Biopsy first: Lessons learned from Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) 140503

Leslie J. Kohman, MD,^a Lin Gu, MS,^b Nasser Altorki, MD,^c Ernest Scalzetti, MD,^d Linda J. Veit, MPH,^a Jason M. Wallen, MD,^a and Xiaofei Wang, PhD^b

ABSTRACT

Objective: Cancer and Leukemia Group B 140503 is an ongoing, multicenter randomized trial assessing whether sublobar resection is equivalent to lobectomy for the treatment of stage I A non–small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) ≤ 2 cm in diameter. The objective of this report is to determine the reasons precluding intraoperative randomization.

Methods: From June 15, 2007, to March 22, 2013, 637 patients were preregistered to the trial. Three hundred eighty-nine were randomized successfully (61%), and 248 patients were not randomized (39%). We analyzed the reasons for nonrandomization among a subset of the nonrandomized patients (208) for whom additional data were available.

Results: Of these 208 patients, undiagnosed benign nodules ($n = 104$, 16% of all registered patients) and understaging of NSCLC ($n = 45$, 7% of all registered patients) were the dominant reasons precluding randomization. Granulomas represent one-quarter of the benign nodules. The understaged patients had unsuspected nodal metastases ($n = 28$) or other more advanced NSCLC. The rate of randomization was significantly greater in those patients who had a preoperative biopsy ($P < .001$).

Conclusions: In a carefully monitored cohort of patients with suspected small NSCLC ≤ 2 cm, a substantial number are misdiagnosed (benign nodules) or understaged. These patients may not have benefited from a thoracic surgical procedure. Preoperative biopsy significantly increased the rate of correct diagnosis. Preoperative biopsy of small suspected NSCLC will reduce the number of nontherapeutic or unnecessary thoracic procedures. Accuracy in preoperative diagnosis is increasingly important as more such small nodules are discovered through lung cancer screening. (J Thorac Cardiovasc Surg 2017;153:1592-7)

Diagnoses in suspected cT1A NSCLC.

Central Message

Preoperative confirmation of diagnosis by biopsy in suspected small non–small cell lung cancer will reduce unnecessary and nontherapeutic lung resections.

Perspective

Cancer and Leukemia Group B 140503 compares sublobar resection to lobectomy for small non–small cell lung cancer. Preoperative diagnosis and staging are correct in only 61%, much greater in patients with preoperative biopsy. The number of patients subject to unnecessary thoracic surgery for small benign nodules will be reduced by increasing the rate of preoperative biopsy.

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From the ^aDepartment of Surgery, State University of New York Upstate Medical University; ^bAlliance Statistics and Data Center, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC; ^cDepartment of Surgery, Weill Cornell Medicine, New York Presbyterian Hospital, New York; and ^dDepartment of Radiology, State University of New York Upstate Medical University, Syracuse, NY.

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Address for reprints: Leslie J. Kohman, MD, Upstate Medical University, 750 E. Adams St, Syracuse, NY 13210 (E-mail: kohmanl@upstate.edu).

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Cancer and Leukemia Group B (CALGB) 140503 is a large, multicenter randomized trial designed to test the hypothesis that sublobar resection (wedge resection or segmentectomy) for peripheral non–small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) ≤ 2 cm in size results in equivalent disease-free survival compared with lobectomy (CALGB is now part of the Alliance for Clinical Trials in Oncology). Randomization (1:1) to lobectomy or sublobar resection is done after preoperative or intraoperative confirmation of both diagnosis and absence of metastasis in at least 3 nodal stations.

