the WHO criteria and RECIST. Whether or not some criteria are superior to others will be investigated in future studies. We expect that the 2009 revised edition of Response Evaluation Criteria in Cancer of the Liver (RECICL), will be widely used in clinical practice as well as in the clinical trial settings, not only in our country but also worldwide, as the criteria are clearer and may be more suitable in response evaluation for liver cancer than WHO criteria or RECIST.

MAJOR REVISED POINTS OF THE RESPONSE EVALUATION CRITERIA IN THE 2009 VERSION

FIRST, WE HAVE clarified the direct effect of local treatments on target nodules. When the non-stained low-density area in local ablation therapy such as ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy and RFA covers all parts of the low-density area in the late phase of dynamic computed tomography (CT) scan before treatment, the lesion is regarded as 100% necrotized and described as treatment effect 4 (TE4), even though the size of the nodule does not decrease in the follow-up CT scan or multiple resonance imaging (MRI). However, when the non-stained low-density area does not cover the low-density area before the treatment, the risk of local recurrence is high.[7–9] Therefore, for ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy and RFA, when the non-stained low-density area is slightly wider across the entire circumference than the low-density area in the late phase of dynamic CT scan before treatment, the lesion is regarded as 100% necrotized (TE4a). When only hypervascularity has disappeared without a slightly wider non-stained region than the low-density area on dynamic CT scan, the condition is judged as TE4b (Table 1).

Second, we have settled the timing at which the overall treatment effects are assessed: (i) the maximum response within 3 months is regarded as the overall treatment effect; (ii) for transcatheter arterial therapy with lipiodol, it is desirable to assess the effect after at least 1 month; (iii) local ablative treatment can be assessed immediately after the treatment; and (iv) for radiotherapy, the maximum response within 6 months may be regarded as the overall effect.

Third, regarding the criteria for "progressive disease" in the overall evaluation, the emergence of a new lesion is regarded as "progressive disease", similar to that advocated in the WHO criteria or RECIST, as shown in the Appendix. However, new lesions are separately described in consideration of the biological characteristics of HCC and the description may contribute to a future review of the criteria, particularly for: (i) intrahepatic solitary lesions (whether it is in the treated area or outside of the treated area by ablation or TACE); (ii) intrahepatic multiple lesions; and (iii) vascular invasion/extrahepatic spread.

Fourth, the RECIST and WHO criteria may be appropriate for radiotherapy and systemic chemotherapy including molecular targeted agents because these are currently used internationally,[10–13] however, we recommend evaluation using the RECICL criteria in combination with the WHO criteria or RECIST in order to clarify which criteria among the three are the most appropriate in future studies. This point is described in the detailed regulation section.

Fifth, in the detailed regulation section, the lowest levels of three tumor markers (α-fetoprotein [AFP], AFP-L3 and Protein induced by vitamine K absence or antagonist [PIVKA-II] or des-gamma-carboxy prothrombin [DCP]) should be measured and described within 3 months and considered with reference to the overall evaluation. It may be useful to prospectively investigate whether there is a difference in the prognosis between complete response (CR) based on imaging alone and CR on imaging in combination with response of tumor markers.

Finally, we include a comparison between the WHO criteria, RECIST[14,15] and RECICL established by the Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan.

Table 1 Treatment effect (TE) on the target nodule

TE4:	The tumor-necrotizing effect is 100% or the tumor size reduction rate is 100%.*
TE4a:	Necrotized area with larger ablated area than original nodule.*
TE4b:	Necrotized area of same size with original nodule.
TE3:	The tumor-necrotizing effect or tumor size reduction rate is between 50% and <100%.*
TE2:	Effects other than TE3 and TE1.
TE1:	The tumor enlarged by >25% regardless of the necrotizing effect.

*For ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy, and radiofrequency ablation, when the non-stained low-density area is slightly wider across the entire circumference than the low-density area in the late phase of dynamic computed tomography (CT) scan before treatment, the lesion is regarded as 100% necrotized (TE4a). When only hypervascularity has disappeared without a slightly wider non-stained region than the low-density area on dynamic CT scan, the condition is judged as TE4b. In transcatheter arterial chemoembolization (TACE), the tendency of reduction of tumor size, without tumor staining by CT scan with contrast enhancement, and denser uniform accumulation of lipiodol than just after lipiodol TACE when lipiodol is used, are classified to be TE4.

DESCRIPTION OF RECICL PROPOSED BY LIVER CANCER STUDY GROUP OF JAPAN

Subjects

THE SUBJECTS ARE patients who are treated initially and for recurrence. Because responses to treatment are evaluated, as a rule, by dynamic CT, intrahepatic lesions with hypervascular tumors are the principle targets of the RECICL criteria. It is essential that tumors can be clearly visualized using an imaging technique.

Detailed description

Description of past medical history

1 Methods and date when definitive diagnosis of liver cancer was made.
2 Previous treatment modality (as described in "c. Description of treatment modalities").
3 Dates of initiation and completion of previous treatment.
4 Methods and date when recurrence was diagnosed.

Descriptions of liver cancer at the time of the initiation of treatment

These issues are based on the second English Edition of the General Rules for the Clinical and Pathological Study of Primary Liver Cancer (edited by the Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan).[16] The following items should be noted:

1 Tumor location.
2 Tumor size, number, and vascular invasion. The tumor size is presented as the major axis and maximum diameter crossing the major axis at a right angle.
3 Macroscopic types.[16,17]
4 Macroscopic staging. Even for tumors that are only assessable by imaging, staging should be described following the rules for surgical findings and the resected specimen.[16,17]
5 Histological grading when biopsy is performed.[16,17]

Description of treatment modalities

1 Name of treatment: transcatheter hepatic arterial therapy (transcatheter arterial infusion chemotherapy, transcatheter arterial embolization, TACE), local treatment (ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy, RFA), radiotherapy such as Liniac, γ-knife, or proton beam line, systemic chemotherapy.
2 Details of treatment: for treatments using drugs, the name of drugs* (anticancer drugs, Lipiodol, etc.), route of administration, treatment interval and single dose, and the total number of administrations and total dose should be described. For other treatment methods, the details should be described appropriately. When the treatment is discontinued, the reason for discontinuation and the presence or absence of adverse effects should be described. (*In addition to the chemotherapeutic drugs, any drugs directly injected into the tumor to necrotize it, such as ethanol, and/or embolizing materials, should be described.)
3 Dates of initiation and completion or termination of treatment.

Assessment of direct treatment effect on target nodule

1 On assessment of the direct effect of treatment on the target nodule, the tumor-necrotizing effect and tumor size reduction rate are calculated based on the size reduction or disappearance of hypervascularity of the nodule on dynamic CT. Findings of dynamic MRI, and/or contrast-enhanced ultrasonography can substitute dynamic CT.
2 The necrotizing effect is assessed by imaging. The percent ratio of the necrotized area to the cross-sectional area of the tumor should be calculated.* (*When various cross-sections are obtained for a single tumor, the total sum of the necrotic area should be used; however, when the maximum cross-section represents the entire findings of the tumor, assessment may be made based on the maximum cross-sectional area.)
3 The size reduction rate is calculated using the equation below, after calculating the product of the major axis of the maximum cross-section by the maximum diameter crossing the major axis at a right angle: size reduction rate = ([product before treatment] – [product after treatment]) / (product before treatment) × 100.
4 Direct treatment effect (TE) on target nodule: effects on individual lesions are categorized into four degrees based on the tumor-necrotizing effect observed within a fixed term* after the initiation of treatment or the maximum tumor size reduction rate, as shown in Table 1. (*For local treatments [such as ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy, RFA], the effects are assessed immediately after treatment. For transcatheter arterial chemotherapy using lipiodol, transcatheter arterial embolization and transcatheter arterial chemoembolization, it is desirable to assess the effect after at least 1 month. For radiotherapy, the effect assessed based on the maximum response within 6 months.)
5 When multiple lesions are present in the liver, TE is determined in individual lesions.

Table 2 Overall response evaluation (effect of treatment on all intrahepatic lesions at 3 months; radiotherapy can be evaluated at 6 months)

Overall evaluation of treatment effect	Effect of treatment on the tumor
CR (complete response)	100% tumor-necrotizing effect or 100% tumor size reduction rate
PR (partial response)	The tumor-necrotizing effect or tumor size reduction rate is between 50% and <100%
SD (stable disease)	Effects other than PR and PD
PD (progressive disease)	The tumor growth >25% regardless of the necrotizing effect, or emergence of a new lesion*

*With regard to the emergence of new lesions, the lesion should be classified as either: (i) intrahepatic solitary lesion (within or outside the treatment area); (ii) intrahepatic multiple lesions (within or outside the treatment area); or (iii) vascular invasion (the portal vein, hepatic vein, bile duct)/extrahepatic spread.

OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE TREATMENT RESPONSE

1 The overall evaluation is determined, based on the effect in the entire liver and its persistence, and categorized as CR, partial response (PR), stable disease (SD) and progressive disease (PD), as defined in Table 2.
2 To use this method to predict the prognosis, TE is determined and recorded at 3 months when retreatment is not performed after the initiation of treatment, as an overall response evaluation, except for radiotherapy, in which the overall evaluation is performed at 6 months.
3 When multiple lesions are present, but the assessment of all of the lesions is difficult, evaluation of the five largest lesions may be considered to represent the overall evaluation of the entire liver, but it is not regarded as CR. In addition, CR should not be given when the findings of the maximum cross-section is regarded to represent the entire tumor. Tumors may only be described as CR when all of the intrahepatic lesions are assessable as well as the effect shown in Table 2 (100% tumor-necrotizing effect or 100% tumor size reduction rate) is obtained.

DETAILED REGULATIONS

THE NECROTIZING EFFECT is assessed based on the response evaluation criteria of treatment on target nodules.

1 The presence, on dynamic CT with an i.v. bolus injection, of a non-stained low-density area after treatment is regarded as a necrotizing effect. A non-stained low-density area represents an apparently lower level than that in the surrounding liver parenchyma in the early and late phases* of dynamic CT with an i.v. bolus injection. Usually, the CT attenuation value of a non-stained low-density area does not increase on dynamic imaging. (*The early phase represents the arterial dominant phase of dynamic CT. The late phase represents the equilibrium phase of dynamic CT.)
2 When lipiodol is used, the presence of a region retaining lipiodol homogeneously and densely in the tumor shown on CT 1 month after therapy is regarded as a necrotizing effect. Dynamic MRI, Doppler ultrasonography and contrast-enhanced ultrasonography can be also used.
3 The effects of radiotherapy, systemic chemotherapy (including treatment with molecular targeted agents) and hepatic arterial chemotherapy should be described by both RECIST and present criteria, RECICL.
4 The lowest levels of three tumor markers (AFP, AFP-L3 fraction, PIVKA-II or DCP) should be recorded as reference values for the overall response evaluation.

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APPENDIX I

TOVERALL EVALUATION OF treatment effects on liver cancer: a comparison between the World Health Organization (WHO) criteria, Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (RECIST) and Response Evaluation Criteria in Cancer of the Liver (RECICL)

	WHO criteria (after 4 weeks)	RECIST (after 4 weeks)	RECICL (after 3 months)
Lesion evaluated	All evaluable lesions	All measurable lesions, target lesions (five lesions, a maximum of 10 lesions when lesions are present over 2 or more organs)	Target lesions (a maximum of five lesions when more than 5 lesions are present)
Evaluation method	Bi-dimensional measurement (changes in the product of the major axis and the diameter crossing the major axis at a right angle). Sum of the all lesions.	Uni-dimensional measurement (changes in the sum of the major axis)	Bi-dimensional measurement (changes in the product of the major axis and the diameter crossing the major axis at a right angle, non-stained regions on dynamic CT and/or lipiodol-deposited regions are measured as necrosis). Sum of the all target lesions.
Overall evaluation			
CR (complete response)	Disappearance of all lesions	Disappearance of all target lesions	100% tumor-necrotizing effect or 100% tumor size reduction rate
PR (partial response)	50% or greater disappearance of all lesions	30% or greater reduction of target lesions	A tumor-necrotizing effect or tumor size reduction rate between 50% and <100%
SD (stable disease)	Effects other than PR and PD	Effects other than PR and PD	Effects other than PR and PD
PD (progressive disease)	≥25% enlargement of a lesion or appearance of a new lesion	≥20% increase or appearance of a new lesion	≥25% enlargement of the tumor regardless of the necrotizing effect or appearance of a new lesion (categorized into three groups: intrahepatic solitary lesion, intrahepatic multiple lesions, and vascular invasion/extrahepatic spread).

APPENDIX II

Example RECICL Evaluation Sheet

Patient Age Male/female ID

1. **Description of Liver Cancer**
   (1) Past medical history
      (i) Method and date of definite diagnosis of liver cancer
      (ii) Past treatment history (only patients treat for recurrence)
   (2) Condition of liver cancer
      Tumor location, number and size of lesions, vascular invasion, macroscopic classification, macroscopic staging, histological type or degree of differentiation

2. **Description of Treatment Method**
   (1) Initial treatment or treatment for recurrence
   (2) Name of treatment (describe all treatments when multiple treatments were performed)
   (3) Details of treatment, including the reason for the discontinuation and the presence or absence of an adverse event when treatment is discontinued
   (4) Dates of initiation and completion of treatment

3. **Treatment Effect on Target Nodule (TE1, 2, 3, 4)**[*1] _____

   (Describe TE4a or 4b for local ablation) Assessment results: Lesion 1 _____
   Lesion 2 _____
   Lesion 3 _____
   Lesion 4 _____
   Lesion 5 _____

4. **Overall Evaluation (CR, PR, SD, PD)**[*2] _____

   Assessment results: _____

When a new lesion appears in PD
(new lesion: a, b, c)

Additional notes: tumor markers

Name of tumor marker	Before treatment	Lowest level within 3 months Time point ( )	6 months (only for radiotherapy)
AFP			
AFP-L3 fraction			
PIVKA-II (DCP)			

*1: Refer to Table 1. *2: Refer to Table 2.

Liver INTERNATIONAL
OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF THE LIVER

Liver International ISSN 1478-3223

REVIEW ARTICLE

Issues and controversies of hepatocellular carcinoma-targeted therapy clinical trials in Asia: experts' opinion

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Keywords
antineoplastic agents – Asia – clinical practice patterns – clinical trials – hepatocellular carcinoma – liver neoplasms

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Received 8 May 2010
Accepted 13 May 2010

DOI:10.1111/j.1478-3231.2010.02292.x

Abstract

Asia has a disproportionate share of the world's burden of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). However, the highly regarded clinical practice guidelines and recommendations for the design and conduct of clinical trials for HCC largely reflect Western practice. In order to design mutually beneficial international clinical trials of promising targeted therapies, it is imperative to understand how the aetiology, staging and treatment of HCC differ between Asian and Western countries. Our group, comprising experts in oncology and hepatology from countries that constitute the Eastern Asian region, convened to compare and contrast our current practices, evaluate potential compliance with the clinical trial recommendations, and offer suggestions for modifications that would enhance international collaboration. Here, we describe the results of our discussions, including recommendations for appropriate patient stratification based on potentially important differences in HCC aetiology, identification of practices that may confound interpretation of clinical trial outcomes (traditional Chinese medicine; antivirals that target hepatitis B virus; heterogeneous embolization procedures), suggestions for utilizing a common staging system in study protocols, recognition that sorafenib usage is limited by financial constraints and potentially increased toxicity in Asian patients, and expansion of patient populations that should be eligible for initial clinical trials with new agents.

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the sixth most common cancer worldwide, diagnosed in approximately 600 000 people per year (1–2). Because of its poor prognosis and high fatality rate, it ranks third among the causes of global cancer-related mortality. A vast majority of cases, and consequently deaths, occurs in the developing world (2–3). HCC is relatively common in the Asia-Pacific region and parts of Africa, but is relatively uncommon in the Americas, Europe and Australia (Table 1) (2). Indeed, more than 70% of cases are diagnosed in Asia, with China alone accounting for 55% of the global cases (3). New treatments are urgently required worldwide.

