Metastatic type 1 gastric carcinoid: A real threat or just a myth?

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Abstract

AIM: To describe disease characteristics and treatment modalities in a group of rare patients with metastatic gastric carcinoid type 1 (GCA1).

METHODS: Information on clinical, biochemical, radiological, histopathological findings, the extent of the disease, as well as the use of different therapeutic modalities and the long-term outcome were recorded. Patients' data were assessed at presentation, and thereafter at 6 to 12 monthly intervals both clinically and biochemically, but also endoscopically and histopathologically. Patients were evaluated for the presence of specific symptoms; the presence of autoimmune disorders and the presence of other gastrointestinal malignancies in other family members were also recorded. The evaluation of response to treatment was defined using established WHO criteria.

RESULTS: We studied twenty consecutive patients with a mean age of 55.1 years. The mean follow-up period was 83 mo. Twelve patients had regional lymph node metastases and 8 patients had liver metastases. The primary tumor mean diameter was 20.13 ± 10.83 mm (mean ± SD). The mean Ki-67 index was 6.8% ± 11.2%. All but one patient underwent endoscopic or surgical excision of the tumor. The disease was stable in all but 3 patients who had progressive liver disease. All patients remained alive during the follow-up period.

CONCLUSION: Metastatic GCA1 carries a good overall prognosis, being related to a tumor size of ≥ 1 cm, an elevated Ki-67 index and high serum gastrin levels.
Key words: Metastatic gastric carcinoids; Gastrin; Chromogranin A; Somatostatin analogues; Stomach neuroendocrine tumor

Core tip: Metastatic gastric carcinoid type 1 (GCA1) are extremely rare and there is no data regarding their natural history, treatment and prognosis. Based on our study, metastatic GCA1 carries a good overall prognosis. Metastatic spread appears to be related to a tumor size of $\geq 1$ cm, an elevated Ki-67 index, and to high serum gastrin levels. Endoscopic surveillance is extremely important for follow-up. Surgical resection should be performed only in patients in whom total tumor excision is expected. Although still controversial, somatostatin analogues could be considered as first line treatment to lower the elevated gastrin levels and suppress enterochromaffin like cell hyperplasia.

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INTRODUCTION

Gastric carcinoids (GCAs) are neuroendocrine tumors (NETs) of the gastric mucosa originating from enterochromaffin like (ECL) cells[1]. GCAs arise either spontaneously or in response to a chronic hypergastrinemia state; due to their rarity (only 2% of all carcinoids and 8.7% of gastrointestinal carcinoids)[2,3], the predictors of metastatic disease have not been systematically addressed.

GCAs are divided into three distinct types. Type 1 (GCA1) represents the majority (approximately 75%) and is associated with chronic atrophic gastritis and autoimmune destruction of parietal cells. Type 2 (GCA2) (approximately 5%-10%) occurs almost always in the context of Multiple Endocrine Neoplasia type 1 (MEN1). Both types 1 and 2 GCAs occur in the setting of elevated serum gastrin which exerts a trophic effect on gastric enterochromaffin-like (ECL) cells leading to neuroendocrine cell hyperplasia and multifocal polypoid carcinoid tumors. These tumors are well differentiated and carry an excellent overall prognosis. Type 3 GCAs (15%-25%) are not related to hypergastrinemia and follow an aggressive course[4,5].

Type 1 GCAs are usually discovered during upper gastrointestinal tract (GIT) endoscopy performed for non specific symptoms (nausea, abdominal pain, dyspepsia)[6], or during investigation of anemia[7,8]. In the past, type 1 GCA was frequently diagnosed in women in their 5th to 7th decades; however, with the more extensive use of endoscopy, the diagnosis occurs at a younger age[9,10].

Traditionally, GCA1s are endoscopically removed[6,7,9]; antrectomy could be considered to remove the source of excessive gastrin secretion[11]. Importantly, somatostatin analogues (SSAs) have been increasingly used in the treatment of patients with GCA1 or GCA2[12], based on their capability to inhibit gastrin release, reduce the ECL cell hyperplasia[13-15], and to substantially decrease tumor load[16-23].

