Reply to: Comment on Dornoff et al.: re-irradiation with cetuximab or cisplatin-based chemotherapy for recurrent squamous cell carcinoma of the head and neck

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To the Editor

First of all, we would like to thank the authors of the letter (Strahlenther Onkol 2015 doi:10.1007/s00066-015-0908-1) for their attentive comments and the editors of the journal for giving us the opportunity to answer.

In the publication referred to in the title, we aimed to communicate our single-institute experience with re-irradiation of head and neck cancer and concomitant therapy with either cetuximab or cisplatin. As no prospective trials addressing this interesting topic exist, we think that these retrospective data may be useful for daily treatment decisions. There were no significant differences concerning treatment response between the two groups. On this occasion we also retrospectively evaluated other patient, tumor, and treatment characteristics that seemed to be of prognostic relevance for our patient collective, and thus we constructed a score only based on the statistical significance of these characteristics.

The authors criticize two points in particular regarding the statistical methods we used for the construction of our prognostic score in this publication. Firstly, it is correctly stated that a prognostic model always needs an external validation, i.e., using an independent cohort. Secondly, the authors of the letter underline that the p values cannot quantify discrimination.

In answer to these comments, we would like to emphasize that our retrospective analysis of this rather small number of patients ($n=66$) did not aim to and could not validate the prognostic score constructed. Besides, the prognosis of such patients cannot be discriminated based only on this score, but lacking other data of higher evidence we wanted to provide some help for daily clinical routine and generate hypotheses for further validation. A future multicenter, prospective trial of head and neck re-irradiation could verify our retrospective, single-center findings and conclusively answer some important questions.

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