Sorafenib is the only targeted therapy currently approved for use in HCC. As in the West, sorafenib is specifically indicated in Asian countries for use in patients with unresectable disease (although availability is limited, particularly in Korea and Taiwan, by the national health insurance agencies). Clinical trials are underway or being developed for all stages of disease with this agent, as well as with a variety of other targeted therapies, including sunitinib, brivanib, foretinib, linifanib (ABT-869), pazopanib and vandetanib. In 2008, the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) published guidelines intended to provide a framework for clinical trial design in HCC (4). As the majority of cases of HCC occur in Asia, it is critical to evaluate how the AASLD recommendations compare with current practice patterns throughout this region. Our group, comprising experts from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, convened in May 2009 to compare and contrast clinical practices and evaluate potential compliance with the Western clinical trial recommendations. The goal of this review is to

Table 1. Age-standardized incidence rates for hepatocellular carcinoma by geographical region in 2002 (2)

Region	Males, rate per 100 000	Females, rate per 100 000
Asia		
China	37.9	14.2
Japan	23.1	7.6
Southeast Asia	18.2	5.7
Western Asia	4.6	2.0
South central Asia	2.6	1.4
Africa		
Middle Africa	27.8	13.4
Eastern Africa	21.1	8.6
Western Africa	15.3	5.6
Southern Africa	7.0	2.5
Northern Africa	4.2	2.2
Europe		
Southern Europe	11.6	4.0
Western Europe	6.2	1.7
Eastern Europe	5.3	2.4
Northern Europe	3.4	1.7
Americas		
North America	5.3	1.9
Central America	4.9	4.9
South America	3.7	2.8
Australia/New Zealand	3.9	1.3

summarize our findings, highlight opportunities for international collaboration, identify potential roadblocks and offer suggestions intended to better facilitate the international clinical development of promising targeted therapies for HCC. Our conclusions are summarized in Table 2 (4) and discussed in the following sections.

Aetiology and prognosis of hepatocellular carcinoma in Eastern Asia vs the West

There are notable regional differences in the aetiology and prognosis of HCC that cannot be ignored in the design and conduct of international clinical trials (5–6). These differences are likely because of both patient-related factors and practice patterns (6). Because it is not entirely clear as to why this clinico-pathological variability exists, international trials must be stratified appropriately to prevent confounding. We agree with the AALSD that stratification by region (West vs Asia) is appropriate and suggest additional stratification factors, such as viral aetiology and use of antiviral therapy for reasons described here.

There are a number of risk factors for the development of HCC, including hepatitis, cirrhosis, certain metabolic diseases and environmental carcinogens (5). Hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV) are two of the most important risk factors for the development of HCC, estimated to be responsible for more than 75% of HCC cases worldwide (2). HBV-related HCC is more prevalent than HCV-related disease in most Asian countries, with the notable exception of Japan, where HCV-related disease predominates (3, 7–8). Although large-scale vaccination programmes that began in the last 10–25 years are expected to reduce the incidence of HBV and lead to a gradual decline in the incidence of HCC throughout Asia in the future, there remains a large number of people already infected with this virus who will develop HCC and require treatment in the years to come.

The predominance of HBV-related HCC in Eastern Asia compared with Japan and Western nations has implications for the design and conduct of international clinical trials. Although the AASLD cautions against 'over-stratification' for what it considers less important prognostic factors, such as aetiology, our group believes that viral aetiology may be an important stratification factor in clinical trials for several reasons. Firstly, there are important clinical differences between HBV- and HCV-related HCC. Nearly all patients with HCV-related HCC also have advanced-stage hepatic fibrosis or cirrhosis, but HBV-related HCC can occur with or without concomitant cirrhosis, an important factor affecting surgical resectability (5, 9–11). HCV-related HCC also tends to evolve more quickly than HBV-related HCC (5). It takes approximately 30 years for HCC to develop after exposure to HCV via virally contaminated blood vs 40–50 years after exposure at birth to HBV. Different mechanisms of carcinogenesis probably explain these findings. It is presently believed that HCV-related HCC occurs as a result of inflammatory processes; the HCV genome does not integrate into the host's genome. Conversely, HBV-related HCC appears to result from both virally induced activation of oncogenic processes and chronic inflammation. Although published reports of the prognostic significance of viral aetiology in advanced HCC are conflicting (6, 12, 13), it is biologically plausible that it affects the clinical course of HCC. Until we have a better understanding of these differences, it may be prudent to stratify clinical trials, particularly those conducted primarily in Asia, by viral aetiology.

A second rationale for stratification by viral aetiology is to avoid potential confounding by the use of antiviral therapy. Because HBV-related HCC predominates in Eastern Asia (with the exception of Japan), antiviral therapy is commonly used during and after HCC treatment. Cancer patients who receive the antiviral agent lamivudine as an adjunct to chemotherapy experience lower rates of HBV reactivation and hepatitis, less severe hepatitis episodes, fewer chemotherapy disruptions and reduced mortality related to HBV reactivation (14–17). In patients undergoing curative resection, radiofrequency ablation (RFA) or other local, non-chemotherapeutic treatments for HBV-related HCC, post-procedural antiviral therapy with lamivudine, adefovir dipivoxil or entecavir increases residual liver volume and/or function and may improve overall survival (OS) (18–20). Other evidence suggests that adjuvant interferon improves recurrence-free survival after potentially curative surgery for HCC (21, 22). Because the use of antiviral therapy

Liver International (2010)

Table 2. Eastern Asian views on American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases recommendations for clinical trial design and endpoints

AASLD recommendations (4)	Authors' perspectives
Diagnosis: pathological confirmation OR noninvasive criteria per AASLD guidelines	Agree
Target population:	
Homogenous, based on one BCLC stage or stratified accordingly	BCLC stage is acceptable, but clinical protocols must take into account portal vein involvement and liver function
Focus on Child Pugh (CP) A because best prognosis; in CP-B/C, death from cirrhosis could mask treatment effects	There is a need for treatment options for Child–Pugh B/C; we believe that in advanced/metastatic HCC, Child Pugh B/C is an ideal population to study but limit to ECOG PS 0 (not 0–1)
Stratification:	
By BCLC stage	Stratification by viral aetiology is important in trials conducted within Eastern Asia
For BCLC stage C, stratify by ECOG PS (0 vs 1–2), tumour burden, and CP score	Stratification by use of antivirals should also be considered
By region (West vs Asia)	Protocols should standardize antiviral therapy and include appropriate monitoring parameters
Overstratification is not desirable (e.g., aetiology and age are less important)	
Control arm for RCTs:	
PEI and RFA are standards of care for early HCC	Heterogeneity in TACE/TAE practices needs to be addressed
Chemoembolization is standard for intermediate stage HCC	Placebo-controlled trials are feasible in unresectable disease, especially for those who are indicated for locoregional therapy, pending maturity of post-TACE sorafenib data
Sorafenib is considered standard of care by most investigators for advanced HCC	Recommendation for sorafenib as comparator in advanced disease is not necessarily reflective of real-world use in North East Asia at this time (e.g., high cost, intolerable side effects)
Liver function:	
Cirrhotic patients present challenge to management and interpretation of toxicities with new agents; trials should separately include and/or evaluate patients with and without cirrhosis	Agree; however, trials should separately include and/or evaluate patients based on presence of cirrhosis *or* grade of liver function
Definition of cirrhosis and method of diagnosis should be identified in the protocol	
CP is the gold standard, but future trials should also consider MELD	
Evaluate liver-related toxic effects via serum aminotransferase; bilirubin; PT	
Phase I trials:	
BCLC CP-A population to define dose, toxicity, and liver-related events	There is interest in conducting phase I trials specifically in Asia because of the potential for PK/PD differences between Asian and Western populations; however, Asian phase I trials may not be necessary for all targeted agents
	CP-A population or CP score up to 7–8 (subgroup of CP–B) would be feasible for standard phase I trials
	Patients with poorer liver reserve (CP-B with score 8–9 and CP-C) could be enrolled in phase I trials testing agents at lower doses
Phase II trials:	
Single arm trials acceptable if contemporary control arm available; otherwise, RCT	For first-line studies in advanced HCC, recommendation for sorafenib is not necessarily reflective of real-world use in North East Asia at this time (e.g., high cost, intolerable side effects)
TTP as primary endpoint; imaging surveillance every 6–8 weeks; OS as secondary endpoint	Agents demonstrated effective as second-line therapy in phase II trials (not necessarily phase III trials) can be compared with sorafenib in first-line studies
Targeted therapy RCT should collect tissue and/or serum samples for correlative studies	
Control arm for initial treatment of advanced disease should be sorafenib, while placebo/BSC is acceptable for second-line studies	
Only agents demonstrated effective for 2nd-line use in phase III trials should then be compared to sorafenib in first-line studies	
New compounds for neoadjuvant/adjuvant use should be compared with placebo or BSC	
Phase III trials:	
OS is the primary endpoint; control arm is current standard of care	OS endpoint but will soon no longer be appropriate in advanced disease with the introduction of multiple line of therapies; hence PFS may be a surrogate but will need to evaluate how well it correlates with OS (i.e., as what was done in colorectal cancer)
Trials of adjuvant or locoregional therapies should include TTR; studies that utilize TTR should conduct molecular studies to differentiate recurrence from *de novo* metachronous tumour	

Table 2. Continued

AASLD recommendations (4)	Authors' perspectives
Designs of new agent+sorafenib vs sorafenib are acceptable; direct comparison to sorafenib as initial therapy only if sufficient evidence of efficacy in phase II studies Prefer initial testing in Child–Pugh A patients	In unresectable disease, the most appropriate endpoint is unknown because of difficulty distinguishing recurrence from second primary in the liver and unreliability of RECIST; time to development of new lesion is a possible endpoint Non-inferiority trials are acceptable if new agents have potential for less toxicity

RCT, randomized controlled trial; TTP, time to progression; OS, overall survival; BSC, best supportive care; MELD, model of end-stage liver disease; PT, prothrombin time; PK/PD, pharmacokinetic/pharmacodynamic; TTR, time to recurrence.

Table 3. Summary of staging systems used in eastern Asia

Geographical region	Staging systems
China	China Criteria of Primary Liver Cancer (PLC)
Hong Kong	Chinese University Prognostic Index (CUPI)
Japan	Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan (LCSGJ) 4th ed Japan Integrated Staging (JIS) American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) 6th ed
Korea	Modified International Union Against Cancer criteria (mUICC)
Taiwan	Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer criteria (BCLC)

differs by region, it may be an important stratification factor. Ideally, efforts should be made to standardize antiviral therapy in the clinical trial protocols to prevent confounding.

Staging systems used in Eastern Asia

Hepatocellular carcinoma differs from other solid tumours because it frequently occurs in an already-diseased organ, which complicates staging as well as the interpretation of survival outcomes in clinical trials (5, 23). As in other tumour types, staging is used to plan therapy, but there is no universally accepted HCC staging system. Indeed, different staging systems are used throughout Eastern Asia (Table 3). The Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) system (Table 4) (24), recommended by the AASLD as the standard for clinical trial design (4), is currently used only in Taiwan and, even there, only in some institutions. Many clinicians in Eastern Asia believe that the risks associated with invasive testing required to diagnose portal hypertension, a component of BCLC staging, are not acceptable, and such testing is, therefore, not performed routinely. Tables 5 (25–27) and 6 (28) summarize the key features of the other staging systems that are used in Eastern Asia.

In China, the Chinese Society of Liver Cancer published the revised Staging Criteria of Primary Liver Cancer in 2001. These criteria are based on tumour size, number and location; portal vein thrombosis; lymph node spread; extrahepatic metastasis; and liver function based on the Child–Pugh score (29). This system is preferred to BCLC because it includes portal vein thrombosis, which has been shown to be a robust independent predictor of mortality (30). In the Japanese staging system, liver function is the first category of evaluation. The degree of liver damage is determined based on levels of serum bilirubin, serum albumin, prothrombin activity, ICG R_{15} and ascites. This information is considered to be in concert with the Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan (LCSGJ) staging system, which assesses the primary tumour (T), regional lymph nodes (N) and the presence or absence of distant metastases (M). Hong Kong does not have a unified staging system; BCLC is considered to be a valuable tool for treatment planning, but it is less useful for prognostication in this population. The prognostic value of the CUPI system, however, has been validated in a population of advanced HCC patients with mainly HBV-related HCC at one centre in Hong Kong (31). Finally, in Korea, the modified International Union Against Cancer (mUICC) system is used.

Overall, we recognize that BCLC staging can be useful for treatment planning, and if BCLC staging is required for international trials that are designed to meet regulatory requirements in the United States or European Union, Eastern Asian countries should be able to comply. However, protocols will need to take into account the portal vein involvement and liver function to better reflect current practices in our countries. For example, it may be necessary to create subclassifications within the BCLC Stage C disease to differentiate patients identified with advanced disease because of extrahepatic metastases vs portal vein thrombosis.

Current treatment patterns in Eastern Asia – resection and transplant

One of the purported advantages of the BCLC staging system is its linkage to a treatment algorithm (Figs 1–4) (32–34). According to this algorithm, patients with early-stage HCC are candidates for a potentially curative treatment, including surgical resection, liver transplant and percutaneous ethanol injection or RFA (32). Chemoembolization is reserved for the treatment of intermediate-stage disease, whereas new agents can be considered in advanced-stage disease. In intermediate- and advanced-stage HCC, participation in randomized controlled trials is also recommended.

Table 4. Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer staging system for hepatocellular carcinoma (24)

Descriptor	Stage	ECOG PS	Tumour	Liver function
Early stage	A1	0	Single tumour < 5 cm	No portal hypertension
	A2			Portal hypertension; normal bilirubin
	A3			Portal hypertension; abnormal bilirubin
	A4		Up to three tumours < 3 cm	Not applicable
Intermediate	B	0	Large multinodular	Child–Pugh A-B
Advanced	C	1–2	Vascular invasion or extrahepatic disease	
Terminal	D	3–4	Any	Child–Pugh C

ECOG PS, Eastern Cooperative Group Performance Status Score.

Table 5. TNM-based staging systems used in eastern Asia

	LCSGJ (25)	AJCC/UICC 6th ed. (26)	Modified UICC 6th ed. (27)
TNM descriptors			
T1	Single tumour, < 2 cm, no vascular involvement	Solitary tumour without vascular invasion	
T2	Any 2 criteria required for T1	Solitary tumour with vascular invasion or multiple tumours but none > 5 cm	
T3	Any 1 criterion required for T1	Multiple tumours > 5 cm or tumour involving a major branch of the portal or hepatic vein(s)	
T4	Meets none of the T1 criteria	Tumour(s) with direct invasion of adjacent organs other than the gallbladder or with perforation of visceral peritoneum	
N1	Regional lymph node metastasis		
M1	Distant metastasis		
Stages			
Stage I	T1N0M0	T1N0M0	IA: single tumour ≤ 2 cm IB: single tumour > 2 cm, without vascular invasion
Stage II	T2N0M0	T2N0M0	IIA: if multiple tumours, none > 5 cm and no vascular invasion IIB: tumour with segmental macroscopic vascular invasion
Stage III	T3N0M0	IIIA: T3N0M0 IIIB: T4N0M0 IIIC: Any T, N1, M0	
Stage IV	IVA: T4N0M0 or Any T, N1, M0 IVB: Any T, Any N, M1	Any T, Any N, M1	

LCSGJ, Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan; AJCC, American Joint Committee on Cancer; UICC, International Union Against Cancer.

Table 6. CUPI Staging System for hepatocellular carcinoma (28)

Variables	Weight/score	CUPI Stage
TNM stage (5th edition)		
I/II	– 3	
IIIa/IIIb	– 1	
IVa/IVb	0	
Asymptomatic on presentation	– 4	
Ascites	3	
AFP ≥ 500 ng/ml	2	
Total bilirubin (micromol/L)		
< 34	0	
34–51	3	
≥ 52	4	
ALP ≥ 200 IU/L	3	
Total score	– 7 to 1	Low risk
	2 to 7	Intermediate risk
	8 to 12	High risk

AFP, α-fetoprotein; ALP, alkaline phosphatase.

Practice patterns in Eastern Asia generally overlap with the BCLC recommendations, but there are notable differences (Figs 1–4) (32–34). Surgical resection is the treatment of choice for non-cirrhotic patients worldwide; however, the prevalence of cirrhosis varies from approximately 95% in Western patients to about 60% in Asian patients, suggesting that a greater number of patients in Asia are potential surgical candidates (32). Unlike resection, liver transplant has the potential to cure both the cancer as well as any underlying cirrhosis, but transplant is not currently a standard of care in much of Eastern Asia. There is a shortage of cadaveric organs due in large part to social and ideological issues (35, 36). Living donor liver transplant (LDLT) is used increasingly in Asia, but selection criteria for appropriate candidates with HCC remain controversial (35). As a result of these differences, rates of use of potentially curative treatments differ between Asia and the West. Within Asia, surgery is performed most frequently in China, Taiwan and Japan, where 34–40% of patients undergo resection.

