Reevaluation of the Correlations between Ultrasound Features of Thyroid Nodules and Grades of Bethesda Classification

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Abstract

AIM: To reevaluate the correlations between ultrasound (US) features of thyroid nodules (THNs) and grades of Bethesda classification, to select correctly the patients who must undergo fine needle aspiration (FNAB).

MATERIAL AND METHODS: In this study, we have included 260 cytopathologies of thyroid gland between the period of 2014–2016. The procedures are performed at radiology department of Hygeia Hospital. In our study, we excluded the cases with a high risk of hemorrhage and the patients which did not accept the anesthetic procedure because of anxiety. The study includes only the first punctures with their respective Bethesda classification and not repeated FNAB cases. First using the z-test, we compared the percentage occupied by the Bethesda categories that are indicative of surgery (BIV + BV + BVI) at US features that suspect malignancy (hypoechogenicity, microcalcifications, abnormal contours, central vascularization), with the percentage occupied by group (BIV + BV + BVI) at the US features which indicate benignity (hyperechoic, no microcalcifications, peripheral vascularization, cystic-solid/cystic, spongiform, normal contours). Furthermore, We have evaluated utilizing the odds ratio if there was a correlation between TR4 and TR5 categories in ACR/TIRADS classification and the categories (BIV+BV+BVI) for any statistical significance. The significance of the dimensions of the nodule was tested as an indicator for surgical intervention. For this purpose, the percentage occupied by the nodules with a diameter larger than 1.5 cm at (BIV + BV + BVI) group was compared with the percentage occupied by nodules smaller than 1.5 cm at BIV + BV + BVI. In addition, we observed if there was a strong statistical correlation between nodules larger than 1.5 cm and the Bethesda categories that suggested malignancy. There was no statistical test made for the features “taller than wide” and microcalcifications because of the small number of cases. It was also made a comparison of percentages (BIV + BV + BVI) even for three clinical features: Men versus women, solitary nodule versus multinodular goiter, left lobe versus right lobe. We compared the percentages occupied by the (BIV + BV + BVI) group of categories in patients over 45 years old with the percentages occupied by this group at patients younger than 45 years old. We also noted which of Bethesda categories is more frequent.

CONCLUSIONS: The features that are more indicative for FNAB are hypoechogenicity, consistency, intranodal vascularization, and extranodular positioning. If a THN has one of the above features and has a dimension of more than 10 mm, it has an indication for FNAB. Indications for FNAB increase with the increasing of the abovementioned features of a THN. The combination of US features that suggest malignancy, TR4 and TR5, with BIII category is a strong indicator for surgical intervention. The results of this study are similar with the results of prior studies, and we could not distinguish any specific US feature that has an absolute indication for FNAB. The appropriate determination of the US features of a THN in correlation with the patient’s clinic information will determine the proper indication for a FNAB.

Introduction

The core of our study raises a question that is mentioned widely in medical opinions before: Which nodule could be malignant based on ultrasound (US) features and subsequently which of them need intervention. To answer these questions, we have to do a quick review of the imaging modalities which are used to examine thyroid nodules (THNs) and its US features.

