Author's response to reviews

Title: Use of Immunohistochemical Markers can Refine Prognosis in Triple Negative Breast Cancer

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Version: 2 Date: 4 May 2007

Author's response to reviews: see over
3rd May 2007

Dear Editor

On behalf of the coauthors, I would like to thank you and the reviewers for their valuable input. We have addressed the comments in bold italic below and also include a copy of the revised manuscript with the changes underlined.

Regards, Marc Tischkowitz

Comments from BMC editor:
Ethical Review – *yes, clarified in materials and methods*

Reviewer: Sunil Lakhani
Reviewer's report:
General
The paper by Tischkowitz et al is an interesting study combining datasets from Montreal and Vancouver. The paper demonstrates that TNP cancers are different in terms of survival compared to non-TNP and that this is also true for CBP groups. Further the paper suggests that not all TNP/CBP tumours are uniformly bad in their prognosis and that there is heterogeneity within these groups.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
In the abstract and introduction, the authors state that basal cancers were originally defined by expression studies and is now common to define on basis of IHC. Small point but there is a plethora of literature pre-expression profiling showing IHC identified basal phenotype – the expression profiling re-defined it. *Clarified in abstract and introduction*
I think the data would be a valuable addition to the literature, however, it should be noted that this aspect of heterogeneity has been reported in different ways by other authors. Reference 6 as well as Sotiriou, 2003 PNAS Vol 100, p10393 (not referenced) both show this feature. Further, the paper by Rakha J Pathol 2006 208, p495 is also relevant here (not referenced). *added*
The authors state that there is a difference in survival between TNP and non-TNP – in table 1, the grade is significantly different between the two sets – can the authors comment regarding the relevance of their finding in this setting?
All multivariate models include grade. The fact that TNP remains significant when grade is taken into account indicates that it is independent of grade.

Page 3 end of 1st Para – the authors ref 9-11 in relation to basal/brca1 – the biggest series depicting this is the non-referenced BCLC study Clin Can Res 2005 11, p5175 added

Bottom page 3/beginning page 4, the authors start out by talking about familial breast cancer and then describe their series - there is room for confusion here since it is not specified that the present data is on sporadic cancers clarified

In material – giving reasons why cases were excluded, the section (c) about DNA quality does not apply here as only IHC has been done. corrected How does this change the numbers? This was included in error and does not affect the numbers. The following line ends in ‘by’ something is missing. corrected

The discussion relating to different prognosis of the different subgroups identified would also benefit from referencing the papers by Laakso et al, Clin Cancer Res. 2006 12 p4185 and Fulford et al Breast Cancer Res 2007 added

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Reviewer: William Anderson

Reviewer's report:

General comments:
The article entitled Using additional immunohistochemical markers can refine prognosis in triple negative breast cancer by Tischkowitz et al used IHC to classify 456 breast cancer cases from JGH and VGH as TNP (ER-, PR-, and HER2-) or CBP (ER-, HER2-, CK5/6+, and EGFR+). Results showed greater impact of so-called “triple negative” (TNP) breast cancer upon breast cancer-specific survival at 3 than 10 years following initial breast cancer diagnosis. That is, the relative risk for breast cancer death for TNP compared to non-TNP was greater at 3 years (RR=4.06) than at 10 years (RR=1.71). A similar pattern was observed for CBP versus non-CBP tumors. In contrast, when CK5/6- and EGFR- were compared to CK5/6+ and EGFR+ tumors, survival differences increased over time.
The manuscript is interesting, confirming that breast cancer is a heterogeneous disease with non-proportional cancer-specific survival or hazard rates for different breast cancer expression patterns or phenotypes. The paper, however, could be strengthened in several specific areas, as described below.

