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Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 34 December 6, 2021

OPINION REVIEW

- 10392** Regulating monocyte infiltration and differentiation: Providing new therapies for colorectal cancer patients with COVID-19

Bai L, Yang W, Qian L, Cui JW

REVIEW

- 10400** Role of circular RNAs in gastrointestinal tumors and drug resistance

Xi SJ, Cai WQ, Wang QQ, Peng XC

MINIREVIEWS

- 10418** Liver injury associated with acute pancreatitis: The current status of clinical evaluation and involved mechanisms

Liu W, Du JJ, Li ZH, Zhang XY, Zuo HD

- 10430** Association between celiac disease and vitiligo: A review of the literature

Zhang JZ, Abudoureyimu D, Wang M, Yu SR, Kang XJ

- 10438** Role of immune escape in different digestive tumours

Du XZ, Wen B, Liu L, Wei YT, Zhao K

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Basic Study

- 10451** Magnolol protects against acute gastrointestinal injury in sepsis by down-regulating regulated on activation, normal T-cell expressed and secreted

Mao SH, Feng DD, Wang X, Zhi YH, Lei S, Xing X, Jiang RL, Wu JN

Case Control Study

- 10464** Effect of Nephritis Rehabilitation Tablets combined with tacrolimus in treatment of idiopathic membranous nephropathy

Ly W, Wang MR, Zhang CZ, Sun XX, Yan ZZ, Hu XM, Wang TT

Retrospective Cohort Study

- 10472** Lamb's tripe extract and vitamin B₁₂ capsule plus celecoxib reverses intestinal metaplasia and atrophy: A retrospective cohort study

Wu SR, Liu J, Zhang LF, Wang N, Zhang LY, Wu Q, Liu JY, Shi YQ

- 10484** Clinical features and survival of patients with multiple primary malignancies

Wang XK, Zhou MH

Retrospective Study

- 10494** Thoracoscopic segmentectomy and lobectomy assisted by three-dimensional computed-tomography bronchography and angiography for the treatment of primary lung cancer
Wu YJ, Shi QT, Zhang Y, Wang YL
- 10507** Endoscopic ultrasound fine needle aspiration *vs* fine needle biopsy in solid lesions: A multi-center analysis
Moura DTH, McCarty TR, Jirapinyo P, Ribeiro IB, Farias GFA, Madruga-Neto AC, Ryou M, Thompson CC
- 10518** Resection of bilateral occipital lobe lesions during a single operation as a treatment for bilateral occipital lobe epilepsy
Lyu YE, Xu XF, Dai S, Feng M, Shen SP, Zhang GZ, Ju HY, Wang Y, Dong XB, Xu B
- 10530** Improving rehabilitation and quality of life after percutaneous transhepatic cholangiography drainage with a rapid rehabilitation model
Xia LL, Su T, Li Y, Mao JF, Zhang QH, Liu YY
- 10540** Combined lumbar muscle block and perioperative comprehensive patient-controlled intravenous analgesia with butorphanol in gynecological endoscopic surgery
Zhu RY, Xiang SQ, Chen DR
- 10549** Teicoplanin combined with conventional vancomycin therapy for the treatment of pulmonary methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Staphylococcus epidermidis* infections
Wu W, Liu M, Geng JJ, Wang M
- 10557** Application of narrative nursing in the families of children with biliary atresia: A retrospective study
Zhang LH, Meng HY, Wang R, Zhang YC, Sun J

Observational Study

- 10566** Comparative study for predictability of type 1 gastric variceal rebleeding after endoscopic variceal ligation: High-frequency intraluminal ultrasound study
Kim JH, Choe WH, Lee SY, Kwon SY, Sung IK, Park HS
- 10576** Effects of WeChat platform-based health management on health and self-management effectiveness of patients with severe chronic heart failure
Wang ZR, Zhou JW, Liu XP, Cai GJ, Zhang QH, Mao JF
- 10585** Early cardiopulmonary resuscitation on serum levels of myeloperoxidase, soluble ST2, and hypersensitive C-reactive protein in acute myocardial infarction patients
Hou M, Ren YP, Wang R, Lu LX

Prospective Study

- 10595** Remimazolam benzenesulfonate anesthesia effectiveness in cardiac surgery patients under general anesthesia
Tang F, Yi JM, Gong HY, Lu ZY, Chen J, Fang B, Chen C, Liu ZY