The US has created a real revolution in the diagnosis of pathologies of the thyroid gland in general and THNs in particular. Unlike in the rest of the organs of the human body, the other imaging modalities have a limited role in thyroid examination. Despite the higher contrast resolution in magnetic resonance imaging and the higher spatial resolution with computed tomography scans (CT), the US remains the best modality for assessing THNs [1] (Figure 1). In scintigraphy (thyroid scan), the normal thyroid demonstrates uniform symmetrical uptake of radioactive material [2]. A THN is considered “hot” when it causes focal accumulation of radioactive material and “cold” when it gives a photopenic defect. It is valuable in tracking of a THN when TSH is low. In the case of a hot nodule with low TSH, the nodule malignancy is rare, so fine needle aspiration (FNAB) is not advised [3]. Despite the relatively high ability of scintigraphy to exclude benign nodules, the poor spatial
by Grani et al., the ACR-TI-RADS classification was found to be most effective in reducing the number of cytoges (at 268 out of 502), with the lowest false negativity of 2.2% (NPV, 97.8%; 95% CI: 95.2–99.2%), with a sensitivity of 83%, specificity 56.2% and PPV 12.8% [9]. That is why THNs included in the study are classified according to ACR-TI-RADS. To understand the US features of THN, it is better first to know normal thyroid glands US appearance and what are THNs. The normal aspect of thyroid gland in the US is hyperechoic, homogeneous and with fine echostucture (Figure 1) [10]. The approximate size of the lobes in adults is 4–6 cm in craniocaudal diameter and 1.3–1.8 cm in anteroposterior and transverse diameters. The isthmus is 3 mm in anteroposterior diameter [11]. THN is defined by the American Thyroid Association “as a discrete lesion within the thyroid gland which is radiologically distinct from the surrounding thyroid parenchyma” [12] (Figure 2). Below, it is a concentrated ACR-TI-RADS classification (Tables 1 and 2). This classification applies only to nodules and not to normal thyroid [13]. In 2007 the Bethesda classification classified the histopathologic findings of the aspirated material into 6 categories [14]. To clearly understand the Bethesda classification, one must know the histopathology of THN and diffuse pathologies of thyroid gland presented briefly below:

Benign lesions
- Benign follicular nodules (Figure 3)
- Adenomatoid nodules
- Follicular adenoma (Figure 4)
- Hurthle cell adenoma
- De Quervain thyroiditis
- Chronic lymphocytic thyroiditis hashimoto (Figure 5)
- Malignant lesions
- Papillary carcinoma (Figure 6)
- Follicular carcinoma (Figure 7)
- Hurthle cell carcinoma
- Poorly differentiated carcinoma
- Poorly differentiated anaplastic carcinoma (Figure 8)
Because the real reason of this study is the differentiation of malignant pathologies, it is important to take a brief look at some of the most important categories.

- Medullary carcinoma
- Lymphoma
- Metastasis

Table 1: ACR-TI-RADS. Points according to ultrasonic features

| Consistency         | Echogenicity       | Shape                        | Contours          | Classification         |
|---------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Cystic 0 point      | Anechogenic 0 point| Wider than taller 0 point    | Clear 0 point     | Without calcifications 0 point |
| Spongiform 0 pike   | Hyperechogenic or isoechogenic 1 point | Taller than Wider 3 points  | Unclear 0 point   | Comet-tail calcifications 0 point |
| Solidocystic 1 point| Hypoechoic 2 point | Marked hypoechoic 3 point   | Irregular lobular 2 points | Microcalcifications 1 point |
| Solid or almost solid 2 points | Marked hypoechoic 3 point | Extralobar protrusion 3 points | Peripheric or rim calcifications 2 points | Microcalcifications 3 points |

Table 2: ACR-TI-RADS. Categories with respective recommendations

| Points | Classification | Recommendations |
|--------|----------------|-----------------|
| TR1: 0 point | Unsuspicious benign 0.3% | No FNA required |
| TR2: 2 points | Unsuspicious 1.5% | No FNA required |
| TR3: 3 points | Mildly suspicious 4.8% | ≥1.5 cm follow-up, ≥2.5 cm FNA follow-up: 1, 3, and 5 years |
| TR4: 4–6 points | Suspicious 9.1% | ≥1.0 cm follow-up, ≥1.5 cm FNA Follow-up: 1, 2, 3, and 5 years |
| TR5: ≥7 points | Highly suspicious 35% | ≥0.5 cm follow-up, ≥1.0 cm FNA annual follow-up for up to 5 years |

