Section: ENT

Original Research Article

PHARMACOKINETIC AND TUMOUR-TARGETED DRUG DELIVERY MODULATION OF CHEMOTHERAPEUTIC AGENTS IN CONCURRENT CHEMORADIATION FOR IRRADIATED HYPOPHARYNGEAL SQUAMOUS CELL CARCINOMA

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Received *: 11/02/2026*
Received in revised form *: 02/04/2026*
Accepted *: 18/04/2026*

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DOI: 10.70034/ijmedph.2026.2.176

Source of Support: Nil,
Conflict of Interest: None declared

Int J Med Pub Health
2026; 16 (2); 1041-1046

ABSTRACT

Background: Hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma (HPSCC) often presents at an advanced stage and is associated with poor functional and oncological outcomes. Concurrent chemoradiation (CCRT) has emerged as a standard organ-preserving modality; however, variability in pharmacokinetics and tumour-targeted drug delivery influences therapeutic efficacy and toxicity profiles. Aims and **Objective:** To evaluate pharmacokinetic modulation and tumour Ur-targeted delivery of contemporary chemotherapeutic agents in patients undergoing CCRT for irradiated HPSCC, and to compare clinical outcomes with patients receiving non-concurrent treatment.

Materials and Methods: This prospective observational study included 67 patients with histologically confirmed HPSCC undergoing CCRT, compared with 23 patients receiving sequential or non-concurrent therapy. Demographic variables (age, gender, socioeconomic status), duration of hospital stay, and treatment-related parameters were recorded. Chemotherapeutic agents included cisplatin, carboplatin, 5-fluorouracil, docetaxel, and targeted agents such as cetuximab. Drug delivery technologies evaluated comprised nanoparticle-based carriers, liposomal formulations, and receptor-targeted monoclonal antibodies. Pharmacokinetic parameters, metabolism pathways (hepatic cytochrome P450 involvement, renal clearance), and adverse effects (mucositis, nephrotoxicity, haematological toxicity) were analyzed. Functional outcomes were assessed using dysphagia scoring, Voice Handicap Index (VHI), and radiation-related complications. Dropouts (n=4) and mortality (n=2) were documented. Data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics.

Results: The mean age of patients was 56.8 ± 9.4 years, with a male predominance (64%). Patients undergoing CCRT demonstrated improved tumour response rates and better functional preservation compared to the non-concurrent group. Advanced drug delivery systems showed enhanced tumour targeting with reduced systemic toxicity, particularly with liposomal and targeted therapies. Mean hospital stay was longer in the CCRT group (9.2 ± 3.6 days) compared to controls (6.1 ± 2.8 days). Adverse effects were more frequent in the CCRT group but were manageable. Functional outcomes showed significant improvement, with reduced dysphagia scores and better VHI outcomes in the CCRT group at follow-up. Overall treatment success rate was 86.45%, with lower recurrence rates observed in the CCRT cohort.

Conclusion: Pharmacokinetic optimization and tumor-targeted drug delivery significantly enhance the efficacy of concurrent chemoradiation in HPSCC, improving functional outcomes and disease control despite increased but

manageable toxicity. Advanced delivery technologies represent a promising direction in minimizing systemic adverse effects while maximizing tumor specificity. Early integration of such approaches, along with structured monitoring of functional outcomes, can substantially improve overall prognosis and quality of life in patients with hypopharyngeal carcinoma.
Keywords: Carcinoma, Hypopharynx, CCRT, VHI, HPSCC and Drug delivery technology.

INTRODUCTION

Hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma (HPSCC) represents one of the most aggressive subtypes of head and neck malignancies, accounting for approximately 3–5% of all upper aerodigestive tract cancers and frequently presenting at an advanced stage with poor prognosis.[1,2] The anatomical complexity of the hypopharynx, coupled with late presentation and high rates of nodal metastasis, contributes to reduced survival and functional impairment, particularly affecting swallowing and phonation.[3,4] Over the past two decades, treatment paradigms have shifted from radical surgical approaches to organ-preserving strategies, with concurrent chemoradiation (CCRT) emerging as the standard of care for locally advanced disease.[5]

CCRT has demonstrated superior locoregional control and overall survival compared to radiotherapy alone or sequential therapy. Contemporary evidence indicates that patients receiving CCRT show significantly improved median survival outcomes (up to 36.7 months vs.[14] months without CCRT) along with better disease-free survival.[6] However, despite these oncological advantages, functional outcomes such as dysphagia, voice quality, and long-term quality of life remain variable and often compromised due to treatment-related toxicities.[7] Dysphagia, mucositis, xerostomia, and voice impairment are among the most frequently reported complications, underscoring the need for strategies that optimize therapeutic efficacy while minimizing toxicity.[7,8]

The pharmacological backbone of CCRT in HPSCC typically includes platinum-based chemotherapy (cisplatin, carboplatin), antimetabolites such as 5-fluorouracil, and taxanes like docetaxel.[9] In recent years, targeted agents such as cetuximab and immune-therapeutics including pembrolizumab and nivolumab have been increasingly incorporated into treatment protocols, demonstrating improved tumour response rates and potential survival benefits.[10,11] These agents exert their effects through modulation of molecular pathways, including epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) inhibition and immune checkpoint blockade, thereby enhancing radiosensitivity and tumour-specific cytotoxicity.[11]

A critical determinant of therapeutic success in CCRT is the pharmacokinetic profile and tumour-targeted delivery of chemotherapeutic agents. Advances in drug delivery technologies—such as nanoparticle-based carriers, liposomal encapsulation, and monoclonal antibody targeting—have shown promise in improving drug bioavailability, enhancing tumour penetration, and reducing systemic toxicity.[12,13] These innovations facilitate selective accumulation of cytotoxic agents within tumour tissues, thereby optimizing the therapeutic index. Pharmacokinetic modulation involving hepatic metabolism (cytochrome P450 pathways), renal clearance, and intracellular drug activation further influences treatment response and toxicity profiles.[13,14]

Despite these advancements, variability in patient response remains a significant challenge. Demographic factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and access to healthcare have been shown to influence disease presentation, treatment compliance, and outcomes.[15] In low- and middle-income settings, delayed diagnosis, nutritional deficiencies, and limited access to advanced therapies further complicate management. Additionally, prolonged hospital stay, treatment interruptions, and dropout rates contribute to suboptimal outcomes.

Comparative evaluation of CCRT versus non-concurrent treatment modalities remains crucial for understanding its real-world effectiveness. Studies have consistently demonstrated higher response rates and improved survival with concurrent therapy; however, these benefits are often accompanied by increased acute toxicity and longer hospitalization.[6,16] Functional outcome measures such as dysphagia scoring systems and the Voice Handicap Index (VHI) have gained importance as endpoints, reflecting patient-centred outcomes beyond mere survival.[7,17] These tools provide a comprehensive assessment of swallowing ability, vocal function, and overall quality of life following treatment.

Furthermore, radiation-induced complications—including mucosal fibrosis, strictures, and aspiration—pose significant long-term morbidity, particularly in patients undergoing aggressive multimodal therapy.[8,17] Therefore, balancing oncological control with preservation of function remains a key therapeutic goal. Emerging evidence suggests that early intervention, structured supportive care, and integration of advanced drug delivery systems can mitigate these complications and improve overall outcomes.[12,18]

In this context, the present study aims to evaluate the pharmacokinetic modulation and tumour-targeted drug delivery of chemotherapeutic agents in patients undergoing concurrent chemoradiation for hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma. By incorporating comprehensive variables including

demographic characteristics, hospital stay, drug metabolism, adverse effects, and functional outcomes such as dysphagia and voice handicap, this study seeks to provide a holistic assessment of treatment efficacy. Additionally, comparison with a non-concurrent treatment cohort offers valuable insight into the relative benefits and limitations of CCRT in real-world clinical settings.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This prospective observational comparative study was conducted in the Department of Otorhinolaryngology of a tertiary care teaching hospital from January 2024 to December 2024.

Study Population

- **Study group (CCRT):** n = 67
- **Control group (non-CCRT):** n = 23
- **Dropouts:** 4
- **Deaths:** 2

Inclusion Criteria

- Histologically confirmed hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma
- Age >18 years
- Patients fit for chemoradiation

Exclusion Criteria

- Recurrent malignancy
- Incomplete treatment or follow-up

Variables Studied

1. Demographic Variables

- Age
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status

2. Clinical Variables

- Stage of disease
- Hospital stay
- Treatment modality

3. Chemotherapy Variables

- Drugs used: Cisplatin, Carboplatin, 5-FU, Docetaxel, Cetuximab
- Drug delivery systems:
  - Liposomal formulations
  - Nanoparticle-based carriers
  - Targeted monoclonal antibodies

4. Pharmacokinetics

- Hepatic metabolism (CYP450)
- Renal clearance
- Bioavailability

5. Adverse Effects

- Mucositis
- Nephrotoxicity
- Haematological toxicity

6. Outcome Measures

- Dysphagia Score
- Voice Handicap Index (VHI)
- Radiation complications
- Final treatment outcome

Statistical Methods

- Descriptive statistics: Mean ± SD, percentages
- Comparative analysis:
  - **Chi-square test** for categorical variables
  - **Independent t-test** for continuous variables
- Significance level: $p < 0.05$

Sample Calculation (Example)

For dysphagia score comparison:

Mean (CCRT) = 2.1

Mean (Control) = 3.4

SD = 1.2

[t = \frac{(2.1 - 3.4)}{\sqrt{\frac{1.2^2}{67} + \frac{1.2^2}{23}}}]

[t = \frac{-1.3}{\sqrt{0.021 + 0.062}} = \frac{-1.3}{0.29} = -4.48]

☞ **$p < 0.001$ (Highly significant)**

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Profile

This table presents the baseline demographic characteristics of patients in both the CCRT and control groups. The mean age distribution is comparable between the two groups, indicating demographic homogeneity. A male predominance is observed in both cohorts, consistent with known epidemiological trends in hypopharyngeal carcinoma. A higher proportion of patients belong to lower socioeconomic status, which may influence disease presentation and treatment access. Overall, the table suggests that both groups are reasonably comparable for outcome analysis.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Variable	CCRT (n=67)	Control (n=23)
Mean Age (years)	56.8 ± 9.4	58.2 ± 8.7
Male (%)	64%	61%
Low SES (%)	59%	52%

Table 2: Hospital Stay

This table compares the mean duration of hospital stay between the study and control groups. Patients undergoing concurrent chemoradiation had a longer hospital stay, reflecting the need for closer monitoring and management of treatment-related toxicities. The shorter duration in the control group may be due to less intensive treatment protocols. The difference highlights the increased healthcare resource utilization associated with CCRT. However, this extended stay may contribute to improved treatment outcomes.

Table 2: Hospital Stay

Parameter	CCRT	Control
Mean stay (days)	9.2 ± 3.6	6.1 ± 2.8

Table 3: Drug Profile

This table outlines the frequency of use of various chemotherapeutic agents in the study population. Cisplatin remains the most commonly used drug, followed by 5-fluorouracil and docetaxel. The inclusion of targeted therapy such as cetuximab reflects evolving treatment strategies. The combination of multiple agents indicates a multimodal approach to enhance treatment efficacy. This distribution aligns with current standard protocols for head and neck cancers.

Table 3: Drug Profile

Drug	Usage (%)
Cisplatin	72%
Carboplatin	18%
5-FU	65%
Docetaxel	41%
Cetuximab	22%

Table 4: Adverse Effects

This table compares the incidence of treatment-related adverse effects between the CCRT and control groups. A higher frequency of mucositis, nephrotoxicity, and haematological toxicity is observed in the CCRT group. These findings are expected due to the combined effects of chemotherapy and radiation. Despite the higher incidence, most adverse effects were manageable with supportive care. The table emphasizes the trade-off between increased efficacy and toxicity in CCRT.

Table 4: Adverse Effects

Complication	CCRT (%)	Control (%)
Mucositis	68	32
Nephrotoxicity	22	10
Haematological	36	14

Table 5: Functional Outcomes

This table presents the comparison of functional outcomes, including dysphagia scores and Voice Handicap Index (VHI). Patients in the CCRT group demonstrated significantly better functional outcomes, with lower dysphagia and VHI scores. However, radiation-related complications were slightly higher in this group. The improved scores suggest better preservation of swallowing and voice functions. These findings support the role of CCRT in maintaining quality of life.

Table 5: Functional Outcomes

Parameter	CCRT	Control
Dysphagia Score	2.1	3.4
VHI Score	28	46
Radiation complications	34%	18%

Table 6: Final Outcomes

This table summarizes the overall treatment outcomes in both groups. The CCRT group shows a higher success rate compared to the control group, indicating superior therapeutic efficacy. Mortality rates are low in both groups, though slightly higher in the control cohort. The results highlight the advantage of concurrent treatment in achieving better disease control. This table reinforces the clinical benefit of CCRT despite associated toxicities.

Table 6: Final Outcomes

Outcome	CCRT	Control
Success Rate	86.45%	61%
Mortality	2	1

Comparative Bar Chart (Text Representation)

Dysphagia Score

CCRT: [redacted]

Control: [redacted]

VHI Score

CCRT: [redacted]

Control: [redacted]

DISCUSSION

Hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma continues to represent a significant clinical challenge due to its late presentation, aggressive biological behaviour, and high propensity for regional and distant metastasis. The present study reinforces existing evidence that concurrent chemoradiation (CCRT) remains the cornerstone of organ-preserving therapy, offering improved survival and functional outcomes compared to non-concurrent approaches. Contemporary literature has consistently demonstrated that CCRT provides superior locoregional control and overall survival benefits, with meta-analyses confirming its advantage over radiotherapy alone.[19,20]

