

1 **Safe Anti-PD-1 Re-challenge with Antibody Switching**
2 **after immune-related adverse events: Brief**
3 **Communication**

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5
6 **ABSTRACT**

7 **Aims:** To evaluate the safety of rechallenge with a different anti-PD-1 antibody
8 after an immune-related adverse event (irAE) that has prompted the
9 discontinuation of anti-PD-1 therapy. **Patients & Methods:** We describe two
10 patients with metastatic melanoma who developed potentially disabling and
11 early irAEs following anti-PD-1 treatment. Therapy was discontinued and
12 toxicities resolved with corticosteroids. **Results:** Rechallenge switching to an
13 alternative anti-PD-1 antibody did not lead to a new or recurrent irAE.

14 **Conclusions:** Switching to a different anti-PD-1 antibody when resuming
15 therapy after an irAE might be a safe strategy and warrants further
16 investigation. Structural and biological differences between antibodies might
17 explain the different safety outcomes.

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1 **SUMMARY POINTS**

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- 3 - Generally, immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICI) are recommended to be
4 permanently discontinued after a grade 3-4 immune-related adverse
5 event (irAE), according to most guidelines.
- 6 - Rechallenge with the reintroduction of the same ICI class or the same
7 molecule after a clinically significant irAE is a difficult clinical decision that
8 merits careful balance of risks and benefits, particularly in patients who
9 did not obtained a clinical benefit yet.
- 10 - Due to their biological and structural differences, a switch of anti-PD-1
11 antibody (e.g. nivolumab to pembrolizumab or *viceversa*) might be a safe
12 approach to consider if rechallenge with anti-PD-1 therapy is planned.
- 13 - Further investigation (prospective randomized trials or real-world data
14 collected into registries) regarding the optimal approach on how
15 reintroducing ICI after development of severe irAEs is warranted.

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TEXT

Programmed cell death-1 (PD-1) blockade has become a cornerstone of cancer treatment in multiple tumor types [1]. Safety is characterized by the emergence of immune-related adverse events (irAEs) that can be severe, disabling and lead to therapy discontinuation [2]. Most clinical trials did not allow immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICI) resumption after a severe irAE. However, re-introduction of ICI is currently becoming a “real-world” scenario for oncologists facing these situations. Here, we report two cases in which switch and re-challenge with an alternative anti-PD-1 antibody following an irAE does not recapitulate the same or a new irAE and allows treatment continuation.

Case Presentations

Case 1 is a 66-year-old male with no relevant past medical history diagnosed with stage IV-M1c (0), BRAF wild-type cutaneous melanoma with bone, soft tissue, lymph nodes and liver metastases. Treatment with nivolumab 3 mg/kg iv 2-weekly was started and the patient was admitted 24 hours after the first infusion because of fever of 39°C. Ceftriaxone was initiated. During admission serum creatinine increased gradually up to 2.05 mg/dL (0.3 – 1.3) with no signs of dehydration and a normal spontaneous urine balance. A urine analysis showed the presence of 15-20% eosinophils. A renal ultrasound scan (US) showed no abnormalities. No known nephrotoxic drugs were involved. After 3 days, blood and urine culture were negative, and antibiotics discontinued. Because of the suspicion of an immune-related nephritis, a kidney biopsy was performed, and the patient was started on methylprednisolone 1mg/kg iv daily. Two days later, creatinine improved to 1.64 mg/dL and the patient was

