

Downstaging of hepatocellular carcinoma with radiofrequency ablation on the Hungarian liver transplantation waiting list – Early results and learned lessons

E. HARTMANN* ■ A. NÉMETH ■ GY. JUHAROSI ■ ZS. LÉNÁRD ■ P. Á. DEÁK ■ V. KOZMA ■
P. NAGY ■ ZS. GERLEI ■ I. FEHÉRVÁRI ■ B. NEMES ■ D. GÖRÖG ■ J. FAZAKAS ■
L. KÓBORI ■ A. DOROS

Semmelweis University, Clinic for Transplantation and Surgery

*Corresponding author: Dr. Hartmann Erika, Baross u. 23–25, H-1082 Budapest, Hungary

Phone: +36 20 8258573 • E-mail: hartmann.erika@gmail.com.

Abstract: Hepatocellular carcinoma, which has developed in liver cirrhosis is a disease where liver transplantation can provide a cure both for the tumour and the underlying liver damage. However, patients can only be transplanted when the tumour number and size do not exceed the Milan criteria. Tumour ablation methods – such as radiofrequency ablation – can provide a chance to make the patient eligible for transplantation. Among the 416 Hungarian liver transplanted patients there are 6 who had received different types of ablative therapy as bridging therapy in different institutions. On the basis of analysis of the patients' data we created a guideline for the treatment of cirrhotic patients with hepatocellular carcinoma with the aim of developing a uniform Hungarian approach.

Keywords: cirrhosis, hepatocellular carcinoma, liver transplantation, waiting list, tumour ablation therapy, radiofrequency ablation

Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), is one of the most common cancers worldwide that usually develops in an already damaged, often cirrhotic liver. Among others, the aetiology of background liver disease is mainly cirrhosis caused by chronic hepatitis B or C viral infection (HBV/HCV). During treatment, not only HCC itself but also the background liver disease should be targeted. Liver transplantation (LT) guarantees the best long-term and disease-free survival because it removes the cirrhotic liver with the tumour. However, the shortage of organs only allows treating a small proportion of patients by LT [1, 2]. According to the Milan criteria for liver transplantation with HCC, a patient can only be transplanted if the nodule is not larger than 5 cm or, in cases of multiplex nodules, if there is a maximum of 3 nodules with the largest not exceeding 3 cm in diameter. Therefore disease progression produces a 25% dropout rate from the waiting lists [3].

Surgical and interventional treatments of HCC, known as downstaging, are widely accepted as bridging therapies to LT, in other words, as therapies with the ability to keep patients on the waiting list [4]. Among the several abla-

tive methods, radiofrequency ablation (RFA) appears to be one of the most efficient percutaneous technique for HCC ablation. Other methods, such as percutaneous ethanol infiltration (PEI) or transarterial chemoembolization (TACE), are used with less favourable results in terms of recurrence or tumour control [5, 6]. RFA seems to be the best technique thanks to its predictable area of induced necrosis and percentage of induced necrotic cells [7].

In these RFA procedures, an ablation electrode at the tip of a needle is placed percutaneously into the targeted tumour under imaging guidance. Radiofrequency electromagnetic waves are transmitted from a generator and converted to heat, thus inducing necrosis in the tissues around the electrode.

The Hungarian Liver Transplant Program started in 1995, and during these years 416 LTs have been performed [8]. RFA became available for downstaging in 2004, though with limited financial resources [9]. From 2004 until the end of 2008, several ablated patients underwent successful LT, allowing their data to be analyzed.

The aim of this report is to determine important factors, such as lesion number, size, histopathologic type, treat-

ment type and time interval between treatment and LT, based on explanted liver histology and to make important refinements of patient selection and treatment protocol.

Patients and Methods

Between 2004 and 2008 we had six liver transplanted patients (2 females, 4 males, with a mean age of 56 years) who were treated with RFA earlier. Five out of six patients had HCV infection related cirrhosis and one had ALD (alcoholic liver disease) related cirrhosis. None of the patients had hepatitis B in their medical history. All the patients with HCV infection underwent targeted antiviral therapy. There were three Child–Pugh Class A and three Child–Pugh Class B patients. In these six patients nine HCC nodules were identified with preoperative imaging techniques, such as ultrasound (US), computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Eight lesions were identifiable with US, eight with CT and six with MRI. Pre-treatment fine needle aspiration biopsy (FNAB) was performed in all patients but not in all lesions.

The bridging therapies and their follow-up imaging tests were carried out in different medical centres. RFA was guided by US (Fig. 1) in four patients, and with CT (Fig. 2) in two patients. MRI guidance was not used, since it is unavailable in Hungary. In three lesions of two patients single 16-gauge open-perfused needle electrodes (Berchtold Medizinelektronik) were applied. One patient with one lesion was treated with the MIRAS device (Invatec) and three patients with five lesions (one, one and three, respectively) were ablated with the RITA Starburst system (Angiodynamics). One patient required general anaesthesia, four patients were ablated under conscious sedation, and one treatment could be performed under local anaesthesia. Two patients received additional PEI and one patient received chemoperfusion.

At follow-ups, multiphase contrast-enhanced CT scans or MRI were performed. The mean time between initial treatment and transplantation was 8.6 months (2–35 months) while the mean time between the last treatment to transplantation was 10.2 months (2–35 months).

All the transplantations were performed from cadaveric donors; no living donation or split transplantation were needed.

The explanted livers were processed and analyzed to assess the degree of tumour necrosis and the signs of vascular invasion (Fig. 3).

The mean post-transplant follow-up was 23.3 months (3–46 months) (Table I).

Results

During the post-ablation follow-up period 4 lesions showed complete necrosis whereas 5 lesions showed only partial response on contrast-enhanced CT or MRI images. Histological examination of the explanted livers revealed more than 14 countable lesions and in one patient

(Nr. 2) several additional small HCC nodules were found. In this patient microscopic vascular invasion was also diagnosed. The lesions were trabecular, except for one that showed diffuse morphology. All of the lesions were grade 2 or 3. Only one of the 9 lesions was completely necrotized at the time of transplantation, while in 7 lesions only partial necrosis could be found. One treated nodule showed no necrosis at all.

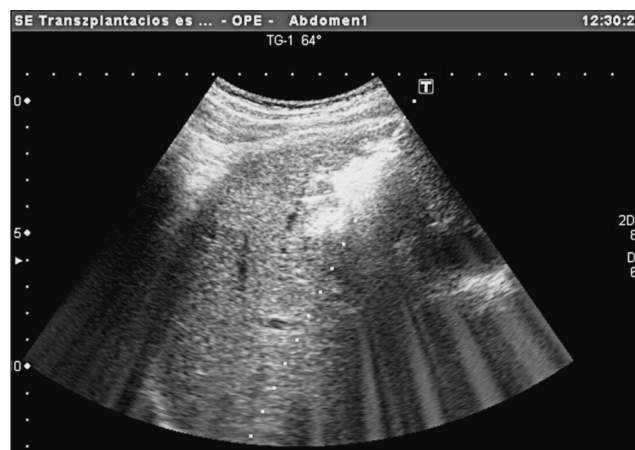


Fig. 1. ■ Ultrasound-guided RFA ablation

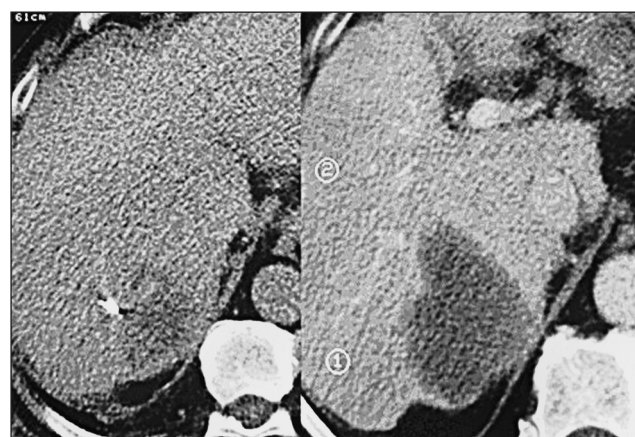


Fig. 2. ■ CT-guided RFA ablation. Non contrast CT shows the tip of the needle at the border of the tumour. Follow-up contrast enhanced CT image shows complete necrosis



