RESEARCH LETTER

Tuberculosis through the rose tinted spectacles of the EBUS endoscopist: be aware of the bias

I read with interest the article on the utility of endobronchial ultrasound-guided transbronchial needle aspiration (EBUS-TBNA) in tuberculous intrathoracic lymphadenopathy by Navani et al.1

EBUS-TBNA has been validated for the assessment of mediastinal nodes in lung cancer2 and to obtain a diagnosis in (presumed) centrally located lung cancer3 or sarcoidosis.4 In addition to a recent report,5 the study by Navani et al adds to the evidence for the use of EBUS-TBNA in cases of presumed tuberculous lymphadenitis. A sensitivity of 94% is reported, which might be too optimistic.

First, patients were selected in a peculiar way. The authors reviewed the files of all EBUS endoscopies and retrospectively selected those cases in which tuberculosis was finally found. Unfortunately, there is no information on how the patients were selected beforehand. The reported figure gives an indication of the sensitivity of EBUS in this particular setting; however, it does not give an answer to the more relevant question about the sensitivity of EBUS-TBNA for all cases in whom tuberculous lymphadenitis is suspected. There were potentially many patients with tuberculous intrathoracic lymphadenitis who were not sent for EBUS.

Second, the use of assessment tools (ie, EBUS) only in patients having the condition leads to an overestimation of sensitivity. Since there is no remedy for the overestimation in this series, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Finally, three of the five pathology grades are grouped as compatible with tuberculosis. Two of these, epithelioid granulomas without caseation and necrosis are primarily compatible with sarcoidosis and cancer rather than tuberculosis,6 despite suggestive symptomaticatology or an (undefined) response to medication. A more conservative analysis combining strict pathological and microbiological criteria would be informative.

Therefore, it might be appropriate to say that for tuberculous lymphadenitis, the sensitivity of EBUS is at the most 94%. Although I recognise the importance of EBUS, my reflections should serve as a reminder to doctors to exercise caution when their diagnosis of tuberculosis is based on the idea that the sensitivity of EBUS is 94% and that a negative EBUS excludes the disease.

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Competing interests None.
Contributors KT is the sole contributor.
Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.
Accepted 11 October 2011
Published Online First 18 November 2011

doi:10.1136/thoraxjnl-2011-201149

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Authors’ response

We thank Dr Young for his comments on the recent UKLS position statement.1 We are aware of the current studies on chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer. However, there is no validated lung cancer risk model in the UK which currently incorporates dynamic lung volumes that could be used in the UKLS trial. All the recruited individuals will have spirometry at the time that they are recruited into the UKLS trial, thus data will be available for developing the Liverpool Lung Project risk model.2 3 We do not wish to focus on COPD risk groups for the pilot UKLS trial.

Smoking is the over-riding risk factor in lung cancer. Our measurements will provide further information concerning the potential for COPD as a useful factor in selecting populations that may benefit from screening. We do not have population-based spirometry in the UK to screen populations and there is an issue over the diagnostic crossover between COPD and asthma.

The search for molecular biomarkers and susceptibility genes, which may be used in early detection programmes, has proved challenging; although there are a number of promising candidates,4 5 none, to date, has been validated to a level where they can be used in an early lung cancer clinical trial.

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Funding National Institute for Health Research Health Technology Assessment.

Patient consent Obtained.

Ethics approval The UKLS trial has received Ethical Approval
Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; internally peer reviewed.
Accepted 20 July 2011
Published Online First 13 September 2011

doi:10.1136/thoraxjnl-2011-200822

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CT screening for lung cancer

We read with interest the recent opinion piece by Field et al14 outlining plans for a CT screening trial in the United Kingdom (the
CT scan arm with nodule management

Spirometry and gene-based risk
‘High risk’ vs ‘Low risk’

No CT scan arm (usual care)

Spirometry and gene-based risk
‘High risk’ vs ‘Low risk’

Follow-up over years—Lung cancer detection rate, Lung cancer survival rate and cost-effectiveness, according to risk profile

Compare CT-based lung cancer detection and survival rates based on genes and spirometry

Compare lung cancer detection and survival rates for low risk in the CT arm with those in the no CT arm stratified by risk

Figure 1 Proposed study design to assess cost-effectiveness in the UK Lung Screen using spirometry and gene-based risk stratification to optimise lung cancer detection rate. LLP, Liverpool Lung Project model.

The UK Lung Screen team in their positional statement outlined the issues to be explored by the trial on CT screening for lung cancer. Although it seems to be a large, well-planned study, we believe that there are some shortcomings in this study that may undermine its significance. There are several other aspects of CT screening that need to be investigated in order to determine the suitability of the screening and thus guide a national programme. The additional investigation areas may include:

1. Studying the number of unnecessary lung biopsies, invasive procedures and surgeries due to cancer screening and the morbidity and mortality caused by these procedures.

2. The risk of development of radiation-induced malignancy, both in patients undergoing routine yearly screening and in those subjected to serial CT scans for suspicious lesions. Some studies have shown significant risk of development of radiation-induced malignancies.

3. Smoking abstinence behaviour in people undergoing screening. Concerns have been raised regarding smokers having a negative result on CT screening believing that they can continue smoking without any increased risk of dying from lung cancer. Such behaviour can expose them to other potentially fatal smoking-related diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and other malignancies.

4. Emotional and psychological effects of false positive results, which can significantly impair the life of the individual. Moreover, investigators are planning to include only those cases with >5% risk of