

# Early Palliative Care for Hepatocellular Carcinoma in Real-world Clinical Practice

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## Background & Aims

- Current guidelines recommend early palliative care (EPC) for all patients with advanced cancer, and referring patients to interdisciplinary palliative care teams is considered optimal.<sup>1</sup>
- However, few reports have described the current situation of EPC for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).
- Here, we investigated **the severity of patients' symptoms and their attitudes to EPC at initiation of chemotherapy** (systemic chemotherapy or hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy [HAIC]) for HCC.

1. Ferrell BR, et al. Integration of palliative care into standard oncology care: American Society of Clinical Oncology Clinical Practice Guideline Update. J Clin Oncol. 2017; 35: 96–112.

## Methods

### Patients and assessment

- We retrospectively analyzed 112 patients with HCC who started systemic chemotherapy or HAIC between October 2015 and September 2022.
- We used a questionnaire before and after starting chemotherapy to assess the patients' symptoms and willingness to contact the palliative care team in our hospital.

### Endpoints

- Severity of symptoms before starting chemotherapy
- Severity of symptoms at 3 months after starting chemotherapy
- Patients' willingness to receive EPC at initiation of chemotherapy
- Frequency and timing of referral to palliative care team

### Statistics

- Continuous data were shown as median [IQR] or mean  $\pm$  SD.
- McNemar test and paired t-test were used to compare categorical data and continuous data, respectively.
- Figure 1 was generated with Kaplan-Meier method.

## Results

### 1. Baseline characteristics (Table 1)

- Median age was 72 years and 84 patients (75%) were male.
- 59 (52.7%) and 53 (47.3%) patients received systemic chemotherapy and cisplatin-HAIC, respectively. Most common 1st-line systemic chemotherapy was lenvatinib (N = 28), followed by sorafenib (N = 17) and atezolizumab + bevacizumab (N = 14).
- 58 (51.8%) patients had died by October, 2022, and the median overall survival was 458 days.

TABLE 1 | Baseline Characteristics

	Systemic chemo (N = 59)	HAIC (N = 53)	All (N = 112)
Age	73 [68.5–79]	72 [65–77]	72 [67–77.3]
Sex (male/female)	45 / 14	39 / 14	84 / 28
Etiology of liver disease (HBV/HCV/ALC/NAFLD/others)	10 / 19 / 12 / 10 / 8	5 / 13 / 25 / 6 / 4	15 / 32 / 37 / 16 / 12
Performance status (0/1)	48 / 11	34 / 19	82 / 30
Child-Pugh score	6 [5–6]	8 [7–9]	6 [5–7]
BCLC stage (A/B/C)	2 / 35 / 22	6 / 26 / 21	8 / 61 / 43
Macrovascular invasion	8 (13.6%)	18 (34.0%)	26 (23.2%)
Extrahepatic metastasis	18 (30.5%)	5 (9.4%)	23 (20.5%)

### 2. Severity of patients' symptoms before and 3 months after starting chemotherapy

- At baseline, 25 (22.3%) and 15 (13.4%) patients had moderate (NRS 4–6) and severe (NRS  $\geq$ 7) symptoms, respectively.
- Among 48 patients who answered the same questionnaire at 3 months, 11 (22.9%) and 13 (27.1%) patients had moderate and severe symptoms, respectively.
- The severity of shortness of breath, nausea, lack of appetite, drowsy, fatigue, and proportion of having moderate/severe symptoms were **significantly worse at 3 months than the baseline values** (Table 2).

