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Title: Pathological complete response in young patients with MSI rectal cancer

Running title: Microsatellite status in early age onset rectal cancer

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Introduction

A major research focus of the past few decades in colorectal cancer (CRC) has been deciphering the underpinning biomolecular processes in order to guide therapeutic decision making and optimise outcomes. Several forms of genetic instability have been described in CRC. Chromosomal instability (CIN) is the hallmark of 85% of cases, whilst microsatellite instability (MSI) is identified in approximately 15%¹.

MSI, a well-defined feature of defective DNA mismatch repair (MMR), may be due to sporadic epigenetic silencing of the MLH1 gene or constitutive mutations in one of the MMR genes (i.e. Lynch Syndrome)². Immunohistochemistry is used to classify tumours as MMR-deficient or MMR-proficient, whilst PCR is used to identify MSI. Dichotomisation of CRC on the basis of MMR or MSI status is now routinely recommended for all patients regardless of age at diagnosis or family history.

Apart from representing an important screening tool for Lynch Syndrome, MSI status may also provide valuable prognostic and therapeutic information. MSI is associated with improved disease-specific survival^{3,4}. Controversy exists as to whether MSI confers a relative resistance to 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) chemotherapy, and the impact of MSI status on response to neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy is unclear^{5,6}.

One of the biggest epidemiological crises facing the world of surgical oncology, is the rapidly rising incidence of early onset rectal cancer (EORC), defined as diagnosis before 50 years^{7,8}. The reasons for this increase are unclear. Whilst overlapping key drivers are implicated in both early and late-onset disease, a number of notable biomolecular differences have been observed⁹⁻¹¹. Although EORC is more likely to occur in the context of a hereditary cancer syndrome, the majority of cases are sporadic and microsatellite stable^{12,13}. As young patients have historically represented a small proportion of cases, the impact of microsatellite status on disease-specific outcomes in this patient group is unknown. Individual institutional data in isolation are too small for meaningful analyses. The REACCT Collaborative was established to aggregate large volume real-world data from specialist centres across the world. The objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of microsatellite status on oncological outcomes in patients diagnosed with rectal cancer aged less than 50 years.

Methods

A complete description of the study methodology is available in *Appendix S1*. In brief, a retrospective international multicentre observational cohort study to assess the clinicopathological features, molecular characteristics and disease specific outcomes of patients diagnosed with early age onset rectal cancer over a 20-year period (2000 to 2020) was performed. Inclusion criteria were adults aged between 18 and 49 years with a histologically confirmed diagnosis of non-metastatic rectal cancer undergoing surgery with curative intent and known MSI status. Data was provided by members of the REACCT Collaborative. Patients who fulfilled the inclusion criteria of the study were selected from the REACCT Collaborative database. Collected data included baseline patient demographics, clinical stage, surgical, and treatment data, histopathological and molecular features, and cancer-specific as well as overall survival information. Microsatellite instability was determined by PCR or immunohistochemistry (IHC). Loss of mismatch repair (MMR) proteins *MLH1*, *PMS2*, *MSH2* or *MSH6* on IHC was classified as MSI. A hereditary cancer syndrome was defined as diagnosis of a constitutive pathogenic variant on germline testing.

Results

Baseline demographics

A total of 400 patients diagnosed with rectal cancer under the age of 50 over a 20-year interval were included in the study. Of those, 50 had tumours with defined MSI. The remaining 350 had MSS tumours. This represents 9.1% of the total number of patients with EO CRC in the REACCT Collaborative database. The median (range) age was 43 (23-49) years and 204 (58.3%) were male. MSI was associated with a first degree relative with CRC. Females accounted for 58% of the MSI group. There was no difference in clinical stage between the two groups.

Pathological features

There were no significant differences in differentiation, or lymphovascular, extramural venous or perineural invasion between the two groups. A complete pathologic response (pCR) was more common among the MSI group (32.3% vs 15.7%, $p = 0.044$). Patients with MSI were less likely to pathological node positive disease (22.0% vs 41.7%, $p = 0.008$).

