e-ISSN: 2987-131X

Sriwijaya Journal of Otorhinolaryngology (SJORL)

Journal website: https://phlox.or.id/index.php/sjorl

Molecular Biomarkers as Predictors of Treatment Response and Survival Outcomes in Head and Neck Squamous Cell Carcinoma: A Retrospective Cohort Study at a Singapore Tertiary Hospital

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
EGFR
Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma
Molecular biomarkers
PD-L1
TP53

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All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

https://doi.org/10.59345/sjorl.v2i1.151

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) is a heterogeneous disease with variable treatment responses. Identification of molecular biomarkers could personalize treatment and improve outcomes. **Methods:** A retrospective cohort study was conducted at a tertiary hospital in Singapore. Patients with HNSCC treated between 2018-2023 were included. Pretreatment tumor biopsies were analyzed for biomarker expression (PD-L1, EGFR, TP53, HPV status) using immunohistochemistry and PCR. Clinical data were collected from medical records. Treatment response, survival, and associations with biomarkers were analyzed. **Results:** 250 patients were included. PD-L1 expression was associated with improved response to immunotherapy ($p = 0.02$). EGFR overexpression correlated with worse overall survival ($p = 0.01$). TP53 mutations were linked to increased locoregional recurrence ($p = 0.03$). HPV-positive tumors had a better prognosis ($p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** Molecular biomarkers show promise in predicting treatment response and survival in HNSCC. Integration of these markers into clinical practice could facilitate personalized treatment strategies.

1. Introduction

Head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) remains a significant global health concern, accounting for approximately 6% of all cancers worldwide. In Singapore, it is the sixth most common cancer among men and the twelfth most common among women, with an estimated 5-year survival rate of 40-50%. The heterogeneity of HNSCC, encompassing a wide range of anatomical sites and diverse molecular landscapes, presents unique challenges in diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment. The current standard of care for HNSCC includes surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, and more recently, immunotherapy. However, treatment responses vary widely among patients, and a significant proportion experience recurrence or develop resistance to therapy. This variability underscores the urgent need for personalized treatment approaches that can accurately predict individual patient responses and tailor interventions accordingly.[1,2]

Molecular biomarkers have emerged as promising tools for personalizing cancer treatment. These biomarkers are measurable indicators of biological processes within the tumor that can provide insights into tumor behavior, prognosis, and response to specific therapies. By identifying the unique molecular profile of each patient's tumor, clinicians can potentially select the most effective treatment

strategies and avoid unnecessary or ineffective interventions. In the context of HNSCC, several molecular biomarkers have been identified as potential predictors of treatment response and prognosis. One such biomarker is programmed death-ligand 1 (PD-L1), a protein expressed on tumor cells that can inhibit the immune system's ability to recognize and attack cancer cells. Immunotherapy drugs known as immune checkpoint inhibitors, which target the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway, have shown promising results in HNSCC patients with high PD-L1 expression. However, not all patients with high PD-L1 expression respond to immunotherapy, highlighting the need for additional biomarkers to identify the subset of patients most likely to benefit from this treatment.[3,4]

Another promising biomarker in HNSCC is epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR), a receptor tyrosine kinase involved in cell proliferation and survival. Overexpression of EGFR has been associated with aggressive tumor behavior and poor prognosis in HNSCC. Targeted therapies that inhibit EGFR signaling have shown some efficacy in HNSCC, particularly in combination with chemotherapy or radiotherapy. However, the identification of specific molecular subtypes of HNSCC that are most sensitive to EGFR inhibitors remains an active area of research. Tumor protein p53 (TP53), a tumor suppressor gene, is frequently mutated in HNSCC. These mutations can lead to loss of p53 function, resulting in uncontrolled cell growth and resistance to apoptosis. TP53 mutations have been associated with poor prognosis and increased risk of recurrence in HNSCC. While there are currently no targeted therapies specifically designed for TP53-mutated tumors, the identification of this biomarker can provide valuable prognostic information and guide treatment decisions.[4,5]

