

for predicting the subsequent HBsAg kinetics in both HBeAg+ and HBeAg- patients. The novel finding in this study was that HBeAg- individuals achieved HBsAg clearance. We found that the median duration to HBsAg clearance was longer in patients with HBeAg- than in those who were HBeAg+ in this study (6.0 vs. 4.4 years). Manesis et al. [28] used modeling to determine that HBeAg- patients receiving LAM treatment would likely require >10 years to achieve HBsAg loss. Furthermore, baseline HBsAg titers were <730 IU/mL in 60 % (12/20) of HBeAg- patients who achieved HBsAg clearance. The only baseline predictive factor of HBsAg clearance was baseline HBsAg levels in HBeAg- patients, except for genotype. There was no difference in HBsAg clearance rates in HBeAg- patients with high- and low-baseline HBV DNA or ALT levels. We hypothesize that HBsAg clearance in these patients may result from long treatment duration and low HBsAg titers.

Our study was limited by the fact that it was a hospital-based retrospective analysis, which means there may be some bias associated with patient type and treatment selection. We were unable to compare HBsAg clearance rates obtained in our study with those of controls untreated with NA. Because all subjects in the study received LAM as an initial NA, and then received rescue therapy when drug-resistant mutations emerged, NA therapy regimens were not uniform across all patients, and there were variations in both treatment dose and duration of previous IFN therapy. We were not able to collect immunological data on our subjects. Finally, our results need to be validated by further studies investigating a large study population receiving long-term ETV or tenofovir with high antiviral potential and a high genetic barrier.

Despite these drawbacks, we were able to determine several factors associated with HBsAg clearance, including HBV genotype and a decline in HBsAg over the initial six months of treatment (HBeAg+ and - cohorts); previous IFN therapy and clearance of HBeAg over the initial six months of treatment (HBeAg+ cohort only); and HBsAg levels (HBeAg- cohort only). It seems that both direct antiviral potential and host immune response are needed to achieve HBsAg clearance by NA therapy. Future studies are needed to validate these findings and to develop treatment regimens for HBsAg clearance in patients with chronic hepatitis B.

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Conflict of interest Dr. Kumada reports having received investigator, lecture, and consulting fees from Bristol-Myers Squibb, Dai-nippon Sumitomo Pharma Co., MSD K.K., and Toray Co. Dr. Ikeda reports having received investigator, lecture, and consulting fees from

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Correlation Between Hepatitis B Virus Surface Antigen Level and Alpha-Fetoprotein in Patients Free of Hepatocellular Carcinoma or Severe Hepatitis

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Alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) is used as a marker of early hepatocarcinogenesis. However, the impact of hepatitis B virus surface antigen (HBsAg) on this relationship in patients with HBV infection is not clear. The present study evaluated the relation between HBsAg and AFP levels at the initial visit in 1,610 untreated HBV patients, free of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) or severe hepatitis. The cumulative rate of HCC was significantly lower in patients with a low AFP level ($\leq 10 \mu\text{g/L}$; below the upper limit of normal) than in those with a high AFP level ($\geq 11 \mu\text{g/L}$) at the initial visit. In patients with HBsAg levels more than 500 IU/ml, HBsAg levels correlated significantly and negatively with AFP levels, and significantly with platelet count. Multivariate analysis of data of patients with HBsAg more than 500 IU/ml identified HBsAg ($< 7,000 \text{ IU/ml}$), albumin ($< 3.9 \text{ g/dl}$), platelet count ($< 20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$), gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase ($\geq 50 \text{ IU/L}$), aspartate aminotransferase ($\geq 34 \text{ IU/L}$), HBeAg (positive), and HBV core-related antigen ($\geq 3.0 \log \text{ U/ml}$) as determinants of a high AFP. Especially, in patients with HBsAg more than 500 IU/ml and low transaminase levels (below the upper limit of normal), HBsAg was identified as significant determinant of a high AFP. On the other hand, in patients with HBsAg less than 500 IU/ml, multivariate analysis identified albumin, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase, and HBV core-related antigen as determinants of a high AFP. The results indicated that HBsAg level seems to affect, at least in part, the AFP levels, and that it can be used as a surrogate marker of early hepatocarcinogenesis. *J. Med. Virol.* 86:131–138, 2014. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

KEY WORDS: HBV; AFP; HBsAg; HBcrAg; genotype; hepatocellular carcinoma

INTRODUCTION

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is a small, enveloped DNA virus known to cause chronic hepatitis and often leads to liver cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) [Viola et al., 1981; Kobayashi et al., 2002; Yao, 2003]. Evidence suggests that the use of elevated alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) for the prediction of early hepatocarcinogenesis in non-HCC patients could be clinically useful. AFP is a fetal glycoprotein produced by the yolk sac and fetal liver [Bergstrand and Czar, 1956] and has been widely used as a serum marker for the diagnosis of HCC [Sato et al., 1993; Johnson, 2001]. Furthermore, high serum AFP levels are also associated with various chronic liver diseases and hepatic regeneration [Kew et al., 1973; Silver et al., 1974; Elftierious et al., 1977; Alpert and Feller, 1978]. Many patients with chronic hepatitis B who are free of HCC have high AFP levels [Chen and Sung, 1979; Di Bisceglie and Hoofnagle, 1989], and some patients with cirrhosis and concomitant high

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inflammatory activity have very high AFP levels [Yao, 2003; Cheema et al., 2004]. On the other hand, some patients with small HCC lesions have only moderately elevated levels of AFP [Shinagawa et al., 1984; Ebara et al., 1986; Bruix and Sherman, 2005]. At present, however, there are no cutoff levels for serum AFP used to predict HCC in patients with HBV infection.

There is growing interest in the use of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) level as a prognostic marker in chronic hepatitis B patients [Chan et al., 2010]. The HBsAg levels are useful for identifying the stage of disease [Jaroszewicz et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2010], to distinguish true inactive carriers from patients with HBe antigen-negative disease [Brunetto et al., 2010; Martinot-Peignoux et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2011; Liaw, 2011], and to predict the response to interferon therapy [Brunetto et al., 2009; Moucari et al., 2009]. Recent studies have also demonstrated that the HBsAg levels are associated with the risk of progression to HCC, especially in patients with low HBV DNA levels [Chan, 2012; Tseng et al., 2012], and that there is a potential correlation between the HBsAg levels and the stage of liver fibrosis [Seto et al., 2012; Martinot-Peignoux et al., 2013]. However, the impact of viral factors, such as the HBsAg level, on serum AFP level as a predictor of early HCC is not clear at present.

The present study included 1,610 untreated patients with HBV infection, free of HCC or severe hepatitis. The present study was designed to provide answers to the following questions: (1) what is the relation between a high serum AFP level at the initial outpatient visit and subsequent development of hepatocarcinogenesis in antiviral-therapy-naïve patients with hepatitis B viral infection? (2) What is the impact of viral factors, such as the HBsAg level, on serum AFP level in such patients, and (3) What is a good surrogate marker for a high serum AFP at the initial visit.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Patients

Among 6,466 consecutive patients who were diagnosed with HBV infection between March 1972 and December 2012 at Toranomon Hospital, 1,610 were selected in the present study based on the following criteria: (1) They were positive for HBsAg (radioimmunoassay, Dainabot, Tokyo, Japan) and negative for anti-HCV (third-generation enzyme immunoassay, Chiron, CA). (2) They were free of HCC at the initial visit. (3) HBV hepatitis was assessed as less than severe at the initial visit, in order to minimize the potential effects of high inflammatory activity. Severe hepatitis was defined as serum transaminase level of ≥ 300 IU/L, and/or total bilirubin level of ≥ 3.0 mg/dL. (4) They had not received antiviral therapy in the past (e.g., interferon and/or nucleot(s)ide analogs) at the initial visit. (5) They underwent examination of

the AFP level (upper limit of normal, $10 \mu\text{g/L}$) at the initial visit. Furthermore, the HBsAg level, HBV core-related antigen (HBcrAg) level, and HBV DNA were also assayed using stored frozen sera obtained at the initial visit. (6) They were free of coinfection with human immunodeficiency virus. (7) They were free of other types of chronic liver disease, including hemochromatosis, Wilson disease, primary biliary cirrhosis, alcoholic liver disease, autoimmune liver disease, inherited liver disease including alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, and hepatic venous outflow block. (8) They consented to the study.

Table I summarizes the profile and laboratory data at the initial visit of the 1,610 patients included in the present study. They included 1,047 males and 563 females, with a median age of 40 years (range: 18–83 years). The median AFP level was $4 \mu\text{g/L}$ (range, 1–1,770 $\mu\text{g/L}$) and the median follow-up time (from the initial visit until the last visit) was 6.0 years (range, 0.0–34.6 years). The study protocol was approved by the Human Ethics Review Committee of Toranomon Hospital.