Fig. 3. ■ Necrosis in the tumour in the explanted liver

Table I. ■ Relevant data of six patients who underwent ablative downstaging before orthotopic liver transplantation

Pt. Nr	Child-Pugh score	HCV	HBV	DT first treatment to LT	DT last treatment to LT	Mode and Nr. of treatment	Nr. of treated HCC	Nr. of HCC in the explanted liver	Degree of necrosis on imaging	Degree of necrosis on histology	PVT	Total size of HCC on imaging (mm)	Immuno-suppression	Follow up (months)	Recurrent HCC	Exit
1	B	yes	no	6.5	3.7	2 × RFA	1	2	partial	partial	no	43	FK + steroid + Eve	2.7	no	no
2	A	yes	no	35.5	35.5	1 × RFA	1	multilobar	complete, but recurrence	minimal	yes	26	FK + steroid + MMF	10.2	no	no
3	A	yes	no	2	2	1 × RFA	1	1 + 1 DN	one partial (80%)	66%	no	32	CyA + steroid + MMF	26.8	no	no
4	B	yes	no	7.4	2.4	1 × RFA + 2 × PEI	1	2	one partial, (90%)	60%	no	51	FK + steroid + MMF	41.6	yes	no
5	A	yes	no	3.5	1.5	1 × RFA + 4 × ChP	2	2	complete	partial	no	22	FK + steroid + MMF	46.5	no	no
6	B	no	no	6.5	6.3	1 × RFA + 1 × PEI	3	2 + 4 DN	two partial, one complete	50%/100%, no necrosis in 1 DN	no	75	FK + steroid + MMF, later FK + Eve	12.1	yes	no
				10.2	8.6	14.0	9	> 14				1	41.5			
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a tumour size exceeding 3 cm (most likely due to microvascular invasion), were associated with a high probability of dropout due to tumour progression [18]. Similar results were presented in a retrospective study by Pompili et al., where 46 HCC were treated with ablative techniques (RFA and/or PEI) before transplantation, and after 9.5 months of mean waiting time the explanted livers were pathologically analyzed. The authors focused on the degree of necrosis, as a measure of the success of ablation procedure and as a factor of prolonged recurrence-free survival. Complete necrosis was found only in 43% of the treated nodules, but the rate was higher after RFA (53%). Again the best results were achieved when lesions with a diameter of less than 3 cm were ablated with RFA [19].

Our preliminary experience shows similar results to that of the larger reports. Patients with larger tumours and longer waiting times had worse results in terms of post-transplantation recurrence. The relationship between the degree of necrosis and time interval is not assessable. Because of the small number of patients and the limited availability of the thermoablative methods, it is not possible to analyze the impact of these ablative therapies on the dropout rate from the Hungarian waiting list.

We used our results combined with the results of the literature to develop a tailored future guideline for the adjuvant treatment of cirrhotic HCC patients waiting for transplantation. This guideline was based on the Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer Group (BCLC) classification [1] and the Milan criteria [10], with additional factors, such as tumour characteristics, periodicity of the follow-up, and repeated treatments [20].

At present the guideline includes the following statements:

- For Child–Pugh Class A–B patients on the waiting list with liver cirrhosis and tumours within the Milan criteria and without portal or hepatic vein invasion: If resection is not possible, ablation should be performed as bridging therapy when the treatable nodule size is less than 3 cm, while chemoembolization or combined therapy should be carried out when the size of the tumour is 3–5 cm. Combined therapy should also be preferred when complete necrosis is not achievable with ablation(s) alone. Follow-up examinations should be adequate (multiphase contrast-enhanced imaging, tumour markers), and should be repeated every 3 months. In case of diagnosed recurrence or new HCC re-treatment should be attempted.
- For patients being evaluated for liver transplantation with HCC exceeding the Milan criteria and with a liver function precluding resection: the therapeutic methods as above should be discussed for downstaging. A successful therapy may allow the patient to enter the waiting list, but risk factors for early post-transplantation recurrence should also be assessed. In these cases,

pre-treatment histopathologic staging may help in proper selection of patients for treatment.

The uniform use of this guideline would allow to refine this approach and assess the results. Therefore the guideline has to be re-evaluated in every year and updated as ablative and embolization technology innovations and new drugs are becoming available.

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to Jane Andrew.

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