

Azacitidine-induced remission enables allogeneic transplantation in *TET2/BCOR*-mutant relapsed extranodal natural killer/T-cell lymphoma: a case report

Extranodal NK/T-cell lymphoma (ENKTL) remains one of the most lethal lymphomas in the relapsed/refractory setting. Asparaginase-based chemotherapy and, more recently, immune checkpoint inhibitors have improved outcomes, but there is no established standard of care for patients who are refractory to both asparaginase-based regimens and PD-1/PD-L1 blockade.

Recent genomic studies have underscored the high prevalence of alterations affecting epigenetic regulators including *TET2*, *BCOR*, *KMT2D*, and *ARID1A*, highlighting epigenetic deregulation as a central feature of ENKTL pathogenesis and a potential therapeutic vulnerability. Although preclinical work has shown that hypomethylating agents (HMA) can restore silenced differentiation programs and induce tumor regression in ENKTL models,¹ clinical evidence supporting their use remains sparse. We report what appears to be the first case of relapsed ENKTL with co-occurring *TET2* and *BCOR* mutations achieving a complete remission with azacitidine (AZA) monotherapy, enabling subsequent allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (allo-HSCT). A 47-year-old woman of Middle Eastern origin presented to Geneva University Hospitals (Geneva, Switzerland) with progressive, painless swelling of the upper eyelid and ptosis. Orbital magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed left-sided enhancing extraconal masses. A biopsy confirmed Epstein-Barr virus (EBV)-positive ENKTL (CD56⁺, cytoplasmic CD3ε⁺, CD5⁻, granzyme B⁺, TIA1⁺) (Figure 1A). Baseline [18F]-FDG positron emission tomography/computed tomography (PET/CT) showed disease confined to the orbits. Plasma EBV DNA was 9.4x10³ IU/mL, and both bone marrow and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analyses were negative. Her prognostic index of natural killer lymphoma-Epstein-Barr virus DNA (PINK-E) score was 2, indicating intermediate-risk disease.² The patient provided written general research consent. Ethics approval was not required for this anonymized single case report under the Swiss Human Research Act (HRA).

The patient received four cycles of SMILE chemotherapy: intravenous (IV) methotrexate (2 g/m² on day 1), ifosfamide (1.5 g/m²/day IV on days 2–4), etoposide (100 mg/m²/day IV on days 2–4), dexamethasone (40 mg/day on days 2–4), and L-asparaginase (6,000 IU/m²/day IV on days 8–17). This was followed by radiotherapy, and a complete metabolic response was achieved with EBV clearance (Figure 1B). Fourteen months later, she relapsed with an orbital recurrence. Salvage therapy with pembrolizumab combined with two cycles of GELOX (IV gemcitabine [1,000 mg/

m² on days 1 and 8], oxaliplatin [130 mg/m² IV on day 1], and L-asparaginase [6,000 IU/m²/day IV on days 1–7]) was administered, followed by radiotherapy with concurrent pembrolizumab and cisplatin. Despite these treatments, the disease progressed with leptomeningeal dissemination and bone marrow involvement. High-dose cytarabine with pembrolizumab, additional radiotherapy, and intrathecal cytarabine plus methotrexate produced only transient normalization of CSF parameters without neurological improvement (Figure 1B).

Targeted next-generation sequencing of diagnostic biopsies using a limited 27-gene panel identified pathogenic mutations in epigenetic regulators, including a clonal *TET2* missense variant (c.5704T>A, p.Tyr1902Asn) affecting the dioxygenase catalytic domain and a splice-site *BCOR* mutation (c.4071+1G>A). Subsequent analysis of the relapse sample using a broader 400-gene panel confirmed the persistence of the *TET2* variant and identified a truncating *BCOR* mutation (c.1570dup; p.Ser524LysfsTer33), whereas the initial splice-site *BCOR* variant was no longer detected, consistent with clonal heterogeneity during disease progression (Table 1). Together, these alterations are expected to impair 5-methylcytosine oxidation and disrupt PRC1.1-mediated repression, respectively, leading to marked epigenetic dysregulation.³

Given the co-occurrence of *TET2* and *BCOR* mutations and reports of AZA responsiveness in *TET2*-mutant T-cell lymphomas,⁴ off-label AZA was initiated at 75 mg/m² subcutaneously on days 1–7 of a 28-day cycle, together with weekly intrathecal cytarabine. Treatment was well tolerated, with grade 2 fatigue, mild injection-site erythema, and one episode of transient grade 3 neutropenia. Following a single cycle, plasma EBV DNA became undetectable, neurological symptoms resolved, CSF cleared, and PET/CT at day 28 showed a complete metabolic remission (Figure 1C). This therapeutic response was confirmed by the absence of detectable NK/T cells in the bone marrow. Notably, no somatic variants were detected in this sample, arguing against the presence of a dominant ancestral clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential (CHIP) clone in this patient within the analytical sensitivity of the assay. A second AZA cycle was given as bridging therapy before myeloablative conditioning (fludarabine 120 mg/m² and total body irradiation 10 Gy) and allo-HSCT from an HLA-matched sibling.

The post-transplant course was complicated by grade 2 acute graft-versus-host disease of the skin and gastrointes-

tinal tract, controlled with prednisone and later ruxolitinib. EBV viremia reappeared on day +70, followed by systemic relapse on day +133. Reintroduction of AZA was ineffective in the context of massive marrow infiltration and secondary

hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis, and the patient died on day +160. Notably, we observed the persistence of *TET2* and *BCOR* mutations at lower allele frequencies (approx. 4%) in the post-transplant relapse biopsy, together with

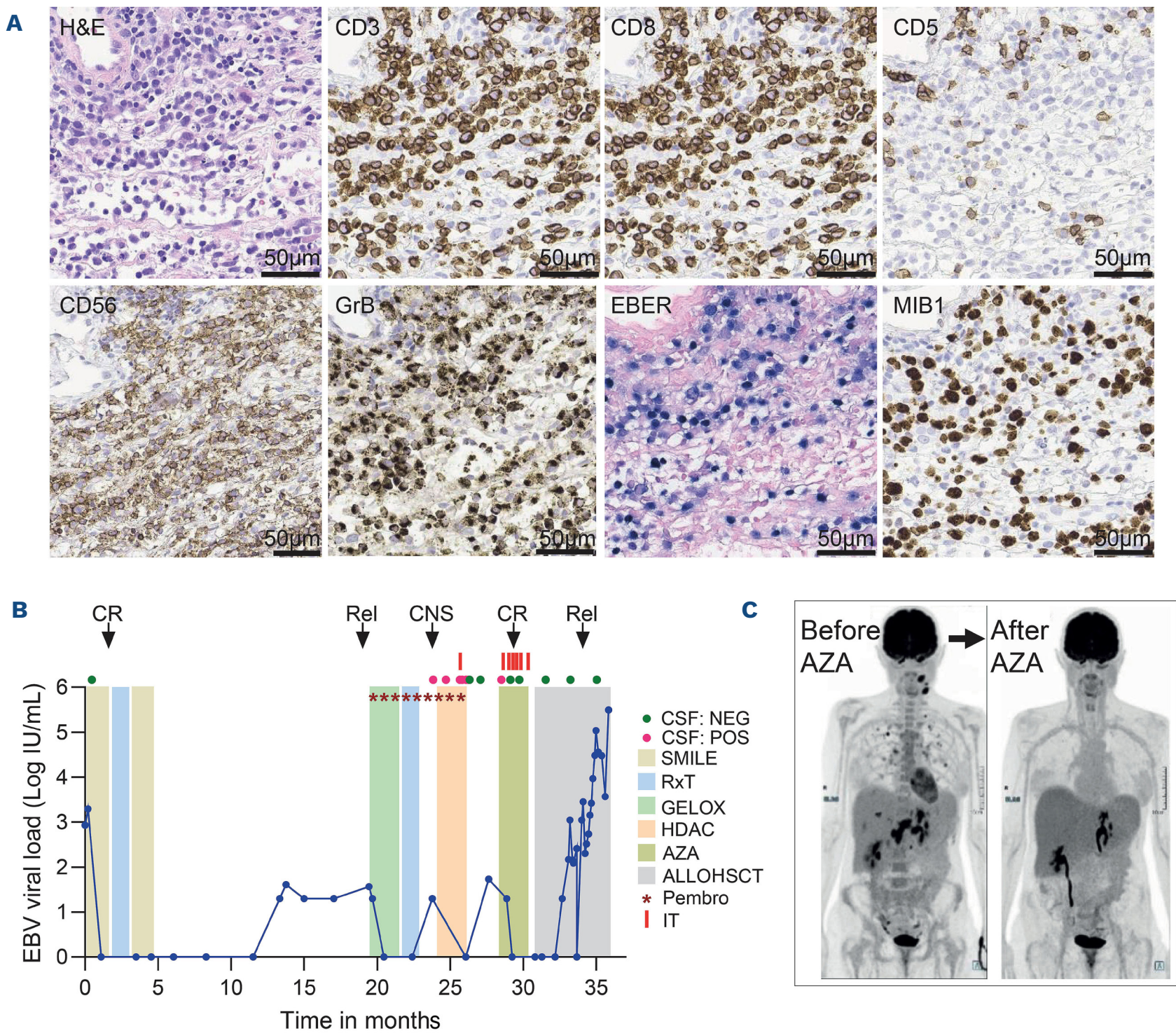


Figure 1. Azacitidine induces complete remission in relapsed *TET2*- and *BCOR*-mutant natural killer/T-cell lymphoma. (A) Histopathological examination of the orbital biopsy showing dense infiltrates of atypical lymphoid cells with angiocentric growth and necrosis (Hematoxylin&Eosin, H&E). Tumor cells expressed CD3, CD8, CD56, and granzyme B (GrB), lacked CD5, and showed a high proliferative index by MIB1 staining. Epstein-Barr virus (EBV)-encoded RNA (EBER) *in situ* hybridization confirmed EBV positivity. Scale bars, 50 μm. (B) Clinical course showing treatment timeline, plasma EBV DNA (blue line), and corresponding therapeutic interventions. AZA: azacitidine (75 mg/m² subcutaneously on days 1-7); CNS: central nervous system; CR: complete remission; CSF: cerebrospinal fluid; GELOX: intravenous (IV) gemcitabine (1,000 mg/m² on days 1 and 8), oxaliplatin (130 mg/m² IV on day 1), and L-asparaginase (6,000 IU/m²/day IV on days 1-7); HDAC: high-dose cytarabine (6 g/m² on days 1, 3 and 5); alloHST: allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation; IT: intrathecal chemotherapy (methotrexate 15 mg, cytarabine 40 mg, and methylprednisolone 15 mg); Pembro: pembrolizumab; Rel: relapse; RxT: radiotherapy; SMILE: methotrexate (2 g/m² IV on day 1), ifosfamide (1.5 g/m²/day IV on days 2-4), etoposide (100 mg/m²/day IV on days 2-4), dexamethasone (40 mg/day on days 2-4), and L-asparaginase (6,000 IU/m²/day IV on days 8-17). (C) Maximum intensity projection [¹⁸F]-FDG positron emission tomography/computed tomography (PET/CT) images: baseline pre-AZA PET/CT demonstrated intensely FDG-avid infiltration of the left premaxillary fat, accompanied by multiple FDG-avid lymphadenopathies involving the cervical, mediastino-hilar, mesenteric, and cardiophrenic regions as well as bilateral pulmonary FDG-avid foci, consistent with disease recurrence and progression. Following a single cycle of AZA therapy, the subsequent PET/CT demonstrated complete metabolic remission of all peri-orbital and systemic lesions.