Randomized Clinical Trial

- 10604** Effects of lower body positive pressure treadmill on functional improvement in knee osteoarthritis: A randomized clinical trial study
Chen HX, Zhan YX, Ou HN, You YY, Li WY, Jiang SS, Zheng MF, Zhang LZ, Chen K, Chen QX

SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

- 10616** Effects of hypoxia on bone metabolism and anemia in patients with chronic kidney disease
Kan C, Lu X, Zhang R

META-ANALYSIS

- 10626** Intracuff alkalinized lidocaine to prevent postoperative airway complications: A meta-analysis
Chen ZX, Shi Z, Wang B, Zhang Y

CASE REPORT

- 10638** Rarely fast progressive memory loss diagnosed as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease: A case report
Xu YW, Wang JQ, Zhang W, Xu SC, Li YX
- 10645** Diagnosis, fetal risk and treatment of pemphigoid gestationis in pregnancy: A case report
Jiao HN, Ruan YP, Liu Y, Pan M, Zhong HP
- 10652** Histology transformation-mediated pathological atypism in small-cell lung cancer within the presence of chemotherapy: A case report
Ju Q, Wu YT, Zhang Y, Yang WH, Zhao CL, Zhang J
- 10659** Reversible congestive heart failure associated with hypocalcemia: A case report
Wang C, Dou LW, Wang TB, Guo Y
- 10666** Excimer laser coronary atherectomy for a severe calcified coronary ostium lesion: A case report
Hou FJ, Ma XT, Zhou YJ, Guan J
- 10671** Comprehensive management of malocclusion in maxillary fibrous dysplasia: A case report
Kaur H, Mohanty S, Kochhar GK, Iqbal S, Verma A, Bhasin R, Kochhar AS
- 10681** Intravascular papillary endothelial hyperplasia as a rare cause of cervicothoracic spinal cord compression: A case report
Gu HL, Zheng XQ, Zhan SQ, Chang YB
- 10689** Proximal true lumen collapse in a chronic type B aortic dissection patient: A case report
Zhang L, Guan WK, Wu HP, Li X, Lv KP, Zeng CL, Song HH, Ye QL
- 10696** Tigecycline sclerotherapy for recurrent pseudotumor in aseptic lymphocyte-dominant vasculitis-associated lesion after metal-on-metal total hip arthroplasty: A case report
Lin IH, Tsai CH

- 10702** Acute myocardial infarction induced by eosinophilic granulomatosis with polyangiitis: A case report
Jiang XD, Guo S, Zhang WM
- 10708** Aggressive natural killer cell leukemia with skin manifestation associated with hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis: A case report
Peng XH, Zhang LS, Li LJ, Guo XJ, Liu Y
- 10715** Chronic lymphocytic leukemia/small lymphocytic lymphoma complicated with skin Langerhans cell sarcoma: A case report
Li SY, Wang Y, Wang LH
- 10723** Severe mediastinitis and pericarditis after endobronchial ultrasound-guided transbronchial needle aspiration: A case report
Koh JS, Kim YJ, Kang DH, Lee JE, Lee SI
- 10728** Obturator hernia - a rare etiology of lateral thigh pain: A case report
Kim JY, Chang MC
- 10733** Tracheal tube misplacement in the thoracic cavity: A case report
Li KX, Luo YT, Zhou L, Huang JP, Liang P
- 10738** Peri-implant keratinized gingiva augmentation using xenogeneic collagen matrix and platelet-rich fibrin: A case report
Han CY, Wang DZ, Bai JF, Zhao LL, Song WZ

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Histology transformation-mediated pathological atypism in small-cell lung cancer within the presence of chemotherapy: A case report

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

The treatment of small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) has progressed little in recent years because of its unique biological activities and complex genomic alterations. Chemotherapy combined with radiotherapy has been widely accepted as the first-line treatment for SCLC.

CASE SUMMARY

Here, we present a 68-year-old male smoker who was diagnosed with SCLC of the right lung. After several cycles of concurrent chemoradiotherapy, the tumor progressed with broad metastasis to liver and bone. Histopathological examination showed an obvious transformation to adenocarcinoma, probably a partial recurrence mediated by the chemotherapy-based regimen. A mixed tumor as the primary lesion and transformation from SCLC or/and tumor stem cells may have accounted for the pathology conversion. We adjusted the treatment schedule in accord with the change in phenotype.

CONCLUSION

Although diffuse skeletal and hepatic metastases were seen on a recent computed tomography scan, the patient is alive, with intervals of progression and shrinkage of his cancer.

