Treatment of lentigo maligna with topical imiquimod

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Summary

A published case report and anecdotal experience suggested that topical imiquimod is an effective treatment for stage 0 melanoma (lentigo maligna). To gauge the efficacy of this therapy, we undertook a trial of topical imiquimod in 30 subjects with histologically confirmed lentigo maligna. Thirty subjects with lentigo maligna were recruited for an open-labelled efficacy trial with daily topical application of imiquimod 5% cream for 3 months. Study subjects were enrolled from the Dermatology service of the University of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma City Veteran’s Administration Hospital Dermatology service and from referrals for the study from other practitioners. In order to determine an initial response rate, a four-quadrant biopsy was carried out on all patients 1 month after cessation of treatment, targeting the most clinically and dermatoscopically suspicious areas. Of 28 evaluable subjects who have completed the 3-month treatment phase, 26 (93%) were complete responders and two were treatment failures at the time of the 4-quadrant biopsy. Over 80% of the 28 subjects that completed treatment have been followed for more than 1 year with no relapses. The results of this study demonstrate that topical imiquimod produces a high complete response rate in lentigo maligna when applied daily for 3 months.

Key words: imiquimod, lentigo maligna, stage 0 melanoma, topical therapy

Introduction

Lentigo maligna (LM) is an increasing problem as the population ages and increasing numbers of people achieve high total ultraviolet (UV) exposures early in life from intentional sun exposure and tanning-bed use. Anecdotal cases of lentigo maligna treated with imiquimod, an immune response modifier (IRM), as well as at least one report in the literature, suggested to us that imiquimod might be a useful therapy for stage 0 melanoma (lentigo maligna). 1

Patients and methods

In order to gauge the efficacy and safety of imiquimod for topical treatment of LM, institutional review board approval was obtained for an open-label trial of imiquimod 5% cream. Thirty subjects were enrolled from the patient populations of the University of Oklahoma Dermatology Clinic, and the Oklahoma City Veteran’s Hospital Dermatology Clinic. Patients referred from community dermatologists were also included. Patients were at least 18 years of age and had a diagnosis of lentigo maligna, with a minimum 2 cm² of tumour left to treat after biopsy. The diagnosis was established on the basis of clinical and dermatoscopic findings consistent with stage 0 melanoma, and supported by histology confirmed by the study pathologist (N.C.). Individuals suspected of having stage 1 melanoma were excluded. The characteristics of the subjects and lesions are given in Tables 1 and 2.

Patients were enrolled after histological confirmation of the diagnosis. Prior to treatment, the tumours were photographed and traced on transparent plastic templates that included outlines of other landmarks so that the affected areas could be located accurately following treatment. At the enrolment visit, patients were instructed in the application of the topical imiquimod cream. Patients subsequently visited the clinic on weeks 1, 4, 8, 12, 16, 24 and 52. Patients were instructed to apply the cream at least 2 cm beyond the suspected margin of the tumour and to attempt to continue daily applications to the site unless treatment

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became intolerable. The goal was for each subject to
treat daily for 12 weeks, unless rest periods were
required due to intolerable irritation or impending
ulceration. Each application by the patient was entered
in a treatment diary, so that the actual number of
treatments used could be determined accurately.

Treatment was discontinued at week 12, and at week
16 a minimum of four 2-mm punch biopsies were
taken in the previously affected area. The precise
locations of these biopsies were determined by ascer-
taining the areas most suspicious for persistent tumour
using both dermatoscopic and clinical criteria. If no
pigmented or suspicious areas could be detected, a
minimum of four biopsies were taken in each of four
arbitrarily defined quadrants.

Results

Thirty subjects were enrolled in the study. Of these, one
patient was withdrawn after the first month because a
random biopsy to monitor therapy suggested invasion
(stage 1). Although the tumour appeared to be
responding, by protocol he was withdrawn, and the
tumour was surgically removed.

At present, 28 patients have completed the 12-
week treatment phase. Of these 28 assessable
patients, two were treatment failures, with persistent
tumour visually and on biopsy at week 16. The
remaining 26 patients were complete responders at
week 16 (defined as complete absence of tumour
by clinical and histological criteria) (Fig. 1). This
corresponds to an initial complete response rate of
93% (26/28). Over 80% of this cohort has now been
followed for at least 12 months, and no relapses have
been observed. No visible erythema was ever noted in
or around the tumour site in the two patients who
failed to respond. These were both treated with
surgical excision.

Side-effects

Approximately one-third of the patients required rest
periods or reduced application frequency after the first
month to avoid intolerable irritation or ulceration of
the treatment area. Beyond mild to moderate irritation
in the treatment area (seen in all subjects except the
treatment failures), side-effects observed in this study
were of three general types: secondary infections,
severe local reactions and cytokine-release syndromes.