Metastatic GCA1 are extremely rare and little is known about their natural history, treatment and prognosis. We conducted a multicenter, retrospective analysis to describe disease characteristics and treatment modalities in a group of rare patients with metastatic GCA1.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Twenty consecutive patients with metastatic GCAs1 treated in five tertiary referral centers for at least 6 mo were studied. Information on clinical presentation, biochemical profile, imaging, histopathological findings and disease extent (using the TNM classification)[24] were recorded. The use of varying therapeutic modalities and the long-term outcome of these patients were also recorded. Patients’ data were assessed at presentation, and thereafter at 6-12 monthly intervals both clinically and biochemically, but also endoscopically and histopathologically.

Clinical assessment

Patients were evaluated for the presence of symptoms such as abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and dyspepsia; the presence of autoimmune disorders associated with pernicious anemia and the presence of other gastrointestinal malignancies in other family members were also recorded.

Biochemical evaluation

Pernicious anemia was defined as a low serum vitamin B12 level (normal range 180-670 pmol/L) and at least one positive antibody against parietal cells, intrinsic factor or proton-pump antigen. Serum gastrin and chromogranin A (CgA) were measured after an overnight fast, and thereafter at regular intervals (3-6 mo) during the study period. Treatment with proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) was discontinued for at least 3 wk before blood samples were taken. Serum CgA and gastrin were measured using commercially available radioimmunoassay kits: CGA-RIACT, CISBIO International, France (normal reference range of 19.4-98.1 ng/mL), or Euro-Diagnostica, Malmo (upper normal limit 4 nmol/L) for CgA, and DiaSorin, Stillwater, Minnesota 55082-0285, United States (normal reference range of 40-108 mU/L) or EURO-Diagnostica, Malmo (upper normal limit 60 pmol/L) for gastrin, respectively.

Imaging assessment

All patients underwent imaging assessment at diagnosis, including either $^{111}$In-pentetreotide scintigraphy (Octreoscan) or ($^{68}$)Gallium-DOTA-TATE/-TOC/-NOC...
PET (17 patients), computerized tomography (CT) of the abdomen (13 patients), or both modalities (11 patients) (Table 1).

