

Non-invasive evaluation of embryo quality for the selection of transferable embryos in human *in vitro* fertilization-embryo transfer

Jihyun Kim¹, Jaewang Lee², Jin Hyun Jun^{2,3}

¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Seoul Medical Center, Seoul; ²Department of Biomedical Laboratory Science, College of Health Science, Eulji University, Seongnam; ³Department of Senior Healthcare, Graduate School, Eulji University, Seongnam, Republic of Korea

The ultimate goal of human assisted reproductive technology is to achieve a healthy pregnancy and birth, ideally from the selection and transfer of a single competent embryo. Recently, techniques for efficiently evaluating the state and quality of preimplantation embryos using time-lapse imaging systems have been applied. Artificial intelligence programs based on deep learning technology and big data analysis of time-lapse monitoring system during *in vitro* culture of preimplantation embryos have also been rapidly developed. In addition, several molecular markers of the secretome have been successfully analyzed in spent embryo culture media, which could easily be obtained during *in vitro* embryo culture. It is also possible to analyze small amounts of cell-free nucleic acids, mitochondrial nucleic acids, miRNA, and long non-coding RNA derived from embryos using real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or digital PCR, as well as next-generation sequencing. Various efforts are being made to use non-invasive evaluation of embryo quality (NiEEQ) to select the embryo with the best developmental competence. However, each NiEEQ method has some limitations that should be evaluated case by case. Therefore, an integrated analysis strategy fusing several NiEEQ methods should be urgently developed and confirmed by proper clinical trials.

Keywords: Assisted reproductive technology; Cell-free nucleic acids; Culture media; Embryo; MicroRNA; Non-invasive; Secretome; Time-lapse imaging

Introduction

Over the past half-century, strategies have been developed to evaluate and select competent preimplantation embryos for uterine transfer in human *in vitro* fertilization-embryo transfer (IVF-ET) pro-

grams. In the early days, morphological characteristics including fragmentation and other features of embryos observed by an optical microscope were mainly used to evaluate the quality and developmental potential of embryos [1]. However, simple daily microscopic observations by clinical embryologists had limitations in accurately predicting the developmental capacity of embryos.

Recently, techniques for efficiently evaluating the state and quality of embryos using time-lapse monitoring systems (TLMSs) and various molecular genetic approaches have been introduced. In particular, TLMS could select viable embryos without concerns regarding observer-variability and disturbances of culture conditions [2]. Various studies have searched for optimal morphokinetic parameters during TLMS, which could enhance the probability of blastocyst formation, aneuploidy, and finally implantation. Analyses of implantation-related morphokinetic parameters during TLMS have facilitated the development of several clinical algorithms as promising tools for the evaluation and prediction of embryos destined to become the

Received: August 8, 2022 · Revised: November 9, 2022 ·

Accepted: November 10, 2022

Corresponding author: **Jin Hyun Jun**

Department of Biomedical Laboratory Science, College of Health Science, Eulji University, 553 Sanseong-daero, Sujeong-gu, Seongnam 13135, Republic of Korea

Tel: +82-31-740-7210 E-mail: junjh55@hanmail.net

*This project was financially supported by the Basic Science Research Program through the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF), funded by the Ministry of Education (NRF-2018R1D-1A1B07046419 to Jaewang Lee and NRF-2020R1F-1A1071918 to Jin Hyun Jun).

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most competent blastocysts [3].

Artificial intelligence (AI) programs based on deep learning technology and big data analysis of TLMS have been developed and applied as a method for the non-invasive evaluation of embryo quality (NiEEQ). The clinical effectiveness of NiEEQ for human IVF-ET programs has just begun to be reported, and there are several algorithms to predict the implantation potential of day-3 or day-5 embryos. Although the application of NiEEQ alone may not be perfect for selecting the best embryos, more advanced information about the physiological and genetic state of embryos could provide insights into all aspects of the embryos' intrinsic characteristics [4].

Furthermore, advanced and sensitive molecular genetic approaches have been successfully applied to spent embryo culture media (SECM), which can be easily obtained during *in vitro* embryo culture. It is possible to analyze small amounts of cell-free DNA (cfDNA), mitochondrial DNA, microRNA, and long non-coding RNA secreted from embryos using real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) or digital PCR, as well as next-generation sequencing (NGS) [5-7]. In addition, studies have evaluated the developmental ability of embryos by analyzing substrates and metabolites produced during *in vitro* culture, which will be discussed further below [8-11]. Many recent studies have evaluated the correlation between the results of SECM analysis and the embryos' developmental competence. However, the results obtained from those methods can be affected by various external sources of contamination and have the disadvantages of needing relatively expensive equipment, having high costs, and requiring special expertise.

