The importance of PSA-Density in active surveillance for prostate cancer

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**Summary**

**Objective:** In this study, we aimed to determine the predictive factor for additional treatment requirement in active surveillance (AS) for patients with low or very low-risk prostate cancer (PCA) and we investigated the effect of tumor burden by total core involvement rate in biopsy to predict need for additional treatment. 

**Material and methods:** 107 patients with PCa in AS between 2005 and 2018 have been evaluated retrospectively. Groups were divided into two groups according to the need for additional treatment. Group 1 received additional treatment, group 2 did not receive additional treatments and active surveillance was continued. Patient’s total prostate-specific antigen (tPSA), prostate-specific antigen density (PSA-D), total core involvement count, quantity and rate at biopsy pathology results and follow-up period were recorded and compared in the two groups.

**Results:** The current cohort includes 107 patients. Mean age at diagnosis was 63.01 years. Mean tPSA values at diagnosis were 6.09 ng/mL and 5.2 ng/mL in the group 1 and group 2, respectively. Mean follow-up period was 38.1 months (range, 12 to 134 months). Only PSA-D measurement significantly predicted need for additional treatment (p = 0.017). ROC analysis showed that the optimal threshold was 0.13 ng/mL/cc (sensitivity: 70.8%; specificity: 57.1%). Additional treatment requirement was not detected in patients with PSA-D cut-off level less than 0.07 ng/mL/cc.

**Conclusions:** Total tumor burden of less than 5% is safe for patients with low or very low-risk PCa in AS. A 0.13 ng/mL/cc cut-off level of PSA-D can predict need for additional treatment in patients managed by AS.

**Key words:** Prostate cancer; Active surveillance; Prostate specific antigen density; Definitive treatment.

Submitted 12 December 2019; Accepted 3 January 2020

**INTRODUCTION**

Prostate cancer (PCa) is the most common cancer in men (1) and has a high mortality rate like lung cancer. PSA screening and early diagnosis have led to a decrease in the mortality rates (2). There are many changes in the treatment of prostate cancer over the years and one of the most significant changes is active surveillance (AS) protocol. The time from the diagnosis of low-risk disease to the clinical progression is generally long and progression signs are detectable during the follow-up period. For this reason, AS is applied at low-risk PCa because definitive treatment can be offered when needed. Another reason for choosing AS, is to prevent overtreatment by selecting patients with low-risk prostate cancer in order to preclude possible side effects of the definitive treatment. In 2003, this point was emphasized to avoid or delay definitive treatment and its associated morbidity without compromising survival (3-5). AS provides these benefits to patients and it is extremely cost effective compared to definitive treatment (6).

Active surveillance has been used for many years in the follow-up of PCa. Unfortunately, we do not know the answer to questions such as “which patients will need additional treatment?” or “when the definitive treatment should be started?” We aimed to evaluate whether total core involvement count, quantity and rate were the correct parameter and we analyzed the efficacy of prostate-specific antigen density or total core involvement rate to predict tumor burden and possible additional treatment needs. We reported outcomes of AS in patients with very low and low-risk PCa.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Study population and design**

1695 patients with prostate biopsy performed due to high prostate-specific antigen (PSA) or significant digital rectal examination findings in our clinics between June 2005 and June 2018 were enrolled. The data were collected retrospectively. No ethical committee approval was required owing to the retrospective nature of our study. A total of 117 patients with PCa were managed by AS. The current cohort with available data includes 107 patients. Patient’s age, digital rectal examination (DRE) findings, prostate volumes (PV), total PSA (tPSA), PSA-Density (PSA-D), in biopsy; total core involvement count (TCIC), quantity (TCIQ) and rate (TCIR), pathology results and follow-up period were recorded.

The criteria for inclusion in the study was as follows: patients with the low risk of cancer progression: > ten years life expectancy, cT1/2, PSA ≤ 10 ng/mL, biopsy Gleason score of ≤ 6, ≤ 2 positive biopsies, minimal biopsy core involvement (≤ 50% cancer per biopsy).

