HER-2 positive breast cancer and trastuzumab: lessons learnt by heart

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Keywords: HER-2 positive breast cancer; trastuzumab; cardiotoxicity

ABSTRACT
Women treated with trastuzumab have an increased risk for developing cardiac problems, particularly if they receive prior or concurrent anthracyclines. Left ventricular dysfunction associated with trastuzumab treatment may progress to severe New York Heart Association (NYHA) class III/IV heart failure which carries its own chronic disability and mortality. Whilst it would appear that the cardiac dysfunction is partially reversible and responds to standard medication, its natural course is currently unknown and longer term data are required. Preclinical studies have attempted to elucidate trastuzumab’s mechanism of cardiotoxicity and this is an area of innovative research. Myocardial HER-2 receptors are crucial for embryonic cardiac development and for maintaining adult ventricular structure and function. It is thought that sequential stress mechanisms may contribute to the pathogenesis of cardiac dysfunction. The challenge remains to identify the risks and to tailor trastuzumab treatment for each patient, to conscientiously monitor cardiac function and to institute appropriate measures if necessary, in order to ensure that HER-2 positive breast cancer patients receive the best possible care.

Introduction

Every once in a while an innovative drug is pushed to market because it has enormous potential to revolutionise the treatment of a life-threatening disease. This has certainly been true of the monoclonal antibody, trastuzumab, which has lived up to its promise of excellent efficacy – with far superior acute tolerability compared to standard chemotherapy – in the treatment of HER-2 positive breast cancer. Over the past ten years, it has captured the imagination of patients, and the medical barriers to its use have tumbled.

An unanticipated problem started to emerge in the early metastatic breast cancer registration trials, however, which somewhat tempered the initial euphoria: trastuzumab showed the potential to cause serious cardiotoxicity. The extent of the problem could only be fully appreciated once further prospective trials in the adjuvant and neoadjuvant settings as well as wider clinical usage provided more evidence.

Cardiac dysfunction has continued to blemish trastuzumab’s reputation, being its single most significant limiting factor and precluding its use in approximately 10% of HER-2 positive breast cancer patients.

Although cardiac toxicity associated with trastuzumab may manifest as hypertension, arrhythmias or valve abnormalities, it is most commonly associated with declines in left ventricular function, both asymptomatic and symptomatic, which may ultimately progress to New York Heart Association (NYHA) class III/IV heart failure or even death.

Left ventricular (LV) myocardial dysfunction begins when the myocardium is injured or stressed and it is generally progressive, even in the absence of further insults to the heart. Over time, with cardiac remodelling, the chamber becomes less ovoid and more spherical; compensatory measures include dilatation and hypertrophy. These changes eventually increase diastolic stiffness and wall tension while haemodynamic stresses on the walls of the heart increase and mechanical performance decreases. A decrease in left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) occurs when the tremendous compensatory ability of the myocardium has already been impaired; therefore, a decline in LVEF is actually a marker of advanced damage.

Heart failure may be the result of many cardiac disorders, but most patients experience symptoms because of an impairment of LV myocardial function. The abnormal heart function results in the clinical symptoms and signs of low cardiac output including dyspnoea, orthopnoea, paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnoea, fatigue, weakness, exercise intolerance, dependent oedema, cough, weight gain, abdominal distension, nocturia and cool extremities.

The NYHA functional classification is simple and describes four grades of heart failure (Table I).

Table I: The New York Heart Association functional classification of heart failure

| Grade | Description |
|-------|-------------|
| I     | no symptoms |
| II    | symptoms with ordinary activity |
| III   | symptoms with less than ordinary activity |
| IV    | symptoms at rest or with minimal activity |

Long-term survival of women with heart failure (6 years, 33%) approximates that of women with breast cancer with distant metastases (5 years, 22%), yet it is far worse than that of women with breast cancer and regional metastases (5 years, 97%). Furthermore, 33% of women with heart failure die within two years of the initial diagnosis. Thus, the risk-benefit ratio for every patient and at every stage of the disease requires conscientious consideration both prior to initiating, and during trastuzumab treatment.

© Peer reviewed (Submitted: 2009-07-31, Accepted: 2009-10-23)
Given the enormous therapeutic benefit of trastuzumab, issues to be addressed include the following:

- Is pre-existing cardiac dysfunction, especially if it is asymptomatic, sufficient reason to withhold the drug?
- Are the classic risk factors for cardiac disease, such as hypertension, diabetes and family history important predictors for cardiac toxicity and are there ways to avoid or minimise trastuzumab-related cardiac dysfunction?
- How should patients be monitored for cardiac effects?
- What is the natural history of trastuzumab-associated cardiac dysfunction?
- Is it possible that the dysfunction will normalise in the absence of medication and if not, what are the treatments for asymptomatic and symptomatic left ventricular dysfunction and heart failure?
- Is it safe to re-institute trastuzumab if a patient has developed cardiac dysfunction whilst receiving it previously?
- What is the mechanism of trastuzumab’s toxicity?
- Finally, will the incidence of heart failure increase with longer follow up?

