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Comparative analysis of various clinical specimens in detection of SARS-CoV-2 using rRT-PCR in new and follow up cases of COVID-19 infection: quest for the best choice

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	PONE-D-20-38439R1
Article Type:	Research Article
Full Title:	Comparative analysis of various clinical specimens in detection of SARS-CoV-2 using rRT-PCR in new and follow up cases of COVID-19 infection: quest for the best choice
Short Title:	Evaluation of multivaried clinical specimens in diagnosis of COVID-19
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Keywords:	SARS-CoV-2, Coronavirus, rRT-PCR, Diagnosis
Abstract:	Appropriate specimen is of paramount importance in Real Time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (rRT-PCR) based diagnosis of novel coronavirus (nCoV) disease (COVID-19). Thus, it's pertinent to evaluate diagnostic utility of various diversified clinical specimen in both diagnosis and follow-up of COVID-19. 924 initial specimen before initiation of treatment from 130 COVID-19 cases and 665 follow up specimen comprising equal number of NPS, OPS, combined swab, sputum, plasma, serum and urine from 15 randomly selected cases were evaluated by rRT-PCR. Demographic analysis showed males (86) twice more affected by COVID-19 than females (44) (p=0.00001). Male and female median age recorded was 42.97 and 32.07 years respectively. Combined swab showed positivity rate of 100 % followed by NPS (91.5%), OPS (72.3%), sputum (63%) while nCoV was found undetected in urine, plasma and serum specimens. The lowest cycle threshold (Ct) values of 10.56, 10.14 and 12.26 and average Ct values of targeted genes E (25.75; CI 24.6-26.7), ORF1b (26.94; CI 25.9-27.9) and RdRP (27.06; CI 26.1-28) indicated higher viral load in combined swab. Analysis of 665 follow-up multivaried specimens showed combined swab the last specimen to become negative, after average 6.6 (range 4-10) days post-treatment, having lowest and average Ct values of ORF1b as 15.48 and 29.96 respectively indicating posterior nasopharyngeal tract as primary nCoV afflicted site with high viral load. Combined swab should be recommended in testing guidelines of diagnosis and monitoring of COVID-19 disease by rRT-PCR and implementing same globally will definitely help in management and control of the pandemic, as it is the need of the hour. Lower Ct in combined and NPS swab indicated posterior nasopharyngeal site as the primary nCoV colonization site.
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Cover Letter

Dated:08.02.2021

To,

Editor

PLOS One

Subject: Ethical restriction on sharing of data.

Dear Sir,

The present study entitles "***Comparative analysis of various clinical specimens in detectionof SARS-CoV-2 using rRT-PCR in new and follow up cases of COVID-19 infection: quest for the best choice***" has been approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee(IEC), All India Institute of Medical Sciences(AIIMS), Raipur, Chhattisgarh. The study contains the potential information of identity of the patients and thus cannot be shared on direct request to corresponding author. Any request for the data other than shown in the manuscript requires an official institutional request to IEC, AIIMS, Raipur on the address mentioned as under.

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Thus, it is requested to update our Data Availability statement on our behalf to reflect the specific information that data cannot be shared on direct request to corresponding author.

Thanking you

Sincerely yours

Dr Sanjay Singh Negi

Associate Professor

Department of Microbiology

AIIMS,Raipur

Comparative analysis of various clinical specimens in detection of SARS-CoV-2 using rRT-PCR in new and follow up cases of COVID-19 infection: quest for the best choice

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Running title: Evaluation of multivaried clinical specimens in diagnosis of COVID-19.

Abstract

The appropriate specimen is of paramount importance in Real Time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (rRT-PCR) based diagnosis of novel coronavirus (nCoV) disease (COVID-19). Thus, it is pertinent to evaluate diagnostic utility of various diversified clinical specimen in both diagnosis and follow-up of COVID-19. 924 initial specimen before initiation of treatment from 130 COVID-19 symptomatic cases and 665 follow up specimen comprising equal number of nasopharyngeal swab (NPS), oropharyngeal swab (OPS), combined ~~swab(NPS+OPS),~~ sputum, plasma, serum and urine from 15 randomly selected cases were evaluated by rRT-PCR. Demographic analysis showed males (86) twice more affected by COVID-19 than females (44) (p=0.00001). Male and female median age recorded was 42.97 and 32.07 years, respectively. Combined swab showed positivity rate of 100 % followed by NPS (91.5%), OPS (72.3%), sputum (63%) while nCoV was found undetected in urine, plasma and serum specimens. The lowest cycle threshold (Ct) values of 10.56, 10.14 and 12.26 and lowest average Ct values of targeted genes ~~*E*(25.75; CI 24.6-26.7), *ORF1b*(26.94; CI 25.9-27.9) and *RdRP*(27.06; CI 26.1-28),~~ were found in combined swab among all specimen types to indicate higher viral load in it. Analysis of 665 follow-up multi-varied specimens also showed combined swab the last specimen among all specimen types to become negative, after average 6.6 (range 4-10) days post-treatment, having lowest and average Ct values of *ORF1b* as 15.48 and 29.96 respectively indicating posterior nasopharyngeal tract as primary nCoV afflicted site with high viral load. The combined swab thus may be more appropriate specimen for its recommendation in guidelines of both diagnosis and monitoring of COVID-19 treatment by rRT-PCR for assessing virus clearance to help physician in taking evidence based discharge decision. Implementing combined swab globally will definitely help in management and control of the pandemic, as it is the need of the hour.

Key words: SARS-CoV-2, Coronavirus, rRT-PCR, Diagnosis.

1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, a name given to a novel coronavirus (nCoV) by the International Committee of Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) was first reported in December 2019 from Wuhan, China and since then it has posed a devastating looming threat to the world, as around 216 countries and territories are so far affected by the virus causing the infection named COVID-19 [1]. Till the date of reporting on 11.11.2020, 50,810,763 were infected, and 1,263,844 succumbed worldwide to the infection [2]. India is the second most affected country after USA, with 8,636,011 confirmed cases and 127,571 deaths as on 11.11.2020 [2]. The disease can occur in any age-group, being more complicated and life-threatening in patients of older age group and those with underlying co-morbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease [3-5]. The early clinical presentation of the COVID-19 varies from entirely asymptomatic to severely symptomatic. In India, more than 70% of the laboratory confirmed cases are asymptomatic [3]. In symptomatic patients, the clinical manifestation includes fever, myalgia, dry cough, fatigue, productive cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, loss of taste and smell, etc. The radiological finding of ground -glass opacities on chest X-ray is one of the prominent observation [4,5]. Since the SARS-CoV-2 has high human-to-human transmissibility rate, the early diagnosis, immediate isolation and early treatment of positive patients is the key to successful management and preventing spread to others. Since testing is the corner stone of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, highly sensitive and specific testing is essentially required, not only for early identification of both the symptomatic cases but also that of asymptomatic cases and their close high-risk contacts, to potentially breaking the transmission chain of COVID-19 infection, which otherwise appears unstoppable at the moment.

Among various viral diagnostic modalities, virus isolation does not appear practically feasible for COVID-19 since it requires Biosafety Level (BSL)-3 laboratory, high technical expertise and longer turn around time of 3-5 days, to identify cytopathic effect in specific cell lines such as Vero E6 cells [6]. Serological test based on SARS-CoV-2 antibody detection, have been reported with varying sensitivity (34 to 80%), cross reactivity with other SARS-CoV, varying rates of seroconversion between 7 and 11 days after onset of symptoms and varying immunological response by ~~individual s~~[7,8]. Antigen detection assays also have the limitation of poor sensitivity and negative predictive values [7].

Therefore, rRT-PCR is the recommended reference test to establish laboratory diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 by detecting at least two genes from various conserved region of specific structural Spike (*S*), Envelope (*E*), Nucleocapsid (*N*) genes and the nonstructural RNA dependent RNA polymerase (*RdRp*) and replicase open reading frame (*ORF*) 1a /b, *ORF 1b*-nsp14 [5,7,9]. Various in-house and commercially available rRT-PCR test is presently being used to amplify these genes for identification of SARS-CoV-2 in the clinical specimens. Oropharyngeal and ~~–~~or nasopharyngeal swabs are currently the most preferred clinical specimens due to non-invasive and easily accessible nature and utilized across the globe to diagnose COVID-19 infection. During initial period of the pandemic in Wuhan, NPS was used for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 [5]. Since then, various studies, systemic reviews and meta-analysis have evaluated the spectrum of clinical specimens in the quest of optimal specimen for its inclusion in guidelines for early identification of SARS-CoV-2 to provide timely treatment to prevent its transmission and thus better management of the pandemic [5, 10-18]. These include upper respiratory tract specimen (~~–~~saliva, OPS, NPS, nasal swab), lower respiratory specimen {sputum, bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BLF) endotracheal ~~aspirate(ET)~~, fibrobronchoscope brush ~~biopsy(FBB)~~}, blood and its products (serum, plasma), urine, feces and rectal swab. These studies and meta-analysis have various

conclusions, probably because of analyzing a different spectrum of clinical specimens. Systemic review and meta-analysis by Bwire et al. [17] and individual study by Wang W et al. [14] reported highest SARS-CoV-2 detection rate in BAL, while similar review and meta-analysis by Mohammadi et al. [18] and individual study by Zhang H et al. [13] recommends specimen of sputum for detection of SARS-CoV-2. Liu et al. [10] and Tong et al. [12] advocated NPS, a choice of specimen for detection of nCoV. Rao et al. [11], on the other hand, found random saliva with a higher detection rate of nCoV than paired NPS and OPS swab. The optimal clinical specimens depend on various factors of ease of accessibility, non-invasive nature, lesser risk to health care professional while collecting specimen and good viral loads for higher chances of detection. Collection of BAL, ET and FBB although have a higher detection rate and may be a specimen of choice in admitted pneumonia cases, yet it always pose a risk of generating droplets to cause infection to healthcare workers. Additionally, they also cannot be a specimen of choice in managing pandemic infection of COVID-19 showing variable clinical manifestation from asymptomatic to mild/moderate and severe cases. Sputum, on the other hand, also pose a challenge not only for collection from cases of COVID-19 patients with dry cough but also for lower detection rate of nCoV as reported earlier [12]. Overall, there is certain uncertainty on understanding the specimens/sites from which the virus can be maximally diagnosed without posing health hazard to healthcare worker. Furthermore, these published studies have also not addressed optimal specimen in patients undergoing treatment to provide the appropriate prognostic indicator of viral clearance in patients undergoing treatment. Considering these facts, this study was undertaken to evaluate the various clinical specimens that appears to be more accessible and feasible and can become a specimen of choice for early identification of SARS-CoV-2 for better management of COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed study has thus evaluated various specimens comprising of combined / paired naso and oropharyngeal swab

(here after referred as a combined swab in the text), NPS, OPS, sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate from known positive COVID-19 patients to understand their diagnostic utility in detection of SARS-CoV-2 as well as monitoring of follow-up cases of COVID-19 undergoing treatment. This study will also provide insight if this virus can also be transmitted in other ways, then merely by respiratory droplets.

2. Methods

2.1. Patient selection

All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS)-Raipur is one of the designated tertiary-care hospital for diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 patients in Chhattisgarh, a state in Central India. A total of 5000 suspected patients, fulfilling either of the various testing criteria, laid down by the government of India, for COVID-19 testing, were referred to AIIMS, Raipur for diagnosis of COVID-19 by rRT-PCR test, from May 2020 till June 2020 [19].

Among 5000-suspected patients, 137 outpatients were diagnosed for COVID-19 infection (2.7% positivity rate) by rRT-PCR using combined swab. All these patients subsequently admitted in the COVID ward of AIIMS, Raipur for isolation and treatment. These patients were evaluated in terms of following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria

All suspected COVID-19 symptomatic patients were included in the study if fulfilling the following criteria-

a. Detected positive for COVID-19 infection by rRT-PCR.
b. Not on any anti-viral / anti-malarial (Hydroxychloroquine) / antibiotic (Azithromycin).
c. Admitted in COVID-19 ward of AIIMS, Raipur for treatment.

Exclusion criteria

a. Nonfulfillment of any of the inclusion criteria was considered as the exclusion criteria in the present study.

Among them, ~~0~~7 patients with recent history of taking Azithromycin were excluded. Accordingly, only 130 patients were enrolled in the study after taking their consent. This study was approved by the Institutional ethical committee (IEC) of AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh (AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536).

Before starting a standard treatment regimen of Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin, all these patients were requested to provide clinical specimens of the following nature.

a. NPS
b. OPS
c. Combined (naso and oropharyngeal) swab
d. Sputum
e. Serum
f. Plasma
g. Urine

Every swab specimen was collected in viral transport medium(VTM) (HiMedia, India) from these patients in morning before washing in the morning using sterile flocked nylon swab. An NPS was collected from single nostril (posterior nasopharyngx) while OPS was collected from both sides of the throat. The combined swab of both NPS and OPS was collected in a single tube of VTM. In total, 7 X 130 = 910 specimens were tested by rRT-PCR. In addition, 14 tracheal aspirates were also obtained from ~~an equal number of~~ intubated patients. Thus, 910 +14 =924 specimens were obtained from new patients prior to starting their treatment.

The positivity rate with all the seven types of clinical specimen was also tested in randomly selected 15 patients in their daily follow-up specimen of seven types until the negative

finding of rRT-PCR were achieved in two consecutive days specimens of all seven types. Six hundred sixty five (665) follow-up specimens were collected from these 15 admitted patients. Thus, 924 initial and 665 follow-up specimens were tested by rRT-PCR for the identification of SARS-CoV-2.

2.2. RNA extraction

All the clinical specimens were processed for viral RNA isolation by using commercially available QIAgen Viral RNA extraction kit, Germany, as per the manufacturer instructions. Briefly, 140µl of the specimen has been treated with 560µl of prepared buffer AVL containing carrier RNA (1 µg/µl). After brief pulse vortexing and 10 minute incubation at room temperature, the specimen was precipitated by adding 560µl of pre-chilled ethanol. Treated specimen then transferred to the spin column. Viral RNA was purified by consecutive treatment with 500µl of buffer AW1 and AW2. Finally, it was eluted in 60µl buffer AVE.

2.3. rRT-PCR test

This test was performed with primers and probes provided by ICMR, targeting *E*, *RdRP* and *ORF1b* genomic region of SARS-CoV-2 and internal control of human *RNAseP* as described earlier [20-22] (Table 1). Briefly, the 25 µl rRT-PCR reaction contained 12.5 µl 2x buffer, 1µl 25X RT-PCR enzyme mix (both from AgPath One-Step RT-PCR kit, ThermoFisher Scientific, USA), 1.5 µl Primer-Probe mix, 5 µl RNAse/DNase free sterile water and 5µl RNA template and tested on CFX 96 Real Time PCR machine of Biorad, USA. The thermal cycling condition included 55^0C for 30 min, 95^0C for 3 min and 45 repeated cycles of 95^0C for 15 sec and 58^0C for 30 sec. The tested specimen was considered positive for SARS-CoV-2 for the cycle threshold (Ct) value less than or equal to 35 for *E* gene and both *RdRP*, *ORF*

171 or either *RdRP* or *ORF*. The positive and negative controls consisted of of viral RNA plasmid
172 and sterile nuclease free water respectively.

173 **Table 1. Primer sequence of various genes of SARS-CoV-2 for rRT-PCR**.

Target gene	Sequence(5'-3')	Source
E gene	ACAGGTACGTTAATAGTTAATAGCGT	Corman et al. [20]
	ATATTGCAGCAGTACGCACACA	
	FAM-ACACTAGCCATCCTTACTGCGCTTCG-BHQ	
RNaseP (Internal Control)	AGATTTGGACCTGCGAGCG	CDC, 2020. [21]
	GAGCGGCTGTCTCCACAAGT	
	FAM-TTCTGACCTGAAGGCTCTGCGCG-BHQ	
RdRp(Confirmatory)	GTGARATGGTCATGTGTGGCGG	Corman et al. [20]
	CARATGTTAAASACACTATTAGCATA	
	FAM-CAGGTGGAACCTCATCAGGAGATGC-QSY	
ORF 1b(Confirmatory)	TGGGGYTTTACRGGTAACCT	Poon et al. [22]
	AACRCGCTTAACAAAGCACTC	
	FAM-TAGTTGTGATGCWATCATGACTAG-QSY	

174

175 **2.4. Gold standard**

176 All 130 rRT-PCR detected cases of COVID-19 infection were considered as the known
177 positive cases to evaluate the efficacy of various clinical specimens for diagnostic utility.

178 **2.5. Statistical analysis**

179 Categorical variables were analyzed by chi-square (χ^2) and student t-test by using SPSS 16
180 version 18(SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) to compare intergroup detection rate by considering
181 $p<0.05$ statistically significant.

182 **3. Results**

183 A total of 130 known positive cases of COVID-19 infection were evaluated in their 924
184 clinical specimens obtained from different anatomical sites by rRT-PCR for detection of
185 SARS-CoV-2 to determine their positivity rate. Demographic analysis of these patients
186 showed the median age of 40.14 years (range 5 to 74 years). Among them, 86 were males
187 while 44 were females showing significant higher COVID-19 infection rate in male than

female (χ^2 = 27.13, p=0.00001, p<0.05). Male median age calculated was 42.97 year, whereas female median age observed of 32.07 years.

rRT-PCR detected all 130 cases with 100 % positivity in combined swab (Table 2). NPS was the next appropriate clinical specimen showing a detection rate of 91.5% followed by OPS and sputum specimens showing 72.3 and 63% positivity respectively. None of the specimens of urine, plasma or serum showed detection of SARS-CoV-2. The 14 TA specimens showed 92.8% positivity by rRT-PCR. Combined swabs showed significantly higher detection rate of SARS-CoV-2 in comparison to NPS, OPS and Sputum (χ^2 =75.46, p=<0.001, p<0.05). On comparison of various individual specimens with combined swabs, a significant difference was noticed in positivity rate between combined swab versus NPS (χ^2 =11.48, p=0.0007, p<0.05), combined swab versus OPS (χ^2 =12.68, P=<0.001, p<0.05) and combined swab versus sputum (χ^2=58.86 p=<0.001, p<0.05). NPS positive detection rate was also found to be significantly higher as compared to OPS and sputum specimen (χ^2 =16.23, p=0.000056, p<0.05; χ^2 =30.01, p,0.00001, p<0.05). However, OPS positive detection rate was not found significantly higher than sputum positivity (χ^2 =2.53, p=0.11, p>0.05).

Table 2. Positivity of rRT-PCR in different clinical samples in 130 known COVID-19 patients.

Total Patient (n=130)	Combined swab (n=130) No.(%)CI	NPS (n=130) No.(%) CI	OPS (n=130) No.(%) CI	Sputum (n=130) No.(%) CI	Urine (n=130) No.(%) CI	Plasma (n=130) No.(%) CI	Serum (n=130) No.(%) CI	Tracheal Aspirate (n=14) No.(%) CI
Male (n=86)	86(100) (95.8-100)	79(91.5) (83.9-96.6)	63 (72.3) (62.6-82.2)	54(62.7) (51.7-72.9)	0(0)	0	0	13(92.8) (66.1-99.8)
Female(n=44)	44(100) (91.9-100)	40(90.9) (78.3-97.4)	31(70.4) (54.8-83.2)	28(63.6) (47.8-77.6)	0(0)	0	0	NA
Total	130(100) (97.2-100)	119(91.5) (85.3-95.7)	94(72.3) (63.8-79.8)	82(63.0) (54.2-71.4)	0(0)	0	0	13(92.8) (66.1-99.8)

Tracheal aspirate was obtained from 14 male cases only. n(number tested), No. (Number), %(Percentage), CI(Confidence Interval), NA(No samples were obtained).

208 Among individual swabs, NPS showed a higher detection rate than OPS. A total of 25 cases
209 (19.2%, 16 males, 9 females) were detected in NPS but undetected in OPS (Table 2).
210 However, a total of 11 (8.4%) cases were missed with NPS alone as the specimen, while
211 nCoV was not detectable in 48 (36.9%) sputum specimens. No case was solely detected in
212 OPS or sputum.

213 The Ct (threshold cycle) values of *ORF 1b*, *RdRP* and *E* gene were also compared between
214 different clinical specimens (Fig. 1). The cluttering of the Ct values was seen due to
215 maximum Ct values falling between 20 and 32. The lowest Ct values 10.56, 10.14 and 12.26
216 of *E*, *ORF1b* and *RdRP* were obtained in combined swab followed by NPS, Sputum and OPS,
217 respectively (Fig. 1). The average Ct value of *E*, *ORF* and *RdRP* were 25.75, 26.94 and 27.06
218 in the combined swabs followed by NP, sputum and OP swabs respectively (Fig. 2). It is
219 Theoretical correlation of inverse relationship between Ct values and viral load gives
220 indication of higher viral load in specimen with low Ct and vise-versa. Thus, it can be
221 inferred that maximum viral load was present in the combined swab, followed by NPS,
222 sputum and OPS, in that order. The specimens of urine, serum and plasma did not show any
223 sigmoidal amplification- based Ct values. The t- test comparison of average Ct value of all
224 the targeted genes namely *E*, *ORF1b* and *RdRp* in various specimen categories showed a
225 significant difference when the combined swab was compared individually with NPS
226 ($p=0.021$, $t=-2.315$), OPS ($p=0.0003$, $t=-3.66$) and sputum ($p=0.0027$, $t= -3.028$).

227 In randomly selected 15 follow up patients' testing, all the seven different types of specimens
228 of combined swab, NPS, OPS, sputum, serum, plasma and urine were tested every day till the
229 two consecutive days' rRT-PCR showed negative results in every clinical specimen (Fig. 3-4,
230 Table 3). In the 'follow-up' category, a total of 665 specimens were obtained over time
231 ranging from 4 to 10 days, with an average of 6.66 days (Fig. 3). A gradual increase in Ct
232 values of ORF1 b from combined swab, NPS, OPS and sputum were noticed in daily testing

indicating patients' affirmative response to treatment and virus clearance while other specimens of plasma, serum and urine showed no detection of SARS-CoV-2 (Fig. 4). The maximum longer duration of days for clearance of virus was observed in combined swab (Fig. 4, Table 3). Earliest clearance with maximum detection of ORF1b was seen in patient P3 in which combined swab and NPS showed the presence of virus for only two treatment days and P11 in which only combined swab showed the presence of virus for two treatment days. Patients 1, 2, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 exclusively showed longer duration of detection of nCOV in a combined swab. Patient 10 shed virus in combined and NPS specimen for longest nine days, followed by P7, which showed nCoV detection in only combined swab for consecutive seven days. During treatment monitoring, the average days of rRT-PCR positivity were 4.5, 3.7, 3.4 and 3.6 from combined swab, NPS, OPS and sputum, respectively.

Table 3. ORF1b positivity of various samples for maximum number of days in daily monitoring of 15 follow up cases.

Patient No.	**ORF1b positivity for maximum number of days during treatment**			
	Combined swab	**NPS**	**OPS**	**Sputum**
P1	5	4	4	4
P2	4	3	2	3
P3	2	2	1	1
P4	4	3	3	3
P5	4	4	4	4
P6	4	4	3	3
P7	7	5	5	5
P8	3	3	3	3
P9	4	2	2	2
P10	9	9	8	9
P11	2	1	1	1
P12	5	4	4	4
P13	6	5	5	5
P14	5	4	4	4
P15	4	3	3	3
Average days positivity	4.5	3.7	3.4	3.6

4. Discussion

The discharge policy for COVID-19 cases emphasized negative rRT-PCR findings on two consecutive days respiratory specimen after symptom resolves. To give specific and accurate negative results, every laboratory needs to rule out false negative PCR result, which otherwise would lead to discharge of such patient, leading to a high probability of transmission in the community especially the family members and other close contacts. The importance of appropriate sampling in helping the lab to diagnose the COVID-19 infection accurately cannot be overemphasized. An appropriate specimen is the foundation stone for good laboratory test result and is one of the essential pre-analytical parameters for quality assurance. It is well-accepted fact that improper specimen is bound to incorrect result. It is therefore said that '*garbage in will yield garbage out*'. The appropriate specimen must also be the optimal specimen in monitoring treatment/follow-up cases to help the clinician in management by taking evidence based decision on discharge. This study was thus conducted to analyze the most appropriate specimen for performing rRT-PCR to diagnose SARS-CoV-2 and monitor follow-up cases.

The present study showed differences in sensitivity of combined swab in comparison to NPS and OPS with which 8.2 and 19.2% positive cases were missed respectively. Thus, if tested alone, NPS and OPS may cause remarkable false negative results that could lead to discharge of these infected patients who are still shedding SARS-CoV-2 from their upper respiratory tract and may be a potential source for transmission of COVID-19 infection. We have compared various studies to assess their finding of clinical suitability of different biodiversified specimens (Table 4). In a study by Wang X et al. [23], it was observed that 73.1% of positive nasopharyngeal cases could not be detected with OPS. Our study exclusively noted that 19.2% of cases were detected by only combined swabs and were missed by other specimen types. The detection rate in sputum was significantly lower as

compared to combined swab and individual NPS and OPS. Thus, sputum specimen alone for diagnosis of COVID-19 infection by rRT-PCR may not be recommended, as it missed 36.9% cases in the present study. Our finding is also corroborated by earlier reported study showing a low positivity rate of 28.53% using sputum in detection of nCoV [12]. However, our finding of low positivity in sputum is in contrast to some of the earlier reported studies and meta-analysis. The systemic review and meta-analysis earlier had found sputum a better specimen than NPS and OPS [18,19]. A separate study by Zhang H et al. [13] too found a higher detection rate of 79.2% in sputum than 37.5% and 20.8% positivity in NPS and OPS, respectively. Among sputum and OPS, Wang W et al. [14] found higher positivity with sputum, whereas Chan et al. [24] and Liu R et al. [25] did not find any significant difference in positivity between them. We further have the opinion of sputum being a non-ideal specimen in case of patients of COVID-19 infection with symptoms of dry cough and unable to produce sputum.

Table 4. Comparative evaluation of our finding with earlier studies.

Study	Nature	No. of Samples	BAL	Sputum	NPS	OPS	Both swab	Feces	Blood	Urine	Rectal/ Anal swab	Serum	Plasma	FBB	TA	Nasal	Random saliva
Wang W et al. [14]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	15	104	8	398	-	153	307	72	-	-	-	13	-	-	-
		Positive	14	75	5	126	-	44	3	0	-	-	-	6	-	-	-
Wang X et al. [23]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	353	353	353	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	67	27	76	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xu et al. [34]	**Prospective**	Tested	-	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	22	-	-	-	-	-	43	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lo et al. [26]	**Prospective**	Tested	-	1	84	-	-	79	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	1	57	-	-	46	-	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chan et al. [24]	**Case series**	Tested	-	3	5	3	-	4	-	5	-	3	4	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	2	4	2	-	0	-	0	-	1	0	-	-	-	-
Chen et	**Retrospectiv**	Tested	-	206	167	-	-	64	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

al. [33]	**e**	Positive	-	155	65	-	-	17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liu R et al. [25]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	5	57	4818	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	4	28	1843	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xie et al. [28]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	-	19	-	19	19	19	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	-	9	-	8	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liu M et al. [10]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	47	47	-	-	-	-	47	-	-	-	-	47	-
		Positive	-	-	26	9	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	23	-
Rao et al. [11]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	-	-	562	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	562
		Positive	-	-	-	-	48	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	60
Tong et al. [12]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	15	382	463	39	-	262	40	135	98	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	7	61	297	10	-	32	3	12	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Zhang H et al. [13]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	97	97	97	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	-
		Positive#	-	79.2	37.5	20.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-
Our study	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	130	130	130	130	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	-
		Positive	-	82	119	94	130	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-

*This study did not show number of specimens detected. # Figures represent percentage.

In case, if only one swab is to be used for COVID-19 diagnosis, then NPS should be preferred over other specimens of OPS, sputum, serum, plasma and urine considering its higher detection rate of nCoV in our study. This preference is in line with the earlier finding of Tong et al. [12] who found higher detection rate of nCoV in NPS than BAL, OPS, Sputum, Urine, Blood, stool, anal swabs and corneal secretions. The finding of Tong et al. [12], Lo et al. [26], Wang X et al. [23], Wang W et al. [14] and meta-analysis by Czumbel et al. [27] also showed NPS a better specimen for detecting SARS-CoV-2. The higher positivity rate of NPS could be correlated to high viral load in nasopharynx than other anatomical sites/specimens.

Our study also found no detection of SARS-CoV-2 in clinical specimens of serum, plasma and urine. Earlier reported study too not found nCoV in either blood or urine specimen [28]. Chan et al. [24], Lo et al. [26], Wang W et al. [14] and reported meta-analysis showed

negative results in urine specimen [17]. In contrast, only Tong et al. [12] had detected nCoV in urine, albeit with a low positivity rate of 16.3%. While the blood specimen was also reported of low positivity of 12.5%, 1% and 0.9% by Tong et al. [12], Bwire et al. [17] and Wang W et al. [14] respectively. Chan et al. [24] found only one positive among three tested serum specimens while there was no positivity detected in plasma specimen. The number of specimens tested by Chan et al. [24] is too low to draw any relevant conclusion. Thus, it is advocated to conduct more studies on larger cohort to evaluate the role of blood and its components in diagnosing SARS-CoV-2 by rRT-PCR and its potential role in transmitting the virus. Ours and earlier published analysis for the absence of SARS-CoV-2 in urine showed that it is not shed from the urogenital system. Among the optimal specimen, Bwire et al. [17] meta-analysis found bronchoalveolar lavage fluid with higher positive(91.8%) rate of detection of SARS-CoV-2 followed by rectal swabs (87.8%), sputum (68.1%), nasopharyngeal swab (45.5%), feces (32.8%), oropharyngeal swab (7.6%), and blood samples (1.0%). Another meta-analysis on respiratory samples found sputum with a significantly higher positive rate of detection of nCoV followed by NPS and OPS [18]. Tong et al. [12], on the other hand, found NPS of highest positive detection rate of nCoV among specimen spectrum of BAL, NPS, OPS, sputum, urine, blood, stool, anal swab and corneal secretion (2.99%) [12]. Rao et al. [11], found saliva a better specimen than paired NPS+ OPS swab. Thus, it is inferred, that ideal appropriate specimen varied in above-discussed studies. However, considering, the fact that more studies finds NPS an ideal specimen in the identification of nCoV, our suggested combined swab may fit more into the definition of appropriate specimen in the pandemic situation due to fulfilling the parameters of applicability in variable clinical spectrum of the disease, easy accessibility in a larger group of patients, lesser risk hazard to health worker and higher detection rate than NPS.

The present study also showed a high positive rate of COVID-19 in males than females as infected males were almost twice that of females. The various earlier studies and meta-analysis too observed higher male susceptibility than females to COVID-19[14, 23, 29]. The prominent possible factors included higher expression of angiotensin-converting enzyme -2 (ACE-2) attachment receptors in males than females, higher incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure in males, immunological differences driven by hormones and X chromosome, behavioral difference of higher level of smoking, drinking. Higher susceptibility of males was further precipitated by the reported epidemiological observation of males more casual approach than females in appropriate compliance to masking, hand hygiene and social distancing practices [30, 31].

In terms of correlating lower Ct value with high viral load, our study showed high viral load detected in the combined swab than other specimens. The individual NPS had the lowest Ct values in comparison to other individual specimens. This finding has also been corroborated by Wang W et al. [14], and Zou et al. [32], who also found higher viral load in NPS than OPS.

Our study also exclusively assessed the most appropriate clinical specimen to monitor the COVID-19 patients' treatment during their follow-up. Combined swabs exhibited longer duration of detection of nCoV as it is the last specimen during treatment follow-up to become negative among all seven types of specimens tested. This finding indicates that the combined swabs were the most appropriate specimen to assess virus clearance among the follow-up patients and thus equip the clinician in patient management and discharge. Data search found one brief report on 22 patients showing that sputum and feces remain positive even after NPS turn negative [33]. Another study on ten pediatric COVID 19 patients by Xu et al. [34] showed that rRT-PCR of rectal swabs was persistently positive after their NPS had become negative.

Novelty of the present study lies in finding combined swabs of ideal specimen in both diagnosis and monitoring of treatment follow-up of symptomatic patients to better assess virus clearance, which eventually help in discharge of truly recovered patients. This finding has clinical implication as early negative with other specimen in follow-up investigation can give pseudoimpression of virus clearance leading to the potential risk of transmission of the COVID-19 infection in case if such patients are discharged. Among the published literature, Rao et al. [11], although found lower sensitivity of paired NPS + OPS swab versus saliva in asymptomatic patient, the difference of study group leaves a scope of further study involving both symptomatic and asymptomatic patients. Nevertheless, the probable reason for higher positivity using combined swab in our study than Rao et al. [11] could be the more viral load in symptomatic than in asymptomatic patients and strict adherence to sample collection in the morning without nasal and throat wash.

Although stool and rectal/anal swab specimen were not tested in our study, few studies showing detection of nCoV in these specimen indicate them as a potential specimen for diagnosis [5, 10, 12, 14, 17, 23]. These findings may suggest of nCoV resist the human gut acidic medium and could be transmitted through the fecal route. Presence of nCoV in stool is also substantiated by evidential presence of its receptors ACE 2 in enterocytes. Nevertheless, the correlation of this potential biological specimen for diagnosis and probability of the virus transmission through feco-oral route deserves further evaluation, since the virus viability in stool has not yet fully explored except Wang W et al. [14] reporting live nCoV from the stool specimen.

The present study limitation includes non-evaluation of some of the other potential specimens like BAL, FBB, saliva, stool and rectal swab. Obtaining BAL and FBB was avoided since collection requires an invasive procedure that may pose high-risk exposure of aerosol generation to health care workers. The feces and rectal/anal swab are also not primarily

indicated considering the respiratory droplet being the commonest established mode of transmission of nCoV. Clinical specimen of feces and rectal/anal swab cannot be considered an optimal specimen considering the limitation of difficulty in collection, transport and processing in comparison to respiratory specimens. Another specimen of saliva has a variable reported finding. Apart from Rao et al. [11] who found saliva a better specimen, earlier reported meta-analysis and review had found saliva of low sensitivity than NPS [27, 35]. Considering these facts, we have not included saliva in our study in addition to another reason that it was not recommended by either WHO or our regional authorities (ICMR) in their interim guidance for detection of SARS-CoV-2 [19, 36]. We could not correlate Ct values of *ORF1b* and *RdRP* with clinical features or disease course because most of the patients' detailed clinical information was not available.

Thus, this study concludes that NPS and OPS alone may miss some SARS-CoV-2 positive cases and hence should not be used exclusively as the sole specimen for diagnosis. Clinical specimen of serum, plasma and urine also not to be used in detection of SARS-CoV-2 by rRT-PCR. This study strongly recommends combined swab as the preferred clinical specimen for detection of SARS-CoV-2 to establish diagnosis of COVID-19. The combined swab may also be considered the most appropriate specimen in monitoring the follow-up cases to provide a better prognostic indicator of viral clearance during treatment. Therefore, the specimen of combined swab has tremendous translational value for defining the recommendation in testing guidelines. Implementing the same globally will help manage and control the pandemic, as it is the hour's need. Lower Ct in combined and NPS specimen also indicates towards the indirect evidence of posterior nasopharynx as the primary nCoV colonization site. Since blood, serum, plasma and urine were negative for presence of nCoV in our study, the other route of transmission was not confirmed in the study and requires more studies with larger sample size for specific conclusive finding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Funding Source

AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh (AIIMS/Raipur/Admin/110).

Authors Contributions

Negi SS, Nagarkar NM, Bhargava A and Das P contributed to conception and design of the manuscript. Behra A was responsible for management of clinical specimen. Sharma K, Aggarwala P, Gandhi D, Mathias A, Sharma S, Singh P, Negi SS contributed in processing, testing and analysis of the specimens by rRT-PCR. Gaikwad U and Wankhede A searched the literature and helped in comparative analysis of our test results with earlier studies. Negi SS wrote manuscript. Negi SS and Gandhi D helped in statistical analysis. Bhargava A, Das P and Nagarkar NM critically reviewed the manuscript.

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Figure legends

Fig 1. The threshold cycle(Ct) values of *E*, *RdRP* and *ORF 1ab* region of SARS-CoV-2 in different clinical samples obtained from 130 patients. The lowest Ct values of all the three target of *E*, *RdRP* and *ORF 1ab* were obtained in combined Throat and nasopharyngeal swabs followed by NP, Sputum and Throat swabs. Urine, Plasma and Serum samples have not shown any amplification.

Fig 2. The average Ct value of *E*, *RdRP* and *ORF 1ab* gene in different clinical samples.

Fig 3. Number of samples tested for 15 follow up cases till rRT-PCR showed negative results in two consecutive days sample. Total number of samples per patients divided by 7 number of samples collected on daily basis gives the number of days the samples were collected for particular patients. Last two days 7 different types of samples were found negative for all the patients.

Fig 4. The values of Ct of *ORF 1ab* in various clinical samples of 15 follow up cases.

Figure 1

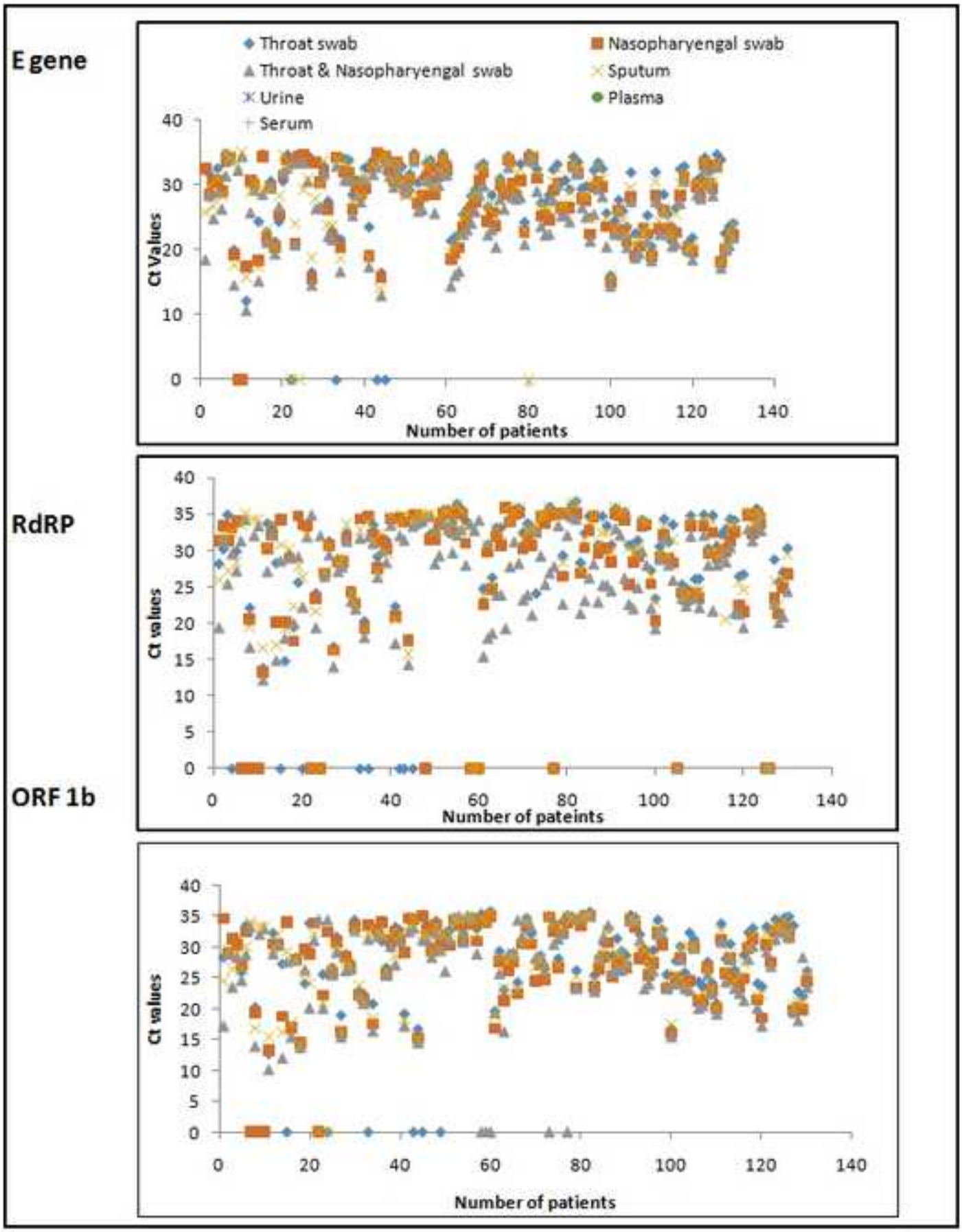

Figure 2

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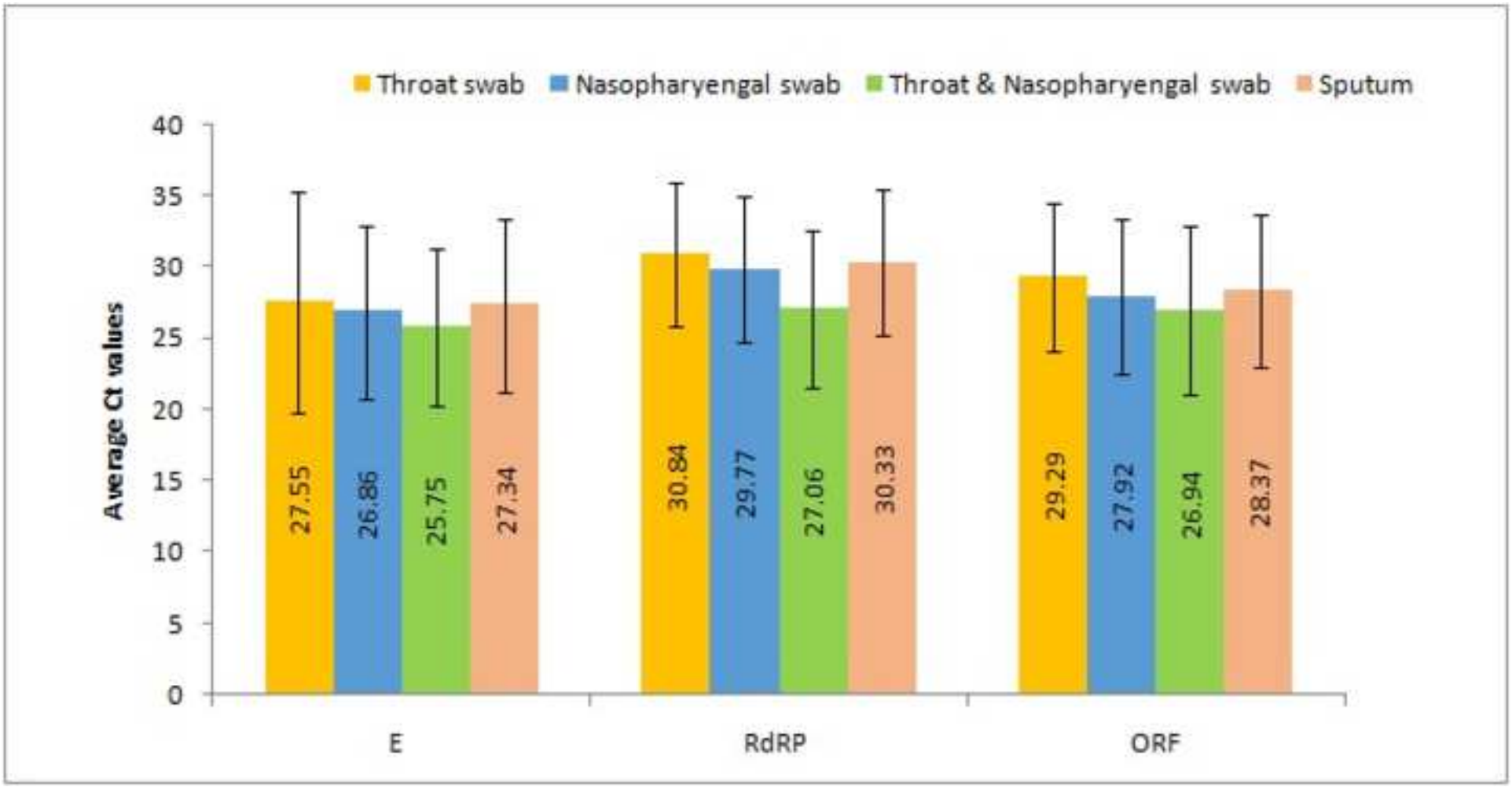

Figure 3

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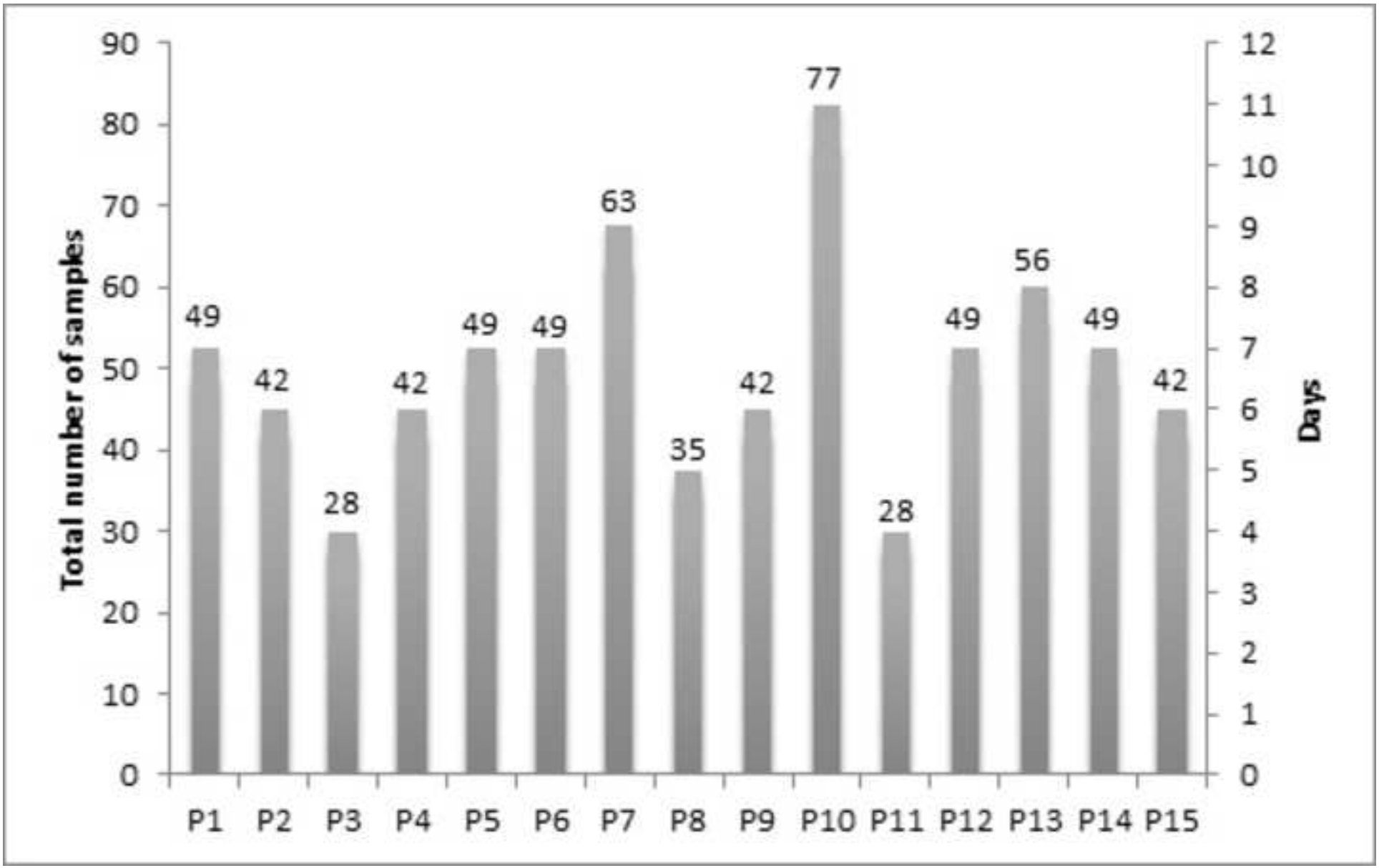

Figure 4

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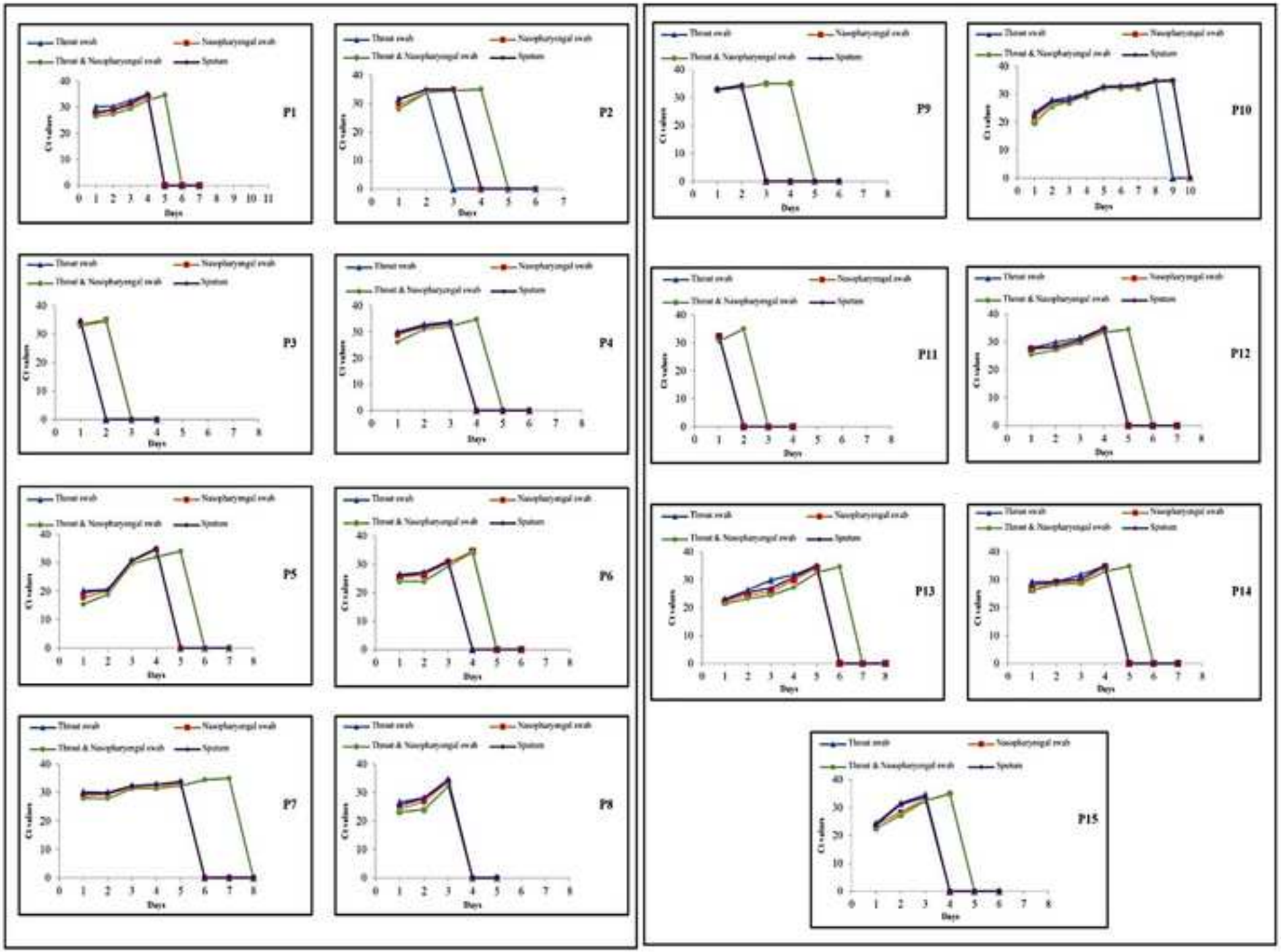

Comparative analysis of various clinical specimens in detection of SARS-CoV-2 using rRT-PCR in new and follow up cases of COVID-19 infection: quest for the best choice

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Running title: Evaluation of multivaried clinical specimens in diagnosis of COVID-19.

Abstract

The appropriate specimen is of paramount importance in Real Time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (rRT-PCR) based diagnosis of novel coronavirus (nCoV) disease (COVID-19). Thus, it is pertinent to evaluate diagnostic utility of various diversified clinical specimen in both diagnosis and follow-up of COVID-19. 924 initial specimen before initiation of treatment from 130 COVID-19 symptomatic cases and 665 follow up specimen comprising equal number of nasopharyngeal swab (NPS), oropharyngeal swab (OPS), combined swab(NPS+OPS), sputum, plasma, serum and urine from 15 randomly selected cases were evaluated by rRT-PCR. Demographic analysis showed males (86) twice more affected by COVID-19 than females (44) (p=0.00001). Male and female median age recorded was 42.97 and 32.07 years, respectively. Combined swab showed positivity rate of 100 % followed by NPS (91.5%), OPS (72.3%), sputum (63%) while nCoV was found undetected in urine, plasma and serum specimens. The lowest cycle threshold (Ct) values of 10.56, 10.14 and 12.26 and lowest average Ct values of targeted genes *E*(25.75; CI 24.6-26.7), *ORF1b*(26.94; CI 25.9-27.9) and *RdRP*(27.06; CI 26.1-28) were found in combined swab among all specimen types to indicate higher viral load in it. Analysis of 665 follow-up multi-varied specimens also showed combined swab the last specimen among all specimen types to become negative, after average 6.6 (range 4-10) days post-treatment, having lowest and average Ct values of *ORF1b* as 15.48 and 29.96 respectively indicating posterior nasopharyngeal tract as primary nCoV afflicted site with high viral load. The combined swab thus may be more appropriate specimen for its recommendation in guidelines of both diagnosis and monitoring of COVID-19 treatment by rRT-PCR for assessing virus clearance to help physician in taking evidence based discharge decision. Implementing combined swab globally will definitely help in management and control of the pandemic, as it is the need of the hour.

Commented [DSN1]: Specific Comment 2: Abstract, ling 8: Please spell out Please spell out NPS (nasopharyngeal swabs) and OPS (oropharyngeal swabs) here since this is the first time NPS and OPS were mentioned. What is combined swab? Do the authors mean combined nose throat swab? Please clarify.

Reply: As per the kind suggestion of the reviewer, necessary changes have been done in line 8 of the revised abstract. We further kindly submit that the combined swab consist of both nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swab in a single tube of viral transport medium. The same has been incorporated in the Method section of the revised manuscript.

Key words: SARS-CoV-2, Coronavirus, rRT-PCR, Diagnosis.

1. Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, a name given to a novel coronavirus (nCoV) by the International Committee of Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) was first reported in December 2019 from Wuhan, China and since then it has posed a devastating looming threat to the world, as around 216 countries and territories are so far affected by the virus causing the infection named COVID-19 [1]. Till the date of reporting on 11.11.2020, 50,810,763 were infected, and 1,263,844 succumbed worldwide to the infection [2]. India is the second most affected country after USA, with 8,636,011 confirmed cases and 127,571 deaths as on 11.11.2020 [2]. The disease can occur in any age-group, being more complicated and life-threatening in patients of older age group and those with underlying co-morbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular disease [3-5]. The early clinical presentation of the COVID-19 varies from entirely asymptomatic to severely symptomatic. In India, more than 70% of the laboratory confirmed cases are asymptomatic [3]. In symptomatic patients, the clinical manifestation includes fever, myalgia, dry cough, fatigue, productive cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, loss of taste and smell, etc. The radiological finding of ground -glass opacities on chest X-ray is one of the prominent observation [4,5]. Since the SARS-CoV-2 has high human-to-human transmissibility rate, the early diagnosis, immediate isolation and early treatment of positive patients is the key to successful management and preventing spread to others. Since testing is the corner stone of managing the COVID-19 pandemic, highly sensitive and specific testing is essentially required, not only for early identification of both the symptomatic cases but also that of asymptomatic cases and their close high-risk contacts, to potentially breaking the transmission chain of COVID-19 infection, which otherwise appears unstoppable at the moment.

Commented [DSN2]: Specific Comment 3: Line 33: "…in extreme of age.", Did the authors mean younger and older or just older? This needs rephrasing and clarify.

Our Reply: The authors meant to say that people of all ages are susceptible to COVID-19 infection. However, various studies have concluded beyond any doubt that older age group and persons with underlying conditions are more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and had a higher case fatality rate. As per the reviewer suggestion, we have reframed this line and it will now be read as
" The disease can occur in any age group being more complicated and life threatening in patients of older age group and those with underlying co- morbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases (Bhandari S et al, 2020; Wu and McGoogan JM 2020; Wang D et al, 2020)."

Among various viral diagnostic modalities, virus isolation does not appear practically feasible for COVID-19 since it requires Biosafety Level (BSL)-3 laboratory, high technical expertise and longer turn around time of 3-5 days, to identify cytopathic effect in specific cell lines such as Vero E6 cells [6]. Serological test based on SARS-CoV-2 antibody detection, have been reported with varying sensitivity (34 to 80%), cross reactivity with other SARS-CoV, varying rates of seroconversion between 7 and 11 days after onset of symptoms and varying immunological response by individual s[7,8]. Antigen detection assays also have the limitation of poor sensitivity and negative predictive values [7].

Therefore, rRT-PCR is the recommended reference test to establish laboratory diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 by detecting at least two genes from various conserved region of specific structural Spike (*S*), Envelope (*E*), Nucleocapsid (*N*) genes and the nonstructural RNA dependent RNA polymerase (*RdRp*) and replicase open reading frame (*ORF*) 1a /b, *ORF 1b*-nsp14 [5,7,9]. Various in-house and commercially available rRT-PCR test is presently being used to amplify these genes for identification of SARS-CoV-2 in the clinical specimens. Oropharyngeal and or nasopharyngeal swabs are currently the most preferred clinical specimens due to non-invasive and easily accessible nature and utilized across the globe to diagnose COVID-19 infection. During initial period of the pandemic in Wuhan, NPS was used for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 [5]. Since then, various studies, systemic reviews and meta-analysis have evaluated the spectrum of clinical specimens in the quest of optimal specimen for its inclusion in guidelines for early identification of SARS-CoV-2 to provide timely treatment to prevent its transmission and thus better management of the pandemic [5, 10-18]. These include upper respiratory tract specimen (saliva, OPS, NPS, nasal swab), lower respiratory specimen {sputum, bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BLF) endotracheal aspirate(ET), fibrobronchoscope brush biopsy(FBB)}, blood and its products (serum, plasma), urine, feces and rectal swab. These studies and meta-analysis have various

conclusions, probably because of analyzing a different spectrum of clinical specimens. Systemic review and meta-analysis by Bwire et al. [17] and individual study by Wang W et al. [14] reported highest SARS-CoV-2 detection rate in BAL, while similar review and meta-analysis by Mohammadi et al. [18] and individual study by Zhang H et al. [13] recommends specimen of sputum for detection of SARS-CoV-2. Liu et al. [10] and Tong et al. [12] advocated NPS, a choice of specimen for detection of nCoV. Rao et al. [11], on the other hand, found random saliva with a higher detection rate of nCoV than paired NPS and OPS swab. The optimal clinical specimens depend on various factors of ease of accessibility, non-invasive nature, lesser risk to health care professional while collecting specimen and good viral loads for higher chances of detection. Collection of BAL, ET and FBB although have a higher detection rate and may be a specimen of choice in admitted pneumonia cases, yet it always pose a risk of generating droplets to cause infection to healthcare workers. Additionally, they also cannot be a specimen of choice in managing pandemic infection of COVID-19 showing variable clinical manifestation from asymptomatic to mild/moderate and severe cases. Sputum, on the other hand, also pose a challenge not only for collection from cases of COVID-19 patients with dry cough but also for lower detection rate of nCoV as reported earlier [12]. Overall, there is certain uncertainty on understanding the specimens/sites from which the virus can be maximally diagnosed without posing health hazard to healthcare worker. Furthermore, these published studies have also not addressed optimal specimen in patients undergoing treatment to provide the appropriate prognostic indicator of viral clearance in patients undergoing treatment. Considering these facts, this study was undertaken to evaluate the various clinical specimens that appears to be more accessible and feasible and can become a specimen of choice for early identification of SARS-CoV-2 for better management of COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed study has thus evaluated various specimens comprising of combined / paired naso and oropharyngeal swab

(here after referred as a combined swab in the text), NPS, OPS, sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate from known positive COVID-19 patients to understand their diagnostic utility in detection of SARS-CoV-2 as well as monitoring of follow-up cases of COVID-19 undergoing treatment. This study will also provide insight if this virus can also be transmitted in other ways, then merely by respiratory droplets.

Commented [DSN3]: Specific Comment 4: Line 69: Change "Sputum, Plasma, Serum, Urine and Tracheal aspirate" to "sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate".

Reply: As per the suggestion, we have changed the "Sputum, Plasma, Serum, Urine and Tracheal aspirate" to "sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate".

2. Methods

2.1. Patient selection

All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS)-Raipur is one of the designated tertiary-care hospital for diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 patients in Chhattisgarh, a state in Central India. A total of 5000 suspected patients, fulfilling either of the various testing criteria, laid down by the government of India, for COVID-19 testing, were referred to AIIMS, Raipur for diagnosis of COVID-19 by rRT-PCR test, from May 2020 till June 2020 [19].

Among 5000-suspected patients, 137 outpatients were diagnosed for COVID-19 infection (2.7% positivity rate) by rRT-PCR using combined swab. All these patients subsequently admitted in the COVID ward of AIIMS, Raipur for isolation and treatment. These patients were evaluated in terms of following inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion criteria

All suspected COVID-19 symptomatic patients were included in the study if fulfilling the following criteria-

a. Detected positive for COVID-19 infection by rRT-PCR.
b. Not on any anti-viral / anti-malarial (Hydroxychloroquine) / antibiotic (Azithromycin).
c. Admitted in COVID-19 ward of AIIMS, Raipur for treatment.

Exclusion criteria

a. Nonfulfillment of any of the inclusion criteria was considered as the exclusion criteria in the present study.

Among them, 07 patients with recent history of taking Azithromycin were excluded. Accordingly, only 130 patients were enrolled in the study after taking their consent. This study was approved by the Institutional ethical committee (IEC) of AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh (AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536).

Before starting a standard treatment regimen of Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin, all these patients were requested to provide clinical specimens of the following nature.

a. NPS
b. OPS
c. Combined (naso and oropharyngeal) swab
d. Sputum
e. Serum
f. Plasma
g. Urine

Every swab specimen was collected in viral transport medium(VTM) (HiMedia, India) from these patients in morning before washing in the morning using sterile flocked nylon swab. An NPS was collected from single nostril (posterior nasopharyngx) while OPS was collected from both sides of the throat. The combined swab of both NPS and OPS was collected in a single tube of VTM. In total, 7 X 130 = 910 specimens were tested by rRT-PCR. In addition, 14 tracheal aspirates were also obtained from an equal number of intubated patients. Thus, 910 +14 =924 specimens were obtained from new patients prior to starting their treatment.

The positivity rate with all the seven types of clinical specimen was also tested in randomly selected 15 patients in their daily follow-up specimen of seven types until the negative

Commented [DSN4]: Specific Comment 5: Line 97: Need approval #.

Journal requirement comment no. 3:

Thank you for including the following ethics statement on the submission details page: 'Study is approved form Institutional Ethical committee.
Name of committe: IEC-AIIMS, Riapur.
Approval number: AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536'
Please also include the specific name of your ethics committee and the approval number in the Methods section of your manuscript."

Our Reply: We have obtained the approval from Institute Ethics Committee(IEC), AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh for the study. The ethical sanction number allotted was AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536. The same has been incorporated in line number 128-129 of the revised manuscript.

Commented [DSN5]: What is combined swab? Do the authors mean combined nose throat swab? Please clarify.
Reply: We kindly submit that the combined swab consist of both nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swab in a single tube of viral transport medium. The same has been incorporated in the revised manuscript.

finding of rRT-PCR were achieved in two consecutive days specimens of all seven types. Six hundred sixty five (665) follow-up specimens were collected from these 15 admitted patients. Thus, 924 initial and 665 follow-up specimens were tested by rRT-PCR for the identification of SARS-CoV-2.

2.2. RNA extraction

All the clinical specimens were processed for viral RNA isolation by using commercially available QIAgen Viral RNA extraction kit, Germany, as per the manufacturer instructions. Briefly, 140µl of the specimen has been treated with 560µl of prepared buffer AVL containing carrier RNA (1 µg/µl). After brief pulse vortexing and 10 minute incubation at room temperature, the specimen was precipitated by adding 560µl of pre-chilled ethanol. Treated specimen then transferred to the spin column. Viral RNA was purified by consecutive treatment with 500µl of buffer AW1 and AW2. Finally, it was eluted in 60µl buffer AVE.

2.3. rRT-PCR test

This test was performed with primers and probes provided by ICMR, targeting *E*, *RdRP* and *ORF1b* genomic region of SARS-CoV-2 and internal control of human *RNAseP* as described earlier [20-22] (Table 1). Briefly, the 25 µl rRT-PCR reaction contained 12.5 µl 2x buffer, 1µl 25X RT-PCR enzyme mix (both from AgPath One-Step RT-PCR kit, ThermoFisher Scientific, USA), 1.5 µl Primer-Probe mix, 5 µl RNAse/DNase free sterile water and 5µl RNA template and tested on CFX 96 Real Time PCR machine of Biorad, USA. The thermal cycling condition included 55^0C for 30 min, 95^0C for 3 min and 45 repeated cycles of 95^0C for 15 sec and 58^0C for 30 sec. The tested specimen was considered positive for SARS-CoV-2 for the cycle threshold (Ct) value less than or equal to 35 for *E* gene and both *RdRP*, *ORF*

Commented [DSN6]: Specific Comments 1: The format of the manuscript needs to be consistent, e.g. change Table 1 to (Table 1), Fig.1 to (Fig. 1), etc.
Our Reply: Done in whole manuscript.

Commented [DSN7]: Comment 5: Line 130, change 2x buffer to 12.5 µl 2x buffer.
Reply: As per the suggestion, we have changed the 2x buffer to 12.5 µl 2x buffer in the line number 164 of the revised manuscript.

or either *RdRP* or *ORF*. The positive and negative controls consisted of of viral RNA plasmid and sterile nuclease free water respectively.

Table 1. Primer sequence of various genes of SARS-CoV-2 for rRT-PCR.

Target gene	Sequence(5'-3')	Source
E gene	ACAGGTACGTTAATAGTTAATAGCGT	Corman et al. [20]
	ATATTGCAGCAGTACGCACACA	
	FAM-ACACTAGCCATCCTTACTGCGCTTCG-BHQ	
RNaseP (Internal Control)	AGATTTGGACCTGCGAGCG	CDC, 2020. [21]
	GAGCGGCTGTCTCCACAAGT	
	FAM-TTCTGACCTGAAGGCTCTGCGCG-BHQ	
RdRp(Confirmatory)	GTGARATGGTCATGTGTGGCGG	Corman et al. [20]
	CARATGTTAAASACACTATTAGCATA	
	FAM-CAGGTGGAACCTCATCAGGAGATGC-QSY	
ORF 1b(Confirmatory)	TGGGGYTTTACRGGTAACCT	Poon et al. [22]
	AACRCGCTTAACAAAGCACTC	
	FAM-TAGTTGTGATGCWATCATGACTAG-QSY	

Commented [DSN8]: Journal requirement comment no. 7:
Please include your tables as part of your main manuscript and remove the individual files. Please note that supplementary tables should be uploaded as separate "supporting information" files.

Our reply: Agreeing with the suggestion, we have uploaded all the tables in the main revised manuscript.

2.4. Gold standard

All 130 rRT-PCR detected cases of COVID-19 infection were considered as the known positive cases to evaluate the efficacy of various clinical specimens for diagnostic utility.

Commented [DSN9]:
Comment 6: Line 137 – 139, 2.4 Gold standard: This is not how the gold standard is defined. I suggest deleting this section.

Our Reply: For evaluating sensitivity of spectrum of clinical specimens, we need to ensure that the specimen were true representative of COVID-19 infection. At present, as per the WHO and various regional guidelines, rRT-PCR is the reference test for confirming the diagnosis of COVID-19. All these 130 cases found positive by rRT-PCR were hence considered true positive cases of COVID-19 to evaluate diagnostic utility of various specimen before and during treatment.
We are respectfully submitting some of the research article highlighting rRT-PCR as gold standard.
1.Czumbel LM, Kiss S, Farkas N, Mandel I, Hegy A, Nagy A, Lohinai Z et al. Saliva as a candidate for COVId-19 diagnostic testing: A meta-analysis. Front Med(Lausanne). 2020 Aug 4;7:465.
2.Lippi G, Simundic AM, Plebani M. Potential preanalytical and analytical vulnerabilities in the laboratory diagnosis of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Clin Chem Lab Med. (2020) 58:1070–6. doi: 10.1515/cclm-2020- 0285.

Accordingly, we request you to kindly allow this to remain as such in the manuscript.

2.5. Statistical analysis

Categorical variables were analyzed by chi-square (χ^2) and student t-test by using SPSS 16 version 18(SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) to compare intergroup detection rate by considering $p<0.05$ statistically significant.

3. Results

A total of 130 known positive cases of COVID-19 infection were evaluated in their 924 clinical specimens obtained from different anatomical sites by rRT-PCR for detection of SARS-CoV-2 to determine their positivity rate. Demographic analysis of these patients showed the median age of 40.14 years (range 5 to 74 years). Among them, 86 were males while 44 were females showing significant higher COVID-19 infection rate in male than

female (χ^2 = 27.13, p=0.00001, p<0.05). Male median age calculated was 42.97 year, whereas female median age observed of 32.07 years.

rRT-PCR detected all 130 cases with 100 % positivity in combined swab (Table 2). NPS was the next appropriate clinical specimen showing a detection rate of 91.5% followed by OPS and sputum specimens showing 72.3 and 63% positivity respectively. None of the specimens of urine, plasma or serum showed detection of SARS-CoV-2. The 14 TA specimens showed 92.8% positivity by rRT-PCR. Combined swabs showed significantly higher detection rate of SARS-CoV-2 in comparison to NPS, OPS and Sputum (χ^2 =75.46, p=<0.001, p<0.05). On comparison of various individual specimens with combined swabs, a significant difference was noticed in positivity rate between combined swab versus NPS (χ^2 =11.48, p=0.0007, p<0.05), combined swab versus OPS (χ^2 =12.68, P=<0.001, p<0.05) and combined swab versus sputum (χ^2=58.86 p=<0.001, p<0.05). NPS positive detection rate was also found to be significantly higher as compared to OPS and sputum specimen (χ^2 =16.23, p=0.000056, p<0.05; χ^2 =30.01, p,0.00001, p<0.05). However, OPS positive detection rate was not found significantly higher than sputum positivity (χ^2 =2.53, p=0.11, p>0.05).

Table 2. Positivity of rRT-PCR in different clinical samples in 130 known COVID-19 patients.

Total Patient (n=130)	Combined swab (n=130) No.(%)CI	NPS (n=130) No.(%) CI	OPS (n=130) No.(%) CI	Sputum (n=130) No.(%) CI	Urine (n=130) No.(%) CI	Plasma (n=130) No.(%) CI	Serum (n=130) No.(%) CI	Tracheal Aspirate (n=14) No.(%) CI
Male (n=86)	86(100) (95.8-100)	79(91.5) (83.9-96.6)	63 (72.3) (62.6-82.2)	54(62.7) (51.7-72.9)	0(0)	0	0	13(92.8) (66.1-99.8)
Female(n=44)	44(100) (91.9-100)	40(90.9) (78.3-97.4)	31(70.4) (54.8-83.2)	28(63.6) (47.8-77.6)	0(0)	0	0	NA
Total	130(100) (97.2-100)	119(91.5) (85.3-95.7)	94(72.3) (63.8-79.8)	82(63.0) (54.2-71.4)	0(0)	0	0	13(92.8) (66.1-99.8)

Tracheal aspirate was obtained from 14 male cases only. n(number tested), No. (Number), %(Percentage), CI(Confidence Interval), NA(No samples were obtained).

Among individual swabs, NPS showed a higher detection rate than OPS. A total of 25 cases (19.2%, 16 males, 9 females) were detected in NPS but undetected in OPS (Table 2). However, a total of 11 (8.4%) cases were missed with NPS alone as the specimen, while nCoV was not detectable in 48 (36.9%) sputum specimens. No case was solely detected in OPS or sputum.

The Ct (threshold cycle) values of *ORF 1b*, *RdRP* and *E* gene were also compared between different clinical specimens (Fig. 1). The cluttering of the Ct values was seen due to maximum Ct values falling between 20 and 32. The lowest Ct values 10.56, 10.14 and 12.26 of *E*, *ORF1b* and *RdRP* were obtained in combined swab followed by NPS, Sputum and OPS, respectively (Fig. 1). The average Ct value of *E*, *ORF* and *RdRP* were 25.75, 26.94 and 27.06 in the combined swabs followed by NP, sputum and OP swabs respectively (Fig. 2). It is Theoretical correlation of inverse relationship between Ct values and viral load gives indication of higher viral load in specimen with low Ct and vise-versa. Thus, it can be inferred that maximum viral load was present in the combined swab, followed by NPS, sputum and OPS, in that order. The specimens of urine, serum and plasma did not show any sigmoidal amplification- based Ct values. The t- test comparison of average Ct value of all the targeted genes namely *E*, *ORF1b* and *RdRp* in various specimen categories showed a significant difference when the combined swab was compared individually with NPS ($p=0.021$, $t=-2.315$), OPS ($p=0.0003$, $t=-3.66$) and sputum ($p=0.0027$, $t= -3.028$).

In randomly selected 15 follow up patients' testing, all the seven different types of specimens of combined swab, NPS, OPS, sputum, serum, plasma and urine were tested every day till the two consecutive days' rRT-PCR showed negative results in every clinical specimen (Fig. 3-4, Table 3). In the 'follow-up' category, a total of 665 specimens were obtained over time ranging from 4 to 10 days, with an average of 6.66 days (Fig. 3). A gradual increase in Ct values of ORF1 b from combined swab, NPS, OPS and sputum were noticed in daily testing

Commented [DSN10]: Journal requirement comment 6: We note that you have included the phrase "data not shown" in your manuscript. Unfortunately, this does not meet our data sharing requirements. PLOS does not permit references to inaccessible data. We require that authors provide all relevant data within the paper, Supporting Information files, or in an acceptable, public repository. Please add a citation to support this phrase or upload the data that corresponds with these findings to a stable repository (such as Figshare or Dryad) and provide and URLs, DOIs, or accession numbers that may be used to access these data. Or, if the data are not a core part of the research being presented in your study, we ask that you remove the phrase that refers to these data.

Our reply: We kindly submit that NPS and OPS specimen detected 119 and 94 cases respectively leaving 25 cases undetected by OPS. This statement has been adequately shown in Table 2. So, considering the phrase "data not shown" untrue, we have deleted the same and cited Table 2 in its place.

indicating patients' affirmative response to treatment and virus clearance while other specimens of plasma, serum and urine showed no detection of SARS-CoV-2 (Fig. 4). The maximum longer duration of days for clearance of virus was observed in combined swab (Fig. 4, Table 3). Earliest clearance with maximum detection of ORF1b was seen in patient P3 in which combined swab and NPS showed the presence of virus for only two treatment days and P11 in which only combined swab showed the presence of virus for two treatment days. Patients 1, 2, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 exclusively showed longer duration of detection of nCOV in a combined swab. Patient 10 shed virus in combined and NPS specimen for longest nine days, followed by P7, which showed nCoV detection in only combined swab for consecutive seven days. During treatment monitoring, the average days of rRT-PCR positivity were 4.5, 3.7, 3.4 and 3.6 from combined swab, NPS, OPS and sputum, respectively.

Table 3. ORF1b positivity of various samples for maximum number of days in daily monitoring of 15 follow up cases.

Patient No.	ORF1b positivity for maximum number of days during treatment			
	Combined swab	NPS	OPS	Sputum
P1	5	4	4	4
P2	4	3	2	3
P3	2	2	1	1
P4	4	3	3	3
P5	4	4	4	4
P6	4	4	3	3
P7	7	5	5	5
P8	3	3	3	3
P9	4	2	2	2
P10	9	9	8	9
P11	2	1	1	1
P12	5	4	4	4
P13	6	5	5	5
P14	5	4	4	4
P15	4	3	3	3
Average days positivity	4.5	3.7	3.4	3.6

4. Discussion

The discharge policy for COVID-19 cases emphasized negative rRT-PCR findings on two consecutive days respiratory specimen after symptom resolves. To give specific and accurate negative results, every laboratory needs to rule out false negative PCR result, which otherwise would lead to discharge of such patient, leading to a high probability of transmission in the community especially the family members and other close contacts. The importance of appropriate sampling in helping the lab to diagnose the COVID-19 infection accurately cannot be overemphasized. An appropriate specimen is the foundation stone for good laboratory test result and is one of the essential pre-analytical parameters for quality assurance. It is well-accepted fact that improper specimen is bound to incorrect result. It is therefore said that '*garbage in will yield garbage out*'. The appropriate specimen must also be the optimal specimen in monitoring treatment/follow-up cases to help the clinician in management by taking evidence based decision on discharge. This study was thus conducted to analyze the most appropriate specimen for performing rRT-PCR to diagnose SARS-CoV-2 and monitor follow-up cases.