Table 1. Somatic variant summary across disease course.

Gene	HGVS variant	VAF, %	Timepoints	Pathogenicity
<i>TET2</i>	c.5704T>A; p.Tyr1902Asn	42	D	Pathogenic
<i>BCOR</i>	c.4071+1G>A (splice site)	29	D	Pathogenic
<i>EPHA3</i>	c.815-1G>A	18	R	Likely pathogenic
<i>TET2</i>	c.5704T>A; p.Tyr1902Asn	38	R	Pathogenic
<i>PLAG1</i>	c.1217C>T; p.Ser406Phe	16	R	VUS
<i>KRAS</i>	c.38G>A; p.Gly13Asp	15	R	Pathogenic
<i>TRRAP</i>	c.10588G>C; p.Val3530Leu	17	R	VUS
<i>BCOR</i>	c.1570dup; p.Ser524LysfsTer33	24	R	Pathogenic
<i>CSF3R</i>	c.2486C>T; p.Thr829Ile	2	PTR	Likely pathogenic
<i>DNMT3A</i>	c.1227G>A; p.Trp409Ter	3	PTR	Pathogenic
<i>TET2</i>	c.5704T>A; p.Tyr1902Asn	4	PTR	Pathogenic
<i>BCOR</i>	c.1570dup; p.Ser524LysfsTer33	4	PTR	Pathogenic

Next-generation sequencing analyses were performed using two different targeted sequencing panels. At diagnosis, a custom 27-gene T-cell lymphoma panel (Illumina MiSeq, IDT xGen Lockdown) was used, covering the following genes: *ARID1A*, *ATM*, *BCOR*, *CARD11*, *CCR4*, *CD28*, *CTNNA1*, *DDX3X*, *DNMT3A*, *FYN*, *IDH2*, *IRF4*, *JAK1*, *JAK3*, *KMT2D*, *PIK3CD*, *PLCG1*, *PRKCB*, *RHOA*, *SETD2*, *SOCS1*, *STAT3*, *STAT5B*, *TET2*, *TNFRSF1B*, *TP53*, and *VAV1*. At relapse, a 400-gene hybrid-capture panel (NGS400v5, Illumina NextSeq, Agilent SureSelect XT HS) was applied; the same 400-gene panel was repeated at post-transplant relapse. Matched germline DNA was sequenced with the 400-gene panel to exclude constitutional variants. D: diagnosis; HGVS: Human Genome Variation Society nomenclature; PTR: post-transplant relapse; R: relapse; VAF: variant allele frequencies; VUS: variant of uncertain significance.

the emergence of additional low-frequency mutations in *CSF3R* and *DNMT3A*, consistent with post-transplant clonal evolution that may have contributed to the lack of response to re-exposure to AZA. Nonetheless, AZA had produced a deep and rapid remission that created a window for potentially curative allo-HSCT. Therapeutic options for relapsed or refractory ENKTL remain limited. allo-HSCT offers the only possibility of durable remission but relies on achieving disease control beforehand. PD-1 blockade yields responses in approximately 40% of patients, aided by frequent *CD274* (PD-L1) 3'UTR alterations, yet durable control is rare.⁵ In contrast, clinical experience with HMA in ENKTL is extremely limited. To our knowledge, only one complete remission has been reported; this was in a patient treated with oral AZA and romidepsin in a phase I study.⁶ In this setting, the complete remission achieved with AZA monotherapy after multiple prior lines of therapy in our patient is notable. Co-occurring *TET2* and *BCOR* mutations in our case may have contributed to a permissive epigenetic context for HMA activity, consistent with observations in other T-cell and myeloid malignancies harboring epigenetic lesions.⁴ Yet epigenetic vulnerability in ENKTL likely extends beyond these specific alterations. Genomic studies show that ENKTL cases frequently carry mutations in chromatin modifiers or DNA methylation regulators. Xiong *et al.* reported that two-thirds of *TET2*-mutant tumors harbor additional epigenetic hits, including *BCOR* and *KMT2D*,⁷ findings echoed by Oishi *et al.*⁸ and by recent profiling studies highlighting

