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**CLINICAL IMPACT OF IMMUNOPHENOTYPIC REMISSION AFTER  
ALLOGENEIC HEMATOPOIETIC CELL TRANSPLANTATION IN MULTIPLE  
MYELOMA**

**Short title:** Immunophenotypic remission post allografting

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1

2 **ABSTRACT**

3 Immunophenotypic remission (IR) is a strong prognostic factor in myeloma patients. The  
4 combination of IR and conventional complete remission (CR) was retrospectively evaluated in 66  
5 patients after allografting. IR was defined as absence of monoclonal plasma cells in bone marrow  
6 aspirates by multiparameter flow-cytometry. Conditioning was non-myeloablative in 55 patients;  
7 reduced-intensity in 10 and myeloablative in 1 patient. The allograft was given upfront in 35/66  
8 (53%) patients. After a median follow-up of 7.1 years, 24 patients achieved both CR and IR (CR/IR  
9 group), 21 achieved IR but not CR with persistence of urine/serum M-component (noCR/IR group),  
10 and 21 did not achieve either CR or IR (noCR/noIR group). Median overall survival (OS) and event  
11 free survival (EFS) were “not reached” and 59 months in the CR/IR group; 64 and 16 months in the  
12 noCR/IR; and 36 and 6 months in the noCR/noIR respectively ( $p<0.001$ ). Cumulative incidence of  
13 extra-medullary disease was 4,4 % in the CR/IR, 38,1% in the noCR/IR and 14,3% in the  
14 noCR/noIR groups respectively at 4 years ( $p<0.001$ ). IR was a valid tool to monitor residual disease  
15 after allografting and allowed to define a cohort of patients at higher incidence of extra-medullary  
16 relapse.

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## INTRODUCTION

The increment in response rates of recent years, longer life expectancy and several treatment options in patients with multiple myeloma (MM) have drawn particular attention to the importance of an in-depth evaluation of "complete remission" and the interest in the assessment of minimal residual disease (MRD) has been growing [1-3]. Two sensitive techniques are currently employed to evaluate MRD: qualitative and quantitative polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based methods and multi-parameter flow-cytometry. PCR-based methods have been of great value in predicting clinical outcomes in MM patients following allografting [4-7], though expensive and labor-intensive, they are characterized by higher sensitivity. A patient-specific molecular marker is, however, detected in only 60% to 70% of patients. The evaluation of MRD through immunophenotyping is more broadly applicable in the MM patients population than PCR as it involves the identification of phenotypic aberrancies in myelomatous plasma cells, which are seen in more than 90% of MM patients. However, the antibody panels used for immunophenotype analysis consist of markers recommended by experts' opinions, and only recently attempts to validate and standardize them have been made [8].

MRD studies using flow-cytometry have so far been carried out on patients treated with autologous transplantation, conventional chemotherapy or new drugs [9-13]. MRD studies in the setting of allografting are however lacking. Here, we report an analysis on the achievement of immunophenotypic response (IR) after an allograft and its prognostic impact when combined with conventional complete remission (CR).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

**Patients** Between January 2000 and December 2011, 80 consecutive MM patients underwent an allograft at our Center. Sixty-nine out of 80 (median age 54 years, range 35-66), with a follow-up of at least 3 months were included in this study. Three were excluded from this analysis because of early

46 treatment related death at 4 months post-transplant (no. 2), and because of incomplete data (no. 1).  
47 Overall, 66 patients were included and their characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Median time from  
48 diagnosis to allogeneic transplant was 13.2 months (range 6.6-101 months). Thirty-five out of 66 (43%)  
49 were treated at diagnosis according to a planned tandem “auto/allo” program and were also included in  
50 previously published prospective clinical trials [14-17]. All patients provided written informed consent to  
51 the proposed treatment and to the use of medical records for research purposes. The present study was  
52 approved by the Institutional Review Board of our Center and conducted according to the Declaration of  
53 Helsinki (NCT01440556).

54

55 **Graft-vs.-host disease** Acute graft-vs.-host disease (GVHD) was diagnosed according to the  
56 recent indications of the National Institute of Health [18]. Chronic GVHD was graded as previously  
57 described [19].

