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Review Article

The Contribution of Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) in the Diagnosis of Fungal Infections without Culture: Metagenomics Applied to Clinical Mycology

A. Rhars[1,2]*, N. Ezzariga[3,2], Z. Lemkhente[1,2]

[1]Laboratory of Parasitology and Mycology CHU Agadir, Morocco
[2]Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy of Agadir - FMPA, Morocco
[3]Laboratory of Microbiology CHU Agadir, Morocco

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Abstract: Fungal infections have emerged as a significant global health concern, particularly among immunocompromised individuals, where they can lead to severe morbidity and mortality. Traditional diagnostic methods, primarily reliant on culture techniques, often fall short due to their lengthy turnaround times and inability to detect non-viable or fastidious organisms. Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) has revolutionized the diagnostic landscape by enabling rapid and comprehensive identification of fungal pathogens directly from clinical specimens without the need for culture. This article explores the principles of NGS, its applications in clinical mycology, and its potential to enhance diagnostic accuracy and treatment outcomes. By leveraging metagenomic approaches, NGS facilitates the detection of mixed infections, antifungal resistance profiling, and real-time monitoring of disease progression. Despite its challenges, including cost and the need for bioinformatics expertise, NGS represents a paradigm shift in the diagnosis of fungal infections, paving the way for improved patient management and outcomes.

Keywords: Fungal infection, Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS), Clinical Mycology.

INTRODUCTION

Fungal infections are increasingly recognized as a major public health issue, particularly in immunocompromised populations, such as those undergoing chemotherapy, organ transplantation, or living with HIV/AIDS. The World Health Organization (WHO) has reported a rise in the incidence of invasive fungal diseases, which are often associated with high mortality rates. Traditional diagnostic methods, including culture, microscopy, and serological tests, have limitations that can hinder timely and accurate diagnosis. Culture methods, while historically the gold standard, can take several days to weeks and may fail to identify non-culturable or slow-growing fungi. Furthermore, these methods often lack sensitivity, particularly in cases of low fungal burden or prior antifungal treatment.

Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) has emerged as a powerful tool to address these challenges. By allowing for the simultaneous sequencing of millions of DNA fragments, NGS provides a comprehensive view of the microbial community present in clinical samples. This capability is particularly valuable in the context of fungal infections, where mixed microbial populations are common. NGS can identify fungal species directly from clinical specimens, bypassing the need for culture and enabling rapid diagnosis. Metagenomics, the study of genetic material recovered directly from environmental samples, plays a crucial role in this process. It allows for the identification and characterization of fungal pathogens based on their genetic signatures, providing insights into their diversity, abundance, and potential pathogenicity. Additionally, NGS can facilitate the detection of antifungal resistance genes, informing treatment decisions and potentially improving patient outcomes.

This article aims to provide an overview of the contributions of NGS to the diagnosis of fungal infections without culture, highlighting its applications in clinical mycology, the challenges it faces, and its

***Corresponding Author:** Rhars Amal
Laboratory of Parasitology and Mycology CHU Agadir, Morocco

future perspectives. By embracing NGS technology, the field of clinical mycology is poised for significant advancements in diagnostic accuracy and patient care.

Principles of Next-Generation Sequencing

Next-Generation Sequencing encompasses a variety of high-throughput sequencing technologies that allow for the simultaneous sequencing of millions of DNA fragments. The process begins with sample preparation, where DNA is extracted from clinical specimens, such as blood, tissue, or other biological fluids. Following extraction, library construction is performed, in which the extracted DNA is fragmented, and specific adapters are ligated to the ends of the fragments. This step facilitates amplification and sequencing. The prepared library is then subjected to sequencing using platforms like Illumina, Ion Torrent, or PacBio, generating vast amounts of sequence data. Finally, bioinformatics tools are employed to analyze the sequence data, enabling the identification of fungal species present in the sample.

The process involves several key steps:

- **Sample Preparation**: DNA is extracted from clinical specimens, such as blood, tissue, or other biological fluids.
- **Library Construction**: The extracted DNA is fragmented, and specific adapters are ligated to the ends of the fragments, facilitating amplification and sequencing.
- **Sequencing**: The prepared library is subjected to sequencing using platforms like Illumina, Ion Torrent, or PacBio, generating vast amounts of sequence data.
- **Data Analysis**: Bioinformatics tools are employed to analyze the sequence data, enabling the identification of fungal species present in the sample.

