AZF MICRO-DELETION IN AZOOSPERMIA AND SEVERE OLIGOSPERMIA: MOLECULAR & HISTOPATHOLOGICAL STUDY IN DUHOK PROVINCE

Rana Adel Hanoon a *, Alaa Hani Raziq b, Farida Fariq Nerwey c

a Scientific Research Center, College of Science, University of Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq – (rana.hanon@uod.ac)
b College of Medicine, University of Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq
c College of Nursing, University of Duhok, Kurdistan Region, Iraq

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1. INTRODUCTION

Infertility is a significant health and reproductive issue that affects 10 to 15% of couples, of which approximately 50% of the cases are due to male factors (Foerst et al., 2001). Estimations pointed that infertility of the male is mainly due to azoospermia and it is prevalent in 10-15% of infertile men (Cocuzza et al., 2013). Several studies have elucidated diverse etiology for azoospermia but in many situations the main reason is still vague (Boettger-Tong, 2008). Previous reports proposed an impaired spermatogenesis as a cause for male infertility which in turn resulted from mutations or deletions in specific genes which control that function (Mitra, 2008). In the male, sex determination is governed by an area located on the short arm of the Y chromosome known as sex-determining region (SRY) which is located on the short arm of the Y chromosome (Yp11), but the set genes involved in spermatogenesis are found on the nearby region of Y chromosome long arm (Yq11). This location of Y chromosome is known as the azoospermia factor (AZF) region and it consists of three sub-regions namely AZFa, AZFb and AZFc (Raicu et al., 2003). Deletions in each particular region occur with different frequency and can result in defective spermatogenesis with clinical outcomes ranging from complete absence of sperm in azoospermia or decreased sperm population in severe oligozoospermia. Micro-deletion in the AZFc sub-region is almost associated with oligospermia while those occurring in the AZFa and AZFb sub-regions have been correlated with azoospermia. In general, deletions in the AZF region have been associated with altered sperm parameters and testicular histological characteristics (Thangaraj et al., 2003). Micro-deletions in the AZF region are the most frequently encountered etiology for spermatogenesis defect. They may be diagnosed by molecular methods and are reported in 5-10% of infertile males. The majority of studies assert that AZFc micro-deletions are the most frequent, followed by micro-deletions in the AZFb and AZFa sub-regions (Krausz et al., 2014). The frequency of the occurrence of micro-deletions can be very fluctuating due to the differences in many factors like Y chromosome background, the ethnicity of the selected patients, clinical criteria for patient selection, and methodological approaches (Naasse et al., 2015).

The aim of the present study is to identify the types of micro-deletions within the AZF region in azoospermic and oligospermic patients in Duhok province.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Forty adult patients suffering from severe oligospermia and azoospermia from Duhok province/Kurdistan region/Iraq took part in the present study. Seminal fluid analyses (SFA) were performed according to the WHO guidelines (World Health Organization, 1999), using Weili color sperm analysis system ver. 6.3 (Beijing Weili New Century Science & Technology Development Co. Ltd). According to the results of SFA, candidate individuals were divided into two groups: those with complete absence of sperms were assigned to azoospermia group while those with sperm count less than 5x106 sperm/ml were considered severely oligospermic.

* Corresponding author
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The blood sample was divided into two parts; four ml was poured into EDTA tubes to extract DNA and the rest were used for hormonal analysis. Follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinizing hormone (LH) profiles were measured by immunofluorescence using Vidas (bioMérieux®, France) system and the results were analysed and interpreted by BMX SOFTWARE; serum FSH level ranging between 1.7-12 mIU/ml was considered normal and normal ranges for serum LH level was 1.7-7 mIU/ml. Patients who are azoospermic with normal FSH and LH levels and normal testes size were subjected to testicular biopsy.

The molecular work started with DNA extraction from patient’s leukocytes according to the standard proteinase K/phenol-chloroform protocol in the laboratory of medical biotechnology at the Scientific Research Center/University of Duhok (Grimberg et al., 1989), then primers for multiplex PCR assays were carefully selected according to the EAA (European Academy of Andrology)/EMQN (European Molecular Genetic Quality Network) guidelines (Simoni et al., 2004). The selected primers were assigned into two sub-groups each consisted of six primers (forward and reverse) specific for the three AZF loci (AZFa, AZFb, and AZFc) (Table 1, 2). Finally, STS primer of SRY (internal control) was included with each set of multiplex PCR to insure the accuracy of the procedure.

### Table 1. Primers sequences & products size of the mix A group

| Master Mix Primers-1 | STS | Forward primer | Reverse primer | AZF interval | Size of products (bp) |
|----------------------|-----|----------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| SRY                  | 5-GAA TAT TCCGC TCT CCG GA-3 | 5-GCT GGT GCT CCA TTC TTC AG-3 | 499 bp |
| SY254                | 5-GGG TGT TAC CAG AAG GCA AA-3 | 5-GAA CCG TAT CTA CCA AAG CAG C-3 | AZFc | 400 bp |
| SY84                 | 5-AGA AGG GTC TGA AAG CAG GT-3 | 5-GGC TAC TAC CTA GAG GCT TC-3 | AZFa | 326 bp |
| SY127                | 5-GGC TCA CAA ACG AAA AGA AA-3 | 5-CTG CAG GCA GTA ATA ACG GA-3 | AZFb | 274 bp |

### Table 2. Primers sequences & products size of the mix B group

| Master Mix Primers-2 | STS | Forward primer | Reverse primer | AZF interval | Size of products (bp) |
|----------------------|-----|----------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| SRY                  | 5-GAA TAT TCCGC TCT CCG GA-3 | 5-GCT GGT GCT CCA TTC TTC AG-3 | 499 bp |
| SY86                 | 5'-GTCGACAACA GACATGCTT C | 5'-ACACACAGAG GACAACCTT | AZFa | 320 bp |
| SY134                | 5-GTC TGC CTC ACC ATA AAGC-3 | 5-ACC ACT GCC AAA ACT TTC AA-3 | AZFb | 301 bp |
| SY255                | 5-GTT ACA GGA TGC GGC GTA TAF-3 | 5-CTC GTG ATG TGC AGC CAC AT-3 | AZFc | 126 bp |

Multiplex polymerase chain reaction (m-PCR) mixtures were prepared in two separate mixes namely, A and B. Each of the mix contained 12.5 µl master mix (0.4 mM dNTPs mix; 4.5 mM MgCl2; 1U Taq DNA polymerase; 1X PCR buffer) (Promega®, USA), 1 µl of each primer forward and reverse of each single individual gene (10 picomol/ml), and 2 µl template DNA, then distilled water was added to attain a final volume of 25 µl.

Amplification conditions were set as follows: 4 minutes initial denaturation at 94˚C followed by 40 cycles of 1 minute denaturation at 94˚C, 45 seconds annealing at 56˚C and 4 minutes extension at 67˚C, followed by a final step of extension for 7 minutes at 67˚C. Afterwards, PCR products were electrophoresed on 2.5 % agarose gel. PCR amplification bands were visualized using ethidium bromide gel staining for 30 minutes. Multiplex PCR conditions were adopted after several trials and as per previous work (Kyumars et al., 2013).

### 3. RESULTS

The results of the current study indicated that out of the 40 patients, 23 were azoospermic (57.5 %) while 17 patients had severe oligospermia (42.5 %). The results also revealed that 13 azoospermic patients out of the 23 (56.5 %) had elevated serum FSH and LH levels. While the remaining 10 patients (43.5 %) showed normal gonadotrophins serum profiles and thus they were subjected to testicular biopsy, which revealed that 4 out of 10 had normal spermatogenesis reflecting obstructive azoospermia (Figure 1) while the other 6 had maturation arrest (Figure 2).

![Figure 1](image1.png) A testicular biopsy from a patient with obstructive azoospermia, note the presence of many spermatozoa in the seminiferous tubules

![Figure 2](image2.png) A testicular biopsy from a patient with azoospermia due to maturation arrest, note the presence of many spermatocytes with the absence of spermatids and spermatozoa in the seminiferous tubules.
The results of the molecular study showed that Y chromosome micro-deletion was observed in 26 (65%) patients out of a total of 40. Micro-deletions in the AZFc sub-region appeared in 16 patients out of 26 (61.5%), and 10 (38.5%) samples showed AZFb micro-deletion, while AZFa micro-deletion was not found in any of the patients. In the present work, mix A (consists of SRY14, SY254, SY84, and SY127 represented by 499 bp, 400 bp, 326 bp, and 274 bp, respectively.) was amplified by multiplex PCR to confirm the existence or the absence of the above-mentioned mutations. Figure 3 shows the electrophoresis patterns of normal individuals holding the three bands of the AZF region.

In the entire tested sample, the results revealed that AZFa (SY84) micro-deletion was not evident and thus a band of 326 bp appeared after being electrophoresed and stained while AZFb (SY127) and AZFc (SY254, 400 bp) have both been deleted and thus their relevant bands did not appear in the electrophorogram (Figure 4).

A band of 320 bp has been observed indicating that AZFa (SY86) region was not deleted. On the other hand, AZFb (SY134) and AZFc (SY255) regions have both been deleted and therefore their relevant bands did not appear in the electrophoresis gel (Figure 6).

**DISCUSSION**

Testicular biopsy is particularly helpful in patients with azoospermia and normal gonadotrophins levels. Generally speaking, four patterns exist namely: germ cell aplasia,
spermatocytic arrest, generalized fibrosis and normal apermatogenesis (Rosai, 2004). In this study, patients with generalised fibrosis and germ cell aplasia were excluded from testicular biopsy testing on the bases of clinical examination and hormonal profile study. Therefore, those subjected to testicular biopsy had either maturation arrest or normal spermatogenesis.

Deletions in the AZF region take place in Y chromosome and can cause serious impact in the genes responsible for spermatogenesis. These micro-deletions are attributed to intra-chromosomal re-arrangement among long homologous repetitive sequences (Repping et al., 2002) and ranked second to Klinefelter’s syndrome when the etiologies for male infertility and spermatogenic deficits are considered (Zaimy et al., 2013). The results of the present work reported much higher rate for Y chromosome micro-deletions in both azoospermic and oligospermic individuals as compared to that observed by others who stated that 1-55% of infertile men suffered from Y chromosome micro-deletions. Generally, most researchers have mentioned a rate of less than 10% (Poongothai et al., 2009). Consistent with previous reports, the results of the present study also revealed that micro-deletions in AZFc region of the Y chromosome prevailed when the three sub-regions were taken into consideration and thus it can be considered as one of the primary causes for spermatogenic defects (Moyet Al-Faisal et al., 2010; Yamada et al., 2010). The ratio of AZF micro-deletion is still higher than in the ratio of the studies conducted in the near vicinity of Iraq. Y chromosome micro-deletion rates of 24.2% and 50% were reported by Omrani et al., (2006) and Malekasgar et al., (2014), from northwest and south of Iran, respectively. The discrepancy in results may be explained in part by ethnicity differences, components of the sample size, population under study and lastly the application of specific STS markers. Six STS markers (two for each region) have been suggested by the EAA/EMQN best practice guideline to enable the accurate determination of all clinically relevant microdeletion (Malekasgar and Mombaini, 2008). In line with the results of current study, AZFc has been found to cause the majority of Y chromosome micro-deletions as it was detected in 70 % of cases studied by Oates et al., (2002). Lower rates approaching 7% have been observed in Turkey (Sargin et al., 2004) and Kuwait (Alkhalaf and Al-Shoumer, 2010), in comparison to the results of the present work. Frequencies of micro-deletions observed in different studies are inconsistent with each other and the cause-effect relationship among sub-deletions and spermatogenesis is still controversial (Abilash et al., 2010). The geographical location and ethnic background might influence these deletions in the AZF regions; possibly in both the patterns of deletion and the phenotypic outcome. The change in the frequency of Y chromosome micro-deletion is also a subject of sample size and endocrine disorder or an undefined environmental influence (Page et al., 1999). Micro-deletions in Y chromosome can lead to progressive worsening of spermatogenesis and that as time passes oligospermic men can turn into azoospermic (Dada et al., 2004). The serious consequences of Y chromosome micro-deletions and the harmful phenotypic manifestations necessitate an accurate determination of the transcriptional activities of various genes on the Y chromosome primarily those found in the AZF region and are mainly associated with male infertility. In conclusion our results emphasize the critical role of Y chromosome micro-deletions in the pathology of male infertility.

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