International Journal of Women's Dermatology xxx (2018) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Women's Dermatology

A deep look into thin melanomas: What's new for the clinician and the impact on the patient☆,☆☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 7 January 2018
Accepted 31 January 2018
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
melanoma
thin melanomas
AJCC 8th edition
sentinel lymph node biopsy

ABSTRACT

Melanoma incidence and mortality are on the rise and although most new cases of melanoma are thin, a significant percentage of these patients still experience disease progression. The American Joint Committee on Cancer publishes staging criteria for melanoma, which were recently updated to the 8th edition. The most significant revision from the 7th edition affects the T1b classification, which now includes melanomas with a Breslow depth of 0.8 mm to 1.0 mm. The second major revision eliminates mitoses as a criterion to upstage a thin melanoma to T1b. Although mitotic figures have been established as an independent prognostic factor, they do not have a significant correlation with sentinel lymph node (SLN) biopsy positivity. SLN status remains the most important independent prognostic factor in thin melanomas. Nonetheless, the identification of patients who are at the highest risk for having a positive SLN test result remains difficult. Importantly, a positive SLN test result has high positive predictive value, but a negative one has very low negative predictive value. Since there is no proven survival benefit in performing an SLN biopsy in T1 disease, dermatologists need to have a personalized discussion with patients with thin melanomas to review expected risks and benefits before undertaking this procedure.

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Introduction

Melanoma incidence is on the rise and has increasingly become a public health concern. Approximately 87,000 new cases of invasive melanoma were diagnosed in 2017 (Siegel et al., 2017). This rising incidence of melanoma has exponentially affected the expanding population of people over the age of 60 years compared with other age groups (Whiteman et al., 2016). Thin melanomas, which up until this point were defined as those with <1mm Breslow depth, account for approximately 70% of new cases and approximately 25% of melanoma deaths (Hieken et al., 2015) despite having an excellent prognosis with an observed 12-year survival of approximately 85% (Maurichi et al., 2014).

☆ Funding sources: None.
☆☆ Conflicts of interest: None.
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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijwd.2018.01.003

The American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) recently published its 8th edition of staging criteria, which went into effect as of January 1, 2018 (Gershenwald et al., 2017). Herein, we summarize the staging changes and rationale for these changes most specifically for T1 tumors because these are the melanomas that dermatologists commonly manage alone.

American Joint Committee on Cancer 8th edition tumor staging update

The impact of Breslow depth and mitoses has been adjusted in the new AJCC staging. The most significant change is that all tumors with a Breslow depth of 0.8 mm to 1.0 mm are now staged as T1b. Nonulcerated tumors with a Breslow depth of <0.7 mm are still classified as T1a. In addition, Breslow depth is now reported to the nearest tenth decimal place. Therefore, with rounding, T1b tumors encompass 0.75 mm to 1.04 mm or any ulcerated tumor of <0.7 mm (Gershenwald et al., 2017). Mitoses are no longer part of the criteria to upstage from T1a to T1b. There were no changes to T2-T4 staging (Gershenwald et al., 2017). The clinical stage groups were not altered; T1a is still stage 1A, and T1b is still stage 1B (Gershenwald et al., 2017).

Breslow depth

Breslow depth is measured from the granular layer or base of an ulcer to the deepest invasive cell across the broad base of the tumor (Breslow, 1970). In a prospective study of 2243 patients in six European centers, the authors found that increasing depth was a statistically significant independent prognostic factor for thin melanomas (Maurichi et al., 2014). Patients with tumors >0.75 mm in depth had a positive sentinel lymph node biopsy (SLNB) test result in 11.7% of cases compared with 4.6% in tumors of 0.50 mm to 0.75 mm (Maurichi et al., 2014).

Another group compared 178 thin melanomas with and without distant metastases and found that the 0.76 to 1.00 mm Breslow depth group had a statistically worse cumulative survival rate (Murali et al., 2012). This prognostic concern for melanomas >0.75 mm in depth was further reinforced in a small retrospective study of 512 patients that showed that all deaths from thin melanomas were due to tumors ≥0.8 mm (Durham et al., 2017).

A recent, large meta-analysis of 10,928 patients with thin melanomas who underwent SLNB examined depth as a prognostic factor. The results showed that patients with tumors >0.75 mm had an increased risk of a positive SLNB compared with tumors <0.75 mm (Cordeiro et al., 2016). The association was even stronger when other high-risk features were present (Cordeiro et al., 2016). Due to the significant evidence demonstrating that melanomas >0.75 mm to 1.00 mm have a worse prognosis, the updated AJCC 8th edition criteria now categorize these tumors as T1b.

