Can axillary and supraclavicular radiotherapy be avoided after breast-conserving surgery and axillary dissection in women with multiple involved axillary nodes? Experience at the European Institute of Oncology

Viviana Galimberti1, Maria Cristina Leonardi2, Nicole Rotmensz3, Edoardo Botteri3, Simona Iodice3, Andrea Sagona1, Rafaela Cecilio Sahium1, Guillermo Bassani1, Anastasio Berrettini1, Simonetta Monti1, Oreste Gentilini1, Claudia Sangalli1, Alberto Luini1, Roberto Orecchia2,4, and Umberto Veronesi1

1Department of Senology, 2Department of Radiotherapy, and 3Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, European Institute of Oncology, Milan, 4University of Milan, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

Aims and background. Although some guidelines recommend adjuvant radiotherapy (RT) to the axilla and supraclavicular nodes if 4 or more axillary nodes are involved, the current practice at our Institute is not to irradiate the axilla but to perform complete axillary dissection in which all 3 Berg levels are removed. We performed a retrospective analysis of patients with 4 or more axillary nodes involved and sufficient follow-up to provide indications as to whether our current treatment is adequate.

Methods. We retrospectively analyzed 287 T1-T3 patients with a median follow-up of 5 years and 4 or more involved nodes treated by quadrantectomy and breast RT but no axillary RT; supraclavicular RT was given only when prognostic factors were unfavorable.

Results. A total of 170 (59.2%) patients did not receive supraclavicular RT, while 117 (40.8%) patients received supraclavicular irradiation. No patient received axillary RT. After a median follow-up of 5 years (range, 4-105 months), 4.7% had died and 13.5% had developed distant metastases in the no supraclavicular RT group, compared to 12.0% dead (P = 0.028 log rank) and 24.8% (P = 0.201 log rank) in the supraclavicular RT group. No patients with supraclavicular RT developed supraclavicular metastases compared to 4 in the no supraclavicular RT group. There were no axillary recurrences.

Conclusions. Complete axillary dissection appears adequate treatment in patients with 4 or more involved nodes. The low breast recurrence rate also suggests that breast conservation is adequate treatment in such patients. Supraclavicular RT appears to reduce the number of supraclavicular metastases but confers no survival advantage. Although a small number of cases were examined in this retrospective single-center series, all received highly uniform treatment.

Keywords: breast cancer, axillary metastases, axillary radiotherapy, supraclavicular radiotherapy, axillary dissection.

Acknowledgments: The authors thank Don Ward for help with the English.

Correspondence to: Viviana Galimberti, MD, Unit of Molecular Senology, Senology Department, Via Ripamonti 435, 20141 Milan, Italy. Tel +39-02-57489717; fax +39-02-57489780; e-mail viviana.galimberti@ieo.it

Received August 13, 2007; accepted October 12, 2007.