Laboratory Tests

HBsAg, HBcrAg, and HBV DNA levels were assayed using stored frozen sera obtained at the initial visit. Blood samples were frozen at -80°C within 4 hr of collection and were not thawed until used for testing. Serum HBsAg level was measured using Architect HBsAg QT assay kit (Abbott Laboratories, Tokyo, Japan), which has a lower limit of detection of

TABLE I. Profiles and Laboratory Data at the Initial Visit of 1,610 Patients Infected With HBV

Demographic data	
Number of patients	1,610
Sex (male/female)	1,047/563
Age (years)*	40 (18–83)
Family history of liver disease ^a	836 (51.9%)
Lifetime cumulative alcohol intake (≥ 500 kg)	112 (7.0%)
Laboratory data*	
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.6 (0.1–2.9)
Aspartate aminotransferase (IU/L)	37 (5–220)
Alanine aminotransferase (IU/L)	48 (5–297)
Albumin (g/dL)	4.2 (1.0–5.6)
Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (IU/L)	37 (2–2,370)
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	14.5 (6.9–18.2)
Platelet count ($\times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$)	19.1 (2.7–44.7)
Alpha-fetoprotein ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	4 (1–1,770)
Virological data	
HBeAg (No. of positive)	690 (42.9%)
HBsAg (IU/mL)*	2,845
	(0.09 to $>125,000$)
HBcrAg (log U/mL)*	4.9
	(<3.0 to >6.8)
HBV DNA (log copies/mL)*	5.7
	(<2.1 to >9.1)
HBV genotype (A/B/C/others/ND)	65/218/1,119/6/202

Data are number and percentages of patients, except those denoted by *, which represent the median (range) values.

^aFamily history of positivity for hepatitis B surface antigen including third-degree relatives.

0.05 IU/ml and upper limit of detection of 250 IU/ml. To expand the upper range from 250 to 125,000 IU/ml, serum samples with the HBsAg levels above the upper range were diluted in a stepwise fashion to 1:20 and 1:500 with Architect diluents using the information supplied by the manufacturer. HBeAg was determined by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay kit (HBeAg EIA; Institute of Immunology, Tokyo, Japan). Serum HBcrAg level was measured using a Cleia HBcrAg assay kit (Fujirebio, Tokyo, Japan) using a fully automated analyzer system (Lumipulse System; Fujirebio). The cut-off value of HBcrAg was 3.0 log U/ml. HBV DNA was quantified using the Cobas TaqMan HBV v.2.0 (Roche Diagnostics, Tokyo, Japan), which has a dynamic range of 2.1–9.0 log copies/ml.

A commercial kit (HBV Genotype EIA; Institute of Immunology) was used to determine serologically the HBV genotypes using the combination of epitopes expressed on the pre-S2 region product, which is specific to each of the major genotypes.

Follow-Up and Diagnosis of Future Hepatocellular Carcinoma

After the initial visit, patients were followed-up once or three times a month. Imaging studies (ultrasonography, computed tomography, or magnetic resonance imaging) were conducted once or more per year.

Statistical Analysis

Non-parametric tests (Mann–Whitney *U*-test, chi-squared test and Fisher's exact probability test) were used to compare differences between two groups. Correlation analysis was evaluated by the Spearman rank correlation test. The cumulative rate of hepatocarcinogenesis was calculated using the Kaplan–Meier technique; differences between cumulative carcinogenesis curves between groups were tested using the log-rank test. Statistical analyses of the rate of hepatocarcinogenesis according to groups were calculated using the period from the initial visit. Univariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses were used to determine the independent surrogate markers of elevated AFP at the initial visit. The odds ratios (OR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) were also calculated. A two-tailed *P*-value less than 0.05 was considered significant. Variables that achieved statistical significance ($P < 0.05$) on univariate analysis were entered into multiple logistic regression analysis to identify significant independent factors for elevated AFP. Potential surrogate markers of elevated AFP at the initial visit included the following pretreatment variables: age, sex, family history of liver disease, lifetime cumulative alcohol intake, total bilirubin, aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT), albumin, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (GGT), hemoglobin, platelet count, HBV genotype, HBeAg, HBsAg levels,

HBcrAg levels, and HBV DNA levels. Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL).

RESULTS

Cumulative Rate of Hepatocarcinogenesis According to the AFP Level at the Initial Visit

A total of 1,061 patients naïve to antiviral therapy from the initial visit until the last visit were evaluated for the rate of development of HCC based on the AFP levels at the initial visit. During the follow-up period, HCC was diagnosed in 31 of 905 patients (3.4%) with a low AFP level ($\leq 10 \mu\text{g/L}$; below the upper limit of normal) and 37 of 156 patients (23.7%) with a high AFP level ($\geq 11 \mu\text{g/L}$) at the initial visit. The cumulative hepatocarcinogenesis rates for patients with low and high AFP levels at the initial visit were 4.7% and 30.2% at the end of 10-year follow-up; 9.1% and 36.5% at the end of 20-year follow-up; and 13.2% and 42.9% at the end of 30-year follow-up, respectively. These results indicate that the rate of hepatocarcinogenesis is significantly higher in patients with HBV infection and high AFP levels than their counterparts with low AFP levels ($P < 0.001$; Log-rank test) (Fig. 1).

HBsAg and AFP Levels at the Initial Visit

Blood samples from all patients were analyzed to determine the relationship between the HBsAg and the AFP levels at the initial visit. The proportions of patients with high AFP levels among those with the HBsAg levels below 500 IU/ml, from 500 to 1,999 IU/ml, from 2,000 to 6,999 IU/ml, from 7,000 to 24,999 IU/ml, and above 25,000 IU/ml were 12.6% (42 of 333 patients), 26.7% (89 of 333), 22.6% (94 of 416), 10.4% (29 of 278), and 6.4% (16 of 250), respectively (Fig. 2A). The relationship between the HBsAg and

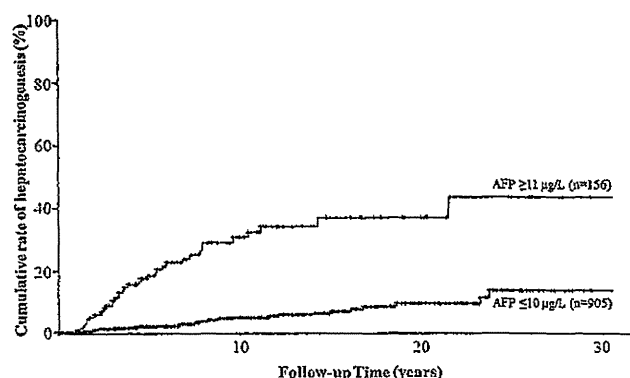


Fig. 1. Cumulative rate of hepatocarcinogenesis according to the AFP level at the initial visit in patients naïve to antiviral therapy from the initial visit until the last visit. The rate of hepatocarcinogenesis was significantly higher in patients with high AFP levels ($\geq 11 \mu\text{g/L}$) than in those with low levels ($\leq 10 \mu\text{g/L}$) at the initial visit ($P < 0.001$; Log-rank test).

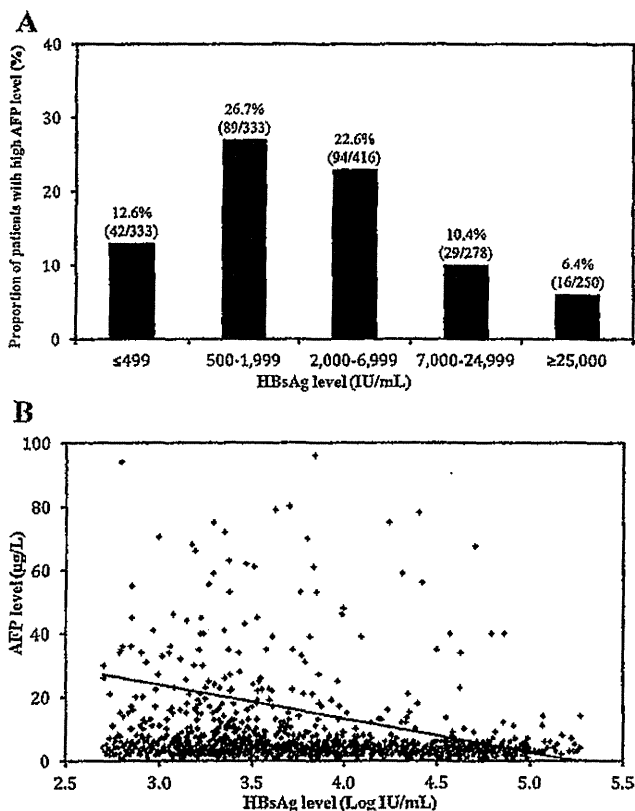


Fig. 2. A: Proportions of patients with the high AFP levels ($\geq 11 \mu\text{g/L}$) at the initial visit, stratified according to the HBsAg levels. Patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml included a significantly lower proportions of patients with the high AFP levels and the HBsAg levels above 7,000 IU/ml (8.5%) than those with the HBsAg levels below 7,000 IU/ml (24.4%) ($P < 0.001$). B: Analysis of data of patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml at the initial visit, showed a significant negative correlation between logarithmically transformed HBsAg and AFP levels ($r = -0.225$, $P < 0.001$).

the AFP levels at the initial visit suggested the presence of two distinct populations within the study group. Especially, in 1,277 patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml, a significantly smaller proportion of patients with high AFP levels were noted among those with HBsAg of more than 7,000 IU/ml (8.5%) than those with the HBsAg levels less than 7,000 IU/ml (24.4%) ($P < 0.001$). Furthermore, the HBsAg levels correlated negatively but significantly with the AFP levels ($r = -0.225$, $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 2B).

