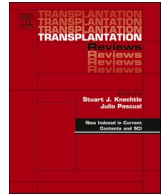




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## Review article

# Current and future role of double-lung transplantation for bilateral lung cancer

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## ABSTRACT

Technological advances have progressively enhanced the survival rate of lung transplant recipients and expanded its indications for various diseases, including the recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). However, according to the International Society for Heart and Lung Transplantation, lung cancer constituted a mere 0.1% of the indications for lung transplantation over the past two decades. This statistic has remained stagnant, and numerous lung cancer patients continue to be excluded from lung transplantation candidacy. Contrary to the general exclusion of lung cancer patients from transplantation, the post-transplant survival rate for these patients is not inferior to that of patients with non-cancerous diseases. Furthermore, lung transplantation may offer curative treatment for patients with bilateral lung cancer whose respiratory insufficiency has advanced independently of cancer progression. This review aims to elucidate and examine the role of double lung transplantation (DLT) in bilateral lung cancer. We summarize the established indications for lung transplantation, appropriate histologic or molecular subtypes of lung cancer for transplantation, technical advances to minimize recurrence, post-DLT survival outcomes for lung cancer patients, and related translational research. We suggest that although DLT for bilateral lung cancer presents challenges, it may be considered a potential treatment option in select circumstances.

## 1. Introduction

Lung transplantation has evolved as a successful therapeutic option for patients with end-stage lung disease over the decades. Since Dr. Hardy's pioneering lung transplantation attempt for lung cancer in 1963 [1], advancements in technology and medical management have broadened surgical expertise and indications for lung transplantation. In the last two decades, significant enhancements in recipient selection, immunosuppressive agents, and surgical techniques have contributed to its widespread adoption. Notably, survival rates have improved, double-lung transplantation (DLT) has become twice as common as single-lung transplantation (SLT), and respiratory failure due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has emerged as a new indication for lung transplantation [2,3]. Despite these advancements, lung cancer has

represented a mere 0.1% of indications for lung transplantation over the past 20 years [4].

Since 2010, the 1- and 5-year survival rates for adult lung transplantation have increased to 85% and 59%, respectively [5,6]. However, the 5-fold higher risk of developing lung malignancies post-transplantation compared to the general population and the 13-fold elevated risk of cancer development in the native lung after SLT have led to physicians' reluctance to utilize lung transplantation for lung cancer patients [7–10]. Additionally, no prospective study has compared survival outcomes between conventional oncologic treatments and transplantation for lung cancer, nor has there been a systematic review of post-transplantation survival outcomes. As a result, lung transplantation for lung cancer has been restricted to select patients, such as those with early-stage lung cancer or histologically

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confirmed bronchioloalveolar carcinoma (BAC) [11–15], while stage IV lung cancer is generally considered a contraindication (Table 1) [16]. Despite these limitations, advancements in surgical techniques and the development of perioperative management protocols have facilitated ongoing exploration of lung transplantation for lung cancer (Fig. 1) [17–21].

This article aims to (1) elucidate the role of DLT in bilateral lung cancer by examining current practices and survival outcomes of DLT for lung cancer, (2) explore the potential future role of DLT for lung cancer, (3) highlight the importance of appropriate candidate selection for DLT to enhance successful outcomes.

## 2. Methods

We used the terms “Lung cancer”, “Double or Bilateral” and “Transplantation” to search articles published in PubMed and EMBASE without any date limitations. A total of 140 and 260 articles were initially retrieved in PubMed and EMBASE, respectively, excluding 183 duplicates. After screening the titles and abstracts, research articles and case series related to bilateral or DLT for lung cancers were manually identified. Publications on metastatic lung cancer ( $n = 9$ ) and incidental lung cancer ( $n = 14$ ) as well as those that did not meet the selection criteria ( $n = 6$ ), an article not published in English ( $n = 1$ ), a commentary ( $n = 1$ ), and a letter to the editor ( $n = 1$ ) were excluded. A total of 8 case series and 74 eligible publications related to DLT for lung cancer were reviewed and summarized in this study (Fig. 2).

