Double-Hit Lymphoma: A Rare Variant

Gaurav Goyal,1) Gabriel C Caponetti,2) and Peter T Silberstein3)

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TO THE EDITOR

Diffuse large B-cell lymphomas (DLBCL) are a heterogeneous group of aggressive lymphomas. Approximately 40% of all B-cell lymphomas have a recurrent reciprocal chromosomal translocation, commonly involving an oncogene and an immunoglobulin loci enhancer. Lymphomas with recurrent chromosomal breakpoints that activate multiple oncogenes, one of which is MYC, are known as “double hit” lymphomas. These chromosomal breakpoints, when present, portend a worse prognosis. Most common double-hit lymphomas involve MYC and BCL2 gene translocations. We describe a very rare case of a patient with DLBCL involving the gene loci MYC and BCL6.

A 34-year-old male presents to the emergency department with bilateral lower extremity weakness and shooting pain. He was unable to ambulate without using a walker and had suffered multiple falls. He had no significant past medical or surgical history. Computed tomography scan of lumbar spine was normal so a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) was performed that showed homogenous hyperintense lesion extending posteriorly from L3-S1 vertebral bodies with obstruction of spinal canal (Fig. 1). The patient underwent L4-L5 laminectomy with resolution of symptoms. He was discharged subsequently with rest of the work-up and treatment planned on an outpatient basis.

Histopathologic evaluation of the biopsy of the lumbar mass revealed the presence of adipose tissue infiltrated by sheets of predominantly medium-sized to large lymphoid cells with round to ovoid nuclei, one to a few conspicuous nucleoli, and variably clumped to fine chromatin (Fig. 2A & 2B). In addition, frequent mitoses, karyorrhectic debris and apoptotic cells were observed, and these findings raised the possibility of shrinkage artifact on the lymphoma cells. By immunohistochemistry, the cells of the infiltrate were shown to be positive for CD20 (Fig. 2C), PAX5 (Fig. 2D), MUM1 (Fig. 2E), FOXP1, and weakly positive for BCL2 (Fig. 2F). An immunostain for Ki-67 showed expression in approximately 95% of the lymphoma cells (Fig. 2G), whereas immunostains for CD3, CD5, CD10, BCL6, GCET1, MYC, CD23, cyclin D1, TdT and CD34 were negative. The immunophenotype was indicative of an activated B-cell (ABC) subtype, according to the Choi algorithm. Limited flow-cytometric evaluation identified a mature B-cell population expressing CD19, CD20 and high-density monotypic immunoglobulin light chains present at 60% of the lymphocytes (less than 0.1% of all CD45-positive events). Cytogenetic (fluorescence in situ hybridization: FISH) testing of the tumor were positive for IGH/MYC fusion (93%) and BCL6/3q27 alternate breakpoint locus rearrangement (93%), without a BCL2/18q21 rearrange-
ment. The overall findings were indicative of a diffuse large B-cell lymphoma with a cytogenetic “double hit”. Subsequent evaluation of a cerebrospinal fluid specimen revealed involvement by large lymphoma cells (Fig. 2H).

**Fig. 2.** Histopathology slides of the lumbar mass. (2A & 2B) H&E stain, (2C) CD20, (2D) PAX5, (2E) MUM1, (2F) BCL2, (2G) Ki-67, and (2H) cytological finding of a cerebrospinal fluid specimen. May-Giemsa stain.

Fluorine-labeled fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography scan of the body showed involvement of lymph nodes both above and below the diaphragm, hence conferring the diagnosis of stage IV “double hit” DLBCL. One week later, he presented with return of symptoms and a repeat MRI of spine showed worsening extradural mass. He was treated with dose-adjusted R-EPOCH (rituximab, etoposide, doxorubicin, vincristine, cyclophosphamide and prednisone). His hospital course was prolonged and fraught with complications like lung and spinal abscess. Currently, the patient is bedridden with a poor prognosis and requires intravenous analgesia with a patient-controlled analgesia device.

New paragraph Double-hit lymphoma refers to a subtype of mature B-cell lymphomas that possess chromosomal translocations involving two oncogene loci, most commonly MYC/8q24 and BCL2/18q21. On rare occasions, it may involve BCL6/3q27 and MYC/8q24 gene loci. The Mitelman Database of Chromosome Aberrations in Cancer, a database that contains virtually all published cytogenetic data on various malignancies, mentions about 26 such cases till date (8% of all double-hit lymphomas).1

MYC translocation confers a negative prognostic impact on patients treated with cyclophosphamide, hydroxydaunorubicin, oncovin, and prednisone (CHOP) and CHOP plus rituximab (R-CHOP) regimens.2 The lymphomas with “double hit” morphology have a more dismal prognosis, even with high-intensity chemotherapy.3,4 MYC gene rearrangement promotes tumor proliferation, and BCL2/BCL6 protein expression inhibits cell apoptosis, hence producing a lethal combination.

Currently, combination chemotherapy with R-EPOCH is the only treatment regimen that has the potential to induce complete response in a proportion of such patients, although with no overall survival advantage.5 In a recent multi-center trial involving patients with double-hit lymphomas treated with high-intensity chemotherapy regimens, the progression-free survival and overall survival rates at 2 years were 40% and 49%, respectively.5 An alternate regimen that has been
recently shown to be effective for penetration into the cerebrospinal fluid consists of rituximab, cyclophosphamide, vincristine, doxorubicin, and dexamethasone (R-hyperCVAD). This regimen, however, is more cumbersome and has the potential to cause severe toxicity. Recently, Zappasodi et al., showed that heat-shock protein 105 (HSP105/HSPH1) is preferentially expressed in high-grade B-cell lymphomas and its inhibition downregulates the expression of MYC and BCL-6, which inhibits tumor growth in vivo. This suggests its potential role as a therapeutic target for treatment of such aggressive B-cell lymphomas.

Additional research to identify diagnostic tests to further characterize the biology of these rare tumors are under way. Until then, it seems imperative to test all aggressive B-cell lymphomas for multiple breakpoint activations by FISH.

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