This review provides an overview of the current status of NiEEQ, including TLMS and advanced molecular biological methods in SECM analysis. We also describe the need to develop a method for integrated analysis to overcome the several limitations of each NiEEQ system that has been used in recent years.

TLMS for the selection of the best embryos for transfer

In human IVF-ET programs, embryo cleavage is observed daily by microscopy during *in vitro* culture, and the quality of embryos is determined by the number of blastomeres, cell symmetry, percentage of fragmentation, and other parameters on the day of transfer. The quality of blastocysts is also assessed according to the blastocysts' expansion state and the appearance of the inner cell mass (ICM) and trophoctoderm cells (TE) [12]. Transferable embryos are traditionally selected through a time-point observation of morphological features by trained clinical embryologists with expertise in embryo evaluation [13]. However, there are some limits in accurately predicting the developmental capacity of embryos by microscopic observations. In-

ter- and intra-observer variations can occur in embryo grading, even when it is performed by expert clinical embryologists [14].

For this reason, the TLMS was developed and applied in human IVF-ET programs [15]. A time-lapse system allows the complete observation of developing embryos in the IVF laboratory within stable culture conditions [16]. Initially, valuable knowledge was obtained through the TLMS during *in vitro* culture of pre-implantation embryos in animal models, such as mice and cows, and the TLMS provided precise information on developmental dynamics by making it possible to recognize important morphological changes of the embryo state [17,18]. The advantages of this system include a reduced need for handling and human risk, uninterrupted culture conditions, the ability to detect abnormal events that would otherwise not be noticed, and reduced inter- and intra-observer variability [16,19].

Through TLMS, various morphokinetic markers of developing embryos to predict blastocyst formation have been proposed, as shown in Table 1 [20-35]. In addition to blastocyst formation, morphokinetic markers associated with embryo implantation have been identified, as shown in Table 2 [22,24,25,34,36-50]. Several algorithms using a combination of morphokinetic variables have been introduced and successfully applied in human IVF-ET to select embryos with higher developmental capacity and implantation potential.

The known implantation data (KID) score is an interesting algorithm to improve embryo selection and predict implantation and live birth. The KID score algorithm attempts to rank embryo quality and optimize embryo selection prior to transfer based on conventional morphology grading [51]. Several reports have demonstrated the efficacy of the KID score algorithm and other similar programs using AI. The KID scores of day-5 blastocysts were found to be inversely proportional to maternal age, but directly proportional to blastocyst morphological grade [52]. This finding indicates that the KID score model works well to select blastocysts with higher implantation potential in patients with advanced maternal age.

More recently, the iDAScore algorithm has been developed; this is a deep learning-based annotation scoring system to predict the viability of embryos and the likelihood of implantation and pregnancy. Automatic embryonic ranking systems with AI have demonstrated higher performance with respect to successful implantation and pregnancy prediction than conventional morphological grading systems for the selection of transferable embryos [53]. The area under the curve (AUC) for the iDAScore was comparable to or higher than those of the KID score and Gardner criteria for young and older groups. In particular, for younger women, the AUC of iDAScore was 0.72, which was greater than those of the other two models.

For the KID score, strongly predictive morphokinetic variables were identified (time to 2 cells, duration of the second cell cycle below or above a threshold) with regard to implantation and live birth

Table 1. Various morphokinetic markers to predict blastocyst formation in time-lapse monitoring systems

Study	Study design	No. of evaluated embryos	Origin of embryos	Time-lapse monitoring system	Identified predictive marker
Wong et al. (2010) [20]	Retrospective study	100	Supernumerary frozen 2PN	Modified Olympus IX-70/71; CKX-40/41 BioStation CT	First cytokinesis, P2 and P3
Hashimoto et al. (2012) [21]	Experimental study	80	Donated human embryos for research	BioStation CT	Durations of second and third mitotic divisions
Hlinka et al. (2012) [22]	Retrospective study	180	Clinical IVF routine	Primo vision	c2, c3, and c4; i2, i3, and i4
Cruz et al. (2012) [23]	Retrospective cohort study	834	Oocyte donation cycles	EmbryoScope	t4, s2, DC3 cells, and tM; UN2 cells
Chamayou et al. (2013) [24]	Retrospective study	224	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t1, t2, t4, t7, t8, tC–tF, and s3
Kirkegaard et al. (2013) [25]	Prospective cohort study	571	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	First cytokinesis, t3, and DC3 cells
Conaghan et al. (2013) [26]	Prospective multicenter study	233	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	Eeva	P2 and P3
Kirkegaard et al. (2014) [27]	Prospective multicenter study	1,519	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	P2 and P3
Cetinkaya et al. (2015) [28]	Retrospective observational cohort study	3,354	Clinical IVF routine	EmbryoScope	CS2
Yang et al. (2015) [29]	Prospective observational study	345	Metaphase I donated for research	Primo vision	Cleavage patterns
Milewski et al. (2015) [30]	Prospective observational study	432	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t2, t5, cc2, and SC
Storr et al. (2015) [31]	Prospective cohort study	380	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	s3, t8, and tEB
Motato et al. (2016) [32]	Retrospective study	7,483	Clinical IVF routine	EmbryoScope	tM and t8–t5
Coticchio et al. (2018) [33]	Retrospective observational study	500	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	PN appearance during fertilization
Zaninovic et al. (2019) [34]	Retrospective multicenter study	27,316	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t3, t3–t2, t5, t3–tPNF and t5–tPNF
Desai et al. (2019) [35]	Retrospective observational study	716	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	Cleavage patterns

