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Preoperative radiotherapy combined with total mesorectal excision for resectable rectal cancer

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INTRODUCTION

Local recurrence is a serious problem in the treatment of rectal cancer, since it causes disabling symptoms and is difficult to treat.^{1,2} There is a high incidence of local recurrence (15 to 45%) after conventional surgery, in which blunt dissection of the rectal fascia often fails to remove all the tissue that may bear tumour.³⁻⁵

In an attempt to improve local control and survival after conventional surgery, radiotherapy has been given. The only randomised trial that compared preoperative and postoperative radiotherapy showed the superiority of preoperative radiotherapy for local control.⁶ The Swedish Rectal Cancer Trial (SRCT) found that preoperative radiotherapy also improved the rate of survival at five years.⁷ A recent meta-analysis⁸ concluded that the combination of preoperative radiotherapy and surgery, as compared with surgery alone, significantly improved overall survival and cancer-specific survival.

The recognition that involvement of the circumferential margin by tumour cells is important in local recurrences has led to the general use of total mesorectal excision,⁹⁻¹³ in which the entire mesorectum is enveloped and resected by precise, sharp dissection. Improvements in local control with this technique have been shown, mainly in retrospective series.^{9-12,14}

In previous studies of radiotherapy for rectal cancer, surgery was not standardised. Since surgical technique is a key factor in the success of tumour control,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ standardisation and quality control with respect to surgery are indispensable for evaluating the effects of adjuvant therapy. Optimal quality must also include the use of standardised methods of pathological examination.¹⁸ A prospective, randomised trial was organised by the Dutch ColoRectal Cancer Group to investigate the efficacy of preoperative radiotherapy in combination with standardised total mesorectal excision in patients with rectal cancer.¹⁹ In this article, we present the results of the trial after a median follow-up of two years.

METHODS

Eligibility, randomisation and sample size

Patients were enrolled between January 1996 and December 1999. To be eligible, patients had to have histologically confirmed adenocarcinoma of the rectum, without evidence of distant metastases, and the inferior margin of the tumour had to be located not farther than 15 cm from the anal verge and below the level of S1-2. Patients with fixed tumours or tumours that were treated by local (transanal) resection were excluded. Patients with previous or coexisting cancer and those who had previously undergone large-bowel surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy of the pelvis, were also excluded.

After informed consent had been obtained, we randomly assigned the patients to treatment with preoperative radiation (5 Gy on each of five days) followed by total mesorectal excision or to total mesorectal excision alone. Randomisation was performed at the central trial office and was based on permuted blocks of six, with stratification according to centre and the expected type of operation (low anterior resection or abdominoperineal resection). The trial was approved by the medical ethics committees of all the participating hospitals. The trial design and the calculation of the sample size have been described in detail elsewhere.¹⁹

Follow-up

Clinical evaluation every three months during the first year after surgery and yearly thereafter for at least two more years was mandatory and included yearly liver imaging and endoscopy.

Local recurrence was defined as evidence of a tumour within the lesser pelvis or the perineal wound. Distant recurrence was defined as evidence of a tumour in any other area. Recurrence at the colostomy site or in the inguinal region was also classified as distant recurrence.

Quality control

In The Netherlands, participating surgeons attended workshops and symposiums, saw instructional videotapes, and were monitored by specially trained instructor surgeons. At each hospital, the first five total mesorectal excisions were supervised by an instructor surgeon.¹⁹ Pathologists were trained to identify lateral spread of tumour according to the protocol of Quirke et al.¹⁸ The results of histopathological examination of the specimens were reviewed by a panel of supervising pathologists and a quality manager.²⁰ Patients' eligibility and treatment and the details of follow-up were checked by study coordinators. Local and distant recurrences were confirmed radiologically or histologically and checked by a radiation oncologist.

