Journal of Clinical Virology 65 (2015) 6–10

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Clinical Virology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jcv

Nucleic acid testing by public health referral laboratories for public health laboratories using the U.S. HIV diagnostic testing algorithm

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 24 November 2014
Received in revised form 21 January 2015
Accepted 23 January 2015

Keywords:
HIV
Algorithms
Nucleic acid amplification test
Diagnostic tests

ABSTRACT

Background: Many public health laboratories adopting the U.S. HIV laboratory testing algorithm do not have a nucleic acid test (NAT), which is needed when the third- or fourth-generation HIV screening immunoassay is reactive and the antibody-based supplemental test is non-reactive or indeterminate.
Objectives: Among public health laboratories utilizing public health referral laboratories for NAT conducted as part of the algorithm, we evaluated the percentage of screening immunoassays needing NAT, the number of specimens not meeting APTIMA (NAT) specifications, time to APTIMA result, the proportion of acute infections (i.e., reactive APTIMA) among total infections, and screening immunoassay specificity.
Study design: From August 2012 to April 2013, 22 laboratories enrolled to receive free APTIMA (NAT) at New York or Florida public health referral laboratories. Data were analyzed for testing conducted until June 2013.
Results: Submitting laboratories conducted a median of 4778 screening immunoassays; 0–1.3% (median 0.2%) needed NAT. Of 140 specimens received, 9 (6.4%) did not meet NAT specifications. The median time from specimen collection to reporting the 11 reactive NAT results was ten days, including six days from receipt in the submitting laboratory to shipment to the referral laboratory. Acute infections ranged from 0 to 12.5% (median 0%) of total infections. Third- and fourth-generation immunoassays met package insert specificity values.
Conclusions: Public health referral laboratories provide a feasible option for conducting NAT. Reducing the time from specimen collection to submission of specimens for NAT is an important step toward maximizing the public health impact of identifying acute infections.

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1. Background

The HIV diagnostic testing algorithm recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL) includes the use of a nucleic acid test (NAT) for specimens with a repeatedly reactive fourth-generation immunoassay and a non-reactive or indeterminate supplemental antibody test that differentiates HIV-1 from HIV-2 [1]. If the NAT is negative, there is no evidence of HIV infection, and the result likely occurred due to a false-positive initial immunoassay. Fourth-generation immunoassays, such as the ARCHITECT HIV Ag/Ab Combo (Abbott Diagnostics, Chicago, Illinois) (ARCHITECT) and the GS HIV Combo Ag/Ab EIA (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Redmond, WA) (GS Combo), appear to perform with high specificity [2–4], so false-positive results should be rare. If the NAT is reactive, there is evidence of acute infection. Identification of acute infections enables timely intervention to treat infected persons and curb onward transmission [5,6].

Only one NAT is Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved for diagnostic use, the APTIMA HIV-1 RNA Qualitative Assay

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcv.2015.01.017
1386-6532/Published by Elsevier B.V.

(APTIMA, Hologic GEN-PROBE, San Diego, CA). Low testing volumes in many laboratories make it impractical to maintain the test due to cost and required technical expertise [7]. The CDC and APHL conducted a demonstration project in which two public health laboratories provided NAT referral services for public health laboratories using the recommended algorithm.

2. Objectives

We assessed whether submitting laboratories adhered to APTIMA specimen handling instructions, the time to provision of APTIMA results, the proportion of acute infections, and the specificity of the third- and fourth-generation screening immunoassays.

3. Study design

New York State Department of Health's Wadsworth Center and the Florida Department of Health, Bureau of Public Health Laboratories were selected to serve as NAT referral laboratories because of their experience using APTIMA. APHL member laboratories using the laboratory algorithm with a repeatedly reactive third- or fourth-generation immunoassay and a non-reactive or indeterminate antibody supplemental test and without access to NAT were invited to participate at no cost. Although not preferred, third-generation immunoassays are listed as an alternative to fourth-generation immunoassays in the algorithm [8], and Western blots and immunofluorescence assays are included as alternatives to supplemental antibody tests that differentiate HIV-1 from HIV-2. Between August 2012 and April 2013, 22 public health laboratories enrolled to send serum or plasma that required NAT to the referral laboratories. We examined data from enrollment until June 2013. During that period, 15 public health laboratories used fourth-generation immunoassays: seven used ARCHITECT and eight used GS Combo. Six laboratories used third-generation immunoassays: five used GS HIV-1/HIV-2 Plus O EIA (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Redmond, WA) (GS Plus O) and one used ADVIA Centaur HIV1/O/2 Enhanced (Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, Tarrytown, NY) (ADVIA). One laboratory switched from a third-generation (GS HIV-1/HIV-2 Plus O EIA (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Redmond, WA)) to a fourth-generation immunoassay (ARCHITECT). For supplemental testing, eight laboratories used an HIV-1/HIV-2 differentiation test, ten used an HIV-1 Western blot, three used both, and one used an HIV-1 immunofluorescence assay and an HIV-2 Western blot.

