

High Pretreatment Serum Concentration of Basic Fibroblast Growth Factor Is a Predictor of Poor Prognosis in Small Cell Lung Cancer¹

Tarja Ruotsalainen, Heikki Joensuu, Karin Mattson, and Petri Salven²

Departments of Internal Medicine [T. R., K. M.] and Oncology [H. J.], Helsinki University Central Hospital, FIN-00290 Helsinki, Finland, and Division of Hematology-Oncology, Weill Medical College of Cornell University, New York, New York 10021 [P. S.]

Abstract

Basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF) is a secreted multifunctional cytokine and a potent stimulator of angiogenesis. We measured bFGF concentrations from serum samples taken from 103 patients with small cell lung cancer at the time of diagnosis. Serum concentration of bFGF (S-bFGF) ranged from undetectable to 54 pg/ml (median, 6 pg/ml). S-bFGF was not associated with age, sex, performance status, or stage. A high pretreatment S-bFGF was associated with poor overall survival. The 1- and 2-year survival rates of the patients within the highest quartile of S-bFGF (≥ 17 pg/ml) were only 26% and 11%, respectively, in contrast to the 49% and 20% 1- and 2-year survival rates of those patients with S-bFGF < 17 pg/ml ($P = 0.013$). The 1- and 2-year survival rates of the patients with extensive-stage disease were 33% and 10%, respectively ($P = 0.0091$). Interestingly, S-bFGF provided additional prognostic information to the stage because the 1- and 2-year survival rates of patients with extensive-stage disease and a high S-bFGF (≥ 17 pg/ml) were as low as 16% and 5%, respectively ($P = 0.0026$). Similarly, in the multivariate model of survival analysis, patients with both extensive-stage disease and a high S-bFGF (≥ 17 pg/ml) were found to have a particularly poor prognosis (relative risk of death, 2.1; 95% confidence interval, 1.2–3.6; $P = 0.0057$). We conclude that a high S-bFGF at diagnosis is associated with poor outcome in small cell lung cancer, possibly reflecting active angiogenesis and rapid tumor growth, and may complement prognostic information obtained by staging.

Introduction

Active angiogenesis is a prerequisite for tumor growth beyond a few cubic millimeters in size and also for the dissemination of

cancer (1). Angiogenesis is regulated by a balance of various positive and negative angiogenic molecules (2). bFGF,³ also called fibroblast growth factor-2, is a secreted multifunctional cytokine that acts as a mitogen for endothelial cells and is a potent inducer of angiogenesis *in vivo* (3, 4). The important role of bFGF in tumor angiogenesis has been shown *in vivo* by immunoneutralizing antibodies against bFGF, which inhibit tumor growth in nude mice (5).

High concentrations of bFGF have been detected in the urine or serum of cancer patients (6–12). A high S-bFGF has been found to be associated with a large tumor size in head and neck cancer (13) and with a short tumor volume doubling time in colorectal cancer (14). In CLL, elevated intracellular level of bFGF correlates with stage, and it is also associated with resistance to chemotherapy (15). Recently, we found that a high pretreatment S-bFGF level is a strong predictor of poor prognosis in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (16, 17). We now wanted to study the possible predictive value of S-bFGF in SCLC, and we measured bFGF concentrations from serum samples taken from 103 patients with SCLC at the time of the diagnosis.

Materials and Methods

Patients. S-bFGF was measured in 103 patients with histologically proven SCLC diagnosed and treated in the Department of Internal Medicine, Helsinki University Central Hospital, between 1990 and 1998. The patients had been participating in a randomized clinical trial to assess the therapeutic value of IFN given concomitantly with chemotherapy and as maintenance therapy (18). The patients were included in the present study if a frozen serum sample taken at the time of the diagnosis and before cancer treatment was available. All patients were treated with combination chemotherapy, consisting of 6 cycles of cisplatin (70 mg/m²) i.v. on day 1 every 28 days and etoposide (100 mg/m²) i.v. on days 1, 2, and 3 every 28 days. The patients were randomly assigned to receive chemotherapy alone or 3×10^6 IU i.m. natural leukocyte IFN (Finnferon-Alpha; Finnish Red Cross, Helsinki, Finland) or recombinant IFN- α -2a (Roceron-A, Roche, Basel, Switzerland) concomitantly with chemotherapy from day 1 of cycle 1 until discontinuation of all cancer treatment. In the event of progression at the locoregional site or brain metastases, chemotherapy was stopped, and the patient was treated with radiotherapy, whereas in the event of progression elsewhere, the patient was offered second-line chemotherapy consisting of epirubicin (75 mg/m²) and ifosfamide (4–5 g/m²) i.v. on day 1 every 28 days, to a maximum of 6 cycles. Seventy-one (69%) of the patients were men, and the median age was 58 years (range, 41–78 years). Physical examination, a chest X-ray, computed tomography scan, and

Received 1/25/02; revised 1/25/02; accepted 7/5/02.

