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Citation

Published Version
doi:10.3233/ACP-2011-0032

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Accessibility
Static digital telepathology: A model for diagnostic and educational support to pathologists in the developing world

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Abstract. Background: The practice of pathology in the developing world presents challenges in terms of limited resources, shortages of trained personnel, and lack of continuing education programs. Telepathology holds promise as a means of diagnostic and educational support.

Methods: We donated multiheaded teaching microscopes equipped with digital cameras to four hospitals in Eastern Africa and trained local pathologists on their use. Static images of challenging cases were posted on a web-based telepathology platform. A U.S.-based pathologist reviewed images in consultation with subspecialist colleagues.

Results: Over a period of 40 months, 109 cases were submitted for second opinion consultation, including 29 dermatopathology cases (26.6%), 14 hematopathology cases (12.8%), and 13 cases each (11.9%) in cytopathology and bone and soft tissue pathology. Static images enabled a complete or partial diagnosis in 100/109 cases (91.7%). Factors precluding a definitive diagnosis included absence of confirmatory immunophenotyping, technical issues, or lack of clinical history. Case responses included a diagnosis and discussion, including differential diagnosis, references, and treatment recommendations.

Conclusion: Static digital telepathology is a simple, cost-effective, reliable and efficient means to provide diagnostic and educational support to pathologists in the developing world. Additional training may help overcome technical factors precluding a definitive diagnosis in certain cases.

Keywords: Telepathology, static imaging, developing world, teledermatopathology, telecytology

1. Background

The practice of pathology in the developing world presents numerous challenges in terms of limited resources, shortages of subspecialists and trained laboratory personnel, and lack of continuing education programs [1]. Retention of trained medical professionals in developing countries is further hampered by the quality of equipment and facilities and limited opportunities to pursue advanced training and research. These challenges exist in a backdrop of a rising incidence of non-communicable diseases, including cancer, diabetes, and coronary artery disease. According to current estimates, 70% of newly reported cancers by the year 2030 will occur in the developing world, underscoring the importance of accurate pathologic diagnosis and staging to the health and well-being of the worldwide community [2].

Telepathology holds great promise as a means of offering diagnostic support, second opinion consultations, and ongoing training to pathologists practicing in resource-challenged settings [3]. Challenges in implementation of telepathology programs in the developing
world center mainly around equipment cost; main-
tenance, servicing and repair; training of key users; 
high volume of data transmission; and internet con-
nectivity, which may be limited in certain regions of 
the world. Despite their growing popularity in many 
pathology practices in the developed world for diagno-
sis, education and second opinion consultation, whole 
slide imaging systems may be impractical to imple-
ment in resource-challenged settings for many of 
the aforementioned reasons. On the other hand, static 
imaging systems present a potentially simpler and 
more cost-effective approach that is both reliable and 
sustainable, and that can be easily replicated across 
multiple settings. One potential drawback of static 
imaging systems is that they rely heavily on the refer-
ring pathologist to select appropriate fields for image 
capture and to obtain images of sufficient quality to 
facilitate a diagnosis. While this may be perceived as a 
disadvantage, the importance of maintaining a critical 
role for pathologists practicing in developing countries 
cannot be understated, particularly for programs whose 
mandates include education and capacity building.

We report our experience with a static digi-
tal telepathology program established to support a 
regional healthcare network of four hospitals in Kenya 
and Tanzania, affiliated with the Aga Khan Uni-
versity and the Aga Khan Development Network 
(AKDN). The largest hospital, located in Nairobi, 
Kenya, is an academic medical center staffed by five 
histopathologists that houses a pathology residency 
training program and an immunohistochemistry lab-
oratory with a limited test menu [4]. This institution 
serves as a referral center for difficult and challenging 
cases to the three smaller affiliated hospitals located in 
Mombasa and Kisumu, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tan-
zania, whose pathology departments are each staffed 
by solo histopathologists.

2. Methods

Multiheaded teaching microscopes equipped with 
mounted digital cameras were donated and deliv-
ered to the four participating hospitals in East Africa. 
This was accomplished over a period of 18 months 
and involved site visits to the participating centers 
by a two-person team, including a pathologist and 
a consultant with expertise in both information sys-
tems and international affairs and development. During 
each site visit, local pathologists and other designated 
hospital staff, including laboratory managers and 
biomedical engineers, were provided with one-on-
one training on image acquisition using the camera 
and software, image upload to the telepathology web-
site, and care and maintenance of the equipment, 
including a basic troubleshooting and repair guide. 
Static images were uploaded to one of two password-
protected iPath telepathology servers (initially to 
http://telemed.ipath.ch/rahp hosted by Telemed Basel, 
Switzerland, then to http://ipath.aku.edu/rahp hosted 
by the AKDN-eHealth Resource Centre, Karachi, Pak-
istan), which are equipped with an electronic mail alert 
system that lets participants in a user group know when 
a new case is posted or when comments are posted in 
response to a case [5, 6]. The program’s main objec-
tive was to provide both diagnostic and educational 
support to submitting pathologists. The same patholo-
gist who participated in the site visits, upon returning 
to the United States, reviewed cases online in consulta-
tion with subspecialist colleagues and posted responses 
to cases with the goal of fulfilling this objective [7].

3. Results

Over a period of 40 months since the program was 
initiated, 109 cases have been submitted for second 
opinion consultation, including 29 dermatopathology 
cases (26.6%); 14 hematopathology cases (12.8%); 13 
cases each (11.9%) in cytopathology and bone and soft 
tissue pathology; eight cases each (7.3%) in gastroin-
testinal, gynecologic, and head and neck pathology; 
and seven breast pathology cases (6.4%) (Fig. 1). 
The remaining nine cases (8.3%) comprised neu-
ropathology, genitourinary, endocrine, pulmonary and 
medical renal pathology (Fig. 1). The 13 cytopathol-
yogy cases included ten fine needle aspirations (FNAs), 
two fluid samples (one pleural fluid and one nipple dis-
charge specimen), and one cervical smear. Pathologists 
from all four participating institutions posted cases, 
and 75% of consultations originated from one of the 
three smaller centers staffed by solo histopathologists 
(Fig. 2).

Each case contained an average of eleven images, 
including clinical images in eight cases (all der-
matopathology cases), radiology images in four cases, 
and gross pathology images in four cases. Based on 
their review of the initial information and images 
posted, consulting pathologists had the option of ask-
ing for additional clinical history or requesting that
Fig. 1. Number of cases posted by pathology subspecialty. More than 60% of cases were posted in four subspecialty areas: dermatopathology (Dermpath), hematopathology (Heme), cytology, and bone and soft tissue (BST) pathology. Additional abbreviations: GI – gastrointestinal; GYN – gynecologic; ENT – ear, nose and throat; Neuro – neuropathology; GU – genitourinary.

Fig. 2. Number of cases posted based on hospital of origin. The “Other” category refers to cases for which glass slides were sent by a referring hospital to one of the four participating institutions that had the telepathology equipment available for image capture and posting.

Additional images be taken from certain fields of interest. Static images enabled a complete or partial diagnosis in 100/109 cases (91.7%), and only nine cases (8.3%) were entirely non-diagnostic. Among partially diagnostic and non-diagnostic cases, factors precluding a definitive diagnosis were related to absence of confirmatory immunohistochemistry or flow cytometry testing, lack of sufficient clinical history, or technical issues such as air-drying artifact, tangential tissue sectioning, poor staining or image quality, or inappropriate field selection. Insofar as such issues were related directly to the telepathology system, attempts to mitigate them were undertaken by providing the referring pathologist with tips and troubleshooting advice related to image quality via electronic mail or conference call. Most such issues were relatively minor, and no major equipment failures have been reported by any of the participating sites during the course of the program. In cases that required additional ancillary testing by immunohistochemistry or molecular genetic studies, we offered to evaluate the case in the traditional manner by requesting that glass slides or blocks be shipped to our institution. This occurred in only six instances (5.5% of cases), and a definitive diagnosis or a narrow differential diagnosis was rendered in five cases using this approach.

Online responses posted to completely and partially diagnostic cases invariably had an educational emphasis: in addition to listing the favored diagnosis, they included a discussion of the differential diagnosis, the rationale for arriving at the favored diagnosis, diagnostic criteria, diagnostic pearls and pitfalls, and references relating to the favored entity or entities in the differential diagnosis, including published articles, websites, and gross and microscopic photographs. Treatment recommendations were provided in certain cases at the discretion of the consulting pathologist.

The average turnaround time from initial posting of the case to posting of the final response was 5.6 days.
4. Discussion

Our experience demonstrates that static digital telepathology is a simple, cost-effective, reliable and efficient means to provide both diagnostic and educational support to pathologists in the developing world. Feasibility studies have shown that these systems may potentially address major unmet needs for clinical services and training in the developing world.

Feedback from the participating pathologists helps to reorient the programs to areas where they are needed most. The areas of pathology in which second opinion consultation was sought originate from four pathology sub-specialty areas: dermatopathology, hematopathology, cytopathology, and bone and soft tissue pathology (Fig. 1). All four areas typically require fellowship training beyond residency in the United States; however, dedicated post-graduate fellowship programs in these areas are not available in Eastern Africa, suggesting the potential for programs of this kind to fulfill a critical unmet need in the region.

