Correlation of Clinicopathologic Features of Resected Hepatocellular Carcinoma with Hepatitis C Virus Genotype

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Clinicopathologic findings in patients with hepatocellular carcinoma complicating hepatitis C virus and outcomes after liver resection were compared between different viral genotypes. One hundred and forty-seven patients with both anti-hepatitis C virus antibody and hepatitis C virus RNA in their sera underwent curative resection for hepatocellular carcinoma in our department between 1991 and 1997. Of these patients, 115 were infected with hepatitis C virus genotype 1b (group 1), and 32 were infected with 2a or 2b (group 2). Clinicopathologic findings and outcomes after operation were compared between the two groups. Alanine aminotransferase activity was significantly higher in group 2 than in group 1. Genotypes did not differ concomitantly with histopathologic features of the carcinoma or adjacent hepatic tissue. Although the tumor-free survival rate did not differ significantly between the two groups, recurrence was not detected during the period beyond 3 years following operation in group 2, while recurrences arose during that period in 16 group 1 patients, most of whom continued to manifest active hepatitis. In 7 of these 16 patients, the recurrent tumors were histologically multicentric in origin. The cumulative survival rate was significantly lower in group 1 than 2. Multivariate analysis indicated that genotype 1b was an independent risk factor for short survival. Patients infected with genotype 1b may have a relatively high risk of ongoing hepatocarcinogenesis and more aggressive progression of associated liver dysfunction, resulting in a poorer outcome than with other genotypes.

Key words: Liver resection — Hepatitis C virus — Viral genotype — Hepatocarcinogenesis — Multicentric carcinogenesis

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is a major cause of chronic liver disease, such as chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis, as well as hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Recent studies have demonstrated that HCV can be classified into several genotypes based on variations in nucleotide sequence.1,2 HCV genotype 1b is reportedly the most prevalent variant in the United States, Europe, and Japan.3–5 In Japan, among patients infected with HCV, about 70% of patients had the viral genotype 1b, 20% had genotype 2a, and 10% had genotype 2b. Patients with genotype 1a or 3 are rare.6,7 The pathogenicity of genotype 1b seems greater than that of other genotypes in terms of associated liver damage, progression of chronic hepatitis C, and development of HCC.5–17 Although controversy persists,8–22 Another unfavorable association of genotype 1b is a relatively poor response to interferon.4,23,24 Additionally, after liver transplantation, patients infected with genotype 1b reportedly developed more aggressive liver disease than transplant recipients infected with other genotypes.16,25,26

In spite of advances in medical imaging and perioperative management, outcome after resection of virally associated HCC remains unsatisfactory, with a high recurrence rate as well as continued progression of associated liver disease.27 Risk factors for recurrence and prognostic factors for other aspects of outcome after resection of HCC have been identified by several investigators.27–36 However, clinicopathologic findings in patients with HCC and outcome after resection of HCC have not been compared between different HCV genotypes, and we set out to do this in the present study.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Patients Between 1991 and 1997, 152 patients with both anti-HCV antibody and HCV RNA in their sera, but lacking hepatitis B surface antigen, underwent curative resection for HCC in our department. Curative resection was defined as complete resection of all macroscopically detectable tumors, with absence of any histologically evident tumor along the parenchymal transection line. No tumors remained in the remnant liver according to computed tomography 3 to 4 weeks after resection. Among the 152 patients, 5 patients infected with more than one HCV genotype were excluded from this study. Remaining patients included 120 men and 27 women, with ages ranging from 46 to 77 years. In 4 of the 152 patients, HCC was
detected after interferon therapy. This study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration and the guidelines of the ethics committee of our institution. Informed consent was obtained from each patient.

Detection of HCV RNA and HCV genotypetype analysis

Serum HCV RNA was detected by polymerase chain reaction with reverse transcription and primers derived from a conserved 5'-untranslated region of the viral genome. HCV RNA was also detected using a branched DNA probe method (Quantiplex HCV-RNA, Chiron, Emeryville, CA). HCV genotypes were determined by amplification of the putative core gene described by Okamoto et al. and were classified according to Simmonds et al.

