Liver transplantation for colo-rectal liver metastasis: Survival without recurrence can be achieved

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Christian Toso¹, Hugo Pinto Marques ², Axel Andres¹, Francisco Castro Sousa³, René
Adam⁴, Antonio Kalil⁵, Pierre-Alain Clavien⁶, Emanuel Furtado⁷, Eduardo Barroso²,
Henri Bismuth⁴, on behalf of the “Compagnons hépato-biliaires” group

¹Divisions of transplant and abdominal surgery, and Hepato-bilio-pancreatic centre,
University of Geneva Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland, ²Hepato-Biliary-Pancreatic and
Transplantation Centre, Curry Cabral Hospital, Lisbon, Portugal, ³Department of Surgery
A, University Hospital of Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal, ⁴Centre Hépatobiliaire, AP-HP
Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France, ⁵Department of Surgical Oncology, Hospital
Santa Rita, do Complexo Hospitalar da Irmandade Santa Casa de Misericórdia de Porto
Alegre, Porto Alegre, Brazil, ⁶Department of Surgery and Transplantation, University
Hospital Zurich, Swiss HPB and Transplant Center, Zurich, Switzerland, ⁷Department of
Surgery A, and Children and Adult Liver Transplantation Unit, University Hospitals of
Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

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Footnote page

Alphabetical list of all abbreviations: ALPPS: associating liver partition and portal vein ligation for staged hepatectomy, CEA: carcinoembryonic antigen, mTOR: mammalian Target-of-Rapamycin, RFA: radio-frequency ablation,

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Correspondence: Christian Toso, Abdominal and Transplant Surgery, Geneva University Hospitals, Rue Gabrielle-Perret-Gentil, 1211 Geneva, Tel: +41223727639, Fax: +41223727766, E-mail: christian.toso@hcuge.ch
To the Editor,

The management of patients with colo-rectal liver metastases has improved significantly over the recent years. However, most patients still cannot undergo complete resection, generally because the location of the metastases within the liver prevents any radical management, and explaining the interest for transplantation. The first attempts were performed in the eighties with poor outcomes, in part due to a high proportion of death not related to the neoplastic disease (1). More recently, the group of Oslo has shown a 60% five-year survival, in 21 patients with colo-rectal metastases (2). Such a survival was better than the one expected on chemotherapy alone (2-4). However, 95% (20/21) of patients had cancer recurrence, most within the first 18 months after transplantation. At present, liver transplantation for colo-rectal metastases remains highly controversial. The potential for long-term disease-free survival needs to be explored, which is the aim of this multi-centric collaborative retrospective study.

A total of 12 patients (6 females/6 males) underwent liver transplantation for colo-rectal liver metastasis, at centers affiliated to the “Compagnons Hépato-Bilaires”, an association of hepato-pancreato-biliary and transplant surgeons, most trained at the Paul Brousse Hospital, Paris, France under the guidance of Professor H. Bismuth. Median age at transplant was 56 years (Table 1). Patients were managed in Lisbon (n=8), Coimbra (n=2), Paris (n=1), and Geneva (n=1) between October 1995 and October 2015 (date of transplant), and no other patient underwent transplantation for this indication at these respective transplant centers. Data collection was conducted according the relevant ethical standards at each institution. The location of the primary adenocarcinoma was the colon in 11 patients, and the rectum in one. Most primary cancers were T3 on pathology,
and many presented between 1 and 3 involved –N1– lymph nodes (two patients were N2 with more than 3 nodes involved, Table 1).

For most patients, liver metastases (9/12) were diagnosed within 12 months after the diagnosis of the primary cancer, and were considered as synchronous. When not diagnosed at the same time as the primary, liver metastases were discovered 4, 7, 19, 24 and 29 months after the primary. At the time of transplantation, patients presented a median of 9 liver metastases. Two had lesions >5 cm, of 5.5 and 8 cm. Median CEA level was 16.9 µg/l, and one patients had CEA >200 µg/l, of 314 µg/l.

Most (11/12) patients received chemotherapy prior to transplantation. Chemotherapy included irinotecan and oxaliplatin in 9 (82%) patients, and a biological agent in 6 (cetuximab in 2, bevacizumab in 3, and both agents in 1). Another patient was treated by intra-hepatic chemotherapy prior to transplantation. All patients responded to chemotherapy, and none was in progression at the time of the transplantation. The decision to conduct a post-transplant adjuvant chemotherapy was based, at least in the recent years, on the aim to obtain a minimum of four months of peri-transplant oxaliplatine and/or irinotecan-including chemotherapy. It was used in four patients. Overall, most patients underwent complex, long-term chemotherapy treatment, with a median of two lines (1 in 1 patient, 2 in 6 patients, 3 in 2 patients, and 4 in 1 patient).

In addition to chemotherapy, 10 patients underwent liver metastasis resection, in one (n=5), two (n=3), or three (n=2) procedures, one of which was a two-stage resection. One patient underwent radio-frequency ablation (RFA) as part of the treatment. At the time of transplantation, any treatment by resection or RFA was not possible anymore.
Transplantations were performed 41 (12-97) months after the resection of the primary.

