The PAXgene Blood ccfDNA System: An Integrated System for Collection, Stabilization, and Purification of Circulating Tumor DNA

[1]Michael Fleischhacker, [2]Bernd Schmidt, [3]Susanne Pedersen, [3]David Murray, [3]Rohan Baker, [4]Natasha Cant, [4]Maryam Zahedi-Nejad, [5]Thorsten Voss, [5]Andrea Ullius and [5]Daniel Groelz

[1]University of Halle, Germany; [2]DRK Kliniken Berlin-Mitte, Germany; [3]Clinical Genomics, North Ryde, Australia; [4]QIAGEN Ltd., Manchester, United Kingdom; [5]PreAnalytiX GmbH, Hilden, Germany
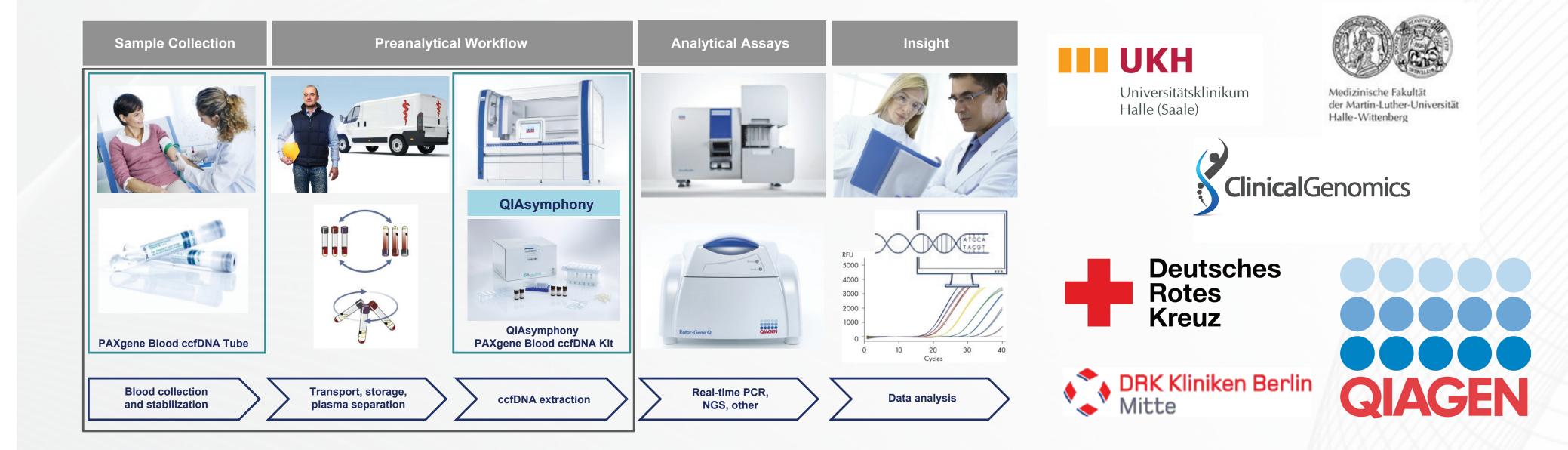
Introduction

The current preanalytical workflows for circulating tumor DNA (ctDNA) analysis have limitations that affect the accurate detection and quantification of these plasma cancer biomarkers. Release of genomic DNA (gDNA) from white blood cells (WBCs) due to cell lysis or apoptosis during whole blood storage in EDTA tubes creates higher gDNA background levels, affecting the sensitivity of ctDNA assays. Current tubes that stabilize WBCs often contain crosslinking reagents, which have negative effects on sensitive downstream assays, including methylation-based assays.

Using ctDNA assays, the new PAXgene® Blood ccfDNA System (see below), consisting of a blood collection tube with unique, non-crosslinking chemistry and an automated circulating cell-free DNA (ccfDNA) extraction kit, was evaluated in 3 research studies.

