

Article

Comparative analysis of lenvatinib and hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy in unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma: a multi-center, propensity score study

Jaejun Lee^{1,2,#}, Ji Won Han^{1,3,#}, Pil Soo Sung^{1,3,*}, Soon Kyu Lee^{1,3}, Hyun Yang^{1,2}, Hee Chul Nam^{1,4}, Sun Hong Yoo^{1,5}, Hae Lim Lee^{1,6}, Hee Yeon Kim^{1,4}, Sung Won Lee^{1,6}, Jung Hyun Kwon^{1,5}, Jeong Won Jang^{1,3}, Chang Wook Kim^{1,4}, Soon Woo Nam^{1,5}, Jung Suk Oh⁷, Ho Jong Chun⁷, Si Hyun Bae^{1,2}, Jong Young Choi^{1,3}, Seung Kew Yoon^{1,3}

¹ The Catholic University Liver Research Center, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 06591, Republic of Korea; pwln0516@gmail.com (J.L.); tmznjf@catholic.ac.kr (J.W.H.); pssung@catholic.ac.kr (P.S.S.); blackiqq@gmail.com (S.K.L.); oneggu@naver.com (H.Y.); hcnam128@catholic.ac.kr (H.C.N.); calla0108@naver.com (S.H.Y.); atom069@naver.com (H.L.L.); hee82@catholic.ac.kr (H.Y.L.); zambrotta@catholic.ac.kr (S.W.L.); doctorkwon@catholic.ac.kr (J.H.K.); garden@catholic.ac.kr (J.W.J.); cwkim@catholic.ac.kr (C.W.K.); drswnam@hanmail.net (S.W.N.); baesh@catholic.ac.kr (S.H.B.); jychoi@catholic.ac.kr (J.Y.C.); yoonsk@catholic.ac.kr (S.K.Y.)

² Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine, Eunpyeong St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 03382, Republic of Korea

³ Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine, Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 06591, Republic of Korea

⁴ Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine, Uijeongbu St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 11765, Republic of Korea

⁵ Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine, Incheon St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 22711, Republic of Korea

⁶ Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine, Bucheon St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 14647, Republic of Korea

⁷ Department of Radiology, College of Medicine, Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 06591, Republic of Korea; oj-cumc@hanmail.net (J.S.O.); chunray@catholic.ac.kr (H.J.C.)

Equal contribution

* Correspondence: pssung@catholic.ac.kr; Tel.: +82-2258-2073; Fax: +82-2-3481-4025

Abstract: The comparative efficacy and safety between lenvatinib and hepatic artery infusion chemotherapy (HAIC) in patients with unresectable hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) are still unclear. This multicenter historical cohort study enrolled 244 patients who were treated with HAIC (n = 173) or lenvatinib (n = 71) between 2012 and 2020. Propensity score matching (PSM) was performed, and 52 patients were selected per group. Clinical outcomes and safety were compared. Objective response rate (ORR) was not different between the two groups (26.0% vs. 23.1%, P = 0.736). Before PSM, HAIC group had a higher proportion of Child-Pugh B and portal vein tumor, whereas lenvatinib group had more patients with extrahepatic metastases, which was adjusted after PSM. There were no differences in progression-free survival (PFS) and overall survival (OS) after PSM (HAIC vs. lenvatinib, median PFS, 3.6 vs. 4.0 months, P = 0.706; median OS 10.8 vs. 7.9 months, P = 0.106). Multivariate Cox-regression showed that alpha-fetoprotein ≤ 1000 ng/mL was only associated factor for OS after PSM in all patients (hazard ratio = 0.421, P = 0.011). Subgroup analysis for patients with high tumor burden beyond the REFLECT eligibility criteria revealed that HAIC group (n = 29) had a significantly longer OS than did lenvatinib group (n = 30) (10.0 vs. 5.4 months, P=0.004). More patients in HAIC group achieved better liver function than those in lenvatinib group at the time of best responses. There was no difference in the incidence of grade 3 and 4 adverse events between the two groups. Therefore, lenvatinib is comparable to HAIC in terms of ORR and OS in unresectable HCC meeting REFLECT eligibility criteria.

Keywords: Hepatocellular carcinoma, Lenvatinib, Hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy, Propensity score matching

1. Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is one of the most common causes of cancer-related deaths worldwide [1]. According to the Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer (BCLC) staging system, HCC can be classified into five stages, and the stage C represents unresectable tumors with macrovascular invasion or extrahepatic spread [1]. For patients with BCLC stage C or with BCLC-B who are not suitable for local or surgical treatment, systemic therapies have been recommended as the first-line therapy [2].

A recent randomized phase 3 trial showed that lenvatinib, a recently introduced tyrosine kinase inhibitor (TKI), is non-inferior to sorafenib in terms of overall survival (OS) in treatment-naïve unresectable HCC (the REFLECT trial) [3]. In addition, our group recently demonstrated that lenvatinib showed better progression-free survival (PFS) than sorafenib as a salvage transarterial treatment [4], which may be due to differences in molecular targets, including fibroblast growth factor pathways [5]. Nevertheless, the eligibility criteria for tumor burden in the REFLECT trial were only applicable to the selected patients (tumor extent < 50% of liver volume, absence of main portal vein tumor thrombosis [PVTT], absence of bile duct invasion) [6], and lenvatinib treatment in patients beyond these criteria showed varying outcomes, dependent on multiple factors, such as previous treatment history or PVTT [7].

Hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy (HAIC) is considered a treatment option for BCLC stage B or C, instead of systemic chemotherapy, for reducing intrahepatic tumor burden by administering cytotoxic chemotherapeutic agents with high intrahepatic concentrations [8, 9]. In addition, it can also be used in the poor responders of transarterial chemoembolization [10, 11]. Therefore, HAIC is recommended as a therapeutic option for advanced HCC with vascular invasion in the Japanese guidelines [12]. Previous reports have shown that the control of intrahepatic tumors by HAIC provides survival benefits, even in patients with extrahepatic metastases or Vp 3/4 PVTT [13, 14]. Until now, there have been several studies comparing the efficacy of HAIC and sorafenib. A randomized phase 3 trial (SILIUS trial), which compared sorafenib alone to sorafenib plus HAIC, failed to show the superiority of the combination in advanced HCC [15]. However, more recently, another phase 3 randomized trial showed that oxaliplatin-based HAIC plus sorafenib exhibited a survival benefit compared to sorafenib alone in patients with HCC with portal vein invasion [16]. This implies that HAIC may be an effective treatment option in selected patient groups. Moreover, small prospective cohort studies showed that HAIC had a survival benefit compared with sorafenib in patients with advanced HCC with macrovascular invasion (MVI) without extrahepatic metastases [17, 18]. Furthermore, a recent large-scale retrospective study using propensity score matching (PSM) analysis also reported that HAIC was superior to sorafenib in patients with advanced HCC with MVI without extrahepatic metastases in terms of OS [19]. However, no previous report has compared the real-world efficacy and safety between lenvatinib and HAIC in unresectable HCC.

Here, we performed a multicenter, historical cohort study in which HAIC and lenvatinib were compared in patients with unresectable HCC in terms of efficacy and safety. We used PSM to correct the various clinical parameters of patients with HCC, including tumor factors. We also analyzed the differences in survival outcomes between lenvatinib and HAIC in subgroup analysis with patients within or beyond the REFLECT eligibility criteria.

2. Patients and methods

2.1. Study population

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Catholic University of Korea (approval number: XC21RID10008), and was performed in accordance with the Declaration of

Helsinki. We retrospectively evaluated 244 consecutive patients with unresectable HCC who were treated with HAIC or lenvatinib at five affiliated hospitals in Korea. Patients treated with HAIC were enrolled from November 2012 to November 2020, whereas patients treated with lenvatinib were enrolled from January 2019 to November 2020. HCC was diagnosed by histologic or radiologic examinations via contrast-enhanced computed tomography (CT) and/or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) confirmed intermediate to advanced HCC, but ineligible for surgical resection; (2) age ≥ 18 years; and (3) Eastern Cooperative Eligibility criteria (ECOG) performance status score of ≤ 2 . The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) lack of follow-up visits after the start of the treatment; (2) a treatment duration of < 2 weeks for lenvatinib-treated patients; (3) less than two cycles of HAIC treatment for HAIC-treated patients; and (4) history of malignancy other than HCC in the previous 5 years.

2.2. Treatment protocol

Lenvatinib was administered once daily at a dose of 8 mg for patients weighing < 60 kg, and at a dose of 12 mg for patients weighing > 60 kg. HAIC was performed as previously described [18, 20]. The chemotherapy regimen consisted of 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) at a dose of $500 \text{ mg/m}^2/\text{day}$, and cisplatin at a dose of $60 \text{ mg/m}^2/\text{day}$. 5-FU was administered for 5 hours daily on days 1–3 and cisplatin for 2 h on day 1 or 2. For arterial chemo-infusion, the catheter was inserted through the femoral artery and its tip was advanced to the common or proper hepatic artery; the other end of the tip was connected to the chemoport implanted in the subcutaneous pocket of the inguinal region. Each session was delivered every 3–4 weeks via an implantable port system.

2.3. Response evaluation

Imaging studies (CT or MRI) were performed every 4–12 weeks for lenvatinib treatment and every 2–3 cycles of HAIC treatment for response evaluation. The assessment was conducted according to the modified Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (mRECIST) as in our previous study [21]. OS was calculated from the start of drug administration until death or the last follow-up day. PFS was calculated as the time from the start of drug administration until disease progression, or drug cessation due to any cause in the absence of disease progression. The objective response rate (ORR) was calculated as the sum of the “complete response” and “partial response” at the response evaluation. The disease control rate (DCR) was calculated as the sum of the complete response (CR), partial response (PR), and stable disease (SD). The treatment response was defined as the best response during treatment. We categorized tumor types into nodular, massive, and diffuse types according to Eggel’s classification [22]. Thereafter, massive and diffuse types were classified as non-nodular types. The modified albumin-bilirubin (mALBI) score was also measured to assess residual liver function at the end of each treatment as previously described [23], and with the following formula: $\text{mALBI} = (\log_{10} \text{ serum total bilirubin } [\mu\text{mol/L}] \times 0.66) + (\text{serum albumin } [\text{g/L}] - 0.085)$. Patients were divided into four groups according to the mALBI score: grade 1 (< -2.60), grade 2a ($2.60 \text{ ALBI score} < -2.27$), grade 2b (-2.27), and grade 3 (< -1.39). Adverse events were assessed according to the Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events version 4.0 [24].

2.4. Propensity-score matching (PSM)

We used PSM to adjust for differences in baseline characteristics between the HAIC ($n = 173$) and lenvatinib ($n = 71$) groups. Variables known to be related to the prognosis of HCC were selected for PSM, and included the ECOG, age, Child-Pugh score, extrahepatic metastasis and vascular invasion, intrahepatic tumor size, tumor type (nodular and non-nodular), and BCLC stage.

One-to-one nearest-neighbor matching within a caliper size of 0.20 was used. PSM analyses resulted in the selection of 52 patients in each group.

2.5. Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using R statistical software (version 4.0.3; R Foundation Inc.; <http://cran.r-project.org>) and SPSS version 23.0 software (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA).

The median clinical parameter values were calculated and the interquartile ranges were documented. The student's t-test was used to compare continuous variables between the two groups. The Kaplan–Meier method was used for survival analyses, including OS and PFS, and differences were examined using the log-rank test. Cox regression analyses were performed to identify the factors associated with survival outcomes, and factors with $P < 0.01$ in univariate analysis were included in multivariate analysis. The therapeutic efficacy was demonstrated by the ORR and DCR, which were compared using the chi-square test. Statistical significance was defined as P -values < 0.05 .

3. Results

3.1. Baseline characteristics

The baseline characteristics are presented in Table 1. Among the 244 patients, 173 received HAIC and 71 received lenvatinib. The patients with HAIC were younger than those with lenvatinib (mean, 58.3 vs. 63.1 years old; $P = 0.001$). In addition, the percentage of Child-Pugh B was higher in the HAIC group than in the lenvatinib group (52.6% vs. 25.4%, $P < 0.001$). The etiology was also significantly different between the two groups ($P = 0.019$); the HAIC group had a higher percentage of hepatitis B virus etiology (77.5% vs. 59.2%) and a lower percentage of alcohol etiology (9.2% vs. 22.5%). The median AFP level was higher (976 vs. 662.2 ng/mL, $P = 0.037$) in the HAIC group. The maximum tumor size was larger in the HAIC group (mean, 9.7 vs. 7.7 cm; $P = 0.005$), and the non-nodular type was more frequent in the HAIC group (63.0% vs. 28.2%, $P < 0.001$), as was PVTT (75.7% vs. 46.5%, $P < 0.001$). In contrast, extrahepatic metastasis was more frequent in the lenvatinib group (52.1% vs. 27.2%, $P < 0.001$). A history of previous HCC treatment was more common in the lenvatinib group than in the HAIC group (83.1% vs. 51.4%, $P < 0.001$). Among those with history of previous HCC treatments, 6 patients in the lenvatinib group and 10 patients in the HAIC group received systemic chemotherapy previously (8.5% vs 5.8%, $P = 0.444$).

PSM was performed to adjust these differences in baseline characteristics between the two groups (Table 1), and 104 patients were selected for analysis after PSM (52 patients per group). No significant differences were observed between the two groups after PSM, except for median PIVKA-II levels ($P = 0.046$).

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of the study population

Treatment	Before PSM		<i>P</i> -value	After PSM		<i>P</i> -value
	Lenvatinib (n = 71)	HAIC (n = 173)		Lenvatinib (n = 52)	HAIC (n = 52)	
Male sex	62 (87.3)	150 (86.7)	1.000	47 (90.4)	45 (86.5)	0.760
Age (years)	63.1 ± 11.5	58.3 ± 10.2	0.001	61.0 ± 11.2	61.2 ± 11.6	0.939
Child-Pugh			< 0.001			1.000
A	53 (74.6)	82 (47.4)		34 (65.4)	33 (63.5)	
B	18 (25.4)	91 (52.6)		18 (34.6)	19 (36.5)	
Etiology			0.019			0.585
HBV	42 (59.2)	134 (77.5)		32 (61.5)	37 (71.2)	
HCV	7 (9.9)	13 (7.5)		4 (7.7)	5 (9.6)	
Alcohol	16 (22.5)	16 (9.2)		12 (23.1)	8 (15.4)	
Others	6 (8.5)	10 (5.8)		4 (7.7)	2 (3.8)	
AFP (ng/mL)	662.2 (37.5– 8000.2)	976 (57.2– 13670)	0.037	1479.3 (66.5– 11987)	308.51 (29– 12979.5)	0.458

PIKVA (mAU/mL)	1648.5 (107.9– 20154.9)	1725 (353– 14845)	0.673	5850.5 (130.8– 25629.3)	872 (405.5– 4796.75)	0.046
Albumin (g/dL)	3.7 ± 0.5	3.4 ± 0.5	0.001	3.5 ± 0.5	3.6 ± 0.5	0.527
Platelet (10 ⁹ /L)	168.8 ± 97.7	174.9 ± 104.7	0.678	164.2 ± 100.1	176.0 ± 105.8	0.560
Maximal tumor size (cm)	7.7 ± 5.3	9.7 ± 4.8	0.005	8.0 ± 5.0	8.1 ± 4.8	0.934
Tumor type			< 0.001			0.549
Nodular	51 (71.8)	64 (37.0)		33 (63.5)	29 (55.8)	
Non-nodular	20 (28.2)	109 (63.0)		19 (36.5)	23 (44.2)	
PVTT	33 (46.5)	131 (75.7)	< 0.001	29 (55.8)	29 (55.8)	1.000
Extrahepatic metastasis	37 (52.1)	47 (27.2)	< 0.001	20 (38.5)	24 (46.2)	0.552
BCLC			0.408			0.625
B	14 (19.7)	25 (14.5)		12 (23.1)	9 (17.3)	
C	57 (80.3)	148 (85.5)		40 (76.9)	43 (82.7)	
ECOG			0.160			0.578
0	28 (39.4)	80 (46.2)		19 (36.5)	18 (34.6)	
1	39 (54.9)	74 (42.8)		30 (57.7)	28 (53.8)	
2	4 (5.6)	19 (11.0)		3 (5.8)	6 (11.5)	
Previous treatment history	59 (83.1)	89 (51.4)	< 0.001	40 (76.9)	30 (57.7)	0.060

Data are presented as n (%), mean ± SD, or median (IQR). PSM: propensity score matching, HAIC: hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy, HBV: hepatitis B virus, HCV: hepatitis C virus, AFP: alpha-fetoprotein, PIVKA: protein induced by vitamin K antagonist, PVTT: portal vein tumor thrombosis, BCLC: Barcelona Clinic Liver Cancer, ECOG: Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group.

3.2. Treatment responses

When we assessed treatment responses using the best response during treatment in the patient groups after PSM, 4 (7.7%) patients in the HAIC group and 2 (3.8%) patients in the lenvatinib group achieved CR, and 11 (21.2%) patients in the HAIC group and 10 (19.2%) patients in the lenvatinib group achieved PR. There was no statistical difference in ORR between the two groups (HAIC, 28.8% vs. lenvatinib, 23.1%; $P = 0.502$) (Table 2), although the DCR was different between the two groups (73.1% in the HAIC group and 51.9% in the lenvatinib group; $P = 0.026$). These tendencies were also observed in the entire cohort without PSM (Table 2).

Table 2. Treatment responses before and after PSM

	Before PSM		<i>P-value</i>	After PSM		<i>P-value</i>
	Lenvatinib (n = 71)	HAIC (n = 173)		Lenvatinib (n = 52)	HAIC (n = 52)	
Treatment responses			0.292			0.583
CR	2 (2.8)	6 (3.5)		2 (3.8)	4 (7.7)	
PR	15 (21.1)	39 (22.5)		10 (19.2)	11 (21.2)	
SD	24 (33.8)	89 (51.4)		15 (28.8)	23 (44.2)	
PD	20 (28.2)	38 (22.0)		16 (30.8)	13 (25.0)	
NA	10 (14.1)	1 (0.6)		9 (17.3)	1 (1.9)	
ORR	17 (23.9)	45 (26.0)	0.736	12 (23.1)	15 (28.8)	0.502
DCR	41 (57.7)	134 (77.5)	0.002	27 (51.9)	38 (73.1)	0.026

Data are presented as n (%). PSM: propensity score matching, HAIC: hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy, CR: complete response, PR: partial response, SD: stable disease, PD: progressive disease, NA: not available, ORR: objective response rate, DCR: disease controlled rate.

3.3. Survival outcomes

We first compared the OS and PFS in the entire cohort without PSM. The median follow-up durations for the HAIC and lenvatinib groups were 6.9 and 4.8 months, respectively ($P < 0.001$), and the median treatment duration for HAIC and lenvatinib was 2.9 and 2.6 months, respectively ($P = 0.159$). The median OS was compared between the two groups, and no statistical difference was observed (HAIC, median of 9.4 months; 95% confidence interval [CI], 7.4–11.4 vs. lenvatinib, median of 9.3 months; 95% CI, 6.8–11.8; $P = 0.489$) (Figure 1A). The median PFS was 3.7 months in the HAIC group (95% CI, 3.0–4.5) and 4.3 months in the lenvatinib group (95% CI, 2.9–5.7), with no statistical significance ($P = 0.422$) (Figure 1B).

After PSM, the median treatment duration did not differ significantly between the two groups (median of 2.9 months in the HAIC group and 2.5 months in the lenvatinib group; $P = 0.150$), either. In contrast, the median follow-up duration was significantly different (median of 7.7 months in the HAIC group and 4.2 months in the lenvatinib group; $P < 0.001$). During the follow-up period, 35 (67.3%) patients in the lenvatinib group and 42 (80.8%) patients in the HAIC group experienced disease progression or death. Although there was a tendency for longer OS in the HAIC group compared to the lenvatinib group (HAIC, median of 10.8 months, 95% CI, 6.9–14.8 vs. lenvatinib, median of 7.9 months, 95% CI, 4.2–11.7), the difference was not statistically significant ($P = 0.106$) (Figure 1C). Moreover, the PFS did not differ significantly between the two groups with median of 4.0 months (95% CI, 2.5–5.5) in the lenvatinib group, and of 3.6 months (95% CI, 2.6–4.6) in the HAIC group ($P = 0.706$) (Figure 1D).

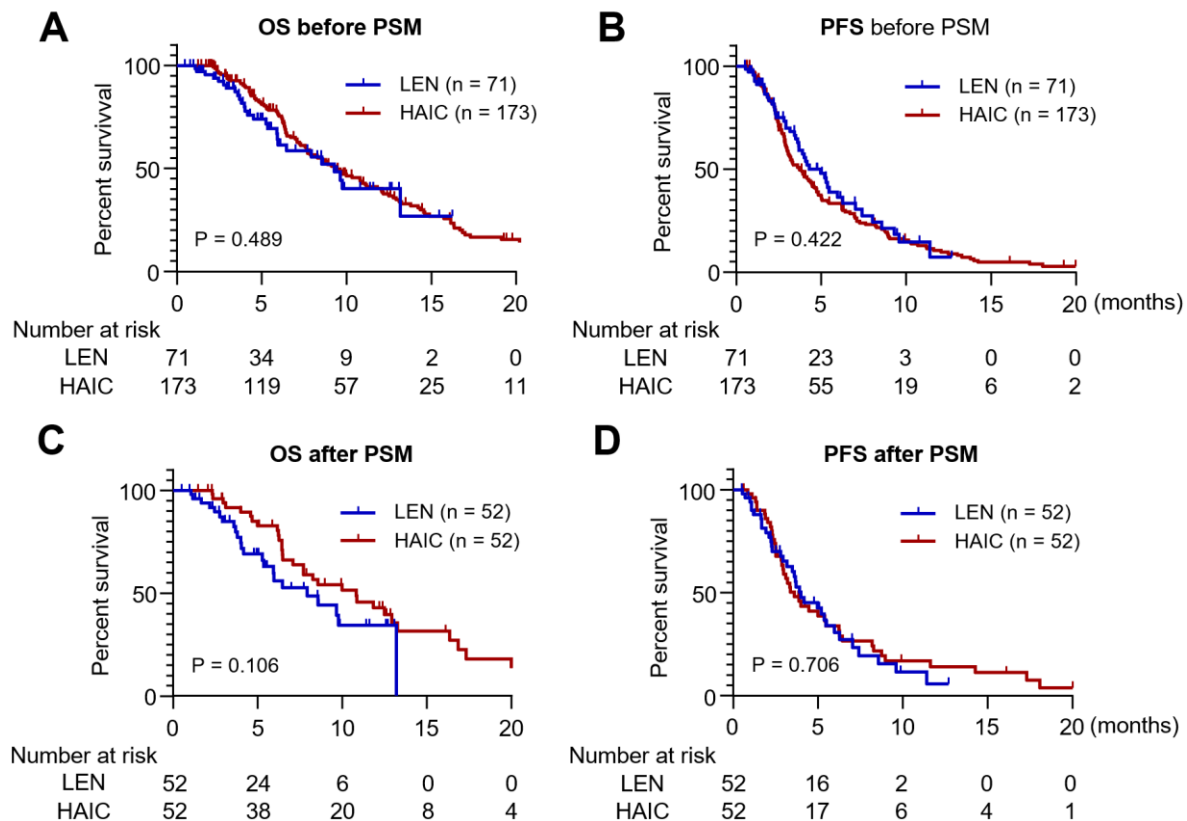


Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier survival curves analyzing OS and PFS in the HAIC and lenvatinib groups before (n = 244) and after PSM (n = 104). (A) Overall survival (OS) of patients treated with lenvatinib and HAIC in the entire cohort. (B) Progression free survival (PFS) of patients treated with lenvatinib and HAIC in the entire cohort. (C) OS of patients treated with lenvatinib and HAIC following PSM. (D) PFS of patients treated with lenvatinib and HAIC following PSM.

3.4. Factors contributing to survival outcomes

Univariate and multivariate analyses were performed using the Cox proportional hazard model to identify factors associated with OS and PFS (Table 3) in the PSM cohort. The cut-off value of AFP was determined to be 1000 ng/mL according to the analysis in our previous study [4]. In univariate analyses, intrahepatic maximal tumor size of ≤ 5 cm, AFP level ≤ 1000 ng/mL, and Child-Pugh A were factors associated with favorable OS. In multivariate analyses, AFP level ≤ 1000 (HR, 0.4; 95% CI, 0.2–0.8; $P = 0.012$) was the only significant factors associated with favorable OS. Regarding PFS, Child-Pugh class A and AFP level ≤ 1000 were significant factors in univariate analyses. However, there were no factors remained to be significantly associated with PFS in multivariate analyses.

Next, we performed subgroup analyses comparing OS between lenvatinib and HAIC groups according to the factors that could potentially be associated with survival outcomes (Supplementary Figure S1). Most subgroups did not show significant differences in HR between the two groups. However, patients in the lenvatinib group with macrovascular invasion (HR, 1.8; 95% CI, 1.0–3.0; $P = 0.032$), maximal intrahepatic tumor size > 5 cm (HR, 2.0; 95% CI, 1.2–3.2; $P = 0.008$), or AFP level > 1000 ng/mL (HR, 1.8; 95% CI, 1.0–3.1; $P = 0.034$) showed inferior OS outcomes compared to the HAIC group. For PFS, the lenvatinib group showed better PFS than the HAIC group in patients with extrahepatic metastasis (HR, 0.5; 95% CI, 0.3–0.8; $P = 0.003$) (Supplementary Figure S2).

Table 3. Univariate and multivariate analyses of the factors influencing OS and PFS in the PSM cohort

Variables	Overall survival			Progression free survival		
	Univariate (<i>P</i> -value)	Multivariate (<i>P</i> -value)	HR (95% CI)	Univariate (<i>P</i> -value)	Multivariate (<i>P</i> -value)	HR (95% CI)
Lenvatinib vs HAIC	0.109			0.707		
Age ≤ 60 years	0.064	0.413	1.3 (0.7-2.3)	0.119	0.547	1.2 (0.7-1.9)
HBV vs. non-HBV	0.869			0.601		
Tumor size ≤ 5 cm	0.033	0.526	0.8 (0.4-1.7)	0.154	0.672	0.9 (0.5-1.5)
Macrovascular invasion	0.246			0.609		
Extrahepatic metastasis	0.140			0.153	0.549	1.2 (0.7-1.9)
Child class A	0.002	0.101	0.6 (0.3-1.1)	0.036	0.252	0.7 (0.4-1.2)
AFP ≤ 1000	< 0.001	0.011	0.4 (0.2-0.8)	0.008	0.104	0.6 (0.4-1.1)
PIVKA-II ≤ 1000	0.097	0.897	1.0 (0.6-2.0)	0.303		

HAIC: hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy, Tx: treatment, HBV: hepatitis B virus, AFP: alpha-fetoprotein, PIVKA-II: protein induced by vitamin K antagonist-II, HR: hazard ratio, CI: confidence interval.

