Case Report

Human Papillomavirus in Non-Small-Cell Lung Cancer: The Impact of EGFR Mutations and the Response to Erlotinib

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A B S T R A C T

It has been suggested that human papillomavirus (HPV) could participate in the development of non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC). A higher HPV infection rate has been reported in the NSCLC samples from Asian non-smoker patients, with adenocarcinomas or responders to EGFR tyrosine kinase inhibitors (EGFR-TKI). We explored a potential relationship between EGFR mutation, response to EGFR-TKI and HPV infection in Western NSCLC patients. We retrospectively analyzed 40 NSCLC samples and the impact of age, gender, histology, tobacco habit and sample type. HPV infection rate was 2.5% and it was not statistically modified by any analyzed variable, although the limited sample size did not provide definitive conclusions. The rate of HPV infection in NSCLC should be studied in patients with EGFR mutations or a tendency toward presenting them.

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Virus del papiloma humano en cáncer de pulmón no microcítico. Impacto de mutaciones del EGFR o respuesta a erlotinib

R E S U M E N

Se ha sugerido que el virus del papiloma humano (HPV) puede originar cáncer de pulmón no microcítico (NSCLC). La tasa de infección HPV es mayor en NSCLC de asáticos, no fumadores, con adenocarcinoma o respuesta a inhibidores tirosin-cinasa del receptor del factor de crecimiento epidermico (EGFR-TKI). Hemos explorado retrospectivamente la relación entre mutaciones EGFR o respuesta a EGFR-TKI e infección HPV en 40 pacientes con NSCLC, considerando el impacto del sexo, edad, subtipo histológico, tabaquismo y tipo de muestra. La tasa de infección HPV fue 2.5%, y no influyó ninguna variable analizada, aunque el escaso tamaño muestral no permite conclusiones definitivas. La tasa de infección HPV en NSCLC debía revisarse en pacientes con mutaciones EGFR o tendencia a presentarlas.

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Introduction

Non-small-cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is the most frequent and lethal tumor in our setting. Tobacco smoke is the cause of more than 90% of cases, but it also appears in unexposed. This implicates the existence of other etiologic factors. In 1979, Syrjänen suggested that human papillomavirus (HPV) DNA, associated with the development of other cancers, could participate in the development of NSCLC.

The rate of HPV infection in NSCLC depends on multiple variables and can increase with the response to Gefitinib, an endothelial growth factor receptor-tyrosine kinase inhibitor (EGFR-TKI) mainly active in mutated EGFR. The relationship between HPV infection and the presence of EGFR mutations in NSCLC has never been researched, although both phenomena coincide in similar patients: Asians, women, non-smokers, those with adenocarcinomas (ADC) and Gefitinib responders. In order to explore this possibility and to confirm the viability of the project and that the initial results support those in the literature, we retrospectively analyzed 40


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Table 1: Percentage of HPV infection in NSCLC samples. According to the variables of our sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (male/female)</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>38-80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample type</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EGFR mutation</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression-free survival Erlotinib</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to Erlotinib</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The main limitation of our study is the small sample size (N=40) that does not allow us to draw conclusions about the incidence and association of HPV infection in NSCLC in a Mediterranean population. But our objective was merely to explore the association between HPV infection and presence of EGFR mutations, validate the technique and verify whether the preliminary data supported reports in the literature in order to extend the series in future research. Meanwhile, this and other manuscripts with a similar or smaller number of cases3-5 spark discussion and are the first to directly analyze the relationship between Erlotinib sensitivity, presence of EGFR mutations and HPV infection in NSCLC.

HPV infection in NSCLC depends on geographic area. A meta-analysis of 37 studies5 (N=2435) situates its incidence between 1% and 78.3%, with a mean of 7.1% in western countries and 20.4% in Asia. Another meta-analysis7 (N=4508) reduces the global rate of infection from 24.5% to 16% in Europe and North America and increases it to 35.7% in Asia. The low rate of HPV infection (0.5%) described in 399 Italian patients with NSCLC8 coincides with ours (2.5%), although this would need to be confirmed in more patients.
HPV infection also depends on the sample analyzed. A Canadian study\(^9\) (No.=1241) and a Croatian study\(^10\) (No.=84) also found no differences between NSCLC and healthy control subjects when comparing bronchial suction or serum samples, but there was evidence of difference in the biopsies. Two Italian studies\(^3,11\) reported infection rates of 21% and 14%, respectively, when they analyzed 21 paraffin blocks and 95 fresh samples of NSCLC. And the Health Institute in Rome\(^12\) reported 21.7% HPV infection in 2468 NSCLC biopsies.

HPV is found in tumor cells and not in healthy neighboring cells,\(^13\) and it is therefore more difficult to find evidence of its DNA in bronchial suction or serum samples with less tumor cellularity. Although all our samples presented tumors, there were no differences between biopsies, cell buttons and cytology samples.

Differences have been reported in HPV infection according to NSCLC histology. A Polish article\(^14\) found no differences between 22 squamous-cell carcinomas, 13 ADC and 5 large-cell carcinomas; meanwhile, a French paper\(^15\) reports a greater incidence of ADC in 31 frozen samples (11% vs 25%). In Asia, a Japanese study\(^5\) with 36 NSCLC observed no differences between squamous carcinomas and ADC (10% vs 9%); a Chinese study\(^16\) with 72 squamous-cell carcinomas, 37 ADC and 71 healthy control subjects found more HPV in squamous-cell carcinoma (51%, 16%, and 22%, respectively); another Japanese article\(^1\) found more HPV in ADC than in squamous carcinomas (30% vs 7%; \(P=0.044\)); and in other studies,\(^17,18\) it is 2.3 times higher in women, non-smokers and ADC. In Asian studies,\(^13,19\) HPV infection in NSCLC is higher in women (57.6% vs 41.1%, \(P=0.048\)) and non-smokers (10.12 times higher).

For the first time, our study probes the possibility that HPV infection is more frequent in patients with EGFR mutation or those who are sensitive to Erlotinib. It has been published that HPV infection increases in NSCLC patients responders to Gefitinib\(^3\) (75% vs 0%) and this mainly acts on mutated EGFR. The most frequent EGFR mutations are in women, Asians, non-smokers and those with ADC, which is the population with greater incidence of HPV.

**Conclusion**

Our data do not confirm the relationship between HPV infection in NSCLC and presence of EGFR mutations or response to Erlotinib. Nevertheless, the determination technique is viable and this hypothesis merits further research with a more extensive series.

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare having no conflicts of interest.

**References**