



## Editorial

## How much reproducibility do we need in human and veterinary pathology?



## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Reproducibility  
Repeatability of diagnosis  
Inter- and intraobserver variation

## ABSTRACT

In diagnostic and research reports as well as text-books of human and veterinary pathology repeatability, reproducibility, inter- and intra-observer variation are mentioned rarely as a problem in preparing diagnosis from macroscopic and/or microscopic samples and discussed inconsistently. However, optimal care and restoration of health for a patient are dependent on reliability of diagnosis, therapy, prognosis and prophylaxis. This requires for all tests and procedures a maximal repeatability and reproducibility, a sensitivity and specificity of 85–95% for procedures and methodologies and a comparison of results procedures and methodologies to a gold standard. Looking at the various steps on the road to diagnosis in pathology this is influenced by a series of laboratory steps preparing tissue samples but most importantly reproducibility depends on the handling of visual information in the central nervous system of the individual diagnostician. Thus reproducibility in this context has to be divided into at least three levels: individual (epistemological, organoleptic, inter- and intra-observer variation, and formal/technological- and normative reproducibility). The aim of the present manuscript is to stimulate the reflection among the pathology experts on this most important topic.

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## 1. Introduction

“Veterinary pathologists achieve 80% agreement in application of WHO diagnoses to canine lymphoma.” This title of a research article by Valli (2008) implies that there is a great deal of agreement and minimal inter-observer variation among veterinary diagnostic pathologists, at least with respect to lymphoma diagnoses. However, this is too simple an assumption in view of other investigations that report significant intra- and inter-observer variation among veterinary pathologists in grading canine cutaneous mast cell tumors (Northrup et al., 2005) or intestinal tissues (Willard et al., 2002). Neither is this problem unique to veterinary pathology nor it is discussed in human pathology as well (Furness et al., 2003). Pathology and radiology, relying heavily on visual interpretation, are the two fields of medicine with the lowest diagnostic error rate reproducibility of diagnosis (Berner and Graber, 2008). However, this not only dependent on the handling of visual information in the central nervous system and individual inter- and intra-observer variation but is influenced by a series of laboratory steps from a macroscopical diagnosis to taking a biopsy and finally the preparation of histopathological slides.

In general, diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, prognoses and prophylaxis in both medical and veterinary medical clinical disciplines and pathology need to be reproducible to regain patient health. But intra- and inter-observer variation is only one, probably the last link in the chain of steps (procedures and methodologies) leading from the patient (tissue sample) to diagnosis. The term reproducibility encompasses the entire set of steps and describes

the certainty that by different people under varying laboratory conditions these steps can be reproduced thus describing the accuracy and reliability of a test method.

## 2. Requirements for the reproducibility

The requirements for the reproducibility of a test method, i.e. procedures and methodologies usually applied in making a diagnosis, are (Berner and Graber, 2008).

- High degree of overall repeatability of all procedures and methodologies applied for the entire test method.
- Sensitivity of between 85% and 95% for procedures and methodologies applied depending on the medical/veterinary speciality.
- Specificity of between 85% and 95% for procedures and methodologies applied depending on the medical/veterinary speciality;
- Comparison of procedures and methodologies applied to a gold standard.

## 3. Applying reproducibility to diagnostic pathology

In applying the term reproducibility to the workflow of making diagnoses in human/veterinary pathology, one realizes that there is not one type of overall reproducibility, but that the notion has to be subdivided into several levels, depending first of all on different kinds of diagnosis (macroscopic, histopathological, immunohistochemical, ultrastructural, molecular and others). These kinds of diagnosis are based on very different preparation steps and

technologies applied, e.g., to a patient post mortem investigation or biopsy. To make such a diagnosis, secondly, a pathologist needs a great number of capabilities, skills, competences and experience to see, recognize and interpret image data on different magnification levels (naked eye vs. microscope). Summarizing this complex network of abilities one can differentiate reproducibility into the following levels:

- Individual (epistemological: i.e. neurobiological, gestalt psychological (visual) and organoleptic (auditory, tactile, olfactory) reproducibility with inter-observer and intra-observer variation (Willard et al., 2002).
- Formal/technological reproducibility (i.e. standardization of technologies and processes, measurement, analysis, ISO standards and others).
- Normative reproducibility (i.e. national and or international, e.g. WHO diagnostic guidelines or legal implications, ethics, social codes and others).

Table 1 exemplifies the necessary steps with respect to the different reproducibility levels on the way from a human or animal patient to a diagnosis creating a data set for further epidemiological evaluation.