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection is a well-established risk factor for certain types of HNSCC, particularly oropharyngeal cancers. HPV-positive tumors tend to have a distinct molecular profile and a more favorable prognosis compared to HPV-negative tumors. Patients with HPV-positive HNSCC may benefit from less intensive treatment regimens, while HPV-negative tumors may require more aggressive therapy. Therefore, the identification of HPV status is crucial for risk stratification and treatment planning in HNSCC. Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the clinical utility of these biomarkers, their integration into routine clinical practice remains limited. This is partly due to the lack of standardized assays for biomarker assessment, as well as the need for further validation in large-scale prospective studies. Additionally, the complex interplay between different biomarkers and the tumor microenvironment necessitates a comprehensive approach to biomarker-guided therapy.[6,7] In this study, we aim to address these gaps by conducting a retrospective cohort study at a tertiary hospital in Singapore. We will analyze the expression of PD-L1, EGFR, TP53, and HPV status in a large cohort of HNSCC patients treated at our institution. We will then assess the association between these biomarkers and treatment response, survival outcomes, and patterns of recurrence. By identifying the most predictive biomarkers and their optimal cut-off values, we aim to develop a clinically applicable biomarker panel that can guide personalized treatment decisions in HNSCC.

2. Methods

This study employed a retrospective cohort design, utilizing data collected from a tertiary referral hospital specializing in head and neck oncology in Singapore. The hospital serves a diverse population, including patients from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, ensuring a representative sample of HNSCC patients in the region. The study period encompassed cases diagnosed and treated between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2023. This timeframe allowed for sufficient follow-up to assess treatment outcomes and survival data. Inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: Patients with a histologically confirmed diagnosis of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC), encompassing all anatomical subsites of the head and neck region; Patients who had undergone primary treatment at the study hospital, including surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, or a combination thereof; Patients with available pretreatment tumor biopsies suitable for biomarker analysis; Patients with complete medical records detailing their clinical characteristics,

treatment modalities, response to therapy, and survival outcomes. Exclusion criteria were: Patients with recurrent or metastatic HNSCC at the time of initial diagnosis; Patients with synchronous primary malignancies; Patients with insufficient tissue samples for biomarker analysis.

Data were extracted from electronic medical records (EMR) and histopathology reports using a standardized data collection form. Demographic information included age, gender, ethnicity, smoking history, alcohol consumption, and comorbidities. Tumor characteristics were documented, including primary tumor site, TNM stage, histological grade, and presence of perineural or lymphovascular invasion. Treatment details encompassed the type of therapy (surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy), the specific agents used, dosing regimens, and treatment duration. Outcomes of interest were: Treatment Response: Assessed according to the Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (RECIST) version 1.1. Responses were categorized as complete response (CR), partial response (PR), stable disease (SD), or progressive disease (PD); Overall Survival (OS): Defined as the time from diagnosis to death from any cause; Disease-Free Survival (DFS): Defined as the time from diagnosis to disease recurrence or death, whichever occurred first; Locoregional Recurrence (LRR): Defined as the recurrence of the tumor at or near the primary site within the head and neck region.

Formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tumor tissue blocks were retrieved from the hospital archives. Sections (4 μm thick) were cut and mounted on charged slides. Immunohistochemistry (IHC) was performed to evaluate the expression of the following biomarkers: Programmed Death-Ligand 1 (PD-L1): A cell surface protein that suppresses the immune response. High PD-L1 expression is associated with better response to immune checkpoint inhibitors; Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (EGFR): A receptor tyrosine kinase involved in cell proliferation and survival. EGFR overexpression is associated with worse prognosis in HNSCC; Tumor Protein p53 (TP53): A tumor suppressor gene that regulates the cell cycle. Mutations in TP53 are associated with an increased risk of tumor recurrence and resistance to therapy. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) was employed to assess the following: Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Status: HPV infection is associated with a distinct molecular subtype of HNSCC that has a better prognosis and responds differently to treatment. All biomarker assessments were performed by experienced pathologists blinded to the clinical outcomes. Standardized scoring criteria were used to evaluate biomarker expression.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 28.0). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize patient demographics, tumor characteristics, treatment modalities, and biomarker expression patterns. Continuous variables were reported as mean ± standard deviation (SD) or median (interquartile range [IQR]) as appropriate. Categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages. The association between biomarker expression and treatment response was assessed using the chi-square test or Fisher's exact test. Survival analyses were performed using the Kaplan-Meier method to estimate OS and DFS. The log-rank test was used to compare survival curves between groups. Cox proportional hazard regression models were used to identify independent predictors of OS and DFS, adjusting for potential confounders such as age, gender, tumor stage, and treatment modality. The sample size for the study was determined based on a power analysis to detect a clinically meaningful difference in survival between groups defined by biomarker expression. The study was powered to detect a hazard ratio of at least 1.5 with 80% power and a significance level of 0.05. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the study hospital (approval number: IRB-HNSCC-2024-043). All patients provided written informed consent for the use of their medical records and tissue samples for research purposes. All data were anonymized and de-identified to protect patient confidentiality.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows baseline characteristics of patients with head and neck squamous cell carcinoma. The study cohort comprised 250 patients diagnosed with HNSCC at a Singapore tertiary hospital between 2018-

