

World Journal of *Clinical Cases*

World J Clin Cases 2024 January 6; 12(1): 1-235



Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 12 Number 1 January 6, 2024

OPINION REVIEW

- 1 Gut-targeted therapies for type 2 diabetes mellitus: A review
Xu TC, Liu Y, Yu Z, Xu B

MINIREVIEWS

- 9 Honeymoon phase in type 1 diabetes mellitus: A window of opportunity for diabetes reversal?
Mittal M, Porchezian P, Kapoor N

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Retrospective Cohort Study

- 15 Evaluating combined bevacizumab and XELOX in advanced colorectal cancer: Serum markers carcinoembryonic antigen, carbohydrate antigen 125, carbohydrate antigen 199 analysis
Zhou DB, Cheng J, Zhang XH
- 24 Clinical value of precise rehabilitation nursing in management of cerebral infarction
Xu YN, Wang XZ, Zhang XR

Retrospective Study

- 32 Marker Ki-67 is a potential biomarker for the diagnosis and prognosis of prostate cancer based on two cohorts
Song Z, Zhou Q, Zhang JL, Ouyang J, Zhang ZY
- 42 Natural history of asymptomatic gallbladder stones in clinic without beds: A long-term prognosis over 10 years
Sakai Y, Tsuyuguchi T, Ohyama H, Kumagai J, Kaiho T, Ohtsuka M, Kato N, Sakai T
- 51 Clinical nursing value of predictive nursing in reducing complications of pregnant women undergoing short-term massive blood transfusion during cesarean section
Cheng L, Li LP, Zhang YY, Deng F, Lan TT
- 59 Effect of cardiac rehabilitation care after coronary intervention on cardiac function recovery and negative mood in patients with myocardial infarction
Yang M, Huang YT, Hu XW, Wu CL
- 68 Efficacy and safety of Nafamostat mesylate in patients with end-stage renal failure
Liu K, Li ZH
- 76 Nursing effect of narrative nursing intervention on postoperative patients with severe lung cancer
Wen B, Liu Y, Min XX, Wang AQ

Observational Study

- 86 Interaction between adolescent sleep rhythms and gender in an obese population
Wu NN, Yan GL, Zhang HY, Sun L, Hou M, Xu GM

SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

- 95 Endoscopic submucosal dissection *vs* transanal endoscopic surgery for rectal tumors: A systematic review and meta-analysis
Huang LW, Zhong Y
- 107 Impact of frailty on outcomes of elderly patients undergoing percutaneous coronary intervention: A systematic review and meta-analysis
Wang SS, Liu WH
- 119 Nasogastric tube syndrome: A Meta-summary of case reports
Juneja D, Nasa P, Chanchalani G, Jain R

CASE REPORT

- 130 Erythrodermic mycosis fungoides: A case report
Xu WB, Zhang YP, Zhou SP, Bai HY
- 136 Azacitidine maintenance therapy for blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm allograft: A case report
Tao LL, Wen HT, Wang ZY, Cheng J, Zhao L
- 142 Congestive ischemic colitis successfully treated with anti-inflammatory therapy: A case report
Lee GW, Park SB
- 148 Subarachnoid hemorrhage misdiagnosed as acute coronary syndrome leading to catastrophic neurologic injury: A case report
Lin JM, Yuan XJ, Li G, Gan XR, Xu WH
- 157 Successful management of severe hypoglycemia induced by total parenteral nutrition in patients with hepatocellular injury: Three cases reports
Fang LZ, Jin HX, Zhao N, Wu YP, Shi YQ
- 163 Endophthalmitis in silicone oil-filled eye: A case report
Yan HC, Wang ZL, Yu WZ, Zhao MW, Liang JH, Yin H, Shi X, Miao H
- 169 Lung imaging characteristics in a patient infected with *Elizabethkingia miricola* following cerebral hemorrhage surgery: A case report
Qi PQ, Zeng YJ, Peng W, Kuai J
- 176 Gastric IgG4-related disease mimicking a gastrointestinal stromal tumor in a child: A case report
Lin HCA, Lee KF, Huang TH
- 180 Labial inverse dilaceration of bilateral maxillary central incisors: A case report
Wang JM, Guo LF, Ma LQ, Zhang J

