapy.

Conclusions: Indices based on a combination of age-related factors, together with judicious use of biological markers, will further improve the prognosis of elderly lung cancer patients.

Keywords: Elderly; non-small cell lung cancer; geriatric assessment; management

Submitted Jan 18, 2013. Accepted for publication Feb 19, 2013.

Introduction

Oncogeriatric medicine has now come of age. It involves a comprehensive, multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach to the elderly cancer patient (1). Life expectancy is increasing in all western countries, and projections show that, in France in 2020, more than 10% of inhabitants will be over 70 years old (2). However, elderly individuals are very heterogeneous, and their management must take into account both medical and social problems and specific cancer therapy (3). Elderly patients are generally excluded from clinical trials, however, representing only 8-13% of patients (4). Medical evaluation of elderly cancer patients is complicated not only by their age but also by comorbidities (5), which are independent prognostic factors.

In the United States, cancer registries show that patients over 65 years of age represent two-thirds of all lung cancer patients, and median age at diagnosis is around 70 years (6). A French observational study (7) showed that, in 2000, 32% of patients treated for lung cancer were over 70 years old, and that 18.1% were over 80.

Yet clinical trials specifically focusing on elderly patients are rare in the field of thoracic oncology, even though their value is now clear (8). Lung cancer management guidelines now include specific recommendations on the treatment of elderly patients (9,10). The international society of geriatric oncology has also issued similar guidelines (11).
This article examines the specific assessment of elderly cancer patients, the use of certain tools for lung cancer treatment, and likely future developments.

**Specificities of lung cancer management in seniors**

The selection criteria are the same whether the elderly patient is a candidate for surgery or radiotherapy, and whether the lung cancer is locally advanced or metastatic.

Aging is accompanied by a number of physiological changes, including a decreased glomerular filtration rate, impaired hepatic metabolism, decreased serum albumin, and a decreased absorption-distribution ratio (3). Elderly patients often have comorbidities: Yancik’s study (12) showed that 13% of patients aged between 55 and 65 years had more than 5 comorbidities, a figure rising to 24% between 66 and 74 years and 40% after 75 years. As stressed by Extermann (13), performance status, a prognostic factor in lung cancer, does not have the same impact on patient management as comorbidities, or on tolerance of either the disease or its treatment. Validated tools are available for assessing such comorbidities, such as the Charlson index (14) and the cumulative illness rating scale - geriatric (15). However, comorbidities, performance status are independent from age in the disease prognosis (14,15).

It is crucial to assess the impact of aging by using geriatric indexes (16,17). These multidimensional tools explore cognitive functions (18), depression (19), and other geriatric disorders (20) such as falls and incontinence, nutritional status, polypharmacy, mobility and environmental conditions. These disorders are combined in the standardized comprehensive geriatric assessment (CGA) proposed by Balducci (21-23). However, as the CGA was particularly time-consuming, a short questionnaire was developed and validated (24,25). This work allowed us to classify the elderly into three groups, as shown in Figure 1.

Recent studies have shown that the use of these indices influences the choice of initial care by multidisciplinary panels in about 1 in 5 cases (26-28).

Quality of life, which is widely assessed in lung cancer patients regardless of age, is particularly important in the elderly. Whatever the tool used, clinical trials must include QOL assessments to ensure that treatment does not have a major negative impact (29).

**Management of early-stage lung cancer**

Age itself does not contraindicate surgery (30), but elderly patients are less likely to be referred to a surgeon (31). There is a positive correlation between the survival rate and the use of limited surgery or video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (32).

**Management of patients with locally advanced lung cancer**

There are currently no published trials of concurrent chemoradiotherapy in elderly patients, but trials not specifically devoted to seniors suggested that toxicity was greater in older patients (33). An ongoing French trial is studying the feasibility of using geriatric assessment for patient and treatment selection (34).

**Management of patients with metastatic lung cancer**

These are the patients who raise the most difficult...
issues. Standard treatment has consisted essentially of monotherapy, as trials conducted in the 2000s failed to show any improvement in survival with doublets. In 2010, however, Quoix et al. (35) showed the superiority of a weekly carboplatin-paclitaxel combination over gemcitabine or vinorelbine monotherapy, albeit at a cost of more severe hematological toxicity.

**Table 1** summarizes the main phase III trials of single-agent and combination therapy in elderly patients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Drugs</th>
<th>N° pts</th>
<th>Response rate (%)</th>
<th>Median survival</th>
<th>1-year survival (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Elvis 1999</td>
<td>VNR</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BSC</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frasci 2000</td>
<td>Gem + VNR</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VNR</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gridelli 2003</td>
<td>VNR</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gem</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gem + VNR</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kudoh 2006</td>
<td>VNR</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doc</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilenbaum 2005</td>
<td>Carbo + Paclitaxel</td>
<td>561</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paclitaxel</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comella 2004</td>
<td>Gem</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paclitaxel</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gem + Paclitaxel</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9.2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>68</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quoix 2010</td>
<td>VNR or Gem</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>0.0004</td>
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<td>225</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.3</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important, in addition to traditional outcomes, to assess quality of life and particularly the impact of toxicities (29). The choice between monotherapy and doublet therapy is still controversial, although the trial conducted by Quoix et al. (35) clearly marked a turning point. Des Guetz et al. (43) recently published a meta-analysis comparing the efficacy and safety of monotherapy versus doublet therapy in patients with metastatic lung cancer. This meta-analysis included 10 studies and 2,605 patients with an average age of 74 years. Overall survival at one year was not improved by the use of doublets versus monotherapy (HR 0.92, CI: 0.82-1.03, P=0.016). In contrast, the response rate was significantly better with doublet therapy (HR 1.51, 1.22-1.86, P<0.001). Gastrointestinal toxicity was similar in the two populations, but neutropenia, thrombocytopenia and anemia were more problematic with doublet therapy. Among grade III/IV adverse effects, thrombocytopenia and anemia were more frequent with doublet therapy. The authors concluded that there was little additional benefit to the use of doublets versus monotherapy in these patients. Further studies are required to confirm these results (35). In addition, as the authors pointed out, these findings are applicable to independent older patients and cannot be extrapolated to fraild patients, for whom the best treatment strategy remains to be defined.

In September 2012, ESMO (44) published its new guidelines favoring platinum-based doublets for elderly patients with PS =0-1 and for some selected patients with PS =2, while monotherapy should be offered to vulnerable patients and those with multiple comorbidities, owing to the higher risk of adverse effects. The “vulnerable” elderly patient was not defined.

While most of the studies presented in **Table 1** selected patients on the basis of standard criteria (age and performance status) (36-42), other teams attempted to define their geriatric patient population more precisely, based on a combination of age, performance status and a comorbidity index (Charlson score). Two open-label phase
II (45,46) trials involved two distinct populations: patients who were considered to be in good general condition with few comorbidities were treated with docetaxel and gemcitabine, while the most fragile patients were treated with docetaxel alone. Both trials were designed to assess the feasibility of the rating tools. Effectiveness was moderate in the monotherapy group, while patients treated with the combination had results similar to those observed in younger patients.

Two randomized phase II trials (47,48) were secondary published with the same selection and a targeted therapy with erlotinib into the treatment strategy. The docetaxel-gemcitabine combination followed by erlotinib gave the best results. Patients were selected on the basis of age, PS, the Charlson score, the number of comorbidities, and geriatric symptoms (falls, incontinence and dependency for ADL and IADL). The results were modest in the fragile patients treated with monotherapy (gemcitabine followed by erlotinib, or vice versa).

These latter two studies showed that geriatric assessment was feasible in clinical trials. Early use of geriatric criteria led to better-defined groups and favored the selection of patients for combination therapy or monotherapy.

Although quality of life was preserved in some clinical trials, such as that conducted by Quoix et al., the risk-benefit assessment must take adverse effects into account (49).

Gradually, targeted therapies have started to be used in these patients. Numerous studies (50-53) have shown that, in Asian patients with activating EGFR mutations, EGFR-TKI significantly improved progression-free survival after frontline treatment, compared to platinum-based chemotherapy. These results were found with gefitinib in an Asian population [HR: 0.36 (0.25-0.51) (52); HR: 0.16 (0.10-0.26) (54)], and with erlotinib in a Caucasian population, HR: 0.37 (0.25 to 0.54) (53).

Following these results, gefitinib and erlotinib obtained marketing authorization for first-line treatment of advanced NSCLC in patients with activating EGFR mutations, even though these studies included very few elderly patients. The age limit for inclusion was 75 years in the studies by Maemondo et al. (52) and Zhou et al. (54), and median age was 65 years in the study by Rosell et al. (53). These activating mutations were a powerful predictor of intense and rapid responses [ORR 58% (53) to 73.7% (52)] to EGFR TKI, a drug with a favorable safety profile. Most elderly EGFR-mutated patients with symptoms or altered general condition (due mainly due to cancer extension) derive a major benefit. Inoue et al. (55) showed that some patients with activating EGFR mutations who were considered ineligible for chemotherapy because of poor PS (3 or 4) could regain a PS of 0 or 1, and that some even became eligible for second-line chemotherapy on disease progression.

There are no specific trials of angiogenesis inhibitors in elderly lung cancer patients.

In the ECOG 4599 trial (56), comparing carboplatin-paclitaxel to carboplatin-paclitaxel-bevacizumab. Bevacizumab did not improve survival in the subgroup of patients aged 70 years or more (median 74 years), although there was a trend towards a better response rate and longer progression-free survival in the bevacizumab group. Toxicity, and especially hematologic adverse effects, was higher in the bevacizumab arm. In the AVAIL study (57) of cisplatin-gemcitabine with or without bevacizumab, progression-free survival was significantly better with bevacizumab and was similar in the older and younger subgroups, without specific toxicity in the older group; however, the median age of patients over 65 was only 68 years. In the ARIES prospective cohort study (58) evaluating the use of bevacizumab in combination with first-line chemotherapy, PFS was respectively 6.6 and 6.7 months in patients <70 years (n=1,320) and ≥70 years (n=647), and overall survival was respectively 14.2 and 12.2 months, i.e. largely inferior in patients ≥70 years. There was no excess toxicity in these latter patients.

The role of bevacizumab in combination with platinum-based chemotherapy in patients ≥70 years of age needs to be determined in a phase III trial specifically dedicated to these patients.

**Future developments**

While clinical practice guidelines favored the use of monotherapy in elderly lung cancer patients, recent studies supported the use of doublets in selected patients.

A phase III trial is now needed to validate the use of a geriatric index as a criterion for patient selection. Enrolment in the Esogia trial (Figure 2) is now complete and the results should be available in 2013. If the results are positive, the short geriatric assessment could become a standard selection tool for the elderly population. The use of a complete or an abbreviated form might facilitate its application (59).

Elderly lung cancer patients cannot be selected on the basis of clinical criteria alone: biological factors must also be taken into account. Rosell et al. (60) have shown that the prevalence of EGFR mutations is higher (41%) among...
patients over 70, supporting the use of EGFR inhibitors.

A recent report of the BATTLE trial (61) showed similar results in seniors and younger patients in an open trial in which treatment selection was based on a biomarker profile (EGFR, K-RAS, B-RAF, cyclin D1, VEGF receptor, and retinoid x receptor).

The future clearly lies in a combination of all these factors. Given the favorable harm-benefit ratio of targeted therapies (EGFR TKI and ALK inhibitors), these drugs might be used as first-line treatments for patients whose tumors bear the molecular target, including patients whose general condition is degraded by the disease. It is possible that, as new therapeutic targets and more effective and well-tolerated drugs are developed, the scope of geriatric assessment may change. Oncogeriatric tools will need to be adapted to these new treatments, including optimal use of biological markers and selection of eligible subpopulations on the basis of clinical criteria, including a geriatric assessment.

Acknowledgements

A. Vergnenegre has received honoraria from Roche, Amgen, Lilly and has received funding for clinical research from Astra-Zeneca, Chugaï, Lilly, Amgen, Roche and Boehringer-Ingelheim; R. Corre has funding for clinical research from Lilly, Roche, Chugai and Sanofi Aventis; H Léna has received honoraria from Lilly for board activity and from Astra Zeneca for speaker activity; H Le Caer has received honoraria from Roche and Lilly.

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Alternative to surgery in early stage NSCLC—interventional radiologic approaches

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Abstract: Interventional radiologists have a variety of techniques in their armamentarium to treat pulmonary tumors. While most therapies are targeted to metastasis or palliation, percutaneous thermal ablation represents a potential therapy for not only palliation, but to treat inoperable early stage disease. Although radiofrequency ablation (RFA) is the most studied of these ablative techniques, newer technologies of thermal ablation, such as microwave and cryoablation have emerged as additional options. In this article, we will review the three different thermal ablative modalities, including patient selection, technique, outcomes, complications, and imaging follow-up. A brief discussion of state of the art techniques such as irreversible electroporation (IRE) and catheter directed therapies will also be included.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); interventional radiologic; radiofrequency ablation (RFA); microwave ablation; cryoablation; irreversible electroporation (IRE); catheter directed therapies

Submitted Jul 24, 2013. Accepted for publication Sep 24, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.02
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.02

Introduction

The standard of care for operable patients with early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is lobectomy with lymph node evaluation (1,2). However, a significant number of patients with early stage NSCLC are not candidates for lobectomy due to diminished pulmonary function and other comorbidities (3-5). For non-surgical candidates, stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) or image-guided percutaneous thermal ablation are attractive options.

For more than a decade, thermal ablation has been an effective, safe, repeatable, and relatively low-cost technique in the treatment of various solid tumors, including in the liver, kidney, adrenal gland, breast and bone (6). In 2000, Dupuy et al. first reported the use of radiofrequency ablation (RFA) in the treatment of lung tumors (7). Since then, RFA has been the most widely used form of thermal ablation in the lung, including in the treatment of medically inoperable or high-risk early stage NSCLC (8-14). In recent years, microwave ablation and cryoablation have also been applied with increasing frequency (15-19).

Percutaneous thermal ablation offers may advantages including its minimally invasive nature, its ability to preserve normal lung parenchyma with minimal effect on pulmonary function, and the ability to perform these procedure under moderate sedation or even local anesthesia (16,19). In fact, most procedures are performed in a single outpatient session and can even be done at the same time as a biopsy (20). Furthermore, percutaneous thermal ablation allows for repeated treatment sessions, which may improve survival in patients who have failed primary treatment (21). Repeated surgery, on the other hand, is often not feasible secondary to either technical difficulty or limited residual pulmonary reserves. SBRT is similarly limited in regards to retreatment of local tumor recurrence secondary to limitations in maximal tolerated radiation dosages to the lung for fear of radiation pneumonitis. Another limitation of some types of SBRT is the need for multiple gold fiducial markers, which are placed percutaneously or bronchoscopically. Percutaneous placement of fiducial markers is associated with higher complication rates than percutaneous thermal ablation (22).
In this article, we will review the three different thermal ablative modalities, including patient selection, technique, treatment outcomes, complications, and imaging follow-up. A brief discussion on state of the art techniques such as irreversible electroporation (IRE) and catheter directed therapies will also be included.

**Patient selection and pre-procedural evaluation**

In the treatment of early stage NSCLC, image-guided percutaneous thermal ablation is indicated for patients who are not surgical candidates due to cardiopulmonary comorbidities such as severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (7,12,18,19,23). Ablative techniques may be performed in patients who have limited pulmonary function. Pulmonary function is generally not significantly changed after thermal ablation. In fact, even in post-pneumonectomy patients with a single lung, RF ablation may be safely performed with preservation of pulmonary function (24,25).

Evaluation of patients prior to thermal ablation entails taking a history and physical examination with attention to bleeding diathesis and medications such as anticoagulants and antiplatelet agents. Medical comorbidities need to be assessed to determine the safety of administering moderate conscious sedation or general anesthesia. Patients should also be screened for the presence of cardiac devices because the energy from RFA may potentially interfere with pacemakers or defibrillators; these patients should have their treatment sessions coordinated with a cardiac electrophysiologist (26). However, this cardiac risk is obviated by bipolar microwave ablation systems as well as cryoablation devices.

Recent imaging, such as computed tomography and/or fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography, are important for assessing tumor size and proximity to neurovascular structures as well as for selecting the type, number, and trajectory of ablation probes (27). An inherent limitation of non-surgical therapy is the inability to systematically assess for nodal disease. In one study, among patients with clinical stage I NSCLC, 13.8% of patients were upstaged to N1 disease on final surgical pathology and an additional 3.5% upstaged to N2 disease (28). The presence of nodal or extra-thoracic disease is generally a contraindication to thermal ablation unless the goal of the treatment is palliative.

Prior to the procedure, the potential side effects are explained to the patient including possible post-ablation syndrome, in which an inflammatory response may result in fever, malaise, and anorexia which may persist for several days (29). Patients may also experience post-procedural mild to moderate pain which is usually controlled with analgesics.

**Techniques**

**RFA**

RFA uses electromagnetic energy of a specific radiofrequency range, generally 375-500 kHz, to achieve controlled thermal destruction of cells and tissues (30). In RFA, an active electrode is placed into the tumor under image-guidance. A grounding electrode is placed on the opposite side of the chest or thigh. When the two electrodes are connected to an RF generator, a voltage gradient is produced. This voltage gradient results in an oscillating electric field that induces electrons to collide with the molecules closest to the applicator, which produces frictional heat (31). Tissue heating to a temperature greater than 60 degrees Celsius leads to immediate cell death secondary to coagulation necrosis (32).

In RFA of the lung, there are several obstacles that limit effective thermal ablation of tumor. First, pulmonary vessels and airways act as a “heat sink” to dissipate energy away from the adjacent normal lung parenchyma; this “heat sink” effect limits the size of the ablation margin surrounding the tumor (33,34). Second, there is inherent high-impedance in inflated lung due to its low water content, which limits the therapeutic ablative volume of ablation (35). Third, a fundamental limitation of RFA is its inability to heat charred or desiccated tissue (34,36).

Two popular RF devices for the treatment of pulmonary tumors are Starburst Radiofrequency Ablation System (Angiodynamics, Latham, NY) and Cool-tip (Covidien, Boulder, CO). The Starburst device uses a deployable array RF electrode via a 14- to 17-gauge needle. The Cool-tip device uses a cluster electrode that is perfused with cold saline or water pumped internally; this mechanism is designed to distribute tissue heating to reduce charring (37).

**Microwave ablation**

Microwave ablation uses electromagnetic energy at a much higher frequency range [generally 900-2,450 MHz (38)] compared to RFA and creates a larger zone of coagulation necrosis (18,39). Unlike RFA, microwave energy penetration does not occur by means of an electric current.
and therefore is thought not limited by the lower electrical conductivity of inflated lung, charred tissue, or desiccated tissue (18,38,40). Furthermore, no grounding pads are used in the microwave ablation. Microwave ablation utilizes rapidly alternating electric fields which cause polar water molecules to spin rapidly. These spinning water molecules then transfer their kinetic energy to the surrounding tissues resulting in hyperthermia (41).

Compared to RFA, microwave ablation can achieve larger ablative zones more quickly with less heat sink effect. In microwave ablation, a single probe may be used for tumors less than 3 cm. Two to three probes are generally used for tumors greater than 3 cm to produce a larger area of thermocoagulation. A thermocouple may be placed separately to measure the intratumoral temperature. Six microwave ablation devices are available for use. The 2,450-MHz generators are Amica (Hospital Service, Rome, Italy), Acculis MTA (Microsulis, Hamsphire, UK), Certus 140 (Neuwave, Madison, WI). The 915-MHz generators are Aveure (Medwaves, San Diego, CA), Evident (Covidien, Mansfield, MA), MicrothermX (BSD Medical, Salt Lake City, UT). The microwave antennae are straight applicators with active tips measuring 0.6 to 4.0 cm in length. The proximal portion of the antennae is cooled with room-temperature fluid or carbon dioxide to minimize damage of skin and tissues (30).

**Cryoablation**

Percutaneous cryoablation uses pressurized argon gas to achieve temperatures as low as −140 degrees Celsius based on the Joule-Thomson principle. At temperatures less than −40 degrees Celsius, cryogenic tissue destruction occurs due to protein denaturation, cell rupture from osmotic water shifts across cell membranes, as well as microvascular thrombosis-induced ischemia (42).

A freeze-thaw-freeze cycle is used for each cryoprobe to achieve thermal coagulation while minimizing air leak and bleeding (43). The thaw portion of the cycle is performed using helium and the cryoprobe is allowed to reach approximately 20 degrees Celsius. An example of a cryoablation protocol would consist of a 10-minute freeze of the tumor, followed by an 8-minute thaw, and then a 10-minute freeze, followed by an active or passive thaw.

Two cryoablation devices are available: Cryocare (Endocare, Irvine, CA) and Presice (Galil Medical, Arden Mills, MN). A cryoprobe measures 1.5 to 2.4 mm in diameter. One to 15 cryoprobes may be placed at a time with each probe achieving thermocoagulation after a single freeze-thaw-freeze cycle.

A comparison of the aforementioned thermal ablation modalities is summarized in Table 1.

**Irreversible electroporation**

IRE is the newest of the percutaneous ablation techniques with only a few reports of IRE use in human subjects. IRE uses very short high-voltage electrical pulses to create permanent nanopores in tumor cell membranes to induce apoptosis and cell death (44-46). IRE is largely non-thermal
and spares the surrounding extracellular matrix. Thus, the theoretical advantage of IRE is that tumor ablation occurs while sparing non-target injury to adjacent airways, blood vessels, and nerves (47). Therefore, IRE may potentially be used to treat pulmonary tumors near the hilum, mediastinum, and chest wall (48).

Preprocedural planning for IRE is essential for two reasons. Patients require general anesthesia and complete neuromuscular blockade to prevent generalized muscle contractions. Second, ECG-gated delivery of IRE is required in the chest to prevent cardiac arrhythmias. There is currently one IRE device approved by the FDA—Nanoknife (Angio Dynamics, Latham, NY). Nanoknife has already been used to ablate tumors in the lung, liver, kidney, prostate, and pancreas. Nanoknife electrodes are monopolar with a retractable sheath which allows for adjustable active length from 1 to 4 cm. Up to six electrodes may be used simultaneously for tumor ablation.

### Outcomes in early stage disease

The literature on pulmonary thermal ablation in early stage disease is heterogeneous due to the diversity of study groups (mixture of primary and secondary lung tumors) and variations in follow-up lengths as well as reporting standards. Furthermore, the vast majority of the studies were performed retrospectively at single institutions (Table 2).

### Ablation

Among the thermal ablation techniques, RFA has been the most widely used in the treatment of early stage NSCLC. The retrospective study by Simon et al. (14) is the largest to date and included 75 patients with stage I NSCLC who underwent percutaneous CT-guided RF ablation. There were 56 patients with stage IA disease and 19 patients with stage IB disease. The mean tumor diameter was 3.0 cm. The overall 1-, 2-, 3-, 4-, and 5-year survival rates, respectively, for stage I NSCLC were 78%, 57%, 36%, 27%, and 27%. The median survival was 29 months. Local tumor progression-free rates were as follows: 1 year, 83%; 2 years, 64%; 3 years, 57%; 4 years, 47%; and 5 years, 47% for tumors 3 cm or smaller. Tumor size was a statistically significant predictor of local tumor progression.

### Table 2 Summary of selected studies that evaluated thermal ablation treatment of inoperable patients with stage I NSCLC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study type</th>
<th>Tumor stage</th>
<th>Mean tumor size (cm)</th>
<th>Overall survival (%)</th>
<th>Cancer-specific survival (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1-yr 2-yr 3-yr 5-yr</td>
<td>1-yr 2-yr 3-yr 5-yr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFA</td>
<td>[Simon et al., 2007] (14) Retrospective</td>
<td>56 stage IA; 19 stage IB</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>78 57 36 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Pennathur et al., 2007] (13) Retrospective</td>
<td>11 stage IA; 8 stage IB</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>95 68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Lencioni et al., 2008] (12) Prospective, intention-to-treat</td>
<td>10 stage IA; 3 stage IB</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>75 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Lanuti et al., 2009] (11) Retrospective</td>
<td>29 stage IA; 5 stage IB</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>85 78 47 82 57 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Hiraki et al., 2011] (10) Retrospective</td>
<td>38 stage IA; 12 stage IB</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>94 86 74 100 93 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Ambrogi et al., 2011] (8) Prospective, intention-to-treat</td>
<td>44 stage IA; 15 stage IB</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>89 59 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microwave ablation</td>
<td>[Liu and Steinke, 2013] (49) Retrospective</td>
<td>15 stage I</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>N/A N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cryoablation</td>
<td>[Yamauchi et al., 2012] (19) Retrospective</td>
<td>34 stage IA (29 T1aN0, 5 T1bN0)</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>88 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RFA, Cryoablation</td>
<td>[Zemlyak et al., 2010] (50) Retrospective</td>
<td>RFA 12 stage I</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>88 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cryo 27 stage I</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>77 90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in this study: median time to progression was 12 months for tumors >3 cm and 45 months for tumors <3 cm (14). It is worthwhile noting that the Charlson comorbidity index predicted patient outcome in cases of inoperable NSCLC (i.e., much better survival in patients with less comorbidities) (51).

The RAPTURE study by Lencioni et al. (12) was the first prospective, intention-to-treat clinical trial for RFA that reported the outcome of 106 patients with 183 lung tumors, among which only 13 patients had stage I NSCLC (stage IA, n=10; stage IB, n=3). The mean tumor size was 2.6 cm for all patients with NSCLC in this study. The patients with stage I disease had a 2-year overall survival of 75% and a 2-year cancer-specific survival of 92%.

The second prospective, intention-to-treat clinical trial by Ambriogi et al. (8) for RFA was of 57 inoperable patients with stage I NSCLC (stage IA tumor, n=44; stage IB tumor, n=15). The mean tumor size was 2.6 cm. Cancer-specific actuarial survivals were 89%, 59%, and 40% at 1, 3, and 5 years, respectively. The median overall survival was 33.4 months and the cancer-specific survival was 41.4 months.

In a retrospective study by Hiraki et al. (10) of 50 nonsurgical patients with stage I NSCLC (stage IA, n=38; stage IB, n=12) who were treated with RFA, the mean tumor size was 2.1 cm. After 37 months of follow-up, the local progression rate was 31%. The overall survival was 94%, 86%, and 74% at 1, 2, and 3 years, respectively. The cancer-specific survival was 100%, 93%, and 80% at 1, 2, and 3 years, respectively.

In a retrospective study by Lanuti et al. (11) of 31 patients with medically inoperable stage I NSCLC had 34 tumors treated with RFA (stage IA, n=29; stage IB, n=5), the mean size of the treated tumors was 2.0 cm. The overall survivals at 1, 2 and 3 years were 85%, 78% and 47%, respectively. Disease-free survivals at 1, 2 and 3 years were 82%, 57% and 39%, respectively. Local progression-free survivals at 1, 2, and 3 years were 71%, 58%, and 58%. The local failure rate was 32% after a median follow-up of 17 months.

Pennathur et al. (13) reported the outcome of 19 high-risk patients with stage I NSCLC (stage IA, n=11; stage IB, n=8) who underwent RFA. The mean tumor size was 2.6 cm. Overall survivals were 95% and 68% at 1 and 2 years, respectively.

Microwave ablation

The first study of microwave ablation in the lung was performed by Feng et al. (15) but no separate subset analysis of early stage NSCLC was performed. The largest study of microwave ablation was done by Wolf et al. (18) which retrospectively examined the recurrence and survival outcome of 50 patients, among which 27 patients had NSCLC and the remainder had small cell lung cancer or metastatic disease. While, the NSCLC stage was not specified, the overall mean tumor size was 3.5 cm. No subset analysis was done for patients with NSCLC versus other malignancies. These limitations limit this study’s ability to assess the efficacy of microwave ablation in the early stage subgroup (18). While several other studies exist such as those by Belfiore et al. (52) and Lu et al. (53), these studies are similarly limited by either a lack of subgroup analysis or no reports of outcome data.

The only study focused on early stage NSCLC is a preliminary retrospective review by Liu et al. (49) of 15 patients with medically inoperable stage I NSCLC who were treated with CT-guided percutaneous microwave ablation. The mean tumor size was 2.5 cm (range, 0.8-4.0 cm). Local progression was 31% after 1-year follow-up; however, 80% of the local progression was observed in pleural-based tumors that were larger than 3.0 cm. No survival data was reported for this study.

Cryoablation

A study by Yamauchi et al. (19) retrospectively reviewed 20 patients with medically inoperable stage IA NSCLC who had 34 tumors treated with CT-guided cryoblation under local anesthesia. Twenty-nine tumors were T1aN0 and 5 tumors were T1bN0. The mean tumor size was 1.4 cm (range, 0.5-3.0 cm) and 12 tumors were subsolid on CT imaging. The 2- and 3-year overall survivals were 88% and 88%, respectively. One patient died of lung cancer progression at 68 months. Two patients died of acute exacerbations of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis which were not considered to be directly related to the cryoablation, at 12 and 18 months, respectively. After a median follow-up of 23 months, the local control was 97%. Only one patient, who had a 1.6 cm squamous cell carcinoma, had local tumor progression at 8 months post-treatment; furthermore, in this patient, the local recurrence was re-treated with cryoablation and there was no evidence of further local recurrence. There was no significant change in the pulmonary function tests before and after cryoablation. The excellent survival data and local control for this study may partially be attributed to the small tumor size and the
significant number of subsolid lesions.

Wang et al. (17) also performed a retrospective study reviewing the outcome for cryoablation of 234 lung tumors but no specific data was reported for patients with early stage NSCLC.

The retrospective study by Zemlyak et al. (50) included 64 patients, among whom 25 underwent sublobar resection, 12 RFA, and 27 cryoablation. The mean tumor size was not reported in this study. However, the RFA group included patients with “larger lesions (≥3 cm)” while the cryoablation group was performed in patients with “lesions <3 cm”. The 3-year overall survival was 87.1%, 87.5%, and 77% for sublobar resection, RFA, and cryoablation, respectively. The 3-year cancer-specific survival was 90.6%, 87.5%, and 90.2%. This study was limited by the small number of patients and selection bias.

**Irreversible electroporation**

There is currently very limited data of the use of IRE in human lung. The majority of the outcome data is derived from animal models (47,48). The theoretical advantage of IRE is preservation of underlying lung architecture and surrounding neurovascular structures, which may permit the use of IRE in ablating tumors in the mediastinum and lung apex. Another theoretical advantage is overcoming “heat sink” effect. Thomson et al. (54) performed IRE in 38 patients, among whom 3 patients had advanced lung cancer. All three patients had inadequate treatment response.

**Complications**

Image-guided percutaneous thermal ablation of lung cancer is generally safe and well-tolerated by most patients even with those with limited cardiopulmonary reserve. Most complications after percutaneous ablation are minor and treated conservatively or with minimal intervention (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complication</th>
<th>Incidence (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pneumothorax</td>
<td>11-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumothorax requiring chest tube</td>
<td>6-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleural effusion</td>
<td>6-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchopleural fistula</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoptysis</td>
<td>3-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulmonary hemorrhage</td>
<td>6-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulmonary artery pseudoaneurysm</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive pneumonitis</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needle tract tumor seeding</td>
<td>0.3-0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common complication after percutaneous lung ablation is pneumothorax. Pneumothorax occurs in 11% to 52% of cases, although only 6% to 29% of patients require chest tube placement (21,56-58). Rarely, there may be a bronchopleural fistula, which occurs in 0.6% of patients and is thought to be related to aggressive treatment (59). Pleural effusion is also a relatively common complication reported in 6% to 19% of cases and may be the result of non-target thermal injury to the pleura (21,57,60).

Hemoptysis and pulmonary hemorrhage are not uncommon after thermal ablation with reported incidences being 3-9% (57,61,62) and 6-18% (63,64), respectively, after RFA. Pulmonary hemorrhage and hemoptysis is more common after cryoablation than after RF or microwave ablation (16,43). Cryoablation has no cautery effect that is inherent in RFA or microwave ablation both of which use extreme heat; furthermore, cryoablation results in damage to microcirculation during the thaw cycle. Pulmonary hemorrhage is usually self-limiting and treated conservatively, although there are case reports of uncontrollable hemorrhage leading to death (23,63-65). Pulmonary artery pseudoaneurysm is a rare but life-threatening complication that occurred in 0.2% in a series of RF ablations (66). Two reports of a pulmonary artery pseudoaneurysm after RFA were both successfully treated using transcatheter coil embolization (67,68).

Non-target thermal damage to peripheral nerves may occur depending on the location of the tumor. If the tumor is in the lung apex, thermal ablation may cause injury to the caudal brachial plexus (69). Phrenic nerve injury is another potential complication if ablation is performed in close proximity (<1 cm) of the phrenic nerve (70). A thorough knowledge of the course of these nerves may reduce the rate of these non-target thermal injuries.

Pneumonitis after RFA is a rare but potentially lethal complication. In one series of RFA in the lung, there were two deaths attributed to interstitial pneumonia; both patients received radiotherapy prior to thermal ablation (60). In another series of patients, bronchiolitis obliterans
organizing pneumonia-like reactive pneumonitis occurred after RF ablation in 0.4% of patients (71).

A very rare but potentially life-threatening complication following any percutaneous needle-based procedure, including lung biopsy and thermal ablation, is systemic air embolism. There have been only two reported cases of systemic air embolism after RFA in the lung, both of which were nonfatal (72,73). The treatment for systemic air embolism is hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

Another rare complication is tumor seeding in the needle tract with reported incidence of 0.3% to 0.7% (74,75).

Follow-up imaging

Imaging is a critical component of thermal ablation because, unlike surgery, there is no tissue sample available for histopathologic evaluation of the ablative margin. Computed tomography (CT) and/or fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography (FDG-PET) are used to ensure complete ablation and to evaluate for treatment response. There is no consensus on which imaging modality or imaging time interval that most accurately detects treatment success or failure or recurrent disease. However, follow-up imaging protocols after thermal ablation generally entail obtaining CT and/or FDG-PET one month post-ablation and then every three months thereafter (76,77).

After RFA, immediate post-procedural CT images demonstrate central consolidation (coagulation necrosis) surrounded by concentric rings of groundglass opacity (edema, inflammation, hemorrhage) (78,79). As the peripheral groundglass opacity overestimates the area of true coagulation necrosis by 4.1 mm (78), it is recommended that the ablation extend at least 5 mm (18,78,80) beyond the tumor. In one study (81), an ablation area at least four times larger than the pre-ablation tumor was predictive of complete ablation.

Within the first week of RFA, contrast-enhanced CT imaging may show a peripheral thin (<5 mm) rim of enhancement, which reflects benign reactive hyperemia (76). FDG-PET is not useful in the immediate post-ablation setting as there is non-specificity in its findings given the background of expected inflammatory reaction (82).

CT imaging 1-month post-RF ablation demonstrates a consolidated lesion that is larger than the pre-ablation tumor. Cavitation can develop in up to 25% of cases; cavitation is thought to occur as the sequelae of physiologic drainage of necrotic tissue (79,81,83). Two to six months post-RFA, CT imaging shows no change or increased size of the ablation cavity in comparison to the pre-ablation tumor. Because of this expected treatment response, Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (RECIST) criteria is not ideal for evaluating changes after thermal ablation.

Beyond 6 months post-RFA, the ablation zone is expected to be smaller in size than the index tumor (84). Tumor recurrence or progression should be suspected if there is increased size of the ablation zone and/or central or nodular enhancement after 6 months (14,80). FDG uptake peaks at approximately 2 weeks post-RF ablation. Increased or new metabolic uptake on FDG-PET imaging at 2 months is suspicious for disease recurrence (85).

After microwave ablation, immediate post-procedural CT shows groundglass/consolidative opacity centrally (coagulation necrosis) with surrounding groundglass opacities (edema, hemorrhage, inflammation) penetrated by well-demarcated probe tracts (Figure 1) (18). The ablation zone increases in size for up to 6 months after treatment due to thermal changes in the adjacent lung parenchyma. After 6 months, the ablation zone should decrease in size and be replaced by consolidation. Cavitation within the ablation zone has been associated with decreased cancer-specific mortality (18), possibly due to cavitary changes occurring more often when there is more complete tumor destruction with thermocoagulation of local tissue blood supply (30). Similar to RFA, central or nodular enhancement on CT as well as increased or new metabolic uptake on FDG-PET imaging is suspicious for treatment failure.

Following the thaw cycle, the cryoablation zone is seen as a low attenuation central area (coagulation necrosis) surrounded by a concentric ring of groundglass opacity (hemorrhage and edema) (43,86). The “ice ball” seen on peri-procedural images overestimates the area of coagulation necrosis by 4 to 5 mm (87-89). After the first month post-ablation, the peripheral groundglass opacity resolves as the central zone of coagulation necrosis becomes well-margined and consolidative. Cavitation may occur within this central area of necrosis (17). On immediate post-procedural contrast-enhanced CT, there may sometimes be peripheral or internal enhancement in the cryoablation zone that should resolve within 1 to 2 months (86). PET is not performed immediately post-cryoablation due to its nonspecificity in the background of reactive inflammation (Figure 2).

At 1 month post-cryoablation, the ablation zone should be decreasing in size. Growth in the ablation zone during the first two months post-ablation is suspicious for tumor recurrence or progression (86). In contrast to RFA or microwave ablative zones, the cryoablation zone generally
involutes earlier and faster which would theoretically allow for earlier detection of treatment failure (17). FDG-PET imaging demonstrating new or increasing uptake after 2 months post-ablation is suggestive of tumor recurrence, whereas the absence of FDG uptake coupled with lesion resolution indicates adequate treatment response (Figure 3).

**Palliative therapies**

Image-guided thermal ablation is also useful in the palliative treatment of lung cancer through local control of advanced or metastatic disease. For example, painful bone metastases may be effectively palliated with RFA or cryoablation (90-93). Currently, there is a multicenter, prospective, single arm study (ECLIPSE trial) that is evaluating the safety and efficacy of cryoablation to patients with pulmonary metastatic disease.

Other palliative interventional radiologic procedures include endovascular stenting for superior vena cava syndrome and bronchial artery embolization for hemoptysis associated with lung cancer (94). Trans-arterial embolization may also be performed for preoperative purposes to decrease blood loss (95,96).

**Emerging therapies**

Less established in treatment of lung tumors but widely
used in treatment of tumors in solid organs such as the liver, transvascular therapy is being reexamined as a potential primary or adjuvant therapy. Several approaches are being investigated, including transpulmonary chemoembolization and image-guided percutaneous- or intra-arterial delivery of therapeutic nanoparticles.

In transpulmonary chemoembolization, the tumor-feeding pulmonary arteries are selectively catheterized after which a mixture of cytotoxic and embolic agents are administered locally. Vogl et al. (96-99) used a femoral vein puncture to access the tumor-supplying pulmonary artery and then infused a combination of lipiodol, mitomycin C, and microspheres to treat metastatic and primary lung tumors. In a study of 17 patients with unresectable primary lung tumors (97), transpulmonary chemoembolization was performed for symptomatic palliation. No major complications occurred with 35% of patients experiencing local progression after a mean follow-up of 11.3 months.

In the future, image-guided minimally invasive procedures will play a role in the delivery of a variety of nanotherapeutics via percutaneous or intravascular methods (100-102). The direct intra-tumoral delivery of therapeutic nanoparticles minimizes systemic toxicity while maximizing local efficacy of tumor destruction. For example, in a new investigational method called “magnetic” chemotherapy, chemotherapeutics are tagged with magnetic nanoparticles. After infusion of the magnetic nanotherapeutics into the vascular supply of the tumor, an external rare earth magnet is placed over the tumor. The resultant magnetic attraction directs the therapeutic particles out of the vessel and into the tumor.

**Conclusions**

Interventional radiologists play a key role in the image-guided thermal ablation of lung malignancies. RFA has been the most widely used form of thermal ablation in the lung. RFA for inoperable early stage NSCLC compares favorably to SBRT in regards to overall patient survival (8,10-14,19,20,49,50,103-108). However, RFA has worse
local control rates than SBRT although this does not appear to affect overall survival as many patients can easily undergo retreatment (20,109). As a more powerful form of thermal ablation, microwave ablation may potentially provide superior local control due to its larger zone of active heating and its ability to achieve higher intratumoral temperatures. There is still limited safety and efficacy data on the use of microwave ablation in early stage NSCLC although its use is growing. The preliminary data on cryoblolation is promising, with one study of medically inoperable early stage NSCLC demonstrating a 3-year overall survival of 88% and a local control rate of 97% (19).

In a recent consensus statement by the American College of Chest Physicians and Society of Thoracic Surgeons regarding inoperable early stage NSCLC, image-guided thermal ablation was considered a treatment option only if the patient was not a candidate for SBRT (110). This statement is not surprising given that interventional radiology was not involved in the consensus and there is a paucity of multi-institutional clinical trials for thermal ablation. However, there is currently a multicenter pilot trial of inoperable patients with stage IA NSCLC treated with RFA, which is funded by the National Cancer Institute and performed through the American College of Surgeons Oncology Group (ACOSOG Z4033) (111). Although the results are not yet published, this RFA cohort was recently compared to sublobar resection and SBRT cohorts from other completed multi-center trials, and the survival was similar (despite the RFA cohort being older and sicker) (20).

Further studies need to be done to determine which patients would benefit most from image-guided thermal ablation. Future research dictating the tumor location, size, and histology that is most suitable for ablation will help patients to achieve the best outcome.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Radiol 2012;23:780-5.


Supportive and palliative care for lung cancer patients

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Abstract: Lung cancer patients face poor survival and experience co-occurring chronic physical and psychological symptoms. These symptoms can result in significant burden, impaired physical and social function and poor quality of life. This paper provides a review of evidence based interventions that support best practice supportive and palliative care for patients with lung cancer. Specifically, interventions to manage dyspnoea, one of the most common symptoms experienced by this group, are discussed to illustrate the emerging evidence base in the field. The evidence base for the pharmacological management of dyspnoea report systemic opioids have the best available evidence to support their use. In particular, the evidence strongly supports systemic morphine preferably initiated and continued as a once daily sustained release preparation. Evidence supporting the use of a range of other adjunctive non-pharmacological interventions in managing the symptom is also emerging. Interventions to improve breathing efficiency that have been reported to be effective include pursed lip breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, positioning and pacing techniques. Psychosocial interventions seeking to reduce anxiety and distress can also improve the management of breathlessness although further studies are needed. In addition, evidence reviews have concluded that case management approaches and nurse led follow-up programs are effective in reducing breathlessness and psychological distress, providing a useful model for supporting implementation of evidence based symptom management strategies. Optimal outcomes from supportive and palliative care interventions thus require a multi-level approach, involving interventions at the patient, health professional and health service level.

Keywords: Lung cancer; palliative care; dyspnoea

Submitted Oct 07, 2013. Accepted for publication Oct 12, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.10.05
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.10.05

Introduction

Lung cancer patients experience multiple symptoms that often co-occur, the most common being dyspnoea, cough, fatigue, pain, anorexia, anxiety and depression. As survival rates for lung cancer are poor (five-year relative survival rates in Australia of 14.1%) (1), these effects often persist over time and intensify as the disease progresses. Studies report that more than 80% of lung cancer patients have multiple symptoms, often experiencing more symptoms and psychological distress than patients with other cancer types (2). It has been estimated that 43% of patients with lung cancer report psychological distress, compared to an overall prevalence rate of 35% across 14 cancer sites (3). Such symptoms can result in significant burden, impaired physical and social function and poor quality of life. Newly diagnosed lung cancer patients also report feeling shocked and frightened and display a high need for information (4). Given the burdensome nature of this disease, it is not surprising that studies have confirmed that patients with lung cancer report a higher burden of psychological and daily living unmet needs compared with patients who have other types of cancer (5-8).
This paper provides a review of evidence based interventions that support best practice supportive and palliative care for patients with lung cancer. Specifically, pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions to manage dyspnoea, one of the most common symptoms experienced by this group, will be discussed to illustrate the emerging evidence base in the field. The evidence to support interventions that focus specifically on addressing psychological distress and unmet needs is also discussed. In addition, given the complex nature of the health and support needs experienced by patients with lung cancer, we consider recent evidence regarding health service level interventions designed to achieve optimal outcomes this population.

Interventions to manage dyspnoea in patients with lung cancer

Pharmacological management of dyspnoea in lung cancer

The evidence base for the pharmacological management of chronic refractory breathlessness is continuing to improve. In this context, chronic is defined as “daily for more than three of the last six months”, and refractory refers to cases where all underlying causes contributing to breathlessness have been assessed as to whether they can be reversed and, if so, whether they should be reversed. Breathlessness in this case is defined as modified Medical Research Council (mMRC) scale 3 or 4--breathless at rest or on minimal exertion such as the basic activities of daily living (dressing, bathing or preparing food). It is likely, however, that people with mMRC scale 2 will also benefit from breathlessness interventions (9,10). The aim of a therapeutic intervention for this population is to reduce symptomatic breathlessness, as breathlessness will rarely be controlled at all times once chronic irreversible underlying causes of the symptom are established. Although this may translate for some people into improved or better maintained levels of function, ultimately the focus is on reducing the subjective experience that we call ‘breathlessness’. It is important, therefore, that both the severity (intensity) of breathlessness and an affective component (the unpleasantness of breathlessness) should be assessed in this context.

Systemic opioids have the best available evidence to support their use in the clinical setting of people with chronic refractory breathlessness. A meta-analysis and an adequately powered, double blind, randomised controlled crossover trial both report the same order of magnitude of benefit (9,11). The major adverse effect in both of these studies was constipation, which should be treated expectantly, with no

recorded episodes of respiratory depression. In prospectively done clinical trials, with carefully titrated opioids, patients have not been admitted to hospital with obtundation, respiratory depression nor confusion. Systemic opioids, where morphine has been the most frequently studied medication, are likely to offer the most benefit.

More recent work has followed patients who gained symptomatic benefit from opioids for chronic refractory breathlessness for up to 660 days to explore the long term efficacy of once daily sustained release morphine (12). In this case, between 10-30 mg of oral morphine per 24 hours was used and delivered a sustained benefit for two thirds of patients who were started on the medication. The majority of this sample derived benefit from just 10 mg per 24 hours.

Other opioids are starting to be studied, but the evidence base strongly supports systemic morphine preferably initiated and continued as a once daily sustained release preparation. In a sub study exploring response to the titration of sustained release morphine for chronic refractory breathlessness, when benefit was derived, there was not only a reduction in breathlessness in the first 24 hours, but continued improvement over the ensuing week (13). This suggests that sustained release morphine should be titrated to effect and, when benefit is gained, further titration delayed for at least one week.

However, the same systematic review did not demonstrate benefit from nebulised opioids, despite the wide-spread presence of opioids receptors in the bronchial tree. This potentially was a type II error and may relate to the way in which opioids were nebulised (14). However, more recent work suggests that opioids delivered at the alveolar level potentially was a type II error and may relate to the way in which opioids were nebulised. The majority of this sample derived benefit from just 10 mg of oral morphine per 24 hours

where morphine has been the most frequently studied medication, are likely to offer the most benefit.

A recently reported randomised control trial demonstrated sustained reduction in breathlessness, improved sleep and decreased cough in a relatively small cohort of people who have long term respiratory damage from previous mustard gas exposure (15).

A number of other medications are being studied. A recent systematic review suggested that there may be benefits from nebulised frusemide unrelated to a diuretic effect (16). The first large study of this has recently been reported and suggests that there may be sustained symptomatic benefit by using nebulised frusemide at a dose of 40 mg/4 mls compared to 4 mls of normal saline. This therapy appeared to be well tolerated (17). Of note, the widespread use of benzodiazepines is not supported with current evidence (18). Although one randomised trial suggested symptomatic benefit was generated more quickly with benzodiazepines in
the setting of acute breathlessness where a diagnostic workup was required, the trade-off was increased somnolence.

Non-pharmacological management of dyspnoea in lung cancer

In addition to the growing evidence base supporting the role of various pharmacological agents in the management of breathlessness, evidence to support the use of a range of other adjunctive non-pharmacological interventions in managing the symptom is also emerging. Recently a landmark study has reported on the use of non-invasive ventilation in people with chronic refractory breathlessness and advanced disease without overt respiratory failure. Participants were randomised to oxygen or non-invasive ventilation set to support mode. Non-invasive ventilation was well tolerated in people with advanced disease many of whom derived symptomatic benefit at rates greater than those people treated only with oxygen (19). It is a therapy which will require careful ongoing evaluation in order to understand the net effect that such interventions will deliver to patients with chronic refractory breathlessness in the last days or weeks of life.

A number of recent systematic reviews have also reported benefits from use of behavioural, psychosocial and environmental modification interventions in the management of dyspnoea (20-22).

Most studies in this field involve testing of multicomponent interventions, where a range of strategies are combined into a bundled intervention, making it difficult to ascertain specific components that have most benefit. It is also difficult to conclude which groups of patients are most likely to benefit from these complex interventions, as there is significant variation in study samples (21). At least one review has concluded that patients who enroll and complete these types of interventions appear to be in the earlier stages of their disease or have better functional abilities than those who do not complete the study (21). The application of these approaches, and what modifications are required for patients as the disease progresses, has not been well established.

Notwithstanding these limitations, behavioural and psychosocial interventions for patients with lung cancer that have some supporting evidence can be categorised according to two main mechanisms of action (20). These categories include interventions to improve breathing efficiency and interventions targeting the affective component of breathlessness by seeking to reduce anxiety and distress. Interventions to improve breathing efficiency include a range of breathing retraining techniques, with systematic reviews concluding there is good evidence to support the effectiveness of these techniques, including pursed lip breathing, diaphragmatic breathing, ‘blow-as-you-go’, positioning and pacing techniques (20).

Another review has concluded that evidence supporting the benefits of exercise programs in controlling breathlessness is not conclusive (23). This review of 16 studies on 13 unique patient groups totaling 675 patients with NSCLC concluded that exercise interventions for patients with NSCLC is safe before and after cancer treatment. While not all studies in this review included breathlessness as an outcome, the authors did conclude there were some positive benefits on exercise capacity, symptoms and some domains of health-related quality of life. The majority of the studies reviewed were, however, small case series and focused mostly on patients immediately pre- and post-surgery. The authors concluded, therefore, that further research is required to establish the effect of exercise, especially in the advanced stage of disease, as well as to determine the optimum type and dose of exercise training.

With regard to interventions aiming to reduce distress associated with breathlessness, interventions including relaxation techniques, coping skills training, and general support for patients and their carers have been reported to achieve positive outcomes (20-22). Relaxation techniques in particular are reported to be beneficial, although the acceptability and sustainability of this approach for all patients has not been determined. As with other non-pharmacological interventions, the available Cochrane Reviews recommend further testing to determine the nature and scope of psychosocial interventions seeking to improve the management of breathlessness (20,22). Application of such techniques also requires careful assessment of a patient’s preferences and capacity to implement them.

The use of a hand held fan has been considered in a limited number of studies. This intervention is thought to produce a flow of air which may alter ventilation when directed to the face, although the exact mechanism of this effect is unclear (24). One small randomised controlled trial (RCT) concluded that the effectiveness of the fan could not be proved, although a small group seemed to benefit, not necessarily related to a relief in breathlessness (24). Work is ongoing to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

Interventions to manage psychological distress and unmet needs in lung cancer patients

Despite high levels of distress and perceived unmet need experienced by this group, evidence to inform effective psycho-educational and supportive care interventions for
lung cancer patients is scarce (25). The probable reason is the considerable challenges faced in conducting trials of complex interventions with this population. Notably, high refusal rates and poor retention have been acknowledged as a significant difficulty in recruiting patients with lung cancer to these trials (26).

Given the high morbidity of people with lung cancer, a focus of work in this area has been on trialing multifaceted intervention targeting the psycho-social well-being of people with lung cancer. In one study, two sessions of nurse-led coaching in progressive muscle relaxation combined with education on self-management of symptoms at the beginning and middle of radiotherapy were compared against usual care in a RCT (n=140). The intervention was demonstrated to be more effective in terms of reducing breathlessness, fatigue and anxiety compared with usual care (27).

Another large trial (N=233) of education versus coping skills training for caregivers showed improvements in patient- and caregiver-reported outcomes, including depression and self-efficacy over time for both groups (28). Both interventions were telephone based and the education consisted of basic information on the illness and patient care and coping skills training incorporating relaxation practices, problem-solving and communication. Interpretation of benefits is complicated by the absence of a suitable ‘no treatment’ control. The most recent trial (n=108) tested whether a tailored, multidisciplinary supportive care program based on systematic needs assessment with two sessions at the commencement and end of treatment was effective in reducing unmet needs and psychological distress and improving quality of life (29). However, due to methodological limitations there were no differences between the two arms.

In summary, available studies of psychosocial and psychoeducational interventions have notable limitations in their design including selection, attrition and reporting bias, small samples, insufficient intervention dose and/or a lack of a suitable control group. Notwithstanding these limitations, it is highly plausible that psychosocial interventions can reduce distress associated with lung cancer. Such approaches are therefore an important part of a comprehensive management plan for this population, although further research is needed to define the precise nature and scope of these interventions and application in differing patient contexts.

**Service delivery models to optimise outcomes for patients with lung cancer**

The complex, multidimensional and chronic nature of lung cancer-related symptoms and associated psychological distress requires an approach to care that enables collaboration between a range of health care providers across inpatient and community settings to support consistent implementation of evidence based supportive care interventions. In recent years, a body of evidence has emerged regarding various health service level interventions that have been designed to achieve optimal outcomes for this group. For example, two studies have investigated post-treatment nurse follow-up versus standard physician follow-up. One three-arm study involved a sample size of 166 people with progressive lung cancer who were randomised to receive a specialised oncology home care program delivered by nurses, a standard home care program delivered by a multidisciplinary team or an office care program delivered by physicians (control group) (30). Participants who received one of the two home-based nurse groups had lower symptom distress, but self-perceived health was also poorer in comparison to the physician follow-up (30). Another study compared nurse follow up with physician follow up after the completion of initial treatment. In this study, patients randomised to nurse-led follow up had open access to nurse specialists Monday to Friday and contact through open access clinic, telephone, and message pager service, and telephone assessment or clinic appointment two weeks after baseline, then every four weeks while the patient was stable with no routine investigations. Emphasis was on rapid and comprehensive communication with general practitioners and the primary healthcare team with regular discussion and referral to a medical team on detection of any new symptom or rapid worsening of condition. Patients who received the nurse-led follow up intervention had less severe dyspnea at 3 months and had better scores for emotional functioning and less peripheral neuropathy at 12 months, although no other significant differences in quality of life domains were identified. Patients who received the nurse-led follow up also scored significantly higher compared to conventional follow up patients in satisfaction with the organisation of care, information and education and personal experience of care at 3, 6 and 12 months from baseline. Importantly, the authors also reported that the pattern of use of services differed between the two groups. Specifically, compared to conventional follow up patients, patients receiving nurse-led follow up had significantly fewer medical consultations with a hospital doctor at three months, had fewer radiographs taken (including chest radiographs) at 3 months and 6 months, and were more likely to have had radiotherapy treatment at 3 months. Additionally, when place of death was known, significantly more patients who received
nurse-led follow up than conventional follow up patients died at home rather than in a hospital or hospice. Comparison of the overall costs of care between groups showed no significant differences (31).

Given the poor prognosis associated with lung cancer, and the likely increasing burden of symptoms as the disease progresses, the potential benefits of referral to palliative care services has also been investigated in one recent study. This randomised trial compared the effect of early referral to palliative care for newly diagnosed metastatic non-small cell lung cancer patients alongside standard oncology care with standard oncology care alone. As hypothesised, patients who received early referral to palliative care had better quality of life and less depressive symptoms than those who received standard care alone. Additionally, and perhaps less expectedly, while patients in the early referral group had less aggressive care than those in the standard care alone group, median survival was longer for patients receiving palliative care compared to standard care (11.6 vs. 8.9 months) (32). While the study was conducted in one large cancer centre in the US with its unique health system and is yet to be tested in other health care contexts, the findings of the study raise important questions for clinicians and health service managers about the adequacy of existing linkages between specialist oncology and palliative care services.

Implications for practice and research

Patients with lung cancer experience significant symptom burden and will benefit from good supportive and palliative care. Over the past decade, there have been important advances in understanding of pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches to managing some common symptoms experienced by this group. This is particularly the case for dyspnoea, although some gaps remain in how these interventions are implemented in practice. Other common symptoms are similarly gaining increased attention, although we have focused on dyspnoea in this review to illustrate advances in the field as the evidence base for this symptom has developed more rapidly than for other symptoms. In addition to the clinical approaches reviewed in this paper, research in this field needs to extend to identify service delivery models that enable implementation of best practice supportive and palliative care. For example, evidence reviews highlight that case management approaches and nurse-led follow-up programs are effective in reducing breathlessness (20,22) and may be useful in reducing symptom and psychological distress (27,30,31).

Such models also have the potential to positively influence the way health services are used. Some evidence also exists to support early referral of patients with metastatic lung cancer to palliative care, alongside standard oncology care (32). While such service delivery models have not been tested across differing health care systems, the findings from these studies are noteworthy and their implications for health services are far reaching. To achieve optimal outcomes for patients with lung cancer requiring supportive and palliative interventions, it is important that these health system level reforms be considered.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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In the past, thoracoscopic sleeve resection has been reserved for the most adventurous and capable minimal invasive thoracic surgeons. However, with improvements in thoracoscopic competency, greater exchange of knowledge and technical know-how, and advances in equipment, increasing number of centers are able to perform sleeve resections thoracoscopically. Jianxing He’s team from China, a group known for their innovation and thoracoscopic excellence, has recently published their experience of bronchial sleeve resections (1). Among the 49 patients, 20 (41%) received the bronchial sleeve lobectomy thoracoscopically, with one patient requiring half-carinal reconstruction in combination with right upper sleeve lobectomy. A 3-port VATS technique was used, with the utility thoracotomy placed anteriorly, and the camera port inferiorly. In just under half of their initial cases, a modified interrupted suture anastomosis technique of closing the membranous posterior wall of the bronchus with continuous 4-O polypropylene followed by alternating figure-of-eight and mattress with 4-O single-strand absorbable suture for the cartilaginous anterior wall was used. For the subsequent remaining cases, a continuous suture technique was used for both the posterior and anterior bronchial walls. Neither covering nor buttressing techniques were needed for the anastomoses, and no postoperative anastomotic leakage was detected. With no perioperative mortality and excellent immediate results, this study seem to further support the relative safety and efficacy of thoracoscopic sleeve resection in experienced thoracoscopic surgery centers. In addition, the study has highlighted the evolution in thoracoscopic bronchial anastomotic technique from the traditional emphasis on the security of interrupted suturing (2), to the increasing use of the more convenient continuous suturing techniques over recent years (1,3,4). Evidently, continuous suturing techniques will result in less suture tangling and may be quicker, while proponents of interrupted suturing have emphasized the potential advantages of less anastomotic site ischemia and security of their technique. It seems impossible to have a meaningful comparison of clinical outcomes between the different anastomotic approaches for thoracoscopic sleeve lobectomy because of the relatively low case numbers, patient heterogeneity and the wide variations in technique within each anastomotic approach, for example, suture size and type used, or stitch spacing, just to mention a few. In thoracic surgery, perhaps more so in thoracoscopic surgery, it is often the technique which the surgeon has been trained and is most comfortable with which produces the best results. The bronchial anastomotic technique chosen should be the one most familiar to the surgeon.

**Doing less for more**

Although there are no randomized trials comparing outcomes following thoracoscopic sleeve resection lobectomy with thoracoscopic pneumonectomy in patients suitable for both procedures, it is well known that the latter is associated with a higher perioperative mortality rate and complications, including pleural space infection, bronchopleural fistula, atrial fibrillation and respiratory failure (5). Furthermore, less clinically apparent parameters such as right ventricular strain and pressure are likely to be higher following thoracoscopic pneumonectomy compared with thoracoscopic sleeve resection lobectomy. Therefore, despite the improving outcomes following thoracoscopic pneumonectomy over the years (6,7), few would argue...
against sleeve resection lobectomy being the procedure of choice for those patients with suitable anatomy, to achieve better lung preservation, and lower morbidity and mortality.

There is currently no prospective study comparing outcomes between thoracoscopic and open sleeve lobectomy. However, we know that the thoracoscopic approach to major lung resection has been associated with attenuated inflammatory cytokine response (8), better preserved postoperative immune function (9,10), attenuated postoperative angiogenic environment (11), less impairment of lung function (12), reduced postoperative pain and less disturbed shoulder dysfunction (13) amongst other advantages, when compared with their open counterparts. Of greater importance is the positive effect of minimizing surgical access trauma through thoracoscopic lung cancer resection on patient survival. Several studies have shown a small 5-year survival advantage in those who underwent thoracoscopic lobectomy for early stage lung cancer when compared with open approach (14,15). Interestingly, a similar survival advantage can be detected in other cancers, such as colon cancer, when resections were performed laparoscopically rather than by open laparotomy (15). Another often forgotten advantage of a quicker postoperative recovery from the thoracoscopic approach is earlier commencement and higher tolerance to adjuvant therapy for advance lung cancer patients (16). Future studies may be needed to determine if similar advantages can be found following minimally invasive thoracoscopic sleeve lobectomy when compared with open approach.

The new horizon

Thoracoscopic sleeve lobectomy, and indeed the whole of minimal invasive thoracic surgery, is undergoing a major evolution (17), from hybrid mini thoracotomy procedures with video-assistance (18), to the 2-port thoracoscopic technique (19), and more recently the single port approach (20). The challenges of thoracoscopic sleeve lobectomy, particularly when the surgery is increasingly being performed through smaller and fewer incisions, are achieving good visualization, utilizing endoscopic instruments for tissue dissection and manipulation, and reducing the difficulty associated with thoracoscopic bronchial anastomosis. Specialized thoracoscopic instruments continue to undergo refinement by producing angulated double hinged and narrower shafted instruments which significantly improves ergonomics and minimize fencing when placed through small surgical incision(s) (21). Another recent advancement is the development of variable wide angled thorascopes that allow up to 120 degrees of vision by either flexible scope tip or rotating prism mechanism. These thorascopes improve the surgeon’s visual field and flexibility, even when the scope movement and position is limited within the confines of a small single incision (22). The laborious task of intracorporeal knot tying for bronchial anastomosis can now be significantly simplified by using an endoscopic “knot tying” device, such as TK Ti-KNOT® (LSI Solutions, Rochester, USA), that conveniently tightens and then secures the suture using a titanium crimp (23). Also, rapid development in barbed suture technology may soon obviate the need for intracorporeal knot tying. On the horizon will be endoscopic robotic arm devices that open inside the thoracic cavity capable of tissue recognition and precision automated micro-suturing (24). Until that day, many of us flesh and bone mortals will need to continue to strive for technical excellence, and be acquainted with the latest and best equipment for our endeavours.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Ng CS. Thoracoscopic sleeve resection—the better approach? J Thorac Dis 2014;6(9):1164-1166. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.07.28
Surgery in 2013 and beyond

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Abstract: Lung cancer is a leading cause of cancer related mortality. The role of surgery continues to evolve and in the last ten years there have been a number of significant changes in the surgical management of lung cancer. These changes extend across the entire surgical spectrum of lung cancer management including diagnosis, staging, treatment and pathology. Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning and ultrasound (EBUS) have redefined traditional staging paradigms, and surgical techniques, including video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS), robotic surgery and uniportal surgery, are now accepted as standard of care in many centers. The changing pathology of lung cancer, with more peripheral tumours and an increase in adenocarcinomas has important implications for the Thoracic surgeon. Screening, using Low-Dose CT scanning, is having an impact, with not only a higher percentage of lower stage cancers detected, but also redefining the role of sublobar resection. The incidence of pneumonectomy has reduced as have the rates of “exploratory thoracotomy”. In general, lung resection is considered for stage I and II patients with a selected role in more advanced stage disease as part of a multimodality approach. This paper will look at these issues and how they impact on Thoracic Surgical practice in 2013 and beyond.

Keywords: Lung cancer; surgery

Submitted Jul 19, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 29, 2013.
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.39

Introduction

Epidemiology

Lung cancer remains a leading cause of cancer related mortality with the WHO reporting 1,380,000 deaths from it in 2008 (Figure 1) (1). It is the most common cancer in men worldwide, fourth in women and globally is responsible for more deaths that breast and prostate cancer combined. Tobacco consumption is incriminated in 85-90% of lung cancer cases.

In Australia, lung cancer is the 5th most commonly diagnosed cancer (2). It poses a significant health burden with an incidence rate of 43.2 cases per 100,000 people. Lung cancer is also the most common cause of cancer death accounting for 18.9% of all cancer deaths (2). Survival rates overall are poor, but the trend is improving with time, being 8.7% for 1982-1987 and increasing to 14.1% for 2006-2010 (3).

Worldwide the epidemiology varies due to socio-economic factors. In more developed countries the incidence is falling in men but is still rising in women (1) largely due to successful efforts at tobacco control and smoking cessation efforts (Figures 2-4). Peak incidence in more developed countries is now in the 8th decade. In less developed countries the lung cancer epidemic is in an earlier phase. Incidence is low but rising rapidly in men and women, and peak incidence occurs 2 decades earlier.

Tumour pathology—non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)

Recent developments in molecular profiling have accentuated

Figure 2 Incidence and mortality of lung cancer in men and women.
the role of the pathologist within the multi-disciplinary team. No longer is it appropriate for the pathologist to determine simply whether a specimen is either small cell or NSCLC. In more developed countries there has been a marked change in the histopathologic profile of non-small cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma no longer being the most common cell type. Recent trends show a significant increase in adenocarcinoma and a shift towards more peripheral squamous cell tumours (4).

Additionally the subclassification of adenocarcinoma into recognizable histologic groups has important prognostic and therapeutic implications. The pathologist will now routinely be required to perform an ever increasing array of tumour genomic assays as many unique tumour mutations and amplifications have been identified that allow targeted therapeutic options. The testing for these mutations is becoming cheaper and in many centres it is now routine to have results on the EGFR and ALK mutation status of all adenocarcinomas. These can be tested on fewer cells, in some cases only 100 cells may be required (5).

Koudelakova et al. recently reviewed the clinically relevant driver mutations (6). Epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene mutations occur in 10-30% of patients with non-small cell lung cancer (6,7). Tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKI) have been demonstrated to show responses in 70-80% of patients with this mutation (6,7). Erlotinib and gefitinib have higher response rates and longer progression free survival compared to chemotherapy.

Figure 3 Trends in incidence of lung cancer in men.

Figure 4 Trends in incidence of lung cancer in women.
Response rates in EGFR negative patients are low. Adenocarcinomas, females and non-smokers have been shown to respond better. Current recommendations are that all newly diagnosed patients with advanced NSCLC be tested, and if positive, should be commenced on a TKI.

The anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) oncogene has been found in 5% of patients, increasing to as high as 20% in light or non-smokers (8). Crizotinib, an ALK TKI, has been shown to be effective and phase III trials are ongoing. It is recommended that this mutation also be tested for.

The thoracic surgeon needs to be well aware of these developments not only to counsel the patient about the implications of such tests in resected specimens but to be fully involved within the multi-disciplinary team during discussions for “more tissue” (9). In patients with advanced metastatic disease, it is imperative that the surgeon brings to the table a realistic assessment of the risk/benefit of the proposed procedure, has knowledge of the chances of a positive result and is fully aware how much tissue is required before embarking on further invasive procedures.

**Surgery—where are we now?**

Surgical management is the standard of care for stage I and II in patients who are medically fit even though there are not randomised controlled trials of surgery versus other therapy in these patients (10,11). Expected 5-year survival figures are 60-80% for stage I and 40-60% for stage II. In a meta-analysis on the role of surgery, Wright et al. analysed trials of surgery against no treatment or non-surgical treatment, concluding that they could neither support nor discount the survival benefit of surgery but that “a little surgery was better than none” (12). There also is a role for surgery in selected stage IIIA cases, usually in a modality setting, and even highly selected cases of stage IIIB and IV cases surgery may merit consideration.

Staging for lung cancer currently follows the TNM classification in its 7th edition and the reader is referred to the IALSC Staging Manual in Thoracic Oncology (13). There has been a logical evolution in trying to select those patients who will benefit from surgical resection and to exclude those in whom surgery will offer no assistance, the so called ‘futile thoracotomy’. The dominant focus is the status of the mediastinal lymph nodes. After the introduction of invasive mediastinal assessment by Daniels [1949], Carlens [1959] and McNeill and Chamberlain [1966], these became the traditional preoperative modes of assessment for the next 40 years (14-16). Accuracy was quite high and these techniques became well established. Cervical mediastinoscopy however, is difficult to teach, and in inexperienced hands a procedure with morbidity and mortality rates. In general, there is strong evidence to suggest that it has been underutilized particularly in low volume centres as outlined in the review by Little et al. in 2005 (17). Video-assisted mediastinoscopy has been a considerable advance providing improved visualization especially for training purposes.

Over the last 30 years Computed Tomography (CT), has come to occupy a central role in assessing the intrathoracic extent of disease and occasionally detects occult distant disease. Assessment of the T component of stage is assisted by CT scan but all surgeons will be aware of the uncertainties in deciding resectability from the CT scan. MRI is usually reserved for apical nodule lesions and sometimes T4 tumours in which the ability to reconstruct in oblique axes may be advantageous. Nodal assessment by CT scan has limited accuracy particularly with nodes <15 mm in short axis dimension. At least 20% of sub-centimetre nodes ultimately are confirmed to be malignant and around 40% of nodes ‘enlarged’ by CT criteria are benign (18).

Positron Emission Tomography (PET) combined with CT (PET-CT) scanning has revolutionized lung cancer staging and represents the biggest single advance in this field. When available, it should be a routine part of staging in all potentially resectable lung cancers, perhaps with the exception of sub-centimetre screen-detected lesions. PET scanning will often show unexpected uptake in nodal or distant sites. Whilst most of these lesions will be shown to be metastatic deposits, false positive uptake is known to occur, the incidence varying between geographical locations. It is thus important that each unit understands the incidence of false positive uptake in its own population and ensures that no one is denied curative surgery inappropriately. In doubtful cases biopsy of the area of uptake is recommended.

The introduction of endobronchial ultrasound (EBUS) has further revolutionised staging of the mediastinum and for that matter, assessment of all cases of mediastinal adenopathy. It is now possible to diagnose and stage the lung cancer patient in a single outpatient procedure, avoiding ‘diagnostic’ and then ‘staging’ bronchoscopies (19). Surgeons should be driving this process.

In experienced hands EBUS has been shown to be highly sensitive and accurate with a lower complication rate than mediastinoscopy. Yasafuku has demonstrated the equivalence of EBUS transbronchial needle aspiration (TBNA) vs. mediastinoscopy and this would now be the procedure.
of choice for mediastinal staging (20). Endo-oesophageal ultrasound (EUS) has been used to stage the posterior mediastinum, evaluate the adrenals and even the left lobe of the liver. Whilst a meta-analysis has shown high sensitivity and specificity, the negative predictive value is limited (21). EBUS and EUS have a complementary role to play with reported accuracy of 95%, if available, they play an important role in minimally-invasive mediastinal staging (22).

In many units mediastinoscopy is reserved for the occasional patient where EBUS is negative but clinical suspicion of nodal disease is high, either as a primary staging or after induction therapy, or where mediastinal nodal involvement by sarcoid or lymphoma is suspected but the cores obtained at EBUS are non diagnostic. Surgeons should be performing these themselves and be au fait with on site pathologic assessment or have a close working relationship with physicians skilled in this technique. EBUS has an important role in preoperative determination of N1 disease. Far from irrelevant because it is still ‘surgical’, where resection is considered, N1 positivity may mean pneumonectomy and this has important implications for patient selection. At some centres, patients with N1 disease may undergo preoperative chemotherapy as it is better tolerated than in the adjuvant setting post pneumonectomy and downsizing bulky disease makes for a potentially more satisfactory surgical approach without an increase in morbidity.

The development of video-assisted mediastinal lymphadenectomy (VAMLA) and transcervical extended mediastinal lymphadenectomy (TEMLA) techniques have been described but as yet their role in primary evaluation of the mediastinum remains unclear (23).

VATS staging is occasionally necessary to evaluate a pleural effusion in which repeated aspirations have not confirmed a malignant cause, when nodal status remains unclear, especially in the aorto-pulmonary zone or if pathological confirmation of additional pulmonary nodules is needed to decide appropriate therapy.

In parallel with the assessment of disease extent it is important to assess patient fitness for surgery. Guidelines on pre-operative evaluation of patients outline the efficient way to stage patients to allow decision making on interventions (24).

The ageing population in the developed world has meant that decision making on suitability for surgery is imperative. Risk factors for surgical morbidity and mortality include patient age, sex, American Society of Anaesthesiologists (ASA) score, performance status, surgical priority, comorbidity, induction chemoradiation, forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV1), renal dysfunction and body mass index (24). Algorithms on the fitness for surgery have been described by the ACCP, ERS, ESTS and BTS (24-26). Functional assessment includes a walk test and cardiopulmonary exercise testing. Surgeons need to bear in mind though that these tests do have shortcomings and in recognition of this, Lim et al. have proposed greater involvement of the patient in the decision making process (13,27).

In evaluating the trends in surgical resection in England, Riaz et al. noted that the resection rates were increasing despite the patient population becoming older, and that more segmental resections were being performed (28). Increasing age was found to be associated with a decreased likelihood of undergoing pneumonectomy or sleeve resection.

Exploratory thoracotomy rates have also dropped, as have the number of pneumonectomies performed. Five year survival for lobectomy and patients with adenocarcinoma was increased and the overall prognosis over time was found to be improved on multivariate analysis, attributed to earlier diagnosis (28,29).

Surgical technique

Surgical access for lung cancer resection remains topical. Thoracotomy has been the traditional approach for resection of lung cancers. Video-assisted thoracoscopic (VAT) lobectomy generates controversy in the surgical field and has been slow to gain popularity. It is not new, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. It has evolved and been assisted by improvements in hardware. Advocates argue that the advantages; reduced pain, shortened hospital duration, decreased air leak, pneumonia and atrial arrhythmias favour VATS over traditional thoracotomy (30,31). In addition, it has been argued that the increase in inflammatory mediators is less exuberant than with open surgery (32). The counter argument relates to the learning curve safety, patient selection, long term survival and the ability to perform an oncologically complete operation with adequate nodal dissection. The latter has been given increased relevance as the 7th edition of TNM requires a minimum number of lymph nodes to be removed and examined pathologically, to allow a pN category to be assigned and a complete R0 resection to be confirmed (13).

The publication of the phase II CALGB 39802 study established the feasibility of this approach and sought to offer a precise definition (33). It was demonstrated that, with
a clear definition of the approach, complications were low and the survival compared favourably to open series. The VATS approach was less expensive, with lower morbidity than cases undergoing thoracotomy. In the absence of large scale randomised controlled trials, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of VATS lobectomy have demonstrated similar benefits (30,31,34). The use of propensity matching, despite some obvious limitations has also been utilised to demonstrate the superior benefits over open thoracotomy (31).

To address the concerns regarding the safety, specifically regarding the management of bleeding, Yamashita et al. published their results with management of intra-operative vessel injury. In a review of 557 patients, there were 26 (4.7%) vascular injuries, 17 of which involved pulmonary arterial branches. Fifty percent of these required conversion to thoracotomy and another 23% required mini-thoracotomy. They also noted no differences in hospital stay and overall morbidity but an increase in surgical time and blood loss (35). This led to the conclusion that safety concerns were not significant enough to preclude the VATS approach.

Hanna et al. compared cancer specific and overall survival in a propensity matched cohort of 190 VATS patient with open lobectomy (36). No statistically significant difference in cancer specific (76.7% vs. 82.9%, P=0.170) or overall survival (64% vs. 73%, P=0.170) was detected. Operative mortality and morbidity were similar in the 2 groups.

In a meta-analysis comparing the long term survival in patients undergoing VATS (n=2,106) and open surgery (n=2,661), Taioli et al. reviewed 20 observational studies. Long term survival was found to be increased in the VATS group with a 5% meta difference (95% CI, 3-6%) (37). Further evidence for at least an equivalent disease-free and overall survival was also provided by Kuritzky et al. (38).

Despite this, the uptake of this approach has been relatively slow. In a review of the STS General Thoracic Database, Paul et al. noted that in 2007, only 30% of all lobectomies were performed thoracoscopically (39).

Subsequent review of Nationwide Inpatient Sample Database by the same author encompassing 2007-2008, demonstrated that only 15% of lobectomies were thoracoscopic (40). Interestingly, the majority of these procedures (67%) were performed in teaching hospitals. Clear consensus on, and compliance with the definition of VATS lobectomy has hampered progress. Furthermore it is never clear what the comparator is for the open approach. Traditional posterolateral thoracotomy for lung cancer resection is clearly obsolete but this is often the “gold standard” against which VATS lobectomy is compared. The randomised trials do not address the observation that an experienced high volume surgeon, using a small 6-8 cm incision with limited rib spreading and standard techniques can achieve outcomes with open surgery equivalent or better than those published for VATS with less cost. Enthusiasm for ‘minimally invasive’ procedures needs to be tempered with tight cost evaluation and data that applies to the wider surgical community rather than specialist academic centres.

In an editorial commenting on VATS lobectomy, Wood noted that this procedure is still generally performed in high volume and academic centres. It is postulated that the improved outcomes noted in most studies relates to the surgeon rather than to the actual procedure (41). A similar point was raised by Farjah et al. noted that there was a higher hazard of death after VATS with low-volume surgeons (42). This is concerning and in our opinion likely to be under reported.

Many surgeons performing lung cancer surgery can do a safe operation with acceptable outcomes. The translation to the VATS approach however is not straightforward. Surgeons should look at their own results and outcomes. If they are equivalent (or better) to those published for VATS, they should not be under pressure to change technique. The vocal proponents of the VATS approach generally have set the baseline for the outcomes studies.

VATS lobectomy has clearly been demonstrated to be safe and oncologically effective, and more radical procedures are also being performed via this route. It is expected that uptake will increase with greater exposure during training of junior surgeons making it the standard of care in the future (43).

The extension of the multi-port approach is the single port technique pioneered initially by Rocco and now by Gonzales-Rivas (44,45).

The lobectomy performed through the uniport incision follows standard procedure with individual ligation of vascular structures and bronchus with mediastinal nodal dissection. Visualisation is entirely via the videoscope. The technique has been well described (45). Advantages include vision directed to the target tissue, similar to open surgery and reduction of post-operative pain. Uniportal VATS limited resections (wedge) can even be performed under locoregional anaesthesia in awake patients (46). The impending increase in referrals from the advent of screening programmes makes this approach important for the future. Clearly there is a learning curve and it has been suggested that surgeons already performing VATS lobectomy via the
How much lung is enough? The role of sub-lobar resection

Sub-lobar resections consist of anatomical segmental resection and wedge resections that are non-anatomical. Wedge resections generally have a poorer outcome compared to anatomical resection. Nakamura et al. reported a 55.4% 5-year survival after wedge excision, lower compared to lobectomy (82.1%) and segmental resection (87.2%) (55). It is with this in mind that the rest of this discussion will focus mainly on anatomical segmentectomy.

Segmental resections for early stage lung cancer have traditionally been reserved for patients with limited functional reserve, medical co-morbidity and for older patients. This is largely in view of the only randomized trial available comparing lobectomy to sub-lobar resection by Ginsberg et al. for the Lung Cancer Study Group (56). They demonstrated an inferior 5-year survival with limited resection as well as a threefold increase in local recurrence rates for tumours smaller than 3 cm confirmed to be N0 at thoracotomy. The locoregional recurrence rate per person/year was 0.044 for segmental resection and 0.086 for wedge resections. This study was limited by the low number included in the study and the unavailability of PET at this time.

Wolf et al. reported their experience with segmental resections compared to open lobectomy. They found a trend to increased local recurrence with shorter overall and recurrence free survival in segmental resections (57). This survival difference should be taken in context though; there were a larger number of older patients with poor lung function in the segmental group.

In a meta-analysis comparing survival to lobectomy for stage I disease, Nakamura et al. demonstrated better survival, albeit not statistically significant, following lobectomy. There was however considerable heterogeneity at time points 3 and 5 years after resection (58).

Interpretation of the data is difficult as there are differences in the application of segmental resection, as well as the extent of mediastinal nodal dissection at the time of resection. Tumour histology also plays a role in the outcomes with slow growing adenocarcinoma demonstrating better results.

In the absence of randomised controlled trials, Tsutani et al. published a propensity matched analysis limited to patients with stage IA lung adenocarcinoma (59). They excluded wedge resections and demonstrated no difference in survival and recurrence free survival in all cohorts before and after propensity matching. Of note was the fact that they included segmental resections for T1b tumours based on the standardized uptake value (SUVmax) and high resolution computerised tomography (HRCT) findings. Solid tumour size on HRCT and lower SUVmax were independent prognostic factors and tended to predict less invasive tumours that were managed by segmentectomy.

Reviewing the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Result (SEER) database, Kates et al. examined the survival outcomes following lobectomy and segmentectomy for stage I tumours up to 1 cm. They noted equivalent survival and commented that segmentectomy may be preferable given the lower rate of complications. No anterior approach may adapt to this technique earlier. Once again, surgeons must evaluate their current practice and make an assessment whether such a technique would be useful to them.

Robotic surgery is an extension of the VATS minimally invasive approach. Proponents argue that there is improved operative field visualisation and better wrist-like motion of the instruments with tremor filtration (47,48). Disadvantages include the added cost associated with the robotic technology. Proponents of the VATS approach also believe that it does not add more to an already well established surgical approach. Evaluating the robotic approach in a systematic review, Cao et al. found that the robotic procedure was safe and effective in specialized centres. Long term efficacy data was limited however and warranted further study (49). Procedures are generally performed via 2–3 ports and a utility incision with no rib spreading, generally following the CALGB VATS technique. This approach still allows lymph node dissection. Studies have demonstrated similar operative times after the initial learning curve, reduced hospitalization and time to normal activity with some evidence for reduced post-operative pain. Equivalent oncological results to open thoracotomy have also been reported (50). The rate of conversion to open thoracotomy has been reported at 7–8% (47–52). In the largest reported series on robotic lobectomy, Park et al. reported an 80% overall 5-year survival with equivalent stage specific survival data compared to VATS approach. Whilst this was in a retrospective study that did not directly compare the 2 approaches, it still demonstrates the oncological efficacy of robotic lobectomy (53).

Whilst technically feasible, widespread uptake in an era of cost containment is highly unlikely. It is a nice marketing tool where competition for patients is high. The same concerns regarding learning curve, training etc. for VATS exist here but are even more pertinent (54).
survival difference could be demonstrated before and after propensity matching (60). Yang and D’Amico reviewed the results of thoracoscopic segmentectomy for lung cancer. The trends in the literature suggest that this approach, specifically for early stage tumours and the low-grade, ground glass opacity (GGO) cases, which if < than 3 cm are now classified as adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS), is safe and feasible (61). Zhong et al. demonstrated similar local recurrence and equivalent 5-year survival comparing thoracoscopic segmentectomy and lobectomy (62). The role of segmental resection is clearly being defined. Gorenstein et al. reviewed surgery for early stage cancer suggesting the following indications for sublobar resection (Table 1) (63).

There are currently 2 randomised controlled trials that may clarify the role of limited resection, the CALGB 140503 (segmentectomy and wedge resection) and JCOG0802/WJOG4607L (segmentectomy). In these trials, selection for limited resection includes tumours 2 cm or less in size, peripheral tumours close to the outer third of the lung and good functional status. These results are awaited (64,65).

Lung preservation is also behind the push for sleeve resections, either bronchial, pulmonary arterial or the double sleeve resection. These are indicated for tumour involving either the origin of a lobar bronchus or lobar branch of the pulmonary artery that does not infiltrate as far as to require pneumonectomy. It allows patients who would not tolerate a pneumonectomy to undergo curative resection. D’Andrilli found that the oncological efficacy of sleeve resection is well established in stage I and II disease with some benefit in stage III over pneumonectomy. Quality of life, prognosis and morbidity were better in patients undergoing sleeve resection compared to pneumonectomy (66). Outcomes following resection and reconstruction of the pulmonary artery have been shown to be similar to standard lobectomy in selected patients (67).

Table 1. Indications for sublobar resection.

<table>
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<th>Indications for sublobar resection in NSCLC</th>
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<tr>
<td>I. Peripheral tumour 2 cm or less</td>
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<td>II. Predominant ground glass appearance on CT scan</td>
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<tr>
<td>III. Patients 75 years or older</td>
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<td>IV. FEV1 less than 60% of predicted</td>
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<td>V. Presence of synchronous tumours</td>
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Nodal dissection

There is ongoing controversy on the role of mediastinal node dissection during the resection. Nodal dissection allows accurate staging for prognostic purposes, thereby determining the need for adjuvant therapy and is necessary to ensure a complete R0 resection as defined by Rami-Porta et al. (68). There is good evidence of improved “stage specific” survival as the number of nodes removed increase. It also removes microscopic nodal disease that may result in local recurrence. The extent of this nodal dissection has long been the subject of discussion.

Wu et al. reported improved overall survival in patients undergoing systematic nodal dissection (SND) which is the only internationally standardized technique for intrathoracic nodal evaluation (69-71). The ACOSOG Z0030 trial reported no difference in survival between patients thought to have no nodal disease or non-hilar N1 disease randomised to nodal sampling or more extensive nodal dissection (72). Of note is the fact that the ACOSOG Z0030 utilised intra-operative frozen section analysis to ensure negative nodal status before randomisation. This is the practice of one of the authors (PG) as well.

In a retrospective review, Cerfolio et al. documented a higher rate of N2 pick-up with mediastinal nodal dissection with no impact on survival (73). This was in normal day to day surgical practice with no intra-operative frozen section.

Arguments against the routine mediastinal nodal dissection include the possibility of increased operative time or post-operative morbidity, a finding not supported by the ACOSOG Z0030. The 7th edition of TNM recommends that assessment of regional lymph node involvement be performed by the removal and subsequent pathological examination of a minimum of 6 nodes/stations, 3 from the mediastinum, including the subcarinal node (#7), and 3 from N1 zones.

Locally ablative therapy

Sub-lobar resection faces challenges from less invasive medical procedures. These include thermal ablation, either radio-frequency (RFA) or microwave, and stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT or stereotactic ablative radiotherapy—SABR) which has demonstrated excellent primary tumour control which some say approaches that of lobectomy (74,75).

RFA is currently utilised for medically inoperable patients with early stage tumours, either stage I or II. It has also been used to manage patients with pulmonary metastases if <5 cm. Reports on the long term benefits are limited though. In an editorial by Fernando, questions on
the role of RFA over SBRT are raised and highlight the possible deficiencies facing RFA (76).

Stereotactic body radiotherapy is mainly in patients deemed high risk for surgery. Senan et al. have demonstrated the efficacy of SABR for early NSCLC in medically inoperable patients (77). The data is based on progression-free survival which is a concern given the acknowledged difficulties in assessing progression after such treatment. In addition local progression may be underestimated if patients are not returned to the specialized centre for follow up. The diagnosis of malignancy was only confirmed in 31% of cases reported by Lagerwaard et al., a further area of concern (78). In a retrospective review of the SEER database, Fernandez et al. compared definitive radiation with sublobar resection in stage IA disease. The 3-year survival favoured sublobar resection in this cohort of high risk patients (79).

A phase III trial is currently underway comparing the sublobar resection with SBRT in high risk stage I disease (80). Patients will be randomised to either treatment arm but interestingly, no routine pre-operative mediastinal nodal staging will be performed which will result in some of the surgical arm being upstaged by nodal dissection. Despite this confounding factor the trial should help define the role of SBRT.

**Lung cancer screening**

The impact of Low-Dose CT (LDCT) screening for lung cancer will result in large numbers of patients being referred for the evaluation of nodules, many of which will not be malignant. Such evaluation requires a dedicated multidisciplinary approach if invasive investigations and resection for benign disease is to be kept at an acceptably low level. Such screening programmes will inevitably lead to an increased volume of patients with small lung cancers (1-2 cm) being presented for possible surgical resection.

The benefits of screening with low-dose CT scans are largely based on the results of The National Lung Screening Trial (NLST) published in 2011 (81). Comparing LDCT to chest radiographs, there was a 20.3% reduction in lung cancer related mortality and a 7% overall reduction in mortality. A caveat though was the false positivity rate of 95% in the NLST screening trial at prevalence screen. Surgical involvement in screening programmes is critical as it is anticipated that the number of referrals will increase.

Guidelines on intervention are currently available from the IALSC (82). Key recommendations include the use of a multidisciplinary team approach with surgery being performed in centres with minimally invasive programmes. Surgical resection, once diagnosis is confirmed, should also be anatomical by lobectomy with SND. Segmentectomy, and even wedge excision might be appropriate for (I) pure ground-glass opacities which if <3 cm with no invasive element and pure lepidic growth are now classified as “adenocarcinoma in-situ” and as such have almost 100% cure rate, and (II) screen-detected part-solid lesions <2 cm in the outer one third of the lung in whom frozen section has confirmed N0 disease and in which resection margins are checked by cytology of frozen section. The results of the JCOG and CALGB studies on segmentectomy may require us to re-evaluate these recommendations, especially as one becomes more concerned about second primaries in patients with high probability of cure from their first cancer.

Indeterminate lesions will require tissue for diagnosis, with CT-guided biopsy being encouraged. The decision to intervene will depend on the probability of lung cancer. It has been shown that lesions >20 mm have an 80% probability of being malignant. The risk of malignancy is reduced with numerous nodules (>6). Part solid (63%), non-solid (18%) and solid (7%) lesions all have varying degrees of malignancy associated with them (83).

We must await the results of ongoing trails, especially in Europe with the Dutch-Belgium randomised NELSON trial and the Danish Lung Cancer Screening Trial to see if the NLST translates across geographical regions and is cost-effective in varied health care systems (84,85).

**Locally advanced disease: the role of surgery in a Multi-Modality setting**

There remains significant controversy as to the role of surgery in locally advanced disease but for most surgeons resection performed as part of multimodal therapy remains the cornerstone for any chance of cure for this group.

Stage III NSCLC represents a heterogeneous group and this is recognized by the recent American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) clinical practice guidelines (86). Most surgeons would feel that isolated single N2 station nodal metastasis, assessed as ‘resectable’ should be considered for a treatment plan to include chemotherapy and surgical resection with or without thoracic radiotherapy which, whilst more contentious, is making a comeback. The order of the tri-modality therapy is variable. Neoadjuvant chemotherapy has been shown to improve survival
compared to surgery alone. Two landmark studies have compared the results of surgery alone in N2 disease versus the impact of neoadjuvant chemotherapy and surgery. Roth et al. showed a 5-year survival of 15% with surgery alone compared to 36% after pre-operative chemotherapy (87), and Rosell et al. obtained a significant overall survival advantage in the combined group (3-year survival of 15%) over surgery alone (3-year survival 0%) (88). Whilst the advantage to neoadjuvant chemotherapy in both arms is similar, an approximately 20% improvement in overall survival, the marked difference in the results of surgery alone (0% versus 15%) suggests the populations of N2 disease entered in to each trial differed significantly.

Recently, Ripley and Rusch have published an authoritative review of the role of induction therapy. After an extensive review of the current best available evidence they conclude that multimodality therapy should be standard of care for stage IIIA (N2) NSCLC, resection being offered to patients suitable for complete resection (89).

Randomised controlled trials of multimodality therapy in pre-operatively determined N2 disease, comparing regimens which included surgery with those using only chemotherapy and radiotherapy have shown the results to be similar. Arguments against the role of surgery in N2 disease cite Van Meerbeck et al., however, looking at the surgical group in this series, it was suggested that surgery less than pneumonectomy may provide a survival advantage (90).

Many surgical oncologists would agree however that the wide variety of findings mandates individualized assessment and treatment planning by a team experienced in lung cancer surgery. Similarly therefore, a smaller peripheral primary tumour and a single paratracheal or subcarinal metastasis that would require a very large radiation field for radical treatment may be better treated with a multimodality approach including surgery. Finally, bulky central tumours with uncertain resectability ( Likely T4) may be better treated with initial chemotherapy/chemoradiotherapy followed by surgical exploration once some cytoreduction has been achieved. However, there is consensus that bulky multi-station disease is better treated with definitive, concurrent chemoradiation. These special treatment issues are also well described in the ACCP guidelines (91).

There have been a significant number of clinical trials evaluating preoperative chemoradiation followed by surgery for locally advanced NSCLC. The most influential of these, including the SWOG 8805, German and Massachusetts General have shown increased resectability rates, increased but acceptable perioperative morbidity and mortality with survival benefit (92-94). In the Prince Charles Hospital it is our preference to use induction chemotherapy alone and reserve surgery post chemoradiation as a salvage option only.

Oncologists in general, conclude from the EORTC 08941, that surgery does not improve survival in patients with N2 disease and therefore should not be used (95). Referral of patients with low volume N2 disease has been limited, which, in our opinion means denying these patients access to better treatment. Better local control occurred in the surgical arm and patients having an R0 resection had improved survival.

Further, the Intergroup trial 0139 showed no overall difference in survival in the surgical arm (96). There was a high mortality rate in the trial after pneumonectomy however and a clear survival advantage was present for patients having lobectomy after induction therapy, findings supporting the ‘unplanned’ analysis of the surgical group in the EORTC 08941. The differences in 5-year survival between the intergroup study and the EORTC are greater than can be explained by the difference between sequential and concurrent chemoradiation suggesting that the study populations were somewhat different. Weder et al. demonstrated that pneumonectomy can be performed with very acceptable morbidity and mortality after induction therapy (97). This further emphasizes the importance of such cases being dealt with by experienced multidisciplinary teams.

The T4 descriptor in the staging system has generally signified ‘irresectable’ disease. Whilst there are undoubtedly cases in which T4 cases, especially when associated with N0 of N1 disease (now stage IIIA in the 7th edition) can be resected and benefit from surgical treatment, it is difficult to support this in the literature since the case series are small and include an unspecified number of cases that were not characterized as T4 before surgery. In many cases in it difficult to be sure without exploration whether this is the case. Each of these patients needs to be assessed individually. Treatment options are between radical intent chemoradiation or surgery. Some centres may opt for surgical exploration and a ‘trial dissection’. In our unit, in some cases, chemotherapy is given before exploration. Responders will undergo exploration with the aim of complete resection. In some units there is a move toward preoperative chemoradiation (98) with which there is little doubt that perioperative morbidity and mortality is higher, as is the pathologic complete response rate. Patient assessment should be in experienced units. Surgery for Pancoast tumour is well established as part of multimodality
therapy. Induction chemoradiation followed by complete surgical resection is the current standard of care.

Improvements in staging technologies have undoubtedly resulted in more patients being identified with unexpected and limited metastatic disease. The standard of care for stage IVB cases is definitive chemotherapy. Adjuvant surgery may be considered in occasional and highly selected patients with oligometastatic disease such as solitary brain and adrenal metastases. There are small series suggesting improved disease-free and overall survival in these circumstances (99,100). This radical approach would only be considered in the uncommon scenario of a resectable, node negative primary with an isolated metastatic deposit. Chemotherapy is an integral component in such cases and in our department would usually be administered after resection of the metastasis and before definitive pulmonary resection.

**Adjuvant chemotherapy**

Recurrence after complete resection for lung cancer is most commonly at distant sites.

There have been 4 positive adjuvant trials from 1994-2001 demonstrating a survival benefit with adjuvant chemotherapy (101-103). The greatest benefit was shown in the National Cancer Institute of Canada JBR.10, however, subset analysis showed no benefit for stage IB patients (104). These results were confirmed in the recent update of the trial results (105). The survival benefit reported in this trial was 15% at 5 years.

The Lung Adjuvant Cisplatin Evaluation (LACE) meta-analysis demonstrated a trend to benefit in stage IB and clear benefit in stage II N1 cases and IIIA mostly N2 cases disease (106).

Adjuvant chemotherapy has become the standard for resected stage II and IIIA disease, with level 1 evidence for cisplatin based chemotherapy in these patients. It has been suggested (level 2B) that high risk stage IB disease including; poorly differentiated carcinoma, vascular invasion, wedge resection and visceral pleural involvement, should also be offered treatment (101,102). In considering these results, it is worth remembering that in all these positive trials the 6th edition of the staging system was used. The benefit for Stage II was therefore in cases with N1 disease and in the stage IIIA cases with N2 disease. The CALGB 9633 trial for 6th edition stage IB was negative and only an unplanned post hoc analysis showed benefit for N0 cases 4 cm or larger. This finding in large N0 cases was not supported when Shepherd et al. pooled the data from the JBR 10 and CALGB 9633 trials (103). It appears clear that adjuvant chemotherapy offers benefit in node positive cases, the role in bulky but node negative cases is uncertain.

It is imperative that surgeons are familiar with this data as they are best placed to assess the suitability for adjuvant therapy. Whilst there is no conclusive data to suggest that neoadjuvant chemotherapy would be better than adjuvant chemotherapy there are reasons to think that it may be more effective (107). There is improved drug delivery to the tumour, particularly lymph nodes, better prospect of receiving the full dose of the planned regimen, earlier treatment of micrometastatic disease, and the possibility of improved resectability. For patients with bulky N1 disease requiring pneumonectomy in our institution neoadjuvant chemotherapy followed by resection is the preferred approach.

The CALGB 150803 trial is currently underway attempting to identify a subset of stage I patients that benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy using a 64-gene signature.

**Small cell lung cancer**

Small cell lung cancer represents 13% of newly diagnosed cases of lung cancer worldwide (108). It is common in heavy smokers, either current or previously, and is associated with early locoregional and distant spread. Treatment modalities are commonly limited to a combination of thoracic irradiation and multi-agent chemotherapy with surgery having a limited role.

Surgery was initially advocated based on the results of the Veterans Administration Surgical Oncology Group in 1982 with a 60% 5-year survival for T1N0 lesions with surgery and chemotherapy (109).

The Lung Cancer Study Group prospective trial of induction chemotherapy followed by either surgery or radiation demonstrated no survival benefit in either treatment arm, but excluded patients with stage I disease (110). It is one of the few randomised trials looking at the role of surgery.

Surgery is recommended for biopsy proven T1N0M0 disease, with adjuvant chemotherapy and prophylactic cranial irradiation (110). It may also be offered after neoadjuvant therapy (111,112). Surgery may also be offered as a salvage option to patients with relapse after remission or non-responders, Shepherd et al. reported a retrospective review with a 23% 5-year survival (113). There have also been selected reports of surgery for extensive disease with staging and selection being critical.
Conclusions

Surgical therapy for lung cancer has advanced since the first pneumonectomy by Evarts Graham (114). Advances in pre-operative, operative and post-operative care have revolutionized management and improved outcomes.

Multi-modality therapy, an expanding role for adjuvant therapy after complete resection and medical alternatives to surgery require that surgeons take an active role in the multidisciplinary discussions. They need to be fully conversant with the available literature and capable of strongly presenting the benefits of surgical options. The expanding use of LDCT screening will involve surgeons in the evaluation and treatment of smaller cancers which force us to re-evaluate our investigative algorithms and surgical options. Sub-lobar resections, minimally invasive strategies with earlier intervention for stage IA disease together with extending the role of surgery in advanced stages point the way forward for the thoracic surgical community.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Introduction

Ground-glass opacity (GGO) is a radiological finding in computed tomography (CT) consisting of a hazy opacity that does not obscure the underlying bronchial structures or pulmonary vessels (1). Pure GGOs are those with no solid components, whereas part-solid GGOs contain both GGO and a solid component. Pulmonary nodules with GGO have been increasingly encountered in routine clinical practice with the increasingly widespread use of CT and the increased resolution of CT imaging. The recent positive results of the National Lung Screening Trial, which reported a 20% decrease in mortality from lung cancer as a result of low-dose CT screening for patients at high risk of developing lung cancer (2), are anticipated to support the use of CT examinations and to increase the detection of GGO lesions.

GGO can be a manifestation of a wide variety of clinical features, including malignancies and benign conditions, such as focal interstitial fibrosis, inflammation, and hemorrhage (3). However, lesions with GGO that do not disappear are often lung cancer or its precursor lesions (4). Favorable prognoses for the surgical resection of lesions with a considerable amount of GGO have been reported in several retrospective studies, in which the relapse rate was reported to be null (5-8). Because some lesions with GGO remain unchanged for years, it is unclear whether all such lesions should be surgically resected, including those that microscopy shows...
to contain cancer cells. It has also not yet been established which surgical procedures are well-balanced. In this article, we review the literature on GGO, with special emphasis on management of GGO-predominant pulmonary lesions.

**Pathological features of lesions with GGO**

**Noguchi's classification**

In 1995, Noguchi et al. reviewed 236 surgically resected small peripheral adenocarcinomas ≤2 cm in diameter and proposed a histologic classification of 6 types based on tumor growth patterns (9). Type A, localized bronchioloalveolar carcinoma (BAC), revealed the replacement of alveolar-lining epithelial cells with a relatively thin stroma. Type B was characterized by localized BAC with focal structural collapse of alveoli. Type C was characterized by localized BAC with foci of active fibroblastic proliferation. Type D (poorly differentiated adenocarcinoma), Type E (tubular adenocarcinoma) and Type F (papillary adenocarcinoma) showed compressive and expanding growth. Types A and B showed no lymph node metastasis and had a better 5-year survival rate (100%) than did Type C (75%) or Types D, E, and F (52%). According to Noguchi's classification, GGO can be found in Type A, B and C tumors that show a replacement growth pattern along the alveolar lining cells; for example, Yang et al. reported that the proportion of GGO in each of these tumor types was 92%, 52%, and 20%, respectively (10).

**New international multidisciplinary classification of lung adenocarcinoma**

In 2011, the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer/American Thoracic Society/European Respiratory Society (IASLC/ATS/ERS) proposed a new international multidisciplinary classification of lung adenocarcinoma (11). The terms BAC and mixed subtype adenocarcinoma are no longer used because these terms were applied to a broad spectrum of tumors. Adenocarcinomas are classified as preinvasive lesions [including atypical adenomatous hyperplasia (AAH) and adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS)], minimally invasive adenocarcinoma (MIA), and invasive adenocarcinoma. AAH is a localized small proliferation of atypical Type II pneumocytes and/or Clara cells lining the alveolar walls and respiratory bronchioles. AIS is a small (≤3 cm) solitary adenocarcinoma with pure lepidic growth, and the complete resection of AIS achieves 100% disease-specific survival. AIS corresponds to Types A and B in Noguchi's classification. MIA is a small (≤3 cm) solitary adenocarcinoma with a predominantly lepidic pattern and ≤5 mm invasion at the largest dimension. MIA does not invade lymphatics, blood vessels, or the pleura and contains no necrosis; therefore, complete resection achieves nearly 100% disease-specific survival. MIA roughly coincides with Type C in Noguchi's classification. In general, lung adenocarcinomas are thought to follow a linear multistep progression whereby AAH progresses to AIS, which is followed by invasive adenocarcinoma.

To discuss the association between the radiological findings of GGO and the pathological diagnosis based on the new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification, we present the updated data from our previous study on lesions with GGO. The inclusion criteria for the study were the following: (I) a lesion diameter ≤3 cm; (II) a GGO proportion >50%; and (III) observation without treatment in the prior 6 months (12). To date, 32 of the 120 lesions were surgically resected. The histological diagnoses were AAH in 3 lesions, AIS in 12, MIA in 11, and invasive adenocarcinoma in 6.

The correlation between the changes in size and the histological types is shown in Figure 1. None of the 3 AAHs increased in size, whereas some of the tumors belonging to the types other than AAH did so. From these observations, it is impossible to determine histopathologic types by changes in lesion size.

The association between the radiological findings at the time of the resection and the pathological types is shown in Figure 2. The solid component proportions were categorized as 0%, 1-25%, 26-50%, and 51-100%. Preinvasive lesions, including AAH and AIS, are typically manifested as pure GGOs, whereas more advanced adenocarcinomas may include a larger solid component within the GGO region.

**Genetic features of lesions with GGO**

Several reports have examined the relationship between pulmonary nodules with GGO and the relatively high frequency of epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations. In a study of 38 patients with adenocarcinoma, the frequencies of GGO in patients with EGFR mutation and wild-types were 74% and 57%, respectively (13). In another study of 153 patients with adenocarcinoma, the GGO volume percentage in tumors with exon 21 mutation (61.7%±31.9%)
The changes in size (mm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Years from the first presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAH</td>
<td>AIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIA</td>
<td>Invasive AD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 1: The correlation between the changes in size from the first presentation to the last CT examination and the histological types. AAH existed only in the no-growth group, whereas the remaining histological types existed in both groups.

was significantly higher than that in EGFR wild-type tumors (30.0%±38.5%) (14). However, the frequencies of EGFR mutation did not significantly differ (25%, 36%, 86%, to 67% in AAH, AIS, MIA, and well-differentiated adenocarcinomas, respectively) (15). Both GGO and EGFR mutations are associated with adenocarcinoma histology, female gender, and nonsmoking status.

In comparison, the incidence of KRAS mutations was 33%, 12%, 8%, and 0% in AAH, AIS, MIA, and well-differentiated adenocarcinomas, respectively, in one report (15). The overall frequency of KRAS mutations in lung adenocarcinoma was limited to 13% (16). These findings cannot be explained without assuming that some tumors with KRAS mutations might undergo regression.

The association between radiological findings of GGO and pathological invasiveness

The accuracy rate of a CT-guided core needle biopsy for nodules with GGO depends on the lesion diameter and the proportion of the GGO component; it ranges from 64.6% to 93% (17-19). Recent CT fluoroscopy-guided biopsy has a higher accuracy rate ranging from 82% to 97% (20-22). Of course, we should interpret these results in light of a possible publication bias. The article on the new IASLC/ATS/ERS classification states that AIS and MIA should not be diagnosed in small biopsies or cytology specimens and that if a noninvasive pattern is present in a small biopsy, it should be referred to as a lepidic growth pattern (11). Therefore, diagnosis usually depends on radiographic findings, which correlate closely with the pathologic diagnosis in the determination of treatment options, including surgery.

A GGO proportion of 50% or more is suggested as a cutoff value for pathological noninvasiveness in each lesion size category (Table 1) (23-28). In lesions ≤3 cm with a GGO component <50%, the rate of lymph node metastasis ranges from 10% to 26% (23-28). Based on these data, in this article, we mainly address pulmonary nodules with GGO proportion >50%.

When pathological invasiveness is defined as the presence of vascular and lymphatic invasion and lymph node metastasis, the specificity of pathological invasiveness was 100% if the cut-off value was set as a consolidation/maximum tumor diameter (C/T) ratio of ≤0.5 for lesions ≤3 cm (29). There has only been one multi-institutional prospective study to predict pathological noninvasiveness. Based on the analysis of 545 patients, Suzuki et al. reported that the specificities for the diagnosis of pathological invasiveness were 96.4% for an adenocarcinoma ≤3 cm with a C/T ratio ≤0.5 and 98.7% for an adenocarcinoma ≤2 cm with a C/T ratio ≤0.25 (30). They concluded that radiological diagnosis of noninvasive lung cancer corresponded well with pathological invasiveness, and radiological noninvasive lung adenocarcinoma could be
defined as an adenocarcinoma ≤2 cm with a C/T ratio ≤0.25.

**Appropriate timing for the decision to surgically resect**

Because GGO-predominant lesions include malignancies, we must decide whether to resect at the first presentation. If the lesions were conservatively observed with CT examinations, we must decide when to resect them.

Recently, the Fleischner Society proposed recommendations for the management of GGOs (31). Briefly, they suggested that biopsy or surgical resection should be considered if the solid component becomes 5 mm or more.

The Japanese Society of CT Screening recommends that lesions with GGO ≥15 mm or a solid component ≥5 mm should be resected or biopsied (32).

Considering the Fleischner Society and the Japanese Society of CT Screening recommendations, we propose a conservative follow-up algorithm for pulmonary lesions ≤3 cm with a GGO component >50%, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Observation with CT examinations for lesions with GGO**

**Natural history of GGO**

It is essential to understand the natural history of GGOs to discuss the conservative follow-up of GGO. Several reports have revealed that some lesions with GGO exhibit gradual growth, whereas others persist for years without changes (33-36). Representative CT images are presented in Figure 4. Recently, 5 reports analyzing more than 100 nodules with GGO have been published, and the results are summarized in Table 2 (12,37-40). Our study is among these reports, and our results are further illustrated in Figure 5 (12). Although the inclusion criteria and the definition of growth are

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**Table 1** The association between GGO proportion and pathological invasiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First author [year] (references)</th>
<th>Lesion size (cm)</th>
<th>GGO proportion (%)</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>LN metastasis [%]</th>
<th>ly</th>
<th>v</th>
<th>pl</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asamuta [2003] (23)</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3 [15]</td>
<td>7*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
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<td>≥50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;50</td>
<td></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>12 [10]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzuki [2006] (25)</td>
<td>≤2</td>
<td>≥50</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>1 [0.9]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>233</td>
<td>46 [20]</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aoki [2001] (26)</td>
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<td>≥50</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1 [4]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>≤50</td>
<td></td>
<td>103</td>
<td>24 [23]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>&gt;50</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>18 [26]</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>&lt;50</td>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16 [21]</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>46</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LN, lymph node; ly, lymphatic invasion; v, vascular invasion; pl, pleural invasion; *, lymphatic invasion or vascular invasion.

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**Figure 3** Conservative follow-up algorithm for pulmonary lesions ≤3 cm with a GGO component >50%. Currently, lesions a with solid component ≥5 mm are recommended for resection. Pure GGOs ≥15 mm should be closely followed because of the tendency to grow. Part-solid GGOs ≥15 mm should be resected even if the solid component is <5 mm. All of the lesions without changes in the size and solid component should be followed for at least 3 years to accurately evaluate the tendency to grow.
variable, 10% to 27% of GGOs gradually grow, whereas others persist without changes for years (12,37-40). It should be noted that according to the updated data from our study, even some part-solid GGOs remained unchanged for more than 3 years; these included 45 pure GGOs (size range, 4 to 16 mm) and 7 part-solid GGOs (size range, 7 to 12 mm). However, the solid component proportions of these 7 part-solid GGOs were only 1-25%.

To discuss the difference between the natural history of pure GGOs and that of part-solid GGOs, we summarized them separately. Among the 5 reports mentioned above, 4 included the natural histories of pure GGOs, and these are summarized in Figure 6 (12,38-40). Approximately 80% of pure GGOs remained unchanged, while others grew in size or progressed to become part-solid GGOs. In comparison, the natural histories of part-solid GGOs were available in 3 reports; these histories are summarized in Figure 7 (12,38,40). Approximately 60% of the part-solid GGOs remained unchanged. These findings indicate that part-solid GGOs seem more likely to grow than pure GGOs are.

**Volume-doubling time (VDT) of nodules with GGO**

The VDT is useful for objectively evaluating GGO-predominant lesions’ tendency to grow. Based on the two-dimensional calculation method, the mean VDTs of 19 pure GGOs and 19 part-solid GGOs were 813 days (±375) and 457 days (±260), respectively (41). Other studies reported

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First author [year] (references)</th>
<th>Inclusion criteria</th>
<th>Patients</th>
<th>Lesions</th>
<th>Follow-up period</th>
<th>With growth [n, %]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Hiramatsu [2008] [37]</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>≥3 months</td>
<td>26^3 [21]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsuguma [2013] [38]</td>
<td>≤2 cm</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>2.4^a</td>
<td>41^a [24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang [2013] [39]</td>
<td>&gt;20%</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>&gt;2 years</td>
<td>4.9^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee [2013] [40]</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>&gt;2 years</td>
<td>3.8^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobayashi [2013] [12]</td>
<td>≤3 cm ≥50%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>≥6 months</td>
<td>4.2^b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Natural history of GGO based on more than 100 lesions

Figure 4: Computed tomography images of two representative pulmonary nodules with GGOs. A, A part-solid GGO lesion became larger, and its solid component increased after 3.3 years. B, A pure GGO lesion persisted without changing in size for 5.8 years.

Figure 5: Changes in the sizes of the 108 evaluated lesions from the time of the first presentation to the last CT scan. Twenty-nine lesions (red) increased by 2 mm or more, whereas the remaining 79 lesions (blue) persisted without changing in size. Adapted with permission from Wolters Kluwer Health © Kobayashi Y. et al. J Thorac Oncol 2013;8:309-14.
Figure 6 The natural history of pure GGOs. Five types of progression are suggested: (A) no change; (B) the size of the lesion increases, but there is no solid component; (C) the size of the lesion increases, and a solid component appears; (D) the solid component increases with no change in lesion size; and E. the size of the lesion decreases, and a solid component appears. The frequencies of each type are summarized. Approximately 80% of the pure GGOs remained unchanged.

Figure 7 The natural history of part-solid GGOs. Four types of progression are suggested: (A) no change; (B) the size of the lesion increases, and the solid component remains unchanged; (C) the size of the lesion and the solid component increases; (D) the solid component increases, with no changes in the lesion size. The frequencies of each type are summarized. Approximately 60% of the part-solid GGOs remained unchanged.
similar results: the mean VDT of pure GGOs ranged from 769 to 880 days (39,40,42). In a recent study using computer-aided three-dimensional evaluation, the mean VDTs of 19 pure GGOs and 28 part-solid GGOs were 629 (±404) days and 277 (±156) days, respectively (43). Based on these data, the VDT of pure GGOs was consistently longer than that of part-solid GGOs.

How long should we follow up nodules with GGO?

It is unclear how long we should follow GGO-predominant lesions that do not meet the criteria for surgical intervention. We analyzed the time at which lesions with GGO began to grow. Among the 108 lesions that met the abovementioned criteria, 29 lesions grew at the median follow-up period of 4.2 years. All 29 of the lesions began to grow within 3 years from the time of the first observation; of these, 13 lesions grew within 1 year, 12 lesions grew within 1.1 to 2 years, and 4 lesions grew within 2.1 to 3 years (12). Therefore, we concluded that such lesions should be followed for at least 3 years to accurately evaluate the lesion growth.

We discuss the appropriate follow-up period based on the VDT of GGO-predominant lesions. We computationally simulated the size changes of pure GGO lesions using the VDT of 813 to 880 days. A 5-mm lesion would grow to 6.7 to 6.8 mm after 3 years of observation, whereas a 10-mm lesion would grow to 13.3 to 13.6 mm within the same period (12). Are these small changes in size (i.e., 1.7 to 1.8 mm and 3.3 to 3.6 mm) detectable on CT examinations? Measurement errors should be considered when we evaluate the increase in size. Kakinuma et al. reported that increase in diameter of >1.72 mm is necessary to identify true growth, considering interobserver measurement errors (44). Therefore, these calculated changes in size should be detectable with CT analysis, and the follow-up period of 3 years seems to be reasonable.

It should be noted that the range of the VDTs stated above was wide in each study, and a few lesions actually began to grow after 3 years of observation (37-39). However, it is reasonable to regard the 3-year observation follow-up period as a benchmark for GGOs because the exceptional cases are in the minority.

Surgical procedure

When the GGO lesion in question is indicated for surgical resection, the extent of surgical resection presents another question. The standard treatment for operable non-small cell lung cancer is lobectomy with dissection of the ipsilateral hilar and mediastinal lymph nodes (45). Asamura et al. reported the prognosis of 545 patients who underwent lobectomy and lymph node dissection in the abovementioned multi-institutional prospective study (30) to predict pathological noninvasiveness. At the median follow-up period of 7.1 years, with the use of the cutoff value of an adenocarcinoma ≤3 cm with a C/T ratio ≤0.5, the 5-year overall survivals of radiologic noninvasive (121 patients) and invasive (424 patients) adenocarcinomas were 96.7% and 88.9%, respectively, and the difference was statistically significant (P<0.001). With the cutoff value of an adenocarcinoma ≤2 cm with a C/T ratio ≤0.25, the 5-year overall survivals of radiologic noninvasive (35 patients) and invasive (254 patients) adenocarcinomas were 97.1% and 92.4%, respectively, and the difference was not statistically significant (P=0.259) (46). These data showed that most of the patients with adenocarcinoma ≤3 cm with a GGO component >50% were cured by lobectomy.

Based on these favorable prognoses, limited surgical resection that preserves lung parenchyma might be indicated for patients with such GGO-predominant lesions. There have been many reports on recurrence-free survival after the limited resection of a GGO lesion. For example, 35 patients with pure GGOs ≤2 cm survived without recurrence after partial resection in 31 patients and segmentectomy in 4 patients (6). Similarly, 48 patients with lesions ≤2 cm with GGO proportions >50% survived without recurrence after partial resection in 33 patients and segmentectomy in 15 patients (47).

In contrast, local recurrence has also been reported. Nakao et al. reported that 4 out of 26 patients with GGO lesions ≤2 cm developed either cut-end recurrence or metachronous primary disease more than 5 years after the initial limited resection (48). In their study, a resection margin greater than 1 cm was ensured (48). Possible reasons for the cut-end recurrence are the difficulty of intraoperatively localizing the GGO and the vague GGO border. The preoperative CT-guided injection of agar near the target GGO lesion has been reported to be useful for making deeply located lesions palpable (49). Furthermore, intraoperative ultrasonography facilitated effective localization in a completely deflated lung and was useful for evaluating surgical margins (50). This method can be performed in complete video-assisted thoracic surgery.

Regardless of the favorable prognoses that were achieved by limited resection in the retrospective studies, prospective
Clinical trials are necessary to establish the efficacy and safety of limited resection. There are two ongoing clinical studies in Japan to assess the efficacy of limited surgical resection for small lung cancer lesions. One study is a Phase III trial comparing lobectomy and segmentectomy for small radiologically invasive lung cancer, which is an adenocarcinoma ≤ 2 cm with a C/T ratio > 0.25 (51). Another study is a Phase II trial of a wedge resection for small radiologically noninvasive lung cancer, which is an adenocarcinoma ≤ 2 cm with a C/T ratio ≤ 0.25 (52).

Conclusions

Surgery achieves favorable prognoses in patients with GGO-predominant lesions. However, the natural history of GGOs has been gradually clarified; some of them grow or increase their solid component, whereas others remain unchanged for years. Therefore, it remains unclear whether all GGO-predominant lesions should be surgically resected, and whether lesions without changes may not require resection. To distinguish GGOs with growth from those without growth, a 3-year observation period is a reasonable benchmark for follow-up. Future studies on the genetic differences between lesions with and without growth will help establish an appropriate management algorithm.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

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Video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy—from an experimental therapy to the standard of care

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Submitted Aug 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 12, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.48
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.48

Without a doubt, video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) has completely revolutionized modern thoracic surgery and significantly improved patient outcomes over the last two decades. Now is a crucial transition point—we are witnessing the VATS lobectomy technique transforming from an experimental procedure to the standard of care for patients with early-stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

A recent meta-analysis of propensity score matched patients by Cao et al. demonstrated significantly lower incidences of overall complications, prolonged air leak, pneumonia, atrial arrhythmias and renal failure, as well as shorter hospitalization compared to open thoracotomy (1). This study further consolidated the benefits of VATS lobectomy for our patients and offered the highest clinical evidence on this topic. In 2012, the Cross-sectional Survey on Lobectomy Approach (X-SOLA) involving 850 general thoracic surgeons worldwide demonstrated that VATS lobectomy has been accepted as a standard surgical procedure (2). The debate regarding the safety of VATS lobectomy is clearly a flavor in the past (2). Not only is it safe to perform lobectomy and segmentectomy using a total VATS approach, it is also technically feasible for resection of locally advanced lung tumors (3,4). To the best of my knowledge, there has been no publication thus far demonstrating inferior outcomes of VATS lobectomy compared to conventional open thoracotomy. On the contrary, a meta-analysis published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology once again confirmed that VATS lobectomy is an appropriate procedure for early-stage NSCLC, in terms of its safety, local oncological control, and survival, when compared with open surgery (5).

The VATS Lobectomy Consensus Meeting was held in Edinburgh, UK in November 2012, which marked the 20th anniversary of this procedure. For the first time in history, 50 world-leading minimally invasive thoracic surgeons from 16 countries reached consensus agreements on several important issues on VATS lobectomy, including its definition, patient eligibility, surgical standard of care and future training (6). It is clear that the Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) definition represents the globally accepted state-of-the-art VATS lobectomy technique (7). Eligibility for VATS lobectomy should include tumor size ≤7 cm, N0 or N1 status and FEV1 or DLCO ≥30% (6). More interestingly, the great majority of the experts regarded a randomized-controlled trial (RCT) comparing VATS lobectomy with open thoracotomy for early-stage NSCLC not necessary. There are generally two groups of people who are still demanding a RCT to come forward. One group is the non-believers who use the lack of RCT as the argument for not doing VATS lobectomy at all and will likely carry on with the traditional open surgery, irrespective of a RCT. But there is little doubt that the trajectory of open lobectomy will eventually follow the course of open cholecystectomy. The other group includes the skeptics who are open-minded and waiting to be convinced. But as a RCT is not going to happen, a more pragmatic approach to evidence-based practice is required.

By now, we need to be realistic that a RCT is never going to happen. Although I agree that this research methodology may have scientific merit, the logistical problems with such a trial are probably insurmountable for several reasons. Few, (if any), patients would agree to the random assignment. I seriously doubt that any patients would subject themselves to open thoracotomy upfront, in a center where VATS lobectomy technique is proficient and the patient is
properly informed about both procedures. At the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, such an attempt of randomization was made with only two patients recruited during a 6-month period. As a result, this trial was terminated prematurely. Indeed, given the promising results of the VATS approach achieved today and the lack of any published evidence on the superiority of open lobectomy over VATS, one has to appreciate the real logistic difficulties of recruiting sufficient numbers of patients to identify small differences (if any) in long-term outcomes. In addition, the surgical quality control on such a multi-institutional, or even multinational study would be exceedingly difficult at best. Furthermore, there would be significant challenges to identify surgeons who are proficient in both VATS lobectomy and open thoracotomy and more importantly, willing to randomize their patients. Finally, we know of no available funding agency for such a trial, and the costs of involved would make participation costs prohibitive for what would be a low-accruing study at all but a handful of centers.

One needs to acknowledge that the acquisition of level I evidence by performing RCTs may not be necessary for experimental therapies to mature into the standard of care. For example, there was never a RCT demonstrating the superiorion of metastasectomy for pulmonary metastases. It needs to be emphasized that a lack of RCT does not equate to a lack of evidence. Despite this, many of us continue to pursue high-level evidence for VATS lobectomy. The European and Asian collaborative groups are independently starting randomized studies comparing VATS segmentectomy versus VATS lobectomy for patients with small peripheral early-stage NSCLC. Our consensus project not only amalgamated the current expert recommendations, but also provided a pivotal role in setting the stage for further multi-institutional databases, the creation of mentoring workshops and standardized training programs to progressively develop this technique widely amongst thoracic surgical trainees and specialists (6).

The scientific question regarding the long-term oncologic efficacy of VATS lobectomy is an important one. However, the current data shows no long-term survival difference or even better survival outcomes with the VATS approach (5). Because of the marked perioperative benefits and equivalent long-term oncologic efficacy, VATS lobectomy must be considered as a standard surgical option for patients to choose. If the patient’s informed decision is VATS lobectomy, the patient should be referred to specialist VATS center for assessment. Denying the patient a chance to choose VATS lobectomy due to the lack of surgical expertise is not justifiable.

In summary, both current evidence and expert consensus indicate that patients undergoing VATS lobectomy for early stage NSCLC, even with suboptimal pulmonary functions, will obtain better perioperative surgical outcomes and at least equivalent long-term efficacy when compared with the open thoracotomy approach. These patients should be considered for VATS lobectomy before embarking on an open thoracotomy, at least in a center with this surgical expertise. In other words, VATS lobectomy for NSCLC after 20 years of surgical refinement should be the current state-of-the-art treatment for early stage NSCLC, unless any future studies demonstrate superior results for open lobectomy.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Yan TD. Video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy—from an experimental therapy to the standard of care. J Thorac Dis 2013;5(S3):S175-S176. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.48
Introduction

Despite the objections of some zealots, there is clearly more than one way to successfully complete a video-assisted thoracoscopic or “VATS” lobectomy, and further refinements to the technique are added yearly. Most thoracic surgeons would define VATS lobectomy as one in which the dissection is completed with reliance on a video image, without the use of a retractor to spread the ribs and increase the width of the intercostal spaces. The actual number, location and aggregate length of the involved incisions are largely a matter of surgeon preference. Further, the actual methods used—fissure dissection compared with a “fissure-less” approach; Use of sharp, blunt or cautery techniques—is also at the discretion of the surgeon, as long as the basic tenet of individual dissection and ligation of the lobar structures is observed.

Operative technique

Preoperative assessment

Early stage (stages I and II) lung cancer is the most common indication for thoracoscopic lobectomy, although increasingly these techniques are applied in the setting of locally advanced disease following induction therapy. Benign tumors and focal areas of bronchiectasis are also usually amenable to a minimally invasive approach. The indications and contraindications to VATS lobectomy are covered in detail in another chapter in this monograph.

The preoperative assessment of patients considered for VATS lobectomy is routine, and is tailored to the indications for surgery. Preoperative imaging studies, including the use of computed tomography (CT) and positron emission tomography (PET), are helpful to confirm the planned extent of resection and the suitability of a VATS approach. Adequate pulmonary reserve is assessed through the use of pulmonary function testing, with occasional use of perfusion scanning and exercise testing when appropriate. Testing for occult cardiac disease is performed when indicated. In general, the preoperative assessment of a prospective patient is similar to any individual considered for pulmonary resection.

Anesthesia and preoperative bronchoscopy

The anesthetic technique for VATS lobectomy is similar to other cases of pulmonary resection. A means for lung isolation, either with the use of a double lumen endotracheal tube or bronchial blocker, is routine. Placement of a thoracic epidural catheter for postoperative pain control, while common in open thoracotomy cases, is usually not needed following thoracoscopic resection and is routinely omitted. It is often helpful to place intercostal blocks using 0.25% bupivacaine at the end of the procedure to aid immediate postoperative analgesia.

Surgeons are well advised to perform bronchoscopy prior to the procedure, to assess the targeted lobar orifice for abnormalities or any variations in anatomy which could have a significant impact on successful completion of the case. For example, encroachment of tumor on the planned line of bronchial resection could lead to abandonment of the minimally invasive approach.

Incisions and general dissection techniques

The vast majority of thoracoscopic lobectomy techniques employ either two, three, or four incisions, with three perhaps the most common. In all approaches, the camera
port (5 to 10 mm) is typically placed low in the chest—7th or 8th intercostal space—and either in the mid or anterior axillary line. A “utility” or “access” incision (3 to 6 cm) is usually placed in the anterior axillary line, over the anterior hilum (about 5th intercostal space) in the cases of upper lobectomy, and an interspace or two lower (adjacent to the major fissure) for middle and lower lobectomies. Third and fourth incisions, commonly 10 mm in size, are placed either through the auscultory triangle, high in the mid-axillary line, or low in the chest in the posterior axillary line. In all cases, no rib spreading is used at any of the incision sites. A soft tissue retractor, either a weitlaner or a commercially available device, is often used at the utility incision. Care must be used at all the incisions to avoid excessive “torqueing” of the rigid instruments on the adjacent ribs and intercostal bundles to avoid postoperative neuralgia.

The surgical procedure is facilitated by roughly aligning the view of the camera with the general direction of the dissection. This is most easily achieved with cameras designed to provide an angled view, either at 30 or 45 degrees from the long axis of the scope. This also allows the surgeon to “see around” the hilum with the camera in a trocar site low in the chest. It is important for the surgeon to remember that occasionally a better view may be available by placing the camera in the access or posterior incision; Flexibility with the operative technique in this fashion can often dramatically lessen the difficulty of the procedure.

Dissection of the hilar structures may be accomplished either using a largely blunt, sharp or cautery-based technique. A thorough knowledge of the hilar anatomy greatly enhances the safety of all of these techniques. Vital structures such as the phrenic nerve or recurrent laryngeal nerve should be identified early and preserved. While all of these techniques are useful, each has obvious drawbacks. It is likely that a combination of approaches probably produces the best results.

Pulmonary vessels and bronchi within the hilum are ligated with endoscopic staplers, although a “TA” type stapler may be used for the bronchus at the surgeon’s discretion. It is important to introduce the stapler into the chest such that, once around the vessel or bronchus, it exits into “free space” and is not encumbered by other structures. This will avoid injury to other tissues, and assure a secure closure of the target. Bronchial arteries may be cauterized or clipped, or stapled in rare cases involving long standing pulmonary infection. Fissures are typically stapled unless complete, in which case cautery may be used.

It is recommended that specimen removal is achieved with the use of a specimen bag, to minimize contact with the soft tissues at the access incision site. Use of this technique has reduced the incidence of “port-site” recurrence which plagued early attempts at thoracoscopic resection.

In cases of malignancy, nodal dissection may be performed either before or after completion of the pulmonary resection. Initial dissection often facilitates the subsequent lobectomy by increasing the mobility of the specimen at the hilar level. Further, identification of significant N2 disease, previously unrecognized, would allow for termination of the procedure prior to resection to allow for induction therapy. Alternatively, access to the various nodal stations is often improved after the pulmonary resection, thus enhancing the completeness of the dissection. Removal of the hilar and lobar nodes is performed during the ligation of the various hilar structures.

Recently, reports of minimally invasive lobectomies utilizing a single port, or “uniport” approach, have been published. This fascinating technique, still in evolution, is described in a separate submission to this monograph.

**Right upper lobectomy (RUL)**

The most common technique for “fissure-less” right upper lobectomy utilizes an “antero to posterior” approach, wherein the dissection progresses from the anterior structures in the hilum to the more posterior structures, dividing the involved fissures last. This technique is felt to minimize complications of air leak which may be associated with significant dissection within an incomplete fissure.

The branches of the superior pulmonary vein pertaining to the RUL are dissected free, and divided with a vascular stapler. In most cases, the stapler is best introduced through the posterior trocar site, or through the camera port. The pleura is incised around the top of the hilum, extending posteriorly to the bronchus intermedius. This allows dissection of the truncus anterior branch of the pulmonary artery, which is divided in a similar fashion. Great care must be taken to avoid excessive retraction of the lobe posteriorly during this maneuver, which may result in arterial injury. It is a good practice to minimize traction on pulmonary vessels during staple ligation, leading to a more secure vascular closure.

Division of the truncus anterior branch will allow improved retraction of the lobe posteriorly, exposing the right upper lobe bronchus and the posterior ascending branch of the pulmonary artery. Either may ligated first,
allowing improved exposure for the second structure. Dissection along the ongoing pulmonary artery will allow identification of the middle lobe branches, as well as the branch to the superior segment of the lower lobe. Occasionally, a separate arterial branch may be identified to the anterior RUL segment. Access to the structures to be divided may be enhanced by initiating division of the minor fissure anteriorly; Alternatively, one may divide the RUL bronchus from a posterior approach.

Finally, one completes the major and minor fissures pertaining to the upper lobe with a stapler. As the RUL becomes more mobile, the surgeon must be careful not to prevent twisting or torsion of the lobe at this step, which may lead to inaccurate completion of the fissures.

If the major fissure is complete or nearly so, it is certainly permissible to dissect and expose the artery within the fissure. Doing so will likely aid in completion of the minor fissure, facilitate identification of the superior segmental pulmonary artery, and may improve exposure to the posterior ascending branch of the pulmonary artery for ligation. However, the surgeon should avoid routine dissection within the fissure for a RUL, as is commonly taught in open surgical techniques. Avoidance of air leak is important to maximize the benefits of a thoracoscopic approach, producing shorter chest tube duration and hospital stay.

Left upper lobectomy (LUL)

The location and number of incisions is analogous to those used in right upper lobectomy. An anterior to posterior, or fissure-less approach, is used. Retracting the lung posteriorly and caudally, the pleura overlying the anterior, superior, and posterior hilum is excised. The superior pulmonary vein is dissected free and ligated with a vascular endoscopic stapler. The surgeon must be assured that a separate inferior vein is present and not included in the stapler, as it is not uncommon on the left side for the two pulmonary veins to join prior to entry into the pericardium. The first branches of the pulmonary artery are then dissected free, a maneuver facilitated by removal of adjacent lymph nodes. Again, the surgeon must take care to avoid excessive traction on the LUL, which may lead to arterial injury as the surgeon attempts to expose these initial branches. Introduction of the vascular stapler for these branches is usually through the access incision or the camera port; the anterior location of these incisions allows the stapler anvil to slip around the branch into free space, with minimal torque on the vessel itself.

At this point, only the pulmonary artery branches to the posterior segment and the lingula remain. Exposing these branches is often helped by division of the LUL bronchus. After division of the superior vein, the surgeon has ready access to the crotch between the upper and lower lobe bronchi. Dissection in this area, along with separation of the pulmonary artery from the LUL bronchus as the former wraps around the bronchus superiorly, allows safe isolation of the LUL bronchus. Introduction of an appropriate endoscopic stapler from the anterior camera port will allow safe passage of the stapler between the bronchus and the pulmonary artery into the free space superior to the hilum. After bronchial division, it is fairly straightforward to identify and ligate the remaining pulmonary artery branches to the LUL. The fissure is then completed with a stapler. Occasionanly, analogous to the RUL technique, it is advantageous to initiate fissure division prior to this point, to allow better exposure to the deeper hilar vessels.

Right middle lobectomy (RML)

A completely “fissure-less” technique for RML resection is not possible, due to the location of the lobe between the upper and middle lobes. However, as the dissection proceeds in a caudal to cranial direction, the minor fissure is divided last. Despite this, the RML is perhaps the easiest lobe to using thoracoscopic techniques. For this resection, it is helpful to employ an auscultory triangle port to allow passage of the endoscopic stapler, as noted below.

The RML vein is isolated and divided, with the vascular stapler introduced via the posterior (if present) or camera port. Minimal dissection within the major fissure usually yields the pulmonary artery, and the portion of the major fissure between the middle and lower lobes may be completed either with a stapler or the cautery if nearly complete. The surgeon must be careful to identify and preserve a small pulmonary artery branch, invariably present, arising in the medial major fissure to the medial basilar segments of the right lower lobe.

Completion of the fissure allows access to the RML bronchus. The bronchus is freed by developing the plane between the pulmonary artery in the fissure and the bronchus, following the artery more proximally as it wraps around the bronchus superiorly. More anteriorly, the bronchus is separated from the pulmonary venous branches to the RUL, and the bronchus is encircled and then ligated with an endoscopic stapler introduced via the posterior port.

With the bronchus divided, the lobe is retracted
cephalad, and one or two pulmonary artery branches are exposed to the RML. Just superior to this, the vein to the posterior segment of the RUL is seen. The arterial branches are isolated and divided either individually or occasionally with the same vascular stapler. If a posterior port is used at this point, it is important that it not be located too caudal, which will make the safe passage of the stapler more difficult. After arterial division, the minor fissure is completed, separating the middle from the upper lobe.

**Lower lobectomy (RLL, LLL)**

In the case of either right or left lower lobectomy, the operation starts with division of the inferior pulmonary ligament, followed by isolation and ligation of the inferior pulmonary vein. The surgeon should attempt to visualize and include the branch to the superior segment, which in some cases may arise low or even separate from the basilar vein branch. In addition, the left side identification of a separate superior vein is prudent, as mentioned previously. Pleural division posteriorly to the area of the upper lobe and anteriorly to the major fissure facilitates this portion of the case.

At this point, as the dissection proceeds cephalad into the subcarinal space, the surgeon makes a choice about the fissure. If complete or nearly so, the fissure may be completed first, allowing access to isolate and divide the pulmonary artery branches to the lower lobe. On the right, the posterior ascending branch to the RUL must be visualized and preserved, while on the left the lingular artery must be identified. After arterial division, only the bronchus remains, which is dissected free of adjacent nodal material for isolation and ligation using either an endoscopic or TA stapler. The bronchial stump should be short, but on the left care must be taken not to incorporate the bronchial side of a migrated double lumen endotracheal tube in the staple line.