The criteria for exclusion in the study were: patients who started follow-up before 2003 and patients whose data could not be reached. Patients who voluntarily opted to leave the active surveillance protocol were not included in this study.

The patient’s medical records were reviewed. Patients’ age, grading and findings of digital rectal examination,
prostate volumes (PVs) calculated by transrectal ultrasound (TRUS) with the ellipse method (length X depth X width X π/6) by using height obtained by transaxial scanning, tPSA, PSA-D that was calculated as tPSA (ng/mL) divided by PV, were evaluated in all patients. In each biopsy, TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR were calculated by total core number (n), total tumor length in all cores (mm) and ratio of total tumor length to total length of biopsy tissues detected within the tumor (%), respectively. Recurrent pathology results and follow-up time were evaluated. Pathological specimens were reviewed by a single genitourinary pathologist based on the 2005 and 2014 International Society of Urological Pathology (ISUP) Consensus Conference grading of prostate cancer (7, 8). The patients who were diagnosed with prostate cancer before 2014 were evaluated using 2005 ISUP grading criteria and patients who were followed-up after 2014 were classified using the 2014 ISUP new grading system. The follow-up protocol included a minimum of four re-examinations per year. tPSA measurement was performed every 3 months for 2 years and then every 6 months in suitable patients. DRE were routinely performed in all patients. Possible tPSA changes were confirmed at least two times. A confirmation biopsy was recommended for all patients within the first year after diagnosis. Confirmation biopsies generally involve more core assessment than standard biopsies. Multiparametric magnetic resonance imaging of the prostate (mpMRI) was performed in patients who do not want to have a second biopsy or before recurrent biopsies. Patient-based modalities are preferred in the definitive treatment decision. Definitive treatment was planned primarily in patients who were found to be unsuitable for AS. However, androgen deprivation treatment was preferred in patients who did not accept surgical treatment or radiotherapy.

**Statistical analysis**

In the analysis of the data, PSPP and Microsoft Excel computer programs were used. As a statistical method in the analysis of data in the research, descriptive analyses (mean and standard deviation) were applied. In the analysis of the data, the normality hypothesis was first investigated using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Mann Whitney U test was used for data analysis after the normal distribution test. The statistically significant parameters were analyzed by the Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) that allowed for the determination of the cutoff value by the combination of the greater specificity and sensitivity by the definition of the area under the curve. The results were evaluated at 95% confidence interval and p < 0.05 significance level.

**RESULTS**

For the 107 patients included in analyses, the mean age at diagnosis was 63.01 years (range, 47 to 74 years). The distributions of all patients by age, PV, tPSA and PSA-D were shown in Table 1 and by TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR in Table 2. An abnormal DRE findings were found in 32 of 107 patients (such as asymmetric growth of lateral lobes, nodule or stiffness). Mean follow up period was 38.1

| Variable     | Mean ± SD (min-max)        |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| Age (years)  | 63.01 ± 5.85 (47-74)       |
| Prostate Volume (ml) | 43.47 ± 17.92 (10-114) |
| tPSA (ng/mL) | 5.53 ± 1.96 (1.24-10)      |
| PSA density (ng/mL/cc) | 0.14 ± 0.09 (0.02-0.83)   |

SD: standard deviation; AS: active surveillance.

| Variable     | Mean ± SD (min-max)        |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| TCIC (n)     | 1.18 ± 0.39 (1-2)         |
| TCIQ (mm)    | 1.89 ± 1.25 (0.1-7)       |
| TCIR (%)     | 14.78 ± 11.24 (0.55-50)   |

SD: standard deviation; TCIC: Total Core Involvement Count; TCIQ: Total Core Involvement Quantity; TCIR: Total Core Involvement Rate.

