Letter to the Editor

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Non-invasive tests for evaluating treatment response in NAFLD

To the Editor:

We read with great interest the intriguing and clinically very relevant study by Rinella *et al.,* wherein they used non-invasive tests (NITs) to evaluate the therapeutic response to obeticholic acid (OCA).[1] The study is based on the 18-month interim results from the phase III REGENERATE trial, in which 931 patients with non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) and fibrosis stage F2 or F3 were randomized to receive placebo or two different OCA doses. Alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST) and gamma-glutamyltransferase as well as fibrosis scores, including FIB-4, enhanced liver fibrosis (ELF), FibroMeter, FibroTest and FibroScan-AST score, were determined and vibration-controlled transient elastography (VCTE) was assessed during the study period of 18 months. A reduction of aminotransferases, the different fibrosis scores and VCTE was observed in OCA- compared to placebo-treated patients. AST and ALT reduction was most evident in patients with improvement of fibrosis ≥1 stage. Aminotransferase levels, however, also improved in OCA-treated patients with no change or even with worsening in fibrosis stage, suggesting that these changes are unrelated to fibrosis. This is in line with a previous study showing that aminotransferases decrease with improvement of histological disease activity in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), but do not significantly correlate with worsening of NAFLD.[2]

In Rinella *et al.*'s study, ELF score changes were more pronounced in patients with fibrosis worsening than with improvement, whereas FIB-4 changes equally reflected fibrosis worsening and improvement.[1] The FIB-4 score was developed to rule-in or -out advanced fibrosis by using two cut-off values.[3] However, a long-term follow-up study of NAFLD patients revealed that changes of FIB-4 are only weakly associated with fibrosis progression in NAFLD.[4] The ELF score considers markers of extracellular matrix remodeling and revealed a high diagnostic performance for the detection of advanced fibrosis in NAFLD.[3]

An early NIT, which detects early signs of fibrogenesis, remains to be established. We suggest that the M30 cell death biomarker, which measures caspase-cleaved cytokeratin-18 (CK-18) fragments after their release from apoptotic hepatocytes, might be very useful to detect fibrosis changes in response to treatment. Studies in HCV-mediated liver damage revealed that M30 is a sensitive NIT that can already be elevated in patients with normal aminotransferase levels but fibrotic liver injury.[5,6] Moreover, patients with NAFLD and low FIB-4, who would not be considered for further risk stratification according to current guidelines, might benefit from serological M30 detection. We have very recently observed in a NAFLD cohort (n = 103) that patients with low FIB-4 but elevated M30 levels had NASH in the majority of cases, from which more than half showed histological signs of fibrosis (43% with F2/F3 fibrosis). Since inflammation and apoptotic liver injury triggers fibrogenesis, M30 levels significantly correlate with liver fibrosis.[7–10] Indeed, CK-18 cleavage is an early event in hepatocyte apoptosis that is causally linked to stellate cell activation and fibrogenesis. Although M30 is not primarily a fibrosis marker, its level encompasses a biological plausibility that should be useful for monitoring therapeutic effects on fibrosis. Rinella *et al.* found a robust dose-dependent reduction of M30 levels in OCA-compared to placebo-treated patients with NASH at month 18. Despite the important findings, however, no information was provided on M30 levels at different time points in the course of treatment with respect to changes in the fibrosis stage. With regard to the close correlation of M30 with liver injury and fibrogenesis, it would be interesting to know how this biomarker reflects fibrosis progression or regression, as shown for other NITs.

Since apoptosis is an early event in the pathogenesis of NAFLD and fibrosis development,[7] the M30 marker might detect a broader range of disease severity and therefore might represent a suitable NIT for monitoring the NAFLD course. M30 is currently used in various clinical studies evaluating novel drugs in NAFLD. Further data from these trials are required to evaluate the suitability of M30, as a single marker or in combination with other parameters, for monitoring disease progression and treatment response in NAFLD.

Heike Bantel[1,*]
Klaus Schulze-Osthoff[2]
[1]*Department of Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Endocrinology, Hannover Medical School, Hannover, Germany*
[2]*Interfaculty Institute of Biochemistry, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany*
[*]Corresponding author. Address: Department of Gastroenterology, Hepatology and Endocrinology, Hannover Medical School, Hannover, Germany.
E-mail address: Bantel.Heike@mh-hannover.de (H. Bantel)

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Authors' contributions

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Author names in bold designate shared co-first authorship

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