The HBsAg Levels and the Platelet Count at the Initial Visit

Blood samples from all patients were analyzed to determine the relationship between the HBsAg levels and the platelet count at the initial visit. The median platelet counts among patients with the HBsAg levels below 500 IU/ml, from 500 to 1,999 IU/ml, from 2,000 to 6,999 IU/ml, from 7,000 to 24,999 IU/ml, and above

25,000 IU/ml were $19.1 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$, $17.2 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$, $18.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$, $20.9 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$, and $21.2 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$, respectively (Fig. 3A). The relationship between the HBsAg levels and the platelet count at the initial visit also suggested the presence of two distinct populations within the study group. Especially, in 1,277 patients with the HBsAg levels of more than 500 IU/ml, significantly higher platelet counts were noted among those with the HBsAg levels of more than 7,000 IU/ml (the median platelet count; $21.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$) than those with the HBsAg levels less than 7,000 IU/ml (the median platelet count; $17.6 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$) ($P < 0.001$). Furthermore, the HBsAg

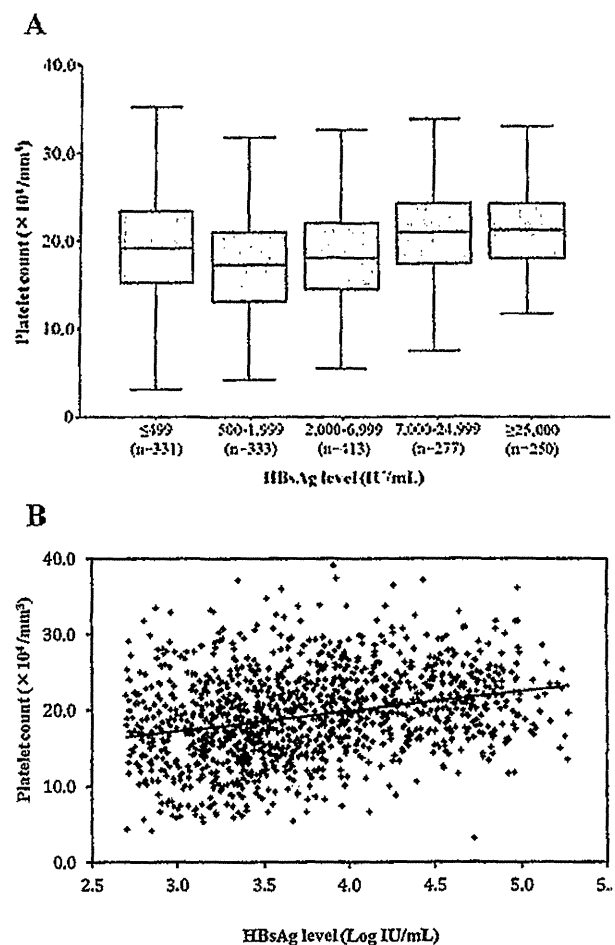


Fig. 3. A: The platelet count at the initial visit, stratified according to the HBsAg levels. Bars within the boxes indicate the median platelet count. The boxes denote the 25th to 75th percentiles, the lower and upper bars the 10th and 90th percentiles, respectively. Among patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml at the initial visit, those with the HBsAg levels above 7,000 IU/ml had significantly higher platelet count (the median platelet count; $21.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$) compared to those with the HBsAg levels below 7,000 IU/ml (the median platelet count; $17.6 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$) ($P < 0.001$). B: Among patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml at the initial visit, logarithmically transformed the HBsAg levels correlated significantly with the platelet count ($r = 0.293$, $P < 0.001$).

levels correlated significantly and positively with the platelet count ($r=0.293$, $P<0.001$) (Fig. 3B).

Clinical Profiles and Laboratory Data According to the HBsAg Level at the Initial Visit

Table II summarizes the clinical profiles and laboratory data according to the HBsAg level at the initial visit of 1,610 patients infected with HBV. Patients with the HBsAg levels below 500 IU/ml were significantly older and exhibited lower inflammatory activity (lower levels of AST and ALT), and had lower viral levels (they were HBeAg negative and had lower levels of HBcrAg/HBV DNA), compared to those with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml ($P<0.001$).

Factors Associated With High AFP Levels at the Initial Visit, Stratified According to the HBsAg Levels

Blood samples from all 1,610 patients were analyzed to determine the factors that affect the AFP level at the initial visit. Among 1,277 patients with the HBsAg levels more than 500 IU/ml at the initial visit, high AFP levels were detected in 228 (17.9%) patients. Univariate analysis identified 12 parameters that correlated significantly with a high AFP level at the initial visit. These included age (≥ 30 years; $P<0.001$), AST (≥ 34 IU/L; $P<0.001$), ALT (≥ 43 IU/L; $P<0.001$), albumin (<3.9 g/dl; $P<0.001$), GGT (≥ 50 IU/L; $P<0.001$), total bilirubin (≥ 1.0 mg/dl; $P<0.001$), platelet count ($<20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$; $P<0.001$), HBV genotype (C; $P<0.001$), HBsAg levels ($<7,000$ IU/ml; $P<0.001$), HBeAg (positive; $P<0.001$), HBV DNA (≥ 5.0 log copies/ml; $P<0.001$),

and HBcrAg (≥ 3.0 log U/ml; $P<0.001$). Multivariate analysis that included the above variables identified seven factors that influenced independently the elevated AFP level at the initial visit. These included HBsAg level ($<7,000$ IU/ml; OR 3.69, $P<0.001$), albumin (<3.9 g/dl; OR 3.09, $P<0.001$), platelet count ($<20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$; OR 2.50, $P=0.001$), GGT (≥ 50 IU/L; OR 2.28, $P=0.001$), AST (≥ 34 IU/L; OR 2.77, $P=0.003$), HBeAg (positive; OR 2.07, $P=0.005$), and HBcrAg (≥ 3.0 log U/ml; OR 5.10, $P=0.031$) (Table III).

Among 333 patients with the HBsAg levels less than 500 IU/ml, a high AFP at the initial visit was detected in 42 (12.6%) patients. Univariate analysis identified nine parameters that correlated significantly with a high AFP level at the initial visit. These included AST (≥ 34 IU/L; $P<0.001$), ALT (≥ 43 IU/L; $P=0.001$), albumin (<3.9 g/dl; $P<0.001$), GGT (≥ 50 IU/L; $P<0.001$), platelet count ($<20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$; $P=0.001$), HBV genotype (C; $P<0.001$), HBeAg (positive; $P<0.001$), HBV DNA (≥ 5.0 log copies/ml; $P=0.001$), and HBcrAg (≥ 3.0 log U/ml; $P<0.001$). Multivariate analysis that included the above variables identified three factors that influenced independently the elevated AFP level at the initial visit. These included albumin (<3.9 g/dl; OR 12.8, $P<0.001$), GGT (≥ 50 IU/L; OR 6.95, $P=0.002$), and HBcrAg (≥ 3.0 log U/ml; OR 5.62, $P=0.010$) (Table III).

Factors Associated With High AFP Levels at the Initial Visit According to the HBsAg Levels in Patients With Low Transaminase Levels

To minimize the effect of inflammatory activity, we examined the data of 618 (among 1,610 patients) who

TABLE II. Profiles and Laboratory Data of Patients Infected With HBV According to the HBsAg Level at the Initial Visit

	HBsAg <500 IU/L	HBsAg ≥ 500 IU/L	P
Demographic data			
Number of patients	333	1,277	
Sex (male/female)	227/106	820/457	NS
Age (years)*	49 (18–75)	38 (18–83)	<0.001
Family history of liver disease ^a	130 (39.0%)	706 (55.3%)	<0.001
Lifetime cumulative alcohol intake (≥ 500 kg)	32 (9.6%)	80 (6.3%)	0.037
Laboratory data*			
Total bilirubin (mg/dl)	0.7 (0.2–2.9)	0.6 (0.1–2.9)	0.033
Aspartate aminotransferase (IU/L)	29 (12–175)	40 (5–220)	<0.001
Alanine aminotransferase (IU/L)	32 (7–289)	56 (5–297)	<0.001
Albumin (g/dl)	4.2 (1.1–5.6)	4.2 (1.0–5.5)	NS
Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (IU/L)	36 (2–2,370)	38 (4–1,638)	NS
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	14.4 (8.4–17.4)	14.6 (6.9–18.2)	NS
Platelet count ($\times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$)	19.1 (2.7–39.6)	19.2 (3.1–44.7)	NS
Alpha-fetoprotein ($\mu\text{g/L}$)	4 (1–968)	4 (1–1,770)	0.005
Virological data			
HBeAg (No. of positive)	37 (11.1%)	653 (51.1%)	<0.001
HBsAg (IU/ml)*	123 (0.09–498)	4,680 (503 to >125,000)	<0.001
HBcrAg (log U/ml)*	<3.0 (<3.0 to >6.8)	5.9 (<3.0 to >6.8)	<0.001
HBV DNA (log copies/ml)*	3.7 (<2.1 to >9.1)	6.6 (<2.1 to >9.1)	<0.001
HBV genotype (A/B/C/others/ND)	7/104/141/0/81	58/114/978/6/121	<0.001

NS; not significant.

