Sustained Response to the Mitogen-Activated Extracellular Kinase Inhibitor Trametinib in a Spindle Cell Sarcoma Harboring a QKI-RAF1 Gene Fusion

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JCO Precis Oncol 6:e2100303. © 2022 by American Society of Clinical Oncology

Introduction

The advent of molecular pathology tools such as next-generation sequencing (NGS) has helped refine the classification of sarcomas and may help find new therapeutic targets. Recently, a new group of soft-tissue sarcomas was described as harboring a distinct immunohistochemistry profile of S100 and CD34 coexpression and recurrent gene fusions involving RAF1, BRAF, or NTRK1/2. In this paper, we report a case of recently described spindle cell tumor displaying a QKI-RAF1 gene fusion resistant to standard cytotoxic chemotherapy. The use of the mitogen-activated extracellular kinase (MEK) 1 and 2 inhibitor trametinib yielded clinical benefit and an absence of progression for 10 months.

Case Presentation

The patient, a 27-year-old woman without significant medical history, sought medical attention in May 2019 in a hospital outside Canada for a spinal cord compression syndrome with severe pain and paraparesis. A laminectomy encompassing T12-L3 vertebrae was performed with an initial improvement in symptoms. She presented again 1 month later in June with cauda equina syndrome with recurrent severe pain and sphincter dysfunction. The magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) showed conus medullaris compression by a dural lesion and she underwent a second T12-L3 laminectomy. The pathology reports from surgery showed intradural high-grade round to spindle cell sarcoma suggestive of Ewing sarcoma.

At that point, the patient transferred her care to the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC) located in Montreal, Canada. A fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) positron emission tomography-computed tomography (PET-CT) performed in July 2019 showed a metabolically active intradural relapse at T11-L1 causing conus medullaris compression. The patient was treated with temozolomide-irinotecan as second-line chemotherapy. The decision to stop chemotherapy was because of the progressively worsening hematologic toxicity of the regimen and rising uncertainty about the accurateness of the diagnosis of Ewing sarcoma, given the lack of radiologic response.

At the same time, the tumor specimens were reviewed at the MUHC and another institution. Given the absence of EWSR1 and SS18 gene rearrangement, the diagnoses of Ewing sarcoma and synovial sarcoma, respectively, were ruled out. On Archer NGS performed in an outside institution, a QKI-RAF1 gene fusion was identified, and a diagnosis of the newly described spindle cell tumor defined by S100 and CD34 coexpression with recurrent gene fusion was made.

The patient re-presented in April 2020, <3 months after the end of her treatment, with recurrent cauda equina. The FDG PET-CT and MRI showed a hypermetabolic intradural relapse at T11-L1 causing conus medullaris compression. The patient was treated with temozolomide-irinotecan as second-line chemotherapy. This treatment was poorly tolerated, and the tumor size increased on MRI after one cycle.

In June 2020, after informed consent for participation to a special-access program, the patient was prescribed single-agent trametinib, a highly selective MEK1/2 reversible antagonist. This treatment was chosen to block the oncogenic effect of the RAF1 gene fusion. After the start of trametinib, her pain was significantly lower. Furthermore, there was a sustained complete metabolic response on FDG PET-CT.
Throughout her illness, the patient had multiple antibiotic courses for recurrent urosepsis secondary to compression of the urinary tract by tumor. She ultimately died of septic shock from multidrug-resistant bacteria in May 2021. No relapse from her sarcoma was observed during the 10 months of trametinib treatment.

Consent for Publication
During her illness, the patient provided verbal consent to publication of this case report.

