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Surgical resection for hepatocellular carcinoma: moving from what can be done to what is worth to be done

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Review

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3 **Hepatology Editorial** on the accepted paper entitled:
4 "The role of hepatic resection in the treatment of hepatocellular cancer"
5
6

7 **Surgical resection for hepatocellular carcinoma: moving from what can be done to**
8 **what is worth to be done**
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11 Renato Romagnoli¹, Vincenzo Mazzaferro² and Jordi Bruix^{3,4}
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14
15 ¹ General Surgery 2U and Liver Transplantation Center, AOU Città della Salute e della
16 Scienza di Torino, University of Turin, Turin, Italy
17 renato.romagnoli@unito.it
18
19

20
21 ² Gastrointestinal Surgery and Liver Transplantation, Istituto Nazionale Tumori IRCCS
22 (National Cancer Institute), Milan, Italy
23 vincenzo.mazzaferro@istitutotumori.mi.it
24
25

26
27 ³ Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) Group, Liver Unit, Hospital Clínic, IDIBAPS,
28 University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
29
30

31 ⁴ Centro de Investigación Biomédica en Red de Enfermedades Hepáticas y Digestivas
32 (CIBERehd), University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
33 jbruix@clinic.ub.es
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Correspondence to:

Jordi Bruix, MD

BCLC Group, Liver Unit

Hospital Clínic

c/Villarroel 170, Floor 4, Stair 11

08036 Barcelona

Spain

Phone: +34 93 227 9803

Fax: +34 93 227 5792

E-mail: jbruix@clinic.ub.es

Abbreviations: HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; CSPH, clinically-significant portal hypertension; MELD, Model for End-stage Liver Disease; NV, normal value