Pathologic examination

Resected liver specimens were sliced serially at a thickness of 5 mm and fixed in 10% formalin. Tissue was then embedded in paraffin, followed by sectioning and staining with hematoxylin and eosin. Histopathologic diagnosis was based on the General Rules for the Clinical and Pathological Study of Primary Liver Cancer in Japan, with some modifications. When a recurrent tumor(s) included a component of well-differentiated tumor, the tumor was also assumed to have a multicentric rather than metastatic origin according to previously reported criteria. Noncancerous hepatic tissue was also examined pathologically according to the method described by Adachi et al. In a noncirrhotic liver, inactive hepatitis was defined as lymphocytic inflammation restricted to the widened portal tracts, leaving the parenchymal limiting plate preserved without necrosis of the periporal hepatocytes. Active hepatitis was defined as portal and periportal inflammation with erosion of the limiting plate, piecemeal necrosis, and fibrosis. In an inactive cirrhotic liver, the interface between the perichyma and septa was sharply defined and cellular infiltration was either mild or confined to the septa. There was little or no focal necrosis or inflammation deep within the nodules. In an active cirrhosis, the interface between the nodules and septa was blurred by piecemeal necrosis and there were abundant inflammatory cells. A diagnosis was considered as confirmed when at least two pathologists agreed.

Operation and follow-up

Bisegmentectomy was done in 17 patients, segmentectomy in 29, subsegmentectomy in 24, and partial resection in 77. After discharge from the hospital, patients were followed closely in the outpatient department. When tumor recurrence was suspected, abnormalities in tumor marker assays, ultrasonography, computed tomography, or some combination of these, angiography, an ultrasonographically guided biopsy, or both were performed urgently.

Factors affecting recurrence and outcome

We studied putative risk factors for recurrence and unfavorable postoperative outcome as suggested by previous studies and our own clinical experience. The variables chosen were age; sex; history of blood transfusion; history of alcohol abuse [at least 86 g of daily ethanol intake for at least 10 years, as defined by the Liver Cancer Study Group in Japan]; results of laboratory tests such as serum concentrations of α-fetoprotein, albumin, and total bilirubin, activities of aspartate aminotransferase and alanine aminotransferase (ALT), platelet count, and indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min; observation of portal invasion and intrahepatic metastasis; cirrhosis and activity of hepatitis in noncancerous tissues; type of resection; surgical free margin; and operative blood loss. When the surgical free margin was less than 10 mm, the margin was defined as tumor wedge positive. When the changes in ALT activity after the operation were evaluated, the mean ALT activity obtained for each patient after the operation (laboratory tests were performed at least four times a year) was calculated.

Statistical analysis

Student’s t test was used to compare mean age between groups. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the results of laboratory tests. The χ² test or Fisher’s exact test was used to compare categorical data. Survival curves after the operation were calculated by the Kaplan-Meier method and the significance of differences was evaluated by means of the log-rank test. To estimate independent risk factors for recurrence and postoperative outcome, a Cox’s proportional hazards regression analysis was performed. P values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

RESULTS

Clinicopathologic findings

Of the 147 patients, 115 (78%) were infected with HCV genotype 1b (group 1), and 32 (22%) were infected with genotype 2a or 2b (group 2). There was no patient infected with a genotype other than 1b, 2a, and 2b. A comparison of the two groups revealed no significant difference of mean age, sex distribution, proportion of patients with a history of blood transfusion, or proportion of patients with a history of alcohol abuse (Table I). In 3 patients in group 1 and 1 patient in group 2, HCC was detected after interferon therapy. ALT activity was significantly higher in group 2 than in group 1 (P=0.044). Albumin concentration was significantly higher in group 2 than in group 1 (P=0.016), but that was within the normal range. No significant difference was seen between groups in the occurrence of an elevated α-fetoprotein concentration (>200 ng/ml), or in aspartate aminotransferase activity, total bilirubin concentration, platelet count, or indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min. No significant difference was apparent in tumor size, prevalences of portal invasion and intrahepatic metastasis, or degree of differentiation of the main tumor. No significant difference was noted in propor-
Risk factors for recurrence and overall postoperative outcome

