Clinical Performance of *Aspergillus* PCR for Testing Serum and Plasma: a Study by the European *Aspergillus* PCR Initiative

P. Lewis White, a Rosemary A. Barnes, b Jan Springer, c Lena Klingspor, d Manuel Cuenca-Estrella, e C. Oliver Morton, f Katrien Lagrou, g Stéphane Bretagne, h Willem J. G. Melchers, i Carlo Mengoli, j P. Peter Donnelly, k Werner J. Heinz, l Juergen Loeffler, m the EAPCRI

Public Health Wales Microbiology, Cardiff, Cardiff, United Kingdom; a Cardiff University, UHW, Cardiff, United Kingdom; University of Würzburg Medical Center, Würzburg, Germany; Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden; Spanish National Centre for Microbiology, Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain; University of Western Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia; National Reference Centre for Mycosis, University Hospitals Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Paris Diderot University, Saint Louis Hospital-APHP, Paris, France; Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, Nijmegen, The Netherlands; University of Padua, Padua, Italy

*Aspergillus* PCR testing of serum provides technical simplicity but with potentially reduced sensitivity compared to whole-blood testing. With diseases for which screening to exclude disease represents an optimal strategy, sensitivity is paramount. The associated analytical study confirmed that DNA concentrations were greater in plasma than in serum. The aim of the current investigation was to confirm analytical findings by comparing the performance of *Aspergillus* PCR testing of plasma and serum in the clinical setting. Standardized *Aspergillus* PCR was performed on plasma and serum samples concurrently obtained from hematology patients in a multicenter retrospective anonymous case-control study, with cases diagnosed according to European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer/Invasive Fungal Infections Cooperative Group and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Mycoses Study Group (EORTC/MSG) consensus definitions (19 proven/probable cases and 42 controls). Clinical performance and clinical utility (time to positivity) were calculated for both kinds of samples. The sensitivity and specificity for *Aspergillus* PCR when testing serum were 68.4% and 76.2%, respectively, and for plasma, they were 94.7% and 83.3%, respectively. Eighty-five percent of serum and plasma PCR results were concordant. On average, plasma PCR was positive 16.8 days before diagnosis and was the earliest indicator of infection in 13 cases, combined with other biomarkers in five cases. On average, serum PCR was positive 10.8 days before diagnosis and was the earliest indicator of infection in six cases, combined with other biomarkers in three cases. These results confirm the analytical finding that the sensitivity of *Aspergillus* PCR using plasma is superior to that using serum. PCR positivity occurs earlier when testing plasma and provides sufficient sensitivity for the screening of invasive aspergillosis while maintaining methodological simplicity.

Attempts to standardize PCR to aid in the diagnosis of invasive aspergillosis (IA) have provided an optimal methodology for the testing of serum and whole blood (WB) (1, 2). A multicenter comparison of the clinical performance of PCR showed a trend toward improved sensitivity (85% versus 79%) and earlier positivity when testing WB compared to serum (3). Even in very high-risk patient groups, the incidence of IA rarely exceeds 15%, and diagnostic tests are best used as a screening tool to exclude disease, reducing the need for empirical antifungal therapy through their excellent negative predictive value (4–6). Any reduction in sensitivity, albeit even if statistically insignificant, might result in an increase in false-negative results, a lack of confidence in the assay, and continued reliance on empirical therapy.

Testing plasma may improve sensitivity compared to PCR detection of *Aspergillus* DNA in serum. A study comparing the performance of a galactomannan (GM)-enzyme immunoassay (EIA) in serum and plasma showed that the mean index generated by testing plasma was significantly greater than that for serum (0.315 versus 0.279, respectively; P = 0.0398), and more cases were diagnosed (7). It was proposed that the blood clot had reduced the available GM within serum samples. In an animal model study evaluating *Aspergillus* PCR testing on different blood fractions, the clot was found to contain the greatest concentration of *Aspergillus* DNA (8). Testing the clot material in routine clinical diagnostics is feasible but has practical limitations. A solution is to simply avoid clot formation by testing plasma.

