



DEPARTMENT OF LABORATORY MEDICINE AND PATHOLOGY

Labs We Order and Then Regret (or Misinterpret): Managing Serologic Test Utilization and Interpretation

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Disclosures

- Advisory Board:
 - Roche Diagnostics
 - Euroimmun US
 - Oxford Immunotech
 - Serimmune Inc.

Objectives

- Review common cases of serologic test over-utilization and/or mis-interpretation
 - Does my patient have herpes or not?
 - Is it Neurosyphilis or Neoplastic Meningitis?
 - Deciphering Fungal Serologies: Antibody vs Antigen
 - Arboviral Diagnostics: What to Rely On and When
 - The Problem with (some) Parasite Serologies



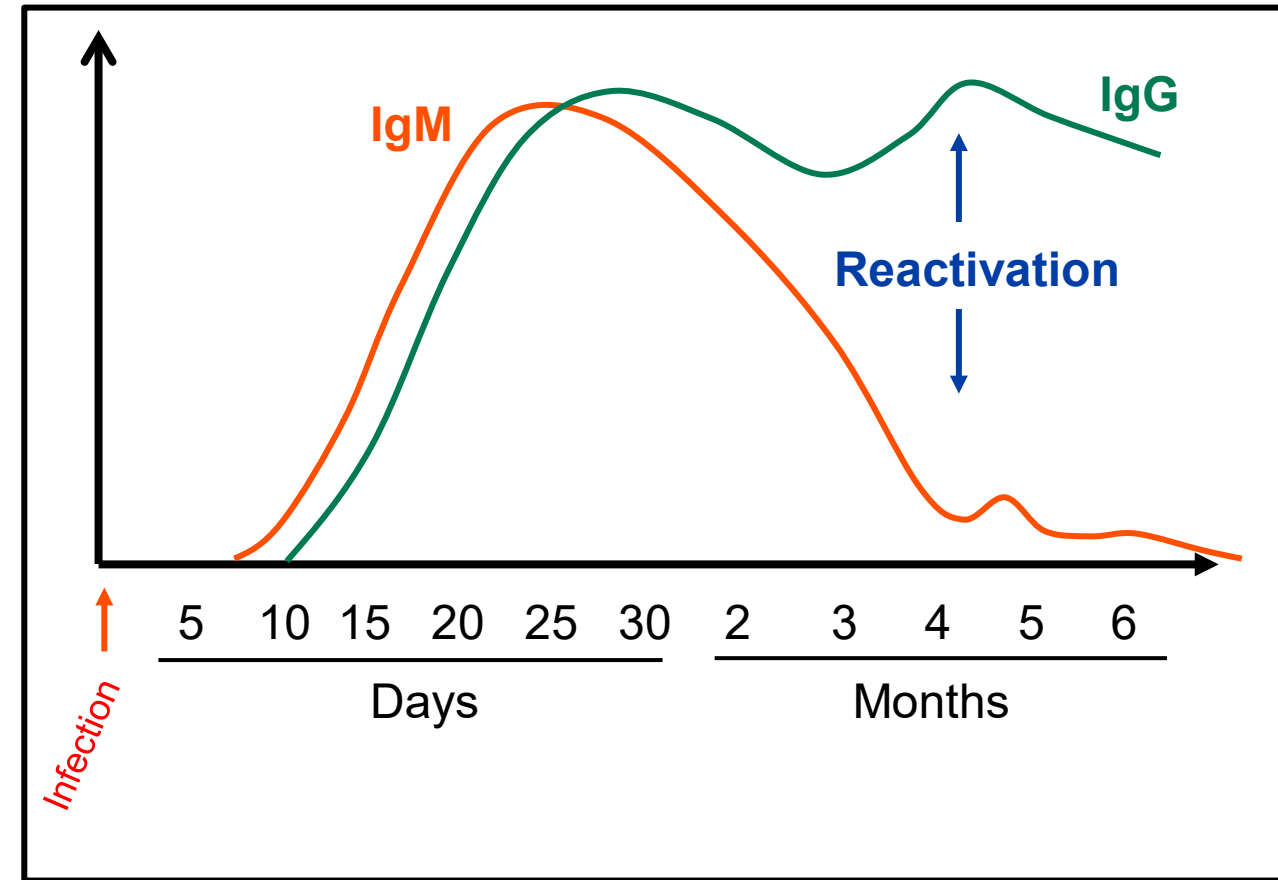
Case 1 – “Does my patient have herpes or not?”

- 32 yo female presents to an STI clinic for screening. No findings on physical exam or concerns noted by the patient.
 - HIV – negative
 - Syphilis – negative
 - *C. trachomatis* – negative
 - *N. gonorrhoeae* – negative
 - HSV 1/2 Antibodies – **IgM positive**/IgG negative
- Provider orders second HSV 1/2 antibody panel from alternative laboratory:
 - IgM negative/IgG negative
- Patient is *very* concerned about an HSV infection, blames and breaks up with her new partner.



HSV – A Refresher on Epidemiology and Immunity

- 2015-2016 NHANES seroprevalence data:
 - HSV-1: 47.8%
 - HSV-2: 11.9%
- Increasing anogenital HSV-1 infections
- Majority of individuals with HSV-2 are unaware
- Immune response to HSV infections:
 - IgM/IgG/IgA develop > 7-10 days
 - IgM ↓ in 2-3 months; variable ↑ in reactivation
 - IgG remains ↑ and is higher in patients with recurrent reactivations



Diagnostic Assays for Detection of HSV 1/2 Infections

- Direct Detection
 - Molecular detection (*ie*, RT-PCR) – **Preferred/Recommended.**
 - Antigen detection/viral culture – no longer routinely performed; limited sensitivity, long TAT
- Indirect Detection via Serology
 - IgM assays:
 - Do not distinguish HSV-1 vs. HSV-2 (*ie*, not type-specific)
 - False positivity: Parvovirus B19, VZV, rheumatoid factor, SARS-CoV-2
 - IgG assays:
 - Type-specific based on HSV glycoprotein G (gG1 and gG2) → 35% AA homology
 - HerpeSelect (DiaSorin) IgG ELISAs most commonly used
 - HSV-1 sens/spec: 91%-96%/92-95%
 - HSV-2 sens/spec: 80%-92%/89-96%
 - ↑ FP rate at low Ab levels (<3.0 index values) → confirmatory testing by blot

When is HSV 1/2 Serologic Testing Useful/Indicated?

- HSV-2 IgG testing is useful for:
 - Recurrent genital or atypical symptoms w/ negative RT-PCR
 - Women of child-bearing age w/ hx of lesions suspicious for HSV w/ negative RT-PCR
 - Clinical diagnosis of genital herpes w/o laboratory confirmation
 - Patient's partner diagnosed w/ genital herpes
 - Persons presenting for STI evaluation, specifically:
 - Multiple sex partners
 - HIV infection or at high risk for infection
- HSV-1 IgG testing less informative
 - No distinction btw site of infection, high seroprevalence rate
- HSV IgM testing: **NOT USEFUL.**

When is HSV 1/2 Serologic Testing Useful/Indicated?

American Academy of Pediatrics. Red Book. 2021

Serologic testing is not useful in neonates. IgM testing for HSV-1 or HSV-2 is not useful because of the lack of a reliable commercially available IgM assay.

