The spectrum hypothesis and the technical revolution in radiotherapy at the origin of a major paradigm shift

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"Predicting is difficult, especially predicting the future...."

The evolution in radiotherapy nowadays allows highly conformal treatment. Even for moving targets, the radiation therapy can be given with high precision, avoiding as much as possible the irradiation of healthy tissue. This allows reduction of the number of fractions and increase of the biological effect of the treatment. The literature shows us that this increase in biological effect opens the perspective of ablative radiotherapy as an alternative to surgery, whether this is for selected primary tumours or for limited metastatic sub-sites. This ablative radiotherapy will change the treatment paradigms in oncology radically. It is cost-effective, non-invasive and, as the treatment is given in a limited number of fractions not requiring a hospital stay, it has no negative impact on the quality of life of the patient.

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Introduction

In the history of treatment of cancer, surgeons such as Halsted developed aggressive loco-regional treatment modalities (ablative treatments) to eradicate cancer. They advanced the hypothesis that cancer is progressing in an orderly fashion, emphasizing the importance of ablation of the primary tumour and adjacent lymph nodes. This theory was replaced by炽热 who claimed that cancer is a metastatic disease at onset. If this is true, the ablative treatment aiming at local and regional control of the disease cancer can improve survival. This theory prevailed for several years during the golden era of development and widespread use of systemic treatment. However, cancer is neither a local disease nor a systemic disease, but it represents a spectrum of diseases. This spectrum hypothesis was first launched by Sam Hellman and Ralph Weichselbaum in 1995.

The metastatic phenomenon is not random and does require the acquisition of capabilities of invasion and metastasis. It is the result of a complex interaction between cancer cells that acquired these capacities for dissemination and invasion and the host especially the niche in which those cells will ultimately settle and proliferate (seed and soil hypothesis of Paget). This theory of a pre-metastatic niche located in the remaining host organ explains the non-random distribution of metastatic deposits and illustrates the importance of a continuous cross-talk between the tumour cells and the host organs. If metastases are not de facto full-blown, there might be an opportunity for an aggressive ablative approach of offering the potential of a significant survival benefit.
Oligo-metastases and the potential impact on outcome of an ablative treatment approach

Surgery, however, has a potential of a curative resection in cases of limited metastatic disease (referred to as oligo-metastatic disease—OMD). For example, in the case of breast cancer, it has been shown in several clinical series that an aggressive local surgical approach for solitary metastatic sites located in the brain, liver, and lung can yield survival figures ranging from 10% to 50% at 5 years. On the one hand, these publications are characterised by differences in patient populations, treatment techniques and modalities of follow-up, but on the other hand, they demonstrate how treatment can be tailored according to a specific patient and disease profile.

A prerequisite for a long survival probability in these surgical series is the complete eradication, i.e. a radical resection labelled as R2 resection by the pathologists (no microscopic or macroscopic residual disease left behind after surgical resection). In general, more information is available in the published literature on surgical modalities to remove metastatic sub-sites as compared to any other local modality, but apparently, very little of this research has been conducted in a prospective fashion.

In view of these surgical publications, two clinical situations can be identified that could well generate opportunities for aggressive local ablative treatment approaches: de novo OMD or induced OMD. In the first situation, de novo OMD, the disease is characterised by the presence of synchronised (i.e. at the time of diagnosis), or metachronic (i.e. after initial diagnosis has been established and an initial treatment has been given for the primary disease) limited number of distant metastatic sub-sites. In the second scenario, if the systemic treatments usually applied in the context of widespread metastatic disease are able to control almost all metastatic sub-sites, yielding a limited number of macroscopically detectable metastatic sub-sites, one should be able to apply ablative treatment approaches to the latter. If this is the case, a single course of ablative treatment might be able to eradicate a partial response (which in fact is synonymous to a total failure) into a complete clinical response which could eventually stand for a period of years and potentially influence positively survival and quality of life. Therefore, if the efficacy of the systemic treatment is increasing constantly, one might envisage an ever-growing importance of local ablative treatment modalities. Moreover, a debulking procedure with a parent local therapy could result in a remaining burden more sensitive to chemotherapy.

The technical evolution allows for ablative radiotherapy

To obtain the same ablative effect as the surgeon, the radiation oncologist should be able to apply a very high dose on a limited volume. However, increasing the physical radiation dose (number of fractions: time: dose per fraction) by conventional conformal techniques results in an increased risk of normal tissue complications. Even using treatment under image guidance (IGRT—Image-Guided RadioTherapy) and beam intensity modulation for optimised dose delivery (IMRT—Intensity-Modulated RadioTherapy), the limits of applicability of a high physical dose will be defined by the tolerance levels of the healthy tissue surrounding the target.