PAXgene Blood ccfDNA System

PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tube (RUO)

QIAsymphony PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Kit (RUO)

Tube features:
- Effective stabilization of:
  - White blood cells – Helps prevent release of gDNA
  - Red blood cells – Helps minimize hemolysis
- Helps maximize ccfDNA yield from plasma, minimize background gDNA
- Non-crosslinking, no DNA modification
- BD Vacutainer® plastic tube with BD Hemogard™ safety closure
  - Helps minimize risk of tube breakage
  - Enhances safety for healthcare and lab personnel
  - Helps minimize contamination between samples
  - Consistent blood draw volume

Kit features:
- Dedicated ccfDNA isolation technology for use with the PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tube
  - Binding chemistry optimized for use with PAXgene ccfDNA reagent
  - Optimized input volumes to accommodate higher volume plasma
- Two protocol lines
  - Standard protocol for preferred extraction of small fragments (≤ 500 bp) with 60 µl elution volume
  - Large fragment protocol for co-isolation of large fragments (> 500 bp) with flexible elution volume (60, 100, 150 µl)
- 2.4 ml or 4.8 ml plasma processing
- Prefilled cartridges are ready to use

PAXgene Blood ccfDNA System Workflow

PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tube and Automated QIAsymphony Kit: Integrated Collection-Stabilization-Preparation (CSP) System

Sample Collection	Preanalytical Workflow	Analytical Assays	Insight

- Blood collection and stabilization → Transport, storage, plasma separation → ccfDNA extraction → Real-time PCR, NGS, other → Data analysis

Study 1

Study Design and Methods

Blood from 29 consented lung cancer patients under treatment was collected in 2 K₂EDTA and 2 PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes. Plasma was either separated from the blood cells shortly after blood collection or the blood was stored for 7 days at room temperature (RT) before plasma separation. ccfDNA was isolated manually from plasma samples of donor 1–10 by using the QIAamp Circulating Nucleic Acid Kit (QIAGEN). An automated ccfDNA isolation procedure was used with plasma samples from donors 11–29 either using the QIAsymphony Circulating DNA Kit (QIAGEN) for EDTA plasma or using the QIAsymphony PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Kit (PreAnalytiX) for plasma generated from blood collected in PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes. Due to swelling of blood cells during prolonged plasma storage in EDTA tubes, the plasma yield decreased substantially. Therefore less plasma had to be used for the automated compared to the manual method. The difference in plasma input volume, along with variation between donor groups, is reflected by generally increased Cₜ levels of eluates generated with the automated preparation. Isolated ccfDNA was quantified by real-time PCR for the amount of the ERV (endogenous retrovirus) sequence as a measure of the total plasma DNA quantity and after bisulfite treatment for methylated SHOX2 as a marker for ctDNA and ACTB (β-actin) as unmethylated control sequence.

Figure 1: Change of target Cₜ over storage time for ccfDNA from plasma generated from EDTA and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes

Real-time PCR assays amplifying 2 fragments of the single copy ERV sequence were used to measure DNA content of original eluates after manual (A) and automated (B) ccfDNA isolation. After bisulfite treatment assays detecting methylated SHOX2 and unmethylated ACTB (control amplicon) were used to characterize these eluates using manual (C) and automated (D) ccfDNA isolation. 4 out of 10 samples processed using the manual method and 3 out of 19 samples processed using the automated method gave valid signals for methylated SHOX2 (Cₜ mSHOX2 < 37) and are shown here.

Figure 2: Change of relative mSHOX2 signal compared to reference gene over storage time

ΔΔCₜ Approach (valid donors, n = 7)
[ΔCₜ = Cₜ mSHOX2 − Cₜ ACTB), ΔΔCₜ (ΔCₜ T₀ − ΔCₜ T₇)]

PCR results from 7 donors with valid mSHOX2 signals (Cₜ < 37) were analyzed. A ΔCₜ was calculated of the mSHOX2 and the ACTB Cₜ values (Cₜ mSHOX2 − Cₜ ACTB). With these ΔCₜ values a ΔΔCₜ (ΔCₜ T₀ − ΔCₜ T₇) was built to visualize the relative signal change of mSHOX2 over time.

