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False-positive for SARS-CoV-2 antigen test in a man with acute HIV infection

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1. Introduction

Recent reports have shown the unreliability of rapid antigen tests for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) due to their low sensitivity [1,2]. Scohy et al. [1] tested 148 nasopharyngeal swabs and reported that the overall sensitivity of the rapid antigen test (COVID-19 Ag Respi-Strip test, Coris Bio-Concept, Gembloux, Belgium) was 30.2% compared to a quantitative reverse transcription PCR (RT-qPCR) test. Another study of 160 SARS-CoV-2 positive respiratory samples confirmed by reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR) showed that the sensitivity of the rapid antigen test (BIOCREDIT COVID-19 Ag, RapiGEN, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea) ranged from 11.1% to 45.7% [2]. These studies clearly indicate that false-negative results should always be considered when using rapid antigen tests. On the other hand, the possibility of false-positive results is rarely emphasized, although false-positive results are an important issue because they can lead to inappropriate patient care and infection control. Ogawa et al. [3] reported a case of 96-year-old woman who tested false-positive for SARS-CoV-2 with Lumipulse G SARS-CoV-2 Ag (Fujirebio, Tokyo, Japan) but her final diagnosis and the reason for the false-positive result were not specified. Herein, we report a case of a man with acute HIV infection who was initially misdiagnosed as having coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) based on the results of a rapid SARS-CoV-2 antigen test.
hospital 9 days after the onset. A rapid antigen test (ESPLINE SARS-CoV-2, Fujirebio, Tokyo, Japan) performed on a nasopharyngeal swab sample was positive, while a chest-X ray and chest computed tomography showed no evidence of pneumonia. The patient was separated in an isolated room apart from the COVID-19 ward while awaiting the confirmatory RT-PCR result. However, the RT-PCR for SARS-CoV-2 performed on nasopharyngeal swabs was repeatedly negative (three times), while the antigen test was repeatedly positive (three times in total). As he was a gay man who had had sex with men, acute human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection was suspected and a rapid antigen/antibody test (ESPLINE® HIV Ag/Ab, Fujirebio, Tokyo, Japan), and chemiluminescent immunoassay (ARCHITECT® HIV Ag/Ab, Abbott Japan, Tokyo, Japan) were performed to test for HIV. Although the rapid antigen/antibody test was negative, the chemiluminescent immunoassay was positive. This patient was eventually diagnosed with acute HIV infection because of a high titer of HIV-RNA (>1.0 × 10^7 copies/mL) and an absence of plasma HIV-1/2 antibodies on Western blot assay (NEW LAV BLOT 1 and 2, Bio-Rad laboratories, Tokyo, Japan). The details of test results were summarized in Table 1.

### 2. Discussion

As far as we are aware, this is the first case to be reported of false-positive results on a SARS-CoV-2 antigen test in an individual with HIV infection. According to the product document of ESPLINE® SARS-CoV-2, the sensitivity and specificity of the test compared to RT-PCR are 66.7% (16/24) and 100%, respectively [4]. Similar to other antigen kits for SARS-CoV-2, this product was confirmed to have no cross-reactivity to influenza and other respiratory viruses; however, its cross-reactivity to HIV has not been tested. Therefore, further investigation is needed to clarify why the SARS-CoV-2 antigen test was positive in this patient, and whether this apprehensiveness is a general issue for SARS-CoV-2 antigen kits.

As the specimen that tested false-positive for SARS-CoV-2 was a nasopharyngeal swab, another question is whether HIV is present in the nasopharyngeal cavity. Although we were unable to find any reports investigating the presence of HIV in nasopharyngeal swabs, it is known that HIV can be detected in many kinds of body fluids, including saliva [5–7]. Therefore, it is theoretically possible for a nasopharyngeal swab to contain HIV, especially in the acute phase of infection when the viral load is high, as was seen in the present case.

Although rapid antigen testing is easy to perform, and provides a rapid result, physicians should consider the possibility of false-positive results in addition to false-negative results, and should diagnose COVID-19 using a nucleic acid amplification test.

### Funding

None.

### Ethical approval

Written informed consent was obtained from the patient for the publication.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Authorship statement

All authors meet the ICMJE authorship criteria.

### Author contributions

All authors participated in the management of this patient. KY, TK, MA, and MS collected clinical data. KY wrote the manuscript, TK, MA, MT, and JF supervised the concept and manuscript writing. All authors participated in the editing.

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