PN, pronuclei; CT, computed tomography; P2, time of division from 2 to 3 cells; P3, time of division from 3 to 4 cells; IVF, *in vitro* fertilization; c2, time between 3 and 4 cells; c3, time between 5 and 8 cells; c4, time between 9 and 16 cells; i, interphase; t4, time of cleavage to 4 cells; s2, the second synchronization parameter (t4–t3); DC, direct cleavage; tM, time from insemination to compaction into the morula stage; UN, uneven blastomere size; ICSI, intracytoplasmic sperm injection; t1, time of cleavage to 1 cell; t2, time of cleavage to 2 cells; t7, time of cleavage to 7 cells; t8, time of cleavage to 8 cells; tC–tF, time of pronuclei appearance to disappearance; s3, the third synchronization parameter (t8–t5); t3, time of cleavage to 3 cells; CS2, cleavage synchronicity from 2 cell; t5, time of cleavage to 5 cells; cc2, the second round of cleavage (t3–t2); SC, $s_{t2} \times \text{odds ratios}_{t2} + s_{t5} \times \text{odds ratios}_{t5} + s_{cc2} \times \text{odds ratios}_{cc2}$; tEB, time from insemination to expanded blastocyst; tPNf, time from insemination to pronuclei fading.

following IVF in a retrospective study comprising 2,827 embryos [54]. For the AI-based automated iDAScore, two parameters were identified (blastocyst grading and direct cleavage) using retrospective data from 18 IVF clinics consisting of 115,832 embryos, of which 14,644 embryos were assessed using the KID score [55].

Another AI-based model, termed Life Whisperer (LW), was developed by assessing the images of 8,886 embryos from 11 IVF clinics and provided time-saving and higher accuracy for successful pregnancy [56]. The LW model significantly improves the predictive accuracy of embryologists for viable and non-viable embryos. The weighted overall accuracy was 64.3% for embryo viability, with an improvement of 24.7% over embryologists' accuracy. This model showed a sensitivity of 70.1% and specificity of 60.5% for viable em-

bryos, while still showing a bias toward high sensitivity.

The DynScore, constructed in 2021, is a model calculated with the Gaussian distributions of the “a” coefficients (defined as the estimated number of maximum cells at 72 hours equivalent to the asymptote of the logistic curve). Logistic regression was performed using morphokinetic parameters from the first 3 days of 1,186 embryos, and the model output was highly predictive of blastocyst formation, with an AUC above 0.9 [57]. Although this model used a machine learning system with reinforcement capacity to predict the fate of embryos, it was only useful for specific types of patients, and it was not able to predict pregnancy.

Deep learning models have achieved good prediction results for successful pregnancy and fetal heartbeat following selected blasto-

Table 2. Various morphokinetic markers to predict implantation potential in time-lapse monitoring systems

