

A critical historical review shows mismatch between available evidence and related international guidelines recommendations: the case of advanced oesophageal cancer

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Background

In the case of advanced oesophageal cancer (AOC) patients, whose prognosis is very poor, most clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) recommend the use of anticancer drugs over best supportive care (BSC) alone, but these recommendations may not have taken into account all the available evidence.

Objective

To assess the agreement over the last 40 years between available evidence and related CPGs regarding treatments with anticancer drugs versus BSC alone for AOC.

Methods

We conducted a historical review in three phases: **1)** After conducting an overview of systematic reviews (SR) and confirming that no SR existed to address our research question, we conducted a new SR to identify all relevant randomised clinical trials (RCTs) that evaluated anticancer drugs versus BSC alone for AOC; **2)** We identified the most relevant international CPGs from ESMO, ASCO, and NICE; **3)** We compared whether the recommendations proposed in the CPGs were supported by the previously identified RCTs.

Results

We identified 15 relevant RCTs. The first two were published in the late 1980s but it was not until 20 years later that new studies were published. We retrieved 11 relevant international CPGs: eight from ESMO, two from ASCO, and one from NICE, published between 2005 and 2023. None of the CPGs referenced the identified RCTs, and instead, they considered other evidence not directly related to the clinical question (Figure 1).

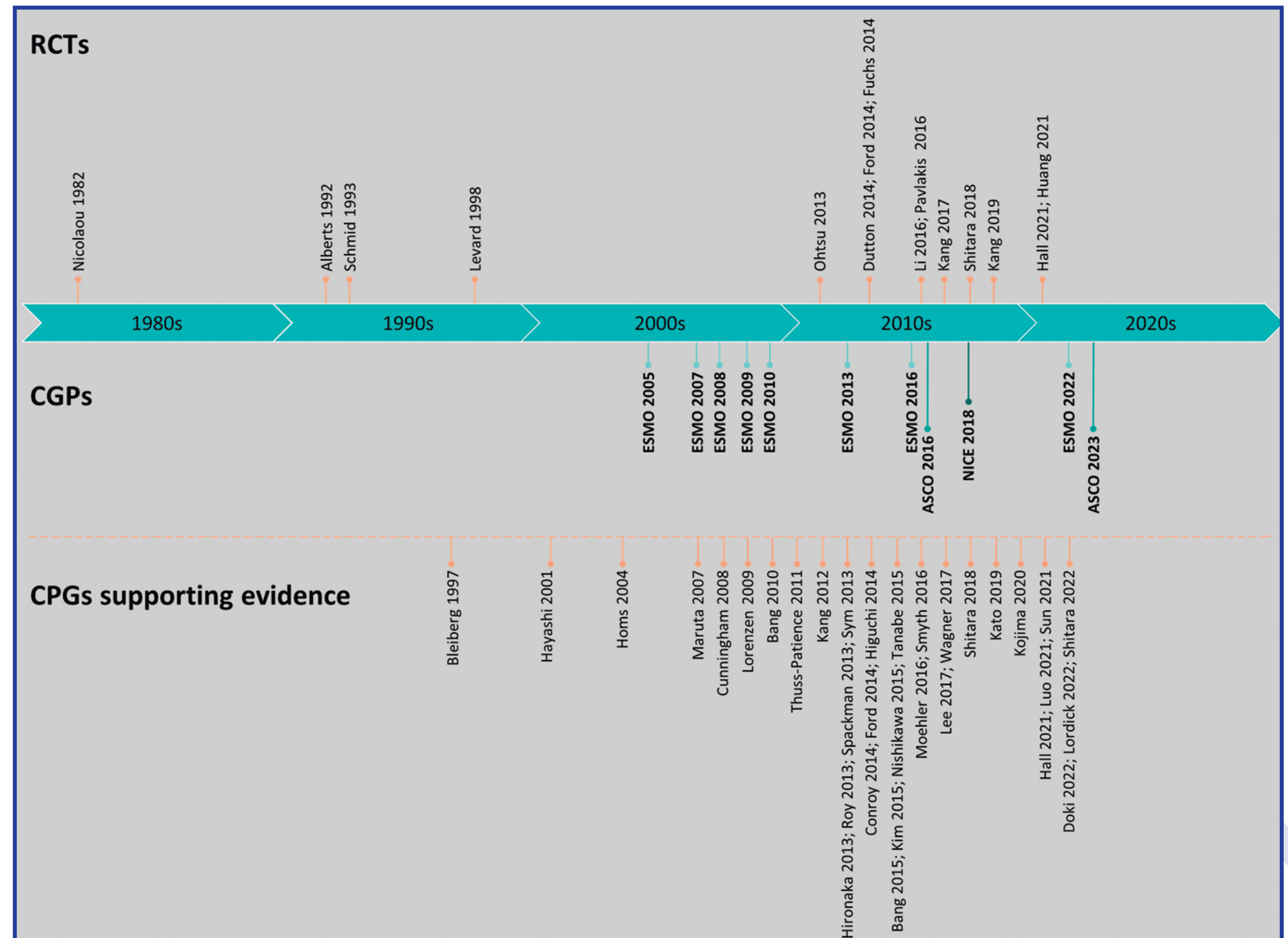


Figure 1: Timeline reflecting RCTs, CPGs and their supporting evidence for advanced oesophageal cancer (1980-2023)

Conclusions

There is a mismatch between relevant research and the evidence considered by CPGs for making their recommendations about anticancer drugs versus BSC alone for AOC. This mismatch could have biased the formulation of recommendations towards favouring the use of anticancer drugs over the BSC alone.

Relevance and importance to patients

AOC patients should be aware that anticancer drugs proposed to them may not be fully supported by the available evidence, even if they are recommended by relevant international CPGs. This lack of concordance could lead to inappropriate overtreatment, that is, the prescription of unnecessary treatments with an uncertain ratio of benefits and harms.