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Performance evaluation of four type-specific commercial assays for detection of herpes simplex virus type 1 antibodies in a Middle East and North Africa population

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ABSTRACT

Background: The number of diagnostic assays for the detection of herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) antibodies has increased over the years. However, their performance characteristics could vary among global populations.

Objective: To investigate performance of two commercial ELISA kits, HerpeSelect[®] 1 ELISA and Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1 (gC1) ELISA (IgG); and two commercial immunoblot (IB)/Western blot (WB) assays, HerpeSelect[®] 1 and 2 Immunoblot IgG, and Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1/HSV-2 gG2 Euroline-WB (IgG/IgM); in detecting HSV-1 antibodies in a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) population.

Study design: Blood specimens were collected from blood donors in Doha, Qatar, June 2013–2016. Twenty specimens were randomly selected from 10 MENA nationalities (Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen; total = 200), and tested for HSV-1 antibodies.

Results: Across all six comparisons between assays, positive percent agreement ranged between 95.7% (95% CI: 91.4–98.3%) and 100.0% (95% CI: 97.8–100.0%). Negative percent agreement ranged between 86.2% (95% CI: 68.3–96.1%) and 96.2% (95% CI: 80.4–99.9%). Overall percent agreement ranged between 95.7% (95% CI: 91.7–97.8%) and 99.4% (95% CI: 96.7–99.9%). Cohen's kappa statistic ranged between 0.84 (95% CI: 0.73–0.95) and 0.98 (95% CI: 0.93–1.00). Compared against IB/WB, HerpeSelect[®] and Euroimmun had sensitivities and specificities > 96% and > 86%, respectively. Positive and negative predictive values were > 97% and > 83%, respectively.

Conclusion: The assays showed excellent concordance with one another, and with a high kappa statistic. The ELISA kits demonstrated robust diagnostic performance compared to the IB/WB assays. These findings support the assays' utility in clinical diagnosis and research in MENA populations.

1. Background

Herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) is one of the most prevalent (mostly asymptomatic) infections worldwide [1,2]. Infections with HSV-1 are associated with oral, ocular, cutaneous, and central nervous system manifestations, and can result in mild to severe morbidities such as gingivostomatitis, neonatal herpes, corneal blindness, meningitis, and encephalitis [3,4]. Although HSV-1 infection is commonly associated with orolabial herpes, evidence indicates a growing role for HSV-1 as a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and as a cause of genital herpes, even surpassing the role of HSV-2 for incident genital herpes in

some settings [5–7].

The World Health Organization and other global partners have embarked on multiple activities to accelerate the global roadmap for STI vaccine development with a focus on an HSV vaccine [8,9]. In particular, a business case for HSV vaccines is being developed factoring global public health need, vaccines' potential impact, pathways of HSV vaccine implementation, anticipated cost-effectiveness, and return on investment [8]. To advance this global effort, it is essential to quantify infection levels for both HSV-1 and HSV-2 infections. Therefore, there is a need to have valid, reliable, and affordable diagnostic assays for the detection of HSV-1 antibodies among different global

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populations.

The biologic and antigenic distinction between HSV-1 and HSV-2 was first described in the 1960s [10,11]. Although the viruses share 83% of their genome and more than 85% of their protein profile, they have a prominent antigenic difference in their envelope glycoprotein G expressed on the surface of the virion, glycoprotein G-1 (gG-1) and G-2 (gG-2), respectively [12]. Epitope mapping studies have shown that despite amino acid sequence similarities between gG from HSV-1 and HSV-2, functional antibodies against HSV-1 epitopes do not recognize gG from HSV-2 [13]. It has been also suggested that glycoprotein gC from HSV-1 may also be antigenically distinct from the gC of HSV-2 [14].

The number of type-specific commercial enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA) and immunoblot (IB)/Western blot (WB) diagnostic assays for the detection of HSV-1 antibodies has increased over the years [15–19]. While these assays are a mainstay of clinical diagnosis and scientific research, their performance characteristics can vary among different global populations [20,21]. To our knowledge, no study has investigated the performance of such commercially-available diagnostic assays in the detection of HSV-1 antibodies in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) populations.

