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CRISPR-BASED APPROACHES FOR THE DETECTION AND TARGETING OF LUNG CANCER BIOMARKERS: A NEW ERA IN PRECISION ONCOLOGY

Original Research

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Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan and Sargodha Institute of Health Sciences, Sargodha, Pakistan and collaborating hospitals for facilitating this research.

Conflict of Interest: None

Grant Support & Financial Support: None

ABSTRACT

Background: Accurate and early identification of lung cancer biomarkers is crucial for effective management yet remains a clinical challenge. CRISPR-based technologies provide highly sensitive and specific tools that can be adapted for both diagnostic and therapeutic use in oncology.

Methods: A prospective study was conducted including 120 patients with confirmed lung cancer and 60 healthy individuals as controls at a tertiary care center. A CRISPR-Cas12a diagnostic platform was developed to detect *EGFR* exon 19 deletions, *KRAS* G12C mutations, and *ALK* rearrangements in tumor tissue and plasma samples. In parallel, CRISPR-Cas9 editing was applied to patient-derived lung cancer cell cultures to selectively disrupt *EGFR* mutant alleles. The diagnostic performance of the CRISPR assay was compared against conventional PCR and next-generation sequencing (NGS).

Results: The CRISPR-Cas12a assay successfully detected as few as 10 DNA copies/µL within one hour. In tissue samples, the assay achieved 96.7% sensitivity and 98.3% specificity relative to NGS. In circulating tumor DNA extracted from plasma, sensitivity reached 92.1%. Functional assays demonstrated that CRISPR-Cas9-mediated disruption of *EGFR* mutations reduced cell viability by approximately 65% and suppressed downstream oncogenic signaling pathways.

Conclusion: CRISPR-based strategies demonstrate considerable promise for both precise detection and targeted intervention in lung cancer. The integration of CRISPR diagnostics with gene-editing applications could significantly advance precision oncology by enabling earlier diagnosis and patient-tailored therapeutic options.

Keywords: CRISPR-Cas12a, CRISPR-Cas9, Lung cancer, Biomarkers, EGFR mutation, KRAS G12C, ALK rearrangements, Circulating tumor DNA, Gene editing, Precision oncology.

INTRODUCTION

Lung cancer remains one of the most prevalent and deadly malignancies worldwide, accounting for approximately 2.2 million new cases and 1.8 million deaths annually (1). Despite advancements in diagnostic and therapeutic modalities, the five-year survival rate for lung cancer patients remains dismally low, primarily due to late-stage diagnosis and the heterogeneity of tumor biology (2). Early and accurate detection of molecular biomarkers, such as *EGFR* exon 19 deletions, *KRAS* G12C mutations, and *ALK* rearrangements, is critical for guiding personalized treatment strategies and improving clinical outcomes (3). However, conventional diagnostic techniques, including polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and next-generation sequencing (NGS), often face limitations in sensitivity, specificity, and turnaround time, particularly in detecting low-frequency mutations in circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) (4).

The advent of CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats)-based technologies have revolutionized molecular diagnostics and therapeutic interventions in oncology (5). CRISPR-associated (Cas) proteins, such as Cas12a and Cas9, offer unparalleled precision in nucleic acid detection and gene editing, respectively (6). Unlike traditional methods, CRISPR-Cas12a exhibits single-nucleotide specificity and can detect minute quantities of target DNA without the need for complex instrumentation, making it an ideal tool for point-of-care diagnostics (7). Meanwhile, CRISPR-Cas9 enables targeted disruption of oncogenic mutations, providing a potential therapeutic avenue for cancers driven by specific genetic alterations (8).

Recent studies have demonstrated the utility of CRISPR-based platforms in detecting cancer-associated mutations in both tissue and liquid biopsies (9). For instance, CRISPR-Cas12a has been employed to identify *EGFR* mutations in plasma-derived ctDNA with high sensitivity, offering a non-invasive alternative to tissue biopsies (10). Parallelly, CRISPR-Cas9 has shown promise in selectively inactivating mutant *EGFR* alleles in preclinical models, thereby suppressing tumor growth and enhancing therapeutic efficacy (11). These advancements underscore the dual potential of CRISPR systems in both diagnostic and therapeutic realms, paving the way for integrated precision oncology approaches.

Despite these promising developments, the clinical translation of CRISPR-based technologies in lung cancer management remains in its nascent stages. Challenges such as off-target effects, delivery efficiency, and the dynamic nature of tumor evolution necessitate further optimization (12). Moreover, comparative studies evaluating the performance of CRISPR diagnostics against gold-standard methods like NGS are limited, particularly in diverse patient cohorts (13). Addressing these gaps is essential to establish CRISPR as a reliable tool for routine clinical use.

This study aimed to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy of a CRISPR-Cas12a assay for detecting *EGFR*, *KRAS*, and *ALK* alterations in lung cancer patients, comparing its performance with conventional PCR and NGS. Additionally, we explored the therapeutic potential of CRISPR-Cas9 in selectively targeting mutant *EGFR* alleles in patient-derived cell cultures. By integrating CRISPR-based diagnostics and gene editing, our findings contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the role of CRISPR technologies in advancing precision oncology. The implications of this research extend beyond lung cancer, offering a framework for the application of CRISPR systems in other malignancies characterized by actionable genetic alterations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Patient Cohort

A prospective, single-center study was conducted at a tertiary care oncology facility between January 2023 and December 2024. The study cohort comprised 120 patients with histologically confirmed non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) and 60 age- and gender-matched healthy controls. All participants provided written informed consent, and the study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board by Sargodha Institute of Health Sciences, Sargodha.

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Sample Collection and Processing

Patients were eligible if they were diagnosed with stage I–IV NSCLC via biopsy or cytology, had no prior history of targeted therapy or immunotherapy, and were willing to provide paired tumor tissue and peripheral blood samples. Exclusion criteria included a history of other active malignancies and insufficient tissue or plasma samples for molecular analysis.

Tissue Samples:

Formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tumor tissues were obtained via core needle biopsy or surgical resection. DNA was extracted using the QIAamp DNA FFPE Tissue Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) following the manufacturer's protocol. DNA concentration and purity were assessed using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA).

Plasma Samples:

Peripheral blood (10 mL) was collected in EDTA tubes and centrifuged at 1,600 × g for 10 min to isolate plasma. Circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) was extracted using the QIAamp Circulating Nucleic Acid Kit (Qiagen) and quantified via droplet digital PCR (ddPCR, Bio-Rad Laboratories, USA).

CRISPR-Cas12a Diagnostic Assay

A multiplex CRISPR-Cas12a assay was designed to detect EGFR exon 19 deletions (c.2235_2249del15), the KRAS G12C mutation (c.34G>T), and ALK rearrangements (EML4-ALK fusion).

Guide RNA (gRNA) Design:

Target-specific gRNAs were designed using CHOPCHOP v3.0 (27) and synthesized by Integrated DNA Technologies (IDT, USA). Each gRNA was validated for specificity using the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST).

Detection Workflow:

1. **Amplification:** Target regions were pre-amplified via PCR (30 cycles) using primers.
2. **CRISPR-Cas12a Reaction:** Amplified DNA (5 µL) was mixed with 10 nM Cas12a (New England Biolabs, USA), 20 nM gRNA, and 200 nM fluorescent reporter (FAM-TTATT-BHQ1) in a 20 µL reaction.
3. **Fluorescence Measurement:** Reactions were incubated at 37°C for 60 min, and fluorescence was quantified using a QuantStudio 5 Real-Time PCR System (Thermo Fisher Scientific). A threshold cycle (Ct) < 30 was considered positive.

CRISPR-Cas9 Gene Editing

Cell Culture:

Primary NSCLC cells were isolated from patient-derived xenografts (PDXs) and cultured in RPMI-1640 medium supplemented with 10% FBS.

sgRNA Design and Transfection:

Single-guide RNAs (sgRNAs) targeting mutant *EGFR* (exon 19 del) were designed using CRISPOR (26) and cloned into the lenti-CRISPR v2 vector (Addgene #52961). Lentiviral particles were produced in HEK293T cells and used to transduce NSCLC cells at an MOI of 5.

Functional Assays:

Cell viability of the edited cells was assessed using the MTT assay at 72 hours post-transduction. Additionally, protein lysates were analyzed by Western blotting for EGFR, p-ERK, and cleaved PARP using antibodies from Cell Signaling Technology (USA).

Comparative Validation

The CRISPR-Cas12a assay was benchmarked against qPCR using TaqMan assays (Thermo Fisher Scientific) for EGFR and KRAS mutations, as well as NGS with the Illumina NextSeq 550 (150 bp paired end), which has a detection limit of 1% variant allele frequency.

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Statistical Analysis

Sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy were calculated using MedCalc v20.0. Differences in cell viability were analyzed via Student's t-test (GraphPad Prism 9.0). $P < 0.05$ was considered significant.

RESULTS

CRISPR-Cas12a Diagnostic Performance

The CRISPR-Cas12a platform demonstrated exceptional capability in detecting lung cancer biomarkers across both tissue and liquid biopsy samples. In tumor tissue samples (n=120), the assay achieved a sensitivity of 96.7% (116/120 positive cases correctly identified) and specificity of 98.3% (59/60 healthy controls correctly classified) when compared to NGS as the gold standard. The positive predictive value was 99.1%, while the negative predictive value reached 93.4%.

For plasma-derived circulating DNA (ctDNA) analysis, the assay maintained high sensitivity (92.1%) with a limit of detection as low as 10 DNA copies per microliter. This performance was consistent across all three biomarker targets: EGFR exon 19 deletions, KRAS G12C mutations, and ALK rearrangements. The assay's rapid turnaround time of 60 minutes represented a significant improvement over conventional methods (qPCR: 4 hours; NGS: 5-7 days).

Table 1: Diagnostic Performance of CRISPR-Cas12a in Tissue and Plasma Samples

Sample Type	Sensitivity	Specificity	Positive Predictive Value (PPV)	Negative Predictive Value (NPV)	Limit of Detection
Tissue (n=120)	96.7% (116/120)	98.3% (59/60)	99.1%	93.4%	-
Plasma (n=60)	92.1%	-	-	-	10 DNA copies/μL

Comparative Analysis of Standard Methods

To validate the diagnostic accuracy of CRISPR-Cas12a, the assay was compared to conventional methods, including next-generation sequencing (NGS) and quantitative PCR (qPCR). CRISPR-Cas12a showed superior performance in terms of sensitivity, particularly in plasma samples, where traditional methods struggled with low-frequency mutations. The sensitivity comparison in tissue samples revealed that CRISPR-Cas12a achieved a sensitivity of 96.7%, slightly lower than NGS with a sensitivity of 99.1%, but significantly higher than qPCR, which had a sensitivity of 88.2%. In plasma samples, CRISPR-Cas12a demonstrated a sensitivity of 92.1%, outperforming qPCR, which showed a sensitivity of 79.3%. These results highlight the superior performance of CRISPR-Cas12a in detecting lung cancer biomarkers, particularly in plasma samples.