3.5. Patients with tumor burden beyond the REFLECT eligibility criteria

In the REFLECT trial, the eligibility criteria for tumor burden were strictly selected and comprised the following: Tumor extent < 50% of liver volume, absence of main PVTT, and absence of bile duct invasion. Patients with a tumor burden exceeding the REFLECT eligibility criteria were demonstrated as “REFLECT (-),” and those with a tumor burden within the REFLECT eligibility criteria were demonstrated as “REFLECT (+)”. In the entire cohort, the ORR was not significantly different between the REFLECT (+) and REFLECT (-) groups (30.1% vs. 23.0%, $P = 0.225$).

Figure 2 shows the Kaplan–Meier survival curve according to the REFLECT eligibility criteria and the type of treatment. In the entire cohort, REFLECT (+) patients showed better outcomes in survival rate compared to REFLECT (-) patients (median of 14.6 vs 7.7 months, $P < 0.001$) (Figure 2A). Among REFLECT (-) patients, the HAIC group showed significantly higher OS than the lenvatinib group (median of 7.9 vs 5.4 months, $P = 0.003$). When only considering patients after PSM, REFLECT (+) patients also showed longer OS than REFLECT (-) PSM patients (median of 12.5 vs 7.7 months, $P = 0.006$). Furthermore, longer OS of the HAIC group compared to the lenvatinib group was also observed among REFLECT (-) PSM patients (median of 10.0 vs 5.4 months, $P = 0.004$) (Figure 2B).

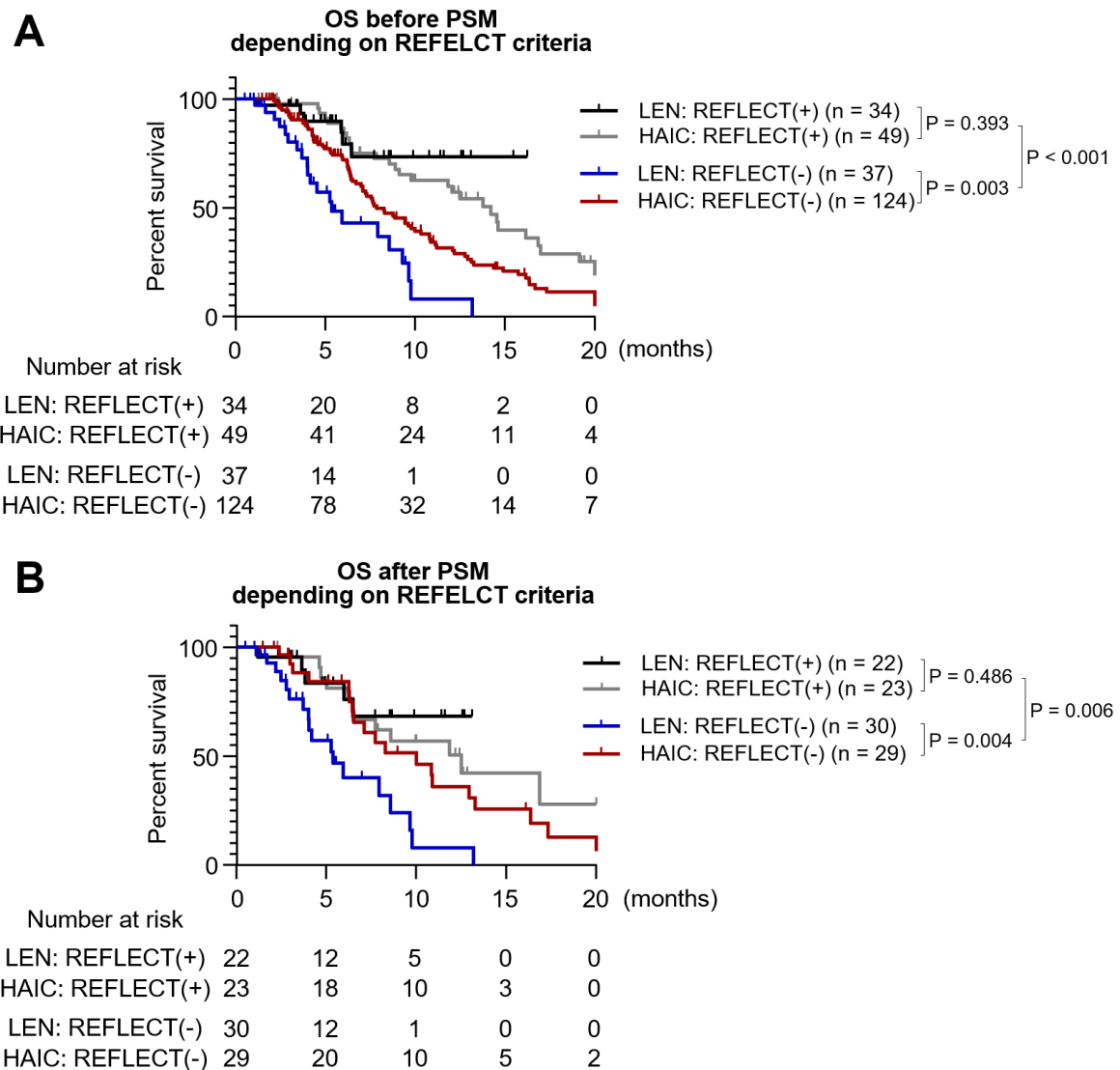


Figure 2. Kaplan–Meier survival curves analyzing OS according to the meeting the RELECT criteria and types of treatment. (A) OS in entire cohort (n = 244). (B) OS in the PSM cohort (n = 104). REFLECT (+) means “meeting the REFLECT criteria”.