2. Objectives

With a large proportion of the population coming from other MENA countries, Qatar provides an opportune setting for comparing and evaluating different type-specific HSV-1 antibody diagnostic assays among MENA populations. Our main objective was to compare the performance of four commonly-used and commercially-available assays in detecting HSV-1 antibodies in a composite population derived from MENA countries. Specifically, we investigated and compared the concordance of HerpeSelect[®] 1 ELISA, Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1 (gC1) ELISA (IgG), HerpeSelect[®] 1 and 2 Immunoblot IgG, and Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1/HSV-2 gG2 Euroline-WB (IgG/IgM). Informed by prior studies [17,18,22], our secondary objective was to assess the diagnostic characteristics of the two ELISA kits with respect to the two IB/WB assays, treated here as reference assays due to their different format for HSV-1 antibody detection.

3. Study design

3.1. Study population

Blood specimens were collected from volunteer men blood donors attending Hamad Medical Corporation, the main healthcare provider in Doha, Qatar, between June 2013 and 2016. The blood specimens were originally collected for other studies [23–28]. A total of 4525 blood specimens were eligible for this study. The sample was comprised of Qataris and MENA expatriates aged ≥ 18 years old.

Informed by prior work [17,29], a sample size of 200 was estimated to be necessary to ensure narrow confidence interval for the Cohen's kappa statistic. Twenty specimens were randomly selected from each of 10 MENA populations resulting in a total sample of 200. These 10 MENA populations comprised subjects from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. The research work was approved by the ethics boards and research committees at Hamad Medical Corporation, Qatar University, and Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar.

3.2. Detection of anti-HSV-1 IgG

3.2.1. ELISA

Sera were tested for the presence of anti-HSV-1 antibodies using two commercial ELISA kits: HerpeSelect[®] 1 ELISA (Cat. No. EL0910G-5, Focus Diagnostics, USA) and Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1 (gC1) ELISA (IgG) kit (Cat. No. EI 2531–2 G, Euroimmun, Germany). The HerpeSelect[®] 1

ELISA kit offered qualitative measurements for HSV-1 IgG antibodies using purified recombinant gG1 antigen [30]. The Euroimmun ELISA kit was a semi-quantitative assay that used affinity chromatography purified-gC1 antigen to detect the presence of HSV-1 antibodies [31].

Both tests were carried out manually according to the manufacturers' instructions, except for the washing step, which was done automatically. The color intensity was measured using a spectrophotometer to read the optical density (OD) at 450 nm; an index value was then obtained by dividing the OD by the mean absorbance of the kit control sera. For HerpeSelect[®] 1 ELISA, sera with OD index values < 0.90 were considered anti-HSV-1 negative, values > 1.10 were considered anti-HSV-1 positive, and values ranging between 0.90 and 1.10 were considered anti-HSV-1 equivocal [30]. For Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1 (gC1) ELISA, sera with OD index values < 0.80 were considered anti-HSV-1 negative, values ≥ 1.10 were considered anti-HSV-1 positive, and values ranging between 0.80 and 1.10 were considered anti-HSV-1 equivocal [30–32].

3.2.2. IB/WB

ELISA tests may have cutoffs that maximize sensitivity at the possible expense of specificity. We compared the ELISA kits against two assays that utilize a different format: 1) HerpeSelect[®] 1 and 2 Immunoblot IgG (Cat. No. IB0900G, Focus Diagnostic, USA) and 2) Euroimmun Anti-HSV-1/HSV-2 gG2 Euroline-WB (IgG/IgM) (Cat. No. DY 2531-1G, Euroimmun, Germany). HerpeSelect[®] IB test strips were striped with purified type-specific proteins: HSV-1 gG-1 and HSV-2 gG2, and a common protein mixture [33]. Euroline-WB test strips contained antigenic extracts of HSV-1 that were electrophoretically separated, then transferred to paper strips [34].