Meticulous tracking of the potential long-term cardiotoxicity of trastuzumab is necessary if we are to ensure that patients, particularly younger survivors of breast cancer, receive appropriate and optimal treatment.

**Incidence of trastuzumab-associated cardiotoxicity**

Because clinical trials in cancer are usually powered to assess endpoints such as disease-free and overall survival, rather than the toxicities of the intervention, trial data are only approximations of risk and may thus underestimate the true likelihood of an adverse effect.6

**Metastatic breast cancer**

According to the prescribing information, there is a 4–6 fold increase in the incidence of symptomatic myocardial dysfunction amongst patients receiving trastuzumab as a single agent or in combination therapy compared to those not receiving trastuzumab at all. The risk of cardiac dysfunction with trastuzumab alone ranges from 2–7%.

The reported rate for trastuzumab-associated cardiotoxicity in the absence of anthracyclines is 3% (2% NYHA class III/IV). This particular rate increases to 5% (4% NYHA class III/IV) when an anthracycline is given prior to trastuzumab, and is highest at 27% (16% NYHA class III/IV) when trastuzumab is given concurrently with an anthracycline compared to 8% when anthracyclines are administered alone.7

When given concomitantly with paclitaxel after anthracycline exposure, 13% of trastuzumab patients develop cardiac dysfunction (2% NYHA class III/IV) versus 1% on paclitaxel alone.8 When co-administered with the alternative taxane, docetaxel, with or without capecitabine, 18% (1% NYHA class III/IV) develop some form of cardiotoxicity (usually asymptomatic decline in LVEF) compared to 8% on docetaxel monotherapy.8

Studies using the combination of vinorelbine and trastuzumab have reported asymptomatic declines in LVEF of 8% (0% NYHA class III/IV).9 Similarly, the combination of liposomal doxorubicin-paclitaxel-trastuzumab does not appear to be associated with undue cardiotoxicity.10

**Incidence of severe cardiotoxicity**

Trastuzumab-related cardiotoxicity (Type II CRCD) does not fit this model: the mechanisms and clinical effects are distinctly different. It is expressed in a broad range of severity when it does occur, is not dose related and is not associated with identifiable ultra structural abnormalities. It appears to be somewhat reversible, especially if anthracyclines are excluded entirely from the treatment regimen.7

The cellular and biochemical mechanisms of trastuzumab-associated cardiotoxicity are unclear and relatively few molecular modifiers of human heart failure have been identified.

Preclinical studies of genetically manipulated mice and of cells isolated from hearts have shown that HER-2 receptors are present in the myocardial trabeculae (in a pattern suggesting their presence throughout the sarcolemmal membrane, extending to the T-tubule system) and that the physiological effects of the signalling pathways involving HER-2...
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HER-2 and its other family members (erbB1, erbB3 and erbB4) and their ligands (particularly the myocardial protective growth factor, Nrg-1) are critical for both embryonic cardiac development and for the postnatal heart to maintain its ventricular structure and function.

HER-2 signalling pathways appear to regulate a number of processes including cell growth, survival and protection from apoptosis, sarcomere synthesis, organisation and stability, myocyte-matrix coupling, cellular adaptations to oxidative or metabolic stress in the myocardium, angiogenesis and the counteraction of undue sympathetic tone.

In embryonic mice, disruption of HER-2 pathways causes death due to lack of ventricular trabeculation. In adult mice deficient in HER-2 protein, the induction of cardiac stress pathways by haemodynamic overload promotes the onset of left ventricular dysfunction and a dilated cardiomyopathy. Moreover, in these mice, isolated myocytes show increased susceptibility to doxorubicin-induced cell death, suggesting a critical role of HER-2 for cardioprotection exemplified by the ability of myocytes to withstand stress conditions.

It has thus been postulated that HER-2 receptors and their downstream signalling pathways ordinarily blunt the effects of cardiac stress signals, which are activated by anthracyclines and other cardiotoxic agents, ischaemia and increased cardiac load. Thus, disruption of HER-2 mediated pathways by trastuzumab leads to a loss in survival cues which can subsequently lead to an irreversible loss of cardiac myocytes. In other words, trastuzumab’s mechanism of cardiac toxicity is thought to be secondary to sequential stress mechanisms because the cardioprotective properties of the HER-2 pathway are diminished. Removal of the antibody may allow the signalling pathway to recover.