The costs of publication of this article were defrayed in part by the payment of page charges. This article must therefore be hereby marked *advertisement* in accordance with 18 U.S.C. Section 1734 solely to indicate this fact.

¹ Supported by grants from the Sigrid Juselius Foundation, the Finnish Medical Foundation, the Maud Kuistila Memorial Foundation, and the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation.

² To whom requests for reprints should be addressed, at Division of Hematology-Oncology, Weill Medical College of Cornell University, 1300 York Avenue, Room C-606, New York, NY 10021. Phone: (212) 746-2017; Fax: (509) 692-0650; E-mail: pjs2004@med.cornell.edu; petri.salven@helsinki.fi.

³ The abbreviations used are: bFGF, basic fibroblast growth factor; S-bFGF, serum concentration(s) of bFGF; SCLC, small cell lung cancer; RR, relative risk; CI, confidence interval; CLL, chronic lymphocytic leukemia.

Table 1 Univariate survival analyses of 103 SCLC patients

Cumulative survival from the diagnosis was computed using the product-limit method. The Wilcoxon test was used to compare the different groups.

Factor	12-Month survival	24-Month survival	P
WHO performance status			
0	63%	23%	0.0010
1-4	26%	13%	
Stage			
Limited disease	58%	30%	0.0091
Extensive disease	33%	10%	
S-bFGF at diagnosis			
<17 pg/ml	49%	20%	0.013
≥17 pg/ml (the highest quartile)	26%	11%	
Age at diagnosis (yrs)			
≤58	48%	21%	0.23
>58 (Median)	37%	14%	
Sex			
Female	50%	22%	0.57
Male	39%	16%	
Stage & S-bFGF			
Limited-stage disease & <17 pg/ml	59%	31%	0.0026
Extensive-stage disease & ≥17 pg/ml	16%	5%	

routine laboratory tests were performed before randomization. Two (2%) of the patients had stage I disease at diagnosis, 1 (1%) had stage II disease at diagnosis, 37 (36%) had stage III disease at diagnosis, and 63 (61%) had stage IV disease at diagnosis. Stages from I to III were considered "limited disease" ($n = 40$; 39%), and stage IV (with distant metastasis) was classified as "extensive disease." During the first year of follow-up, 55 (53%) patients died, and by the end of the second year, 85 (83%) patients had succumbed. All surviving patients were followed-up longer than for 24 months.

Serum Samples and bFGF Immunoassay. Peripheral venous blood samples were taken before treatment. The samples were collected in sterile test tubes, centrifuged at $2000 \times g$ for 10 min, and then stored at -20°C . S-bFGF concentrations were determined as S-bFGF immunoreactivity using a quantitative sandwich enzyme immunoassay technique (Quantikine High Sensitivity Human Fibroblast Growth Factor Basic Immunoassay; R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN) as described previously (16). The system uses a solid phase monoclonal antibody and an enzyme-linked polyclonal antibody raised against recombinant human bFGF. For each analysis, $100 \mu\text{l}$ of serum were used. All analyses and calibrations were carried out in duplicate. The calibrations on each microtiter plate included recombinant human bFGF standards. Optical densities were determined using a microtiter plate reader (Multiscan RC Type 351; Labsystems, Helsinki, Finland) at 490 nm. The blank was subtracted from the duplicate readings for each standard and sample. A standard curve was created by plotting the logarithm of the mean absorbance of each standard versus the logarithm of the cytokine concentration. Concentrations are reported as pg/ml. No association was found between the length of the storage and the bFGF concentration ($P > 0.1$; Mann-Whitney test). This result is in agreement with our earlier findings (16) and suggests that serum samples can be safely stored at -20°C for at least 8 years (the study period) without a significant decline in bFGF immunoreactivity.