### Table 1  Clinical and histopathological characteristics of the study patients

| Patient No. | No. of lesions | Size, largest lesion (mm) | Ki-67% | CT before Tx | SRS/(68)Ga before Tx | Distant mets | Gastrin (40–108 mU/L) | Surgery | Residual disease | SSA/monthly dosage (mg) | Outcome | F/U Period (mo) |
|-------------|----------------|---------------------------|--------|--------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|-----------------|------------------------|---------|----------------|
| 1           | multiple       | 15                        | 2%     | -            | Uptake (stomach, LN)  | no          | 1811                  | 125     | wedge resection   | no                     | Som A 90 | cure          | 108     |
| 2           | solitary       | 35                        | 2%     | Liver mets   | Uptake (stomach, Liver) | liver       | -                     | 125     | Birollth 2 + LN  | liver      | no         | SD     | 84      |
| 3           | multiple       | 21                        | 2%     | Liver mets   | Uptake (stomach, Liver) | liver       | 2204                  | 325     | none             | liver      | San LAR 30 | CR     | 36      |
| 4           | multiple       | 55                        | 20%    | Stomach lesion | Uptake (stomach)     | diaphragm   | 1800                  | -       | Birollth 2 + LN  | liver      | no         | cure   | 24      |
| 5           | multiple       | 25                        | 1%     | Stomach lesion | Uptake (stomach, LN) | no          | 1403                  | -       | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | no       | cure          | 18      |
| 6           | multiple       | -                         | 15%    | Hepato-gastric | no data               | -           | -                     | ER      | no              | no                     | no       | cure          | 12      |
| 7           | solitary       | 17                        | 4%     | LN            | Uptake (stomach, LN)  | no          | 700                   | 600     | wedge resection   | no                     | no       | cure          | 132     |
| 8           | multiple       | 15                        | 1%     | Liver mets and LN | Uptake (LN, Liver)   | liver       | 407                   | 190     | ER, largest       | liver      | San LAR 30 + INF 50 mcg/wk | PR     | 36      |
| 9           | solitary       | 10                        | 1%     | Liver mets and LN | no data               | liver       | -                     | -       | wedge resection   | no                     | no       | cure          | 360     |
| 10          | solitary       | 30                        | 5%     | Stomach lesion | no uptake              | no          | 5130                  | 43      | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 120     |
| 11          | multiple       | 17                        | 1%     | -            | no uptake              | no          | -                     | ER      | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 168     |
| 12          | multiple       | 14                        | 5%     | -            | no uptake              | no          | -                     | -       | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 72      |
| 13          | solitary       | 47                        | 15%    | -            | Uptake (stomach, Liver) | liver       | 5470                  | 45      | ER               | liver      | none         | SD     | 120     |
| 14          | multiple       | 30                        | 2%     | -            | Uptake (LN, Liver)     | no          | 1336                  | 335     | ER, recurrent     | liver      | none         | SD     | 48      |
| 15          | multiple       | 10                        | 2%     | No pathology | no uptake              | no          | 3000                  | 3100    | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 48      |
| 16          | multiple       | 30                        | 2%     | Stomach lesion | no data               | no          | -                     | -       | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 36      |
| 17          | solitary       | -                         | 1%     | Liver mets   | Uptake (liver)         | liver       | 1612                  | 10      | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 36      |
| 18          | multiple       | 20                        | -      | Stomach lesion | no data               | no          | -                     | -       | wedge resection   | no                     | none      | cure          | 60      |
| 19          | multiple       | 20                        | -      | No pathology | no uptake              | no          | 1600                  | -       | Birollth 2 + LN  | no                     | none      | cure          | 72      |
| 20          | multiple       | 15                        | -      | Liver mets   | Uptake (stomach, Liver) | liver       | 458                   | 336     | ER               | liver      | San LAR 30 | SD     | 72      |

Nr. of lesions, solitary: one lesion seen on endoscopy, multiples ≥ 2 lesions seen on endoscopy; CT: Computerized tomography; SRS: Somatostatin receptor scintigraphy (Octreoscan); (68)Ga: (68)Gallium-DOTA-TATE/-TOC/-NOC PET; Tx: Treatment; SSAs: Somatostatin analogues; LN: Lymphadenopathy; mets: Metastases; SomA: Somatuline Autogel; SanLAR: Sandostatin LAR; INF: Interferon; ER, Billroth 2 + LN: Gastro-jejunostomy and lymph nodes dissection; wedge resection: wedge resection (triangular resection) of a part of the stomach; ER: Endoscopic resection; SD: Stable disease; PR: Partial response; CR: Complete response.

**Endoscopic and histopathological assessment**

All patients underwent upper GI endoscopy and 6/20 also underwent endoscopic ultra-sonography (EUS). Upper GI endoscopy with multiple biopsies was performed in order to assess the lesions and map surrounding gastric mucosa for changes of atrophic gastritis; the “dominant” lesions were biopsied and removed if possible. EUS was performed to assess invasion of the muscularis propria, regional lymph node involvement and/or visible metastases. Histopathological diagnosis was performed using biopsies taken from both the tumors and the surrounding mucosa at diagnosis or periodically during the follow-up period, or, in case of tumor excision - from the surgical specimen. Sections were immunostained for chromogranin (CG), neuron specific enolase (NSE), synaptophysin (SYN), and the Ki-67 proliferative index using the MIB-1 antibody. The diagnosis of NETs was confirmed morphologically during endoscopy together with a positive immunocytochemical staining for NSE, SYN and/or CG.
**Evaluation of response to treatment**

Disease response was defined using established WHO criteria\(^{[24]}\).

