Circulating tumor cells in breast cancer

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ABSTRACT

Breast cancer is a heterogeneous disease. Liquid biopsy is a novel diagnostic tool and may provide answers to many questions related to unevenness in prognosis and ultimate outcome. Different technologies for CTC isolation, enrichment, detection, and characterization are under evaluation. Various clinical trials and meta-analysis have been conducted to define the role of CTC in early and metastatic breast cancer. CTCs are superior to other serum markers for prognostication. Their role as predictive marker remains elusive.

Key words: Circulating tumor cells, Early breast cancer, Metastatic breast cancer, Liquid biopsy

“The cancer cells that crawl”

The last decade has been the era of “revolutionary ideas” and “commendable practice changing” trends in cancer treatment.

Breast cancer has largely been known as a “systemic disease.” Paget’s “seed and soil” hypothesis is one of the accepted theories that may explain the progression of limited disease to distant sites. Owing to emendation in the adjuvant treatment of early breast cancer (EBC) patients, prognosis of these patients is gratifying. Approximately, 20–30% of appropriately treated EBC patients eventually fail and land up in metastatic stage.[1]

Not only there has been upsurge in the invention of novel targeted therapies and immunotherapies, but also the field of cancer diagnostics has undergone immense elaboration. Presently, prognosis and prediction of treatment outcome are merely defined on the characteristics of either resected tumor or biopsy specimen. At times, this may be fallacious and unsatisfactory. The novel diagnostic tools such as liquid biopsy may provide answers to many questions related to unevenness in prognosis and ultimate outcome. Liquid biopsy is collection and/or extraction of anybody fluid and processing it for separating tumor products. It is a liquid biomarker isolated from body fluid and may be called “real-time cancer detection.” The liquid biopsy may yield circulating tumor cells (CTCs), circulating tumor nucleic acids (ctRNA, circulating tumor DNA [ctDNA], miRNA, mRNA, and long non-coding RNA), or exosomes (small membrane-derived vesicles, 40–100 nm, containing various molecules such as signal proteins, miRNA, lipids, and exoDNA).[2] These components of tumor are collectively called as circulating tumor products (CTPs) and may be released into the peripheral blood from either primary tumor or metastatic deposits.

Role of Circulating Tumor Cells in Metastatic Progression

Breast cancer is a heterogeneous disease and may possess different types of cancerous clones even in a single tumor mass. During metastatic progression, the tumor cells must first detach from the primary tumor and intravasate into the bloodstream. This is possible owing to the genetic evolution of clone cells and phenotypic changes in the epithelial cells (epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition [EMT]).[3] These cells in circulation called CTCs must evade immune detection and extravasate into microvessels of a target tissue. The successful formation of a micrometastasis or metastatic lesion, however, is dependent on the ultimate ability of these cells to adapt, survive, proliferate, and induce neoangiogenesis in the target tissue.[4]

Studies in the field of dormant metastasis initially relied on the detection of micrometastasis which as defined by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) and the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) is any tumor focus at any site >0.2 mm diameter and/or >200 confluent tumor cells but none >2.0 mm.[5] Tumor dormancy in these micrometastasis has been reported and accepted as a logical reason for prolonged latency before developing overt metastasis. The prognostic significance of micrometastasis in the case of breast cancer was established in lymph nodes (N1mi) and other sites (M1) as in the case of bone marrow.[6]

With advances in technology focus shifted more toward the detection of isolated tumor cells (ITCs) denoted as N0(i+) and disseminated tumor cells (DTCs) denoted as cM0(i+) by UICC and AJCC and defined as either isolated or clusters of cells <0.2 mm in diameter in lymph nodes as ITCs and any tissue
outside breast and surrounding regional lymph nodes (bone
marrow, peritoneal cavity, and blood) in the absence of clinical/
radiographic findings of overt metastases. The major difference
between DTCs and micrometastasis as defined originally by
UICC and AJCC lies in their non-proliferating dormant state
and absence of stromal reaction. Since epithelial cells are
normally absent in the bone marrow and peripheral circulation,
detection of these kinds of cells in the blood or marrow implies
the presence of CTC or DTC.[7]

