Case Report

Neglected Basal Cell Carcinomas in the 21st Century

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Although tumors on the surface of the skin are considered to be easily recognizable, neglected advanced skin neoplasms are encountered even in the 21st century. There can be numerous causes of the delay in the diagnosis: fear of the diagnosis and the treatment, becoming accustomed to a slowly growing tumor, old age, a low social milieu, and an inadequate hygienic culture are among the factors leading some people not to seek medical advice. The treatment of such advanced neoplasms is usually challenging. The therapy of neglected cases demands an individual multidisciplinary approach and teamwork. Basal cell carcinoma (BCC), the most common cutaneous tumor, usually develops in the elderly, grows slowly, and has an extremely low metastatic potential; these factors are suggesting that BCCs might well be the “ideal candidates” for neglected tumors. Five neglected advanced cases of BCC were diagnosed in our dermatological institute between 2000 and 2009. The clinical characteristics and treatment modalities of these neoplasms are discussed, together with the possible causes of the neglect.

1. Introduction

Tumors on the surface of the skin are generally visible and considered to be easily recognizable both for healthcare professionals and for the patients themselves. However, people with neglected advanced skin neoplasms are still encountered in dermatological practice in the 21st century. There can be numerous causes of the delay in the diagnosis: the person may fear the diagnosis and the treatment or become accustomed to the usually slowly-growing tumor. Old age, a low social milieu, and an inadequate hygienic culture may also be factors explaining why some people are not aware of the significance of a delayed diagnosis.

Basal cell carcinoma (BCC) is the most common cutaneous tumor and one of the most frequent skin diseases observed by dermatologists [1, 2]. Most of these tumors arise in the head and neck area, particularly in the elderly, and usually grow slowly. The metastatic potential is very low and is mainly detected in association with aggressive or long-standing, large neglected tumors [1–4]. The characteristics of BCCs suggest that they might well be the “ideal candidates” for neglected tumors. During the past 10 years, 5 neglected advanced cases of BCC were diagnosed in our regional center of dermatological oncology.

2. Case Reports

The main clinical characteristics of the patients and the treatment applied are listed in Table 1.

Case 1. When a 44-year-old male first sought for medical advice in December 2009, he had already had a mutilating, horrifying tumor on the right side of his face for 10 months. He lived alone in a farmhouse in a rural, but quite densely populated area. Two years previously, his own dog had clawed on the right side of the patient’s nose, with the injury leaving a scar. Eleven months before his presentation, he had suffered another minor injury in the same region caused by a splinter of wood. A gradually growing, ulcerating lesion had subsequently developed on his face (Figure 1). The clinical diagnosis was BCC, but the possibility of Wegener’s
Table 1: Data on the neglected BCC patients and their treatment (BCC: basal cell carcinoma, SCC: squamous cell carcinoma).

| Case no | Age/sex | Residence   | Duration, clinical history                         | Diagnosis                                      | Treatment              |
|---------|---------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1       | 44 y male | farm        | injury 2 years previously, growing lesion for 10 months | BCC                                            | surgical removal       |
| 2       | 96 y female | town       | >2 years                                          | BCC                                            | radiotherapy           |
| 3       | 63 y male  | town        | several years, rapidly growing for months         | BCC with suppurative inflammation              | surgical removal       |
| 4       | 84 y male  | village     | 1 year                                            | BCC                                            | surgical removal       |
| 5       | 68 y male  | village     | 1 year, immunosuppressed (renal transplant) patient | neck: BCC, face, ear: SCC                      | surgical removal       |

granulomatosis also emerged together with a suspicion of leprosy or some other bacterial infection. The CT scan revealed an extensive bone defect: the maxillary sinus had perished, half of the nasal bone and the zygomatic arch were missing, and the external wall of the frontal sinus was involved. As three types of bacteria were identified, intravenous antibiotic treatment was started. Multiple biopsies confirmed the presence of BCC (Figure 2). The tumor was resected at the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Department and the defect was covered with a frontotemporal rotation flap and a latissimus dorsi musculocutaneous free flap. In the postoperative period, the patient suffered a right-sided temporal lobe emollition of the brain, resulting in left-sided hemiplegia. The skin layer of the flap necrotized, but the muscular layer remained intact, and healed by secondary epithelialization. After 6 months, recurrences around the mouth necessitated repeated excisions with a forearm fasciocutaneous free flap reconstruction. This flap necrotized in full thickness and it had to be removed, and the defect

Figure 1: Case 1: A mutilating tumor on the right side of the patient’s face.

Figure 2: Case 1: The histopathology of the first biopsy specimen confirmed the diagnosis of BCC.

Figure 3: Case 1: The patient is tumor-free, but his face has not been reconstructed functionally or esthetically.

Figure 4: Case 2: An ulcerated tumor in the right parieto-occipital region, with bone destruction.
Case 3. A 63-year-old man living in an agricultural town had had a small exophytic skin-colored nodule in the middle of his back for many years. This had started to grow rapidly and become ulcerated during the past few months. By his first medical visit in September 2009, suppurative inflammation with abscess formation had developed in the nearby dermis (Figure 5). Consequently, an incisional biopsy and incision of the abscess were initially performed, and systemic antibiotic therapy was administered. The histopathological diagnosis was BCC. Laboratory tests revealed that the patient had previously unrecognized non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus. In a second operation, the whole tumor was removed with conservative wound care because of the inflammation. The patient at first participated in regular surgical followup and treatment of the remaining ulcer, but he later failed to appear for the oncology followup.

Case 4. An 84-year-old male resident in an agricultural village presented in September 2008 with numerous actinic keratoses on his head and neck and with a slowly growing tumorous mass in the presternal area, which he had observed one year previously (Figure 6). The tumor which proved to be a BCC was removed with free surgical margin and the defect was covered by a mesh-graft skin transplant. At the same time, an in situ superficially spreading malignant melanoma in a melanocytic nevus was removed from his back. The patient has currently been under regular followup for 2 years.

Case 5. A 68-year-old male, living in a village, underwent renal transplantation in 1995 and had subsequently received immunosuppressive therapy. A slowly growing tumor developed on the right side of his neck one year prior to his clinical presentation in 2009. Both the clinical and lymph nodes, but no other dissemination was detected and the tumor mass remained stable for several months.
the histopathological diagnosis indicated BCC. Additionally, there were two small SCCs in the preauricular region and on the right ear (Figure 7).

3. Discussion

Around one-third of giant BCCs result from patients’ neglect [1, 2, 5]. There can be numerous reasons for delay in seeking medical advice. The factors are best documented in the 21st century. BCC, the most common cutaneous tumor, usually develops in the elderly, grows slowly, and has an extremely low metastatic potential making it an “ideal candidate” for a neglected tumor. Although there are many possibilities for the treatment of BCCs, the therapy of such neglected cases always demands an individual and multidisciplinary approach and teamwork.

4. Conclusions

Neglected advanced skin tumors can be encountered even in the 21st century. BCC, the most common cutaneous tumor, usually develops in the elderly, grows slowly, and has an extremely low metastatic potential making it an “ideal candidate” for a neglected tumor. Although there are many possibilities for the treatment of BCCs, the therapy of such neglected cases always demands an individual and multidisciplinary approach and teamwork.

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