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Patients with chronic hepatitis infected with HCV genotype 1b and pretreatment HCV RNA levels $\geq 5.0 \log_{10}$ IU/mL who underwent antiviral therapy with peginterferon alpha and ribavirin between December 2004 and January 2010. (N=808)

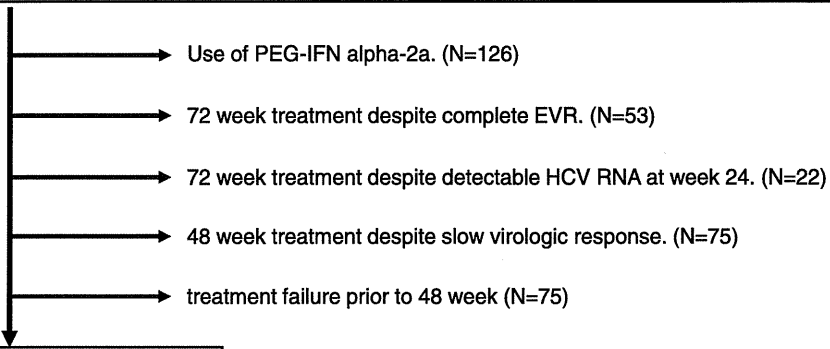


Figure 1 Study patients. (N=516)

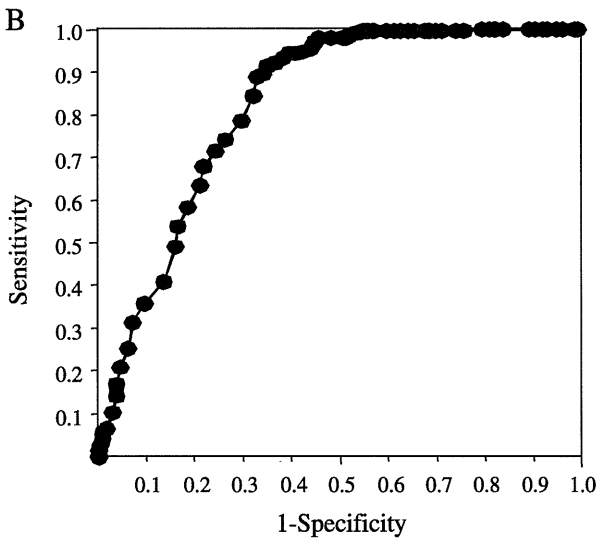
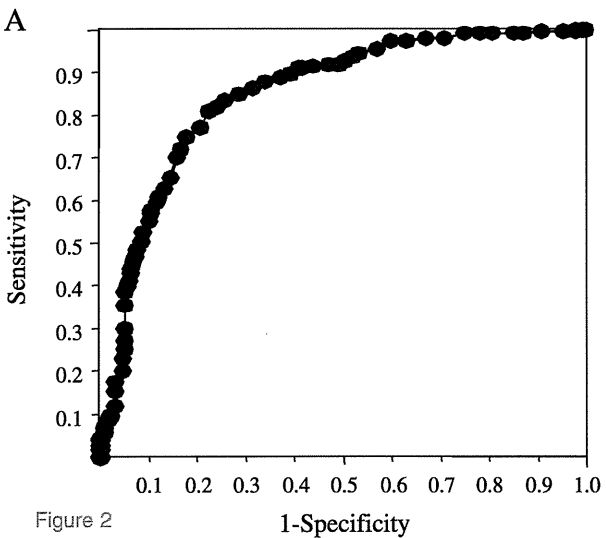


Figure 2

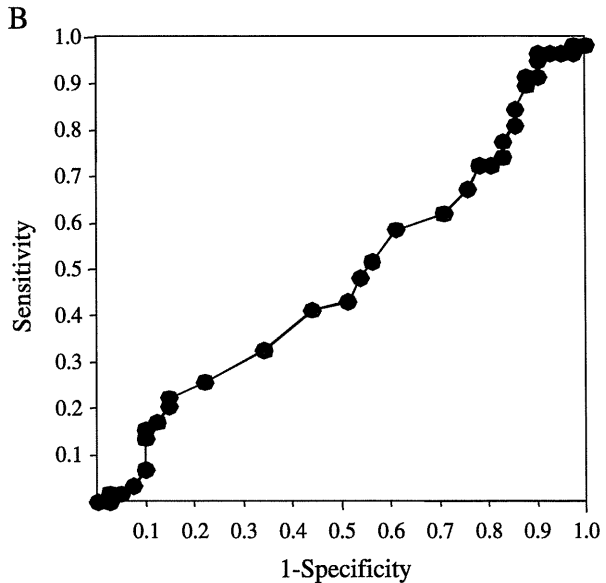
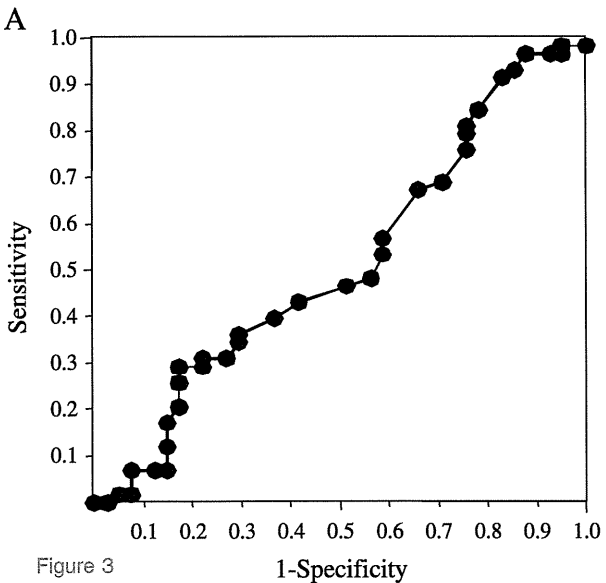


Figure 3

Comparison of resection and ablation for hepatocellular carcinoma: A cohort study based on a Japanese nationwide survey

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Background & Aims: The treatment of choice for early or moderately advanced hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) with good liver function remains controversial. We evaluated the therapeutic impacts of surgical resection (SR), percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI), and radiofrequency ablation (RFA) on long-term outcomes in patients with HCC.

Methods: A database constructed on the basis of a Japanese nationwide survey of 28,510 patients with HCC treated by SR, PEI, or RFA between 2000 and 2005 was used to identify 12,968 patients who had no more than 3 tumors (≤ 3 cm) and liver damage of class A or B. The patients were divided into SR ($n = 5361$), RFA ($n = 5548$), and PEI groups ($n = 2059$). Overall survival and time to recurrence were compared among them.

Results: Median follow-up was 2.16 years. Overall survival at 3 and 5 years was respectively 85.3%/71.1% in the SR group, 81.0%/61.1% in the RFA, and 78.9%/56.3% in the PEI. Time to recurrence at 3 and 5 years was 43.3%/63.8%, 57.2%/71.7%, and 64.3%/76.9%, respectively. On multivariate analysis, the hazard ratio for death was significantly lower in the SR group than in the RFA (SR vs. RFA: 0.84, 95% confidence interval, 0.74–0.95; $p = 0.006$) and PEI groups (SR vs. PEI: 0.75, 0.64–0.86; $p = 0.0001$). The hazard ratios for recurrence were also lower in the SR group than in the RFA (SR vs. RFA: 0.74, 0.68–0.79; $p = 0.0001$) and PEI groups (SR vs. PEI: 0.59, 0.54–0.65; $p = 0.0001$).

Conclusions: Our findings suggest that surgical resection results in longer overall survival and shorter time to recurrence than either RFA or PEI in patients with HCC.

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Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the fifth most common cancer in men and the seventh in women, worldwide [1]. Outcomes remain disappointing, despite recent progress in the techniques of diagnosis and therapy. Japanese [2], European [3] and American [4] clinical practice guidelines strongly recommend surgical resection (SR) and percutaneous ablation, including radiofrequency ablation (RFA) and percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI), for the management of early or moderately advanced HCC (i.e., up to 3 tumors 3 cm or less in diameter) in patients with adequately maintained liver function. Although comparative studies of these treatments have been conducted previously [5–7], the most suitable treatment strategy still remains controversial.

By nationwide surveys initiated in 1965, the Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan has prospectively collected data on patients with HCC in Japan. The Group conducted two retrospective analyses to define the treatment with the best outcomes [8,9]. However, each of the analyses was flawed, and had several problems: data on RFA were not included in the first report [8], and the follow-up period was short in the second one [9]. Although the second analysis demonstrated that surgical resection was superior to RFA and PEI for preventing recurrence [9], no apparent difference in the overall survival could be discerned between surgery and percutaneous ablation therapies (RFA and PEI). Thus, the treatment of choice for less advanced HCC still remains under debate.

Before starting this study, the results of 2 randomized controlled trials (RCT) were available [10,11]. As we pointed out in a previous report [12], however, the study designs of these 2

Keywords: Hepatectomy; Surgical resection; Radiofrequency ablation; Percutaneous ethanol injection.

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Abbreviations: HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; SR, surgical resection; RFA, radiofrequency ablation; PEI, percutaneous ethanol injection; TACE, transcatheter hepatic arterial chemoembolization.



