Review article

Advances in SPECT for Optimizing the Liver Tumors Radioembolization Using Yttrium-90 Microspheres

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Abstract

Radioembolization (RE) with Yttrium-90 (⁹⁰Y) microspheres is an effective treatment for unresectable liver tumors. The activity of the microspheres to be administered should be calculated based on the type of microspheres. Technetium-99m macroaggregated albumin (^{99m}Tc-MAA) single photon emission computed tomography/computed tomography (SPECT/CT) is a reliable assessment before RE to ensure the safe delivery of microspheres into the target. ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging as a posttherapeutic assessment approach enables the reliable determination of absorbed dose, which is indispensable for the verification of treatment efficacy. This article intends to provide a review of the methods of optimizing ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging to improve the treatment efficacy of liver tumor RE using ⁹⁰Y microspheres.

Keywords: Bremsstrahlung SPECT, radioembolization, single photon emission computed tomography/computed tomography, Yttrium-90 microspheres

Introduction

Radioembolization (RE) with Yttrium-90 (⁹⁰Y) microspheres by hepatic arterial administration is the effective treatment for unresectable primary and metastatic liver cancers.^[1,2] Transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) is a conventional treatment for unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).^[3] The therapeutic benefit of the hepatic arterial approach is based on the unique dual vascular supply of the liver.^[4,5] It should also be noted that postembolization syndrome following RE with ⁹⁰Y microspheres is less intense than after TACE, as RE has a longer time to progression and less toxicity than chemoembolization.[6,7] Selective internal radiotherapy (SIRT) with ⁹⁰Y microspheres has been increasingly used over the past decade for RE of inoperable liver metastases of colorectal cancer (CRC), although its first clinical trials date back to the early 1960s.^[8] The physiological basis for tumor targeting

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Quick Response Code:	Website: www.wjnm.org	
	DOI: 10.4103/1450-1147.157120	

in SIRT is an increased arterial vascularization of the targeted tumor compared to the normal liver parenchyma.^[9,10] In addition, ⁹⁰Y-labeled monoclonal antibodies such as ⁹⁰Y Zevalin (ibritumomab tiuxetan) can be used in targeted radionuclide therapy (TRT) for the radioimmunotherapy of malignant diseases such as non-Hodgkin lymphoma.^[11-13] Unresectable liver cancer causes a lot of suffering worldwide and eventual death in many patients.^[14] RE involves the infusion of ⁹⁰Y microspheres into the hepatic arterial circulation, from which approximately 80-100% liver tumor blood flow is derived.^{[15] 90}Y RE is an effective treatment of HCC if the ⁹⁰Y microspheres accumulate in the right location, at the right dose, and with the right intent.^[16,17]

Inadvertent delivery of ⁹⁰Y microspheres into the hepatic arteries and subsequently nontarget localization – and thus offtarget irradiation – can lead to some severe complications after RE, such as acute radiation dermatitis of the abdominal wall, periumbilical and abdominal pain, gastrointestinal ulceration/bleeding, cholecystitis, pancreatitis, radiation pneumonitis, and hepatic decompensation.^[18-20] As the hepatic vascular anatomy and tumor-to-normal arterial blood flow ratio are highly variable between metastases and between different patients, it is essential to plan and perform, before RE with ⁹⁰Y microspheres, specific treatment simulation