The case of CTCs demands special mention. These CTCs are
circulating at very low frequency in the blood, thereby making
their concentration minuscule (~1 CTC per 10^6–10^7 leukocytes).
Such a low concentration necessitates the development of
sensitive and specific approaches for their isolation,
enumeration, and molecular characterization. Butler and Gullino
estimated that 1 g of tumor tissue (10^6 cells) sheds about
3–4 × 10^6 tumor cells into the circulation per day. Not all of
these CTCs are successful in establishing distant metastatic
disease. Fidler et al. demonstrated that after 24 h of intravenous
administration of tumor cells, <0.1% cells remain viable and
<0.01% of these viable CTCs can produce metastasis.[8] Fidler
named those successful as the “decathlon champions” of
CTCs. The predicted half-life of these CTCs is in the range of
1–2.4 h. This low “success rate” could be explained by a model
similar to “survival of the fittest.”

Methods for Circulating Tumor Cells Isolation and
Detection

There are many different technologies for CTC isolation,
enrichment, detection, and characterization [Table 1]. These
technologies may be divided into the phase of enrichment and
isolation, followed by cell detection and cell characterization.
Technology for CTC isolation uses either physical separation or
immunoaffinity-based methods for CTC enrichment.[9] Physical
separation is based on their biophysical and biomechanical
properties which distinguish CTCs from normal blood cells,
e.g., size (larger; >8 μm), less deformability, density, and
electricity. Immunoaffinity-based enrichment is based on a
CTC marker usually a cell surface protein. The “perfect”
CTC marker for immunoaffinity-based enrichment would be
expressed on all CTCs but not on autochthonous blood cells
(leukocytes, endothelial cells, hematopoietic stem cells, and
mesenchymal stem cells). Such marker should not be repressed
or destroyed during the invasion and circulation process.
The search for cell surface markers is ongoing, and many including
EpCAM and Muc1 have been tried for immunoaffinity-based
enrichment. Currently, defined CTC is a cell with nucleus,
visible cytoplasm, and the expression of cytokeratin and
absence of CD45 expression.[10]

Using above-mentioned differential properties of CTCs,
they can be enriched either by positive selection of CTCs,
e.g., EpCAM-based CellSearch; negative depletion of non-
CTCs, e.g., red blood cells by hypotonic lysis or density
gradient-based methods and white blood cells by antibodies
directed against leukocytes, e.g., leukocyte common antigen
(CD45); or on a combination of both. Examples of commercial
tests based on positive selection – CellSearch and CTC chip.
Examples of commercial tests based on negative depletion –
RosetteSep.[11] Finally, CTC detection and characterization can
be done by immunocytochemical (flow cytometry); molecular
(reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction [RT-PCR]); and
functional assays (cell culture – EPISPOT; xenotransplantation).

Hardships in Circulating Tumor Cells Research

Circulating epithelial cells have been reported in patients
without malignancy, e.g. inflammatory conditions and benign
colon diseases, but these conditions are rare.[12]

Many CTC detection techniques including CellSearch depend
solely on positive selection of CTCs based on epithelial
protein expression (e.g. EpCAM and cytokeratins). Since these
expressions may have intra- and inter-tumoral heterogeneity,
this process of positive selection may not be absolutely
accurate. Second, detection of epithelial markers alone may
miss CTCs bearing mesenchymal signatures. These issues have
been addressed by using EpCAM-independent enrichment
approaches by antibody-independent and antibody-dependent
methods.

“Hitting” the functionally competent CTCs is the most needed
and is being tested in vitro immunoSpot ELISPOT test, the
invasion assay (based on active digestion of a fluorescently
labeled cell adhesion matrix), and in vitro xenotransplantation
assay. While most of these tests are underway their clinical
validation, only one test CellSearch, a technology based on
EpCAM-positive enrichment, has received US Food and Drug
Administration (FDA) approval for CTC detection as an aid
in monitoring patients with metastatic breast, colorectal, and
prostate cancer.