If the fissure is incomplete, one may dissect down through the fissure, identify the pulmonary artery, and proceed as above. However, a better approach is to complete a “fissure-less” dissection in a caudal to cranial fashion, developing the fissure last. To do so, after vein ligation, the surgeon proceeds with the dissection into the lower subcarinal space. Anteriorly, the wall of the lower lobe bronchus is followed into the fissure. On the right, the RML bronchus is identified and kept cephalad to the line of dissection. On the left, a similar approach is used to the identified upper lobe bronchus. If the pulmonary artery is seen at this point, this greatly facilitates dissection between the two structures. A similar dissection technique is utilized posteriorly. On the left, the pulmonary artery is simple to identify posteriorly, enabling dissection between bronchus and artery. On the right, dissection posteriorly proceeds just cephalad to the identified superior segmental bronchus. Working from both anterior and posterior directions, some blunt dissection may be needed to complete bronchial isolation. Partial division of the fissure at this point of the case may greatly enhance visualization. When the lower lobe bronchus is encircled, it is divided with an endoscopic stapler. This then allows isolation and ligation of the pulmonary artery to the lower lobe. Again, care must be taken with respect to the lingular artery and the posterior ascending branch on the right. Finally, the remaining major fissure is completed.

**Closure and perioperative management**

Following placement of a single chest tube and assurance of hemostasis, chest closure is routine. Absorbable suture is used for the muscle layers and soft tissues external to the chest wall, with no intercostal sutures placed. The skin is closed with absorbable subcuticular suture.

Postoperative management is also routine, but should incorporate a paradigm shift from management strategies used for open lobectomy. As mentioned earlier, some of the advantages in minimally invasive surgery are lost if care plans based on a several day hospital stay after thoracotomy are used. Early mobilization and ambulation, combined with aggressive chest tube management, will result in earlier discharge from hospital, faster recovery and better patient satisfaction.

**Outcomes and conclusions**

The safety and efficacy of thoracoscopic lobectomy have been demonstrated in several large studies, comparable to open lobectomy (1-3). VATS lobectomy has been shown to be associated with less morbidity (4-7), at least equivalent mortality (4,8,9), shorter hospital stays (4-8), improved functional outcomes (10-12), and less costs (13-15) compared with an open approach. Perhaps most important, minimally invasive lobectomy is oncologically equivalent (1,4,8,9,16,17), at a minimum, to lobectomy through open thoracotomy. A direct comparison with open lobectomy remains lacking, though, and the concept of a prospective randomized trial comparing the open and VATS...
approaches has been considered repeatedly. However, the recognized advantages of a thoracoscopic approach among dedicated thoracic surgeons have likely eroded any clinical equipoise needed for such a trial. Indeed, these advantages are not lost on practicing thoracic surgeons. Approximately 50% of lobectomies registered in the Society of Thoracic Surgeons General Thoracic Database are completed via a thoracoscopic approach (18), and the percentage continues to increase.

Current frontiers in thoracoscopic surgery now include chest wall resection and reconstruction, muscle flap transposition, sleeve resection, and the use of uniportal techniques. In the years ahead, we may expect advances in these areas, along with further refinement of established techniques in thoracoscopic surgery.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Contraindications of video-assisted thoracoscopic surgical lobectomy and determinants of conversion to open

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Abstract: Since the introduction of anatomic lung resection by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) was introduced 20 years ago, VATS has experienced major advances in both equipment and technique, introducing a technical challenge in the surgical treatment of both benign and malignant lung disease. The demonstrated safety, decreased morbidity, and equivalent efficacy of this minimally invasive technique has led to the acceptance of VATS as a standard surgical modality for early-stage lung cancer and increasing application to more advanced disease. However, only a minority of lobectomies are performed using the VATS technique, likely owing to concern for intraoperative complications. Optimal operative planning, including obtaining baseline pulmonary function tests with diffusion measurements, positron emission tomography and/or computed tomography scans, bronchoscopy, and endobronchial ultrasound or mediastinoscopy, can be used to anticipate and potentially prevent the occurrence of complications. With increasing focus on operative planning, as well as comfort and experience with the VATS technique, the indications for which this technique is used has grown. As such, the absolute contraindications have narrowed to inability to tolerate single lung ventilation, inability to achieve complete resection with lobectomy, T3 or T4 tumors, and N2 or N3 disease. However, as VATS lobectomy has been applied to more advanced stage disease, the rate of conversion to open thoracotomy has increased, particularly early in the surgeon's learning curve. Causes of conversion are generally classified into four categories: intraoperative complications, technical problems, anatomical problems, and oncological conditions. Though it is difficult to anticipate which patients may require conversion, it appears that these patients do not suffer from increased morbidity or mortality as a result of conversion to open thoracotomy. Therefore, with a focus on a safe and complete resection, conversion should be regarded as a means of completing resections in a traditional manner rather than as a surgical failure.

Keywords: Video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS); lobectomy; contraindications; positron emission tomography (PET)

Submitted Jun 04, 2013. Accepted for publication Jun 15, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.08

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.08

Introduction

Since the introduction of anatomic lung resection or lobectomy for lung cancer by video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) in the 1990s, VATS has experienced major advances in both equipment and technique and has subsequently been demonstrated to be safe and effective for the treatment of early-stage lung cancer (1-5). It is associated with decreased morbidity and length of stay and offers equivalence in terms of survival and recurrence rates (6,7). As such, VATS lobectomy is now accepted as a standard surgical modality for early-stage lung cancer and has been gradually applied to more advanced disease (8). However, only a minority of lobectomies are performed using the VATS technique, as only approximately 45% of lobectomies registered in the Society of Thoracic
Surgeons database are performed thorascopically (9). Its adoption has been variable, likely due to perceived technical challenges when compared to an open approach and the concern for intraoperative complications, especially during a surgeon’s learning curve, discouraging smaller centers from adopting VATS lobectomy (10).

**Operative planning**

As with most surgical procedures, the optimal strategy for managing complications of VATS pulmonary resections is to prevent their occurrence. VATS represents a new approach and not a new procedure. Therefore, the preoperative evaluation and indications for VATS major resections remains the same as for conventional resection. Avoiding complications is dependent on appropriate preoperative workup and patient selection. Planning for as safe a VATS resection as possible involves consideration of patient characteristics, the radiographic appearance of the area of lung to be removed, and the anticipated technical aspects of the case.

All patients have a preoperative examination with a positron emission tomography (PET), computed tomography (CT) scan, bronchoscopy, and endobronchial ultrasound/mediastinoscopy for preoperative staging (unless it is benign lung disease or a peripherally-located T1 tumor on PET) (11). Additionally, preoperative evaluation and staging for thoracoscopic resection should include pulmonary function tests (PFTs) with diffusion measurements. The performance of thoracoscopic procedures is usually dependent on the ability to achieve and maintain single-lung ventilation, which involves careful consideration of the patient’s contralateral lung status. Obtaining quantitative ventilation-perfusion scans can help in determining the ability of a patient with marginal functional status to tolerate pulmonary resection. The lowest limits in lung function parameters that would still be considered acceptable for VATS lobectomy have not been scientifically studied (12), but this would depend upon, among other factors, the surgeon’s judgment, experience, and technique; the contribution of the excised lobe to overall lung function; and the exact location of the pathology. Additionally, VATS resections have been shown to be able to be accomplished in patients with lung function who have typically been thought to be too poor to undergo more conventional resection via thoracotomy (13,14). We have performed lobectomies on selected patients whose forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV,1) was less than 30% predicted with excellent outcomes (15). In fact, one major advantage of VATS resection is that it allows recruitment of older and sicker patients with multiple comorbidities who would otherwise not be suitable candidates for resection through a conventional thoracotomy approach (13,16). Moreover, aggressive preoperative pulmonary rehabilitation can be considered in patients initially considered not to be candidates for resection owing to poor PFTs (17). Finally, patients who are not candidates for an anatomical resection could still be considered for VATS wedge resection (18). In all such cases, it is imperative to consider that conversion to thoracotomy is possible for all patients for whom VATS resection is planned.

**Contraindications to VATS lobectomy**

Since major lung resection by VATS was first introduced in the early 1990s, the indications and contraindications of these procedures have changed over time. Thus, whereas initially a history of prior surgery, endobronchial lesion, or even the administration of induction chemotherapy were regarded as contraindications, the experience that has since been gained, together with improvements in instrumentation and thorascopic imaging, have now changed this situation in most hospitals with experience in VATS. As such, recent studies have shown that lobectomy by VATS in cases of bronchogenic carcinoma with prior chemotherapy can be carried out safely and effectively without an increase in the rate of complications (19). And although endobronchial lesions were previously considered a contraindication for VATS, some authors do not consider this issue a contraindication at present (20). Furthermore, there are publications reporting on thoracoscopic sleeve resections (21).

Nevertheless, in addition to the general contraindications, such as recent myocardial infarction and severe coagulopathy, there remain a few absolute contraindications that are specifically applicable to VATS major resections. Apart from the inability to tolerate single lung ventilation, which is relatively uncommon, absolute contraindications to thoracoscopic lobectomy include the inability to achieve complete resection with lobectomy, lobectomy, T4 tumors, and N3 disease (22). Absolute tumor size criteria that would preclude VATS resections have not been defined, though large specimens (tumors greater than 6 cm in diameter) may not be amenable to removal without rib spreading; this tends to negate the benefit of minimal access surgery. Despite these previously cited absolute contraindications, the ideal patient for thoracoscopic lobectomy, particularly...
early in a surgeon’s experience performing the operation, is one with a peripheral T1 or T2 lesion without nodal disease.

It remains controversial as to whether VATS lobectomy is justified for lung cancer patients with lymph node metastasis (23). It was generally considered that patients with lymph node metastasis were not suitable candidates for VATS lobectomy (8,24). Additionally, it has been suggested that if a suspicious looking mediastinal lymph node is detected, it should be biopsied and a frozen section examination performed; confirmation of N2 disease mandates conversion to open surgery for complete mediastinal lymphadenectomy or induction chemotherapy depending on the exact circumstances (25). These guidelines have stemmed from a concern over incomplete lymph node dissection during VATS lobectomy. However, Watanabe et al. reported that the outcomes of VATS lobectomy were comparable to those of thoracotomy in clinical N0 but postoperative pathological N2 patients (26). Additionally, previous studies have compared the efficacy of a lymph node dissection of a VATS lobectomy with standard thoracotomy and have demonstrated that the results are similar (23,27,28). Nevertheless, it remains that in some institutions, preoperative or intraoperative lymph node metastasis is a contraindication for a VATS lobectomy and mandates conversion if discovered intraoperatively (29).

True pleural symphysis that leads to abandonment of the VATS approach is uncommon in our experience, but it may represent a contraindication for surgeons without extensive experience. Once a space is created when the correct plane in the pleural space is entered, endoscopic adhesiolysis can proceed quickly and safely using a combination of sharp and blunt dissection under videoscopic vision. VATS has the advantage over conventional thoracotomy in visualizing, with high resolution for details, the apex and base of the hemithorax.

Relative contraindications include tumors that are visible at bronchoscopy and the presence of hilar lymphadenopathy that would complicate vascular dissection (benign or malignant). Tumors visible in the bronchus by bronchoscopy within 2 cm of the origin of the lobe to be resected and where a possible sleeve resection might be needed are likely not amenable to a VATS approach. Calcified hilar adenopathy, such as with histoplasmosis, can likewise complicate vascular dissection (30).

The use of prior thoracic irradiation and induction therapy have previously been considered relative contraindications, but thoracoscopic lobectomy has been shown to be both safe and effective for patients who received induction therapy for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (19,31). Prior thoracic surgery, incomplete or absent fissures, and benign mediastinal adenopathy should not be considered contraindications. Redo-VATS surgery has been reported, and prior surgery is no longer considered an absolute contraindication to VATS resection (32). Though fused fissures present a technical challenge to VATS lobectomy, with experience and proper operative planning, successful lobectomy can be accomplished—the fused fissure should be divided last following the pulmonary vasculature and the bronchus. Finally, though chest wall involvement requires thoracotomy for resection, VATS can be used to perform the lung portion of the surgery and allow placement of the incision better situated for the area of the chest wall to be removed.

It is important to note that with improving surgeon experience and comfort with VATS lobectomy, just as several indications have been modified and expanded, the number of contraindications has been reduced. However, there remains some institutional variability in contraindications for this same reason. In a high-volume tertiary care institution experienced in the technique of VATS lobectomy such as our own, contraindications evolved to include a narrow patient population. Other institutions cite chest wall invasion, tumor infiltration beyond the fissure, invasion of the pericardium or diaphragm, centrally placed tumors in the hilum and adherent to vessels, as well as induction radiotherapy or chemotherapy as contraindications (11,33). Nevertheless, we do not consider these absolute contraindications. Additionally, evidence from our institution has shown VATS lobectomy to be safe and technically viable in patients receiving induction chemotherapy (19,31). As such, these additional institutional contraindications likely represent surgeon comfort and experience with VATS techniques rather than those deemed necessary for patient safety, anatomical reasons, and complete oncological resection.

**Conversion to open thoracotomy**

Conversion rates for thoracoscopic lobectomy to open thoracotomy have been reported to range from 2% to as high as 23%, with these higher rates stemming from patients with more advanced NSCLC (34-40). Krasna et al. reported an 8% conversion rate in 321 patients undergoing VATS procedures for various indications.
(41). Most commonly the conversion to thoracotomy was deemed necessary because of oncological reasons, such as centrally located tumors requiring vascular control or sleeve resection, or unexpected T3-T4 tumors that infiltrate to the chest wall, diaphragm, or superior vena cava. These authors concluded that abnormal hilar nodes with granulomatous or metastic disease adherent to the superior pulmonary vein may be better evaluated and more safely resected with thoracotomy. However, about 30% of thoracotomy conversions in this series were for non-oncological reasons, such as pleural adhesions (41). In the series of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center Thoracic Service, conversion to open thoracotomy because VATS was not “technically adequate” occurred in 44/410 patients (11%) (42). In a recent institutional study, our conversion rate was 4% (36/916) when patients had an attempted VATS lobectomy for lung cancer, with patients with clinically node-positive disease (N1-N3) having statistically significantly higher conversion rates than clinical N0 patients (43).

Overall, causes of conversion can generally be classified into four categories: intraoperative complications (e.g., bleeding from vascular injury, usually to branches of the pulmonary artery and occasionally injury to the pulmonary vein; bronchus injury by the endotracheal tube), technical problems (e.g., equipment or stapler malfunction, failure to progress, poor visualization), anatomical problems (e.g., absent or thick fissure, calcified peri-arterial lymph nodes, diffuse pleural adhesions, chest wall invasion, tumor size precluding removal through the utility incision, need for sleeve resection), and oncological conditions (e.g., intraoperative discovery of N2 tumors, invasion of the artery, invasion of the parietal pleura, positive margins that need to be extended). However, the ability to predict which patients are more likely to require conversion to thoracotomy has not been thoroughly addressed to date. Given that studies have demonstrated that emergent conversion to open thoracotomy has been found to be significantly correlated with VATS-associated complications during the first 30 postoperative days (44), the ability to anticipate patients that may be high-risk for conversion may prevent this unexpected eventuality and its associated morbidity.

One of the most dreaded complications for surgeons is massive bleeding from pulmonary vessels. Dense adhesive disease often increases the risk of vascular injury, necessitating conversion to an open procedure. It is important to note that even in such cases, dissection of vessels can generally be difficult, and risk of vessel injury and bleeding can be high even by thoracotomy. Both Craig et al. and Yim et al. have reported mechanical failure of the staplers that resulted in massive bleeding (45,46). In these cases, bleeding was controlled by pressing on the bleeder with a sponge stick and conversion to thoracotomy. It should be pointed out that these are anecdotal cases, and the mechanical staplers available now are generally very reliable, and while stapler malfunction may occur, it is relatively rare. Certain avoidable conditions have been incorrectly associated with the stapler. For example, the use of metal clips in the hilar dissection is discouraged, as the stapler will not function if a clip is included in the stapler’s jaw. Additionally, attention to the amount of tension when retracting during the stapling process, the arterial branch may tear before the completion of the stapling when the linear strength of the artery is reduced with the initiation of this process. Additionally, several technical developments have avoided the bleeding problems and consequent conversion to thoracotomy that are pitfalls of VATS techniques (46). These include use of visceral pleura to buttress staple lines, routine use of vertically apposed staplers, and expertise in extracorporeal and intracorporeal knot tying with fine suture.

Nevertheless, these results highlight the fact that even in the event of significant bleeding from a major pulmonary vein or artery branch injury that cannot be repaired thoracoscopically, the source of bleeding can usually be identified and controlled with a thorascopic instrument to allow controlled and stable conversion to thoracotomy. However, these injuries are usually managed successfully without conversion by the experienced thoracoscopic surgeon. With advanced skill and experience in endoscopic suturing, in the event of minor to moderate bleeding from the pulmonary vasculature, conversion can often be avoided.

Video equipment malfunctions are unique to VATS compared with open thoracotomy. The surgeon must be prepared when video equipment failures occur to prevent complications from taking place as a result. The operating room team must have someone familiar with the set-up of the camera, light source, and monitors present at all times as well as the ability to obtain back-up equipment or contact an expert in the event of equipment failure. Additionally, the surgeon and the entire operative team must always be prepared with the instruments needed to convert to thoracotomy in the event of patient instability or non-recoverable video equipment problems.

An additionally described cause of conversion to open lobectomy is particular to areas in which histoplasmosis is
endemic, specifically states bordering the Ohio River valley and the lower Mississippi River, making the hilar dissection challenging (30). In a recent study by Samson et al., patients with evidence of calcifications specifically involving the hilum of resection had a 37% risk of conversion, and those with evidence of calcifications along the bronchial tree, but not along the hilum of resection had an intermediate rate of conversion at 25% (47). In fact, calcification score was the only predictor of conversion to open thoracotomy in multivariable modeling including lobe resection, race, gender, reoperation status, age, body mass index, tumor size, baseline PFTs, and time since first VATS lobectomy case to factor in the possible learning curve effect. In another study examining unplanned conversion for VATS lobectomy by Park and colleagues, 41% of conversions were due to hilar nodal anthracofibrosis and hilar adhesions, and were associated with increased operative time and length of stay (48). When the authors retrospectively reviewed the CT scans, hilar calcifications were seen in 71% of these patients. In these cases, careful review of the preoperative chest CT scan is essential, focusing on calcifications in the hilum, especially at the origin of the lobar bronchus that is to be divided. To date, however, there are few studies evaluating the role of imaging studies in selecting the surgical approach for lobectomy, and those that do are limited to the size and location of the tumor. Mason and colleagues evaluated the role of imaging studies in predicting complications associated with VATS and demonstrated that pleural thickening and calcifications on CT or chest X-ray predicted difficulties (49). However, this study included all VATS procedures with only a small number of lobectomies.

Samson and colleagues additionally demonstrated, not surprisingly, that when compared with completed VATS, converted VATS operations were significantly more likely to result in postoperative atrial fibrillation, increased length of stay, increased duration of chest tube drainage, longer surgery time, and increase in estimated blood loss (47). Interestingly, on comparison of converted VATS to planned open thoracotomy, VATS conversion was only an independent predictor of longer length of stay, and combined mortality and morbidity were similar. In fact, several studies have examined the implications of unplanned conversion from VATS to thoracotomy. One study evaluated the outcomes in 26 patients who underwent a converted VATS procedure and compared them with the outcomes of 52 patients who underwent a planned thoracotomy. There were no significant differences between the groups in perioperative (30-day) or long-term outcomes (50). Sawada and colleagues found that VATS conversion was associated with increased blood loss, perioperative complications, and length of surgery compared with completed VATS, similar to the recent data of Samson and colleagues (47,51). Nevertheless, these authors concluded that patients with evidence of calcifications involving the hilum of resection can undergo attempted VATS lobectomy, but perhaps this should not be attempted during the learning curve or by surgeons who are not as experienced with open pulmonary resection in these patients.

The number of patients undergoing VATS lobectomy as opposed to an open procedure has significantly increased over recent years but conversion rates have fallen (52). The anticipated learning curve for an advanced minimally invasive procedure can be clearly tracked. Cause of conversion initially was for a variety of reasons, but with experience and as confidence levels increased, reason for conversion for anatomical reasons has also increased, possibly reflecting bolder patient selection or discomfort with a perceived anatomical problem, such as chest wall adhesions. In addition, there are oncological reasons a decision to convert may be taken, with tumor size and location and extranodal invasion by a metastatic node being obvious markers. However, apart from the latter case, the decision of conversion depends solely on the surgeon's preference. Several reports have supported the use of VATS for complete lymph node dissection and showed no significant differences in survival or recurrence between VATS and thoracotomy (8,53-55). Thus, in cases of gross lymph node metastasis, the decision to convert must be carefully weighed.

But as programs developed, despite increasing numbers of VATS resections, conversions for anatomical reasons have tended to fall as have conversions for vascular injury (53). This is explained by the experience gained in vascular dissection and in the management of the fissure, particularly in complex cases, post-chemotherapy patients and even reoperations. The nature of the conversion and whether conversion is controlled is important both for the obvious safety aspects of the patient but also for how smoothly the minimally invasive approach is perceived amongst colleagues as well as the confidence of the surgeons performing the VATS lobectomy.

Generally, high conversion rates have declined as surgeons became more familiar with advanced thoracoscopic lobectomy, an operation with a challenging learning curve. This trend has been demonstrated previously, with a decreasing proportion of conversions as an increasing
number of thoracoscopic lobectomies were performed for advanced-stage disease (35). And although conversion to thoracotomy should always be considered as a tool available to manage any unexpected situation, conversion rates have been shown to be as low as 1.6% to 2.5% in large series by experienced thoracoscopic surgeons (35,56). Further, though it is clear that the accumulation of experience has improved the surgical team's skill, allowing them to avoid and/or manage problems, resulting in a reduced conversion rate, these results also suggest that there remains a patient population in which VATS lobectomy is difficult to perform. It is generally accepted that dense hilar lymphadenopathy, pleural symphysis and fused fissure make VATS lobectomy difficult, and increase the likelihood of conversion to an open procedure. Specifically, persistent air leak beyond seven days was the most common morbidity seen in earlier experience and almost certainly related to hilar dissection when the fissures were incomplete (57).

Ultimately, the decision for conversion is left to each surgeon's skills and patience. It is difficult to establish any guideline for the conversion; however, our approximate timing of the decision for conversion is as follows: in cases with bleeding, as previously described, a sponge stick is first applied in order to tamponade the bleeding. Once the bleeding is controlled, a decision about whether or not the repair can be performed under VATS is made. When the bleeding cannot be controlled or repair seems to be difficult under VATS, conversion to thoracotomy is considered. In cases with a fused fissure or dense hilar lymphadenopathy, if the pulmonary artery cannot be isolated, conversion is considered.

Finally, although it may ultimately be difficult to predict who will require conversion from VATS to open surgery, there are a few important considerations regarding this matter. First, one of the advantages of VATS lobectomy is the magnified visualization it affords, which is useful for dissecting vessels or identifying small bleeders and makes this technique useful even in cases where conversion to an open procedure may be considered likely preoperatively. Secondly, after the surgeon's learning curve with advanced VATS techniques is surpassed and the conversion rate presumable reaches its nadir, attempts at decreasing conversion rates may only serve to delay the timing of conversion and increase the risks. The first objective of the operation is to perform a safe and complete resection. Once problems arise, repair takes a longer time, and the risks are increased. It is important not only to plan safe maneuvers to avoid problems, but also to have the courage to convert if there is any sense of discomfort experienced by the surgeon with VATS. Finally, long-term outcome is an important parameter to evaluate the safety and feasibility of converted VATS lobectomy. Jones et al. reported that the long-term outcome of converted VATS lobectomy for lung cancer was equivalent to that of successful VATS lobectomy (50). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that VATS's lobectomy is feasible for lung cancer surgery even from the viewpoint of the safety rate of converted VATS.

Conclusions

VATS was introduced nearly 20 years ago. Since then, VATS has experienced major advances in both equipment and technique, especially for the treatment of benign lung disease (58). With the accumulation of experience for the treatment of benign diseases, VATS has gradually begun to be employed for radical resection of lung cancer (3,4). VATS lobectomy is now considered standard in thoracic surgery, with acceptable safety and efficacy for both lung cancer and benign lung diseases (59,60). Several investigators have reported that the outcomes of VATS lobectomy for lung cancer are comparable to those of thoracotomy (35,38,61,62). While no large, controlled studies have been conducted to compare VATS with thoracotomy, it is now generally accepted that the outcomes of VATS are not inferior to those of thoracotomy. However, another concern is the safety of VATS lobectomy. Subsequent to VATS lobectomy, perioperative complications and mortality have been reported to occur at rates of approximately 5-32% and 0-7%, respectively; these rates are also generally accepted to be comparable to those reported for thoracotomy (35,38,63,64).

However, VATS lobectomy sometimes requires, for a variety of reasons, emergency conversion to thoracotomy. There are difficulties with the procedure, including a narrow view angle, complicating conditions such as pleural adhesions and dense hilar lymphadenopathy, oncologic problems if the disease is lung cancer, and the surgeon's discomfort with VATS instruments. As such, even though the technical safety of VATS lobectomy is widely accepted, there remains a range of situations that can result in unplanned conversion to open thoracotomy during the procedure, especially during a surgeon's training period (30).

The most important concern with unplanned conversions is the possible increased risk of mortality, morbidity, and cancer recurrence. Patients who undergo unplanned conversion to open thoracotomy most likely experience a
longer operating time, extra lung manipulation, increased risk of injury to adjacent tissue, and increased blood loss, which may all adversely affect the outcome. And although the safety and efficacy of successful VATS lobectomy has been documented by many authors, there are fewer data regarding failed VATS lobectomy. The few studies regarding this problem report no significant increase in mortality or morbidity (50,51). Apart from vascular and bronchial injuries, which result from technical problems, the other causes of conversion may be predictable preoperatively. For example, in light of clear hilar calcifications on preoperative CT, conversions due to anthracofibrosis may be able to be anticipated. Certain vascular anomalies resulting in conversion are often visible on preoperative enhanced CT. Finally, preoperative PET scans can show a high probability of lymphatic metastasis in cases converted because of gross metastasis of these lymph nodes. Although unexpected conversion to thoracotomy during VATS does not appear to compromise prognosis, the decision to convert must be made promptly to reduce the operating time, blood loss, and possible complications. Accordingly, when attempting a VATS procedure, access ports must be placed to facilitate immediate conversion to open thoracotomy and to support instrument manipulation and anatomic accessibility of the stapler to close vessels and the bronchus. And in the context of narrowing contraindications for VATS lobectomy and surgeons overcoming the learning curve associated with increasingly complex resections, conversion should not be regarded as a surgical failure but rather as a way to safely complete resections in a traditional manner.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Hanna JM, Berry MF, D’Amico TA. Contraindications of video-assisted thoracoscopic surgical lobectomy and determinants of conversion to open. J Thorac Dis 2013;5(S3):S182-S189. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.08
Background

Video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) has been used more and more in daily practice for diagnosis and treatment of lung diseases especially non-small cell lung carcinoma in the last decade (1,2). Despite the growing enthusiasm for VATS resections, this minimally invasive technique has had slow adoption due to concerns regarding oncologic principles, costs, possible complications, time spent on learning curve and lack of surgeon training (3). Potential benefits of VATS for lung resections are listed in the literature as smaller incisions, less pain, less blood loss, faster postoperative recovery, shortened hospital stay, similar or superior survival rates. In contrast video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) has higher equipment costs, increased operating room times, at least initially, and a learning curve for the team. However when an experienced surgeon performs the surgery, significant hospital savings combined with better outcomes are achieved by video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy.

Recent data supporting advantages of VATS lobectomy

Several single institution series and a recent Society of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) database have demonstrated that compared with open thoracotomy, video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy may be associated with fewer postoperative complications (13). In the study of Paul
et al. 73.8 % of patients who underwent video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy had no complications, where as 65.3% of patients underwent lobectomy via thoracotomy had no complications. Compared with open lobectomy, video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy was associated with a lower incidence of arrhythmias, reintubation, blood transfusion as well as a shorter hospital stay and chest tube duration (13). In addition to these early functional advantages, video-assisted thoacoscopic lobectomy has been shown to have comparable long-term outcomes (14,15). The peri-operative advantages as well as the short and long-term outcomes reported have assuaged the concerns of the safety and efficacy aspects of video-assisted resections for the thoracic oncology patient population. However the drawbacks to VATS include higher equipment costs, longer operative room times and steeper learning curves for surgeons and operating room personnel (3).

### Economic comparison of VATS versus open lobectomy

In a recent study our group compared hospital costs and perioperative outcomes for video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery and open lobectomy procedures in the United States using the Premier Prospective Database (Premier Inc, Charlotte, NC) (3). The study included the time period from the third quarter of 2007 through 2008. A total of 3,961 patients (open n=2,907, VATS n=1,054) were included in this evaluation. Length of stay was 7.83 days versus 6.15 days for open versus VATS. Surgery duration was shorter for open procedures at 3.75 versus 4.09 hours for VATS (Table 1) (3). The risk of adverse events was significantly lower in the VATS group (P=0.019) (3). Although statistically not significant, pneumonia occurred more frequently in the open group (9.1%) versus VATS (8.1%). Arrhythmias, other cardiac events and bleeding were found to be significantly more prevalent in the open group than in the VATS group. The frequency of patients with prolonged lengths of stay (>14 days) was higher in the open group than in the VATS group. Hospital costs were higher for open versus VATS; $21,016 versus $20,316 (P=0.027). Given that there is both a reduction in adverse events and a 1.68 day reduction in length of stay with VATS, one might expect the difference in cost between open and VATS to be greater than $700. Therefore, we looked at surgeon experience to determine if this played a role in cost. We examined surgeon experience with VATS over the 6 months prior to each operation and found a significant association between surgeon experience and cost. Average costs ranged from $22,050 for low volume surgeons to $18,133 for high volume surgeons. For open lobectomies, cost differences by surgeon experience were not significant and both levels were estimated at $21,000. These data suggest that economic impact is magnified as the surgeon's experience increases.

In another recent retrospective study the relationship between volume and outcome in VATS surgery was evaluated (16). This relationship was striking for cost and utilization outcomes and VATS lobectomy as compared to VATS wedge resection. Outcomes following VATS surgery seems to be strongly associated with experience (16). This report showed that the reduction in cost and resource utilization increases significantly with greater experience and is most marked for VATS lobectomy for lung cancer. Moreover, thoracic surgeons have better VATS outcomes than non-thoracic surgeons and greater experience with open procedures does not correlate with better VATS outcomes. These findings reinforce the need for surgeons to focus on their VATS technique to achieve the best outcomes.

Another report on cost of VATS lobectomies revealed that the total hospital costs in the VATS group were lower than for those in the open lobectomy group ($5,391 vs. $5,593) (17). The reasons for the higher total hospital costs for open lobectomy were explained as longer hospital stays, longer chest tube duration and the need for more medications to control pain. Pulmonary complications, including respiratory dysfunction, pneumonia, atelectasis, empyema and prolonged air leak were less common with VATS approach in this series. A subset of patients in this

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group were compared according to the surgeon's experience (early learning period vs. experienced learning period). Because of the decreased operation duration during the experienced learning period, the cost of anesthesia was significantly lower for these patients compared with those during the early period (17).

As the cost of surgical disposables play an important role in the total cost of VATS lobectomy, differences in the cost of resection of different lobes are also recorded (17,18). Casali and Walker demonstrated that upper lobectomy is more expensive than other types of lobectomy and that the difference in cost is mainly due to different need for the number of stapler cartridges (18). Cho demonstrated that the cost of surgical materials for resection of a lower lobe was lower than that for resection of the an upper lobe. The cost was $1,630 vs. $1,981 for right side and $1,655 vs. $1,908 for left side. When the total hospital costs were evaluated between the VATS lobectomy and open lobectomy groups for the five different lobes, VATS lobectomy for the left lower lobe was much more cost-effective than open lobectomy, although the difference was not statistically significant (17).

Using robotic technology to perform pulmonary surgery is of great current interest to the thoracic surgical community (19). Robotic lobectomies have been performed on a limited basis, with the advocates suggesting that the visualization and dissection are superior compared with a VATS approach. Robotic technology does have a certain appeal. The arms have a wrist-like movement and the magnification and depth of field of the robotic camera are superior to the standard VATS camera. However, it is not clear that these are significant advantages compared with VATS in the realm of cancer surgery. Compared with a VATS approach, the robotic incisions are the same size, the stapling instruments are the same, and the removal of the specimen is the same. The safety of VATS dissection of the vascular structures is excellent, with minimal reported problems after more than 17 years of experience. The completeness of lymph node dissection is complete with VATS and is not better with the robot, at least to date. Also, the surgical time and cost are significantly less for VATS (20). Robotic lobectomy has higher associated costs than VATS, primarily attributed to increased costs of the first hospital day, but it is less costly than thoracotomy approach for lobectomy (21). The average cost of VATS is substantially less than thoracotomy primarily because of a decreased length of stay. The cost of robotic assistance for VATS is still less than thoracotomy, but greater than VATS alone (21).

**Conclusions**

Minimally invasive techniques, such as VATS and robotics, are becoming the preferred approach in many surgical disciplines. Lobectomy performed by the VATS approach as compared with an open technique results in shorter length of stay, fewer adverse events and less overall cost. Patients who undergo VATS are discharged without home assistance and have low opiate requirements. Where there may be concern over the cost of the thoracoscopic equipment required for VATS, the significant hospital savings combined with better outcomes, particularly when an experienced surgeon performs the surgery, clearly favor the VATS approach over a thoracotomy. As the demand for health care resources increases, we must pay more attention to cost. Data, to date, shows a significant cost savings when a VATS approach is used compared to a thoracotomy for resection of lung cancer while enhancing short term outcomes and likely comparable or improved long term survival.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.*

**References**


Indication for VATS sublobar resections in early lung cancer

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Abstract: When dealing with early non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) sublobar resections still remain part of the surgical armamentarium. In selected patients with lung cancer, the combination of the potential benefits of parenchyma sparing procedures to the limited trauma provided by Video Assisted Thoracic Surgery (VATS) techniques can become very appealing. Two main groups are included: non-anatomical (wedges) and anatomical (segmentectomies) excisions. We describe the techniques, results and potential indications of both of these techniques.

Keywords: Minimally invasive surgery; segmentectomy; wedge

Submitted Jul 22, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 10, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.41
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.41

Introduction

At present, surgery remains the most used radical treatment for early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (1). Lobectomy has been traditionally considered the gold standard procedure for early NSCLC following the Lung Cancer Study Group (LCSG) randomized controlled trial (2). However, the attempt to increase resection rates led to the need to offer surgery to patients with higher surgical risks: the elderly, the breathless and the ones with multiple co-morbidities (3-5). To manage these potential surgical risks and the possible long-term impairment in quality of life and respiratory function, surgeons have applied sublobar techniques to the management of lung cancer. These can be divided very clearly into two groups: non-anatomical resections (wedge) and anatomical resections (segmentectomies). The difference is the attempt during segmentectomies to follow the oncological principles of a lobectomy by achieving anatomical division of segmental veins, arteries and bronchi as well as good parenchymal clearance.

Video Assisted Thoracic Surgery (VATS) is on the increase in the management of benign and malignant processes. Large experiences have convinced the surgical community not only of the safety and possibilities of VATS surgery in early lung cancer, but of the benefits when compared to open surgery in terms of postoperative pain, length of recovery, return to activities, immune response to surgery and oncological results (6-9). As with open surgery where there is a variety of surgical approaches described (posterolateral, anterior, muscle-sparing, hybrid thoracotomies), VATS can also be performed with different surgical accesses: posterior approach, anterior approach, 2-port approach and single-port access (10-13).

We aimed to explore the potential possibilities and current experiences of the combination of sublobar resections and VATS techniques for early NSCLC.

Non-anatomical sublobar resections (wedge)

Wedge resections involve the excision of a pulmonary lesion with clear parenchymal margins with no attempt to deal with the hilar lobar structures (arteries, veins or bronchi). Although traditionally has been considered as a compromise operation due to the results of the LCSG trial that reported increase local recurrence compared to lobectomy, the indications for wedge excisions may be on the increase (2). Invariably, it is necessary that the lesion is peripheral so it can be identified and “wedged out” safely with sufficient margins. Despite the theoretical limitations as a sound
Technique

Wedge resections can be performed via VATS using a number of incisions including the single-port approach (16). Ideally the lung should be collapsed as it facilitates location of pulmonary nodules and instrumentation, but it can potentially be performed in a ventilated lung in patients that can’t tolerate single lung ventilation. There are different ways to identify the lesions including palpation with instruments or the tip of the finger, but also more complex techniques using technology such as placement of metal wires/coils (17,18), instillation of different contrasts (19-21) or use of intraoperative ultrasound techniques (22).

Once the nodule has been identified, surgical staplers are applied to excise and seal the pulmonary parenchyma with clear margins. A brief example of a diagnostic excision of a nodule in the left lower lobe via a single port incision is demonstrated in Video 1 with the position of the incision and instruments is illustrated in Figure 1.

Results

There is very limited evidence available to assess the role of wedge resections in lung cancer. One randomized controlled trial by the LCSG reported a similar survival, but increased recurrence of cancer in patients undergoing sublobar compared to lobar resections (2). The surgical community accepted the results and acknowledged the effort of the trialists and, even accepting the trial limitations, considered lobectomy as the procedure of choice for early lung cancer thus reserving sublobar resections for specific cohorts of patients who might benefit of the preservation of the parenchyma or a quicker procedure.

The experiences reported in the use of VATS wedge resections when compared to lobectomy are consistent with traditional reports in the thoracotomy approach. Wolf et al reported a retrospective comparative series of 154 sublobar resections (43% via VATS) and 84 lobectomies (10% via VATS) performed in patients with small early lung cancer. Patients who underwent lobectomy had a better survival and disease-free survival, but the sublobar group was significantly older and with worse respiratory reserve, highlighting the selection bias in this and every other study of its kind (23). Landreneau et al. reached similar conclusions in a multicenter study evaluating 102 wedge resections (60% by VATS) when compared to lobectomies (24).

One of the potential limitations of the use of VATS in deep-sited small lesions is the difficulty to locate them during surgery. The use of technologies has helped the identification of these nodules. Lee et al. were successful in 101 of 103 cases with small pulmonary nodules with the wire location techniques with an average operative time of 11 minutes (16). Molins et al. reported 50 out of 52 patients successfully underwent VATS excision of small nodules also identified by wires in the ambulatory setting (18). Similar success rates are reported by surgeons using different markers (methylene blue, radionuclides or contrast) (19-21). Finally, the use of intraoperative ultrasound has been reported by VATS, even in the single-port approach (25). Whatever the technology available, all these techniques seem to aid in identification of deep or small nodules during VATS surgery.
Indications

Based on the limited available evidence and the reported use of wedge resections in certain cohorts of patients with lung cancer we can identify possible indications for sublobar wedge resection in early NSCLC:

I. Cases in which preservation of parenchyma is mandatory. These include patients with very limited pulmonary reserve with COPD, significant pulmonary fibrosis that carry poor prognosis when lobectomy is performed, pulmonary hypertension and, more recently, in the management of metachronous or synchronous lung cancers;

II. Cases where preoperative histology could not be obtained or confirmed. Not only in very small pulmonary nodules unable to be biopsied percutaneously, but cases with history of distant malignancies where diagnosis metastasis/primary couldn’t be made, or when radiological appearances are not very suggestive of cancer but patients request histological confirmation;

III. Diagnostic dilemmas in patients with underlying nodular lung disease (tuberculosis, sarcoid, rheumatoid) where one or more nodules are suspicious for malignancy during the course of their chronic disease in which a possible early NSCLC could be missed;

IV. Patients with severe comorbidities or very advanced age presenting with a peripheral nodule where a very short general anaesthesia period is preferred, where a wedge can be perform within few minutes, even with patients spontaneously ventilated.

Anatomical sublobar resections (segmentectomies)

Segmentectomies consist in the anatomical excision of one or more pulmonary segments. It is required to divide segmental branches of pulmonary artery, vein and bronchi related to the excised segments. The traditional technique of finding the segmental parenchymal plane by hand or electrocautery has now been substituted in many cases by the use of surgical staplers placed beyond the intersegmental plane with the potential benefit of reducing air leaks and parenchymal bleeding (26-28).

Segmentectomies for early lung cancer have been reported in the literature, and appear to be used more frequently (29,30). Surgeons have identified the potential role as an alternative to lobectomy in situations to increase operability (the elderly, patients with poor respiratory reserve, previous pulmonary resection) and resectability (multifocal ground-glass opacities, synchronous tumors, history of other solid malignancies where diagnosis of metastasis is a possibility), but also as the preferred option in small early stage NSCLC (31,32).

There is a limited but growing experience in the use of VATS segmentectomies, championed by experienced thoracoscopic surgeons but progressively being adopted by more units (33,34). The procedures can be performed via all the different VATS approaches including the Uniportal one (Video 2) and the instruments position is shown in Figure 2.

Technique

Segmentectomies can be divided into Typical (where parenchymal division involves 2 planes) or Atypical (more complex and technically demanding, when the segmental excision involves 3 planes). Examples of the former are...
excision of segments 6 on either side, lingulectomies, left apical upper tri-segmentectomies, left basal trisegmentectomies, right 7-10 segmentectomy. The rarer atypical segmentectomy examples are segmentectomy of 7-8 in the right, or 9-10 bilaterally.

With the patient on the lateral decubitus and forced hyperextension of the chest cavity to increase the intercostal space, a 4 cm incision is performed anterior to the latissimus dorsi edge at the level of 4th-5th intercostal space. The 30-degree thoracoscope is inserted to explore the pleural cavity. The thoracoscope is kept at the most posterior end of the wound allowing the insertion of 2, 3 or even more thoracoscopic instruments without interfering with them. Initially adhesions are divided with electrocautery and the left apical upper trisegmentectomy is performed. The Pulmonary Artery is identified and the initial branches are isolated and divided with an endo stapler. The segmental veins with preservation of the branches draining the lingula are then isolated and divided. Slightly more difficult is the identification of the segmental bronchus. Once this is isolated, we recommend that an inflation test is carried out prior to bronchial division as errors have been reported in VATS procedures. Once the bronchus has been divided, the parenchymal plane is identified by the inflation method prior to the excision. The specimen is removed with the help of a specimen bag in order to facilitate extraction and to minimize theoretical risk of wound seeding. A single intercostal drain is inserted after division of the inferior pulmonary ligament, lymph node excision and satisfactory lung re-expansion. Surgeons have employed other methods to identify the segmental plane: indocyanine green instillation or isolated inflation of the segments to be resected, all of them valid.

**Results**

The only randomized controlled trial including anatomical segmentectomies for lung cancer is the LCSG that, unfortunately, grouped segmentectomies together with wedge excisions. It concluded that survival after sublobar resections was equivalent to lobectomy but recurrence rates were much higher making a strong case for lobectomy to be considered the procedure of choice in early lung cancer. Unfortunately, the conclusions were impossible to extrapolate into a whole segmentectomy cohort due to the trial design (2).

Following this, few case-matched reports and several comparative series have indicated the value of anatomical segmentectomies to be similar to lobectomies in small size lung cancers, not only in the high-risk but also in the overall population (35-37). While survival or recurrence rates appear to be similar, there is evidence to demonstrate the lesser impact on pulmonary function after segmental resections.

If we apply the potential advantages seen in large experiences of surgeons performing VATS lobectomies compared with open lobectomies (less pain, early recovery, less complications and reduce immune response) the prospect of VATS anatomical segmentectomies might be very appealing (6-9). Several authors have described their experiences with a variety of VATS approaches from 4 to Single-port, and there are some comparative series between VATS and Open segmentectomy for lung cancer (38).

Overall, authors have not seen any significant differences in perioperative outcomes, survival or rates of recurrence between VATS segmentectomy and VATS lobectomy (Table 1) (39-43). The loco-regional recurrence rates vary between 2.8% and 7.7% in the different reports, similar to after VATS lobectomy by the same surgeons. One manuscript by Atkins et al compared the outcomes between open and VATS segmentectomies performed in an experienced thoracoscopic unit, with perioperative results indicating that VATS techniques do not compromise outcomes (38).

| **Table 1** Reports showing experiences in VATS segmentectomy for lung cancer |
|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Author                  | Year | Operations                                      | Number | Locoregional recurrence |
| Atkins                  | 2007 | Open segmentectomy; VATS segmentectomy         | 28; 48 | 8.3%; 7.7%               |
| Saphiro                 | 2009 | VATS lobectomy; VATS segmentectomy             | 113; 31| 3.6%; 3.5%               |
| Yamashita               | 2011 | VATS lobectomy; VATS segmentectomy             | 71; 38 | 5.6%; 7.1%               |
| Soukiasian              | 2012 | VATS lobectomy; VATS segmentectomy             | 266; 73| Ns (same survival)       |
| Zhong                   | 2012 | VATS lobectomy; VATS segmentectomy             | 81; 39 | 4.9%; 5.1%               |
| Zharo                   | 2013 | VATS lobectomy; VATS segmentectomy             | 138; 36| 4.4%; 2.8%               |

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Authors have not seen a significant reduction in the patients’ hospital stay after VATS segmentectomy compared to VATS lobectomy, maybe as a consequence of longer lasting air leaks after segmentectomy due to the more extensive parenchymal trauma than after a fissureless VATS lobectomy (39-43). In the VATS experience we are yet to confirm the benefits on pulmonary function that segmentectomy seems to have over lobectomy in thoracotomy cohorts (44).

Indications

Based on the limited available evidence, and pending the results of modern studies underway (CALBG-140503 trial of segmentectomy vs. lobectomy for early lung cancer), the possible indications for VATS sublobar resections in NSCLC include:

I. Nodules in patients with a previous history of solid malignancies in cases where intraoperative frozen sections can not differentiate a primary lung cancer from a distant metastasis;

II. Multicentric ground glass opacities previously described as bronchoalveolar carcinoma;

III. Second primary in cases who have undergone pulmonary resection in the past;

IV. Surgery in patients deemed to have a high-risk for a lobectomy including respiratory diseases, extreme age;

V. An increasing number of segmentectomies are being used as procedure of choice in patients with peripheral early lung cancer of less than 2 cm.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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 Totally thoracoscopic pulmonary anatomic segmentectomies: technical considerations

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Background: While video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomies are being increasingly accepted, VATS segmentectomies are still considered as technically challenging. With the renewed interest for sublobar resection in the management of early stage lung carcinomas, the thoracoscopic approach may have a major role in a near future. We report our technique and results.

Patients and methods: Totally thoracoscopic anatomic segmentectomy, i.e., using only endoscopic instrumentation and video-display without utility incision, was attempted on 117 patients (51 males and 66 females), aged 18 to 81 years (mean: 62 years). The indication was a clinical N0 non-small cell lung carcinoma in 69 cases, a solitary metastasis in 17 cases and a benign lesion in 31 cases. The following segmentectomies were performed: right apicosuperior [26] right superior [10], right basilar [18], lingula sparing left upper lobectomy [15], left apicosuperior [11], lingula [7], left superior [14], left basilar [13] and subsegmental resection [3]. Segmentectomy was associated with a radical lymphadenectomy in 69 cases.

Results: There were 5 conversions to thoracotomy. The mean operative time was 181±52 minutes, the mean intraoperative blood loss was 77±81 cc. There were 12 postoperative complications (11.7%). The median postoperative stay was 5.5±2.2 days. Out of the 69 patients operated on for a cN0 lung carcinoma, 6 were finally upstaged.

Conclusions: Totally thoracoscopic anatomic pulmonary segmentectomies are feasible and have a low complication rate.

Keywords: Segmentectomy; thoracoscopy; video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS)

Submitted Apr 23, 2013. Accepted for publication Jun 20, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.06.25
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.06.25

Video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) and thoracoscopic major pulmonary resections are accepted as a valid alternative to open surgery as it is now evident that minimally invasive surgery is beneficial in terms of reduced postoperative pain, shorter hospital stay, shorter recovery and better compliance to adjuvant chemotherapy, without compromising oncological principles (1). However few series of video-assisted pulmonary segmentectomies have been published and totally endoscopic-so-called complete VATS-segmentectomies series are even more infrequently reported (2,3). Many different techniques of thoracoscopic major pulmonary resections have been described, depending on the use of an accessory mini-thoracotomy, endoscopic instrumentation, and, video display. In the totally endoscopic approach only endoscopic instruments and monitor visualization are used. This is the technique that will be described in this article (4). By totally endoscopic we mean: (I) 100% video display; (II) no access incision and (III) only use of trocars and endoscopic instruments (5) (Figures 1,2). The aim of this article is not to discuss the oncologic validity of segmentectomies for early stage lung carcinomas but to describe and discuss some technical aspects and the results of totally thoracoscopic anatomic segmentectomies (TTAS).

Patients and methods

From January 2008 to January 2013, TTAS was attempted in 117 patients (51 males and 66 females) ranging in age...
Figure 1 Main steps of a right anterior basilar subsegmentectomy of segments 7+8. (A) Three-dimensional reconstruction of arteries and bronchi; (B) a loop is passed around the main basilar arterial trunk and helps exposure of the arterial branches; (C) after division of the artery to the anterior segments, backward traction of the loop helps exposing the bronchus to segments 7+8; (D) segmental distribution of the branches of the right lower pulmonary vein. (A, artery; B, bronchus; V, vein; S, segment).

Figure 2 Main steps of a posterior subsegmentectomy of segments 9+10. (A) Three-dimensional reconstruction of arteries; (B) Dissection of the artery to the posterior segments; (C) after division of the artery to the posterior segments, forward traction of the loop helps exposing the bronchus to segments 9+10; (D) final aspect before reventilation after removal of the posterior segments. (RUL, Right upper lobe; ML, middle lobe; A, artery; B, bronchus; V, vein; S, segment).
from 18 to 81 years (mean: 62 years). The indication was either a benign lesion (31 patients), a solitary metastasis (17 patients), or a suspicion of clinical stage I non-small-cell lung carcinoma (NSCLC) (69 Patients). The reason for performing a segmentectomy for an NSCLC was an impaired lung function and/or a previous history of pulmonary resection, clinical stage IA in fragile patients or carcinoid tumor.

Patients’ consent was routinely obtained. Intraoperative and postoperative data were recorded in a prospective manner into a database that was approved by our Institutional Review Board. The variables entered in the database were the following: need for conversion to thoracotomy, duration of the surgical procedure as noted on the operating room records, operative blood loss, intraoperative complications, number of collected lymph nodes and of dissected lymph node stations for patients operated on for NSCLC, duration of chest drainage, postoperative stay and postoperative complications. The types of segmentectomy are specified in Table 1.

**Technical aspects**

We have previously described our technique in detail (Gossot, 2010#53). In brief, the procedure was performed under general anesthesia with split ventilation using a double-lumen endotracheal tube. Patients were positioned in lateral decubitus as for a thoracotomy. The surgeon stood anterior or posterior to the patient, depending on the segments to be resected. He usually stood posterior to the patient for right sided resections and anteriorly for left sided ones. Two monitors were used and the thoracoscope was placed on a mechanical scope holder. In a fashion similar to our technique of totally endoscopic lobectomies, we used a deflectable thoracoscope housing a distal CCD (LTF, Olympus, Tokyo, Japan) (6) connected to a high definition camera system (HDTV) (Exera II, Olympus, Tokyo, Japan). Only specifically designed endoscopic instruments for VATS major resections were used. As a rule, trocars with a diameter ranging between 3 mm (micro-instruments) and 15 mm (endostapler and retrieval bag were utilized). For lung cancer patients, intersegmental lymph nodes, when present, were analyzed by frozen section to confirm the indication for segmentectomy. Larger vessels were divided with endostaplers while haemostasis of small caliber vessels was performed with clips, with a bipolar vessel sealing device (LigaSure™, Valleylab, Boulder, CO, USA) or with a combination of both methods. The root of the intersegmental veins was preserved and used as landmark for identification of the intersegmental plane. Demarcation between the resected and preserved segments was usually made possible by gentle reventilation and adequate application of a long 5-mm lung forceps whose position was adapted according to the inflation-deflation line. The intersegmental plane was divided by a combination of bipolar sealing device (for its peripheral and thin portion) and stapling (for its central and thick portion) using 4.8 mm staples (Endo-GIA II, Covidien Autosuture, Mansfield, MA). When the remaining segment was mobile and at risk of torsion, it was anchored to the adjacent lobe with a TA endostapler. An additional radical lymphadenectomy was performed for all patients operated on for a suspicion of lung carcinoma, according to a previously described technique (7). No utility incision was used. On completion of the pulmonary resection, the specimen was wrapped into an endobag and retrieved through one of the port sites that was enlarged to a length of 2 to 4 cm, depending on the specimen size. The use of a rib spreader was never required for specimen extraction. In most cases, only 1 chest tube was placed through one of the port site. Its removal was decided according to usual rules, i.e., no air leakage and output inferior to 200 cc per day.

**Results**

There were 5 conversions to thoracotomy (4.2%) for a
fused fissure (2 cases) and for non-controllable hemorrhage (3 cases). In 1 of these hemorrhagic complications, the planned right apicoposterior segmentectomy was finally converted into an upper lobectomy. All 5 patients had a simple postoperative course. In the 112 other patients who had a totally thoracoscopic procedure, there were 3 intraoperative complications, i.e., a partial disruption of the staple line during division of the intersegmental plane requiring endoscopic suturing. The postoperative course of these 3 patients was simple and they were discharged between postoperative day 4 and 5. Operative time ranged from 87 to 315 minutes (mean, 181±52 minutes). The estimated blood loss ranged from 0 cc (non-measurable) to 450 cc (mean, 77±81 cc). No patient needed blood transfusion. All but 12 patients had an uneventful postoperative course (90%). Complications are listed in Table 2. Out of the 12 complications, 10 were minor whereas 2 were major, i.e., requiring a reoperation. These 2 patients had an ischemia of the remaining lingula after a lingula sparing left upper lobectomy. They underwent a lingulectomy by thoracoscopy (1 patient) or by thoracotomy (1 patient), with a simple postoperative course. The drainage duration ranged from 1 to 7 days (mean, 3.3±1.9 days) and the hospital stay from 2 to 22 days (mean, 5.5±2.2 days). The final pathological results are listed in Table 3. For the 69 patients who were operated on for a suspicion of primary lung carcinoma and who had an additional lymphadenectomy, the mean number of removed hilar lymph nodes (station 10) ranged from 0 to 6 (mean, 3±2) and from station 11-12 ranged from 1 to 9 (mean, 3±2) was. The mean number of collected mediastinal lymph nodes was 21±7 and the mean number of dissected lymph node stations was 3.5±1. For patients operated on for lung cancer, the tumors were staged pathological N0 in all but 2 cases which were upstaged N1 and 4 cases which were upstaged N2.

**Discussion**

**Anatomical landmarks**

Segmentectomy is considered a challenging procedure if done by thoracotomy and even more so if it is performed thoracoscopically (2). Not only the anatomical relationships are difficult to grasp, especially for the young and less experienced surgeons, but the identification and division of the intersegmental plane is a concern. The issue is more relevant for upper segmentectomies. Not only the number of arteries arising from the pulmonary artery is variable but their distribution is sometimes difficult to appreciate because the vessels can usually not been dissected to a sufficient length. This is especially true for the ascending arteries to the right upper lobe. These arteries can supply only the posterior segment of the upper lobe or both the posterior and anterior segments. The study of preoperative computed tomography three-dimensional reconstruction helps assessing the number, size and direction of these arteries without doubt (8). Having the vascular pattern in mind helps the surgeon performing a safer dissection of the branches of the pulmonary artery, especially when the fissure is fused and/or when lymph nodes are present. In a series of 49 patients selected for VATS lobectomy, Fukuhara et al. found that preoperative three-dimensional computed pulmonary angiography was identifying the PA branches in 95% of the cases (9). In their series, only some small
branches (less than 2 mm in diameter) were missed. In the beginning of our experience, most patients candidate to an upper segmentectomy had a multidetector row preoperative computed tomography (CT) angiography with three-dimensional volume-rendering reconstruction of arterial and venous anatomy. Nevertheless, CT reconstruction was not done for the lower segments since anatomical variations of the vascular supply to the lower lobes has less impact on the surgical technique and can be easily managed (8-10). As we felt more confident with the technique and the thoracoscopic vision of anatomical landmarks, the resort to preoperative CT reconstruction was progressively abandoned.

Intersegmental plane

Another difficulty faced during thoracoscopic segmentectomy is the identification and division of the intersegmental plane. When performed through a thoracotomy, this step is facilitated by the use of manual palpation which is not possible via thoracoscopy. Several methods have been described. The most common is the creation of a ventilated-deflated line by reventilating the operated lung once the segmental bronchus has been stapled. This technique has drawbacks: (I) reventilation obscures the vision and this is a much more troublesome problem than during thoracotomy; (II) the segments to be resected can be partly reventilated through the collateral canals, leading to an unclear demarcation line.

Therefore some authors have suggested acting reverse, i.e., reventilating the whole lung once the segmental bronchus has been divided and then collapsing it, so that only the diseased segments remain inflated (11). Others have suggested using selected jet ventilation in the segmental bronchi to be divided (12). In emphysematous patients we have used a similar method by injecting air through the channel of a bronchofiberscope, after selective endoscopy of the segmental bronchus.

Once the intersegmental plane has been determined, the last issue is the choice of the division method. Some authors have used a combination of blunt dissection, electrocautery and application of fibrin sealant (12). When air leaks were observed, some surgeons applied mattress suture with pledgets (12). These methods have the advantage of sparing parenchyma, but comprise a risk of postoperative air leak. Actually, most authors use staplers (Table 4). Stapling is however not that easy. First, it may require using many cartridges, up to 5 in the series of Watanabe (11). Second, the limited opening of the endostaplers and the thickness of the parenchyma expose to disruption of the staples line, an adverse event that occurred twice in our series. The consequences were not serious but led to troublesome blood loss and required hand suturing.

Segmental ischemia

In our series, 2 patients had to be reoperated for an ischemia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shiraishi 2004 (13)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Rigid 30°</td>
<td>240±72</td>
<td>169±68</td>
<td>Ultrasonic shears</td>
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<td>102</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4-8</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>129 [60-275]</td>
<td>50 [10-350]</td>
<td>Electrocautery + fibrin sealant</td>
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<td>VATS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>136±45</td>
<td>250±200</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oizumi (16)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Rigid 30°</td>
<td>216 [146-425]</td>
<td>100 [3-305]</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schuchert (17)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rigid 0°</td>
<td>136 [120-152]</td>
<td>171 [133-209]</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watanabe (11)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 (3.5-6)</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>220 [100-306]</td>
<td>183 [30-770]</td>
<td>Electrocautery + Stapling + fibrin sealant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro (18)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leshnower (19)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>Rigid 30°</td>
<td>145±55</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamashita (20)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Rigid 30°</td>
<td>257±91</td>
<td>132±181</td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>TT</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Deflectable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stapling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N, number; VATS, video-assisted thoracic surgery; TT, totally thoracoscopic; cm, centimeter; min, minutes; mL, milliliter; NS, Not stated; *, expressed as mean and range or mean ± standard deviation.
of the lingula after an upper division of the left upper lobe. In one case, it was unclear whether ischemia was related to the torsion of the remaining segment or to an injury of the lingular vein, while torsion was obvious in the second case. This complication has been reported by others (21).

Although the thoracoscopic approach offers a clear and magnified view, one of its limitations is the difficulty in obtaining a global vision of the operative field, especially as the lung is reinflated. Therefore, a wrong positioning of the remaining segment can be overlooked. In addition, securing the segment to the adjacent lobe by thoracoscopy is not that easy. When performed by thoracotomy, it is usually done by applying anchoring stiches on a partially reventilated parenchyma. This is almost impossible to perform by thoracoscopy due to the lack of space caused by reinflation of the lung. We have overcome this difficulty by applying 1 or 2 cartridges of staples, using an endostapler with no knife (Endo-TA, Covidien). Thorough examination of the remaining segment is required to avoid mispositioning. Should a reoperation be necessary, it can be performed by re-thoracoscopy (22), as occurred in one of our patient.

**Lymph node dissection**

Several works dealing with the issue of the validity of lymph node dissection during VATS lobectomy and segmentectomy have been recently published. Basing on a cohort of 14,473 patients, Whitson et al. have shown that survival was not statistically different between lobectomy and segmentectomy if a lymph node dissection was performed (24). Therefore, the quality of lymph node dissection during segmentectomy for lung cancer is most likely a crucial part of the procedure. Recently, Hattori et al. showed that the rate of positive lymph nodes was high for solid T1A tumors especially in case of high standardized uptake value (SUV<sub>max</sub>). They advocate for a thorough intraoperative evaluation of lymph nodes to prevent locoregional recurrence (25). However, it seems that lobar and segmental lymph node clearance is a weak point of the thoracoscopic approach for sublobar resection. Boffa et al. have demonstrated that nodal upstaging form cN0 to pN2 was no statistically different between the open and thoracoscopic approach but that upstaging form cN0 to pN1 was significantly higher when the patient was operated via thoracotomy (9.3% versus 6.7%) (26). This difference tended to be minimized with experience of the surgeon (26). A satisfactory clearance of stations 11 and 12 can be achieved with the use of patience, appropriate dissection and hemostatic tools and frozen section if any suspicion of nodal metastasis (24).

**Tumor-free margins**

In case of lung cancer, frozen section must also be used for examination of the margins after completion of segmentectomy. Indeed, local recurrence after limited resection is related not only to nodal involvement but also to the size of the lesion and to the width of the surgical margins (19). The majority of recurrences are seen when the

### Table 5 Results for published series of VATS or totally thoracoscopic segmentectomies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First author</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>VATS/TT</th>
<th>Conversion rate</th>
<th>Morbidity</th>
<th>Chest tube duration* [days]</th>
<th>Postoperative. stay* [days]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shiraishi (13)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>4.5±3.2</td>
<td>12.7±3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okada (14)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins (15)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>3.5±4</td>
<td>4.3±3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ozumi (16)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1 [1-7]</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schuchert (17)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watanabe (11)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3 [1-9]</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shapiro (18)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>2 [1-33]</td>
<td>4 [1-98]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leshnower (19)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>VATS</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2.8±1.3</td>
<td>3.5±1.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>Yamashita (20)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4.8±3.4</td>
<td>12.2±8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This series</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>3.3±1.9</td>
<td>5.6±2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N, number; VATS, video-assisted thoracic surgery; TT, totally thoracoscopic; NS, Not stated; *, expressed as mean and range or mean ± standard deviation.
ratio between the margin and the tumor size is less than (27). Accordingly, frozen section should be used if any doubt exists as to completeness of resection.

**Conclusions**

Although a totally endoscopic approach to anatomic segmentectomies can seem challenging and difficult, the operation time in our series was acceptable and the morbidity rate was low (Table 5). Combining the advantages of an endoscopic approach and anatomic limited resection could be highly beneficial for those of the patients who fulfill the criteria of a sublobar resection. With the renewed interest for sublobar resection in the management of early stage lung carcinomas, the thoracoscopic approach may have a major role in a near future (28,29), provided the following criteria are fulfilled: (I) true anatomic resection with hilar division of bronchovascular elements; (II) adequate clearance of intersegmental lymph nodes and (III) tumor-free margins.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure:* The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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18. Shapiro M, Weiser TS, Wisnivesky JP, et al. Thoracoscopic segmentectomy compares favorably with thoracoscopic...
Teaching video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomy

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Abstract: Video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomy has become the standard of care for early stage lung cancer throughout the world. Teaching this complex procedure requires adequate case volume, adequate instrumentation, a committed operating room team and baseline experience with open lobectomy. We outline what key maneuvers and steps are required to teach and learn VATS lobectomy. This is most easily performed as part of a thoracic surgery training program, but with adequate commitment and proctoring, there is no reason experienced open surgeons cannot become proficient VATS surgeons. We provide videos showing the key portions of a subcarinal lymph node dissection, posterior hilar dissection of the right upper lobe, fissureless right middle lobectomy, and fissureless left lower lobectomy. These videos highlight what we feel are important principals in VATS lobectomy, i.e., N2 and N1 lymph node dissection, fissureless techniques, and progressive responsibility of the learner. Current literature in simulation of VATS lobectomy is also outlined as this will be the future of teaching in VATS lobectomy.

Keywords: video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomy; teaching; simulation

Submitted Jul 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 22, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.31
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.31

Introduction

Video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomy has rapidly become the standard of care for early-stage lung cancer treatment throughout North America and increasingly in the world. A VATS lobectomy is defined as the use of a 3-6 cm access incision without rib-spreading, one to three additional 1 cm ports, and the use of a thoracoscope to visualize the dissection and subsequent lobectomy. Compared to an open thoracotomy and lobectomy, a VATS lobectomy has equivalent oncologic results, less post-operative pain, shorter hospitalization, earlier return to activities of daily living, earlier administration of adjuvant therapies, and is less expensive (1,2). Despite these advantages there are several barriers to the adoption of more advanced VATS procedures including lobectomy. These include a lack of formal education and training, cost, lack of access to technology (particularly in non-North American or Western European countries), and a continued lack of education about the oncologic merits of the procedure relative to an open thoracotomy.

A recent survey of thoracic surgery residents reveals that 58% believe they are proficient in performing a VATS lobectomy at the completion of their residency program. Those individuals who were dedicated thoracic surgeons were much more likely (86%) to be comfortable performing a VATS lobectomy relative to those individuals with a mixed practice (28%) (3). Collectively, this suggests that there needs to more emphasis on introducing, teaching, and monitoring progression of the VATS lobectomy procedure to our trainees as well as those surgeons who are interested in incorporating the procedure into their existing practice.

There is an increasing literature on how advanced technologic procedures should be introduced into surgical practice (4-6). It is now well established that there is distinct learning curve for learning how to safely and proficiently perform a VATS lobectomy (4-9). The actual technical aspects of the procedure including number of incisions and methodologies to dissect and divide bronchovascular
structures will vary amongst surgeons and are also dependent on the tumor stage and biology. For these reasons, the purpose of this review is to highlight important aspects of teaching and learning VATS lobectomy with an emphasis on programmatic requirements, patient selection, and strategies to facilitate the learning process, including simulation. We will also discuss some basic technical considerations that apply to all VATS lobectomy procedures.

**Programmatic and individual requirements**

McKenna describes several important pre-requisites relative to beginning a VATS lobectomy program (9). One the most important points is that the entire operating room team (nurses, scrub technicians, first assistants) need to be familiar with open procedures before attempting VATS lobectomies. In addition, there should be an adequate volume of lobectomies (>25/year) in the practice. The surgeon who is performing VATS lobectomy procedures should have done a relative large number of smaller VATS procedures (i.e., wedge resection, lymph node biopsies, etc.). In addition, the surgeon should have observed several “live” VATS lobectomies and, if at all possible, assisted in the operations. There is no substitute (i.e., simulation, workshop, or video) for actual experience when one is adopting a new surgical technique. Frequently, this requires more than one observation or active participation. In addition, the best approach is for the scrub and circulating nurses to have also observed a live case or two so they can also become familiar with the basics of the procedure. These individual and programmatic pre-requisites apply to both new thoracic surgery residents and more experienced surgeons who are adopting this technology to their practices.

An additional pre-requisite that is rarely mentioned is the need for the appropriate VATS instrumentation, endostaplers, and the necessary instruments should conversion to an open procedure be indicated. Failure to have the appropriate VATS instruments, thoracoscopes and monitors can result in inadvertent intraoperative injuries, prolong the case, increase conversion rates, and demoralize surgeon and team morale and interest in the procedure. We routinely use a 45° thoroscope while others prefer a 30° or flexible tipped camera (10). These angled scopes offer the most versatility in providing alternate angles to view the anterior and posterior hilum without switching camera port access sites. Use of dissecting two-point scissors, needle holders, long Harken or Semb clamps, DeBakey clamps and axial handle forceps are all basic and required instruments to facilitate performing a VATS lobectomy.

The last pre-requisite is for the surgeon and the other team members to understand their responsibilities should the case require conversion from VATS to open procedure. It is extraordinarily rare to require conversion emergently as most complications, including major bleeding, can be managed with elective or urgent conversion maneuvers.

**Intraoperative teaching**

**Incisions and surgeon positions**

Once the patient is positioned, attention is given to selection of the appropriate locations of the incisions. We use a 5 mm thoroscope and therefore place a small trocar in the 7th or 8th intercostal space (ICS) in the middle to posterior axillary line to guide subsequent incision placement. A 4 cm access incision is then made anteriorly in the 4th ICS for upper and middle lobectomies and in the 5th ICS for lower lobectomies. This incision needs to be quite anterior. A third 1 cm incision is then made depending on surgeon preference.

If the teaching surgeon is going to stand posteriorly at the patient’s back, then it is easier to teach, guide, and first assist if the third incision is placed posterior to the camera port. If the teaching surgeon is going to stand anteriorly on the same side as the learner, then the third 1 cm incision is best placed anterior to the camera port. We prefer to have the teaching surgeon stand posteriorly and the learner stands anteriorly. We typically do not place trocars in these third incisions and thus only need a 5 mm trocar for the entire procedure. Additional ports are placed at the discretion of the surgeon. All ports should be separated by 6-8 cm in order to avoid unnecessary fencing of intrathoracic instruments. In teaching VATS lobectomy, as with other cases, there is a progression of responsibility for the case.

It is important to remember that an open lobectomy is typically performed via a posterior approach while a VATS lobectomy is almost always an anterior approach. Thus, a VATS lobectomy offers a “different view” for many surgeons. A final caveat is that if a two- or three-incision VATS lobe strategy is used, then the operating surgeon will need to operate more exclusively through the anterior access incision and therefore will most certainly need the full armamentarium of VATS instrumentation.

The correct placement of the access incision and ancillary
First step in the learning process. This exposes the learner to much of the anatomy from an anterior approach as well as the various lung positioning and retraction maneuvers to facilitate the nodal dissection. While not routine, there are maneuvers that can be done to facilitate the N2 nodal dissection for the novice VATS lobe surgeon. For instance, division of the azygous vein at the junction of the SVC facilitates the dissection of 2R and 4R nodal stations.

We routinely begin our nodal dissection by retracting the lung anteriorly to completely dissect of station 7 (Video 1) and the posterior station 10L nodes. When indicated for more anteriorly located right upper lobe tumors or tumors near the minor fissure, it is also possible to begin to isolate and divide lobar bronchovascular structures from this posterior approach, as outlined in Video 2. In these cases the right upper lobe bronchus is isolated and divided first followed by the truncus arterial branch next, with the remainder of the segmental pulmonary arterial vessels and lobar veins taken from a continued posterior approach or from an anterior approach.

Teaching the N1 nodal dissection can be challenging for both the instructor and the learner. Notwithstanding the oncologic benefit, it is imperative that all N1 nodes be removed in order to facilitate the accurate identification of the lobar bronchi and perhaps more importantly the segmental branches of the pulmonary artery. We prefer a combination of blunt (metal suction device) and sharp dissection with either scissors or low-dose cautery to remove these nodes. The primary difficulty the learner has when performing a N1 dissection is the loss of haptic perception. Intraoperative teaching of this aspect of the procedure is best done by (I) having the correct VATS instrumentation; (II) explaining normal and common variant anatomy; and (III) moving anterior to posterior in the nodal dissection. Analysis of the STS database for upstaging of pulmonary malignancies following either VATS or open lobectomy found that significantly fewer N1 nodes were obtained following VATS lobectomy, indicating that VATS surgeons need to be more complete in sending N1 nodal tissue (11). The routine dissection and removal of the N1 lymph nodes makes subsequent isolation and division of the segmental pulmonary arteries with the endostapler much more expeditious and safer.

**Fissureless VATS lobectomy**

The majority of VATS lobectomies do not require identification of the pulmonary artery in the fissure and...
thus division of the parenchyma is commonly the last step of the procedure. This fissureless approach is best taught during open thoracotomies for lobectomies. We perform a fissureless VATS lobectomy in the majority of cases. As shown in Video 3 (a VATS middle lobectomy) and Video 4 (a VATS left lower lobectomy) a fissureless approach is simple, straightforward and in my opinion is less likely to result in injury to segmental pulmonary arterial branches. On occasion partial division of a fissure may facilitate the dissection and when appropriate should be performed. In addition, an experienced VATS surgeon will occasionally need to dissect vascular structures in the fissure to safely remove centrally-located or large tumors. These types of operations are not, however, appropriate beginning cases for the novice VATS lobectomy surgeon.

In general, when teaching a fissureless approach the pulmonary vein is isolated and divided first. This is a relatively simple maneuver most of the time and one that an intermediate learner can do within 10-15 minutes. Once complete it offers exposure to the lobar bronchus (lower and middle lobectomies) and pulmonary arterial segmental vessels. Each successive division opens up the dissection of the next structure, until the fissures are the only remaining attachments. We find that dissection and confirmation with various instruments that mimic the angles of the stapling devices are helpful in orienting subsequent endostapler application. We utilize the VATS curved and straight DeBakey clamps to approximate the angles one must have for the endostaplers.

**Case progression**

When teaching any new surgical technique there needs to be a progression toward independence for all steps of the procedure. In general, one can divide the steps in a VATS lobectomy into discrete, defined maneuvers (see Table 1 example). The learner and the instructor can both track progress, operative times per maneuver, and technical results and then make necessary adjustments on this data.

**Simulation and VATS lobectomy**

Advanced minimally-invasive procedures such as a VATS lobectomy require a specialized surgical skill set. Surgical simulation may be able to facilitate a more rapid and safe introduction into surgical practice without exposing the patient to unnecessary risk. There are a number of relevant issues regarding simulation in thoracic surgery including identification of an appropriate and realistic model (computer-based, animal, or tissue block) and validation of the model (12-15). As outlined by Tong et al. the utility of a task-based simulator depends on its fidelity and validity. Fidelity, also known as face validity, refers to how real the simulator experience feels to the student. Content validity evaluates whether the steps performed in the simulator are accurate to what is done in the actual procedure. Construct validity evaluates the ability of the simulator to discriminate between learners at different levels of experience (14).

Groups at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and New York University have developed a porcine-block and a virtual reality trainer VATS lobectomy model, respectively (13,15). The porcine lung block model has been shown to have a high fidelity and is perhaps the best studied and most validated model for teaching VATS lobectomy (14,15). The porcine block left lung model is not anatomically identical.
to human anatomy, but the tissue and advanced dissection techniques are reproducible and are detailed in an evaluation by senior surgeons (15). Additional groups have developed simulators for open surgery as well, which could be easily transitioned to VATS (16).

The virtual trainer has advantages in ease of set-up and fidelity to human anatomic variants as well as the ability to improve the model as technology improves. The upfront costs are estimated to be $25,000-35,000 for required infrastructure and will need further development. The virtual reality trainer can score the movements of the surgeon, allowing users to track their progress and set benchmarks for resident progress (13). Validation studies of the porcine block model were performed by Tong et al. and showed that in 31 residents with varying experience with VATS lobectomy that this model discriminated well between novice, intermediate, and experienced VATS lobectomy surgeons (14).

In all likelihood, the use of both platforms will be advantageous at different points in thoracic surgery training and in learning the VATS lobectomy procedure. The virtual reality platform can be used as often as one likes, and would be a good starting point for novice VATS lobectomy surgeons. The porcine model can then be used once surgeons gain some operative experience and will facilitate the development of fine dissection skills and gain a “feel” for tissue strength with sharp and blunt dissection of hilar vessels. In the United States, thoracic surgery education and training is transitioning to shorter, integrated programs which will certainly need simulation to adequately prepare surgeons with a reduced time in training. Unfortunately, there is still no universally identified simulation model and exposure opportunities are varied and limited to individual institutions. A more uniform and accessible simulation strategy for teaching and learning the skills required to perform a VATS lobectomy is needed.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Right, middle, and lower bronchial sleeve lobectomy by video-assisted thoracic surgery

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Submitted Aug 06, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 21, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.61
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.61

Introduction

Surgical treatment remains the most effective approach to extending the long-term survival of patients with lung cancer (1).

However, for tumors that have already invaded the orifice of upper lobe bronchus and/or main bronchus, lobectomy alone can not completely remove the tumors, whereas pneumonectomy will severely damage the lung functions. On the contrary, bronchial sleeve lobectomy is featured by not only the maximal resection of tumors but also the maximal reservation of the normal lung tissues and lung functions and the remarkably decreased complications. Thus, it has shown good effectiveness in treating central-type lung cancer (2). The bronchial sleeve lobectomy extends the indications of lung cancer surgeries (3); When applied under thoracoscope, it can reduce the damage to the chest organs/tissues and the post-operative pain and therefore is particularly superior (4).

Clinical data

An 18 years old female patient was admitted on May 18, 2013 due to “heart palpitations on exertion with shortness of breath, occasionally accompanied with dry cough”. Chest computed tomography (CT) at admission showed right middle lobe atelectasis (Figure 1). Bronchoscopy displayed a mass at the orifice of right middle-lower bronchus. Pathology indicated the presence of “bronchial mucoepidermoid carcinoma” (Figure 2A). After the pre-operative preparation was well performed, he received right, middle, and lower bronchial sleeve lobectomy and lymph node dissection by video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) under general anesthesia (Video 1). During the surgery, obstructive atelectasis was seen in the right, middle and lower lung and excessive expansion seen in the right upper lung. Also, some paratracheal and subcarinal lymph nodes were found to be swollen. After the surgery, the tracheal stump was sent for pathologic examination, which showed no residual cancer. The post-operative pathology showed bronchial mucoepidermoid carcinoma (Figure 2B), whereas no metastasis was seen in lymph node stations 2, 4, 7, 8, 11, and 12. Anti-inflammatory and symptomatic treatment was provided after the surgery. The patient recovered well from the surgery and was discharged on the tenth post-operative day. One month later, the Chest CT scan showed right upper lobar inflation (Figure 3).

Pre-operative preparation

The patient underwent blood tests, urine analysis, ECG, and pulmonary function tests before the surgery to comprehensively evaluate the general conditions and his tolerance to the surgery. Informed consent was obtained before the surgery.

Surgical procedures

The patient was under general anesthesia with double-lumen endotracheal intubation. One lung ventilation of the healthy side was done when the patient was asked to take a supine position on the healthy side. A 1-cm incision was made at the sixth intercostal space on the right anterior axillary line as the observation port; A 5-cm incision was made at the fourth intercostal space on the

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Figure 1 Chest CT shows right middle lobe atelectasis. (A) Lung window; (B) Mediastinal window.

Video 1 VATS right middle-low bronchial sleeve lobectomy for lung cancer.

Figure 2 Both the bronchoscopic biopsy and post-operative pathology indicate the presence of bronchial mucoepidermoid carcinoma. (A) Bronchoscopic biopsy; (B) post-operative pathology.

Figure 3 Chest CT scan showed right upper lobar inflation.
anterior axillary line as the main operation port; And a 1-cm incision was made near the sixth intercostal space on the posterior axillary line as the auxiliary operation port. After the insertion of instruments, the mediastinal pleura of portopulmonary was dissected and the right inferior pulmonary ligament was disconnected. However, the hyperinflation of the lower right lung hampered the operation. Thus, the right, middle, and lower bronchi were dissected firstly and then transected, so as to relieve the hyperinflation of the lower right lung. The arteries and veins in the right, middle, and lower lungs were divided and then transected. The swollen lymph nodes in the hilum of lung were removed. End-to-end anastomosis of the right upper lobe bronchus to the main bronchus was performed using the prolene 3-0 suture. After the anastomosis, sterile water was injected into the thoracic cavity to find out if there was any gas leakage. A right lower chest tube was placed. Bronchoscopic sputum suction was performed. The condition of the anastomotic stoma was checked; Since it was patent, the incisions were then sutured.

**Post-operative management**

The post-operative management of patients who have undergone full thoracoscopic bronchial sleeve lobectomy is basically the same as those who have received conventional thoracoscopic lobectomy. It mainly includes adequate postoperative analgesia, prophylactic use of antibiotics, and resolving sputum. Effective expectation and early ambulation should also be encouraged. A second chest X-ray showed good recruitment of the residual lung. The drain was electively removed when drainage was less than 100 mL/day.

**Discussion**

Currently the bronchial sleeve lobectomy is still based on the traditional open surgery. However, the open surgery-related trauma can severely affect the post-operative quality of life. Even worse, its damage to the respiratory muscles on the chest wall can increase the perioperative mortality.

However, in some patients with central lung cancer, bronchial sleeve lobectomy can achieve an effectiveness similar as the pneumonectomy, and meanwhile can achieve the maximal reservation of the post-operative lung functions, improve the quality of life, and extend the survival (5). The min-invasive bronchial or vascular sleeve lobectomy by VATS can minimize the above problems. However, the full thoracoscopic surgery can be challenging for the operators. The bronchial sleeve lobectomy should only be performed by thoracic surgeons who have been well trained in laparoscopic techniques in carefully selected patients to ensure the safety.

**Acknowledgements**

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Introduction
Bronchial sleeve resection of lung tumors has emerged as an effective approach which not only removes the lesion but also avoids pneumonectomy, thereby reducing surgical mortality and maximizing lung function and long-term survival (1). Chen et al. reported a video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) lobectomy for lung cancer under non-intubated epidural anesthesia, which demonstrated acceptable safety and feasibility (2). However, there are no reports describing bronchial sleeve resection under non-intubated anesthesia. Here, we describe a case of complete endoscopic bronchial sleeve resection of right lower lung cancer under non-intubated epidural anesthesia.

Case report
A 70-year-old man presented with a mass in the right lower lung during physical examination. Lung function tests showed forced vital capacity (FVC) of 73.1% and forced expiratory volume in 1 s (FEV₁) of 71.5%. Computed tomography (CT) showed a mass at the dorsal segment of the lower right pulmonary lobe (Figure 1), measuring approximately 3×4 cm², as a thick-walled eccentric cavity.

On November 11, 2013, the patient underwent complete thoracoscopic resection under non-intubated epidural anesthesia. Intramuscular midazolam (0.07 mg/kg) and atropine (0.01 mg/kg) were administered at 30 min before anesthesia. Epidural puncture was performed at the T7-8 intervertebral space, with the epidural catheter tip pointed towards the head and fixed after confirming successful placement. Following epidural injection of 0.375% ropivacaine and a test dose of 2 mL ropivacaine, the patient was observed for 5 min for signs of total spinal anesthesia. If total spinal anesthesia was not achieved, two more injections of 0.375% ropivacaine were administered, totaling 8 mL.

With a mask to supply oxygen and remove nitrogen, 2 μg/mL of intravenous propofol was given via target-
controlled infusion (TCI) in combination with 0.2 μg/kg intravenous infusion of sufentanil. When adequate sedation was achieved, a laryngeal mask airway (LMA) was inserted and the anesthesia machine was connected to provide simultaneous intermittent mandatory ventilation (SIMV). Arterial catheterization was performed at the right internal jugular vein and the radial artery on the non-operative side.

Epidural injection of 4 mL 0.375% ropivacaine was administered at an interval of 60 min. Continuous intravenous infusion of 1.0-1.5 μg/mL propofol was performed via TCI. Continuous infusion of remifentanil 0.03 μg/kg·min and dexmedetomidine hydrochloride 0.5-1.0 μg/kg·h was administered to maintain sedation. An intraoperative spectrum analyzer was used to monitor the sedative effect, with the bispectral index (BIS) maintained at 40-60. The sedation depth was adjusted according to the monitored parameters. Spontaneous breathing was maintained, with a respiratory rate of 12-20 beats/min.

To suppress the cough reflex caused by lung tissue stretch during the thoracoscopic operation, the intrathoracic vagus nerve was blocked. Under direct vision in thoracoscopy, 3-5 mL of 0.375% ropivacaine was injected near the vagus nerve inferior to the mediastinal pleura above the azygos arch adjacent to the trachea.

The approach for non-intubated epidural thoracoscopic surgery was the 3-port method. With the patient in a left lateral position, the endoscopic observation port was made in the 7th intercostal space at the anterior axillary line, the working port in the 5th intercostal space at the anterior axillary line, and the auxiliary port in the 7th intercostal space at the posterior axillary line. Using a 30° endoscope, the observation field covered the entire chest cavity. Using the connection between the operated side and the outer atmosphere and a gentle push on the lesion side, an iatrogenic pneumothorax was formed to collapse the right lung. After vagus nerve blockade, exploration of the dorsal side of the right lower lung was performed, where a mass measuring 4×5×5 cm³ was found, with evident pleural

![Figure 1](mass_at_the_dorsal_segment_of_the_right_lung_on_computed_tomography_CT.)
surface indentation. Johnson’s endoscopic automatic stapler was initially used to isolate the incomplete fissure, and the right lower pulmonary artery and vein were incised. The right lower lobular bronchus was then similarly transected, sent for frozen biopsy and shown to be “bronchial margin residual cancer”. While waiting for the pathological result, systematic lymphadenectomy was performed. To preserve the right and middle lung, bronchial sleeve resection was planned, and the surgery was continued without switching to intubation. The right middle lobe and the bronchi in the middle segment were transected at the root. The frozen pathology showed no residual lesions in the margin of the intermediate segment and the proximal middle bronchus. The right middle lobular bronchus was then joined with the right intermediate bronchus, and was continuously sutured with single 3-0 Prolene suture silk. After anastomosis, a pressurized balloon was applied in conjunction with laryngeal mask ventilation to expand the lungs, and no leakage was observed at the bronchial anastomosis. Upon confirmation of hemostasis, the operation was completed.

Results

The operation time was 165 min, involving 25 min of bronchial anastomosis and 120 mL blood loss. Five groups of a total of 18 lymph nodes were dissected during surgery. Histopathology results were as follows: moderately differentiated squamous cell carcinoma of the right lower lung, stump carcinoma in situ of the lower lobe bronchus, no tumor in the proximal margins of the right middle lobe and intermediate bronchi, and no lymph node metastasis in any dissected group (0/18). The patient did not require assisted breathing postoperatively. He was able to drink and eat at 4 h postoperatively and was mobile at postoperative day 1. At postoperative day 3, the drainage was removed, and no leaks, pulmonary infection, atelectasis, bronchial fistula, or other complications were observed. He was discharged on postoperative day 6. Pulmonary CT at 1 month postoperatively showed no anastomotic strictures (Figure 2).

Comment

In the present case, since there was a stump residual tumor in the bronchus after lobular resection, we switched to the sleeve resection technique. Given that the patient was stable and the advantage of reduced operative time required for bronchial anastomosis, the non-intubated anesthetic approach was undertaken with the hope of avoiding further injury. Therefore, we performed bronchial sleeve resection under non-intubated anesthesia with satisfactory results, demonstrating that non-intubated anesthesia could be successfully used in not only conventional VATS lobectomy but also for complicated bronchial anastomosis.

To avoid perioperative respiratory failure, non-intubated epidural anesthesia is usually performed only in a select group of patients, with estimated operation time within 3 h and have ASA grade I-II, body mass index <25, and good lung function reserves. In such patients, SPO\textsubscript{2} ≥90% can be maintained (2-4). In this patient, since we needed to open the airway for bronchial sleeve resection, which stopped the inhalation of oxygen from the nostrils, the inhaled oxygen concentration was reduced and the SPO\textsubscript{2} briefly decreased to 80%. We therefore provided assisted ventilation with a laryngeal mask and balloon to increase the oxygen flow and ventilation, rapidly improving the SPO\textsubscript{2} to a safe range of 90-95%, reversing the hypoxemia while reducing CO\textsubscript{2} reabsorption. After completing bronchial anastomosis, the patient’s ventilation recovered immediately, and hypoxemia and hypercapnia improved significantly.

In conclusion, thoracoscopic bronchial resection under non-intubated epidural anesthesia can be performed, allowing successful removal of the tumor while retaining adequate functionality of the lung tissue. The patient recovered rapidly, awakened quickly postoperatively, began to eat and drink and was mobile soon after surgery, with a short hospital stay.
Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Anesthesia with nontracheal intubation in thoracic surgery

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Objective: To study one-lung respiration during VATS wedge resection of bullae and pulmonary nodules with nontracheal intubation, and to explore the changes of vital signs when patients return to two-lung ventilation.

Methods: Twenty-two patients with normal cardiopulmonary function and absence of contraindications to epidural anesthesia were included in this study. VATS wedge resection of bullae or pulmonary nodules was performed. 0.5% Ropivacain was administrated for epidural anesthesia (T8-9), and 2 mL of 2% lidocaine was used for local anesthetic block of the intrathoracic vagus nerves. The BIS value was maintained between 50 and 70 by target-controlled infusion of propofol and remifentanil. Electrocardiogram (ECG), heart rate (HR), blood pressure (Bp), pulse oxygen saturation (SpO₂), respiratory rate (RR), bispectral index (BIS) and urine volume were monitored.

Results: None patients were converted to endotracheal intubation during anesthesia. MAP and SpO₂ after wound disclosure were stable (P>0.05), level of CVP significantly elevated, HR and RR increased (P<0.05), PaCO₂ increased gradually while PaO₂ remained stable. Fifteen minutes after wound closure, MAP, RR and SpO₂ returned to their pre-anesthesia levels, PH value gradually recovered, PaCO₂ tended to decrease and returned to normal one hour after wound closure. Physical agitation occurred in one case due to inadequate epidural anesthesia during skin incision. Cough before intrathoracic vagal blockade was noted in two cases (9.1%) because of lobe traction.

Conclusions: Nontracheal intubation is feasible in VATS wedge resection of bullae and pulmonary nodules. The patients are with stable intraoperative vital signs and none experiences hypoxemia; intraoperative hypercapnia is tolerable and transient, which can be improved quickly when bilateral lungs resume spontaneous respiration.

Keywords: Anesthesia; nontracheal intubation; thoracic surgery

Submitted Mar 06, 2012. Accepted for publication Mar 13, 2012.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2012.03.10
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2012.03.10

Introduction

As lung separation techniques and anesthesia management advances in thoracic surgery, video-assisted thoracic surgery rapidly develops as well. As a result, the operating time and surgical trauma in wedge resections of bullae and pulmonary nodules have been significantly reduced. Since Pompe reported awake VATS wedge resection of solitary pulmonary nodules under thoracic epidural anesthesia in 2004, thoracic sympathectomy, lung metastases resection, pulmonary nodule resection, pulmonary bulla resection, biopsy of lung and pleura, resection of mediastinum nodules and pulmonary lobectomy in a similar anesthetic manner have continually been reported (1-7).
Although VATS wedge resection of bullae and pulmonary nodules with nontracheal intubation has been proven to be feasible, various factors, such as spontaneous respiration with one-lung ventilation during operation, intercostal muscle damage induced by thoracic epidural anesthesia intravenous administration of sedatives and analgesics, and operative position, may aggravate respiratory impairment, causing hypoxemia and hypercapnia, or even serious complication as well.

In addition, as for VATS operations under anesthesia with nontracheal intubation, it is not clear how the vital signs, such as respiration and circulation, will change during one-lung ventilation. Moreover, the trend and time of vital signs recovery after conversion to two-lung ventilation have not been reported. This clinical observation of 22 cases of VATS wedge resection of bullae or pulmonary nodules under anesthesia with nontracheal intubation explored changes of the vital signs during one-lung ventilation and subsequent two-lung ventilation.

**Patients and methods**

**Research design**

Anesthesia protocols were audited and approved by the Hospital Ethical Committee. The inclusion criteria for subjects were ASA I-II, age between 18 and 65, BMI <25, Mallampati grade I-II, little airway secretion and absence of epidural puncture contraindication. VATS wedge resections of bullae and pulmonary nodules were performed. Anesthetic protocols were explained to the participants before the informed consent was obtained.

**Anesthesia**

Patients received intramuscular Midazolam 0.06 mg/kg and Atroine 0.01 mg/kg 30 minutes before anesthesia. Electrocardiogram (ECG), heart rate (HR), blood pressure (Bp), pulse oxygen saturation (SpO₂), respiratory rate (RR) and bispectral index (BIS) and urine volume were continuously monitored after the patients entered the operation room. The thoracic epidural catheter was inserted at the T8-9 interspace, 3 cm towards the head, after intravenous infusion had been established. 2 mL of 2% Lidocaine was injected with the patients in supine position. Five minutes after the injection when no abnormal reaction to the anesthesia was observed, 3 mL of 0.5% Ropivacain was administrated followed by re-injection of another 3 mL 5 minutes later to reach a level of anesthesia between T2 and T10. Target-controlled infusion of Propofol and Remifentanil was started, and the BIS value was maintained between 50 and 70 by adjusting target concentration. During the whole research process, nasopharyngeal airway and face mask were used for oxygen inhalation, with an oxygen flow of 3-5 L/min.

Catheters were inserted via the right internal jugular vein or the right subclavian vein to continuously monitor the central venous pressure (CVP). And catheterization via the radial artery was performed to continuously monitor the invasive blood pressure (IBP). An incision into the chest wall on the operated side caused pulmonary collapse, leading to iatrogenic pneumothorax. Patients received local administration of 2 mL of 2% Lidocain injected under thorascoposcopic guidance to achieve local anesthetic block of the intrathoracic vagus nerves. After the pleural cavity was closed and the wound was sutured, a face mask was used to assist the patients in ventilation to inflate the lung tissue. After the target controlled infusion was stopped and the epidural catheter was removed, the patients were transferred to a post anesthesia care unit (PACU).

If SpO₂ gradually decreased below 90% during anesthesia, a face mask was needed to assist ventilation in order to improve systematic oxygenation; if PaCO₂ ≥80 mmHg, operation had to be suspended and mechanical ventilation was delivered via a face mask to assist gas exchange. If ventilation could not be improved by the face mask, endotracheal intubation would be resorted.

Vital signs were monitored at pre-anesthesia, before and 15, 30, 45 minutes after wound disclosure as well as 15, 30, 45 minutes after wound closure. At the above time points, arterial blood was simultaneously extracted for blood gas analysis to detect values of pH, PaO₂, PaCO₂ and Lac. Operating time, arrhythmia, physical agitation, coughs before and after local anesthetic block of the intrathoracic vagus nerves and the cases transferred to endotracheal intubation were all recorded.

**Statistical analysis**

Primary outcome measures included values of HR, SpO₂, RR, Bp, CVP and arterial blood gas analysis. Secondary outcome measures included BIS, operating time, physical agitation and coughs. Age, height, weight and BMI were expressed by average value ± standard deviation. Two-sample t-test was used for statistical analyses. All data were analyzed with SPSS 13.0. A P value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.
Results

From July to December of 2011, 9 VATS resections of bullae and 13 wedge resections of lung nodules were performed under combined anesthesia with epidural block, local block of the thoracic vagus nerve and analgesic sedation.

The general clinical data of the patients were detailed in Table 1. Their average age was 39.18±18.52 years and their average BMI was 20.57±2.35. No arrhythmia was found by ECG monitoring. No patients needed conversion to endotracheal intubation during anesthesia. Physical agitation caused by inadequate epidural anesthesia was noted in one case (4.5%) during skin incision. Cough occurred before local anesthetic block of the vagus nerves in two cases (9.1%), which was caused by stretching of pulmonary lobes when exploring and exposing the vagus nerves, but no cough occurred after completion of the vagus nerve blockade.

The HR and SpO\textsubscript{2} values before wound disclosure were almost the same as those before anesthesia; the BIS value obviously declined by 28.8% (P<0.01); the mean arterial pressure (MAP) slightly declined by 15.4%; the respiration rate decreased by 30.3% (Table 2). The changes of operative indexes after wound disclosure were detailed in Table 3.
MAP and SpO₂ changed slightly (P>0.05) while the CVP rose significantly; the sedation level deepened with gradually decreased BIS value; HR and respiratory rate (P<0.05) gradually increased; acidemia was gradually aggravated with increasing PaCO₂ but no hypoxemia occurred after PaO₂ was maintained stable.

Compared with those before anesthesia, the MAP, RR and SpO₂ values 15 minutes after wound closure returned to their pre-anesthesia levels. Patients were still in light sedation, with slightly increased HR and BIS value of 73.4±13.6 (Table 4). Under spontaneous respiration with oxygen inhalation via a nasal tube (2–3 L/min), arterial blood gas analysis showed that PH value gradually recovered and PaCO₂ tended to decrease but returned to normal one hour after wound disclosure. The oxygenation index significantly declined 15 minutes after thoracotomy but recovered to that before thoracotomy 30 minutes later. Although the value of Lac after thoracotomy was higher than that before wound disclosure, both Lac values were within the normal range (Table 5).

**Discussion**

The present study enrolled subjects to undergo VATS bullectomy or lumpectomy which can be accomplished simply and in a short time. In our series, the operation duration was (57.5±14.2) min, and the duration from wound disclosure to closure when the negative pressure restored in the thoracic cavity in all cases did not exceeded 45 minutes. As a result, we did not have a long time to observe the pathophysiologic changes after pneumothorax.

Incisions through the chest wall for VATS are generally made between the 4th and 7th costal interspace, so we chose the T8/9 thoracic interspace as the puncture site to perform thoracic epidural blockade because it could maintain effective analgesia in the operative field. In this study, limb agitation occurred during skin incision due to insufficient epidural anesthesia in one patient, whose operation was then completed after further TCI anesthesia.

Cough reflex is a complicated process of neuro-physiological reflex. The cough center is located in the solitary nucleus over the medulla oblongata area of the brain, associated with respiratory neurons. Cough receptors are located mainly on the posterior wall of trachea, pharynx, and mucosa of bronchus. Receptors above secondary bronchi are sensitive to mechanical stimuli while those below are sensitive to chemical stimuli. Impulses caused by stimuli travel via the vagus nerve to the medulla of the brain and trigger a cough. Two cases in our study coughed during operative exploration and lobe traction before intrathoracic vagal blockade, but none had operation-irritated cough during the whole procedure after local anesthesia with lidocaine over the intrathoracic vagus nerve. This indicates intrathoracic vagal blockade may effectively prevent cough reflex, which is in consistency with another relevant study (7).

| Table 4 Vital signs before anesthesia and 15 min after wound closure (x±s) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Before anesthesia          | 15 min after wound closure  |
| BIS            | 92.5±5.6                    | 73.4±13.6**                 |
| MAP (mmHg)     | 84.9±9.5                    | 84.1±11.4                   |
| HR (bpm)       | 78.9±13.9                   | 90.3±12.9*                  |
| RR (bpm)       | 15.8±1.4                    | 15.0±4.3                    |
| SpO₂ (%)       | 99.2±1.1                    | 99.0±2.6                    |

Compared with those before anesthesia, *, P<0.05; **, P<0.01.

| Table 5 Blood gas analyses before wound disclosure, 15, 30 and 60 min after wound closure (x±s) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Before wound disclosure | 15 min after wound closure | 30 min after wound closure | 60 min after wound closure |
| pH               | 7.30±0.06                   | 7.29±0.06                   | 7.32±0.05                   | 7.34±0.03                   |
| PaCO₂ (mmHg)     | 57.6±10.6                   | 54.1±11.3                   | 48.9±7.30*                  | 47.7±4.45**                 |
| PaO₂ (mmHg)      | 260.7±119.2                 | 144.1±98.8*                 | 144.1±69.3**                | 133.8±42.5**                |
| Oxygenation index | 411.1±149.9                 | 289.5±141.7**               | 410.5±117.6                 | 420.7±146.7                 |
| HCO₃⁻ (mmol/L)   | 27.7±2.1                    | 25.5±2.5**                  | 25.0±2.6**                  | 25.6±2.2**                  |
| BE (mmol/L)      | 1.10±1.76                   | -1.00±2.41*                 | -1.19±2.80*                 | -0.39±2.43                  |
| Lac (mmol/L)     | 0.65±0.44                   | 1.08±1.33                   | 1.13±0.98                   | 0.97±0.63                   |

Compared with those before wound disclosure. *, P<0.05; **, P<0.01.
mainly as follows: (I) decreased activity of the non-operated thoracic cage due to operative posture related compression; (II) further decreased activity of the thoracic cage caused by impaired intercostal muscle function following thoracic epidural anesthesia; (III) inhibition of the respiratory center caused by any anesthetic, sedative and analgesic agent; (IV) paradoxical breathing due to the collapse and insufficiency of the operated lung; (V) muscle flaccidity over the laryngopharynx in sedation which may produce and accelerate glossoptosis, leading to upper respiratory obstruction and aggravating paradoxical respiration and mediastinal flutter.

We strictly selected subjects with good cardiorespiratory functions and without difficult airway. The patients breathed oxygen through a ventimask during the procedure to maintain a good oxygenation index, with SpO\textsubscript{2} above 95%. When epidural anesthesia worked and TCI analgesia was administered, the breathing slowed down and hypercapnia was observed. When iatrogenic pneumothorax occurred on the operated side, the respiratory rate grew compensatorily and PaCO\textsubscript{2} increased continuously, which reached to the peak 15 minutes after pneumothorax but began to relieve slightly 30 minutes later. We consider that the hypercapnia occurring in this procedure is tolerable and has little effect on the hemodynamics. It is believed that the increase of PaCO\textsubscript{2} along with the decrease of pH mainly depends on the increasing speed of PaCO\textsubscript{2} and functional compensation of the kidney. The side effects and tolerance of hypercarbia are mainly related to the cardiovascular and cerebrovascular status of the patients. Studies have indicated that permissive hypercarbia relieves as well as deteriorates cerebral-ischemia-reperfusion injury in rats. Which role it will play is closely correlated with its severity. In a range of 60-100 mmHg, PaCO\textsubscript{2} relieves cerebral-ischemia-reperfusion injury in rats by inhibiting neuron apoptosis while it aggravates cerebral edema induced by cerebral-ischemia-reperfusion injury in a range of 101-120 mmHg (8). Propofol may significantly decrease the intracranial pressure and maintain the balance of cerebral oxygen supply and demand in patients with permissive hypercarbia (9).

Patients breathed with bilateral lungs after wound closure, lung dilatation and thoracic negative-pressure drainage. The arterial blood gas analysis 15 minutes later showed all values returned almost to their levels before wound disclosure. Our results also showed that the hypercapnia during pneumothorax was quickly and effectively improved after operation, particularly one hour later.

The blood pressure before operation was lower than that before anesthesia, which was induced by epidural anesthesia and TCI sedation. Thoracic epidural blockade may significantly influence the thoracic sympathetic nerve system, inducing vasodilatation and decreased blood pressure. The arterial blood pressure maintained basically normal after iatrogenic pneumothorax, with no arrhythmia noted by continuous ECG monitoring, which indicates that the mediastinal flutter has no significant influence on circulation. The increases of heart rate and CVP may be compensations for the slowed down venous return following the disappearance of negative pressure in unilateral thoracic cavity.

In the present study, we demonstrated that VATS wedge resection of bullae and pulmonary nodules with nontracheal intubation are feasible in operations that can be accomplished in a short time. Patients can maintain stable intraoperative physical signs without severe hypoxemia. The intraoperative hypercarbia is tolerable and transient and can be improved quickly when the bilateral lungs resume spontaneous respiration. Further research, however, is still to be further studied to characterize the hypercarbia 30 minutes after pneumothorax and to explore its systematic impacts.

References


Introduction

A disease of serious harm to human health and life, lung cancer has shown evidently increasing morbidity and mortality worldwide in recent years, and ranked first in both figures in developed and developing countries (1). Although surgery has been recognized as the most effective method of treatment for early-stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), most patients with lung dysfunction, due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) after a history of smoking, are at a higher risk of complications after lung surgery. Therefore, a history of lung cancer with severe COPD is a contraindication to lobectomy. With the ongoing application of lung volume reduction surgery both at home and abroad, it has been shown that, after the removal of part of the lesions in lung tissue, lung function can be improved to varying extents for some patients with severe emphysema (2). An increasing number of studies have confirmed improvement in the lung function of patients with
lung cancer and severe COPD following lobectomy (3-5). Those findings have shed new light on the indications for lobectomy in patients with lung cancer and COPD.

Video-assisted thoracoscopic lobectomy was first applied for the treatment of lung cancer in 1992. Its greatest advantage included the minimal invasiveness, reduced postoperative pain and less damage to the respiratory muscle and pulmonary function (6). The video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) has been reported (7) to allow significantly faster recovery of pulmonary functionality for in the early stages after lobectomy, compared with open-chest surgery, which further suggests that VATS protects lung function more efficiently as it causes less damage to respiratory muscles. With the wide application of VATS and continuous advancement in the technology of anesthesia, intensive care and preoperative respiratory function management, the indications for pulmonary resection are also expanding to include more and more elderly patients or long-term smokers whose lung function is already impaired. At present, favorable short- and long-term outcomes have been reported in a few studies using VATS lung resection to treat patients with lung cancer and severe COPD (8). So far, however, only a small number of such cases undergoing VATS lobectomy have been reported, and the findings are not sufficient to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of this approach in this regard. Hence, this study is conducted to assess the safety and effectiveness of VATS lobectomy based on the findings of 61 patients with lung cancer and severe COPD who underwent this treatment in our department.

Materials and methods

Clinical data

The clinical data of patients undergoing VATS lobectomy in First Affiliated Hospital of Guangzhou Medical College from January 2000 to January 2011 were retrospectively analyzed. Sixty-one patients complicated with COPD were identified and enrolled in this study based on the GOLD classification standard for COPD (9). Upon enrollment, all participants were engaged in a series of preparation before surgery, including quitting smoking, respiratory function exercise, administration of phlegm drugs and chest physiotherapy.

Preoperative examination and surgical methods

Before surgery, all participants received physical examination, routine blood tests, ECG, cardiac color Doppler ultrasound and lower extremity deep venous color Doppler ultrasound. Respiratory function tests include pulmonary ventilation-dispersion function tests and ventilation-perfusion radionuclide scans. Coronary CT or treadmill activity tests were performed in patients with suspected coronary heart disease over the age of 60, as well as coronary interventional examination, if necessary.

Preoperative tumor staging was based mainly on the chest X-ray examination, chest CT, head and abdominal MRI, whole body bone scan, and bronchoscopy. PET/CT scans were recommended for patients considered to be stage II or above. All participants underwent VATS lobectomy and hilar and mediastinal lymph node dissection, of which the specific surgical techniques were already reported in our previous study (10).

Data collection and follow-up

The demographic data, smoking status, lung function test results, operative time, blood loss, postoperative hospital stay, postoperative chest tube residence time, postoperative tumor stage, postoperative complications, and pre- and postoperative ECOG performance status of all enrolled patients were collected. The following postoperative complications were recorded: perioperative mortality (in-hospital mortality or death of any cause in 30 days after surgery), severe complications (surgery-related: second thoracotomy due to postoperative bleeding; Respiratory: ARDS and bronchopleural fistula, pneumonia, pulmonary embolism, empyema, pulmonary edema, tracheostomy or second endotracheal intubation; Cardiac: myocardial infarction, myocardial ischemia or angina pectoris, cerebrovascular event, deep vein thrombosis; Others: acute renal failure, acute gastrointestinal bleeding, etc); and mild complications (atelectasis, postoperative air leakage for more than seven days, pleural effusion, atrial fibrillation or other arrhythmias, wound infection, etc). Long-term follow-up was conducted to identify the breathing status, tumor recurrence and survival of all patients, for a period of 1-60 months.

Statistical analysis

Measurement data were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (x±s). The chi-square test was used in the correlation analysis of changes in the ECOG performance status of the participants, and Kaplan-Meier survival analysis was conducted to identify the correlation with postoperative
survival. The Cox regression model test was performed for each variable with a P value of ≤0.20 in the univariate analysis. The statistical analysis was completed in SPSS 13, with P<0.05 indicating a statistically significant difference.

Results

Clinical data

Sixty-one cases were finally included in the retrospective study, including 53 men (86.9%) and eight women (Table 1). The average age was 64 years (46-83 years). Fifty-one patients were long-term smokers. The preoperative FEV1/FVC was <70% and FEV1% <50% in all patients, with a mean preoperative FEV1 of 0.99 L (0.54-1.58 L) and mean FEV1% of 38.4% (22-49.82%).

All of the 61 patients underwent the VATS lobectomy or sleeve resection plus systemic lymph node dissection [right upper lobe in 23 cases (37.7%), right middle lobe in three (5.0%), right lower lobe in eleven (18.0%), left upper lobe in thirteen (21.3%) and left lower lobe in eleven (18.0%)]. The mean operative time was 218 minutes (120-355 minutes), with a mean intraoperative blood loss of 342 mL (50-1,600 mL). None of the patients converted to thoracotomy. Postoperative pathology reported 34 cases of adenocarcinoma (55.7%), 20 cases of squamous cell carcinoma (32.8%) and seven of other tumors (11.5%). All participants were subject to pathological and clinical staging according to the TNM Classification of the UICC, 7th edition (11). As a result, there were nine patients of IA (14.8%), nineteen of IB (31.1%), fourteen of IIA (23.0%), six of IIB (9.8%), and thirteen of IIIA (21.3%).

Complications after surgery

Two patients died of ARDS during the perioperative period, and 24 patients (39.3%) presented postoperative complications (Table 2). Twenty-two patients (36.1%) had respiratory complications postoperatively, including air leakage in 16 cases (25.8%), pulmonary infection in six, respiratory failure in three, atelectasis in two and pulmonary embolism in two. The average hospital stay was 16±1.1 days (5-54 days).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Demographics and clinical data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Male:female</td>
<td>53:8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>FEV1 (L)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEV1%</td>
<td>38.40 (22-49.82)</td>
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<td>FEV1/FVC%</td>
<td>47.88 (25.79-69)</td>
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<td>VATS operations</td>
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<td>Lobectomy</td>
<td>57 (93.4%)</td>
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<td>Sleeve resection</td>
<td>4 (6.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right upper lobe</td>
<td>23 (37.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right middle lobe</td>
<td>3 (5.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right lower lobe</td>
<td>11 (18.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left upper lobe</td>
<td>13 (21.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left lower lobe</td>
<td>11 (18.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean operative time (mins)</td>
<td>218 (range, 120-355)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bleeding (L)</td>
<td>342 (range, 50-1,600)</td>
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<td>Hospital stay (days)</td>
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<td>Adenocarcinoma</td>
<td>34 (55.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Squamous cell carcinoma</td>
<td>20 (32.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<td>Staging</td>
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<td>IA</td>
<td>9 (14.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IB</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIA</td>
<td>14 (23.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIB</td>
<td>6 (9.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIIA</td>
<td>13 (21.3%)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Complications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complication</td>
<td>Patients, No*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mortality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Air leak</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrial fibrillation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory failure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atelectasis</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empyema</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pulmonary embolism</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wound infection</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleeding</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Some patients had more than one complication.
Overall survival

During a median follow-up time of 39 months (1-60 months), five patients were lost to follow-up and 27 died. The survival rate was 75.4% in the first year, and 50.9% in five years (Figure 1). In the univariate analysis using the Log-rank test, the outcomes were correlated with age and postoperative TNM staging (P=0.007 and 0.006, Table 3). The median survival of patients not older than 65 years was 48 months, and reduced to 31 months in those older than 65 (P=0.007, Figure 2). Patients with stage I tumors had a median survival of 49 months, while those had stage II/III tumors had only 28 months. The difference was significant between them (P=0.006, Figure 3). In the Cox regression model, when taking into account those factors showing significant effect on survival in the univariate analysis, age and TNM staging after tumor resection were independent predictive factors for the 5-year survival in those patients (P=0.014 and 0.013, Table 4).

The ECOG scores were recorded three months before and after surgery to evaluate the changes of lung function and quality of life for the patients (12). The results showed that mean ECOG scores of 1.51 and 1.31 before and after surgery, respectively, among the 59 patients, excluding two who died during the perioperative period. The difference between those scores was significant (P<0.05).

Discussion

Lung cancer and COPD are two common diseases of human beings. The presence of both conditions in a patient
can increase the risk of complications after lung surgery due to underlying lung function damage. Since lung cancer patients with severe COPD are at a higher risk of postoperative complications, most of they have to receive non-radical partial lung resection (wedge or segmental resection) instead of lobectomy, which is currently recognized as the most effective means of treatment for early stage lung cancer. For patients with lung cancer, however, both pulmonary wedge resection and segmental resection are associated with a significantly increased recurrence rate and lower postoperative survival compared with standard lobectomy (13,14).

With the ongoing application of lung volume reduction surgery, it has been found that partial lung resection can achieve the similar result to volume reduction for patients with lung cancer and emphysema (3), which can minimize or even improve postoperative pulmonary function loss. Those findings have shed new light on the surgical options for patients with lung cancer and severe COPD. With the development of surgical techniques, anesthesia and intensive medical technology, an increasing number of studies have reported that lung resection can be tolerated by patients with lung cancer and severe pulmonary insufficiency, and can lead to satisfying outcomes (3,8,15-18).

Since the early 1990s, VATS has been rapidly developed and widely applied in the world, involving almost all areas of general thoracic surgery. Compared with thoracotomy, VATS enables a smaller incision without removing or stretching the ribs open, sparing respiratory muscles from injuries and thus minimizing the loss of lung function. Moreover, with a smaller incision, patients will suffer less pain postoperatively and expectorate more easily, reducing the incidence of postoperative pulmonary infection and complications as well. In view of those advantages, VATS procedures have been used in a growing number of studies to treat patients with lung cancer and severe pulmonary dysfunction (8,19).

Previous studies have shown that, however, patients with lung cancer and COPD have an increased risk of cardiopulmonary complications compared to patients with lung cancer alone (20). In the present study, two patients died of respiratory failure in the perioperative period and 24 patients (39.3%) had postoperative complications, of which 22 (36.1%) had respiratory complications with an average hospital stay of 16 days after surgery. It can be seen that the incidence of postoperative respiratory complications in this study is not unacceptable compared with the previous reports. According to the existing studies, open chest surgery is associated with a longer postoperative hospital stay and higher incidence of respiratory complications in patients with lung cancer and severe pulmonary dysfunction compared with the VATS procedures, which further demonstrates that the VATS technique is an ideal option for such patients. A possible explanation for the lower risk of postoperative pulmonary complications is that reduced injury to respiratory muscles, smaller chest wall incision and consequently less pain allows patients to cough and expectorate more easily and get out of bed sooner after VATS, and this in turn reduces the likelihood of other complications of the respiratory system. In the present study, pulmonary complications were observed in 36.1% of the patients, which is lower than the report of most studies with open chest surgery (3,16,17) but higher than those with VATS surgery (8). Martin et al. (8)

**Figure 3** Survival according to stage: stage I disease (n=26) versus stages II/III (n=30) (P=0.006).

**Table 4** Multivariate analysis of overall survival.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Hazard ratio</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unfavorable</td>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>&gt;65</td>
<td>≤65</td>
<td>2.899</td>
<td>1.239-6.787</td>
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<td>pTNM stage</td>
<td>II/III</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>3.113</td>
<td>1.273-7.609</td>
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</table>
**Table 5** Lung resection in poor pulmonary function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>No. of Patients</th>
<th>Pulmonary function tests</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Hospital stay (days)</th>
<th>Mortality 30 days %</th>
<th>Morbidity 30 days %</th>
<th>Respiratory complications (pulmonary and pleural) and remarks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nakajima <em>et al.</em> 2009 (17)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Pred FEV% &lt;50%</td>
<td>Open: wedge + segment 4, lobectomy 26, pneumonectomy 6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11 (30.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pneumonia 5, Bronchopleural fistula 3, Empyema 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garzon <em>et al.</em> 2006 (10)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Pred FEV1 &lt;0.8 or FEV1% &lt;50%</td>
<td>VATS: lobectomy 13, wedge resection 12</td>
<td>7.4 [2-26]</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (20.0)</td>
<td>Air leak 2, Atelectasis 2, Pneumonia 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linden PA <em>et al.</em> 2005 (18)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Pred FEV1% &lt;35%</td>
<td>Open: wedge resection 65, lobectomy 10, wedge resection 5, segmentectomy 4, lung volume reduction/wedge 8. VATS: lobectomy 4, segmentectomy 4</td>
<td>8.37</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>41 (41.0)</td>
<td>Prolonged air leak 22, New oxygen requirement 11, Respiratory failure 4, Pneumonia 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magdeleinat <em>et al.</em> 2005 (19)</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>Pred FEV% ≤50%</td>
<td>Open: pneumonectomy 16, lobectomy 73, z segmentectomy 7, wedge resection 10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5 (8.5)</td>
<td>74 (69.8)</td>
<td>Pneumonia 27, Atelectasis 16, Bronchitis 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martin U <em>et al.</em> 2005 (8)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>ppoFEV1% &lt;40%</td>
<td>VATS: lobectomy 17, segmentectomy 17</td>
<td>7 [3-31]</td>
<td>2 (5.8)</td>
<td>10 (29.4)</td>
<td>Pneumonia 3, Air leak 3, Empyema 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choong <em>et al.</em> 2004 (3)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mean FEV1 =0.7 L mean Pred FEV1% =29%</td>
<td>Open: lobectomy 18, wedge resection 3</td>
<td>9 [5-24]</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19 (90.5)</td>
<td>Respiratory failure 2, Air leak 11, Mini-tracheostomy 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solli <em>et al.</em> 2003 (20)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Pred FEV% &lt;50% or DLCO% &lt;50%</td>
<td>Open: pneumonectomy 10, lobectomy 11, z sublobar resection 10, segmentectomy 7, wedge 2</td>
<td>7 [4-21]</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16 (31.6)</td>
<td>Respiratory failure 1, Atelectasis 3, Pneumonia 1, Air leak 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present study</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Pred FEV% &lt;50%</td>
<td>VATS: lobectomy 62</td>
<td>16±1 [5-54]</td>
<td>2 (3.2)</td>
<td>22 (36.1)</td>
<td>Air-leak 16, Pneumonia 6, Respiratory fail 3, Atelectasis 2, Pulmonary embolism 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FEV, forced expiratory volume; ppoFEV1, predicted postoperative percentage of FEV1; Pred, predicted; VATS, video-assisted thoracic surgery.
carried out VATS lung resection for 34 patients with lung cancer and a FEV1% <40%; Although there were two dead cases, respiratory complications were observed in only ten patients (29.4%). In the present study, although the incidence of postoperative respiratory complications was higher than the above findings (8), systemic radical surgery was administered to all of the patients with lung cancer and severe COPD in the former, while VATS lobectomy accounted for up to 50.2% and 50% (8) in the other two studies. Lobectomy is associated with much greater surgical injury and loss of functional alveolar areas than either wedge resection or segmentectomy, and there were seven patients with extremely severe COPD and a preoperative FEV1% of only 27.8% (22-29.9 %) in this study.

Patients in this study had a relatively long hospital stay, averaging 16 days. Although it is slightly shorter than 20 days as reported by Magdeleinat et al. (17), it is longer than all of the other studies, which may be largely due to the surgical approaches. In this study, all 61 patients received either lobectomy or sleeve resection, whereas lobectomy accounts for a relatively small part in all of the remaining studies.

In the present study, both short- and long-term survival rates are observed in patients with moderate COPD who received lobectomy or sleeve resection after a 5-year follow-up. The survival analysis showed a 1-year survival rate of 75.4%, which was basically consistent with the findings of Magdeleinat (17), and a 5-year survival rate of 50.9%, which was higher than the report of Magdeleinat. Further analysis showed significantly better outcomes in patients with stage I lung cancer than in those with stages II or III, with the 5-year survival rates being 73.1% and 32.3%, respectively (P<0.05), which were generally consistent with other reports (8,15,17). According to the report by Martin et al. (8), the analysis of 34 patients with stage I lung cancer and severe pulmonary dysfunction who underwent VATS lobectomy or segmental resection revealed a 5-year survival up to 69.7%, without significant difference between the two groups. Nakajima et al. (15) found a 5-year survival of 57.9% in the stage I group as a part of 36 patients with lung cancer and severe lung dysfunction, but the 5-year survival was merely 11.9% in the more advanced groups.

Lung cancer and COPD are mostly found in elderly people, while patients over the age of 65 years account for about 50% and those over the age of 70 years account for 30–40% of all cases (21). COPD and cardiovascular diseases are the common concomitant diseases in elderly smokers with lung cancer, and the presence of such conditions may directly or indirectly affect their therapy and outcomes. In the study of Janssen-Heijnen et al. (22), age was regarded as an independent factor for the survival outcomes of patients with stages I and II NSCLC, though it had no significant impact on the survival outcomes of patients at more advanced stages. Li et al. (23) also found that the 5-year survival rate was significantly higher in patients with stage I lung cancer who were not older than 65 years, compared with those older. In our previous study, we also found that age could be a critical factor in predicting the outcomes of those patients (24). A number of studies (15,17,25) have shown that, for patients complicated with severe pulmonary dysfunction, those with stage I lung cancer would have a better outcome than patients with the condition at stages II and III (P<0.05). In the present study, multivariate statistical analysis also suggested that age could be an independent prognostic factor for patients with lung cancer and severe COPD, which was consistent with previous reports.

However, there are several limitations in this study due to its retrospective nature. Although it has included the largest number of patients with lung cancer and severe COPD undergoing VATS lobectomy so far, the absolute number is not significantly large. Secondly, the present analysis included only the 5-year survival but not the time to progression, and did not take into account the subsequent treatment patients received after the surgery when calculating the 5-year survival rates. Finally, an objective comparison between the lung function data before and after the surgery is unavailable because some of patients did not receive postoperative pulmonary function tests. Hence, the changes in the quality of life can merely be analyzed based on some relatively objective indicators in the present study. A more comprehensive prospective study will be needed to further determine the safety and effectiveness of VATS lobectomy as the treatment for patients with lung cancer and severe COPD.

In conclusion, VATS lobectomy can be safely and effectively performed for patients with NSCLC and severe COPD to achieve a satisfying long-term survival outcome as good as the routine VATS procedure, with an acceptable incidence of postoperative complications. Therefore, our preliminary conclusion is that for younger patients at an earlier stage (stage I), VATS lobectomy can be used as a more effective treatment option.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.
References

Analysis of feasibility and safety of complete video-assisted thoracoscopic resection of anatomic pulmonary segments under non-intubated anesthesia

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Objective: To explore the feasibility and safety of complete video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (C-VATS) under non-intubated anesthesia for the resection of anatomic pulmonary segments in the treatment of early lung cancer (T1N0M0), benign lung diseases and lung metastases.

Methods: The clinical data of patients undergoing resection of anatomic pulmonary segments using C-VATS under non-intubated anesthesia in the First Affiliated Hospital of Guangzhou Medical University from July 2011 to November 2013 were retrospectively analyzed to evaluate the feasibility and safety of this technique.

Results: The procedures were successfully completed in 15 patients, including four men and eleven women. The average age was 47 [21-74] years. There were ten patients with adenocarcinoma, one with pulmonary metastases, and four with benign lung lesions. The resected sites included: right upper apical segment, two; right lower dorsal segment, one; right lower basal segment, two; left upper lingular segment, three; left upper apical segment, one; left upper anterior apical segment, two; left upper posterior segment, one; left lower basal segment, one; left upper posterior and apical segments, one; and left upper anterior and apical segments plus wedge resection of the posterior segment, one. One case had intraoperative bleeding, which was controlled with thoracoscopic operation and no blood transfusion was required. No thoracotomy or perioperative death was noted. Two patients had postoperative bleeding without the need for blood transfusions, and were cured and discharged. The pathologic stage for all patients with primary lung cancer was IA. After 4-19 months of follow-up, no tumor recurrence and metastasis was found. The overall mean operative length was 166 minutes (range 65-285 minutes), mean blood loss 75 mL (range 5-1,450 mL), mean postoperative chest drainage 294 mL (range 0-1,165 mL), mean chest drainage time 2 days (range 0-5 days), and mean postoperative hospital stay 5 days (range 3-8 days).

Conclusions: Complete video-assisted thoracoscopic segmentectomy under anesthesia without endotracheal intubation is a safe and feasible technique that can be used to treat a selected group of IA patients with primary lung cancer, lung metastases and benign diseases.

Keywords: Video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS); segmentectomy; lung cancer

Submitted Jan 01, 2014. Accepted for publication Jan 06, 2014.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.01.06
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.01.06
Introduction

Lung cancer is the most common cancer worldwide, accounting for about 15% of cancer cases around the world, and 28% of cancer deaths (1). Lung cancer is also associated with the highest morbidity and mortality among all malignant conditions in China (2). Surgical resection by thoracotomy or thoracoscopy is the preferred treatment for early-stage non-small cell lung cancer (3). Since the early 1990s, video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) has been rapidly developed and widely applied in the world, involving almost all areas of general thoracic surgery. Compared with thoracotomy, VATS enables a smaller incision without removing or stretching the ribs open, sparing respiratory muscles from injuries and thus minimizing the loss of lung function. Moreover, with a smaller incision, patients will suffer less pain postoperatively and expectorate more easily, reducing the incidence of postoperative pulmonary infection and complications as well (4). Thoracoscopic lobectomy is a representative application of thoracoscopic surgical techniques in thoracic surgery.

With the development and extensive application of imaging techniques such as high-resolution computed tomography (HRCT) and low-dose spiral computed tomography (CT), the detection rate of small lung nodule of unknown nature has been increasing. Lung resection is considered to be applicable for early lung cancer (T1N0M0), small metastases and localized benign lesions (such as bronchiectasis and tuberculosis) (5-8). Compared with lobectomy, segment resection better preserves lung functions while removing small nodules (9). With the intensified aging population, some patients are often complicated with cardiovascular diseases that make them unable to tolerate lobectomy, and therefore segmental resection has also been considered for the treatment of patients with primary lung cancer and poor cardiopulmonary function (3).

For now, general anesthesia with one-lung intubated ventilation is the standard anesthesia in thoracic surgery. Intubated anesthesia is, however, often associated with postoperative throat discomfort, including primarily irritating cough, and throat pain in some patients. On the other hand, non-intubated anesthesia can reduce general anesthesia-related complications, and many investigators have therefore begun to explore its application in general thoracic surgery. Dong et al. reported that thoracoscopic wedge resection under non-intubated anesthesia was feasible and safe (10). Chen et al. reported the safety and feasibility of thoracoscopic resection under non-intubated anesthesia (lobectomy, lung resection and wedge resection) in 285 patients (11). Hung et al. reported segmental resection under non-intubated anesthesia in 21 patients, finding that the technique preserved maximum normal lung tissue while reducing the loss of lung functions, and general anesthesia-related adverse reactions (12). This study summarizes 15 patients undergoing C-VATS resection of anatomic pulmonary segments under non-intubated anesthesia in our department.

Subjects and methods

Clinical data

Patients undergoing C-VATS resection of anatomic pulmonary segments from July 2011 to November 2013 were enrolled. All patients received pre-operative chest high-resolution thin-slice enhanced CT scans and pulmonary function tests. For those suspected of lung cancer, additional upper abdomen CT, head MRI, whole body bone scintigraphy or whole body PCT examination was needed to exclude distant metastases. Patients were eligible when they had an ASA grade of I-II, BMI <25 and no evident airway secretions or contraindications for epidural puncture in preoperative anesthesia assessment (11). All operations were performed by the same group of thoracic surgeons and anesthesiologist team. The primary outcome measures included the operative time, intraoperative blood loss, hospital stay, chest drainage, chest tube duration, and type of lung resection.

Indications for segmental resection

The indications for segmental resection included: (I) a lung mass close to the hilum in which wedge resection is not possible; (II) history of lung lobe resection, leading to the consideration of an additional primary lesion; (III) past history of other malignancies and lung solitary tumors, for which differentiation with primary lung cancer is not possible via intraoperative frozen sections; (IV) multiple pulmonary ground-glass shadows, for which atypical adenomatous hyperplasia (AAH), adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS) or minimally invasive adenocarcinoma (MIA) may be suspected; (V) a complication with any cardiopulmonary disease that makes lobectomy intolerable; and (VI) peripheral early lung cancer ≤2 cm in diameter.

Surgical methods

Administration of anesthesia: with established intravenous
rehydration, an epidural catheter is inserted in the thoracic T6-7 space. In the supine position, 2 mL of 2% lidocaine is injected through the epidural catheter. If signs of spinal anesthesia are not present in five minutes, fractionated injection of 12 mL 0.375% ropivacaine is administered. Before surgery, the anesthesia level should reach between T2 and T10. Propofol and remifentanil are infused for sedation and analgesia during surgery, with the BIS values maintained between 40 and 60. During surgery, masked and nasopharyngeal airway assisted ventilation is given with an inhaled oxygen concentration FiO₂ of 0.33. Monitors are mounted on both sides along the patient’s head, which generally lies on the opposite side to the operating site, with the hilum and waist padded to further widen the intercostal space. The operator stands in front of the patient, the first assistant on the patient’s back side, and the second assistant handles the thoracoscope. The first port is generally made in the 7th or 8th intercostal space at the anterior axillary as the observation port. It should be noted that, in case that the diaphragm is too high or unclear on the X-ray images, this port should be positioned at a higher intercostal space to avoid injuring the abdominal organs. The second port is usually in the 7th intercostal space at the posterior axillary line and the third port close to the lesion, which form a triangle on the chest wall. All of them are treated with soft incision protectors to serve as the surgical operation channels. All video-assisted thoracic operations are performed using Stryker 1288 HD 3-Chip Camera/1288 with a three-chip HD camera system and specially designed endoscopic instruments in our department. After insertion of the thoracoscope from the first port, full chest exploration is conducted to determine whether there is evidence that the lesion is unresectable, such as pleural metastasis or other sign of metastases. Local vagus nerve block is achieved with 2 mL of 2% lidocaine under thoracoscopic guidance in the chest cavity, followed by spray of appropriate amount of the same concentration on the surface to reduce coughing that may induced by pulling of the lung tissue, ensuring a steady operation environment.

The thoracoscopic lung resection is done following the basic principle for lobectomy, in the order of arteries, bronchi, veins, and lung parenchyma in general. For resection of upper segments in the left upper lung, the veins are treated first because the superior branch of the superior pulmonary vein is anterior to, and blocks part of, its anterior branch, and thereby it should be first transected. The use of staplers and vascular clips is at the discretion of the operator depending on the vessel sizes during the surgery. According to the experience of the surgeons in our department, the use of hemolok and titanium clips should be avoided when clamping blood vessels. That is mainly because their application may affect the appropriate operation of other equipment such as stapler. (For example, a clip being caught in the stapler may prevent it from being successfully triggered.). Although in the event that vessels are well exposed, a stapler can be used to directly close or ligate and cut them off, there are still many factors that may affect those operations to such an extent that vessels are excessively pulled and injured when the stapler passes through them. In such cases, the tip of a linear stapler can be guided through the stapler guiding catheter to safely pass the posterior part of a vessel to successfully cut it off. The same method can be used to cut off bronchi, with satisfactory results. After the vessels and bronchi at the lesion segment are resected, the lung segment is in an atelectasis state. The anesthesiologist is instructed to maintain low volume low pressure ventilation to help determine the intersegmental plane. In addition, when the veins around the segment and in the surrounding segments to be preserved are well exposed, they can also be used to help identify the intersegmental plane. Mediastinal lymph node assessment is an essential component in thoracoscopic segmental resection for non-small cell lung cancer. Systemic lymph node dissection is performed following the segmental resection. Frozen sections of the segmental bronchus stumps and lymph nodes are sent for pathological tests. When positive intersegmental or interlobular metastases are present, switch to lobular resection is always preferred as long as the patient’s physical conditions allow. If there is so little residual tissue following the resection that the high mobility makes lung torsion likely, Gossot et al. suggests connecting with the adjacent lobes via TA to reduce the postoperative complication (10). During surgery, if SpO₂ drops to below 90%, mask assisted ventilation is needed to improve oxygenation. If blood gas analysis shows an arterial carbon dioxide partial pressure of ≥80 mmHg, the operation needs to be suspended followed by mask-assisted gas exchange. If the ventilation does not improve in this way, endotracheal intubation is required (9). Chest tube drainage is routinely used after the surgery. When there is no leakage and thoracic fluid volume is less than 200 mL per day, removal of the drainage can be considered.

Specific methods of segmental resection

(I) Resection of right upper posterior apical segments: the
apical and posterior segments can be treated separately, but they are usually removed at the same time. The posterior ascending aorta anterior to the upper lobular bronchus is treated before the bronchi. The upper lobe is pulled forward to expose the posterior mediastinum. The pleura of the upper lobe bronchus close to the mediastinum are opened using coagulation hook, “peanut” gauze or a combination of both. A 45-mm endoscopic stapler is used to open the posterior part of the oblique fissure to help expose the ascending aorta, and the artery is transected. With combined use of the cautery hook, right-angle clamp and ultrasonic scalpel, the surrounding soft tissue is separated until the apical segmental bronchus is fully exposed. The apical artery is located posterior to it. A cutting stapler is used to close the bronchus while the posterior arteries are properly protected. After transection of the segmental bronchus, the apical artery is revealed. The upper lung lobe is pulled backwards to expose the apical vein anterior to the hilum, which is then closed and cut. When eventually cutting the lung parenchyma, the anesthesiologist is instructed to maintain low-pressure ventilation so that the boundary line between ventilated and non-ventilated areas can be followed as the cutting line.

(II) Resection of the upper segment in the right lower lung: with combined use of the coagulation hook and ultrasonic scalpel, the pleura around the hilum in the right lower lung are divided and the oblique fissure opened using a stapler. The pulmonary arteries are gradually exposed. After the upper segmental artery is divided and cut, the posterior bronchus is revealed, separated, stapled and cut. The inferior pulmonary ligament is transected through to the inferior pulmonary vein. Gauze is used to expose the superior segmental vein upwards from the inferior pulmonary vein, and the former is then cut with a vascular clamp or stapler.

(III) Resection of the basal segment in the right lower lung: the anterior part of the oblique fissure is opened to expose the basal segment artery, which is transected and closed. The segmental bronchus is separated from the deep structure of the artery. The anesthesiologist is instructed to help identify if the basal segment bronchus is closed off by ventilation. The inferior pulmonary ligament is transected through to the inferior pulmonary vein. With the inferior lobe is pulled up, the surrounding tissue of the inferior pulmonary vein is divided using the cautery hook and peanut gauze. The basal segment vein is exposed and transected.

(IV) Lingular segment of the left upper lung: the lingular artery is separated and transected to reveal the upper lobular bronchus and lingular segmental bronchus. The latter is clamped, and low ventilation is used to identify its closure before transaction. The superior pulmonary vein is separated until its lowermost branch is exposed. If the lingular segmental vein can be located, it is transected before the intersegmental pulmonary tissue is handled. Otherwise, the lingular segmental vein can be treated until the lingular segmental tissue is fully separated.

Results

The procedures were successfully completed in 15 patients, including four men and eleven women. The average age was 47 [21-74] years. The patient characteristics are listed in Table 1. Pathological examination showed ten patients with adenocarcinoma, one with pulmonary metastases, and four with benign lung lesions (Table 2).

Segmental resections were successful in all patients without switching to thoracotomy or lobectomy. The
resected sites included: right upper apical segment, two; right lower dorsal segment, one; right lower basal segment, two; left upper lingular segment, three; left upper apical segment, one; left upper anterior apical segment, two; left upper posterior segment, one; left upper posterior and apical segments, one; and left upper anterior and apical segments plus wedge resection of the posterior segment, one. Resected lung segments are shown in Table 3.

One case had intraoperative bleeding of 1,450 mL, which was controlled with thoracoscopic operation and no blood transfusion was required. There were no perioperative deaths. Two patients of postoperative bleeding were controlled with hemostatic medicine without the need for blood transfusions, and no other serious complications occurred. All patients were cured and discharged. The overall mean operative length was 166 minutes (range 65-285 minutes), mean blood loss 75 mL (range 5-1,450 mL), mean postoperative chest drainage 294 mL (range 0-1,165 mL), mean chest drainage time 2 days (range 0-5 days), and mean postoperative hospital stay 5 days (range 3-8 days) (Table 4).

