Clinical Review Criteria

Afirma® Thyroid FNA Analysis (Gene Expression Classifier) for Thyroid Nodules with Indeterminate Fine Needle Aspiration Cytopathology

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Criteria

For Medicare

See the LCD for Genetic Testing (L24308)

For Non-Medicare Members, see below.

There is insufficient evidence in the published medical literature to show that this service/therapy is as safe as standard services/therapies (and/or) provides better long-term outcomes than current standard services/therapies.

The following information was used in the development of this document and is provided as background only. It is not to be used as coverage criteria. Please only refer to the criteria listed above for coverage determinations.

Background

Thyroid nodules are very common; they are clinically identified in 5-7% of the population, and incidentally on ultrasonography in up to 50% of women and 20% of men over the age of 50. The thyroid nodules are typically benign, but 5-15% prove to be malignant. It is thus recommended that any identified nodule measuring one centimeter or more in diameter be diagnostically evaluated. Thyroid fine needle aspiration (FNA) biopsy is the most widely used method for clinical evaluation of a suspicious thyroid nodule. FNA is a safe and simple outpatient procedure that yields cellular material suitable for cytological analysis. However 15-30% of the biopsied nodules has indeterminate cytology and cannot be conclusively diagnosed by FNA biopsy alone. Most patients with indeterminate lesions (defined in the Bethesda System as Atypia of Undetermined Significance or Follicular Lesion of Undetermined Significance, suspicious for Follicular or Hurthle Cell neoplasm and suspicious for malignancy) are referred to surgery. Currently, surgery is performed for both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes in these patients with indeterminate aspirates. Surgery has high operative efficacy in removal of thyroid cancer, however approximately three-quarters of the nodules with indeterminate FNA cytology are ultimately found to be benign on final surgical pathology. Thus, a large proportion of patients with indeterminate nodules may undergo unnecessary

In an attempt to preoperatively classify the indeterminate thyroid nodules different novel diagnostic tests and molecular markers have been investigated. These include immunohistochemistry, mutation and gene rearrangement testing, and gene expression and microarray analysis. Each has its performance characteristics and diagnostic values. Ideally a molecular marker or panel of markers would be accurate in differentiating benign from malignant in any lesion that is considered suspicious or indeterminate. It should be simple to use, reproducible by all institutions, and cost-effective. Genetic markers associated with malignancy such as mutation markers (e.g. BRAF, RAS) and gene rearrangements (e.g. RET/PTC and PAX8-PPARy) have high specificity and positive predictive values; and when detected they can "rule in" the diagnosis of thyroid cancer. However, they have limited sensitivity and negative predictive values as they fail to detect a large proportion of malignant samples that do not contain one of the mutations or rearrangements being tested, i.e. mutation or rearrangement markers cannot 'rule out' malignancy when not detected (Alexander 2012, Kouniavsky 2012, Ward 2013).

Microarray techniques seek to identify patterns of expressed RNA in the human genome that are predictive of benign or malignant thyroid disease. Unlike single gene mutations or rearrangements, microarray diagnostic tests involve tens to hundreds of expressed genes. The currently available diagnostic microarray for use in thyroid nodule analysis is the Afirma Gene Expression Classifier (GEC) recently developed by Veracyte, Inc. It is a genomic test designed with the intention of preoperative identification of benign thyroid nodules in patients with indeterminate FNA cytopathological results. The test assesses gene expression from mRNA isolated from thyroid FNA samples by comparing the mRNA expression detected in a thyroid FNA against a panel of 167 molecular genes. It uses a multidimensional algorithm to identify the thyroid FNA samples with a benign gene expression pattern (Alexander 2012, Kim 2012, Ward 2013).

Afirma GEC is commercially owned by Veracyte Corporation; South San Francisco, California and is offered through a sole source, Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA), a certified reference laboratory. Afirma CEC analysis is indicated only for nodules with indeterminate cytology, and is not performed on cytologically benign, malignant, or nondiagnostic (insufficient FNA samples) nodules. The assay classifies nodule as either benign or suspicious for malignancy. With a preoperative identification of a nodule that is benign rather than malignant, observation or ultrasound follow-up could be recommended instead of thyroid surgery, i.e. potentially avoids unnecessary surgery (Alexander 2012, Duick 2012, Ward 2013).

Medical Technology Assessment Committee (MTAC)

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<tr>
<th>10/21/2013</th>
<th>Evidence Conclusion</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tr>
<td>Analytic validity</td>
<td>Evaluating the analytic performance of Afirma GEC includes studying the stability of RNA in FNAs during collection, storage, and shipment; reproducibility of the test; and its analytic sensitivity and specificity under various conditions e.g. interference of the assay with bloody FNA and genomic DNA.</td>
<td>The use of does Afirma® Thyroid FNA Analysis (Gene Expression Classifier) for Thyroid Nodules with Indeterminate Fine Needle Aspiration not meet the Group Health Medical Technology Assessment Criteria.</td>
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Multiple lots of benign and malignant total RNA were manufactured and used as process controls to determine the analytic sensitivity of the test using different RNA input quantity and under different dilution of malignant FNA content. These studies indicated tolerance to variation in RNA input across a range of 5-25 ng, as well as dilution of malignant FNA material down to 20%.

