A simple diagnostic index comprising epithelial membrane antigen and fibronectin for hepatocellular carcinoma


* Research & Development Department, Biotechnology Research Center, New Damietta City, Egypt.
† Faculty of Science, ‡ Tropical Medicine Department, Faculty of Medicine, § Faculty of Medicine, Children’s Hospital, Mansoura University, Mansoura, Egypt.
|| Faculty of Science, Damietta University, New Damietta, Egypt. ¶ Faculty of Science, Helwan University, Cairo, Egypt. ** Delta University, Gamasa, Egypt.

ABSTRACT

Background and rationale for the study. Continuing search for suitable tumor-markers is of clinical value in managing patients with various malignancies. These markers may be presented as intracellular substances in tissues or may be released into the circulation and appear in serum. Therefore, this work is concerned with identification and quantitative determination of epithelial membrane antigen (EMA) and fibronectin and estimating their performances as surrogate markers for identifying hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC).

Results. A total of 627 individuals constituted this study [fibrosis (F1-F3) = 217; cirrhosis = 191; HCC = 219]. Western-blot was used for identifying EMA and fibronectin in sera. As a result, a single immunoreactive band was shown at 130-kDa and 90-kDa corresponding to EMA and fibronectin, respectively. They were quantified using ELISA providing values in HCC higher than fibrosis or cirrhosis with a significant difference (P < 0.0001). For identifying HCC, EMA showed 0.82 area under receiver-operating characteristic curve (AUC) with sensitivity = 70% and specificity = 78% while fibronectin yielded AUC = 0.70 with sensitivity = 67% and specificity = 82%. FEBA-Test comprising fibronectin and EMA together with total-bilirubin and AFP was constructed yielding AUC = 0.92 for identifying HCC from cirrhosis with sensitivity = 89% and specificity = 85%. FEBA-Test was then tested for differentiating HCC from fibrosis showing AUC = 0.97 with sensitivity = 90% and specificity = 89%. FEBA-Test enabled the correct identification of HCC patients with CLIP 0-1 and size ≤ 3 cm with AUC = 0.80 and AUC = 0.84, respectively, indicating its ability in identifying early HCC.

Conclusions. A four-marker index may improve the early detection of HCC with a high degree of accuracy.

Key words. Liver fibrosis. Cirrhosis. HCC. Markers. FEBA-Test.

INTRODUCTION

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is considered as a major cause of liver associated diseases throughout the world. People with HCV have 2% annual risk and 7 to 14% five-year risk for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). HCC is the most common primary malignancy of the liver, being the fifth most frequent cancer worldwide and the third most frequent cause of mortality among oncological patients. For these reasons, it is mandatory to establish a definite strategy for diagnosing HCC at a stage where curative treatments can be performed. Many physicians screen high-risk populations with various strategies including serum α-fetoprotein (AFP) and ultrasonography. However, despite the large number of published studies in recent years, efficacy and cost/effectiveness of screening and surveillance of cirrhosis for diagnosing HCC is still debated. The use of AFP, a tumor marker variably secreted by hepatocellular carcinomas, to detect these tumors has been widely debated. AFP had 39-65% sensitivity and 76-94% specificity for detecting HCC in previously published studies. Several investigators concluded that AFP is not a useful diagnostic test, but AFP continues to be commonly used. Additionally, it is almost impossible to evaluate the actual sensitivity of ultrasonography and other imaging techniques from the published studies on screening...
and surveillance, since the gold standard remains undefined. However the analysis of these studies by Gebo, et al. graded the evidence for the use of ultrasoundography in this setting as weak evidence. This work is concerned with determining the levels of epithelial marker such as epithelial membrane antigen (EMA) together with fibronectin and then estimating their performance as surrogate markers for detecting HCC. Moreover, we aimed to create a simple diagnostic discriminant index utilizing EMA, fibronectin together with other markers for HCC diagnosis.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