Of the ten patients with primary lung cancer, nine received mediastinal lymph node dissection or systemic lymph node sampling, and the pathological staging showed stage IA for them; one patient who did not receive the above procedure had micro invasive adenocarcinoma in the left lung. After 4-19 months of follow-up for the patients, no tumor recurrence and metastasis was found.

### Discussion

Whether segmental resection can achieve comparable effects to lobectomy for the treatment of early stage lung cancer is still controversial. Previous studies have shown that for early lung cancer, particularly when the tumor diameter is ≤ 2 cm, segmental resection can yield comparable long-term survival as with lobectomy (13,14). However, evidence in this regard comes mainly from retrospective case comparisons and meta-analyses, and the role of segmental resection in NSCLC needs to be further confirmed by large international multi-center randomized controlled clinical studies (CALGB 140503 in the United States and JCOG0802/WJOG4607L in Japan).

Complete thoracoscopic segmental resection is a complex and technically demanding procedure, requiring the surgeon to be extremely familiar with the anatomic structures of every segmental vessel and bronchus. One of the major technical difficulties is confirmation of the plane between segments. Most investigators traditionally suggest low-pressure ventilation after occlusion or transection of segmental bronchi, so that the plane can be determined by differentiating between the collapsed and expanded interface. The purpose of the ventilation is to avoid the influence on endoscopic vision and operation by excessive expansion of lung tissue. According to our experience, a long-handled tong may be used to clamp the plane after low-pressure ventilation, as it provides two main advantages: (I) in view of the traffic between the lung segments, adjacent lung segments can be expanded with ventilation, blurring the lung segment boundary;

### Table 3 Thoracoscopic resection of lung segments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Left</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4 + S5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1 + S3 + PS2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7 + S8 + S9 + S10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1 + S3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1 + S2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7 + S8 + S9 + S10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: S1, apical; S2, posterior; S3, anterior; S4 + S5, lingular; S6, superior; S7, medial basal; S8, anterior basal; S9, external basal; S10, posterior basal.

### Table 4 Intra- and post-operative conditions of lung resection surgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Value/number of patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean operation length (min)</td>
<td>166 [65-285]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean intraoperative blood loss (mL)</td>
<td>75 [5-1,450]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean drainage volume, mL</td>
<td>294 [0-1,165]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean drainage days</td>
<td>2 [0-5]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean postoperative stay (days)</td>
<td>5 [3-8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perioperative complications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postoperative bleeding, n (%)</td>
<td>2 (13.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
is the remarkable mediastinal motion, which requires intubation anesthesia, the biggest challenge for surgeons in invasive lung cancer surgery at present. With non-resection surgery should be one of the most minimally allowing faster recovery to preoperative mobility. Chest tube duration, shorten the length of hospital stay, and of lung function and reduce postoperative pain, shorten incidence of pulmonary complications, maximize protection endoscopic resection of lung segments may reduce the or lung infection after surgery. Therefore, non-intubation breathing; some patients may even experience atelectasis to alveolar hypoventilation due to rapid and shallow difficult to discharge after surgery, and indirectly leading suppresses the cough reflex, making pulmonary secretions reduced. Coughing may worsen wound pain, which in turn be removed. With non-intubated anesthesia, coughing 24-h chest drainage is less than 200 mL, the drainage can tests suggest good lung recruitment and no air leaks, and drinking, and get out of bed. Chest X-ray scans could be performed on the same the day after surgery. If imaging tests suggest good lung recruitment and no air leaks, and 24-h chest drainage is less than 200 mL, the drainage can be removed. With non-intubated anesthesia, coughing induced by postoperative throat discomfort is significantly reduced. Coughing may worsen wound pain, which in turn suppresses the cough reflex, making pulmonary secretions difficult to discharge after surgery, and indirectly leading to alveolar hypoventilation due to rapid and shallow breathing; some patients may even experience atelectasis or lung infection after surgery. Therefore, non-intubation endoscopic resection of lung segments may reduce the incidence of pulmonary complications, maximize protection of lung function and reduce postoperative pain, shorten chest tube duration, shorten the length of hospital stay, and allow faster recovery to preoperative mobility.

Non-intubated anesthesia combined with C-VATS lung resection surgery should be one of the most minimally invasive lung cancer surgery at present. With non-intubation anesthesia, the biggest challenge for surgeons is the remarkable mediastinal motion, which requires full cooperation among the surgeon, anesthetists and assistants. Mediastinal movement occurs when the ipsilateral intrathoracic pressure was significantly higher than that of the contralateral side in open pneumothorax, resulting in mediastinal shift to the contralateral area that further limits expansion of the contralateral lung. During inhalation and exhalation, the unbalanced pleural pressure on both sides experiences cyclical changes so that the contralateral mediastinum moves toward the contralateral side during inhalation and the opposite side during exhalation. In non-intubation segmental resection, the patient’s spontaneous breathing has to be retained in order to achieve atelectasis of the operative side and good ventilation of the contralateral lung, so that both the oxygen supply and a favorable operating field can be secured. With collapsed ipsilateral lung after thoracotomy, some patients will have obvious mediastinal swing, which will affect the surgeon's surgical operation, particularly when dealing with blood vessels in which excessive traction may lead to bleeding. To mitigate the impact of the mediastinal swing during surgery, anesthesiologists can increase the amount of opioids based on the operation, reduce the breathing frequency or the respiratory tidal volume, thereby reducing the amplitude of the swing. At the same time, appropriate ventilation can be given based on the results of blood gas analysis to avoid serious hypercapnia, so as to maintain the body's acid-base balance.

Based on the fifteen patients undergoing non-intubated anesthesia combined with C-VATS lung resection in our department, the technique is feasible and safe with the help of skilled anesthetists with experience in thoracoscopic lobectomy and non-intubated anesthesia. So far, there has been no shift to thoracotomy and lobectomy. Although there was one case of bleeding, it was well controlled endoscopically without the need of blood transfusion. As for the two cases of postoperative bleeding, no blood transfusions were needed and no other complications were observed. The incidence of perioperative complication was 13.4%. The mean operative time was 166 minutes, mean intraoperative blood loss 75 mL, mean postoperative chest drainage two days, and mean postoperative hospital stay five days. The operative time and the number of days in hospital are comparable to those reported with VATS under general anesthesia, while intraoperative blood loss, chest drainage time and perioperative complications were better than the latter (Table 5).

In summary, complete video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (C-VATS) under non-intubated anesthesia for
the resection of anatomic pulmonary segments in the treatment of early lung cancer (T1N0M0), benign lung diseases and lung metastases is safe and feasible, and can reduce postoperative pain, improve the appearance with small incisions, shorten chest drainage duration and postoperative hospital stay, provide maximum protection of lung functions, and reduce complications after general anesthesia. However, it requires that the surgeon has extensive experience in thoracoscopic lung resection in good cooperation with anesthesia doctors. Due to the short follow-up period, the long-term efficacy needs to be further confirmed. The long-term effect of non-intubated thoracoscopic anatomic segmental resection needs to be further studied and identified in a larger-scale study.

### Acknowledgements

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### References


Comparative study of systematic thoracoscopic lymphadenectomy and conventional thoracotomy in resectable non-small cell lung cancer

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Objective: To assess the feasibility and safety of the video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery (VATS) systematic lymph node dissection in resectable non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

Methods: The clinical data of patients with NSCLC who underwent VATS or thoracotomy combined with lobectomy and systematic lymphadenectomy from January 2001 to January 2008 were retrospectively analyzed to identify their demographic parameters, number of dissected lymph nodes and postoperative complications.

Results: A total of 5,620 patients were enrolled in this study, with 2,703 in the VATS group, including 1,742 men (64.4%), and 961 women (35.6%), aged 59.5±10.9 years; and 2,917 in the thoracotomy group, including 2,163 men (74.2%), and 754 women (25.8%), aged 58.5±10.4 years. Comparing the VATS with the thoracotomy groups, the mean operative time was 146 vs. 157 min, with a significant difference (P<0.001); and the average blood loss was 162 vs. 267 mL, with a significant difference (P<0.001). Comparing the two groups of patients data, the number of lymph node dissection: 18.03 in the VATS group and 15.07 in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); postoperative drainage time: 4.5 days in the VATS group and 6.37 days in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); postoperative hospital stay: 6.5 days in the VATS group and 8.37 days in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); postoperative hospital stay: 6.5 days in the VATS group and 8.37 days in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); proportion of postoperative chylothorax: 0.2% (4/2,579) in the VATS group and 0.4% (10/2,799) in the thoracotomy group, without significant difference (P>0.05).

Conclusions: For patients with resectable NSCLC, VATS systematic lymph node dissection is safe and effective with fewer postoperative complications, and significantly faster postoperative recovery compared with traditional open chest surgery.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery (VATS); systematic lymph node dissection

Submitted Jan 03, 2014. Accepted for publication Jan 06, 2014.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.01.07
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.01.07
Introduction

Lung cancer is a serious hazard to human health and life, with a significant rising trend in terms of morbidity and mortality around the world in recent years. This condition has become the leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, both for developed and developing countries (1). Although there are many methods for treating lung cancer at present, the recognized option of choice for the treatment of early- and mid-stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is surgical excision, and the standard surgical method is lobectomy combined with systematic lymph node dissection. As early as in 1983, Martini et al. (2) first reported the use of lobectomy and mediastinal lymph node dissection for the treatment of primary lung cancer.

With the wide application of minimally invasive techniques in the surgical field, the use of video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) in the treatment of NSCLC has been increasingly valued by thoracic surgeons. With the greatest advantage of minimal invasiveness, reduced postoperative pain and less damage to the respiratory muscle and pulmonary function, the VATS technique has been applied in the lobectomy of lung cancer as early as in 1992 (3). In 1995, McKenna et al. (4) first reported the use of VATS lobectomy combined with mediastinal lymph node dissection in the treatment of primary lung cancer.

Thorough lymph node dissection is one of the keys for successful comprehensive treatment of lung cancer, as it provides definite staging and guidance for the prognosis and the next treatment, and can improve the local remission rate and prolong disease-free survival time. According to the guidelines issued by the European-Society of Thoracic Surgeons (ESTS), systematic lymph node dissection is required for resectable NSCLC regardless of VATS or thoracotomy (5). Whether VATS allows thorough mediastinal lymph node dissection and can achieve comparable effects to thoracotomy has been controversial. At present, the reported results varied in different studies on the use of VATS for lobectomy combined with lymphadenectomy of resectable NSCLC compared with thoracotomy (6-14). So far, however, the number of studies comparing the two techniques is not large enough for a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness and safety of systematic lymphadenectomy using VATS versus thoracotomy. This study aims to determine the effectiveness and safety of VATS-based systematic lymphadenectomy by retrospectively analyzing the related multi-center, large-scale clinical data.

Materials and methods

Clinical data

The clinical data of patients with NSCLC who underwent VATS or thoracotomy combined with lobectomy and systematic lymphadenectomy in eight hospitals in China from January 2001 to January 2008 were retrospectively analyzed, and 5,620 patients were included in this study. Upon enrollment, all participants were engaged in a series of preparation before surgery, including quitting smoking, respiratory function exercise, administration of phlegm drugs and chest physiotherapy.

Preoperative examination and surgical methods

Before surgery, all participants received physical examination, routine blood tests, ECG, cardiac color Doppler ultrasound and lower extremity deep venous color Doppler ultrasound. Respiratory function tests included pulmonary ventilation-dispersion function tests. Coronary artery CT or treadmill activity tests were performed in patients with suspected coronary heart disease over the age of 60, as well as coronary interventional examination, if necessary.

Preoperative tumor staging was based mainly on chest CT, head and abdominal MRI, whole body bone scan, and bronchoscopy. PET/CT scans were recommended for patients considered to be stage II or above.

All participants underwent VATS or open chest lobectomy and hilar and mediastinal lymph node dissection, of which the specific surgical techniques were already reported in our previous study (15).

Thoracotomy group: a standard posterolateral incision of about 10-20 cm was made for placement of intercostal distraction to carry out the thoracotomy under direct vision. The operation included anatomic lobectomy plus systematic mediastinal lymph node dissection.

Systematic mediastinal lymph node dissection was common in both procedures, instead of lymph node sampling, involving at least three groups of mediastinal and intrapulmonary lymph nodes (including subcarinal lymph nodes). The surrounding fat tissue was be resected together with the lymph nodes en bloc. The resected lymph node specimens were independently examined and interpreted by two or more senior pathologists.

Data collection and follow-up

The demographic data, operative time, blood loss, number
of dissected lymph nodes, postoperative hospital stay, postoperative chest tube duration, postoperative tumor type, stage, and occurrence of postoperative chylothorax were collected for all patients.

**Statistical analysis**

Measurement data were expressed as mean ± standard deviation ($x \pm s$). The statistical analysis was completed in SPSS 13, with $P<0.05$ indicating a statistically significant difference.

**Results**

**Clinical data**

A total of 5,620 patients were finally included in the retrospective study, with 2,703 in the VATS group, including 1,742 men (64.4%) and 961 women (35.6%), aged 59.5±10.9 years; and 2,917 in the thoracotomy group, including 2,163 men (74.2%), and 754 women (25.8%), aged 58.5±10.4 years (Table 1).

All patients underwent VATS or open chest lobectomy plus systematic lymphadenectomy. Comparing the VATS with the thoracotomy groups, the mean operative time was 146 vs. 157 min, with a significant difference ($P<0.001$); and the average blood loss was 162 vs. 267 mL, with a significant difference ($P<0.001$) (Table 2). The postoperative pathological test showed 1,663 patients with adenocarcinoma (61.5%), 675 patients with squamous cell carcinoma (25.0%), 126 patients with adenosquamous carcinoma (4.7%), and 239 patients with other types of tumors (8.9%) in the VATS group; and 1,326 patients with adenocarcinoma (45.5%), 1,081 patients with squamous cell carcinoma (47.1%), 168 patients with adenosquamous carcinoma (5.8%), and 342 patients with other types of tumors (11.8%) in the thoracotomy group (Table 1).

According to the 2009 International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC) staging criteria (16), all patients were subject to clinical pathological staging classification. There were 1,415 patients at stage I (52.3%), 657 patients at stage II (24.3%), and 631 patients at stage IIIA (23.3%) in the VATS group; and 1,246 patients at stage I (42.7%), 794 patients at stage II (27.2%), and 877 patients at stage IIIA (30.1%) in the thoracotomy group (Table 2).

**Postoperative conditions (Table 2)**

Comparing the two groups of patients data, the number of lymph node dissection (Figure 1): 18.03 in the VATS

---

**Table 1 Characteristics of included patients**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VATS (%)</th>
<th>Open (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>2,703</td>
<td>2,917</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1,742 (64.4)</td>
<td>2,163 (74.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>961 (35.6)</td>
<td>754 (25.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean ± SD), years</td>
<td>59.5±10.9</td>
<td>58.5±10.4</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squamous carcinoma</td>
<td>675 (25.0)</td>
<td>1,081 (37.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adenocarcinoma</td>
<td>1,663 (61.5)</td>
<td>1,326 (45.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adenosquamous carcinoma</td>
<td>126 (4.7)</td>
<td>168 (5.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large cell carcinoma</td>
<td>62 (2.3)</td>
<td>198 (6.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAC</td>
<td>75 (2.8)</td>
<td>102 (3.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>102 (3.8)</td>
<td>101 (3.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNM stage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage I</td>
<td>1,415 (52.3)</td>
<td>1,246 (42.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage II</td>
<td>657 (24.3)</td>
<td>794 (27.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage III (A)</td>
<td>631 (23.3)</td>
<td>877 (30.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: VATS, video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery; BAC, bronchioloalveolar carcinoma.
group and 15.07 in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); blood loss: 162.2 mL in the VATS group and 267.34 mL in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); postoperative drainage time: 4.5 days in the VATS group and 6.37 days in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); postoperative hospital stay: 6.5 days in the VATS group and 8.37 days in the thoracotomy group on average, with a significant difference (P<0.001); proportion of postoperative chylothorax: 0.2% (4/2,579) in the VATS group and 0.4% (10/2,799) in the thoracotomy group, without significant difference (P>0.05).

### Table 2
Comparisons of numbers of sampled lymph nodes and operation duration between VATS and open surgery for resectable stage NSCLC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VATS (N=2,703)</th>
<th>Open (N=2,917)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of sampled LNs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18.03 (10.14)</td>
<td>15.07 (8.55)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage I</td>
<td>17.26 (9.29)</td>
<td>14.32 (7.98)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stage II</td>
<td>18.53 (11.20)</td>
<td>15.38 (8.91)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage IIIA</td>
<td>19.27 (10.68)</td>
<td>15.86 (8.90)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation length/minutes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>145.71 (13.03)</td>
<td>156.72 (17.03)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage I</td>
<td>145.75 (12.95)</td>
<td>156.09 (17.06)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage II</td>
<td>145.40 (12.51)</td>
<td>157.63 (16.95)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage IIIA</td>
<td>145.96 (13.71)</td>
<td>156.80 (17.04)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
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<td>Blood loss/mL</td>
<td>162.20 (142.56)</td>
<td>267.34 (220.31)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
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<td>Drainage days</td>
<td>4.50 (1.84)</td>
<td>6.37 (3.45)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of hospitalization/days</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chylothorax</td>
<td>4/2,579 (0.2%)</td>
<td>10/2,799 (0.4%)</td>
<td>0.117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: NSCLC, Non-small cell lung cancer; VATS, video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery; LNs, lymph nodes; Total, all stages (stage I-III).

### Figure 1
Comparisons of numbers of sampled lymph nodes between VATS and open surgery for resectable stage NSCLC. Abbreviations: NSCLC, Non-small cell lung cancer; VATS, video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery. *, With a significant difference.
Discussion

Lymph node metastasis is an important way of local and distant metastases in malignant cancer, as well as in NSCLC. It has a very important role in the prognostic determination and development of therapeutic strategies. Thus, for resectable NSCLC, the standard surgical method is lobectomy in combination with systematic lymph node dissection, which can improve the local control rate and prolong disease-free survival time.

Although it remains unconfirmed whether systematic lymphadenectomy can benefit patients with NSCLC oncologically, accurate lymph node staging still plays an important role in determining the need of postoperative adjuvant therapy and prognosis. Studies have shown that systematic lymphadenectomy is significantly superior to lymph node sampling in accurate staging. Investigators have found 4% patients at N2 stage with systematic lymph node dissection from 524 stage I patients who were identified with negative lymph nodes based on the sampling (17).

In the past, standard posterior lateral open chest lobectomy and lymph node dissection was mostly used for early and mid-stage resectable NSCLC. However, it is associated with a surgical incision often larger than 10 cm, extensive injury, slower postoperative recovery and higher incidence of postoperative complications. Since the early 1990s, VATS has been rapidly developed and widely applied in the world, involving almost all areas of general thoracic surgery. Compared with thoracotomy, VATS enables a smaller incision without removing or stretching the ribs open, sparing respiratory muscles from injuries and thus minimizing the loss of lung function. Moreover, with a smaller incision, patients will suffer less pain postoperatively and expectorate more easily, reducing the incidence of postoperative pulmonary infection and complications as well.

The safety and effectiveness of VATS lobectomy combined with lymph node dissection for the treatment of early NSCLC has been confirmed, more and more studies have shown that this technique has comparable long-term oncological outcomes as a radical option to traditional open thoracic surgery (18,19). Moreover, National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) treatment guidelines for NSCLC has also clarified that VATS is a viable option for treating resectable lung cancer, particularly for those who can not tolerate standard thoracotomy due to physical conditions. This means that VATS treatment of NSCLC has covered most internationally recognized indications for surgical treatment of lung cancer.

As we all know, a thorough lymph node dissection is essential for the prognosis of patients with NSCLC, but it remains controversial whether this can be achieved with thoracoscopic systematic lymphadenectomy for NSCLC. In contrast to the thoracic surgery, many surgeons suspect the feasibility and thoroughness of thoracoscopic lymph node dissection. The primary concern is residual lymph nodes. In this regard, many studies have confirmed that after VATS lymph node dissection, the residual lymph node rate is very low. Hoksch et al. (20) did VATS lymphadenectomy in corpses followed by standard lateral open chest exploration, and the results showed no significant residual hilar and mediastinal lymph nodes. Sagawa et al. (21) performed VATS lymph node dissection in 29 NSCLC stage I patients followed by open chest exploration, and confirmed that there were only 2-3% of residues.

Since it has been applied in lymph node dissection, VATS has witnessed numerous controversies about whether it is superior or inferior to thoracotomy in this regard. Retrospective or prospective clinical studies yielded varying results as well (6-14,22). Ramos et al. (11) conducted a retrospective study to compare the number of dissected lymph nodes and stations with the two approaches by collecting the clinical and pathological data from patients with stage I non-small cell lung cancer patients. The results showed that an average dissection number of 5.1 stations in the VATS group, which was more than 4.5 stations in the open chest group, with a significant difference. However, the average number of 22.6 dissected nodes in the VATS group was far fewer than 25.4 nodes in the open chest group, with a significant difference.

Lee et al. (23) analyzed 141 VATS patients and 115 cases of thoracic surgery for resectable NSCLC, finding that VATS yielded fewer dissected nodes compared with the open chest group (11.3±6.4 vs. 14.3±8.8, P=0.001), and the total number of dissected stations (3.1±1.1 vs. 3.8±1.2, P<0.001). Further analysis revealed that both differences came mainly from the dissection of mediastinal lymph nodes. On the other hand, some studies have confirmed that there is no difference in the number of either dissected nodes or dissected stations between the two approaches. Yang et al. (22) compared 62 patients with resectable NSCLC, which 31 cases in each of the VATS and thoracotomy groups, and found no significant difference in the number of either node or station dissected. In the present study, we found through statistical analysis that there was a mean number of dissected nodes of 18.03 in the VATS group and 15.07 in the thoracotomy group, with a significant difference (P<0.001)
between the two groups, which is inconsistent with previous reports. We believe that the thoracoscopic vision has almost zero dead angles during intrathoracic operations. It can provide a good surgical field and has a visual zoom effect to magnify the surgical field, with which the hilar structures and mediastinal lymph node stations can be more clearly identified and exposed. In this way, we are able to clean out more mediastinal lymph node, reducing the incidence of residual lymph nodes.

The safety of VATS lobectomy in combination with systematic lymphadenectomy for resectable NSCLC is another concern. We have found through literature review and comparison (Table 3) that the majority of studies suggest that VATS has great advantages in terms of postoperative complications, postoperative chest tube drainage duration and postoperative hospital stay compared with thoracotomy. This study also confirms this conclusion. We believe that the smaller surgical wound and more clearly exposed blood vessels, lymph nodes and lymph vessels during VATS have made it possible to accurately dissect target tissue during dissection without damaging small blood vessels and lymph nodes, thus reducing lymphatic drainage and the occurrence of postoperative chylothorax, allowing earlier postoperative extubation and reduced postoperative hospital stay.

However, there are several limitations in this study due to its retrospective nature. Although this study has involved the most cases in comparison of VATS and open chest lymph node dissection, the origination of data from several studies with surgeons of varying thoracoscopic technical levels may have contributed to certain data deviation. Secondly, this study only analyzes two surgical procedures only in terms of the number of lymph node dissection and related postoperative complications, without comparing the differences in the prognosis. Therefore, a more comprehensive prospective study will be needed to further determine the safety and effectiveness of VATS lymph node dissection.

In conclusion, for patients with resectable NSCLC, VATS systematic lymph node dissection is safe and effective with acceptably low incidences of postoperative complications, and significantly faster postoperative recovery compared with traditional open chest surgery.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**References**

7. Rueth NM, Andrade RS. Is VATS lobectomy better:

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**Table 3 Comparisons between VATS and open surgery for resectable stage NSCLC**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>No. of patients</th>
<th>No. of sampled LNs</th>
<th>Hospital stay/days</th>
<th>Drainage days</th>
<th>Chylothorax</th>
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<td>14.7</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
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<td>96</td>
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<td>25.4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>7.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
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<td>Scott WJ, et al. 2010 (10)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>31</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our study</td>
<td>2,703</td>
<td>18.03</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbreviations:** NSCLC, Non-small cell lung cancer; VATS, video-assisted thoracoscopy surgery; LNs, lymph nodes.
Neoadjuvant chemotherapy in early-stage non-small cell lung cancer

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Abstract: Surgical resection followed by adjuvant chemotherapy is the standard of care for completely resected stages II and III non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients. In order to improve survival in patients with early-stage NSCLC, efforts have been focused on the use of chemotherapy and radiotherapy before surgery with the aim of reducing the risk of relapse. Neoadjuvant chemotherapy is an attractive treatment option which is employed in different tumors and may well be associated with certain advantages in NSCLC patients such as being effective in treating occult microscopic systemic disease, downstaging mediastinal lymph node and improving the success of surgery by tumor reduction. Furthermore, chemotherapy compliance prior to surgery is generally better than after surgery. The potential disadvantages are treatment-related toxicities and the delay of surgery. At present, neoadjuvant chemotherapy is still considered an experimental treatment modality in early-stage disease and its role should be more clearly defined.

Keywords: Neoadjuvant; early-stage; non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)

Submitted Jul 08, 2013. Accepted for publication Oct 09, 2013.

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.07

Introduction

Current standard care for treating early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is surgical resection, when feasible, followed by adjuvant chemotherapy in stages II and III. However, chemotherapy compliance in the post-surgery setting is relatively poor and other strategies, such as neoadjuvant chemotherapy, have been addressed in clinical trials.

The role of neoadjuvant or induction chemotherapy in non-metastatic NSCLC has been evaluated in non-randomized and randomized clinical trials since neoadjuvant or induction therapy in resectable patients carries several theoretical advantages including locoregional cytoreduction, control of distant micrometastases, and a higher preoperative chemotherapy compliance compared with chemotherapy compliance after surgery. When this neoadjuvant approach was first discussed, the main potential disadvantages were treatment-associated toxicities and a delay in the surgical procedure, although at present, these drawbacks are considered barely relevant.

Studies analyzing neoadjuvant chemotherapy, and neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy

In the 1990s, two small randomized trials comparing neoadjuvant platinum-based chemotherapy followed by surgery versus surgery alone in stage IIIA NSCLC had a profound impact because they demonstrated a survival benefit in patients receiving preoperative chemotherapy. Rosell et al. (1) compared resection and post-operative radiation (50 Gy) versus induction chemotherapy with three courses of cisplatin, mitomycin C and ifosfamide followed by resection and post-operative radiation in 60 patients with stage IIIA NSCLC. A three-fold survival advantage was seen in those patients who received induction chemotherapy (26 versus 8 months, P<0.001). Roth et al. (2) reported the results of a similar clinical trial in which 60 patients with stage IIIAN2 disease were randomly assigned to receive induction chemotherapy with three cycles of cyclophosphamide, etoposide and cisplatin followed by resection versus surgical resection alone. Radiation was...
administered to more than half the patients in both groups. Induction chemotherapy was associated with a six-fold increase in median survival (64 versus 11 months, P<0.008).

Updated analyses of both studies continue to favor survival in the neoadjuvant chemotherapy arms. Long-term results of Rosell et al. study (3) confirmed a statistically significant survival difference (22 versus 10 months, P=0.005). In the long-term report of the Roth et al. (4) study with a follow-up of 82 months, 32% of patients who underwent neoadjuvant chemotherapy remained alive versus 16% of those who had undergone surgery alone (P=0.056).

The results of these two studies were discussed extensively as the survival advantages for the neoadjuvant chemotherapy groups were far greater than could be reasonably expected (5) and because both studies have a number of weaknesses in their design. These include variable prescription of adjuvant radiotherapy, the use of older drugs, and the application of the 1986 staging classification, in which stage III is even more heterogeneous than in the present one. Furthermore, in the Rosell et al. study there was a poor outcome in the surgery-alone group, which may be attributable to an imbalance of biological prognostic factors.

Since these early studies, several groups have evaluated neoadjuvant chemotherapy combinations prior to surgery in patients with early-stage disease.

In 2001, the French Thoracic Cooperative Group reported the results of a phase III study including 355 patients with stage IB, II and IIIA disease randomized to receive neoadjuvant chemotherapy (two courses of mitomycin C, ifosfamide and cisplatin) followed by surgery versus surgery alone (6). In both arms, patients with pT3 or pN2 disease received adjuvant thoracic radiotherapy, and responding patients received two additional cycles of adjuvant chemotherapy. Overall response to induction chemotherapy was 64%. The median survival was 37 months for the combined arm versus 26 months for the surgical arm (P=0.15). Interestingly, a survival benefit was observed in patients with stage I or II (P=0.027), but not in patients with stage IIIA (P=0.85). A major limitation of this study was the chemotherapy regimen employed, which resulted in poor compliance and an excess of toxicity in the initial phases of the trial.

The role of induction chemotherapy in stages IB to T3N1 NSCLC has also been evaluated by the Biomodality Lung Oncology Team (BLOT) trial in a phase II study in order to assess the feasibility of this approach. A total of 94 patients with early-stage NSCLC were scheduled to receive two courses of paclitaxel and carboplatin administered every three weeks followed by surgery and then, 3 cycles of adjuvant chemotherapy with the same agents for patients undergoing complete resection (7). Ninety-two patients completed preoperative chemotherapy, 59% of major responses were observed, and 82% underwent complete resection. However, only 45% of the patients received the planned adjuvant chemotherapy. In this trial, the 5-year survival rate was 42%. Based on this study, the Southwest Oncology Group (SWOG) 9900 trial randomly assigned 354 patients with stages IB, II or IIIA (excluding superior sulcus tumors and N2 disease) NSCLC to either three cycles of induction chemotherapy with paclitaxel and carboplatin followed by surgery versus surgery alone (8). This trial was closed to accrual early, owing to the data available in 2004 showing that adjuvant therapy improved survival after surgery. In the study, a response rate of 41% was seen in the neoadjuvant chemotherapy arm. In both arms of the trial, 84% of the patients underwent complete resection. The median overall survival was 62 months for neoadjuvant chemotherapy arm versus 41 months for the surgery alone arm, with a 19% reduction in the risk of death in favor of induction chemotherapy. However, this difference did not achieve statistical significance (HR 0.80, P=0.10).

The Medical Research Council LU22/NVALT 2/ EORTC 08012 trial evaluated the role of induction chemotherapy with one of six platinum-based combinations followed by surgery versus surgery alone in 519 patients with stages IA to III NSCLC (9). The study was negative with regard to overall survival (HR 1.02, P=0.86). Subgroup analyses were not reported.

The Spanish Lung Cancer Group led the NATCH (Neo-adjuvant Versus Adjuvant Taxol/Carbo Hope) trial which included 624 patients with stages IA (size >2 cm), IB, II, T3N1 NSCLC (10). It was a three-arm study in which participants were randomly assigned to receive induction chemotherapy followed by surgery, surgery followed by adjuvant chemotherapy or surgery alone. The chemotherapy regimen was paclitaxel and carboplatin. Although a trend for improved 5-year disease-free survival rates with neoadjuvant therapy was observed (38.3% with neoadjuvant chemotherapy, 36.6% with adjuvant chemotherapy, and 34.1% with surgery alone), there were no statistical differences (P=0.71) among the three arms; it is noteworthy that the majority of patients had stage I disease. In this trial, in the subgroup of patients with stage II-T3N1, the 5-year disease-free survival rates favored the neoadjuvant arm (36.6% in the neoadjuvant group, 31%
in the adjuvant arm, and 25% in the surgery group). A greater proportion (90%) of patients in the neoadjuvant group received the planned three cycles of neoadjuvant chemotherapy compared with the adjuvant group in which only 66% of the patients started adjuvant treatment.

Recently, the CHEST (Chemotherapy for Early Stages Trial) has reported surprisingly different results (11). This study randomly assigned 270 patients with stages IB, II and IIIA NSCLC to three cycles of induction chemotherapy with cisplatin and gemcitabine followed by surgery versus surgery alone. Overall, a significant advantage for induction chemotherapy was found with regard to progression-free survival (HR 0.70, P=0.003) and overall survival (HR 0.63, P=0.02), the study being positive in its primary end point (progression-free survival). However, the benefit of induction chemotherapy in progression-free survival was limited only to the subgroup of patients with stages IIB or IIIA disease (92% were IIB); progression-free survival at 3 years was 23% better in the chemotherapy group (P=0.002). The risk of death was reduced by almost 60% among patients with stage IIB/IIIA disease who were randomly assigned to receive induction chemotherapy (HR 0.42, P<0.001). In contrast, in the stage IB/IIIA subgroup (93% were IB) there were no differences in progression-free survival (HR 1.06, P=0.83) or overall survival (HR 1.02, P=0.94). Interestingly, in this study, slightly more patients in the surgery alone arm (25%) required pneumonectomy compared with 17% of patients in the chemotherapy arm.

Meta-analyses from data of randomized trials addressing the role of neoadjuvant chemotherapy in early-stage NSCLC are of interest. Berghmans et al. reported data from six randomized trials, published between 1990 and 2003, including 590 patients (12). The addition of neoadjuvant chemotherapy to surgery was associated with a non-significant improvement in overall survival (HR 0.65, 95% CI, 0.41-1.04).

Burdett et al. examined data from seven randomized trials including 988 patients, published between 1990 and 2005. Neoadjuvant chemotherapy improved survival (HR 0.82, 95% CI, 0.69-0.97), with an absolute benefit of 6% at 5 years (13).

In the CHEST trial results, Scagliotti et al. reported the results of a meta-analysis including 10 randomized clinical trials with a total of 2,188 patients comparing neoadjuvant chemotherapy followed by surgery versus surgery alone (including NATCH trial and CHEST data). This meta-analysis did show a significant survival advantage for those patients randomly assigned to receive induction chemotherapy (HR 0.89, P=0.02) (11).

Finally, preliminary results from a systematic review and meta-analysis of individual patient data from 13 randomized trials reported that neoadjuvant chemotherapy was associated with an improvement in survival in operable patients with 5% absolute benefit at 5 years (HR 0.88, P=0.025) (14).

Another strategy is the addition of thoracic radiotherapy to chemotherapy in the preoperative setting, which may improve local control and help sterilize mediastinal disease. The principal drawback of preoperative chemoradiotherapy is that it can lead to an increase in surgical complications, principally bronchopleural fistula and post-pneumectomy mortality. Neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy has been analyzed mainly in stage III disease. The phase III randomized North American Intergroup Trial (Intergroup 0139 trial) addresses the role of surgery after neoadjuvant chemoradiation in resectable stage III NSCLC; 429 potentially resectable patients with biopsy-proven stage IIIA N2 NSCLC were randomly assigned to concurrent chemoradiotherapy (two cycles of cisplatin and etoposide plus radiotherapy up to 45 Gy) followed by surgical resection or further radiation to a definitive dose of 61 Gy (15). Consolidation chemotherapy with cisplatin/etoposide was given to patients in both arms (15). The 5-year disease-free survival rate was 22% for the surgical group and 11.1% for the definitive radiation group. However, the two groups did not differ in their median overall survival (23.6 months versus 22.2 months, respectively, HR 0.87, P=0.24). The mortality rate observed in the surgical arm was 7.9%, compared with 2.1% in the definitive radiation arm. After neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy, postoperative mortality was 26% for those patients who underwent pneumonectomy compared with only 1% in patients who had a lobectomy. In an exploratory unplanned, matched subgroup analysis, patients treated with a lobectomy after induction concurrent chemoradiotherapy had a significantly better survival than those who underwent a pneumonectomy or were treated non-surgically.

Two randomized studies address the potentially favorable contribution of adding thoracic radiotherapy to chemotherapy before surgery in patients with stage III disease. The German Lung Cancer Cooperative Group conducted a clinical trial including 558 stage III NSCLC patients, all of whom received three cycles of cisplatin and etoposide; the control group then underwent surgery followed by post-operative radiotherapy while
the investigational arm received further chemotherapy with hyperfractionated radiotherapy (1.5 Gy twice daily to 45 Gy) followed by surgery (16). Although the addition of radiotherapy in the preoperative setting increased the rate of mediastinal clearance (46% versus 29%) and decreased the rate of positive surgical margins (8% versus 14%), no differences were observed in progression-free survival or overall survival between the two groups. The risk of bronchopleural fistula (5% versus 1%) and post-pneumectomy mortality (14% versus 6%) was higher in patients receiving preoperative radiotherapy.

At the ASCO-2013 meeting the results of a Swiss trial analyzing neoadjuvant chemotherapy with or without preoperative irradiation in stage IIIAN2 disease (SAKK trial 16/00) were presented (17). Patients with resectable stage IIIAN2 were randomized to receive 3 cycles of neoadjuvant cisplatin and docetaxel followed by accelerated boost radiotherapy or neoadjuvant chemotherapy alone with subsequent surgery for all patients. They reported the results of a planned interim analysis on data of the first 219 patients. In this study, preoperative radiotherapy did not improve median event-free survival (12.8 months for the preoperative chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy arm versus 11.8 months for the preoperative chemotherapy alone arm) or survival (27.1 months for the preoperative chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy arm versus 26.2 months for the preoperative chemotherapy alone arm).

Overall, these two randomized studies (16,17) suggest that the addition of preoperative radiotherapy seems not to improve overall survival.

**Summary and conclusions**

In the light of available data, there is, at present, clearer evidence favoring adjuvant strategies when compared with neoadjuvant strategies in early-stage NSCLC. Overall, neoadjuvant approaches are less well studied than adjuvant strategies and the majority of neoadjuvant trials have closed early and have been small in size. Some advantages are associated with neoadjuvant chemotherapy. The compliance with neoadjuvant chemotherapy is better; in the NATCH trial, in which patients were randomized before surgery, a considerable number of patients were unable to receive adjuvant chemotherapy due to slow recovery from surgery. There are subgroups of NSCLC patients who clearly benefit from neoadjuvant strategies, such as those with pathologic complete response at surgery (18), but there are no markers to identify those patients at diagnosis. In our opinion, in the light of the NATCH and CHEST trial results, neoadjuvant strategies may be considered for patients with more advanced disease (T3N1, and patients with multiple N1 regions involved in the preoperative staging) and for those in whom we believe adjuvant chemotherapy could be difficult to administer.

**Acknowledgements**

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**References**


Although surgery is regarded as the primary treatment modality for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), only 20-25% of tumors are suitable for potentially curative resection (1) and even after resection, a substantial percentage of these patients eventually develop local recurrence or distant metastases. Therefore more effective treatment strategies to reduce lung cancer mortality and recurrence rate are needed. Only recently has the use of adjuvant chemotherapy become standard in early stage NSCLC, at least for stage II and resected IIIA NSCLC. Controversies remain about the benefit for stage I patients. Five-year survival improvements of 5% to 10% have been reported with cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy from multiple large randomized phase III clinical trials and meta-analyses. Questions remain as to which patients benefit and which regimens are best. In this paper, important clinical research in the field of adjuvant chemotherapy of NSCLC is reviewed.

Abstract: Surgery is regarded as the primary treatment modality for early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), but even after complete resection, a substantial percentage of these patients eventually develop local recurrence or distant metastases. Therefore more effective treatment strategies to reduce lung cancer mortality and recurrence rate are needed. Only recently has the use of adjuvant chemotherapy become standard in early stage NSCLC, at least for stage II and resected IIIA NSCLC. Controversies remain about the benefit for stage I patients. Five-year survival improvements of 5% to 10% have been reported with cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy from multiple large randomized phase III clinical trials and meta-analyses. Questions remain as to which patients benefit and which regimens are best. In this paper, important clinical research in the field of adjuvant chemotherapy of NSCLC is reviewed.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); adjuvant chemotherapy; elderly patient

Submitted Jul 09, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 15, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.07.01
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.07.01

Although surgery is regarded as the primary treatment modality for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), only 20-25% of tumors are suitable for potentially curative resection (1) and even after resection, a substantial percentage of these patients eventually develop local recurrences or distant metastasis. Consequently, 5-year survival rates after surgery are disappointingly low, ranging from 58% to 73% in stage I, 36% to 46% in stage II, and only 19% to 24% in patients with stage IIIA tumors (2).

Therefore more effective treatment strategies to reduce lung cancer mortality and recurrence rate are needed. High expectations for post-operative (adjuvant) chemotherapy were based on the fact that this is a standard treatment after complete resection in malignancies such as breast (3) and colon (4). But only recently has adjuvant chemotherapy become standard in early stage NSCLC. Questions remain as to which patients benefit and which regimens are best. In this paper, important clinical research in the field of adjuvant chemotherapy of NSCLC is reviewed, in order to provide a reference for further clinical practice. Data with pre-operative (neo-adjuvant) therapy, alternatives to chemotherapy, and prognostic or predictive biomarkers are discussed elsewhere.

Early trials of adjuvant chemotherapy with regimens consisting of alkylating agents and older chemotherapy did not show any clear impact on survival. In 1995 an individual patient data-based meta-analysis (5) from 52 randomized trials and 9,387 patients was initiated by the British Medical Research Council’s Cancer Trials Office, Cambridge; the Institut Gustave Roussy, Villejuif, France; and the Istituto Mario Negri, Milan, Italy, and was carried out on behalf of the Non-small Cell Lung Cancer Collaborative Group (NSCLCCG). Data were available from 14 trials (4,357 patients and 2,574 deaths) for evaluating surgery versus surgery plus chemotherapy. The trials included platinum-based and non-platinum based regimens. The overall hazard ratio of 0.87; 95% CI, 0.74 to 1.02; (P=0.08), or 13% reduction in the risk of death, suggested an absolute benefit from
chemotherapy, but it was not statistically significant. This ignited the interest of study groups for NSCLC adjuvant chemotherapy after surgery and led to multiple large randomized trials, which have subsequently proven the benefit suggested by the original 1995 meta-analysis. The standard of care has now become adjuvant chemotherapy for resected non-small cell lung cancer.

The Adjuvant Lung Project Italy (ALPI) trial (6) was the first large, prospective adjuvant study designed to detect small differences in survival that were in the range detected by the NSCLCCG meta-analysis. This trial was a randomized controlled study to evaluate the Mitomycin C, Vindesine, Cisplatin (MVP) regimen in patients with radically resected stages I-IIIA non small-cell NSCLC. A total of 1,209 patients (1,086 from the Italian centers and 123 from EORTC-LCCG centers) were enrolled in this study. Patients were randomly assigned to the MVP arm or the control arm and received adjuvant radiotherapy according to the policy of the individual participating center. In total, 69% of patients on the experimental arm completed the planned 3 cycles of MVP treatment. Sixty-five percent of patients received radiotherapy in the MVP arm, and 82% in the control arm. Treatment-related deaths were documented in 10 patients (three patients in the MVP arm and seven patients in the control arm), respectively. After median duration of follow-up for 64.5 months (52.1-79.6 months), no significant difference in overall survival (OS) was seen with an OS HR of 0.96 (95% CI, 0.81-1.13; \( P=0.589 \)), nor in progression-free survival (HR=0.89, 95% CI, 0.76-1.03; \( P=0.128 \)). Median overall survival was 55 months in the MVP arm and 48 months in the control arm. One possible reason for this result may be low compliance with chemotherapy, or the regimen utilized. In the multivariable analysis, only disease stage and sex were associated with survival (\( P<0.001 \) for stage II or III versus stage I and \( P=0.034 \) for male versus female, respectively).

Another theory about the lack of benefit seen with adjuvant chemotherapy in this NSCLC population is that the health of patients who have undergone a major thoracic surgical procedure is very often compromised by the procedure itself, and these patients usually require a long time to fully recover.

Investigators in the United Kingdom (UK) reported a randomized trial (Big Lung Trial-BLT) (7) evaluating cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy in patients with completely resected stage I-IIIA NSCLC. Between November 1995 and November 2001 a total of 381 patients were enrolled into the trial from 52 UK and 4 non-UK centers. One hundred ninety-two patients were randomized to receive chemotherapy(C), and 189 to no chemotherapy (NoC). Twenty-seven percent of patients had stage I disease, 38% stage II, and 26% stage IIIA, respectively. Fifty-two (14%) patients received radiotherapy as part of their planned primary treatment. In the chemotherapy arm the patients were prescribed three cycles of 3-weekly cisplatin-based chemotherapy, primarily doublet regimens. Only 64% of patients finished all three cycles of the chemotherapy as planned, with the rest requiring dose reductions or delays. There were 6 treatment related deaths and 30% of patients experienced grade 3/4 toxicity. With a median-follow time of 34.6 months, the median survival was 33.9 months for Chemotherapy patients, and 32.6 months for No-chemotherapy patients. The overall survival hazard ratio was 1.02 (95% CI, 0.77-1.35, \( P=0.90 \)) and PFS hazard ratio was 0.97 (95% CI, 0.74-1.26, \( P=0.81 \)). The results of ALPI and this trial taken together cast doubt on the utility of adjuvant chemotherapy.

More recent trials, however, have been positive and have led to a change in the standard of care. The International Adjuvant Lung Cancer Trial (IALT) (8) was the largest prospective, randomized trial to test the hypothesis from the NSCLCCG Meta-analysis (5). From February 1995 to December 31, 2000, 1,867 completely resected stage I-III NSCLC patients were recruited by 148 centers in 33 countries. They were randomized to adjuvant chemotherapy or best supportive care. Each participating center could determine the pathological stages of disease to include, the dose of cisplatin given per cycle, the drug that was combined with cisplatin, and the postoperative radiotherapy policy. Adjuvant chemotherapy regimens included cisplatin combined with etoposide, vindesine or vinblastine. In the chemotherapy group, 73.8 percent of patients received at least 240 mg/m^2 of cisplatin. Twenty-seven percent of patients received postoperative radiotherapy. The median follow-up was 56 months. A total of 22.6% of the patients had at least one episode of grade 4 toxic effect and seven patients (0.8%) died of toxic effects of chemotherapy. The disease-free survival rate was significantly higher in the chemotherapy group (HR=0.83, 95% CI, 0.74-0.94, \( P<0.003 \)). The overall survival rate was also significantly higher in the chemotherapy group (HR=0.86, 95% CI, 0.76-0.98, \( P=0.03 \)); the five-year survival rates were 44.5% vs. 40.4%. The absolute five-year benefit in overall survival was 4.1 percent, a value that is concordant with the estimation from the chemotherapy meta-analysis (5). However, in 2009, the long-term follow-up results with a median follow-
up 7.5 years was reported (9), and while the results still showed potential benefit, the significance was lost with an overall survival HR of 0.91 (95% CI, 0.81-1.02; P=0.10), but a persistently significant benefit on disease-free survival (HR, 0.88; 95% CI, 0.78-0.98; P=0.02). The results of overall survival were significantly different before and after 5 years of follow-up (HR, 0.86; 95% CI, 0.76-0.97; P=0.01 vs. HR, 1.45; 95% CI, 1.02-2.07; P=0.04). The reasons behind this are not clear. The non-lung cancer deaths analysis showed a HR of 1.34 (95% CI, 0.99-1.81; P=0.06). The second malignancies were not significantly different (8-year rate of approximately 10%) between the arms. Although absolute 5-year survival benefits of 4% are fairly modest, and the long-term benefit is not as robust, on a global scale the use of cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy could potentially help keep approximately 10,000 more NSCLC patients alive at 5 years. The positive results of this study and others that matured around the same time, laid the foundation for the routine use of adjuvant chemotherapy and future trials.

Most of the earlier trials have used a variety of chemotherapy combination regimens, including toxic triplet regimens, but the National Cancer Institute of Canada Clinical Trials Group JBR.10 trial in patients with completely resected stage IB or stage II non-small-cell lung cancer utilized a regimen of vinorelbine (VNR) plus cisplatin (DDP) as adjuvant chemotherapy (10). This study was a North American intergroup, phase III, randomized trial and between 1994-2001 it enrolled 482 patients who were randomly assigned to observation or vinorelbine plus cisplatin chemotherapy. No patients received adjuvant radiotherapy. Fifty-eight percent of the patients received three or more cycles of cisplatin, 77% had at least one dose reduction or omission, and 55% required one dose delay or more, most related to neutropenia at the expected time of vinorelbine administration on day 15 (cycle week 3). Seventy-three percent of patients had grade 3 or 4 neutropenia. With median follow-up of just over 5 years, five-year survival rate was 69% in the vinorelbine-cisplatin group and 54% in the observation alone (P=0.03). In subgroup analysis there was no statistically significant improvement in overall survival among patients with stage IB disease. In the quality-of-life (QOL) analyses (11), despite toxicity, the decline in function and symptom-related domains during chemotherapy in this trial was limited and resolved rapidly (within three months after completion of therapy). In 2010, an updated survival analysis (12) with a median follow-up of 9.3 years was published. Patients in the adjuvant chemotherapy arm continued to show a significant survival advantage compared with observation (HR, 0.78; 95% CI, 0.61-0.99; P=0.04). The absolute benefit for 5-year survival was 11% (67% chemotherapy vs. 56% observation). For patients without lymph node involvement, patients with tumors 4 cm or larger in size derived clinically meaningful benefit from chemotherapy (HR, 0.66; 95% CI, 0.39-1.14; P=0.13), while those with tumors smaller than 4 cm did not (HR, 1.73; 95% CI, 0.98-3.04; P=0.06). Seventy-three percent of patients died of disease or complications of treatment of their NSCLC and 10.6% patients developed second malignancies. This was the first clinical trial in which all patients on chemotherapy received third-generation chemotherapy drugs in an adjuvant setting for completely resected NSCLC, and has the best reported outcomes.

The Adjuvant Navelbine International Trialist Association (ANITA) reported positive results from their phase III randomized trial in patients with completely resected stage IB, II, and IIIA NSCLC (13). From December 1994, to December 2000, 840 patients were enrolled and randomly assigned to vinorelbine plus cisplatin or to observation (control). Postoperative radiotherapy was optional, decided by every participating center, and was to be decided before patients were included into the trial. Among the patients, 37% underwent pneumonectomy and 39% had stage IIIA disease. Fifty percent of patients completed the planned four cycles. Grade 3-4 neutropenia was seen in 85% patients in the chemotherapy arm and there were seven (2%) treatment-related deaths in the chemotherapy group. Median survival was 65.7 months (95% CI, 47.9-88.5) for the chemotherapy group and 43.7 months (35.7-52.3 months) for controls [hazard ratio 0.80 (0.66-0.96), P=0.017]. The absolute overall survival benefit for patients receiving chemotherapy compared with controls was 8.6% at 5 years. Relapse was lower in the chemotherapy group than in the observation group (local relapse, 12% of patients vs. 18% of patients, P=0.025). Subgroup analysis indicated that the benefit is seen in patients with stage II and IIIA disease. Postoperative radiotherapy was delivered to 232 (28%) patients (> N0) with improved 5-year survival in patients with N2 disease who received PORT from both groups. This trial showed survival benefits of the vinorelbine-cisplatin combination in the adjuvant setting and confirmed the JBR.10 (10) findings in patients with stage II disease; and also provided new data for patients with stage IIIA NSCLC.

Paclitaxel/carboplatin remains one of the most widely used regimens in the United States for advanced stage
NSCLC, partly due to a favorable toxicity profile. There has only been one large randomized trial to explore this regimen in the adjuvant setting, CALGB9633, which randomly assigned completely resected stage IB (T2N0) patients to four postoperative cycles of paclitaxel (200 mg/m²) and carboplatin (AUC =6) chemotherapy versus surgery alone. The trial started in September 1996 and was closed in November 2003 by the Data and Safety Monitoring Board after a planned interim analysis following accrual of 344 patients. Chemotherapy was well tolerated, and there were no treatment-related toxic deaths. The predominant toxicity was grade 3 to 4 neutropenia, which was observed in 35%. Fifty-seven percent (77 of 136) of patients received four cycles of chemotherapy at full dose. This trial was initially presented at ASCO 2004 (14) as positive (HR: 0.62; 95% CI, 0.44-0.89; P=0.014) with median follow-up of 34 months. However in the final publication of the mature results with median follow-up of 74 months, the survival gain lost statistical significance in OS (HR, 0.83; 90% CI, 0.64-1.08; P=0.125), and DFS (HR, 0.80; 90% CI, 0.62-1.02; P=0.065); respectively. In the subgroup of tumor size ≥4.0 cm in diameter though, there were significant advantages in OS (HR, 0.69; 90% CI, 0.48 to 0.99; P=0.043) and DFS (HR, 0.69; 90% CI, 0.49 to 0.97; P=0.035) for patients who received chemotherapy. Results of CALGB 9633 (and confirmatory findings from NCIC-CTG-JBR-10) support consideration for adjuvant chemotherapy in stage IB patients who have tumors ≥4.0 cm in diameter. However, the routine use of carboplatin/paclitaxel as an adjuvant regimen is discouraged based on the results of this trial.

The Lung Adjuvant Cisplatin Evaluation (LACE) analysis (15) collected and pooled data on 4,584 patients from the 5 randomized adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy trials which were conducted after the NSCLCCG 1995 meta-analysis (5) and whose cohorts were larger than 300 patients: ALPI (6), IALT (8), ANITA (13), BR.10 (10), BLT (7). With a median follow-up of 5.1 years (3.1-5.9 years) the result showed there was a statistically significant benefit (HR: 0.89; 95% CI, 0.82-0.96; P=0.005) in OS for the chemotherapy group compared with the control group corresponding to an 11% reduction in the risk of death and absolute survival benefits of 3.9% and 5.4% at 3 and 5 years, respectively. The benefit varied with stage (test for trend, P=0.046) with an HR of 1.41 (0.96-2.09) for stage IA, 0.93 (0.78-1.10) for stage IB, 0.83 (0.73-0.95) for stage II, and 0.83 (0.73-0.95) for stage III. The rate of overall grade 3 to 4 toxicity was 66% and the most common toxicity was neutropenia (9% grade 3 and 28% grade 4).

This analysis clearly confirmed that cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy is of benefit for completely resected NSCLC and further supports its use in routine clinical practice. Of note, 59% of patients received at least 240 mg/m² of cisplatin.

Results from LACE were very closely mirrored by the results of the updated NSCLC Meta-analyses Collaborative Group (16) which conducted a meta-analysis to assess the effectiveness of adjuvant chemotherapy in patients with NSCLC from randomized trials starting from Jan 1, 1965. The individual data was from 11,107 patients from 47 comparisons in 33 trials, which is more than three times that available in 1995. The comparison of surgery plus chemotherapy versus surgery alone was based on 34 trial comparisons and 8,447 patients (3,323 deaths) and showed a benefit of adding chemotherapy after surgery [hazard ratio (HR) 0.86, 95% CI, 0.81-0.92, P=0.0001], with an absolute increase in survival of 4% (95% CI, 3-6%) at 5 years (from 60% to 64%). Results for recurrence-free survival (HR 0.83, 95% CI, 0.77-0.90, P<0.0001), time to locoregional recurrence (0.75, 0.66-0.85, P<0.0001), and time to distant recurrence (0.80, 0.72-0.89, P=0.0007) all significantly favored chemotherapy. Another comparison of surgery plus radiotherapy and chemotherapy versus surgery plus radiotherapy was based on 13 trial comparisons and 2,660 patients (1,909 deaths) and showed a benefit of adding chemotherapy to surgery plus radiotherapy (HR 0.88, 95% CI, 0.81-0.97, P=0.009), representing an absolute improvement in survival of 4% (95% CI, 1-8%) at 5 years (from 29% to 33%).

The largest proportion of patients randomized to date to adjuvant chemotherapy have received cisplatin/vinorelbine (CVb, 41%) (17), which also was the most homogeneous subgroup in terms of drug doses and eligibility. As shown in a LACE meta-analysis subgroup analysis (17), the cisplatin/vinorelbine combination was associated with a substantially superior survival benefit compared with other cisplatin-based regimens. However, toxicity has been a critical issue in platinum-based adjuvant protocols with neutropenia in up to 85% and febrile neutropenia in up to 9% reported. Further points of concern are incomplete treatment delivery in up to 50% of the patients, mainly due to toxicity and patient refusal (18). In a phase III trial (19) in advanced stage NSCLC, the combination of cisplatin and pemetrexed (CPx), a multi-target folate antimetabolite, showed a good safety profile and convenient administration schedule and also OS superiority in adenocarcinoma (HR=0.84, P=0.03) and large cell (HR=0.67, P=0.03), both separately and
grouped together as “nonsquamous” (HR=0.81, P=0.005) when compared with gemcitabine combined with cisplatin. The question of whether this regimen could be used in the adjuvant setting was addressed in the TREAT study (20), a prospective, open-label, randomized phase 2 trial conducted in 16 centers in Germany and Belgium. A total of 132 patients with completely resected IB, IIA, IIB or T3N1 NSCLC were randomly assigned to cisplatin/pemetrexed (CPx) or cisplatin/vinorelbine (CVb). Postoperative radiotherapy was not allowed. The primary objective was the clinical feasibility rate. The results showed that the feasibility rate differed significantly and was higher in CPx than CVb [95.5% (95% CI, 87.5-99.1%) vs. 75.4% (95% CI, 63.1-85.2%), P=0.0010]. However, for efficacy data, the limitations of the size of a phase II trial, and of a large proportion of patients with stage IB or with squamous cell carcinoma, have to be taken into account. Further results of adjuvant cisplatin combined with pemetrexed are expected from the ITACA (EudrACT #: 2008-001764-36) and the ECOG E1505 (NCT00324805) trials. Although there is a lack of level 1 data regarding the utility of cisplatin/ pemetrexed in an adjuvant setting, the NCCN guidelines (21) still recommend it as an option for non-squamous histology adjuvant chemotherapy. In addition to cisplatin/vinorelbine and cisplatin/pemetrexed, other regimens included on the E1505 trial, which closed to accrual in September 2013, include cisplatin/gemcitabine and cisplatin/docetaxel, which are also included as options per the NCCN. In interim data presented on E1505 (22), all 4 options have been selected on a fairly equal basis for patient enrolled onto the trial.

The treatment of lung cancer in the elderly bears special consideration. Between 2003 and 2007, 68% of cases of lung cancer were diagnosed in patients more than 65 years old and approximately 37% in patients over age 75 in the United States (23). However, although the incidence of NSCLC in elderly patients is high, they are underrepresented in clinical trials frequently (24). In a retrospective subgroup analysis of the JBR.10 trial (25), there were in total 155 patients (nearly 1/3 of the total) aged 65 years or older and the eldest patient was 82 years old, and in this subgroup adjuvant chemotherapy significantly prolonged overall survival (HR 0.61; 95% CI, 0.38-0.98; P=0.04). In a pooled analysis of the effect of age on adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy in the LACE meta-analysis (26), patient and treatment characteristics, overall and event-free survival, delivery, chemotherapy toxicity and cause-specific mortality were compared among different age groups. There are 414 patients (9%) age 70 years or older. A trend toward survival benefit with adjuvant chemotherapy in elderly patients was shown (HR 0.90; 95% CI, 0.70-1.16; P=0.29), and no differences in severe toxicity rates were observed. This pooled analysis concluded that adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy should not be withheld from elderly patients with NSCLC purely on the basis of age. These findings improved the probability of chemotherapy administration in the elderly in North America. A population based study based on the Ontario Cancer Registry (27) demonstrated that the percentage of patients aged at least 70 years of age who received adjuvant chemotherapy increased from 3.3% (2001 to 2003) to 16.2% (2004 to 2006). Twenty-eight percent of patients received carboplatin-based and 70% of patients received cisplatin-based regimens. In the Ontario analysis, the four-year survival of elderly patients increased significantly (47.1% for patients diagnosed from 2001 to 2003; 49.9% for patients diagnosed from 2004 to 2006; P=0.01). Survival improved in all subgroups except patients age ≥80 years. In US 16,420 patients >65 years with resected stage IB-IIIA NSCLC diagnosed between 1992 and 2007 were identified from the SEER-Medicare database (28). Among these patients, 1,803 (11%) received platinum- base adjuvant chemotherapy and this was associated with improved OS. However, 83% of the treated patients received carboplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy and had a comparable OS advantage, and more favorable toxicity profile when compared with cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy. In clinical practice, biologic age instead of chronologic age should be considered.

The combination of uracil and tegafur (also referred to as UFT, a pro-drug of 5FU) is an oral anticancer agent with good absorption in the small intestine (29). The West Japan Study Group for Lung Cancer Surgery reported that survival was significantly longer in patients assigned to adjuvant treatment with uracil-tegafur than in patients assigned to observation alone after complete resection of stage I, II, or III non–small-cell lung cancer. The five-year survival rate was 64 percent in the uracil-tegafur group and 49 percent in the control group (P=0.02). In a subgroup analysis, there was no significant difference in overall survival between the UFT group and the control group among patients with squamous-cell carcinoma (P=0.24) (30). Another Japanese Phase III randomized trial enrolled 979 patients with stage I (T1N0M0 or T2N0M0) adenocarcinoma of the lung and randomized them to receive either UFT 250 mg/m² for 2 years or observation. With median follow-up for 73 months, the difference in overall
survival between the two groups was statistically significant in favor of the UFT group (P=0.04). In subgroup analysis, the survival rate among patients with T2 disease in the UFT group was significantly higher than that in the control group, whereas among patients with T1 disease, there was no significant difference in survival between the UFT and control groups (31). A meta-analysis of postoperative adjuvant chemotherapy with tegafur-uracil in non-small-cell lung cancer (32) showed that postoperative adjuvant chemotherapy with UFT improved 5- and 7-year survival in a Japanese patient population composed primarily of stage I adenocarcinoma patients. Now in Japan, UFT is used as the standard postoperative adjuvant chemotherapy for stage I NSCLC patients with a tumor larger than 2 cm (33). S-1 is an orally active combination of tegafur and gimeracil [an inhibitor of dihydropyrimidine dehydrogenase, which degrades fluorouracil and oteracil (which inhibits the phosphorylation of fluorouracil in the gastrointestinal tract, thereby reducing the gastrointestinal toxic effects of fluorouracil)] (34). Tsuchiya et al. (35) reported a phase II trial that included 51 curatively resected pathologic stage IB-IIIa non-small-cell lung cancer patients who received 8 courses (4-week administration, 2-week withdrawal) of S-1 at 80-120 mg per day. Postoperative 1-year administration of S-1 seems feasible as an oral adjuvant chemotherapy for lung cancer and further trials are ongoing. The Japanese WJOG4107 trial enrolled 200 patients with completely resected stage II and IIIA (excluded multi-station N2 cases) NSCLC who were randomized to receive either oral S-1 (40 mg/m² twice per day) for consecutive 2 weeks repeated every 3 weeks or oral cisplatin (60 mg/m² day1) plus oral S-1 (40 mg/m² twice per day) for consecutive 2 weeks repeated every 3 weeks for 4 cycles. Relapse free survival rate on 2 years was 65.6% (95% confidence interval, 55.3-74.0%) in the S-1 arm and 58.1% (95% confidence interval, 47.7-67.2%) in the cisplatin plus S-1 arm. OS data was not mature.

In summary, adjuvant therapy for NSCLC has reached a new era, but continued progress must be made. At this time, the role of adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy has been established by multiple large randomized phase III trials for resected stage II and IIIA NSCLC, but it is controversial in high risk stage IB patients and is not recommended for those with resected stage IA disease. The majority of the adjuvant chemotherapy data is with cisplatin/vinorelbine but other cisplatin-based regimens are commonly utilized and are included in ongoing clinical trials. The carboplatin/paclitaxel regimen is only recommended if patients have comorbidities and are not able to tolerate cisplatin.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

References


VATS lobectomy facilitates the delivery of adjuvant docetaxel-carboplatin chemotherapy in patients with non-small cell lung cancer


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Background: To evaluate the safety and tolerability of docetaxel/carboplatin regimen in the post-operative setting of patients with non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

Methods: Enrolment of 133 patients with stage Ib - IIIa NSCLC was undertaken in an open-label, single arm study to assess the safety and tolerability of docetaxel (75 mg/kg) and carboplatin (AUC 5.5) administered for 3 cycles after resection for curative intent. The primary endpoint of the study was safety, as reflected by a febrile neutropenia rate of <10%. Other endpoints assessed protocol compliance and the impact of minimally invasive surgical technique.

Results: Patient accrual was completed at 1 center in the US and 10 centers in China in <6 months. Febrile neutropenia complicated treatment in 12 patients (9.0%), below the predetermined safety threshold of 14 patients. Four VATS and 8 open thoracotomy patients experienced febrile neutropenia (P=0.26). Completion of the three-cycle adjuvant regimen was achieved in 86% (95% CI, 77-95%) of patients. Sixty-two of 66 VATS patients compared to 53 of 67 open thoracotomy patients received all three doses according to protocol (P<0.01). Thirteen serious adverse events (9.8%) and no deaths were attributed to the study regimen.

Conclusions: In this rapidly accrued study, docetaxel and carboplatin were well-tolerated in the adjuvant treatment of NSCLC. Adjuvant treatment compliance was higher among patients undergoing a minimally invasive surgical approach. (ClinicalTrials.gov number NCT00883675).

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer; adjuvant chemotherapy; docetaxel; carboplatin

Submitted Jan 01, 2012. Accepted for publication Feb 04, 2012.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2012.02.05
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2012.02.05
Introduction

With an ever-increasing array of novel therapeutics competing for clinical resources, the rate at which new cancer treatments can be evaluated and made available to under-served populations depends heavily on the recruitment of patients into mid-stage and late-stage clinical trials. For many cancers, including non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), this rate of development traditionally has been slow; many trials require years to complete patient accrual, while others close enrollment prior to attaining target sample sizes and compromise the studies’ power to fully evaluate their therapeutic strategies (1). This problem has been particularly pronounced in the area of post-operative adjuvant therapies. The China Clinical Trials Consortium (CCTC), a cooperative group formed to facilitate the development of advanced clinical research in China, has been designed to access in a rapid, efficient and rigorous manner extremely large pools of cancer patients previously unavailable to participate in the development of new cancer therapies.

Compared to many other cancers, overall survival among patients with NSCLC remains poor, even when the disease is discovered in its earliest stages (2). Attempt at curative resection even for stage IA patients, for example, is associated with only 70-75% survival (3,4); survival after resection for stages II-IIIA ranges from 30-50% (4). Early, undetected metastasis is responsible for the vast majority of the failures of these local treatments, and adjuvant systemic therapies for NSCLC have therefore been investigated extensively. Whereas alkylating agents do not seem to add any survival benefit in this patient population, platinum-based combination (doublet) therapies have consistently been shown to confer an absolute 5-year survival benefit ranging between 4% and 15% (5-9).

Positive randomized studies of adjuvant chemotherapy for NSCLC have studied combinations of cisplatin with either etoposide or a vinca alkaloid (e.g., vinorelbine), or of carboplatin and paclitaxel (6-9). The combination of carboplatin and docetaxel has been studied in patients with advanced-stage NSCLC in patients who had not received any prior therapy (10). In that study, the efficacy of this combination was comparable to that of a cisplatin-vinorelbine doublet. Grade 3 or 4 toxicity in the form of nausea, vomiting or anemia, however, was higher among patients receiving vinorelbine than among patients receiving docetaxel combined either with cisplatin or carboplatin. A number of quality of life parameters were also improved in the docetaxel arms compared to the patients who had received vinorelbine.

Benefit from chemotherapy, whether administered as a first line agent for late-stage patients or in the adjuvant setting after an attempt at curative resection, depends on successful completion of a prescribed course of therapy (11). In this regard, successful completion of adjuvant regimens has been somewhat disappointing in previously reported studies (7,8), likely related to the reduced functional status of patients still recovering from anatomic lung resection. In two studies of adjuvant cisplatin-vinorelbine, for example, only 58-61% of eligible patients completed at least 3 cycles of post-operative chemotherapy; in one study 77% of patients required at least one dose reduction or omission (7), while in the other 62% of patients received <66% of the planned dose of vinorelbine and 37% tolerated only <66% of the total dose of cisplatin (8). The combination of docetaxel and carboplatin, on the other hand, has been well-tolerated as a first line therapy for late stage patients (10). Only one study, however, has evaluated the safety and tolerability of this regimen in the post-operative setting, and its small sample size and long accrual period likely compromised its ability to establish its pre-defined safety target (12). We therefore assessed these parameters in a cohort of 133 patients in an open-label, single arm study. The CCTC was enlisted to accelerate completion of the study.

Methods

Study design and patients

For this open label study, the primary endpoint of safety was defined as a febrile neutropenia rate of 10% or less. A Simon’s two-stage sequential design (13) indicated that a sample size of 133 would yield a power of 90% with an alpha set 5% to test the null hypothesis that P<0.850 versus the alternative hypothesis that P≥0.930 where P was the absence of febrile neutropenia. Accordingly, the combination of docetaxel and carboplatin would be rejected if 14 or more cases of febrile neutropenia were observed in conjunction with this adjuvant therapy.

Enrollment of patients took place at a single center in the United States (Dartmouth-Hitchcock Norris Cotton Cancer Center) and at ten sites in China that were early members of the CCTC. Five patients were enrolled during a pilot phase at CCTC sites between July and September 2009. The remaining 128 patients were subsequently enrolled within a six-month period between October 2009 and April 2010. Two patients were enrolled during this period in the US; 39, 45 and 47 patients were enrolled at centers in Beijing-Tianjin, Guangzhou and Shanghai, respectively.
The protocol was approved by an ethics committee at each center, and was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki and the International Committee on Harmonization guidelines for Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP, E6). Every patient provided written informed consent according to GCP guidelines. An independent data and safety monitoring board was also appointed.

Eligibility criteria included: 2-8 weeks within complete resection (R0) of pathologically confirmed NSCLC, stage IB-IIIA according to IASLC 7th TNM staging system (14), via lobectomy, bilobectomy or pneumonectomy plus formal lymph node dissection; age >17 and ECOG status 0-1 with normal organ function based on blood counts and chemistries. Patients with concurrent malignancies or who received any prior therapy for NSCLC were excluded, as were HIV-positive patients and patients with grade 2 or higher neuropathy, treatment within 30 days with any other investigational anti-cancer agent, previous treatment with docetaxel or carboplatin, or hypersensitivity to platinum.

**Procedures**

Patients were registered in the study after undergoing resection with curative intent and after confirmation of eligibility criteria. After providing written informed consent, patients were prescribed a total of three courses of combination therapy with docetaxel (75 mg/m2 IV) and carboplatin \([\text{AUC} \times (\text{estimated creatinine} +25)]\). Docetaxel was administered before carboplatin on the first day of each three-week cycle. Complete blood counts were measured each week until the completion of all three cycles, and blood chemistries were measured prior to initiation of each cycle. An absolute neutrophil count of at least 1,200/mm3 was required before each cycle, and specified dose modifications were instituted for various grades of neutropenia and/or thrombocytopenia. Patients requiring more than 2 dose reductions were removed from the study; colony-stimulating factors were used at the discretion of physicians according to published American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) guidelines. Patient follow up visits were scheduled at 3, 6, 12, 18 and 24 months after the last dose of chemotherapy, and every 12 months thereafter until the 60-month follow up is reached.

**Statistical analysis**

The primary endpoint was defined as the rate of febrile neutropenia associated with the adjuvant administration of docetaxel/carboplatin. Secondary endpoints such as rates of adverse events (AEs) and serious adverse events (SAEs), specific toxicities (based on highest grade according to Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events, version 4.0), dose modifications, removal from the study, and completion of the three prescribed cycles of chemotherapy were assessed as indicators of the regimen’s tolerability. Post-hoc comparison of chemotherapy utilization was made between patients undergoing a minimally invasive video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) approach versus traditional open thoracotomy. Dichotomous variables were compared using a Chi-squared test, while continuous variables were compared using Student’s \(t\)-test. A \(P\)-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

After a preliminary three-month period of protocol initiation, 96% of patient enrollment was completed between October 2009 and April 2010. A total of 89 men (67%) and 44 women (33%) were enrolled; patient characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Lobectomy was performed in 118 patients (89%, including 3 sleeve lobectomies), while the remaining patients received either bilobectomy (7.5%) or pneumonectomy (8.6%). Sixty-six procedures (50%) were performed using a VATS approach, including 62 lobectomies (53% of lobectomies), 1 bilobectomy (14% of bilobectomies), and 3 pneumonectomies (38% of pneumonectomies).

A total of 115 patients (86%) completed three cycles of docetaxel-carboplatin therapy according to protocol (Table 2). Discontinuation of therapy resulted from adverse reactions in 6 cases (4.5%) and patient withdrawal in 12 (9%). Among patients receiving all three cycles, only 2 (1.5%) received less than 66% of their target doses of carboplatin, and 3 (2.3%) received between 67 and 75% of their carboplatin doses, all 5 tolerating their full docetaxel doses (Table 3). Docetaxel dose reduction was required in only 4 patients (3.5%) receiving all three cycles. Among patients receiving all three cycles, 74 (64%) received full dose chemotherapy; 56% of patients in the study therefore received all three cycles of full-dose chemotherapy. Utilization of a VATS approach for resection was associated with a lower rate of therapy discontinuation; 62 of 66 VATS patients compared to 53 of 67 open thoracotomy patients received all three doses according to protocol (\(P<0.01\)). In addition, only 1 VATS patient receiving all three doses required a dose reduction of >10% of the target doses,
compared to 16 patients undergoing open thoracotomy (P<0.001). Interestingly, there was no difference in the time from surgery to initiation of chemotherapy between the VATS patients and the open thoracotomy patients (32±9 and 34±9 days, respectively, P=0.4).

Febrile neutropenia was encountered in a total of 12 patients (9.0%), below the pre-defined safety threshold rate of 14 cases. Five cases occurred after the second cycle of adjuvant chemotherapy, with the remainder occurring after the third cycle. Hospitalization for febrile neutropenia was required only in 1 case; each case resolved without serious complication (Table 4). Four VATS patients and 8 open thoracotomy patients experienced febrile neutropenia (P=0.26). There were no treatment related deaths, and grade 3 or 4 toxicities are reported in Table 5. Some degree of neutropenia was observed in 74 patients (56%); grade 3 or 4 neutropenia was observed in 55 patients (41%). Grade 3 or 4 nausea, vomiting or diarrhea was encountered in only 3 patients (2%) during the course of therapy.

Eighteen serious adverse events (SAEs) were encountered in 14 (10.5%) patients, including 4 allergic reactions to docetaxel that required discontinuation of therapy; two of which required hospitalization for hypotension (Table 6). Nine of the other SAEs involved hospitalization, either for febrile neutropenia (1 patient), infection (3 patients), severe neutropenia (3 patients) or severe vomiting/diarrhea (2 patients); the last SAE involved a pelvic infection requiring intravenous antibiotics.

Discussion

According to the pre-specified criteria, the combination of docetaxel and carboplatin was determined in this study to be safe in the adjuvant treatment of NSCLC. There were no treatment-related deaths. Febrile neutropenia was

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Patient characteristics</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days till First Chemotherapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squamous cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large cell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<tr>
<td>LN Status</td>
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<td>ECOG</td>
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<table>
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<th>Table 2 Protocol compliance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patients who completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle III</td>
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*P<0.01 vs. Open thoracotomy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 Percent of target carboplatin dose in patients completing 3 cycles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>carboplatin dose in patients completing 3 cycles</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;66%</td>
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<tr>
<td>67-75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>76-90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91-99%</td>
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<tr>
<td>100%</td>
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**P<0.001 vs. Open thoracotomy.
Table 4 Regimen toxicity of febrile neutropenia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Febrile neutropenia</th>
<th>Total 12 (9%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
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Table 5 Regimen safety and toxicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toxicity</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutropenia</td>
<td>26 (19%)</td>
<td>29 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anemia</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrombocytopenia</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigue</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausea</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vomiting</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diarrhea</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleural effusion</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperbilirubinemia</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
<td>0</td>
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Table 6 Serious adverse events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serious adverse events</th>
<th>Patients (events)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Febrile neutropenia requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allergic reaction not requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allergic reaction requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection not requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infection requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutropenia requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vomiting/Diarrhea requiring hospitalization</td>
<td>2 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring Hospitalization</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, several important adjuvant trials have been halted due to poor patient accrual (6,16). This efficient enrollment was accomplished via the participation of the CCTC, an organization recently formed to advance fully ICH-GCP compliant clinical research at leading cancer centers in China. Although concern was raised prior to study initiation about the use of ‘Western’ doses of chemotherapy in an Asian population that often receives reduced doses (17), the full dose of docetaxel and carboplatin was well-tolerated in this study. In fact, as has been seen in a previous study of carboplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy for NSCLC (9), compliance with the treatment protocol was high, with 86% of patients receiving all three cycles, compared to approximately 60% of patients in adjuvant studies of vinorelbine and cisplatin (7,8). Enforcement of strict protocol adherence among CCTC investigators and the tolerability of the regimen under study were likely responsible for the high compliance rate observed.

A similar study of the feasibility of docetaxel and carboplatin in the adjuvant treatment of NSCLC was recently conducted at seven centers in the United States (12). Although that study failed to meet its predetermined safety and feasibility target by a very small margin, the overall results were very similar to the current study. Those investigators reported completion of the study regimen in 79% of patients, and a febrile neutropenia rate of 11%. Interestingly, however, nearly two and a half years were required to complete enrollment of 72 patients in that phase II trial. Had those investigators attempted to accrue the sample size of 133 patients included in this study, enrollment at the same pace would have required four and a half years, compared to the enrollment period of approximately 6 months in this CCTC clinical trial.

In this initial study, the CCTC was therefore able to accelerate enrollment by nearly an order of magnitude over accrual in a comparable American trial. Importantly, this accrual speed did not result in a compromise of protocol or GCP compliance. Similar acceleration of other important, large-scale clinical projects may transform current capabilities for the development of novel cancer therapies. An unprecedented ability to rapidly conduct several phase II studies of a single agent in parallel, for example, may allow a much broader range of indications for a novel therapeutic to receive reasonable consideration, and may prevent the oversight of an important new indication for drug usage that might have resulted from a previous limitation of clinical resources.

This study was not designed prospectively to compare a
traditional open thoracotomy to a more minimally invasive VATS approach to anatomic resection, and patients were therefore not randomized between these two forms of surgery. A relatively comparable of patients in our cohort, however, received each form of treatment, which allowed some post hoc comparisons to be made. In another retrospective, non-randomized study that compared 43 patients who underwent complete resection by thoracotomy to 57 patients treated via thoracoscopy (18), VATS lobectomy patients had statistically significantly fewer delayed doses and fewer dose reductions than thoracotomy patients. In addition, 61% of VATS patients versus 40% of thoracotomy patients in that study received 75% or more of their planned adjuvant regimen (P=0.03). In comparison, only 57% of the thoracotomy patients in the Cancer and Leukemia Group B trial 9633 received full-dose chemotherapy (19), and the Intergroup JBR.10 trial reported that 55% of their thoracotomy patients had at least 1 dose delay (7). Similarly, only 34% of patients in the chemotherapy arm of the Adjuvant Lung Project Italy series received all scheduled doses without adjustment or delay; only 69% completed their treatments with or without adjustments or delay (20). The potential benefit of a minimally invasive surgical approach, with a likely reduction in post-operative pain and an easier post-operative recovery period prior to initiation of chemotherapy (21), was supported by the observation that treatment protocol compliance and delivery of target doses of adjuvant chemotherapy were higher among patients undergoing VATS lobectomy in the current study.

Taken together, the results of this study suggest that the combination of docetaxel and carboplatin is both safe and well-tolerated in the adjuvant treatment of NSCLC, and that adjuvant treatment compliance was highest among patients undergoing a minimally invasive surgical approach. Ongoing follow-up of the cohort of patients enrolled in this study will provide some insight into the relative efficacy of this regimen compared to the reported experience in other adjuvant studies. Perhaps more important, this study also demonstrated successful implementation of the founding premise of the CCTC: that substantial improvement in the current landscape for the development of novel cancer therapies can be achieved through rigorous organization and management of dedicated clinical study groups involving emerging centers of excellence in cancer care and research.

**Disclosure:** No potential conflict of interest. Presented at the 14th World Conference on Lung Cancer, Amsterdam, July 6, 2011.

**References**


Anti-tumor immune response in early stage non small cell lung cancer (NSCLC): implications for adjuvant therapy

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Abstract: The demonstration that systemic chemotherapy improves survival in patients who have had resection of early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) represents a significant advance. The absolute benefit of adjuvant chemotherapy in this setting is small with an overall survival improvement of 5%. In addition, there are many patients who have contraindications to cisplatin-based adjuvant therapy. Adjuvant chemotherapy is intended to target systemic micrometastases that remain after primary resection. The observation that cancers can relapse months or years after initial surgery implies that the residual micrometastases exist in a latent or dormant state. The concept of tumor dormancy offers therapeutic potential through induction or maintenance of the dormant state in disseminated tumor cells or through eradication of these dormant cells. Cancer dormancy is a complex process with multiple potential mechanisms. This review will focus on some of the evidence for immune related tumor dormancy and the potential for immune therapies to improve outcomes in the adjuvant setting in NSCLC.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); anti-tumor immune response; immunotherapy; checkpoint inhibitors; gene signature (GS); immune dormancy

Submitted Sep 28, 2013. Accepted for publication Oct 12, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.09
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.09

Introduction

The demonstration that systemic chemotherapy improves survival in patients who have had resection of early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) represents a significant advance in the treatment of this disease (1). The absolute benefit of adjuvant chemotherapy in this setting is small with an overall survival improvement of 5%. In addition, there are many patients who have contraindications to cisplatin-based adjuvant therapy. Hence, a non-cytotoxic therapy that could be combined with chemotherapy to improve survival or could be applied in patients not eligible for adjuvant chemotherapy would be in a welcomed advance.

Adjuvant chemotherapy is intended to target systemic micrometastases that remain after primary resection. The observation that cancers can relapse months or years after initial surgery implies that the residual micrometastases exist in a latent or dormant state. In addition, experimental models of dormancy have been developed that allow for investigation into different mechanisms of tumor dormancy (2). The concept of tumor dormancy offers therapeutic potential through induction or maintenance of the dormant state in disseminated tumor cells or through eradication of these dormant cells.

Cancer dormancy is a complex process with multiple potential mechanisms. More broadly, these can be categorized into cellular dormancy, resulting from tumor growth arrest of disseminated tumor cells, or tumor mass dormancy related to limitations in vascular supply or to an active host immune response (3).

This review will focus on the evidence for immune related tumor dormancy and the potential for immune
therapies to improve outcomes in the adjuvant setting in NSCLC.

**Immune dormancy**

It has been more than half a century since Burnet and Thomas proposed a formal hypothesis of cancer immune-surveillance wherein one of the primary functions of the immune system is to protect against cancers. Dunn et al. (4) expanded this into a broader proposal of immunoediting, which envisages not only elimination of cancer cells (immune-surveillance), but also a dynamic interaction between cancer cells and immune system, which leads to an equilibrium phase. This process selects for less immunogenic cancer cells until the selection eventually leads to cancer cell escape from immune control. The equilibrium phase could account for the period of immune dormancy while escape would signal clinical relapse. The extensive experimental data from those models and correlated clinical studies in human patients that support the concept of immune dormancy have been reviewed elsewhere (5-9).

One line of clinical evidence supporting an interaction between host immune system and human cancer cells are the numerous studies documenting infiltration of human malignancies by immune cells. While many reports focus on tumor infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs), effector cells of the innate immune system (macrophages, mast cells, dendritic cells and natural killer cells) have also been shown to be major constituents of tumor infiltrates (10).

Colorectal cancer is one of the most studied human cancers linking TILs and prognosis. Initial reports linking TILs to better prognosis date back more than thirty years (11). More recently, Galon et al. (12) found that, in colorectal cancer, the type, density, and location of TILs within the tumor were strongly linked to survival independent of tumor stage.

Tumor infiltrating immune cells and prognosis in NSCLC

A number of studies have investigated the link between tumor-associated immune response in the primary tumor and patient outcome after surgical resection in early stage NSCLC. While these studies have a number of limitations including small patient numbers, specificity of the markers of immune cells used, lack of correlation with micro-anatomical location and failure to assess functional status of immune cells, they do suggest a potential prognostic role for assessing tumor infiltrating immune cells after resection of early stage non small cell lung cancer.

In an early report of over 700 resected NSCLC specimens, Johnston et al. (13) found that non-specific evaluation of tumor infiltrating immune cells was not correlated with prognosis. However, the presence of T cells infiltrating among the cancer cells was associated with favorable prognosis. Wakabayashi (14) also pointed out the importance of assessing immune cell infiltration in various tumor compartments: within the tumor cell nests (epithelial), within the central stroma (stromal), and along the invasive margins.

Tumor associated macrophages (TAMs) constitute a major component of tumor infiltrating immune cells (10) and have the potential to promote tumor progression or support an immune response (15). A number of groups have reported that the number of tumor infiltrating macrophages could be associated with favorable survival in early stage NSCLC (16,17). In contrast, the largest reported trial (18) found no association between TAMs in either stromal or tumor epithelial compartments and survival in 335 resected NSCLCs. These contradictory results might possibly be due to failure to distinguish M2 macrophages, which are tumor angiogenesis promoting, and M1 macrophages which may exert a cytotoxic effect on cancer cells (15). Studies by Ohri (19) and Ma (20) found that macrophages expressing markers for M1 phenotype were associated with better prognosis in early stage NSCLC.

Dendritic cells are the most efficient antigen presenting cells for inducing an immune response to cancer. Al-Shibli et al. (18) measured immature dendritic cells in the tumor epithelial and stromal compartments from resected NCLC. Higher stromal DCs were associated with absence of nodal involvement and significantly better disease specific survival. Similar results were reported by Inoshima (21), who assessed 132 resected NSCLC specimens for dendritic cell infiltration in tumor nests. Higher DC counts were more common in stage I patients and an independent prognostic factor for overall survival. This study also looked at the correlation between VEGF expression and DC infiltration. In addition to its role in angiogenesis, VEGF has been shown to inhibit both the maturation and function of DCs (22). Tumors expressing high levels of VEGF had less DC infiltration and the combination of high VEGF expression and low DC infiltration resulted in a significantly lower 5-year survival than patients with low VEGF and high DC infiltration (14.5% versus 43.4%). These results
suggest a potential clinically important interaction between VEGF and an anti-tumor immune response and a role for anti-VEGF therapy in restoring DC function.

A favorable effect on prognosis in early stage NSCLC was seen in studies investigating infiltration of primary NSCLC by CD8+ cytotoxic T lymphocytes (16,23,24). In a report of 335 consecutive stage I-IIIA NSCLC specimens, Al-Shibli et al. evaluated tissue microarrays for epithelial and stromal CD4+, CD8+ and CD20+ lymphocytes. High density of both CD4+ and CD8+ lymphocytes in the stroma but not the epithelial compartment were associated independent predictors of disease specific survival.

Malignant tumors are composed not solely of the malignant cells but also stromal, endothelial, and immune/inflammatory cells that interact in complex ways. These interactions may lead to presence of immune cells that are immature or anergic. As a marker of a functional anti-tumor immune response Gottlin (25) looked at the relationship between presence of organized lymphoid structures, germinal centers (GC) and survival in early stage NSCLC. The GCs are organized loci containing mature dendritic cells and T cells adjacent to B cells and are an adaptive immune response. They assessed 91 early stage NSCLC specimens for the presence of GCs and found 32 (35%) to have GCs at tumor margins or tumor center. The presence of intratumoral but not marginal GCs was associated with earlier stage (Stage I) and in stage I patients, presence of intratumoral GCs was associated with better survival than no GCs. A separate study from France (26), looked at the presence of tertiary lymphoid structures, which they designated tumor-induced bronchus associated lymphoid tissues (Ti-BALT) in 74 patients with resected early stage NSCLC. The Ti-BALT is composed of mature dendritic cell/T-cell clusters adjacent to B-cell follicles. The used the density of mature DCs as a marker of Ti-BALT. The density of mature DCs was significant predictor of overall, disease specific and disease free survival. They concluded that their data suggested that infiltration of tumor cells by mature DCs resulted in organization and proliferation of T and B-cells in Ti-BALT. They proposed a potential role of mature DC density as a prognostic factor for relapse in early stage NSCLC.

The studies cited provide substantial evidence for the existence an antitumor response in NSCLC. These studies suggest a potential role for correlating host immune response with survival in early stage NSCLC and a role in potentially selecting patients for adjuvant therapy. However, there is no convincing evidence that assessment of any component of the innate or adaptive immune response can reliably predict outcomes after surgical resection of NSCLC. The large tumor banks from randomized trials of adjuvant chemotherapy provide the potential to assess the prognostic ability of host immune response in early NSCLC in a large sample size taken in a multi-center setting and whether or not a local immune response to the primary tumor might predict for benefit of adjuvant chemotherapy.

**Gene signature (GS) predicting response to immunotherapy**

It is believed that a cancer phenotype associated with immune response does occur and may identify patients more likely to respond to immunotherapy. Ulloa-Montoya et al. (27) used tissue microarrays from patients with advanced melanoma treated with MAGE-A3 antigen specific cancer immunotherapy (ASCI) to identify a pre-treatment gene expression signature associated with clinical benefit. Clinical benefit was defined as objective response, stable disease for more than 4 months or mixed response with unequivocal tumor shrinkage. Genes selected from the microarray data were corroborated using quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR) and these. The GS identified not only identified patients with clinical benefit but also was predictive of better overall survival (29 versus 16.2 months) with MAGE-A3 ASCI treatment in patients whose tumors were GS positive versus those who were GS negative.

This GS was applied to resection specimens from patients enrolled in an independent randomized phase II trial of MAGE-A3 ASCI as adjuvant therapy in stage IB or II NSCLC. The GS was assessed from 157 of the 162 randomized patients. There were 61 patients who were GS positive. A positive GS was associated with a better disease free interval (DFI), the primary end-point of the trial (HR 0.42; 95% CI: 0.17-1.03; P=0.06). Although no benefit in terms of overall survival was seen for MAGE-A3 ASCI in the overall study population, in patients with GS positive tumors a strong trend in favor of benefit from MAGE-A3 ASCI was seen (HR 0.63; 95% CI: 0.22-1.78; P=0.38).

Analysis of the genes included in the GS positive tumors showed an over-representation of immune related genes. Genes involved included MHC class I and II, T cell markers regulated by interferon gamma (IFN-G), genes involved in antigen presentation and chemokines. The authors concluded that a specific tumor microenvironment favors the presence of immune effector cells in responding
patients. Of interest, the GS did not appear to be prognostic in placebo arm. This might reflect the small sample size or the selection of patients for the trial based on MAGE-A3 expression.

Prospective evaluation of this GS in randomized phase III trials in melanoma and NSCLC are planned. Confirmation of the predictive value of a GS for immune response would be valuable in patient selection for on-going trials and potential could be valuable in selecting patients likely to benefit from MAGE-A3 immunotherapy.

**Checkpoint inhibitors**

The demonstration of agents targeting immune check-points can result in tumor response in human solid tumors (28) and improve survival (29) has renewed interest in cancer immunotherapy. The fact that these agents have activity when used alone is support for an endogenous host immune response to cancer cells.

Under normal circumstances, immune checkpoint inhibitors are integral to maintaining cell tolerance and protecting normal tissue from damage during immune response (30). Counter-balancing stimulatory and inhibitory signals regulate T cell activation. The two most relevant immune checkpoint inhibitors are cytotoxic T-lymphocyte associated antigen 4 (CTLA4) and programmed cell death protein 1 (PD1).

CTLA4 is expressed exclusively on T cells and primarily acts to regulate the amplitude of early T cell activation (30). It is not expressed on the naive or memory T cells and expression is triggered only after antigen binds to T cell receptor (TCR). Hence, the clinical activity of the CTLA blocking antibodies implies that a host T cell response to tumor antigens exists but is suppressed by factors in the tumor microenvironment.

The major role for PD1 is to limit activity of T cells in peripheral tissue and to limit autoimmunity (30). The expression of PD1 is induced after T cell activation. PD1 must bind to one of its ligands, PD1 Ligand1 (PD L1 or B7-H1) or PD1 Ligand2 (PD L2 or B7-DC) in order to inhibit T cell activation signals. Unlike CTLA4, the expression of PD1 is not limited to T cells. It is also expressed on B cells and natural killer cells.

The ligands for PD1 are commonly upregulated on tumor cells including NSCLC (31) and they have potential as biomarkers for response to PD1 ligand blockade. The expression of PD L1 on tumors may be a form of adoptive immune resistance and is further evidence of an endogenous host immune response and a potential mechanism of immune escape. Zhang et al. (32) compared PD1 expression on peripheral blood CTLs from healthy controls to those obtained from peripheral blood of 21 NSCLC patients undergoing surgical resection and to PD1 expression on TILs from resected specimens from 16 of these patients. The expression of PD1 was higher in peripheral blood CTLs from NSCLC patients than healthy controls and highest in the TILs from the surgical resection specimens. The PD1 expressing TILs showed less differentiated phenotype and were less capable of production of IFN G and IL-2 and of proliferation. Blocking antibodies to PDL1 but not PDL2 lead to increased cytokine production and T cell proliferation.

Immunosuppressive regulatory T cells (Treg) also highly express PD1 and early expression of PD1 can shift T cells from an activated state to one of anergy. Assessing TILs for expression of PD1 or its ligands may be important in studies evaluating TILs and the association with prognosis in NSCLC. Schneider et al. (33) assessed tumors from 12 patients undergoing potentially curative resection for early stage NSCLC for the expression of B7-H3, a member of the PDL1 ligand family, on DCs from tumor and normal lung distant from tumor. Expression of B7-H3 was significantly upregulated on DCs from tumor compared to healthy lung and these DCs were inferior at stimulating T cell proliferation. The ability to stimulate T cell proliferation could be restored by blocking antibodies for B7-H3.

The above evidence, although taken from small, single institution studies, suggests that the PD1/PDL1 pathway may play a role in immune escape in human NSCLC, even at an early stage. The potential to reverse the immunosuppression with blockade of PD1/PDL1 pathway provides rationale for studies of PD1/PDL1 blocking agents in the adjuvant setting.

**Immunotherapy as adjuvant therapy in NSCLC**

The concept of immunotherapy as an adjuvant treatment after resection of early NSCLC is not a new one. The Ludwig Lung Cancer Study Group investigated immune-stimulation with intrapleural Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) versus placebo as adjuvant therapy in early stage NSCLC more than 30 years ago (34). This non-specific immunotherapy which was administered once in early post-operative setting, resulted in an increased complications, mainly empyema, and inferior disease-free survival in the BCG group. Since that time, our understanding of cancer
immunology has increased tremendously (35) and has led to the development of more specific immunotherapies. Recent successes with specific immunotherapy strategies in castrate resistant prostate cancer (36) and melanoma (29) have renewed excitement in the potential immunotherapy to modify the clinical course of solid malignancies.

There are few cancer immunotherapies that have been assessed in the adjuvant setting in NSCLC. The two agents that have completed phase III clinical trials are both antigen specific (vaccine) strategies: tecemotide, previously known as L-BLP25, and MAGE-A3 ASCI.

Tecemotide is an antigen specific immunotherapy targeting the MUC1 glyco-peptide. A randomized phase IIIB (37) trial with tecemotide versus observation showed a potential survival advantage in patients with stage III NSCLC. This led to the design of a global randomized placebo controlled phase III trial of tecemotide versus placebo in patients with stage III NSCLC after primary therapy with chemo-radiation (START). Hence, the tecemotide was given as adjuvant to the primary chemoradiation. Patients with stage III NSCLC who achieved partial response or stable disease to the primary chemoradiotherapy were randomized to tecemotide or placebo until disease progression. Patients were stratified based on stage at initial presentation, response to primary chemoradiation (stable disease versus partial response), region of the world, and mode of delivery of chemoradiation (sequential versus concurrent). Despite challenges related to a clinical hold imposed on this START trial, more than 1,500 patients were randomized and 1,239 patients were included in the primary analysis (38). Tecemotide was well tolerated even when administered for prolonged periods. However, the primary end point of improvement in overall survival in the primary analysis population was not met. A preplanned subgroup analysis based on stratification variables did show, in the largest subgroup of patients treated with concurrent chemoradiation (n=806), tecemotide adjuvant therapy resulted in a 10.2 months improvement in median survival (HR, 0.78; 95% CI: 0.64-0.95; P=0.016). Although this could not be considered a statistically significant result, the clinically significant difference in survival seen with tecemotide in a large sub-group of patients with stage III disease suggests a strong signal of efficacy.

MAGE-A3 gene is expressed in a number of cancers, including melanoma and NCLC. It is not expressed on normal tissues with the exception of testis and placenta and is considered a tumor specific antigen and ideal candidate for active immunotherapy. MAGE-A3 ASCI targets the MAGE-A3 tumor specific antigen. In a randomized phase II trial (39) in 182 patients with resected stage IB or II NSCLC, MAGE-A3 ASCI showed a strong trend for improved disease-free interval compared to observation. This trial was conducted prior to wide-spread of the use of adjuvant chemotherapy. An updated survival analysis of this phase II trial was recently published (40). Further follow up to 70 months continues to show a strong trend in favor of MAGE A3 ASCI in terms of DFI (HR 0.78; 95% CI: 0.49-1.24; P=0.248) although no difference was seen in overall survival (HR 0.99). A very large global double-blind placebo controlled phase III trial was initiated to test MAGE-A3 ASCI as adjuvant therapy in NSCLC. The MAGE-A3 as Adjuvant Non-Small Cell LunG Cancer Immuno Therapy (MAGRIT) trial is perhaps the largest adjuvant trial in NSCLC. More than 9,300 patients with stage I-IIIA NSCLC who had undergone surgical resection were screened for MAGE-A3 expression. Patients with tumors expressing MAGE-A3 were stratified based on whether they received adjuvant chemotherapy or not and then randomized to receive MAGE-A3 ASCI or placebo. The MAGRIT trial completed its target accrual of 2,270 patients in late 2011. The results of this trial are eagerly awaited.

**Future directions**

The limited success of adjuvant chemotherapy in early stage NSCLC is not surprising given the multiple mechanisms involved in tumor dormancy. Cytotoxic chemotherapy is likely to target those micro-metastases that are actively proliferating during the relatively brief time adjuvant therapy is administered. Although elimination of micro-metastases may be the optimal goal, maintaining them in a dormant state may prove an equally valuable strategy. The recent demonstration that very prolonged (10 years) adjuvant anti-estrogen therapy with tamoxifen is superior to shorter durations (5 years) would suggest that maintaining dormancy could be an effective adjuvant strategy (41). Future improvements in adjuvant therapy for NSCLC will likely involve combination strategies that target different aspects of dormancy and can build on the gains made with adjuvant chemotherapy or be effective in patients for whom cytotoxic therapy is not an option.

The wide range of immunotherapies currently under investigation makes it difficult to generalize, but there are a number of features that make immunotherapy particularly attractive in the adjuvant setting. Vaccine or
active specific immunotherapies are easy to administer, have a favorable toxicity profile and can thus be administered for prolonged periods. Immunotherapy has the potential to induce T cell memory and hence, the effect may persist long after the treatment is completed. Finally, contrary to what is popularly believed, immunotherapy may be synergistic when combined with chemotherapy (42) and targeted therapies (43).

The evidence currently available on the prognostic implications of tumor infiltrating immune cells is insufficient to support routine use. The tumor banks available for the large randomized adjuvant trials present an ideal opportunity to explore not only their prognostic value but also to help better understand the complex interactions between cancer and the immune system in early stage NSCLC. Such studies should focus not only on TILs and their location, but also the potential role of PD1/PDL1 in early stage NSCLC. This could help define whether a population suitable for a potential adjuvant trial with agents targeting this pathway might be identified. This is particularly relevant given the demonstration of clinical activity of checkpoint inhibitors such as anti-CTLA4 and anti-PD1/PDL1 anti-bodies. However, these are but a fraction of the receptors and ligands the have been identified as modulators of an anti-cancer immune response (30). It will be important to define which, if any, of these are relevant in a particular cancer.

The ultimate value of immunotherapies in the adjuvant setting will await demonstration of improved clinical outcomes in randomized trials. The recently completed START trial, while not meeting its primary end-point, shows a strong signal for improved survival with tecemotide as adjuvant therapy after concurrent chemo-radiation in stage III NSCLC. A confirmatory trial, focusing on patients completing concurrent chemo-radiation is being planned. The MAGRIT trial of MAGE-A3 ASCI in the adjuvant setting will define whether this immunotherapy can improve outcomes when given after adjuvant cytotoxic chemotherapy and/or in patients not suitable for adjuvant chemotherapy. This trial will also help define whether a GS might be used to predict patients likely to benefit from the MAGE-A3 ASCI.

Conclusions

The multitude of strategies used by tumors to circumvent immune recognition means that immunotherapy strategies aimed at enhancing one aspect of the immune response or overcoming one aspect of immune resistance are likely to meet with limited success. The availability of clinically active immunotherapies targeting different aspects of the immune response allow for the exploration of combinations of immune therapies. As an example, the activity seen with the checkpoint inhibitors is likely to be limited to patients in which a pre-existing anti-tumor immune response has occurred. By combining checkpoint inhibitors with other strategies such as ASCI, cytotoxic chemotherapy or certain targeted therapies that stimulate an anti-tumor immune response, their clinical activity might be enhanced. Although developing combination therapies presents many challenges, the opportunity to improve clinical outcomes is greatest with such strategies.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

In stage IV non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), DNA molecular testing for mutations in epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) and gene rearrangements of anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) has become the new standard of care. This is based on the unprecedented efficacy of small molecule EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) such as gefitinib and erlotinib against EGFR mutant NSCLC (1,2), and the ALK TKI crizotinib against ALK positive NSCLC (3). While these highly active drugs should conceptually be effective as a component of the curative treatment of earlier stage NSCLC, the presently available evidence is minimal as pivotal studies are either underway or still in development. This article reviews current evidence about the use of adjuvant therapy for molecular targets in NSCLC, in particular regarding the use of EGFR TKIs in the treatment of early stage NSCLC harboring EGFR mutations (Video 1).

Retrospective studies regarding adjuvant gefitinib and erlotinib

In 2004, activating EGFR mutations were identified as a key biomarker of sensitivity to the EGFR-TKIs gefitinib and erlotinib (4-6). Based on the observed cytotoxicity of these agents upon cell lines, and the availability of EGFR TKIs by prescription for the treatment of stage IV NSCLC, some physicians began to use these drugs in patients with early stage disease. Memorial Sloan Kettering performed a retrospective analysis of 167 patients with stage I-III EGFR mutant NSCLC and compared a cohort of 56 patients who received neoadjuvant or adjuvant EGFR TKI to a separate cohort of 111 patients who did not receive TKI (7). In a multivariate analysis that adjusted for stage and treatment with adjuvant chemotherapy, patients who received an EGFR-TKI had a 2-year disease free survival (DFS) rate of 89%, as compared with 72% for patients not treated with TKI (P=0.06), suggesting possible benefit and supporting the need for prospective research. The 2-year overall survival was ≥90% in both groups, and was not statistically different.

In another retrospective study from Memorial, 22 patients who recurred after adjuvant EGFR TKI treatment were identified, of whom 11 were retreated with TKI and 8 responded for a median duration of 10 months (8). In this study, the resistance mutation T790M was only identified in tumors from patients who were either in the midst of adjuvant EGFR TKI therapy or less than 6 months from completion. This suggests that, similar to estrogen-receptor positive breast cancer treated with adjuvant tamoxifen (9),
longer duration of an active adjuvant therapy may potentially be beneficial, and that adjuvant TKI therapy may not be increasing cure rates, but may simply be delaying recurrences.

**Adjuvant gefitinib**

Over 10 years ago, two large randomized trials were designed to test EGFR TKIs in early stage NSCLC (not molecularly-selected patients)—one involving chemoradiation followed by gefitinib in stage III NSCLC (SWOG S0023), and the other with adjuvant gefitinib in stage I-III NSCLC. Unfortunately, in 2005, the large ISEL trial of second line gefitinib in unselected stage IV NSCLC failed to meet its overall survival endpoint, which prematurely disrupted enrollment in both early stage trials (10).

The phase III S0023 study enrolled a total of 243 patients with stage III NSCLC expected to receive concurrent chemotherapy and radiation and randomized them to outback gefitinib for up to 5 years or placebo (11). An unplanned interim analysis in 2005 at the time of the ISEL read-out demonstrated a signal of harm for gefitinib, with a median survival time of 23 months for patients receiving gefitinib, and 35 months for patients who received placebo (P=0.013). A subset analysis to look for potential benefit, or at least lack of harm, in patients with EGFR mutation-positive disease could not be retrospectively performed. Based on this study, EGFR-TKI therapy after combined chemoradiation is not recommended outside of a clinical trial.

In the phase III BR.19 study, patients with stage IB-IIIA NSCLC were randomized, following surgical resection and optional adjuvant chemotherapy, to 2 years of adjuvant gefitinib or equivalent placebo. Of a planned 1,160 patients, enrollment stopped at 503 in 2005 based on the negative ISEL trial and S0023 interim report. All patients were taken off of their assigned therapy. The analysis reported during the time the large RADIANT trial became underway, increasing evidence suggested that EGFR mutation status was a bigger determinant of response to EGFR TKI than either EGFR protein expression or EGFR gene amplification. Therefore, we initiated a single arm phase II trial with 2 years of adjuvant erlotinib following surgery for stage I-IIIA surgically resected EGFR mutant NSCLC patients, dubbed the SELECT (Surgically resected EGFR mutant Lung cancer with adjuvant Erlotinib Cancer Treatment) trial (17). Following primary surgical resection, patients received standard-of-care adjuvant chemotherapy and/or radiation at the discretion of their treating physician, followed by adjuvant erlotinib at 150 mg po daily. A report at ASCO 2012 of the first 36 enrolled patients demonstrated that the majority were able to tolerate 2 years of adjuvant treatment, though some required dose reductions. Only two patients recurred before two years (one during adjuvant

stage IIA-N2 NSCLC were treated with either 4 cycles of adjuvant carboplatin and pemetrexed, or the same chemotherapy followed by 6 months of gefitinib (13). Unlike the S0023 and BR.19 trials, no patients received radiation, and all patients had tumors with sensitizing EGFR mutations. An improvement was observed for the gefitinib arm versus the control arm for median DFS (39.8 vs. 27.0 mo, P=0.014, HR 0.37) and a trend toward improved median overall survival was noted (41.6 vs. 32.6 mo, P=0.066, HR 0.37). While this study is small, it does suggest benefit for an EGFR mutant population with adjuvant gefitinib treatment.

**Adjuvant erlotinib—SELECT and RADIANT**

Following FDA approval for erlotinib in the second line treatment of stage IV NSCLC based on the BR.21 trial (14), the potential efficacy of erlotinib in the adjuvant setting became an important question. The RADIANT trial is an ongoing phase III trial which targeted 945 patients with stage I-IIIA NSCLC whose tumors have EGFR protein expression by immunohistochemistry (IHC), or increased EGFR gene copy number by fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) (15). Following surgical resection and optional adjuvant chemotherapy, patients were randomized 2:1 to erlotinib for 2 years or placebo. The biomarker analysis presented early demonstrated an EGFR mutation positive rate of about 17%, suggesting that approximately 40 patients will be on the control arm and 80 on the erlotinib arm (16). The initial results of this trial, including a biomarker based outcome analysis, are expected soon.

During the time the large RADIANT trial became underway, increasing evidence suggested that EGFR mutation status was a bigger determinant of response to EGFR TKI than either EGFR protein expression or EGFR gene amplification. Therefore, we initiated a single arm phase II trial with 2 years of adjuvant erlotinib following surgery for stage I-IIIA surgically resected EGFR mutant NSCLC patients, dubbed the SELECT (Surgically resected EGFR mutant Lung cancer with adjuvant Erlotinib Cancer Treatment) trial (17). Following primary surgical resection, patients received standard-of-care adjuvant chemotherapy and/or radiation at the discretion of their treating physician, followed by adjuvant erlotinib at 150 mg po daily. A report at ASCO 2012 of the first 36 enrolled patients demonstrated that the majority were able to tolerate 2 years of adjuvant treatment, though some required dose reductions. Only two patients recurred before two years (one during adjuvant

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erlotinib, and one following early discontinuation), for an observed 2-year DFS of 94%. An additional 10 patients recurred after 2 years and most still were responsive to subsequent EGFR TKI therapy. This trial was subsequently expanded to 100 patients total and has been completely enrolled, with results for the entire study population expected in another 1-2 years.

**Future directions/conclusions**

Based on the mixed results of existing trials, there are plans for larger phase III trial to further establish the magnitude of benefit, and potential risk, of adjuvant TKI in molecularly selected subgroups of patients. In the United States, the NCI and cooperative oncology groups are designing randomized placebo-controlled phase III trials that add adjuvant TKI to standard therapy regimens: one with adjuvant EGFR TKI in surgically resected EGFR mutant NSCLC (n=410), and another with adjuvant crizotinib in resected ALK-positive NSCLC (n=336) (18). Randomized trials that test substitution of EGFR-TKI with adjuvant chemotherapy are also ongoing in Asia, including the WJOG6410L trial in Japan (19) and the ADJUVANT trial in China (20), each of which are randomizing more than 200 patients between adjuvant cisplatin/vinorelbine and adjuvant gefitinib for stage II-III patients after resection. If these phase III trials show promise of efficacy, the next generation of TKIs, with their expanded spectrum of activity, may present additional opportunity for improvement. Furthermore, some fundamental biological questions, such as whether these agents are cytotoxic against micrometastatic disease or simply cytostatic, will require ongoing long-term follow up, and potentially investigating extended durations of treatment.

**Acknowledgements**

Neal—Support for clinical research (Genentech/OSI/Astellas, Boehringer Ingelheim). Sequist—Unpaid consulting for Boehringer-Ingelheim, Clovis Oncology, Merrimack Pharmaceuticals, AstraZeneca. Paid consulting for GSK. Support for clinical research (Genentech/OSI, Boehringer-Ingelheim).

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The continuing role of chemotherapy for advanced non-small cell lung cancer in the targeted therapy era

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Abstract: There have been remarkable advances in the targeted treatment of advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) over the past several years. Survival outcomes are steadily improving as management paradigms shift in the diagnosis and treatment of advanced NSCLC. Customizing treatment based on histology and molecular typing has become a standard of care in this era of targeted therapy. While new chemotherapeutic agents have proven effective, the pivotal role of platinum-based chemotherapy doublets has been confirmed. Maintenance chemotherapy has become an option, but who to employ it in remains unclear in the real-world setting. Efforts to overcome resistance to targeted agents are ongoing utilizing combination regimens of chemotherapy plus targeted agents, but optimizing combination strategies needs further exploration. This review highlights recent developments in novel chemotherapeutics and in chemotherapy strategies over the past two years. Despite advances in molecular medicine, there remains an essential role for chemotherapy in advanced NSCLC, even in the recent targeted therapy era.

Keywords: Advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); recent developments; chemotherapy strategies; targeted therapy

Submitted Aug 05, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 19, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.47
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.47

The continuing role of chemotherapy for advanced non-small cell lung cancer in the recent targeted therapy era

Despite remarkable advances in the targeted treatment of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) over the past several years, chemotherapy remains of paramount importance in the treatment of advanced NSCLC. Even in patients whose tumors contain EGFR activating mutations or ALK gene rearrangements and are treated with first line tyrosine kinase inhibitors, resistance invariably develops, with chemotherapy remaining the cornerstone of subsequent therapy. In profiling mutations of 1,000 metastatic lung adenocarcinoma patients, although the Lung Cancer Mutation Consortium was able to identify actionable mutations, including molecular aberrations linked to approved drugs and clinical trials in 54% of cases (1), in only a small minority, about 14-18% in Western populations, are there approved targeted drugs (EGFR and ALK TKIs) with which to treat them. As of yet, no drugs targeting oncogenic-driver pathways have been approved in squamous cell lung cancers, though clinical trials are ongoing. With the majority of advanced lung cancer patients not harboring actionable driver mutations with paired targeted agents that effectively improve outcomes, advancing chemotherapy regimens through rational drug combinations and discovery of new potent chemotherapeutics remains critical. This review highlights advances in chemotherapy of advanced NSCLC over the past two years.

Continuing central role of platinum compounds in first line chemotherapy of advanced stage NSCLC

Although recently implemented treatment guidelines recommend that patients with advanced stage NSCLC...
whose tumors harbor EGFR activating mutations or ALK gene rearrangements be treated first line with erlotinib or crizotinib, respectively, it is with the realization that there is no overall survival benefit to patients with EGFR mutated cancers whether they receive an EGFR TKI first line or second line. This TKI-first recommendation is true even in patients with tumor-related poor performance status (2). For ‘fit’ patients who do not have an oncogene-driven cancer, platinum doublet chemotherapy (with consideration of bevacizumab in non-squamous histology patients) remains the cornerstone of treatment. In an attempt to preserve efficacy and minimize toxicity, platinum-free combinations of newer agents have been tested against conventional platinum-based combinations. Although a recent meta-analysis of 16 randomized trials found that the efficacy was comparable between non-platinum doublets of third-generation agents and platinum-based doublets for pooled overall survival (HR = 1.03, 95% CI: 0.98-1.08, P=0.290) (3), all evidence based guidelines support platinum-based therapy as standard of care. Subgroup analyses by different non-platinum doublet protocols revealed that none of the four non-platinum doublets achieved a different survival when compared with platinum-based doublets. The pooled progression-free survival showed that platinum-based doublets may have an advantage over non-platinum doublets (HR = 1.06, 95% CI: 1.01-1.12, P=0.03). In this study, a meta-analysis of toxicity could not be performed.

In an attempt to show that platinum compounds were non-essential, a recent Phase III trial in advanced stage NSCLC with performance status 2 randomized patients to receive pemetrexed with or without carboplatin. All efficacy parameters favored the carboplatin-pemetrexed combination over pemetrexed alone: response rate 23.8% vs. 10.3%, PFS 5.8 vs. 2.8 months, and OS 9.3 vs. 5.3 months (4). Clearly, the weight of evidence in all categories of advanced NSCLC without EGFR mutation or ALK fusion favors platinum-based doublet therapy.

**Biomarkers to select platinum and non-platinum chemotherapy**

Utilizing DNA repair enzymes as biomarkers for better selecting front-line chemotherapy is an area of active investigation. Low ERCC1 expression by either IHC or RT-PCR has been shown in preliminary studies to be a potential biomarker of benefit to platinum compounds and low RRM1 a potential biomarker of benefit to gemcitabine. The ERCC1 enzyme removes platinum-induced DNA adducts, and thus low ERCC1 levels are associated with platinum sensitivity (5). RRM1 is a subunit of ribonucleotide reductase which is the main target of gemcitabine; thus, low RRM1 levels are associated with gemcitabine sensitivity (6). In the recently published phase III TASTE trial in metastatic NSCLC, patients were randomly assigned 2:1 to the experimental arms: (I) gemcitabine/carboplatin if RRM1 was high and ERCC1 was low; (II) docetaxel/carboplatin if RRM1 was high and ERCC1 was low; (III) gemcitabine/docetaxel if RRM1 was low and ERCC1 was high; and (IV) docetaxel/vinorelbine if both were high (7). Control arm patients received gemcitabine/carboplatin. There were no statistical differences for progression-free survival or overall survival. The authors note they required real-time processing of tumor specimens for ERCC1, RRM1 and in situ protein levels. Therefore day-to-day variations in the reagent assay reliability and processing procedures may have affected the reliability and reproducibility of these assays. A recent attempt to validate ERCC1 by IHC as a prognostic marker to platinum based chemotherapy in the adjuvant setting failed as the same antibody to ERCC1 (but a different batch) could not detect the functional ERCC1 isoform (8).

Thymidylate synthase (TS), the de novo source of thymidylate synthesis, is an essential enzyme for DNA replication and cell growth and one of the primary targets of pemetrexed. Pemetrexed has a potential histology-specific benefit which may be related to higher levels of TS expression in squamous histology of the lung compared to adenocarcinoma with overexpression of TS is related to a reduced sensitivity to pemetrexed (9). In vitro studies have correlated differential expression of TS and pemetrexed sensitivity (10). In an analysis of the largest data set for gene expression of biomarkers reported to date, significant histology-related associations for ERCC1, RRM1, and TS were seen, warranting randomized phase III trials assessing the predictive value of these chemotherapy-related biomarkers (11).

Another biomarker that may assist in chemotherapy selection is SPARC (secreted protein acidic and rich in cysteine), a matricellular glycoprotein that is produced by tumor and/or neighboring stroma. SPARC expression is thought to facilitate the intracellular accumulation of nanoparticle albumin-bound paclitaxel (nab-paclitaxel) (12). Multiple issues in assay development, standardization, tissue processing and antibody reliability have affected the potential utility of these biomarkers to better select rationale chemotherapy combinations in advanced NSCLC. Further development of these predictive biomarkers is of interest to
convert chemotherapy into targeted chemotherapy.

**Pemetrexed first line therapy for non-squamous histology**

Pemetrexed is a multi-targeted anti-folate employed: with platinum derivates for first-line treatment, as single agent for subsequent lines of treatment, and as maintenance therapy. In the landmark JMDB trial, Scagliotti et al. demonstrated no difference in overall survival between cisplatin/gemcitabine and cisplatin/pemetrexed as first-line treatment of patients with metastatic NSCLC. However, in a preplanned subset analysis the cisplatin-pemetrexed combination was superior in non-squamous histology with a median overall survival of 12.6 months in the cisplatin-pemetrexed arm and 10.9 months in the cisplatin-gemcitabine arm (HR =0.84; 95% CI: 0.71-0.99; P=0.03) (13).

By contrast, patients with squamous carcinoma had a worse median overall survival in the cisplatin-pemetrexed arm than in the cisplatin-gemcitabine arm (9.4 vs. 10.8 months; HR =1.23; 95% CI: 1.0-1.5; P=0.05).

In a more recent study the Norwegian Lung Cancer Study Group enrolled 436 patients to compare health-related quality of life (HRQoL) between carboplatin-pemetrexed and carboplatin-gemcitabine as first-line treatments for advanced NSCLC. The two regimens achieved similar results in terms of HRQoL and overall survival (7.3 months for carboplatin-pemetrexed vs. 7.0 months for carboplatin-gemcitabine; P=0.63) (14).

Multivariate analyses and interaction tests did not reveal any significant associations between specific histology and survival. Carboplatin-pemetrexed combination was not superior in non-squamous histology, in contrast to the JMDB trial. In another randomized phase III trial carboplatin-pemetrexed achieved a longer median survival without toxicity when compared to carboplatin-docetaxel in advanced non-squamous NSCLC (3.2 vs. 0.7 months; HR =0.45; 95% CI: 0.34-0.61). The primary end-point of survival without toxicity was defined as the interval from randomization to the first treatment-induced grade 3-4 adverse event (15). In a meta-analysis published in 2012, Li and colleagues evaluated a selection of clinical trials in which platinum-based combinations including pemetrexed were compared with platinum-based combinations including other third- generation agents for first-line treatment. A consistent survival advantage with pemetrexed was observed especially in non-squamous NSCLC (which represented the majority of the patients) (16). A meta-analysis of five trials (three first-line trials, one second-line trial, one maintenance trial) confirmed that pemetrexed, when compared with alternative treatments or placebo, is consistently associated with a significant overall survival improvement in non-squamous histology (HR =0.82) but not in squamous histology (HR =1.19) (17).

**Combining chemotherapy with targeted agents**

The diagnosis and management paradigm of metastatic NSCLC has transitioned into an algorithm of presence or absence of oncogene addiction as a key branch point to selecting appropriate treatment. As described above, with the identification of driver mutations such as EGFR and ALK, EGFR-TKIs and crizotinib are supplanting traditional chemotherapy for upfront treatment of these patients (18). However, initial TKI responders inevitably relapse due to acquired resistance. More recently, an added layer of complexity related to intrapatient tumor heterogeneity has been observed, particularly relevant to the clonal evolution of somatic mutations from the primary tumor to metastatic lesions and the mixed response to treatment in different tumor sites (2). At the same time, chemotherapy combinations have reached a therapeutic plateau for metastatic disease (19).

Therefore, an area of focus has therefore been on interrogating the combination of novel targeted agents together with chemotherapy to optimize efficacy, survival and overcome acquired resistance. Early studies done combining EGFR inhibitors with concurrent chemotherapy in unselected populations did not confer a survival advantage (20).

Given the lack of benefit seen in combining concurrent chemotherapy and EGFR TKIs in an unselected patient population, efforts to best integrate chemotherapy and TKI regimens are ongoing. One such approach is intercalating a TKI with chemotherapy based on the preclinical rationale that EGFR TKIs cause G1 cell-cycle arrest thus inhibiting cell-cycle dependent cytotoxic effects of chemotherapy (21). Because the mechanism of action of EGFR-TKIs has the theoretical potential to interfere with or even negate the effects of chemotherapy, it has been hypothesized that sequential or intermittent schedules to confer pharmacodynamic separation may confer better benefit (18).

Table 1 lists recent phase III trial results combining chemotherapy with a targeted agent or novel small molecule inhibitors for within the past two years. The treatment algorithms include single-target agents, multi-target agents, concurrently, intercalated with chemotherapy and as maintenance.
Table 1 Recent Phase III Trials combining chemotherapy and targeted agents in the past two years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted agent</th>
<th>Trial design and chemo partner</th>
<th>Sequencing of targeted agent</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>EGFR inhibitors</td>
<td>First line, unselected platinum/gemcitabine + erlotinib or placebo on days 15-28 f/by erlotinib or placebo</td>
<td>Intercalated + maintenance</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>PFS = 7.6 vs. 6.0 months, HR = 0.57 (0.47-0.69) P&lt;0.0001; OS = 18.3 vs. 15.2 months, HR = 0.79 (0.64-0.99) P=0.0420; intercalated erlotinib vs. placebo</td>
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<td>Erlotinib FAST-ACT2 (22)</td>
<td>Second line, squamous Pem/cetux vs. Pem vs. docetaxel/cetux vs. docetaxel f/by cetux in cetux arms</td>
<td>Concurrent + maintenance</td>
<td>Pem = 605; Docetaxel = 333</td>
<td>PFS = 2.70 vs. 2.27 months, HR = 0.93 (0.81-1.08) P=0.305; OS = 6.74 vs. 7.85 months HR 1.05, (0.91-1.2) P=0.47; cetux + chemo vs. chemo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cetuximab SELECT (23)</td>
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<td>VEGF Bevacizumab PRONOUNCE (24)</td>
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<td>Bevacizumab PointBreak (25)</td>
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<td>Cediranib NCIC BR29 (26)</td>
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<td>Sorafenib NExUS (27)</td>
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<td>Aflibercept VITAL (28)</td>
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<td>Multitargeted agents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nintedanib LUME-lung2 (29)</td>
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<td>Nintedanib LUME-lung1 (30)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vandetanib (31) (VEGF, EGFR inhibitor)</td>
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The recently published FASTACT-2 study shows that intercalating erlotinib and chemotherapy yields improved progression-free survival and overall survival in East Asian patients enriched for EGFR-activating mutations. However, progression-free survival and overall survival were not significantly different in EGFR wild-types groups (22). Treatment benefit was noted only in patients whose tumors harbored an EGFR activating mutation (median progression-free survival 16.8 vs. 6.9 months, HR =0.25; P<0.0001; median overall survival 31.4 vs. 20.6 months, HR =0.48; P=0.0092).

The anti-VEGF monoclonal antibody Bevacizumab has demonstrated a overall survival benefit in combination with carboplatin and paclitaxel in a phase III trial and this combination can be considered an option in treating nonsquamous NSCLC. However, since the year 2000, over 11 other phase III trials have been negative to date for an overall survival benefit when combining bevacizumab or other anti-angiogenic agents to platinum based chemotherapies. One important issue in employing anti-angiogenesis therapy is absence of a predictive marker for therapeutic benefit. Differences in progression-free survival vs. overall survival benefits may also be confounded by effect of further therapies, given the existence of a variety of moderately active agents now available for second and third line treatments.

In the recent PRONOUNCE study the primary objective was to compare progression-free survival without Grade 4 toxicity (G4PFS) between a two drug regimen (Pem/Carbo) vs. three (Pac/Carbo + Bev) in a phase III superiority trial (24). The rationale for this trial design can be questioned. Nevertheless, study outcomes were negative. In the PointBreak trial patients were randomized to carboplatin/paclitaxel/bevacizumab followed by bevacizumab maintenance and compared to carboplatin/pemetrexed/bevacizumab followed by pemetrexed/bevacizumab maintenance (25). There was no overall survival advantage inclusive of all age subgroups. In fact, OS was numerically in favor of paclitaxel.

Nintedanib is a novel multtargeted oral inhibitor of VEGFR, FGFR, and PDGFR, which showed improved progression-free survival when combined with chemotherapy (29,30). Other exploratory avenues showing early signals in combination with chemotherapy include combining immunotherapies such as Ipilimumab or PD-L1 or chaperone proteins such as Hsp90 inhibitor Ganetespib (32-34).

In summary, optimal methods for combing chemotherapy and targeted therapies remain unclear. In addition, these trials emphasize that patient selection factors may dictate outcomes independent of the therapies being evaluated.

**Maintenance therapy in advanced NSCLC**

Maintenance therapy strategies that improve patient outcomes are an area of active investigation in NSCLC. Both continuation and switch maintenance approaches have been actively studied. Continuation maintenance strategies hope to suppress tumor growth beyond the time of 4 cycles of standard front-line chemotherapy. Alternatively, switch maintenance strategies hope to delay resistance to treatment by incorporating a new chemotherapeutic agent with a different mechanism of action. Ultimately, the goal of maintenance therapy is not just enhance progression-free survival, but to prolong overall survival without decreasing QoL.

The most prominent recently published study of maintenance chemotherapy is PARAMOUNT. In this large, phase III trial patients with non-squamous NSCLC were randomized to pemetrexed or placebo plus best supportive care after induction with 4 cycles of cisplatin/pemetrexed. Both progression-free (HR =0.62, P<0.0001) and overall survival (HR =0.78, P=0.019) were significantly prolonged with continuation maintenance pemetrexed (35,36). Discontinuation of maintenance pemetrexed due to toxicity was low (5%). A comparable number of patients in both treatment arms received post-discontinuation therapy (64% of patients treated with placebo and 58% of patients treated with pemetrexed maintenance). However, maintenance therapy is expensive. A recent Chinese cost-effectiveness analysis estimated cost per quality adjusted life year of maintenance pemetrexed in the Chinese health care system to be between $125,000 and $180,000 (37). Furthermore, it remains unclear in non-squamous patients whether close follow up with timely second line therapy or re-initiation of pemetrexed upon progression would have comparable efficacy to pemetrexed maintenance, particularly in patients who initially benefit from a first-line platinum/pemetrexed doublet, and then are observed without maintenance. Lastly, there is considerable debate as to whether 4 cycles of induction chemotherapy is an adequate point for consideration of maintenance, or whether the 2 months increase in median PFS could be achieved with further induction therapy.

In another pemetrexed maintenance trial (JMEN) that used a switch maintenance strategy, overall survival was improved and patients’ QoL was similar compared to placebo except for a slight decrease in appetite and delayed
worsening of hemoptysis and pain (38). In particular, the results of this trial are confounded by a very low rate of second line crossover to pemetrexed in the placebo arm, making real world interpretation difficult. Other trials employing maintenance with gemcitabine and docetaxel after frontline chemotherapy did not show any overall survival benefit when combined with initiating treatment after progression of disease (39,40). A criticism of many maintenance trials is the high percentage of patients randomized to the best-supportive care only arm failing to receive second-line therapy upon progression. Subset analyses of some maintenance treatment trials suggest that patients with stable disease may benefit more from a maintenance strategy, rather than those who respond. Though hypothesis generating, the rationale is sound: patients who do not have a response may progress quicker and would typically receive early second line agents. Thus, regardless of terminology, a switch to docetaxel or gemcitabine could be considered second line therapy instead of maintenance therapy, particularly in squamous histology patients with good functional status who do not have a response to frontline therapy.

**New chemotherapeutics**

**Albumin-bound paclitaxel**

Taxanes have been a backbone of NSCLC therapy for well over a decade. 130-nm albumin bound paclitaxel (nab-paclitaxel) differs from standard bound paclitaxel (sb-paclitaxel) by being preferentially taken up into cancer cells via caveolae mediated transcytosis. The proposed mechanism involves enhanced drug delivery to tumor by albumin binding to SPARC (secreted protein, acidic and rich in cysteine), which is preferentially expressed on tumor cells compared to normal tissue (41). It also lacks the cremophor vehicle present in standard bound paclitaxel that can trigger allergic reactions. Nab-paclitaxel was studied in combination with carboplatin and compared to sb-paclitaxel plus carboplatin as first-line therapy of metastatic NSCLC in a large, randomized phase III trial. This trial met its primary endpoint of increased response rate for the carboplatin and nab-paclitaxel combination (33% vs. 25%, P=0.005) (42). The largest gains in response rates were noted in squamous cell histology patients (41% vs. 24%) and no increase in ORR was seen in non-squamous histology. There also was less grade ≥3 neuropathy compared to the sb-paclitaxel combination. However, no significant improvement in overall or progression free survival was noted. In a subset analysis, patients from North America and age ≥70 had significantly improved overall survival with nab-paclitaxel, however this subset analysis should be considered hypothesis generating only. Nab-paclitaxel is clearly a suitable substitute for sb-paclitaxel when allergy to the cremophor vehicle is present or in patients with baseline neuropathy. In addition, nab-paclitaxel could be considered preferential in those with squamous histology when a response is needed, where a subset analysis showed a higher difference in response rates. This rationale is also supported by the realization that new treatment options for NSCLC patients with squamous histology lag far behind those for lung adenocarcinoma.

**Cabazitaxel**

Cabazitaxel is another taxane currently being studied in a phase II trial in advanced NSCLC (NCT01438307). Recent data in metastatic prostate cancer that showed a significant overall survival benefit underlies the merit of its evaluation in NSCLC (43). Trial results with cabazitaxel in metastatic NSCLC are not yet mature.

**Vintafolide (EC145): a folate-vinca alkaloid conjugate**

Vinca alkaloids have documented activity in NSCLC, but have largely been supplanted by taxanes and pemetrexed for first or second line systemic treatment of NSCLC. Vintafolide is a conjugate folate molecule linked to vinblastine. Over 75% of NSCLC is folate receptor positive (by immunohistochemistry), offering the potential of folate receptor-targeted therapy. In a recent phase II trial, companion imaging of the folate receptor via $^{99m}$Tc-EC20 CT scans was used to select patients with folate receptor expressing tumors for treatment with vintafolide. Thus, EC20 uptake is under development as a potential predictive biomarker to vintafolide. In a phase II trial of heavily pretreated relapsed/refractory NSCLC patients with positive EC20 scans, clinical benefit (stable disease + overall response rate) was seen in 26% of patients (44). Currently vintafolide is being studied in combination with docetaxel in a randomized phase II trial of relapsed/refractory NSCLC patients (NCT01577654).

**Eribulin mesylate**

Eribulin mesylate is a synthetic analogue of halichondron B
isolated from a rare marine sponge. It inhibits microtubule dynamics using a distinct mechanism from taxanes or vinca alkaloids. It was recently approved for breast cancer based on a trial showing improved overall survival in heavily pretreated metastatic breast cancer patients who previously received an anthracycline and a taxane (45). In a phase II trial in NSCLC patients who had previously received a taxane, response rates were low (5%), but 50% of patients achieved stable disease (46). Eribulin is currently being studied in combination with erlotinib (NCT01104155), pemetrexed (NCT01126736) or physicians choice of control drug (NCT01454934) in 3 separate clinical trials.

Ixabepilone

Ixabepilone is an epithilone (a novel anti-microtubule class of agent) that similar to taxanes binds and stabilizes microtubules, eventually resulting in G2/M cell-cycle arrest. Some preclinical studies show it is active in taxane-resistant models and ixabepilone is approved for treatment of metastatic breast cancer. In a randomized phase II trial in NSCLC, it did not improve overall survival or achieve any other clinically meaningful endpoint (47). The investigators stratified patients based on beta-3 tubulin immunohistochemistry and showed it to be a negative prognostic indicator, but not a predictive marker of benefit to ixabepilone. As there is no clear signal of superiority compared to paclitaxel, the future development of ixabepilone in advanced NSCLC treatment is unclear.

Pralatrexate

Pralatrexate, a folate analogue targeting dihydrofolate reductase, was recently studied in a randomized phase II trial compared to erlotinib in metastatic NSCLC patients who progressed on first-line therapy. A trend towards increased overall survival was observed and an increase in progression free survival was noted (48). In this study 18 of 100 patients treated with pralatrexate had prior pemetrexed. There was a high rate of mucositis with pralatrexate despite B12 and folic acid supplementation. As pemetrexed is increasingly being incorporated into upfront treatment regimens of nonsquamous NSCLC and the toxicity of pralatrexate appears higher, the role of additional anti-folate therapies is unclear.

Summary of new chemotherapeutic agents

Multiple new chemotherapeutic agents are currently in clinical development or have been recently evaluated in NSCLC (Table 2).

Several of these drugs are from similar drug classes to those already shown to be active in NSCLC (cabazitaxel, pralatrexate) while others have been reformulated to preferentially target tumor cells (albumin-bound paclitaxel, vintafolide). Ixabepilone and eribulin affect microtubule dynamics through distinct mechanisms of action compared to taxanes. None of the clinical trials to date with these drugs suggest dramatic benefits in advanced NSCLC patients, but some of these new agents may have a role in specific treatment settings, as per nab-paclitaxel discussed above.

Discussion

Chemotherapy remains the indispensible choice for the vast majority of patients with advanced NSCLC, given the relative rarity of currently defined and treatable oncogene-
driven patient subsets. Several new chemotherapeutic agents for NSCLC are in clinical development, though their actual role in the current treatment paradigm is yet to be determined. As we seek to rank, order and rationally combine existing chemotherapies to achieve optimal patient outcomes, some promising results have emerged. Switch or continuation maintenance strategies are of benefit, but defining exactly who to treat remains problematic, as the trial designs may not have always reflected real-world considerations. Several aspects of maintenance therapy need further examination including the optimal number of induction chemotherapy cycles, the role of treatment-free intervals, QoL, economic considerations, and whether progression-free survival is a worthy therapeutic goal in this disease setting (49). Platinum based cytotoxic chemotherapy has been the backbone of treatment for metastatic NSCLC for decades and non-platinum combinations have not shown superiority. Attempts to employ biomarkers of DNA repair or other biomarkers for chemotherapy have been hindered by methodological issues to date. Optimal strategies for integrating chemotherapy and targeted therapeutics are an area of active investigation with promising results.

Despite the remarkable advances in the targeted treatment of NSCLC in the past several years, chemotherapy remains of paramount importance in the treatment of advanced NSCLC.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Chemotherapy advances in small-cell lung cancer

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Abstract: Although chemotherapeutic advances have recently been heralded in lung adenocarcinomas, such success with small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) has been ominously absent. Indeed, the dismal outlook of this disease is exemplified by the failure of any significant advances in first line therapy since the introduction of the current standard platinum-etoposide doublet over 30 years ago. Moreover, such sluggish progress is compounded by the dearth of FDA-approved agents for patients with relapsed disease. However, over the past decade, novel formulations of drug classes commonly used in SCLC (e.g., topoisomerase inhibitors, anthracyclines, alkylating and platinum agents) are emerging as potential alternatives that could effectively add to the armamentarium of agents currently at our disposal. This review is introduced with an overview on the historical development of chemotherapeutic regimens used in this disease and followed by the recent encouraging advances witnessed in clinical trials with drugs such as amrubicin and belotecan which are forging new horizons for future treatment algorithms.

