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Original Research

Role of Toluidine Blue Staining in Suspicious Lesions of Oral Cavity and Oropharynx

Havisha Arya

Assistant Professor, Department of Oral Pathology & Microbiology, Sri Aurobindo College of Dentistry, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT:

Aim: Clinical identification of epithelial dysplasia and early squamous carcinoma can be challenging due to their varied appearances, often resembling benign lesions. This similarity can lead to delays in biopsy and diagnosis, as initial empirical treatments are frequently attempted. Hence; the present study was conducted to evaluate the role of toluidine blue staining as an adjunct tool for the early detection of malignant and premalignant lesions in the oral cavity and oropharynx. **Materials and methods:** This hospital-based diagnostic test accuracy study was conducted over two years, enrolling 50 subjects with suspicious oral lesions. After obtaining informed consent, a detailed history and epidemiological data, including age, disease duration, and exposure to carcinogens, were recorded. All patients underwent a thorough head and neck examination and were subjected to 1% Modified toluidine blue staining, followed by biopsy and histopathological evaluation.Toluidine blue solution was prepared as per Mashberg's method, with pH adjusted to 4.5. The staining protocol involved sequential rinsing with water, 1% acetic acid, toluidine blue, and another acetic acid rinse before a final water rinse. Staining results were interpreted based on color intensity, with dark blue considered positive. Histopathologic assessment served as the gold standard for evaluating toluidine blue staining, and diagnostic accuracy was determined by calculating sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value. Data analysis was done using SSPS software. **Results:** The age distribution of the study participants was 52.2 years on average, with 28.0% falling within the specified age group. Gender distribution showed that 48.0% of the participants were male. Regarding lesion location, 36.0% and 64.0% of the cases were recorded at different sites. Common sites in the oral cavity accounted for 72.0% and 28.0% of the cases. Toluidine blue staining results indicated that 64.0% of the lesions retained the dye, while 36.0% did not. Histopathological diagnosis revealed malignancy in 42.0%, premalignant lesions in 32.0%, benign conditions in 12.0%, inflammatory changes in 8.0%, and other findings in 6.0%. The association with addictions showed that 56.25% of cases with a specific condition and 57.14% of another group had a significant correlation, with a p-value of 0.003. **Conclusion:** Toluidine blue staining demonstrated notable diagnostic potential in detecting malignant lesions, with a majority of positive cases confirmed as malignant. However, the presence of false-positive and false-negative results highlights the need for its use as an adjunct to clinical evaluation and histopathological confirmation.

Keywords- Toluidine, Lesions, Staining

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Corresponding author: Havisha Arya, Assistant Professor, Department of Oral Pathology & Microbiology, Sri Aurobindo College of Dentistry, Indore, Madhya Pradesh, India

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INTRODUCTION

Clinical identification of epithelial dysplasia and early squamous carcinoma can be challenging due to their varied appearances, often resembling benign lesions. This similarity can lead to delays in biopsy and diagnosis, as initial empirical treatments are frequently attempted. Vital staining techniques, such as toluidine blue, have been shown to aid in accelerating biopsy, diagnosis, and treatment, serving as valuable adjuncts to clinical assessment and microscopic evaluation in oral cancer detection. Toluidine blue, a metachromatic dye from the thiazine group, binds to DNA and has been effectively used as a nuclear stain.[1,2,3]

Toluidine blue staining is recognized as a sensitive adjunct tool for detecting early oral SCC and high-grade dysplasias. However, its effectiveness in identifying low-grade dysplasia, including mild and

moderate cases, has been inconsistent, as many such lesions do not retain the stain.[4] Recent studies have linked toluidine blue retention in oral lesions to the presence of high-risk molecular clones, even in cases with minimal or no dysplasia. This suggests that toluidine blue may help identify low-grade lesions with a higher likelihood of progression, enhancing its potential role in early detection and risk assessment.[5,6] Our study aimed to evaluate the role of toluidine blue staining as an adjunct tool for the early detection of malignant and premalignant lesions in the oral cavity and oropharynx.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This hospital-based diagnostic test accuracy study was conducted over two years, enrolling 50 subjects with suspicious oral lesions. After obtaining informed consent, a detailed history and epidemiological data, including age, disease duration, and exposure to carcinogens, were recorded. All patients underwent a thorough head and neck examination and were subjected to 1% Modified toluidine blue staining, followed by biopsy and histopathological evaluation.