Study 2
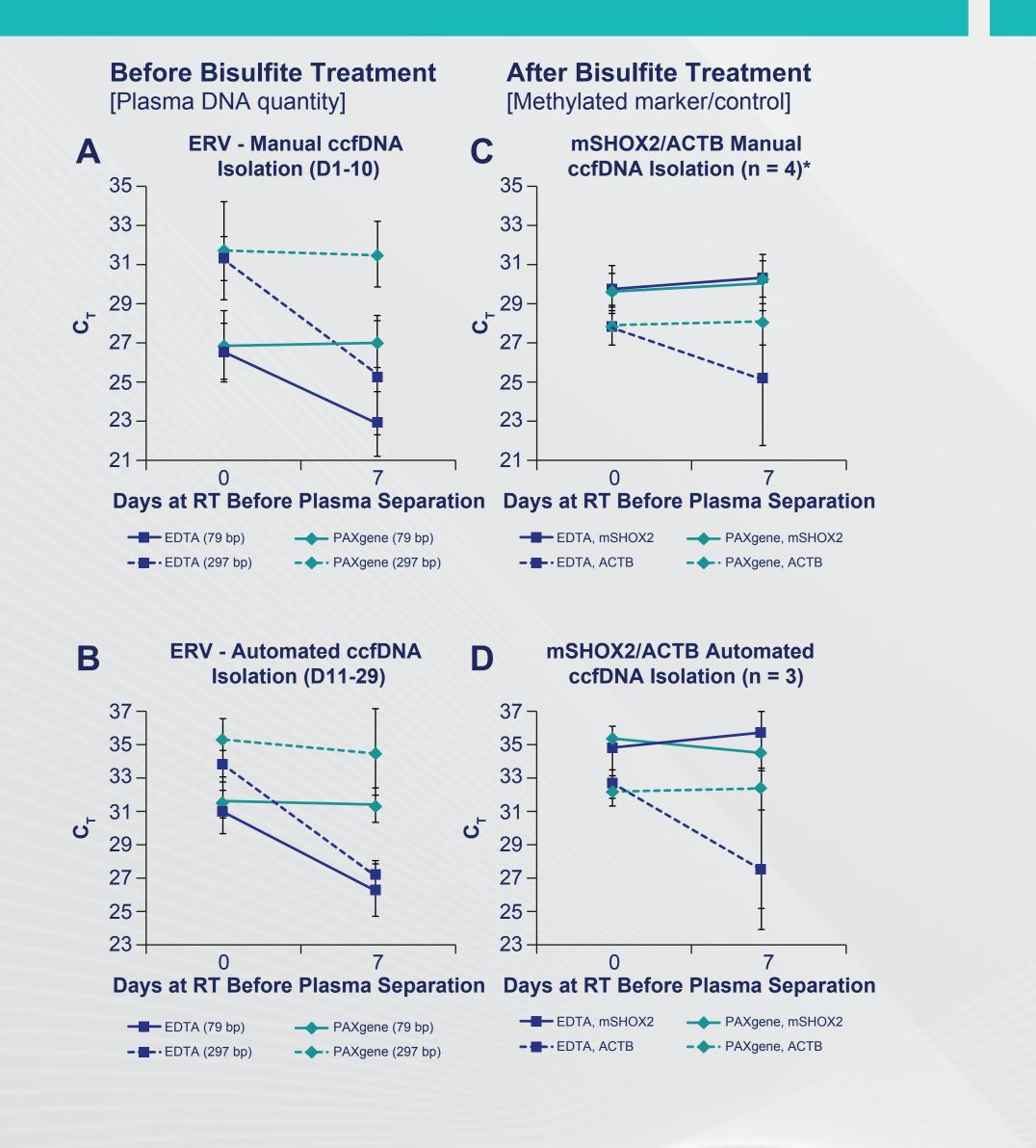
Study Design and Methods

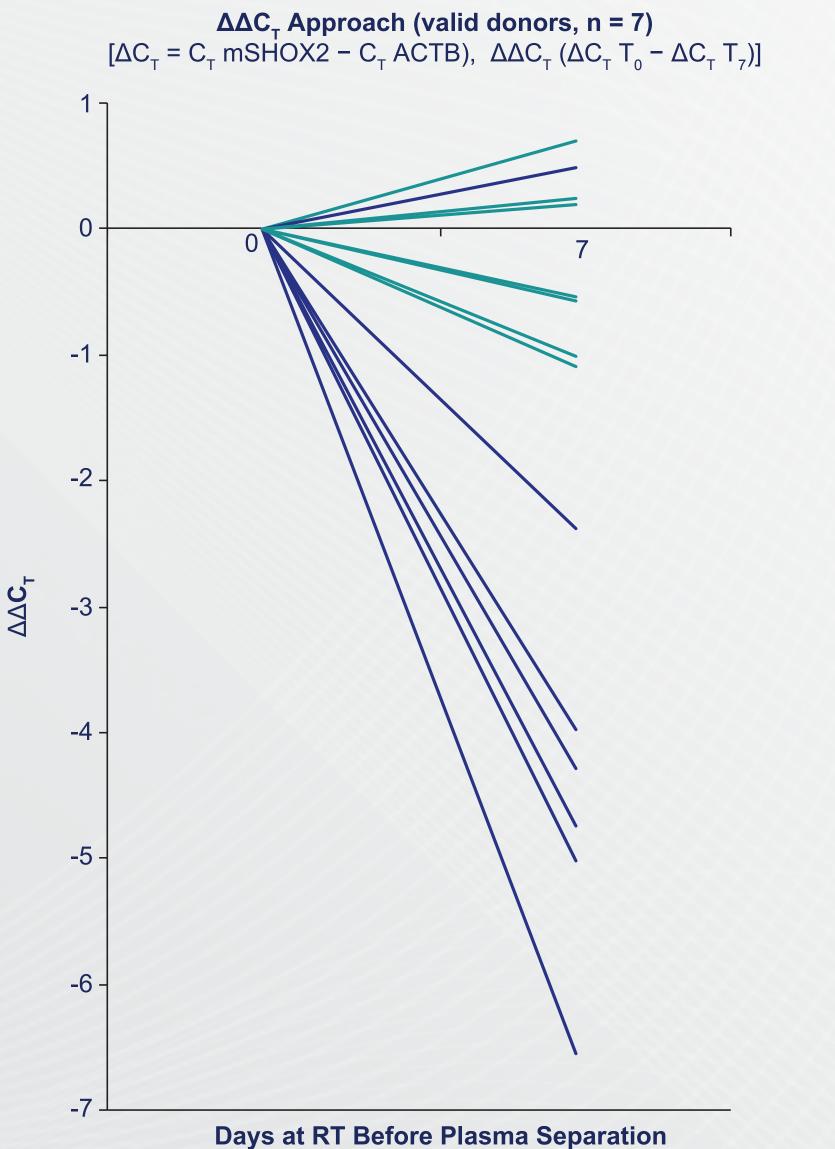Whole blood was obtained from consented healthy donors in both K₂EDTA and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes. Blood from each tube type was pooled separately and spiked with 1000 pg/ml methylated DNA, transferred back into the respective tubes and left at room temperature for up to 7 days. Tubes were gently inverted twice every day to simulate tubes in transit. Two tubes, one of each type, were taken each day and centrifuged