**Blood samples**

A total of 373 consecutive Egyptian individuals [133 with liver fibrosis (F1-F3), 115 with liver cirrhosis (F4) and 125 with HCC] constituted the estimation group. In addition, a total of 254 patients [84 with F1-F3, 76 with F4 and 94 with HCC] constituted the validation group. Histopathological classification of liver fibrosis and cirrhosis was performed according to the METAVIR score. Liver fibrosis was defined as a Metavir score of \( \leq 3 \) (F1-F3) whereas cirrhosis was defined as a Metavir score of 4 (F4). The diagnosis of HCC was carried out according to the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) Practice Guidelines. The diagnosis of HCC was based on AFP levels above 400 U/L, presence of hepatic focal lesion(s) detected by liver ultrasound (US), and was confirmed by computed tomography (CT) and/or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) techniques. The final diagnosis was confirmed by histopathologic analysis on US-assisted fine-needle biopsy, when indicated. Patients with other causes of liver diseases, or other suspected malignancies were excluded from the present study. None of the HCC patients had received transarterial embolisation or chemotherapy or underwent radiofrequency ablation or surgical interference. Staging of HCC was conducted as follows: Cancer of the Liver Italian Program (CLIP) score, based on four items and with a score ranging from 0 to 6. These four items included:

- I. Child-Pugh stage (A = 0, B = 1, and C = 2).
- II. Tumor morphology (uninodular < 50% = 0; multinodular > 50% = 1; and massive or > 50% = 2).
- III. AFP level (< 400 U/L = 0; > 400 U/L = 1); and
- IV. Presence of portal vein thrombosis (no, 0; yes, 1).

Liver function tests [albumin, total bilirubin, aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and alkaline phosphatase (ALP)] were all measured using fresh serum in automated biochemistry analyzer (Roche/Hitachi 917, Mannheim, Germany). AFP level was estimated by chemiluminescence, with Immulite (1000) AFP kit (Diagnostic Products Corporation; Los Angeles, CA, USA).

**Western-blot and gel electroelution**

First of all, sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) was carried out in 0.75 mm-thick, 12% vertical slab gels according to the method of Laemmli. This technique facilitated the separation of a mixture of proteins according to their molecular weights. Following electrophoretic separation, Western electroblotting is used for transferring the separated protein bands onto a nitrocellulose membrane (0.45 mm pore size, Sigma) in a protein transfer unit according to Towbin, et al. Then, they were immunostained using their specific monoclonal antibodies corresponding to EMA and fibronectin separately. Finally, both EMA and fibronectin bands were cut and electroeluted separately from preparative polyacrylamide gels at 200 V for 3 h in a dialysis bag (Sigma). The protein content of the purified bands was determined and the remainder was stored at -20°C. Western-blot is primarily a research tool which is useful and highly sensitive and specific, but not routinely used for diagnosis for large numbers of samples. Therefore, low cost ELISA test was used for quantifying these biomarkers.

**Quantitation of epithelial membrane antigen and fibronectin using ELISA**

To quantitate EMA, serum samples were diluted (1:40) in coating buffer (50 mM carbonate/bicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6) and were added (50 μL/ well) to 96-well microtiter plates at 4°C overnight. After blocking with 0.5% BSA in coating buffer (200 μL/ well), the specific mouse monoclonal antibodies at dilution 1:100 in PBS was added (50 μL/well) and was incubated at 37°C for 2 h. Then, goat anti-mouse antibody conjugated with alkaline

Phosphatase (Sigma) diluted (1:300) in 0.2% BSA in PBS-T20 was incubated at 37°C for 1 h. The plate was washed with PBS + 0.5% Tween 20 after every step. The substrate was 1 mg/ml p-nitrophenyl phosphate and the intensity of the signal was determined by measuring the absorbance at 450 nm after 10 min using a microtiter plate reader (2960, Metetrech Inc, Germany). Fibronectin was quantified using ELISA and fibronectin specific monoclonal antibody. Serial concentrations of the purified EMA (1.2-37.5 μg/mL) and fibronectin (200-1,600 mg/L) were tested in parallel to establish a dose-response curve as a function of the concentration in serum samples.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed by SPSS software version 15.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) and GraphPad Prism package; version 5.0 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA). Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation. The correlation was evaluated by Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient. A value of p < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. The deviation of AFP was successfully corrected by log transformation of the data. The main endpoint was the identification of HCC patients vs. cirrhotic patients using a simple predictive score. For formulating the predictive score, univariate analysis based on Student’s t test was performed to identify variables that were significantly different between HCC patients vs. those with cirrhosis. All variables with a high AUC and a high significance on univariate analysis were entered in stepwise linear regression analysis to develop a model for identifying HCC. Based on the receiver-operating characteristic (ROC) analysis, the best cutoff points were selected and then common indicators of score performance (sensitivity, specificity, accuracy, positive predictive value (PPV) and negative predictive value (NPV)) were derived from such a 2 x 2 contingency table.

RESULTS

Patient characteristics

Laboratory characteristics of all patients were summarized in table 1. The mean age of the patients included in this study was 51.5 ± 10.2 years, 253 (67.8%) were men while 120 (32.2%) were women. Overall, 35.7% had liver fibrosis (F1-F3), 30.8% had liver cirrhosis (F4) and 33.5% had HCC. As anticipated, patients that developed F1-F3 were young with a mean (± SD) of 42.7 (± 7.2) years as compared to those who developed F4 or HCC. Patients with HCC produced a range of AFP values from normal to more than 49,268 U/L. The main endpoint of the current study was concerned with discriminating HCC patients from cirrhotic patients. To determine which factors could differentiate HCC from cirrhosis, the laboratory data of these two groups were analyzed. As expected, the data showed that the distribution of all evaluated laboratory blood markers (AST, ALT, ALP, albumin, total bilirubin and AFP) differed significantly (P < 0.05) between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marker</th>
<th>Estimation study (n = 373)</th>
<th>Validation study (n = 254)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F1-F3 (n = 133)</td>
<td>F4 (n = 115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>42.7 ± 7.2</td>
<td>55 ± 8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AST (U/L)a</td>
<td>54 ± 30</td>
<td>70 ± 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALT (U/L)a</td>
<td>66 ± 39</td>
<td>48 ± 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AST/ALT ratio</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.3</td>
<td>1.6 ± 0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALP (U/L)a</td>
<td>72 ± 37</td>
<td>151 ± 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albumin (g/dL)a</td>
<td>4.3 ± 0.4</td>
<td>3.3 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total bilirubin (mg/dL)a</td>
<td>0.8 ± 0.4</td>
<td>1.8 ± 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFP (U/L)a</td>
<td>5.9 ± 1.0</td>
<td>18.3 ± 3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log (AFP (U/L)a)</td>
<td>0.5 ± 0.4</td>
<td>0.9 ± 0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMA (μg/mL)b</td>
<td>2.6 ± 1.8</td>
<td>3.3 ± 1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibronectin (mg/L)</td>
<td>447 ± 157</td>
<td>496 ± 137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Reference values: aspartate aminotransferase (AST) up to 40 U/L; alanine aminotransferase (ALT) up to 45 U/L; albumin 3.8-5.4 g/dL; total bilirubin up to 1 mg/dL; alkaline phosphatase (ALP) 22-92 U/L; α-fetoprotein (AFP) up to 10 U/L. b EMA: epithelial membrane antigen. *P value for F4 vs. HCC (P > 0.05 is considered non significant; P < 0.05 is considered significant).
HCC patients and cirrhotic patients. However, AST/ALT ratio did not differ between the two groups (P > 0.05) as shown in table 1.

Identification and quantitation of both EMA and fibronectin

The target EMA and fibronectin were identified based on SDS-PAGE procedure followed by Western-blot. A single immunoreactive band was shown at 130-kDa and 90-kDa molecular weight corresponding to epithelial membrane antigen and fibronectin, respectively, in sera of patients with cirrhosis (F4) and HCC (Figure 1). Then, these bands were purified from sera using the electroelution technique and were quantified using dose-response curves of their serial concentrations. As a result, the concentration of EMA and fibronectin were higher in HCC patients and cirrhotic patients. However, AST/ALT ratio did not differ between the two groups (P > 0.05) as shown in table 1.

**Figure 1.** Identification and purification of epithelial membrane antigen (EMA) and fibronectin. A. Western-blot of selected serum samples using mouse monoclonal antibody specific to EMA; lanes 1-2: sera of healthy individuals, lanes 3-5: sera of patients with liver cirrhosis, lanes 6-8: sera of HCC patients. B. SDS-PAGE and Western-blot of HCC serum sample and purified EMA antigen. Lane 1: serum of patients with HCC, lane 2: purified EMA antigen from patients with HCC. C. Western-blot of selected serum samples using mouse monoclonal antibody specific to fibronectin; lanes 1-2: sera of healthy individuals, lanes 3-5: sera of patients with liver cirrhosis, lanes 6-8: sera of HCC patients. D. SDS-PAGE and Western-blot of HCC serum sample and purified fibronectin antigen. Lane 1: serum of HCC patients with, lane 2: purified fibronectin antigen from HCC patients. Molecular weight markers were myosin (215 kDa), phosphorylase B (120 kDa), bovine serum albumin (84 kDa), ovalbumin (60 kDa) and carbonic anhydrase (39.2 kDa).
patients versus those with liver fibrosis (F1-F3) or cirrhosis (F4).