58

59 **Response Assessment** Disease response was assessed by urine and serum immune-fixation and  
60 bone marrow aspirates at 3, 6, 12, 18, 24 months after allografting, and yearly thereafter. Whole-body  
61 conventional radiography or magnetic resonance imaging were performed yearly or as clinically indicated  
62 (overt relapse or complaints of bone pain). Disease response and disease relapse were defined according  
63 to the European Bone Marrow Transplantation Group criteria [20]. Achievement of CR was defined as  
64 the absence of monoclonal component by immunofixation on both serum and urine, disappearance of any  
65 soft tissue plasmacytoma and less than 5% plasma cells in the bone marrow. The incidence of extra-  
66 medullary disease (EMD) in first relapse post allografting was monitored, and EMD was defined as  
67 previously described [21].

68 First pulls of bone marrow samples had to contain at least 13000 cells/uL for flow-cytometry  
69 MRD studies. Plasma cells quantification was obtained by 4 to 6-colour staining with the following  
70 monoclonal antibodies: CD38, CD138, CD56, CD19, CD45, cyKappa, cyLambda. A FACSCanto II

71 Flow-cytometer equipped with FACSDiva software (BD Biosciences, San José, CA) was used. A total of  
72  $1 \times 10^6$  events were acquired and analyzed for each sample, as previously reported [22]. Flow-cytometry  
73 analysis had a sensitivity of  $10^{-4}$  cells [23]. IR was defined as less than 0.01% monoclonal plasma cells in  
74 the bone marrow sample.

75 Assessment of CR and IR was done at best response. According to the achievement of CR and/or  
76 IR, patients were divided into 4 groups: those who achieved CR and IR (CR/IR), those who obtained CR  
77 but not IR (CR/noIR), those not in CR but in IR (noCR/IR) and those who did not achieve either CR or IR  
78 (noCR/noIR). Time to CR and IR was evaluated excluding patients who were in CR and IR at the time of  
79 transplant, respectively.

80

81 **Genetic abnormalities** Although single evaluation of chromosome 13 deletion (del(13)) is no  
82 more considered an optimal prognostic marker, it still has value as it is frequently associated with t(4;14),  
83 del(17) or t(14;20). Thus patients presenting del(13) with/without other cytogenetic aberrations were  
84 considered as at high risk [24].

85

86 **Statistical methods** Primary endpoints were overall survival (OS) and event free survival (EFS)  
87 in the 4 patient cohorts defined by the achievement of CR and/or IR. OS was defined as time from  
88 transplant to death by any cause, and EFS as the time from transplant to progression/relapse/death as a  
89 result of any cause, whichever occurred first. Alive patients were censored as of October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. OS  
90 and EFS curves were estimated by the Kaplan-Meier method and compared using the log-rank test. OS  
91 and EFS were then analyzed by the univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazards model,  
92 comparing by the Wald test the following risk factors: age at diagnosis (>55 vs. ≤55 years), gender (male  
93 vs. female), year of diagnosis (2008-2011 vs. 2004-2007 vs. 2000-2003), number of chemotherapy  
94 regimens (≥2 vs. 1), ISS (stage III vs. I-II), Durie and Salmon stage (IIIA-IIIB vs. IA-IB-IIA-IIB), donor  
95 gender (male vs. female), donor type (matched unrelated donor vs. sibling donor), cytogenetic profile

96 (high risk vs. standard risk), EMD [21] in the clinical course before allografting, occurrence of acute and  
97 chronic GVHD (any vs. none) and disease response (CR/IR, CR/noIR, noCR/IR, noCR/noIR). Six- and  
98 twelve-month landmark analyses were performed to estimate survival by disease response. The  
99 occurrence of acute and chronic GVHD and post-transplant IR and CR were treated as time-dependent  
100 variables. Cumulative incidences of developing acute GVHD, chronic GVHD, overall relapse and  
101 extramedullary relapse were estimated by the Gray test to compare the cumulative incidence curves of the  
102 main event, in the presence of a competing event (defined as death without acute or chronic GVHD or  
103 relapse occurred before the development of acute or chronic GVHD for acute and chronic GVHD, as  
104 death without previous relapse for overall relapse, as death without previous extramedullary relapse or  
105 occurrence of bone relapse for extramedullary relapse) [25]. Non-relapse mortality (NRM) was defined  
106 as death without previous relapse [25]. Patient characteristics were tested using the Fisher's exact test for  
107 categorical variables and the Mann-Whitney test for continuous ones. All reported p-values were two-  
108 sided, at the conventional 5% significance level. Data were analyzed as of January 2014 by IBM SPSS  
109 21.0.0 (Chicago-IL, USA) and R 2.15.2 package cmprsk (The R Foundation for Statistical Computing,  
110 Wien-A).

