

Evaluating laser interstitial thermal therapy for newly diagnosed, deep-seated, large-volume glioblastoma: survival and outcome analysis

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OBJECTIVE Laser interstitial thermal therapy (LITT) has emerged as an alternative for treating glioblastoma (GBM) in patients deemed unsuitable for resection due to deep-seated or eloquent location, age, or comorbidities. However, its safety and efficacy in large-volume, deep-seated, newly diagnosed GBM (nGBM) tumors remain insufficiently studied. Therefore, the authors aimed to assess the outcomes of LITT in the treatment of deep-seated, large-volume nGBM.

METHODS A retrospective analysis of patients with nGBM who underwent LITT between February 2013 and August 2023 was conducted. Patients with deep-seated tumor volume ≥ 10 cm³ treated with LITT were compared to patients with deep-seated tumor volume < 10 cm³. Demographic, perioperative, and follow-up data were collected and compared among both groups. Kaplan-Meier survival analysis and Cox proportional hazards regression were performed to evaluate the impact of various clinical and treatment-related factors on patient survival.

RESULTS A total of 33 patients in the study group (mean \pm SD age 65.7 ± 10.2 years, 58% male) with mean tumor volume 36.0 ± 21.6 cm³ were compared to 23 controls (mean age 67.0 ± 12.5 years, 61% male) with mean tumor volume 5.2 ± 2.7 cm³. There were no significant differences in hospital length of stay ($p = 0.494$), temporary neurological deficits and edema within 30 days ($p = 0.705$ and $p > 0.999$, respectively), 30-day readmissions ($p = 0.139$), < 30 -day complications ($p = 0.918$), complications between 30 days and 3 months ($p = 0.903$), and new motor and speech deficits within 3 months ($p = 0.883$ and $p > 0.999$, respectively) between the study and control groups. Kaplan-Meier analysis did not reveal any statistically significant difference in overall survival (OS) between groups ($p = 0.227$). Multivariate analysis indicated that tumor volume did not significantly affect the hazard ratio for individuals undergoing LITT (HR 1.16, 95% CI 0.83–3.29, $p = 0.150$).

CONCLUSIONS This pilot study suggests that LITT is safe for treating patients with large-volume, deep-seated nGBM compared to those with small-volume tumor. Although there appears to be improved OS in patients with smaller lesions with greater EOA, significance was not achieved in this cohort.

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KEYWORDS glioblastoma; laser interstitial thermal ablation; large volume; management; complications; newly diagnosed

GLIOMASTOMA (GBM) remains the most common malignant primary brain tumor, with an incidence of 3.19 cases per 100,000 individuals, a high recurrence rate, and a median overall survival (OS) of approximately 15 months despite aggressive treatment.^{1,2} According to National Comprehensive Cancer Network guidelines, maximal safe resection followed by radiotherapy with concurrent and adjuvant chemotherapy is the standard of care for newly diagnosed GBM (nGBM).^{3,4} Challenges such as tumor location in eloquent areas or deep areas such as the basal ganglia or crossing the cor-

pus callosum, along with concerns about surgery tolerance due to age and comorbidities, complicate resection.^{5–8} Although extent of resection (EOR) correlates with OS, aggressive resection poses risks to eloquent brain and may adversely affect survival.⁹

Laser interstitial thermal therapy (LITT) has emerged as a minimally invasive, ablative technique for cytoreduction of unresectable or recurrent GBM, offering an alternative to traditional craniotomy.^{10–14} Beyond cytoreduction, LITT-induced thermal disruption of the blood-brain barrier enhances local and systemic drug delivery, potentially

ABBREVIATIONS EOA = extent of ablation; EOR = extent of resection; GBM = glioblastoma; KPS = Karnofsky Performance Scale; LITT = laser interstitial thermal therapy; mFI-11 = modified 11-item frailty index; nGBM = newly diagnosed GBM; OS = overall survival; PFS = progression-free survival.