#### 4. Macroscopic diagnosis of a patient's lesion

The first step in the process of making a pathological diagnosis is the naked eye evaluation of a structural difference from the norm on/in a patient organ. This leads to a macroscopic diagnosis and is primarily a visual process. In other words the eye of a pathologist is used as a measuring device, differentiating colors, brightness values, structures, sizes and movement of the lesion. The ability to differentiate between these parameters depends on the intensity of light and colors, the absolute and relative size of the lesion and training and abilities, both physical and mental, of the pathologist (<https://wiki.fh-muenster.de/fb3/boesche/doku.php?id=public:mt.auge>). With respect to reproducibility this procedure falls into the level of individual/epistemological reproducibility.

The interpretation of a visual impression of either artistic or scientific origin is, according to Ernst Kris and Ernst Gombrich (cited from Kandel, 2012), a creative brain process. Nature or biology is thus comparable to the artist: Gombrich (1978) terms this process “visual discovery through art”. In particular the process of creating a macroscopic pathology diagnosis uses more than visual information. It includes organoleptic data of tactile origin, like consistency or surface temperature of a localized lesion compared to healthy surrounding areas, patient olfactory data and patient auditory events showing e.g. pain or crepitation of a fracture. Gestalt psychology summarizes this in one sentence: “The whole is more than the sum of its parts” describing the interactions of representation from visual and organoleptic information as important steps on the way to making a macroscopic diagnosis.

It was Gombrich (1978) who, following the ideas of Gestalt psychology, first realized that in the central nervous system the visual representations mentioned are processed by the basic thalamic perception system and from there via a bottom up process reach higher visual cognitive areas. In the cortical cerebral areas primary visual perceptions are further processed (compared) under consideration of previously acquired knowledge, leading to classification of information, checking of hypotheses and conclusions. Gombrich (1978) distills these processes to the sentence: “perception is based on classification of representations”, avoiding visual illusions (Kandel, 2012). A perfect example of an optical illusion is the “Necker cube” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necker\\_cube](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Necker_cube)).

To be able to classify visual and organoleptic representations of a patient's macroscopic lesions on the way to a diagnosis and achieve minimal intra- and inter-observer variation, a pathologist needs first of all a thorough, specialized post-graduate training. In addition, internal and external peer review by more experienced colleagues completes the gain of experience (Willard et al., 2002). Once procedures to apply internal or external peer review are standardized and formalized and written up in “standard operational procedures” (SOP) they become part of accreditation and standardization systems (<http://www.hp-management.ch/pdf/17025-grundlagen.pdf>) and are part of formal/technological reproducibility.

#### 5. Taking, processing and interpreting a biopsy

Taking a biopsy from a patient is a surgical procedure to remove a representative tissue sample from a previously diagnosed lesion for further preparation, aiming at microscopic diagnosis. All procedures involved are highly standardized. Thus with respect to reproducibility this procedure falls into the level of formal/technological reproducibility.

##### 5.1. Fixation and embedding of tissue samples

For many years the procedures and methodologies involved are highly standardized and partially automated using specific laboratory equipment. Most of the laboratories involved in such work follow guidelines like EN/ISO 17025 (<http://www.swisstestinglabs.ch/qualitaetssicherung/iso-17025.html>) or comparable systems. Thus with respect to reproducibility, this procedure falls into the level of formal/technological and normative reproducibility.

##### 5.2. Cutting and staining of tissue sections

In most histopathological laboratories tissue sections are cut manually on microtomes, however, the methods applied are highly standardized and regulated by guidelines like EN/ISO 17025 or comparable systems. Staining is usually automated in specialized automated laboratory equipment and again regulated by guidelines like EN/ISO 17025 or comparable systems. Thus with respect to reproducibility this procedure falls into the level of formal/technological and normative reproducibility.

Microscopic reading of slides and preparation of a microscopic diagnosis and final diagnosis

To read slides, specially trained pathologists use a microscope. Although using this technical tool instead of the naked eye, visual impressions are processed in a way similar to that described earlier. In the cortical cerebral areas the primary visual perceptions (visual impression gained from the tissue section) are further processed (compared) under consideration of previously acquired knowledge, leading to classification of information (diagnoses), checking of hypothesis and conclusions (overall diagnosis).

Thus with respect to reproducibility these procedures fall into the level of individual/epistemological reproducibility.

##### 5.3. Quality control by internal or external peer reviews

Over the last decades macroscopic and histopathological diagnoses, especially of neoplastic lesions from different national or international laboratories, were hardly comparable due to local or national schools of thought and thought styles, according to Fleck (1936, 1979). To optimize individual/epistemological reproducibility and in particular inter-observer variation, in a first step, several different classification systems for tumors were developed to gain information on the prognosis of a specific neoplasm. This development evolved parallel to implementation

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