Secondary infections considered significant enough
to merit topical antibiotic treatment were seen in four
patients. A fifth patient warranted treatment with
systemic antibiotics combined with topical antibiotics.
The presence of secondary infection was judged clin-
ically by the presence of honey-coloured crusts and/or
purulence, combined with a recent corresponding
increase in surrounding erythema, swelling and ten-
derness. The three secondary infections observed in this
study cleared after topical and/or systemic antibiotics
combined with a 7-day rest period. Treatment was
restarted in all cases.

While all responding patients had variable amounts
of irritation at the treatment site, 10 reported severe
local skin reactions (SLRs). Six of the patients reporting
SLRs required rest periods ranging from 2 to 14 days.
Four of these patients stopped treatment early, inclu-
ding one who discontinued treatment because of a
cytokine-release reaction.

Cytokine-release syndrome is occasionally seen with
topical IRM therapy, and is presumably due to release
of sufficient quantities of interferon or other cytokines
to induce systemic symptoms similar to those associ-
ated with the systemic use of interferon (headache,
gastrointestinal upset, malaise, fever). The risk of this
may increase as the area treated and the degree of
inflammation triggered by the IRM increases. Two
patients in this study were considered to have this side-
effect, one severe enough to discontinue therapy
prematurely (due to chills, malaise, stomach upset
and headache), and another who had mild application-
associated headaches that did not prevent completion
of the protocol. Although the more severely affected of
these two individuals discontinued treatment after only
8 days, both patients had complete responses.
Discussion

Lentigo maligna is several times more common than invasive melanoma. In one recent study, half of the melanomas diagnosed arose from lentigo maligna. Analyses performed in previous decades suggested that this was principally a disease of the elderly who might die of old age before the tumour became lethal. Lentigo maligna today is increasingly a disease of middle age and even younger adults, which can include individuals in their 30s, especially sunseekers or avid tanners. In the present study, almost half the patients were under the age of 70, and four of them were under 50. In younger adults, successful treatment is more important to avoid a fatal outcome, as a greater percentage of these individuals will live long enough for the tumour to progress and become life-threatening.

It appears that a high percentage of individuals who respond to this form of therapy achieve complete responses (all who reacted with inflammation in this study). It is not clear why two subjects in the present study failed to respond. Because LM has the potential to spread rapidly and/or progress to an invasive melanoma, patients with this tumour are generally highly motivated. Poor compliance as a cause of treatment failure therefore seemed unlikely in this group.

Imidazoquinolines, such as imiquimod, work through activation of the NF-κb and the Jnk signal transduction pathways via Toll-like receptors (TLRs). It is possible that the two nonresponders had an absence or a structural variation in their TLRs, which prevented a drug response. It is also possible that there was another defect somewhere in this signal-transduction pathway.

Figure 1. Subject response to imiquimod at: (A) week 0; (B) week 1; (C) week 4; and (D) week 16.
Our experience has been that all areas of tumour need to be treated to obtain a complete local response. This clinical observation is consistent with the notion that a primary mechanism of action of tumour clearance of topically applied imiquimod is through activation of innate immune mechanisms such as natural killer cells and activated macrophages.

Surgery for LM has a relatively high failure rate with larger lesions, due to technical difficulties in determining clear margins. Surgery for LM has a relatively high failure rate with larger lesions, due to technical difficulties in determining clear margins. Cure rates for large LMs may prove to be higher for topical imiquimod treatment than for standard surgical treatments, primarily due to technical difficulties with surgical margins. It is feasible to treat for several centimetres beyond the visible margins of tumours with imiquimod cream, which should yield higher cure rates. Thus, topical imiquimod may prove to be the treatment of choice for very large tumours, in poor surgical candidates, or in the young to avoid surgical scars.

Topical IRMs, such as imiquimod, provide a nonsurgical alternative and may also prove useful as an adjunct to traditional surgical methods. Surgery will probably remain the treatment of choice for lesions that are easily resectable, particularly as this approach may lend itself more easily to accurate pathological staging of the tumour.

This pilot study demonstrates that topical imiquimod is a highly effective therapy for LM, although additional studies should be carried out to confirm these results. This is a treatment that should be carried out by specialists, as diagnostic expertise with pigmented lesions is necessary to avoid inadvertent treatment of more advanced tumours, as well as to adequately monitor treatment responses.

Acknowledgments

We extend special thanks to local physicians who referred patients for this study, including Dr Jeffrey Shuart of Blackwell, OK; Dr David Eslicker of Bartlesville, OK; Dr Mark Dawkins, Pamela Allen, Tom Nix, and Eric Wyatt of Oklahoma City, OK; Dr Dan Minor of Tahlequah, OK; and Dr Martha Robinson and David Adelson of Tulsa, OK, U.S.A.

Dr Mark Naylor is a scientific consultant to 3M Pharmaceutical and has been a principal investigator in 3M sponsored commercial drug trials. This study was an investigation-initiated study supported by 3M Pharmaceuticals.

References

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