Key Words: Small-cell lung cancer; Adenocarcinoma; Transformation; Chemotherapy; Case report

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Core Tip: In this report, we present a male patient with a diagnosis of small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) who developed metastatic adenocarcinoma, a subtype of non-SCLC, after standard chemotherapy regimens. He has survived for 90 mo since the first diagnosis, which is longer than expected.

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INTRODUCTION

Small-cell lung cancer (SCLC) is a subtype of lung cancer because of its histology and morphology, and it accounts for 15%-20% of newly diagnosed cases worldwide every year[1]. Owing to its rapid growth and progression, it is often diagnosed at an advanced stage by histopathological examination, indicating a life expectancy of less than 1 year. As for treatment, there is a consensus that normative chemotherapy and appropriate-dose radiotherapy lead to high response rate in a clinical pathology selection-dependent manner that is recommended by American Society of Clinical Oncology[2,3]. It should be noted that targeted therapy and immunotherapy, which are likely to be effective in the treatment of non-SCLC (NSCLC)[4], are not recommended for SCLC because of the absence of mutation-driven evolution and its characteristic histological and molecular features[5]. However, histological transformation is likely to change the treatment strategy, facilitating appropriate and rational decisions in SCLC management. Here we present a male patient with an initial diagnosis of SCLC who developed metastatic adenocarcinoma, a subtype of NSCLC, after standard chemotherapy regimens. He has survived for 76 mo since the first diagnosis, which longer than expected.

CASE PRESENTATION

Chief complaints

A 68-year-old man with a smoking history of 40 pack-years came to seek medical advice in light of cough, expectoration, and shortness of breath.

History of present illness

A contrast-enhanced computed tomography (CT) scan of the chest (which cannot be found at present) indicated a malignant tumor of the lung. Ultrasound-guided percutaneous biopsy confirmed the lesion characteristics and histopathology. At high magnification, cells in two biopsy samples of same lesion were uniform in size and arrangement, fusiform in shape with hyperchromatic nuclei (Figure 1D), and having an aggressive growth pattern. Coupled with immunohistochemistry (IHC), these results indicated a SCLC diagnosis (Figure 2). Molecular pathology was tested by amplification-refractory mutation system (ARMS)-PCR, which indicated an absence of sensitive mutation (Supplementary Figure 1A). According to the American Society of Clinical Oncology Endorsement of the American College of Chest physicians guidelines, the patient was treated with concurrent chemoradiotherapy consisting of six cycles of etoposide and carboplatin with thoracic radiotherapy Dt45Gy/30F twice per day. After treat, his clinical symptoms improved and the lesion in the right lower lobe shrank dramatically on CT scanning (Figure 1A).

History of past illness

The patient suffered from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, hypertension, and diabetes for at least 10 years. As they were not thought to be associated with the progression of lung cancer, we did not include a detailed description in this article.

