STUDY PROTOCOL

Creation of a rectal cancer registry in Italy by the Advanced International Mini-Invasive Surgery (AIMS) academy clinical research network [version 1; peer review: 3 approved]


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Abstract

Background: The management of rectal cancer is multimodal and involves a multidisciplinary team of cancer specialists with expertise in medical oncology, surgical oncology, radiation oncology and radiology. It is crucial for highly specialized centers to collaborate via networks that aim to maintain uniformity in every aspect of treatment and rigorously gather patients' data, from the first clinical evaluation to the last follow-up visit. The Advanced International Mini-Invasive Surgery (AIMS) academy clinical research network aims to create a rectal cancer registry. This will prospectively collect the data of patients operated on for non-metastatic rectal cancer in high volume colorectal surgical units through a well design pre-fashioned database for non-metastatic rectal cancer, in order to take all multidisciplinary aspects into consideration.

Methods/Design: The protocol describes a multicenter prospective observational cohort study, investigating demographics, frailty, cancer-related features, surgical and radiological parameters, and oncological outcomes among patients with non-metastatic rectal cancer who are candidates for surgery with curative intent. Patients enrolled in the present registry will be followed up for 5 years after surgery.
Discussion: Standardization and centralization of data collection for neoplastic diseases is a virtuous process for patient care. The creation of a register will allow the control of the quality of treatments provided and permit prospective and retrospective studies to be carried out on complete and reliable high quality data. Establishing data collection in a prospective and systematic fashion is the only possibility to preserve the enormous resource that each patient represents.

Keywords
Rectal surgery, registry, network
Introduction
There are nearly 125,000 new cases of rectal cancer diagnosed every year in Europe, representing one of the leading causes of cancer-related morbidity and mortality world-wide1. Five decades ago, the prognosis of rectal cancer was poor, with locoregional cancer recurrence rates of up to 40% and 5-year survival rates of <50% for locally-advanced tumors2. These disappointing outcomes were improved by innovations in surgical technique, multimodality therapy and education3.

Total mesorectal excision (TME) remains the cornerstone in the treatment of non-metastatic rectal cancer. To achieve high quality TME, which is the key-factor for proper oncological resection, surgeons must respect well-known embryological planes, which were made famous as the boundaries of Heal’d’s Holy plane4.

While the surgical principles for rectal cancer have changed little during the last decade, the novelties in the radiological study of the disease, as well as in the administration of neoadjuvant and adjuvant therapy, have largely modified the treatment of this neoplasm5. Nowadays, the management of rectal cancer is multimodal and involves a multidisciplinary team of cancer specialists with expertise in medical oncology, surgical oncology, radiation oncology and radiology. Therefore, it is becoming crucial for highly specialized centers to design pre-fashioned databases for non-metastatic rectal cancer in order to take all multidisciplinary aspects into consideration. Previous attempts to establish rectal cancer registries, such as The Norwegian Rectal Cancer Project6 and The Spanish Rectal Cancer Project7, were based on the need to first extend adequate oncological treatment, and second to increase the use of minimally invasive surgery.

The Advanced International Mini-Invasive Surgery (AIMS) academy clinical research network aims to create a rectal cancer registry that will prospectively collect data of patients operated on for non-metastatic rectal cancer in high volume colorectal surgical units, maintaining uniformity in every aspect of the treatment and rigorously gathering patients data, from the first clinical evaluation to the last follow-up visit.

Purpose
The aim of the AIMS academy clinical research network rectal cancer registry is to prospectively collect data from different minimally-invasive colorectal units in Northern Italy, with standardization of the pre-operative, intra-operative and post-operative management for patients operated on for non-metastatic rectal cancer with curative intent.

The primary outcome is to prospectively collect short and long term oncological outcomes. The second outcome is to collect information on the compliance of patients to oncological treatments, both in neoadjuvant and adjuvant settings and their quality of life.

Protocol
Study design
This protocol describes a multicenter prospective observational cohort study, investigating demographics, cancer-related features and oncological outcomes among patients who are non-metastatic rectal cancer candidates for surgery with curative intent. Patients enrolled in the present registry will be followed up for 5 years after surgery. All participating centres are public tertiary non-academic hospitals of northern Italy.

The study was approved by the Comitato Etico Scientifico Milano Area 3 (protocol number 295-052019). The study protocol has been registered as an observational study at ClinicalTrials.gov: NCT04045236 (first received, 3 August 2019). All participating centres received approval from local ethics committees.

Patients and eligibility criteria
Patients receiving the diagnosis of non-metastatic rectal cancer and the indication for a curative treatment will be enrolled in the registry. The target population will consist of all patients enrolled in the participating centers from the start of the rectal cancer registry on. Patients will be identified through their medical record numbers. One investigator in each center will obtain written informed consent from each patient and keep the patients updated on data collection.

Inclusion criteria: 1) histologically proved adenocarcinoma of the rectum; 2) patient aged > 18 years old; 3) indication for surgical resection with curative intent.

Exclusion criteria: need for emergency surgery, palliative operation or metastatic disease at presentation.

Data collection
Demographic information and anamnesis with a focus on oncologic history will be recorded at the first outpatient visit, together with a complete clinical examination. Data regarding the symptoms of presentation will be collected and categorized as haemorrhagic framework, alteration of bowel habits or pain. Every patient will undergo a pre-operative staging (see Extended data: CRF1) with chest-abdominal computerized tomography scan with intravenous contrast, complete colonoscopy, pelvic magnetic resonance (MR) imaging and endorectal ultra sound (EUS) examination. Blood sample with serum level of CEA, CA 19.9 and a full nutritional panel will be collected and analysed. Charlson Comorbidities Index adjusted for age4 will be calculated for every patient, while those >70 years old will be assessed for frailty risk using the modified Frailty Index (mFI) described by Robinson et al.8 (see Extended data: CRF1).

All data regarding radiation doses received, total amount of chemotherapy administered and number of cycles, toxicities or adverse reaction and possible reasons for not completed treatment
The registry has been enrolling patients since January 2019.

Study status
The registry has been enrolling patients since January 2019.

Discussion
The primary aim of this registry is to prospectively collect data from different minimally invasive colorectal units in Northern Italy with a standardization of the pre-operative, intra-operative and post-operative management for patients operated on for non-metastatic rectal cancer with curative intent.

Standardization and centralization of data collection for neoplastic diseases is a virtuous process for patient care. The creation of a register allows the control of the quality of treatments provided and permits prospective and retrospective studies to be carried out on complete and reliable high quality data.

In the last few years, the need to raise the quality of care for rectal cancer patients has been reported in numerous studies\(^{19}\) as well as the clear association between hospital volumes and outcomes after rectal surgery\(^{20}\). Speaking a common language in such a complex field is no longer a benefit but rather the only way to face new challenges waiting for us in the near future.

Due to the aging population, the number of frail patients affected by rectal cancer is expected to grow\(^{21}\). As a consequence, the identification of frail patients and the need to search for tailored management able to prevent adverse complications and to improve clinical outcomes of this population will play a fundamental role in oncological surgery in the years to come\(^ {22}\). Thus, all methods available to screen a patient for frailty, such as the Mini Cog test, the Katz Index of Independence in Activities of Daily Living (ADL), and the Timed Up and Go (TUG) test must become an integrated part of daily clinical work\(^ {23,24}\).

The accuracy achieved by pre-operative MR imaging during the last decade\(^ {25}\) has lead to important results in both preoperative staging and radiologic response evaluation after neo-adjuvant therapy\(^ {26}\). Indeed, radiologic restaging is increasingly involved in the therapeutic decision-making process\(^ {27}\). Thus, structuring a synoptic and uniform MR report must become a prerogative in management of rectal cancer patients.

As mentioned in the study protocol section, intra-operative data concerning which type of devices or staplers used during surgery will be recorded in the registry, allowing us to look for possible correlations with clinical outcomes. A well-structured prospective analysis among high volume units will help to define the real complication rate after rectal cancer surgery, which has been usually derived retrospectively and therefore potentially underestimated\(^ {28}\).