Keywords: Small cell lung cancer (SCLC); amrubicin; belotecan; picoplatin; relapsed SCLC

Submitted Jul 18, 2013. Accepted for publication Jul 30, 2013. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.43

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.07.43

Introduction

For several decades, lung cancer has been and remains by far the most common malignancy in the world with an estimated 1.6 million new cases per annum (12.7% of total) (1). It is also the leading cause of cancer-related mortality with an estimated 1.38 million deaths per annum (1). Small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) accounts for between 10% to 15% of all lung cancer cases and is closely linked to the intensity and duration of tobacco smoking (2). As such, typical SCLC patients are elderly, current or past heavy smokers with multiple cardiovascular and pulmonary comorbidities that may impede optimal management. SCLC is characterised by its aggressive nature with rapid growth, paraneoplastic endocrinopathies and early metastasis (3). In developed countries, the incidence of SCLC peaked in the 1980s corresponding to peak rates of cigarette smoking 20 years prior, but is now slowly decreasing due to changing smoking patterns (2).

Untreated SCLC is rapidly fatal within two to four months (3,4). Initial management strategies for SCLC included surgery or radiotherapy alone if deemed unresectable (3,5). Ultimately, both modalities proved to be suboptimal with very low long-term survival rates and early relapses, usually with distant metastatic disease. In 1969, chemotherapy with single agent cyclophosphamide doubled survival when compared to best supportive care alone (6). Following that, combination chemotherapy was trialled and shown to be superior to single agents (7,8). Dramatic response rates, including complete responses (CR), brought forward the tantalising promise of a cure in the 1980s. However, whilst SCLC is initially sensitive to chemotherapy and radiotherapy, relapse is almost inevitable and the efficacy of treatment beyond first line dwindles as it becomes increasingly resistant to treatment (9,10).

For many other solid-tumour malignancies, advances in diagnosis and treatment have resulted in improved survival. However for SCLC, the 5-year survival rates have not improved significantly over the last 40 years and...
have currently plateaued (2,11,12). In Australia, the 5-year survival rate improved only marginally between the years of 1982-1987 and 2000-2007 with males improving from 3% to 5% and females 5% to 8% (12).

Over the last 30 years, phase III trials of chemotherapy for SCLC have yielded only a two month improvement in median survival time (10). Radiotherapy in the form of prophylactic cranial irradiation (PCI) has provided incremental improvements in those achieving a complete or near-complete response with initial chemotherapy (5.4% improvement in 3-year survival rate from 15.3% to 20.7%) (13).

In contrast to non-small cell lung cancer, the advances in tumour genomics, chemotherapy and targeted therapy have been relatively sluggish for SCLC. There has been a distinct paucity of change to chemotherapy regimens beyond those first used in the 1970s and 1980s and currently platinum-etoposide remains the backbone of therapy (14,15). Recent advances in understanding molecular pathways and genomic aberrations involved in SCLC pathogenesis will hopefully translate into novel therapeutic targets to improve outcomes (16,17).

This review commences with a synopsis of the history and evolution of SCLC and its treatment (Table 1), with a focus on chemotherapy. This is followed by a comprehensive overview of the current systemic options for de novo and relapsed disease as well as novel chemotherapeutic agents and regimens on the horizon.

### Table 1 History of treatments for SCLC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Surgery&lt;br&gt;Radiotherapy&lt;br&gt;Nitrogen mustard</td>
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<td>1960s</td>
<td>Recognition that SCLC was a different entity compared to other bronchogenic carcinomas (non-small cell lung carcinoma)&lt;br&gt;2 tier clinical staging system (limited and extensive) introduced by the Veteran's Administration Lung Cancer Study Group for SCLC&lt;br&gt;Single agent chemotherapy trials—cyclophosphamide</td>
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<td>1970s</td>
<td>Combination chemotherapy superior to single agents&lt;br&gt;Combination anthracycline-based chemotherapy (CAV or CEV)</td>
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<td>1980s</td>
<td>Combination platinum-based chemotherapy (EP)&lt;br&gt;Chemotherapy combined with thoracic radiation for LD-SCLC</td>
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<td>1990s</td>
<td>Early concurrent thoracic radiation with chemotherapy for LD-SCLC&lt;br&gt;Chemotherapy for relapsed disease&lt;br&gt;Prophylactic cranial irradiation (PCI) for those with good performance status and complete response following combined chemoradiation for LD-SCLC</td>
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<td>2000s</td>
<td>Hyperfractionated thoracic radiation&lt;br&gt;Irinotecan plus cisplatin (IP) for ED-SCLC (Japan)&lt;br&gt;PCI also offered to those with ED-SCLC with good performance status and good response following initial treatment&lt;br&gt;Novel regimens (incorporating taxanes, gemcitabine)&lt;br&gt;Trials of sequencing, cycling and maintenance chemotherapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>IASLC introduce TNM staging for SCLC&lt;br&gt;Novel agents (amrubicin, belotocan, bendamustine, picoplatin, palifosfamide)</td>
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CAV, cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine; CEV, cyclophosphamide, epirubicin, vincristine; EP, etoposide, cisplatin; IP, irinotecan, cisplatin.

### SCLC: histology and staging

SCLC was initially believed to be caused by arsenic exposure in miners and was previously labelled as ‘lymphosarcoma of the mediastinum’ (18). In 1926, Barnard discovered that the ‘oat cell sarcoma tumour’ in fact had an epithelial origin arising from the lung (19). In 1967, the World Health Organisation (WHO) first categorised SCLC into four histological subtypes based on Barnard’s observations including: (I) lymphocyte-like; (II) polygonal; (III) fusiform
and (IV) other (3,9). Numerous revisions were made by the WHO before the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer (IASLC) modified it further in 1988, replacing the term ‘oat-cell’ with ‘small cell carcinoma’.

The original staging system for SCLC was introduced in 1968 by the Veterans Administration Lung Cancer Study Group and consisted of two clinical subgroups namely ‘limited disease’ (LD-SCLC) and ‘extensive disease’ (ED-SCLC) (20). LD-SCLC was defined as tumour and nodes confined to one hemithorax and able to be encompassed within a single radiotherapy port, whilst all else was ED-SCLC (11,20).

Approximately 30-40% of patients present with LD-SCLC and are optimally treated with combination chemotherapy with thoracic radiation. Median survival is between 15 to 20 months with 2- and 5- year survival rates of 20-40% and 10-20% respectively (21). Unfortunately, most patients (60-70%) will present with ED-SCLC and are treated with combination chemotherapy resulting in a median survival between 8 to 13 months. Moreover, both 2- and 5-year survival rates remain poor at approximately 5% and 1-2% respectively (21).

As most of SCLC literature utilises the two-subgroup clinical staging system, it remains relevant for clinical decision-making regarding therapy. However there are significant differences between survival outcomes within the ‘limited disease’ subgroup. When LD-SCLC is further stratified according to the IASLC’s Tumour, Node, Metastasis (TNM) classification (7th edition 2010), 5-year survival rates range from 38% for stage IA to 9% for stage IIIB (11). This highlights the need for more precise stratification and as such the TNM staging is now recommended at least in clinical trials for non-metastatic disease (11,15).

**Evolution of combination chemotherapy**

Although combination chemotherapy is now widely accepted to be integral in the treatment of all stages of SCLC, this contrasts with historical systemic strategies (15,22,23). In the 1940s, initial efforts to treat SCLC involved surgery until radiotherapy was shown to be superior, even for operable cases in 1969 (5,14,18). Alkylating agents such as nitrogen mustard were used as early as 1942, but at the time, the true nature of SCLC was yet to be discovered and all bronchogenic carcinomas were treated similarly (18,23-26). Nitrogen mustard did improve inoperable bronchogenic carcinoma’s median survival time from 93 to 121 days (notably only 81 of 468 had oat cell carcinoma) (25,26). In 1962, Watson and Berg argued that ‘oat cell carcinoma’ with its distinctly aggressive nature and propensity for early metastasis might be better treated with combination intensive chemotherapy and radiation rather than local treatments such as surgery or radiation alone (23).

Cyclophosphamide was the first cytotoxic chemotherapy agent to demonstrate a statistically significant survival advantage over placebo [1969] for bronchogenic carcinoma including SCLC (4.0 vs. 1.5 months) (6). Furthermore, in 1979, the combination of cyclophosphamide-based chemotherapy plus thoracic radiation was shown to be superior compared to radiotherapy alone (7,27).

Following these promising results with cyclophosphamide, further single agent cytotoxics were studied with objective overall response rates (ORR) of up to 62% including; anthracyclines, etoposide, tenoposide, ifosfamide, hexamethylmelamine, cisplatin, carboplatin, vindesine, vincristine and nimustine (28). From this, it was recognised that the epipodophyllotoxins (etoposide and tenoposide) were some of the most active single agents in SCLC (29-32). Indeed, a randomised trial using three different schedules of etoposide showed response rates between 20-62% (33). Alkylating agents including ifosfamide showed response rates of up to 46% (28) and other alkylators including cisplatin and carboplatin were less active but animal studies suggested synergism with etoposide (28-33). As single agents in heavily pre-treated SCLC, cisplatin and carboplatin had ORRs of 15% and 24% respectively (28).

Following this, the combination of cyclophosphamide with an anthracycline (doxorubicin or epirubicin) and vincristine (CAV or CEV) was investigated. In extensive disease, CAV showed 14% CR rate, 57% ORR and median survival of 26 weeks. In limited disease, CAV had a 41% CR rate, 75% ORR and median survival of 52 weeks (8). The addition of etoposide to the CAV regimen (CAVE) did not reproducibly improve survival but came at the cost of increased haematological toxicity (34). Thus until the mid-1980s, CAV was the standard regimen for first line induction chemotherapy (34,35).

In cases where anthracyclines were contraindicated due to severe cardiac or hepatic dysfunction, an alternative regimen was suggested using a combination of the most active and synergistic drugs in pre-clinical models. VP-16 or etoposide was combined with cisplatin (EP) and the combination yielded an impressive ORR of 86-89% (29,30). ORR approximated 55% in those refractory to previous anthracycline-based chemotherapy. Median survival times
were 70 and 43 weeks for limited and extensive stage disease respectively (30,31). In the realms of SCLC management, this study proved to be ground-breaking as it yielded responses comparable to anthracycline-based chemotherapy in patients with poorer performance status, serious cardiac disease or extensive liver and brain metastases (30,31).

Following this, direct comparisons between CAV and EP showed equivalent response rates (61% for CAV versus 51% for EP) (36). CR rates and median survival rates were 10% versus 7% and 8.6 versus 8.1 months for CAV and EP respectively (36). Alternating CAV and EP was also investigated and was no different except for a trend towards longer median time to progression (4 months with EP versus 5.2 months with EP/CAV alternating) (36). However, Fukuoka et al. conducted a similar trial in Japan showing that EP or CAV alternating with EP (CAV/EP) had significantly higher response rates compared to CAV (78%, 76% and 55% respectively) (37). Survival times favoured the alternating regimen CAV/EP (11.8 months) compared to EP (9.9 months) (P=0.056) or CAV (9.9 months) (P=0.027) (37).

These results favouring platinum-containing regimens have been confirmed by a subsequent randomised phase III trial with 5 years of follow up (38). In LD-SCLC, EP was superior to CEV with 2- and 5-year survival rates of 25% and 10% respectively in the EP arm compared to 8% and 3% in the CEV arm (P=0.0001) (38). For ED-SCLC, there was a trend towards survival benefit with EP over CEV but these were not statistically significant with median survival 8.4 versus 6.5 months respectively (38). When combined with concurrent thoracic radiation, EP is also better tolerated than anthracycline-based regimens (e.g., less oesophagitis and pneumonitis) and so became the most frequently used chemotherapy regimen for SCLC (10,22,30,31,37-40).

The increasing use of platinum in a host of solid tumours has stimulated a plethora of studies comparing its efficacy with non-platinum regimens along with head to head comparisons between cisplatin and carboplatin. With respect to SCLC, a meta-analysis by Pujol et al. found that cisplatin-based regimens had an increased probability of response over those without cisplatin (OR 1.35, 95% confidence interval of 1.18-1.55) (41). Cisplatin is associated with significant nephrotoxicity, neurotoxicity and gastrointestinal adverse effects whereas carboplatin is associated with more myelosuppression (42). The COCIS meta-analysis by Rossi focused on whether or not cisplatin was required or if carboplatin could be substituted (42). It suggested that carboplatin-based regimens were equivalent in terms of ORR, progression-free survival (PFS) and overall survival (OS) compared to cisplatin-based regimens (42). Thus it seems reasonable to substitute carboplatin for cisplatin to avoid non-haematological toxicities.

First-line chemotherapy

Current combination chemotherapy with either EP or CAV achieves partial or complete responses rates between 50% to 85% alongside median survival times ranging from 9 to 12 months (4,10). In the hope of improving the outlook for SCLC, several novel agents have been investigated upfront in view of encouraging preliminary results witnessed with these drugs in relapsed disease. Much of the progress seems to have been focussed around the DNA topoisomerase enzymes that are critical for DNA replication and ultimately cell survival (Table 2). Dual inhibition of both topoisomerase I and II can produce significant cytotoxic effects by arresting both DNA and RNA replication by maintaining torsional stresses that ultimately impede tumour cell division (53).

Irinotecan

Irinotecan, a topoisomerase I inhibitor, has shown much promise in numerous phase II trials. The Japanese Clinical Oncology Group (JCOG) conducted a phase III trial combining cisplatin with irinotecan (IP) and compared it to EP in treatment naïve ED-SCLC (43). The trial was terminated early due to an interim analysis showing a significant benefit in median survival with IP compared to EP (12.8 versus 9.4 months respectively, P=0.002) (43). OS rates at 2 years were 19.5% and 5.2% respectively suggesting new hope in ED-SCLC (43). Myelosuppression was more common with EP whilst diarrhoea was more common in the IP arm (43).

Whilst this regimen was adopted as first-line therapy for SCLC in Japan, confirmatory studies were required prior to changing standard practice in other countries. Two large North American studies looked at the IP combination but found conflicting results to the JCOG study (44,45). The first used a slightly modified protocol (cisplatin 30 mg/m² i.v.i. plus irinotecan 65 mg/m² i.v.i. on days 1 and 8 every 21 days) compared to the JCOG (cisplatin 60 mg/m² i.v.i. day 1 and irinotecan 60 mg/m² i.v.i. on days 1, 8, and 15 q28 days) and found no differences in survival (44). The follow up SWOG S0124 trial used an IP protocol identical to that used in the JCOG trial but found that IP was equivalent to, but not superior to EP, both in terms of ORR and OS (45).
It is postulated that pharmacogenomic variability amongst different ethnic populations could be a potential reason for the differing results; a concept covered further in this review.

**Belotecan**

Belotecan is a novel camptothecin derivative that inhibits topoisomerase I and positive results from single agent therapy in previously untreated ED-SCLC were seen in a phase II trial (46). It had an impressive ORR of 53.2%, time to progression (TTP) of 4.6- and 10.4-month median OS (46). The most common toxicity was haematological with up to 71% grade 3/4 neutropenia (46). Subsequently, belotecan was combined with cisplatin in two phase II studies which both showed an ORR ≥70% and median survival time of ≥10 months (47,48). The results of an ongoing phase III trial (COMBAT) are eagerly anticipated as it compares belotecan-cisplatin with the gold standard EP in chemotherapy naïve SCLC (54).

**Amrubicin**

Amrubicin is a synthetic anthracycline derivative which shares structural features with doxorubicin and also stabilises the topoisomerase II-DNA complex (55). Its active metabolite amrubicinol is believed to preferentially accumulate in tumour cells and is thus associated with reduced toxicity including anthracycline-cardiotoxicity (53,56,57). A phase II study in previously untreated ED-SCLC patients found that single agent amrubicin had an ORR of 75.8%, median survival time (MST) of 11.7 months and 2-year survival rate of 20.2% (50).

Consequently, the introduction of amrubicin in first...
line platinum doublet therapy has been investigated with response and survival rates comparable to those documented with platinum-etoposide regimens. Ohe et al. conducted a phase I-II study of amrubicin combined with cisplatin in first line ED-SCLC to determine the maximum tolerated dose and recommended dose of the novel combination consisting of amrubicin 40 mg/m²/day and cisplatin 60 mg/m²/day (49). They reported an impressive ORR of 87.8% (36 of 41 patients) at the recommended dose schedule. The MST was 13.6 months and 1-year survival rate 56.1%, however these outcomes were counteracted by significant grade 3/4 neutropenia (95.1%) (49).

The West Japan Thoracic Oncology Group 0301 trial was a phase II study investigating sequential triplet chemotherapy with IP followed by amrubicin in previously treated ED-SCLC (51). They reported an ORR of 79% with median PFS 6.5 months. Median OS was 15.4 months but this came at the cost of significant myelosuppression with 91% grade 3/4 neutropenia and 15% febrile neutropenia associated with amrubicin (51).

The EORTC 08062 randomised phase II trial compared amrubicin monotherapy (A) or in combination with cisplatin (AP) versus the standard EP regimen in a non-Asian population (52). Independent reviewer ORR was reported as 61%, 67% and 67% for A, AP and EP respectively (52,58). Although amrubicin is associated with significantly more grade ≥3 haematological toxicities, its impressive response rates are generating interest to further investigate its potential use for SCLC (52).

More recently, Noro et al. conducted a phase II study of non-cross resistant chemotherapy by alternating AP with weekly IP for treatment naïve ED-SCLC (59). Whilst this showed an impressive ORR of 85% including 20% CR, significant myelosuppression was evident with 83.3% grade ≥3 neutropenia. However, weekly IP was associated with significantly more diarrhoea. The MST was 359 days (12 months), median PFS 227 days (7.5 months) and one-year OS rate of 40% (59). Hence, the combination of amrubcincisplatin (AP) or alternating AP with IP seems to be a very active regimen for SCLC and AP is now being compared to EP in a phase III trial (60).

**Maintenance and consolidation therapy**

Due to the propensity for SCLC to promptly relapse, maintenance therapy has been a strategy employed to prolong time to recurrence or progression. The Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) conducted a phase

III trial of maintenance topotecan (topoisomerase I inhibitor) for patients with stable or responding disease following four cycles of induction cisplatin-etoposide (61). Although PFS was significantly improved, there was no difference in patient-related quality of life or OS between observation and topotecan arms (8.9 versus 9.3 months; P=0.43) (61).

Subsequently, a systematic review and meta-analysis by Rossi et al. found that the addition of maintenance chemotherapy, interferons or biological agents only produced a very small and clinically insignificant survival benefit (62).

**Second-line chemotherapy**

Although initial objective chemotherapeutic responses to first line treatment are generally observed, this is seldom witnessed beyond this setting with a median OS often <6 months from the point of relapse (63). In line with other diseases where platinum agents represent the core of primary gold standard therapy (e.g. gynaecological cancers), the extent of initial response is a reasonably robust predictor of future outcome in the event of tumour progression. However, as the usual definition of true platinum sensitivity (i.e. platinum free interval of ≥12 months) used in such diseases is rarely applicable in SCLC, historical classifications have adopted a relatively sombre tone reflecting the unrelenting course of this disease.

Initial reports in the 1980s defined chemoresistant patients with disease that had either progressed during first-line therapy or within 90 days of its completion (64). In turn, PFS extensions beyond this time period are generally categorised as having ‘sensitive’ disease. Moreover, in particular cases with both high responses from initial induction chemotherapy and prolonged treatment free intervals (TFI) of >6 months, rechallenging with the same drugs used in primary therapy can achieve response rates of 50% (65,66). These early studies helped define the current nomenclature of ‘sensitive relapsed’ (PFS >3 months), ‘resistant’ (PFS <3 months) and ‘refractory’ (progression through first line treatment) SCLC (67). However, amongst the literature, the ‘refractory’ and ‘resistant’ definitions increasingly appear to be used interchangeably.

With respect to the second-line cytotoxic strategies employed, there is no general consensus on the most effective regimen. However, there is a leaning towards standard therapy with the camptothecin; topotecan, which to date represents the sole agent with FDA approval specifically for this setting. In comparison with commonly used combinatorial approaches such as CAV, topotecan appears to have
equivalent response (24.3% vs. 18.3%; P=0.285) and median survival rates (TTP: 13.3 vs. 12.3 weeks; P=0.552; OS: 25 vs. 24.7 weeks; P=0.795) but superior palliation of symptoms such as dyspnoea, anorexia, hoarseness, and fatigue (68). Furthermore, the addition of oral topotecan to best supportive care (BSC) resulted in improved symptom control and significant OS advantages over BSC alone (25.9 versus 13.9 weeks; P=0.01) (69). Of interest, the direct comparisons of oral and intravenous administration have revealed equivalence in terms of response rates (18.3% vs. 21.9%), median OS (33 vs. 35 weeks) and quality of life (70).

Patients with relapsed SCLC will exhibit reasonable responses to other single agents including paclitaxel (71), irinotecan (72), gemcitabine (73) and vinorelbine (74). Nevertheless, although the response rates with such monotherapies are often inferior to combinations of these drugs with platinum agents (75-77), the benefits of combinatorial approaches are often offset by increased toxicity. However, for patients deemed to have sensitive relapse with a PFS of greater >3 months, rechallenging with platinum-based doublets presents a possible option. This approach has been confirmed in a recent meta-analysis conducted by Garassino et al. amongst 161 patients with SCLC undergoing second line therapy having failed EP (78). In this study, subjects were treated independent of their platinum sensitivity and only 30 (18.6%) were rechallenged with platinum. Notably, patients from this particular cohort with platinum sensitive disease showed a trend towards superior ORR (34.5% vs. 17.5%, P=0.06) and OS (9.2 vs. 5.8 months, P=0.08) in comparison with those treated with non-platinum agents (78). Interestingly, clinical benefit (i.e. SD + PR) was obtained in 30% of patients with refractory/resistant disease who underwent platinum rechallenge (78). Despite these results, rechallenging with platinum is mainly reserved for patients with both sensitive relapsed disease and a TFI >6 months.

Despite the modicum of success with such regimens, a clear therapeutic ceiling has been reached with the current armament of cytotoxic agents available for second line treatment and beyond. For this reason, research has focused on developing novel formulations of drug classes such as platinum salts, anthracyclines, camptothecins and alkylating agents; all of which have been the cornerstone of progressive SCLC treatment for several decades (Table 3).

**Amrubicin**

The encouraging results emanating from the aforementioned first-line phase II/III studies with amrubicin containing regimens have stimulated significant interest in relapsed SCLC. Within this sphere, several small Phase II trials have been conducted for both sensitive and refractory SCLC (53) (Table 3) which could potentially help establish an alternative 2nd line regimen to topotecan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author [Year]</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Regimen</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>ORR (%)</th>
<th>Median TTP or PFS (wks/mo.)</th>
<th>Median survival time (weeks/mo.)</th>
<th>Survival rates (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Von Pawel et al. [1999] (68)</td>
<td>III &gt;6 mo.</td>
<td>T vs. CAV</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>T: 24.3 (CAV: 18.3; P=0.285)</td>
<td>T: 13.3 wks CAV: 12.3 wks P=0.552</td>
<td>T: 25 wks CAV: 24.7 wks P=0.795</td>
<td>NR</td>
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<tr>
<td>O'Brien et al. [2006] (69)</td>
<td>III All relapsed SCLC</td>
<td>T (oral) vs. BSC</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>T: 7; (44 SD)</td>
<td>TTP</td>
<td>T: 16.3 wks BSC: 13.9 wks P=0.01</td>
<td>6 month survival, T: 49 BSC: 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eckhardt et al. [2007] (70)</td>
<td>III ≥90 days</td>
<td>T (oral) vs. T (i.v.i.)</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>T (oral): 18.3 T (i.v.i.): 21.9 P value NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>T (oral): 33 wks T (i.v.i.): 35 wks</td>
<td>1 yr survival, T (oral): 32.6, T (i.v.i.): 29.2 2 yr survival, T (oral): 12.4, T (i.v.i.): 7.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Onada et al. [2006] (79)</td>
<td>II &lt;/&gt;60 days</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>44 (16 refractory, 28 sensitive)</td>
<td>Refractory: 50 sensitive: 52</td>
<td>Refractory: 10.3 wks sensitive: 11.6 wks</td>
<td>1 yr survival, refractory: 40, sensitive: 46</td>
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*Table 3 (continued)*
Table 3 (continued)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author [Year]</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Treatment free interval</th>
<th>Regimen</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>ORR (%)</th>
<th>Median TTP or PFS (wks/mo.)</th>
<th>Median survival time (weeks/mo.)</th>
<th>Survival rates (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Inoue et al. [2008] (80)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$&lt;$90 days</td>
<td>A vs. T</td>
<td>59 evaluable (A=29, T=30)</td>
<td>23 refractory, 36 sensitive</td>
<td>A: 38 (refractory 17, sensitive 53)</td>
<td>A: 8.1 mo. (refractory 5.3 mo., sensitive 9.9 mo.)</td>
<td>NR</td>
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<td></td>
<td>PFS A: 3.5 mo. (refractory 2.6 mo., sensitive 3.9 mo.)</td>
<td>T: 2.2 mo. (refractory 1.5 mo., sensitive 3.0 mo.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ettinger et al. [2010] (81)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$&lt;$90 days</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>21.3 (1.3 CR, 20 PR)</td>
<td>PFS: 3.2 mo.</td>
<td>6.0 mo.</td>
<td>6 month survival, 48; 1 yr survival, 15.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jotte et al. [2011] (82)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$\geq$90 days</td>
<td>A vs. T</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>A: 44 (refractory 17, sensitive 53)</td>
<td>PFS A: 4.5 mo. (refractory 3.3 mo.)</td>
<td>A: 9.2 mo. T: 7.6 mo.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jotte et al. [2011] (83) (ACT-1 study)</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>$&lt;$90 days</td>
<td>A vs. T</td>
<td>637 (A=424, T=213)</td>
<td>A: 31 (refractory 17, sensitive 53)</td>
<td>PFS A: 4.1 mo. (refractory 3.3 mo.)</td>
<td>A: 7.8 mo. T: 7.5 mo. refractory; A: 6.2 mo., T: 5.7 mo., P=0.049</td>
<td>1 yr survival, A: 17, T: 8 (P=0.019) 18-month survival, A: 12, T: 0 (P=0.0006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treat et al. [2002] (84)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$&lt;$8 wks</td>
<td>PIC</td>
<td>37 (13 resistant, 24 sensitive)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>PFS: 9.1 wks</td>
<td>26.9 wks</td>
<td>6 month survival, 50.6 1 yr survival, 16.9</td>
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<td>Eckhardt et al. [2009] (85)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Refractory: PD through 1st line therapy Resistant: $&lt;$90 days Sensitive: $\geq$91 days $&lt;$180 days</td>
<td>PIC</td>
<td>77 (44 refractory, 27 resistant, 6 sensitive)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>PFS: 9.1 wks</td>
<td>26.9 wks</td>
<td>6 month survival, 50.6 1 yr survival, 16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciuleanu et al. [2010] (86) (SPEAR study)</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>$\leq$6 mo.</td>
<td>PIC vs. BSC</td>
<td>401 (268 PIC + 133 BSC)</td>
<td>27 refractory, 6 sensitive</td>
<td>PFS refractory with no post study treatment PIC + BSC: 21 wks BSC: 20 wks NS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhee et al. [2011] (87)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>All relapsed SCLC</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>PFS: 2.2 mo.</td>
<td>9.9 mo.</td>
<td>1 yr survival, 38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeong et al. [2010] (88)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$\geq$3 mo.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>PFS: 4.7 mo.</td>
<td>13.1 mo.</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim et al. [2012] (89)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>All relapsed SCLC (Platinum sensitivity not defined)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>50 (30 refractory, 20 sensitive)</td>
<td>14 refractory: 10, sensitive: 20</td>
<td>PFS: 1.6 mo. refractory: 1.5 mo., sensitive: 2.8 mo.</td>
<td>4.5 mo. refractory: 4.0 mo., sensitive: 6.5 mo.</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schmittel et al. [2007] (90)</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>$\geq$60 days</td>
<td>BEN</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>PFS 4.0 mo.</td>
<td>7.0 mo.</td>
<td>1 yr survival, 16 2 yr survival, 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T, topotecan; CAV, cyclophosphamide/doxorubicin/vincristine; A, amrubicin; PIC, picoplatin; B, belotecan; BEN, bendamustine; BSC, best supportive care; NR, not reported.
The first of these studies highlighting the salvage potential of amrubicin was published by Onoda et al. in 2006 (79). This multicentre phase II study enrolled 60 patients with relapsed SCLC; 16 refractory (i.e. TTP <60 days from treatment discontinuation) and 44 with sensitive disease (i.e. demonstrable 1st line treatment response and PD >60 days post treatment discontinuation). In line with the current recommended dosing schedule, single agent amrubicin was administered at 40 mg/m² d1-3 every 3 weeks. The median number of treatment cycles was 4 cycles (range, 1-8 cycles). Interestingly, the ORR for refractory and sensitive patients were almost equivalent at 50% (95% CI, 25% to 75%) and 52% (95% CI, 37% to 68%) respectively. However, superior PFS (2.6 vs. 4.2 months), OS (10.3 vs. 11.6 months) and 1-year survival (40% vs. 46%) favoured patients with sensitive disease (79). With respect to toxicity, grade 3/4 myelosuppression was most commonplace with high rates of neutropenia (83%), followed by anaemia (33%) and thrombocytopenia (20%). Importantly, only 3 patients (5%) experienced febrile neutropenia and no treatment-related deaths were documented (79).

Naturally, these findings fuelled the development of a subsequent study directly comparing the efficacy of amrubicin (40 mg/m² d1-3 q3 weeks) and topotecan (1 mg/m² d1-5 q3 weeks) within the second line setting. Another phase II Japanese study conducted by Inoue et al. enrolled 60 SCLC patients pre-treated with platinum-based chemotherapy (80). Of the 59 evaluable, 23 had refractory (defined as no response to 1st line therapy or relapse <90 days of discontinuation) and 36 had sensitive disease. Clear benefits of amrubicin (n=29) over topotecan (n=30) were evident with ORR of 38% (95% CI, 20% to 56%) and 13% (95% CI, 1% to 25%) respectively. In addition, these advantages were highlighted further with patients stratified according to sensitive (53% vs. 21%) or refractory (17% vs. 0%) disease (80). Although the superiority of amrubicin over topotecan reflected in the PFS (3.5 vs. 2.2 months), this did not extend to the MST (8.1 vs. 8.4 months). Rates of neutropenia (79% vs. 43%), febrile neutropenia (14% vs. 3%) and non-haematological toxicities grade ≥3 were higher in the amrubicin arm and unfortunately, one treatment related death secondary to neutropenia was observed in this group of patients (80).

Analogous to other success stories with novel therapeutics initially trialled in Asian populations [e.g. IPASS in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (91)], these results were greeted with initial caution as certain pharmacogenomic profiles exclusive to such cohorts could possibly preclude the same responses in Caucasian patients. Specifically, nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate (NADPH) oxidase is an enzyme critically involved in the metabolism of amrubicin and the polymorphisms of this enzyme which are recognised in Asian populations could potentially influence response (92). Consequently, two studies focusing on 2nd line amrubicin treatment in refractory and sensitive SCLC have been conducted in patients from Western populations. With respect to platinum-refractory disease, Ettinger et al. conducted a phase II study with single agent amrubicin in 75 patients who achieved a median PFS of 38 days following 1st line chemotherapy (81). Of these, 69 patients received a median of 4 cycles (range, 1-12 cycles), with a modest ORR of 21.3% (95% CI, 12.7% to 32.3%). In addition 1 CR (1.3%) and 15 PR (20%) were witnessed alongside a PFS and OS of 3.2 months (95% CI, 2.4 to 4.0 months) and 6.0 months (95% CI, 4.8 to 7.1 months), respectively (81). Interestingly, amongst the 43 (57%) patients who failed to respond to initial platinum-based therapy, a 16.3% ORR (95% CI, 6.8% to 30.7%) was observed (81).

The subsequent Jotte et al. study with amrubicin in platinum-sensitive SCLC (i.e. TFI ≥90 days) bore similarities to the Inoue trial by employing a topotecan-containing comparator arm (82). Patients (n=76) were randomised 2:1 to amrubicin (n=50; 40 mg/m² i.v.i. d1-3, q21 days) or topotecan (n=26; 1.5 mg/m² i.v.i. d1-5, q21 days). Again, significantly higher ORR was witnessed with amrubicin compared with topotecan (44% vs. 15%; P=0.021) and this also translated into superior median PFS (4.5 vs. 3.3 months) and OS (9.2 vs. 7.6 months). In contrast to the Inoue study, there was a trend towards more myelosuppression (≥ grade 3) with topotecan as opposed to amrubicin (82). In conclusion, the favourable results witnessed with amrubicin in ORR, PFS, OS in sensitive/refractory SCLC and the superiority over topotecan in Asian cohorts are also apparent in patients from the Western world and has consequently stimulated the development of a further larger scale study. Namely, the randomised phase III ACT-1 study aimed to compare the efficacy of 2nd line amrubicin with topotecan in patients with relapsed SCLC (83). In this trial 637 patients were randomized 2:1 to amrubicin (n=424) 40 mg/m² i.v.i. d1-3 or topotecan (n=213) 1.5 mg/m² i.v.i. d1-5. In line with similar aforementioned studies with these regimens, the results presented at the 2011 American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Annual Meeting confirmed that amrubicin had significantly improved ORR compared to topotecan (31% vs. 17%; P=0.0002) (83). Furthermore, despite no differences in PFS, OS trends favoured amrubicin (HR 0.88; 95% CI, 0.73-1.06; P=0.17), with a particular leaning towards patients with...
refractory disease (HR 0.77; 95% CI, 0.59-1.00; P=0.049) (83).

In addition, small Phase I/II studies have explored the efficacy of combining amrubicin and topotecan as a potential 2nd line regimen (93,94). However despite the 60-70% ORR achieved, any optimism generated from these trials is tempered by unacceptable toxicities including grade 4 myelosuppression, fatal diarrhoea and pneumonitis (94). Nevertheless, the results from the larger amrubicin monotherapy studies have certainly shed significant light on a plausible alternative therapeutic agent that could salvage patients with relapsed SCLC.

**Picoplatin**

Picoplatin (ZD0473) is a novel organic platinum analogue developed specifically to circumvent the development of platinum resistance mediated by sulphur-containing compounds such as glutathione and metallothionein (95,96); thiol agents that detoxify through avid platinum binding (97). This property extends its anti-neoplastic activity beyond the standard functionality of platinum revolving around DNA alkylation, inter- and intra-strand cross-linking which all facilitate apoptosis. More specifically, an in vitro study has confirmed the reversal of resistance to both cisplatin and carboplatin with picoplatin in platinum resistant H69 and SBC-3 SCLC lines (98). Moreover, it appears that the mechanism of action underlying this phenomenon relates to a decrease in platinum accumulation (98). The first clinical reports confirming single agent activity of picoplatin in relapsed SCLC were published by Treat et al. with a phase II study in SCLC patients with platinum resistant (defined as PD <8 weeks from 1st line platinum based treatment, n=13) or sensitive disease (n=24) (84). The ORR was modest at 15.4% and 8.3% and median OS was 27.3 and 35.7 weeks for the resistant and sensitive groups respectively (84,96). A subsequent larger study with picoplatin monotherapy (150 mg/m² i.v.i. q3 wks consisted of 77 patients with relapsed SCLC; 57% (n=44) with platinum refractory disease (no response to platinum based therapy), 35% (n=27) with platinum resistance (i.e. relapse <90 days from completing 1st line platinum based therapy) and 8% (n=6) with platinum sensitive disease (i.e. relapse ≥91 days <180 days following completion of 1st line platinum-based therapy) (85). In view of the preponderance of refractory/resistant patients in this study, the ORR was low at 4% with a median PFS and OS of 9.1 and 26.9 weeks respectively (85). With respect to adverse events, the most common grade 3/4 toxicities were thrombocytopenia (48%), followed by neutropenia (25%), and anaemia (20%). Significantly, there were no episodes of febrile neutropenia (85).

Both of these aforementioned studies set the foundations for the Study of Picoplatin Efficacy After Relapse (SPEAR) trial (86). This phase II study consisted of 401 patients with relapsed SCLC (<6 months of completing 1st line platinum-based chemotherapy) randomised 2:1 to picoplatin with BSC (n=268) or BSC alone (n=133). Disappointingly, this trial failed to show any survival advantages in the treatment arm over BSC (P=0.09) (86). However, this may be explained by the unbalanced proportion of patients who received post study chemotherapy in the BSC arm. Interestingly, the subset analysis of refractory patients (i.e. no response or relapse <45 days of completing 1st line platinum-based therapy) who did not receive post-study chemotherapy (n=273), revealed statistically significant PFS advantage favouring the picoplatin arm (P=0.03) amounting to just 2 weeks (86). Despite this, it appears curious why a comparator of BSC was chosen over drugs such as topotecan and amrubicin which both have documented activity in the second line setting. However, with the justifiable nihilism generated by the SPEAR trial amongst lung oncologists, it appears unlikely that such a study will ever be realised.

**Belotecan**

The modest efficacy witnessed in first-line therapy with the novel topoisomerase I inhibitor; belotecan is also mirrored in a few small studies in the relapse setting. Rhee et al. published the results of a Phase II trial in 25 patients with relapsed SCLC (sensitivity status unknown) treated with belotecan at an initial dose of 0.5 mg/m² i.v.i. d1-5 q21 days (87). In accordance with toxicity, appropriate dose adjustments were only allowed to be implemented once during subsequent cycles. Out of the 21 evaluable patients, 6 had an objective tumour response; i.e. ORR 24% on the intention to treat analysis. Furthermore, the median PFS and OS were 2.2 and 9.9 months respectively with a 1-year survival rate of 38.3% (87). Although the incidence of grade 3/4 neutropenia was particularly high (88%), severe non-haematological toxicities were not commonplace (87). Similarly, another single agent study was executed in 27 patients with refractory disease who had relapsed within 3 months of obtaining response from platinum-irinotecan based first line therapy (88). The ORR was 22%, with median PFS of 4.7 months (95% CI, 3.6-5.8 months) and a reasonable median OS of 13.1 months (95% CI, 10.4-15.8 months) (88). The latter result is of particular interest as it
suggests that belotecan has a role in salvaging patients who are resistant to other topoisomerase I inhibitors.

More recently, Kim et al. have published a larger study investigating the efficacy of belotecan monotherapy in 50 patients with sensitive relapsed (n=20) or refractory SCLC (n=30) (89). The ORR was 14% (95% CI, 4-24%) with a median follow up period of 4.2 months (range, 0.1-19.2 months), and median PFS and OS of 1.6 and 4.5 months respectively. As expected, patients with sensitive relapsed disease fared significantly better compared to refractory counterparts for ORR (20% vs. 10%), OS (6.5 vs. 4.0 months; P=0.003) with a trend towards superior PFS (2.8 vs. 1.5 months; P=0.053). Of note, the multivariate analysis confirmed that the type of relapse and prior response to chemotherapy were independent prognostic factors for OS (89). Again, grade 3/4 myelosuppression was evident with the highest rate associated with neutropenia (54%) followed by thrombocytopenia (38%) and anaemia (32%) (89). Furthermore, one treatment-related death secondary to sepsis was documented in this study. Despite the expected deleterious side effects, belotecan has shown modest activity within the second line setting for both sensitive and refractory SCLC and, as with amrubicin, warrants further exploration in this particular domain.

Future directions and closing remarks

The novel chemotherapeutic agents previously highlighted have indeed provided some optimism, albeit short lived. Other drugs have recently come to the fore and similarly demonstrate variable degrees of efficacy. Bendamustine; a bifunctional alkylating agent, has shown activity in combination with carboplatin in chemotherapy-naive ED-SCLC. Amongst 55 patients, Koster et al. documented an ORR of 72.7% which included a single complete responder. In addition median TTP (5.2 months), MST (8.3 months) and toxicity profiles all compared favourably in comparison to other standard 1st line platinum containing regimens (99). Bendamustine also appears effective in sensitive relapsed SCLC (i.e. TFI ≥60 days) with ORR 29% and median PFS and OS of 4 and 7 months respectively (90). In view of this preliminary data, a current phase I/IIa study is actively recruiting 30 patients with chemotherapy-naive SCLC to be treated with 3 cycles of bendamustine combined with irinotecan followed by 3 cycles of standard carboplatin and etoposide (Clinicaltrials.gov identifier: NCT00856830).

Following on from the success of pemetrexed in non-squamous non-squamous NSCLC and mesothelioma (100,101), attempts have been made to add this to the armament of therapeutic regimes in SCLC. However the outcomes of two recent phase II studies using pemetrexed monotherapy (500 and 900 mg/m²) in patients with sensitive and refractory relapsed SCLC have been inadequate with minimal efficacy seen in this setting (102,103). These damning results are not entirely unexpected. The discrepancies in the efficacy of pemetrexed in non-squamous and squamous NSCLC seen with the seminal Scagliotti study (100), are based on the higher thymidylate synthase (TS; the principal substrate for pemetrexed) expression associated with squamous histotypes (104). Indeed, a subsequent study has further shown that lower TS expression in advanced non squamous NSCLC is associated with longer PFS (105). Moreover, TS expression in SCLC (both from resected tumours and cell lines) is significantly higher than pulmonary squamous and adenocarcinomas (106,107). Hence, it would appear counterintuitive to adopt strategies involving TS inhibitors for SCLC therapy.

This review has attempted to outline the historical and current progress in the chemotherapeutic management of SCLC. Platinum-etoposide doublets still represent the gold standard of first line therapy and attempts to switch the mode of topoisomerase inhibition may prove to be the most strategic method in improving survival. Although the survival advantages garnered from substituting etoposide for irinotecan in the JCOG study were not recapitulated in the subsequent SWOG S0124 trial; current studies comparing the efficacy of amrubicin or belotecan with platinum with EP (52,54) could potentially change practice. Similarly, both of these agents are showing promise as single agents in salvaging patients with either sensitive or refractory relapsed disease. Tackling the dearth of FDA approved 2nd line regimens in SCLC, there is an obvious urge to develop larger clinical trials with these agents. Furthermore, despite the disheartening outcomes in the SPEAR study, picoplatin may still serve as a viable alternative to either cisplatin or carboplatin in its ability to avert the development of resistance. Hence, trials comparing picoplatin doublets with other platinum containing regimens in previously untreated SCLC could also be considered.

As with other solid tumour types, the successful quest in prolonging survival in SCLC will most likely involve appropriate combinations with the novel drugs outlined in this review alongside emerging therapies such as multi-targeted receptor tyrosine kinase inhibitors or other agents.
which serve to block signalling cascades inherent to the aggressive tumorigenicity of SCLC (e.g. inhibitors of IGFR, mTOR, MET and hedgehog signalling). Exhaustive preclinical studies with such combinatorial therapies will be required to examine both their efficacy and the inevitable upregulation of resistance pathways that ensue. The development of future clinical trials emanating from these studies will require robust design in order to make significant steps in changing the landscape of this bleak disease.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Targeted therapy in lung cancer: IPASS and beyond, keeping abreast of the explosion of targeted therapies for lung cancer

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Abstract: Advances in the treatment of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) over the last decade have predominantly involved the development of therapies directed at molecular targets such as mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) or rearrangements in the anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) gene. Other targets have been discovered at low frequency, with multiple agents approved or in development for treatment of these rare molecular subtypes. The tumour microenvironment has also provided opportunities for therapies targeting angiogenesis and the host immune response. This review will provide an overview of current targeted therapies in NSCLC and promising treatment approaches on the horizon.

Keywords: Non-small-cell lung carcinoma (NSCLC); molecular targeted therapy; immunotherapy; epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR); anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK)

Submitted Jul 19, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 19, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.52
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.52

Introduction

Delivering a high chance of benefit and avoiding futile treatment is crucial in the management of advanced lung cancer where quality of life is constantly at risk from disease progression or treatment toxicity. This ideal is now achievable with the realisation of targeted therapy in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). Targeted therapy refers to pharmaceutical agents that affect a known molecular target in the cancer cell or tumour microenvironment. In some cases, the presence of the target is determined prior to treatment by interrogating tumour samples with a variety of histological and molecular techniques. In other cases, the presence of the target is assumed to be present in the majority of patients on the basis of prior analyses on large numbers of samples. Detectable targets that indicate a high chance of treatment benefit with a given therapy are termed predictive biomarkers. This is in contrast to prognostic biomarkers, which merely indicate an influence on prognosis rather than treatment response. Testing for mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene and rearrangements of the anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) gene in adenocarcinoma of the lung are now in routine clinical use as predictive genomic biomarkers in the management of advanced lung cancer. The group of patients with lung adenocarcinomas that harbour either of these genomic alterations (15-50% depending on the population studied) are already benefiting from targeted therapy with oral kinase inhibitors such as erlotinib and crizotinib. Other potential predictive genomic biomarkers in known oncogenes such as BRAF, ROS1, MET and PIK3CA have been identified in a systematic fashion and efforts are underway to target them with novel drug compounds.

It is clear now that lung cancer represents a constellation of diseases with distinct molecular profiles and sensitivity to treatment. This re-imagining of the classification of lung cancer has been paralleled by the discovery that squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma of the lung have very different molecular architectures, and distinguishing the two on histological grounds remains a crucial first step to guide subsequent molecular analyses. Determining the molecular subtypes of lung cancer in the clinic requires an ongoing effort to develop reliable molecular diagnostics,
as has occurred with testing for EGFR mutation and ALK rearrangement. Lung cancer therapy is also likely to benefit from the nascent field of cancer immunotherapy, with preliminary evidence that targeting the host immune response to lung cancer will be a successful and versatile treatment modality in the future. This review will summarise the current state of targeted therapy for lung cancer with a focus on NSCLC, and discuss promising agents in development.

**Targeting oncogenic mutations and chromosomal aberrations in NSCLC**

**EGFR-mutant NSCLC**

Mutations in the EGFR gene found in adenocarcinoma of the lung was the first biomarker predictive of benefit from a targeted therapy in NSCLC, and was exemplary of the impressive efficacy that could be expected from this paradigm. Small molecule inhibitors of EGFR were originally developed and tested in unselected lung cancer populations, where some patients were noted to have dramatic responses (1,2). Subsequent studies revealed that tumours with mutations in the intracellular tyrosine kinase domain that mediates downstream signalling of the EGFR gene product had substantial clinical responses to oral tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) such as gefitinib or erlotinib (3-5).

Before EGFR mutation was known to be a predictive biomarker, certain patient populations were seen to benefit more from EGFR TKIs, namely those with lung adenocarcinomas, Asian ethnicity, females and never-smokers. It is now known that the enhanced efficacy in these populations is explained by the greater likelihood that their tumours harbour EGFR mutations (5-8) and that such mutations are almost exclusively found in adenocarcinoma of the lung (7-9). There is however no clinical characteristic that can be used in lieu of EGFR mutation testing.

The efficacy of EGFR TKIs in advanced EGFR-mutant lung cancer has now been established in eight randomised phase III clinical trials. The first of these was the pivotal IPASS study which evaluated the efficacy of gefitinib versus first line chemotherapy with carboplatin and paclitaxel in an Asian population of light or never smokers with advanced lung cancer (10). As part of this study which involved over 1,200 patients, 437 patients had tumour samples assayed for EGFR mutations. In the overall population, the study showed a non-inferior progression free survival for gefitinib compared to chemotherapy. It was also found that EGFR mutation was a very strong predictor of improved progression free survival with gefitinib, and that gefitinib was inferior to chemotherapy in patients without EGFR mutations. These results were confirmed in the phase III First-SIGNAL study which also compared gefitinib to chemotherapy in never-smokers with advanced lung cancer (11).

In addition to IPASS and First-SIGNAL, there have been six randomised controlled phase III trials comparing the EGFR TKIs gefitinib, erlotinib or afatinib to chemotherapy in patients with exclusively EGFR-mutant lung cancer, both in Asian and Caucasian populations. These studies which are summarised in Table 1 (12-17), uniformly show superior

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**Table 1 Phase III trials of EGFR TKIs in exclusively EGFR-mutant advanced NSCLC**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Patients</th>
<th>Targeted agent</th>
<th>Comparator arm</th>
<th>Primary endpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Japan Thoracic Oncology Group 3405 (12)</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
<td>Cisplatin + Docetaxel</td>
<td>Median PFS 9.2 versus 6.3 months (HR 0.49, 95% CI: 0.34-0.71, P&lt;0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East Japan Study Group 002 (13)</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
<td>Carboplatin + Paclitaxel</td>
<td>Median PFS 10.8 versus 5.4 months (HR 0.3, 95% CI: 0.22-0.41, P&lt;0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPTIMAL (14)</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>Erlotinib</td>
<td>Carboplatin + Gemcitabine</td>
<td>Median PFS 13.1 versus 4.6 months (HR 0.16, 95% CI: 0.1-0.26, P&lt;0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EURTAC (15)</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>Erlotinib</td>
<td>Cisplatin + Docetaxel or Gemcitabine</td>
<td>Median PFS 9.7 versus 5.2 months (HR 0.37, 95% CI: 0.25-0.54, P&lt;0.0001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUX-Lung 3 (16)</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>Afatinib</td>
<td>Cisplatin + Pemetrexed</td>
<td>Median PFS 11.1 versus 6.9 months (HR 0.58, 95% CI: 0.43-0.78, P=0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUX-Lung 6 (17)</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>Afatinib</td>
<td>Cisplatin + Gemcitabine</td>
<td>Median PFS 11 versus 5.6 months (HR 0.28, P&lt;0.0001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PFS, Progression free survival; HR, Hazard ratio; CI, Confidence interval.
response rates, progression free survival and quality of life with EGFR TKIs compared to cytotoxic chemotherapy. Despite mature follow up data (18-20), no trial of a first line EGFR TKI has shown an overall survival benefit, most likely explained by the large numbers of patients in the chemotherapy arms of these trials that crossed over to EGFR TKI treatment after progression. Although there has been no direct comparison, the second generation EGFR TKI afatinib appears to have more toxicity compared to gefitinib and erlotinib, with higher rates of severe diarrhoea and skin rash (16).

It is now recommended that all patients with advanced adenocarcinoma of the lung be tested for EGFR mutations (21), which is typically carried out using DNA sequencing of archival formalin fixed tumour tissue obtained at biopsy. The frequency of EGFR mutation in current or former smokers is approximately 10%, and in never smokers can be up to 40-50% (8,22). Due to the superior response rates and quality of life seen with erlotinib or gefitinib compared to chemotherapy, it is also recommended that all patients with EGFR-mutant NSCLC receive these treatments as first line therapy (23-25).

EGFR TKIs continue to have a role in NSCLC without EGFR mutations, where they may inhibit the overexpressed non-mutant protein, so-called wild-type EGFR. Erlotinib was found to improve overall survival in advanced NSCLC compared to placebo following progression on second or third line chemotherapy in the NCIC Clinical Trials Group BR.21 phase III study (26). This study was conducted before the link between EGFR mutation and EGFR TKI response was known, but subsequent subgroup analysis showed that the benefit was maintained in patients with wild-type EGFR and non-adenocarcinoma histology. A similar phase III study comparing gefitinib to placebo in a heavily pre-treated population failed to meet statistical significance, but there was a trend towards improved survival (27) with gefitinib.

Only one phase III study has compared EGFR TKIs to chemotherapy as second line therapy in a population that is specifically EGFR wild-type (28). Although this study suggested that docetaxel was a superior treatment in this group, final publication of results is awaited. A variety of studies have been conducted in unselected populations, showing that EGFR TKIs are non-inferior to second line chemotherapy (29), have a role as maintenance therapy after first line chemotherapy (30), and have similar efficacy to second line chemotherapy in patients that have failed to respond to first line treatment (31). There are no data to suggest the use of EGFR TKIs as first line therapy in EGFR wild-type disease, and this strategy appeared to be detrimental in IPASS (10) and also in the phase III TORCH study of erlotinib followed by chemotherapy versus chemotherapy followed by erlotinib (32).

Second generation EGFR TKIs are irreversible inhibitors of mutant EGFR, and also inhibit other receptors in the epidermal growth factor family. Afatinib, an ErbB receptor family blocker, is one such drug that has progressed furthest in development. In a phase IIb/III study of afatinib versus best supportive care in an unselected population of patients who had progressed on two chemotherapy regimens as well as either erlotinib or gefitinib, there was a modest prolongation of progression free survival by 2 months, but no overall survival benefit (33). Afatinib has also been tested in two phase III randomised trials as first line therapy in patients with EGFR-mutant NSCLC (Table 1) where it showed superior progression free survival compared to chemotherapy (16,17). It has been approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for this indication. Another second generation EGFR TKI dacomitinib has shown superior progression free survival compared to erlotinib when given after failure of prior chemotherapy in a phase II study of 188 patients (34), and is currently under investigation in two phase III studies compared to erlotinib (ARCHER) or placebo (BR26).

An alternative approach to targeting EGFR in NSCLC has been the use of monoclonal antibodies engineered to have strong affinity for the EGFR protein, such as cetuximab (35). Two randomised phase III trials have been conducted comparing chemotherapy to chemotherapy plus cetuximab in advanced NSCLC. The FLEX study of 1,125 patients with advanced NSCLC showed a modest improvement in overall survival of around 1 month with the addition of cetuximab to chemotherapy (36). A similar study failed to show benefit in the primary endpoint of progression free survival (37). Data about the role of EGFR protein expression in predicting benefit have been conflicting, although a retrospective subgroup analysis showed high EGFR expression was predictive of longer survival with cetuximab in the FLEX study (38,39). The lack of clear benefit and uncertainty over an appropriate biomarker has limited the use of cetuximab.

**Acquired treatment resistance to EGFR TKIs**

There is now little doubt about the effectiveness of EGFR TKIs in EGFR-mutant NSCLC. However, despite high initial response rates, drug resistance and clinical failure is
inevitable with the use of these agents over the course of a patient's treatment, so-called acquired resistance. In contrast to cytotoxic chemotherapy, the well defined mechanism of action of EGFR TKIs means that treatment resistance is a potentially tractable problem. Serial biopsies of tumours before and after treatment with EGFR TKIs have provided insight into the mechanisms of treatment failure (40-43), and have now been performed in sufficient numbers of patients to give an overview of the most common resistance mechanisms. In approximately 60% of cases, treatment failure is mediated by the presence of the secondary EGFR mutation T790M that is resistant to inhibition by current EGFR TKIs (40,43). This is presumed to develop from a resistant population of cells already present in low numbers before treatment with EGFR TKIs (44). In another 5-15% of cases, activation of alternative pathways within the cell that free it from dependence on EGFR signalling occurs, most commonly involving amplification of the MET gene (40-42,45) and mutations in PIK3CA (41). Mutations in BRAF have also been seen, and confirmed to confer resistance in cell line models (46), as has amplification of HER2 (47). Activation of the AXL kinase appears to be another mechanism of acquired resistance (48).

Unexpectedly, transformation to small cell histology has been observed in approximately 5% of cases (41,42) and several of these patients responded to conventional chemotherapy regimens used for small cell lung cancer (41). It is of note that several mechanisms of resistance may co-exist in the same tumour (41-43), such as T790M mutation and MET amplification.

The great value in understanding the mechanism of acquired resistance is that it provides a pathway to developing improved therapeutic strategies. Given that T790M mutations are the most common mechanism of acquired resistance, developing EGFR TKIs that inhibit T790M mutant EGFR is a logical next step. There is in vitro evidence that second generation EGFR TKIs such as afatinib may have better efficacy against T790M mutations (49), although response rates in trials with populations expected to have significant numbers of T790M mutations have been poor (33). A phase II study of afatinib combined with cetuximab has however shown promising results, controlling disease in all 22 patients enrolled with 36% showing partial responses (50). Toxicity has been a problem with this combination however. Finally, third generation mutation-selective EGFR TKIs such as CO-1868 have been developed that specifically inhibit the T790M mutant EGFR protein. CO-1868 is currently being tested in a phase I trial in patients with advanced EGFR-mutant NSCLC that have progressed on other EGFR TKIs, where it has shown preliminary evidence of efficacy in resistant disease and a favourable toxicity profile (51). AP26113 is another third generation EGFR TKI with T790M activity that is in phase I/II testing (52).

Targeted therapies already exist or are in development for other molecular pathways that may mediate acquired resistance, such as those involving HER2, BRAF, PIK3CA and MET. Combining such therapies with EGFR TKIs may provide an avenue for preventing or delaying acquired resistance. This has been applied in vitro where EGFR TKI resistance was reversed by co-administration of a MET inhibitor (53,54). Challenges remain in designing trials of tailored drug combinations in this setting and managing the potential toxicities that arise.

**ALK-positive NSCLC**

ALK was first detected as a fusion oncogene in lung adenocarcinoma in 2007 (55,56), although it had previously been identified as a fusion oncogene arising from a translocation between chromosome 2p and 5q in a subset of anaplastic large cell lymphomas (57). In the context of NSCLC the most frequent ALK gene rearrangement arises due to a short inversion in chromosome 2p where the ALK gene is fused with the echinoderm microtubule-associated protein-like 4 gene (EML4). The aberrant fusion protein EML4-ALK promotes cell growth, and is sufficient to transform cells into a malignant phenotype in vitro (55). ALK-positive cells seem to rely almost exclusively on the fusion protein to drive cell growth and survival, a concept termed ‘oncogene addiction’ that also applies to EGFR-mutant NSCLC (58). In this context, inhibition of oncogene function in EML4-ALK addicted tumours should result in growth arrest and cell death, and this was observed in animal models using small molecule kinase inhibitors targeting ALK (59,60).

Although developed originally as a small molecule inhibitor of the oncogene c-MET, crizotinib was also found to inhibit the ALK kinase (61), and was already in phase I trials when ALK was discovered to play a role in lung cancer. A reliable diagnostic method was also developed to detect ALK fusions in archival lung tissue using fluorescence in situ hybridisation (FISH) with break-apart probes. This enabled patients with advanced ALK-positive lung cancer to be enrolled rapidly into a phase I trial of crizotinib, where an impressive response rate of 60% was demonstrated (62,63).
Most of these patients had received prior chemotherapy. A subsequent report with more mature data compared the overall survival of patients who received crizotinib in the phase I study to ALK-positive patients that were not enrolled and also ALK negative patients. Although not a randomised comparison, use of crizotinib was associated with improved survival compared to historical cohorts (64). It was also noted that the presence of an ALK fusion was not prognostic for survival in the absence of crizotinib.

Of the 1,500 patients screened for ALK fusions in the phase I study, only 5% were positive (62). In a similar fashion to EGFR mutations, some clinicopathologic characteristics predict a higher likelihood of ALK positivity, including young age, lack of smoking history and adenocarcinoma with solid, acinar or signet-ring histologic patterns. In an unselected population with NSCLC the frequency of ALK positivity is approximately 4% (62,65-68). ALK fusions are only very rarely found in lung cancers that have mutations in other oncogenes such as EGFR or KRAS (67).

Crizotinib has since been compared to standard second line chemotherapy in a multi-centre phase III randomised controlled trial in 342 patients with advanced ALK-positive lung cancer that had progressed after first line chemotherapy (69). Almost all of the patients in the standard arm received pemetrexed or docetaxel. The study was clearly positive for the primary endpoint with a median progression free survival of 7.7 months in the crizotinib arm and 3.0 months in the chemotherapy arm, shown in Figure 1 (HR 0.49, 95% CI: 0.37-0.64, P<0.0001) (69). Crizotinib also improved baseline symptoms and delayed subsequent worsening to a greater degree than chemotherapy in quality of life analyses. There was no overall survival benefit seen, most likely because at least 64% of patients in the chemotherapy arm subsequently received crizotinib. A phase III trial of crizotinib as first line treatment for ALK-positive lung cancer has recently completed accrual. Crizotinib has received regulatory approval in Europe and the United States. It is recommended by international guidelines that testing for the presence of an ALK fusion be considered for all patients with adenocarcinoma of the lung (23,70).

Crizotinib and ALK positive lung cancer is a unique example of the promise of targeted therapy. It has taken only 4 years from the original discovery of the EML4-ALK fusion in lung cancer to the FDA approval of crizotinib and its widespread clinical use for this indication.

Acquired resistance to crizotinib

With time, resistance to ALK inhibition with crizotinib is inevitable. The median progression free survival in the largest study of crizotinib was 7.7 months (69). In a similar fashion to EGFR TKIs, biopsy of progressing lesions in patients treated with crizotinib has provided insight into resistance mechanisms (71-74). Mutations in the ALK gene appear to mediate resistance in around one third of patients, although there is a much wider spectrum of mutations than that seen in EGFR-mutant lung cancer where T790M dominates as discussed previously. Activation of alternate signalling pathways involving EGFR and c-KIT (an oncogene targeted by imatinib) may also play a role in mediating resistance (71). In vitro studies suggest that targeting the alternative pathway with existing agents such as gefitinib in the case of EGFR or imatinib for c-KIT may reverse resistance to crizotinib (71). The mechanism of crizotinib resistance in ALK positive tumours currently remains unknown in around one third of cases (75). Of concern, multiple different resistance mechanisms may occur simultaneously in the same patient (71).

Next generation ALK inhibitors with different properties to crizotinib have been developed to have greater potency and potentially target resistance mutations. One agent CH5424802, has been tested in phase I and phase II trials in crizotinib naïve ALK-positive NSCLC, and is notable for the 93% overall response rate seen (76). Another agent LDK378 has shown efficacy in a phase I trial which included both
crizotinib resistant and naïve ALK-positive NSCLC (77), with a response rate of 70%. LDK378 also appeared effective in the presence of resistant ALK mutations.

**KRAS-mutant NSCLC**

KRAS mutations occur in around 30% of NSCLC (73), making them the most common driver mutation seen in an unselected population. Adenocarcinomas make up the majority of NSCLC with KRAS mutations (78), and there is a positive association with smoking history (79). KRAS mutations may predict a lack of benefit from EGFR TKIs in patient with wild-type EGFR, but data have been conflicting (80-82). Despite much research, it has not proved possible to directly target KRAS, although recent progress has been made (83). Alternative strategies have involved targeting the down stream signalling pathway of KRAS (84), a role fulfilled by the MEK inhibitor selumetinib (85). In a randomised phase II trial of second line therapy in KRAS-mutant advanced NSCLC, selumetinib plus docetaxel was superior to docetaxel in response rate and progression free survival (86). Other approaches to targeting KRAS-mutant NSCLC in early phase trials include PIK3CA/mTOR/AKT pathway inhibitors in combination with MEK inhibitors to effectively block downstream KRAS signalling (87).

**Other oncogenes in NSCLC**

With the advent of next generation sequencing technology, driver oncogenes beyond EGFR, ALK and KRAS have been characterised in NSCLC, often at frequencies of less than 5% (88). As targeted therapies already exist for several of these altered genes and are in use in other cancer types, there is currently a focus on identifying lung cancer patients with these alterations and matching them to appropriate therapies within early phase trials (89). There are clear differences between squamous cell and adenocarcinoma histologies in terms of driver oncogenes (9,90), so these will be discussed separately. The pattern and frequency of alterations are summarised in Figure 2.

**Adenocarcinomas**

**ROS1 translocation**

Fusion genes involving the receptor tyrosine kinase ROS1 have been found in 1-2% of NSCLC typically in never or light smokers with adenocarcinoma (91,92). This fusion is notable as it appears sensitive to inhibition with crizotinib (91,93), and defines a molecular subclass of lung cancers with clinical similarity to ALK-positive cancers.

**MET amplification**

MET is the gene for the hepatocyte growth factor receptor (HGFR). Activation of MET signalling is sufficient to transform cells to a malignant phenotype, and has effects on the cell cycle and survival. NSCLC cells commonly overexpress MET, and MET amplification is a defined pathway of resistance to EGFR TKIs (40-42,45). The monoclonal antibody onartuzumab (MetMAb) blocks binding of HGF to the MET receptor. It was combined with erlotinib in a randomised phase II trial in advanced NSCLC after failure of prior therapy. In patients with MET overexpression, combination therapy significantly prolonged overall survival from 4.6 to 12.6 months (HR 0.37, 95% CI: 0.2-0.71, P=0.002) compared to erlotinib alone. Tivantinib, a small molecule MET inhibitor was tested in a phase III trial in combination with erlotinib, but the study was closed early for futility (Press Release, ArQule Inc. and Daiichi Sankyo Co.).

**BRAF mutations**

BRAF is a well characterised driver mutation in metastatic melanoma, where it is treated with oral BRAF inhibitors such as vemurafenib or dabrafenib. A phase II trial of dabrafenib in BRAF mutant NSCLC is ongoing, with 7 out of the first 17 patients on trial demonstrating a partial response (94). The frequency of BRAF mutation in NSCLC is 1-5% (88,95,96), and appears to be at least equally as common in current or former smokers as non-smokers. The classic sensitising V600E mutation was only found in 50% of the BRAF mutant lung cancers, which may limit the use of currently available BRAF inhibitors (95).

**HER2 amplification and mutations**

HER2 amplification or mutation is known to exist in some lung cancers with a frequency of around 3% (97). Attempts at treating HER2 amplified NSCLC with the monoclonal anti-HER2 antibody trastuzumab were unsuccessful (98). HER2 mutation in exon 20 is a more promising molecular subgroup, and there exist several small molecule inhibitors of the HER2 tyrosine kinase such as afatinib or dacomitinib (99). There have been early reports of some responses to these drugs in patients with HER2 mutations (100), and trials are ongoing.

**RET translocations**

Fusions involving the receptor tyrosine kinase RET gene
have recently been identified in lung adenocarcinomas, and in vitro studies have confirmed the oncogenic potential of at least some of the identified fusions (101). The prevalence of RET rearrangements is estimated at between 1-2%, being higher in never or light smokers (92,101). The RET kinase inhibitor vandetanib (102) is a well established treatment for medullary thyroid carcinoma and may be a treatment option for RET positive adenocarcinoma of the lung.

**PIK3CA mutation**

*PIK3CA* is a known oncogene central to the phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K) pathway that is deregulated in multiple cancer types (103). *PIK3CA* has been found altered in 1-2% of lung adenocarcinomas, and may co-exist with other mutant oncogenes (104-106). There is considerable effort to target this gene in other cancer types, and early phase trials are underway with *PIK3CA* targeted therapy for lung cancer both as monotherapy and in combination with other targeted agents and chemotherapy.

**Squamous cell carcinomas**

Recent progress has identified three potential therapeutic targets in squamous cell carcinoma of the lung. The fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1) is one such target, which is amplified in 21-22% of squamous cell carcinomas in recent studies (107,108). These studies also showed that FGFR1 amplified cells underwent apoptosis when treated with a small molecule FGFR1 inhibitor, and FGFR1 amplified tumours in mice shrank with inhibitor therapy, suggesting that FGFR1 is an important driver in...
some squamous cell carcinomas. Multiple small molecule inhibitors of FGFR1 are in development and entering early phase trials, with promising preliminary activity (109).

Mutations in the receptor tyrosine kinase DDR2 gene have been seen in 2% of squamous cell carcinomas of the lung (9,110). TKIs widely used in treating chronic myeloid leukaemia such as dasatinib also have activity against DDR2. Dasatinib has produced partial responses in some squamous NSCLC patients in phase I trials (111,112). In one of the patients with a response, sequencing of a tumour biopsy revealed a DDR2 mutation (110). Phase II trials of dasatinib specifically in squamous cell carcinoma of the lung are underway.

Alterations in genes playing a role in the PI3K pathway are present in 30–50% of squamous cell carcinomas, mostly comprising PIK3CA amplification and mutation, and deletion of the tumour suppressor gene PTEN (9,106). This pathway is important to maintaining cell survival and promoting growth (103), but the relationship between alterations in this pathway and response to inhibitors is complex. Phase I trials of PIK3CA inhibitors are underway in squamous NSCLC.

Targeting the tumour microenvironment

Angiogenesis in lung cancer

Angiogenesis has emerged as a broadly available target in multiple cancer types, as any sizeable tumour requires the ability to form a new blood supply to survive (113,114). The most well studied pathway mediating angiogenesis involves the vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) family of ligands and associated receptors which have intracellular tyrosine kinase domains that mediate downstream signalling (115). Targeting VEGF receptor tyrosine kinase signalling using small molecule inhibitors has generally proven unsuccessful, despite multiple agents having been tested in phase III trials (116-122). The VEGF and FGF receptor inhibitor nintedanib combined with chemotherapy has shown a marginal benefit of less than one month in progression free survival over chemotherapy alone, as second line treatment of advanced NSCLC in two phase III trials (123,124).

Bevacizumab is the most widely used anti-angiogenic agent in routine practice. It is a recombinant humanised monoclonal antibody that binds to VEGF, specifically the VEGF-A isoform, and prevents activation of the VEGF receptor (125). The Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group E4599 trial was performed in 878 patients with advanced NSCLC, and compared bevacizumab plus chemotherapy with carboplatin and paclitaxel to chemotherapy alone (126). Bevacizumab was continued as maintenance therapy until progression after 6 cycles of chemotherapy. Median overall survival was superior with bevacizumab at 12.3 versus 10.3 months (HR 0.79, 95% CI: 0.67-0.92; P=0.003). Progression free survival and response rate were also superior with bevacizumab in a second phase III trial AVAiL, although overall survival was no different (127). Toxicities of bevacizumab include arterial thromboembolism, hypertension, augmented chemotherapy-related haematological toxicity and bleeding (126). Due to the higher risk of significant haemoptysis, bevacizumab should not be used for squamous cell histology. Bevacizumab has not had widespread uptake as standard first line therapy outside of the United States due to concerns about toxicity, cost and the lack of a biomarker predictive of benefit.

Immunotherapy

Recent advances in tumour immunology have revealed that the immune system plays an important role in controlling malignant growth, and shapes the characteristics of the tumour that eventually manifests clinically (128). Harnessing the immune system as a therapeutic modality has already shown success in advanced melanoma (129) and prostate cancer (130). Although traditionally not considered to be an immunogenic tumour type, there is evidence that markers of a host immune response to lung cancer have a significant prognostic impact in both the adjuvant setting and advanced disease (131-134). Enhancing the immune response may therefore represent a rational therapeutic target. Immunotherapy in lung cancer consists primarily of two approaches: vaccines derived from lung cancer cell lines or tumour associated antigens, and immuno-stimulatory checkpoint antibodies.

Vaccines

Several vaccines have shown promising results in phase II trials, and are currently being evaluated in randomised phase III trials. The largest trials will be discussed here.

Belagenpumatucel-L is an irradiated whole cell product consisting of multiple lung cancer cell lines reflecting adenocarcinoma, large cell carcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma histologies together with an immuno-adjuvant (135). A small single arm phase II trial conducted in a mixed population of early stage and advanced lung cancer demonstrated...
radiological responses in 15% of patients with measurable disease and a positive correlation between prolonged overall survival and higher vaccine dose (135). Belagenpumatucel-L is being further evaluated in a phase III trial recruiting patients with stage III-IV disease that is stable or responding after first line therapy.

Other vaccines consist of antigens expressed exclusively or predominantly in lung cancer cells. Melanoma-associated antigen-A3 (MAGE-A3) is expressed in 35% of NSCLC (136), and has been prepared as a mono-antigenic vaccine. This was tested in a randomised placebo-controlled phase II trial following resection of stage I-II NSCLC showing cellular expression of MAGE-A3 (137). Following surgery, the disease free survival and overall survival were no different between vaccine and placebo groups, but there were numerically fewer recurrences in the vaccine group after a median of 44 months post surgery (35% versus 43% in placebo group). 2,270 patients have been recruited to a phase III trial of the MAGE-A3 vaccine, with results awaited.

MUC-1 is an epithelial cell protein that is differentially glycosylated in malignant cells (138) and overexpressed in NSCLC (139,140). The BLP25 vaccine contains the MUC-1 peptide and an immuno-adjuvant encased in a liposomal delivery system (141). In a phase III randomised trial comparing BLP25 to placebo after concurrent or sequential chemoradiotherapy for stage III NSCLC, patients who had received concurrent treatment showed a median overall survival of 30.8 months compared to 20.6 months with placebo (HR 0.78, 95% CI: 0.64-0.95; P=0.016) (142). BLP25 also prolonged survival in a phase II study in advanced NSCLC compared to best supportive care but this was not statistically significant (141). TG4010 is an alternative approach to MUC-1 vaccination, incorporating an attenuated but replication competent vaccinia virus that encodes for the MUC-1 protein and interleukin-2 (143). In a randomised phase II study, cisplatin and gemcitabine plus TG4010 was compared to cisplatin and gemcitabine alone in 148 patients with advanced NSCLC (144). Progression free survival at 6 months was 43% with the vaccine versus 35% without, but this difference was not statistically significant. Further studies with BLP25 and TG4010 are awaited.

**Immune checkpoint blockade**

Immune checkpoints refer to the molecular mechanisms that control T-cell responses to foreign antigens. Part of the immune checkpoint system encompasses stimulatory or suppressive co-receptors that modulate the interaction of the T-cell receptor (TCR) with human leukocyte antigen (HLA) expressed on the target cell. Two such receptors have emerged as important therapeutic targets in cancer. The cytotoxic T-lymphocyte antigen 4 (CTLA-4) receptor is expressed on T-cells following activation by antigen, and serves to dampen the T-cell response to promote self-tolerance and prevent autoimmune activation. Programmed cell death protein 1 (PD1) is also expressed on T-cells and similarly provides a mechanism for down-regulating the T-cell response if the ligand (programmed cell death 1 ligand 1 or PD-L1, also known as B7) is encountered. Preventing T-cell suppression at the tumour-immune interface by disrupting immunosuppressive signals forms a promising therapeutic strategy for advanced lung cancer that may also extend to adjuvant treatment.

The toxicities of the various immune checkpoint antibodies are similar and relate to autoimmune phenomena such as colitis, skin rash, pneumonitis and endocrinopathies. As these do not overlap with chemotherapy toxicity, combining these treatments with chemotherapy is a feasible approach. Ipilimumab is a humanised IgG1 anti-CTLA-4 receptor antibody, and is already an established therapy for advanced melanoma (129). A randomised placebo controlled trial was conducted comparing ipilimumab plus carboplatin and paclitaxel chemotherapy to placebo plus chemotherapy in 204 patients with advanced NSCLC (145). Ipilimumab was given in two schedules in the treatment arms: concurrent treatment starting after the first cycle of chemotherapy and phased treatment starting after two cycles of chemotherapy. In light of experience with melanoma that ipilimumab may cause an initial worsening in the radiological appearance of lesions used to assess progression free survival, modified immune-related radiological response criteria were used (146). The study was positive for the primary endpoint of immune-related progression free survival, which was 5.7 months in the phased treatment group compared to 4.6 months in the control group (HR 0.72, P=0.05). Efficacy was most pronounced in patients with squamous cell histology. A similar randomised phase II trial was carried out in 130 patients with extensive stage small cell lung cancer, and showed a trend towards improvement in immune-related progression free survival for the phased regimen in combination with chemotherapy compared to chemotherapy alone (6.4 versus 5.3 months; HR 0.64; 95% CI: 0.4-1.02; P=0.03) (147). Further trials for squamous cell lung cancer and small cell lung cancer are planned.
Multiple tumour types express the PD-L1 ligand on their cell surface, highlighting the role of the PD-1 receptor in suppressing anti-tumour T-cell responses (148). Monoclonal antibodies to both PD-1 and PD-L1 have been tested in several phase I trials that enrolled considerable numbers of patients with NSCLC (148,149). In one such trial the anti-PD-1 antibody nivolumab (formerly known as BMS-936558/MDX-1106) produced an unprecedented response rate of 18% amongst 129 NSCLC patients that were heavily pre-treated, with half of these patients having received three or more previous lines of therapy (148). In addition, the anti-PD-L1 antibody BMS-936559 produced response rates of 10% in a phase I trial that included 49 patients with NSCLC (149). The benefit was evident for both squamous cell carcinomas and adenocarcinomas. From these two trials there is early evidence that expression of the PD-L1 ligand in the tumour microenvironment, which can be evaluated with immunohistochemistry, may predict benefit from anti-PD-1/PD-L1 therapies. In addition to nivolumab, lambrolizumab is another anti-PD-1 antibody that has shown efficacy in melanoma and is being evaluated in lung cancer. Upcoming trials involving nivolumab and lambrolizumab are shown in Table 2.

### Conclusions

The last ten years have seen a revolution in the way that lung cancer is conceptualised and treated, born out by advances in genomics, cell biology and drug development technologies. The same advances that facilitated this revolution will continue to provide a roadmap for ongoing improvements by identifying new targets and defining the mechanisms of treatment failure and resistance. The transition of crizotinib from an investigational compound to an approved therapy in a mere 4 years also provides hope that there will be a rapid expansion in therapeutic options available to patients in the near feature. Similarly, immunotherapy represents an entirely new class of agents with a promising efficacy and toxicity profile. With the arrival of targeted therapy come multiple challenges however. The development of targeted therapies is often at odds with the traditional clinical trial structure required by regulatory authorities, where phase III trials illustrating an overall survival benefit are considered the gold standard. In addition, targeted therapies carry high costs to the patient or funding agency, and the long term economic viability of the current drug development cycle is uncertain. Finally, it is still the case that the majority of patients with advanced lung cancer have no targeted therapy available to them at the current time, either due to a lack of known targets in their tumour or poor access to novel agents. Addressing both these issues will remain a priority if the successes of the past decade are to be maintained.

### Acknowledgements

**Disclosure:** Brett Hughes has served on Advisory Boards for Roche, Pfizer and Boehringer Ingelheim. Benjamin Solomon has served on Advisory Boards for Roche, Pfizer, Novartis, Astra Zeneca, Eli Lilly, Clovis Oncology and Boehringer Ingelheim.

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Lung Cancer

Lung Cancer

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Activation of apoptosis (programmed cell death) is a highly efficient means of tumour suppression frequently hijacked in lung cancer, and is a major goal of cancer drug therapy. When this can be achieved in the clinic, it is associated with durable disease control. Targeting the core apoptosis pathway has been a research goal since its initial discovery, and outstanding research endeavours have been translated into discovery of a new class of potent, targeted “apoptotic agents”. Despite this, early phase II clinical trials have not met with initial expectations. This review addresses the challenges and significant potential, in the light of recent discoveries, for personalising therapy with apoptotic agents as a basis for improving outcomes in lung cancer.

Apoptosis: a primer

The core apoptosis pathway constitutes a genetically hardwired, and highly regulated mechanism for ensuring cellular demise. It plays a critical role in development, but is hijacked by cancer cells, as an essential transforming process during tumor evolution (1). Apoptotic cell death involves three key events; firstly, an initiation phase engaged by a stimulus such as cellular damage, stress, or inhibition of critical growth factor pathways. Secondly, a commitment phase in which an irreversible decision to initiate apoptosis is made. Mitochondria play a critical role in this phase. Thirdly, the execution phase involving cellular demise. Much is understood regarding the regulation of the apoptotic pathways, in particular, the interplay of the BCL2 proteins which orchestrate the signalling of these first and second phases.

The BCL2 family are composed of pro- and antiapoptotic members which physically interact to govern the initiation of apoptosis (2-4). This event is regulated by the oligomerisation of multidomain proapoptotic BCL2 proteins BAK and BAX, which constitutively reside in the outer mitochondrial membrane and/or cytoplasm respectively (2,5,6). The trigger for oligomerisation is the BH3-only domain protein sub-family (which comprises at least 8 proteins—BID, BIM, PUMA, BAD, NOXA, BFM, BNIP3, and HRK). BH3 proteins are activated either by transcriptional upregulation e.g., Death receptor triggered cleavage of BID, P53 driven upregulation of NOXA/PUMA or post-translational modification of BIM by phosphorylation). These proteins then cause apoptosis by either directly triggering oligomerisation of BAX/BAK (BID,BIM,PUMA) or releasing BAX/BAK from members of the prosurvival BCL2 family (BCLX, BCL2, BCLW, MCL1, A1) (7-12). The propensity of BAX/BAK to oligomerise is governed by the ratio of prosurvival to proapoptotic proteins. Cancer cells appear to constitutively activate BH3 proteins (13-15). In order to protect against apoptosis, selection for amplification of prosurvival BCL2 family proteins BCLX and MCL1 occurs as a common event (16). Amplification is associated with dependency which may be therapeutically tractable as discussed further on.

BAX/BAK oligomerisation causes permeabilisation of the outer mitochondrial membrane, releasing multiple pro-apoptotic factors into the cytosol (17-20). This is the event which constitutes irreversible commitment to death—the beginning of the end for the cancer cell. Cellular demolition is executed by the caspases, a family of zymogens which are post-translationally modified leading to their activation (21,22).

Apoptosis and therapeutic outcomes in lung cancer

In recent years, it has become clear, that to achieve
effective outcomes in cancer therapy, induction of apoptosis appears to be a critical requirement. This is borne out in the dramatic radiological regressions associated with inhibition of non-squamous non-small cell lung cancer, harbouring either somatic mutations of the epidermal growth factor receptor (23,24) or an anaplastic lymphoma kinase fusion protein (EML4-ALK) (25-27). These so-called “driver oncogenes” constitutively activate, and lead to dependency on, growth factor signalling pathways involving phosphoinoside 3 kinase/AKT/mTOR and mitogen activated protein kinase (MAPK) axes (28). As a consequence, these pathways constitutively phosphorylate and suppress the BH3 only protein BIM. Following the inhibition of mutated receptor EGFR or ALK receptor tyrosine kinases, BIM is unleashed, leading to activation of BAX/BAK and apoptosis (29-33). Indeed, BIM expression is a prerequisite for clinical activity (34,35). This new paradigm involving targeting of driver oncogene addiction has shown that the mitochondrial apoptosis pathway is fully functional in NSCLC, and that provided a driver oncogene dependency can be identified, mitochondrial apoptosis can be efficiently activated leading to significant improvement in clinical outcome. With the most comprehensive genomic landscape studies to date having recently defined the extent of common somatic mutations in lung cancer (36-38), it is likely that many more clinically tractable oncogene addictions will be validated as effective targets for inducing apoptosis efficiently.

**Personalising anti-apoptotic BCL2 inhibition**

Prosurvival BCL2 proteins suppress BAX/BAK activation by sequestering both of these multidomain proteins and/or BH3 only proteins (2). The first and most specific inhibitor of BCL2/X/W was ABT-263 (Abbott) (39). Phase II studies were conducted in small cell lung cancer, based on preclinical evidence of addiction to BCL2. However, limited efficacy was observed (40). Why was this? MCL1 is a widely overexpressed prosurvival protein; indeed it is one of the most commonly amplified genes in cancer (16). MCL1 efficiently overcomes the proapoptotic effects of ABT263 and may play a role in clinical drug resistance (41-45). Importantly, the prosurvival BCL2 family addiction observed in cell lines and xenografts was not borne out in heterotransplants nor patients, suggesting that SCLC may not be “predominantly BCL2/BCLX” addicted in the clinical setting. Furthermore, it is clear in SCLC that the tumour microenvironment could significantly impact cancer cell biology by significantly attenuating apoptotic susceptibility (46,47), something which has been modelled preclinically in NSCLC and mesothelioma (48,49). Nevertheless, patient subgroup analysis showed that in patients with high circulating Pro-GRP, encoded by a gene neighbouring BCL-2 and co-amplified in SCLCs with BCL2 amplification, there was a greater response rate (40). This suggests, that in the context of BCL2 amplified SCLC, AB263 may exhibit single agent activity consistent with a degree of sensitivity. This genetic event exists only in a proportion of patients with SCLC, implicating a need to select patients harbouring BCL-2 amplification. Indeed, in common with other modes of targeted therapy, treating the right target population is likely to be a critical requirement for achieving clinically relevant activity when considered as single agents.

Recent analysis of genome-wide somatic copy number variations in cancer has revealed BCLX encoded by BCL2L2 and MCL-1, as the most frequently amplified genes in the cancer genome, and are encoded at 1q21.2 and 20q21 respectively (16). Where there is evidence of amplification, this appears to be associated with addiction, at least at the preclinical level. A proportion of NSCLCs harbour amplification at these loci, suggesting that addiction could be exploited. One novel approach has been recently reported. A search for transcriptional repressors of MCL1 (which has an exceedingly short protein half-life of around 30 minutes) identified anthracyclines as potent MCL-1 inhibitors (50). These compounds owe their proapoptotic activity to the transcriptional repression of MCL1, leading to its rapid downregulation at protein level. In the context of 1q21.2 amplification, this is associated with induction of apoptosis. This raises the intriguing question as to whether or not anthracyclines may exhibit particularly high activity in the context of 1q21.2 amplification in NSCLC, and deserved to be addressed in a clinical trial. High dose epirubicin has an associated response rate of around 25%, and 1q21.2 amplification occurs in around 25% of patients (36,51). Whether the majority of responders to epirubicin were also 1q21.2 amplified, is as yet, unknown.

Taken together, it appears that addiction to prosurvival BCL2 family proteins is restricted to subsets of lung cancers. These subsets may be identifiable through detection of somatic mutations involving amplification. Apoptotic agents targeting prosurvival BCL2 proteins are, when considered as monotherapy, are likely to be much like any other targeted agent, in that they may only exhibit useful efficacy in restricted subsets of cancers, perhaps
identifiable through individual copy number variations.

**Death receptors**

The apoptosis pathway can be directly activated through the ligation of cell surface receptors related to the tumour necrosis factor superfamily which include tumour necrosis factor related apoptosis inducing ligand (TRAIL) receptors (52,53). A direct consequence of receptor oligomerisation is the assembly of a cell surface signalling module (the death inducing signalling complex or DISC), which comprises homotypic domain interactions between receptor (TRAIL receptor 1 or 2), an adaptor (FADD), and an apical caspase (8 or 10). The proapoptotic activity of TRAIL ligands is selective for cancer versus normal cells (54). Recently, it has been shown that in vivo, disruption of tumour endothelial vasculature by TRAIL causes tumour regression (55). Agonistic antibody based activation of receptors for TRAIL have been explored in a series of recent phase II clinical trials in non-small cell lung cancer (56,57). Preclinical studies demonstrated promising synergy when combined with chemotherapy and other targeted agents (58-61). Unfortunately, predicted improvement in efficacy was not confirmed in unselected patients (62). Despite this, it has been found that TRAIL monotherapy is potentially very active in a small population of patients with NSCLC. For example, one patient with chemorefractory NSCLC exhibited a confirmed response lasting 96 weeks following the agonistic DR5 antibody (conotumumab, AMG-655) (63). This potentially reflects an underlying “hypersensitive” subgroup for which, there is at present, no validated predictive biomarker. TRAIL agonists are inhibited by the cellular FLICE like inhibitor protein (c-FLIP) which exhibits high expression in non-small cell lung cancer, and the ratio of FLIP to caspase 8 is a potential rheostat, regulating sensitivity to TRAIL receptor agonists. Similarly, O’glycosylation (64) and VDAC1 have been implicated as regulators of TRAIL sensitivity preclinically (65). What role these potential biomarkers have in vivo, if any, should be systematically investigated in future studies in order to maximize the likelihood of identifying a TRAIL receptor agonist sensitive population; something which clearly exists, albeit perhaps at low frequency.

**Smac’ing lung cancer**

During permeabilization of the mitochondrial outer membrane, one of the apoptogenic factors released is the second mitochondria derived activator of apoptosis (SMAC) (20). Since its discovery, SMAC was shown to target inhibitor of apoptosis proteins, which constitutively suppress caspase activation and therefore the execution phase of apoptosis. The conserved tetrapeptide motif AVPI in SMAC interacts with the BIR domain of caspase 3, blocking its activation. Structure based analysis of this interaction led to a rational drug discovery effort to create so-called smac mimetics (66,67). This class of pharmacology however was shown to uncover a programmed necrosis pathway (68,69). In an inflammatory microenvironment, cytokine activation of TNF receptors leads to the assembly of a so called type 1 complex, which is prosurvival, and signals to caspase 8 through NF kappa beta. This signalling is dependent upon bound cIAP1 and cIAP2. SMAC or its mimetics interact with cIAP1/cIAP2 leading to their rapid ubiquitination and degradation. The consequence is the recruitment of TNF receptor with caspase 8 into complex II, comprising RIP kinase which leads to necrotic death of the cell. This death signalling is driven by TNF receptor activation; as such, the conversion of a survival pathway, to a death signalling pathway following IAP degradation, effectively exploits the tumour microenvironment and so constitute a “death switch”.

SMAC mimetics are at the earliest stage of development with respect to “apoptotic agents” and are currently under phase 1 evaluation in the clinic (70). At present, there are, as yet no defined molecular biomarkers of clinical sensitivity, however it is clear from preclinical studies that autocrine TNF-alpha activation facilitates the synergistic interaction between SMAC mimetic and chemotherapy (71). Accordingly, there is an expectation that this class of agent might be most effective in highly inflammatory cancers.

**Systematic approaches for personalising apoptotic agents**

An initiative entitled the genomics of drug sensitivity established as a collaboration between the Wellcome Sanger Institute in the UK and Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard, in the USA, provides a potentially high throughput platform for identifying genetic biomarkers of sensitivity and/or resistance, that might aid clinical development of apoptotic agents (72,73). Using over 1,000 genetically defined cell lines, a candidate drug is screened for sensitivity. The correlation between sensitivity measured by IC50 and genetic mutations are determined. As such,
this provides a remarkably powerful tool for hypothesis generation, particularly around hitherto unanticipated but statistically robust drug-gene associations. For example, for ABT-263, the CML driver oncogene bcr-abl is highly correlated with in vitro activity (72).

**Summary**

Efficient induction of apoptosis is a prerequisite for effective disease control in the management of lung cancer, exemplified by receptor tyrosine kinase inhibitor efficacy in EGFR and EML4-ALK mutated NSCLC. Decades after the discovery of the core apoptosis signalling pathways, apoptotic agents have finally been developed with potent on-target activity. Population based genetic heterogeneity of lung cancer is now an accepted reality that has underpinned successful stratified therapy. Despite this, development of apoptotic agents has been predominantly conducted in unselected populations. The challenge moving forward will be understand how best to target these drugs using molecular biomarkers, so as to maximize patient benefit in selected subgroups.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure:* The author declares no conflicts of interest.

**References**


Kinase inhibitors have limited benefit in cancer treatment because of a rebound effect, as exemplified by the inhibition of mitogen-activated protein-extracellular signal-regulated kinase (MEK) in triple-negative breast cancer cells. MEK inhibition causes acute loss of extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK), resulting in rapid c-Myc degradation, which induces the expression and activation of several receptor tyrosine kinases (RTKs) (1) (Figure 1). The transduction of signals from activated RTKs has been termed “signalability”. This signalability is markedly suppressed in BRAF^{V600E} melanomas (2), which have high levels of ERK-dependent feedback and markedly decreased sensitivity to extracellular ligands. BRAF-driven tumors are relatively insensitive to secreted growth factors because of the inability of ligands to induce signaling. However, ERK inhibition reduces the ERK-dependent feedback, growth factors can signal, and the antitumor effects of the inhibitor are attenuated. Thus, the signaling network is radically changed and reactivated as...
This dynamic reprogramming of signalability was also described in triple-negative breast cancers. MEK inhibition with AZD6244 increased RTK expression and downstream survival signaling, coinciding with the reactivation of RAF-MEK-ERK signaling. AZD6244 induces expression of platelet-derived growth factor receptor beta (PDGFRb), VEGFR2, HER3, AXL and DDR1 (Figure 1). Sorafenib inhibits PDGFRα/β, VEGFR2, DDR1/2, BRAF and RAF (1), and the combination of AZD6244 with sorafenib caused a synthetic lethal effect. This kinase rewiring has also been observed in EGFR-mutant non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) resistant to erlotinib, where AXL was overexpressed in 20% of cases. The tumor growth was reverted with the addition of an AXL inhibitor to erlotinib (5).

Induction of signalability when ERK-dependent feedback is relieved requires the presence of RTKs. Multiple ligands contribute to ERK rebound in melanomas exposed to BRAF inhibitors, including EGF, hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), NRG and FGF, which antagonized vemurafenib sensitivity in several BRAF<sup>V600E</sup> melanomas tested (Figure 2).

An adaptation to inhibition of ERK signaling (2).

In fact, several reports have shown that ligands, particularly HGF, can cause resistance to RAF inhibitors (6,7). In contrast, other growth factors, such as PDGF and insulin growth factor (IGF), have a minimal effect and some, like transforming growth factor beta, accentuated vemurafenib-induced growth inhibition (2). BRAF<sup>V600E</sup> melanoma cells have high levels of pMEK and pERK and high levels of dual specificity phosphatase (DUSP) 6 and Sprouty (Spry) 2. After 24 hours of exposure to vemurafenib, DUSP6 and Spry2 levels were markedly diminished, leading to relief of ERK-dependent feedback and potentiating a permissive signaling environment. Tumor growth of melanoma-derived xenografts was abrogated with the combination of vemurafenib and either lapatinib or neratinib (2).

In order to understand how EGFR-driven tumors adapt to pathway inhibition and design more effective therapies, it is necessary to identify the pathways that can be reactivated in the patients. This will require comparison of pretreatment biopsies with biopsies obtained hours after treatment and the development of new technologies to determine which ligands are present and which pathways become reactivated. This can permit the rational
combination of therapies aimed at inhibiting adaptive resistance to the targeted therapy.

**ERK signaling**

ERK signaling plays an important role in regulating pleiotropic cellular functions. Activation of RTKs causes Ras to adopt an active, guanosine triphosphate (GTP)-bound conformation in which it induces the dimerization and activation of members of the RAF kinase family. Activated RAF phosphorylates and activates MEK1/2, which phosphorylate and activate ERK1/2, which in turn regulate cellular function by phosphorylating multiple substrates. A complex network of negative-feedback interactions limits the amplitude and duration of ERK signaling. Negative feedback is mediated directly by ERK-dependent inhibitory phosphorylation of components of the pathway, including EGFR, SOS and RAF. Importantly, ERK activation induces the expression of proteins that negatively regulate the pathway, including members of the Spry and DUSP families. BRAF-mutant colorectal cancers, which express greater levels of pEGFR than BRAF-mutant melanomas, are less sensitive to vemurafenib in spite of transient inhibition of pERK, since rapid ERK reactivation occurs through EGFR-mediated activation of Ras and CRAF. Interestingly, combined RAF and EGFR inhibition blocked reactivation of ERK signaling. Spry4 levels decreased after treatment with vemurafenib, coinciding with induction of pCRAF and pERK. Tumors with BRAF colorectal cancer cell lines were abrogated with the combination of vemurafenib and erlotinib. High pEGFR levels were observed in 60% of patients with colorectal cancer, who may benefit from combined RAF/EGFR or RAF/MEK inhibition (8). Similarly, in multiple BRAF**V600E** colon cancers, the inhibition of EGFR by cetuximab or gefitinib or erlotinib was strongly synergistic with BRAF inhibition both in vitro and in vivo. BRAF inhibition causes a rapid feedback activation of EGFR, supporting continued proliferation in the presence of BRAF inhibition (9).

In Kras-driven NSCLCs, ERK activity is negatively regulated by DUSP1, which can be abrogated by crosstalk with the Notch pathway. A significant proportion of patients with NSCLC have a hyperactivated Notch pathway, which is evidenced by higher levels of active g-secretase complex, increased levels of NICD (the activated form of Notch1), decreased Numb mRNA (a negative regulator of the Notch pathway), and increased HES1 protein (a downstream target of the Notch pathway). NSCLC patients with high HES1 expression had shorter overall survival. The Notch pathway regulates ERK phosphorylation by abrogating DUSP1 (10). These observations support the therapeutic potential of targeting g-secretase with MEK inhibitors in Kras-driven NSCLCs.

ERK activation is a common feature of tumors with RTK dysregulation stemming from EGFR, Kras or BRAF mutations. MEK inhibitors induced activation of phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K)-Akt in EGFR-mutant cancer models via loss of an inhibitory threonine phosphorilation in the conserved juxtamembrane domains of EGFR and HER2 (11). Phosphorylation of the threonine residue impairs EGFR activation through disruption of receptor dimerization. Recent findings suggest that direct ERK-mediated phosphorylation of EGFR T669 and HER2 T677 suppresses activation of ERBB3. Suppressing ERK with AZD6244 prevented the effects of EGFR T669A on ERBB3/PI3K/Akt signaling in an EGFR-mutant cancer cell line. These findings suggest that combining MEK inhibition with ERBB3 or PI3K inhibitors may be a valuable strategy. The combination of MEK inhibitors with ERBB3 antibodies would block feedback activation of Akt and induce synthetic lethality (Figure 3). Interestingly, in Kras-mutant cancers that initially respond to single-agent RAF and MEK inhibitors, chronic inhibition of this pathway may lead to persistent activation of EGFR or HER2 (12).

**Other feedback systems involving insulin growth factor receptor (IGFR) and mammalian target of rapamycin (mTOR)**

The PI3K, RAF/MEK/ERK and mTORC1 pathways transmit signals from RTKs to downstream effector networks regulating cell growth, metabolism, survival and proliferation. One of the first feedback mechanisms indicating a rewiring phenomenon was the inhibition of mTORC1, which relieves protosomal degradation of IRS1, leading to feedback upregulation of IRS1/PI3K/Akt, reducing the efficacy of mTORC1 inhibitors as single agents and prompting the use of combination therapies (13,14). Briefly, mTORC1 activation leads to PI3K and MAPK inhibition through a negative feedback loop stemming from S6K1, while treatment with mTORC1 inhibitors results in a hyperactive RTK/IRS1/PI3K pathway, increasing the signal toward the Ras-RAF1-MEK1/2-ERK pathway. Hence, the combination of MEK and mTORC1 inhibitors could induce synthetic lethality by attenuating the rebound effect (13).
mTOR is an intracellular serine threonine kinase involved in the control of translational initiation. PI3K/Akt-dependent phosphorylation signaling occurs through tuberin, the protein product of TSC1/TSC2 complex, which leads to activation of mTOR. mTOR phosphorylates S6 kinase, which phosphorylates the ribosomal protein S6. mTOR also phosphorylates eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4E-binding protein (4E-BP1). This causes 4E-BP1 to disassociate from the eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4E (eIF4E), allowing activation of protein translation. Hyperactivation of mTOR signaling frequently occurs in cancer in more than 70% of patients, making the targeting of mTOR an attractive anticancer therapy. Rapamycin, a naturally occurring allosteric inhibitor of mTORC1, and its analogs (rapalogs) are clinically approved for treatment of renal cell cancer, mantle cell lymphomas and pancreatic neuroendocrine tumors. However, the overall success of rapalog monotherapy is limited. In a feedback mechanism, rapamycin inhibits the function of mTOR, leading to the downregulation of S6 kinase and maintenance of the 4E-BP1 eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4E complex. The inhibition of mTOR leads to downregulation of pS6K and p4E-BP1, leading to a rebound of Akt, since the negative feedback loop is lost. This allows activation of IRS1 (15,16). IGF1 receptor inhibition could prevent rapamycin-induced Akt activation and sensitize tumor cells to inhibition of mTOR (16). Erlotinib also blocked the rapamycin-induced increase in Akt phosphorylation in lung cancer cell lines (15).

About 30% of cancers exhibit elevated eIF4E levels, which correlate with poor prognosis. eIF4E overexpression induces cell transformation by selectively augmenting translation of mRNAs referred to as eIF4E-sensitive mRNAs, which encode proliferation- and survival-promoting proteins (cyclins, c-MYC and Bcl-xL). Multiple factors can induce the expression of eIF4E in cancer cells, including gene amplification and transcriptional upregulation by c-MYC, and lead to an increase in eIF4E mRNA stability by HuR. HuR increases Musashi1 mRNA stability, and high Musashi1 expression is associated with Notch1 expression. Musashi1 represses the regulation of NUMB mRNA, a negative regulator of Notch (17). Resistance to BEZ235, a dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitor) can be acquired through amplification of eIF4E. A model has been proposed whereby an elevated eIF4E/4E-BP ratio renders tumors resistant not only to a TOR inhibitor but also to dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitors. These findings suggest that the eIF4E/4E-BP ratio could serve as a predictive marker for tailoring personalized treatment with TOR inhibitors (18).

PI3K and Akt inhibitors relieve negative feedback on ERBB receptors and other RTKs, leading to partial reactivation of PI3K/Akt signaling, MEK/ERK signaling, and other downstream pathways, potentially limiting the use of PI3K inhibitors as single agents. For example, receptor activation of PI3K-Akt causes Akt-dependent phosphorylation of FOXO proteins, which downregulate the expression of some of the receptors that are tightly coupled to PI3K, including HER3, IGF1R and IR. In addition, Akt activation leads to activation of TORC1 and S6K, which inhibits IRS1 expression, as mentioned above. Akt inhibitors will result in activation of FOXO-dependent transcription of receptors and, importantly, inhibition of S6K-dependent inhibition of signalability with resultant activation of multiple receptors. In fact, all drugs that inhibit components of dysregulated mitogenic signaling pathways would be expected to relieve feedback inhibition of other components of the signaling network. Combined inhibition of the oncoprotein and key pathways reactivated by inhibition of negative feedback would thus enhance antitumor activity. Akt inhibitors cause tumor regression when combined with low doses of HER kinase of HSP90 inhibitors, which prevent or attenuate induction of receptor

Figure 3 The combination of MEK inhibitors with ERBB3 antibodies blocks feedback activity of Akt in multiple cancer models (12).
phosphorylation (3). The combination of ganetespib, a HSP90 inhibitor, with BEZ235, a dual pan-PI3K/mTOR inhibitor, displayed significant efficacy in a Kras-mutant NSCLC xenograft model (19).

NSCLC cell lines harboring PI3K pathway alterations (RTK activation, PI3K mutation or amplification, or PTEN loss) are sensitive to the PI3K inhibitor GDC0941. Also, a dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitor, GDC0980, has shown even broader activity across cell lines and tumor xenografts. The combination of GDC0941 with paclitaxel, erlotinib, or a MEK inhibitor had greater effects on cell viability than PI3K inhibition alone (20). PIK3CA mutations and PTEN loss are predictors of sensitivity to PI3K inhibitors, as are FBXW7, which encodes a ubiquitin ligase that degrades mTOR, and GOLPH3, which is amplified in NSCLC and associated with mTOR inhibitor sensitivity. Tumor cells harboring deletions or mutations in FBXW7 are sensitive to rapamycin treatment (21). Rapamycin was significantly more effective against xenograft tumors expressing high levels of GOLPH3. GOLPH3, a Golgi oncoprotein, is a bona fide oncoprotein that is amplified in several types of cancers (22). In two EGFR-mutant NSCLC cell lines (HCC827 and H1975), GDC0941 showed greater than 100% tumor growth inhibition. The dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitor GDC0980 had greater antitumor activity than GDC0941 in models harboring Kras mutations or dual PIK3CA/Kras mutations (22). Intriguingly, treatment of inhibitor-sensitive cell lines with GDC0941 and GDC0980 resulted in increased expression of RTKs such as ERBB3 and MET; akin to the abovementioned examples (Figure 4). Co-targeting EGFR or downstream at the level of MEK could result in synergistic inhibition of cell growth, consistent with the hypothesis that such co-targeting may block PI3K inhibitor-induced pathway reactivation (Figure 4). It is particularly intriguing that the NSCLC cell line H1975 (16 copies of MYC) was very sensitive to GDC0941, which suggests that the biology of PI3K resistance may differ between breast cancer and NSCLC (20). In fact, a new rewiring mechanism of resistance to dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitors has been reported in breast cancer. Following PI3K-mTOR inhibition with BEZ235, increasing IRS1-dependent activation of JAK2/STAT5 and secretion of IL-8 was observed in several cell lines and primary breast tumors (Figure 5). Pharmacological inhibition of JAK2 abrogated this feedback loop and combined inhibition of PI3K/mTOR (with BEZ235) and JAK2 (with NVP-BSK805) synergistically reduced cancer cell number and tumor growth. The findings pave the way for co-targeting of the

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**Figure 4** Co-targeting EGFR or downstream at the level of MEK results in synergistic inhibition of cell growth in NSCLC cell lines treated with PI3K inhibitors or dual PI3K/mTOR inhibitors (20).

**Figure 5** In triple-negative breast cancer, PI3K/mTOR inhibition elicits a positive feedback loop by activating JAK2/STAT5. Inhibition of JAK2 abrogates this feedback and provides a rationale for combining inhibition of PI3K/mTOR and JAK2/STAT5 pathways (23).
PI3K/mTOR and JAK2/STAT5 pathways in triple-negative breast cancer (23).

Treatment with erlotinib increased the levels of EGFR/IGF1R heterodimer localized on cell membrane, activated IGF1R and its downstream signaling mediators, and stimulated mTOR-mediated de novo protein synthesis of EGFR and survivin in NSCLC cells. These data suggest that enhanced synthesis of survivin protein mediated by the IGF1R/EGFR heterodimer counteracts the antitumor action of erlotinib, suggesting the need for integrating IGF1R targeted agents with EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) for patients with NSCLC (24). Although this evidence is compelling, no trials have investigated this possibility. What is intriguing is that IGF1R targeted therapy has so far failed to give the expected results. Interestingly, the anti-IGF1R antibody figitumumab induced IGF1R/b-arrestin association, allowing b-arrestin1-dependent activation of ERK signaling. In consequence, the addition of an ERK1/2 inhibitor increased sensitivity to figitumumab (25). b-arrestin acts as an E3 ligase adaptor in response to IGF1R stimulation. After IGF binds to the tetrameric IGF1R, b-arrestin recruits Mdm2 to the receptor. Mdm2 ubiquitinates IGF1R, causing its internalization. Once internalized, IGF1R is degraded by the proteosome and b-arrestin mediates the activation of ERK from internalized signalosomes. ERK then translocates to the nucleus and activates transcription (26). In short, b-arrestin1 recruitment to IGF1R leads to ERK signaling activation and receptor downregulation. The combination of IGF1R targeting antibodies and MAPK inhibitors could be a new treatment strategy (25). Furthermore, Klotho inhibits the IGF1 pathway. Low Klotho expression has been found in breast cancer. Studies in breast cancer cells revealed increased activation of the FGF pathway following Klotho overexpression. Therefore, Klotho is an inhibitor of the IGF1 pathway and an activator of the FGF pathway in human breast cancer (27).

Adaptive resistance in NSCLC driven by EGFR mutations

EGFR mutant-driven NSCLC responds very well to EGFR TKIs such as erlotinib. However, the response rate is around 60% and progression-free survival around one year or less, and all patients will eventually relapse (28,29). There are thus intrinsic resistance mechanisms, at least for the 30-40% of patients who do not respond initially, which can be attributed to crosstalk with other signaling pathways. For responders, the limited progression-free survival indicates that adaptive mechanisms of resistance can develop. Our hypothesis is that responders have high expression levels of BIM and that attenuation of the ERK pathway caused by erlotinib can lead to an effect similar to that observed with BRAF inhibitors in melanomas driven by BRAF<sup>V600E</sup> mutations (Figure 2) or with MEK inhibitors in triple-negative breast cancers (Figure 1). The loss of ERK function can lead to the stimulation of several RTKs and ligands (Figure 6). It is thus absolutely vital to perform a rebiopsy several hours following erlotinib treatment in order to understand the dynamic changes that cancer cells can undergo. The experience acquired in breast cancers with MEK inhibitors and in melanoma with BRAF inhibitors can be reproducible in EGFR-mutant NSCLC responders. Understanding the phenomenon of adaptive resistance from the beginning can lead to combining EGFR TKIs with other inhibitors blocking other RTKs, which presumably will include ERBB3. The correct identification of adaptive resistance mechanisms will allow us to implement the correct combination of targeted therapies for a true synthetic lethal effect that will increase the currently limited progression-free survival.
times attained with EGFR TKIs alone.

Acknowledgements

Work in Dr Rosell’s laboratory is partly supported by a grant from La Caixa Foundation, which had no role in writing the manuscript or in the decision to publish.

Disclosure: This manuscript has not been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References


State of the art of radiotherapy

Pilar Garrido, Mª Eugenia Olmedo

Abstract: Locally advanced or stage III disease accounts for ~30% of patients with non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC), which means only in the United States, more than 50,000 new patients each year. Stage III is a very heterogeneous disease, the management of patients is complex and several conditions (performance status, weight loss, comorbidities, characteristics of nodal involvement or resectability) must be considered before selecting the best treatment, which in most cases is chemotherapy (CT) and radiotherapy (RT). In this article, we will review key changes in the management of unresectable stage III during the last decades. Also we will highlight some challenges and areas of active research.

Keywords: Stage III; chemoradiation; locally advanced disease; concomitant therapy

Combined treatment versus radiotherapy alone

Potentially curative treatment of unresectable stage III necessitates adequate locoregional control as well as control of the micrometastatic disease that is likely to be present in most patients. In the early 1990s, the standard of care for locally advanced disease was RT alone, led to a median survival time of less than 10 months and 3-year survival rates below 10%. In the early 1990s, a phase III trial conducted by the Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) group (1) showed a survival advantage using sequential therapy with CT and RT (Table 1). The trial randomized patients with unresectable stage III and medically inoperable stage II NSCLC to receive two cycles of cisplatin and vinblastine over 5 weeks followed by RT to 60 Gy versus RT alone. The response rate was 56% for patients receiving chemotherapy and radiation compared with 43% for patients receiving radiation therapy alone; median survival times were 13.7 versus 9.6 months, respectively (P=0.0066). More importantly, there was a 17% survival rate at 5 years in the combined-modality therapy arm versus a 7% rate in the radiation therapy alone arm, with few patients experiencing relapse after 2 to 3 years of follow-up. These results were duplicated in a separate phase III run by the US Intergroup study, reported by Sause et al. (2). Based on the radio sensitizer activity of most CT agent, particularly cisplatin and carboplatin, the concomitant administration of both modalities was also explored and compared with RT alone. Randomized data from Jeremic et al. (3,4) confirmed the clinical benefit of concurrent chemoradiotherapy compared with radiation alone by comparing hyperfractionated radiation therapy alone with hyperfractionated radiation therapy and different regimens of carboplatin/etoposide. The concurrent regimens significantly improved 3-year survival [23% vs. 6.6% (3), 23% vs. 9% (4)]. There was no significant reduction in the rate of distant metastasis with concurrent chemoradiation. Data reported by Shaake-Koning et al. (5) in a European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) three-arm trial evaluated 331 patients assigned to radiation alone (55 Gy), radiation with weekly cisplatin (30 mg/m<sup>2</sup>), or radiation with daily cisplatin (6 mg/m<sup>2</sup>). The addition of cisplatin to the thoracic radiation resulted in an improvement in overall survival compared with radiation alone. The 3-year survival rate for radiation alone was 2% compared with 13% for patients receiving radiation with weekly cisplatin and 16% for patients receiving radiation with daily cisplatin. In two-way comparisons, statistical...
significance was only achieved for the radiation and daily cisplatin arm (P=0.009). Although other trials have failed to show a survival advantage with concurrent chemoradiation therapy compared with radiation therapy alone, several meta-analyses, focused on adding platinum-containing chemotherapy either at systemic doses preceding or at low radiosensitizing dose concomitant with chest radiotherapy in patients with good performance and no significant weight loss, also showed a significantly improvement on the outcomes as compared with single modality chest radiotherapy with traditional dose and fractionation schedules (1.8-2.0 Gy per fraction per day to 60-70 Gy in 6-7 weeks). The first meta-analysis was published in 1995 (6). The patients treated with chemotherapy and radical radiotherapy experienced a 13% reduction in risk of death with an absolute survival benefit of 4% at 2 years. Studies in which radiotherapy and chemotherapy were given concurrently were specifically excluded from this analysis, so this benefit was observed for sequential chemoradiotherapy. In 2004, an individual patient data metaanalysis (7) was published comparing radiotherapy alone with concurrent chemoradiotherapy based on nine trials and 1,764 patients. It showed an absolute survival advantage of 4% at 2 years when combining radiation therapy with chemotherapy (HR 0.89; 95% CI, 0.81-0.98; P=0.02). Finally, the Cochrane review of 2004 (8) concluded that the addition of concurrent chemotherapy to radical radiation therapy reduced the risk of death at 2 years by 7% [relative risk (RR), 0.93; 95% CI, 0.88-0.98; P=0.01]. The risk of acute esophagitis (grade ≥3) is greater with concurrent treatment (RR, 1.58; 95% CI, 1.19-2.09; P=0.001), but there was no significant difference in the risk of acute pneumonitis. Thus, sequential and concomitant combined-modality strategies were each established to be superior to radiotherapy alone offering a 4% increase in absolute survival at 2 years and confirmed combined modality as the standard of care in the management of locally advanced inoperable NSCLC.

### Table 1 Phase III comparing radiotherapy alone versus combined treatment in stage III NSCLC patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Arms</th>
<th>Number of patients</th>
<th>Median survival (months)</th>
<th>3-y OS (%)</th>
<th>5-y OS (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dillman (1)</td>
<td>CT + RT</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.012</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sause (2)</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RT alone</td>
<td></td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremic (3)</td>
<td>HFX</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeremic (4)</td>
<td>HFX</td>
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<td>14</td>
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CT, chemotherapy; RT, radiotherapy; HFX, hyperfractionated radiotherapy; OS, overall survival; Wk, weekly.

### Sequential versus concomitant chemoradiation

The next generation of clinical trials investigated concurrent chemoradiation versus sequential approach, showing in two of three phase III studies favorable results to concomitant therapy (Table 2). The West Japan Lung Cancer Group conducted the first published trial about this topic (9). They randomized 320 patients to receive thoracic radiation (56 Gy, split-course) either after or concurrent with cisplatin (80 mg/m²), vindesine (3 mg/m²), and mitomycin (8 mg/m²) chemotherapy. Patients receiving concurrent therapy had a median survival time of 16.5 months compared with 13.3 months for the sequentially treated patients (P=0.03). The 5-year survival rate was also superior for the concurrently treated patients (15.8%) compared with patients receiving sequential therapy (8.9%). However, the study NPC 95-01 run by the Groupe Lyon-Saint-Etienne d’Oncologie Thoracique-Groupe Français
did not achieve a statistical significance difference on survival between concomitant and sequential approaches (P=0.24). In this trial, 205 patients were randomized to receive either 3 cycles of cisplatin (120 mg/m²) and vinorelbine (30 mg/m² weekly) followed by thoracic radiation at a dose of 66 Gy or concurrent therapy consisting of cisplatin (20 mg/m²) and etoposide (50 mg/m²) for two cycles along with thoracic radiation. Patients in the concurrent arm received 2 further cycles of consolidation chemotherapy that consisted of cisplatin (80 mg/m²) and vinorelbine (30 mg/m² weekly) to match the total cisplatin dose given in the other arm. In spite of similar findings to the West Japan Lung Cancer Group trial, with numerical advantage for the concurrent therapy in median survival time (14.5 versus 16.3 months) and in the 2- and 4-year survival rates (26.5% and 14.2%, versus 39.3% and 20.7%, respectively), the trend toward prolonged survival with concomitant therapy did not achieve statistical significance. One possible explanation is the high number of toxic deaths in the concurrent arm compared to the sequential one (10 versus 6). Finally, the third and largest randomized phase III trial comes from the Radiation Therapy Oncology Group (RTOG) (11). In RTOG 94-1012, 610 patients were randomly assigned to the following three treatment arms: once-daily radiation (60 Gy) after induction cisplatin (100 mg/m²) and vinblastine (5 mg/m²) chemotherapy; once-daily radiation [60] concurrent with the same chemotherapy; or hyperfractionated radiation (69.6 Gy) with concurrent cisplatin (50 mg/m²) and oral etoposide (50 mg twice daily). The median survival time was superior for patients receiving concurrent therapy with daily radiation (17.0 months) compared with patients receiving sequential treatment (14.6 months); this result was statistically significant (P=0.038). The overall 4-year survival rate was also better for patients on the concurrent arm compared with the sequential arm (21% vs. 12%, respectively). Several phase II studies and meta-analysis also supported the benefit of concomitant over sequential therapy. A systematic review and individual patient data meta-analysis including 1,205 patients conducted by the NSCLC Collaborative Group (12) confirmed a significant benefit of concomitant therapy on overall survival (HR, 0.84; 95% CI, 0.74 to 0.95; P=0.004), with an absolute benefit of 5.7% (from 18.1% to 23.8%) at 3 years and 4.5% at 5 years. Notably, although rates of distant failures were equivalent (HR, 1.04; 95% CI, 0.86 to 1.25; P=0.69), concomitant treatment decreased locoregional progression (HR, 0.77; 95% CI, 0.62 to 0.95; P=0.01). Concomitant therapy also increased acute esophageal toxicity (grade 3-4) from 4% to 18% with a relative risk of 4.9 (95% CI, 3.1 to 7.8; P=0.001) but not acute pulmonary toxicity. Authors concluded that concomitant therapy improved survival of patients with locally advanced NSCLC, primarily because of a better locoregional control, but at the cost of manageable increased acute esophageal toxicity.

### Chemoradiation plus induction or consolidation strategies

In spite of the advantage in survival demonstrated by the use of concomitant CT and RT, both locoregional and distant failure remain a problem. Following treatment with chemoradiotherapy, 70% to 75% of patients develop recurrent or progressive disease; roughly one third of

| Table 2 Phase III trial comparing sequential and concomitant chemoradiotherapy in stage III NSCLC patients |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| N Arm | MST (months) | 5-y OS (%) | P |
| Furuse (9) | 320 Sequential (MVdP/RT) | 13.3 | 8.9 | 0.03 |
| | 314 Concomitant (MVdP + RT) | 16.5 | 15.8 | |
| Fournel (10) | 205 Sequential (VrbP/RT) | 14.5 | 14.2* | 0.24 |
| | Concomitant (PE + RT) | 16.3 | 20.7 | |
| Curran (11) | 610 Sequential (PVb/RT) | 14.6 | 10 | 0.046 |
| | Concomitant (PVb + RT) | 17 | 16 | |
| | Concomitant (PE + HFX) | 15.6 | 13 | |

N, number of patients; MST, median survival time; OS, overall survival; MVdP, Mytomicin, vindesine and cisplatin; RT, standard radiotherapy; PVd, Cisplatin, vindesin; PE, cisplatin, etoposide; HFX, Hyperfractionated radiotherapy; VrbP, Vinorelbine, cisplatin; *4-years survival.
The Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) conducted several studies focused on the induction strategy. They published in 2002 (13) the results of a randomized phase II trial comparing efficacy and toxicities of three regimens in which patients were randomized to receive one of these three agents (paclitaxel, gemcitabine, or vinorelbine) in combination with cisplatin for two cycles as induction chemotherapy followed by two additional cycles of these drugs with concurrent standard chest radiotherapy. They postulated that given the encouraging activity of these agents, in the stage III setting might lead to further prolongation of survival times. In addition, all three agents have been demonstrated to act as radiation sensitizers in preclinical models. The primary end points were response to both induction and concomitant chemoradiotherapy. One hundred eighty seven patients were accrued. Total response rates to induction chemotherapy on the three study arms were 40%, 33%, and 44% (gemcitabine, paclitaxel, and vinorelbine) and best overall response rates were 74%, 67%, and 73% with overlapping 95% CIs. The most common toxicities to induction chemotherapy were grade 3 or 4 granulocytopenia on all three arms (observed in approximately 50% of patients) and 25% grade 3 or 4 thrombocytopenia on the gemcitabine arm. However, there were notable differences among the three study arms in the toxicities during concomitant chemoradiotherapy. Grade 3 or 4 granulocytopenia was seen in 51% of patients treated with gemcitabine and 53% of patients treated with paclitaxel, which contrasts with 27% of patients treated with vinorelbine. In addition, thrombocytopenia was seen in 56% of patients on the gemcitabine arm. Grade 3 or 4 esophagitis was most pronounced on the gemcitabine arm (35% of patients grade 3 and 17% of patients grade 4) whereas these numbers were 35% and 4% for paclitaxel and 13% and 12% for vinorelbine. Overall median survival time for all patients was 17 months. For the three study arms, median survival times and 3-year survival rates were 18.3, 14.8 and 17.7 months and 28%, 19% and 23% for gemcitabine, paclitaxel and vinorelbine, respectively. Based on its widespread acceptance by oncologists and general good tolerance they chose carboplatin and paclitaxel as a chemotherapy regimen for the subsequent phase III trial, the CALGB 39-801 (14) study. The primary endpoint was to detect a 40% increase in median survival, from 13 to 18.2 months, with the addition of induction chemotherapy. Three hundred sixty-six patients were randomly assigned to immediate concurrent chemoradiotherapy with weekly carboplatin and paclitaxel during 66 Gy of chest radiotherapy, or induction CT with two cycles of carboplatin and paclitaxel administered every 21 days followed by identical chemoradiotherapy. The study was negative because survival differences were not statistically significant, with a median survival on concomitant arm of 12 versus 14 months on induction CT arm and a 2-year survival of 29% and 31% respectively. However, the toxicity, mainly of neutropenia grade 3 or 4 was superior in the induction CT arm (18% and 20%, respectively). Remarkably, the survival times were at the lower range of reported values for patients with stage III disease treated with concomitant chemoradiotherapy even after adjusting for prognostic factors such as the weight loss. Possible explanations could be the selection of a weekly regimen of CT during RT treatment and/or the use of a carboplatin-based regimen instead of a cisplatin-based one. In any case, this study demonstrated the absence of value to adding induction CT with currently established agents.

Testing the hypothesis of consolidation CT the Southwest Oncology Group (SWOG) run two consecutive phase II studies. In the first one (SWOG-9019) (15), published in 2002, all patients received cisplatin, 50 mg/m²/d on days 1, 8, 29, and 36; etoposide, 50 mg/m²/d on days 1 to 5 and 29 to 33; and RT, 1.8 Gy per day, 5 days a week, starting within 24 hours of the first day of chemotherapy followed by two cycles of the same CT regimen. Fifty eligible patients were accrued. Grade 4 neutropenia was the most common toxicity (32%). Grade 3/4 esophagitis occurred in 12% and 8%. Median follow-up was 52 months, and overall median survival was 15 months and 3- and 5-year survivals were 17% and 15%. The second phase II study, S9504 (16), was designed to test the concept of taxane sequencing in combined-modality therapy and patients were selected using identical eligibility, staging criteria, and treatment, excepting docetaxel consolidation that those of the predecessor study (S9019). The primary objective was to estimate, within the limitations of a historical comparison, whether substitution of docetaxel for continued PE during the consolidation phase of treatment would improve survival compared with the predecessor trial S9019, and whether toxicities were acceptable. A sample size of 80 eligible patients with stage IIIIB disease confirmed...
on central review was required to demonstrate a 6 months increase in median survival compared with that observed in S9019. Concurrent chemoradiotherapy was generally well tolerated, but two patients died from probable radiation-associated pneumonitis. The esophagitis rate was 17% (20% in S9019). Neutropenia during consolidation docetaxel was common (57% with grade 4). At a median follow-up of 71 months, the median progression free survival was 16 months and the median survival 26 months. Overall survival at 3, 4, and 5 years was 37%, 29%, and 29%, respectively. Although the survival results were provocative, particularly the long-term results updated in a second paper (17), confirmation and validation using a phase III design was necessary. Regrettably, when that study was run (18), the results did not confirm the survival advantage of using three cycles of docetaxel after concomitant CT/RT versus concomitant CT/RT alone. The Hoosier Oncology Group (18) randomized patients to receive three cycles of docetaxel versus observation after finishing without progression concomitant chemoradiation with the same regimen than previous SWOG phase II studies. The primary objective was overall survival. Based on a data and safety monitoring board recommendation, the trial was closed after an analysis of the initial 203 patients. The grade 3-5 toxicities were clearly superior in the docetaxel arm (febrile neutropenia 10.9%, pneumonitis 9.6%, 5.5% died) as well as the percentage of patients hospitalized (28.8% during docetaxel versus 8.1% in observation arm). Although the MST for all patients was extremely good (21.7 months), no statically differences were found between docetaxel and observation arms (21.2 and 23.2 months, respectively). An update in survival was published (19), adding a retrospective analysis of efficacy and toxicity in older patients included in the trial. The 3-, 4-, and 5-year survival rates for the overall study were 30.7%, 18.0%, and 13.9%, respectively, without differences between docetaxel and observation. Older patients had similar MST but higher rates of grade 3/4 toxicity and hospitalization during induction.

### Direct comparison between induction and consolidation strategies

Four randomized phase II study and an early closed phase III trials were focused on directly compared combined chemoradiation plus full doses of CT previously or at the end of concomitant therapy (Table 3). Belani and cols (20) published in 2005 a phase II randomized noncomparative trial conducted to determine the optimal sequencing and integration of paclitaxel/carboplatin with radiotherapy in stage III NSCLC patients. Survival data were compared with historical standard sequential chemoradiotherapy data from the RTOG. Patients received two cycles of induction paclitaxel/carboplatin followed every 21 days by RT (arm 1, sequential) or two cycles of induction paclitaxel/carboplatin followed by weekly paclitaxel/carboplatin with concurrent RT (arm 2, induction/concurrent), or weekly paclitaxel/carboplatin/RT followed by two cycles of full doses of paclitaxel/carboplatin (arm 3, concurrent/consolidation). The primary objective was survival. For analyses, each arm was compared with a historical control using the

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**Table 3** Randomized phase II studies comparing induction versus consolidation chemotherapy in patients receiving concomitant chemoradiotherapy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Scheme</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>MST (months)</th>
<th>2-y OS (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belani</td>
<td>CT → RT</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT → CT/RT</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT/RT → CT</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senan</td>
<td>CT → CT/RT</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>63*</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT/RT → CT</td>
<td></td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fournel</td>
<td>CT → CT/RT²</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT/RT → CT</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garrido</td>
<td>CT → CT³/RT</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CT/RT → CT</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CT, Chemotherapy; RT, radiotherapy; N, number of patients; MST, median survival time; OS, overall survival; *1-year OS.

Chemotherapy regimens: ¹Carboplatin and paclitaxel; ²Cisplatin and paclitaxel; ³Cisplatin and vinorelbine; ⁴Cisplatin and docetaxel; ⁵Gemcitabine and docetaxel; ⁶Carboplatin and docetaxel.
sequential chemoradiotherapy arm of the RTOG 88-08 trial, for which the available reported median survival time was 13.7 months. The final number of patients enrolled was 276. According to the paper, when the accrual to the phase II study reached the projected number of patients, an interim statistical analysis using the triangle test was applied to all three arms. Arm 2 was closed to accrual due to the low likelihood of benefit compared with historical control. Sample sizes in arms 1 and 3 were expanded to accommodate a phase III design. Subsequently, when data from the RTOG 9410 study became available and confirmed the benefit of concurrent therapy, accrual decreased and the study was permanently closed to accrual. Although the study was not designed to directly compass among arms, the final results were favorable to consolidation arm with median overall survival of 13.0, 12.7, and 16.3 months for arms 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The most frequent grade 3-4 toxicity during induction chemotherapy was granulocytopenia (32% and 38% of patients on study arms 1 and 2, respectively) and the most common locoregional grade 3/4 toxicity during and after RT was esophagitis, as expected more pronounced with concomitant therapy (arms 2 and 3).

Three European studies have been also designed to compare face-to-face induction and consolidation strategies but using a phase II approach. The Pulmon Art (21) was a multicenter trial conducted in 15 centers from 8 European countries designed to examine the safety and toxicity profile of two sequences cisplatin-docetaxel, either as induction before or consolidation after concurrent CT-RT with radiosensitizing doses of the same doublet in order to identify the most feasible regimen for further studies. The primary end point was the incidence of grade ≥3 esophagitis in the two treatment sequences. They estimated that the maximal rate considered acceptable by clinicians was 25%. Seventy-two patients (36 patients each arm in the intent to treatment design) were randomly allocated but 5 patients were switched from consolidation to induction arm due to higher V20 than permitted. The safety population consisted of 41 patients treated in the induction arm and 29 in the consolidation one. Adverse events that were grade ≥3 were reported for 63% of patients and 72%, respectively. The incidence of grade ≥3 esophagitis was not significantly different from the allowable incidence of 25% (Grade 3-4 in 32% and 2% in the induction arm and 21% and 3%, in the consolidation arm). A total of 18 patients developed grade ≥2 radiation pneumonitis but no significant correlation was observed between V20, and incidence of grades 2-5 pneumonitis. The authors did not find differences in overall response rate, overall survival (with a median OS of all eligible patients was 28.0 months) or progression free survival between arms. In spite of the selection of patients, 26% discontinued treatment prematurely and only 55-57% received the planned RT dose of 66 Gy.

A French multicenter phase II study included 133 patients in 35 centers (22). It compared 3 cycles of cisplatin every 21 days and reduced vinorelbine doses on day 1 and 8 concomitant with RT plus two cycles of cisplatin and paclitaxel as induction or consolidation. The primary objective was response rate at the end of treatment. Toxicities and response rates are similar in both arms, but induction followed by CT/RT appears to provide a better therapeutic outcome with median survival time of 19.3 versus 16.9 months and 2-year survival rates of 47% versus 43% (induction and consolidation, respectively).

Finally, the SLCG 0008 study conducted by the Spanish Lung Cancer Group (23) initially compared three arms (sequential CT followed by thoracic radiation; concurrent CT/TRT followed by consolidation CT and induction CT followed by concurrent CT/RT). However, based on the preliminary results of the RTOG 9410 trial published at that time, the sequential arm was closed with only 19 patients enrolled. The study continued comparing concomitant arms plus induction or consolidation CT and results of 135 patients from 16 Spanish university hospitals were available. The full dose regimen selected was a non-platinum schema (docetaxel and gemcitabine) based on an expected better tolerability profile. Weekly docetaxel and carboplatin was chosen to receive in combination with RT (60 Gy). The primary endpoint was response rate, with no statistically differences founded between the two arms (56% consolidation and 57% induction). Hematological toxicity was mild but significantly superior with consolidation CT; the esophagitis rate was similar in both arms (16% and 15%). With a median follow-up of 57 months, no statistically significant differences were found between consolidation and induction arm in median survival (13 and 13.8 months) or long-term survival (2-y OS 27% vs. 40%, 5-y OS 16% vs. 22%). Based on the modest results founded in median survival time and similar toxicities to other platinum regimen, authors concluded that this regimen cannot be recommended as an alternative to platinum-based CT/TRT. A phase III study was designed to directly compare both strategies using a triplet combination of CT with cisplatin, gemcitabine and vinorelbine but it was
prematurely closed for poor accrual due to administrative problems (24). To clarify this question a meta-analysis of the pooled data of the phase II studies should be addressed since they are very similar in design and patient selection.

**Studies comparing second and third generation chemotherapy agents**

Clinical research efforts have focused on incorporating newer chemotherapeutic agents, either singly or in combination with a platinum compound, into concurrent chemoradiation regimens for locally advanced NSCLC. A large number of pilot studies have been reported, many of which have shown encouraging results. However, for many newer chemotherapeutic agents, dose-limiting toxicities require that lower doses be given during the concurrent phase. Two Japanese phase III studies addressed this topic, being both published in 2010. The Okayama Lung Cancer Study Group run a phase III (OLCSG 0007) (25) comparing the West Japan Lung Cancer Group regimen (cisplatin, vindesine, and mitomycin) with docetaxel and cisplatin administered on a day 1 and 8 regimen for two cycles plus RT, which was not administered in split course in any arms. The primary endpoint was the survival time at 2 years considering on the basis of previous report of an approximately 35% 2-year survival rate for the MVP arm and 55% for the DP arm. Based on this analysis, 96 patients in each arm were required. According to the results, the study was negative because the difference on survival at 2 years did not reached statistical significance (P=0.059) although was numerically superior (78.8% versus 70.3%). Similarly, although the response rate, median survival time, and progression free survival rates tended to be greater in the DP arm than in the MVP arm, the differences were not statistically significant (P>0.05). Authors remarked unpredictably better survival in the MVP arm, possibly related to a better selection of patients as well as the use of a non split course of RT. Based on this, the sample size was small to detect survival differences.

The West Japan Oncology Group conducted other phase III trial (WJTOG0105) with 3 arms (26). Treatment was composed of concurrent chemoradiotherapy and subsequent consolidation chemotherapy. Patients enrolled on arm A received 4 cycles of the MVP regimen. On day 2 of chemotherapy, RT was begun at the dose of 2 Gy/fraction given in 15 fractions over 3 weeks, followed by a rest period of 1 week. Subsequently, radiation was again resumed at the dose of 2 Gy/fraction given in 15 fractions over 3 weeks. The total dose of radiation administered was 60 Gy. In arms B patients received weekly irinotecan and carboplatin during RT followed by two cycles of full dose of both agents. RT was initiated on day 1. The total dose of 60 Gy was given in 30 fractions over a 6-week period. Finally, patients in the arm C were allocated the same schema but irinotecan was substituted by paclitaxel. The primary end point was comparison of the overall survival between the control group (arm A, with an estimated median OS time of 16.5 months) and each of the treatment groups (arm B or C, that would show an increase in the median OS to 20.5 months). A total of 456 patients were registered in a period of 4 years [2001-2005]. Regarding the toxicity, the incidences of grade 3 or worse hematologic toxicity, infection, febrile neutropenia, and gastrointestinal toxicity were significantly higher in arm A than in arm B or C. There were no statistically significant differences in the incidences of esophagitis, dyspnea, or pneumonitis. Similarly to the previous study, the differences in survival were not statically significant (arm A vs. B, P=0.392; arm A vs. C, P =0.876) with median survival time and 3- and 5-year survival rates of 20.5 months, 35.3%, and 17.5% in arm A, 19.8 months, 24.2%, and 17.8% in arm B, and 22.0 months, 26.4%, and 19.5% in arm C. The authors emphasized the more favorable profile of arm C (paclitaxel/ carboplatin) to justify their conclusion about that regimen should be considered standard.

Finally, a small trial bi-centric phase II trial designed to assess the activity and safety of weekly paclitaxel-carboplatin versus cisplatin-etoposide (PE) and RT has been recently published (27). Consolidation treatment was delivered as per local protocol considering either platinum-based doublet chemotherapy regimen or single agent chemotherapy regimen both acceptable. The primary endpoint of this trial was 3-year overall survival but only 35 patients in each arm were considerer needed based on an assumption of differences in 3-year survival between 35% for PE regimen and 18% for the weekly paclitaxel/ carboplatin schema. The results in terms of median survival time were favorable to PE (20.2 versus 13.5 months) in the PC arm. The 3-year survival rates were 33.1% and 13%, respectively. By contrary, the incidence of Grade 3-4 neutropenia was higher in the PE arm than that in the PC arm (78.1% vs. 51.5%, P=0.049). Once again, the total failure, locoregional relapses, and distant metastases were high in both arms (57.6%, 33.3%, and 33.3% in the PE arm and 78.1%, 46.9%, and 40.7% in the PC arm), highlighting the need to explore new strategies.
New chemotherapy agents

Pemetrexed, a multitargeted antifolate active in advanced non-squamous NSCLC patients have been also tested in stage III. Several phase I studies (28-30) found that it was feasible to combine pemetrexed/carboplatin or cisplatin at full dose with RT. In addition, phase II (31,32) results showed promising results compared with historical studies, but these results needed to be confirmed in larger trials. Regrettably, the phase III trial comparing the combination of pemetrexed, cisplatin with cisplatin, etoposide concomitant with RT in patients with nonsquamous NSCLC stopped the accrual on September 2012 because the experimental arm has crossed the futility boundary and it is unlike to attend the HR of 0.74 in favor of the pemetrexed arm.

Table 4 Ongoing phase II studies in stage III NSCLC EGFR mutated patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design</th>
<th>Primary objective</th>
<th>Number estimated patients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erlotinib + RT vs. CDDP/Etoposide/RT NCT01714908</td>
<td>PFS</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gefitinib + RT NCT01391260</td>
<td>ORR</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoadjuvant Afatinib, then CT, then surgery and adjuvant CT followed by Afatinib ASCENT Trial NCT01553942</td>
<td>ORR</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RT, radiotherapy; CT, chemotherapy (pemetrexed and cisplatin); PFS, progression free survival; ORR, overall response rate.

