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Estrogen receptors α and β and aromatase as independent predictors for prostate cancer outcome

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Androgens are considered important in normal prostate physiology and prostate cancer (PCa) pathogenesis. However, androgen-targeted treatment preventing PCa recurrence is still lacking. This indicates additional mediators contributing to cancer development. We sought to determine the prognostic significance of estrogen receptors, ER α and - β , and the aromatase enzyme in PCa. Tissue microarrays were created from 535 PCa patients treated with radical prostatectomy. Expression of ER α , ER β and aromatase were evaluated using immunohistochemistry. Representative tumor epithelial (TE) and tumor stromal (TS) areas were investigated separately. Survival analyses were used to evaluate the markers correlation to PCa outcome. In univariate analyses, ER α in TS was associated with delayed time to clinical failure (CF) ($p = 0.042$) and PCa death ($p = 0.019$), while ER β was associated with reduced time to biochemical failure (BF) ($p = 0.002$). Aromatase in TS and TE was associated with increased time to BF and CF respectively ($p = 0.016$, $p = 0.046$). Multivariate analyses supported these observations, indicating an independent prognostic impact of all markers. When stratifying the analysis according to different surgical centers the results were unchanged. In conclusion, significant prognostic roles of ER α , ER β and aromatase were discovered in the in PCa specimens of our large multicenter cohort.

Prostate cancer (PCa) is continually a challenge as one of the leading causes of cancer-related death amongst men¹. Androgens are considered as key regulators of physiological processes in the prostate, including prostatic growth, differentiation, development and secretory function, but their role in PCa pathogenesis is not yet defined^{2,3}. The response to androgens is mediated through the androgen receptor (AR), which is expressed in both prostatic epithelial and stromal cells⁴. This androgen-dependency has been thoroughly investigated and formed the basis for androgen deprivation therapy (ADT), which is an essential PCa treatment in metastatic disease. Innovative approaches in androgen signalling targeting are developing. Oral inhibitors targeting CYP-17 (by abiraterone) and the AR (by enzalutamide) has increased survival in metastatic castration-resistant PCa (CRPC) in phase III studies^{5–8}. However, recurrence of CRPC still remains a challenge. This indicates a complexity in the progression from invasive cancer to castration refractory disease and additional mediators appear to be involved in this malignant transformation.

The involvement of androgens in PCa has led to an increased interest in the involvement of other sex steroid hormones and their synthesis in PCa development. Local estrogen production happens through the conversion of androstenedione to estrone, and testosterone to estradiol which is catalyzed by the aromatase enzyme (CYP 19). This process takes place in several tissues, including the prostate^{9–11}. Aromatase inhibitors are currently used in treatment of advanced breast cancer in post-menopausal women. The effect of aromatase inhibitors on CRPC has also been investigated, however a beneficial effect has not been shown^{12,13}. So far, results regarding local aromatases activity in PCa have been diverging^{9–11}, and few studies have focused on the association between

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local aromatase expression and PCa. Currently, genetic polymorphism of the aromatase gene, *CYP19A1*, and its association to PCa has received interest and is undergoing investigation^{14–16}.

The involvement of estrogens in PCa is not a novel concept^{2,3}. Estrogens were used as the main PCa treatment until the 1950s due to their ability to suppress serum testosterone levels via negative feedback on luteinizing hormone (LH) production¹⁷. However, as serious cardiovascular side effects were an increasing concern, new ADT methods developed (e.g. LH-releasing hormone antagonists) and estrogen treatment was discarded¹⁷.

The effects of estrogens are mediated through two different receptors, ER α and ER β ¹⁸, both expressed in the human prostate. Estrogens involvement in PCa development received renewed interest after the discovery of the second ER receptor (ER β) in the prostate¹⁸. This has led to development of a paradigm regarding the different roles of the ERs in PCa. So far the hypothesis has been that ER β has a predominantly protective effect in PCa, while ER α is oncogenic^{19–23}. However, the role of ERs in PCa remains controversial as opposing results regarding their behavior in PCa development are still emerging^{24–31}.

In order to understand the ERs involvement in PCa we have investigated the epithelial and stromal expression of ER α , ER β and aromatase in different tissue compartments in a large cohort of 535 prostatectomy specimens. We further analyzed their prognostic impact on patient outcome and correlation to clinicopathological variables. All three markers were detected in either tumor related stromal cells (TS), tumor epithelial cells (TE) or both and correlated to PCa outcome.

Materials and Methods

Patients and tissue data. Primary tumor tissue from 535 radical prostatectomy (RP) patients was included in this study. The tumor tissue was retrospectively collected from the Departments of Pathology at the University Hospital of Northern Norway (n = 248), Nordland Hospital (n = 59) and St. Olavs Hospital (n = 228) from the period 1995–2005. Patients who had (I) radiotherapy to the pelvic region prior to surgery, (II) other malignancies within 5 years prior to the PCa diagnosis, (III) inadequate paraffin-embedded tissue blocks, and (IV) lack of clinical follow-up data, (V) received hormonal therapy prior to or at the time of the prostatectomy, were excluded. All primary cancers were histologically reviewed by two pathologists (ER and LTB) and the tumors were graded according to the modified Gleason grading system^{32,33} and staged according to the WHO guidelines³⁴. Median follow-up time of survivors was 89 (range 6–188) months at the last patient update in November 2012. The cohort is thoroughly described in a previous paper³⁵.

The Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics (2009/1393), the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD), and the National Data Inspection Board approved this study. All patients were made anonymous with each trial number. These numbers were initially linked to identity for only one purpose prior; to collect clinical information. Written consent from the patients was considered, but as this was a retrospective study where most of the material was more than 10 years old and most of the patients deceased, it was considered not needed. The aforementioned parties accepted this solution. All data was analyzed anonymously.

Microarray construction. Tissue Microarray (TMA) construction was chosen for high-throughput molecular pathology analysis. For each case, a pathologist (ER) identified and marked two representative areas of tumor tissue (epithelial tumor cells), two with tumor stromal tissue, one area with normal epithelial tissue, and one area with normal stromal tissue. From each of these areas, cores were sampled from each donor block in order to construct TMA blocks.

The TMAs were assembled using a tissue-arraying instrument (Beecher Instruments, Silver Springs, MD, USA). We used a 0.6 mm diameter needle to harvest cores from the marked tissue areas from the corresponding formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tissue blocks. The samples were inserted into an empty recipient paraffin block according to a coordinate pattern. To include all core samples, twelve tissue array blocks were constructed. Multiple 4 μ m sections were cut with a Micron microtome (HM355S), affixed to glass slides, and sealed with paraffin. The detailed methodology has been reported previously³⁶.

Immunohistochemistry (IHC). The following antibodies were used in this study: Rabbit polyclonal ER α antibody (SC-543, Santa cruz, 1/100), mouse monoclonal ER β antibody (clone PPG5/10, MCA1974s, AbD Serotec, 1/10), and goat polyclonal aromatase (CYP-19) antibody (SC-14245, Santa cruz, 1/50). The TMA slide sections were deparaffinised and rehydrated and antigen retrieval was performed by microwaving (450 W) in 0.01 M citrate buffer at pH 6.0 for 20 minutes. The sections were cooled to room temperature (RT) and endogenous peroxidase activity was blocked by incubation with a solution of 0.5% hydrogen peroxide for 10 minutes. The sections were then incubated in 5% normal serum ABC kit (Vector Laboratories) for 1 h at RT to block non-specific binding. Subsequently, the sections were incubated overnight at 4 °C with primary antibodies, however for goat polyclonal aromatase the incubation time was 45 minutes at RT. After washing, the sections were incubated with the corresponding secondary antibodies for 1 h at RT. The Vectastain ABC kit (Vector Laboratories) was used for the avidin-biotin complex method according the manufacturer's instructions. The sections were lightly counterstained with hematoxylin, dehydrated through an ethanol series, cleared in xylene and mounted. Two different controls for our staining method were applied. Firstly, control staining of the sections with an isotype-matched control antibody without the primary antibody. Secondly, multiple organ tissue microarray as positive and negative tissue controls were used to verify the specificity of the staining in every staining procedure. The positive tissue controls comprised ovary for ER α , colon adenocarcinoma for ER β and placenta for aromatase; Negative tissue controls were samples of normal pancreas and liver. Details regarding antibody validation are presented in supplementary information (S1) and IHC staining of control tissue is depicted in Fig. 1.

Scoring of IHC. The ARIOL imaging system (Applied Imaging Corp., San Jose, CA, USA) was used to scan and digitalize the IHC stained TMA slides. The slides were loaded in the SL 50 automated slide loader and

