

Morphology and function of human spermatozoa

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Summary

The assessment of semen quality has long been based on sperm density, motility and morphology. In the last 5 years, sperm morphology has received increasing attention. This can be attributed to a new evaluation technique of morphology, which was introduced by Kruger and coworkers in 1988. At the same time a new staining technique, Diff-Quik, was introduced. This Diff-Quik staining is a time saving procedure compared to Papanicolaou staining which has also been widely used in evaluating sperm morphology. Slides stained with Papanicolaou and Diff-Quik have almost the same quality, enabling the morphological status of spermatozoa to be evaluated in detail. However, the latter technique gives a clear background of the stained smears.

The main difference between studies of morphology lies in the application of the criteria for evaluation. The predictive value of human sperm morphology for IVF was evaluated. For the first time, the WHO (World Health Organization) and Kruger's strict criteria (MEUSC) were compared in patients with normal sperm density and motility parameters. Although there was a correlation between the percentage of normal morphology with the WHO criteria and fertilization in-vitro ($r=0.282$, $p<0.001$), the correlation for strict criteria was much better ($r=0.555$, $p<0.000005$)(Chapter II).

We have also determined an optimal cut-off point for normal morphology. Below 5% normal morphology there was a severe impairment of the fertilization rate (23%). Also in comparison to other sperm parameters, MEUSC showed the highest (and the only clinically acceptable) kappa value (0.439)(Chapter II).

In Chapter III, the predictive value of the Hypoosmotic Swelling Test (HOST) was evaluated and compared with the morphology scores.

The most appropriate cut-off point for the HOST in the native sample was found at 60% swelling. However, the kappa value of 0.151 demonstrates that this agreement was entirely due to chance. The correlation between sperm swelling in response to hypoosmotic conditions and fertilization in vitro was low ($r = 0.334$). MEUSC on the other hand correlated better with the fertilization outcomes and also predicted IVF failure better than the HOST(Chapter III).

In Chapter IV, a larger and nonselected IVF population was studied for both the WHO criteria and the strict criteria. The aim was to search for other parameters in the native sample to allow establishing reliable patient selection criteria for IVF. Of the classical seminal measurements, the best cut-off points to predict IVF failure were found to be: sperm density $20 \times 10^6/\text{ml}$, motility 30%, progressive motility 30%, progressive motile sperm density (PMSD) $3 \times 10^6/\text{ml}$, normal morphology using WHO criteria 14%, and morphology evaluation using strict criteria 5%. Even in this unselected IVF population, the cut-off point for the WHO criteria was below the official 50% WHO limits, which was applicable at the time of the study (Recently the WHO has changed

the normal morphology lower limit to 30%).

Since PMSD was the second best parameter, it was combined with MEUSC in predicting fertilization and pregnancy rates. When both parameters were below their respective cut-off points, the fertilization rate was only 18% and no pregnancies were achieved. On the other hand, the fertilization rate was 72% and the pregnancy rate was 27% if both parameters were above their respective cut-off points.

In Chapter V, morphology scores after swim-up and the number of morphologically normal spermatozoa in the insemination medium (IMNS) were evaluated with respect to IVF outcome.

The highest correlation between the pre- and post swim-up sperm parameters was found for sperm morphology scores, showing that sperm morphology score in the swim-up portion can be predicted from the native sample ($r=0.804$)(Chapter V).

After the swim-up procedure, a significant increase in spermatozoa exhibiting progressive motility and normal morphology was observed for the whole group. However, the percentage of spermatozoa with progressive motility did not improve significantly in the infertile group whereas in the fertile group there was a significant increase ($p<0.0005$). The percentage of normal morphology showed a significant increase in both groups ($p<0.001$).

Since the number of progressive motile spermatozoa was adjusted to the same level in the IVF medium, the possible parameters to be used as IVF predictors were sperm density, the percentage of spermatozoa with normal morphology in the native sample and the number of morphologically normal spermatozoa used for IVF (IMNS). Sperm density had no effect on the IVF outcome. IMNS showed a weak correlation with fertilization outcome ($r=0.336$, $p<0.001$) but failed to give a clinically acceptable cut-off point whereas MEUSC was the best predictor (Chapter IV).

The highest predictive value for IVF outcome was found for the percentage of morphologically normal spermatozoa, both in the native and post swim-up samples. Moreover, only these two parameters gave clinically acceptable cut-off points (5% and 8% respectively). When native MEUSC scores and post swim-up MEUSC scores were both below their respective cut-off levels, fertilization rate was 7% and no pregnancies were achieved.

The number of progressively motile spermatozoa can be elevated by motility stimulants. Pentoxifylline (PF), a phosphodiesterase inhibitor, is widely used for this purpose. In Chapter VI, the effects of PF incubation on intracellular cAMP concentrations and motility parameters have been evaluated. All motility parameters were significantly higher in the PF group when compared with the control group ($p<0.05$). Intracellular cAMP concentrations were not significantly different in control and PF groups after processing of the spermatozoa as for IVF. Moreover, there was a significant elevation in the intracellular cAMP concentrations in the PF group immediately after incubation

($p < 0.0005$). Our results are in agreement with previous findings and show that once the cAMP levels have been elevated with pentoxifylline, subsequent washing does not affect the hyperactivation and sensitization of the spermatozoa to spontaneous acrosome reaction, although the cAMP levels decrease. Therefore, PF can be used as a stimulant for IVF to enhance the progressive motile density and further washing will not negate the stimulatory effect.

In conclusion, the results from Chapters II to IV show that morphology evaluation using strict criteria (MEUSC) for evaluation of human sperm morphology plays an important role in predicting IVF results and that it is superior to WHO criteria. Additional parameters for IVF prediction are PMSD in the native sample and the MEUSC in the insemination medium. Furthermore, the fact that there were no pregnancies in patients who have semen samples that fall below cut-off points for MEUSC, PMSD and post swim-up MEUSC scores, should motivate the clinician to search for treatment procedures in addition to classical IVF treatment, such as incubating the sperm with pentoxifylline, which enable the recovery of higher numbers of progressive motile spermatozoa for in vitro insemination (Chapter VI).

Samenvatting

De kwalitatieve beoordeling van semen is lang gebaseerd geweest op spermatozoa-concentratie, -motiliteit en -morfologie. Gedurende de laatste vijf jaar heeft de morfologie van de spermatozoa steeds meer de aandacht met name gekregen. Dit kan worden toegeschreven aan een nieuwe evaluatiemethode van de morfologie, die geïntroduceerd werd door Kruger en medewerkers in 1988. Tegelijkertijd werd door deze groep een nieuwe kleurtechniek geïntroduceerd. Deze Diff-Quik kleuring is een tijdbesparende procedure vergeleken met de veel gebruikte Papanicolaou kleuring. Beide kleurmethoden geven kwalitatief zeer goede en vergelijkbare preparaten waarbij het morfologisch aspect van spermatozoa tot in details bestudeerd kan worden. De Diff-Quik kleuring geeft echter minder achtergrondkleuring, hetgeen een voordeel is.

Het belangrijkste verschil tussen studies aangaande de morfologie van spermatozoa is gelegen in de toepassing van de evaluatiecriteria. In hoofdstuk II wordt de voorspellende waarde van de morfologie van humane spermatozoa onderzocht ten aanzien van in-vitro fertilisatie (IVF) resultaten. Voor het eerst sinds de introductie van de nieuwe evaluatiecriteria door Kruger en medewerkers werden de WHO (World Health Organization) en de strikte criteria van Kruger (MEUSC) met elkaar vergeleken bij patiënten met normale spermatozoa-concentraties en -motiliteit. De morfologie werd geëvalueerd in met Diff-Quik gekleurde preparaten, gemaakt van vers semen. Hoewel het percentage spermatozoa met normale morfologie volgens de WHO criteria bleek te correleren met de kans op bevruchting in vitro ($r=0.282$, $p<0.001$), bleek deze correlatie bij de strikte criteria veel beter te zijn ($r=0.555$, $p < 0.000005$) (Hoofdstuk II). Ook werd het optimale afkappunt voor normale morfologie bepaald. Bij semen met minder dan 5% spermatozoa met normale morfologie (MEUSC) werd een laag bevruchtingspercentage gevonden (23%). In vergelijking met andere semenparameters bleek de MEUSC de hoogste (en de enige klinisch acceptabele) kappa waarde (0.439) te hebben (Hoofdstuk II).

In hoofdstuk III wordt de voorspellende waarde van de Hypoosmotic Swelling Test (HOST) ten aanzien van de bevruchting in vitro geëvalueerd, en vergeleken met de morfologie-scores. Het meest geschikte afkappunt voor de HOST in onbewerkt semen bleek bij 60% zwelling te liggen. Echter, de bijbehorende lage kappa waarde van 0.151, betekent dat de overeenstemming tussen de HOST en de IVF resultaten aan het toeval zijn toe te schrijven. Ook de correlatie tussen de zwelling van spermatozoa als gevolg van de hypoosmotische condities en de bevruchting in vitro bleek laag te zijn ($r=0.334$). MEUSC echter bleek beter te correleren met het resultaat van de in vitro fertilisatie, en bleek ook beter dan de HOST te kunnen voorspellen in welke gevallen geen enkele eicel bevrucht zou worden (Hoofdstuk III).

In hoofdstuk IV worden de resultaten beschreven van een onderzoek verricht bij een grotere en niet-geselecteerde IVF populatie. Het doel van deze studie

was om te onderzoeken welke parameters van de semenanalyse (inclusief de morfologie volgens de WHO criteria en de MEUSC) betrouwbare selectie criteria zouden zijn voor patiënten die in aanmerking komen voor een IVF behandeling. Als beste afkappunten voor de verschillende klassieke semen parameters werden gevonden: spermatozoa concentratie 20 miljoen/ml, motiliteit 30%, progressieve motiliteit 30%, progressief bewegende spermatozoa concentratie (PMSD) 3 miljoen/ml, normale morfologie volgens WHO criteria 14%, en normale morfologie volgens strikte criteria 5%. In deze niet-geselecteerde IVF patiëntengroep bleek het beste afkappunt voor de morfologie volgens de WHO criteria beneden het officiële WHO afkappunt uit 1987 van 50% te liggen. Zeer recent (1993) heeft de WHO dit afkappunt gewijzigd in 30%. Na de MEUSC bleek de PMSD de beste parameter te zijn om bevruchting in vitro en zwangerschap te kunnen voorspellen. Bij een combinatie van beide parameters beneden hun respectievelijk afkappunt werd een bevruchtingspercentage van slechts 18% gevonden, en werd geen enkele zwangerschap verkregen. Bij beide parameters boven hun afkappunt werd een bevruchtingspercentage van 72% en een zwangerschapspercentage van 27% gevonden.

Voor het onderzoek beschreven in hoofdstuk V werd de morfologie bestudeerd van de spermatozoa die in contact worden gebracht met de eicellen. Deze spermatozoa zijn door middel van een zogenaamde "swim-up" techniek geselecteerd uit het verse semenmonster. De voorspellende waarde ten aanzien van bevruchting in vitro van zowel het percentage, als het aantal spermatozoa met een normale morfologie werd onderzocht. Van alle onderzochte spermatozoa bleek de morfologie de beste correlatie te vertonen tussen de waarden gevonden in het verse semen en in de "swim-up"-oplossing ($r=0.804$). Na de swim-up procedure werd een significante stijging gevonden in het percentage morfologisch normale spermatozoa, voor zowel de fertiele patiëntengroep, als de infertiele groep ($p<0.001$). In de fertiele groep werd na de swim-up procedure ook een significante stijging gevonden in het percentage progressief bewegende spermatozoa ($p<0.0005$), terwijl in de infertiele groep deze stijging niet gevonden werd.

Omdat bij elke patiënt een zelfde aantal progressief bewegende spermatozoa in het inseminatie medium gebracht werden, blijven als mogelijke parameters voor het voorspellen van de IVF resultaten over de totale spermatozoa-concentratie, het percentage spermatozoa met normale morfologie, en het aantal spermatozoa met normale morfologie (IMNS). De totale spermatozoa-concentratie bleek geen effect te hebben op het IVF resultaat. IMNS liet een geringe correlatie zien met de bevruchtingsresultaten ($r=0.336$, $p<0.001$), maar gaf geen klinisch acceptabel afkappunt. MEUSC bleek de beste voorspeller (Hoofdstuk IV).

Het percentage spermatozoa met een normale morfologie heeft de hoogste voorspellende waarde ten aanzien van de IVF resultaten, zowel in het verse semenmonster als in het swim-up monster. Het zijn ook deze twee parameters die klinisch acceptabele afkappunten geven (5% en 8%, respectievelijk). Bij een

combinatie uitkomsten ander het afkappunt van zowel de MEUSC van het verse semen, als de MEUSC van het swim-up monster, was het bevruchtingspercentage slechts 7% en er werd geen enkele zwangerschap gerealiseerd.

Het percentage progressief bewegende spermatozoa kan verhoogd worden met behulp van motiliteitsstimulantia. Pentoxifylline (PF), een fosfodiesterase remmer, wordt vaak gebruikt voor dit doel. In hoofdstuk VI worden de effecten van de incubatie van spermatozoa met PF op de intracellulaire cAMP concentratie en motiliteitsparameters van spermatozoa beschreven. Gevonden werd dat alle motiliteitsparameters significant hoger waren in de PF groep, vergeleken met de controle groep ($p < 0.05$). In de PF groep werd direct na de incubatie ook een significante verhoging van de intracellulaire cAMP concentratie gevonden ($p < 0.0005$). Als de spermatozoa echter bewerkt werden als voor een IVF behandeling, bleken de intracellulaire cAMP concentraties niet significant verschillend te zijn in de controle en de PF groepen. Deze resultaten zijn in overeenstemming met eerdere bevindingen en laten zien dat, zodra de cAMP niveau's in de spermatozoa eenmaal verhoogd zijn geweest onder invloed van PF, een verdere incubatie van de spermatozoa in medium zonder PF geen invloed meer heeft op de staat van hyperactivatie van de spermatozoa, hoewel de cAMP niveau's weer dalen. PF kan daarom gebruikt worden bij IVF om de progressief bewegende spermatozoa-concentratie te vergroten, en verdere wasprocedures zullen dit stimulerend effect niet te niet doen.

Concluderend kan gesteld worden, dat uit de resultaten beschreven in hoofdstuk II - IV blijkt, dat de morfologische evaluatie van humane spermatozoa, op basis van strikte criteria (MEUSC), een belangrijk instrument is om de bevruchtingspercentages bij in vitro fertilisatie te voorspellen, en dat de MEUSC beter voorspelt dan de morfologische evaluatie op basis van de WHO criteria. Additionele parameters die belangrijk zijn voor de voorspelling van IVF resultaten zijn de PMSD in het verse semenmonster en de MEUSC in het inseminatiemedium. Het feit dat er geen zwangerschappen gevonden werden bij patiënten met MEUSC, PMSD en post swim-up MEUSC scores beneden hun respectievelijke afkappunten, is een motivatie om te zoeken naar behandelprocedures, zoals de incubatie van spermatozoa met PF, die het mogelijk maken om een groter aantal progressief bewegende spermatozoa te verzamelen voor IVF (Hoofdstuk VI).

Sperm sayısı, hareketliliği ve morfolojisi, ejakülat kalitesini belirleyen faktörler olarak kabul edilmektedir. 1988 yılında Kruger et al. in önerdiği yeni morfoloji değerlendirme tekniği sayesinde, sperm morfolojisi son 5 senedir diğer parametrelere göre daha fazla önem kazanmıştır. Aynı dönemlerde, rutin olarak kullanılan Papanicolau boyama yöntemine alternatif olarak, daha hızlı sonuç veren Diff-Quik boyama yöntemi de önerilmiştir. Preparat kalitesi açısından iki boyama yöntemi arasında fark olmamakla birlikte, Diff-Quik ile boyanmış preparatlarda sperm morfolojisi daha detaylı olarak değerlendirilebilir. Diff-Quik ile boyanmış preparatlar ayrıca daha net bir fona sahiptir.

Sperm morfoloji çalışmaları arasındaki en belirli farklılık değerlendirme yöntemlerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Sperm morfolojisinin in vitro fertilizasyon (IVF) programlarındaki rolü değerlendirilmiştir. Literatürde ilk kez Dünya Sağlık Örgütü (WHO) ile Kruger tarafından önerilmiş olan dikkatli morfoloji değerlendirmesi (MEUSC), sperm sayısı ve hareketliliği normal olan hastalarda (IVF programı çerçevesinde) karşılaştırılmıştır. Hernekadar WHO değerlendirme yöntemi ile in vitro dölleme sonuçları arasında bir korelasyon saptanmışsa da ($r=0.282$, $p<0.001$), bu korelasyon dikkatli değerlendirme yöntemi lehinedir ($r=0.555$, $p<0.000005$)(Chapter II).

Yayınlanmış eşik değerleri kullanmak yerine, yeni değerlendirme yöntemi için, yeni bir eşik değeri araştırılmıştır. Normal morfoloji yüzdesi %5 in altında olan hastaların in vitro dölleme yüzdesi düşmüştür (%23). Tüm sperm parametreleri için ROC eğrileri oluşturulmuş ve MEUSC en yüksek kappa değeri (0.439) ile birlikte klinikte tek kabul edilebilir parametre olarak saptanmıştır (Chapter II).

Chapter III de hiposmotik şişme testinin (HOST) klinik yararlılığı değerlendirilmiş ve sperm morfolojisi ile karşılaştırılmıştır. HOST için en uygun eşik değeri %60 olarak saptanmışsa da 0.151 ile sınırlı kalan kappa değeri bu eşik değerinin tamamen şans eseri olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. HOST ile in vitro dölleme arasındaki korelasyon da düşüktür ($r=0.334$). Bunun yanında MEUSC ile in vitro dölleme arasındaki korelasyon yüksek olup, başarısız IVF sonuçlarını (%0 dölleme) önceden belirleyebilmiştir.

Chapter IV de, hiçbir kısıtlamaya gidilmeksizin tüm IVF grubu MEUSC ve WHO değerlendirme yöntemleri çerçevesinde incelenmiştir. Aynı zamanda MEUSC e yardımcı başka parametrelerin olup olmadığını araştırmak amaçlanmıştır. Klasik parametreler için en uygun eşik değerler; sperm sayımı $20 \times 10^6/ml$, hareketlilik %30, progresif hareketlilik %30, progresif hareketli sperm sayısı (PMSD) $3 \times 10^6/ml$, normal morfolji WHO yöntemi %14, ve normal morfoloji dikkatli değerlendirme yöntemi %5, olarak saptanmıştır.

Ayırım yapılmamış bu IVF popülasyonunda da WHO yöntemi için saptanmış olan %14, Dünya Sağlık Örgütü'nün o dönemlerde kullandığı %50 eşik değerinin çok altındadır (Dünya Sağlık Örgütü bu değeri yakın zamanda %30 a

indirmiştir).

PMSD, MEUSC tan sonra en iyi ikinci parametre olarak saptandığından, bu iki parametre in vitro dölleme ve hamilelik yüzdesi göz önünde tutularak birlikte değerlendirilmiştir. Bu iki parametre, yukarıda verilen eşik değerlerin altına düştüğünde dölleme yüzdesi yalnızca %18 olup, bu grupta hiçbir hamilelik saptanmamıştır. Bunun yanında eğer her iki parametre de eşik değerlerinin üzerinde ise dölleme yüzdesi %72, hamilelik yüzdesi %27 olarak saptanmıştır. Chapter V de swim-up prosedürü sonrasındaki morfolji ile inseminasyon sıvısı içindeki normal morfolojiye sahip sperm sayısı (IMNS), IVF sonuçları ışığında değerlendirilmiştir.

Swim-up öncesi ve sonrası sperm parametreleri değerlendirildiğinde, saptana en yüksek korelasyon morfoloji skorlarına aittir. Bu sonuç swim-up sonrasında saptanan morfoloji yüzdesinin, swim-up öncesinden doğru şekilde tahmin edilebileceğini göstermektedir ($r=0.804$)(Chapter V).

Tüm grupta swim-up prosedürü sonrasında progresif motilite yüzdesi ve sayısında, ve normal morfoloji yüzdesinde belirgin bir artış saptanmıştır. Fakat grup fertl ve infertil olarak ayrı ayrı değerlendirildiğinde progresif hareketlilik yüzdesindeki belirgin artış yalnızca fertl guruba ait olup ($p<0.0005$), infertil grupta saptanmamıştır. Normal morfoloji ise her iki grupta da belirgin artış göstermiştir ($p<0.001$).

IVF inseminasyon sıvısında, progresif hareketlilik gösteren sperm sayısı sabitleştirildiğinden, elimizde IVF sonuçlarını önceden belirleyecek parametre olarak yalnızca, bu sıvıdaki sperm sayısı, normal morfoloji yüzdesi ve normal morfolojiye sahip sperm sayısı kalmaktadır. Sperm sayısının IVF sonuçlarına hiçbir etkisi yoktur. IMNS dölleme yüzdeleri ile ılımlı bir korelasyon göstermekle birlikte ($r=0.336$, $p<0.001$) klinikte kabul edilebilecek bir eşik değer gösterememektedir. MEUSC ise en belirleyici parametre olma özelliğini korumaktadır (Chapter IV).

IVF sonuçlarını en iyi belirleyici iki parametre swim-up öncesi ve sonrasındaki MEUSC skorlarıdır. Daha önemlisi, klinikte kullanılabilecek eşik değerleri ancak bu iki parametre vermektedir (sırasıyla %5 ve %8).

Bu iki parametre birlikte değerlendirildiğinde, eşik değerlerin altında kalan hastalarda dölleme yüzdesi %7 olup hamilelik saptanmamıştır.

Progresif hareketli sperm sayısı motilite stimulanlarının yardımı ile arttırılabilir. Pentoxifylline (PF), bir fosfodiesteraz inhibitörü olup, geniş bir kullanım alanı bulmuştur.

Chapter VI da, PF inkubasyonunun spermlerdeki intrasellüler siklik adenosinmonofosfat (cAMP) konsantrasyonu ve motilite parametrelrine etkisi incelenmiştir. Tüm motilite parametreleri kontrol gurubu ile karşılaştırıldığında PF gurubunda belirgin olarak yüksektir ($p<0.05$). Spermatozoa rutin IVF prosedürüne tabi tutulduğunda intrasellüler cAMP konsantrasyonlarında değişiklik saptanamamıştır. Fakat cAMP konsantrasyonları PF inkubasyonunun hemen akabinde ölçüldüğünde, PF gurubu belirgin şekilde yüksektir

($p < 0.0005$).

Bu sonuçlar literatürdekiler ile birlikte değerlendirildiğinde, şu sonuç çıkmaktadır; cAMP konsantrasyonu PF inkübasyonu ile yükselmekle birlikte, PF sıvıdan uzaklaştırıldığında cAMP konsantrasyonu düşse bile bu spermin hiperaktivasyonuna ve spontan akrozom reaksiyonu sensitizasyonuna engel olmamaktadır. Bundan dolayı PF, IVF programlarında uyarıcı olarak kullanılabilir, ayrıca sıvıdan uzaklaştırılması uyarıcı özelliğini etkilememektedir.

Sonuç olarak, Chapter II den IV e kadar olan bölümlerin verileri, dikkatli değerlendirme yönteminin, IVF sonuçları açısından önemli rol oynadığını ve Dünya Sağlık Örgütü yöntemine olan üstünlüğünü vurgulamaktadır.

MEUSC e yardımcı diğer parametreler PMSD ve swim-up sonrası MEUSC dur. Daha önemlisi, bu üç parametreye ait eşik değerlerin altına düşen hastalar klinisyenleri rutin IVF tedavisi dışında, PF incubasyonu gibi daha fazla sayıda progresif hareketli sperm sayısı elde edebilecekleri alternatif tedaviler aramaya motive etmelidir (Chapter VI).

	ABSENT	PRESENT
POSITIVE	True Positive (a)	(b) False Positive
NEGATIVE	False Negative (c)	(d) True Negative

The diagnostic properties can be calculated with the following formulas:

$$N = a+b+c+d$$

$$\text{Positive Predictive Value} = a / (a+b)$$

$$\text{Negative Predictive Value} = d / (c+d)$$

$$\text{Sensitivity} = a / (a+c)$$

$$\text{Specificity} = d / (c+d)$$

$$\text{Likelihood Ratio Positive (LR+)} = \text{Sensitivity} / (1-\text{Specificity})$$

$$\text{Likelihood Ratio Negative (LR-)} = (1-\text{Sensitivity}) / \text{Specificity}$$

$$\text{Observed Agreement (OA)} = (a+d) / N$$

$$\text{Agreement by Chance (AC)} = [(a+c) \times (a+b) / N] + [(b+d) \times (c+d) / N] / N$$

$$\text{Kappa} = (OA - AC) / (1 - AC)$$

ROC curves are based on sensitivity and specificity. Sensitivity is an index of the ability of the test to detect the disease when it is present, and specificity is the ability of the test to correctly identify the absence of the disease. Sensitivity and specificity can be considered the stable properties of a diagnostic test, because they do not change when different proportions of diseased and well patients are tested. However, they fluctuate mutually when different cut-off points are chosen. The product of this fluctuation reflects the overall usefulness of the test and can be displayed graphically as the ROC curve (Figure 1).