


First-line treatment in lymphomatoid papulosis: a retrospective multicentre study

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Summary

Background. Data regarding response to treatment in lymphomatoid papulosis (LyP) are scarce.

Aim. To assess the daily clinical practice approach to LyP and the response to first-line treatments.

Methods. This was a retrospective study enrolling 252 patients with LyP.

Results. Topical steroids, methotrexate and phototherapy were the most common first-line treatments, prescribed for 35%, 20% and 14% of the patients, respectively. Complete response (CR) was achieved in 48% of treated patients. Eczematous lesions significantly increased relative risk (RR) of not achieving CR (RR = 1.76; 95% CI 1.16–2.11). Overall median time to CR was 10 months (95% CI 6–13 months), and 78% of complete responders showed cutaneous relapse; both results were similar for all treatment groups ($P > 0.05$). Overall estimated median disease-free survival (DFS) was 11 months (95% CI 9–13 months) but DFS for patients treated with phototherapy was 23 months (95% CI 10–36 months; $P < 0.03$). Having the Type A LyP variant (RR = 2.04; 95% CI 0.96–4.30) and receiving a first-line treatment other than phototherapy (RR = 5.33; 95% CI 0.84–33.89) were significantly associated with cutaneous early relapse. Of the 252 patients, 31 (13%) had associated mycosis fungoides unrelated to therapeutic approach, type of LyP or T-cell receptor clonality.

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Conclusions. Current epidemiological, clinical and pathological data support previous results. Topical steroids, phototherapy and methotrexate are the most frequently prescribed first-line treatments. Although CR and cutaneous relapse rates do not differ between them, phototherapy achieves a longer DFS. Presence of Type A LyP and use of topical steroid or methotrexate were associated with an increased risk of early relapse.

Introduction

Lymphomatoid papulosis (LyP)¹ is considered the least aggressive member of the group of primary cutaneous CD30 lymphoproliferative disorders.^{2–4} LyP usually runs a chronic course from years to decades, with recurrent crops of papules or nodules that may crust and ulcerate, then resolve. However, the clinical course seems to vary from patient to patient, with most patients developing flares over decades, and a significant percentage of patients developing associated lymphomas.⁵ Overall, large published series focusing on LyP are scarce, and precise treatment and follow-up data are difficult to assess.^{3,6–10} Topical steroids, psoralen ultraviolet A (PUVA) phototherapy and low-dose methotrexate are the best-documented treatments,⁵ but series are short and often do not provide data on dosage or follow-up. Treatments may be followed by long-term complications,⁵ and do not seem to alter the natural course of LyP, with active disease expected at follow-up in up to 62%³ of patients.

Methods

The study was approved by the local ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Patients

Using the convenience sampling method, the Spanish Cutaneous Lymphoma Task Force retrospectively analysed the clinical records of patients with LyP treated in 17 university hospitals in Spain between May 1986 and March 2014. All patients fulfilled the diagnostic criteria of the World Health Organization (WHO) and European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer classifications for LyP.² The following data were recorded for each patient: sex, age at diagnosis, interval to diagnosis, lesion location, clinical appearance and extent,³ histopathological type of LyP, T-cell receptor (TCR) clonality, first-line therapy outcome, and follow-up data. Patients were treated as per physician's choice. Response was graded as complete response (CR) (complete disappearance of all the lesions), partial response (PR) (> 50% reduction in skin involvement), or no

response (NR) (< 50% reduction in skin involvement, no change in disease or worsening of disease). Cutaneous relapse was defined as the development of any new lesion after CR.⁵ For patients achieving CR, the following end points were computed: time to CR, disease-free survival (DFS) and cutaneous relapse rate. Early relapse and late relapse were defined as the development of new lesions within 6 months and after 12 months, respectively, following declaration of CR.