- 188 Changes in macrophage infiltration and podocyte injury in lupus nephritis patients with repeated renal biopsy: Report of three cases
Liu SY, Chen H, He LJ, Huang CK, Wang P, Rui ZR, Wu J, Yuan Y, Zhang Y, Wang WJ, Wang XD
- 196 Primary acinic cell carcinoma of the breast: A case report and review of literature
Ding JS, Zhang M, Zhou FF
- 204 Acupuncture for cervical dystonia associated with anxiety and depression: A case report
Zhang YT, Zhang JJ, Zha BX, Fan YQ, Xu YB, Yang J, Zhang QP
- 210 Intestinal malrotation complicated with gastric cancer: A case report
Jia XH, Kong S, Gao XX, Cong BC, Zheng CN
- 217 Addison's disease caused by adrenal tuberculosis may lead to misdiagnosis of major depressive disorder: A case report
Zhang TX, Xu HY, Ma W, Zheng JB
- 224 Pleural empyema with endobronchial mass due to *Rhodococcus equi* infection after renal transplantation: A case report and review of literature
Liang GF, Chao S, Sun Z, Zhu KJ, Chen Q, Jia L, Niu YL

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

- 232 Chronic venous insufficiency, could it be one of the missing pieces in the puzzle of treating pain?
Chang MC

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The primary aim of *World Journal of Clinical Cases* (WJCC, *World J Clin Cases*) is to provide scholars and readers from various fields of clinical medicine with a platform to publish high-quality clinical research articles and communicate their research findings online.

WJCC mainly publishes articles reporting research results and findings obtained in the field of clinical medicine and covering a wide range of topics, including case control studies, retrospective cohort studies, retrospective studies, clinical trials studies, observational studies, prospective studies, randomized controlled trials, randomized clinical trials, systematic reviews, meta-analysis, and case reports.

INDEXING/ABSTRACTING

The WJCC is now abstracted and indexed in Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE, also known as SciSearch®), Journal Citation Reports/Science Edition, Current Contents®/Clinical Medicine, PubMed, PubMed Central, Reference Citation Analysis, China Science and Technology Journal Database, and Superstar Journals Database. The 2023 Edition of Journal Citation Reports® cites the 2022 impact factor (IF) for WJCC as 1.1; IF without journal self cites: 1.1; 5-year IF: 1.3; Journal Citation Indicator: 0.26; Ranking: 133 among 167 journals in medicine, general and internal; and Quartile category: Q4.

RESPONSIBLE EDITORS FOR THIS ISSUE

Production Editor: Si Zhao; Production Department Director: Xiang Li; Editorial Office Director: Jin-Lei Wang.

NAME OF JOURNAL

World Journal of Clinical Cases

ISSN

ISSN 2307-8960 (online)

LAUNCH DATE

April 16, 2013

FREQUENCY

Thrice Monthly

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Bao-Gan Peng, Salim Surani, Jerzy Tadeusz Chudek, George Kontogeorgos, Maurizio Serati

EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/2307-8960/editorialboard.htm>

PUBLICATION DATE

January 6, 2024

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INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/204>

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICS DOCUMENTS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/287>

GUIDELINES FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/240>

PUBLICATION ETHICS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/288>

PUBLICATION MISCONDUCT

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/208>

ARTICLE PROCESSING CHARGE

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/242>

STEPS FOR SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/239>

ONLINE SUBMISSION

<https://www.f6publishing.com>



Azacitidine maintenance therapy for blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm allograft: A case report

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Specialty type: Medicine, research and experimental

Provenance and peer review: Unsolicited article; Externally peer reviewed.

Peer-review model: Single blind

Peer-review report's scientific quality classification

Grade A (Excellent): 0
Grade B (Very good): B
Grade C (Good): 0
Grade D (Fair): 0
Grade E (Poor): 0

P-Reviewer: Shalaby MN, Egypt

Received: August 25, 2023

Peer-review started: August 25, 2023

First decision: December 7, 2023

Revised: December 12, 2023

Accepted: December 19, 2023

Article in press: December 19, 2023

Published online: January 6, 2024



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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN) is a rare, highly invasive malignant neoplasm. There is no universally accepted standard of care because of its rarity and the dearth of prospective research. It is still challenging for some patients to achieve persistent clinical remission or cure, despite the success of allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (allo-HSCT), indicating that there is still a significant recurrence rate. We report a case of prevention of BPDCN allograft recurrence by azacitidine maintenance therapy and review the relevant literature.

CASE SUMMARY

We report a 41-year-old man with BPDCN who was admitted to hospital due to skin sclerosis for > 5 mo' duration. BPDCN was diagnosed by combined clinical assessment and laboratory examinations. Following diagnosis, the patients underwent induction consolidation chemotherapy to achieve the first complete remission, followed by bridging allo-HSCT. Post-transplantation, azacitidine (75 mg/m² for 7 d) was administered as maintenance therapy, with repeat administration every 4–6 wk and appropriate extension of the chemotherapy cycle. After 10 cycles, the patient has been disease free for 26 mo after transplantation. Regular assessments of bone marrow morphology, minimal residual disease, full donor chimerism, Epstein-Barr virus, and cytomegalovirus all yielded normal results with no abnormalities detected.

CONCLUSION

Azacitidine may be a safe and effective maintenance treatment for BPDCN following transplantation because there were no overt adverse events during the course of treatment.

Key Words: Blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm; Azacitidine; Allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation; Maintenance therapy; Case report

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Core Tip: Blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN) is a rare and aggressive hematological tumor with cutaneous invasion as the first clinical manifestation, as well as lymph nodes, soft tissues, peripheral blood, and bone marrow involvement. The first recommended treatment option is allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation, but there is still a high recurrence rate after transplantation. We present a case of azacitidine maintenance treatment to prevent BPDCN allograft relapse in our center.

Citation: Tao LL, Wen HT, Wang ZY, Cheng J, Zhao L. Azacitidine maintenance therapy for blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm allograft: A case report. *World J Clin Cases* 2024; 12(1): 136-141

URL: <https://www.wjgnet.com/2307-8960/full/v12/i1/136.htm>

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v12.i1.136>

INTRODUCTION

Blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm (BPDCN) is a rare hematological malignancy that develops from a precursor of plasmacytoid dendritic cells. The median age of BPDCN patients at diagnosis is 61–67 years, and the median overall survival (OS) is 12–14 mo[1,2].

Pathomorphological and immunophenotypic characteristics are the key factors used to diagnose BPDCN. The 2022 5th edition of the World Health Organization Classification of Myeloid and Histiocytic/Dendritic Neoplasms[3] places BPDCN after myeloid neoplasms, which are thought to be derived from common myeloid progenitors that give rise to monocytes/histiocytes/dendritic cells and are morphologically easily confused with other more common myeloid malignancies. The classification focuses on immunophenotypic diagnosis[3]. Our patient expressed CD4, CD56, CD123, CD303 and CD304, and none of the expected negative markers were present. Bridging allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (allo-HSCT) after the first complete remission (CR1) with induction consolidation chemotherapy is currently the best option for treating BPDCN. Patients can undergo maintenance therapy after transplantation to reduce recurrence and lengthen survival. We present a case of a patient diagnosed with BPDCN at our center who was treated with azacitidine maintenance therapy after allo-HSCT and had good outcomes.

CASE PRESENTATION

Chief complaints

In September 2020, a 41-year-old man was admitted to our hospital for skin sclerosis for > 5 mo' duration.

History of present illness

Symptoms started 2 wk before presentation with purplish subcutaneous nodules on the skin of the head, trunk and limbs.

History of past illness

The patient was previously healthy. There was no disease history in other systems.

Personal and family history

The patient denied any family history of malignant tumors.