A Guide to Utilization of the Microbiology Laboratory for Diagnosis of Infectious Diseases: 2018 Update by the IDSA /ASM

HSV serology is useful primarily for immunostatus and exposure status testing. IgM serology is no longer recommended.

CDC. STI Treatment Guidelines, 2021

Immunoglobulin M (IgM) testing for HSV-1 or HSV-2 is not useful because IgM tests are not type specific and might be positive during recurrent genital or oral episodes of herpes (460). Therefore, HSV IgM testing is not recommended.

- HSV IgM testing:
 - **NOT USEFUL.**

What Does HSV IgM Utilization Look Like in Our Lab?

- Retrospective review of all HSV tests ordered btw May and July 2018
 - HSV IgM/IgG panel, HSV IgM alone, HSV IgG alone, HSV RT-PCR
 - 22,854 HSV tests performed → 20% of tests were HSV IgM only

Table 1. Positivity Rates for HSV1/2 RT-PCR and Serologic Testing (IgM and IgG) from May to July, 2018 at Mayo Clinic Laboratories

HSV Test Ordered	Number of Tests Performed	Positivity Rate
RT-PCR alone	9,999	49.7%
IgM-alone	1,171	1.2%
IgM and IgG Serology	1,171	21.6% (IgM and HSV1 and/or HSV2 IgG: 13.4%, IgM and HSV1 and/or HSV2 IgG: 1.5%)
RT-PCR and IgM	171	4.7%

Swab samples collected within 7 days of each other

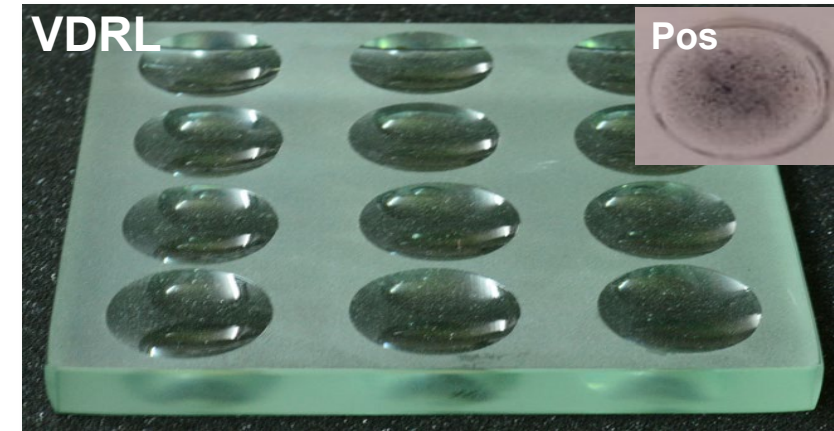
Solution to the HSV IgM Problem?

Jung S and Theel ES. *JALM*. 2020;5(1):239-245

- HSV IgM testing is over-utilized with questionable value-add to patient care.

Case 2 – Is it Neurosyphilis or Neoplastic Meningitis?

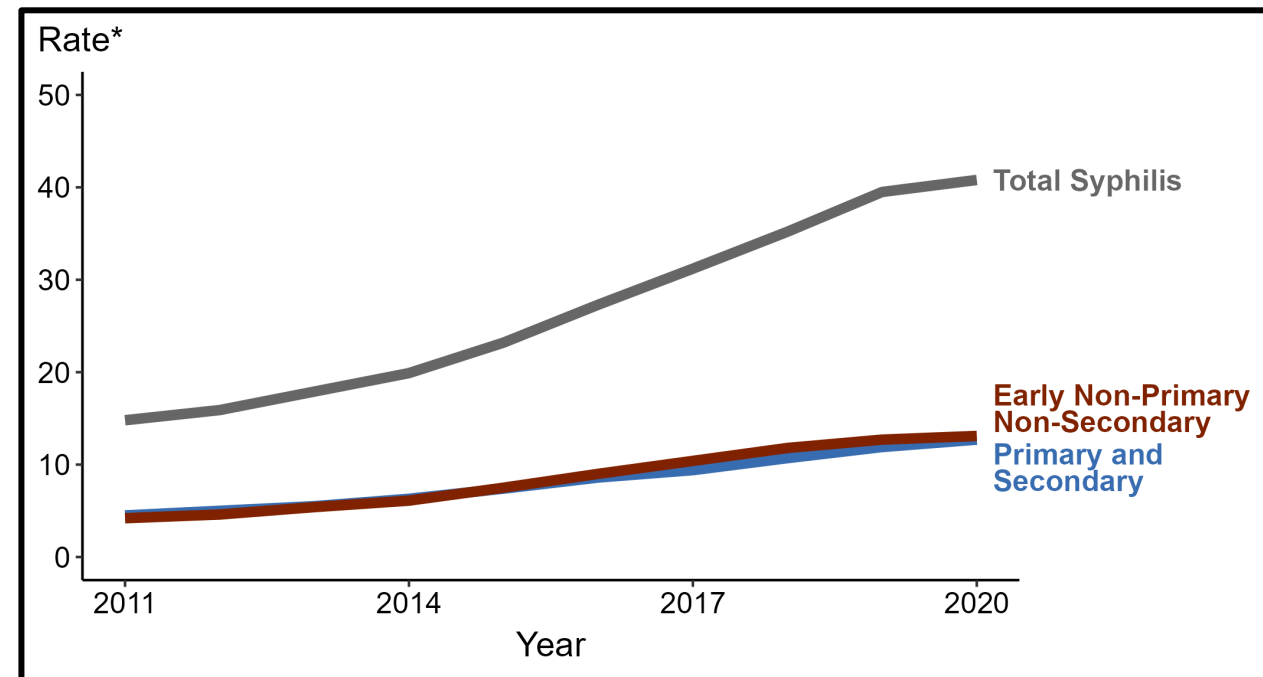
- 55 yo previously healthy male presented to the ED with generalized weakness, mental status changes, gait ataxia and imbalance
- Fairly extensive initial infectious disease and neurologic work-up
 - Negative for everything except:
 - **VDRL on CSF – 1:8**
- Patient initiated on Pen G without improvement
- Subsequent testing revealed:
 - Metastatic adenocarcinoma and meningeal carcinomatosis
 - Repeat CSF VDRL was negative



Clinician call to the lab: This patient has neoplastic meningitis. Why was the VDRL positive?

Neurosyphilis – A Quick Refresher

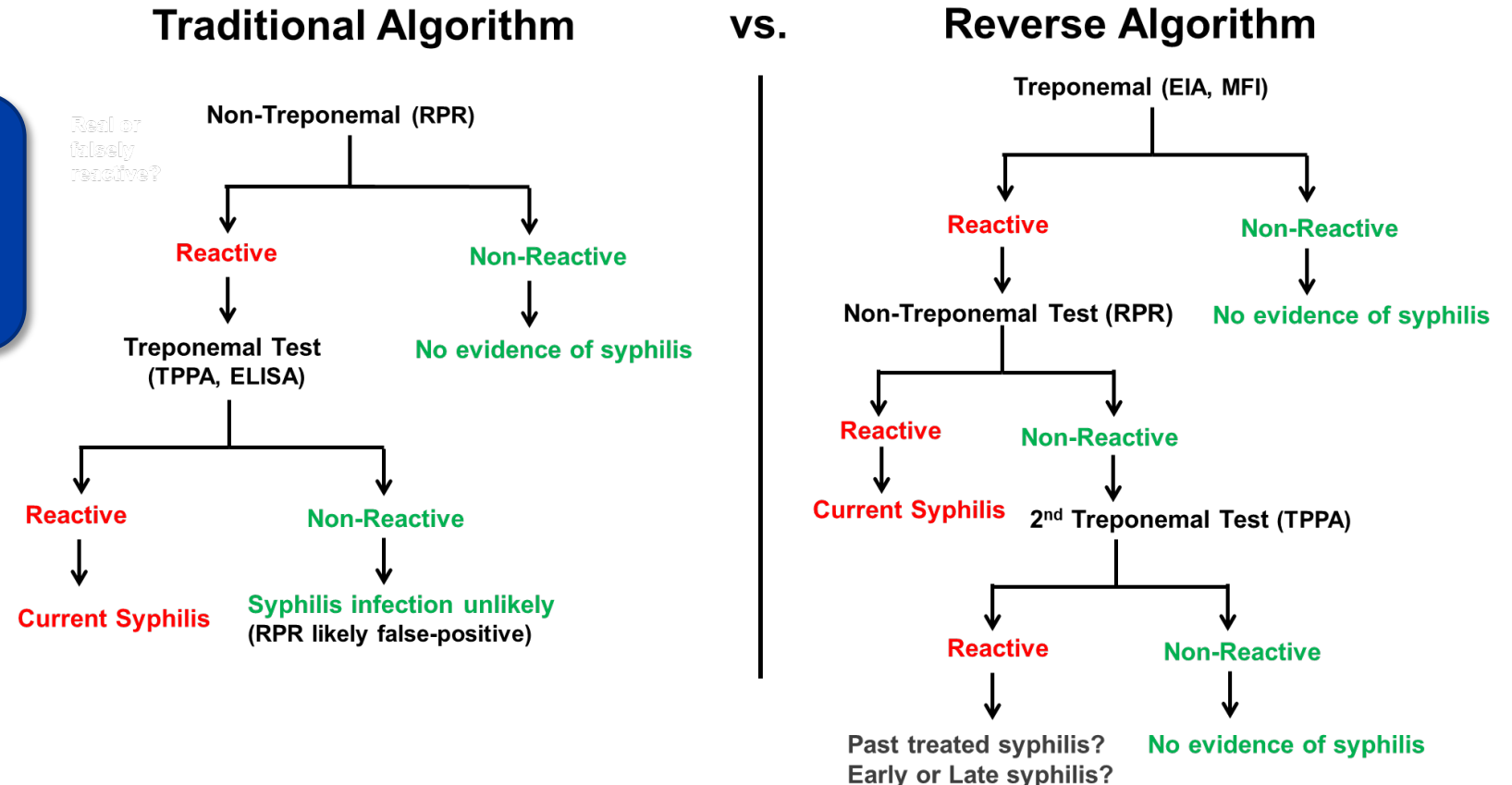
- *T. pallidum* CNS infection can occur at any stage
- ~ 1.8% of early syphilis cases have neurologic involvement ('09-'15, CDC)
- Indications for CSF evaluation:
 - Neurologic signs/symptoms
 - Abnormal CSF findings in asymptomatic pts remains unclear
- Diagnosis is multi-pronged:
 - Confirmed Ab positive in blood
 - Typical CSF findings:
 - ↑ cell count, protein
 - Reactive VDRL



Testing for Syphilis and Neurosyphilis

- Reverse is more sensitive than Traditional algorithm for primary syphilis (96% vs 75%)
- Only recommended for use in serum!

Patient did not have syphilis serology ordered...



Testing for Neurosyphilis

Non-treponemal

CSF Testing:	Sensitivity	Specificity
VDRL*	66.7%-87.5%	78.2%-90.2%
RPR*	51.5%-100%	81.1%-100%

Best balance btw Sn/Sp...?

*symptomatic neurosyphilis
**vs. VDRL+ patients

Back to the case:

Investigation into VDRL utilization at our institution due to calls regarding VDRL positivity in either untested or seronegative patients

VRDL Utilization at Mayo Clinic

- 25-yr ('94-'18) retrospective review of all VDRL-CSF orders across Mayo Clinic sites
 - Chart review of VDRL+ pts to determine final Dx
 - TP VDRL: (+) serology in blood w/ symptoms
 - FD VDRL: (-) serology in blood of pt with alternative diagnosis
- Overall VDRL positivity: 0.18%
 - PPV of (+) VDRL: 71.7%
 - TP & FP VDRL titer ranges were identical (1:1 to 1:8)
- FP VDRL pts:
 - Abx started for 4/15 pts
 - ID consult for 10/15 pts
 - Delay in cancer treatment for 1 pts

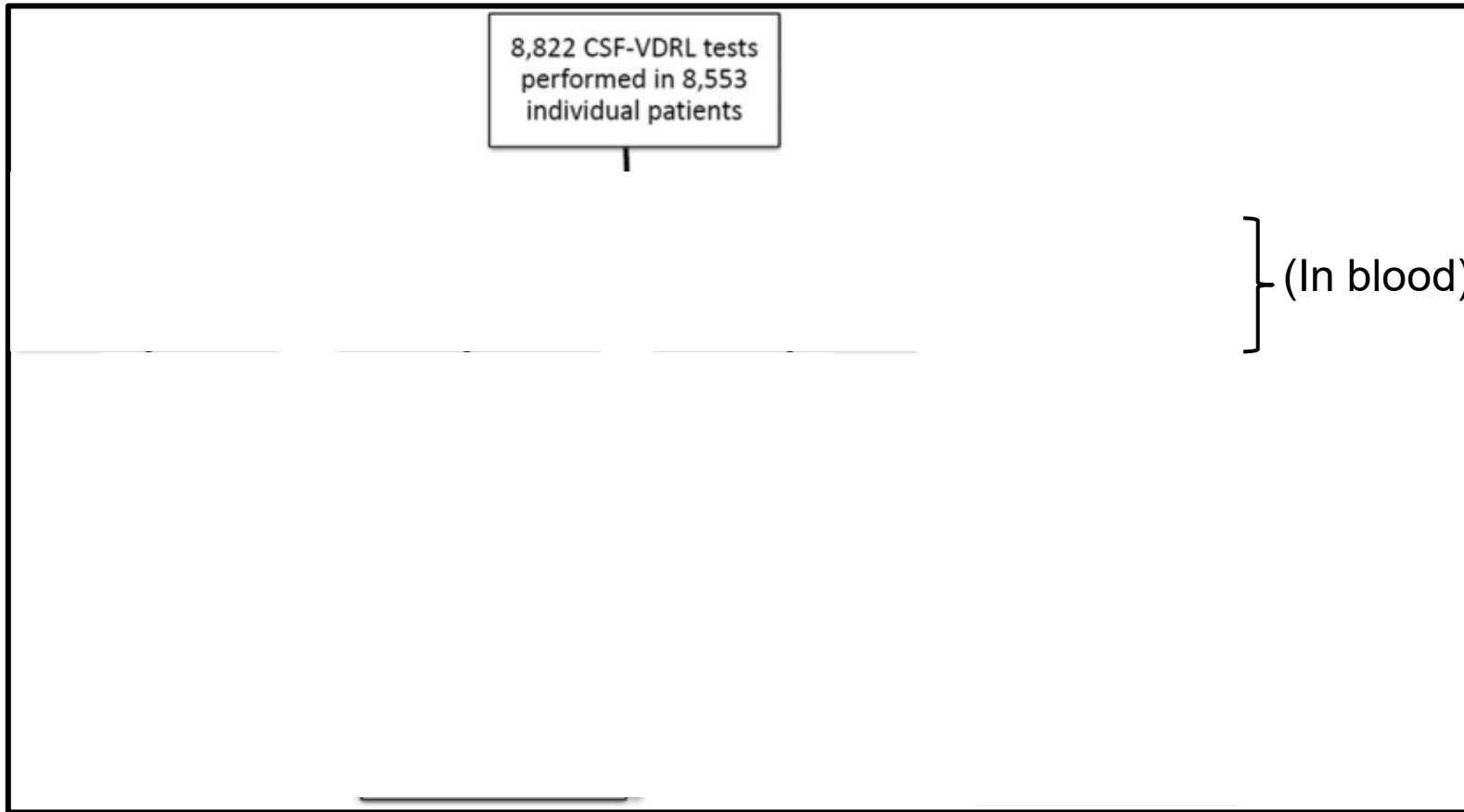
33,933 CSF-VDRL tests performed
(32,626 individual patients)

