Chemotherapeutic Resistance in Egyptian Acute Myeloid Leukemia Patients

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Abstract

Background: Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) is a heterogeneous disorder with variable genetic abnormalities and cytogenetic alterations which provide a significant disease prognosis and determine response to therapy. Purpose: We aim to investigate the expression of the MDR1 gene in 100 Egyptian AML patients, to identify their role on both the progression and chemotherapeutic refractoriness together with assessment of known prognostic molecular markers; FLT3-ITD and NPM1 mutations. Methodology: Quantitative assessment of MDR1 gene expression was performed by quantitative RT-PCR. Additional prognostic molecular markers were determined as internal tandem duplications of the FLT3 gene and nucleophosmin gene mutation A. Results: MDR1 gene expression levels and FLT3/ITD mutations were significantly higher in AML patients with resistant disease with P value <0.001 and 0.002 respectively. However, NPM1 was insignificantly higher in patients with CR P-value 0.14. In MDR positive group, wild FLT3/ITD with or without NPM1 mutation was favorable in achieving CR with p value 0.02. MDR negative group, wild FLT3/ITD with or without NPM1 mutation showed insignificantly higher CR rates with p value (0.35). Kaplan-Meier curves revealed statistically significant difference between MDR1-negative and MDR1-positive patients regarding their DFS and OS between the two groups where DFS and OS were higher in MDR1-negative patients with p value 0.004 and 0.01, respectively. Conclusion: The results obtained by the current work together with the previous researches concerning the study of multidrug resistance genes in AML patients provide additional evidence of the role played by these genes as predictors of chemoresistance and poor treatment outcome.

Keywords: Acute myeloid leukemia- chemoresistance- treatment outcome

Introduction

Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) is a heterogeneous disorder with variable genetic abnormalities and cytogenetic alterations which provide a significant disease prognosis and determine response to therapy (Liu et al., 2007). Specific AML entities had been identified by WHO through focusing on significant cytogenetic and molecular genetic subgroups. In the entity of AML with recurrent genetic abnormalities, the most commonly identified prognostic balanced cytogenetic abnormalities are t(8;21)(q22;q22) and inv(16) (p13.1q22). They are usually associated with a good response to chemotherapy and a high complete remission (CR) rate with long term disease-free survival (DFS). Therefore, considerable progress has been made not only in understanding AML pathogenesis, but also in the development of diagnostic assays and novel therapies (Döhner et al., 2015). In the last decade, many somatically acquired mutations have been identified in several genes in cytogenetically normal (CN) AML such as FLT3-ITD, NPM1, CEBPα...etc. The fms-related tyrosine kinase 3 (FLT3) gene is a member of type III receptor tyrosine kinase (RTK) and located on chromosome 13q12 (Grafone et al., 2012). Mutations in FLT3 predict inferior response to chemotherapy and poor overall survival in AML patients. FLT3 mutations have been found in ~ 30% to 35% of adult AML patients. These mutations have been preferentially found in AML patients with normal karyotype (Takahashi et al., 2011). Mutations that result in the constitutive activation of FLT3 have been identified in two functional domains of the receptor. Internal tandem duplications (ITDs) in the juxtamembrane domain (JM) and activating point mutations in the second tyrosine kinase domain (TKD) which occur in ~ 30% and 10% of AML patients, respectively (Leung et al., 2013). FLT3 mutations causes activation of signal transduction networks mainly PI3K-AKT, RAS-MEK-MAPK, and STAT5 pathways and result in uncontrolled cell proliferation. Also, these mutations suppress myeloid transcription factors

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Asian Pac J Cancer Prev, 20 (8), 2421-2427
Gene expression was tested by real-time PCR based on SYBR Green I fluorescence using StepOne (Applied Biosystems, USA). We used the following primer sequences for MDRI gene: F: 5'-GCAAGGCTATCCAGATCTCTCTC3' and reverse primer sequence: 5'-ACCATTTCATGTCTGAGCACC3' according to Ottone et al., (2008). A 360-bp fragment was visualized by electrophoresis on 2% agarose gel. As internal control, we used β-actin amplification with the following primers sequence: 5'-GCATCTGACTTTGAGCCTCAG3' and reverse primer sequence: 5'ACCATTTCCATGTCTGAGCACC3'.

