A rapid culture system uninfluenced by an inoculum effect increases reliability and convenience for drug susceptibility testing of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*

Yong-Gyun Jung1,2,3, Hyejin Kim4, Sangyeop Lee5, Suyeoun Kim5, EunJi Jo5, Eun-Geun Kim5, Jungil Choi6, Hyun Jung Kim5, Junghoon Yoo5, Hye-Jeong Lee6, Haeun Kim4, Hyunjoo Jung4, Sungweon Ryoo9 & Sunghoon Kwon5,6,7,8

The Disc Agarose Channel (DAC) system utilizes microfluidics and imaging technologies and is fully automated and capable of tracking single cell growth to produce *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (MTB) drug susceptibility testing (DST) results within 3~7 days. In particular, this system can be easily used to perform DSTs without the fastidious preparation of the inoculum of MTB cells. Inoculum effect is one of the major problems that causes DST errors. The DAC system was not influenced by the inoculum effect and produced reliable DST results. In this system, the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) values of the first-line drugs were consistent regardless of inoculum sizes ranging from ~10^3 to ~10^8 CFU/mL. The consistent MIC results enabled us to determine the critical concentrations for 12 anti-tuberculosis drugs. Based on the determined critical concentrations, further DSTs were performed with 254 MTB clinical isolates without measuring an inoculum size. There were high agreement rates (96.3%) between the DAC system and the absolute concentration method using Löwenstein-Jensen medium. According to these results, the DAC system is the first DST system that is not affected by the inoculum effect. It can thus increase reliability and convenience for DST of MTB. We expect that this system will be a potential substitute for conventional DST systems.

Tuberculosis (TB) remains a major global health concern; it killed 1.5 million people in 20141. The key to stopping TB transmission is rapid diagnosis and correct treatment with regimens based on drug susceptibility tests. To cope with and detect the emergence of resistant TB, much effort has been devoted to improving diagnostic tools based on culture and molecular techniques.

Molecular DSTs based on the detection of genotypic mutations are advantageous for the rapid screening of drug resistant TB, but there are critical gaps because the correlation of genotypic mutations with drug resistance are not fully understood and because the molecular DSTs have been applied only in some drug-resistant cases2,3. Additionally, these DSTs cannot detect all mutations involved in resistance, because the commercialized tests (line probe assays and Xpert MTB/RIF) only cover certain genes and regions (e.g. a limited resistance-determining

1Interdisciplinary Program of Biomodulation, Myongji University, Yongin, Gyeonggi-do, 17058, Republic of Korea. 2Myongji Bioefficiency Research Centre, Myongji University, Yongin, Gyeonggi-do, 17058, Republic of Korea. 3Center for Nutraceutical and Pharmaceutical Materials, Myongji University, Yongin, Gyeonggi-do, 17058, Republic of Korea. 4Korean Institute of Tuberculosis, Osong, Cheongju, Chung Buk, 28158, Republic of Korea. 5QuantaMatrix Inc., Seoul National University Hospital CMI, Jongno-ku, Seoul, 03082, Republic of Korea. 6Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Seoul National University, Seoul, 08826, Republic of Korea. 7Institutes of Entrepreneurial BioConvergence, Seoul National University, Seoul, 08826, Republic of Korea. 8Seoul National University Hospital Biomedical Research Institute, Seoul National University Hospital, Seoul, 03080, Republic of Korea. 9Clinical Research Centre, Masan National Tuberculosis Hospital, Changwon, Korea. Yong-Gyun Jung and Hyejin Kim contributed equally to this work. Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to S.R. (email: viweon@gmail.com) or S.Kw. (email: skwon@snu.ac.kr)
region (RRDR) of the \( \text{rpoB} \) gene. Culture-based DSTs, called “phenotypic DSTs”, analyze viable cells grown either in broth or on solid medium and detect phenotypic resistance. The phenotype DST methods are widely accepted as a gold standard by the World Health Organization (WHO), but have not been widely performed owing to their disadvantages: (1) they are time-consuming, (2) they present a risk of potential infection and (3) the results of phenotype DST methods are not fully reproducible.

MGIT 960 (Becton Dickinson, MD, USA) is a liquid-culture system that can shorten the DST running time from the 4–6 weeks of the Löwenstein-Jensen (L-J) method to ~13 days. Although MGIT 960 offers faster DST results than solid methods, it still has many barriers to overcome, as do another conventional methods. First, one of the main barriers is preparing the proper cell number at the inoculum stage. The culture-based DST methods require a strict standardized inoculum size to produce reproducible DST results. However, in the MTB DST, it is not easy to evenly homogenize clumps of waxy-coated MTB cells; the clumps possibly cause inadequate cell numbers at the inoculum stage, leading to the inoculum effect (IE) during DST. IE is one of the major problems that cause DST errors, leading to reduced drug activity from the increased bacterial cell density. Consequently, IE can increase the MICs of anti-TB drugs, resulting in irreproducible DST results. Secondly, the procedures involved in the inoculum preparation and culturing are always a concern from the standpoint of biosafety because the MTB cell suspension is serially diluted to adjust the correct cell density and this step could generate MTB aerosols, resulting in increased risk of laboratory TB transmission.

To date, there have been various approaches to shorten the turn-around time of DSTs, but none have attempted to overcome the inoculum effect even though it influences the reproducibility of DST results. Using microfluidics and imaging technologies, we designed and developed the Disc Agarose Channel system, which is fully automated and capable of tracking single cell growth to produce MTB DST results within 3–7 days.

In the present study, we observed that this system is not influenced by inoculum size. To verify this finding, we evaluated the consistency of MIC values with various inoculum sizes in the range of ~10³ to ~10⁸ CFU/mL, as well as determined the critical concentration and validated the DAC system without measuring inoculum size on clinical isolates for clinical application. These results showed that the DAC system is not affected by inoculum size, and we observed strong agreement (96.3% overall agreement for the 12 tested anti-TB drugs) between the DAC system and the L-J method (reference method).

### Materials and Methods

#### Strains.

The *M. tuberculosis* H37Rv ATCC 27294 and total 484 clinical MTB strains containing Pan-susceptible, multidrug resistant (MDR) and extensively drug resistant (XDR) isolates were obtained from the Korean Institute of Tuberculosis (KIT). All procedures for MTB cultures and DSTs were performed using a biological safety cabinet (BSC) inside the KIT’s biosafety level 3 (BSL3) laboratory. Drug susceptibility results of all clinical isolates in this study were previously determined by the absolute concentration method using L-J medium prepared in-house.

#### Analysis of activities of anti-TB drugs with various inoculum concentrations.

For the inoculum effect study, all isolates were freshly sub-cultured on L-J medium before being used. The colonies were vortexed in a tube containing a few drops of PBS and glass beads, to break up the large clumps. The bacterial cells were inoculated as a set 5 × 10⁻⁵ to 5 × 10⁸ CFU/mL including the standard inoculum of bacterial concentration (~5 × 10⁵ CFU/mL). To create high bacterial density (~10⁸ CFU/mL), the dense suspension was centrifuged for 10 minutes at 3,000 g and the pellet was resuspended in sterile PBS to achieve ~10⁸ CFU/mL. Then, this bacterial suspension was serially diluted. The cell numbers were counted by the bacterial CFU method on Middlebrook 7H11 agar (BD BBL, MD, USA) plates with the easySpiral plater system (Interscience, Saint Nom la Breteche, France). To estimate the MIC values for the 4 first-line drugs, five concentrations were tested according to two-fold serial dilutions. MTB H37Rv and two clinical isolates were prepared as described above. The MICs for each drug were estimated with various inoculum sizes, ranging from ~10⁴ to ~10⁶ CFU/mL. To compare the appropriate inoculum size among three DST tests, L-J DST and MGIT 960 DST were both performed by the standard methods according to a previously described study. The DSTs of three different methods with H37Rv were performed with differing inoculum sizes, ranging from ~10⁴ to ~10⁸ CFU/mL. The critical concentrations (CCs) of the DAC system were adopted as the breakpoints of the BACTEC 460 TB and MGIT 960 systems, based on the Middlebrook 7H9 (BD BBL, MD, USA) broth, because it was reported that the CCs were dependent on the medium.

#### Broth microdilution test.

The broth microdilution (BMD) test was used as a gold standard recommended by the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI). The extended spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBL)-negative *E. coli* ATCC 25922 strain was purchased from ATCC and clinical the ESBL-positive *E. coli* was obtained at SNUH as described previously. For the BMD test, the ceftriaxone solutions were prepared from the stock solution. A 100 μL volume of the antimicrobial agent at the appropriate concentration, which was determined by the CLSI recommendation, was pipetted into the bottom of 96-microwell plates (Falcon/BD Biosciences, CA, USA). Ten microliters of bacterial stock solution was inoculated into the wells at final concentrations of 10⁻⁵ to 10⁻⁷ CFU/mL. After 16–20 h of incubation at 37°C, the MIC values of the microdilution wells were read as the concentration at which there was ≥ 99% reduction in growth compared to the control, by unaided visual inspection.

