Technical Note

Exploring breast and prostate cancer RNA-seq derived radiosensitivity with the Genomic Adjusted Radiation Dose (GARD) model

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Radiation therapy Genomics Personalized medicine Prostate cancer Breast cancer GARD

ABSTRACT

The use of a 10 gene transcriptional signature as part of the GARD model has been shown to be predictive of radiotherapy benefit for a range of cancers, with the potential to determine an optimal overall dose per patient. We used publicly available RNA-seq transcriptomics data from a luminal B breast cancer patient and from 14 prostate cancer patients to explore the radiosensitivity indices (RSI) and so GARD estimates of both tumour and proximal normal biopsies from each individual. Clear differences of clinical relevance in derived radiobiological properties between tumour and proximal normal tissues were evident for the breast cancer patient, whilst such differences across the prostate cancer cohort were more equivocal. Using the prostate cancer cohort’s median tumour predicted GARD value as a threshold for high therapeutic effect for radiotherapy, we found evidence that a higher overall prescribed dose than the widely used 72 Gy/36fx could benefit half of these patients. This exploratory study demonstrates the potential combining the GARD model with sequencing based transcriptomics could have in informing personalised radiotherapeutic practise for both breast and prostate cancer patients.

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread use and acknowledged efficacy of radiotherapy in treating patients with a range of cancers, there is a growing appreciation that the standardised treatment regimen prescribed for specific tumours may be sub-optimal. The one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to have an equal therapeutic effect for all patients due to patient genotype and tumour heterogeneity. The growth in the use of genomics assays over the past decade has provided a means to formally assess radiosensitivity at the individual level. Work studying clonogen survival curves from a subset of the NCI60 panel together with associated transcriptional activity culminated in the derivation of a 10-gene panel based radiosensitivity index (RSI), measured in units of SF2, which was validated in several clinical studies [1], demonstrating enhanced radiotherapeutic efficacy based on a given tumour’s transcriptomic derived RSI.

Subsequent work incorporating the predicted transcriptional RSI into the Linear Quadratic formalism yielded the development of the Genome Adjusted Radiation Dose (GARD) model [2], which permits estimation of patient specific radiobiological properties directly from the expression profile of the tumour under scrutiny. Several subsequent studies have further validated the efficacy of the GARD model in quantifying the efficacy of radiotherapy for certain patients over others for several cancer types, and in using the distribution of GARD estimates among a given cohort to identify those patients for whom a lesser or greater overall radiation dose would be appropriate to optimise tumour control [3,4]. In the most recent study, a pooled pan-cancer analysis in 11 separate clinical cohorts of 1,615 unique patients with 7 different cancer types definitely demonstrated the GARD derived dose, not overall physical RT doses, was predictive of RT benefit as regards recurrence and overall survival [5].

Quantifying normal tissue complications is a critical component of any radiation treatment plan, and by convention this is determined from agreed tissue-specific radiobiological parameters that are considered universally applicable to all patients. However, the personalised and fundamentally genomic nature of radiotoxicity has been known for some time [6–8]. The conventional GARD formalism lacks a means of quantifying radiosensitivity for proximal normal tissues to the tumour being targeted, as the RSI is typically estimated from expression microarray analyses which are based around a differential estimate of expression between pair-matched tumour and normal tissue samples. Indeed, questions have been raised about the potential presence of normal tissue within the tumour samples compromising the GARD assay itself [9]. We reasoned that by directly sequencing transcripts from both tumour and
normal tissue samples using RNA-seq, we could implement the GARD model for both separately, and use this information to assess the suitability of radiation dose escalation for a given patient, in particular for those cases where limiting proximal normal tissue radioxicity is a priority.

In this short communication, we articulate an exploratory study involving publicly available RNA sequence data for one breast cancer patient (T = 10, N = 3) where we describe our novel methodology to generate RSI estimates directly from such transcriptomic data, and how we use these to characterise the likely radiotherapeutic response - both tumour and proximal normal tissue - of this patient to a standard fractionation treatment regimen of 50 Gy/25fx. We additionally apply the same approach to a publicly available RNA sequence data archive for 14 prostate cancer patients (T = 1, N = 1 for each patient). As the radioxicity of proximal normal prostate tissue is not of current clinical relevance, our interest here is to determine if dose escalation would be appropriate for all/any of these patients as derived from each tumour’s RSI. As no prior studies involving prostate cancer have been reported using the GARD methodology, this component of our exploratory study is particularly novel.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sequence Data

10 tumour and 3 adjacent normal samples were biopsied from a single Korean woman diagnosed with invasive ductal luminal B carcinoma, and the extracted RNA sequenced using ~100 bp paired-end reads on an Illumina HiSeq 2500 platform [10,11]. Patient metadata can be found in Supplementary Table S1. For the prostate cancer cohort, data was retrieved from a previously published study examining and concatenating from a TCP model using Gaussian distributed prediction function plot (Fig. 2A) for each patient. A LOESS model fit through the optimal patient dosages yields a sigmoidal curve, as predicted from tumour control probability (TCP) models and previously demonstrated in [26,27], where the sigmoidal distribution was generated from a TCP model using Gaussian distributed values at 0.35 with 0.08 standard deviation, suggesting a similar relationship between values and optimal patient dosage using the GARD model. Fig. 2A highlights the benefit higher overall dosages could have for several patients, in some cases greater than the standard prescribed (72 Gy/36fx). 35% of patients would achieve a high TCP at 70 Gy dosage in 2 Gy fractions, with 92% of patients obtaining high TCP at 75 Gy.