1 discharged on tapering doses of prednisone. A kidney biopsy demonstrated an
2 acute tubule-interstitial nephritis with focal inflammatory infiltrates without
3 immune-mediated complexes evidenced by immunofluorescence (Figure 1).
4 Nivolumab was discontinued due to the histological confirmation nephritis
5 associated with a grade 2 creatinine increased according to Common
6 Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events (CTCAE) v5.0. Three weeks later,
7 serum creatinine level was within the normal range and corticosteroids were
8 discontinued. During the following month, the patient required bone
9 radiotherapy and a surgical fixation of the head of the left femur due to a bone
10 metastasis. A CT scan performed 12 weeks after the only dose of nivolumab
11 given showed a partial response which was maintained over 6 months with no
12 anti-PD-1 treatment. At disease progression, the patient was concerned to
13 receive the same anti-PD-1 and agreed to anti-PD-1 retreatment with
14 pembrolizumab (2 mg/kg iv every 3 weeks). At anti-PD-1 resumption the patient
15 had no symptoms or laboratory value abnormalities and was on no
16 immunosuppression. He received 3 doses of pembrolizumab 3-weekly over the
17 course of 10 weeks with no evidence of adverse events (Figure 2 A), but
18 unfortunately treatment was discontinued due to progressive disease and he
19 was transitioned to hospice care.

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21 Case 2 is a 68-year-old woman with no relevant past medical history who was
22 diagnosed with a stage IV uveal melanoma. Staging PET-CT scan showed lung
23 and lymph node metastases and no liver metastases. Blood tests prior to
24 treatment showed no abnormalities. First-line treatment with pembrolizumab 2
25 mg/kg iv every 3 weeks was started. Prior to the second dose, blood tests

1 showed a grade 3 transaminitis (aspartate aminotransferase, AST 211 U/L and
2 alanine aminotransferase, ALT 215 U/L, normal range 5 – 40), according to
3 CTCAE v5.0, with bilirubin within normal range. Serologic tests for hepatitis B
4 and C were negative. An abdominal US ruled out liver metastases and bile duct
5 alterations. Prednisone 1 mg/kg/day *po* was initiated and pembrolizumab
6 interrupted. Four weeks later, AST and ALT were within normal range and
7 steroids were withdrawn. Re-challenge with anti-PD-1 was considered and
8 agreed with the patient a switch to nivolumab. The patient initiated nivolumab
9 3mg/kg iv 2-weekly, two weeks after the last dosing of corticosteroids; and
10 received a total of 6 doses of nivolumab over the course of 12 weeks with an
11 excellent tolerance (Figure 2 B). Restaging imaging showed progressive
12 disease, no liver metastases were described. Subsequently, she received a
13 second line of therapy with anti-CTLA-4 monotherapy for four doses without
14 further progression. She developed a hypophysitis and no other irAEs.

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16 Discussion

17 Published guidelines of irAE management by different groups and widely
18 recognized societies are based on the algorithms developed during the conduct
19 of clinical trials with ICIs and expert consensus[3-5]. Generally, these guidelines
20 recommend the permanent discontinuation of ICI following a grade 3-4 irAE.
21 Resuming ICIs after a potential life-disabling irAEs requires a thorough
22 discussion with the patient to balance the risk-benefit ratio for a recurrent or
23 new severe and permanent decline in organ function. A recent review describes
24 three possible ways of retreating patients with ICIs after a severe irAE: a class
25 switch from anti-PD-(L)1 to anti-CTLA-4 therapy or vice versa; a rechallenge

1 with the reintroduction of the same class agent, or the same molecule and ICI
2 resumption concomitantly with immunosuppressive therapy[6]. Limited data are
3 available on any of these strategies and although interesting reports have been
4 published, the lack of clinical trials makes that rechallenge with ICI still remains
5 an open debate and it is not accurately addressed in clinical guidelines.

6
7 A class switch of ICI is a feasible option for melanoma patients, for whom both
8 anti-PD-1 and anti-CTLA-4 therapies are approved. A retrospective analysis
9 from Menzies *et al* [7] that included 67 melanoma patients who discontinued
10 ipilimumab due to severe irAEs (86% grade \geq 3) were subsequently treated with
11 anti-PD-1. Thirty-four percent of patients develop new/different irAEs with anti-
12 PD-1 and 21% had grade 3-4 irAEs suggesting a potential overlap in
13 susceptibility to severe irAEs. Another study assessed the safety of ipilimumab
14 following failure of anti-PD-1 therapy[8]. Globally, 35% of patients receiving
15 ipilimumab after anti-PD-1 developed grade 3-4 irAEs. When considering the
16 sequencing from one class of ICI to another, the relatively long half-life of the
17 agents and the duration of receptor occupancy of peripheral blood T cells, can
18 be important considerations as class switching may be equivalent to giving
19 these agents combined with a possibly higher chance of inducing irAEs.