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Characteristic

before the real therapy to rule out any side effects.^[21,22] Technetium-99m macroaggregated albumin (99mTc-MAA) scintigraphy by single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) in combination with computed tomography (CT), that is, SPECT/CT should be recommended in a pretherapeutic assessment in order to establish dependable treatment planning, metabolic response, and a predictive dosimetric model.^[23,24] In addition, tumor-to-normal activity concentration ratio and the biodistribution of 90Y microspheres are two crucial parameters for confirming the effectiveness of RE with 90Y microspheres. [25,26] Posttherapeutic assessment is indispensable in evaluating the abovementioned physical and physiological parameters. Posttherapy dosimetry on the basis of the ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging is a useful tool to verify absorbed dose delivery.^[27] The role of SPECT in diagnostic imaging and internal dosimetry is well established in nuclear medicine.^[28] A considerable amount of literature has been published on RE with ⁹⁰Y resin or glass microspheres as an effective treatment of unresectable liver tumors or metastases, whereas there has been relatively scarce literature focused on the role of SPECT as a complementary method to this therapeutic treatment. In the present review, the role of SPECT imaging as the posttherapeutic and pretherapeutic assessment modality is evaluated for RE using ⁹⁰Y microspheres. Moreover, we discussed the recently-used optimization approach for quantitative ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging.

<u>⁹⁰Y Microspheres and Activity</u> <u>Determination</u>

⁹⁰Y is a pure beta-emitting isotope with a physical half-life of 2.67 days. The emitted particles have a maximum energy of 2.27 MeV, a mean energy of 0.93 MeV, and an average penetration range of 2.5 mm, with a maximum 11 mm range in tissue. The ⁹⁰Y can be labeled with resin or glass microspheres that have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).^[29,30] Both glass microspheres (TheraSphere, MDS Nordion, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) and resin microspheres (SIR-Spheres, Sirtex Medical, Sydney, Australia) are used to treat hepatic primary and metastatic neoplasms.^[31] In spite of the many similarities, there are some differences between the two types from the point of view of dosimetry and performance. The resin type is used adjuvant to chemotherapy with floxuridine, as well, with fluorouracil (5-FU) as the radiosensitizing agent.^[10,29] Microsphere reflux during administration is the main cause of gastroduodenal ulcer.^[32] The risk of reflux in the case of resin microspheres is greater than in glass due to an embolic tendency of resin related to its lower specific activity and the subsequent higher number of microspheres required with the same activity compared to the glass type.^[33] The characteristics of both types of microspheres are shown in Table 1.

	(TheraSphere)	(SIR-Spheres)
Specific activity (Bq per sphere)	2500	50
Dose to tumor volume	No	Yes
Adjuvant to chemotherapy	No	Yes
Mean number of spheres per dose ($\times 10^{6}$)	4	50
Median diameter (µm)	25	35

Table 1: Characteristics of the glass and resin 90Y

microsphere agents

Glass

microsphere microsphere

Resin

Based on the assumptions that ⁹⁰Y glass microspheres are uniformly distributed in the liver volume and with a nominal average target dose of 150 Gy/kg, the required activity of the glass microspheres in RE could be calculated by Equation 1:

$$A_{glass}(GBq) = \frac{D(Gy) \times M(kg)}{50(\frac{Gy.kg}{GBq})}$$
Equation 1

where A_{glass} is the activity of the ⁹⁰Y glass microspheres, D is the nominal target dose, and M is the liver mass that was calculated from the CT data. Currently, the activity of the resin microspheres in RE is determined by the following three methods, based on the assumption that ⁹⁰Y resin microspheres are nonuniformly distributed in the liver tumor volume:.^[34,35]

The body surface area method

This method is the most common/widely used method to calculate activity for ⁹⁰Y resin microspheres. The BSA is calculated by Equation 2:^[36]

BSA =
$$0.20247 \times h(m)^{0.725} \times w(kg)^{0.425}$$
 Equation 2

where *h* and *w* are the patient's height and weight, respectively. The required activity of the 90 Y resin microspheres was calculated by Equation 3:

$$A_{resin} (GBq) = (BSA - 0.2) + (\frac{V_{tumor}}{V_{tumor} + V_{liver}})$$
 Equation 3

where A_{resin} is the activity of the ⁹⁰Y resin microspheres and and the volumes of the tumor and liver, respectively.^[29]

