

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Bile duct thrombi in hepatocellular carcinoma: is aggressive surgery worthwhile?

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Obstructive jaundice as a result of bile duct tumour thrombus (BDTT) is an unusual clinical entity and an uncommon presenting feature of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). This study evaluates the outcome of hepatectomy for HCC with obstructive jaundice as a result of BDTT in non-cirrhotic livers.

**Methods:** Between 1997 and 2012, out of 426 patients with HCC in non-cirrhotic livers, 39 patients with BDTT (Group I  $n = 39$ ), who underwent a hepatectomy, were analysed and compared with the non-BDTT group (Group II  $n = 387$ ).

**Results:** The demographic profile and biochemical parameters between Group I and Group II were compared; apart from the presence of jaundice at presentation and an elevated serum bilirubin, there were no significant differences. Post-operative morbidity and mortality were 11 (28.2%) and 2 (5.1%), respectively, in Group I. There were no differences between the groups with regards to the operative variables and short-term outcomes. The 1-, 3- and 5-year survival rates in Group I were 82%, 48% and 10%, respectively, with a median survival of 28.6 months and were significantly poorer than Group II (90%, 55% and 38%, respectively, with a median survival of 39.2 months).

**Conclusion:** The mere presence of BDTT in HCC does not indicate an advanced or inoperable lesion. When technically feasible, a formal hepatic resection is the preferred first-line treatment option in these patients.

Received 29 September 2014; accepted 30 November 2014

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## Introduction

Obstructive jaundice is an uncommon presenting feature of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The incidence of obstructive jaundice in HCC is in the range of 1% to 12%, with a tumour thrombus in the bile duct (BDTT) being one of the causes.<sup>1–3</sup> These patients exhibit clinicopathological features which differ from those with parenchymal cholestasis owing to extensive tumour infiltration or advanced cirrhosis.<sup>4,5</sup> Even although the prognosis in this type of HCC is poor, it is much better than those with jaundice caused by hepatic insufficiency.<sup>4,5</sup> Identification of

this group of patients is imperative, because surgical treatment may be beneficial. There is a paucity of studies regarding BDTT in HCC, especially with respect to the outcome of hepatectomy and its impact on prognosis. In this study, we aimed to evaluate the outcome of hepatectomy for HCC in patients with obstructive jaundice as a result of BDTT in a non-cirrhotic liver and compare its morbidity, mortality and long-term prognosis with those who underwent a resection without BDTT.

## Materials and methods

From January 1997 to December 2012, 426 patients with a non-fibrolamellar type of HCC in non-cirrhotic livers underwent liver resections at the Institute of Surgical Gastroenterology and Liver

This study was presented at the 11th World IHPBA Congress, 22–27 March 2014, Seoul.

Transplantation, Stanley Medical College Hospital, Chennai, India. Among them, 39 patients were diagnosed to have pathologically confirmed (post-operative) BDTT (Group I). These patients were compared with the remaining 387 patients without BDTT (Group II). Their demographic, clinicopathological and investigative (biochemical and radiological) data were noted. Hepatocellular carcinoma with BDTT was classified according to the location of BDTT, as proposed by Ueda *et al.* (Type 1: involving the second order intrahepatic duct, Type 2: involving the first-order intrahepatic duct, Type 3a: extending to the hepatic confluence, Type 3b: implanted tumour growing in the common hepatic duct (CHD) and Type 4: dislodged BDTT within the CHD) (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

Pre-operative workup included liver function tests, viral screen and imaging in the form of abdominal ultrasonography, and abdominal computed tomography (CT) (Fig. 2a–c). Magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography, when available, was used to evaluate the extent of a BDTT (Fig. 2d). Operative procedures were based on the general condition, tumour status, pre-operative liver function tests, pre-operative diagnosis of the location of the primary tumours, extension of BDTT and the future remnant liver parenchyma. Pre-operative biliary drainage in the form of percutaneous transhepatic biliary drainage was performed selectively when the patient's serum bilirubin was more than 5 mg/dl or if the patient developed cholangitis. Anatomical resection was done for the primary liver tumour. For a free-floating thrombus in the bile duct, a choledochotomy was done and the tumour was extricated. (Fig. 3) In cases of an invaded bile duct, it was resected with the entire tumour, and biliary-enteric anastomosis was performed. The specimen was labelled and sent for histopathological examination. Tumour size, number, surgical margin, classification of thrombus and its size were noted. The operation time was defined as the time period from incision of the skin to closure of the wound. Post-operative morbidity included all the complications related to the hepatic surgery. Peri-operative mortality was

defined as either within 30 days of surgery or occurring in hospital. After discharge, patients were followed-up on a 3-monthly basis with alpha fetoprotein (AFP) and ultrasound or CT every 3 months for the first 2 years, beyond which the patient was followed-up on a 6-monthly basis.

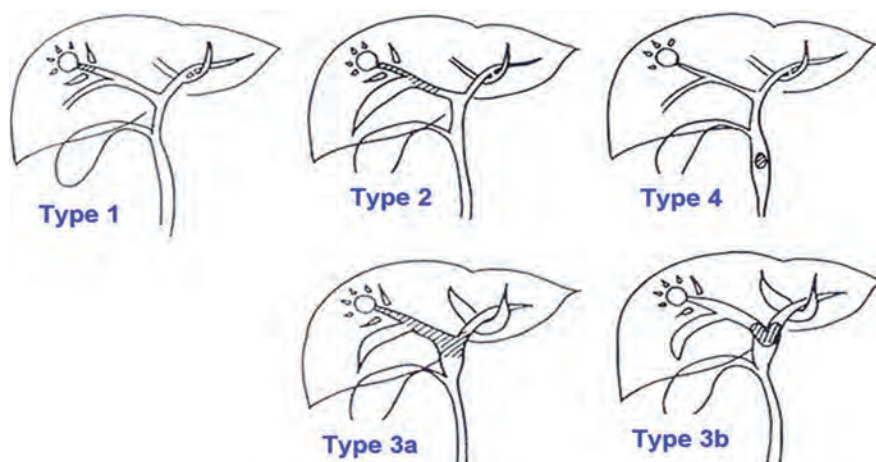
## Statistical analysis

Data were expressed as the mean  $\pm$  SD for numerical variables or percentages for nominal variables. Mann-Whitney *U* test or *t*-tests were used to compare numerical variables, and the Chi-Square test or Fisher's exact test was carried out to compare nominal variables. Overall survival rates were estimated using the Kaplan–Meier method and compared using the log-rank test. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS software (version 16.0; SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).  $P < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant.

## Results

The demographic profile of the patients in BDTT and non-BDTT groups were compared with regards to their age, gender, viral marker status, Child–Pugh status and jaundice at presentation (Table 1). In total, 18 patients with BDTT (46.1%) presented with jaundice on admission, which was significantly higher than the non-BDTT group (1.5%). In the non-BDTT group, jaundice was as a result of the presence of a centrally located tumour with direct compression over the biliary radicals or haemobilia. There were no other significant differences between the two groups. On comparison of biochemical parameters between the two groups (Table 2), the serum bilirubin levels were significantly higher in the BDTT group. There were no other differences in biochemical parameters noted between the groups.

Sixteen patients underwent a right hepatectomy with a tumour thrombectomy via a choledochotomy. An extended right hepatectomy with extra hepatic bile duct excision was the next most



**Figure 1** UEDA classification of bile duct thrombi<sup>6</sup>

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