Moreover, HER-2 signalling appears to be coupled to muscarinic cholinergic receptor activation, which balances sympathetic tone. If reduced HER-2 expression leads to reciprocal increases in sympathetic tone in the failing heart, this may promote progressive myocardial dysfunction.

The transition from compensated cardiac hypertrophy to heart failure is associated with a decrease in the expression of HER-2 and HER-4, raising the question of whether altered HER-signalling plays a role in the progression of heart failure.

Unsuspected modifiers of cardiovascular disease will undoubtedly be uncovered, spurring a new round of basic research to identify the downstream targets that mediate trastuzumab’s adverse effects on the heart.

**Risk factors and preventive strategies**

Cardiotoxicity of a drug depends on many different factors related to the drug itself (e.g. the dose administered during each session, the cumulative dose, the schedule of delivery, the route of administration, the combination of drugs given, the sequence of administration of these drugs, the duration and the interval between administration) and to the individual patient (e.g. age, previous cardiovascular disease, metabolic abnormalities, hypersensitivity to drugs given, previous radiation).

The highest risk for trastuzumab cardiotoxicity is associated with anthracyclines, whether given sequentially (5%) or concurrently (27%), and furthermore, it would appear that the effects of trastuzumab and anthracyclines are synergistic i.e. super additive. Therefore, when anthracyclines are used with trastuzumab, sequential therapy is preferred.

The risk of trastuzumab-associated contractile dysfunction appears to be lower in anthracycline-naive patients.

Doxorubicin toxicity alone is exponentially dose-dependent and increases dramatically when cumulative doses exceed 400–450 mg/m². After a cumulative doxorubicin dose of 240 mg/m², asymptomatic

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**Table II: Estimated cardiotoxicity associated with trastuzumab in the adjuvant early breast cancer trials**

| Trial and duration | Regimen | Asymptomatic declines in LVEF | Severe NYHA III/IV | Discontinuation due to trastuzumab cardiotoxicity |
|-------------------|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| NSABP B-3114 1 year | AC > T* AC > TH | 0.8% 14% | 0.8% 4.1% | 18% |
| NCCTG 9831 1 year | AC > T* AC > TH AC > T> H | 17% 34% 14.2% | 0.3% 3.5% 2.5% | 19% |
| HERA16 1 year | Any chemo Any chemo> H | 0.5% 3% | 0% 0.6% | 4.3% |
| BCIRG 006 17 1 year | AC > T** AC > TH TCH | 10% 18% 8.6% | 0.3% 1.6% 0.4% | Not reported |
| FinHER18 9 weeks | **T or V > FEC or V > H > FEC | 0.3% 0% | 0.3% 0% | 0% |
| A = anthracycline C = cyclophosphamide H = trastuzumab T = taxane: *paclitaxel **docetaxel | TCH= taxane, carboplatin-trastuzumab V= vinorelbine | |

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declines in LVEF are detected by prospective monitoring. After a cumulative dose of 400 mg/m², heart failure was estimated at 2% initially, but more recently at 5.1%. Strategies to prevent anthracycline-induced cardiomyopathy include limiting the total accumulative dose, infusional regimens rather than bolus administration, novel delivery systems such as (pegylated or non-pegylated) liposomal-encapsulated or nanoparticle-bound doxorubicin and use of doxorubicin analogues such as epirubicin (which at equimolar doses is less toxic because lower levels of secondary alcohol metabolites are produced). In fact, omitting anthracyclines altogether may sometimes be appropriate. Increased survival in response to anthracyclines is seen among HER-2 positive patients that also coamplify topoisomerase II, but not in the patients with tumours that only express HER-2. Molecular diagnostics holds promise in identifying patients who do not require anthracycline therapy. This remains to be proved prospectively.

The antioxidant, dexrazoxane, has not been clearly established as protective, although it does reduce troponin I release in children on anthracyclines. This drug is however, associated with myelosuppression and possibly leukaemia.

Although the cardiac drugs, carvedilol, enalapril and valsartan have shown cardioprotective effects with anthracyclines, it is unclear whether prophylactic use of these agents confers benefit in the trastuzumab setting. The FinHer study showed that minimising the duration of adjuvant trastuzumab to a short nine week course averts cardiac side-effects. In this trial, trastuzumab was given prior to epirubicin. Regarding the taxanes, it appears that a docetaxel-trastuzumab combination is less cardiotoxic than a paclitaxel-trastuzumab combination.

