Clinicopathological Significance of HER2/neu Expression in Gastric Carcinoma

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gastric cancer remains the most common cause of cancer related death worldwide. HER2/neu protein overexpression in gastric carcinoma was found to be an independent indicator of poor prognosis.

The present study was designed to evaluate the frequency of HER2/neu expression in gastric carcinoma, and also the relationship between HER2/neu expression with clinicopathological parameters.

Methods: Analysis of HER2/neu expression was done by immunohistochemistry in 41 specimens of Gastric carcinoma over a period of one year and was correlated with clinicopathological parameters. Samples with IHC score 2+ and 3+ were taken as HER2 positive.

Result: The study revealed 15 (36.6%) cases of gastric carcinoma being positive for HER2/neu. Of the 41 cases, 5 were classified as score 3+ (12.2%), 10 were classified as score 2+ (24.4%), 11 were classified as score 1+ (26.8%) and 15 were classified as score 0 (36.6%). Peak incidence was found in the age group of 41-50 years. Significant correlation of HER2/neu expression was found with intestinal type (p-value=0.003) and also with moderately differentiated type (p-value=0.018) of gastric adenocarcinoma. However, no significant correlation was found with the other clinicopathological parameters like age, sex, site, lymph node status and staging.

Conclusion: HER-2/neu over-expression was significantly associated with intestinal type and moderately differentiated gastric carcinoma. HER2/neu status can be considered as an important prognostic factor in gastric carcinoma.

Keywords: Gastric Carcinoma, HER2/neu, Immunohistochemistry, Clinicopathological.

Introduction

Carcinoma stomach is the fourth most commonly diagnosed cancer in the world and is also the second most common cause of cancer-related deaths.¹ Worldwide it accounts for 7.8% of cancers.² In India, the annual incidence rate of gastric cancer is 10.6 per 100000 population.³ As per the data obtained from the National Cancer Registries, the rate of gastric cancer is more in North-eastern and Southern states of Indian subcontinent. However, in North-eastern registries the rates for gastric cancer are higher than that of rest of the country.⁴

In majority of the cases, patients present at an advanced stage, when the tumor is unresectable and systemic chemotherapy remains the main stay of treatment. The overall survival of patients has improved using various chemotherapeutic combinations. However, new targeted therapeutic approaches are essential for better prognosis. Recently, HER2 has been validated as a molecular target for this disease.⁵

HER2/neu (c-erb-2) is an oncogene, encoding a transmembrane glycoprotein that has tyrosine kinase activity known as p185, which belongs to the family of epidermal growth factor receptors.⁶ Several biological functions such as cell proliferation, differentiation, motility, and apoptosis are regulated by HER-2. It was reported that over-expression of HER-2 is seen in many types of cancer like breast, lungs, salivary gland, ovary, colon, prostate and pancreas.⁷,⁸ HER-2 is over-expressed in 10%-38% of gastric cancer patients.⁹ However, the correlation between the expression of HER-2 protein and the prognosis of gastric cancer is still controversial. Different studies have shown varied levels of HER-2 expression in gastric carcinoma.¹⁰,¹¹,¹²

Trastuzumab (Herceptin) is a fully humanized monoclonal antibody. Targeting the extracellular domain of the HER2 receptor, Trastuzumab prevents its activation. Currently it is being used for the treatment of HER2-positive breast cancer and has shown to improve survival in patients with HER-positive breast cancer.¹³ Researchers are now studying the antitumor activity of Trastuzumab in patients with HER2-positive gastric adenocarcinomas.

In the recently concluded Trastuzumab for Gastric cancer (ToGA)¹⁴ trial, it was shown that patients receiving trastuzumab treatment protocol had an improved overall survival over those not receiving this treatment.
Various studies have been conducted across the globe to study the frequency of Her2/neu expression in gastric carcinoma, but very few published data are available on Indian population. Hence, the present study is being undertaken to assess the frequency of HER2/neu in gastric carcinoma patients and also to evaluate its association with the clinicopathological parameters.

**Materials and Methods**

The present study was conducted on the biopsy specimens of stomach received at a tertiary care hospital in Dibrugarh. It was a hospital based cross sectional study consisting of forty one samples of primary gastric adenocarcinoma (endoscopic/ excision biopsy specimens) collected over a duration of one year (June 2014 to May 2015). Detailed clinical data of the patients were obtained as per the patient’s clinical data sheet.

Inclusion criteria: Histopathologically confirmed gastric carcinoma cases received either as endoscopic biopsy or post gastrectomy biopsy specimen.

Exclusion criteria:
1. Cases with extensive tumour necrosis without sufficient viable tumour cells.
2. Patients receiving prior chemotherapy.
3. Non-compliant patient or patient not willing to participate in the study.

Ethical clearance was taken from the Institutional ethical committee before commencement of the study.

Histopathology: Tissues were grossed in detail and then fixed in 10% buffered formalin and subsequently tissues were processed according to standard protocol. 3-5 μ thick sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin stain and were examined for the histopathological type and the grade of the tumor. Further sections were subjected to immunohistochemistry (IHC).