Study	Study design	No. of evaluated embryos	Origin of embryos	Time-lapse monitoring system	Identified predictive marker
Lemmen et al. (2008) [36]	Retrospective study	19	IVF/ICSI cycles	Nikon Diaphot 300 microscope with camera in a closed system	Nuclei appearance in the first blastomere
Meseguer et al. (2011) [37]	Retrospective study	247	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t5, s2, cc2, UN 2 cell, MN 4 cell, and DC 1–3 cells
Azzarello et al. (2012) [38]	Prospective study	159	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	PN breakdown
Hlinka et al. (2012) [22]	Retrospective study	114	ICSI cycles	Primo Vision	c2, c3 and c4; i2, i3, and i4
Rubio et al. (2012) [39]	Retrospective multi-center study	5,225 (1,659 transferred)	IVF cycles from donated and autologous oocytes	EmbryoScope	DC 2–3 cells
Freour et al. (2013) [40]	Retrospective analysis and prospectively collected database	191	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t4 and s3
Chamayou et al. (2013) [24]	Retrospective study	178	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	cc3
Kirkegaard et al. (2013) [25]	Prospective cohort study	84	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	None
Rubio et al. (2014) [41]	Prospective randomized control trial	2,638	ICSI cycles from donated oocytes	EmbryoScope	t5, s2, cc2, UN 2 cell, MN 4 cell, and DC 1–3 cells
Aguilar et al. (2014) [42]	Retrospective cohort study	1,448	ICSI cycles from donated oocytes	EmbryoScope	Time to 2PB, PF, and length of S-phase
Basile et al. (2015) [43]	Retrospective multi-center study	1,122	ICSI cycles from donated and autologous oocytes	EmbryoScope	cc2, t3, t5, UN 2 cell, MN 4 cell, and DC 1–3 cells
Vermilyea et al. (2014) [44]	Retrospective multi-centric study	331	IVF/ICSI cycles	Eeva	P2 and P3
Freour et al. (2015) [45]	Retrospective study	528	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t5, s2, cc2, UN 2 cell, MN 4 cell, and DC 1–3 cells
Dominguez et al. (2015) [46]	Retrospective cohort study	28	ICSI cycles from donated oocytes	EmbryoScope	cc2
Adamson et al. (2016) [47]	Prospective concurrent cohort study		ICSI and IVF cycles from autologous oocytes	Eeva	P2 and P3
Goodman et al. (2016) [48]	Prospective randomized control trial	2,092	ICSI and IVF cycles from autologous oocytes	EmbryoScope	cc2, s2, t5, s3, tSB, MN, and irregular division
Coello et al. (2017) [49]	Retrospective observational cohort study	429	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	Vitrified/warmed blastocyst morphology and collapse pattern
Zaninovic et al. (2019) [34]	Retrospective multi-center study	816	Fresh oocyte ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	t3–t2
Barberet et al. (2019) [50]	Retrospective cohort study	232	ICSI cycles	EmbryoScope	PN appearance and MN 2 cells

IVF, *in vitro* fertilization; ICSI, intracytoplasmic sperm injection; t5, time of cleavage to 5 cells; s2, the second synchronization parameter (t4–t3); cc2, the second round of cleavage (t3–t2); UN, uneven blastomere size; MN, multinucleated; DC, direct cleavage; PN, pronuclei; c2, time between 3 and 4 cells; c3, time between 5 and 8 cells; c4, time between 9 and 16 cells; i, interphase; t4, time of cleavage to 4 cells; s3, the third synchronization parameter (t8–t5); cc3, the third round of cleavage (t8–t4); PB, polar body; PF, time of pronuclei fading; t3, time of cleavage to 3 cells; P2, time of division from 2 to 3 cells; P3, time of division from 3 to 4 cells; tSB, time of starting blastulation.

cyst transfer [58,59], and a few studies have reported the prediction of embryo euploidy [60–62]. The correlation between euploidy and embryo morphokinetics has been widely studied, as shown in Table 3 [60–74]. Using a known data set of single static embryo images, the Embryo Ranking Intelligent Classification Algorithm was developed

to rank embryos based on ploidy and implantation potential [75]. The euploid prediction algorithm, with comprehensive consideration of morphokinetic parameters, patient age, and ploidy state determined by preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) improved the predictive efficiency and accuracy (the AUC of 0.80) [76]. To improve the

Table 3. Various morphokinetic markers to predict embryo euploidy in time-lapse monitoring systems