recurrent epigenetic drivers on the X chromosome.⁹ Notably, this concept has been further supported by a recent clinical study showing that DNMT inhibitors can overcome PD-1 resistance in relapsed/refractory ENKTL through epigenetic reprogramming and immune pathway restoration.¹⁰ However, the phase III ORACLE trial comparing oral AZA with investigator's-choice standard therapy in relapsed/refractory TFH lymphoma did not meet its primary endpoint of improved progression-free survival and did not show a preferential benefit in patients harboring *TET2* or other epigenetic mutations, indicating that HMA activity is not restricted to specific epigenetic genotypes.¹¹ In addition, clinical reports have described responses to HMA in the absence of *TET2* mutations in angioimmunoblastic T-cell lymphoma, and functional screens in T-cell lymphoma models have not identified loss of *TET2* or *BCOR* as being necessary for HMA sensitivity.^{12,13} AZA can, therefore, be considered in selected relapsed/refractory ENKTL patients irrespective of *TET2/BCOR* status, particularly when standard options are exhausted. Several biological features may account for the pronounced AZA sensitivity. Although co-occurring loss-of-function mutations in *TET2* and *BCOR* may have contributed to HMA sensitivity, our observation does not prove a purely tumor-intrinsic, AZA-only effect. AZA can enhance tumor immunogenicity through viral mimicry and interferon pathway activation,^{14,15} and persistent PD-1 receptor occupancy following prior pembrolizumab exposure may have further amplified this immune response, even if the delay between

the last dose of pembrolizumab and the first administration of AZA was 3.8 months. This anti-tumor immune response may also have contributed to the neurological improvement despite limited CSF penetration of AZA. The combination of these mechanisms provides a coherent explanation for the rapid and profound remission observed after a single treatment cycle.

This case illustrates that AZA monotherapy can induce complete remission in relapsed ENKTL with epigenetic alterations, enabling subsequent allo-HSCT. These observations support further evaluation of HMA-based strategies in relapsed ENKTL, with integrated molecular profiling to better define the biological contexts associated with response.

Authors

Carmen de Ramon Ortiz,¹ Hana Abouzeid,² Chiara De Bernardi,¹ André Durham,¹ Gregory Mathoux,³ Stavroula Masouridi,¹ Thomas A. Mckee,⁴ David Sibon,⁵ Olivier Hermine,⁶ David M. Weinstock,^{7,8} Kristof Egervari⁴ and Jerome Tamburini^{1,9}

¹Oncology Department, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland; ²Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland; ³Division of Nuclear Medicine and Molecular Imaging, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland; ⁴Division of Clinical Pathology, Geneva University Hospitals, Geneva, Switzerland; ⁵Lymphoid Hematology Department, Henri Mondor University Hospital, AP-HP, and Paris-Est Créteil University, Créteil, France; ⁶Department Hematology, Hôpital Necker, Assistance Publique Hôpitaux de Paris, University Paris Descartes, Imagine Institute, INSERM U1123, Paris, France; ⁷Medical Oncology, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, MA, USA; ⁸Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA and ⁹Centre for Translational Research in Onco-Hematology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Geneva, and Swiss Cancer Centre Leman, Geneva, Switzerland.

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Correspondence:

J. TAMBURINI - jerome.tamburinibonnefoy@unige.ch

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Disclosures

No conflicts of interest to disclose.

Contributions

CRO and KE contributed to patient care and manuscript preparation. HA, CDB, AD, GM, SM and TM contributed to patient care. DS, OH and DMW were consulted on therapeutic decisions. JT contributed to patient care, supervised the study, and wrote the manuscript.

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Data-sharing statement

The original data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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