Physical examination

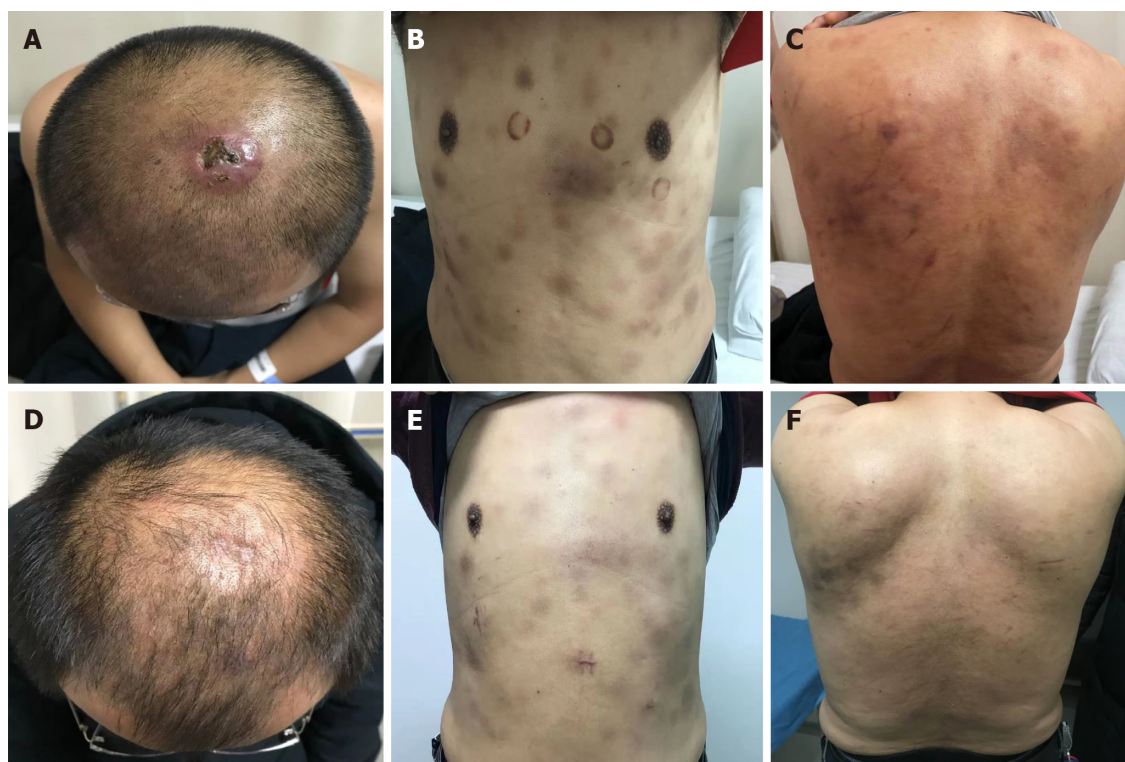
Physical examination revealed scattered cyanotic subcutaneous nodules on the skin of the head, trunk and extremities, higher than the skin surface, with clear boundaries, no tenderness and poor mobility. The head induration and ulceration formed dark purple scabs, and no abnormalities were found in the remaining physical examination (Figure 1A-C).

Laboratory examinations

No abnormality was found in routine blood and urine analyses.

Imaging examinations

Positron emission tomography-computed tomography (PET-CT) revealed a 28-mm-long thickening of the subcutaneous soft tissue behind the left scapula, as well as mild fluorodeoxyglucose uptake (maximum standard uptake value 1.26).



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Figure 1 Skin lesion characteristics in patient with blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm. A: On admission for physical examination Breakdown of subcutaneous nodules on the head; B: Abdominal skin nodule; C: Skin nodules on back; D-F: In February 2021, skin healing was induced by idarubicin combined with cytarabine (IA) regimen combined with high-dose cytarabine regimen for a total of three cycles.