Molecular targeted agents

In non-selected population different types of agents have been evaluated in stage III NSCLC. The SWOG investigated the use of gefitinib as maintenance after maximum cytoreduction with chemoradiotherapy in the phase II study S0023 (33). All patients received cisplatin, etoposide concomitant with radiotherapy followed by 3 cycles of docetaxel. Patients whose disease did not progress were randomly assigned to gefitinib 250 mg/d or placebo until disease progression, intolerable toxicity, or the end of 5 years. The planned sample size was 672 patients to confer power of 0.89 to detect a 33% increase over the expected median survival time of 21 months. However, an unplanned interim analysis rejected the alternative hypothesis of improved survival at the P=0.0015 level for 243 randomly assigned patients and the study was closed. The median survival time was 23 months for gefitinib and 35 months for placebo (P=0.013). Although the reasons for this result remain unclear, it was established that routine use of maintenance EGFR-TKIs in stage III disease outside of a clinical trial should be avoided.

Cetuximab has been also tested in several studies in the stage III setting (34). Blumenschein and colleagues reported a median survival of 22.7 months and 50% 2-year survival in RTOG 0324 (35), adding weekly cetuximab to low-dose weekly paclitaxel-carboplatin with RT, followed by consolidation cetuximab-paclitaxel-carboplatin. On the basis of these results, an intergroup phase III trial (RTOG 0617) was designed to test radiation with carboplatin and paclitaxel, with or without cetuximab. However, on June 2011, two of the four arms in the protocol were closed to accrual when a planned interim analysis showed that the higher radiation dose being tested, 74 Gy, could not produce an overall survival benefit compared with the lower, standard dose of 60 Gy (36). Although data are immature, treatment-related toxicities were not significantly different (37), and differences in local versus distant disease failure have not been reported. The 60 Gy control and cetuximab arms of the study are currently ongoing.

Antiangiogenic therapy has been also tested in stage III. Unfortunately, to date, phase II trials of bevacizumab combined with platinum-based chemoradiotherapy were closed early because of an excess risk of hemorrhage and tracheoesophageal fistulas (38).

Limited data with molecular targeted agents are available in selected population such as the EGFR mutated patients but several phase II studies are ongoing (39-42) (Table 4).

Future directions

Unfortunately, despite much effort during the last 20 years, we have witnessed little progress in treating unresectable stage III NSCLC. Treatment failures continue to occur both locoregionally and/or distantly, although radiographic evidence of locoregional failures only account for approximately one third of recurrences, suggesting the urgent need for more adequate systemic control. Similarly, novel approaches to improve radiation
therapy delivery are needed. Strategies such as intensity-modulated radiotherapy, which enhances the radiation oncologist’s ability to contour radiation doses around a tumor with selective sparing of adjacent structures, and proton therapy are being investigated but caution should be used when interpreting the results of the trials exploring these modalities due to selection biases inherent in phase II studies and the lack of level 1 evidence. Therefore, outside the context of clinical trials, these techniques cannot be recommended as a standard alternative. Finally, it should be pointed out that therapeutic advances will likely come from a greater understanding of tumor biology and optimal patient selection. Improving our understanding of molecular subtypes will hopefully lead to rational drug design and more precise clinical trial questions. Only through active partnerships between patients and their healthcare providers to enroll patients in appropriate clinical trials will we see significant improvements in outcomes in our patients in a near future.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Garrido P, Olmedo MªE. State of the art of radiotherapy. Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(3):189-199. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.02
Recent advances in radiotherapy for thoracic tumours

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Abstract: Radiation Oncology technology has continued to advance at a rapid rate and is bringing significant benefits to patients. This review outlines some of the advances in technology and radiotherapy treatment of thoracic cancers including brachytherapy, stereotactic radiotherapy, tomotherapy and intensity modulated radiotherapy. The importance of functional imaging with PET and management of movement are highlighted. Most of the discussion relates to non-small cell lung cancer but management of mesothelioma and small cell lung cancer are also covered. This technology has substantial benefits to patients in terms of decreasing toxicity both in the short and longer term.

Keywords: Radiotherapy; technology; review; advances; thoracic

Submitted Jul 31, 2013. Accepted for publication Aug 19, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.46
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.46

Non-small cell lung cancer—staging

One cannot consider radiotherapy advances without first evaluating the impact of imaging. We should note the staging changed with the introduction of TNM version 7 following a large multinational, multi-disciplinary, and international collaboration (1). Clearly, avoiding treating patients with metastatic disease is beneficial and improves the cost effectiveness of treatment (2). However, we have reached another level of PET use with the rational integration of functional imaging data into radiotherapy planning. It makes little sense to try to treat possible subclinical disease when you are unable to control the primary tumour (David Ball—personal communication). Indeed trying to treat larger volumes may actually impair outcomes by compromising dose.

Waiting time continues to receive attention. Earlier studies have shown that delay is associated with larger tumour volumes at treatment (3). Most recently the effect of delay on the extent of the disease on PET volumes has been examined (4). When patients were subjected to a staging PET and an RT planning PET it was evident that the mean tumour volume had almost doubled on PET. 6/82 patients were then unsuitable for radical treatment (4).

EBUS/TBNA has had an effect here as well. While FDG PET is exquisitely sensitive it is not 100% specific; the presence of tuberculosis significantly complicates the analysis for example. Recent studies of regional nodes suggest TBNA in instead of PET may improve staging accuracy (5).

PET-MR is the next major clinically available advance in imaging technology. Concurrent acquisition of PET data and MR imaging has presented significant technical challenges as the whole method of acquiring a PET image has had to be re-engineered (6,7). The presence of a magnetic field however, limits the range of positrons thereby increasing in intrinsic resolution of PET-MR when compared to conventional PET. This technology is in the early stages of clinical adoption.

In-situ disease (CIS)/minimally invasive disease

Bronchial brachytherapy has attracted some interest with advances in bronchoscopic technique and technical improvements such as bronchoscopic ultrasound (EBUS) allowing a unique view of the tumour.
Brachytherapy is being employed using bronchoscopically placed catheters and an iridium HDR source. Bronchoscopic advances such as ultrasound have assisted in the definition of tumour volume and defining the edges of tumour to be treated.

**Managing movement of the tumour and organs at risk**

Various techniques exist to account for tumour movement, both during planning and treatment. Fiducial markers are one such solution that is useful throughout. Implanted fiducial markers present an opportunity to better define tumour outline at the planning stage and provide a ‘geometric fix’ on a tumour during therapy, when coupled with real-time imaging modalities. Advances here are happening concurrently with technical developments in bronchoscopy and ultrasound.

A robotically controlled linear accelerator (Cyberknife™, Accuray) solves the online movement problem by moving the radiation source in sync with the target. Diagnostic X-rays are used to close the feedback loop with the linear accelerator, constantly updating it with the position of the target. Another such online target tracking system is Calypso (Calypso Medical), which uses radio frequency transponders as fiducial markers.

Offline gating presents yet another solution to the problem allowing for more precise target definition. Here the CT puts the images into “bins” according to the phase of the breathing cycle. Total scan time is increased but useful position data can be acquired; thus a “4D CT” is generated. Online gating systems are also available for target motion compensation during treatment by tracking the motion of the patients external contour, such as Varian RPM. Systems such as this however, track a surrogate of the target motion, not the target motion itself.

Another example of motion compensation is to use a PET fused to the planning CT. As the PET is acquired over about 20 mins it smears out the tumour volume effectively defining a region in which the tumour is most likely to reside.

4D CT (and 4D-PET) have been looked at as a way of defining tumour motion which may be more accurate than our usual geometric expansions. Finally coaching of patients using some form of bio-feedback is finding increasing clinical application with the same aim.

**Volume definition**

With better technology telling us where to treat; so have come RT advances allowing us to treat small and moving targets. The concept of “volumetric conformity” still has significant difficulties with implementation. At present automated methods for tumour delineation have not proven robust enough for clinical use.

PET imaging with 18FDG has revolutionised both the staging and treatment volume definition but problems remain. Standardised uptake values (SUV) are not standardised between machines and edges of the tumour remain difficult to define (8-10). Modelling has been undertaken looking at the changes in dose to critical normal tissues. This shows PET decreases the dose delivered to normal tissue; while improving the tumour control probability (11).

Cone beam CT (or tomotherapy megavoltage CT) present the possibility of adjusting tumour volume definitions during treatment as the tumour shrinks (12). Such approaches appear to decrease the volume of normal tissue irradiated (13).

Finally automated target volume definition, again with FDG, has been attempted. As yet there is little agreement with “manually derived” contours (14). The technology is still immature but may one day allow daily changes in treatment volume without prohibitive cost.

**Treatment response**

Advances in imaging have allowed changes to the irradiated volume to occur even on a daily basis (15).

A pilot study of interval PET has shown that a PET two weeks into treatment can be useful in terms of defining response to radiotherapy (16). Further modifications will no doubt examine dose painting to boost areas of greater tumour activity. While we doubt any oncologist would stop treatment early in the course of treatment it may be a prompt to increase dose or intensify treatment.

Intensity modulated radiotherapy (IMRT) techniques such as helical tomotherapy have allowed us to “bend” the dose cloud around critical structures. The role of tomotherapy would seem to be particularly in central and posteriorly placed tumours where the radiation oncologist is trying to avoid critical structures. It may have a role in treating multiple primary tumours or RT plans in which very large volumes of normal tissue are being irradiated. The role of dose painting and dose escalation continues to receive research attention.

Planning studies suggest the dose uniformity and homogeneity may be better with tomotherapy™ but the
area irradiated to low dose is probably increased (13). Tomotherapy™ has been evaluated in studies looking at integral dose and the risk of induced malignancies (17). This is thought to be no greater than other highly conformal techniques (Figure 1).

Hypofractionation using stereotactic body radiotherapy

Probably the largest clinical impact has come from hypofractionating treatment. The biological effect of RT is significantly increased by giving a small number of large fractions (so called hypofractionation). Often this is less than five fractions. The work of Timmerman and others have highlighted the importance of a biologically equivalent dose (BED) of at least 150 Gy (18,19). Given the significant changes in patterns of care which are happening, it is surprising there is not a wealth of randomised clinical trials (20). The practical implications of implementing such a change to treatment paradigms should not be forgotten (21).

Central tumours have caused some concern that toxicity would be increased but a recent systematic review has not borne this out (22). As long as an appropriate fractionation schedule is employed the toxicity appears manageable and efficacy maintained. Imaging is even more important for hypofractionation, and especially with regard to motion compensation.

Protons have been employed in hypofractionated lung treatment although cost remains prohibitive in many countries (23).

Investigators have looked at minimally invasive disease treated with stereotactic radiotherapy (24). Fitting with the concept of tumours formerly referred to as bronchioloalveolar carcinoma (BAC) as a field change there were concerns that there would be potential difficulties with defining the edges of the tumour. Interestingly however, the there was no significant difference noted in three year regional failure.

Tumour volume

Tumour volume has been investigated by the Trans-Tasman Radiation Oncology Group (TROG). Previously tumour size was not shown to correlate with clinical stage (25) and more recent work has shown the relationship to prognosis is complex. Indeed the new staging system makes little mention of tumour size (26). The prognostic significance of tumour size changes over time—in the first 18 months the larger the tumour the higher risk of dying. Beyond 18 months the association is weak and the authors suggest size alone should not be a reason to deny a patient potentially curative treatment (26).

Locally advanced disease

The advances here are likely to be from combinations of chemotherapy or combinations with molecular agents. We need better tools to quantify the effect of low doses of radiation on normal lung tissue. The high dose region is usually able to be smaller and more conformal but problems still remain.

In locally advanced disease the challenge lies in minimising volumes of normal lung irradiated while covering all the tumour and doing so at a dose high enough to sterilise the area. New approaches to advanced disease include the addition of biologic agents such as cetuximab (27,28) as they have in other sites. This is based on preclinical models suggesting a radiosensitisation effect (27). This treatment has modest additional benefit.

Molecular markers

The molecular revolution has not escaped this corner of
Small cell lung cancer

PET imaging with 18FDG for small cell lung cancer has been examined in a systematic review (34). Cost appeared comparable—at least in the Australian context. Radiotherapy changes, such as changed field borders, resulted in changes in about 28% of patients. About 6% of small cell lung cancer patients would be offered RT after a PET who would not have been offered RT prior to PET. A further 9% of patients with occult metastatic disease would be spared radical treatment.

We have phase III evidence supporting the benefit of hyperfractionated accelerated radiotherapy but the uptake of this seems slow in practice—perhaps reflecting the difficulty in getting patients though such a regimen. Perhaps here is a further application of IMRT treatment.

Mesothelioma—pleural radiotherapy

IMRT techniques have been widely used in management of resected and unresected malignant pleural mesothelioma (35-37). There is as yet no consensus on its role as a routine standard of care (38).

There are some reports that conventional lung normal tissue constraints using V20 and Mean Lung Dose MLD are not appropriate after extrapleural pneumonectomy and that more conservative constraints using V5 are needed (39).

An Italian study has reported in abstract form reporting the use of accelerated hypofractionation over 5 fractions with helical Tomotherapy for unresected mesothelioma with acceptable toxicity (40). An Australian study reported 71% infield local control included PET based Total Glycolytic Volume as well as survival outcome data using IMRT (41).

Conclusions

It is fortunate that emerging health technologies are set to change the way we implement radiation oncology practice to achieve the best outcomes for our patients with lung cancer. Nonetheless, despite the hope and promise of new technologies we should not forget the effect that our treatments have on our patient’s quality of life. As these new tools allow us to do more—we hope that we will be better able to choose patients for treatment, adapt that treatment to them and that with more conformal treatment related toxicity will reduce (42).

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Fay M, Poole CM, Pratt G. Recent advances in radiotherapy for thoracic tumours. J Thorac Dis 2013;5(S5):S551-S555. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2013.08.46
Introduction

The strictest definition of early stage non-small cell lung carcinoma (NSCLC) refers to patients with T1-2aN0 tumors (1). This chapter will focus on the management of these early stage NSCLC with radiotherapy, and specifically with high dose high precision stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT), also known as stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR).

Currently the standard or care for early stage NSCLC is lobectomy in patients who are suitable candidates (2). However, many patients are not suitable for lobectomy due to medical co-morbidities, pulmonary function or in some circumstances patient preference. The surgical alternatives to lobectomy, in the form of sublobar resections, are being explored in such patients. Radiotherapy is an option for patients who are not able to undergo surgical resection. We do not recommend observation in this patient population, unless the patient is estimated to have an extremely limited life expectancy from comorbidities, as the median survival in patients with untreated stage I NSCLC is 14 months and the majority die of lung cancer (3). In a population based study, the introduction of SBRT lead to a reduction in the proportion of patients receiving no treatment for their early stage lung cancer, and also significantly improved the survival of patients with early stage lung cancer at the population level (4).

Prior to the widespread use of SBRT, radiotherapy involved 6 to 7 weeks of treatment with standard dose fractionation of 2 Gy per fraction daily; typical doses were 60 Gy in 30 fractions or more, to the primary tumor and surrounding lung (“involved field”) and occasionally to the lymph node regions deemed at risk of harboring microscopic disease. These regimens have the advantage of conventional dose per fraction, with potentially less late normal tissue injury (although these doses are well above radiation tolerance of lung, and some amount of lung fibrosis is to be expected), but a lower biological dose. With lower biological doses there is an expected lower rate of long-term local control (5). Clinical outcomes were generally poor with local failures occurring in approximately 40% of patients (6). The focus of therapy turned to dose escalation in the hope of improving clinical outcomes, specifically local control in this patient population.
Dose escalation strategies occurred in the form of hypofractionated regimens. Common regimens used at our institution which have acceptable efficacy, 20% local failure at 5 years, and are well tolerated are 60 Gy in 15 fractions reported 2-year actuarial local control of 88% and 2-year overall survival of 69%. The most frequent toxicities were fatigue, cough and dyspnea. Radiation pneumonitis occurred in 10% of patients (8).

**Stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT)**

Lung SBRT or SABR involves using few high dose fractions to treat small target volume (9) guided by a set of coordinates (thus the term “stereotactic”). These coordinates are set in relationship to the precise location of the tumor, rather than a set of external marks (tattoos) or anatomical landmarks (such as bony structures), which is typical for conventional RT. The principles of body SBRT are an adaptation of the principles and experience gained from stereotactic brain RT, a well-established high-precision RT technique that uses a set of coordinates on a stereotactic frame affixed to the patient’s head, to direct multiple beams to a well-defined intracranial target. This allows the delivery of high doses of RT to the target while minimizing the exposure of normal tissue. In the case of lung cancer, the coordinates are set in relationship to the tumor itself, which can be visualized either directly with volumetric imaging such as cone-beam CT which is part of a linear accelerator, or localized through use of implanted fiducial markers, akin to what has been used with gold seed implants for prostate radiotherapy.

In addition to the use of tumor localization in the three dimensions, other important principles of stereotactic RT that need to be applied to lung SBRT are the precise outline (contouring) of a well-defined target (tumor), identification of a relatively tight (small) planning target volume (PTV) by minimizing target motion and set-up variation, conformal RT planning, using multiple small beams coming from various directions and planes, daily set-up verification prior to each treatment and the use of high RT doses that can ensure high rates of tumor cell kill.

Several single center and multicenter prospective studies, as well as numerous retrospective reports have established the safety and efficacy of lung SBRT for early stage lung cancer. There are many dose and fractionation schedules used. Local control in the order of 85-90% has been reported with most dose-fractionation schedules that provide a biologic effective dose (BED) of 100 Gy or more (10). Those schedules include 48 Gy in 4 fractions (of 12 Gy each), 55 Gy in 5 fractions (of 11 Gy each), 60 Gy in 8 fractions (of 7.5 Gy each), and 54-60 Gy in 3 fractions (of 18-20 Gy per fraction). The choice of schedule and dose depends on tumor size, location and institutional experience/preference.

In the context of lung SBRT tumors are generally <5 cm. SBRT may be considered for T1-2N0M0 and select <5 cm T3N0M0 chest wall NSCLC (11). It is our practice to deliver 54 Gy in 3 fractions for larger peripheral tumors, away from organs at risk (OAR), 48 Gy in 4 fractions for peripheral tumors <3 cm in diameter and 60 Gy in 8 fractions for centrally located tumors (i.e., tumors within a 2 cm radius of the airway or great vessels). The optimal dose for centrally located tumors is controversial and is awaiting analysis and reporting of the phase I/II RTOG study 0813 (12). In the phase II multicenter RTOG 0236 study, SBRT for early stage NSCLC in medically inoperable patients, with 60 Gy/3 fractions (equivalent to 54 Gy/3 fractions when corrected for lung tissue inoperable patients) was associated with a 3-year 98% tumor control, 91% local control and 56% overall survival (OS) (13).

Accurate mediastinal staging in potential candidates from SBRT is essential. Traditionally, patients who receive surgical resection for early stage NSCLC would have invasive mediastinal staging, either preoperative or intraoperative. In surgical patients staged preoperatively with PET/CT as N0, the occult node positivity rate at the time of surgery is 18%. Patients with tumors >3 cm or high SUVmax are at higher risk of occult nodal metastasis (14). Thus, before proceeding with SBRT, patients should at a minimum have PET staging and biopsy of any enlarged or suspicious nodes, and there may be merit in EBUS staging of other SBRT candidates who are at a high risk occult nodal disease. However, despite the absence of rigorous staging, the incidence of nodal relapse following SBRT is low, 5-10% in most series; low dose irradiation to first eschalon nodal regions has been postulated as one possible cause and immune effect of SBRT to the primary lesion in causing a presentation of antigens and resultant immune response that may control other areas of micro-metastatic disease (15), have been postulated as explanations, both have some evidence supporting them.

**Technological considerations**

As described above, SBRT is a technically rigorous treatment...
which requires precise tumor localization and treatment
delivery to minimize the potential for significant toxicity
to normal structures or organs at risk (OARs) (16). To
accomplish this one must consider immobilization strategies,
respiratory motion control, accurate target delineation,
advanced planning algorithms and image guidance (17). We
will briefly review the major technological considerations
for the planning and delivery of SBRT focusing on motion
management and image guidance.

Motion management

All intrathoracic tumors are affected by respiratory
movement. Respiratory motion management is an essential
component for the successful delivery of lung SBRT (17).
There are two major strategies to manage motion in
lung SBRT. The first involves reducing respiratory
excursion, typically either through abdominal compression
or active breathing control (ABC) (Figure 1). In some
institutions tumor motion is restricted in all patients, in
other institutions it is restricted in select circumstances
and some institutions employ no motion restriction.
When motion restriction is used selectively, a threshold is
selected, commonly 1 cm (17). In our institution, using that
threshold, less than 25% of patients, require abdominal
compression to manage respiratory motion (17).

The second method of motion management involves
using real-time tumor tracking to intermittently delivery
radiotherapy when the target is in the treatment position,
this is referred to as “gating”. Regardless of the technique
used to manage tumor motion, accurate analysis and
interpretation of the motion observed on the 4D planning
CT scan and accurate localization of the tumor at the time
of SBRT delivery is essential to ensure ablation of the
tumor and sparing of critical structures.

Target localization

The Stereotactic Body Frame (SBF) was the immobilization
strategy used in the earliest reports of extracranial SBRT
(18,19) (Figure 2). Those early reports emphasized the
importance of patient immobilization and accurate
repositioning for multi-fraction treatments (9). Clinical
outcomes with frame-based SBRT strategies were
acceptable (20) however this technique requires a significant
amount of treatment unit time and special equipment had to
be purchased with staff trained to use it. Now, image guided
strategies have been widely implemented to replace the SBF.
Continued improvements in the delivery of frameless SBRT
offer potential improvements in clinical outcome. Patients
with poorer performance status drift more in position
during SBRT (21). A change in the delivery of SBRT from
multiple static beams to more contemporary volumetric
modulated arc therapy (VMAT) affords a faster treatment
time which may improve position accuracy by affording less
time for patients to drift out of position.
Several techniques can be used to confirm the tumor location just before or during radiotherapy. These techniques include: CT-on-rails (22), real-time tumor gating (23), TomoTherapy (24), CBCT (25), and Cyberknife (real-time tumor tracking using a robotic system) (26). The conceptual principles are as discussed above, the practical details differ depending on the system. Figure 3 demonstrates how cone beam images on the treatment unit can be used to position the patient more accurately and guide the radiation beams directly onto the tumor target.

**Patient selection for SBRT**

SBRT has most widely been adopted for tumors located in the periphery of the lung. In a prospective phase II study conducted by the RTOG the 3-year primary tumor control for stage I/II NSCLC treated with 18 Gy ×3 fractions was 97.6% with only 1 local failure in 55 patients. The lobar control rate at 3 years was 90.6% and the 3-year disease free survival was 48.3% (27). Overall the regimen was well tolerated with 7 patients with grade 3 toxicity and 2 patients with grade 4 toxicity. There were no grade 5 toxicities (27).

SBRT is most commonly used for patients with tumors <5 cm however some centers do deliver SBRT to larger tumors. In our experience, larger tumors still had comparable rates of local control but had higher rates of regional and distant failures, and somewhat higher rates of grade 2 pneumonitis (28).

**SBRT toxicity**

The rate of adverse events following SBRT is low, however in some circumstances has been severe or fatal (16). The most common side effect in the acute phase is fatigue which is typically mild (grade 1) and seen in approximately 50% of patients (11). Radiation pneumonitis can occur in the 6 weeks to 9 months following SBRT. More uncommon but worrisome due to the catastrophic nature of the outcomes are toxicities related to the central mediastinal structures such as the major vessels (aorta, vena cava etc.) and the proximal airways. Rarely, grade 4 and 5 toxicities such as massive hemoptysis have been reported following SBRT, almost exclusively in the cases of central tumors (29).

Rib fractures and chest wall pain are two side-effects that are almost never reported after conventional fractionated radiotherapy, but have become widely reported and recognized to be associated with SBRT (30). Rib fractures are often asymptomatic and should not be mistaken for bone metastases (Figure 4). In a dosimetric and clinical multivariate analysis age, female gender and D0.5 were significantly associated with rib fractures following SBRT (31).

Radiation pneumonitis, a limiting toxicity with conventional RT for lung cancer, and associated with the volume of lung being treated (32) is less commonly reported in patients treated with SBRT, likely due to much smaller volumes treated, even though most patients treated with SBRT have limited lung function. One series reported that grade ≥2 pneumonitis occurred in 11% of patients (29). The risk of radiation pneumonitis is associated with increasing mean lung dose (29).

Similarly, there is minimal reduction of pulmonary function after SBRT and this treatment is suitable even for patients with severe COPD who are oxygen-dependent. At our institution we do not have a minimum cut-off for FEV1 or DLCO. All patients are considered on an individual basis for suitability for SBRT. The only group of patients who are at a higher risk of pulmonary toxicity are patients with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.
The ability to accurately identify patients with residual or recurrent tumors is increasingly important as SBRT is used in operable patients where surgical salvage for a local recurrence may be an option. Further work on other imaging modalities such as MRI, perfusion CT or FLT-PET may be of clinical benefit.

Central tumors

Centrally located tumors require careful consideration when treated with SBRT. Two criteria are currently applied to identify tumors as central: the RTOG 0236 study defined them as tumors that are “within or touching the zone of the proximal bronchial tree defined as a volume 2 cm in all directions around the proximal bronchial tree (carina, right and left main bronchi, right and left upper lobe bronchi, intermedium bronchus, right middle lobe bronchus, lingular bronchus, right and left lower lobe bronchi)” (33). The RTOG 0813 trial in addition also defined as central those “tumors that are immediately adjacent to mediastinal or pericardial pleura (PTV touching the pleura)” (12). Some institutions consider central tumors to also be any tumor within 2 cm of any mediastinal structure (34) although with careful planning, avoidance of mediastinal structures should be possible in most of the latter group.

Timmerman et al. reported an excess of respiratory events in patients who received 60 Gy in 3 fractions to centrally located tumors (16). Patients with central tumors had a 2-year freedom from severe toxicity of 54%, significantly lower than patients with peripheral tumors (84%) (16). Thus lead to the introduction of modified fractionations schedules for central tumors. There is significant heterogeneity in institutional practices in that regard, and most try to achieve a BED of 100 or greater. In a patterns-of-practice survey the majority of clinicians preferred a slightly more protracted fractionation schedule (≥4 fractions) for centrally located tumors (35). It is our institutional practice to deliver 60 Gy in 8 fractions; this is supported by data from the NKI group (11,34). Other institutions have reported 50 Gy in 4 fractions (36,37), 48 Gy in 4 fractions (38), 48 Gy in 6 fractions (39), or 60 Gy in 5 fractions (39).

The RTOG phase I/II trial in patients with centrally located tumors has reached the highest planned dose level of 60 Gy in 5 fractions (12) although analysis needs to await the full one year follow-up to determine whether this is
indeed the maximum tolerated dose. The hope is that this study will establish a safe and efficacious dose fractionation for central tumors and will also provide novel data on the radiation tolerance of mediastinal structures.

**Medically operable patients**

SBRT is now the standard of care in the majority of centers for patients who cannot have surgery for early stage NSCLC. The role of SBRT in patients who are surgical candidates remains controversial. The RTOG has completed accrual to a phase II study exploring the 2-year local control rate in medically operable patients treated with SBRT (40). A review by Onishi et al. of SBRT in medically operable patients who refused surgery reported a promising 5-year local control rate of 92% for T1 tumors and 73% for T2 tumors. The 5 year overall survival was 72% for T1 and 62% for T2 tumors (41). However, to conclusively assess the efficacy and safety of SBRT in operable patients compared to surgical resection, randomized data is needed. It is challenging to randomize patients to such different treatment modalities however, several phase III trials have been opened but all had to close due to poor accrual (42). Case-control studies that have included propensity matching (43) have demonstrated that SBRT results are at least equivalent and quite possibly superior to surgery, especially if compared to wedge resection. This is indeed intriguing and provides a solid foundation to offer SBRT even to surgical candidates.

**Conclusions**

SBRT is a safe and effective treatment for patients with early stage NSCLC who cannot undergo surgical resection. Further studies are needed to determine the safe standard of practice for centrally located tumors and to determine the role of SBRT in medically operable patients.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** Drs Bezjak and Giuliani have received travel funding from Elekta Inc and Dr Bezjak has received research support from Elekta Inc in the past.

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38. Stauder MC, Macdonald OK, Olivier KR, et al. Early pulmonary toxicity following lung stereotactic body...


Cite this article as: Giuliani ME, Bezjak A. Alternatives to surgery in early stage disease—stereotactic body radiotherapy. Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(5):332-339. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.10
Introduction

Even after complete resection of operable non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), patients are at high risk of recurrence (1). This risk of relapse is both distant and local, so that adjuvant chemotherapy as well as radiotherapy have been evaluated in randomized, though often underpowered, trials.

Concerning adjuvant chemotherapy, the results of the first published meta-analysis were updated in 2010 (2) including a total of 8,447 patients with both data from the old trials, and from all recent trials, showing an absolute increase in survival of 4% at 5 years (from 60% to 64%, \(P<0.0001\)). The beneficial effect of adjuvant chemotherapy was also observed in the LACE meta-analysis, which only included trials with cisplatin-based regimen (3), showing an absolute survival benefit at five years of 5.4% (\(P=0.005\)). After complete resection, adjuvant chemotherapy is now a standard of care for stage II and III NSCLC patients, even for elderly patients (4), but is controversial in stage I patients (5). Nonetheless, even among these patients, local control remains an important issue as 20-40% of patients...
will suffer from loco-regional relapse.

Concerning post-operative radiotherapy (PORT), it has been evaluated for decades, and, despite several trials and meta-analysis, it is still debated.

**PORT through the prism of evidence-based medicine**

The PORT meta-analysis which initially included 9 randomized trials (6-12) is a landmark study published in 1998 (13) and updated in 2005 (14) with a 10th study (15). The conclusions of this meta-analysis are well known among clinicians: PORT is detrimental to patients with early stage (I or II), whereas for those with N2 disease there was no significant adverse effect. The details of the 10 trials are much less known than the conclusions of the meta-analysis, however, these details are of paramount importance to better understand the possible role of PORT in the N2 subgroup of patients which is not clear as shown in Tables 1, 2. It should be outlined that none of these trials used adjuvant chemotherapy which is now a standard (2,3).

Three randomised trials were dedicated to early stage (pN0) patients. The first trial was performed by Van Houtte et al. (6) and included 175 N0 patients from 1966 to 1977. PORT was delivered with a cobalt 60 unit (Co). The 5-year survival rate was respectively 24% in the RT arm and 43% in the control arm. The deleterious effect of RT was even more pronounced after pneumonectomy with a survival rate of 16% with PORT and 43% in the control arm. A study performed a decade later, by the same team (17), has highlighted the potential benefit of modern facilities (linear accelerator and computed tomography-based treatment planning): the 5-year survival rate was only 8% among patients treated with Co, whereas it was 30% in patients treated with more modern radiotherapy. The second trial dedicated to pN0 patients is the study of Lafitte et al. (10) which found no significant difference in overall survival or local control between surgery and PORT versus surgery alone. The authors pointed out that the main pattern of relapse was distant recurrence and that systemic adjuvant therapy should be considered. The third study performed by Trodella et al., also focused on pN0 patients (15). PORT was delivered at the dose of 50.4 Gy in 28 fractions of 1.8 Gy, using modern facilities as described above. The first

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**Table 1 Details and results of certain phase III studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Recruitment Stage</th>
<th>N patients Total dose/fraction size (Gy)</th>
<th>RT technique</th>
<th>Local recurrence rate (%) P</th>
<th>5-year survival rate (%) P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium (6)*</td>
<td>1966-1977 I, II (N0)</td>
<td>104 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt</td>
<td>10.90 ns</td>
<td>43 &lt;0.05 (no PORT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCGS (12)</td>
<td>1978-1985 II, III</td>
<td>120 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt</td>
<td>41 0.001</td>
<td>40 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMS (11)</td>
<td>1981-1995 II, III</td>
<td>182 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td>33.20 0.01</td>
<td>40.5 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lille (10)*</td>
<td>1985-1991 I</td>
<td>72 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td>na ns</td>
<td>51.6 ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GETCB (7) [86 and 88]</td>
<td>1986-1994 I, II, III</td>
<td>355 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td>34 ns</td>
<td>43 0.002 (no PORT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (15)*</td>
<td>1989-1997 I</td>
<td>53 – –</td>
<td>Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td>23 0.019</td>
<td>58 0.048 (PORT)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria (16)</td>
<td>I, II, III</td>
<td>72 – –</td>
<td>Linac</td>
<td>20 &lt;0.01</td>
<td>20.4 ns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*, pN0 patients; **, this result was no longer significant when updated (14).
results published in 2002 showed a positive trend in overall 5-year survival in favor of PORT (67% versus 58% in the control arm, P=0.046), but this trend was not confirmed when data were reanalyzed for the update of PORT meta-analysis (14). Even if this trend was unconfirmed, the authors highlighted, that the treatment fields were very limited, and that there was no detrimental effect related to PORT in this trial which used modern radiotherapy. However, it is now generally considered that such pN0 patients are more at risk of distant failure than local failure.

Three randomized studies included stage II and III, or pN1 and pN2 patients, excluding thus pN0 patients. In the randomized study conducted by the Lung Cancer Study Group (LCSG) (12), 230 patients with stage II or III resected squamous cell carcinoma were enrolled. There was no significant difference in overall survival, with a 5-year survival rate of about 40% in both arms, although PORT reduced significantly the rate of local recurrence (1% with PORT and 41% in the control arm, P<0.001). Moreover, subgroup analysis suggested that disease free survival (DFS) could be prolonged by PORT for N2 patients. The study of the Medical Research Council (MRC) (9) had a similar design to the LCSG trial, but it also included patients with adenocarcinoma. The results were quite similar with better local control that did not translate into a significant overall survival benefit. Once again, subgroup analysis revealed a trend for better overall survival in N2 patients. A phase III Chinese trial involving 366 N1 or N2 resected patients, came to the same conclusions: they found a lower rate of local recurrence (12.7% with PORT and 33.2% in the control arm, P=0.01) with no impact on survival (5-year survival rate was respectively 42.9% with PORT and 40.5% in the control arm, P=0.56).

Finally, the study of Dautzenberg et al. (7) which is the largest trial included in the meta-analysis on PORT, included 728 patients: 221 with stage I, 180 patients with stage II and 327 patients with stage III. The authors observed a detrimental effect of PORT on survival: 5-year overall survival rate was 30% with PORT versus 43% in the control arm (P=0.002). Once again for N2 patients, there was a trend in favor of PORT in decreasing loco-regional relapse. The excess of deaths among patients treated with PORT was due to a high incidence of cardiac and respiratory complications (such as cardiorespiratory failure, radiation pneumonitis, and massive haemoptysis). These non-cancer-related deaths seemed correlated with fractionation: they were much more frequent among patients who had received a daily fraction of 2 Gy or more (26% with daily fraction >2 Gy versus 16-18% in case of daily fraction ≤2 Gy). In the Mayer study (16), which was not included in the meta-analysis, 155 completely resected patients with T1-3 N0-2 NSCLC were randomly assigned to observation or PORT. The results (16) were similar to those of the LCSG (12), CAMS (11) or MRC (9): a significant increase of local control could be observed among patients who had PORT but with no impact in overall survival.

In the early 90s, for operable patients with small N2 nodal involvement, surgery and PORT was considered as a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trial</th>
<th>Recruitment</th>
<th>Total dose/fraction size (Gy)</th>
<th>RT technique</th>
<th>No deaths/no patients</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>P</th>
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<td>1966-1977</td>
<td>60/2 Cobalt 88/98</td>
<td></td>
<td>S+PORT 88/98 80/104</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>(no PORT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCSG (12)</td>
<td>1978-1985</td>
<td>50.4/1.8 Cobalt and Linac</td>
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<td></td>
<td>84/110</td>
<td>81/120</td>
<td>0.457</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAMS (11)</td>
<td>1981-1995</td>
<td>60/2 Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td>S+PORT 83/153 100/164</td>
<td>0.874</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lille (10)*</td>
<td>1985-1991</td>
<td>45-60/2 Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59/81</td>
<td>45/82</td>
<td>0.032</td>
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<td>EORTC 08861</td>
<td>1986-1990</td>
<td>56/2 Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26/52</td>
<td>20/54</td>
<td>0.098</td>
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<td>MRC LU11 (9)</td>
<td>1986-1993</td>
<td>40/2.6 Cobalt and Linac</td>
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<td></td>
<td>116/154</td>
<td>123/154</td>
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<td>1988-1992</td>
<td>30/2.5-3 Cobalt and Linac</td>
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<td>1986-1994</td>
<td>60/2-2.5 Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>69/99</td>
<td>59/90</td>
<td>0.378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GETCB-88 (7)</td>
<td>1988-1994</td>
<td>60/2-2.5 Cobalt and Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>152/274</td>
<td>120/265</td>
<td>0.002   (no PORT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy (15)*</td>
<td>1989-1997</td>
<td>50.4/1.8 Linac</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23/51</td>
<td>30/53</td>
<td>0.215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaanalysis (14)</td>
<td></td>
<td>730/1,107 691/1,125</td>
<td></td>
<td>No deaths/no patients</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.002   (no PORT)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*, pN0 patients.
standard of care, before publication of several studies and meta-analyses (18-20) had proven the beneficial effect of adjuvant (or neo-adjuvant) chemotherapy in this group of patients [IALT, JBR, ANITA, LACE, Meta-analyses 2010, 30]. Therefore, the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) proposed a randomised phase III study which allocated patients who had complete surgery to PORT (50.4 Gy in 1.8 Gy fractions), which was considered as the reference arm, or to chemo-radiotherapy (CPORT: cisplatin and etoposide regimen administered concurrently with PORT) (21). There was no significant difference between the 2 arms, neither in terms of survival (3-year survival rates respectively of 52% with PORT and 50% with CPORT, P=0.56), nor local recurrences (13% with PORT and 12% with CPORT, P=0.84). Interestingly, the authors performed a retrospective analysis in order to compare the impact of a simple systematic sampling versus a complete mediastinal lymph node dissection (22) and found a survival advantage among patients who had a mediastinal lymph node dissection. Nonetheless, the result of this nonrandomized and non-planned comparison should be interpreted with caution. They outline that the modalities of surgery and most importantly nodal exploration are also important to consider, in order to evaluate PORT. Finally in this chapter it seems important to mention that a group of the studies included in the meta-analysis published in 2010, based on individual data from 13 randomised trials (2,660 patients; 63% being stage III) has evaluated the combination of surgery plus PORT which was the control arm versus surgery plus PORT and adjuvant chemotherapy which was the investigational arm (2). An absolute and significant survival benefit of 4% in favor of adjuvant chemotherapy was found (the 5-year survival rates were 29% in the surgery plus PORT and 33% with surgery plus PORT and chemotherapy, P=0.009). This survival benefit was similar to that observed with surgery plus chemotherapy compared to surgery alone. The authors concluded that the benefit of chemotherapy was similar irrespective of whether PORT was added to surgery or not. So adjuvant chemotherapy has become the standard of care, for stages II and III patients. The question would now concern PORT which should be in the investigational arm, whereas the control arm would include surgery plus chemotherapy.

**Could an increase of loco-regional control be beneficial to high risk patients?**

Four randomised trials including N2 patients [LCSG (12), CAMS (11), MRC (9) and the Austrian trial (16)] found PORT to be associated with a significant decrease of local failure but no impact on survival. The study of Dautzenberg et al. (7) suggested that PORT could improve local control only in N2 patients. It should be outlined that these studies were performed at an era where staging evaluation did not comprise PET-CT scan and brain imaging, so that several patients included in these trials, especially those with N2 disease, might have been metastatic at the time they were included. Thus, the potential effect of PORT on local control may also have been diluted by the occurrence of distant metastases. As adjuvant chemotherapy is now part of the standard treatment in these patients, PORT needs to be reevaluated in the subgroup of patients who, after a complete staging evaluation with PET-CT and brain imaging, are found to be pN2. The question of PORT may also be valid in high risk patients who have pre-operative chemotherapy whether or not they have nodal downstaging. As shown in a Swiss phase II study which evaluated neo-adjuvant chemotheraphy in stage IIIA patients with proven pathological N2 disease, the rate of local relapse can be high as it reached 60% at 5 years (23). Recently, Mauguen et al. (24) have found that disease free survival seemed to be a valid surrogate endpoint for overall survival. This finding also suggests that improving local control and disease free survival might improve survival.

Within the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) database (25), 7,465 patients treated from 1988 to 2002 (a time period in which linear accelerators were already common in clinical treatment) were retrospectively analysed. The same conclusions were drawn than those suggested by PORT meta-analysis (13,14): a survival benefit for N2 patients and a detrimental effect on survival for N0 and N1, even if it can be extrapolated that patients were treated with more modern radiotherapy techniques. Among the 840 patients included in the ANITA trial (20), 232 received PORT. Survival of patients with and without PORT in each arm (adjuvant chemotherapy or observation) was well described (26): in univariate analysis, PORT had a detrimental effect on survival, but, in the subgroup of patients with N2 disease, survival was improved with PORT both in the chemotherapy (median survival of 23.8 months without PORT and 47.4 months with PORT) and the observation arm (median survival of 12.7 months without PORT and 22.7 months with PORT). The author thereby advocated that further evaluation of PORT in completely resected pN2 NSCLC should be performed in randomized trials. Scotti et al. have retrospectively reviewed the data of
175 patients with completely resected N2 disease (27). Local failure rates were 15.1% in the PORT group and 32.1% in the no-PORT group (P=0.009), but overall survival was similar in both groups. For these patients treated between 1988 and 2004, radiotherapy has resulted in mild toxicity.

Patients with ipsilateral mediastinal lymph node involvement are a heterogeneous subgroup. From a retrospective study involving 702 patients who underwent surgery in 6 French centers, Andre et al. (28) have used a subclassification taking into account 2 criteria concerning nodal involvement: minimal (mN2: no preoperative detection of N2 disease) or clinical (cN2: enlarge lymph node on CT scan) disease, and single (L1) or multiple (L2) lymph node involvement. The 5-year survival rates for patients treated with primary surgery were dramatically different within subgroups: mN2 L1 (244 patients): 34%, mN2 L2 (78 patients): 11%, cN2 L1 (118 patients): 8% and cN2 L2 (122 patients): 3%. Unfortunately, no data were available concerning the pattern of relapse. For the authors, the poor prognosis of cN2 patients leads to propose multimodality treatment, such as peri-operative (neoadjuvant and adjuvant) chemotherapy and PORT. We have seen that surgery and adjuvant chemotherapy is now the standard of care (2,29), thus, neoadjuvant chemotherapy is the preferred sequence by some clinicians. However, a recent meta-analysis didn't find any survival difference between pre and post-operative chemotherapy (30). As mediastinal downstaging after induction treatment is a strong and a relevant prognostic factor for local recurrence. Another Japanese study has retrospectively assessed 332 completely resected N2 patients between 1992 and 1993 in Japan (33). Out of these 332 patients, 130 (39.2%) experienced local failure. The number of N2 stations was found to be a prognostic factor for local recurrence. Another Japanese study has retrospectively assessed PORT according the number of lymph node stations involved (34). PORT had no significant effect on overall survival, but significantly improved disease-free survival (by decreasing local recurrence) in patients with multiple N2 involvement. In this subgroup of patients, the 5-year disease-free survival rates were 41% in the PORT group and 5.9% in the non-PORT group. The same concept was tested by Urban et al. who analysed 11,324 patients from the SEER database (35). Their results suggest, once again, that PORT is beneficial to patients with pN2 disease, when the lymph node ratio (number of positive nodes/number of resected nodes) is at least 50% or more.

Is the detrimental effect of PORT still an issue with modern radiotherapy?

All patients randomised in the 11 phase 3 studies evaluating PORT were treated before 2000; some were even included as early as 1966. It must be emphasized that only 3 out of the 11 randomized trials evaluating PORT used exclusively modern radiotherapy, i.e., computed tomography based treatment planning and linear accelerator delivering high energy [(15,16) and the unpublished EORT 08861 trial], and a substantial number of patients enrolled in these studies were treated with Co unit. As shown in Tables 1,2, a worse survival was found in the Belgian (6) and the GETCB studies (7), which use Co, high total dose (60 Gy) and high dose per fraction (>2 Gy). It has been demonstrated that using more “modern” radiotherapy, resulted in lower morbidity than treatment with cobalt unit (17). Moreover, the use of a 2-dimensional technique, instead of CT-based 3 dimensional conformal radiotherapy, leads to an underdosage in the area at risk (36). The total dose, the dose per fraction and the treated volume are also of major concern when considering toxicity. Firstly, the total dose delivered to the majority of patients included in the meta-analysis (6,7,10,11) was as high as 60 Gy, whereas 54 Gy would be sufficient in a prophylactic setting and less harmful (37). Secondly, it is well demonstrated that fractionation schedules with more than 2.5/3 Gy per fraction leads to a higher rate of cardiac (38) and pulmonary (39) injury. Dautzenberg et al. (7) highlighted the detrimental effect of large doses per fraction in PORT. In most studies included in the meta-analysis, the irradiated volume was usually quite large and included most of the mediastinum (both the ipsi and contra lateral side of the mediastinum) and the supraclavicular area. Incidence of nodal involvement derived from surgical series (40) and the pattern of relapse after surgery without PORT (41) may help to define higher risk areas. To further improve the definition of the nodal areas at risk, a CT-based node map, derived from the classification proposed by Mountain and Dresler (42), has been defined (43). However there have been changes concerning the delimitations of nodal stations and introduction of the nodal zone concept in the new TNM classification (44).

Breast cancer provides an interesting model of benefit/risk balance with adjuvant radiotherapy: despite a decreased risk of local recurrence with radiotherapy, no significant impact on
overall survival has been proven until the end of the 90s (45,46), due to an increased risk of mortality from ischemic heart disease. With modern radiotherapy, a significant benefit in favor of radiotherapy has finally be highlight (45,46), and it has been shown that the risk of death from heart disease has substantially decreased more contemporary techniques of radiotherapy (47).

For patients suffering from NSCLC, some retrospective data suggest that PORT-related toxicity might have also decreased with time. Rate of death from intercurrent disease (DID) of the patients included in the ECOG study, which evaluated PORT versus CPORT (21), was compared to the expected rate of DID calculated from United States vital statistics (48). The 4-year rate of DID was 12.9% for patients treated in the ECOG study, and was not significantly different from the 10.1% 4-year expected rate of DID (P=0.16). Data concerning 6,148 patients treated from 1983 to 1993 were obtained from the SEER program (49): 3,589 received PORT (58%) and 2,559 did not (42%). PORT was significantly associated with an increased risk of death from heart disease. However, this excess of cardiovascular toxicities after PORT was only observed in the cohort of patients treated between 1983 and 1988 but not in the cohort of patients diagnosed from 1989 to 1993. The authors hypothesize that the decrease of cardiac toxicity related to PORT was due to improvements of the thoracic radiotherapy (treatment planning with computed tomography allowing 3-dimensional conformal radiotherapy and high energy delivered by linear accelerator instead of Cobalt).

Overall, radiotherapy modalities used in the randomized trials included in the meta-analysis (13) appear now outdated, especially when compared to the recommendations for planning and delivery of thoracic radiotherapy that have been recently published (50). Latest techniques could further decrease PORT-related toxicity. Image-guided radiotherapy (IGRT) offers several ways to deal with respiratory motion (51,52), such as the deep-inspiration breath-hold radiotherapy (53), the breathing-synchronized radiotherapy or the 4-dimensional CT scan (54) which allows to generate a personalized treatment volume. The clinical results are encouraging (55,56), notably concerning toxicity. Intensity modulated radiotherapy (IMRT) allows better dose distribution compared to conformal radiotherapy (57), with interesting clinical results in inoperable NSCLC (58,59).

Tobacco use seems to be associated with poorer outcome to patients treated by surgery and PORT (60). Gareen et al. (61) have suggested that clinicians have to help patients to quit smoking by giving them specific advice and follow-up instead of a brief injunction.

So, a randomized trial testing PORT for N2 patient was urgently needed...

The ongoing phase III Lung Adjuvant Radiotherapy Trial (ART) is randomizing completely resected patients with cytologically or pathologically proven N2 mediastinal disease between PORT and observation (62) (Figure 1). Patients may have had neo-adjuvant chemotherapy, or adjuvant chemotherapy. At initial staging, 18-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography scanning is recommended (63). In case of pre-operative chemotherapy, the ipsilateral mediastinal involvement has to be pathologically proven before any treatment, so that even in case of mediastinal downstaging (N2 to N1 or N0), the patient can enter the study. Even if induction chemotherapy produces a good response, up to one third of these patients may eventually suffer from local relapse (64), thus it seems interesting to evaluate PORT in this subgroup of patients. There has been a proposal for the definition of complete resection by a group of surgeons of the IASLC (65). Lymph node exploration is mandatory, however the surgeon might choose to use either a simple node sampling or a complete systematic nodal dissection, because the role of these 2 approaches is still debated (66-68). Three-dimensional conformal radiotherapy is, of course, mandatory, together with the use of high-energy photon (6-10 MV) delivered by a linear accelerator. The planned total dose is 54 Gy (37) in fractions of 1.8 or 2 Gy, and the dose per fraction should never exceed 2 Gy (7,38,39). Elective nodal irradiation, which means to treat the whole mediastinum, including the ipsi and contra lateral side of the mediastinum down to the pillars of the diaphragm, and the supra clavicular areas, is not allowed. Treated volume is now limited to involved node station(s) and stations at high risk according to tumor location (40,41,69). This contouring protocol has been evaluated and was able to reduce variability of the treated volume among clinicians (70). Quality assurance procedures, such as a dummy run before any inclusion in a center, aim to verify the compliance to the Lung ART protocol (volume definition, dose to organ at risk, etc.). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that compliance to radiotherapy protocol mustn’t be neglected because it can dramatically impact outcome (71). The main end point of this study is disease free survival (DFS) (24). The 3-year DFS among pN2 patients is about 30%, and the 3-year local recurrence rate is also about 30% (18). In order to observe a 10% absolute improvement of the DFS (from 30% to 40%), the inclusion of 700 patients is planned in the Lung ART study.
This study, involving the Intergroupe Francophone de Cancerologie Thoracique (IFCT 0503), has accrued more than 200 patients in France, and has been joined recently by a large national group from the United Kingdom, and the Lung Group, as well as the Radiation Oncology Group from the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC 22055-08053). Another trial is ongoing in China comparing 4 cycles of adjuvant chemotherapy to 4 cycles of chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy, after complete resection of NSCLC.

In the pre-PET era, the high rate of distant metastases diluted any real effect of local control on overall outcome. As the population of resected N2 patients has changed, because of better selection (more accurate staging with PET CT, brain imaging), better surgery (lung sparing techniques, pre-op and post-op care...), administration of systematic adjuvant or neo-adjuvant chemotherapy which has become standard of care, the major technical advances of radiotherapy may enhance the ability of PORT to improve local relapse free survival and possibly overall survival but this has to be proven. The results of these randomized trials could change the standard care in resected N2 patients.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**References**


Radiotherapy

Proton radiotherapy in the treatment of lung cancer

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Abstract: Radiation therapy for lung cancer often leads to treatment-related pneumonitis or lung fibrosis, especially when given with concurrent chemotherapy. These side effects can impair quality of life and negatively affect treatment outcomes. With the advent of proton radiotherapy comes the possibility of reducing these toxicities by minimizing the amount of non-target tissue that is irradiated. Protons have significantly different physical characteristics that can make their use advantageous over standard photon radiotherapy. Multiple retrospective reviews and phase I/II studies have linked the use of protons with fewer side effects in at least some patients with lung cancer, and randomized trials comparing proton therapy with photon treatments are ongoing. Technologic advances may allow for even further minimization of toxicity associated with radiation therapy. In this review, we discuss the current state of proton therapy for the management of lung cancer as well as challenges and opportunities for further development of this treatment modality.

Keywords: Radiation therapy; lung cancer; protons

Submitted Nov 05, 2012. Accepted for publication Dec 06, 2012.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-676X.2012.12.02

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-676X.2012.12.02

Introduction

Ever since the first attempts to treat malignancy with radiotherapy were made in the early 1900s, delivering a tumorcidal dose of radiotherapy while minimizing toxicity to nearby normal tissues has always been a challenge. Initially, tumors could be targeted only via direct or near-direct contact with a radiotherapy source. With the advent of Cobalt-60 radiation sources and, later, linear accelerators, therapeutic radiation could be delivered to virtually any site in the body. However, the dose that can be delivered to the tumor continues to be limited by normal tissue constraints. Fundamentally, this is determined by the physical characteristics of standard photon or electron radiotherapy. Photons, which include standard X-rays, and electrons deposit the radiation dose over the entire track of the beam; after peaking at a physically determined depth in water (or tissue), the deposited dose decreases slowly. For example, as shown in Figure 1, the maximum dose of radiation delivered by a standard 6 MV photon beam is at a depth of 1.5 cm in water. For electrons of similar energies, the depth at which maximum dose is delivered (D_max) is even less. This dose distribution is reasonable for superficial tumors, but for tumors more than 1.5 cm below the surface of the skin, for one radiation beam, the normal tissue proximal to the tumor will be treated to a higher dose than the tumor itself. This physical reality is compensated for in standard radiotherapy by the use of multiple beams that converge at the level of the tumor. With more advanced planning techniques, such as intensity-modulated radiotherapy (IMRT), the intensity of each beam can be altered by using a computer-determined “best solution” for all beams to maximize tumor dose while sparing surrounding normal tissue. Despite these significant advances, standard radiotherapy continues to be limited by the generally inalterable physical characteristics of a photon (or electron) beam. This has led to interest in other forms of radiotherapy with different beam characteristics. Here we focus primarily on proton radiotherapy, the most common charged particle therapy in clinical use for lung cancer in the United States.
Physical characteristics of proton beams

As previously stated, photon beams reach their maximum dose (D_max) at a known depth in tissue, a known physical property determined by the beam energy. Higher photon energies lead to greater D_max at the expense of increased fall-off dose as well as increased possibility of neutron scattering. However, charged particles such as protons have minimal ionization along their beam path, meaning that the dose delivered to any point along the beam path is minimal and the entrance dose for any particular proton beam is less than that for a comparable photon beam. Instead, the vast majority of dose in a charged particle beam is deposited near the end of the beam path, when the particles have nearly stopped (Figure 1). This phenomenon was initially observed as early as 1904, and has been dubbed the “Bragg peak” for its discoverer William Henry Bragg (1). By modulating the proton energy, the depth of the Bragg peak, or point of maximal radiation dose delivery, can be altered. However, the area of the Bragg peak for any one proton energy is too narrow for clinical use, requiring the use of a summed proton beam of multiple energies, resulting in the so-called “spread-out Bragg peak” (Figure 1).

A concept useful in comparing forms of radiotherapy is that of relative biologic effectiveness (RBE). Simply stated, this is a ratio between a standard dose of radiation (typically 250 kVp X-rays) and the dose of the test radiation required to produce the same biologic effect. Although the concept is fairly simple, derivation of the RBE is a complex process, depending upon a number of variables including the type of tissue being studied, the degree of hypoxia within the tissue, the type of radiation being used, the dose delivered, and the energy lost over the beam path (linear energy transfer or LET). Historically, the RBE for a variety of different types of radiation has been determined primarily by in vitro and preclinical studies. For clinical use, the RBE for a proton beam (within the Bragg peak) is generally assumed to be 1.1 (2,3), meaning that for every 1 Grey (Gy), the biological effectiveness of a proton beam is similar to what is seen with 1.1 Gy of standard X-rays. This has led to the use of the term cobalt-Grey equivalent (CGE) when describing doses or proton therapy. Thus 74 CGE is equivalent to 67.3 Gy delivered by protons. Although the RBE/CGE concept provides a clinically useful value, several caveats must be borne in mind. The RBE is thought to vary slightly over the breadth of a Bragg peak. Specifically, the experimentally determined RBE values within a proton beam generally increase over the Bragg peak and are highest in the final millimeters (4-8). This effect is recognized in the course of routine clinical treatments by the recommendation that no proton beam should terminate in a critical normal structure. RBE also varies as a function of the tissue irradiated; in vivo preclinical models have predicted average values ranging from 0.7 to 1.6 (2). Examination of this variation in the RBE of a proton beam has led to attempts to integrate this factor into treatment planning (9-11).

Clinical use of proton therapy in lung cancer

The use of proton radiotherapy has grown substantially, particularly over the past decade, with 10 facilities using this modality in the United States alone. The unique characteristics of proton radiotherapy has led to its use being championed to allow both sparing of normal tissue and increasing the radiation dose delivered to targets heretofore limited by proximity to adjacent normal surrounding structures. Particular interest in proton radiotherapy has been expressed for the treatment of lung cancer. The standard therapy for locally advanced lung cancer involves a combination of radiation and chemotherapy delivered concurrently, typically to radiation doses of 60-70 Gy. However, treatment in this dose range can be quite toxic, leading to significant pulmonary injury (mainly pneumonitis and fibrosis) as well as esophagitis and other toxic effects (12). Any damage to the lungs in patients with lung cancer tends to be exacerbated by a lack of pulmonary reserve, as many patients present with some form of chronic obstructive disease from cigarette smoking and many require supplemental oxygen even before radiotherapy. The findings regarding the value of dose-escalation in these patients is somewhat conflicting (13,14).
One possibility for this disparity could be treatment-related toxicity; in other words, although tumor control may be increased in patients treated with higher radiation doses, the commensurate increase in toxicity and toxicity-related death can mask any potential benefit. Hence the desire for a radiation treatment modality that can minimize radiation dose to critical structures (e.g., the lungs) while allowing the possibility of dose escalation to the target. One such modality that attempts to achieve this goal is proton beam therapy.

Several planning studies have been done to compare the dose to normal surrounding structures associated with either photon or proton radiotherapy. Generally, in these studies, proton beam therapy has shown benefits over standard conformal radiotherapy; specifically, the dose to the uninvolved lung can in some cases be superior to that provided via conventional radiotherapy (15-17) or IMRT (15,17). Examples of a typical plan for passive scatter proton radiotherapy and one for IMRT are shown in Figure 2. Proton radiotherapy may also have advantages over photon-based stereotactic radiotherapy for smaller tumors in terms of sparing normal tissue (15,18-20). However, the benefit from the use of protons from the dosimetric perspective is not universal. Because of the uncertainty of the exact range of the Bragg peak, particularly in hypodense tissues such as lung, the use of additional margin of high-dose radiation may be required, leading to a higher dose to critical structures, particularly when they are close to the target (21). Further, because many tumors have irregular borders and involve the mediastinum, highly conformal IMRT may provide an advantage in regard to normal tissue sparing compared with the traditional passive-scatter approach to proton radiotherapy (22).

Dosimetric studies aside, a growing body of literature details the clinical experience of using charged particle therapy for lung cancer. Several institutions have generated significant data from the use of proton radiotherapy as monotherapy. One of the earliest published studies reported the investigators’ experience in treating mainly early-stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) with a proton boost after traditional photon radiotherapy. In that study of 37 patients, the local control rate was 87%, and only 2 patients developed symptomatic pneumonitis (23). Studies of stereotactic or hypofractionated proton-based radiotherapy
for early-stage lung cancer have shown similar local control rates for small, peripheral lesions (24-27). However, in the same studies, local control rates for larger lesions have been less favorable, falling in the range of 40% to 60%. Toxicity in these studies has been minimal; in a phase I/II trial recently completed at MD Anderson Cancer Center involving a dose of 87.5 CGE, the rates of symptomatic pneumonitis and esophagitis were 11% and 6% (27).

Less information is available regarding combinations of proton radiotherapy with concurrent chemotherapy for locally advanced lung cancer. The guiding principle for radiotherapy to the lung has been to increase the dose to the point of maximum tolerability, as a radiation dose-response relationship has been observed for locally advanced lung cancer (13). However, any dose escalation must take into account the significant toxicity associated with thoracic radiotherapy. In fact, the most recent national trial of dose-escalated thoracic radiotherapy initiated by the RTOG led to the premature closure of the high-dose treatment group (74 Gy) because of the absence of any observed survival benefit (14). Although the final toxicity data from this trial were not available when this review was written, it is worth noting that 7 patients died in the high-dose group versus 3 in the control group (treated to 60 Gy). Thus, it seems that significant caution should be observed in attempting dose escalation of thoracic radiotherapy when that therapy involves conventional methods. However, a recent retrospective review of concurrent platinum-based chemotherapy and proton radiotherapy noted particularly low rates of pneumonitis (2%) and esophagitis (5%) compared with those rates in a similar group of patients treated to a lower dose (63 Gy) by either 3-dimensional conformal radiotherapy or IMRT (28). Further investigation of these results in a phase II trial showed similarly positive results, with local control rates of close to 80% and pneumonitis and esophagitis rates of around 2% and 11% (29). These results are also being evaluated further in a Bayesian randomized trial of image-guided proton radiotherapy compared with photon radiotherapy for patients with locally advanced lung cancer.

Despite the dosimetric evidence and some clinical data supporting the use of proton radiotherapy for the treatment of lung cancer, significant challenges remain. First, treatment planning using proton radiotherapy is complicated by the inherent motion of the lung. Unlike photon radiotherapy, protons are drastically affected by the material through which they pass. Thus tissue densities must be accounted for during treatment planning. However, the motion of the lung - and consequently the motion of the tumor - during the respiratory cycle can make this challenging, particularly in light of the finite range of protons. Although proton radiotherapy is appealing in the context of sparing normal structures, any changes in the path of the beams during respiration could change the range of the proton beam significantly, leading to marginal misses of the target or increased dose to surrounding normal structures. This problem has been addressed in several planning studies [reviewed in (30)], and a variety of different approaches are being used to minimize this problem. In one such approach, “smearing” the target volume artificially increases the volume targeted in an attempt to ensure good coverage despite small changes arising from motion during the respiratory cycle. This problem of appropriate targeting is further amplified by changes in the tumor itself during radiotherapy: tumors can shrink or become more cavitary in response to radiotherapy, which again changes the density of the tissue traversed by the proton beam and altering its range. At MD Anderson Cancer Center, we have tried to minimize this problem by obtaining images throughout the course of the radiotherapy and modifying the plans (“adaptive planning”) if the tumor responds significantly.

Further difficulties arise from highly irregular targets. As noted previously, IMRT can in many cases provide more conformal treatment for large irregular lesions. In an initial dosimetric comparison between IMRT and proton radiotherapy as part of the above-mentioned randomized protocol, IMRT was found to have a dosimetric advantage in many cases (31). One possible solution to the problem of conformality is the use of some form of modulated proton radiotherapy. Conventional proton radiotherapy (“passive scatter”) uses material to scatter the beam over a large area, with a rotating wheel placed in the beam path to allow generation of a spread-out Bragg peak. This approach basically delivers a uniform dose over the extent of the target, but does not allow generation of irregular contours for the dose to be delivered. The concept of “pencil beam” proton radiotherapy is being investigated to improve upon this dose distribution; in this technique, the dose can be “painted” over any particular target by the use of pencil beams of protons directed at small segments of an individual target. Although this approach can improve the conformal coverage of irregular targets, in some situations it can be less robust than use of a passive scatter beam, because the accuracy of scanning beam proton radiotherapy is affected to an even greater extent by organ motion (32). Studies of the use of scanning beam technology for the treatment of...
lung cancer are ongoing.

Finally, cautions have been raised regarding the problem of unintended neutron dose when using proton radiotherapy. The production of secondary neutrons may be of particular concern for passive scatter beams, in which a physical component is placed in the beam path, because these scattered neutrons may themselves be carcinogenic. Although this could be of significant import for younger populations, patients with lung cancer tend to be older, and risk estimates for carcinogenesis are highest for young patients (33). Further, the magnitude of neutrons generated by passive scatter beams is debated in the literature (34). Regardless, the advent of scanning beam technology has greatly reduced the possible risk of neutron scatter in the use of proton beam radiotherapy (33).

**Future challenges and opportunities**

The advent of proton radiotherapy for lung cancer brings with it an opportunity to minimize the toxicity of current standard-of-care therapy. At present, this possibility is being investigated in at least one randomized trial in which the benefits of passive scatter proton radiotherapy are being compared with those of IMRT. Further prospective studies are also ongoing to compare the benefits of stereotactic proton radiotherapy with those of standard 3D-conformal stereotactic radiotherapy. So, what further challenges and opportunities remain? One major criticism of proton radiotherapy for the treatment of lung cancer is its cost. The development of proton radiotherapy capability requires a significant cost outlay for any institution. Moreover, a treatment course of proton radiotherapy is significantly more expensive at the current time than is a comparable course of IMRT. Although this cost will likely decrease with time, proton radiotherapy remains an expensive treatment option. However, the costs of proton radiotherapy for lung cancer must be weighed against the costs of toxicity associated with therapy. In fact, in one cost-effectiveness model involving only recent studies, proton radiotherapy was found to be cost-effective for the management of selected cases of lung cancer (35). This finding underscores the idea that merely calculating treatment costs does not completely measure the value of any particular therapy.

With regard to technology, the current “cutting edge” in proton radiotherapy delivery is the development of intensity modulation. As noted previously, one of the disadvantages of passive beam proton radiotherapy is the inability to conform to a highly irregular target or to allow dose-painting within the irradiated field. Scanning beam technology removes this disadvantage. Moreover, one could conceivably generate treatment plans that take advantage of the increased RBE at the Bragg peak by deliberately encompassing a radioresistant area of a tumor (e.g., an hypoxic area) within the Bragg peak of each scanning beam. Theoretically, this approach would lead to improved response without incurring any toxicity associated with dose escalation. However, as noted previously, scanning beam technology for proton delivery is highly dependent on precise planning software and improved motion management. As these technologies improve, true intensity modulation of protons in the treatment of lung cancer will become a reality.

In summary, the current state of proton beam radiotherapy or intensity-modulated proton beam radiotherapy for lung cancer is one of optimism. Prospective trials of proton radiotherapy are ongoing, and those findings, as they mature, will be valuable in further clarifying the role of proton radiotherapy for the management of this deadly disease.

**Acknowledgements**

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

Surgery remains the only potentially curative treatment for early-stage non-small cell lung cancer patients (NSCLC) resulting in 5-year survival rates ranging from 77% in pathological stage IA to 23% in stage IIIA tumors (1).

Clinical trials and meta-analyses have demonstrated that in patients with radically resected disease adjuvant chemotherapy improves 5-year survival rates. However, a customization of systemic treatment is needed to avoid treatments in patients cured by surgery alone or to justify the use of adjuvant chemotherapy in high risk patients, including those in stage IA. Recently, the possibility of identifying prognostic and predictive factors related to the genetic signatures of the tumor that could affect adjuvant and neo-adjuvant treatment choices for resectable non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) has been of interest. This review summarizes the current status and future opportunities for clinical application of genotyping and genomic tests in early NSCLC.

Keywords: Prognostic and predictive biomarkers; early stages; non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC); gene signatures

Abstract: In early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) large randomized trials have demonstrated that in patients with radically resected disease adjuvant chemotherapy improves 5-year survival rates. However, a customization of systemic treatment is needed to avoid treatments in patients cured by surgery alone or to justify the use of adjuvant chemotherapy in high risk patients, including those in stage IA. Recently, the possibility of identifying prognostic and predictive factors related to the genetic signatures of the tumor that could affect adjuvant and neo-adjuvant treatment choices for resectable non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) has been of interest. This review summarizes the current status and future opportunities for clinical application of genotyping and genomic tests in early NSCLC.

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Submitted Sep 15, 2013. Accepted for publication Oct 10, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.05
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.10.05
variation, DNA methylation and microRNA and several genomic signatures have been identified and tested in early stage NSCLC for their prognostic value.

**Excision repair cross-complementation group 1**

Cisplatin inhibits replication by binding to DNA and forming platinum-DNA adducts causing strand breaks when the DNA helices unwind in preparation for replication. The nuclear excision repair (NER) family of genes is involved in repair of these DNA strand breaks (14). The excision repair cross-complementation group 1 (ERCC1) enzyme is involved in the final step of the NER pathway that recognizes and removes cisplatin-induced DNA adducts, therefore, leading to cisplatin resistance. High tumoral ERCC1 expression, therefore, predicts for cisplatin resistance.

ERCC1 activity may be assessed as protein by standard immunohistochemistry (IHC) or automated AQUA technology (15). Alternatively, it can be assessed at the mRNA level through quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (qRT-PCR). Currently, there is no consensus about the superiority of one approach versus the other because both techniques are rarely assessed concomitantly (16,17).

In resected NSCLC, patients with high ERCC1 expression (>50 unitless ratio) had a better survival outcome (median OS, 94.6 vs. 35.5 months; P=0.01) when compared to patients with low ERCC1 expression generating the hypothesis that an intact DNA repair mechanism may reduce the accumulation of genetic aberrations that are thought to contribute to malignant potential phenotype and therefore the risk of relapse after definitive treatment (18).

The predictive role of ERCC1 was initially assessed by RT-PCR in a series of small retrospective studies in advanced NSCLC (19,20). The median overall survival (OS) was significantly longer in patients with low ERCC1 compared to patients with high ERCC1. Subsequently, ERCC1 was investigated in a subgroup of patients enrolled in a large adjuvant chemotherapy trial (21) and, by standard immunohistochemistry, in 761 paraffin-embedded tumor samples (22). A benefit from cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy was associated with the absence or low expression of ERCC1 (test for interaction, P=0.009) with a significantly prolonged disease-free survival and OS among patients with ERCC1-negative tumors (HR for death, 0.65; 95% CI, 0.50-0.86; P=0.002) as opposed to ERCC-1 positive tumors. Moreover, the prognostic value of ERCC1 was confirmed in the control group with a significantly higher 5-year OS among patients with ERCC1-positive tumors than negative ones (HR, 0.66; 95% CI, 0.49-0.90; P=0.009). The same tumors were also scored by AQUA and low ERCC1 scores were marginally prognostic (HR =0.77 for high versus low scores, P=0.10) (23) while in an additional study, ERCC1 was exclusively predictive in squamous cell carcinoma (24).

The specificity of the commonly used mouse monoclonal antibody 8F1 to ERCC1 has been extensively debated (25,26). It was also found that none of the 16 antibodies tested could distinguish among the four known ERCC1 protein isoforms (27). In the neo-adjuvant setting, mRNA ERCC1 levels in pretreatment tissue samples were correlated with the capacity to achieve an objective response following platinum-based chemotherapy (P<0.05), but not with the formation of local or distant metastases (28).

The predictive value of ERCC1 was enhanced by the concurrent evaluation of MutS homolog 2 (MSH2), a major active component of the mismatch repair system. Patients with double-negative tumors experienced a greater benefit from chemotherapy (29).

Overall these data indicate a prognostic role of ERCC1 expression while its predictive role remains to be further assessed and additional validation studies are needed.

**Breast cancer susceptibility gene 1**

The protein encoded by breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 (BRCA1) has a crucial role in DNA repair as well as in cell-cycle checkpoints and mitotic spindle assembly (30). BRCA1 sensitizes cancer cells to apoptosis induced by antimicrotubule drugs, such as taxanes and vinca alkaloids, while conferring resistance to DNA-damaging agents, including platinum agents. The potential prognostic role of a panel of nine candidate biomarkers including BRCA1 was investigated in two independent cohorts of chemotherapy naive patients with early-stage NSCLC. BRCA1 was the only independent factor affecting OS (31). In a group of patients with locally advanced NSCLC, treated with neo-adjuvant cisplatin and gemcitabine followed by surgery, those with the lowest levels of BRCA1 mRNA expression had significantly greater benefit from chemotherapy in terms of clinical and pathological downsizing and OS (32).

For its localization to sites of DNA double strand breaks, the upstream activity of the receptor-associated protein 80 (RAP-80) is required for BRCA1. In a first line study in advanced NSCLC patients with the lowest expression of both BRCA1 and RAP-80 receiving cisplatin
plus gemcitabine it was shown that RAP-80 can modulate the effect of BRCA1. In addition to a close correlation with BRCA1, RAP-80 expression was identified as an independent predictor for OS (33). In a phase II feasibility study of adjuvant chemotherapy in patients with stage II-IIIA NSCLC, those with high BRCA1 transcriptional levels received single agent docetaxel, whereas those with intermediate and low BRCA1 expression were treated with cisplatin-doublets and OS did not differ between the treatment arms (34).

A recent meta-analysis of 23 studies assessed the role of BRCA1 as a predictor of clinical outcome in platinum- and paclitaxel-based chemotherapy in NSCLC patients. In 17 platinum-based studies, low/negative BRCA1 was associated with better objective response rate [ORR] (OR =1.70, 95% CI, 1.32-2.18), longer OS and event-free survival [EFS] (HR =1.58, 95% CI, 1.27-1.97, and HR =1.60, 95% CI, 1.07-2.39 for OS and EFS, respectively). In 4 paclitaxel-based chemotherapy studies, patients with high/positive BRCA1 had better ORR (OR =0.41, 95% CI, 0.26-0.64) while OS and EFS were not evaluated because of the insufficient data available (35). Some studies reported that ERCC1 expression is closely linked to RRM1 and BRCA1 levels (32,36,37), with concordant levels in 70-80% of cases (20,38).

**Ribonucleotide reductase M1**

Ribonucleotide reductase M1 (RRM1) is the regulatory component of an essential enzyme that catalyzes the reduction of ribonucleoside diphosphates to the corresponding deoxyribonucleotides. A role for ribonucleotide reductase in DNA repair has been proposed, given the capacity of RRM1 to bind a p53-regulated paralog of RRM2 called p53R2 (39,40). Increased RRM1 predicts for decreased tumor invasiveness and metastatic potential, therefore predicting for more indolent behavior, perhaps mediated through its direct correlation with phosphatase and PTEN (phosphatase and tensin homolog) protein expression (41,42). In resected NSCLC, RRM1 protein proved prognostic, with low levels associated with a median OS of 60.2 months, compared to more than 120 months in high RRM1 tumors (43). RRM1 is a major predictor of disease response to gemcitabine, being its predominant target, as well as platinum (44). Several studies investigated the predictive value of RRM1 in patients treated with gemcitabine plus cisplatin (45,46) demonstrating that RRM1 expression was significantly and inversely correlated with disease response, though not with survival (47). A recent meta-analysis in 1,243 patients with advanced NSCLC treated with gemcitabine-based regimens concluded that low tumor RRM1 was associated with a better response rate and longer survival (48).

**Thymidylate synthase**

Thymidylate synthase (TS) catalyzes the conversion of deoxyuridine monophosphate (dUMP) to (deoxy) thymidine monophosphate (TMP), which requires oxidation of tetrahydrofolate to dihydrofolate. High tumoral levels of TS have been associated with resistance to 5-FU (49-51). Retrospective and prospective data from phase III trials in advanced NSCLC have established the favorable predictive value of TS in non-squamous NSCLC treated with pemetrexed with mRNA and protein TS expression lower in non-squamous compared to squamous histology and small cell lung cancer (52,53). These findings have been recently confirmed in a large retrospective study, although there was a wide range between individual patients (54).

Similarly distinct TS expression patterns among NSCLC subtypes were observed in stage I-IIIA NSCLC (55). In two different cohorts of chemotherapy naive patients with resected early-stage NSCLC, TS was a prognostic factor with mixed results. In one study high TS mRNA (but not protein) expression, was significantly associated with adverse disease free survival (DFS) and in the other study, high TS expression as determined by AQUA but not by qRT-PCR, predicted improved OS (55,56).

ITACA (International TAilored Chemotherapy Adjuvant) (57) trial is a randomized phase III trial comparing adjuvant pharmacogenomic-driven chemotherapy based on ERCC-1 and TS assessment by qRT-PCR versus standard adjuvant chemotherapy in completely resected stage II-IIIA NSCLC. The molecular assessment groups patients into four different genetic profiles with patients dichotomized by high versus low expression of both ERCC-1 and TS. Within 30 to 45 days post-surgery, patients in each genetic profile are randomized to receive either a standard adjuvant chemotherapy doublet (control arm) or an experimental treatment guided by molecular determinants (tailored chemotherapy arm). The study is currently accruing patients in Italy and in Germany and more than 600 patients have been already randomized (see Figure 1).
Figure 1 Study Design of The ITACA Adjuvant Trial. Randomization is performed according to each genetic profile. Cisplatin-doublet, investigator choice is the Control Arm of the study. Chemotherapy is either Vinorelbine 25-30 mg/m$^2$ IV over 10 minutes, days 1 and 8 & Cisplatin 75 mg/m$^2$ IV over 60 minutes, day 1, immediately following Vinorelbine or Docetaxel 75 mg/m$^2$ IV over 60 minutes, day 1 & Cisplatin 75 mg/m$^2$ IV over 60 minutes, day 1, immediately following Docetaxel or Gemcitabine 1,200 mg/m$^2$ IV over 30 minutes, days 1 and 8 & Cisplatin 75 mg/m$^2$ IV over 60 minutes day 1, immediately following gemcitabine. For the purpose of the final statistical analysis at the end of the study all controls will be grouped together in one single group (control group, blu boxes and line) and all tailored chemotherapies will be assembled together (experimental group, orange boxes and line).

Cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1B

The cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1B, p27$^{kip1}$, is a tumor-suppressor protein that induces cell-cycle arrest in phase G1. Despite its anti-proliferative properties, p27$^{kip1}$ up-regulation leads to de novo resistance to platinum agents by allowing cancer cells to repair DNA damage and avoid apoptosis. A survival benefit from cisplatin-based chemotherapy was only demonstrated in patients with p27$^{kip1}$ negative tumors (58,59). Cyclin D2 has been associated with poor recurrence-free survival in patients in stage III NSCLC treated with surgery with or without adjuvant chemotherapy (60).

β-tubulin

β-tubulin (βTubIII) is an essential element of microtubules, which serves as a cellular structural component involved in vital processes, including mitosis. Class III β-tubulin (βTUBIII) corresponds to an isotype with enhancing impact on microtubule dynamics, contributing to intrinsic cancer cell resistance to antimitotic agents. Several studies have shown that βTubIII expression may predict response and outcome in patients with advanced NSCLC receiving tubulin binding agents (61,62). In patients with early stage NSCLC treated with an adjuvant vinorelbine-based regimen (2), high βTUBIII expression was shown to be an independent adverse predictor of recurrence-free survival (63). The prognostic value was confirmed retrospectively in patients enrolled in another adjuvant study (64) and more recently in a neo-adjuvant study (65). In patients with β-tubulin positive immunostaining, median PFS was 30.6 versus 60.1 months (HR =1.46; 95% CI, 1.08-1.99) for those negative.
**RAS oncogene and p53**

KRAS mutation was associated in some studies with a poor prognosis in early NSCLC patients (66) but not in others. In the phase III NCIC JBR.10 adjuvant trial, where patients with stage IB-II disease were prospectively stratified by the presence of mutation in any of the RAS genes, the effect of RAS mutation status on the treatment outcome and prognosis was not significant. Nevertheless, the lack of benefit from the cisplatin/vinorelbine combination in patients with RAS mutations, in contrast to the total study population, may suggest a possible negative predictive role (67). Similarly, another adjuvant study in stage IB patients showed that, the presence KRAS mutations trended for an inferior survival of patients with tumors larger than 4 cm (68). Consistent data were reported in an Italian adjuvant study where in a subgroup of 227 patients the presence of K-RAS mutation, but not p53 and Ki67, in the univariate, but not in the multivariate analysis, was associated with shorter survival (69).

p53 nuclear immunoreactivity is considered a surrogate marker of TP53 gene mutations. However, the sensitivity and positive predictive value of p53 IHC expression for TP53 mutation status are estimated to be only 75% and 65%, respectively (70). A retrospective analysis of the phase III NCIC-JBR.10 adjuvant trial showed p53 IHC overexpression to be an independent unfavorable prognostic factor among patients in the observation arm. In contrast to p53 expression, TP53 mutation status was neither prognostic for survival, nor predictive for efficacy of adjuvant chemotherapy (71).

**Gene expression signatures**

Microarray technologies allow exploration of the prognostic significance of thousands of markers using high-throughput and computational approaches. To date, in lung cancer more than 30 studies have been reported (72) a large number showing that gene expression signature may stratify early stage NSCLC patients with different prognosis or survival outcome.

Although most of these signatures have been validated in one or more independent patient cohorts, microarray dataset overlaps between the genes sets have consistently been minimal. Thus there is a strong possibility that sample collection methods, processing protocols, single-institution subject cohorts, small sample sizes, and peculiarities of the different microarray platforms are contributing significantly to the results. To address these issues, a multi-institutional collaborative study was conducted to generate gene expression profiles from a large number of samples with *a priori* determined clinical features, useful to evaluate proposed prognostic models for potential clinical implementation. A large series of lung adenocarcinomas were tested for whether microarray measurements of gene expression either alone or combined with basic clinical covariates (stage, age, sex) can be used to predict overall survival in lung cancer subjects. Risk scores were produced substantially correlated with actual subject outcome, especially when clinical and molecular information are combined to build prognostic models for early stage lung cancer (73).

A malignancy-risk gene signature composed of several genes associated with proliferative activity has been successfully applied to predict breast cancer risk (74,75) and also tested for prognostic and predictive value in an early-stage NSCLC patients. The malignancy-risk gene signature was tested using a large NSCLC microarray dataset from the Director's Challenge Consortium (n=442) and two independent NSCLC microarray datasets (n=117 and 133 datasets, respectively). The malignancy-risk gene signature was significantly associated with OS (P<0.001) in two independent datasets and also with adjuvant chemotherapy (P=0.02) (76). Xu *et al.* developed an empirical model which is not based on the knowledge of patients' survival time for determining the lung cancer biomarker signature. It has been hypothesized that instead of an individual gene, two functionally imbalanced groups of genes (Yin and Yang) determine the fate of the tumor cells, which ultimately determines patient’s survival time. The Yin and Yang genes were selected by comparing expression data from normal lung and lung cancer tissue samples using both unsupervised clustering and pathways analyses. The model was tested in four independent lung cancer datasets and significantly stratified patients into high- and low-risk survival groups and predicted chemotherapy outcomes for stages II and III (77).

A 14-gene expression assay that uses quantitative PCR, runs on formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded tissue samples, and differentiates patients with heterogeneous statistical prognoses was developed in a cohort of 361 resected patients with non-squamous NSCLC and validated in 2 different cohorts of 433 patients with resected stage I non-squamous NSCLC and 1,006 patients with stage I-III non-squamous NSCLC resected in several leading Chinese cancer centres. The signature significantly segregated patients in low-, intermediate- and high-risk patients with relevant differences in 5-year survival rate. Multivariate
analysis in both cohorts indicated that no standard clinical risk factors could account for, or provide, the prognostic information derived from tumour gene expression. This quantitative-PCR-based assay reliably identified patients with early-stage non-squamous NSCLC at high risk for mortality after surgical resection (78).

Other biomarkers in early NSCLC

Insulin receptor (IR) and Insulin-like growth factor receptor (IGF1R) are implicated in the development and progression of NSCLC, either by interacting with the EGFR pathway or independently. In patients with resected NSCLC, IGF1R amplification determined by FISH was an independent favorable prognostic factor, unlike IGF1R protein (79). It has been observed that in early stage NSCLC, IGF1R/EGFR FISH+ and IGF1R/EGFR IHC+ were associated with shorter disease-free survival (P=0.05 and P=0.05, respectively). Patients with concomitant IGF1R/EGFR FISH+/IHC+ had a worse DFS and OS (P=0.005 and P=0.01, respectively) (80).

Hepatocyte growth factor receptor (c-MET) is a proto-oncogene associated with tumor invasive growth. In patients with resected stage I-III carcinomas, not treated with adjuvant chemotherapy, a high MET gene copy number was an independent adverse prognostic factor mainly in squamous histotype (81). Similarly, in patients with early-stage NSCLC HER2 expression was associated with poorer prognosis especially in stages IB and IIA diseases (82).

Higher expression of CXCR7 is associated with metastatic progression and poor DFS in patients with stage I NSCLC (83). In a retrospective analysis of completely resected stage I tumors, patients with CXCR4-positive tumors had a significantly longer survival than patients with CXCR4-negative tumors (P=0.039). Interestingly, the 5-year metastasis rates were 23.5% and 34.1% in patients with CXCR4-positive and CXCR4-negative expression, respectively (P=0.2) (84).

Recently, a set of genes with altered methylation status were identified in stage I NSCLCs, some of which associated with survival. Such newly identified potential candidates for a NSCLC molecular screening need further analysis in order to determine their clinical utility (85,86).

Studies in early stage NSCLC have reported an association between vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) over-expression and progression or poor survival (87,88), but overall the prognostic role of VEGF expression in NSCLC remains undetermined.

Conclusions

Currently, tumor stage remains the strongest predictor of survival in NSCLC. Early-stage patients are treated primarily by surgical resection. However, 30% to 55% of these patients develop recurrence and die of their disease. The current staging system is inadequate for predicting the outcome of treatment and the prognosis in individual patients. For this reason there is an urgent need to search for new individual biomarkers and gene signatures in the tumor tissue. Many studies have investigated several molecular alterations in early lung cancer and their predictive and prognostic implications are still a matter of clinical research and even for the most promising are not yet ready for prime time application. Currently, randomized clinical trials are exploring the real value of these new diagnostic tools.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Introduction

Lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer-related mortality in the world, responsible for 1.4 million deaths/year (1). A striking feature of lung cancer is its poor survival, with 5-year survival less than 10% in the UK and less than 15% in the USA. One major contributing factor to poor survival is the late clinical presentation of the majority of patients, 80% present with locally advanced or distant metastatic disease at which stage treatments are generally much less effective. The benefit of early diagnosis was underlined by the National Lung Screening Trial which investigated the effect of low dose CT screening in an at risk population and reported a 20% reduction in lung cancer specific mortality (2). However, achieving long-term survival even after curative intent surgery is a major challenge with recurrence occurring in 50% of cases overall and five-year survival rates of 58% to 73% for stage I, 36% to 46% for stage II and 24% for stage IIIA reported (3). Recurrence most commonly occurs at distant sites indicating the presence of micro-metastatic disease undetected by current staging strategies (4,5). Trials of platinum based adjuvant chemotherapy to treat micro-metastases have shown increases in 5-year survival in the order of 5% in patients with stage II-IIIA disease (6). The adjuvant treatment of stage I is more controversial as definitive evidence of efficacy is lacking (7). There is therefore a pressing clinical need to develop both more effective adjuvant therapy but also target the current therapies in a more effective
manner. Pathological stage is the most robust methodology of selecting patients for adjuvant chemotherapy however recurrence rates even in stage I disease are in the order of 25% to 40% suggesting that an additional marker/markers that enable accurate stratification of recurrence risk over and above that provided by pathological stage are necessary for more accurate prognostication. In such a way it may be possible to stratify high-risk stage I patients who may benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy and low risk stage II who may avoid chemotherapy. Furthermore, lung cancer is a heterogenous disease and the molecular profile and/or biological behavior of disease recurring after surgery may be different to that of the primary tumor. Consequently, there may be added benefit of examining circulating factors, which may reflect the behavior and molecular profile of metastatic disease more accurately than primary tumor sampling, which could result in sampling error because of tumor heterogeneity.

Method

A literature search was performed using PubMed/Medline. Search limits set included human studies, 1990 to the present day (June 2013) and articles written in English. Initial searches using the terms: circulating biomarkers, non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and prognostic/predictive were followed by more targeted searches. For circulating tumor cells (CTCs) additional search terms included: CTCs, CellSearch (CS), ISET and pulmonary vein. Nucleic acid searches used additionally: circulating nucleic acids, or DNA, or RNA or microRNA and protein searches included specific proteins including: carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA), or CYFRA 21-1, or neuron specific enolase and other identified proteins. Finally reference lists were screened for additional studies.

Results

Standard clinical measures in blood

Standard biochemical and hematological measures, taken routinely as part of the assessment for radical treatment, may in themselves provide additional prognostic information. The results of several trials are discussed below.

Hemoglobin

Tomita et al. studied 240 patients who underwent surgical resection of NSCLC (8). Classification of low hemoglobin level was <13.0 g/dL in men and <12.0 g/dL in women. Overall, 88 patients (36.7%) were classified as having a low pre-operative hemoglobin. Five-year survival was significantly lower in patients with a low hemoglobin (43.0% vs. 73.5%; P<0.0001). After multivariate analysis pre-operative hemoglobin level remained a significant poor prognostic factor.

White blood cells

The impact of peripheral pre-operative white blood cell count has been investigated in several reports (9-12). A total white blood cell count above the median has been reported to be a poor prognostic factor (9). Kobayashi et al. examined the outcomes of 237 patients with resected node negative NSCLC (10). Raised neutrophil count and low lymphocyte count were associated with survival after univariate analysis; however only a low lymphocyte count remained an indicator of poor prognosis after multivariate analysis. Similarly Zhang et al. reported elevation of peripheral lymphocytes to be a favorable prognostic factor (11). Sarraf et al. examined the ratio of neutrophil and lymphocyte counts as a prognostic marker. This measure was significantly associated with stage, however after multivariate analysis the ratio remained an independent prognostic factor (12).

Platelets

A study of 510 patients by Yu et al. examined pre-operative platelet count and outcomes in patients newly diagnosed with NSCLC (13). All patients were treated with surgical resection [clinical stage I n=234 (45.9%), stage II n=128 (25.1%) and stage III n=148 (29.0%)]. Three-year overall survival (OS) was 75.3% for patients with a normal count (≤300x10^9/L, n=449; 88.0%) and 59.2% for those with an elevated count (>300x10^9/L, n=61; 12.0%); the risk of disease progression was also increased (HR 1.57, 1.02-2.45). Multivariate analysis showed age and platelet count to be the only independent prognostic markers. Tomita et al. also reported that pre-operative thrombocytosis (>40x10^4/mm3) was a poor prognostic marker in a study of 289 patients undergoing resection for NSCLC. Five-year survival was 30.8% in patients with elevated platelets (n=13/289) compared with 68.7% in patients with a normal count (276/289) (14).

These studies suggest that routinely measured clinical parameters in blood may provide prognostic information. The advantages of this approach are that no additional cost is required for the assays and the assays themselves are
robust. The disadvantages are that measured changes are not necessarily specific to the cancer but may be reflective of other co-morbidities or co-existing acute illnesses such as infection.

Circulating proteins

Historically circulating proteins have been most intensely investigated as prognostic biomarkers in the early lung cancer setting. The most commonly investigated proteins are CEA and CYFRA 21-1 and these studies are reviewed below.

CEA

CEA is a cell adhesion glycoprotein that is expressed in a limited number of tissues and at very low levels in healthy individuals (15). A large number of studies over the past two decades have examined the prognostic value of CEA in serum/plasma in early stage NSCLC [reviewed (16) and summarized in Table 1]. A majority of studies have found elevated levels of CEA to be associated with poor prognosis in resected NSCLC including stage I (17-21,23,27,28,30,32-35,37,40-47). A limited number of studies have reported no association (25,29,31,38,48,49). The largest study by Okada et al. examined pre and post-operative serum CEA levels in 1,000 patients undergoing resection for NSCLC (33). Patients with elevated levels of pre-operative CEA (368/1,000) had significantly lower 5-year survival compared to patients with normal levels (53.8% vs. 75.2%; P<0.0001). In patients with resected pathological stage I disease, those with persistently elevated post-operative CEA levels had significantly worse 5-year survival (48.6%) than patients whose CEA level normalized post-operatively (74.2%) and those who had normal pre-operative levels (84.2%) (34). Several studies have confirmed the association with persistently elevated CEA in the post-operative period and marked reduction in survival (17,18,30,33,39). As an example, Kosu et al. retrospectively analyzed pre and post plasma CEA levels in 263 patients with resected pathological stage I NSCLC (18). A majority had adenocarcinoma and half the population had less than 5 pack years smoking history. Patients with normal CEA before and after surgery had a 5-year survival of 95.5% compared with 85.5% (4-year survival) in patients with a pre-operative high CEA that normalized post-operatively and 59.3% in patients whose CEA was elevated both pre and post-operatively. After multivariate analysis tumor diameter greater than 30 mm, the presence of visceral pleural invasion and persistent CEA elevation were independent poor prognostic indicators. The authors conclude that patients with high post-operative CEA may benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy.

One important aspect of many of the studies investigating CEA as a prognostic marker is that the prevalence of smoking is relatively low with upwards of half the lung cancer cases being diagnosed in never smokers. Significantly smoking may increase CEA expression in lung tissue (50). In the study by Okada et al. CEA measurement was not prognostic in current smokers potentially reducing the clinical use of CEA in populations with a higher burden of smoking induced lung carcinogenesis (34). In a majority of studies it is also unclear what role co-existing inflammatory conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease may have in modifying CEA measurements.

CYFRA 21-1 (serum cytokeratin 19 fragment)

Cytokeratins are filamentous proteins ubiquitously expressed by epithelial cells which can be used as markers of epithelial origin (51). Cytokeratin 7, 8, 18 and 19 are the most commonly seen types associated with carcinomas and these proteins can leak into the circulation and be detected as degraded complexes and as such may act as circulating biomarkers of malignancy (52,53). Degradation fragments of cytokeratin 19 can be detected in the circulation, referred to as CYFRA 21-1, released from tumor cells by necrosis or cell lysis. This protein fragment has been assessed as a prognostic marker in several studies (25,32,38,45,46,54-58). A meta-analysis of 2,063 patients with newly diagnosed NSCLC showed an elevated pre-treatment CYFRA 21-1 fragment level (>3.6 ng/mL) to be an independent poor prognostic factor at 12 months (HR 1.88, 1.64-2.15) (56). Raised CYFRA 21-1 was of borderline significance in a subpopulation of patients treated with surgical resection (survival HR 1.41, 0.99-2.03; n=437). In a study of 85 patients with squamous cell carcinoma (stages I-IIIA), the risk of death after five years of follow up was doubled in patients with CYFRA 21-1 levels above 3.6 ng/mL (HR 2.05; 1.09-3.83) (54).

Several studies have examined the combined prognostic value of pretreatment CEA and CYFRA 21-1 as a ‘tumor marker index’ (TMI) (25,32,57). Blankenburg et al. reported no prognostic value of either single or combined measures in a study of 240 patients. In contrast, studies by Tomita (57) and Muley (32) both reported improved prognostic value to the combined data. Muley et al. reported reduced 3-year survival in 153 stage I patients with raised CYFRA 21-1.
Table 1 Summary table of studies that have investigated the prognostic value of circulating CEA levels in patients undergoing radical lung cancer surgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>No. patients</th>
<th>Stage [%]</th>
<th>Pathology [%]</th>
<th>CEA level [ng/mL]</th>
<th>Smoking status [% NS]</th>
<th>CEA result [n [%]]</th>
<th>Outcome [^4]</th>
<th>Prognostic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kato 2013 (17)</td>
<td>177 I</td>
<td>Ad [80]; Sq [20]</td>
<td>&gt;2.5 Ad; &gt;3.0 Sq</td>
<td>Ad [50]; Squ [3]</td>
<td>Ad: HH 29 [23.1], HN 36 [28.6], N 61 [48.4], Sq: H 15 [41.7]</td>
<td>5 ys DFS: Ad: HH 49.4%, HN 65.1%, N 93.4%, Sq: H 51.9%, N 81.0%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kozu 2013 (18)</td>
<td>263 I</td>
<td>Ad [81]; Sq [18]</td>
<td>&gt;3.5</td>
<td>&lt;5 pack yr [49]</td>
<td>N 198 [75.3], HN 44 [16.7], HH 21 [8.0]</td>
<td>5 ys: N 95.5%, HN 85.5%, HH 59.3%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin 2012 (19)</td>
<td>169 IB-IIIA after 2 cycles adj chemo</td>
<td>Ad [37]; Sq [49]</td>
<td>&gt;4.7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H 63 [37.3], N 98 [58.0]</td>
<td>Median DFS: H 34 vs. N 53 months</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nagashima 2012 (20)</td>
<td>71 I [70]</td>
<td>Sq [100]</td>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>SI low [44]</td>
<td>H 19 [26.8], N 52 [73.2]</td>
<td>DFS: H 63.5%, N 88.2%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tomita 2012 (21)</td>
<td>197 I [75]; II-III [24]</td>
<td>Ad [80]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H 48 [24.3], N 149 [75.6]</td>
<td>5 ys: H 51.1%, N 82.7%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Hanagiri 2011 (22)</td>
<td>341 I</td>
<td>Ad [77]; Sq [16]</td>
<td>&gt;2.5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H 88 [25.8], N 253 [74.2]</td>
<td>5 ys: H 76.3%, L 88.3%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Takahashi 2011 (23)</td>
<td>649 I [76]; II [10]</td>
<td>Ad [71]; Sq [24]</td>
<td>&gt;3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>HH 145 [22.3], HN 149 [23.0], N 297 [45.8]</td>
<td>5 ys: HH 51.1%, HN 85.5%, N 78.4%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blankenburg 2008 (25)</td>
<td>240 I</td>
<td>Ad [38]; Sq [42]</td>
<td>&gt;6.7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5 ys: H 49% vs. N 66%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kashiwabara 2008 (26)</td>
<td>136 I</td>
<td>Ad [100]</td>
<td>&gt;2.5</td>
<td>NS [65]</td>
<td>H 16 [11.8], N 120 [88.2]</td>
<td>DFS: H 43.8%, N 95%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matsuguma 2008 (27)</td>
<td>455 I</td>
<td>Ad [69]; Sq [25]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>NS [35]; FS [25]</td>
<td>HH 20 [4.4], HN 112 [24.6], N 323 [71.0]</td>
<td>5 ys: HH 43.1%, HN 56.2%, N 85.9%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hsu 2007 (28)</td>
<td>163-f I</td>
<td>Ad [83]</td>
<td>&gt;6</td>
<td>NS [93]</td>
<td>H 47 [29], N 115 [71]</td>
<td>5 ys: H 59.6%, N 75.7%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kobayashi 2007 (29)</td>
<td>163 I &lt;2 cm</td>
<td>Ad [83]</td>
<td>&gt;5.0</td>
<td>NS [48]</td>
<td>H 20 [12.5], N 140 [87.5]</td>
<td>HR 1.03 (0.3-3.1)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Matsuoka 2007 (30)</td>
<td>275 I</td>
<td>Ad [70]; Sq [26]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>NS [38]</td>
<td>H Ad 51, Sq 13, N Ad 133, Sq 50</td>
<td>5 ys Ad: H 54.6%, N 86.9%; Sq: H 82.1%, N 78.5%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizuguchi 2007 (31)</td>
<td>137 I</td>
<td>Ad [63]; Sq [34]</td>
<td>&gt;7.8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Not prognostic after multivariate analysis</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muley 2004 (32)</td>
<td>153 I</td>
<td>Ad [49]; Sq [39]</td>
<td>&gt;9.8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3 ys: H 41.6% vs. N 79.2%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 (continued)
baseline levels prior to surgical resection (3-year survival: high 60.2% vs. normal 78.4%). Patients were categorized according to high, intermediate and low levels of geometric mean CEA and CYFRA 21-1 and 3-year survival analyzed. Survival was 96.7% in patients with low levels, 77.2% in the intermediate group and 55.7% in patients with high levels. Tomita et al. reported reduced 5-year survival in patients with elevated pre-treatment CYFRA 21-1 (5-year survival: high 40% vs. normal 67%), in a cohort of 291 patients of stage I-III. An analysis of 5-year survival by TMI, defined as positive by the presence of elevated CYFRA 21-1 and or CEA, showed reduced survival with TMI positive patients (37.1%) compared to TMI negative patients (72.3%).

A study by Mizuguchi et al. measured Sialyl Lewis x (an important cell surface carbohydrate antigen) in addition to CYFRA 21-1 and CEA pre-operatively in 137 patients with completely resected stage I NSCLC (31). Thirty of the patients recurred and after multivariate analysis pre-operative CYFRA 21-1 and SXL levels, but not CEA, were independent prognostic markers. Patients with high

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>No. patients</th>
<th>Stage [%]</th>
<th>Pathology</th>
<th>CEA level ng/mL</th>
<th>Smoking status [% NS]</th>
<th>CEA result [%]</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Prognostic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Okada 2004 (33)</td>
<td>1,000 I [70]</td>
<td>Ad [69]; Sq [26]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>HH 126 (12.6), HN 242 (24.2), N 632 (63.2)</td>
<td>5 yrs: HH 35.2%, HN 62.6%, N 75.2%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okada 2004 (34)</td>
<td>954 I [69]</td>
<td>Ad [73]; Sq [27]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>Ad [50]; Sq [8]</td>
<td>smoking increases CEA</td>
<td>5 yrs: Ad 83.7/57.4, Sq 76.6/28.0</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sakao 2004 (35)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Ad [100]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>H 24 [24], N 76 [76]</td>
<td>DFS: H 33.3%, N 63.2%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomita 2004 (36)</td>
<td>313 I-II [70]</td>
<td>Ad [70]; Sq [30]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5 yrs: Ad H 42.5%, N 77.6%; Sq H 57.8% N 63.3</td>
<td>Ad-yes, Sq-no</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buccheri 2003 (37)</td>
<td>118 I [57]; II [14]</td>
<td>Ad [49]; Sq [40]</td>
<td>&gt;10</td>
<td>H [55]</td>
<td>Stage I + II 1yr rec: H 67%, N 12%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinmuth 2002 (38)</td>
<td>67 I [64]; III-III [36]</td>
<td>Ad [25]; Sq [46]; Lg [24]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>No significant difference in survival</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sawabata 2002 (39)</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>&gt;7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>HH 15 (5.1%), HN 41 (13.9%) Ad, HN 68%, N 241 (81%)</td>
<td>5 yrs: HH 18%, N 72%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suzuki 1999 (41)</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>Ad [100]</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
<td>&lt;5 pack yr [40] H 89, N 180</td>
<td>5 yrs: H 53%, N 78.5%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubins 1998 (42)</td>
<td>50 I [56]; II [14]; III [30]</td>
<td>Ad [42]; Sq [44]</td>
<td>variable</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Reduced survival with increasing CEA level</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icard 1994 (43)</td>
<td>152 I [34]; II [23]; Illa [36]</td>
<td>Ad [43]; Sq [28]</td>
<td>all &gt;10; Int 10-30; H &gt;30</td>
<td>Stage I: Int 35, H 7; stage II: Int 17, H 12; stage Illa: Int 28, H 17</td>
<td>5 yrs: stage I: H 0%, Int 40%; stage II: H 0%, Int 44%; stage Illa: H 9%, Int 0%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Ad, adenocarcinoma; Sq, squamous cell carcinoma; Lg, large cell carcinoma; 2 NS, non-smoker; FS, former smoker; SI, smoking index; 3H, high preoperatively; HH, high pre and post-operatively; N, normal pre-operatively; HN, high pre-operatively and normal post-operatively; Int, intermediate; 4abbreviations as per 3, DFS, disease free survival; OS, overall survival; 5 yrs, 5-year survival.
levels of both markers were five times more likely to recur than those with normal values (Table 2).

Neuron specific enolase
Enolases are integral to the glycolysis pathway by linking 2-phosphoglycerate and phosphor-enolpyruvate metabolism. Neuron specific enolase has been associated with small cell lung cancer as a clinical biomarker (59). However several studies have examined NSE as a circulating biomarker in NSCLC (38,49,54,55,60,61). In three of the studies NSE was not prognostic (38,49), including a study of 164 patients with resected stage I disease (60). Two studies reported an association with poor prognosis in advanced disease (54,55). However, the largest study to date by Yu et al. looked at 481 patients with operable NSCLC and measured pre-operative serum levels of NSE, SCC and carbohydrate antigen 125 (CA125) (61). Both elevated levels of NSE and CA125 were associated with reduced disease free survival (DFS) and OS. In a multivariable Cox regression model advanced clinical stage and both elevation of CA125 and NSE were independent prognostic factors associated with reduced survival. Elevation of more than one circulating biomarker was associated with a worse outcome.

C-reactive protein (CRP)
Elevated CRP has been associated with poorer outcomes after surgery in two studies (62,63). O’Dowd et al. reported elevated CRP but not total white cell count to be an independent prognostic factor after multivariate analysis (63). Median survival was 75.9 months in the normal CRP group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>No. patients</th>
<th>Stage [%]</th>
<th>Pathology [%]</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Level ng/mL</th>
<th>Smoking status (% NS)</th>
<th>Result n [%]</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Prognostic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomita 2010 (57)</td>
<td>291 I [64], II-III [36]</td>
<td>Ad [72]</td>
<td>CYFRA 21-1</td>
<td>&gt;2.4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H 58, N 233</td>
<td>5 ys: H 40%, N 67%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CEA + CYFRA = TMI</td>
<td>&lt;1= both N, &gt;1=1or 2 H</td>
<td>5 ys: &lt;1 72.3%, &gt;1 37.1%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blankenburg 2008 (25)</td>
<td>240 I</td>
<td>Ad [38], Sq [42]</td>
<td>CYFRA 21-1</td>
<td>&gt;3.3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H 71 [30], Int 87 [36], N 82 [34]</td>
<td>5 ys: H 64%, N 64%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CEA + CYFRA = TMI</td>
<td>Geometric mean</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mizuguchi 2007 (31)</td>
<td>137 I</td>
<td>Ad [63], Sq [34]</td>
<td>CYFRA 21-1</td>
<td>&gt;3.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>OS: HR 3.5 (2.9-4.1)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SLX</td>
<td>&gt;36 U/mL</td>
<td>OS: HR 4.1 (3.4-4.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SLX + CYFRA</td>
<td>&lt;1= both N, 1=1H +1N, &gt;1= both H</td>
<td>5 ys: &gt;1-13%, 1-52%, &lt;1-80%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muley 2004 (32)</td>
<td>153 I</td>
<td>Ad [49], Sq [39]</td>
<td>CYFRA 21-1</td>
<td>&gt;3.3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>H [21], N [79]</td>
<td>3 ys: H 60.2% vs. N 78.4%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NSE</td>
<td>&gt;14.5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Not related to outcome</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CEA + CYFRA = TMI</td>
<td>Geometric mean</td>
<td>H 49 [23], Int 60 [42], N 32 [35]</td>
<td>3 ys: H 55.7%, N 96.7%</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Ad, adenocarcinoma; Sq, squamous cell carcinoma; Lg, large cell carcinoma; 2NS, non-smoker; FS, former smoker; SI, smoking index; 3H, high preoperatively; HH, high pre and post-operatively; N, normal pre-operatively; HN, high pre-operatively and normal post-operatively; Int, intermediate; 4abbreviations as per 3, DFS, disease free survival; OS, overall survival; 5 ys, 5-year survival.

Table 2 Summary table of studies to have combined CYFRA 21-1 and CEA/SLX to determine a tumor measure index (TMI)
and 26.2 months in the high CRP group. Similarly Hara et al. showed reduction in 5-year disease specific (56.2% vs. 77.6%; P=0.003) and OS (50.2% vs. 74.2%; P=0.001) in the high CRP arm.

Fibrinogen
Sheng et al. report the prognostic significance of fibrinogen, an important protein in the clotting cascade, in a study of patients with operable NSCLC (n=567; 69.3% were stage I + II) (64). Normal serum fibrinogen levels (<4 g/L) were recorded in 343 patients (60.4%) compared with 224 patients (39.5%) with elevated fibrinogen levels (>4 g/L). Patients with higher baseline fibrinogen levels had lower 3-year progression-free survival (49.2% vs. 63.3%) and lower OS rates (66.0% vs. 80.9%) than patients with normal serum fibrinogen concentrations. Fibrinogen level was an independent poor prognostic marker after Cox proportional regression analysis.

Other circulating proteins
Squamous cell carcinoma antigen has been investigated in several studies without showing prognostic significance (31,54,60,65). CA125 is a standard clinical measure used in the diagnosis and monitoring of patients with ovarian cancer, but its prognostic potential has also been investigated in a small number of studies looking at patients undergoing curative resection of NSCLC. Three studies have reported elevation of pre-operative CA125 to be associated with a worse prognosis (65-67) with one study reporting no association (60).

Despite the multiple studies of circulating proteins described above none have proved sufficiently robust to incorporate into routine practice either to alter the intensity of follow up or direct adjuvant therapy.

Circulating nucleic acids
Circulating DNA can be detected in healthy individuals and in significantly higher concentrations in patients with cancer (68). Tumor specific RNA and DNA can enter the circulation through processes including necrosis and apoptosis from both primary and metastatic sites and may also be detected in plasma/serum (69).

Total circulating free DNA
Total circulating plasma DNA concentration was investigated as a potential biomarker in a population of 1,035 heavy smokers over the age of 50 who were taking part in an annual low dose CT screening study (70). A total of 38 patients were diagnosed with lung cancer during the study period. Study participation also included annual blood tests and no difference in median DNA concentration was seen between cases and controls at baseline. However, in 33 lung cancer cases who went on to have surgical resection, and who also had repeat blood samples, median DNA concentration was significantly higher within the 12-month period immediately prior to diagnosis and surgery (4.6 ng/mL) compared with samples taken over a year prior to diagnosis (2.4 ng/mL). This finding suggests that longitudinal changes in DNA concentration may predict for the development of malignancy in smokers rather than a fixed threshold concentration. In addition, five-year survival was noted to be significantly worse in patients with DNA concentrations in the highest tertile (33%) when compared to the lowest tertile. A similar association with outcome was reported by van der Drift et al., in a study of 46 patients with newly diagnosed NSCLC (29/46 were stage I to III). Significantly reduced survival was seen in patients with DNA concentrations in the highest tertile (median survival 11.8 months) compared to the lowest tertile (median survival 21.5 months) (71).

Conversely, baseline circulating free DNA concentration was not correlated with prognosis, either DFS or OS, in a study of 76 patients undergoing curative resection (stage I-II n=60, stage III n=16) (72). However in patients who relapsed early (within 3 months; n=9) increasing circulating DNA concentration was seen in a repeat blood sample taken 3 months post-operatively. By comparison patients who did not relapse showed a reduction in DNA concentration by the same time point. A similar finding was reported by Szpechcinski et al. who demonstrated reduction (n=11) or stability (n=7) in circulating DNA levels in patients who had undergone resection of NSCLC between 3 to 6 months post-surgery except for 2 individuals with early relapse whose DNA concentrations increased significantly (73). On this basis cfDNA might have an application to monitor patients for relapse prior to symptom development or radiological change and thereby inform on the intensity of follow up.

Circulating microRNAs
MicroRNAs are small non-coding single stranded RNA molecules that serve a regulatory purpose in controlling the function of messenger RNA (74,75). Tissue expression of microRNAs has been shown to be prognostic in NSCLC (76). MicroRNAs can also be detected in the
circulation, where they are stable (77), and several studies have examined their prognostic significance in early stage lung cancer. Hu et al. developed a panel of 4 miRNAs (high miR-486 and miR30d; low miR1 and miR499) whose differential expression was associated with poor survival (78). Testing of the panel in 243 patients with stage I-IIIa NSCLC treated with both surgery and adjuvant chemotherapy showed the miRNAs to be an independent predictor of survival. Indeed the authors reported a dose effect dependent on how many markers in the panel were affected and increasing risk of cancer death (2 measures: HR 3.14, 1.7-6.0; 3 measures HR 16.5, 8.6-31.7; 4 measures 34.1, 16.3-71.6).

Boeri et al. examined the predictive value of miRNAs in plasma taken from two CT screening trials (79). Patients who attended for annual CT screening also had an annual blood test. A panel of 15miRNAs (mir-660, mir-140-5p, mir-451, mir-28-3p, mir-30c, and mir-92a most commonly deregulated) was able to correctly categorize 30 out of 35 patients who developed lung cancer, using plasma taken over 12 months and upwards of 28 months prior to diagnosis. Misclassification occurred in 1 out of 5 control pools. A further signature was developed (containing mir-486-5p) to explore the use of miRNA expression and prognosis at the time of diagnosis. The panel correctly classified 9 out of 11 patients with poor prognosis but misclassified 2 out of 10 patients with good prognosis.

Chen et al. examined the prognostic significance of a specific miRNA (miR-17-5p) in the serum of 221 patients newly diagnosed with lung cancer (80). Ablant expression of miR-17-5p has previously been demonstrated in lung cancer and serum miR-17-5p levels were significantly higher in this study than normal controls. Patients were stratified according to expression levels (stage I-III: high expression n=99 and low expression n=109) and survival compared. High expression was associated with a lower median survival of 33 months compared with 40 months. This difference remained after a Cox proportional hazard model (HR 1.8, 1.04-3.01). Reduced survival in patients with stage I disease (n=180) was also reported by Heegaard et al. when the population was stratified according to miR-233 levels (reduced levels associated with worse survival) (81). Silva et al. demonstrated a reduction in DFS for patients undergoing surgery (n=37) who had low levels of miR-30e-3p (DFS rate at 50 months =13%, 14-52) compared with high levels (DFS rate 50%, 23-77) (82). Measures of plasma let-7f and miR-20b were not associated with DFS. Survival was associated with differential expression of three miRNAs (miR-96, miR-182, and miR-183) in a study of 70 patients with NSCLC treated with surgical resection (76).

Circulating mRNA

Cheng et al. explored the prognostic value of relative levels of circulating cMET mRNA in blood from 45 patients undergoing resection using RT-PCR (83). Over-expression of cMET, a proto-oncogene implicated in angiogenesis and metastasis, was recorded in 23 patients and after a mean follow up period of 23 months 18 (78.3%) of these patients had recurred and 8 died. This compared with 4 (18.2%) recurrences and no deaths in the cMET negative group. After multivariate analysis cMET positivity was the strongest predictor of recurrence (HR 3.9, 1.2-13.3). Hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), the ligand for cMET, has been variably associated with outcome in early stage NSCLC; reported to be prognostic in studies with small samples sizes (84,85) but not in a much larger study of 196 patients (86).

CTCs

CTCs or Circulating Tumor Microemboli (CTMs, cells in contiguous groups) are postulated to have a critical role in the development of metastatic disease (87). The detection of CTCs in patients with lung cancer has been described in numerous clinical studies and has in general been associated with a poorer prognosis (88). A number of different methods have been used [reviewed (89)] and the field is rapidly evolving; current methodologies can be broadly divided into assays that physically isolate individual cells/groups of cells for further characterization and nucleic acid based techniques, which infer the presence of CTCs.

Cell based detection

The most robustly developed platform is CellSearch (CS), which is fully validated and approved for clinical use in advanced breast, bowel and prostate cancer. CTC enrichment from blood is performed automatically (CellTracks AutoPrep) through immunomagnetic selection of epithelial cell adhesion molecule (EpCAM) expressing cells, using ferrofluid particles coated with an anti-EpCAM antibody, which are then separated from blood by magnets. Selected cells are then stained with phycoerythrin-conjugated anti-cytokeratin (8,40,44) antibodies (epithelial cell marker), allophycocyanin-conjugated anti-CD45 antibodies (white blood cell marker) and a nuclear stain (4’,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole;
Analysis is undertaken using a semi-automatic fluorescence microscope (CellTracks Analyser II) and CTCs categorised using morphological (round or oval, visible nucleus in cytoplasm, cells at least 4 μm in diameter) and immunofluorescent criteria (CK+, DAPI−, CD45−). The automated processing and semi-automated analysis produce low intra and inter-assay variability (90). Using this method, our group has shown that CTC number is an independent prognostic marker in advanced NSCLC; in univariate analysis, patients ≥5 CTCs had an OS of 4.3 months compared with 8.1 months in those with <5 CTCs (P<0.001). Indeed, CTC number was the strongest predictor of OS (HR 7.9, 2.9-22.0; P<0.001) after multivariate analysis. However, ≥2 CTCs were detected in only 32% of stage IV patients (19/60) and rarely in patients with stage III (7%, 2/27) and not at all in stage II (0%, 0/14) (91). One possible disadvantage of the CS approach is the reliance on EpCAM positive selection. EpCAM expression is commonly found in tumours of epithelial origin (92), but not necessarily on all CTCs (93).

The theory of epithelial to mesenchymal transition proposes that cells develop a more metastatic phenotype, reflected by down regulation of epithelial markers and upregulation of mesenchymal markers, that facilitates migration from the primary tumour into the circulation (94). Selection of CTCs based purely on epithelial markers may underestimate the CTC burden and therefore lower the sensitivity of this approach; this may be especially relevant in NSCLC (95). Selection of CTCs using non-epithelial based markers may therefore have advantages; one example is ISET (Isolation by Size of Epithelial Tumour cells) (96). ISET technology involves the filtering of blood through a membrane with 8 μm pores to isolate cells or groups of cells larger than this size independently of cellular protein expression. Cells may then be characterized morphologically and by protein expression. Using this method in a direct comparison with CS we have shown that ISET identifies significantly more CTCs and CTMs in a study of 40 patients with advanced lung cancer (97). In this study ISET demonstrated CTCs in 80% (32/40) of patients compared with 23% (9/40) using CS; CTCs were detected by both methods in only 7 patients and although CTMs were detected in 38% (15/50) by ISET, CS identified no CTMs.

In the early non-small cell cancer setting, Hofman et al. investigated the prognostic value of CTCs detected in peripheral blood drawn from 210 patients prior to surgical resection of NSCLC using both CS and ISET (98,99). Pathological stage was I or II in 62% (131/210) and III or IV in the remainder (38%, 79/210). CTCs were standardly defined (CK+, DAPI−, CD45−) with CS and with ISET as cells with positive immunocytochemical staining for cytokeratin and/or vimentin with morphological features of non-hematological cells. CTCs were detected in 69% of patients overall [ISET: 50% + ve (104/210); CS: + ve: ≥1 in 39% (82/210) and ≥2 in 21% (44/210)]. CTC number was not related to disease stage or histological subtype. CTC counts were higher using ISET (mean 34, range, 1 to 23) compared with CS (mean 12, range, 1 to 150). In the 144 patients where CTCs were detected only one in five (20%, 42/210) were detected using both CS and ISET. ISET cells stained with cytokeratin alone in 26.0% (27/104), cytokeratin and vimentin in 52.9% (55/104) and vimentin alone in 22.1% (23/104). Multivariate Cox proportional hazard regression analysis showed the presence of CTCs to be a poor prognostic factor, associated with reduced DFS after a median follow up of 15 months, irrespective of method used for CTC detection (CS: HR 1.6, 1.3-4.7; P=0.008. ISET: HR 1.4, 1.1-3.3; P=0.006).

A small study by Sawabata et al. examined CTC count using CS in peripheral blood immediately pre and post operatively and 10 days after surgical resection of NSCLC. CTCs were detected in 1 of 9 before, 3 out of nine patients immediately after and in no patients 10 days after surgery. After a median follow up of 14 months no patient had evidence of relapse (100).

**Nucleic acid based detection**

Nucleic acid based methodologies to detect CTCs have been used in the early NSCLC setting. A study by Yie et al. applied a RT-PCR ELISA technique to the cellular fraction of peripheral blood (2 mL) taken from patients with NSCLC to determine the concentration of survivin mRNA (101). Survivin is a protein commonly overexpressed in malignancy and has a role in tumor progression (102). The authors determined an upper limit of normal for survivin mRNA concentration in blood by examining 172 healthy volunteers. Levels above the highest in this cohort were then classed as abnormal and designated as CTC positive. Using this classification, 44.1% of patients with NSCLC taking part in the study had detectable CTCs (n=63/143), corresponding to 26% of stage I + II (n=13/50) and 47.9% (n=35/73) of stage III patients. Follow up for a median period of 36 months was performed on 67 patients who were treated with surgical resection; of these 26 were
CTC positive (38.8%). A total of 18 relapses occurred in the CTC positive cohort (n=18/26; 60% stage I + II, 75% stage III) compared with 4 in the CTC negative cohort (n=4/41; 15.9% stage I + II, 8.3% stage III). The likelihood of relapse was significantly higher in CTC positive patients (RR 43.5, 2.7-70.9; P=0.008).

A panel of 4 marker genes (homo sapiens keratin 19, ubiquitin thiolesterase, highly similar to HSFIB1 for fibronectin, tripartite motif-containing 28) was developed by Sher et al. and tested (RT-PCR) in a cohort of 54 patients undergoing curative resection of NSCLC (104). The panel was determined by examining genes with large differential expression ratios between lung cancer cell lines and white blood cells. Detection of any of the marker genes classified a sample as CTC positive; the detection rate was 72% (39/54). The method was further developed to allow semi-quantitative measurement of the relative expression of marker genes to determine a circulating tumor cell load; which was validated using spiked tumor cell experiments. Patients were categorized into high and low cancer cell load for analysis and those with a low cancer cell load had better prognosis when matched for stage.

Yamashita et al. examined the blood of 103 patients with NSCLC pre and post-surgery (105). CTCs were defined by the detection of mRNA for CEA, which is expressed in epithelial cells. Patients with detectable CEA in the pre-operative blood sample had a significantly worse prognosis. Median survival in patients with a positive pre-operative test was 14 months compared to over 26 months in those with a negative test. Multivariate analysis showed that stage and CEA mRNA detection were independent prognostic factors (P=0.0004, RR 0.21). Yoon et al. sampled blood from patients before and after resection of NSCLC (n=79) and defined CTC status by the presence of thyroid transcription factor-1 (TTF-1) and cytokeratin19 (CK19) mRNA using real time RT-PCR (106). TTF-1 was detected in 36.1% (22/61) and 37.5% of patients before and after surgery respectively. CK19 mRNA positive samples were detected in 42.6% (26/61) and 25.0% (12/48) before and after surgery. Post-surgery positivity for both markers was most strongly correlated with shorter disease-free survival (P=0.006). Patients who only had post-surgery positive TTF-1 samples had a significantly shorter disease-free survival (P<0.001); this was not the case for CK19, which was not prognostic when measured independently.

**Pulmonary vein sampling**

In addition to analysis of peripheral blood, a small number of studies using various methodologies have explored the presence of CTCs within the pulmonary vein at the time of surgical resection. The pulmonary veins drain blood directly from the lungs and deliver oxygenated blood to the heart for distribution to the systemic circulation; their proximity to the primary tumor and the ability to take blood before the filtering effect of the capillary bed, which has been reported to remove 90% of CTCs (107), makes pulmonary vein sampling potentially advantageous. In a study of 30 patients undergoing resection of lung cancer, Okumura et al. detected CTCs in 96% (n=29/30) of pulmonary compared with 17% (n=5/30) of matched peripheral vein samples (using CS) (108). Pulmonary vein CTC count was not prognostic after a median follow-up period of 13 months (2 deaths from lung cancer—one patient with high and one with low pulmonary vein CTC count).

A novel method of CTC detection, involving a CD45 negative enrichment step followed by density gradient centrifugation, was developed by Funaki et al. who reported a pulmonary vein CTC prevalence of 72% (n=68/94) (109). Circulating tumor micro-emboli were detected in over half of patients with a CTC positive blood sample (n=35/68). Recurrence occurred in a total of 16 patients at local (n=4), local and distant (n=7) and distant only (n=5) sites after a median follow up period of 13 months. Of these 16 patients 15 had detectable CTCs or CTMs in the pulmonary vein at the time of surgery. Multivariate analysis showed the presence of pulmonary vein CTMs (RR 8.9, 1.7-21.0; P=0.002) to be the only significant predictors of relapse.

Sienel et al., using an anti-cytokeratin antibody to define CTCs, detected pulmonary vein CTCs in 18% of patients (11/62) (110). There was an overall trend towards poor prognosis in patients with detectable CTCs, 7/11 died from lung cancer compared to 13/39 patients with no CTCs detected (P=0.054). Subgroup analysis of patients with no mediastinal nodal involvement (i.e., N0 or N1) showed CTC detection to be a significantly adverse prognostic marker (RR 4.2, 1.6-11.1; P=0.004) after multivariate analysis. Pulmonary vein CTCs were also shown to have adverse prognostic significance by Dong et al. using flow cytometry to detect CTCs (defined as CD45-, CK+, 2F7/S5A+) (111). Of 31 patients included in the study 15 had detectable CTCs (48.4%). Median follow up was 30 months and patients with CTCs in the pulmonary vein had significantly worse prognosis [2-year survival 62.5% (CTC –ve) vs. 26.7% (CTC +ve); P=0.023]. Multivariate analysis showed that only disease stage and CTC positive test (RR 2.8, 1.1-7.2;
P=0.03) were the only independent prognostic tests. By contrast, Franco et al. reported the presence of CTCs in the pulmonary vein of 23.9% of patients undergoing resection of NSCLC (n=11/45) but CTC number was not related to prognosis (112).

In these studies the prevalence of pulmonary vein CTCs was markedly different (18% to 96%). The interpretation of these results needs to take into account not only methodological differences in CTC isolation and characterization but also the exact timing of pulmonary vein sampling with respect to the operation itself. Surgical manipulation of lungs peri-operatively has been investigated as a potential cause of increased CTCs. Two studies examining the sequence of vessel ligation at the time of surgery concluded that initial pulmonary vein ligation was associated with a lower post-operative release of CTCs than pulmonary artery ligation (113,114). However, studies by Yamashita et al. and Kozak et al. reported that the sequence of vessel ligation had no significant impact on prognosis (105,115). In three of the studies pulmonary vein sampling was performed after lung resection, potentially artificially elevating CTC numbers. Nevertheless, collectively the results are provocative for CTC analysis from pulmonary vein samples to inform on prognosis and thereby therapeutic decision making.

In summary, these studies overall have demonstrated the presence of CTCs in the surgical setting and have associated the finding of CTCs with a poorer prognosis. The utility of CTC detection has not yet been developed to a point that could guide clinical decision making and further prospective studies are required for this purpose.

**Conclusions and future directions**

Achieving long-term survival in patients with radically treated early stage lung cancer remains a major challenge with recurrence rates overall of 50%. Several different circulating biomarkers show promise as indicators of prognosis in patients with resected NSCLC. As an example, CEA has been studied most extensively and recent studies measuring pre and post-operative CEA levels have identified a small proportion of stage I adenocarcinoma patients with a particularly poor prognosis who may benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy. Evidence is lacking however for the predictive value of CEA in this setting. Some studies were performed prior to the routine use of adjuvant therapy or in stage I patients who are not routinely treated. In addition, the prognostic value of CEA may be more applicable to countries with a significant proportion of non-smoking lung cancer cases (up to 50% in some reports). The clinical value in European and American populations is less clear-cut, where there is a much heavier burden of smoking induced lung cancer and as a consequence common co-existence of inflammatory lung conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

A panel of biomarkers may be more reliable in predicting prognosis than a single measure, e.g., combined CYFRA 21-1 and CEA, which have been shown in several studies to be more strongly associated with prognosis than each individual measure taken alone. Newer markers such as circulating nucleic acids (DNA or microRNAs) or CTCs have the potential to reflect directly the biological behavior and provide molecular insights into the tumor biology itself. However, due to the ready availability and low cost of protein based markers in clinical laboratories, it would be prudent to include for example CEA or CYFRA 21-1 in any prospective study of a novel biomarker requiring more sophisticated and costly technology.

There are a multitude of studies that have examined circulating biomarkers and prognosis post-surgical resection. Results do indicate that it may be possible to differentiate patients with similar pathologies and stage into high and low risk categories based on the probability of recurrence on the basis of a convenient blood based test. Adjuvant therapy trials of the late 1990s/early 2000s did not incorporate translational studies of circulating biomarkers; focusing instead on tissue markers in resected tumor tissue. With the availability of new technologies and the opportunities they provide it may be opportune to revisit adjuvant trials with prospective evaluation of circulating biomarkers.

**Acknowledgements**

**Disclosure:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Despite the decrease in the incidence of squamous cell carcinoma of the lung (SQCCL) in the last decades, it still represents 20-30% of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (1). Unlike non-smoker lung adenocarcinoma, where strong biomarkers of response to specific tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKI) (such as activating mutations of EGFR or ALK rearrangements) are available, in SQCCL actionable alterations have only been partially characterized in recent years, without any breakthrough in treating such tumor entities (2).

Gene copy number (GCN), like other genetic structural variations, represents an event of strong evolutionary pressure within both normal cells and particularly in cancer cells, where genomic instability it is a hallmark. GCN gains, such as gene duplication or amplification, can cause an increase in protein levels. Nowadays, there are three
molecular mechanisms that can potentially produce a gene amplification, including the double-stranded DNA repair pathways: non-homologous end-joining (NHEJ), non-allelic homologous recombination (NAHR) (3,4), and DNA re-replication. In DNA re-replication, license control of replication is lost and a single DNA molecule is replicated more than once, triggering GCN gains, amplification, genomic instability and tumorigenesis (5).

Fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1) is one of the four family members of the FGFR of transmembrane tyrosine kinase receptors (TKR) involved in regulation of embryonic development, differentiation and cell proliferation (6-8). The functional validation of FGFR1 gene amplification in SQCCL was initially described by Weiss et al. Their work placed this histological-tumor subtype on the edge of the wave, identifying new therapeutic options that could change the management of SQCCL patients (9).

Broad amplification at 3q chromosome is the most frequent chromosomal alteration in SQCCL tumors. It was initially reported using fluorescent in situ hybridization (FISH) (10). It is known that increasing frequency of 3q amplification can be found from dysplasia to metastatic squamous lesions (11). Moreover, the potential epidemiological relationship of 3q amplification and tobacco consumption has been suggested (2). A recent comprehensive genomic characterization of SQCCL reported that 3q amplicon covers 3q13 to 3q29 (12). They also showed a correlation of GCN and mRNA levels at single-gene resolution.

This review highlights the recent findings on the prognostic and/or predictive value of FGFR1, as well as other important genes targeted by the 3q chromosome amplification in SQCCL.

**FGFR1 amplification**

FGFR is a family of receptors tyrosine kinases (RTK) consisting of four family members (FGFR1-4). FGFR1, like other RTKs, has an extracellular domain, a transmembrane domain and an intracellular domain, where the catalytic tyrosine kinase domain is located. The FGFR1 gene resides at 8p12 cytoband and spans a genomic DNA fragment of 57.7 Kb in length. Upon receptor activation, it promotes cell proliferation, angiogenesis, survival and apoptotic resistance through the PLCγ/PKC, RAS/MAPK and PI3K-AKT pathways (13). The oncogenic potential of activated FGFR1 represents an attractive therapeutic target that is currently being clinically tested.

The seminal work of Weiss et al. (9), demonstrated a growth dependency of a subset of SQCCL based on FGFR1 amplification that was abrogated both in lung cancer cell lines and in NCI-H1581 mice xenografts by PD173074, a specific TKI. No activating mutations were found. Twenty-two percent of squamous lung cancer tumors were carriers of FGFR1 focal amplification, as detected by FISH. Further studies confirmed that the percentage of amplification ranges from 16-22% (14-16) and independent in vitro studies confirmed that FGFR1-amplified cells are vulnerable when treated with a specific TKI (17). FGFR1 has also been reported to be amplified in other cancers, including 17.4% oral squamous cell carcinoma (18), 6% of esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (19), 10-17% of breast (20,21), 7.8% of ovarian (22,23), 3.4% of bladder (24) and 9% of prostate cancer (25).

Heist et al., in a retrospective cohort of 226 SQCLC, where almost 70% of the patients were staged as IA-IIB, detected 16% of FGFR1 amplification. They measured gene copy number by FISH, using for the threshold of gene amplification a FISH ratio equal to 2.2 or higher (14). In this study, amplification of FGFR1 was not correlated with age, sex, stage or smoking history. They found no correlation with overall survival. On the other hand, Weiss et al. reported a trend towards inferior survival among patients amplified for FGFR1 (9). In a recent work carried out by Kim et al. reported that patients, carriers of FGFR1 amplification, had significantly shorter disease-free survival and overall survival than diploid patients (wild type), regardless of sex, smoking status, adjuvant therapy and pathologic stage. These findings are in contradiction to those previously published by Heist and Weiss, and suggest FGFR1 amplification is an independent prognostic marker in this cohort of patients. Furthermore, in the same study, a positive association of FGFR1 amplification and smoking habit, in a dose-dependent manner, was reported. An interesting observation is that none of the 37 patients classified as never-smokers were carriers of amplified FGFR1 (26). Recently, a 100% concordance of FGFR1 amplification between primary SQCCL tumors and their lymph node metastatic tissue was described, suggesting an important role for FGFR1 in tumor prognosis and progression. So further studies are needed to validate whether the prognostic impact of FGFR1 amplification is a population-based phenomena or not (16).

Due to the important biological impact of FGFR
activation in tumor cell growth, survival, tumor angiogenesis, progression and metastasis, the development and clinical testing of anti-FGFR compounds are currently major areas of research. There has been a great expectation as some reports have suggested FGFR1 amplification as a predictive biomarker of specific TKIs. There are two different types of FGFR inhibitors under development: small TKI molecules and ligand-competitor antibodies (see Table 1). Most of the small molecules exert their biological activity by binding into the ATP-binding pocket. This prevents either autophosphorylation of the receptor or proliferative signal transduction through transphosphorylation of receptor-dimers and their downstream adaptor proteins such as FSR2 (17,27). A clinical trial with BIBF1120, which inhibits FGFR1, will be developed in the Netherlands and in Spain in the second line treatment of SQCCL patients with FGFR1 amplification. Double methodological validation of FGFR1-amplified tumors will be carried out by FISH and multiplex ligation-dependent probe amplification (MLPA).

Taking advantage of what we have learned from gastrointestinal stromal tumors treated with imatinib/sunitinib (28,29), as well as from the history of erlotinib/gefitinib or crizotinib in lung cancers carriers of mutant EGFR (30,31) or ALK-rearrangements (32) respectively, we will need to identify the mechanisms of intrinsic, adaptive and acquired resistance to TKI treatment, as quickly as possible, and how to revert them clinically. The priority should be to analyze the presence of gain-of-functional mutations, amplification or overexpression of RTKs that activates redundant pro-survival pathways which bypass the drugged one (33,34). In addition, alterations in apoptotic pathways have also been demonstrated a key role in TKI resistance, and thus need to be analyzed (35-38).

Currently, fluorescent in situ hybridization (FISH) is the standard method available for identification of gene amplification among cancer patients. The previous

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Abbreviations: FGFRs, fibroblast growth factor receptors; VEGFRs, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor; PDGFRs, platelet derived growth factor receptor; IGF-1R, Insulin Growth factor-1 receptor; KIT, mast/stem cell growth factor receptor; FLT3, fms-like tyrosine Kinase receptor 3; CSFR, colony stimulating factor receptor; n/a, not applicable.
experience from ERBB2 in breast cancer has shown that a key point was the inter-laboratories standardization of FISH criteria (39,40). Recently it has been reported in a cohort of 307 squamous lung carcinomas a reference guide to classify the tumor entities with respect to their FGFR1 gene status by FISH (41). The authors defined low-level amplification by ≥5 FGFR1 signals in ≥50% of tumor cells, whereas high-level amplification is defined by an FGFR1/centromere 8 (CEN8) ratio ≥2.0, or by an average number of FGFR1 signals per tumor cell nucleus ≥6, or by the percentage of tumor cells containing ≥15 FGFR1 signals or large clusters ≥10%.

In order to establish an appropriate GCN threshold correlation between FGFR1 gene dosage and drug response in SQCCL patients, we propose to measure FGFR1 gene status by FISH along with, a secondary independent quantification of FGFR1 gene copy number by MLPA. In addition to clarify how FGFR1 amplification is translated at active-protein levels, we recommend measuring phospho FGFR1 and phospho FSR2 as indicators of FGFR1 signal transduction activity (17,27).

3q amplification

Over the recent decades, due to the great technical advancement in the field of molecular biology, there has been vast improvement towards the genetic characterization of tumors, in an effort to understand how their biology can be targeted to improve cancer patient care. One of the most frequent chromosomal aberrations found in NSCLC is the amplification at 3q chromosome, which can be present in up to 43% of cases. It can be found in squamous dysplasia, established carcinoma and also in metastatic tissue (42) and is suggested that 3q amplification frequency increases as disease progresses (43). It is known that each patient carries a different length of 3q chromosome amplicon (see Figure 1). We hypothesized that the number and the biological importance of the trapped genes in each patient’s 3q amplicon might be helpful to explain the inter-individual differences in disease outcome or its response towards specific targeted therapy.

