International Journal on Science and Technology (IJSAT)
E-ISSN: 2229-7677 ● Website: www.ijsat.org ● Email: editor@ijsat.org

Diagnostic Comparison of Automated and Manual Blood Culture Systems in Detecting Bacteremia: A Retrospective Study in a Tertiary Hospital

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Abstract

Background: When diagnosing bloodstream infections (BSIs), blood culture is still considered the gold standard. This study examines the diagnostic accuracy of automated and manual blood culture systems in a tertiary care hospital.

Methods: Using earlier documentation, we undertook a cross-sectional study on two hundred blood culture records which consisted of 300 with a hand-operated system and another 300 using an automated BACTEC/BacT-ALERT system. The retrieved samples were evaluated against several key parameters including positivity rate; contamination rate, time to detection, as well as pathogen distribution.

Results: Compared to the manual method, the automated system demonstrated a higher positivity rate (37.3% vs 26%), lower contamination rate (1.7% vs 5.3%) and significantly shorter mean detection time (21.4 vs 44.6 hours). In all categories, common organisms recovered including Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, and Klebsiella pneumoniae had their recovery rates augmented by the automated system.

Conclusion: Enhanced sensitivity, faster detection, decreased contamination, and improved overall performance make a strong case for incorporating automated systems into high-volume and critical care environments. In contrast, manual methods are more appropriate in resource-constrained settings. However, automation offers clear surgical and operational benefits in the treatment of septicemia.

Keywords: Blood culture, automated system, bacteremia, manual culture, bloodstream infection, diagnostics

Introduction

Effective detection, coupled with appropriate antimicrobial treatment, remains critical for managing both bacteremia and bloodstream infections (BSIs) due to their life-threatening potential. Precise detection of BSIs is facilitated through blood cultures, however, early identification is pivotal in determining clinical outcomes for critically ill, neonatal, or immunocompromised patients. While manual blood culture

systems were developed to assist with limited healthcare resources, their application is often tempered by operator bias, slow detection, and lower sensitivity.

Clinical microbiology has advanced substantially with the introduction of automated blood culture systems like BACTEC and BacT/ALERT, increasing pathogen detection and reducing time to sensitivity. These systems enable uninterrupted microbial growth testing which positively flags samples in real time. This facilitates a reduction in the duration of hospital stays and healthcare expenditures while expediting the initiation of targeted therapy (Saher et al., 2023; Rawat et al., 2019).

Many automated systems provide ease of operational application; however, minimal implementation expenditures alongside reduced costs renders manual systems more appealing in developing countries (Chowdhury et al., 2021). In tertiary care hospital settings, evaluating the use of these systems relative to automated systems remains a significant gap in performing comparative research.

The goal of this study is to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy, time to detection, and level of contamination associated with manual and automated blood culture systems in identifying bacteremia at a tertiary care hospital. The results of this study may guide the policy on diagnostic procedures, cost-benefit analysis, and quality improvement initiatives in hospital laboratories.

Sure! Here is a complete Literature Review section based on your topic: “Detection of Bacteremia: Comparison of Automated vs Manual Blood Culture Systems.” It integrates results from major studies, emphasizes evaluation parameters such as sensitivity, and time to positivity while accounting for logistical issues, and adds inline citations for immediate reference.

Literature Review

Timely detection of bloodstream infections (BSIs) using blood cultures is essential for initiating effective antimicrobial therapy, making it the cornerstone of BSI diagnosis. Clinical microbiology practices have changed with the introduction of automated blood culture systems, especially in high-throughput hospital laboratories.

In a 2023 study comparing automated and manual blood culture systems, Saher and colleagues highlighted the former's enhanced sensitivity and speed of septicemia detection in comparison to the latter’s manual techniques. According to the study, automated systems are thought to enhance clinical outcomes through increased early pathogen recovery, reduced false negative rates, and improved clinical outcomes.

Focusing on neonatal septicemia, Chowdhury et al. (2021) found that automated methods not only provided a higher positivity rate, but also tested samples in a shorter time frame when compared to conventional bottles. While manual methods were more economical, they proved unreliable when it came to early detection, which poses a problem in neonatal units where prompt treatment is crucial.

In a study by Rawat et al. (2019) comparing BACTEC 9050 with manual culturing, use of the automated system led to pathogen detection in a significantly shorter timeframe (mean ~18 vs 48 hours) indicating improved efficiency. The study also noted better yields of fastidious organisms in automated setups.