To estimate and compare the diagnostic accuracy of these individual markers, ROC curves were used (Figure 3B). Using this method, the following biomarkers EMA (AUC = 0.81) followed by AFP, fibronectin and total bilirubin (AUC = 0.70) had the best diagnostic accuracies for identifying HCC and showing strong correlations with histological disease progression. Next, based on ROC analysis, optimal cutoff points for these four candidate markers were determined and their diagnostic performances for identifying HCC were measured and presented in Figure 3C. Then, AFP, EMA, fibronectin and total bilirubin were combined in a single predictive function to improve their diagnostic accuracies for predicting HCC.

Development of FEBA-Test

Although baseline levels of age, AST, ALT, ALP, albumin, total bilirubin, AFP, fibronectin and EMA were all significant on univariate analysis and were identified as predictors of HCC, only AFP, EMA,
fibronectin and total bilirubin retained significance when combined with each other and the following function called FEGA-Test was generated that could improve the prediction of HCC.

FEGA-Test = [0.001 x fibronectin (mg/L) + 0.13 x EMA (μg/mL) + 0.036 x total bilirubin (mg/dL) + 0.83 x log AFP (U/L) - 0.063].

In addition, Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient between the FEGA-Test and its candidate markers were measured for the impact of each marker on the predictive criteria (Figure 3E).

**Diagnostic ability of FEGA-Test**

The areas under the ROC curve was used to estimate the diagnostic value of FEGA-Test derived from our data set that showed an AUC = 0.92 for differentiating HCC from F4 (Figure 4A) which was evident to be more efficient than that produced by AFP.

(HC)


Next, an optimal cutoff point > 2.2 was selected and the diagnostic performances were shown in figure 4B. For FEBA-Test > 2.2, the probability of patient to have HCC increases. On contrary, for FEBA-Test ≤ 2.2, the probability of patient to have HCC decreases as shown in figure 4B. The distribution of FEBA-Test levels in HCC patients in relation to F4 patients were compared and presented as box plots (Figure 4C). As seen in figure 4C, the values of FEBA-Test in HCC patients were higher than those in cirrhotic patients. The median value in F4 was 1.6 while that of HCC was 3.6 with an extremely significant difference (P < 0.0001). Moreover, FEBA-Test significantly correlated with histological disease progression with a Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient of 0.72 (P < 0.0001). On the other hand, the effectiveness of FEBA-Test for discriminating HCC patients from those who developed F1-F3 was then estimated using ROC curve that showed a superior AUC = 0.97 (Figure 4D). Likewise, an optimal cutoff point > 1.8 was then selected to separate HCC patients from F1-F3 patients and the diagnostic performances were clarified in figure 4E. At this point, 112 of 126 (PPV = 89%) would have HCC and only 14 of 322 without HCC would be classified incorrectly. In addition, 118 out of 131 (NPV = 90%) would have F1-F3 and only 13 out of 125 without fibrosis would be classified falsely. The distribution of FEBA-Test levels in patients with HCC in relation to those who developed F1-F3 were compared and were presented as box plots in figure 4F. The median value in F1-F3 was 1.2 while that of HCC was 3.6 with an extremely significant difference (P < 0.0001).

Figure 4. Diagnostic performances and distribution of FEBA-Test. A-C. For separating patients with HCC from those with liver cirrhosis (F4). D-F. For separating patients with HCC from those with liver fibrosis (F1-F3). AUC: area under the ROC curve. Sn: sensitivity. Sp: specificity. Ac: accuracy. PPV: positive predictive value. NPV: negative predictive value.
Figure 5. Distribution of epithelial membrane antigen (EMA), fibronectin (FN) and FEBA-Test levels among different groups of patients with liver pathology in addition to diagnostic performances of FEBA-Test. A. Distribution of EMA. B. Distribution of FN. C. Distribution of FEBA-Test. D. Area under curves for FEBA-Test for separating patients with F4 from patients with different stages of HCC. E. Calculated sensitivity (Sn), specificity (Sp) and accuracy (Ac) for FEBA-Test for discriminating patients with F4 from patients with different stages of HCC.

