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Acute Leukemias II

Prognostic Factors
and Treatment Strategies

With 332 Figures and 257 Tables



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Preface

Acute leukemia a quite homogenous disease when untreated reveals a substantial heterogeneity in its response to therapy. While cure is achieved in a certain proportion of patients other cases prove to be highly resistant. The curability is superior in acute lymphoblastic (ALL) than in acute myeloid (AML) leukemia and – within both types – higher in children as compared to adults.

The two age groups and cell types can be further subdivided into prognostic groups by special diagnostic features. Thus, in AML a longer remission duration is associated with the presence of Auer rods, myelomonocytic morphology with increased abnormal eosinophils, inversion of chromosome 16, and translocations of chromosomes 15; 17 and 8; 21 whereas AML after preleukemia, monocytic morphology and abnormalities of chromosomes 5 or 7 predict for earlier relapse. In ALL the common ALL and T-cell phenotype indicate a favourable outcome while B-cell phenotype, a high leukocyte count and translocations of chromosomes 4; 11 and 9; 22 (Philadelphia chromosome) show an unfavourable prognosis. The prognostic significance of some of the factors, however, may differ between different clinical trials and may thus be treatment dependent. Furthermore, their relevance for individual patients remains far from being understood since one patient may experience an early relapse while another patient with identical prognostic factors becomes definitely cured by the same treatment. Thus, a risk-adapted treatment concept as derived from the analysis of patient groups may fail in the individual case due to inadequate treatment intensity or overtreatment ultimately leading to treatment related death.

Risk adapted treatment strategies are well established in childhood ALL where in standard risk patients the high cure rates seem to hold up even after reducing treatment intensity. In AML, in contrast, treatment was gradually intensified in all patients, but

failed to break through the sound barrier of unsatisfactory cure rates even in special subgroups. While new protocols including more effective supportive care show some increase in the initial response rates and certain improvements in the long-term results, no beneficial effect on the relapse rate during the first 1½ years emerged from any of these regimens. Thus, high chances for cure are presently restricted to children with ALL and to lesser proportions children with AML and adults with ALL and AML.

Within these potentially curable subgroups chemotherapy – its intensity and duration – seems to have an important impact and further improvements appear possible by intensive multiple step treatment strategies including autologous bone marrow transplantation or high-dose consolidation chemotherapy. These options may be facilitated by the introduction of recombinant human hematopoietic growth factors which may diminish the limits of myelotoxicity and allow more effective antileukemic treatment.

Adoptive immunotherapy is a new antileukemic principle using immunomodulators and showing promising effects in pre-clinical studies. Similar mechanisms seem to be involved in the graft-versus-leukemia effect in allogeneic bone marrow transplantation.

Since Acute Leukemias I appeared three years ago new approaches have been coming up and relevant data of more established methods are now available. Several multicenter trials helped better understanding the role of major treatment alternatives and led to improved treatment strategies. Numerous valuable contributions from the leading groups in leukemia research provide a most up-to-date state of the art in this second volume of Acute Leukemias.

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Index of Senior Authors

- Adriaansen, H. J., Rotterdam,
The Netherlands 41
- Amadori, S., Rome, Italy 222
- Andreeff, M., New York, USA 747
- Appelbaum, F. R., Seattle, USA
736
- Aul, C., Düsseldorf, FRG 504
- Aur, R. J. A., Riyadh,
Saudi Arabia 382
- Bartram, C. R., Ulm, FRG 17
- Becher, R., Essen, FRG 133
- Beelen, D. W., Essen, FRG 688
- Berrebi, A., Rehovot, Israel 342
- Blume, K. G., Stanford, USA
636
- Bökkerink, J. P. M., Nijmegen,
The Netherlands 110
- Bömelburg, T., Münster, FRG
577
- Borsi, J. D., Trondheim, Norway
118
- Brammer, K. W., Sandwich, UK
546
- Büchner, T., Münster, FRG 261,
724
- Bührer, C., Hannover, FRG 500
- Cassileth, P. A., Philadelphia, USA
267
- Chen, P. M., Taiwan, ROC 712
- Chybicka, A., Wroclaw, Poland
72
- Clarkson, B., New York, USA
397
- Coccia-Portugal, M. A., Pretoria,
Republic of South Africa 318
- Creutzig, U., Münster, FRG 226
- Davis, C. L., London, UK 339
- Dekker, A. W., Utrecht,
The Netherlands 551
- Dicke, K. A., Houston, USA 667
- Donhuijsen-Ant, R., Duisburg,
FRG 362
- Dörffel, W., Berlin-Buch, GDR
494
- Dörmer, P., München, FRG 3
- Douer, D., Tel-Hashomer, Israel
78
- Doxiadis, I., Essen, FRG 62, 709
- Ehninger, G., Tübingen, FRG
316
- v. Eiff, M., Münster, FRG 555
- Essink, M. E., Münster,
FRG 558
- Estey, E. H., Houston, USA 732
- Fengler, R., Berlin, FRG 511
- Fiere, D., Lyon, France 409
- Fink, F. M., Innsbruck, Austria
233
- Fleischer, J., Dresden, GDR 392
- Freund, M., Hannover, FRG 432
- Gale, R. P., Los Angeles, USA
684
- Gattermann, N., Düsseldorf, FRG
374
- Gorin, N. C., Paris, France 660
- Grier, H. E., Boston, USA 193
- Hagemeijer, A., Rotterdam,
The Netherlands 23
- Hagenbeek, A., Rijswijk,
The Netherlands 31
- Harbott, J., Giessen, FRG 451
- Harousseau, J. L., Nantes, France
299
- Hayat, M., Villejuif, France 271
- Heil, G., Ulm, FRG 67
- Heinecke, A., Münster, FRG
285, 290
- Henke, M., Freiburg, FRG 702
- Henze, G., Berlin, FRG 483, 619
- Herrmann, F., Mainz, FRG 717
- Heyll, A., Düsseldorf, FRG 387
- Hiddemann, W., Münster, FRG
604
- Hoelzer, D., Frankfurt, FRG 763
- Huber, Ch., Innsbruck, Austria
652
- Jacobs, P., Cape, South Africa
428

