ABSTRACT

Introduction: There are, at present, no biomarkers to predict to prognosis of Gallbladder cancer. We conducted a prospective exploratory study to evaluate the role to serum CA 19-9 and CA 242 as prognostic markers.

Material and Methods: We enrolled consecutive patients for this study and CA 19-9 and CA 242 were estimated from venous samples. Association of these markers with clinical variables and median overall survival (OS) difference between patients who has raised versus normal levels of these markers was determined.

Results: Sixty-two patients were enrolled for this study. Forty-four (71%) patients had elevated CA19-9. Thirty-nine (62.9%) patients had an raised CA242 levels. CA 19-9 was found to be significantly associated with the presence of jaundice (p=0.038) and advanced stage (p=0.009). Median OS of patients who had elevated CA 19-9 was 5.73 months compared to 8.33 months in patients who had normal CA 19-9. The difference was not statistically different (p= 0.15). Median OS for patients who had elevated CA 242 was 5.53 months, which was inferior to those who had normal levels (9.1 months). This difference approached, but was not statistically significant (p=0.055).

Conclusion: This is the first study to show association between CA 19-9 and stage of disease in GBC. At present, CA 19-9 and CA 242 cannot be recommended as prognostic markers. However, role of CA 242 needs to be examined in a larger cohort of patients of GBC to establish its usefulness.

Keywords: CA19-9, CA242, Gallbladder Cancer

INTRODUCTION

Gallbladder cancer (GBC) is the most common malignant lesion of the biliary tract. It is one of the commonest malignancies among women in North India with an age-standardized rate of 8.0 per 100,000 females in Dew Delhi during the period 2003-2007.1

Gallbladder cancer has a dismal prognosis with a median survival of 2-4 months in patients with unresectable disease and a 1-year survival of less than 5%.2 Even with the use of modern combination chemotherapy, the median progression free survival is only about eight months and median overall survival is 11.7 months.3

Tumor markers are antigens and bioactive substances produced by tumor cells due to abnormal expression of correlated genes. They are either not produced or only minimally produced, in normal tissues, and can be detected in tissues, body fluids or excreta of patients with cancer. Tumor markers are used for diagnosis, prognosis and to detect recurrences in a variety of cancers. They provide rapid results with acceptable reliability and minimum cost and pain to patients.

The prognosis of GBC depends on multiple variables- stage of disease, lymph node status and cellular differentiation.45 Very little evidence exists on the use of tumor markers for prognostication in GBC.

Elevated carbohydrate antigen 19-9 (CA 19-9) has been shown to be associated with poorer prognosis in pancreatic adenocarcinomas.6 Similarly, CA 242 has been shown to determin prognosis in pancreatic cancer and had better association than CA 19-9 levels.7 As gallbladder and pancreas share the same embryonic origin, it is expected that the tumor markers in pancreatic cancer may be useful in GBC also.

Though commonly used, the role of CA 19-9 in the diagnosis of GBC is still uncertain. It has poor sensitivity and specificity-17% and 67% respectively.8 For prognosis, scant data is available. In one study, elevated pre-operative CA 19-9 levels have been found to a prognostic factor for poor survival in resected biliary malignancies.9 However, this study has a small number of GBC and only included patients who underwent surgery.

Carbohydrate Antigen 242 (CA 242), like CA 19-9 is also a sialicated carbohydrate antigen and has been used as a tumor marker for pancreatic cancer. CA242 has been shown to have better sensitivity and specificity 64% and 83% respectively when compared to CA 19-9 in the diagnosis of GBC.9 CA 242 has not been studied yet as a prognostic factor in GBC. At present, there is lack of informative biomarkers to prognosticate gallbladder cancer and to predict response to treatment. We, thus, conducted this exploratory study for quantitative evaluation of CA 19-9 and CA 242 as prognostic markers in GBC.