## 3. Indications for lung transplantation

### 3.1. Lung transplantation for lung cancer

The main indications for lung transplantation have been chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, or pulmonary fibrosis usually due to interstitial pneumonia and rarely

sarcoidosis, histiocytosis and connective tissue-related disease, cystic fibrosis,  $\alpha$ 1-anti-trypsin deficiency emphysema, and idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension [22–26]. Although lung cancer as an indication for lung transplantation had increased from 19 cases (0.1% of total) in 2006 to 32 cases (0.1% of total) in 2010 [27,28], it accounted for only 0.1% of the total lung transplantation cases during the last two decades (Table 2) [17,29,30]. Furthermore, according to the data provided by the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network/United Network for Organ Sharing (OPTN/UNOS), the frequency of DLT for lung cancer was approximately 0.11% between 2011 and 2020 [31]. However, lung transplantation could serve as an alternative treatment approach for lung cancer refractory to systemic therapies, where the cancer does not respond to standard treatments, including immunotherapy, chemotherapy, radiation, or targeted therapy [21].

The first DLT was performed in 1986 on a patient who had an emphysema [32]. Since 2002, the annual number of DLTs has exceeded that of SLTs, with cystic fibrosis being the most common indication for DLT between 1987 and 2007 [22]. However, according to the 2015 annual report of the International Society of Heart and Lung Transplantation (ISHLT), COPD became the most common indication for DLT, whereas bronchiectasis associated with cystic fibrosis and interstitial lung disease were reported as the second and third most common indications, respectively, similar to SLT [33]. As the indications for lung transplantation continued to broaden, several cases of DLT for lung malignancy had been reported [11,14,15,34–36]. According to these publications, around 40%–50% of recipients experienced lung cancer recurrence after DLT, with the transplanted lung being the most common recurrence site [12–15,34]. Despite the relatively higher risk of tumor recurrence after lung transplantation, lung transplantation has still been considered owing to its acceptable survival outcomes. Notably, the 5-year overall survival (OS) and cancer-specific survival (CSS) rates of patients who received lung transplantation for lung cancer are approximately 39%–57% and 50%–86%, respectively [12,13,34].

The primary objective of cancer surgery is the complete removal of

**Table 1**  
Summary of published case reports regarding double-lung transplantation for lung cancer.

Authors	Year	No. of patients	Histology of tumor	Use of cardio-pulmonary bypass	Recurrence (n, %)	Initial recurred site	Recurrence-free survival (range, mo)	Overall survival (range, mo)	Overall survival rate (%)	Cancer-specific survival rate (%)
Etienne et al. [11]	1997	1	BAC <sup>a</sup>	Unknown	0/1 (0.0)		65	65	5-year 100.0	5-year 100.0
Garver et al. [15]	1999	5	BAC	Yes	3/5 (60.0)	Donor lung (n = 3)	10–50	10–50	2-year 60.0	2-year 60.0
Payolan et al. [14]	2000	2	BAC	Yes (n = 1) No (n = 1)	1/2 (50.0)	Donor lung (n = 1)	9, 16	16, 48	2-year 50.0	2-year 100.0
Zorn et al. [34]	2003	7	BAC	Yes (n = 5) No (n = 2)	4/7 (57.1)	Donor lung (n = 3) Brain, Bone (n = 1)	9–76	15–89	2-year 74.1 5-year 57.1	2-year 83.3 5-year 66.6
de Perrot et al. <sup>c</sup> [12]	2004	Single (n = 9) Double (n = 17)	BAC	Yes (n = 21) No (n = 5)	13/26 (50.0); 5-yr 35.0%	Donor lung (n = 11) Others (n = 2)	5–29	11–82	5-year 39.0 10-year 31.0	81.8 <sup>d</sup>
Ahmed et al. <sup>c</sup> [13]	2012	Single (n = 6) Double (n = 23)	BAC (n = 14) BAC + ADC <sup>b</sup> (n = 11) ADC (n = 2) Unknown (n = 2)	Unknown	–	–	–	–	5-year 57.0 10-year 25.0	83.0 <sup>d</sup>
Wang et al. [35]	2012	1	BAC	No	0/1 (0.0)		12	12	1-year 100.0	1-year 100.0
Zhang-Velten et al. [36]	2020	1	Lepidic predominant ADC	Unknown	1/1 (100.0)	Donor lung (n = 1)	17	144	12-year 100.0	12-year 100.0

<sup>a</sup> Bronchioloalveolar carcinoma.

<sup>b</sup> Adenocarcinoma.

<sup>c</sup> It was not possible to distinguish between patients who underwent single- or double-lung transplantation for lung cancer.

<sup>d</sup> The period of cancer-specific survival was not identified.

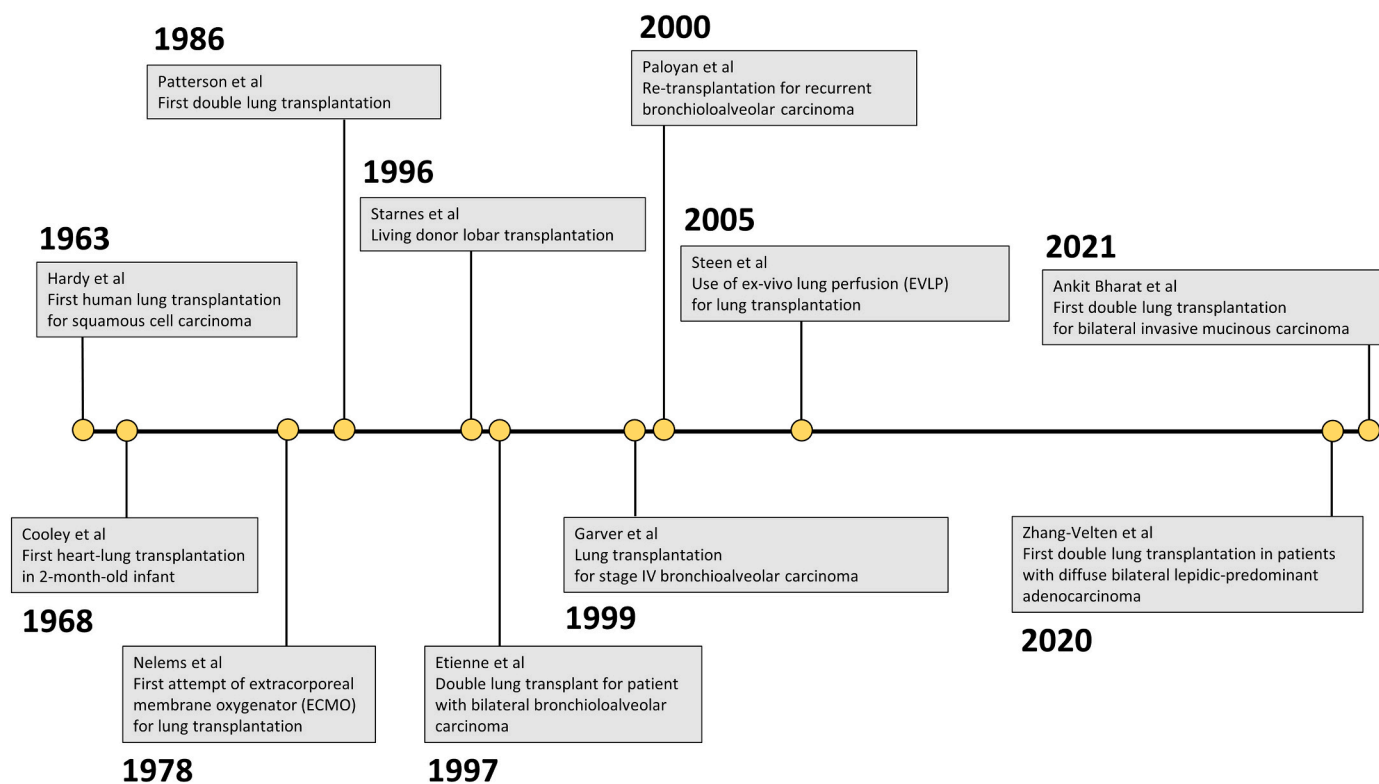


Fig. 1. History of lung transplantation.

the cancerous tissue. Pneumonectomy is considered in situations where extensive multifocal disease or diffuse cancers render limited resections unfeasible [12]. Consequently, bilateral pneumonectomy, in concept, constitutes the radical removal of all pulmonary disease, and when combined with DLT, can be employed for bilateral diffuse lung cancers that are resistant to systemic therapies. However, these patients should not have extrapulmonary disease or regional nodal metastasis prior to lung transplantation (Fig. 3) [37].

### 3.2. Histology of lung cancer for lung transplantation

Considerations for lung transplantation encompass not only the extent of disease but also the histologic subtype of lung cancer. Initially, the 2007 report on evidence-based clinical practice guidelines published by the American College of Chest Physicians did not regard lung transplantation as a therapeutic option for BAC [38]. However, the most recent update from the ISHLT stated that adenocarcinoma in situ (AIS) and minimally invasive adenocarcinoma (MIA) of the lung may be accepted as special disease considerations when conventional medical therapies fail [39]. Lung transplantation should be reserved for lung-limited AIS, MIA, lepidic predominant adenocarcinoma, or unresectable diffuse cancer that is refractory to oncologic treatments [37,40]. Furthermore, invasive mucinous carcinoma (IMA) tends to present with multicentric or multilobar opacities, consolidation, and bilateral involvement [41]. Consequently, bilateral IMA of the lung with respiratory failure may also be considered an indication for DLT.

Given its generally poorer oncologic outcomes compared to other lung cancer subtypes, IMA has not been traditionally considered an indication for lung transplantation [42,43]. However, oncologic outcomes can vary depending on the distinct phenotypes of IMA [44–49]. While several studies reported worse prognosis for IMA patients than non-IMA patients [50,51], one study on the prognosis of IMA in the lungs found no significant difference in overall survival (OS) between IMA and non-IMA cases [52]. Furthermore, two other studies revealed that resectable and stage IV IMAs exhibited better OS than non-IMAs

with similar characteristics [53,54]. These inconsistent results may be attributed to prognostic differences among IMA phenotypes or the presence of prognosis-related factors such as spread through air spaces (STAS) or mucin-producing characteristics [44,55–58]. Additional research on histology-related prognosis or prognosis-related factors could help identify more suitable candidates for lung transplantation and broaden the indications for this procedure.

### 3.3. Survival outcomes after DLT in lung cancer

According to data from the OPTN/UNOS, patients with BAC/cancer had a 5- and 10-year graft survival rate of 44% and 19%, respectively; however, their OS rate was higher (5-year OS, 57%; 10-year OS, 25%). Although lung cancer has been regarded as an unfavorable indication for lung transplantation owing to poor survival outcomes, the long-term OS of patients who received lung transplantation for lung cancer was not inferior to that of patients undergoing transplant for other indications (HR = 1.11,  $p = 0.665$ ) [13]. ISHLT and OPTN/UNOS data have shown similar trends, with a 5- and 10-year OS rate of 39% and 31% after lung transplantation for lung cancer, respectively (Table 2) [12]. Moreover, other case series have shown a 5-year OS rate of 20%–100% after lung transplantation for lung cancer [11,15,34,36]. Available evidence suggests that as follow-up periods increase, the survival difference between lung cancer and noncancer patients who had received lung transplantation decreases. Earlier enrollment of patients with lung cancer as candidates for lung transplantation, when their condition is still much better, can improve survival rates.

An analysis of survival rates after lung transplantation according to whether patient received DLT or SLT revealed a significant difference between the two groups. Notably, patients in the DLT group showed superior 5- and 10-year survival outcomes than those in the SLT group (DLT group: 3-year, 24.9%; 5-year, 19.6%; SLT group: 3-year, 44.6%; 5-year, 32.5%) [33]. A comparison of post-transplant lung cancer between the DLT and SLT groups revealed that the incidence of post-transplant lung cancer was significantly greater in the latter (9/131, 6.9%) than

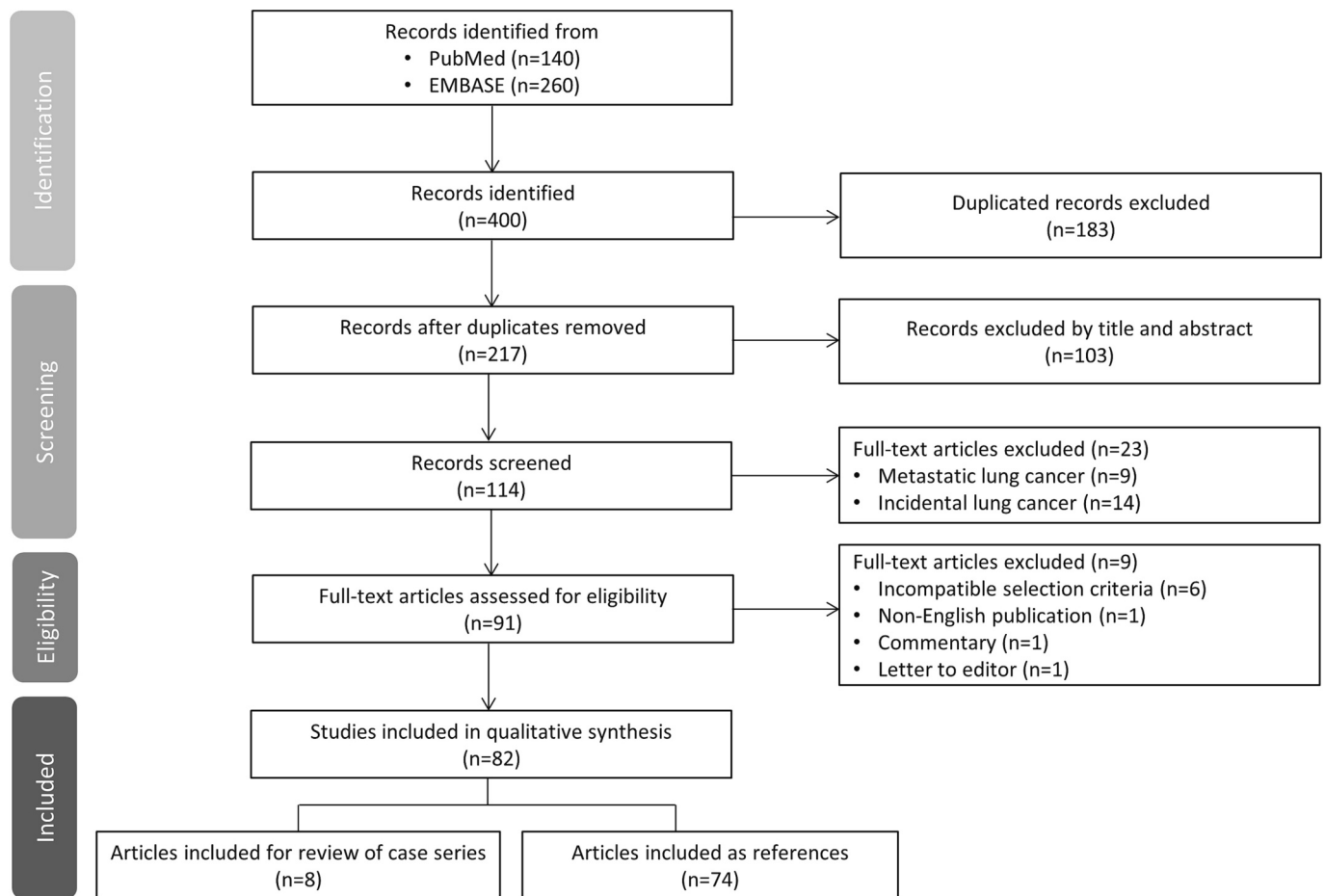


Fig. 2. Flow diagram for selecting eligible publications.

in the former (0/131, 0%;  $p = 0.002$ ) [59]. Another study found that longer follow-up periods resulted in greater differences in survival rates between the DLT and SLT groups [22]. These findings suggest that DLT is more beneficial than SLT [7,60,61].

Furthermore, a study on lung transplantation for lung cancer found that survival outcomes were better with DLT than with SLT. Moreover, reports showed that the 2- and 5-year OS of SLT for lung cancer was 50%, whereas those of DLT for lung cancer were 60% and 57%, respectively [15,34]. In the overall case series, the 2-, 5-, and 10-year OS rates after DLT for lung cancer were 50%–74%, 39%–100%, and 25%–31%, respectively [11–15,34].

Several case series found that the cancer-specific survival (CSS, 50%–86%) was slightly higher than the overall survival (OS) in patients who received DLT for lung cancer [12,34], whereas recurrence rates varied from 0% to 75% (8-year survival after bilateral lung transplantation for BAC of the lungs) [11,12,14,15,34,62]. The most common site for tumor recurrence after lung transplantation for lung cancer is the transplanted donor lung, and the characteristics of recurrent tumors are very similar to those of the recipient’s explanted lung [13,15]. This suggests that the recurrence originates not from the donor but from residual tumor components entering into the air space or the residual respiratory system. Therefore, further studies should investigate technical and therapeutic strategies for improving survival outcomes after lung transplantation for lung cancer.

### 3.4. Advances in surgical techniques for DLT in lung cancer

The current surgical approach of lung transplantation includes a technique of sequential lung transplantation. Using this approach, the

worst lung is typically replaced first followed by the second. This technique requires airway anastomosis at the levels of each main bronchus. A unique advantage of this technique is the possible avoidance of cardiopulmonary bypass (CPB). Although several studies have supported the use of CPB [63–65], there are concerns associated with it use which include bleeding, early graft dysfunction, acute-phase reaction of protease cascades, leukocyte and platelet activation resulting in tissue injury, and endothelial damage by increasing capillary permeability or pulmonary edema [66–69]. The technique of sequential lung transplant provides the flexibility regarding the use of CPB unlike the en bloc double lung transplant in which both lungs have to be simultaneously removed necessitating CPB [32,65].

Most DLTs are now performed as a sequential procedure, with CPB generally not being used. Importantly, during the sequential DLT technique, after one side of the lung is resected, ipsilateral lung transplantation is performed while maintaining ventilation with the remaining lung. Thereafter, the contralateral lung is removed while maintaining ventilation using the transplanted lung. During each single-lung ventilation, malignant cells can potentially spread from the diseased lung into the newly transplanted lung. Indeed, in the published reports, local recurrence seems to occur most frequently in the first lung implanted. Further support of this mode of transmission stems from the fact that most lung cancer recurrences are detected in the donor’s lung and not in extrathoracic organs and show molecular patterns similar to that of the initial lung cancer [15,70]. Therefore, for the purposes of lung transplantation for patients with cancer, we advocate the use of bilateral pneumonectomy using CPB first and then implanting both new lungs sequentially.

To avoid using CPB, several studies have proposed the use of

**Table 2**

Type of lung transplantation, indication, and overall survival of patients who received double-lung transplantation (DLT) for lung cancer based on data from the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network/United Network for Organ Sharing (OPTN/UNOS) and International Society of Heart and Lung Transplantation (ISHLT).

Variables		OPTN/ UNOS data (%)		ISHLT data (%)
Type of lung transplantation [17,80]	Double-lung transplantation	63.69	Double-lung transplantation	65.58
	Single-lung transplantation	36.31	Single-lung transplantation	34.42
Indication of DLT [17,22]	Cystic fibrosis	32.83	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	31.89
	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	11.04	Bronchiectasis	27.38
	Idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis	6.72	Interstitial lung disease	24.01
	Primary pulmonary hypertension	3.51	Pulmonary arterial hypertension	6.09
	Lung cancer	0.10	Lung cancer	0.09
Overall survival (OS) [12,13,81,82]	Others	22.09	Others	41.34
	DLT for noncancer disease	5-year OS 50 10-year OS 27	DLT for noncancer disease	5-year OS 50 10-year OS 35.3
	DLT for lung cancer	5-year OS 57 10-year OS 25	DLT for lung cancer	5-year OS 39 10-year OS 31

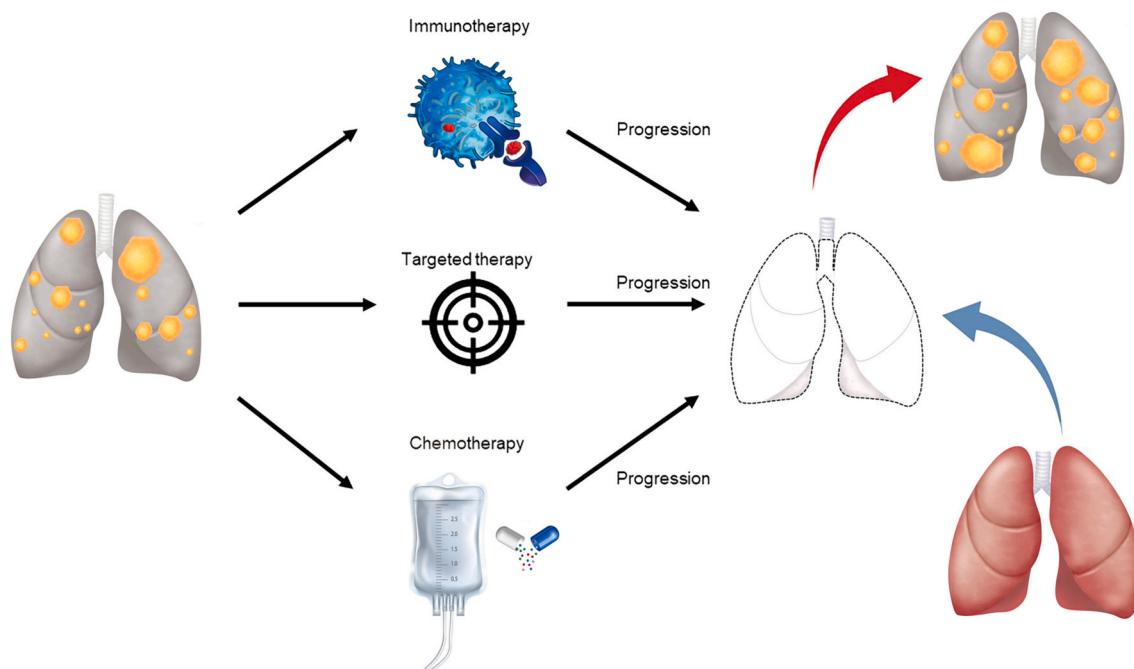
\*Although some data may have been duplicated in the OPTN and ISHLT registry, it was impossible to distinguish.

extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) [71]. Since CPB

requires full-dose heparin while ECMO uses low-dose or no heparin, multiple studies have reported significantly lower post-transplant complication rates in groups utilizing ECMO [72,73]. The intra-operative ECMO group experienced fewer transfusions, fewer reoperations, and a lower incidence of bleeding and early graft dysfunction compared to the CPB group. Although the 1-year and 3-year mortality rates for recipients who received DLT were higher in the no-ECMO group than in the ECMO group ( $p = 0.016$ ,  $p = 0.020$ ) [74], the 90-day mortality rate was only 3.1%, and 2-year survival was 86% when intra-operative ECMO was used during DLT. Nonetheless, there was no significant difference between recipients who used CPB or ECMO. While ECMO might be potentially associated with lower bleeding risks, if bilateral pneumonectomy is performed, the recipient will require a full dose of anticoagulation, as the heart must be entirely bypassed while the lungs are implanted. This is necessary since outflow from the right ventricle is divided following the bilateral pneumonectomy and is not restored until at least one lung is implanted and the pulmonary circulation to that lung is opened. Hence, CPB might be better suited for the DLT for recipients with cancer.

### 3.5. Translational research in DLT for lung cancer

New technologies and advances in the field of lung cancer may impact transplant care for lung cancer patients. With the improvement in surgical technique and post-operative management, the long-term survival following lung transplantation have greatly improved. Lung transplantation could be a highly impactful treatment option for carefully selected patients with medically refractory treatment cancers limited to the lungs. The very early stages of lung cancer or recurrence can be identified by calculating changes in the levels of circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) or other biomarkers [75–77]. Translational studies using ctDNA are being actively conducted not only for the early detection of lung cancer and its recurrence but also in the field of post-transplant lymphoproliferative disorder, a common post-transplant malignancy in heart and lung transplant recipients [78,79]. These studies can contribute to increasing the success rate of lung transplantation in lung cancer. However, further translational studies are required to determine the role of lung transplantation as a curative



**Fig. 3.** Treatment process of bilateral lung cancer up to double-lung transplantation (DLT). When conventional medical therapies fail and progression to respiratory failure is observed in patients with bilateral lung cancer confined to both lungs, DLT can be considered for curative treatment.

treatment for lung cancer.

#### 4. Conclusions and future directions

This review demonstrated that DLT has the potential to be a treatment option for patients with bilateral lung cancer refractory to systemic therapies and who have progressed to respiratory failure. Although the performance rate of lung transplantation for lung cancer has been only 0.1% for 20 years, evidence suggests that lung cancer patients who received lung transplantation showed acceptable survival outcomes.

Recent advances in surgical and medical technologies for lung transplantation have contributed significantly to increasing the success rate of lung transplantation. To date, however, the status and histologic characteristics of lung cancer as an indication for DLT have been restrictive, preventing us from exploring the potential role of DLT as a treatment option for bilateral lung cancer. This could be addressed by identifying a special protocol to improve the survival outcomes of patients with bilateral lung cancer, which should differ from the general protocol for lung transplantation. Achieving this will require several additional studies that evaluate associated clinical and pathologic factors.

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#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jeeyeon Lee:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Samuel J. Schellenberg:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Liam Il-Young Chung:** Investigation. **Ankit Bharat:** Data curation, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. **Young Kwang Chae:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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