

Results of Proton Beam Therapy without Concurrent Chemotherapy for Patients with Unresectable Stage III Non-small Cell Lung Cancer

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Introduction: This study was performed retrospectively to evaluate the outcome of patients with stage III non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) after proton beam therapy (PBT) alone.

Methods: The subjects were 57 patients with histologically confirmed NSCLC (stage IIIA/IIIB: 24/33) who received PBT without concurrent chemotherapy. The cohort included 32 cases of squamous cell carcinoma, 18 adenocarcinoma, and 7 non-small cell carcinoma. Lymph node metastases were N0 7, N1 5, N2 30, and N3 15. Planned total doses ranged from 50 to 84.5 GyE (median, 74 GyE).

Results: Planned treatment was completed in 51 patients (89%). At the time of analysis, 20 patients were alive, and the median follow-up periods were 16.2 months for all patients and 22.2 months for survivors. The median overall survival period was 21.3 months (95% confidence interval: 14.2–28.4 months), and the 1- and 2-year overall survival rates were 65.5% (52.9–78.0%) and 39.4% (25.3–53.5%), respectively. Disease progression occurred in 38 patients, and the 1- and 2-year progression-free survival rates were 36.2% (23.1–49.4%) and 24.9% (12.7–37.2%), respectively. Local recurrence was observed in 13 patients, and the 1- and 2-year local control rates were 79.1% (66.8–91.3%) and 64.1% (47.5–80.7%), respectively. Grade ≥ 3 lung toxicity was seen in six patients, esophageal toxicity occurred at grade ≤ 2 , and there was no cardiac toxicity.

Conclusion: The prognosis of patients with unresectable stage III NSCLC is poor without chemotherapy. Our data suggest that high-dose PBT is beneficial and tolerable for these patients.

Key Words: Proton, Non-small cell lung cancer, Advanced lung cancer, Radiotherapy.

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Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is a common cause of cancer death worldwide.¹ Surgery is recommended as the first choice for curative local treatment. However, in most cases, the disease is inoperable at the time of presentation because of metastasis or a locally advanced unresectable tumor. Many trials have shown a clinical benefit of concurrent chemoradiotherapy for the prognosis of patients with locally advanced inoperable disease. However, improvement of prognosis and reduction of side effects remains challenging, and previous clinical trials have often involved younger patients or patients with a good performance status.^{2–6}

Treatment for NSCLC has not been established in elderly patients and patients with adverse prognostic factors or comorbidities. Radiotherapy or chemotherapy alone has been used for these patients, but the results of radiotherapy alone with standard doses (60–66 Gy) are extremely poor.^{7–9} Proton beam therapy (PBT) gives superior dose localization compared with conventional radiation and is therefore expected to deliver a high dose to the tumor with less toxicity.¹⁰ In our institution, PBT has been used for patients with advanced lung cancer with the goals of reduced toxicity and better local control.^{11,12} Herein, we report an analysis of 57 patients with unresectable stage III NSCLC who were treated with PBT without concurrent chemotherapy.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Patients

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards defined in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Tsukuba. All patients provided written informed consent after a comprehensive discussion covering the nature of their illness, the therapeutic goal, other therapeutic options, and potential adverse effects.

From 2001 to 2010, 57 patients with stage III NSCLC (stage IIIA/IIIB, 24/33, male/female, 47/10) were treated with PBT (Probeat; Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan) without concurrent chemotherapy. This report is based on data collected up to March 31, 2011. Patient and tumor characteristics are shown in Table 1. The median age of the patients was 72

TABLE 1. Patients and Tumor Characteristics (*n* = 57)

