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Autopsy and Case Reports, vol. 7, no. 1, 2017, January-March, pp. 31-35
Hospital Universitário da Universidade de São Paulo

DOI: https://doi.org/10.4322/acr.2017.002

Available in: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=576068163007
Small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma of the nasopharynx: a rare case report

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Azevedo D, Rios E, Vendeira L, Sarmento C. Small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma of the nasopharynx: a rare case report. Autopsy Case Rep [Internet]. 2017;7(1):31-35. http://dx.doi.org/10.4322/acr.2017.002

ABSTRACT

Small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma rarely appears primarily in the head and neck and exhibits aggressive behavior with a poor prognosis. The pathologist has a significant role in the diagnosis, and a consensual treatment still does not exist. The authors report the case of a middle-aged male patient who presented repeated episodes of massive epistaxis. The diagnostic work-up disclosed the diagnosis of small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma of the nasopharynx. The patient was treated with chemotherapy followed by radiotherapy. Imaging examinations performed after the end of treatment showed apparent complete remission of the disease. The patient was kept under active surveillance with no signs of local relapse or distant metastasis after 4 years of follow-up.

Keywords
Carcinoma, Small Cell; Neuroendocrine, Carcinoma; Nasopharynx

INTRODUCTION

Small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma is a high-grade tumor that usually presents aggressive behavior. The lungs represent the most common primary site, and extra pulmonary cases comprise only 2.5–5% of the cases,\textsuperscript{1,2} mainly involving the esophagus,\textsuperscript{3} colon,\textsuperscript{4} urinary bladder,\textsuperscript{5} and cervix.\textsuperscript{6} The involvement of the head and neck structures is even rarer, and in these cases, the larynx is the most frequently involved organ.\textsuperscript{7} Due to its rarity, the diagnosis and treatment are challenging. We present the case of a nasopharyngeal small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma, which, as far as we know, is the ninth case reported in the literature.\textsuperscript{8-15}

CASE REPORT

A 54-year-old Caucasian male patient sought medical care complaining of recurrent epistaxis and dysphonia for 2 weeks. He had a history of heavy smoking. Physical examination and laboratory tests were normal. The computed tomography (CT) of the paranasal sinuses revealed the presence of an extensive nasopharyngeal lesion measuring 5 × 6 cm predominantly involving the left side, extending to the nasal fossae, parapharyngeal space, and pterygoid muscles. There was neither intracranial extension nor bone involvement.

A nasofibroscopy was performed showing a reddish lesion of the left nasal fossae, which was biopsied.
The result was inconclusive (esthesioneuroblastoma vs. small cell carcinoma), but another biopsy favored the diagnosis of small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma, confirmed by the immunohistochemical study, which presented diffuse expression of CAM 5.2 and synaptophysin in rare neoplastic cells, in the absence of neuron-specific enolase, chromogranin, and neurofilaments (Figure 1).

The magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) detected the infiltration of the soft palate and confirmed the presence of a tumor in the nasopharynx measuring 6.5 cm at its longest axis; presenting a similar extension observed with the CT.

Clinical staging was II: cT2N0M0 according to the proposal for the 8th edition of the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC)/Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). The patient was treated with primary chemotherapy with carboplatin AUC5 (day 1) and etoposide 100 mg/m² (days 1, 2, and 3) every 21 days. After the end of the fourth cycle of chemotherapy, the patient underwent a planning CT scan (Figure 2) and started radiotherapy receiving a total dose of 70 Gy to the nasopharynx and 60 Gy to the cervical region.

On the second month of follow-up, another pharyngeal MRI was performed, which demonstrated that the pharynx was free of neoplastic lesions and no cervical lymph nodes were enlarged.

A CT scan of the thorax and abdomen was conducted on the sixth month of follow-up, which showed a spiculated pulmonary nodule measuring 16 mm and another nodular lesion in the pancreatic tail, which were tackled by aspiration biopsy. The cytology was inconclusive for the pulmonary nodule, and negative.

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for malignancy for the pancreatic lesion. The positron emission tomography using $^{18}$F-fluorodeoxyglucose (PET-$^{18}$F-FDG) revealed the radiotracer uptake (SUV max = 6.96) in two lymph nodes of the pulmonary hilum and another in the subcarinal topography, besides a mild enhancement of the radiotracer uptake (SUV max = 2.33) in the middle pulmonary lobe, both suspected of metastasis. No other sites, namely the pancreas and the nasopharynx, showed abnormal radiotracer concentration consistent with a malignant disease. A transbronchial fine-needle aspiration of the hilar lymph nodes was performed by endobronchial ultrasound, and the cytological examination was negative for malignancy. Oncologic surveillance was maintained afterward.

**DISCUSSION**

The neoplasms with neuroendocrine differentiation involving the head and neck structures, including the nasopharynx, are exceedingly rare. The diagnosis of such an entity is challenging because of the morphological characteristics as well as the biopsy sample size, which does not always allow the distinction among other types of neoplasms. The immunohistochemical study has an indispensable central role to confirm the epithelial and
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Table 1. Cases of small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma of the nasopharynx by age at diagnosis, gender, treatment and outcome

| Case/Reference | Age at diagnosis (years) | Gender | Treatment | Outcome |
|----------------|-------------------------|--------|-----------|---------|
| Lin et al.8    | 43                      | M      | Induction ChT followed by RT | Died 38 months after diagnosis |
| Deviprasad et al.9 | 40        | M      | Surgery   | Died 11 months after surgery |
| Subha10        | 51                      | M      | Radiotherapy | Relapse after the first month of the end of treatment and died |
| Lee et al.11   | 41                      | M      | Induction ChT followed by CCRT | Remission 9 months after completion of therapy |
| Shunyu et al.12 | 52        | M      | CCRT      | Died 32 months after diagnosis |
| Takahashi et al.13 | 54        | M      | Induction ChT followed by CCRT | Persistence of disease after ending treatment |
| Aguiar et al.14 | 43        | F      | ChT       | Died 4 months after diagnosis |
| Bellahammou et al.15 | 46     | F      |           |         |

CCRT = concomitant chemoradiotherapy; ChT = chemoradiotherapy; F = female; M = male.

To summarize, small cell neuroendocrine carcinomas of the nasopharynx are high-grade tumors, and therefore convey a poor prognosis.

The therapeutic options for these tumors are varied. However, the treatment of choice is still undefined because only eight cases have been reported in the literature to date (Table 1).

CONCLUSION

Despite the lack of a consensual therapeutic modality, the multimodality approach (chemo and radiotherapy) showed evidence of increment in the survival rate of patients with the diagnosis of sinonasal small cell neuroendocrine carcinoma.20,21 In our case, the option of sequential treatment (chemo followed by radiotherapy) was based on the histology type and the tumor size. Despite the poor prognosis of this entity, we verified no evidence of locoregional relapse or distant metastasis at the end of a 4-year period of follow-up.

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Conflict of interest: None

Financial support: None

Submitted on: November 24th, 2016
Accepted on: February 23rd, 2017

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