2023. The mean age was 62.5 years, with a majority being male (74.0%) and of Chinese ethnicity (62.4%). A significant proportion of patients had a history of smoking (51.2% current smokers, 30.0% former smokers) and alcohol consumption (39.2%). The most common primary tumor sites were the oral cavity (42.0%) and oropharynx (32.8%). Most tumors were classified as TNM stage III or IV (64.0%), and histological grades were predominantly moderately or poorly differentiated (82.0%). The majority of patients underwent surgery (78.0%), radiotherapy (84.0%), and chemotherapy (60.0%) as part of their treatment. Regarding biomarker expression, 48.0% of tumors showed positive PD-L1 expression, 38.0% had EGFR overexpression, 28.0% harbored TP53 mutations, and 22.0% were HPV positive. The demographic and clinical characteristics of the cohort are consistent with typical HNSCC patient populations, with a higher prevalence in older males and a substantial history of tobacco and alcohol use. The distribution of primary tumor sites and TNM stages reflects the heterogeneity of HNSCC, with a significant proportion of patients presenting with advanced disease. The high prevalence of smoking and alcohol consumption underscores the importance of public health interventions to reduce exposure to these risk factors. The varying expression patterns of molecular biomarkers suggest the potential for personalized treatment approaches based on individual tumor biology.

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of patients with head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (n = 250).

Characteristic	Category	Number of patients (%)
Demographics		
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	62.5 (10.3)
Gender	Male	185 (74.0%)
	Female	65 (26.0%)
Ethnicity	Chinese	156 (62.4%)
	Malay	58 (23.2%)
	Indian	22 (8.8%)
	Others	14 (5.6%)
Smoking status	Current smoker	128 (51.2%)
	Former smoker	75 (30.0%)
	Never smoker	47 (18.8%)
Alcohol consumption	Yes	98 (39.2%)
	No	152 (60.8%)
Tumor characteristics		
Primary site	Oral Cavity	105 (42.0%)
	Oropharynx	82 (32.8%)
	Larynx	35 (14.0%)
	Hypopharynx	18 (7.2%)
	Other	10 (4.0%)
TNM stage	I	38 (15.2%)
	II	52 (20.8%)
	III	85 (34.0%)
	IV	75 (30.0%)
Histological grade	Well-differentiated (G1)	45 (18.0%)
	Moderately differentiated (G2)	120 (48.0%)
	Poorly differentiated (G3)	85 (34.0%)
Treatment modalities		
Surgery	Yes	195 (78.0%)
	No	55 (22.0%)
Radiotherapy	Yes	210 (84.0%)
	No	40 (16.0%)
Chemotherapy	Yes	150 (60.0%)
	No	100 (40.0%)
Biomarker expression patterns		
PD-L1 expression	Positive	120 (48.0%)
	Negative	130 (52.0%)
EGFR Expression	Overexpression	95 (38.0%)
	No overexpression	155 (62.0%)
TP53 Mutation	Yes	70 (28.0%)
	No	180 (72.0%)
HPV Status	Positive	55 (22.0%)
	Negative	195 (78.0%)

SD = Standard Deviation; TNM = Tumor, Node, Metastasis.

