Author's reply regarding the letter to the editor about our article: A nomogram for predicting occult lymph node metastasis in early hypopharyngeal cancer with cN0

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Dear Editor,

We thank for the thoughtful and constructive comment on our recent report: A nomogram for predicting occult lymph node metastasis in early hypopharyngeal cancer with clinically negative cervical lymph node (cN0). We really appreciate the suggestion on limited sample size for the prediction model.

We have admitted that this retrospective single-center study needed a larger sample size and further external validation with more different cohorts as the current nomogram was based on a small cohort.

According to inclusion and exclusion criteria, regrettably, we collected only 78 cases for the study. The sample size was small. Hypopharynx cancer is relatively rare and accounts for roughly 3% of all head and neck cancers [1]. Patients with early stage of hypopharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma (HPSCC) are frequently asymptomatic and nonspecific. When more evident symptoms such as dysphagia, hoarseness, or sore throat present, most patients are often already in advanced stage, delaying the diagnosis of hypopharyngeal carcinoma. Patients with stage III and IV accounted for 17–27% and 57–68.5%, respectively, according to previous studies [2, 3]. Moreover, due to rich lymphatic network near the hypopharynx, cervical lymph node metastasis often accompanies HPSCC. 60–80% of patients presented with cervical lymph node metastases at the time of diagnosis [4]. In addition, a considerable proportion of

early hypopharyngeal cancers choose larynx-preserving treatment. The increasing use of non-surgical treatment (radiotherapy and chemotherapy) for hypopharyngeal cancer has apparently led to a decline in rates of laryngopharyngectomy. The above reasons result in low numbers of early hypopharyngeal cancers with cN0. In fact, the number of HPSCC treated in our center is in the domestic leading level.

We are trying to enlarge the clinical sample size. A project to establish a China's special database on hypopharyngeal cancer has been launched. We hope a larger sample size and a multi-center and prospective study to further confirm the outcomes.

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