False Positive Results With SARS-CoV-2 RT-PCR Tests and How to Evaluate a RT-PCR-Positive Test for the Possibility of a False Positive Result

To the Editor:

The most widely utilized Nucleic Acid Amplification Test (NAAT) to detect SARS-CoV-2 RNA is the reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test, manufactured by many companies targeting one or more genomic regions of the virus. Although there is a several log difference in the sensitivity of the different RT-PCR tests to pick up viral RNA, many have sufficient analytical sensitivity to detect a viral load during the preinfectious stage in infected individuals. However, none of the tests have sufficient clinical sensitivity to detect virus during the first several days after infection, nor are they 100% sensitive at the time of peak infectiveness. Much has been written about the issue of false negative RT-PCR tests in symptomatic, presymptomatic, and asymptomatic persons infected with the virus. Less has been published about the problem of false positive RT-PCR or other NAAT tests.

In the United States, because of a shortage of tests and testing facilities during the early months of the pandemic tests were primarily used for diagnoses to identify a person with an active infection associated with signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or who had definite or suspected recent exposure to the virus. Later, the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approved testing to be extended to screen for infection in individuals without known or suspected exposure to SARS-CoV-2 living in congregate settings, such as long-term care facilities or prisons. Finally, periodic screening programs have been developed for educational institutions, sport teams, and the workplace to detect asymptomatic, presymptomatic, and symptomatic infected individuals early and isolate them to reduce them infecting others.

The overall accuracy of a RT-PCR test is based upon its sensitivity representing the ability to detect infected individuals and the specificity, which is the percentage of uninfected people who test negative. The FDA has published recommendations concerning the data and the information that test manufacturers should supply in their application for Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). For analytical specificity they ask for in vitro cross-reactivity studies to demonstrate that the test does not react with related pathogens, high prevalence disease agents, and normal or pathogenic flora that are reasonably likely to be encountered in a clinical specimen. Many of the RT-PCR assays have a 100% sensitivity in this analysis as reported by the manufacturers. For clinical evaluation, the FDA recommends testing 30 positive clinical samples and 30 individual negative samples and comparing the results of the test under consideration to an existing EUA RT-PCR test of high sensitivity. Acceptable clinical performance is defined as a minimum 95% positive and negative percent agreement (PPA and NPA). For a screening indication, the PPA recommendation remains at more than equal to 95% and the NPA is raised to 85% for a prevalence of 0.1%. The PPV drops to 4.5%. For a prevalence of 1%, the PPV drops to 19.2%.

Table 1 lists various factors that have been documented to contribute to false positive RT-PCR results. Based upon our own experience in investigating groups of false positive RT-PCR results and discussions with laboratory directors, the two most common problems are contamination and determining the cut-off for stating that a specimen is positive with a low viral load versus being called indeterminate or equivocal. The WHO, and an international consortium of experts have addressed these issues and have produced a checklist for laboratories to reduce possible causes of false positive RT-PCR results and how to handle equivocal results.

The overdiagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 infection has multiple potential adverse effects (Table 2); the inconvenience, financial, and psychological issues affecting those misdiagnosed; the possible exposure of uninfected individuals to infected people in hospital or congregate living areas; misdiagnosed persons foregoing social distancing and the masks use because they think that they are immune from COVID-19; and temporary closure of a business because of the need to quarantine coworkers. In addition, the overdiagnosis can inflate the number of asymptomatic infections in public health statistics.

Recognizing that a positive RT-PCR result may be a false positive may be difficult. If a RT-PCR-positive individual has signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or has had exposure to somebody who has been shown...
or suspected of harboring the virus, it is prudent to assume that the result is a true positive, as has been the recommendation of the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control. However, in an asymptomatic individual without known close contact with an infectious individual, especially in a low prevalence setting, the finding of a positive RT-PCR test result should raise the possibility that the result is a false positive. “Red flags” that should alert the laboratory personnel include finding an acute rise in the percentage of positive results in comparison to the days and weeks before for all of the samples run in the lab or from a particular collection site, noting that multiple positive samples were in close proximity on the plates in the PCR platform, or finding that the high volume of positive samples exhibit high cycle time (Ct) values that could be associated with a low viral load or issues affecting the cutoff for calling a sample positive, indeterminate, or negative. In these situations, the laboratory should re-extract the original sample and rerun it on the original PCR platform or a different platform with a similar sensitivity. If this cannot be done, a new sample should be obtained and tested.

We have examined the issue of false positive results in a screening setting for a segment of the entertainment industry. The various unions that represent members involved in studio and TV productions have provided guidelines for testing and other safety measures in a publication, The Safe Way Forward. They have divided productions into several zones each with their own PCR testing requirements from testing three times a week to testing every 2 weeks. From September 27 through December 5, 2020, The Walt Disney Company performed 122,300 PCR tests at TV production sites, of which 323 were positive (0.26%).

TABLE 1. Causes of False Positive SARS-CoV-2 RT-PCR Results (Modified From Ref\[12,13\])

| Cause                                      |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Sampling (eg, an infected worker or surfaces; aerosolization of virus during collection) |
| Extraction (eg, aerosolization in containment hood) |
| PCR amplification                          |
| Production of Lab Reagents (eg, manufacturers of the positive control may have contaminated other reagents produced in the same facility; contamination of other consumables) |
| Contamination of the equipment by high viral titer specimens (eg, sample carryover) |
| Cross-reaction with other viruses (eg, other coronaviruses) |
| Sample mix-ups                              |
| Software problems                           |
| Data entry or transmission errors          |
| Miscommunicating results                    |
| Variations in parameters around the LOD and definition of an indeterminate result |
| Assuming that an indeterminate result is a positive |
| Non-specific reactions                      |

LOD, limit of detection; RT-PCR, reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction.

TABLE 2. Impacts of False Positive Results (Modified From Ref\[12,21\])

| Impact                                      |
|--------------------------------------------|
| Unnecessary isolation of individuals and quarantining of close contacts with financial and psychological strains |
| Unnecessary contact tracing and testing     |
| Wasteful consumption of personal protective equipment |
| Delays in surgical or other procedures     |
| Prolong hospital stays with wasteful consumption of PPE |
| Potentially harboring uninfected individuals with infected individuals in hospitals and congregate living areas with possible nosocomial infection |
| Possible exposure to inappropriate medical treatment |
| Individual given false sense of security about immunity so may not follow public health guidelines or receive vaccination |
| Impede correct diagnosis of patients with symptoms |
| Overdiagnosis may distort epidemiologic statistics by including false-positives to estimate prevalence, hospitalization, and death rates as well as modeling (eg, some individuals classified as asymptomatic carriers may actually had a false positive test) |

PPE, Personal Protective Equipment.

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evaluating an unexpected positive result in an asymptomatic individual without known close contact with an actively infected person in a screening setting for the entertainment industry (Fig. 1). We feel that this algorithm should be applicable to any screening situation and conforms to the recommendation of the WHO, the United Kingdom, and the Norwegian Institute of Public health as well as multiple authors.12,15,21,30,31

In summary, we have provided additional evidence that false positive SARS-CoV-2 PCR test results do occur in the clinical setting and are especially a problem in a low prevalence screening situation where the prior probability of a positive test is low. Although it is acknowledged that resource limitations may constrain the amount of retesting performed, we posit that the human and economic costs of considering all positive results to be definitive evidence of infection warrant an evaluation for the possibility that the result is falsely positive in an asymptomatic individual without known exposure to an actively infected person.

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The UCLA Fielding School of Public Health and The David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA
Los Angeles, California

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Glenn D. Braunstein, MD
Department of Medicine, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center
Los Angeles, California

Lori Schwartz, MD, FACOEM
Pamela Hymel, MD, MPH, FACOEM
The Walt Disney Company
Burbank, California

Letter to the Editor

FIGURE 1. Management of a positive molecular test in a screening setting.
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