## 112 RESULTS

113 **Study population** At diagnosis all patients presented with measurable disease and 12 out of 66  
114 (18%) with EMD. Thirty-five out of 66 received the allograft as part of their first line treatment, whereas  
115 the remaining (31/66, 46%) were transplanted at relapse (Table 1). In 2/31 (6%) EMD presented at  
116 relapse before the allograft. Conditionings are summarized in Table 1. Post-grafting immuno-suppression  
117 consisted of calcineurine inhibitors (cyclosporine or tacrolimus) and mycophenolate mofetil in 60 (91%),  
118 and cyclosporine and methotrexate in the remaining. Patients did not receive maintenance therapies or  
119 donor lymphocyte infusion post allograft until relapse, with the exception of 6 recent patients who started  
120 lenalidomide at six months post transplant as per protocol. Due to the rather long study period, fluorescent

121 in situ hybridization (FISH) was performed in only 20 (30%) patients: del(13) aberration was detectable  
122 in 6 patients, 1 patient presented del(13) associated with del(17) and t(4;14) and 1 patient resulted positive  
123 for t(4;14); the remaining 12 patients were negative for del(13).

124 All patients had suitable bone marrow aspirates for IR evaluation.

125  
126 **Non-relapse mortality and GVHD** NRM of the overall population of 80 patients was 13.8% at 1  
127 and 3 years, 15.3% at 5 years. In the 66 patients who survived at least 3 months and formed the study  
128 population, NRM was 6.1%, 9.1% and 10.8% at 1, 3 and 5 years respectively. After a median follow-up  
129 of 7.1 years (range 2.6-13.2), the incidence of acute and chronic GVHD was 44.6% and 52.4%. Patients  
130 transplanted at relapse developed more acute GVHD ( $p=0.03$ ), whereas those transplanted upfront  
131 developed more chronic GVHD ( $p=0.034$ ). Overall, main cause of death was disease relapse in both  
132 patients transplanted upfront and at relapse.

133  
134 **Disease response and relapse** At the time of the allograft, 9 (14%) patients were in CR and 21  
135 (32%) in IR, 5 of these were both in CR and IR. After the allograft, all 21 IR patients remained in IR and  
136 25 additional patients entered IR for a total of 45/66 (68%), whereas 24/66 (36%) patients achieved CR,  
137 of whom only 7 were in CR pre-transplant. Median time to IR was 7 months (range 1-48, no. 23),  
138 whereas median time to CR was 8 months (range 1-60, no. 17). Among the 45 patients who achieved IR,  
139 26 performed Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and 2 Computerized Tomography (CT) scans of the  
140 spine at the time of best response, 14 were in the CR/IR group and 14 in the noCR/IR group. Only 4 out  
141 of 28 MRI/TC scans showed myeloma infiltration, and all in the noCR/IR group. Seventeen patients in IR  
142 did not perform any MRI/CT scan. Twenty-one patients showed discrepant results with persistent serum  
143 and/or urine monoclonal component despite the absence of monoclonal marrow plasma cells. Overall,  
144 patients were divided into the following cohorts: 24 in CR and IR (CR/IR group); 21 in IR but not CR  
145 (noCR/IR group); 21 in neither CR nor IR (noCR/noIR group). No patient was in CR but not in IR



146 (CR/noIF group) (Table 2). Among patients in the CR/IR group, 5/24 only achieved CR before IR. Given  
147 the small cohort an analysis could not be carried out. Patients in the 3 cohorts were equally balanced for  
148 age, year of transplant, disease stage, median  $\beta$ 2microglobulin, number of previous therapies,  
149 conditioning, donor gender and type. Conditioning regimen and acute GVHD were not correlated with  
150 disease response group ( $p=0.703$  and  $p=0.282$ , respectively), whereas chronic GVHD ( $p=0.047$ ) and  
151 previous therapy lines ( $p=0.015$ ) were.

152 Overall, at follow up, cumulative incidence of disease relapse was 32%, 50% and 62% at  
153 1, 3 and 5 years, respectively. At the same time-points, it was higher in the noCR/noIR group (67%, 81%,  
154 not applicable) as compared with the noCR/IR group (33%, 62%, 72%) and with the CR/IR group (0%,  
155 13%, 30%,  $p<0.001$ ). Among patients who achieved IR, median time to clinical relapse post-transplant  
156 was 9.7 months in the noCR/IR group and 30 months in the CR/IR one. The overall incidence of extra-  
157 medullary first relapse was 9%, 15% and 20% at 1, 3 and 5 years, respectively. At the same time-points, it  
158 was 5%, 14%, not applicable in the noCR/noIR; 24%, 33%, 44% in the noCR/IR; and 0%, 0%, 4% in the  
159 CR/IR group ( $p<0.001$ ) (Figure 1). Sites of EMD are reported in Table 3. Fourteen (12 at diagnosis and 2  
160 at pre-transplant relapse) out of 66 (21%) developed EMD before the allograft. However, only 3 of these  
161 14 were among those who experienced EMD after the allograft.