1Associate Professor, Department of Surg Oncology, Dr. RMLIMS, Lucknow, 2Associate Professor, Department of Biochemistry, Dr. RMLIMS, Lucknow, 3Senior Research Fellow, Department of Pathology, Dr. RMLIMS, Lucknow, 4Professor and Head, Department of Pathology, Dr. RMLIMS, Lucknow, India

Corresponding author: Dr. Akash Agarwal, Room no 31, Department of Surgical Oncology, 2nd Floor, Academic Block, Dr. RML Institute of Medical Sciences, Vibhuti Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow-226010, India

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MATERIAL AND METHODS

A prospective observational study was conducted over a period of two years at our hospital. All patients with gallbladder cancer with ECOG performance status of 0-2 were enrolled in this study. Patients who were suffering from a second malignancy and those who were unwilling to participate were excluded.

Sixty two patients were planned for enrolment in this study. All the participants of the study underwent a standardized interview using a questionnaire on medical history, family history, demographic profile, and lifestyle habits. For female patients, information on marital status, age at first pregnancy, number of pregnancies and number of childbirths, age of menarche and menopause (if menopausal) was additionally recorded.

Five ml venous blood was collected from the study subjects at start of enrolment. Serum was isolated and processed as per manufacturer’s instructions. CA 19-9 was measured by Chemiluminescence immunoassay and values >35U/ml were considered as positive while values <=35U/ml were negative. CA 242 was measured by ELISA (United Biolink Inc.). Values >20 U/ml were considered as positive while values <=20 U/ml were negative. All the enrolled patients were followed up from date of registration using the hospital records and telephonic interview. Patients were followed up for a minimum of 6 months after the end of enrolment. The research was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Association was studied using Chi-square test. Survival was analyzed using the Kaplan-Meier method and compared by log-rank analysis. P-values were considered significant at < 0.05 level. (2-sided). All analyses were performed using the SPSS statistical analysis software, version 15.0 (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA).

RESULTS

A total of 62 patients were enrolled for this study. The majority of patients were females (42 versus 20 males); a male: female ratio of 1:2.1. The median age of patients was 55 years (range 30-85 years).

Gallstones were present in 32 (51.6%) patients. Thirty two patients (51.6%) had obstructive jaundice. Majority of patients had stage IV disease (82.3%). Most patients had an

| Variable               | Number (percentage) |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| Age: (Median, range)   | 55(30-85)           |
| Sex                    | Male 20(32.3%)      |
|                        | Female 42(67.7%)    |
| Gallstones             | Present 32 (51.6%)  |
|                        | Absent 30 (48.4%)    |
| Jaundice               | Present 32 (51.6%)  |
|                        | Absent 30 (48.4%)    |
| Performance status     | 0 3 (4.8%)          |
| (WHO -ECOG)            | 1 42 (67.7%)        |
|                        | 2 12 (19.4%)        |
|                        | 3 5 (8.1%)          |
| Stage (TNM)            | 1 0 (0)             |
|                        | 2 2 (3.2%)          |
|                        | 3 9 (14.5%)         |
|                        | 4 51 (82.3%)        |

Table-1: Demographic and Clinical Profile

| Variable     | CA 19-9 Elevated | CA 19-9 Normal | p value | CA 242 Elevated | CA 242 Normal | p value |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|---------|----------------|---------------|---------|
| Jaundice     | Present 26       | 6              | 0.038 * | 22             | 10            | 0.263   |
|              | Absent 18        | 12             |         | 17             | 13            |         |
| Gallstones   | Present 19       | 11             | 0.200   | 18             | 13            | 0.467   |
|              | Absent 25        | 7              |         | 22             | 9             |         |
| Sex          | Male 17          | 3              | 0.093   | 12             | 7             |         |
|              | Female 27        | 15             |         | 27             | 17            |         |
| Stage        | II 0             | 2              | 0.009 * | 0              | 2             | 0.412   |
|              | III 4            | 5              |         | 5              | 4             |         |
|              | IV 40            | 11             |         | 34             | 17            |         |

Table-2: Univariate analysis of association between CA 19-9, CA 242 and clinical features
Agarwal, et al. Prognostic Value of CA19-9 and CA242 in Gallbladder Cancer

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However, it has not been evaluated before in 8,17,18 Similar to published results, we found that Previous reports show that Se CA 19-9 is CA 242 was elevated in 39% of our patients. Here, 15,16 10 The use of CA 242 has not been reported as yet. 8,12,13