Scanning this QR code will take you to the article title page.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CALGB	= Cancer and Leukemia Group B
CT	= computed tomography
NELSON	= Dutch Belgium Randomized Lung Cancer Screening Trial
NSCLC	= non–small cell lung cancer
PET	= positron emission tomography
VATS	= video-assisted thoracic surgery

During trial design, we estimated that 30% of patients would be ineligible for randomization as the result of understaging or misdiagnosis. The actual percentage of registered patients who were unable to go on to randomization was about 40%. This rate of inaccuracy in the assessment of small nodules presumed to be clinical T1a NSCLC indicates that even in an era of improved imaging and staging methods, numerous patients are still subjected to thoracic surgery who may not benefit from it. We hypothesized that knowing the reasons why so many patients could not be randomized would allow corrective action to lower this rate and avoid unnecessary surgery with its attendant risks and costs.

METHODS

CALGB 140503 is a noninferiority study that will determine whether a limited lung resection is equivalent to a standard lobectomy for the treatment of early-stage I NSCLC. Patients are recruited who could tolerate lobectomy and whose tumor is ≤ 2 cm in diameter and peripheral (outer third of the lung) in location. The surgeon must believe that the tumor is resectable by wedge resection or segmentectomy and that the patient can tolerate lobectomy. All evaluations for distant disease, including pathologic examination of mediastinal and hilar lymph nodes at the time of operation, must be negative. Intraoperative randomization takes place only after the frozen sections of the required nodal stations nodes are negative and the surgeon confirms that both lobectomy and sublobar resection would be technically feasible. The surgeon may decide at any time to withdraw the patient from the assigned arm because of technical or patient safety reasons.

Approval for CALGB 140503 was granted by the Central Institutional Review Board on May 4, 2007, and subsequently by the institutional review board at each participating institution. The study is registered with ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT00499330) as of July 10, 2007. Approval for the substudy (A081202: Ancillary Analysis of Unrandomized Patients on CALGB 140503: A Phase III Randomized Trial of Lobectomy versus Sublobar resection for Small ≤ 2 cm Peripheral Non-small Cell Lung Cancer) was granted by the Alliance for Clinical Trials in June 2012.

Informed Consent

The protocol specifies that “the patient must be aware of the neoplastic nature of his/her disease and willingly consent after being informed of the procedure to be performed, side effects, risks, and discomforts. Human protection committee approval of this protocol and a consent form is required.” A consent form approved by CALGB/Alliance, the Central Institutional Review Board, and each institution’s institutional review board was provided to and discussed with each patient by the site study team. A signed copy is on file at each site and the Alliance data center.

Preregistration eligibility criteria for parent study, CALGB 140503 were as follows:

- Peripheral NSCLC ≤ 2 cm as determined by computed tomography (CT) scan. Patients with pure ground-glass opacities or pathologically confirmed N1 or N2 disease are not eligible.
- Tumor location suitable for either lobar or sublobar resection (wedge or segment).
- Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group performance status of 0-2.
- No previous malignancy within 5 years (later changed to 3 years) other than nonmelanoma skin cancer or superficial bladder cancer or carcinoma in situ of the cervix.
- No previous neoadjuvant therapy for this malignancy.
- Intraoperative randomization eligibility criteria.
- Histologic confirmation of NSCLC (if not already obtained).
- Confirmation of N0 status by frozen section examination of nodal levels 4, 7, and 10 on the right side and 5, 6, 7, and 10 on the left side.

The Principle Investigator requested additional records from all 248 consented patients on CALGB 140503 who were registered but not randomized between study opening in 2007 (first patient registered October 17, 2007) and a cut-off date of March 22, 2013. Requests were sent to both the enrolling thoracic surgeon and the clinical research associate at each site for the following documents: operative report, pathology report, discharge summary, and preoperative positive emission tomography (PET) and CT reports. The data were sent by the study sites to the Alliance Statistics and Data Center. Although the consent signed by all registered participants covered the sharing of this information, and they are collected routinely on all randomized patients, the protocol did not require their submission once a patient was withdrawn from the study due to nonrandomization.