Further diagnostic work-up

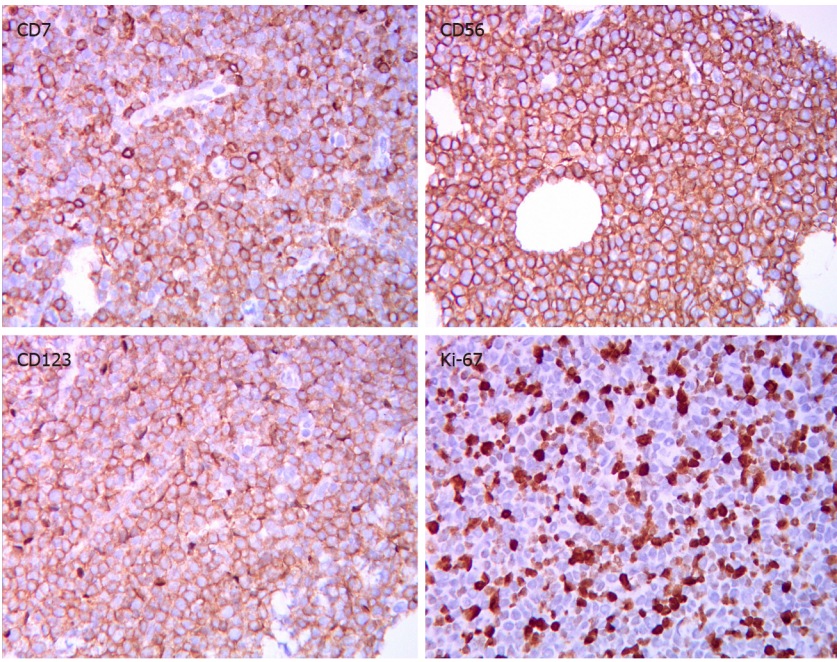
Bone marrow cytology showed active granulopoiesis megakaryocytes were visible, platelets were scattered in clusters, and the lymphocyte ratio was normal. Pathological biopsy showed malignant infiltration of hematopoietic tissue in the abdominal skin. Immunohistochemistry showed (Figure 2): CD4 (+), CD56 (+), CD123 (+), CD43 (+), CD45 (+), CD7 (+), CD99 (+), CD2 (+/-, poor signal localization), CD5 (-), CD20 (-), CD30 (-), CD34 (-), CD117 (-), CD138 (-), myeloperoxidase (-), terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase (less +), TIA-1 (-), Ki-67 (+, 80%-90%). We considered the diagnosis of BPDCN. Flow cytometry of bone marrow cells revealed that 0.49% of cells (occupying nuclei) expressed CD123, Human leukocyte antigen (HLA)-DR (a subtype of Major histocompatibility complex class II), CD56, CD123, CD303, CD304, CD4, and CD7dim, but not CD34, CD117, CD33, CD13, CD11b, CD14, CD64, CD5, CD3, CD4, CD8, or CD2. Epstein-Barr encoding region *in situ* hybridization was negative, as was TCR gene rearrangement. Karyotype: 46, XY[20]. Bone marrow biopsy revealed a small amount of juvenile cell hyperplasia.

FINAL DIAGNOSIS

Given the immunohistochemistry results and clinical history, bone marrow infiltration of BPDCN was considered.