Applications of NGS in Clinical Mycology

Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) has transformed the field of clinical mycology by providing innovative methods for the identification and characterization of fungal pathogens. One of the most significant applications of NGS is in the identification of fungal pathogens. Unlike traditional methods that rely on culture, which can be time-consuming and labor-intensive, NGS allows for rapid and precise identification of fungal species directly from clinical samples. By targeting specific regions of the fungal genome, such as the ribosomal RNA gene, NGS can provide species-level identification, even for fungi that are difficult to culture or identify by other means. This ability to detect rare or emerging fungal species is crucial in the context of invasive fungal infections, where timely diagnosis can significantly influence clinical outcomes.

Another major application of NGS is the detection of mixed infections. Fungal infections are often polymicrobial, involving multiple fungal species simultaneously. NGS excels in this context by enabling the simultaneous detection and quantification of various pathogens within a single sample. This comprehensive view of the microbial landscape is essential for tailoring antifungal therapy. For example, in cases of candidiasis, where multiple Candida species may be present, NGS can help identify resistant strains, allowing clinicians to choose more targeted and effective therapies.

Additionally, NGS plays a critical role in antifungal resistance profiling. Antifungal resistance is a growing concern in the treatment of fungal infections, and NGS facilitates the detection of resistance genes associated with specific fungal strains. By analyzing these resistance genes within fungal genomes, clinicians can gain insights into the mechanisms of resistance and adjust treatment strategies accordingly. This capability is particularly valuable in managing patients with recurrent or chronic fungal infections, where resistance patterns may evolve over time.

Moreover, NGS can be used to monitor changes in the fungal population during treatment. By employing NGS to analyze samples taken at different time points, healthcare providers can assess the efficacy of antifungal therapies and detect the emergence of resistant strains in real time. This dynamic monitoring is especially important in immunocompromised patients, who are at higher risk for developing complicated infections.

In addition to these applications, NGS also contributes to understanding the epidemiology of fungal infections. By sequencing strains from different geographical locations or patient populations, researchers can track the spread of specific fungal pathogens and identify potential outbreak sources. This information is vital for public health surveillance and can guide infection control measures in healthcare settings.

Furthermore, NGS enables the exploration of the fungal microbiome, providing insights into the interactions between fungal species and their hosts. Understanding these interactions can reveal how certain fungi contribute to disease and may lead to the identification of novel therapeutic targets.

Overall, the applications of NGS in clinical mycology are vast and continue to expand as technology evolves. By enhancing the speed and accuracy of fungal pathogen identification, improving the management of antifungal resistance, and facilitating comprehensive monitoring of infections, NGS has the potential to significantly improve patient outcomes in the realm of fungal diseases. As research progresses, the integration of NGS into routine clinical practice is likely to become a standard approach in the diagnosis and management of fungal infections, ultimately leading to better healthcare outcomes for patients worldwide.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the significant advantages that Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) offers in the field of clinical mycology, several challenges and limitations must be addressed to fully realize its potential. One of the primary concerns is the high cost associated with NGS technology. The expenses related to sequencing equipment, reagents, and the necessary bioinformatics infrastructure can be substantial, creating barriers for many clinical laboratories, particularly those in resource-limited settings. This financial burden can hinder the widespread adoption of NGS, limiting its availability to only well-funded institutions and specialized centers.

In addition to cost, the complexity of NGS data analysis poses another significant challenge. The vast amount of data generated by NGS requires sophisticated computational tools and expertise in bioinformatics for accurate interpretation. Many clinical laboratories may lack the necessary resources or personnel with the required training to analyze and interpret NGS data effectively. This gap can lead to delays in diagnosis and treatment, undermining the timeliness that NGS is meant to provide. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of sequencing technologies necessitates continuous education and training for laboratory staff, which can be resource-intensive. Standardization of NGS protocols is also a critical issue. Currently, there is a lack of universally accepted guidelines for sample preparation, sequencing, and data analysis in the context of fungal diagnostics. This variability can lead to inconsistencies in results between different laboratories, complicating the interpretation of findings and potentially impacting patient care. Establishing standardized protocols and best practices is essential to ensure reliable and reproducible results across different clinical settings.

Another limitation of NGS is the potential for overdiagnosis or misinterpretation of results. NGS can detect a wide range of fungal species, including those that may not be clinically relevant or are simply colonizers rather than pathogens. This can lead to confusion in clinical decision-making, as clinicians may struggle to differentiate between true infections and incidental findings. The challenge lies in developing robust clinical criteria to interpret NGS results accurately, ensuring that treatment is reserved for genuine infections. Additionally, the issue of antifungal resistance complicates the landscape further. While NGS can identify resistance genes, the clinical implications of these findings are not always straightforward. The presence of resistance genes does not necessarily correlate with treatment failure, as some resistant strains may still be susceptible to certain antifungal agents. Understanding the clinical significance of detected resistance markers is crucial for guiding effective treatment strategies. Moreover, the integration of NGS into routine clinical practice raises concerns about data privacy and security. The genomic data generated from patients can be sensitive, and safeguarding this information is paramount. Ensuring compliance with regulations regarding patient data protection and confidentiality presents an additional layer of complexity for healthcare institutions adopting NGS technologies. Lastly, there is a need for ongoing research to evaluate the clinical utility of NGS in various contexts. While NGS has shown promise in identifying fungal pathogens, more studies are needed to establish its effectiveness in diverse patient populations and clinical scenarios. This research will help clarify the role of NGS in routine diagnostics and its impact on patient outcomes.

