Epithelial-Myoepithelial Carcinoma of The Minor Salivary Glands: Report of Two Cases with Literature Review

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Case report

Keywords: Epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma, Minor salivary gland, Ki-67, Pleomorphic adenoma.
Abstract

Epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma (EMC) is a rare malignant salivary gland tumor, which is especially uncommon in the minor salivary glands (MSG). We report literature review of EMC of the MSGs with our experience of two cases. Case 1 is a 75-year-old woman with a hard elastic mass in the hard palate, sized $2.5 \times 2$ cm without ulceration. Incisional biopsy was suggestive of pleomorphic adenoma. Tumor resection was performed with adequate surgical margin. Case 2 is a 44-year-old woman with a mass in the hard palate, sized $1.8 \times 1.6$ cm without ulceration. Incisional biopsy was suggestive of pleomorphic adenoma or a low-grade salivary gland carcinoma and intraoral tumor resection was performed. Both have good postoperative courses and are alive with no evidence of local recurrence or metastasis at 25 and 10 months. The Ki-67 labeling index in Case 1 and 2 were 10.6 and 3.8 %. Considering that the anatomy, structure, and size of salivary glands are quite different from MSGs, EMCs of the MSG cannot be predicted similarly to EMCs of the major salivary glands. The present review with 18 cases revealed no consensus on treatment methods for MSG cases other than surgery.

Background

Epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma (EMC) is a rare malignant salivary gland tumor that accounts for < 1% of all salivary gland epithelial neoplasms and approximately 2% of malignant salivary gland neoplasms [1, 2]. The mean age of patients with EMC at diagnosis is 60 years, and it shows a slight female predilection [3]. Most EMCs develop in the parotid gland, while some develop in the submandibular gland [1, 4]. In general, EMC is indicated by the recurrence rate of 30–50%, lymph node metastasis rate of 15–20%, and 5- and 10-year survival rates of 80–94% and 72–90%, respectively [1, 4–6]. However, these were evident in most of major salivary gland cases. The minor salivary glands (MSG) cases are an uncommon anatomic site for the origin of EMCs.

Histopathologically, it is characterized by a biphasic glandular arrangement of inner eosinophilic ductal epithelial cells and outer clear myoepithelial cells [1, 2]. However, several histologic variants of EMCs, such as sebaceous [5, 7], oncocytic/apocrine [8, 9], and double-clear [5, 10], have been described. In addition, some cases experienced high-grade malignancy, which is often associated with a poorer prognosis [1, 2, 5, 11–17]. Furthermore, other benign or malignant neoplasms can exhibit clear myoepithelial features, which render the differential diagnosis of EMCs further complicated [18].

Due to its rare occurrence, the clinicopathological features and optimal treatment strategies of EMCs of the MSGs have not been fully described, and the relevant literature mostly comprises case reports. Herein, we report two cases of EMC originating from the MSG, and review the relevant literature and assessed our cases.

Case Presentation

Case 1
A 75-year-old woman referred to our department with a complaint of an abnormal swelling on the hard palate for a few months. The patient did not have any history of specific underlying systemic disease or trauma. Intraoral examination revealed a hard, elastic mass in the right side of the hard palate, sized 2.5 × 2 cm and without ulceration. Histopathological analysis of the sample obtained from incisional biopsy was suggestive of pleomorphic adenoma (PA) of the hard palate. The patient refused excision; therefore, regular follow-up visits for monitoring the tumor had been performed. After a follow-up period of about 14 months, the tumor showed rapid growth. Computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed an internal non-uniformly enhanced tumor mass, which led to pressure absorption of the palatal bone but invasion of the sinus and nasal cavity was not evident. Although the imaging examinations could not indicate the significant findings of malignancy, it guided a presumptive diagnosis of malignancy, based on the intratumoral heterogeneity. The significant cervical adenopathy was not evident. After 1 year and 3 months from the first examination, tumor resection with adequate surgical margins through an intraoral approach was finally performed under general anesthesia. Intraoperatively, the tumor was resected including the surrounding gingiva and the periosteal, and a layer of the palatal bone was shaved off.

Case 2

A 44-year-old healthy woman presented at our department with a complaint of a swelling in the hard palate. It had been followed up by her regular dentist for 2 months, but the swelling was not improved. Intraoral examination revealed a hard, elastic mass in the right side of the hard palate, sized 1.8 × 1.6 cm and without ulceration. Histopathological analysis of the incisional biopsy sample was suggestive of PA or a low-grade salivary gland carcinoma of the hard palate. CT and MRI revealed an internal non-uniformly enhanced tumor mass, which led to pressure absorption of the palatal bone but invasion of the sinus and nasal cavity and significant cervical adenopathy were not evident. Thereafter, the treatment was restricted because of the SARS-CoV-2 infection pandemic in Japan. There was no evidence of rapid tumor growth or metastasis. After four months from the first examination, since the treatment restrictions were released, intraoral tumor resection was performed under general anesthesia. Similar to Case 1, the tumor was peeled off including the periosteal and a layer of the palatal bone was shaved off. Both patients have good clinical courses on surgical sites and are alive with no evidence of local recurrence or cervical lymph node / distant metastasis at 25 and 10 months after the surgery, respectively.