to generate plasma. ccfDNA was isolated from EDTA plasma using the QIAsymphony DSP Virus/Pathogen Kit (QIAGEN) or from PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tube plasma using the QIAsymphony PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Kit (PreAnalytiX). Isolated ccfDNA fragments were bisulfite-converted using the Epitect FAST Kit (QIAGEN) and analyzed with the GEMINI assay (Clinical Genomics) for 2 methylated targets (BCAT1 and IKZF1) and 1 control target (ACTB).
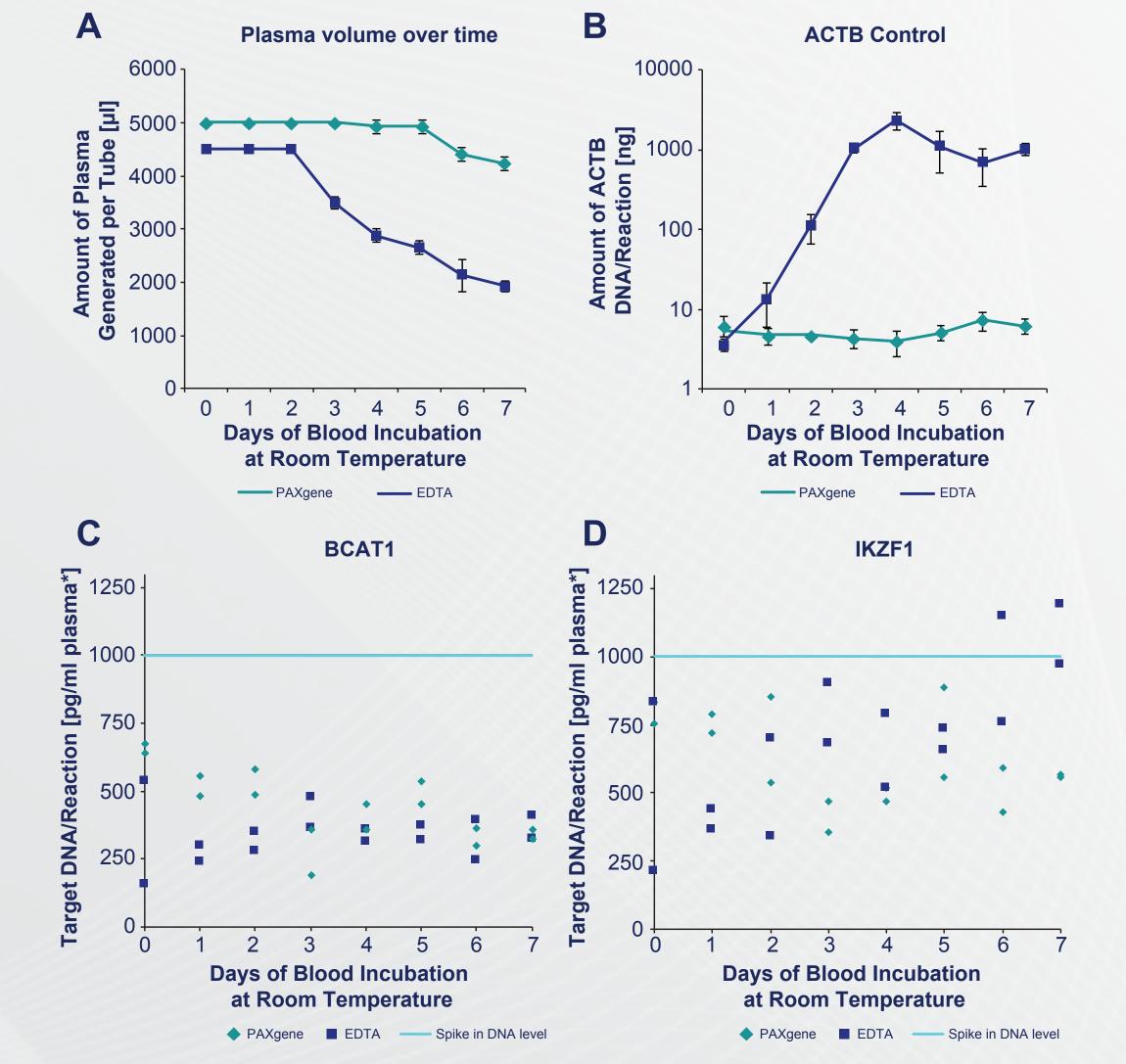
In a similar approach, pooled blood from 10 consented healthy donors was not spiked with methylated DNA to analyze the occurrence of false positive callings over time. Four blood samples of each tube type per day were processed with the same procedure as described above and tested for positivity with 3 PCR reaction replicates per target.
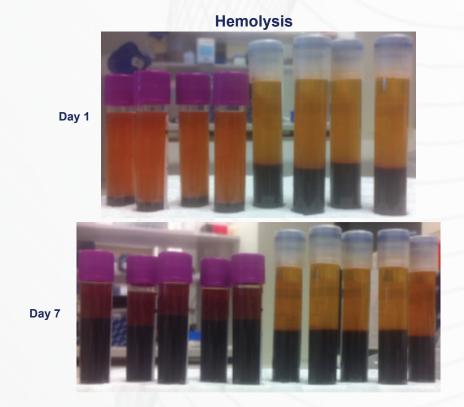
Figure 3: Plasma yield and change of target signal over storage time for plasma ccfDNA generated from blood collected and stored in EDTA and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes

Plasma volume yield was measured over time (A). After bisulfite treatment, a triplex real-time PCR assay was used to characterize the eluates: A fragment of ACTB (B, to measure DNA content of original eluates) and the two methylated target sequences BCAT1 (C) and IKZF1 (D) were amplified.

*Data were corrected for the reduced plasma volume. High losses from plasma recovery resulted in low target concentrations for the EDTA tube. This led to more variable and less accurate concentration determination.

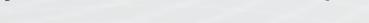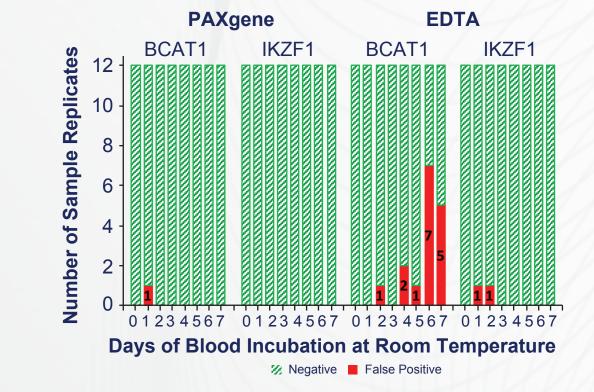**Figure 4: Hemolysis and plasma-hematocrit distribution in blood collected in EDTA or PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes**

EDTA tubes (purple closures) and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes (pearl white closures) stored for 1 and 7 days at room temperature (25°C).

After 7 days of storage there was significant hemolysis observed in the EDTA tubes.

Figure 5: False Positive Callings over Storage Time

Three PCR replicates per target sequence were analyzed with eluates generated from blood of 4 donors collected either in both EDTA and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes. Blood was stored for up to 7 days at room temperature (25°C).

Table 1: Overall GEMINI positivity

	EDTA	PAXgene	Total
POS	13 [41%]	1 [3%]	14
NEG	19	31	50
Total	32	32	64

At least 1 of the 6 total PCR reactions (3 per target sequence) has to give a signal to be regarded as positive.