Patients	
Age (yr)	72 (42–85)
Sex	
Male	47
Female	10
Performance status	
0	33
1	20
2	4
Previous chemotherapy	
yes	14
No	43
Tumors	
Stage	
IIIA	
T2N2M0	19
T3N0M0	1
T3N1M0	1
T3N2M0	3
IIIB	
T1N3M0	3
T2N3M0	3
T3N3M0	2
T4N0M0	6
T4N1M0	4
T4N2M0	8
T4N3M0	7
Pathology	
Adenocarcinoma	18
Squamous carcinoma	32
Non-small cell carcinoma	7

years (range, 42–85 years), and 33, 20, and 4 patients had an Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group performance status of 0, 1, and 2, respectively. Concurrent chemotherapy was not performed due to old age, comorbidities (interstitial pneumonitis [IP], chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, obstructive pneumonitis, poor cardiac or lung function, cholangitis, diabetes, and dementia), and patient refusal for 23, 18, and 7 patients, respectively. Five of those 45 patients had induction chemotherapy followed by PBT. In addition, nine other patients had induction chemotherapy—in three the plan was to be reconsidered for surgery after a potential response to chemotherapy, and in six the initial tumor was deemed too bulky for radiotherapy. However, there was no response to chemotherapy in any of those patients. The fraction size was 2.0 to 6.6 GyE (median, 2.0 GyE) given once daily, 5 days per week. A fraction size of 6.6 GyE was used for one patient with a T4N0M0 tumor with vertebral body invasion. The planned total doses were 50 to 84.5 GyE (median, 74 GyE), and the median value for the equivalent dose in 2.0 Gy per fraction (assuming $\alpha/\beta = 10$) was 78.3 GyE. The cohort included 32 cases of squamous cell carcinoma, 18 adenocarcinoma, and 7 non-small cell carcinoma. The lymph node metastasis status was N0 7, N1 5, N2 30, and N3 15. Periodic follow-up examinations were performed for 6 months after

the completion of PBT. Chest computed tomography (CT) after PBT was taken at least once every 3 months for 2 years, and once every 6 months thereafter. Adverse effects were scored using the Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Effects, version 3.0.¹³

Proton Therapy

For treatment planning, chest CT images in 5-mm-thick slices were obtained in the treatment position in a body cast (Engineering System Co., Matsumoto, Japan) during the end-expiratory phase using a respiratory-gated system (Hitachi). The clinical target volume (CTV) encompassed the tumor volume (defined as the primary tumor), clinically positive lymph nodes, and locoregional lymph nodes, plus a margin of 5 to 10 mm in all directions. Prophylactic lymph nodes were not included in the CTV. Clinically positive lymph nodes were defined as nodes ≥ 1 cm visualized on a CT scan or as positron emission tomography (PET)-positive lymph nodes. PET scans were available in 35 patients. The planned target volume covered the CTV with a 5-mm margin in all directions and an additional 5-mm margin in the caudal direction to compensate for respiratory motion.

Treatment was delivered through 200 MeV proton beams during the end-expiratory phase using a respiratory gating system, as described previously.^{13–21} The patient's body was immobilized using an individually shaped body cast (ESFORM; Engineering System Co., Matsumoto, Japan). Respiratory gating was controlled using a laser range finder that monitors the movement of the patient's body surface. The photon equivalent dose (Gray equivalent dose; GyE) was defined as the physical dose (Gy) \times the relative biological effectiveness of the proton beam. Based on the biological response of salivary gland tumor cells, the relative biological effectiveness of the proton beam was assigned a value of 1.1. Before each treatment, correct placement of the patient relative to the radiation field was confirmed fluoroscopically. The treatment time was approximately 15 to 20 minutes for each fraction. Patients were routinely examined once a week and the target volume was shrank due to tumor shrinkage once (*n* = 32), twice (*n* = 11), and thrice (*n* = 1) in 44 patients.

Statistical Analysis

Actuarial survival and disease control rates were calculated from the first day of treatment with PBT using the Kaplan-Meier method. Progression-free survival was determined as the period from the beginning of PBT to the date of relapse, as assessed by imaging according to the Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors, or death. The local control rate was calculated based on the time until the tumor size increased by more than 20%. Differences in survival were evaluated by log-rank test.²² A *p* value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. All statistical analyses were performed using commercially available software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

RESULTS

Planned treatment was completed in 51 patients (89%). The prescribed regimen could not be completed due to