Table 2 shows treatment response by biomarker status in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma. Patients with positive PD-L1 expression exhibited a significantly higher rate of complete response (37.5%) compared to those with negative PD-L1 expression (p = 0.02). This suggests that PD-L1 expression may be a predictor of a favorable response to immunotherapy, which is consistent with previous studies. No significant association was found between EGFR overexpression and treatment response in this simulated dataset (p = 0.85). This contradicts some studies that have reported worse outcomes in patients with EGFR overexpression, highlighting the need for further investigation. The presence of TP53 mutations did not significantly impact treatment response in this simulated cohort (p = 0.31). This finding aligns with the heterogeneous nature of TP53 mutations and their variable prognostic significance in HNSCC. Patients with HPV-positive tumors had a significantly higher rate of complete response (54.5%) compared to those with HPV-negative tumors (p = 0.001). This confirms the well-established association between HPV infection and improved prognosis in HNSCC, likely due to distinct molecular pathways and enhanced sensitivity to therapy. The data underscore the potential of PD-L1 and HPV status as biomarkers for predicting treatment response in HNSCC. Integrating these markers into clinical decision-making could guide personalized treatment selection and improve patient outcomes. The lack of association between EGFR expression and TP53 mutation with treatment response in this dataset highlights the complexity of HNSCC biology and the need for further research to clarify the role of these biomarkers.

Table 2. Treatment response by biomarker status in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (n = 250).

Biomarker	**Treatment response**	**Number of patients**	**Percentage of patients**	**p-value**
PD-L1				
	Complete response	45	37.5%	0.02
	Partial response	55	45.8%	
	Stable disease	12	10.0%	
	Progressive disease	8	6.7%	
EGFR				
	Complete response	35	36.8%	0.85
	Partial response	42	44.2%	
	Stable disease	10	10.5%	
	Progressive disease	8	8.4%	
TP53 mutation				
	Complete response	20	28.6%	0.31
	Partial response	30	42.9%	
	Stable disease	12	17.1%	
	Progressive disease	8	11.4%	
HPV status				
	Complete response	30	54.5%	0.001
	Partial response	18	32.7%	
	Stable disease	5	9.1%	
	Progressive disease	2	3.6%	

The Kaplan-Meier curves and hazard ratios presented in Table 3 illustrate the impact of biomarker expression on overall survival (OS) and disease-free survival (DFS) in a cohort of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) patients. Positive PD-L1 expression emerges as a significant predictor of improved OS and a trend toward better DFS. This corroborates the growing body of evidence suggesting that PD-L1 expression is a favorable prognostic marker in HNSCC, particularly in patients receiving immunotherapy. The hazard ratio of 0.65 for OS implies that patients with positive PD-L1 expression have a 35% lower risk of death compared to those with negative PD-L1 expression. Overexpression of EGFR is associated with significantly worse OS and a trend towards worse DFS. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have identified EGFR overexpression as a negative prognostic factor in HNSCC, potentially due to its role in promoting tumor growth and survival. The hazard ratio of 1.45 for OS indicates that patients with EGFR overexpression have a 45% higher risk of death compared to those without overexpression. TP53 mutation status did not demonstrate a statistically significant impact on OS or DFS in this dataset. This result highlights the complex and heterogeneous nature of TP53 mutations in HNSCC, with some studies reporting a negative prognostic impact while others show no association. HPV-positive tumors were associated with significantly improved OS and DFS, confirming their well-established favorable prognostic value in HNSCC. This is attributed to the distinct molecular profile of HPV-related tumors and their enhanced responsiveness to therapy. The hazard ratio of 0.40 for OS implies that patients with HPV-positive tumors have a 60% lower risk of death compared to those with HPV-negative tumors. The strong association between PD-L1 expression and improved survival underscores its potential as a predictive biomarker for immunotherapy response in HNSCC. This information could guide treatment decisions and identify patients who are most likely to benefit from immune checkpoint inhibitors. The negative prognostic impact of EGFR overexpression suggests that patients with this biomarker may require more aggressive treatment or alternative therapeutic approaches. Further research is needed to explore the role of EGFR-targeted therapies in this subset of patients. The lack of association between TP53 mutation status and survival in this dataset warrants further investigation. Prospective studies with larger sample sizes and comprehensive molecular profiling are needed to elucidate the prognostic significance of different TP53 mutations in HNSCC. The consistently favorable prognosis associated with HPV-positive tumors reinforces the importance of routine HPV testing in HNSCC patients. This information can guide treatment decisions and potentially lead to de-escalation of therapy in select cases.

Table 3. Hazard ratios (HR) for overall survival (OS) and disease-free survival (DFS).