The accompanying paper (9) describes a multicenter analytical evaluation of *Aspergillus* PCR testing of serum and plasma that confirmed this difference in performance. When whole blood was spiked with clinically expected quantities of *A. fumigatus* genomic DNA and subsequently fractionated into serum and plasma, it was found that positivity, as determined by *Aspergillus* PCR crossing points (quantification cycle [C\textsubscript{t}]) were significantly earlier for plasma compared to those for serum, indicating that there was a greater fungal burden available in plasma than in serum, as PCR efficiency appeared to be comparable for the two samples (9).
TABLE 1 Patient demographics with EORTC-MSG diagnosis of IA*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Proven/probable IA (n = 19)</th>
<th>NEF (n = 42)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of males/no. of females</td>
<td>13/6</td>
<td>25/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (mean [range]) (yr)</td>
<td>52.2 (24–73)</td>
<td>52.5 (21–78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying condition (no.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AML/MDS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphoma</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myeloma</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALL</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CML/CLL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA (no.)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA/sinusitis (no.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*IA, invasive aspergillosis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design and patient population. The clinical evaluation was performed over 12 months by two centers experienced in Aspergillus PCR testing based in Public Health Wales, Microbiology Cardiff (PHW), Cardiff, United Kingdom, and the University of Würzburg (UKW), Würzburg, Germany. Initially, EDTA whole-blood and clotted-blood samples were concurrently sent at the request of a consulting clinician for routine Aspergillus PCR and GM-EIA diagnostic investigations as part of local screening strategies. On completion of routine testing, excess plasma and serum were stored at −80°C for quality control and performance assessment purposes. Retrospective testing on excess serum and plasma was performed as an anonymous case-control study to assess the performance of Aspergillus PCR assays, and it did not impact patient management. All clinical information was gathered as part of routine diagnostic care, and no further information specific to this study was required. The study was approved by local ethical and research and development boards.

Cases were selected on the basis of a diagnosis of proven/probable IA, categorized using the revised European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer/Invasive Fungal Infections Cooperative Group and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Mycoses Study Group (EORTC-MSG) definitions, relying on GM-EIA as the mycological criterion for defining probable cases (10). The PCR result was not used in defining disease. Cases of probable IA in each center were confirmed by the other center reviewing the radiological evidence. Controls were selected on the basis of risk factors, but possible IA cases were not included in the study, due to diagnostic ambiguity. The baseline patient demographics are shown in Table 1.

Galactomannan EIA. GM-EIA testing was performed using the Plate-Lab Aspergillus EIA (Bio-Rad), according to the manufacturer’s instructions, and all runs were required to meet the designated validity criteria. The GM-EIA was considered positive when the optical density was ≥0.5.

DNA extraction. All manual DNA extraction steps were performed in a class 2 laminar flow cabinet and were compliant with EAPCRI recommendations (2). At PHW, DNA was extracted from 0.5 ml of undiluted serum and plasma using the commercially available DSP virus kit on the Qiagen EZ1 XL Advance automated extractor, according to the manufacturer’s instructions, and DNA was eluted in 60 μl. At UKW, DNA was extracted from 1.0 ml of undiluted serum and plasma using the commercially available Qiagen UltraSens virus kit, according to the manufacturer’s instructions, with the following modifications: (i) no carrier RNA was used, (ii) lysate centrifugation was adjusted to 3,000 × g, and (iii) the elution buffer volume was increased to 70 μl and was incubated on the column at room temperature for 2 min, followed by centrifugation of the tubes for 2 min (3). At PHW, extractions included a positive control (serum/plasma spiked with 20 genome equivalents [ge] of A. fumigatus DNA) and a negative control (serum/plasma from a healthy donor), while at UKW, only a negative control was utilized.

