Endoscopic transpapillary biopsies and intraductal ultrasonography in the diagnostics of bile duct strictures: a prospective study

D Domagk, C Poremba, K-H Dietl, N Senninger, A Heinecke, W Domschke, J Menzel

Background: In bile duct strictures, examination of wall layers by intraductal ultrasonography (IDUS) performed during endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) may be diagnostically useful.

Methods: In the present study 60 patients with bile duct strictures of unknown aetiology were examined preoperatively by ERCP, including transpapillary biopsies and IDUS. Histopathological correlation was available for all patients undergoing these procedures.

Results: Postoperative diagnosis revealed 30 pancreatic carcinomas, 17 bile duct cancers, three gall bladder cancers, and 10 benign bile duct strictures. Using endoscopic transpapillary forceps biopsies (ETP), a correct preoperative diagnosis was achieved in 36 of 60 patients (60% of cases). Among the 50 malignant tumours, preoperative diagnosis by ETP revealed a sensitivity of 52% and a specificity of 100%. ERCP supplemented by IDUS allowed for correct preoperative diagnosis in 83% of cases (50 of 60 patients), which was significantly higher than the accuracy of ETP (p=0.008). By combining ETP with IDUS, a correct preoperative diagnosis was made in 59 of 60 patients resulting in an accuracy rate of 98%.

Conclusions: Because of its low accuracy, exclusive use of ETP is not a reliable diagnostic tool for a definitive preoperative diagnosis of bile duct strictures. By combining IDUS and ETP with ERCP however, preoperative diagnostic accuracy can be improved substantially.

Abbreviations: ERCP, endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography; IDUS, intraductal ultrasonography; ETP, endoscopic transpapillary forceps biopsies; EUS, endoscopic ultrasonography.
considered characteristic of inflammatory lesions. Endosonographic criteria used in the present study are the generally accepted criteria for describing bile duct tumours and tumours of the pancreas. Penetration was defined as a continuation of the main echo poor tumour mass into adjacent structures. Tumours invading vascular structures or both hepatic ducts were classified as irresectable. No adverse events related to IDUS occurred during examination or follow up.

Transpapillary biopsies (n=4–8) were taken out of the biliary strictures by endoscopic forceps (MTW Endoscopy, Wesel, Germany). The tissue specimen was taken out of the bile duct stricture by either straight or angled endoscopic forceps. If insertion of the endoscopic forceps into the stricture was not possible, biopsies were taken from the lower margins of the bile duct stenosis. Histological analysis of the tissue specimens taken during endoscopy and surgery was performed at the Department of Pathology, and the specimens were independently assessed by two experienced pathologists. The tissue specimens transpapillarily. After performing IDUS and after assessment of the transpapillary biopsy, other imaging modalities (for example, computed tomography, endoscopic ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging) were performed as additional diagnostic modalities (for example, computed tomography, endoscopic ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging) were performed as additional diagnostic modalities (for example, computed tomography, endoscopic ultrasound, magnetic resonance imaging) were performed as additional diagnostic modalities. If the biopsy was found to be highly dysplastic—that is, cytologically highly dysplastic epithelial cells were found but invasion could not be proved because of the lack of stroma in the biopsy specimen—the case was considered positive for the purposes of statistical analysis. Significance was calculated by McNemar's test and 95% confidence intervals were determined. Differences were considered statistically significant if p<0.05.

**RESULTS**

**Final diagnoses**

In the present study series of 60 patients, the final diagnoses obtained from histopathological examination of the surgical specimen revealed 30 pancreatic carcinomas, 17 bile duct cancers, three gall bladder cancers, and 10 benign bile duct strictures (table 1). Figure 1 shows the allocation of the strictures modified according to the criteria of Tompkins and colleagues.