The New York referral laboratory reported APTIMA results to the submitting laboratory by telephone or fax, and mailed a report. The Florida laboratory returned APTIMA results to the submitting laboratory by secure fax, and sent an email about the fax.

By submitting laboratory, we reported the number of specimens needing NAT. Nucleic acid tests, such as APTIMA, have more restrictive criteria for usage than serologic tests. We evaluated the proportion not meeting package insert requirements. We assessed the proportion of acute infections among total infections in each submitting laboratory. We conducted a sensitivity analysis for acute infections among total infections to assess the maximum proportion of acute infections. In this analysis, we considered specimens eligible for NAT testing that did not receive it, as well as submitted specimens with reactive NAT, to be acute infections. The occurrence of false-positive screening test results impacts how often NAT is needed. We calculated the specificity of each screening immunoassay by submitting laboratory. We conducted a sensitivity analysis that represented the worst case scenario for specificity, in which specimens with false-positive screening assay results based on NAT, and those eligible for NAT that did not receive it, were considered to have false-positive results. Finally, since timely provision of results among those with acute infection is paramount, we assessed the time from specimen collection to reporting of results, by APTIMA result.

4. Results

4.1. Specimens needing NAT

Submitting laboratories conducted between 486 and 39,257 third or fourth-generation immunoassay tests (median = 4778) (Table 1). From 0% to 1.3% (median = 0.2%) of specimens tested in each submitting laboratory needed NAT. Of those 290 specimens, 140 (48.3%) were submitted to the referral laboratories. The median specimen volume sent was 600 μL.

4.2. Specimen adequacy for NAT

Of 140 specimens submitted, 9 (6.4%) were insufficient for testing because blood was stored for greater than 3 days before centrifugation ($n = 6$), or because serum was held for more than 8 days at 4 °C or above in the submitting laboratory ($n = 3$).

4.3. Infections during the study period

Laboratories reported between 8 and 460 total HIV infections (Table 1). The proportion of acute infections among total infections ranged from 0 to 12.5% (median = 0%). According to the sensitivity analysis, the maximum proportion of acute infections among total infections ranged from 0 to 36.4% (median = 12.9%). The highest percentage was from the laboratory with eight total infections. There was no evidence of testing more than one specimen from persons identified with acute infection, based on the laboratory information systems in New York, and given that no two specimens tested in Florida came from the same laboratory.

4.4. Screening assay specificity

The median specificity for all assays was >99.9% (Table 2). The specificity confidence interval for all screening immunoassays overlapped with or was higher than that listed in the package insert (not shown), except for one 'worst case' estimate for specificity for the GS HIV-1/HIV-2 Plus O EIA (98.7%).

4.5. Time to APTIMA results

The time from specimen collection to APTIMA result reporting was 11 days for those with non-reactive results and 10 days for those with reactive results (Table 3). The time from specimen receipt at the submitting laboratory to shipment to the referral laboratory was the biggest lag, and took six days. Referral laboratories tested specimens with APTIMA within two days.

5. Discussion

During the study, 22 laboratories using the recommended HIV diagnostic testing algorithm enrolled to receive NAT, which is indicative of the need for alternative NAT sources for public health laboratories. Approximately 0.2% of specimens tested needed NAT, and third- and fourth-generation immunoassays performed with high specificity. Thus, it may not be cost-effective for public health laboratories to implement NAT in-house. Most specimens submitted to public health referral laboratories were suitable for APTIMA testing. Eleven acute infections were identified, some of which occurred in areas with low rates (i.e., <1%) of established infection.

The time from specimen collection to release of results from the referral laboratory was ten days for specimens from persons with acute infection, and there may have been subsequent