Statistical analysis

Statistical calculations were performed using SPSS software (v19.0; IBM SPSS, Armonk, NY, USA). Summary results for continuous variables are expressed as medians, means and interquartile ranges (IQR). Qualitative variables are expressed as percentages. Inter-group differences were analysed using the Mann–Whitney *U*-test or Kruskal–Wallis test for continuous variables, and the χ^2 or Fisher exact test for dichotomous variables. Kaplan–Meier estimates of time to CR and DFS were compared using the log-rank test. The 95% CIs were calculated. Sample size was not planned. All *P* values shown are two-tailed, with alpha of 5%, hence significance was set at *P* < 0.05.

Results

Patient demographics

In total, 252 patients (140 men and 112 women) were included. Median age at diagnosis was 48 years (range 1–80 years). There was no significant difference in LyP course in the different age groups. Median interval to diagnosis was 6 months (range 1–280 months), and median follow-up was 52 months (range 1–277 months).

Disease

There was no predominant anatomical site of involvement; 83% of the patients showed generalized cutaneous disease and none had nodal or visceral

involvement.⁵ The Type A LyP variant, characterized by a wedge-shaped dense dermal perivascular lymphoid infiltrate composed of small lymphocytes and large atypical CD30+ cells with Reed–Sternberg appearance, was seen in 70% of patients.² Monoclonal

rearrangement of TCR was detected in 47% of patients. A papular eruption was present in 90% of the 252 patients at diagnosis, whereas only 30% had ulcerated papules. Table 1 lists the main clinical features of the included patients.

Table 1 Main clinical and pathological findings and follow-up data.

Total (N = 252)	Male n = 140	Female n = 112	P	
Age at diagnosis, years				
Median	48	51	46	0.18*
IQR (25th–75th percentile)	35–61	37–62	34–61	
Range	1–80	1–79	2–80	
Time to diagnosis, months				
Median	6	7	4	0.53*
IQR (25th–75th percentile)	1–25	2–28	1–21	
Range	1–280	1–250	1–280	
Follow-up, months				
Median	52	48	52	0.79*
IQR (25th–75th percentile)	17–101	11–105	23–99	
Range	1–277	1–263	1–277	
Extent of skin lesions % (n)				
Generalized	83 (210)	83 (116)	84 (94)	0.48†
Regional	17 (42)	17 (24)	16 (18)	
T-cell receptor rearrangement % (n)				
Monoclonal	47 (44)	40 (24)	59 (20)	> 0.05†
Polyclonal	47 (44)	55 (33)	32 (11)	
Oligoclonal	6 (6)	5 (3)	9 (3)	
Pathological variant % (n)				
A	70 (133)	69 (73)	72 (60)	> 0.05†
B	24 (45)	22 (24)	25 (21)	
C	1 (3)	1 (1)	2 (2)	
D	2 (4)	4 (4)	–	
E	3 (5)	4 (4)	1 (1)	
Type of lesion % (n)				
Papules	90 (227)	89 (124)	92 (103)	> 0.05†
Nodules	20 (50)	27 (38)	11 (12)	
Plaques	12 (29)	11 (16)	12 (13)	
Tumours	7 (17)	9 (12)	5 (5)	
Eczematous	5 (12)	7 (10)	2 (2)	
Location of lesions % (n)				
Limbs	92 (225)	90 (124)	94 (101)	> 0.05†
Trunk	58 (142)	58 (80)	58 (62)	
Head/neck	25 (60)	27 (37)	22 (23)	
Mucosa	3 (8)	3 (4)	4 (4)	
Disease-related survival, years, %				
5	100	100	100	0.98‡
10	100	100	100	
Lymphoma-related survival, years, %				
5	98	96	100	0.16‡
10	98	96	100	
Overall survival, years, %				
5	96	96	96	0.98‡
10	96	96	96	
Association with lymphoma % (n)				
Mycosis fungoides	13 (31)	16 (22)	9 (10)	0.08†
Overall	14 (36)	18 (25)	9 (10)	

IQR, interquartile range. *Mann-Whitney *U*-test; † χ^2 or Fisher test; ‡Wilcoxon test.