It is well known that the dose response relationship for tumour and normal tissue to surviving irradiation is best represented with a sigmoid dose response curve. Both dose response curves - in an ideal world - should be separated as much as possible to offer a therapeutic index as large as possible and hence increase the probability of increasing dose and cure without complications. However, both curves are in reality not that much separated. Therefore, any increase in physical total dose will, without any doubt, result in an increase of the probability of side-effects in healthy tissue. One of the main reasons for the limitations of the physical dose increase is linked to the necessity of taking - within the irradiated volume encompassed by the prescription isodose - not only the gross tumour volume (GTV) and the possible microscopic extension (clinical target volume = CTV), but also safety margins which are necessary to cope with movement of the target (internal target volume=ITV) and uncertainties which are positional (daily repositioning uncertainties) or mechanical (technically linked to the device) in nature (planning target volume=PTV). The end result is a rather large volume to be irradiated at a
therapeutic dose level in order to obtain local control. Therefore, this large volume encompasses a significant amount of non-target tissue. If one were able to reduce these safety margins, he could potentially avoid a physical dose escalation without taking significant increased risk of late normal tissue complications. To do so, one has to eliminate the impact of and/or movement of the target and/or positional and/or mechanical uncertainties. A reduction of the thickness of the shell taken around the target by a couple of millimeters will have a tremendous effect on the amount of normal tissue within the volume encompassed by the prescription isodose. This can be highlighted by a straightforward example: if you remove the peel of an orange without dropping it away in the basket, the total volume of this collected peel corresponds to the volume of the fruit itself. Therefore, every reduction of the shell thickness results in a significant reduction of the volume of healthy tissue within the prescription isodose.

One of the largest shells added to the CTV is the one required by the respiratory-related movement of the target. If there is a possible gain to look for to reduce the amplitude of the safety margins, reducing the shell required to cope for respiratory-related movement of the target is obviously a logical choice. There are two ways to eliminate respiratory movement: either you consider gating or you choose tracking. In gating you ask the patient, to breath-hold and you switch on the beam during this breath-hold period. It is obvious that here you have to rely on perfect collaboration from your patient which might be a tricky issue especially in older and frail patients with respiratory disorders. To avoid this compliance problem you can opt for tracking. In tracking the patient does not provide a special effort and you ask him to breathe normally. The key for tracking is to register continuously the potential impact of the respiratory movement on the target position. Therefore, you rely on a correlation model built up by external markers and internal markers. External markers alone, such as for example infra-red emitters positioned on the patient chest wall coupled to a detector somewhere in the room capturing the infrared signal from the moving emitter, are not reliably giving the position of the target. This is especially true as there is no way to assess whether movement of external and internal markers are linearly linked. Moreover, external markers alone do not account for complex internal target movements (for example hysteresis). The best thing to do is to couple the information provided by the external markers to assessment of positional changes of internal markers. These internal markers can be either surrogates for the target (e.g. bony structures) or, more interestingly, directly the target itself. Provided the latter can be localized with radiological imaging. An alternative to the target itself is the use of several gold fiducials implanted under CT-guidance at the boundaries of the target in a particular geometrical position one to each other so that even complex movement can be tracked adequately. Whatever is used as internal marker to avoid continuous imaging during beam on time, one should establish a correlation model between external markers and internal markers. If this correlation model is built, one can rely on external markers registered discontinuously and internal markers registered at different time points during the beam-on time. An example of such an approach is the CyberKnife® system which allows continuous and real-time tumor tracking with an overall precision in case of a moving target of 0.7±0.3mm. This precision is even better for non-moving targets (precision for a brain location is 0.4mm).

One can argue that repeated imaging during beam-on time is detrimental for a patient's health but the amount of supplementary dose given by this imaging is negligible compared to the dose given for therapeutic reasons and significantly less than the one used by cone beam CT used in routine for positioning checking in conventional radiotherapy. If the dosimetrical problem is solved by isocentric and non-isocentric, co-planar and non-co-planar multiple beams, if the amplitude of the safety margin around the target is reduced by tracking, this paves the way to a significant increase of the biological effectiveness of the dose (BED). Without significantly modifying for example the applied total physical dose, the BED will be greatly enhanced by using the same physical dose but a limited number of fractions. Indeed, in the BED formula the biological effect depends upon total physical dose and relative effect. The relative effect is highly weighted by the sensitivity of a given tissue (target tissue or healthy
tissue) to changes in fraction size. If the tissue is sensitive to a change in fractionation, a significant increase in the dose per fraction will greatly impact the RBE. If the sensitivity to a change in fractionation is greater in the healthy tissue surrounding the target, one should pay particular attention to limit the applied fractional dose on this healthy tissue by leaving it as much as possible outside the volume encompassed by the prescription isodose. On the other hand, tumours have often sensitivity to fractionation changes which are rather close to the ones observed for healthy tissue. If this is the case, one could exploit the significant increase in biological effect by using high fractional doses on tumours, but at the same time taking particular care to eliminate healthy tissue as much as possible. A clinical illustration of this concept is the treatment of early stage NSCLC.

