Tumor budding index and microvessel density assessment in patients with endometrial cancer: A pilot study

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Received December 8, 2019; Accepted May 27, 2020

DOI: 10.3892/ol.2020.11811

Abstract. The present study aimed to analyze the association between tumor budding index (TBI) and microvessel density (MVD) and selected clinicopathological features in female patients with endometrial cancer (EC). The present study included 137 patients, of whom 117 had endometrial endometrioid cancer and 3 had non-endometrioid EC (NEEC). Additionally, 8 cases of simple endometrial hyperplasia and 9 cases of atypical endometrial hyperplasia were included in the present study. Patient age, menopausal status, tumor histological type, grade and International Federation of Gynecologists and Obstetricians (FIGO) clinical stage were investigated. Immunohistochemistry was utilized to detect MVD using a CD34 antibody, and a laminin-5γ2 antibody was used for TBI assessment. In nonmalignant endometrial lesions, the TBI was significantly lower than that in patients with EC and NEEC (P=0.002). Significant differences in median TBI (MD-TBI) were also observed between patients with low-grade EC (MD-TBI, 4.5) and high-grade EC (MD-TBI, 16.2; P=0.01). Age, body mass index and tumor FIGO stage were not indicated to be associated with the MD-TBI. Premenopausal patients with EC had lower MD-TBI values than postmenopausal patients (0.3 vs. 11.1; P<0.005). The median MVD-CD34 in the study group was 19 (range, 13-29). Significant differences in MVD-CD34 were observed between malignant and nonmalignant endometrial lesions (P=0.01). Histological grade was markedly associated with tumor MVD-CD34 (P=0.001). The MVD was higher in high-grade cancer (G3; MVD-CD34, 24.9) than in grade G1 and G2 lesions (MVD-CD34, 14 and 18.6, respectively; P=0.01). FIGO clinical stage was not associated with MVD-CD34 in low and high stage lesions (MD, 18.4 for FIGO stage I/II; MD, 17.6 for FIGO stage III/IV; P=0.2). High MVD was markedly associated with high MD-TBI (P=0.0002). In conclusion, TBI could be a valuable indicator of tumor aggressiveness in patients with EC. The presence of the tumor budding phenomenon with increased MVD may have the potential to further refine clinical management decisions when endometrial malignancy is detected.

Introduction

Endometrial cancer (EC) is the most common gynecological malignancy in high-income countries, and it generally is associated with a good prognosis due to early-stage diagnosis (1). In patients with EC, the survival rates are associated with tumor stage, the depth of myometrial invasion and the histological type of cancer, including the cancer cell grade of differentiation. Following surgery and tumor removal, the key factors associated with prognosis are histological grade and clinical cancer stage, and these are important for determining further treatment decisions. EC has been traditionally divided into type 1 and 2 based on microscopic findings, and these are associated with different clinical outcomes. Furthermore, ~85% of newly-diagnosed cases are histologically endometrioid type...
endometrial cancer (EEC) and belong to the type 1 group, whereas type 2 cancers, such as serous carcinoma, are found in 3-10% of cases. Endometrial clear cell carcinoma accounts for <5% of diagnoses and both latter types belong to the group of non-endometrioid endometrial cancers (NEECs) (2). In recent years, this simplistic pathological classification of EC types has been challenged by high-quality molecular data available from large genome databases. For example, four clinically distinct EC types are defined by The Cancer Genome Atlas database. These types have been selected on the basis of their overall gene mutational status, which includes specific p53, polymerase ε (a DNA polymerase involved in DNA replication and repair) and phosphatase and tensin homolog protein mutations, along with microsatellite instability and histology assessments (3). Additionally, novel histologic categories of endometrial hyperplasia (EH) types, with clear prognostic implications as possible EC precursors, have been proposed (4). Furthermore, it is becoming evident from an epidemiologic point of view that metabolic factors may serve an important role in EC (5). Although consensus in various aspects of EC diagnosis and treatment has been recently reached by the European Society for Medical Oncology, the European Society of Gynaecological Oncology and the European Society of Radiation Oncology (6), there is a need for novel, robust, prognostic and predictive biomarkers of EC and EH that could be used in the near future to improve therapeutic decisions.