Study 3

Study Design and Methods

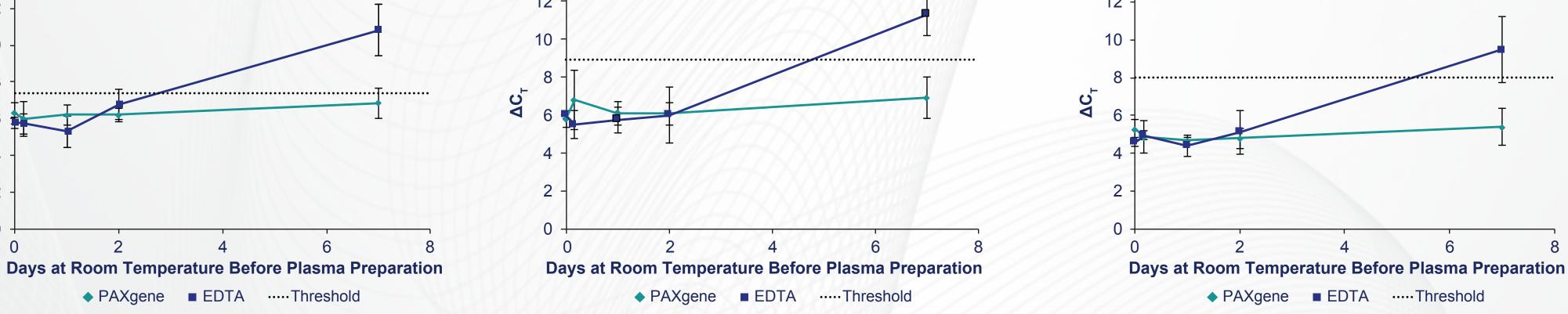Blood from 5 healthy donors was collected in 5 EDTA and 5 PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes and spiked with restriction enzyme treated EGFR DNA containing exon 19 deletions and exon 20 and 21 substitutions (T790M, L858R). Plasma was either separated from the blood cells shortly after blood collection or the blood was stored for up to 7 days at room temperature before plasma separation. ccfDNA was isolated from plasma samples using an automated ccfDNA isolation procedure either with the QIAsymphony Circulating DNA Kit (QIAGEN) for EDTA plasma or using the QIAsymphony PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Kit (PreAnalytiX) for plasma generated from blood collected in PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes. Isolated ccfDNA was tested with the QIAGEN therascreen® EGFR Plasma RGQ PCR Kit (RUO).

Figure 6: Change of ΔCₜ values of target versus control signal over storage time for ccfDNA from plasma generated from EDTA and PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes

The relative signals of the 3 mutations covered by the therascreen EGFR assay are shown: (A) point mutation T790M, (B) L858R, and (C) deletion in exon 19. Each PCR was done in duplicates. To calculate the ΔCₜ value the average Cₜ of each mutant was subtracted by the average Cₜ of the wildtype sub-assay. The average of all donors is shown in the figure for all test time points. The therascreen EGFR assay defines a threshold for each sub-assay. ΔCₜ values above this threshold result in false-negative calls.

Results

Both studies 1 and 2 demonstrated constant levels of the methylation ctDNA markers, SHOX2, BCAT1 and IKZF1, in PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes over the investigated time course. There was no significant release of gDNA in the PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tube whereas a significant release of gDNA was detected in EDTA samples. The change in the ratio between target and control signal was significantly lower in ccfDNA from PAXgene compared to EDTA samples. For EDTA blood accessible plasma volume strongly decreased while hemolysis increased drastically over time compared to blood collected in PAXgene Blood ccfDNA Tubes where only small changes in these parameters were observed. In study 2 the percentage of false positive samples was 41% for EDTA and 3% for PAXgene samples.

Likewise, study 3 showed constant EGFR Cₜ values in the PAXgene system with reliable mutation detection, whereas the high DNA concentration from the EDTA system resulted in false-negative callings.

Conclusions

The new system allows researchers to accurately detect and quantify plasma cancer biomarkers from blood samples that have been stored in the tube for up to 7 days at RT. This includes challenging assays based on methylated ctDNA. The system provides the required assay sensitivity to allow the correct assay interpretation beyond the typical 3–6 hour storage limit for EDTA tubes.

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