PCR amplification. The PCR methods showed comparable performance when testing EAPCRI panels and were conducted in accordance with the EAPCRI recommendations, including the use of an internal control PCR to monitor inhibition (1, 2).

At UKW, an Aspergillus-specific real-time PCR assay targeting the internal transcribed spacer 1 (ITS1)/5.8S rRNA gene region was used as previously described (3). The final reaction volume was 21 μl, containing 0.3 μM forward primer, 0.3 μM reverse primer, 0.15 μM hydrolysis probe, 10 μl of TaqMan gene expression master mix (Applied Biosystems), and 10 μl of template DNA. Amplification was performed using a StepOnePlus machine (Applied Biosystems), with the following conditions: 95°C for 10 min, and 60 cycles of 95°C for 5 s, 54°C for 15 s, and 72°C for 1 s. Negative and positive PCR controls were included for every run.

At PHW, the Aspergillus real-time PCR test was performed as a single-round assay using a Rotor–Gene Q high-resolution melting (HRM) instrument (Qiagen, United Kingdom) targeting the 28S rRNA gene, as previously described (11). The final reaction volume was 50 μl containing 0.75 μM primers, 0.4 μM hydrolysis probe, 4 mM MgCl₂, 5 μl of Roche LightCycler hybridization master mix (Roche, United Kingdom), 9 μl of molecular-grade water, and 15 μl of template DNA. PCR controls in the form of cloned PCR products (300, 30, and 3 input copies) and no-template molecular-grade water were included to monitor PCR performance.

Both centers tested each sample in duplicate. The analytical threshold was defined by at least one replicate generating a positive signal at any cycle during the PCR.

Statistical analysis. Patients with proven and probable IA were classified as cases, and patients with no evidence of fungal disease were categorized as controls. The clinical performance was defined using both single-positive PCR and multiple-positive (≥2) PCR thresholds. The validity of positive PCR was determined by comparing the rate of positivity in samples originating from cases compared to the rate of false positivity in control samples. Sensitivity, specificity, positive and negative likelihood ratios, and the diagnostic odds ratios of the PCR assays were calculated using 2 by 2 tables. Predictive values were not calculated because of the artificially high prevalence of IA (proven/probable IA, 19/62 [30.6%]), which is typical of case-control studies. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were generated for each proportionate value and, where required, P values (Fisher’s exact test; significance threshold, P = 0.05) were calculated to determine the significance of the difference between rates (12). A Kappa statistic was calculated to test the agreement between PCR results and was applied individually to the total population and for cases and controls. The observed agreement between PCR results and between PCR and GM-EIA results was also calculated. For cases of IA, the first assay result from serum PCR, plasma PCR, and GM-EIA to become positive was identified, and the timing of PCR positivity was compared to that of a diagnosis of IA, as determined by the date at which histology or both radiology and GM-EIA were positive.

C₀ values for PCR-positive results and for cases and controls were also compared, with both C₀ values being included for the confirmed positive results. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, D’Agostino-Pearson test, and Shapiro-Wilk test were applied to all populations to determine normality.
TABLE 2 Sample concordance when testing serum and plasma specimens by Aspergillus PCR

| Plasma PCR results by sample group (no.) | No. of samples with serum PCR result of: | \( C_q \) values for positive samples occurred significantly earlier for cases (mean, 40.4 cycles; 95% CI, 40.1 to 41.5 cycles) than for controls (mean, 44.5 cycles; 95% CI, 43.0 to 45.9 cycles) (Mann-Whitney test, \( P < 0.0005 \)). There was no difference in a comparison of \( C_q \) values for PCR-positive serum samples originating from cases (mean, 40.9 cycles; 95% CI, 40.3 to 41.5 cycles) or controls (mean, 41.1 cycles; 95% CI, 40.2 to 42.1 cycles) (unpaired \( t \) test, \( P = 0.7478 \)) (Fig. 1). \( C_q \) values for false-positive plasma PCR results originating from the control population occurred significantly later than those for false-positive serum PCR results (Mann-Whitney test, \( P = 0.0009 \)). There was no difference in \( C_q \) values in the plasma or serum PCR-positive results of cases of IA (Mann-Whitney test, \( P = 0.2925 \)).

