






SHORT REPORT

Haematological Malignancy – Clinical

Secondary primary malignancies after CD-19 directed CAR-T-cell therapy in lymphomas: A report from the Italian CART-SIE study

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Summary

Secondary primary malignancies (SPM) have been reported after anti-BCMA or anti-CD19 chimeric antigen receptor (CAR)-T-cell therapies. While the cytotoxic effect of antecedent therapies, including chemotherapy and radiotherapy, has been well established, few data are available on risk related to CAR-T immunotherapies. The study aimed to analyse the incidence of SPM in 651 patients enrolled in the Italian prospective observational CART-SIE study. SPMs were documented in 4.3% (28/651), and the most frequent SPMs were haematological malignancies. In conclusion, the frequency of SPMs in our cohort of heavily pretreated patients receiving CAR-T was relatively low and consistent with previous studies.

KEY WORDS

acute leukaemia, immunotherapy, late effects of therapy, malignant lymphomas, MDS, T-cell lymphoma

INTRODUCTION

Secondary primary malignancies (SPMs) have been extensively described in patients with haematological malignancies, due to both genetic susceptibility and DNA-damaging treatments.¹ Chemotherapy (CT), radiotherapy and autologous (ASCT) or allogeneic stem cell transplant (allogeneic SCT) have a well-characterized genotoxic effect; recently, a 5-year cumulative risk of solid tumours of 4% and of myeloid malignancies of 3% has been reported after high-dose CT and ASCT, with a 38-fold higher risk of secondary myeloid neoplasms.² While the role of cytotoxic therapies has been established, few data exist on SPMs after chimeric antigen receptor (CAR)-T-cell immunotherapies. In November 2023, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

published a warning about a serious risk of T-cell malignancy following CAR-T cells,³ suggesting a possible correlation between CAR transduction and malignant transformation of T lymphocytes based on reports of subsequent ‘CAR-positive’ T-cell non-Hodgkin lymphomas (T-NHL). The incidence of SPMs has been variably reported ranging from 0% to 15% across studies^{4–9}: the FDA Adverse Events Reporting System (FAERS) database has been recently analysed and 4.3% incidence of all SPMs was reported, of which 2.7% and 0.1% were leukaemias (comprising of acute myeloid leukaemias (AML) and myelodysplastic syndromes (MDS)) and T-NHL respectively.¹⁰

We herein report the incidence of SPM in a large cohort of patients affected by relapsed/refractory (R/R) non-Hodgkin lymphomas treated in 21 Italian centres with currently

For affiliations refer to page 4.

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in-label CAR-T cells, namely axicabtagene ciloleucel (axi-cel), tisagenlecleucel (tisa-cel) and brexucabtagene autoleucel (brexu-cel).

METHODS

The Italian CART-SIE is a multicentre prospective observational study collecting data from R/R B-NHL treated with in-label CAR-T according to the eligibility criteria, as defined by the Italian Drug Agency (detailed in [Supporting Information S1](#)). The study was conducted according to Helsinki Declaration and good clinical practice guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained by institutional review boards at each site (INT 180/19, Approval number 431/DG, 2019). All participants provided written informed consent. Potential risk factors for occurrence of SPMs were analysed,

including previous treatments, cytopenias at the time of the apheresis, cytokine release syndrome (CRS), immune effector cell-associated neurotoxicity syndrome (ICANS), immune effector cell-associated haematotoxicity (ICAHT) and CAR-HEMATOTOX score.¹¹ A cut-off of absolute neutrophil count <500/mm³ and platelets <100.000/mm³ was used to determine the association between pre- and post-infusion cytopenias and SPMs.

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize patient baseline characteristic, namely median and interquartile range for continuous variables, and absolute and relative frequencies for categorical variables. Univariable logistic models were used to evaluate the association between the

TABLE 1 Baseline characteristics of patients with secondary primary malignancies compared to the whole cohort.