Major Compulsory Revisions by section (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

1) Introduction: Technically, gene expression patterns have identified three (not two) ER negative tumors, i.e., basal-like (TNP), HER2+, and the so-called normal-like or unclassified tumors. This distinction is
relevant given that “normal-like” tumors can also have the TNP expression pattern (ER-, PR-, and HER2-).
So, without CK5/6 and EGFR, the normal-like tumors might be misclassified as basal-like TNP. **Corrected in introduction**

With that said, it would be useful to know how many basal-like TNP tumors also were CBP. **Added in results**
The difference between TNP and CBP might reflect the number of normal-like or unclassified breast cancers.
Additionally, although most basal-like tumors do not express ER, PR, and HER2, some do; and so, the overlap between basal-like and TNP breast cancer also is not complete (Cleator et al The Lancet Oncology 8: 235, 2007). These issues could be discussed in either the introduction or discussion sections of the manuscript. **Addressed in introduction**

2) Materials and Methods: Sample size information is difficult to follow. For example, the authors state that treatment data were available for 380 cases in the combined series (VGH and JGH), yet ChemoRx data was available for 448 cases (table 1). **380 is wrong, the correct overall number is 456 – changed in Materials and Methods**

Case contribution also is more clearly defined for JGH than for VGH. **Clarified in Materials and Methods**

3) Materials and Methods, tables 3a and 3b: I find the tables confusing. Some of the columns should be widen to accommodate data in a single row. For example, the word “yes” is split over two lines. **Corrected**

I also am not convinced that the parsimonious model adds much beyond their multivariate model. **While there is some overlap between the parsimonious and multivariate models, there is also an important difference in that for model 3 of the survival at 10 years time, the P-values are significant in the parsimonious model but not in the multivariate model. This is one of the main points of the paper. We would therefore prefer to keep both parsimonious and multivariate analyses in the table.**

Additionally, why is parsimonious model 1 only adjusted for tumor size and LN, whereas model 2 is adjusted for tumor size, LN, and grade while model 3 is adjusted for tumor size, LN, and center?

**This has been clarified in the text. All 3 models start by including the same covariates. That is, Center, age of diagnosis, tumor size, axillary lymph node status and histological grade. Model 1 also includes the variable TNP and {CK5/6 or EGFR}. Model 2 also includes the variable CBP and PR. Model 3 also includes the variable ER, HER2, PR and {CK5/6 or EGFR}.**

For each three models, the parsimonious model is built by removing the variables with the least amount of influence to the likelihood function. So that depending on the correlations between each covariate, some will be kept while others will lose statistical significance. The former will remain in the parsimonious models while the latter will be removed. Hence different variables will appear in each parsimonious model.

What is meant by the statement that all of the models accounted for missingness? To “account” for missing data, the authors would need to know the cause of missingness, e.g., did missingness occur at random or was it non-random based upon race, tumor characteristics, etc. In sum, their method of accounting for missing data should be clearly described.

**This has been clarified in the text.**
The method of taking missing data into account in the statistical model was to include a variable defined as 1 if the data is missing and as zero otherwise.

If the P-value associated from this variable is statistically significant, then the missing data has a different survival from the baseline value of that variable. Even if we cannot declare whether the missingness is random or not; it is still taken into account in the model.

If the P-value is not statistically significant either the missingness does not correlate with survival when compared to the baseline value of the variable or there are too few missing values to properly assess the correlation.

The variables with some missing values where Grade (test for missing values effect at 10 years time, P-value =0.12), tumor size (P=0.44), lymph node (P=0.0002, RR=2.9), CK5/6 (P=0.69), EGFR (P=0.65), [CK5/6 or EGFR] (P=0.40), CBP (P=0.84). Similar but less significant results where observed at 3 years time.