The empirical method

The usability of the empirical method is related to the accuracy of CT or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in the differentiation of the degree of liver involvement by the tumor. According to this method, administration of 2.0 GBq for <25% involvement, 2.5 GBq for 25-50% involvement, and 3.0 GBq for >50% involvement is appropriate in liver tumor RE. One of the deficiencies of this method is its low safety margin.^[37]

Partition model method

The calculation of ⁹⁰Y resin microsphere activity by using the partition model method is based on the information

obtained from ^{99m}Tc-MAA planar or SPECT/CT imaging.^[38] This model is usually applicable for discrete and solitary hepatic tumors. The activity calculated by this method is higher than that suggested by the empirical and BSA methods, with an equivalent safety threshold.^[35]

SPECT in Pretherapeutic Assessment

^{99m}Tc-MAA scintigraphy should be performed before liver tumor RE and also prior to the activity calculation using ⁹⁰Y to arrive at the accurate treatment plan and to estimate the tumor-to-normal activity ratio, as well as minimizing the radiation risk to the normal parenchymas in view of the fact that normal parenchymas have a lower tolerance for the treatment dose.^[39,40] The particle size and biodistribution of 99mTc-MAA is similar to the 90Y resin microspheres [Figure 1].^{[3] 99m}Tc-MAA SPECT imaging done before RE is superior to planar imaging with regard to the detection of gall bladder uptake and extrahepatic shunting to the gastrointestinal or pulmonary tract. Furthermore, SPECT combined with integrated low-dose CT increases sensitivity and specificity, and thus the detection accuracy of extrahepatic radiotracer activity, and this in turn decreases the toxicity and incidence of complications in RE.^[10,28] The spatial resolution and image quality of SPECT imaging are strongly depend on the type of collimator, reconstruction algorithm, and acquisition energy window. Therefore, a low-energy high-resolution (LEHR) parallel-hole collimator and iterative reconstruction algorithms such as ordered subset expectation maximization (OSEM) with a 10% or 20% energy window centered at the peak of 99mTc (140 keV) are preferred for 99mTc-MAA SPECT imaging.[41,42]



Figure 1: A typical gamma camera scan (a) after accumulated 99mTc-MAA within the liver with no extrahepatic shunting and (b) bremsstrahlung scan within 1 h after 90Y microspheres were administered intra-arterially in the same patient

SPECT in posttherapeutic assessment

The treatment efficacy of RE, according to the ⁹⁰Y biodistribution image and quantitative assessment of the tumor-to-normal dose ratio, is a reliable parameter for the treatment.^[43] ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging after RE has shown great potential to provide a reliable dose evaluation, which is essential for dose verification; additionally, CT in combination with ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT is used for attenuation and scatter correction, and this further increases quantitative accuracy.^[4,44] Quantitatively, ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging is one of the most challenging topics in nuclear medicine. Here, too, the image quality and quantification accuracy of the ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging strongly depend on the type of collimator, reconstruction algorithm, and acquisition energy window.^[45]

Energy window optimizing for ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT

In conventional nuclear medicine imaging, gamma-emitter radioisotopes with a pronounced photopeak, such as ^{99m}Tc, are used for imaging, and the acquisition energy window placed around the photopeak. In contrast, ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung photons arise from the interaction of β -particles with the patient body and have a continuous and broad energy spectrum extending up to the highest beta energy emission (2.3 MeV) without a pronounced photopeak.^[46] Therefore, the choice of the acquisition energy window strongly affects the reliability of the dose and the activity estimation. Figure 2 shows a typical ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung energy spectrum. In ⁹⁰Y imaging, only the primary photons are suitable, but the scatter-to-primary ratio is significant in any energy window.^[43,47] The main problem in ⁹⁰Y imaging is that the photons with energies less than 60 keV have attenuated