Liver grafts were from 6 non-marginal donors after brain-death, 5 domino donors with familial amyloid polyneuropathy, and one living-related donor. Transplantation was part of a planned treatment strategy following previous liver resection in 6 patients. In 2 patients, transplantation was performed upfront without previous resection, considered impossible because of diffuse liver disease. In three patients, transplantations were performed as salvage procedures: after massive bleeding (and packing) following liver resection, for a failed associating liver partition and portal vein ligation for staged hepatectomy (ALPPS) procedure, and for post-resection liver failure. Finally, one patient was transplanted with inferior vena cava replacement due to tumor invasion. Overall, 6 patients could be categorized as having planned transplantations, and 6 patients could be retrospectively considered as having received “compassioned” transplantations.

The median length of hospital stay for transplantation was 16 days. Seven patients had complications, including 3 patients with grade 2 complications according to Clavien-Dindo (pneumonia and fever of unknown origin treated by antibiotics, and rejection treated by steroids), 1 patients with grade 3b complication (biliary leak requiring endoscopic stenting), 2 patients with grade 4a complication (kidney failure requiring dialysis, prolonged ventilation requiring a tracheostomy), and 1 patient with grade 5 complication (death following severe bleeding and shock). Eight patients received mTOR inhibitors as part of their maintenance immunosuppression.

Overall patient survivals were 83 ±11 %, 62 ±15 %, and 50 ±16 % at 1, 3 and 5 years, after a median follow-up of 26 (0-108) months (Figure 1). Six patients had a recurrence, affecting the lungs (n=5), the liver (n=3), and the peritoneum (n=1). Disease-free
survivals were 56 ±14 %, 38 ±15 %, and 38 ±15 % at 1, 3 and 5 years. Treatment of recurrence included palliative chemotherapy in five patients and radiotherapy in one. Five patients were alive and free of cancer 7, 43, 47, 48, and 108 months after transplantation (Table 1).

Patients undergoing transplantation for compassionate indications (upfront, salvage, and vena cava involvement) had significantly worse disease-free survivals than patients with planned indications (p=0.02). Looking at the Oslo criteria (2), the last pre-transplant CEA level (≥80 vs. <80 µg/l, p=0.09) and the time between resection of the primary cancer and transplantation (≥24 vs. <24 months, p=0.01) also tended to predict disease-free survival.

The size of the largest metastasis at transplant (≥5.5 vs. <5.5 cm) failed to predict survival (p=0.47).

As a whole, the present investigation goes one step further compared to the Norwegian experience, as it demonstrates that disease-free survival can be achieved. However, such an outcome was only seen in patients after transplantation performed as deliberate procedures in a long-term treatment (n=6). These patients had previously undergone a combined oncological/surgical management with multiple courses of chemotherapy, and often multiple liver resections. None had a progressive disease at the time of transplantation. Conversely, the six patients with upfront, emergency, and extrahepatic disease transplantations (“compassionate” indications) did significantly worse, and most had a recurrence within 18 months, suggesting that transplantation in these situations must be avoided.

In addition, the present cohort shows that the time between colo-rectal surgery and transplantation (with a cut-off at 24 months) and the last CEA level (80 µg/l) tend to
predict disease-free survival, while tumor diameter (<5.5 cm) and cancer progression (no patient in progression) could not be identified. These factors as a whole should be used and refined for selecting patients for prospective trials (short time between primary and transplant, low CEA, small lesion, without progression) (2).

Of note, the Norwegian experience (21 published patients) has been possible thanks to the unique high organ donor availability in this country, where the recipient needs are covered within a short waiting time. In all other countries, the lack of donors represent a major challenge to transplantation for colo-rectal liver metastasis. Outcomes still need to be improved and validated before potentially justifying a systematic use of liver grafts for this indication on a common waiting list with patients with end-stage liver failure and hepatocellular carcinoma. In the meantime, domino, and living-donor liver grafts should be favored, and the RAPID concept further explored (5). In addition, current transplantation for non-resectable colo-rectal metastasis should be conducted within prospective trials with strict inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The present study should be seen as a proof-of-feasibility, demonstrating the potential of achieving disease-free survival after transplantation colo-rectal metastases in a meaningful proportion of patients. It should encourage turning away from more emotional indications, in favor of prospective studies with strict selection criteria to explore the potential of this modality.