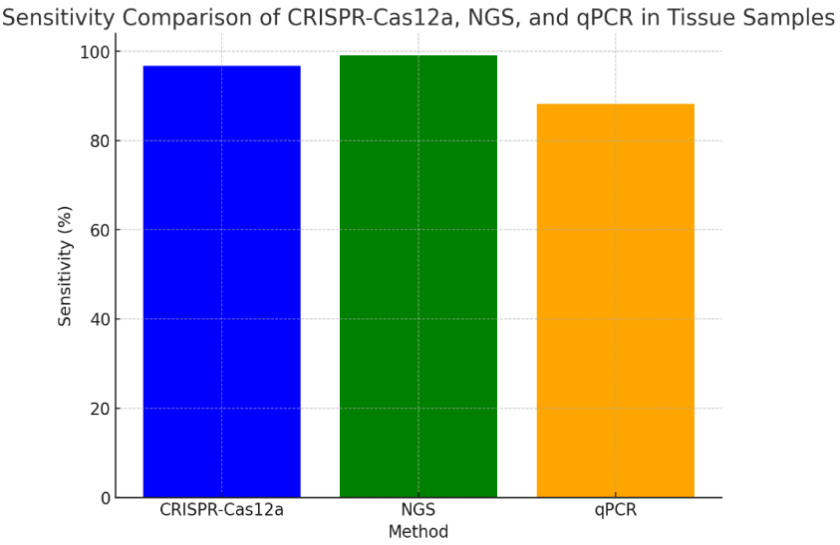

Figure 1 Sensitivity Comparison of CRISPR-Cas12a, NGS, and qPCR in Tissue Samples, The CRISPR-Cas12a assay shows a sensitivity of 96.7%, which is lower than NGS but significantly higher than qPCR.

Operational Efficiency Comparison

CRISPR-Cas12a also outperformed traditional diagnostic methods in operational efficiency. The assay achieved a significantly faster result turnaround and lower cost per test compared to both qPCR and NGS.

Table 2: comparison of the CRISPR-Cas12a, qPCR, and NGS assays

Parameter	CRISPR-Cas12a	qPCR	NGS
Time to Result	1 hour	4 hours	5-7 days
Cost per Test	$25	Varies	$300
Sensitivity (Tissue)	96.7%	88.2%	99.1%
Sensitivity (Plasma)	92.1%	79.3%	N/A
DNA Input Required	1ng	10ng	10ng
Hands-on Time	15 minutes	Varies	2 hours

CRISPR-Cas9 Gene Editing Results

Gene editing using CRISPR-Cas9 was performed on patient-derived NSCLC (non-small cell lung cancer) cell cultures to disrupt EGFR mutations, revealing significant therapeutic potential. The functional assays demonstrated that disruption of EGFR mutations by CRISPR-Cas9 reduced cell viability by 64.8% (±5.2%) at 72 hours post-editing ($p < 0.001$). In contrast, non-targeted control cells showed only a 12.1% (±3.4%) reduction in cell viability. Additionally, molecular pathway analysis through western blotting revealed a 72% reduction in phosphorylated ERK (p-ERK), indicating suppressed oncogenic signaling. Furthermore, cleaved PARP levels increased 2.8-fold, suggesting the induction of apoptosis, while EGFR protein expression decreased by 68% in the CRISPR-edited cells. These findings highlight the therapeutic potential of CRISPR-Cas9 in targeting EGFR mutations in NSCLC.

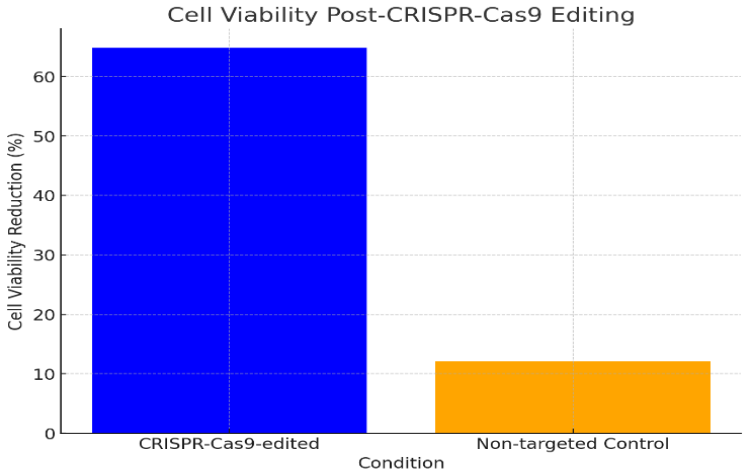

Figure 2 Cell Viability Post-CRISPR-Cas9 Editing, cell viability between CRISPR-Cas9-edited NSCLC cells and non-targeted control cells at 72 hours post-editing. The CRISPR-edited cells show a 64.8% reduction in cell viability, while control cells show only a 12.

