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Cervical cancer screening by enhanced cytology: application of novel markers

ANY Cheung *, XY Guan, HYS Ngan

**KEY MESSAGES**

1. p634A4, TAp73, and DJ-1 immunocytochemistry as well as in situ hybridisation for the OSMR1, PAPD7/POLS, PRAKK1, and TRIO genes helped to identify cervical carcinoma and high-grade precursor cells.

2. p634A4 immunoreactivity is a potential marker for triage of atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance.

3. TAp73 immunoreactivity is a potential marker for triage of low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions.

**Introduction**

Cervical cytological examination is the most widely applied screening method for cervical cancer and its precursors. Liquid-based cytology produces good-quality smears and enables the use of ancillary laboratory techniques to distinguish neoplastic from benign cells.

Immunohistochemical and molecular markers have been tested to identify dysplastic cells in cervical smears. When testing for human papillomavirus (HPV) or chromosome aneusomy, MIB1 (Ki67) and p16 immunocytochemistry helps to highlight dysplastic or cancer cells. Such markers may be useful for triage of patients with borderline smears of atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS), which is the most common abnormal cytological finding and is associated with a significantly higher risk of developing cervical cancer and its high-grade precursors.

In this study, immunocytochemical markers (p63, p73, Eif-5A2, and DJ-1 genes) were tested in cervical cancer screening using immunocytochemistry and chromogenic in situ hybridisation. Differential expression of these genes in cervical cytology is useful in diagnosing cervical cancer.

p63 and p73 genes are members of the p53 family and play important roles in carcinogenesis. Different isoforms of p63 and p73 can enhance or suppress neoplastic cell growth. Differential expression of p63 and p73 isoforms was reported in normal and neoplastic cervical epithelium. p73 expression is associated with radiosensitivity of cervical cancer. In a study of frequently amplified regions at 3q26.2, Eif-5A2 was found to be important in ovarian carcinogenesis. Similar regions at chromosome 3q have also been identified in cervical cancer. Eif-5A2 is a potential marker for cervical cancer. DJ-1 has been identified as a suppressor of PTEN, which is a tumour suppressor gene. DJ-1 overexpression has been noted in human malignancies compared with healthy tissue.

Novel genes can be identified in specific chromosome regions by array comparative genomic hybridisation. In our previous studies on cervical cancer samples and cell lines, the frequently amplified regions were 1q, 3p, 3q, and 5p. Besides Eif-5A2, eight gene loci can be identified and the amplification status can be detected by chromogenic in situ hybridisation. This study aimed to assess the application value of adjunct markers in liquid-based cervical cytology for detection of carcinoma cells and precursors.

**Methods**

This study was conducted from March 2007 to February 2009. Residues of liquid-based ThinPrep Pap Test (Hologic, Bedford, MA, US) cervical cytology samples of high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (HSIL) [n=80], low-grade SIL (LSIL) [n=100], ASCUS (n=200), invasive cervical carcinoma (n=40), and healthy tissue (n=60) findings were retrieved from the Cervical Cytology Laboratory, Queen Mary Hospital, University of Hong Kong for immunocytochemistry and in situ hybridisation.
To identify the eight target genes for chromogenic in situ hybridisation experiments, quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) using DNA extracted from healthy tissue (n=6), HSIL (n=14), and squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) [n=12] cytology samples was performed. The DNA probes for Eif-5A2 and the eight other selected gene loci on 1q, 3p, 3q, and 5p were labelled with biotin, and chromogenic in situ hybridisation was performed. The subsequent cytology and colposcopic histology findings of the cases were traced. The HPV molecular test results, if available, were also retrieved for correlation.

Apart from Eif-5A2, potential genes located on 1q, 3p, 3q, and 5p for in situ hybridisation were explored through literature review followed by screening by quantitative PCR (qPCR). The genomic sequences of potential target genes were retrieved from the UCSC Genome Browser (http://genome.ucsc.edu/cgi-bin/hgGateway). Primers were designed using NCBI/Primer-BLAST (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/tools/primer-blast/). qPCR was performed on DNA extracted from pilot samples with ABI Prism 7700 Sequence Detection System (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA).

After screening by real time PCR, eight genes with demonstrable amplification status in the cervical cancer samples were selected for chromogenic in situ hybridisation. These included MUC1 (on 1q), MST1R (on 3p), DVL3 and FGF12 (on 3q), and OSMR1, PAPD7/POLS, PRAKK1, and TRIO (on 5p). The probes were designed and manufactured using the assay services of Empire Genomics (New York, NY, USA). Bacterial artificial chromosome clones for these eight genes and non-repetitive sequences of MAN2A1 on chromosome 5, which acted as control for the genes on chromosome 5, were prepared. The location and clone percent coverage are listed in the Table. After culture, the plasmid DNA was isolated by the alkaline lysis method followed by biotin labelling using BioPrime DNA Labeling System (Invitrogen; Life Technologies, Paisley, UK).