Data are number/percentages of patients, except those denoted by *, which represent the median (range) values.

^aFamily history of positivity for hepatitis B surface antigen including third-degree relatives.

TABLE III. Results of Multivariate Logistic Analysis for Factors Associated With the High AFP Levels at the Initial Visit

Factor	Category	Risk ratio (95%CI)	P
Patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml (n = 1,277)			
HBsAg (IU/ml)	1: $\geq 7,000$	1	
	2: $< 7,000$	3.69 (2.12–6.41)	< 0.001
Albumin (g/dl)	1: ≥ 3.9	1	
	2: < 3.9	3.09 (1.88–5.05)	< 0.001
Platelet count ($\times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$)	1: ≥ 20.0	1	
	2: < 20.0	2.50 (1.47–4.24)	0.001
Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (IU/L)	1: < 50	1	
	2: ≥ 50	2.28 (1.40–3.72)	0.001
Aspartate aminotransferase (IU/L)	1: < 34	1	
	2: ≥ 34	2.77 (1.42–5.39)	0.003
HBeAg	1: Negative	1	
	2: Positive	2.07 (1.24–3.45)	0.005
HBcrAg (log U/ml)	1: < 3.0	1	
	2: ≥ 3.0	5.10 (1.16–22.4)	0.031
Patients with the HBsAg levels below 500 IU/ml (n = 333)			
Albumin (g/dl)	1: ≥ 3.9	1	
	2: < 3.9	12.8 (4.02–41.7)	< 0.001
Gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase (IU/L)	1: < 50	1	
	2: ≥ 50	6.95 (2.06–23.5)	0.002
HBcrAg (log U/ml)	1: < 3.0	1	
	2: ≥ 3.0	5.62 (1.51–21.0)	0.010

Low transaminase levels were defined as transaminase levels below the upper limit of normal.

had low transaminase levels (AST ≤ 33 IU/L and ALT ≤ 42 IU/L, i.e., below the upper limits of normal) to further determine those factors that determine the high level of AFP at the initial visit. High AFP was detected in 26 (6.1%) patients among 426 with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml and low transaminase levels. Using the data of these patients, univariate analysis identified three parameters that correlated significantly with a high AFP level at the initial visit. These included albumin (< 3.9 g/dl; $P = 0.004$), platelet count ($< 20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$; $P = 0.012$), and HBsAg levels ($< 7,000$ IU/ml; $P = 0.004$). Multivariate analysis that included the above variables identified albumin (< 3.9 g/dl; OR 3.92, $P = 0.001$) and HBsAg levels ($< 7,000$ IU/ml; OR 4.33, $P = 0.004$) as independent determinants of a high AFP level at the initial visit (Table IV).

Among 192 patients with the HBsAg levels below 500 IU/ml and low transaminase levels, high AFP

levels were detected at the initial visit in 12 (6.3%). Univariate analysis identified three parameters that influenced significantly the elevated AFP level at the initial visit. These included albumin (< 3.9 g/dl; $P = 0.010$), GGT (≥ 50 IU/L; $P = 0.011$), and platelet count ($< 20.0 \times 10^4/\text{mm}^3$; $P = 0.020$). Multivariate analysis that included these variables identified albumin (< 3.9 g/dl; OR 7.19, $P = 0.004$) as the only independent determinant of a high AFP level at the initial visit (Table IV).

DISCUSSION

There is little information on the cutoff value of AFP that can be used to predict the future probability of HCC in patients with HBV infection. The present study followed-up patients naïve to antiviral therapy from the initial visit and showed that the rate of hepatocarcinogenesis was significantly higher in those with high AFP levels at the baseline than those with low levels. To our knowledge, the present study is the first to report the hepatocarcinogenesis rate stratified according to the AFP level in patients infected with HBV but free of HCC at the initial visit, based on a large-scale long-term follow-up cohort. The results indicated that patients with high AFP levels at the initial visit are at high risk of HCC, and emphasize the need to determine the factors that could affect the AFP level as surrogate markers of early hepatocarcinogenesis. Previous studies in patients with HCV infection indicated that suppression of the AFP level by treatment with interferon reduced the HCC risk even in those without complete eradication of HCV [Arase et al., 2007; Asahina et al., 2013]. However, there is little

TABLE IV. Results of Multivariate Analysis for Factors Associated With the High AFP Levels at the Initial Visit

Factor	Category	Risk ratio (95%CI)	P
Patients with HBsAg > 500 IU/ml and low transaminase levels (n = 426)			
Albumin (g/dl)	1: ≥ 3.9	1	
	2: < 3.9	3.92 (1.71–9.01)	0.001
HBsAg (IU/ml)	1: $\geq 7,000$	1	
	2: $< 7,000$	4.33 (1.58–11.9)	0.004
Patients with HBsAg < 500 IU/ml and low transaminase levels (n = 192)			
Albumin (g/dl)	1: ≥ 3.9	1	
	2: < 3.9	7.19 (1.87–27.8)	0.004

Low transaminase levels were defined as transaminase levels below the upper limit of normal.

evidence that suppression of the AFP level by antiviral therapy reduces the HCC risk in patients with HBV infection. Further prospective studies are needed to investigate this issue in detail.

In the present study, the relationship between the HBsAg levels and the AFP levels detected at the initial visit suggested the presence of two distinct groups within the study patients. Interestingly, in patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml, a significant negative correlation was observed between the HBsAg and the AFP levels, and a significant positive correlation was observed between the HBsAg and the platelet count. Previous studies indicated that high serum AFP levels correlated with liver fibrosis Stage 3 and 4 [Bayati et al., 1998; Chu et al., 2001; Hu et al., 2002, 2004], and that lower thrombocytopenia was closely associated with advanced liver disease [Ikeda et al., 2009; Akuta et al., 2012]. Considered together, these results emphasize the importance of hyper- α -fetoproteinemia and thrombocytopenia in the prediction of severe liver fibrosis, respectively. Based on the present results and the recent reports suggesting the potential correlation between the HBsAg level and the stage of liver fibrosis [Seto et al., 2012; Martinot-Peignoux et al., 2013], it is possible that HBsAg levels could correlate with the stage of fibrosis in patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml. Further studies are needed to determine the value of hyper- α -fetoproteinemia in patients with low and high HBsAgemia.

In addition to the HBsAg level, multivariate analysis also identified HBcrAg as another viral factor that influenced independently the AFP level at the baseline. HBcrAg comprises HBcAg, HBeAg and a 22-kDa precore protein coded with the precore/core gene [Kimura et al., 2002, 2005]. Previous studies reported a significant correlation between serum HBcrAg concentrations and intrahepatic levels of covalently closed circular DNA (cccDNA) [Wong et al., 2007; Suzuki et al., 2009]. Other studies indicated that HBcrAg is a useful predictor of HCC during antiviral therapy [Kumada et al., 2013], and post-treatment recurrence of HCC during antiviral therapy [Hosaka et al., 2010]. The present study, based on patients naïve to antiviral therapy showed that high serum HBcrAg concentrations also correlated with high AFP at the initial visit. This is the first report demonstrating the potential usefulness of HBcrAg as a surrogate marker for early hepatocarcinogenesis.

The impact of the HBsAg level on hepatocarcinogenesis is not clear at this stage. In this study, the effect of the HBsAg levels at the initial visit on HCC was assessed in 1,061 consecutive antiviral therapy-naïve patients infected with HBV. Analysis of data of 794 patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml at the initial visit (after exclusion of patients on antiviral therapy) showed a significantly lower cumulative HCC rate in patients with the HBsAg levels above 7,000 IU/ml than those with levels below 7,000 IU/ml ($P < 0.001$, Log-rank test, Fig. 4). This

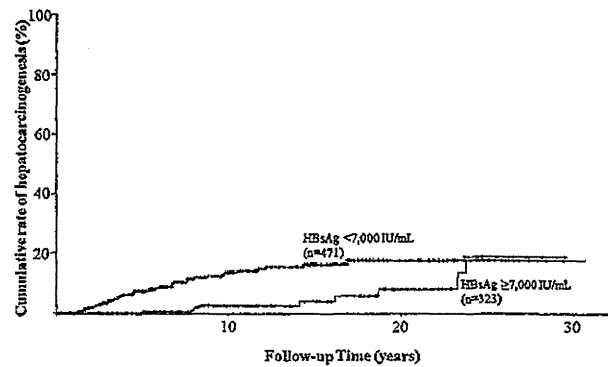


Fig. 4. Cumulative rate of hepatocarcinogenesis stratified according to the HBsAg levels at the initial visit in patients naïve to antiviral therapy from the initial visit until last visit. In a preliminary study based on 794 patients with the HBsAg levels above 500 IU/ml at the initial visit, the cumulative hepatocarcinogenesis rate for patients with the HBsAg levels more than 7,000 IU/ml was significantly lower than for those with levels below 7,000 IU/ml ($P < 0.001$; Log-rank test).

result suggests that HBsAg levels at the baseline do not only influence AFP, but also play a role in hepatocarcinogenesis. Further studies need to be performed to determine the pathomechanisms of HBsAg in hepatocarcinogenesis.