**Forceps biopsy analysis**

Using ETP, a correct preoperative diagnosis was achieved in 33 of 60 patients (60%; 26 patients with malignancies, 10 patients with non-malignant lesions). Among the 50 malignant tumours, preoperative diagnosis by ETP revealed a sensitivity of 52% and a specificity of 100% (table 2). Biopsy histology was regarded as malignancy positive when invasion (n=22 patients) or highly dysplastic cells without stroma (n=4 patients) were found in tissue specimens. In this study, no further classification was made by the pathologist with regard to the origin (bile duct, pancreas, gall bladder) of the neoplastic lesion—that is, the samples were reported as adenocarcinomas with their respective histological grade (n=22) or as...
cytologically positive cells with high grade dysplasia (n=4). All four cases with high grade dysplasia subsequently proved to be invasive carcinomas on examination of the surgical specimen. In another 15 patients, low grade dysplastic cells (n=2 patients) or ulcerative/highly inflammatory cells (n=13 patients) were encountered in samples without definite signs of malignancy.

**Intraductal ultrasonography**

IDUS allowed correct diagnosis of bile duct carcinomas with sensitivity and specificity rates of 88% and 86%, respectively (table 2). For neoplastic lesions of pancreatic origin infiltrating the bile duct, IDUS had a sensitivity of 90% and a specificity of 83% (see fig 2). For carcinomas originating in the gall bladder with infiltration of the bile duct, no separate statistical analysis was performed because of the small number of cases (n=3). ERCP supplemented by IDUS allowed for correct preoperative diagnosis in 83% of cases (50 of 60 patients, 48 patients with malignancies, two patients with non-malignant lesions), which is significantly superior to the accuracy of ETP (60%; p=0.008). By combining ETP with IDUS (table 2), a correct preoperative diagnosis was made in 59 of 60 patients (49 patients with malignancies, 10 patients with non-malignant lesions) resulting in an accuracy rate of 98%. Forty eight of 50 cases (92%) with a final diagnosis of “malignancy” (obtained from histopathological examination of the surgical specimen) had endosonographically been classified as clearly malignant according to the IDUS criteria mentioned above. IDUS did not show typical endosonographic features of malignancies in two of these 50 patients. In these two patients...
the differential diagnosis was pancreatic carcinoma versus inflammatory lesion in the head of the pancreas by IDUS criteria (fig 3).

Comparing IDUS and ETP with regard to localisation of biliary stenoses (proximal, middle, and distal third), McNemar’s test proved IDUS to be superior to ETP in the diagnostics of distal biliary stenoses (p=0.022). Because of the small number of cases, no statistically significant difference was found between IDUS and ETP in bile duct strictures of the proximal (n=12) and mid third (n=7) (table 3).

**DISCUSSION**

Diagnosis of strictures affecting the biliary tract using non-surgical methods is highly desirable to allow for adequate planning of surgical or non-surgical treatments. Although many patients are managed without histological confirmation, confirmation allows accurate decision making with reference to total patient management, including surgery, endoscopic stenting, chemotherapy, or radiotherapy. Brush cytology is considered an accurate technique in providing a cytological diagnosis of bile duct strictures. However, recently published studies on brush cytology or transpapillary forceps biopsy of bile duct strictures did not compare these techniques with histopathology of resection specimens in all patients. In the present study, all of the 60 patients underwent surgery thus allowing an accurate evaluation of the techniques.

In the past decade, several attempts have been made to examine bile duct strictures endoscopically. For brush cytology, a sensitivity of 56%, specificity of 91%, and an accuracy rate of 65% were reported (n=86, histopathologically proved n=35). However, results for ETP from four prospective studies have been encouraging, with a sensitivity of 53%, a specificity of 100% in both series, and an accuracy of 60% versus 68%.

However, a diagnosis of malignancy can only be determined by the pathologist when invasion of tumour cells into the stroma is seen in the biopsy specimen. As many biopsies from bile duct strictures contain only clusters of epithelial cells without underlying stroma, it is impossible for the pathologist to prove invasive growth of the tumour which is, by definition, the criterion for malignancy. High grade dysplasia of epithelial cells suggests malignancy but does not prove invasion.