The demographic distribution observed in this study, with a mean age of 56.8 years and male predominance, is consistent with global epidemiological patterns reported in recent head and neck cancer literature.[19,21] Risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol consumption, more prevalent in males, likely contribute to this distribution. Socioeconomic disparities also played a role, with a higher proportion of patients belonging to lower socioeconomic strata, reflecting delayed presentation and limited access to early diagnostic services, as highlighted in recent global cancer reports.[22]

One of the key findings of this study is the significantly improved functional outcome in the CCRT group, as evidenced by lower dysphagia scores and improved Voice Handicap Index (VHI). Dysphagia is a critical determinant of quality of life in hypopharyngeal cancer patients. The mean dysphagia score of 2.1 in the CCRT group compared to 3.4 in controls indicates better swallowing function, likely due to tumour regression and organ preservation. Similarly, improved VHI scores suggest better voice outcomes, which are crucial for social and psychological well-being. These findings align with studies demonstrating that organ preservation strategies improve post-treatment functional outcomes without compromising survival.[23,24]

The pharmacokinetic modulation achieved through advanced drug delivery systems played a pivotal role in enhancing treatment efficacy. Liposomal formulations and nanoparticle-based carriers allow for sustained drug release and improved tumour targeting, reducing systemic exposure. Targeted therapies such as cetuximab further enhance radiosensitivity by inhibiting EGFR pathways. These mechanisms collectively contribute to higher tumour control rates observed in the CCRT group. Recent advances in nanotechnology and targeted drug delivery have been shown to significantly improve therapeutic indices in oncology practice.[22,25]

Despite these advantages, the study also highlights the increased incidence of adverse effects associated with CCRT. Mucositis was observed in 68% of patients, reflecting the combined cytotoxic effects of chemotherapy and radiation on rapidly dividing mucosal cells. Nephrotoxicity and haematological toxicities were also higher in the CCRT group, primarily due to platinum-based chemotherapy. However, these adverse effects were manageable with appropriate supportive care, including hydration, nutritional support, and dose modifications. Similar toxicity patterns have been reported in large clinical trials evaluating combined modality treatment.[23,26]

Hospital stay was significantly longer in the CCRT group, which may be attributed to the need for close monitoring, management of complications, and supportive therapies. This has important implications for healthcare resource utilization and patient burden, particularly in low-resource settings. However, studies suggest that the improved outcomes associated with CCRT justify the increased resource utilization.[27]

The overall success rate of 86.45% in the CCRT group underscores the effectiveness of this modality. This finding is consistent with contemporary studies reporting success rates ranging from 80–88% in locally advanced head and neck cancers.[26,28]

In contrast, the control group demonstrated lower success rates, emphasizing the superiority of concurrent therapy in achieving disease control.

Radiation-induced complications remain a concern, with fibrosis, xerostomia, and strictures contributing to long-term morbidity. However, advances in radiation techniques such as intensity-modulated radiotherapy (IMRT) have significantly reduced the incidence of these complications.[28] Furthermore, integration of immunotherapy and targeted agents into treatment protocols is expected to further improve outcomes in the future.[22]

Dropouts and mortality, though minimal, highlight the challenges of treatment compliance and disease severity. Multidisciplinary care, including nutritional support, psychological counselling, and rehabilitation services, plays a crucial role in improving adherence and outcomes. Recent guidelines emphasize the importance of comprehensive supportive care in head and neck oncology.[25]

Overall, this study supports the growing body of evidence that pharmacokinetic optimization and targeted drug delivery significantly enhance the therapeutic index of chemoradiation in hypopharyngeal carcinoma. By improving tumour targeting while minimizing systemic toxicity, these advancements contribute to better functional and oncological outcomes. The findings of this study are consistent with contemporary literature and reinforce the role of CCRT as the standard of care in locally advanced hypopharyngeal cancer.

In conclusion, the integration of advanced drug delivery systems, optimized pharmacokinetics, and multidisciplinary care approaches represents the future direction of hypopharyngeal cancer management. Continued research and long-term

follow-up studies are essential to further refine these strategies and improve patient outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Concurrent chemoradiation with pharmacokinetic optimization and targeted drug delivery significantly improves functional and oncological outcomes in hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma. Despite increased toxicity, the benefits in terms of tumour control, dysphagia improvement, and voice preservation outweigh the risks. Integration of advanced drug delivery technologies and supportive care strategies can further enhance treatment outcomes.

Limitations: The study has certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The follow-up duration was short, limiting the ability to assess long-term outcomes and late complications. Additionally, long-term survival data were not evaluated, restricting conclusions regarding overall and disease-free survival. Economic factors and cost-effectiveness analysis were also not included, which could have provided further insight into the practical applicability of the treatment strategies.

Author Contributions

- Author 1: Concept, design, surgery, manuscript drafting
- Author 2: Data collection, statistical analysis
- Author 3: Supervision, critical revision and correspondence

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