The present study has certain limitations. First, the study did not examine the effects of other genotypes, apart from HBV genotype B or C. Second, the study population was limited to Japanese and did not include other races, and thus generalization of the results to other races cannot be made based on the results. Third, the study did not investigate the effects of antiviral therapy (interferon and/or nucleot(s)ide analogs) on the outcome since such therapy suppressed the AFP levels and thus reduce the risk of HCC in patients with HBV infection.

In conclusion, the present studies demonstrated that the HBsAg level seem to influence the AFP levels and can be used as a surrogate marker for early hepatocarcinogenesis in patients with hepatitis B viral infection.

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Short Communication

Potential of a no-touch pincer ablation procedure for small hepatocellular carcinoma that uses a multipolar radiofrequency ablation system: An experimental animal study

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Aim: Treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma located on the liver surface is frequently difficult because direct puncture of the tumor must be avoided during needle insertion. The aim of this study was to investigate the utility of a no-touch pincer ablation procedure that uses a multipolar radiofrequency ablation (RFA) system for a tumor located on the liver surface.

Methods: The experimental animals were three pigs, and RFA was performed with two internally cooled bipolar electrodes. Three ablative procedures were compared: linear insertion at regular 13-mm intervals (pattern 1; virtual target tumor size, <10 mm); fan-shape insertion, maximum interval 20 mm (pattern 2; virtual target tumor size, <15 mm); and 25 mm (pattern 3; virtual target tumor size, <20 mm). All electrodes were inserted at a 30-mm depth. For patterns 1 and 2, ablation was performed on three other parts of the liver, and for pattern 3, ablation was performed on two other parts.

Results: For the median transverse and longitudinal diameter to the shaft, with the pattern 1 procedure, the ablative areas were 32 mm × 30 mm, and with the pattern 2 procedure, the ablative areas were 27 mm × 30 mm with carbonization of the liver surface. In contrast, with the pattern 3 procedure, the ablative areas were 45 mm × 26 mm; however, the ablative margin did not reach the surface, and carbonization was not apparent.

Conclusion: The no-touch pincer ablation procedure (with an electrode interval of ≤20 mm) may be useful when performed with two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for small nodules that protrude from the liver surface.

Key words: bipolar, hepatocellular carcinoma, multipolar, no-touch ablation, radiofrequency ablation

INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE AVAILABLE treatment options for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), surgical resection is generally considered to be a local eradication method that can provide a satisfactory long-term outcome.^{1–8}

Recent advances in imaging procedures have led to increased detection of early-stage HCC and to improved survival due to the increased identification of patients in whom hepatic resection is possible.^{9,10}

For patients who are not eligible for surgery for various reasons (e.g. lack of sufficient liver function for surgical resection), percutaneous local therapy is a viable therapeutic option. Several local ablation therapies are available, including percutaneous ethanol injection, percutaneous acetic acid injection, cryotherapy, percutaneous microwave coagulation therapy and radiofrequency ablation (RFA). In addition to surgical resection, local ablation therapies, particularly RFA, are considered to be local eradication methods for HCC that can provide good long-term outcomes.¹¹ Therefore, in recent years, RFA has become a widely used option for the primary treatment of small-size HCC. However, we often

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encounter cases of HCC that are difficult to treat with RFA as a result of tumor location, especially nodules that protrude from the liver surface. In addition, a relationship between percutaneous local approaches to HCC (including tumor biopsy) and tumor seeding has been reported previously,^{12,13} and with regard to the risk of treatment-related tumor seeding, the following risk factors have been reported: tumor size, tumor location (subcapsular portion), α -fetoprotein level, tumor stage and histopathological grade.^{14,15} Therefore, a no-touch approach to local therapy may be considered an ideal treatment method for HCC.

Recently, a multipolar ablation system became available. Until now, in Japan, monopolar electrodes have typically been used, and the present cases are usually treated with some technical arrangement. For example, in the case of using a multi-tined expandable electrode, after obliquely inserting the electrode to avoid direct puncture of the target tumor, the multi needles are expanded toward the target tumor via non-tumor tissue, or in the case of using an internally cooled electrode, multiple insertions are made to avoid direct puncture of the target tumor, and RFA is performed after each insertion. However, these methods do not always provide enough of a treatment effect due to the influence of uncertain treatment procedures and natural, direct puncture to a tumor is indispensable. In contrast, a multipolar ablation system that uses an internally cooled bipolar electrode can combine the use of one to three electrodes at the same treatment session. When three electrodes are used, this system can treat large tumors; however, in the case of small tumors, it is not really necessary to use three electrodes to treat the target tumor. In addition, when we used this multipolar ablation system, usually electrodes were inserted into HCC, but in theory, this system can use no-touch ablation. However, to our knowledge, there are no technical reports that describe a non-direct punctual RFA method that uses a bipolar ablation system for HCC located on the liver surface. In this experimental animal study, we assumed that a small (<20 mm) HCC nodule protruded from the liver surface, and examined proper pincer ablation methods using two internally cooled bipolar electrodes.

METHODS

Summary of experimental procedures

WE USED A bipolar RFA device (CelonPOWER System; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH [Telto,

Germany]) and two internally cooled bipolar electrodes (30-mm, 15-G, CelonProSurge; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH). RFA was applied in the livers of three normal female domestic pigs (each pig's weight was 60 kg) under general anesthesia maintained until killing. The abdomen was opened so that the needle could be inserted under an ultrasonography (US) guide directly into the upper region of the liver where the thickness was larger than 3.5 cm. As a pig liver consists of five thin lobes, RFA sessions were performed two to three times in each liver for evaluation of the "no-touch pincer ablation procedure". After the experiments were completed, the animal was killed, and the ablated liver lobes were excised immediately. The specimen was cut in the plane of the needle tract and photographed to evaluate the shape and size of the ablated zone (white zone). The experimental protocol was approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Animal Experimentation of Toranomon Hospital.

Protocol of the no-touch pincer ablation procedure

We used a bipolar RFA device (CelonPOWER System; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH), and all ablation procedures were performed with two internally cooled bipolar electrodes (30-mm, 15-G, CelonProSurge; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH). Internal liquid circulation of the applicator enables the efficiency of coagulation to be increased. The delivery rate was set to 30 mL/min of saline solution at room temperature. The liquid flow was provided by a triple peristaltic pump, which is part of the system. The electrodes were operated by a power control unit working at 470 kHz and providing a maximum output power of 250 W (OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH). In this study, output power and total energy in each session were fixed at 60 W and 25 kJ, respectively, according to the dosimetry table for the bipolar RFA system (CelonPOWER System; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH).

With regard to the ablation protocol, we performed the following three types of ablation procedure: linear insertion, at regular 13-mm intervals (pattern 1); fan-shape insertion, maximum interval of 20 mm (pattern 2); and 25 mm (pattern 3). All electrodes were inserted at a 30-mm depth from the liver surface under a US guide (Fig. 1). Each ablation procedure was performed for the following number of times: pattern 1, three sessions; pattern 2, three sessions; and pattern 3, two sessions. In this study, we assumed that the size of the virtual target tumor was less than 10 mm in pattern 1,

