The last decade has seen major progress in the understanding of non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), with the growing recognition that NSCLC is not a single disease but rather a collection of many different subgroups with identifiable and potentially targetable genetic lesions. The first targetable driver mutations were sensitizing mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain of the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene (1,2), now known to be present in about 10% of NSCLC in Caucasian patients and conferring a high degree of responsiveness to the oral tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) erlotinib and gefitinib (3). A number of prospective clinical trials have now established that EGFR TKIs induce objective responses in about 70% of patients whose tumors harbor mutations, with a significantly increased median progression free survival (PFS) compared to cytotoxic chemotherapy (4). Nonetheless, most of these patients will eventually progress despite TKI therapy, a phenomenon termed acquired resistance (AR).

Acquired resistance to EGFR TKIs can be achieved through a number of different mechanisms. The most common mechanism (50%) is the development of a secondary T790M mutation in exon 20 of the EGFR gene (5). Other less common mechanisms include increased signaling through parallel receptor tyrosine kinases such as the MET (6) and transformation into a small cell phenotype (7). Presumably this heterogeneity of mechanisms would make a single approach unlikely to be successful at overcoming AR, but nonetheless a number of strategies have been proposed and are being tested in randomized trials. One such strategy is the use of second-generation EGFR inhibitors such as XL 647 (Exelixis Inc., San Francisco, CA) and irreversible pan-HER inhibitors such as neratinib (HKI-272; Wyeth/Pfizer, New London, CT), PF00299804 (Pfizer), and afatinib (BIBW 2,992; Boehringer Ingelheim Pharma GmbH, Ingelheim, Germany). Although these agents have shown some ability to inhibit T790M mutant NSCLC in vitro (8,9), evidence of clinical activity of these agents in patients with AR is lacking (10,11).

The LUX-Lung 1 trial was a randomized, double-blind, international phase 2b/3 trial of single agent afatinib versus
placebo in 585 patients with advanced lung adenocarcinoma who had not progressed after at least 12 weeks of treatment with either erlotinib or gefitinib. This study population was intended to represent a clinically defined group with AR to EGFR TKIs, and the primary endpoint was overall survival. Although the response rate (7% versus 0.5%) and PFS (3.3 vs. 1.1 months; P<0.0001) were improved in the afatinib group compared to placebo, there was no difference in median overall survival (OS) between the arms (10.8 months for afatinib vs. 12 months for placebo; P=0.74) (12). Of note, tissue was not required for entry in the study, and as a result only 141 of the 585 pts (24%) had tissue available for analysis. Of those, 68% were found to have EGFR mutations, evenly split between the treatment and control arms. Only 8 patients (4 in the afatinib arm) had identifiable T790M mutations, and no other known mechanisms of AR were tested.

The intent of the study investigators was to test the efficacy of afatinib in patients with EGFR mutant lung cancer who had developed AR, but the way they went about it was problematic. For one thing, they did not require testing for EGFR mutations prior to enrollment, which diluted the study sample with patients with wild-type EGFR who would perhaps be less likely to benefit from an irreversible EGFR TKI. Second, efforts have been made to rigorously define clinical acquired resistance to EGFR TKIs, to allow maximum enrichment of patients in trials such as the LUX-Lung study. The most widely accepted definition is the Jackman definition: prior treatment with a single-agent EGFR TKI and either or both of the following: a tumor that harbors an EGFR mutation or objective clinical benefit from treatment with an EGFR TKI (PR/CR or stable disease for ≥6 months); systemic progression of disease while on continuous treatment with the TKI within the last 30 days; and no intervening systemic therapy between cessation of the TKI and initiation of new therapy (13). By this strict definition only 34% of patients in the afatinib arm (vs. 42% in the placebo arm) would have had true AR, and the magnitude of benefit was indeed numerically higher in this group with a PFS of 4.5 vs. 1 month although not statistically significant.

So are we able to draw any conclusions at all from this trial? The liberal definition of AR, the lack of tissue testing to determine mutational status and mechanisms of resistance, and the high degree of subsequent treatment (68% and 79% in the afatinib and placebo arms) combined to muddy the waters. However, if we extrapolate from the minority of patients with available tissue, then we can assume that most patients had tumors with EGFR mutations and that most had AR of one mechanism or another. If that is the case then this study, along with the prior failure of neratinib to show benefit in this population (11), casts doubt on the strategy of using irreversible EGFR TKIs as monotherapy in patients with AR.

Interestingly, there is preliminary evidence that afatinib has activity in AR, including T790M, when combined with the anti-EGFR antibody cetuximab (Imclone, owned by Eli Lilly and Company, New York, NY and Bristol-Myers Squibb Company, Princeton, NJ) (14). We know that cetuximab combined with erlotinib has no activity in the AR population (15), raising the intriguing idea that irreversible EGFR inhibitors may have promise in AR when combined with other agents. More mature, peer reviewed results from this trial are anxiously awaited. The indisputable lessons from LUX-Lung 1, however, are that future trials in the EGFR TKI acquired resistance population must be rigorous in defining their target population, and that every patient enrolled must have tissue available for molecular testing so that clear conclusions can be made from the results.

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