Evaluation of the prognostic value of derived neutrophil/lymphocyte ratio in early stage non-small cell lung cancer patients treated with stereotactic ablative radiotherapy

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Abstract
The derived neutrophil-lymphocyte ratio (dNLR) is a systemic inflammatory marker. The present study focusing on the prognostic value of pre-treatment dNLR in patients of early stage non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC).

From 2012 to 2016, patients with newly diagnosed early stage NSCLC were investigated. Only those who treated with stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR) were enrolled in this study. dNLR was calculated from complete blood count prior to SABR. The optimal cut-off value of dNLR was determined by receiver operating curve. Kaplan–Meier curves and Cox proportional models were used to analyze the impact of pre-treatment dNLR on disease free survival (DFS) and overall survival (OS).

There were 69 patients eligible for analysis, the median follow-up period was 30.9 months. Calculated by receiver operating characteristic curves, the optimal cut-off value of dNLR was 1.99. Kaplan–Meier curves demonstrated that a decreased dNLR was correlated with favorable DFS and OS. In univariate analysis, high dNLR was associated with decreased survival; moreover, multivariate analysis revealed that a decreased dNLR was an independent significant favorable prognostic factor for both DFS and OS.

An elevated pre-treatment dNLR may be an independent prognostic biomarker for DFS and OS in patients with early stage NSCLC that are eligible for SABR. dNLR is a reliable, inexpensive, simple, and readily available tool for risk-stratification and should be considered in daily clinical practice.

Abbreviations: 3DCT = 3-dimensional CT, 4DCT = 4-dimensional CT, CBC = complete blood count, DFS = disease free survival, dNLR = derived neutrophil-lymphocyte ratio, HR = hazard ratio, ITV = internal target volume, NSCLC = non-small cell lung cancer, OS = overall survival, SABR = stereotactic ablative radiotherapy.

Keywords: derived neutrophil-lymphocyte ratio, non-small cell lung cancer, prognostic factor, stereotactic ablative radiotherapy

1. Introduction
Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among males and the second leading cause of cancer death among females across the world, the most common type of lung cancer is non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), which occupied nearly 85%.[1] Over the last 25 years, lung cancer mortality rates have declined.[2] With the implementation of low-dose computed tomography screening, approximately 16% of patients were diagnosed with early stage tumor (T1–2 N0 M0) and the incidence will increase in future.[3] Surgical resection remains the mainstay treatment for early stage NSCLC, however, there were increased risk of surgery for elderly patients or patients combined with comorbidities. Stereotactic ablative radiotherapy (SABR), also known as stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy, has been proved to be an efficacy treatment protocol in medically inoperable early stage NSCLC and oligometastatic lung cancer, obtained favorable local control rates and achieved survival benefits.[4–6] Sun et al reported the efficacy of SABR for clinical stage I NSCLC in a prospective study, with a median follow up of more than 7 years, the incidence of progression free survival and overall survival (OS) were 49.5% and 55.7%, respectively, at 5 years and 38.2% and 47.5%, respectively, at 7 years; in the meantime, there were low level of disease recurrence rates.[7] Furthermore, some investigators exploited the immunologic effects of radiotherapy; SABR contributed to immunogenic death in primary cancer, result in the exposes and release of tumor antigen, priming of tumor specific cytotoxic T cells, and inducing an anticancer
immune response.\textsuperscript{[8,9]} The immune mechanisms of SABR is associated with a favorable disease control.\textsuperscript{[10]} Therefore, clinical tools that are easily available and economically feasible to assess the prognosis of early stage NSCLC patients who received SABR is necessary.

It is well established that inflammation plays a critical role in carcinogenesis and tumor proliferation.\textsuperscript{[11]} In recent years, systemic inflammation markers such as neutrophil to lymphocyte ratio, C-reactive protein, lymphocyte to monocyte ratio, platelet to lymphocyte ratio, and albumin, have all been demonstrated to correlate with disease outcomes in cancer patients.\textsuperscript{[12,13]} It appeared that the systemic manifestations of inflammation provide a valuable marker for treatment stratification and prognosis. In addition, some other studies reported the derived inflammation that derived from total neutrophil and white cell counts, can provide prognostic information in variety of malignancies.\textsuperscript{[14,15]} However, the majority of these studies primarily concentrated on surgical resection and definitively chemoradiotherapy, and the prognostic role of pretreatment inflammation marker dNLR in patients who treated with SABR is of very little concern. dNLR is an inexpensive and readily obtainable index from complete blood count (CBC). The objectives of this study were to investigate the prognostic value of systemic inflammation marker dNLR on disease free survival (DFS) and OS for patients with medically inoperable stage I NSCLC who received SABR. We also attempt to identify the optimal cut-off point of dNLR in these cohort of patients.