Study	Study design	No. of evaluated embryos	Time-lapse monitoring system	Biopsy day after fertilization	Analysis methods of PGD	Identified predictive marker
Chavez et al. (2012) [60]	Prospective observational study	75	Custom-built microscope	Day 3	aCGH	P1, P2, P3, and fragmentation
Campbell et al. (2013) [61]	Retrospective cohort study	98	EmbryoScope	Day 5	aCGH/SNP array	tSB and tB
Basile et al. (2014) [62]	Retrospective cohort study	504	EmbryoScope	Day 3	aCGH	t5–t2 and cc3
Rienzi et al. (2015) [63]	Longitudinal cohort study	455	EmbryoScope	Day 5	CCS	None
Chawla et al. (2015) [64]	Retrospective cohort study	460	EmbryoScope	Day 3	aCGH	tPNf, t2, t5, cc2, cc3, and t5–t2
Vera-Rodriguez et al. (2015) [65]	Prospective observational study	85	Eeva	Day 3	aCGH	Time between PN disappearance and the start of 1st cytokinesis; 3 to 4 cell
Mumusoglu et al. (2017) [66]	Retrospective cohort study	415	EmbryoScope	Day 5	aCGH	t9, tM, tSB, tB, and tEB,
Desai et al. (2018) [67]	Retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data	767	EmbryoScope	Day 5	aCGH/NGS	Dysmorphisms, tSB, tEB, and tEB-tSB
Rocafort et al. (2018) [68]	Retrospective study	1,482	Eeva	Day 5	NGS	P2 and P3
Huang et al. (2019) [69]	Retrospective observational study	188	EmbryoScope	Day 5	aCGH	Starting time to blastocyst expansion
Yap et al. (2019) [70]	Retrospective study	807 Patients	EmbryoScope	Day 5	NGS	KIDscore D5 algorithm (score 6.0–9.9)
Gazzo et al. (2020) [71]	Retrospective study	492	EmbryoScope	Day 5	NGS	KIDscore D5 algorithm
Ozbek et al. (2021) [72]	Retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data		EmbryoScope	Day 5	NGS	Cleavage patterns
Urich et al. (2022) [73]	Prospective observational study	212	EmbryoScope	Day 5	NGS	t2 and t3
De Gheselle et al. (2022) [74]	Retrospective cohort study	539	EmbryoScope	Day 5	NGS	tPB2, tPNa, and t7

PGD, preimplantation genetic diagnosis; aCGH, array-based comparative genomic hybridization; P1, time of division from 1 to 2 cells; P2, time of division from 2 to 3 cells; P3, time of division from 3 to 4 cells; SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism; tSB, time of stating blastulation; tB, time from insemination to formation of a full blastocyst; t5, time of cleavage to 5 cells; t2, time of cleavage to 2 cells; CCS, comprehensive chromosome screening; tPNf, time from insemination to pronuclei fading; cc2, the second round of cleavage (t3–t2); cc3, the third round of cleavage (t8–t4); PN, pronuclei; t9, time of cleavage to 9 cells; tM, time from insemination to compaction into the morula stage; tEB, time from insemination to expanded blastocyst; NGS, next-generation sequencing; tPB2, time of 2nd polar body extrusion; tPNa, time from insemination to pronuclei appearance; t7, time of cleavage to 7 cells.

benefits of the AI model in terms of prediction of clinical pregnancy, validation for AI applications with a large-scale dataset is needed. The morphological features of embryos are not absolute, and do not fully represent the potential of embryos for successful implantation.

Despite their widespread application, embryo morphological assessments with TLMS have limited predictive power, especially for genetic variations and metabolic competence. Several studies have clearly demonstrated that embryo morphology and time to blastocyst formation are linked to embryo metabolism. Many approaches rely on intracellular measurements or quantification of metabolites in the spent media to detect the metabolic activity of the whole em-

bryo. Those methods are either invasive or require highly specialized skills. Non-invasive techniques to measure embryonic development and metabolic state may assist in improving embryo selection in clinical laboratories.

Development and advancement of molecular biological methods for the analysis of SECM

Traditionally, invasive biopsy of pre-implantation embryos is performed for PGT to identify inherited or *de novo* euploidy or aneuploidy (Figure 1A). However, aneuploid cells are preferentially elimi-