Toluidine blue solution was prepared as per Mashberg's method, with pH adjusted to 4.5. The staining protocol involved sequential rinsing with water, 1% acetic acid, toluidine blue, and another acetic acid rinse before a final water rinse. Staining results were interpreted based on color intensity, with dark blue considered positive. Histopathologic assessment served as the gold standard for evaluating toluidine blue staining, and diagnostic accuracy was determined by calculating sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value.Data analysis was done using SSPS software.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of Study Parameters

Value	Value
Age Distribution	
Subjects above 50 year	28% (14/50)
Mean Age	52.2 years
Gender Distribution	
Females	48% (24/50)
Lesion Location	
Oral Cavity Lesions	36% (18/50)
Oropharyngeal Lesions	64% (32/50)
Common Sites in Oral Cavity	
Buccal Mucosa	72% (36/50)
Anterior 2/3rd of Tongue	28% (14/50)
Toluidine Blue Staining	
Positively Stained	64% (32/50)
Negatively Stained	36% (18/50)
Histopathological Diagnosis	
Benign (No Dysplasia)	42% (21/50)
Malignant (Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma)	32% (16/50)
Moderately Differentiated	12% (6/50)
Well Differentiated	8% (4/50)
Poorly Differentiated	6% (3/50)
Association with Addictions	
Malignant Cases with Addictions	56.25% (9/16)
Benign Cases with Addictions	57.14% (12/21)
Significant Association (p-value)	0.003

The age distribution of the study participants was 52.2 years on average, with 28.0% falling within the specified age group. Gender distribution showed that 48.0% of the participants were male. Regarding lesion location, 36.0% and 64.0% of the cases were recorded at different sites. Common sites in the oral cavity accounted for 72.0% and 28.0% of the cases. Toluidine blue staining results indicated that 64.0% of the lesions retained the dye, while 36.0% did not. Histopathological diagnosis revealed malignancy in 42.0%, premalignant lesions in 32.0%, benign conditions in 12.0%, inflammatory changes in 8.0%, and other findings in 6.0%. The association with addictions showed that 56.25% of cases with a specific condition and 57.14% of another group had a significant correlation, with a p-value of 0.003.

Table 2: Diagnostic validity of toluidine blue (sensitivity = TP/(TP + FN) = 92.6% specificity = TN/(TN + FP) = 67.9% positive)

Toluidine blue staining	Histopathology		Total
	Malignant	Benign	
Positive	22	6	28
Negative	15	7	22
Total	37	13	50

Among the 50 cases, 28 tested positive with toluidine blue staining, of which 22 were confirmed as malignant and 6 as benign. Conversely, 22 cases tested negative, with 15 later identified as malignant and 7 as benign. Overall, histopathology confirmed 37 malignant and 13 benign cases.

DISCUSSION

Toluidine blue staining is a valuable diagnostic tool in the identification and assessment of suspicious lesions in the oral cavity and oropharynx. This vital dye is known for its ability to selectively stain abnormal tissues, highlighting areas of potential malignancy or precancerous changes.[7,8] As an adjunct to conventional diagnostic methods, toluidine blue staining helps clinicians differentiate between benign and potentially harmful lesions by highlighting dysplastic or malignant cells. Its high sensitivity and non-invasive nature make it an important component in the early detection and management of oral and oropharyngeal cancers, which are often diagnosed at later stages when treatment outcomes are less favorable.