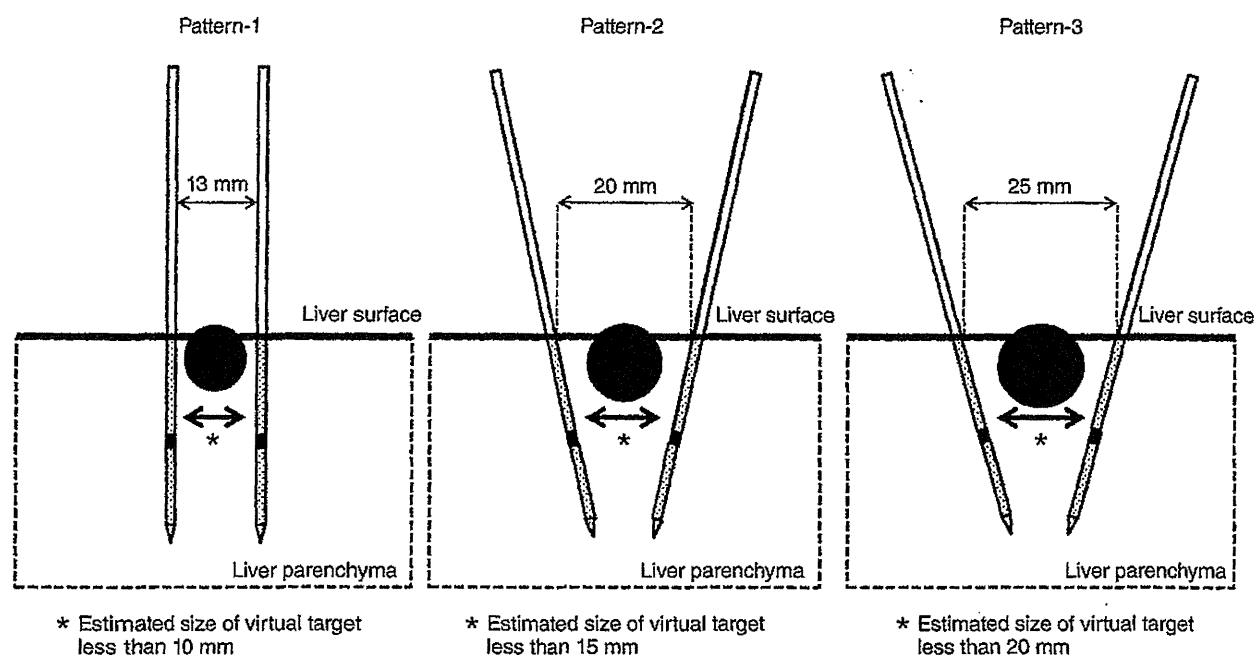


Figure 1 Protocol for a pincer ablation procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for a virtual nodule that protrudes from the liver surface.

less than 15 mm in pattern 2 and less than 20 mm in pattern 3.

Measurement procedure of the ablative margin

After completion of the experiments, the animal was killed and the ablated liver lobes were excised immediately. The specimen was cut in the plane of the needle tract and photographed to evaluate the shape and size of the ablated zone (white zone).

Statistical analysis

The size of the ablated zone and the duration of ablation were compared among the three groups with the Kruskal–Wallis test. All values are expressed as medians. A *P*-value of less than 0.05 denoted the presence of a statistically significant difference.

RESULTS

Features of the no-touch pincer ablation procedure

THE THREE TYPES of pincer ablation procedure applied to the pig liver were performed in the area shown in Figure 2(a).

Table 1 summarizes the features of each pincer ablation procedure for the treatment of the virtual target located on the liver surface.

In the median (range) transverse and longitudinal diameter to the shaft, ablative areas were: pattern 1, 32 (27–35) mm × 30 (30–35) mm; pattern 2, 27 (25–35) mm × 30 (30–32) mm; and pattern 3, 45 (40–50) × 26 (25–27) mm. There were no significant differences in the size of each ablative area among the three ablation procedures. However, with the pattern 3 procedure, the transverse diameter to the shaft was larger than with the other procedures, and as a result, the ablative form was flatter. On the other hand, patterns 1 and 2 acquired sufficient ablative areas that covered the liver surface with carbonization of the surface; however, with pattern 3, the ablative areas did not reach the liver surface, and carbonization of the liver surface was not apparent (Fig. 2b–d).

In addition, there were no significant differences among ablation procedures in the duration of ablative time.

DISCUSSION

WE OFTEN ENCOUNTER cases of HCC that are difficult to treat with RFA as a result of tumor location, especially nodules that protrude from the liver

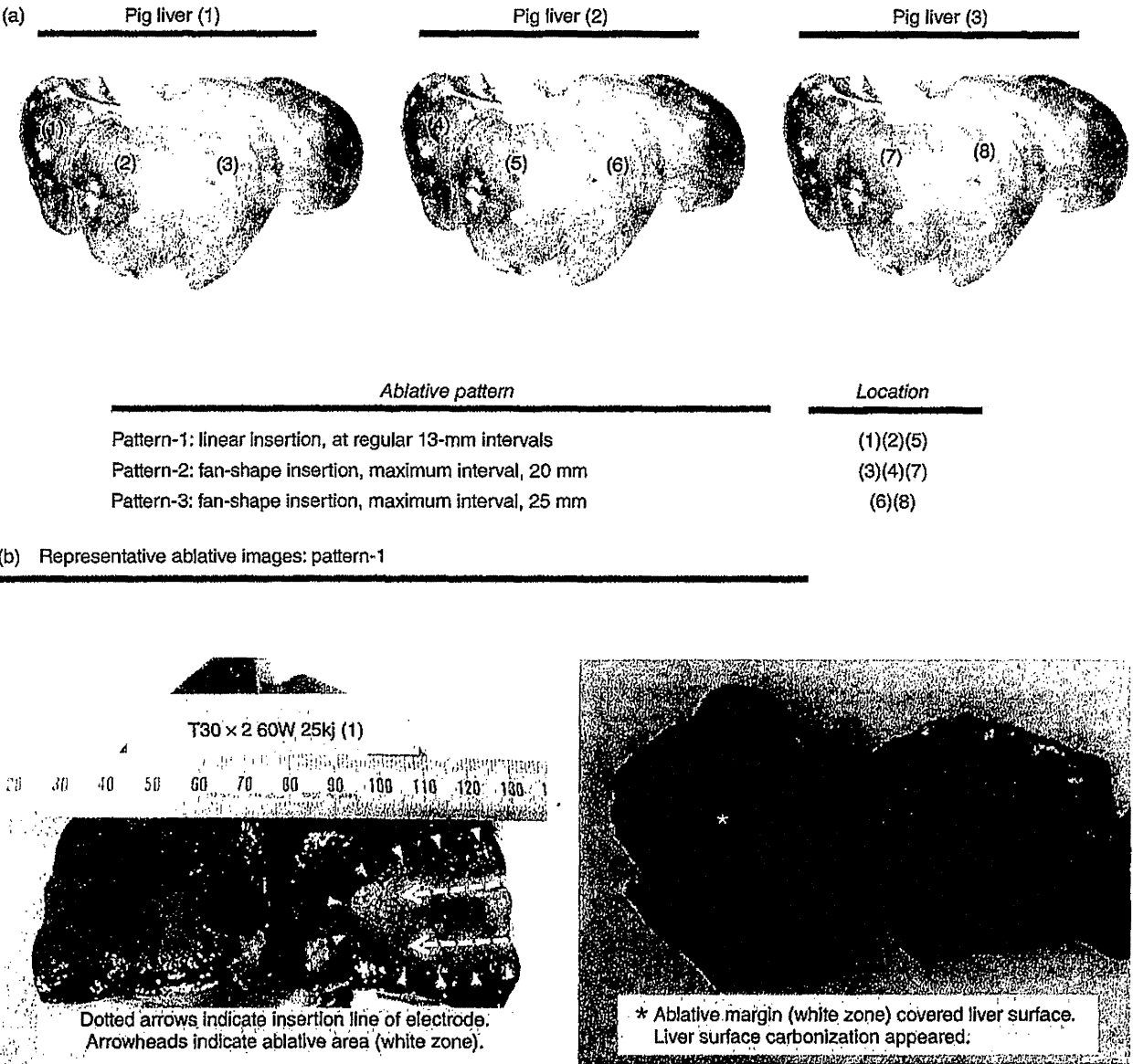
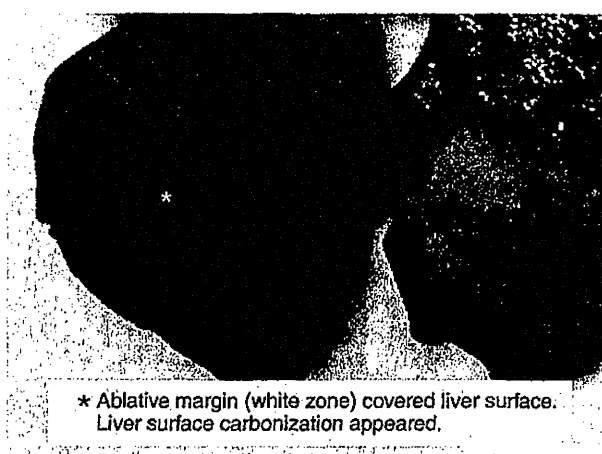
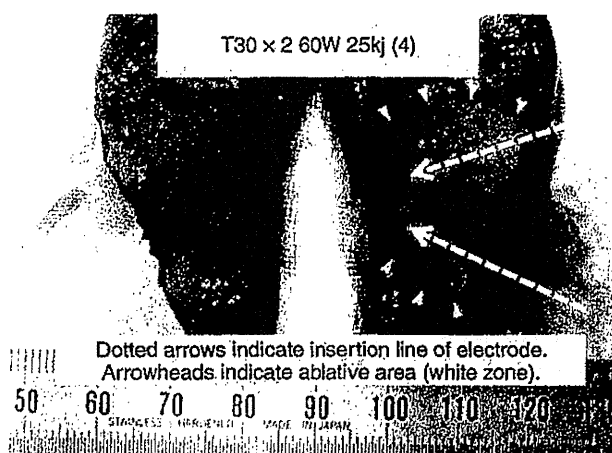


Figure 2 (a) Schema of the ablative areas of each pincer ablation procedure in the three pig livers. (b) One of the ablative shapes and the margin achieved with the pattern 1 procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for a virtual nodule that protrudes from the liver surface. With this pattern, we inserted the electrodes linearly (maximum interval for each electrode was 13 mm). The ablative margin covered the liver surface with carbonization of the liver surface. (c) One of the ablative shapes and the margin achieved with the pattern 2 procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for a virtual nodule that protrudes from the liver surface. With this pattern, we used a fan-shape insertion method (maximum interval for each electrode was 20 mm). The ablative margin covered the liver surface with carbonization of the liver surface. (d) Ablative shape and margin achieved with the Pattern 3 procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for a virtual nodule that protrudes from the liver surface. With this pattern, we used a fan-shape insertion method (maximum interval for each electrode was 25 mm). The ablative area close to the liver surface was larger than with the other procedures. However, the ablative margin did not cover the liver surface, and carbonization of the liver surface was not apparent.

