LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Re: Axillary Staging in the Neoadjuvant Setting

TO THE EDITORS:

We commend Chung and Giuliano for their attempt to bring some order and logic into the decision-making process for the timing of sentinel node biopsy (SNB) in relation to neoadjuvant chemotherapy.¹ However, we are concerned about the wisdom of separating the SNB done before neoadjuvant chemotherapy from the axillary dissection done after neoadjuvant chemotherapy if the SNB is positive.

Chung and Giuliano posit that the axillary dissection should be carried out with the definitive breast surgery, after neoadjuvant chemotherapy, if the SNB done before neoadjuvant chemotherapy demonstrates metastases in sentinel nodes. Patients undergoing neoadjuvant chemotherapy are more likely to have lymph node metastases at the time of presentation than those undergoing surgery initially. Most importantly, from the oncologic standpoint deferring axillary dissection may lead to loss of information regarding the number of nodes that harbored metastases before neoadjuvant chemotherapy. Neoadjuvant chemotherapy avoids a mastectomy in only 25% of patients when used to try to achieve breast conservation.² The loss of this information may therefore affect decisions regarding the need for chest wall and lymphatic basin radiotherapy that is related to the number of involved nodes

in patients requiring mastectomy. These decisions may directly impact patient survival.³ From a practical viewpoint, axillary dissection that is distanced in time from the SNB, as happens when a sentinel node that was not involved at frozen section turns out to be involved after paraffin section, is technically more difficult in our experience.

When SNB is carried out before neoadjuvant chemotherapy, we recommend performing a frozen section at the time of SNB and completing the axillary dissection during the same operation if sentinel nodes harbor metastases.

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Published Online: 1 January 2011

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