3. Discussion

This study aimed to create a RNA-seq based methodology for RSI calculation and utilize the GARD model in order to assess the efficacy of planned standard of care radiotherapy on an individualized basis, taking into account adjacent normal tissue radioxicity as required. The latter is of particular importance for those cancers localised within existing organs for which there is a need to limit radiotoxicity, such as breast cancers. The use of RNA-seq data distinguishes it from the conventional GARD estimation which is based on a gene expression microarray methodology. Recent work by Dai et al. [28] attempted to determine RSI directly from RNA-seq data, however that approach could not correct for cross-sample count normalization [29]. By applying a weighted trimmed means of M (TMM) values with log2 transformation, we have been able to correct for both inter-sample gene count
Fig. 1. A: Luminal B Breast Cancer Patient: Boxplot showcasing RSI for 9 tumour and 3 adjacent normal tissue samples. B: Prostate Cancer Patient: Boxplot showcasing RSI for tumour and adjacent normal tissue in 14 normal-tumour matched samples.

Fig. 2. A: Empirical cumulative distribution plot for the minimum total radiotherapy dose for tumour control per patient in the prostate dataset, using median GARD across the prostate dataset as the threshold for a high GARD score. The labels indicate each patient’s GARD value in the plot.
comparison and cross sample normalization [30].

We used this methodology to explore the radiosensitivity heterogeneity across tumour and adjacent normal tissue in two datasets, in a single patient with luminal B breast cancer and in 14 patients with prostate cancer. In both cases, the gene panel derived RSI values showed greater consistency for the tumour against the normal samples for both cancer types, in addition to an overall trend for greater RSI associated with normal tissues. Whilst more forensic analysis would be necessary to confirm normal tissue ‘contamination’ in the tumour samples, its clear that the differences in RSI are consistent with differing transcriptional signatures, consistent with our gene expression analysis (data not shown), resolving to some extent prior concerns of normal tissue contamination compromising the GARD model [9].

For the luminal B breast cancer dataset, both RSI and GARD estimates were significantly different between the tumour and normal tissue biopsies from the same patient, with the GARD value at the 21 threshold previously reported for enhanced radiotherapeutic efficacy [5]. The significant difference in GARD derived optimal dose between both breast tissue types indicates the potential for enhanced tumour control probability by increasing the overall biological effective dose without enhancing normal toxicity. Optimal radiotherapeutic regimens aim to maximise the therapeutic index between tumour control and normal tissue complication probabilities. This preliminary study demonstrates the potential of using GARD to characterise the predicted radiotherapeutic outcome of both the tumour and proximal normal tissue for a given patient, and in so doing, provide valuable additional information towards personalising treatment.

Limiting radioxicity to proximal normal prostate tissue is not considered in clinical practise, and so the variations in tumour-normal RSI determined for each patient in the prostate cancer cohort are not in any way actionable, other than pointing to clearly differing radiobiological conditions between both tissue types. The majority of patients in the prostate cancer cohort show tumour RSI values in excess of 0.4, which has been previously proposed as being a threshold indicating suitability for hypofractionation [31,32] (Supplementary Figure S4). Many of these same patients were also identified as likely requiring a higher prescribed dose to achieve optimal GARD for tumour control in our study (Fig. 2). Of note is the fact that there is no evident correlation between the RSI estimates and other clinical variables such as PSA, stage, or Gleason Score (Table S1). Whilst we caution drawing conclusions on such a small sample, taken together these data suggest that such RSI profiling may have value in radiation treatment planning for treating localised disease in this first application of the GARD model to prostate cancer.

Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study involved the use of publicly available RNA-seq data for which prior ethical approval and consent would have been required prior to submission on the BioProject repository.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials
The breast cancer data is available at BioProject: PRJNA432903; GEO:GSE110114. The prostate cancer data is available at BioProject: PRJEB2449. All code used to process data is available on github: https://github.com/BenNolann/rsi_analysis. A docker container with all relevant software: https://hub.docker.com/repository/docker/bennolan/rnaseq

Authors’ contributions
AG conceived of the study, detailed the proposed work, coordinated the study, and lead the drafting of the manuscript. BN and BOS worked equally on processing and analysing the data, and contributed to the drafting of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest
The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement
NUI Galway’s Office of the Vice President for Equality and Diversity provided support in the form of an Athena Swan Midcareer Lecturer Research Capacity Building Grant awarded to AG. No additional external funding was received for this study.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version, at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctro.2022.08.002.

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