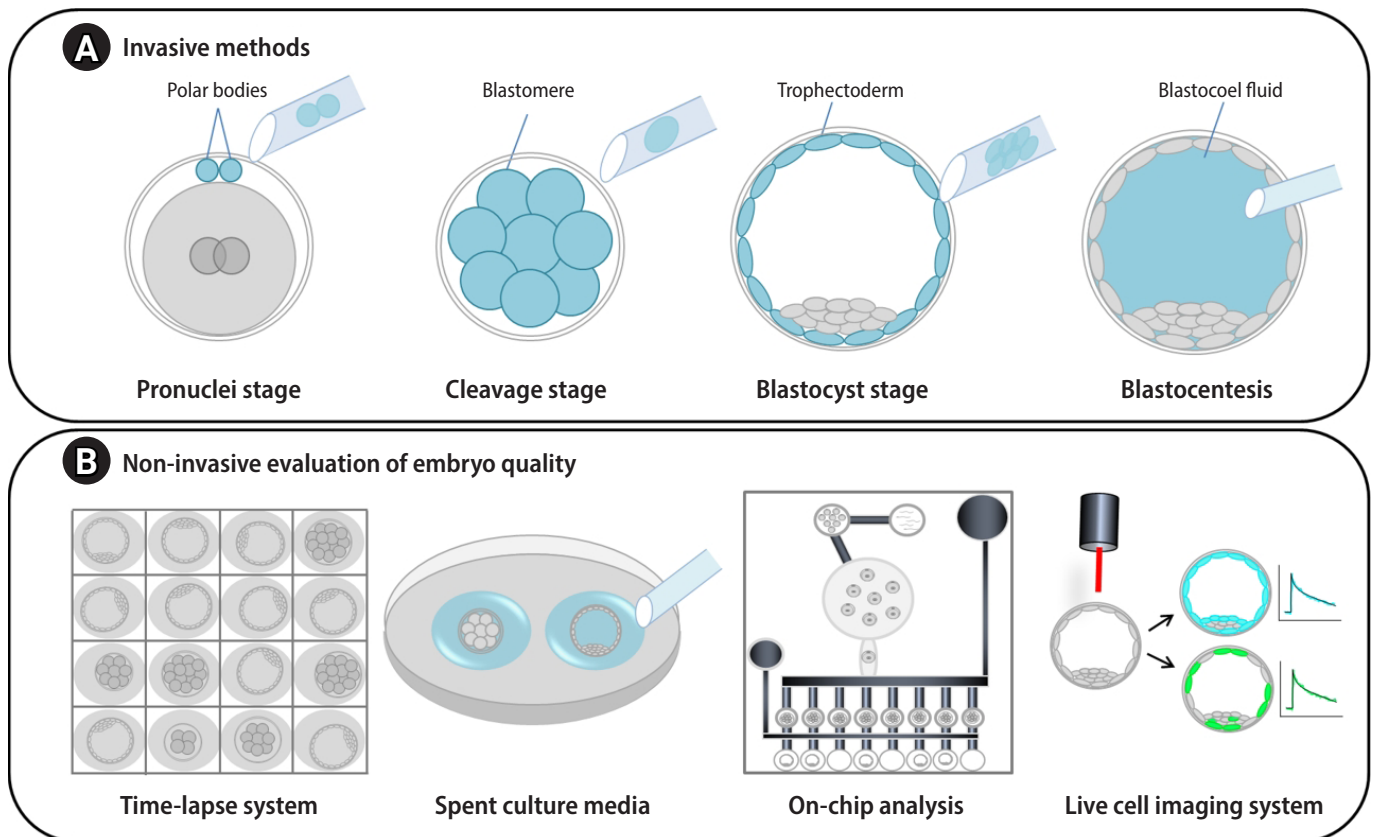


Figure 1. Invasive and non-invasive methods for evaluation of embryo quality. (A) For invasive methods, genetic materials can be obtained by polar body biopsy at the pronuclei stage, blastomere biopsy for cleavage-stage embryos, and trophoblast biopsy or blastocoel fluid aspiration for blastocyst-stage embryos. (B) For non-invasive methods, image analysis of embryos using time-lapse monitoring systems; spent culture media analysis with quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR), digital PCR, and on-chip-analyses; and live cell image analyses using advanced microscopic systems have been applied.

nated from mosaic embryos via processes of apoptosis or expulsion of cells during compaction. This is a cause of misdiagnosis or poor pregnancy outcomes. It was found that autophagy-mediated apoptosis eliminated aneuploid cells in a mouse model of chromosome mosaicism [77].

Many researchers have used non-invasive methods to determine the metabolic and genetic state of embryos concerning their viability and pregnancy outcomes for IVF patients (Figure 1B). During *in vitro* culture of human embryos, a variety of macromolecules, including proteins, nucleic acids, genetic material, and extracellular vesicles are present in SECM. Of many molecules, the level of GDF9 in human SECM was linked to embryo quality and viability [78]. Interestingly, various miRNA populations have been detected in the SECM, and these miRNAs may influence genes impacting early embryo development [79]. Profiling the secretome in SECM provides potential diagnostic biomarkers for embryo quality and ploidy [80-82]. Interestingly, a comparative analysis of the metabolomic profiles of SECM on day 5 found two different clusters of metabolite composition between euploid and aneuploid embryos with good morphology. Fur-

thermore, untargeted metabolomics of SECM by high-performance liquid chromatography–mass spectrometry identified potential biomarkers of embryos with good morphology that would undergo unsuccessful implantation [83]. In a preliminary report, three artificial neural networks that combined morphological variables and proteins using blastocyst image analysis and proteomic profiles of SECM were able to predict live birth, with an AUC of 1.0 in receiver operating characteristic curve analysis [84]. The researchers suggested that their model may provide an efficacious tool to select the embryo most likely to lead to a live birth in a euploid cohort. It may be applied to reduce the number of transferred embryos per patient to prevent complicated multiple pregnancies.

