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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Diagnostic Utility of Immunohistochemical expression of CDX2, CK7 and CK20 in Colorectal AdenocarcinomaAsmaa A. Iatif ^{*1}, Ragaa M Abd Elwahab¹, Naira A Abd Elhamid², Amira A Salem¹¹ Pathology Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University, Zagazig, Egypt² Pathology Department, National Cancer Institute, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt***Corresponding author:**Asmaa Abdullatif Mohammed
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University, Zagazig, Egypt.**Email:**Asma_abdullateef@hotmail.com**Submit Date** 2019-09-21**Revise Date** 2019-12-01**Accept Date** 2019-12-20**ABSTRACT****Background:** Invoking of primary site of carcinoma of unknown origin using immunohistochemistry is essential for accurate diagnosis, particularly in the current era of targeted therapies, smaller sample sizes.

This study aimed to assess immunohistochemical expression of CK7, CK20, CDX2 in metastatic colorectal, gastric, pancreatic adenocarcinomas, to evaluate their possible diagnostic role when metastatic colorectal carcinoma suspected in carcinoma of unknown primary site.

Methods: A retrospective study was performed on 80 paraffin blocks including 40 cases of documented colorectal carcinoma, 20 cases of gastric carcinoma and 20 cases of pancreatic carcinoma were stained by immunohistochemical technique using CK7, CK20, CDX2. The resulted data were statistically analyzed.**Results:** CK7-ve/CK20+ve immunoprofile had a specificity of 95% in predicting colorectal adenocarcinomas, which was superior to that of CDX2. CDX2 positivity had a higher sensitivity (95%) than the CK phenotype.**Conclusions:** Both CDX2 expression, and CK7-ve/CK20+ve are the most sensitive, specific markers for colorectal carcinoma. CDX2 is a useful adjunct for diagnosis of intestinal adenocarcinomas, particularly when CK7, CK20 yield equivocal results. CK7-ve/CK20+ve expression is superior in its specificity, positive predictive value.**Key Words:** Colorectal adenocarcinoma; Gastric; Immunohistochemistry; CDX2; CK7; CK20.**INTRODUCTION**

Colorectal carcinoma (CRC) ranks as the third most common cancer, the second leading cause of cancer related death worldwide in 2018^[1]. In Egypt, it is the sixth commonest cancer among both males, female according to 2014 National cancer registry program results ^[2]. CRC is representing 53% of gastrointestinal tract cancers ^[3and4]. Although diagnosis of colorectal cancer is usually not difficult in the primary site. Yet it may represent a diagnostic problem as a metastatic tumor of unknown origin ^[5].

Metastatic tumor of unknown primary site is a common clinical problem, that accounts for 3-5% of malignancy making it one of top 10 cancers in incidence and mortality in both men and women as 90% of which proved to be carcinoma ^[6]. The identification of the primary site is a key for further therapy. The correct diagnosis can be reached through a combination of clinical findings, diagnostic imaging modalities, routine evaluation of hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) and evaluation of

immunohistochemical markers for more accurate diagnosis ^[7]. Cytokeratins represent intermediate filaments of cytoskeleton in all epithelial cells, comprise 20 different polypeptides ^[8]. The relative expression of CK7/CK20 is still the cornerstone in narrowing the differential diagnosis of metastatic carcinoma of unknown primary ^[9]. CK20 is specific for GI tract, especially colorectal, urothelial and Merckel cell carcinoma. On the other hand, CK7 is characteristic for glandular malignancies originating from breast, lung, biliary tract, thyroid and Mullerian epithelium ^[10]. Despite this apparent tissue-specific distribution, ectopic CK20 expression in sporadic cases of carcinomas, derived from normally CK20 negative tissues, has also been noted, but this aberrant expression is restricted to a relatively limited sub-population of tumor cells ^[11]. CDX2 is a nuclear transcription factor that has a key role in the processes of intestinal cell proliferation and differentiation that can be used as IHC marker for neoplasm of intestinal origin ^[12]. Although CDX2

is used for detecting adenocarcinoma of colon, small intestine, it is variably expressed in gastric, pancreatic ductal carcinoma, cholangiocarcinoma [13]. Also broad range of CDX2 expression was seen in primary ovarian mucinous carcinoma [14].

METHODS

Tissue specimens: A retrospective study was performed on 80 paraffin blocks. Cases were collected from the Pathology Department, Zagazig University, in the period from October 2016 to January 2019. The selected specimens were obtained by surgical excision. Metastatic colorectal carcinoma (n=40) [group A], gastric carcinoma (n=20) [group B], and pancreatic carcinoma (n=20) [group C].

All included carcinomas were classified into well, moderately, or poorly differentiated, corresponding to WHO criteria [15].

Immunohistochemical staining

The primary antibodies used were rabbit anti-CDX2 monoclonal antibody (ACI 3144 A, B, Biocare Medical, USA, 1:100 dilution), mouse anti-Cytokeratin 7 monoclonal antibody (C.M.061A,B,C, Biocare Medical, USA, 1:100 dilution) and anti-Cytokeratin 20 monoclonal antibody (C.M.062A,C, Biocare Medical, USA, 1:100 dilution).

Colonic mucosa was considered as positive controls for CDX2, CK20. Normal pancreatic tissue was used as a CK7 positive control. Negative controls were done by replacement of the primary antibodies with usual saline

Technique: Positively charged slides at thickness 5 microns were embedded in xylene for 5 minutes. Series of xylene, alcohol were done, then slides were microwaved in 0.01 M sodium citrate (pH 6.0) for antigen retrieval for 25 minutes. Incubation for 10 minutes with 3% hydrogen peroxide was done, then in 1.5% bovine serum albumin at room temperature for 1 h. Primary antibodies (anti-CDX2 or anti-CK7 or anti-CK20) were incubated at room temperature for 30 minutes, then a secondary antibody from a streptavidin biotin complex peroxidase kit was used with the substrate 3,3'-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride (D.A.B; Dako) for 10 minutes in D.A.B. then, slides were rinsed with distilled water and immersed in Mayer's hematoxylin.

Interpretation of immunostaining

Evaluation of CDX2 expression:

Nuclear reactivity was considered as positive staining for CDX2. Cases were divided into the following groups: (negative): no staining and only few scattered positive cells <5% was considered to be negative; (1+): 5-25% of cells stained; (2+): 25-50% of cells stained; (3+): 51-100% of cells stained [5].

Evaluation of CK7, CK20 expression:

CK7 and CK20 were expressed in a membranous and/or cytoplasmic pattern and the tumor was considered positive for these antibodies if more than 5% of the tumor cells showed membranous and/or cytoplasmic staining. The extent of positive cells were recorded in a semiquantitative method according to a scale from 1 to 3; 6-25% (1), 26-50% (2), and 51-100% (3). The pattern of staining was recorded as focal (<50%) or diffuse (>50%) [16].

The combination of immunohistochemical findings of CK7/CK20 was divided into four classes as follows: CK7+ve/CK20-ve, CK7-ve/CK2+ve, CK7+ve/CK20+ve, CK7-ve/CK20-ve [17]. Two pathologists evaluated all slides in a blinded manner

Ethical Consideration

A written consent was obtained from all cases. This work has been carried out following the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000) for humans' studies. Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the faculty of Medicine Zagazig University affirmed the study protocol

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The collected data were tabulated and statistically analyzed using SPSS program version 18.0. Chi square test was used to calculate difference between qualitative variables. P value of <0.05, <0.01 indicates significant and highly significant results, respectively.

RESULTS

Cases were distributed in the age group of 40-80 years, overall male: female ratio was 2: 1 approximately. About 46.3% of the cases (37/80) were grade 2.

Immunohistochemical expression of CK7 and CK20 among the studied groups (N=80): (figure1-5).

CK20 was expressed in 92.5% (37/40) of colorectal, 65% (13/20) of gastric, and 25% (5/20) of pancreatic adenocarcinomas. Positive CK7 immunostaining was found in 7.5% (3/40) of colorectal, 90% (18/20) of gastric, 95% (19/20) of pancreatic adenocarcinomas. In CRC, CK20 positive cases was statistically significantly higher than CK7 positive cases (P<0.001).