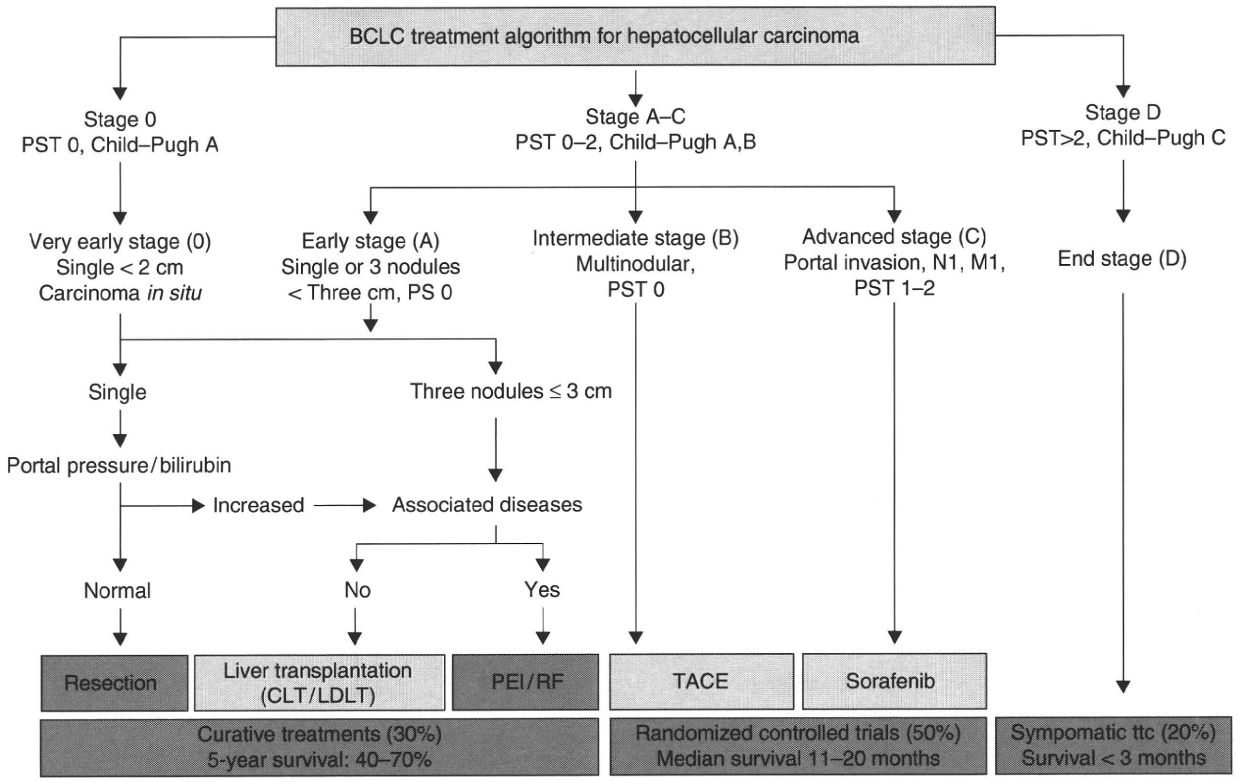

Fig. 1. Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) staging classification and treatment algorithm (32).

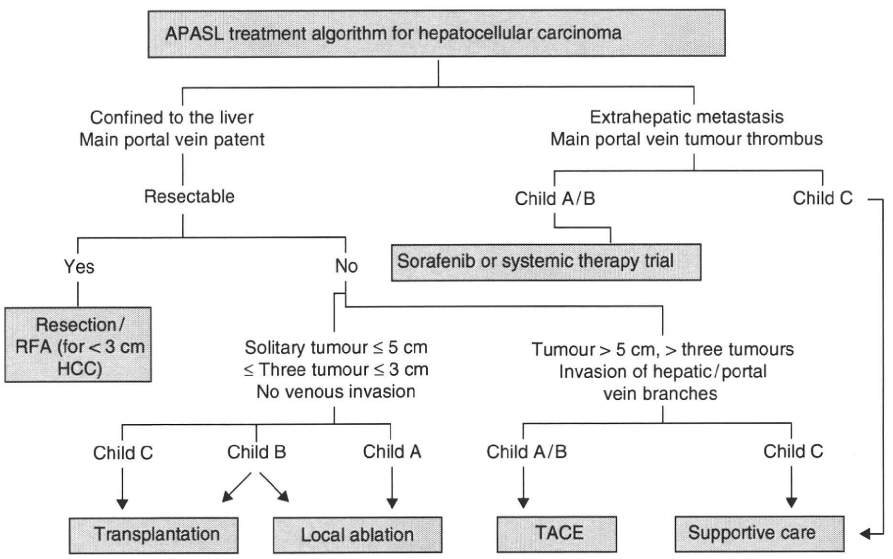

Fig. 2. Asia Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL) treatment algorithm for hepatocellular carcinoma (kindly provided by Prof. Ann-Lii Cheng, National Taiwan University Hospital). This algorithm forms the basis for treatment in some Taiwanese institutes.

Approximately 15–20% of patients in Korea and Hong Kong undergo resection. In the US, where transplant is more widely available, it is estimated that fewer than 20% of patients undergo potentially curative treatment with either resection or transplant (37).

Other variations in practice are indicated in recent guidelines from the Asian Pacific Association for the Study of Liver Disease (APASL) currently used in Taiwan (Fig. 2). The APASL recommends stratifying patients first by the extent of tumour spread and portal vein involvement

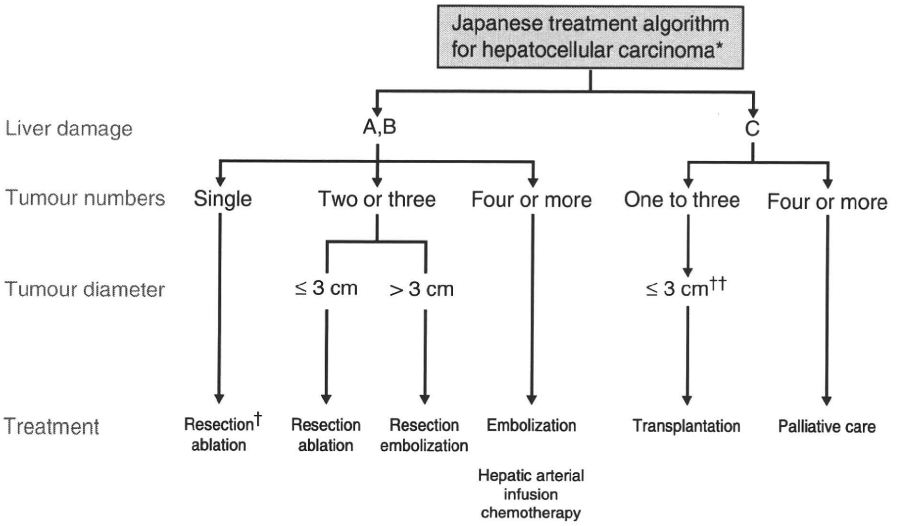

Fig. 3. Treatment algorithm for hepatocellular carcinoma utilized in Japan (33). *Presence of vascular invasion of extraheptic metastasis to be indicated separately. †Selected when the severity of liver damage is class B and tumour diameter is ≤2 cm. ††Tumour diameter is ≤5 cm when there is only one tumour.

rather than by performance status (PS) and Child–Pugh score when making treatment decisions. Unlike in the BCLC algorithm, some patients with Child–Pugh C HCC can be considered for transplant. This difference is also seen in the guidelines from the Japanese Society of Hepatology; however, transplant is an option only for patients with Child–Pugh C HCC in Japan (Figs 1–4) (33). The Korean treatment algorithm provides a general overview of treatment options, which are guided by the mUICC stage, Child–Pugh score and PS (Figs 1–4) (34). Most hepatic resections in Korea are performed in patients with Child–Pugh A liver dysfunction and ECOG PS ≤ 2; when transplant is offered, it is nearly always a LDLT (34).

Unlike other guidelines, those from the Chinese Society of Liver Cancer focus on local resection with reresection for recurrence and, importantly, recognize the role that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) plays in managing this disease. The two main types of TCM used in the setting are prescribed (a) for general liver health and to slow the progression of cirrhosis or (b) to counter the side effects of chemotherapy. Because TCM could be a confounder in international clinical trials, this issue needs to be addressed. It is important for international trials to allow for the use of TCM administered for general liver health as patients and clinicians are unlikely to abandon this practice. However, if necessary, it would be acceptable to exclude TCM given as an adjunct to chemotherapy from future trials.

