



Screening for Hepatocellular Carcinoma

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After graduation from the University of Hong Kong in 1992, Dr MF Yuen has been working in the Department of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong. He started the specialty training of Gastroenterology and Hepatology in 1995. He obtained the degree of Doctor of Medicine (MD) with Sir Patrick Manson Gold Medal in 2001 and the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in 2005. He is now the Associate Professor of Department of Medicine, The University of Hong Kong. He serves as a council member in different organizations including Asia Pacific Hepatitis B Management Advisory Board, Hong Kong Association for the Study of Liver Diseases, and The Hong Kong Society of Gastroenterology. He also serves as reviewer for many international journals including *Gastroenterology*, *Hepatology*, *Gut* and *Journal of Hepatology*.

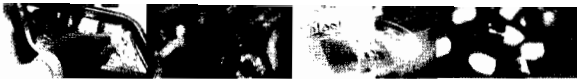
Dr Yuen's research interests are on chronic hepatitis B infection with extensive studies on prevention, natural history, molecular virology and treatment of this disease including treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma. He has already published more than 13 research papers in various international journals. He was awarded the Outstanding Young Researcher Award by The University of Hong Kong in 2005.

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is the fourth most common cancer in the world. The median survival in symptomatic patients is only a few weeks. HCC fulfills most of the 10 criteria for cost-effective screening set up by WHO in 1968. The one issue that remains to be settled is whether the cost of diagnosis and treatment is economically balanced with the whole medical expenditure.

The two screening tests for HCC are ultrasonography and alpha fetoprotein (AFP) levels. Ultrasonography (US) can detect lesions down to 1-2 cm but often cannot distinguish HCC from haemangioma and cirrhotic nodules. In one study the false positive rate was 82.5% with a positive predictive value of 15.1% only¹. AFP as a screening test is also problematic because it is often raised in acute exacerbation of chronic hepatitis². In a case control study it had a sensitivity of 60% and positive predictive value of 25% only³ though combining the US and AFP can increase the sensitivity. At present, they remain the main screening methods because they are convenient, non-invasive and easily assessable. Though earlier studies fail to show improvement in patient management and survival by screening, more recent studies demonstrate that screening can increase the chance of curative treatment and, more importantly, improve survival even after the adjustment of lead-time bias. This is probably due to the improvement in medical treatment and technology.

The interval of surveillance should be around 4-6 months based on the extrapolated growth rate of HCC from a study in Taiwan showing that the most rapid growing tumours take 4.6 months to grow to 3 cm in diameter¹.

The scene for the debate on usefulness/cost-effectiveness of screening for HCC has been set by an Italian study in 1991 which showed that operability of screened HCC (4 out of 29) was lower than that of HCC which were detected incidentally (13 out of 29; $p=0.027$)³. More recent studies are beset by the problem of lack of a prospective control group for ethical and practical reasons. This leads to lead-time bias and length bias. Bearing these biases in mind, four recent studies show that screening for HCC does lead to better chance of treatment and prolonged survival⁶⁻⁹. However while the study of Yuen et al calculated the annual cost to detect one HCC to be US\$1,167, that of Bolondi et al found the cost per treatable HCC to be an unacceptably high US\$17,934. The debate on cost-effectiveness continues. The ultimate answer may depend on the prevalence of the disease in different localities.



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