Discussion
Using NGS, \( \text{RAF1} \) gene fusion was recently described in eight soft-tissue sarcomas with various fusion partners including \( \text{PDZRN3}, \text{SLMAP}, \text{and TMF1} \). The tumors were found in different organs and usually displayed low-grade features. Only one of the four cases for which follow-up is available developed distant metastases. Our case is the first \( \text{RAF1} \) gene fusion sarcoma to be intradural and fused with \( \text{QKI} \). Additionally, it was high grade and behaved aggressively, relapsing quickly after definitive chemotherapy and radiation therapy, but did not metastasize. Importantly, it is the first sarcoma case where an \( \text{RAF1} \) gene fusion was successfully targeted by an MEK1/2 inhibitor, resulting in a prolonged clinical benefit and metabolic response on imaging. Successful targeting of \( \text{RAF1} \) gene fusions by MEK1/2 inhibitors has been described in melanoma and anaplastic pleomorphic xanthoastrocytoma. \( \text{RAF1} \) indeed promotes tumor growth through its interaction with MEK1/2 and the activation of the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathway.

\( \text{RAF1} \) is a recently identified oncogene. \( \text{RAF1} \) is part of the \( \text{BRAF} \) gene family and codes for the C-RAF protein. Like \( \text{BRAF} \), \( \text{RAF1} \) activates the MAPK pathway via its interaction with the MEK 1 and 2 to promote tumor growth and invasion. Point mutations of \( \text{RAF1} \) in tumor are rarer than \( \text{BRAF} \) because of its lower basal activity. Nevertheless, multiple oncogenic gene fusions involving \( \text{RAF1} \) have recently been described in melanoma, acinar pancreatic carcinoma, brain tumors, and sarcoma. Thus, unlike \( \text{BRAF} \) where somatic mutations are frequent oncogenic drivers, gene rearrangement is thought to be the main event leading to the transformation of \( \text{RAF1} \) into an oncogene. Moreover, identification of \( \text{RAF1} \) rearrangement is essential because there is reported response to MEK inhibitors. For example, patients with melanoma characterized by wild-type \( \text{BRAF} \) but harboring an \( \text{RAF1} \) gene fusion responded to trametinib and cobimetinib. There is also a report of an anaplastic pleomorphic xanthoastrocytoma harboring an \( \text{ATG7-RAF1} \) gene fusion that responded to the MEK inhibitor cobimetinib.

The fusion partner of \( \text{RAF1} \) in our case is \( \text{QKI} \). The product of \( \text{QKI} \) is an RNA-binding protein implicated in glial development and myelinization. Recently, it has been identified in oncogene fusions in pediatric brain tumors with \( \text{MYB} \) and \( \text{RAF1} \) genes. Furthermore, the \( \text{QKI-RAF1} \) fusion gene was shown to be a driver oncogene in cell lines by activating the MAPK and phosphoinositide-3 kinase/ mammalian target of rapamycin (PI3K/mTOR) pathways. The use of MEK1/2 reversible antagonist trametinib slowed tumor proliferation. The addition of everolimus, an mTOR inhibitor, to trametinib suppresses tumor growth more effectively and could be considered in case of resistance to single-agent trametinib. In our patient, the use of single-agent trametinib was sufficient to halt cancer proliferation.

In conclusion, we describe here the first case of a \( \text{QKI-RAF1} \) gene fusion in a high-grade soft-tissue sarcoma of intradural location. With secondary resistance to conventional multiagent chemotherapy, the use of the MEK1/2 inhibitor trametinib induced a prolonged metabolic response and clinical benefit. Unfortunately, access to sequencing methods and targeted drugs can be challenging, particularly in rare tumors where good evidence is scarce. Our case illustrates the benefit of NGS in diagnosis accuracy and identification of a therapeutic target, resulting in effective treatment for our patient.

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**AUTHORS’ DISCLOSURES OF POTENTIAL CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

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Thierry Alcindor
Consulting or Advisory Role: Novartis Canada Pharmaceuticals Inc, Taiho Pharmaceutical, Pfizer/EMD Serono, Roche Canada, Merck, Bayer, BMS, AstraZeneca
ACKNOWLEDGMENT
The authors thank Dr. Cristina Antonescu from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center for the molecular analysis that led to the accurate diagnosis of this case.

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