Detection of FLT3/ITDs and NPM1 mutation

Briefly, the FLT3 gene was amplified using the following forward primer sequence: 5’-CATTTGTCGTTTTAAACCTTGCTA3’ and reverse primer sequence: 5’-ATTATTCTCGTGGCTTCCCAG3’. The PCR reaction was performed using a 25 μl mixture of 1x PCR buffer, 3 mM MgCl2, 0.2 mM dNTPs, 0.2 μM of each primer, 200 ng of genomic DNA, and 0.5 U of Taq DNA polymerase. The PCR conditions were as follows: initial denaturation at 94°C for 5 min, followed by 35 cycles of denaturation at 94°C for 30 sec, annealing at 60°C for 30 sec, and extension at 72°C for 1 min, with a final extension at 72°C for 7 min. The PCR products were separated by electrophoresis on 2% agarose gel stained with ethidium bromide under UV light. For analyzing the presence of type A mutation in NPM1 exon 12, we used a forward primer sequence: 5’CCAAGAGGCTATTCAGATCTCTCTC3’ and reverse primer sequence: 5’ACCATTTCATGTCTGAGCACC3’. The PCR conditions for molecular studies. The study was approved by the Research ethical Committee of Clinical Oncology and nuclear medicine, School of Medicine, Cairo University, and informed consents were obtained from all participants prior to enrollment in the study.

RNA extraction

Extraction of total RNA was performed by QiAamp RNA Blood Mini Kit (Qiagen, Germany) according to manufacturer’s instructions. RNA integrity was tested on the Nanodrop (ND-1000) and stored at −80°C. Total RNA was reverse transcribed using random primers with a high-capacity cDNA archive kit (Applied Biosystem, Foster city, CA, USA).

Quantitative assessment of MDRI gene expression

MDRI gene expression was tested by real-time PCR based on SYBR Green I fluorescence using StepOne (Applied Biosystems, USA). We used the following primer sequences for MDRI gene: F: 5'-GGCAAAAGCAGGAGAATACGC-3' and reverse primer sequence: R: 5'-TTCAATGGTGGTTGCGCAT-3' and GAPDH as the housekeeping gene: F: 5'-GAAGTGTGACGTAAGTAGG-3' and R: 5'-GAAGATGGTGGATTAGTGTTGCTT-3' as described by Yang et al. 2012. The relative quantification (RQ) of MDRI gene expression was assessed by 

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\Delta \Delta C_t = ([Ct(\text{MDRI sample}) - Ct(\text{GAPDH sample})] - \])
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Table 1a. Comparison between AML Patients with MDR1 Negative or Positive According to Their Clinical and Laboratory Data

| Parameter | MDR1 negative n=48 (48%) | MDR1 positive n=52 (52%) | P-value |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Age       |                          |                          |         |
| Adulthood | 44 (47.3%)               | 49 (52.7%)               | 0.71    |
| Childhood | 4 (57.1%)                | 3 (42.9%)                |         |
| Gender    |                          |                          |         |
| Male      | 24 (51.1%)               | 23 (48.9%)               | 0.56    |
| Female    | 24 (45.3%)               | 29 (54.7%)               |         |
| FAB Classification |          |                          |         |
| M1        | 19 (51.4%)               | 18 (48.6%)               | 0.132   |
| M2        | 15 (53.6%)               | 13 (46.4%)               |         |
| M4        | 9 (60%)                  | 6 (40%)                  |         |
| M5 and M6 | 5 (25%)                  | 15 (75.8%)               |         |
| Mol. studies |                  |                          |         |
| FLT3-ITD wild | 34 (53.1%)               | 30 (46.9%)               | 0.171   |
| FLT3-ITD mutant | 14 (38.9%)               | 22 (61.1%)               |         |
| NPM1 WILD | 28 (47.5%)               | 31 (42.9%)               | 0.89    |
| NPM1 mutant | 20 (48.8%)               | 21 (51.2%)               |         |
| Cytogenetic studies |                     |                          |         |
| t (8;21) positive | 16 (45.7%)               | 19 (54.3%)               | 0.74    |
| t (8;21) negative | 32 (49.2%)               | 33 (50.8%)               |         |
| inv16 positive | 12 (44.4%)               | 15 (55.6%)               | 0.67    |
| inv16 negative | 36 (49.3%)               | 37 (50.7%)               |         |