**Table 3.** 5-year average of PCa patients who underwent PSA follow-up with active surveillance.

| Follow-up period | n (Overall) | tPSA (ng/mL) (min-max) |
|------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| First year (initial) | 107         | 5.35 (1.24-10)         |
| Second year (confirmation) | 100         | 5.88 (0.43-28.1)       |
| Third year       | 69          | 5.86 (1.04-12.2)       |
| Fourth year      | 48          | 6.88 (0.84-22)         |
| Fifth year       | 32          | 6.56 (1.64-19.08)      |

**Table 4.** Evaluation of descriptive characteristics according to the patients with or without additional treatment requirement (surgical or medical).

| Additional treatment (-) n = 24 | Additional treatment (+) n = 83 | p        |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------|
| Mean ± SD (min-max)             | Mean ± SD (min-max)             |          |
| Age (years)                     | 63.92 ± 5.79 (57-74)            | 62.76 ± 5.84 (47-74) | 0.74     |
| Prostate Volume (ml)            | 40.5 ± 12.16 (15-70)            | 49.95 ± 19.45 (10-114) | 0.72     |
| tPSA (ng/mL)                    | 6.09 ± 1.83 (3.36-9.47)         | 5.2 ± 2.02 (1.24-10) | 0.7      |
| PSA density (ng/mL/cc)          | 0.18 ± 0.06 (0.07-0.28)         | 0.14 ± 0.12 (0.03-0.83) | 0.017*   |
| TCIC (n)                        | 1.16 ± 0.38 (1-2)               | 1.19 ± 0.39 (1-2) | 0.79     |
| TCIQ (mm)                       | 1.88 ± 1.36 (1-6)               | 1.96 ± 1.34 (1-7) | 0.64     |
| TCIR (%)                        | 15.56 ± 11.93 (5-50)            | 15.31 ± 12.81 (5.50-50) | 0.75     |

SD: standard deviation; TCIC: Total Core Involvement Count; TCIQ: Total Core Involvement Quantity; TCIR: Total Core Involvement Rate. * < 0.05.
Table 5.
Number of patients managed with additional treatments in different PSA-density levels and grouping of patients with radical prostatectomy by ISUP grade.

| PSA-D ≤ 0.13* (n = 58) | PSA-D > 0.13* (n = 49) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| **Mean ± SD**           | **Mean ± SD**          |
| Age (years)             | 63.06 ± 5.41           | 62.91 ± 6.39 |
| ATR                     | n = 7 (%)              | n = 17 (%)   |
| Treated with radical prostatectomy ISUP 1 | 0 (85.71) | 6 (35.29) |
| ISUP 2                  | 0                      | 5 (29.41)    |
| ISUP 3                  | 0                      | 1 (5.88)     |
| ISUP 4                  | 0                      | 0            |
| ISUP 5                  | 1 (14.28)              | 0            |
| pT0**                   | 0                      | 1 (5.88)     |
| Treated with RT         | 0                      | 2 (11.76)    |
| Treated with ADT        | 0                      | 2 (11.76)    |

PSA-D: PSA-Density. ATR: Additional Treatment Requirement. ISUP: International Society of Urological Pathology. RT: Radiotherapy. ADT: Androgen-Depression Therapy. *: ng/mL/cc. **: tumor tissue was not detected in pathology specimen after radical prostatectomy.

Table 6.
Number of PCa patients managed with active surveillance according to ISUP grades.

| ISUP Grades (PCa in RP) | n (Overall) | %  |
|-------------------------|-------------|----|
| ISUP 1                  | 12          | 60 |
| ISUP 2                  | 5           | 25 |
| ISUP 3                  | 1           | 5  |
| ISUP 5                  | 1           | 5  |
| pT0*                    | 1           | 5  |

*: tumor tissue was not detected in pathology specimen after radical prostatectomy. ISUP: International Society of Urologic Pathologists. PCa: Prostate cancer.

months (range, 12 to 134 months); tPSA changes in the following years after diagnosis were shown in Table 3. There was no difference in TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR levels between the 2 groups as reported in Table 4 (p > 0.05). The PSA-D was less than 0.13 ng/mL/cc in 58/107 patients and only 7 (12.06%) of them required additional treatment; in 49/107 patients PSA-D was more than 0.13 ng/mL/cc and 17 (34.69%) of them required additional treatment (Table 5). When the cut-off level of PSA-D was based on 0.13 ng/mL/cc, the follow-up period until the decision to start additional treatment was 26.14 months for PSA-D ≤ 0.13 and 25.4 months for PSA-D > 0.13 months, respectively.