Molecular characteristics

MSI tumours were more likely to occur in the context of genetic predisposition. A hereditary

cancer syndrome was diagnosed in 30.0% of patients (n=15) with MSI tumours compared to 3.1% of patients (n=11) with MSS tumours (HR 13.21, 95% CI 5.63-30.97, $p = <0.0001$). Only 72.0% (n=36) of the MSI group and 65.7% (n=230) of the MSS group had undergone genetic testing at the time of data collection.

Survival

Survival data was available for 392 patients (98%). Overall median follow-up was 35 months (1-197). Among the MSI group median overall survival was 58 months (1-197), with 1-, 3- and 5-year overall survival rates of 100%, 95% and 89% respectively. Equivalent values in the MSS group were 32 months (1-158) and 96%, 90% and 84%. Median disease-free survival was 57 months in the MSI group (1-197) and 23 months (1-158) in the MSS group. In patients with MSI, the disease-free survival rate at 1, 3 and 5 years was 98%, 90% and 87%, compared with 89%, 72% and 66% among those with MSS tumours (*Figure 1*). On sub-analysis based on pathological stage, survival was better in the MSI group for stage I, II and III disease, however the differences were not statistically significant.

Disease recurrence

In the MSI group, no patient developed locoregional disease recurrence compared with 24 patients (6.9%) in the MSS group ($p = 0.159$). Five patients (10%) with MSI developed metastatic disease compared with 72 (20.6%) in the MSS group ($p = 0.084$).

Factors predictive of disease-specific outcomes

On univariable analysis, in the MSI group, no variable was significantly associated with disease recurrence. In the MSS group, lymphovascular, extramural, and perineural invasion, TRG 3, and node positivity were significantly associated with worse DFS on univariable analysis. On multivariable analysis, only lymphovascular invasion (HR 2.831, 95% CI 1.09, 7.31, $p = 0.032$) and adjuvant chemotherapy (HR 4.893, 95% CI 1.29, 18.63, $p = 0.02$) were significantly associated with disease recurrence.

Discussion

Increased understanding of the biomolecular processes that underpin tumour development has enabled the molecular stratification of patients with CRC. The most commonly used molecular classification system in clinical practice dichotomises CRC into tumours with MSI and tumours that are MSS. Unsurprisingly, tumours that arise from different oncogenic pathways differ clinically. In this study of 400 patients with early age onset rectal cancer, 12.5% of patients demonstrated MSI. MSI was associated with reduced likelihood of nodal positivity, increased rate of pCR and improved disease-specific survival. MSI tumours were also more likely (but not exclusively) to occur in the context of a hereditary cancer syndrome.

Epidemiological and registry-based studies have demonstrated an alarming increase in EO CRC worldwide over the past four decades^{7,15,16}. This increase is predominantly driven by a rise in the rate of distal tumours⁸. Historically, males have accounted for a greater proportion of patients with rectal cancer than females. A recent nationwide Swedish registry-based study however, reported a male-to-female incidence rate ratio of 1.07 in adults aged 18-49, compared to 1.71 among those aged greater than 49¹⁷. MSI has been shown to have a female preponderance, in particular among patients with proximal colon tumours¹⁸. In the present study, although there were more males overall, females accounted for the majority (58%) of patients in the MSI group. This is in contrast to a large North American nationwide study of all age rectal cancer where the majority of patients in both the MSI and MSS groups were male (60.8% and 61% respectively)¹⁹. The impact of female sex on risk of early age rectal cancer or presence of MSI remains to be defined.