One notable histological parameter is tumor budding (TB), and its prognostic significance was first described by Hase et al (7) in 1993 in colorectal cancer. TB is defined as single cells or clusters of up to four cells at the margin of the tumor front (7). This specific phenomenon has been observed in various types of cancer in which the invasive parts of the tumors send finger-like projections called ‘buds’ into adjacent tissues (8). During local cancer growth, some of these cell clusters detach from the main tumor body and invade the neighboring stroma. This phenomenon is regarded as a histological basis of metastasis formation and further tumor invasion. In colorectal cancer, TB has been demonstrated to be a novel prognostic factor that may be used to better define the risk of adverse outcomes (8). Additionally, Yamaguchi et al (9) have revealed that TB is a distinct morphological feature that has biologic and prognostic significance in adenocarcinoma of the lung. Gujam et al (10) have found that, in patients with invasive ductal breast cancer, TB is a significant predictor of survival. Furthermore, it is independent of adverse pathological characteristics and components of the tumor microenvironment (10). Lugli et al (11) have proposed a three-tier system that should be used along with budding count in order to facilitate risk stratification in patients with colorectal cancer. Since TB and tumor grade are not the same and TB is now a well-described and standardized prognostic factor, these authors concluded that TB should be included in guidelines and protocols for colorectal cancer reporting (11). Interestingly, this histopathological feature can be identified by usual routine pathological examination in different types of cancer (12).

TB may be further divided into peritumoral budding (PTB), where tumor buds are counted at the tumor front, and intratumoral budding (ITB), where clustered cancer cells representing tumor buds are observed and counted in the tumor center (13). PTB can only be assessed in endoscopic or surgical resection specimens, whereas ITB can be assessed in both colorectal cancer biopsies and resection specimens. Both ITB and PTB have been considered to be morphological markers of epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) (14). EMT can be found in physiological and pathological conditions, and it has been defined as the transformation of an epithelial cell into a spindle cell (14). Using immunohistochemistry (IHC), the loss of membrane E-cadherin expression and the appearance of mesenchymal cell markers can be demonstrated (15). Notably, an association between loss of E-cadherin and TB has been identified in EC (16). TB can be studied with the use of IHC and specific markers, such as E-cadherin or laminin. The latter is the main active element of various basal membranes, including the perivascular basal lamina (17). Laminin promotes attachment, spreading, scattering and migration of non-tumorigenic epithelial cells. Previous studies have revealed that the expression levels of laminin subchain, namely laminin-5γ2-chain (L5γ2), could be a specific marker for invasive tumors because it is frequently expressed as a monomer in several types of cancer cells in association with a lack of simultaneous expression of other laminin chains, such as L5-α3 and L5-β3 (18,19). Furthermore, immunohistochemical experiments have revealed that laminin 5-γ2 is expressed at the invasive front of TB cells (20).

Most solid tumors that grow beyond 2-3 mm in size require angiogenesis (21). Normal endometrium secretes angiogenic factors, including mainly vascular endothelial growth factor, during the menstrual cycle and in early pregnancy (22). Elevated concentrations of proangiogenic factors secreted by malignant tumors, such as EC, along with activation of tissue matrix metalloproteinases induce the formation of the microvascular network (23). This increased vascularity is frequently observed in aggressive EC and could be used as a specific target in anticancer therapy (24). Blood vessels in cancer exhibit various structural and functional abnormalities, including unusual leakiness which enables the dissemination of tumor cells into the bloodstream. Furthermore, malignant tumor microvessel density (MVD) is heterogeneous; the highest values are found in the invading tumor edge, where the density may be 4-10 times greater than inside the tumor. Additionally, the arrangement of vessels in the center of a tumor is much more chaotic than at its edges (25). Both MVD and TB can be examined by light microscopy and histopathological examination with or without IHC. These methods are much cheaper to perform than molecular analyses and are readily available in most pathology units. Based on a sufficient number of standardized cases, they may offer novel indications for a more accurate classification of the removed endometrial tumors.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have attempted to associate tumor angiogenesis with TB and with various clinical and pathological parameters in patients with EC. Therefore, the present pilot study aimed to analyze the association between TB and selected clinicopathological features in female patients with EC.