Two patients with PSA-D > 0.13 ng/mL/cc lost their chance of definitive treatment. PSA-D was associated with predicting of additional treatment requirement for active surveillance (p = 0.017) and ROC analysis showed that the optimal threshold was 0.13 ng/mL/cc (sensitivity: 70.8%; specificity: 57.1%). Twenty patients underwent radical prostatectomy (RP) as additional treatment in follow-up. Average follow-up time until RP was 25.47 months (range, 12 to 60 months).

In patients with prostate cancer managed by active surveillance, annual changes of tPSA levels in follow-up according to patients with PSA-Density > 0.13 or 0.13 ≤ ng/mL/cc are shown in Figure 1. Pathology results of radical prostatectomy specimens according to the ISUP classification are reported in Table 6. Twelve out of 20 (60%) radical prostatectomy specimens were graded ISUP 1. Two patients preferred radiotherapy (RT) and another two received androgen-deprivation therapy (RT not approved by radiation oncologist) as additional treatment (Figure 2).

Additional treatments were offered to other two patients, but the patients refused to additional treatments and were removed from the treatment protocol of their own volition. Additional cancers were observed in 3 of 107 patients under follow-up; one patient was diagnosed with bladder cancer and two patient diagnosed with renal cell cancer. Two patients died due to non-cancerous causes (chronic heart failure and lymphoma).

Figure 1.
In patients with prostate cancer managed by active surveillance, annual changes of PSA levels in follow-up according to patients with PSA-Density > 0.13 or 0.13 ≤ ng/mL/cc.

PSA: prostate specific antigen. PSAD: prostate-specific antigen density. TPSA1,2,3,4,5: First, second, third, fourth and fifth year total prostate specific antigen levels in follow-up.
**Discussion**

Active Surveillance is a well-recognized option in patients with low (clinical stage T1-T2a and tPSA < 10 ng/mL and Grade Group 1) and very low-risk (clinical stage T1-T2a and tPSA < 10 ng/mL and Grade Group 1 and PSA-Density < 0.15 ng/mL/cc and < 34% of biopsy cores positive and no core with > 50% involved) PCa (9). There are different protocols and selection criteria to select the appropriate patient. tPSA, clinical stage, and number of positive cores, each core involvement, PSA-D and a life expectancy of at least 10 yr are the basis of different protocols.

Prostate specific antigen threshold values in AS are variable, but generally less than 10 ng/mL, in a study conducted by Royal Marsden Clinic in 2008, tPSA threshold was determined ≤ 15 ng/mL (10). Clinical stage T1c or T2a is accepted as eligible for AS guidelines. The tPSA threshold values for AS suggested by the guidelines have a low risk potential. However, we think that the low Gleason score is more valuable than the low PSA, and the threshold value of high PSA values (above 10 ng/mL) should be preferred in appropriate patients. In our clinical practice, we apply AS more flexibly in informed patients (information including detailed explanations about their condition and the likely outcomes of treatment) than the guidelines suggest.

PSA-Density is a predictor of upgrading of ISUP degree after radical prostatectomy and it is used safely in AS (11-13). The threshold value of PSA-D is 0.15 ng/mL/cc in current guidelines, but nowadays, in some studies, the cut-off value of PSA-D of 0.08 ng/mL/cc indicates significant risk for disease progression (14). Jin et al. found that optimal cut-off level of PSA-D was 0.13 ng/mL/cc (11). Barayan et al. found that a PSA-D > 0.15 ng/mL/cc is an important predictor for disease progression (15). In our cohort, PSA-D was the only factor that was statistically significant in predicting the need for additional treatment and optimal cut-off level was 0.13 ng/mL/cc. In patients with PSA-D > 0.13 ng/mL/cc, a larger part of the patients needed additional treatment and follow-up period until the decision to start surgical or hormonal therapy was shortened when the PSA-D was increased. In patients with PSA-D greater than 0.13 ng/mL/cc, high Gleason scores (from 3+4 to 4+5) were detected when radical prostatectomy was performed as definitive treatment. In a study by Camur et al., upgrading was seen in 35 (44.8%) of 78 patients included in the study, but PV had no significant effect on upgrading in AS appropriate patients (16). Although PV is ineffective, AS criteria may include PSA-D. Patients with PSA-D levels < 0.07 ng/mL/cc were not upgraded and needed no additional treatment. Especially very low PSA-D levels (< 0.07) are extremely safe. We think that risk classifications according to PSA-D levels will contribute to the determination of secondary or tertiary biopsy requirements in follow-up protocols of patients and believe that the cut-off value of the recommended PSA-D in the guidelines should be updated to below 0.15 ng/mL/cc.