162  
163 **Clinical outcomes** Overall, after a median follow-up of 7.1 years (range 2.6-13.2), median OS  
164 and EFS were 5.5 and 1.4 years respectively. In patients in CR, median OS and EFS were not reached and  
165 59 months as compared with 40 and 9 months in those not in CR ( $p<0.001$ ). Median OS and EFS in  
166 patients who achieved IR were 96 and 41 months as compared with 36 and 6 months in those who did not  
167 ( $p<0.001$ ). Landmark analysis showed that being in IR at six months post-transplant was not statistically  
168 associated with better OS and EFS (7.5 vs. 5.0 years.  $p=0.132$  and 4.1 vs. 1.2 years  $p=0.065$ ,  
169 respectively), whereas IR at 12 months post-transplant conferred an advantage in OS (10.3 vs. 2.4  
170  $p=0.018$ ) but not in EFS (3.6 vs. 1 year,  $p=0.634$ ).

171 By patient cohort, median OS and EFS were not reached and 59 months in the CR/IR cohort, 64  
172 and 16 months in the noCR/IR cohort, and 36 and 6 months in the noCR/noIR cohort respectively  
173 ( $p < 0.001$ , both for OS and EFS) (Figure 1). Among patients not in CR, there was a significant advantage  
174 in EFS and a trend for better OS for those who reached IR compared to the noCR/noIR group ( $p = 0.001$   
175 and  $p = 0.063$ , respectively).

176 With the limitations of the small sample size (only 20 patients evaluated), OS in high risk patients  
177 by FISH analysis was 39 months as compared with “not reached” in standard risk patients ( $p = 0.009$ ),  
178 whereas EFS was not statistically significant (19 months vs. 64 months,  $p = 0.097$ ).

179 All patients with EMD at first relapse (no.13) after the allograft eventually died of disease  
180 progression. OS in patients first relapsed with EMD was significantly shorter than in those relapsed  
181 without EMD (39 vs. 57 months,  $p = 0.034$ ). By contrast, there was no difference in OS and EFS between  
182 newly diagnosed patients with EMD and those without.

183 By univariate and multivariate analysis, belonging to the CR/IR cohort was the only significant  
184 predictor for prolonged OS and EFS ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Table 4, Table 5).

## 186 DISCUSSION

187 MRD analysis is currently used for evaluating treatment efficiency and patient risk stratification in  
188 several hematological malignancies [26]. In MM, not only is MRD of primary importance to assess tumor  
189 shrinkage, but it is now regarded as one of the strongest prognostic predictors, irrespective of any given  
190 treatment. MRD analysis by multicolor flow-cytometry has been introduced in many clinical trials on  
191 myeloma. The prognostic impact of achieving IR has been described after conventional chemotherapy,  
192 autografting and, more recently, after new drugs [9-13].

193 Despite some limitations due to its retrospective nature, our study underlines the clinical  
194 importance of achieving IR also after allografting (Figure 1). Post-transplant IR was associated with

195 significantly better OS and EFS. Landmark analyses suggested that IR at 12 months post allografting had  
196 greater impact on OS than IR at 6 months. This might be explained by an ongoing and/or late occurrence  
197 of graft-vs-myeloma effect. However, in patients in IR, clinical outcomes were different in the light of CR  
198 status. OS and EFS were not reached and 59 months in the CR/IR group, and 64 and 16 months in the  
199 noCR/IR group, respectively ( $p<0.007$  and  $p<0.014$ , Figure 1). To stress the role of IR, we also observed  
200 that patients in noCR/IR showed an intermediate clinical outcome compared with those in CR/IR and in  
201 noCR/noIR (Figure 1). IR and CR status was the only variable significantly associated with improved OS  
202 and EFS by multivariate analysis ( $p=0.001$ ), whereas GVHD, the number of previous therapy lines,  
203 conditioning regimen, and year of transplant were not (Table 4, Table 5). Other authors reported similar  
204 outcomes between patients who were MRD negative but not in CR and those MRD positive [13]. Paiva et  
205 al. [11] reported 21% of patients in IR with persistent positive immunofixation after autografting.  
206 Moreover, progression free survival (PFS) was progressively shorter, 71, 65, and 37 months, in patients in  
207 IR/CR, in IR/noCR and in noIR/CR respectively ( $p=0.001$ ). This study clearly showed that the  
208 achievement of remission by flow-cytometry had a higher prognostic value than remission by  
209 immunofixation. In our study, we cannot draw such a definitive conclusion on the role of IR, given the  
210 lack of patients in CR but not in IR.

