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**Molecular biomarker analysis and immUnotherapy in patients
with clear cell RenAl Cell CarciNoma: an Observational,
retrospective/prospective, multicenter study. URANO trial**

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BACKGROUND

Clear cell renal cell carcinoma (ccRCC) is the most frequent histologic subtype (70-85%)¹. ccRCC is characterized by inactivation of the von Hippel-Lindau gene (VHL) in 44-90% of cases. An early event during the evolution of ccRCC is loss of function mutation of the von Hippel-Lindau (VHL) gene². Direct VHL sequencing experiments from subjects with sporadic ccRCC show that up to 75% of these subjects have biallelic loss of function mutation of VHL genes, and up to 19% exhibit expression inactivation by hypermethylation³. The normal function of the HIF complex (a heterodimer composed of α and β subunits) is to regulate expression of several genes in response to hypoxia⁴. Many of these proteins are involved in cell growth and survival, motility, invasion, metastatization, angiogenesis, hydrogen ion (pH) regulation, and glucose metabolism. Phenotypically, RCC is a highly vascular tumor, with increased VEGF levels, and its growth can be stimulated by factors produced through the HIF-1 pathway. Following VHL, the most prevalent mutations are: PBRM1 (Polybromo 1) (32–41%), BAP1 (BRCA-associated protein-1) (6–15%), SET domain containing 2 (SETD2) (3-11%), TP53 (5%), KDM5C (3–5%), PIK3CA (3%), ATM (3%), TSC1 (3%), ARID1A (2%), CDKN2A (2%)⁵. VHL, PBRM1, SETD2 and BAP1 genes are located on chromosome 3p⁶. PBRM1, SETD2, BAP1, KDM5C (JARID1C) and KDM6A (UTX) genes encode the chromatin regulatory proteins and mutation in these gene could be alter the chromatin landscape and transcriptional program^{7 8 9}. Many studies indicated the basis of kidney cancer in a metabolic disease due to activation of gene involved in metabolic pathway as VHL, MET, FLCN, TSC1, TSC2, TFE3, TFEB, MITF, fumarate hydratase (FH), succinate dehydrogenase B (SDHB), succinate dehydrogenase D (SDHD) and PTEN^{10 11 12}. The TCGA data showed the correlation between disease aggressiveness and metabolic shift that involved increased dependence on pentose phosphate shunt, downregulation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) and the Krebs cycle, increased glutamine transport and fatty acid production¹³. BAP1 is a tumor suppressor gene which encodes a nuclear deubiquitinase and is located on chromosome region 3p21¹⁴. Peña-Llopis S. et colleagues studied histological features of tumors with loss of BAP1 showing a correlation with high tumor grade and mTORC1 activation¹⁵. Kapur et al. described the prognostic role of BAP1 and PBRM1 mutations in patients underwent to surgical resection of a clear cell renal cell carcinoma comparing findings from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center (UTSW) with a cohort from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA). Presence of BAP1 mutation was characterized by higher Fuhrman grade, sarcomatoid and rhabdoid histology, tumor necrosis and mTORC1 activation ($p < 0.05$). BAP1 mutant tumors were associated with the expression of gene involved in growth factor signaling (NGF, prolactin ErbB, PTEN, IGF-1; insulin receptor, neuregulin, IL8)¹⁶. Hakimi AA et al. showed the impact of BAP1 and SETD2 mutation on cancer specific survival (CSS) in TOGA and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) cohorts.¹⁷ Kapur P et colleagues studied the association of BAP1 immunohistochemical (IHC) expression with survival in patients with non metastatic ccRCC treated with nephrectomy. BAP1 loss correlated significantly with pathological features as higher Fuhrman grade (p