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21 Resuming ICIs de-escalating to a single-based anti-PD-1 therapy after an irAE
22 secondary to anti-CTLA-4 and anti-PD-1 combination can be considered for
23 selected patients with appropriate monitoring thus 50% of rechallenged patients
24 develop recurrent or distinct irAEs, most frequently grade 1-2 events; and, 30%
25 of patients discontinue the resumed anti-PD-1 due to irAEs of any grade[9].

1 However, it is unclear which is the optimal approach in case of anti-PD-1
2 monotherapy interruption due to a potentially life-disabling irAE. In a
3 retrospective study of lung cancer patients from Santini and colleagues[10], 38
4 patients were retreated with anti-PD-(L)1 monotherapy after discontinuation due
5 to toxicity, including 14 (37%) and 24 (63%) patients who had received an anti-
6 PD-1 plus anti-CTLA-4 combination and an anti-PD-(L)1 single agent,
7 respectively. The first irAE was grade 1-2 in 25 (66%) patients and grade 3-4 in
8 13 (34%) patients. Among the re-challenged population, 10 (26%) patients had
9 a recurrence of the initial irAE and 10 (26%) patients a distinct irAE, which were
10 severe (grade 3-4) in 8 out of 20 cases (40%). The majority of the new/recurrent
11 irAEs occurred early and were manageable; however, 2 treatment-related
12 deaths occurred. Following retreatment, 5 patients (13%) experienced a partial
13 response. Similarly, Simonaggio *et al*[11] recently published a retrospective
14 study of anti-PD-(L)1 re-challenge following a grade 2 or higher irAE in 40
15 patients with a broad spectrum of cancers who discontinued ICI. Patients had
16 received anti-PD-1 as monotherapy (65%), anti-PD-1 combined with anti CTLA-
17 4 (10%) or combined with another agent (7.5%); anti-PD-L1 monotherapy
18 (12.5%) or anti-PD-L1 combined with other drug (2.5%). In their report, among
19 the 40 patients retreated with anti-PD-(L)1, the same irAE (42.5%) or a new
20 irAE (12.5%) occurred in 22 patients (55%) with no increase in severity.
21 Interestingly, an early onset and the need for hospitalization due to the severity
22 of the initial irAE leading to ICI interruption was linked to a higher likelihood of a
23 recurrent or new irAE with re-challenge. Neither of these studies detail whether
24 the patients were retreated with the same anti-PD-(L)1 or if they were switched
25 to an alternative anti-PD-(L)1 antibody. Both studies suggest that rechallenge

1 with anti-PD-(L)1 in patients with different cancers is acceptable with close
2 monitoring, and permanent discontinuation of ICI a reasonable option in those
3 cases where an objective response has been achieved.
4 Another retrospective study from Abu-Sbeih *et al*[12] assessed specifically the
5 safety of ICI resumption in 167 patients with different cancers after immune-
6 mediated diarrhea and colitis (IMDC) following ICI therapy. Patients had
7 received anti-CTLA-4 (28%), anti-PD-(L)1 (47%) and combination with anti-
8 CTLA-4 and anti-PD-1 (25%). 135 and 32 patients resumed anti-PD-(L)1 and
9 anti-CTLA-4 therapy, respectively, most frequently because of continued
10 therapy. IMDC recurred in 57 patients (34%) overall, mostly grade 1-2 in
11 severity; 43 patients (32%) after anti-PD-(L)1 and in 14 patients (44%) following
12 anti-CTLA-4 resumption; 82% required immunosuppressive therapy for
13 recurrent IMDC, and all required permanent discontinuation of ICI therapy. This
14 analysis suggests that resumption of ICI after IMDC in many patients can be
15 considered, especially anti-PD-1/L1.