Circulating Tumor Cells Subpopulation

Work by various researchers has shown that CTC may have
different phases/ages in its lifespan. It has been reported to
exist as a subpopulation expressing either epithelial markers or
mesenchymal predominance or in intermediate state. It may also
acquire the characteristics of quiescence and self-renewal, thus
behaving as a cancer stem cell (most commonly identified by
CD44+/CD24− or ALDH1 expression).[13] Now, DTCs are also
recognized as a subtype of CTC.

Applications of Isolated Circulating Tumor Products

CTCs isolated from patient’s blood (or other fluids) may
be used for a number of applications such as identifying
specific markers by immunostain; genomic amplification and
translocation by fluorescence in situ hybridization. Nucleic acid
Table 1: Various CTC isolation and detection methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Vendor/Developer</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immunoaffinity assay</td>
<td></td>
<td>EpCAM-coated beads based positive selection using magnetic beads followed by staining and image analysis. Clinically validated in metastatic breast, colorectal and prostate cancer. Only FDA approved platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell search</td>
<td>Veridex</td>
<td>Immunomagnetic bead enrichment (EPCAM, MUC-1, mesothelin) followed by nested PCR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adna test</td>
<td>Adnagen</td>
<td>CTC enrichment assay using the combination of anti-CK and anti-EPCAM antibodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-EPCAM, Anti-CK antibody</td>
<td>Glenn Deng, Stanford University</td>
<td>Functionalized structured medical wire coated with anti-EPCAM antibodies placed directly into the blood stream of a patient via an indwelling catheter. Stays in the arm vein for 30 min and thus enables the capture of CTCs in vivo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell collector</td>
<td>Gilupi</td>
<td>EpCAM-coated chip to capture EPCAM expressing cells followed by elution and electrical counting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biofluidica CTC</td>
<td>Biofluidica</td>
<td>Initial depletion of CD45 followed by EPCAM expressed selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epispot</td>
<td>Laboratoire de virologie</td>
<td>Biotin-tagged antibodies that bind selectively to CTCs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microfluidic devices</td>
<td></td>
<td>Label-free technology that uses lateral traps to capture tumor cells based on size and deformability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oncocee</td>
<td>Biocept</td>
<td>Microvortices are used to significantly increase the number of interactions between target CTCs and the antibody-coated chip surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearcell</td>
<td>Clearbridge</td>
<td>CTC isolation is achieved by flowing a sample over a proprietary designed set of 56,320 microfluidic capture chambers. The Systems will then characterize the cells for downstream analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herringbone-chip</td>
<td>Daniel Haber and Mehmet toner</td>
<td>Microporous membrane filter allows size selective isolation of CTCs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De novo Sciences Jetta 400</td>
<td>Wayne Klohs, Sunitha Nagrath, Gil Omenn, David Parkinson, Ken Pienta</td>
<td>Lithographically fabricated filters with precision pore dimensions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size based devices</td>
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<td>Uses size and deformability using a weir-type step filter</td>
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<td>Screencell</td>
<td>Screencell</td>
<td>Porous barrier density gradient centrifugation technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellsieve</td>
<td>Creativ microtech</td>
<td>Immunomagnetic enrichment of target cells. Individual extraction of isolated cells based on their physical characteristics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Size and deformability</td>
<td>Angle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parsortix</td>
<td>Angle</td>
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<td>Density</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oncoquick</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
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CTC: Circulating tumor cell, FDA: Food and Drug Administration, PCR: Polymerase chain reaction

(CDNA or RNA) can be extracted and applied for sequencing, quantitative RT-PCR, and expression profile analysis. It may also be possible to obtain cell culture from the isolated viable CTC. Haber et al. beautifully narrated the difference between utilities of CTC and cfDNA. cfDNA may be largely utilized for amplification, deletion, translocation, point mutation, and chromosomal abnormalities.[14]

Circulating Tumor Cells in Breast Cancer Patients

There have been various clinical trials and meta-analysis [Table 2] to understand and establish the role of CTC in breast cancer in the last few years. CTCs have been separated in both metastatic breast cancer (MBC) and, later, EBC patients. Below is the brief understanding of the so far gained knowledge regarding CTCs in breast cancer.