*, Significant at P ≤ 0.05

Table 1b. Comparison between AML Patients with MDR1 Negative or Positive According to Their Laboratory Data

| Parameter | MDR1 negative n=48(48%) | MDR1 positive n=52(52%) | P-value |
|-----------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Hb gm/dL  |                          |                          |         |
| Range     | 3-13.7                   | 3.7-12                   |         |
| Mean±SD   | 7.8±2.1                  | 7.4±1.9                  | 0.343   |
| Median    | 7.6                      | 7.3                      |         |
| TLCx10⁹/cm³ | 3.3-272                 | 1.5-312                  |         |
| Range     | 55.625±62.1              | 62.996±67.7              |         |
| Mean±SD   | 55.625±62.1              | 51.75                    | 0.456   |
| Median    | 59                      | 51.75                    |         |
| Plts x10⁹/cm³ | 6-386                  | 5-228                    |         |
| Range     | 80.8±87.1                | 48.7±53.7                |         |
| Mean±SD   | 80.8±87.1                | 48.7±53.7                | 0.030*  |
| Median    | 86.5                     | 55.5                     |         |
| P.B blast (%) | 10-95                  | Oct-99                   |         |
| Range     | 51.8±25.5                | 53.8±28.6                |         |
| Mean±SD   | 51.8±25.5                | 53.8±28.6                | 0.702   |
| Median    | 52.5                     | 55.5                     |         |
| B.M blast (%) | 21-99                  | 21-99                    |         |
| Range     | 76.0±21.9                | 74.9±25.3                |         |
| Mean±SD   | 76.0±21.9                | 74.9±25.3                | 0.836   |
| Median    | 86.5                     | 85                       |         |

*, Significant at P ≤ 0.05

Results

Patients’ characteristics

Our patients were 47 males and 53 females with a male to female ratio 0.9. Their ages ranged between 5 and 70 years with a mean value of 38.7±15.9 years. AML cases were stratified according to their age into adulthood cases (93%) and childhood cases (7%). Seventy one patients were de novo AML cases while 29 patients were in relapse. As regards FAB classification, 37% were M1, 28% were M2, 15% were M4, 17% were M5 and 3% were M6. Molecular studies revealed 36 patients had FLT3/ITD mutation and 41 patients had NPM1 mutation A. Regarding cytogenetic studies 35 patients were t(8;21) positive and 27 patients were inv.16 positive.

MDR1 gene expression levels

In the control group, MDR1 gene expression level ranged between 0.53 and 2.6 with a mean value of 1.129±0.620 and a median value of 0.894. However, in AML patients, it ranged between 0.001 and 191.34 with a mean value of 8.672±26.260 and a median value of 1.133. MDR1 gene expression level in de novo patients ranged between 0.005 and 29.446 with a mean value of 3.637±6.5 while in relapsed patient, it ranged between 0.53 and 2.6 with a mean value of 1.129±0.620. Statistical analysis showed significant difference in expression levels between the two groups with p value = 0.00. Comparison between AML patients with MDR1 negative versus positive according to their clinical and laboratory data was described in Table 1a and 1b.

Correlation between MDR1 expression levels, FLT3/ITD and NPM1 mut. A and response to therapy

Complete remission (CR) was defined as recovery
of bone marrow morphology with less than 5% blasts, neutrophil count 1/109/L or more, platelet count 100/109/L or more, and no evidence of extra medullary leukemia. Resistant disease (RD) was defined as treatment resistance when evaluation did not meet the criteria of complete remission. Early death was defined as death before completion of the induction therapy cycle. These latter patients were not included in evaluation of resistant disease. Fifty seven patient achieved CR with MDR1 gene expression level ranged between 0.003 and 29.45, with a mean value of 2.912±5.592 and median value of 0.86. Forty three patients had RD with MDR1 gene expression level ranged between 0.001 and 191.341, with a mean value of 16.308±38.458 and median value of 3.68. There was statistically significant difference noticed in MDR1 gene expression between the two patients groups with P value <0.001. In this study, 48 patients were MDR1 negative with 32 patients achieved CR after induction therapy and 16 patients had RD. However, 52 patients were MDR1 positive with 25 patients achieved CR after induction therapy and 27 patients had RD. There was no statistically significant difference between patients as regards the response to therapy in the 2 groups (P value 0.061). Regarding FLT3/ITD mutation, there was statistically significant difference between cases who achieved CR and those with RD with p-value (0.002), where CR rates were higher in patients with wild FLT3/ITD than in mutant FLT3/ITD patients. While NPM1 mutation A showed no statistically significant difference between cases who achieved CR and those with RD with P-value 0.14. AML patients were stratified into groups according to MDR1 gene expression, FLT3-ITDs and NPM1 mutation A status. Statistical analysis of studied molecular genetic abnormalities regarding the response to therapy show significant difference between cases who achieved CR and those with RD within patients with MDR1 +ve with P-value=0.020* where CR rate was higher with (FLT3/ITD wild, NPM1 mut.A neg.) and