Figure 2: A typical 90Y bremsstrahlung energy spectrum was obtained using a gamma camera equipped with a MEGP collimator. Three energy window widths of 50% (57-94 keV) centered at 75 keV, 30% (102-138 keV) at 120 keV, and 50% (139-232 keV) at 185 keV were set on the spectrum

in the patient body and those with energies higher than 500 keV have penetrated through or been scattered by the collimator septa; however, the optimal acquisition energy window is in the energy range. On the other hand, the highest percentage of photons with the energy range 160-300 keV arise from the backscattered compartment behind the crystal, and those with the energy range 300-2000 keV arise from penetration through or scattering by the collimator septa. A characteristic x-ray peak appeared at 75 keV due to the interaction between the bremsstrahlung photons and lead (Pb) in the collimator decreasing the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR). These photons degrade image quality and quantitative accuracy.^[48,49] The dominant effect with a narrow energy window is noise, owing to the low count level and low system sensitivity, as an undesirable effect. On the other hand, for a wide energy window the most critical image-degrading factor is beam-hardening artifacts. It is agreed that the 100-160 keV is the optimal energy window, as this range has a lower scatter-to-primary ratio and therefore ensures the highest accuracy in dose determination.^[50,51] As a whole, both the single-energy window (SEW) and multiple-energy window (MEW) methods are used to choose the optimal energy window for ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging. Shigeki Ito *et al.* have shown, on the basis of the multiple-energy range (MER) method, that three energy peaks centered around 75 keV (50%), 120 keV (30%), and 18 5 keV (50%) provide the highest system sensitivity and the lowest imaging acquisition time suitable for clinical imaging. In addition, it should be noted that there is a trade-off relationship between sensitivity and spatial resolution, so it is expected that the more the sensitivity, the less the image quality.^[43]

Collimator and reconstruction algorithm optimizing for ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT

The OSEM iterative reconstruction algorithm optimizes the quantitative accuracy of ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT and eliminates streak artifact, compared with the conventional filtered backprojection (FBP) reconstruction algorithm.^[21] The collimator in SPECT is a critical component of the imaging chain and has a major impact on activity estimation. Routinely, ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging is performed with a high-energy general-purpose (HEGP) collimator or with a medium-energy general-purpose (MEGP) parallel-hole collimator, which is designed for high-energy isotopes such as gallium-67 (67Ga) and iodine-131 (131I), and yet a special parallel-hole collimator has never been fabricated for ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging [Figure 3].^[52] Rotating slat collimators and pinhole collimators have been proposed for SPECT imaging with high-energy isotopes and isotopes with extensive energy spectra.[45,53,54] Xing Rong et al. have proposed an optimal parallel-hole



Figure 3: Typical bremsstrahlung SPECT scans after RE with 90Y microspheres were acquired with (a) a MEGP collimator and (b) a HEGP collimator. Energy window was set for 100-150 keV

collimator with a small amount of septal scatter and penetration for quantitative ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging.^[55]

Conclusion

RE with ⁹⁰Y is an effective treatment for hepatic tumors. The quantity of the administered activity for ⁹⁰Y resin or glass microspheres is an influential parameter in the effectiveness of the RE. The required activity of the 90Y microspheres is determined based on the type of microspheres. 99mTc-MAA SPECT/ CT before RE constitutes appropriate pretherapy planning and enables predictive dosimetry, thus presenting as a valuable diagnostic tool regarding the biodistribution of 90Y microspheres. 90Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging after RE should be used to verify the therapy's clinical effectiveness and to obtain a precise absorbed dose delivery pattern. Finally, the collimator, reconstruction algorithm, and acquisition energy window are important components in ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT imaging and play key roles in image quality, quantitative accuracy, and accurate dosimetry. Therefore, the optimization of these parameters leads to improved treatment efficacy and ⁹⁰Y bremsstrahlung SPECT image quality/quantity.

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How to cite this article: Roshan HR, Azarm A, Mahmoudian B, Islamian JP. Advances in SPECT for Optimizing the Liver Tumors Radioembolization Using Yttrium-90 Microspheres. World J Nucl Med 2015;14:75-80.

Source of Support: Nil, Conflict of Interest: None declared.