Treatment

In total, 87 patients (35%) were initially treated with topical steroids, while 51 (20%) received systemic methotrexate (≤ 20 mg weekly), 36 (14%) underwent phototherapy [PUVA for 30 patients and ultraviolet (UV)B for 6 patients] and 19 (6%) received other treatments (topical and systemic antibiotics, dapsone, antihistamines or oral steroids). The remaining 59 patients (23%) did not receive any treatment. First-line therapies did not differ between men and women ($P > 0.05$), or between patients with regional and those with generalized lesions ($P > 0.05$).

Response

Clinical response to first-line treatment is shown in Table 2. Of the 193 patients treated, 86 (48%) achieved CR. No significant difference was detected for any treatment with regard to patient sex or cutaneous disease extent, but having lesions with an eczematous morphology conferred a significantly increased relative risk (RR) of not achieving CR ($P < 0.03$) (RR = 1.76; 95% CI 1.16–2.11) (supplementary Table S1). Overall estimated median time to CR was 10 months (95% CI 6–13 months), and there was no significant difference between the analysed treatments ($P = 0.09$). Of the 86 patients who achieved CR, 67 (78%) developed cutaneous relapse, and this rate was similar for all investigated treatments ($P = 0.24$) (Table 2).

Overall estimated DFS (median) since CR was 11 months (95% CI 9–13 months), but DFS for patients treated with phototherapy was significantly longer ($P < 0.03$) (23 months; 95% CI 10–36 months) (Fig. 1). Overall estimated median DFS since first-line treatment withdrawal was 5 months (95% CI 1–10 months) but again, this was significantly ($P < 0.02$) better (23 months; 95% CI 1–50 months) for phototherapy-treated patients (Fig. 2).

Rates of:	Overall	Topical steroids	Methotrexate	Phototherapy	Others	<i>P</i>
CR, % (<i>n</i>)	48 (86)	44 (34)	52 (25)	61 (20)	37 (7)	> 0.05 †
PR	37 (65)	33 (26)	44 (21)	30 (10)	42 (8)	
NR	15 (26)	23 (18)	4 (2)	9 (3)	21 (4)	
Cutaneous relapse*	78 (67)	71 (24)	92 (23)	75 (15)	71 (5)	0.24†

CR, complete response; PR, partial response; NR, no response. *Only for patients who achieved CR; † χ^2 test or Fisher exact test.

Relapse

The Type A morphological variant was significantly ($P = 0.04$) more prevalent in patients who had early relapse compared with those who had late relapse (RR = 2.04; 95% CI 0.96–4.30). Use of a first-line treatment other than phototherapy was recorded more frequently in patients with early relapse than in those with late relapse ($P < 0.02$) (RR = 5.33; 95% CI 0.84–33.89) (supplementary Table S2).

Mortality and comorbidities

Four patients died of unrelated diseases and three patients died due to associated lymphomas: mycosis fungoides (MF), Sézary syndrome and CD30 anaplastic lymphoma kinase-negative anaplastic large cell lymphoma (ALCL). Table 1 lists survival data. An associated lymphoma was seen in 36 patients (14%), of whom 31 (13%) had MF (21 men and 10 women; χ^2 test; $P = 0.15$). MF developed after LyP (median gap 42 months; range 2–92 months) in 15 patients, of whom 5 received initial methotrexate treatment for LyP, 5 were treated with topical steroids and 5 underwent phototherapy. MF development showed no significant association with any type of LyP or with TCR status ($P > 0.05$).

Discussion

LyP mainly develops between 45 and 52 years of age,^{3,10} although several cases have been diagnosed in young patients.¹¹ Classic reports of LyP describe recurrent crops of reddish-brown papules and/or nodules that frequently crust or ulcerate and then resolve, often leaving atrophic scars,^{1,2} but in our study, we observed this pattern in only one-third of cases. We found that 90% of patients developed a papular eruption at diagnosis, and 20% had nodules; the latter percentage is higher than the 3–4%^{3,7} previously reported. A recently proposed accurate definition of

Table 2 Response to first-line active treatment.