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trials were critically flawed by factors such as insufficient sample size, excessively optimistic hypotheses, and high conversion ratios. Because of these problems, the results of the two RCTs do not allow firm conclusions to be drawn concerning the important clinical question: is surgery or percutaneous ablation the treatment of choice for early or moderately advanced HCC? To answer this question, we conducted this cohort study based on the latest data available from a Japanese nationwide survey.

Patients and methods

Patients and settings

The Liver Cancer Study Group of Japan has performed nationwide surveys of patients with primary liver cancer since 1965. Patients are registered and followed up, as reported previously [9]. Although this study protocol was not submitted to the Institutional Review Board of each institution participating in the nationwide survey, the collection and registration of data of patients with HCC were performed with the approval of each institution. Because RFA has been available for clinical use since 1999 in Japan, we set the study period from 2000 to 2005, to exclude preliminary experiences with RFA. During this period, a total of 28,510 patients with HCC were registered and received surgical resection, RFA or PEI as the primary treatment with curative intent for HCC. We identified 12,968 patients who met the following criteria: (1) liver function classified as liver damage A or B defined by the Liver cancer Study Group of Japan [13]; (2) number of tumors 3 or less; (3) maximum tumor diameter ≤ 3 cm. The 12,968 patients were divided into 3 groups according to the treatment received: SR group ($n = 5361$, 41.3%), RFA group ($n = 5548$, 42.8%), and PEI group ($n = 2059$, 15.9%). The diagnostic criteria and details of follow-up were described previously [8]. Because it has been unusual for biopsies to be performed in cases treated by percutaneous ablation in Japan, histological findings such as microscopic vascular invasion, tumor grading, and microscopic intrahepatic metastasis were not evaluated in this study. Relevant clinical data were collected and analyzed.

Statistical analyses

The baseline characteristics of the three groups (Table 1) were compared by analysis of variance for continuous variables and by Chi-square or Mantel-trend tests for categorical variables. Consistent with our preliminary report [9], the SR group had a higher proportion of younger patients and male patients than the RFA and PEI groups. Hepatitis C virus infection was less prevalent in the SR group than in the RFA and PEI groups. Based on the liver damage class, serum albumin and total bilirubin levels, platelet counts, and the indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min, liver function was better in the SR group than in the RFA and PEI groups, consistent with our previous report [9]. As for tumor-related factors, the number of tumors was smaller, and the maximum tumor diameter was larger in the SR group than in the RFA or PEI group. The SR group had the lowest proportion of patients with abnormally elevated alpha-fetoprotein levels (≥ 15 ng/ml) and the highest proportion of patients with abnormally elevated des- γ -carboxy prothrombin levels (≥ 40 AU/ml).

Overall survival and time to recurrence curves were plotted using the Kaplan-Meier method and compared with the use of the log-rank test. Recurrence was diagnosed on the basis of imaging studies, clinical data, and/or histopathological studies at each institution [9].

The therapeutic impacts of surgical resection, RFA and PEI were estimated using a Cox proportional hazards model including the following 10 covariates: age, gender, liver damage class, hepatitis C virus antibody, hepatitis B surface antigen, platelet count, number of tumors, tumor size, and serum alpha-fetoprotein and des- γ -carboxy prothrombin levels. The results of multivariate analysis were expressed as hazard ratios with 95% confidence intervals. p values of <0.05 were considered to indicate statistical significance.

For the subgroup analyses, the study populations were classified into 8 subgroups according to the tumor size ($<$ or ≥ 2 cm), tumor number (single or multiple), and liver damage class (A or B). Macroscopic vascular invasion was excluded from the subgroup analyses because its presence is a contraindication to percutaneous ablation therapies. The therapeutic impacts of the three treatments were evaluated in each of these subgroups, and hazard ratios with 95% confidence intervals and p values were calculated according to the above three factors (tumor size, number of tumors, and liver damage class).

Results

The median follow-up after treatment was 2.16 years, and the 5th and 95th percentiles were 0.14 and 5.19 years, respectively. The overall survival rates at 3/5 years were 85.3%/71.1% in the SR group, 81.0%/61.1% in the RFA group, and 78.9%/56.3% in the PEI group (Fig. 1). The median survival times were 8.4, 5.9, and 5.6 years in the three groups, respectively. The time to recurrence rates at 3/5 years in the 3 groups were 43.3%/63.8%, 57.2%/71.7%, and 64.3%/76.9%, respectively (Fig. 2).

According to the results of the multivariate analysis, the hazard ratio for death in the SR group was 0.84 (0.74–0.95, $p = 0.006$) relative to that in the RFA group, and 0.75 (0.64–0.86, $p = 0.0001$) relative to that in the PEI group (Table 2A). The hazard ratios for recurrence in the SR group were 0.74 (0.68–0.79, $p = 0.0001$) and 0.59 (0.54–0.65, $p = 0.0001$) relative to those in the RFA and PEI groups, respectively (Table 2B). These results indicated that the overall survival and time to recurrence rates were both significantly better in the SR group than in the RFA and PEI groups.

The overall survival rates following surgical resection, RFA and PEI in the 4 subgroups with a single tumor are shown in Fig. 3A–D. The results of the subgroup analyses (summarized in Fig. 4A) showed that the overall survival was significantly longer in the SR group than in the RFA group in 2 subgroups of patients, namely, those who had a single tumor smaller than 2 cm in diameter with liver damage class A, and those who had a single tumor 2 cm or larger in diameter with liver damage class B.

As shown in Fig. 4B, the time to recurrence was shorter in the SR group than that in the RFA group in the 4 following subgroups: patients with a single tumor with liver damage class A (regardless of the tumor size), those with multiple tumors 2 cm or larger in diameter with liver damage class A, and those with a single tumor 2 cm or larger in diameter with liver damage class B.

Discussion

Our study showed that surgical resection was associated with significantly lower risk of both death and recurrence as compared to RFA and PEI in patients with early or moderately advanced HCC. Our previous preliminary report [9] suggested that surgery reduces the risk of recurrence, but failed to demonstrate any difference in the overall survival between surgery and percutaneous ablation therapies in patients with early or moderately advanced HCC. The present study reconfirms that surgery is associated with a reduced recurrence rate and newly shows that surgery yields a longer overall survival than percutaneous ablation therapies.

Differences in the results between the present study and previous investigations are most likely related to the sample size and length of follow-up. The total number of subjects increased markedly from 7185 in our previous study to 12,968 in this study, and the median follow-up period increased from 10.4 months to 2.16 years (25.9 months). These factors are considered not only to have enhanced the reliability of our findings, but also to have strengthened our conclusions. We believe that our results, which are, of course, subject to the inherent drawbacks of the study design, are meaningful, given the current lack of credible data derived from well-designed RCTs.

The large sample size and prolonged follow-up period also allowed us to perform several subgroup analyses, which were not feasible in our previous study [9]. We classified the patients

Table 1. Baseline characteristics.

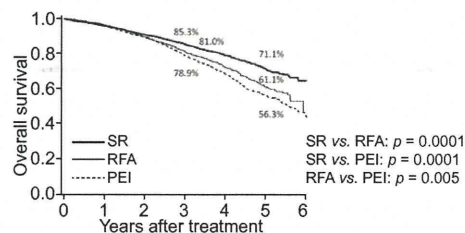
Variables	SR n = 5361	RFA n = 5548	PEI n = 2059	p value
Age, median (5, 95 percentile), yr	66 (48, 77)	69 (52, 80)	69 (52, 80)	<0.0001 ^a
Sex				<0.0001 ^b
Male, No. (%)	3967 (74.0)	3569 (64.3)	1303 (63.3)	
Female, No. (%)	1394 (26.0)	1979 (35.7)	756 (36.7)	
Hepatitis virus infection				<0.0001 ^b
HBs Ag(+)/HCV-Ab(-), No. (%)	908 (16.9)	462 (8.3)	141 (6.8)	
HBs Ag(-)/HCV-Ab(+), No. (%)	3393 (63.3)	4263 (76.8)	1632 (79.3)	
HBs Ag(+)/HCV-Ab(+), No. (%)	106 (2.0)	87 (1.6)	32 (1.6)	
HBs Ag(-)/HCV-Ab(-), No. (%)	760 (14.2)	512 (9.2)	160 (7.8)	
Unknown	194 (3.6)	224 (4.0)	94 (4.6)	
Liver damage				<0.0001 ^b
A, No. (%)	4000 (74.6)	3349 (60.4)	1204 (58.5)	
B, No. (%)	1361 (25.4)	2199 (39.6)	855 (41.5)	
Serum albumin, median (5, 95 percentile), g/dl	3.9 (3.1, 4.6)	3.7 (2.9, 4.4)	3.7 (2.8, 4.4)	<0.0001 ^a
Serum total bilirubin, median (5, 95 percentile), mg/dl	0.8 (0.4, 1.5)	0.9 (0.4, 1.9)	0.9 (0.4, 2.2)	<0.0001 ^a
Platelet count, median (5, 95 percentile), x 10 ⁴ /μl	12.6 (5.8, 24.0)	9.9 (4.5, 20.4)	9.5 (4.4, 19.6)	<0.0001 ^a
ICG R15, median (5, 95 percentile), %	15 (5, 35)	22 (7, 51)	24 (8, 51)	<0.0001 ^a
Tumor number				<0.0001 ^c
Single, No. (%)	4458 (83.2)	4068 (73.3)	1449 (70.4)	
Two, No. (%)	706 (13.2)	1096 (19.8)	443 (21.5)	
Three, No. (%)	197 (3.7)	384 (6.9)	167 (8.1)	
Tumor size, median (5, 95 percentile), mm	23 (12, 30)	20 (10, 30)	17 (10, 30)	<0.0001 ^a
Alpha-fetoprotein				<0.0001 ^b
≥15 ng/ml, No. (%)	2726 (50.9)	3028 (54.6)	1125 (54.6)	
<15 ng/ml, No. (%)	2457 (45.8)	2301 (41.5)	828 (40.2)	
Unknown, No. (%)	178 (3.3)	219 (3.9)	106 (5.2)	
Des-γ-carboxy prothrombin				<0.0001 ^b
≥40 AU/ml, No. (%)	2182 (40.7)	1593 (28.7)	541 (26.3)	
<40 AU/ml, No. (%)	2651 (49.5)	3322 (59.9)	1169 (56.8)	
Unknown, No. (%)	528 (9.9)	633 (11.4)	349 (17.0)	

HBsAg, hepatitis B virus antigen; HCV-Ab, hepatitis C virus antibody; ICG R15, indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min.