• All improved on therapy

• 67% with CNS malignancy

VDRL Utilization at Mayo Clinic

- Assessed appropriateness of VDRL orders in a 8,553 patient subset:
 - Appropriate order *if any positive syphilis serology result in blood*



‘Syphilis’ or ‘neurosyphilis’ appeared in 13.8% of charts from VDRL negative patients...

Conclusions and Solutions to the VDRL Problem

- Cause of FP VDRLs?
 - Detect antibodies to damaged cells, also present in other diseases = BFPs
- 98% of VDRL negative patients were untested or seronegative
 - Syphilis/neurosyphilis infrequently considered prior to VDRL ordering
- Importance of pre-test probability, particularly in low-prevalence setting
- Issue likely result of 'box-checking' or pre-defined order sets
- Solutions:
 - Continued clinician education regarding appropriate ordering...
 - Laboratory control measures: Require positive serology in blood *before* performing VDRL

Case 3 – Deciphering Fungal Serologies: Antibody vs. Antigen

- 49 yo, previously healthy female from MN presents to the ED with 1 week history of SOB, fever, nonproductive cough and chest pain
 - Bilateral, diffuse, nodular interstitial infiltrates and elevated WBC
 - No remarkable social history, no smoking, no pets, no international travel
 - ‘Canoe and caving’ trip on St. Croix River in WI 4 weeks prior

Infectious Disease Testing:

Histoplasma serologic results initially discounted due to negative molecular and antigen test results.

Call to the lab: Why is everything negative? What do the titers mean?

Assay	Specimen	Qual (Quant) Results
FilmArray Respiratory Panel	NP Swab	Negative for all
Fungal/Bacterial Cx	BAL/Blood	No growth (12 days)
<i>Histoplasma</i> Ag	Serum/Urine	Negative
<i>Blastomyces</i> Ag	Serum/Urine	Negative
<i>Histoplasma & Blastomyces</i> PCR	BAL	Negative
<i>Histoplasma</i> Ab	Serum	ID: M-band Yst: 1:64 Myc: Negative

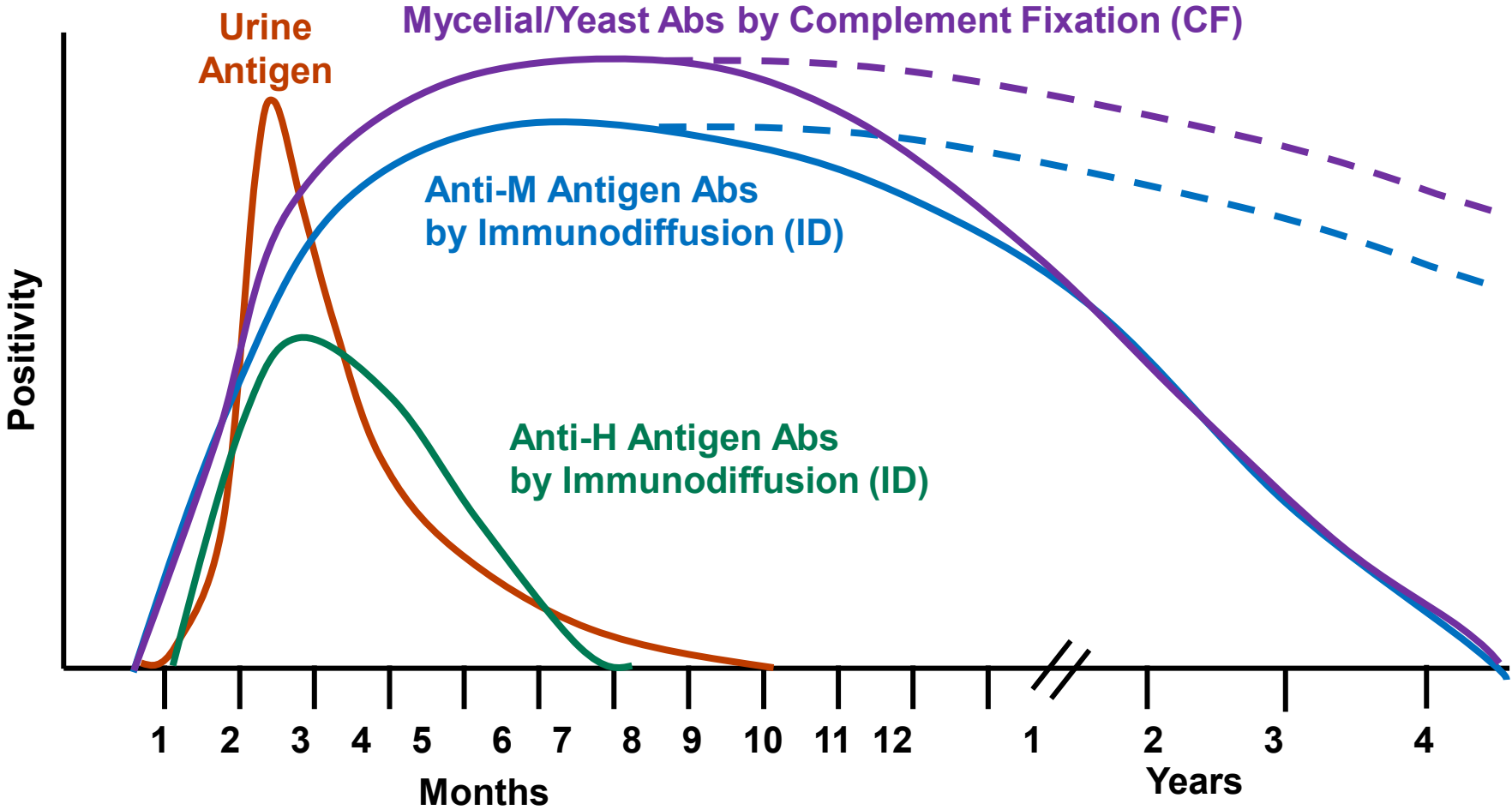
Antibody/Antigen Detection for *Histoplasma*: General Concepts