Analytic specificity of the test using malignant samples mixed with blood (up to 83%) and genomic DNA (up to 30%) showed minimal assay interference. However, benign FNA samples mixed with relatively high proportions of blood had a potential for yielding false positive results.

The authors also examined the stability of RNA in FNAs during collection and shipment and found that RNA content within FNAs preserved in FNAProtect was stable for up to 6 hours at room temperature with no change in RNA yield, and that the FNA storage and shipping temperatures had no significant effect on GEC scores. They also examined the reproducibility of the test and indicated that it was reproducible from extraction through GEC results, including variation across operators, runs, reagent lots, and laboratories.

The authors concluded that the analytical performance and reproducibility of the Afirma Gene Expression Classifier was successfully verified.

The research was supported by Veracyte Corporation, (the maker of Afirma GEC), and the authors of the study were either employed by, or were consultants to the corporation.

Clinical validity

A perfect test would have high sensitivity and high specificity in correctly detecting or excluding a condition. A molecular diagnostic test with high sensitivity offers a high negative predictive value when the risk of malignancy (ROM) is low, and can "rule out" malignancy. Conversely, a test with high specificity offers high positive predictive value and can "rule in" cancer. To be of use in avoiding surgery, a test that better distinguishes benign from malignant nodules needs to have high sensitivity and high negative predictive value.

The literature search identified two published studies on the validation of Afirma GEC (Chudova et al, 2010, and Alexander et al. 2012); both funded by Veracyte Corporation the maker of Afirma GEC. The more recent and larger validation study by Alexander and colleagues (evidence table 1), was a double-blind prospective multicenter validation study. 4,812 thyroid FNAs were obtained from 3,789 patients. 577 (12%) samples were classified as indeterminate, and less than half (46%) were ultimately selected for GEC analysis. Molecular results were compared to the gold standard of post-surgical histopathology interpreted by a panel of blinded endocrine histopathologists for clinical validation. The overall sensitivity of the Afirma test was 92% with a negative predictive value (NPV) of 93% (95% for atypical or follicular lesions of undetermined significance (AUS/FLUS), 94% for a follicular neoplasm, and 85% for a lesion suspicious for malignancy). It is to be noted that the predictive values of a test vary with the prevalence of the disease in the population studied and may not be generalized to other groups. A better analysis would be the likelihood ratios which are not affected by prevalence.

Seven of the 85 (8.2%) overall cancers were diagnosed incorrectly by the
GEC as benign (false negative). The authors attributed the false negative results to insufficient RNA in the FNA sample used for GEC. The test had an overall low specificity and positive predictive values (52% and 47% respectively).

Atypical or follicular lesions of undetermined significance (AUS/FLUS) accounted for almost 50% of the indeterminate thyroid FNAs samples. 43% of these FNA were reclassified with the GEC as benign and 57% remained in their suspicious category. Other investigators showed that repeat FNAs without a molecular test can also accurately reclassify >50% of the nodules in the AUS/FLUS category as benign (Faquin 2013). The study was conducted to validate the GEC accuracy by comparing it to surgical histopathology, and the authors did not compare its performance to repeat FNA or other immunochemical testing.

Clinical utility

The clinical utility of Afirma GEC was evaluated in a retrospective study by Duick and colleagues, 2012, (Evidence table 2). They obtained their data from 21 endocrinology practices in 11 states. The authors conducted a chart review of 368 patients with 395 cytologically indeterminate thyroid nodules that were GEC benign. 7.6% of these patients with Afirma GEC benign nodules underwent surgery and 94.4% were managed nonoperatively. The study did not have a comparison group, but the authors compared the 7.6% surgical rate to a 74% historical rate of diagnostic surgery (P<0.001). The indications for surgery for those with GEC benign results included a large size or rapid growth of the nodules, local pressure symptoms, or the presence of a second suspicious nodule or malignant nodule. The authors explained that these were similar to indications for surgery on nodules with benign FNA cytologically. The study was retrospective, used a historical comparison, and investigated the decision-making of endocrinologists experienced in managing patients with thyroid nodules, which may differ from that made by primary care providers or other specialists. In addition the authors of the study did not provide data on long-term follow-up of those who were managed by watchful waiting rather than surgery.

In conclusion, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether Afirma GEC is more accurate than repeat FNA or immunochemical testing in reclassifying cytologically indeterminate thyroid nodules. There is also insufficient evidence to determine the impact of Afirma GEC on clinical management and net health outcomes in patients with indeterminate thyroid nodules.

Evidence/ Source Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Literature Search</th>
<th>Articles</th>
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<td>10/21/2013</td>
<td>The literature search for gene expression classifier for preoperative identification of benign thyroid nodules with indeterminate fine needle aspiration cytopathology revealed a number of articles on molecular diagnostic tests. Many were reviews, editorials, letters, or were unrelated to the current review. The search identified a study on the analytic validity of the test, two on its clinical validity, and retrospective study on its clinical utility. The following studies were selected for critical appraisal.</td>
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See Evidence Table

See Evidence Table

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<th>Creation Date</th>
<th>Review Dates</th>
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<td>12/03/2013</td>
<td>12/03/2013&lt;sup&gt;MPC&lt;/sup&gt;, 1/07/2014&lt;sup&gt;MPC&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1/7/2014</td>
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MPC Medical Policy Committee

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