Only a few genes that are targeted by the 3q chromosome amplicon have been functionally validated as prognosis modifiers of cancer disease, and even fewer as biomarkers of cancer therapy. Among these genes are phosphatidylinositol-4,5-bisphosphate 3-kinase, catalytic subunit alpha (PIK3CA) (44-46), SRY-related HMG-box (SOX2) (47-50), tumor protein 63 (TP63) (42), atypical Protein kinase C iota (aPKCt) (51,52), eukaryotic translation initiation factor 4 gamma 1 (EIF4G1) (53,54), member of RAS oncogene family RAP2B, and others.

PIK3CA encodes for the p110α catalytic subunit of phosphatidylinositol (PI) 3-kinase. A broad range of cancer-related functions have been associated with its activation, such as cell proliferation, survival, oncogenic RAS signaling and transformation, making this an attractive target for therapeutic intervention. PIK3CA was found to be amplified in up to 45% of SQCCL cancer patients (55-59) and, due the strong correlation between PIK3CA amplification and its increased activity through its downstream effectors such as AKT and mTOR, this gene also appeared as an oncogene candidate (44). Abnormalities including mutations and amplification of PIK3CA/AKT/mTOR/PTEN are more common in SQCCL than in adenocarcinoma of the lung (60-62). Similar results have been showed by Spoerke et al. in their study where they have evaluated the candidate predictive biomarkers of sensitivity to select PI3K/mTOR pathway inhibitors in lung cancer patients. They suggests that different predictive biomarker strategies might be needed for both squamous and non-squamous patient populations, due to their alteration patterns and frequency (46).

The transcription factor TP63 (TP73L) is a homologue of p53 that functions by transactivating p53-targeted genes. The TP63 gene is expressed as multiple isoforms with different functions, including a full length (TAp63) and a truncated amino-deleted isoform ΔNp63, also called p40 (63). TAp63 can induce cell cycle arrest and apoptosis in response to DNA damage (64), whereas ΔNp63 has opposite functions because of its competition with p53, with respect to cell cycle arrest, mobility, invasion (epithelial–mesenchymal transition) and senescence. The ratio of TAp63 and ΔNp63 regulates chemosensitivity. ΔNp63a is the most commonly expressed TP63 isoform in squamous cell carcinoma together with TP63 amplification (65). Massion et al. reported that 88% of SQCCLs have TP63 amplification by FISH (42). As an interesting finding, they observed that TP63 amplification was an early event in the development of squamous carcinoma along with overexpression by IHC which results in better survival. ΔNp63 has been demonstrated as a more specific maker of squamous cell carcinoma than full length TP63, in the differential diagnosis in comparison with other lung histologies (66,67).

The SOX2 gene is a key transcription factor that coordinates embryonic development, differentiation and self-renewal of normal non-alveolar epithelium of...
the airway. SOX2 amplification has been reported in 43-60% (11,48,50,68) of SQCCL and in 27% of SCLC (69). The biological and clinical impact of SOX2 in lung cancer is reviewed by Karachaliou et al. (doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.01.01).

CEP63 (centrosomal protein 63 kDa) plays a role in DNA damage response. Following DNA double strand breaks (DSBs) formation, it is delocalized from centrosomes and recruits CDK1, a regulator mitotic entry of the cell (70,71).

We took advantage of a recent report where authors performed a high resolution genomic characterization of SQCCL by RNA-seq, gene copy number and mRNA expression analysis (12) that is publicly available at the cBio cancer genomics portal (72). In this section, we will summarize the recent evidence of selected 3q-resident genes, where gene amplification might explain its contribution to malignant transformation, tumor progression or its role as a biomarker for targeted therapies.

From protein-coding genes located at 3q, we only selected those having strong correlation of GCN and mRNA. We defined strong GCN-mRNA correlation for a given gene, when at least 50% of the amplified tumors expressed higher levels of mRNA than diploid tumors (see Figure 2).

**Atypical protein kinase C iota (aPKCi)**

aPKCi belongs to the atypical subgroup within the protein kinase C family of structurally related serine/threonine kinases. Different PKC isoenzymes are involved in different functions, such as: cellular differentiation, proliferation, polarity and apoptosis. Atypical PKCs, unlike most of the members of the family, can be activated independently of Ca²⁺, diacylglycerol or phosphatidyserine (73). High aPKCi expression has been found in several human tumors, including squamous carcinomas of head and neck (64), esophageal (74,75) and lung (52), but also in lung adenocarcinoma (76). Recent data suggests that aPKCi activity is required by the oncogenic RasG12D mice model to progress from bronchial hyperplasia to lung tumor (77). In the same study, bronchoalveolar stem cells that lacked Prkci, the mice gene that encodes for aPKCi, were unable to transform neither in vitro nor in vivo.
Figure 2 Boxplots of mRNA expression vs. gene copy number in SQCCL selected oncogenes. Only protein-coding genes were considered for screening as candidate genes. Gene data was retrieved from the cBio portal (http://www.cbioportal.org/public-portal/) based on their GCN- mRNA correlation and previous available bibliography. Those genes in which ≥50% of the amplified tumors expressed higher mRNA levels than diploid were selected for further bibliographic review. A-G, selected genes showing an strong correlation of GCN and mRNA expression levels. H, an example of a discarded gene due to its low correlation value.
aPKCι interacts with PAR6α, forming a complex that triggers the activation of RAC1-PAK-MEK-ERK pro-survival pathway. Interestingly in NSCLC, the ECT2 oncogene, which also localizes at 3q amplicon, is mislocalized in the cytoplasm, where it is a target of phosphorylation at Thr-328 by aPKCι (78) for a proper oncogenic signaling through the RAC1 small GTPase pathway (79).

Taking into consideration, the importance of aPKCι in KRAS-mediated lung tumors, the prognostic and/or predictive role of PRKCI amplification and aPKCι overexpression needs to be evaluated in oncogene “addicted” lung tumors, such as lung adenocarcinoma induced by EGF-activating mutations or oncogenic rearrangements of ALK, where targeted therapies have a strong impact on patient survival and quality of care. Of course, it might be also interested to address the same question in SQCCL carriers of FGFR1 amplification treated with FGFRs inhibitors.

Activated CDC42 kinase 1 (ACK1)

ACK1, also known as TNK2, is a non-receptor tyrosine and serine/threonine protein kinase which functions as transducer of multiple ligand-activated RTKs including EGFR (80,81), AXL (82), MERTK (53), HER2 (83) and PDGFR (84) by activating cytosolic or nuclear effectors such as AKT and AR respectively to promote cell growth and survival (85,86). EGF ligand stimulation activates the ACK1 activity, which at the same time prevents EGFR from ubiquitination (87). AKT activation by ACK1 happens in a PI3K-independent manner. When phosphorylated by ACK1 at Tyr-176, unlike the PI3K-activated AKT, it is confined to the membrane phosphatidic acid phospholipid. Once the phospho-activated AKT/ACK1 complex is located at the plasma membrane, it then translocates into the nucleus where it phosphorylates FoxO3a, preventing the expression of the BIM-1 pro-apoptotic gene, the GADD45 DNA repair gene and p21 and p27 inducers of cell cycle arrest. Moreover it can also activate the mitotic progression (88).

In addition, the E3 ubiquitin ligase Nedd4-2 is a negative regulator of ACK1 when co-expressed (87,89), and can be rescued by treatment with MG132, a proteasomal inhibitor. Xenografts of prostate LNCaP cells are usually poorly tumorigenic in nude mice. But when LNCaP cells expressing a constitutively activated ACK1 were engrafted into nude mice, they rendered very large tumors within the first 24 days after injection. In prostate cancer, activated ACK1, phosphorylates androgen receptor (AR) either at Tyr-267 or Tyr-363 led to the nuclear translocation of AR/ACK1 complex, thus activating the transcription of AR target genes such as prostate-cancer proteins: prostate-specific antigen (PSA) and HK2, independently of androgen or testosterone, the Androgen receptor ligands (83). Interestingly, a hallmark of prostate cancer progression implies the acquisition of an androgen-resistant phenotype, which might be explained in some cases by the AR estrogen-independent activation by ACK1.

Conclusions

Taking into consideration, the potential biological and medical impact of FGFR1, its activation turned to be a major area of research interest. Although prognostic data on FGFR1 has only recently been reported, the results are contradictory. Larger studies are needed to clarify its prognostic role. Furthermore, FGFR1 inhibitors have entered clinical trials, and over the next few years its predictive role with targeted TKIs will be definitely clarified.

On the other hand, finding new predictive biomarkers in highly genetic heterogeneous tumors such as SQCCL might be challenging because of the coexistence of multiple driver oncogenes, both in the same cellular clone or in different ones. An example might be the 3q chromosome amplification in SQCCL.

Acknowledgements

Work in Dr. Rosell’s laboratory is partly supported by a grant from La Caixa Foundation, which had no role in writing the manuscript or in the decision of publication.

Disclosure: This manuscript has not been published so far or submitted for publication elsewhere. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Cite this article as: Mendez P, Ramirez JL. Copy number gains of FGFR1 and 3q chromosome in squamous cell carcinoma of the lung. Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(2):101-111. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.05
Predictive models for customizing chemotherapy in advanced non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)

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Abstract: The backbone of first-line treatment for Epidermal Growth Factor (EGFR) wild-type (wt) advanced Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients is the use of a platinum-based chemotherapy combination. The treatment is characterized by great inter-individual variability in outcome. Molecular predictive markers are extremely needed in order to identify patients most likely to benefit from platinum-based treatment and resistant ones, thus optimizing chemotherapy approach in NSCLC. Several components of DNA repair response (DRR) have been investigated as potential predictive markers. Among them, high levels of expression of ERCC1, both at protein and mRNA levels, have been associated with resistance to cisplatin in NSCLC. In addition, low levels of expression of RRM1, a target for gemcitabine, have been associated with improved OS in advanced NSCLC patients treated with cisplatin and gemcitabine. Preclinical data and retrospective analyses showed that BRCA1 is able to induce resistance to cisplatin and sensitivity to antimicrotubule agents. In addition, the mRNA levels of expression of RAP80, encoding for a protein cooperating with BRCA1 in homologous recombination (HR), have demonstrated to further sub-classify low BRCA1 NSCLC tumors, improving the predictive model. On the basis of biological knowledge on DNA repair pathway and recent controversial results from clinical validation of potential molecular markers, integrated analysis of multiple DNA repair components could improve predictive information and pave the way to a new approach to customized chemotherapy clinical trials.

Keywords: Platinum; ercc1; brca1; dna repair; predictive modeling

Submitted Feb 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 12, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.07
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.07

Introduction

The most important progresses in the field of advanced NSCLC disease are related to the capacity of individuating so-called driver-mutations, that is molecular alterations able to render the tumors specifically sensitive to targeted therapy. The first and best known example is the discovery of EGFR mutations, characterizing a subgroup of tumors in which the treatment with EGFR selective inhibitors (gefitinib, erlotinib, afatinib) significantly improves survival and quality of life (1-6). Currently, we also know that patients carrying ALK rearrangements could significantly benefit from crizotinib treatment (7) and that we can individuate several other subgroups of patients with lung adenocarcinoma characterized by dysregulation of main oncogenic pathways induced by a specific genetic alteration (8,9). Finally, a series of potentially targetable molecular alterations have been recently found also in squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) (10). Nevertheless, still about 80% of advanced NSCLC patients receive standard first-line chemotherapy treatment and their best therapeutic option is considered platinum-based chemotherapy, when clinically feasible. Clinical and radiological responses are obtained only in a subgroup of these patients and the median overall survival (OS) of the chemotherapy-treated population is still inferior to one year. Moreover, platinum-based chemotherapy is currently the standard second-line treatment after progression to an EGFR-inhibitor in EGFR-mutated patients.
In this clinical context, the aim of the research concerning molecular predictive markers of platinum sensitivity is to optimize chemotherapy approach and provide more precise information to patient at diagnosis.

**Biological rationale for predictive models in NSCLC**

Cisplatin and carboplatin act as DNA-damaging agents and have largely overlapping resistance mechanisms. For this reason, defective DNA repair capacity, one of the main factors responsible for carcinogenesis, may contribute to the cytotoxic effect of the drugs. On the other hand, DNA repair capacity, contributing to genome stability, is one of the most studied mechanisms of platinum resistance.

Cellular DNA repair capacity depends on complex inter-related mechanisms, also interacting with cell cycle control and apoptotic pathways. For this reason, considerable efforts have been made to validate predictive markers as surrogate of DNA repair capacity and, in particular, of the capacity of repairing the lesions induced by platinum on DNA.

Cisplatin and carboplatin inhibit DNA replication mainly acting as cross-links inducing agents. They bind DNA, and in prevalence nucleophilic N7-sites on purine bases, leading to the generation of protein-DNA and DNA intra- and, less commonly, interstrand adducts. Platinum-induced lesions cause distortions in DNA structure that are recognized by multiple DNA repair pathways. These DNA distortions are mainly repaired by the nucleotide excision repair (NER) system. NER is a pathway involved in DRR specifically targeting DNA helix-distorting lesions, including cisplatin- and ultraviolet-induced lesions. It functions as a so-called “cut-and-paste” mechanism including different sequential steps: DNA damage recognition, local opening of the DNA helix around the lesion, damage excision and gap filling. It consists of two sub-pathways: global genome NER (GG-NER) and transcription-coupled NER (TC-NER), sharing the same core mechanism but differing in the way that DNA lesions are recognized and in the target DNA sequences. TC-NER specifically recognizes actively transcribed DNA sequences (Figure 1).

The structure-specific endonuclease excision repair cross-complementing 1 (ERCC1) is a protein playing pivotal role in GG-NER. It is thus involved in the rate-limiting step of the pathway, that is incision process. Together with its XP group F (XPF) partner, it cuts the damaged DNA strand at the 5 site of the helix-distorting lesion. In addition, the ERCC1/XPF complex is also involved in the homologous recombination (HR) repair of platinum-induced DNA damage. In tumor experimental models cisplatin exposure is able to increase ERCC1 mRNA expression levels. The mRNA expression of ERCC1 correlates with the capacity of DNA adducts repair (11,12) while higher activation of ERCC1 is associated with platinum resistance in several tumor models (13).

RRM1 is the regulatory subunit of ribonucleotide reductase and controls the function of the enzyme involved in deoxynucleotide production. Deoxynucleotide availability is essential to conclude NER and this could explain a potential predictive role for ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1 (RRM1) in patients treated with platinum, in addition to known data about gemcitabine sensitivity. Gemcitabine is an inhibitor of ribonucleotide reductase and increased RRM1 expression has been associated with gemcitabine resistance (14,15). In clinical setting, low mRNA levels of RRM1 have been associated with gemcitabine resistance (14,15). In clinical setting, low mRNA levels of RRM1 have been associated with improved outcome of patients treated with platinum and gemcitabine, showing a sort of synergism in the DNA-repair-linked resistance mechanisms of the two drugs (16-18).

Replication blocks induced by cisplatin lead to activation of HR, creating the so-called “stalled replication forks” and, in this way, the sequential coordinated action of NER and...
HR is required for repairing the platinum-induced DNA damage. HR is one of the major pathways involved in DNA double strand breaks (DSBs) repair. It acts using the non-damaged strand as a template and so it is considered an “error-free” system (Figure 2). The role of HR in the repair of platinum-induced lesions is at the basis of the potential role of Breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 (BRCA1), one main component of HR, in predicting resistance to platinum.

HR is a complex mechanism initiating with the recognition of DSBs by the multifunctional protein sensor complex (MRE11-RAD50-NBS1), the activation of the check-point phosphoinositide 3-kinase related ATM, ATR and DNA-PK and the subsequent phosphorylation of histone H2AX proteins (19). ATM phosphorylates the mediator of DNA checkpoint 1 (MDC1) at the region surrounding the DSB and in this way triggers the recruitment of DNA repair effectors (Figure 3). The assembly process requires a series of post-translational modifications of DNA repair components. In particular, the E3 ubiquitin-ligase RNF8 recognizes the phosphorylated MDC1 and creates a complex with the E3 ubiquitin-ligase RNF168 and the E2 ubiquitin-conjugating enzyme UBC13, leading to the recruitment of BRCA1 (20). The assembly of the RNF8-UBC13 complex is facilitated by the activity of the HECT type E3 ligase (HERC2) (21), an E3 ubiquitin-ligase which can also target BRCA1 for degradation (22).

A large proportion of BRCA1 present at DSBs co-localizes with a group of proteins forming a complex called BRCA1-A complex, including also BARD1, BRCC36, ABRAAX and RAP80 (Figure 3). In particular, RAP80, an ubiquitin-interaction motif (UIM) protein, recognizes the histones ubiquitinated by RNF8/UBC13 and triggers the formation of the complex. In experimental model, the presence of RAP80 is essential for the recruitment of the BRCA1-A complex at DNA damage sites, while its loss

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**Figure 2** The figure shows the two main pathways involved in the repair of double strand breaks: homologous recombination, an error-free mechanism, using undamaged strand as template, and non-homologous end-joining, an error-prone mechanism.
abrogates the repair response (23-27). On the other hand, BRCA1 forms also other complexes at DNA damage sites, increasing the level of complexity.

Notably, BRCA1 is considered to play a fundamental role also in TC-NER (28-29) (Figure 1). This point could be particularly relevant, since GG-NER could have low affinity for cisplatin-induced DNA adducts, while TC-NER is specifically initiated by cisplatin cross-links and an experimental model of TC-NER deficient cells demonstrated hypersensitivity to cisplatin (30-32). The effect of the BRCA1 in determining resistance to platinum has been also directly demonstrated in preclinical models and, in parallel, BRCA1-deficiency has been associated with platinum-resistance (33-35).

BRCA1 is also involved in Non homologous end-joining (NHEJ), an error-prone pathway involved in DSBs repair and in mismatch repair (MMR), which can recognize cisplatin-induced DNA lesions, while normally dealing with erroneous insertions, deletions and mis-incorporations of bases during DNA replication (36).

The role of BRCA1 in HR and NHEJ response to DSBs (Figure 2) implies inter-relation with other DNA repair components. In particular, recent findings show a complex functional interplay with 53BP1, a protein acting as an activator of P53, but also involved in NHEJ and HR. The protein 53BP1 modulates the chromatin structure at DNA damage sites and contributes in maintaining genomic stability (37). In addition, it is able to negatively regulate HR repair, by inhibiting CTIP, a protein that creates a complex with BRCA1 (BRCA1-C complex), thus supporting HR (38). Interestingly, 53BP1 function could contribute to the expression of BRCA1-loss phenotype and, in the absence of 53BP1, HR capacity could be maintained independently on BRCA1 (38). Finally, BRCA1-independent HR capacity can be suppressed by abrogating RNF8, consistently with the complexity of the pathway (39).

The protein 53BP1 is recruited at DNA damage sites through two different mechanisms, activated after MDC1 recruitment at DNA damage sites. The first mechanism of 53BP1 localization at DSBs is driven...
by histone methylation, regulated by the methyltransferase MMSET (40) (Figure 3).

In addition to ubiquitination process, the assembly of DNA repair effectors at DSB requires also another post-translational modification process called sumoylation. For this reason, specific small ubiquitin-related modifier (SUMO)-conjugating systems are required. In particular, the E3 ligase PIAS1 and PIAS4 are recruited at DSBs and their depletion reduces BRCA1 accumulation at DSBS (41). PIAS4 forms a complex with E2 ligase UBC9, positively modulating 53BP1 function (42) (Figure 3).

The complex and inter-related pathways involved in the repair of platinum-induced DNA lesions explain the difficulty in finding one single marker measurable in patients’ blood or tumor biopsies able to effectively predict resistance to platinum in clinical setting.

**Strategies for building predictive models in lung cancer**

The biological observation that tumor cells with defective capacity of removing cisplatin-DNA adducts are hypersensitive to platinum and the increasing knowledge about DNA repair pathways, forming a complex integrated network, carries great potential clinical application. In translational application of this knowledge the issue is to find a reliable marker able to measure the cellular capacity of repairing platinum-induced DNA damage and clinically performable in samples from patients’ blood or small biopsies.

The most direct method of quantifying DNA repair capacity would be to measure and to monitor the rate of unrepair DNA-adducts in tumor cells following platinum exposure directly (Table 1). For practical application, it is possible to measure DNA repair capacity in vitro by culturing patients’ peripheral lymphocytes and measuring the unrepair DNA adducts induced by a cross-links inducing agent. Recently, it has been suggested that the DNA repair capacity, quantified with this method, could predict the patients’ outcome to platinum-based chemotherapy. A retrospective analysis in a large but heterogeneous population of NSCLC showed a trend for improved overall survival (OS) in patients with the lowest rate of DNA repair capacity measured in peripheral lymphocytes. This trend was higher in the subgroup of patients with stage I-IIIA disease and in adenocarcinoma histology (43).

Anyway, the most studied way to translate preclinical findings about DNA repair and platinum efficacy into clinical benefit is based on the idea that one single protein could lead the repair of DNA-induced damage and that its activity could mirror global capacity of repairing platinum-induced lesions and, consequently, predict resistance to platinum. Actually, most of the clinical data available and currently under prospective evaluation concerns the use of a molecular marker, considered the main protagonist of a DNA repair pathway, as potential predictive marker of platinum resistance (Table 1). In particular the most studied molecular markers are the aforementioned ERCC1, BRCA1 and RRM1. These markers have been studied both at protein levels, with immunohistochemistry (ICH), and at mRNA level, through quantitative reverse transcriptase PCR. From the technical point of view, quantitative reverse transcriptase shows high sensitivity and reproducibility. The use of mRNA measurement could be suitable for screening a series of markers in retrospective analyses, and could be successfully performed also in small biopsies and formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded tissues (51), even though it could have some limits in quantifying differences in the expression of very low expressing genes, using this kind of samples. In addition, it could require centralized evaluation in laboratories with long-term experience in the specific field. On the other hand, IHC is a really cost-effective method, although sometimes appearing less reproducible and objective. Once a marker is validated, IHC testing has the potentiality of being performed at each pathology centre providing rapid predictive information, if sufficient tumor material is available. Particularly interesting is also the possibility of studying DNA repair components expression in circulating tumor cells (CTCs), which are present in peripheral blood of patients with metastatic disease and can be analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively with several techniques. The most important point is the possibility to analyze the expression of specific biomarkers in CTCs, as surrogate of tumor samples, and to monitor functional changes of these biomarkers induced by treatment. Preliminary promising data are available from a small cohort of patients and relevant difference in progression free survival (PFS) to platinum-based chemotherapy was described favoring the group of patients lacking ERCC1 expression. Unfortunately, serial evaluation at multiple time points was missing for most of the patients (54) (Table 1).

On the basis of DNA repair complexity, some retrospective data are also already available about the possibility that integrated analysis of more than one component of a DNA repair pathway could provide more precise predictive information (51) (Table 1).
Clinical data available about DNA repair components as molecular predictive markers in NSCLC

Several potential molecular markers have been suggested for predicting the efficacy of platinum-based treatment and some of them are still under clinical evaluation.

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Abbreviations: CTCs, circulating tumor cells; DFS, disease free survival; NSCLC, non-small cell lung cancer; OS, overall survival; PFS, progression free survival; ps, patients; RR, response rate; SCC, squamous cell carcinoma.

ERCC1 and RRM1

In advanced NSCLC samples low ERCC1 mRNA expression levels have been associated with improved survival after first-line treatment with cisplatin and gemcitabine, thus seemingly confirming the biological resistance model (18,46). Recently, a predictive value for ERCC1 (and BRCA1) mRNA expression...
has been confirmed also in a series of patients treated with a platinum-based combination in second-line setting (47) (Table 1).

A meta-analysis including the results of 12 selected studies confirmed the potential predictive value of ERCC1, either at mRNA or at protein level, showing that negative/low ERCC1 expressing NSCLC patients treated with platinum-based combinations achieve higher response rate (RR) and improved median OS. In parallel, it indicated little difference favoring IHC in the results according to the technique used. The predictive effect seemed higher in the Asiatic population, compared to the Caucasian one and in patients treated with a combination including cisplatin, while it decreased when considering also carboplatin-based chemotherapy (55).

In advanced patients treated with this platinum and gemcitabine, also low RRM1 expression levels correlate with improved outcome (14,16-17). On the other hand, RRM1 is known to be associated with resistance to gemcitabine even when administered in non-platinum containing combinations (56-58). A meta-analysis, including the results of 18 selected trials, indicated an improved RR, PFS and OS for NSCLC expressing negative/low RRM1 treated with gemcitabine-containing chemotherapy (59).

A recently published individual patient analysis suggested that customizing chemotherapy according to ERCC1 and RRM1 expression could be translated into improved outcome for advanced NSCLC patients. The analysis included a comparison between two study populations, including four prospectively accrued cohorts of patients: the “personalized treatment” group and the “standard treatment” one (48). In the “personalized” group of treatment, ERCC1 and RRM1 were measured at mRNA level through real-time reverse transcriptase; patients whose tumors expressed low levels of both genes received carboplatin and gemcitabine, those with high levels of both genes received docetaxel and vinorelbine, patients with high ERCC1 and low RRM1 received gemcitabine and docetaxel, those with low ERCC1 but high RRM1 were treated with carboplatin and docetaxel (60). Even though the design of the study implies only hypothesis-generating results, it is encouraging to see that patients accrued in a phase II trial (NCT00215930) and thus treated according to the levels of expression of ERCC1 and RRM1 showed statistically significant improvement, both in terms of RR and of OS, when compared with patients receiving a “non-moleculary-driven” treatment (48) (Table 1).

In the adjuvant setting the predictive role of ERCC1 was suggested for the first time by an important retrospective analysis of tumor samples from patients enrolled in the International Adjuvant Lung Cancer Trial (IALT). The benefit of cisplatin-based adjuvant chemotherapy in terms of OS was limited to patients whose tumors did not express ERCC1. On the contrary, the expression of the marker was associated with improved prognosis in the group of patients who did not receive adjuvant chemotherapy. In this large study, ERCC1 was investigated at protein level using ICH (44) (Table 1).

Only the results of prospective phase III trials will let us draw definitive conclusions. Prospective results on the predictive role of ERCC1 are available in advanced disease setting. Standard chemotherapy with cisplatin and docetaxel was compared with customized treatment according to the mRNA levels of expression of ERCC1 measured in pretreatment biopsies. In the experimental arm, patients with low levels of ERCC1 received cisplatin and docetaxel, patients with high ERCC1 received docetaxel and gemcitabine. The patients allocated to the experimental arm demonstrated a significantly improved response rate (RR), not mirrored by increase of OS (49). This was the first prospective phase III clinical trial with available results in the field of customized chemotherapy and raised many questions about the methods to use to customize chemotherapy and the best chemotherapy combination for studying predictive models. Currently, several prospective trials are ongoing to validate ERCC1 predictive role both in early stage (phase III: TASTE, NCT00775385; ITACA) and in advanced stage disease (phase III: NCT00801736; NCT00499109; phase II: NCT01648517, NCT01356368; NCT00736814) (Table 2). In most of the studies the predictive value of ERCC1 is analyzed in conjuction with RRM1 evaluation, in particular when considering chemotherapy first-line combination including cis- or carboplatin and gemcitabine.

**BRCA1**

Clinical investigation concerning the predictive role of BRCA1 expression in NSCLC has retrospectively confirmed that low mRNA expression is correlated with good prognosis and increased sensitivity to cisplatin (50,61). A retrospective analysis in paraffin-embedded NSCLC samples, collected before neoadjuvant treatment with cisplatin and gemcitabine, demonstrated that the group of tumors with the lowest expression of BRCA1 obtained the greatest benefit from cisplatin-gemcitabine treatment (50) (Table 1). On the basis of this finding, a prospective phase II trial was planned. In this
trial, the treatment of advanced non-squamous NCSLCs was customized according to mRNA expression levels of BRCA1 measured by reverse transcriptase PCR. Patients whose tumors expressed low levels of BRCA1 received cisplatin and gemcitabine in first line setting; patients with high levels of the two received docetaxel alone, while patients with intermediate expression of BRCA1 were treated with cisplatin and docetaxel. The study demonstrated the feasibility of BRCA1 expression analysis in clinical practice and the median OS achieved was similar in the three genotyped groups. The samples from patients enrolled in the prospective trial were retrospectively analyzed to measure mRNA expression of RAP80 and ABRAXAS, as main components of BRCA1-A complex (Figure 3). The mRNA expression of RAP80 resulted as potential new predictive marker, able to further subclassify the outcome of low-BRCA1 expressing patients.

In the study population, patients with low levels of both BRCA1 and RAP80 obtained an impressive median PFS of 14 months (51).

Consequently, a multi-centric phase III trial has been coordinated in order to confirm the predictive value of integrated BRCA1-RAP80 analysis and their applicability in clinical practice (BREC, NCT00617656) (Table 2). In the trial, the outcome of advanced NSCLC patients treated with non-personalized chemotherapy (cisplatin-docetaxel) in first-line setting is compared to the one of patients receiving customized chemotherapy. The primary end-point is time to progression (TTP). All the samples of patients allocated to the experimental arm are analyzed for mRNA expression of BRCA1 and RAP80 through real-time PCR and the levels of expression of the two genes are categorized using tertiles as cut-off points. Patients in the experimental arm receive cisplatin and gemcitabine if RAP80 is low, independently on the levels of BRCA1, cisplatin and docetaxel if RAP80 is intermediate or high in the presence of low or intermediate BRCA1, docetaxel alone when BRCA1 is high and RAP80 intermediate or high. The accrual has been completed and interim analysis results will be soon available. Another phase III prospective trial is ongoing to test the predictive value of BRCA1 in the adjuvant setting (GEPC-SCAT, NCT00478699) (Table 2). Patients with stage II or IIIA NSCLCs, after complete surgical resection, are randomized to receive adjuvant chemotherapy with cisplatin and docetaxel or adjuvant chemotherapy customized according to BRCA1 mRNA levels. Patients allocated to the experimental arm receive cisplatin and gemcitabine if BRCA1 is low, cisplatin and docetaxel if BRCA1 is intermediate, docetaxel alone if BRCA1 is high.

**New perspectives: integrated analysis of multiple DNA repair components and histology-driven analyses**

While prospective trials are ongoing, controversial data about DNA repair components as predictive markers of platinum-based chemotherapy efficacy are available. In other words, not all the retrospective series confirmed the predictive role of ERCC1 and BRCA1 and several are the possible explanations. Among the most recent retrospective series, an analysis of mRNA expression levels of ERCC1 in formalin-fixed paraffin embedded tumor samples did not confirm the predictive role of ERCC1. The mRNA expression of ERCC1 was neither correlated to RR nor to OS in advanced NSCLC patients prospectively recruited in a phase III trial and treated with platinum-

| Table 2 Ongoing prospective clinical trial evaluating the predictive role of ERCC1, RRM1 and BRCA1 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Trial number                                  | Phase           | Clinical setting     | Biomarker       | Methodology     |
| NCT00775385                                   | Phase II-III    | Adjuvant (II-IIIA)  | ERCC1           | IHC             |
| NCT00801736                                   | Phase III       | Advanced disease    | ERCC1           | NA              |
| NCT00499109                                   | Phase III       | Advanced disease    | ERCC1; RRM1     | NA              |
| NCT01648517                                   | Phase II        | Advanced disease    | ERCC1; RRM1     | mRNA            |
| NCT01356368                                   | Phase II        | Advanced disease    | ERCC1; RRM1     | NA              |
| NCT00736814                                   | Phase III       | Advanced disease    | ERCC1; RRM1     | mRNA            |
| NCT00617656                                   | Phase III       | Advanced disease    | BRCA1; RAP80    | mRNA            |
| NCT00478699                                   | Phase III       | Adjuvant (II-IIIA)  | ERCC1; TS       | IHC and mRNA    |

Abbreviations: IHC, immunohistochemistry; NA, not available.
based chemotherapy (52). In a more recent retrospective evaluation, tumor tissues from patients prospectively enrolled in a phase III trial and treated with platinum and gemcitabine were analyzed for the expression of six DNA repair components. In this case, the authors found no predictive value for BRCA1 and RAP80 mRNA, whereas low ERCC1 and ABRAXAS levels were associated with increased RR and improved OS mRNA and PFS. Notably, in this study only 45 patients out of 137 had sufficient tumor material to perform planned analyses (53). These results are also in contrast with the data of the retrospective analysis published in 2009, showing potential predictive value for RAP80, but not for ABRAXAS (51).

In a larger series of patients, treated with platinum-based chemotherapy in adjuvant setting, protein expression of seven DNA repair components has been analyzed using IHC. The number of cases with evaluable results was variable according to the different biomarkers, with a range of 550-716 cases. Despite the large study population, neither tested biomarker was able to predict the benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy with statistical significance. The analyzed DNA repair components were generally expressed at higher levels in squamous cell carcinomas, with respect to adenocarcinoma histology. In the analysis by histology, higher benefit from platinum-based adjuvant chemotherapy was demonstrated in squamous cell carcinoma patients with low expression of ERCC1 and ATM. This difference in outcome was measured in terms of disease free survival (DFS) (45). Actually, histology has gained increasing role in NSCLC definition and treatment decision making in the latest years and we know that different biology characterizes adenocarcinoma versus squamous cell carcinoma.

All mentioned controversial results open new questions and suggest a new approach to predictive modeling in lung cancer.

Probably analysis by histology will help in the interpretation of retrospective analyses and ongoing prospective validation of potential predictive markers. Squamous cell carcinoma should probably be analyzed separately for non-completely known biological reason. One possible explanation is that the pattern of expression of DRR genes is different according to histology. Recently we have confirmed higher levels of expression of BRCA1, but also 53BP1 and UBC9, in squamous histology in a retrospective series of 115 advanced NSCLCs (62). Also in our series the differential expression according to histology was not mirrored by differential sensitivity to platinum-based chemotherapy according to histology. Another point to take into account is the differential sensitivity to different platinum-based chemotherapy according to histology. It is possible that the chemotherapy combinations could influence the outcome of patients differently in different histological subtypes, increasing the level of complexity. We already know that the partner for platinum in chemotherapy combinations could influence predictive modeling interpretation. As a matter of fact, platinum and gemcitabine seem to show a sort of synergism in DNA repair-associated resistance mechanisms (16-18), whereas taxanes and vinca alkaloids could not be the best partner for platinum in customized chemotherapy approach. BRCA1 is modulator of cellular response to chemotherapy drugs, inducing resistance to platinum and sensitivity to antimicrotubule agents (63). Finally, when interpreting the results in retrospective series treated with platinum-based combinations also containing pemetrexed, the well-known differential sensitivity to the drugs should be taken into account according to histology (64) and the molecular modulators of pemetrexed sensitivity (65).

In addition to histology-driven analyses, predictive information in lung cancer could be improved by building predictive models able to integrate the influence of several DNA repair components, contributing to cellular response to DNA repair damage. Actually, cellular response to DNA damage includes redundant mechanisms normally contributing to genome stability and interacting in sometimes unexpected ways to chemotherapy-induced DNA damage. We know that RAP80 expression could improve BRCA1 predictive information, when analyzed at mRNA levels in low BRCA1 expressing NSCLCs (51). One of the most interesting inter-relation is the one between BRCA1 and 53BP1. We have recently explored the predictive value of integrated BRCA1 and 53BP1 analysis in advanced NSCLC patients treated with a platinum-based combination not including antimicrotubule agents in first-line setting. In this series, we measured BRCA1, 53BP1 and other six components of 53BP1 pathway at mRNA level using real-time PCR. The levels of mRNA expression were considered as categorical variables using median values as cut-off points. BRCA1 was not confirmed as predictive marker, when considered in isolation. Among patients expressing low levels of BRCA1 mRNA, patients with low levels of 53BP1 obtained an impressive median OS of more than 19 months and a PFS of 10 months, in sharp contrast with patients with low BRCA1 and high 53BP1 (median OS: 8.2 months, median PFS: 5.9 months; P=0.01 for OS, P<0.0001 for PFS). In patients with high levels of
BRCA1 the median OS was 10 months, independently on 53BP1 (62). These results demonstrate the potentiality of integrated predictive modeling in lung cancer.

Conclusions

Current clinical data concerning the potential predictive role of DDR components require confirmation by large prospective randomized phase III trials but highlight the possibility of significant improvement in outcome of advanced NSCLC patients treated with chemotherapy. Available data suggest that different platinum-based doublets should be analyzed separately, considering the possible influences of different predictive markers and that histology-driven analysis could improve predictive modeling interpretation. In addition, only optimal clinical stratification of patients will permit correct interpretation of results concerning predictive biomarkers. Finally, current results demonstrate that it is difficult to identify a single marker able to predict response to a drug or a combination of drugs. Integrated analysis of several potential biomarkers based on the study of DNA repair pathways biology will probably provide more insight in predictive modeling in lung cancer.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Martina Boscaro for reviewing the language of the article.

Disclosure: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Bonanno L. Predictive models for customizing chemotherapy in advanced NSCLC. Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(3):160-171. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.07
Are we ready to use biomarkers for staging, prognosis and treatment selection in early-stage non-small-cell lung cancer?

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Abstract: Lung cancer accounts for the majority of cancer-related deaths worldwide. At present, platinum-based therapy represents the standard of care in fit stage II and IIIA non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients following surgical resection. In advanced disease, personalized chemotherapy and targeted biologic therapy based on histological and molecular tumor profiling have already shown promise in terms of optimizing treatment efficacy. While disease stage is associated with outcome and is commonly used to determine adjuvant treatment eligibility, it is known that a subset of patients with early stage disease experience shorter survival than others with the same clinicopathological characteristics. Improved methods for identifying these individuals, at or near the time of initial diagnosis, may inform the decision to pursue adjuvant therapy options. Among the numerous candidate molecular biomarkers, only few gene-expression profiling signatures provide clinically relevant information, while real-time quantitative polymerase-chain reaction (RT-qPCR) strategy involving relatively small numbers of genes offers a practical alternative with high cross-platform performance. mRNA and/or protein expression levels of excision repair cross-complementation group 1 (ERCC1), ribonucleotide reductase M subunit 1 (RRM1) and breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 (BRCA1) are among the most promising potential biomarkers for early disease and their clinical utility is currently being evaluated in randomized phase II and III clinical trials. This review describes the most promising clinicopathological and molecular biomarkers with predictive and prognostic significance in lung cancer that have been identified through advanced research and which could influence adjuvant and neoadjuvant chemotherapy decisions for operable NSCLC in routine clinical practice.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer; adjuvant therapy; biomarkers; individualized therapy

Submitted Feb 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 11, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.06
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.06

Introduction

Approximately 25-30% of patients with non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) present with early stage disease and undergo surgery with curative intent. Despite complete tumor resection, many of these patients will develop systemic relapses with or without local relapses and will eventually die. A meta-analysis of early trials indicated a trend towards improved survival for adjuvant platinum-based chemotherapy and led to a re-evaluation of adjuvant treatment in clinical trials in large patient populations. Several of these trials demonstrated an improved survival with the use of adjuvant chemotherapy. The survival benefit was then further confirmed in a meta-analysis that included all five cisplatin-based trials (Table 1) (1-7). Early NSCLC comprises a heterogeneous group of diseases, with diverse innate aggressiveness and degree of response to cytotoxic agents. For instance, some patient subsets with stage II or even stage IIIA have excellent prognosis...
Others, such as the elderly or less fit, as well as those with stage I disease, remain undertreated despite potential benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy. This underscores the need for a customized approach to tailor adjuvant chemotherapy according to patient characteristics and tumor characteristics. Personalizing therapy based on an individual patient’s molecular profile is a potentially promising approach to optimize efficacy with available agents. Prognostic biomarkers indicate the natural course of disease, irrespective of treatment, while those defined as predictive can foresee differential therapeutic outcomes. However, some biomarkers combine both of these functions, such as ERCC1 and RRM1. Identification and application of the appropriate biomarkers would enable selection of only high-risk patients to receive the most effective treatment. In this review we describe potential predictive and prognostic markers and their current role, benefit, and possible future use in the management of patients with early stage NSCLC.

Clinicopathological prognostic and predictive factors in early stage NSCLC

It has long been recognized that differences in clinical factors such as stage, sex, and tumor factors such as cellular differentiation, vascularity, and vascular invasion, are prognostic of outcome and important in determining adjuvant therapy decisions for early stage NSCLC. To date, pathological stage, as defined by tumor size and nodal status, is the only prospectively validated clinicopathological biomarker with both prognostic and predictive value. According to guidelines from the European Society of Medical Oncology (ESMO), American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) and the American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP), platinum-based adjuvant chemotherapy is considered standard treatment for resected stage II-IIIA disease with an estimated survival benefit of 4-5% at 5 years (8-11). Although pre hoc subgroup analyses have shown no benefit for patients with pathological stage IB disease, interpretation of these results should be cautious, since the test for interaction between treatment effect and stage was not significant in any of the phase III trials with platinum-based regimens (2-4,12). Only one of the available meta-analyses did demonstrate a significant differential treatment effect, largely in the stage IA subgroup, suggesting that patients with stages II and IIIA have greatest benefit (2). The reported 11% 5 years survival gain of adjuvant tegafur-uracil in stage I NSCLC cannot be directly extended to Western countries where tegafur-uracil has not yet been reliably tested (13). At the same time, the assumption of therapeutic benefit for stage IB disease with tumor size larger than 4 cm is based on an unplanned subgroup analysis (5). Nonetheless, worse prognosis observed with increasing T size has been recognized in the 7th TNM edition. T2 was divided into T2a (3-5 cm) and T2b (5-7 cm), with 5 year overall survival of 58% and 49%, respectively (P<0.0001); T2bN0 was upstaged to stage IIA. Correlation with the

Table 1: Adjuvant chemotherapy of completely resected NSCLC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N Stage CT</th>
<th>5-year survival (%)</th>
<th>HR (95% CI)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ALPI-EORTC (1) 1,088 I-IIIA MVP 49 48 0.96 (0.81-1.13) NS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IALT (2) 1,867 I-III Cis/Vinca 44.5 40.4 0.86 (0.76-0.98) &lt;0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCIC CTG-JBR.10 (3) 482 IB-II Cis/Vinorelbine 69 54 0.69 (0.52-0.91) 0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANITA (4) 840 IB-IIIA Cis/Vinorelbine 51.2 42.6 0.80 (0.66-0.96) 0.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALGB 9633 (5) 344 IB Carbo/Paclitaxel 57 5 0.80 (0.60-1.07) 0.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLT (6) 381</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACE meta-analysis (7) 4,584 I-IIIA Cisplatin-based 48.8 43.5 0.89 (0.82-0.96) 0.004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ALPI, adjuvant lung project Italy; NCIC CTG-JBR.10, National Cancer Institute of Canada Clinical Trials Group-JBR.10 trial; ANITA, Adjuvant Navelbine International Trialist Association; CALGB, Cancer and Leukemia Group B; BLT, Big Lung Trial; IALT, International Adjuvant Lung Cancer Trial; LACE meta-analysis, Lung Adjuvant Cisplatin Evaluation meta-analysis; CT, chemotherapy; MVP, mitomycin C, vindesine and cisplatin; Vinca, etoposide or vinorelbine or vinblastine or vindesine; HR, hazard ratio.
new staging system failed to validate the 5 cm cut-off in the 9-year update of CALGB 9633, showing a trend towards a significant benefit for adjuvant treatment for patients with tumors >7 cm (HR=0.53; P=0.051), although this interaction should be investigated further (14-16).

With regard to the importance of accurate staging, a recent retrospective analysis of lymph node dissection in more than 20,000 patients with pathological stage I NSCLC implied that the number of recovered lymph nodes might be predictive for survival outcomes, although this could well be attributed to a direct therapeutic effect (17). Furthermore, a large retrospective analysis from the SEER database showed that the increasing number of resected positive nodes and a higher ratio between metastatic and overall resected nodes has an independent negative prognostic impact for overall survival in N1 patients (18,19). Recent studies investigated high tumor grade, vascular invasion and visceral pleural infiltration as poor prognostic determinants, based on mostly retrospective cohort studies, and are commonly recommended as adjunct selection criteria for patients who are borderline candidates for adjuvant chemotherapy (20,21).

Other clinicopathological features prospectively shown to be independent, unfavorable prognostic factors in early NSCLC include older age, male sex and non-squamous-cell histology. Only performance status was likely to predict therapeutic effect (3,4,7). Likewise, certain histological subtypes, such as large-cell neuroendocrine carcinoma and pure bronchioloalveolar carcinoma which confer, respectively, worse or better outcome, could also guide treatment strategy (22,23). Interestingly, a high correlation between gene expression profile signatures and tumor histological phenotype has been shown for early NSCLC (24). It seems that even a thoroughly validated molecular signature does not outperform combined conventional clinical and pathologic variables in predicting survival of NSCLC patients (24). Therefore, incorporating the subtype and grade into conventional clinical models could provide predictive accuracy similar to that of well validated gene panels (24).

**Molecular prognostic and predictive markers in early stage NSCLC**

**Gene expression profiling signatures**

Gene expression profiles may facilitate treatment decisions in lung cancer, similar to their use to predict chemotherapy benefit in early stage breast cancer. Several groups have developed prognostic signatures based on mRNA, microRNA or proteomic profiles in order to better define patients with good prognosis who could potentially be spared adjuvant treatments, and those with poor prognosis who may benefit from successful adjuvant therapies. However, most prognostic signatures have some limitations that should be taken into account when analyzing their potential clinical utility. For instance, survival of NSCLC patients depends to a large extent on co-morbidity factors and the impact of this cannot be accounted for by prognostic tests based on tumor molecular profiling. At the same time, methodological or statistical data analyses have often been insufficient in the original studies proposing the signature for clinical use. Consider the recent example of the phase III Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) 30506 trial that was originally designed to validate the potential utility of a lung cancer metagene model in selecting patients with pT1-T2N0 tumors for adjuvant chemotherapy. The study was recently amended as the original authors failed to replicate their own results. This highlights the need for very careful large-scale validation of prognostic signatures before they can be prospectively tested in clinical studies with adjuvant therapies for lung cancer (25).

Subramanian and Simon have recently published an elegant review of 16 published studies involving the analysis of gene expression data for developing prognostic signatures in NSCLC, in which they report serious methodological flaws in design and analysis, including inappropriate patient dataset selection, lack of independent validation, biased reporting of re-substitution statistics, incomplete protocol specification and use of statistical methods (26). Indeed, only a few gene signature studies have yielded data specifically referring to NSCLC stages IA, IB, or II that warrant further prospective validation (27-33). Among them it is worth mentioning the prognostic 15-gene signature for early NSCLC that was recently reported as the first deriving from prospectively collected tumor samples from patients enrolled in a phase III adjuvant trial. Gene expression profiling was conducted on mRNA from 133 frozen tumor samples from the National Cancer Institute of Canada Clinical Trials Group (NCIC CTG)-JBR.10 trial (28). The prognostic value of this gene signature was tested in four independent published microarray data sets and by quantitative reverse-transcriptase polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR). Among these genes were...
nuclear proteins or transcription regulators such as mouse double minute 2 homolog (MDM2), zinc finger protein 236 (ZNF236), fos-related antigen 2 (FOSL2), hexamethylene bis-acetamide (HMBA)-inducible protein 1 (HEXIM1), myelin transcription factor 1-like (MYT1L) and inhibitor of kappa light polypeptide gene enhancer in B-cells (IKBKAP). The second subset of genes included protein melan-A (MLANA), ATPase subunit beta-1 (ATP1B1), L1 cell adhesion molecule (L1CAM), and stathmin-2 (STMN2), which encode for transmembrane-or membrane-associated proteins, potentially involved in signaling pathways and, finally, sodium/potassium-transporting ATPase subunit beta-1 (ATP1B1) and uridine monophosphate synthetase (UMPS) which are involved in purine and pyrimidine metabolism, respectively, suggesting dependency of NSCLC on these pathways (28).

This 15-gene expression profile was unique in that it could also predict response to systemic chemotherapy, whereas most other gene profiles have served only as prognostic markers following surgery. The signature was shown to interact significantly with the effect of cisplatin plus vinorelbine chemotherapy, with high-risk patients benefiting the most, although its potential predictive role requires independent validation. Also clinically relevant to the adjuvant strategy, this signature was able to assign, separately, stage IB and II patients to high- and low-risk subgroups with significantly different overall survival (28). When the predictive value of previously published prognostic signatures, applied to treated and untreated patients in the JBR.10 data set was evaluated, only the six-gene signature identified by Boutros was proved to be both significantly prognostic and predictive (27). The six-gene model comprised: syntaxin 1A (STX1A), hypoxia inducible factor 1A (HIF1A), chaperonin containing TCP1 subunit 3 (CCT3), MHC Class II DP beta 1 (HLA-DPB1), v-maf musculoaponeurotic fibrosarcoma onco-gene homolog K (MAFK), and ring finger protein 5 (RNF5) (27).

Finally, a 14-gene assay that uses RT-qPCR analysis of formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded tissues was developed with a cohort of 361 patients with non-squamous NSCLC resected at the University of California, San Francisco, by Kratz, He, et al. from Michael Mann and David Jablons’ group (34). The investigators developed a 14-gene signature panel, consisting of 11 cancer-related genes: BCL2-associated athanogene (BAG1), breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 (BRCA1), cell division control protein 6 homolog (CDC6), cyclin-dependent kinase 2 associated protein 1 (CDK2AP1), receptor tyrosine-protein kinase erbB-3 (ERBB3), galactoside 3(4)-L-fucosyltransferas (FUT3), interleukin 11 (IL11), lymphocyte-specific protein tyrosine kinase (LCK), Rho family GTPase 3 (RND3), SH3 domain-binding glutamic acid-rich protein (SH3BGR), and wingless-type MMTV integration site family, member 3A (WNT3A) together with 3 reference genes, esterase D (ESD), TATA box binding protein (TBP) and Yes-associated protein 1 (YAP1). They validated the candidate gene signatures in 2 different populations: a community-based series of 433 resections for stage I non-squamous NSCLC from Northern California, and a cohort of 1,006 resections for stage IA-IIIB non-squamous NSCLC from the China Clinical Trials Consortium (34). The combination of gene signatures proved to be independently prognostic, irrespective of TNM stage grouping (34), in stage I, II and III patients. The prognostic value was significantly greater than certain clinical risk stratification criteria proposed by the US National Comprehensive Cancer Network for stage I resections (34). Furthermore, it was similarly effective in the Northern California and Chinese validation populations (34). However, there are some limitations to this study that should be pointed out. For instance, patients with squamous cell histology were excluded and there was poor overall quality of pathologic nodal staging, bearing in mind that 18% of resections for NSCLC in United States have no lymph nodes examined. As with all studies so far, this is another retrospective series, albeit the largest and most rigorously validated one performed to date.

**Individual prognostic and predictive biomarkers in early-stage NSCLC**

There are several candidate markers for sensitivity or resistance to chemotherapy identified in retrospective analyses of tumor biopsies from phase III clinical trials testing the value of adjuvant chemotherapy (Tables 2,3).

**Excision repair cross complementation group 1 (ERCC1)**

ERCC1 is a rate limiting enzyme in the nucleotide excision repair (NER) and interstrand cross-link repair pathways, which recognizes and repairs platinum induced adducts. Cancer cells overexpressing ERCC1 are more likely to have de novo resistance to cisplatin and a growing list of reports links cisplatin, carboplatin, and oxaliplatin resistance to ERCC1 mRNA levels in tumors. This relationship has been suggested for patients with gastric, bladder, ovarian, colorectal, and lung cancer. It was shown that ERCC1 levels evaluated by immunohistochemistry (IHC) are also
### Table 2 Prognostic biomarkers in early stage non-small cell lung cancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Stage of disease</th>
<th>Number of patients</th>
<th>Study design</th>
<th>Biomarker (assay)</th>
<th>Biomarker status</th>
<th>HR for overall survival (P value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olaussen et al., 2006 (35)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/761</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>ERCC1 (IHC)</td>
<td>Positive expression (H-score &gt; median value)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamal et al., 2010 (36)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/673</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>MSH2 (IHC)</td>
<td>High expression (H-score=3)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsao et al., 2007 (37)</td>
<td>IB-II</td>
<td>482/253</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within NCIC CTGJBR.10</td>
<td>p53 (IHC)</td>
<td>Positive expression (staining score ≥15%)</td>
<td>1.89 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graziano et al., 2010 (38)</td>
<td>IB</td>
<td>344/250</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within CALBG 9633</td>
<td>p53 (IHC)</td>
<td>Positive expression</td>
<td>2.30 (0.0005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seve et al., 2007 (39)</td>
<td>IB-II</td>
<td>482/265</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within NCIC CTGJBR.10</td>
<td>βTUBIII (IHC)</td>
<td>High expression (H-score &gt; median value)</td>
<td>1.72 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosell et al., 2007 (40)</td>
<td>I-III; IB-II</td>
<td>126; 58 (validation cohort)</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis of co-hort data</td>
<td>BRCA1 (RT-qPCR)</td>
<td>High expression (relative gene Expression &gt; median value)</td>
<td>1.98 (0.02); 2.4 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HR, hazard ratio.

### Table 3 Predictive biomarkers in early stage non-small cell lung cancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Stage of disease</th>
<th>Number of patients</th>
<th>Study design</th>
<th>Biomarker (assay)</th>
<th>Biomarker status</th>
<th>HR for overall survival (P value); P value for interaction test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Olaussen et al., 2006 (35)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/761</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>ERCC1 (IHC)</td>
<td>Negative expression vs. positive expression (H score&gt; median value)</td>
<td>0.65 (0.002) vs. 1.14 (0.40); 0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamal et al., 2010 (36)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/658</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>MSH2/ ERCC1 (IHC)</td>
<td>Both low vs. both high</td>
<td>0.65 (0.01) vs. 1.32 (0.19); 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamal et al., 2010 (36)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/not defined</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>MSH2/p27 (IHC)</td>
<td>Both low vs. both high</td>
<td>0.65 (0.01) vs. 1.31 (0.22); 0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamal et al., 2010 (36)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/673</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>MSH2 (IHC)</td>
<td>Low expression vs. high expression (H score =3)</td>
<td>0.76 (0.03) vs. 1.12 (0.48); 0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsao et al., 2007 (37)</td>
<td>IB-II</td>
<td>482/253</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within NCIC CTGJBR.10</td>
<td>p53 (IHC)</td>
<td>Positive expression (staining score≥15%) vs. negative</td>
<td>0.54 (0.02) vs. 1.40 (0.26); 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipits et al., 2007b (41)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/778</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>p27 (IHC)</td>
<td>Negative expression vs. positive expression (H score &gt; median value)</td>
<td>0.66 (0.006) vs. 1.09 (0.54); 0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pirker et al., 2007 (42)</td>
<td>I-III</td>
<td>1867/778</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis within IALT study</td>
<td>ERCC1/p27 (IHC)</td>
<td>Both negative vs. both positive</td>
<td>0.52 (95% CI: 0.36-0.74) vs. 1.27 (95% CI: 0.87-1.84); not specified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HR, hazard ratio; vs., versus.
predictive for the survival benefit afforded by adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy in patients with totally resected stage I to IIIA NSCLC (35).

The International Adjuvant Lung Cancer Trial (IALT)-Bio translational research project aimed to study molecular biomarkers of tumors for their potential predictive values with regard to the effect of adjuvant chemotherapy on survival in IALT patients. Five groups of molecular biomarkers (19 markers in total) were studied by IHC: drug transporters, DNA repair, cell cycle regulators, signal transduction and apoptosis. Both ERCC1 and cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1B (CDKN1B or p27) were found to have predictive value in patients with completely resected NSCLC undergoing adjuvant cisplatin-based chemotherapy (35). Interestingly, in patients randomly assigned to the observation arm, the subgroup with ERCC1-positive tumors had better survival compared with those with ERCC1-negative tumors (35). The paradoxical status of ERCC1, which was found to be a good prognostic marker in untreated resected NSCLC patients but a poor predictor of efficient adjuvant chemotherapy, was also confirmed in another study by Zheng et al, where the concomitant high expression of RRM1 and ERCC1 delineated a subgroup of chemonaïve patients with stage I disease with excellent survival outcomes (43). p27 is a tumor-suppressor protein that induces cell-cycle arrest in phase G1. Overexpression of p27 may confer de novo resistance to cisplatin by giving necessary time to repair cisplatin-induced DNA damage. In retrospective analysis of the IALT, patients with p27-negative tumors had longer survival after chemotherapy compared with surgery alone (41). Among six cell cycle regulators evaluated by IHC within the IALT-bio project, only p27 was identified to significantly correlate with treatment effect. Its predictive ability was independent from ERCC1 expression and, as anticipated, only patients with p27-negative tumors had survival benefit of cisplatin-based chemotherapy. Furthermore, when combining the IHC features of ERCC1 and p27, patients with tumors negative for both biomarkers seemed to benefit most from adjuvant chemotherapy (41).

In a pharmacogenomic trial with a biomarker-strategy design in advanced NSCLC by Cobo et al., ERCC1 mRNA expression was evaluated prospectively in an attempt to predict response to cisplatin-based or cisplatin-free chemotherapy regimens in stage IIIB or IV in NSCLC patients (44). Overall response rate was significantly higher in the genotypic arm, where chemotherapy regimen was tailored by ERCC1 mRNA expression (44). Patients in the control arm were not evaluated for the biomarker and received standard platinum-based combination (44). Within the customized arm, patients with low ERCC1 levels were treated with the same regimen as the control arm, whereas those with high levels received a non-platinum regimen (44). Most importantly, however, clinical relevance remained limited, given that there was no difference between the two arms in either progression-free survival or overall survival. This paradox of favorable long-term outcome despite cisplatin chemoresistance probably indicates that, by preventing mutagenesis, DNA repair may not only prevent cancer but may retard molecular events related to progression in established tumors. Thus, high expression of ERCC1 may indicate a favorable outcome in these untreated patients by identifying tumors that have progressed relatively little at the molecular level. Intact DNA repair mechanisms prevent accumulation of genetic aberrations that confer a high malignant potential (45). A recent meta-analysis failed to support two common ERCC1 gene polymorphisms ERCC1 C118T/C8092A and ERCC2 Lys751Gln/Asp312Asn as useful prognostic factors for assessing treatment response to platinum-based chemotherapies in NSCLC patients (46).

Additional biomarkers related to the repair of cisplatin-induced DNA damage have been included in the IALT bio project in order to enhance the predictive power of ERCC1. MutS homolog 2 (MSH2) is a major active component of the mismatch repair machinery; IHC expression of MSH2 displayed a very similar pattern of significance to ERCC1. Specifically, patients with low MSH2 levels had markedly better survival with adjuvant chemotherapy. Those with high levels seemed to have no benefit and in fact had a median survival 9 months shorter than those who did not receive chemotherapy, although this was not statistically significant. Similar to the prognostic role of other DNA-excision-repair proteins, high MSH2 levels predicted significantly longer survival in patients in the observation arm. When MSH2 and ERCC1 expression patterns were combined to form four phenotypes, the benefit from chemotherapy was significantly greater for patients with double-negative tumors. This was also noted when MSH2 expression was combined with that of p27, suggesting that MSH2 immunostaining was a superior predictive biomarker when considered jointly with either of the two other variables (36).

**Ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1 (RRM1)**

RRM1 is a regulatory component of ribonucleoside-
diphosphate reductase, a key enzyme in DNA synthesis that catalyzes the formation of deoxyribonucleotides, by reducing ribonucleotides. The reaction requires generation of a radical allowing the 2’-hydroxyl of ribose to be reduced, which is carried out by the RRM1 enzyme (47). The antimetabolite gemcitabine interferes with the function of RRM1 by reducing the pool of deoxyribonucleotide-5’-diphosphate available for DNA synthesis (45). Although relevant data for the adjuvant setting are lacking, correlative studies within randomized clinical trials in advanced NSCLC have shown that RRM1 overexpression, either at the mRNA or protein level, predicts poor response to gemcitabine-based chemotherapy (48-50). It is somewhat surprising that RRM1 protein expression has recently predicted outcome in patients treated with cisplatin and vinorelbine in a biomarker study. In this treatment arm, patients without RRM1 protein expression showed improved disease control rates, progression-free survival and overall survival, while RRM1 had no predictive impact in patients treated with cisplatin, paclitaxel and gemcitabine (51).

In contrast to predicting chemoresistance, RRM1 is a biologically and clinically important determinant of malignant behavior in NSCLC whose overexpression seems to confer favorable outcome. RRM1 suppresses cell migration and metastasis, which is at least partially mediated through induction of the phosphatase and tensin homolog gene (PTEN). RRM1 is in a region of frequent loss of heterozygosity (LOH), and LOH at this locus was found to be an independent determinant of poor survival in a large cohort of patients with stage I and II NSCLC (52). High RRM1 transcriptional expression, defined as mRNA levels above the median value, was favorably prognostic of survival in two independent cohorts of patients with resected NSCLC, most of who were diagnosed at early stage and treated with surgery only. In this study, RRM1 overexpression was a stage-independent predictor of survival, albeit highly correlated with PTEN expression (53). Longer overall survival was recently found in another group of NSCLC patients with high RRM1 mRNA expression who had undergone curative lung resection (54). The prognostic role of RRM1 was also confirmed by Zheng et al. who measured RNA expression of RRM1 and ERCC1 using RT-qPCR in fresh frozen and formalin fixed paraffin-embedded tumor samples (43). This study showed that RRM1 expression correlated with ERCC1 expression and that patients whose tumors had high expression of RRM1 had superior survival compared with the low expression group (43). In contrast to the previous study, there was no correlation with PTEN expression at the protein level. Interestingly, the concomitant high expression of RRM1 and ERCC1 delineated a subgroup of patients with excellent survival outcomes, accounting for 30% of the cohort (43).

Breast cancer susceptibility gene 1 (BRCA1)

BRCA1 is a multifunctional nuclear phosphoprotein which is ubiquitously expressed in all tissues and serves in part as a tumor suppressor, a “caretaker” and a “gatekeeper” in preserving genomic stability. BRCA1 has recently emerged as one of the most appealing biomarkers for personalizing chemotherapy in NSCLC. It has been implicated in normal cellular functions including cell cycle regulation, replication, mitotic spindle assembly, transcription regulation and higher chromatin hierarchical control (55). Also, BRCA1 has a crucial role in DNA repair as a component of the transcription-coupled NER and the homologous recombinant repair pathways. BRCA1 functions as a sensitizer to apoptosis induced by antimicrotubulin agents, such as taxanes and vinca alkaloids and also abrogates apoptosis induced by a range of DNA-damaging agents, including cisplatin and etoposide. Upstream activity of the receptor-associated protein 80 (RAP-80) is required for localization of BRCA1 to sites of DNA double-strand breaks (55).

In a recently reported feasibility study, adjuvant chemotherapy was customized based on BRCA1 mRNA levels in 84 patients with completely resected NSCLC. Patients with higher BRCA1 transcriptional levels were treated with single agent docetaxel, whereas those with intermediate and low BRCA1 expression received cisplatin-based doublets. Interim analyses showed that single-agent docetaxel was not inferior to cisplatin/docetaxel in terms of survival in patients with high BRCA1 levels (56). Therefore, high BRCA1 predicts resistance to cisplatin and possibly sensitivity to docetaxel. Expression levels of BRCA1, divided in quartiles, were assessed in a cohort of 55 patients with stage II to IIIA NSCLC who received neoadjuvant chemotherapy with cisplatin/gemcitabine followed by complete resection. Those with the lowest levels of BRCA1 mRNA expression had significantly greater benefit from chemotherapy in terms of clinical and pathological downsizing as well as overall survival (57).

The potential prognostic role of BRCA1 was investigated in two independent cohorts of chemo naïve patients with early-stage NSCLC analyzed by RT-qPCR.
In the study by Rosell et al., expression level of nine genes involved in DNA repair, including BRCA1, were correlated with overall survival in 126 NSCLC patients who had undergone complete resection and did not receive adjuvant chemotherapy (40). In a univariate analysis, three genes appeared to influence relapse: myeloid zinc finger 1 (MZF1), thioredoxin-1 (TRX1), and BRCA1. However, only BRCA1 and stage III disease remained significant predictors of survival in the multivariate analysis (40). For the 40 patients with a high level of BRCA1 expression, median survival was 29 months while median survival was not reached for the 83 patients with low BRCA1 expression (40). The striking lack of prognostic significance of other biomarkers included in this study may be partially due to the strong intergene coexpression, such as that between BRCA1 and ERCC1, observed. The independent adverse prognostic effect of high BRCA1 expression was confirmed in another cohort of patients with early stage NSCLC also evaluated for ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA levels. In this study, xeroderma pigmentosum complementation group G (XPG), a key gene for the NER system, was identified as an independent favorable predictor of survival outcome, as well as a potential modulator of recurrence risk among patients with BRCA1 overexpression (58).

**Thymidylate synthase (TS)**

Thymidylate synthase (TS) and methylenetetrahydrofolate reductase (MTHFR) play important roles in folate metabolism. TS is an enzyme involved in purine synthesis and, as an anti-cancer chemothera-py target, can be inhibited by TS inhibitors such as fluorinated pyrimidine fluorouracil or certain folate analogues, most notably pemetrexed. Consistent findings across phase III trials in advanced NSCLC have established the favorable predictive effect of non-squamous cell histology on treatment with pemetrexed (59). Differentially high TS expression in squamous cell NSCLC represents the main molecular basis underlying this treatment by histology interaction. Data from a current study indicate higher TS expression levels in squamous cell and in high-grade carcinomas (60). No clinical data exist to confirm the predictive role of either histology or TS expression in the adjuvant setting. However an independent prognostic effect for TS has been revealed in chemonaïve patients with resected early stage NSCLC. TS protein expression was correlated significantly with higher proliferative activity of NSCLC cells and, consequently, with poor prognosis in patients with NSCLC who had higher TS level (61). Two other different studies of chemonaïve patients with resected early stage NSCLC revealed an independent prognostic effect for TS, but with conflicting qualitative results. High TS expression at the mRNA, but not IHC level, was significantly associated with adverse disease-free survival in the study from Shintani et al. High TS expression as determined by automated in situ protein quantification, but not by RT-qPCR, predicted improved overall survival in the latter study, in which also TS protein levels did not correlate with those of ERCC1 and RRM1 (62,63). No correlations between intratumoral TS levels and any known clinicopathological variables were reported, with the exception of a recently published article in which TS gene expression was associated with disease stage, lymph node metastasis, tumor differentiation, prognosis, and tumor cell proliferation in patients with lung adenocarcinoma (64).

**Kirsten-rous avian sarcoma (KRAS) and p53**

The Kirsten-rous avian sarcoma (KRAS) protein is a member of the RAS family of proteins that encode small GTPases involved in cellular signal transduction. Activation of Ras signalling causes cell growth, differentiation, and survival, by transmitting signal downstream from growth factor receptors, including epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). From the three RAS genes, KRAS contains > 90% of the mutations detectable in almost 10-25% of NSCLC and mostly affecting codon 12 and 13 (65). Recent data suggested that KRAS mutations may affect outcome of NSCLC patients receiving chemotherapy. In the adjuvant setting, data from the JBR10 trial suggested no benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy in KRAS mutated patients (3,37). Similarly, a retrospective analysis of patients with stage IB disease enrolled in the phase III CALGB-9633 study showed that, among those with tumors larger than 4 cm, KRAS mutations may predict less overall survival benefit from the combination of carboplatin plus paclitaxel (66). In the LACE-BIO pooled analysis, the prognostic and predictive role of KRAS mutations was investigated in 1,751 patients treated with adjuvant chemotherapy. Among evaluable patients, KRAS mutations had no effect on survival (67). It should be stressed that the formal test for interaction between the biomarker and treatment effect was not statistically significant in any of the above studies. KRAS mutation status is associated with cigarette smoking and adenocarcinoma histology. The role of KRAS mutations as a prognostic factor in NSCLC remains controversial. Although some studies suggested a potential...
negative prognostic effect, other studies did not confirm any negative impact on survival for individuals harboring KRAS mutation (68-71).

The TP53 gene, located on the short arm of human chromosome 17, encodes for a nuclear phosphoprotein involved in the regulation of cell proliferation. The tumor suppressor protein, p53, has a wide range of functions, most of which are mediated via regulation of gene transcription. Commonly described as ‘the genome guardian’, p53 is involved in important cellular processes, such as stress response, cell-cycle control, DNA repair and apoptosis. The mutant gene product, which tends to accumulate to high levels in cancer cells, is believed to exert a dominant negative effect over coexpressed normal TP53. In resected lung cancers, point mutations of the TP53 gene have been found in all histologic types, including approximately 45% of resected NSCLC and, even more frequently, in small-cell lung cancer. Similar to observations with KRAS mutations, p53 mutations have been retrospectively correlated with clinical features such as younger age and squamous histology, but not sex, tumor stage, nodal status, neuroendocrine differentiation, or prior chemotherapy. Many retrospective studies have examined the prognostic role of p53 gene mutations in NSCLC. However, most of these studies have been limited by small size, heterogeneous patient samples, potential selection biases, and/or insensitive p53 mutation detection techniques, leading to inconsistent results. p53 mutations have been associated with decreased survival, no statistically significant change in survival, or improved survival in NSCLC. Previous meta-analyses have indicated that TP53 mutations and p53 expression are weak predictors of outcome in NSCLC (72,73). In contrast, the first published prospective trial examining the prognostic role of p53 mutations in NSCLC demonstrated that neither p53 expression nor TP53 mutations were shown to have predictive value. However, this should be interpreted taking into consideration the different study design and the use of an old-generation regimen (74). However, in the retrospective companion analysis of the phase III NCIC CTG-JBR.10 adjuvant trial p53 IHC overexpression was found to be an independent unfavorable prognostic factor among patients in the observation arm. In addition, only patients with p53-positive tumors derived benefit from the cisplatin plus vinorelbine combination. In contrast to p53 expression, TP53 mutation status was neither prognostic for survival, nor predictive for efficacy of adjuvant chemotherapy (37). This suggests that the biological effects of TP53 mutations and p53 protein overexpression are not equal, highlighting their complex role in tumor aggressiveness and chemosensitivity. Finally, a recent biomarker study as part of the phase III CALGB- 9633 adjuvant trial identified p53 and mucin overexpression as independent adverse prognostic factors for stage IB patients (38).

β-TUBULIN and epidermal growth factor receptor

β-tubulin is an essential element of microtubules, which, in turn, serve as cellular structural components involved in vital processes, including mitosis. Among described mechanisms of resistance to anti-tubulin agents, class III β-tubulin (βTUBIII) overexpression is of particular interest. To assess whether βTUBIII might be a useful marker in early NSCLC patients undergoing adjuvant chemotherapy with a vinorelbine-based regimen, levels of βTUBIII were measured in tumor samples from patients treated in the NCIC CTG JBR.10 study. No significant interaction between the biomarker and the effect of cisplatin plus vinorelbine combination was found. Subgroup analysis suggested that high, rather than low, βTUBIII levels were predictive for chemotherapy benefit. However, high βTUBIII expression was shown to be an independent adverse predictor of recurrence-free survival (39). Its prognostic value was retrospectively confirmed in patients enrolled in the IALT study (75). The adverse prognostic significance of high βTUBIII expression is consistent with prior published reports in the setting of advanced NSCLC. Rosell et al. correlated high βTUBIII mRNA levels with inferior outcome in advanced NSCLC patients treated with anti-tubulin agents (76). It has also been shown that high level of expression of βTUBIII in tumor cells, assessed by a semiquantitative IHC assay, was associated with a lower response rate and poor prognosis in advanced NSCLC patients receiving vinorelbine-based chemotherapy (77). In a recent study, high tumor expression of βTUBIII, assessed by IHC in 47 NSCLC patients receiving a paclitaxel-based regimen, was predictive of lower response to therapy and inferior survival (78).

Epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) status, defined by mutation analysis or amplification by fluorescent in situ hybridization (FISH), was recently explored in correlation with the results of the phase III NCIC CTG-JBR.10 adjuvant trial. Neither sensitizing mutations nor high gene copy were significantly prognostic in the observation arm. Similarly, although there was a trend toward greater benefit from the cisplatin plus vinorelbine 

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combination, interaction between the biomarkers and treatment effect was not significant (79). After adjusting for covariates, a recent large, prospective, cohort study of patients with stage I-III adenocarcinoma, 20% of whom had received perioperative chemotherapy, failed to show any significant association between overall survival and mutation status of either EGFR or KRAS (80). In conclusion, the potential prognostic and predictive effect of EGFR amplification and the two most prominent mutations, del 19 and L858R, with regard to chemotherapy effect in the adjuvant setting remains undefined.

Conclusions

Finally, are we ready to adopt the use of biomarkers into early stage NSCLC staging, prognosis and treatment selection? Survival amongst cancer patients has improved in recent decades with the availability and application of various treatment modalities. Tumor classification, stage and, sometimes, grade are used to assess prognosis. Although adjuvant chemotherapy has been well established for patients with early stage NSCLC, stage alone is not an ideal biomarker to predict the utility of chemotherapy as the vast majority of patients derive no benefit from treatment. The discovery of molecular biomarkers with the potential to select high-risk patients and predict drug efficacy is essential, especially in controversial fields such as treatment of elderly patients and stage I disease. Biomarker expression often supplants or complements tumor classification, stage or grade. In recent years, a widespread search for new, tumor biology-driven therapeutics has begun, especially in advanced NSCLC. However in the adjuvant setting, it seems that discovery of so-called promising markers translates rather slowly into clinical applicability and few markers have so far been integrated into clinical practice. There are many practical issues, such as the pharmaceutical companies concerns regarding fractionation of markets and medico-legal fears surrounding generation and possession of information. Furthermore, it can take time for physicians and patients to accept and adopt customizing adjuvant chemotherapy. However, as therapies become increasingly target specific, biomarkers will inevitably develop in tandem to play greater roles in staging, grading, and selection of adjuvant therapy; the practical hurdles are many and complex. As already mentioned, the RT-qPCR strategy involving a relatively small number of gene biomarkers and the use of paraffin-embedded specimens seems to outperform wide-genome profiling, although cutoff point definition for continuous variables, such as transcript levels, is particularly challenging because of the great inter-individualization variation of gene expression. In addition, the limited size of most studies and variable techniques used for marker determination plays a role. Often, initially promising results are not reproducible. Another important point is the possible discordance of biomarker status between different types of assays and the corresponding differences in association with clinical outcomes. As already discussed, mRNA expression of a biomarker gene does not necessarily correlate with protein levels as determined by IHC. Apart from multiple technical issues that potentially affect the results of each method, biomarker expression at the protein level depends on additional translational factors, such as microRNA, posttranslational modifications and degradation.

Although the cisplatin plus vinorelbine doublet is currently the standard option for adjuvant chemotherapy, use of appropriate surrogate biomarkers would facilitate randomized clinical trials to establish alternative or superior regimens with smaller sample sizes and shorter follow-up time. The prognostic and/or predictive role of many of the aforementioned biomarkers has been strongly supported by retrospective translational studies. Ideally, biomarkers should be validated analogously in prospective, well-controlled clinical studies of diverse patients across multiple institutions, with well-established standards for all steps of the process. We are anxiously awaiting the results of four prospective multicentre clinical trials of customized adjuvant strategy currently underway (Table 4). ERCC1, RRM1 and BRCA1 are considered to be among the most promising biomarkers with stage-independent, combined prognostic and predictive value, the clinical utility of which is being validated in the ongoing large-scale, randomized phase II and III trials. Until the, highly anticipated, results are in, neither these nor other candidate biomarkers should be used in daily clinical practice as decision-making criteria.

These steps towards personalized medicine will hopefully represent a shift in the management of early staged NSCLC. Indeed, NSCLC should no longer be viewed as one common generic disease, but rather as a collection of rarer tumors with differing biological behaviors and sensitivities to various systemic treatments.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Table 4 Ongoing prospective biomarker studies in early stage non-small cell lung cancer

<table>
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AQUA, automated quantitative analysis; SWOG, Southwest Oncology Group; ITACA, International Tailored Chemotherapy Adjuvant; TASTE, Tailored Post-Surgical Therapy in Early Stage NSCLC; GECP-SCAT, Spanish Lung Cancer Group (Grupo Español de Cancer de Pulmón)-Spanish Customized Adjuvant Trial; RADIANT, Randomized Double-blind Trial in Adjuvant NSCLC with Tarceva; * taxane (↑ERRC1 and TS mRNA levels), or pemetrexed (↑ERRC1, ↓TS mRNA levels), or cisplatin/gemcitabine (↓ERRC1, ↑TS mRNA levels, or cisplatin/pemetrexed (↓ERRC1 and TS mRNA levels) versus standard chemotherapy with a platinum-based doublet chosen by the investigator; **Customized treatment according to EGFR and ERCC1 status: erlotinib (EGFR-mutant tumors) or observation (ERCC1-positive tumors) or cisplatin/pemetrexed (EGFR-wild type and ERCC1-negative tumors); ***Customized chemotherapy: docetaxel (high BRCA1 levels) or cisplatin/docetaxel (intermediate BRCA1 levels) or cisplatin/gemcitabine (low BRCA1 levels).

References


Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is the leading cause of cancer mortality worldwide, and traditional chemotherapeutic drugs are only modestly effective. Most lung cancer patients usually present with advanced stage disease, where the efficacy of chemotherapy is low, with a 5-year survival rate lower than 15% (1).

The discovery of mutated oncogenes encoding activated signaling molecules that drive cellular proliferation and promote tumor growth has led to the development of more effective and less toxic targeted therapies for NSCLC patients. Particularly, NSCLC patients with mutations in epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene have dramatic responses and better outcome with the EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKI) gefitinib and erlotinib (1-9).

The EGFR is a well characterized mutated oncogene in NSCLC that is associated predominantly with adenocarcinoma histology. EGFR-mutated tumors depend to EGFR signaling for their proliferation and survival. Nearly 90% of lung-cancer-specific EGFR mutations comprise a leucine-to-arginine substitution at position 858 (L858R) and deletion in exon 19 that affect the conserved sequence LREA (delE746-A750) (3,8,10,11).

Unfortunately, despite the dramatic efficacy of EGFR TKI in NSCLC patients with EGFR activating mutations, all patients eventually acquire resistance, with progression of disease occurring in patients around 10-13 months after starting treatment (2,7,12). There are two main mechanisms of resistance to EGFR TKI; the lack of an initial response to therapy, also called de novo or primary resistance to EGFR TKI, and resistance that develops following an initial response to EGFR TKI, also called acquired resistance to EGFR TKI.

To discover those mechanisms involved in EGFR TKI resistance, several studies have identified mechanisms involved in primary and secondary resistance to EGFR TKI treatment that can also be potential therapeutic strategies, although up to 30% of cases of acquired resistance to EGFR TKI are still unexplained. In this review we describe the mechanisms of resistance to EGFR TKIs in NSCLC patients that have been discovered and potential therapeutic strategies to overcome EGFR TKI resistance. Additionally we highlight the importance of performing additional biopsies not only at time of acquired resistance to EGFR TKI but also immediately after initiation of therapy to discover the remaining unknown mechanisms of acquired resistance to EGFR TKI as well as the underlying molecular basis of the heterogeneity in response to EGFR TKI.

**Keywords:** Primary resistance; acquired resistance; epidermal growth factor receptor; non-small cell lung cancer
resistance is a significant challenge in order to develop more effective targeted therapies alone or in combination with EGFR TKI for patients with NSCLC and EGFR mutations. In this article we review the molecular basis of resistance of EGFR mutant NSCLC patients to EGFR TKI and rebiopsy strategies to better understand the underlying molecular basis of resistance.

**Primary resistance to EGFR TKIs**

Patients with NSCLC and EGFR activating mutation will experience significant tumor regression with EGFR TKI in approximately 70% of cases (5), which means a lack of an initial response in about 30% of patients. Those patients will present primary or de novo resistance to EGFR TKI.

To date, two main mechanisms of primary resistance to EGFR TKI in EGFR mutant NSCLC patients have been described: first, the presence of secondary alterations in EGFR that prevent inhibition of EGFR by an EGFR TKI (also known drug resistant EGFR mutation), and second, the presence of additional genetic alternations that occur together with EGFR mutation.

**Secondary alterations in EGFR**

**EGFR exon 20 insertions**

EGFR Exon 20 insertions comprise approximately 4% of all EGFR mutant NSCLC (13) and are associated with lower sensitivity to the reversible EGFR TKIs both in preclinical models and in patients that have experienced a lack of response when treated with gefitinib or erlotinib (14-16). The irreversible EGFR TKIs could be more effective in these mutations (15,17-19).

**EGFR T790M (c.2369C>T) mutation in non-small cell lung cancer**

The T790M mutation results in an amino acid substitution at position 790 in EGFR, from a threonine (T) to a methionine (M). This gatekeeper mutation also occurs within exon 20, which encodes part of the kinase domain EGFR and alters the binding of EGFR TKI to the ATP-binding pocket, and therefore EGFR TKI are unable to block EGFR signalling (20-22). These pretreatment T790M mutations generally occur together with another EGFR sensitizing mutation and have been found to be associated with decreased sensitivity to EGFR TKIs (16).

Additionally, the baseline T790M mutations may be present as an underlying germline mutation at a low frequency (0.5% of never smokers with lung cancer) (23) and may be associated with familial cancer syndromes (24).

Rosell et al. assessed the T790M mutation in pretreatment diagnostic specimens from 129 EGFR TKI treated advanced NSCLC patients with EGFR mutations, and found that EGFR T790M mutation was present in 45 of 129 patients (35%). Progression-free survival was 12 months in patients with and 18 months in patients without the T790M mutation (P=0.05). Additionally, it was found that low BRCA-1 levels neutralized the negative effect of the T790M mutation and were associated with longer progression-free survival to erlotinib, whereas high levels of BRCA-1 may lead to de novo resistance through increased DNA damage repair capacity, suggesting that pretreatment assessment of both T790M mutation and BRCA1 expression could be useful to predict outcome (25). Additionally, in the EURTAC trial the T790M mutation was detected in 38% of the pretreatment specimens analysed (26).

Fujita et al. evaluated the incidence of T790M in pretreatment tumor specimens using highly sensitive colony hybridization technique and was detected in 30/38 resected tumor tissues of patients with the EGFR mutation (79%). The median time to treatment failure was 9 months for the patients with pretreatment T790M and 7 months for the patients without the T790M mutation (P=0.44), and suggested that patients with high proportion of T790M allele may have a relatively favorable prognosis (27).

In addition to EGFR T790M, primary EGFR TKI resistance may also be due to other secondary mutations in EGFR (e.g., D761Y) that can occur concurrent with an activating EGFR kinase domain mutation (e.g., L858R) (28).

**Genetic alternations with EGFR mutations**

Other genetic alterations may occur together with EGFR mutation causing EGFR TKI resistance by preserving cell survival even with EGFR inhibition. These additional genetic alterations that promote EGFR pathway include:

**Activation of phosphoinositide-3-kinase (PI3K)/AKT signaling**

Phosphatase and tensine homolog (PTEN) acts as a tumor suppressor by negatively regulating the PI3K/AKT signaling pathway. In preclinical studies, loss of PTEN was associated with decreased sensitivity of EGFR mutant lung
tumors to EGFR TKI by increased activity of the PI3K-AKT pathway, and degradation of activated EGFR (29,30).

Somatic mutations in PIK3CA have been found in 1-3% of all NSCLC (31,32). These mutations usually occur within two “hotspot” areas within exon 9 (the helical domain) and exon 20 (the kinase domain). Preclinical data has shown that introduction of activating PIK3CA mutants into EGFR mutant lung cancer cell lines confers resistance to EGFR TKI (33).

Cross-talk with the IGF1R pathway

Resistance to EGFR TKI in cell lines with EGFR activating mutations through crosstalk with the IGF1R pathway has been observed through in preclinical models. For example, some EGFR-mutant cells undergo only G1 cell cycle phase arrest in the presence of erlotinib, but undergo apoptosis when co-treated with an IGF1R-specific antibody (34). In another study, EGFR mutant NSCLC cell lines persisting after EGFR TKI treatment were enriched for a drug-tolerant subpopulation that may have existed prior to treatment that showed a distinct chromatin state that is regulated by IGF1R signalling (35).

Activation of NFκB signaling

NFκB is a protein complex that controls the transcription of DNA. NFκB signaling has been associated with cancer and inflammation (36), and it has also been suggested that activation of NFκB signaling may cause primary resistance to EGFR TKI treatment in EGFR mutant lung cancer patients.

Bivona et al. used a cell line (H1650) with EGFR mutation but resistant to EGFR TKI and showed that inhibition of the NFκB pathway enhanced cell death by EGFR TKI whereas activation of NFκB rescued EGFR-mutant lung cancer cells from EGFR TKI treatment. Additionally, genetic or pharmacologic inhibition of NFκB enhanced erlotinib-induced apoptosis in erlotinib-sensitive and erlotinib-resistant EGFR-mutant lung cancer models, and increased expression of the NFκB inhibitor IκB, predicted for improved response and survival in EGFR-mutant lung cancer patients treated with EGFR TKI. Importantly, IκB status was not predictive of outcomes in EGFR mutant lung cancer patients treated with surgery or chemotherapy, indicating NFκB signaling is a specific biomarker of EGFR TKI response in this patient population (37). These data identify NFκB as a potential drug target, together with EGFR, in EGFR-mutant lung cancers.

High BIM expression levels

BIM, also known as BCL2-like 11, is a pro-apoptotic protein that is overexpressed in different malignancies (38,39). Various chemotherapeutic agents use BIM as a mediating executioner of cell death. Hence, BIM suppression supports metastasis and chemoresistance. BIM upregulation is required for apoptosis induction by EGFR-TKIs in EGFR-mutant NSCLC. Low BIM mRNA levels could lead to gefitinib resistance in NSCLC with EGFR mutations and could be a marker of primary resistance. The extracellular regulated kinase (ERK) pathway also negatively regulates BIM expression in NSCLC with EGFR mutations (40-42). Components that cause induction of BIM may have a role to overcome resistance to EGFR TKI in NSCLC with EGFR mutations. Recent studies have shown that HDAC inhibition can epigenetically restore BIM function in vitro and death sensitivity of EGFR-TKI, in cases of EGFR mutant NSCLC where resistance to EGFR-TKI is associated with a common BIM polymorphism (43).

Treatment approaches to overcome primary resistance

For lung cancer patients harboring secondary alterations in EGFR, more effectively EGFR TKI is needed. Second-generation irreversible EGFR TKI have shown to be more active targeting T790M or EGFR exon 20 insertion mutation than gefitinib or erlotinib (44-46). Additionally, the Spanish Lung Cancer Group is conducting a phase Ib/IIb Study to evaluate the role of gefitinib in combination with olaparib in NSCLC patients with EGFR mutation to overcome primary resistance in those patients with high BRCA1 levels (NCT01513174). For lung cancer patients harboring other genetic alterations with EGFR mutation the use of polytherapy could overcome primary resistance. For example, a phase II trial of erlotinib and AT-101 (BCL-2 pan inhibitor) in NSCLC patients with EGFR mutations has been performed, although no results have been presented, yet (NCT00988169).

Additionally, a combination of an EGFR TKI with PI3K-AKT, IGFR, NFκB or BIM inhibitors could also play a role in those alterations co-occur causing EGFR TKI resistance.

Acquired resistance to EGFR TKI

Several mechanisms of acquired resistance to EGFR TKI in EGFR mutant NSCLC patients have been reported, which
could be grouped in four main categories: first, the presence of secondary mutations in EGFR; second, the presence by-pass tracks activation; third a phenotypic transformation; and fourth, additional genetic alternations that occur together with EGFR mutation. Up to 30% of cases are still unexplained.

**Second-site mutations in EGFR**

Approximately 50-60% of cases with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI therapy have a second-site mutation T790M ("gatekeeper mutation") in the kinase domain of EGFR that coexists with the EGFR activating mutation (21,47). Conversely to primary T790M mutation, acquired resistance by T790M mutation identifies a subset of EGFR-mutant lung cancers with indolent growth in preclinical (48) and clinical set (49).

The subclonal populations of EGFR mutant tumor cells with and without the EGFR T790M can coexist in an EGFR mutant NSCLC with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI. This heterogeneity would explain both the “flare” phenomenon (rapid tumor regrowth upon withdrawal of an EGFR TKI) observed upon discontinuation of an EGFR TKI and also the finding that EGFR mutant NSCLC patients may respond to subsequent EGFR TKI treatment after initial discontinuation of therapy (50-53).

In addition to EGFR T790M mutation, there are other mutations that have been associated with acquired EGFR TKI resistance: T854A in exon 21 (54), L747S (55), and D761Y (28), both in exon 19. However, the frequency of all such mutation appears to be very low in comparison with the T790M mutation.

**By-pass tracks activation**

Other mechanism of acquired resistance to EGFR TKI is the activation of parallel pathways in which the key downstream targets of EGFR are activated independently of EGFR. These mechanisms include MET amplification and HGF overexpression. Amplification of the receptor tyrosine kinase MET leads EGFR inhibitor resistance by causing phosphorylation of ERBB3, which in turn sustains the activation of the PI3K/Akt signal downstream, providing a bypass signalling even in the presence of EGFR inhibitor. MET amplification was required to kill the resistant cells, suggesting a persistent oncogenic addiction to EGFR pathway beyond to acquired resistance to EGFR TKI (56-58). In the clinic, MET amplification was reported in 4% of patients. The prevalence of MET-dependent resistance may depend upon the assay used (59).

Although MET amplification can occur with the EGFR T790M mutation, about 60% of MET amplification is independent of T790M mutation. There is an inverse relationship between the presence of T790M and MET gene copy number, suggesting a complementary role of the two mechanisms in the acquisition of resistance. In preclinical models, MET inhibitors may be able to overcome MET-mediated resistance, even in cells that harbour the T790M mutation (60). Concurrent inhibition therapy might be essential for outcome improvement (61). MET activation by overexpression of its ligand, HGF, also induced drug resistance in vitro and in vivo through GAB1 signalling, which directly activates PI3K/Akt pathway (62). In patients with paired tumor specimens, HGF expression was higher in drug-resistant specimens than in the pretreatment specimens (P=0.025) (63) and in other study with 23 acquired resistance tumors, high-level HGF expression was detected in higher proportion than T790M mutation (62). Japanese patients with weak HGF expression by immunohistochemistry tend to have lower 5-year OS than those with overexpression (22.2% vs. 75%, P=0.259) (64). Of note, MET amplification has also been observed in EGFR mutant NSCLC patients prior to EGFR TKI and was associated with the development of acquired resistance to EGFR TKIs (60), suggesting that EGFR TKI may select for preexisting cells with MET amplification during the acquisition of EGFR TKI resistance.

**Phenotypic transformation**

This acquired resistance mechanism includes the histological transformation to small cell lung cancer (SCLC) and the epithelial to mesenchymal transition (EMT), with an incidence of 14% and 5%, respectively (58). These new SCLC retain the original EGFR-sensitizing mutation and respond to standard small cell carcinoma chemotherapy, but the exact mechanism for this histological transformation is unknown.

EMT is a phenomenon characterized in which the cancer cell looses its epithelial morphology and develops a more spindle-like mesenchymal morphology with often associated with a shift in expression of specific proteins (for example,
loss of E-cadherin and gain of vimentin) resulting in a more invasiveness phenotype (65). The exact mechanism for the acquisition of the EMT phenotype remains unclear; some studies have found an upregulation of NOTCH-1 expression (66), the aberrant expression of transforming growth factor (TGF)-\(\beta\) (67,68), and phosphorylation of MEK (69). Increased expression of E-cadherin, has been associated with clinical activity of EGFR TKI in NSCLC patients (70,71). EMT has been also associated with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI in preclinical models (65,71) as well as in several studies (58). It is unknown if mesenchymal-like cells in the acquired resistant tumors are exist prior to therapy or are induced upon drug treatment. It has been recently described that activation of the AXL receptor tyrosine kinase by overexpression or upregulation of its ligand GAS6 confers acquired resistance to EGFR TKI in preclinical models, and the inhibition of AXL restored erlotinib sensitivity. Upregulation of AXL was associated with the development of an EMT in EGFR mutant NSCLC with acquired resistance. Approximately 20% of the EGFR TKI resistant tumors showed increased AXL expression (72).

**Additional genetic alternations**

**PIK3CA mutation**
Mutation in PIK3CA was identified in 5% of EGFR mutant lung cancers that developed acquired EGFR TKI resistance as well as in preclinical models (58).

**PTEN mutation**
In preclinical models, loss of PTEN expression contributes to TKI resistance in NSCLC (73). Cells with knockdown of PTEN, with constitutive PI3KCA activation, have a deficient homologous recombinant DNA repair and increased sensitivity to cisplatin and PARP inhibitors (74).

**HER2 amplification**
HER2 amplification has been recently detected in 12% of tumors with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI, and only in 1% of untreated EGFR mutant NSCLC cells. This new mechanism of acquired resistance was exclusive with T790M mutation (75). Interestingly, in preclinical models the combination of afatinib plus cetuximab significantly inhibited HER2 phosphorylation. These results implicate HER2 as a novel protein involved in the sensitivity or resistance of EGFR mutant NSCLC providing a rationale to assess its status and target HER2 in such tumors.

**MAPK1 amplification**
MAPK1 amplification was described in approximately 5% of clinical specimens from patients with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI treatment and was mutually exclusive with the T90M mutation or MET amplification (76).

**BRAF mutation**
RAS pathway mutations are rare, but BRAF mutations (V600E, G469A) can occur in 1% of tumors with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI (77).

**JAK2**
In a preclinical cell line model, the activation of JAK2 (an upstream STAT signal pathway) caused acquired EGFR TKI resistance. Combined treatments of erlotinib plus a JAK2 inhibitor (JSI-124) restored sensitivity to erlotinib in PC-9/ERB3 cells and reduced tumors in a murine xenograft model (78).

**IGFR**
In vitro data showed that the increased IGF-1R signalling through the loss of IGF inhibitory proteins may also mediate resistance to EGFR TKI by activating downstream targets that bypass dependency in EGFR (79).

**Loss of activating EGFR mutant gene**
Loss of activating EGFR mutant gene contributes to acquire resistance to EGFR TKI in lung cancer cells. This loss of addiction to mutant EGFR resulted in gain of addiction to both HER2/HER3 and PI3K/AKT signalling to acquire EGFR TKI resistance (80).

**Treatment approaches to overcome acquired resistance**
Given this role of persistent EGFR signalling in causing resistance to TKI, a second generation irreversible EGFR TKI bind to a different EGFR tyrosine kinase domain have shown activity against lung cancer cells harboring both EGFR activation mutations and the T790M resistance-mutation (17,45,81,82). A phase III trial of afatinib versus placebo in patients with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI demonstrated a 2-month improvement in progression free survival; although no significant benefit in overall survival was observed (83). A more recent strategy for intensification of EGFR inhibition has been the addition of monoclonal antibodies targeting EGFR, such as cetuximab. Combined treatment
with afatinib and cetuximab induced regression in T790M transgenic murine and mice models with erlotinib resistant lung tumors (84). This synergistic activity has been confirmed in phase I/II clinical trial, with a response rate of 32% in heavily pre-treated population with T790M-positive and T790M-negative tumors and a median Progression free survival of 4.67 months (85). Erlotinib plus cetuximab has showed to overcome T790M-mediated drug resistance in preclinical data (86). However, this strategy did not show significant activity in a phase I/II trial in patients with acquired resistance to erlotinib (85). The new T790M specific inhibitor WZ-4002 is also under investigation, and has demonstrated to induce greater growth inhibition in vitro and in vivo against T790M than against WT EGFR (87).

Indeed, the FLT3 inhibitor, an indolocarbazole compounds, is under investigation as potent and reversible inhibitor of EGFR T790M that spare wild-type EGFR in the context of T790M-mediated drug resistance in NSCLC (88). Combined treatments of erlotinib plus therapies targeting compensatory pathways that lead to acquired EGFR TKI resistance may overcome resistance. The addition of a MET inhibitor may benefit those patients with EGFR mutant NSCLC and MET amplification. Antibodies targeting the MET ligand HGF (AMG102), MET itself (MetMAb), and small molecule inhibitors against MET are in clinical development. The combination of AXL inhibitors, such as XL880, MP-470 or SGI-7079, with an EGFR TKI is also a potential approach to overcome resistance associated with EMT (89).

Furthermore, inhibition of NOTCH-1 can be a novel strategy for the reversal of the EMT phenotype thereby potentially increasing therapeutic drug sensitivity to lung cancer cells. BEZ235, a dual inhibitor of PI3K and mTOR, would overcome EGFR-TKI resistance induced by HGF in an EGFR mutant lung cancer cell lines (90).

Finally, combination therapy with EGFR TKI and PI3KCA inhibitor, PARP inhibitors (in PTEN mutant patients), HER2 inhibitors, B-RAF inhibitors or IGFR inhibitors could have a therapeutic effect in tumors with acquired resistant to EGFR TKI by those mechanisms and some of them are being investigated in clinical trials (91).

**Strategies to determine molecular basis of resistance to EGFR TKI in NSCLC with EGFR mutations**

As commented previously, the biological basis underlying acquired EGFR TKI resistance is unknown in approximately 30% of patients. Some of these previously described mechanisms of resistance to EGFR TKI that have been identified in preclinical models and have not been validated in patients with acquired resistance. The analysis of clinical specimens is crucial to discover the remaining unknown mechanisms of EGFR TKI resistance. In the last years many authors have published their own experience with rebiopsies on patients with EGFR mutant NSCLC at the time of progression in order to identify how EGFR mutant NSCLC acquire resistance to EGFR TKI (Table 1).
Arcila et al. undertook a rebiopsy study to determine the feasibility of rebiopsy in patients with EGFR mutant NSCLC with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI and to evaluate the spectrum of EGFR mutations and MET amplification in tumors at progression. One hundred and fifty three samples were obtained from 121 patients including frozen samples, fresh fluids, FFPE tissue and cytologies from fine needle aspirates (FNA); eighty-two per cent were successfully analyzed. Biopsies provided the highest success rate followed by FNA and pleural fluids. Pathologic confirmation was performed in 106 resistant tumors: one hundred and two adenocarcinomas, one squamous cell carcinoma, two small cell carcinomas and 1 with a mixed histology (combined large cell carcinoma/adenocarcinoma in one sample and a high grade neuroendocrine carcinoma in a second). EGFR mutations (exons 19 and 21) were found in 100/104 in resistant samples, seventy-one per cent had EGFR exon 19 deletions, one per cent had an insertion in exon 18 and 28% had an exon 21 point mutation. Of note, patients with multiple tissue sampling had the same mutation in all tumor sites, and all patients maintained the baseline sensitizing mutation. The T790M mutation was detected in 51% of mutant samples by standard analysis, and the retest of 30 negative patients by the LNA-PCR/sequencing method detected 11 additional mutants, raising the T790M mutation rate to 70%. MET amplification was found in 51% of mutant samples by standard analysis, and the retest of 30 negative patients by the LNA-PCR/sequencing method detected 11 additional mutants, raising the T790M mutation rate to 70%. MET amplification was found in 51% of mutant samples by standard analysis, and the retest of 30 negative patients by the LNA-PCR/sequencing method detected 11 additional mutants, raising the T790M mutation rate to 70%. The T790M mutation was detected in 28% had an exon 21 point mutation. Of note, patients with multiple tissue sampling had the same mutation in all tumor sites, and all patients maintained the baseline sensitizing mutation. The T790M mutation was detected in 62% of patients in the rebiopsy specimens with longer survival after progression than patients without T790M (49,59).

Sequist et al. performed rebiopsies on 37 EGFR mutant NSCLC patients with acquired resistance to identify the mechanisms of resistance to EGFR inhibitors. Pre- and post-EGFR TKI tumor samples were analyzed for the presence of genetic alterations with a genotyping platform (SNaPshot assay), and EGFR and MET amplification with fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH). Eighteen (49%) patients acquired the T790M mutation, and two (5%) patients developed MET amplification, which was not present in the pretreatment specimen. Two (5%) patients showed acquired PIK3CA mutations, two (5%) cases had β-catenin mutations (together with the T790M mutation). Fifteen (41%) rebiopsies didn’t reveal any new mutations. The authors also found significant histological alterations in the resistant tumor; five patients (14%) had a diagnosis of SCLC, all maintaining the original EGFR mutation. Additionally, three resistant specimens had phenotypic changes consistent with a mesenchymal, supporting an ETM, none showed another identified resistance mechanism while maintained their original EGFR mutation. Of note, EMT or SCLC were not observed in biopsies from EGFR wild-type tumors resistant to chemotherapy (58).

Interestingly, multiple biopsies over the course of the disease were performed in 3 patients showing gain and loss of the T790M mutation in multiple biopsies from the same anatomical location during the clinical course in two of them at time of progression or when de EGFR TKI was interrupted. The rebiopsy from the third patient showed SCLC transformation with the original EGFR L858R mutation plus an acquired PIK3CA mutation. However, those changes were not observed at progression to treatment for SCLC, where adenocarcinoma histology with EGFR L858R mutation was again demonstrated (58). These results explain why retreatment of NSCLC patients with EGFR TKI who had experienced favorable results from their initial treatment could benefit some patients (53,92).

Oxnard et al. performed a rebiopsy protocol in EGFR mutant lung cancer patients with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI comparing for the presence of the T790M. T790M was identified in 62% of patients in the rebiopsy specimens with longer survival after progression than patients without T790M (49,59).

Finally, Ohashi et al. systematically screened for recurrent mutations in RAS/NRAS/BRAF/MEK1 in nearly 200 tumor samples from patients with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI. They found two BRAF mutations: one case with concurrent EGFR exon19 deletion and EGFR T790M and BRAF V600E mutations and another case with EGFR exon19 deletion and the BRAF G469A mutation (2/195, 1.0%). They studied further the biological and therapeutic consequences of acquired NRAS and BRAF mutations in EGFR-mutant lung tumor cells and showed that these tumor cells were resistant to erlotinib alone but were sensitive to combination treatment with EGFR and MEK inhibition (77).

There is no doubt that identifying the molecular mechanisms underlying variable response and resistance to EGFR TKI in EGFR mutant NSCLC is a major obstacle to optimize EGFR TKI therapy. A more comprehensive analysis of clinical specimens from EGFR TKI-treated patients should offer a better knowledge about if known mechanisms of resistance occur exclusively and concomitantly to promote clinical resistance. This is a key issue to resolve because we will need to determine whether to target individual or multiple drivers of resistance with targeted therapies in patients according to their molecular alterations present in their tumors.
Additionally, multiple rebiopsy studies also suggest that genetic mechanisms of resistance are potentially reversible, and therefore, a static diagnostic biopsy may be insufficient to guide therapeutic decision making throughout the course of a patient’s disease (58). To perform a rebiopsy at time of progression in EGFR mutant NSCLC patients is becoming more and more standard.

However, the underlying molecular basis of the heterogeneity in response to EGFR TKI has never been explored in patients immediately after initiation of therapy. This information would be crucial to study the early changes that can compromise response and progression and would help to uncover the molecular causes of treatment resistance and optimize the EGFR TKI therapy. Characterizing the complete molecular landscape of response to EGFR TKI in EGFR mutant NSCLC specimens from patients before and serially during treatment would reveal not only novel biomarkers of response to therapy but also potential new therapeutic targets to prevent or overcome resistance to EGFR TKI in NSCLC patients.

**Summary**

Several studies have showed that rebiopsy of EGFR mutant NSCLC patients with acquired resistance to EGFR TKI is feasible and provides sufficient material for mutation analysis in most patients. Interestingly, a wide heterogeneity in resistance mechanisms has been observed, each of which may require its own therapeutic strategy.

Indeed, it is becoming crucial the need of continuous assessment of each tumor evolution during the course of treatment not only to determine how it became resistant to therapy but also to allow us to design rational strategies to overcome resistance or to prevent acquired resistance in patients.

Since many patients do not undergo rebiopsy at progression, the lack of available resistant tumor tissue limits the molecular guided stratification of patients and negatively affects further investigation of acquired resistance. Of note, mechanisms of primary resistance are not usually analyzed in rebiopsy protocols in EGFR mutant NSCLC patients receiving EGFR TKI after the initiation of EGFR TKI which compromises a better understanding of how to prevent resistance to therapy.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure:* The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Substantial discrepancy has recently emerged regarding the true frequency of activating epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations in African American (AA) NSCLC subpopulations. Three recent reports appear to contradict earlier, and generally consistent, findings of a low mutation frequency in AA patients. The first round of sequencing studies by our group and others (2005 to 2009, Table 1) indicated that the frequency of activating EGFR mutations was significantly lower in African Americans (AA), ranging from 2-3% (4 of 160 cases combined), compared to a White cohort (1-5). However, in 2011 two large studies (Table 1: Reinersman, Cote) observed a much higher frequency of activating EGFR mutations in AA NSCLC cohorts, ranging from 12-19% (31 of 188 cases combined), without significant differences compared to White NSCLC cohorts. A third 2011 study (Table 1: Harada) reported an even higher EGFR mutation frequency of 31% for AA NSCLC, though this is based on a limited cohort of only sixteen cases (6-8).

What could account for these discordant results? One explanation may lie in the heterogenous study cohorts. While not all prior studies have provided data on smoking status—and this is somewhat surprising given the disease at hand—comparison of the studies which do report this information, demonstrates that the proportion of never-smokers in the AA NSCLC cohorts varies widely from 13% to 57% (see Table 1). We would argue that the lower end of

**Keywords:** African-American; epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR); non-small cell lung cancer; Simpson's paradox
this range (13% Leidner) is more informative to community practice, and is more congruent with previously reported smoking rates in a large AA NSCLC cohort (7% in a series of 1,288 patients) (9); than the high proportion of never-smokers in recent studies indicating a higher frequency of EGFR mutation for AA NSCLC (57% Cote, 50% Harada). This skew may be due to archival specimen sourcing from referral-based tertiary/quaternary centers, and also points to the likely explanation for discrepancy—Simpson's paradox—a statistical phenomenon in which a correlation observed between heterogeneous groups in the aggregate, is reversed when groups are disaggregated (10-12).

As an illustration of Simpson's paradox, we can disaggregate smoking status and EGFR mutation findings based on results from the only two studies which published sufficient data to allow for this analysis (see Table 2, Leidner, Cote). Notably, these two studies had similar sized cohorts of AA NSCLC cases, but arrived at divergent conclusions regarding EGFR mutation frequency. Table 2 presents disaggregated results according to ever/never smoking status for each study. In both studies, the ever-smoker group represents the large majority of the AA NSCLC cohort, (87% Leidner 46/53 and 84% Cote 56/67), as would be expected. Restricting analysis to AA ever-smokers, demonstrates good agreement between studies at 2% EGFR mutation frequency (1/46 Leidner and 1/56 Cote).

### Table 1: Summary of literature on EGFR in AA NSCLC

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequencing Method</strong></td>
<td>Sanger</td>
<td>Sanger (del19 and L858R only)</td>
<td>Sanger</td>
<td>Sanger</td>
<td>Sanger (del19 and L858R only)</td>
<td>Sequenom Mass Spec.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P-value (AA vs. White)</strong></td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>African-American (n)</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutation frequency</strong></td>
<td>3% (1/41)</td>
<td>43% (6/14)</td>
<td>0% (0/8)</td>
<td>3% (2/66)</td>
<td>2% (1/53)</td>
<td>31% (5/16)</td>
<td>19% (23/121)</td>
<td>12% (8/67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>95% CI</strong></td>
<td>0-13%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0-40%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0-11%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13-27%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Never smokers</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>57% (8/14)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>13% (7/53)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>16% (11/67)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutations in never smokers</strong></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100% (5/5)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>88% (7/8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White (n)</strong></td>
<td>177</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutation frequency</strong></td>
<td>14% (25/177)</td>
<td>21% (55/259)</td>
<td>7% (10/139)</td>
<td>3% (2/76)</td>
<td>17% (15/89)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13% (61/476)</td>
<td>16% (12/77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>95% CI</strong></td>
<td>9-20%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>4-13%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>11-26%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10-16%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% Never Smokers</strong></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15% (13/89)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>27% (21/77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutations in never smokers</strong></td>
<td>48% (12/25)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>40% (6/15)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>66% (8/12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast, when the small AA never-smoker groups are compared, the real driver of divergence comes sharply into view, with a 64% discrepancy in EGFR mutation frequency between studies (0/7 Leidner 0% and 7/11 Cote 64%). Strikingly, 7 of the 8 total EGFR mutations identified by Cote et al., were detected in the very limited AA never-smoker subgroup (n=11).

The discrepancy between the two studies above, which disappears for ever-smokers when data are disaggregated, illustrates of Simpson’s paradox—a statistical phenomenon with implications both in the theoretical context and in practical application. In the famous Berkeley court case, alleged bias favoring males over females was claimed, based on analysis of admissions data in the aggregate. The alleged bias was subsequently shown to be driven by consistent and disproportionately higher rates of female applicants to more competitive departments, which came into clear view only after disaggregated analysis at the departmental level (13). This is also the likely explanation for apparent discrepancy between EGFR tissue profiling studies in AA NSCLC. In this case, disaggregation of the data according to smoking status (for the two studies where this is possible) demonstrates that the apparent divergence is driven entirely by results from very small never-smoker subgroups.

Additional discrepancies between the various studies which should be mentioned, include differences in the specific EGFR mutations being reported and the varying sensitivity of detection for the sequencing methods employed. Two activating EGFR mutations are routinely tested in clinical practice: a short oligonucleotide deletion in exon 19 (del 19) and a non-synonymous point mutation in exon 21 leading amino acid substitution at residue 858 (L858R). Together, these two mutations (del 19 and L858R) account for up to 90% of identified EGFR mutations. Several, much rarer mutations have been reported, including prior reports in the AA NSCLC tissue profiling literature (Table 1). Because these rare mutations are not routinely tested in clinical practice, the actual sensitivity they may, or may not, confer to EGFR targeted therapy is not known. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that some EGFR mutations may actually confer resistance. In the recent study by Harada et al., five EGFR mutations were observed in a cohort of 16 AA NSCLC cases, and notably, all were observed in AA never-smokers (6). Two of these five mutations represented rare insertions in exon 20 (N771GY and 767A-769V dup). Subsequent laboratory modeling using YFP-tagged MCF-7 cells expressing these mutations actually showed increased resistance to erlotinib in vitro, which may open an intriguing line of future investigation concerning mechanisms of proclivity to rare variant EGFR mutations in specific population groups.

A further source of potential discrepancy between studies bears mention—the use of different sequencing technologies, which could influence the scope and threshold of mutations being detected. While most prior studies relied on standard Sanger sequencing for mutational profiling, the study by Cote et al. used a higher sensitivity platform (Sequenom mass spectrometry) which can detect mutation in as few as 5-10% of tumor cells (14). Whether response to EGFR TKI in a tumor consisting of >90% wild-type EGFR cells is clinically meaningful, remains to be determined, but may ultimately reveal that higher sensitivity is not a sine qua non of clinical benefit.

A final consideration must be given to patient self-reporting for determination of race which may lead to selection bias. Objective measure of genetic admixture is now theoretically possible, for example using ancestry SNP genotyping panels (15). The complex interaction of race and genetics in somatic tumorigenesis is not mechanistically well characterized or clinically interpretable at the present time. However, as hinted at by clustering of rare variant EGFR mutations in NSCLC, this may be an area ripe for future investigations as genomic advances proceed apace.

Table 2 Disaggregation of ever vs. never smokers to illustrate Simpson’s paradox

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Ever smokers</th>
<th>Never smokers</th>
<th>Combined</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutation% AA NSCLC</td>
<td>2% (1/46)</td>
<td>2% (1/56)</td>
<td>0% (0/7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the end, tissue-based EGFR mutational analysis is only a surrogate for what is actually of primary clinical interest: a reasonable prediction of treatment efficacy. In order to further assess the treatment effects of EGFR TKI’s, we reviewed treatment response in an unselected AA NSCLC patient population treated in the community setting (Cleveland, OH). If indeed activating EGFR mutations are significantly rarer among AA NSCLC patients, a significantly lower rate of objective response would be expected in comparison to a White, North American counterpart where previous objective response...
rates of roughly 10% have been observed (12.3% Perez-Soler et al. 2004 and 8.9% Shepherd et al. 2005) (16,17).

Self-identified AA patients with advanced NSCLC treated with empiric EGFR TKI (either erlotinib or gefitinib) prior to widespread mutation testing, were evaluated for radiographic response by RECIST criteria (18). Patient characteristics are summarized in Table 3.

We observed a 5% rate of response to EGFR TKI among unselected AA NSCLC patients treated in the community setting prior to the advent of routine EGFR mutation screening, using objective RECIST criteria and chart review of 57 cases. While this result did not reach significance (P=0.223), when compared against a 10% response rate as reported in large North American trials of unselected primarily White NSCLC patients (16,17), it represents a trend toward reduced rate of response. This trend is more in line with the results of early tissue profiling studies, including our own, which pointed to a lower frequency of activating EGFR mutations in AA vs. White NSCLC, and is consistent with current clinical practice of limiting EGFR TKI to patients with activating EGFR mutations by tissue analysis, regardless of race. As EGFR mutations are more frequent in never-smokers, a true evaluation of mutational frequency by race should be studied in a never-smoker cohort to help clarify the relationship between race and EGFR mutational status.

Acknowledgements

Funding: R. Leidner, NCI 5K12 CA076917-12.

Disclosure: B. Clifford, None; P. Fu, None; N. Pennell: Teva, Oncogenex; B. Halmos: Eli-Lilly, Pfizer, Oncothyreon, Daiichi and OSI; R. Leidner, None.

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Table 3 Patient characteristics

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age, years</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
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<td>Range</td>
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<table>
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<th>Gender, no of patients</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<th>Histology</th>
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<td>Adenocarcinoma</td>
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<td>Squamous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large Cell</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage at time of EGFR TKI therapy</th>
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<tr>
<td>IIIB</td>
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<td>IV</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Smoking status</th>
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<tr>
<td>Never smoker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ever smoker (current or previous)</td>
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<tr>
<th>EGFR TKI therapy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erlotinib</td>
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<td>Gefitinib</td>
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<tr>
<th>First line EGFR TKI therapy</th>
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<td>37% (21/57) *</td>
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*21% with brain metastases (12/57).


International trial of adjuvant therapy in high risk stage I non-squamous cell carcinoma identified by a 14-gene prognostic signature

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Abstract: There is widespread agreement amongst clinical oncologists that more refined risk-stratification in early-stage lung cancer patients beyond conventional TNM staging is needed. Over the past decade, a number of molecular prognostic signatures have been designed to meet this need by correlating patterns in the differences in gene expression or modification to patient prognosis. Unfortunately, the majority of proposed signatures are not amenable to practical widespread implementation or have not yet undergone large-scale, rigorous clinical validation. A practical 14-gene prognostic signature that has undergone large-scale blinded independent validation is now ready for widespread clinical use. An international clinical trial is underway that has been designed to document the precise degree of benefit derived from adjuvant therapy in high-risk stage I patients identified by the 14-gene prognostic assay.

Keywords: Non-small cell lung cancer; molecular; prognostic; predictive; biomarker; signature; personalized therapy; adjuvant therapy

Submitted May 13, 2013. Accepted for publication May 17, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.05.01

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.05.01

Introduction

Surgical resection remains the gold standard of treatment for patients with stage I non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and essentially represents the hope for cure (1,2). As compared to the high 5-year survival rates experienced by patients with the other prevalent, localized solid tumors such as breast cancer (98%), colorectal cancer (91%), and prostate cancer (100%), the 5-year survival rate after diagnosis of “localized” lung cancer is only 53% (3). Although some of these survival differences may be attributed to differences in patient demographics associated with each of these solid tumors, the wide discrepancy in outcomes also indicates that the label of “localized” disease conferred by our current TNM staging system does not adequately predict outcome or response to “complete” resection.

Current surgical standard of care dictates the complete removal of an affected lobe as opposed to sublobar resection for patients with stage I disease whenever possible (4). The poorer outcomes associated with sublobar resections is thought to be due to the presence of micrometastatic disease that has spread either locally or via the lymphatic system past the detectable margins of surgical resection. The prevalence of micrometastatic disease in lung cancer not only explains the poor outcomes associated with sublobar resections, but also the inadequacy of our current staging system that relies on tumor size, and nodal status alone to predict the likelihood of distant occult metastasis or micrometastasis and therefore patient outcome.

Molecular prognostic signatures

The desire to improve risk stratification beyond TNM staging has led to the recent development of molecular
prognostic signatures in lung cancer. A number of biomarker signatures prognostic of survival in NSCLC have been proposed (5,6). After a decade of research and dozens of proposed signatures, proof-of-principle is no longer the objective. Clinicians are now looking for a meaningful way to integrate data from a prognostic gene signature into the standard care of NSCLC patients. More accurate prognostic information, such as may be accessible through gene signatures, could contribute in a very important way to this current clinical decision making. That decision making often involves suboptimal choices that are often being weighed largely based on the current level of inadequately precise prognostic information based on TNM staging alone. For example, a more accurate prognostic picture may influence the approach toward surgical resection. Achieving complete oncologic lobar resection at the expense of pulmonary function is often a challenging balance to strike in patients with limited cardiopulmonary reserve. Often, such patients with stage IA lung cancer undergo wedge resection rather than anatomic resection because of the estimated risk of greater pulmonary volume loss. Subsequent risk analysis of the resected tumors could allow a more precise risk-benefit ratio to be estimated in the consideration of subsequent re-operation for completion lobectomy. Prognostic signatures may also contribute to decisions regarding post-operative care. Patients with high-risk tumors could be followed closely with more frequent imaging and be considered for adjuvant chemotherapy after surgical resection. Although the NCCN currently recommends administration of adjuvant chemotherapy in “high-risk” stage I patients [defined as stage IB disease and one of the following features: poorly differentiated tumors, vascular invasion, wedge resection, tumors larger than 4 cm, visceral pleural involvement, or undetermined lymph node status (Nx) (7)], these collective criteria based on conventional clinicopathologic features have never been validated to predict benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy. Conversely, patients with low-risk tumors could potentially be spared from toxic chemotherapy regimens that may be more likely to harm than help.

Until recently, the successful translation of prognostic signature bench research to the bedside has been challenging. One major barrier has been the lack of development of a prognostic signature using practical laboratory technology. Most proposed prognostic signatures have been developed using microarray technology (5,6). While microarrays are extremely powerful at surveying multiple potential prognostic gene candidates, the practical applicability of microarrays for a clinically rigorous test remains largely unproven. Microarrays typically require fresh-frozen tissue that has been snap-frozen immediately upon surgical resection (6). This creates a logistical barrier that may prove extremely difficult or even impossible to overcome in a community non-academic based setting. While new reagents such as RNAlater (Life Technologies, Foster City, CA) that preserve RNA at room temperature may one day provide a possible alternative to snap freezing, the overall robustness of such a platform, which involves a microarray approach that relies inherently upon extremely pure RNA, remains to be seen. In addition, many microarray-based prognostic signatures are platform dependent and based on complex algorithms (6), making them difficult for other groups to interpret, understand, and independently validate. A clinical trial based on the “metagene” prognostic model which utilized a complex microarray-based algorithm, for example, was recently stopped and the research paper describing the algorithm was recently retracted because of the inability of other groups to independently validate the model (8).

The lack of rigorous clinical validation has been the second major barrier to clinical adoption. The majority of proposed prognostic gene signatures lack clinically relevant validation. While an attempt has been made by many groups to develop prognostic algorithms using large patient cohorts, the necessity of validating these algorithms on equally large independent cohorts in a blinded fashion has been underemphasized (5,6,9). As a result, it is difficult to convince the clinician that a prognostic gene signature that was developed on a specific population is universally applicable to the patient in front of them. This is an even bigger problem in tests that rely upon a large amount of quantitative data to generate a result due to statistical “overfitting”. Overfitting leads to quantitative coefficients and cut-off points that are too specific to the training cohort; validation on independent datasets typically fails in these cases. As a result, tests developed by “overfitting” data to the study population cannot be generalized to other patient populations (6).

**Development and validation of a 14-gene prognostic algorithm using paraffin-embedded tissues**

In light of the technical challenges posed by use of a microarray-based platform and objection from the clinical community about the lack of rigorous clinical validation,
our group recently developed a quantitative PCR-based assay that measures gene expression in formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) lung tumor specimens (10). Quantitative PCR is robust, inexpensive, widely available, easy to interpret, and highly reproducible. Special techniques were developed to extract RNA from 361 FFPE specimens from patients who had undergone resection of stage I-IV non-squamous NSCLC at UCSF (10). The expression levels of 14 genes were measured using quantitative PCR and correlated to patient outcomes using penalized cox proportional hazards modeling (10). Three of these genes were housekeeping genes; eleven of these genes are intricately related to known canonical lung cancer pathways such as \textit{KRAS} and \textit{eGFR} (10). Risk scores were divided into terciles in the UCSF training cohort to yield low-, intermediate, and high-risk categories.

Once the prognostic algorithm was derived on this UCSF cohort, blinded, independent validation was performed using two large international cohorts. The first validation cohort consisted of 433 patients who underwent resection of pathologic stage I disease in the Kaiser-Permanente Northern California healthcare system. The second cohort consisted of over 1,000 patients who underwent resection of pathologic stage I-III disease at major centers of cancer care excellence that belong to the China Clinical Trials Consortium (CCTC).

Kaplan-Meier analysis demonstrated that the assay was able to successfully risk stratify patients at low, intermediate, and high-risk of mortality within 5 years of surgical resection. This risk stratification was successful not only in the Kaiser stage I validation cohort, but also within each of the stages of the CCTC validation cohort (10). Risk category was the strongest predictor of morality after adjusting for age, sex, smoking history, histology, and stage. In addition, the assay improved risk discrimination in all stage I patients (stage IA and IB) beyond the NCCN criteria (6) currently used to identify high-risk stage I patients for adjuvant chemotherapy. Furthermore, the assay was able to successfully risk-stratify patients with node-negative tumors less than 2 cm, identifying patients with almost 50% 5-year mortality despite surgical resection of these small T1a tumors (11). The numbers of small T1a tumors is expected to rapidly increase as more and more institutions and providers adopt the new lung cancer screening guidelines (6).

Of note, only one other group attempted blinded, large-scale independent validation of a molecular prognostic signature. A multi-center effort was made as part of the National Cancer Institute Directors Challenge to develop and validate a microarray-based signature using fresh frozen tissue samples collected at multiple institutions (12). Eight signatures were submitted by the participating institutions for validation. None of these signatures, however, was able to risk stratify stage I patients better than clinical covariates alone (12), highlighting the difficulty of achieving successful blinded validation of molecular prognostic signatures.

**Worldwide trial of adjuvant therapy in patients with high risk stage I non-squamous cell carcinoma**

The NCCN currently recommends administration of adjuvant chemotherapy in “high-risk” stage I patients. The following criteria define “high-risk” patients according to the NCCN (7):

- (I) poorly differentiated tumors;
- (II) vascular invasion;
- (III) wedge resection;
- (IV) tumors larger than 4 cm;
- (V) visceral pleural involvement;
- (VI) insufficient lymph node staging (Nx).

Notably, with the exception of tumor size, none of the above criteria have been validated to predict benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy. They have been adopted by the NCCN with the thought that these criteria are correlated with more aggressive tumors and worse survival. It has already been shown, however, that the 14-gene assay far outperforms the above NCCN criteria in identifying high-risk patients (10). The new gene signature may therefore represent a more rigorously validated tool for implementation of this current published guideline. A randomized clinical trial that has been designed to document the exact degree of benefit derived from adjuvant chemotherapy in high-risk patients identified by the assay is underway.

**Conclusions**

There is widespread acknowledgment of the need for more refined risk-stratification in early-stage lung cancer patients beyond conventional TNM staging. Although the development of molecular prognostic signatures has met this need, the majority of proposed signatures lack clinical relevance because they are impractical or have not yet
undergone rigorous clinical validation. A practical 14-gene prognostic signature that has undergone large-scale blinded independent validation is now ready for widespread clinical use. An ongoing international clinical trial is expected to provide additional documentation of the degree of benefit derived from this personalization of lung cancer care that is already being integrated into current practice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Christina Pham for her helpful assistance with editing this manuscript.

Disclosure: The authors have a consulting relationship with Pinpoint Genomics Inc./Life Technologies Corporation, the company that established a CLIA-certified laboratory and developed the molecular assay based on UCSF technology. The authors are also inventors of related technology owned by the University of California, for which the University has submitted patent applications and which has been licensed to Pinpoint Genomics/Life Technologies Corporation.

References


Cite this article as: Kratz JR, Mann MJ, Jablons DM. International trial of adjuvant therapy in high risk stage I non-squamous cell carcinoma identified by a 14-gene prognostic signature. Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(3):222-225. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.05.01
Introduction

Lung cancer, predominantly non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC), is the leading cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide (1). The majority of patients are diagnosed at advanced stages in which there are few treatment options (2). Despite the limited efficacy, platinum-based doublet chemotherapy remains the standard first-line treatment for advanced NSCLC in recent years (3,4). Advances in genetic testing allowed the discovery of existence and clinical significance of driver oncogenes which could be selected as a therapeutic target, such as activated epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations (5). It has been

Prognosis

Impact of EGFR mutation status on tumor response and progression free survival after first-line chemotherapy in patients with advanced non-small-cell lung cancer: a meta-analysis

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Objectives: Non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients harboring sensitive epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutations derive greater benefits from EGFR-tyrosine kinase inhibitors (EGFR-TKIs) than those with wild type tumors. However, whether EGFR mutation status is associated with the efficacy of cytotoxic chemotherapy or prognosis in advanced NSCLC patients remained controversial. Thus, we sought to conduct a meta-analysis to answer this question.

Methods: Electronic databases were searched for eligible literatures. The primary outcomes were objective response rate (ORR) and 6-month progression-free survival (PFS) rate. The pooled odds ratio (OR) was calculated using random-effects model. Subgroup analyses stratified by study types, EGFR mutation detection methods, chemotherapy regimens, and patient origins were proposed.

Results: A total of 14 studies involving 1,772 advanced NSCLC patients with known EGFR mutation status who had received first-line chemotherapy were included. Patients with positive EGFR mutation had numerically higher ORR than wild type patients (36.2% vs. 30.1%) without significant differences (OR 1.24, 95% CI, 0.90 to 1.70; P=0.19). However, patients with EGFR mutants had significantly superior 6-month PFS rate than wild-type patients (58.6% vs. 47.2%; OR 1.88, 95% CI, 1.33 to 2.65; P=0.0003). Results of the subgroup analyses were concordant with the overall ones.

Conclusions: This comprehensive analysis revealed that advanced NSCLC patients with sensitivity EGFR mutation had higher 6-month PFS rate and potentially greater ORR compared with wild-type patients after first-line chemotherapy. It suggested that EGFR mutation status should be considered a significant factor for patient stratification in evaluating the efficacy of antitumor agents in addition to EGFR-TKIs.

Keywords: Non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC); epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutation; first-line chemotherapy; meta-analysis

Submitted on Jul 17, 2014. Accepted for publication Jul 23, 2014.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.07.33

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2072-1439.2014.07.33
extensively proved that NSCLC patients who harbor sensitive EGFR mutations (exon 19 deletion or L858R mutation in exon 21) derive greater benefits from EGFR-tyrosine kinase inhibitors (EGFR-TKIs), such as erlotinib and gefitinib, than those with wild type tumors (6,7). The predictive value of EGFR mutation status for EGFR-TKIs efficacy has been substantially confirmed.

In contrast, people used to believe there is no correlation between EGFR mutation status and cytotoxic chemotherapy. Data from some previous studies suggested that Asians represented higher response rate than Caucasians in receiving chemotherapy (8). From the present point of view, the most prominent intrinsic genetic variance between these two races is the proportion of patients with EGFR mutations. Considering the huge differences in tumor biology between EGFR mutation-positive and -negative NSCLC, it is interesting to investigate whether EGFR mutation status also influence chemotherapy efficacy. Several recent studies revealed that advanced NSCLC patients with positive EGFR mutation had favorable response to first-line cytotoxic chemotherapy compared with wild type patients (9,10), while another study showed contrary results (11). In addition, another clinical research reported that there was no obvious association between EGFR mutation status and first-line chemotherapy response in NSCLC (12). Therefore, whether EGFR mutation status is associated with responsiveness to front-line chemotherapy in advanced NSCLC is still not clear. A comprehensive analysis of the various outcomes is warranted. Thus, we sought to perform a meta-analysis incorporating all available evidences to evaluate the clinical outcome according to the EGFR mutation status in patients with advanced NSCLC treated with front-line conventional chemotherapy.

Methods

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Eligible studies should meet the following criteria: (I) studies which investigate or report a subset of patients with first-line chemotherapy without combination of EGFR inhibitors (e.g., TKIs or monoclonal antibodies) or other agents potentially targeting the EGFR pathway (e.g., multitargeted antiangiogenic TKIs) in patients with local advanced or metastatic (IIIB or IV) NSCLC; (II) prior neoadjuvant or adjuvant chemotherapy in patients with recurrence after surgery was permitted if it had elapsed from last administration to relapse at least 6 months; (III) EGFR mutation analysis was performed on available tumor tissue samples instead of circulating free DNA in serum in first-line chemotherapy treatment cohort; (IV) at least one primary outcomes was available. Studies failed to meet the inclusion criteria will be excluded.

Outcomes measures, data extraction and quality assessment

Primary outcomes for this meta-analysis were objective response rate (ORR), namely partial response (PR) plus complete response (CR), and 6-month progression-free survival (PFS) rate. The data collection and assessment of methodological quality followed the QUORUM and the Cochrane Collaboration guidelines (http://www.cochrane.de). The data on study type, treatment regimens, major clinical features, ORR and 6-month PFS rate were extracted by two investigators (FW and PH) independently. Figures were electronically digitized and Kaplan-Meier curves were downloaded by appropriate software (Engauge Digitizer, ver 2.12, Mark Mitchell, 2002, free software downloaded from http://sourceforge.net). Two reviewers (SW and DQ) used a JADAD score to evaluate the quality of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and a modified Newcastle-Ottawa scale to assess the quality of non-RCT studies (13). Discrepancies were discussed by all investigators to reach consensus.

Statistical analysis

In consideration of any potential heterogeneity, we conducted this meta-analysis with a random-effect model in order to avoid any potential heterogeneity. The results were reported as pooled odds ratios (ORs) with the corresponding 95% confidence interval (CI). Subgroup and sensitivity analysis were stratified for literature type, EGFR mutation analysis method, therapeutic regimen, patient...
origins. An OR greater than one reflected a better ORR or 6-month PFS rate in the EGFR mutant arm. Statistical heterogeneity across studies was assessed with a forest plot and the inconsistency statistic ($I^2$). Statistical significance was considered at $P<0.05$. All calculations were performed using REVIEW MANAGER (version 5.0 for Windows; the Cochrane Collaboration, Oxford, UK).

**Publication bias**

An extensive search strategy was made to minimize the potential for publication bias. Graphical funnel plots were generated to visually assess a publication bias (14). The statistical methods to detect funnel plot asymmetry were the rank correlation test of Begg and Mazumdar and the regression asymmetry test of Egger (14,15).

**Results**

**Eligible studies**

We identified 1,322 records according to the search strategy and finally included 14 studies (six RCTs, one prospective study and seven retrospective studies) involving 1,772 advanced NSCLC patients who had been tested for EGFR mutations in first-line chemotherapy treatment cohort (9-12,16-25). *Figure 1* summarized the flow chart. Among these studies, chemotherapy regimens were platinum-based doublets at standard dose, namely cisplatin/carboplatin plus one of the third generation agents (including gemcitabine, paclitaxel, docetaxel, vinorelbine, and pemetrexed), or some non-platinum based regimens. Regimens were not specific in five retrospective studies (10,21-24) so that they were excluded in subgroup analysis stratified for therapeutic regimen. Detecting approaches for EGFR mutation included direct sequencing, nested polymerase chain reaction (PCR), amplification refractory mutation system (ARMS), polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism (PCR-RFLP), real time-quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR), denaturing high-performance liquid chromatography (DHPLC), which were also a sub-grouping factor. We considered time to progression (TTP) as PFS in studies by Eberhard (11) and Lee (21). *Table 1* summarized the characteristics of all involved studies.

**Objective response rate and six-month PFS rate**

According to all literature with available data, patients with positive EGFR mutation had higher pooled ORR than wild type patients (35.8% vs. 30.1%), but there was no significant difference between the two groups (OR 1.24, 95% CI, 0.90 to 1.70; $P=0.19$; heterogeneity: $\chi^2=17.47$, $P=0.03$, $I^2=31$%; *Figure 2A*). Subgroup analyses stratified by study type (RCT vs. non-RCT), EGFR mutation detecting method (direct sequencing vs. non-sequencing methods), therapeutic regimen (gemcitabine-based vs. non-gemcitabine-based regimens and cisplatin-based vs. carboplatin-based regimens) and patient origin (Asians vs. non-Asians) consistently revealed no significant difference between the mutant group and wild type group (*Table 2*). EGFR mutants had higher 6-month PFS rate than wild type patients (62.1% vs. 51.8%).