| Subgroup                          | CR  | RD  | P-value |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|---------|
| FLT3/ITD mutant, NPM1 +ve        | 2   | 3   |         |
| FLT3/ITD mutant, NPM1 -ve        | 3   | 14  |         |
| MDR1                             | 9   | 5   | 0.020*  |
| Positive                         |     |     |         |
| FLT3/ITD wild, NPM1 +ve          | 10  | 6   |         |
| FLT3/ITD mutant, NPM1 +ve        | 3   | 2   |         |
| FLT3/ITD mutant, NPM1 -ve        | 5   | 4   |         |
| Negative                         |     |     |         |
| FLT3/ITD wild, NPM1 +ve          | 13  | 6   | 0.349   |

*, Significant at P ≤ 0.05
Correlation between MDR1 expression levels, FLT3/ITD and NPM1 mut. A and OS and DFS

AML patients were followed up for 6-24 months according to available clinical data, the Overall Survival rate (OS: defined from the date of diagnosis till the date the patient died, or was last seen) and the Disease Free Survival rate (DFS: defined from the date of CR achievement till the date the patient relapsed) were assessed. AML patients with MDR1 negative had a cumulative DFS at 6 months 47.3%, while patients with MDR1 positive had a cumulative DFS at 6 months of 16.9%, with statistically significant difference encountered between the two patients’ group (P value 0.004). While, AML patients with MDR1 negative had a cumulative OS at 6 months 56.3%, while patients with MDR1 positive had a cumulative OS at 6 months 28%, with statistically significant difference between the two patients’ group (P value 0.01). After stratifying AML patients into groups according to studied molecular genetic abnormalities. MDR1 +ve group and MDR1 -ve showing significant higher OS and DFS in FLT3/ITD wild patients whether NPM1 is mutant or not, Figures 1-4.

