minimize false-negative results caused by flanking-sequence deletions/polymorphisms, a potential pitfall for all PCR-based assays.

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References


Clara R.L. Teo2
Indhu-Shree Rajan-Babu2
Hai-Yang Law3
Caroline G. Lee4,5,6
Samuel S. Chong2,7,8*

Departments of 2 Paediatrics and 4 Biochemistry
Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine
National University of Singapore
Singapore
3 Department of Paediatric Medicine
KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital
Singapore
5 Division of Medical Sciences
National Cancer Centre Singapore
Singapore
6 Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School
Singapore
7 Khoo Teck Puat – National University
Children’s Medical Institute
National University Hospital
Singapore
8 Department of Laboratory Medicine
National University Hospital
Singapore

*Address correspondence to this author at Department of Pediatrics
Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine
National University of Singapore
Singapore 119228, Singapore
Fax +65-6772-4100
E-mail paecs@nus.edu.sg

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Tolerance of Droplet-Digital PCR vs Real-Time Quantitative PCR to Inhibitory Substances

To the Editor:

Real-time quantitative PCR (qPCR)1 is a rapid and sensitive method that forms the foundation for many clinical diagnostic tests. Droplet digital PCR (ddPCR) shares these qualities with qPCR, but owing to reaction partitioning, ddPCR is proposed to exhibit increased tolerance to interfering substances, making it an attractive alternative to qPCR for diagnostic applications.
copies/µL (in a 20-µL reaction) over 3 biological replicates. Droplets in partially inhibited samples show fluorescent units ranging between those of positive and negative droplets and can be easily visualized in 1-dimensional amplitude plots (Fig. 1, wells 4–7). In a typical uninhibited sample, a tight threshold (Fig. 1, orange line) is placed near the cluster of positive droplets and is constant for a specific target. However, in the case of partial inhibition, a broad threshold is applied to the ddPCR QX100 analysis near the negative droplets to appropriately incorporate all partially inhibited droplets (Fig. 1, blue line).

Using this strategy, we calculated log IC₅₀ values from the resulting inhibition curves. Greater than a half log increase in IC₅₀ was observed for both the IE and gB targets of ddPCR over qPCR for both SDS (absolute log difference in IC₅₀ qPCR vs ddPCR IE, 0.554, and vs ddPCR gB, 0.628) and heparin (absolute log difference in IC₅₀ qPCR vs ddPCR IE, 0.65, and vs ddPCR gB, 0.853). The probability of difference between the data sets for ddPCR and qPCR was >99.99% for both inhibitors and both ddPCR targets, indicating that ddPCR tolerated the presence of these inhibitors better than qPCR. However, this difference was not noted when we compared ddPCR and qPCR in the presence of EDTA for both ddPCR targets (log difference in IC₅₀ qPCR vs ddPCR IE, 0.116, and vs ddPCR gB, 0.0198), possibly owing to different inhibition mechanisms. EDTA is a calcium chelator, whereas SDS and heparin both act on DNA polymerase.

The ddPCR CMV assay is more tolerant to SDS and heparin than the qPCR assay, indicating that reaction partitioning through digitization may reduce susceptibility to these traditional PCR inhibitors. The data suggest that individual microreactions mitigate the impact of inhibitors on PCR amplification by retaining discernible positive signals even when moderate PCR inhibition is occurring in a droplet. Since PCR reactions are not partitioned in qPCR, amplification is dependent on the concentration of inhibitor in the entire reaction, leading to an increased number of amplification cycles required to reach a signal above a given threshold. In turn, this will result in inaccurate quantification of template in the original sample. In ddPCR, on the other hand, quantification is dictated by the Poisson distribution. Theoretically, each droplet ideally contains 1 or 0 copies of template. This distribution can also be applied to the presence of inhibitory substances. Amplification will depend on the presence or absence of template and the presence or absence of inhibitory concentrations of inhibitor in each droplet. Delayed amplification or reduced amplification efficiency per cycle due to partial inhibition can be visualized by using amplitude plots. This mechanism allows optimal placement of the analysis threshold to include positive droplets that exhibit amplitude shifts due to the effects of inhibitors (Fig. 1). The results from the inhibitor-spiked PCR reactions provide proof-of-concept that ddPCR may offer an advantage over qPCR when dealing with inhibition-prone samples. Other clinical specimen types, such as stool, sputum, and tissue, are known to be more recalcitrant to removal of inhibitors through typical extraction methods, so ddPCR may prove especially useful for such specimens.

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References


To the Editor:

Previously, we reported false-negative results generated by the OSOM human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG)1 Combo test (Genzyme Diagnostics)1 and certain lots of the hCG Cardinal Health Combo SP brand rapid test device (SP hCG rapid test; Cardinal Health)2 owing to increased concentrations of hCG/β core fragment (hCGβcf). We refer to this phenomenon as the variant hook effect. In a hospital setting, these false negatives pose a substantial risk of adverse outcomes if pregnant patients are given treatments

Point-of-Care and Over-the-counter Qualitative Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) Devices Remain Susceptible to False-Negative Results Caused by Excess hCG β Core Fragment

Tanis C. Dingle3
Ruth Hall Sedlak3
Linda Cook3
Keith R. Jerome3,4*

3 Department of Laboratory Medicine
University of Washington
Seattle, WA
4 The Vaccine and Infectious Disease Institute
Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
Seattle, WA

*Address correspondence to this author at
1100 Fairview Ave. N, E5-110
Seattle WA 98109
Fax 206-667-4411
E-mail kjerome@fhcrc.org

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1 Nonstandard abbreviations: hCG, human chorionic gonadotropin; hCGβcf, hCG β core fragment; POC, point-of-care; OTC, over-the-counter.