Effect of topical imiquimod as primary treatment for lentigo maligna: the LIMIT-1 study*

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Summary

Background Topical imiquimod is sometimes used for lentigo maligna (LM) in situ melanoma instead of surgery, but frequency of cure is uncertain. Pathological complete regression (pCR) is a logical surrogate marker for cure after imiquimod, although residual LM and atypical melanocytic hyperplasia may not be reliably distinguished. A trial comparing imiquimod vs. surgery might be justified by a high imiquimod pCR rate.

Objectives Primary: to estimate the pCR rate for LM following imiquimod. Secondary: to assess the accuracy of prediction of pCR, using clinical complete regression (cCR) plus negative post-treatment biopsies, tolerability, resource use, patients’ preferences and induced melanoma immunity.

Methods This was a single-arm phase II trial of 60 imiquimod applications over 12 weeks for LM then radical resection. A pCR rate ≥ 25 out of 33 would reliably discriminate between pCR rates < 60% and ≥ 85%. Clinical response was assessed and biopsies taken after imiquimod. Patients recorded adverse events in diaries. Patient preference was measured after surgery using a standard gamble tool. Results The pCR rate was 10 of 27 (37%, 95% confidence interval 19–58%). The rate of cCR plus negative biopsies was 12 of 28, of whom seven of 11 had pCR on subsequent surgery. The median dose intensity was 86·7%.

Of the 16 surveyed patients, eight preferred primary imiquimod over surgery if the cure rate for imiquimod was 80%, and four of 16 if it was ≤ 40%.

Conclusions The pCR rate was insufficient to justify phase III investigation of imiquimod vs. surgery. Clinical complete response and negative targeted biopsies left uncertainty regarding pathological clearance. Some patients would trade less aggressive treatment of LM against efficacy.
Lentigo maligna (LM) in situ melanoma characteristically presents as a slowly developing brown or dark brown macule on chronically sun-exposed skin in people aged > 50 years. In the U.K. guidelines, complete surgical resection is recommended with curative intent. Five per cent of patients with typical LM may actually have early invasive melanoma, and the risk of progression to invasive lentigo maligna melanoma (LMM) is poorly quantified. Reported outcomes following surgery vary, including a 30% probability of recurrence at 66–98 months and a 1.5% probability of transformation to LMM for 81 patients, a crude failure rate (recurrence plus incomplete excision) of eight of 102 following resection excision with 2-mm margins, and crude recurrence rates of 16% of 269 (5–9%) following wide local excision and three of 154 (1.9%) following Mohs micrographic surgery. LM occurs most frequently on the head and neck, so surgery can cause significant functional and cosmetic disability and, in some cases, might not be feasible.

In 2001, a U.K. survey showed that the most widely used treatments for LM were surgery, cryotherapy, radiotherapy and observation, in that order, with nonsurgical approaches possibly associated with higher recurrence rates and used more for patients aged > 70 years. Radiotherapy may have a place in LM management, with the aim of trading less invasive intervention and better function and cosmesis against a possibly higher risk of recurrence or progression to melanoma. No trials have been undertaken comparing the outcomes of surgery and radiotherapy or other nonsurgical treatments.

Imiquimod is a synthetic imidazoquinoline nucleoside analogue available as a 5% strength topical formulation, with low systemic availability. Skin application induces local inflammation with intensity related to the frequency of application. The use of topical imiquimod as a nonsurgical treatment for LM has increased following an initial case report in 2000 of disease control for 9 months after treatment for 7 months. Treatment duration is not defined, but 12 weeks is widely used; any benefit of longer treatment is unclear. An effect against LM has been confirmed in subsequent case reports and small uncontrolled trials, and in a systematic review, with response rates of 77–90%. These studies lacked long-term follow-up to substantiate disease control and post-treatment histology; the majority of cases involved biopsies only, with the possibility of sampling error. One small study used complete surgical excision following imiquimod treatment, and reported complete response in four of six patients recruited. A recent retrospective series reported recurrence of LM following imiquimod alone in six of 22 patients vs. two of 36 having surgery plus imiquimod with a mean follow-up of around 40 months.