Circulating Tumor Cells in Metastatic Breast Cancer

The utmost need to improve the survival of MBC patients led Cristofanilli et al. to test the hypothesis that the levels of CTC could predict survival. They conducted a prospective, multicenter study in 177 measurable MBC patients. Levels of CTCs were tested both before the start of treatment and at first follow-up visit, that is, approximately at three to four weeks. As a control, circulating epithelial cells were rare in healthy (mean, 0.1 ± 0.2 per 7.5 ml of whole blood) and benign breast disorders (mean, 0.1 ± 0.9 per 7.5 ml of whole blood). A Cutoff threshold of ≥5 CTC/7.5 ml was reported as binary notation capable of conferring prognostic significance. Patients with CTCs ≥5 per 7.5 ml of whole blood, as compared with the group with fewer than 5 CTCs per 7.5 ml, had a shorter median progression-free survival (PFS) (2.7 vs. 7.0 months, P < 0.001) and shorter
Overall survival (OS) (10.1 vs. >18 months, $P < 0.001$). At the first follow-up visit after the initiation of therapy, this difference between the groups persisted (PFS, 2.1 vs. 7.0 months; $P < 0.001$; OS, 8.2 vs. >18 months; $P < 0.001$). Investigators concluded that this cutoff gave a reliable estimation of disease progression and survival earlier than estimations made with the use of traditional imaging methods (3–4 vs. 8–12 weeks after the initiation of therapy, respectively). The multivariate analysis showed that the levels of CTCs at baseline and at the first follow-up visit were the most significant predictors of PFS and OS of all the variables.$^{[15]}$

In a similar study at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, CTCs were counted in 151 patients of MBC. These patients were also evaluated for other prognostic cancer markers such as hormone receptor and Her2 status along with CA 27.29. Cases with 5 or more CTC had a median OS of 13.5 months. The median OS for those with <5 CTC was above 29 months. The research group rested their case stating that CTCs have superior and independent prognostic value.$^{[16]}$

Based on the background that increased CTCs were associated with poor prognosis in terms of PFS and OS, Smerage et al. (SWOG SO500 trial) tested the response of change of chemotherapy after one cycle of first-line chemotherapy in MBC patients. Patients who had increased CTCs after 21 days of therapy were randomized either into continuing same therapy or change of therapy. No difference in survival was reported in these two arms (10.7 months and 12.5 months, respectively, $P = 0.98$). Median survival of patients who did not have increased CTCs at baseline and whose CTCs dropped after first cycle of therapy were 35 and 23 months, respectively. The prognostic value of CTCs was confirmed, and investigators concluded that early change of therapy was not effective in changing OS. They suggested that such findings may be predictive of innate chemotherapy refractoriness of the tumor and strongly recommended the clinical trial participation of patients having increased CTCs after one cycle of therapy.$^{[17]}$

Riethdorf et al. suggested the differential responses to treatment between the primary tumor and metastasis and/or CTCs.$^{[18]}$ CirCe01 and STIC CTC are the currently undergoing clinical utility trials based on CTC count.

Any disease has some risk factors that may be either prognostic of the disease behavior or predictive of the treatment response. In advanced breast cancer, traditional prognostic factors do not always adequately predict treatment response. Giuliano et al. in their retrospective study explored the role of CTC counts as predictors of disease evolution in breast cancer patients with limited metastatic dissemination. A pre-treatment level ≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml was associated with an increased baseline number of metastatic sites compared with <5 CTCs/7.5 ml ($P = 0.0077$). At the time of treatment failure, development of new lesions was significantly greater and frequent in

