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Immunotherapy improves the prognosis of lung cancer: do we have to change intensive care unit admission and triage guidelines?

Antoine Guillon, Karen Reckamp, Nathalie Heuzé-Vourc'H

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Critical Care

Immunotherapy improves the prognosis of lung cancer: do we have to change ICU admission and triage guidelines?

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Corresponding Author:	Antoine Guillon, M.D., Ph. D. Centre Hospitalier Regional Universitaire de Tours FRANCE
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
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Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
First Author:	Antoine Guillon, M.D., Ph. D.
First Author Secondary Information:	
Order of Authors:	Antoine Guillon, M.D., Ph. D. Karen L Reckamp Nathalie Heuzé-Vourc'h
Order of Authors Secondary Information:	

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10 **Authors:**

11 Antoine Guillon^{1,2,3},

12 antoine.guillon@univ-tours.fr
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19 Karen L. Reckamp⁴,

20
21 KReckamp@coh.org
22
23
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25

26
27 Nathalie Heuzé-Vourc'h^{2,3}

28
29 nathalie.vourch@univ-tours.fr
30
31
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33

34 **Affiliations:**

- 35
36 1. CHRU de Tours, Service de Réanimation Polyvalente, F-37000 Tours, France
37
38 2. INSERM, Centre d'Étude des Pathologies Respiratoires, U1100, F-37032 Tours,
39
40 France
41
42
43 3. Université François Rabelais de Tours, F-37032 Tours, France
44
45
46 4. City of Hope Comprehensive Cancer Center, Duarte, CA, USA
47
48
49
50

51 **Corresponding author:**

52 Dr. Antoine Guillon

53 Service de Réanimation Polyvalente, CHRU Bretonneau,

54
55 2 Bd Tonnellé, F-37044 Tours Cedex 9, France.

56
57 Phone: 0033247471322; Fax: 0033247396536; antoine.guillon@univ-tours.fr
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Soon, bald heads may not be a sign which identifies a patient with cancer receiving treatment. Indeed, therapies for cancer patients are improving dramatically, leading to increased survival rates and most are associated with a different toxicity profile. Recently, antibody-based therapy has transformed the therapeutic landscape and biology of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and other solid tumors. This may also reshuffle the playing cards for an ICU admission policy due to improved outcomes. In November 2016, the results of the KEYNOTE-024 trial showed for the first time the superiority of immunotherapy over chemotherapy as first-line treatment for NSCLC [1]. In this phase 3 trial, a humanized monoclonal antibody (mAb) against programmed death 1 (PD-1) was tested in patients who had previously untreated advanced NSCLC. The clinical trial was stopped by the safety monitoring committee on the basis of substantial clinical benefit of immunotherapy, and patients remaining in the chemotherapy group were switched to receive immunotherapy.

Immunotherapy with immune checkpoint inhibitors has ushered in a new chapter in the treatment of solid tumors. In place of directly targeting cancer cells, these drugs stimulate immune cells to enhance the host immune response against cancer. Two classes of immune checkpoint inhibitors with blocking antibodies have demonstrated a high level of antitumor activity in a variety of malignancies: (i) anti-cytotoxic T-lymphocyte antigen-4 antibodies (not yet approved in NSCLC); (ii) inhibitors of PD-1 (nivolumab, atezolizumab and pembrolizumab) - all established second-line therapeutic options for patients with metastatic NSCLC [2].

Antibody-based therapy in NSCLC is a therapeutic breakthrough – the first mAb was approved only a decade ago [3]. It is difficult to predict lung cancer’s mortality because new mAbs therapeutic options continue to emerge and improve survival for patients. When a clinical trial is completed in lung cancer, the overall survival may have change due to innovative immunotherapy, making previous results obsolete overnight. Indeed, the development of immunotherapy and combinations for lung cancer causes triage criteria for admission into the ICU to be in constant flux. We believe that we have entered into a time when triage criteria based on lung cancer prognosis will be almost impossible to define for ICU-clinician. Consequently, ICU admissions will have to be determined by high-quality consultation between the intensivist and thoracic-oncologist to define prognosis and appropriate treatment goals. Intensivists should note: the prognosis and survival for lung cancer will be transformed by this mAb immunotherapy revolution.

Abbreviations

1 ICU: intensive care unit

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3 NSCLC: non-small cell lung cancer

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5 mAb: monoclonal antibody

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7 PD-1: programmed death 1

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15
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42 AG is intensivist, specialized in respiratory disease; KLR is thoracic-oncologist, specialized in
43 lung cancer; NHV is researcher in biology, specialized in immunotherapies.
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