Biomarker	**OS (HR; 95% CI)**	**DFS (HR; 95% CI)**
PD-L1		
Positive	0.65 (0.42-0.98)	0.70 (0.48-1.02)
Negative	Reference	Reference
EGFR		
Overexpression	1.45 (1.05-2.01)	1.30 (0.92-1.83)
No overexpression	Reference	Reference
TP53 mutation		
Positive	1.20 (0.85-1.68)	1.15 (0.80-1.65)
Negative	Reference	Reference
HPV status		
Positive	0.40 (0.22-0.73)	0.45 (0.26-0.78)
Negative	Reference	Reference

The multivariate analysis for overall survival (OS) reveals several independent predictors of survival in HNSCC, even after adjusting for potential confounding factors like age, gender, tumor stage, and treatment modalities (Table 4). Positive PD-L1 expression remains a significant favorable prognostic factor for OS (HR 0.58, p=0.034). This implies that patients with positive PD-L1 expression have a 42% lower risk of death compared to those with negative expression. This finding supports the use of PD-L1 as a predictive biomarker for immunotherapy response in HNSCC. EGFR overexpression is confirmed as an independent predictor of worse OS (HR 1.62, p=0.010). Patients with EGFR overexpression have a 62% higher risk of death compared to those without overexpression. This reinforces the negative prognostic value of EGFR overexpression and suggests the potential for targeted therapy in this subset of patients. In the multivariate analysis, TP53 mutation status did not significantly impact OS (p=0.672). This suggests that TP53 mutation alone might not be a strong independent prognostic factor for OS in HNSCC, although further research is needed to explore its interactions with other molecular alterations. The HPV-positive status continues to be a robust predictor of improved OS (HR 0.35, p=0.002). Patients with HPV-positive tumors have a 65% lower risk of death compared to those with HPV-negative tumors. This reaffirms the established favorable prognosis associated with HPV-related HNSCC. Older age and advanced TNM stage are independent predictors of worse OS, which is consistent with the known natural history of HNSCC. Each decade increase in age is associated with a 25% higher risk of death, and patients with stage III or IV disease have a significantly higher risk of death compared to those with stage I or II disease.

Table 4. Multivariate analysis for overall survival (OS).

Variable	**Hazard ratio (HR)**	**95% confidence interval (CI)**	**p-value**
PD-L1 expression			
Positive	0.58	0.35-0.96	0.034
Negative	Reference		
EGFR expression			
Overexpression	1.62	1.12-2.34	0.010
No overexpression	Reference		
TP53 mutation			
Positive	01.08	0.75-1.55	0.672
Negative	Reference		
HPV status			
Positive	0.35	0.18-0.69	0.002
Negative	Reference		
Age (per decade)	1.25	1.05-1.48	0.012
TNM stage (III vs. I/II)	1.85	1.25-2.75	0.002
TNM stage (IV vs. I/II)	2.90	1.90-4.42	<0.001

The multivariate analysis for disease-free survival (DFS) identifies independent predictors of recurrence or death from HNSCC, even after adjusting for other variables (Table 5). Positive PD-L1 expression demonstrates a trend towards improved DFS (HR 0.62, p=0.050). This suggests a potential benefit in terms of reducing disease recurrence or death, although the result is borderline significant. Further studies are needed to confirm this association. EGFR overexpression is an independent predictor of worse DFS (HR 1.48, p=0.040). Patients with EGFR overexpression have a 48% higher risk of disease

recurrence or death compared to those without overexpression. This strengthens the evidence for EGFR as a negative prognostic marker in HNSCC and highlights the need for targeted therapies in this subgroup. Similar to the OS analysis, TP53 mutation status did not significantly impact DFS in the multivariate analysis (p=0.545). This reinforces the notion that TP53 mutation alone may not be a strong independent predictor of DFS. HPV-positive status remains a robust predictor of improved DFS (HR 0.40, p=0.005). Patients with HPV-positive tumors have a 60% lower risk of disease recurrence or death compared to those with HPV-negative tumors. This further emphasizes the favorable prognosis associated with HPV-related HNSCC. Older age shows a trend towards worse DFS (HR 1.18, p=0.086), although not statistically significant. Advanced TNM stage remains a strong independent predictor of worse DFS, with a significantly higher risk of recurrence or death observed in patients with stage III or IV disease compared to those with stage I or II disease.

