Pattern of Overexpression of HER-2 Biomarker in Breast Cancers in South East Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Purpose: To determine the prevalence of Her-2 overexpression in breast cancer and its features. Second highlight what is new and applicable in our setting.

Material and methods: Data of all immunohistochemically typed blocks for breast cancer was pulled and only those negative for Estrogen receptor (ER), progesterone receptor (PgR) and Her 2 neu receptor (HER-2) amplification positive were used.

Results: A total of 417 patients with Invasive Ductal Carcinoma of the breast participated, because we have an unscreened population with poor mammography screening penetrance, most cases came in as invasive ductal carcinoma. Majority were females 98.3%. More than half of respondents 60.2% were between 31 and 50 years old (Table 1). The mean age was 44.6 ± 6.4 years. Ten were HER-2 type making up 2.4% (table 2). All of them were females (Table 3). Majority 7 (70%) were found in the 41-50 years age group (Table 4). Six (6) had stage 3 disease while 4 (40%) had clinically detectable metastases mostly to the lungs with two also having central nervous system involvement in addition. Trastuzumab was recommended but only 3 (30%) could afford it and are still alive 2 years post treatment with a two having stage 2 disease and one with stage 3 disease, while the rest 6 had paclitaxel neoadjuvant chemotherapy without trastuzumab and half has passed away within 24 months leaving only 3 with terminal disease and central nervous system metastases. Conclusion: Most presented late at stage 3 or 4 as premenopausal, and survival was poor at 59% of stage 3. Trastuzumab was extremely beneficial where it was affordable.

Keywords: Breast Cancer, (HER-2), Estrogen receptor (ER), tumors.

**INTRODUCTION**

The HER2-array subtype of breast cancer refers to the larger group of hormone receptor–negative (low expression of Estrogen Receptor and related genes by array) tumors identified by complete immunostaining for HER2 overexpression or FISH for excess gene copy number [1]. Most tumors that are clinically HER2-positive will fall within the HER2-array subtype. However, other tumors that are HER2 positive by immunohistochemistry or FISH will also overexpress hormone receptors, and most of these tumors fall within the luminal subtypes rather than the HER2-array subtype [2-4]. In this section, we are referring only to the HER2-array subtype, which does not express hormone receptors. The HER2-array tumors are also characterized by overexpression of other genes in the ERBB2 amplicon such as GRB7 [5]. Like basal-like tumors, the HER2-array subtype tumors have a high proportion, 40% to 80%, of TP53 mutations, and are significantly more likely to be grade 3 than luminal a tumors [1, 6].

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Applying immunohistochemical methods for the assessment of sections of breast tumours, using antibodies to the Her-2/neu protein, allows investigation of tumours for overexpression of the protein, and relating protein expression to tumour prognosis [7]. Her-2/neu overexpression is amplified in 20–25% of primary breast cancers and has been associated with poor prognosis [8]. The association between Her-2/neu amplification and poor prognosis was first determined in 1987 by Slamon and co-workers [8]. Amplification of Her-2/neu gene was shown to strongly correlate with time of relapse and overall survival. Her-2/neu status is also important for selecting those with metastasis for therapy with trastuzumab (Herceptin) [9].

The use of both internal and external quality control ensured reproducibility and reliability in the procedure.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Four hundred seventeen cases of breast cancer seen over a period of 3 years from January 2014 to December 2016 were routinely tested for estrogen and progesterone positivity as well as Her-2 positivity.

The scoring was according to the 2013 ASCO/CAP recommendation for Her-2/neu scoring [10]. The Staining Pattern Score for Her-2/neu Staining Assessment are as below:

No membrane staining is observed = 0 negative

Partial staining of the membrane in any proportion of the cancer cells = 1 + Negative

Weak to moderate complete staining of the membrane, greater than 10% of cancer cells = 2 + Equivocal

Strong, complete staining of the membrane, greater than 10% of cancer cells = 3 + Positive with (normal epithelial elements and external controls). FISH was used to confirm the positive cases.

