Immunofluorescent Monoclonal Antibody Detection of Breast Cancer in Bone Marrow: Sensitivity in a Model System

Michael P. Osborne, Shirin Asina, George Y. Wong, Lloyd J. Old, and Richard J. Cote

The sensitivity of this assay has been examined using cells from an established human breast cancer cell line (MCF-7) mixed with normal bone marrow at various dilutions from 400 cancer cells/10⁶ normal marrow cells (400:10⁶) to 10:10⁶. MCF-7 cells were detected at the lowest concentration studied, namely 10:10⁶. The number of fluorescent labeled MCF-7 cells counted at each concentration was related to the concentration by a simple nonlinear statistical model. At the concentration of 10:10⁶, the model shows that this technique has the sensitivity to detect between two and four MCF-7 cells 95% of the time. Moreover, by extrapolation, the model predicts that even at the very low concentration of 2:10⁶ there is a 95% chance of detecting one cancer cell. Therefore, this assay may be a very sensitive method for detecting cancer cells in the bone marrow in vivo.

INTRODUCTION

The 10-year survival statistics for operable stage breast cancer patients treated by surgery and/or irradiation are approximately 83% for Stage I (T1N0M0) (1), 73% for Stage II (T2N0M0) (2), 50% for Stage II (T1 and T2N1M0) (2), and 20% for Stage III (T3N1M0) (3). The commonest site of dissemination of breast cancer is the bony skeleton via the bone marrow (4). Standard methods of staging at the time of initial treatment, such as biochemical measurement of alkaline phosphatase, bone scanning, skeletal radiography, and routine cytological examination of bone marrow, fail to identify those patients who are going to relapse. Improvement in the methods of detecting tumor cells in the bone marrow of patients with early stage disease at the time of diagnosis may aid in selecting candidates for adjuvant therapy.

Mabs which recognize membrane and cytoskeletal antigens expressed by epithelial derived cells (C26, T16, AE1) have been used in an immunohistochemical (immunofluorescent) method to find cancer cells in bone marrow aspirates of primary breast cancer patients (5). This method was evaluated in a model system using a human breast cancer cell line (MCF-7) and normal human bone marrow to assess clinically relevant sensitivities and to account for variations in the observations by statistical analysis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Human Breast Cancer Cell Line. MCF-7 human breast cancer cells (Michigan Cancer Foundation, Detroit, MI) were grown in Eagle’s minimal essential medium at 37°C, supplemented with Hanks’ buffered salts, nonessential amino acids, sodium pyruvate, α-glutamine (10 ng), gentamicin (50 μg/ml), penicillin (10 units/ml), streptomycin (1 mg/ml), Fungizone (2.5 μg/ml), bovine insulin (6.6 ng/ml), and 7% fetal calf serum. Cells were seeded into Petri dishes (60 x 15 mm) at a density of 0.5 x 10⁶ cells/dish. Medium was changed every 3 days.

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2 To whom requests for reprints should be addressed, at Breast Cancer Research Laboratory, Department of Surgery, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, 1275 York Avenue, New York, NY 10021.
3 The abbreviations used are: TNNI, tumor-nodes-metastasis classification; Mah, monoclonal antibody; PBS, phosphate-buffered saline; BSA, bovine serum albumin; NLS, nonlinear least squares; WNLS, weighted nonlinear least squares.
an appropriate model for the data is given by

\[ \text{NUM} = a \text{CONC}^b + e \]

where \(a\) and \(b\) are unknown parameters, and \(e\) is a random error term with zero mean representing measurement errors and biological variations of observed values of \(\text{NUM}\) about the population mean value \(a \text{CONC}^b\). The parameter \(a\) gives the mean number of MCF-7 cells detected at concentration of \(10^6\). The parameter \(b\) represents the change in mean \(\text{NUM}\) on a logarithmic scale per unit change in \(\text{CONC}\), also expressed on a logarithmic scale.

A NLS procedure was used to obtain the NLS estimates of \(a\) and \(b\). Residual analysis revealed that the variance of \(e\) increased linearly with concentration. In order to obtain optimal NLS solutions, it was necessary to weight the NLS procedure by an appropriate set of weights. A linear regression of the standard deviation of \(\text{NUM}\) on \(\text{CONC}\) was used to determine the weights. Standard asymptotic statistical arguments were applied to the WNLS results in order to obtain standard errors and construct confidence intervals.

