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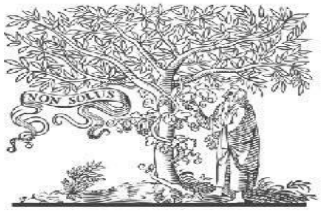

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Paper Authors
Dr. Brahmam Pasumarthi, Dr Lakshminarayana SA, Dr. Vamseedhar Annam, Dr Naladi Baratha Jyothi

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A Thorough Overview of Current Developments in the Creation of Diagnostic Parasitology Assays Based on Aptamers

[1]Dr. Brahmam Pasumarthi
Associate professor, Biology, Dept of Humanities and sciences,
PACE Institute of Technology and Sciences, Ongole, Prakasam district,
Andhra Pradesh, India.
brahmampp147@gmail.com
[2]Dr Lakshminarayana SA
Professor and Head, Department of Microbiology
Rajarajeswari Medical College and Hospital, Bangalore
lakshmi.kims@gmail.com
Dr. Vamseedhar Annam
Professor, Department of Pathology, Rajarajeswari Medical College and Hospital, Kambipura,
Mysore Road, Bangalore - 560074.
Vamseedhar_a@yahoo.com
[4]Dr Naladi Baratha Jyothi
Assistant professor in Zoology, Maris Stella College Autonomous
Vijayawada, NTR District, Andhra Pradesh
Pincode:520008
drbarathajyothinaladi@gmail.com

Abstract Parasitic infections pose a significant global health burden, necessitating the development of accurate and efficient diagnostic assays for timely detection and effective management. In recent years, aptamers have emerged as promising alternatives to traditional diagnostic tools in parasitology due to their high affinity and specificity for target molecules. This review provides a comprehensive overview of the current developments in diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers, highlighting their advantages, challenges, and potential applications. The review begins by introducing the concept of aptamers and their unique properties, including their selection methodologies and structural characteristics. The advantages of aptamers over conventional diagnostic methods, such as antibodies, are discussed, emphasizing their cost-effectiveness, stability, and ease of synthesis. Next, the review focuses on the application of aptamers in the diagnosis of various parasitic infections. It covers a wide range of parasitic pathogens, including protozoa, helminths, and arthropods, and describes the specific aptamer-based assays developed for their detection. These assays utilize diverse formats, such as colorimetric, electrochemical, and fluorescence-based platforms, and exhibit high sensitivity and specificity. Additionally, multiplexing strategies and the integration of aptamer-based assays with other diagnostic techniques are explored,

enhancing their utility in complex parasitic infections. Furthermore, the challenges and limitations associated with aptamer-based diagnostic assays in parasitology are discussed. These include the potential for false positives or negatives, the need for extensive validation, and the limited availability of well-characterized aptamers for certain parasitic targets. Strategies to overcome these challenges, such as the use of modified aptamers and advanced assay optimization techniques, are highlighted. The review concludes with an outlook on the future directions and potential applications of aptamer-based diagnostic assays in parasitology. The integration of aptamers into point-of-care devices, the development of aptamer-based therapeutics, and the emergence of aptamer libraries for rapid aptamer discovery are discussed, indicating a promising future for this field.In summary, aptamer-based diagnostic assays have shown great potential for accurate and efficient detection of parasitic infections. Despite the existing challenges, ongoing advancements in aptamer selection, assay optimization, and integration with existing diagnostic platforms hold promise for the development of robust and reliable aptamer-based diagnostic tools for parasitology in the near future.

Keywords: parasitology, aptamers, diagnostic assays, protozoa, helminths, arthropods, point-of-care devices, therapeutics, molecular diagnostics.

Introduction

Parasitic infections represent a major global health challenge, impacting the lives of millions of individuals worldwide. Timely and accurate diagnosis plays a crucial role in effectively managing and controlling these infections. In recent years, aptamers have emerged as promising tools for diagnostic parasitology assays. Aptamers are short single-stranded DNA or RNA molecules that exhibit high affinity and specificity for target molecules. Their unique properties have attracted significant attention, offering new possibilities for the development of diagnostic tools in parasitology. This comprehensive review aims to provide an in-depth overview of the current developments in the creation of diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers, highlighting their advantages, challenges, and potential applications.

Aptamers, obtained through the Systematic Evolution of Ligands by Exponential Enrichment (SELEX) process, possess the ability to specifically recognize and bind to target molecules produced by parasitic pathogens. The selection methodologies

and properties of aptamers will be discussed in detail, shedding light on their distinctive characteristics and their potential to revolutionize diagnostic assays in parasitology. The review will delve into the application of aptamers in the diagnosis of various parasitic infections, encompassing a broad range of pathogens such as protozoa, helminths, and arthropods. The focus will be on describing specific aptamer-based assays that have been developed for the detection of key parasitic pathogens, including but not limited to *Plasmodium spp., Trypanosoma spp., Leishmania spp.,* and *Schistosoma spp*. These assays utilize diverse detection platforms, such as colorimetric, electrochemical, and fluorescence-based methods, providing heightened sensitivity and specificity. The potential for multiplexing strategies, allowing the simultaneous detection of multiple parasites, will also be explored, highlighting the versatility of aptamer-based assays in addressing complex parasitic infections.

Challenges and limitations associated with aptamer-based diagnostic assays in parasitology will be addressed. Factors such as false positives or negatives, stemming from non-specific binding or variations in target expression, will be examined. Rigorous validation of aptamer-based assays will be emphasized to ensure their reliability and accuracy. Additionally, the review will discuss the limited availability of well-characterized aptamers for certain parasitic targets and propose strategies to overcome these limitations, including the use of modified aptamers and advanced assay optimization techniques.The review will conclude by discussing the future directions and potential applications of aptamer-based diagnostic assays in parasitology. The integration of aptamers into point-of-care devices holds promise for rapid and on-site diagnosis, particularly in resource-limited settings. Aptamer-based therapeutics, such as targeted drug delivery systems, offer potential avenues for the treatment of parasitic infections. Moreover, the emergence of aptamer libraries and high-throughput aptamer discovery techniques opens doors for the rapid identification of aptamers against a wide range of parasitic targets[1].

Aptamer

An aptamer is a short, single-stranded nucleic acid molecule (DNA or RNA) or a peptide that can bind specifically to a target molecule. Aptamers are often referred to as "chemical antibodies"

because they can recognize and bind to a wide range of targets, including proteins, small molecules, viruses, and even whole cells, with high affinity and specificity. Aptamers are generated through a process called SELEX (Systematic Evolution of Ligands by Exponential Enrichment). SELEX involves multiple rounds of selection and amplification, where a large pool of random nucleic acid sequences or peptide variants is exposed to the target molecule. The sequences that bind to the target with the highest affinity are isolated, amplified, and subjected to subsequent rounds of selection. Over time, the pool of aptamer sequences becomes enriched for those that have the highest affinity for the target.

The unique three-dimensional structure of an aptamer enables it to bind to its target molecule through various interactions, including hydrogen bonding, van der Waals forces, and hydrophobic interactions. Aptamers can be engineered to have high specificity and affinity for their target, often rivaling or surpassing traditional antibody-based recognition. One significant advantage of aptamers is their versatility and ease of modification. They can be chemically synthesized, allowing for the introduction of modifications to enhance stability, increase binding affinity, or attach reporter molecules for detection purposes. Aptamers can be used in a wide range of applications, including diagnostics, therapeutics, biosensors, drug delivery, and targeted imaging[2].

Aptamer selection

Aptamer selection is the process of isolating and identifying aptamers with high affinity and specificity for a target molecule. The selection process typically involves multiple rounds of screening and amplification to enrich the pool of aptamer candidates that bind to the target.The most commonly used method for aptamer selection is SELEX (Systematic Evolution of Ligands by Exponential Enrichment). SELEX involves the following steps:

Library Generation

A large pool of random DNA or RNA sequences (typically 10^13 - 10^15 different sequences) is synthesized. The sequences are usually 40-100 nucleotides long and contain randomized regions flanked by fixed primer-binding sites.

Binding

The library of sequences is incubated with the target molecule of interest under specific conditions (buffer, temperature, etc.) that favor binding. This step allows

the aptamers to interact with the target and form complexes.

Separation

Unbound sequences are separated from the target-bound sequences. Various methods can be used for separation, such as filtration, centrifugation, or affinity chromatography. The bound sequences are retained for further analysis.

Amplification

The bound sequences (aptamer candidates) are amplified using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR). This amplification step generates a larger pool of aptamer candidates for the subsequent rounds of selection.

Enrichment

The amplified sequences are subjected to additional rounds of binding, separation, and amplification. Each round of selection aims to enrich the pool of sequences that have higher affinity for the target molecule [3].

Counter-Selection (Optional)

In some cases, a counter-selection step may be included to remove aptamer candidates that bind to undesired targets or exhibit non-specific binding. This step helps to improve the specificity of the selected aptamers[4].

Sequencing and Characterization

After several rounds of selection, the enriched aptamer candidates are sequenced to identify the specific sequences that have the highest affinity for the target. The selected aptamer sequences are then synthesized and further characterized for their binding properties and potential applications.

The number of selection rounds required for aptamer isolation depends on the complexity of the target and the desired affinity of the aptamers. Typically, 6-15 rounds of selection are performed to obtain aptamers with sufficient binding properties.In recent years, alternative methods to SELEX, such as cell-based selection, have also emerged. These methods involve screening aptamers against live cells or complex biological matrices to obtain aptamers that can specifically recognize cell surface markers or distinguish between different cell types.Overall, aptamer selection is a systematic process that aims to identify and isolate aptamers with high affinity and specificity for a target molecule. This process enables the development of aptamers for various applications in

biotechnology, diagnostics, and therapeutics [5].

Properties of aptamers

Aptamers possess several unique properties that make them attractive for various applications in biotechnology, diagnostics, and therapeutics. Some key properties of aptamers include:

High Affinity and Specificity

Aptamers can exhibit high binding affinity and specificity for their target molecules. Through the SELEX process, aptamers can be selected to recognize a wide range of targets, including proteins, small molecules, viruses, and cells. The affinity of aptamers can often rival or surpass that of antibodies.

Versatility

Aptamers can be generated against a wide range of targets, from small molecules to complex biological entities. They can bind to various types of targets, including proteins, peptides, nucleic acids, carbohydrates, and even non-biological targets like metals or small molecules. This versatility allows aptamers to be used in diverse applications.

Stability

Aptamers can exhibit high stability, allowing them to maintain their structure and function under different conditions, including temperature, pH, and exposure to nucleases or proteases. Modifications to the aptamer backbone, such as the incorporation of modified nucleotides or chemical modifications, can enhance stability and increase resistance to degradation.

Small Size

Aptamers are relatively small compared to antibodies, which confers several advantages. Their small size allows for better tissue penetration, efficient delivery to cells, and easier modification or conjugation with other molecules, such as fluorophores, drugs, or nanoparticles.

Ease of Synthesis

Aptamers can be chemically synthesized using solid-phase synthesis techniques. This allows for cost-effective and scalable production of aptamers with consistent quality. Additionally, aptamers can be easily modified during synthesis by incorporating modified nucleotides or adding functional groups for conjugation purposes[6].

Reversible Binding

Aptamers can exhibit reversible binding, meaning they can bind and dissociate from their target molecules. This property allows for the development of aptamer-based biosensors or switches, where binding and release of the target can be detected and monitored.

Low Immunogenicity

Aptamers are synthetic nucleic acids or peptides, which generally have low immunogenicity compared to antibodies derived from animals. This property reduces the risk of unwanted immune responses when aptamers are used in diagnostic or therapeutic applications.

Reproducibility

Aptamers can be synthesized to have identical sequences, ensuring consistent performance and reproducibility in experiments and applications. This reproducibility is advantageous for assay development and manufacturing processes[7].

These properties collectively make aptamers powerful tools in various fields, including diagnostics, targeted therapy, bio sensing, drug delivery, and molecular imaging. Aptamers are being explored and developed for a wide range of applications, and their unique properties continue to drive research and innovation in the field of nucleic acid-based molecular recognition.

Aptamers application in diagnostic parasitology

Aptamers have shown promise in the field of diagnostic parasitology, where they can be used to develop assays for the detection and identification of parasitic infections. Here are the steps involved in creating diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers:

Selection of Target Parasite

Determine the specific parasite or group of parasites that you want to detect or identify. This could be a protozoan parasite like Plasmodium falciparum (malaria), Trypanosoma spp. (African sleeping sickness), or Leishmania spp. (leishmaniasis), or a helminth parasite like Schistosoma spp. (schistosomiasis) or Fasciola spp. (fascioliasis) [8].

Aptamer Selection

Perform SELEX or a similar aptamer selection process to isolate aptamers that bind specifically to the target parasite or a parasite-specific biomarker. The selection process should be performed using appropriate controls, such as closely

related non-pathogenic species or non-parasitic organisms, to ensure specificity.

Aptamer Characterization

After aptamer selection, characterize the selected aptamers for their binding affinity, specificity, and stability. This can involve techniques such as surface plasmon resonance (SPR), fluorescence-based assays, or enzyme-linked assays to quantify the binding of aptamers to the target parasite or biomarker [9].

Assay Design

Based on the characteristics of the selected aptamers, design an appropriate assay format for parasite detection. This could include sandwich assays, lateral flow assays, or enzyme-linked aptamer assays (ELAAs). Consider factors such as sample type, sensitivity, specificity, and ease of use in resource-limited settings.