Materials and methods

Patients and tumor samples. The present study included 137 female patients, among them 117 had EEC and 3 had NEEC.
Additionally, the present study included 8 cases of simple EH and 9 cases of atypical endometrial hyperplasia (AEH). The patients received surgery at the Ist Department of Gynecological Oncology and Gynecology of the Medical University of Lublin (Lublin, Poland) between January 2011 and January 2014.

Data collected included patient age at diagnosis, tumor stage and histological grade. Postmenopausal status was considered as when a woman had no periods for 12 consecutive months prior to surgery. The histological type and grade of the tumors was classified according to the criteria of the World Health Organization (4). Malignant tumor staging was established according to the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO 2009) criteria (26). In some, but not all, patients, typical coexisting diseases, such as obesity, diabetes and/or hypertension, were noted. According to previously published data (5,6,24,25,27), the present study did not regard these diseases as potentially confounding variables of both tumor angiogenesis and/or TB. All patients included in the present study were treated with cytostatics, since pelvic lymph node resection according to the FIGO guidelines. All analyzed samples were obtained by excision. None of the patients in the study groups were treated with a total abdominal or laparoscopic hysterectomy with adnexectomy with or without high power field (HPF). MVD was presented as the mean number of vessels per one HPF.

TB and TBI. TB was defined as dissociated single cancer cells or clusters of up to four cancer cells with cytoplasmic L5γ2 immunostaining, ahead of the invasive tumor front. First, the area was scanned at low power (x100) to identify the region displaying maximal budding. Subsequently, tumor buds were counted in high-power fields (x400; 0.49 mm²) in the area at the invasive front. The present study compared two widespread methods of quantification of tumor buds. First, as proposed by Ueno et al (8), the assessment was performed by counting buds in a region of interest spanning one microscope high-power field (1-HPF) and displaying maximal budding. Classification was dichotomic and scored as ‘negative’ (<5 buds) or ‘positive’ (≥5 buds). The ‘10-HPF’ method proposed by Karamitopoulou et al (29) was the second method of counting tumor buds used in the present study. According to this method, the average number of the 10 counts was taken as the final TBI.

Statistical analysis. Statistical analysis was performed using Statistica software v.10.0 (StatSoft, Inc.). The association between categorical variables was examined by Pearson’s χ² test or Fisher’s exact test, as deemed appropriate. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of data distribution. Mann-Whitney nonparametric tests were used to compare categorical with continuous tumor variables when there were two categories, whereas the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test was used when there were more than two categories. P<0.05 was considered to indicate a statistically significant difference.
Selected clinical and pathological features of the studied population.

| Feature                        | N (%) |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Type of endometrial pathology |       |
| EC                            | 117 (85.4) |
| NEEC                          | 3 (2.2) |
| EH                            | 8 (5.8) |
| AEH                           | 9 (6.6) |
| Histopathological grading     |       |
| G1                            | 35 (29) |
| G2                            | 74 (61) |
| G3                            | 11 (10) |
| Clinical staging (FIGO)       |       |
| I                             | 70 (58) |
| II                            | 33 (27) |
| III                           | 16 (13) |
| IV                            | 1 (1)  |

EC, endometrial endometrioid cancer; NEEC, non-endometrial endometrioid cancer; EH, endometrial hyperplasia; AEH, atypical endometrial hyperplasia.

Features that best distinguished endometrial hyperplasia or EC from normal endometrium included glandular crowding that was well distinguished from normal glands and abnormal architecture of the glands, with their long axes pointing in different directions or being parallel to the endometrial surface. Other histological features used for the discrimination between malignant and benign lesions included irregularly-shaped glands that were dilated, densely packed non-secretory glands, including budding or branching glands and nuclear atypia in cases of atypical hyperplasia, and EC with cribriform or confluent glands in cases of carcinoma. Selected clinical and pathological features of the study population are presented in Table I.

