Reviewer's report

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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Reviewer: Sheng-Nan Lu

Reviewer's report:

General comment:
This retrospective study, enrolled a cohort of patients with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) in very early and early stage, aimed to determine the impact of treatment options in patients’ survival stratified according to BCLC classification. Despite there was no significant difference in survival for the choice of treatment in patients with very early stage, there was significant survival benefit for curative treatment in early stage patient. However, appropriate treatment options recommended by AASLD guideline offered no impact on survival in multivariate analysis. At the end, the authors concluded that treatment options according to AASLD guideline had no or only partial impact in survival for HCC patients in very early and early stage. There were not enough patients in the very early stage HCC to persuade the reader to ascertain the conclusion. However, the conclusion was impressed based on the analysis in early stage HCC.

Major comments:
1. Although the study cohort included 530 patients in very early or early stage HCC, liver transplantation was the choice of treatment in only 14 patients. Based on the limited numbers of patients in the transplantation group, it is too early to make a conclusion that transplantation had no impact on survival.

Minor comment:
1. In the AASLD guideline, portal hypertension was a major determinant to exclude patient from resection in very early or early stage HCC. The authors should clarify how they define portal hypertension in their management of patients with HCC.
2. In the internal validation analysis of 100 patients with early stage HCC, the authors should make a table and stratify patients according to treatment options.
3. Too many tables! Please try to delete unnecessary tables. Rewrite your tables to meet the format of scientific papers. In Table 4 and 6, mean survival might be unnecessary.
4. Please add case number, results of log-rank tests, and symbol of censor cases in your figures. Figures should have the function of “self-explanation”.
Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests