Application of the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle for managing immune-related adverse events

Satoshi Hibi (✉ shibi@hospy.or.jp)

Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Yuko Shirokawa

Department of Nursing, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Kengo Nanya

Department of Clinical Laboratory Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Yuko Kato

Medical Social Consultation Room, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Nobuto Ito

Department of Pharmacy, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Takae Kataoka

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Takashi Yoshida

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Yoshiaki Marumo

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Satoshi Kayukawa

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Shu Yuasa

Department of Pharmacy, Nagoya Memorial Hospital

Kenji Ina

Shinseikai Dai-ichi Hospital

Research article

Keywords: immune checkpoint inhibitor, immune-related adverse event, Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, emergency room, quality improvement, multidisciplinary team

Posted Date: February 8th, 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-970795/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Journal of Analytical Oncology on December 12th, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.30683/1927-7229.2021.10.06>.

Abstract

Background

Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) sometimes cause immune-related adverse events (irAEs), the timing of occurrence of which is difficult to predict. We created a system to safely manage the patients treated with ICIs who visit hospital during an emergency.

Methods

We utilized the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle method to improve the quality of countermeasures for irAEs in the emergency room. First, an icon showing the patients treated with ICIs was developed for inclusion in electronic medical records. Second, ICI-specified urgent sets of clinical laboratory tests were prepared to cover the spectrum of irAEs. Third, a direct call system to either the attending physician or the chemotherapy team was established. A flow chart for managing irAEs has been prepared since September 2018. We retrospectively analyzed the electronic medical records from September 2018 to December 2020 to determine the effectiveness of the developed system.

Results

In the first cycle of PDCA, 24 patients administered ICIs were retrospectively surveyed and seven visited the emergency room. Six cases were examined according to the flow chart, whereas the other patient complaining of grade 2 diarrhea were not examined because of incomplete knowledge regarding ICIs and irAEs. As part of the “Act” step, we reminded the doctors of the flow chart and gave a lecture to the residents on how to manage irAEs. During the second and seventh cycle, no cases were observed without consulting the flow chart.

Conclusions

Quality improvement activities for the management of irAEs were conducted using the PDCA cycle methodology. Patients on ICIs are now being continuously monitored to further improve management quality.

Background

Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) have revolutionized cancer therapy and significantly prolonged the survival of patients with the specific types of cancer¹⁻⁵. However, these inhibitors can also trigger autoimmune reactions referred to as immune-related adverse events (irAEs), and include skin rash, enterocolitis, pneumonitis, and endocrine disorders^{6, 7}.

With expansion in the approved uses of ICIs for many types of cancer, irAEs have been observed in multiple organs during or even after the end of ICI treatment. Because general physicians as well as

medical oncologists encounter patients treated with ICIs in the clinical setting, managing such patients has become common practice in the emergency room (ER).

Therefore, we aimed to improve the quality of chemotherapy involving ICI and management of these patients during emergency visits. We utilized the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle method^{8, 9}, which has been reported as useful for improving quality management of infectious disease, but not in cancer medicine.

Methods

A pilot study was conducted to investigate the medical records of patients treated with ICIs who visited ER from February 2016 to December 2017. The chemotherapy team exchanged opinions with the doctors who encountered these patients. Through this survey, the following points were noted.

Sharing information on the administration history of ICIs during an emergency visit is crucial.

Detection of irAEs, particularly endocrine disorders, based on patient complaints of symptoms is difficult.

Residents who typically have a first approach for patients in the ER are unfamiliar with either ICI treatment or irAEs.

There is no consultation system regarding irAEs when the attending physician is off duty.

These problems were reviewed by the chemotherapy team, and the PDCA cycle was implemented as follows.

Plan

(P) An icon should be included in the electronic medical records to show which patients are currently or were previously administered ICIs.

(P) ICI-specified urgent sets of clinical laboratory tests should be performed to cover the spectrum of irAEs.

(P) A direct call system should be made, starting with the attending physician or chief doctor of the same department, followed by the chemotherapy team.

(P) This information should be disseminated to all medical staff.

Do

(D) We developed an icon for inclusion in electronic medical records to show which patients were treated with ICIs (Figure 1).

(☒) Urgent sets of clinical laboratory tests were prepared through collaboration of the chemotherapy team and Department of Medical Safety Management (Table 1a).

(☒) A flow chart of the direct call system was prepared in September 2018 (Figure 2).

(☒) We informed all medical staff of the flow chart at the doctors' office and head nurses' committee and disseminated the chart using the local network system.

Check

(☒) These plans are assessed every 4 months by investigating the electronic medical records of patients who visited the ER.

Act

(☒) The assessment is reviewed by the chemotherapy team. Any new or unresolved concerns are incorporated into the next cycle to improve the process.

Results

The ICIs used in Nagoya Memorial Hospital are listed in **Table 2**. Our preliminary survey before planning the PDCA cycle revealed that 32 patients were treated with ICIs and 4 patients had emergency visits. Residents first saw these patients at the ER and then consulted with a senior doctor on duty or chief physicians. These cases were handled appropriately without incident; however, there was a request for a system tool to describe the administration history of ICIs. As a plan for the PDCA cycle, an icon showing which patients had been treated with ICIs was included in the electronic medical records in September 2018 based on the request (Figure 1). This icon is shown on the top window of the medical record, and can be immediately recognized by the medical staff. Second, ICI-specified urgent sets of clinical laboratory tests were prepared to cover the spectrum of irAEs (Table 1a). Third, the flow chart of a direct call system was prepared (Figure 2). We informed all doctors and nurses of this flow chart at the doctors' office and head nurses' committee and disseminated this information using the local network system.

In the first cycle of PDCA between September and December 2018, 24 patients were treated with ICIs and seven visited the hospital because of an emergency. The reasons for visiting the ER were infection in two cases, irAEs in two cases, disease burden in two cases, and tumor pain in one case. Six cases were evaluated according to the flow chart, whereas one case with grade 2 diarrhea was not examined at the emergency department because knowledge on ICIs and irAEs was incomplete. We reminded the doctors to use this flow chart at doctors' office committee again, and gave a lecture to residents who encountered patients in the emergency department on the importance of irAEs and how to manage these patients. From the second to seventh cycle of the PDCA, some patients had emergency visits in each cycle (**Table 3**), and all patients were appropriately handled according to the manual.

Through discussion with the multidisciplinary chemotherapy team, we applied countermeasures for earlier detection of irAEs. First, we created an irAE-specific test set in February 2018 which was performed periodically before and after starting ICI treatment (Table 1b, 1c). In the fourth cycles of PDCA (September to December 2019), the rates of ICI-specific testing were examined for each department; the rates before and after introduction of the irAE-specific test set were compared. Before initiating ICI treatment, the check rate of thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH), free triiodothyronine (FT₃), free thyroxine (FT₄), and Krebs von der Lungen-6 (KL-6) was 92%, which was the same as before introduction of the test set (Table 4). The check rates of hemoglobin A1c (HbA1c), cortisol, and adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) increased from 62–89%, 69–100%, and 46–100%, respectively. After initiating ICI treatment, the check rates of TSH, FT₃, and FT₄ were the same (92%), and those of KL-6, surfactant protein D (SP-D), and HbA1c improved from 54–65%, 46–54%, and 54–62% (Table 5), but were not sufficient even after introduction of irAE-specific test set. These results indicate that doctors were generally not aware that irAEs, including endocrine disorders, can occur at any time. Therefore, continuous monitoring was initiated by the chemotherapy team to check the implementation of the irAE-specific test. If the test set was not scheduled by doctors, the chemotherapy team reminded the attending doctors to order a test set every month. In the “Act” step of the PDCA, we gave a lecture to new residents and continuous monitoring was performed by the chemotherapy team.

In the fifth cycle (January to April 2020), 26 patients were administered ICIs and 3 patients visited the hospital for an emergency. The reasons for visiting the ER were tumor burden in one case and underlying disease burden in two cases. The implementation rates of irAE-specific testing gradually increased to 89% for TSH, FT₃, and FT₄; 78% for KL-6 and SP-D; and 67% for HbA1c. The doctors intentionally did not order these tests each month because health insurance may not cover the cost of ICI-specific testing once per month. Accordingly, we encouraged the physicians to implement ICI-specific testing every other month. In addition, based on academic society reports^{10–12}, cortisol, ACTH, and general urine tests were added to the follow-up test set.

In the sixth cycle (n=27), six patients visited the ER for infection in five cases and an irAE in one case. One patient with an irAE had grade 3 adrenal insufficiency and was treated according to the manual, leading to hospitalization. In the seventh cycle (n=26), six patients visited the ER for infection in one case, irAE (grade 1 diarrhea) in one case, tumor burden in 2 cases, and underlying disease burden in 2 cases.

Discussion

We aimed to improve the quality of treatment with ICIs using the PDCA cycle method. Although there are several reports on using the PDCA cycle method to improve the quality management of infectious disease^{8, 9}, few are available in the oncology field.

Guidelines for managing irAEs are available in western countries^{13, 14}. As irAEs can occur at any time, either during treatment with ICIs or even after discontinuation of treatment, the patients must be continuously and closely monitored^{6, 7}. In addition, the indication for ICI therapy has been extensively

expanded, increasing the number of patients being administered ICIs. Therefore, more patients treated with ICIs are expected to visit the hospital for emergencies. In our hospital, residents inexperienced in cancer medicine often have a first approach to such patients in the ER. To improve the quality irAE management, four countermeasures were planned and implemented in the first cycle of the PDCA. In analyzing the first cycle of the PDCA, we found that a patient complained of grade 2 diarrhea during visits to the ER at night, and returned home only with symptomatic treatment but no specific examinations or consultations with a senior doctor. As this incident was mainly caused by the resident's lack of awareness of irAEs, several lectures were held to inform the residents of how to manage irAEs as the "Act" step.

From September 2018 to December 2020, ICIs were administered to 46 patients with cancer in outpatient settings. Among them, 28 patients developed irAEs as shown in Table 6. Three patients were directly admitted to our hospital because of grade 3 irAEs such as anorexia, vomit, acute renal failure and adrenal insufficiency. All patients eventually recovered from the irAEs because of the early diagnosis and treatment. Two patients with severe-grade irAEs, pneumonitis and type 1 fulminant diabetes mellitus, did not come to the ER but rather attended outpatient consultation appointments. A patient had developed grade 4 pneumonitis by the time he had been consulted on his reserved outpatient day and was hospitalized. Considering these cases, patients should be also educated on irAEs and the importance of undergoing medical examination as soon as possible before developing a severe condition. Moreover, three patients consulted their family doctors before visiting our hospital; thus, to manage patients with cancer being administered ICIs, it is important to share information and cooperate with local clinics.

Conclusions

We conducted quality improvement activities with a multidisciplinary team for managing irAEs, particularly in cases of emergency visits. Successful management of irAEs should involve early diagnosis and close monitoring of patients administered ICIs. Use of the PDCA cycle method will contribute to improving the quality and security of ICI treatment.

Abbreviations

ICI
immune checkpoint inhibitor
irAE
immune-related adverse event
PDCA cycle
Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle
ER
emergency room
TSH
thyroid-stimulating hormone

FT₃
free triiodothyronine
FT₄
free thyroxin
KL-6
Krebs von der Lungen-6
HbA1c
hemoglobin A1c
SP-D
surfactant protein D
ACTH
adrenocorticotrophic hormone

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The protocol of this study was approved by the ethics committee of Nagoya Memorial Hospital (approval No. 2021-007) and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

SH, KI wrote the manuscript. SH reviewed the medical records. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Authors' information

Affiliations

Department of Pharmacy, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: shibi@hospy.or.jp

Satoshi Hibi

Department of Nursing, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: milklemon300@yahoo.co.jp

Yuko Shirokawa

Department of Clinical Laboratory, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: nanya@hospy.or.jp

Kengo Nanya

Medical Social Work Consultation Room, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: tomomatsu@hospy.or.jp

Yuko Kato

Department of Pharmacy, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: n.ito.kinenn@gmail.com

Nobuto Ito

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: t-kataoka@hospy.or.jp

Takae Kataoka

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: ysdtk@yahoo.co.jp

Takashi Yoshida

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: ymarumo.35.home@gmail.com

Yoshiaki Marumo

Department of Clinical Oncology, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: kayu_kawa@yahoo.co.jp

Satoshi Kayukawa

Department of Pharmacy, Nagoya Memorial Hospital, 4-305 Hirabari, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-8520, Japan

E-mail: s-yuasa@hospy.or.jp

Shu Yuasa

Shinseikai Dai-ichi Hospital, 1302 Takamiya-cho, Tenpaku-ku, Nagoya, 468-0031, Japan

E-mail: kina@hospy.or.jp

Kenji Ina

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Tables

Table 1a Urgent set of clinical laboratory tests.

disease	examination
thyroid disease	TSH, FT ₃ , FT ₄
interstitial lung disease	KL-6, SP-D, chest X-ray
diabetes mellitus	HbA1c
adrenal insufficiency hypophysitis	cortisol, ACTH
myocarditis	ECG

Table 1b Test set before starting ICI treatment.

disease	examination
thyroid disease	TSH, FT ₃ , FT ₄
interstitial lung disease	KL-6, SP-D, chest X-ray
diabetes mellitus	HbA1c
adrenal insufficiency hypophysitis	cortisol, ACTH
myocarditis	ECG

Table 1c Test set after starting ICI treatment.

disease	examination
thyroid disease	TSH, FT ₃ , FT ₄
interstitial lung disease	KL-6, SP-D
diabetes mellitus	HbA1c

ICI: immune checkpoint inhibitor, TSH: thyroid-stimulating hormone, FT₃: free triiodothyronine, FT₄: free thyroxine; KL-6: Krebs von der Lungen-6, HbA1c: hemoglobin A1c, SP-D: surfactant protein D; ACTH: adrenocorticotrophic hormone, ECG: electrocardiogram

Table 2 Immune checkpoint inhibitors that have been used at Nagoya Memorial Hospital.

Mechanism	Generic name	Malignancy	Medical department
Anti-PD-1 antibodies	Nivolumab	Lung	Pulmonology
		Gastric	Medical Oncology
		Lymphoma	Clinical Oncology
		Renal	Urology
	Pembrolizumab	Lung	Pulmonology
		Bladder	Medical Oncology
Anti-PD-L1 antibodies	Atezolizumab	Lung	Pulmonology
	Durvalumab	Lung	Pulmonology

Anti-PD-1 antibody: anti- programmed cell death 1 antibody

Anti-PD-L1 antibody: anti- programmed cell death-ligand 1 antibody

Table 3 Check of PDCA cycle.

PDCA cycle	duration	patient number on ICI	case number of consultation	diagnosis of consultation	diagnosis of irAE	case number of irAE in hospitalization
first	from September to December 2018	24	7	infection(2) irAE(2) tumor burden(2) tumor pain(1)	diarrhea (grade2), vomiting and anorexia (grade3)	1
second	from January to April 2019	24	7	infection(3) irAE(2) tumor pain(1) cough(1)	adrenal insufficiency (grade2), nausea (grade1)	0
third	from May to August 2019	25	5	infection(2) irAE(1) tumor burden(1) underlying disease burden(1)	acute renal failure (grade3)	1
fourth	from September to December 2019	25	5	irAE(1) tumor burden(3) tumor pain(1)	skin eruption (grade2)	0
fifth	from January to April 2020	26	3	tumor burden(1) underlying disease burden(2)		0
sixth	from May to August 2020	27	6	infection(5) irAE(1)	adrenal insufficiency (grade3)	1
seventh	from September to December 2020	26	6	infection(1) irAE(1) tumor burden(2) underlying disease burden(2)	diarrhea (grade1)	0

Table 4 Check rates of ICI-specific test before starting treatment and comparison between pre- and post-introduced ICI-specific set.

examination	patient number before n=13 after n=26	total (%)	Pulmonology (%)	Urology (%)	Medical Oncology (%)
TSH	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	94	100	100
FT ₃	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	94	100	100
FT ₄	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	94	100	100
KL-6	pre-introduced	92	100	75	100
	post-introduced	92	100	60	100
SP-D	pre-introduced	77	83	50	100
	post-introduced	73	60	100	100
HbA1c	pre-introduced	62	50	67	67
	post-introduced	89	89	60	100
Cortisol	pre-introduced	69	100	75	0
	post-introduced	100	100	100	100
ACTH	pre-introduced	46	100	0	33
	introduced	100	100	100	100
Chest X-ray	pre-introduced	100	100	100	100
	introduced	100	100	100	100
ECG	pre-introduced	69	83	25	100
	introduced	92	89	100	100

Table 5 Check rates of ICI-specific test after starting treatment and comparison between pre- and post-introduced ICI-specific set.

examination	patient number before n=13 after n=26	total (%)	Pulmonology (%)	Urology (%)	Medical Oncology (%)
TSH	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	100	80	100
FT ₃	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	100	80	100
FT ₄	pre-introduced	92	100	100	67
	post-introduced	92	100	80	100
KL-6	pre-introduced	54	67	25	100
	post-introduced	65	50	80	100
SP-D	pre-introduced	46	67	0	67
	post-introduced	54	56	80	100
HbA1c	pre-introduced	54	17	75	67
	post-introduced	62	56	100	100

Table 6 Immune-related adverse events in outpatient setting from September 2018 to December 2020.

disease	examination
thyroid disease	TSH, FT ₃ , FT ₄
interstitial lung disease	KL-6, SP-D, chest X-ray
diabetes mellitus	HbA1c
adrenal insufficiency hypophysitis	cortisol, ACTH
myocarditis	ECG

Figures

Figure 1

Figure 1

Electronic medical record icon showing patients treated with ICIs

Figure 2

1. Ensure the administration history of ICIs based on the icon in the electronic records.
2. Carry out urgent sets of clinical examination if the patient has a symptom of irAE and consult with a senior doctor on duty.

In case of difficulty in the management of patients on ICIs,

- ① Consult the attending physician or a chief doctor in the same department
- ② Consult doctors on the chemotherapy team (two medical oncologists) without hesitation

Figure 2

Flow chart of direct call system to manage irAEs