Microscopical findings

In our cases, a biphasic glandular structure consisting of glandular cavities with acidophilic vesicles and neoplastic myoepithelial cells with clear vesicles outside the cavities was observed under high magnification. IHC showed that the tumor was diffusely positive for AE1/AE3; neoplastic myoepithelial cells were positive for p63, S100, calponin, and α-smooth muscle actin (α-SMA), and glandular duct-forming cells were positive for epithelial membrane antigen (EMA). In Case 1, the tumor was diagnosed as EMC due to the active fission images and the high score of Ki-67 labeling index (10.6%) (Figure 1). In Case 2, although Ki-67 labeling index score was 3.8% and fission images were not frequent, as invasion
into the existing MSGs was evident (Figure 1), the tumor was diagnosed as EMC. Both cases were negative at the surgical margin.

**Review of literature**

We searched the PubMed database for English literature pertaining to EMCs of the MSGs using the keywords “epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma” and “minor salivary gland” (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed). Literature published between January 2000 and December 2020, with well-written description of disease condition, treatment, clinical course, histopathological analysis and findings including IHCs, and prognosis were considered eligible for inclusion. EMC cases in the floor of mouth were excluded because it was not clear if the primary site was the MSGs or the sublingual gland.

We identified 38 cases in 27 articles about EMCs in the MSGs. Of the 38 cases, 18 cases satisfied the above-mentioned inclusion eligibility. The details are summarized in Table 1 [3,19-29]. The cohort included 10 women and 8 men with a median age of 64 (range: 29–83) years. The distribution of the primary subsite was as follows: the hard or soft palate in 12 patients, buccal mucosa in 4, nasal cavity in 2, oropharynx and subglottis in 1 patient, respectively. Regarding the diagnosis, while only 3 cases (3/18 cases, 16.7%) were diagnosed as EMC by incisional biopsy, other cases were pathologically diagnosed by the whole tumor examination. The primary antibodies used to diagnose EMC were almost similar: cytokeratins (CK), EMA, S100 protein, p63, calponin, CD10, CD117, vimentin, SMA, glial fibrillar acid protein, and Ki-67, and appropriate positive and negative controls were employed. Ki-67 labeling index was calculated in 10 cases, and the median index value was 17.65% (range: 3.5-40) (Table 2). The tumor size ranged from 1 × 1 cm to 3.7 × 2.5 cm. The disease duration, from self-noticing the lesion for the first time to the first visit to the hospital, ranged from 1 month to 8 years. The median postoperative follow-up period was 18.0±21.2 months (range: 6–84). Adjuvant radiotherapy was performed in 5 cases (27.8%) with a positive surgical margin in 4 cases and a narrow margin in 1 case. One patient died due to local failure 48 months after tumor resection and postoperative radiotherapy.

**Discussion And Conclusion**

Some reports have highlighted the aggressive nature of EMCs. However, the prognosis indicated a low-grade malignancy of the tumor. Seethala et al. reported that 61 patients with EMC showed a local recurrence rate of 36.3%, distant metastasis rate of 5.2%, but 5-year survival rate of 93.5% is high [5]. Moreover, distant metastases to the lung, kidney, or brain were found in 8–10% of the cases [30]. Vazquez et al. reported that the 10-year survival rate of patients treated only by surgery was 93.2% and of those treated by surgery and adjuvant radiotherapy was 87.6% ($p = 0.4832$) [6]. They also reported that the > 4 cm lesion was one of the significant poor prognosticators [6]. However, above-mentioned reports included EMCs in the major salivary glands in a significant proportion, demonstrates the low credibility to apply directly for the MSG cases. Moreover, since the anatomy, structure, and the size of major salivary glands are different from MSGs [31], the size of the tumor also cannot be directly considered as a factor to
decide treatment for the MSG cases. In the present review, in fact, tumor size of MSG cases ranged from 1 × 1 to 3.7 × 2.5 cm: their sizes were all under 4 cm. Other, the disease duration (range: 1 month – 8 years) had a large width, means MSGs cases always cannot be found earlier than that in major salivary gland cases.

Regarding the treatment, the present review could not establish no consensus in the optimal treatment strategy of EMCs of the MSGs due to the limited number of the MSG cases. The role of radiotherapy in EMCs of the MSGs is not discussed adequately. Adjuvant radiotherapy is recommended in major salivary gland tumors where the primary tumor is > 4 cm in size or where the surgical margins are positive [33, 34, 35]. However, no signicancy in the survival has been reported in adjuvant radiotherapy [6]. The data from the present review cannot also validate radiotherapy (n = 5, Table 1). The role of adjuvant chemotherapy in EMC is also not well documented. According to Cerda et al., chemotherapy should be considered when irradiation is delivered in doses of 65 Gy or more in the patients with locoregional high-risk salivary gland tumors (close or positive margins) [36].