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18 Case reports have also described successful rechallenge with the same class
19 agent but different molecule in different scenarios. Swami *et al*[13] retreated a
20 patient with atezolizumab (anti-PD-L-1) after nivolumab (anti-PD-1)
21 discontinuation due to persistent polyarthritis that required corticosteroids and
22 methotrexate. Symptoms improved and immunosuppressant requirements
23 decreased suggesting that a switch from anti-PD-1 to anti-PD-L1 or *viceversa*
24 can be a safe, hypothetically thanks to a differential expression of PD-1 and
25 PD-L1/2 across different cell types. In the case reported by Lepir *et al*[14], a
26 patient was initially treated with nivolumab showing progressive disease and a
27 switch to pembrolizumab was decided. The patient experienced a partial

1 response and the authors proposed that pharmacodynamics differences
2 between these antibodies might be responsible of this phenomenon.
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4 Lastly, some authors support the strategy of rechallenge with concurrent
5 immunosuppression[6, 15, 16], although limited data is available. In a recent
6 retrospective study, ICIs were restarted after IMDC resolution, concomitantly
7 with vedolizumab, an $\alpha 4\beta 7$ integrin inhibitor that blocks T cell trafficking to the
8 gut, and only one out of eight patients had recurrence of irAEs compared to
9 three out of six who did not receive vedolizumab[17]. Similarly, Badran *et al*[18]
10 resumed concurrent ICIs (pembrolizumab; ipilimumab; ipilimumab and
11 nivolumab, or cemiplimab) and anti-TNF α therapy (infliximab) in a cohort of 5
12 patients with different malignancies who developed immune-related colitis
13 refractory to corticosteroids. All patients were able to continue ICI therapy
14 without recurrence of symptoms. Concurrent immunosuppressants and ICI
15 therapy did not seem to impact negatively on tumor control and was associated
16 with a better side effect profile. An ongoing phase I clinical trial
17 (NCT03293784)[19] is evaluating the safety and tolerability of treating
18 metastatic melanoma with ICIs combined with either infliximab or certolizumab,
19 a similar anti-TNF α agent, to avoid the onset of irAEs.
20
21 Herein we report two cases of safe re-challenge following clinically significant
22 irAE by switching the anti-PD-1 antibody. On presentation with symptoms,
23 patients 1 and 2 were initiated on corticoid therapy for irAEs and achieved a
24 good control. The decision to resume ICI after irAEs carries a risk of relapse of
25 the same or a new irAE, as discussed earlier, and is often done on an individual

1 basis. We suggest that anti-PD-1 antibody switching might be considered in
2 patients who develop severe or disabling irAEs early in their immunotherapy
3 course where additional immunotherapy is likely to provide a benefit, and where
4 other treatment alternatives are either unavailable or have a low likelihood of
5 providing benefit. Because some toxicities are deemed too serious (e.g.
6 neurologic toxicities, severe pneumonitis or cardiac events) to resume any
7 immune therapy, clinicians should use critical judgement and caution in
8 resuming or switching anti-PD-1 in patients with life-threatening irAEs.
9 Prospective data will be necessary, however, to clearly define toxicities where
10 anti-PD-1 switching might be both safe and lead to improved tumor outcomes.
11
12 Nivolumab and pembrolizumab are both IgG4 kappa with high affinity and
13 specificity against PD-1[20]. Both antibodies have overlapping indications for
14 the treatment of solid tumors and they have never been compared in a face-to-
15 face clinical trial. However, structural and biological differences exist among
16 them. First, whereas pembrolizumab is an engineered humanized antibody,
17 nivolumab is fully human. The strength with which an antibody binds the target
18 molecule also differs among them: while nivolumab affinity measured as K_D
19 (equilibrium dissociation constant) is 3.06 pM, pembrolizumab K_D is 29 pM.
20 Moreover, the epitope regions, where the different antibodies bind to PD-1, are
21 not identical. Pembrolizumab shows a much greater overlap with the PD-L1
22 binding site than nivolumab and there is practically no overlap between the
23 binding sites, dominated by interactions with the PD-1 N-loop in the case of
24 nivolumab and the PD-1 CD loop in the case of pembrolizumab[20-23]. All
25 these distinctive characteristics might generate slight differences in their clinical

1 efficacy and safety profile. We postulate that these biological and structural
2 differences, together with a hypothetical intrinsic genetic tendency for toxicity of
3 each individual, might trigger a particular immune response to a specific
4 antibody leading to an early onset and severe irAE. Epitope prediction analysis
5 and/or antigen-antibody reactivity tests in patient tissue[24] might help to
6 elucidate our findings and hypothesis.

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8 Randomized studies have shown that patients treated with combination
9 ipilimumab and nivolumab and who experience clinically significant irAEs have
10 high response rates and excellent clinical outcomes with observation alone [25,
11 26]. Thus, many patients with ongoing stable or responding disease may not
12 need to resume ICI therapy. However, patients who experience a severe or life-
13 disabling irAE early while on anti-PD-1 therapy may benefit from anti-PD-1
14 switching when a dramatic progressive disease or a rapid clinical response
15 have not yet been shown. Certainly, we cannot rule out that resuming the same
16 anti-PD-1 agent might have achieved a similar outcome. Prospective data will
17 be necessary to clearly define populations where is both safe and leads to
18 improved tumor outcomes.

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20 Our experience helps provide evidence of the safety of anti-PD-1 switching and
21 we propose this may promote the initiation of prospective or collaborative
22 retrospective studies to examine the impact of resuming the same anti-PD-1
23 antibody or switching to a different anti-PD-1 on both irAEs and antitumor
24 activity.

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1 In conclusion, this report provides our experience in resuming anti-PD-1 therapy
2 following a potentially disabling and early onset irAE by antibody switching. We
3 postulate that disparities in antibody properties such as class, recognition of
4 different epitope region or affinity might be responsible of the clinical success of
5 this approach. We believe that this strategy warrants further investigation, either
6 in the context of a clinical trial or by collecting the experience from additional
7 centers. In addition, it might be a strategy to consider especially if no further
8 effective treatments are available and no clinical benefit has not yet been
9 obtained.

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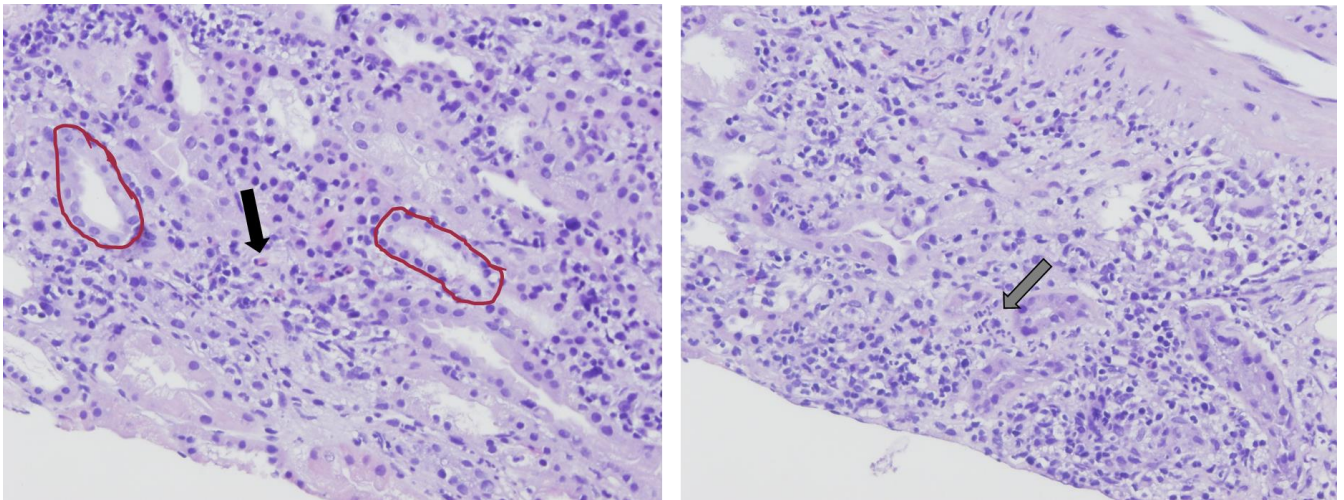
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1 **FIGURES**

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6 **Figure 1. Percutaneous renal biopsy (hematoxylin-eosin stain) with acute**
7 **tubule-interstitial nephritis.** Acute tubulitis (red line, left panel) with mixed
8 focal inflammatory lymphocytic (grey arrow, right panel), neutrophilic and
9 eosinophilic (black arrow, left panel) infiltrates. Multiple immunofluorescence
10 assays, including C3, C4, IgA, IgG, IgM and fibrinogen were negative.

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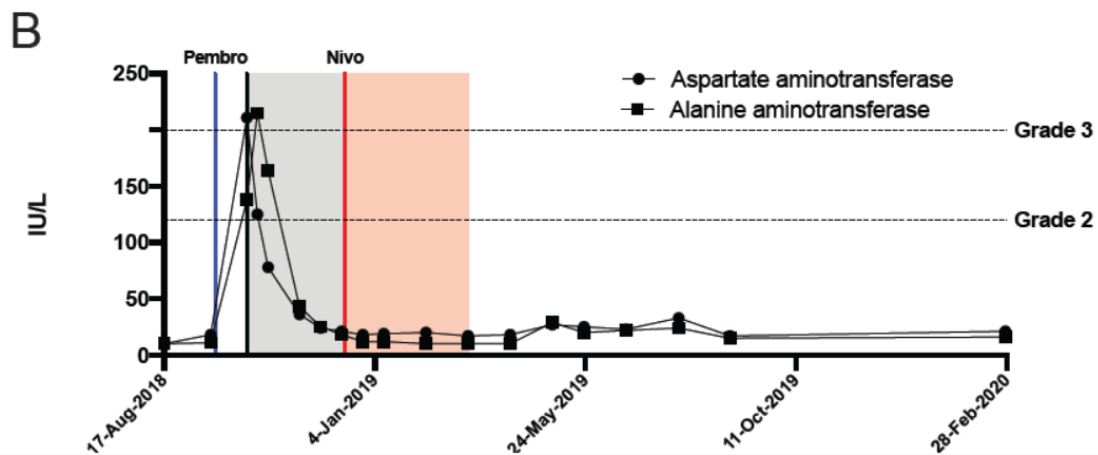
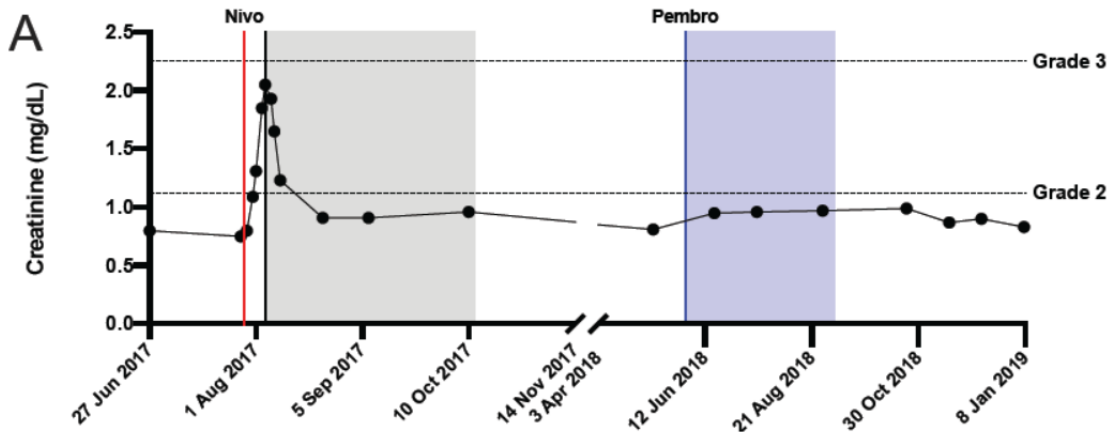


Figure 2. Patients timelines showing treatments and immune-related adverse events. Red line and shade, Nivolumab treatment; blue line and shade, Pembrolizumab treatment; gray shade, corticosteroids treatment.

A, serum creatinine levels of patient 1

B, serum aspartate and alanine aminotransferase of patient 2

1 **TABLES**

2

3 **Table 1. Retrospective studies evaluating rechallenge with anti-PD-(L)1 following an irAE**

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Study	Number of patients rechallenged	Tumor type	Initial ICI target	ICI at rechallenge	Initial irAE	irAE at rechallenge	Recurrent irAE	New irAE	ORR	Anti-PD-(L)1 to anti-PD-(L)1	irAE at rechallenge to anti-PD-(L)1
Menzies <i>et al</i> [7]	67	Melanoma	Ipilimumab	Anti-PD-1	Grade 3-4: 86%	25 (67%) Grade 3-4: 21%	2 (3%)	23 (34%)	40%	-	-
Pollack <i>et al</i> [9]	80	Melanoma	Anti-CTLA-4 + anti-PD-1	Anti-PD-1	Grade 2: 31% Grade 3-4: 69%	40 (50%) Grade 1-2: 65% Grade 3-5: 35%	14 (18%)	9 (11%)	70%	-	-
Santini <i>et al</i> [10]	38	NSCLC	PD-(L)1: 24 (63%) PD-(L)1 + CTLA-4: 14 (37%)	Anti-PD-(L)1	Grade 1-2: 66% Grade 3-4: 34%	20 (53%) Grade 1-2: 60% Grade 3-4: 40%	10 (26%)	10 (26%)	13%	24 (63%)	NR
Simonaggio <i>et al</i> [11]	40	Melanoma (28%), lung (15%), lymphoma (15%), colorectal (15%), other (27%)	PD-1: 26 (65%) PD-L1: 5 (12.5%) PD-1 + CTLA-4: 4 (10%) PD-(L)1 combination: 4 (10%)	Anti-PD-(L)1	Grade 2: 47.5% Grade 3-4: 52.5%	22 (55%) Grade 2: 38% Grade 3-4: 62%	17 (42.5%)	5 (12.5%)	35% (3 patients not evaluated)	31 (77.5%)	NR

Abu-Sbeih <i>et al</i> [12]	167*	Melanoma (54%), NSCLC (16%), genitourinary (10%), other (20%)	PD-(L)1: 79 (47%) CTLA-4: 47 (28%) PD-1 + CTLA- 4: 41 (25%)	Anti-CTLA-4 (19%) Anti-PD-(L)1 (81%)	Grade 3-4: 35.5% [†]	NR	34 (34%) Grade 1- 2: 89% Grade 3- 4: 10.5%	NR	NR	71 (42.5%)	26 (37%)
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1 ICI, immune-checkpoint inhibitor; irAE, immune-related adverse event; ORR, objective response rate; NSCLC, non-small cell lung cancer; NR, not reported.
2 *Rechallenge because of cancer progression or relapse in 48 patients (29%).
3 †This study only included immune-related diarrhea and colitis.
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5