| | Overall (N=651) | No second cancer (N=623) | Second cancer (N=28) |
|--|-------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Age, median [Q1, Q3] | 59.0 [49.0, 65.0] | 59.0 [48.0, 66.0] | 59.0 [51.5, 65.0] |
| Male sex, n (%) | 416 (63.9%) | 395 (63.4%) | 21 (75.0%) |
| CAR-T product, n (%) | | | |
| Axi-cel | 312 (47.9%) | 298 (47.8%) | 14 (50.0%) |
| Brexu-cel | 86 (13.2%) | 84 (13.5%) | 2 (7.1%) |
| Tisa-cel | 253 (38.9%) | 241 (38.7%) | 12 (42.9%) |
| Histology, n (%) | | | |
| DLBCL/HGBL | 489 (75.1%) | 465 (74.6%) | 24 (85.7%) |
| MCL | 84 (12.9%) | 82 (13.2%) | 2 (7.1%) |
| PMBCL | 76 (11.7%) | 74 (11.9%) | 2 (7.1%) |
| Missing | 2 (0.3%) | 2 (0.3%) | 0 (0%) |
| Disease status, n (%) | | | |
| Refractory | 442 (67.9%) | 423 (67.9%) | 19 (67.9%) |
| Relapse | 195 (30.0%) | 187 (30.0%) | 8 (28.6%) |
| Missing | 14 (2.2%) | 13 (2.1%) | 1 (3.6%) |
| Ann Arbor III-IV, n (%) | 456 (70.0%) | 431 (69.2%) | 25 (89.3%) |
| IPI ≥3, n (%) | 218 (33.5%) | 207 (33.2%) | 11 (39.3%) |
| Extranodal sites, yes, n (%) | 342 (52.5%) | 327 (52.5%) | 15 (53.6%) |
| Bulky disease, n (%) | 224 (34.4%) | 213 (34.2%) | 11 (39.3%) |
| Bone marrow involvement, n (%) | 80 (12.3%) | 75 (12.0%) | 5 (17.9%) |
| Number of previous treatments, median [Q1, Q3] | 2.00 [2.00, 3.00] | 2.00 [2.00, 3.00] | 2.00 [2.00, 3.25] |
| Previous ASCT, n (%) | 200 (30.7%) | 185 (29.7%) | 15 (53.6%) |
| Bridging therapy, n (%) | 527 (81.0%) | 505 (81.1%) | 22 (78.6%) |
| RT as bridging therapy, n (%) | 139 (21.4%) | 133 (21.3%) | 6 (21.4%) |
| CAR-HEMATOTOX, n (%) | | | |
| Low | 240 (36.9%) | 232 (37.2%) | 8 (28.6%) |
| High | 119 (18.3%) | 110 (17.7%) | 9 (32.1%) |
| Missing | 292 (44.9%) | 281 (45.1%) | 11 (39.3%) |

Abbreviations: ASCT, autologous stem cell transplantation; DLBCL, diffuse large B-cell lymphoma; HGBL, high grade B-cell lymphoma; IPI, international prognostic index; MCL, mantle cell lymphoma; PMBCL, primary mediastinal B-cell lymphoma; RT, radiotherapy.

TABLE 2 Univariable logistic models for myeloid malignancies.

| | OR | 95% CI | Overall <i>p</i> -value | Non-linear <i>p</i> -value | Adjusted <i>p</i> -value* |
|--|------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Age, 65 vs. 49 [Q1, Q3] (<i>n</i> = 649) | 0.96 | 0.45–2.02 | 0.6072 | 0.3719 | 0.916 |
| Sex, male vs. female (<i>n</i> = 648) | 1.12 | 0.45–2.81 | 0.8105 | | 0.963 |
| CAR-T (<i>n</i> = 651) | | | | | |
| Brexu-cel vs. Axi-cel | 0.65 | 0.14–3.00 | 0.8551 | | 0.963 |
| Tisa-cel vs. Axi-cel | 0.89 | 0.35–2.26 | | | |
| Histology (<i>n</i> = 649) | | | | | |
| DLBCL vs. PMBCL | 3.17 | 0.41–24.50 | 0.6117 | | 0.916 |
| HGBL vs. PMBCL | 2.14 | 0.24–19.52 | | | |
| MCL vs. PMBCL | 1.83 | 0.16–20.59 | | | |
| Disease status, relapsed vs. refractory (<i>n</i> = 637) | | | | | |
| Ann Arbor III–IV (<i>n</i> = 644) | 8.58 | 1.14–64.38 | 0.0366 | | 0.030 |
| IPI ≥3 vs. <3 (<i>n</i> = 548) | 1.38 | 0.55–3.45 | 0.4933 | | 0.916 |
| Extranodal sites, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 636) | 1.41 | 0.58–3.46 | 0.4493 | | 0.916 |
| Bulky disease, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 643) | 1.42 | 0.59–3.42 | 0.4350 | | 0.916 |
| Bone marrow involvement, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 355) | 1.77 | 0.59–5.33 | 0.3122 | | 0.916 |
| Number of previous lines, 3 vs. 2 (<i>n</i> = 649) | 1.94 | 0.75–5.00 | 0.0896 | 0.6633 | 0.103 |
| ASCT, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 645) | 3.09 | 1.28–7.46 | 0.0120 | | 0.071 |
| Bridging therapy, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 651) | 1.00 | 0.33–3.03 | 1.0000 | | >0.999 |
| RT as bridging therapy, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 527) | 1.17 | 0.40–3.38 | 0.7730 | | 0.936 |
| HEMATOTOX, high vs. low (<i>n</i> = 359) | 3.39 | 1.08–10.59 | 0.0359 | | 0.030 |
| Low platelets at the time of apheresis, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 648) | 0.94 | 0.21–4.14 | 0.9373 | | 0.963 |
| Low platelets day 90 yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 471) | 9.7 | 3.16–29.79 | 0.0001 | | <0.001 |
| Low neutrophils apheresis yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 645) | 0.00 | 0.00– >10000 | 0.8455 | | 0.916 |
| Low neutrophils day 90 yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 470) | 0.78 | 0.10–6.04 | 0.8116 | | 0.963 |
| ICAHT, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 545) | 5.09 | 1.57–16.48 | 0.0066 | | 0.086 |
| CRS, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 651) | 0.40 | 0.15–1.06 | 0.0655 | | 0.292 |
| CRS, G ≥3 vs. <3 (<i>n</i> = 551) | 0.53 | 0.07–4.07 | 0.5391 | | 0.916 |
| ICANS, yes vs. no (<i>n</i> = 651) | 0.87 | 0.31–2.40 | 0.7828 | | 0.963 |
| ICANS, G ≥3 vs. <3 (<i>n</i> = 171) | 1.15 | 0.19–7.06 | 0.8820 | | 0.963 |