<0.0001), advanced pT stage ($p = 0.0021$), tumor necrosis ($p < 0.0001$) and sarcomatoid dedifferentiation ($p = 0.0001$)¹⁸. Joseph RW et al. showed that patients with loss of BAP1 protein expression had an increased risk to die from ccRCC (HR: 3.6; 95% CI, 2.28-4.10, $p = 6.77 \times 10^{-14}$). Jones J et al identified a gene signature detectable in metastatic setting and then related to progression¹⁹. Brannon AR et colleagues stratified ccRCC in two molecular prognostic groups designed by two different gene expression profiling: clear cell type A (ccA) and clear cell type B (ccB). Afterwards, it was developed a molecular model comprising 34-gene expression signature (ClearCode34) using NanoString platform to identified these subtype of tumor which confirmed the same prognostic trend: ccB group showed a higher recurrence risk compared to ccA group (HR: 2.3; 95% CI, 1.6-3.3; $p = 0.0000043$)²⁰. Rini B, et al. developed a 16-gene signature to predict recurrence risk in patients with stage I-III clear cell RCC who underwent nephrectomy²¹.

Checkpoint blockade immunotherapy has rapidly demonstrated unprecedented efficacy becoming the new standard of care for several cancer. The approval of immune checkpoint inhibitors targeting programmed death 1 (PD-1), nivolumab²², and the combination therapy with ipilimumab, an anti-cytotoxic T-lymphocyte-associated antigen 4 antibody²³, has significantly changed the treatment landscape of renal cell carcinoma. Despite the encouraging success of immune checkpoint inhibitors, only a small subset of patients respond to this treatment. Bassanelli M et al²⁴ identified a 17-gene expression signature (unfavorable genomic signature [UGS]) to predict a poor prognosis (recurrence-free survival <1 years) in patients with stage I-III ccRCC treated with nephrectomy (cytoreductive, partial or radical nephrectomy). Currently, several biomarker analysis are identified molecular subsets associated with differential response to immune checkpoint inhibitor or tyrosine kinase inhibitor targeting vascular endothelial growth factor receptors (VEGFR) 1, 2 and 3^{25 26}

Hypothesis/ PURPOSE:

The objective of the current study is to identify molecular biomarkers to associate with different outcome checkpoint inhibitor (nivolumab or ipilimumab + nivolumab) that could lead to different therapeutic approaches in patients with mRCC

STUDY DESIGN:

Observational, retrospective/prospective, multicenter trial to investigate the correlation between molecular biomarkers and histological features with outcome of patients with clear cell renal cell carcinoma, treated with nivolumab or ipilimumab + nivolumab

POPULATIONS:

Adult patients (age ≥ 18 years) with advanced/metastatic clear cell renal cell carcinoma, who received nivolumab or ipilimumab plus nivolumab, as clinical indication

INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Inclusion criteria

- Age \geq 18 years
- Histological diagnosis of clear cell renal cell carcinoma
- Advanced or metastatic disease
- At least one cycle of nivolumab or nivolumab plus ipilimumab, as clinically indicated
- Written informed consent

Exclusion criteria

Non clear cell renal cell carcinoma

EFFICACY ASSESSMENT

- Tumour response to treatment will be defined according to RECIST criteria ²⁷
- Timing of radiological assessment will be based on local practice patterns.

STATISTICAL METHODS

As a general approach quantitative variables distributions will be tested for normality assumption through the Shapiro-Wilks test, items not normally distributed will be reported as medians and interquartile ranges (IQR= 1st and 3rd quartile) and analysed using the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test for unmatched group. Variables respecting normality assumptions will be reported as mean \pm standard deviation and compared among subgroups using Student't test. Categorical variables will be expressed as absolute frequency and percentage and proportions will be compared by Chi-square test or Fisher's exact test, as appropriate according to the expected frequencies in each cells. Survival times will be estimated with the Kaplan-Meier method and differences in survival curves will be assessed with the log-rank test. This analysis is explorative and 'hypotheses generating' in nature, a 2-tailed p value <0.10 will be considered as suggestive of statistical significance without any adjustment for multiple testing. All analyses will be performed using SPSS v. 21.0 (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA).

IMPLICATIONS IN CLINICAL PRACTICE: To personalize the therapeutic approach in patients ccRCC

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