Treatment trends for unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma

Transarterial embolization and chemoembolization (TACE) are well-accepted standards of care for the treatment of early-stage, unresectable HCC. However, embolizing materials and techniques vary widely from country to country and institution to institution. Moreover, there is no consensus on the optimal frequency of these procedures, the optimal interval between procedures or most appropriate efficacy endpoints. Although TACE procedures could be standardized in international clinical trial protocols, such an approach could limit the number of institutions that are willing and able to participate, thereby prolonging the recruitment period. In addition, a wide variety of other locoregional therapies are also in use in Eastern Asia. These issues present a major obstacle to the design and conduct of rigorous international trials.

In China, TACE is used in patients with small tumours that are unresectable, in those who have confined disease but uncompensated liver disease and in those with multiple large tumours who have compensated liver disease. Embolizing materials used are lipiodol and/or gelatin sponge particles, which are administered with chemotherapy agents, including fluorouracil, cisplatin, epirubicin and mitomycin-C. Other locoregional therapies used in China are intratumoural injection, laser therapy, cryotherapy, hepatic arterial infusion (HAI), RFA and microwave coagulation therapy.

In Hong Kong, agents used for TACE include cisplatin, lipiodol and gelatin sponge particles. The protocol, in general, includes assessment of the tumour size and vascularity, as determined by the hepatic arteriogram. A cisplatin–lipiodol emulsion is then infused until a reduction of arterial blood flow occurs with the feeding arteries embolized with gelatin sponge particles. The goal is to reduce the arterial blood flow without totally occluding the vessel. For patients with good lipiodol uptake by the tumour, TACE can be repeated serially. A clinical trial evaluating TACE in Hong Kong at a university medical centre utilized a similar protocol with a longer treatment interval of 2–3 months (38).

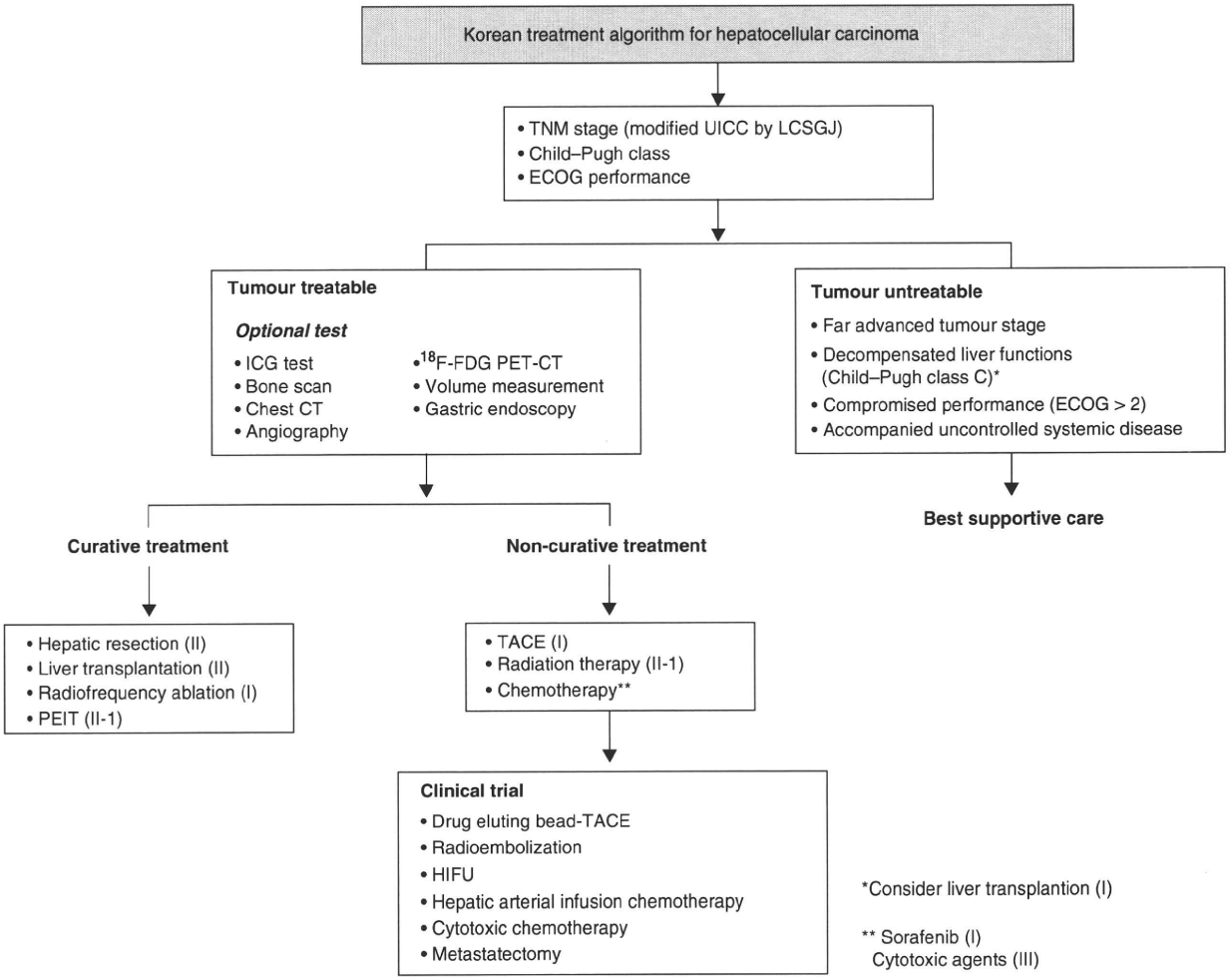

Fig. 4. Treatment algorithm for hepatocellular carcinoma utilized in Korea (34). Levels of evidence are indicated as follows: Level I, evidence obtained from at least one properly designed randomized controlled trial; level II-1, evidence obtained from well-designed controlled trials without randomization; level II-2, evidence obtained from well-designed cohort or case–control analytical studies, preferably from more than one centre or research group; level II-3, evidence obtained from multiple time series with or without the intervention or from dramatic results in uncontrolled trials; level III, opinions of respected authorities, based on clinical experience, descriptive studies or reports of expert committees. HIFU, high-intensity focused ultrasound; ICG, indocyanine green 15-min retention rate.

In Japan, TACE is a standard treatment. If residual HCC lesions are observed, TACE is repeated until severe liver damage occurs. Embolizing materials used are a mixture of lipiodol with epirubicin or cisplatin followed by gelatin sponge particles. For patients with portal vein thrombosis at the first branch or portal trunk or patients with multiple and/or large tumours, HAI is used. Chemotherapy regimens that are used for HAI include cisplatin alone, 5-FU and cisplatin (FP) and 5-FU and interferon.

In Korea, TACE is the most commonly utilized treatment for HCC, especially for intermediate and advanced disease. Embolizing material for TACE includes doxorubicin, alone or in combination with 5-FU or cisplatin, and gelatin sponge particles. Other treatments used to manage unresectable disease include HAI, concurrent chemotherapy/radiotherapy and supportive care (39–40).

In Taiwan, TACE is used in patients who have unresectable tumours confined to the liver, no portal vein thrombosis, and either tumours of > 5 cm, more than three tumours or hepatic/portal vein branch invasion and a Child–Pugh classification of A/B. A combination of lipiodol and doxorubicin is commonly used.

Treatment trends in advanced hepatocellular carcinoma

Chemotherapy has not been shown to prolong OS in HCC (41). Targeted therapies are now at the forefront of clinical research, with results being available for sorafenib, sunitinib, ABT-869, brivanib, pazopanib, vandetanib and erlotinib plus bevacizumab in advanced HCC (42–55). Of the targeted therapies studied to date in HCC, only sorafenib has been approved for use in Asia and Western nations. Initially approved for the treatment

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of advanced disease, sorafenib is now also being evaluated in global clinical trials for adjuvant use, after resection, ablation or TACE (56).

The initial approval of sorafenib was based on the results of two randomized, placebo-controlled trials that used similar eligibility and staging criteria and were conducted in parallel: one in the West (the SHARP study) and the other in Eastern Asia (China, South Korea, Taiwan) (4, 43). In SHARP, sorafenib significantly prolonged survival in patients with advanced HCC relative to placebo [hazard ratio (HR) = 0.69; 95% CI, 0.55–0.87; $P < 0.001$] (4). Median survival times were 10.7 months in the sorafenib arm vs 7.9 months in the placebo arm. Survival was also prolonged in the Asian study (HR = 0.68; 95% CI 0.50–0.93; $P = 0.014$) (43). Median survival times were 6.5 months in the sorafenib arm compared with 4.2 months in the placebo arm. The reasons for the lower median survival times in each arm of the Asian study relative to the corresponding arm of the SHARP study are not entirely clear, but the finding is consistent with other published data that suggest that Asian patients have poorer survival than their Western counterparts (6, 57–59). One possible explanation is that in SHARP, fewer patients (82–83%) had BCLC stage C disease relative to the Asian trial (95–96%).