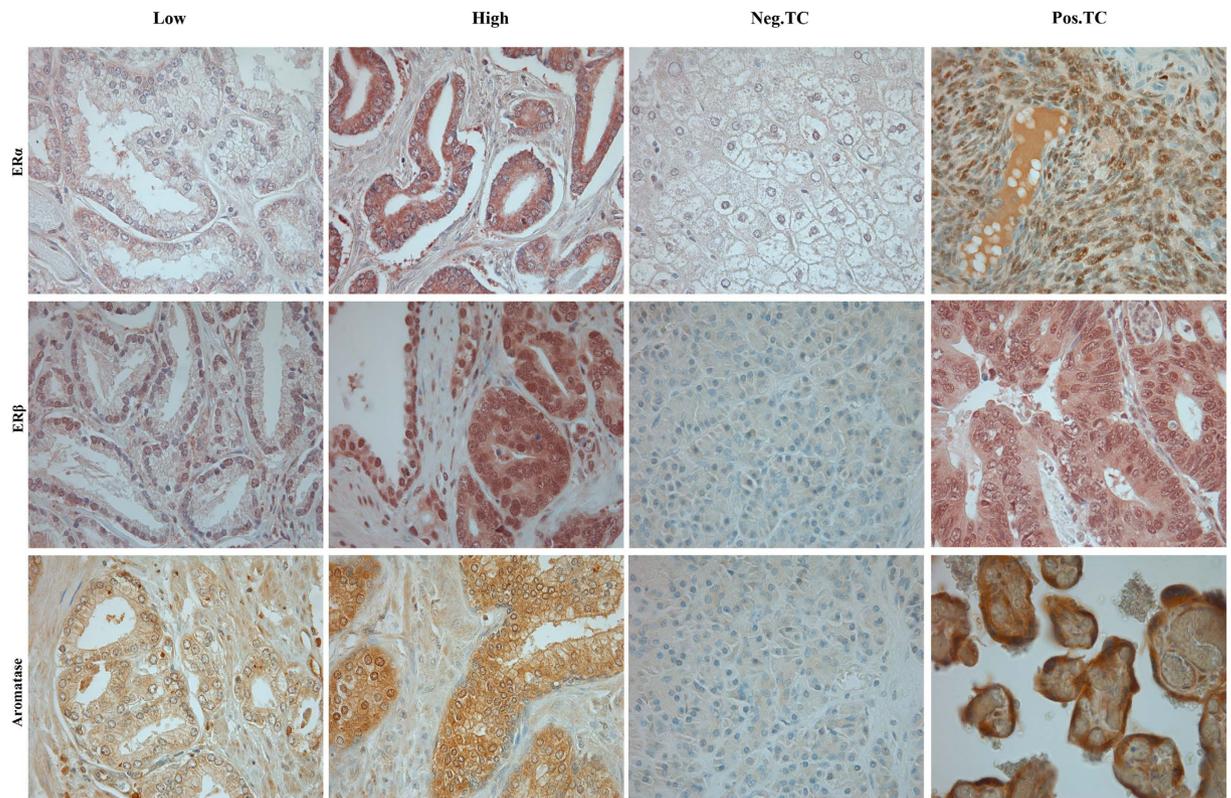


Figure 1. Immunohistochemical analysis of estrogen receptor (ER) α , ER β and aromatase in prostate cancer (PCa) specimens and tissue controls. Microscopic pictures of tissue micro array representing expression of aromatase, estrogen receptor (ER) α and ER β by immunohistochemistry staining in PCa sections. Original magnification x40 showing low and high expression of ER α , ER β and aromatase in in tumor cells (TE) and tumor associated stromal cells (TS) of PCa in addition to positive tissue controls (Pos.TC) and negative tissue controls (Neg.TC) for each antibody. Positive tissue controls; ER α – ovary, ER β – colon adenocarcinoma and aromatase – placenta. Negative tissue controls; ER α – liver, ER β and aromatase – pancreas.

scanned at a low resolution (1.25x) and high resolution (20x) using an Olympus BX61 microscope with an automated platform (Prior Scientific, Cambridge, UK). Images of the cores were uploaded into the ARIOL Software. All samples were de-identified and scored manually by two experienced parties independent of each other: ER α and ER β by two pathologists (ER and SFI) and aromatase by one pathologist (ER) and one MD student (TG) trained by an experienced pathologist. Consequently, all reported marker expressions are based on two separate evaluations of the tissue cores. The scoring was done semi-quantitatively and both parties were blinded to any pathological or clinical information. In case of discrepancy of more than one, the slides were re-examined. When selecting the representative pictures of IHC stained TMA cores depicted in Fig. 1, the TMA slides were evaluated by microscope and pictures of the selected cores were taken manually through microscope.

Overall, the percentage of ER α and ER β positive cells varied between the different cores, there was however little variation in staining intensity. ER α and ER β density was therefore given a score between 0–3, reflecting the percentage of positive cells in the examined compartment. The applied scoring system was as follows: 0: 0%, 1: \leq 5%, 2: 6–50%, 3: $>$ 50%. For aromatase there was an overall high percentage of positive cells, but variation in staining intensity was observed. The degree of aromatase protein expression in cytoplasm was therefore graded according to the dominant staining intensity. The scoring was done using the following system: 0 = negative, 1 = weak, 2 = moderate, 3 = strong. For each case, mean scores were calculated. Further, the scoring values were dichotomized as high and low intensity or density of stained cells. Both median, mean and quartile cut off values were considered, but the optimal cut off was chosen based on adequate number of patients in each group and statistical trends. The cut off for ER β in TS and aromatase in TE was defined as the median (1.5, 1.0) value. For ER α and aromatase in TS the cut off was set to the value \geq 1st quartile (0.75, 0.63). Marker expressions were evaluated in all the different PCa compartments: Normal epithelia (NE), normal stroma (NS), hyperplasia (H), TE and TS. Further, marker expression in the different compartments and their correlation with biochemical failure (BF), clinical failure (CF) and prostate cancer death (PCD) was analyzed.

Statistical methods. All statistical analyses were performed using the statistical package IBM SPSS, version 21 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). A Wilcoxon signed rank test was used to assess differences in ER β , ER α and aromatase expression between the different compartments: TE vs. TS. Spearman correlation coefficient was performed to examine the association between ER β , ER α , aromatase expression and clinicopathological variables. The Kaplan-Meier method was used for the univariate survival analysis, and log-rank test was used to assess

statistical significance. Univariate analyses were constructed for the following end-points: (1) Biochemical failure free survival (BFFS), (2) Clinical failure free survival (CFFS) and (3) PCa death free survival (PCDFS). BF was determined as PSA recurrence ≥ 0.4 ng/ml in a minimum of two different blood samples postoperatively³⁷. CF was defined as verified local symptomatic recurrence and/or findings of metastasis to bone, visceral organs or lymph nodes by CT, MR, bone scan or ultrasonography. PCD was defined as death caused by progressive and disseminated castration-resistant PCa uncontrollable by therapy. All significant variables from the univariate analysis were entered in the multivariate analysis using backward stepwise Cox regression model with a probability for stepwise entry removal at 0.05 and 0.1, respectively. The IHC scoring values from each pathologist were compared for inter-observer reliability by use of a two-way random effect model with absolute agreement definition. The significance level used was $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