In Sweden, the technique of total mesorectal excision was introduced on a national basis several years ago,^{12,13} as was the protocol of Quirke et al.¹⁸ The European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer participated in this trial under protocol 40971. Visits to other participating hospitals and specialists were made before the start of the trial to ensure the quality of treatment at those sites. For logistic reasons, no quality control with respect to radiotherapy, surgery, or pathological examination was performed outside The Netherlands during the trial.

Statistical analysis

Case-report forms were sent to the central trial office, where information on the forms was entered into a data base and analysed with SPSS statistical software (version 9.0 for Windows, SPSS, Chicago). Chi-square tests were used to compare proportions. Mann-Whitney tests were used to compare quantitative and ordinal variables. Univariate analyses of survival were carried out by the Kaplan-Meier method, and the evaluation of differences between the two groups was performed with the log-rank test. The Cox proportional hazards model was used to calculate hazard ratios and 95% confidence intervals in the univariate and multivariate analyses. A two-sided P value of 0.05 or less was considered to indicate statistical significance.

The starting point for the analyses of survival and recurrence was the day of surgery. Data on patients who were alive or free of recurrence were censored at the time of the last follow-up. The analysis of overall survival was performed on an intention-to-treat basis and thus included all the eligible patients. The rate of local recurrence was calculated on the basis of the number of eligible patients who underwent a macroscopically complete local resection. The rate of distant recurrence was calculated on the basis of the number of eligible patients who did not have distant metastasis at the time of surgery. The overall rate of recurrence was calculated on the basis of the number of eligible patients who had macroscopically complete local resection without distant metastasis. Analyses of postoperative morbidity and mortality were based on the total number of eligible patients who underwent resection.

RESULTS

Patients

A total of 1861 patients were randomly assigned to one of the two treatment groups. There were 1530 patients from 84 Dutch hospitals, 228 from 13 Swedish hospitals, and 103 from 11 other European and Canadian centres. Of these 1861 patients, a total of 56 were found to be ineligible before randomisation, including 4 patients for whom there was no information on eligibility. Our analysis therefore included 1805 eligible patients. Of these, 1653 patients had a curative resection. Of the remaining 152 patients, 57 did not undergo a macroscopically complete local resection, and 95 were found to have distant metastasis at surgery (Table 1). The characteristics of the 1805 patients who were eligible for the study and the features of their tumours were similar in the two treatment groups (Table 2). In 28 patients (2%), no tumour was found in the resected specimen, despite a preoperative biopsy that showed an adenocarcinoma.

Table 1. Characteristics of the eligible and ineligible patients and rates of macroscopically complete local resection, according to treatment group.*

Variable	All patients	Treatment group	
	No. (%)	Radiotherapy plus surgery	Surgery alone
Randomly assigned to treatment	1861 (100)	924 (100)	937 (100)
Ineligible for participation	56	27	29
No adenocarcinoma	8	5	3
Fixed tumour	2	-	2
Tumour treated by transanal resection	2	2	-
Tumour location > 15 cm from anal verge	5	4	1
Previous cancer	21	8	13
Coexisting cancer	11	4	7
Previous large-bowel surgery, pelvic radiotherapy, or chemotherapy	3	2	1
No information on eligibility	4	2	2
Eligible for participation	1805 (97)	897 (97)	908 (97)
Incomplete local resection			
Without distant metastases	31	10	21
With distant metastases	26	14	12
Complete local resection	1748 (94)	873 (94)	875 (93)
With distant metastases	95	47	48
Without distant metastases (curative)	1653 (89)	826 (89)	827 (88)

* Percentages are based on the total numbers of patients randomly assigned to one of the two treatment groups.

Protocol violations

Patients with major or minor protocol violations, or both, were included in all the analyses.

Major violations: Of the 897 eligible patients assigned to undergo radiotherapy before total mesorectal excision, 29 did not receive preoperative radiotherapy for the following reasons: known metastases (8 patients), carcinoma in situ (1), sigmoid carcinoma (3), a second cancer (1), withdrawal of informed consent (11), and physical limitations that made radiotherapy impossible (5). Long-term preoperative radiotherapy was given to seven patients for locally advanced tumours. One patient was unable to tolerate surgery and was treated

with long-term radiotherapy alone. Preoperative radiotherapy was discontinued in 14 patients, mainly because of neurotoxicity.