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* Figure 1 Profile summarizing the trial flow.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead author</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Study category (phase)</th>
<th>Therapeutic regimen [cases in total]</th>
<th>Age, median [range] [y]</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Non-smoker (%)</th>
<th>Adenocarcinoma (%)</th>
<th>Evaluable cases for EGFR mutation analysis</th>
<th>EGFR mutation status</th>
<th>EGFR mutation method</th>
<th>ORR (%)</th>
<th>Six-month PFS rate (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>David A. Eberhard</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>RCT (III)</td>
<td>Paclitaxel 200 mg/m² BSA, d1, q3w + carboplatin (AUC = 6), d1, q3w × 6 cycles [540]</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>20 (3.7)</td>
<td>105 (19.4)</td>
<td>113 Nested PCR 18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>3/14 (21.4)</td>
<td>10/14</td>
<td>(71.43)</td>
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<td>Tony S. Mok</td>
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<td>RCT (III)</td>
<td>Paclitaxel 200 mg/m² BSA, d1, q3w + carboplatin (AUC = 5-6) d1, q3w × 6 cycles [608]</td>
<td>57.0 (25-84)</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>569 (93.6)</td>
<td>591 (97.2)</td>
<td>214 Dxs ARMS 18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>61/129 (47.3)</td>
<td>64/129</td>
<td>(49.61)</td>
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<td>Shirin Khambata-Ford</td>
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<td>RCT (III)</td>
<td>Paclitaxel 225 mg/m² BSA or docetaxel 75 mg/m² BSA, d1, q3w × 6 cycles [338]</td>
<td>65.0 (34-85)</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>25 (7.4)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>87 Direct sequencing 18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1/9 (11.1)</td>
<td>7/9</td>
<td>(77.78)</td>
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<td>Ji-Youn Han</td>
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<td>RCT (III)</td>
<td>Gemcitabine 1,250 mg/m² on d1 and 8+ cisplatin 80 mg/m² on d1 q3w × ≤9 cycles [150]</td>
<td>56.5 (19-74)</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>150 (100.0)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>43 Direct sequencing 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>6/16 (37.5)</td>
<td>9/16</td>
<td>(56.25)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cesare Gridelli</td>
<td>Interna</td>
<td>RCT (III)</td>
<td>Gemcitabine 1,200 mg/m² BSA, d1, 8, q3w + cisplatin 80 mg/m² BSA, d1, q3w × ≤6 cycles [380]</td>
<td>62.0 (34-81)</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>79 (20.8)</td>
<td>212 (55.8)</td>
<td>137 PCR-RFLP 19, 21</td>
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<td>(70.00)</td>
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<td>Yi-Long Wu</td>
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<td>Gemcitabine 1,250 mg/m² BSA, d1, 8, q4w + carboplatin (AUC = 5) or cisplatin 75 mg/m² BSA, d1, q4w + placebo d15-28, q4w × 6 cycles [225]</td>
<td>57.3 (37-88)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>107 (48.0)</td>
<td>168 (75.0)</td>
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<td>(56.25)</td>
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<td>Yuko Kawano</td>
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<td>Prospective (II)</td>
<td>Pemetrexed 500 mg/m² BSA, d1, q3w + cisplatin 75 mg/m², d1, q3w × ≤4 cycles [50]</td>
<td>60.0 (28-74)</td>
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<td>14 (28.0)</td>
<td>41 (82.0)</td>
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<td>6/9 (66.7)</td>
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<td>(33.33)</td>
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<td>Kyung-Hun Lee</td>
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<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>Platinum-based regimen [75]</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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Table 1 (continued)
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<td>Meina Wu</td>
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<td>61.0 [21-78]</td>
<td>66 (45.5)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>106 (73.1)</td>
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<td>DHPLC</td>
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<td>19/55 (34.5)</td>
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<td>Aristea Kalikaki</td>
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<td>30 (23.4)</td>
<td>39 (30.5)</td>
<td>96 (75.0)</td>
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<td>Non-platinum-based regimen [49]</td>
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<td>Jin Hyun Park</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>Gemcitabine + cisplatin/carboplatin [131]</td>
<td>59.0 [26-82]</td>
<td>120 (55.3)</td>
<td>144 (66.4)</td>
<td>174 (80.2)</td>
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<td>23/85 (27.06)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Paclitaxel + cisplatin/carboplatin [86]</td>
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<td>63.0 [29-81]</td>
<td>73 (36.5)</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
<td>Gemcitabine + cisplatin [81]</td>
<td>57.0 [17-42]</td>
<td>17 (42.5)</td>
<td>57 (24)</td>
<td>24 (60.0)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Direct sequencing</td>
<td>18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>13/40 (32.5)</td>
<td>36/40 (90.00)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Docetaxel + cisplatin [77]</td>
<td>62.0 [19-46]</td>
<td>61 (46.3)</td>
<td>61 (21)</td>
<td>21 (51.2)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Direct sequencing</td>
<td>18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>13/41 (31.7)</td>
<td>35/41 (85.37)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vinorelbine + cisplatin [71]</td>
<td>58.0 [15-45.5]</td>
<td>58 (45.5)</td>
<td>19 (67.6)</td>
<td>22 (61.1)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Direct sequencing</td>
<td>18, 19, 20, 21</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>13/36 (36.1)</td>
<td>35/36 (97.22)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

RCT, random control trial; AUC, area under the concentration time curve; BSA, body-surface area; ADK, adenocarcinoma; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; ORR, objective response rate; TTP, time to progression; PFS, progression-free survival; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; ARMS, amplification refractory mutation system; PCR-RFLP, polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism; RT-qPCR, real time-quantitative PCR; DHPLC, denaturing high-performance liquid chromatography; NA, not available.
Figure 2 (A) Meta-analysis on objective response rate among advanced NSCLC patients receiving first-line chemotherapy according to EGFR mutation status; (B) meta-analysis on 6-month PFS rate among patients receiving first-line chemotherapy according to EGFR mutation status. NSCLC, non-small-cell lung cancer; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; PFS, progression-free survival; CI, confidence interval; I², inconsistency statistic.

with significance (OR 1.88, 95% CI, 1.33-2.65; P=0.0003; heterogeneity: \( \chi^2 = 16.93, df = 12 (P = 0.13); I^2 = 35\% \); Figure 2B). Subgroup analyses also revealed similar tendency of significantly superior 6-month PFS of EGFR mutants, regardless of study types, methods of EGFR mutation detection, chemotherapy regimens and patient origins (Table 3). Additionally, we pooled the results of DCR although only five studies reported this data. No differences between EGFR mutation positive and negative groups were observed (OR 1.33, 95% CI, 0.93-1.91; P=0.11; heterogeneity: \( \chi^2 = 2.23, P=0.69, I^2 = 0\% \); Figure 3).

Assessment of heterogeneity and publication bias

As described above, the statistical heterogeneity was moderate. Any potential clinical heterogeneity was examined and subsequently excluded by subgroup analyses. In addition, sensitivity analysis by leaving any study out did not alter the general results. There was no publication bias for both outcome measures, with asymmetrical appearance on funnel plot analysis (Figure 4) and all P values greater than 0.05 in Begg’s test and Egger’s test.

Discussion

The association of EGFR mutation status with the responsiveness or prognosis in patients with advanced NSCLC after first-line chemotherapy was controversial based on previous small-size reports. A meta-analysis that could incorporate all available results, including subgroup data from RCTs as well, is a good way to address our concerns. In the current study, we found that 6-month PFS rate was significantly higher in EGFR mutants than in wild type patients after first-line chemotherapy, while the ORR and DCR appeared to be higher but the difference did not reach significance. These results admit of two
### Table 2
Subgroup analysis on objective response rate among advanced NSCLC patients receiving first-line chemotherapy according to EGFR mutation status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of included studies</th>
<th>Number of included studies</th>
<th>Objective response rate (event/total)</th>
<th>Test of heterogeneity</th>
<th>Test of effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EGFR mutation positive</td>
<td>EGFR mutation negative</td>
<td>Chi², P value, I² (%)</td>
<td>OR (95% CI), P value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>219/605</td>
<td>310/1,030</td>
<td>17.47, 0.13, 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Random control trial</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>78/216</td>
<td>91/356</td>
<td>11.36, 0.02, 65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-random control trial</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>141/389</td>
<td>219/674</td>
<td>5.56, 0.59, 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>EGFR mutation analysis method</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct sequencing method</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>63/182</td>
<td>122/434</td>
<td>6.20, 0.29, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-direct sequencing methods</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>156/423</td>
<td>188/596</td>
<td>10.95, 0.09, 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic regimen</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemcitabine based regimens</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>52/189</td>
<td>56/181</td>
<td>0.67, 0.88, 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-gemcitabine based regimens</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>120/293</td>
<td>112/388</td>
<td>9.11, 0.10, 45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic regimen</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisplatin based regimens</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>54/145</td>
<td>63/160</td>
<td>1.93, 0.38, 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carboplatin based regimens</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>65/152</td>
<td>64/262</td>
<td>5.49, 0.06, 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>210/573</td>
<td>240/734</td>
<td>12.72, 0.18, 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Asia area</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9/32</td>
<td>70/296</td>
<td>4.75, 0.09, 58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1Non-direct sequencing methods included Nested PCR, ARMS, PCR-RFLP, RT-qPCR, and DHPLC. NSCLC, non-small-cell lung cancer; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; ARMS, amplification refractory mutation system; PCR-RFLP, polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism; RT-qPCR, real time-quantitative PCR; DHPLC, denaturing high-performance liquid chromatography; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; I², inconsistency statistic; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of included studies</th>
<th>Number of included studies</th>
<th>Six-month PFS rate (event/total)</th>
<th>Test of heterogeneity</th>
<th>Test of association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EGFR mutation positive</td>
<td>EGFR mutation negative</td>
<td>Chi²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>329/561</td>
<td>443/938</td>
<td>16.93</td>
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<td>Literature type</td>
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<td>Random control trial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>131/236</td>
<td>224/473</td>
<td>8.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-random control trial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>198/325</td>
<td>219/465</td>
<td>8.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>EGFR mutation analysis method</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct sequencing method</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>147/173</td>
<td>169/315</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-direct sequencing methods¹</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>182/388</td>
<td>274/623</td>
<td>7.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic regimen</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemcitabine¹ based regimens</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>109/209</td>
<td>134/298</td>
<td>5.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-gemcitabine¹ based regimens</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>186/293</td>
<td>212/388</td>
<td>10.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapeutic regimen</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisplatin based regimens</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>178/286</td>
<td>167/330</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carboplatin based regimens</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>81/152</td>
<td>138/262</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution area of patients</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>298/518</td>
<td>295/644</td>
<td>9.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Asia area</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31/43</td>
<td>148/294</td>
<td>6.48</td>
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</table>

¹Non-direct sequencing methods included Nested PCR, ARMS, PCR-RFLP, RT-qPCR, and DHPLC; ¹We defined gemcitabine + platinum-based regimen as gemcitabine + cisplatin/carboplatin; ³We defined non-gemcitabine + platinum-based regimen as taxane/paclitaxel/docetaxel + cisplatin/carboplatin or vinorelbine/pemetrexed + cisplatin. NSCLC, non-small-cell lung cancer; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; ARMS, amplification refractory mutation system; PCR-RFLP, polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism; RT-qPCR, real time-quantitative PCR; DHPLC, denaturing high-performance liquid chromatography; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; PFS, progression-free survival; I², inconsistency statistic; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.
Firstly, EGFR mutation might indeed be a predictor to the efficacy of cytotoxic chemotherapy. Activation of EGFR-dependent pathway plays an important role in the proliferation and aggressive phenotype transition of epithelial cells especially EGFR-mutated tumors (26,27). Moreover, a prior research indicated that a critical level of EGFR signaling was necessary for cisplatin-mediated apoptosis in tumor cells and suggested an inhibitory effect of this pathway on the repair of cisplatin-damaged DNA (28). Therefore, it was reasonable to hypothesize that tumor cells harboring EGFR mutation are more sensitive to cytotoxic chemotherapy. The hypothesis for selective killing of EGFR+ cells was supported by a clinical observation which showed a reduced plasma EGFR mutation frequency after chemotherapy in patients with NSCLC (29). By selectively eliminating or suppressing the ‘seeds’, tumor growths were persistently restricted, which translated into prolonged PFS as our result indicated. On the other hand, EGFR mutants did have higher pooled response rate although the magnitude of benefit was not as great as that of PFS. We suspected that the magnitude difference was attributed to the intratumoral heterogeneity. A recent study demonstrated that approximately 30% of patients presented intratumoral EGFR mutational heterogeneity through microdissection of the tumor samples (30). Therefore, tumors detected as EGFR mutated not necessarily contain pure EGFR+ cells. In other words, the intratumoral abundance of EGFR+ cells might be small in some patients. Thus, selective killing of EGFR+ cells was probably not associated with significant tumor shrinkage. As a result, patients intrinsically ‘responded’ to the chemotherapy might fail to meet the criteria for ORR (at least a 30% decrease in the sum of diameters of target lesions) according to Recist 1.1 criteria (31). However, direct evidence to confirm this mechanism requires real-time re-biopsy after treatments, which seems to be an impossible mission considering ethics. Secondly, we can not rule out the possibility that the improved PFS was merely the underlying prognostic effect of EGFR mutation since there was evidence showing that EGFR mutation was likely to be a favorable prognostic factor (32). However, the prognostic value of EGFR
mutation itself in NSCLC was still controversial (33).

Nonetheless, regardless of what the true causes are, this comprehensive analysis confirmed the association between EGFR mutation and PFS. This was highly concordant with an important report this year that among the patients treated with non-targeted therapy, those with a driver mutation detected had a longer median overall survival than those without identified driver mutations (2.4 vs. 2.1 years) (34). All these results gave us some important hints. Firstly, we strongly suggested that investigators should consider the proportion of EGFR mutation patients as a stratification factor in designing or reviewing clinical studies regarding chemotherapy regimen or other non-targeted agents. Second, it might partially explain why some clinical trials on chemotherapy in Asia reported higher response rate than those in Europe-American, and similarly, explain the negative results of combination of gefitinib with chemotherapy in patients with EGFR mutation compared with chemotherapy alone in some previous studies (35). In addition, the response to chemotherapy in EGFR wild type patients or projectively driven mutation 'pan-negative' patients was worse than what we acknowledged. Therefore, more efforts should be made to improve the prognosis of this population.

Notably, we only focused on first-line chemotherapy in this analysis in order to minimize the crossover effects. Some previous investigations suggested an inferior response from EGFR-TKIs following treatment of chemotherapy (36). Consistently, the study by Bai et al. also showed that the overall incidence of EGFR mutation was lower in plasma DNA after first-line chemotherapy (29). Thus, getting second-line or third-line chemotherapy involved will tangle the discussion.

This is the first study to comprehensively answer the impact of EGFR mutation on chemotherapy, addressing the confusion from inconsistent conclusions of current studies. However, there are several limitations. First, our meta-analysis was based on non-randomized studies and sub-group data extracted from RCTs, which somehow compromised the evidence level. Second, EGFR exons identified as mutant were heterogeneous among included articles but we were unable to assess whether 19 or 21 exon alterations had different impact on chemotherapy. Finally, we failed to investigate different first-line regimens separately with limited data. In addition, we cannot differentiate the respective impact of EGFR mutation on cell-cycle nonspecific antineoplastic agents (platinum) and specific agents (third-generation agents). For clinical practice, after all, it is essential to determine the optimal regimen for EGFR mutant NSCLC patients, especially who have failed front-line EGFR-TKIs or have no access to these agents. Further studies are warranted.

In conclusion, this meta-analysis showed that advanced NSCLC patient with EGFR mutation had significantly higher 6-month PFS rate and potentially higher ORR than wild type patients after first-line chemotherapy. We suggest that EGFR mutation status should be considered a stratification factor not only in studies regarding EGFR-targeted drugs but also in those regarding non-EGFR-targeted drugs.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


**FGFR1 amplifications in squamous cell carcinomas of the lung: diagnostic and therapeutic implications**

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*Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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**Abstract:** Fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1) is a type 4 receptor tyrosine kinase. The receptor and its ligands play an important role in development and physiology. However, constitutive activation of FGFR1 by gene amplification, translocation or mutation is associated with various malignancies as, for example, breast cancer or myeloproliferative diseases. We have recently reported that FGFR1 amplification occurs in 20% of pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas, and preclinical tests have shown that these alterations are therapeutically tractable. These findings make FGFR1 amplification a potential biomarker for lung cancer treatment. Squamous cell carcinomas of the lung are characterized by an uneven FGFR1 gene copy number distribution. Therefore, fluorescence in situ hybridization assays need to address focality and heterogeneity of FGFR1 in these tumors. Here, we review our proposal for a reading and evaluation strategy. Furthermore, we highlight the emerging landscape of clinical trials with selective and unsselective FGFR inhibitors and provide first response data from early clinical trials.

**Keywords:** Lung cancer; squamous cell carcinoma; fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1); FISH

Submitted Feb 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 07, 2013.

doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.03

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.03

**Introduction**

Fibroblast growth factor receptor 1 (FGFR1) amplification represents now one of the most promising predictive biomarkers in lung cancer. This alteration seems to become the first therapeutically relevant genetic change in pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas, which occurs frequently in these tumors. In contrast to adenocarcinomas of the lung, squamous cell carcinomas do not significantly harbor EGFR mutations or ALK, ROS1 or RET translocations, which are therapeutically tractable. Therefore, FGFR1 amplifications in pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas are currently in the focus of many researchers and various ongoing clinical trials.

Squamous cell carcinoma is a common subgroup of lung cancer, which is strongly associated with smoking. The estimated annual incidence is approximately 123 newly diagnosed cases per 100,000 inhabitants in Europe (1,2). It is suspected that both incidence and prevalence will still increase, especially among female patients. The current therapeutic regimen for locally advanced or metastatic tumors consists of conventional platinum based chemotherapy and radiation (3). Very recently, data from our group indicated, however, that a focal amplification of chromosome band 8p12, representing the second most common genetic alteration, occurs in pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas which was proven to be related to FGFR1 amplification (4). Subsequently, we could confirm this finding in a large cohort of 420 clinical lung cancer samples by fluorescence in situ hybridization (5). Furthermore, data from in vitro studies provided first evidence that FGFR1
amplified squamous cell lines are in fact exploitable by FGFR inhibitors (4).

**The FGFR family of receptor tyrosine kinases**

FGFR1 is a member of the type 4 family of receptor tyrosine kinases, which consists of the closely related and highly conserved FGFRs 1 to 4. All these proteins are transmembrane receptors which are composed of an extracellular ligand binding domain, a transmembrane domain and an intracellular part which contains the functionally relevant tyrosine kinase domain. Three immunoglobulin-like loops (IgI-III) build the extracellular part, with IgI and II being separated by a so-called acidic box of few amino acid residues. IgII and III form the ligand binding site. The binding specificity of the receptors is regulated by alternative splicing of the IgIII portion as exons 8 and 9 build alternatively the C-terminal part of this domain, thus forming the IIIb or IIIc variant of the receptor, respectively (6). Epithelial tissues express mostly the IIIb variant, whereas IIIc predominates in mesenchymal cells (7). This alternative splicing is, however, restricted to FGFR1-3 with FGFR4 being expressed always in the IIIc form.

FGFRs are activated by binding of their specific ligands - the fibroblast growth factors (FGFs) of which 18 different types are currently known. FGFs can function in an autocrine or paracrine manner and may even have hormonal long-distance effects. Furthermore, FGFs can also be liberated from the stroma, for instance during invasive tumor growth. FGFs bind high specificity to FGFRs and form a complex with dimerized receptor molecules and a heparan sulphate proteoglycan chain. These activated complexes undergo conformation change and activation of the tyrosine kinase domains which finally trans-phosphorylate. After binding and phosphorylation of adapter proteins FGF signaling functions via different downstream effectors, e.g., the signal transducer and activator of transcription (STAT) pathway. Another signaling axis consists of phospholipase C\(\gamma\), protein kinase C and ends in the RAS - MAP kinase pathway. An important regulator of FGFR signaling is FGFR substrate 2 (FRS2) which binds to the juxtamembrane domain of activated FGF receptors and which recruits GRB2 and other downstream molecules finally leading again to an activation of the RAS - RAF - MAP kinase pathway as well as the PI3K - AKT pathway. Among others proteins FGFR-like 1 (FGFRL1 or FGFR5) functions as a negative regulator. FGFRL1 has the capability of binding (or “trapping”) FGFs without subsequent tyrosine kinase activity.

FGFR activity and FGF signaling play a major role in development, proliferation, differentiation and survival. Thus, FGFRs are crucial for embryogenesis, e.g., for limb development and organogenesis, and are highly important for many physiological processes including wound healing. In this context, FGFRs can act even as tumor suppressors.

**The role of FGFR1 in oncogenesis**

Gains of function of the FGF receptors were found to be associated with various malignancies. Constitutive activation of FGFR1 occurs basically by three major mechanisms: gene amplification, translocation or activating mutations (for overview and selected references see Table 1). FGFR1 mutations have been reported in melanomas but this appears to be a rather rare event. FGFR1 amplification, however, belongs to the most frequent genetic changes in breast cancer. Amplification of FGFR1 has additionally been reported in squamous cell carcinomas of the head and neck as well as from the esophagus. Translocations of FGFR1 have originally been described in a myeloproliferative hematological disorder which has now been referred to as “8p11 myeloproliferative syndrome characterized by FGFR1 translocation” by the current WHO classification system. Very recently FGFR1 translocations were additionally found in a subset of glioblastoma multiforme and in a rhabdomyosarcoma.

Altered FGF receptor activity contributes to cancer development by regulating different key processes. Meanwhile, there is clear evidence that unscheduled FGFR activation leads to an increase in cell proliferation and prolonged survival but also cell migration and angiogenesis are stimulated.

**FGFR1 amplification in lung cancer - epidemiology**

Very recently we have reported on the frequency of FGFR1 amplifications in pulmonary carcinomas. In the so far largest series we found 20% FGFR1 amplified tumors among squamous cell carcinomas (5) which was recently confirmed in a second independent study (19). Therefore, FGFR1 amplification represents one of the most frequent driver lesions in lung cancer next to EGFR mutations, and far more often than ALK, ROS1 or RET rearrangements or other therapeutically targetable alterations. The high frequency as well as the large list of potential inhibitors which are currently in early or advanced clinical trials make...
**FGFR1 amplification** one of the most promising biomarkers for lung cancer treatment.

It is, however, noteworthy that - at least until now - no convincing case of an adenocarcinoma has been proven to be **FGFR1** amplified. In our series of nearly one hundred pulmonary adenocarcinomas all cases were clearly negative for gene amplifications whereas polysomic cases were frequently noticed (5). This finding seems to be restricted to pure adenocarcinomas as we have seen **FGFR1** amplification occasionally in adeno-squamous carcinomas. Furthermore, we have found additionally a pulmonary large cell carcinoma **FGFR1** amplified (5). This might reflect the fact that emerging data from expression profiles provide evidence that some pulmonary large cell carcinomas represent a dedifferentiation endpoint of squamous carcinomas. Taken together, among non small cell carcinomas, **FGFR1** amplification seems to be strongly associated with squamous morphology.

Very recently, we further reported that also small cell carcinomas of the lung can harbor **FGFR1** amplifications (12). Preliminary and not yet published data from our screening program provide first evidence that this is a reproducible finding which can be confirmed in clinical routine cohorts. The frequency of **FGFR1** amplifications among small cell carcinomas seems to be lower than in squamous cell carcinomas. Based on our current and still ongoing epidemiologic studies we estimate the frequency of **FGFR1** amplifications among small cell carcinomas around 5%.

**Detection of FGFR1 amplifications by fluorescence in situ hybridization**

Therapeutic effects of **FGFR1** tyrosine kinase inhibitors seem to be dependent on significantly increased **FGFR1** gene copy numbers. It still needs to be clarified whether **FGFR1** amplification only serves as a surrogate marker for receptor protein overexpression since the receptor itself should represent obviously the therapeutic target. There are currently no validated antibody assays on the market, which could reliably detect **FGFR1** expression levels quantitatively or semiquantitatively by using paraffin embedded tumor samples. Thus, comprehensive studies on the correlation between **FGFR1** gene copy numbers and protein expression levels are still missing. Therefore, current clinical trials with **FGFR1** inhibitors enroll patients who are found to be “**FGFR1** amplified”. Reliable **FGFR1** FISH probes are now commercially available. Therefore, fluorescence *in situ* hybridization assays on formalin fixed and paraffin embedded material are carried out to screen patients for clinical trials. This is an important fact as lung cancer samples *per se* are often hard to diagnose. Biopsy samples, which are obtained endoscopically or by transthoracic CT-guided biopsy are often very small and contain only little tumor tissue. Tumor cells are frequently damaged by manipulations and show often crushing artifacts. Surgical samples contain often large tumor areas of necrosis or dense fibrosis which regularly influence hybridization quality.

**Table 1 FGFR1 alterations in malignancies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FGFR1 alterations</th>
<th>Tumor entities (estimated frequency)</th>
<th>Selected references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amplification</td>
<td>Breast cancer (10%)</td>
<td>Reis-Filho et al. [2006] (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ovarian cancer (5%)</td>
<td>Gorringe et al. [2007] (9)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bladder cancer (3%)</td>
<td>Simon et al. [2001] (10)</td>
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<td>Rhabdomyosarcoma (3%)</td>
<td>Missiaglia et al. [2009] (11)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Squamous cell carcinoma of the lung (20%)</td>
<td>Schildhaus et al. [2012] (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small cell carcinoma of the lung (5%)</td>
<td>Peifer et al. [2012] (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Head and neck squamous cell carcinomas (17%)</td>
<td>Freier et al. [2007] (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Esophageal squamous cell carcinoma</td>
<td>Randia et al. [2012] (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translocation</td>
<td>8p11 myeloproliferative syndrome [ZNF198-FGFR1] (100%, entity defining alteration as part of myeloid and lymphoid neoplasms with abnormalities of FGFR1 and various translocation partners of FGFR1)</td>
<td>WHO classification [2008] (15)</td>
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<td>Chronic myeloid leukemia (rare)</td>
<td>WHO classification [2008] (15)</td>
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<td>Rhabdomyosarcoma [FOXO1-FGFR1] (one case)</td>
<td>Liu et al. [2011] (16)</td>
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<td>Glioblastoma multiforme [TACC-FGFR1/3] (3%)</td>
<td>Singh et al. [2012] (17)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activating mutation</td>
<td>Melanoma (rare)</td>
<td>Lin et al. [2008] (18)</td>
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Therefore, lung cancer tissue is basically a challenge for FISH. Despite this fact we were able to establish a robust and reliable FISH assay, and we have noticed a drop out rate below 5% in our laboratory by using our protocol (5).

\textit{FGFR1} amplification is not yet convincingly defined. Some authors have simply applied the criteria which are commonly used for detection of \textit{her2} amplifications in breast cancer. From our experience, however, these criteria are not useful to evaluate \textit{FGFR1} FISH assays for squamous cell carcinomas of the lung. \textit{FGFR1} in these tumors is characterized by some unique features which make \textit{FGFR1} FISH assays challenging. One major issue is heterogeneity and focality of gene amplifications (\textit{Figure 1}). Thus, adequate screening for amplification hot spots is a prerequisite for reliable \textit{FGFR1} evaluation. Based on our reading and evaluation strategy (5), we recommend careful scanning of the entire tumor area by using a 40× or 63× oil objective. \textit{FGFR1} and centromer 8 (CEN8) signals should be counted for individual tumor cells (63× or 100× oil objective). We suggest counting of 20 tumor cell from three areas, resulting in a total of 60 nuclei. Counting areas should be selected from prior screening as the hot spot areas containing the highest number of \textit{FGFR1} copies. If the signals are found to be evenly distributed random areas should be used. Another important phenomenon is focality of \textit{FGFR1} gene copy distribution. Very often isolated tumor cells with a very high number of \textit{FGFR1} gene copies occur which are surrounded by tumor cells with normal or only slightly increased gene copy numbers. Therefore, it turned out to be mandatory to count contiguous and cohesive tumor cells from each area. It should be avoided to pick only suspicious tumor cell nuclei with increased \textit{FGFR1} and/or CEN8 copy numbers because this approach might lead to an overestimation of gene copy numbers.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Fluorescence in situ hybridization for detection of \textit{FGFR1} amplification in pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas. A. In this tumor, \textit{FGFR1} (green) and chromosome 8 (CEN8, orange) copies are more or less evenly distributed. Only occasionally, microclusters are seen (arrow); B. Heterogeneity occurs frequently in these tumors. Beside tumor cells with normal or only slight increase in copy numbers, there are many tumor cell nuclei with tight clusters of amplified \textit{FGFR1}, some of which are indicated by arrows. Note that the occurrence of \textit{FGFR1} clusters is not necessarily related to the size of the nuclei.}
\end{figure}

In this tumor, \textit{FGFR1} (green) and chromosome 8 (CEN8, orange) copies are more or less evenly distributed. Only occasionally, microclusters are seen (arrow); B. Heterogeneity occurs frequently in these tumors. Beside tumor cells with normal or only slight increase in copy numbers, there are many tumor cell nuclei with tight clusters of amplified \textit{FGFR1}, some of which are indicated by arrows. Note that the occurrence of \textit{FGFR1} clusters is not necessarily related to the size of the nuclei.

Furthermore, the gene copy distribution in pulmonary squamous cell carcinomas is different from e.g., \textit{her2} in breast cancer. A significant proportion of tumors show co-localized clusters with numerically balanced increase in both \textit{FGFR1} and CEN8 copy numbers. Another more or less specific feature represents so-called microclusters which consist of a tight accumulation of more than three \textit{FGFR1} signals. We have proposed to regard these microclusters as 5 signal copies.

Having counted 60 tumor cells a final decision has to be made whether a given sample is “amplified” or not. As already mentioned there are until now no convincing criteria to judge \textit{FGFR1} FISH assays in squamous cell carcinomas. From our point of view this FISH assay should finally serve as a predictive biomarker which should be capable to predict response to anti-FGFR treatment. However, criteria for thresholds and cut-off values still have to be determined retrospectively after finishing the currently ongoing clinical trials individually for each compound. Therefore, we have developed evaluation criteria (“Cologne Score”) which are suitable to detect patients with the highest gene copy numbers and to enroll them in clinical trials. In this context, it seems to be important to us not only to use \textit{FGFR1}/CEN8 ratio as criterion for FISH positivity since we have noticed tumors with an enormous increase in \textit{FGFR1} gene copy numbers in a background of co-localized clusters, i.e. an additional increase of centromeric DNA material. These cases would finally result in a ratio of nearly 1.0 and would be considered negative if the decision would rest solely on \textit{FGFR1}/CEN8 ratio. Therefore, it appears useful also to consider average gene copy number as a criterion for positivity. Furthermore, we have seen isolated tumor cells with high level cluster amplification which were surrounded by lesional cells with normal or only slightly increased gene copy numbers. Thus, we proposed to include additionally the percentage of tumor cell with gene clusters of at least 15 gene copies in the catalogue of FISH criteria.
Considering all these items we have proposed to diagnose FGFR1 amplification (“high level amplification”) if one of the following criteria is fulfilled: (I) FGFR1/CEN8 ratio is ≥2.0, (II) average gene copy per nucleus is ≥6.0, and (III) percentage of tumor cells containing ≥15 gene copies or large cluster is ≥10%.

Beside unamplified tumors with nearly normal gene count and amplified cases as defined above we became aware of a third category of squamous cell carcinomas which is characterized by a moderate increase of FGFR1 gene copies. For these more or less polysomic cases we have defined a “low level amplification” category which we defined by a percentage of ≥50% of tumor cells containing ≥5 FGFR1 gene copies. This criterion was derived and adapted from previous studies on squamous cell carcinomas of the head and neck as well as from reports on breast cancer (8,13). Since polysomy is a common phenomenon in cancer, one might expect that many squamous cell lung cancers might fall into this category. It is, however, important to emphasize the fact that this low level amplification contributes for only one fifth of the amplified pulmonary squamous carcinomas. Low level amplification is found in only 4% of these tumors.

**Therapeutic implications resulting from oncogenic FGFR dependence**

The identification of FGFR alteration in various types of human cancer led to rapid development of compounds targeting FGFR. As described above, the FGFR family comprises 4 members (FGFR1, 2, 3 and 4). The small molecules act either as selective pan inhibitors of the FGFR family or as non-selective inhibitors, which usually target not only FGFR but also other intracellular proteins. Table 2 summarizes FGFR inhibitors in current clinical development.

Currently ongoing phase Ia/Ib and phase II studies recruit patients either with diagnosed FGFR alterations only or include unselected patient populations [for overview of FGFR trials see ref (20)].

The phase I/II studies with AZD4547, BJI398, E-3810 and dovitinib include only patients with genetic FGFR alterations. The phase II with ponatinib is recruiting patients with squamous cell carcinoma with retrospective outcome analysis of FGFR altered patients (20).

Nintedanib and XL999 were investigated in advanced non small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) without further selection (1,21). All other trials recruited patients with different solid tumors without any further molecular analysis.

**Trials recruiting patients with FGFR alterations**

BGI398 is a selective FGFR inhibitor which blocks FGFR1, FGFR2 and FGFR3. The drug is supposed to be effective in tumors with activated FGFR axis due to activating mutations or gene amplification. The BGI398 phase Ia (first in man) trial recruited patients with solid tumors in an escalating dose schedule starting from 5 mg daily. After cohort 3, only patients with FGFR1 or FGFR2 amplification or FGFR3 mutation are included. Preliminary analysis was conducted after 26 recruited patients including 10 patients with FGFR1 amplified breast cancer and 3 patients with FGFR1 amplified squamous cell carcinomas of the lung. One patient with FGFR1 amplified squamous cell lung cancer with an FGFR1/CEP8 ratio of 2.6 by FISH analysis treated with 100 mg BGI398 showed partial response in CT scan at 8 weeks, confirmed at 12 weeks with an substantial SUV decrease on PET scan at week 4 (22). The trial is currently treating patients with FGFR alterations on maximal tolerate dose in the expansion part of the phase I.

The phase I study with the selective FGFR inhibitor AZD4547 (FGFR 1, 2, 3 inhibitor) is currently recruiting patients with FGFR amplified tumors at a maximal tolerated dose.

Dovitinib - as an unselective FGFR inhibitor - blocks also VEGFR 1, 2, 3 and PDGFR β besides FGFR 1, 2, 3. First phase I/II studies were conducted in patients with metastatic melanoma without any pre-selection according to genetic alterations. A moderate clinical benefit of stable disease was reached in 12 from 47 enrolled patients (23). The phase I/II study in patients with advanced or metastatic renal cell cancer showed 2 partial responses from 20 recruited patients (24). A phase II study treating 77 metastatic breast cancer patients showed 13% partial responses in the group of patients who were FGFR1 amplified and hormone positive (25). Phase II studies in patients with metastatic gastric cancer and FGFR2 amplification and in patients with advanced endometrium cancer and FGFR2 mutation (stratified to non-mutated patients) are currently ongoing (20).

The expansion part of the phase I study with E-3810, a combined inhibitor of FGFR 1 and VEGFR 1, 2, 3, is recruiting patients with FGFR1 amplification and patients relapsing after response or long stable disease after antiangiogenic treatment (26).

Ponatinib is a multikinase inhibitor of FGFR-1, 2, 3, 4, Abl, Src, FLT-3 and c-KIT showing high clinical activity in heavily pretreated patients with chronic myeloid leukemia resistant
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to other tyrosine kinase inhibitors (27). The phase II study enrolling squamous cell lung cancer patients with retrospective analysis of FGFR alterations is currently ongoing (20).

**Trials recruiting NSCLC patients without molecular testing**

Nintedanib, a FGFR 1, 2, 3, VEGFR 1, 2, 3 and PDGFR α/β inhibitor showed clinical activity in phase I in advanced solid tumors with one complete and two partial responses occurred in patients with renal (n=2) and colorectal cancer (n=1) among 61 recruited patients (28). The phase II study in unselected patient population with NSCLC showed one partial response and 35 stable diseases in 73 treated patients (21).

XL999 is a multikinase inhibitor of FGFR 1, 3, VEGFR 2, PDGFR α/β, FLT-3 and Src. The preliminary results of a phase II study in nine NSCLC patients showed one partial response (29).

**Trials recruiting other cancer entities without molecular testing**

Brivanib (FGFR 1 and VEGFR 2 inhibitor) is one of the few FGFR compounds in late clinical development. The phase I was performed in an unselected patient population. In a dose finding part, the best response was stable disease in 1 patient with NSCLC from 5 patients with different tumor entities (30). Another large phase I study recruited 68 patients with different tumor entities. Two patients achieved partial response, one with renal cell carcinoma and one with a carcinoma of Vaters’s ampulla (31). The phase II study on brivanib in 55 patients with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) showed one complete and 3 partial responses. The median progression free survival (PFS) and overall survival (OS) were 2.7 and 10 months, respectively (32).

In the phase II discontinuation trial, patients with various tumors and stable disease after initial treatment with brivanib was stratified according to FGF-2 expression and randomized to receive either brivanib or placebo. Fifty-three patients with FGF-2 expression and soft tissue sarcoma showed a PFS of 2.8 months in a brivanib group comparing to 1.4 months in the placebo group (33). Regarding the phase III trials, the study in patients with HCC after failure on sorafenib did not meet its primary endpoint in improving of OS (34).

Phase I study with JNJ-42756493, a selective pan FGFR inhibitor is currently ongoing in an unselected patient population with solid tumors and lymphomas after standard treatment (20). Similarly, phase I study with ARQ087 recruiting unselected patients with solid tumors is currently ongoing (20).

The phase I study with danusertib, which inhibits besides FGFR 1 also Aurora kinase A, B, C, Abl, Ret and TrkA was performed in unselected patient population. Although the compound showed some clinical benefit in small cell lung, colorectal, breast and ovarian cancer, the adverse effect were characterized due to pronounced hematological toxicity with febrile neutropenia (35). The phase II study on danusertib in metastatic castration resistant prostate cancer showed moderate clinical activity with median PFS of 3 months (36).

FP-1039 is a ligand trap, which binds to FGF ligands and prevents them from binding to FGFRs. A phase I study recruiting patients with all solid tumors showed moderate clinical activity with tumor shrinkage of 20% in a patient with a prostate cancer (37). Phase II study enrolling patients with FGFR2 mutated endometrial cancer is currently ongoing (20).

LY2874455 is an inhibitor of all FGF receptors with low VEGFR 2 activity (38). The phase I study recruiting patients with all types of advanced cancer (20).

MK-2461 is a common inhibitor of FGFR 1, 2, 3, c-Met, Ron, Flt-1, 3 and PDGFR β. The phase I in solid tumors showed mild clinical activity (39).

Orantinib, a multikinase inhibitor of FGFR 1, VEGFR 2 and PDGFR β was investigated mainly in hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). A phase I/II study in 35 patients with HCC showed one complete and two partial responses (40).

XL228 is a multikinase inhibitor of FGFR1, IGF1R, Aurora A, B, FAK, Src and bcr-abl. The phase I study in advanced solid tumors and lymphoma showed one partial response in a patient with adenocarcinoma of the lung (41).

**Conclusions**

A great variety of FGFR inhibitors is currently in clinical development. First results show that these drugs basically have therapeutic effects on solid and hematologic tumors. Data from trials enrolling lung cancer patients indicate that genetic prescreening increases antitumoral efficacy since we could provide first evidence for therapeutic response of a pulmonary FGFR1 amplified squamous cell carcinoma patient to treatment with a selective FGFR inhibitor. Therefore, FISH is currently the method of choice to detect squamous cell carcinomas of the lung with FGFR1 amplification.
Acknowledgements

Disclosure: HUS has received honoraria and reimbursements from Pfizer, Abbott Molecular, Zytomed Systems and Roche Pharma, and grants, honoraria and reimbursements from Novartis Oncology. LN has received honoraria from Roche and Novartis, and travel support from Pfizer, Bayer, Novartis, Roche and Lilly. JW has served as an advisory board member of Novartis and Astra Zeneca and has received research support from Novartis and honoraria from Novartis and Astra Zeneca. RB declares no conflict of interest.

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ALK and ROS1 as a joint target for the treatment of lung cancer: a review

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Abstract: Rearrangements of the anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) have been described in multiple malignancies, including non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC). ALK fusions have gain of function properties while activating mutations in wild-type ALK can also occur within the tyrosine kinase domain. ALK rearrangements define a new molecular subtype of NSCLC that is exquisitely sensitive to ALK inhibition. Crizotinib, an orally available small molecule ATP-mimetic compound which was originally designed as a MET inhibitor, was recognized to have “off-target” anti-ALK activity and has been approved in the USA for the treatment of patients with ALK-positive NSCLC. Chromosomal rearrangements involving the ROS1 receptor tyrosine kinase have also been recently described in NSCLC, while crizotinib is currently under clinical trial in this molecular subset of NSCLC patients. The basic approaches of any computer aided drug design work in terms of structure and ligand based drug design. Details of each of these approaches should be covered with an emphasis on utilizing both in order to develop multi-targeted small-molecule kinase inhibitors. Such multi-targeted tyrosine kinase inhibitors can have antiproliferative activity against both ROS1 and ALK rearranged NSCLC. Herein, we highlight the importance of targeting these proteins and the advances in optimizing more potent and selective ALK and ROS1 kinase inhibitors.

Keywords: Anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK); drug design; kinase inhibitors; non-small cell lung cancer; proto-oncogene tyrosine-protein kinase ROS (ROS1)

Submitted Feb 20, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 25, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.11
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.11

Lung cancer remains the leading cause of cancer mortality in the world with non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounting for 80% of cases (1). Conventional chemotherapeutic regimens only marginally improve the outcome of NSCLC patients at advanced stages of disease, with median survival time less than one year after diagnosis (2). Protein kinase activation by somatic mutation or chromosomal alteration is a common mechanism of tumorigenesis. The discovery of a number of these molecular alterations underlying lung cancer has led to uniquely targeted therapies with specific inhibitor drugs such as erlotinib and gefitinib for mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), or crizotinib for the gene translocation resulting in the echinoderm microtubule associated protein like 4 (EML4)-anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) oncogene (3-5). EML4-ALK was the first targetable fusion oncokine to be identified in 4-6% of lung adenocarcinomas. EML4-ALK generates a transforming tyrosine kinase with as many as nine different variants identified (6,7) and represents a novel molecular target in a small subset of NSCLCs. Patients with EML4-ALK positive tumors are characteristically younger age, female, and never to light smokers (5,8,9). The fusion gene has been observed predominantly in adenocarcinomas (4-7%) (5,9). Based on data from a phase I clinical trial which showed an overall response rate of 57% and a probability of progression-free
survival at 6 months of 72%, crizotinib has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of NSCLC patients with ALK transforming rearrangements (5).

Similarly, proto-oncogene tyrosine-protein kinase ROS (ROS1) is an orphan receptor tyrosine kinase (RTK) that forms fusions and defines another clinically actionable oncogenic driver mutation in NSCLC (10). It has been recently reported that approximately 1.4% of NSCLCs harbor ROS1 rearrangements (11,12). Of the ROS1 fusion-positive tumors, 30% are known to harbor a recurrent translocation t[5;6][q32;q22], which creates the CD74 molecule, major histocompatibility complex, class II invariant chain (CD74)-ROS fusion kinase (13). In fact, ROS1 is evolutionarily related to ALK. Patients with ROS1 rearrangements are also significantly younger, more likely to be never-smokers and are more often diagnosed with the histological subtype of adenocarcinoma with wide distribution of tumor grade (11). Although ROS1 shares only 49% amino acid sequence homology with ALK in the kinase domains, several ALK inhibitors have demonstrated in vitro inhibitory activity against ROS1 (14). Recently, a report from investigators at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center has showed that ROS1-driven tumors can be treated with crizotinib and describes the remarkable response of one patient to crizotinib treatment (11). Interestingly, in this study ROS1 rearrangements were found to be mutually exclusive to ALK rearrangements (11). Preliminary results of a phase I trial of ROS1-positive advanced-stage NSCLC patients treated with crizotinib reported a response rate of 57% and a disease control rate of 79% at 8 weeks (15).

The discovery of new selective and potent inhibitors of ALK and ROS1 kinase raises the importance of using these drugs as a new method for treatment of ALK- and ROS1-derived lung cancer. This review focuses on the importance of targeting these proteins and describes the advances in optimizing more potent and selective ALK and ROS1 kinase inhibitors that have an optimal pharmacokinetic profile and the capacity to inhibit acquired resistant mutations. We aim to stimulate interest and encourage of researchers from different disciplines to learn about new therapeutic avenues following the development of compounds targeting ALK and ROS1 kinases with the aim of increasing survival to these lethal forms of lung cancer.

**Structural insights and computational simulations**

Receptor Tyrosine kinases (RTK) are transmembrane glycoproteins where the domain responsible to the tyrosine kinase activity is located in the cytoplasm. Although extracellular domain shows remarkable structural differences between TK families, the intracellular region is sensibly conserved.

Although a few years ago there was no resolved three-dimensional structure of ALK, similarity between its sequence permitted to predict its folding from a known RTK structure used as a template, using homology models. Thus, the human ALK receptor was modeled from mouse c-Abl (16), activated insulin receptor tyrosine kinase (InsR) (17,18) or insulin-like growth factor-1 receptor (IGF-1R) (19).

Fortunately, recently some crystal structures of the catalytic domain of ALK have been reported in literature at different resolution levels. All of them are available in the Protein Data Bank (PDB) (20) with ID entries 3L9P, 3LCS, 3LCT (Figure 1) (21).

Once the three-dimensional structure of the ALK receptor is available, biological processes related to its structure can be studied virtually, as for example substrate affinity (22), receptor autoactivation or resistant mutations. It can even be used as a structural template in order to predict the structure of RTK homologues by homology modeling (23).
However, crystallographic data should be taken carefully: the combination of crystallographic and biochemical studies reveals that the active conformation of ALK protein requires the phosphorylation of specific residues (24,25) and some ALK crystal structures published to date correspond to unphosphorylated proteins (26).

Additionally, some ALK molecular structures have also been resolved including a bound ligand (Table 1). These co-crystallized structures reveal the active site of the protein against one giving compound and describe the interaction within the protein-ligand complex. This information is relevant to assist structure-aided molecular design of ALK inhibitors (i.e. Structure-Based Drug Design, SBDD), providing valuable information about how to improve ALK selectivity.

From SBDD models rises the first approved drug for the treatment of ALK-positive NSCLC, crizotinib (29). By the time diaminopyrimidine (DAP) derivatives were consolidated as bioactive motives, great efforts were done in order to increase its selectivity (31), to optimize their activity (32) or to propose new scaffolds that mimic them. Evaluation of receptor-ligand interactions using docking techniques has become the most preferred SBDD method to study small-molecule ALK inhibitors, not only specific compounds as Novartis NVP-TAE684 (17) but also families including pyridine (33), pyrrolotriazine (19), and the hydrophobic region and/or the gatekeeper. This helps to identify candidates (18,33).

Most of the SBDD results agree to consider the targeting of the ATP binding site of the tyrosine kinase domain as a good approach to design RTK inhibitors (35). The analysis of docking results may help to understand the inhibition mechanism, according to the interaction between candidates and the hydrophobic region and/or the gatekeeper. This helps to identify e.g., that preferred interactions of 2-aminopyridines within the ATP binding pocket include hydrogen bonds of pyridine and amino nitrogens with residues close to the gatekeeper (i.e. Met1184 and Glu1182) (34).

Ligand-based drug design (LBDD) has also been applied in the development of new ALK inhibitors. Structure-Activity Relationship (SAR) models correlate the chemical structure of inhibitors with their biological activity. They have been applied to screen series of piperidine carboxamides (27), 2-acyliminobenzimidazoles (28), macrocycles (36), 7-amino-1,3,4,5-tetrahydrobenzo[\(d\)]azepin-2-ones (37), 2,3,4,5-tetrahydro-benzo[\(d\)]azepines (38), 2,7-disubstituted pyrrolo[2,1-\(f\)][1,2,4]triazines (39), diaminocyclohexane methanesulfonamides (40) or tetracyclic derivatives (41,42), tetrahydropyrido[2,3-b]pyrazines (34), 3,5-diamino-1,2,4-triazole ureas (43), arlyoxy oxypyrimidinones (44), identifying which substituents confer high ALK-response and proposing chemical modifications of hit compounds.

Far from what it seems, SBDD and LBDD are not exclusive. Most of published LBDD studies include modeling of candidates with the receptor using docking. LBDD and SBDD information can be combined to create pharmacophore models where chemical features (identified from LBDD methods) are used to generate structural keys that active ALK inhibitors must fulfill, taking into account receptor-ligand interactions (identified from SBDD methods) (19,45).

Since mechanisms to drug resistance have been experimentally related to mutations in the ALK amino acid sequence, many efforts have been done in order to obtain resolved crystal structures of ALK mutants (Table 2).

Ligand co-crystallizations are also available in mutated structures (mainly F1174L and R1275Q) (26), highlighting structural changes responsible of such behavior. Although resistance can be well correlated with structural changes in some cases (e.g., ALK\(^{L1275Q}\)) (46), other mutations exhibit a more subtle behavior.

It is well know that ALK\(^{L1196M}\) mutants are crizotinib resistant (47). However, it is interesting to note that the comparison between co-crystal structure of crizotinib with ALK\(^{WT}\) (2XP2) (29) and ALK\(^{L1196M}\) (2YFX, McTigue M, 2012, unpublished data) reveals that L1196M mutation has little effect on crizotinib’s binding mode (Figure 2).

It has been recently demonstrated that at least four mutations could be involved in crizotinib’s resistance (Figure 3): L1196M acts as a gatekeeper and modifies crizotinib’s binding site by steric interference (49); G1202R and S1206Y are both located in the solvent-exposed region near to the binding site but G1202R blocks sterically the binding site whereas S1206Y could destabilize electrostatic interaction (50); 1151T insertion is furthest from N terminus Ca-helix but confers a high-level crizotinib resistance probably derived from the modification of ATP affinity (51). This knowledge has been used to design new compounds against gatekeeper mutants (52).

However, other mutations have also been identified. Most of them are abutting the Ca-helix and activation loop, becoming responsible for the modification of the kinase active site. On the basis of the crystal structures, these
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Molecular Structure</th>
<th>Ligand name</th>
<th>PDB ID (resolution)</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>piperidine-carboxamide</td>
<td>4DCE (2.03Å)</td>
<td>(27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>piperidine-carboxamide</td>
<td>4FNZ (2.60Å)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>PHA-E429</td>
<td>2XBA (1.95Å)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>NVP-TAE684</td>
<td>2XB7 (2.50Å)</td>
<td>(22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>acyliminobenzimidazole inhibitor 36</td>
<td>4FOD (2.00Å)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>acyliminobenzimidazole inhibitor 1</td>
<td>4FOB (1.90Å)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image7.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>acyliminobenzimidazole inhibitor 2</td>
<td>4FOC (1.70Å)</td>
<td>(28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image8.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>crizotinib</td>
<td>2XP2 (1.90Å)</td>
<td>(29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image9.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>CH5424802</td>
<td>3AOX(1.75Å)</td>
<td>(30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lung Cancer

Table 2 List of resolved structures of mutated ALK receptor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutation</th>
<th>PDB ID</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F1174L</td>
<td>2YJR (1.90Å)</td>
<td>McTigue M, 2012, unpublished data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1174L catalytic domain</td>
<td>4FNW (1.75Å)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1156Y</td>
<td>2YJS</td>
<td>McTigue M, 2012, unpublished data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1196M</td>
<td>2YHV</td>
<td>McTigue M, 2012, unpublished data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1196M+crizotinib</td>
<td>2YFX</td>
<td>McTigue M, 2012, unpublished data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1275Q catalytic domain</td>
<td>4FNX (1.70Å)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1275Q cd + benzoxazole</td>
<td>4FNY (2.45Å)</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 Molecular structure of crizotinib co-crystalized with (A) ALKwt receptor, PDB ID: 2XP2; and (B) ALKL1196M mutant, PDB ID: 2YFX. Although Lys-Met exchange the binding mode of crizotinib remains unchanged. Structures analysis has been performed and rendered using MOE software (48).

mutations can be related with formation or alteration of hydrogen bonds (e.g., L1152R and C1156Y mutations) (53) or conformational changes (e.g., F1174L induces structural changes leading to an increment of ATP affinity which requires of irreversible inhibitors to block it) (35).

Thus, ligand co-crystallizations can not only help to the understanding of the structural basis of mutations related to drug resistance, but also to identify the binding mode of the second generation ALK inhibitors (30). When no crystallographic data is available, binding mode of new inhibitors with ALK mutants are computationally modeled using docking techniques (54) or molecular dynamic simulations (55). These interaction models provide a useful tool to screen drug candidates (after their validation with experimental evidences).

However, specificity for one receptor could be undesirable in a so complex biological context. For this reason, promiscuous inhibitors (e.g., dual inhibitors) have become gradually more interesting. When a set or library of knowing active ligands for one target is available, the specificity for the second target can be predicted by screening the previous library applying either SBDD or LBDD (56). In this respect, the ALK inhibitor TAE684 has been experimentally evaluated on ROS1, given the high homology between ALK and ROS1 human receptors (57-59).

Unfortunately, tridimensional structure of ROS1 receptor is not available and studies of ligand-receptor interactions have been always performed using ROS1 homology models using IGF-1R (60) or ALK itself (14). Homology models can be later used to study molecular interactions with ligands using docking methods in order to
elucidate their binding mode (60).

In contrast to homology models, other studies consider the structurally related MET receptor as a reference to find inhibitors which are able to interact with kinase domain. Given the receptor, homology docking studies on MET receptors could be therefore extended to structurally similar receptors like ROS1 (61). In fact, ALK inhibitors can also be used on ROS1 according to their similarity (62).

**ALK and ROS1 small molecule inhibitors under development**

In the last ten years a lot of efforts have been devoted to the development of compounds active against the ALK and ROS1 kinases. The principal reported inhibitors, the companies involved in the development, the core scaffold present in such compounds, the mutation against which the compounds are effective, their off-targets, and the clinical stage achieved are summarized in Table 3. On the other hand, the structures of the disclosed compounds are included in Figure 4.

**ALK inhibition**

One of the first discovered ALK inhibitors was NVP-TAE684, a small molecule with a dianilinopyridine scaffold which targets competitively the ATP in its binding site. Firstly, it was showed that NVP-TAE684 could block growth in cell lines and in a mouse model of ALCL (17). Besides to inhibit the proliferation of neuroblastoma and NSCLC cell lines, this ALK inhibitor reduced tumors expressing variants of ALK or EML4-ALK fusion proteins, confirming the oncogenic activity of the fusion kinase and consequently the therapeutic potential of targeted inhibitors (62,63). Despite several studies have reported the effectiveness of NVP-TAE684 against tumors induced by constitutively active ALK or against cell lines with ALK translocations and point mutations, this compound is not currently in any clinical trial (64-68).

Crizotinib (PF-02341066), which was originally developed to inhibit hepatocyte growth factor receptor (c-MET) but a few time later showed inhibitory activity against ALK, is an ATP-competitive small molecule like NVP-TAE684 (69,70). Crizotinib, with an aminopyridazine as a core, was described for first time in 2007 and only three years later were reported the first promising clinical trials in NSCLC patients with EML4-ALK fusion genes (5). Phase I study concluded the benefits of the treatment with crizotinib of patients with advanced EML4-ALK-positive NSCLC. Among the 119 patients enrolled, after the treatment with crizotinib, 2 displayed a total recovery, 69 had a partial response and 31 were considered to have stable disease (71). The result of this inhibitory activity and the response of patients to the treatment with crizotinib, motivated its FDA approval under the trade name of Xalkori® (Pfizer). A Subsequent study in phase III trials reported crizotinib resistance in EML4-ALK positive NSCLC patients with some ALK mutations, especially secondary mutations, indicating a 64% overall survival in response to crizotinib treatment of EML4-ALK positive NSCLC patients after two years (49,53,72-74).

After the clinical trials of crizotinib, ALK was established as a drug target in cases of NSCLC, but the discovery of resistance related to mutations created the need to develop a second-generation of ALK inhibitors with the capability to overcome mutation-mediated drug resistance. Some pharmaceutical companies and research groups have reported different new promising candidate drugs to inhibit mutated ALK.

One of these second-generation ALK inhibitors is AP26113, whose chemical structure has not been disclosed but it is believed to be a member of a family compounds described in a patent of ARIAD based on a dianopyrimidine structure bearing pendant phosphinoyl groups (75). This product is a multikinase inhibitor which shows more selectivity and inhibitory potency against ALK (IC\(_{50}\) =0.62 nM) than crizotinib (IC\(_{50}\) =3.6 nM). Apart from showing growth inhibition against EML4-ALK and nucleophosmin-ALK fusion gene (NPM-ALK) positive cells, the most interesting feature of AP26113 is that could inhibit some EML4-ALK mutated forms, therefore it could be a useful alternative in cases of crizotinib resistance. Currently, AP26113 is in phase I/II clinical trials (67,76-78).

In order to inhibit ALK mutations, another family of compounds was developed by Xcovery including X-276, X-376 and X-396 (79,80). There is not so much information in the literature about X-276 but it is considered a more selective and potent ALK inhibitor than crizotinib (81). X-376 and X-396 are members of the same family based on aminopyridazine scaffold, despite X-396 showed better results than X-376. X-396 was approximately 10-fold more potent than X-376. X-396 is AP26113 included in Table 3. On the other hand, the structures of the disclosed compounds are included in Figure 4.
**Table 3** List of ALK inhibitors under development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chemical scaffold</th>
<th>Therapeutics</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>ALK activity</th>
<th>ALK secondary mutations</th>
<th>Other targets</th>
<th>Clinical stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aminopyridine</td>
<td>Crizotinib PF-02341066 Xalkori®</td>
<td>Pfizer</td>
<td>24 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>c-MET ROS1</td>
<td>FDA approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dianilinopyridine</td>
<td>NVP-TAE684</td>
<td>Novartis</td>
<td>&lt;10 nM</td>
<td>L1196M F1174L</td>
<td>IR, IGF-1R, FLT3, TIE2 LRRK2, ROS1</td>
<td>Not a clinical candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>AP26113</td>
<td>ARIAD</td>
<td>0.62 nM</td>
<td>L1196M F1174C I1171T F1245C E1210K S1206R G1269S</td>
<td>Multiple kinases ROS1</td>
<td>Phase I/II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>X-276</td>
<td>Xcovery</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aminopyridazine</td>
<td>X-376</td>
<td>Xcovery</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>X-396</td>
<td>Xcovery</td>
<td>&lt;0.4 nM</td>
<td>L1196M C1156Y</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetracyclic indole</td>
<td>CH5424802 AF-802</td>
<td>Chugai</td>
<td>1.9 nM</td>
<td>L1196M F1174L R1275Q C1156Y</td>
<td>GAK, LTK</td>
<td>Phase I/II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrrolopyrimidin</td>
<td>GSK1838705A</td>
<td>GlaxoSmithKline</td>
<td>0.5 nM</td>
<td>IR</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triazinediamine</td>
<td>ASP3026</td>
<td>Astellas</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>ROS1</td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indolocarbazole</td>
<td>CEP-14083</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>2 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>IR, VEGFR2, TIE2, DLK Not a clinical candidate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Indolocarbazole</td>
<td>CEP-14513</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>4 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>IR, VEGFR2, TIE2, DLK Not a clinical candidate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetrahydropyrazine</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>10 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diaminopyridine</td>
<td>CEP-28122</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>1.9 nM</td>
<td>F1174L R1275Q</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>CEP-37440</td>
<td>Cephalon/Teva</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrrolotriazine</td>
<td>Compound 32</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>6 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tetraazatetracyclo-</td>
<td>Macrocycle 2m</td>
<td>Cephalon</td>
<td>0.5 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decosanoanaene</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrrolopyrazole</td>
<td>PHA-E429</td>
<td>Nerviano Medical</td>
<td>91 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Multiple kinases</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indazole</td>
<td>NMS-E628</td>
<td>Nerviano Medical</td>
<td>55 nM</td>
<td>L1196M C1156Y</td>
<td>IGF-1R, Aurora B</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>CRL151104A</td>
<td>Chembridge St Jude</td>
<td>9.75 nM</td>
<td>F1174L R1275Q</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyridone</td>
<td>Pyridone 1</td>
<td>Chembridge St Jude</td>
<td>380 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>WZ-5-126</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.4 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>LDK378</td>
<td>Novartis</td>
<td>0.15 nM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>ROS1</td>
<td>Phase I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,4-pyrimidinediamine</td>
<td>3-39</td>
<td>Novartis</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyridoisoquinoline</td>
<td>F91873 and F91874</td>
<td>Institut de Recherche Pierre Fabre</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Multiple kinases</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure undisclosed</td>
<td>TSR-011</td>
<td>Tesaro</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>preclinical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c-MET, hepatocyte growth factor receptor; IR, insulin receptor; IGF-1R, insulin-like growth factor 1 receptor; FLT3, FMS-like tyrosine kinase 3; TIE2, angiopoietin-1 receptor; LRRK2, leucine-rich repeat kinase 2; GAK, cyclin G-associated kinase; LTK, leukocyte tyrosine kinase; VEGFR2, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor 2; DLK, dual leucine zipper kinase.
Figure 4 Structures of reported ALK and ROS1 inhibitors.
(EML4-ALK positive NSCLC) cell lines against 180 nM of crizotinib. Furthermore X-396 displayed good inhibition in crizotinib resistant cell lines (Ba/F3-EML4-ALKL1196M, IC\textsubscript{50} =106 nM; Ba/F3-EML4-ALK\textsuperscript{F1174L}, IC\textsubscript{50} =48 nM). Thus, X-396 initiated phase I clinical trials in June 2012 (82).

CH5424802, also known as AF-802, is a tetracyclic indole which has a high ALK\textsuperscript{WT} inhibitory activity in \textit{in vitro} assays (IC\textsubscript{50} =1.9 nM) as well in front of mutated ALK\textsubscript{R1275Q} (IC\textsubscript{50} =2.0 nM), KARPAS-299 (NPM-ALK positive ALCL; IC\textsubscript{50} =3.5 nM), SR-786 (IC\textsubscript{50}=6.9 nM), NB-1 (ALK amp, IC\textsubscript{50} =4.5 nM); KELLY (IC\textsubscript{50} =62 nM) and Ba/F3 (EML4-ALK\textsuperscript{L1196M}) that allowed that CH5424802 is a potent inhibitor for a therapy with capacity to overcome the acquired resistance to crizotinib (30,41,83). Due to these promising results, CH5424802 is in phase II/III of clinical trials.

GSK1838705A, developed by GlaxoSmithKline and currently in preclinical phase, contains a pyrrolopyrimidine scaffold and has showed to be selective IGF-1R, insulin receptor (IR) and ALK inhibitor (IC\textsubscript{50} =1.2, 2 and 0.5 nM respectively). Furthermore, the inhibition of the proliferation of different ALCL cell lines, such as L-82 (IC\textsubscript{50} =24 nM), SUP-M2 (IC\textsubscript{50} =28 nM), SU-DHL-1 (IC\textsubscript{50} =31 nM), Karpas-299 (IC\textsubscript{50} =52 nM) and SR-786 (IC\textsubscript{50} =88 nM), has also been described. Besides the potent inhibition of ALK by GSK1838705A, such compound also inhibit cell lines harboring ALK fusion genes in different ALCL cell lines expressing NPM-ALK (IC\textsubscript{50} =24-88 nM) and in H2228 NSCLC cells expressing EML4-ALK (IC\textsubscript{50} =191 nM). In addition, it was proved that GSK1838705A inhibits the EML4-ALK phosphorylation (84,85).

There are not so many details about ASP3026, a triazinediamine developed by Astellas which is in Phase I in clinical trials. This compound showed potent and selective activity against EML4-ALK driven tumors with gatekeeper mutation, therefore it is able to overcome crizotinib resistance (86).

Based on the structure of two natural products, staurosporine and 7-hydroxystaurosporine which are able to inhibit ALK (IC\textsubscript{50} =150 nM and 5 µM respectively in the presence of 30 µM ATP in an ELISA-based ALK assay) (87), Cephalon developed some compounds targeted to inhibit ALK. CEP-14083 and CEP-14513 have showed ATP-competitive activity in ALK, displaying IC\textsubscript{50} values in enzymatic assays of 2 and 4 nM, respectively, and 10-30 nM in cellular assays (88). The capability of CEP-14083 to inhibit cell lines and animal models harboring ALK alterations was also described (89). Furthermore, CEP-14083 is able to inhibit other kinases, such as IR, vascular endothelial growth factor receptor 2 (VEGFR2), angiopoietin-1 receptor (TIE2), and dual leucine zipper kinase (DLK) but, due to unfavorable physicochemical properties, CEP-14083 and CEP-14513 were discarded for \textit{in vivo} studies (88). Then, Cephalon developed a second generation of ALK inhibitors with different scaffolds, some of them being currently in preclinical studies. Thus, they reported tetrahydroprazines with IC\textsubscript{50} around 10 nM and 150 nM in enzyme and in Karpas-299 cell line, respectively (34). They also described 2,4-diaminopyrimidines, the most representative compound is CEP-28122, showing a high selectivity (600-fold with respect to IR, a closely related kinase family member) and a high potency (IC\textsubscript{50} =1.9 and 20 nM in enzyme and in Karpas-299 cell line, respectively). CEP-28122 also induced growth inhibition in NPM-ALK positive ALCL and EML4-ALK positive NSCLC tumor xenografts in mice. In addition, inhibited growth of neuroblastoma cell lines harboring ALK activating mutants, such as F1174L in NB-1643 cells and R1275Q in SH-SY5Y cells, but not in cell lines which expresses ALK\textsuperscript{WT} (SKNAS cells) (32,37,90). Cephalon also described pyrrolotriazines among which compound 32 displayed an IC\textsubscript{50} =6 nM in an enzymatic assay and 100 nM against NPM-ALK cells, showing high selectivity in a test against 256 kinases (39). Finally, they reported tetraazatetracyclo docosanonaene macrocycles, Macrocyle 2m showing a high inhibitory potency \textit{in vitro} (IC\textsubscript{50} =0.5 nM) as well as in a cell-based assay (IC\textsubscript{50} =10 nM) and high selectivity (173-fold with respect to IR) (36).

PHA-E429 is a compound developed by Nerviano with a pyrrolopyrazole scaffold which is considered as a multikinase inhibitor that also is able to inhibit ALK (IC\textsubscript{50} =91 nM) (51,91). NMS-E628, an indazole compound, developed by the same company, inhibits ALK (IC\textsubscript{50} =55 nM against NMP-ALK cells) but also IGF-1R and Aurora B (92). NMS-E628 has showed a high efficiency inhibiting the growth of ALCL cells and NSCLC cells bearing EML4-ALK (H2228) rearrangement and in addition was able to overcome the L1196M and C1156Y mediated TKI resistance (93,94).

CRL151104A, developed by ChemBridge Research Laboratories and St Jude Children’s Research Hospital, whose structure is not available, is a third-generation ATP
Some kinase inhibitors were assayed against ROS1 and one of them, staurosporine, showed high inhibitory activity (IC\(_{50}\) =0.9 nM) (61). On the other hand, several heterocyclic compounds, such as AST-487, PP 2, AG 1487, PDGFR-I-III and D-64406, showed moderate to low inhibitory activities (IC\(_{50}\) =1,700, 5,200, 13,600, 48,000 and 365,000 nM respectively) (103-105).

Due to the high homology between the kinase domains of ROS1 and ALK, some ALK inhibitors were assayed against ROS1-driven cells and tumors. NVP-TAE684 showed in vitro activity against HCC78 cell lines expressing ROS1 and inhibition of signaling downstream of ROS1 inducing apoptosis in BaF3/FIG-ROS positive cells (IC\(_{50}\) =10 nM) (57,79). Furthermore, a computational study of NVP-TAE684 showed its higher affinity for the ROS1 kinase domain with respect to the ALK kinase domain (14).

Apart from being the first ALK inhibitor approved by FDA, crizotinib is also able to inhibit ROS1 with an IC\(_{50}\) value of 1.7 nM in an in vitro assay. This high inhibition in an enzymatic-based assay was not confirmed in a cell-based assay (IC\(_{50}\) =1.4 μM against the HCC78 ROS1-rearranged NSCLC cell line) (79). The inhibition of the ROS1 phosphorylation by crizotinib in the HCC78 cell line in a moderate manner was also described (106). Although only 2% of NSCLC cases harbor ROS1 rearrangements, it is described the case of a patient having a ROS1 positive tumor (without EGFR mutations nor ALK rearrangements) who did not responded to erlotinib treatment (an EGFR inhibitor) but was totally recovered in 12 weeks after crizotinib treatment. This case is the proof that ROS1 is a prime target for the development of new inhibitors for the treatment of NSCLC (11).

Some other ALK inhibitors were assayed against ROS1 with promising results. Thus AP26113 (IC\(_{50}\) =1.9 nM) (67) and WZ-5-126 (IC\(_{50}\) =8.2 nM) (51), together with crizotinib and ASP3026, have entered clinical trials (59).

Finally, there are only two pyrazole ROS1 selective compounds (KIST301072 and KIST301080), which showed good ROS1 inhibitory activity (IC\(_{50}\) =199 and 209 nM, respectively) when tested against 45 kinases (60,106,107).

**Conclusions**

Traditionally, depending on the type of tumor, therapeutic approaches include different combinations of surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. However, alternative therapies using receptor tyrosine kinase (RTK) as targets started to be introduced in the beginning of this century. In
In the case of lung cancer, such approach has led to discovery of a number of these targeted therapies with specific inhibitor drugs such as erlotinib and gefitinib for mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR). However, in a 4-7% of the of lung adenocarcinomas these treatments are ineffective due to the presence of ALK and/or ROS1 rearrangements. This problem has been partially overcome due to the development of crizotinib (Xalkori®, Pfizer) but the discovery of some crizotinib resistant ALK mutations has forced the research of new inhibitors. Furthermore, the implication of ROS1 protooncogene in this kind of tumors has rendered the situation even more complicated. The present review has tried to show the importance of ALK and ROS1 as combined targets for the development of new treatments for non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) when the most common approaches fail and the efforts carried out in this field to date.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Activated RET and ROS: two new driver mutations in lung adenocarcinoma

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Abstract: Rearrangements of ROS1 and RET have been recently described as new driver mutations in lung adenocarcinoma with a frequency of about 1% each. RET and ROS1 rearrangements both represent unique molecular subsets of lung adenocarcinoma with virtually no overlap with other known driver mutations described so far in lung adenocarcinoma. Specific clinicopathologic characteristics have been described and several multitargeted receptor kinase inhibitors have shown in vitro activity against NSCLC cells harbouring these genetic alterations. In addition, the MET/ALK/ROS inhibitor crizotinib has already shown impressive clinical activity in patients with advanced ROS1-positive lung cancer. Currently, several early proof of concept clinical trials are testing various kinase inhibitors in both molecular subsets of lung adenocarcinoma patients. Most probably, personalized treatment of these genetically defined new subsets of lung adenocarcinoma will be implemented in routine clinical care of lung cancer patients in the near future.

Keywords: Lung cancer; adenocarcinoma; RET; ROS

Submitted Feb 10, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 12, 2013. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.08

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.08

Introduction

Recent genomic characterization of lung adenocarcinoma led to the discovery of several key genetic alterations involved in the induction of proliferation and metastatic spread as well as in prevention of apoptosis in lung adenocarcinoma cells. Nearly all of these driver mutations are mutually exclusive thus accounting for the classification of lung adenocarcinoma in several genetically defined subgroups. The dependency of the tumors on these driver mutations in the distinct subgroups is underlying their pharmacological vulnerability for specific inhibitors. The identification of specific activating mutations in the EGFR gene and specific rearrangements of the ALK gene have already been successfully translated into clinical routine with the use of in the meantime approved targeted therapeutic agents (erlotinib, gefitinib and crizotinib). Treatment with these targeted therapeutics results in a remarkably increased response rate, progression free survival time and overall survival compared to standard chemotherapy in these molecularly defined subgroups (1-4) thus overcoming for the first time the therapeutic nihilism in advanced adenocarcinoma based on median overall survival times of less than 1 year with chemotherapy unchanged for decades.

Unfortunately, although driver mutations can be identified in over 50% of lung adenocarcinoma (5,6) by now, only 15% of patients with lung adenocarcinoma, i.e. those with EGFR mutations or ALK aberrations, benefit from personalized treatment in clinical routine, while in the other patients either the driver mutations so far have not been fully clinically validated or no driver mutations are known at all.

Recently, two new receptor tyrosine kinase gene rearrangements affecting together up to 3% of lung adenocarcinoma patients were discovered and, based on the observations described in this review, may soon extend the spectrum of effective personalized treatment options in lung cancer.
The rearranged during transfection (RET) gene was found to be rearranged in lung adenocarcinoma patients (1%) for the first time in 2012 by four independent groups (7-10) and preliminary studies demonstrated sensitivity of lung cancer cell lines harboring a RET rearrangement to RET-kinase inhibitors like vandetanib (9).

The ROS1 rearrangement was first discovered in lung adenocarcinoma in 2007 (11). In 2012 a study determined a frequency of ROS1 rearrangements in a large lung adenocarcinoma cohort (n=1,073) of 2% (12). In addition, first results of a phase I trial investigating the use of crizotinib in patients harboring ROS1 rearrangements showed promising results (13).

Both kinases are involved in rearrangements resulting in fusion of their kinase domains to different partners. The fusion partners are responsible for the homo-dimerization underlying the oncogenic potency of the gene fusion products.

This review will focus on RET- and ROS1 kinases, their physiological role in the cell and their function as an oncogenic driver especially in lung adenocarcinoma. Furthermore, we will give an overview on current RET- and ROS1 kinase inhibitors and current clinical trials evaluating specific RET- and ROS1 inhibitors.

**RET discovery and mechanism of action**

The RET proto-oncogene was first described as an oncogene activated through DNA rearrangement in the NIH-3T3 cell model in 1985 (14). RET is located on chromosome 10q11.2 and spans 21 exons. It encodes for a receptor tyrosine kinase with an extracellular domain (containing four cadherin-like repeats, a calcium binding site, and a cystein rich region), a transmembrane region and an intracellular kinase domain (15). There are three common isoforms of RET, the long (RET51), intermediate (RET43), and short (RET9) form, which arise through alternative splicing of the mRNA at the carboxyterminal cytoplasmic tail. They are named after the number of amino acids that follow the point of divergence. RET51 and RET9 are the best characterized isoforms (16). The main ligands of the RET protein belong to the glial-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF) family, which include GDNF, artemin, neurturin and persephin. The RET-Receptor is part of a cell surface complex, it binds a member of the GDNF family in conjunction with GDNF-family receptor alpha (GFR) co-receptors. After a ligand has bound to the RET-Receptor, it is activated through the formation of a RET-homodimer with subsequent activation of the kinase domain leading to autophosphorylation of intracellular domains (17). Multiple downstream signaling pathways are activated through the activation of the RET protein, these include the RAS/RAF/ERK, the PI3K/AKT and the JNK pathways (18). RET is expressed in neuronal subsets of the central and peripheral nervous system, the Wolffian duct, the budding ureter, the nephric duct and spermatogonia. RET kinase null mice are born alive, but die within one day because of renal aplasia or dysplasia. They also do not develop enteric nervous plexuses, which is in line with the development of Hirschprung's disease caused by loss-of-function mutations in RET (19).

The first link between RET and human cancer was established by the discovery of somatic rearrangements of RET in papillary thyroid carcinoma (RET/PTC). These rearrangements lead to a constitutive activation of the tyrosine kinase (18). Up to 30% of sporadic and up to 70% of radiation induced papillary thyroid carcinomas (PTC) show a somatic rearrangement of the RET gene (20). So far 12 different 5’-fusion partner genes of RET have been described. Germline activating point mutations of RET are associated with the multiple endocrine neoplasia type 2 (MEN 2) syndrome. The MEN 2 syndrome is divided into three distinct phenotypes: MEN 2A [medullary thyroid carcinoma (MTC), pheochromacytoma (PC) and hyperparathyroidism], MEN 2B (MTC and PC) and Familial Medullary Thyroid Cancer (FMTC). Each phenotype has a strong association with specific mutation sites within the RET gene. Somatic mutations in RET are also associated with 50% of sporadic medullary thyroid cancer (21).

**RET in NSCLC**

In 2012 four independent groups identified independently the presence of a new rearrangement involving the RET-kinase domain in NSCLC. These groups screened a total of 2,650 lung cancer patients (22) and described a frequency of 1% RET rearrangements (7-9). RET expression in the lung is under normal conditions very low, but is significantly increased with the presence of the RET fusion gene (7). The transforming ability of the KIF5B-RET fusion gene could be shown in preclinical models using Ba/F3 cells, which were shown to grow interleukin-3 independent after expression of the fusion protein and in NIH 3T3 cells, which showed anchorage-independent cell proliferation after the expression of the RET fusion protein (7). The artificial cell systems showed sensitivity to the treatment with the multi-kinase inhibitors vandetanib,
sunitinib and sorafenib, which are able to inhibit the kinase activity of RET (9). Current data suggests, that RET rearrangements occur mutually exclusive with other known driver alterations in NSCLC, which further supports its role as a driving oncogene in NSCLC (9,22). The most common RET fusion protein is comprised of the first 15 exons of the \textit{KIF5B} gene and the exons 12-20 of the \textit{RET} gene. Exon 1-15 of \textit{KIF5B} contains a kinesin motor and coiled-coil domains that mediate homodimerization of the fusion proteins (9). The \textit{KIF5B} exon 15 fusion site was also shown to be present in the KIF5B-ALK fusion protein in NSCLC (23). Exons 12-20 of the \textit{RET} gene contain the \textit{RET} kinase domain allowing downstream kinase signaling and activation of the PI3K/Akt and/or the RAS/MAPK pathway (24). Up till now 7 variants of the \textit{KIF5B-RET} fusion gene have been described and besides \textit{KIF5B} two other fusion partner have been detected, i.e. the \textit{CCDC6} gene and the \textit{NCOA4} (nuclear receptor coactivator 4) gene (8,25). \textit{CCDC6} and \textit{NCOA4} have been described before in PTC as RET/PTC1 and RET/PTC3, respectively. They both also contain coiled-coil domains, which are able to mediate dimerization of the oncoproteins (26).

Concerning the correlation between NSCLC harboring RET fusion and clinical characteristics, Wang and colleagues screened 936 patients with NSCLC and could identify 13 RET fusion positive patients (1.4%) in their population. They suggested specific clinicopathologic characteristics for RET fusion positive patients, including younger age (≤60 years), never-smoker status, early lymph-node metastases, poor differentiation of the tumor and a solid predominant subtype (25). The detection of fusion genes can be conducted using RT-PCR, FISH and IHC. Interesting data have been published showing a sensitivity of 90% and specificity of 97.8% for IHC testing for ALK translocations, when compared to FISH in NSCLC (27). So far, however, IHC has not been established for RET detection and thus was not used in trials screening for RET fusions in NSCLC (9,25). Therefore FISH, although cost and labor intensive, still seems to be the gold standard for the detection of RET fusions (Figure 1) in NSCLC. In addition, the use of RT-PCR might miss new fusion partners (25). However, given the necessity of simultaneous pretherapeutic assessment of numerous driver mutations in lung cancer, it seems reasonable that next generation based multiplex sequencing will substitute distinct single gene assays involving RET in the near future (28).

**RET inhibitors**

So far no clinical trials using RET inhibitors in NSLCL harbouring RET fusion genes have been published. Since RET fusions and activating mutations are present in differentiated thyroid carcinomas (DTC) and medullary thyroid carcinoma (MTC) (20) we will thus start to summarize data from clinical trials studying tyrosine kinase inhibitors with anti-RET activity in patients with DTC and MTC. However, these results may only be of limited value for the understanding of RET inhibition in NSCLC, since the spectrum of RET mutations and RET fusions in thyroid carcinoma differs from what so far is known for RET in NSCLC.

Specific aberrations in RET present in thyroid carcinoma can be assigned to specific subgroups of the disease. RET fusions are mostly present in PTC, which closely resemble the fusions present in NSCLC (8,26). Preclinical studies have shown that different tyrosine kinase inhibitors with anti-RET activity show different activity against the various aberrant RET forms present in thyroid carcinomas (29). For instance, cabozantinib showed greater activity compared to vandetanib in cells harboring the RET/PTC1 fusion gene (29), a fusion gene which is also present in NSCLC. These observations should be considered in planning trials with anti-RET tyrosine kinase inhibitors also in lung cancer.

Anti-RET tyrosine kinase inhibitors have already been evaluated in NSCLC, however, not focusing of patients harbouring RET fusion genes in their tumors (30-32). Thus, these trials do not add valuable information concerning the use of these drugs in RET positive lung cancer patients only. Furthermore, the drugs used in these trials (vandetanib,
The phase II study was initiated showing a significantly improved efficacy and prolongation of PFS for vandetanib compared to placebo in patients with sporadic and hereditary MTC with a hazard ratio of 0.46 (95% CI, 0.31-0.69; P<0.001) (34). Preclinical studies suggest that vandetanib has superior activity in MEN2B cell lines compared to cabozantinib (29). The predominant mutation in MEN2B is the activating M918T point mutation in the RET kinase domain, which is also the most frequent mutation in sporadic MTC (35). Vandetanib also showed activity against RET/PTC in vitro and in vivo (36).

**Cabozantinib**

Cabozantinib, a potent inhibitor of RET, VEGFR2 and MET tyrosine kinases, received FDA approval for its use in MTC in November 2012. Early signals of activity in MTC were seen in a phase I dose escalation trial, which led to the testing of cabozantinib in patients with MTC in an expansion cohort of the phase I study. Of the 35 patients with MTC and measurable disease included into the study 17 patients (49%) experienced a 30% or greater reduction in the sum of tumor diameters at first assessment. Disease control of at least 6 months was present in 68% of the patients (37). Following the positive data from the phase II study a large phase III study was started, which tests cabozantinib vs. placebo in patients with progressive, unresectable, locally advanced or metastatic MTC. First data were presented at ASCO 2012, which showed that the primary objective of significant PFS prolongation was met (HR 0.28 95% CI, 0.19-0.40; P<0.0001) (38).

In July 2012 a phase II study testing cabozantinib in KIF5B/RET positive NSCLC patients has been initiated at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (NCT01639508) and is thus to our knowledge the first study investigating a personalized treatment approach for this newly defined subgroup of NSCLC. Interestingly, in vitro studies showed a greater activity of cabozantinib compared to vandetanib in cell lines harboring the RET/PTC1 fusion gene, which also has been found in NSCLC (29).

**Sorafenib**

Sorafenib is a multi-tyrosine kinase inhibitor targeting VEGFR1, VEGFR2, KIT, RET, BRAF and CRAF (39). In vitro sorafenib was shown to inhibit RET in the low nanomolar range and exerted anti-tumor activity in RET-driven xenografts (40). Sorafenib has been tested in several phase II studies in patients with DTC, anaplastic thyroid carcinoma and MTC (41-43). In an open-label phase II study of 41 patients with PTC, 6 patients (15%) showed a PR and 23 (56%) patients had a stable disease for longer than 6 months. The PRs seen in the patients were durable with a median duration of 7.5 months. The authors concluded that sorafenib is an active drug in metastatic PTC. Genetic testing was included into the trial and the great majority of PTCs harbored an activating RET mutation whereas none was positive for RET/PTC1 or RET/PTC3. These observations render translation into the RET driven NSCLC setting difficult (43). In another phase II study sorafenib was tested in locally advanced or metastatic MTC. Of 15 evaluable patients with sporadic MTC, one patient had a PR and more than 50% of the patients had SD ≥15 months. The majority of tumors in the tested population had activating mutations in the RET gene (42) The phase II study from Gupta-Abramson et al. demonstrated in 30 (27 out of 30 being DTC) patients with metastatic, iodine-refractory thyroid carcinoma a PR rate of 23% (7 patients). The median PFS was stated with 19.75 months. Data of specific genetic testing were not presented in this paper. Given the PR rate of 23% and the PFS of 19.25 months the sorafenib treatment may be considered superior to chemotherapy in these patients (41).
Sunitinib is a multi-tyrosine kinase inhibitor targeting VEGFR, Flt-3, c-Kit and RET (40) and has proven to be a potent inhibitor of RET/PTC oncoproteins in vitro and in vivo (36). In a phase II study in iodine refractory DTC and MTC from 33 evaluable patients one patient showed a complete response (3%), ten patients had a PR (28%) and 16 patients demonstrated stable disease (46%). There was also a significant association seen between decreased 18FDG-PET uptake and RECIST response (44). Intermediate results of two studies testing sunitinib in patients with thyroid carcinoma were presented at ASCO 2008 (45,46). The study of Cohen et al. presented data of 31 evaluable patients with DTC treated for at least two cycles with sunitinib. Of these patients 13% showed a PR and 65% of patients a SD. In MTC there have been no PRs reported, but a SD rate of 85% (45) In a mixed patient cohort with MTC, DTC and anaplastic thyroid carcinoma Ravaud et al. demonstrated in 15 evaluable patients a PR rate of 7% (n=1) and a SD rate of 80% (n=12) (46). In addition two case reports have been published, one reporting a PR in a patient with MTC and one in a patient with PTC treated with sunitinib (47,48).

**Motesanib**

The multi-tyrosine kinase inhibitor motesanib inhibits VEGFR, PDGFR, Kit and RET and demonstrated activity in TT tumor cell xenografts expressing the RET C634W protein (49). But there have also been reports indicating the ineffectiveness of motesanib in inhibiting the C634W mutant form of RET and being only active in wild type RET (50). Motesanib was tested in two phase II studies involving patients with thyroid cancer. One study which included 93 patients with confirmed locally advanced metastatic DTC or MTC yielded a 14% PR rate and a 68% SD rate. However none of the patients genetically analyzed showed a RET mutation or RET rearrangement in their tumor (51). Another phase II trial studying motesanib in MTC included 91 patients. In this trial only 2% of the patients were reported to have achieved a PR and 81% of the patients had a SD. The objective response rate for RET-mutation negative (n=10) and for RET-mutation positive (n=28) was 10% and 0%, respectively (50).

**ROS1 discovery and mechanism of action**

ROS was first described as an oncogene product of the avian sarcoma RNA tumor virus UR2 (University of Rochester tumor virus 2) in 1982 and v-ROS1 was identified in the same year as the distinctive oncogenic sequence in UR2 (52,53). In the UR 2 virus v-ROS1 is fused to the gag-gene and the product of the fusion gene gag-ros was identified to have tyrosine kinase activity (54). In 1984 the mfs gene, which later was discovered to be similar to c-ROS1, was reported

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*trial including ROS1 patients running, no preclinical data found.
to induce malignant transformation of NIH3T3 cells (55). *ROS1* (v-ros avian UR2 sarcoma virus oncogene homolog 1) has been mapped to chromosome 6q16-6q22 (56). The region is involved in nonrandom chromosomal rearrangements in different malignancies including, glioblastoma, cholangiocarcinoma and lung adenocarcinoma (8,57,58). The ROS1 receptor tyrosine kinase consists of an extracellular domain, a hydrophobic transmembrane region and an intracellular kinase domain. ROS is a unique receptor which is remotely related to the ALK and Insulin receptor family (59,60). The extracellular domain of ROS1 contains a YWTD -propeller domain that folds into three -propeller domains and nine fibronectin type III domains. Although ROS1 has a large extracellular domain no ligand has been found so far. The presence of fibronectin III domains is a common feature of cell adhesion molecules (CAMs), therefore the combination of fibronectin III domains in the extracellular domain of ROS1 coupled with the intracellular kinase activity might be a way of direct translating adhesion engagements to intracellular signaling pathways (60). Multiple downstream signaling pathways are activated through the activation of ROS1, these include the STAT3, PI3K/AKT and RAS/MAPK/MEK pathway, although it is important to notice that the transforming ability of the chimeric EGFR-Ros on chicken embryo fibroblasts or NIH3T3 cells was not hindered through the application of the MEK inhibitor PD98059 (61). *ROS1* was shown to be expressed in mouse, rat and chicken kidneys and intestine (60). In mice the expression of c-ROS seems to play a role in the development of the kidneys, especially in stages which involve epithelial-mesenchymal interactions. In adult mice with mature kidneys c-ROS expression is low (62). In the testicles expression of c-ROS was detected in mice and is limited to epithelial cells of the caput epididymis. The importance of ROS for the maturation of the epithelial cells of the epididymis was seen in ROS-null mice. These mice lost the ability of reproduction due to deficient sperm function, which was most likely due to improper capacitation supporting the significance of a functional epididymis for maturation of the spermatocytes. Besides from infertility c-ROS knockout mice were healthy (63). In humans c-ROS has also been detected in the epididymis, although the spatial distribution was different from what was seen in mice (64). Expression of c-ROS was also detected in other human tissues, such as lung, placenta and skeletal muscle tissue (60).

The first link between human cancer and ROS1 was established in 1987 by the discovery of somatic rearrangements involving ROS1 in glioblastoma cell lines, although the partner of ROS1 was not identified (65). The fusion of the FIG (Fused in Glioblastoma)-gene with *ROS1* was elucidated by Charest et al. in 2003. It was shown that the FIG-ROS1 fusion protein was created through a small intra-chromosomal deletion and was therefore the first example of a receptor tyrosine kinase fusion protein, which did not occur from a translocation or inversion (57). Furthermore it was shown that the FIG-ROS fusion protein was able to transform NIH3T3 cells *in vitro* and to enable tumor formation in immunocompromised nude mice (58).

The expression of the FIG-ROS fusion protein in the CNS *in vivo* was able to induce the formation of glioblastomas (66). FIG-ROS fusion proteins were also discovered in cholangiocarcinoma cell lines and patient derived tumors (58).

**ROS1 in NSCLC**

Rearrangements in NSCLC involving ROS1 (*Figure 1*) were first described by Rikova *et al.* in 2007.

In a phosphoproteomic screen of 41 NSCLC cell lines and 150 NSCLC tumors 2 ROS1 fusions (SLC34A2-ROS1 and CD74-ROS1) were detected (11). SLC34A2-ROS1 was discovered in the HCC78 cell line. SLC34A2 is part of the solute carrier family and is expressed in many different organs such as lung, mammary glands, testis and liver. It is believed that the gene product of SLC34A2 the protein NaPi-IIb is involved in the reabsorption of Pi in the surfactant of lung alveolars. The protein is supposed to span the cell membrane in 8 loops (67). Mutations of SLC34A2, which abrogate the normal protein function, are associated with pulmonary alveolar microlithiasis (68). In the fusion gene 2 variants exist, either a fusion between exon 4 of SLC34A2 and exon 32 of ROS or exon 4 of SLC34A2 and exon 34 of ROS. In both cases the fusion gene expresses a protein with two transmembrane domains (11). The CD74-ROS1 fusion was discovered in a tumor from a female never-smoker with adenocarcinoma. In this tumor exon 6 of CD74 was found to be fused with exon 34 of ROS1. CD74 codes for a type II membrane protein. The protein functions as a receptor for the macrophage migration inhibitory factor and as a chaperon for MHC class II proteins (69). The transforming ability of SLC34A2-ROS was shown in the ability of the fusion gene to cause anchorage-independent growth and tumor formation in nude mice of 3T3 cells transduced with a retrovirus.
containing SLC34A2-ROS (58). The oncogenic ability of the CD74-ROS1 fusion gene has also been validated in fibroblasts and NSCLC cells were the ectopic expression of the CD74-ROS1 fusion gene induced high invasiveness in vitro (Matrigel Boyden chamber invasion assay) and the formation of metastases in vivo (70).

Recently, two large studies screening together more than 2000 patients with NSCLC for the presence of ROS1 rearrangements found the frequency of ROS1 rearrangements in NSCLC to be approximately 2% (8,12). The clinical characteristics of patients with a ROS1 fusion were very similar to patients with an ALK translocation. It was found that patients with a ROS1 fusion positive tumor were more commonly light smokers (<10 pack years) or never-smokers and ROS1 fusions were associated with younger age and adenocarcinoma histology (12). The study conducted by Takeuchi et al. and Govindan et al. discovered additional fusion partners of ROS1 in NSCLC: tropomyosin 3 (TPM3), syndecan 4 (SDC4), leucine-rich repeats and immunoglobulin-like domains (LRIG3), ezrin (EZR) and endoplasmic reticulum protein retention receptor 2 (KDEL R2) (8,71). The kinase activity of ROS1 is retained in the known fusion proteins (72) and ROS1 rearrangements were not overlapping with other known oncogenic events in NSCLC, like KRAS mutations, EGFR mutations or ALK fusions (12). A transgenic mouse model expressing the EZR-ROS1 fusion protein in lung alveolar epithelial cells has been developed and could demonstrate the formation of adenocarcinoma in both lungs at an early age (73).

**ROS1 inhibitors**

Although ROS1 has been known to play a role as an oncogene in glioblastoma for a long time (65), selective ROS1 inhibitors have not yet been clinically tested. Given that the ROS1 kinase shares high sequence homology with ALK, which is reflected in an amino acid sequence homology of 77% at the adenosine triphosphate (ATP)-binding site (74), the activity of ALK-kinase inhibitors were tested in cell lines and tumors harboring ROS1 fusion proteins (58). The ALK-inhibitor TAE684 showed activity in the lung cancer cell line HCC78, which harbors the SLC34A2-ROS1 fusion gene and in BaF3 cells expressing the FIG-ROS fusion protein (58,75). Crizotinib, the approved ALK/MET inhibitor for NSCLC patients harboring an ALK-translocation also showed activity in the HCC78 cell line (12,76). Following these signals the phase I trial of crizotinib (NCT00585195) was amended for the inclusion of patients with solid tumors harboring a ROS1 rearrangement. Preliminary results presented at ASCO and ESMO 2012 demonstrated promising results of crizotinib in ROS1 rearranged NSCLC with an objective response rate of 57% and a disease control rate of 80% after 2 months (13). Our group also recently published a case of a heavily pretreated NSCLC patient whose tumor harbored a ROS1 rearrangement and showed a compete metabolic response in 18FDG-PET/CT after 4 weeks of treatment with crizotinib which is maintained now for more than 4 months (77). Currently there are also two trials ongoing testing second-generation ALK inhibitors in ROS1 fusion positive tumors. These trials are evaluating the safety and activity of AP26113 (NCT01449461) and ASP3026 (NCT01284192). For a list of multi-kinase inhibitors with anti-ROS1 activity refer to Table 1.

**Conclusions**

The identification of RET- and ROS1 rearrangements in NSCLC is a consequence of our increasing knowledge of the genomic basis of malignant transformation in lung cancer resulting in the identification of an increasing number of distinct and therapeutically tractable molecular subgroups. Tyrosine kinase inhibitors with anti-RET activity have shown promising preclinical and clinical activity in thyroid carcinomas. However, up till now most of the trials conducted were entity driven and did not distinguish between the molecular subtypes which are present in thyroid carcinomas and NSCLC. Thus, although these trials provide some evidence that aberrant RET may serve as a target for kinase inhibitor therapy, the translation of these observations to NSCLC seems to be problematic. Therefore, prospective trials RET translocated NSCLC are needed, although their realization may be a challenge given the low incidence of RET rearrangements in NSCLC. The ongoing trial of cabozantinib in KIF5B-RET fusion positive NSCLC (NCT01639508) is a first step in the right direction. In the case of ROS1 an impressive activity of the ALK/MET/ROS inhibitor crizotinib has already been reported as result of a still ongoing phase I trial in heavily pretreated NSCLC patients with ROS rearrangements in their tumors. Based on these results approval of crizotinib for the treatment of ROS positive NSCLC in the near future seems probable. Other clinical trials evaluating the safety and activity of second generation small molecule inhibitors with anti-ROS1 activity are also currently tested in ROS1 fusion positive patients, but no results have been
presented so far. Furthermore, it remains to be elucidated how new selective RET- and ROS-inhibitors will perform clinically (78). Given the low frequency of these two new driver mutations the execution of clinical trials addressing the efficacy of RET- and ROS-inhibitors is in particular challenging and requires the establishment of large and effective molecular screening networks providing real time molecular diagnostics of high quality (28).

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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HER2 driven non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC): potential therapeutic approaches

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Abstract: Oncogenic driver mutations identified in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) have triggered the development of drugs capable of interfering in intracellular signaling pathways involved in tumorigenesis. Tyrosine kinase inhibitors, such as erlotinib or gefitinib, have demonstrated promising results in patients with advanced NSCLC that harbor EGFR mutations. Human epidermal growth factor 2 (HER2/ERBB2/neu) is a member of the ERBB family of tyrosine kinase receptors, and is activated by homodimerization or heterodimerization with other ERBB receptors. Deregulation of HER2 gene, by overexpression and/or gene amplification has been proved important in breast and gastric cancer, in which overexpression of HER2 confers greater response to specific anti-HER2 treatment, including trastuzumab. In lung carcinogenesis, HER2 mutations are thought to be more clinically relevant than overexpression or gene amplification. HER2 mutations in NSCLC, described exclusively in adenocarcinoma histology, are present in approximately 4% of this subset of lung cancer patients, suggesting that thousands of patients per year may possibly benefit from targeted therapy. Therefore, we conclude that systematic genotypic testing in this subgroup of NSCLC patients should include detection of HER2 mutations. In addition, clinical trials with standard anti-HER2 agents and new investigational therapies are ongoing, with promising preliminary results, as illustrated in this review, although further research is warranted in this field.

Keywords: HER2; lung adenocarcinoma; mutation; targeted therapy

Submitted Jan 18, 2013. Accepted for publication Feb 19, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.02

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.02

Introduction

Lung cancer continues to be the leading cause of cancer-related death, as estimated by the American Cancer Society, responsible for 26% of all female cancer deaths and 29% of all male cancer deaths in the U.S. in 2012 (1). Considering that non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounts for 80-85% of cases of lung cancer (2) and that significant improvement in survival rates, approximately 17% at 5 years for recently diagnosed NSCLC and less than 4% if presenting with distant metastasis (3), has not been achieved in the last decade with conventional chemotherapy, novel therapeutic approaches are warranted in this field. As a result of these advances, systematic genomic testing for patients with NSCLC is becoming the new standard of care in clinical decision-making, due to the identification of driver mutations that have triggered the development of new molecules targeting these specific alterations in cancer cells. For example, somatic mutations in epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) confer greater response rates to tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) that target the catalytic domain of EGFR, such as erlotinib and gefitinib, compared to standard therapy in advanced NSCLC, 70% vs. 33.2% in first-line trials (4,5). In a similar manner, crizotinib, the anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) tyrosine kinase inhibitor, has demonstrated response rates of approximately 60% with progression-free survival greater than 10 months in those NSCLC characterized by ALK rearrangements (6).
These studies have enabled to conclude that both EGFR-mutant and ALK-positive NSCLC constitute two defined subgroups of oncogene-driven tumors with potentially effective targeted therapy. Furthermore, approximately 15-20% of NSCLC diagnosed in Europe and North America bear EGFR mutations or ALK rearrangements (7), enhancing the significance of the development of drugs capable of interfering with their intracellular effects.

Based on these results, the identification of other activating mutations has been pursued in hopes of improving survival in NSCLC by specifically treating these genomic alterations. These potential therapeutic targets include KRAS, BRAF, HER2 and PIK3CA, in addition to ROS1 fusions. KRAS mutations, in codons 12, 13 and 61, reported in approximately 20% of cases of lung adenocarcinomas, predict negative outcome in terms of response to EGFR TKIs. No targeted therapies have demonstrated an increase in overall survival in KRAS-mutant NSCLC, although selumetinib, an inhibitor of MAPK extracellular signal-regulated kinase (MEK) 1/2 (downstream of KRAS), in combination with docetaxel in previously treated advanced NSCLC has shown promising results in a recent phase 2 trial (8).

Regarding activating mutations in BRAF, HER2 and PIK3CA, incidence reported for each group ranges from 1-4%, a lower although significant frequency that is encouraging further investigation of these genetic alterations and consequent therapeutic implications. HER2 mutations in NSCLC constitute a clear molecular target, particularly in a subset of patients with distinct clinical features, including female non-smokers with adenocarcinomas, similar to those patients with EGFR-mutant lung cancer. Here, we seek to review the characteristics of HER2 mutations that enable interaction with molecules that specifically target these receptors in lung adenocarcinomas, as well as the results of preliminary studies that assess the efficacy of anti-HER2 therapy applied to NSCLC.

**Tumorigenesis induced by HER2 mutations**

HER2 [also known as epidermal growth factor receptor-2 (EGFR2), ERBB2 or NEU] is a member of the ERBB receptor tyrosine kinase family, which includes 3 additional members; EGFR (HER1/ERBB1), HER3 (ERBB3) and HER4 (ERBB4). The binding of ligands to the extracellular domain of EGFR, HER3 and HER4 induces homodimerization of these receptors, catalytically activating a cascade of intracellular pathways involved in cellular proliferation, differentiation and migration. These reactions are induced by cytoplasmic signal transducers such as PLC-γ1, Ras-Raf-MEK-MAPKs, phosphatidylinositol-3 kinase (PI3K), Src or the signal transducers and activators of transcription (STATs). However, no ligand has been described for HER2, regardless of structural resemblance between ERBB receptors. In fact, HER2 has been identified as the preferred binding partner of the other ERBB receptors, in particular, of EGFR with formation of HER2/EGFR heterodimers with increased potential for signaling than EGFR homodimers (9). This unique characteristic of HER2 has been partially attributed to its increased flexibility due to a glycine-rich region following the alpha-helix C of HER2, which explains its low intrinsic catalytic activity and less stable conformation when activated (10). Consequently, HER2 overexpression potentiates EGFR signaling which relates to the increased response in EGFR-positive NSCLC with HER2 overexpression to erlotinib or gefitinib (11), specific inhibitors of active EGFR, but not of HER2 or inactive EGFR.

HER2 gene, regulated by overexpression and/or gene amplification, has been proven important in many cancers, including breast and gastric cancer, in which overexpression of HER2 confers poor prognosis although it relates to possible benefit from specific anti-HER2 therapy. With the arrival of trastuzumab, a humanized monoclonal IgG1 that targets the extracellular domain of HER2, and its effect in combination with cytotoxic chemotherapy on survival rates of breast and gastric cancer with overexpression of HER2, a new door in molecular-targeted therapy was opened. However, although HER2 overexpression and amplification has been described in 6-35% and in 10-20%, respectively, of NSCLC patients, the first clinical trials including patients treated with trastuzumab in addition to gemcitabine-cisplatin or to docetaxel, failed to demonstrate benefit in survival in HER2 IHC-positive patients (12,13).

These findings triggered investigation of activating mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain of HER2 gene, first described in 2004. HER2 mutations have been reported to exist in up to 4% of NSCLC and are more common in Asians, never smokers, women and adenocarcinomas (14), characteristically similar to patients with EGFR mutations. These mutations occur in the first four exons of the tyrosine kinase domain (exons 18-21), including the most frequently observed alteration, a 12-bp duplication/insertion of the amino acid sequence YVMA in exon 20 at codon 776 (HERYVMA). The mutated region of exon 20 in the HER2
gene corresponds to the nine codon region in exon 20 of the EGFR gene, where duplications and insertions have also been described, resulting in conformational changes of the tyrosine kinase domain that lead to narrowing of the ATP binding cleft and, consequently, increased kinase activity compared to wild-type receptors (HER<sup>WT</sup>). In vitro studies have demonstrated that HER<sub>YVMA</sub> induces ligand-independent transphosphorylation and stronger association with signal transducers that mediate cell proliferation, motility and survival processes than HER<sup>WT</sup> (15). In fact, HER<sub>YVMA</sub> activates EGFR in absence of ERBB ligands and EGFR kinase activity, which explains that EGFR TKIs erlotinib and gefitinib have no effect on EGFR and HER2 phosphorylation in HER<sub>YVMA</sub> cells. However, when the effect of trastuzumab in cell proliferation was tested in these in vitro studies, inhibition was achieved in presence of HER<sub>YVMA</sub> but not cells overexpressing HER<sup>WT</sup>, findings consistent with the reported inability of the IgG1 to bind with EGF and or EGFR/HER2 heterodimers (16). Therefore, authors concluded that tumor cells harboring HER2 mutations are resistant to EGFR inhibitors although remain sensitive to HER2 inhibitors and dual EGFR/HER2 inhibitors.

### Epidemiology of HER2 mutations in lung cancer

Up to date, few studies regarding HER2 mutations in NSCLC have been published, primarily in Asian patient populations in which never smokers constitute a greater percentage of lung cancer patients (approximately 30%) compared to North American and European populations (10%). Incidence of HER2 mutations has been reported in 2-5% of NSCLC adenocarcinomas (Table 1). In a retrospective study of pulmonary resection samples obtained at the Fudan University Shanghai Cancer Centre (17), a total of 202 patients, never smokers, with lung adenocarcinoma that had not received neoadjuvant chemotherapy, were included. The median age at diagnosis was 57.3 years and no significant differences were observed in age, stage or degree of tumor differentiation between males and females. Of these samples, 89.1% harbored known oncogenic driver mutations in EGFR (75.25%), HER2 (5.94%), ALK fusion (4.95%), KRAS (1.98%), ROS1 fusion (0.99%). Patients with no identified driver mutation were diagnosed at a younger age. 12 samples with HER2 kinase domain mutations were detected, including 11 exon 20 insertions and 1 L775P point mutation.

Recently, the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Centre (MSKCC) group published the largest assessment to date of HER2 mutations in predominantly Caucasian population (18). Of 560 lung adenocarcinoma samples that resulted negative for EGFR and KRAS major mutations tested previously, 26 HER2 mutations in 25 cases were identified (5%), all mutually exclusive with point mutations in EGFR, KRAS, BRAF, NRAS, PI3KCA, MEK1 and AKT mutations as well as ALK rearrangements. No HER2 mutations were detected among 104 squamous cell carcinomas and 6 small-cell carcinomas tested. 92% (24/26) of these HER2 mutations were in-frame insertions in exon 20 (from 3 to 12 bp) between codons 775 and 881, of which the most common (83%) was the 12-bp duplication/insertion of YVMA at codon 775. The other two cases were point mutations, L775S and G776C. Median follow-up after diagnosis of advanced disease was 19 months for all patients. No significant differences in overall survival were described between HER2 and other molecular subsets. Morphologically, 92% were moderately or poorly differentiated adenocarcinomas. An additional analysis was performed to assess for HER2 gene copy number alterations by FISH in 11 HER2 mutated and 39

### Table 1 Frequency of HER2 mutations among lung adenocarcinoma samples in recently published studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study group</th>
<th>Total (No.)</th>
<th>HER2 mutation (No.)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tomizawa K et al. (Lung Cancer 2011)</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li G et al. (J Thor Oncol 2012)</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun Y et al. (J Clin Oncol 2010)</td>
<td>52&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcila M et al. (Clin Cancer Res 2012)</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhang Y et al. (Clin Cancer Res 2012)</td>
<td>349&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardarella S et al. (J Thor Oncol 2012)</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li G et al. (PLos One 2011)</td>
<td>202&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup>Inclusion of adenocarcinoma samples of never-smokers only; <sup>2</sup>Inclusion of adenocarcinoma samples of female never-smokers only.
WT cases. None of HER2-mutant specimens were positive for HER2 amplification; 18% presented high polysomy (>4 copies of HER2 in >40% of cells) and 73% low polysomy. Amplification of HER2 was detected in one case, in the WT group, and interestingly this case was also found to harbor an EGFR exon 19 deletion. Therefore, HER2 mutation was not associated with concurrent HER2 amplification.

In this study, the overall prevalence of HER2 mutations was estimated to be approximately 2%, similar to statistics obtained in smaller European studies (19). In addition, HER2 mutations were most frequent among never-smokers (P<0.0001) although there were no associations with gender, race or stage of disease.

**Therapeutic implications: HER2-targeted therapy in NSCLC**

HER2 overexpression and gene amplification has been observed in breast, gastric and ovarian malignancies, inducing sensitivity to HER2-targeted drugs including trastuzumab, pertuzumab, lapatinib and T-DM1. Both amplification and high copy number gains have also been identified in NSCLC, although first clinical trials with anti-HER2 therapies in unselected patients failed to demonstrate survival benefit in HER2 positive NSCLC (defined by immunohistochemistry) (12,20). However, there is new hope that HER2 mutations may be more relevant in lung carcinogenesis than HER2 amplification or overexpression. Based on previous *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies, Cappuzzo *et al.* showed that lung cancer harboring the HER2 Gly776Leu mutation responded to treatment with trastuzumab and paclitaxel in a patient with chemotherapy-refractory lung adenocarcinoma (21).

Considering that HER2-mutant NSCLC may benefit from HER2 inhibition or dual EGFR/HER2 inhibition, but not single blockage of EGFR, novel TKIs simultaneously targeting EGFR/HER2 have been investigated. Transgenic mice models with induced expression in lung epithelium of the most common HER2 mutant, HER2<sup>YVMA</sup>, developed lung adenosquamous carcinomas in distal and proximal bronchioles (22). In these models, treatment with erlotinib, trastuzumab, BIBW2992 and/or rapamycin revealed that the combination of BIBW2992 (afatinib), an irreversible dual TKI targeting both EGFR and HER2, and rapamycin, an inhibitor of the downstream effector protein mTOR, produced the most significant shrinkage (50.1±27.4% tumor regression measured by MRI) of tumor specimens. In addition, immunohistochemical analysis of these tumors treated with BIBW2992 and rapamycin proved this combination to be the most effective regimen for inhibition of upstream and downstream signaling of both the ERBB/PI3K/mTOR and the MAPK signaling pathways. Surprisingly, a relatively low effect was observed in HER2<sup>YVMA</sup> models treated with trastuzumab, with an average tumor regression of 13.59% (±10.89%), which was theoretically explained by postulating that trastuzumab is capable of inhibiting phosphorylation of membranous HER2 but unable to inhibit intracellular HER2 signaling associated with Golgi, endoplasmic reticulum, and other transport vesicles. Interestingly, continuous expression of HER2<sup>YVMA</sup> was proven necessary for tumor maintenance, indicating that HER2 is of great importance in lung adenosquamous tumorigenesis.

Case reports of afatinib in patients with HER2 mutant NSCLC have revealed promising results (23). Of patients who were included in an exploratory Phase II study of afatinib, five patients with non-smoking history and metastatic lung adenocarcinomas were identified to harbor HER2 mutations in cancer specimens. Three of these were evaluated, observing objective response to afatinib in all cases.

Neratinib, an irreversible pan-ERBB-receptor family inhibitor, has been studied in a phase II trial in patients with advanced NSCLC who progressed following erlotinib or gefitinib (24). Three subgroups, EGFR mutant, wild-type EGFR and EGFR TKI naïve- adenocarcinoma with light smoking history, were compared obtaining objective response rates of 3.4%, 0% and 0%, respectively. Only a small subgroup of patients with G719X mutation at exon 18 of EGFR-positive tumors, refractory to reversible TKIs, benefited from neratinib. Based on these results, neratinib is no longer in development for NSCLC although investigation in HER2-positive breast cancer continues.

PF00299804 (dacomitinib), another irreversible TKI targeting ERBB family members EGFR, HER2 and HER4, is being evaluated in patients with NSCLC. Preliminary data of dacomitinib in the HER2-mutant cohort reveal a 14% (3 of 22) partial response rate and 27% of these patients (6 of 22) have maintained stable disease to date (25).

In addition to TKIs, other molecules targeting EGFR and HER2 receptors have been developed. Considering that the heat shock protein 90 (Hsp90) chaperone stabilizes various oncogenic kinases necessarily involved in signal transduction and proliferation of lung chaperone cells, when Hsp90 was demonstrated to interact with mutant EGFR, inhibition of these chaperones became a new potential therapeutic approach (26). NSCLC with
activating EGFR mutations that develop acquired resistance to EGFR TKI after treatment with erlotinib or gefitinib, have been proven sensitive to Hsp90 inhibitors both in NSCLC cell lines in vitro and in vivo (27). Other targets of Hsp90 include mutant HER2, mutant BRAF or mutant or overexpressed MET; therefore, adenocarcinomas harboring HER2 mutations may benefit from disruption of chaperone function. In fact, ganetespib, a novel non-geldanamycin potent Hsp90 inhibitor that impedes binding of Hsp90 to its co-chaperone, p23, has been proven effective in NSCLC cell lines in mice models driven by mutations in both EGFR and HER2VMA (28). These promising data support further investigation in clinical trials.

Conclusions

The discovery of oncogenic driver mutations in NSCLC is leading to the development of new therapies targeting specific molecular alterations. Detection of EGFR mutations and ALK rearrangements in tumor specimens of recently diagnosed NSCLC is currently standard of care, in order to identify subsets of patients that may respond to TKIs, such as erlotinib or gefitinib and crizotinib, respectively. Considering the prevalence of lung adenocarcinoma and clinical relevance of other mutations in NSCLC, including HER2, at diagnosis of this subgroup of lung cancer patients, we suggest expanding systematic genotype testing to include detection of these molecular alterations. In comparison with other types of cancer (i.e. breast, gastric) in which HER2 overexpression and gene amplification is associated to greater response to anti-HER2 drugs such as trastuzumab, first clinical trials in HER2 IHC-positive NSCLC failed to demonstrate benefit in the addition of trastuzumab to chemotherapy. However, HER2 mutations are thought to play a more significant role in lung cancerogenesis than overexpression or gene amplification, achieving promising results with trastuzumab in advanced HER2-mutant NSCLC. Therefore, identification of HER2 mutations, rather than HER2 IHC-positive cancer specimens, should be studied in recently diagnosed stage IV NSCLC patients.

In addition, considering that cancer cells harboring HER2 mutations may respond to both HER2 inhibitors and dual EGFR/HER2 inhibitors, newer agents, including dacomitinib and afatinib, are currently under investigation in clinical trials specifically for this indication. Phase II studies have demonstrated promising initial results, although further investigation is necessary. Inhibition of chaperones to oncogenic kinases has revealed favorable results in preclinical models, constituting a new therapeutic strategy to be explored in both EGFR- and HER2-mutant NSCLC.

In summary, mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain of HER2 identify a subset of NSCLC adenocarcinomas, with a greater prevalence among never-smokers, which may respond to novel agents that specifically target this alteration. HER2 mutations are mutually exclusive with other driver mutations and are independent of HER2 gene amplification. Considering the prevalence of lung adenocarcinomas and given the availability of standard and investigational therapies targeting HER2, clinical genotyping of these tumors should include HER2.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Lung Cancer


Targeting EML4-ALK driven non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC)

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Submitted Feb 12, 2013. Accepted for publication Mar 07, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.04

View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.03.04

Introduction

Recently, due to key discoveries relating to the molecular biology of many cancers and the development of effective and specific targeted treatments, the ability to personalize cancer therapy based on individual patient genotypes has become a reality in clinical practice (1). Some examples of this genotype-specific approach to anti-cancer therapeutics are BCR-ABL targeted therapy in chronic myelogenous leukemia, C-KIT inhibition in gastrointestinal stromal tumors, the use of Kristen rat sarcoma (KRAS) to negatively select EGFR inhibitors in colon cancer, HER2-directed therapy in breast cancer, and BRAF inhibitors in melanoma (2-13). Several other therapies are currently under investigation in clinical trials and will likely soon broaden this list further.

We have learned that there are different subsets of lung cancers that can be molecularly defined, targeted-treated and which exhibit differential outcomes in terms of response and survival when compared with tumors not harboring any specific mutations. The discovery of EGFR mutations in lung cancer represented the first event that marked this tremendous change in our understanding and management of lung cancer. Moreover, the discovery of the implications of Anaplastic Lymphoma Kinase (ALK) rearrangements in lung cancer has changed the paradigm of how we treat different subgroups of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients (11,14).

ALK inhibitors are able to disrupt the signaling cascade related to cell survival, producing an apoptotic response (15,16). Crizotinib, an oral ALK inhibitor, has demonstrated a clinical benefit in this subset of patients that exceeds the usual expectations for this disease (13). Therefore, the inclusion of ALK screening in the molecular diagnosis of lung cancer is mandatory, considering that the frequency of ALK alterations has been reported to range from 2% to 25% of lung cancer patients between different series (1,2,17-24).

Some questions still remain a matter of debate. Firstly, which technique is most suitable to detect ALK alterations? Secondly, which patients should be included in screening programs? Thirdly, how should the sequence of available therapies be administered to these patients and, lastly, how can we understand the mechanisms of resistance that all patients invariably ultimately develop to ALK inhibitors?

ALK in lung cancer

Although ALK mutations do occur, the majority of ALK-positive tumors induce the aberrant signal through the formation of fusion genes. ALK rearrangements were initially identified in anaplastic large cell lymphoma. Since then, this alteration has been described in other tumors such as inflammatory myofibroblastic tumors, neuroblastoma and NSCLC, among others (11,25-29). These rearrangements induce a chimeric protein with ligand-independent tyrosine kinase activity that acts through different signaling pathways, such as RAS/MEK/ERK which are related to the proliferative effect, and PI3K/ AKT y JAK3/STAT3 which are involved in cell survival (16,30,31).

Up to eleven different variants of ALK chromosomic rearrangement have been described. Echinoderm microtubule associated protein like-4 (EML4) represents the most frequent partner for ALK in lung cancer. Figure 1 shows the general...
distribution of EML4-ALK rearrangement depending on different exons of EML4 present in the fusion forms. Other partners for ALK are TFG and KIF5B (30,32,33).

The presence of ALK rearrangements has more frequently been associated with certain clinical and pathological features, including adenocarcinoma histology (especially cribiform, signet-ring cells and solid patterns), never or light smoking history and male gender (Table 1). More importantly, wild type (WT) status for EGFR and KRAS mutations represents a more suitable criteria for ALK screening since simultaneous overlapping with other oncogenic driver mutations is uncommon (37,38). When considering these features,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Clinical and pathological features</th>
<th>General frequencies</th>
<th>ALK + results by subgroups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soda 2007 (11), n=33</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>27.3% vs. 72.7%</td>
<td>11.1% vs. 8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese population</td>
<td></td>
<td>54.5% vs. 45.4%</td>
<td>5.5% vs. 13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66% vs. 33%</td>
<td>9.15% in both groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inamura 2008 (17), n=149</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>43.6% vs. 56.4%</td>
<td>4.6% vs. 2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese population</td>
<td></td>
<td>67.4% vs. 32.6%</td>
<td>3.4% vs. 0%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54% vs. 46%</td>
<td>2.5% vs. 4.3%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>35% vs. 65%</td>
<td>0% vs. 4.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japanese population</td>
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<td>65% vs. 35%</td>
<td>2% vs. 0%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50.6% vs. 49.4%</td>
<td>2.9% vs. 2.6%</td>
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<td>Inamura 2009 (20), n=363</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>41.5% vs. 58.1%</td>
<td>5.7% vs. 3.4%</td>
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<td>Japanese population</td>
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<td>69.7% vs. 30.3%</td>
<td>4.3% vs. 0%</td>
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<td>53% vs. 47%</td>
<td>3.7% vs. 5.1%</td>
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<td>Shaw 2009 (12), n=141</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>60% vs. 40%</td>
<td>23.7% vs. 6.1%</td>
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<td>Clinical selection</td>
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<td>63% vs. 37%</td>
<td>17.9% vs. 5.8%</td>
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<td>66% vs. 34%</td>
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<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>53% vs. 47%</td>
<td>8.5% vs. 0.8%</td>
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<td>78.6% vs. 21.4%</td>
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<td>50.4% vs. 49.6%</td>
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<td>15.4% vs. 6%</td>
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<td>US</td>
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<td>100% vs. 0%</td>
<td>5.6% vs. 0%</td>
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<td>25.9% vs. 74.1%</td>
<td>11.8% vs. 8.4%</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>Martelli 2009 (21), n=120</td>
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<td>6.25% vs. 7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy, Spain</td>
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<td>52.5% vs. 47.5%</td>
<td>4.76% vs. 10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>80% vs. 20%</td>
<td>8.3% vs. 4.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambridge 2010 (23), n=66</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>60% vs. 40%</td>
<td>39.4% vs. 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian, Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
<td>92.4% vs. 7.5%</td>
<td>21.3% vs. 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5M, 9F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salido 2011 (24), n=107</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>15% vs. 85%</td>
<td>0% vs. 3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain and US</td>
<td></td>
<td>65% vs. 35%</td>
<td>2.8% vs. 2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>77% vs. 23%</td>
<td>2.43% vs. 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paik 2011 (35), n=465</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>37.7% vs. 62.3%</td>
<td>5.8% vs. 3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese population</td>
<td></td>
<td>58.1% vs. 41.9%</td>
<td>6.8% vs. 0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>68.2% vs. 31.8%</td>
<td>3.6% vs. 5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi 2011 (36), n=101</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese population</td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>5M, 5F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwak 2010 (13), n=82</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>76% vs. 24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molecular selection</td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>96% vs. 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>52% vs. 48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaw 2011 (30), n=412</td>
<td>Never smokers vs. smokers, Adenocarcinoma vs. other, Male vs. female, Age</td>
<td>42.5% vs. 54.5%</td>
<td>40% vs. 9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molecular selection</td>
<td></td>
<td>91.5% vs. 8.5%</td>
<td>23.3% vs. 11.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>41.5% vs. 58.5%</td>
<td>27% vs. 19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n, number of patients included; NR, not reported; vs., versus.
especially molecular selection, the likelihood of detecting an ALK rearrangement increases from 2-10% in the general population to 24-40% in this molecularly selected population, according to different series (see References and data in Table 1). Thus, the criteria for ALK screening should include the prior negative result of screening for EGFR and KRAS mutations, primarily avoiding the use of clinical and pathological characteristics (Figure 2A). Importantly, we should consider that frequencies of ALK rearrangements in other subgroup of patients, such as heavy smokers and other histology subtypes different to adenocarcinoma, are still only anecdotic.

Currently, three different techniques are available for detecting ALK rearrangement, though which of these is the most convenient is still a matter of debate. Consideration needs to be given to the characteristics required for a diagnostic tool to become the technique of choice for large scale screening programs, such as high sensitivity and especially high specificity to detect real true positive cases and thus avoid the need for additional procedures. Moreover, this technique needs to be cost-effective and widely available (Table 2). However, when considering the specific use of the ALK inhibitor crizotinib in ALK-positive patients, fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) has been considered to be the gold standard for detecting ALK rearrangements, using the ALK Vysis LSI ALK Dual Color

**Figure 2** Algorithm for ALK screening in lung cancer patients. (A) Selection of patients to be included in the screening, based on clinical-pathological and molecular criteria. (B) Proposal for different techniques to be used in a large screening program. EGFR, Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor; PPV, positive predictive value; RT-PCR, Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction; TN, true negative; TP, true positive.
Break Apart Rearrangement Probe (Abbott Molecular, Abbott Park, IL). Other regulatory agencies admit the use of other diagnostic techniques, as in Japan and Europe. FISH confers higher sensitivity and specificity when compared to real-time-PCR (RT-PCR) and immunohistochemistry (IHC). However, FISH is not widely available and is less cost-effective than other techniques. The algorithm these authors propose would include the use of IHC for the first analysis; results scored as 0 and 3 could be considered as true negative and true positive, respectively. However, for results scored as 2 and 1, a confirmatory test should be performed since these two groups accumulate the highest rates of false negative and false positive results (Table 3). This algorithm includes confirmation by FISH and RT-PCR (Figure 2B).

Table 2 Advantages and disadvantages of different techniques used to detect ALK rearrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>RT-PCR</th>
<th>FISH</th>
<th>IHC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td>High sensitivity</td>
<td>High specificity</td>
<td>Easy reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quick method</td>
<td>PETT is suitable for this technique</td>
<td>Quick method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Possibility of detection of new promoters</td>
<td>Lower cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gold standard technique for the clinical trials using ALK inhibitors</td>
<td>Possibility of detection of new variants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Detection of all rearrangements, no specific promoter is required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Widely available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commercialized antibodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
<td>High quality and enough RNA quantity is required</td>
<td>Lower sensitivity</td>
<td>The fusion gene is indirectly detected by the protein expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficult to obtain RNA from small biopsies</td>
<td>Expertise in interpreting the results</td>
<td>Risk of false negative results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potential degradation of RNA in PETT</td>
<td>Risk of false negative results</td>
<td>Results can vary according to type and dilution of the antibody and reading method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No new promoters are detected</td>
<td>No widely available</td>
<td>Compared to other tumors, the protein expression can be weaker in lung cancer (risk of false negative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No widely available</td>
<td>More time consuming</td>
<td>Reading method has been adapted from EGFR and HER2 score systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher cost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PETT, paraffin embedded tumor tissue.

Current status of ALK inhibition in lung cancer: crizotinib trials (Table 4)

Since clinical practice currently differs from country to country, it is necessary to review data from different clinical trials to understand these differences, in particular how access to different drugs depends on patients’ regional backgrounds.

Crizotinib (PF-2341066; XALKori, Pfizer, New York, NY) is an oral small-molecule with tyrosine kinase inhibitor (TKI) properties of both MET and ALK (46). The fast approval of crizotinib in the US was based on the results of a phase I trial expansion cohort which included ALK-positive NSCLC patients (13) in which a total of 82 patients were treated. This trial demonstrated that crizotinib was an effective agent in this subset of patients with an overall response rate of 57% (56% confirmed partial responses and 33% stable disease). The estimated probability of 6 months progression-free survival (PFS) was 72%. Additionally, crizotinib was confirmed as a safe drug. The majority of adverse events were grade 1 and 2 gastrointestinal disorders (13). Based on these results, the FDA approved the use of crizotinib in NSCLC patients harboring ALK rearrangements independently of any prior treatment the patient had received. A more recent analysis of patients included in this expansion cohort (n=119) confirmed the previous findings: response rate was 61% and response occurred independently of clinical features such as age, gender, number of previous therapies and performance status. The median PFS was 10 months, and the estimated overall survival rates at 6 and 12 months were...
Table 3 Summary of trials reporting the results of different techniques used for detecting ALK rearrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Positive results for ALK</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
<th>Other interesting data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soda</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>9.10%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Detection of other variants, utility of cytology samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>4.80%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inamura</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>149 adeno (221 NSCLC)</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>3.4% in adeno; 2.3% in NSCLC</td>
<td>IHC, DAKO ALK1 1:20</td>
<td>100% of concordance with IHC; 2 variant 1 y 3 variant 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Variant 1 in a mixed adeno (papillary and BAC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Variant 2 in acinar adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinmura</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>2.60%</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No other variants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Variant 1 y variant 2 (2 cases)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Both positive results in adeno and smoking history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations, one case associated with p53 mutation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inamura</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>253 adeno (363 NSCLC)</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>IHC, DAKO ALK1 1:20</td>
<td>4.3% in adeno; 3.1% in NSCLC</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>5 cases in adeno and 0 cases in other histologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Predominance in acinar adeno (54.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Predominance in never smokers (63.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations, one case associated with p53 mutation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IHC SE 100%, SP N/R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wong</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>Chinese, no other criteria</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>6.2% adeno, 4.9% in NSCLC</td>
<td>IHC, DAKO ALK1 1:100</td>
<td>All cases adeno, 90,9% never smokers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations, one case associated with p53 mutation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>EGFR and KRAS mutations are negative, the proportion of ALK positive results is 1.8% in never smoker males and 6.5% in never smoker females</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaw</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>Clinical selection</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>IHC, DAKO ALK1, RT-PCR</td>
<td>At least 2 clinical criteria for selection: Asian population, adenocarcinoma, female, never smoking history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More frequent in male, adenocarcinoma (predominance in signet-ring cells), younger patients and never smoking history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Similar response to chemotherapy and lower response to TKI compared to EGFR and KRAS-mutant patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>89% of ALK positive results in stage IV NSCLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodig</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>Clinical and pathological selection</td>
<td>DAKO ALK1 ALK1 1:2</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>FISH</td>
<td>ALK positive results more frequent in younger patients, solid and signet-ring adenocarcinoma and more advanced stages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IHC SE 80 an 40% with and without tiramin amplification vs. FISH S 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exclusive with EGFR mutations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martelli</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Italy, Spain</td>
<td>DAKO ALK1 ALK1, ALKc (SP8) y 5A4</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>FISH, RT-PCR</td>
<td>IHC SE 0% and SP 0% (ALK detection in areas distant to the tumor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boland</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Clinical and pathological selection</td>
<td>DAKO ALK1, 2% ALK1 1:100</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>FISH, RT-PCR</td>
<td>SE100% and SP100% (validated in an independent cohort of 335 NSCLC cases)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 (continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Number of samples</strong></th>
<th><strong>Population</strong></th>
<th><strong>Technique</strong></th>
<th><strong>Positive results for ALK</strong></th>
<th><strong>Confirmation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Other interesting data</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Takeuchi 2009 (32)</td>
<td>Japanese, no other criteria</td>
<td>ALK1, 5A4</td>
<td>6.15%</td>
<td>RT-PCR</td>
<td>IHC SE 100% and SP 100% for both techniques. IAEP method used for interpreting the IHC results. IAEP and PCR improve the detection rates for new ALK variants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mino-Kenudson 2010 (40)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>DAKO ALK1 ALK1 1:50, 1:2</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>FISH, RT-PCR</td>
<td>ALK-protein expression is lower in lung adenocarcinoma, risk of FN results. Use of new Ab at a higher concentrations improves SE with no effect in SP. ALK1 SE 67% y SP 97% vs. D5F3 SE 100% y SP 99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ros-Camidge 2010 (23)</td>
<td>Caucasian, Hispanic</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>21.3% (19.7%)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Positive results in 100% adenocarcinoma and 60% never smokers. 1 case with concomitant EGFR mutation (exon 20). 0% concomitant KRAS mutations. No concomitant MET amplification. FISH SE and SP improve to 100% when at least 4 tumor areas are analyzed. ALK positive result in 54% of cases when sampling tumor area vs. 6.8% in areas adjacent to the tumor area, in ALK positive tumors. ALK positive result in 6% of cases when sampling tumor area vs. 6% in areas adjacent to the tumor area, in ALK negative tumors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwar 2010 (13)</td>
<td>Molecular selection</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>RT-PCR, IHQ (retrospective)</td>
<td>Clinical benefit of crizotinib: RR 57%, SD 33%, PFS rate at 6 m72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salido 2011 (24)</td>
<td>Spain, US, no other criteria</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>IHQ, DAKO ALK1</td>
<td>2 cases EML4-ALK, 1 case ±ALK. IHC positive in 2 cases EML4-ALK and negative in ±ALK case. FISH: 63% increase GCN y 17% ALK amplification. Unknown predictive value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paik 2011 (35)</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>IHQ, 5A4 1:30</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>FISH positive in 19/453 (4.2%). FISH is concordant with IHC when score 3, 1 and 0. FISH is variable with score 2. SE and SP of IHC 100% and 95.8%, respectively. FP IHC 1.5%. Exclusion of EGFR and KRAS mutations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yi 2011 (36)</td>
<td>Japanese, clinical selection</td>
<td>DAKO ALK11 1:100</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>IHC SE 90% and SP 97.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 (continued)
Table 3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of samples</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Positive results for ALK</th>
<th>Confirmation</th>
<th>Other interesting data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaw 2011 (41)</td>
<td>92 ALK+ vs. 320 ALK-</td>
<td>Molecular selection</td>
<td>FISH Vysis</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>RT-PCR, IHQ (retrospective)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ALK positive results are more frequent in male, adenocarcinoma, younger patients, never smokers and Caucasian population.

Adeno, adenocarcinoma; ALK+, presence of ALK rearrangement; BAC, bronquioloalveolar carcinoma; FN, false negative; FP, false positive; GCN, gene copy number; IHC, immunohistochemistry; m, months; N/R, no reported; RT-PCR, reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction; PFS, progression-free survival; RR, response rate; SE, sensitivity; SD, stable disease; SP, specificity; TKI, tyrosin kinase inhibitors. Brand names for different antibodies and probes: DAKO Mouse Monoclonal Anti-Human CD246, ALK Protein Clone ALK1 (Dako, Dermank and CA); D5F3 Rabbit monoclonal anti-human CD246, clones D5F3 and D9E4, Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA; 5A4 Mouse monoclonal anti CD246, clone 5A4, Novocastra, Newcastle, UK; LSI ALK (Abbott) ALK Vysis LSI ALK Dual Color, Break Apart Rearrangement Probe; Abbott Molecular, Abbott Park, IL.

Table 4 Summary of the clinical trials reporting the efficacy results with crizotinib in ALK positive patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>pI (12,42)</th>
<th>pII (43,44)</th>
<th>pIII (45)</th>
<th>Chemotherapy (PEM+DOC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>crizotinib</td>
<td>crizotinib</td>
<td>crizotinib</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>crizotinib</td>
<td>Chemotherapy (PEM+DOC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall RR (%)</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of response (median, weeks)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of treatment (median, weeks or cycles)</td>
<td>32 w</td>
<td>22 w</td>
<td>11 cycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months PFS</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mPFS (median, months)</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>8.1 (6.8-9.7)</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mOS</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OS rates 6 m, 12 m</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>90%, 81%</td>
<td>NR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DOC, docetaxel; m, months; m-PFS, median progression-free survival; mOS, median overall survival; n, number of patients included; PEM, pemetrexed; NR, no reported; RR, response rate; w, weeks.

90% and 81%, respectively (42).

Similar results were obtained from patients included in the PROFILE 1005, a phase II single-arm study to evaluate the efficacy and safety of crizotinib in pretreated NSCLC patients harboring ALK rearrangements. A total of 136 patients received crizotinib in second line (9.6%), third line (27.2%) and forth line (27.2%). Thirty percent of patients had received more than 4 previous lines of treatment. This study demonstrated an overall response rate of 50% for a heavily pretreated population. Except for Asian patients, no other clinical characteristics influenced response, with similar benefit regardless of smoking history, performance status and previous treatment exposure (43).

Notably, standard, second line, single-agent treatments for unseleted patients with advanced NSCLC achieve an overall response rate of less than 10% and PFS of less than 3 months (47,48).

An up-to-date analysis for patients included in the PROFILE 1005 trial, in which more than 900 patients were treated, has been reported (44). The first 261 patients had received treatment with a median duration of 48 weeks and had been considered as mature population. The results were consistent with those previously reported. The overall response rate was 60% (54-66%) with median duration of response of 46 weeks (35-54 weeks) and PFS was 8.1 months (6.8-9.7 months). Fifteen percent of patients discontinued crizotinib and 10% had a dose reduction due to an adverse event. The most frequent adverse events were vision disorders (54%), nausea (51%), diarrhea (44%), vomiting (44%), and constipation (37%), which were mostly grade 1 and 2 (44).

Since most of ALK-positive patients currently receive crizotinib at some point during treatment, in the absence of data from a randomized controlled trial, the effect
of this drug on overall survival remains unclear. Thus, a retrospective comparison to evaluate the impact of crizotinib on overall survival has been reported. Patients with advanced NSCLC from 3 patient cohorts were included in this analysis: 82 ALK-positive patients treated with crizotinib from the expansion cohort of a phase I trial of crizotinib, 36 ALK-positive controls who did not receive crizotinib and 253 ALK-negative/EGFR-negative patients. Among the ALK-positive patients treated with crizotinib, median overall survival from initiation of crizotinib was not reached and overall survival did not differ with age, gender, smoking exposure, or ethnic background. Overall survival in the ALK-positive crizotinib-naïve controls was similar to that in the entire cohort. However, overall survival was significantly improved in patients receiving crizotinib as second or third line therapy, compared with crizotinib-naïve patients receiving any other second line therapy (49).

Patient-reported outcomes of disease- and treatment-related symptoms, quality of life (QoL), and health status have been reported in the PROFILE 1005 trial (50). Data for symptom scores and QoL from the first 136 patients for whom efficacy and safety data are available have been presented (43,50,51). The results indicate that patients receiving crizotinib presented clinically meaningful and statistical (≥10-point change and P≤0.05, respectively) improvements in some symptoms from baseline. There were clinically meaningful improvements in pain, dyspnea, and cough from cycle 2, and in fatigue from cycle 5, and these improvements were maintained through subsequent cycles (49). Moreover, global QoL was maintained throughout treatment with crizotinib with clinically meaningful improvement at cycle 7 (51). Significant reductions in pain (50), dyspnea, cough, fatigue, insomnia, and alopecia symptom scales were maintained with therapy (51). Improvement in mean QoL was also reported but changes were not clinically significant, indicating that QoL was stable with more cycles of treatment (50). Clinical meaningful improvements were observed for physical, role and social functioning and for global QoL (51,52).

Recently, results for the PROFILE 1007 study have been reported (45). This large phase III trial (n=347) compared crizotinib vs. chemotherapy in ALK-positive patients previously treated with a prior chemotherapy regimen including a platinum-doublet. Patients were randomized to receive crizotinib or chemotherapy (pemetrexed or docetaxel, depending on the previous therapy). Those patients assigned to the chemotherapy arm were allowed to receive crizotinib when progression occurred. This crossover occurred in 62% of patients initially assigned to receive chemotherapy. The study met its primary endpoint, with a difference in PFS in favor of crizotinib [7.7 vs. 3 m, HR (95% CI), 0.49 (0.37-0.64), P<0.0001]. Response rate significantly favored crizotinib, with 65% of responses in the crizotinib arm vs. 20% in the chemotherapy arm (pemetrexed 29% and docetaxel 6.9%, P<0.0001). Interim analysis of overall survival (when 28% of survival events had occurred) showed no statistically significant difference between crizotinib and chemotherapy with a preliminary estimated median OS of 20.3 vs. 22.8 months; HR 3.02; 95% CI 0.68-1.5, P=0.5394), but not adjusted for crossover. The most frequent adverse events related to crizotinib were visual disturbances (59%), diarrhea (53%), nausea (52%), vomiting (44%), and elevated transaminases (36%). Frequent adverse events with chemotherapy were nausea (35%), fatigue (29%), decreased appetite (21%), and alopecia (20%). The incidence of grade 3-4 adverse events was similar in both arms (31%). Duration of treatment was longer for crizotinib vs. chemotherapy with a median number of administered cycles of 11 vs. 4, respectively (45). Crizotinib offered clinically meaningful and statistical (P<0.001) improvements in some symptoms from baseline. There were improvements in cough, dyspnea, fatigue, alopecia, insomnia, and pain. Moreover, global QoL as well as physical, role, emotional, cognitive and social functioning favored crizotinib over chemotherapy (P<0.001) (45).