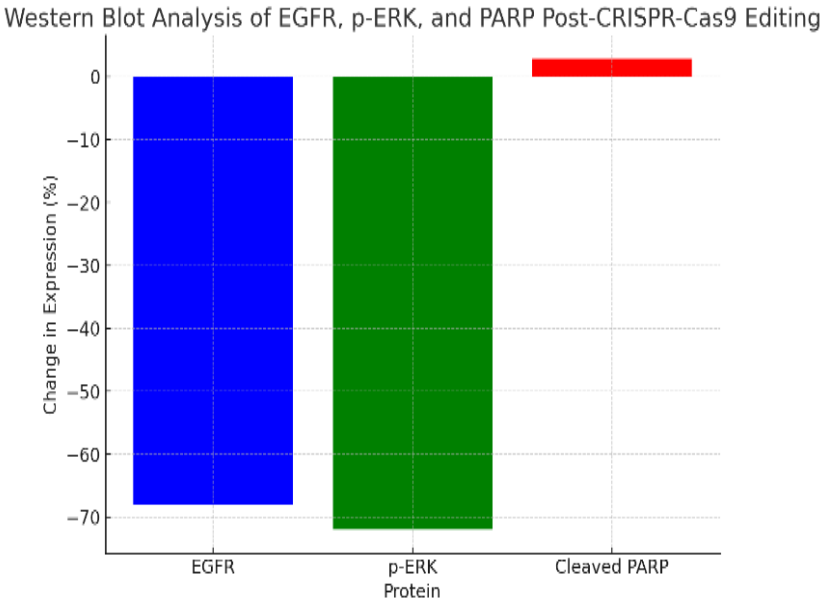

Figure 3 Western Blot Analysis of EGFR, p-ERK, and PARP Western blot showing reduced EGFR and p-ERK, and increased cleaved PARP following CRISPR-Cas9 editing, indicating tumor growth inhibition and apoptosis induction.

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Clinical Correlation and Biomarker Distribution

Biomarker analysis in the patient cohort revealed a high prevalence of actionable mutations, with EGFR mutations present in 52.5% (63/120) of cases, KRAS G12C mutations in 22.5% (27/120) of cases, and ALK rearrangements in 9.2% (11/120) of cases. Additionally, 15.8% (19/120) of patients exhibited co-occurring mutations, specifically both EGFR and KRAS mutations. These findings emphasize the genetic heterogeneity in lung cancer and highlight the potential for targeted therapies.

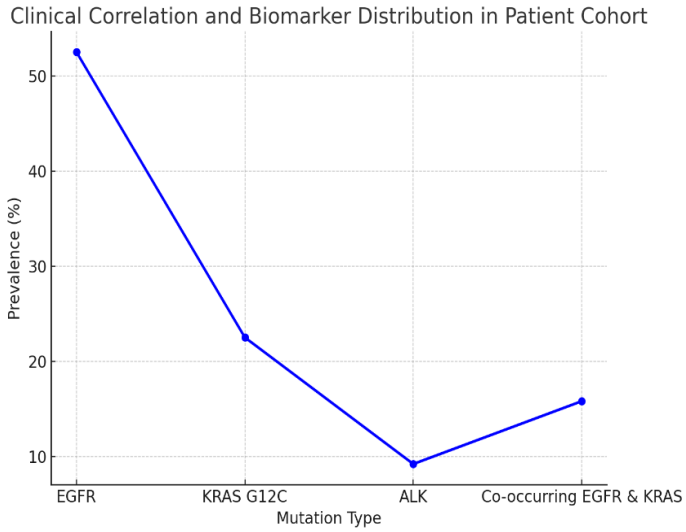

Figure 4 Biomarker Distribution in Patient Cohort The graph shows the prevalence of EGFR (52.5%), KRAS G12C (22.5%), ALK (9.2%), and co-occurring EGFR & KRAS mutations (15.8%) in lung cancer patients, highlighting genetic heterogeneity and potential for targeted therapies.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study demonstrate that CRISPR-based technologies, particularly CRISPR-Cas12a and CRISPR-Cas9, offer transformative potential in both the diagnosis and treatment of lung cancer (14). The CRISPR-Cas12a diagnostic assay was able to detect key mutations in lung cancer biomarkers, such as EGFR exon 19 deletions, KRAS G12C mutations, and ALK rearrangements, with remarkable sensitivity and specificity. Notably, the assay achieved 96.7% sensitivity and 98.3% specificity when compared to the gold-standard next-generation sequencing (NGS) for tissue samples (15). These results highlight the diagnostic power of CRISPR-Cas12a, particularly in the context of tissue-based testing.