2. Patients and methods

2.1. Patients data

From January 2012 to December 2016, medical data of newly diagnosed NSCLC patients were retrospectively analyzed in the First People’s Hospital of Lianyungang. All patients were clinically staged by computed tomography, magnetic resonance imaging, and positron emission-CT prior to treatment. Patients were excluded if they met the following criteria: had small cell histologic features, received other anticancer treatment prior to SABR, without curative intention, diagnosed with metastatic lung tumor, combined with other malignancies. There were 73 medical inoperable early stage NSCLC patients who received SABR. Four patients were removed from the final analysis, 1 patient was lost to follow up and 3 patients with unavailable laboratory parameters. The seventh edition of the TNM classification for lung cancer staging was applied. This analysis has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, and written informed consent was obtained from each patient before SABR.

2.2. Treatment

All patients suspected of lung tumor underwent computed tomography scan of the thorax as part of their staging, and the results of the scan were compared to those of staging PET/CT. Magnetic resonance imaging of the brain was used to detect brain metastasis. Blood samples were collected 1 week prior to radiation therapy. Both 3-dimensional CT and 4-dimensional CT (4DCT) were performed at the time of radiation simulation. During free breathing, the respiratory motion of lung tumor was tracked by the real time position management system. According to the real time position management signal, 10 phase 4DCT image datasets were generated within a respiratory cycle. Maximum intensity projection or average intensity projection CT datasets can be calculated from the 10 phases of the 4DCT to delineate the tumor. Three-dimensional CT datasets are commonly utilized for delineation of the gross target volume, and the maximum intensity projection datasets was used to contour internal target volume (ITV). Based on the combining of gross target volume and ITV, the combined ITV was formed. Using an isotropic 5mm margin, the planning target volume was generated around the combined ITV. According to tumor size and location, several radiation doses were prescribed. For tumors with a maximum diameter less than 3cm, they were treated with 48 Gy in 4 fractions; and for tumors larger than 3cm, the most used treatment strategies include 50 Gy in 5 fractions and 55 Gy in 5 fractions. Daily on-line kilovoltage imaging with weekly cone beam computed tomography were adopted to confirm the tumor position during radiation therapy (Turebeam SN1403 accelerator, Varian Medical Systems, Palo Alto, CA).

2.3. Inflammation biomarkers

Blood samples were drawn 1 week prior to radiation therapy. A CBC was done and inflammation parameters including neutrophil count and lymphocyte were collected. The following formula was used to calculate the derived neutrophil to lymphocyte ratio: dNLR = ANC/WBC-ANC.\textsuperscript{[16]} Receiver operating characteristic curve was applied to determine the optimal cut-off values of dNLR.

2.4. Follow-Up data

Once the cancer treatment ends, all patients would receive a follow up cancer care plan form the doctor. Patients return to the radiation oncologist for follow up appoints every 3 months during the first 2 years after the completion of treatment, and twice a year after that. In general, a computed tomography imaging of the thorax and up abdomen with contrast was performed, a PET/CT scan and brain magnetic resonance imaging were conducted if necessary.

2.5. Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS 20.0 (IBM Software Group, Chicago, IL). The primary endpoint of this study was OS, defined from the date of initial diagnosis to date of death or the last follow up. Kaplan–Meier’s methodology was used to calculate the survival curves and log-rank test was applied to examine potential differences among the various variables. Univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazard regression models was used to assess the potential prognostic factors of OS. All statistical analyses were 2 sided, and \( P < .05 \) was considered to be statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. Patient characteristics

There were 69 patients diagnosed with early stage NSCLC were identified during the period from June 2012 to October 2016. All patients included in the present analysis were treated with SABR and available for CBC data. The median follows up time was
30.9 months; median age of the eligible patients was 74 years. Most of the patients had pretreatment biopsy and diagnosed with adenocarcinoma histologic features. The proportion of stage T1 disease was about 69.6%, approximately 66.7% of patients were male. Baseline demographics and clinical characteristics are illustrated in Table 1.

### 3.2. Immune parameters

The immune profiles for the entire patient population were acquired form pretreatment CBC. The median neutrophil count was $4.0 \times 10^9$ cells/L (range: $1.75 \times 10^9$ - $7.0 \times 10^9$ cells/L). The median monocyte count was $0.43 \times 10^9$ cells/L (range: $0.15 \times 10^9$ - $0.81 \times 10^9$ cells/L). The median platelet count was $237.66 \times 10^9$ cells/L (range: $112.0 \times 10^9$ - $427.0 \times 10^9$ cells/L). The median lymphocyte count was $1.92 \times 10^9$ cells/L (range: $0.75 \times 10^9$ - $4.57 \times 10^9$ cells/L). The median serum albumin level was 4.1 g/dL. The calculated median dNLR was 1.99 (range: 0.78–7.84).