Ulceration

Although common in thick melanomas, ulceration is rare in T1 disease (Garbe et al., 2002). One study found that ulceration was present in only 1.7% of T1 disease but rates of 34.0% and 53.2% were noted in T3 and T4 disease, respectively (Garbe et al., 2002). The presence of ulceration is an independent adverse prognostic parameter in thick melanomas but its predictive value has been inconsistent in thin melanomas (Garbe et al., 2002). One study from the German Central Malignant Melanoma Registry and another that examined 1563 patients over 30 years noted no difference in prognosis for T1 melanomas with and without ulceration (Garbe et al., 2002; Kalady et al., 2003). It was suggested that the statistical power needed to demonstrate a subtle survival difference with ulceration was not achieved due to insufficient patient numbers (Kalady et al., 2003).

One small study previously discussed did show a statistical difference in distant metastasis-free survival between ulcerated and nonulcerated thin melanomas (Murali et al., 2012). However, these results were questionable since the ulceration rate was much higher than that of other studies at 9.5% (Garbe et al., 2002; Murali et al., 2012). Another review demonstrated that ulcerated thin melanomas had a higher association of positive SLNB compared with nonulcerated tumors (Maurichi et al., 2014), but few other investigations reached this same conclusion (Cooper et al., 2013; Warycha et al., 2009). A recent Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results registry study showed that 16.1% of patients with ulcerated thin melanomas died at 10 years compared with only 2.8% of patients with nonulcerated tumors (Landow et al., 2017). However, this paper did not analyze other secondary factors that may have affected prognosis, specifically mitoses (Landow et al., 2017). Therefore, at this time, there are conflicting reports documenting the prognostic importance of ulceration in thin melanomas, and there is mixed support for the AJCC 8th edition upstaging T1 disease.

Mitoses

The prognostic significance of mitoses has long been debated in the literature. In the 7th edition of the AJCC staging criteria, mitotic rate was included as a criterion for upstaging a thin melanoma to T1b, replacing Clark level of invasion. The first large study to examine the mitotic rate studied 3661 patients with stage 1 and 2 melanomas (Azzola et al., 2003). The study showed that mitotic rate was an independent prognostic factor, was more significant than ulceration, and that even the presence of one mitotic figure conferred a statistically worse prognosis than no mitoses (Azzola et al., 2003). These conclusions were confirmed with a larger multicenter study that studied 13,296 stage 1 and 2 melanomas and found that the mitotic rate was the strongest prognostic factor after depth (Thompson et al., 2011). Another group revealed that the presence of mitoses had a worse cumulative survival, specifically in T1 melanomas (Murali et al., 2012).

Today, there is little debate about the prognostic significance of mitoses but a debate persists with regard to what number of mitoses per mm^2 is required to affect staging. There is also a debate concerning the ability to predict SLNB positivity. These studies have all been complicated by the variability in observing and documenting mitotic figures, which supports the need to adhere to a standardized detection method when studying this characteristic (Knezevich et al., 2014).

A large meta-analysis studied the factors predicting a positive SLNB in 3651 thin melanomas and showed that mitotic rate did not correlate with a positive SLNB (Warycha et al., 2009). However, another study revealed conflicting results by demonstrating that the presence of one mitosis was significant in predicting a positive SLNB compared with no mitoses (Maurichi et al., 2014). A large Dutch study retrospectively reviewed the impact of the transition from the AJCC 6th to 7th edition with the addition of mitoses to the criteria (Oude Ophuis et al., 2017). During the study period, the T1b cohort doubled with the AJCC 7th edition criteria, and there was an almost 400% increase in performed SLNBs (Oude Ophuis et al., 2017). They found no difference in SLNB positivity rates or survival at 5 years between the two groups. The conclusion of the study was to reconsider the incorporation of mitotic rate in the staging criteria (Oude Ophuis et al., 2017). Another extensive review concluded that one mitotic figure did not predict a positive SLNB and should not be the sole criteria to encourage an SLNB (Kirkland and Zitelli, 2014).

Please cite this article as: Chiaravalloti AJ, et al, A deep look into thin melanomas: What's new for the clinician and the impact on the patient, (2018), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijwd.2018.01.003