Statistical Methods

Core statistical team members from the Alliance Statistics and Data Center at Duke University Cancer Institute, who are investigators on this study, performed the analysis. The data were locked on April 29, 2016. We summarized various reasons for nonrandomization from the study database. Frequencies and percentages of the reasons were tabulated and depicted graphically. *P* values comparing randomized versus unrandomized patients were calculated from *t* test for continuous variable (age) or from χ^2 test for categorical variables.¹⁻⁴

RESULTS

At the time of data acquisition for this report, 637 patients had been registered to CALGB 140503, 389 (61%) had been randomized successfully, and 248 patients were not randomized (39%). Over time, the rate of successful randomization in the study as a whole increased steadily from 56% to 73% (Figure 1). We analyzed the reasons for nonrandomization among a subset of the unrandomized patients (208, 84% of the unrandomized) for whom the reason for not randomizing was available. Thirty-nine of 59 participating institutions that accrued patients during the study interval contributed to the 208-patient subset. Eleven institutions, comprising 29 registered patients, randomized all their patients so did not contribute to this analysis. Twenty-six institutions (134 patients) submitted data on all nonrandomized patients. Nine institutions (16 patients) did not submit data on any of their nonrandomized patients. The other 13 institutions (74 patients) submitted data on 13% to 94% of their nonrandomized patients.

FIGURE 1. Rate of randomization over time.

The reasons for failure to submit data were related largely to change in data management personnel over time at the institutions and the lack of resource capacity at the sites to search patient records for these documents.

Demographics and nodule characteristics for these patients are shown in Table 1. Unrandomized patients were younger and more likely to be never-smokers than randomized patients. Most notably, the unrandomized patients (both in the 208-patient subset and the entire cohort of 248 unrandomized patients) had a rate of preoperative biopsy only one half that of the successfully randomized patients. Reasons for nonrandomization (Table 2) included benign nodules, more advanced NSCLC (clinical understaging), small cell lung cancer, metastatic disease from other sites, and technical or administrative reasons.

DISCUSSION

We analyzed the reasons for nonrandomization in patients participating in CALGB 140503, a multi-institutional randomized study of lobectomy versus sublobar resection for clinical Stage IA NSCLCs ≤ 2 cm in diameter who will not be included in the primary analysis. We found that despite all contemporary forms of imaging in an era of easily available and safe transthoracic needle

biopsy and invasive staging techniques, a substantial number of patients with clinical T1a NSCLC actually have benign disease masquerading as cancer, more advanced NSCLC, or other malignancies. Our most notable finding was that randomized patients had a much greater rate of preoperative biopsy confirming their diagnosis ($P < .001$). This finding supports recommending preoperative biopsy for all patients with suspected small lung cancers to avoid unnecessary thoracic surgery for those who have a benign nodule or a metastasis from another primary cancer.

Most pulmonary nodules found incidentally and on screening are benign, especially in areas with endemic granulomatous disease.⁵ Single-institution reviews of surgery for patients with pulmonary nodules range from 86% benign in a group of solitary pulmonary nodules treated by video-assisted thoracic surgery (VATS) excision without preoperative biopsy⁶ to 9% in a group of patients from the histoplasmosis belt, a very high percentage of which were granulomas.⁵ DeCamp and colleagues⁷ found 40% of nodulectomies benign. Our results fall within the published range. Benign nodules < 2 cm in diameter rarely require excision for treatment or palliation, and most patients in CALGB 140503 with benign lesions probably had unnecessary surgery that could have been avoided by preoperative biopsy in most cases.