Another apparent discrepancy between the results of the pivotal sorafenib studies is the rate of adverse events reported in each population. Hand–foot skin reactions (HFSR) were more frequent in the Asian population, although the difference appears to be because of an increase in the incidence of low-grade events. In the SHARP study, HFSR of any grade occurred in 21% of patients, but the incidence was 45% in the Asian trial (42, 43). Grade 3 HFSR events occurred in 8 and 11% of patients, respectively, and dose reductions for HFSR were reported in 5 and 11% respectively (42, 43). HFSR has complicated other Asian studies, and it is currently not uncommon for lower doses of sorafenib to be used in practice in Eastern Asia. In a phase I study of sorafenib in Japanese patients, eight of 14 patients (57%) who received sorafenib 400 mg twice daily developed HFSR; the rate was lower (38%) in the group that received 200 mg twice a day (60). In one Korean study of 97 patients, 56% developed the hand–foot syndrome, with 9% experiencing grade 3/4 toxicity (61). Treatment was interrupted in 34% of patients because of adverse events, most commonly HSFR, and 25% of patients required dose reduction during sorafenib therapy. Grade 3/4 hyperbilirubinaemia associated with marked elevations of ALT was seen in four patients (4%), but the researchers could not determine whether these events were because of hepatotoxicity or massive tumour necrosis or both. It has been reported recently that sorafenib-induced hyperbilirubinaemia may be because of pharmacogenetics (62). A patient with a UGT1A1 polymorphism developed isolated hyperbilirubinaemia during sorafenib treatment, which may be explained by the fact that sorafenib inhibits UGT1A1. In the setting of a low endogenous production of UGT1A1, sorafenib could theoretically cause elevations of bilirubin, and more specifically, unconjugated bilirubin, due to the inhibition of UGT1A1.

Although sorafenib has been approved for the treatment of advanced HCC, it is not widely used throughout Asia at the current time, mainly because of cost (10). In the Korean trial, it is notable that approximately 10% of patients discontinued sorafenib prematurely and against medical advice, mainly because of cost (61). We estimate that approximately 10–15% of eligible patients in Hong Kong receive sorafenib, with a much lower usage ($\leq$ 3%) in China, Korea and Japan. In some areas, patients only have access to sorafenib if they can pay for it themselves. Several cost-sharing programmes have been started to manage this issue, and they have been successful to a certain extent in that they allow expanded use in a targeted population. However, this practice is unsustainable in the long term.

Ultimately, the greatest impact that the approval of sorafenib has had on practice in Eastern Asia is to decrease the therapeutic nihilism associated previously with the systemic treatment of HCC and to increase referral rates for trials of systemic therapy vs repeat TACE. However, it should be noted that the recommendation of the AASLD that sorafenib be the comparator in randomized phase II and phase III trials does not reflect the current practice in Eastern Asia and may be difficult to achieve because of cost. The use of sorafenib as a control arm may be required in trials designed to gain the regulatory approval of other agents; ideally, the agent would be provided at no cost by the sponsor(s) of these trials. Such an arrangement could require an unusual degree of collaboration between competing pharmaceutical companies or may necessitate that academic or cooperative groups design and conduct these studies with financial support from all commercial interests. Irrespective of funding, Asian investigators will also want to see protocols that include flexible dosing strategies to allow for lower dosing based on tolerability to the greatest extent possible.

Finally, we also support the slight modifications to the recommended population for initial clinical research. The AASLD recommends conducting trials first in patients with Child–Pugh A liver impairment, initiating studies in patients with more severe liver impairment only after safety and efficacy are demonstrated in this population. However, given the great need for effective agents in patients with advanced HCC and Child–Pugh advanced B or C liver impairment, we believe that this is an ideal population in which clinical trials should be conducted. Eligibility should be restricted, however, to those with an acceptable PS, such as ECOG PS0.

Perspectives on drug development and endpoints for hepatocellular carcinoma clinical trials

There is a great need for clinical trials to be conducted in patients with resectable disease. In addition to the usual paradigm in oncology, in which agents are first evaluated in patients with metastatic disease, we believe that

promising agents can also be initially evaluated in resectable disease, given the lack of effective systemic therapies in this setting. These patients remain at risk for recurrent disease and the development of new lesions in the remaining liver.

For patients with unresectable disease, it is still feasible to conduct placebo-controlled trials, although opportunities are limited and data on the results of on-going studies with sorafenib post-TACE are pending. We would suggest that studies in this setting be limited to patients who have achieved maximal response after TACE, based on modified EASL criteria (63). Such an approach helps to create a more homogeneous study population and may make it easier to define subsequent disease progression. Nonetheless, more research is required to determine the optimal clinical endpoints in this setting. One possible endpoint to consider is time for the development of a new lesion, an endpoint that would not require distinguishing recurrent disease from a second primary cancer.

In advanced disease, there is a great interest in identifying effective agents for second-line therapy, as well as treatments for patients with Child–Pugh B and C liver impairment. In general, we agree that OS is the most important endpoint for randomized phase III trials, but it must be recognized that with the introduction of multiple lines of therapy for advanced disease, OS will soon be confounded. In the near future, we may need to use surrogate outcomes for OS in phase III trials. Progression-free survival should be evaluated as an appropriate surrogate, like the cases that have been done in colorectal cancer (64), especially post-TACE. Disease-free survival should be evaluated as an endpoint in the adjuvant setting. Finally, it should be noted that we believe that non-inferiority trial designs would be acceptable in Eastern Asia to demonstrate the efficacy of novel agents that have the potential to be better tolerated or less toxic than current treatment options.

Conclusions

Hepatocellular carcinoma is a heterogeneous disease that is managed differently throughout the world. Because of differences in aetiology, staging and treatment, clinical practice guidelines and recommendations for the design and conduct of clinical trials that have been developed primarily in the West cannot be used throughout the world without modification. Major differences between Eastern Asia and the United States and European Union include a greater burden of HBV-related HCC in Asia; use of locally developed and validated staging systems; different rates of use of potentially curative treatments such as surgery and transplant; heterogeneous TACE procedures; and lack of access to and lower tolerability of sorafenib among patients with advanced HCC. The burden of HCC falls markedly in Asian countries, and more effective treatments are urgently needed. Researchers in Eastern Asia can be effective partners in international clinical drug development when the differences in local practice are recognized and addressed in a thoughtful, collaborative process.

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JJCO Japanese Journal of Clinical Oncology

Jpn J Clin Oncol 2010;40(10)949–953
doi:10.1093/jjco/hyq074
Advance Access Publication 21 May 2010

A Conundrum for Randomized Controlled Trials: Experience from a Small Hepatocellular Carcinoma Trial

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Received February 22, 2010; accepted April 15, 2010

Objective: The aim of this study was to explore why patients accepted or declined to participate in a randomized clinical trial, which was subsequently discontinued because of a low recruitment rate.
Methods: Forty-one patients were invited to participate in a randomized clinical trial that aimed to compare local ablation therapies and surgery to treat small asymptomatic hepatocellular carcinomas. These patients were then asked to answer a questionnaire that assessed patient perception and reasons for accepting or declining to enroll in the randomized clinical trial. When patients had a strong preference for a specific treatment, the questionnaire assessed why, how and when they had chosen it.
Results: The response rate was 6/6 (100%) and 30/35 (86%) for the participant and non-participant groups, respectively. Among the 30 non-participants, 23 had a strong preference for local ablation therapies, which was less invasive and offered shorter hospitalization. Patient preference for a specific treatment often stemmed from their consultations with a clinician who referred them to a specialist hospital. Patients without strong preference for a specific treatment participated in the randomized clinical trial because of altruistic motivations.
Conclusion: When new treatments that are innovative and less burdensome become widespread, they are difficult to compare with standard therapy utilizing a well-designed randomized clinical trial. Consequently, when an innovative treatment is developed, investigators should consider designing a randomized clinical trial as early as possible.