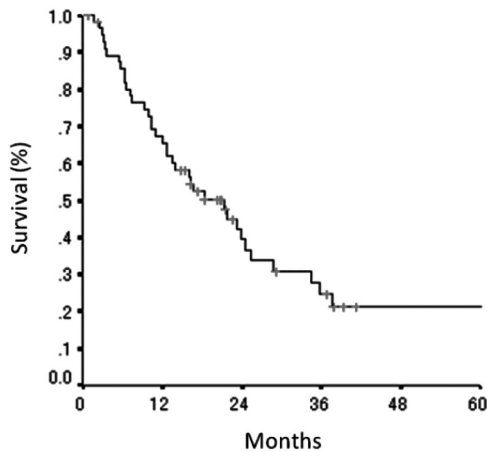


FIGURE 1. Overall survival of all patients treated with proton beam therapy.

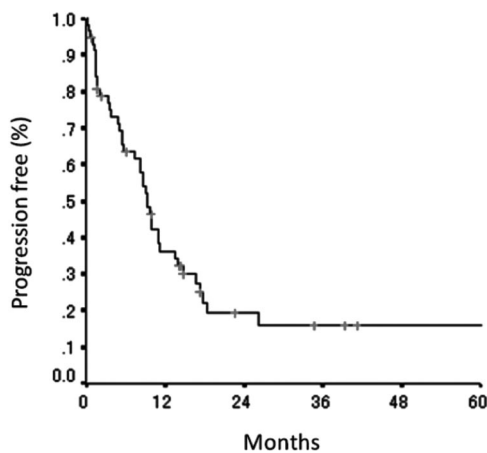


FIGURE 2. Progression-free survival of all patients treated with proton beam therapy.

pneumonitis (three patients), disease progression (two patients), and technical problems (one patient). At the time of analysis, 20 patients were alive, and the median follow-up periods were 16.2 months for all patients and 22.2 months for survivors. The median overall survival period was 21.3 months (95% confidence interval: 14.2–28.4 months), and the overall survival rates at 1 and 2 years were 65.5% (52.9–78.0%) and 39.4% (25.3–53.5%), respectively (Figure 1). Stage (IIIB and IIIA), pathology, and previous chemotherapy had no significant effect on overall survival ($p = 0.53, 0.14,$ and $0.78,$ respectively). However, patients with N0,1 disease had a better outcome than those with N2,3 disease ($p = 0.04$).

Disease progression occurred in 38 patients. The progression-free survival rates at 1 and 2 years were 36.2% (23.1–49.4%) and 24.9% (12.7–37.2%), respectively (Figure 2). Initial relapse sites were as follows: primary tumor or lymph nodes within the field: 7, extrafield regional lymph nodes: 4, primary tumor plus distant metastases: 2, distant metastases only: 17, and intrapulmonary metastases: 8 (Table 2). Local recurrence was observed in 13 patients, and the 1-

TABLE 2. Initial Site of Relapse

Sight	No. of Patients
Primary tumor and lymph node within the field	7
Primary tumor + distant metastasis	2
Extra-field regional lymph node	4
Distant metastasis	17
Bone	6
Brain	2
Liver	1
Stomach	1
Multiple (bone, brain, liver, adrenal, muscle, abdominal lymph nodes)	7
Intrapulmonary metastasis	8

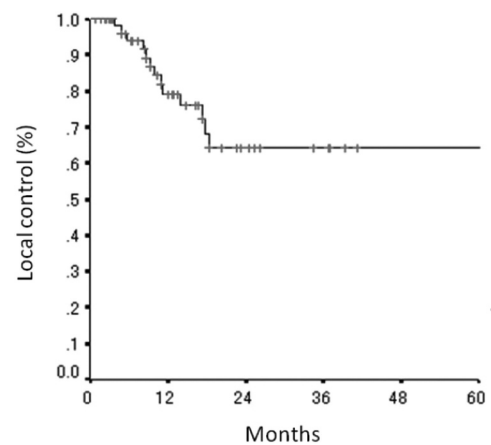


FIGURE 3. Local control for all patients treated with proton beam therapy.