Statistical Analysis. Statistical analyses were done using the software package StatView 5.01 (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC). The Mann-Whitney test was used to compare S-bFGF concen-

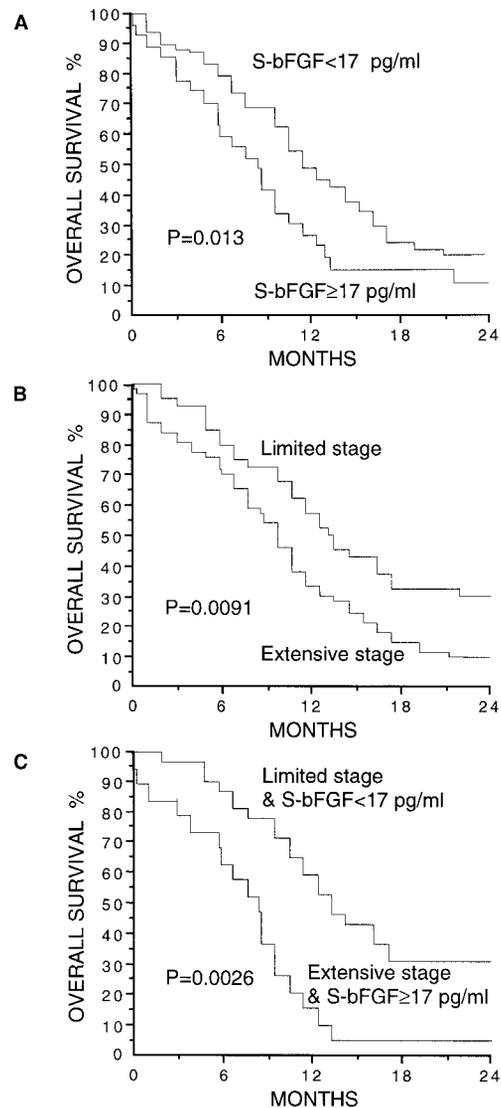


Fig. 1. Overall survival of 103 patients with SCLC by pretreatment S-bFGF (A), stage (B), and the combination of S-bFGF and stage (C). The highest quartile (serum bFGF ≥ 17 pg/ml) was used as the cutoff value.

trations in different groups. Cumulative survival was computed according to the product-limit method of Kaplan-Meier from the date of the diagnosis. The Wilcoxon test was used to compare survival of the different subgroups of patients. The relative influence of different variables on survival was studied in multivariate survival analyses using the proportional hazards model of Cox. All P s are two-tailed.

Results

S-bFGF in Patients at Diagnosis. S-bFGF concentrations ranged from undetectable to 54 pg/ml (median, 6 pg/ml; mean, 11 pg/ml) among the 103 patients with SCLC. One-fourth of the patients had S-bFGF ≥ 17 pg/ml (the highest quartile). The S-bFGF were not associated with age at diagnosis (tested $>$ median \leq , 58 years), the WHO performance status (0 versus 1-4), stage (limited versus extensive), or sex ($P > 0.05$ for all comparisons).

Table 2 Multivariate survival analyses of 103 SCLC patients

The proportional hazards model of Cox was used.

Factor	RR (e^{β})	95% CI for RR	P
Stage			
Extensive disease	1.8	1.1–2.8	0.02
S-bFGF at diagnosis			
≥ 17 pg/ml (the highest quartile)	1.5	0.9–2.4	0.09
WHO performance status			
1–4	1.4	0.9–2.2	0.12
Extensive stage disease & S-bFGF ≥ 17 pg/ml	2.1	1.2–3.6	0.0057

S-bFGF and Overall Survival. Several factors correlated strongly with overall survival in univariate survival analyses in the present series (Table 1). Patients with a high S-bFGF at diagnosis had inferior overall survival in comparison with those with lower pretreatment concentration of S-bFGF. The 1- and 2-year survival rates of the patients within the highest quartile of S-bFGF concentrations (S-bFGF ≥ 17 pg/ml) were only 26% and 11%, respectively, in contrast to the 49% and 20% 1- and 2-year survival rates of those patients with S-bFGF < 17 pg/ml ($P = 0.013$; Fig. 1, Table 1). The 2-year survival rate of patients with extensive-stage disease was 10%, in comparison with the 30% 2-year survival rate of the patients with limited-stage disease ($P = 0.0091$; Table 1; Fig. 1). Interestingly, S-bFGF appeared to provide additional prognostic information to the stage because the 2-year survival rate of patients with both a high S-bFGF (≥ 17 pg/ml) and extensive-stage disease ($n = 19$) was as low as 5%, in contrast to the 31% 2-year survival rate of those 32 patients with both a low S-bFGF and limited-stage disease ($P = 0.0026$; Table 1; Fig. 1).

S-bFGF in Multivariate Survival Analyses. To find out whether high pretreatment S-bFGF has an independent influence on survival, it was entered in multivariate analyses together with performance status and stage. In the proportional hazards model of Cox, extensive stage surfaced as the only factor having independent influence on survival (the RR of death (e^{β}), 1.8; 95% CI, 1.1–2.8; $P = 0.02$; Table 2). However, similar to the results of the univariate analyses, S-bFGF provided additional prognostic information to the stage in the multivariate model of survival as well. The highest independent prognostic power in the model was obtained when stage and S-bFGF were combined: again, the patients with extensive-stage disease and high S-bFGF (≥ 17 pg/ml) were found to have a particularly poor prognosis (RR, 2.1; 95% CI, 1.2–3.6; $P = 0.0057$; Table 2).

Discussion

We found a high pretreatment S-bFGF to be associated with unfavorable survival in SCLC patients. S-bFGF was not correlated to stage or any other clinicopathological feature, except overall survival. It is of particular interest that in SCLC, S-bFGF may complement the prognostic information obtained by staging because combining the stage and S-bFGF enabled us to identify a subgroup of SCLC patients with particularly poor outcome. These results are in agreement with those we obtained in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (16, 17) and suggest that a high S-bFGF level may reflect active angiogenesis and rapid tumor growth. Interestingly, in a recent study, Song *et al.* (19) found that elevated levels of bFGF in the conditioned medium of solid and metastatic tumors induced broad spectrum resistance to

cancer drugs with diverse structures and action mechanisms (paclitaxel, doxorubicin, and 5-fluorouracil). Inhibition of bFGF by monoclonal antibody and its removal by immunoprecipitation resulted in complete reversal of the chemoresistance, and an inhibitor of bFGF (suramin) enhanced the *in vitro* and *in vivo* activity of chemotherapy, resulting in shrinkage and eradication of well-established human lung metastases in mice without enhancing toxicity. Similarly, in CLL, elevated intracellular level of bFGF is associated with resistance to chemotherapy (15).

The source of bFGF in the serum samples of our patients remains unknown. It is possible that bFGF in sera of SCLC patients is released mainly by malignant cells or by a combination of cancer cells and normal cells including the endothelial cells and peripheral blood cells. S-bFGF may alternatively be produced by normal cells under deregulated stimulation by malignant cells. Peripheral blood megakaryocytes and platelets (20), mononuclear cells (21), T cells (22, 23), macrophages (24), and granulocytes (20) have the capacity to produce bFGF. In CLL, elevated intracellular levels of bFGF are found in the CLL cells, and a high intracellular bFGF level in the CLL cells is associated with a high stage of the disease (15). In a transgenic mouse fibrosarcoma model, there is a change in the localization of bFGF from its normal cell-associated state to extracellular release in the later stages of the multistep development of fibrosarcoma. This change is concomitant with the neovascularization seen *in vivo*. Thus, in this multistep tumorigenesis pathway, there appears to be a discrete switch to the angiogenic phenotype that correlates with the export of bFGF (25). In a tumor-bearing mouse model, the origin of elevated bFGF levels in the urine was found to be almost exclusively from tumor cells (26). In agreement with this finding, *i.v.* administered bFGF has been found to distribute preferentially to the kidneys and the liver (27). In a study in colorectal cancer, bFGF concentrations in blood taken from mesenteric vein draining the tumor were more than 4-fold higher than those in the peripheral blood of the same patients (8). These data suggest that a large proportion of circulating bFGF in cancer patients may be derived from the tumor.

Several antiangiogenic molecules are already in preclinical and clinical testing, and their influence on angiogenic factors in serum and clinical outcome now needs to be studied. It will be of particular interest to see whether serum angiogenic factors can be used as a monitor of antiangiogenic cancer therapy. S-bFGF may be associated with outcome in many different types of human cancer in addition to lymphoma (16, 17) and SCLC because angiogenesis is required for growth and dissemination of all cancers. bFGF may also be an interesting target for antiangiogenic cancer therapy in SCLC.