A 6.4% rate of nodal upstaging is considerably lower than noted in a review of all Stage I NSCLC from the Society of Thoracic Surgeons database, where it was 14.3% for thoracotomy and 11.6% for VATS⁸ and in the Danish Lung Cancer Registry (18.6%).⁹ A recent review comparing robotic and VATS lobectomy found that among cT1a patients, 3.5% had pN1 and 4.9% had pN2, comparable with our findings.¹⁰ Meyers and colleagues¹¹ did a cost-effectiveness analysis of routine mediastinoscopy in patients with clinical stage I lung cancer by CT and PET and concluded that such patients benefit little from mediastinoscopy unless the prevalence of N2 disease exceeds 10%. We do not have information on

TABLE 1. Demographics and nodule characteristics (percentages based on number of patients with data available for analysis)

	All registered patients (n = 637)	Randomized (n = 389)	Unrandomized (n = 248)	Included in analysis (n = 208)	P value comparing randomized vs unrandomized
Age, mean (SD)	66 (10)	68 (9)	64 (10)	64 (10)	<.001
Female, n (%)	359 (56%)	228 (59%)	131 (53%)	114 (55%)	.151
Location of nodule, n (%)					.572
RUL	216 (36%)	141 (37%)	75 (36%)	75 (36%)	
LUL	162 (27%)	107 (28%)	55 (27%)	55 (27%)	
RLL	82 (14%)	50 (13%)	32 (15%)	32 (15%)	
LLL	93 (16%)	65 (17%)	28 (14%)	28 (14%)	
RML	39 (7%)	22 (6%)	17 (8%)	17 (8%)	
Preoperative biopsy done, n (%)	238 (41%)	192 (50%)	46 (23%)	46 (23%)	<.001
Never smoker, n (%)	79 (14%)	44 (11%)	35 (18%)	35 (18%)	.036

RUL, Right upper lobe; LUL, left upper lobe; RLL, right lower lobe; LLL, left lower lobe; RML, right middle lobe.

TABLE 2. Reasons for nonrandomization among 208 patients with data available

Reason	No. patients, n (%) (N = 208)
Not NSCLC	120 (57.7%)
Benign	104 (50.0%)
Granuloma	24 (11.5%)
Hamartoma*	9 (4.3%)
Infection	11 (5.3%)
Other†,‡	60 (28.8%)
Other malignancy	16 (7.7%)
Small cell lung cancer	3 (1.4%)
Carcinoid	4 (1.9%)
Lymphoma	5 (2.4%)
Metastatic, other site	4 (1.9%)
NSCLC but ineligible (more advanced)	47 (22.6% of unrandomized, 10.7% of all registered NSCLC)
Positive nodes—(§)	28 (13.5% of unrandomized, 6.4% of all registered NSCLC)
N2	20
N1	6
Not specified	2
Satellite nodule	6 (2.9%)
Second cancer in other lobe	3 (1.4%)
Pleural effusion	2 (1.0%)
Tumor >2 cm	6 (2.9%)
Other (multiple lesions)	2 (1.0%)
Technical reasons	12 (5.8%)
Unable to sample nodes	3 (1.4%)
Unsuitable for sublobar resection	6 (2.9%)
Hemorrhage	1 (0.5%)
Difficult anatomy	2 (1.0%)
Administrative/other/unknown	29 (13.9%)
Patient refusal/withdrawal	12 (5.8%)
Surgeon decision	7 (3.4%)
Unknown	10 (4.8%)

NSCLC, Non–small cell lung cancer. *One was also unsuitable for wedge. †One patient had eligible NSCLC but a suspected lymphoma in another lobe that turned out to be benign. ‡Two cases of chronic inflammation, one each emphysema, inflammatory nodule, ischemic necrosis, scar tissue, and sarcoidosis. The remainder were unspecified. §One N2 case pathology was small cell.

how many patients in CALGB 140503 had false-negative mediastinoscopy (if it was positive, they would not have been registered for this trial) or other forms of mediastinal nodal biopsy such as endobronchial ultrasound, but because our rate of N2 upstaging by mediastinal biopsy at VATS or thoracotomy was only 4.6%, it is unlikely that mediastinoscopy would have detected many additional cases not detected by direct biopsy of 3 mediastinal nodal stations. There does not seem to be a compelling case for additional preoperative mediastinal staging in patients with suspected T1a NSCLC.