So that the only missing data that appears to correlate with survival is lymph node status. Since lymph node positive status lowers the survival, a fair proportion of the missing status should really be positive but as we adjust for the missingness in the multivariate model; We believe it should not make an impact on the assessment of the other variables as missing status did not correlate with TNP, CBP nor with [ CK5/6 or EGFR ] status: 19\% of subjects with missing lymph node status where TNP positive ( 9/48 ) compared to 13\% of subjects with non-missing lymph node status where TNP positive ( 54/408, P-value=0.28 ); 11\% of subjects with missing lymph node status where CBP positive ( 4/38 ) compared to 18\% of subjects with non-missing lymph node status where CBP positive ( 60/337, P-value=0.36 ); 26\% of subjects with missing lymph node status where [ CK5/6 or EGFR ] positive ( 10/38 ) compared to 36\% of subjects with non-missing lymph node status where [ CK5/6 or EGFR ] positive ( 121/337, P-value=0.28 ).

4) Materials and Methods, figure 1: The description of the Poisson model is confusing. I think that the authors are saying that although TNP cases were less likely to be node positive than non-TNP cases (OR=0.44, table 1), nodal status was positively associated with tumor size for both TNP+ and TNP- cases (figure 1). If this is correct it should be clearly described. Clarified in materials/methods and figure 1 and results

5) Results/discussion, page 6: Given that the non-proportional survival effects at 3 and 10 years for TNP tumors is their main finding, the authors should probably provide some statistical test for trend. This will be especially important since the confidence intervals overlap for TNP versus non-TNP, i.e., RR=4.06 (2.11-7.82) at 3 years and 1.71 (1.05-2.78) at 10 years.

Now dealt with in results section

6) Results/discussion, page 7: The authors state that models 1 and 2 share ER- negative status, but fail to acknowledge that these two models also share HER- expression.

Corrected
Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
1) There is a typo in reference 7 \textit{corrected}
2) Reference # 18 is incomplete \textit{corrected}

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
The abstract would be easier to read if it were structured (Background, Methods, Results, Discussion). Similarly, the results and discussion sections probably should be separated.
Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded \textbf{What next?:} to the major compulsory revisions
\textbf{Level of interest:} An article of importance in its field
\textbf{Quality of written English:} Acceptable
\textbf{Statistical review:} Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.
Reviewer: Laura Collins

Reviewer's report:

General
Using Additional Immunohistochemical Markers Can Refine Prognosis In Triple Negative Breast Cancer

This study is original and well thought out. The authors performed immunohistochemical staining of triple negative breast cancers as a surrogate for gene expression profiling to ascertain whether the addition of CK5/6 and EGFR would refine prognostication in this cohort of (ER-/PR- and HER2-) women.

It is well recognized that women with basal like breast cancers fare poorly. Newer data are suggesting that this subset of women may have a particularly poor outcome in the first few years following diagnosis, but, as the authors point out, this difference in prognosis may diminish with time from diagnosis.

The data from this study confirm the above mentioned findings regarding the effect of the triple negative phenotype having the most impact on prognosis in the first three years of follow up. A novel aspect of this paper is that the authors have evaluated the influence of CK5/6 and EGFR (markers of the basal phenotype) on survival differences. The findings of this study indicate that it is these two markers that may prove to be better markers for predicting long term outcome in women with triple negative breast cancers.

The authors have also attempted to evaluate the effect of triple negative phenoptype on lymph node status. The numbers here become very small, and while the findings are provocative, I am not sure that interpretations made can be considered reliable in this setting.

Overall, a nice study that has added to the body of work on triple negative/basal like breast cancers and determination of prognosis for this cohort of women.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

None

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Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Formatting of the tables was off in my copy; ensure that column widths are sufficient to allow "Yes", CI and p-values to be printed out on one line. corrected

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Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

I think the title would be better phrased as "Use of Immunohistochemical Markers can Refine Prognosis in Triple Negative Breast Cancer" Thank you for this suggestion – we agree and have changed the title

What next?: Accept after discretionary revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.
Use of Immunohistochemical Markers can Refine Prognosis in Triple Negative Breast Cancer