Among the CK20 positive cases, CK20 expression showed a diffuse pattern in 86.5% (32/37) cases of colorectal carcinomas, and focal pattern in 76.9% (10/13), 100% (5/5) cases of gastric, pancreatic carcinomas respectively (p<0.001). On the other hand, CK7 expression had diffuse pattern in 66.7% (12/18), 84.2% (16/19) cases of gastric, pancreatic carcinomas respectively, and focal pattern in 66.7% (2/3) of colorectal carcinomas (p<0.001); as shown in **Table 1**.

Combination of CK20/CK7 immunoprofile showed that CK7-ve/CK20+ve was expressed by 35 of 40 (87.5%) colorectal, 2 of 20 (10%) gastric carcinomas, was not detected in any pancreatic carcinomas cases (p<0.001). CK7+ve/CK20+ve phenotype was detected in 2/40 (5%) of colorectal, 11/20(55%) of gastric, 5/20(25%) of pancreatic carcinomas. CK7+ve/CK20-ve was detected in 2% (1/40) of colon carcinomas, 35% (7/20) of gastric, 70% (14/20) of pancreatic adenocarcinomas (p<0.001). Only one case of pancreatic, 2 cases of colorectal and no gastric adenocarcinomas showed a CK7-ve/CK20-ve immunophenotype; as shown in **Table 2**.

Immunohistochemical expression of CDX2 among the studied groups (N=80): (figure 6,7).

The current study showed that CDX2 expression was detected in 38/40 (95%) colorectal, 12/20 (60%) gastric, 3 / 20 (15%) pancreatic adenocarcinoma cases (p<0.001).(**Table 2**)

Twenty four out of 38 (63%) of positive cases of CRC demonstrated strong, diffuse staining. On the other hand, 58.3% (7/12) positive cases of gastric

carcinomas showed focal reactivity, All positive cases of pancreatic carcinoma showed focal CDX2 staining (p<0.001) as shown in **Table 1**.

Comparison between CK7/CK20 immunoprofile and CDX2 expression in our studied groups:

Thirty four out of 40 (85%) of colorectal carcinomas showed CK7-ve/CK20+ve/CDX2+ve immunoprofile. Conversely,

CK7+ve/CK20+ve/CDX2+ve (8/20, 40%), CK7+ve/CK20-ve/CDX2-ve (12/20, 60%) were the commonest immunoprofile in gastric, pancreatic carcinomas respectively **as shown in Table 2**.

We also evaluated the diagnostic performance of CDX2, CK7-ve/ CK20+ve in distinguishing CRC from pancreatic and gastric adenocarcinoma. CK7-ve/CK20+ve immunoprofile had a specificity of 95% in predicting colorectal adenocarcinomas, which was superior to that of CDX2. CDX2 positivity had a higher sensitivity (95%) than the CK phenotype; as shown in **Table 3**.

Table (1): Distribution of CK7, CK20 and CDX2 staining with percentages of positive cells in primary colorectal, gastric and pancreatic adenocarcinomas

Cases		negative		Positive		Total
		0	1+	2+	3+	positive
Colorectal carcinoma (n=40)	CK7	37(92.5%)	2(5%)	1(2.5%)	0(0%)	3(7.5%)
	CK20	3(7.5%)	1(2.5%)	13(32.5%)	23(57.5%)	37(92.5%)
	CDX2	2(5%)	2(5%)	12(30%)	24(60%)	38(95%)
Gastric carcinoma (n=20)	CK7	2(10%)	1(5%)	8(40%)	9(45%)	18(90%)
	CK20	7(35%)	5(25%)	8(40%)	0(0%)	13(65%)
	CDX2	8(40%)	1(5%)	6(30%)	5(25%)	12(60%)
Pancreatic carcinoma (n=20)	CK7	1(5%)	1(5%)	2(10%)	16(80%)	19(95%)
	CK20	15(75%)	0(0%)	5(25%)	0(0%)	5(25%)
	CDX2	17(85%)	0(0%)	3(15%)	0(0%)	3(15%)

Table (2): Comparison of CK7/20 staining pattern and CDX2 expression in our studied groups

	Colorectal carcinoma (n =40)		Gastric carcinoma (n =20)		Pancreatic carcinoma (n =20)	
	CDX2+ve	CDX2-ve	CDX2+ve	CDX2-ve	CDX2+ve	CDX2-ve
CK7-ve/CK20+ve	34(85%)	1(2.5%)	2(10%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)
CK7+ve/CK20+v e	1(2.5%)	1(2.5%)	8(40%)	3(15%)	1(5%)	4(20%)
CK7+ve/CK20-ve	1(2.5%)	0(0%)	2(10%)	5(25%)	2(10%)	12(60%)
CK7-ve/CK20-ve	2(5%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1(5%)