Endoscopic ultrasonography (EUS) has made an impressive impact on endoscopic imaging. Moreover, recently developed ultrasonic miniprobes can be passed through the working channel of standard endoscopes to provide high frequency ultrasonicographic images. The ultrasonic miniprobe is an ideal instrument to be inserted into fluid filled tubular structures such as the biliary and pancreatic ductal systems that are only slightly larger than the miniprobe itself.

In a previous study by Menzel et al, conventional endosonography (EUS) was compared with IDUS in biliary strictures. The present study evaluated the impact of ETP and IDUS on the diagnosis of biliary strictures. EUS was not regularly performed in all patients included in this trial. The aim and techniques used in the present study differed substantially from those of Menzel et al as ETP were taken, and both ETP and IDUS were performed in the same session during ERCP. Therefore, more information—histology and staging of the tumour—about the bile duct strictures are obtained during a single endoscopic examination (ERCP).

In a previous study by Tamada et al, IDUS used for bile duct cancer diagnosis gave an accuracy of 76%. In this study however IDUS was not compared with the histomorphology of surgical resection specimens. This fundamental limitation of many studies concerning imaging of the bile duct is due to the difficulty in comparing imaging results with histological analysis of resected specimens as most patients with benign bile duct strictures do not undergo surgery.

Compared with standard EUS, intraductal scanning within the bile duct structure improved diagnostic accuracy as well as estimation of local tumour extent. Although ultrasonography does not provide histopathology of resection specimens, it allows for staging the tumour category. Due to the limited ultrasonic penetration for both IDUS and EUS, understaging of biliary carcinomas in the proximal bile duct and bile duct bifurcation has been observed.

Application of high ultrasound frequencies enhances the resolution but reduces the depth of penetration. Thus IDUS is not suitable for lymph node staging. The staging information from the present trial (preoperative histology, assessment of local tumour extension) has been used for clinical care decision in patients with bile duct strictures. Due to the lack of information regarding lymph node stage and distal metastases however, IDUS and ETP by themselves do not allow for a complete evaluation on resectability. Nevertheless, they do contribute to more accurate decision making with reference to total patient management.

In conclusion, ERCP provides a unique opportunity to obtain histological specimens from patients with biliary strictures of unknown aetiology and, additionally, allows for biliary staging and localisation. The diagnostic accuracy however is not complete and must be correlated with surgical resection specimens.

**Table 3** Exact 95% confidence interval and McNemar’s test of endoscopic transpapillary biopsy (ETP) and intraductal ultrasonography (IDUS) with respect to localisation of biliary stenoses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Stenosis (localisation)</th>
<th>Accuracy (No of patients)</th>
<th>Accuracy (%)</th>
<th>Lower margin (%)</th>
<th>Upper margin (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>ETP</td>
<td>Proximal</td>
<td>9/12</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distal</td>
<td>22/41</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>60.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td>36/60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>67.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDUS</td>
<td>Proximal</td>
<td>12/12</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distal</td>
<td>31/41</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>83.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td>50/60</td>
<td>83.3</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>87.9†</td>
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</table>

Mc Nemar’s test: *p=0.022 versus ETP in distal stenoses; †p=0.008 versus ETP in all stenoses.
decompression. Preoperative assessment of tissue samples from strictures affecting the biliary tract may permit more accurate decision making in total patient management. Accuracy of ETP alone is not reliable enough to allow for a definitive preoperative diagnosis of bile duct strictures. ETP complemented by IDUS can achieve a significant improvement in preoperative diagnosis. Thus in patients with bile duct strictures, ERCP plus IDUS, ETP, and the option to drain the bile duct system can provide biliary decompression as well as a diagnosis of malignancy with a high degree of accuracy.

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REFERENCES
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