Patients were considered in remission if symptoms disappeared, gastrin and CgA levels were substantially reduced (> 50% reduction) or returned to normal range and if there was no evidence of residual disease following treatment. The study was approved by the local institutional ethical committees and informed consent was obtained from all patients.

**Statistical analysis**

Results were expressed as mean ± SD. Nonparametric ANOVA (Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA) was used to assess and compare different parameters (such as the mean age at diagnosis, the size of the largest tumor, the Ki-67 etc.) at diagnosis (Table 2), or the levels of gastrin at diagnosis and following surgical treatment/at last visit (Table 1). Post hoc comparisons were made using Mann-Whitney \(U\) test. A \(P\) value of < 0.05 was considered significant.

**RESULTS**

The clinical characteristics of all patients included in the study are shown in Table 3. The cohort included 9 men and 11 women with a mean age of 55.1 years. Whereas women are usually at higher risk for autoimmune atrophic gastritis, our cohort included patients of both genders, showing only a slight preponderance in the number of female patients. The mean duration of follow-up was 83 mo (range 12-360 mo). Other autoimmune diseases (e.g., Hashimoto’s thyroiditis, Sjögren’s syndrome) were diagnosed in two patients (10%). In three patients (15%) there was a first-degree relative with history of gastric (2 patients) or pancreatic (one patient) adenocarcinoma.

**Basal evaluation (at diagnosis)**

At diagnosis gastroscopy revealed macroscopic gastric carcinoid tumors (described as “nodules”, “ulcers” or “polyps”) in all patients, with a mean diameter of 20.14 ± 10.83 mm (mean ± SD) (range 4-55 mm). The tumors were single in 6/20 patients (30%), and multiple (defined as ≥ 2 tumors seen on gastroscopy) in the remaining 14 (70%). ECL cell hyperplasia was observed in all patients. The mean Ki-67% proliferation index was 6.8% ± 11.2% (range 1%-20%). None of the patients included in the present series presented with ZES and the associated MEN1 syndrome or with characteristics of type 3 gastric carcinoids (Tables 1 and 4).

EUS was intended to be performed in all patients in order to reveal any residual and/or sub-mucosal tumors. Signs of aggressiveness or invasiveness at first biopsy were demonstrated in seven out of 12 patients with available data (58%) and included: ulceration of the primary lesion in two patients (17%); vascular invasion in two patients (17%); invasion of the muscularis mucosa and lamina propria in four patients (33%). Peri-gastric/gastrohepatic ligament lymph node invasion was observed in 9 patients (45%) as demonstrated by CT scan and/or Octreoscan or (68)Ga-DOTATOC/NOC/TATE PET-CT; distant metastases were present at initial diagnosis in 9 patients (45%), and included liver metastases in eight and diaphragmatic metastases in one out of the 20 patients.

**Treatment**

Ten out of the twenty patients (50%) underwent total gastrectomy or a Billroth 2 operation (gastro-jejunostomy) and lymph node dissection, another 4 patients (20%) underwent antrectomy and wedge resection, whereas endoscopic resection of the dominant lesion was performed in 5 patients (25%). One patient underwent only primary tumor biopsy (Table 1, patient No. 3).

Histopathological analysis following tumor resection demonstrated positive staining by immunohistochemistry (IHC) for neuroendocrine markers (chromogranin and synaptophysin) in all patients (100%), for vesicular monoamine transporter 2 (VMAT2) in two patients (10%), and for neuron specific enolase (NSE) in seven patients (35%). Ki-67 indices were available in 17 out of the 20 patients included; eleven tumors were defined as ENETS grade 1.
(Ki-67 \leq 2\%) and six tumors as grade 2 (Ki-67 between 2%-20%). The final value for the mean Ki-67 proliferation index measured 4.8%, slightly lower than the Ki-67 value at first endoscopy (6.8%); interestingly, the Ki-67 was significantly higher in the liver/lymph node metastases than in the primary tumor in 4/20 patients.

Based on local team decision, five out of the 20 patients assessed were treated with somatostatin analogues (SSAs): in four patients Sandostatin LAR (Novartis, Basel, Switzerland) 30 mg/month, in one patient Somatuline Autogel (Ipsen, Paris) 90 mg/month, whereas in one patient pegylated interferon alpha was added to the SSA at a dosage of 50 micrograms per week, as anti-secretory and anti-proliferative therapy.

Treatment related adverse events were reported in only 3 patients and included diarrhea (one patient), fatigue (in the patient treated with interferon alpha) and gastrectomy-related dumping syndrome in one patient.

None of the patients received chemotherapy or peptide receptor radioligand therapy, to date.

**Laboratory and imaging assessment at diagnosis**

Gastrin and CgA levels were elevated at diagnosis in all patients with available data (14/20 patients for gastrin, and 13/20 patients for CgA) and reached 2138.4 ± 1562 mU/L for gastrin (normal range 40-108 mU/L) and 507.6 ± 403.7 ng/mL for CgA (normal range 19.4-98.1 ng/mL), respectively. No clear correlation was found between initial gastrin and CgA serum levels and the number or size of the tumors.

High levels of anti-parietal cells antibodies were found in all patients in whom their titer was determined. The levels of vitamin B12 were low in all but six patients, with a mean value of 162 ± 87 pmol/L (normal range 180-670 pmol/L) (Table 4).

Data on functional imaging - 111 In-pentetreotide scintigraphy (Octreoscan) or (68)Ga-DOTATOC/NOC/TATE PET-CT (performed based on local availability) were available at diagnosis in 17/20 included patients: in 12 patients (71%) there was increased tracer uptake by the gastric lesions as well as by the perigastric metastatic lymph nodes and liver lesions. Twelve patients underwent (68)Ga-DOTATOC/NOC/TATE-PET-CT demonstrating an increased uptake by the tumor and metastases in 9 patients, and no pathological uptake in the remaining 3 patients. Five patients performed an Octreoscan, showing increased uptake by the tumor in 3, and no pathological uptake in 2.

Interestingly, in the five patients with no pathological uptake by either functional imaging method, the Ki-67 index of proliferation was \leq 2\% and the tumor size was \geq 1 cm.

**Follow-up assessment and treatment outcome**

All patients remained alive during the follow-up period. During follow-up after the first intervention, the disease was stable in all patients: in the subgroup who underwent total gastrectomy or Billroth 2 operation (gastro-jejunostomy) and lymph node dissection (10 patients, 50%), as well as in the subgroup of the 4 patients (20%) who underwent antrectomy and wedge resection, the disease did not progress or recur during follow-up. The same was observed in the other patients in the present series, including those who underwent repeated endoscopic resection of the largest lesions. In the seven patients with persistent liver disease, somatostatin analogue treatment was administered in three patients: in two Sandostatin LAR 30 mg/month alone, (inducing disease stabilization in

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Table 4  Features associated with the diagnosis of gastric carcinoid type 1 in our patients

| Patient No. | Vitamin B12 levels (n. 180-670 pmol/L) | APCA | Gastrin levels (n. 40-108 mU/L) | Prior use of PPIs | 1st gastroscopy (macroscopic) | Histo-pathology | H. Pylori |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|------|-------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| 1           | 45 positive (1/20)                |      | 1811                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + IM       | negative |
| 2           | 165 positive                      |      | -                             | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + IM + NECH | -        |
| 3           | 333 positive (1:160)             |      | 2204                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | negative |
| 4           | 186 positive (1:20)              |      | 1800                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | negative |
| 5           | 104 positive (1:20)              |      | 1403                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | negative |
| 6           | 122 positive (1:80)              |      | -                             | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 7           | 121 -                            |      | 700                           | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 8           | 86 -                             |      | 407                           | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 9           | 50 -                             |      | -                             | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 10          | positive (1:140)                 |      | 5130                          | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 11          | -                                |      | -                             | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 12          | -                                |      | -                             | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 13          | 184 positive (1:160)             |      | 5470                          | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 14          | 121 positive                     |      | 1336                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 15          | 215 -                            |      | 3500                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 16          | -                                |      | -                             | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 17          | 345 -                            |      | 1612                          | no                 | solitary                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 18          | 130 -                            |      | 506                           | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 19          | 181 -                            |      | 1600                          | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |
| 20          | 167 positive                     |      | 458                           | no                 | multiple                      | CAG + NECH     | -        |

APCA: Antiparietal cells antibodies; PPIs: Proton pump inhibitors; CAG: Chronic atrophic gastritis; IM: Intestinal metaplasia; NECH: Neuroendocrine cells hyperplasia; H. pylori: Helicobacter pylori.
DISCUSSION

GCAs are rare neoplasms, accounting for about 1.25% of all malignancies\textsuperscript{[23]}. Their incidence, however, is increasing, most probably as a result of widespread use of endoscopy and imaging. Despite the relatively indolent biological behaviour of GCA1 tumors, approximately 8%-23% have been reported as presenting with an aggressive clinical course, metastasizing to regional lymph nodes and rarely to the liver\textsuperscript{[7]}. The European Neuroendocrine Tumor Society (ENETS) consensus guidelines on GCA1 treatment are based on tumor size (less or more than 1 cm) and specify that, despite a preference for a conservative approach, based on endoscopic follow-up, lesion resection is recommended whenever possible\textsuperscript{[36]}. Specifically, in patients with lesions of more than 1 cm, EUS should be performed to assess gastric wall and lymph nodal involvement before the decision about the type of excision (endoscopic mucosal resection, EMR, or subtotal gastrectomy/wide resection) is taken. Although biotherapy with somatostatin analogues (SSAs) is still a matter of debate according to the ENETS guidelines, we and others have recently demonstrated the beneficial effect of long-acting Somatostatin analog (SSAs) on hormone levels, tumor growth, and adverse effects associated with somatostatin analogue treatment. Eighteen patients (90%) had symptoms attributed to the disease (such as abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting or dyspepsia) that improved in all following treatment. Furthermore, new approaches are under investigation. Recent preclinical data demonstrated possible beneficial effects of interferon-beta (IFN-\beta) in inhibiting cell proliferation and stimulating apoptosis in a PNET cell line model\textsuperscript{[29-31]}.

Moreover, a new gastrin/CCK2 receptor antagonist molecule, YF476, appears to induce potent inhibition of ECL cell proliferation compared with dopamine agonists or dopamine/somatostatin chimera molecules, and to provide new insights for the therapy of hypergastrinemic gastric NETs associated with low acid states, such as in our patients\textsuperscript{[32]}. Noteworthy, a recent phase II study demonstrated good tolerability for the multi receptor ligand SSA pasireotide (SOM230) in patients with GEP NETs refractory to available SSAs\textsuperscript{[33]}. In the present study we sought to define risk factors for increased malignant potential at the time of diagnosis in patients with GCA1. From a total of 254 consecutive patients with GCA1 followed and treated at 5 tertiary referral medical centers, we identified 20 patients with metastatic disease to locoregional lymph nodes or liver at presentation (7.9%). In our series, the patients with metastatic GCA1 were younger, had larger tumors, had a higher Ki-67 proliferation index, and presented with higher gastrin levels compared with the group of patients with non-metastatic GCA1 tumors (Table 2). These results are in accordance with a recent study published by Saund MS and coworkers\textsuperscript{[34]}, demonstrating that in a group of 984 patients with localized GCA1, tumor size and depth predict lymph node metastasis; they recommended endoscopic resection for intraepithelial tumors < 2 cm and perhaps tumors < 1 cm invading into the lamina propria or submucosa.