In particular, static digital telepathology appears well-suited to offering support for dermatopathology cases, which comprised more than a quarter of all cases for which second opinion consultation was sought (Fig. 1). This frequency exceeds the percentage of skin biopsies seen at the participating hospitals where, according to submitting pathologists, such specimens account for only 5–15% of their volumes. The high rate of posting in this area is likely related to the complete absence of board-certified dermatopathologists in the region. In addition, the small size of typical skin biopsies minimizes limitations of field selection and sampling bias, increasing the likelihood of accurate digital diagnosis even when only selected fields are evaluated [8]. In a focused review of the 29 dermatopathology cases submitted for teleconsultation during our evaluation period, nearly two-thirds of the cases were inflammatory lesions, which are usually perceived by general pathologists as diagnostically more challenging than neoplastic lesions [9]. Glass slides available for review in 22/29 cases (76%) yielded a high diagnostic agreement of 95% between still image telepathology and glass slides diagnoses; the lack of agreement in the single discordant case was attributed to field selection bias (i.e., exclusion of the most diagnostic field of interest by the referring pathologist) (Gimbel DC et al., unpublished data). The dermatopathology cases have also included some rare and unusual entities, such as a case of concurrent Kaposi sarcoma and molluscum contagiosum diagnosed in a single biopsy [10]. Sharing of such cases at regional pathology meetings, and their subsequent publication in the peer-reviewed pathology literature, have provided educational and research opportunities to trainees and pathologists located at both the submitting and receiving institutions, an additional benefit of the telepathology program.

In contrast to dermatopathology, the subspecialty area of cytopathology appears to face greater challenges in offering diagnostic accuracy on a still image-based platform. Despite the relatively large number of cytology cases seen at the participating hospitals, and the fact that most cytology screening and evaluation is performed by histopathologists who do not have cytology subspecialty training, only about 12% of cases submitted for teleconsultation were cytology cases. In order to explore the reasons underlying this unexpectedly low rate of posting, we undertook a telecytology feasibility study, led by pathologists from both the United States and Eastern Africa [11]. Forty
consecutive cytology cases, including cervical smears, fluids, and FNAs, were posted for review by one of the pathologists based in Eastern Africa and still images were evaluated by six regional colleagues with varying levels of experience in histopathology and cytopathology. Each pathologist’s still image diagnoses were compared to consensus diagnoses generated by review of glass slides following a several month wash-out period. Diagnostic concordance rates between still image and glass slides diagnoses ranged from 71% to 93%, and were higher for pathologists who had been in practice longer. More experienced pathologists also expressed greater levels of comfort with the technology and expressed higher levels of confidence in their digital diagnoses compared to their junior colleagues. In a large number of cases, causes of diagnostic discordance were related to poor image quality and field selection bias. Cytopathology specimens may be particularly challenging to review via digital means given the greater depth of focus required for their thorough evaluation, and the increased potential for sampling bias when cells are spread out over a large area of the slide and only certain fields are assessed [12, 13]. Despite these challenges, the findings of our feasibility study suggest that high rates of diagnostic accuracy may still be achieved with still image telecytology, provided that care is taken to minimize technical issues related to slide staining and smearing and that several photographs are taken from different areas of the slide. The level of experience of the consulting pathologist is also crucial, as pathologists who have been in practice longer appear to be more comfortable in rendering diagnoses on an entirely digital platform.

In summary, we present a simple and relatively inexpensive, yet efficient and reliable, model for diagnostic and educational support to pathologists in the developing world using a static imaging system and web-based case evaluation and reporting. Despite the known limitations of static imaging over whole slide imaging systems, we have maintained a relatively low frequency of non-diagnostic cases using this method and have achieved acceptable diagnostic concordance rates in instances in which glass slide review has been undertaken. When a definitive diagnosis has not been possible, limiting factors are mainly technical in nature and may be overcome by additional training on slide preparation, staining, and image capture to achieve higher quality images. When traditional glass slide evaluation has been required for a definitive diagnosis, we have used the telepathology system as a screening tool to select these cases sparingly, further minimizing costs and risks of slide breakage or loss during shipment. Due to its strong educational focus, the program has benefited referring and consulting pathologists alike, in terms of building confidence and achieving a greater sense of awareness of unusual entities, and has spawned several publications and ongoing research projects led by U.S. and East African-based pathologists in partnership with one another. The latter benefit has contributed to a more stimulating environment for intellectual discourse in a region in which retention of highly-trained personnel is an immense challenge. We encourage our pathology colleagues around the world who are fortunate enough to work in resource-rich environments to explore establishing similar partnerships as the one we describe with pathologists in resource-challenged settings. Collaborations such as these will serve to build global capacity for diagnostic excellence, a key component of any healthcare development strategy, thereby ensuring that patients throughout the world have access to accurate pathologic diagnoses as a critical part of their care.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the Aga Khan Health Board, USA, the Aga Khan Foundation, USA, and the Department of Pathology, Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) for their support of the telepathology program; Telemed Basel and the AKDN eHealth Resource Centre for their support of the internet-based platforms that were used during this study; and all of the pathologists at MGH and other institutions who have generously donated their time and expertise in evaluating these cases.

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