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Acknowledgements

MT is funded by the Jewish General Hospital Weekend to End Breast Cancer, Rethink Breast Cancer Canada, and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation. The Genetic Pathology Evaluation Centre is supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Sanofi-Aventis. DGH and TON are scholars of the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research. WDF is funded by CBCRA.
Abstract
Basal-like breast cancer has been extensively characterized on the basis of gene expression profiles, but it is becoming increasingly common for these tumors to be defined on the basis of immunohistochemical (IHC) staining patterns, particularly in retrospective studies where material for expression profiling may not be available. The IHC pattern that best defines basal-like tumors is under investigation and various combinations of ER, PR, HER2-, CK5/6+ and EGFR+ have been tested. Using datasets from two different hospitals we describe how using different combinations of immunohistochemical patterns has different effects on estimating prognosis at different time intervals after diagnosis. As our baseline, we used two IHC patterns ER-/PR-/HER2- ("triple negative phenotype", TNP) and ER-/HER2-/CK5/6+ and/or EGFR+ ("core basal phenotype", CBP). There was no overall difference in survival between the two hospital-based series, but there was a difference between the TNP and non-TNP groups which was most marked at 3 years (76.8% vs 93.5%, p<.0001). This difference reduced with time, suggesting that long term survivors (beyond 10 years) in the TNP group may have comparable survival to non-TNP cases. A similar difference was seen if CBP was used instead of TNP. However when CK5/6 and/or EGFR expressing tumors were analyzed without consideration of ER/PR status, the reduction in survival increased with time, becoming more pronounced at 10 years than at 3 years. This suggests that these tumor types have a persistently poorer prognosis over the longer term, an observation that may have important therapeutic implications as drugs that target the EGFR are currently being evaluated in breast cancer.

Introduction
Gene expression studies using DNA microarrays have identified several distinct breast cancer subtypes which differ significantly in prognosis [1, 2]. These subtypes include three main subtypes of
estrogen receptor (ER) negative tumors - the basal-like (ER-/HER2-), the ER-/HER2+ subtype and the normal-like/unclassified subtype, and at least 2 types of ER+ tumors (luminal A and luminal B) [2]. Basal-like tumors typically show high expression of genes characteristic of the basal epithelial cells of the normal mammary gland, including stratified epithelial cytokeratins, such as cytokeratins 5, 14, 15 and 17 [3]. Basal-like breast cancers account for around 15% of all invasive ductal breast cancers of no special type [4] with a higher prevalence among African-American women [5]. Conventional histopathological as well as molecular studies of breast cancers with “basaloid” differentiation have shown that basal-like tumors are often high grade [6], have areas of necrosis [7], may have a typical or an atypical medullary phenotype [8] and have a distinct pattern of genetic alterations [6], including frequent TP53 mutations [2]. A high proportion of BRCA1 tumors exhibit the basal-like phenotype and germ-line BRCA1 mutations result in breast cancers that are more likely to be basal-like in nature [9-12].

The breast cancer subtypes have been extensively characterized by gene expression analysis using DNA microarrays and while this remains the gold-standard, it is not currently feasible for large-scale clinical applications or retrospective studies using formalin fixed, paraffin-embedded samples. In these situations the immunohistochemical staining profile (IHC) can be a useful surrogate of gene expression analysis. However the optimum immunohistochemical profile of basal-like breast cancer remains unclear. The “triple negative phenotype”, TNP (ER-, PR-, HER-) is increasingly used as a surrogate marker for basal-like breast cancer as it has the advantage that these three stains are already used routinely in clinical work-up of breast cancers [13]. Although most basal-like tumors do not express ER, PR, and HER2, some may, and the overlap between basal-like and TNP breast cancer is not complete [14]. Moreover, the ER−, HER2−, CK5/6+ and/or EGFR+ profile seems to correlate better with basal-like breast cancer gene expression profiles [3, 15]. We sought to clarify how the utilization of different marker combinations affects prognostic outcome.

We have previously shown that tumors expressing the CK5/6 marker are associated with germline BRCA1 mutations based on data on unselected breast cancer cases from a single institution (Jewish General Hospital, JGH) [9]. Here we present data on both the JGH series (n= 192) and a second series of 264 breast cancer cases from the Vancouver General Hospital (VGH), focusing specifically correlations between IHC profiles and outcome in basal-like cancer.
Materials and Methods

Clinicopathological Review and IHC. For the JGH series, the study design is an ethnically restricted single hospital-based retrospective cohort study, as described previously [9]. Of 309 consecutive cases of Ashkenazi Jewish women age 65 or less diagnosed with a first primary, non-metastatic, invasive breast cancer between January 1, 1980 and November 1, 1995 at the Sir Mortimer B. Davis-Jewish General Hospital, Montreal, QC, 17 (5.5%) were excluded (because (a) we were unable to locate pathology blocks; (b) we found only carcinoma in situ was present on the available path blocks; leaving 292 cases. 192 cases had sufficient material to generate a tissue microarray. Blocks were identified from each of these women, and clinicopathological and follow-up information were obtained by chart review. All of the specimens were reviewed by one pathologist (L. R. B.) for histological type, nuclear/histological grade, and lymph node status, and were stained for ER, PR and HER2 and CK5/6 IHC, as described previously [9]. The VGH study group comprised women with primary invasive breast cancer who underwent surgery for breast cancer between 1974 and 1995 at Vancouver General Hospital. These were consecutive cases, and the presence of invasive breast carcinoma was the only selection criterion in this study. Outcome data were available for all of the patients, with median follow-up of 15.4 years (range, 6.3–26.6 years) and the assembly of archival tumor blocks into tissue microarrays, IHC and scoring were as described previously [16]. Epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) immunostains were also applied to both series, using methods described previously [15]. Information on the adjuvant use of hormone therapy or chemotherapy was obtained from the clinical record; these data were available on 440 cases and 448 cases respectively out of the total of 456 cases in the combined series. All cases had been collected as part of studies which were subject to ethical approval obtained from the local institutional ethical review boards (McGill University/Jewish General Hospital and Vancouver General Hospital).

Statistical Analysis. Clinical, pathological, and molecular data were collected in a mutually blinded fashion. Patient characteristics were compared using nonparametric Wilcoxon’s test and Fisher’s exact test. Borderline statistical significance was defined as P-values between .05 and .10. Survival rates were calculated from the date of primary surgery until death from breast cancer (breast cancer-specific survival). The median follow-up of those who did not die of breast cancer was 11.13 years.
Ten-year survival curves were estimated using the Kaplan-Meier method, and significance was assessed with the log-rank test.

To estimate the relative risk (RR) of death from breast cancer, three Cox proportional hazards models were built, all of which included the following measured prognostic factors: Center, age of diagnosis, tumor size, axillary lymph node status and histological grade. The first model was built to assess the importance of TNP and included terms for TNP and [CK5/6 and/or EGFR] positive status. The second model was built to assess the importance of CBP and included terms for CBP and PR positive status. The third model was built to assess the importance of each component of the TNP and CBP criteria and included terms for ER and HER2 negative status, PR and [CK5/6 and/or EGFR] positive status. In all three models missing values were factored in by creating a dichotomized variable to identify whether or not the variable of interest was missing. This allowed us to include all 456 subjects (compared to 327 subjects without adjustment for missing).

The survival model was reanalyzed separately for 244 node-negative and 162 node-positive subjects. Survival data were analyzed and censored at both 3 years time and at 10 years time, and significance was assessed at the 5% level using two-sided tests. All three parsimonious models were built using the log-likelihood ratio test, employing a backward approach in which variables with the highest contribution to the likelihood function were kept in the model and where the parsimonious model was assumed when all P-values were below a 10% threshold. The parsimonious model is thus built by removing the variables with the least amount of influence to the likelihood function; depending on the correlations between each covariate, some will be kept while others will lose statistical significance and be removed. All three models start by including the same covariate, that is, center, age of diagnosis, tumor size, axillary lymph node status and histological grade. Model 1 also includes the variable TNP and {CK5/6 or EGFR}. Model 2 also includes the variable CBP and PR. Model 3 also includes the variable ER, HER2, PR and {CK56 or EGFR}.

