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Hepatocellular Carcinoma(HCC): are we performing too many liver biopsies?

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Abstract

AIM
Once a diagnosis of HCC is made on Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), a liver biopsy is often undertaken for tissue diagnosis. We examined whether biopsy in such cases is really necessary.

METHODS & RESULTS
Of all 998 liver biopsies performed in our University Hospital between January 2007 and January 2013, 26 had a histological diagnosis of HCC. 8 of these had prior liver MRI, of which 4 were reported as HCC. In all 4 cases, the alpha fetoprotein (AFP) was raised. On the other hand, 25 of the 26 patients had prior Computer-assisted Tomography (CT), with only 5 reported as HCC. Moreover, of all 95 urgent or scheduled MRI Liver scans performed in our hospital between Jan 2011 and Dec 2012, 2 were reported as HCC, and both were confirmed on biopsy.

DISCUSSION
Whilst our study, to date, has limited power, we advocate MRI as a first line investigation for suspected HCC. Moreover, in cases where the MRI shows a diagnosis of HCC **and** the AFP is raised, we argue that a liver biopsy, which itself carries risks, may not be necessary. However, in cases where the AFP is raised, and the MRI is suspicious for HCC, but cannot exclude metastasis, we *would* advocate a liver biopsy. This is because there are reported cases in the literature of AFP-producing gastric cancers with liver metastases.