3.6. Treatment-related toxicity

Table 4 shows the adverse events, grade ≥ 3 in the lenvatinib and HAIC groups after PSM. Elevation of aspartate aminotransferase was the most common severe adverse event (11/52, 21.2%) in the HAIC group, followed by elevation of alanine aminotransferase (7/52, 13.5%) and hyperbilirubinemia (7/52, 13.5%). In the lenvatinib group, hypertension (5/52, 9.6%), thrombocytopenia (5/52, 9.6%), diarrhea (5/52, 9.6%) and hepatic encephalopathy (5/52, 9.6%) were the most common severe adverse events. Proteinuria was observed in three patients in the lenvatinib group. Overall, the prevalence of severe adverse events was not significantly different between the two groups, with 48.1% (25/52) in the HAIC group and 44.2% (23/52) in the lenvatinib group ($P = 0.694$).

Table 4. Grade ≥ 3 AEs associated with lenvatinib or HAIC treatment after PSM

Adverse event	HAIC (n = 52)	Lenvatinib (n = 52)	P-value
AE grade ≥ 3 (overlapped)	25 (48.1)	23 (44.2)	0.694
HFSR	0 (0)	2 (3.8)	
Hypertension	0 (0)	5 (9.6)	
Nephrotoxicity			
Proteinuria	0 (0)	3 (5.8)	
Elevated creatinine	2 (3.8)	0 (0)	
Hematologic			
Anemia	4 (7.7)	1 (1.9)	
Neutropenia	1 (1.9)	0 (0)	
Thrombocytopenia	2 (3.8)	5 (9.6)	
Laboratory			
Hyperbilirubinemia	7 (13.5)	3 (5.8)	
AST	11 (21.2)	2 (3.8)	
ALT	7 (13.5)	1 (1.9)	
Gastrointestinal			
Nausea/vomiting	3 (5.8)	2 (3.8)	
Diarrhea	2 (3.8)	5 (9.6)	
Decreased appetite	3 (5.8)	2 (3.8)	
Hepatic encephalopathy	3 (5.8)	5 (9.6)	
Fatigue	3 (5.8)	2 (3.8)	
Dyspnea	0 (0)	1 (1.9)	
Abdominal pain	1 (1.9)	0 (0)	

The data are presented as n (%). AE: adverse event, HAIC: hepatic arterial infusion chemotherapy, HFSR: hand foot skin reaction, AST: aspartate aminotransferase, ALT: alanine transaminase

3.7. Liver function after lenvatinib or HAIC

The residual liver function was evaluated using the Child-Pugh score and mALBI in each group following PSM (Table 5). Evaluation of residual liver function was done at the point of which the best treatment response was achieved. For those who had not undergone response evaluation, liver function was reviewed at one month after the drug administration. As a result, 23 (44.2%) patients in the lenvatinib group, and 35 (67.3%) patients in the HAIC group showed Child-Pugh A liver function at the time of best responses, which was significantly higher in the HAIC group ($P = 0.018$). Furthermore, more patients in the HAIC group achieved better liver function by mALBI $\leq 2a$ than those in the lenvatinib group (48.1% vs. 25%, respectively, $P = 0.015$) (Table 5). Overall, HAIC tended to preserve hepatic reserve compared to lenvatinib.

Supplementary Figure S3 shows the survival outcomes between groups with and without subsequent therapy in the PSM cohort. We only considered patients who discontinued the lenvatinib or HAIC therapies ($n = 93$). Forty patients who received lenvatinib or HAIC treatment received subsequent therapy and exhibited a median OS of 10.833 months, which was significantly longer than that of patients without subsequent therapy ($n = 53$; median OS, 6.267 months; $P = 0.033$). The number of patients who underwent subsequent therapy was significantly different between lenvatinib and HAIC groups ($P = 0.015$) (Supplementary Table S1). Fourteen (30.4%) patients in the lenvatinib group and 26 (55.3%) in the HAIC group underwent subsequent therapy. Nivolumab ($n = 4$) was the most common choice for lenvatinib failure patients, whereas sorafenib ($n = 11$) was the most frequently selected drug for subsequent therapy after HAIC treatment.

Table 5. Residual liver function at the time of best treatment response

	Lenvatinib (n = 52)	HAIC (n = 52)	P
Child-Pugh class A	23 (44.2)	35 (67.3)	0.018
mALBI grade $\leq 2a$	13 (25.0)	25 (48.1)	0.015

The data are presented as n (%). Adm, Administration, mALBI, modified albumin-bilirubin

4. Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report to compare the real-world outcomes of lenvatinib and HAIC in patients with unresectable HCC. There was no statistically significant difference in OS and PFS between the lenvatinib and HAIC groups before and after PSM. The REFLECT eligibility criteria included patients with a tumor extent < 50% of the liver volume, absence of main PVTT, and absence of bile duct invasion [3]. In patients beyond the REFLECT eligibility criteria, the HAIC group showed better OS than the lenvatinib group before and after PSM. There was no significant difference in severe adverse events between the two groups. These results suggest that lenvatinib and HAIC have similar efficacy and safety in unresectable HCC; however, selected groups with high intrahepatic tumor burden and PVTT may benefit from HAIC.