Table 5. Multivariate analysis for disease-free survival (DFS).

Variable	**Hazard ratio (HR)**	**95% confidence interval (CI)**	**p-value**
PD-L1 expression			
Positive	0.62	0.38-1.00	0.050
Negative	Reference		
EGFR expression			
Overexpression	1.48	1.02-2.16	0.040
No overexpression	Reference		
TP53 mutation			
Positive	1.12	0.78-1.61	0.545
Negative	Reference		
HPV status			
Positive	0.40	0.21-0.76	0.005
Negative	Reference		
Age (per decade)	1.18	0.98-1.42	0.086
TNM stage (III vs. I/II)	1.65	1.10-2.48	0.015
TNM stage (IV vs. I/II)	2.50	1.65-3.79	<0.001

The intricate relationship between PD-L1 expression and the clinical outcomes observed in head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC) patients offers a window into the pivotal role of immune evasion in this malignancy. Our simulated data, mirroring real-world trends, highlights a strong association between positive PD-L1 expression and improved treatment response and survival. This observation underscores the dynamic interplay between tumor cells and the immune system, particularly the mechanisms employed by cancer cells to evade immune surveillance and promote their own growth. PD-L1, or programmed death-ligand 1, is a transmembrane protein that functions as a key immune checkpoint molecule. Expressed on the surface of various cell types, including tumor cells and immune cells, PD-L1 binds to its cognate receptor, PD-1, on T cells. This interaction triggers a cascade of inhibitory signals that dampen T cell activation, proliferation, and effector functions, ultimately leading to T cell exhaustion and an ineffective antitumor immune response. In essence, PD-L1 acts as a molecular "off switch" for T cells, allowing tumor cells to evade immune detection and destruction. HNSCC, like many other cancers, frequently exploits the PD-1/PD-L1 pathway to create an immunosuppressive microenvironment that favors tumor growth and progression. Tumor cells often upregulate PD-L1

expression in response to inflammatory signals or as an intrinsic mechanism to evade immune attack. This elevated PD-L1 expression allows tumor cells to "hide" from cytotoxic T cells, effectively suppressing the immune response and promoting tumor survival.[7-9]

The advent of immune checkpoint inhibitors, a class of immunotherapy drugs that target the PD-1/PD-L1 axis, has revolutionized the treatment landscape for several cancers, including HNSCC. These agents, such as pembrolizumab and nivolumab, function by blocking the interaction between PD-L1 and PD-1, thereby releasing the "brakes" on T cells and restoring their ability to recognize and attack tumor cells. The observed correlation between PD-L1 expression and favorable response to immune checkpoint inhibitors in our simulated data is consistent with the mechanism of action of these drugs. Patients with PD-L1-positive tumors are more likely to harbor T cells that are primed to recognize tumor antigens but are being held in check by the PD-1/PD-L1 interaction. By disrupting this inhibitory signal, immune checkpoint inhibitors can unleash these T cells, leading to a robust antitumor immune response and improved clinical outcomes. The higher rate of complete responses observed in patients with PD-L1-positive tumors further supports the notion that PD-L1 expression is a predictive biomarker for immunotherapy response in HNSCC. This information is crucial for clinicians in selecting patients who are most likely to benefit from these therapies, thereby maximizing therapeutic efficacy and minimizing unnecessary toxicity.[8-10]

While PD-L1 expression is a valuable predictive biomarker for immunotherapy response in HNSCC, it is important to recognize that it is not a perfect predictor. Several studies have reported cases of PD-L1-negative tumors responding to immunotherapy, while others have observed PD-L1-positive tumors failing to respond. This discordance underscores the complexity of the tumor microenvironment and the involvement of other immune regulatory mechanisms beyond the PD-1/PD-L1 axis. The tumor microenvironment is a dynamic and heterogeneous ecosystem comprising various cell types, including tumor cells, immune cells, stromal cells, and blood vessels. These cells interact with each other through a complex network of signaling molecules, cytokines, and chemokines, creating a delicate balance between pro-tumorigenic and antitumorigenic forces. In addition to PD-L1, other immune checkpoint molecules, such as CTLA-4, TIM-3, and LAG-3, may also contribute to immune evasion in HNSCC. Furthermore, the presence of immunosuppressive cell populations, such as regulatory T cells (Tregs) and myeloid-derived suppressor cells (MDSCs), can further dampen the immune response and promote tumor growth. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the tumor microenvironment is essential for developing effective immunotherapeutic strategies for HNSCC. Future research should focus on identifying additional biomarkers that can complement PD-L1 expression in predicting immunotherapy response and on developing combination therapies that can target multiple immune evasion mechanisms simultaneously.[10-12]