As there was an upper age limit in the JGH series and no upper age limit for the VGH series, the analyses were repeated without the VGH cases over 65 years. Since the final results did not essentially differ with and without older cases, all subjects were kept in the statistical analysis. Similar models were used to determine the influence of adjuvant chemotherapy or hormonal therapy on prognosis.
A Poisson regression model was built to examine the relationship between the number of positive lymph nodes and tumor size in TNP+ and TNP- cases: \( \ln(\mu) = \ln(N_{\text{exam}}) + \alpha + \alpha_{\text{TNP+}} + \beta_{\text{TNP+}} \times \text{Tsize} + \beta_{\text{TNP+}} \times \text{Tsize} \), where: \( \mu \) = average number of positive nodes, \( \alpha \) = overall intercept, \( \alpha_{\text{TNP+}} \) = extra intercept for TNP+ patients, \( \beta \) = overall slope, \( \beta_{\text{TNP+}} \) = extra slope for TNP+ patients, and the natural logarithm of the number of nodes examined was used as an offset.

**Results**

At 10 years time, there was no overall difference in survival for all breast cancer types between the JGH and VGH centers (\( p=.17 \)) and TNP tumors made up 14% of cases in both series (JGH, 27 tumors, VGH, 36 tumors). In the combined series, the median age at diagnosis was 9.4 years younger in the TNP group (\( p=.0006 \)) and median survival was 6.75 years in the TNP groups versus 9.09 years in the non-TNP group, \( p=.02 \). There was a significant overlap between the TNP and CBP groups with 49/58 (84%) of TNP cases also falling in the CBP group. Comparison of clinical features in TNP and non-TNP cases in the combined series (Table 1) showed that TNP cases had an increased likelihood of a higher histological grade (odds ratio (OR), for grade 3: 17.7 [95% confidence interval, C.I., 6.05-51.5], \( p<.0001 \)), a larger tumor (OR for tumor >2cm: 1.85 [95% C.I. 1.04-3.32], \( p=.04 \)) but had a decreased likelihood of positive lymph nodes (OR = 0.44 [95% C.I. 0.23-0.84], \( p=.01 \)). While there was a clear correlation between tumor size and the mean number of positive lymph nodes in both the non-TNP and the TNP group, this correlation was less strong with the TNP group (\( P=0.01 \)) and the interaction between tumor size and TNP status on lymph node status was of borderline significance (\( p=0.10 \), Figure 1). Breast cancer survival at 3 and 10 years correlated closely with histological grade, size and lymph node involvement (Table 2). The effect of TNP on prognosis was stronger at 3 years than at 10 years, with TNP conferring a univariate RR of 4.06 [95% C.I. 2.11-7.82], \( p=.0001 \) at 3 years (Table 3a) compared to 1.71 [95% C.I. 1.05-2.78], \( p=.03 \) at 10 years (Table 3b). Although there is a degree of overlap between the confidence intervals at 3 years and at 10 years, this is small and the fact that the TNP parameter is not present in parsimonious model 1 at 10 years (Table 3b) but is present in the same model at 3 years provides further evidence indicating that the differences are real. A similar pattern was seen with the CBP variable. Predictably, TNP cases were less likely to receive hormone therapy and more likely to receive chemotherapy (Table 1). At 10 years, survival was 63% in TNP cases treated with chemotherapy versus 66% in the no treatment group; the corresponding figures for CBP were 68%.
and 62%. These differences were not significant and there was also no difference in survival with adjuvant hormone therapy.

