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The Effect of Early Detection of Occult Brain Metastases in HER2-Positive Breast Cancer Patients on Survival and Cause of Death.

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PURPOSE: The aim of the study is to evaluate disease-free survival, survival from the detection of brain metastases, overall survival, and cause of death in patients with occult brain metastases (Group I) vs. patients with symptomatic brain metastases (Group II). **METHODS AND MATERIALS:** In 80 HER2-positive breast cancer patients, treated with trastuzumab and cytostatic agents for metastatic disease, magnetic resonance imaging screening of the brain was performed, and in 29 patients (36%) occult brain metastasis was detected (Group I). Whole-brain radiotherapy was delivered to Group I. This first group was compared with 52 patients who had symptomatic brain metastases (Group II) and was treated the same way, at the same clinic, during the same time period. **RESULTS:** Median disease-free survival was 17 months in Group I and 19.9 months in Group II ($p = 0.58$). The median time interval between the dissemination of the disease and the detection of occult or symptomatic brain metastases was 9 and 15 months, respectively ($p = 0.11$). When the brain metastases were detected, the median survival was 9 and 8.78 months, respectively ($p = 0.80$). The median overall survival was 53 and 51 months, respectively ($p = 0.94$). In the group with occult brain metastases (Group I) 16% of patients died because of progression within the brain. In the group with symptomatic brain metastases (Group II) the rate of cerebral death was 48% ($p = 0.009$). **CONCLUSIONS:** Whole-brain radiotherapy of occult brain metastases in HER2-positive breast cancer patients with visceral dissemination produces a three-fold decrease in cerebral deaths but does not prolong survival.

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