Introduction

Prenatal Diagnosis started in the fifties with prenatal sex determination in amniotic fluid cells. In 1966, Steele and Breg showed that chromosome constitution of fetus could be determined by amniotic fluid cultured cells analysis. The first attempt of 1st Trimester prenatal diagnosis were made by Kullender and Sandahl (1973) and Hahneman (1974) who used long term cultures of Chorionic villi from 1st trimester abortions for foetal karyotyping. In 1975, Chinese group (Anshen Iron & steel Company) reported foetal sex chromatin analysis in direct preparations of Chorionic villi during early pregnancy. Screening of the pregnant ladies for genetic disorders like Down syndrome, Neural Tube defects, Thalassemia major, etc. are the milestones in Prenatal Diagnosis.

Indications for invasive Prenatal Diagnosis include:
1. Maternal age of 35 years at the expected date of confinement(Advanced maternal age ).
2. History of previous child with de novo chromosomal aneuploidy i.e. Down syndrome.
3. One of the parents having structural chromosomal abnormalities.
4. Family history of x-linked disorder i.e. Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, Haemophilia A and B.
5. Risk of a neural tube defect and abnormal findings in maternal serum screening and ultrasound examination.

Methods of Prenatal Diagnosis and Screening:
Invasive Techniques:
- Amniocentesis
- Chorionic Villus Sampling
- Cordocentesis

Non-invasive Techniques:
- Maternal serum alpha-feta protein
- First and second trimester maternal serum screening
- Isolation of fatal cells in maternal circulation
- Ultrasoundography

Screening for Down syndrome
First trimester screening: Performed ideally between 11-13 weeks of gestation. Maternal serum Pregnancy-Associated Plasma Protein A (PAPP-A), Human Chorionic Gonadotropin (β-hCG) are the investigations carried out in first trimester of pregnancy. PAPP-A is depressed below the normal range in all trisomies, β-hCG is elevated in trisomy 21 but depressed in other trisomies. Ultrasonography revealed increased nuchal translucency in the first trimester of pregnancy.

Second trimester screening
Triple screen: Include estimating 3 substances in the mother’s serum i.e. MSAFP (Maternal serum Alfa fetoprotein), free β-hCG and unconjugated estriol.
Quadruple Screen: All these substances are depressed below the normal range in all trisomies with the exception of free β-hCG which is elevated in trisomy 21 but depressed in the other trisomies .
suggested that mostly Inhibin A is elevated in trisomy 21 but not significantly affected in the other trisomies. Second trimester triple and quadruple screens provide detection rates for autosomal trisomies of approx. 72% and 81% respectively.9

Preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD): Preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) has come up in the field of prenatal diagnosis for approximately a decade. Parents with family histories of serious monogenic disorders and translocations are the ones who frequently undergo these tests. Two widely used methods of PGD are:

1. Polar body testing
2. Blastomere testing

Polar Body Testing: Polar bodies are tested to analyse the genetic status of the oocyte. So only the maternal genetic contribution can be studied not the paternal derived disorders. Polar body testing involving 2 polar bodies increase the accuracy and efficiency of diagnosis because of recombination events.

Blastomere PGD: This process involves removal of one or two blastomere cells from the 4-8 cell pre-embryo stage, for the purpose of pre-implantation analysis. Subsequent genetic analysis is carried out after removal of the cell(s) from the blastomere, placing the developing embryo into the culture dish and inserting the removed cell(s) into a test tube.

Chromosomal Analysis: Either amniocentesis or CVS can provide fatal cells for karyotyping as well as for biochemical or DNA analysis. Preparation and analysis of chromosome from cultured amniotic fluid cells or cultured chorionic villi require 7-10 days. Fluorescence in situ hybridization is used to screen interphase nuclei in fetal cells for aneuploidies of chromosome 13, 18, 21, X and Y. However, a larger number of cells may be analysed to investigate the presence of Mosaicism (presence of 2 or more cell lines in an individual or tissue sample).

Karyotype Analysis: The 24 types of chromosome can be identified by the unique banding pattern exhibited with various stains. There are three commonly used staining methods. The most common method used in clinical laboratories of karyotype analysis is Giemsa (G) banding, others are Quinacrine Mustard (Q Banding) and R banding (chromosome receives special treatment i.e. heating before staining).

Fluorescence in situ Hybridization (FISH): FISH is mainly used to examine the presence or absence of particular DNA sequence or to evaluate the organization of a chromosome or chromosomal region. It detects the presence or absence of micro deletions, micro duplications and aneuploidy. DNA probes (specific for chromosome ,chromosomal region or genes) can be used to detect the presence, absence or location of a particular gene both in metaphase as well as interphase cells; treated with antibodies, finally, the fluorescent signals are examined under the microscope (Fig. 1).

DNA Molecular Analysis
Once a specimen is collected, a variety of laboratory techniques may be used to diagnose single gene disorders prenatally. Choosing which technique to use depends upon the suspected disorder.

Direct DNA analysis
Direct mutation analysis involves analysing a target segment of DNA for the presence of a specific mutation. DNA analysis can be performed either by direct mutation screening or indirect approach of genetic linkage analysis by using markers. Mutation analysis with restriction enzymes
In the mutations known to alter the splice site, direct analysis by restriction enzyme assay will be useful in identifying the polymorphism. Single restriction enzyme (known to cut the DNA at a specific splice site) is used to digest the Control as well as the Sample DNA, the resultant DNA fragments (called restriction fragment length polymorphisms, or RFLPs) are analysed to detect the presence of a mutation by Southern blotting (Fig. 2).
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Fig. 2: Direct mutation analysis with restriction enzymes. (a) Sickle cell anaemia and β haemoglobin gene (b) Southern blot analysis

Sequencing of restriction enzyme products

The DNA fragments obtained by restriction digestion, can be sequenced by Sanger dideoxy method, a specialized amplification technique (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Sanger dideoxy method (Sequencing restriction enzymes and polymerase chain reaction)

Linkage Analysis: Linkage analysis is a method of mapping genes that use family studies to detect linkage between two genes passes on from one generation to other. This is an indirect means of detecting a patient’s mutation status. Microsatellite repeats, Restriction Fragment Length Polymorphisms (RFLPs) and Variable Number Tandem Repeats (VNTRs) are used as marker of Polymorphism. DNA from affected and healthy unaffected family members is analysed for these polymorphisms to determine the mutation pattern.

New Diagnostic Techniques

Fetal cells in maternal circulation: Some cells from the developing fetus may enter into the maternal circulation in early stage of first trimester of pregnancy. Isolation and genetic analysis of such cells is one of the recent cell-based non-invasive prenatal diagnostic tests. Fetal cells isolated from maternal blood (based on the markers they express on their surface), identified by staining, separated from maternal cells for chromosome and/or DNA analysis.

Ethics

Prenatal diagnosis is used to guide the couple to avoid having offspring with a serious hereditary disorder. So, it is important to consider the ethics, of the given situation. Genetic diagnosis help in making a decision about maintaining or ending a pregnancy, place stress upon the family. The ethical issues include:

1. The ethical dilemmas to continue or abort a pregnancy.
2. Prenatal testing seldom leads to treatment beneficial to the fetus. Is knowledge of the test result more beneficial than harmful or vice versa?
3. Are the risks of invasive prenatal diagnostic procedures, such as amniocentesis worth the potential benefit?
4. Questions of privacy of genetic information and Duty to warn family members.

Conclusion

Prenatal diagnosis opens the door to a new era of genetics in Medicine, knowledge that improve health, relieving suffering. Ethical principles are intertwined with prenatal genetic testing, so each case requires integrated team approach to ensure most appropriate care.

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