In the combined JGH/VGH series, the difference in survival between the TNP and non-TNP groups (Figure 2) was most marked at 3 years with an absolute reduction of 16.7% in the TNP group (76.8% versus 93.5%, p<.0001). Although the absolute reduction in survival of 9.2% at 10 years in the TNP group was still significant (p=.03), the difference appeared to be reducing with time, suggesting that long term survivors in the TNP group may have a comparable survival to non-TNP cases. When using CBP instead of TNP a similar overall survival pattern emerged with a significant difference at 3 years (77.4% versus 93.4%, p=<.0001) that also became less marked at 10 years.

However, when tumors negative for CK5/6 and EGFR expression were compared to tumors that expressed either CK5/6 or EGFR (Figure 3) the absolute survival difference was notably greater at 10 years (17.1%, p=.0007), than that at 3 years (7.8%, p=.02). This was reflected in the multivariate parsimonious models (Table 3a and 3b) which showed that at 3 years time, both TNP and CBP parameters not only remained in their respective parsimonious models but both also worked well in predicting outcome (models 1 and 2). As both models share ER negative and HER2 negative status, these appear to be the main driving factors predicting early outcome. Indeed, when all components of TNP and CBP are analyzed separately (model 3), only ER negative and HER2 negative status remained in the parsimonious model while positive PR status and [CK5/6+ and/or EGFR+] status fell out of the model.

In contrast, the data at 10 years indicates that ER negative and HER negative status diminishes in influence with increasing time, with [CK5/6+ and/or EGFR+] status becoming the main driving factor. Therefore CBP (which incorporates CK5/6 and/or EGFR+) may be a better model at 10 years.

Discussion

The data presented here show that different immunohistochemical marker combinations may influence prognosis at different points in time. This is in agreement with the recent findings of Anderson et al. who using the SEER database found that at 17 months, ER- hazard rates peaked at 7.5% per year then declined, whereas ER+ hazard rates were comparatively constant at 1.5–2% per
year; falling ER- and constant ER+ hazard rates crossed at 7 years after which time prognosis was better for ER+ cases [17].

TNP had a marginally greater effect on prognosis in lymph node negative patients compared to lymph node positive patients (Figures 4a and 4b). The univariate relative risk for breast cancer death at 3 years in the TNP group versus the non-TNP group was 5.40 and 3.48 among lymph node negative patients and lymph node positive patients respectively, giving a magnitude of reduction in survival at 3 years of 0.68 in lymph node positive patients compared to lymph node negative patients. Whether lymph node status has less prognostic value in basal-like breast cancers remains a contentious issue. For example in their recent study of African-American women, Carey et al did not see a poor survival in lymph node negative basal-like breast cancer, but it was very poor in lymph node positive cases [5] while other groups have found that node-negative basal-like breast cancer also carries a poor prognosis [18]. In this study the limited correlation between tumor size and mean number of lymph nodes in the TNP group and the modest difference of the effect of TNP between lymph node negative and lymph node positive groups suggest that lymph node involvement is a less reliable predictor of prognosis in the TNP group.

Data from the first cohort studied (JGH) indicate that breast cancers with the TNP have a worse prognosis at least in the first three years after diagnosis but this difference in prognosis may diminish with time from diagnosis. These data were validated in a second large independent data set (VGH). Both data sets showed very similar overall survival curves suggesting that they are generally comparable. Although both data sets were identified retrospectively, this is counterbalanced by the fact that they originate from different centers and the degree of consistency between the two data sets which strengthens the overall findings. However, given the small numbers of cases analyzed, any impact of treatment on survival stratified by TNP status would have had to be very large to become apparent and further larger, preferably randomized, studies are required to assess this in greater detail.