Figure 3: Solitary, spongiform, nodus 25 × 16 mm in size, without vascularization inside, extralobar, in the lower pole of the right thyroid. Papillary carcinoma, follicular variant (a). Needle shadow during the biopsy (b)

Figure 4: Hyperechogenic nodus with cystic degeneration inside and peripheric or rim calcifications. In the post operatory biopsy resulted papillary carcinoma, follicular variant (a). Needle shadow during the biopsy (b)

Figure 5: (a and b) Thyroiditis Hashimoto. Right lobe, transverse view with "leopard skin" pattern (a). Longitudinal view with moderate vascularization (b)

- Papillary carcinoma, which as mentioned above comprised the most part of malignant pathologies of thyroid gland, has a papillary architecture composed of follicular cells with distinct nuclear features [15]. When the FNAB is positive for papillary carcinomas, total thyroidectomy is indicated, because of its multifocal nature, with or without subsequent ablation with radioactive iodine. If FNAB is suspicious, lobectomy with "intraoperative frozen biopsy" is recommended for confirmation. If the result is positive, the other lobe is removed. The prognosis of papillary carcinoma is generally good (10 years relative survival at 93%). Bad prognostic factors are age over 45 years and advanced stage of the tumor. Total body scan with 131I is useful in assessing disease recurrence after thyroidectomy and ablation [7].

Figure 6: (a and b) Solitary, hypoechoic nodus, with clear post operatory biopsy resulted papillary carcinoma, follicular variant (a). Needle shadow during the biopsy (b)

- Follicular carcinoma consists of follicular cells with capsular or vascular invasion [16] and comprises 11% of thyroid malignancies [7]. Both, follicular adenoma and carcinoma, in FNAB are considered as follicular neoplasms or suspected as such and are reported in
6–12% of FNABs [17], 15–30% of which are malignant [16]. It is more common in men, the elderly, and those with large nodules [16]. Treatment modalities include total thyroidectomy with or without ablation with radioactive iodine for the invasive form and lobectomy or isthmus removal for minimally invasive forms. The prognosis is generally good with 10 years of relative survival in 85% of cases. Poor prognostic factors are older age over 45 years and advanced stage [18].

Aim of the study

The evaluation of the statistical correlation between US features of THN and grades of Bethesda classification, to correctly select the patients who must undergo FNAB.

Material and Methods

In this study, we have included 260 cytologies of thyroid gland during a period from 2014 to 2018. The procedures are performed at the radiology department of Hygeia Hospital with GE Logiq P7 (GE Healthcare, Chicago, Illinois, USA), GE Logiq E9 (Chicago, Illinois, USA) and SIEMENS ACUSON NX2 (Siemens Healthcare GmbH, Erlangen, Germany) US machines. In our study are excluded the cases with a high risk of hemorrhage and the patients which did not accept the anesthetic procedure because of anxiety.

Figure 7: (a and b) Solitary, heterogeneous, mainly hyperechogenic nodus, with clear contours, of the right thyroid lobe, classified Bethesda IV. In the post operatory biopsy resulted follicular carcinoma (a). Central vascularization (b)

Anaplastic (or undifferentiated) carcinoma is a highly malignant neoplasm with the features of a high-grade carcinoma. It comprises 2% of primary thyroid malignancies [16]. It has a poor prognosis with 5 months to 1-year survival in only 20% of cases [19]. Surgical removal is not always an option due to its early local spread. If it can be performed, it is necessary to be done immediately and by a surgeon specialized in surgeries for thyroid pathologies of this kind, because reintervention is often impossible. First of all, accurate staging plays a crucial role. Then, chemotherapy and radiotherapy can be applied. Anaplastic carcinoma does not uptake iodine so the diagnosis with thyroid scan and ablation with radioactive iodine cannot be applied [15].