#### Drug susceptibility test.

The DST method of the DAC system was previously described. We mixed 300 μL of the MTB cell suspension with 900 μL of 0.5% agarose at 37°C by vortexing. Subsequently, 40 μL of 0.375% agarose mixture with MTB cell suspension was loaded into the inlet of a DAC chip. The agarose was then
allowed to solidify at room temperature for 1 minute. Each TB drug was lyophilized and added into each well. The lyophilized drug resolved immediately after a 0.5 mL addition of the 7H9 broth containing 10% OADC; the proper concentration of each drug was adjusted. The resolved drug in the culture medium was then allowed to diffuse into the agarose. After this process, the DAC chip was then sealed by an air-permeable film for safety and prevention of contamination and incubated in a temperature-controlled culture chamber at 37 °C for 7 days. One area at the edge of the agarose was automatically imaged with a 20× lens on an inverted microscope every other day using the time-lapse method. Growth images were then automatically processed (Fig. 1).

**Determination of critical concentrations in the DAC system.** Based on the critical concentrations of the BACTEC 460 TB and MGIT 960 systems for each drug recommended by the WHO policy guidelines on DST of second-line anti-TB drugs in 2008, five concentrations were chosen according to two-fold serial dilutions. Strains were chosen from 89 well-characterized susceptible groups obtained from new cases and 141 resistant groups obtained during drug treatment from pulmonary tuberculosis patients (Supplementary Table S1). After graphing the curve of MIC distribution, the CCs for each drug were determined at the concentration where the cumulative percentage difference between susceptible and resistant strains mostly showed the greatest percentage difference as previously described13.

**Validation of the DAC system.** The DAC system established CCs was validated with a total of 254 clinical MTB strains including pan-susceptible strains and resistant strains tested by the L-J method. Each drug was lyophilized in the DAC chip according to its critical concentration. To ensure the consistency of lyophilized drugs, the reference strain MTB H37Rv ATCC 27294 and the clinical isolate KIT87190 strain were used as internal controls for each test of DST20. DSTs of the DAC system were performed without measuring the MTB inoculum size and the DST results of the DAC system were compared with those of the L-J method. For a blinded assessment of the outcomes, results from the DAC system were determined automatically using an imaging processing program without knowledge of the results from the reference method.

**Resolution of discrepancy between the DAC system and the L-J method.** The discrepant results between the DAC system and the L-J method were confirmed by DNA sequence analysis21,22. We performed DNA
sequencing by using the target regions involved in the following genes as previous described22; rpoB (RRDR) for rifampin and rifabutin, embB for ethambutol, rrs and rpsL for streptomycin, gyrA for quinolones, and rrs, eis and tlyA for kanamycin, amikacin and capreomycin, respectively: Target regions for each gene are rpoB = 759807–763325, embB = 4246517–4249810, rrs = 1471846–1473382, rpsL = 781560–781934, gyrA = 7302–9818, eis = 2714124–2715477, and tlyA = 1917940–1918746 of the H37Rv genome sequence (Genbank accession number NC_000962.3)22.

Antimicrobial agents and drug lyophilization in the DAC chip. All drugs were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA) including the first line drugs (isoniazid (INH), rifampin (RIF), streptomycin (STR), ethambutol (EMB), and rifabutin (RFB)) and the second-line drugs (amikacin (AMI), capreomycin (CAP), kanamycin (KAN), levofloxacin (LEV), moxifloxacin (MOXI), ofloxacin (OFL), and para-aminosalicylic acid (PAS)). Stock solutions of each antibiotic were prepared in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions and working solutions were prepared fresh from the stock solution. For drug lyophilization, all drugs in the DAC chip were freeze-dried under a vacuum, and the freezing process was carried out using a freeze dryer (Ishin Biobase Co., LTD., Korea). After freeze-drying, the DAC chip was packaged in an aluminum foil vacuum-sealed pouch and stored at 4 °C before use. The 12 lyophilized anti-TB drugs in the DAC chip were validated by MIC determination using the clinical isolate KIT87190 strain. Quality control ranges of MIC value for each drug were determined from three different batches twice a week for 5 weeks, resulting in 30 replicates in total (Supplementary Table S2)31.

Results
Activities of anti-TB drugs in the DAC system are not affected by inoculum size. Because the DAC system is a new method based on microfluidics and imaging technologies, the optimal bacterial density at the inoculum step needed to be determined by comparison with the MIC values from the conventional DST methods. First, we estimated the MICs for the first-line drugs (INH, RIF, STR and EMB) with the various inoculum sizes in the range of ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL. The MIC values from the different inoculum sizes of MTB H37Rv, the standard laboratory strain, were determined and compared within 7 days. Surprisingly, consistent MICs were obtained with the same MIC regardless of the inoculum size. The MIC values were 0.025 μg/mL and 0.05 μg/mL for INH, 0.5 μg/mL and 1.0 μg/mL for RIF, 0.5 μg/mL and 1.0 μg/mL for STR, and 2.5 μg/mL and 5.0 μg/mL for EMB with inoculum sizes of ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL, respectively (Fig. 2A).

To compare the DAC systems with the other conventional DST systems on the point of the inoculum effect, the DSTs of three different methods with H37Rv were performed with various inoculum sizes from ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL. The DST results of the DAC system with H37Rv were all “susceptible (S)” regardless of the inoculum size. In contrast, the DST results of either the L-J method or MGIT 960 were “resistant (R)” or “system error” when the inoculum size was higher than ~10^6 CFU/mL (Fig. 2B). This result indicated that the DAC system was not sensitive to the inoculum effect, in contrast to the other conventional DST methods.

For further verification, we examined four clinical isolates, two pan-susceptible strains and two XDR MTB strains. In the DAC system, we did not observe any inoculum effect from MIC determinations of the clinical strains with various inoculum sizes from ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL (Fig. 2C). The MIC values were determined with essential agreement regardless of inoculum size, with the exception of STR against two susceptible strains. The MIC values of STR were from 0.5 to 2.0 μg/mL, but the highest value did not exceed 2.0 μg/mL, which was the critical concentration of the BACTEC 460 TB system34,35.

For verification with extended clinical strains and random inoculum sizes, 110 clinical strains containing 31 pan-susceptible and 79 MDR MTB determined by the L-J method were tested. The DST results of the first-line drugs were determined and compared to those of the L-J method. The breakpoints of the BACTEC systems were employed as in Fig. 2B. The inoculums of all strains were randomly prepared without measuring cell density by four researchers. Then, 3 weeks afterward, they were counted by the bacterial CFU method on 7H11 agar plates. The highest inoculum size was 1.1 × 10^5 CFU/mL, and the lowest was 1.4 × 10^2 CFU/mL (Fig. 3A) according to the CFU counting results. In spite of various inoculum sizes with ~1,000-fold ranges, there were high agreement rates (overall 95.2% agreement) compared with the DST results of the L-J method (Fig. 3B).

With such consistent MIC data, the DAC system could minimize the inoculum effect that causes limitations in the in vitro drug susceptibility test6,27. To explain this phenomenon, the physical characteristics of the DAC system were considered. The enclosed environmental conditions of the agarose matrix may contribute to the minimization of the inoculum effect. To verify this hypothesis, the ESBL-negative E. coli ATCC 25922 and a clinical ESBL-positive E. coli strain were tested with inoculum concentrations of 5 × 10^3 to 5 × 10^7 CFU/mL and 0.013–128 μg/mL of cefepime (a beta-lactam antibiotic) in both the DAC system and the conventional BMD method. Interestingly, antimicrobial susceptibility tests against both ESBL-positive and -negative strains showed an inoculum effect for the BMD method, but not for the DAC system. The IE was more serious in the case of the ESBL-positive strain in the BMD method (Fig. 3C). This effect implies that in the BMD method, metabolites or proteins (beta-lactamase) produced by the ESBL-positive strain easily bind and inactivate cefepime, whereas in the DAC system, they could be trapped in the agarose, and cannot bind and inactivate the antibiotic, even at ~5 × 10^7 CFU/mL.

Determination of the critical concentration of anti-TB drugs in the DAC system. The CCs of five of the first-line and seven of the second-line anti-TB drugs in the DAC system were determined with 230 clinical isolates whose DST results were already well characterized by both the absolute L-J method and DNA sequence analysis. The inocula of all clinical strains were randomly prepared without measuring cell density.

The MIC values for the first-line drugs (INH, RIF, STR, EMB, and RFB) and the second-line drugs (AMI, CAR, KAN, LEV, MOXI, OFL, and PAS) were determined within 7 days. After determining the MIC of each drug, the CCs for each drug were established at the concentration where the cumulative percentage difference between
susceptible and resistant strains mostly showed the greatest percentage difference except for STR and RFB (Fig. 4). The determined CCs were 0.1 μg/mL for INH, 1.0 μg/mL for RIF, 2.0 μg/mL for STR, 5.0 μg/mL for EMB, 2.0 μg/mL for AMI, 2.5 μg/mL for CAP, 2.5 μg/mL for KAN, 1.5 μg/mL for LEV, 0.5 μg/mL for MOXI, 2.0 μg/mL for OFL, 0.5 μg/mL for RFB, and 4.0 μg/mL for PAS.

For the CC of STR, there was the greatest percentage difference at 1.0 μg/mL. However, it was reported that the MIC range of STR against the MTB H37Rv and H37Ra by the BACTEC system were 0.094~0.75 and 0.38~1.5 μg/mL, respectively, and the CC of STR was 2.0 μg/mL in the BACTEC system. In addition, the MIC values of STR against the susceptible MTB strains isolated from new patients before drug treatment showed 1.0 or 2.0 μg/mL repeatedly in the DAC system. For these reasons, we determined that the CC of STR was 2.0 μg/mL in the DAC system.

For the CC of RFB, 0.125 μg/mL showed the greatest percentage difference, but 0.5 μg/mL was determined as the critical concentration according to the BACTEC system because the CC determination is dependent on the medium and both the DAC system and the BACTEC system used the same 7H9 broth. There was no significant difference in the agreement rate between 0.125 μg/mL (96.9%) and 0.5 μg/mL (94.8%).

**Validation of the automated DAC system.** In the previous work, the DAC system was fully automated with an image-processing program for rapid DST. The DSTs of the first-line drugs were performed with H37Rv

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**Figure 2.** Activities of anti-TB TB drugs in the DAC system are not affected by inoculum size. (A) The MIC values for the first-line drugs according to various inoculum sizes. MTB H37Rv ATCC 27294 cells from ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL were inoculated in the DAC system and the MIC values were determined. The spots (circle, triangle and square) of each drug indicate the MIC values from three independently repeated experiments. The tested concentrations for each drug were a two-fold dilution scale. The breakpoints of the BACTEC 460 TB and MGIT 960 systems based on the Middlebrook 7H9 broth were adopted for the DAC system; 0.1 μg/mL for INH, 1.0 μg/mL for RIF, 1.0 μg/mL for STR, and 5.0 μg/mL for EMB. The red horizontal line indicates the breakpoints for each drug. All MIC values were determined under the breakpoints. (B) The comparison of an inoculum effect for the first-line drugs against H37Rv between the DAC system and two routine methods, the L-J method (solid) and MGIT 960 method (liquid). The various inoculum sizes from ~10^4 to ~10^7 CFU/mL were tested. The DST results were represented as resistant (R) or susceptible (S). The DST results were consistently "S" regardless of the various inoculum sizes in the DAC system, whereas they were changed from "S" to "R" or "Error" over 5 × 10^6 CFU/mL in the two routine methods. (C) The MIC values from clinical isolates in the various inoculum sizes. The MIC values from two pan-susceptible and two resistant strains were estimated for the first-line drugs. The inoculum sizes were from ~10^0 CFU/mL to ~10^8 CFU/mL for two drug susceptible strains and two drug resistant strains. There was no inoculum effect with the clinical isolates in the DAC system.
and ~30 clinical isolates in 11. In this work, to create a more convenient system, each drug was lyophilized in the DAC chip, and the activities of lyophilized drugs showed consistency within quality control ranges of 12 anti-TB drugs at 4 °C for 6 months (Table 1 and Supplementary Table S2). Additionally, we obtained reproducible results for each drug, between tests done during different weeks by three different operators (Supplementary Table S3). To validate the CCs of this system in a clinical setting, DSTs of the first-line and second-line drugs were performed with 254 clinical isolates including susceptible and resistant MTB strains categorized by the L-J method. The inocula of all clinical strains were randomly prepared without measuring cell density. The DST results were compared with those of the reference method (the L-J method). INH and RIF showed very high agreements (100% and 99.6%, respectively) for both susceptible and resistant strains. The agreement rates for the other anti-TB drugs were also high, in the range of 91.3 ~ 99.2%. The overall agreement rate for all drugs was 96.3% (Table 2). Sixty-seven strains showed discrepant results between the DAC and the reference method. To resolve any discrepancy between-tests, we analyzed some discrepant results using DNA sequence analysis. The comparison of results after their resolution is shown in Table 3. The DNA sequencing results of the target genes showed a better correlation when using the DAC system (62.1%) than when using the L-J method (37.9%). Although the L-J method has been considered the gold standard for phenotypic DST for MTB, they may show falsely low MICs, causing the resistant strain to be evaluated as susceptible to the tested drug, compared with the molecular DST results of whole-genome sequencing, suggesting that the DAC system provides more accurate DST results than the conventional method.

Safety of the DAC system. In the MTB DST, safety is one of the most important issues. MTB cells can often infect lab researchers during DST procedures through MTB aerosol generation from serial dilution, or accidental leakage of MTB cells from test tubes or wells in a plate. In the broth microdilution method, the inoculum effect in the ESBL-negative E. coli ATCC 25922 strain was over 10^7 CFU/mL, and the inoculum effect of the ESBL-positive E. coli strain was over 10^6 CFU/mL. However, in the DAC system, there was no inoculum effect with either the ESBL-negative or ESBL-positive strains from 10^5 CFU/mL to 10^7 CFU/mL.
comparison of MTB cell counts between the DAC and the liquid culture systems in the broth medium. H37Rv was inoculated with $4 \times 10^5$ CFU/mL into both the broth of the liquid culture system and the agarose matrix of the DAC system. At 1, 3, 5, and 7 days after inoculation, the supernatants from both devices were taken, and MTB cells were counted according to the CFU method. In the liquid culture system, MTB cells were observed in the broth after 1 day; the cell count increased from $4 \times 10^5$ CFU/mL to $1.4 \times 10^7$ CFU/mL. However, in the DAC system, MTB cells were detected in the broth only after 5 days, at $1.5 \times 10^2$ CFU/mL; this count had slightly increased after 7 days, to $6.2 \times 10^3$ CFU/mL. Taken together, the DAC system can efficiently prevent the accidental leakage of MTB cells during the DSTs to reduce TB infection risk.

Discussion

There are some reasons that the MTB DSTs have not been performed easily and widely: (1) safety issues (2) irreproducible DST results and (3) a long turn-around time (4 to 6 weeks)\(^2,3^1\). The DAC system shows that it is possible to overcome these barriers. The MTB cells in the DAC system are embedded in the solidified agarose matrix, so that the suspended MTB cells can be minimized in the broth medium, to reduce the risk of contact from liquid medium leakage. The inoculum size is one of the main factors underlying these barriers, and inappropriate inoculum cell concentrations lead to DST errors\(^6,8,17\). The DAC system can produce faster and more reproducible DST results regardless of the inoculum size (in the range of $10^3$~$10^8$ cell/mL) within 7 days. There was no inoculum effect in this system, and it was not necessary to measure McFarland turbidity values of the MTB cells to prepare the proper inoculum size.

In previous studies, the duration for which drug concentration remained above the MIC (% \(T > \text{MICS}\) was measured in \textit{in vivo} animal models, and there was no significant difference in %\(T > \text{MIC}\) required for drug efficacy, regardless of inoculum size or ESBL production status; on the other hand, the MIC values of \textit{in vitro} tests were increased for high inoculum size\(^3^2\). This pattern suggested that the IE could be an artifact caused by the limitations of \textit{in vitro} DST methods\(^2^6,2^7\). Based on this hypothesis, the DAC system could mimic \textit{in vivo} DSTs more than the other conventional \textit{in vitro} DST systems.
There are two possibilities why the inoculum effect did not occur in the DAC system: (1) the absolute amount of MTB cells is below the range in which the inoculum effect appears. In the DAC system, $10^3$~$10^8$ cells/mL bacterial cell suspension is diluted with agarose at a 1:3 dilution ratio, and the agarose-cell solution contains $2.5 \times 10^2$~$2.5 \times 10^7$ cells/mL of bacterial cells. The 40 $\mu$L mixture was loaded, and then 0.5 mL of liquid medium was added to the well. The final cell number for DST becomes $5.0 \times 10^0$~$5.0 \times 10^5$ cells/mL. The inoculum size of $5.0 \times 10^5$ cells/mL is hardly known to have an inoculum effect according to CLSI guidelines. (2) The enclosed environmental conditions in the agarose matrix may contribute to the minimization of the inoculum effect. In the DAC system, the MTB cells are immobilized by agarose, and their metabolites or proteins that inhibit antibiotic

Table 1. Validation of the 12 lyophilized anti-TB drugs. The 12 lyophilized anti-TB drugs in the DAC chip were validated by MIC determination using the clinical isolate KIT87190 strain. Activities of lyophilized drugs showed consistency at 4 °C for 6 months with quality control ranges of each drug. As a control, fresh drugs (Fresh) were prepared and the MIC values were determined. The tests were repeated three times. There are two possibilities why the inoculum effect did not occur in the DAC system: (1) the absolute amount of MTB cells is below the range in which the inoculum effect appears. In the DAC system, $10^3$~$10^8$ cells/mL bacterial cell suspension is diluted with agarose at a 1:3 dilution ratio, and the agarose-cell solution contains $2.5 \times 10^2$~$2.5 \times 10^7$ cells/mL of bacterial cells. The 40 $\mu$L mixture was loaded, and then 0.5 mL of liquid medium was added to the well. The final cell number for DST becomes $5.0 \times 10^0$~$5.0 \times 10^5$ cells/mL. The inoculum size of $5.0 \times 10^5$ cells/mL is hardly known to have an inoculum effect according to CLSI guidelines. (2) The enclosed environmental conditions in the agarose matrix may contribute to the minimization of the inoculum effect. In the DAC system, the MTB cells are immobilized by agarose, and their metabolites or proteins that inhibit antibiotic
activity could also be trapped in the agarose matrix, thus preventing easy binding and inactivation of antibiotics in the broth. In Fig. 3C, the result implies that beta-lactamase in the DAC system could be trapped in the agarose, and cannot bind and inactivate the antibiotic, even at high inoculum size.

The resolution results of the DAC system showed a better correlation with DNA sequencing when compared with the conventional method, but the cases (MOXI, KAN, and RFB) showed lower correlation by resolution (Table 3). For MOXI, four isolates showing the “R” agreement in the DAC system (4/12, 33.3%) were detected to have mutations in \( \text{gyrA} \). The other eight isolates (“S” result in the L-J method and “R” in the DAC system) had a mutation in \( \text{gyrA} \) (S95T) as well, but this mutation is not associated with resistance. To clarify MOXI sequencing results, it is necessary to analyze all regions associated with fluoroquinolone resistance, such as efflux pumps, \( \text{gyrB} \), and the other regions of \( \text{gyrA} \), despite showing low frequency.

For RFB, three isolates showing “R” agreement in the DAC system (3/7, 42.9%) were detected as having SNPs causing S531L and H526Y in the \( \text{rpoB} \) region known as the resistant region. Among four discrepant isolates (“S” result in the DAC system), three were detected to have the same SNP (S531L), but one was observed to have an H516Y substitution in showing rare rifampicin or RFB susceptible isolates in the MGIT 960 DST. For KAN, among 10 discrepant isolates, three isolates were tested by sequencing the \( \text{rrs} \), \( \text{eis} \), and \( \text{tlyA} \) regions. There was no mutation in three isolates, whereas mutations were detected in the \( \text{rrs} \) (nucleotide A1401G) region in two of these strains, no mutations were found in the \( \text{eis} \) and \( \text{tlyA} \) regions. Further studies may be necessary to understand the genetic basis of these phenotypes.

There are systems for rapid DSTs such as the MGIT 960 and MODS systems. The MGIT 960 system can generally produce DST results in 9 to 13 days and is commercialized, but this system has a severe inoculum effect and detects cell growth by an indirect method, e.g., measuring fluorescence rates depending on the amount of oxygen consumption. In addition, the DST results are easily spoiled by bacterial contamination. In the microscopic observation drug susceptibility assay (MODS) system, MTB growth is measured by cord formation (a direct measuring method), and DST results can be produced in 5 to 14 days. However, it has been reported that some MTB cells cannot form cords, and therefore, DST results are not reproducible. The MODS also poses a safety risk in the DST procedure. Therefore, the MODS system is not easily fully automated and has not yet been commercialized in the clinical area. The DAC system is fully automated and enables us to produce rapid and accurate DST results.

### Table 2. Comparison of validation results by the L-J method and the DAC system.

| Drug (µg/mL) | No. Tested | Agreement (DAC/L-J) | Discrepancy (DAC/L-J) | Overall Agreement Rate | Sensitivity (%) | Specificity (%) | PPV (%) | NPV (%) |
|-------------|------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|--------|--------|
| INH (0.1)   | 254        | 127 127             | 0 0                   | 100% (254/254)        | 100            | 100            | 100    | 100    |
| RIF (1.0)   | 254        | 124 129             | 0 1                   | 99.6% (253/254)       | 99.2           | 100            | 100    | 99.2   |
| STR (2.0)   | 254        | 65 171              | 15 3                  | 92.9% (236/254)       | 95.6           | 91.9           | 81.3   | 98.3   |
| EMB (5.0)   | 254        | 115 133             | 5 1                   | 97.6% (248/254)       | 99.1           | 96.4           | 95.8   | 99.3   |
| AMI (2.0)   | 254        | 79 168              | 4 3                   | 97.2% (247/254)       | 96.3           | 97.7           | 95.2   | 98.2   |
| CAP (2.5)   | 254        | 63 174              | 13 4                  | 93.3% (237/254)       | 94.0           | 93.0           | 82.9   | 97.8   |
| KAN (2.5)   | 254        | 89 155              | 9 1                   | 96.1% (244/254)       | 98.9           | 94.5           | 90.8   | 99.4   |
| LEV (1.5)   | 254        | 86 160              | 2 6                   | 96.9% (246/254)       | 93.5           | 98.8           | 97.7   | 96.4   |
| MOXI (0.5)  | 254        | 81 158              | 15 0                  | 94.1% (239/254)       | 100            | 91.3           | 84.4   | 100    |
| OFL (2.0)   | 254        | 96 156              | 0 2                   | 99.2% (252/254)       | 98.0           | 100            | 100    | 98.7   |
| PAS (4.0)   | 254        | 61 171              | 13 9                  | 91.3% (232/254)       | 87.1           | 92.9           | 82.4   | 95     |
| RFB (0.5)   | 254        | 91 156              | 4 3                   | 97.2% (247/254)       | 96.8           | 97.5           | 95.8   | 98.1   |

### Table 3. Comparison of discrepant results after resolution by DNA sequence analysis.

| Drug | No. Discrepancy (DAC/L-J) | No. tested by Sequencing | Agreement (DAC/Sequencing) | Agreement (L-J/Sequencing) |
|------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| RIF  | 1                         | 1                        | 1/1 (100%)                | 0/1 (0%)                  |
| STR  | 18                        | 11                       | 7/11 (63.6%)              | 4/11 (36.4%)              |
| EMB  | 6                         | 4                        | 2/4 (50.0%)               | 2/4 (50.0%)               |
| AMI  | 7                         | 7                        | 4/7 (57.1%)               | 3/7 (42.9%)               |
| CAP  | 17                        | 13                       | 9/13 (69.2%)              | 4/13 (30.8%)              |
| KAN  | 10                        | 3                        | 1/3 (33.3%)               | 2/3 (66.7%)               |
| LEV  | 8                         | 7                        | 5/7 (71.4%)               | 2/7 (28.6%)               |
| MOXI | 15                        | 12                       | 4/12 (33.3%)              | 8/12 (66.7%)              |
| OFL  | 2                         | 2                        | 2/2 (100%)                | 0/2 (0%)                  |
| RFB  | 7                         | 7                        | 3/7 (42.9%)               | 4/7 (57.1%)               |
accurate MIC results regardless of the inoculum size and provides a safer DST process in one week, demonstrating that this system can be a better substitute for conventional DST systems. Although the DAC system has great potential to be used in the clinic, there remains some work to do. PZA is one of the first-line drugs but was not included in the DAC system because the DST culture condition for PZA is different from the other drugs. The DAC system needs a protocol for the PZA test so that it can be included. This system was validated with more than 250 clinical samples, but additional validation processes are needed with more clinical strains from various clinical sites.

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Author Contributions

Y.-G.J. (Myongji University), S.K. (Seoul National University, QuantaMatrix Inc.) and H.K., S.R. (Korean Institute of Tuberculosis) contributed to the concept and design of the study and writing the manuscript. Y.-G.J. and H.K. designed experiments and prepared the Figures. Y.-G.J., S.L., E.J., J.C., H.J.K., J.Y. (QuantaMatrix Inc.) and H.K., H.-J.L., H.K., H.J. (Korean Institute of Tuberculosis) contributed to the performance of the experiments and data analysis. E.-G.K. (QuantaMatrix Inc.) contributed to the design and production of the DST chip.

Additional Information

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Competing Interests: S.L., S.K. (QuantaMatrix Inc.), E.J., E.-G.K., H.J.K. and S.K. (QuantaMatrix Inc., Seoul National University,) at the time of manuscript submission, were employed at QuantaMatrix, Inc., which is commercializing the DST technology. S.L., S.K., E.-G.K., H.J.K., and S.K. (QuantaMatrix Inc.) have equity interest in QuantaMatrix, Inc.

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