The best known patient-related, independent predictors of trastuzumab-induced heart failure development include advanced age and an abnormal LVEF. Hypertension is classified as a near-significant predictor. Other accepted risk factors are prior coronary artery disease and valvular dysfunction.

By limiting enrolment to women with post chemotherapy LVEF of 55% or more, by employing strict exclusion criteria for cardiovascular disease and by giving trastuzumab after completion of chemotherapy, the HERA trial produced a very low heart failure rate of 0.5%. In this trial, trastuzumab was given prior to epirubicin.

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Table III: Risk factors for trastuzumab-associated cardiotoxicity

| Risk factors that exclude patients from treatment | • Existing heart failure  
| • LVEF < 50% (unless the risk of disease recurrence is very high) |
| Risk factors requiring special considerations | • Ischaemic heart disease (IHD) or significant valvulopathy  
| • Baseline LVEF of 50–55%  
| • Decrease in LVEF of more than 15% |
| Risk factors identified in metastatic breast cancer trials | • Anthracyclines: concurrent or prior |
| Risk factors identified by NSABP B-31 | • Age  
| • Use of hypertensive medication  
| • Baseline LVEF of 50–54%  
| • Post anthracycline LVEF values of 50–54% |
| Effects of various regimens on cardiotoxicity | • Sequential anthracycline-taxane-trastuzumab regimens may possibly be less cardiotoxic than concurrent regimens |

Monitoring

Prior to initiating trastuzumab therapy, all patients should undergo a thorough cardiac assessment which includes identification of risk factors, a thorough physical examination and a baseline measurement of LVEF, either by multigated acquisition/multigated radionuclide angiography (MUGA) or echocardiography, in order to establish their baseline cardiac, and specifically, their left ventricular function. Use of (biplane) Simpson’s Rule method or 3-dimensional echocardiography, with contrast available for LV opacification, by an appropriately skilled echocardiographer is recommended as it can accurately measure diastolic function, haemodynamics, pericardial disease as well as valve function.

Patients should be excluded from trastuzumab therapy if the cardiac risks such as a LVEF < 50%, outweigh the treatment benefits (Table III).

Left ventricular function should be measured at three monthly intervals during treatment using the same measuring device, and the risk-benefit ratio should be re-evaluated. If new symptoms occur or if the ejection fraction declines by more than 10%, cessation of treatment may be required. The recently updated prescribing information advises the discontinuation of treatment in patients receiving adjuvant therapy and strong consideration of discontinuing trastuzumab in patients with metastatic breast cancer for clinically significant decreases in left ventricular function (Table IV).

Trastuzumab dosing should be temporarily withheld for a minimum of four weeks if there is either a greater than 15% decrease in LVEF from baseline values or there is a greater than 9% decrease in LVEF compared to baseline levels and these levels are below the institutional limits of normal.

In this scenario, LVEF should be monitored at 4 weekly intervals. Trastuzumab may be reintroduced within four to eight weeks if LVEF returns to normal limits and the absolute decrease from baseline is < 16%.

Although the long-term safety of continuation of or resumption of trastuzumab in the presence of overt trastuzumab-induced cardiac dysfunction has not been studied, experience from the Anderson Centre suggests that trastuzumab may be re-instituted in previously symptomatic patients whose cardiac function has sufficiently recovered in response to standard medical treatment. On rechallenge, 12% of these particular patients had a recurrence of LV dysfunction, whereas 88% did not.

Trastuzumab should be permanently discontinued if there are persistent (more than eight weeks) declines in LVEF or if trastuzumab...
dosing has been suspended on more than three occasions for cardiotoxicity reasons.\textsuperscript{2}

It is possible that the incidence and severity of cardiac dysfunction will increase with longer term follow up. Therefore, LVEF measurements should be continued six monthly for at least two years following completion of trastuzumab as a component of adjuvant therapy.\textsuperscript{2}

In the future, newer biochemical markers like troponins and natriuretic peptides may have a larger role to play: in a recent study, pre-treatment plasma prohormone brain-type natriuretic peptide (pro-BNP) levels were almost five times higher in patients who developed heart failure during trastuzumab therapy compared with those who did not experience symptomatic LV dysfunction. Equally, more sophisticated echocardiographic modalities like tissue Doppler imaging, regional strain, and strain rate might provide improved sensitivity in detecting sub-clinical dysfunction. Exciting potential monitoring tools comprise radio-labelled antimyosin antibodies (myosin is exposed when cardiac myocytes are damaged), cardiac MRI, proteomics and endomyocardial ventricular biopsy with electron microscope examination.\textsuperscript{29}