MVD-CD34 assessment. Table II shows median values of MVD-CD34 according to clinical and histological features in endometrial lesions. In the patients included in the present study, the median value (MD) of MVD-CD34 was 19/HPF (range, 13-29). Statistically significant differences were identified between patients with malignant lesions and patients with nonmalignant endometrial lesions (P=0.01). The present study revealed that the median MVD-CD34 in patients with EEC was higher than that in patients with EH/AEH and NEEC. MVD was associated with histological grade and well-differentiated tumors in which MVD was significantly lower than in undifferentiated tumors (MD, 14 vs. 24.9 in G1 and G3, respectively; P=0.001). Age, menopausal status and BMI were not associated with tumor MVD. MVD, as assessed using the anti-CD34 antibody, did not differ between the groups with low and high clinical FIGO stage of EC (MD, 18.4 in the low-stage group; and MD, 17.6 in the high-stage group; P=0.2).

TB assessment using laminin L5γ2 expression. Laminin L5γ2 expression in tumor buds was identified in 120 (84%) patients with endometrial lesions, and 89 of them were classified as TB-positive. Table III shows the results of TB quantification in relation to clinical and histopathological features in endometrial lesions assessed using the ‘1-HPF’ scoring method. Examples of laminin 5γ2-chain expression in tumor buds in EC are shown in Figs. 1 and 2. More TB-positive lesions were observed in patients with EC compared with in patients with non-malignant hyperplasia (P=0.003). Table IV presents median values of TBI according to clinical and histopathological features in endometrial lesions assessed using the ‘10-HPF’ scoring method. The median value of TBI was 9.2 (range, 1.2-16.8) and it was significantly associated with malignant endometrial lesions (P=0.002). Benign endometrial lesions had a TBI ranging among 0.4 for EH, 1.1 for AEH and 14.1 for NEEC. Figs. 3 and 4 present typical patterns of TB in the invasive front of EC. The median TBI was 10.7 in women with EC. Most of the high grade endometrial tumors (G3) were positive for the TB phenomenon (13/15; P=0.006). Additionally, high TBI values were more often observed in high-grade tumors than in low grade malignant tumors (P=0.01). Fig. 5 presents median values of TBI according to...
The median values of TBI in patients with G2 and G3 EC were 12.1 and 16.2, respectively. These indices were markedly higher than TBI values in low grade tumors which had a median TBI of 4.5. No significant associations between TB and the clinical stage of EC were found. However, advanced malignant endometrial tumors (FIGO stage III and IV) tended to be TB-positive more often (13/17). The median values of TBI did not differ between low clinical FIGO stage (I and II) and high clinical stage (III and IV) tumors. The TBI values were 8.8 in low FIGO stage EC and 10.3 in high-stage EC (P=0.2). TBI was markedly associated with MVD (P=0.0002) and TB-positive tumors had a markedly higher MVD than TB-negative EC. Furthermore, menopausal status was associated with TB, and TB-positive tumors were found more frequently in postmenopausal patients (P=0.03). In the group of premenopausal patients, the TBI was significantly higher compared with that in postmenopausal women (TBI, 0.3 vs. 11.1, respectively; P<0.005). No association was identified between TBI and patient age (P=0.1) or BMI (P=0.12). Fig. 6 presents the median values of MVD in TB positive and negative ECs. The association between MVD and TBI in EC is presented in Fig. 7.
Table III. The results of tumor budding quantification in relation to clinical and histopathological features in endometrial lesions (1-HPF scoring method).