Of the 908 eligible patients assigned to total mesorectal excision alone, 3 patients withdrew their informed consent and requested radiotherapy (5 Gy on each of five days), and 8 patients had advanced local tumours for which long-term preoperative radiotherapy was given.

Postoperative adjuvant therapy was not allowed in patients who had microscopically tumour-free margins without spillage of tumour cells during the operation. Of 1759 eligible patients with available information on margins and tumour spillage, 1351 (77%) had tumour-free margins without tumour spillage. Eighty-five of these patients (38 in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 47 in the group assigned to surgery alone) received adjuvant therapy (chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or chemoradiotherapy), which was a major protocol violation.

Minor violations: Of the 846 eligible patients randomly assigned to preoperative radiotherapy who received the total dose of 25 Gy, the interval between the first day of radiotherapy and the day of surgery exceeded 10 days in 110 patients (13%). In 127 of the patients (15%), the upper border of the treatment field was at the level of S1–2 instead of at the promontory, and in 161 of the patients undergoing an abdominoperineal resection (19%), the perineum was not included in the treated volume.

Table 2. Characteristics of the 1805 eligible patients.*

Characteristic	Radiotherapy plus surgery		Surgery alone		
	(n=897)	(%)	(n=908)	(%)	
Age (yr)					P=0.79
Median	65.0		66.0		
Range	26-88		23-92		
Sex					P=0.92
Male	573	(64)	578	(64)	
Female	324	(36)	330	(36)	
Distance of tumour from anal verge					P=0.48
10.1-15 cm	267	(30)	280	(31)	
5.1-10 cm	384	(43)	364	(40)	
≤5 cm	244	(27)	263	(29)	
Unknown	2		1		
Type of resection					P=0.12
None	16	(2)	29	(3)	
Low anterior	579	(65)	604	(67)	
Abdominoperineal	251	(28)	234	(26)	
Hartmann†	50	(6)	40	(4)	
Unknown	1		1		
TNM-stage					P=0.53
0	11	(1)	17	(2)	
I	265	(30)	244	(27)	
II	252	(28)	245	(27)	
III	300	(34)	324	(36)	
IV	61	(7)	61	(7)	
Unknown or no resection	8		17		

* Characteristics were unknown in some cases because not all case-report forms were received.

Because of rounding, not all percentages total 100. TNM denotes tumour-node-metastasis.

† A Hartmann resection is a low anterior resection without the construction of an anastomosis.

Postoperative morbidity and mortality

The median interval between randomisation and surgery was 21 days in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 14 days in the group assigned to surgery alone. The patients assigned to radiotherapy and surgery lost slightly more blood during the operation than those assigned to surgery alone (median loss, 1000 vs. 900 ml, $P < 0.001$), and of the patients who had an abdominoperineal resection, those assigned to radiotherapy had more perineal complications than those assigned to surgery alone (26% vs. 18%, $P = 0.05$). No other significant differences with respect to postoperative morbidity and mortality were found between the two groups.

Follow-up

As of February 2001, surviving eligible patients without local recurrence had been followed for a median of 24.9 months (range, 1.1 to 56.0). Of these patients, 87% were followed for at least one year, 54% for at least two years, 24% for at least three years, and 5% for at least four years. Rates of survival and recurrence are presented here at a follow-up of two years. A reanalysis as of June 1, 2001, produced essentially the same results for all the major end points of the study.

Events

As of February 2001, 365 (20%) of the 1805 eligible patients had died. Of the 365 deaths, 61 occurred postoperatively, 231 were related to rectal cancer (growth of the primary tumour (in cases of macroscopically incomplete resection) or recurrence), and 70 were not related to rectal cancer. In three patients, the cause of death was unknown.

Local recurrence occurred in 87 patients. Of these 87 patients, 45 (52%) had local recurrence alone, 28 (32%) had both local and distant recurrences, and 14 (16%) had local recurrence after distant metastasis was found at surgery (in 9 patients) or during follow-up (in 5). A total of 227 patients were found to have only distant recurrence.

Overall survival

The rate of overall survival at two years was 82.0% in the group assigned to radiotherapy before surgery and 81.8% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P = 0.84$, Figure 1). The hazard ratio for death in the group assigned to surgery alone as compared with the group assigned to preoperative radiotherapy was 1.02 (95% confidence interval (CI), 0.83 to 1.25).

Local recurrence

The rate of local recurrence at two years was 5.3% in the population of 1748 patients who underwent a macroscopically complete local resection. The rates of local recurrence at two years were 2.4% in the group assigned to radiotherapy before surgery and 8.2% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P < 0.001$, Figure 2). According to a univariate analysis, the hazard ratio for local recurrence in the group assigned to surgery alone as compared with the group assigned to preoperative radiotherapy plus surgery was 3.42 (95% CI, 2.05 to 5.71).

In the univariate analyses, treatment-group assignment ($P < 0.001$), the location of the

tumour (distance of the tumour from the anal verge, $P=0.003$), and the tumour-node-metastasis (TNM) stage ($P<0.001$) were significant predictors of the risk of local recurrence. In the multivariate Cox regression analysis (Table 3), the treatment-group assignment ($P<0.001$), the tumour location ($P=0.03$), and the TNM stage ($P<0.001$) were independent predictors of the risk of local recurrence, whereas the type of resection ($P=0.90$) had no independent prognostic value with respect to this end point.

Univariate subgroup analyses showed that preoperative radiotherapy reduced the risk of local recurrence significantly in patients who had tumours with an inferior margin less than or equal to 5 cm ($P=0.05$) or 5.1 to 10 cm ($P<0.001$) from the anal verge (Table 4). Radiotherapy had no significant effect on tumours located 10.1 to 15 cm from the anal verge ($P=0.17$). For TNM stage II and III tumours, preoperative radiotherapy had a significant beneficial effect ($P=0.01$ and $P<0.001$, respectively), which was not observed for TNM stage I and IV tumours ($P=0.15$ and $P=0.25$, respectively). However, tests for interaction among the tumour location, TNM stage, and treatment-group assignment in a multivariate analysis showed no significant interaction between tumour location and treatment-group assignment ($P=0.08$) or between the TNM stage and treatment-group assignment ($P=0.61$), suggesting that the treatment effect did not differ among the subgroups analysed (data not shown).

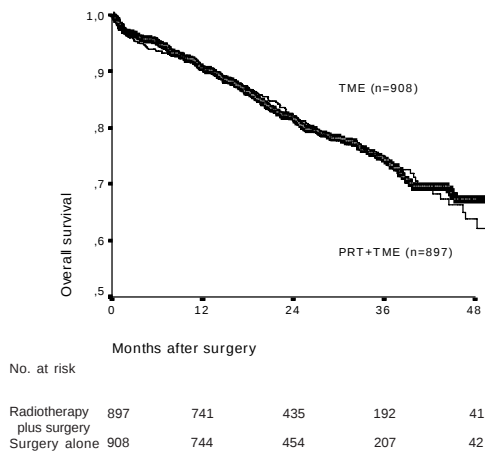


Figure 1. Rates of overall survival in the population of 1805 eligible patients, according to treatment group. At two years, the rate of overall survival was 82.0% in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 81.8% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P=0.84$).

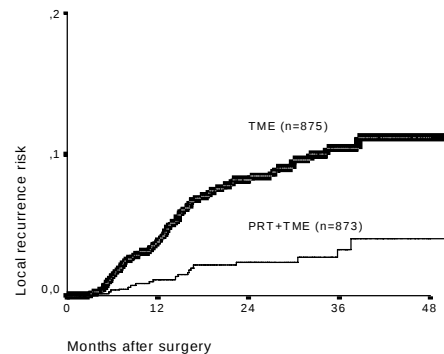


Figure 2. Rates of local recurrence in the population of 1748 eligible patients who underwent macroscopically complete local resection, according to treatment group. At two years, the rate of local recurrence was 2.4% in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 8.2% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P<0.001$).

Distant recurrence

The rate of distant recurrence at two years was 14.8% in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 16.8% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P=0.87$). The hazard ratio for distant recurrence in the surgery-only group as compared with the radiotherapy-plus-surgery group was 1.02 (95% CI, 0.80 to 1.30).

Overall recurrence

The overall rate of recurrence (the rate of local recurrence and distant recurrence) at two years was 16.1% in the group assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 20.9% in the group assigned to surgery alone ($P=0.09$). The hazard ratio for any recurrence in the surgery-only group as compared with the radiotherapy-plus-surgery group was 1.21 (95% CI, 0.97 to 1.52).

Table 3. Results of multivariate Cox regression analysis of local recurrence among the 1748 eligible patients with a macroscopically complete local resection.*

Variable	Hazard ratio	95% CI	
Treatment group			$P<0.001$
Radiotherapy and surgery	1.00	2.05-5.70	
Surgery alone	3.41		
Distance of tumour from anal verge			$P=0.03$
10.1-15 cm	1.00		
5.1-10 cm	2.13	1.13-4.01	$P=0.02$
≤5 cm	2.78	1.22-6.31	$P=0.02$
Type of resection			$P=0.90$
Low anterior	1.00		
Abdominoperineal	1.15	0.59-2.24	$P=0.68$
Hartmann†	1.16	0.42-3.25	$P=0.78$
TNM-stage			$P<0.001$
I	1.00		
II	3.44	1.26-9.39	$P=0.02$
III	9.69	3.89-24.2	$P<0.001$
IV (distant metastases but complete local resection)	16.2	5.40-48.6	$P<0.001$

* A variable was included in the multivariate analysis if the P-value in the univariate analysis was less than 0.10. Patients with missing data were excluded from the analysis of local recurrence. Twenty-eight patients without a tumour (TNM stage 0) were excluded from the multivariate analysis because they were not at risk for local recurrence. CI denotes confidence interval and TNM tumour-node-metastasis.

† A Hartmann resection is a low anterior resection without the construction of an anastomosis.

DISCUSSION

In this trial, we evaluated the efficacy of short-term preoperative radiotherapy combined with standardised total mesorectal excision in patients with resectable rectal cancer. We found that radiotherapy before total mesorectal excision can improve local control of disease.

Reported rates of local control after surgery for rectal cancer vary widely. In studies of conventional, nonstandardised surgery, usually with a minimal follow-up of five years, rates of local recurrence have been 15 to 45%.³⁻⁵ By contrast, surgeons who specialise in total mesorectal excision report local-recurrence rates of 7% or less.⁹⁻¹¹ The low rate of local recurrence in the group assigned to total mesorectal excision only in our study (8.2% at two years) demonstrates that similar excellent results can be achieved by other surgeons at multiple centres after they are trained in the procedure.

We found that preoperative radiotherapy further reduced the two-year rate of local recurrence from 8.2% to 2.4%, an indication of the value of preoperative radiotherapy when used in conjunction with standardised surgery. In the Swedish Rectal Cancer Trial (SRCT), the reduction in the rate of local recurrence at five years from 27% in the surgery-

Table 4. Results of univariate log-rank analyses of two-year rates of local recurrence among the 1748 eligible patients with a macroscopically complete local resection, according to selected prognostic variables.*