Optimization and Validation

Optimize the assay conditions, including aptamer concentration, buffer composition, and incubation times, to achieve optimal sensitivity and specificity. Validate the assay using well-characterized clinical samples or validated reference samples to assess its performance parameters, such as sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy [10].

Multiplexing and Targeting Multiple Parasites

If desired, develop multiplexed assays to detect multiple parasitic infections simultaneously. This can be achieved by using different aptamers targeting different parasites or biomarkers, or by combining aptamer-based assays with other detection methods such as PCR or antibody-based assays.

Integration with Detection Platforms

Consider the detection platform or instrument that will be used with the aptamer-based assay. This could be a simple visual readout, a portable point-of-care device, or a high-throughput laboratory instrument. Ensure compatibility between the assay format and the chosen detection platform.

Clinical Evaluation

Conduct clinical evaluations of the aptamer-based diagnostic assay using a well-defined cohort of patient samples. Compare the results of the aptamer-based assay with gold-standard methods (such as microscopy, PCR, or serology) to assess its clinical sensitivity and specificity.

Optimization and Commercialization

Refine and optimize the assay based on feedback and further validation studies.

Address any limitations or challenges identified during the development process. If the assay demonstrates promising performance, consider commercialization options such as seeking regulatory approvals, partnerships with diagnostic companies, or technology transfer[11].

Creating diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers requires careful selection of target parasites, efficient aptamer selection and characterization, assay design and optimization, and rigorous validation. Aptamer-based assays have the potential to offer advantages such as high sensitivity, specificity, and the ability to be tailored for specific parasites or biomarkers, making them valuable tools for the diagnosis and management of parasitic infections.

Limitation and challenges of aptamers

While aptamers offer numerous advantages, they also have some limitations and challenges that should be considered:

Off-Target Binding

Aptamers, like any other targeting molecule, can potentially exhibit off-target binding to unintended molecules. This can result in false-positive or false-negative results in diagnostic assays. Careful selection, optimization, and characterization of aptamers are essential to minimize off-target binding[12].

***In Vivo* Stability**

Aptamers can undergo degradation or clearance in vivo, which may limit their utility in certain applications, such as systemic delivery or prolonged circulation. Incorporating modifications, such as chemical stabilization or conjugation to protective carriers, can help improve aptamer stability in biological fluids.

Batch-to-Batch Variability

Aptamer synthesis can involve chemical modifications and purification steps, which can introduce variability between batches. Quality control measures need to be implemented to ensure consistency and reproducibility in aptamer-based assays or therapeutic formulations.

Limited Tissue Penetration

Aptamers, particularly larger ones, may face challenges in penetrating certain tissues or crossing physiological barriers. Strategies such as optimization of aptamer size, conjugation to delivery systems, or alternative administration routes can be explored to overcome this limitation [13].

Immunogenicity

Although aptamers are generally considered to have low immunogenicity compared to antibodies, they can still elicit immune responses in some cases. Preclinical and clinical evaluations are important to assess the immunogenic potential of aptamers and ensure their safety for therapeutic applications.

Limited Target Accessibility

Aptamers typically bind to specific sites on the target molecule. If the target site is inaccessible or buried within a larger protein structure, aptamer binding may be hindered. This can limit the effectiveness of aptamers for certain targets or require alternative strategies, such as target site engineering or selection of aptamers against accessible epitopes [14].

Cost and Manufacturing

The cost of aptamer synthesis and manufacturing can be higher compared to traditional antibodies. Additionally, the production of large quantities of aptamers with consistent quality can be challenging. However, as aptamer synthesis technologies advance and scale, these challenges are gradually being addressed.

Limited Commercial Availability

Compared to antibodies, a wide range of commercially available aptamers is currently limited. While numerous aptamers have been reported in the literature, obtaining commercially validated aptamers for specific targets may still be a challenge, requiring custom synthesis or in-house development [15].

Intellectual Property

Aptamers, being synthetic molecules, can be subject to intellectual property restrictions. This can impact their accessibility, availability, and commercial development. It is important to be aware of existing patents or licensing agreements related to aptamers of interest.Despite these limitations and challenges, ongoing research and technological advancements continue to address and overcome many of these issues. Aptamers still hold significant promise as versatile tools in various applications, and ongoing efforts aim to enhance their performance, stability, and accessibility.