Recruited Patients gave their consent to use their tissue blocks for this study. An approval was first secured from the relevant to meet the ethical guidelines to enable the study to be carried out. Results of these samples were and slides were collated and subsequently analyzed.

The sample size population was 500 patients was obtained but due to improper age documentations, 83 were dropped. Inclusive criteria are:

1. Established breast cancer diagnosis whose diagnosis has been verified by at least two pathologist.
2. Consent from patients to use their tissue blocks for the study as well as proper documentation of patient’s details including age.

3. Those who were typed had their tissue blocks obtained using rabbit monoclonal antibodies.

All monoclonal Antibodies used were procured as predilute ready to use and stored at a cold chain of 2–8°C until they were used for typing.

**Her-2/neu receptor description**

Her-2 receptor also known as (c-ERB-2) is a member of the epidermal growth factor (EGFR) family. It is a cell membrane surface bound tyrosine kinase and is normally involved in signal transduction pathways leading to cell growth and differentiation. Her-2/neu is a mouse monoclonal antibody derived from cell culture supernatant that is concentrated, dialysed, filter sterilized, and diluted in buffer pH 7.5, containing BSA and sodium azide as preservative. Storage is at 2–8°C. [11]. Quality controlled procedural steps involved in this typing includes:

1. Microtomy to produce 2–4 μm thick sections.
2. Heating at 64° for 2 h.
3. Heat epitope retrieval using citrate in a Bios SB pressure cooker at 100°C for 25 min.
4. Peroxidase blocker application for 5 min.
5. Application of primary Antibody 30 min.
6. Secondary Biotylated link 10 min.
7. Application of HRP label 10 min.
8. Application of DAB substrate chromogen 5 min.
9. Application of Hematoxylin counter staining 11 min.11–15

**RESULTS**

A total of 417 patients with Invasive Ductal Carcinoma of the breast participated, because we have an unscreened population with poor mammography screening penetrance, most cases came in as invasive ductal carcinoma. Majority were females 98.3%. More than half of respondents 60.2% were between 31 and 50 years old (Table 1). The mean age was 44.6 ± 6.4 years.

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DISCUSSION

Her-2 neu overexpression was found in a mere 2.4% and has never been reported in our immediate environment previously. Ukah et al., has reported a prevalence rate of 11.4% in an area quite close to our environment [12]. Other studies showed her-2 positivity in other parts of Nigeria to be 30.8% in Lagos [13]. Reports from other parts of Nigeria have shown values of 22.0%, 10.6%, 20.8% from Maiduguri (North-eastern Nigeria) [14], Nnewi (South-eastern Nigeria) 15 and Benin (Mid-western Nigeria) [16] respectively. We clearly had the lowest percentage most probably because we verified each report with a fluorescent in-situ hybridization method. Elsewhere in Accra Seshie et al., reported 25.5 her-2 positivity in a retrospective study done in Korle Bu Teaching Hospital Ghana [17]. The median age of presentation was the 41-50 years age group. The study by Sanni et al., found a mean age of presentation of 52+13 years13. However, there is no association of the HER2-array subtype with either age or race [12] and no association with known risk factors [18]. Human epidermal growth factor type 2 over-expressed breast cancer subtype was seen in 10.6% of cases, with a mean age of 45.8±11.7 years compared to the mean age of 46.3±12.3 years for all breast cancers [15].

All were females and the all had grade 111 tumours in keeping with its aggressiveness. Treatment with trastuzumab made a significant difference as all who were treated with trastuzumab survived 24 months unlike those who did not receive tarstuzumab with 50% mortality over 24 months.

The case has been made again for a good health insurance policy which will help screen our population to help discover these cases earlier. Availability of trastuzumab is clearly an indispensable addition to neoadjuvant chemotherapy which clearly helped our remission rate.

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CONCLUSION

Her-2/neu is a vital biomarker in the evaluation of breast cancer in our environment. The treatment with trastuzumab did make a significant difference in their survival. We have by this study established a baseline data for her 2 subtype of breast cancer going forward.

REFERENCES