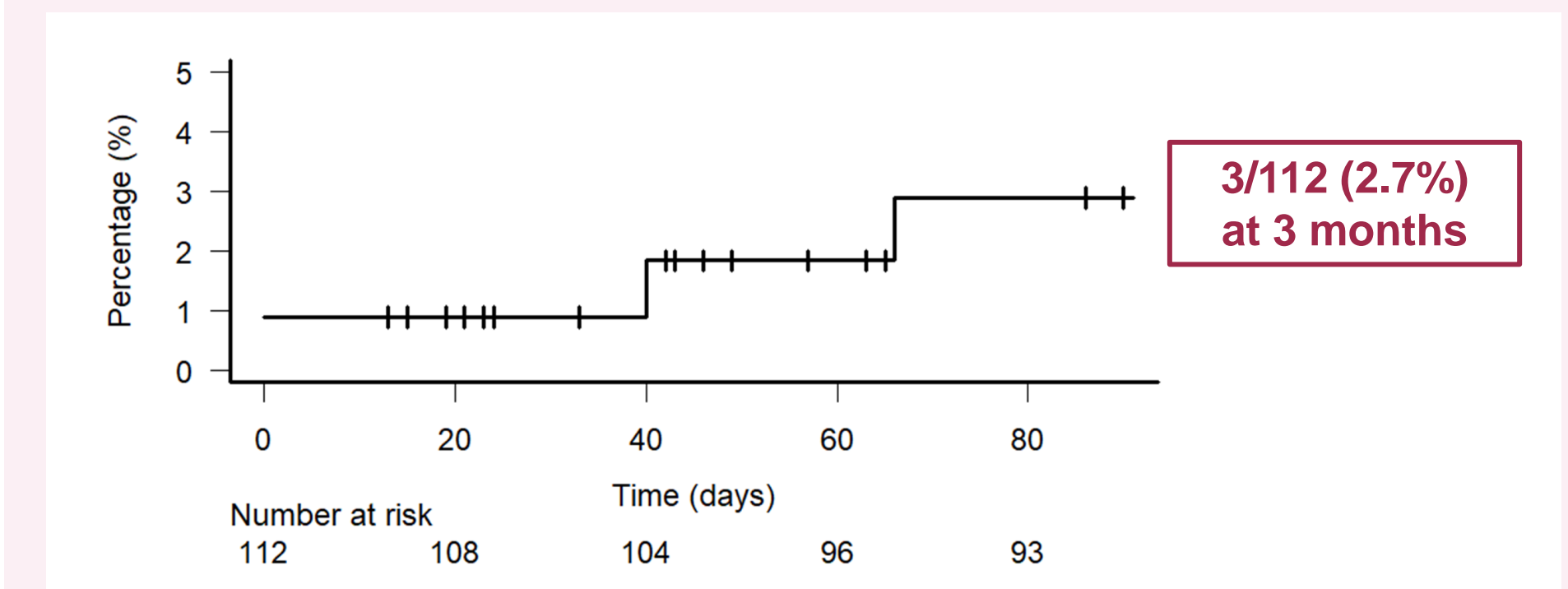
TABLE 2 | Numerical rating scale (0–10) of patients' symptoms

	Baseline	At 3 months	P value
Pain	0.8 $\pm$ 1.5	1.4 $\pm$ 2.0	0.096
Shortness of breath	0.5 $\pm$ 1.3	1.3 $\pm$ 2.4	0.014*
Nausea	0.1 $\pm$ 0.4	0.8 $\pm$ 2.1	0.023*
Lack of appetite	0.9 $\pm$ 1.9	2.3 $\pm$ 3.2	0.003*
Drowsy (sleepy)	1.0 $\pm$ 1.7	1.8 $\pm$ 2.4	0.026*
Fatigue (tiredness)	0.9 $\pm$ 1.4	1.9 $\pm$ 2.5	0.008*
Numbness or tingling	0.4 $\pm$ 1.3	0.6 $\pm$ 1.5	0.449
Emotional distress	1.5 $\pm$ 2.4	2.1 $\pm$ 2.6	0.189
Interference in daily life due to emotional distress	1.0 $\pm$ 1.9	1.5 $\pm$ 2.5	0.193
Percentage of having moderate or severe symptoms (NRS $\geq$ 4)	13 / 48 (27.1%)	24 / 48 (50%)	0.010*
Percentage of having severe symptoms (NRS $\geq$ 7)	6 / 48 (12.5%)	13 / 48 (27.1%)	0.096

### 3. Patients' willingness and receiving rate of EPC

- Before starting chemotherapy, **only 2 (1.8%) patients answered that they wanted to contact the palliative care team.**
- **Only 3 (2.7%) patients received interdisciplinary palliative care** by the team within 3 months after starting chemotherapy (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 | Cumulative incidence of referral to palliative care team



## Conclusion

- ✓ About 1/3 of patients had moderate or severe symptoms when they started chemotherapy for HCC; however, only 1.8% of patients desired early palliative care (EPC).
- ✓ Education of both patients and health care providers will be needed to improve the integration of EPC for HCC.

## Conflict of Interests

The presenters have nothing to disclose