The two IB/WB assays were performed and interpreted according to the manufacturers' instructions. The HerpeSelect[®] IB is designed to detect anti-HSV-1 and anti-HSV-2 antibodies. The kit strips contain four antigen bands: an anti-human serum control band, a herpes common antigen band (a blend of HSV-1 and HSV-2 native virus antigens), and recombinant antigen bands for gG-1 (HSV-1) and gG-2 (HSV-2). Each assay run must, at a minimum, include one antigen strip reacted with a positive control serum, and one antigen strip reacted with the negative control serum (provided by the kit). The gG-1 and gG-2 bands on the positive control are at a low positive "cut-off" staining intensity to provide a reading comparison. For the test to be considered valid, the anti-human band must be clearly visualized. In addition, the positive control serum must react with all of the four bands on the strip, while the negative control must react with, and only with, the anti-human serum control band.

Reading of the strips that were valid by the above definition was done visually by comparing the intensity of the gG-1 and gG-2 bands relative to the gG-1 and gG-2 bands on the positive control strip. If the band is as dark or darker than the respective positive control band, then the band in question is reactive (positive). In contrast, if the band is lighter than the reading control band, then the band is unreactive (negative). The overall reactivity of bands is then used to interpret the results as per a table provided by the manufacturer [33]. For instance, to be considered positive for anti-HSV-1, the specimen must provide positive reactions with the anti-human serum, HSV common antigen, and gG-1 bands. A valid negative specimen for anti-HSV-2 will have anti-human and HSV type common bands but no band for gG-1. An equivocal test result is defined as reactive for anti-human serum and HSV common antigen bands, but negative for gG-1 and gG-2 bands.

On the other hand, results from Euroline-WB were interpreted qualitatively using a scanner with a EurolineScan software [34]. The EUROLineScan software is used to scan and digitally evaluate the strips according to the presence and intensity of recognizable bands on the blot strips. The EUROLineScan is able to measure band intensities, and according to the number of units each band produces, it is categorized into either positive, negative, or equivocal. Negative results were ≤ 12 units, equivocal 13–20 units, and positive results correlated with ≥ 20

units.

3.3. Statistical analysis

Results were cross-tabulated for one-to-one comparisons between the four assays. Equivocal and borderline results were excluded from the analysis. Four concordance measures were estimated: positive percent agreement, negative percent agreement, overall percent agreement, and Cohen’s kappa statistic. Using either HerpeSelect® IB or Euroline-WB, separately, as the reference standard, sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value, and negative predictive value were calculated to assess the performance of the two ELISA kits. Level of significance was set at 5%, and a 95% confidence interval (CI) was reported for each measure. All measures were estimated using Microsoft Excel 2016.