Abbreviations: ASCT, autologous stem cell transplantation; CRS, cytokine release syndrome; DLBCL, diffuse large B-cell lymphoma; HGBL, high grade B-cell lymphoma; ICAHT, immune effector cell-associated haematotoxicity; ICANS, immune effector cell-associated neurotoxicity; IPI, international prognostic index; MCL, mantle cell lymphoma; PMBCL, primary mediastinal B-cell lymphoma; RT, radiotherapy.

**p*-values adjusted for the false discovery rate. Bold values indicate *p* < 0.005.

incidence of second malignancies and different risk factors; the *p*-values were adjusted for multiple testing using the Benjamini–Hochberg method to control the false discovery rate.¹² Multivariable analysis was not possible due to a low number of events observed.

RESULTS

From 2019 to 2023, 651 patients were enrolled in the CART-SIE study; those with a minimum follow-up of 30 days after CAR-T infusion were analysed (Table 1). Median follow-up was 12.2 months (IQR: 6.22–23.29). SPMs were documented in 4.3% (28) of patients; the most frequent were haematological malignancies (*n* = 25, 3.8%), of which 21 were myeloid malignancies (3.2%, AML = 4, MDS = 17). Four cases (0.61%) of

lymphoid neoplasms were observed: one Hodgkin lymphoma, one EBV-positive B-NHL and two (0.3%) T-NHL (large granular leukaemia = 1, T-helper follicular proliferation = 1). Solid tumours were observed in three patients (0.46%), namely one EBV-positive nasopharyngeal carcinoma, one colorectal cancer and one prostate cancer in a patient with a pre-existing prostate adenoma. No cases of non-melanoma skin cancer were reported. Median time from CAR-T infusion to diagnosis of haematological malignancy was 9.2 months (range 1–39.5). Focusing on myeloid malignancies, median time to diagnosis was 9 months (range 1–39.5). Among patients with myeloid malignancies, cytogenetic and TP53 data were available in 85.6% (18) patients; complex karyotype and TP53 mutation were reported in 7 (30%) and 4 (19%) patients respectively. Only 1/21 patients had performed a next-generation sequencing (NGS) myeloid panel prior to CAR-T infusion and found a clonal

haematopoiesis of indeterminate potential (CHIP). Details on diagnosis and outcome of all patients are shown in [Table S1](#). The 2-year cumulative incidence of second malignancies was 6.97% (95% CI: 4.58–10.63) for all SPMs and 5.09% (95% CI 3.10–8.38) for myeloid malignancies in the entire cohort. Univariable logistic regression was used to identify possible risk factors for occurrence of SPMs; a higher risk for occurrence of SPMs was found in patients with low platelets at day +90 after infusion (OR 5.89, 95% CI 2.5–13.9, $p < 0.01$), while a trend towards higher risk for SPMs was found in patients with Ann Arbor stage III–IV at diagnosis, previous ASCT, development of ICAHT and high CAR-HEMATOTOX, although not reaching statistical significance at adjusted p -values. Further information is shown in [Table S2](#). When focusing on myeloid malignancies (as displayed in [Table 2](#)), a higher risk for occurrence was found in patients with Ann Arbor Stage III–IV ($p = 0.03$), high CAR-HEMATOTOX score ($p = 0.03$), low platelet count at day +90 post-infusion ($p < 0.01$). A trend towards higher risk for myeloid malignancies was found in patients who had received ASCT and had ICAHT after CAR-T infusion, although not reaching statistical significance. No correlation with age, CAR-T product, number of previous lines of therapy, previous RT, development of CRS or ICANS and cytopenias prior to CAR-T infusion was demonstrated. Among all patients with SPM, 10 deaths were registered, three due to recurrence of the B-cell lymphoma, seven related to SPMs (3 allogeneic SCT-related mortality, 1 progression of AML, 1 EBV-related nasopharyngeal carcinoma, 1 EBV-positive B-NHL, 1 COVID-19 infection).