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3 Radical resection is the mainstay of treatment for organ tumors. The same could apply to
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5 hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) if frequent multifocality and coexisting cirrhosis did not
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7 limit its role. Current guidelines (1,2) recommend resection only for single nodules *of any*
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9 *size* in patients without tumor-related symptoms and clinically-significant portal
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11 hypertension (CSPH) and with normal bilirubin (≤ 1 mg/dl). If this profile is not fulfilled,
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13 postoperative morbidity increases and long-term survival is significantly reduced. An
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15 extension of the recommendation has been repeatedly suggested, since in patients with
16
17 CSPH (3,4), multiple nodules or intrahepatic vascular invasion resection can be attempted
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19 with high rates of technical success in experienced Centers, even though tumor
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21 elimination by surgery translates into an improved survival only in properly selected
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23 candidates. Actually, while tumor removal would be technically feasible in patients with a
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25 large tumor burden or impaired liver function, resection may be not worth attempting as
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27 survival could even be decreased.
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32 In real life the decision to resect HCC is based on patient individual components and local
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34 conditions that are not captured by guidelines. Debate about resection is fuelled by several
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36 publications in which the outcome in suboptimal candidates is still felt acceptable, because
37
38 it appears to be better than with other treatment options or no treatment. The controversy
39
40 will further grow as improvement in surgical techniques and new drugs for hepatitis C virus
41
42 will determine a reduction in postoperative morbidity, as it happened with hepatitis B virus.
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44 Finally, the growing epidemic of HCC in metabolic syndrome may also prime resections in
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46 large/multifocal tumors occurring in non-cirrhotic liver, although comorbidities and
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48 advanced age may preclude safe surgery in many of these patients.
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54 In this issue of HEPATOLOGY, Roayaie *et al* (5) expose the surgical management of HCC
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56 within the Bridge database that collected information about new incident cases worldwide.
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58 In a cohort of 8,656 patients the Authors evaluated how frequently guidelines for resection
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3 were followed and whether straying from them impacted on survival. A total of 862 (10%)
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5 patients were classified as ideal resection candidates and more than 80% of them
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7 underwent surgery; the remaining were mostly treated by ablation or embolization and
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9 experienced a two-fold increased mortality risk. These results could be used to support the
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11 superiority of resection, but they could also reflect the fact that associated conditions
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13 (advanced age, comorbidities) excluded those less healthy subjects from surgery. The
14
15 main study interest is focused in the 7,794 (90%) patients who were classified as non-ideal
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17 candidates, 20% of whom were resected despite a suboptimal profile. Unfortunately, the
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19 database did not register intrahepatic tumor location and type of hepatectomy performed.
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21 As known, the propensity of hepatologists to refer and of surgeons to operate on non-ideal
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23 cirrhotic patients is influenced by the extent of planned resection and the perceived risk of
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25 the intervention. Therefore, the reader is left with the feeling that drivers of the decision to
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27 resect or not a non-ideal candidate were not thoroughly recorded and, consequently, non-
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29 ideal resected patients formed a not fully reproducible cohort. The fact that just few
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31 resected cases had severe liver disease (Child-Pugh C, bilirubin >2 mg/dl, severe portal
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33 hypertension reflected by platelets <50,000/mm³) or very compromised general conditions
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35 (performance status 3-4) suggests that clinicians took into account liver function, tumor
36
37 location and general health status when favoring resection. Indeed, the <5% postoperative
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39 mortality rate indicates a quite appropriate evaluation of short-term surgical risks.
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41 However, while remaining acceptable, in non-ideal patients the risk of 90-day perioperative
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43 death was almost four times higher than in ideal ones (4.5% vs 1.2%), and the fact that
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45 resection can be performed without excessive early mortality should not be understood as
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47 if the long-term survival would be as good as in optimal candidates.
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56 The analysis in all resected patients (ideal and non-ideal) showed that CSPH and bilirubin
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58 >1 mg/dl were not associated with mortality if taken separately, while their association
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3 conditioned a worse prognosis. Multivariate analyses were performed using both a more
4 sensitive (platelets $<100,000/\text{mm}^3$ or evidence of varices/splenomegaly) and a more
5 accurate definition of CSPH (platelets $<100,000/\text{mm}^3$ and evidence of
6 varices/splenomegaly). Even though not significant in both models, CSPH was shown to
7 increase the hazard ratio (from 1.17 to 1.24) with a trend toward significance (p from 0.12
8 to 0.08) moving from the first to the second analysis. Instead, multivariate models in non-
9 ideal candidates (resected and non-resected) exposed CSPH as a negative prognostic
10 factor, stressing once more the significant impact of CSPH on prognosis in cirrhotic
11 patients.
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25 Certainly, different methods of defining CSPH (hepatic vein pressure gradient vs surrogate
26 markers) and different study designs fuel the debate about the role of CSPH. A Japanese
27 study (6) confirmed the impact of portal hypertension on long-term outcome after
28 resection, while Italian studies reporting their data (3) or using propensity-score matching
29 (4) suggested a lack of impact. Single center data should be carefully assessed in order to
30 ensure that postoperative mortality and survival rates reflect the figures observed in
31 referral centers. In addition, propensity score studies need to be validated to avoid the flaw
32 due to the exclusion of outliers that are indeed detected by the assessment of the key
33 parameter, which in liver resection may be portal hypertension. This relevant role of CSPH
34 is reinforced by a recent Barcelona (7) and two Asian meta-analyses (8,9).
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49 Interestingly, the study by Roayaie *et al* raises the value of bilirubin >1 mg/dl for a better
50 stratification of the patients classified as having CSPH using suboptimal definitions in
51 comparison with hepatic vein catheterization. Bilirubin role was identified in the seminal
52 study in Barcelona and is included in guidelines. Such 'breakpoint' is frequently dismissed,
53 yet it appears to sense the surgical risk of non-ideal candidates as per CSPH while serving
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3 to predict the survival of resected patients. Bilirubin is also a covariate of the Model for
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5 End-stage Liver Disease (MELD) score, which is a reliable predictor of postoperative liver
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7 failure if higher than 10 (4).
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11 Roayaie *et al* report a 15% mortality risk reduction in ablated patients as compared to
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13 resected ones, thus endorsing the recommendation to give priority to ablation in patients
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15 with small tumors that can be effectively and safely ablated. As expected, non-ideal
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17 patients who were transplanted had the best outcome. This reinforces the role of
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19 transplantation in guidelines: first-line treatment for non-ideal resection candidates fulfilling
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21 criteria for transplant. Long-term survival was better with resection than with transarterial
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23 therapies, but as mentioned before, it is impossible to ascertain whether the driver for an
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25 improved outcome was surgery by itself or the bias introduced by clinical decisions and/or
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27 available expertise in non-surgical options.
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34 After all, Roayaie's paper basically argues on how guidelines should be used in an
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36 individual patient who could undergo different treatments, and whether the principle should
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38 be endorsed that all 'curative' options must be explored before relying on 'palliative' ones.
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40 This suggestion tends to privilege initial activity (initial cure with risk of recurrence) rather
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42 than long-term survival which is the real goal. We believe that guidelines constitute a
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44 useful framework in which clinicians' decisions can be tested, especially for patients with a
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46 well-defined profile. They help protecting from overtly incorrect choices, safeguarding
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48 health system quality. Instead, patients with characteristics that are not within the strict
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50 recommendation require the assessment by experts, who may make non-ideal decisions
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52 on non-ideal patients but always consider individual and general factors favoring either
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54 one of the available treatments (Table 1). In such perspective, guidelines are like the
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56 fundamental rules for playing a sport, whose ignorance does not allow admission to
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3 practice. However, as in professional sports where the bare application of fundamentals
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5 does not forcibly imply to win the game, the too rigid interpretation of guidelines could stop
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7 experimenting new potentially successful strategies and possibly preclude some patients
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9 from benefiting from more effective treatments chosen on expert judgment. Thereby,
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11 guidelines expose the current recommended practice and data such as those provided by
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13 Roayaie *et al* may open the door to prospective and robust investigations in the area of
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15 surgical resection. These may result in data leading to modify the current guidelines or just
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17 reinforce them. In the absence of such clarifying information, the debate will continue.
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Table 1. Factors concurring to select treatment for hepatocellular carcinoma confined to the liver.