- Serologic test sensitivity (Ab and Ag detection) dependent on:
 - Clinical manifestation
 - Acute diffuse pulmonary
 - High fungal burden exposure → severe pulmonary infection
 - Symptomatic pulmonary
 - Most common presentation, milder, often misdiagnosed as CAP
 - Develops weeks post exposure
 - Chronic pulmonary
 - In patients w/ underlying lung disease
 - Progressive disseminated
 - Immunostatus
 - Ab Sensitivity
 - 38% - 63% in uncontrolled HIV+ pts
 - 18% - 30% of SOT recipients

Disease State	Ab % Sens	Ag % Sens
Acute Diffuse Pulm.	64%-70%	65%-83%
Prog. Disseminated	70%-75%	92%-95%
Symptomatic Pulm.	>95%	19%-34%
Chronic Pulm.	83%-100%	6%-33%

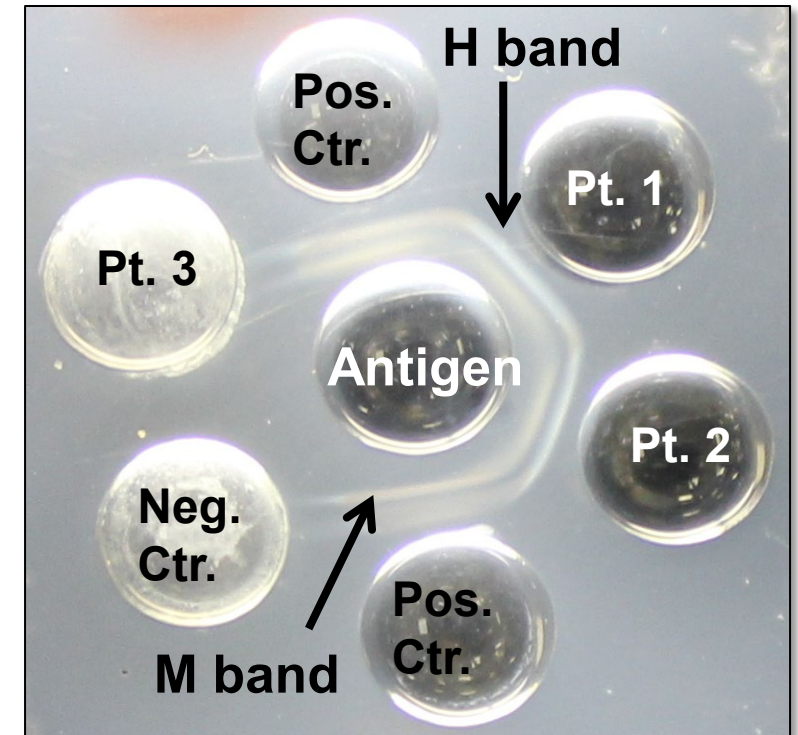
A combined diagnostic approach w/ culture, antibody and antigen remains ideal...

Histoplasma Antibody and Antigen Kinetic Patterns



Performance Pearls for Immunodiffusion Assays

- *Histoplasma* antibodies against two antigens :
 - **H antigen** (β -glucosidase) → Recent infection
 - Detected in ~35% of patients
 - Undetectable ~ 6 months post-infection
 - **M antigen** (catalase) → Recent vs. remote infection
 - Detectable in 70%-90% of acute cases
 - >90% remain positive >2 yrs post-infection
- Specificity: ~99%
 - ~0.5% M-band seropositivity in endemic areas



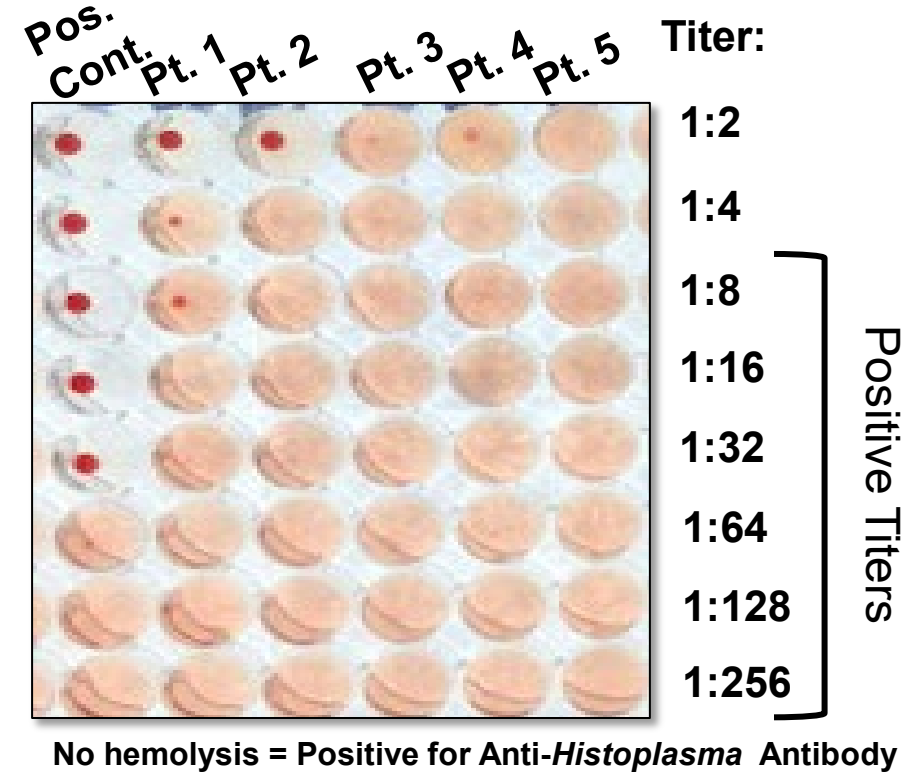
Performance Pearls for Complement Fixation Assays

- Antibody detection against 2 *Histoplasma* antigens:
 - **Mycelial** – Histoplasmin
 - **Yeast** – Chemically killed yeast

	Sensitivity	Specificity
Mycelial Ag	70%-75%	95%-98%
Yeast Ag	90-95%	85%-95%

- Seropositive for 1-2 years

Titer	Interpretation
<1:8	Negative
1:8 – 1:16	Past infection/Residence in endemic area Occur in ~1/3 of active disease
≥1:32 or 4X Δ	Likely active disease



Histoplasma Antigen Detection Assays

- Two widely used qEIAs to detect *Histoplasma* galactomannan, differ in design
 - MiraVista Diagnostics: Polyclonal Ab
 - IMMY Inc.: Monoclonal Ab
 - Ag values do not correlate between assays
- Cross-reactivity w/ other fungi:
 - *Coccidioides/Paracoccidioides* (0-67%)
 - *Penicilium marneffeii* (~40%)
 - *Blastomyces* (>95%)
 - ~1/3 of patients tested for *Histoplasma* Ag are also tested for *Blastomyces* antigen, concurrently

IMMY vs. MiraVista Urine Ag EIAs	
Positive Agreement*	82%-90%
Negative Agreement	95%-98%

*Higher for first time diagnosis

Concurrent testing on serum		<i>Histoplasma</i> Ag	
		Positive	Negative
<i>Blastomyces</i> Ag	Positive	72	19
	Negative	4	3434
PPA		95.7% (86.8-98.3)	
NPA		99.4% (99.1-99.7)	
OPA		99.3% (99.0-99.3)	

*Unpublished; All discordant samples <LoQ

Case 3 – Deciphering Fungal Serologies: Antibody vs. Antigen

- Serology continues to play a role in *H. capsulatum* diagnostics
 - Key role in patients with subacute pulmonary and chronic infections
 - Careful interpretation of results required to differentiate active vs. remote infection
- Significant antigen cross-reactivity between *Histoplasma* and *Blastomyces* antigen assays...
 - ...is there a need/role for both?