Results

Patient characteristics. An overview of the patient's demographic, clinical and histopathological characteristics is presented in Table 1. Median age at surgery was 62 years (47 to 76). The radical prostatectomy was retropubic in 435 cases (81%) and perineal in 100 cases (19%). Combined Gleason score ranged from 6 to 10 and tumor stage from T2a to T3b. Median PSA was 8.8 (range 0.7–104). At the last follow-up in 2012, 170 (32%) had experienced BF, 36 (7%) experienced CF and 15 (3%) had died due to PCa.

Scoring agreement. There was a good scoring agreement between the scorers. The intra-class correlation coefficient (reliability coefficient, r) was 0.93 ($p < 0.001$) for the ER α marker and 0.79 ($p < 0.001$) for the ER β marker and 0.89 ($p < 0.001$) for the aromatase marker respectively.

Expression of ER α , ER β and aromatase expression and their correlation with clinicopathological variables. ER α and aromatase staining was predominantly cytoplasmic (Fig. 1). The staining of ER β was both nuclear and cytoplasmic (Fig. 1). ER α staining in epithelial cells was primarily negative (NE and TE negative in 70 and 64%, respectively) (Fig. 1). For the small selection of patients with a positive epithelial ER α expression, no significant difference in BFFS, CFFS or PCDFS was found. ER β staining was overall positive in stromal and epithelial cells of both benign and malignant prostate tissue. The percentage of ER β positive cells was however significantly higher in TE compared to TS (mean value 1.93 and 1.26 respectively, $p < 0.001$). Aromatase staining was also in general positive. Though, a stronger aromatase expression was detected in NS compared to TS (mean value 1.29 and 1.09 respectively, $p < 0.001$). There was also a stronger aromatase staining intensity in NS compared to NE (mean value 1.29 and 1.05 respectively, $p < 0.001$). No further difference in expression was detected for either marker.

The correlation between marker expressions and clinicopathological variables was weak or non-significant ($r < 0.2$). However, a positive correlation was detected between ER α and ER β in TS ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$). As expected, in TS both ER α and ER β displayed a correlation to aromatase ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$ and $r = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$). The same correlation was observed in TE for ER α , ER β and aromatase respectively ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$ / $r = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$).

Univariate analysis. Variables significant for BF were pT-stage ($p < 0.001$), pN-stage ($p < 0.001$), preoperative PSA ($p < 0.001$), Gleason score ($p < 0.001$), tumor size ($p < 0.001$), perineural infiltration (PNI, $p < 0.001$), positive surgical margin (PSM, $p = 0.041$), apical PSM ($p = 0.040$), non-apical PSM ($p < 0.001$), and lymphovascular infiltration (LVI, $p < 0.001$). For CF, significant prognostic factors were: pT-stage ($p < 0.001$), pN-stage ($p < 0.001$), Gleason score ($p < 0.001$), tumor size ($p = 0.019$), PNI ($p = 0.001$), PSM ($p = 0.038$), non-apical PSM ($p < 0.001$) and LVI ($p < 0.001$). For PCD the prognostic factors were: pT-stage ($p = 0.027$), pN-stage ($p < 0.001$), Gleason score ($p < 0.001$), PNI ($p = 0.002$), non-apical PSM ($p = 0.029$) and LVI ($p = 0.009$).

Results from univariate analysis of molecular markers according to BFFS, CFFS and PCDFS are presented in Table 2 and Fig. 2A–F. In TS, a high density of ER α was associated with increased CFFS ($p = 0.042$) (Fig. 2A) and increased PCDFS ($p = 0.019$) (Fig. 2B), albeit this trend was not displayed in BFFS ($p = 0.819$). High ER β expression was on the other hand associated with reduced BFFS ($p = 0.002$) (Fig. 2C). Further, a strong TS staining intensity of aromatase was associated with increased BFFS ($p = 0.016$) (Fig. 2D). In TE, a strong intensity of aromatase was also associated with increased CFFS ($p = 0.036$) (Fig. 2E) and similar curves tending towards significance were observed for PCDFS ($p = 0.061$) (Fig. 2F). When stratifying these analyses according to the different surgical centers the same trends were displayed. In addition to these findings, we demonstrate a trend for the markers ER α in TS and aromatase in TE in adding prognostic value (4–12% reduced 10-year CFFS in low versus high expression subgroups) within each pathological PCa stage (Table 3).

When merging the expression levels of ER α and aromatase in TS, a combined high level of the two markers (high/high vs. high/low, low/high, low/low) was associated with increased CFFS ($p = 0.029$) (S1 Table 2). The same tendency was also displayed when merging ER α in TS and aromatase in TE. A combined high level (high/high, high/low, low/high vs. low/low) was associated with increased CFFS ($p = 0.038$) and PCDFS (0.003), but not BFFS ($p = 0.854$) (S1 Table 2). Further, when merging the stromal expression of ER β and aromatase, a beneficial effect of a combined level low ER β and high aromatase (low/high) in BFFS stood out compared to the high ER β and low aromatase (high/low) combination which was associated with reduced time to BFFS ($p < 0.001$) (S1 Table 2). When combining ER β in TS and aromatase in TE, no obvious trends or significant results were displayed.

Multivariate analysis. Results from multivariate analysis are presented in Table 4. In addition to pT-stage, Gleason score ≥ 9 apical PSM, and non-apical PSM, both ER β (HR: 1.70, 95% CI: 1.19–2.42, $p = 0.004$) and aromatase (HR: 0.55, 95% CI: 0.38–0.80, $p = 0.002$) in TS were independent prognostic factors for BF. ER α in TS emerged as a significant, independent marker for CF (HR: 0.43, 95% CI: 0.22–0.86, $p = 0.018$) in addition to non-apical PSM, PNI and Gleason grade ≥ 9 . This was also the case for aromatase in TE (HR: 0.43, 95% CI:

Characteristic	Patients (n)	Patients (%)	BF (170 events)		CF (36 events)		PCD (15 events)	
			5-year EFS (%)	p	10-year EFS (%)	p	10-year EFS (%)	p
Age				0.55		0.085		0.600
≤65 years	357	67	76		92		97	
>65 years	178	33	70		88		96	
pT-Stage				<0.001		<0.001		0.027
pT2	374	70	83		96		98	
pT3a	114	21	60		86		98	
pT3b	47	9	43		73		89	
pN-stage				<0.001		<0.001		<0.001
NX	264	49	79		95		98	
N0	268	50	71		89		97	
N1	3	1	0		33		67	
Preop PSA				<0.001		0.085		0.061
PSA < 10	308	58	80		93		99	
PSA > 10	221	41	67		88		95	
Missing	6	1	—		—		—	
Gleason				<0.001		<0.001		0.001
3 + 3	183	34	83		98		99	
3 + 4	220	41	76		94		98	
4 + 3	80	15	69		84		95	
4 + 4	19	4	63		76		94	
≥9	33	6	34		67		87	
Tumor size				<0.001		0.019		0.098
0–20 mm	250	47	82		94		99	
>20 mm	285	53	67		88		96	
PNI				<0.001		<0.001		0.002
No	401	75	79		95		98	
Yes	134	25	60		81		93	
PSM				0.041		0.038		0.697
No	249	47	81		94		97	
Yes	286	53	69		89		97	
Non-apical PSM				<0.001		<0.001		0.029
No	381	71	81		95		98	
Yes	154	29	57		81		94	
Apical PSM				0.040		0.484		0.313
No	325	61	73		90		96	
Yes	210	39	77		92		98	
LVI				<0.001		<0.001		0.009
No	492	92	77		93		98	
Yes	43	8	46		71		87	
Surgical proc.				0.230		0.414		0.581
Retropubic	435	81	76		90		97	
Perineal	100	19	67		95		98	

Table 1. Patient characteristics and clinicopathological variables as predictors of biochemical failure-free survival, clinical failure-free survival and disease-specific survival (univariate analysis; log-rank test) (N = 535). Abbreviations: BF = biochemical failure; CF = clinical failure; PCD = prostate cancer death; PCa = prostate cancer; EFS = event free survival; LVI = lymphovascular infiltration; NR = not reached; PNI = Perineural infiltration; Preop = preoperative; PSA = Prostate specific antigen; PSM = Positive surgical margin; Surgical proc = surgical procedure.

0.21–0.90, $p = 0.024$). Further, $ER\alpha$ in TS was the only marker that served as an independent prognostic factor for PCD (HR: 0.28, 95% CI: 0.1–0.78, $p = 0.015$) along with Gleason grade ≥ 9 and PNI, although aromatase in TE tended towards significance. Further, $ER\alpha$ in TS and aromatase in TE combined emerged as an independent prognostic factor for CF (HR: 0.43, 95% CI: 0.21–0.87, $p = 0.02$) and PCD (HR: 0.24, 95% CI: 0.085–0.65, $p = 0.005$). The combination $ER\alpha$ and aromatase and $ER\beta$ and aromatase respectively in TS did not reach statistical significance in multivariate analyses.

Marker expression	Patients (n)	Patients (%)	BFFS			CFFS			PCDFS			
			5-year (%)	10-year (%)	p	5-year (%)	10-year (%)	p	5-year (%)	10-year (%)	p	
ER α TS	Low	144	26.9	73	67	0.819	94	86	0.042	98	89	0.019
	High	373	69.7	74	61		97	93		99	98	
	Missing	18	3.4									
ER β TS	Low	368	68.8	77	66	0.002	97	91	0.658	100	97	0.486
	High	149	27.9	67	54		95	91		99	97	
	Missing	18	3.4									
Aromatase TS	Low	131	24.5	66	54	0.016	94	90	0.225	98	91	0.668
	High	386	72.1	77	65		97	91		99	98	
	Missing	18	3.4									
Aromatase TE	Low	275	51.4	73	61	0.487	95	93	0.036	98	96	0.061
	High	242	45.2	75	64		97	96		99	97	
	Missing	18	3.4									

Table 2. Marker expressions as predictor for BFFS, CFFS and PCDFS in PCa patients (n = 535), (univariate analysis; log rank test), significant p-values in bold (threshold $p \leq 0.05$). Abbreviations: ER α = estrogen receptor alpha; ER β = estrogen receptor beta; TE = tumor epithelial cells; TS = tumor stromal cells; BFFS = Biochemical failure free survival; CFFS = clinical failure free survival; PCDFS = prostate cancer death free survival.

Discussion

In our large cohort of 535 PCa specimens, an independent association was detected between PCa outcome and ER α , ER β and aromatase expression. In TS, high-density of ER α was independently and significantly associated with both increased CFFS and PCDFS. In contrast, a high ER β density level was independently and significantly associated with reduced BFFS. Further, a strong staining intensity of aromatase in both TS and TE was significantly and independently associated with increased BFFS and CFFS respectively. In addition, a correlation and an additive effect were discovered when analyzing the combined expression of ERs and aromatase. A major strength of our study is the large multicenter cohort and the long follow-up. In addition, our results were validated in two different cohorts, yielding data tending towards the end results in the total cohort. In addition, few studies have investigated these markers independently in both epithelial and stromal areas of PCa with a clinical event-free survival.

In accord with previous publications, ER α density level was predominantly negative in NE in the PCa patients²³. However, we did not observe an increased expression of epithelial ER α in TE compared to NE, nor a previously reported correlation between ER α versus Gleason grade or tumor progression^{21,28}. But notably, patients with high ER α level in TS had significantly increased PCDFS. This is supported by other studies^{24,29–31} and indicates a more complex role of ER α in PCa than the previously ascribed role as a tumor promoter. In fact, Slavin *et al.* discovered using IHC, *in vitro* invasion assays and *in vivo* studies that ER α in TS is beneficial for PCa patients²⁹. This could potentially be attributed to a PCa metastasis-suppressing role of ER α ²⁹. In a recent follow-up article, Slavin *et al.*³⁰ further hypothesize that ER α in TS of prostate cancer can be utilized as a prognostic marker to predict cancer progression. In addition, Zellweger *et al.* detected an improved overall survival for CRPC patients with stromal ER α expression²⁴. This is further supported by Celhay *et al.* who noted survival to be significantly reduced in PCa patients with low stromal ER α expression³¹.

In our material ER β was expressed, to various extents, in the majority of both epithelial and stromal cells. This is in agreement with previous publications^{23,24,38}, although some report ER β to be predominantly localized in the basal cell epithelial compartment and to a lesser extent in the stromal. Many reports, including this, suggest a negative role of ER β expression on PCa prognosis^{24–28}. There have also been reports of a tumor promoting role of ER β , especially in PCa metastasis^{23,25,26}. This may indicate ER β to exert various effects at different stages of PCa development. However, several publications have delivered contradictory reports on the protective role of ER β in PCa, e.g., loss of ER β as cancer progresses^{20,22,23}. Supporting our findings, Zellweger *et al.* reported that increased ER β expression in hormone naïve PCa (HNPC) was associated with a worse outcome²⁴. Possible reason for the adverse effect of ER β has previously been described. Yang *et al.* reported that non-androgenic proliferation of PCa can occur through estrogen-mediated activation of AR in complex with ER β and proline-, glutamic acid- and leucine rich protein 1 (PELP1), an AR cofactor known for its proto-oncogenic abilities²⁷. It has also been reported a correlation between ER β and Cyclin D1 in hormone-naïve PCa patients³⁹, a protein with known proliferative function.

Recently, several ER β isoforms have been isolated and different functions of these isoforms have been hypothesized, including several with tumor promoting abilities^{25,26,40}. Recent evidence suggests that subtype ER β 2 promotes migration and invasion of cancer cells in addition to cell proliferation, whereas ER β 1 has tumor-suppressing effects²⁶. Further evidence suggest ER β 2 to be a functional modulator of ER α and ER β 1²⁶. Considering the strong correlation between ER subtypes in TS, the hypothesis of an interaction and regulation between these receptors is strengthened. Our study and several previous publications, has not investigated ER β isoforms. This is, however, an important topic for future research and could explain some of the previous diverging results regarding ER β .