RESULTS

Fig. 1 shows a MCF-7 bone marrow mixture after incubation with T16, C26, and AE1 anti-epithelial mouse Mabs and then fluorescein-conjugated rabbit anti-mouse antiserum. Under UV microscopy the MCF-7 cells can be identified; both cell surface and cytoplasmic components show positive fluorescence (Fig. 1A). The MCF-7 cells showed strong and uniform staining when the antibody cocktail was used with over 90% of cells showing reactivity. The same field is seen under phase-contrast microscopy in Fig. 1B. Note that normal bone marrow elements are not identified by the immunofluorescence technique.

Table 1 shows that the number of detectable positive cells increases with increasing concentration of MCF-7 cells in normal nucleated bone marrow cells and that the number of positive smears increases with increasing number of MCF-7 cells. In this experiment, at the lowest concentration measured, MCF-7 cells constitute only 0.001% of the population of two cell types or 1 cancer cell (MCF-7) in 100,000 (10^5) normal bone marrow cells. Fig. 2 shows the plot of \(\text{NUM}\) on \(\text{CONC}\) for all the measurements from the six experiments. It is evident that there was a considerable amount of variation of \(\text{NUM}\) at each concentration and that the variation increases as concentration increases. The mean values shown on the plot (Fig. 2) suggest that a linear model cannot satisfactorily fit the data, at least not at the level of sensitivity required by this kind of experiment. The reason why the plot is nonlinear is unknown. Moreover, the plot also indicates that the relationship between \(\text{NUM}\) and \(\text{CONC}\) for \(\text{CONC} < 400 \times 10^6\) can be quite different from that for \(\text{CONC} \geq 400 \times 10^6\).

The WNLS procedure described in “Materials and Methods” was applied to the data for \(\text{CONC} < 400 \times 10^6\). The estimated equation was

\[ \text{NUM} = 0.4003 \text{CONC}^{0.34} \]

The standard errors of the WNLS estimates of \(a\) and \(b\) were 0.10 and 0.055, respectively. About 92% of the total variation of \(\text{NUM}\) about zero was explained by its nonlinear regression on \(\text{CONC}\). The diagnostic plot in Fig. 3 indicates the appropriateness of the model.

Table 2 summarizes the WNLS fit to the data at six observed concentrations. Extrapolation of the model to four low concentrations is also given. The entries of Columns 2 and 3 show that a very good fit to the data at the range of concentrations investigated was obtained with the simple nonlinear model. The high level of sensitivity of the assay is demonstrated as the 95% confidence interval at concentration equal to 2 \times 10^5 contained 1. It should be pointed out that this model also appears to closely fit recently described data but the extent of variability associated with the sensitivities described are unknown since no statistical analysis was presented (11).

DISCUSSION

A significant proportion of patients presenting with apparently local primary breast cancer have micrometastases undetectable by conventional staging procedures. The most reliable prognostic indices, axillary lymph node status and primary tumor diameter, cannot predict which individual patient has systemic micrometastases that will ultimately progress to relapse and death.
SENSITIVITY OF Mab IN DETECTING MICROMETASTASES

Table 1 Sensitivity of immunofluorescent assay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCF-7 cells:10^6 BMC</th>
<th>% of MCF-7 cells</th>
<th>% of no. of slides</th>
<th>% of positive slides</th>
<th>Sample mean MCF-7 cells</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
<td>6/25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>0.0025</td>
<td>11/25</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>5.17</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>15/25</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>18/25</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>19/25</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>13/16</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>56.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>25/25</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>109.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* BMC, bone marrow cells.

Table 2 Summary of nonlinear fits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCF-7 cells:10^6 BMC*</th>
<th>Sample meana</th>
<th>Estimated meanb</th>
<th>Asymptotic SE of estimated mean</th>
<th>95% confidence interval for the mean</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.85, 1.83</td>
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<td>0.60</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>400</td>
<td>109.60</td>
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</table>

* BMC, bone marrow cells; Sample mean, sample mean number of MCF-7 cells detected in 5–6 independent experiments; Estimated mean, estimated mean number of MCF-7 cells detected.