The present study showed differences in sensitivity of combined swab in comparison to NPS and OPS with which 8.2 and 19.2% positive cases were missed respectively. Thus, if tested alone, NPS and OPS may cause remarkable false negative results that could lead to discharge of these infected patients who are still shedding SARS-CoV-2 from their upper respiratory tract and may be a potential source for transmission of COVID-19 infection. We have compared various studies to assess their finding of clinical suitability of different biodiversified specimens (Table 4). In a study by Wang X et al. [23], it was observed that 73.1% of positive nasopharyngeal cases could not be detected with OPS. Our study exclusively noted that 19.2% of cases were detected by only combined swabs and were missed by other specimen types. The detection rate in sputum was significantly lower as

compared to combined swab and individual NPS and OPS. Thus, sputum specimen alone for diagnosis of COVID-19 infection by rRT-PCR may not be recommended, as it missed 36.9% cases in the present study. Our finding is also corroborated by earlier reported study showing a low positivity rate of 28.53% using sputum in detection of nCoV [12]. However, our finding of low positivity in sputum is in contrast to some of the earlier reported studies and meta-analysis. The systemic review and meta-analysis earlier had found sputum a better specimen than NPS and OPS [18,19]. A separate study by Zhang H et al. [13] too found a higher detection rate of 79.2% in sputum than 37.5% and 20.8% positivity in NPS and OPS, respectively. Among sputum and OPS, Wang W et al. [14] found higher positivity with sputum, whereas Chan et al. [24] and Liu R et al. [25] did not find any significant difference in positivity between them. We further have the opinion of sputum being a non-ideal specimen in case of patients of COVID-19 infection with symptoms of dry cough and unable to produce sputum.

Table 4. Comparative evaluation of our finding with earlier studies.

Study	Nature	No. of Samples	BAL	Sputum	NPS	OPS	Both swab	Feces	Blood	Urine	Rectal/ Anal swab	Serum	Plasma	FBB	TA	Nasal	Random saliva
Wang W et al. [14]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	15	104	8	398	-	153	307	72	-	-	-	13	-	-	-
		Positive	14	75	5	126	-	44	3	0	-	-	-	6	-	-	-
Wang X et al. [23]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	353	353	353	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	67	27	76	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xu et al. [34]	**Prospective**	Tested	-	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	22	-	-	-	-	-	43	-	-	-	-	-	-
Lo et al. [26]	**Prospective**	Tested	-	1	84	-	-	79	-	49	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	1	57	-	-	46	-	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chan et al. [24]	**Case series**	Tested	-	3	5	3	-	4	-	5	-	3	4	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	2	4	2	-	0	-	0	-	1	0	-	-	-	-
Chen et	**Retrospectiv**	Tested	-	206	167	-	-	64	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

al. [33]	**e**	Positive	-	155	65	-	-	17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liu R et al. [25]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	5	57	4818	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	4	28	1843	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Xie et al. [28]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	-	19	-	19	19	19	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	-	-	-	9	-	8	0	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Liu M et al. [10]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	47	47	-	-	-	-	47	-	-	-	-	47	-
		Positive	-	-	26	9	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	23	-
Rao et al. [11]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	-	-	-	562	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	562
		Positive	-	-	-	-	48	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	60
Tong et al. [12]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	15	382	463	39	-	262	40	135	98	-	-	-	-	-	-
		Positive	7	61	297	10	-	32	3	12	8	-	-	-	-	-	-
Zhang H et al. [13]	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	97	97	97	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	-
		Positive#	-	79.2	37.5	20.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-
Our study	**Cross sectional**	Tested	-	130	130	130	130	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14	-	-
		Positive	-	82	119	94	130	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13	-	-

*This study did not show number of specimens detected. # Figures represent percentage.

In case, if only one swab is to be used for COVID-19 diagnosis, then NPS should be preferred over other specimens of OPS, sputum, serum, plasma and urine considering its higher detection rate of nCoV in our study. This preference is in line with the earlier finding of Tong et al. [12] who found higher detection rate of nCoV in NPS than BAL, OPS, Sputum, Urine, Blood, stool, anal swabs and corneal secretions. The finding of Tong et al. [12], Lo et al. [26], Wang X et al. [23], Wang W et al. [14] and meta-analysis by Czumbel et al. [27] also showed NPS a better specimen for detecting SARS-CoV-2. The higher positivity rate of NPS could be correlated to high viral load in nasopharynx than other anatomical sites/specimens.

Our study also found no detection of SARS-CoV-2 in clinical specimens of serum, plasma and urine. Earlier reported study too not found nCoV in either blood or urine specimen [28]. Chan et al. [24], Lo et al. [26], Wang W et al. [14] and reported meta-analysis showed

negative results in urine specimen [17]. In contrast, only Tong et al. [12] had detected nCoV in urine, albeit with a low positivity rate of 16.3%. While the blood specimen was also reported of low positivity of 12.5%, 1% and 0.9% by Tong et al. [12], Bwire et al. [17] and Wang W et al. [14] respectively. Chan et al. [24] found only one positive among three tested serum specimens while there was no positivity detected in plasma specimen. The number of specimens tested by Chan et al. [24] is too low to draw any relevant conclusion. Thus, it is advocated to conduct more studies on larger cohort to evaluate the role of blood and its components in diagnosing SARS-CoV-2 by rRT-PCR and its potential role in transmitting the virus. Ours and earlier published analysis for the absence of SARS-CoV-2 in urine showed that it is not shed from the urogenital system. Among the optimal specimen, Bwire et al. [17] meta-analysis found bronchoalveolar lavage fluid with higher positive(91.8%) rate of detection of SARS-CoV-2 followed by rectal swabs (87.8%), sputum (68.1%), nasopharyngeal swab (45.5%), feces (32.8%), oropharyngeal swab (7.6%), and blood samples (1.0%). Another meta-analysis on respiratory samples found sputum with a significantly higher positive rate of detection of nCoV followed by NPS and OPS [18]. Tong et al. [12], on the other hand, found NPS of highest positive detection rate of nCoV among specimen spectrum of BAL, NPS, OPS, sputum, urine, blood, stool, anal swab and corneal secretion (2.99%) [12]. Rao et al. [11], found saliva a better specimen than paired NPS+ OPS swab. Thus, it is inferred, that ideal appropriate specimen varied in above-discussed studies. However, considering, the fact that more studies finds NPS an ideal specimen in the identification of nCoV, our suggested combined swab may fit more into the definition of appropriate specimen in the pandemic situation due to fulfilling the parameters of applicability in variable clinical spectrum of the disease, easy accessibility in a larger group of patients, lesser risk hazard to health worker and higher detection rate than NPS.

Commented [DSN11]: Specific Comment 7: Line 266: The positive rate should be 0.9% not 0.009%.

Our Reply: We sincerely apologize for typing error. We have changed 0.009% to 0.9% in the line number 310 of the revised manuscript.

The present study also showed a high positive rate of COVID-19 in males than females as infected males were almost twice that of females. The various earlier studies and meta-analysis too observed higher male susceptibility than females to COVID-19[14, 23, 29]. The prominent possible factors included higher expression of angiotensin-converting enzyme -2 (ACE-2) attachment receptors in males than females, higher incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure in males, immunological differences driven by hormones and X chromosome, behavioral difference of higher level of smoking, drinking. Higher susceptibility of males was further precipitated by the reported epidemiological observation of males more casual approach than females in appropriate compliance to masking, hand hygiene and social distancing practices [30, 31].

In terms of correlating lower Ct value with high viral load, our study showed high viral load detected in the combined swab than other specimens. The individual NPS had the lowest Ct values in comparison to other individual specimens. This finding has also been corroborated by Wang W et al. [14], and Zou et al. [32], who also found higher viral load in NPS than OPS.

Our study also exclusively assessed the most appropriate clinical specimen to monitor the COVID-19 patients' treatment during their follow-up. Combined swabs exhibited longer duration of detection of nCoV as it is the last specimen during treatment follow-up to become negative among all seven types of specimens tested. This finding indicates that the combined swabs were the most appropriate specimen to assess virus clearance among the follow-up patients and thus equip the clinician in patient management and discharge. Data search found one brief report on 22 patients showing that sputum and feces remain positive even after NPS turn negative [33]. Another study on ten pediatric COVID 19 patients by Xu et al. [34] showed that rRT-PCR of rectal swabs was persistently positive after their NPS had become negative.

Novelty of the present study lies in finding combined swabs of ideal specimen in both diagnosis and monitoring of treatment follow-up of symptomatic patients to better assess virus clearance, which eventually help in discharge of truly recovered patients. This finding has clinical implication as early negative with other specimen in follow-up investigation can give pseudoimpression of virus clearance leading to the potential risk of transmission of the COVID-19 infection in case if such patients are discharged. Among the published literature, Rao et al. [11], although found lower sensitivity of paired NPS + OPS swab versus saliva in asymptomatic patient, the difference of study group leaves a scope of further study involving both symptomatic and asymptomatic patients. Nevertheless, the probable reason for higher positivity using combined swab in our study than Rao et al. [11] could be the more viral load in symptomatic than in asymptomatic patients and strict adherence to sample collection in the morning without nasal and throat wash.

Although stool and rectal/anal swab specimen were not tested in our study, few studies showing detection of nCoV in these specimen indicate them as a potential specimen for diagnosis [5, 10, 12, 14, 17, 23]. These findings may suggest of nCoV resist the human gut acidic medium and could be transmitted through the fecal route. Presence of nCoV in stool is also substantiated by evidential presence of its receptors ACE 2 in enterocytes. Nevertheless, the correlation of this potential biological specimen for diagnosis and probability of the virus transmission through feco-oral route deserves further evaluation, since the virus viability in stool has not yet fully explored except Wang W et al. [14] reporting live nCoV from the stool specimen.

The present study limitation includes non-evaluation of some of the other potential specimens like BAL, FBB, saliva, stool and rectal swab. Obtaining BAL and FBB was avoided since collection requires an invasive procedure that may pose high-risk exposure of aerosol generation to health care workers. The feces and rectal/anal swab are also not primarily

Commented [DSN12]: Comment 1. It is clear when one looks at the cited works of the manuscript that the reference search of the authors ended in mid June 2020. No later paper is cited except a WHO guideline. This is unacceptable in this exploding area of research.

Both that introduction and the discussion must include recent comparative meta-analyses on the subject. In this respect, the Discussion should also emphasize the novelty of the present work compared to those.

indicated considering the respiratory droplet being the commonest established mode of transmission of nCoV. Clinical specimen of feces and rectal/anal swab cannot be considered an optimal specimen considering the limitation of difficulty in collection, transport and processing in comparison to respiratory specimens. Another specimen of saliva has a variable reported finding. Apart from Rao et al. [11] who found saliva a better specimen, earlier reported meta-analysis and review had found saliva of low sensitivity than NPS [27, 35]. Considering these facts, we have not included saliva in our study in addition to another reason that it was not recommended by either WHO or our regional authorities (ICMR) in their interim guidance for detection of SARS-CoV-2 [19, 36]. We could not correlate Ct values of *ORF1b* and *RdRP* with clinical features or disease course because most of the patients' detailed clinical information was not available.

Thus, this study concludes that NPS and OPS alone may miss some SARS-CoV-2 positive cases and hence should not be used exclusively as the sole specimen for diagnosis. Clinical specimen of serum, plasma and urine also not to be used in detection of SARS-CoV-2 by rRT-PCR. This study strongly recommends combined swab as the preferred clinical specimen for detection of SARS-CoV-2 to establish diagnosis of COVID-19. The combined swab may also be considered the most appropriate specimen in monitoring the follow-up cases to provide a better prognostic indicator of viral clearance during treatment. Therefore, the specimen of combined swab has tremendous translational value for defining the recommendation in testing guidelines. Implementing the same globally will help manage and control the pandemic, as it is the hour's need. Lower Ct in combined and NPS specimen also indicates towards the indirect evidence of posterior nasopharynx as the primary nCoV colonization site. Since blood, serum, plasma and urine were negative for presence of nCoV in our study, the other route of transmission was not confirmed in the study and requires more studies with larger sample size for specific conclusive finding.

Commented [DSN13]: Reviewer comment 3. The authors suggested that their lower Ct in combined and NPS swab indicated the primary nCoV colonization site is the posterior nasopharynx. They did not provide any direct evidence for this. Therefor this should be removed from the major findings and conclusion. However, the indirect evidence that they provided should be discussed and compared to data of others received by other methodologies.

Our reply: **Our reply:** As per the suggestion, we have removed our statement 'primary nCoV colonization site is the posterior nasopharynx', and modified it as indirect evidence in the discussion.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Funding Source

AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh (AIIMS/Raipur/Admin/110).

Authors Contributions

Negi SS, Nagarkar NM, Bhargava A and Das P contributed to conception and design of the manuscript. Behra A was responsible for management of clinical specimen. Sharma K, Aggarwala P, Gandhi D, Mathias A, Sharma S, Singh P, Negi SS contributed in processing, testing and analysis of the specimens by rRT-PCR. Gaikwad U and Wankhede A searched the literature and helped in comparative analysis of our test results with earlier studies. Negi SS wrote manuscript. Negi SS and Gandhi D helped in statistical analysis. Bhargava A, Das P and Nagarkar NM critically reviewed the manuscript.

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Comments and their reply

Comments 1: The format of the manuscript needs to be consistent, e.g. change Table 1 to (Table 1), Fig.1 to (Fig. 1), etc.