211 The discrepancy between IR and not CR was observed in 32% of our transplant patients. This  
212 finding may be explained by a number of reasons. It may partly be argued that bone marrow aspirates do  
213 not systemically represent the marrow status and areas of marrow disease may persist. It may however be  
214 more plausible that residual extra-medullary plasma cells continue secreting monoclonal  
215 immunoglobulins in sanctuary sites where agents with anti-myeloma activity and/or a potential *graft-vs.-*  
216 *myeloma* may have little or slower effect. This hypothesis is supported by a higher incidence of extra-  
217 medullary relapse in the IR/noCR cohort: 44% in noCR/IR group vs. 4% in CR/IR group at 5 years  
218 ( $p<0.001$ ). A high incidence of EMD following allografting after reduced-intensity conditioning was  
219 previously reported. In a series of 70 patients enrolled in a Spanish study, extra-medullary involvement  
220 was documented in 10 out of the 27 patients at first relapse (37%) [27]. Interestingly, the incidence of

221 extra-medullary relapses was higher in patients who had developed chronic GVHD. Importantly, these  
222 patients had no evidence of disease recurrence in the marrow at the time of relapse. The Authors  
223 suggested that *graft-vs.-myeloma* effects may have been more efficient in the marrow or, alternatively,  
224 that monoclonal plasma cells involved in extra-medullary relapse were more resistant to donor T-cells. In  
225 another multi-center study, Minnema et al. reported an incidence of EMD of 20.4% in 54 relapsed MM  
226 patients from a total group of 172 treated with sequential autologous-allogeneic non-myeloablative  
227 transplantation [28]. Interestingly, no association with chronic GVHD and EMD at relapse was found. In  
228 our experience, chronic GVHD did not impact on extra-medullary relapse. Overall, the association  
229 between chronic GVHD and *graft-vs.-myeloma* effects, is still debated [29].

230 Finally, the recent observation of a possible increase of the occurrence of EMD, especially after  
231 multiple relapses, may partly be explained by the current natural history of myeloma where patients  
232 commonly live longer as compared to past decades [30]. A study on 1003 MM patients showed an  
233 increase in EMD incidence in the period 2000-2007 as compared with previous years raising concerns,  
234 despite a dramatic improvement in OS, about a correlation with the use of novel agents with potent anti-  
235 myeloma activity and/or a greater use of high-dose therapy [30]. However, the observation that the  
236 increase was evident both at diagnosis and at relapse suggests that other factors are contributory [31]. To  
237 reduce the risk of bias when comparing the patient cohorts of our study, we particularly focused on the  
238 presence of EMD at diagnosis and at first relapse post-transplant. In our series, the presence of EMD at  
239 diagnosis did not correlate with a higher risk of EMD development post transplant and only the noCR/IR  
240 status was significantly associated with extra-medullary relapse. Though EMD before allografting did not  
241 impact on survival, post transplant extra-medullary relapse was associated with poorer outcome in  
242 comparison with bone relapse (OS 39 vs. 57 months,  $p=0.034$ ).

243 Although the potential role of positron emission tomography integrated with computed  
244 tomography (PET/CT) in the assessment of MM continues to be a matter of debate [32], it may be  
245 particularly informative to early diagnose EMD, together with other readily available laboratory assays

246 such as serum free light chains assay [33]. Patients in IR/noCR could be ideal candidates for a clinical  
247 follow up that routinely includes PET/CT to possibly detect extra-medullary relapse before the occurrence  
248 of symptoms.

249 In conclusion, evaluation of MRD by flow-cytometry is a sensitive prognostic tool after  
250 allografting and should routinely be introduced in clinical practice. The achievement of IR is associated  
251 with better clinical outcomes. Moreover, the combination of IR and CR is helpful to identify a subset of  
252 patients (IR-noCR) at higher risk of developing extra-medullary relapse who may benefit from a more  
253 stringent follow up and consolidation treatment with new agents [34,35].

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**FIGURE LEGEND**

369 **Figure 1.** Clinical outcomes in three cohorts of patients defined by achievement of complete  
370 clinical remission (CR) and immunophenotypic remission (IR): patients in CR and IR (CR/IR)  
371 (green line); patients not in CR but in IR (blue line); patients not in CR and not in IR (pink line)