Media release

SAKK presentation on the treatment of follicular lymphoma at the meeting of the American Society of Hematology (ASH) in San Francisco, California.

New treatment for follicular lymphoma

Patients with follicular lymphoma respond better to treatment if they take the antibody rituximab (MabThera®) in combination with the immune modulator lenalidomide (Revlimid®). This is the conclusion of a study by the Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research (SAKK) in cooperation with the Nordic Lymphoma Group (NLG), which builds on many years of research on chemotherapy-free treatment of follicular lymphoma.

Bern, 9 December 2014 – Patients with follicular lymphoma could benefit in future from a new treatment using the antibody rituximab in combination with lenalidomide, a substance that acts on the immune system. If lenalidomide is added to therapy with rituximab, more patients showed a complete absence of any signs of follicular lymphoma than after rituximab monotherapy. This is the result of a joint study by researchers from the Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research (SAKK) and the Nordic Lymphoma Group (NLG). The study was presented today at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Hematology (ASH) in San Francisco, California.

Follicular lymphoma is a malignant cancer of the lymphatic system, which usually develops slowly and often goes unnoticed for a long time, because it does not cause pain or any other symptoms. The disease is considered incurable with a few exceptions as for instance in patients where the disease is localized and can be treated with radiotherapy. Existing treatment options are aimed at slowing the progression of the disease by means of immuno-chemotherapy. These treatment concepts can improve the survival of patients with follicular lymphoma. But most patients suffer a relapse after such treatment. Moreover, patients with relevant concomitant disorders can often not be treated with immuno-chemotherapy. New treatments with a longer response and less toxicity are therefore necessary.

In recent years, the therapeutic approaches for follicular lymphoma have changed considerably thanks to the use of treatments based on antibody based therapy. The antibody rituximab in particular has led to a regression of the tumor in a large proportion of patients, even in patients who do not respond to chemotherapy. The SAKK and the NLG are therefore investigating treatments based on rituximab in order to find therapies that are more effective and better tolerated for patients. In earlier studies by the two research groups, a long-lasting response was achieved for some patients with rituximab alone. The study SAKK 35/10 has now investigated the activity of rituximab in combination with lenalidomide versus therapy with rituximab alone, because lenalidomide enhances the damage of cancer cells through the natural immune systems, and the researchers therefore assumed that lenalidomide could enhance the anti-tumor cell activity of rituximab.
Altogether 154 patients with previously untreated follicular lymphoma were enrolled in the study. 36% of patients who received the combination therapy of rituximab and lenalidomide showed a complete response to treatment - i.e. the complete absence of any signs of follicular lymphoma - 23 weeks after the start of therapy. In the patients who received treatment with rituximab alone, this was only the case in 25% of patients. A disadvantage, however, was that more patients who received the combination therapy suffered from side effects. Thirteen patients had to stop treatment because of side effects. Further studies are needed to show whether the more effective treatment also prolongs the time to the next tumor therapy and leads to longer survival overall.

The full abstract can be found at:


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The Swiss Group for Clinical Cancer Research (SAKK) has committed itself to conducting clinical cancer trials as a non-profit organization since 1965. Its major goal is to investigate new cancer therapies and to improve existing tumor treatments, in order to cure the disease or to prolong survival and improve life quality of patients suffering from cancer. Research is conducted through a national network and in cooperation with centers and study groups abroad. SAKK is supported by a service-level agreement with the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) as well as partners such as the Swiss Cancer League and the Foundation Cancer Research Switzerland. More information: www.sakk.ch