Only 11 patients were excluded from randomization because of a malignant second nodule of NSCLC pathology found at surgery (6 satellite nodules, 3 cancers in another lobe, and 2 with multiple lesions). This finding is consistent with a study by Stiles and colleagues,¹² where the incidence

of secondary nodules in patients having surgery for NSCLC was 57% but only 13% were malignant. Patients with known or suspected multiple cancers would not have been eligible for this study.

Younger patients and never-smokers are considered at lower risk for lung cancer, although the rate of never-smokers with cancer is increasing, and one estimate puts it at 15% currently.¹³ Our rate of never-smokers was greater in the unrandomized than the randomized groups (18% vs 11%, $P = .036$) and the unrandomized group also was younger (mean 64 years vs 68, $P < .001$), which could indicate a lower chance of malignancy and perhaps should favor even more strongly a less invasive approach, such as needle biopsy, in those with a lower predicted incidence of malignancy.

Biopsy for diagnosis of small lung nodules can be accomplished via transthoracic image guided needle biopsy (fine-needle aspiration or core biopsy) or bronchoscopic biopsy, including navigational bronchoscopy. The patients in this trial had peripheral nodules suitable for sublobar resection, likely more often indicating transthoracic biopsy. The diagnostic success of transthoracic image-guided fine needle aspiration or core needle biopsy is now more than 90%¹⁴⁻¹⁷ and the risk of severe complications is low (0.75% in one large series).¹⁸

In contrast, in the Dutch Belgium Randomized Lung Cancer Screening Trial (NELSON), 43% of patients who had thoracotomy for nodules that turned out to be benign had at least one minor complication, and 3 of 47 patients (6%) had a major complication.¹⁹ The Surgical Group of the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer opines that “the use of CT-guided biopsy for suspicious nodules should be encouraged and will in many cases facilitate the surgical decision process.”²⁰ Most benign nodules ≤ 2 cm in diameter will not require excision for symptoms or disease management, and surgery can be avoided completely once a benign diagnosis has been confirmed by biopsy.

Although the current study is not directly comparable with a screening group (we do not have information about how many of these participants had their nodules detected on screening), comparison of rates of surgery for benign conditions in screening cohorts is useful because the type of lesion in CALGB 140503 is similar to those frequently encountered in screen-detected nodules (≤ 2 cm). The use of a robust algorithm for evaluation and surveillance of dominant and secondary nodules, such as those employed in experienced screening programs should assure that interventions are appropriate and limited to those with a high pretest probability of malignancy.

Documented benefits of CT scan screening for lung cancer began with the 1999 publication of Early Lung Cancer Action Project results.²¹ The Early Lung Cancer Action Project evaluation protocol dictated careful attention to imaging details and adherence to follow up regimens. No

patient had surgery for benign disease, the vast majority of biopsies revealed cancer, and no complications occurred as a consequence of any of the biopsy procedures, even for the small noncalcified nodules. Flores and colleagues²² updated the International Early Lung Cancer Action Project results in 2014. Among 31,646 baseline and 37,861 annual repeat screenings performed at US sites, 492 patients underwent surgical resection, of whom 437 (89%) were diagnosed with lung cancer. Among these 437, 91% had pathologic stage I disease. Of clinical Stage I lung cancers, 7% had more advanced disease diagnosed at operation, identical to our finding. Among the 492 surgical resections, 230 had a preoperative diagnosis of lung cancer. Among the remaining 262 patients, who did not have a preoperative biopsy, 20% had a nonmalignant diagnosis (greater than our rate of 15%). These results again emphasize the importance of preoperative biopsy to avoid unnecessary surgery.