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increasing progression-free survival (PFS).^{12,15,16} Most literature on LITT for GBM focuses on tumor volumes typically ranging from 1 to 60 cm³, with a median volume of approximately 10 cm³ across recent studies.^{14,17–20} Some studies hypothesize that larger initial tumor sizes (> 10 cm³) may impact LITT efficacy due to the risk of incomplete ablation.^{15,21,22} However, to date, no study has specifically analyzed LITT outcomes and efficacy in large nGBM. Therefore, our study aimed to compare LITT outcomes in patients with large, deep-seated nGBM, defined as tumor volumes ≥ 10 cm³,²³ with those with smaller deep-seated nGBM (< 10 cm³).

Methods

Patient Selection

After Institutional Review Board approval, a retrospective chart review was conducted of all patients treated with LITT at our institution from February 2013 to August 2023. LITT was offered to patients deemed high-risk surgical candidates due to age, comorbidities, or tumor locations posing higher risks of postoperative neurological morbidity, as evaluated by the primary neurosurgeons (R.J.K., M.E.I., and A.H.S.). Detailed information regarding our LITT protocol has been previously reported.²⁴

Inclusion Criteria

We included patients with 1) age ≥ 18 years, 2) histopathological diagnosis of GBM, 3) preoperative Karnofsky Performance Scale (KPS) score > 50, 4) life expectancy of at least 3 months, and 5) no contraindications to MRI. Patients with recurrent GBM were excluded from this study. Patients lacking postoperative follow-up were excluded from the analysis. At our institution, patients who undergo LITT for nGBM include those with deep-seated lesions or lesions in eloquent brain that do not come to the surface, and therefore only these locations were included. Deep-seated tumors were defined as those located in regions of the brain that are not easily accessible via traditional surgical approaches, specifically those in areas such as the basal ganglia, thalamus, hypothalamus, corpus callosum, internal capsule, hippocampus, and insular cortex. Patients with tumor volume ≥ 10 cm³ were categorized under the study group, while those with tumor volume < 10 cm³ were categorized under the control group.

Data Collection

Patient demographic and preoperative data, including age at surgery, sex, preoperative KPS score, preoperative deficits, and modified 11-item frailty index (mFI-11) score, were collected. MR images were reviewed to obtain preoperative lesion characteristics, including location, laterality, and volume. The Philips PACS image system's freehand tool was used to measure lesion volume, as previously described.²⁴ Intraoperative data collected included operative time, ablation time, number of trajectories and passes, and extent of ablation (EOA). EOA was calculated as follows: EOA = postoperative ablation volume/preoperative tumor volume $\times 100$.

Data on outcomes included postoperative deficits, KPS

score, 30-day readmission, and postoperative complication. Postoperative complications were grouped as occurring either within 30 days postoperatively or 30 days to 3 months postoperatively and encompassed new-onset neurological deficits, complications, or other clinical occurrences. Information about adjuvant treatment (radiation therapy and/or chemotherapy) was collected. Data on OS, defined as the time from treatment to the date of death or last follow-up, were also obtained.

Statistical Analysis

Comparison of the categorical variables between the study and control cohorts was performed using the chi-square and Fisher exact tests, as appropriate. Continuous variables were compared using either the Student t-test or Welch's t-test depending on the equality of variance tested using Levene's test. Mean and standard deviation were reported for all continuous variables, except for KPS and mFI-11 scores, for which median and IQR (25th–75th percentile) were used due to nonnormal distributions.

Kaplan-Meier survival curves were constructed to assess OS from the date of the LITT procedure. Univariable and multivariable Cox regression analyses were conducted to identify predictors of OS. Prior to finalization of the multivariate Cox model, exploratory interaction term analysis was performed to assess changes in the effects of the covariates based on the volume group variable.

In the final multivariable model, continuous variables were scaled, and the model was bootstrapped ($n = 1000$) with a penalizer of 0.1. The final variables included in the multivariate model were age at surgery, tumor volume > 10 cm³, EOA, and 30-day readmission. Statistical significance was set at a p value < 0.05 for all analyses. Statistical analyses were performed using Python version 3.11.5 for MacOS and GraphPad Prism software version 10.1.2 (GraphPad Software Inc.).

Results

Patient Characteristics

During the study period, 313 patients underwent the LITT procedure at our institution. Of these, 56 patients met the inclusion criteria and had nGBM with tumors located deep in the cortex or underneath eloquent structures. These included 33 patients with tumor volume ≥ 10 cm³ categorized as the study group and 23 patients with tumor volumes < 10 cm³ categorized as the control group. The mean \pm SD (range) preoperative tumor volume in the study group was 36.0 ± 21.6 (11.34–91.73) cm³ compared to 5.2 ± 2.7 (0.36–9.63) cm³ in the control group ($p < 0.001$). Figure 1 shows representative MRI slices of the patients with tumors ≥ 10 cm³ categorized under the study group.

Patient demographic, clinical, and radiological characteristics are detailed in Table 1. There were no significant differences in age, sex, tumor location, mFI-11, or preoperative deficits between the two groups. Although the median (IQR) KPS scores were similar in both groups, the difference was statistically significant (80 [70–80] for the study group vs 80 [80–80] for the control group, $p = 0.009$).

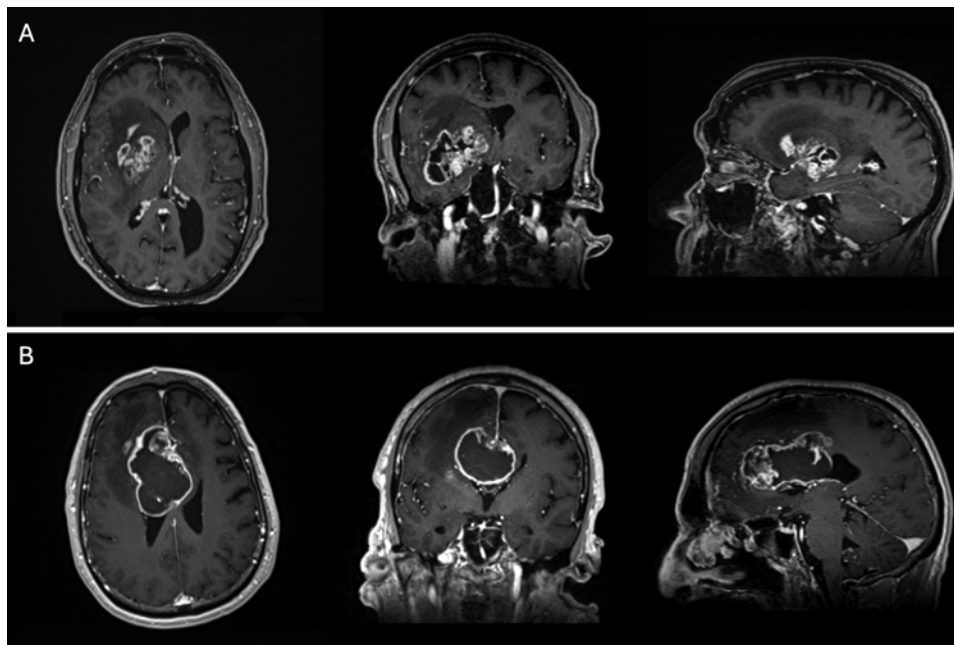


FIG. 1. Preoperative T1-weighted MR images with contrast of sample cases in the study group (≥ 10 cm³) showing patients with nGBM with a 45.86-cm³ lesion involving the basal ganglia (A) and a 79.56-cm³ lesion involving the bilateral frontal lobe and anterior corpus callosum (B).

Operative Data

Regarding operative data, the mean procedure duration, ablation time, and number of pullbacks were greater in the study group, and the differences were statistically significant (Table 2). There was no significant difference in the number of trajectories between the two groups ($p = 0.113$). Moreover, EOA was significantly lower in the study group compared to the control group ($121.2\% \pm 47.9\%$ vs $195.2\% \pm 127.1\%$, $p = 0.013$).

Outcomes

There were no significant differences in the mean length of hospital stay and rates of temporary neurological deficits within 30 days and 30-day readmission (Table 3). Although 1 patient in the study group compared to 0 patients in the control group had cerebral edema within 30 days, the difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.999$). Similarly, while 7 patients (21.21%) in the study group compared to 6 patients (32.58%) in the control group had complications within 30 days, the difference was not statistically significant. Complications within 30 days in the study group included altered mental status ($n = 2$), cerebral edema ($n = 1$), hydrocephalus ($n = 1$), intracranial hemorrhage ($n = 1$), seizure ($n = 1$), and urinary tract infection ($n = 1$). In comparison, 30-day complications in the control group included aphasia ($n = 1$), anaphylactic cardiac arrest ($n = 1$), hyperglycemia ($n = 1$), right-sided hemiparesis ($n = 1$), and seizure ($n = 2$) ($p = 0.918$). Moreover, there were no significant differences between the study and control groups in terms of the incidence of complications from 30 days to 3 months postsurgery (28% vs 22%, $p = 0.903$). These complications in the study group included altered

mental status ($n = 2$), cerebral edema ($n = 1$), deep vein thrombosis ($n = 1$), impaired balance ($n = 1$), noncommunicating hydrocephalus ($n = 1$), and sinus bradycardia ($n = 1$). In contrast, complications within 30 days to 3 months in the control group included altered mental status ($n = 1$), anaphylaxis ($n = 1$), aphasia ($n = 1$), and dysphagia ($n = 1$) ($p = 0.903$). Finally, there were no significant differences in the development of new motor and speech deficits within 3 months of surgery.

Survival Outcomes and Predictors of Survival

The mean OS was longer in the control group (392 days vs 282 days). However, Kaplan-Meier analysis (Fig. 2) showed no statistically significant difference in OS between the two groups ($p = 0.227$).

Univariate Cox regression revealed that older age at surgery (HR 1.04, 95% CI 1.01–1.08, $p = 0.007$) and 30-day readmission rate (HR 6.26, 95% CI 2.24–17.50, $p < 0.001$) were factors predictive of reduced OS. EOA and preoperative tumor volume were nonsignificant on univariate analysis (Table 4).

In fitting the Cox model, interaction terms showed no significant disproportionate effects of the covariates based on the volume group. Thus, no interaction terms were included in the final model. In the final multivariate Cox analysis (Fig. 3, Table 4), older age at surgery was associated with a significant increase in the hazard ratio for the entire cohort (HR 1.73, 95% CI 1.19–2.51, $p < 0.005$). Similarly, 30-day readmission increased the hazard ratio (HR 4.92, 95% CI 1.74–13.92, $p < 0.005$). EOA did not significantly alter the hazard ratio in the sample ($p = 0.690$). Importantly, patients with large-volume tumors also did not show a significantly increased hazard ratio ($p = 0.150$).

TABLE 1. Patient demographic and tumor characteristics

Variable	Study Group (n = 33)	Control Group (n = 23)	p Value
Demographic			
Age, yrs	65.7 ± 10.2	67.0 ± 12.5	0.663
Male sex	19 (58)	14 (61)	>0.999
Preop KPS score	80 (70–80)	80 (80–80)	0.009
Preop mFI-11 score	18 (9–18)	18 (9–18)	0.600
Preop neurological deficit	30 (91)	20 (87)	0.976
Preop seizure	7 (21)	9 (39)	0.246
Tumor characteristics			
Preop tumor vol, cm ³	36.0 ± 21.6	5.2 ± 2.7	<0.001
Max tumor diameter, cm	4.95 ± 1.14	2.72 ± 0.94	<0.001
Supratentorial	33 (100)	22 (96)	0.855
Infratentorial	0 (0)	1 (4)	0.855
Side			
Rt	16 (48.48)	5 (21.74)	0.024
Lt	10 (30.30)	15 (65.22)	0.009
Bilat	7 (21.21)	3 (13.04)	0.500
Location*			
Frontal	10 (30.30)	7 (30.43)	0.779
Temporal	11(33.33)	9 (39.13)	>0.999
Parietal	12 (36.36)	6 (26.09)	0.270
Cerebellum	0 (0.00)	1 (4.35)	0.450
Involvement of deep-seated structures			
Corpus callosum	11 (33.33)	6 (26.09)	0.768
Hippocampus	6 (18.18)	6 (26.09)	0.522
Basal ganglia	5 (15.15)	2 (8.69)	0.688
Insula	4 (12.12)	2 (8.69)	>0.999
Thalamus	4 (12.12)	4 (4.35)	0.704
Amygdala	3 (9.09)	2 (8.69)	>0.999
Cerebellum	0 (0)	1 (4.35)	>0.999

Values are shown as number (%), mean ± SD, and median (IQR) unless indicated otherwise. Boldface type signifies statistical significance (p < 0.05).
 * Predominant locations had extension into the deep-seated structures listed.

TABLE 2. Operative characteristics

Variable	Study Group (n = 33)	Control Group (n = 23)	p Value
Op time, mins*	256 ± 70.7	212 ± 84	0.045
Ablation time, mins*	11.5 ± 4.6	7.1 ± 3.1	<0.001
No. of trajectories			
1	27 (82)	22 (96)	0.113
2	6 (18)	1 (4)	0.113
No. of pullbacks	4 (3–4)	2 (1–3.5)	<0.001
EOA, %	121.2 ± 47.9	195.2 ± 127.1	0.013

Values are shown as number (%), mean ± SD, and median (IQR) unless indicated otherwise. Boldface type signifies statistical significance (p < 0.05).
 * Data were unavailable for all patients.

TABLE 3. Treatment outcomes

Variable	Study Group (n = 33)	Control Group (n = 23)	p Value
Hospital LOS, days	3.9 ± 3.5	3.3 ± 2.1	0.494
New temporary neurological deficit <30 days*	1 (3)	2 (10)	0.705
Complications <30 days*	7 (21.21)	6 (32.58)	0.918
Postop edema <30 days*	1 (4)	0 (0)	>0.999
30-day readmission	5 (15)	0 (0)	0.139
Complications 30 days to 3 mos*	9 (28)	4 (22)	0.903
New motor deficit <3 mos*	2 (8)	2 (38)	0.883
New speech deficit <3 mos*	3 (10)	2 (15)	>0.999
Postop radiation therapy*	24 (92)	16 (100)	0.696
Postop chemotherapy*	26 (100)	14 (93)	0.778
OS, days	282 ± 291	392 ± 361	0.213
Death	25 (76)	16 (70)	0.835

LOS = length of stay.
 Values are shown as number (%) or mean ± SD unless indicated otherwise.
 * Data were unavailable for all patients.

No variables violated the Cox proportional hazards assumption, and multicollinearity was not observed (variance inflation factor < 1.5).

Discussion

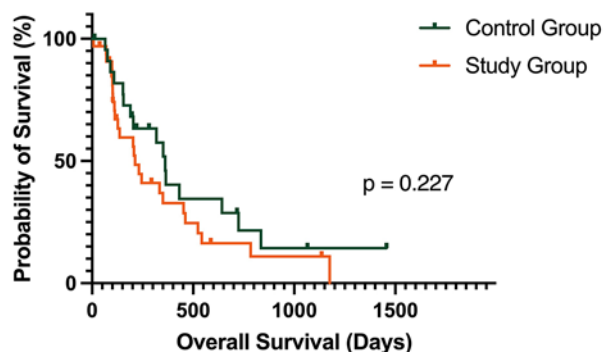
Since its first description by Sugiyama et al. in 1990,²⁵ LITT has emerged as an effective treatment modality for direct cytorreduction of GBM.²⁶ Its minimally invasive nature has led to a recent increase in its adoption for the surgical management of GBM.^{17,26} Initially, concerns were raised regarding the efficacy of LITT for large (≥ 10 cm³) or nonspherical tumors,^{15,27} but subsequent studies demonstrated that multiple catheters and trajectories could achieve complete ablation despite their tumor size or morphology.¹⁵ Many authors have raised concerns about increased perioperative and postoperative complications, particularly pertaining to cerebral edema and mass effect.^{26,28}

Study Overview

In this study, we investigated whether LITT increased complications or affected survival in patients with large nGBM ≥ 10 cm³ compared to controls. We found no significant differences in postoperative complications or survival outcomes between the study and control groups.

