Reviewer’s report

Title: Application of tumor-node-metastasis staging 2002 version in locally advanced hepatocellular carcinoma: is it predictive of surgical outcome?

Version: 1 Date: 6 June 2010

Reviewer: Matthias M Dollinger

Reviewer’s report:

Major Revisions:
The authors focus in their report on the recurrence after surgical resection and imply that the TNM-classification should be changed with vascular invasion as predictor of the worst outcome. This point is well argued with data from the retrospective study. However, there are much more fundamental conclusions to be drawn from the study, which has only been briefly touched by the authors at the end of the "conclusions section": patients with vascular invasion had a medium survival of only 5.8 months comparing with 7.9 months for patients on placebo in the Sharp-Study, who are arguably not resectable with a more advanced HCC. This means, these patients die earlier with surgery than if you do nothing. The authors have to provide:
1. the median overall survival of all groups
2. provide the baseline characteristics of the patients
3. compare the survival with the natural history of HCC and other therapies which could have been used such as TACE or sorafenib

It would be more important to first delineate the indication for surgery based on survival before discussing recurrence. In this respect the impact of the described combination of TACE and surgery has to be analysed, too.

Minor essential revisions: 24 variables are probably statistically too many for 298 patients with random effects being possible. This should be discussed with a statistician.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

Competing interests: Research funding (phase II/III studies) by Bayer HealthCare
and CytoChemia.