- Janka-Schaub, G. E., Hamburg, FRG 489
- Jehn, U., München, FRG 277, 333
- Jelkmann, W., Lübeck, FRG 83
- Keating, M. J., Houston, USA 593
- Knauf, W. U., Heidelberg, FRG 314
- Koeppler, H., Marburg, FRG 699
- Körbling, M., Heidelberg, FRG 675
- Kraft, J., Essen, FRG 566
- Krehmeier, C., Münster, FRG 129
- Kurrle, E., Ulm, FRG 254
- Kusnierz-Glaz, C., Münster, FRG 351
- Lampkin, B. C., Köln, FRG 310
- Lathan, B., Köln, FRG 295
- Leeuw, J. A., Groningen, The Netherlands 580
- Lie, S. O., Oslo, Norway 215
- Link, H., Hannover, FRG 322, 741
- Linkesch, W., Wien, Austria 330
- Löffler, H., Kiel, FRG 239
- Löwenberg, B., Rotterdam, The Netherlands 655
- Ludwig, W. D., Berlin, FRG 419, 516
- Lutz, D., Vienna, Austria 141
- Marit, G., Pessac, France 614
- Maschmeyer, G., Essen, FRG 525
- Matysiak, M., Warszawa, Poland 587
- Mittler, U., Magdeburg, GDR 571
- Müller, N., Münster, FRG 563
- Neuser, J. Essen, FRG 583
- Niethammer, D., Tübingen, FRG 638
- Nölle, I., Kiel, FRG 145
- Ohno, R., Nagoya, Japan 304
- Oster, W., Mainz, FRG 9
- Petti, M. C., Rome, Italy 249
- Pflueger, K. H., Marburg, FRG 87
- Plunkett, W., Houston, USA 610
- Rees, J. K. H., Cambridge, UK 243
- Reichle, A., München, FRG 159
- Riehm, H., Hannover, FRG 439
- Ritter, J., Münster, FRG 185
- Ritterbach, J., Giessen, FRG 153
- Rohatiner, A. Z. S., London, UK 413
- Rowe, J. M., Rochester, USA 326
- Rubin, M., Bethesda, USA 531
- Runde, V., Düsseldorf, FRG 346
- Sallan, S. E., Boston, USA 459
- Schaefer, U. W., Essen, FRG 649
- Schaison, G., Paris, France 157, 467
- Scharf, R. E., La Jolla, USA 357
- Scheulen, M. E., Essen, FRG 122
- Schipperus, M. R., Rotterdam, The Netherlands 98
- Schrader, C., Hannover, FRG 95
- Schütt, S., Berlin, FRG 56
- Siegert, W., Berlin, FRG 76
- Slater, R. M., Amsterdam, The Netherlands 169
- Slavin, S., Jerusalem, Israel 36
- Steuber, C. P., Houston, USA 198
- Storb, R., Seattle, USA 629
- Suciu, S., Hamburg, FRG 166
- Sullivan, K. M., Seattle, USA 539
- Suttorp, M., Kiel, FRG 368
- Teichmann, J. V., Berlin, FRG 103
- Tsurusawa, M., Aichi-ken, Japan 174
- Urański, T., Szczecin, Poland 137
- Veerman, A. J. P., The Hague, The Netherlands 473
- Verdonck, L. F., Utrecht, The Netherlands 707
- Volkman, M., München, FRG 50
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- Weisdorf, D., Minneapolis, USA 679
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Table of Contents

Leukemia Cell Biology and Basic Science

Myelodysplastic Syndromes: Preleukemic or Early Leukemic Conditions? P. DÖRMER	3
Mechanisms of Autocrine and Paracrine Growth Control in Acute Myelogenous Leukemia W. OSTER, R. MERTELSMANN, and F. HERRMANN	8
Clonal Analysis of Human Leukemias by Molecular Genetic Approaches C. R. BARTRAM and J. W. G. JANSSEN	17
Clinical Relevance of Cytogenetics in Acute Leukemia A. HAGEMEIJER and D. C. VAN DER PLAS	23
Minimal Residual Disease in Acute Leukemia: Lessons Learned from Animal Models A. HAGENBEEK and A. C. M. MARTENS	31
Toward Improvement of Therapeutic Strategies in Leukemia by Amplification of the Immune Response Against Leukemia S. SLAVIN, A. ECKERSTEIN, I. HARDAN, M. BEN SHAHAR, R. OR, E. NAPARSTEK, and L. WEISS	36
Double Marker Analysis for Terminal Deoxynucleotidyl Transferase and Myeloid Antigens in Acute Nonlymphocytic Leukemia Patients and Healthy Subjects H. J. ADRIAANSEN, H. HOOIJKAAS, M. C. KAPPERS-KLUNNE, K. HÄHLEN, M. B. VAN'T VEER, and J. J. M. VAN DONGEN	41
Antigen Receptor Rearrangement and Expression in Acute Leukemias M. VOLKMANN, P. MAR, P. PACHMANN, E. THIEL, and B. EMMERICH	50
Immunoglobulin and T-Cell Receptor Gene Rearrangements in Childhood Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia and Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma S. SCHÜTT, K. SEEGER, C. SCHMIDT, W. SIEGERT, and G. HENZE	56