Interferon Alpha Gel for Herpes zoster

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A considerable medical scandal concerning an antiviral agent was publicized in Japan in November 1993 [1]. Several patients died following treatment with a combination of anticancer agents and the antiviral agent which had already been approved by the government. At around the same time, we encountered a patient with hepatocellular carcinoma who presented a severe herpes zoster infection after having received various kinds of anticancer therapy including intravenous drugs. Despite our earnest persuasion, the patient refused any available antiviral agent. We then prepared a gel ointment (10,000 U/g) from interferon α (n-IFN-α, Namalwa®, Sumitomo Pharmaceutical Company, Osaka, Japan) and applied 5 g to the affected area every day by puncturing each vesicle. Four days later, the vesicles were completely eliminated, and the redness of the skin subsided. The patient was thus cured without any side-effects. We have used this gel in 7 other patients who gave their consent. A similar effect was obtained in all but one with this gel (table 1). Thus, although not very effective in relieving pain, the interferon gel shortens the period for vesicles to disappear and can be a safe therapy for herpes zoster infection. Several studies [2-5] have discussed interferon injection therapy but have not been put into practice because the higher doses of interferon raise concern over side-effects [4, 5] and cost. In our method, a much lower dose is given percutaneously which was nevertheless very effective. Therapy for herpes zoster infection may become even safer and easier to administer.

References
Table 1. Patient details and clinical courses

HCC = Hepatocellular carcinoma; -= no obvious diseases were detected; LC = liver cirrhosis; GC = postoperative state of gastric cancer, L = Left; R = right; is = intercostal space.
1 This patient had acyclovir (500 mg/day) administered intravenously for 7 days following coating of interferon gel for 3 days. The vesicles completely disappeared 8 days after the start of acyclovir treatment.
2 Gastric cancer was detected with upper intestinal endoscopy.
3 This patient was given interferon gel ointment for 4 days following acyclovir treatment (500 mg/day) for 5 days. The vesicles and pain had not disappeared in the period of acyclovir treatment.

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