Immunohistochemistry:

IHC staining was done using HER2 (BioGenex, mouse Ig). Positive and negative cases of control group were taken during the staining procedure of IHC. Known case of HER2/neu positive (3+) breast cancer tissue was used as positive control for HER2/neu immunostaining whereas normal gastric mucosal glands which were negative for HER2/neu, were taken as negative control

HER2/neu scoring for gastric cancer was done as proposed by Hoffman et al11 with scores as follows: 0, no reactivity or membranous reactivity in <10% of cells; 1+, faint/barely perceptible membranous reactivity in >10% of cells (cells are reactive only in part of their membrane); 2+, weak to moderate complete or basolateral membranous reactivity in >10% of tumour cells & 3+, moderate to strong complete or basolateral membranous reactivity in >10% of tumour cells.

Cases with HER2 score of 0 and 1+ were considered HER2 negative, while cases with HER2 score of 2+ and 3+ were considered HER2 positive. For cases with HER2 score of 2+, FISH analysis is recommended, but we could not do it in our study due to economic constraints. Statistical evaluation was done to look into the expression profile among various subgroups of gastric carcinoma with chi-square test. A p-value of < 0.05 was considered significant.

**Result**

Our study included 41 cases of gastric carcinoma (33 endoscopic biopsy and 8 surgical resection specimens). There were 28 male patients and 13 female patients with Male:Female ratio of 2.15:1. Age ranged from 21-80 years with a mean age of 51.4±10.14 years. The most common site of gastric carcinoma was antrum (68.3%) with 25 cases (60.9%) showing an ulcerative growth. (Figure: 1) Majority of the cases of gastric adenocarcinomas were of intestinal type (60.9%). (Figure: 2) Most of the tumours were of poorly differentiated type (51.2%). Of the 41 cases, 13 cases (31.7%) had lymph node metastasis and 12 cases (29.3%) were in Stage IV. (Table:1)

Out of 41 cases, 15 cases (36.6%) had HER2/neu score 0, followed by 11 cases (26.8%) with HER2/neu score 1+ (Figure: 5), 10 cases (24.4%) with HER2/neu score 2+ (Figure: 4) and 5 cases (12.2%) with HER2/neu score 3+ (Figure: 3). (Table:2) HER2 overexpression (2+/3+ immunostaining on IHC) was found in 15 cases (36.6%) while HER2 negative (0/1+ immunostaining on IHC) cases comprised 26 cases (63.4%).

In our study, HER2/neu expression was more in the intestinal type 14 cases(56%) followed by the diffuse type 1 case(7.1%). HER2/neu status was found to be significantly associated with types of Gastric adenocarcinoma (p value=0.003). (Graph:1) We found HER2/neu expression more in the moderately differentiated carcinoma 6 cases(75%). A significant association was observed between HER2/neu status and degree of differentiation of gastric carcinoma (p value=0.018). (Graph:2)

**Discussion**

The present study was carried out to see the expression of HER2/neu in gastric carcinoma patients and correlate it with clinicopathological parameters. Our study revealed HER2/neu overexpression of 36.6% taking IHC score of 2+ and 3+ as HER2 positive. However, we found only 12.2% cases with 3+ positivity. Hence, the actual HER2 positivity rate would be lower.
### Table 1: HER2/neu expression of gastric carcinoma with clinicopathological parameters.

| Parameter                  | HER2/neu expression | p-value |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------|
|                            | IHC score(0/+1)   | IHC score(+2/+3) |
| **IHC score(0/+1)**        |                    |         |
| Age <50                    | 12                 | 06      | 0.237 |
| Age >50                    | 14                 | 09      |       |
| Gender Male                | 20                 | 08      | 0.118 |
| Gender Female              | 06                 | 07      |       |
| Tumour site Antrum         | 18                 | 10      | 0.916 |
| Tumour site Body           | 04                 | 03      |       |
| Tumour site Cardia         | 01                 | 01      |       |
| Tumour site Fundus         | 03                 | 01      |       |
| Type of tumor Intestinal   | 11                 | 14      | 0.003 |
| Type of tumor Mixed        | 02                 | 0       |       |
| Type of tumor Diffuse      | 13                 | 01      |       |
| Histological differentiation Well differentiated | 07 | 05 | 0.018 |
| Histological differentiation Moderately differentiated | 02 | 06 | |
| Histological differentiation Poorly differentiated | 17 | 04 | |
| Lymph node metastasis      | Present            | 08      | 0.865 |
| Lymph node metastasis      | Absent             | 18      |       |
| Stage I and II             | 20                 | 09      | 0.251 |
| Stage III and IV           | 06                 | 06      |       |

### Table 2: HER2/neu scoring of Gastric adenocarcinoma

| Score | No. of case | Percentages |
|-------|-------------|-------------|
| 0     | 15          | 36.6        |
| +1    | 11          | 26.8        |
| +2    | 10          | 24.4        |
| +3    | 5           | 12.2        |
| **TOTAL** | **41** | **100** |