Assay	Specimen	Qual (Quant) Results	
FilmArray Respiratory Panel	NP Swab	Negative for all	
Fungal/Bacterial Cx	BAL/Blood	<i>H. capsulatum</i> (18 days)	
<i>Histoplasma</i> Ag	Serum/Urine	Negative	
<i>Blastomyces</i> Ag	Serum/Urine	Negative	
<i>Histoplasma/Blastomyces</i> PCR	BAL	Negative	
<i>Histoplasma</i> Ab	Serum	ID: M-band Yst: 1:64 Myc: Negative	ID: M-band Yst: 1:1024 Myc: 1:64

Case 4 – Arboviral Diagnostics: What to rely on and when

- 56 yo female from MN presented to the ED in July with a 10d history of fever, confusion, gait instability, aphasia and maculopapular rash
 - CSF: Protein, 75 mg/dL; 153 cells/ μ L (38% lymphocytes), normal glucose, clear
- Gamut of ID testing on serum/CSF – all negative
 - GS, cultures, RT-PCR for WNV, HSV, *B. burgdorferi*, EBV, CMV, Influenza, Enterovirus, etc.
 - Cell-free DNA mNGS on plasma and CSF
- Arboviral serology panel ordered 3 days post-admission:

	CSF		Serum	
	IgM	IgG	IgM	IgG
Eastern Equine Encephalitis Virus	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10
Western Equine Encephalitis Virus	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10
La Crosse Virus	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10
St. Louis Encephalitis Virus (SLEV)	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10	<1:10
West Nile Virus (WNV)	Equ.	Neg.	Equ.	Neg

Clinician call to the lab:

Is this result consistent with WNV infection?

Why was the WNV PCR negative?

Encephalitis of Unknown Origin



Experts warn of increases in **tick-borne** Powassan virus

By Susan Scutti, CNN

Not a tick...

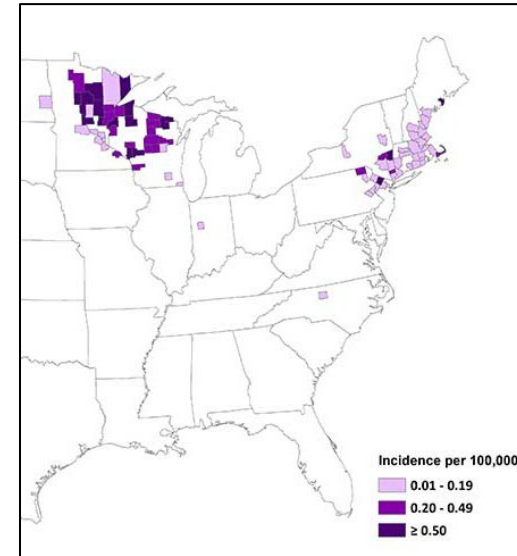
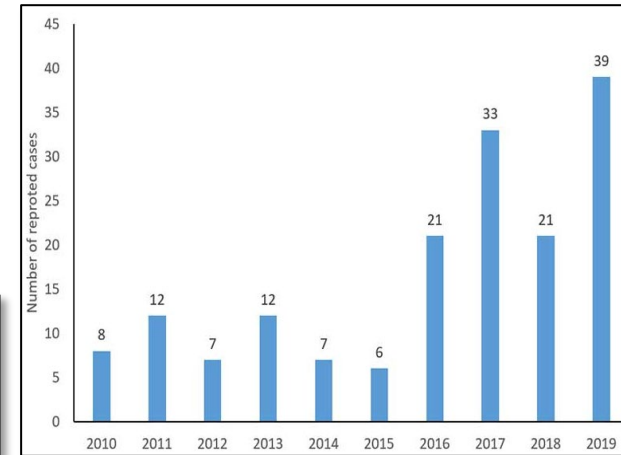
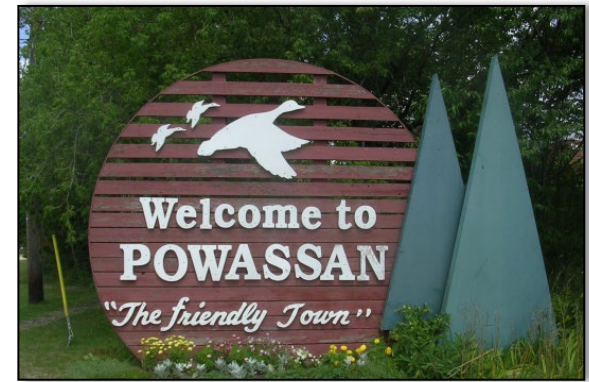


- Additional testing for Powassan virus
 - POWV RT-PCR – Negative in CSF/Serum
 - POWV IgM EIA – **Positive in CSF/Serum**
 - POWV PRNT at CDC – **1:128 in CSF/1:1024 in serum**

Clinician call to the lab:
But the POWV PCR is negative?