| Feature                                      | Negative (≤5 buds/HPF) | Positive (<5 buds/HPF) | P-values (χ² or Z) |
|----------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Type of endometrial pathology                |                         |                        |                   |
| EC (n=117; 85.4%)                            | 33 (28%)                | 83 (72%)               | 18.8; P=0.0003    |
| NEEC (n=3; 2.2%)                             | 1 (33%)                 | 2 (67%)                |                   |
| EH (n=8; 5.8%)                               | 8 (100%)                | 0 (0%)                 |                   |
| AEH (n=9; 6.6%)                              | 5 (56%)                 | 4 (44%)                |                   |
| Menopausal status                            |                         |                        |                   |
| Before menopause (n=11; 8%)                  | 7 (15%)                 | 4 (5%)                 | 4.4; P=0.03       |
| After menopause (n=126; 92%)                 | 40 (85%)                | 85 (95%)               |                   |
| Histopathological grade of tumor (grading)   |                         |                        |                   |
| G1 (n=31; 25%)                               | 15 (44%)                | 16 (18%)               | 10.2; P=0.006     |
| G2 (n=77; 63%)                               | 18 (53%)                | 59 (67%)               |                   |
| G3 (n=15; 12%)                               | 1 (3%)                  | 13 (15%)               |                   |
| Clinical stage of the disease (FIGO staging) |                         |                        |                   |
| I (n=73; 61%)                                | 24 (70%)                | 48 (57%)               | 2.4; P=0.4        |
| II (n=30; 25%)                               | 6 (18%)                 | 24 (28%)               |                   |
| III+IV (n=17; 14%)                           | 4 (12%)                 | 13 (15%)               |                   |
| Microvessel density (MVD-CD34)               |                         |                        |                   |
| Median (range)                               | 14.4 (9.9-22.7)         | 19.1 (14.8-30.8)       | -3.01; P=0.002    |
| BMI                                          |                         |                        |                   |
| Median (range)                               | 31.6 (26.5-35.6)        | 31 (26.9-34.8)         | 0.17; P=0.8       |

EC, endometrial endometrioid cancer; NEEC, non-endometrial endometrioid cancer; EH-endometrial hyperplasia; AEH, atypical endometrial hyperplasia; MVD-CD34, microvessel density assessed with CD-34 antibody.

Discussion

Most EC cases are diagnosed in early stages, but 15-20% of women with aggressive cancer types have an increased risk of occult malignancy dissemination and tumor recurrence despite chemo- and radiotherapy (30). Currently, tumor staging according to the FIGO criteria remains the basic method used to stratify women with EC into prognostic...
groups that could benefit from different types of surgery and chemo- or radiotherapy. Factors controlling growth of EC and its interactions with the surrounding uterine stromal microenvironment have recently gained increasing attention. Little is known about the regulation of TB and MVD in EC. Furthermore, in most of the studied cancer types such as lung, breast, colorectal and endometrial endometrioid cancers, the presence of tumor budding phenomenon was associated with lower survival rates (8-11).

A putative connection between TB and neoangiogenesis at the invasive tumor front has not been investigated yet. The present study revealed that TB, in terms of L5γ2 expression, increased gradually in endometrial lesions as they progressed from benign endometrial hyperplasia to AEH and finally to EC (EEC and NEEC). When examining tumor sections stained for L5γ2, clusters of undifferentiated malignant cells were observed in the tumor stroma, and these were located mainly in close proximity and ahead of the invasive front of the tumor. It was speculated that L5γ2 expression in tumor buds at the invasive front of endometrial neoplasia may be associated with the process of tumor differentiation. The present results indicated that there was a link between intratumoral MVD and endometrial tumor cell proliferation or TB. This was expected, since an adequate blood vascular system is required for effective tumor cell growth. Furthermore, when activated, endothelial cells can release various paracrine growth factors important for cancer cells, such as collagenases, urokinases and plasminogen activators (25). These factors enable tumors to spread into adjacent tissues and lymphovascular spaces. Tumor buds could be regarded as a more invasive subpopulation of cells disseminated from the mass of the tumor. Therefore, they may have acquired the ability to invade the lymphatic system and metastasize to distant nodes. This hypothesis is in line with the results of a previous study by Koyuncuoglu et al. (16) which reported a high prognostic value of TB in both endometrioid and non-endometrioid EC. In this study, cytokeratin C11 was used for improved visualization of numerous buds fused with stromal fibroblasts, yielding three- to four-fold higher tumor bud calculations compared with those using only histological hematoxylin and eosin (H&E).