This data clearly establish that crizotinib is superior to standard second line chemotherapy, usually with docetaxel and pemetrexed which were the comparators in this trial. This superiority was confirmed in terms of prolonging PFS and improving response rate, as well as improving patient symptoms and QoL.

Results from the currently ongoing PROFILE 1014 study (ClinicalTrials.gov identifier NCT01154140) comparing first line crizotinib vs. chemotherapy are expected to elucidate whether, mirroring the experience with EGFR-TKIs in EGFR-mutant lung cancer, the ALK inhibitor is a better strategy when administered upfront (53-57).

### Beyond crizotinib

Despite the good activity and tolerability profile of crizotinib for treating ALK-positive patients, several molecules have been being tested to evaluate newer regimens with a more desirable toxicity profile and more convenient administration schedules for patients, though...
without jeopardizing clinical activity. Moreover, patients with initial good responses to crizotinib invariably develop resistance. Therefore, further therapies are required when resistance occurs.

Based on the previous experience with EGFR-mutant NSCLC, mutations affecting the kinase domain of ALK were expected to mediate resistance to crizotinib. In fact, the first report of the presence of such mutations was published along with the first results of crizotinib activity in ALK-positive NSCLC (13,58). The presence of two different kinase domain mutations, L1196M and C1156Y, occurred in different clones from the same patient. Other resistant mutations have been reported to date (L1152R, G1269A, S1206Y, G1202R and 1151 Tins) with further mutations already identified. Collectively these mutations can mediate crizotinib resistance in ALK-positive tumors (59-61). These findings are in contrast with the experience in EGFR, in which resistance is mainly mediated by the emergence of a predominant mutation, T790M, and other secondary mutations are rare (62,63). Furthermore, different ALK mutations identified so far have shown a differential spectrum of sensitivity to crizotinib and other ALK inhibitors, suggesting that not all the newer ALK inhibitors may be equally effective in treating ALK-positive patients who develop resistance to crizotinib (60,64,65).

Other mechanisms implicated in ALK resistance have been described. These include, firstly, the copy number gain of the ALK gene fusion, which occurs simultaneously with resistant mutations (61,66). Secondly, the presence of other oncogenes that may become active via mutation or other mechanism and coexist with ALK, such as EGFR, HER2 or KIT (59-61,63). Thirdly the emergence of a separate clone that harbors other oncogenes different to ALK, such as EGFR or KRAS (61). Additionally, the underexposure of the Central Nervous System (CNS) to crizotinib may partly underlie this resistance and warrants consideration for the development of newer ALK inhibitors that can attain optimal concentration in the cerebrospinal fluid (67).

LDK378 is a next generation ALK inhibitor able to inhibit both ALK and the C1156Y variant. Results of the first in-human phase 1 trial have been recently reported (68). Fifty-six ALK-positive patients were included in the dose-finding phase, starting at a dose of 50 mg/day. Twenty-seven patients had lung cancer (11 ALK-positive lung cancers). LDK378 was administered orally once-daily, starting at 50 mg/day. Of 47 patients evaluable for response, 24 (51%) responded and all responses were in ALK-positive NSCLC patients. Twenty one (81%) of 26 patients who had progressed to crizotinib and were treated at a dose level of ≥400 mg/day responded. The maximum tolerated dose was 750 mg/day. Dose limiting toxicities included diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, dehydration, and ALT elevation. The most frequent grade 3 side effect was diarrhea, which occurred in 5 (9%) patients. However, the most common side effects (all grades) were nausea (59%), vomiting (54%) and diarrhea (48%). Some activity has been reported in CNS metastases, which suggests good penetration in the cerebrospinal fluid.

CH5424804 is a next generation ALK inhibitor able to inhibit ALK as well as the C1156Y and L1196M variants. Recently communicated results of a phase I/II trial demonstrated very promising activity in crizotinib-naïve ALK-positive NSCLC with a response rate of 85% and range of duration of treatment from 2-46 weeks. Thirty four patients were enrolled in the trial and CH5424804 was administered at 300 mg twice-daily. The majority of patients remain on treatment at the time of this communication. The main treatment-related adverse events were ALT, AST and bilirubin elevation (7, 6 and 3 patients, respectively), neutropenia (5 patients, 2 grade 3), rash (4 patients), nausea (4 patients), and myalgia (3 patients) which were mostly grade 1 except for neutropenia (2 cases were grade 3). Only one patient presented a treatment-related eye disorder and was grade 1. No dose reductions were necessary due to side effects. Activity in CNS metastases was shown (69).

AP26113 is a novel, synthetic, orally-active TKI that inhibits mutant forms of ALK and EGFR, as well as TKI-resistant forms such as L1196M (ALK) and T790M (EGFR) (66). This drug does not inhibit the native form of EGFR. Results of the first in-human phase 1/2 trial have been recently reported (70). A total of 34 patients were included in the dose-finding phase, starting at a dose of 30 mg/day. Twenty-seven patients had lung cancer (11 ALK-positive patients, 11 EGFR-mutant patients and 5 WT for ALK and EGFR). Nine ALK-positive patients were crizotinib-resistant, while 2 were crizotinib-naïve. Among the ALK patients, 8 partial responses were recorded, 6 among the crizotinib-resistant patients and 2 among crizotinib-naïve patients. The initial doses of 60 and 90 mg/day were sufficient to achieve some of these partial responses. The more frequent side effects were nausea (32%), diarrhea (18%, 3% of grade 3), loss of appetite (12%), fatigue (26%, 3% of grade 3), and vomiting (12%). Four (12%) patients presented pneumonia, in all cases grade 3. Notably, no rash or visual disturbances were reported. Similarly to previous next generation ALK inhibitors, activity in CNS disease has been reported. The phase 2 expansion will include 4 cohorts: ALK-positive lung cancers.
 naïve to crizotinib, crizotinib-resistant ALK-positive lung cancers, EGFR mutant lung cancers resistant to reversible TKIs, and other cancers harboring ALK abnormalities.

Another strategy to try to overcome ALK resistance consists of targeting the chaperone pathway. Results of Heat-Shock-Protein 90 (HSP90) inhibition in a cohort of ALK-positive patients have been reported (71). AUY992 is a potent, non-geldanamycin, HSP90 inhibitor. Its activity as a once-weekly, 1-hour infusion has been tested in a specific cohort of 22 ALK-positive lung cancer patients. The overall response rate was 32%, with a disease control rate of 59% and an estimated PFS at 18 weeks of 35.8%. The overall response rate in ALK-positive crizotinib-naïve patients (8) was 50%, with a disease control rate of 100% and an estimated PFS of 62.5% at 18 weeks. The most frequent treatment related side effects were eye disorders (74%), diarrhea (68%), nausea (39%), vomiting (26%), and fatigue (21%). Grade 3-4 side effects included eye disorders (7%), diarrhea (6%), and fatigue (4%). AUY922 had an acceptable safety profile. Activity was demonstrated both in crizotinib-naïve and crizotinib-resistant patients.

Other ALK inhibitors, as well as HSP90 inhibitors and different combinations are being currently tested in clinical trials to evaluate the safety profile and the activity in patients harboring ALK rearrangement (Table 5).

### Conclusions

Lung cancer harboring ALK rearrangements has emerged as a relevant subtype of this disease, based both on its particular natural history and on the success of crizotinib in efficaciously treating this specific population. However, some challenges remain, such as a how to better manage adverse events related to treatment, more convenient therapeutic schedules for our patients, how to effectively treat CNS disease and overcome or delay the emergence of resistance. Newer strategies including next generation ALK inhibitors or novel drugs may help to address some of these questions.

### Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ALKi, ALK inhibitor; C-N, crizotinib-naïve; C-R, crizotinib-resistant; HSP90i, Heat Shock Protein 90 inhibitor.


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Introduction
Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths worldwide and non–small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounts for 80% of all lung cancer cases (1). The standard first-line therapy for patients with advanced NSCLC was a platinum-based doublet combination chemotherapy but modest progress has been made with the use of chemotherapy, and additional treatment strategies are needed. So cancer drug development has shifted from cytotoxic, nonspecific chemotherapies to molecularly targeted, rationally designed drugs with greater efficacy and lower toxicities. For this challenge, the best knowledge of cancer biology is required. Nowadays, we are able to identify different genetic changes that allow us to consider NSCLC as a major disease which can be molecularly reclassified into several subsets of diseases (2). RAS gene family members encode small GTPases that activate various signaling pathways involved in proliferation, differentiation and cell survival (Figure 1). RAS proteins function as molecular switches that cycle between a GDP-bound inactive state and GTP-bound active state. Ras proto-oncogenes are the most frequent mutated genes in NSCLC, with mutations detected in about 25% of all tumors, mainly adenocarcinoma subtype (3).

KRAS mutant NSCLC, a new opportunity for the synthetic lethality therapeutic approach
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Abstract: K-RAS accounts for 90% of RAS mutations in lung adenocarcinomas, the most commonly mutated oncogene in NSCLC, with mutations detected in about 25% of all tumors. Direct inhibition of KRAS has proven clinically challenging. So far, no successful targeted therapy has been developed and remains an elusive target for cancer therapy. Despite significant efforts, currently there are no drugs directly targeting mutated KRAS. Thus, new strategies have emerged for targeting RAS including the use of synthetic lethality. A specific knowledge of individual tumor molecular abnormalities that result in oncogene-specific “synthetic lethal” interactions will allow the rationale to combine promising targeted therapies for KRAS-mutated NSCLC. In this article, we review the new approach based on testing drugs or combinations of agents that work downstream of activated K-RAS.

Keywords: RAS oncogene family; KRAS mutant; NSCLC; selumetinib; synthetic lethality

Submitted Jan 18, 2013. Accepted for publication Feb 27, 2013.
doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.07
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2013.02.07
speed up GTPase activity, mutations at that position slow GTP transition to GDP increasing GTP levels. Mutations at codon 61 affect the energy gradient needed to transform substrate (GTP) into product (GDP) because wild-type residue at that position stabilizes the transition state for GTP hydrolysis. So, it is critical to know specific site and biochemical effects when a K-Ras mutation is diagnosed because pharmacological modulation is completely different.

Although KRAS mutations have been widely hypothesized to be related to direct tobacco exposure, they do occur in approximately 15% of lung adenocarcinomas from never-smokers (4). Thus, KRAS tumor status cannot be easily predicted on the basis of smoking history alone. KRAS transversion mutations (G/T or G/C) are more common in former or current smokers and transition mutations (G/A) are more common in patients who never smoked cigarettes.

KRAS mutations have been associated with a poor prognosis such as a lower expectancy for survival (5), reduced benefit from adjuvant chemotherapy, they predict resistance towards EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (6), and obtain less clinical benefits from chemotherapy compared with the general NSCLC population (7).

**Treatment of KRAS mutated NSCLC: an unresolved issue**

Direct inhibition of KRAS has proven clinically challenging. Although KRAS mutations were identified in lung cancer nearly 30 years ago (8), no successful targeted therapy has been developed and remains an elusive target for cancer therapy (9). So far, there is no yet effective treatment for patients with these types of tumors although we consider that K-RAS is not a unique target but a myriad of targets that combine absence of affinity for a catalyst (GAP) or

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**Figure 1** The major RAS effector pathways. CDC42, cell division cycle 42; DAG, diacylglycerol; FOX, forkhead transcription factor; GAP, GTPase-activating protein; GEF, guanine nucleotide exchange factor; IKK, IκB kinase; IP3, inositol-1,4,5-trisphosphate; mTORC, mTOR complex; NF-κB, nuclear factor-κB; PDK1, phosphoinositide-dependent kinase 1; PKC, protein kinase C; PLA, phospholipase A; PLCε, phospholipase Cε; PLD, phospholipase D; RALGDS, RAL guanine nucleotide dissociation stimulator; RHEB, RAS homologue enriched in brain; RIN1, RAS and RAB interactor 1; TIAM1, cell lymphoma invasion and metastasis 1.
decreasing affinity for GTP (P-Loop impairing) as well as other biochemical complexities.

Until now, all efforts to inhibit mutant KRAS in NSCLC have failed and few compounds have been assessed by clinical trial. One of the reasons to explain this point is because RAS enzyme kinetics is hard to inhibit due to affinity to substrates, catalyst proteins and sequential conformational changes after first signal that occurs inside this multi-target protein. In fact, the lack of specificity of KAS inhibitors could be related to this biochemical complexity that could be targeted at different levels: membrane attachment, P-Loop and thermodynamic requirements.

Various potent and selective inhibitors of RAS function were developed in the 1990s, with the aim to prevent association of RAS with the inner face of cell membrane (10). First, farnesyl transferase inhibitors avoid a critical post-translational modification in pre-RAS protein blocking isoprenylation. As farnesyl residues are needed to attach K-RAS to membrane it was hypothesized that this sort of inhibitors could inhibit RAS proteins (11). In fact, these inhibitors blocked RAS-dependent oncogenic activity “in vitro” and in preclinical animal models, but unfortunately failed in the clinical practice and showed little clinical efficacy because of a sequential post-translational modification at pre-Ras that compensates first steps of K-RAS maturation (12).

Although effective KRAS inhibitors are not currently available, genetic approaches have identified novel drug targets that are essential for RAS cellular localization and function, raising hope that new inhibitors of specific biochemical functionality of K-RAS will soon be developed.

**Rationale for a new treatment strategy for K-RAS mutated NSCLC**

A different approach has been based on testing drugs or combinations of agents that work downstream of activated K-RAS. If you take into account that different KRAS-mutant tumors can activate several signalling pathways, a new treatment strategy for KRAS-mutant NSCLC should be based on the combination of targeted agents that inhibit downstream effectors of K-RAS dependent-tumors according to the “RAS-ome” (Figures 2, 3). In this way, a specific knowledge of individual tumor molecular abnormalities that result in oncogene-specific “synthetic lethal” interactions will allow the rationale to combine promising targeted therapies for KRAS-mutated NSCLC.

**Targeting HER pathway**

Epiregulin (EREG) is ligand of the EGF receptor/EGFR and ERBB4 and is a putative transcriptional target of
mutated KRAS dependent signaling that contributes to an aggressive phenotype and could be a promising therapeutic target in oncogenic KRAS-driven NSCLC (13) (Figure 2).

**Targeting MEK pathway**

Initial efforts focused on proteins downstream K-Ras at the RAS/RAF/mitogen-activated protein kinase (MEK)/extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) signaling pathway. The MAPK pathway converges at the MEK1/MEK2 kinases, for which the only known substrates are the ERK1/ERK2 kinases (Figures 2, 3). In fact, MEK inhibition would block ERK signalling irrespective of the upstream stimulus.

MEK1 and MEK2 are dual specificity kinases, RAF-phosphorylated, that phosphorylate the tyrosine and threonine residues on ERK1 and 2, leading to proliferation and migration activation. Mutations in RAS or RAF lead to a sustained oncogenic signal and predict response to MEK inhibition in laboratory models.

Selumetinib (AZD6244, ARRY-142886; AstraZeneca, Alderley Park, Cheshire, UK) is an orally available, potent, selective, non-ATP competitive inhibitor of MEK1/MEK2 kinases (IC50 14 nM for MEK1). Preclinical data from KRAS-mutant NSCLC tumor xenografts showed that selumetinib significantly suppressed tumor growth (14), especially in tumors harboring RAS mutations (15). Initial clinical studies of selumetinib showed target inhibition and tumor responses (16). A phase I trial demonstrating tolerability and preliminary efficacy of selumetinib at 100 mg twice daily (17), identified an acneiform rash as the main dose-limiting toxicity (DLT). However, treatment with selumetinib alone, showed little clinical efficacy in a phase II clinical trial in unselected pre-treated patients with NSCLC when selumetinib was compared with pemetrexed (18).

Results of additional preclinical in-vivo studies have shown that the combination of selumetinib and docetaxel leads to greater tumor-growth inhibition or regression, and
apo
terability (19,20). This combination showed a manageable
terability profile in advanced solid tumors (21) in phase
I. With this rationale, a randomised, double-blind, phase
II clinical trial combining docetaxel (75 mg/m² on day 1
of a 21-day cycle) with or without oral selumetinib (75 mg
twice daily in a 21-day cycle) in KRAS-mutant NSCLC
patients after first-line progression (22). Mature data
evidenced a promising trend in overall survival for patients
treated at experimental arm (median OS 9.4 vs. 5.2 mo; HR
0.80; 80% CI, 0.56-1.14; one-sided P=0.21). Additionally,
median progression-free survival was statistically significant
(5.3 vs. 2.1 mo, HR 0.58; 80% CI, 0.42-0.79; one-sided
P=0.014), and an impressive response rate around 37% in
the combination group compared with 0% in the docetaxel
alone group (P<0.0001). In post-hoc analyses, there were
also improvements in lung cancer symptoms and all these
benefits might be attributable to the cytoreductive effects of
the treatment. However, a higher rate of febrile neutropenia
(18% vs. 0%), diarrhea, vomiting, stomatitis, and dry skin
with selumetinib plus docetaxel were communicated.

Obviously, this is a phase II study and requires further
validation in a large phase III clinical trial. Furthermore, the
study has potential limitations such as the small sample size
and the absence of independent confirmation of progression-
free survival and tumor response. Moreover, the control
group of the study who received docetaxel alone clearly had
poor evolution, lower than expected in previous clinical trials
in unselected patients receiving docetaxel at second line
setting (23). Furthermore, a new question emerges because
poor efficacy of docetaxel in K-RAS mutant NSCLC patients
should be investigated. Conversely, the potential synergy of
docetaxel and selumetinib remains unclear and additional
studies are needed. In-vivo mechanistic drug sequencing
studies have shown that administration of selumetinib after
docetaxel, rather than before, induced more apoptosis. This
finding could have important clinical implications for any
dosing schedule of this combination. This contrasts with the
majority of previous studies in NSCLC, in which addition
of a targeted agent to chemotherapy has not resulted in
improved efficacy.

Another important issue is the therapeutic effect of
specific KRAS mutations, to define a subpopulation of
KRAS-mutant NSCLC in which the combination of selumetinib and docetaxel leads to improved efficacy. Previous studies showed that KRAS mutation subtype seems to be an important predictor of treatment outcome (24).

Wide genomic approaches have evidenced that it is usual
for many mutations to co-exist. In this regard, K-RAS
mutations in NSCLC patients could be co-expressed with
additional sequence alterations. Thus, a recent study done
in mice showed that overlapping mutations at p53 or LKB1
affect efficacy of selumetinib plus docetaxel (25) as well
as docetaxel alone in tumors that harbors a mutated Kras
sequence. For example, combination of selumetinib plus
docetaxel provides substantial benefit in K-Ras<sup>mt</sup>/p53<sup>mt</sup> lung
cancer models. Conversely, mice harboring Kras<sup>mt</sup>/LKB1<sup>mt</sup>
tumors show primary resistance to this schedule. LKB1 (liver
kinase B1) also known as serine threonine kinase 11 (STK11)
the defective sequence of which is a cause of Peutz-Jeghers
syndrome. Its role is critical in p53-dependent apoptosis,
mainly involved at mitochondrion steps. When LKN1
is unable to exert its activity, p53-dependent death is
impaired. LKB1 is somatically inactivated in about 30%
of NSCLC (26), and the combination of LKB1 loss and
KRAS mutation results in a more aggressive phenotype
than tumors only harboring KRAS mutations (27). In fact,
the decreased activation of ERK phosphorylation in KRAS/
LKB1 tumors suggests that the proliferation of these tumors
may be driven through other signaling pathways. KRAS/
LKB1-mutant tumors have heightened activation of both
AKT and SRC. This type of tumors with KRAS mutated
and LKB1 inactivated show sensitivity to rapamycin or the
MEK inhibitor CI-1040.

Several selumetinib trials are currently enrolling patients,
including a phase II study (NCT01229150) in previously
treated NSCLC stratified by KRAS status. Mutated KRAS
and wild-type KRAS patients are randomized to receive
selumetinib and erlotinib or selumetinib alone (28). In
addition, the drug is being evaluated with thoracic radiation
in one trial (NCT01146756) and in two multi-arm trials
(NCT01306045 and NCT01248247) that assign treatment
mainly involved at mitochondrion steps. When LKN1
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AKT and SRC. This type of tumors with KRAS mutated
and LKB1 inactivated show sensitivity to rapamycin or the
MEK inhibitor CI-1040.

Other MEK inhibitors have been already tested. Trametinib (GSK 1120212 or JTP-74057) is a reversible,
allosteric MEK1/MEK2 inhibitor with an IC50 of 0.7 nM
for MEK1, and a high specificity as demonstrated by
limited activity against a panel of 180 other kinases. A
multi-arm phase I/IIb trial (NCT0192165) is assessing
many treatment combinations, specifically with a goal of
identifying appropriate regimens for lung and pancreatic
cancer treatment. An open-label, randomized phase II
trial (NCT01362296) in second-line NSCLC that harbors
muta–tion in KRAS, NRAS, BRAF, or MEK1 is currently
recruiting patients.

Dual targeting of MEK with inhibition of other kinases
in the same pathway, such as EGFR, or with inhibition
of a parallel pathway are also promising directions for ongoing trials.

**Targeting PI3K pathway**

PI3K is a site of convergence and stem for multiple pathways resulting in complex regulation of signaling and the potential for significant off-target effects, including activation of alternative networks to promote oncogenesis (Figure 3).

NSCLC harbors several molecular alterations involving the PI3K pathway, including PIK3CA amplification and mutation, decrease or loss of phosphate, and tensin homologue (PTEN), AKT mutations, LKB1 loss and KRAS mutation. For all of these features, PI3K pathway is one of the promising approaches to target RAS downstream signaling proteins. Conversely, K-RAS mutations have been predicted to mediate resistance to PI3K inhibitors (29). For this reason, a potential strategy of treatment of KRAS mutant tumors will be focused on dual inhibition of PI3K and MEK/ERK signaling.

MK-2206 is an oral pan-Akt inhibitor that binds Akt in its inactive configuration. MK-2206 has shown preclinical activity in a panel of NSCLC lines, with the greatest activity in a PIK3CA-mutated model (30). Combination therapy with selumetinib demonstrated synergy (31) and is being evaluated clinically (NCT01021748) (32).

**Targeting nuclear factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells (NF-κB) pathway**

KRAS mutated tumors can activate nuclear factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells (NF-κB) pathway and produce anti-apoptotic signals, essential for NSCLC survival through cREL and Bcl-xL (33) (Figures 1, 3). So, NF-κB signaling and the non-canonical IκB kinase, TBK1, may represent an alternative strategy for targeting KRASmut-driven tumors. These observations suggest a pharmacological alternative for potential treatment of cancers harboring RAS mutations (34).

**Neurofibromatosis type 1 pathway**

Neurofibromatosis type 1 (NF1) gene regulates cell motility and invasion, and displays high homology with RAS GTPase activating protein (Figure 3). Loss of NF1 produces hyper-activation of RAS signaling in 40% of NSCLC (35). NF1-deficient malignancies and KRAs/p53-mutant lung cancer exhibit an aggressive phenotype in murine models. However, agents that enhance proteotoxic stress, including the HSP90 inhibitor IPI-504 showed relevant responses when combined with rapamycin (36). Other HSP90 inhibitors are under evaluation (37). Since the mTOR inhibitor rapamycin has shown potential activity against NF1-associated tumors, it could be a new option of treatment (38).

**Wilms tumor gene pathway**

The Wilms Tumor gene (WT1) is a tumor suppressor gene that recognizes and binds to the DNA sequence 5’-CGCCCCGCC-3’. Curiously, function may be isoform-specific as isoforms lacking the KTS motif may act as transcription factors and isoforms containing the KTS motif may bind mRNA and play a role in mRNA metabolism or splicing. This biological complexity offers many possibilities for drug development, including those that affect KRASmut-driven biology. Recently, a study in both mouse and human cells has shown that the loss of WT1 could activate a senescence program in KRASmut cells (39). If this observation is confirmed, a new approach of treatment will be opened.

**GATA2 pathway**

The development of RNA interference technology has enabled the possibility of testing biological roles of putative genes in wide-genome scale. In this regard, several screenings assays have been carried out in cell libraries aimed to identify genes the inhibition of which is selectively deleterious to K-RASmut cells (40). Candidate genes were then tested in larger panel of KRAS mutant and wild-type cancer cells. Finally, K-RASmut cancer cell lines were found to be dependent on some genes such as the transcription factor GATA2 (41).

GATA-binding Factor 2 or erythroid transcription factor (GATA2) can be involved in regulation of the proteasome activity, IL-1 and Rho-signaling pathways. Recently, it has been observed that loss of GATA2 reduced the viability of NSCLC cells harboring RAS mutations, whereas wild-type cells were unaffected (42). Although GATA2 itself is likely undruggable, combined suppression of GATA2-regulated pathways with clinically approved inhibitors caused marked tumor clearance. Pharmacological inhibition of GATA2-mediated pathways with bortezomib and fasudil results in dramatic tumor inhibition (43). These observations present a new treatment option to KRAS mutant NSCLC.
Seven in absentia homolog 2 pathway

The human homolog of Drosophila seven-in-absentia--SIAH-1 and SIAH-2 are ubiquitin E3 ligases and driving ubiquitin-mediated degradation of conserved downstream components of the RAS pathway that are required for mammalian RAS signal transduction (Figure 3). In this regard, SIAH-2 regulates the tumor growth by degradation of SPRY2 and subsequent activation of the RAS-ERK pathway. Since SIAH-2 can be involved in different NSCLC, SIAH-2 may be a viable target for novel anti-RAS and anticancer agents aimed at inhibiting EGFR and/or RAS-mediated tumorigenesis (44).

RNA-binding motif 5 pathway

RBM5 (RNA-binding motif protein 5, also named H37/LUCA-15) gene is a component of the spliceosome. A complex (also known as the prespliceosome) that regulates the alternative splicing of a number of mRNAs. It has demonstrated tumor suppressor activity (45). RBM5 can inhibit the growth of lung cancer cells and induce apoptosis both in vitro and in vivo (46). RBM5 is downregulated by the constitutively activated RAS mutant protein, RAS (G12V), in rat embryonic fibroblast cells, which indicates a correlation between the RAS pathways and RBM5 activity (47). Further evaluation of interrelationships between RBM5 expression and KRAS gene must be carried out to open a novel therapeutic approach.

IL-8 pathway

Interleukin-8 (IL-8; CXCL8) is a cytokine of the CXC chemokine family that is involved in neutrophil recruitment and activation. In addition, IL-8 is an angiogenic growth factor that is overexpressed in different cancers, including NSCLC (48). Lung adenocarcinoma and muco-epidermoid carcinoma cells produce substantial amounts of IL-8, and express both CXCR1 and CXCR2 IL-8 receptors. Activating mutations of KRAS upregulate IL-8 expression in NSCLC and IL-8 can play a role in cell growth and migration in oncogenic KRAS-driven NSCLC (49).

Twist-related protein 1 pathway

Twist1 acts as a transcriptional regulation as a heterodimer with E proteins. Interestingly, Twist1 regulates gene expression differentially, depending on dimer composition: homodimers induce expression of FGFR2 and POSTN while heterodimers repress FGFR2 and POSTN expression and induce THBS1 expression. Additionally, it has been suggested to play an important role during tumor progression. For example, transgenic mouse models have shown that Twist1 cooperates with KRAS (G12D) to markedly accelerate lung tumorigenesis by abrogating cellular senescence programs and promoting the progression from benign adenomas to adenocarcinomas. Moreover, the suppression of Twist1 to physiological levels is enough to cause KRAS mutant lung tumors to undergo senescence losing their neoplastic features (50). The suppression of TWIST1 in human tumors may be an effective example of pro-senescence therapy.

Conclusions

Traditionally, treatment decisions for patients with lung cancer have historically been based on tumor histology and TNM stage. One promising treatment strategy involves the further subdivision of NSCLC into clinically relevant molecular subsets, according to a classification schema based on specific so-called driver mutations.

Although mutational activation of the KRAS pathway is the most frequent genetic event in NSCLC, it remains an elusive target for cancer therapy. In fact, it has been considered an “undruggable” genetic alteration.

A key goal in cancer research is the discovery of new drug targets that will selectively impair the viability of tumoral cells such as KRAS mutant NSCLC. Therefore, a specific knowledge of individual tumor molecular abnormalities that result in oncogene-specific “synthetic lethal” interactions will allow the rationale to combine promising targeted therapies for KRAS-mutated NSCLC. Recently, a MEK inhibitor, selumetinib, has shown interesting efficacy when combined with docetaxel in patients with KRAS-mutant tumors. Several pathways may provide attractive approaches to develop new treatments in KRAS-mutated NSCLC.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


Sex-determining region Y (Sry)-related high mobility
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diverse aspects of development (1). Members of the SOX
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important roles in the regulation of organ development
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and cell-type specification (1). SOX2 was initially reported
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differentiation (2). More recent studies indicate that SOX2
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exists in the nuclei of embryonic stem (ES) cells and acts as
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SP cells show higher expression levels of stem cell genes,
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such as SOX2 and Oct4 and tumorigenesis properties than
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non SP cells (6).
SOX2 is transcriptionally regulated by an enhancer
SOX2 is transcriptionally regulated by an enhancer
containing a composite SOX-OCT element that the
containing a composite SOX-OCT element that the
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octamer-binding transcription factor 4 (Oct4) and SOX2
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bind in a combinatorial interaction (7). It appears that the
SOX2-Oct4 regulatory complex upregulates a large number
SOX2-Oct4 regulatory complex upregulates a large number
of genes important for the maintenance of the pluripotency
of genes important for the maintenance of the pluripotency
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of ES cells and downregulates genes responsible for the
initiation of differentiation (8). There is abundant evidence that SOX proteins might also affect the Wnt/β-catenin pathway. They can either antagonize or facilitate β-catenin/TCF-mediated transcription in the context of different SOX species (9). In parallel, G1/S-specific cyclin-D1 (CCND1) has been identified as the downstream target of SOX2 which agrees well with the cellular behavior of SOX2 in promoting the G0/G1 to S transition (10). Above all, SOX2 has been recently recognized as a novel target of EGFR-Src-AKT signaling in NSCLCs that modulates self-renewal and expansion of stem-like cells, making the relative SOX2 expression and functions within the tumor-CSCs a major determinant in EGFR-targeted therapy (11).

A number of links have been found between SOX transcription factors and human cancers. For instance, SOX2 promoter silencing by DNA methylation has been reported in some human gastric carcinomas (12). In contrast, several publications report overexpression of SOX2 in glioblastomas (13), non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) (14,15), SCLC (16), prostate cancer (17), hepatocellular carcinomas (18) osteosarcomas (19), and breast carcinomas (20), supporting a role of SOX2 as an oncogene in these tissues. These reports suggest that SOX2 could activate important gene cascades involved in tumor initiation and progression and in the maintenance of a poorly differentiated state. In this review, we will attempt to deepen our knowledge on the underlying molecular mechanism of SOX2’s function in lung tumorigenesis, which may emerge as a novel promising strategy for lung cancer therapy.

The role of SOX2 in small cell lung cancer

SCLC is a distinct clinical and histological entity within the range of lung cancer (21). The incidence and mortality of SCLC worldwide make this disease a notable healthcare issue. SCLC represents 13% of all newly diagnosed cases of lung cancer worldwide, and its prognosis remains poor, with an overall median survival following treatment of 10 months and a 5-year survival of 5% (22). Its management has followed the major developments of modern cancer treatment through the integration of biology, imaging, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy.

The immunohistochemical analysis of SOX2 expression in various types of lung cancer found that SCLC tissues revealed a higher expression level of SOX2 than NSCLC tissues (23). In parallel, SOX2 was found to cooperate with important oncogenes like Wnt1, Wnt2, c-Myc and Notch to promote lung tumor occurrence, while downregulation of SOX2 inhibited proliferation and induced apoptosis in tumor cells (23). Another study of more than 50 tumour samples and SCLC cell lines (H446 and H720) has shown that SOX2 is amplified in approximately 27% of cancers (16).

SOX2 plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of ES cell pluripotency by regulating lineage commitment factors and later in development, is involved in specification and maintenance of neural stem cells during neurogenesis. Notably, conditional induction of SOX2 in lung epithelial cells is also known to increase the number of neural progenitor cells (24). SCLCs are tumors with neuroendocrine features. SOX2 protein overexpression has previously been noted in high-grade SCLC, and immunoreactive antibodies against SOX2 have been detected in sera from SCLC patients (25,26).

Two possibilities may account for the increased expression of SOX2 in SCLC. One is that the normal progenitor cell of SCLC, generally presumed to be the neuroendocrine Kulchitsky cell, expresses SOX genes; thus, the expression of this antigen in SCLC represents the persistence of these differentiation characteristics during neoplastic clonal expansion. The other possibility is that SOX genes are not expressed in normal adult Kulchitsky cells or bronchial epithelium and that the expression of these genes in SCLC represents a reactivation of lineage-specific embryonic markers, reflecting the developmental stage at which SOX2 is coexpressed. Rudin et al., found that cell proliferation can be suppressed in vitro by silencing SOX2 (using short hairpin RNAs) which implicates this gene in driving SCLC and suggests a plausible novel therapeutic strategy (16).

The role of SOX2 in squamous cell lung cancer

It has been found that SOX2 amplification and consequent SOX2 protein overexpression represent important mechanisms of tumor initiation and progression in a considerable subset of squamous cell carcinomas (SCCs) (27). The reported frequency of SOX2 amplification in lung SCCs varies from 20% to 60% with these variations in frequency being most likely due to methodological discrepancies applied by different laboratories but also differences between the cohorts and tumor heterogeneity (28-31). Lung SCCs are known to commonly harbor an amplification of the genomic region 3q. The amplification locus of 3q comprises additional genes, such as the defective in cullin neddylation 1, domain containing 1 (DCUN1D1) and the
phosphoinositide-3-kinase, catalytic, alpha polypeptide (PIK3CA) that previously have been proposed to be target oncogenes of the 3q amplicon. Recent studies have provided strong evidence that SOX2 is the primary amplification target within the common 3q amplicon and functional studies using shRNA against SOX2 showed an impact on tumor biology, thus making SOX2 the most promising candidate 3q oncogene (28,29,32).

A peak of genomic amplification on chromosome 3q26.33 that contains SOX2 gene, in SCCs of the lung and esophagus has been recently reported (28). However SOX2 alone cannot transform immortalized tracheobronchial epithelial cells and Forkhead box E1(FOXE1) or Fibroblast growth factor receptor 2 (FGFR2) are required as transforming cooperative genes (28). Toschi et al., evaluated SOX2 and FGFR1 gene copy number by fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) in tissue microarray cores in 447 surgically resected patients (33). They reported that increased SOX2 and FGFR1 gene copy number is a common event in lung cancer patients with squamous cell histology and that SOX2 gene gain is a favorable prognostic factor in early stage resected patients (33).

It seems that SOX2 correlates with markers of squamous differentiation in lung SCCs. For instance, TP63 and Keratin 6A (KRT6A), which encode for the squamous markers p63 and cytokeratin 6A, respectively, were among the transcripts most correlated with SOX2 expression in lung SCCs (28). When SOX2 was ectopically expressed in the NCI-H2009 lung adenocarcinoma cell line, both TP63 and KRT6A were induced, demonstrating actions of SOX2 that promote squamous identity rather than de-differentiation to a pluripotent state, thus consistent with its role as a lineage survival oncogene (28). It has also been demonstrated that SOX2 overexpression in epithelial cells of the adult lung drives development of histologically well differentiated adenocarcinoma with significant squamous cell features including widespread expression of p63, FoxE1 and Desmoglein-3, a phenotype not unique to tumors induced by SOX2 (14). Inducible deletion of the tumor suppressor liver kinase B1 (LKB1) along with inducible expression of oncogenic K-Ras leads to adenocarcinoma with squamous features as well (34). It is possible that SOX2 alone can drive expression of some squamous tumor markers, but an additional oncogenic stimulus is required to drive complete squamous differentiation.

Within the primitive foregut there is reciprocal expression of NKX2.1 (also known as thyroid transcription factor 1; TITF1) and SOX2 in compartments that form the trachea and esophagus, respectively (35). As the developmental transcription factor NKX2-1 is an amplified lineage survival oncogene in lung adenocarcinoma, SOX2 may similarly represent a lineage survival oncogene in lung SCCs (35). Bass et al., found that SOX2 amplification was enriched in the lung SCC tumor population, while NKX2-1 amplification was enriched in lung adenocarcinoma (28). The complementary roles of SOX2 and NKX2-1 in distinct cancer lineages thus parallel their actions in development.

Functional studies underscore the oncogenic role of SOX2 in squamous cell carcinomas. In squamous cell carcinoma cell lines harboring SOX2 amplification, suppression of SOX2 had an anti-proliferative effect (28). Furthermore, cell lines overexpressing SOX2 exhibited increased migratory activity and enhanced colony formation (29). In preinvasive lesions of the lung, SOX2 expression has been reported to occur in normal bronchial epithelium, alveolar bronchiolization, squamous dysplasia, as well as carcinoma in situ (30). Furthermore, SOX2 amplification was reported in none of a series of low-grade bronchial lesions, but in all high-grade lesions, suggesting upregulation during preinvasive disease progression (36). Consistently, it has been shown that conditional homozygous SOX2 overexpression in Clara cells induces bronchial epithelial hyperplasia with 50% of cases showing a progression to lung cancer in mice (14). Taken together, these results strongly indicate that SOX2 harbors oncogenic potential and has a role during tumorigenesis.

An association between elevated SOX2 expression and indicators of better patient outcome, most importantly prolonged overall survival, was recently demonstrated (37). Increased levels of SOX2 amplification indicated a better histological differentiation grade and a trend to improved patient survival (37). In a cohort of early stage lung SCCs, patients with SOX2 expression above the median showed prolonged overall survival (14). The molecular mechanisms accounting for SOX2 being associated with favorable prognosis in lung SCCs is still unknown and further studies are needed to clarify the functional aspects of SOX2. SOX2 overexpression might recapitulate transcription networks active in normal squamous precursor cells and thus counteract the chaos of malignant dedifferentiation or alternatively, SOX2 overexpression might occur early during lung SCC carcinogenesis and might be lost during disease progression, due to genetic inactivation. Furthermore tumors arising from an upregulation of SOX2 exhibit a clear squamous cell differentiation and thus can...
be associated with better prognostic features, similar to NKX2-1 in lung adenocarcinomas.

Besides the lung, SOX2 has been found to be amplified and expressed in squamous cell carcinomas originating from other organ sites, predominantly derived from the embryonic foregut, but also from non-foregut tissues, such as the skin, the cervix, and the penis (27,28,38,39). Squamous carcinogenesis from diverse body sites may thus share similar underlying mechanisms and SOX2 might be a general marker for SCC differentiation regardless the tissue of origin. All the above studies used a similar strategy of chromosomal aberrations screening to identify the SOX2 locus as one of the most frequently amplified sites over the SCC genome and further highlighted the recurrent SOX2 activation and its indispensable role for squamous cell survival. However, it remains to assess the impact of the recurrent activation of SOX2 in advanced primary tumors and how SOX2 may mechanistically be involved in tumor progression and aggressiveness.

**The role of SOX2 in lung adenocarcinomas**

Previous findings revealed that SOX2 is expressed in bronchial epithelial cells of the lung, whereas it is absent in alveolar cells (30,38). Likewise, adenocarcinoma precursor lesions, such as atypical adenomatous hyperplasia, proved to be negative for SOX2 expression (30). In the study of Cai et al., the amplification of SOX2 in SCCs and adenocarcinomas was 31.6% and 20%, respectively (40). No SOX2 amplification was found among smokers with adenocarcinoma (40). In contrast, 10 of 38 (26.3%) cases involving patients with no history of smoking and with adenocarcinoma presented SOX2 amplification, indicating that SOX2 amplification may be an activating pathway to adenocarcinoma (40).

Another recent study showed that SOX2 is strongly and diffusely expressed in approximately 90% of pulmonary SCC and 20% of adenocarcinoma (41). When SOX2 expression was examined in stage I lung adenocarcinoma patients, SOX2 was detected in 50% of cases and it was more frequent in tumors from older and male patients (41). Compared to SOX2-negative tumors, SOX2 expression predicted a shorter time to tumor progression and shorter overall survival and appeared to be an independent predictor of poor outcome in stage I lung adenocarcinomas which may help stratify patients at increased risk for recurrence (41). Taken together, these results might suggest a prognostic role for SOX2 in lung adenocarcinomas. However, given the overall low frequency of SOX2 amplification and overexpression, the significance of this finding needs further evaluation.

*As previously described, SOX2 gene amplification is more common in the SCCs of smokers while the incidence of SOX2 amplification is in the early stage of tumorigenesis in NSCLC. However SOX2 is also activated in more advanced SCC tumors (26,29). Therefore the SOX2 gene is not only activated by amplification but is also affected by other regulators that promote its transcription, affecting its downstream genes. SP cells isolated from established human NSCLC cell lines and tumors are highly enriched in NSCLC-CSCs and EGFR-Src-AKT signaling axis contributes significantly to the self-renewal of SP cells (11). Interestingly, SOX2 transcription factor is the predominant downstream target of EGFR signaling in these cells and plays a major role in self-renewal growth and expansion of SP cells, independent of Oct4 and Nanog (11).

EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors are able to downregulate self-renewal and SP phenotype. Singh et al., have reported that blocking EGFR-receptors results in a significant decrease in SP frequency in both A549 and H1650 cells along with decreased EGFR phosphorylation as well as ABCG2 expression in both cell lines (11). Depletion of EGFR expression by erlotinib or gefitinib inhibits the self-renewal of SP cells and so does the combination of gefitinib with the irreversible EGFR-tyrosine kinase inhibitor BIBW2992 in the H1975 cell line with acquired resistance to gefitinib or erlotinib due to the secondary point mutation in exon 20 of EGFR (T790M) (11). When the downstream signaling events of EGFR expression were examined, it was found that c-Src, ERK and AKT signaling impinge transcription factors associated with stemness (Figure 1A) (11). EGFR inhibition by gefitinib or BIBW as well as inhibition of Src activity by dasatinib markedly decreased phosphorylation of EGFR, Src, ERK and AKT and reduced SOX2 expression; Oct4 and Nanog levels were not affected (Figure 1B,C) (11). The contribution of ERK and AKT pathways to EGFR mediated induction of SOX2 has also been examined. Phosphorylation of ERK is suppressed by the MEK inhibitor PD98059 and AKT phosphorylation is suppressed by the PI3-kinase inhibitor, LY294002. PI3-kinase inhibitors can also slightly inhibit ERK phosphorylation (Figure 1D) (11). However, as shown in Figure 1E, inhibition of MEK activity does not affect the levels of SOX2 while the PI3-kinase inhibition, markedly reduces its levels with corresponding reduction in SP frequency (11). Therefore, relative SOX2 expression and functions within the tumor-
Figure 1 (A) EGFR activation as well as c-Src signaling result in phosphorylation of EGFR, ERK and AKT and mediate induction of SOX2 that modulates self-renewal of SP cells together with other transcription factors like Oct4 and Nanog; (B) inhibition of EGFR with gefitinib or BIBW results in decreased phosphorylation of EGFR, ERK and AKT and reduces SOX2 levels with corresponding reduction in SP frequency. The expression of Oct4 and Nanog is not affected; (C) inhibition of c-Src with dasatinib results in decreased phosphorylation of EGFR, ERK and AKT and reduces SOX2 levels with corresponding reduction in SP frequency. The expression of Oct4 and Nanog is not affected; (D) the PI3K inhibitor LY294002 suppresses AKT phosphorylation, slightly inhibits ERK phosphorylation and reduces the levels of SOX2; E. Inhibition of MEK activity does not affect the levels of SOX2.
CSCs may be a major determinant in EGFR-targeted therapy against NSCLCs. This information might also be potentially useful to overcome the acquired resistance to EGFR therapies, by targeting downstream targets of EGFR signaling, including SOX2.

In summary, SOX2 might be a molecular target of lung adenocarcinomas. Transient transfection of SOX2 siRNA completely abrogated the tumorigenicity of SP cells in a lung adenocarcinoma cell line (LHK2) (42). SOX2 has a role in maintenance of stemness and tumorigenicity of human lung adenocarcinoma CSCs but further molecular analysis especially upstream and downstream of SOX2 should reveal the mechanisms of its tumorigenicity, making SOX2 a potential target for treatment.

Conclusions

SOX2 has been shown as hallmark of lung cancer but its role in lung cancer formation or progression has been partially elucidated. Amplification and overexpression of SOX2 are strongly associated with SCC morphology and favorable clinicopathological features in SCCs, including longer overall survival. In contrast, both events are less frequent in SCLC and rare in adenocarcinoma and of uncertain prognostic significance. The finding of SOX2 amplification/upregulation being frequent in lung SCCs, but rare in lung adenocarcinomas might reflect a fundamental molecular difference in carcinogenesis between these tumor entities.

The elucidation of SOX2-dependent pathways may identify novel therapeutic vulnerabilities in lung cancer and may uncover additional common pathways between cancer, normal development and the maintenance of pluripotency. The appearance of compensatory mechanisms favoring survival of cancer cells after therapy represents a limitation in therapies targeting EGFR and understanding but also overcoming EGFR-TKI resistance mechanisms in NSCLC patients has become a burning issue lately. Molecular pathways are interconnected, and thus, combination therapy is emerging as an appropriate strategy to treat those patients. Unfortunately very few patients undergo repeated tumor biopsies at the time when resistance develops to help guide appropriate therapeutic choices and the need to develop noninvasive methods to identify resistance mechanisms becomes more evident. For instance we should consider the possibility of using quantitative reverse transcriptase-PCR in measuring plasma SOX2 mRNA in lung cancer patients with gained-resistance to EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors and confirm whether high circulating plasma mRNA levels of SOX2 could be undocumented as a mechanism of resistance to EGFR-targeted therapy. In parallel the plasma mRNA measurement of the druggable downstream targets of EGFR signaling that regulate SOX2, can be also of great significance. Moreover SOX2 amplification may be more effectively identified by examining copy number changes by FISH specifically on individual circulating tumor cells. The recent advances in isolating circulating tumor cells suggest that this may be possible and can be combined with genotyping studies to examine mechanisms of resistance to EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors.

Except from targeting downstream targets of EGFR signaling that regulate SOX2 as mentioned above, being able to target SOX2 itself and other transcription factors involved in tumor initiation and maintenance can provide a unique opportunity for anti-cancer intervention. However, because of their lack of small molecule binding pockets, transcription factors are currently an example of ‘undruggable targets’. Thus, novel strategies to effectively down-regulate these targets are required. Recently Zinc-finger-based artificial transcription factors (ATFs) were able to reactivate the expression of the tumor-suppressor genes and repress potential oncogenes including SOX2 in breast cancer cell lines (43). These data suggest that the targeted down-regulation of highly expressed oncogenes using ATF-based technologies can be used as a powerful tool for the long-term targeting of oncogenic TFs with potential application in cancer biology. In summary, the above data elucidate and offer novel perspectives on the multiple roles that the transcription factor SOX2 exerts on carcinogenesis. SOX2 that is expressed in lung SCC and adenocarcinoma, but also in SCLC tissues can act as novel unite marker and ideal therapeutic target. In view of the fact that the transcriptional activity of SOX2 is critical in mediating tumorigenesis, we believe that further studies investigating how SOX2 activity is regulated will be highly worthwhile.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Introduction**

Lung cancer remains the most lethal form of cancer worldwide, with 1.37 million deaths in 2008 (1). Due to lack of effective screening programs until recently, most patients present with advanced disease, where the mainstay of therapy is chemotherapy. Frontline treatment for patients with lung cancer consists of platinum doublet therapy, based on seminal publications that established improvement in survival over best supportive care (2). Recent advances in the genetic characterization of lung cancers have resulted in use of targeted agents for specific subsets of NSCLC. However, the majority of patients still receive systemic chemotherapy since targetable molecular abnormality is detected only in approximately 20%. There is a great need to find new targets to improve the efficacy of treatment for lung cancer patients.

The insulin-like growth factor (IGF) pathway has been extensively studied as an important signaling pathway in cancer. IGF-1 and its receptor, the insulin growth factor 1 receptor (IGF-1R), have been implicated in carcinogenesis and to cancer risk in the population. IGF-1, produced in the liver, mediates the effects of growth hormone. IGF-1R is a member of the insulin receptor subclass of tyrosine kinase membrane receptors and shares structural homology with the insulin receptor (3). IGF-1R consists of a tetramer of two alpha subunits that bind IGF-1, and insulin less avidly, and two intracellular beta subunits, which have tyrosine kinase domains with the ATP binding site. IGF-1R can then signal through adapter proteins insulin receptor substrate (IRS) 1 and 2 to activate downstream targets including the PI3K/AKT/mTOR and Ras/Raf/MAPK pathways, leading to cell cycle progression, cell proliferation, and cell survival (Figure 1). Serum IGF-binding proteins (IGFBPs) bind 90% of circulating IGF-1 and prevent receptor binding and prolong half-life of IGF-1. IGF signaling has been
implicated in regulation of angiogenesis, as this pathway can activate HIF-1α expression and VEGF secretion in lung cancer cell lines (3). There also appears to be crosstalk between IGF pathway and EGFR signaling; inhibition of the EGFR pathway is less effective in the presence of IGF-1R overexpression, suggesting a potential mechanism behind development of resistance to EGFR inhibitors.

The IGF signaling pathway has been implicated in carcinogenesis and cancer risk in many studies. In a landmark paper, lack of IGF-1R expression in mouse fibroblasts resulted in loss of oncogenic transformation by simian virus 40 (SV40) large T antigen expression (4). Wild-type fibroblasts were transformed by SV40 large T antigen expression and able to form foci in both culture and soft agar, demonstrating hallmarks of cancer cells with loss of contact inhibition and anchorage-independent growth. These findings were further verified by the loss of transformation seen in fibroblasts treated with antisense RNA against IGF-1R. This was the first demonstration of the importance of IGF-1R in carcinogenesis.

IGF-1 was also shown to be important for tumor growth in a breast cancer xenograft model in mice; mice that were homozygous for lit mutation, resulting in loss of IGF-1/growth hormone axis, had significantly smaller tumors than in control mice (5). With regards to lung cancer, IGF overexpression in transgenic mice led to the development of adenomatous hyperplasia (6). IGF-1R is overexpressed in cancer cell lines and in human cancers (3,7). IGF-1 and IGF-1R overexpression has been studied in multiple epidemiological studies and linked to increased risk of lung, ovarian, pancreatic, breast, and colorectal cancers (7).

**Clinical trials with IGF-1R inhibitors in lung cancer**

Based on the sound pre-clinical rationale supporting IGF-1R as a therapeutic target, agents that inhibit IGF-1R were evaluated in clinical trials (Table 1). The majority of the studies conducted to date have evaluated monoclonal antibodies that bind to, and inhibit the IGF-1R. Presently, small molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors of IGF-1R are also under development.

**Figitumab**

The first specific IGF-1R antagonist which was developed in the clinic is fitumumab (Table 2), previously known as CP-751,871, a fully humanized monoclonal antibody against IGF-1R (Pfizer, New London, CT). Phase II data

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**Figure 1** IGF-1R Signaling Pathway. IGF-1 is regulated by binding to insulin growth factor binding protein (IGFBP). Free IGF-1 can bind to IGF-1R, and activate downstream signaling through the insulin receptor substrate (IRS) to promote cell growth and proliferation (Ras/Raf/MEK pathway) and cell survival and cell cycle progression (PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway).
were published in 2009, which showed very promising activity in combination with platinum doublet chemotherapy (8). Patients with chemotherapy-naïve advanced and metastatic non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) were randomized 2:1 to carboplatin/paclitaxel/figitumumab (PCF) or carboplatin/ paclitaxel (PC). Carboplatin was dosed to achieve an area under the plasma concentration-time curve (AUC) of 6 and paclitaxel at 200 mg/m² every 3 weeks; figitumumab was given to the first cohort of patients at 10 mg/kg IV and second cohort at 20 mg/kg IV, every 3 weeks. Patients in the control arm could receive figitumumab with or without PC per investigator’s discretion at progression (n=20 patients). Patients in the treatment arm could continue on single agent figitumumab after discontinuation of chemotherapy (n=47 patients). The study demonstrated an objective response rate (ORR) of 54% with PCF compared to 42% in PC arm. The most remarkable findings were from a subgroup analysis: patients with squamous cell carcinoma were found to have an ORR of 78% and 12-week progression-free survival (PFS) rate of 89% with figitumumab 20 mg/kg. An additional 30 patients were enrolled to single arm expansion cohort to confirm these results. There was no difference in PFS between the PCF and PC groups, but for patients in the control arm that received figitumumab at progression, this translated into improved PFS with HR 0.56 (P=0.0153, 95% CI, 0.28 to 0.87). The combination therapy was associated with a higher incidence of grade 3 and 4 hyperglycemia seen in PCF arm (15%) compared to PC arm (8%). There were eight deaths during study treatment, with 5 reported in the PCF arm compared to 3 deaths in PC. Based on these phase II data, there was great excitement in proceeding with a phase III, particularly in patients with squamous cell histology, for whom there have been few successful therapies.

The results of the phase III study were presented at the 2010 American Society for Clinical Oncology (ASCO) meeting (9). The planned enrollment was 820 patients with non-adenocarcinoma NSCLC to be randomized to PCF with 20 mg/kg or PC in the first line setting. The primary endpoint was overall survival (OS). The study was terminated after 681 patients (86% squamous and 88% stage IV) were enrolled based on a planned interim analysis that demonstrated a hazard ratio that crossed futility boundary favoring PC. The OS in PCF was 10.3 months compared to 8.5 months in PC arm (HR 1.23, 95% CI, 1.0-1.5, P=0.051). In patients with serum IGF-1 level greater than or equal to 1 ng/mL, OS was 10.2 months in PCF group compared to 7 months in PC group (HR 0.97, 95% CI, 0.6-1.7). The OS hazard ratio favored PC in patients with low baseline IGF-1 (HR 1.6 PCF/PC ratio for patients with IGF1 <120 ng/mL, P=0.006) and PCF in patients with high baseline IGF1 levels (over 145 ng/
mL, HR=0.62, P=0.13). The disappointing results of the phase III study were likely a consequence of the lack of predictive biomarkers for patient selection, particularly in light of the absence of survival benefit in the preceding phase II study.

Based on the correlation between efficacy of figitumumab and the serum IGF-1 levels in the Jassem study, biomarker analysis was done in the serum specimens collected from patients that participated in the phase II study described earlier (10). The study team evaluated IGF-1, IGF-2, IGFBP1-3, insulin, and cotinine in plasma samples obtained from patients. Of all these, high pre-treatment levels of free IGF-1 defined as at least 0.54 ng/mL were found to correlate with improved PFS (P=0.007) in patients who received 20 mg/kg dose of figitumumab. Conversely, low levels of free IGF-1 was associated with a median PFS of <3 months (P=0.026). For patients treated with chemotherapy alone, IGF-1 levels were not predictive of PFS improvement, suggesting that the marker is specific for therapy with figitumumab. The authors found that a threshold of free IGF-1 level above 0.7 ng/mL predicted different median PFS by treatment group: 2.63 months with chemotherapy alone, 3.97 with PCF using 10 mg/kg figitumumab dose, and 6.53 months in PCI group who received 20 mg/kg figitumumab. In patients with free IGF-1 levels below 0.7 ng/mL, there was no difference in median PFS between the three treatment groups. There was a correlation between high free IGF-1 levels and expression of vimentin, a mesenchymal marker that is linked with epithelial to mesenchymal transition (EMT). The results from these two studies suggest that baseline serum IGF-1 level could help select patients that might benefit from figitumumab combination. These results may be useful to the clinical development of other IGF-1R inhibitors.

Figitumumab was also studied in combination with erlotinib in the phase III ADVIGO 1018 study. This trial enrolled patients with advanced NSCLC with non-adenocarcinoma histology in the second or third line setting. The study was halted due to an interim analysis which demonstrated the futility of this combination in March 2010 (11). As the data have never been presented, it is unclear what factors may have impacted the disappointing results.

R1507

R1507 is a humanized recombinant monoclonal antibody against IGF-1R developed by Roche (Basel, Switzerland). Based on preclinical observations that IGF-1R signaling interacts with EGFR signaling and may mediate resistance to EGFR inhibitors, R1507 was studied in a phase II trial in combination with erlotinib in patients with advanced NSCLC (12). Patients with metastatic NSCLC that had progressed on one or two prior chemotherapy regimens were randomized to erlotinib 150 mg orally daily in combination with either R1507 9 mg/kg IV weekly, 16 mg/kg IV every 3 weeks or placebo. The primary endpoint was PFS rate at 12 weeks. Patient tumor samples were tested for activating EGFR mutations and KRAS mutations. In this patient population of predominantly male patients (65-68%) with a minority of never smokers (9-16%), there was no difference in 12-week PFS rate between the treatment groups: 41% with erlotinib alone, 42% erlotinib and weekly R1507, and 45% erlotinib and every 3 weekly R1507. The OS was 8.1 months in erlotinib alone, 8.1 months erlotinib and weekly R1507, and 12.1 months with erlotinib and 3 week R1507, which was not statistically significant: the hazard ratio was 0.84 with weekly R1507 (0.58 to 1.21, 90% CI, P=0.43) and 0.72 with three weekly R1507 (0.53 to 0.99, 90% CI, P=0.09). However, in the 27% of patients with mutated KRAS, the 12-week PFS rate was improved to 36% in patients who received R1507 compared to 0 in patients treated with placebo (P=0.039). It is interesting that the KRAS mutated patients seem to benefit from the addition of IGF-1 inhibitor R1507 to EGFR inhibition, as these patients are typically resistant to EGFR inhibition. The results suggest that patients with KRAS mutations may benefit from combined inhibition of the IGF-1R and EGFR pathways.

In order to determine other predictive biomarkers for treatment with R1507 and erlotinib, archived tumor tissue and plasma were assessed for free and total IGF-1, IGFBP-3, IGF-1R, pAKT, PTEN, EGFR, and KRAS and correlated with the primary endpoint of the study, 12-week PFS rate (13). Free IGF-1 level was significantly correlated with improved 12-week PFS rate in the patients treated in the 16 mg/kg dose of R1507: 46% patients with elevated free IGF-1 level treated with R1507 achieved 12 week PFS compared to 18% patients in placebo arm, HR=3.94 (95% CI, 1.2-13.6). None of the other biomarkers had a significant impact on treatment response with R1507. These results further substantiate the observations that high levels of serum IGF-1 might be a useful selection parameter for treatment with IGF-1R inhibitors.

Cixutumumab

Cixutumumab (IMC-A12) is a fully humanized monoclonal IgG1 antibody against IGF-1R developed by Imclone
(Bridgewater, NJ). Preclinical studies demonstrated high affinity binding of IMC-A12 to IGF-1R and inhibition of the IGF-1R signaling pathway; in addition, both single agent activity as well as additive and synergistic effects with cytotoxic agents and targeted therapies like cetuximab and mTOR inhibitors were observed (14). Two phase II studies have been performed by ECOG investigating IMC-A12 activity in lung cancer patients. The ECOG 4508 study (15) randomized patients with metastatic NSCLC that were ineligible for bevacizumab to treatment with carboplatin and paclitaxel combined with either cetuximab weekly, IMC-A12 every two weeks, or both. The trial was terminated early for safety concerns related to excessive 30-day mortality with the four-drug regimen, after only 129 patients of planned 180 patients were enrolled. The median PFS was similar between the arms: 3.4 months in cetuximab arm, 4.3 months in IMC-A12 arm, and 4.1 months in combination arm. OS was also comparable in all treatment groups: 11.7 months cetuximab arm, 9.6 months IMC-A12 arm, and 8.4 months in combination arm. There were 13 deaths on treatment, including 9 patients who died within 1 month of initiation of study drug. There were higher rates of neutropenia, hyperglycemia, and thromboembolic events in the treatment arms that included IMC-A12. However, 6 of the 13 deaths occurred in patients who did not receive IMC-A12 so the high mortality seen was not solely due to IGF-1R inhibition, and could have resulted from pre-existing medical conditions. Studies utilizing IMC-A12 with other agents in lung cancer have proceeded without excessive toxicities.

IMC-A12 is also being studied in patients with small cell lung cancer. The ECOG 1508 study enrolled patients with extensive stage small lung cancer and randomized them to treatment in one of three arms: standard cisplatin and etoposide for 4 cycles, cisplatin and etoposide in combination with GDC-0449, an oral Hedgehog inhibitor, for 4 cycles with continuation of GDC-0449 as maintenance therapy, or cisplatin and etoposide with IMC-A12 on days 1, 8, 15 with IMC-A12 maintenance therapy until disease progression. The primary endpoint of the study is PFS; the study has completed accrual and the results are anticipated to be reported soon.

IMC-A12 has also been studied in combination with EGFR inhibitors. Results from a phase I study of erlotinib in combination with IMC-A12 were recently published (16). This trial examined the safety of erlotinib 150 mg daily combined with 3 different doses of IMC-A12: 6 mg/kg weekly or 5 mg/kg weekly given on 28 day cycle or 15 mg/kg every 21 days. Eighteen patients were treated and the most frequent toxicities seen were fatigue, rash, and diarrhea. Four patients in the 6 mg/kg dose cohort had DLTs including 3 patients with grade 3 fatigue and 1 patient with grade 3 acneiform rash. The 5 mg/kg dose was declared as the maximum tolerated dose for the weekly schedule. Five patients had stabilization of disease as best response while the remaining 13 patients progressed on study. The median PFS was 39 days (range, 21-432 days), with no significant differences in efficacy seen between the three dose cohorts. Three patients with activating EGFR mutations had a median duration on study of 217 days compared to 37 days in the wild-type EGFR group. Only 13 patients had serum available for biomarker analysis. There was a non-significant trend towards benefit in patients with the highest quartile of free IGF-1. This study was terminated from a planned expansion into phase II study due to lack of robust efficacy with the combination regimen (12). The strategy of combining EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors with IGF-1R, though promising from preclinical studies, has failed to translate into meaningful improvement in the treatment of unselected NSCLC patients.

Two other studies utilizing IMC-A12 in NSCLC patients are currently ongoing. A phase II study by ECOG evaluates carboplatin/paclitaxel/bevacizumab with or without IMC-A12 in patients with metastatic or recurrent NSCLC in the frontline setting (ClinicalTrials.gov NCT 00955305). The primary endpoint will be PFS with secondary endpoints of OS, ORR, and toxicity. The other open study is the JAEM trial sponsored by Eli Lilly (Indianapolis, Indiana), a phase II trial randomizing patients with metastatic NSCLC with non-squamous histology to treatment with either cisplatin/pemetrexed/IMC-A12 or cisplatin/pemetrexed (ClinicalTrials.gov NCT 01232452). The primary endpoint will be PFS with secondary outcomes including ORR, OS, duration of response, time to progression, change in tumor size, and quality of life assessment in a total of 220 patients. The study will have a major emphasis on biomarker assessment.

**MK-0646**

MK-0646 (Dalotuzumab) is another monoclonal antibody against IGF-1R that was developed by Merck (Whitehouse Station, NJ). Phase I data were published last year examining the safety of MK-0646 in patients with tumors that expressed IGF-1R as determined by immunohistochemistry (IHC) (17). Eighty patients were treated with breast and colon cancer being the most common tumor-types. The drug was well tolerated with the most frequent toxicities of hyperglycemia,
asthenia, chills, back pain, and aspartate aminotransferase elevation. There were 3 patients with grade 3 or higher toxicity, including tumor pain, hyperglycemia, and a biopsy proven leukocytoclastic vasculitis, which resolved once study drug was discontinued. MK-0646 dose was escalated from 1.25 to 20 mg/kg in a total of 6 dose cohorts without an MTD being achieved. Pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamics data was also collected; various protein levels were assessed by IHC and quantified by histochemical scores (H-scores). In 33 matched pairs of baseline and on-treatment tumor samples and 69 matched pairs of baseline and on-treatment skin biopsy samples, there was decrease in IGF-1R levels in both tumor (P=0.02) and skin (P=0.04) after 3 weeks of MK-0646 treatment. Reduced expression of proteins regulated by IGF-1R signaling, such as EGFR and phosphorylated MAP kinase, was also seen. In the 76 patients who had evaluable responses by RECIST criteria, 6 patients had stable disease, including 2 patients with Ewing’s sarcoma. It is interesting that although all the patients were selected for the study by the presence of IGF-1R expression by IHC, this did not predict treatment response with MK-0646 monotherapy.

Subsequently, a phase I/II study of erlotinib in combination with MK-0646 in unselected patients with advanced or metastatic NSCLC that has progressed after first-line therapy was conducted (ClinicalTrials.gov NCT 00654420). Another study that has completed accrual is a phase Ib study of erlotinib and MK-0646 to determine imaging and molecular determinants of response. This study utilized positron emission tomography (PET) response at weeks 1 and 3 to guide therapy with PFS and OS as secondary endpoints. Patients with locally advanced or metastatic NSCLC that progressed on 1 or 2 prior chemotherapy regimens were treated with erlotinib for one week. If there was a decrease in FDG uptake seen on PET, the patients continued on erlotinib. If there was no PET response, the patients were continued on erlotinib in combination with MK-0646 until disease progression. Patients were allowed to crossover from erlotinib to combination arm at time of disease progression. Results for this study have not yet been reported.

### IGF-1R inhibition in other malignancies

To date, the efficacy of IGF-1R inhibition in NSCLC has been disappointing. There have been multiple studies of IGF-1R blockade in other tumor types, including colon cancer, pancreatic cancer, and breast cancer that have shown limited activity. The most promising data have been seen in Ewing’s sarcoma. Ewing’s sarcoma is defined by the presence of the EWS/FL-1 fusion gene, which results in malignant transformation in an IGF-1R dependent manner (18). Inhibition of IGF-1R inhibits Ewing’s sarcoma growth in tumor xenograft models (19). Based on these preclinical data, the phase I study of figitumumab included expansion cohorts for patients with refractory advanced sarcomas and specifically for Ewing’s sarcoma (20). There were 29 sarcoma patients with 16 with Ewing’s sarcoma. Of the 28 patients with response data, 2 patients with Ewing’s sarcoma had objective responses, including 1 complete response. Eight patients achieved stable disease for at least 4 months.

Further studies of IGF-1R monoclonal antibodies in Ewing’s sarcoma have also failed to show impressive single agent efficacy. The phase I/II study of figitumumab enrolled 31 patients with sarcoma to 2 dose escalation cohorts (21). There were 107 patients with Ewing’s sarcoma enrolled in the phase II portion of the study; 15 of 106 evaluable patients had partial response (ORR 14.2%) and 25 achieved stable disease with a median OS of 8.9 months. Again, free IGF-1 levels predicted patients that benefited most from IGF-1R inhibition: patients with baseline IGF-1 higher than 0.65 ng/mL had median OS of 10.4 months (P<0.001) compared to OS of 3.6 months in those with lower levels. A phase II study of R1507 enrolled 115 patients with refractory or recurrent Ewing’s sarcoma to treatment with R1507 dosed at 9 mg/kg weekly; however, the study was amended after ongoing PK studies demonstrated that higher peak serum concentrations attained with 27 mg/kg every 3 weeks resulted in increased tumor shrinkage in a xenograft model (22). A total of 109 patients were enrolled to the weekly dose cohort and 6 patients to the higher dose cohort. The objective response rate was 10% with a median duration of response of 29 weeks and median OS of 7.6 months. Treatment was well tolerated with most common grade 3 or 4 AEs of pain, anemia, thrombocytopenia, asthenia, and hyperglycemia (3 patients). Factors found to predict survival in multivariate analysis included bone primary tumor, Karnofsky performance status of at least 90%, total IGF-1 level above 110 ng/mL, and higher percentage increase in total IGF-1 from baseline to week 6. Similarly, IMC-A12 was investigated in a phase I/II study of patients with refractory solid tumors: the recommended phase II dose was defined at 9 mg/kg (23). In 30 patients treated with Ewing’s sarcoma, only 3 patients had partial response with single agent IMC-A12. Again despite promising preclinical data, IGF-1R inhibition with monoclonal antibodies has not resulted in significant single agent activity in Ewing’s sarcoma.
Is there a future for IGF-1R targeting in oncology?

Despite promising preclinical data and strong rationale for targeting IGF-1R, clinical efficacy has been disappointing in multiple studies, in lung cancer and other diseases. There are multiple potential reasons behind the failure of IGF-1R inhibition to live up to its promise. First, no study has studied the effects of IGF-1R inhibitors on the receptor at the level of the tumor and subsequent downstream signals. Defining specificity of a targeted agent against its target in patients is challenging, as often tumor tissue is not easily accessible for multiple biopsies to test IGF-1R expression for baseline and post-treatment levels. Nonetheless, this is an integral determination to make to assess if a targeted therapy fails because it does not truly achieve the desired effects on its intended target or because inhibition of the target by itself was not adequate to induce disease response.

However, the presence of IGF-1R expression may not be enough to predict response to IGF-1R inhibition, as was seen in the MK-0646 phase I study (17). Most tumors are not dependent on only one aberrant signaling pathway for tumor growth. There are multiple downstream signaling pathways that are activated by IGF-1R signaling; any of these pathways can become constitutively activated to overcome loss of IGF-1R signaling. For example, mTOR signaling has been shown to be activated in breast cancer cell lines resistant to IGF-1R inhibition; this could be overcome by treatment with the mTOR inhibitor everolimus (24). This combination has been studied in phase I studies and shown to have promising activity, particularly in patients with Ewing’s sarcoma and adrenocortical carcinoma (25-27). Given the genetic complexity of most tumors, particularly lung cancer, targeting of multiple signaling pathways will likely be required to result in therapeutic efficacy.

The insulin receptor (IR) also signals through the PI3K-AKT pathway. IR signaling is up-regulated when IGF-1R expression is decreased by treatment with monoclonal antibodies (28). OSI Pharmaceuticals (Melville, NY) is developing orally bioavailable dual IGF-1R and IR inhibitor, OSI-906, which has been shown to have efficacy in preclinical cell line and tumor xenograft models with activated IR and IGF-1R signaling (29). This compound binds reversibly with the ATP binding cleft of the catalytic domains of both receptors and can bind both the active and inactive forms of the receptor. This dual targeting may be another way to make IGF-1R blockade a more effective strategy.

One of the major lessons to be learnt from the development of IGF-1R inhibitors in NSCLC is the lack of efforts to develop patient selection methods as part of early phase studies. The negative results of large phase III studies quickly quelled the enthusiasm for development of these agents and halted further investment into biomarker discovery. However, as can be seen from the studies described in this article, elevated baseline serum IGF-1 levels have shown near consistent correlation with improved efficacy with IGF-1R antagonists. These observations were noted in phase I and II studies. However, the phase III studies were conducted in unselected patients even before the results of phase I and II studies could be carefully analyzed for predictive biomarkers. For example, figitumumab was immediately pushed into phase III studies with combinations of chemotherapy and with erlotinib without waiting for biomarker analysis from the earlier phases of study. Unfortunately, both strategies utilizing figitumumab have been proven futile. The pressure to bring drugs to patients early, has no doubt contributed to the conduct of phase III studies with limited supporting data. Unfortunately, too often, potentially useful drugs have been discarded because of an accelerated development path without careful biomarker discovery efforts. We believe that the biological data that link IGF-1R pathway activation to cancer are compelling and the rationale to inhibit IGF-1R is sufficiently strong. IGF-1R inhibition is likely still a viable target in lung cancer.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Cite this article as: Pillai RN, Ramalingam SS. Inhibition of insulin-like growth factor receptor: end of a targeted therapy? Transl Lung Cancer Res 2013;2(1):14-22. doi: 10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2012.11.05
**MET inhibition in lung cancer**

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**Abstract:** Targeted agents have completely changed cancer treatment strategy, leading it from a “one size fits all” approach to a customized therapy. In this scenario Met, a heterodimere receptor tyrosine kinase deeply involved into embryogenesis and organogenesis, has been introduced many years ago as a potential target for biological agents, becoming “druggable” only in this last period of time. Met can be altered through receptor overexpression, genomic amplification, mutations or alternative splicing, autocrine or paracrine secretion of hepatic growth factor (HGF): these dysregulations stimulate tumorigenesis (in terms of cell-cell detachment, proliferation, invasion, angiogenesis and survival) and metastatization. Met is overexpressed in lung cancer and Met gene amplification can drive the dependency of cell survival and proliferation upon the Met signaling. Both Met overexpression and amplification seem to correlate with poor prognosis. Met amplification is also described to be linked to EGFR acquired resistance. Several Met inhibitors have been tested both in preclinical and human trials, demonstrating activity in lung cancer treatment. This paper aims to summarize data on Met biological function, on its interaction with cell signaling and other pathways and to present data on those Met inhibitors currently under evaluation.

**Keywords:** Lung cancer; Met; targeted therapy

Submitted Nov 16, 2012. Accepted for publication Dec 17, 2012.
View this article at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3978/j.issn.2218-6751.2012.12.04

**Introduction**

The discovery of new cancer-driver genes and the enforcement of molecules targeting them have changed the landscape of Non Small Cell Lung Cancer (NSCLC) treatment.

As a matter of fact, the previous scenario of advanced NSCLC treatment has been completely revolutionized, switching from a “one size fits all” approach to a personalized therapy.

Somatic mutations of the Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR) tyrosine kinase domain positively correlated with clinical responsiveness to specific inhibitors: gefitinib, erlotinib and afatinib, two reversible and one irreversible EGFR inhibitors, have consistently demonstrated significant increase of Response Rate (RR) and Progression-Free-Survival (PFS) compared to standard chemotherapy in EGFR mutated NSCLC patients with advanced disease (1-7).

The Anaplastic Lymphoma Kinase (ALK), firstly identified from a chromosomal translocation leading to the production of merged proteins in Non-Hodgkin lymphomas, was then detected as a fusion with the echinoderm microtubule-associated protein-like 4 (EML4) in 6.7% of NSCLC patients (8,9). Crizotinib (PF02341066, Xalkori) targets EML4-ALK thus gaining astonishing response rates in a phase I/II trial and more recently in a phase III trial (10,11).

Unfortunately, other biomarkers already identified in NSCLC are still “undraggable” and one clear example is KRAS. KRAS is a member of the RAS family of oncogenesis, involved in signal transduction and tumorigenesis and its mutations, frequently in codons 12 and 13, have been reported in 20-30% NSCLCS (12-15). Some sign of activity
came in the last year from a targeted agent (Selumetinib), which compared to standard chemotherapy in KRAS mutated patients gave interesting results in terms of RR and PFS (16).

Several other molecular markers’ alterations have been described in NSCLC such as: phosphatidylinositol 3-kinases (PI3K) (2%), lipid kinases that regenerate a key mediator between growth-factor receptors and intracellular downstream signaling pathways; ERBB-2 (2%); B-RAF (1-3%), a Ser-Thr kinase that links RAS GTPases to downstream proteins of the MAPK family, thus controlling cell proliferation; ROS1 (about 1%), oncogene that encodes a transmembrane tyrosine kinase receptor; AKT; RET and MET (17-21).

Since the first MET pathway description, several inhibitors have been preclinically and clinically tested, both alone and in combination with chemotherapy or other targeted therapies.

This paper will focus on MET biology, its role in the cell function and tumorigenesis, specifically in lung cancer, as well as on the molecules that target it.

**Met discovery and mechanism of action**

Met is a heterodimer receptor tyrosine kinase composed of a α-chain and a β-chain, linked by a disulphide bond.

Met was originally isolated as the product of a human oncogene, trp-met, in tumor cells treated with a chemical carcinogen. Met gene encodes a 170-kD protein (p170\(\text{oncogene}\)) in tumor cells treated with a chemical carcinogen. Met gene encodes a 170-kD protein (p170\(\text{oncogene}\)) that has constitutive and ligand-independent tyrosin- kinase activity. Met has pivotal functions in embryogenesis and organogenesis of placenta, liver, kidney, neurons and muscles (22-25).

Moreover, in vivo, Met receptor activation determines a phenomenon called “invasive growth”, which includes cell proliferation, scattering, survival, motility and invasion, epithelial-mesenchymal transition and branched morphogenesis (26,27).

The natural ligand for this receptor is the HGF, produced by stromal and mesenchymal cells, that acts primarily on Met-expressing epithelial cells in an endocrine and/or paracrine fashion (24,28). HGF-induced Met tyrosine kinase activation is regulated by paracrine ligand delivery, ligand activation at the target cell surface and ligand-activated receptor internalization and degradation (29). Going more into details, when HGF binds to the Met receptor, Met major autophosphorylation sites (located within the tyrosine kinase domain) are phosphorylated, with subsequent intrinsic catalytic activation of multiple signaling cascades involved in cell proliferation, survival, angiogenesis, morphogenesis, cell scattering, motility, migration and invasion. An activated docking site in the kinase domain further recruits intracellular adaptor molecules through the SH2 domains and other recognition motifs, such as GAB1 (a key coordinator of the cellular responses to Met).

Downstream signaling of the GRB2-mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) cascade, PI3K-mTOR pathway, and STAT pathway are eventually activated, mediating various cellular functions (27,30,31). Finally, in order to activate the receptor, proteolytic cleavage of proHGF is necessary (25).

HGF is mainly produced by stromal tissue like liver and bone marrow, and is expressed in a multitude of mesenchymal-derived cells. Being Met expression detected in the epithelium of most tissues, this indicates that HGF-Met signal transduction pathway contributes to mesenchymal-epithelial interactions (24,32-34).

Met downregulation occurs through rapid internalization of Met itself and subsequent degradation by the lysosome: this process is regulated by ligand-dependent ubiquitination of Met, a process also modulated by specific tyrosine phosphatases and recently identified as proteins decorin and LRIG1 (35,36).

Met can be altered through receptor overexpression, genomic amplification, mutations or alternative splicing. These alterations lead to signaling deregulation that can be mediated through ligand (HGF)-independent receptor activation or through its ligand (HGF)-dependent activation via autocrine (intratumoral HGF), paracrine (mesenchymal or microenvironmental HGF), or endocrine (circulatory HGF) loop signaling cascades (29).

HGF and Met are highly expressed in various stem and progenitors cells, but are only expressed at low levels in their mature cells (25). In preclinical animal models, whereas the overexpression of Met and/or HGF has been shown to stimulate tumorigenesis and metastasis, downregulation of Met or HGF expression resulted in increased apoptosis and decreased tumor growth and blood vessel density (37-40). Moreover, Met interacts synergistically with VEGF to promote angiogenesis, cell proliferation and invasion (41). This occurs through the transcriptional up-regulation of the hypoxia inducible factor-16 and amplified HGF signaling, that resulted in both induction of invasion and increased expression of VEGF (41).

Met pathway is also one of the key players in the development of acquired resistance to VEGF pathway inhibitors: the inhibition of Met expression prevented hypoxia-induced invasion growth (42,43).
The increased Met expression described in case of response to ionizing radiation through the ATM-NFκB signaling pathway, could lead to radioresistance and cancer invasion (44).

**Met pathway and cross-talks**

The cross-talk of Met with various signaling pathways is described in literature and that one between Met and EGFR/HER family receptors is particularly important in lung cancer (45-49).

Met and EGFR family receptors are often described co-expressed in tumors and transactivation of Met depends on elevated expression of EGFR in many human tumors (46,50,51). Conversely, HGF stimulation promotes transactivation of EGFR in multiple cell lines, including NSCLC (49).

Cooperation between Met and EGFR occurs also indirectly: when Met activates Src, this lead to EGFR phosphorylation and the creation of docking sites for EGFR interactors involved in downstream signaling (52).

Moreover, through receptor cross-talk, Met exerts a key role in the development of resistance to EGFR family inhibitors. One example is the stimulation of HER-3 phosphorylation and signaling to Akt (a key signaling molecule required for cell survival and proliferation) when Met is amplified and overexpressed (53,54). Inhibition of Met in EGFR inhibitors resistant cells, either in vitro or in vivo, promotes apoptosis, tumor growth reduction and significant necrosis (49,53).

**MET and NSCLC**

Met receptor is overexpressed in both Small Cell Lung Cancer (SCLC) and NSCLC, mainly in non-squamous histotype (65-67).

Recent tumor microarray expression analysis demonstrated a 72% Met expression in human lung cancer tissue and 40% Met receptor over-expression; such values are higher than in breast (16%) and ovarian cancer (31%), but lower than in renal (70%) and colorectal cancers (CRC; 78%) (67). Phospho-Met expression is found to be at the highest levels in lung cancer (73%), followed by ovarian (33%), breast (23%), and renal (18%) cancer (67).

Met gene amplification can guide the dependency of cell survival and proliferation upon the Met signaling, even in lung cancer cell lines. Blocking Met causes significant growth inhibition, G1-S arrest and apoptosis in cell lines harboring Met gene amplification. When Met is not amplified, its levels of activation are low and cells are unable to grow (68).

Different studies have reported primary Met amplification to be in the wide range of 2% to 21%, in lysosomal degradation, whereas LRIG1 and EGFR associated via their extracellular domains, allow enhanced EGFR phosphorylation. Thus, Met promotes resistance to VEGFR and EGFR inhibitors (59,60).

Cross-talk between Met and KRAS signaling has also been described both in preclinical and clinical findings (61,62). Met activates RAS directly or via a protein-tyrosine phosphatase (63). Similarly, PI3K could be directly activated by Met or indirectly by RAS protein (30).

Moreover, Met directly binds to and sequesters the Fas receptor. This interaction prevents Fas self-aggregation and ligand binding, thus inhibiting Fas activation and apoptosis (64).

Finally, preclinical studies exploring a combination of anti-Met therapeutic agents with mTOR inhibitors have also demonstrated an increased growth suppression, compared to mTOR inhibitors alone (62).

Met plays also a functional role in signaling pathways mediated by other membrane proteins. Integrin-dependent signaling could trigger ligand-independent Met phosphorylation following cellular adhesion, and Met and integrins might have independent yet synergistic roles in cell invasion. Plexins, single-pass transmembrane receptors for semaphorins, acts cooperatively with Met for cell adhesion and migration (45).
NSCLC lung adenocarcinomas, particularly in TKI-naïve cohorts (69-72).

In lung cancer, Met receptor mutations were mainly found clustered in the non-tyrosine kinase domain, in the juxtamembrane (JM) domain and in the sema domain (67). These mutations are oncogenic activating variants, that result in a deletion in the juxtamembrane domain with enhanced oncogenic signaling, tumorigenicity, cell motility, and migration (27,73). Met kinase domain mutations have been found to be somatically selected in the metastatic tissues, compared with the primary solid cancers (74).

Literature data are quite discordant on the prognostic value of Met over-expression, amplification and mutation.

The overexpression of circulating Met in patients with NSCLC has been strongly associated with early tumor recurrence and patients with adenocarcinoma and Met amplification have also demonstrated a trend for poor prognosis (69,75,76).

Concerning the correlation between Met FISH status and clinical characteristics, only Okuda and colleagues demonstrated an association with male gender and smoking status, showing also a relationship with high Met gene copy number (77). In the same trial, both FISH positive and gene amplified cases had a worse prognosis, although the difference was not statistically significant and among the Met FISH-positive NSCLCs, patients with gene amplification showed not significantly worse OS compared to those with high polysomy.

All FISH-positive cases had squamous histology, adenocarcinoma had Met amplification: high Met gene copy number tended to have shorter OS and PFS than those with low Met gene copy number, being this difference statistically significant only in the squamous histotype.

Moreover, at multivariate analysis done on squamous histology, increased Met gene copy number and Met amplification were confirmed to be independent poor prognostic factors.

No significant difference in prognosis was found in patients having adenocarcinoma regardless Met FISH status in the korean study. In contrast, Beau-Faller and colleagues found a tendency toward shorter event-free survival in adenocarcinoma patients with increased Met gene copy number, whereas Kanteti and colleagues demonstrated that the high Met gene copy number in adenocarcinoma was associated with a trend of better prognosis (69). However, the above mentioned study has some critical methodology aspects as it was conducted on a small sample size and qPCR was used as test and not FISH, done on DNA samples extracted from formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) archival tumor tissues (70).

Capuzzo and colleagues found no patient with EGFR mutation was Met FISH positive, but increased Met gene copy number significantly correlated with EGFR FISH-positive status (78).

Acquired Met amplification has also been linked to approximately 22% of non-T790M mediated secondary gefitinib resistance in NSCLC patients, although it can also occur concurrently but independently (52,53,78-80).

Using in vitro cell line models, the Met gene amplification in gefitinib-resistant cell clones was identified (53).

Rho and colleagues tried to demonstrate that Met activation, rather than gene amplification, is sufficient to promote EGFR resistance, but the activation appear to be secondary to increase passage numbers rather than to EGFR-Tki exposure (81).

More recently, two prospective analyses have investigated the mechanism of EGFR-Tki resistance through the tissue rebiopsy: high Met gene copy number was found in 11% and 5% of the tissue samples, respectively (82,83).

**Met inhibitors**

Several inhibitors have been tested so far: they can be classified according to their mechanism of action in selective Met inhibitors, unselective Met inhibitors and antibodies targeting Met or HGF (Figure 1, Table 1).

**Selective Met inhibitors**

**Tivantinib**

Tivantinib (ARQ 197) is the first non-ATP-competitive small molecule that selectively targets the Met RTK, locking and stabilizing the kinase in a “closed” and “inactive” conformation, causing the disruption of Met phosphorylation and the downstream signaling.

Moreover, tivantinib enhances Met degradation through the ubiquitin/proteasome pathway in vitro, induces apoptosis in Met activated cell-lines and it’s active in multiple human cancer xenografts (84,85).

Tivantinib acts synergically with antiangiogenetic drugs in preclinical studies on solid tumor cell lines (86).

Studies in vitro and in vivo demonstrated its activity in several types of cancer such as breast, colorectal and gastric cancer (85,87).

Met cancer expressing cell lines treated with tivantinib displayed either a dose-dependent loss of proliferative
capacity or caspase-dependent Met apoptosis, which positively correlated with either ligand-dependent Met activity or constitutively active Met. Tivantinib does not exert any activity in cancer cell lines not expressing Met or phospho-Met.

Tivantinib has been investigated in three phase I trials, as single agent and in combination.

In the first dose-escalation phase I trial, tivantinib is administered as single-agent in patients with advanced solid tumors. Initially, an intermittent dosing was planned but, due to the bradycardia experienced in the other phase I trial using this schedule, the protocol was amended and the following 79 patients received a continuous dose (88).

No MTD was reached in this study and less than 33% of patients experienced DLTs at any given dose. Thus, the recommended phase II dose was confirmed at 360 mg twice a day as per a concomitant phase I study, where this MTD was identified (88).

The most commonly reported drug-related adverse events of any grade included fatigue, gastrointestinal (GI) disorders (nausea, vomiting and diarrhea) and anemia.

Pharmacokinetic was linear. There was considerable

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**Figure 1** Met inhibitors in the clinic.
inter-patient variability, but no relationship between drug-related adverse events (AEs), dose and extent of tivantinib exposure; consequently, this inter-patient variability was not considered relevant for its clinical safety. Partial responses registered in this trial were equal to 4.8% (89).

In another phase I trial, two formulations of tivantinib were tested: the amorphous and the crystalline A formulation. The trial was lead in a single institution, the Royal Marsden Hospital (Sutton, United Kingdom) and highlighted the following DL T s: one patient had grade 3 fatigue at 200 mg, one patient presented a grade 3 febrile neutropenia, one other a grade 3 mucositis, one a grade 3 palmar-plantar erythrodysesthesia and one a grade 3 hypokalemia at 400 mg. The MTDs- recommended phase 2 doses (RP2Ds) were 300 mg bi-daily for the amorphous formulation and 360 mg bi-daily for the crystalline A formulation. The main grade 1-2 AEs, all generally self-limiting, were fatigue (15.7%), nausea (13.7%), vomiting (11.8%). Tivantinib is metabolized by CYP2C19: one patient with CYP2C19 deficiency experienced grade 4 febrile neutropenia and grade 3 mucositis as the drug’s AUC was 3-fold higher (90).

The crystalline A formulation of tivantinib resulted in lower drug exposure at 300 and 360 mg twice daily, compared with the amorphous form at 300 mg twice daily (likely due to different dissolution characteristics). RECIST stable disease ≥4 months was the best response in 14 patients, together with minor tumor regressions (88).

As the ratio of the poor metabolizers of CYP2C19 in Asians is around 20% (while is very low in Caucasians), a Japanese phase I trial was designed to evaluate drug’s safety profile of tivantinib in this group of patients with metastatic solid tumors and the drug was well tolerated, but CYP2C19 genotype clearly affected the exposure and the RP2Ds differed for “no poor metabolizers” (360 mg bi-daily) and for “poor metabolizers” (240 mg bi-daily). Most common AEs were similar to those mentioned above (91). A phase III trial was conducted in Asia in advanced NSCLC

| Table 1 Ongoing trials on Met inhibitors |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Molecule | Targets | Type | Phase | Monotherapy or combination | Drug associated | Patient populations |
| Tivantinib | c-Met | TKI | I | Combination | Topotecan | SCLC |
| | | | II | Combination | Erlotinib | EGFR pos NSLC |
| | | | II | Combination | Erlotinib | KRAS pos NSLC |
| AMG 337 | c-Met | TKI | I | Monotherapy | - | Solid tumors |
| Cabozantinib | c-Met, VEGFR2, RET, Kit, AXL, FLT3 | TKI | II | Monotherapy | - | Solid tumors |
| | | | II | Monotherapy | - | KIF5B/RET NSCLC |
| | | | I | Combination | Erlotinib | EGFR neg NSCLC |
| Foretinib | c-Met, VEGFR, PDGFRb, Tie-2, RON, Kit, FLT3 | TKI | I-II | Combination | Erlotinib | NSCLC |
| Golvatinib | c-Met, VEGFR | TKI | I | Monotherapy | - | Solid tumors |
| MGCD265 | c-Met, VEGFR, RON, Tie2 | TKI | I-II | Combination | Erlotinib/ Docetaxel | NSCLC |
| Onartuzumab | c-Met | MoAb | II rand | Combination | CBDCA-Pacl | Squamous NSCLC |
| | | | III | Combination | Erlotinib | Met positive NSCLC |
| | | | II rand | Combination | Platinum + Pem; | Non-squamous NSCLC |
| | | | | | Platinum + Pacl + Bev | |
| Rilotumumab | HGF | MoAb | I-II | Combination | Erlotinib | NSCLC |
| CBDCA, carboplatin; Pacl, paclitaxel; Pem, pemetrexed; Bev, bevacizumab; rand, randomised; SCLC, small cell lung cancer; NSCLC, non-small cell lung cancer; KRAS, v-Ki-ras2 Kirsten rat sarcoma viral oncogene homolog; EGFR, epidermal growth factor; KIF5B/RET, kinesin family member 5B/ret proto-oncogene; Met, met proto-oncogene; TKI, tyrosine kinase inhibitor; MoAb, monoclonal antibody.
patients, comparing erlotinib + tivantinib versus erlotinib + placebo at the dose calculated considering the CYP2C19 polymorphism (92). A press release in August 2012 announced a suspension in the accrual for this study, due to suspected cases of interstitial lung disease (93).

Based on the preclinical data showing a synergistic action between EGFR-TKi and Met inhibitors, an open-label sequential dose escalation phase I trial on tivantinib + erlotinib was set up. Thirty-two metastatic cancer patients were included: 59% were males, 75% PS 1 and mean age was 60 years. The MTD was not established, however, the RP2D was 360 mg bi-daily for tivantinib and 150 mg daily for erlotinib. Two DLT were experienced at 360 mg (grade 4 neutropenia, grade 3 thrombocytopenia), none at 240 or 120 mg. The most common AEs were cutaneous rash, fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhea, bradycardia and anemia, mostly grade 1 and 2. No drug related death, but 11% grade 3-4 neutropenia and 8% grade 3-4 nausea were recorded (94).

This combination of erlotinib (150 mg daily) + tivantinib (360 mg bi-daily) every 4 weeks was further studied in a phase II, double-blind, randomized open-label study in comparison with erlotinib 150 mg daily + placebo, in previously treated locally advanced or metastatic NSCLC patients. One hundred and sixty-seven patients were enrolled and homogeneously distributed between the two arms (mainly males, never or former smoker, with stage IV disease and adenocarcinoma histology): 10% in the combination arm versus 18% in the standard arm presented an EGFR mutation, 10% versus 17% a KRAS mutation, 26% versus 26.5% had 4 or more MET gene copy number. The ORR was 10% for erlotinib + tivantinib versus 7% for the control arm.

Median investigator’s PFS was 3.8 months for the tivantinib + erlotinib arm versus 2.3 months for the erlotinib + placebo arm (HR=0.81, P=0.024); the reviewer’s PFS was 3.6 versus 2 months (HR=0.74, P=0.09). Median OS was 8.5 for the investigational arm versus 6.9 months for the control arm (HR=0.87, P=0.47). Pre-planned exploratory survival analysis in non-squamous histology showed a trend of benefit from the combination arm in both PFS (HR=0.71) and OS (HR=0.72). Even in a small number of patients, the subgroup analysis showed an advantage in terms of PFS for EGFR wild type (HR=0.70) and KRAS mutated patients (HR=0.76) and for Met FISH positive patients (HR=0.76).

Treatment was well tolerated both in the investigational and in the control arm: low grade rash (9.5% versus 7.2%) and diarrhea (7.1% versus 7.2%), fatigue (4.8% versus 6%), nausea (1.2% versus 4.8%), vomiting (3.6% versus 1.2%), dyspnea (7.1% versus 13.3%), anemia (6% versus 7.2%) were the most common reported toxicities (95).

On the basis of data coming from this phase II trial, the phase III MARQUEE trial was designed in non-squamous NSCLC patients with the same schema, having the overall survival (OS) as primary end-point. Unfortunately, a press release in October 2012, revealed that the primary end point in the intent to treat population was not met, but no further data are yet available (96,97).

Others selective Met inhibitors

PF-04217903 is a selective ATP-competitive small inhibitor of Met kinase. It inhibits tumor cell proliferation, survival, migration/invasion in Met-amplified cell lines in vitro, and shows marked antitumor activity in tumor models harbouring either Met gene amplification or a HGF/Met autocrine loop. PF-04217903 also demonstrates potent antiangiogenic properties in vitro and in vivo (98). In 2012 a phase I trial with PF-04217903 in patients with advanced solid tumors was prematurely discontinued, due to strategic development decision by Pfizer. No safety concerns were reported (99).

AMG 337 is a selective inhibitor of the proto-oncogene Met thereby disrupting Met signal transduction pathway. A phase I, open-label, sequential dose escalation and expansion study with AMG 337 in subjects with advanced solid tumors is currently ongoing (100) (Table 1).

INCB028060 is an oral potent and highly selective Met inhibitor, capable of suppressing tumor growth in vivo at doses that are extremely well tolerated (101,102). Good tolerance was confirmed in a phase I standard 3+3 dose-escalation study once or twice daily on a continuous 28-day schedule in patients with advanced solid tumors. The MTD was not reached and no grade 3-4 AEs were noted, except grade 3 ALT increase in a patient with liver metastases and grade 2 ALT levels at baseline. Grade 1-2 AEs experienced were mild tremor, fatigue, nausea, diarrhea, indigestion and headache (103).

Non-selective Met inhibitors

Crizotinib

Crizotinib was synthesized primarily as a Met inhibitor. It was engineered based on interactions of a precursor (PHA-665752) with the ATP-binding sites of the Met kinase domain thus resulting in displacement of the kinase
Cabozantinib inhibits HGF and VEGF-mediated cell migration and also Met and VEGFR phosphorylation and the tubule formation, with no evidence of cytotoxicity.

This effect described in vitro, turned into in vivo significant tumor regression, without any relevant toxicity (109).

Several phase I trials have already been published verifying the schedule, the formulation, the dose of the drug, both as single-agent and in combination with other molecules.

Kurzrock and colleagues studied single-agent cabozantinib both in suspension and capsule formulation, at intermittent (5 days on, 9 off) and continuous schedule: MTD was defined at 175 mg continuous schedule, being DLT mucositis, elevated lipase and altered liver function (110).

The continuous dose was further investigated in a Japanese only population: MTD was 60 mg, being grade 3 hypertension the DLT (111).

Regarding combination regimens, a phase I study analyzed the interaction of the combination cabozantinib and rosiglitazone, as the latter is a CYP2C8 substrate, but no interaction was found between these two compounds (112,113).

Cabozantinib was further studied in several phase II trials in different tumor types. Among them, one phase II trial investigated treatment with cabozantinib in NSCLC patients previously treated with anti-EGFR TKi (50%) and anti-VEGF therapies (32%). At week 12 the ORR was 10% and the overall DCR 40%. No difference in terms of PFS (median 4.2 months) was seen in the two populations according to the treatment response at 12 weeks. The most common grade 3-4 events were diarrhea (7%), palmar-plantar erythrodyesthesia (8%), fatigue (13%) and asthenia (7%) (114).

Likewise tivantinib, also cabozantinib was tested together with erlotinib or gefitinib in vivo and in vitro in EGFR TKi resistant NSCLC xenograft models harboring Met amplification. Gefitinib and cabozantinib were tested on gefitinib resistant cell lines either alone and in combination and the two molecules together were substantially more potent than each drug alone (>50% inhibition). The same result was obtained with the combination of erlotinib and cabozantinib on erlotinib resistant cell lines (115).

The combination of cabozantinib and erlotinib was tested on 54 NSCLC patients in a phase Ib/II study. Patients were divided into 5 cohorts in two parallel arms: arm A (75 mg cabozantinib + 100 mg erlotinib; 125 mg cabozantinib + 100 mg erlotinib; 125 mg cabozantinib + 50 mg erlotinib) and arm B (75 mg cabozantinib +150 mg erlotinib; 50 mg cabozantinib +150 mg erlotinib). Twelve patients experienced at least 1 DLT: diarrhea, increased AST levels, palmar-plantar erythrodyesthesia, mucositis,
hypertension, hypokalemia, elevated lipase and fatigue. The most common grade 3-4 adverse events were diarrhea (26%), fatigue (15%), dyspnea (12%) and hypoxia (9%) (116).

In advanced NSCLC patients two phase II trials are ongoing: the first one randomizes EGFR wild type patients to erlotinib, cabozantinib or erlotinib plus cabozantinib as second or third line therapy; the second study investigates cabozantinib in patients with KIF5B/RET positive NSCLC (117,118) (Table 1).

Foretinib
Foretinib (XL-880, EXEL-2880) is an oral multi-kinase inhibitor developed to target Met and several other receptor tyrosine kinases involved in tumor angiogenesis. It is an ATP-competitive inhibitor and binds the ATP pocket of both Met and VEGFR-2 tyrosine kinase domains with high affinity.

Both in vitro and in vivo, foretinib inhibits Met and VEGF receptor-2 (VEGFR-2) and have high in vitro affinity for PDGFRb, Tie-2, RON, Kit, and FLT3 kinases, preventing tumor growth through a direct effect on tumor cell proliferation and inhibition of invasion and angiogenesis, mediated by HGF and VEGF receptor (119).

Two phase I trials have been published: the first investigated foretinib administered for 5 consecutive days every 14 days in a 3+3 dose escalation study; in the second study foretinib was administered once daily for 28 days. Both trials were conducted in patients with metastatic or unresectable solid tumors. MDT was defined as 3.6 mg/kg for 5 consecutive days every 14 days in the first study and as 80 mg daily in the second; DLTs in the first study included grade 3 elevations in aspartate aminotransferase and lipase, whereas in the second trial hypertension, dehydration and diarrhea were described.

Additional AEs in both studies included hypertension, fatigue, diarrhea, vomiting, proteinuria, and hematuria. In these studies no responses were observed and most of patients achieved a stable disease as best response (120,121).

A phase I, open-label, randomized, 2-part crossover study assessed the safety, pharmacokinetics and relative bioavailability of single doses of foretinib free base tablet formulation compared to a bisphosphate salt capsule formulation: both were well tolerated and their pharmacokinetics and relative bioavailability were not clinically different (122).

On the basis of preclinical data, showing that combining foretinib with erlotinib or lapatinib effectively decrease the phosphorylation of Met, HER1, HER2, HER3, AKT, and ERK in cell lines, a phase I/II study of erlotinib in association or not with foretinib in previously treated NSCLC patients has been designed and is currently ongoing (123,124) (Table 1).

Golvatinib
Golvatinib (E7050) is a novel small molecule ATP-competitive inhibitor of Met receptor, that potently and selectively inhibits the autophosphorylation of Met and VEGF-induced phosphorylation of VEGFR (125).

Golvatinib also circumvents resistance to reversible, irreversible, and mutant-selective EGFR-TKIs induced by exogenous and/or endogenous HGF in EGFR mutant lung cancer cell lines, by blocking the Met/Gab1/PI3K/Akt pathway in vitro and also prevents the emergence of gefitinib-resistant cells, induced by continuous exposure to HGF (126).

A phase I study with oral daily golvatinib administered continuously once a day in patients with advanced solid tumors was performed. Three DLTs were observed: grade 3 increase in GGT and alkaline phosphatase levels and grade 3 fatigue, all at 450 mg. The MTD was determined to be 400 mg every day. Frequently occurring AEs were fatigue (68%), diarrhea (65%), nausea (62%), vomiting (53%), decreased appetite (47%), ALT increase (38%) and AST increase (23%). No grade 4 AEs were observed (127).

Other molecules
MGC D265 is an oral receptor tyrosine kinase inhibitor targeting Met, VEGF, RON and Tie2. Preclinical data have demonstrated synergism of action with erlotinib and early clinical trials are currently ongoing (128) (Table 1).

ANG707 is another non-selective Met inhibitor under investigation in early phase trials (129).

Antibodies
Antibodies against Met
Onartuzumab (MetMab)
MetMab is a recombinant, fully humanized, monovalent monoclonal anti-Met antibody based on the human IgG1k framework sequence. It binds in the sema domain of Met within the extracellular domain, where it acts to inhibit HGF binding and initiation of receptor activation. The unique monovalent design of MetMab eliminates the potential for Met activation via antibody-driven receptor dimerization (130).

The activity shown in vitro by MetMab did not translate
into a full activity in vivo: only about 65% tumor inhibition was demonstrated, indicating that blockade of HGF by MetMAb is not sufficient for full tumor inhibition in specific tumors (130).

A phase I trial investigated sequential 3+3 dose-escalation of endovenous MetMAb in advanced solid tumors: MetMAb was three weekly intravenously administered, both as single agent and in combination with bevacizumab 15 mg/kg every three weeks, until progression.

Most frequent MetMAb AEs as single-agent were: fatigue (56%), peripheral edema (35%), decreased appetite (32%), constipation (29%), nausea (27%), vomiting (24%) and hypoalbuminemia (24%); there was no consistent relationship between AEs and dose level.

Grade 3 AEs were peripheral edema (9%), abdominal pain, AST increase, fever and hyponatremia. No Grade 4 toxicity was observed. The combination arm had similar toxicities; no grade 3 or 4 toxicity was experienced. MTD was not reached. The best response was stable disease (131).

The phase II trial was a global, randomized, double-blind trial evaluating the combination of MetMAb + erlotinib versus placebo + erlotinib in second/third line NSCLC advanced patients. One hundred and twenty-eight NSCLC patients were enrolled with a baseline immunohistochemical evaluation of Met: 54% of the patients were considered as Met positive (high protein expression at IHC). Met positive patients treated in the experimental arm had a significantly higher PFS (3.0 vs. 1.5 months; HR 0.47; P=0.01) and OS (12.6 vs. 4.6 months; HR 0.37; P=0.002) (132).

Based on phase II data, a randomized, phase III, multicenter, double-blind, placebo-controlled study evaluating the efficacy and safety of onartuzumab in combination with erlotinib in patients with Met positive NSCLC who have received standard chemotherapy for advanced disease is currently recruiting patients (133) (Table 1).

The positive results of the phase I trial on MetMAb in combination with bevacizumab have paved the way to the ongoing randomized phase II multicentric double-blind placebo-controlled study evaluating the efficacy and safety of MetMAb in combination with either bevacizumab + platinum + paclitaxel or pemetrexed + platinum as first-line treatment in patients with stage IIIB and IV non-squamous NSCLC (134).

**Antibodies against HGF**

**Ficlatuzumab**

Ficlatuzumab (AV-299) is a potent hepatocyte growth factor (HGF) inhibitor IgG1 monoclonal antibody, that binds to the HGF ligand with high affinity and specificity.

Ficlatuzumab was studied in two phase I trials and one phase II study. In both phase I trials it was associated with gefitinib and erlotinib. In the first phase I trial ficlatuzumab was biweekly administered intravenously over 30-60 minutes both as single-agent and in combination with erlotinib at 150 mg continuously in advanced solid tumors. There were no DLT in the monotherapy arm; consequently no MTD was identified.

For the combination arm there was one DLT (grade 3 mucositis). The RP2D for both monotherapy and combination regimen was defined as 20 mg/kg every 2 weeks. Ficlatuzumab as a single-agent demonstrated a stabilisation of disease in 50% of the cases (135).

The second phase Iib trial enrolled only Asiatic patients with unresectable NSCLC: ficlatuzumab was administered intravenously every 2 weeks at two dose levels (10 and 20 mg/kg) in combination with gefitinib at 250 mg daily.

No DLTs were observed in the dose-escalation cohorts; 20 mg/kg of ficlatuzumab every 2 weeks + gefitinib 250 mg daily was selected as RP2D. Among 12 patients in the 20 mg/kg cohort, 5 partial responses were achieved (136). Most frequent treatment-emergent adverse events (AEs) were fatigue (27-33%), dermatitis acneiform (53%, particularly for the combination regimens), diarrhea (33-46%) and edema (16-27%) for both single-agent and combination therapy (135,136).

The efficacy of ficlatuzumab together with gefitinib was further investigated in a multicenter, open-label, exploratory, 2-arm randomized phase 2 study in previously untreated Asian NSCLC patients with the doses defined in the phase I. One-hundred eighty-eight patients were randomized with a baseline evaluation of Met by IHC and gene copy number. In the low Met group, ORR (41 versus 22%) and median PFS (7.3 versus 2.8 m) favored the combination regimen with a manageable toxicity profile (137).

**Rilotumumab**

Rilotumumab (AMG 102) is a fully human monoclonal antibody that selectively targets and neutralizes hepatocyte growth factor/scatter factor (HGF/SF). It preferentially bound to the β-chain of the human, mature, active form of HGF, and had no apparent effect on proteolytic processing of the inactive HGF precursor (138).

Two phase I trials have been published so far with AMG 102 in advanced refractory solid tumors: one as single agent and one in combination with bevacizumab or motesanib (139).

In the monotherapy trial, AMG 102 was well tolerated up to the planned maximum dose of 20 mg/kg, MTD was not reached and pharmacokinetic was linear. Two patients...
experienced DLTs: one grade 3 hypoxia and grade 3 dyspnea (0.5 mg/kg cohort) and one grade 3 upper GI hemorrhage (1 mg/kg cohort). Treatment-related AEs were generally mild and included fatigue (13%), constipation (8%), nausea (8%), vomiting (5%), anorexia (5%), myalgia (5%), and hypertension (5%). Seventy percent of the evaluable patients had a SD as best response (139).

The phase Ib combination study sequentially enrolled patients into four cohorts, but the number of those receiving AMG 102 plus motesanib was insufficient to adequately assess safety and the accrual was early suspended because of reports of cholecystitis in other motesanib studies. No dose-limiting toxicities were reported and the combination of AMG 102 with bevacizumab seemed to have acceptable toxicity. AEs were generally mild and included fatigue (75%), nausea (58%), constipation (42%) and peripheral edema (42%) (140).

**TAK 701**

TAK-701 is a humanized monoclonal antibody that binds HGF thus inhibiting its binding to Met receptor. TAK-701 in combination with gefitinib blocks the phosphorylation of Met, EGFR, extracellular signal-regulated kinase, and AKT in HGF expressing human NSCLC cell lines with an activating EGFR mutation. Combination therapy also markedly inhibited the tumor growth in vivo (141).

Preliminary data of a phase I study in advanced solid malignancies with TAK-701 showed that the most common AEs were cough, abdominal pain, constipation and fatigue, all grade 1-2. There were 3 grade 3 AEs (gastrointestinal ileus, pleural effusion, urinary tract infection) and 1 grade 4 AE (dyspnea). No DLT was found and the MTD has not been reached (142).

**Conclusions**

In patients with advanced NSCLC, a correct definition of the histotype is still the first step to design a proper therapeutic algorithm, but personalized molecular diagnosis is becoming more and more relevant.

Genetically defined subsets of cancers may share dependence on a specific signaling pathway: specific inhibitors targeting these pathways would be most effectively tested in patient populations characterized by molecular markers.

Moreover, genetic events that arise and are selected during tumor progression may become essential for tumor survival, a phenomenon generally described as “oncogene addiction”: cancer cells appear to depend on a single overactive oncogene to proliferate and survive (143). Optimal case selection, diagnostic and pharmacodynamic biomarker development, the identification and testing of rationally designed anticancer drugs and combination strategies are crucial to develop the best treatment for the right patient (144).

New generations of molecularly targeted drugs will allow more personalized medicine and more efficacious and less toxic antitumor therapies in patients with defined molecular aberrations, sparing normal cells thus sparing toxicity (145,146).

Met can act as an ‘oncogene expedient’ even in absence of genetic alterations and might potentiate the effect of other oncogenes, promote malignant progression and participate in tumor angiogenesis (147).

Met dysregulation correlates with disease prognosis in numerous cancers and represents a possible target for personalized treatment. The clinical efficacy of Met targeting agents in lung cancer needs further details from the ongoing trials as well as more information are necessary to establish the most appropriate diagnostic test to identify Met expression or amplification.

Several molecules are currently under investigation and two of them already reached phase III trials in advanced NSCLC.

**Acknowledgements**

*Disclosure*: All the authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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Introduction

It is hard to believe that only a decade ago the treatment of non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) was based on simple exclusion of small-cell phenotype. In the last 10 years, steps toward a better knowledge of the mechanisms underlying this lethal disease moved researchers to investigate potential molecular alterations responsible for tumor growth and, consequently, for therapeutic approach. The discovery of mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) has dramatically changed the treatment of NSCLC (1-3). For patients with lung adenocarcinoma and activating EGFR tyrosine-kinase inhibitors (TKIs) - such as gefitinib or erlotinib - median overall survival (OS) ranges between 24 and 30 months (4-6), contrasting with the historical plateau of 10 months obtained with front line platinum-based chemotherapy in molecularly unselected populations (7). Seven large phase III randomized trials conducted in more than 1,400 patients harboring classical EGFR mutations - such as deletion in exon 19 or the L858R substitution in exon 21 - have established a new standard of care (4,5,8-12). In fact, all of these studies demonstrated the superiority of gefitinib, erlotinib or, more recently, afatinib in terms of response rate (RR) and progression free-survival (PFS) when compared to conventional platinum-doublet chemotherapy (Table 1). Because the vast majority of subjects enrolled in chemotherapy arm received an EGFR-TKIs at progression, no formal advantage in overall survival has emerged from the aforementioned trials. Nevertheless, in all trials median survival was up to 2-3 years, indicating that EGFR-TKIs are changing natural history of EGFR mutated NSCLC. Finally, since TKI toxicity is generally less severe than the one observed with platinum-based chemotherapy, offering an EGFR-TKIs to a sensitive
patient means delay toxic effects of chemotherapy and preserve quality of life (QoL). Similarly, a significant benefit was observed in those EGFR mutant patients treated with erlotinib or gefitinib as second- or third-line treatment (13,14) as well as in maintenance setting (15,16). Taken into account, all these data reinforced the conviction that patients carrying an activating EGFR mutation should never lose the opportunity of receiving an EGFR-TKI during the course of their disease.

However, the enthusiasm generated by these findings has been modulated by the awareness that, until now, no patient can be cured and inevitably all our patients progress and die for their disease. Aim of the present article is to briefly discuss the pitfalls of the first generation EGFR TKIs and to highlight the available data on a new class of inhibitors, also called irreversible or covalent, in the treatment of NSCLC.

### Unmet needs with reversible EGFR-TKIs

Main criticisms related to first-generation EGFR-TKIs are listed in Table 2.

First, a consistent proportion of EGFR mutant patients, approximately 30%, never respond to anti-EGFR TKIs due to primary resistance and the mechanism of this phenomenon is poorly understood (17). On the other hand, we know that EGFR mutation does not mean sensitive mutation. EGFR mutations exist in exon 18-21 of the tyrosine-binding domain of the EGFR (1,2,18). As previously reported, deletion in exon 19 and L858R point mutation in exon 21 account for the 90% of EGFR mutations detected in NSCLC and are clearly associated with benefit to EGFR TKIs (4,5,8-12). Beside these classical or typical mutations, there is still a small group of “uncommon” mutations, as G719, S768, L861 and others, that can occur with or without a common mutation (19) and for which the clinical impact is poorly understood. Wu et al., analyzed a large series of 1,261 lung cancer cases of which 627 were EGFR mutant, with the aim to evaluate the outcome to erlotinib or gefitinib according to the type of mutation (20). The authors confirmed that classical mutations derived the greatest benefit in terms of RR, PFS and OS (74%, 8.5 and 19.6 months respectively) from such treatment; nevertheless the absolute difference in outcome was not so huge when considering the less frequent G719 and L861 mutations (RR 53.3% and 60.0%, PFS 8.1 and 6.0 months, OS 16.4 and 15.2 months for G719 and L861 respectively); on the other hand, some rare uncommon mutations (i.e., V769M and A871E) failed to respond to EGFR TKIs (RR 20%, PFS 1.6 months and OS 11.1 months) with a clinical trend that was very similar to that observed for EGFR wild type population (RR 16.5%, PFS 2.0 months and OS 10.4). Although, the retrospective nature of the investigation and the low sample size of uncommon mutations in large phase III trials, only 6% and 3.8% in the NEJ002 and IPASS respectively (4,10), do not permit to draw any definitive conclusion, at the present time it is not recommended in clinical practice to treat in first-line a patient with uncommon mutation with erlotinib or gefitinib.

Second, treatment with reversible EGFR TKIs is generally defined as “overall well tolerated”. Indeed in the large phase III trials comparing erlotinib and gefitinib

### Table 2 Main criticisms reported with first-generation EGFR-TKIs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>No response in near 30% of NSCLC with classical exon 19-21 mutation</th>
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<tr>
<td>(I)</td>
<td>No clear benefit in presence of uncommon mutations</td>
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<td>(II)</td>
<td>Toxicity</td>
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<td>(III)</td>
<td>No patient is cured: median duration of response 9-12 months</td>
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<tr>
<td>(IV)</td>
<td>Lack of efficacy in presence of “acquired” T790M mutation</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>EGFR TKI</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Median PFS in TKI arm (months)</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>HR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPTIMAL (11)</td>
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<td>154</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Signal (8)</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
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<td>8.4</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPASS (4)</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WJTOG 3405 (9)</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEJSG 002 (10)</td>
<td>Gefitinib</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EURTAC (5)</td>
<td>Erlotinib</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUX-3 (12)</td>
<td>Afatinib</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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versus standard platinum based chemotherapy, also the toxicity profile was significantly better in the “experimental” arms; the incidences of grade >3 skin rash, diarrhea and liver dysfunction, the three most common adverse events related to EGFR TKIs treatment, did not exceed 20% and the proportion of patients that discontinued therapy due to toxic effects is less than 10% (4,5,8-10). Nevertheless, this small amount of patients, even if molecularly-favored, no longer benefited from therapy. On the other hand, unlike conventional chemotherapy, treatment with targeted agents is continued until disease progression; as a consequence also a long-lasting grade 2 toxicity could became “psicologically serious” over the time mainly because, more often, treated patients are young and able to normal activities.

Last but not least, the most relevant problem related to EGFR TKI therapy is the emergence of acquired resistance (21-23). Indeed, despite an initial dramatic tumor regression in up to 80% of cases after a median time of 9-12 months, all patients progress and the possibility of further control tumor growth inevitably decreases.

**Acquired resistance to EGFR TKIs: clinical, biological and therapeutic implications**

From a clinical point of view, we refer to acquired resistance according to the criteria proposed by Jackman and coworkers (24) in 2010 considering as “resistant” those patients treated with single-agent erlotinib or gefitinib (I) who progressed while on treatment and (II) who harbored a sensitive EGFR mutation or (III) if EGFR status is wild type or unknown, who obtained partial or complete response or a significant and durable (>6 months) clinical benefit - according to RECIST or WHO criteria - after initiation of EGFR TKI therapy. Two important issues derived from this work: first, the utility of a relative simple criteria to correctly define and select for novel clinical trials a population otherwise too heterogeneous; second, the concept that a progression that occur while on treatment could be interpreted as a transitory clinical condition related to the type of therapy (i.e., reversible EGFR TKIs) rather than to a true EGFR-pathway-independent tumor growth. In other words, the sensitivity to an anti-EGFR TKIs could be restored after a break period (3,22,25); for this reason many trials with sequential use of chemo- and EGFR targeted therapies are ongoing (25).

From biological point of view, prolonged exposure to erlotinib or gefitinib provides selective pressure for the development of tumor clones able to growth irrespective of the drug inhibition. The mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of secondary resistance are object of extensive evaluation and some of these are so far elucidated (22,23,26). Several preclinical studies demonstrated that the two main mechanisms responsible for acquired resistance are the up-regulation of the downstream signal by mesenchymal-epidermal transition (MET) amplification and the emergence of T790M EGFR gatekeeper mutation (26-30). Other mechanisms include EGFR amplifications, PI3KCA mutations or a transition from epithelial to mesenchymal differentiation (26). More interestingly, for a little percentage of resistant tumors occurs transformation into SCLC (26).

The “acquired” T790M mutation - a characteristic point mutation in the exon 20 of the EGFR gene - is associated with lack of activity of first generation EGFR TKI and is responsible for secondary resistance in at least 50% of patients exposed to erlotinib or gefitinib (22,23,26,38). Initial data showed that this event occur in less than 3% of mutated patients before starting and EGFR TKI therapy (30). More recently, using high sensitive methods, the EGFR T790M mutation was detected in up to 40% of previously untreated NSCLC, suggesting that what we call an “acquired resistance” is a pre-existing phenomenon (39). Retrospective data from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center suggested that this molecular event is largely underestimated, when assessed by low-sensitive technique (39). Whereas the vast majority of EGFR mutations are sensitive to TKIs because they decrease the affinity of the receptor for its natural substrate ATP, the presence of T790M, altering the conformation of the tyrosine kinase domain of the EGFR, restore its affinity for ATP at the levels similar than reported for EGFR wild type thus reducing the ability of reversible EGFR TKIs to effectively compete with ATP (40-41). *In vitro* studies demonstrated that gefitinib-resistant as well T790M mutation positive clones remain sensitive to irreversible EGFR TKIs that are structurally similar to erlotinib and gefitinib (42); unlike reversible TKIs, this new class of inhibitor contain an acceptor-group that binds covalently with the Cys797 present at the ATP-binding site of mutant EGFR. As discussed above, due to their characteristics irreversible EGFR TKIs seemed to be the ideal compounds.
to test in order to overcome T790M acquired resistance (42).

A fascinating way to interfere with the signaling cascade of the EGFR, in order to overcome resistance, is to simultaneously inhibit both the extracellular and intracellular receptor domains. The clinical proof of the so-called “vertical inhibition” comes from previous experience in HER2-overexpressing trastuzumab-resistant metastatic breast cancer, in which the combination of trastuzumab and lapatinib was superior to lapatinib alone in terms of RR and PFS (43).

Similarly in NSCLC, the combination of afatinib and cetuximab induced nearly complete tumor regression in T790M transgenic murine models (44). On this base, a pivotal phase Ib study has been recently conducted in NSCLC patients with clinically defined acquired resistance with the aim to explore the safety and activity of the combination (45). In the initial cohort, 22 patients were exposed to afatinib at the oral daily dose of 40 mg and cetuximab 500 mg/m² intravenously every 2 weeks. Adverse events were consistent with the typical class-effects previously reported (i.e., diarrhea and skin rash) and were generally mild, with only 3 patients experiencing grade 3 skin toxicity. Every patient obtained disease control with a median reduction in tumor size of 76% and a promising activity of 36% (8/22 including 4/13 T790M positive cases), leading to enrollment of an additional cohort of 80 patients. Final results have been recently presented. Main grade 3 adverse events were skin rash (12%) and diarrhea (6%); 96 patients were evaluable for efficacy and treatment resulted in 75% of disease control rate with a response rate of 30%, without significant difference between T790M positive and T790M negative patients (32% versus 28% months); median PFS was 4.7 months (46). These encouraging results deserve further validation in large phase III trials.

**New generations EGFR TKIs**

The second generation of EGFR inhibitors, also-defined irreversible or covalent EGFR inhibitors, afatinib, dacomitinib and neratinib, are pan-ErbB inhibitors and their activity against both EGFR activating mutations and the T790M mutation has been demonstrated in *in vivo* models (47-49).

**Afatinib**

Afatinib (BIBW2992) binds irreversibly to EGFR, HER2, HER4 and also to EGFR receptors carrying the T790M mutation, suggesting a potential role in overcoming resistance. Multiple phase I studies identified in 50 mg once daily the maximum tolerated dose (MTD) with main toxicities represented by diarrhea and skin rash (50). On this basis, the LUX-Lung clinical trial program has been launched for testing this molecule in different setting in advanced NSCLC patients.

In the phase 2b/3 LUX-Lung 1 trial (51), a total of 585 adenocarcinoma patients who met criteria for acquired resistance to EGFR-TKIs as proposed by Jackman et al. (24), were randomized in a 2:1 fashion to receive daily oral afatinib 50 mg plus best supportive care (BSC) or placebo plus BSC as third or subsequent line of therapy. The primary end-point was overall survival. Interestingly, the trial did not need archival tumor tissue and the subjects were not screened for *EGFR* status, but the prior disease control for >3 months under TKIs treatment was used as surrogate criterion to increase probability of *EGFR* mutations. The treatment with afatinib resulted in better activity (RR 7% versus 0.5%) and longer PFS (3.3 months, 95% CI, 2.79-4.40 months) than it was in placebo group (1.1 months, 95% CI, 0.95-1.68 months, HR 0.38, P<0.0001). Surprisingly, the PFS benefit did not translate in survival benefit. Median overall survival was 10 and 12 months for the afatinib and placebo arm respectively; the reason behind this unusual finding could be the confounding effect of post-study therapies; indeed, a greater proportion in the placebo arm than in the afatinib arm receive subsequent treatment, including chemotherapy and EGFR TKI.

Similar activity was preliminary reported in the LUX-Lung 4, a phase II open label trial, in which 62 Japanese patients who progressed after 1 or 2 chemotherapy lines and prior erlotinib or gefitinib underwent therapy with afatinib at the dose 50 mg (52). Response rate was 8%, with DCR of 66%, while PFS resulted of 4.4 months.

Afatinib was also evaluated as first line and second line therapy in patients who had not received a first generation TKI. The LUX-Lung 2 trial was a single-arm, multicenter phase II study evaluating the efficacy of afatinib 40-50 mg daily in advanced adenocarcinoma with *EGFR* activating mutations (53). A total of 129 subjects (first line N=61; second line, N=68) were enrolled onto the study; notably 18% of patients presented an uncommon mutation. In overall population objective RR, DCR and PFS were 59%, 83% and 14 months respectively, with a median overall survival of 24 months; no difference in outcome was noted between patients harbored L858R or deletion in exon 19 irrespective of line of therapy, while the efficacy in terms
of RR, PFS and OS was lower in those patients with uncommon mutations (RR 39%; median PFS 3.7 months; OS 16.3 months).

The LUX-lung 3, the first phase III study using the combination of pemetrexed and cisplatin as a comparator arm, randomly assigned in a 2:1 fashion EGFR mutant adenocarcinoma patients to receive as front line therapy afatinib 40 mg daily or six cycles of chemotherapy (12). The study, which enrolled 345 patients, met its primary end point of PFS. Patients treated with afatinib had a 42% relative reduction in risk of progression compared with those receiving standard chemotherapy (11.1 versus 6.9 months, HR 0.58; 13.1 versus 6.9 months, HR 0.47 for patients with classical EGFR mutations). Treatment with afatinib was also associated with higher response rate (56% versus 23%, ITT population) and better toxicity profile than chemotherapy, although G3 diarrhea and skin rash occurred in 14% and 16% of cases receiving the study drug.

Dacomitinib

Dacomitinib (PF0299804), covalently binds the adenosine triphosphate domain of each of three kinase active members of the HER family: EGFR/HER1, HER2 and HER4. In preclinical experiences, dacomitinib showed greater antitumor activity in gefitinib-resistant NSCLC in vitro and in vivo models (49). In NSCLC clinical trials, Dacomitinib has been evaluated in three different setting: after EGFR TKI failure (54-56), in second line in patients not previously exposed to a reversible EGFR TKI and in front line in EGFR mutants patients (57,58).

In a phase I study (54), a disease control rate (PR + SD) of 34% was seen in 44 patients pretreated with first-generation EGFR TKIs (94%) and chemotherapy (79%); most frequently any-grade adverse events observed at the recommended daily dose of 45 mg were diarrhea (78%) and skin rash (65%). In another phase I/II trial conducted in 36 advanced NSCLC patients who progressed after one or two prior chemotherapy regimen and erlotinib (55), DCR was observed in 67% and 40% of patients with adenocarcinoma and squamous cell carcinoma respectively. In another Korean phase II trial (56), enrolling 42 patients with similar characteristics, preliminary results demonstrated an activity of 15% with a DCR of 25%.

Ramalingam et al. published the results of the first randomized trial on irreversible EGFR TKI in lung cancer patients never exposed to TKI treatment (59). Subjects enrolled onto this phase II study were randomly assigned to receive as second line treatment erlotinib (N=94) or dacomitinib (N=94). The primary end point was PFS. In the dacomitinib arm there was a higher number of patients with ECOG performance status 2, EGFR mutant and treated with 2 or more prior chemotherapy than in the erlotinib arm. PFS resulted in favor of the experimental arm (median PFS 2.8 versus 1.91 months; HR 0.66); the improvement in PFS was reported across most of the subgroup considered and particularly in KRAS wild type/EGFR any status (median PFS 3.71 versus 1.91 months; HR 0.55), KRAS wild type/ EGFR wild type (median PFS 2.21 versus 1.84 months; HR 0.61), while for EGFR mutant patients median PFS resulted of 7.44 in both arms. The objective RR was lower in the erlotinib arm than in dacomitinib arm (5.3% versus 17%), as DCR (14.9% versus 29.8%) did. However, grade diarrhea and skin rash were more frequent with dacomitinib than with erlotinib.

More recently, Kris et al. reported the results of the 1017 study of dacomitinib at the dose of 30-45 mg daily in NSCLC patients with EGFR mutations or HER2 mutations (i.e., exon 20 insertions or point mutations) or HER2 amplification (57). Endpoints included progression-free survival rate at 4 months (PFS at 4 M), PFS, partial response (PR) rate and safety. EGFR cohort included never or light-former smoker (<10 pack year) patients with metastatic non-pretreated adenocarcinoma or treatment-naïve patients with known EGFR mutations, while HER2 cohort enrolled subjects with HER2 mutations or amplification who received any number of prior therapy. In the EGFR cohort (Cohort A, N=89), 46 of patients harbored a classical mutation (exon 19, N=25; exon 21, N=21); in this subgroup, RR rate was 76% while PFS at 4M and PFS were 95.5% (95% CI, 83.2-98.9%) and 18.2 months (95% CI, 12.8-23.8 months) respectively. As expected, common side effects were diarrhea, skin toxicity and nail changes. Cohort B is still recruiting and in the first 22 enrolled patients (HER2 amplification, N=4; HER2 mutation, N=18) an interesting activity of 14% was observed, but limited to those patients carrying a HER2 mutation.

Neratinib

Neratinib (HKI-272), an irreversible HER family inhibitor targeting EGFR/HER-1, HER-2 and HER-4, was initially tested in a phase I trial of 72 patients with advanced ErbB2 or ErbB1/EGFR IHC positive tumors (58). Maximum tolerated dose (MTD) was determined to be 320 mg and the most common related adverse event at this dose was
diarrhea. Strikingly, a long-lasting disease control (defined as stable disease for >24 weeks) was observed in 43% of refractory NSCLC patients.

A large non-randomized phase II trial explored the activity of neratinib in three different cohorts of advanced pretreated NSCLC patients (60). Arm A included patients with activating EGFR mutation (N=91), arm B included EGFR wild-type patients (N=48) while arm C included EGFR TKI-naïve patients selected for adenocarcinoma histology and smoking history (N=28). Subjects in arms A and B had to have received at least 12 weeks of prior erlotinib/gefitinib treatment. In the overall population (N=158), the activity was lower than expected, with only 2% of responders (RR 3.4% arm A; 0% arm B; 0% arm C). Interestingly, the three responding patients harbored the rare G719X point mutation in exon 18, maybe suggesting that neratinib could be less effective in presence of classical EGFR mutations; on the contrary, the presence of T790M mutation did not seem guarantee any benefit from such treatment. Median PFS was 15.3 weeks in the entire cohort, without significant difference between the three arms (15.3, 16.1 and 9.3 weeks in arm A, B and C respectively). Nevertheless, in the first 39 patients receiving neratinib at the dose of 320 mg daily the occurrence of grade 3 diarrhea was unacceptably high (50%); as a consequence, a dose reduction to 240 mg was required in order to improve tolerability with the hypothetical disadvantage of negatively affect response. Anyway, this major limitation led to dissipate the interest to further explore neratinib in NSCLC.

**Discussion**

The ideal inhibitor might be equally effective irrespective of the type of EGFR mutations, highly similar to the binding site of the receptor, active even in presence of T790M clones and - from the patient point of view - at least with identical or better toxicity profile than older compounds. Have the irreversible EGFR TKIs met all this endpoints?

In front line setting, the efficacy of covalent inhibitors is comparable to the one reported for reversible TKIs. In the LUX Lung 3 trial median PFS for patients with typical EGFR mutations is more than 13 months, with an absolute improvement of nearly 7 months respect to chemotherapy arm (12). These results is quite similar to those reported in the OPTIMAL trial, in which an impressive HR of 0.16 for PFS in favour of erlotinib arm was observed (11); nevertheless, unlike OPTIMAL, in the LUX-3 the difference in outcome between EGFR-TKI therapy and chemotherapy appears to be real, considering the high performance of the comparator arm. In phase II trial, Dacomitinib showed an unexpected PFS of nearly 18 months, but this finding deserves further validation in prospective large phase III studies (57). In terms of activity, best response rate observed in phase II trials of first and second generation EGFR-TKIs seemed almost identical for both class of inhibitors (53,57,61,62) (Table 3). Large phase III trials comparing head-to-head irreversible versus reversible EGFR TKIs are urgently needed to define whether covalent inhibitors may improve outcomes and possibly delay the onset of resistance.

Once again, patients harboring a classical mutation gained the greatest benefit from such treatments. In the LUX Lung 2, in which 18% of patients presented uncommon mutations, the RR and PFS was lower for this population and in any case, were consistent with those reported for gefitinib and erlotinib (53). In the LUX Lung 3 study (12,63), 48 (10.6%) patients presented uncommon mutations that were were categorized into 5 groups: T790M, G719X, S768I, exon 20 insertions, L861Q; the first 3 groups included double mutant patients. Tumour response and prolonged PFS were noted in 2 double mutant patients (L858R + T790M; S768I + L858R) and in 2 with single uncommon mutation (G719X and S768I), while in the other cases SD was the best response. Nevertheless these results are inconclusive, as the effect of afatinib in doublet mutant patients could be in part referred to the presence of the L858R mutation. As previously reported (60), neratinib

| Table 3 Comparison of best reported phase II results for EGFR TKIs in patients with EGFR-Mutant lung cancers (Exon 19 and Exon 21) |
|---------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|                                | Pts Enrolled, N | RR, %       | mPFS, mos   | mOS, mos    |
| Dacomitinib (57)               | 46             | 74          | 17          | NR          |
| Afatinib (53)                  | 129*           | 66          | 15          | 32-39       |
| Erlotinib (61)                 | 33             | 70          | 14          | 31          |
| Gefitinib (62)                 | 27             | 59          | 9.2         | 17.5        |

*51 treated first-line.
seemed to be more effective in presence of the rare G719X mutation; this might simply reflect a different sensitivity of specific mutations to an EGFR TKI. Furthermore, is it not possible to exclude that this result was obtained by chance because of the very small number of patients.

Irreversible TKIs have been developed with a specific focus on patients with acquired resistance to erlotinib or gefitinib. LUX-Lung 1 (51) and LUX-Lung 4 (52) trials failed to demonstrate a clear benefit in terms of RR in patients with acquired resistance and particularly in those cancers with T790M; the activity reported in the 2 studies was only 7% and 8%, lower than expected. We recently presented a retrospective analysis of 68 advanced lung adenocarcinoma patients with acquired resistance to reversible EGFR TKIs treated with afatinib and we reported a response rate of 10.6% with a disease control rate of 65%. Four of the five responding patients harbored a classical mutation including 1 patient with T790M; in 9 patients in which tumor biopsy was repeated before starting afatinib, only 2 patients had T790M mutation, with no evidence of response (64). All these results are disappointing and suggest that the ability of covalent inhibitor in overcome acquired resistance may have limitations unpredicted in preclinical experiences; a possible explanation could be the different drug concentration achieved in humans respect to preclinical models.

Another critical issue concerns the toxicity profile of the irreversible inhibitors. In metastatic setting, the preservation of QoL still remains one of the goals of therapy, mainly when considering second and subsequent line of treatment. In the case of neratinib, an unacceptable incidence of 50% of grade diarrhea required a dose reduction in the Sequist’s phase II trial (60). Grade 3 adverse events reported in LUX 1 and 2 trials (51,52), led the clinicians to consider 40 mg as the “optimal” tolerated dose, instead of 50 mg defined in phase I trial (50). Anyway, indirect comparison of phase III trials showed higher incidences of diarrhea, skin rash and stomatitis for afatinib respect to erlotinib or gefitinib (4,5,8). Main grade >3 toxicities with EGFR-TKIs are listed in Table 4. Taken into account, all these data suggested that toxicities of covalent inhibitors are probably higher than those observed with first-generation compounds.

Conclusions

Irreversible EGFR TKIs could represent a promising therapeutic option in the treatment of NSCLC. Although in absence of trials directly comparing reversible versus irreversible TKIs, available data failed to demonstrated a superior efficacy respect to first-generation inhibitors. Furthermore, the activity reported in patients harbouring an EGFR uncommon mutation is consistent with the one observed for gefitinib and erlotinib. Although the clinical development of covalent inhibitors focused on T790M-dependent acquired resistance, activity observed in this particular subgroup was only modest. The high affinity for ATP binding site could in part explain the prevalence of typical class-effects observed with afatinib, neratinib and dacomitinib. Results from ongoing and planned clinical trials, will help us to define the role of second generation TKIs in our clinical practice.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


The goal of the book was to provide a resource that is usable in all countries, providing straightforward data as well as food for thought for providers worldwide. Its design by Howard Smith, MD, was brilliant in its simplicity as well as its breadth of coverage. It is useful both for the student and resident physician being first exposed to death and dying as well as the palliative care specialist that may be an expert in one facet of the patient’s disease, but not in others. After reading this book, it was Dr. Smith’s goal to arm the reader with a new set of tools in their daily responsibility and to be the best provider possible for their patients. It is meant to spawn interest in further reading on topics of interest and to promote future directions of study.

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“... to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always.”
Attributed to Dr. Edward Livingston Trudeau, founder of a 19th century tuberculosis sanatorium, this could easily be a defining slogan for palliative care because nearly all care models highlight the reigning importance of the individual as the central point of care.

Amy P. Abernethy, M.D., Ph.D.
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