High incidence of malignancy in SAPHO syndrome

Sirs,

SAPHO syndrome is a rare disease with chronic inflammatory osteocartilaginous symptoms and dermatological lesions. SAPHO syndrome is sometimes regarded as one of the spondyloarthropathies (1). Only a few case studies have reported SAPHO syndrome patients with simultaneous or subsequent malignancy (2, 3). To clarify the relationship between SAPHO syndrome and subsequent malignancy, we compared the cumulative malignancy rate of SAPHO syndrome with that of psoriatic arthritis (PsA), one of the spondyloarthropathies. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Tokyo (no. 2431 and 11952). We retrospectively examined 22 patients with SAPHO syndrome diagnosed in or outside of our hospital from January 2000 to June 2017. All patients met the inclusion criteria of Benhamou et al. (5). 132 patients with PsA from TOSPAR (Todai Spondyloarthritits Registry) were compared as disease controls. As a result, 6 patients developed malignancies after the onset of SAPHO syndrome (27.3%). No significant differences were observed in clinical characteristics (Supplementary Table S1).

Since the average observation period of both SAPHO syndrome and PsA patients was approximately 10 years, we compared the cumulative malignancy-free rate for 10 years after the onset of SAPHO syndrome or PsA (Fig. 1). The malignancy rate among SAPHO syndrome patients was significantly higher than that of PsA patients (log rank p=5e-05); this was confirmed by univariate Cox proportional hazards regression modeling (hazard ratio [HR], 6.70; 95% confidence interval [CI], 2.227–20.13; p=0.00071). SAPHO syndrome was identified as an independent risk factor for malignancy even after adjusting for onset age of SAPHO syndrome or PsA as covariate (Suppl. Fig. S1; adjusted HR, 5.97; 95% CI, 1.76–20.22; p=0.0041). In addition, while the cumulative incidence of malignancy of 50-year-old people in Japan in the next 10 years is 5% for males and 6% for females (6), the incidence of malignancy in this study was much higher (27.3%). Therefore, it is unlikely that the association between SAPHO syndrome and malignancy is fully explained by any confounding by age. Comparing the characteristics of the SAPHO syndrome patients with or without malignancy, a history of allergy was significantly more frequent among patients without malignancy compared with patients with malignancy (20.0% vs. 90.0%; p=0.017; Suppl. Table S2). Similarly, SAPHO syndrome patients without a history of allergy had a higher rate of malignancy than those with an allergy history (80.0% vs. 10.0%; p=0.017). Except for the age at the onset, no other significant differences in clinical features were observed based on the presence of malignancy (Suppl. Table S2, S3). An unknown allergic mechanism may therefore be involved in SAPHO syndrome.

It is uncertain why patients with SAPHO syndrome are more likely to develop malignancy than those with PsA. One possible hypothesis is that chronic inflammation caused by SAPHO syndrome could induce carcinogenesis. The P2X7-interleukin (IL)-1β axis is reported to be dysregulated in SAPHO syndrome, providing the rationale for the use of IL-1 inhibitors for treatment (7). Inflammation in the tumour microenvironment mediated by IL-1β has been hypothesised to play a major role in cancer invasiveness, progression, and metastasis (8). Another hypothesis is that the malignancy itself or its treatment including BCG injection could trigger SAPHO syndrome (2, 9). This report is the first retrospective study to statistically demonstrate a risk of malignancy after the onset of SAPHO syndrome. Although our observation is based on a limited number of participants due to the rarity of SAPHO syndrome, our data suggests the possibility that SAPHO syndrome is a heterogenous disease, with subgroups of patients developing allergy or subsequent malignancy.

Acknowledgements
We thank all the study participants and all the members of the Department of Allergy and Rheumatology and the Department of Immunotherapy Management for the collection of clinical data.

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Competing interests: Y. Yamada received a fee from BMS, Y. Nagafuchi received financial support or fees from BMS, Chugai, Kissei, Mitsubishi Tanabe, and Pfizer. S. Tateishi received consulting fees, speaking fees and/or honoraria from Eisai, AbbVie and Eli Lilly. H. Harada received financial support or fees from Nihon Pharmaceutical and Novartis. S. Sumitomo received financial support or fees from AbbVie, Eisai, Chugai, UCB, BMS, Takeda, AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Mitsubishi Tanabe, Novartis Pharma, and Asahi Kasei. K. Kubo received financial support or fees from Chugai, Towa, Mitsubishi Tanabe, Eisai, BMS, Japan Blood Products Organization, Astellas and Asahi Kasei. H. Shoda received fees from Pfizer, BMS, Eli Lilly, Glaxo-SmithKline, Chugai, UCB, and Daiichi-Sankyo. H. Kanda received consulting fees, speaking fees, and/or honoraria from Astellas, Abbvie, Ayumi, Asahi Kasei, Eisai, BMS, Pfizer, Daiichi-Sankyo, Janssen, Novartis, Nihon Kayaku and Eli Lilly. K. Fujiy has received grants, consulting fees, speaking fees, and/or honoraria from Takeda, BMS, Mitsubishi Tanabe, Asahi Kasei, Sanofi, Eli Lilly, Daiichi-Sankyo, Ono, Janssen, AbbVie, Astellas, Eisai, Pfizer, Chugai, Novartis, UCB, Tsumura, Taisho Toyama, Nihon Kayaku and Ayumi. The other co-authors have declared no competing financial interests.

The Department of Immunotherapy Management, Graduate School of Medicine, University of Tokyo had courses endowed by Mitsubishi Tanabe, Chugai, Ayumi, Taisho Toyama, Nippon Kayaku, UCB, and AbbVie.

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Letters to the Editors

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