### 3.3. Survival analyses

Receiver operating characteristic curve for dNLR was conducted and the optimal cut-off points was 1.99 of the entire cohort. Based on the calculated cut-off values of dNLR, both DFS and OS were optimally differenced, and patients were divided into two groups (high dNLR group [≥1.99] and low dNLR [<1.99] group). Next, we analyzed the 2 groups by Kaplan–Meier survival analysis, the 3-years DFS and OS rates in the low dNLR group were 82.2% and 87.8%, respectively; while the 3-years DFS and OS rates in the high dNLR group were 26.8% and 65.4%, respectively (Figs. 1 and 2). A decreased dNLR were associated with better survival.

### 3.4. Prognostic factor analyses

The pretreatment parameters were analyzed to determine whether they would predict for both DFS and OS. On univariate analysis, elevated dNLR predicted for worse DFS ($P = .001$, hazard ratio [HR]=6.69 [95% confidence interval (CI), 2.22–20.16]) and OS ($P = .037$, HR=4.13 [95% CI, 1.00–17.04]). Then, multivariate analyses were performed to determine the independent prognostic factors for DFS. decreased dNLR ($P = .001$, HR=6.99 [95% CI, 2.35–21.26]) was correlated with better DFS and OS ($P = .045$, HR=4.41 [95% CI, 1.04–18.77]) (Table 2). Consequently, dNLR could be used as an independent prognostic marker.

### 4. Discussion

The current study firstly reports that elevated dNLR was associated with poor survival in patients of early stage NSCLC who received SABR. Our results also suggest that a decreased
dNLR was an independent prognostic factor for this patient population. The bilateral influence of inflammation and cancer was first reported by Rudolf Virchow in 1863. Over the past few decades, emerging evidence demonstrating the prognostic value of systemic inflammation biomarkers in tumor formation, cancer progression, and metastasis. The systemic inflammation biomarkers including neutrophil to lymphocyte ratio, platelet to lymphocyte ratio, and lymphocyte to monocyte ratio have been well characterized in patients with cancers. These biomarkers also have been investigated in early stage NSCLC patients treated with SABR and most of the patients included were elderly individuals. Recently, dNLR has been investigated as a novel systemic inflammation biomarker in cancer invasion and treatment resistance. Cox et al evaluated the prognostic value of dNLR in patients recruited to the SCOPE1 trial and found an elevated dNLR prior to anticancer therapy was an independent biomarker for OS and progression free survival. Likewise, Yucel et al explored the effect of host inflammation on survival and treatment efficacy by using dNLR, the outcomes showed this new systemic inflammation biomarker can be routinely used in oncogene-addicted NSCLC. In this analysis, we found dNLR as an independent prognostic factor of OS in patients of early stage NSCLC treated with SABR; in the meantime, our study has validated pretreatment dNLR as an independent prognosis factor of OS in patients of early stage NSCLC treated with SABR; in the meantime, our study has validated pretreatment dNLR as an independent prognosis factor of OS in patients of early stage NSCLC treated with SABR.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we demonstrated that dNLR as a systemic inflammation biomarker was correlated with DFS and OS in early stage NSCLC patients treated with SABR. It is a readily available tool and could be served as an independent prognostic marker in daily practice. Future clinical trials are needed to determine dNLR as a stratification factor and select eligible patients treated with SABR.

Table 2

| Variable | DFS Univariate analysis | Multivariate analysis | OS Univariate analysis | Multivariate analysis |
|----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
|          | HR (95%CI) | P        | HR (95%CI) | P          | HR (95%CI) | P    | HR (95%CI) | P    |
| Age (≥65 vs <65) | 1.09 (0.36–3.26) | .884 | 2.50 (0.32–19.80) | .384 |
| Sex (male vs female) | 0.75 (0.25–2.24) | .610 | 1.12 (0.30–4.25) | .863 |
| Smoke status (yes vs no) | 1.09 (0.42–2.85) | .865 | 0.58 (0.16–2.08) | .403 |
| Tumor stage (T1 vs T2) | 1.39 (0.57–3.36) | .471 | 2.22 (0.67–7.38) | .193 |
| BED (>106Gy vs ≤106 Gy) | 1.52 (0.64–3.59) | .340 | 2.12 (0.64–6.96) | .218 |
| Complications (yes vs no) | 1.34 (0.54–3.33) | .534 | 0.38 (0.11–3.17) | .125 |
| dNLR (>1.99 vs ≤1.99) | 6.69 (2.22–20.16) | .001 | 6.99 (2.35–21.26) | .001 |

**DFS** = disease free survival, **OS** = overall survival, **dNLR** = derived neutrophil to lymphocyte ratio, **HR** = hazard ratio, **CI** = confidence interval.
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