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Perspective

Advances in Point-of-Care Diagnostics for Rapid Infectious Disease Identification

Hannah Vogel*

Department of Clinical Microbiology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

DESCRIPTION

Rapid and accurate identification of infectious diseases is a critical component of modern healthcare, particularly in emergency and resource-limited settings. Delays in diagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment, increased transmission, and worse patient outcomes. Point-of-care diagnostic technologies have emerged as an important solution, enabling clinicians to obtain clinically relevant results within minutes to hours at or near the site of patient care.

Traditional laboratory diagnostics often require centralized facilities, specialized equipment, and trained personnel. Samples must be transported, processed, and analyzed, which can introduce delays. In contrast, point-of-care systems are designed for simplicity, portability, and speed. These devices aim to provide immediate diagnostic information that can guide clinical decision-making during the initial patient encounter.

One of the most widely used point-of-care approaches involves rapid antigen detection tests. These assays identify specific proteins from pathogens such as viruses or bacteria in clinical samples. They are commonly used for respiratory infections, including influenza and other viral illnesses, where early identification can influence isolation measures and treatment decisions. Although generally faster than laboratory-based methods, their sensitivity can vary depending on the pathogen load and timing of infection.

Molecular-based point-of-care diagnostics have significantly improved accuracy compared to earlier rapid tests. Techniques such as nucleic acid amplification allow for the detection of pathogen genetic material with high sensitivity. These methods can identify infections at earlier stages and are increasingly being used for conditions such as tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, and respiratory viral diseases. The development of compact, automated systems has enabled these tests to be performed outside traditional laboratory environments.

Biosensor technologies represent another important advancement in point-of-care diagnostics. These devices use biological recognition elements to detect pathogens or host biomarkers associated with infection. Signals generated by the interaction between the target molecule and the sensor are converted into measurable outputs, providing rapid results. Ongoing research aims to improve the stability, sensitivity, and cost-effectiveness of these systems.

The integration of microfluidics has further enhanced the capabilities of point-of-care diagnostics. Microfluidic platforms allow precise manipulation of small fluid volumes, enabling complex laboratory processes to be performed on compact devices. These systems can combine sample preparation, amplification, and detection within a single unit, reducing the need for external equipment and simplifying workflow.

Host-response biomarkers are increasingly being incorporated into diagnostic strategies. Instead of directly detecting pathogens, these tests measure the body's immune response to infection. Markers such as inflammatory proteins can help distinguish between bacterial and viral infections, supporting more appropriate use of antibiotics. This approach contributes to efforts to reduce antimicrobial resistance by improving diagnostic accuracy.

Despite significant progress, several challenges remain in the widespread adoption of point-of-care diagnostics. One limitation is variability in performance across different environments. Factors such as temperature, humidity, and operator training can influence test accuracy. Ensuring consistent performance under diverse conditions is essential for reliable use in global healthcare settings.

Cost is another important consideration. While point-of-care tests can reduce downstream healthcare expenses by enabling early treatment, the initial cost of advanced devices may be prohibitive in low-resource regions. Efforts to develop affordable technologies are necessary to ensure equitable access to diagnostic innovations.

Quality control and regulatory oversight are also essential. Point-

Correspondence to: Hannah Vogel, Department of Clinical Microbiology, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, E-mail: hannah.vogel@uzhmed.ch

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of-care devices must meet rigorous standards to ensure accuracy and reliability. Regulatory agencies evaluate these technologies to confirm that they perform consistently and safely in clinical settings. Continuous post-market surveillance is also important to monitor real-world performance.

CONCLUSION

Point-of-care diagnostics represent a major advancement in the rapid identification of infectious diseases. By bringing diagnostic testing closer to the patient, these technologies improve clinical decision-making, reduce delays, and support better infection control. Continued innovation, combined with efforts to improve accessibility and reliability, will further enhance their role in modern medical practice.