TABLE 3. Early Toxicity ($n = 57$)

	Grade					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Pneumonitis	49	1	4	1	1	1
Esophagitis	48	8	1	0	0	0
Cough	55	1	1	0	0	0
Dyspnea	57	0	0	0	0	0
Skin	36	16	5	0	0	0

and 2-year complete local control rates were 79.1% (66.8–91.3%) and 64.1% (47.5–80.7%), respectively (Figure 3).

Acute and late toxicities are summarized in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. Acute esophageal toxicity was grade ≤ 2 . Grade ≥ 3 acute lung toxicity occurred in three patients. The patient with grade 3 pneumonitis was treated effectively with steroid therapy. One patient developed grade 4 pneumonitis during treatment and had to discontinue treatment, and another patient with severe died of pneumonitis during treatment. These two patients had preexisting severe IP before diagnosis of NSCLC and had taken oral steroid for the disease. They were unable to undergo surgery and photon

radiotherapy because of IP. The patients with grade 5 pneumonitis had received chemotherapy, but the disease had progressed. Proton therapy was also challenging for these two patients but was conducted in accordance with their strong wishes. The median percentage of lung volume receiving 20 Gy (V20) and the mean lung dose were 15% and 7.9 GyE, respectively, in all patients. V20s in the grade 4 and grade 5 patients were 10.5 and 20%, respectively, and mean lung dose were 5.8 and 9.1 GyE, respectively, which were not significantly higher than these values in other patients.

Late toxicity could be evaluated in 48 patients. Fibrotic reactions in the treated regions were observed in follow-up CT in every case. There was no cardiac toxicity. Two patients developed grade 3 dyspnea and one case showed grade 5 hemoptysis; however, this patient had undergone repeated biopsy of the irradiated bronchus.

DISCUSSION

Concurrent chemoradiotherapy has become the standard treatment for patients with locally advanced unresectable NSCLC.²⁻⁶ However, some patients cannot tolerate this

treatment because of its toxicity. These patients are treated with radiotherapy alone, but their survival is extremely poor.⁷⁻⁹ van Meerbeeck et al.²³ reported a randomized study comparing surgery versus radiotherapy of 66 Gy in 33 fractions followed by induction chemotherapy in stage IIIA patients and demonstrated that the mean survival time from random assignment was 17.5 months for patients who received radiotherapy. Also, Atagi et al.²⁴ reported a randomized study comparing concurrent radiotherapy (60 Gy in 30 fractions) versus radiotherapy alone (60 Gy in 30 fractions) for elderly patients (≥ 71 years) with stage III patients and found that the mean survival time of patients treated by radiotherapy alone was 14.2 months.

Recently, it has been proposed that more aggressive local treatment can improve survival.^{6,25,26} Conformal 3D radiotherapy enables delivery of higher doses to the tumor, and favorable survival outcomes have been reported in many dose escalation studies.^{6,25,27-31} With 74 Gy conformal radiotherapy for stage III disease, Kong et al.³¹ obtained overall survival rates at 2 and 3 years of 50 and 47%, respectively. Yuan et al.²⁹ also showed favorable results of dose escalation and omission of elective nodal irradiation for inoperable stage III disease, with delivery of 68 to 74 Gy with concurrent chemotherapy giving 1-, 2-, and 5-year survival rates of 69.9, 39.4, and 25.1%. However, dose escalation is limited by the high incidence of pulmonary and esophageal toxicity. The frequency of effects on the esophagus is influenced by the length of the esophagus receiving 40 to 60 Gy,³⁰ and irradiation of large volumes and at high doses increases the risk of pulmonary complications. Maguire et al.³² found grade ≥ 3 esophagitis and late pulmonary toxicity in 15 and 17% of cases irradiated at 73.6 Gy, and Rosenman et al.³⁰

TABLE 4. Late Toxicity (n = 48)

	Grade					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
Dyspnea	41	2	3	2	0	0
Pneumonitis	44	1	3	0	0	0
Esophagitis	48	0	0	0	0	0
Skin	47	1	0	0	0	0
Hemoptysis	47	0	0	0	0	1

