Abstract: BACKGROUND: Renal cell carcinoma (RCC) is the sixth leading cause of death in developed countries. A third of all RCC patients are confronted with metastatic disease. Since their approval in 2005 and 2006 in the USA, new targeted therapies may lead to substantial progress. Thus, the aim of this cohort study was to present clinical characteristics and survival in metastatic RCC in a population-based sample before widespread implementation of these new therapies. METHODS: Patients (2264) with metastatic RCC registered between 1978 and 2005 in the cancer registry of Munich, Bavaria were analysed. RESULTS: Median survival and 5 year relative survival from the 1st metastases were 14.4 months and 21%, respectively. Median survival has slightly improved from 13.2 months in 1978-1987 to 15.6 months since 2002. CONCLUSION: Survival of patients with metastatic RCC did not substantially improve within the last three decades. Assuming that new targeted therapies are successful in the treatment of metastatic RCC, population-based data like these can provide a basis for assessing the progress shown in clinical studies and for surveying critically the future implementation of new therapies in routine care.