EFFECTS OF PEMBROLIZUMAB ON THE TUMOR MICROENVIRONMENT (TME) AFTER ONE PRESURGERY TREATMENT CYCLE IN PATIENTS WITH TRIPLE-NEGATIVE BREAST CANCER (TNBC): PHASE 1B KEYNOTE-173 STUDY

¹Peter Schmid*, ²Yeon Hee Park, ³Eva Muñoz-Couselo, ⁴Sung-Bae Kim, ⁵Joohyuk Sohn, ⁶Seock-Ah Im, ⁷Esther Holgado, ⁸Theodoros Foukakis, ⁹Sherko Kümmel, ¹⁰Rebecca Dent, ¹¹Yuan Sun, ¹²Lingkang Huang, ¹³Jennifer Yearley, ¹⁴Petar Jelinic, ¹⁵Vassiliki Karantz, ¹⁶Javier Cortés. ¹Centre for Experimental Cancer Medicine, London, UK; ²Samsung Medical Center, Seoul, Korea, Republic of; ³Vall d'Hebron Institute of Oncology (VHIO), Barcelona, Spain; ⁴Asan Medical Center, University of Ulsan College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea, Republic of; ⁵Yonsei Cancer Center, Yonsei University College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea, Republic of; ⁶Seoul National University Hospital, Cancer Research Institute, Seoul National University College of Medicine, Seoul, Korea, Republic of; ⁷Ramón y Cajal University, Madrid, Spain; ⁸Karolinska Institutet and Breast Cancer Center, Theme Cancer, Karolinska University Hospital, Solna, Sweden; ⁹Kliniken Essen-Mitte, Essen, Germany; ¹⁰International Breast Cancer Center Quironsalud Group, Singapore, Singapore; ¹¹Merck and Co., Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, USA

Background In the phase 3 KEYNOTE-522 trial, neoadjuvant pembrolizumab+chemotherapy followed by adjuvant pembrolizumab monotherapy resulted in a statistically significant improvement in pathologic complete response (pCR) and event-free survival, compared with neoadjuvant chemotherapy alone, in patients with early-stage TNBC. In the phase 1b KEYNOTE-173 (NCT02622074) trial—another neoadjuvant pembrolizumab+chemotherapy trial—we evaluated TNBC biopsy samples at baseline and collected after one cycle of neoadjuvant pembrolizumab, before the initiation of chemotherapy, to explore the features within the TME at both time-points that might be potentially predictive of clinical response and the effects of a single cycle of pembrolizumab on cell populations within the TME.

Methods Twenty paired samples (baseline and obtained following one cycle of pembrolizumab before the initiation of chemotherapy) were included. Multiplex immunohistochemistry analyzed deconvoluted cell fractions by spatial localization (tumor compartment, stromal compartment, or total tumor) using three 6-plex panels: T cell (CD3/CD8/FoxP3/Ki67/granzyme B/PD-1), myeloid cell (CD68/CD163/MHCII/arginase/CD33/CD11c), and natural killer cell (CD16/CD56/CD11b/CD20/CD3/CD45). Area under the receiver operating characteristic (AUROC) was used to assess associations between immune subsets and pCR. Analyses were descriptive, with top-ranked findings reported, and were deemed hypothesis generating; no claims of statistical significance are made.

Results At baseline, 6 of 75 evaluated immune subsets (counting different compartments) showed 95% CIs of AUROC not crossing 0.5 with pCR. These include some myeloid cell populations within the tumor compartment (AUROC, 95% CI), specifically CD11c⁺ (macrophage and dendritic cell [DC]: 0.85, 0.63–1.00), CD11c⁺/MHCII⁺/CD163⁺/CD68⁺ (DC: 0.76, 0.53–0.99), CD11c⁺/MHCII⁺/CD163⁺/CD68⁺ (nonactivated/immature DC: 0.8, 0.54–1.00), and CD11c⁺/CD163⁺ (M2 macrophage: 0.77, 0.55–0.99). Other associations with pCR included baseline CD11c⁺/MHCII⁺/CD163⁺/CD68⁺ (non-activated/immature DC) within the total tumor (AUROC, 0.76; 95% CI, 0.51–1.00) and the baseline ratio of CD11c/CD3 within the tumor compartment (AUROC, 0.75; 95% CI, 0.52–0.98). Although T-cell associations were relatively weak, specific CD8 subsets, especially CD8⁺/granzyme B⁺/Ki67⁺, showed a trend toward association. Negative correlations between change from baseline and baseline values were observed; therefore, baseline detrending was applied to change

from baseline values. One immune subset showed a negative association trend between change from baseline and pCR after baseline detrending: CD163⁺/MHCII⁺ (DC3) within the stroma (AUROC, 0.2; 95% CI, 0.0–0.42).

Conclusions Although the sample size in this exploratory analysis was small (n=20), myeloid cell populations within the tumor compartment at baseline show a promising association trend, as evaluated by AUROC, with pCR after neoadjuvant pembrolizumab+chemotherapy in early-stage TNBC. Changes in immune subsets following one cycle of pembrolizumab were not strongly associated with pCR.

Trial Registration ClinicalTrials.gov, NCT02622074

Ethics Approval The study protocol and all amendments were approved by the relevant institutional review board or ethics committee at each study site.

Consent All patients provided written informed consent to participate in the clinical trial.

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