DISCUSSION

Tumor markers have been used in many cancers, for diagnosis, prognosis and for detecting recurrences. Though clinical prognostic factors like nodal staus, stage and differentiation are known, very little data is available on the usefulness of serum tumor markers for the purpose of prognosis in GBC. Although CA 19-9 has been evaluated as a diagnostic marker for GBC, it’s utility is limited by low sensitivity and specificity.8 Previous reports show that Se. CA 19-9 is elevated in about 60% of patients in biliary tract cancers. However, these figures are limited to studies which evaluated resectable patients and included all biliar cancers, not only those with GBC.10 Similar to published results, we found that 71% patients of GBC had elevated Se. CA 19-9. Similarly, CA242 has also been studied for diagnostic purposes, but its utility has been limited. In the same study, it was found that CA 242 was elevated in 64% of the patients.8 CA 242 was elevated in 39% of our patients. Here, prevalence of raised CA 242 is not in conformity to the reported literature. Though we could not find any association with levels of CA 242 and stage of disease, difference in stage of patients in the two studies may be a reason for the difference in results. Currently, there is no literature to report an association of elevated Se CA 19-9 with stage of GBC. We found that elevated CA 19-9 was significantly associated with stage IV disease. Jaundice and CA 19-9 have been shown to be associated.11 This is also evident in our study where we found significantly elevated levels of CA 19-9 in patients with jaundice. However, the interpretation and relevance of this elevation remains unclear, especially for diagnostic purposes. We did not find any association of Ca 242 with any of the baseline characteristics including stage, presence of jaundice, gallstones and sex of the patient.

CA 19-9 has been studied as a prognostic marker in resectable GBC where it has shown to be of statistically significant benefit.9,12,13 However, it has not been evaluated before in prognostication of advanced/ metastatic disease status except in one study which inculded all biliary tract malignancies.14 In this study, there were about 25% GBC patients and the analysis was not done for these patients separately. In our study, we could not find any significant association between the presence of elevated levels of CA 19-9 and survival. Thus, we would not recommend CA 19-9 estimation for this purpose. Pancreas and the biliary systen have similar embryonic origin. Tumor markers which have been shown to be useful in pancreatic cancer have been shown to be of use for biliary malignancies as well. CA 242 has been shown to be of prognostic significance in pancreatic cancer.15,16 However, very little literature exists about the utility of CA 242 in GBC. Most of the existing literature evaluates the diagnostic utility of this biomarker to differenciate it from benign condition of GBC.8,17,18 The use of CA 242 has not been reported as yet. Though we could not find a statistically significant prognostic value of CA 242, it aproached statistical significance. Given the small number of patients and limitations of this study, as discussed later, it seems worthwhile to evaluate this marker in context of a lager study.

This study was carried out in one of the highest incidence areas in the world. The majority of the patients included were of advanced disease, which reflects the true distribution of the disease. This is also the first instance where these tumor
markers have been evaluated for prognostic purpose in GBC patients who not necessarily underwent surgery. The findings of this research are encouraging especially with respect to the use of CA 242 as a prognostic marker.

Our study has a few limitations as well. The distribution of patients is skewed towards advanced disease, with very few patients of localized disease. This is primarily due to very few patients who present with early and localized disease. Also, a large number of patients 16 (26%) were censored due to loss to follow up. This can be an important factor in arriving at the present results. However, this problem of censoring is inherent to most clinical studies done outside a clinical trial setup, albeit, to a lesser extent.

CONCLUSION

Gallbladder cancer remains as one of the important cancers in North India. There is lack of informative biomarkers which could help in determining the prognosis of these patients. We have, for the first time, demonstrated that elevated CA 19-9 is associated with increased stage of the disease. This exploratory study also shows that there might be a role of serum biomarkers in determining the prognosis of GBC, especially Se. CA 242. Though at present, the use of these tumor markers cannot be suggested, definitive results can be expected when a larger cohort of GBC patients of various stages are evaluated in a larger prospective study. Also, the role of these serum markers should be investigated to predict response to surgery and chemotherapy and for monitoring recurrence.

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