

Original Article

## Role of immature platelet fraction in etiological diagnosis of thrombocytopenia

Himani Bajaj<sup>1</sup>, Taruna Rajpal<sup>1</sup>, Monika Sharma<sup>1</sup>, Pratap Singh<sup>2</sup>, Alok Hemal<sup>3</sup>, Vijay Kumar<sup>1</sup>

Departments of <sup>1</sup>Pathology, <sup>2</sup>Internal Medicine, <sup>3</sup>Pediatrics, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences (ABVIMS) and Dr RML Hospital, New Delhi, India.

**\*Corresponding author:**

Vijay Kumar,  
Department of Pathology,  
Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute  
of Medical Sciences and Dr  
Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital,  
New Delhi, India.

[vjaypgi1@gmail.com](mailto:vjaypgi1@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Immature platelet fraction (IPF) is a newer automated parameter that measures the ratio of reticulated platelets to a total number of platelets. A measure of reticulated platelets determines the rate of thrombopoiesis which can help in differential diagnosis of thrombocytopenia. The study aims to evaluate the relationship between IPF and causes of thrombocytopenia and establish its clinical utility.

**Materials and Methods:** The study was a prospective observational study conducted for 9 months. A total of 70 cases with an equal number of healthy age-matched controls were included in the study. Based on the pathogenesis of thrombocytopenia, the cases were grouped into platelet hypoproduction, hyperdestruction, and megaloblastic anemia. The association between IPF values among control and different case groups was evaluated.

**Statistical analysis:** Assuming a 95% confidence level, the sample size calculated is 61 subjects. Based on the etiopathogenesis of thrombocytopenia, cases were categorized into three groups. Qualitative variables were compared using the Chi-square test/Fisher's exact test. Quantitative variables were compared using unpaired *t*-test/Mann-Whitney test.  $P < 0.05$  was considered significant at a 95% confidence level.

**Results:** The reference range of IPF among healthy controls was estimated to be 0.6–6.8%. The mean IPF was significantly higher in the hyperdestructive group (10.6%) as compared to the hypoproducer group (3.6%). The optimal cutoff value of IPF for differentiating hyperdestruction causes from hypoproduction causes was 8.20% with a sensitivity of 75% and specificity of 87.5%.

**Conclusions:** IPF can be used as an initial tool in the diagnostic evaluation of thrombocytopenia.

**Keywords:** Thrombocytopenia, Immature platelet fraction, Automation

### INTRODUCTION

Thrombocytopenia is not a disease entity by itself, but a finding that may result from several disease processes. Platelet counts below 150,000/ $\mu$ L define thrombocytopenia, but they do not reveal the underlying pathology.<sup>[1]</sup> The causes of thrombocytopenia can be grouped into three major categories based on the causative process, as due to increased destruction, decreased production, or splenic sequestration/abnormal pooling.<sup>[2]</sup> The assessment of the thrombopoietic activity in the bone marrow is necessary for correct diagnosis and treatment in thrombocytopenic patients.

For a long time, bone marrow aspiration remained the gold standard method for evaluating the cause of thrombocytopenia. However, this procedure is invasive, time consuming, as well as carries

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an overt risk of bleeding diathesis in critical thrombocytopenia cases.<sup>[3]</sup> Other serological tests (for infectious diseases), platelet associated immunoglobulin G (for Immune Thrombocytopenic Purpura (ITP)), and molecular markers for disseminated intravascular coagulation are used in evaluating thrombocytopenic patients but they are relatively costly.<sup>[4]</sup>

With the availability of automated analyzers, new indices related to platelet count are being estimated. Recently, immature platelet fraction (IPF) has been investigated as a prospective platelet activation marker.<sup>[5]</sup> It is an automated detection of reticulated platelets in peripheral blood. The IPF is identified by flow cytometric techniques and the use of nucleic acid-specific dye in the reticulocyte/optical platelet channel. The flow cytometric IPF determination uses fluorescent dyes – polymethine and oxazine, which penetrate the cell membrane staining the RNA in the red blood cells (RBC) and immature/reticulated platelets.<sup>[6]</sup> Several clinical papers on reticulated platelet analysis have shown that in thrombocytopenia, platelet RNA content correlates directly with megakaryocyte activity. The number of reticulated platelets increases when platelet production rises and decreases when production falls.<sup>[7]</sup> This can help in determining whether the thrombocytopenia is central or peripheral without the need for bone marrow examination. Our study attempts to find the predictive value of IPF in differentiating hyperdestructive thrombocytopenia with hypoproliferative thrombocytopenia.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was a prospective observational study conducted in the Department of Pathology, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, Delhi, for 9 months. A total of 70 cases were included in the study. An equal number of healthy age and gender matched controls were also enrolled. All patients with hematological disease with platelet counts  $<1.5$  lakhs/ $\mu$ L and confirmed on peripheral smear examination have been included after careful bone marrow examination. Patients with pseudothrombocytopenia were excluded from the study. Healthy age- and gender-matched individuals with hemoglobin, total leukocyte count, and platelet counts within the normal range were taken as controls. Blood samples from the study population were collected on the same day of the bone marrow procedure in Ethylenediamineacetic acid (EDTA) acid tubes and processed within 4 h. The platelet count and IPF (using SYSMEX 1000N hematology analyzer according to the manufacturer's instructions) were noted and entered into Excel spreadsheets for 70 subjects with thrombocytopenia and an equal number of healthy age matched controls. The peripheral smears, bone marrow aspirates, and biopsy slides were also evaluated. The clinical diagnosis, diagnosis on bone marrow examination along with IPF% of peripheral blood sample was entered

into an excel sheet. According to the bone marrow findings, the cases were grouped into Group 1 with peripheral thrombocytopenia (platelet hyperdestruction), Group 2 with central thrombocytopenia (hypoproliferative group), and Group 3 with megaloblastic anemia. The megaloblastic group was separated from the hypoproliferative group because the etiology of thrombocytopenia in megaloblastic anemia has been postulated as hypoproduction in some studies and as ineffective erythropoiesis in other studies.<sup>[8]</sup> Appropriate statistical tests were applied.

## Statistics

Sample size calculation was based on the assumptions of minimum 80% power and 5% significance level (significant at 95% confidence level). Assuming a 95% confidence level and a margin of error (confidence interval) of  $\pm 10\%$ , the sample size calculated is 61 subjects needed for the study. The cases were then categorized based on the etiopathogenesis of thrombocytopenia into Groups 1, 2, and 3. Categorical variables were presented in number and percentage (%), and continuous variables were presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation. Qualitative variables were compared using the Chi-square test/Fisher's exact test. Quantitative variables were compared using unpaired *t*-test/Mann-Whitney test.  $P < 0.05$  was considered significant at a 95% confidence level. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 24.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). The receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was obtained.

## RESULTS

A total of 70 cases with thrombocytopenia on which bone marrow procedure was performed were included in this study. There were 49 (70%) males and 21 (30%) females in the study group. The patient's age ranged from 3 years to 75 years. The median age was 29 years. Seventy healthy controls with normal hemoglobin, total leukocyte count, and white blood count were also included in the study. The median age was 32 years. Cases were classified based on etiopathogenesis into three groups-hyperdestructive, hypoproliferative, and megaloblastic. There were 34 (48.6%) cases of hyperdestructive etiology (GROUP 1), 27 (38.5%) cases of hypoproliferative etiology (Group 2), and 9 (12.9%) cases of megaloblastic anemia (Group 3). Table 1 shows the etiological distribution of cases among three groups.

The comparison of platelet counts and IPF% among controls and different study groups is shown in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. The range of IPF% in controls was 0.6–6.8%. In the hypoproliferative group, the IPF% ranged from 0.2–16.9% to 2.1–37.7% in the hyperdestructive group.

A significant difference was seen in the platelet counts of cases with controls. The IPF% was significantly higher in cases with

**Table 1:** Etiological distribution of cases among three groups.

Study groups	Group 1 (Cases with hyperdestructive etiology)	Group 2 (Cases with hypoproduction etiology)	Group 3 megaloblastic anemia
No. of cases	34 (48.6%)	27 (38.5%)	9 (12.9%)
Etiology	Infections (20 cases) ITP (9 cases) hemolytic anemia (2 cases) Rheumatoid arthritis (1 case) Rheumatic heart disease (1 case)	Acute leukemia (20 cases) Plasma cell dyscrasia (4 cases) Aplastic anemia (3 cases)	

ITP: Immune Thrombocytopenic Purpura

**Table 2:** Total platelet count among all groups.

Total platelet count (/μL)	Group			
	Controls	Group 1 (Hyperdestructive etiology)	Group 2 (Hypoproduction etiology)	Group 3 (Megaloblastic anemia)
Mean (SD)	230,471.43±53,893.54	37,956.52±40,891.74	48125.0±41828.02	59,966.67±40,933.49
Median (IQR)	221,500 (187,250–270,400)	20,000 (10,000–60,000)	30,000 (20,000–87,500)	50,000 (20,000–82,250)
Range	1,50,000–3,99,000	2,000–1,20,000	10,000–1,30,000	10,000–1,40,000

SD: Standard deviation, IQR: Interquartile range

**Table 3:** IPF% among all groups.

IPF (%)	Group			
	Controls	Group 1 (Hyperdestructive etiology)	Group 2 (Hypoproduction etiology)	Group 3 (Megaloblastic anemia)
Mean (SD)	3.19±1.67	13.37±8.18	5.0±4.23	9.44±12.97
Median (IQR)	2.8 (1.97–4.65)	10.6 (8–16.52)	3.6 (1.92–7.72)	6.25 (2.82–10.3)
Range	0.6–6.8	2.1–37.7	0.2–16.9	0.1–64.3

IPF: Immature platelet fraction, SD: Standard deviation, IQR: Interquartile range

thrombocytopenia than controls. Furthermore, a statistically significant difference in IPF% was noted for Group 1 with Group 2 and Group 3, with  $P < 0.001$  and  $< 0.01$ , respectively. IPF% was significantly higher in cases with increased platelet destruction than with decreased platelet production [Table 4]. The optimal IPF value for discriminating between Groups 1 and 2 was derived using the ROC curve [Figure 1]. An IPF value of 8.20% was calculated as the cutoff value for differentiating hyperdestructive thrombocytopenia from hypoproduction thrombocytopenia with a sensitivity of 75% and specificity of 87.5%.

## DISCUSSION

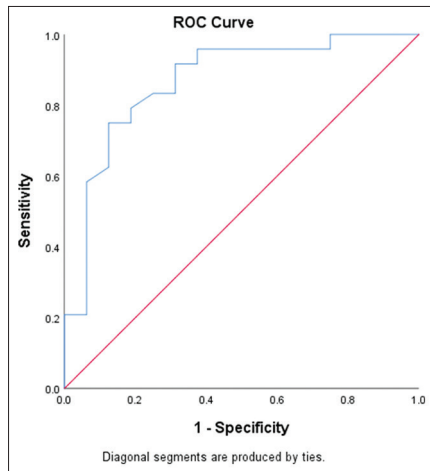
The etiological diagnosis of thrombocytopenia (Total Platelet count  $< 150,000/\mu\text{L}$ ) requires laboratory confirmation along with clinical assessment. Till now, bone marrow examination is considered as a gold standard for confirmation of the diagnosis, which is an invasive and time consuming procedure. Our study was aimed at

analyzing and establishing the usefulness of IPF as a newer, rapid, and inexpensive automated platelet parameter for the diagnosis of thrombocytopenia. IPF is expressed in percentage, which is a measure of reticulated platelets which are newly released platelets with increased RNA content as compared to mature platelets. They can be considered platelet analogs of RBC reticulocytes and reflect underlying thrombopoietic activity.<sup>[9]</sup> In our study, the normal range of IPF was calculated from 70 age matched healthy individuals and was found to be 0.6–6.8% with a mean value of  $3.19 \pm 1.67$  and median of 2.8 (Interquartile range [IQR] = 1.97–4.65). This is in concordance with studies done by Goel *et al.*,<sup>[10]</sup> Briggs *et al.*,<sup>[6]</sup> and Dadu *et al.*,<sup>[11]</sup> which calculated their normal reference IPF% as 0.7–5.7%, 1.1–6.7%, and 0.7–4.3%, respectively. IPF was significantly higher in cases of the hyperdestructive group (mean IPF =  $13.37 \pm 8.18$ ) as compared to the hypoproduction group (mean IPF =  $7.90 \pm 10.90$ ) and controls (mean IPF  $3.19 \pm 1.67$ ) with  $P$ -value being  $< 0.001$  between the two groups. ROC curve analysis revealed an optimal cutoff value of 8.20% for differentiating between

**Table 4:** P-value between different groups.

	P-value					
	Controls and Group 1	Controls and Group 2	Controls and Group 3	Group 1 and Group 2	Group 1 and Group 3	Group 2 and Group 3
Platelet count(/ $\mu$ L)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	0.17	0.01	0.25
IPF (%)	<0.001	0.16	<0.001	<0.001	<0.01	0.18

Group 1: Cases with hyperdestructive etiology, Group 2: Cases with hypoproliferative etiology, Group 3: Cases of Megaloblastic anemia. IPF: Immature platelet fraction

**Figure 1:** Receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC) using immature platelet fraction for prediction of hyperdestructive etiology.

hyperdestructive and hypoproliferative thrombocytopenia with a sensitivity of 75% and specificity of 87.5%. This is consistent with studies done by Goel *et al.*<sup>[10]</sup> and Jung *et al.*<sup>[12]</sup> Goel *et al.*<sup>[10]</sup> also classified thrombocytopenic patients into hypoproliferative and hyperdestructive groups and found significantly higher mean IPF in the hyperdestructive group (13.4%) as compared to the hypoproliferative group (4.6%). The optimal cutoff between both groups is 5.95%, with a sensitivity of 88% and specificity of 75.9%. Studies done by Cho *et al.*<sup>[13]</sup> had also evaluated the discriminatory power of IPF in discriminating hyperdestructive and hypoproliferative causes of thrombocytopenia and found that IPF was significantly higher in the hyperdestructive group (Mean IPF: 6.2% [IQR 4.3–10.3%]) than both control groups (Mean IPF: 1.8% [1.32–4.4%]) and hypoproliferative group (mean 1.8% [0.9–2.3%]) with all  $P < 0.001$ . However, similar to our study, they did not find a significant difference between the hypoproliferative group and the control group ( $P = 0.18$ ). Ashraf *et al.*<sup>[14]</sup> had found higher IPF (mean: 25.5% and IQR = 15.2–39.3%) in the hyperdestructive group (peripheral thrombocytopenia) as compared to the hypoproliferative group (mean: 8.2% and IQR = 4.6–16.7%) with a statistically significant difference ( $P < 0.001$ ). In our study, we evaluated the megaloblastic group separate from

the hypoproliferative and hyperdestructive group, similar to the studies done by Akula *et al.*<sup>[7]</sup> and Rajashekar *et al.*<sup>[8]</sup> In our study, the megaloblastic group constituted 41% of cases [Table 1]. The median IPF was 6.25%, with a range of 0.1–64.3% [Table 3]. The IPF in the megaloblastic group was significantly higher as compared to other hypoproliferative causes ( $P < 0.01$ ). This suggested a mechanism other than hypoproliferation for thrombocytopenia in megaloblastic anemia. Akula *et al.*<sup>[7]</sup> had also attempted to study the role of IPF in the diagnosis and prognosis of thrombocytopenic groups. This study also evaluated IPF in megaloblastic groups in addition to hypoproliferative and hyperdestructive groups and found the IPF range of hyperdestructive group 4.4–55.6%, hypoproliferative 2.8–7.4%, and megaloblastic group as 5.3–30.7%. Hence, the megaloblastic group needs to be separated from the hypoproliferative and hyperdestructive group as IPF% was significantly higher, and further studies are needed for assessment in megaloblastic patients.

## CONCLUSIONS

IPF is a simple, inexpensive, rapid, and non-invasive automated marker for the etiology of thrombocytopenia. By differentiating between hypoproliferative and hyperdestructive causes of thrombocytopenia, it has a definite role in the initial assessment of the etiology of thrombocytopenia and, hence, can be integrated as a standard parameter to evaluate the thrombopoietic state of the bone marrow.

The study is, however, limited by a smaller sample size, and a larger sample size needs to be studied for a definitive conclusion.

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## Author contributions

Dr Himani Bajaj- Study Conception and Design, Data collection and selection of cases, Analysis and interpretation of results, Draft manuscript preparation; Dr Vijay Kumar,

Dr Taruna Rajpal, Dr Monika Sharma- Study Conception and Design, Analysis and interpretation of results, Review of manuscript; Dr Pratap Singh, Dr Alok Hemal- Data collection and selection of cases, clinical correlation.

### Ethical approval

The research/study approved by the Institutional Review Board at Atal Bihari Vajpayee Institute of Medical Sciences and Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital New Delhi, number 575 (18/2022)/IEC/ABVIMS/RMLH/1035, dated August 27, 2022.

### Declaration of patient consent

The authors certify that they have obtained all appropriate patient consent.

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Nil.

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

### Use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for manuscript preparation

The authors confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript and no images were manipulated using AI.

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