Future Perspectives

The future of Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS) in clinical mycology appears exceptionally promising, with ongoing advancements poised to enhance diagnostic capabilities and patient care significantly. As technology continues to evolve, we can expect reductions in the costs associated with NGS, making it more accessible to a broader range of clinical laboratories. Currently, the high cost of sequencing technology and the associated infrastructure can be prohibitive for many institutions, particularly in resource-limited settings. However, as sequencing platforms become more affordable and user-friendly, the integration of NGS into routine clinical practice is likely to increase, allowing for widespread adoption and utilization.

In addition to cost reduction, improvements in sequencing speed and accuracy are anticipated. Next-generation sequencing technologies are continually being refined, leading to faster turnaround times for test results. This rapid processing is critical in clinical settings, especially for diagnosing life-threatening fungal infections where timely intervention can drastically alter patient outcomes. Enhanced accuracy will also reduce false positives and negatives, further solidifying the reliability of NGS as a diagnostic tool. Moreover, the development of targeted NGS panels specifically designed for common fungal pathogens is expected to enhance diagnostic efficiency. These panels can focus on the most clinically relevant organisms and their associated resistance genes, streamlining the process of identifying infections and tailoring appropriate treatments. By concentrating on high-yield targets, clinicians can obtain actionable results more quickly, facilitating prompt therapeutic decisions.

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning into NGS data analysis represents another exciting frontier. Advanced algorithms can process vast datasets generated by sequencing, identifying patterns and correlations that may not be immediately apparent to human analysts. This capability could lead to more accurate predictions regarding disease outcomes, resistance patterns, and optimal treatment strategies, ultimately improving personalized medicine approaches in fungal infection management. Furthermore, as our understanding of the fungal microbiome deepens, NGS will play a vital role in exploring the interactions between fungal species and their hosts. Insights gained from microbiome studies can inform the development of novel therapeutic strategies, including probiotics or microbiome-modulating treatments that could help restore balance in dysbiotic states associated with fungal infections.

Collaboration between clinical microbiologists, infectious disease specialists, and bioinformaticians will be crucial in maximizing the potential of NGS. By fostering interdisciplinary partnerships, the clinical community can develop standardized protocols and guidelines that ensure the consistent application of NGS in diagnosing fungal infections. Such collaboration will also facilitate the sharing of data and insights across institutions, driving collective advancements in understanding fungal pathogenesis and resistance mechanisms. Public health implications of NGS are also significant. As surveillance programs increasingly incorporate NGS for tracking fungal outbreaks and monitoring resistance trends, public health officials will be better equipped to respond to emerging threats. This proactive approach can lead to more effective infection control measures and improved strategies for managing public health risks associated with fungal diseases.

The future of NGS in clinical mycology is bright, with the potential to revolutionize the diagnosis and management of fungal infections. As technology advances and becomes more integrated into clinical workflows, NGS will likely become a standard component of fungal diagnostics. This evolution promises to enhance not only the accuracy and speed of diagnoses but also the overall quality of care for patients suffering from fungal infections. By embracing these advancements, the healthcare community can significantly improve patient outcomes and contribute to better management of fungal diseases globally.

CONCLUSION

Next-Generation Sequencing represents a significant advancement in the diagnosis of fungal infections, particularly in cases where traditional culture methods fall short. Its ability to provide rapid, comprehensive, and accurate identification of fungal pathogens has the potential to revolutionize clinical mycology. As technology continues to evolve, the integration of NGS into routine clinical practice will likely improve patient outcomes and facilitate more effective management of fungal infections.

While NGS holds great promise for advancing the diagnosis and management of fungal infections, several challenges and limitations must be addressed. High costs, data complexity, the need for standardization, potential for overdiagnosis, resistance interpretation, data privacy concerns, and the requirement for further research are all critical factors that need to be navigated. By tackling these challenges, the clinical mycology community can work towards fully integrating NGS into standard practice, ultimately enhancing patient care and outcomes in the management of fungal diseases.

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