The reported levels of ploidy agreement between non-invasive SECM samples and biopsied embryonic cells vary widely [85]. A study found various cfDNAs in SECM from 57 embryos of seven IVF patients, and their genetic testing by array-based comparative genomic hybridization was consistent with TE biopsy [86]. Furthermore, single-cell bisulfite sequencing of SECM identified cfDNAs derived from human blastocysts, cumulus cells, and polar bodies, and de-

tected cellular origin and chromosome aneuploidy. The DNA methylation-based approach decreases the risk of contamination by maternal components, which interfere with a genetic diagnosis [87].

The greatest advantage of non-invasive genetic testing is cost-effectiveness due to the lack of fees for embryo biopsy, and it is useful as first-line PGT [88,89]. The efficiency of this method has been restricted by technical complications associated with DNA contamination and low sensitivity, resulting in clinical misdiagnoses [90]. In many cases, a small sample size reduces the reliability of the results of non-invasive PGT. Larger-scale and well-designed studies testing embryo-derived and extra-embryonic genetic material are warranted to shed light on the mechanisms and potential dynamics of embryo mosaicism.

Another issue to be considered for non-invasive genetic testing is SECM preparation. Group culture is not suitable, and it is necessary to place only one embryo in each small drop of culture medium. This aspect strongly affects culture conditions by evaporation and leads to excessive use of culture dishes. Modification of the culture platform on which gametes, embryos and media flow are handled may offer benefits including rapid fluid manipulation and feasibility of usage. The microfluidic method utilizes fluid movement along microchannels in a micro- or nano-environment during cell culture, while the embryos remain largely undisturbed [91]. Microfluidics platforms facilitate the easy manipulation or removal of gametes/embryos dealing with small volumes and the examination of metabolomic activity and profiles, offering a feasible non-invasive predictor of embryo quality [91,92]. Some lab-on-a-chip devices have met with a certain degree of success in adherent cell systems [93,94]. The technical development of integrative automation for more complex procedures within the same platform remains a work in progress. Embryo culture and subsequent analysis on the same platform offer the ability to reduce cell handling and the potential introduction of laboratory errors.

Electron carriers, such as nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide and flavin adenine dinucleotide, have recently been used to characterize variations in the metabolic state obtained using fluorescence lifetime imaging microscopy (FLIM) [95]. This measuring system allows the observation of distinct metabolic states between ICM and TE, and makes it possible to detect variations in individual blastocysts from the same patient and between patients. However, the association between FLIM data and embryo ploidy has not yet been fully elucidated.

Clinical outcomes of TLMS and SECM analysis in human IVF-ET programs

TLMS for pre-implantation embryos in human IVF-ET programs

provides more embryo information as a non-invasive tool. However, it has been debated whether using a TLMS could improve the clinical outcomes compared with conventional evaluation systems. These TLMSs have been applied to clinical practice since the early 2000s, and many clinical trials have been reported. This review discusses the overall trend and future directions through a review of meta-analyses of clinical trials.

The first meta-analysis on the efficiency of TLMS was reported in 2014 [96]. The authors suggested that TLMS does not significantly offer the likelihood of achieving clinical and ongoing pregnancy in blastocyst transfer. They concluded that more research is needed to improve the quality of the available evidence and to investigate the usefulness of TLMS interventions for the selection of transferable embryos.

Thereafter, several meta-analyses were published until 2019, and all suggested that it is difficult to confirm a significant difference between TLMS and conventional methods [97-100]. In a Cochrane review published in 2019, the authors concluded that there was insufficient good-quality evidence of differences in live birth, ongoing pregnancy, miscarriage and stillbirth, and clinical pregnancy rates between TLMS and conventional methods.

However, a recent meta-analysis reported that TLMS interventions were effective [101]. Two randomized controlled clinical trials demonstrated the efficacy of TLMS in various conditions in the last 6 years [102,103]. Many retrospective studies using TLMS have reported statistically significantly higher rates of pregnancy success compared to traditional methods [54,104-107]. In addition, the KID score and iDAScore, using AI algorithms based on deep learning, have been developed and their applications are expanding in human IVF-ET programs [3,51,53,108,109]. The fully automated iDAScore model reduces manual evaluation and eliminates bias due to inter- and within-observer variability [55].

However, a couple of studies have reported that the evidence for significant advantages of TLMS remains unclear [110-112]. Elective single cleavage-stage embryo transfer with TLMS did not have any advantages over conventional observation in young women with good ovarian reserve [111]. That study also suggested that single blastocyst transfer with TLMS does not increase the likelihood of ongoing pregnancy compared to conventional observation; in particular, the use of a TLMS to choose blastocysts for fresh single embryo transfer on day 5 did not improve ongoing pregnancy rate compared to morphology alone [112].