DISCUSSION

The frequency of SPMs in our cohort of heavily pretreated patients was relatively low and consistent with previous studies and with recent FAERS analysis. Similarly, frequency of myeloid malignancies appeared to be consistent since with previous reports after high-dose CT and ASCT. Since all patients in our study received such treatments prior to CAR-T infusion, the late effects of CAR-T cells could not be dissected from that of antecedent cytotoxic therapies; an adequate evaluation of such late effects could not be performed in the absence of a comparative cohort of patients not progressing to CAR-T cells. Indeed, while cytotoxic therapies remain well-established critical factors in the development of secondary myeloid neoplasms due to a combination of genetic predisposition and exposure to DNA-damaging agents, it remains unclear whether therapy with CAR-T cells itself or its immunosuppressive microenvironment plays a role in malignant clone transformation; longer follow-up is required to address this question, while the presence of the CAR transgene in cases of T-cell malignancies diagnosed after CAR-T infusion should be evaluated. Late or unexplained cytopenias occurring after CAR-T require a comprehensive assessment including bone marrow aspiration and biopsy, along with an NGS myeloid panel to detect possible signs of myeloid

neoplasms or other haematological conditions which could lead to cytopenias (i.e. T-LGL). Our study has some limitations: Median follow-up was short as 12 months and likely inadequate to capture the long-term risk of SPMs; moreover, a possible under-reporting of myeloid malignancies could have occurred since it was difficult to assess whether all patients with persistent cytopenias had performed a complete evaluation. In conclusion, CAR-T cells represent nowadays a promising therapeutic strategy for lymphoid malignancies and other non-malignant conditions, such as autoimmune diseases: longer follow-up, close monitoring and better comprehension of pathophysiology of SPMs are required to establish evidence-based risk stratification and treatment approach. Our data support the notion that any long-lasting cytopenia should be carefully evaluated to rule out an SPM.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

PCo, AB and AC were involved in conception and design. AC, BC, SB, PCh, ADR, MCT, AMB, MF, LB, MCDC, MN, MM, JO, AD and AA were involved in provision of study materials or patients. AB, AC, SL, GET and PCo were involved in collection and assembly of data. SL, AB, AC and PCo were involved in data analysis and interpretation. All authors were involved in manuscript writing, final approval of manuscript and accountable for all aspects of the work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

AC—Advisory boards and/or honoraria for lectures/educational events: Abbvie, Gilead Sciences, Eli Lilly, Ideogen, Hoffmann La-Roche, Janssen-Cilag, Novartis, SecuraBIO, Takeda. BC—Advisory boards and honoraria for lectures/educational events: Kite Gilead, Novartis. SB—Speaker bureau: Bristol-Myers Squibb, Gilead, Novartis; advisory board: Novartis; travel accommodation: Novartis, Roche. ADR—consulting fees: Roche, Takeda, Incyte, Kite-Gilead, Novartis, Abbvie; speakers bureaus: Roche, Kite-Gilead, Janssen, Abbvie, Eli-Lilly, Sobi, Incyte, Recordati Rare Disease; advisory board: Takeda, Kite-Gilead, Roche, Abbvie, Novartis. PCo—Speaker and/or participating in advisory board: AbbVie, ADC Therapeutics, Amgen, BeiGene, Celgene, Daiichi Sankyo, Eli Lilly, Gilead/Kite, GSK, Incyte, Janssen, Jazz Pharma, Novartis, Pfizer, Roche, Sanofi, SOBI, Takeda. The other authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset analysed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The study was conducted according to Helsinki Declaration and good clinical practice guidelines.

PATIENT CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants provided written informed consent.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL FROM OTHER SOURCES

N/A.

CLINICAL TRIAL REGISTRATION

Ethical approval was obtained by institutional review boards at each site (INT 180/19, Approval number 431/DG, 2019).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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