Table (3):Diagnostic performance of CDX2 expression and CK7-/CK20+ immunophenotype in differentiating colorectal adenocarcinomas from pancreatic and gastric adenocarcinomas

	Sensitivity	Specificity	PPV	NPV	Accuracy
CDX2	95	62.5	71.7	92.5	78.8
CK7-ve/CK20+ve	87.5	95	94.6	88.4	91.2
CDX2 and CK7-ve/CK20+ve	85	95	94.4	86.4	90

PPV: Positive Predictive Value NPV: Negative Predictive Value

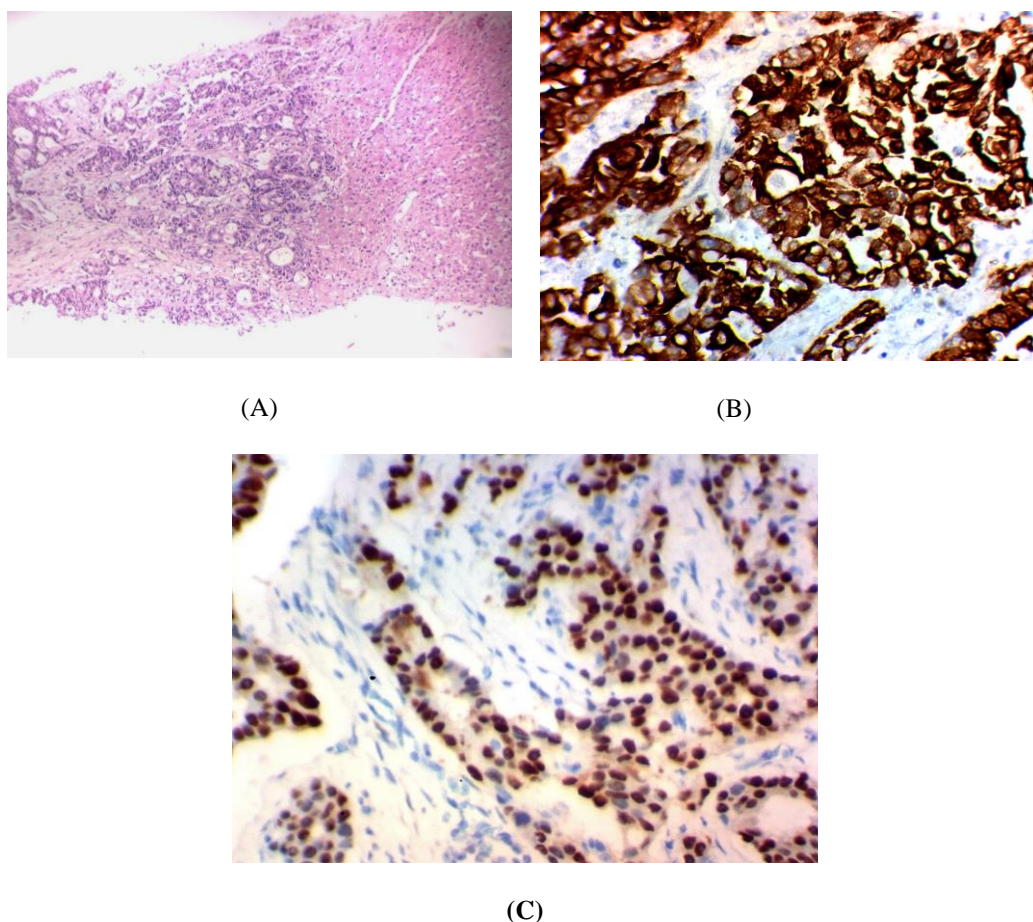
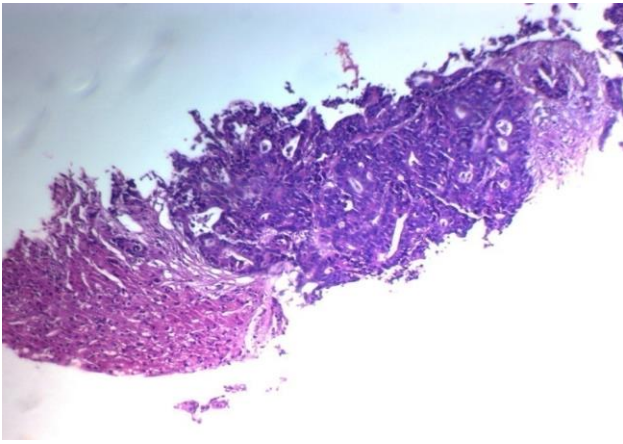
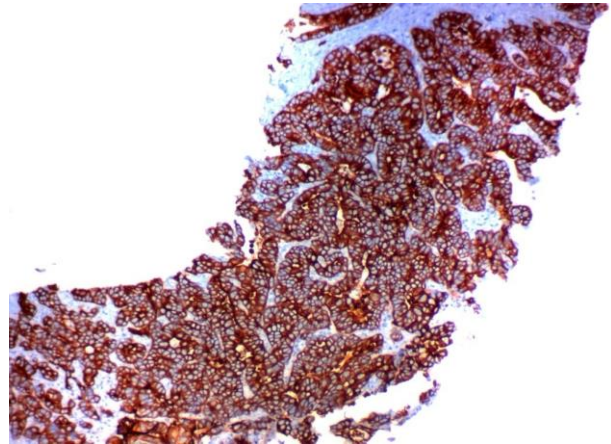


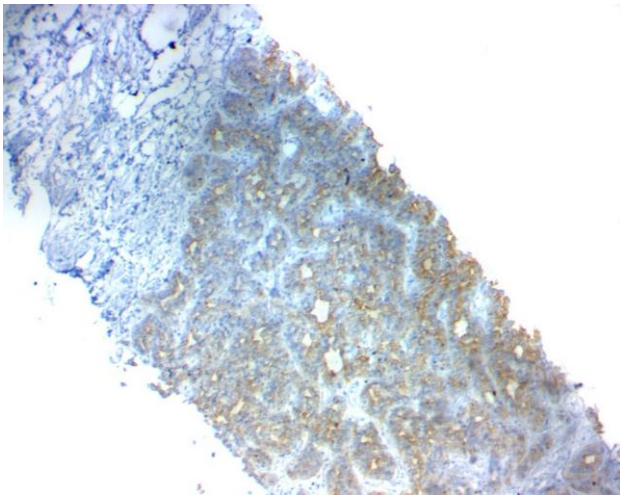
Figure 1. A metastatic moderately differentiated colonic adenocarcinoma (A: hematoxylin and eosin, X200) displayed diffuse, strong cytoplasmic and membranous staining for CK20 (B) and diffuse strong CDX2 nuclear expression(C). (B and C immunoperoxidase, X400).



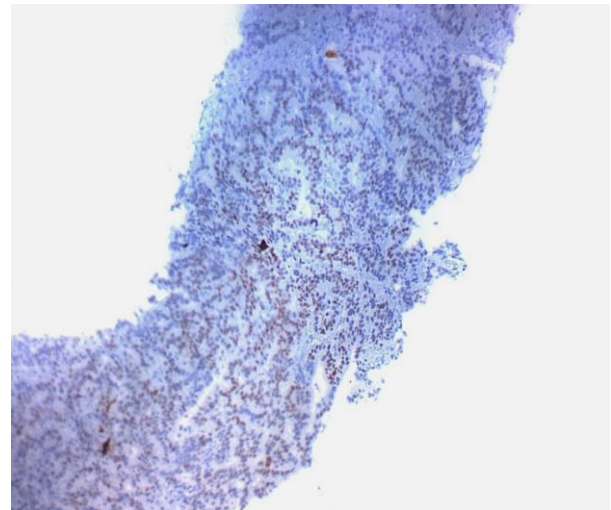
(A)



(B)



(C)



(D)

Figure 2. A metastatic moderately differentiated gastric adenocarcinoma (A: hematoxylin and eosin, X200) displayed diffuse, strong cytoplasmic and membranous staining for CK7 (B), weak cytoplasmic staining for CK20 (C), and diffuse moderate CDX2 nuclear expression(D). (B, C and D immunoperoxidase, X200).

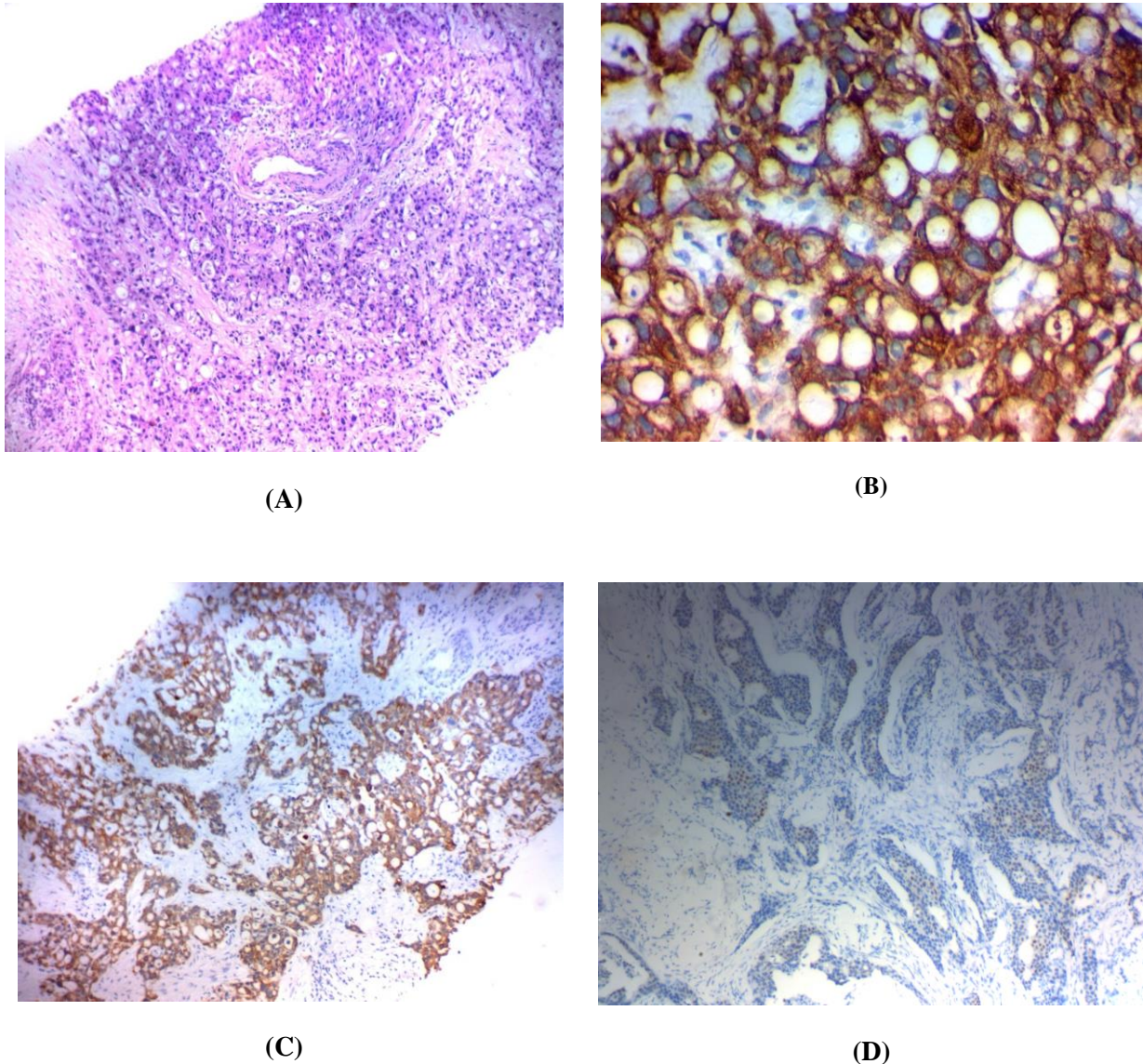


Figure 3. A metastatic poorly differentiated pancreatic adenocarcinoma

(A: hematoxylin and eosin, X200) displayed diffuse, strong membranous and cytoplasmic staining for CK7 (B), diffuse, moderate cytoplasmic staining for CK20 (C), and focal, weak CDX2 nuclear expression (D). (B, C and D immunoperoxidase, (B), original magnification X400; (C)-(D), original magnification X 200

DISCUSSION

Carcinoma of unknown primary origin (CUP) is defined by histologically confirmed metastatic carcinoma in the absence of clinical, radiographic, or pathologic identification of a primary site [18].

Metastasis is a major cause of death of CRC patients who almost present with metastases before primary tumor is found. In such cases, immunostaining is one of the helpful methods to identify the primary site [19].

Previous studies reported that CK7-ve/CK20+ve pattern identifies in CRC between 65% to 95% [16, 21, and 22], compared with one third of gastric carcinomas, and less than 10% of pancreatic carcinomas [23, 24, 25, 26]. These results are consistent with the current results in which 87.5% of CRC, 10% of gastric carcinoma showed CK7-

ve/CK20+ve immunophenotype. However, non of pancreatic carcinomas expresses this pattern.

Our results also are in line with results of studies conveyed by **Bayrak et al.**, [5], who found that CK7-ve/CK20+ve phenotype showed a specificity of 96.7% in identifying CRC.

Heterogeneity of gastric and pancreatic carcinomas was noticed having a non-specific immunoprofile. Also there is overlapping between CK7 and CK20 expression in CRC and other adenocarcinomas [27]. In the present study, 5% of CRC, 55% of gastric, 25% of pancreatic carcinomas showed CK7+ve/CK20+ve profile. This profile is not useful to suggest a specific anatomic site of origin. However, CK20 expression was diffuse in the majority of CRC cases, mainly focal in gastric, pancreatic adenocarcinomas as in previous studies [6, 27, 28]. The utility of CK7 and CK20 are not

helpful in predicting site of origin of adenocarcinoma in the absence of morphologic or immunohistochemical support [18]. CDX2 is a nuclear transcriptional regulator of intestinal cell differentiation and survival. It is considered specific for enterocytes [29, 30].

The expression of CDX2 was found in 95% of CRC, 60% of gastric carcinomas, and 15% of pancreatic adenocarcinomas ($p < 0.001$). These findings support the view of **Logani et al** [31], **Yang et al** [32], and **Moskaluk et al** [33] who concluded that CDX2 is typically used for diagnosis GIT adenocarcinomas, particularly duodenum, and colon. Results obtained by **Altree-Tacha et al** [34] and **Barbareschi et al** [35] stated that CDX2 expression is highly sensitive for metastatic colorectal carcinoma, but also stains gastric, pancreatobiliary, ovarian carcinoma.

Results of this study also are consistent with results of **Zhang et al** [36] who showed that CDX2 expression is significantly higher in gastric carcinoma compared to normal gastric mucosa, indicating that CDX2 is up-regulated in the gastric tumorigenesis with a reported positivity in 53.3% of 60 cases. **Kaimaktchiev et al** [37] also found CDX2 expression in 22.5% of gastric carcinomas cases particularly in intestinal-type.

With regard to CDX2 expression in pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma. **Chu et al** [38] and **Xiao et al** [39], both reported heterogeneous CDX2 expression in 22%, 36.1% of studied cases, respectively, which has been challenged by others showing no CDX2 expression. [40]

Based on previous studies, we noted that CDX2 cannot differentiate CRC, from gastric carcinoma, pancreatic carcinomas, although CDX2 had a higher sensitivity for CRC than for gastric and pancreatic one. The pattern of CDX2 positivity can also be of diagnostic value; in most carcinomas of the stomach, pancreas, and biliary tract, CDX2 staining is usually observed at low levels in scattered tumor cells, in contrast to the uniform, robust CDX2 immunostaining characteristic of CRC. We also found that CK7-ve/CK20+ve expression displayed a higher specificity for CRC than CDX2 alone (95% vs 62.5%), but less sensitive (87.5% vs. 95%). A panel of CK7, CK20, and CDX2 has been used to assess GIT carcinoma of unknown primary.

CONCLUSION

This study point to the CK20+ve/CK7-ve immunophenotype which is more specific in predicting the colorectal origin of metastasis than CDX2 expression. Both the CK7-ve/CK20+ve phenotype, CDX2 expression are highly specific, sensitive markers of CRC.

Conflicts of interest: no conflicts of interest.

Financial Disclosures: non

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