There are other, smaller randomized trials of CT scan screening for lung cancer either completed or in progress. They show a wide range of surgery for benign nodules: Detection and Screening of Early Lung Cancer With Novel Imaging Technology (DANTE) trial: 0.9% surgery for benign lesions,²³ Continuing Observation of Smoking Subjects Early Detection Trial for Lung Cancer (COSMOS) trial: 12% surgery for benign nodules,²⁴ and NELSON trial: 24% surgery for benign nodules.¹⁹ The NELSON trial also showed that radiologist expertise can reduce the number of false-positive results.²⁵ Strict adherence to a diagnostic protocol such as International Early Lung Cancer Action Project²⁶ as well as increasing the rate of preoperative nodule biopsy in highly suspicious lesions should reduce these numbers so that fewer patients are subject to surgery which may not benefit them, with the associated risks and costs.

Our finding that in a large well-controlled study of clinical stage IA NSCLC, 26% (120 not NSCLC plus 47 more advanced NSCLC of a total registered of 637) had a different diagnosis not discovered until VATS or thoracotomy, and one half of these (104 benign of 208 analyzed, 16% of 637 registered patients) were benign also has implications for the appropriateness of local therapy such as stereotactic body radiotherapy or radiofrequency ablation when done without preoperative confirmation of diagnosis. Core biopsies are diagnostic in more than 90% of nodules with a low rate of complications¹⁴⁻¹⁷ and should be routine for suspected lung cancer, especially younger patients and never-smokers.

Study Limitations

The 208 patients included in this analysis represent 84% of unrandomized patients at cut-off date and may not be representative of the entire cohort, noting that some participating institutions are not represented among these 208 patients. We believe, however, the chance of

systematic bias in only one direction coming from 13 different institutions is rather slight. We also have based our analysis on the entire 248 patients in the unrandomized group. Some of these categories might be different if we knew the reason for nonrandomization in the remaining 16%.

The ability of PET scan to improve accuracy will be assessed in the imaging component of the parent trial and having a PET scan may be correlated with rate of randomization. We do not have the data yet to investigate this possibility.

There may be a difference between the rate of under- and overstaging in this trial subset and that encountered in the nonstudy situation. In particular, surgeons motivated to accrue patients to clinical trials may enter them even if the clinical suspicion for lung cancer is low. Or, there may be a different practice pattern or threshold for preoperative biopsy in patients considered for a clinical trial versus standard practice. Either of these, if true, would make the rate of patients subject to unnecessary operation different in the current analysis than in common practice.

Multidisciplinary lung cancer clinics or tumor boards, accreditation by the Commission on Cancer, and adherence to National Comprehensive Cancer Network or other guidelines also may influence biopsy rates. Local availability and expertise in techniques such as transthoracic image guided biopsy, endobronchial ultrasound and navigational bronchoscopy as well as diagnostic radiologic and pathologic expertise or participation in a formal screening protocol may also contribute to institutional variation.

CONCLUSION

In a carefully monitored cohort of patients with suspected small NSCLC ≤ 2 cm, a substantial number are misdiagnosed (benign nodules) or understaged. These patients may not have benefited from a thoracic surgical procedure. Preoperative biopsy significantly increased the rate of correct diagnosis and will reduce the number of nontherapeutic or unnecessary thoracic procedures. The unrandomized patients were younger and more frequently never-smokers, favoring even more strongly a biopsy before proceeding to surgical resection in such patients since their likelihood of cancer is lower. Accuracy in preoperative diagnosis is increasingly important as more such small nodules are discovered through lung cancer screening.

The parent trial for this subset analysis, CALGB 140503, is an ambitious and successful randomized controlled trial addressing the question of whether sublobar resection, including mediastinal lymph node dissection, is equivalent to pulmonary lobectomy in terms of cancer-related outcomes. We look forward to the primary analysis of this landmark trial.

Conflict of Interest Statement

Leslie Kohman receives support for research unrelated to this paper from CareFusion. Nasser Altorki received support from AstraZeneca for clinical trial research and from Genentech for clinical trial participation. All other authors have nothing to disclose with regard to commercial support.

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