^aANOVA.

^bChi-square.

^cMante-trend test.



Patients at risk

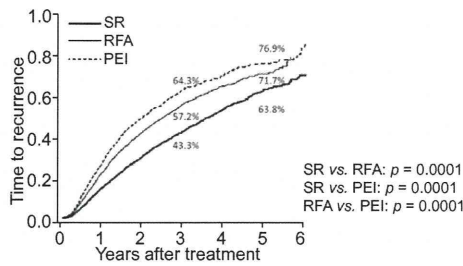
SR	5361	3833	2570	1680	894	400	29
RFA	5548	3780	2328	1264	589	160	5
PEI	2059	1595	1112	718	444	247	58

Fig. 1. Overall survival curves after surgical resection (SR), radiofrequency ablation (RFA), and percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI).

into 8 subgroups according to 3 factors (liver damage class, tumor size, and number of tumors), which have repeatedly been shown to be clinically relevant prognostic factors. The results of the sub-

group analyses indicated that surgical resection would effectively prevent recurrence in patients with relatively advanced HCC (2–3 cm in diameter) among the study populations, irrespective of liver damage class or number of tumors. This finding suggests that surgery might be superior to percutaneous ablation therapies in patients with a more advanced tumor stage. As for the subgroups with a single tumor, surgical resection yielded better overall survival and time to recurrence rates than RFA or PEI. Especially in the subgroup with a single tumor smaller than 2 cm in diameter, both the overall and time to recurrence rates were statistically significantly better after surgery than after RFA, whereas no such statistically significant differences in these two parameters between the two treatment groups were detected in a few subgroups with a single tumor, maybe due to the insufficient sample size of the subgroups. Thus, surgical resection would be considered as the treatment modality of first choice for a single HCC, as recommended by the Japanese clinical practice guideline [2]. Overall, there was a trend toward superior

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Patients at risk							
SR	5361	3265	1844	1039	451	189	15
RFA	5548	2954	1396	591	225	62	4
PEI	2059	1154	583	304	172	90	15

Fig. 2. Time to recurrence curves after surgical resection (SR), radiofrequency ablation (RFA), and percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI).

overall and time to recurrence rates after surgery than after RFA and PEI.

The reason why the long-term outcomes of the SR group were better than those of the PEI and RFA groups cannot be definitely

clarified from the results of this study, however, in theory, surgical resection has the advantage of offering better local control of HCC over PEI and RFA, both of which have some potential risks of local recurrence associated with insufficient ablation. In addition, anatomic resection to remove minute tumor satellites [14] might have decreased the recurrence rate in the SR group, although this remains a speculation.

Recently, the latest trial from China [15], which had an adequate sample size (total 230 patients), reported that surgical resection yielded significantly better long-term outcomes than RFA. Although the study design was better than that of the two previously reported RCTs [10,11], it appeared to have limitations with respect to the results, such as drop in the overall survival in the RFA group as compared with that in the surgery group during the early period after treatment. The early deaths in the RFA group could have been treatment-related rather than cancer-related. Thus, no conclusion can be drawn from the three currently available RCTs.

One of the limitations of our study is the diversity of demographic factors in the study population, which would have been

Table 2. Hazard ratios for death and recurrence adjusted by multivariate analysis.

A For death

Variables		Hazard ratio	95% CI	p value
Treatments	SR vs. RFA	0.84	0.74, 0.95	0.006
	SR vs. PEI	0.75	0.64, 0.86	0.0001
	RFA vs. PEI	0.88	0.77, 1.01	0.08
Age	<65 vs. ≥65	0.71	0.63, 0.79	0.0001
Sex	Female vs. male	0.87	0.78, 0.98	0.03
HBsAg	Positive vs. negative	0.91	0.74, 1.11	0.34
HCV Ab	Positive vs. negative	0.93	0.79, 1.10	0.40
Liver damage	A vs. B	0.62	0.56, 0.69	0.0001
Platelet count	≥10 ⁴ vs. <10 ⁴ /μl	0.76	0.68, 0.85	0.0001
Tumor size	<2 vs. ≥2 cm	0.82	0.73, 0.92	0.0007
Tumor number	Single vs. multiple	0.72	0.64, 0.80	0.0001
AFP	<15 vs. ≥15 ng/ml	0.66	0.59, 0.74	0.0001
DCP	<40 vs. ≥40 AU/ml	0.59	0.53, 0.66	0.0001

B For recurrence

Variables		Hazard ratio	95% CI	p value
Treatments	SR vs. RFA	0.74	0.68, 0.79	0.0001
	SR vs. PEI	0.59	0.54, 0.65	0.0001
	RFA vs. PEI	0.81	0.74, 0.88	0.0001
Age	<65 vs. ≥65	0.83	0.78, 0.89	0.0001
Sex	Female vs. male	0.88	0.82, 0.95	0.0001
HBsAg	Positive vs. negative	1.04	0.92, 1.17	0.53
HCV Ab	Positive vs. negative	1.15	1.04, 1.27	0.007
Liver damage	A vs. B	0.87	0.81, 0.93	0.0001
Platelet count	≥10 ⁴ vs. <10 ⁴ /μl	0.92	0.86, 0.98	0.02
Tumor size	<2 vs. ≥2 cm	0.84	0.79, 0.90	0.0001
Tumor number	Single vs. multiple	0.69	0.64, 0.74	0.0001
AFP	<15 vs. ≥15 ng/ml	0.71	0.67, 0.76	0.0001
DCP	<40 vs. ≥40 AU/ml	0.72	0.67, 0.77	0.0001

HBsAg, hepatitis B virus surface antigen; HCV, hepatitis C virus; Ab, antibody; AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; SR, surgical resection; RFA, radiofrequency ablation; PEI, percutaneous ethanol injection; CI, confidence interval.

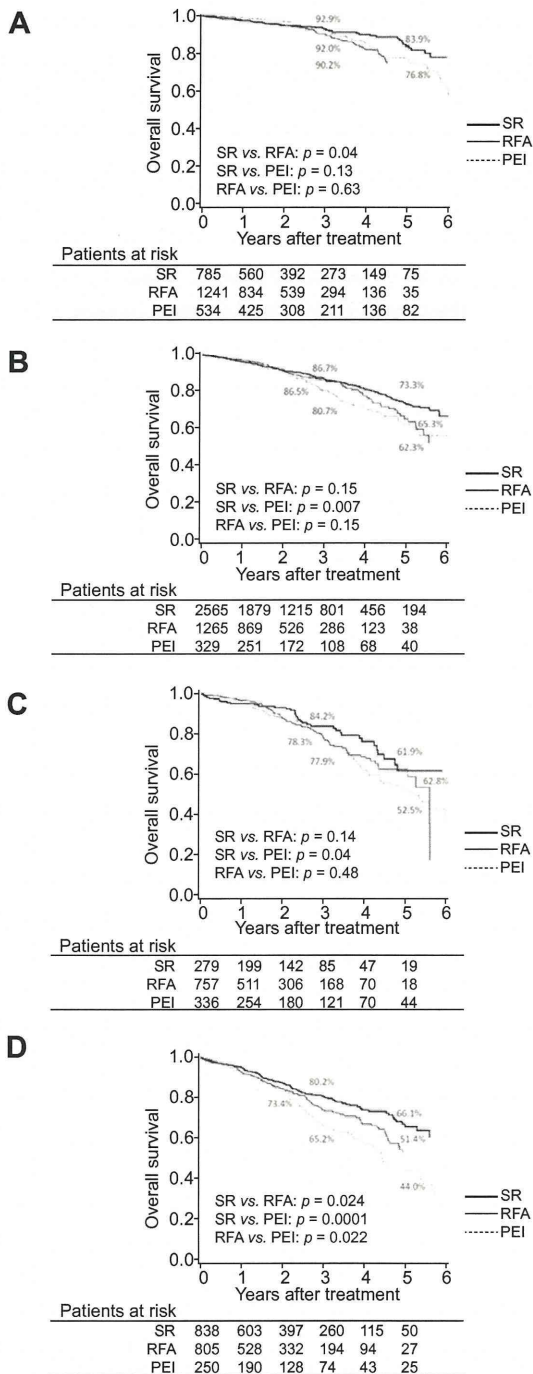


Fig. 3. Overall survival rates after surgical resection (SR), radiofrequency ablation (RFA), and percutaneous ethanol injection (PEI) in the subgroup of cases with single tumor and liver damage class A and B. (A) Liver damage class A, a single tumor (<2 cm); (B) liver damage class A, a single tumor (2–3 cm); (C) liver damage class B, a single tumor (<2 cm); (D) liver damage class B, a single tumor (2–3 cm).