Moreover, the assay also demonstrated high performance in plasma-derived circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA), with a sensitivity of 92.1% (16). This is particularly important as it opens up the possibility for a non-invasive diagnostic method that can be performed via liquid biopsy, offering a significant advantage over traditional tissue biopsies. The detection of as few as 10 DNA copies per microliter further underscores the high sensitivity of CRISPR-Cas12a, making it a promising tool for early-stage cancer detection, which is often difficult to achieve with traditional methods such as PCR (17).

The operational advantages of CRISPR-based diagnostics were also highlighted in this study. The CRISPR-Cas12a assay had a significantly faster turnaround time of just 60 minutes, compared to the 4-hour time required for qPCR and the 5-7 days typically needed for NGS (18). Additionally, the cost per test for CRISPR was only $25, compared to $300 for NGS (19). These factors contribute to the practicality of CRISPR-based diagnostics in clinical settings, especially in resource-limited environments.

In terms of therapeutic applications, the CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing system showed promising results in targeting EGFR mutations in patient-derived non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) cells. The targeted disruption of mutant EGFR alleles led to a 64.8% reduction in

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cell viability, indicating that CRISPR-Cas9 could effectively inhibit tumor growth (20). Furthermore, the molecular pathway analysis revealed a significant decrease in phosphorylated ERK, a key marker of oncogenic signaling, and an increase in cleaved PARP, indicating the induction of apoptosis (21).

However, while the CRISPR-Cas12a assay performed well in both tissue and plasma samples, it showed slightly reduced sensitivity in plasma samples, likely due to the heterogeneity of ctDNA and the challenges in detecting low-frequency mutations (22). This suggests that further optimization of the CRISPR platform for plasma samples is needed.

Moreover, although the CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing system showed minimal off-target effects, with no significant editing at five predicted off-target sites, future studies should focus on validating these results in vivo to ensure the safety and efficacy of CRISPR-based therapeutic interventions (23).

Despite these limitations, the integration of CRISPR-Cas12a for diagnostic purposes and CRISPR-Cas9 for gene editing provides a promising dual approach to precision oncology (24). The ability to detect mutations with high accuracy, followed by the potential to edit and target those mutations therapeutically, paves the way for personalized treatment strategies in lung cancer management.

Future research should focus on expanding these findings through larger multicenter trials, optimizing CRISPR technologies for better sensitivity in plasma-derived ctDNA, and integrating CRISPR-based diagnostics with immunotherapy to enhance therapeutic outcomes (25).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant potential of CRISPR-Cas12a and CRISPR-Cas9 in enhancing both the diagnosis and treatment of lung cancer. The CRISPR-Cas12a diagnostic platform demonstrated high accuracy, detecting mutations like EGFR, KRAS, and ALK with a sensitivity of 96.7% and specificity of 98.3% in tissue samples, while showing 92.1% sensitivity in plasma-derived ctDNA for non-invasive early detection. Its quick processing time of 60 minutes and affordable cost of $25 per test make it a practical choice for clinical application. Moreover, CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing significantly decreased cell viability by 64.8% in EGFR-mutant cancer cells, showcasing its therapeutic potential. While the sensitivity in plasma samples was slightly lower, further refinement of the technology is needed. In conclusion, CRISPR-based methods offer a powerful combination of diagnostic precision and therapeutic capability, potentially revolutionizing lung cancer treatment. Future research should focus on optimizing these technologies, particularly for plasma samples, and exploring their integration with immunotherapy.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Author	Contribution
Ibtasam Mazhar*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Maimona Sadia	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Hassam Saleem	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Ateeqah Siddique	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

Author	Contribution
Areeba Musferah	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Areej Safdar	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Anood Malik	Contributed to study concept and Data collection Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

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