Discussion

Multidrug resistance may be an inherent phenomenon seen before medications or acquired after an initially successful treatment begins (Filipits, 2004). The MDR phenotype is described as the simultaneous resistance against various drugs that have no structural similarity and act on different molecular targets. It is a multifactorial phenomenon with biochemical resistance mechanisms in common, which can include the reduction of intracellular drug concentrations by changes in its influx/efflux (Larsen et al., 2000). Here, we aim to investigate the expression of the MDR1 gene in AML patients, to identify their role on both the progression and chemotherapeutic refractoriness. As this is important chemotherapeutic drug transporters, quantification of this gene by real-time PCR offers particular promise as prognostic markers and markers for drug resistance in AML patients together with assessment of known prognostic molecular markers; FLT3-ITD and NPM1 mutations. In our study, MDR1 gene expression was insignificantly higher in AML cases compared to controls with P value = 0.57. This is in agreement with (Xu et al., 2008; Farawela et al., 2014) who reported that the expression of MDR1 gene was significantly higher in
AML patients than in normal controls. Also, *MDR1* gene expression was insignificantly higher in relapsed cases compared to de novo cases with *P* value = 0.66. Several studies have reported a higher *MDR1* expression at time of relapse as compared to time of diagnosis (Farawela et al., 2014; Beck et al., 1996; Gekeler et al., 1992). However, most studies suggest an identical expression or even lower level of *MDR1* in relapsed/refractory AML (Hart et al., 1994; Sato et al., 1990). Moreover, Huh et al., 2006 reported that MDR mRNA expression did not give significant effects on tendency to relapse or continuous CR status after induction chemotherapy. Our AML patients were divided into 2 groups; MDR1 negative and MDR1 positive according to Farawela et al., 2014. Forty eight patients were MDR1-negative and 52 patients were MDR1-positive. This is in accordance with (Leith et al., 1999; Fujimaki et al., 2002). Their studies reported that over a third of AML patients had MDR1 expression. Also, these frequencies were higher than those previously reported in the study of Schaich et al., (2004) who reported that 25% their AML patients had MDR1expression-positive in addition to (Huh et al., 2006; Farawela et al., 2014) who reported that *MDR1* gene was expressed in 23.1 % and 39.6 % of AML patients, respectively. On the contrary, Pirker et al., (1991) reported positive *MDR1* gene expression in about 71% of their AML cases. There was no statistically significant difference noticed between AML patients with MDR1-negative and MDR1-positive as regards their age, gender, FAB classification or other clinical and laboratory features except for platelet count which was higher in MDR1 negative patients. This is in accordance with (Illmer et al., 2002; Farawela et al., 2014). As regards response to induction therapy; *MDR1* gene expression levels were significantly higher in AML patients with RD with *P* value < 0.001. Our results are similar to Farawela et al., 2014 who observed that *MDR1* gene expression levels were higher in cases with RD than cases who achieved CR; however it didn’t reach statistically significant difference. FLT3/ITD represents one of the most frequent genetic alterations in AML. In our study FLT3/ITD showed statistically significant difference between cases who achieved CR and those with resistant disease were FLT3/ITD higher in patients with RD. This is in agreement with Wang et al., (2017) who reported that FLT3/ITD-positiveAML patients had higher relapse incidence. These observations have validated FLT3 as a therapeutic target in AML with FLT3 inhibitors have shown promising results when combined with standard therapy. In our study, NPM1 showed statistically insignificant difference between cases who achieved CR and those with RD were NPM1 mutation was higher in patients with CR. Similarly, Zidan et al., (2013) reported that NPM1 mutation is a prognostic factor for a favorable outcome in Egyptian population. The current work aimed to verify the impact of the studied molecular genetic abnormalities on the response to therapy. AML patients were stratified into groups according to *MDR1* gene expression, FLT3/ITDs and NPM1 mutation A status. In MDR positive group, wild FLT3/ITD with or without NPM1 mutation was favorable in achieving CR with *P* value (0.02). In MDR negative group, wild FLT3/ITD with or without NPM1 mutation showed insignificantly higher CR rates with *P* value (0.35). However, Farawela et al., (2014) reported that there was no statistically significant difference noticed between cases who achieved CR and those with RD except for those with negative for *MDR1* expression together with mutated NPM gene where CR rate was higher in this group. Our patient with wild FLT3/ITD showed significantly higher DFS and OS with *P* value 0.001 and <0.001, respectively. Similar to Wang et al., (2017) who reported that FLT3/ITD-positive AML patients had lower DFS as well as OS. Our Patient with NPM mutant showed insignificantly higher DFS and OS with *P* value 0.709 and 0.708, respectively. This is in agreement with that previously reported by Verhaak et al., (2005) who reported that NPM1 mutations express independent favorable prognostic value with regard to OS, and DFS. Kaplan-Meier curves revealed statistically significant difference between MDR1-negative and MDR1-positive patients regarding their DFS and OS between the two groups where DFS and OS were higher in MDR1-negative patients with *P* value 0.004 and 0.01, respectively. This is compatible to that previously reported by (Pirker et al. 1991; Schaich et al., 2004) who reported a significant decrease in both DFS and OS of AML patients with detectable *MDR1* gene expression compared to the DFS and OS of MDR1 RNA-negative patients. Also, Huh et al., 2006 reported that MDR1-positive AML had poor 2-yr survivals; yet this observation was not supported by statistical analysis.

In conclusion, the results obtained by the current work together with the previous researches concerning the study of multidrug resistance genes in acute myeloid leukemia patients providing additional evidence of the role played by these genes as predictors of chemoresistance and poor treatment outcome. Hence, MDR1 blockade-mediated cheemoresponse reversal, or novel chemotherapeutic approaches directed against cancer expressing MDR1 could enhance tumor eradication and contribute to durable clinical response.

**Acknowledgements**

We deeply acknowledge the scientific and technical support offered by Oncology dep. molecular lab team. We are also thankful for our dear patients as well as IT dep. team.

**Conflicts of interest**

Authors declared no conflicts of interest.

**Ethical approval**

All procedures performed in the study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments (GCP guidelines) or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.
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DOI:10.31557/APJCP.2019.20.8.2421
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