caused by the selection process of treatment modalities. As similar to the previous retrospective studies [5–9], the patients amenable to surgery had had younger age, less prevalence of hepatitis

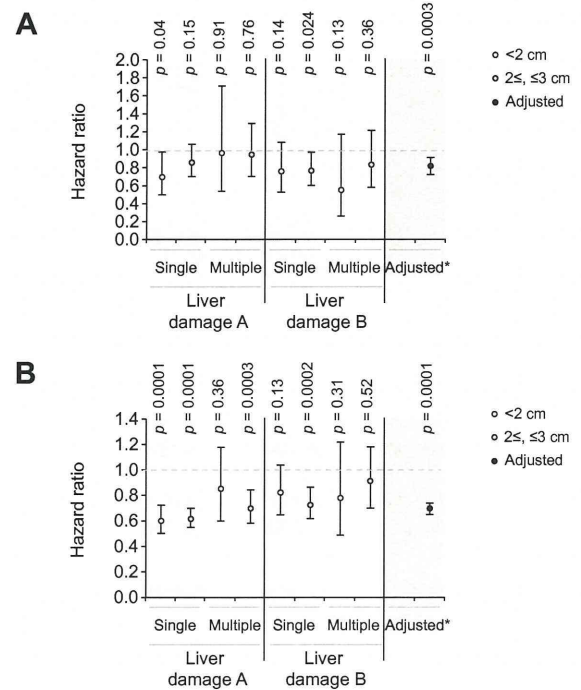


Fig. 4. Hazard ratios for death and recurrence with 95% confidence intervals and p values after surgical resection relative to those after radiofrequency ablation in the 8 subgroups. *The adjusted values for death and recurrence were calculated according to the three factors (tumor size, number of tumors, and liver damage class), as done in each subgroup. (A) Hazard ratios for death; (B) hazard ratios for recurrence.

C virus infection, better liver function, less association with portal hypertension, fewer number of tumors and lower alpha-fetoprotein level, whereas their tumor size was larger and their des- γ -carboxy prothrombin level was higher. To minimize potential effects of confounding factors, we studied patients who had similar tumor-related and liver function-related factors and performed multivariate analysis using 10 clinically important factors, similar to our previous study [9]. Although it is impossible to completely eliminate potential negative impacts of demographic diversity, we believe that our results are clinically meaningful, because of the large sample size of our study. In Japan, a nationwide RCT in patients with HCC is now ongoing, and the results are expected to lead to more definitive conclusions [16].

Another potential limitation of our study is the lack of data on liver function during the follow-up, which precluded assessment of the relationship between the liver function status and the choice of treatment at recurrence. In HCC, the influence of the first treatment is considered to be smaller than that in other primary malignant diseases, because the liver function remarkably affects the recurrence rate. Further investigations, particularly prospective clinical trials, are needed to address these issues.

In conclusion, this large cohort study based on data obtained by a nationwide survey in Japan, suggests that surgical resection may offer some advantage over RFA and PEI in terms of both overall survival and time to recurrence in patients with less advanced HCC. Although our results are considered as being more reliable than those of previous studies comparing the treatment

Research Article

outcomes in HCC, our conclusions need to be confirmed by future RCTs.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors who have taken part in this study declared that they do not have anything to disclose regarding funding or conflict of interest with respect to this manuscript.

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Baseline Factors and Early Viral Response (Week 4) to Antiviral Therapy With Peginterferon and Ribavirin for Predicting Sustained Virologic Response in Patients Infected With Hepatitis C Virus Genotype 1: A Multicenter Study

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Both baseline predictive factors and viral response at week 4 of therapy are reported to have high predictive ability for sustained virologic response to peginterferon and ribavirin combination therapy in patients with hepatitis C virus (HCV) genotype 1. However, it is not clear how these baseline variables and week 4 response should be combined to predict sustained virologic response. In this multicenter study, the authors investigated the impact of baseline predictive factors on the predictive value of week 4 viral response. Receiver-operating characteristic curve analyses were performed to evaluate the ability of week 4 reduction in HCV RNA levels to predict sustained virologic response in 293 Japanese patients infected with HCV genotype 1b. Analyses were performed in all patients and in patient subgroups stratified according to baseline variables. Overall, week 4 viral reduction demonstrates a high predictive ability for sustained virologic response. The sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value, and accuracy were higher than those of viral reduction at week 12. However, the best cut-off levels differ depending on the baseline factors and they were lower in patients with unfavorable baseline predictors. When patients had the TG/GG rs8099917 genotype, the best cut-off was markedly low with low PPV. Week 4 viral response can be a predictor of sustained virologic response in patients with HCV genotype 1 and is better than week 12 viral response. However, the cut-off

levels should be modified based on the baseline predictive variables. **J. Med. Virol.** 85:65–70, 2013. © 2012 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

KEY WORDS: chronic hepatitis C; peginterferon and ribavirin; week 4 viral response; baseline predictive factors, genetic polymorphism near the *IL28B* gene

INTRODUCTION

Although the combination antiviral therapy with peginterferon (PEG-IFN) and ribavirin has increased markedly the rate of patients with a sustained virologic response, that is, the eradication of hepatitis C virus (HCV), only 50% of patients infected with HCV genotype 1 had achieved a sustained virologic response, approximately. Several studies reported that early HCV viral dynamics during therapy have a high

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predictive value for a sustained virologic response in HCV genotype 1-infected patients. Previous studies reported that the response of HCV during combination therapy, that is, the changes in serum HCV RNA levels after starting therapy, has been shown to be an important predictor of the treatment outcome [Zeuzem et al., 2001; Buti et al., 2002; Berg et al., 2006]. Several recent reports have emphasized the importance of evaluating the viral dynamics at 4 weeks after starting therapy to predict a sustained virologic response. A rapid virologic response, in which serum HCV RNA is undetectable at 4 weeks after starting therapy, has been a strong predictive factor of a sustained virologic response reportedly [Martinez-Bauer et al., 2006; Poordad et al., 2008; Martinot-Peignoux et al., 2009; de Segadas-Soares et al., 2009]. In addition to a rapid virologic response, reduced serum HCV RNA levels at 4 weeks after starting therapy has also been reported to have a strong predictive value for the likelihood of achieving sustained virologic response to PEG-IFN and ribavirin combination therapy in patients infected with HCV genotype 1 [Yu et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2010; Toyoda et al., 2011; Marcellin et al., 2012]. These studies suggested that a reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 4 is closely associated with the probability of achieving sustained virologic response.

Aside from early viral response to therapy, several baseline host and viral factors are associated with treatment outcome. Genetic polymorphism near the *IL28B* gene (rs12979860 or rs8099917) is the strongest baseline factor associated with treatment outcome in patients with HCV genotype 1 reportedly [Ge et al., 2009; Suppiah et al., 2009; Tanaka et al., 2009; McCarthy et al., 2010; Rauch et al., 2010]. In addition, studies from Japan have reported that amino acid substitutions at residue 70 of the HCV core region and amino acids 2,209–2,248 of the NS5A region of HCV (i.e., interferon sensitivity-determining region, ISDR) are viral factors associated with treatment outcome in patients with HCV genotype 1b [Enomoto et al., 1996; Akuta et al., 2005, 2007a; Donlin et al., 2007; Maekawa and Enomoto, 2009; Hayes et al., 2011]. Given these various predictors for a sustained virologic response, that is, week 4 viral response and baseline variables, how should they be combined to predict treatment outcome more precisely? In the present study, the authors investigated how to incorporate week 4 viral response to PEG-IFN and ribavirin combination therapy with baseline predictive factors to predict a sustained virologic response.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients and Analyses

In this multicenter study, 682 patients who underwent PEG-IFN alpha-2b and ribavirin combination therapy in a standard treatment regimen at one of the participating institutions, (Musashino Red Cross Hospital, Kurume University Hospital, Shin-Matsudo

Central General Hospital, Kagawa Prefectural Central Hospital, and Ogaki Municipal Hospital) between December 2004 and January 2010 were initially included into the retrospective analyses. All patients were infected with HCV genotype 1b; patients with HCV genotype 1a are usually not found in the Japanese general population. Pretreatment HCV RNA levels were $\geq 5.0 \log_{10}$ IU/ml, based on a quantitative real-time PCR-based method (COBAS Ampli-Prep/COBAS TaqMan HCV Test; Roche Molecular Systems, Pleasanton, CA; lower limit of quantification, $1.7 \log_{10}$ IU/ml; lower limit of detection, $1.0 \log_{10}$ IU/ml) [Colucci et al., 2007; Pittaluga et al., 2008], because the use of ribavirin along with PEG-IFN is not approved by Japanese National Medical Insurance System for patients with pretreatment HCV RNA levels $< 5.0 \log_{10}$ IU/ml. No patients had co-infection with hepatitis B virus or human immunodeficiency virus. All patients had 100% medication adherence for both PEG-IFN and ribavirin during the initial 4 weeks of therapy and 80% or more throughout the treatment period. Among these 682 patients, three baseline factors, genetic polymorphism near the *IL28B* gene, amino acid substitution at residue 70 of the HCV core region, and ISDR sequence had been measured prior to treatment in 405 patients. We excluded 112 of these 405 patients with extended treatment duration up to 72 weeks because the extension of treatment duration might influence outcomes, leaving 293 patients who underwent 48-week standard regimen included in the final sample (Fig. 1).