Operative Data

It is intuitive to expect greater mean procedure duration, ablation time, and number of pullbacks while treating large-volume nGBM. Our findings of statistically significant differences between the study and control groups in terms of these operative parameters align with those of other authors.^{23,29} Despite this, our study found no significant difference in postoperative outcomes between the study and control groups.



Number at Risk

	0	500	1000	1500
Control	23	7	3	1
Study	33	7	3	1

FIG. 2. Kaplan-Meier plot comparing OS between the study and control groups. No significant difference was observed between groups.

Cerebral Edema Risk

LITT for large GBM in our study did not increase malignant cerebral edema risk. There was no associated significant overall perioperative or postprocedural morbidity related to cerebral edema or resultant mass effect. Contrastingly, the systematic review of Alattar et al. on LITT noted edema risk in brain metastases, wherein patients with lesion volumes ranging from 29 to 70 cm³ developed postablation malignant edema, thereby suggesting caution for lesions \geq 10 cm³.²³ Our study had 1 patient in the study group develop cerebral edema within 30 days of surgery; however, none had malignant edema. Therefore, our study challenges the notion of avoiding LITT solely based on lesion size.

Extent of Ablation

Our findings of a lower EOA within our study group,

as compared to the control group, align with the findings of other authors who demonstrated a negative linear relationship between preoperative lesion size and EOA.⁵ EOA has been likened to EOR for predicting PFS and OS in patients with GBM.^{12,30} Our institution previously reported the association between greater EOA and survival in patients with nGBM,¹² showing an EOA threshold of 70% yielding the most significant differences in PFS and OS. Despite the study group having a lower EOA, both the study and control groups in our study had a mean EOA greater than 70%. Because of this, it is understandable that there was no significant difference in OS between groups. Our hypothesis is that in addition to ablation of the surrounding tumor, LITT likely also causes a local immune response that assists in providing a treating effect toward the tumor.^{29,31} This finding supports the use of LITT for large-volume GBM and challenges the narrative that one cannot achieve sufficient ablation to yield a benefit in this difficult-to-treat patient population.

Survival and Prognostic Factors

Age at surgery and 30-day readmission significantly impacted OS in our cohort. Our findings align with those of other authors who similarly noted that age negatively impacted OS.¹⁹ Although age is a significant negative prognostic factor for GBM,^{32,33} some studies did not show it to influence either PFS or OS after LITT.³⁴ Variability in the impact of age on post-LITT survival warrants further exploration, yet we believe that older age is associated with decreased intracranial compliance, increased frailty, and brain elastance,³⁵⁻³⁸ thereby negatively affecting OS after LITT.

Our findings regarding the significant impact of 30-day readmission on OS are consistent with those of other studies in the literature.³⁹⁻⁴¹ Botros et al. found that even after adjusting for age, mFI-5 score, KPS score, tumor EOR, and total number of surgical procedures, 30-day readmis-

TABLE 4. Univariate and multivariate Cox regression analyses of factors affecting OS

Covariates	Univariate Analysis				Multivariate Analysis			
	HR	Lower 95% CI Limit	Upper 95% CI Limit	p Value	HR	Lower 95% CI Limit	Upper 95% CI Limit	p Value
Age (yrs)	1.04	1.01	1.08	0.007	1.73	1.19	2.51	<0.005
Male sex	1.24	0.65	2.37	0.507				
Preop KPS score	1.01	0.96	1.06	0.608				
Preop mFI-11 score	4.33	0.34	55.33	0.259				
Preop neurological deficit	2.42	0.73	8.03	0.147				
Preop seizure	0.88	0.45	1.74	0.720				
Preop tumor vol >10 cm ³	1.47	0.78	2.77	0.230	1.66	0.83	3.29	0.150
No. of pullbacks	1.00	0.81	1.25	0.981				
EOA	1.00	0.99	1.00	0.259	1.08	0.75	1.54	0.690
Hospital LOS (days)	0.95	0.86	1.06	0.344				
New temporary neurological deficit <30 days	1.37	0.33	5.78	0.665				
30-day readmission	6.26	2.24	17.50	<0.001	4.92	1.74	13.92	<0.005
Complications 30 days to 3 mos	1.21	0.59	2.49	0.742				

Boldface type signifies statistical significance ($p < 0.05$).

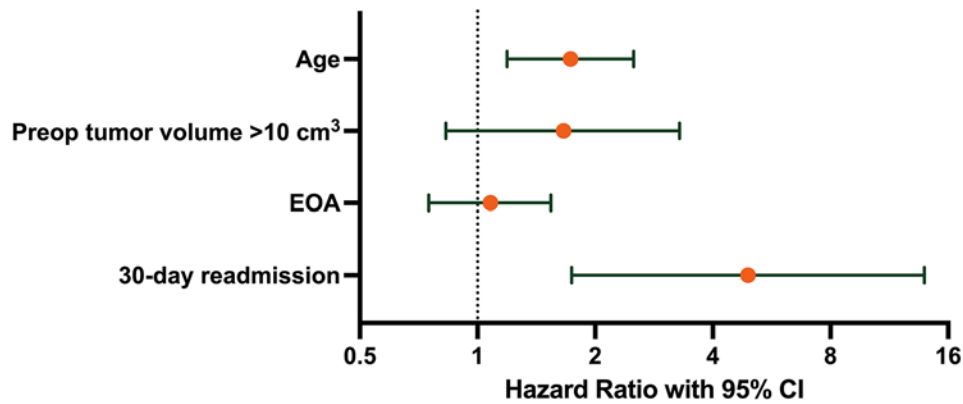


FIG. 3. Multivariate Cox proportional hazards model. Older age at surgery and 30-day readmission were associated with higher risk of death. Patients with larger tumor volumes were not at significantly increased risk of death.

sion remained associated with increased risk of death.³⁹ Our study reinforces the need to closely monitor patients readmitted within 30 days, keeping these negative prognostic outcomes in mind.

Institutional Experience and Evolution

Our institution's LITT experience over the past decade (2013–2023) suggests that we are offering LITT to patients with larger tumor volumes as compared to the past.^{24,42} We believe that in parallel with technological advancements, as brain tumor centers continue to perform LITT and as neurosurgeons gain experience, the criteria for what tumor volume is considered amenable to ablation should expand.

Strengths and Limitations

Our study was inherently limited by its retrospective nature and small patient size. To overcome these limitations, we included only patients with complete records available. Additionally, this was a single-institution study, but it involved patients managed under three neurosurgeons. Because our study was not powered to detect small differences in OS outcomes, these data cannot be interpreted as indicative of a trend, and any observed differences should be interpreted with caution. Future studies and validation in larger cohorts and multi-institutional collaborations are crucial to provide the statistical power needed.

Despite these limitations, to the best of our knowledge, we report the first and the largest series to specifically evaluate the use of LITT for deep-seated, large-volume nGBM. Our study assessed its viability as a safe and efficacious treatment option in this vulnerable patient population, with the largest patient cohort compared to those of any existing volumetric subgroup analyses. We believe our results would help counsel patients regarding management options for treating deep-seated, large-volume nGBM.

Conclusions

Our study indicates that LITT is safe for large, deep-seated nGBM. There was no increase in postoperative morbidity for patients with large nGBM. Age at surgery and readmission significantly impacted survival, irrespec-

tive of tumor size. Further research is warranted to validate our findings and optimize patient outcomes in this challenging patient population.

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Author Contributions

Conception and design: Khalafallah, K Shah, Knott, Berke, Komotar, Ivan. Acquisition of data: K Shah, Knott, Berke, Ivan. Analysis and interpretation of data: Khalafallah, K Shah, Knott, Berke, Ivan. Drafting the article: Khalafallah, K Shah, Knott, Berke, Komotar, Ivan. Critically revising the article: Khalafallah, K Shah, Knott, Berke, Ivan. Reviewed submitted version of manuscript: all authors. Approved the final version of the manuscript on behalf of all authors: Khalafallah. Statistical analysis: Khalafallah, Ivan. Administrative/technical/material support: Khalafallah, Knott, Berke. Study supervision: Khalafallah, Knott, Komotar, Ivan.

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