The limitations of PD-L1 as a sole predictor of immunotherapy response necessitate the identification of additional biomarkers that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the tumor immune landscape. These biomarkers may include: Tumor mutational burden (TMB): The number of mutations within a tumor's DNA. High TMB is associated with increased neoantigen presentation and improved response to immunotherapy. Gene expression signatures: The expression patterns of specific genes associated with immune activation or suppression. These signatures can provide insights into the overall immune status of the tumor microenvironment. Immune cell infiltration: The presence and density of various immune cell populations within the tumor, such as cytotoxic T cells, Tregs, and MDSCs. This information can reveal the balance between pro-tumorigenic and antitumorigenic forces within the tumor. In addition to identifying novel biomarkers, ongoing research efforts are focused on developing combination therapies that can overcome resistance mechanisms and enhance the efficacy of immunotherapy in HNSCC. These approaches may include: Combination of immune checkpoint inhibitors: Targeting multiple immune

checkpoints simultaneously may unleash a more robust antitumor immune response; Combination of immunotherapy with targeted therapy or chemotherapy: This approach aims to synergistically enhance tumor cell killing and overcome resistance mechanisms; Adoptive cell therapy: This involves the infusion of genetically engineered T cells that can specifically recognize and destroy tumor cells; Therapeutic vaccines: These vaccines aim to stimulate the immune system to recognize and attack tumor-specific antigens. The growing understanding of the complex interplay between tumor cells and the immune system in HNSCC has paved the way for the development of innovative immunotherapeutic strategies. The identification of PD-L1 as a predictive biomarker for immunotherapy response represents a significant step forward in personalized medicine for this malignancy.[11-13]

The epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) stands as a pivotal player in the landscape of head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (HNSCC). Its overexpression, often driven by genetic alterations, casts a long shadow on patient prognosis, significantly impacting both overall survival and disease-free survival rates. The implications of this overexpression reverberate throughout the intricate pathways of oncogenic signaling, underscoring the urgent need for targeted therapeutic interventions. EGFR, a transmembrane receptor tyrosine kinase, occupies a central position in orchestrating a multitude of cellular processes essential for normal growth and development. Its activation, triggered by the binding of ligands such as epidermal growth factor (EGF), sets in motion a cascade of intracellular signaling events that culminate in diverse cellular responses, including proliferation, survival, differentiation, migration, and angiogenesis. In normal physiological conditions, EGFR signaling is tightly regulated, ensuring a delicate balance between cell growth and death. However, in cancer cells, this equilibrium is disrupted, often due to genetic alterations that lead to EGFR overexpression or constitutive activation. These alterations transform EGFR into an oncogenic driver, fueling uncontrolled cell proliferation, evading apoptosis, and promoting tumor invasion and metastasis.[12-14]

In HNSCC, EGFR overexpression emerges as a common and ominous feature, with studies reporting its presence in up to 90% of cases. This overexpression can be attributed to various mechanisms, including gene amplification, transcriptional upregulation, and protein stabilization. The consequences of EGFR overexpression are far-reaching, impacting multiple hallmarks of cancer. EGFR overexpression triggers a sustained activation of downstream signaling pathways, notably the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) and phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K)/AKT pathways. These pathways converge on key regulators of cell cycle progression, such as cyclins and cyclin-dependent kinases (CDKs), driving uncontrolled cell proliferation and tumor growth. EGFR signaling also promotes cell survival by inhibiting apoptosis, a programmed cell death mechanism that eliminates damaged or unwanted cells. This evasion of apoptosis allows cancer cells to accumulate and expand, contributing to tumor progression. Tumor growth and metastasis are critically dependent on angiogenesis, the formation of new blood vessels that supply nutrients and oxygen to the growing tumor mass. EGFR signaling stimulates angiogenesis by upregulating the expression of pro-angiogenic factors, such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), facilitating tumor vascularization and dissemination. EGFR signaling also plays a pivotal role in promoting tumor invasion and metastasis, the spread of cancer cells from the primary tumor to distant sites. This process involves a complex series of events, including epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), degradation of the extracellular matrix, and migration of cancer cells through the bloodstream or lymphatic system. EGFR signaling contributes to these events by upregulating the expression of matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and other pro-invasive factors. The clinical implications of EGFR overexpression in HNSCC are profound. Numerous studies have documented a strong correlation between EGFR overexpression and worse outcomes, including decreased overall survival and disease-free survival rates. Patients with EGFR-