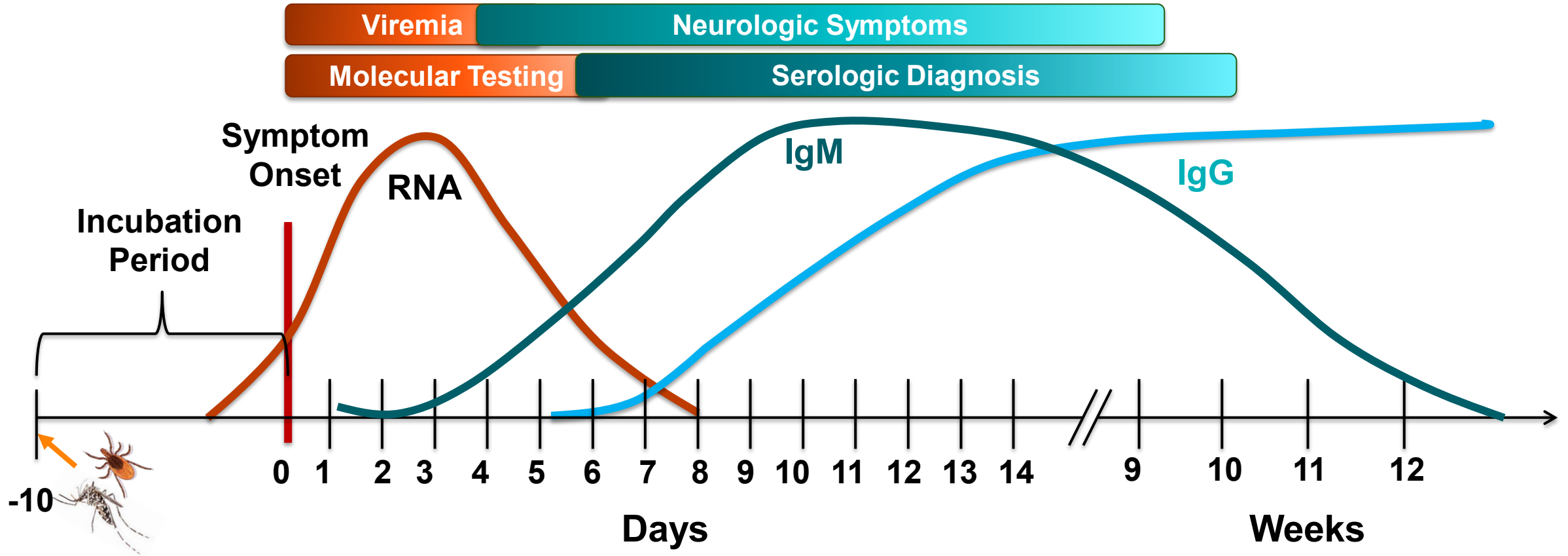
Powassan Virus Refresher

- *Ixodes* sp. tick-transmitted flavivirus maintained in small rodents
 - Transmission to humans w/in 15 min of tick attachment!
 - 4%-5% of ticks harbor POWV
 - Infections underdiagnosed due to limited awareness/diagnostics
- ~1/3 of patients develop systemic symptoms
 - ~1/3 develop CNS involvement
 - 10% fatality rate
- No targeted treatment, but diagnosis important:
 - Discontinue empiric antibiotics
 - Provide diagnostic/prognostic information
 - Epidemiology



Timing is everything:

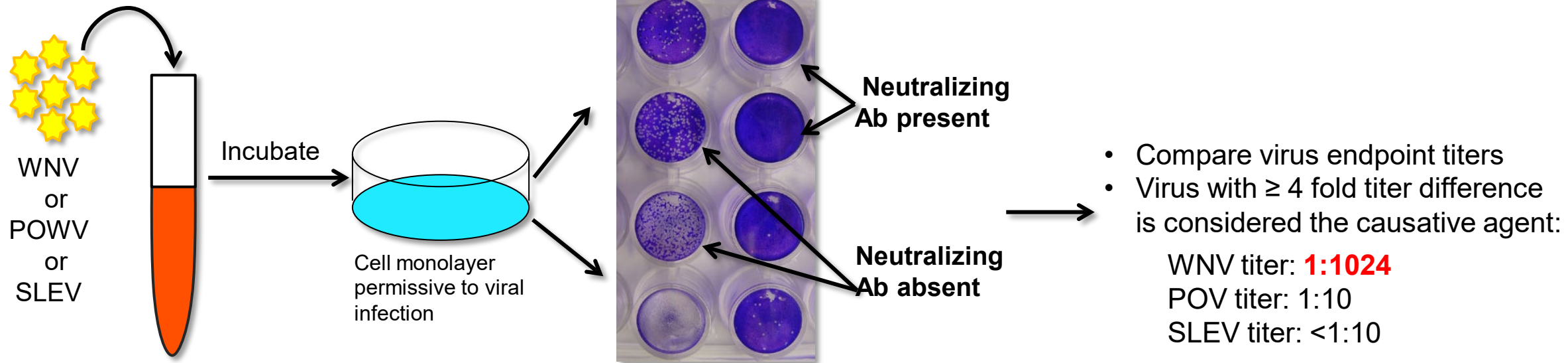
Test selection guided by symptom duration for neuroinvasive arboviruses



- Serologic testing often relied on due to:
 - Transient and low-level viremia at time of presentation
 - Limited molecular test availability for certain viruses (ie, POWV)

Plaque Reduction Neutralization Tests (PRNT)

- Detection of neutralizing (functional) antibodies
- Remains the reference method for arboviral antibody detection due to ↑ specificity
 - Remain a challenge to perform (eg, safety, technically difficult, laborious, slow TAT)
 - Used at PHLs/CDC for confirmatory testing
- Surrogate nAb assays increasingly being developed
 - But still a challenge to run...

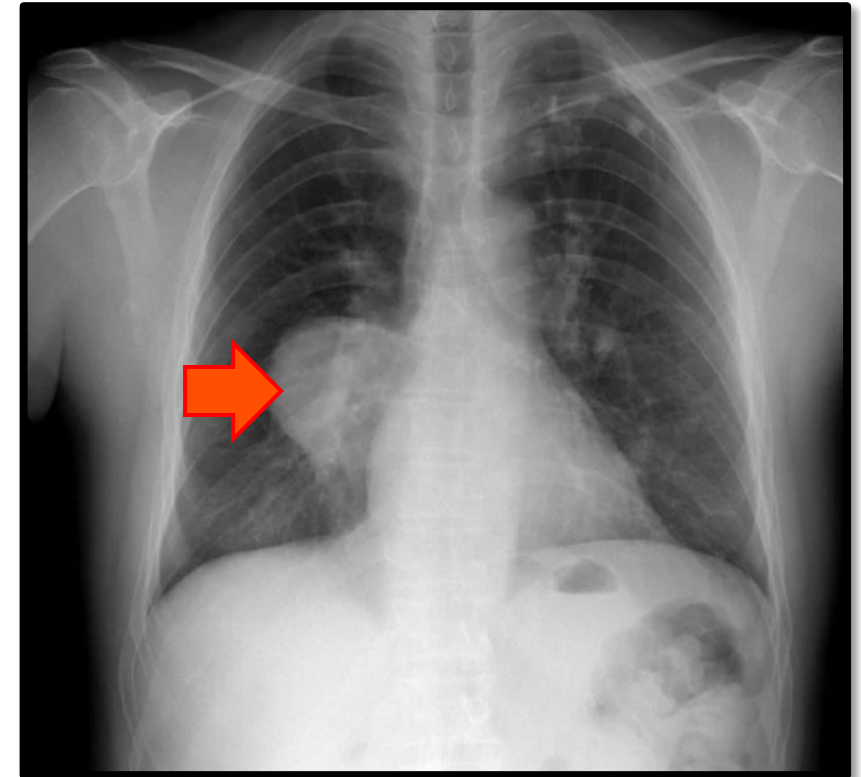


Case 4 – Conclusion

- Patient continued to decline neurologically and expired 3 months post-diagnosis
- Molecular testing for arboviruses:
 - Useful during acute phase of infection (< 7-10 days)
 - Limited RT-PCR sensitivity due to:
 - Short viremic period, low viral load, delayed patient presentation
 - Limited availability outside of PHLs and CDC
 - mNGS shows promise...
- Serologic testing for arboviruses:
 - Remains the preferred diagnostic method (> 5-7 days)
 - Insensitive during early disease and in immunocompromised patients, persistent seropositivity and limited availability

Case 5 – The Problem with Parasite Serologies

- 46 yo male with ~4 month history of RUQ pain, inhalation ‘tightness’ and on/off low-grade fever
 - Argentina native, worked on sheep farm since childhood
 - Leukocytosis w/ eosinophilia (30%)
 - Imaging...
- *Echinococcus* infection high on differential
 - *Echinococcus* IgG → Negative