One of the important challenges in the field of PGT of preimplantation embryos is the use of non-invasive procedures [113-115], with the aim of improving PGT cost-efficiency and safety. The collection of SECM is not a difficult procedure, and it can be safely performed on all cultured embryos. It does not require special expertise in embryo

manipulation, unlike invasive biopsies of embryos and blastocysts. Since this method avoids all detrimental effects of suboptimal micro-manipulations and the potential risks caused by invasive procedures, it does not affect the embryo development and reproductive potential. Moreover, SECM can be collected at any pre-implantation developmental stage; even cleaved embryos with fewer than six cells on day 3 and early blastocysts can be tested, unlike invasive PGT, which is based on embryo biopsy or blastocentesis. Hence, PGT by SECM might be particularly suitable for cultured growing embryos with low implantation potential that cannot be tested by invasive PGT. In fact, SECM-PGT is relatively fast, taking less than 12 hours from SECM collection to genetic analysis [116-118], and the results may be available before embryo transfer or cryopreservation. If there is a positive diagnosis, another SECM sample should be collected after 24 hours of incubation for confirmation. Many published reports have suggested that SECM is a potential alternative source of embryonic DNA, indicating that SECM-PGT is a promising procedure for the genetic testing of all developing embryos [119,120]. However, before implementing SECM-PGT in clinical practice, it is necessary to improve its reliability [121]. The standardization of SECM-PGT and establishment of guidelines are also essential to enable reliable comparisons of results and to verify the consistency of results among IVF-ET centers.

Debate continues regarding the reliability of alternative sources of genetic materials for embryo evaluation, although cfDNAs from SECM have been successfully detected and amplified. Discrepancies have been found regarding the concordance of the embryonic genetic state obtained from SECM and other DNA sources, including polar bodies, embryos, and TE biopsies, and whole embryos. There have been many discussions and suggestions on standardization and validation methods in several review papers on this issue [90,113,122-125]. With the latest advanced methods, such as NGS and mass spectrometry, which have recently emerged as superior analysis methods, it has become possible to verify the source of the genetic sample used for analysis and assess the probability of accurately estimating the genetic state of the embryo [126]. However, mosaicism, multinucleation, blastomere fragmentation, and contamination of SECM are still difficult to overcome. In particular, it is not easy to accurately distinguish genetic material of maternal or paternal origin and from the embryo.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of human IVF-ET programs is to achieve a healthy pregnancy and birth, ideally from the selection and transfer of the single best, most competent embryo. The effectiveness of NiEEQ in clinical applications of human IVF-ET programs has been pur-

sued intensively. However, each non-invasive method, such as TLMS and SECM analysis, has limitations that must be handled case by case. Since the evaluation of the embryo state using TLMS is based on morphological criteria, it is impossible to confirm variation at the actual genome and gene expression level. It is also difficult to reflect differences according to the culture conditions of each laboratory and the characteristics of each individual. In SECM analysis, alterations of nucleic acids and metabolites may appear depending on the presence or absence of cumulus cells or sperm that can be cultured if they attach to the fertilized oocytes. In order to overcome these limitations of NiEEQ, it would be ideal to develop integrated analysis methods through the fusion of complementary methods.

Rapidly developing, deep learning and AI algorithms with big data analysis can play a crucial role in improving and assisting many methods of both TLMS and SECM analysis. Several studies are being conducted to support the application of various techniques by developing automated annotation programs for the morphological dynamics of TLMS and genetic analysis of SECM. This advanced computational approach is expected to provide fast, robust, and reliable results while reducing bias in the interpretation of data and selection of the best embryo.

In the near future, it is expected that new integrated NiEEQ methods will emerge that can combine the advantages and compensate for the disadvantages of these two methods. We need to develop an integrated NiEEQ for the best embryo selection to achieve a healthy pregnancy and birth.

Conflict of interest

Jin Hyun Jun is an editorial board member of the journal but was not involved in the peer reviewer selection, evaluation, or decision process of this article.

No other potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article were reported.

ORCID

Jihyun Kim	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2466-1925
Jaewang Lee	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6801-7149
Jin Hyun Jun	https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9898-4471

Author contributions

Conceptualization: JHJ. Data curation: JK, JL. Formal analysis: JHJ, JK. Funding acquisition: JL, JHJ. Methodology: JK, JL. Visualization: JHJ, JK. Writing—original draft: JK. Writing—review & editing: JHJ, JL.

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