The routine use of imiquimod as primary therapy for LM requires proof of efficacy in a large trial compared with the outcomes of surgical excision. We reasoned that, to justify this investment, imiquimod treatment should be shown to have a high probability of achieving pathological complete response (pCR). Patients and clinicians might take into account the probability of cure with imiquimod and avoiding surgery for a premalignant condition, assuming progression is susceptible to surveillance. We surveyed U.K. dermatologists’ opinions regarding what threshold of pCR rate would justify routine use of imiquimod instead of surgery. We then designed a single-arm trial to justify progression to a larger randomized trial. We sought opinion from trial participants regarding what threshold of efficacy they would trade against avoiding surgery, using a structured questionnaire.

Patients and methods

Participants

This study was coordinated through the Nottingham Clinical Trials Unit, and approved by Nottingham Research Ethics Committee 2 and eight hospitals recruited between October 2010 and August 2011. The trial was registered with clinicaltrials.gov identifier NCT01161888.

To be eligible, patients had to give informed written consent, have a clinical diagnosis of primary untreated LM (acquired pigmented macule present for > 12 months, no change in skin surface texture or contour, no palpability, diameter > 10 mm, sited on the head or neck) and histologically confirmed LM without invasive melanoma in one or more 4-mm punch biopsies from the darkest area, reported by a pathologist member of a recognized National Health Service skin cancer multidisciplinary team. The LM had to be suitable for complete surgical excision using a 5-mm lateral margin, and to be easily definable visually around its entire circumference. Patients had to be aged > 45 years, fit, and willing for surgery, without coexisting or adjacent melanoma or nonmelanoma skin cancer that might compromise study treatment; neither pregnant nor breastfeeding; without hyper-sensitivity to imiquimod or excipients; not taking immunosuppressive medication and not participating in another intervention study.

Treatment and follow-up

The trial interventions and investigations are detailed in Figure 1. The pretreatment lesion was photographed, tattooed at 360, 90, 180 and 270 degrees, outlined in ink and traced on a transparency. Training in mapping and tattooing was
provided. Patients applied imiquimod (Aldara®; Meda Pharma-ceuticals Ltd, Bishops Stortford, U.K.) 5 days per week to the visible lesion plus a 2-cm margin of normal surrounding skin for approximately 8 h (overnight). It was then washed off with soap and water as defined in the patient information leaf-let. After 12 weeks of treatment, lesions were remapped, biopsied and excised with central pathological reporting. The User Opinion Questionnaire was undertaken 12 weeks post-surgery by the first 16 patients.

Outcome measures

The primary outcome measure was pCR, defined as the absence of LM in both post-treatment biopsies and resected LM. Imiquimod is an experimental treatment in which post-treatment biopsies would be part of the assessment of clearance. Resection is the standard of care and, in this trial, permits assessment of LM clearance in the whole lesion. Other pathological outcomes were partial regression (pPR, atypical melanocytes present in the epidermis with abnormal distribution and number, but insufficient features to define LM), no change (presence of LM) or progressive disease (invasive melanoma).

Clinical outcomes were complete regression (cCR, complete disappearance of abnormal pigmentation), partial regression (cPR, reduction in size of pigmented area or obvious reduc- tion in its intensity), no change (appearance identical to that pretreatment) and progressive disease (increased size or inten- sity of pigmentation or development of a papule or nodule within LM). Targeted biopsies were scored as for the resection specimen, detailed above. For each individual, the prediction of pCR using clinical examination of the mapped regions (weeks 22–24) plus targeted presurgical biopsies was com- pared with the pathological response in the whole post-treat- ment resected lesion, including any LM outside the clinically mapped margins of disease.

Patients kept weekly diaries through 12 weeks of treatment of adverse reactions, numbers of treatments, treatment accept- ability on a visual analogue scale and reasons for treatment withdrawal. The number of consultations was recorded.

Following surgery, the participants completed a question- naire selecting between ‘I want to have imiquimod as first treatment’ vs. ‘I want to have surgery now’ for 15 hypotheti- cal trial results ranging from ‘imiquimod cures 100% of people; surgery cures 95% of people’ to ‘imiquimod cures 10% of people; surgery cures 95% of people’. The explanation
included that imiquimod treatment included surveillance and deferred surgery in the event of progression.