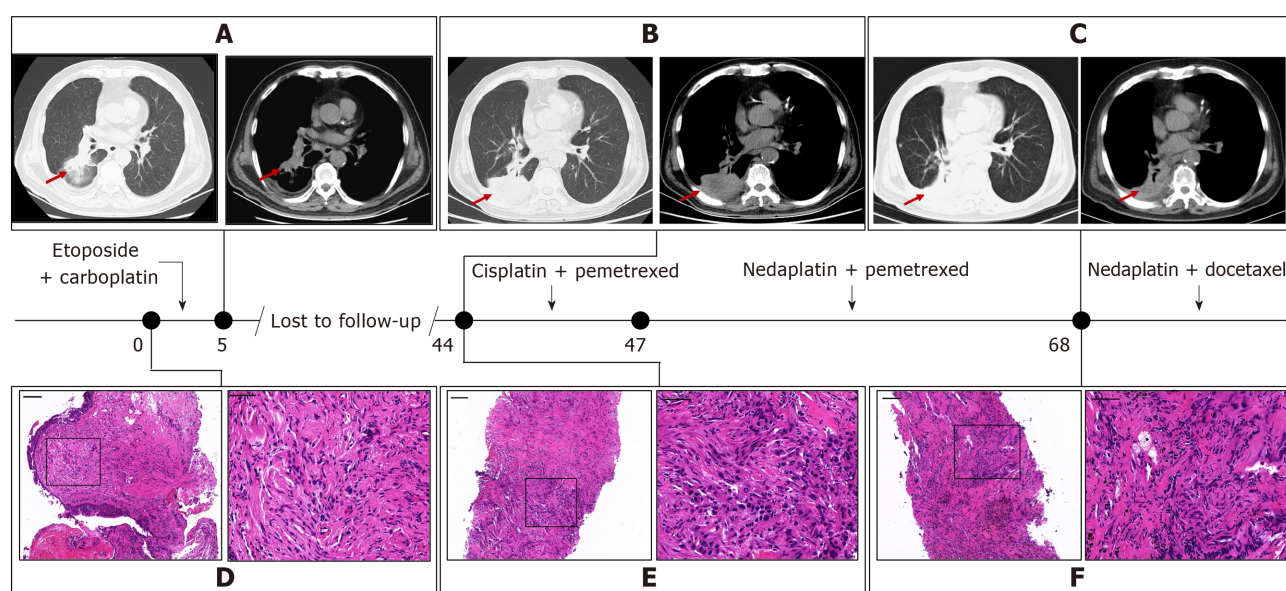


Figure 1 Clinical history of the histological transformation from small-cell lung cancer to adenocarcinoma in this patient. A-C: Computed tomography changes of the right lesion in different months with the indicated chemotherapy. D-F: Hematoxylin-eosin staining of bronchoscopy needle aspiration biopsy shows different characteristics and histopathology in corresponding weeks. Magnifications are $\times 10$ (left) and $\times 40$ (right) with 100 μm and 50 μm scale bars.

Laboratory examinations

The presence of bilateral pulmonary interstitial hyperplasia and inhomogeneous emphysema were consistent with tumor progression and deterioration of the patient's condition. Ultrasound-guided percutaneous biopsies were performed to determine the reason why the standard SCLC treatment did not have a curative effect. The tumor cells were ovoid with hyperchromatic nuclei and arranged in strips or nests (Figure 1E). Immunohistochemistry (IHC) indicated poorly differentiated adenocarcinoma owing to the presence of some specific pathological markers (Figure 2). What needed more attention was that several SCLC markers, such as thyroid transcription factor (TTF)-1, cytokeratin (CK)5/6, and P40, were expressed only in individual cells, and Ki-67-positive cells accounted for more than 25%, indicating rapid growth and proliferation of tumor cells. Genetic analysis found that the patient had no epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) mutation or anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) rearrangement (D5F3 Ventana IHC). However, repeated molecular pathology showed that after standard chemotherapy, the patient bore a *KRAS* mutation (Supplementary Figure 1B), which corresponded with the histology findings. Four cycles of cisplatin and pemetrexed achieved a decrease in the size of the lesion in the right lower lung, which further supported the diagnosis of adenocarcinoma.

Imaging examinations

With the remission of clinical symptoms, the patient failed to continue regular follow-up and periodic imaging. It was beyond our expectation that the patient suffered thoracalgia in the lower right chest 3 years after the last CT examination. A CT examination of his chest indicated growth and consolidation of the lesion in the lower right lung, with scattered nodules, and right inferior lobe insufficiency compared with a CT obtained 3 years previously. (Figure 1B).

FINAL DIAGNOSIS

Advanced lung cancer.

TREATMENT

After the patient stopped treatment, he experienced persistent dull pain in the right hypochondriac region and back with no noticeable improvement after odynolysis. Follow-up imaging revealed that the parietal pleura were eroded by invasive

