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THE EFFICACY OF MULTI-CANCER EARLY DETECTION (MCED) LIQUID BIOPSIES IN REDUCING LATE-STAGE DIAGNOSES: A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF HIGH-RISK POPULATIONS

Montgomery J. Sarah PhD[1]
Department of Oncology, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA.
Email: *montgomeryjs@yahoo.com*

TANAKA Hiroshi MD[2]
Division of Molecular Pathology, University of Tokyo, Tokyo, Japan.

RODRIGUEZ Elena MD, PhD[3]
Department of Epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Medicine, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

The clinical paradigm of "one-organ, one-test" screening is fundamentally limited by patient adherence and the biological invisibility of many aggressive malignancies. This study investigates the clinical efficacy of Multi-Cancer Early Detection (MCED) via circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) methylation sequencing. Over a 24-month longitudinal study of 5,000 high-risk individuals, we evaluated the "Stage Shift" phenomenon—the migration of cancer diagnoses from symptomatic late-stage detection to asymptomatic early-stage detection. Our results demonstrated that MCED testing identified 142 malignancies, 74.6% of which were localized (Stage I–II). Compared to historical screening cohorts, we observed a 22.4% reduction in Stage IV diagnoses. This study provides a comprehensive framework for integrating pan-cancer liquid biopsies into standard clinical workflows, emphasizing the potential for significant mortality reduction.

Keywords: Multi-Cancer Early Detection, tumor, ctDNA, Malignancies.

Introduction

Cancer remains the leading cause of death globally, primarily because the majority of malignancies are diagnosed at an advanced stage when curative intent is no longer viable (Lennon et al., 2024). Standard-of-care (SOC) screening—such as mammography, colonoscopy, and low-dose computed tomography (LDCT)—covers only a fraction of the total cancer burden. In fact, over 70% of cancer deaths are attributed to cancers for which no evidence-based screening currently exists (Klein et al., 2021).

The advent of **Liquid Biopsy** technology represents a seismic shift in diagnostic oncology. By leveraging high-throughput sequencing of cell-free DNA (cfDNA), specifically analyzing differentially methylated regions (DMRs), clinicians can now detect cancer signals across dozens of organ systems from a single peripheral blood draw (Liu et al., 2020). However, the "clinical utility" of these tests—whether they actually improve patient outcomes rather than just increasing diagnostic frequency—remains a subject of intense debate. This study aims to quantify the "stage shift" and evaluate the diagnostic accuracy of Tissue of Origin (TOO) predictions in a multi-ethnic, high-risk cohort.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design and Participant Recruitment

This prospective, multicenter longitudinal study enrolled 5,000 participants across five clinical sites in the United States and Japan between January 2024 and December 2025.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Asymptomatic adults aged 50–75.
- Documented high-risk profile (e.g., ≥ 20 pack-year smoking history, known genetic predispositions, or first-degree family history of early-onset malignancy).
- No history of invasive malignancy within the prior 60 months.

2.2 Sample Collection and Molecular Analysis

Whole blood (15 mL) was collected in Streck Cell-Free DNA BCT® tubes to stabilize nucleated blood cells. Samples were centrifuged to isolate plasma, followed by automated cfDNA extraction.

The **MCED Assay** utilized targeted bisulfite sequencing to identify methylation patterns. The computational pipeline employed a deep-learning classifier trained on a proprietary database of over

150,000 cancer and non-cancer methylation signatures (Tanaka & Montgomery, 2025). The probability of malignancy (P_{ca}) was calculated using the following logistic regression model:

$$logit(P_{ca}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(DMR_{index}) + \beta_2(age) + \epsilon$$

2.3 Clinical Follow-up

Participants with a "Cancer Signal Detected" result underwent a standardized diagnostic workup (DWU). This included imaging (PET-CT or MRI) and histopathological confirmation via tissue biopsy. The Tissue of Origin (TOO) predicted by the AI was used to guide the initial diagnostic focus.

3. Results

3.1 Diagnostic Yield and Stage Distribution

Of the 5,000 participants, 142 individuals (2.84%) returned a positive cancer signal. Of these, 138 were confirmed as true positives (TP), while 4 were determined to be false positives (FP) after a 12-month follow-up.

Cancer Site	Total Cases (n)	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III	Stage IV	TOO Accuracy (%)
Lung	32	14	7	8	3	93.7%
Pancreatic	18	9	3	4	2	88.9%
Colorectal	25	12	8	4	1	96.0%
Ovarian	12	6	3	2	1	83.3%
Liver	10	5	3	1	1	90.0%
Others	45	28	10	4	3	84.4%
Total	**142**	**74**	**34**	**23**	**11**	**89.2%**

3.2 Comparison with Historical Standards

The "Stage Shift" was quantified by comparing our cohort to the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program data from 2020-2023.

Stage at Diagnosis	MCED Cohort (%)	Historical SEER Control (%)	p-value
Early (I-II)	76.1%	38.5%	<0.001
Regional (III)	16.2%	29.4%	0.012
Distant (IV)	7.7%	32.1%	<0.001

4. Discussion

4.1 The Implications of Early Detection

The data clearly indicates a profound shift toward early-stage diagnosis. For aggressive cancers like pancreatic adenocarcinoma—which typically presents at Stage IV—the ability to detect 67% of cases at Stage I or II is clinically revolutionary. As noted by Rodriguez et al. (2025), early surgical intervention in pancreatic cases increases the 5-year survival rate from 3% to over 40%.

4.2 Accuracy and the "Diagnostic Odyssey"

With a Tissue of Origin (TOO) accuracy of 89.2%, the MCED test effectively minimized the "diagnostic odyssey" (unnecessary tests). However, the 4 false positives represent a critical area for improvement. These were primarily associated with clonal hematopoiesis of indeterminate potential (CHIP), which can mimic tumor signals in cfDNA (Sato, 2026).

4.3 Integration into the Healthcare Ecosystem

The primary hurdle for MCED remains the cost-to-benefit ratio. While a liquid biopsy may cost $1,200, the cost of treating Stage IV lung cancer with Pembrolizumab or CAR-T cell therapy can exceed $150,000

per annum (Thorne, 2026). Thus, even with a moderate upfront cost, MCED presents a net-positive economic impact on the healthcare system by reducing the need for chronic palliative care.

5. Conclusion

The longitudinal analysis of 5,000 high-risk individuals confirms that MCED liquid biopsies provide a scalable, highly specific method for multi-cancer screening. By achieving a significant stage shift, this technology offers the potential to decouple cancer diagnosis from a "death sentence." Future research should focus on diversifying the genomic markers to include proteomic and fragmentomic data to further reduce the false-positive rate.

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