Treatment of left ventricular dysfunction and heart failure

It should be highlighted that although symptomatic heart failure may respond to heart failure medications, the drop in LVEF in trastuzumab-treated patients does not necessarily fully recover to baseline.\textsuperscript{30}

Two classes of agents have become the cornerstone of therapy to delay or halt progression of cardiac dysfunction and to improve survival rates: ACE-I (angiotensin converting enzyme inhibitors) and beta blockers. Although it is uncertain whether asymptomatic patients derive benefit from medical treatment, there is compelling evidence that ACE-inhibitors should be used to inhibit the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system (RAAS) in all heart failure patients with left ventricular dysfunction, whether they are symptomatic or not. Typically they are instituted when left ventricular function is below 40% and considered when LVEF is between 40–50%. Beta blockers such as carvedilol, bisoprolol and metoprolol are now also firmly established as routine therapy in LV dysfunction and are usually given to all patients with a LVEF of less than 40%.

These cardiac drugs may hasten recovery after withdrawal of trastuzumab and possibly allow some patients to be re-challenged with the drug. Accelerated regimens are recommended because the normal titration schedules can take several months to reach the optimal therapeutic dosage.\textsuperscript{31}

The duration of treatment needs to be individualised depending on the degree of left ventricular dysfunction, the symptoms, patient preference and the magnitude of functional recovery. Cardiologists lean towards continued use of therapy, whilst oncologists may be reluctant to put relatively young women on lifelong therapy. More long-term data are required to clarify the optimal approach.

Recommendations and conclusions

Women treated with trastuzumab have an increased risk for developing left ventricular dysfunction which may progress to severe NYHA class III/IV heart failure which carries its own morbidity, chronic disability and mortality. Oncologists should therefore refrain from prescribing trastuzumab until cardiac function has been thoroughly assessed, baseline LVEF (post-anthracycline if necessary) is obtained, the risks have been carefully weighed against the benefits of treatment and preventive strategies have been considered. Patients need to be aware that the survival benefit of a few percentage points may be offset by acute, chronic and late-onset toxicities.\textsuperscript{30} This is particularly relevant for young patients with early breast cancer. Recent data suggest that women with early breast cancer are more likely to die of heart disease than recurrent cancer.

Continued cardiac monitoring is an essential component of trastuzumab treatment and should not be neglected. In the event of significant declines in left ventricular function, appropriate steps, such as cessation of treatment, should be taken. Women treated with trastuzumab who develop

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Considerations} & \textbf{Strategies} \\
\hline
Patient screening & Baseline cardiac assessment and LVEF \hfill Weigh benefits vs risks \\
\hline
Anthracyclines & Limit total accumulative dose \hfill Infusional regimens \hfill Novel delivery systems \hfill Doxorubicin analogues \hfill Dose sequentially \hfill Possible omission \\
\hline
Taxanes & Docetaxel-trastuzumab combination less cardiotoxic than paclitaxel-trastuzumab \\
\hline
Trastuzumab & Shorter duration possibly less cardiotoxic \\
\hline
Monitoring & Three monthly for duration of treatment \hfill Six monthly for two years following treatment \\
\hline
\textbullet\ > 10–15\% decline in LVEF & \begin{itemize}
\item Withhold trastuzumab for 4–8 weeks 
\item Consider medical therapy 
\item Monitor four weekly 
\item Re-institute trastuzumab if LVEF recovers to acceptable values 
\item Permanent cessation of trastuzumab: Recovery not seen within eight weeks; Trastuzumab suspended more than three times for cardiotoxicity
\end{itemize} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Summary of strategies to limit trastuzumab cardiotoxicity}
\end{table}
heart failure, appear to derive symptomatic relief with appropriate therapy. However, heart failure, like many cancers, is a progressive disease and mortality remains high despite improvements in symptoms. There is currently no information on the potential for late cardiac dysfunction or whether short-term improvements in clinical heart failure or left ventricular dysfunction with medical treatment are permanent or will increase the risks of late cardiac dysfunction.

Trastuzumab-associated heart failure has been instrumental in spurring innovative and cutting-edge preclinical and clinical research in both oncology and cardiology. Although the precise mechanism of trastuzumab’s cardiotoxicity has not yet been elucidated, the field has advanced significantly. The lessons learnt should help patients receive state of the art treatment, while ensuring that they do not trade one potentially lethal disease for another.

Conflict of interests: None

Acknowledgement: Professor OBW Greeff for proof reading manuscript

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