Receiver-operating characteristic (ROC) analyses were performed to evaluate the value of week 4 reduction in HCV RNA levels in predicting sustained virologic response and an area under the ROC curve (AUROC) was generated. Best cut-off levels were determined based on the sensitivity and specificity. Sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and accuracy were also calculated using these cut-off levels. Analyses were performed for all patients and subgroups according to baseline variables. The same analyses were performed on the reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 12 after starting therapy.

The study protocol was in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration and was approved by the ethics committee of each participating institution.

Measurements of Serum HCV RNA Levels, Amino Acid Substitution at Residue 70 in the HCV Core, Amino Acid Sequence of ISDR, and Genetic Polymorphism Near the *IL28B* Gene

After each patient gave informed consent, serum samples were obtained during the patient's regular hospital visits just prior to beginning treatment, every 4 weeks during the treatment period, and during the 24-week follow-up period after treatment. Serum samples were stored at -80°C until they were analyzed. HCV RNA levels were measured using a quantitative

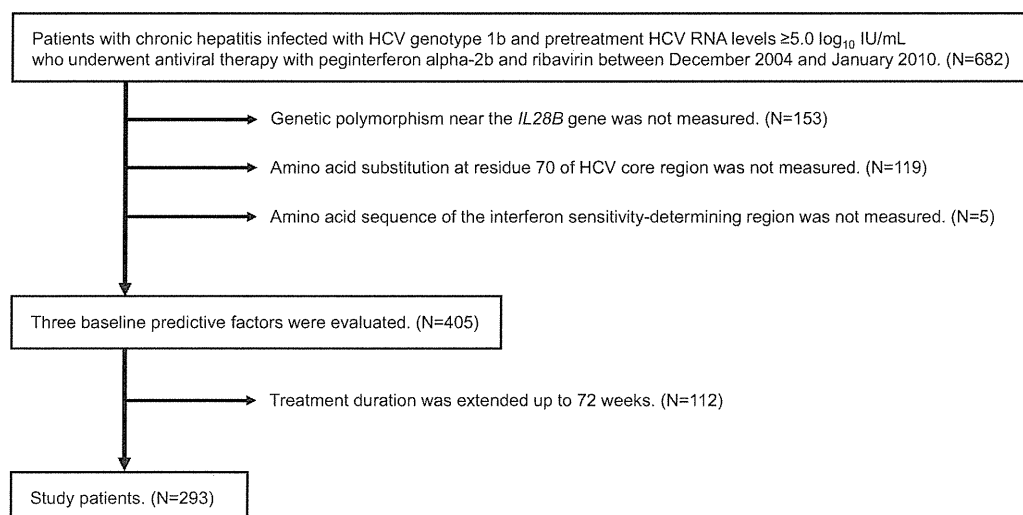


Fig. 1. Schematic representation of the study patients.

real-time PCR-based method (COBAS AmpliPrep/COBAS TaqMan HCV Test). The reductions in HCV RNA 4 and 12 weeks after starting therapy were calculated based on the pretreatment HCV RNA levels. When calculating the reduction in HCV RNA levels, HCV RNA concentration was defined as zero when HCV RNA was undetectable (i.e., rapid virologic response at week 4 and complete early virologic response at week 12).

Amino acid 70 of the HCV core region and the amino acid sequence of the ISDR were analyzed by direct nucleotide sequencing of each region as described previously [Enomoto et al., 1996; Akuta et al., 2007b]. The following PCR primer pairs were used for direct sequencing of the HCV core region:

5'-GCCATAGTGGTCTGCGGAAC-3' (outer, sense primer), 5'-GGAGCAGTCCTTCGTGACATG-3' (outer, antisense primer), 5'-GCTAGCCGAGTAGTGT-3' (inner, sense primer), and 5'-GGAGCAGTCCTTCGTGACATG-3' (inner, antisense primer). The following PCR primers were used for direct sequencing of ISDR: 5'-TTCCACTACGTGACGGGCAT-3' (outer, sense primer), 5'-CCCGTCCATGTGTAGGACAT-3' (outer, antisense primer), 5'-GGGTCACAGCTCCCTGTGAGCC-3' (inner, sense primer), and 5'-GAGGGTTGTAATCCGGCGTGC-3' (inner, antisense primer). When evaluating the ISDR, HCV was defined as wild-type when there were zero or one amino acid substitutions in residues 2,209–2,248 as compared with the HCV-J strain [Kato et al., 1990], and as non-wild-type when there was more than one substitution.

Genotyping of rs8099917 polymorphisms near the *IL28B* gene was performed using the TaqMan SNP assay (Applied Biosystems, Carlsbad, CA) according to the manufacturer's guidelines. A pre-designed and functionally tested probe was used for rs8099917 (C_11710096_10, Applied Biosystems). Genetic polymorphism of rs8099917 reportedly corresponds to

rs12979860 in more than 99% of individuals of Japanese ethnicity [Tanaka et al., 2010]. The TT genotype of rs8099917 corresponds to the CC genotype of rs12979860, the GG genotype of rs8099917 corresponds to the TT genotype of rs12979860, and the TG heterozygous genotype of rs8099917 corresponds to the CT of rs12979860.

RESULTS

Patients Characteristics and Baseline Variables

Table I summarizes patient characteristics. The polymorphism of rs8099917 was TT genotype in 204 patients (69.6%). Amino acid substitution at residue 70 was arginine in 200 patients (68.3%). HCV-ISDR was non-wild-type in 78 patients (26.6%). All these variables (TT genotype of rs8099917, arginine at residue 70, and non-wild-type ISDR) were reportedly associated with favorable response to therapy.

As a final outcome, 113 patients (38.6%) achieved sustained virologic response. Sensitivity, specificity, PPV, NPV, and accuracy were 97%, 48%, 54%, 97%, and 67%, respectively, according to genotypes of rs8099917 near the *IL28B* gene. They were 85%, 42%, 48%, 82%, and 59%, respectively, according to amino acid substitutions at residue 70 in the HCV core region, and 43%, 84%, 63%, 70%, and 78%, respectively, according to ISDR of HCV NS5A region.

Association Between Week 4 Viral Reduction and Treatment Outcome Based on Baseline Predictive Factors

Table II shows the predictive value of a reduction in serum HCV RNA levels at week 4 of therapy in all patients and based on each baseline predictive variable. Week 4 viral reduction demonstrates a high predictive ability for a sustained virologic response with

TABLE I. Characteristics of Study Patients

Age (years), median (range)	60 (20–80)
Sex (male/female) (%)	150 (51.2)/143 (48.8)
BMI, median (range)	22.6 (15.8–33.3)
Prior treatment for HCV (no/yes) (%)	201 (68.6)/92 (31.4)
Initial dose of PEG-IFN (μg), median (range)	80.0 (40.0–150.0)
Initial dose of ribavirin (mg), median (range)	600 (200–1,000)
Pretreatment HCV RNA levels (\log_{10} IU/ml), median (range)	6.1 (5.0–7.4)
Platelet count ($\times 10^3/\mu\text{l}$)	159 (43–373)
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	13.9 (8.6–18.1)
Neutrophil count (μl^{-1})	2,430 (4,670–7,480)
Alanine aminotransferase (IU/L)	49 (10–485)
Genetic polymorphisms of rs8099917 (TT/TG or GG) (%)	204 (69.6)/89 (30.4)
Amino acid at residue 70 of HCV core (arginine/glutamine or histidine) (%)	200 (68.3)/93 (31.7)
Amino acid sequence of ISDR (non-wild-type/wild-type) (%)	78 (26.6)/215 (73.4)

(N = 293).

BMI, body mass index; HCV, hepatitis C virus; PEG-IFN, peginterferon; ISDR, interferon sensitivity-determining region.

a high AUROC in all patients, in which sensitivity, specificity, PPV, NPV, and accuracy were more than 80%. The best cut-off for the prediction was 3.1-log_{10} reduction. When patients were stratified according to baseline predictive factors, AUROC remained above 0.85, indicating retention of high predictive ability. However, the best cut-off levels differ depending on baseline factors, and they were lower in patients with unfavorable baseline predictors (TG/GG genotype of rs8099917 near the *IL28B* gene, glutamine/histidine at residue 70 of the HCV core region, and wild-type of ISDR). Especially, when patients had the TG/GG rs8099917 genotype, the calculated best cut-off level was markedly lower than that of patients with the TT genotype. Sensitivity, specificity, PPV, NPV, and accuracy were more than 70% in all patient subgroups, except for patients with the TG/GG genotype in whom PPV was only 10%.

