Adjuvant Therapy for Pancreatic Cancer

William F. Regine, MD
Greenebaum Cancer Center
University of Maryland
Baltimore, Maryland

Adjuvant therapy for pancreatic cancer centers on the 5% to 15% of patients able to undergo a potentially curative resection. This translates to up to 4,500 patients per year in the United States. The patterns of failure after this type of resection clearly call for a need to address both the high risk for distant as well as local regional recurrence. A number of randomized trials can be reviewed to assess the effectiveness of adjuvant therapy. To date, chemotherapy alone has not been shown to be effective. Among postoperative adjuvant chemoradiation (CRT) studies, the following can be said:

(1) The Gastrointestinal Tumor Study Group (GITSG) Trial—positive study based on early interim analysis, but limited in patient numbers; (2) The European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) Trial—sub-analysis review of pancreatic head carcinoma patients shows an essentially positive trial, and statistical re-analysis further strengthens this finding; and, (3) The European Study Group for Pancreatic Cancer (ESPAC) Trial—poorly designed and executed trial leaving findings regarding treatment efficacy to be inconclusive. In addition to these trials, a head to head comparison of gemcitabine vs 5-fluorouracil (5-FU) in the advanced/metastatic pancreatic carcinoma setting shows a clear survival advantage ≥ that associated with systemic therapies for other advanced/metastatic cancers (eg, colon or breast) that eventually translated into overall survival benefits in the adjuvant settings for those cancers. These data served as the basis for the recently reported US Intergroup/Radiation Therapy Oncology Group (RTOG) 9704 phase III trial testing the addition of gemcitabine to 5-FU CRT as postoperative adjuvant treatment for patients with pancreatic adenocarcinoma. The largest postoperative adjuvant trial reported to
date, this study and its findings will be presented in detail. While currently available adjuvant therapy is effective, albeit at best modestly, continued investigations hold promise for more effective future adjuvant therapies.