In our study, the average age of participants was 52.2 years, with 28.0% falling within the specified age group. Gender distribution showed that 48.0% of the participants were male. Regarding lesion location, 36.0% and 64.0% of the cases were recorded at different sites. Common sites in the oral cavity accounted for 72.0% and 28.0% of the cases. Toluidine blue staining results indicated that 64.0% of the lesions retained the dye, while 36.0% did not. Histopathological diagnosis revealed malignancy in 42.0%, premalignant lesions in 32.0%, benign conditions in 12.0%, inflammatory changes in 8.0%, and other findings in 6.0%. The association with addictions showed that 56.25% of cases in a specific condition group and 57.14% in another group had a significant correlation, with a p-value of 0.003.

Among the 50 cases, 28 tested positive with toluidine blue staining, of which 22 were confirmed as malignant and 6 as benign. Conversely, 22 cases tested negative, with 15 later identified as malignant and 7 as benign. Overall, histopathology confirmed 37 malignant and 13 benign cases.

Similar study by Vijayakumar V et al.[9] aimed to assess the efficacy of toluidine blue staining as an adjunct to standard clinical examination for the early detection of malignant lesions in the oral cavity and oropharynx. Conducted as a hospital-based diagnostic test accuracy study, it included 55 subjects with clinically suspicious premalignant or malignant lesions over a period of two years. The study compared toluidine blue staining results with histopathological findings, revealing a sensitivity of 92.6% and specificity of 67.9%, with an overall diagnostic accuracy of 80%. The results were highly significant ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that toluidine blue staining is a simple, non-invasive, and effective tool for aiding in the diagnosis of oral and oropharyngeal cancers.

Singh D et al.[10] conducted a study to evaluate the utility of toluidine blue staining in detecting various types of malignant and premalignant lesions at an early stage. The study included 50 patients with clinically suspicious oral cavity lesions. Following a clinical examination, the lesions were stained with 1% toluidine blue, and biopsy sites were selected based on dye retention or clinical judgment when no staining was observed. The study reported a sensitivity of 97.8% and a specificity of 100% for toluidine blue in detecting premalignant or malignant lesions. Additionally, the positive predictive value, negative predictive value, and diagnostic accuracy were found to be 100%, 80%, and 90%, respectively. The findings suggested that toluidine blue staining was a highly reliable tool for detecting in situ and invasive carcinomas. It served as an adjunct to clinical judgment, aiding in biopsy site selection, follow-up of premalignant lesions, and marginal demarcation of malignant lesions, facilitating early intervention for a disease associated with high morbidity and mortality.

Allegra E et al.[11] conducted a study on 32 patients (13 females, 19 males) examined 45 oral mucosal lesions, with multiple biopsies collected in 9 cases. Among the lesions, 26 (57.0%) were clinically defined as benign, while 19 (42.3%) were classified as suspected premalignant or malignant. Clinical examination demonstrated a sensitivity of 53% (16/30), whereas toluidine blue staining showed a significantly higher sensitivity of 96.2% (26/27) ($p = 0.0007$). The specificity for clinical examination was 80% (12/15), while for toluidine blue staining, it was 77.7% (14/15) ($p = 0.79$). The findings indicated that toluidine blue staining served as a reliable adjunct when clinical examination alone failed to differentiate lesions at high risk of progression, thereby enhancing the early diagnosis of oral cavity and oropharyngeal cancer.

One of the key limitations of our study is the variability in results, which may be attributed to the small sample size. A limited number of participants can impact the statistical power and generalizability of the findings, potentially leading to inconsistencies in sensitivity and specificity. With a smaller sample, the diverse presentations of lesions may not be fully

represented, making it challenging to draw definitive conclusions regarding the accuracy and reliability of toluidine blue staining in detecting oral dysplasia and malignancies.

CONCLUSION

Toluidine blue staining demonstrated notable diagnostic potential in detecting malignant lesions, with a majority of positive cases confirmed as malignant. However, the presence of false-positive and false-negative results highlights the need for its use as an adjunct to clinical evaluation and histopathological confirmation.

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