The data presented here add to the growing body of evidence that basal-like breast tumors have a worse prognosis [13, 15, 18, 19] and respond less well to chemotherapy at relapse [20], although there remains a significant degree of heterogeneity within this group [6, 21-24]. Some of these studies have used microarray-based gene expression studies to identify the basal-like group and, while these studies are likely to be more accurate in delineating the basal phenotype than
standard immunohistochemical methods, they are not yet routinely used in clinical practice. The advantage of this study is that it uses markers that are readily available in most pathology departments and is therefore directly translatable into routine clinical management, and can be applied to archival specimens for which long-term follow-up information is already available.

A large number of new markers are emerging which aim to further delineate the basal phenotype [23, 25]. However, ER, PR, HER2, EGFR and CK5/6 are already routinely available in most centers. ER, PR, and HER2 in particular are used to guide treatment decisions in breast cancer [26] and it is therefore important to know exactly how expression of these markers affects prognosis. Haffty et al. have recently published prognosis data on a series of 482 patients, 117 of which had a TNP [13]. The median follow up time was 7.9 years and TNP was an independent predictor of disease-specific survival (hazard ratio =1.79; 95% CI 1.03 -3.22). Another recent study showed that in the neoadjuvant setting, patients with ER negative and HER2 negative breast cancer have higher sensitivity to anthracycline-based chemotherapy than the luminal subtype, and have higher rates of pathologic complete response [27]. Our data confirms that TNP is useful as a prognostic marker, but also suggests that the effect of TNP on survival reduces over time and that focusing on CK5/6 and/or EGFR expression may provide a better marker for long term prognosis (beyond three years). Several new drugs that target the EGFR in breast cancer are currently being evaluated [28] and the observations presented here suggest that the effects of these drugs may become more apparent over the longer term, beyond the time over which a typical drug trial would extend. This would have important implications for trial design and interpretation of results. Finally, an increasing number of immunohistochemical markers are being utilized in the identification of basal-like and BRCA1-related breast cancers [18, 29-31], and further validation of these additional markers will be required if they are also to be used as a guide to clinical prognosis and therapeutic choices [14].
Legends

**Table 1.** Age at diagnosis, tumor characteristics and treatment given in the TNP and non-TNP groups. P-values based on Fisher’s exact test.

**Table 2.** Univariate Cox proportional hazards model for survival until death from breast cancer at 3 years and 10 years. Total number of subjects is 456. Total number of events is 39 and 111 at 3 and 10 years respectively.

**Tables 3a and 3b.** Cox proportional model for survival until death from breast cancer at 3 years time (3a) and 10 years time (3b). All statistical modeling adjust for variables with missing values (see methods). The full multivariate model also includes terms for centre, age of diagnosis, histological grade, tumor size and lymph node. Parsimonious model was assumed when all P-values were below 10%. All three parsimonious models also included terms for tumor size and lymph node status. Parsimonious model-2 also included a term for Histological grade while parsimonious model-3 also included a term for the centre. Total number of subjects is 456. Total number of events is 39 and 111 at 3 and 10 years respectively.

**Figure 1.** Poisson regression curve examining the relationship between tumor size, lymph node status and TNP group. The number of positive lymph nodes showed a closer correlation with tumor size in the non-TNP group compared to the TNP group.

**Figure 2.** Survival until breast cancer death by TNP status. Survival at 3 years time was 76.8% in the TNP cases versus 93.5% among non-TNP cases (p<.0001); Survival at 10 years time were, respectively 65.0% and 74.2% (p=.03).

**Figure 3.** Survival until breast cancer death by Ck5/6 and EGFR status. Survival at 3 years time was 85.6% among CK5/6 and/or EGFR positive cases versus 93.4% among cases that were negative for both CK5/6 and EGFR (p=.02); Survival at 10 years time was 61.4% and 78.5% (p=.0007) respectively.
Figures 4a and 4b. In TNP cases, the magnitude of the decrease in survival was approximately 1.5-fold greater at 3 years in the lymph node positive subgroup (Figure 4a) compared to the lymph node negative subgroup (Figure 4b).

References