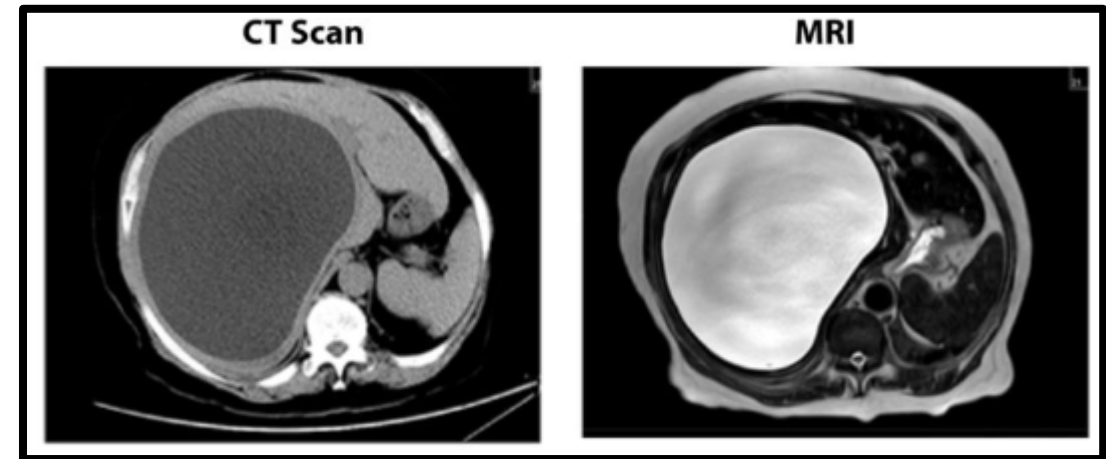
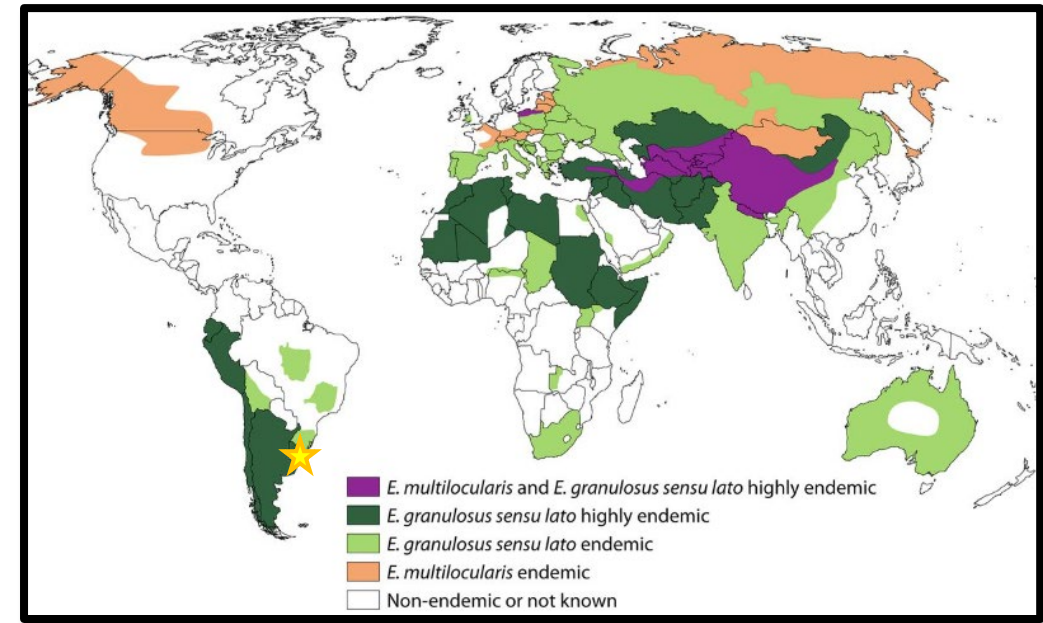


Durhan G, et. al. *Insights Imaging*. 2020;11(116)

Provider call to the lab:
“History and imaging suggest this is a hydatid cyst...does the negative serology rule it out?”

Echinococcus species

- Cestodes – 9 recognized species
 - *E. granulosus* sl and *E. multilocularis* most common
 - Complex lifecycle w/ definitive canine/felids host & herbivore intermediate host
- Risk factors for human infection includes dog and livestock contact
- Clinical features
 - Early stages are typically asymptomatic
 - Symptoms appear due to cyst enlargement and physical compression/blockage of organ(s)



Diagnostic Approaches and Pitfalls

- Definitive: Imaging and lesion classification per WHO criteria

- Serology is supportive only

- Highly variable performance depending on the antigen and assay type

- Sensitivity impacted by:

- Cyst vitality – calcified cysts → more often seronegative
- Integrity – ruptured/collapsed → more often seropositive
- Location – liver/bone → more often seropositive

- Specificity:

- False positives → helminths, certain cancers, hepatic cirrhosis, collagen vascular disease

Echinococcus Ag	Sensitivity (range)	Specificity (range)
Hydatid Fluid	31%-96%	41%-100%
Antigen B	38%-91%	65%-100%
Antigen 5	44%-89%	80%-100%

A negative serology result does not rule out echinococcosis

a. Infectious agents for which serologic testing remains the reference diagnostic method or is a key diagnostic aid

Bacterial/mycobacterial	Viral	Fungal	Parasitic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Anaplasma phagocytophilum</i>^a • <i>Bartonella</i> spp. • <i>Borrelia</i> spp. • <i>Brucella</i> spp.^b • <i>Chlamydia psittaci</i> • <i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i> serovars L1, L2, L2a, L2 (lymphogranuloma venereum) • <i>Coxiella burnetii</i> • <i>Ehrlichia chaffi</i> spp.^a • <i>Francisella tularensis</i>^b • <i>Leptospira</i> spp. • Latent infection with <i>Mycobacterium tuberculosis</i> • <i>Rickettsia</i> spp. • <i>Treponema pallidum</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arboviruses • CMV^c • EBV (mononucleosis)^c • Hepatitis viruses • HIV (p24 Ag/Ab) • Lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus • Parvovirus B19 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Aspergillus</i> spp. galactomannan Ag for invasive pulmonary aspergillosis • <i>Blastomyces dermatitidis</i> (Ag/Ab) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Echinococcus</i> spp. • <i>Strongyloides</i> spp.^c • <i>Taenia solium</i> • <i>Toxoplasma gondii</i> • <i>Trichinella spiralis</i> • <i>Trypanosoma cruzi</i>

*Documentation of immunity against vaccine preventable diseases

b. Common clinical scenarios for which serologic testing should be avoided:

Suspected active infection with:	Serologic test to avoid:	Preferred alternative diagnostic method:
HSV (genital lesions)	IgM	NAAT on lesion swab
<i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i>	IgM, IgG	NAAT on urine or swab
<i>Helicobacter pylori</i>	Total Ab, IgM, IgG for diagnosis, or response to therapy	Urea breath test, stool antigen test, NAAT on stool/gastric biopsy
<i>Legionella</i> spp.	Total Ab, IgM	NAAT on respiratory sample, urine antigen
<i>Mycoplasma pneumoniae</i>	IgM	NAAT on respiratory sample
<i>Aspergillus</i> spp. (invasive pulmonary aspergillosis)	IgG, IgE	Culture of respiratory sample, <i>Aspergillus</i> galactomannan antigen on serum or BAL fluid, NAAT where available
<i>Candida</i> spp.	IgM, IgA, IgG, or antigen	NAAT and/or culture of appropriate specimen
<i>Cryptococcus</i> spp.	IgM, IgG	Cryptococcal antigen, culture, and/or NAAT of appropriate specimen

THANK YOU!

QUESTIONS?