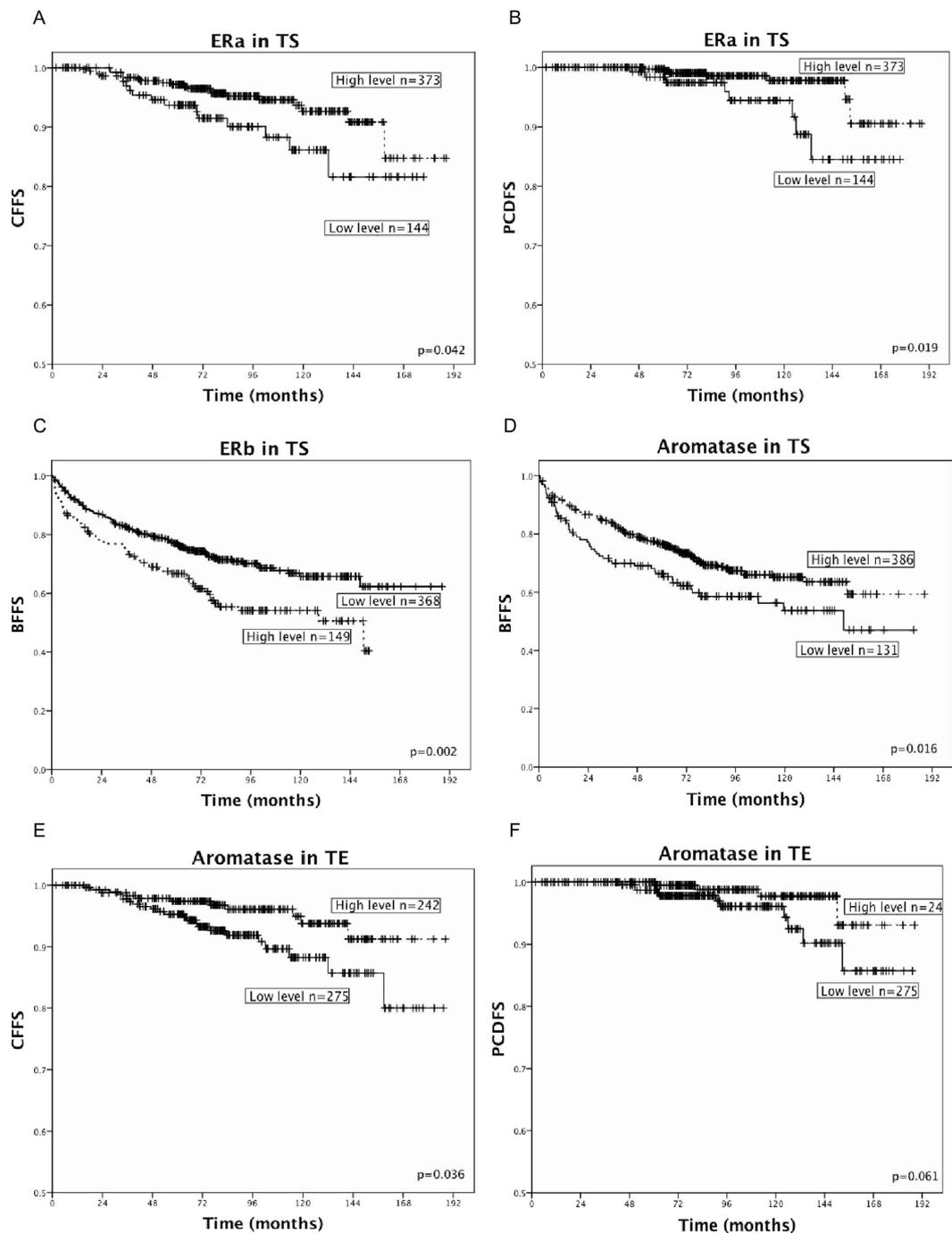


Figure 2. Association with prostate cancer outcome and estrogen receptor (ER) α , ER β and aromatase expression level. Kaplan Meier curves displaying biochemical failure free survival (BFFS), clinical failure free survival (CFFS) and prostate cancer death free survival (PCDFS) in relation to high or low expression level of ER α , ER β and aromatase expression in prostate cancer (PCa) patients (n = 535). **(A)** ER α in tumor associated stromal cells (TS) and CFFS. **(B)** ER α in TS and PCDFS. **(C)** ER β in TS and BFFS. **(D)** Aromatase in TS and BFFS. **(E)** Aromatase in tumor cells (TE) and CFFS. **(F)** Aromatase in TE and PCDFS.

Our study demonstrated a wide distribution of aromatase in stromal and epithelial cells of both benign and malignant prostate tissue. Aromatase has previously been detected in both epithelial and stromal tissue, but agreement regarding its compartmental expression is however currently lacking^{9–11}. There are limited recent studies investigating the expression of aromatase in various prostatic tissue compartments, with respect to PCa pathogenesis. However, two studies observed a positive association between aromatase and PCa recurrence^{31,41}, contradicting our findings. Genetic polymorphism in the gene encoding aromatase, *CYP19A*, has also been a topic of interest. There have been reports, however with equivocal results, indicating that different single nucleotide polymorphism (SNPs) in *CYP19A* influences PCa risk and survival^{14,16}. This association is however disputed

Risk groups of localized prostate cancer	10 year CFFS (%)					
	ER α in TS			Aromatase in TE		
	Low (%)	High (%)	p	Low (%)	High (%)	p
I (n = 42)	NE	NE	—	NE	NE	—
IIA (n = 109)	92	96	0.886	92	96	0.904
IIB (n = 206)	87	99	0.001	93	97	0.148
III (n = 154)	76	84	0.442	76	88	0.074

Table 3. Ten year CFFS for patients with low or high levels of ER α in TS and aromatase in TE respectively in relation to prognostic groups of PCa. The stratification of our cohort into prognostic groups are constructed according to the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) TNM system. By adding either the ER α or the aromatase marker to the already well-established clinical markers, prognostic impact is added across each pathological stage (univariate analysis; log rank test), significant p-values in bold (threshold $p \leq 0.05$). Prognostic group IV has been removed due to $n = 0$. Abbreviations: PCa = prostate cancer; ER α = Estrogen receptor α ; TS = tumor associated stroma; TE = Tumor epithelium, CFFS = Clinical failure free survival; PSA = Prostate specific antigen; GS = Gleason score; TS = tumor stage; NE = No event.