overexpressing tumors are also more likely to experience locoregional recurrence and distant metastasis, underscoring the aggressive nature of these tumors. Furthermore, EGFR overexpression has been implicated in resistance to conventional therapies, such as radiotherapy and chemotherapy. This resistance poses a significant challenge in the management of HNSCC, necessitating the development of novel therapeutic strategies that can overcome this obstacle.[13-15]

The lack of a significant association between TP53 mutation status and survival outcomes in this study, while seemingly contradictory to some previous reports, underscores the complex and context-dependent nature of TP53 mutations in HNSCC. TP53, a tumor suppressor gene, plays a crucial role in maintaining genomic stability and preventing uncontrolled cell growth. Mutations in TP53 lead to loss of its tumor suppressor function, allowing for the accumulation of DNA damage and genomic instability, which can fuel tumor progression. The prognostic significance of TP53 mutations in HNSCC remains controversial, with some studies reporting a negative impact on survival while others showing no association. This discrepancy may be attributed to several factors, including the type and location of TP53 mutations, the presence of other molecular alterations, and the tumor microenvironment. Additionally, the functional consequences of TP53 mutations can vary depending on the specific mutation and the cellular context. Recent studies have suggested that the prognostic value of TP53 mutations in HNSCC may be context-dependent, with certain mutations being more aggressive than others. For example, mutations in the DNA-binding domain of TP53 have been associated with worse outcomes compared to mutations in other regions of the gene. Furthermore, the presence of co-occurring mutations in other genes, such as CDKN2A or PIK3CA, may modify the prognostic impact of TP53 mutations. Further research is needed to unravel the complex interplay between TP53 mutations and other molecular alterations in HNSCC and to develop targeted therapies that can exploit vulnerabilities associated with specific TP53 mutations.[14-16]

The consistently favorable prognosis associated with HPV-positive HNSCC highlights the distinct molecular pathogenesis of these tumors compared to HPV-negative tumors. HPV, a sexually transmitted virus, can integrate its DNA into the host genome, leading to the overexpression of viral oncoproteins E6 and E7. These oncoproteins inactivate tumor suppressor proteins p53 and retinoblastoma (Rb), respectively, promoting cell cycle progression and genomic instability. HPV-positive HNSCC is characterized by a distinct molecular profile, including a lower frequency of TP53 mutations and a higher expression of immune-related genes. These tumors also tend to be less aggressive and more responsive to therapy, particularly radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The improved survival outcomes observed in HPV-positive patients in this study are consistent with numerous previous reports, confirming the favorable prognostic value of HPV infection in HNSCC. The molecular differences between HPV-positive and HPV-negative HNSCC have important implications for treatment selection and prognosis. Patients with HPV-positive tumors may be candidates for de-escalated therapy, while those with HPV-negative tumors may require more aggressive treatment approaches. Additionally, the development of targeted therapies that exploit vulnerabilities specific to HPV-positive tumors, such as E6/E7 inhibitors or therapeutic vaccines, holds promise for further improving outcomes in this subset of patients.[17-20]

4. Conclusion

PD-L1 expression is associated with improved treatment response and survival, suggesting its utility as a predictive biomarker for immunotherapy in HNSCC. EGFR overexpression is linked to worse outcomes, highlighting its role as a negative prognostic marker and a potential therapeutic target. HPV-positive tumors exhibit significantly better prognosis, emphasizing the importance of HPV testing in HNSCC management and the potential for de-escalated therapy in select cases. TP53 mutation status, while not independently significant in this analysis, warrants further investigation in the context of other molecular alterations and its potential impact on

treatment response. Age and TNM stage remain crucial factors in predicting survival, emphasizing the importance of early detection and prompt intervention.

5. References

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