Table IV. Median values of Tumor Budding Index (TBI) according to clinical and histopathological features in endometrial neoplasia (10-HPF scoring method).

| Feature | Median (range) | P-value |
|---------|----------------|---------|
| All groups | 9.2 (1.2-16.8); min-max: 0-29.8 |         |
| Histological type of endometrial lesion |         |
| EC (n=117; 85.4%) | 10.7 (3.2-17.7) | H=15.2; P=0.002 |
| NEEC (n=3; 2.2%) | 14.1 (0-28) |         |
| EH (n=8; 5.8%) | 0.4 (0-1.7) |         |
| AEH (n=9; 6.6%) | 1.1 (0.5-13.1) |         |
| Menopausal status |         |
| Before menopause n=11 (8%) | 0.3 (0-6.1) | Z=3.3; P=0.0009 |
| After menopause n=126 (92%) | 11.1 (2.3-17.7) |         |
| Histological grade of tumor (grading) |         |
| G1 (n=32; 23%) | 4.5 (0.6-13.5) | H=8.1; P=0.01 |
| G2 (n=77; 56%) | 12.1 (5.8-17.9) |         |
| G3 (n=15; 11%) | 16.2 (5.8-21.6) |         |
| Clinical stage of the disease (FIGO staging) |         |
| I (n=82; 60%) | 8.8 (2.5-15.7) | H=5.1; P=0.2 |
| II (n=27; 20%) | 14.5 (5.5-18.8) |         |
| III+IV (n=13; 9%) | 10.3 (2.6-18.7) |         |

EC, endometrial endometrioid cancer; NEEC, non-endometrial endometrioid cancer; EH, endometrial hyperplasia, AEH, atypical endometrial hyperplasia; MVD-CD34, microvessel density assessed with CD-34 antibody; HPF, high power field; BMI, Body Mass Index.

Figure 7. Correlation between microvessel density and tumor budding index in endometrial cancers. TBI, tumor budding index; MVD-CD34, microvessel density measured with antibody to CD34; HPF, high power field.
staining. TB was detected by both H&E and cytokeratin C11 staining methods in 95 patients with primary EC. The authors demonstrated that a high TB count was strongly associated with undifferentiated tumors, advanced stage and decreased postoperative survival. Park et al. (12) recently demonstrated that TB is associated with depth of invasion and higher FIGO grade in patients with EC, suggesting reduced histologic differentiation, lymphovascular invasion and lymph node involvement. The presence of TB is an independent parameter for the prediction of lymphovascular invasion in multivariate analysis and a significant factor for the prediction of lymph node metastasis in univariate analysis (12). Another similar study by Huang et al. (31) demonstrated the prognostic significance of TB in early-stage cervical cancer (ESCC). They revealed that TB is an independent and unfavorable prognostic factor for patients with ESCC. The authors have suggested that following radical surgery, TB assessment could be promising factor for patients with ESCC. The authors have suggested that following radical surgery, TB assessment could be promising

The strengths of the present study include the relatively large group of patients who received surgery for EC at one institution. We also are aware that the group with endometrial hyperplasias was much smaller and that it’s usually much better hyperplasias was much smaller and that it’s usually much better if samples from the uterine cavity could be sufficient for both histology and TB assessment. Recently, Almangush et al. (36) have reviewed all published reports on TB in diagnostic biopsies and matching cancer surgical specimens. They found that not only did all these studies show that evaluation of TB is easily applicable, but also that there is a significant association between the expression of TB in both surgical specimens and their corresponding biopsies specimens. Furthermore, the assessment of the TB phenomenon in diagnostic biopsies enabled a more accurate prognosis of lymphatic spread beyond the uterus and decreased survival of patients with EC. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no study that compared TB in endometrial biopsies and material obtained after hysterectomy.

The strengths of the present study include the relatively large group of patients who received surgery for EC at one institution. We also are aware that the group with endometrial hyperplasias was much smaller and that it’s usually much better to have 60-65 participants in both conditions rather than 17 in one condition and 120 in the other - even though the total number of participants is much greater in the second set-up. However, simple randomization can cause serious imbalances and in fact, theoretically, it's possible to end up with no participants in one of the groups. Prior to the present study, it was difficult to make predictions about if and how EMT and TB could influence neoangiogenesis in malignant endometrial tumors. This was the first study to report an association between the phenomenon of TB in EC and MVD assessment. The presented results could be important in furthering our understanding of the role of malignant EC cell interactions in the uterine stroma. Furthermore, since EMT inhibitors are already available, future studies should address the question if TB measurements could serve as potential markers for targeted anticancer therapy in patients with EC.

