

Reply to 'Comment on 'Efficacy and toxicity of treatment with the anti-CTLA-4 antibody ipilimumab in patients with metastatic melanoma after prior anti-PD-1 therapy''

Samantha Bowyer^{1,2}, Prashanth Prithviraj^{3,4}, Paul Lorigan⁵, James Larkin⁶, Grant McArthur⁷, Victoria Atkinson⁸, Michael Millward^{2,9}, Muoi Khou¹⁰, Stefan Diem⁶, Sangeetha Ramanujam¹¹, Ben Kong¹⁰, Elizabeth Liniker¹¹, Alexander Guminski¹¹, Phillip Parente¹², Miles C Andrews^{3,4}, Sagun Parakh³, Jonathan Cebon^{3,4}, Georgina V Long^{10,11,13}, Matteo S Carlino^{10,11,13} and Oliver Klein^{*,3,4}

¹Rockingham General Hospital, Perth, Western Australia, Australia; ²School of Medicine and Pharmacology, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Western Australia, Australia; ³Department of Medical Oncology, Olivia Newton-John Cancer Centre, Austin Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ⁴Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ⁵The Christie NHS Foundation Trust and University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; ⁶Royal Marsden Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK; ⁷Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ⁸Princess Alexandra Hospital, Greenslopes Private Hospital, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; ⁹Department of Medical Oncology, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, Nedlands, Western Australia, Australia; ¹⁰Westmead Hospital, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; ¹¹Melanoma Institute Australia, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia; ¹²Box Hill Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia and ¹³University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Sir,

We have read with great interest the correspondence from Imafuku *et al.* The authors provide further evidence that sequential treatment of anti-PD-1 blockade followed by the application of the anti-CTLA-4 antibody ipilimumab is associated with an increased rate of severe immune-related toxicity (Danlos *et al.*, 2015; Khoja *et al.*, 2015; Aya *et al.*, 2016; Bowyer *et al.*, 2016; Furudate *et al.*, 2016). This contrasts with the reverse treatment sequence where no increased frequency of immune-related adverse events has been observed (Weber *et al.*, 2015; Ribas *et al.*, 2016). The observations of Imafuku *et al.* suggest that the timing between the administration of the last dose of an anti-PD-1 antibody and the first dose of ipilimumab is a critical factor with all patients who experienced high-grade immune-related toxicity, having received their first dose of ipilimumab within 1 month after the last administration of an anti-PD-1 antibody. In our patient cohort, the median time interval between therapies has been 32 days in patients who developed severe autoimmune toxicity vs 46 days in patients without toxicity, a difference that was statistically not significant. It should also be remembered that a high receptor occupancy is achieved after only a single dose of an anti-PD-1 antibody that persists for several months so that the turnover of PD-1 expressing immune cell populations may also be important in determining the immunological outcome next to the half-life of the antibody itself (Brahmer *et al.*, 2010). The sequence in which PD-1 and CTLA-4 molecules are engaged on effector T cells also leads to vastly different gene expression profiles and one may propose to distinct immunological outcomes providing a potential explanation why differences in immune-related toxicity can be observed depending on the treatment sequence of checkpoint regulators (Das *et al.*, 2015).

Imafuku *et al.* did not present any efficacy data, but it should be emphasised that treatment with ipilimumab after anti-PD-1 failure has significant clinical activity with an objective response rate of 10–15%, which is in keeping with the treatment experience of ipilimumab in anti-PD-1 therapy naive patients. This has recently been confirmed in a larger data set of patients who received ipilimumab after progression on pembrolizumab in the Keynote-006 clinical trial (Long *et al.*, 2016).

Overall, these data highlight that ipilimumab is a treatment option after progression on anti-PD-1 therapy and patients should be closely monitored for immune-related adverse events, particularly, if anti-CTLA-4 therapy is initiated shortly after the last application of an anti-PD-1 agent. An ongoing randomised clinical trial (NCT02731729) will provide prospective data regarding the efficacy and toxicity of single-agent ipilimumab therapy, or combination therapy of ipilimumab and nivolumab in patients who progress on anti-PD-1 therapy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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*Correspondence: Dr O Klein; E-mail: oliver.klein@onjcri.org.au

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