Association Between Week 12 Viral Reduction and Treatment Outcome Based on Baseline Predictive Factors

Table III shows the predictive value of a reduction in serum HCV RNA levels at week 12 of therapy in all patients and based on each baseline predictive variable. The predictive ability of week 12 viral reduction

for sustained virologic response was decreased in comparison to that of week 4 with a low AUROC in all patients. The specificity, PPV, and accuracy of the prediction at week 12 were also lower than those at week 4. The best cut-off levels increased to 5.0-log_{10} reduction. When patients were stratified according to the genetic polymorphisms of rs8099917 near the *IL28B* gene and according to amino acid substitutions at residue 70 of the HCV core region, the differences of the best cut-off levels based on these baseline factors were less marked than those at week 4, although the best cut-off levels remained lower in patients with unfavorable baseline predictors. The difference of best cut-off levels between patients with TT genotype and with TG/GG genotype of rs8099917 also decreased, but PPV in patients with TG/GG genotype remained low (21%). In contrast, the difference in the best cut-off levels increased when patients were stratified according to amino acid sequences in ISDR. The best cut-off level of the reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 12 for predicting sustained virologic response was higher in patients with HCV of wild-type ISDR, an unfavorable baseline variable, than in patients with HCV of favorable non-wild-type ISDR, which was inverse to the evaluation with week 4 viral reduction in which the cut-off level was higher in patients with HCV of non-wild-type ISDR.

TABLE II. AUROC, Best Cut-Off Level, Sensitivity, Specificity, PPV, NPV, and Accuracy of the Reduction in Serum HCV RNA Levels 4 Weeks After Starting PEG-IFN and Ribavirin Combination Therapy From Pretreatment Levels for Predicting Sustained Virologic Response

	N	AUROC	Best cut-off	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	PPV (%)	NPV (%)	Accuracy (%)
Overall	293	0.92746	$3.1 \log_{10}$	88	87	81	92	87
<i>IL28B</i> -TT	204	0.88353	$3.2 \log_{10}$	87	78	82	84	83
<i>IL28B</i> -TG or GG	89	0.84302	$1.1 \log_{10}$	100	69	10	100	70
Core 70-R	200	0.91023	$3.2 \log_{10}$	86	83	82	87	85
Core 70-Q or H	93	0.94350	$2.8 \log_{10}$	88	93	75	97	92
ISDR-non-wild type	78	0.93455	$3.0 \log_{10}$	90	90	94	84	90
ISDR-wild type	215	0.92654	$2.9 \log_{10}$	92	84	71	96	87

AUROC, area under the receiver-operating characteristics curve; PPV, positive predictive value; NPV, negative predictive value; HCV, hepatitis C virus; PEG-IFN, peginterferon; R, arginine; Q, glutamine; H, histidine; ISDR, interferon sensitivity-determining region.

TABLE III. AUROC, Best Cut-Off Level, Sensitivity, Specificity, PPV, NPV, and Accuracy of the Reduction in Serum HCV RNA Levels 12 Weeks After Starting PEG-IFN and Ribavirin Combination Therapy From Pretreatment Levels for Predicting Sustained Virologic Response

	N	AUROC	Best cut-off	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	PPV (%)	NPV (%)	Accuracy (%)
Overall	293	0.86907	5.0 log ₁₀	88	73	67	91	79
<i>IL28B</i> -TT	204	0.79216	5.11 og ₁₀	81	61	70	73	71
<i>IL28B</i> -TG or GG	89	0.92829	4.6 log ₁₀	100	87	21	100	88
Core 70-R	200	0.81791	5.0 log ₁₀	88	63	69	86	75
Core 70-Q or H	93	0.94272	4.9 log ₁₀	100	84	59	100	87
ISDR-non-wild type	78	0.87298	5.0 log ₁₀	88	79	88	79	85
ISDR-wild type	215	0.89572	5.4 log ₁₀	84	79	63	92	81

AUROC, area under the receiver-operating characteristics curve; PPV, positive predictive value; NPV, negative predictive value; HCV, hepatitis C virus; PEG-IFN, peginterferon; R, arginine; Q, glutamine; H, histidine; ISDR, interferon sensitivity-determining region.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to confirm the predictive value of week 4 viral dynamics of HCV for predicting sustained virologic response to the combination therapy with PEG-IFN and ribavirin in patients infected with HCV genotype 1 and with pretreatment HCV RNA levels of ≥ 5.0 log₁₀ IU/ml in a large multicenter study of Japan. The comparison of the predictability for sustained virologic response between week 4 and week 12 viral reductions revealed the higher predictive ability of week 4 viral response. In a recent study, Marcellin et al., [2012] suggested that a ≥ 3 log₁₀ reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 4 of PEG-IFN and ribavirin combination therapy is a reliable factor for predicting sustained virologic response in patients with HCV genotype 1. Our current results are consistent with their analysis for patients with HCV genotype 1b and those with pretreatment HCV RNA levels ≥ 5.0 log₁₀ IU/ml overall. The reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 4 appears to be a good and reliable predictor for a sustained virologic response. Although week 12 viral response (i.e., early virologic response) has been used as a pivotal decision criterion to extend treatment duration or to discontinue treatment, the predictive value is lower when the reduction in HCV RNA levels is compared to week 4 viral response.

When patients were stratified based on baseline predictive factors, however, the best cut-off levels for sustained virologic response were not constant. The cut-off levels decreased in patients with unfavorable baseline factors, that is, TG/GG genotype of rs8099917, glutamine/histidine at residue 70 of the HCV core region, and wild-type sequence of ISDR, indicating that the reduction in HCV RNA occurs slowly in patients with these unfavorable baseline variables. Conversely and paradoxically, the results may indicate that one can expect sustained virologic response in patients with a smaller reduction in HCV RNA levels at week 4 if they have unfavorable baseline variables.

When predictive value was evaluated using week 12 viral reduction, the best cut-off levels remained lower in patients with unfavorable TG/GG rs8099917 genotype and patients with HCV of unfavorable

glutamine/histidine at residue 70 of the HCV core region. In contrast, the best cut-off level was higher in patients with HCV of unfavorable wild-type ISDR. Previous studies reported the association between the genetic polymorphisms near the *IL28B* gene (rs12979860 and rs8099917) and amino acid substitution at residue 70 of HCV core region [Abe et al., 2010; Kobayashi et al., 2010], whereas no associations were reported between these two variables and ISDR mutation. This might explain the difference in the relationship of early viral response during therapy between with two baseline predictive factors, *IL28B* genetic polymorphisms and amino acid substitution of HCV core region and with ISDR mutation.

The calculated PPV was markedly low in patients with the unfavorable TG/GG genotype of rs8099917 (CT/TT genotype of rs12979860) both by the evaluations at weeks 4 and 12 viral responses. Therefore, it appears to be difficult to identify patients in this subgroup who are likely to achieve a sustained virologic response by their week 4 viral response, although week 4 viral response can be a factor used to identify patients with a high likelihood of achieving sustained virologic response in other subgroups.

In conclusion, week 4 viral response can be a predictor of sustained virologic response in patients with HCV genotype 1. However, the cut-off levels should be modified based on baseline host and viral predictive variables. In addition, week 4 viral response is not predictive in patients with unfavorable genotype of genetic polymorphism near the *IL28B* gene.

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Original Article

Fibrosis score consisting of four serum markers successfully predicts pathological fibrotic stages of chronic hepatitis B

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Aim: In order to evaluate and judge a fibrotic stage of patients with chronic hepatitis B, multivariate regression analysis was performed using multiple fibrosis markers.

Method: A total of 227 patients from seven hepatology units and institutes were diagnosed by needle biopsy as having chronic liver disease caused by hepatitis B virus. Twenty-three variables and their natural logarithmic transformation were employed in the multivariate analysis. Multiple regression function was generated from data of 158 patients in one hospital, and validation was performed using the other data of 69 patients from six other hospitals.

Results: After stepwise variable selection, multivariate regression analysis finally obtained the following function: $z = 1.40 \times \ln(\text{type IV collagen 7S}) (\text{ng/mL}) - 0.017 \times (\text{platelet count}) (\times 1000^3/\text{mm}^3) + 1.24 \times \ln(\text{tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase-2}) (\text{ng/mL}) + 1.19 \times \ln(\alpha\text{-2-macroglobulin})$

(mg/dL) – 9.15. Median values of fibrosis scores of F1 ($n = 73$), F2 ($n = 42$), F3 ($n = 31$) and F4 stages ($n = 12$) were calculated as 0.95, 2.07, 2.98 and 3.63, respectively. Multiple regression coefficient and coefficient of determination were 0.646 and 0.418, respectively. Validation with patient data from other institutions demonstrated good reproducibility of fibrosis score for hepatitis B (FSB), showing 1.33 in F1 ($n = 27$), 2.20 in F2 ($n = 20$), 3.11 in F3 ($n = 20$) and 5.30 in F4 ($n = 2$), respectively.

Conclusion: A concise multiple regression function using four laboratory parameters successfully predicted pathological fibrosis stage of patients with hepatitis B virus infection.

Key words: chronic hepatitis, hepatitis B virus, liver cirrhosis, liver fibrosis, multiple regression analysis, stage

INTRODUCTION

WHEN HEPATITIS B virus (HBV)-related chronic liver disease is found by biochemical and virological examination, liver biopsy can establish the definitive diagnosis of chronic hepatitis and its fibrotic staging. Although these pathological procedures are reliable and informative both in diagnosis and treatment,

they sometimes require medical invasion and financial costs, including the risk of bleeding from needle puncture, some pain experienced during the procedure and hospital stays of a few days. The pathological examination is, therefore, rarely performed repeatedly in a short period of time, unless disease activity is severe or progression of liver disease is highly suspected. Recently, many authors described the usefulness of ultrasonographic elastography and multiple resonance imaging technology in the estimation of staging of chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis.¹⁻⁵ These ways of estimation using the imaging apparatuses seem truly useful for current patients, but they cannot evaluate and compare with past fibrotic states of patients retrospectively. Moreover,

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the same apparatus for elastometry will not be available for repeated measurement for a follow-up examination, for example, several years later.