(c) Representative ablative images: pattern-2



(d) Representative ablative images: pattern-3

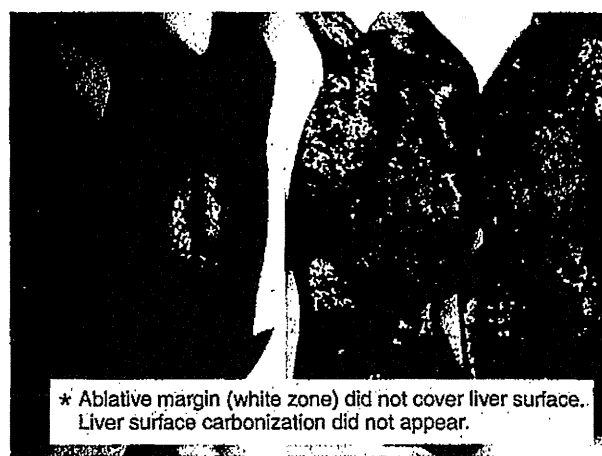
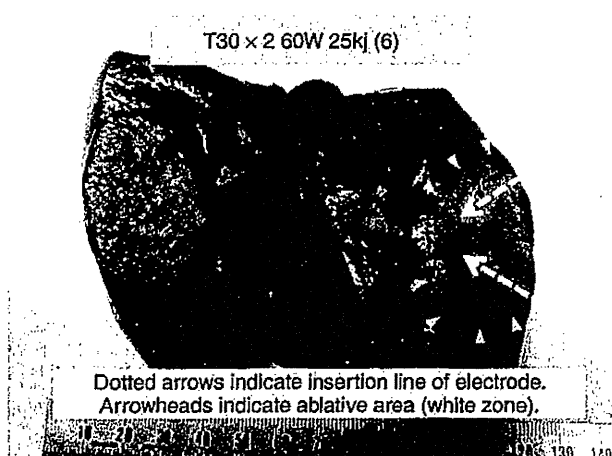


Figure 2 Continued

surface. In these situations, a multipolar ablation system that uses internally cooled bipolar electrodes may be suitable for treatment. With a multipolar ablation system, we can combine the use of one to three electrodes at the same treatment session, and when three electrodes are used, this system can treat a large tumor. However, in the case of small tumors (<20 mm), it is not really necessary to use three electrodes for treatment of the target tumor. However, in the dosimetry table of this bipolar system in Figure 3, which was made from previously reported early clinical data¹⁶ and basic analy-

sis, when two internally cooled bipolar electrodes are used (30 mm, 15-G, CelonProSurge; OLYMPUS Winter & Ibe GmbH), the recommended interval of each electrode in this system was 13 mm. With this regulation, we can treat only small tumors (<13 mm) when we perform no-touch pincer ablation using two electrodes. Therefore, in this study we assumed a virtual target tumor with a tumor diameter less than 20 mm, and investigated the efficacy of a no-touch pincer ablation procedure and the maximum size of the tumor using two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for nodules that

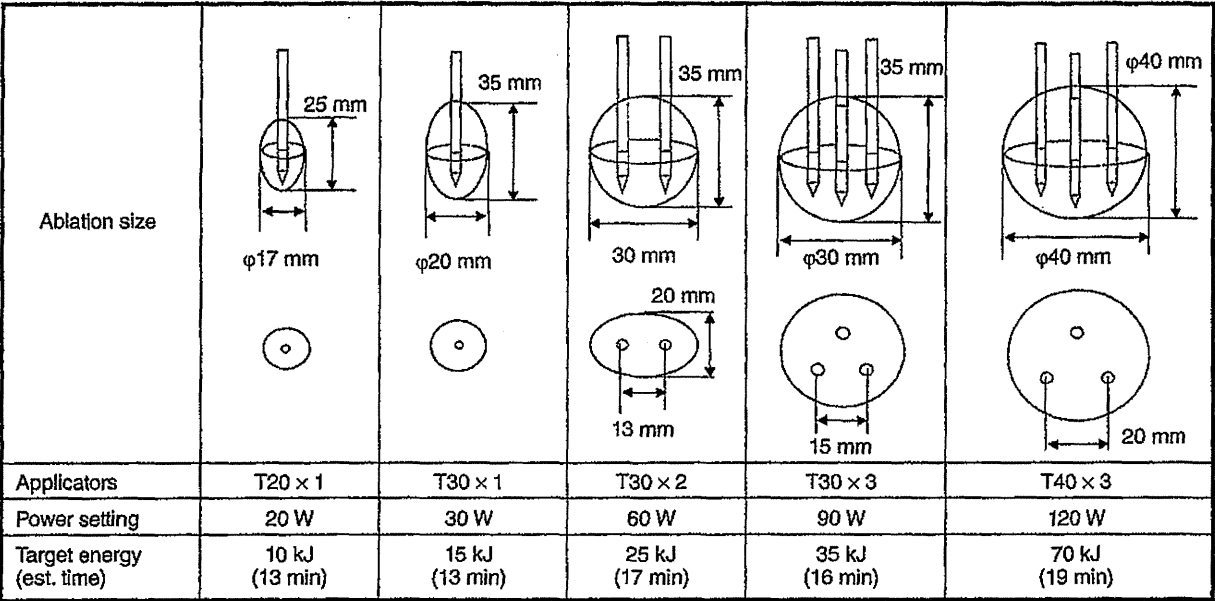
Table 1 Features of each pincer ablation procedure for the treatment of the virtual target located on the liver surface

	Pattern 1			Pattern 2			Pattern 3		P
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	
Duration	13'46"	13'16"	12'58"	14'38"	13'50"	13'30"	13'05"	12'40"	P = 0.151
Ablated area									
Transverse diameter, mm	27	35	32	25	27	35	45	40	P = 0.113
Longitudinal length, mm	35	30	30	32	30	30	27	25	P = 0.102
Ablated area covered liver surface	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Liver surface carbonization appeared	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	

protrude from the liver surface. In addition, we investigated only the fan-shape insertion method at a maximum interval of 20–25 mm. The reason for this is that in an actual RFA procedure, it is occasionally difficult to insert two electrodes in the same intercostal space for slightly large nodules that protrude from the liver surface; therefore, in this study, we examined a fan-shape ablation method that assumed two different intercostal approaches. Our results showed that with the

pattern 3 treatment procedure, we could not acquire a sufficient ablative margin to the side of the liver surface. From these results, tumors of 20 mm or more may not be suitable for a no-touch pincer ablation procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes in this bipolar system.

In contrast, with the pattern 1 and 2 treatment procedures, we acquired a sufficient ablative margin to the side of the liver surface with carbonization of the liver



- The data are based on Frericks *et al.*, Radiology (2005) 237: 1056–1062. The reported average efficacy was ~0.5 millilitre ablation volume per kilojoule. From these data, the required energy for an ablation sphere or ellipsoid of given diameter was calculated.
- The application of blood flow interruption (e.g. Pringle's manoeuvre, embolization) allows for a significant reduction of the target energy.

Disclaimer: this dosimetry table does not replace the monitoring of actual ablation sizes. The ablation diameters are approximations based on statistical data; they are not guaranteed for individual clinical cases. Ablation size and shape as well as the procedure time may significantly vary due to tumor physiology and vascular structure. A deviation from the recommended applicator distances may also have an impact on the ablation dimensions.

Figure 3 Dosimetry table for the CelonPOWER system (in Japan).

surface. These results may indicate that tumors of less than 15 mm are candidates for the no-touch pincer ablation procedure that uses two internally cooled bipolar electrodes in this bipolar system.

Finally, this experimental animal study had some limitations. First, the number of animals was very small, and the target tumor was a virtual tumor. Second, an additional examination regarding a no-touch linear insertion procedure for maximum intervals of 20 mm and 25 mm for each electrode was not enforced. Third, we could not investigate the same fan-shape ablation procedure using monopolar RFA in this study, because we assumed it would be too difficult to carry out a two-step insertion method using a monopolar electrode under the influence of a first ablation for nodules that protrude from the liver surface. Fourth, we could not investigate the pathological changes in the ablative area in this study. Therefore, with only these study results, it may not be possible to draw conclusions regarding the utility of the fan-shape insertion method using a bipolar RFA device. To solve these problems, we must carry out an additional large-scale study that includes pathological examination in the near future.

