Author's response to reviews

Title: Early and very early hepatocellular carcinoma: when and how much do staging and choice of treatment really matter? A multi-center study.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Mr Dunkley,

as requested we provide the point by point response to the concerns of the referees.

FORMATTING CHANGES:
1. We added the requested statements on ethics and privacy policy (Methods, page 5).
2. We included the acknowledgements section and we notified that there was no financial funding for this work (page 15).
3. We modified our article in order to conform to the journal style.

REVIEWER 1
Major comment
1. In the Discussion section, we already clearly stated that: “being low the number of patients with “very early” HCC, we might have missed the expected difference in survival among treatment groups and prospective validation analysis is needed to define the best treatment in this subgroup of patients” (Discussion, page 11). This is particularly true for liver transplantation. We have also included an additional paragraph (page 13) on the limitations given by the long time of patient recruitment.

Minor comment
1. We clarified that “we considered portal hypertension (as clinically suggested by the presence of esophageal varices) or bilirubine level <2 mg/dl as exclusion criteria for resection” (Methods, page 4).
2. We added the table for the subgroup of patients of the internal validation (Table 7).
3. We deleted Table 3, conformed all tables to the requested format and removed mean survival, as suggested.
4. We added case number and log rank results.
5. We considered the paper suggested and commented it (Discussion, page 12, Ref 27).

REVIEWER 2
1. We corrected the aims of the study (Abstract, page 2).
2. We added statistical methods (Abstract, page 2).
3. We reported all the results requested (Abstract, page 2).
4-5-6. To reduce the mentioned bias we introduced an internal validation analysis on a more recent period (Results, page 9). Moreover, we addressed the comments 4-5-6 in the paragraph on study limitations, as well as in the Abstract and in the Discussion, clearly stating that validation analysis on more recently diagnosed patients are needed.
7. We highlighted the study limitations (page 13).

Minor essential revisions
1. We modified as requested, referring to the staging system with the name “BCLC staging system” throughout the text.