In spite of the accuracy of biopsy and convenience of elastography in chronic liver disease, clinical diagnosis based on biochemistry and hematology is still indispensable for the daily practice of many patients with HBV-related liver disease. Recently, several studies were published about estimation of hepatitis stages, using one or more serum biomarkers. Discriminant functions or multivariate analyses demonstrated that approximately 60–90% of patients with chronic hepatitis B were correctly classified as having mild hepatitis and severe hepatitis with advanced fibrosis.^{2,6–13} Up to the present time, however, the usefulness of the discriminant functions are less valuable for a few reasons. First, these functions were made for the purpose of discrimination of severe hepatic fibrosis from mild fibrosis, and four histological classifications (F1–F4) were neglected in almost of the studies. Second, some studies analyzed both hepatitis B and hepatitis C virus infection, although the significance and actual values of each liver function test in the evaluation of the severity of liver disease were not similar among each viral hepatitis and alcoholic liver disease. Third, biochemical markers for liver fibrosis (e.g. hyaluronic acid, type IV collagen, procollagen III peptide)^{14–16} were not always included in those previous studies.

We tried to generate a function estimating fibrotic stages of HBV-related chronic hepatitis, which were objectively diagnosed by liver biopsy. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to make a reliable multiple regression function and to obtain practical coefficients for significant variables also using fibrosis markers.

METHODS

Patients

A TOTAL OF 273 Japanese patients with chronic hepatitis B were recruited for the study from seven hospitals in Japan: Toranomon Hospital, Hiroshima University Hospital (K. Chayama, M.D.), Ehime University Hospital (M. Onji, M.D.), Musashino Red Cross Hospital (N. Izumi, MD), Shizu University Hospital (E. Tanaka, M.D.), Showa University Hospital (M. Imawari, M.D.) and Osaka University Hospital (T. Takehara, M.D.). Inclusion criteria for this study were: (i) positive hepatitis B surface antigen for more than 6 months; (ii) persistent or intermittent elevation in aspartate aminotransferase (AST)/alanine aminotransferase (ALT) levels; and (iii) liver biopsy showing chronic hepatitis

(F1–F4). We excluded those patients with overt alcoholic liver disease or fatty liver, association of other types of liver disease (e.g. hepatitis C, primary biliary cirrhosis, autoimmune hepatitis), or those associated with hepatocellular carcinoma or other malignancy. Among the patients, 244 patients fulfilled the conditions for the study: complete demographic data, basic laboratory data of hematology and biochemistry, required liver biopsy specimens, and sufficient amount of frozen sera. Also, we excluded additional 17 patients with eventual histological diagnosis as F0 stage.

Finally, a total of 227 patients who were diagnosed as having chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (F1–F4) were analyzed for the following hematological, biochemical and histopathological examination. There were 172 males and 55 females aged 16–70 years (median, 39 years).

All the patients presented written informed consent in individual hospitals and medical centers, and the study was approved in each ethical committee.

Hematological and biochemical examination

Hematological and standard biochemical evaluation had been performed in each medical institution: white blood cells, red blood cells, hemoglobin, platelets, total bilirubin, AST, ALT, AST/ALT ratio (AAR), γ -glutamyl transpeptidase (γ -GTP), total protein, albumin and γ -globulin.

Special biochemical examinations including “fibrosis markers” were carried out using stored frozen sera at -20°C or lower: α -2-macroglobulin, haptoglobin concentration, haptoglobin typing, apolipoprotein A1, hyaluronic acid, tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase (TIMP)-1, TIMP-2, procollagen III peptide and type IV collagen 7S.

Histological diagnosis of chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis

All the 227 cases fulfilled required standards of histological evaluation: sufficient length of specimen, hematoxylin–eosin staining, and at least one specimen with fiber staining. Four independent pathologists (Y. T., J. F., F. K. and T. F.), who were not informed of patients’ background and laboratory features except for age and sex, evaluated the 227 specimens regarding the stages of fibrosis and activity. Pathological classification of chronic hepatitis staging was based on Desmet *et al.*¹⁷

Before judgment of histological staging of individual specimens, the pathologists discussed the objective and reproducible judgment of pathological diagnosis of

hepatitis. They made a panel about obvious criteria using typical microscopic pictures for each stage, and it was always referred to during the procedure of pathological judgment. When inconsistent results were found in the diagnosis of hepatitis stage among the pathologists, the final judgment accepted majority rule among them.

Statistical analysis

Non-parametric procedures were employed for the analysis of background characteristics and laboratory data among patients in each stage, including Mann-Whitney *U*-test, Kruskal-Wallis test and χ^2 -test.

The normality of the distribution of the data was evaluated by a Kolmogorov-Smirnov one-sample test. Because certain variables partly did not conform to a normal distribution, natural logarithmic transformation of bilirubin, AST, ALT, γ -GTP, α -2-macroglobulin, hyaluronic acid, type IV collagen 7S and TIMP-2 were also analyzed in the following calculation. The natural logarithmic transformation of the results yielded a normal distribution or symmetrical distribution for all the analyzed factors. After the procedures, the following multiple regression analysis became rationally robust against deviations from normal distribution. In order to avoid introducing into the model any variables that were mutually correlated, we checked the interaction between all pairs of the variables by calculating variance inflation factors. Of the highly correlated variables, less significant factors were removed from the viewpoint of multicollinearity.

Multivariate regression analysis was performed using 158 patient data from Toranomon Hospital (training dataset) to generate a training data of predicting function. We used a stepwise method for selection of informative subsets of explanatory variables in the model. Multiple regression coefficient and coefficient of determination were also taken into account in the selection of variables. Next, we validated the obtained predictive function using the remaining 69 patient data from the other six liver institutions (validation dataset).

A *P*-value of less than 0.05 with two-tailed test was considered to be significant. Data analysis was performed using the computer program SPSS ver. 19.¹⁸

For evaluation of the efficiency and usefulness of obtained function for fibrosis estimation, we compared various fibrosis scores for hepatitis B and C, including AAR,¹⁹ AST-to-platelet ratio index (APRI),²⁰ FIB-4,²¹ FibroTest²² and discrimination function of cirrhosis from hepatitis in Japanese patients.²³

RESULTS

Pathological diagnosis

FOUR PATHOLOGISTS INDEPENDENTLY judged the fibrotic stages and inflammatory activity for 227 specimens of chronic hepatitis/cirrhosis caused by HBV. One hundred patients (44.1%) had a fibrosis stage of F1, 62 (27.3%) F2, 51 (22.5%) F3 and 14 (6.2%) F4. In the subgroup of the 158 patients in the training group, judgment as F1 was made in 73 cases, F2 in 42, F3 in 31 and F4 in 12. Of the 69 patients in the validation group, judgment as F1 was made in 27, F2 in 20, F3 in 20 and F4 in two.

According to hepatitis activity classification, A0 was found in five (2.2%), A1 in 100 (44.1%), A2 in 107 (47.1%) and A3 in 15 (6.6%).

Laboratory data of each hepatitis stage in the training group

There were 124 men and 34 women with a median age of 39 years ranged 16–70 years. Laboratory data of 158 patients in the training group are shown in Table 1. Although several individual items were well correlated with the severity of hepatic fibrosis, significant overlap values were noted among F1–F4 stages: platelet count, γ -globulin, α -2-macroglobulin, haptoglobin, hyaluronic acid, TIMP-2 and type IV collagen 7S.

Significant variables serving staging of hepatitis

Univariate analyses using trend analysis with the Cochran-Armitage method showed that the fibrotic stage of chronic hepatitis B (FSB) was significantly correlated with platelet count (Spearman: $r = -0.45$, $P < 0.001$), γ -GTP ($r = 0.19$, $P = 0.017$), γ -globulin ($r = 0.29$, $P < 0.001$), α -2-macroglobulin ($r = 0.32$, $P < 0.001$), hyaluronic acid ($r = 0.36$, $P < 0.001$), TIMP-2 ($r = 0.16$, $P = 0.043$), procollagen III peptide ($r = 0.30$, $P < 0.001$) and type IV collagen 7S ($r = 0.55$, $P < 0.001$).