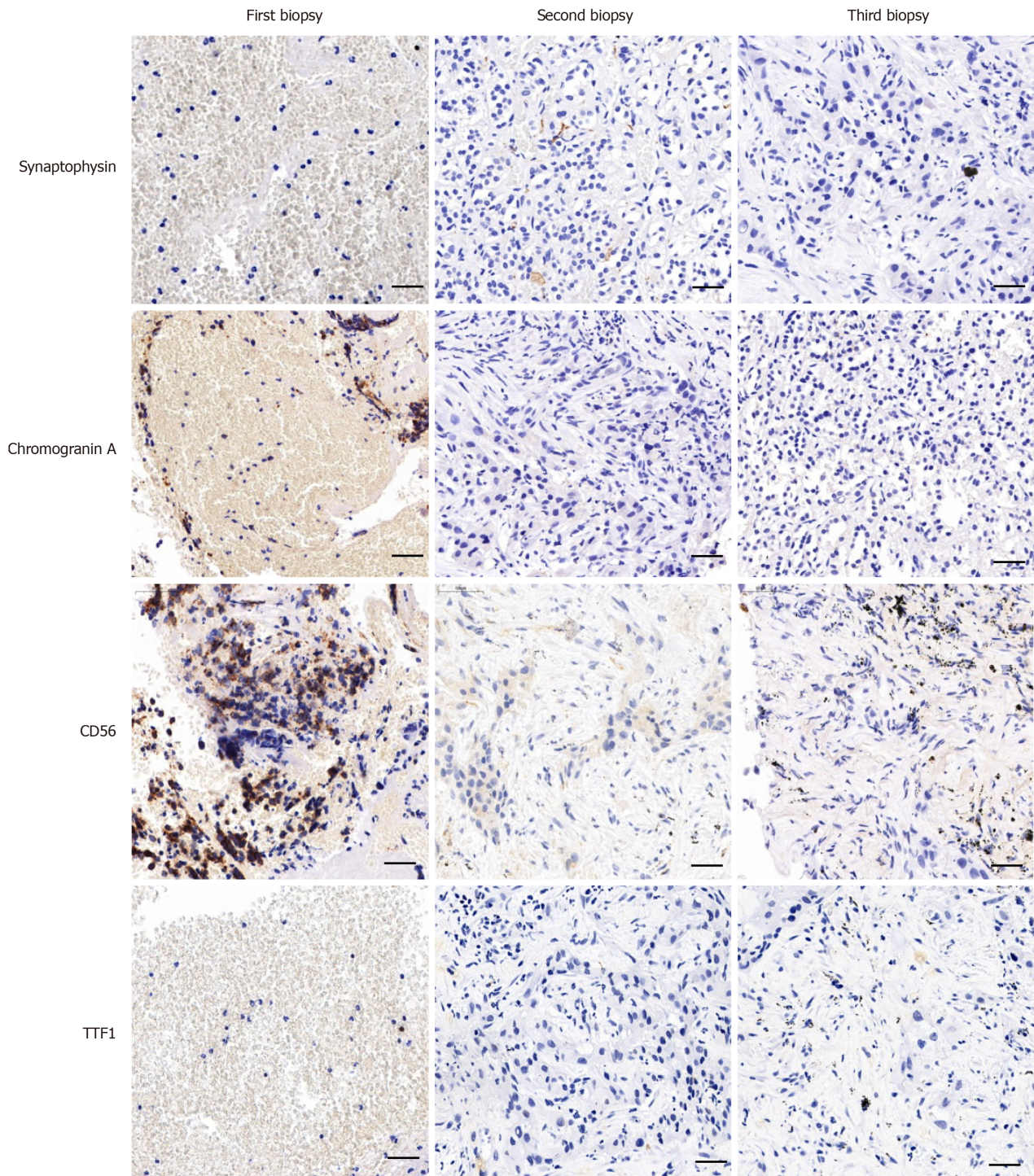


Figure 2 Immunohistochemical staining of three biopsies. Several typical biomarkers of small-cell lung cancer were examined repeatedly at different stages. Synaptophysin, chromogranin A, CD56 and TTF1 indicate histological transformation. Magnifications are $\times 40$; The scale bar is 50 μm .

malignant cells, and that there was a strong possibility that tumor cells had invaded bone, brain, liver, and local and distant lymph nodes. According to the patient's condition and his tolerance of chemotherapeutic drugs, nedaplatin plus pemetrexed, together with intermittent local radiation, were seen as the best treatment choice. After several cycles, the clinical manifestations were improved. However, after a 4 mo interval, CT revealed that the solid pulmonary nodules in the right lung had enlarged, pleural effusion had emerged in the right thoracic cavity, and a nodule embedded in upper lobe of the left lung had progressed, all of which indicated tumor progression (Figure 1C). A third ultrasound-guided biopsy of the same nodules in the right lung found large cells with hyperchromatic nuclei arranged as in an adenoma, and with aggressive characteristics (Figure 1F). IHC staining and molecular examination supported the previous diagnosis of adenocarcinoma of the lung (Figure 2 and

Supplementary Figure 1C). Combination treatment with nedaplatin and pemetrexed were continued for two cycles, until the patient reported the appearance of blood in the phlegm.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

Subsequently, pemetrexed was substituted for docetaxel in previous therapeutic schedule in several cycles to now. At this time, the patient is alive 76 mo after the definitive diagnosis.

DISCUSSION

It is well known that SCLC accounts for a small proportion of newly diagnosed lung cancer worldwide every year. The incidence is the highest in male and female smokers, and SCLC has a high mortality less than 1 year after diagnosis[1]. On the basis of the location of the lesion and distant metastasis, SCLCs are generally staged as limited and extensive disease, which have different prognoses and treatment schedules. Its characteristic rapid progression and late diagnosis as metastatic disease determine its poor prognosis, with a median survival of 3 mo in untreated patients. A high response rate and sensitivity to chemotherapy and radiotherapy make it possible to alleviate SCLC to some extent, but lead to relapse within the first year after chemoradiotherapy[6].