Reply: We sincerely apologize for our mistake. As per the suggestion, we have revised the format of the whole manuscript as per the PLOS One requirement.

Comment 2: Abstract, ling 8: Please spell out Please spell out NPS (nasopharyngeal swabs) and OPS (oropharyngeal swabs) here since this is the first time NPS and OPS were mentioned. What is combined swab? Do the authors mean combined nose throat swab? Please clarify.

Reply: As per the kind suggestion of the reviewer, we have spell out NPS and OPS as Nasopharyngeal and Oropharyngeal swab respectively in line 8 of the revised abstract. We further kindly submit that the combined swab consist of both nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swab in a single tube of viral transport medium. The same has been incorporated in the revised manuscript.

Comment 3: Line 33: "…in extreme of age.", Did the authors mean younger and older or just older? This needs rephrasing and clarify.

Reply: The authors meant to say that people of all ages are susceptible to COVID-19 infection. However, various studies have concluded beyond any doubt that older age group and persons with underlying conditions are more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and had a higher case fatality rate. As per the reviewer suggestion, we have reframed this line and it will now be read as

" The disease can occur in any age group being more complicated and life threatening in patients of older age group and those with underlying co- morbid conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases (Bhandari S et al, 2020; Wu and McGoogan JM 2020; Wang D et al, 2020).

Comment 4: Line 69: Change "Sputum, Plasma, Serum, Urine and Tracheal aspirate" to "sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate".

Reply: As per the suggestion, we have changed the "Sputum, Plasma, Serum, Urine and Tracheal aspirate" to "sputum, plasma, serum, urine and tracheal aspirate".

Comment 5: Line 130, change 2x buffer to 12.5 µl 2x buffer.
Line 97: Need approval #.

Reply: As per the suggestion, we have changed the 2x buffer to 12.5 µl 2x buffer in the revised manuscript.

We have obtained the approval from Institute Ethics Committee, AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh for the study. The ethical sanction number allotted is AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536. The same has been incorporated in the revised manuscript.

Comment 6: Line 137 – 139, 2.4 Gold standard: This is not how the gold standard is defined. I suggest deleting this section.

Reply: Respectfully, it is submitted that in the present study we have evaluated various clinical specimen for their diagnostic utility in detection of SARS-CoV-2 in both new and follow up cases. In such scenario, we need to ensure that the patients must be known diagnosed cases of COVID-19 infection. Since, real time PCR has been recommended throughout the world for diagnosis of SARS-CoV-2 in various clinical specimen during pandemic of COVID-19, we consider these 130 cases diagnosed by rRT-PCR as reference to analyze various clinical samples from them in initial and follow up stages.

Accordingly, we request you to kindly allow this to remain as such in the manuscript.

1. Comment 8: Line 266: The positive rate should be 0.9% not 0.009%.

Reply: We sincerely apologise for typological error. We have changed 0.009% to 0.9% in the revised manuscript.

Journal requirement

1. Please ensure that your manuscript meets PLOS ONE's style requirements, including those for file naming. The PLOS ONE style templates can be found at https://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/file?id=wjVg/PLOSOne_formatting_sample_main_body.pdf and https://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/file?id=ba62/PLOSOne_formatting_sample_title_authors_affiliations.pdf

   Our reply: We have ensured that our revised manuscript meet PLOS ONE's style requirements.

2. We suggest you thoroughly copyedit your manuscript for language usage, spelling, and grammar.

   Our reply; We have done editing of our manuscript for language usage, spelling and grammar to best of our scientific knowledge.

3. Thank you for including the following ethics statement on the submission details page:
   'Study is approved form Institutional Ethical committee.
   Name of committe: IEC-AIIMS, Riapur.
   Approval number: AIIMSRPR/IEC/2020/536'
   Please also include the specific name of your ethics committee and the approval number in the Methods section of your manuscript."

Our reply: The specific name of the ethics committee is Institutional Ethical Committee(IEC), AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh. The same has been mentioned in the revised manuscript.

4. We note that you have indicated that data from this study are available upon request. PLOS only allows data to be available upon request if there are legal or ethical restrictions on sharing data publicly. For information on unacceptable data access restrictions, please see http://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/data-availability#loc-unacceptable-data-access-restrictions.

In your revised cover letter, please address the following prompts:

a) If there are ethical or legal restrictions on sharing a de-identified data set, please explain them in detail (e.g., data contain potentially identifying or sensitive patient information) and who has imposed them (e.g., an ethics committee). Please also provide contact information for a data access committee, ethics committee, or other institutional body to which data requests may be sent.

b) If there are no restrictions, please upload the minimal anonymized data set necessary to replicate your study findings as either Supporting Information files or to a stable, public repository and provide us with the relevant URLs, DOIs, or accession numbers. Please see http://www.bmj.com/content/340/bmj.c181.long for guidelines on how to de-identify and prepare clinical data for publication. For a list of acceptable repositories, please see http://journals.plos.org/plosone/s/data-availability#loc-recommended-repositories.

We will update your Data Availability statement on your behalf to reflect the information you provide.

Reply: We respectfully submit that data of the study contain the potentially identifying patient's information. Therefore, these data most likely cannot be shared. However, any such request depends on permission from Institutional Ethical Committee, AIIMS, Raipur, Chhattisgarh.

We request the editor to update this statement on our behalf.

5. PLOS requires an ORCID iD for the corresponding author in Editorial Manager on papers submitted after December 6th, 2016. Please ensure that you have an ORCID iD and that it is validated in Editorial Manager. To do this, go to 'Update my Information' (in the upper left-hand corner of the main menu), and click on the Fetch/Validate link next to the ORCID field. This will take you to the ORCID site and allow you to create a new iD or authenticate a pre-existing iD in Editorial Manager. Please see the following

video for instructions on linking an ORCID iD to your Editorial Manager account: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xcclfuvtxQ.

Reply: The ORCID iD for the corresponding author is 0000-0002-5292-9132 and the id is validated in Editorial Manager.

6. We note that you have included the phrase "data not shown" in your manuscript. Unfortunately, this does not meet our data sharing requirements. PLOS does not permit references to inaccessible data. We require that authors provide all relevant data within the paper, Supporting Information files, or in an acceptable, public repository. Please add a citation to support this phrase or upload the data that corresponds with these findings to a stable repository (such as Figshare or Dryad) and provide and URLs, DOIs, or accession numbers that may be used to access these data. Or, if the data are not a core part of the research being presented in your study, we ask that you remove the phrase that refers to these data.

Our reply: We kindly submit that NPS and OPS specimen detected 119 and 94 cases respectively leaving 25 cases undetected by OPS. This statement is adequately shown in Table 2. So we are removing the phrase "data not shown" and citing Table 2 in place of it.

7. Please include your tables as part of your main manuscript and remove the individual files. Please note that supplementary tables should be uploaded as separate "supporting information" files.

   Our reply: Agreeing with the suggestion, we have uploaded all the tables in the main revised manuscript.

Reviewer Comments:

1. It is clear when one looks at the cited works of the manuscript that the reference search of the authors ended in mid June 2020. No later paper is cited except a WHO guideline. This is unacceptable in this exploding area of research.

Both that introduction and the discussion must include recent comparative meta-analyses on the subject. In this respect, the Discussion should also emphasize the novelty of the present work compared to those.

Bwire GM, Majigo MV, Njiro BJ, Mawazo A. Detection profile of SARS-CoV-2 using RT-PCR in different types of clinical specimens: A systematic review and meta-analysis. J Med Virol. 2021 Feb;93(2):719-725. doi: 10.1002/jmv.26349. Epub 2020 Aug 2. PMID: 32706393; PMCID: PMC7404904.

Mohammadi A, Esmaeilzadeh E, Li Y, Bosch RJ, Li JZ. SARS-CoV-2 detection in different respiratory sites: A systematic review and meta-analysis. EBioMedicine. 2020 Sep;59:102903. doi: 10.1016/j.ebiom.2020.102903. Epub 2020 Jul 24. PMID: 32718896; PMCID: PMC7380223.

Our reply: It is kindly submitted that the authors had already mentioned and discussed the findings of all the research article included in the meta-analysis of Bwire et al like findings of Wang et al, Xu et al, Lo et al, Chan et al, Chen et al, Liu et al, Wang W et al. Further agreeing to your kind suggestion, we have included the specific finding of both these meta-analysis in our discussion. Novelty of the present work also has also been mentioned in revised manuscript mentioned as under.

Among all the published reports, novelty of the present study lies in its assessment of various clinical specimen in both diagnosis and follow-up of COVID-19 patients. To the best of authors' knowledge, none of the earlier studies evaluated combined swabs as the potential clinical specimen in both diagnosis and monitoring of treatment follow-up cases. Present study found combined swab to provide appropriate clinical picture of clearing of the viruses from the patient undergoing treatment as it was the last specimen among all tested specimen to turned negative. This finding has clinical implication as early negative result of other specimen in follow-up investigation can give pseudoimpression of virus clearance leading to potential risk of transmission of the COVID-19 infection in case if such patients are discharged.

Commented [DSN1]: Comment 1. It is clear when one looks at the cited works of the manuscript that the reference search of the authors ended in mid June 2020. No later paper is cited except a WHO guideline. This is unacceptable in this exploding area of research.

Both that introduction and the discussion must include recent comparative meta-analyses on the subject. In this respect, the Discussion should also emphasize the novelty of the present work compared to those.

2. Key original papers having similar aims as the present work should also be quoted and compared to the present data in the Discussion:

Liu M, Li Q, Zhou J, Ai W, Zheng X, Zeng J, Liu Y, Xiang X, Guo R, Li X, Wu X, Xu H, Jiang L, Zhang H, Chen J, Tian L, Luo J, Luo C. Value of swab types and collection time on SARS-COV-2 detection using RT-PCR assay. J Virol Methods. 2020 Dec;286:113974. doi: 10.1016/j.jviromet.2020.113974. Epub 2020 Sep 16. PMID: 32949663; PMCID: PMC7493793.

Tong Y, Bao A, Chen H, Huang J, Lv Z, Feng L, Cheng Y, Wang Y, Bai L, Rao W, Zheng H, Wu Z, Qiao B, Zhao Z, Wang H, Li Y. Necessity for detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA in multiple types of specimens for the discharge of the patients with COVID-19. J Transl Med. 2020 Nov 2;18(1):411. doi: 10.1186/s12967-020-02580-w. PMID: 33138834; PMCID: PMC7605325.

Zhang H, Chen M, Zhang Y, Wen J, Wang Y, Wang L, Guo J, Liu C, Li D, Wang Y, Bai J, Gao G, Wang S, Yang D, Yu F, Yan L, Wan G, Zhang F. The Yield and Consistency of the Detection of SARS-CoV-2 in Multiple Respiratory Specimens. Open Forum Infect Dis. 2020 Aug 26;7(10):ofaa379. doi: 10.1093/ofid/ofaa379. PMID: 33072810; PMCID: PMC7499703.

Rao M, Rashid FA, Sabri FSAH, Jamil NN, Seradja V, Abdullah NA, Ahmad H, Aren SL, Ali SAS, Ghazali M, Manaf AA, Talib H, Hashim R, Zain R, Thayan R, Amran F, Aris T, Ahmad N. COVID-19 screening test by using random oropharyngeal saliva. J Med Virol. 2021 Jan 4. doi: 10.1002/jmv.26773. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 33393672.

Our reply: Sincerely acknowledging the kind comment of reviewer, we have incorporated all suggested studies and critically analyzed our result with finding of these studies. In doing so, we have re-framed the introduction and discussion section of the manuscript.

3. The authors suggested that their lower Ct in combined and NPS swab indicated the primary nCoV colonization site is the posterior nasopharynx. They did not provide any direct evidence for this. Therefor this should be removed from the major findings and conclusion. However, the indirect evidence that they provided should be discussed and compared to data of others received by other methodologies.

Our reply: As per the suggestion, we have removed our statement of primary nCoV colonization site is the posterior nasopharynx and modified it as indirect evidence in the discussion.

4. The data and the details of Figure 4 are simply invisible. Downloaded high resolution does not help on this a lot. For visibility and clarity, this figure should be completely redrawn.

Our reply: We have redrawn the figure 4. Hopefully it will be accessible in high resolution at your end.

5. The limitations of the study should be discussed in the Discussion in more details. For example, saliva is one of the most promising diagnostic sample. This should be discussed. At least the following meta-analysis should be cited and briefly credited in the discussion:

Czumbel LM, Kiss S, Farkas N, Mandel I, Hegyi A, Nagy Á, Lohinai Z, Szakács Z, Hegyi P, Steward MC, Varga G. Saliva as a Candidate for COVID-19 Diagnostic Testing: A Meta-Analysis. Front Med (Lausanne). 2020 Aug 4;7:465. doi: 10.3389/fmed.2020.00465. PMID: 32903849; PMCID: PMC7438940.

Our reply: Yes, the limitation of the study has been discussed in more detail in the discussion of revised manuscript.

6. The English language of the paper needs extensive revision by a professional language editor. Particularly, many sentences are very long, complicated, therefore, hard to understand.

Our reply: the English language is revised extensively in the revised manuscript.

6. PLOS authors have the option to publish the peer review history of their article (what does this mean?). If published, this will include your full peer review and any attached files.