The REFLECT trial demonstrated that lenvatinib is not inferior to sorafenib as a first-line treatment in unresectable HCC in terms of OS (HR, 0.9; median of 13.6 months vs. 12.3 months) [3]. In the present study, the REFLECT (+) group showed a mean OS of 14.6 months in the entire cohort and 12.5 months in the PSM cohort, which is consistent with the result from REFLECT trial. Regarding ORR, the total lenvatinib group in our study showed an ORR of 23.9% (by mRECIST), which are compatible with the recent real-world studies [4, 25], and lower than that of REFLECT trial. However, even for REFLECT (+) patients in the present study, they showed ORR of 30.7% (by mRECIST), which is lower than that in REFLECT trial. [3] This may be due to the inclusion of a higher number of treatment-experienced patients in our study.

Regarding liver function following treatment, lenvatinib significantly deteriorated liver function between baseline and week 2 and baseline to week 4, as measured by ALBI grade [26]. Preserved liver function at baseline in sequential treatment following TKI predicted improved prognosis [27], and early decline of liver function was associated with poor prognosis in unresectable HCC [26]. In agreement with this previous study, we observed a tendency for worsening of liver function in the lenvatinib group than in the HAIC group when showing best treatment responses (Child-Pugh A, 44.2% vs. 67.3%; $P = 0.018$, mALBI $\leq 2a$, 25% vs. 48.1%; $P = 0.015$), resulting in a lower rate of inclusion following subsequent therapy in the Lenvatinib group (55.3% vs. 30.4%, $P = 0.015$). We also showed that subsequent treatment following lenvatinib or HAIC was associated with longer OS, which emphasizes the importance of residual function following the treatments. Thus, HCC treatment in patients with poor liver function, such as Child-Pugh B in patients with advanced stage, remains a clinically unmet need. Although it is not generally recommended as a first-line treatment, HAIC is recommended as a therapeutic option for advanced HCC with vascular involvement, especially in the Japanese guidelines [12]. The Taiwanese and Korean guidelines suggest HAIC as an option for selected patients [28, 29]. TKIs, including sorafenib or lenvatinib, are generally used in patients with Child-Pugh A, whereas HAIC can also be used in Child-Pugh B patients. A previous report suggested that HAIC does not significantly reduce liver function in Child-Pugh A patients [30]. Furthermore, HAIC improved liver function in responders when administered in Child-Pugh B patients, which might be linked to the resolution of vascular invasion [31, 32]. Thus, HAIC may have clinical benefits in patients with poor liver function.

Previous studies have investigated the combination or sequential application of TKIs and HAIC. A recent randomized study, the SILIUS trial, compared sorafenib versus sorafenib plus HAIC in patients with unresectable HCC, including extrahepatic metastases [15]. Although there

was no significant difference in OS between the groups, subgroup analyses showed that the combination treatment had a survival benefit in patients with main portal vein invasion [15], which is consistent with other previous reports [16, 33]. Since lenvatinib seems to have a better tumor response rate than sorafenib, future studies are needed to identify the clinical benefit of the combination of lenvatinib and HAIC, especially in patients with vascular invasion. In this regard, a recent retrospective study showed that the lenvatinib, toriplimab, and HAIC combination regimen is superior to lenvatinib alone in terms of PFS and OS [34]. Furthermore, the survival benefit of sequential therapy, both TKI after HAIC failure or HAIC after TKI failure, remains unclear. A retrospective study showed that sorafenib treatment after HAIC failure had a higher survival rate than HAIC alone [35]. In contrast, HAIC improved survival after sorafenib failure [36], which demonstrated the potential role of sequential application of each treatment. Indeed, a previous study highlighted the effect of targeting intrahepatic lesions in prolonging survival following sorafenib treatment [37], and systemic therapies such as regorafenib and nivolumab showed poor responses rates following sorafenib treatment [38]. Therefore, future studies should investigate this sequential strategy in lenvatinib settings. Of note, continuing treatment following lenvatinib failure provided a survival benefit, suggesting that an effective post-progression treatment following lenvatinib failure still needs to be developed [39].

Despite the retrospective design, our study is the first to show comparable clinical outcomes of lenvatinib and HAIC in patients with unresectable HCC, although HAIC had better survival outcomes in selected patient groups. Future large-scale, prospective studies are needed to validate our results.

Supplementary Materials: The following are available online at www.mdpi.com/xxx/

Author Contributions: Pil Soo Sung: study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, manuscript writing, and manuscript approval. Jaejun Lee and Ji Won Han: study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and manuscript writing. Hyun Yang, Soon Kyu Lee, Hee Chul Nam, Sun Hong Yoo, Hae Lim Lee, Hee Yeon Kim, Sung Won Lee: data collection. Jung-Hyun Kwon, Jeong Won Jang, Chang Wook Kim, Soon Woo Nam, Jung Suk Oh, Ho Jong Chun, Si Hyun Bae, Jong Young Choi, Seung Kew Yoon: data interpretation and manuscript approval.

Funding: This research was supported by the Basic Science Research Program through a National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korean government (MSIT) (2021R1C1C1005844 to P.S.S.). This research was also supported by the Basic Science Research Program through a NRF grant funded by the Ministry of Education (NRF-2019R1I1A1A01059642 to P.S.S.).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Catholic University of Korea (approval number: XC21RIDI0008).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was not required, because this research was retrospective study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Acknowledgments: none

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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