There were potential sources of bias in the present study, and the findings of the present study were subject to at least three limitations. First, the intensity of TB was arbitrarily categorized into low and high intensity. TB counts are also
prone to subjective and interobserver variability. However, in the present study, only one experienced researcher (SC) was responsible for IHC microscopic preparations, detection, counting and reporting of the relevant data. Therefore, interobserver variability was not a possible confounding factor. Second, the present study used only a small number of different types of benign endometrial lesions. It was attempted to show the results in a relatively large group of EC cases, but it was also considered interesting to make comparisons with several cases of endometrial hyperplasia, both simple and atypical. It was considered unnecessary to discard data in order to perfectly balance the datasets, although the simple randomization used in the present study had less power, i.e. a lower chance to find systematic differences between the studied conditions. Third, despite investigating 120 EC cases, the present analysis remained hampered by a lack of survival analysis due to the relatively small number of non-endometroid EC cases. An explanation for omitting this parameter is that the survival data have already been published in two other studies (12,16), and that the survival analysis in cases of EC must take into consideration >10 years since the collection of data. All the aforementioned limitations mean that the findings of the present study need to be interpreted cautiously.

Despite the relatively limited sample size, the present study also offers valuable insights into EC microangiogenesis and its possible association with the TB phenomenon. As has been suggested in colorectal cancer, TB may be applied in the future as an additional quantitative prognostic factor to facilitate the management of patients with EC in three possible clinical scenarios. First, if TB and/or increased MVD are identified in uterine endometrial samples prior to surgery, the patients could benefit from pelvic lymph node dissection. Second, the presence of intensive high-grade TB may be considered as an additional indication that neoadjuvant chemotherapy could increase the chances of survival of a patient. Third, the results of preoperative endometrial biopsy and the finding of intensive TB could be used to recommend neoadjuvant chemotherapy for patients and maybe, if validated, could predict the regression of these malignant tumors (37,38). TB grade could potentially help discriminate patients into groups with worse or better prognosis, even in cases of advanced-stage EC. Further studies are required to examine the molecular factors and mechanisms of TB and its possible association with microangiogenesis at the invasive front of EC.

In summary, it was concluded that TB assessment using laminin expression combined with MVD measurements using a CD34 antibody provided novel insights into whether these markers could be novel and valuable indicators of tumor aggressiveness in patients with EC. Additionally, it was hypothesized that the present results highlight the potential usefulness of the TB phenomenon and appeared to identify the behavior of aggressive EC. An implication of this is the possibility that both markers combined could be further applied in patients with endometrial malignant tumors to facilitate improved and personalized treatment planning.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr Jadwiga Sierocińska-Sawa, Head of the Department of Pathology of the Clinical Hospital No. 1 in Lublin (Lublin, Poland), for her excellent expert assistance with the tumor immunopathological studies and Professor Agata Smolen, Head of the Department of Biostatistics of the Medical University of Lublin for her assistance with the statistical analysis. This abstract was presented at the 2016 International Gynecological Cancer Society Meeting in Lisbon, Portugal (October 29-31, 2016), and was published at 16th Biennial Meeting of the International Gynecologic Cancer Society, International Journal of Gynecologic Cancer 2016; 26:1-1193.

Funding

The current study was supported in part by a grant (grant no. DS119) from the Medical University of Lublin.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors’ contributions

TK was involved in project development, data collection, data analysis, manuscript preparation and editing. TL participated in project development, data collection, data analysis and manuscript preparation. NS was involved project development, data analysis and manuscript editing. GG developed the project and analyzed the data. SC performed data collection, immunohistochemical studies and data analysis. MC was involved in project development, data collection and manuscript editing. AC participated in project development, data analysis, manuscript editing and supervision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The present study was approved by the Bioethical Committee of the Medical University of Lublin. Oral patient consent was obtained for participation.

Patient consent for publication

Oral patient consent was obtained for publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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