Medullary carcinoma originates from neuroendocrine C cells of thyroid, which secrete calcitonin [20] and accounts for 4% of all primary thyroid malignancies [7]. Even this pathology does not uptake iodine therefore, similarly to anaplastic carcinoma, thyroid scan diagnosis and radioactive iodine therapy are not an option. About 80% of cases are sporadic and only 20% have a familial character, with type 2a of multiple endocrine neoplasia the most common familial condition [7]. The primary treatment is total thyroidectomy [16]. The prognosis is intermediate with 75% 10 years of relative survival [7].

Established in 2007, the Bethesda System for Thyroid Cytology Reports is a classification with six categories that comprise the explanations of risks for malignancy and recommendations for further management [14] (Table 3).

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The technique that has been used is the same as the one that is described in the literature [15]. The patient is placed on the examination table in the supine position with the neck extended, which optimizes visualization of the thyroid during the US examination. The radiologist usually stands near the patient's chest, which we consider to be the most anatomically intuitive approach; in some cases, however, the radiologist may need to stand near the patient's head. Preliminary US of the area of interest with a high-resolution 10–12-MHz linear-array transducer is performed to determine a suitable approach to the nodule. The patient is asked...
Each pass consists of approximately 50 vigorous controlled excursions of the needle through the nodule over a 20-s period. For solid lesions, multiple peripheral regions should be sampled to increase the adequacy rate. For mixed cystic and solid lesions or predominantly cystic lesions with a solid mural nodule, the solid component of the lesion is targeted to improve diagnostic yield. If color Doppler analysis shows relative increased vascularity in a portion of a nodule, this region is similarly targeted. For vascular nodules, the small (27-gauge) needle size, capillary technique, and short needle dwell time are particularly important for improving diagnostic yield by decreasing the amount of blood in the aspirate. If a prior biopsy specimen was reported as nondiagnostic or indeterminate, we perform combined FNAB and core biopsy. Upon completion of biopsy, gentle manual pressure may be applied, the skin is cleansed, and a sterile dressing is put in place. The patient is discharged immediately after the procedure. No major complications requiring intervention or hospitalization have been reported. Most of cases experience a slight pain and discomfort. In rare cases, the puncture may cause a small subcapsular or intranodal hematoma that resolves spontaneously (Figure 10).
Results

After performing statistical tests, it was found that, for the features, hypoechogenic (P_b = 38.18%) versus hyperechogenic (P_a = 24.34%), according to the z test (p < 0.05), the difference between the percentages was statistically significant (z = -1.958; p = 0.0239<0.05). In the case of microcystic calcifications (P_a = 28.07%) versus without microcystic calcifications (P_a = 23.65%), according to the z-score test (p < 0.05), the change was insignificant (z = -0.685; p = 0.2467 > 0.05). For the feature of central vascularization (P_a = 37.7%) versus peripheral vascularization (P_a = 24.75%), the comparison was made with the statistical test z-score according to which the difference is significant (z = -1.98; p = 0.0239<0.05). For the features of regular contours (P_a = 24.78%) versus irregular contours (P_a = 23.33%), the comparison was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = 0.173; p = 0.4313>0.05). For the central vascularization (P_a = 50%) versus intralobular nodule (P_a = 20.8%), the comparison was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = 3.686; p = 0.0001<0.05).

Furthermore, we have evaluated utilizing the odds ratio if there was a correlation between TR4 and TRS categories in ACR/TIRADS classification and the categories (BIV+BV+BVI) for any statistical significance.

The significance of the dimensions of the nodule was tested as an indicator for surgical intervention. For this purpose, the percentage occupied by the nodules with a diameter larger than 1.5 cm at BIV + BV + BVI group was compared with the percentage occupied by nodules smaller than 1.5 cm at BIV + BV + BVI. In addition, we observed if there was a strong statistical connection between nodules larger than 1.5 cm and the Bethesda categories that suggested malignancy. There was no statistical test made for the features “taller than wide” and microcystic calcifications because of the small number of cases. It was also made a comparison of percentages (BIV + BV + BVI) even for three clinical features: men versus women, solitary nodule versus multinodular goiter, left lobe versus right lobe. We compared the percentages occupied by the (BIV + BV + BVI) group of categories in patients over 45 years old with the percentages occupied by this group at patients younger than 45-years-old. We also noted which of Bethesda categories is more frequent.