In the present series, most of the patients with metastatic GCA1 were symptomatic, with presence of epigastric or abdominal pain, dyspepsia, bloating, nausea, loose stools or early satiety. A possible explanation for these symptoms may be the presence of atrophic gastritis together with achlorhydria in all patients with GCA1, as well as the increased levels of gastrin\textsuperscript{[35,36]}. Of note, there was a clear correlation between the size of the tumor at diagnosis and tumor metastatic spread in our study, as in all patients included the tumor size was ≥ 1 cm. Moreover, the mean Ki-67 index of proliferation in the metastatic GCA1 was significantly higher than in the localized tumors (Table 2), most probably due to an increased number of patients with grade 2 tumors in our series (6/20 patients, 30%) and indicating the utmost importance of performing immunohistochemical staining for this marker in all patients with GCA1. Findings of aggressiveness and/or invasiveness at diagnosis (e.g., ulceration of the lesion, vascular invasion, muscularis propria or lamina propria invasion) are all predictive factors for an aggressive biological behaviour, in parallel with a tumor size of ≥ 1 cm. In this high risk group, EUS or cross-sectional imaging should be performed to assess the presence of lymph nodes/liver metastatic disease. Regarding the imaging characteristics of metastatic GCA1, it appears from our study that no radiological parameters, tumor number or tumor uptake on somatostatin receptor scintigraphy could distinguish between local and metastatic tumors. All of the metastatic GCA1 patients accomplished tumor resection with a low compli-
cation rate, and with an excellent outcome. Following or in parallel with tumor resection, medical therapy was administered in five patients, based on clinical experience. Importantly, under treatment with SSAs, the disease stabilized in 3 patients, in one patient the primary tumor, the metastatic lymph nodes and the liver metastases regressed and completely disappeared (Figure 1 and Table 1), whereas in another patient, pegylated interferon α

Figure 1  Computed tomography and 68Ga-DOTATOC-PET-Computed tomography images before and during treatment with somatostatin analogue (sandostatin LAR 30 mg/mo). Pathologic uptake in the gastric and hepatic lesion (A + B) adjacent lymphadenopathy and liver lesion (C + D), disappeared on follow up imaging (E - H).
was added to the SSA and induced disease stabilization. In none of the twenty patients with metastatic GCA1 was disease progression observed over a mean follow-up period of 54 mo.

Based on the results of our study, metastatic GCA1 do exist, are extremely rare, and carry a good overall prognosis. Metastatic spread appears to be related to a tumor size of $\geq 1$ cm, and therefore endoscopic ultrasound evaluation is recommended in such patients. Elevated Ki-67 index of tumor proliferation, as well as high serum gastrin levels, represent additional risk factors for metastatic disease. Endoscopic resection and/or subtotal gastrectomy are recommended by the ENETS guidelines in all patients with gastric carcinoids of $\geq 1$ cm; however, in our personal opinion, SSAs might be considered as possible treatment in order to lower the elevated gastrin levels, suppress ECL cell hyperplasia, and obviate the need for surgical excisions, particularly in patients with multiple or relapsing tumors, as well as in those with metastatic disease of the liver. Treatment with SSAs could be theoretically continued as long as gastrin/GCA1 levels are suppressed, in parallel with disease stabilization observed on regular endoscopic follow-up. However, this approach is still problematic by the lack of controlled trials, the high cost of these drugs as well as the limited accessibility to SSAs in some areas. Although the potential role of SSAs (“cold” SSAs, as monthly injections, or radioactive “hot” SSAs, PRRT) cannot be denied - it remains still controversial and it has to be confirmed in larger studies. Moreover, surgical procedures should be most probably performed only in patients in whom total tumor excision can be expected. Therefore, in these patients, endoscopic surveillance (as well as repeated oncological surveillance by imaging in metastatic cases) is the most important measure. Prospective multicenter randomised studies, including larger number of patients, would be optimal for definition of the best therapeutic approach, the duration of treatment and its efficacy in terms of long-term survival. However, due to the extreme rarity of this condition, the probability for such trials is remote, and therefore clinicians who manage these patients will most probably have to rely on personal experience and data from retrospective studies, such as ours.

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