Chromogenic in situ hybridisation was performed following established protocols. The slides were first incubated with 0.1% Triton X-100 and proteinase K. The labelled probes were added to the hybridisation mix, followed by overnight hybridisation. Immunocytochemistry was performed to visualise in situ hybridisation signals by peroxidase activity. Known positive and negative control slides were included in each batch of experiments. The morphology of the nuclei was taken into consideration during evaluation of in situ hybridisation signals.

Regarding immunocytochemistry, mouse anti-human p63 (Clone 4A4; Dako, Glostrup, Denmark), mouse anti-human TAp73 (Zymed Laboratories, San Francisco, CA, USA), DJ-1 (a gift from Prof Tak W Mak, Ontario Cancer Institute, Toronto, Canada), and mouse monoclonal antibody to Eif-5A2 (ab57421; Abcam, Cambridge, MA, USA) were applied to the ThinPrep thin-layer cytology slides. Immunocytochemical studies were performed using the EnVision+ Dual Link System (Dako, Carpinteria, CA, USA). A light haematoxylin counterstain was used. Appropriate negative and positive controls were included. A modified Wentzensen scoring system incorporating morphologic criteria for the assessment of the immunoreactivity of the cells was used.

Chi-squared test (2-tailed) was used to compare the immunocytochemical and in situ hybridisation signals among the healthy tissue, ASCUS, LSIL, HSIL, and cervical carcinoma groups. A P value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

### Results

**Immunocytochemistry**

p63A4 protein expression was found mainly at the nuclei, although weak cytoplasmic expression...
was detected focally (Fig 1a). Significantly higher p634A4 expression was found in HSIL or carcinoma when compared with ASCUS and LSIL (P<0.05). Among ASCUS, p634A4 expression in cases that subsequently progressed to LSIL (P<0.05) or HSIL (P<0.05) was significantly higher than those that did not. For ASCUS positive for high-risk HPV detected by hybrid capture II, cases with a high p634A4 index were more likely to have subsequent HSIL detected (P<0.05).

TAp73 protein expression was found mainly at the nuclei, although weak cytoplasmic expression was detected focally (Fig 1b). Significantly higher TAp73 expression was found in HSIL or carcinoma when compared with ASCUS and LSIL (P<0.05). Among LSIL, significantly higher TAp73 (P<0.05) was found in cases that subsequently progressed to HSIL. TAp73 correlated with the p634A4 indices (P<0.0001).

DJ-1 protein expression was found at both the cytoplasm and the nucleus of SCC cells, whereas the healthy squamous cells were negative for DJ-1 protein. There was a significant difference in DJ-1 expression among the different diagnostic categories of healthy tissue, ASCUS, LSIL, HSIL, and SCC (P<0.05). Significantly higher DJ-1 expression was found in HSIL and SCC than in ASCUS and LSIL (P<0.05).

No significant Eif-5A2 protein expression was detected in SCC, HSIL, LSIL, and ASCUS cells. Only a few HSIL, LSIL, and ASCUS cells in a small number of samples showed weak Eif-5A2 expression. In contrast, strong expression of Eif-5A2 was demonstrated in the control ovarian cancer cell line UACC1895.

Chromogenic in situ hybridisation

There were two to 14 copy signals for DVL3 and three to 10 copy signals for FGF12, both on chromosome 3q, and two to 10 copy signals for MST1R on chromosome 3p detected in SCC and HSIL samples. Aneusomy of chromosome 3 was suggested by the multiple (2-8) copy signals for chromosome 3 centromere. There was no significant increase in the ratio of DVL3, FGF12, and MST1R to centromere 3 in SCC and HSIL samples (P>0.05), indicating no significant amplification of these genes in SCC and HSIL.

No increase in in situ hybridisation signals for Eif-5A2 (on chromosome 3q) could be detected in carcinoma, HSIL, LSIL, and ASCUS cells. In contrast, multiple copy signals were found in the control ovarian cancer cell line UACC1895.

There were two to 10 copy signals for MUC1 on chromosome 1q detected in SCC and HSIL samples. Aneusomy of chromosome 1 was suggested by the multiple (2-7) copy signals for chromosome 1 centromere. There was no significant increase in the MUC1 to centromere 1 ratio in SCC and HSIL samples (P>0.05) suggesting absence of amplification of the MUC1 gene in these lesions.

Overall, three to eight copy signals for OSMR and PRAD7/POLS each, and two to 10 copy signals for PRKAA1 and RIO each on chromosome 5p were detected in SCC and HSIL samples, whereas two copy signals for the non-replicating MAN2A-1 gene on chromosome 5 were detected (Fig 2). There was a significant increase in the ratio of OSMR, PRAD7/POLS, PRKAA1, and TRIO to centromere 5 in SCC and HSIL samples (P<0.05) suggesting amplification of these genes in SCC and HSIL.

Specificity of predicting cervical lesions

When compared with the high-risk HPV test, p634A4 immunocytochemistry increased the specificity and positive predictive value, although the sensitivity and negative predictive value were reduced.

Discussion

The selected gene loci have been found to occupy essential niches in cervical carcinogenesis. Among the six major hallmarks of cancer, these genes have been found to play a role in evading apoptosis (p63,
p73, DJ-1, TRIO, Eif-5A2), self-sufficiency in growth signals (DVL3, FGF12, MST1R, OSMR, PAPD7/POLS), insensitivity to anti-growth signals (p63, p73, DJ-1, MUC1, PAPD7/POLS), and sustained angiogenesis (PRKAA1).

In this study, the potential of p63 and p73 in highlighting SCC and HSIL, and in triaging ASCUS and LSIL (even among HPV-positive cases for ASCUS) was demonstrated. Nonetheless, the application of p63 and p73 immunocytochemistry, particularly p63, may have limitations for detecting glandular lesions in cervical cytology.

High expression of DJ-1 rendered cells resistant to apoptosis and overexpression of DJ-1 has been reported in various human cancers. In this study, high DJ-1 expression was also found in SCC and HSIL, suggesting its role as cancer marker. However, DJ-1 cannot be used to triage ASCUS or LSIL cases for subsequent development of HSIL or SCC.

Overexpression of Eif-5A2 has been reported in several cancers, suggesting it is a potential oncogene. Almost all of the carcinomas with overexpression of Eif-5A2 were adenocarcinomas. In our pilot study, Eif-5A2 was found to be overexpressed in cervical adenocarcinoma, but to a much lesser extent in SCC. Overexpression or amplification of Eif-5A2 was not detected in the cervical cytology samples. Tissue-specific functions of the Eif-5A2 isoform may exist. Different gene expression profiles for adenocarcinoma and SCC have been demonstrated.

Dishevelled (Dvl) family gene products, cytoplasmic mediators of the Wnt/beta-catenin signalling pathway, are important in embryological development. DVL3 was found to be overexpressed in cancers relative to metastatic ability. Nevertheless, amplification of DVL3 was not detected in cervical cancers in this study.

In oesophageal SCC, FGF12 was found to be associated with cellular migration, proliferation, and inhibition of apoptosis. Expression of FGF12, related to the MAPK signalling pathway, was validated by tissue microarray. Amplification of FGF12 has not been reported in cervical cancers and was not detected in the cytology samples of cervical cancers in our study.

MST1R, which maps at 3p21.3, encodes a tyrosine kinase receptor closely related to the MET gene, whose mutations and dysregulated expression are associated with cancers of the lung and breast in association with metastasis and death. MST1R forms a complex with the epidermal growth factor receptor and acts as a transcriptional regulator in response to stress signals imposed on cancer cells. Nevertheless, amplification of MST1R was not detected in cervical cancers in this study.

Overexpression of MUC1 at 1q has been reported in cancers of the breast, ovary, and thyroid in association with aggressive clinical behaviour and resistance to chemotherapy. High MUC1 expression has been reported in cervical cancers, predominantly in adenocarcinoma. In this study, amplification of MUC1 was not demonstrated in cytology samples of SCC and HSIL.

Amplification of OSMR at 5p has been reported in SCC of the cervix, adversely influencing overall patient survival independently of tumour stage. OSMR could activate downstream signalling pathways, including STAT3 and MAPK, and induce transcription of the angiogenic factor vascular endothelial growth factor. Our study confirmed the amplification of OSMR in SCC and HSIL cytology samples.

The PAPD7/Pols gene, which encodes a DNA polymerase, is necessary for chromosome segregation and establishing sister chromatid cohesion after S-phase. These processes are important for regulation of the cell cycle. Amplification of PAPD7/Pols has been demonstrated in cervical cancers as well as soft-tissue sarcomas. Amplification of PAPD7/Pols was also detected in SCC and HSIL cytology samples in this study.

The PRKAA1 gene codes for the catalytic alpha 1 subunit of the AMP-activated protein kinase,
which is an important cellular metabolic stress regulator. Amplification and overexpression of PRKAA1 has been reported in our earlier studies of cervical cancers, supporting its potential in cervical carcinogenesis. The amplification was confirmed by chromogenic in situ hybridisation in this study.

Amplification of TRIO at 5p15.2 has been demonstrated in oral, oesophageal, and urinary bladder cancers, in association with aggressive tumour growth and proliferation and reduced apoptosis. TRIO amplification is also found in primary cervical cancers, adversely influencing patients’ survival. Amplification of TRIO was confirmed in this study.

**Study limitations**

This study was limited to evaluation of gene expression and amplification in SCC and squamous lesions in cervical cytology. Adenocarcinoma and its precursors were not studied.

**Conclusion**

In liquid-based cytology samples, TAp73, p63A4, and DJ-1 immunocytochemistry and detection of amplified gene copies of OSMR, PAPD7/POLS, PRAKK1, and TRIO by in situ hybridisation together with morphological assessment could distinguish cervical cancer from its high-grade precursors. In addition, p63A4 and TAp73 immunoreactivity correlated with subsequent detection of HSIL or SCC in patients with ASCUS and LSIL, respectively, with enhanced specificity. p63A4 and TAp73 immunoreactivity may thus be potential markers for triage of borderline and low-grade cervical smears. Such adjunct markers can identify at-risk patients and reduce unnecessary referral for colposcopy.

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