Characteristics of Lung Cancer in Korea

Choon-Taek Lee

Department of Internal Medicine, Seoul National University College of Medicine

Koreans are a single racial group with a high smoking rate among men and a low smoking rate amongst women. Recent statistics from Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare revealed that lung cancer became the second most common cancer death in Korean male, following only stomach cancer. In contrast of decreasing tendency in death rate due to stomach cancer and hepatoma in Korea, death rate due to lung cancer has increased by 53.5% from 1990 to 1999.

This report documents a retrospective investigation conducted by The Korean Academy of Tuberculosis and Respiratory Disease into the characteristics of all lung cancers diagnosed between Jan 1, 1997 and Dec 31, 1997 in Korea. Among the 3,794 patients included in this study, 76.8% were smokers and 79.3% were male. In particular 89.8% of the males were smokers. Squamous cell carcinoma was the most frequent type of lung cancer encountered (44.7%), this was followed by adenocarcinoma (27.9%). The smoking rate in the case of adenocarcinoma (56.2%) was significantly lower than that found in both squamous cell carcinoma (87.4%) and small cell lung cancer (84.3%). The most common symptom was a cough (57.2%). Only 7.2% of patients were asymptomatic. Bronchoscopic biopsy has a primary role in the diagnosis of squamous cell carcinoma and small cell cancer but percutaneous needle biopsy has a more important role in the case of adenocarcinoma. Two-thirds of the non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) patients were detected in the unresectable advanced stages (IIIB: 28.8% and IV: 36.5%). Only 13.7% and 4.5% of patients were in stage I and II, respectively.

Comparison of pathologic staging and clinical staging in 409 patients after surgery, in 67.4%, the pathologic staging was identical with clinical staging. Up-staging was found in 18.8% and down-staging was found in 13.1%.

In conclusion, in contrast to other developed countries, squamous cell carcinoma is still the most frequent type of lung cancer in Korea. The high proportion of smokers and the high incidence of advanced, unresectable lung cancer at diagnosis have urged us to develop a national anti-smoking program to promote the cessation of smoking and the early detection of lung cancer.