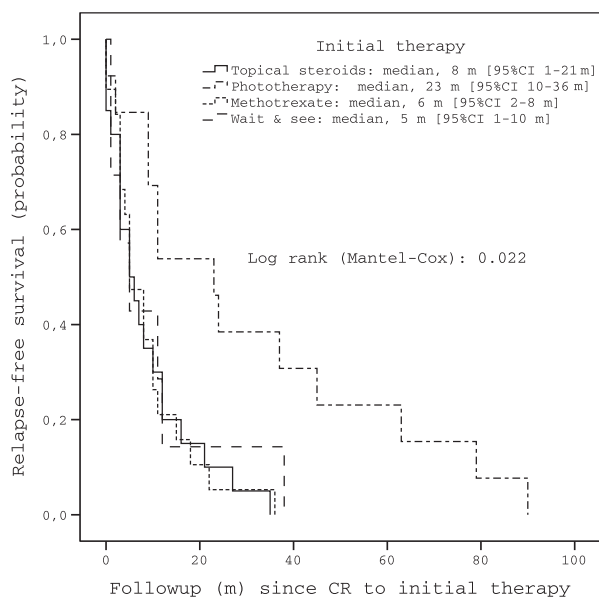


Figure 1 Disease-free survival since complete remission following initial therapy.

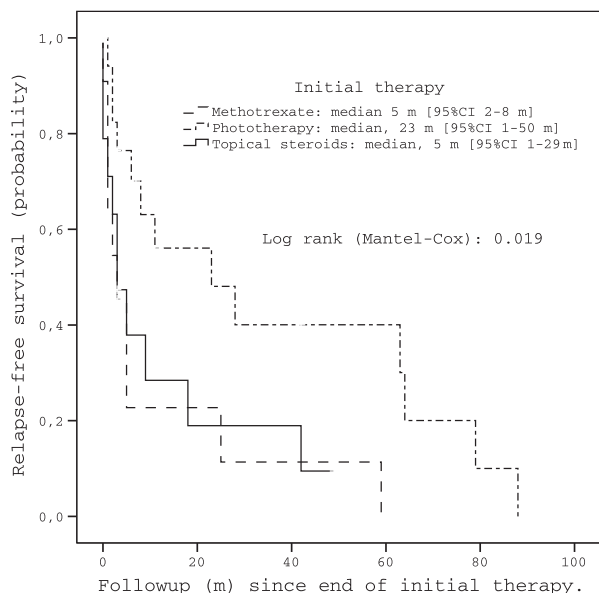


Figure 2 Disease-free survival since the end of initial therapy (only for patients with complete response).

nodular lesions will help to reduce bias.⁵ Current data suggest that eczematous features of LyP lesions are significantly associated with a poorer response to treatment. Widespread cutaneous involvement prevails,^{1,2,7,9} and there is no predominant anatomical site of involvement.³ Mucosal locations have been described in up to 3% of patients.¹²

The updated WHO classification of haematological malignancies recognizes the three original variants (Types A, B and C) of LyP, as well as the more recently described type D (mimics primary cutaneous aggressive epidermotropic CD8 cytotoxic T-cell lymphoma), type E (angioinvasive), LyP with chromosome 6p25 rearrangement, and some even rarer variants.¹³ Type A is the most common LyP variant,^{2,4,5,10,14} and we observed it in 70% of cases in our study. We also found that Type A LyP was slightly but significantly associated with early relapse. The second most frequent variant was Type B LyP, which has a predominance of atypical cells with cerebriform nuclei.^{2,5}

Clonally rearranged TCR genes have been detected in approximately 60–70% of LyP lesions.¹⁵ We identified it in around 50% of our patients, but, in contrast to previous reports,^{6,14} we did not find any correlation between clonality and disease behaviour (supplementary Tables S1 and S2).

Grouping the most relevant studies focusing on PUVA phototherapy,^{5,10,16–19} we found useful information on response for 44 patients; CR, PR and NR rates were 13%, 62% and 25%, respectively. Phototherapy with UVA 1²⁰ or UVB¹¹ was also associated with a favourable outcome. Our study includes response data for 33 patients treated with phototherapy as first-line therapy, which showed higher CR rates in those patients, highlighting the need for controlled studies. Some authors have suggested that patients treated with phototherapy achieve a faster response,⁵ but our results do not support this hypothesis. In previous studies, rapid relapse after therapy withdrawal was reported in 84% of the patients treated with PUVA.^{5,10,16–19} The relapse rate in our study was similarly high (75%), but DFS was longer than previously described, and was also longer than DFS in patients who received treatments other than phototherapy.

Single-agent chemotherapy with low-dose methotrexate (15–25 mg weekly) seems to be effective in controlling LyP. Results for around 150 patients have been reported previously. In three previous large series,^{10,21,22} CR and PR was achieved by 36% and 41%, respectively, of 119 patients. In our study, the rates were 52% and 44%, respectively, of 47 treated patients. Although satisfactory long-term control has been described in 87% of patients with maintenance doses,²¹ a relapse rate of 67–75% after drug withdrawal has been reported.^{5,9,21,22} We observed an even higher relapse rate (92%) after a short DFS (median 5 months).

Topical steroids are often used in LyP,^{5,10} and in our study, they were the first-line therapy for 35% of

patients. A recent study on 151 patients¹⁰ reported CR and PR in 8% and 38%, respectively, whereas we found higher rates (44% and 33%, respectively), similar to those achieved by the other treatments assessed.

Several additional approaches have been used in patients with LyP,^{5,10} but only very limited numbers of patients have been reported, and follow-up data are often not available, thus they will be not discussed further here. To our knowledge, brentuximab vedotin²³ is the only treatment that has been prospectively evaluated in LyP, and induced CR in 5/9 patients.

In our study, 78% of the patients who achieved CR after first-line active treatment relapsed, and even higher rates have been published^{3,6,7,9,24} with longer follow-up. Our study provides new data regarding time to CR and DFS; median time to CR was 10 months without significant differences between treatments, while median DFS after CR was 11 months, but a significantly longer DFS was found for patients who received phototherapy compared with those managed with topical steroids, methotrexate or no treatment (Fig. 1), even after treatment withdrawal (Fig. 2). Accordingly, first-line treatments other than phototherapy carry a significantly increased risk of early relapse.

Association with lymphoma has been reported in up to 62% of patients with LyP, but wide variability exists between series.^{3-7,9,10} Our results agree with those of a previous large series,³ in which 19% of patients had an associated lymphoma. Referral bias and the convenience sampling method may partially explain the variability between studies.^{7,10,25} Development of the second lymphoma may be delayed as long as 36 years,⁶ making life-long follow-up of patients with LyP essential.⁵ Mycosis fungoides is the most common associated malignancy,^{5,6,9,10,25} followed by ALCL and Hodgkin disease.^{3,10} There is not enough evidence supporting a decreased risk of lymphoma in treated patients,^{9,10} and in our study, all subsequent lymphomas developed in treated patients.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study supports previous clinical, pathological and epidemiological findings, based upon a large number of patients. It also enhances knowledge about the routine initial therapeutic approach to patients with LyP, chiefly concerning response rates, time to response, DFS and risk factors for relapse. However, LyP is difficult to assess by retrospective studies, and the commonly used convenience sampling method carries generalizability limitations.

The consensus proposal by Kempf *et al.*⁵ is crucial for reproducibility of future studies. They recommend that there should be better definitions for clinical morphology, recording of potentially useful variables and development of a global response score. Prospective and controlled studies are mandatory to address the natural course of LyP, response to treatments and prognostic biomarkers.

Learning points

- The current study reports the largest series of patients with LyP published to date.
- The clinical, pathological and epidemiological data support previous results.
- Topical steroids, phototherapy and methotrexate are the most commonly prescribed first-line treatments.
- CR and cutaneous relapse rates do not differ between these treatments, but phototherapy achieves a longer DFS time.
- Early relapse is associated with having the Type A variant and receiving first-line treatment other than phototherapy.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Table S1. Predictive variables for complete response with first line therapy.

Table S2. Predictive variables for early (< 6 months) vs. late (> 12 months) cutaneous relapse in patients who achieved CR with initial therapy.