For the group of features (solidocystic + cystic + spongiform) (P_a = 15.49%) versus solid (P_a = 28.57%), the comparison was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = -2.17; p = 0.015<0.05). For two clinical features mentioned above, the results were as follows: the comparison, female (P_a = 23.82%) versus male (P_a = 41.18%), was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = -1.593; p = 0.0556 > 0.05). The comparison of multinodular (P_a = 21.36%) versus solitary (P_a = 26.75%) nodules was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = -1.958; p = 0.0239<0.05). For the feature of regular contours (P_a = 24.78%) versus irregular contours (P_a = 23.82%) versus central vascularization (P_a = 24.75%), the comparison was made with the statistical test z-score (p < 0.05) according to which the difference is significant (z = -3.686; p = 0.0001<0.05).

Regarding the size of the nodules, the comparison of percentages according to the z-score test (p < 0.05) showed that nodules larger than 1.5 cm occupy a percentage (59.4%) statistically higher in the categories that suggest malignancy than the nodules below 1.5 cm (40.6%) (z = -2.121; p = 0.017<0.05). The percentage of nodules larger than 1.5 cm in the categories that suggest for benign nature (which do not suggest surgery) is 60.2%, almost the same as the percentage in the categories that suggest malignancy.

Based in the odds ratio (p < 0.05), no relationship statistically significant was observed between the TR4
Reducing the number of unnecessary thyroid biopsies

The group of categories (BI + BII) occupies 37.7% of cases, categories (BIV + BV + BVI) occupy 31.5%, while that BIII occupies 30.7% of cases. As can be seen, the differences between them are not significant, but it is impressive that only category BII occupies approximately 1/3 of all cases.

Discussions

Two of the most important US features of nodules that indicate for FNA are “hypoechogenicity” and extralobar location of THN, which is consistent with the results of almost all the other studies in this field. An important feature is the central vascularization of THN. That is why we recommend that it should be included in the ACR/TI RADS classification as well as in other similar classifications that do not contain it. Another strong feature is the consistency of THN. A solid nodus is more indicative than solidocystic or spongiform one. Age over 45 years old is also an indicative feature, but not of particular importance. The size of the nodule over 1.5 cm is an indicative feature, but not very important. The size of the nodule over 10 mm, it has an indication for FNAB.

Microcalcifications did not prove to be an important feature in the recommendation for FNA. This can have several reasons, as follows: (1) The evaluation was not done in real time but in retrospective based on footage and prints. (2) The examiner’s experience in evaluating microcalcifications. (3) The type of machine and preset used for thyroid examination. (4) The number of cases probably should have been larger to make a more realistic assessment. The contours did not turn out to be a significant discriminatory feature, probably due to the limited number of cases. Clinical features such as gender, multinodular goiter or solitary nodule, being in the right or left lobe did not prove important to indicate a recommendation for FNA. It is worth noting here that for the feature men versus women, it is needed a separate study, with a larger number of cases, to draw a more realistic statistical conclusion.

Conclusions

The features that are more indicative for FNAB are hypoechogenicity, consistency, intranodal vascularization, and extralobar positioning. If a THN has one of the above features and has a dimension of more than 10 mm, it has an indication for FNAB. The more of the above features a THN has the more indication for a FNAB it will have. The combination of US features that suggest malignancy, TR4, and TR5, with BII category is a strong indicator for surgical intervention. The results of this study are similar with the results of prior studies and we could not distinguish any specific US feature that has an absolute indication for FNAB. The appropriate determination of the US features of a THN in correlation with the patient’s clinic information will determine the proper indication for a FNAB.

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