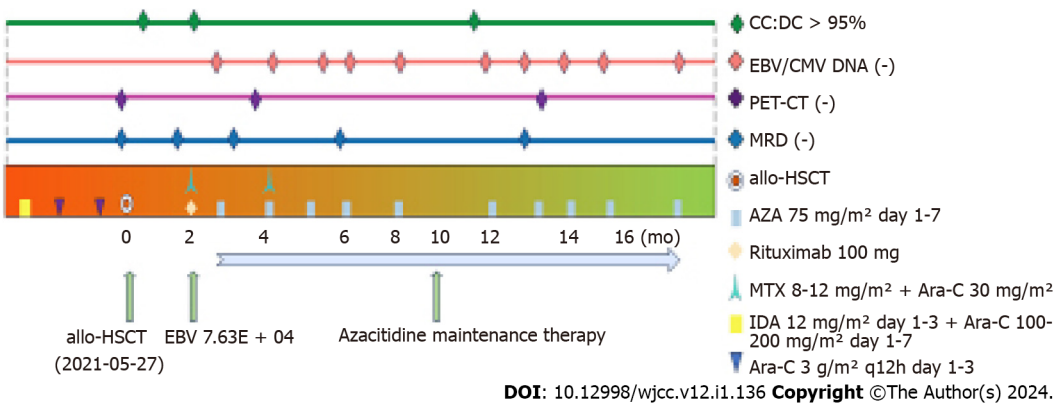
TREATMENT

The treatment was as follows (Figure 3). From February 2021, he was given three cycles of induction chemotherapy with the idarubicin/cytarabine regimen and the high-dose cytarabine regimen, the patient's damaged skin healed (Figure 1). In April 2021, review of minimal residual disease (MRD) results less than 10^{-4} ; PET-CT showed that uptake was not abnormally high on systemic imaging. In May 2021, allo-HSCT was performed. The donor's son had an HLA compatibility of 6/12. Pretreatment scheme: Cotysine arabinoside + busulfan/cyclophosphamide + anti-thymocyte globulin; Neutrophil engraftment appeared at day + 12 post-transplantation, and platelet engraftment showed up at + 15. Review of the quantitative results of Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) DNA in July 2021: 7.63×10^4 . EBV results turned negative after a single dose of rituximab 100 mg. In September 2021, azacitidine (75 mg/m² for 7 d) maintenance treatment was administered, which was repeated every 4-6 wk, and the chemotherapy cycle was appropriately extended.



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Figure 2 Abdominal skin tumor cells diffusely positive for CD7, CD56, CD23, Ki-67 (hematoxylin and eosin, 400 ×).



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Figure 3 The treatment process and efficacy evaluation of patient with blastic plasmacytoid dendritic cell neoplasm. allo-HSCT: Allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation; AZA: Azacitidine; MTX: Methotrexate; IDA: Idarubicin; Ara-C: Cytarabine; CC: Complete donor chimerism; DC: Donor chimerism; MRD: Minimal residual disease; EBV: Epstein-Barr virus; CMV: Cytomegalovirus; PET-CT: Positron emission tomography-computed tomography.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

At 26 mo after transplantation, the patient had been treated for 10 cycles, and no serious adverse events occurred. Regular review detected MRD, bone marrow morphology, EBV, chimerism, and cytomegalovirus.

DISCUSSION

The diagnosis of BPDCN was confirmed after the pathomorphological findings were considered. BPDCN is extremely rare worldwide, and there is no standard unified treatment protocol. Local radiotherapy, systemic chemotherapy, and HSCT are common clinical treatment regimens[4]. The cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine, prednisone, hyperfractionated cyclophosphamide, vincristine, doxorubicin, and dexamethasone, acute lymphoblastic leukemia-like, acute myeloid leukemia (AML)-like, and NK/T-like regimens, among others, are commonly used chemotherapeutic regimens. Clinical trials using 5-azacitidine to treat BPDCN have also yielded positive results[5]. However, the number of cases so treated was small, and the long-term therapeutic effect requires confirmation in large clinical trials. Some cases of BPDCN can be transformed into AML or may coexist with myelodysplastic syndromes. *TET2* gene mutations associated with DNA methylation have been identified in BPDCN patients. The demethylating agent azacitidine has been approved for the treatment of moderate to high-risk myelodysplastic syndromes and AML. Given that BPDCN is also a myeloid

