LETTER TO EDITOR

A serum metabolomics analysis reveals a panel of screening metabolic biomarkers for esophageal squamous cell carcinoma

Dear Editor,

Endoscopy with iodine staining was widely used for esophageal cancer (EC) screening in high-incidence area. Most endoscopy screening-positive population was found to develop esophageal epithelium lesion, and therefore endured higher risk for developing esophageal squamous cell carcinoma (ESCC) than normal population. However, endoscopic screening may be too costly and invasive for large-scale population, and non-invasive biomarkers may be more applicable and cost effective for population-based screening.

In this population-based screening study, we aim to identify potential metabolic biomarkers for early screening of ESCC, and establish the optimal early ESCC screening model. Ultra-performance liquid chromatography-quadrupole time-of-flight mass spectrometry (UPLC-QTOF/MS) was used to explore ESCC screening related metabolic biomarkers and profile difference between ESCC screening-positive subjects and normal population. Detailed information on metabolites measurement and methods were provided in the Supporting Information.

In total, 1104 participants were included in this study (Table 1). Among the training dataset, ESCC screening-positive subjects were more likely to be older males, with higher systolic blood pressure, higher proportion of smokers, alcohol drinker than healthy controls. No significant differences were found regarding sex, BMI, diastolic blood pressure, alcohol drinking between two groups.

Principal component analysis shows a clear tendency of separation between two groups (Figure 1B). The tight clustering trend of QC samples indicates a good analytical reproducibility of this metabolomics study. Partial least-squares discriminant analysis was used to investigate the metabolic profile difference between ESCC screening-positive subjects and healthy controls. Figure 1C also demonstrates a clear separation between two groups. The Q2 regression line and all permuted R2 values show that this model had no risk of overfitting (Figure 1D).

A total of 70 metabolites, with false discovery rate (FDR) smaller than 0.05 and the variable importance in projection (VIP) larger than 1, were selected as differential metabolites to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects (Figure 2B and C). Among these differential metabolites, 14 differential metabolites were identified using reference standards, and the other 56 differential metabolites were interpreted according to their MS/MS spectra. Table S1 presents detailed information of 14 metabolites identified using reference standards. Due to the different level of metabolite identification, we built random forest models (RF models) with two combination of potential biomarkers, respectively.

Table 2 and Table S2 summarize RF models composed of 14 potential metabolic biomarkers for early screening of ESCC, and establish the optimal early ESCC screening model. Ultra-performance liquid chromatography-quadrupole time-of-flight mass spectrometry (UPLC-QTOF/MS) was used to explore ESCC screening related metabolic biomarkers and profile difference between ESCC screening-positive subjects and normal population. Detailed information on metabolites measurement and methods were provided in the Supporting Information.

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TABLE 1  The baseline characteristics of training and validation dataset

| Variables | Training (n = 662) | Validation (n = 442) |
|-----------|--------------------|----------------------|
|           | HC (n = 311)       | PRCS (n = 351)       | p-Value | HC (n = 272) | PRCS (n = 170) | p-Value |
| Age (year) | 53.0 (7.6)         | 58.9 (7.2)           | <0.001  | 53.3 (9.4)   | 58.1 (11.5)    | <0.001  |
| Females, n (%) | 179 (57.6)     | 176 (50.1)          | 0.067   | 169 (62.1)  | 99 (45.0)      | <0.001  |
| BMI (kg/m²)  | 24.8 (3.4)         | 24.3 (7.6)          | 0.292   | 24.5 (3.4)  | 23.7 (3.1)     | 0.007   |
| SBP (mm Hg)  | 129.8 (24.0)       | 134.4 (21.5)        | 0.009   | 130.8 (18.6) | 133.8 (22.9)   | 0.133   |
| DBP (mm Hg)  | 84.2 (13.8)        | 84.3 (11.9)         | 0.900   | 83.0 (10.4) | 84.2 (11.7)    | 0.262   |
| Smoker, n (%) | 54 (17.4)         | 94 (26.8)           | 0.005   | 34 (12.5)   | 45 (26.5)      | <0.001  |
| Drinker, n (%) | 76 (24.4)        | 110 (31.3)          | 0.059   | 6 (2.2)     | 1 (0.6)        | 0.350   |

| Pathology          |                |                      |        |                |                      |        |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|--------|----------------|----------------------|--------|
| Esophagitis, n (%) | –              | 78 (22.2)            | –      | –              | 56 (32.9)            | –      |
| Mild dysplasia, n (%) | –          | 189 (53.8)          | –      | –              | 68 (40.0)            | –      |
| Moderate dysplasia, n (%) | –           | 41 (11.7)          | –      | –              | 33 (23.6)            | –      |
| Severe dysplasia, n (%) | –           | 15 (4.3)           | –      | –              | 5 (2.9)              | –      |
| TIS, n (%)         | –              | 12 (3.4)            | –      | –              | 4 (2.4)              | –      |
| Invasive tumor, n (%) | –             | 16 (4.6)           | –      | –              | 4 (2.4)              | –      |

Data are means ± SD, or n (%).
Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; DBP, diastolic blood pressure; ESCC screening-positive subjects, PRCS; HC, healthy control; SBP, systolic blood pressure; TIS, tumor in situ.
† Rate was calculated after removing missing value.

FIGURE 1  Metabolic profile analysis and early ESCC screening model. (A) Study design; (B) PCA score plot discriminating ESCC screening-positive subjects and healthy controls; (C) PLS-DA three-dimensional scores plot discriminating ESCC screening-positive subjects and healthy controls; (D) validation plot obtained from 200 permutation tests; (E) ROC curve for random forest model combing 14 metabolites; (F) decision curves for 14 metabolites to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects; and (G) calibration curves for 14 metabolites to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects.
FIGURE 2 ESCC screening model composed with 8 metabolites. (A) The typical UPLC-QTOF/MS chromatograms; (B) heatmap plot of 14 metabolites confirmed using standard references in the validation data; (C) heatmap plot of 56 metabolites interpreted according to their MS/MS spectra in the validation data; (D) best subset selection for metabolites interpreted according to their MS/MS spectra; (E) ROC analysis of random forest model for eight metabolites; (F) decision curves for eight metabolites to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects; and (G) calibration curves for eight metabolites to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects.

TABLE 2 Random forest model composed 14 metabolic biomarkers to predict ESCC screening-positive subjects

| Model                              | N     | AUC     | Sensitivity | Specificity | PPV    | NPV    |
|------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------------|-------------|--------|--------|
| Risk factors†                      | 309   | 0.643(0.541,0.734) | 0.756(0.533,0.933) | 0.557(0.341,0.761) | 0.466(0.396,0.575) | 0.817(0.738,0.931) |
| Metabolites                        | 309   | 0.806(0.728,0.878) | 0.873(0.745,0.964) | 0.705(0.590,0.821) | 0.676(0.602,0.774) | 0.887(0.803,0.962) |
| Metabolites and risk factors†       | 309   | 0.828(0.755,0.893) | 0.782(0.582,0.927) | 0.782(0.615,0.936) | 0.719(0.607,0.878) | 0.838(0.753,0.931) |
| Metabolites (by stages)            | N     | AUC     | Sensitivity | Specificity | PPV    | NPV    |
| Esophagitis                        | 56    | 0.711(0.596,0.819) | 0.800(0.550,1.000) | 0.671(0.316,0.835) | 0.365(0.266,0.519) | 0.927(0.867,1.000) |
| Dysplasia                          | 106   | 0.771(0.665,0.863) | 0.839(0.677,0.968) | 0.723(0.554,0.831) | 0.532(0.429,0.651) | 0.922(0.859,0.981) |
| TIS and Invasive cancer            | 8     | 0.939(0.841,1.000) | 1.000(1.000,1.000) | 0.902(0.829,1.000) | 0.200(0.125,1.000) | 1.000(1.000,1.000) |

Abbreviations: AUC, area under curve; NPV, negative predictive value; PPV, positive predictive value; TIS, tumor in situ. These 14 metabolites were confirmed using standard references.

†Age, sex, BMI, SBP, smoking, and alcohol drinking.

Table S6 presents reclassification table of individuals of predicted risk using risk factors only versus combined potential metabolic biomarkers. The net reclassification index (NRI) of risk factors-only versus risk factors plus 14 potential metabolic biomarkers was 0.30 (95% CI 0.14–0.46, \( p < 0.001 \)), while integrated discrimination improvement (IDI) was 0.11 (95% CI 0.06–0.16, \( p < 0.001 \)). Consistent with results from receiver operating characteristic (ROC) analysis, prediction model composed of metabolites and risk factors was superior to all other models (Figure 1F and G). The NRI of risk factors-only versus risk factors plus eight potential biomarkers was 1.18 (95% CI 0.97–1.37, \( p < 0.001 \)), while IDI was 0.46 (95% CI 0.38–0.54, \( p < 0.001 \)).

We used a secondary validation set from Shandong Tumor Hospital to validate the performance of two combinations of potential biomarkers. Consistent with the above results, the AUCs were 0.986 (95% CI 0.963–0.999) and...
FIGURE 3 Enriched KEGG pathways analysis. (A) Boxplot of 22 differential metabolites; (B) metabolite sets enrichment overview; (C) network enrichment analysis; and (D) metabolic pathways associated with ESCC
0.949 (95% CI 0.893–0.992) for the combination of 14 potential biomarkers and eight potential biomarkers, respectively (Table S7 and Figure S1).

Finally, we mapped 22 potential biomarkers based on KEGG database and MetaboAnalyst (Figure 3A). Four metabolic pathways were associated with ESCC at the FDR threshold of 0.05 and the pathway impact value threshold of 0.001. Figure 3B–D revealed evident disorders in tyrosine metabolism, tryptophan metabolism, phenylalanine, tyrosine and tryptophan biosynthesis, and phenylalanine metabolism.

In this untargeted metabolomics study, we conducted a population-based screening study among adult subjects from high-incidence area of China, with relatively large sample size. Currently, metabolomics studies for ESCC screening have been reported. However, these studies were restricted in small sample size and limited information on early ESCC screening. Based on this study, a new panel of differential metabolites were identified as potential biomarkers and showed good performance in ESCC screening.

Overall, we identified a new panel of differential metabolites as potential biomarkers to discriminate endoscopy screening-positive population in this study. Risk reclassification was also improved significantly, compared with risk factors by the addition of metabolomic biomarkers. Better discrimination and calibration performance show these metabolites have utility in supporting clinical decisions and leads to the best decisions. A panel of serum metabolic biomarkers may be a valuable and invasive tool in ESCC early screening.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Esophageal Cancer Screening Base in high-risk area of China (City of Feicheng, Shandong, China) is a joint effort of many investigators and staff members whose contribution is gratefully acknowledged. We appreciate the enrolled adult volunteers for the provision of data.

**FUNDING INFORMATION**

National Natural Science Foundation of China, Grant Numbers: 81973147, 81573246, and 81673271; Cheeloo Young Scholars Program of Shandong University, Shandong University multidisciplinary Research and Innovation Team of Young Scholars, Grant Numbers: 2020QNQT11 and IFYT18034.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT**

Study protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Shandong Tumor Hospital, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in this study (Ethics Approval ID: SDTHEC201305002).

Jiali Lv\(^1,2,4\), Jialin Wang\(^5\), Xiaotao Shen\(^4\), Jia Liu\(^5\), Deli Zhao\(^6\), Mengke Wei\(^1,2\), Xia Li\(^1,2\), Bingbing Fan\(^1,2\), Yawen Sun\(^3\), Fuzhong Xue\(^1,2\), Zheng-Jiang Zhu\(^4\), Tao Zhang\(^1,2,4\)

\(^1\) Department of Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Cheeloo College of Medicine, Shandong University, Jinan, China

\(^2\) Institute for Medical Dataology, Cheeloo College of Medicine, Shandong University, Jinan, China

\(^3\) The Shandong Cancer Hospital Affiliated to Shandong University, Jinan, China

\(^4\) Interdisciplinary Research Center on Biology and Chemistry, Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai, China

\(^5\) Yanjing Medical College, Capital Medical University, Beijing, China

\(^6\) Tumor Preventative and Therapeutic Base of Shandong Province, Feicheng People’s Hospital, Feicheng, China

**Correspondence**

Tao Zhang, Department of Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Cheeloo College of Medicine, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong 250012, China, PO Box 100, 44 Wenhuaixi Rd, Jinan 250012, China.

Email: taozhang@sdu.edu.cn

Zheng-Jiang Zhu, Interdisciplinary Research Center on Biology and Chemistry, Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Shanghai 200032, China.

Email: jiangzhu@sioc.ac.cn

\(^4\) Both authors contributed equally to this work.

**ORCID**

Tao Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1048-4443
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SUPPORTING INFORMATION
Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.