### Table 2: Trials in CTC breast

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<td>≥5 CTC/7.5 ml: Cut-off for prognostic significance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cristofanilli et al.</td>
<td>≥5 CTC/7.5 ml had shorter median PFS and OS levels at baseline and at first follow-up most significant predictors of PFS and OS</td>
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<td>Cristofanilli et al.</td>
<td>CTCs have superior and independent prognostic value</td>
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<td>Smerage et al.</td>
<td>Early change of therapy was not effective in changing OS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuliano et al.</td>
<td>≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml</td>
<td>Retrospective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuliano et al.</td>
<td>Increased baseline number of metastatic sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuliano et al.</td>
<td>Development of new lesions were significantly greater on treatment failure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giuliano et al.</td>
<td>Significant shorter time to visceral metastasis</td>
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<td>Pierga et al.</td>
<td>Confirmed independent poor prognostic value associated with increased CTCs in terms of survival</td>
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<td>Bidard et al.</td>
<td>Established CTC as dynamic prognostic marker of PFS and OS</td>
<td>Pooled analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTC in early breast cancer</td>
<td>Established CTC as a significant independent prognostic factor for DFS, DDFS, BCSS and OS</td>
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<td>Janni et al.</td>
<td>In EBC, at least 1 CTC may be of value</td>
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<td>CTCs are prognostic for reduced DFS, distant DFS, BCSS, and OS before the start of systemic treatment</td>
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<tr>
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<td>CTCs are prognostic for DFS after completion of adjuvant chemotherapy</td>
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<td>Rack et al.</td>
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<td>Lucci et al.</td>
<td>Detection of one or more circulating tumor cells at start of therapy predicted both decreased PFS and OS</td>
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<td>Lucci et al.</td>
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<td>Pachmann et al.</td>
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<td>Hall et al.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Piegra et al.</td>
<td>CTC detection at baseline independently predicted poor 3-year DFS and 3-year OS</td>
<td>Pooled analysis</td>
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CTC: Circulating tumor cell, DFS: Disease-free survival, OS: Overall survival, RFS: Relapse-free survival

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**Note:** The above text is a transcription from the document. The original layout, formatting, and some symbols may not be fully represented in this text format.
patients with ≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml compared with those with <5 CTCs/7.5 ml. Patients with predominantly nonvisceral metastatic sites and single metastatic site, with ≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml had remarkably significant shorter time to visceral metastases and development of new metastatic sites compared with <5 CTCs/7.5 ml. Patients with increased CTCs had worse survival. Thus, they concluded that baseline CTCs counts can be used as an early predictor of metastatic potential in breast cancer patients with limited metastatic dissemination.[19]

An important question that intrigues the mind of oncologist is whether CTC is a best prognostic marker to date. The first prospective observational study in this regard was IC 2006-04. The study confirmed the independent poor prognostic value associated with increased CTCs in terms of survival.[20] Bidard et al. reported the prospectively planned secondary objective of the IC 2006-04 study, the comparison of CTC with different serum tumor markers (carcinoembryonic antigen [CEA], cancer antigen 15-3 [CA 15-3], and cytokeratin fragment 21-1) and non-tumor markers (lactate dehydrogenase and alkaline phosphatase).[21] Both the investigators reported no clear prognostic superiority of CTC over serum markers. To establish the clinical validity of CTC quantification and other serum markers, a pooled analysis including 1944 patients over 17 centers was performed. Increased CTC (≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml) at baseline, after 3–5 and 6–8 weeks of therapy conferred significantly poor survival in terms of PFS and OS. Bidard et al. reported the superiority of CTC over serum markers (CEA and CA15.3) and defined CTC as “dynamic prognostic marker of PFS and OS which should be interpreted in conjugation with other features; addition of CTC count at baseline and monitoring during treatment significantly increases the prognostic value of the model.”[22]

### Circulating Tumor Cells in Early Breast Cancer

Over the past few years, integration of multidisciplinary approach for treating breast cancer has boosted the cure rate and survival of breast cancer patients. Still number of appropriately treated EBC patients, approximately 20–30%, ultimately fail and land up in metastatic stage.[1] Pantel et al. have reported that occult micrometastasis is out-of-reach of high-resolution technologies.[23] Questioning the traditional prognostic factors and peeping into CTCs notoriety gives many plausible explanations.