References

- Folkman, J. Angiogenesis in cancer, vascular, rheumatoid and other disease. *Nat. Med.*, 1: 27–31, 1995.
- Hanahan, D., and Folkman, J. Patterns and emerging mechanisms of the angiogenic switch during tumorigenesis. *Cell*, 86: 353–364, 1996.
- Friesel, R. E., and Maciag, T. Molecular mechanisms of angiogenesis: fibroblast growth factor signal transduction. *FASEB J.*, 9: 919–925, 1995.
- Bikfalvi, A., Klein, S., Pintucci, G., and Rifkin, D. B. Biological roles of fibroblast growth factor-2. *Endocr. Rev.*, 18: 26–45, 1997.
- Hori, A., Sasada, R., Matsutani, E., Naito, K., Sakura, Y., Fujita, T., and Kozai, Y. Suppression of solid tumor growth by immunoneutralizing monoclonal antibody against human basic fibroblast growth factor. *Cancer Res*, 51: 6180–6184, 1991.
- Dirix, L. Y., Vermeulen, P. B., Pawinski, A., Prove, A., Benoy, I., De Pooter, C., Martin, M., and Van Oosterom, A. T. Elevated levels of the angiogenic

cytokines basic fibroblast growth factor and vascular endothelial growth factor in sera of cancer patients. *Br. J. Cancer*, 76: 238–243, 1997.

7. Cronauer, M. V., Hittmair, A., Eder, I. E., Hobisch, A., Culig, Z., Ramoner, R., Zhang, J., Bartsch, G., Reissigl, A., Radmayr, C., Thurnher, M., and Klocker, H. Basic fibroblast growth factor levels in cancer cells and in sera of patients suffering from proliferative disorders of the prostate. *Prostate*, 31: 223–233, 1997.
8. Landriscina, M., Cassano, A., Ratto, C., Longo, R., Ippoliti, M., Palazzotti, B., Crucitti, F., and Barone, C. Quantitative analysis of basic fibroblast growth factor and vascular endothelial growth factor in human colorectal cancer. *Br. J. Cancer*, 78: 765–770, 1998.
9. Chodak, G. W., Hospelhorn, V., Judge, S. M., Mayforth, R., Koepfen, H., and Sasse, J. Increased levels of fibroblast growth factor-like activity in urine from patients with bladder or kidney cancer. *Cancer Res.*, 48: 2083–2088, 1988.
10. Nguyen, M., Watanabe, H., Budson, A. E., Richie, J. P., Hayes, D. F., and Folkman, J. Elevated levels of an angiogenic peptide, basic fibroblast growth factor, in the urine of patients with a wide spectrum of cancers. *J. Natl. Cancer Inst. (Bethesda)*, 86: 356–361, 1994.
11. O'Brien, T. S., Smith, K., Cranston, D., Fuggle, S., Bicknell, R., and Harris, A. L. Urinary basic fibroblast growth factor in patients with bladder cancer and benign prostatic hypertrophy. *Br. J. Urol.*, 76: 311–314, 1995.
12. Ugurel, S., Rapp, G., Tilgen, W., and Reinhold, U. Increased serum concentration of angiogenic factors in malignant melanoma patients correlates with tumor progression and survival. *J. Clin. Oncol.*, 19: 577–583, 2001.
13. Leunig, A., Tauber, S., Spaett, R., Grevers, G., and Leunig, M. Basic fibroblast growth factor in serum and urine of patients with head and neck cancer. *Oncol. Rep.*, 5: 955–958, 1998.
14. Dirix, L. Y., Vermeulen, P. B., Hubens, G., Benoy, I., Martin, M., De Pooter, C., and Van Oosterom, A. T. Serum basic fibroblast growth factor and vascular endothelial growth factor and tumour growth kinetics in advanced colorectal cancer. *Ann. Oncol.*, 7: 843–848, 1996.
15. Menzel, T., Rahman, Z., Calleja, E., White, K., Wilson, E. L., Wieder, R., and Gabrilove, J. Elevated intracellular level of basic fibroblast growth factor correlates with stage of chronic lymphocytic leukemia and is associated with resistance to fludarabine. *Blood*, 87: 1056–1063, 1996.
16. Salven, P., Teerenhovi, L., and Joensuu, H. A high pretreatment serum basic fibroblast growth factor concentration is an independent predictor of poor prognosis in non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. *Blood*, 94: 3334–3339, 1999.
17. Salven, P., Orpana, A., Teerenhovi, L., and Joensuu, H. Simultaneous elevation in the serum concentrations of the angiogenic growth factors VEGF and

bFGF is an independent predictor of poor prognosis in non-Hodgkin lymphoma: a single-institution study of 200 patients. *Blood*, 96: 3712–3718, 2000.

18. Mattson, K., Niiranen, A., Pyrhönen, S., Riska, H., Maasilta, P., Halme, M., Jekunen, A., Sarna, S., and Cantell, K. Concomitant chemotherapy (CT) and interferon α (IFN α) for SCLC. *Proc. Am. Soc. Clin. Oncol.*, 14: 370, 1995.
19. Song, S., Wientjes, M. G., Gan, Y., and Au, J. L. Fibroblast growth factors: an epigenetic mechanism of broad spectrum resistance to anticancer drugs. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 97: 8658–8663, 2000.
20. Brunner, G., Nguyen, H., Gabrilove, J., Rifkin, D. B., and Wilson, E. L. Basic fibroblast growth factor expression in human bone marrow and peripheral blood cells. *Blood*, 81: 631–638, 1993.
21. Gu, X. F., Bikfalvi, A., Chen, Y. Z., Caen, J. P., and Han, Z. C. Constitutive and selective expression of basic fibroblast growth factor in human leukaemia cell lines. *Eur. J. Haematol.*, 55: 189–194, 1995.
22. Peoples, G. E., Blotnick, S., Takahashi, K., Freeman, M. R., Klagsbrun, M., and Eberlein, T. T lymphocytes that infiltrate tumors and atherosclerotic plaques produce heparin-binding epidermal growth factor-like growth factor and basic fibroblast growth factor: a potential pathologic role. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 92: 6547–6551, 1995.
23. Blotnick, S., Peoples, G. E., Freeman, M. R., Eberlein, T. J., and Klagsbrun, M. T lymphocytes synthesize and export heparin-binding epidermal growth factor-like growth factor and basic fibroblast growth factor, mitogens for vascular cells and fibroblasts: differential production and release by CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ T cells. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 91: 2890–2894, 1994.
24. Kuwabara, K., Ogawa, S., Matsumoto, M., Koga, S., Clauss, M., Pinsky, D. J., Lyn, P., Leavy, J., Witte, L., Joseph-Silverstein, J., *et al.* Hypoxia-mediated induction of acidic/basic fibroblast growth factor and platelet-derived growth factor in mononuclear phagocytes stimulates growth of hypoxic endothelial cells. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, 92: 4606–4610, 1995.
25. Kandel, J., Bossy-Wetzel, E., Radvanyi, F., Klagsbrun, M., Folkman, J., and Hanahan, D. Neovascularization is associated with a switch to the export of bFGF in the multistep development of fibrosarcoma. *Cell*, 66: 1095–1104, 1991.
26. Soutter, A. D., Nguyen, M., Watanabe, H., and Folkman, J. Basic fibroblast growth factor secreted by an animal tumor is detectable in urine. *Cancer Res.*, 53: 5297–5299, 1993.
27. Hondermarck, H., Courty, J., Boilly, B., and Thomas, D. Distribution of intravenously administered acidic and basic fibroblast growth factors in the mouse. *Experientia (Basel)*, 46: 973–974, 1990.

High Pretreatment Serum Concentration of Basic Fibroblast Growth Factor Is a Predictor of Poor Prognosis in Small Cell Lung Cancer

Tarja Ruotsalainen, Heikki Joensuu, Karin Mattson, et al.

Cancer Epidemiol Biomarkers Prev 2002;11:1492-1495.

Updated version Access the most recent version of this article at:
<http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/content/11/11/1492>

Cited articles This article cites 27 articles, 12 of which you can access for free at:
<http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/content/11/11/1492.full#ref-list-1>

Citing articles This article has been cited by 8 HighWire-hosted articles. Access the articles at:
<http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/content/11/11/1492.full#related-urls>

E-mail alerts [Sign up to receive free email-alerts](#) related to this article or journal.

Reprints and Subscriptions To order reprints of this article or to subscribe to the journal, contact the AACR Publications Department at pubs@aacr.org.

Permissions To request permission to re-use all or part of this article, use this link
<http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/content/11/11/1492>.
Click on "Request Permissions" which will take you to the Copyright Clearance Center's (CCC) Rightslink site.