Whole-blood samples (40 mL) were harvested before and after imiquimod treatment and sent by first-class post to the Human Biomaterials Resource Centre, Birmingham, where peripheral blood mononuclear cells were isolated by differen- tial centrifugation and cryopreserved in the vapour phase of nitrogen. Circulating T-lymphocyte responses against melano- cyte differentiation antigens melan A, gp100 and tyrosinase, and against cancer testis antigens MAGE A1, MAGE A3 and NY-ESO-1 were measured using an ex vivo ELISPOT assay, using overlapping peptides covering the whole of each antigen.

**Statistical design and analysis**

In 2009 all consultant members of the British Association of Dermatologists were asked to mark on a visual analogue scale the pCR rate for imiquimod below which ‘I do not think that imiquimod has any potential at all to be used for primary treatment for lentigo maligna’ and the pCR rate above which ‘I would be persuaded that imiquimod definitely should be used in the primary treatment of lentigo maligna’.

This was a single-arm phase II trial with a sample size of 33, requiring pCR in \( \geq 25 \) participants to justify progression to phase III (A’Hern’s method, \( p_0 = 60\% \), \( p_1 = 85\% \), \( a = 5\% \), \( 1 - b = 95\% \)). The bounds (\( p_0 \) and \( p_1 \)) were derived from the upper quartile of pCR thresholds for derma- tologists responding to the two questions above. The recruit- ment target was 40 participants to account for attrition.

The primary intent-to-treat analysis included patients who discontinued imiquimod treatment early but proceeded to sur- gery as per the protocol requirements. The pCR rate for patients undergoing surgery after imiquimod was estimated with 95\% confidence intervals (CIs).

The accuracy of clinical assessment was reported as the proportion of cases where cCR plus negative biopsies correctly predicted pCR in the subsequent surgical resection specimen.

Imiquimod dose intensity was calculated from patient diary returns, assuming 60 applications (5 days per week for 12 weeks) to be 100\%.

Patients’ opinions are presented descriptively as the propor- tion of patients preferring imiquimod over surgery in relation to a range of hypothetical cure rates for imiquimod compared with a cure rate for surgery of 95\%. Analyses were performed using Stata v12 (StataCorp, College Station, TX, U.S.A.).

**Results**

Responses from 174 U.K. consultant dermatologists each iden- tified a lower pCR rate below which they considered imiqui- mod to have no potential to treat LM (median 40\%, interquartile range (IQR) 30–60\%) and an upper pCR rate above which they could definitely be persuaded of the poten- tial of imiquimod to treat LM (median 80\%, IQR 60–85\%). This was interpreted as indicating that only 25\% of clinicians would reject further investigation of imiquimod as a treatment for LM even if the pCR rate was \( \geq 60\% \), and only 25\% of clinicians would demand a pCR rate \( \geq 85\% \) to justify further investigation of imiquimod. We determined that an observed pCR threshold rate of \( \geq 25 \) out of 33 would reliably exclude a true pCR rate \( < 60\% \) and be powered not to miss a true pCR rate \( \geq 85\% \) (see statistical design).

Twenty-nine patients consented; one withdrew consent and 28 were evaluable. Their median age was 72 years (IQR 65–79), 18 were male, the median size of LM was 14 mm (IQR 12–22; range 10–70) and lesions were located on the cheek (11), ear (four), forehead (four), nape of neck (one), nose (seven) and scalp (two). The median dose intensity over 12 weeks was 86–7\%, including three patients stopping treat- ment early after 4, 8 and 11 weeks; 27 underwent surgical excision after imiquimod (Fig. 1).

Twenty-seven patients were evaluable for the primary out- come. Ten achieved pCR (37\%, 95\% CI 19–58\%). None showed LM at the surgical margins. The patients with pCR had achieved imiquimod dose intensity below (seven) and above (three) the median of 86–7\%.

Central review of a single pretreatment section did not con- firm the diagnosis of LM in three patients: one with epidermal hyperpigmentation without melanocyte atypia; one with com- pound melanocytic naevus and one with pigmentation and elongated rete ridges without melanocyte atypia. The pCR rate was eight of 24 (33\%, 95\% CI 16– 55\%) if these patients are excluded. However, priority was given to the fuller clinicopathological diagnosis made by the multidisciplinary team at the site.

Post-treatment resection specimens from a further nine patients were scored as pPR (abnormal features falling short of defining persistent LM – see methods), seven had definite residual LM in the resection specimen and one had evidence of LMM.

Clinical evaluation showed that 13 of 28 patients had com- plete disappearance of the LM after imiquimod (i.e. cCR; 46\%, 95\% CI 28–66\%). Of these, on the post- treatment biopsy, 12 were negative for LM and one showed probable residual LM. Thus clinical and targeted pathological evaluation yielded a response rate of 12 of 28 (43\%, 95\% CI 24–63\%). Of these 12, one declined resection, and seven of the remain- ing 11 (64\%, 95\% CI 31–89\%) had pCR on the resection specimen. Three of 15 who did not achieve cCR were observed nonetheless to have pCR (Fig. 2). Regarding the three with pathological evidence falling short of LM on central review of a single diagnostic slide, the outcomes were cCR + pCR, cCR + pPR and cPR + pCR.

Eleven of 29 patients (38\%) had a severe local-site reaction over the study period; 10 (34\%) had a moderate reaction and eight (28\%) had mild or no reaction. This peaked at week 4, when 24\%, 48\% and 14\% had mild, moderate and severe reactions, respectively. By week 12, 11\% and 15\% still had moderate or severe reactions, respectively. Nine of 19 patients (47\%) having a moderate or severe local-site reaction had a pCR, whereas one of eight patients (13\%) with mild or no
reaction had a pCR. Scores for acceptability of imiquimod through 12 weeks of treatment were reported by 24 of 29 patients. Dose reductions occurred in five of 12 reporting consistently good tolerance and eight of 12 reporting variably poor tolerance.

There were 143 adverse events, of which 84 (59%) were definitely related to treatment. Medication was provided for 117 (82%) adverse events, and 140 (98%) resolved. There was no additional health service use for 18 of 29 (62%), one unscheduled visit for eight (28%) and more than one unscheduled visit for three patients (10%).

Sixteen patients completed the treatment preference survey having experienced both treatments (Fig. 3). One expressed a strong preference for immediate surgery even with a hypothetical cure rate of 100% for imiquimod, and four strongly preferred imiquimod, tolerating hypothetical cure rates for imiquimod ≤ 40% vs. 95% for surgery. Half of the patients stated they would opt for surgery if the cure rate for imiquimod was ≤ 85%.

Imiquimod might work by inducing immune responses against proteins characteristic of melanoma cells. We tested blood samples from 16 patients for such responses, of whom 11 had paired samples analysed about 3 months apart. Target proteins were a number of proteins characteristic of melanoma (melan A, gp100, tyrosinase, NY-ESO-1, MAGE A1 and MAGE A3) and, to confirm the patients’ cells were working, proteins were made by common infections (termed CEPT). Positive recognition of target proteins was defined conventionally as a number of reacting immune cells against target proteins that was more than double the background immune reactivity.

Twenty-seven samples from 16 patients were tested, and of these, 18 from 12 patients made a clear positive recognition of

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**Discussion**

It is reasonable to try to spare patients surgery for LM; it can impair function and be disfiguring, and may not be feasible.
Nonsurgical approaches need not equal surgery in efficacy, provided treatment failure could be recognized and surgery undertaken before progression to invasive melanoma.

Imiquimod promotes an inflammatory state through the activation of macrophages and antigen-presenting cells via Toll-like receptor 7 signalling, and this localized inflammation can result in regression of neoplastic cells.\textsuperscript{26} We undertook a single-arm phase II trial to determine whether investment is justified in a phase III trial comparing imiquimod with surgery.\textsuperscript{3} Clinical regression following imiquimod treatment can be followed by relapse.\textsuperscript{3} Therefore, pCR, measured by detailed histological examination of LM resected after imiquimod therapy, was selected as the surrogate outcome measure for possible long-term disease control.

The pCR rate of LM to imiquimod was estimated as 37\% (10 of 27), with CIs indicating that a true pCR rate $> 60\%$ was unlikely and $> 85\%$ very unlikely. Even had accrual continued to target, the highest possible observed pCR rate would have been 16 of 33, falling short of the preplanned efficacy threshold of 25 of 33.