Regarding surgical expertise among the centers involved, continuous monitoring of the integrity of the resected specimens should definitely increase the overall quality of surgery.

Detailed analysis of the compliance to adjuvant chemotherapy for locally advanced rectal cancer is extremely important considering recent data reported in the literature\(^ {29,30}\). The unexpected low level of compliance reported in these previous case series has questioned the traditional administration of
adjuvant chemotherapy, searching for new strategies for locally advanced rectal tumours, such as total neoadjuvant chemotherapy.

Conclusions
The creation of a registry for patients operated on for non-metastatic rectal cancer is a necessary requirement. Establishing data collection in a prospective and systematic fashion is the only possibility to preserve the enormous resource that each patient represents.

Data availability
Underlying data
No underlying data is associated with this article.

Extended data

This project contains the following extended data:
- CRF1: Patient’s information and cancer staging form.
- CRF2: Neo-adjuvant chemoradiotherapy and cancer restaging form.
- CRF3: Surgery, surgical outcomes and pathological examination form.
- CRF4: Adjuvant chemotherapy form.
- CRF5: Oncological follow-up form.

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Zero “No rights reserved” data waiver (CC0 1.0 Public domain dedication).

Acknowledgements
AIMS Academy: www.aimsacademy.org

References


Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ✔ ✔ ✔

Version 1

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The Northern Italian research group presents a study protocol detailing specifics of a rectal cancer registry, which consists of a multicentric collaboration aiming to gather reliable, prospectively collected data for rectal cancer research. The authors need to be congratulated for their initiative. Multi-institutional collaborations are needed in the rapidly evolving field of multi-modal treatment of locally advanced rectal cancer. The authors emphasise new challenges of an ageing, frail population. Radiotherapy- or surgery-sparing strategies may represent interesting alternatives to conventional treatment schemes.

Overall the protocol is clear and concise. I would like to suggest expanding on the following points:

- Multi-institutional collaborations are challenging, since dealing with a heterogeneous patient- and provider population, surgical and perioperative care. How do the authors account for that?

- Standardization: Do all centers use similar treatment protocols? How standardized is the surgical approach? Do all centers perform robotic proctectomy? How experienced are participating surgeons? Are all participating centers teaching facilities?

- I think the authors may expand on complication assessment. Who is assessing complications, are these institution-specific abstractors or do centers dispose of surveillance tools, i.e. for surgical site infections?

- How do the authors ascertain data quality? National data registries ideally need (independent) audit and validation. Who is auditing data accuracy?

Is the rationale for, and objectives of, the study clearly described?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate for the research question?
Yes
Are sufficient details of the methods provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Colorectal surgery, minimally-invasive surgery

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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Abe Fingerhut
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This registry is unique and essential to research in Italy. The Advanced International Mini-Invasive Surgery (AIMS) academy clinical research network has a major role in this multicenter prospective observational cohort study, I agree that standardization and centralization of data collection for neoplastic diseases is essential for patient care. The creation of a register will allow the control of the quality of treatments provided and permit prospective and retrospective studies to be carried out on complete and reliable high quality data.

Is the rationale for, and objectives of, the study clearly described?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate for the research question?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Surgery and clinical research
I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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This paper describes the creation of a national registry for non metastatic rectal cancer. The main issue is a high quality standardization of rectal cancer multimodal treatment, staging and follow up.
I think that the core of the project is well explained and clarified. Additional materials are clear and quite user friendly.
The methods are well described and expanded enough.
The need for well designed databases on rectal cancer is clearly expressed by the literature.
I believe that this registry represents a high quality attempt in the direction of a centralized and appropriate treatment for rectal cancer.

Is the rationale for, and objectives of, the study clearly described?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate for the research question?
Yes

Are sufficient details of the methods provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are the datasets clearly presented in a useable and accessible format?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Colorectal surgery

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.
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