Six versus 12 months’ adjuvant trastuzumab in patients with HER2-positive early breast cancer: the PERSEPHONE non-inferiority RCT

Helena Earl,1,2,3* Louise Hiller,4 Anne-Laure Vallier,5 Shrushma Loi,4 Karen McAdam,6,7 Luke Hughes-Davies,1,7 Daniel Rea,8 Donna Howe,4 Kerry Raynes,4 Helen B Higgins,4 Maggie Wilcox,9 Chris Plummer,10,11 Betania Mahler-Araujo,12,13 Elena Provenzano,3,12 Anita Chhabra,14 Sophie Gasson,4 Claire Balmer,4 Jean E Abraham,1,2,3 Carlos Caldas,1,2,3,15 Peter Hall,16 Bethany Shinkins,17 Christopher McCabe,18 Claire Hulme,17,19 David Miles,20 Andrew M Wardley,21,22 David A Cameron16 and Janet A Dunn4 on behalf of the PERSEPHONE Steering Committee and Trial Investigators

1Department of Oncology, University of Cambridge, Addenbrooke’s Hospital, Cambridge, UK
2Cambridge Breast Cancer Research Unit, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge, UK
3NIHR Cambridge Biomedical Research Centre, Cambridge, UK
4Warwick Clinical Trials Unit, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
5Cambridge Clinical Trials Unit – Cancer Theme, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge, UK
6Department of Oncology, North West Anglia NHS Foundation Trust, Peterborough City Hospital, Peterborough, UK
7Department of Oncology, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge, UK
8Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit (CRCTU), Institute of Cancer and Genomic Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
9Independent Cancer Patients’ Voice, London, UK
10Translational and Clinical Research Institute, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
11Department of Cardiology, Freeman Hospital, Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
12Department of Histopathology, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge, UK
13Metabolic Research Laboratories, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK
Declared competing interests of authors: Helena Earl reports grants from Roche (Basel, Switzerland) and Sanofi-Aventis (Paris, France), personal fees and travel expenses from Daiichi Sankyo (Tokyo, Japan), AstraZeneca plc (Cambridge, UK) and Intas Pharmaceuticals (Ahmedabad, India), travel expenses from Pfizer Inc. (New York, NY, USA) and Amgen Inc. (Thousand Oaks, CA, USA) and personal fees from prIME Oncology (Atlanta, GA, USA), all outside the submitted work. Karen McAdam reports grants from Roche and personal fees from Roche, Novartis International AG (Basel, Switzerland), Pfizer and Eisai Co., Ltd (Tokyo, Japan), all outside the submitted work. Daniel Rea reports personal fees and grants from Roche during the conduct of the study, as well as personal fees from Novartis, Pfizer, Genomic Health (Redwood City, CA, USA) and Daiichi Sankyo, and grants from Celgene Corporation (Summit, NJ, USA), all outside the submitted work. Chris Plummer reports personal fees and non-financial support from Roche Products Limited, Novartis UK Limited, Pfizer UK Limited, Celgene and Incyte Corporation (Wilmington, DE, USA) for attending education meetings. He also reports personal fees and non-financial support from Amgen Limited for attending education meetings and advisory boards, all outside the submitted work. Jean Abraham reports fees to her institution, and accommodation and travel expenses from AstraZeneca for session boards and advisory chairs, as well as fees to her institution, and accommodation and travel expenses from Pfizer for a lecture, all outside the submitted work. Carlos Caldas reports grants from Genentech, Inc. (South San Francisco, CA, USA), Roche, Servier Laboratories (Suresnes, France) and AstraZeneca outside the submitted work, and that he is a member of the AstraZeneca IMED External Science Panel. Peter Hall reports grants from Roche, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Novartis, Eisai and Daiichi Sankyo outside the submitted work. Christopher McCabe's institution holds research contracts with Roche and reports grants from Roche, all outside the submitted work. David Miles reports personal fees from Roche/Genetech, outside the submitted work. Claire Hulme reports that she is a member of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment Commissioning Board. Andrew M Wardley reports personal fees from Roche, Napp Pharmaceuticals Ltd (Cambridge, UK), Amgen, Merck Sharp & Dohme (Hoddesdon, UK), Novartis, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Laboratoires Pierre Fabre (Paris, France), Accord (Barnstaple, UK), Athenex (Buffalo, NY, USA), Gerson Lehrman Group (New York, NY, USA), Coleman Research Expert Network Group (New York, NY, USA) and Guidepoint Global (New York, NY, USA). He also reports personal fees and other from Eli Lilly and Company (Indianapolis, IN, USA) and Daiichi Sankyo, all outside the submitted work. He is leading the National Cancer Research Institute Breast Group Initiative to develop the next de-escalation trial for HER2-positive breast cancer. David A Cameron reports funds to his institution from Novartis, AstraZeneca, Pfizer, Roche, Eli Lilly and Company, Puma Biotechnology (Los Angeles, CA, USA), Daiichi Sankyo, Synthon (Uttrecht, the Netherlands), SeaGen International GmbH (Zug, Switzerland), Zymeworks (Vancouver, BC, Canada), Elsevier (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), European Cancer Organisation (Brussels, Belgium), Celgene Corporation, Succinct Medical Communications (Wilmington, DE, USA), Immutep (Sydney, NSW, Australia),
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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

The background

There are several different types of breast cancer and some are called ‘HER2 positive’. These cancers can often be cured by treatment with chemotherapy and a drug called trastuzumab (also known as Herceptin®; Roche, Basel, Switzerland). Although the first trials of trastuzumab used 12 months treatment, we did not know if less treatment could work as well. A small trial in Finland showed that giving trastuzumab for just 9 weeks was also effective. We know that trastuzumab can have some side effects, including heart problems, so it was important to see if we could reduce the length of treatment time, which is usually 12 months.

What did we do?

We wanted to find out if we could treat patients safely with 6 months rather than 12 months of trastuzumab. We carried out a clinical trial called PERSEPHONE, in which over 4000 patients with this type of early breast cancer took part. Half of the patients were given 12 months of trastuzumab and half were given 6 months of trastuzumab.

What did we find?

We found that the two groups of patients had very similar benefit from treatment. At 4 years after diagnosis 90.3% of those who had received 12 months of trastuzumab were alive and free of any breast cancer recurrence, compared with 89.5% of those who had received 6 months. In other words, 125 patients would need to be treated with 12 months’ trastuzumab rather than 6 months’ trastuzumab for one more person to be alive and cancer-free 4 years from diagnosis.

The side effects?

Severe side effects of trastuzumab were seen on at least one occasion in 24% of 12-month patients compared with 19% of 6-month patients. More patients receiving 12 months of trastuzumab had to stop trastuzumab early because of heart problems (8% of 12-month patients compared with 3% of 6-month patients).

What does this all mean?

We have shown that 6 months of trastuzumab has similar outcomes to 12 months in treating patients with HER2-positive early breast cancer but with fewer severe side effects, including heart problems, fewer visits to hospital for patients and significant cost savings for the NHS.
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This report

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