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“Compagnons Hépato-bilio-pancréatiques” group

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Rene Adam (Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France), Dimitri Alden (New York, USA), Malcolm Aldridge (East and North Hertfordshire NHS, Hertford, UK), Oscar Andriani (Hospital Universitario Austral, Buenos Aires, Argentina), Arie Ariche (West Galile Medical Center, Nahariyya, Israel), Ibrahim Astarcigolu (Genel Cerrahi Anabilim Dali, Izmir, Turkey), Eduardo Barroso (Hospital de Curry Cabral, Lisbon, Portugal), Abdelkader Belkouchi, Hopital Avicenne, Rabbat, Maroc), Henri Bismuth (Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France), Fernando Buabse (San Miguel de Tucuman, Argentina), Fulvio Calise (Ospedale Cardarelli, Napoli, Italy), Enrique Miguel Canepa (Hospital Privado de Comunidad, Cordoba, Argentina), Francisco Castro Sousa (Coimbra University Hospital, Coimbra, Portugal), Daniel Cherqui (Hopital Paul-Brousse, Villejuif, France), Laurence Chiche (Bordeaux University Hospital, Bordeaux, France), Miguel Ciardullo (Hospital Italiano, Buenos Aires, Argentina), Pierre-Alain Clavien (Zurich University Hospital, Zurich, Switzerland), Marvin Corlette (Belmont, CA, USA), Guido Costamagna (Università Cattolica de Sacre Cuore, Rome, Italy), Joao Coutinho
(Hospital St Maria, Lisbon, Portugal), Ignazia Demma (Anthea Hospital, Bari, Italy),
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Hospital Chinese Beijing, China), Jean Edmond (Columbia University, New York, USA),
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(Sheba Medical Center, Tel-Aviv, Israel), Olivier Farges (Hopital Beaujon, Clichy,
France), Cyrille Feray (Hôpital Henri-Mondor, Paris, France), Dominique Franco
(Hopital Antoine-Béclère, Clamart, France), Francisco Navarro Freire (University of
Granada, Granada, Spain), O James Garden (University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK),
Jean-François Gigot (Cliniques Universitaires Saint Luc, Bruxelles, Belgium), Jean
Gugenheim (Hopital de l’Archet II, Nice, France), Nagy Habib (Hammersmith Hospital,
London, UK), Ellen Hagopian (Jersey Shore University Medical Center, New Jersey,
USA), Emir Hoti (St Vincent’s University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland), John Isaac (Queen
Elizabeth Medical Centre, Birmingham, UK), Marc Johann (Hopitaux Privés de Metz,
Metz, France), Ousmane Ka (Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, Senegal), Antonio
Kalil (Hospital Moinhos de Vento, Porto Alegre, Brazil), Andreas Katz (Greenville
Medical Tower, Texas, USA), Jina Krissat (Blackpool Victoria Hospital, Blackpool,
UK), Réal Lapointe (Centre Hospitalier de l’Université de Montréal, Montréal, Canada),
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Lima (Hospital Felice Rocho, Belo Horizonte, Brazil), Marcelo Linhares (Universidade
Federal de Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil), Valerio Lucidi (Erasme University Hospital,
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(Medical College & BYL Nair Hospital, Mumbai, India), Francesco Meriggi (University
of Pavia, Pavia, Italy), Mario Morino (Istituto di Clinica e Terapia Chirurgica, Torino, Italy), Richard Nakache (Tel-Aviv Souraski Medical Center, Tel-Aviv, Israel), Benoit Navez (Cliniques Universitaires Saint-Luc, Bruxelles, Belgium), Gennaro Nuzzo (Hepatobiliary Unit Largo R, Roma, Italy), Roger Obregon (Federal University of Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil), Raul Oleas (Quito, Ecuador), Jorge Paulino (Hospital de Curry Cabral, Lisbon, Portugal), Riccardo Pellicci (Ospedale Santa Corona, Pietra Ligure, Italy), Hugo Pinto Marques (Hospital de Curry Cabral, Lisbon, Portugal), Joseph Raccuia (New York University Langone Medical Center, New York, USA), Juan Manuel Rico Juri (Imbanaco Medical Center, Cali, Colombia), Antonio Robecchi (Turin, Italy), Rodolfo Rossi (Sanatoria Mater Dei, Buenos Aires, Argentina), Daradkeh Salam (Jordan University, Amman, Jordan), Faouzi Saliba (Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France), Didier Samuel (Hopital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France), Carlos Eduardo Santos (National Cancer Institute of Brazil, Botafogo, Brazil), Sabine Sarnacki-Feray (Hopital Necker, Paris, France), TzyypYuan Shann (Auckland, New Zealand), David Sherlock (North Manchester General Hospital, Manchester, UK), Daniel Shouval (Hadassah Hebrew University Hospital, Jerusalem, Israel), Christian Toso (Geneva University Hospital, Geneva, Switzerland), Oscar Traynor (National Surgical Training Centre, Dublin, Ireland), Françoise Van Hove (Hôpital Paul Brousse, Villejuif, France), Corinne Vons (Hopital Jean-Verdier, Paris, France), Raja Wakim (Mount Lebanon Hospital, Hazmieh, Lebanon), Krzysztof Zieniewicz (Warszawski Uniwersytet Medyczny, Warsaw, Poland)
References


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*Grey background shows patients with ongoing disease-free survival. White background shows patients with recurrence and/or death. *Until last follow-up (for the patients 1 to 5, and 10) or death.  
CEA: carcinoembryonic antigen, Ox/I: oxaliplatin/irinotecan, NA: not available or not applicable.
Figure legends

Figure 1: Overall (full line) and disease-free (dashed line) survivals
Overall survival

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DFS

| Month | 12 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 1 |