Finally, to summarize the points to be noted at the time of performing the pincer ablation procedure, first, we should insert the needle carefully under US guidance, because in this procedure, measuring the distance of the needle tip from the liver surface and the two needle intervals on the liver surface correctly is the most important point.

Second, with this procedure, we should pay attention to the risk of thermal damage to the visceral peritoneum. Therefore, if possible, thermal protection using measures such as artificial ascites should be considered.

Third, in this study, we did not observe a portal or hepatic vein thrombus in the ablative area. However, this study was performed mainly in the vicinity of the liver surface, and usually this area does not include large vessels. Therefore, we need to use caution as with monopolar ablation when we ablate near large vessels.

In conclusion, the no-touch pincer ablation procedure (with an electrode interval of ≤ 20 mm) may be useful when performed with two internally cooled bipolar electrodes for small HCC tumors that protrude from the liver surface.

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Original Article

Discrimination of fibrotic staging of chronic hepatitis C using multiple fibrotic markers

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

Methods: A total of 581 patients from eight hepatology units and institutes were diagnosed by needle biopsy as having chronic liver disease caused by hepatitis C virus. Twenty-three variables and their natural logarithmic transformation were employed in the multivariate analysis.

Results: Multivariate regression analysis finally obtained the following function: $z = 2.89 \times \ln(\text{type IV collagen 7S}) (\text{ng/mL}) - 0.011 \times (\text{platelet count}) (\times 10^3/\text{mm}^3) + 0.79 \times \ln(\text{total bilirubin}) (\text{mg/dL}) + 0.39 \times \ln(\text{hyaluronic acid}) (\mu\text{g/L}) - 1.87$. Median values of the fibrotic score of F1 ($n = 172$), F2 ($n = 80$),

F3 ($n = 37$) and F4 ($n = 16$) were calculated as 1.00, 1.45, 2.82 and 3.83, respectively. Multiple regression coefficient and coefficient of determination were 0.56 and 0.320, respectively. Validation with patient data from other institutions demonstrated good reproducibility of the fibrotic score for hepatitis C (FSC), showing 1.10 in F1 ($n = 156$), 2.35 in F2 ($n = 73$), 3.16 in F3 ($n = 36$) and 3.58 in F4 ($n = 11$).

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

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

INTRODUCTION

WHEN HEPATITIS C virus (HCV)-related chronic liver disease was found by biochemical and virological examination, peritoneoscopy and/or liver biopsy can establish the definitive diagnosis of chronic hepatitis and liver cirrhosis. 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 examination, medical expenses and hospitalization for a

few days. The pathological examination is, therefore, rarely performed repeatedly in a short period of time, even when disease activity is severe and progression of liver disease is highly suspected. Recently, many authors described the usefulness of ultrasonographic elastography and magnetic resonance imaging technology in the estimation of staging of chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis.^{1–4} These ways of estimation using the imaging apparatuses seem truly useful for current patients, but it cannot evaluate and compare with past fibrotic states of patients retrospectively. Moreover, the same apparatus for elastometry will not be available for repeated measurement for a follow-up examination, several years later for example.

In spite of the accuracy of biopsy and of 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

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HCV-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 C were correctly classified as mild hepatitis and severe hepatitis with advanced fibrosis.^{5–16} The usefulness of the discriminant functions was, however, less valuable up to the present time 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, F2, F3 and F4) were selected in almost of the studies. Second, some studies analyzed both hepatitis B virus and HCV 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)^{17–19} were not always included in those previous studies.

We tried to generate a function estimating fibrotic stages of HCV-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 fibrotic markers.

METHODS

Patients

A TOTAL OF 605 Japanese patients with chronic hepatitis C were recruited for the study from eight 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, M.D.), Shishu University Hospital (E. Tanaka, M.D.), Showa University Hospital (M. Imawari, M.D.), Osaka University Hospital (T. Takehara, M.D.) and Kagoshima University Hospital (H. Tsubouchi, M.D.). Inclusion criteria for this study were: (i) positive HCV antibody 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, F2, F3 or F4). We excluded those patients with overt alcoholic liver disease or fatty liver, association of other types of liver disease (e.g. hepatitis B, primary biliary cirrhosis, autoimmune hepatitis), or those associated with hepatocellular carcinoma or other malignancy. Among the patients, 603 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. We also excluded an additional 22 patients with eventual histological diagnosis of F0 stage.

Finally, a total of 581 patients who were diagnosed as having chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (F1, F2, F3 or F4) were analyzed for the following hematological, biochemical and histopathological examination. There were 305 males and 276 females aged 15–78 with a median of 55 years.

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

Hematological and biochemical examination

Hematological and standard biochemical evaluation had been performed in each medical institution: white blood cell, red blood cell count, hemoglobin, platelet count, total bilirubin, AST, ALT, AST/ALT ratio (AAR), γ -glutamyltransferase (GGT), total protein, albumin and γ -globulin.

Special biochemical examinations including fibrotic markers were carried out using stored frozen sera at -20°C or lower: $\alpha 2$ -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 of the 581 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 581 specimens regarding the stages of fibrosis and activity. Pathological classification of chronic hepatitis staging was based on Desmet *et al.*²⁰

Before judgment of histological staging of individual specimens, the pathologists discussed objective and reproducible judgment of pathological diagnosis of hepatitis. They made a panel for 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 stage of hepatitis among the pathologists, the final judgment was accepted as the 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 Kolmogorov-Smirnov one-sample test. Because certain variables partly did not conform to a normal distribution, natural logarithmic transformation of bilirubin, AST, ALT, GGT, 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 of inflation factors. Of the highly correlated variables, less significant factors were removed from the viewpoint of multicollinearity.

Multivariate regression analysis was performed using 305 patient data from Toranomon Hospital (training dataset), to generate 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 are also taken into account in the selection of variables. Next, we validated the obtained predictive function using the remaining 276 patient data from the other seven 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 version 19.²¹

For evaluation of the efficiency and usefulness of obtained function for estimation of fibrosis, we compared various fibrotic scores for hepatitis C, including AAR,⁸ AST-to-platelet ratio index (APRI),¹² FIB-4¹³ and FibroTest.⁹

RESULTS

Pathological diagnosis

FOUR PATHOLOGISTS INDEPENDENTLY judged the fibrotic stages and inflammatory activity for 581 specimens of chronic hepatitis/cirrhosis caused by HCV. A total of 328 patients (56.5%) had a fibrotic stage of F1, 153 (26.3%) F2, 73 (12.6%) F3 and 27 (4.6%) F4. In

the training subgroup (*n* = 305), judgment of F1 was made in 172, F2 in 80, F3 in 37 and F4 in 16. In the validation group (*n* = 276), judgment as F1 was made in 156, F2 in 73, F3 in 36 and F4 in 11.

According to hepatitis activity classification, A0 was found in nine patients (1.52%), A1 in 350 (60.2%), A2 in 198 (34.1%) and A3 in 24 (4.1%).

Laboratory data of each hepatitis stage in training group

There were 161 males and 144 females with a median age of 54 years (range, 22–69). Laboratory data of the 305 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 to F4 stages: platelet count, GGT, γ -globulin, hyaluronic acid and type IV collagen 7S.

Regression function generated from training patient group

After stepwise variable selection, multivariate regression analysis finally obtained the following function: $z = 2.89 \times \ln(\text{type IV collagen 7S (ng/mL)}) - 0.011 \times (\text{platelet count}) (\times 10^3/\text{mm}^3) + 0.79 \times \ln(\text{total bilirubin (ng/mL)}) + 0.39 \times \ln(\text{hyaluronic acid } (\mu\text{m/L})) - 1.87$. Median values of the fibrotic score of F1 (*n* = 172), F2 (*n* = 80), F3 (*n* = 37) and F4 stages (*n* = 16) were calculated as 1.00, 1.45, 2.82 and 3.83, respectively (Fig. 1). The multiple regression coefficient and coefficient of determination were 0.56 and 0.32, respectively.

A 55-year-old man with F1 fibrotic stage (Fig. 2a) showed serum type IV collagen concentration as 3.8 ng/mL, platelet as 152×10^3 count/mm³, total bilirubin as 0.8 mg/dL and hyaluronic acid as 16 μ g/L. The regression function provided his fibrotic score as 1.16. Another man aged 43 years had F3 fibrosis with severe hepatitis activity of A3 on histological examination (Fig. 2b). His type IV collagen was 11.0 ng/mL, platelet 162×10^3 count/mm³, total bilirubin 0.7 mg/dL and hyaluronic acid 189 μ g/L, and regression function calculated his fibrotic score as 4.98.

Validation of discriminant function

Validation data of 276 patients (Table 2) were collected from the other seven institutions in Japan. When applying the regression function for the validation set, the fibrotic score for hepatitis C (FSC) demonstrated good reproducibility, showing 1.10 in patients with chronic hepatitis of F1 (*n* = 156), 2.35 in F2 (*n* = 73), 3.16 in F3 (*n* = 36) and 3.58 in F4 (*n* = 11) (Fig. 3). Although F4