Future research on aptamers

In recent years, aptamers have emerged as promising tools for various applications in biotechnology and medicine. Aptamers are short, single-stranded DNA or RNA

molecules that can bind to specific target molecules with high affinity and specificity. They offer several advantages over traditional antibody-based approaches, including ease of synthesis, stability, and low immunogenicity. As the field of aptamer research continues to evolve, here are some potential areas of future research: [16]

Expansion of target diversity

Aptamers have primarily been developed against protein targets, but there is a growing interest in expanding the target diversity to include small molecules, peptides, carbohydrates, and even whole cells. Future research may focus on developing novel strategies for generating aptamers against a broader range of targets, enabling applications in drug discovery, diagnostics, and therapeutics.

Improved selection strategies

The process of selecting aptamers through SELEX (Systematic Evolution of Ligands by Exponential Enrichment) can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Future research may explore the development of innovative selection strategies that enhance the efficiency and speed of aptamer discovery. This could involve the integration of high-throughput screening methods, microfluidic systems, or in silico approaches to streamline the selection process.

Structural characterization of aptamer-target complexes

Understanding the structural basis of aptamer-target interactions is crucial for rational design and optimization of aptamers. While some aptamer-target complex structures have been elucidated, there is still a need for more comprehensive structural information. Future research may focus on employing techniques like X-ray crystallography, cryo-electron microscopy, and nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy to determine the high-resolution structures of aptamer-target complexes [17].

Development of aptamer-based therapeutics

Aptamers have shown great potential as therapeutic agents, with applications in targeted drug delivery, cancer therapy, and antimicrobial therapy. Future research may involve optimizing aptamers for in vivo stability, pharmacokinetics, and therapeutic efficacy. Additionally, efforts may be directed towards improving strategies for targeted delivery of aptamers to specific tissues or cells, such as through nanoparticle-based formulations or conjugation with targeting moieties.

Integration with other technologies

Aptamers can be combined with other technologies to enhance their functionality and broaden their applications. For instance, integrating aptamers with nanomaterials, such as graphene, quantum dots, or gold nanoparticles, can lead to improved detection sensitivity or enable controlled drug release. Future research may explore such synergistic approaches to leverage the unique properties of aptamers and other nanotechnologies [18].

Biosensing and Diagnostics

Aptamers have been widely used as recognition elements in biosensors for the detection of various analytes, including proteins, small molecules, and pathogens. Future research may involve the development of innovative biosensing platforms that offer high sensitivity, selectivity, and rapid detection. This could include the integration of aptamers with emerging technologies like microfluidics, lab-on-a-chip devices, or smartphone-based diagnostics[19,20].

Conclusion

Overall, future research on aptamers is likely to focus on expanding their target repertoire, improving selection strategies, understanding the structural basis of aptamer-target interactions, developing aptamer-based therapeutics, integrating with other technologies, and advancing biosensing and diagnostic applications. These efforts will contribute to the continued growth and application of aptamers in various fields, revolutionizing personalized medicine, diagnostics, and biotechnology. The development of diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers has shown promising progress and holds significant potential for improving the detection and diagnosis of parasitic infections. Aptamers, which are single-stranded DNA or RNA molecules selected for their ability to bind to specific targets, offer several advantages over traditional diagnostic methods. Firstly, aptamers can be generated against a wide range of parasitic targets, including surface proteins, enzymes, and other biomolecules, enabling the development of highly specific assays for different parasitic species. This specificity helps in accurate identification and differentiation of parasites, which is crucial for effective treatment and control measures.

Secondly, aptamer-based assays have demonstrated high sensitivity, allowing for the detection of low parasitic loads that may be missed by conventional methods. This is particularly important for detecting

early-stage infections or monitoring treatment response. Additionally, aptamers can be easily synthesized and modified, making them adaptable for various diagnostic platforms, including lateral flow assays, microarrays, and biosensors. Their compatibility with these different formats facilitates rapid and point-of-care testing, enabling timely diagnosis and reducing the burden on laboratory infrastructure. Moreover, aptamers can be engineered to be stable, cost-effective, and compatible with different sample types, such as blood, urine, or stool. This versatility in sample compatibility enhances the feasibility of aptamer-based assays for field settings and resource-limited regions where parasitic infections are prevalent.

However, despite the promising developments, several challenges still need to be addressed before aptamer-based diagnostic parasitology assays can be widely implemented. These include the need for comprehensive validation studies to establish their clinical performance and reliability, as well as addressing issues related to assay standardization, reproducibility, and cost-effectiveness. In conclusion, the current developments in the creation of diagnostic parasitology assays based on aptamers demonstrate their potential as powerful tools for accurate and sensitive detection of parasitic infections. Continued research and validation studies are necessary to further optimize these assays and overcome the challenges associated with their implementation. If successfully addressed, aptamer-based assays could revolutionize the field of parasitology diagnostics, enabling early detection, improved patient management, and better control of parasitic diseases.

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