The formal statistical approach taken here is important. First, conclusions about the sensitivity of our assay are valid if inherent laboratory as well as biological variations are accounted for in the analysis. In this study, the extent of variation across six sets of experiments was substantial and increased with higher concentrations; this may be due to biological factors such as variability. In addition, rather than use light-microscope methods, we have used an indirect immunofluorescent method to identify extrinsic epithelial cells, with the belief that it might be easier to detect fluorescent cells against a dark background (Fig. 1) and thus improve the likelihood of detecting extrinsic cells. The purpose of the current investigation is to demonstrate and statistically validate the sensitivity of the immunofluorescent method. We have shown in our prior clinical studies a comparable ability to detect extrinsic cells using only two to three sites for bone marrow aspirations by this method (5, 23) as opposed to the eight sites used by the Ludwig group (17). We were able to detect breast cancer cells in the bone marrow of breast cancer patients without evidence of metastases to lymph nodes in 23% of patients with T1N0M0 and 33% of patients with T2N0M0 disease (5).

The skeleton is a common site of distant metastases from breast cancer and is frequently the first organ in which metastases develop. Conventional cytology of bone marrow fails to detect micrometastases in early stage patients (12). An immunocytochemical technique designed to detect low numbers of breast cancer cells in the bone marrow of patients with operable disease has been studied by the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research group (13–20). We have recently reported on a similar immunocytochemical method which detected the presence of breast cancer cells in the bone marrow of patients with early stage disease (1). Unlike the Ludwig group, which used rabbit antiserum to epithelial membrane antigen (21, 22), we have used a mixture of mouse Mabs directed against antigens. The specificity of these antibodies has been well characterized, and in addition to reacting with most breast cancers, they do not react with normal bone marrow elements (5). As reported previously, the antibodies used here did not react with bone marrow cells from 44 subjects undergoing diagnostic and staging work-ups for nonepithelial malignancy such as leukemia and lymphoma (5). The antibodies react with most breast cancers and, when used in combination, react with over 90% of breast cancer cells in frozen sections of primary breast cancers. Although there is some variation in the intensity of staining from case to case, all breast cancers tested showed good reactivity. In addition, rather than use light-microscope methods, we have used an indirect immunofluorescent method to identify extrinsic epithelial cells, with the belief that it might be easier to detect fluorescent cells against a dark background (Fig. 1) and thus improve the likelihood of detecting extrinsic cells. The purpose of the current investigation is to demonstrate and statistically validate the sensitivity of the immunofluorescent method. We have shown in our prior clinical studies a comparable ability to detect extrinsic cells using only two to three sites for bone marrow aspirations by this method (5, 23) as opposed to the eight sites used by the Ludwig group (17). We were able to detect breast cancer cells in the bone marrow of breast cancer patients without evidence of metastases to lymph nodes in 23% of patients with T1N0M0 and 33% of patients with T2N0M0 disease (5).
settling or clumping of MCF-7 cells or other unknown causes. Second, the statistical analysis led to a simple mathematical model which succinctly delineates the relationship between number of cancer cells detectable and concentration. More importantly, the fitted model has enabled us to make statistical confidence statements about sensitivity of the assay at any concentration, particularly at the low concentrations of clinical relevance.

Further studies are necessary to determine whether this method of determining the prevalence of cancer cells in the bone marrow independently predicts for site of relapse and prognosis. The development of more specific monoclonal antibodies used in optimum combinations may be required (24). Utilization of strict criteria to distinguish extrinsic (epithelial) cells from normal bone marrow constituents will enhance sensitivity. Improvement of complementary immunocytochemical staining techniques may be accomplished by using alkaline phosphatase (14, 25) or glucose oxidase following in vitro culture (26). Peroxidase staining methods are less suitable due to high levels of endogenous peroxidase in bone marrow elements. Should our highly sensitive method be proved to be a predictor of prognosis, then automated methods such as computerized fluorodensitometry may allow more efficient processing of larger numbers of specimens.

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REFERENCES

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