Marker	BF (n = 170)		CF (n = 36)		PCD (n = 15)	
	HR (95% CI)	p	HR (95% CI)	p	HR (95% CI)	p
pT - stage		<0.001				
pT2	1		NE		NE	
pT3a	1.81 (1.22–2.63)	0.003				
pT3b	2.84 (1.74–4.65)	<0.001				
Gleason grade		0.055		0.019		0.085
3 + 3	1		1		1	
3 + 4	1.02 (0.68–1.51)	0.922	2.12 (0.74–1.20)	0.160	3.55 (0.39–32.03)	0.26
4 + 3	1.45 (0.90–2.30)	0.127	3.00 (0.94–9.56)	0.063	9.05 (1.02–80.52)	0.048
4 + 4	1.28 (0.61–2.70)	0.513	2.89 (0.55–15.14)	0.210	5.97 (0.36–100.39)	0.22
≥ 9	2.27 (1.25–4.12)	0.007	6.80 (2.17–21.32)	0.001	15.67 (1.70–144.62)	0.015
PNI	NE		2.12 (1.03–4.39)	0.043	3.4 (1.1–10.53)	0.034
Preop. PSA	1.37 (0.99–1.91)	0.057	NE		NE	
Apical PSM	0.69 (0.49–0.98)	0.038	NE		NE	
Non-apical PSM	1.72 (1.21–2.44)	0.002	3.16 (1.52–6.60)	0.002	NE	
ER β TS	1.70 (1.19–2.42)	0.004	NE		NE	
Aromatase TS	0.55 (0.38–0.80)	0.002	NE		NE	
Aromatase TE	NE		0.43 (0.21–0.90)	0.024	0.33 (0.10–1.04)	0.059
ER α TS	NE		0.43 (0.22–0.87)	0.018	0.28 (0.10–0.78)	0.015

Table 4. Cox regression analysis (backwards stepwise model) summarizing significant independent prognostic factors for BF, CF and PCD in PCa patients (n = 535), significant p values in bold (0.05 threshold). Abbreviations: ER α = estrogen receptor alpha; ER β = estrogen receptor beta; TS = tumor associated stromal cells; TE = tumor epithelial cells; BF = biochemical failure; CF = clinical failure; PCD = prostate cancer death; PNI = perineural infiltration; PSA = prostate specific antigen; PSM = positive surgical margin; NE = not entered.

by others¹⁵. It is not evident how increased aromatization can exert a beneficial mechanism in PCa. Besides the role of SNPs and aromatase in PCa, an explanation may be a local depletion of testosterone due to the shuttling of testosterone towards estrogen production. This could in turn decrease stimulation of the AR.

By detecting aromatase expression in the PCa specimens, in addition to the strong correlation between aromatase and the ERs in TS and TE, we confirm a local production of estrogens in PCa and its stimulation of the local receptors. This indicates estrogens' ability to directly act upon the prostate gland, not only through negative feedback on the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis. This is of particular interest since it is still unresolved whether locally produced or circulating hormones effect PCa more⁴².

There are several factors that may explain some of the discrepancies regarding these hormonal biomarkers. The reproducibility of prognostic biomarker studies is always a challenge⁴³. The cohorts are different, the tissue handling and fixation are different, the lab procedures for biomarker detection (in this case IHC) are different and details on intraprostatic localization of scoring and the biomarker expression analyses are different. Considering the extent of discrepancy in the large number of publications available, a systematic review/meta-analysis with subsequent validation of the most promising studies is highly warranted. The heterogenous nature of the prostate, the different downstream responses to stimulation of stromal or epithelial receptors, respectively, the stromal-epithelial interactions, and the crosstalk between the ARs, ER α s and ER β s are all factors complicating

attempts to decipher roles of the different sex steroid hormones in PCa pathogenesis. This complexity is demonstrated by contradicting results between human PCa samples^{24,25} and PCa cell line studies^{11,20,41}. As an example, several preclinical studies have described protective effects of selective estrogen-receptor modulators (SERM) on PCa through the activation of ER β ^{44,45}. However, this mechanism has to our knowledge never been effectively adapted in the clinic. This is also the case for studies investigating ER α blockage and aromatase inhibitors^{12,13,46}.

In the present study, ERs and aromatase emerged as potential prognostic biomarkers for PCa in addition to other well-established markers. This is demonstrated by the significant impacts in the multivariate analyses (Table 4). In addition, we observed that our markers added prognostic value (4–12% reduced 10-year CFFS in low versus high expression subgroups) even within each pathological stage (Table 3). With additional confirmation, it is likely that this can be adapted to at least a sub-group of PCa patients in the future.

Conclusion

We found both ERs and aromatase to be significantly and independently associated to PCa outcome. In TS, a high expression of ER α was associated with increased CFFS and PCDFS, while a high expression of ER β was associated with reduced BFFS. In addition, high aromatase expression in both TS and TE was favorable with respect to BFFS and CFFS, respectively. For CFFS, the impact of these markers added prognostic relevance within each stage group. This knowledge may be valuable for the development of future prognostic biomarkers in PCa, but further validation is warranted before clinical application.

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Additional Information

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