Even though genome-based diagnosis has increased the options for targeted therapy for NSCLC patients, SCLC treatment options remain limited to regimens based on chemotherapy and radiotherapy. In addition, therapeutic effectiveness varies with the patient's condition, drug dose and frequency, and the quantity of radiation. It is noteworthy that, compared with NSCLC, biomolecular aberrations such as mutations of *EGFR*, *KRAS* and *BRAF* genes or *ALK* gene rearrangements are rare in SCLC, which leads to a lack of indications for the use of tyrosine kinase inhibitors⁷. Instead, mutations of genes involved in p53 and RB and deletions or increased copy number in specific chromosomes contribute to carcinogenesis, and few effective, targeted drugs are available[8]. Surprisingly, a recent study reported that atezolizumab, a programmed cell death ligand 1 (PD-L1) inhibitor of immunotherapeutic drugs, combined with etoposide and carboplatin extended overall survival of SCLC patients and has been approved as first-line treatment of advanced-stage SCLC, indicating the feasibility of immunotherapy to extend the life expectancy of SCLC patients[9].

In this case, the biopsy had SCLC characteristics, and the patient received several cycles of combination treatment with chemotherapy plus radiotherapy. A second biopsy of the same lesion was found to be adenocarcinoma of lung cancer. Other than improper procedures and ineluctable errors in drawing samples, there are several explanations for this phenomenon. (1) The first involves mixed types of lung cancer at the initial diagnosis. After combined treatment with chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the dominant SCLC component was suppressed or eliminated, leading to development of the adenocarcinoma component. Although both are sensitive to platinum-based drugs, SCLC is more vulnerable to chemotherapy compared with other types of lung cancer. However, the first histological examination revealed no significant expression of adenocarcinoma-related biomarkers in either of two samples from the same lesion. Furthermore, comparison of the two biopsies found that there were indeed different types of lung cancer in the same lesion, which excludes mixed tumors in this case; (2) The second explanation is histopathological transformation from SCLC to NSCLC. It has been widely reported that transformation from EGFR-mutated NSCLC to SCLC while using tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) is a potential mechanism to mediate resistance to targeted drugs[8]. Histological transformation in SCLC is rarely reported, however. Three biopsies were obtained from this patient, and IHC staining and molecular pathology revealed changes in particular biomarkers that indicated histological transformation of the lung cancer. Moreover, switching the treatment regimen based on the histopathological results alleviated the clinical manifestations, which further supported our previous diagnosis; and (3) The third is tumor stem-cell oriented adenocarcinoma. Tumor stem cells are liable to be stimulated in particular circumstances, leading to differentiation, proliferation, and the formation of lesions[10,11]. However, given that the number of stem cells is limited and the methods of detection are not well advanced, tumor stem-cell oriented adenocarcinoma

should also be taken into account. In this patient, repeated biopsies indicated a possibility that he experienced an SCLC-NSCLC transformation, mainly because of pathology-oriented diagnosis and variable characteristics on CT scans. Although a rational diagnosis of histological transformation is not possible without surgical samples, it is seemly proper to take transformation into account after excluding other underlying possibilities. Further verification is needed.

CONCLUSION

Our experience with this case highlights several key points that are critical for clinical diagnosis and treatment. The first is the necessity for several ultrasound- or CT-guided biopsies. Repeated biopsies dynamically monitor phenotypic alterations of tumor cells, which facilitates the use of appropriate treatment regimens. Secondly, sampling multiple sites in primary and metastatic organs contributes to increased accuracy of diagnosis, avoiding the limitation of single site. In this patient, samples at different lesions in first biopsy helped to determine the presence of a mixed tumor or only one type of tumor cell. Thirdly, genetic analysis or DNA sequencing help physicians to diagnose pathology, select the best treatment schedule, and assess patient prognosis. Somatic mutations in several oncogenes, including *EGFR*, *ALK*, *ROS1*, and others, drive abnormal proliferation of mutant cells that can be targeted by TKIs, even though the mutations are rare in SCLC. Detecting mutations is conducive to discovering histological transformation and expanding therapeutic alternatives. Finally, the implementation of standard diagnostic and therapeutic programs is important to inhibit the development of malignant lesions and further improve healing.

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