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.

Version: 1 Date: 11 November 2008

Reviewer: Laura Crocetti

Reviewer's report:

The manuscript deals with the impact of staging on survival of patients with very early and early hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The study foresaw the retrospective analysis of prognostic factors associated with survival to a large patient population, including the application of the Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) staging system endorsed by the American Association for Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD). The studies aimed at validating guidelines, in this case the AASLD recommendations and the BCLC staging system, are of the utmost importance. However the retrospective application of the guidelines in many different centers represents the main limitation of the study. Major revisions and limitations of the study are listed below:

1. Abstract: The aims of the study should be the same in the abstract as at the end of the background.
2. Abstract: Statistical methods should be briefly described also in the Methods section in the Abstract.
3. Abstract: In the Results all the data collected should be reported for both classes of patients (proportion of patients in the two classes, proportion treated according BCLC guidelines, results of univariate and multivariate analysis).
4. Abstract, Conclusions: the fact that many patients were not treated according to the BCLC guidelines could be due to the fact that many patients were allocated to treatment many years before the proposal of these guidelines. Therefore these concept should not be considered as a conclusive one.
5. The Authors analyzed data coming from patients admitted to centers in a very wide time interval (1986-2004), when the available technical resources were not adequate to accurately diagnose early and very early HCCs.
6. Radiofrequency ablation was not available in the late 80’s and early 90’s, and also available therapeutical techniques underwent significant technological and methodological developments during the last 20 years. Therefore the fact that the BCLC staging system was often not followed and that treatment choice did not have an impact on survival could not represent an actual situation.
7. A paragraph concerning study limitations should be added.

Minor essential revisions:

1. It is advisable to call the staging system with the same name throughout the
manuscript, e.g. BCLC staging system instead of AASLD-BCLC. In fact the therapeutical algorithm reported in the AASLD document is the BCLC staging system.

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

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

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

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests