Nasopharyngeal carcinoma in Malaysia: A path toward better outcomes

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ABSTRACT
It is over 50 years since the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), the first human cancer virus, was discovered. EBV remains the most common persistent viral infection globally, with approximately 95% of the world's population sustaining an asymptomatic life-long infection. Its strongest cancer association is with undifferentiated nasopharyngeal carcinoma (NPC), a malignancy endemic to southern China and Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, where the Bidayuh people have the highest incidence rates in the world. Indeed, many unique characteristics of NPC could be attributable to the virus. The presence of EBV in virtually all tumour cells of NPC provides unique opportunities for biomarker and therapeutic intervention, including immunotherapy and interventions aimed at EBV-driven pathways. Plasma EBV DNA, in particular, has emerged as a valuable tool for post-treatment surveillance and disease monitoring. Immune checkpoint inhibitors, especially PD-1/PD-L1 blockers, are now being used to treat NPC, particularly in recurrent or metastatic settings. However, in Malaysia, the use of these approaches is still limited due to cost and access issues. This presentation will provide an overview of current NPC management in Malaysia, highlight emerging treatment options, and suggest practical ways to improve patient outcomes.

Keywords: Nasopharyngeal carcinoma, epstein-barr virus, NPC, EBV, Malaysia