The number of positive cores is limited by two according to many authors. In California University, this value should not exceed 33% of the total number of cores taken (17). Many guidelines and Authors have suggested that involvement rate in cores should be limited to 50%. Soloway et al. suggested a rate of 20% (18) and Porten et al. of 33% (19). We think that 50% is an optimal value, but this rate cannot be evaluated in inadequate biopsy samples. The ideal core length should be more than 1.5 cm. Tumor measurements such as number of positive cores, fraction of positive cores, linear percentage of carcinoma in each core or across all sites and linear millimeters of carcinoma in each core or across all sites are used for patient selection in AS (20). The actual area of the tumor in millimeters is used to calculate percentage (21). The percent of needle biopsy cores and surface area are the strongest predictors of tumor volume and pathological stage (22). In the literature, many articles found that maximum percent core involvement at diagnosis was associated with progression (23-26). Sernberg et al. (27) and Iremashvili et al. (28) created nomograms that include number of positive cores and percent of positive cores at diagnosis. However, disease progression and extent of cancer on biopsy are not associated significantly in some studies (29, 30).

In this area, open to different interpretations, TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR measurements are optional and we thought that the TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR would be more significant than the amount of tumor rate in each core. Quintal et al found that TCIC and TCIR were significantly stronger than linear percentage of cancer or greatest millimeter length in each core to predict biochemical recurrence (31). Brimo et al. found that TCIR is closely associated with stage and biochemical failure (32). However, Park et al. found that...
these parameters were not significant in predicting pT3 disease (33). Russo et al. found a cut-off value of 0.4 mm for each core (34). Today, clearly defined and accepted values are still not available to predict total tumor burden. In this study, we found that the measurements except than PSA-D were insufficient in predicting the need for additional treatment.

One of the most important points in AS is patient compliance to follow-up periods. Patients may want to withdraw from the AS protocol because they can not accept living with recurrent PSA measurements, examinations, biopsies and diagnosis of tumor. For this reason, follow-up of this protocol with non-invasive methods such as mpMRI is extremely valuable. Alberts et al found that Prostate Imaging Reporting and Data System score of 1-3 and PSA-D of < 0.15 ng/mL/cc did not show Gleason score upgrading in biopsies at each time point of surveillance (35). AS may be more preferable to patients with low risk PCa due to reduced biopsy requirements in the future. Especially combination of PSA-D and mpMRI may be the future of this therapy management. The limitations of the study are the evaluation of data retrospectively, the relatively patients’ low compliance with the follow-up protocol, the comparatively short mean follow-up period and the lack of multiparametric MRI findings. More studies are needed to predict total tumor burden at diagnosis and additional treatment requirement over time.

CONCLUSIONS
Active surveillance in the treatment of prostate cancer is a proven protocol and there is a high degree of consensus on its criteria. Although TCIC, TCIQ and TCIR measurements are thought to help us to have an idea about the total tumor burden and progression, there is no contribution to predict the need for additional treatment. Therefore, we don’t think they need to be measured routinely. Cut-off value of PSA-D as a 0.13 ng/mL/cc may be effective in determining the risk group and may be predictive of the need for additional treatment in the follow-up.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT
The authors would like to thank the entire staff of the Department of Urology, Sultan Abdulhamid Han Education and Research Hospital and certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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