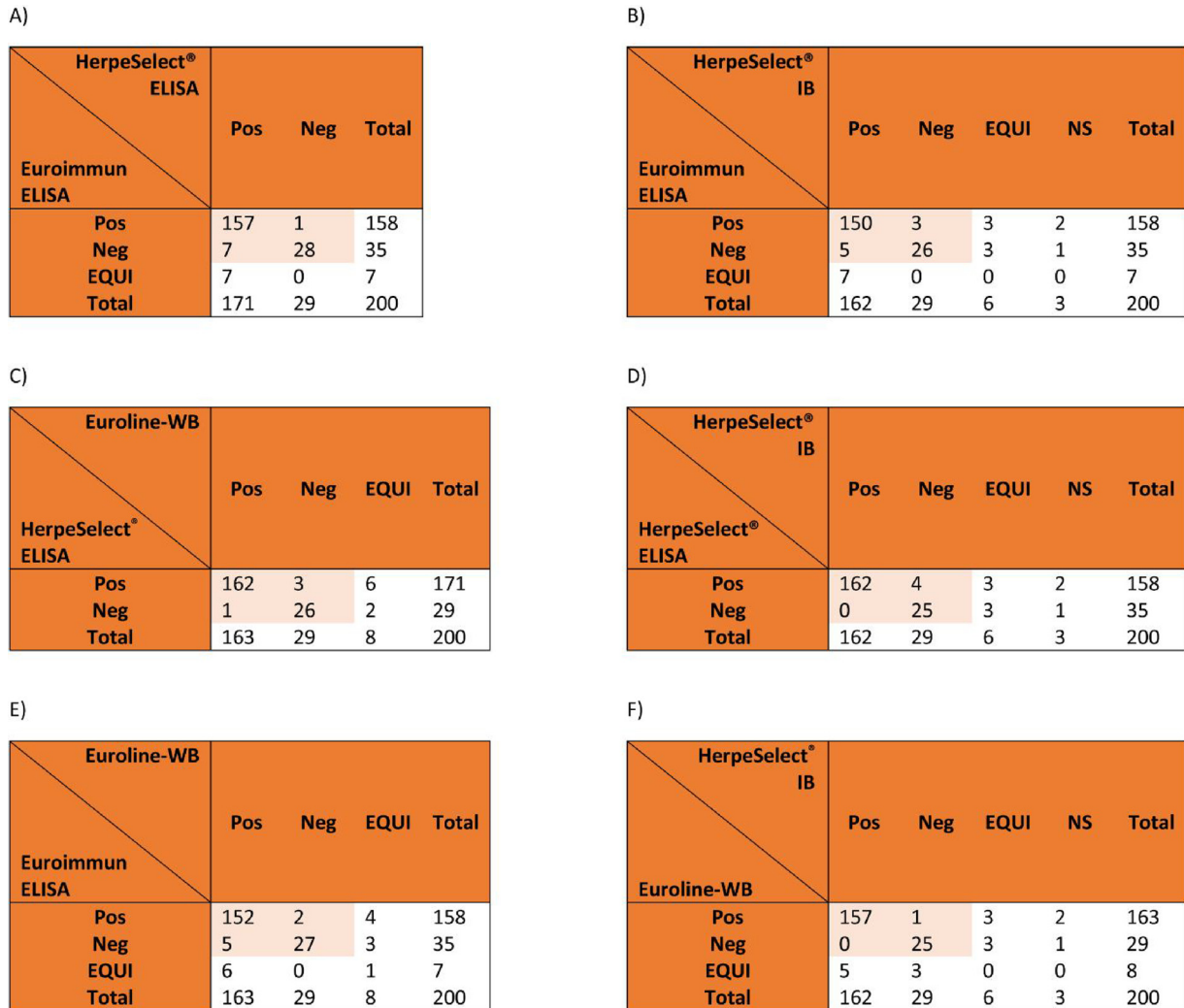
The Cohen’s kappa is a robust statistic that measures the level of agreement (beyond chance) between two tests [35]. It ranges between 0 and 1. Informed by the literature, Cohen’s kappa values greater than 0.75 represent excellent agreement, values between 0.40 and 0.75 represent fair to good agreement, and values below 0.40 represent poor agreement [35].

4. Results

Fig. 1 shows the cross-tabulations for all six comparisons between the four assays. Of the 200 MENA blood specimens tested, 171 (85.5%, 95% CI: 79.8–90.1%) were positive for HSV-1 antibodies by HerpeSelect® 1 ELISA, 158 (79.0%; 95% CI: 72.7–84.4%) by Euroimmun ELISA, and 163 (81.5%; 95% CI: 75.4–86.6%) by Euroline-WB. Due to insufficient sera, three specimens were not tested using HerpeSelect® IB. As such, of the 197 specimens tested, 162 (82.2%; 95% CI: 76.2–87.3%) were positive for HSV-1 antibodies by HerpeSelect® IB. No specimen was equivocal using HerpeSelect® 1 ELISA, while seven specimens were equivocal using Euroimmun ELISA. Six specimens were equivocal using HerpeSelect® IB, while eight specimens were equivocal using Euroline-WB.

There were 177 specimens that had no equivocal results on any diagnostic test. Among these, 21 (11.9%) were negative and 147 (83.1%) were positive for HSV-1 antibodies in all diagnostic tests used. Only 4 (2.3%) specimens were positive for HSV-1 antibodies in only one of the four diagnostic tests while 5 (2.8%) specimens were positive for HSV-1 antibodies in different combinations of the diagnostic tests.

Fig. 2 reports the concordance assessment measures between the four diagnostic assays. Positive percent agreement ranged between 95.7% (95% CI: 91.4–98.3%) and 100.0% (95% CI: 97.8–100.0%).



Pos - Positive; Neg - Negative; EQUI - Equivocal; NS – Not enough blood specimen

Fig. 1. Cross-tabulated results of 200 specimens tested for HSV-1 antibodies by HerpeSelect® ELISA, Euroimmun ELISA, HerpeSelect® IB, and Euroline-WB assays.

A) Positive percent agreement and negative percent agreement

Positive percent agreement % (95% CI) / Negative percent agreement % (95% CI)	HerpeSelect® ELISA	Euroimmun ELISA	HerpeSelect® IB	Euroline-WB
HerpeSelect® ELISA		95.7 (91.4-98.3)	100.0 (97.8-100.0)	99.4 (96.6-100.0)
Euroimmun ELISA	96.6 (82.2-99.9)		96.8 (92.6-98.9)	96.8 (92.7-99.0)
HerpeSelect® IB	86.2 (68.3-96.1)	89.7 (77.7-97.8)		100.0 (97.7-100.0)
Euroline-WB	89.7 (72.7-97.8)	93.1 (77.2-99.2)	96.2 (80.4-99.9)	

B) Cohen's kappa statistic and overall percent agreement

Cohen's kappa statistic (95% CI) / Overall percent agreement % (95% CI)	HerpeSelect® ELISA	Euroimmun ELISA	HerpeSelect® IB	Euroline-WB
HerpeSelect® ELISA		0.85 (0.75-0.95)	0.91 (0.83-1.00)	0.92 (0.84-1.00)
Euroimmun ELISA	95.9 (92.0-97.9)		0.84 (0.73-0.95)	0.86 (0.76-0.96)
HerpeSelect® IB	97.9 (94.8-99.20)	95.7 (91.7-97.8)		0.98 (0.93-1.00)
Euroline-WB	97.9 (94.8-99.2)	96.2 (92.4-98.2)	99.4 (97.0-99.9)	

Fig. 2. Concordance assessment between the results of 200 specimens tested for HSV-1 antibodies by HerpeSelect® ELISA, Euroimmun ELISA, HerpeSelect® IB, and Euroline-WB assays.

Negative percent agreement ranged between 86.2% (95% CI: 68.3–96.1%) and 96.6% (95% CI: 82.2–99.9%). Overall percent agreement ranged between 95.7% (95% CI: 91.7–97.8%) and 99.4% (95% CI: 97.0–99.9%).

Specifically, the two ELISA kits had a positive percent agreement of 95.7% (95% CI: 91.4–98.3%), a negative percent agreement of 96.6% (95% CI: 82.2–99.9%), and an overall percent agreement of 95.9% (95% CI: 92.0–97.9%). The two IB/WB assays had a positive percent agreement of 100.0% (95% CI: 97.7–100.0%), a negative percent agreement of 96.2% (95% CI: 80.4–99.9%), and an overall percent agreement of 99.4% (95% CI: 97.0–99.9%).

The Cohen's kappa statistic for all six comparisons was ≥ 0.75 (p -value < 0.001 in all comparisons), indicating excellent agreement [35]. It ranged between 0.84 (95% CI: 0.73–0.95) for the comparison between Euroimmun ELISA and HerpeSelect® IB and 0.98 (95% CI: 0.93–1.00) for the comparison between HerpeSelect® IB and Euroline-WB. The Cohen's kappa statistic for the comparison between the two ELISA kits was estimated at 0.85 (95% CI: 0.75–0.95).

Fig. 3 shows the four diagnostic and performance assessments for HerpeSelect® ELISA and Euroimmun ELISA kits in detecting HSV-1 antibodies with respect to the reference IB/WB assays. Overall concordance for all four assessments was estimated at $> 95\%$. Sensitivities and specificities for all comparisons were estimated at $> 96\%$ and $> 86\%$, respectively. Positive and negative predictive values were estimated at $> 97\%$ and $> 83\%$, respectively.

Against HerpeSelect® IB, HerpeSelect® ELISA detected 162/162 anti-HSV-1 positive specimens, resulting in a sensitivity of 100.0% (95% CI: 97.8–100.0%). Specificity was 86.2% (95% CI: 68.3–96.1%), while the positive and negative predictive values were 97.6% (95% CI:

94.0–99.1%) and 100.0% (95% CI 86.7–100.0%), respectively. Euroimmun ELISA detected 150/155 anti-HSV-1 positive specimens, resulting in a sensitivity of 96.8% (95% CI: 92.6–98.9%). Specificity was 89.7% (95% CI: 77.7–97.8%), while the positive and negative predictive values were 98.0% (95% CI: 94.4–99.3%) and 83.9% (95% CI 67.4–92.9%), respectively.

Against Euroline-WB, HerpeSelect® ELISA detected 162/163 anti-HSV-1 positive specimens, resulting in a sensitivity of 99.4% (95% CI: 96.6–100.0%). Specificity was 89.7% (95% CI: 72.7–97.8%), while the positive and negative predictive values were 98.2% (95% CI: 94.8–99.4%) and 96.3% (95% CI: 81.7–99.3%), respectively. Euroimmun ELISA detected 152/157 anti-HSV-1 positive specimens, resulting in a sensitivity of 96.8% (95% CI: 92.7–99.0%). Specificity was 93.1% (95% CI: 77.2–99.2%), while the positive and negative predictive values were 98.7% (95% CI: 95.4–99.6%) and 84.4% (95% CI: 68.3–93.1%), respectively.

5. Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first examination of the performance of two commercial ELISA and two commercial IB/WB assays in detecting HSV-1 antibodies in a MENA population. Serological testing among this population identified high prevalence of positive HSV-1 sera using HerpeSelect® 1 ELISA (86%), Euroimmun ELISA (79%), Euroline-WB (82%), and HerpeSelect® IB (82%). However, our results have also identified several sera as equivocal by Euroline-WB and HerpeSelect IB. These borderline results reflect the presence of antibodies to HSV common antigens while simultaneously the absence of glycoprotein gG-1. Without the visible type specific band, the assay in these cases is not

A) HerpeSelect® IB

	Overall Percent Agreement % (95% CI)	Sensitivity % (95% CI)	Specificity % (95% CI)	Positive Predictive Value % (95% CI)	Negative Predictive Value % (95% CI)
HerpeSelect® ELISA	97.9 (94.8-99.2)	100.0 (97.8-100.0)	86.2 (68.3-96.1)	97.6 (94.0-99.1)	100.0 (86.7-100.0)
Euroimmun ELISA	95.7 (91.7-97.8)	96.8 (92.6-98.9)	89.7 (77.7-97.8)	98.0 (94.4-99.3)	83.9 (67.4-92.9)

B) Euroline-WB

	Overall percent agreement % (95% CI)	Sensitivity % (95% CI)	Specificity % (95% CI)	Positive predictive value % (95% CI)	Negative predictive value % (95% CI)
HerpeSelect® ELISA	97.9 (94.8-99.2)	99.4 (96.6-100.0)	89.7 (72.7-97.8)	98.2 (94.8-99.4)	96.3 (81.7-99.3)
Euroimmun ELISA	96.2 (92.4-98.2)	96.8 (92.7-99.0)	93.1 (77.2-99.2)	98.7 (95.4-99.6)	84.4 (68.3-93.1)

Fig. 3. Performance assessment in detecting HSV-1 antibodies for HerpeSelect® ELISA and Euroimmun ELISA assays with respect to each of the two reference standards of HerpeSelect® IB, and Euroline-WB assays.

able to distinguish the type of HSV [36]. These results may be due to early seroconversion in which type common antibodies may appear before those to type specific antigens, but this phenomenon has not been specifically proven for assays, only for Western blot [37].

All assays showed excellent positive, negative, and overall concordance with one another. In the six comparisons between these four assays, the positive percent agreement was > 95%, the negative percent agreement was > 86%, and the overall percent agreement was > 95%. The Cohen's kappa statistic was also high in all comparisons (> 0.84). These results support the comparable performance and utility of using any of these assays to clinically diagnose exposure to this infection, and to assess HSV-1 seroprevalence in MENA populations.

We further found that the two ELISA kits demonstrated robust diagnostic performance when compared to each of the IB/WB assays as the reference assays. In all four comparisons, the sensitivity was > 96% and the specificity was > 86%. The positive and negative predictive values were also high at > 97% and > 83%, respectively. The sensitivities, specificities, and positive predictive values were also similar for both ELISA kits, though a slight difference was identified for the negative predictive value. The latter was higher for HerpeSelect® ELISA compared to Euroimmun ELISA. These results further support the utility of these two ELISA kits in clinically diagnosing exposure to this virus and measuring HSV-1 seroprevalence, particularly in MENA populations.

There is evidence for variation in the sensitivity and specificity of HSV-1 assays by population [20,30,38]. Data from the United States of America suggests that HerpeSelect® ELISA has less than optimal sensitivity and may miss > 20% of seropositive cases compared to WB [39–42]. Our results here and our earlier HSV-1 seroprevalence study [27], however, suggests that this may not be the case for MENA populations—we measured very high HSV-1 seroprevalence in several MENA populations that was > 90%. Different levels of exposure and rechallenge to this infection and different immune activation levels, as well as global diversity within and between HSV-1 and HSV-2 glycoproteins [43], may explain some of the observed differences in sensitivity by population. Consequently, this provides an opportunity for further research to conduct similar comparison studies in other global

populations, and to compare the similarities and variations in the results from one population to another.

The similar outcomes of these assays and their concordance suggest that any of them could be used for clinical diagnosis and scientific research. However, logistical factors may favor the use of one as opposed to another in a specific setting—the choice of assay may depend on the kit's availability, its costs, and laboratory infrastructure and demands for its use. For example, the total incubation duration for the Euroimmun ELISA kit is 75 min [31], in comparison to 100 min for the HerpeSelect® ELISA kit [30], which could be an important factor if a large number of specimens need to be tested in a specific laboratory. Meanwhile, Focus has automated platforms for their ELISA that can reduce the hands-on time in processing the samples.

There are limitations to this study. Our sample included blood specimens only from men, as we used existing sera that was collected from men. There were three specimens (two were positive by ELISA and confirmed positive by Euroline-WB) that were not tested using HerpeSelect® IB due to insufficient sera. Measures of agreement between assays, such as Cohen's kappa statistic, can depend on the true seroprevalence of infection [44], but our sample may not be representative for the true seroprevalence in the population. However, the observed seroprevalence in this sample was similar to that observed in MENA populations [27,45], and we employed a sampling strategy that enhances the representativeness of this sample of diverse MENA populations (20 random specimens selected per nationality for 10 nationalities). We treated HerpeSelect® IB and Euroline-WB as reference standards for the purpose of comparison, based on their IB/WB biological format and because we could not use (for logistical reasons) the University of Washington's WB, considered widely as the reference gold standard for HSV serology [15]. The use of HerpeSelect® IB and Euroline-WB for diagnosis and confirmation has been reported in the literature [15–17], but, ideally, larger studies will affirm their accuracy for HSV-1 detection.

In conclusion, we conducted a comparison study of four commonly used commercial assays in detecting HSV-1 antibodies in a MENA population. All assays showed excellent positive, negative, and overall concordance with one another, and with a high Cohen's kappa statistic.

The two ELISA kits demonstrated robust and similar diagnostic characteristics when compared to each of the IB/WB assays. These findings support the utility of using these assays in clinical diagnosis and scientific research in MENA populations.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare that we have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Disclose funding received for this work

Others.

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