**FEBA-Test and CLIP scoring system**

Also, we aimed to estimate the diagnostic ability of FEBA-Test in identifying the percent of cases at different stages of HCC that were categorized according to CLIP scoring system (CLIP 0, 9.3%; CLIP 1, 18.6%; CLIP 2, 34.9%; CLIP 3, 23.3%; CLIP 4, 14%). Patients with HCC who had CLIP 5-6 were missing in this study. We used CLIP score (0-1) to define early stages of HCC. To stage patients according to CLIP scoring system, multiple clinical indexes, such as Child-Pugh score, tumour morphology, AFP level and presence of portal vein thrombosis, were taken into account. The distribution of FEBA-Test levels in addition to EMA and fibronectin in different liver pathological groups is depicted in figure 5A-5C. The differences in FEBA-Test values were statistically extremely significant (P < 0.0001) between patients who developed cirrhosis vs. those who had liver fibrosis, HCC (CLIP 0-1), HCC (CLIP 2-3) and HCC (CLIP > 3). Our results showed that the use of FEBA-Test could discriminate patients with HCC who had CLIP 0-1 and size ≤ 3 cm from those who developed F4 with AUCs of 0.80 and 0.84, respectively, indicating its potential ability in identifying early HCC. In addition, FEBA-Test could discriminate patients with HCC who had CLIP > 1 and size > 3 cm from those who developed F4 with AUCs of 0.94 and 0.89, respectively (Figure 5D). Additionally, the diagnostic performances for FEBA-Test for identifying these different groups were calculated and presented in figure 5E.

**Validation study**

We evaluated whether the predictive criteria identified in the estimation study were able to reproduce their predictive ability in a subsequent different, but related group of patients. The characteristics of the validation group were similar to that of estimation group with no significant differences in any of the assessed variables as previously depicted in table 1. It is evident that the aforementioned results were reproduced in the validation study with no significant
difference. At cutoff level > 2.2, FEBA-Test yielded
sensitivity = 83% with PPV = 90% and accuracy =
91%, specificity = 88% with NPV = 81% for dis-
criminating HCC from F4. As well, at cutoff level >
1.8, FEBA-Test generated sensitivity = 88% with
PPV = 89% and accuracy = 96%, specificity = 88%
with NPV = 87% for discriminating HCC from F1-F3.

