

# Thymic Malignancy in a Breast Cancer Patient

*Is there an Association with Anti-estrogenic Effects of Tamoxifen?*

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Acta Oncologica Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 115–116, 2004

Received 12 June 2003

Accepted 18 August 2003

With the increasing success of modern therapies in achieving long-term remissions in many cancer patients, the incidence of second primary tumors is rapidly increasing. Second tumors are closely related to the treatment of primary malignancy and to the effect of the curative therapy on pre-existing genetic susceptibility, predisposing the patient to a secondary malignancy.

Adjuvant chemotherapy, hormonal therapy and radiation therapy have been shown to be effective in reducing cancer recurrence and death in women with early-stage breast cancer (1). However, as patients with breast cancer receive intensive treatment and survive longer, the risk of therapy-induced secondary malignancies is more than a clinical problem (2, 3). Specific risk factors cited include use of multiple alkylating agents and their cumulative dose, duration of treatment, use of combinations of radiotherapy and chemotherapy (4). Besides chemo- and radiotherapy, tamoxifen is being increasingly blamed for increasing the incidence of new primary tumors (5).

We present the case of a female patient who developed thymic cancer following successful treatment of breast cancer with adjuvant chemo- and radiotherapy and who was currently receiving adjuvant tamoxifen therapy, and discuss the possible mechanisms underlying the development of secondary thymic cancer in breast cancer patients. It is a known fact that thymoma is associated with an increased risk of second malignancy (6), but to our knowledge this is the first published case of thymic cancer following the treatment of breast cancer.

*Case report.* A 51-year-old premenopausal woman who underwent right modified radical mastectomy due to breast cancer in September 1999 was referred to our department in the post-operative period. The histopathological diagnosis was invasive lobular carcinoma. The patient had stage IIIA (T3N1M0) disease but there was no evidence of metastatic disease. She received six cycles of adjuvant cyclophosphamide (500 mg/m<sup>2</sup> i.v. day 1), doxorubicin (50 mg/m<sup>2</sup> i.v. day 1), 5-fluorouracil (500 mg/m<sup>2</sup> i.v. day 1) combination chemotherapy (CAF) regimen and received radiotherapy after the third cycle of the CAF regimen (chest wall 2 Gy/day, total 46 Gy, and internal mammary chain 50 Gy). Adjuvant tamoxifen 10 mg twice daily was started in November 2001, as the patient's tumor was shown to be progesterone receptor positive, although estrogen receptor negative. In routine follow-ups, a widening of the upper mediastinum was detected on a chest x-ray in the 8th month of tamoxifen treatment. Computed tomography of the thorax revealed multinodular goiter with retrosternal extension

and a retrosternal lobulated mass, 3 × 2 cm in diameter. Laboratory examinations including complete blood count, electrolyte count, liver function tests, thyroid function tests, tumor markers and bone scintigraphy were all within normal ranges. The patient complained of mild shortness of breath probably caused by multinodular goiter. She underwent left near total, right subtotal thyroidectomy and mediastinal tumor excision in September 2002. The pathology was consistent with nodular hyperplastic thyroid and well-differentiated thymic carcinoma according to the Müller-Hermelink classification (7) with capsular and vascular invasion (WHO Grade B 3). The thymic region was not treated with radiotherapy as the patient had already received the maximum dose of radiation to this area.

*Discussion.* Adjuvant chemotherapy, hormonal therapy and radiotherapy, and a combination of these modalities are being administered to a growing proportion of breast cancer patients. In view of the proven therapeutic benefit of these treatments and the prolonged life expectancy of those treated, it has been important to evaluate the carcinogenic potential of adjuvant treatment (8). There is evidence that second primary malignancies may be associated with potentially carcinogenic treatment of the initial cancer, such as radiation therapy or chemotherapy (9). A combination of radiotherapy and chemotherapy may further increase the risk of these cancers.

In any discussion of treatment-related second malignancies, it is of important to remember that not all second cancers are due to previous therapies. The occurrence of second primary malignancies may be a chance occurrence, and may result from host susceptibility factors such as genetic predisposition or immune deficiency, or may be linked to common carcinogenic influences, e.g. environmental factors or a clustering of different risk factors in the same individual.

In relation to the general population, women with breast cancer have a significant, excess incidence for some cancers. However, thymoma is not included among them. In our case, the association between thymoma and breast cancer can be fully or partly explained by a common etiology such as genetic predisposition and hormonal risk factors. Sex hormones strongly influence the development of thymus tumors in spontaneous thymoma BUF/Mna rats through their receptor within the tumor cells (10, 11). Thymic epithelial cells have cytoplasmic estrogen receptors and estrogen regulates a normal cellular differentiation process indirectly via its receptor in the thymus (12). Estrogens depress thymosin release from the thymus, leading to involution of the thymus. So, in

contrast to breast cancer, estrogen is a negative risk factor for thymoma development. Thymoma and breast cancer apparently cannot be linked to the same risk factors.

Decreasing levels of estrogen may facilitate thymosin release and then increase the size of the thymus (13). Once thymomagenesis is induced, the tumor cells lose their sensitivity to estrogen as neoplastic changes start in the thymic epithelial cells with the impairment of estrogen-receptor function (because of decreased estrogen receptors), resulting in automatic differentiation and/or proliferation. It has been demonstrated that some phenotypic changes in thymic epithelial cells are important in the development of thymomas. In particular, the enhanced expression of epidermal growth factor (EGF) and thymosins may play an important role in the proliferation of epithelial cells and lymphocytes, respectively (14). The regulation of EGF receptor by estrogen in rat uterus has been reported (15). As tamoxifen results in a decrease in the availability of estrogen, in our case this could have led to the increase in thymus size, owing to increased thymosin release. This could have resulted in some phenotypic changes in thymic epithelial cells, leading to the development of thymoma. Thus, thymoma development may be due to the anti-estrogenic effect of tamoxifen.

Tamoxifen increases the incidence of endometrial cancer. The joint analyses of Scandinavian tamoxifen trials showed an increased risk of colorectal and stomach cancer after tamoxifen use (5). To date, no increased risk of thymoma in tamoxifen-treated patients has been demonstrated. However, thymoma is a rare disease and existing studies have not had sufficient power to exclude a risk increase.

Another risk factor in this case is radiotherapy. In animal studies, SCID mice have been reported to be radiation sensitive (16) and prone to developing thymic tumors as a result of low-level ionizing radiation (17). However, these tumors are lymphomas, and not of epithelial origin. No association between radiation and thymoma has been demonstrated in humans, but there is insufficient data to rule out radiation as the etiological factor in the development of thymoma. Radiotherapy, possibly combined with chemotherapy, may be a contributor to the excess risk of thymoma.

In conclusion, thymoma secondary to breast cancer may be related to the anti-estrogenic effects of tamoxifen and possibly to the mutagenic effects of radiation on the epithelial cells of the thymus. A chance association is also possible, but the combination lends further support to the suggestion that thymic malignant lesions be added to the list of diseases already accepted as being associated with breast cancer and tamoxifen. However, unless similar reports appear in the literature, this association will remain as a postulation.

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