malignancy, azacitidine may be used for its treatment as well. Pagano *et al*[6] assessed the efficacy in 43 patients of various chemotherapeutic regimens, concluding that ALL-like regimens were superior to AML-like regimens. The first CD123-targeted drug, tagraxofusp (SL-401), was approved in 2018 for patients aged ≥ 2 years with BPDCN. SL-401, a recombinant fusion protein that directly targets the interleukin 3 receptor on the surface of BPDCN cells, has shown moderate efficacy in this disease, but the number of cases is limited, and more convincing prospective randomized controlled trials are needed to validate this finding[7,8]. Bridging allo-HSCT after CR1 with induction consolidation chemotherapy is currently the best option for treating AML and BPDCN[9,10]. By analyzing 15 patients with BPDCN who received allo-HSCT and underwent marrow clearance, Lu *et al*[9] found an OS rate of $73.3\% \pm 10.5\%$. However, the risk of relapse after transplantation remains high, with 40%–70% of AML patients relapsing within the first year of treatment, and the 1-year OS rate for relapsed patients is only 23%[11,12]. Patients who receive maintenance therapy after transplantation may experience fewer relapses and live longer.

Azacitidine has been recognized as one of the best agents for post-transplant maintenance therapy in AML patients, but there is still disagreement about when to begin maintenance therapy after transplantation, the duration of therapy, the optimal maintenance dose, and whether a combination of drugs is needed[13,14]. Azacitidine administration soon after transplantation was found to improve the graft-versus-leukemia (GVL) effect by increasing CD8+ T-cell responses induced by epigenetic-silencing-related oncogenes. Azacitidine increased the GVL effect but not the incidence of graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), which may be related to the increase in T regulatory cell numbers[15]. It also has no effect on neutrophil implantation, and similar immunomodulatory effects of another methylating drug, decitabine, have not been reported[13,16,17]. There have been cases of exploratory use of azacitidine or decitabine in the maintenance treatment of AML or myelodysplastic syndrome in China and elsewhere[16], with good efficacy, but the azacitidine dose is typically 32 mg/m² for 5 d. Azacitidine has less cytotoxicity and milder myelosuppressive effects than decitabine. Azacitidine is better tolerated by patients as a post-transplant maintenance therapy for AML (32/36 mg/m², 5 d) and significantly prolongs OS and disease-free interval (DFS), according to phase 1 and 2 clinical studies[18,19]. Lou *et al*[15] assessed the efficacy of azacitidine (75 mg/m², 7 d) maintenance therapy in 30 AML transplant patients. They treated 10 patients who were positive for MRD prior to azacitidine treatment, and nine of the 10 MRD-positive patients, including all seven flow MRD-positive patients and two of three molecular MRD-positive patients, became negative after treatment. The median OS of the 30 patients was 33.7 ± 1.8 mo, with a 3-year OS rate of $83.2\% \pm 9.9\%$ and a 3-year DFS rate of $81.3\% \pm 9.4\%$. By the end of the study, four (13.33%) patients had relapsed, for a 3-year cumulative relapse rate of $18.7\% \pm 9.4\%$. A total of 23.33% (7/30) of the treated patients had grade III/IV myelosuppression. Two patients had varying degrees of cutaneous chronic GVHD reduction, one patient had hepatic GVHD exacerbation, and no patient had new-onset GVHD. The use of azacitidine (75 mg/m², 7 d) in maintenance therapy after allo-HSCT in AML patients reduces the relapse rate, improves OS, and is safe and well tolerated without increasing the incidence of GVHD. Patients require continuous treatment for maximum benefit because the recommended duration of azacitidine in phase 2 studies is up to 12 mo[19].

CONCLUSION

Our patient's age at onset was 41 years, with skin and bone marrow involvement, and there were no significant adverse effects during treatment, indicating that azacitidine is safe and effective as post-transplant maintenance therapy in patients with BPDCN, but these results need to be confirmed in larger-sample prospective clinical trials.

FOOTNOTES

Author contributions: Tao LL designed the study and wrote the manuscript; Wen HT and Wang ZY collected and analyzed the data; Tao LL and Cheng J prepared figures; Cheng J and Zhao L was in charge of patient treatment and designed the paper; All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Informed consent statement: Informed written consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this report and any accompanying images.

Conflict-of-interest statement: All the authors report no relevant conflicts of interest for this article.

CARE Checklist (2016) statement: The authors have read CARE Checklist (2016), and the manuscript was prepared and revised according to CARE Checklist (2016).

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S-Editor: Li L

L-Editor: A

P-Editor: Li L

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