The diagnostic methods in EMCs of the MSG have basically remained unchanged: combined routine HE with multi-IHC staining (Table 2). Our cases were stained with almost the same variation. However, these accepted diagnostic methods do pose difficulties in the differential diagnosis of EMCs. On microscopic examination, PA is composed of epithelial and myoepithelial cells within variable stroma that may comprise of myxoid, fibrous, chondroid, mucinous, or even osseous/cartilage tissue: the biphasic pattern of epithelial and myoepithelial cells in this tumor resembles EMC. Most EMCs show a multinodular pattern with evidence of invasion and a classic arrangement of myoepithelial cells with clear cytoplasm that strikingly contrast with the inner low-cuboidal luminal cells. The biphasic structures of EMCs have an interface of a thickened, hyaline-like basement membrane, which is distinct from the chondromyxoid matrix intermingling with the outer myoepithelial cells in PAS staining [15]. Cases of an EMC arising in a PA have been described in the literature, and the diagnosis of malignancy in such cases is predicated on the presence of invasion [5, 37, 38]. According to Eneroth et al., the risk of malignancy in PA varies from 1.6 to 7.5% [39]. Our Case 1 might be this type. Also, an analysis of recurrent PAs indicated that 7.1% undergo malignant transformation and that the risk of malignancy increases with disease progression [40]. In general, carcinoma arising in a PA is difficult to diagnose because the mixed tumor component is often small and easily overlooked and the malignant component may be difficult to classify [41]. From this viewpoint, it can be deduced that the diagnostic accuracy of incisional biopsy is not high. In this review, only 3 cases (16.7%) could be diagnosed as EMC by incisional biopsy, indicated the limit of the microscopical diagnosis of EMC of the MSG using a part of small mass. In contrast, El Hallani et al. indicated that 80% of EMCs arising in a PA and the genetic profile of patients with EMCs varies between the absence or presence of preexisting PA and its cytogenetic signature [37]. Moreover, Nakaguro et al. and Urano et al. reported, since the IHC for RAS Q61R is highly sensitive and specific for detecting the HRAS Q61R mutation in EMC which has been reported to be frequent in and specific to EMC, the evaluation of RAS Q61R can be a useful tool to diagnose EMC [18, 42].
In conclusion, diagnosis of EMC of the MSG cases is still difficult, because the tumor is small and a mimicking tumor could be present. Additional other diagnostic methods (e.g., genomic analysis) may be helpful for an accurate presurgical diagnosis. The present review revealed no consensus on treatment strategy for EMC of the MSG other than surgical treatment. More MSG cases should be accumulated to establish accurate treatment approach and to find the prognosticator.

**Abbreviations**

EMC
Epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma

MSG
Minor salivary gland

CT
Computed tomography

MRI
Magnetic resonance imaging

HE
Hematoxylin and eosin

IHC
Immunohistochemistry

CK
Cytokeratin

EMA
Epithelial membrane antigen

SMA
α-smooth muscle actin

PA
Pleomorphic adenoma

**Declarations**

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:**

This study followed the Declaration of Helsinki on medical protocol and ethics, and the regional Ethical Review Board of Tokyo Medical and Dental University approved the study (Permission no. D2015-600). Patient consent for publication was acquired.

**Consent for publication:**

The written informed consent to publish the personal and clinical details of the participant was obtained and a copy of the written consent is available for review by the Editor of this journal.
Authors’ contributions
KO contributed to the conception and design of the study and wrote and edited the manuscript. KO, YM, YK, HT, HH, MY, YY, TK, YS, and HH contributed the treatment of cases. MT, KK, and TI contributed the pathological diagnosis of the cases. KO and HH critically revised the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials
Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest Statement
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interests.

Funding
No funding was received.

Acknowledgments
Not applicable.

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**Tables**

Due to technical limitations, table 1,2 is only available as a download in the Supplemental Files section.
Figure 1

Hematoxylin and eosin and Ki-67 staining images. Morphological and immunohistochemical pattern of the present cases with epithelial-myoepithelial carcinoma. A: Hematoxylin and eosin staining showing a biphasic glandular structure consisting of glandular cavities with acidophilic vesicles and neoplastic myoepithelial cells with clear vesicles outside the cavities. B: Immunohistochemistry with Ki-67 showing active fission images and a high Ki-67 labeling index (10.6%). C, D: Hematoxylin and eosin staining showing a component with dense growth of acidophilic tumor cells and a component with cord-like or network-like growth of epithelioid-like neoplastic myoepithelial cells. Although Ki-67 labeling index was low (3.8%), apparent invasion of preexisting minor salivary glands can be identified (yellow arrowheads), which is a crucial finding of malignancy.
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- Table1.jpg
- Table2.jpg