Drivers of Treatment Selection	In favor of RESECTION	In favor of TRANSPLANTATION	In favor of ABLATION	In favor of TRANSARTERIAL THERAPIES
Patient				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Age ▪ Performance Status ▪ Comorbidities 	<p>≤ 75 years 0 absent / minor</p>	<p>≤ 70 years any grade (high MELD) absent</p>	<p>no limit 0 major</p>	<p>no limit 0 major</p>
Tumor				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Size ▪ Number ▪ Location within liver 	<p>≥ 3 cm single peripheral / exophytic growth</p>	<p>single ≤ 5 cm up to 3 nodules ≤ 3 cm any site</p>	<p>≤ 3 cm up to 3 nodules central, far from vessels, bile tract and viscera</p>	<p>any size large / multinodular central</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vascular invasion (branch / segment) ▪ Satellites 	<p>not relevant by some not relevant only in anatomic resections</p>	<p>absent not counted when < 1 cm</p>	<p>absent absent</p>	<p>not relevant by some not relevant</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Alpha-fetoprotein ▪ Perceived anti-tumor efficacy 	<p>the lower the better high</p>	<p>< 1,000 ng/ml very high</p>	<p>any level high</p>	<p>any level moderate</p>
Liver Disease				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quality of parenchyma ▪ Portal hypertension ▪ Bilirubin (NV ≤ 1 mg/dl) ▪ MELD score 	<p>non-cirrhotic absent / mild normal very low</p>	<p>cirrhotic any degree any level any value</p>	<p>cirrhotic any degree normal / ≤ 2 x NV low</p>	<p>cirrhotic any degree normal / ≤ 2 x NV low</p>
Local Factors				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specialized surgical expertise ▪ Interventional non-surgical expertise ▪ Organ donation rate ▪ Competition with non-HCC patients on transplant waiting-list 	<p>available not available low high</p>	<p>available not relevant high low</p>	<p>not available available low high</p>	<p>not available available low high</p>

Abbreviations: MELD, Model for End-stage Liver Disease; NV, normal value; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma