The triage of low-grade cytological abnormalities by the immunocytological expression of cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) versus Human Papillomavirus test: a real possibility to predict cervical intraepithelial neoplasia CIN2 or CIN2+

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Abstract
Objective: Assessing the hypothesis that p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) immunocytochemistry (ICC) has better relevance than Human Papillomavirus (HPV) testing at detecting high-grade cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (HGCIN) upon histopathological diagnosis in women with abnormal cytologies such as atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASC-US) or low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (LSIL). Materials and Methods: A retrospective study of 63 selected cases (22 with ASC-US and 41 with LSIL) was performed at “St. Pantelimon” Clinical Hospital, Bucharest, Romania, using p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) ICC and Linear Array HPV Genotyping Test. All cases have been followed-up by colposcopy and biopsies. The sensitivity and specificity of p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) and HPV were analyzed by chi-squared test. Results: LSIL cytologies were more likely to be p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) positive than those with ASC-US: OR=3.1, 95% CI (1.06–9.11). The processed data show that in women with LSIL the sensitivity of p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) is 37.5% higher than that of high-risk(hr)-HPV \((p=0.0050)\), whereas in ASC-US it is 44.5% higher \((p=0.0577)\). In ASC-US, p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) has a higher specificity (84.62%) than hr-HPV (53.85%); for LSIL cytologies, this difference is less steep: 58.82% for p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) as compared to 47.06% for HPV. Conclusions: The p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) is significantly more sensitive than hr-HPV in both low-grade abnormal cytologies and has higher specificity than HPV testing to detect HGCIN, mainly in women with ASC-US cytologies. Only women with ASC-US and LSIL cytologies who test positive for p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) should be directed to colposcopy and/or biopsy. p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\) is a suitable immunocytochemical marker which increases the accuracy of diagnosis at women with low-grade cytologic abnormality.

Keywords: Atypical Squamous Cells of Undetermined Significance (ASC-US), Low-grade Squamous Intraepithelial Lesions (LSIL), Human Papillomavirus (HPV), cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor (p16\(^{\text{INK4a}}\)), Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia grade 1, 2, 3 (CIN 1, 2, 3), Liquid Based Cytology (LBC).

Introduction
According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and World Health Organization (WHO), every year 3402 Romanian women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 2005 die from this disease [1, 2]. It is the most common cancer in Romanian women aged 15–44, with an annual crude incidence rate of 24.4 out of 100 000 women [1, 2]. In Romania, the primary cancer prevention measure supported by the Public Health Ministry is Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination. Unfortunately, parents are reluctant to accept the vaccination of their girls.

In the summer of 2012, the Romanian Ministry of Health has initiated a screening program for cervical cancer with the support of the European Union. One of the goals is to facilitate the implementation of such management protocols on a wider scale in clinical practice. The Romanian cervical screening program uses the Papanicolaou (Pap) cytology.

National government-funded research programs investigating cervical cancer have existed in Romania since 2007. One of these grants was awarded to the Departments of Gynecology and Histopathology at the “St. Pantelimon” Clinical Hospital, Bucharest, and resulted in the development of a research center. The main purpose of the research grant was to translate into clinical practice novel biotechnologies able to identify suitable biomarkers for selecting abnormal cytologies that correspond to cervical intraepithelial neoplasia.

The quest to determine the most accurate biomarker for the detection of the abnormal cytologies most likely to evolve into cervical cancer is ongoing, particularly in cases with abnormal cytologies such as atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASC-US) or low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (LSIL).
One of the most important emerging biomarkers in the characterization of precancerous cervical lesions is the cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}, a tumor suppressor protein. The superiority of the p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} immunocytochemistry assay (p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} ICC) over high-risk Human Papillomavirus (hr-HPV) DNA detection resides in the fact that the overexpression of p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} indicates the presence of oncogenic transformations within the cervical cells. Conversely, hr-HPV detection cannot distinguish between transient and transforming HPV infections [3].

The present study evaluates the hypothesis that p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} immunocytochemistry (ICC) test is more effective than hr-HPV at identifying women with ASC-US and LSIL who are subsequently diagnosed with cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) equal or higher grade 2 (CIN2+) upon histopathological diagnosis. This study investigated the possibility of a statistical correlation between the immunoeexpression of p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} and the existence of high-grade precancerous cervical lesions.

Simultaneously, we checked, on a statistical basis, the superiority of cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} test as compared to HPV test in differentiating those abnormal cytologies underlying CIN2+ at histopathological diagnosis.

The addition of this immunocytochemical marker to the actual diagnostic panel may influence the clinical management of p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}-positive patients with the aforementioned abnormal cytologies.

**Materials and Methods**

The data were collected between 2009–2010 from the archives of Gynecology and Pathology Departments, “St. Pantelimon” Clinical Hospital, Bucharest, Romania.

The methodology of the current research focuses on three types of investigations represented by immunocytochemical expression of cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}, HPV genotyping of cervical cells included within liquid medium and histopathological diagnosis by HE (Hematoxylin–Eosin) staining of cervical biopsies tissue.

From a total amount of 1820 Papanicolaou (Pap) cytologies, only 63 cases were selected according to the following criteria: ASC-US or LSIL cytologies, age between 25 and 65 years, specimens collected in liquid medium and histopathological diagnosis by HE (Hematoxylin–Eosin) staining of cervical biopsies tissue.

A more deep evaluation indicated that 77.7% of these p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}-positive cytologies a high percentage, size or increased nuclear/cytoplasmic ratio, irregular nuclear shape, granular or hyperchromatic chromatin, variable cellular morphology - and cytoplasmic staining, we classified samples as p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} negative and p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} positive, when positivity was observed for at least two of afore-mentioned nuclear criteria.

The Linear Array HPV Genotyping Test was used for detecting Human Papillomavirus (HPV). The used methodology allowed to detect 37 distinct HPV genotypes classified according to their oncogenic risk (Muñoz N et al., 2003) [5]. Samples were selected if they were positive for one or more of high-risk of oncogenic transformation genotypes (hr-HPV).

Histopathological results were classified into two groups. The first group contains cases with histopathological diagnosis (HPD)\textless ;CIN2, that is cases which are negative for dysplasia (ND) or positive for cervical intraepithelial neoplasia grade 1 (CIN1).

The second group contains cases with HPD\geq CIN2+, that is cases positive for cervical intraepithelial neoplasia with grade equal or higher than 2 (CIN2+).

The ability of p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} and hr-HPV testing to predict CIN2+ was evaluated by computing the sensitivity (Se), specificity (Sp), and positive predictive value (PPV) of these two markers in the selected specimens.

The statistical relevance of the obtained data was computed with a chi-squared test. For this, we employed the statistical software GraphPad Prism 6.0b, Macintosh Version (©1994–2012, Software MacKiev).

**Results**

From the 63 selected cytological specimens, 41 were typical for LSIL and 22 were characteristic of ASC-US. The case distribution as regards the association of abnormal cytologies with hr-HPV positive infection and the possibility of CIN2+ histopathological diagnosis result showed the following aspects. Therefore, according to mentioned selection criteria, 41% of the 22 cases with ASC-US were positive for hr-HPV. The statistical analysis shown that 33.3% of these HPV-positive cases were diagnosed with CIN2+ after histopathological diagnosis. Within the same group of ASC-US cases, 41% were positive for p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}.

A more deep evaluation indicated that 77.7% of these p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}-positive cytologies were obtained from patients diagnosed with CIN2+ after biopsy (Table 1).

The present study reveals the same significant issues concerning the association between HPV high-risk infection, positivity of p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} and CIN2+ in cases with LSIL cytology. Therefore, hr-HPV infection was demonstrated in 51.2% of the 41 specimens with LSIL (Figures 1–3).

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The data obtained shown that from these cases 50% were HPV-positive and were proved to be CIN2+ at histopathological diagnosis. Within the same group of LSIL cases, 68% were positive for p16\textsuperscript{INK4a} and from these p16\textsuperscript{INK4a}-positive cytologies a high percentage, 87.5%, was obtained from women who were diagnosed with CIN2+ after biopsy (Table 1).

The sensitivities and specificities of these investigated markers were compared in order to establish if one of the two markers was superior to the other with respect to detecting CIN2+ (Figure 4).
The triage of low-grade cytological abnormalities by the immunocytological expression of cyclin-dependent kinase...

Table 1 – The distribution of hr-HPV infection and p16INK4a positivity in a study group of 63 women, correlated with their cytological and histopathological diagnosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cytology results (n=63)</th>
<th>ASC-US (n=22)</th>
<th>LSIL (n=41)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Histopathological diagnosis (n=63)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>15.3% (2)</td>
<td>77.7% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>84.6% (21)</td>
<td>22.2% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hr-HPV</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive %</td>
<td>46.15% (6)</td>
<td>33.3% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative %</td>
<td>53.8% (16)</td>
<td>66.6% (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p16INK4a – Cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16INK4a; HR-HPV – High-risk human papillomavirus; ASC-US – Atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance; LSIL – Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion; ≤CIN2 – Negative for dysplasia or cervical intraepithelial neoplasia grade 1; ≥CIN2+ – Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia grade 2 or 2+; n – No. of cases.

The Se, Sp, and PPV of p16INK4a and hr-HPV for a subsequent diagnosis of cervical intraepithelial neoplasia were calculated and analyzed with the chi-square test in order to determine their relevance (Table 2).

Table 2 – Sensitivity and specificity of p16INK4a and HPV testing in ASC-US and LSIL cytologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cytology</th>
<th>p16 (95% CI)</th>
<th>HPV test (95% CI)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASC-US</td>
<td>Sensitivity 0.77 (0.39–0.97)</td>
<td>Specificity 0.84 (0.54–0.98)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSIL</td>
<td>Sensitivity 0.87 (0.67–0.97)</td>
<td>Specificity 0.58 (0.32–0.81)</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HPV – Human papillomavirus; p16INK4a – Cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor p16INK4a; ASC-US – Atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance; LSIL – Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion.

Women with LSIL were three times more likely than those with ASC-US to have p16INK4a-positive cervical test are (Odds Ratio, OR=3.1; 95% CI: 1.06–9.11). Concurrently, hr-HPV positive tests in LSIL cytologies were eleven times more likely than those in ASC-US cytologies to be p16INK4a-positive (OR=11.8; 95% CI: 1.66–84.56).

Figure 1 – Cytology: ASC-US versus LSIL (before p16INK4a test). Pap test, ob. ×20 (photo collection of own research grant).

Figure 2 – Immunocytochemistry: p16INK4a test. LSIL: Intermediate squamous cells p16INK4a positive (nuclear and in cytoplasmic staining), increased nuclear size irregular nuclear shape, granular or hyperchromatic chromatin and nuclear pleomorphism, ob. ×20 (photo collection of own research grant).

Figure 3 – Immunocytochemistry: p16INK4a test. HSIL: p16INK4a positive squamous cells, hyperchromatic nuclei, irregularity of nuclear margins, cytoplasmic positivity of p16INK4a, ob. ×20 (photo collection of own research grant).

Figure 4 – Histopathology: CIN2 (high-grade cervical intraepithelial neoplasia), medium size cells with enlarged, hyperchromatic nuclei, nuclear pleomorphism and irregular nuclear margins, in 2/3 of thickness of squamous epithelium, HE staining, ob. ×20 (photo collection of own research grant).
For women with ASC-US cytologies, the hr-HPV test had a Se of 33.33%, a Sp of 53.85% and a PPV of 33.33% for the identification of CIN2. In cases with LSIL samples, the hr-HPV test had a Se of 50%, a Sp of 47.06% and a PPV of 57.14%.

In ASC-US cytologies, the p16INK4a immunocytochemical assay had a Se of 77.78%, a Sp of 84.62% and a PPV of 77.78% for the identification of CIN2+. In LSIL samples, the p16INK4a ICC had a Se of 87.50%, a Sp of 58.82% and a PPV of 75%.

In cases with ASC-US cytologies, the analysis of the Sp of the hr-HPV test versus that of p16INK4a ICC demonstrated that the latter led to an almost significant increase by 30.77% in the detection of cases negative for dysplasia or positive for CINI in comparison to the former (p=0.0891).

A comparison between the PPV of hr-HPV detection versus that of p16INK4a ICC in ASC-US cytologies shown another almost significant increase by 44.5% in favor of p16INK4a (p=0.0577).

For women with LSIL cytologies the analysis of the Sp of the hr-HPV test versus that of p16INK4a ICC demonstrated that the latter led to a statistically insignificant rise by 11.76% in the detection of cases negative for dysplasia or positive for CINI in comparison to the former (p=0.4921).

The relational aspects between the PPV of hr-HPV detection versus that of p16INK4a ICC in LSIL cytologies demonstrated another statistically insignificant rise by 17.8% in favor of p16INK4a (p=0.1870).

A comparison between the Se of p16INK4a ICC versus that of hr-HPV highlighted a significant increase in the identification ratio for CIN2+ positive cases in favor of p16INK4a: 37.5% in LSIL cytologies (p=0.0050) and 44.45% in ASC-US cytologies (p=0.0577).

Discussion

Randomly controlled trials have demonstrated that HPV-based screening is more efficient than cytology-based screening for the detection of cervical neoplasia [6]. Recently published data states that cervical cytology exams may prove useful in the triage of HPV-positive cases [7]. Current research is focused on the detection of biomarkers suitable for the triage of abnormally Papanicolaou cytologies and which can be translated into daily clinical practice (e.g., p16INK4a and p16INK4a-Ki67 double staining) [8].

A meta-analysis performed by Jolien Roelens in 2012 showed that p16INK4a is more accurate than hr-HPV at the detection of those cases of ASC-US and LSIL, which are diagnosed as CIN2+ at the histopathological diagnosis.

The sensitivities and specificities of p16INK4a and HPV test were compared in order to establish if one of the two markers was superior to the other with respect to detecting CIN2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>p16INK4a – ASC-US</th>
<th>p16INK4a – LSIL</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holladay EB et al. (2006)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wentzensen N et al. (2007)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denton KJ et al. (2010)</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izaaks CD et al. (2011)</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

We compared our research results with other up-to-date worldwide-published results on the same interesting subject. The present study notices that the specificity of p16INK4a is high in both ASC-US and LSIL cytologies, particularly in ASC-US. The results of our work show that the specificity of HPV is similarly increased in ASC-US and LSIL cytologies, but is significantly lower than the specificity of p16INK4a.

A study by Samarawardana P et al. [14] exposed similar conclusions. Their work states that the sensitivity and specificity of p16INK4a for the detection of underlying CIN2+ are 81.7% and 83.3% respectively (p=0.81). The same study determined that the Se and Sp of hr-HPV are lower than those of p16INK4a: 78.1% and 50.9% respectively (p=0.01). Other recent studies recommend the use of p16INK4a as a supplemental triage biomarker for ASC-US and LSIL cytologies, which have already been assigned as “high-risk” after hr-HPV detection [15, 16].

Our results on the sensitivity of the two biomarkers partly differ from those of other studies, as p16INK4a proved to be significantly more sensitive than hr-HPV in both ASC-US and LSIL samples. This result may have been generated by the fact that some of the cases included in the study group were positive for at least one of the fifteen high-risk HPV genotypes instead of being positive only for genotypes 16 and 18, which are responsible for the majority of cervical cancers. Another particular fact is that in the present study the hr-HPV test was detected with the Linear Array HPV Genotyping Test. Therefore, the results must be interpreted in light of the fact that there are more specific tests such as the APTIMA RNA assay or Hybrid-Capture-2, which increase the specificity of the detection with a slight-to-inexistent loss in cross-sectional sensitivity [17, 18].

Conclusions

Our study reveals that the p16INK4a immunoexpression in ASC-US cytologies produces high values for both sensitivity and specificity. Thus, we straightforwardly make the following recommendation for clinical practice. Women with ASC-US cytologies who test positive for p16INK4a should be directed to colposcopy and/or biopsy, while women who test negative should not. The same reasoning can be applied for the p16INK4a immuno-
expression in LSIL cytologies. In this case, the sensitivity is high, so we expect to miss a low number of positives. However, due to a lower specificity value, one should expect a larger number of patients to be unnecessarily directed to colposcopy and/or biopsy. This study highlights the fact that modern high-fidelity biotechnologies are necessary to ensure the prevention of cervical neoplasia. However, this cannot be done without making these strategies accessible to a large population of women.

For Romania, a feasible affordable solution is to screen women with Papanicolaou test and to consequently triage abnormal cytologies using p16\(^{INK4a}\) immunochemical staining in both ASC-US and LSIL cytologies.

Acknowledgments
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