In the early phase of CTC era, DTC, a subtype of CTC, was shown to have prognostic value in EBC patients. Braun et al. in their pooled analysis of 4703 patients, having DTC in bone marrow, reported poor outcome in these patients before initiation of therapy.[6] Ianni et al. conducted a pooled analysis of 3173 patients having non-metastatic (Stage I–III) breast cancer from 5 breast cancer institutes. The presence of CTCs was associated with a large tumor size, increased lymph node involvement, unfavorable histological grade, and lobular tumor type, whereas no significant association was identified between CTC presence and menopausal status, hormone-receptor status, or HER2 status. Patients with CTCs more often received neoadjuvant and/or adjuvant chemotherapy than did patients without CTCs. Presence of CTC was a significantly independent prognostic factor for disease-free survival (DFS), distant DFS, breast cancer-specific survival, and OS. CTC was not significantly associated with prognosis for nodal stage N0 disease and also in hormone receptor negative/HER2-positive tumors. They stressed upon that though ≥5 CTCs/7.5 ml is the accepted cutoff in metastatic setting, CTCs prognostic relevance in EBC is independent of cutoff value, and presence of at least 1 CTC may be of value.[24]

Another large prospective, randomized, multicentric study (SUCCESS, Germany) which gives insight into the role of CTC in EBC was reported by Rack et al. CTCs were analyzed in 2026 patients with EBC before adjuvant chemotherapy and in 1492 patients after chemotherapy. They reported increased CTCs to be a prognostic marker for reduced DFS, distant DFS, breast cancer-specific survival, and OS before the start of systemic treatment and for DFS after completion of adjuvant chemotherapy. CTC detection was more in node-positive patients as compared to node negative (P < 0.001). No association was found with tumor size, grading, or hormone receptor status. Interestingly, the initially CTC-negative patients who subsequently developed CTCs fared better than initially CTC-positive patients whose CTCs disappeared post-treatment, suggesting CTC clearance does not predict chemotherapy benefit.[25]

Lucci et al. conducted a prospective study of 302 chemo-naive patients with Stage I to III operable breast cancer undergoing surgery for their primary tumors between February 2005 and December 2010 at MD Anderson Cancer Center and showed that detection of one or more CTCs at start of therapy predicted both decreased PFS and OS.[26]

A German group studied 35 women with EBC and enumerated their CTC before any treatment. 17 tested positive for CTC and the other 18 tested negative. Follow-up data showed that the group that tested negative for CTC had a median OS of 125 months. In contrast, the group with 5 or more CTC/7.5 ml of blood had a median OS of only 61 months.[27]

### Circulating Tumor Cells in Inflammatory Breast Cancer

An intermediate between EBC and MBC is IBC (inflammatory breast cancer). Hall et al. in their work reported the prognostic significance of one or more CTC in 7.5 ml blood who received neoadjuvant therapy for IBC. Using this cutoff, approximately 15–20% of non-IBC patients have CTC detection.[28] Hall et al. reported CTC detection, with same criteria, in 27% of patients. Hall et al. reported CTC detection, with same criteria, in 27% of patients. In IBC, CTC detection was not associated with either tumor characters or with pathological complete response. They reported the major prognostic impact on the relapse-free survival.
Piegra et al., recently, in the pooled analysis of two multicentric Phase II trials (BEVERLY 1 and 2) of neoadjuvant therapy combined with bevacizumab showed that CTC detection is an independent prognostic factor in 52 primary HER2+ IBC patients. At baseline, 39% patients had ≥1 detectable CTC. After 4 cycles of CT, a dramatic drop in CTC to a rate of 9% was observed. Pathological complete response rate was 40% and was associated with the absence of hormonal receptor and HER2+ status. CTC detection at baseline independently predicted the significant difference in 3-year DFS (70% vs. 39% for patients with < 1 vs. ≥ 1 CTC/7.5 mL and 3-year OS [92% vs. 56%]).[30]