It is improbable that we missed a true effect. Firstly, 27 of 29 patients completed the study and were available for analyses. Secondly, 21 of 29 patients had moderate or severe skin inflammation, similar to the imiquimod toxicity described in case reports of apparently successful imiquimod treatment. Thirdly, the median dose intensity was 87\%, and reduced dose intensity across 12 weeks did not obviously associate with lower probability of achieving pCR. Our pCR rate by detailed pathological examination is lower than the $> 75\%$ regression rate judged by clinical inspection and biopsies in a systemic review of predominantly retrospective series and cases. Note that these case reports and series lacked consistent definition and were susceptible to selection and publication bias.\textsuperscript{14}

Recently, another trial observed a pCR rate of 20 of 38 assessable patients with LM treated with imiquimod for 12 weeks.\textsuperscript{19} A further study compared topical imiquimod with topical imiquimod plus topical tazarotene, followed by Mohs excision of the treatment site, with pCR rates of 57 vs. 66\%, respectively.\textsuperscript{18}

Can we rationally offer imiquimod as first-line treatment for LM, reserving surgery for treatment failure? Persistent or progressive clinical abnormality after imiquimod might reasonably be taken to indicate proceeding to surgery, because only three of 15 such patients had pCR on the resected specimen. Conversely, apparent cCR and negative biopsy was an unreliable predictor of pCR, with only seven of 11 cases with cCR plus negative biopsies confirmed as pCR on examination of the excision specimen. We recognize that pPR as defined in this study is indistinguishable from actinic melanocytic hyperplasia, likely to be present in chronically subdamaged skin.\textsuperscript{27} Thus there is uncertainty whether pPR induced by imiquimod might also be a marker for long-term clinical remission, which was not addressed in our study.

The efficacy threshold to justify phase III evaluation had been selected to exclude, at the 5\% probability level, proceeding to phase III despite a true pCR rate of $< 60\%$ and rejecting further investigation despite a true pCR rate $> 85\%$. These thresholds were based on a survey of a large group of U.K. dermatologists. However, reported opinions were diverse. Only half would definitely reject imiquimod treatment even if the true pCR rate was $< 40\%$, and one-quarter would have settled for a true pCR rate $< 60\%$ definitely to proceed to phase III. Offering imiquimod treatment for a premalignant condition, with surgery reserved for progression, is a credible strategy for some clinicians despite a low pCR rate. How might patients view this issue? We surveyed the opinion of the first 16 consecutive patients after each had experienced both imiquimod and surgery, and again observed diversity of opinion: four of 16 would still have opted for imiquimod even with the probability of cure $\leq 40\%$. However, we had not expected the very high early attrition on accrual, in which only one-fifth of identified patients enrolled for the trial. This might cause bias favouring imiquimod because this attrition itself may reflect patients’ preference for surgery.

Destroyed cells in a proinflammatory milieu might act as an autologous vaccination against melanoma, resulting in systemic immunity. However, we observed that our participants generally had a frequency of circulating activated T cells recognizing melanoma differentiation or cancer germline antigens below the limit of detection of the ex vivo ELISPOT assay (around 50 per $10^6$ peripheral blood mononuclear cells) even after imiquimod treatment. A larger sample would be needed to estimate confidently the immune response rate, and this would also require assays able to detect and measure lower-abundance immune reactivities.

In summary, imiquimod causes local skin adverse reactions, which are variably tolerated by patients and can be managed by adjusting the frequency of applications. We estimated the pCR rate of LM to imiquimod to be 37\%. This fell short of our predefined end point that would justify progression to a randomized comparison vs. surgery, assuming that pCR is a prerequisite for long-term disease control. The uncertainty over the interpretation of pPR and the possibility that imiquimod given for a longer duration might convert pPR to pCR might still justify such a trial. We observed that clearance of LM clinically and on targeted biopsies missed patients either in whom LM was pathologically persistent or in whom pathological persistence was, at best, uncertain. Based on this, with-out a larger long-term trial, the use of imiquimod cannot be recommended as standard first-line treatment for LM outside exceptional circumstances.

Acknowledgments

The Clinical Trials Pharmacy Team at Nottingham University Hospitals. We would like to thank our participants, without whom we would not have been able to complete this study.

References


Appendix