DISCUSSION

It is a worthy of noting that liver fibrosis eventu-
ally leads to end-stage cirrhosis and/or HCC in a sig-
nificant number of patients. HCC develops in a
cirrhotic liver in 80% of cases, and this pre-neoplas-
tic condition is the strongest predisposing factor.
Consequently, proper definition of early HCC has
critical implications as one third of dysplastic les-
sions will develop a malignant phenotype. Thus,
there is an urgent need to identify better tools to
characterize these lesions. Several tumor markers
have been proposed for HCC diagnosis. Lens culi-
naris agglutinin-reactive fraction of AFP (AFP-
L3) and Des-gamma carboxyprothrombin (DCP) have
been approved by the Food and Drug Administra-
tion as plasma markers for HCC. DCP is a more
specific HCC marker than AFP because other liver
diseases don’t cause an increase of DCP serum lev-
eels. DCP measurement for HCC has 48-62% sensitiv-
ity and 81-98% specificity. However, it has been
reported that AFP-L3 and DCP are less sensi-
tive than AFP for the diagnosis of early stage HCC.
On the other hand, Attallah, et al. reported that cyto-
tokeratin-1 may be clinically valuable as a surrogate
marker for identifying HCC. Herein, this work
was concerned with the identification and quantita-
tive determination of EMA and fibronectin and then
estimating their performances for HCC diagnosis.
With respect to EMA, it is a type of mucins which
are a group of high molecular weight glycoproteins
found on epithelial surfaces. In general, mucins are
produced by secretory epithelial cells for the lubri-
cation and protection of ducts and lumen. The loss of
cell architecture and polarity associated with malig-
nant disease means that EMA, normally confined to
luminal surfaces, is shed into the bloodstream and
thus has potential as a tumor marker. The abnor-
mal EMA molecules reveal new protein epitopes or
carbohydrate antigens, and may be recognized by
the immune system as notable tumor associated ant-
igens. It was reported that EMA is expressed by
adenocarcinomas of the breast, ovary and colon and
has been suggested as a circulating tumour marker.
However, the expression levels of EMA in liver can-
cer and cirrhotic liver tissues and their correlation
with carcinogenesis still remain to be elucidated.
EMA could detect small deposits of malignant cells
in organs such as liver. There are discrepant re-
results for EMA expression in HCC. Sasaki and Naka-
uma reported that EMA core protein is expressed
in intrahepatic bile duct carcinoma, but not in HCC.
However, Cao, et al. demonstrated that EMA is re-
markably expressed in HCC cells and can be consid-
ered as an indicator of HCC prognosis. In this
study, EMA was identified using Western-blot at
130-kDa. Several previous authors identified EMA
in different body fluids as a high-molecular-weight
glycoprotein (35-1500 kDa). Our results showed that
patients with HCC have a significantly elevated
EMA compared to patients who developed F1-F3 or
F4. Additionally, EMA significantly was correlated
with histological disease progression with a Spear-
man’s rank correlation coefficient of 0.533 and ena-
abled the correct identification of patients who have
HCC with 0.81 AUC. On the other hand, fibronectin
is a major component of the extracellular matrix
that is considered to have an important role in
chronic inflammatory periodontal disease. Fibro-
nectin also plays important roles in the devel-
opment and pathogenesis of many disorders, includ-
ing cancer. Fibronectin plays an important role
in signal transduction and cell adhesion and is par-
tially regulated by TGF-β, a cytokine that plays a
central role in controlling the growth of normal
hepatocytes. Abnormal fibronectin protein expres-
sion in HCC may be a manifestation of dysregula-
tion of this important cell cycle control point.
Abnormal fibronectin expression may also cause
abnormal cell-to-cell or cell-to-extracellular matrix
adhesion, contributing to tumor development.
In fact, fibronectin has been implicated in the devel-
opment of multiple types of human cancer and it has
been associated with cell migration and invasion in
several metastatic models. Studies of fibronectin
in breast carcinomas have shown stronger expres-
sion than in normal breast parenchyma, and a dif-
f erent distribution. In addition, it was reported that
fibronectin levels increase with the progression of
colorectal cancer and this expression is a useful
marker of the degree of disease advancement.
Apparently, fibronectin plays an important role in
cancer progression, and thus is hypothesized to be
highly associated with HCC progression. It was
stated that the expression of fibronectin is increased
in liver tumor growth and this elevation has been
linked to resistance to therapy. Furthermore,
fibronectin either regulates, or is regulated by, a
similar to that obtained by Marrero, sensitivity dropped to 35%. Our results were almost U/L presents a superior specificity of 99% but the diagnostic accuracy of AUC = 0.97. These results were reproduced in the validation study with no significant difference. In an additional part of this study the ROC curve analysis was used to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy of FEBA-Test in identifying different stages of HCC that were categorized according to CLIP scoring system. We used CLIP 0·1 to define early HCC. To stage patients in the CLIP score, multiple clinical indexes, such as Child-Pugh score, tumour morphology, AFP level, and presence of portal vein thrombosis were taken into account. FEBA-Test gave AUCs 0.80 and 0.84 for identifying patients with HCC who had CLIP 0·1 and size ≤ 3 cm, respectively. This result may indicate the ability of FEBA-Test in identifying early stages of HCC. In addition, FEBA-Test enabled the correct identification of patients with HCC who had CLIP > 1 and size > 3 cm with AUCs 0.94 and 0.89, respectively. In summary, we showed that FEBA-Test may improve the detection of HCC with a high degree of accuracy. Further prospective multicenter studies involving a greater number of patients are warranted to validate the usefulness of the produced score in clinical practice.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AAR: AST/ALT ratio.
- AFP: alpha fetoprotein.
- ALP: alkaline phosphatase.
- ALT: alanine aminotransferase.
- AST: aspartate aminotransferase.
- EMA: epithelial membrane antigen.
- HCC: hepatocellular carcinoma.
- HCV: hepatitis C virus.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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