For plasma, a threshold of 42.3 cycles appeared to be optimal, generating sensitivity and specificity values of 79.0% (95% CI, 54.4 to 94.0%) and 100% (95% CI, 91.6 to 100%), respectively (Fig. 2). A positivity threshold of 45 cycles provides sufficient sensitivity to exclude IA when testing plasma, resulting in a sensitivity of 94.7% and a negative likelihood ratio of 0.06. As the \( C_q \) values generated by serum PCR were similar for cases and controls, it was not possible to determine an optimal \( C_q \) threshold using ROC analysis (Fig. 2), and a determination of the performance was better achieved by qualitative interpretation of results (positive/negative) (Table 4). The area under the ROC curve was signifi-
other assays on five occasions (Fig. 3). GM-EIA was the earliest occasion, and it was concurrently positive in combination with positive result; it was the sole first positive assay result on eight positive PCR results within the same episode.

Aspergillus was, on average, 16.8 (95% CI, 3.6 to 30.0) and 10.8 (95% CI, 9.4 to 20.1) days, respectively, earlier than the diagnosis of IA, when testing serum. A diagnostic approach requiring plasma, 8/13 patients had consecutive PCR-positive results compared to 6/8 when testing serum. The horizontal bar represents the median value and the error bars the interquartile range.

**FIG 1** Comparison of crossing point values for positive PCR results when testing serum and plasma. The horizontal bar represents the median value and the error bars the interquartile range.

**FIG 2** Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve for *Aspergillus* PCR testing of serum and plasma. The ROC curve was calculated using the earliest Cq value per patient, with patients negative by PCR given a Cq value of 50 cycles. Each point represents a Cq value.

**DISCUSSION**

This clinical evaluation supports the analytical evidence confirming free DNA to be more abundant in plasma than in serum. Plasma PCR sensitivity (94.7%) was higher than that of serum PCR (68.4%), generating a negative likelihood ratio of 0.06, which is sufficient to exclude disease in patients not receiving mold-active prophylaxis/treatment (13). Unfortunately, it was not possible to identify whether individual patients were receiving mold-active prophylaxis without breaking anonymity. However, the effects of prophylaxis on decreasing the available fungal burden and assay sensitivity would apply equally to serum and plasma. The sensitivity of serum PCR in this current study was comparable to that for serum in a previous study comparing whole-blood (WB) and serum PCR performance, whereas the current plasma PCR sensitivity was comparable to that of previous WB PCR (3). Increasing assay stringency by using a clinical threshold of ≥2 PCR-positive results improved plasma PCR specificity to 100%, with a positive likelihood ratio of >68.4; this would allow IA to be reliably diagnosed (Table 4), although it would delay the diagnosis by a median of 14 days (range, 2 to 24 days) compared to that with a single PCR-positive result, limiting clinical utility. Plasma was the first indicator of IA in 68% of cases, albeit in combination with other biomarker tests in just under half.

In the analytical study, the Cq values associated with true-positive PCR results with plasma occurred significantly earlier than those with serum. Conversely, in the clinical study, there was no significant difference in Cq values for true-positive results when testing plasma or serum, although false-positive results occurred significantly later when testing plasma, which allowed a positivity threshold to be determined. In the analytical study, the majority of samples (23/27) gave concordant positive results. In the clinical study, most positive samples (53/74) were either positive in serum or plasma, with only 21 being positive in both. A comparison of only concordantly positive serum and plasma samples showed a median value for plasma of 39.8 cycles, which occurred approximately 1 cycle earlier than that found for serum (median Cq of 40.5), ($P = 0.4373$).
The limited concordance between serum and plasma PCR and between PCR and GM-EIA likely reflects that levels of Aspergillus DNA in the circulation are low and at the limit of detection of real-time PCR. As a result, PCR positivity is often not reproducible, although it is still considered significant (14). Furthermore, degradation of the DNA target was a possibility (15). For serum, no prior testing had been performed, although for plasma PCR, positives before and after Cq values were not significantly different (P = 0.097). Given that the overall sample positivity rates were similar and the mean Cq values for cases of IA when testing serum (40.9 cycles) and plasma (40.8 cycles) were almost identical, the effect of storage appears to be minimal. One caveat is that the variability of real-time PCR Cq values at this late stage of amplification is wide, and prospective clinical comparison is required to overcome any associated limitations.

In the clinical study, the concentration of circulatory DNA was lower than that encountered in the analytical evaluation. As evident in the clinical study. From an analytical perspective, it is essential that all DNA concentrations be within the reproducible detection range, as testing outside these boundaries might generate random erroneous results leading to false conclusions. Nevertheless, clinical performance appeared to be superior in plasma, as the sensitivity was comparable to that found for WB PCR testing (86%; 95% CI, 73 to 93%) (16). However, automated sample processing is simpler, being the same as that used for serum.

Targeting free circulating Aspergillus DNA (DNAemia) is technically less demanding than targeting DNA associated within the circulating fungal cells (2). The analytical evaluation showed that the amount of cell-free DNA is greater in plasma than that in serum, which is likely the result of DNA becoming trapped during clot formation (9). DNA concentrations in clot material have been shown to be higher than those found in serum, supporting this hypothesis (8). Moreover, the use of clots in daily practice is technically challenging. Usually, blood is drawn into 4- to 6-ml Vacutainers, and subsequent clot formation will occupy approximately half of this volume, so it cannot be processed unless it is divided into smaller amounts. Testing a single aliquot of this divided material would be preferable, but it assumes an equal distribution of Aspergillus DNA within the clot. Whether this is the case has not been determined and might result in false negativity. Testing multiple aliquots increases costs and the complexity of interpretation, as positivity may vary between aliquots. Since the use of plasma precludes clot formation, there may be a reduction in the loss of DNA.

In summary, testing of serum and plasma by PCR is technically less demanding than that of WB and allows Aspergillus PCR to be performed in routine molecular diagnostic laboratories alongside viral and bacterial assays. This multicenter clinical evaluation supports the analytical findings in the accompanying manuscript (9), in which analytical sensitivity in plasma appeared superior to that of serum. In the clinical evaluation, there was a trend toward increased sensitivity, and positivity occurred earlier when testing plasma. Despite the limitations (population size and retrospective testing) of this case-control study, the results justify further prospective cohort or randomized control studies to confirm clinical validity and accurately define the clinical utility of testing different types of specimens.

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**TABLE 4 Performance of Aspergillus PCR when testing serum and plasma samples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Serum</th>
<th>Multiple (≧2) PCR positive threshold</th>
<th>Plasma</th>
<th>Multiple (≧2) PCR positive threshold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity (no./total no., % [95% CI])</td>
<td>13/19, 68.4 (46.0–84.6)</td>
<td>8/19, 42.1 (23.1–63.7)</td>
<td>18/19, 94.7 (75.4–99.1)</td>
<td>13/19, 68.4 (46.0–84.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity (no./total no., % [95% CI])</td>
<td>32/42, 76.2 (61.5–86.5)</td>
<td>40/42, 95.2 (84.2–98.7)</td>
<td>35/42, 83.3 (69.4–91.7)</td>
<td>42/42, 100 (85.1–100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive LR</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>&gt;68.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative LR</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOR</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>95.0</td>
<td>&gt;213.8*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 95% CI, 95% confidence interval; LR, likelihood ratio; DOR, diagnostic odds ratio. Positive LR and DOR values were calculated with a specificity of 99% to overcome the variability of real-time PCR values associated with plasma PCR analytical testing were not as evident in the clinical study.
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REFERENCES