An emerging focus of modern management of rectal cancer, is the role of molecular profile in therapeutic decision making. Neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy is the standard of care for locally advanced disease, however pathological response varies considerably. Achieving a pCR is a positive prognostic indicator, associated with excellent locoregional control²⁰. A startling result from these data is the enhanced pCR event rate in young patients with MSI rectal cancer. This opens the possibility of organ preservation in this specific group. It is known that disease-free survival with pCR is excellent, therefore it may be possible to consider avoiding operation in some of these patients²¹. It should be remembered that these are otherwise healthy individuals in whom socioeconomic, psychosocial and quality of life factors are arguably more important than at advanced stages of life. Where that is the case it will be important to build on the knowledge base being acquired from discrete choice

experimental data in patients with pCR due to chemoradiotherapy for oesophageal cancer. In those studies, it was found that patients were prepared to give up life years in order to avoid the potentially disabling symptoms due to the anatomical, physiological and social impact of major surgical extirpation²². In particular the negative impact on genitourinary function that may arise as a result of major pelvic surgery and the established risk of poor lower gastrointestinal function (low anterior resection syndrome) may be avoided with an organ preserving approach^{23,24}. The socioeconomic advantages to eliminating major surgery in this youthful population group is intuitively better. However, there are negative consequences to neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy which include (but are not limited to) diminished fertility, pelvic fractures, and neuropathy²⁵⁻²⁷. Clearly, research to determine discrete choice experimental information from patients in this distinct patient group is needed to inform patient-doctor decision-making.

Despite receiving more treatment, young patients with rectal cancer demonstrate similar disease-specific survival to their older counterparts¹². Oncological outcomes according to MSI status however are limited. In the present study, patients with MSI demonstrated better disease-specific survival. Statistical differences were purposely not assessed because this data represents real-world data which can be relatively crude. Where that is the case, the use of statistics could be misleading. Nonetheless, the absolute difference of 15% between 5-year disease-free survival (MSI vs MSS; 87% vs 66%) is certainly clinically significant. As expected, overall survival did not differ with between groups.

MSI status is an important screening tool for genetic cancer predisposition e.g. Lynch Syndrome. Constitutive pathogenic mutations in the MMR genes lead to defective MMR, of which MSI is a well-defined feature². In the present study, 6.5% of patients overall were diagnosed with a genetic predisposition. These data, in keeping with other series, suggest that rectal cancer in young adults is infrequently due to a hereditary cancer syndrome (albeit more frequently than their older counterparts)¹². For MSI tumours however, almost 1 in 3 patients had a genetic predisposition (MSI vs MSS; 30.0% vs 3.1%) highlighting the important of genetic testing in this group. Despite young age at disease onset being a hallmark of genetic predisposition, the majority of cases of EOCRC are sporadic with MSS tumours^{11,28}. As the full spectrum of genes implicated is unknown however, it is possible that a proportion of patients with sporadic disease actually harbour mutations not yet identified^{13,29}. Advances in next-generation sequencing with multigene panel testing will unveil this spectrum.

This study has limitations including the retrospective nature, lack of complete dataset for the entire study group, and heterogeneity in treatment across the collaborative group. The study period spanned 20 years, and chemotherapy and radiotherapy strategies have evolved over that time. Nonetheless, this study represents real-world data and provides a useful platform for future planning. Evidently, neoadjuvant therapy should be a focus of modern trials in this patient group. Total neoadjuvant therapy, which is associated with favourable short-term outcomes including improved chemotherapy compliance and superior pCR rates, may represent an attractive strategy³⁰. Furthermore, there is potential for immunotherapy to be integrated into the neoadjuvant treatment paradigm. Checkpoint inhibitors may offer a great therapeutic advantage in select patients. The NICHE study demonstrated remarkable response to checkpoint blockade among patients with non-metastatic colon cancer³¹. Importantly, collaboration undoubtedly represents an ideal approach to answer these key questions.

Figure legend

Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier curve of disease free survival for patients with Stage I-III disease comparing MSI and MSS.

No. at risk	0m	12m	24m	36m	48m	60m
MSI	50	42	37	31	29	22
MSS	342	247	166	128	87	66

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