Expert Review of Anticancer Therapy ›
Volume 15, 2015 - Issue 5

Editorial

Onartuzumab in lung cancer: the fall of Icarus?

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Pages 487-489 | Published online: 30 Mar 2015

Cite this article https://doi.org/10.1586/14737140.2015.1031219

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Keywords:

c-MET non-small-cell lung cancer ornatuzumab Phase I trial design

During the last decade, there has been a revolution in non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) with the development of targeted therapies. The best known example being the inhibition of EGFR-activating mutations by tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs), for example, erlotinib or gefitinib. Unfortunately, after a few months, these patients show signs of resistance. One of the resistance mechanisms against EGFR-TKIs is c-MET amplification, which occurs in approximately 10–20% of patients with acquired resistance [1,2].

Despite its fame as a resistance mechanism, the receptor also plays a role in TKI-naïve patients. In this population, c-MET overexpression can be found in 14–69% of patients [3] and de novo c-MET amplification in about 5% [4,5].

A number of targeted therapies against c-MET have been developed and several are in clinical trials. One of these inhibitors is the c-MET monovalent antibody onartuzumab of Genentech, which has received a lot of attention lately due to the failed Phase III trial in late-stage NSCLC in combination with erlotinib. Although the overall results of the randomi dvanced NSCLC w immuno ession-free survival ns; p = 0.002) [tiated in c-MET IHC ck of clinically

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First, the -MET positive ival formalin NFIRM anti-total ME mab [8,9]. This acc 84 equivoca on resection sections or tissue blocks. Also, the specificity and accuracy have been tested,

which showed that there was no cross-reactivity for RON and that the scoring of the IHC was in accordance with the mRNA levels of c-MET. In terms of fixation, the pathologist can be guided by the internal controls of the tissue (endothelium = 1+ staining intensity, bronchial epithelium = 2+ intensity), but the use of semi-quantitative controls is recommended [8]. About 50% of the screened patients could be enrolled in the trial. However, the scoring criteria can greatly influence the number of selected patients. As reported, the choice of biomarker was made based on a comparison between FISH and IHC in the Phase II study (on a small number of 66 patients). It should be noted that, as for IHC, the cutoff value for FISH can make a big difference. In the Phase II study, a MET/CEP7 ratio of 2 or a total copy number of 5 was used as a cutoff, whereas other studies (e.g., crizotinib in c-MET-amplified NSCLC) showed the best response in patients with a ratio of 5 or more. Should we focus more on HGF, the ligand of c-MET? As HGF is produced by the tumor microenvironment or can even be produced by the tumor cells themselves, it can also evoke the activation of c-MET and even resistance against gefitinib [10,11]. The great number of selected patients might have obscured beneficial results in the actual group of patients that could benefit from treatment with onartuzumab.

The second comment that can be made is the fact that the c-MET status is determined on archival tissue of patients treated with one or two lines of chemotherapy. As resectio xpression may cha raising the questio imate for the leve problem that aris l vary betwee ince fixation can hav influence the re

Third, g emarkable that only he results presente ., a lot of variatio e preclinical evidenc in patients with wil that the c-MET and wed that c-MET can activate the EGFR pathway through the upregulation of ligand transcription

(TGF-β and EGF) [14,15]. However, Breindel et al. showed that EGFR directly activates c-MET, but that c-MET needs the HER3 receptor to activate EGFR [16]. There is no doubt that there exists a connection between both pathways, the only question is if EGFR is as strongly activated by c-MET as c-MET is activated by EGFR. In fact, the dual inhibition of c-MET and EGFR might have no real impact. Nevertheless, the results seen in the Phase II trial might be biased since the c-MET-positive arm contained a higher population of EGFR-mutant NSCLC patients in the erlotinib + onartuzumab arm (20%) in comparison with 7% EGFR-mutant patients in the erlotinib + placebo arm. This would mean that the real potential target population should present with both an EGFR mutation and c-MET positivity. At the American Society of Clinical Oncology 2014, data from the Phase III trial were presented but submolecular analysis was still ongoing.

Although this clinical trial may have failed, it gives rise to a lot of new questions and encourages the discussion of which c-MET biomarker to use for optimal patient selection. Should we really quit choosing c-MET IHC as a biomarker? Or do we need to change the IHC cutoffs? Is it ethical to include a large number of patients in a Phase III study (490 patients) when we have evidence of lack of efficacy in the Phase II study? Must we be more cautious with the design of clinical studies? In oncology, history continues to demonstrate that matching the right patient (with the appropriate biomarker) with the appropriate drug is the winning team [13]. Maybe we should, like Icarus, fl

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Related Research Data

Biomarker Analyses from a Placebo-Controlled Phase II Study Evaluating Erlotinib ± Onartuzumab in Advanced Non–Small Cell Lung Cancer: MET Expression Levels Are Predictive of Patient Benefit

Source: Clinical Cancer Research

MET gene amplification or EGFR mutation activate MET in lung cancers untreated with EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors

Source: International Journal of Cancer

MET Amplification Leads to Gefitinib Resistance in Lung Cancer by Activating ERBB3 Signaling

Source: Science

Prognostic Value of MET Gene Copy Number and Protein Expression in Patients with Surgically Resected Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer: A Meta-Analysis of Published Literatures

Source: PLoS ONE

Monovalent antibody design and mechanism of action of onartuzumab, a MET antagonist with anti-tumor activity as a therapeutic agent

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Source: Cancer Research

Ligand-triggered resistance to molecular targeted drugs in lung cancer: Roles of hepatocyte growth factor and epidermal growth factor receptor ligands

Source: Cancer Science

MET-negative patients—eclipsing benefits

Source: Nature Reviews Clinical Oncology

c-MET/Phospho-MET Protein Expression and MET Gene Copy Number in Non-small Cell Lung Carcinomas

Source: Journal of Thoracic Oncology

“Companion Diagnostics”: Has Their Time Come and Gone?

Source: Clinical Cancer Research

Randomized Phase II Trial of Onartuzumab in Combination With Erlotinib in Patients With Advanced Non–Small-Cell Lung Cancer

Source: Journal of Clinical Oncology

Induction of MET by Ionizing Radiation and Its Role in Radioresistance and Invasive Growth of Cancer

Source: JNCI Journal of the National Cancer Institute

EGF Receptor Activates MET through MAPK to Enhance Non–Small Cell Lung Carcinoma Invasion and Brain Metastasis

Source: Cancer Research

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