Variable	Radiotherapy plus surgery		Surgery alone		
	no. of patients at risk	Local recurrence at 2 yr (%)	no. of patients at risk	Local recurrence at 2 yr (%)	
Overall	873	2.4	875	8.2	P<0.001
Sex					
Male	555	2.5	557	7.2	P<0.001
Female	318	2.2	318	9.8	P<0.001
Distance of tumour from anal verge					
10.1-15 cm	262	1.3	271	3.8	P=0.17
5.1-10 cm	372	1.0	350	10.1	P<0.001
≤ 5 cm	237	5.8	253	10.0	P=0.05
Type of resection					
Low anterior	577	1.2	603	7.3	P<0.001
Abdominoperineal	248	4.9	232	10.1	P=0.02
Hartmann†	47	3.2	39	10.7	P=0.18
TNM-stage					
I	265	0.5	244	0.7	P=0.15
II	251	1.0	241	5.7	P=0.01
III	298	4.3	324	15.0	P=0.001
IV (distant metastases but complete local resection)	47	10.1	48	23.8	P=0.25

* Patients with missing data were excluded from the analysis of local recurrence. Twenty-eight patients without a tumour (TNM stage 0) were excluded from the multivariate analysis because they were not at risk for local recurrence. In a Cox proportional-hazards analysis of age (as a continuous variable), the hazard ratio for local recurrence at two years was 0.99 (95% CI, 0.95-1.04; P=0.77) in the group of 873 patients assigned to radiotherapy and surgery and 1.01 (95% CI, 0.99-1.04; P=0.21) in the group of 875 patients assigned to surgery alone. TNM denotes tumour-node-metastasis.

† A Hartmann resection is a low anterior resection without the construction of an anastomosis.

only group to 11% in the radiotherapy-plus-surgery group improved the rate of overall survival at this time point from 48% in the surgery-only group to 58% in the combined-treatment group.⁷ An effect of preoperative radiotherapy on overall survival has not yet been detected in our trial, probably because of the small number of local recurrences and the short follow-up. However, we believe that a median follow-up time of 24.9 months is sufficient to detect the effect of preoperative radiotherapy on local recurrences, 55% to 80% of which occur during the first 2 years after surgery, with the peak rate at 6 to 12 months.^{4,21,22}

The beneficial effect of preoperative radiotherapy in our trial was observed for all tumour locations 15 cm or less from the anal verge and for all TNM stages. However, in a univariate subgroup analysis, the effect was not significant in patients who had tumours with an inferior margin more than 10 cm from the anal verge and in patients who had TNM stage I or IV tumours. Nevertheless, multivariate tests indicated that the treatment effect probably did not differ among subgroups defined according to tumour location, TNM stage, and treatment assignment. Therefore, considering the difficulties involved in predicting the location of tumours high above the anal verge and in determining the TNM stage preoperatively, the decision not to irradiate before surgery should be carefully considered.

Preoperative radiotherapy does not result in “down-staging”²³ and is therefore not suitable

for locally advanced tumours. To avoid short-term irradiation of such tumours, we advocate accurate preoperative imaging (e.g. computed tomography or magnetic resonance imaging). This lack of down-staging explains why short-term preoperative radiotherapy has no effect on sphincter preservation, which is often an end-point in conventional trials of long-term radiotherapy.

Concern has been expressed about the side effects of hypofractionated radiation.²⁴ In the Stockholm I trial²⁵ and Imperial Cancer Research Fund trial,²⁶ postoperative mortality was higher among patients who received radiotherapy than among those who did not. In both trials, a suboptimal irradiation technique increased the treated volume considerably. In the SRCT, postoperative mortality did not increase with radiation, provided that radiotherapy was optimal.²⁷ In our trial, there was no difference in in-hospital mortality between the two groups. In the SRCT, however, there was more incontinence among patients who underwent preoperative irradiation and subsequently underwent a sphincter-preserving surgery.²⁸

In conclusion, total mesorectal excision can significantly decrease the risk of local recurrence of resectable rectal cancer. This result was achieved in a large, multicentre trial that included extensive instruction and quality control of the surgical technique. In this large group of patients who underwent standardised surgery, short-term preoperative radiotherapy further reduced the risk of local recurrence.

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