The overall tumor-free survival rate tended to be lower in group 1 than 2, but this difference was not statistically significant ($P=0.181$; Fig. 1, Table II). During the 3 years after operation, tumor-free survival rates decreased along similar curves in both groups, but after 3 years following operation no group 2 patients developed a recurrence, whereas recurrence occurred in 16 group 1 patients. We next compared clinicopathologic features in patients with and without recurrences later than 3 years following operation. The proportions of patients infected with HCV genotype 1b and of patients with a high average of postoperative ALT activity (>45 IU/liter, indicating continuous active hepatitis) were significantly higher in patients with recurrence beyond 3 years following operation than in patients without recurrence (Table III). Pathologic examination of the recurrent tumor was possible in 8 of the 16...
group 1 patients with recurrence, and in 7 of the 8 patients the tumors showed histologic evidence of multicentric origin. The cumulative survival rate was significantly lower in group 1 than in group 2 ($P=0.019$; Fig. 2, Table IV).

While 3 patients in group 2 died of HCC recurrence, 44 patients in group 1 died of recurrence and 3 others in the same group died of deteriorating liver function without tumor recurrence. We compared the types of treatments after recurrence between the two groups and no significant difference was found (Table V).

Multivariate analysis indicated that intrahepatic metastasis and portal invasion were independent risk factors for recurrence (Table VI). The odds ratio for tumor recurrence with HCV genotype 1b relative to other genotypes was 1.619. Genotype 1b was an independent risk factor for short survival ($P=0.044$). Odds ratio for short survival with HCV genotype 1b relative to other genotypes was 3.346.

### Table II. The Number of Patients at Risk for Recurrence over Follow-up Time

| Years after operation | Group 1 | Group 2 |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| 0                     | 115     | 32      |
| 1                     | 79      | 23      |
| 2                     | 48      | 14      |
| 3                     | 27      | 6       |
| 4                     | 13      | 4       |
| 5                     | 7       | 2       |
| 6                     | 4       | 2       |
| 7                     | 1       | 0       |
| 8                     | 0       | 0       |

### Table III. Genotype and Hepatitis Activity in Patients with and without Recurrence More than 3 Years Following Operation

| Variable                                | Recurrence more than 3 years following operation | $P$   |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------|
| Genotype (1b/other)$a$                   | Yes ($n=16$)                                   | 0.009 |
| Postoperative ALT activity              | Yes ($n=16$)                                   | 0.019 |

($>45$ IU/liter)$a$  ($\%$)

| Variable                                | Yes ($n=16$) | No ($n=17$) | $P$   |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-------|
| Genotype (1b/other)$a$                   | 16/0         | 11/6        | 0.009 |
| Postoperative ALT activity              | 15 (94)      | 10 (59)     | 0.019 |

($>45$ IU/liter)$a$  ($\%$)

### Table IV. The Number of Patients at Risk for Survival over Follow-up Time

| Years after operation | Group 1 | Group 2 |
|-----------------------|---------|---------|
| 0                     | 115     | 32      |
| 1                     | 103     | 27      |
| 2                     | 81      | 23      |
| 3                     | 71      | 17      |
| 4                     | 50      | 10      |
| 5                     | 17      | 7       |
| 6                     | 10      | 5       |
| 7                     | 5       | 0       |
| 8                     | 0       | 0       |

### Table V. Numbers of Patients Receiving Various Therapies for Recurrent Liver Tumor in Group 1 ($n=81$) and Group 2 ($n=16$)

| Group 1 | Group 2 |
|---------|---------|
| Second resection |
| Alone   | 4       | 1       |
| With TAE/HAI | 2        | 0       |
| With PEIT | 2       | 1       |
| With TAE/HAI and PEIT | 9   | 0       |
| TAE/HAI |
| Alone   | 29      | 5       |
| With PEIT | 20      | 6       |
| PEIT    | 4       | 2       |
| No therapy | 11$^b$ | 1       |

$^a$ Numbers of patients.

HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV, hepatitis C virus; ALT, alanine aminotransferase.

$^b$ Two patients who underwent radiation for bone metastasis.