Circulating Tumor Cells in HER2+ Breast Cancer

Yet, another poor prognostic factor in the outcome of breast cancer patients is HER2 overexpression. Wulfing et al. and Hayashi et al. have reported the poor prognostic value of HER2+ CTC in comparison to HER2-CTC in patients with EBC and MBC, respectively. Wulfing even reported the HER2 discordance rate between primary tumor and CTC in EBC patients.[30]

Currently, treatment decisions at the time of MBC relapse are generally made based on the receptor status of the primary breast cancer. However, discordance in receptor status between primary tumor and disease recurrence has been observed in up to 10% of patients. It is either because of clonal evolution or shedding of the “hidden” HER2+ cells from the primary. How shall those patients be treated who are negative for Her2 amplification at primary site but exhibit amplification in CTCs? As yet, there are minimal data addressing this. Meng et al. reported in their retrospective study of 24 patients with MBC and HER2 – primary tumor, that four of nine patients with HER2+ CTCs at the time of metastatic disease received trastuzumab. Of these, one had rapid remission of symptoms and complete response on imaging, two patients had partial responses, and one no response.[31]

The question remains open and continues to beg the answer. DETECT III, randomized phase III trial (NCT01619111), and French CirCtE T-DM1, single arm study shall answer this question.

Circulating Tumor Cells as Liquid biopsy

Imaging allows obtaining a biopsy from most metastatic sites and is relatively cheap and standard of care but fraught with serious morbidity occasionally and a rare fatality. In light of this, analysis of biomarkers on CTC is an attractive option and has been alluded to as liquid biopsy. Serial assessment of biomarker status, therefore, can only be realistically obtained from a less invasive procedure such as harvested CTCs. The barriers to use of liquid biopsy, however, are many such as cost, availability, validated platforms, and clinical validity and utility of test outcomes. However, needless to say that concept is appealing.

Circulating Tumor Cells as Companion to Imaging in Determining Response to Treatment

Investigators have shown that CTCs evaluation may be more accurate than imaging used to evaluate the effectiveness of treatment in MBC. In a pioneering work performed in 2006, MBC patients had imaging tests done before and 10 weeks after they began therapy. CTC was measured 4 weeks after the start of therapy. The group that responded to treatment based on imaging tests but had 5 or more CTCs suffered a poorer outcome than the cohort with CTC counts below 5 but less definite response on imaging. These findings suggest that the levels of CTC were far more important at predicting survival compared to the actual visual changes noted on imaging tests. In addition, there was a 15% disagreement in the interpretation of the imaging tests between the two radiologists, compared to <1% variation in the results of CTC testing. The precision of CTCs enumeration coupled with superior response predictor demonstrates the potential of CTCs vis-à-vis radiologic studies and seems to be a more robust predictor of survival than is a radiographic response.[32]

Conclusion

CTCs are the unique and novel way of liquid biopsy. Ease of accessing blood sample or any other fluids do merit over other invasive procedures. CTCs bear prognostic significance in breast cancer patients (early, inflammatory, and metastatic). CTCs are superior to other serum markers for prognostication. Their role as predictive marker remains elusive. CTC evaluation is limited by the availability of current isolation technologies and their cost. Various trials are underway to better understand the validity and utility of CTC in breast cancer.

The increasing use of precision molecules in the treatment of cancer and acquired resistance thereof may propel the use of liquid biopsy to seek secondary mutations. Can the liquid biopsy reliably and accurately mirror the changes in the tumor sites is a question that needs to be answered, however, this seems to be an important potential use. With thousands of targeted molecule in development, an early intermediate end point will be handy in speedy launch of newer drugs.

The methods of enumeration and harvesting CTCs are many but lack analytical validity which in any case is by comparison to cell search system (the only FDA approved system) which itself has received criticism for relying on EPCAM-based positive selection, the expression of which may actually be suboptimal during EMT. Other new systems are under evaluation and may have proven ability to address the heterogeneity of CTC.

There are several challenges to making CTCs as a multifunctional cancer biomarker, but such challenges also provide opportunity for innovative and ingenious discoveries. The limit of science is decided by the ability of the human
mind to think and once the mind is seeded by a new thought the answers will come. History bears testimony to this fact.

References