### Table 3: HER2/neu status versus type of gastric carcinoma (lauren's classification) by various authors:

| Author                  | Year | HER2 status with Histological type | p-value |
|-------------------------|------|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Rajagopal I et al.      | 2015 | Intestinal 32.7% Diffuse 0% Mixed - | 0.054 |
| Gordon MA et al         | 2013 | 53% 36% 7% | <0.001 |
| Tewari M et al          | 2013 | 45% 12% - | 0.006 |
| Movagharnejad K et al   | 2013 | 12% 6% - | >0.05 |
| Gomez-Martin C et al    | 2012 | 11% 4% - | 0.064 |
| Yan SY et al            | 2011 | 22.1% 5.4% 4.5% | <0.05 |
| Barros-Silva JD et al   | 2009 | 81.6% 7.9% 10.5% | 0.007 |
| Raziiee HR et al         | 2007 | 33% 5% 0% | 0.001 |
| Tanner M et al          | 2005 | 21.5% 2.2% 5.3% | 0.005 |
| **Present study**       | 2015 | 56% 7.1% 0% | 0.003 |
Table 4: HER2/neu status versus degree of differentiation by various authors:

| Author                  | Year | HER2 status with Degree of differentiation | p-value |
|-------------------------|------|-------------------------------------------|---------|
|                         |      | Well differentiated | Moderately differentiated | Poorly differentiated |         |
| Rajagopal I et al.\textsuperscript{15} | 2015 | 11.1%                                      | 37.5%   | 0%       | 0.042   |
| Shan L et al\textsuperscript{24}           | 2013 | 16%                                       | 20.1%   | 6.1%     | <0.01   |
| Yan SY et al\textsuperscript{18}           | 2011 | 16.7%                                     | 11.4%   | 16.9%    | >0.05   |
| Raziee HR et al\textsuperscript{20}        | 2007 | 41%                                       | 11%     | 7%       | 0.001   |
| Present study           | 2015 | 41.7%                                     | 75%     | 19%      | 0.018   |

Graph 1: HER2/neu status versus types of Gastric adenocarcinoma (LAUREN’S Classification).

Graph 2: HER2/neu status versus Degree of differentiation of gastric adenocarcinoma.
Fig. 1: Gross Specimen of Stomach Showing an Ulcerative Growth.

Fig. 2: Histopathology Showing Adenocarcinoma of Stomach.

Fig. 3: IHC Showing Complete Membrane Staining (Score 3+).

Fig. 4: IHC Showing Moderate Basolateral Staining In > 10% of Cells (Score 2+).

Fig. 5: IHC Showing Faint Membranous Staining (Score 1+).
In the present study, HER2/neu overexpression was found to be significantly associated with types of Gastric adenocarcinoma (p=0.003) with highest expression in intestinal type of gastric carcinoma (56%), followed by the diffuse type (71%). The present study is in accordance with the findings of study conducted by Rajagopal et al.13 (2015), Gordon M.A. et al.16 (2013), Tewari M.et al.17 (2013), Yan S.Y.et al.18 (2011), Barros-Silva J. D.et al.19 (2009), Raziee H.R. et al.20 (2007), and Tanner M. et al.21 (2005). (Table:3) Although Movaghanejad K. et al.22 (2013) and Gomez-Martin C. et al.23 (2012), found majority of cases with HER2 expresion in intestinal type, no statistically significant association was found.

The present study also revealed a significant association between HER2/neu status and degree of differentiation of gastric carcinoma (p=0.018). HER2/neu positivity rate was found highest among cases with moderately differentiated gastric carcinoma (75%) followed by well differentiated gastric carcinoma (41.7) and poorly differentiated gastric carcinoma (19%). The present study is in accordance with the findings of study conducted by Rajagopal et al.15 (2015) and Shan L. et al.24 (2013). (Table:4) Although Raziee H.R. et al.20 (2007) found association between HER2 status and degree of differentiation, majority of their cases were of well differentiated. Yan SY et al.18 (2011) found no association between HER2 status and degree of differentiation.

Role of HER2/neu expression in gastric carcinoma has been studied widely by different authors across the globe. HER2/neu protein overexpression in gastric carcinoma was found to be a poor prognostic indicator. Identification of biologically aggressive tumour by HER2 overexpression in gastric carcinomas is of prognostic significance, as in addition to traditional chemotherapy, Herceptin/Trastuzumab will help increase survival rates of patients.

Trastuzumab was recently approved in many countries as a treatment modality for metastatic adenocarcinomas of the stomach and gastroesophageal junction. In order to ascertain whether trastuzumab therapy might be beneficial to a particular patient both HER2 scores and clinical correlation is a necessity.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the present study showed HER-2/neu overexpression was significantly associated with intestinal type and moderately differentiated type of gastric carcinoma. No significant association was found between HER2/neu status with the other clinicopathological parameters. Hence, HER2/neu status can be considered as an important prognostic factor in gastric carcinoma.

In our study major limitation was the non-availability of FISH analysis for HER2/neu expression with 2+ positive cases which needs evaluation for better correlation. Further studies should be carried out with greater number of cases and longer duration of follow up of the patients, to highlight more on the significance of HER2/neu expression with prognosis of the patients.

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