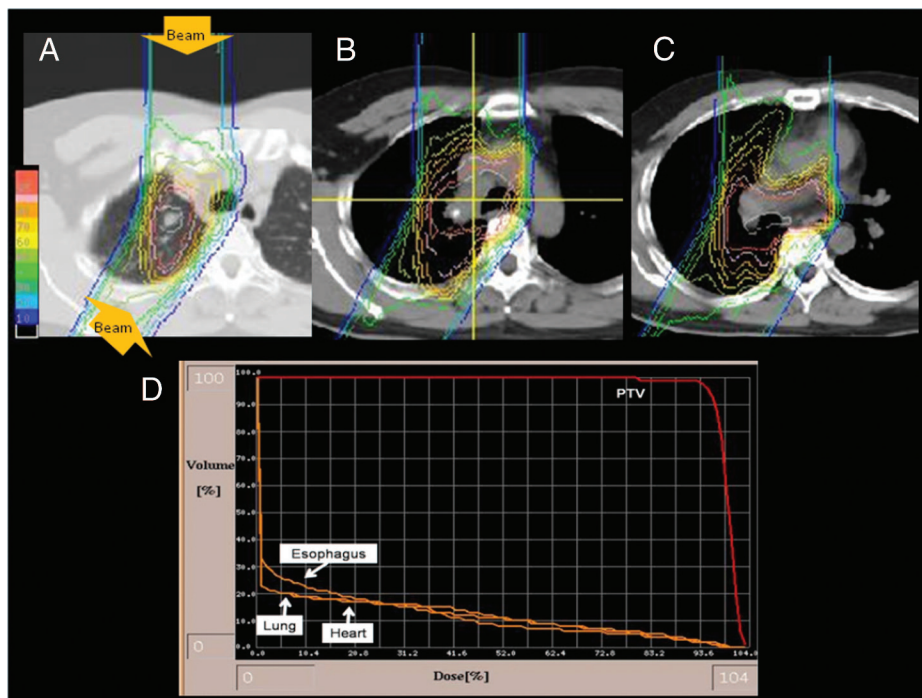


FIGURE 4. Dose distribution (A, B, C) and dose-volume histogram (D) of proton beam therapy. A, Primary tumor. B and C, The doses of esophagus, heart, and lung were reduced.

reported that 8% of patients had grade ≥ 3 esophagitis after irradiation at 66 to 74 Gy.

For most patients in the current study, chemotherapy was not suitable or prior standalone chemotherapy had not been effective. For 14 patients who did not respond to prior chemotherapy, the prognosis was expected to be extremely poor. However, our results for survival were better than those for patients treated with radiotherapy alone or those who responded to induction chemotherapy. Also, cases with severe toxicity were less frequent than in other dose escalation studies. These outcomes may have been due to dose escalation, recent improvement of salvage treatment, and the excellent dose localization of PBT. Figure 4 shows the dose distribution and dose-volume histogram for one patient. Using proton beams allowed the doses to the lung, esophagus, and heart to be reduced.

Chang et al.³³ compared dose-volume histograms in patients with stage III NSCLC treated by photon therapy or PBT and demonstrated that the doses to the normal tissue were lower with PBT, compared with intensity modulated radiotherapy, and that PBT could reduce the doses to the lung, esophagus, and heart. In this study, elective nodal irradiation was omitted, and the 1- and 2-year local control rates were 79.1% (66.8–91.3%) and 64.1% (47.5–80.7%), respectively. The first recurrence at extrafield regional lymph nodes was observed in only four patients (7%). Recent advances in imaging using PET have resulted in more precise detection of lymph node metastases, and therefore we suggest that omission of elective nodal irradiation is reasonable. However, distant metastases is still a problem, and 31 (44.3%) of our patients had initial relapse with intrapulmonary or distant metastases. This emphasizes the difficulty of establishing an effective and less toxic systematic therapeutic approach. However, taking into consideration that the prognosis of patients with unresectable stage III NSCLC who could not be treated with concurrent chemotherapy or who did not respond to induction chemotherapy is expected to be poor, we conclude that our data suggest that high-dose standalone PBT is beneficial and tolerable for these patients.

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