A conventional treatment, although conformal, can usually be applied safely at the total physical dose level of 60 Gy in 33 fractions of 2 Gy over 6.5 weeks. At this dose level we expect a less than 15% probability of local control at two years. The same tumour can be approached with Stereotactic Body Radio Therapy (SBRT), using Real-Time Turnout Tracking (RTTT) with a total physical dose of 60 Gy applied in only three fractions of 20 Gy each over an overall treatment time (OTT) of a single week. Besides the obvious reduction of the treatment burden for the patient by reducing the total number of fractions, this dose schedule results in a 70% to 90% probability of local control at two years translating in an overall survival of about 60% which is comparable to survival figures after surgery.3 In these surgical series, however, the patients are highly selected because of their good general condition and tumour characteristics allowing a surgical intervention. This is definitely not the case in SBRT series. First, older patients selected for surgery because of their general health condition are addressed for SBRT and nevertheless the survival figures in this negatively-selected patient population are comparable to surgery. The key to success for SBRT therefore, is optimal definition of the target, based on high resolution multi-modal imaging (combining morphological and metabolic information), and optimised hypofractionated dose delivery through multi-beam approach with image-based RTTT. These techniques, therefore, do allow an ablative radiotherapy to be given with only a very limited risk of side-effects as the dose fall-off is extremely sharp outside of the volume encompassed by the prescription isodose.

Radiotherapy versus surgery in the ablative paradigm

There are several advantages of ablative radiotherapy as compared to surgery: there is no invasive procedure requiring several days in hospital, the treatment is given on an ambulatory basis, the cost of treatment is significantly reduced provided one takes into consideration total direct and indirect costs, the treatment can easily be given for another metastatic sub-site appearing at a later time point, there are virtually no acute side-effects and the treatment is totally painless. The impact on quality of life, in contrast to an invasive surgical procedure, is only small and limited in time as the number of fractions are restrained to an absolute minimum.

There is another important advantage linked to the use of image-guided radiation to eradicate the tumour target. The ablative surgical procedure should be timed, i.e. if the margins are defined or involved, the survival drops dramatically. In contrast, in case of SBRT, even if the dose fall-off outside the volume encompassed by the prescription isodose is extremely rapid, the dose is not null outside the target volume. There are data showing the link between the number of clonogenic cells to eliminate and the dose to be applied.11 Therefore, in the area of possible microscopic extension, outside the CTV - which in theory already contains a safety shell to cope with microscopic extension beyond the macroscopically visible target volume - the lower radiation dose might be able to eradicate these isolated cells.

The paradigm shift and the complexity of evidence-based medicine

It seems obvious that SBRT will play an important role in the treatment of selected patients. There is no doubt that progress in medicine has been made thanks to the use of randomised controlled trials. In various fields the implementation of individualised treatment tailored according to a wide variation of patient and tumour characteristics, highlighting the complexity and heterogeneity of the disease, will reduce our ability to run large randomised trials.
Key messages for clinical practice

1. Stereotactic body radiotherapy (SBRT) allows high dose delivery in a limited number of fractions, resulting in a significant increase in biological effect.
2. In selected patients, SBRT may offer an alternative to surgery.
3. SBRT is safe, cost-effective, and limits the burden of the treatment on patients and therefore improves quality of life.
4. SBRT with real-time image-guidance (IG-RT) opens the way to major paradigm shifts in oncology.

If one considers comparing two treatment modalities, the prerequisite is obviously a mandatory informed consent. If one has to inform a patient thoroughly on two very different treatment modalities with a big differential in invasiveness, there will be without any doubt a very high refusal rate as patients will spontaneously opt to be treated with the less invasive procedure! This is the case for SBRT. A typical example is the ablation in the United States of America (USA) of a randomised trial designed to compare medical surgery to ablative radiotherapy performed in three fractions in one week in early stage non-small cell lung cancer. Once the patients are informed about the possible side-effects of surgery, they no longer want to be randomised and ask for SBRT. One could argue ironically that there has never been a randomised trial at the use of paracetamol and yet its use saves lives! More seriously, the reduced possibilities of running randomised controlled trials put the pressure on the radiation oncology community, in order to perform comprehensive prospective outcome analyses. And outcome is not only a story of local control, disease-free survival (DFS) and overall survival (OS) but includes also quality of life and cost-effectiveness.

Conclusion

The technological evolution, specifically in the fields of imaging, informatics and robotics, has opened the door to highly conformal IG-RT. The possibility to track the target in real-time reduces the magnitude of the safety shell to be taken around the target to make sure that the latter at any time is within the prescription isodose. The increase in resolution of the imaging and the combination of morphological and metabolic information will provide the possibility to reduce the amount of healthy tissue even further.

This elimination of healthy tissue from the high-dose volume allows the use of large doses per fraction. This results in a significant increase in biological effect without an increased risk of acute and late complications. Stereotactic image-guided SBRT therefore allows a treatment with an ablative potential comparable to surgery, it offers the advantages of being safe, non-invasive, and cost-effective, with almost no deleterious impact on a patient's quality of life. This treatment option will originate major paradigm shifts in oncology, not only for the treatment for primary tumours but also for the eradication of limited metastatic disease.

References