Regression function generated from training patient group

After stepwise variable selection, multivariate regression analysis finally obtained the following function: $z = 1.40 \times \ln(\text{type IV collagen 7S}) (\text{ng/mL}) - 0.017 \times (\text{platelet count}) (\times 1000^3/\text{mm}^3) + 1.24 \times \ln(\text{TIMP-2}) (\text{ng/mL}) + 1.19 \times \ln(\alpha\text{-2-macroglobulin}) (\text{mg/dL}) - 9.15$. Median values of the fibrosis score of F1 ($n = 73$), F2 ($n = 42$), F3 ($n = 31$) and F4 stages ($n = 12$) were calculated as 0.95, 2.07, 2.98 and 3.63, respectively

Table 1 Demography and laboratory data of 158 patients in training group

	F1 (n = 73)	F2 (n = 42)	F3 (n = 31)	F4 (n = 12)
Demographics				
Men : women	58:15	33:9	23:8	10:2
Age (median, range)	36 (16–70)	39.5 (18–66)	39 (25–64)	43 (32–59)
Laboratory data (median, range)				
WBC ($\times 1000/\text{mm}^3$)	5.4 (2.5–10.6)	5.1 (2.4–8.7)	4.9 (3.0–8.7)	4.1 (3.7–6.6)
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	15.3 (10.3–18.8)	15.4 (12.5–17.9)	15.2 (11.5–17.2)	14.45 (12.1–18.2)
Platelet ($\times 1000/\text{mm}^3$)	204 (124–341)	173 (82–308)	155 (96–220)	130 (86–230)
Albumin (g/dL)	4.1 (3.2–4.9)	4.0 (3.2–5.1)	4.0 (3.3–4.9)	3.95 (3.4–4.6)
Bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.8 (0.2–1.7)	0.8 (0.3–2.3)	0.9 (0.4–5.4)	0.85 (0.6–2.3)
AST (IU/L)	48 (16–450)	55 (17–588)	54 (17–1446)	76.5 (27–396)
ALT (IU/L)	102 (10–839)	90 (12–886)	85 (19–2148)	89 (18–809)
γ -GTP (IU/L)	37 (7–247)	55 (8–687)	44 (14–564)	69 (33–262)
γ -Globulin (g/dL)	1.29 (0.78–2.11)	1.495 (0.62–3.20)	1.43 (0.90–2.30)	1.735 (0.92–2.47)
γ -Globulin (%)	17.3 (10.8–26.1)	19.3 (8.5–35.6)	19.9 (12.9–28.6)	22.55 (13.9–30.2)
α -2-Macroglobulin (mg/dL)	226 (116–446)	276 (148–495)	261 (202–565)	286.5 (166–425)
Haptoglobin (mg/dL)	77 (<5–318)	59 (<5–238)	61 (<5–151)	48.5 (<5–145)
Apolipoprotein A-I (mg/dL)	134 (89–212)	143 (78–250)	133 (87–189)	125 (73–169)
Hyaluronic acid ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	16 (<5–130)	32.5 (<5–204)	38 (<5–418)	49 (24–335)
TIMP-1 (ng/mL)	168 (93–271)	172 (116–314)	157 (119–365)	192 (145–365)
TIMP-2 (ng/mL)	80 (41–135)	80.5 (35–121)	92 (38–251)	85.5 (70–123)
Procollagen III peptide (U/mL)	0.75 (0.53–1.90)	0.835 (0.45–1.20)	0.89 (0.58–2.50)	1.05 (0.71–2.20)
Type IV collagen 7S (ng/ml)	4.0 (2.7–7.7)	4.6 (2.6–9.6)	5.6 (2.3–15.0)	7.2 (4.2–14.0)

ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; γ -GTP, γ -glutamyl transpeptidase; TIMP, tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase; WBC, white blood cells.

(Fig. 1). The multiple regression coefficient and coefficient of determination were 0.646 ($P < 0.001$) and 0.418 ($P < 0.001$), respectively.

Because the generated regression function was obtained by multivariate analysis with stepwise variable selection, several variables were removed from the function due to multicollinearity among them. Mutual correlation among the fibrosis predictors are shown in Table 2.

A 28-year-old man of F1 fibrotic stage (Fig. 2a) had a serum type IV collagen concentration of 4.4 ng/mL, platelet 221×10^3 count/ mm^3 , TIMP-2 75 ng/mL and α -2-macroglobulin 226 mg/dL. The regression function provided a fibrosis score of 0.99. Another man aged 46 years had F3 fibrosis on histological examination (Fig. 2b). His type IV collagen was 5.3 ng/mL, platelet 137×10^3 count/ mm^3 , TIMP-2 92 ng/mL and α -2-macroglobulin 255, and the regression function calculated his fibrosis score as 3.10.

Validation of discriminant function

Validation data of 69 patients (Table 3) were collected from the other six institutions in Japan. When applying

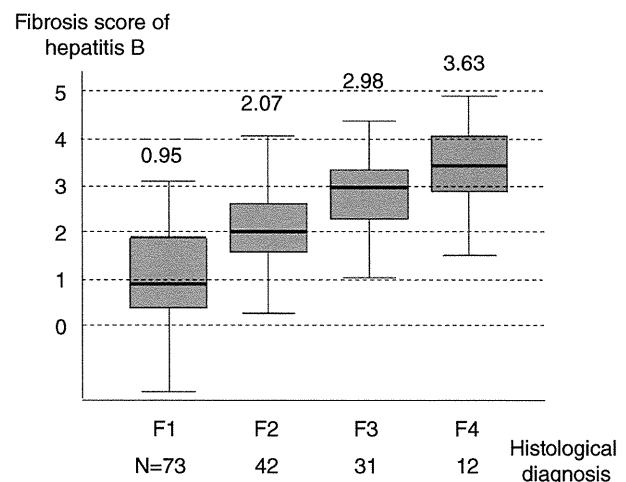


Figure 1 Box and whisker plots of fibrotic score of each histological fibrosis group in the training dataset. The fibrosis score of hepatitis B was generated by the function, $z = 1.40 \times \ln(\text{type IV collagen 7S}) (\text{ng/mL}) - 0.017 \times (\text{platelet count}) (\times 1000^3/\text{mm}^3) + 1.24 \times \ln(\text{tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase-2}) (\text{ng/mL}) + 1.19 \times \ln(\alpha\text{-2-macroglobulin}) (\text{mg/dL}) - 9.15$.

Table 2 Correlation coefficients (Spearman's ρ) among fibrosis predictors used in multivariate analysis

	Platelet	gamma-globulin	ln (α -2-macroglobulin)	ln (hyaluronate)	ln (P-III-P)	ln (IV collagen)	ln (TIMP-2)
Platelet ($\times 10^3/\text{mm}^3$)	1.000	-0.214 ($P = 0.008$)	-0.260 ($P = 0.001$)	-0.384 ($P < 0.001$)	-0.045 ($P = 0.58$)	-0.297 ($P < 0.001$)	0.094 ($P = 0.24$)
γ -Globulin (g/dL)	1.000	1.000	0.276 ($P = 0.001$)	0.349 ($P < 0.001$)	0.342 ($P < 0.001$)	0.414 ($P < 0.001$)	0.268 ($P = 0.001$)
ln (α -2-macroglobulin) (mg/dL)			1.000	0.281 ($P < 0.001$)	0.141 ($P = 0.078$)	0.171 ($P = 0.032$)	-0.079 ($P = 0.32$)
ln (hyaluronic acid) (mg/L)				1.000	0.373 ($P < 0.001$)	0.493 ($P < 0.001$)	0.089 ($P = 0.27$)
ln (procollagen III peptide) (U/mL)					1.000	0.600 ($P < 0.001$)	0.145 ($P = 0.071$)
ln (type IV collagen) (mg/L)						1.000	0.358 ($P < 0.001$)
ln (TIMP-2) (mg/L)							1.000

TIMP, tissue inhibitor of matrix metalloproteinase.

the regression function for the validation set, the fibrosis score demonstrated good reproducibility, showing 1.33 in patients with chronic hepatitis of F1 ($n = 27$), 2.20 of F2 ($n = 20$), 3.11 of F3 ($n = 20$) and 5.30 of F4 ($n = 2$), respectively (Fig. 3). Although F4 fibrosis stage consisted of only two patients and the score 5.30 was regarded as of rather higher value, the scores of other stages of fibrosis were concordant with histological fibrosis.

Comparisons of efficacy with various fibrosis scores (Fig. 4)

In order to evaluate the efficacy and usefulness of the obtained FSB, we compared it with previously reported fibrosis scores using training data. AAR, APRI and FibroTest showed only slight correlation with actual histological stage. FIB-4 demonstrated an increasing trend of the score associated with histological fibrosis, but significant overlapping scores were found in F1–F4. Spearman's correlation coefficients of AAR, APRI, FIB-4 and FibroTest were 0.199 ($P = 0.012$), 0.265 ($P = 0.001$), 0.412 ($P < 0.001$) and 0.330 ($P < 0.001$), respectively. Our FSB showed a Spearman's correlation coefficient of 0.625 ($P < 0.001$), and was a much higher value than the others. The dichotomous discrimination function for cirrhosis and hepatitis C in Japanese patients²³ showed good differentiation also in patients with hepatitis B virus.

DISCUSSION

RECOGNITION OF SEVERITY of chronic hepatitis is essential in managing patients with chronic HBV infection: estimation of length of infection, existence of any previous hepatitis activity, presumption of current fibrotic stage, and prediction of future fibrosis progression and hepatocarcinogenesis. Differential diagnosis of cirrhosis from chronic hepatitis is especially important in the evaluation of chronic HBV infection. Identification of liver cirrhosis often leads to an important change in management of the patient: need for fiberoptic examination for esophageal varices, ultrasonographic exploration for the association of liver cancer, and prediction of hepatic decompensation. Guidelines published by the American Association of Study of Liver Disease²⁴ recommend liver biopsy for HBV carriers with aminotransferase elevation or for any candidates of antiviral therapy, because hepatic fibrosis sometimes shows unexpectedly far advancement to cirrhosis, and because it is very difficult to evaluate and translate the liver function tests or ultrasonographic findings compared to chronic hepatitis type C.