Key words: small asymptomatic hepatocellular carcinomas – local ablation therapies – liver resection – randomized clinical trial

INTRODUCTION

Randomized clinical trials (RCT) are the gold-standard to evaluate the safety and efficacy of proposed new treatments (1–3). When a new treatment shows benefits, it is introduced into general practice and is expected to improve the quality of care. However, an appropriate evaluation of an unproven new treatment through a RCT is difficult when it becomes integrated into general clinical practice because of its innovative and minimally burdensome nature (3). Consequently, the co-existence of a new treatment and a standard therapy often leads to diminished patient access to beneficial treatments.

Small asymptomatic hepatocellular carcinomas (HCC) are increasingly recognized as a problem in Japan since the initiation of periodic surveillance of high-risk populations (4). Surgical resection has been accepted as the first-line treatment for HCC. In addition, several local ablation therapies (LAT) have been developed to treat HCC, including percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI) (5) and radiofrequency ablation (RFA) (6). They are minimally invasive and have been recognized as an alternative to surgery in small HCC patients. Retrospective studies have reported that the prognosis of patients undergoing PEI (7–10) or RFA (6,11) for small HCC was equivalent to that of patients selecting surgery. However, the optimal therapeutic strategy for small HCC is under debate. Patient decisions regarding treatment are often guided by the expertise of their consulting clinician, which is frequently affected by sectionalism that is predominant in the Japanese medical community.

In 2002, a RCT (the parent study) was organized to settle the longstanding debate comparing the benefits of LAT relative to surgery in treating small HCC (i.e. three or fewer tumors, where each tumor is 3 cm in diameter or smaller). Table 1 shows the study outline. The trial was carried out in three cancer hospitals (Institutions A, B and C) and a university hospital (Institution D), where physicians and surgeons had the opportunity to build a framework for cooperation. We reached a consensus on what to include in the informed consent form and how to obtain it from patients. Specifically, we explained the clinical equipoise by noting: (i) the probability of 5-year disease-free survival associated with the two treatments was 25 and 10% for surgery and LAT, respectively; and (ii) the probability of 5-year survival associated with the two treatments was 62 and 59% for surgery and LAT, respectively (10). The purpose of the parent study and difference between two treatments were explained in informed consent form as follows; the purpose of this study is to compare the effectiveness, risk, burden and cost between surgery and LAT. Surgery has been usually performed for your type of cancer. LAT has been found to be effective and spread widely, but there is no solid evidence that LAT has a similar benefit to surgery. Currently, the proportion of recurrence in surgery is lower than LAT. However, there is little difference in long-term survival between surgery and LAT. LAT imposes less burden and invasiveness on patients than surgery. The comparative table of benefit, burden and cost in two treatments also was put on the form.

Table 1. Outline of the parent study

	Contents
Purpose	To compare local ablation therapies (RFA, PEI) with surgical resection
Eligibility	Hepatocellular carcinoma, three or fewer tumors each 3 cm in diameter or smaller, Child-Pugh class: A or B
	Age: ≥20, <80
Endpoints	
Primary endpoints	Overall survival and disease-free survival
Secondary endpoints	Medical costs, hospitalization period, Toxicity
Sample size	120 patients
Recruit period	2 year
Institutions	Cancer hospitals (Institution A, B, C), University hospital (Institution D)

Between October 2002 and April 2003, 41 patients were invited to participate in this study. Among these patients, six agreed and 35 refused to participate. Although a similar study was completed in China (12), the steering committee decided to discontinue the trial because of the low recruitment rate. Within this context, the aim of this study was to explore why patients accepted or declined to participate in the trial, and to use this information to provide insights for future research.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

We invited 41 patients, who were originally asked to participate in the parent study, to take part in this study. These patients were then asked by an attending clinician to respond to a questionnaire accompanied by an envelope. Patients were directed to place the completed questionnaire into the envelope and deliver it to the hospital staff. This study was approved by the National Cancer Center Hospital research ethics committee.

The questionnaire contained both multiple-choice and open-ended questions that aimed to assess the reasons behind patient decisions to participate in the study. We also examined views of non-participants towards random allocation. When non-participants had a strong preference towards a specific treatment, we assessed their perception by inquiring why, how and when they developed this preference. The questionnaire, developed by the investigators, was pilot-tested with laypersons to ensure clarity and comprehensibility of the questions. The questionnaires are shown in the Supplementary data, Appendix, available at http://www.jjco.oxfordjournals.org.

RESULTS

The survey was performed between May and July of 2003. Among the six participants and 35 non-participants, 6 (100%) and 30 (86%) patients, respectively, responded to the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the number of patients who accepted or declined participation in the parent-trial. Table 2 also shows the number of non-participants who chose surgery or LAT. Only 15% of patients participated in the parent-trial. There were no differences among institutions. Among the 30 respondents who declined trial entry, four had surgery, 25 had LAT and the remaining one was unknown.

Table 2. Number of patients (Pt) who accepted or declined participation

	Pt invited to RCT	Participant (%)	Non-participant		
			Total	Surgery	Local ablation therapies
Institution A	10	3 (30)	7	1	6
Institution B	8	1 (12)	7	1	6
Institution C	12	1 (8)	11	0	11
Institution D	11	1 (9)	10	4	6
Total	41	6 (15)	35	6	29

Reasons for Participation or Non-participation

Table 3 summarizes participants' reasons for deciding to participate in the parent-trial. All participants answered that they thought participation in the trial would contribute to the development of medicine. When asked about their major reason for participation, three participants marked 'the contribution to medical development' and two participants noted 'clinicians asked me to participate'.

Table 4 shows non-participants' reasons for refusing to enroll in the parent-trial. Four patients (13%) answered that they preferred surgery to LAT whereas 23 (77%) noted that they preferred LAT. One of two patients who received LAT stated 'I disliked surgery'; although the other stated 'clinicians did not ask strongly to participate'. Twelve patients (40%) stated that they were not satisfied with the random allocation into a treatment group. Among these 12 patients, 7 (58%) answered that patients should decide their own treatment whereas 3 (25%) answered that clinicians should decide. Two patients (17%) answered that randomization was inhumane. One patient (8%) stated that random allocation was problematic when two treatments were very different. One patient (8%) stated that he/she could not understand randomization.

Table 3. The frequency of agreement to each statement according to participation among six patients

Statement[a]	Number of respondents (%)
I thought participation in the trial would contribute to the development of medicine	6 (100)
Clinician asked me to participate	2 (33)
I thought there were no differences between two treatments	1 (17)
Other	
I had no preference because my tumors were small	1 (17)
I could not decide which treatment to have	1 (17)

[a]More than one response was allowed.

Table 4. The reasons of 30 non-participants for refusal

Statement[a]	Number of respondents (%)
I was not satisfied to be assigned to the treatment by randomization	12 (40)
Patient should decide the treatment	7 (58)
Clinician should decide the treatment	3 (25)
Randomization was inhumane	2 (17)
Two treatments were very different	1 (8)
I could not understand randomization	1 (8)
I wanted to receive local ablation therapies	23 (77)
I wanted to receive surgery	4 (13)
Other	
Clinician did not ask me to participate	1 (3)
I disliked surgery	1 (3)

[a]More than one response was allowed.

Reasons for Refusing Trial Entry Among Non-participants

Table 5 shows non-participants' reasons for why they subsequently decided to undergo surgery or LAT. All four patients who received surgery and one patient who receive LAT answered that they had thought the probability of recurrences would be lower. Among the patients who had LAT, the majority (20/25, 75%) stated that LAT imposed a lower amount of burden and invasiveness to their body than surgery. In addition, about half of the non-participants (12/25, 48%) stated that the hospitalization period would be shorter with LAT than with surgery. One patient stated that the medical cost of LAT was fewer.

Table 6 summarizes the results of how non-participants made their treatment decisions. Among these four patients who had surgery, three answered that they followed their surgeons' recommendation and one answered he/she followed physicians' recommendation. Among these 25 patients who had LAT, 2 (8%) answered that they referred to their surgeons, 21 (84%) answered that they relied on their attending physicians' recommendation and 9 (36%) answered that they relied on general practitioners' recommendation. Thirteen out of 25 patients who had LAT answered they had already decided to obtain this treatment before they were invited to the trial.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we found that patients who declined trial entry had a strong preference for LAT, which was less invasive and offered a shorter hospitalization course. We also found that this patient preference had stemmed from patient consultations with either a clinician or general practitioner who