TAE, transarterial embolization; HAI, hepatic arterial injection; PEIT, percutaneous ethanol injection therapy.
Seventy-five patients in group 1 and 19 patients in group 2 had HCC without portal invasion or intrahepatic metastasis, which are related to recurrence originating from the primary HCC. Although the tumor-free survival rates were not significantly different between the 75 group 1 patients and the 19 group 2 patients ($P=0.266$, Fig. 3), the cumulative survival rate was significantly lower in the 75 group 1 patients than in the 19 group 2 patients ($P=0.042$, Fig. 4).

**DISCUSSION**

Several studies have suggested a difference in pathogenicity of HCV genotypes with respect to development of HCC. In a prospective multivariate analysis of 163 consecutive patients, Bruno et al. found that cirrhotic patients infected with HCV genotype 1b have a significantly higher risk of HCC than patients infected with other genotypes. Several case-control studies and cross-sectional studies have also shown a high prevalence of genotype 1b infection in patients with HCC. However, the relationship between HCV genotype and various forms of severe liver disease including HCC remains controversial.

In the present study we found ALT activity to be significantly higher in group 2 (genotype 2a or 2b) than in group 1 (genotype 1b). The implication is that hepatitis was more active in group 2, although no significant difference in the proportion of patients with active hepatitis was found between the two groups. In group 2, HCC may develop in the context of more severe hepatitis than HCC occurring in group 1. In other words, HCC may have developed even in the presence of mild hepatitis in the patients with genotype 1b.

The tumor-free survival rate was not significantly different between the two groups, although in group 1 tumors often recurred at more than 3 years following operation, while in group 2 all recurrences became evident within 3 years. The proportions of patients infected with HCV genotype 1b and of patients with continuing active hepatitis were significantly higher among patients with tumor recurrence more than 3 years following operation. Several other investigators have reported that active hepatitis is a risk factor for recurrence after operation. We have found that the prevalence of multicentric carcinogenesis increases with advancing severity of active hepatitis. In this study, pathologic examination of recurrent tumors presenting more than 3 years following operation strongly suggested that at least 7 of 16 tumors were multicentric in origin, representing newly developed HCC. These results indicate that patients infected with HCV genotype 1b continue to harbor active hepatitis and continue to have a higher potential for carcinogenesis after HCC resection than patients infected with other genotypes.

In the patients we studied, the cumulative survival rate was significantly lower in group 1 than in group 2. As
regards the types of treatments for recurrent tumor(s) no significant difference was found between the two groups. As noted above, one factor was a higher incidence of recurrence, including the new development of HCC. Additionally, three patients in group 1 died of worsening liver function without recurrence of HCC. In contrast, no group 2 patient died of progressive liver failure. In patients without portal invasion or intrahepatic metastasis (those without risks for recurrence originating from the primary HCC), the cumulative survival rate was significantly lower in group 1 than in group 2 although the tumor-free survival rate was not significant between the two groups. More severe progression of chronic hepatitis C has been seen in patients infected with HCV genotype 1b than in those with genotype 2.3-9 Therefore, deteriorating liver function may contribute to the lower cumulative survival rate in group 1, although the number of patients in this study was too small to allow a definitive conclusion regarding this issue.

The mechanisms responsible for greater pathogenicity of HCV genotype 1b remain unknown. HCV genotype 1b reportedly may have an enhanced capacity to escape host immunity, given that it has two hypervariable regions in the envelope domain (HVR-1 and HVR-2) while other types have only HVR-1.3,10 As a result, type 1b may either undergo different regulation of gene expression or possess proteins producing more severe cytopathic effects in hepatocytes than proteins of other genotypes.17,54

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that the HCV genotype should be considered in the treatment of HCC, because different genotypes may be associated with differences in outcome following resection. Patients infected with HCV genotype 1b should be monitored closely even long term after the operation, because new HCCs may develop.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Professor T. Kuroki for his advice in the virological examinations, and we also thank Dr. H. Tanaka, Dr. T. Tsukamoto, Dr. H. Hamba and Dr. S. Takemura for their support in analysis. This work was supported in part by grants from the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Japan.

(Received August 12, 1999/Revised September 24, 1999/Accepted September 30, 1999)

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