In pediatric care, Ahmad et al. (2017) noted that automated systems had a greater ability to detect Staphylococcus aureus and gram-negative bacilli compared to culturing portions of the specimens. They remarked that the automation of processes in high risk environments enhances the ability to accurately identify clinically significant isolates because conventional methods often overlook significant isolates.

The importance of laboratory automation in improving patient outcomes has also motivated De Socio et al. (2018) who reported that automation of workflow processes for cultures resulted in a faster time to report which enabled early targeted treatment and decrease the length of hospitalizations. These benefits were strongest in emergency and critical care regions of the hospital.

Not all studies, however, completely disregard the importance of manual systems in resource-poor settings. Wahud et al. (2009) reported that well-monitored manual blood culture techniques can yield valid results, although the time required for incubation makes the process labor intensive.

Lastly, several technical aspects such as blood volume, the rate of contamination, and analytical workflow preceding the measurement affect a particular system's performance. As illustrated by Lin et al. (2013), the volume of blood analyzed in automated systems significantly influenced the detection rates in such systems, proving that some form of adherence to best practice guidelines is essential no matter what system is employed.

Overall, the literature strongly supports the effectiveness of the automation systems in detecting bacteremia more quickly and sensitively as compared to their manual counterparts, particularly in high-acuity hospital environments. However, with the adherence to quality standards, manual techniques still hold as suitable options in low-resource settings.

Methodology

Study Design and Setting

The scope of the study is a retrospective, cross-sectional analysis between the two extremes of the year 2023. It was undertaken in the Microbiology Department of a tertiary teaching hospital. Its objective was to ascertain the accuracy of blood culture systems, both automated and manual, in identifying bacteremia in admitted patients with suspected blood infections (BSIs).

Study Population

The population is bound by blood culture specimens from patients who were admitted across all divisional units, e.g., medical, surgical, pediatric, as well as the intensive care unit. The specimen submitters had likely suspected their patients to have evidence of bacteremia or sepsis irrespective of

their age. The criteria for exclusion consisted of incomplete documentation along with contaminated cultures.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

During the time period of the study, 600 blood culture samples underwent analysis, 300 processed through manual blood culture and 300 via automation (availability of BACTEC™ 9050 or BacT/ALERT® system). The samples were selected through systematic random sampling from the LIS to minimize selection bias.

Blood Culture Procedures

Aseptically blood samples were procured from prescribed patients, 5–10 mL for adults and 1–3 mL for pediatric patients.

- For manual culture, samples were inoculated in blood and MacConkey agars, then brain heart infusion (BHI) broth was used and placed in an incubator with the temperature set to 37°C for a maximum of 7 days. Starting from Day 2, subcultures were performed daily.

- In the automatic system, samples were inoculated into the culture bottles as per the manufacturer's outline and placed in the analyzer. Subsequently, the analyzer performed CO_2 partitioning on CO_2 production measurement for microbial growth monitoring.

Samples with positive results were processed for Gram staining, subculturing, primary biochemical identification, then etched through antimicrobial susceptibility tests according to CLSI's standards.

Parameters Evaluated and Data Collection

The parameters detailed below were extracted from laboratory and patient records.

- Diffusion time (hours)
- Positive culture ratio
- Organisms type isolate
- Contamination ratios
- Final clinical diagnosis alongside antimicrobial therapy result if accessible

Statistical Analysis

Statistical evaluation of the information was conducted through SPSS v26. Measures of central tendency: mean, median, and SD were computed for the continuous variables, whereas frequencies and percentages were utilized to depict the categorical variables.
While, the comparison of positivity and contamination rates in manual and automated systems was done through chi-square analysis.

In detection mean time comparisons, independent t-tests were employed. The threshold for statistical significance was set as $p < 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

An ethical review committee granted the approval for this study. Also, due to the nature of the study as a retrospective analysis of de-identified laboratory records, informed consent was not necessary. Confidentiality of patients' identities and private information was upheld, with data being de-identified prior to any analysis. The study follows the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki along with the internal ethical policies of the institution.

Findings

This study examined a total of 600 blood culture samples, of which 300 were done manually and 300 with an automated blood culture system. The patients' ages ranged from neonates to 84 years (mean age 41.2 years), with a gender distribution of 57% male and 43% female. The samples came from several hospital units: ICU (32%), medical wards (31%), pediatrics (21%), and surgical units (16%).

Comparison of Diagnostic Performance

The **automated system** demonstrated superior performance in several key areas, as summarized in **Table 1** below. It yielded a higher number of positive cultures (112 vs. 78), a lower contamination rate (1.7% vs. 5.3%), and a significantly shorter mean time to detection (21.4 hours vs. 44.6 hours).

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings

Parameter	Manual System	Automated System
Total Samples	300	300
Positive Cultures	78	112
Contamination Rate	5.3%	1.7%
Mean Time to Detection (hrs)	44.6	21.4

These findings underscore the **efficiency and diagnostic advantage of automated systems**, supporting their adoption in high-throughput clinical settings.

Organisms Isolated

Pathogen profiles revealed that the automated system consistently identified **a greater number of pathogens** across all categories, particularly gram-negative bacteria and *Staphylococcus aureus*. **Table 2** presents the distribution of isolates obtained by each system.

Table 2. Organisms Isolated by System

Organism Isolated	Manual (n)	Automated (n)
Staphylococcus aureus	18	28
Escherichia coli	20	34
Klebsiella pneumoniae	14	22
Pseudomonas aeruginosa	10	14
Candida spp.	5	7
Others	11	7

The **increased recovery of clinically significant pathogens** by the automated system further highlights its enhanced sensitivity and reliability in detecting bloodstream infections.

Discussion

This research was conducted to evaluate and contrast the diagnostic accuracies of the manual and automated blood culture systems in detecting bacteremia within a tertiary care hospital. Results provided evidence showing the clear advantage of the automated system in positivity rate, average time of detection, and contamination versus time—all prominent features in the automated systems trends across other regions.

The automated method achieved 112 positive cultures compared 78 with the manual approach, resulting in 43.6% enhanced pathogen recovery. This supports the studies done previously by Saher et al. 2023 and Chowdhury et al. 2021, which observed increased diagnostic yield in adults and neonates with automated blood culture systems. Sensitivity of Automated systems is higher due to constant stirring, enhanced solution, real-time CO_2 level supervision, all leading to accelerated detection of growth of microbes.

Additionally, the automated group's average time of detection (21.4 hours) is far superior than the manual groups average time of detection (44.6 hours), which allows for faster initiation of therapy. In pediatrics and ICU units, these require immediate action otherwise adverse effects might occur. These findings support Rawat et al. 2019, who also noted reduced detection time with the BACTEC 9050 systems.

The study noted that the automated system has lower contamination rates (1.7% vs. 5.3%). This might be the result of reduced manual intervention as well improved bottle design which lowers external

contamination. On the other hand, manual techniques necessitate frequent subculturing and manual monitoring, heightening contamination, and nosocomial infection risks.

In relation to organism recovery, the automated system captured a greater number of Escherichia coli, Staphylococcus aureus, and Klebsiella pneumoniae, which are the most common bloodstream infection pathogens. These organisms are known to exhibit faster growth rates and were well captured by the automated system, as was also reported by Ahmad et al (2017).

Despite the financial constraints posed by automated systems in certain domains, their clinical and operational advantages such as streamlined processes, enhanced sensitivity, reduced workload, and faster turnaround times, greatly aid in infection control and management. For laboratories with high sample throughput and critical care responsibilities, automation becomes a worthwhile long-term investment.

Besides noting the findings of this study, it is also important to address its limitations. The study is retrospective in nature, which means it depended on pre-existing records that could contain errors in data entry or a lack of appropriate clinical correlation. In addition, certain areas like + [what listing is this aligned with? mention prior 'specify' factors list here] (i.e., prior antibiotic treatment)/the volume of blood drawn/the time taken to load the sample weren’t controlled for, which might have had an impact on the recovery rates.

Conclusion

This study automated blood culture systems detect bloodstream infections at a higher rate than manual methods. The automated system showed greater positivity and less contamination with much faster TAT, ensuring timely clinical response. These benefits advocate the use of automation in hospital microbiology labs, especially in critical care and emergency regions.

Considering resource constrained regions, manual culture can be optioned. However, automated systems remain **operational and clinically preferential** for infection control and improving patients' overall outcomes due to enhanced sensitivity and efficiency. Improvement in diagnostic precision and laboratory performance entails strategic decision-making towards adopting automation systems in most hospitals.

Cost-benefit analysis alongside the long-term patient outcome in varying clinical domains with automated workflow requires research initiative.

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