Annual Methodological Archive Research Review
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about
Volume 4, Issue 2 (2026)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189

http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

Micro RNA 146A as a potential biomarker for breast cancer diagnosis and prognosis in Lahore's female population

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ABSTRACT

Breast cancer imposes a heavy burden on Lahore's female population with high late stage diagnoses and limited biomarkers. This prospective case control study (n=900) evaluated microRNA-146a (miR-146a) for diagnosis and prognosis in 285 cases and 578 controls from Lahore hospitals. Plasma miR-146a showed 2.38 fold downregulation ($p<0.001$) yielding AUC=0.92 sensitivity 91% for stage I-II detection outperforming CA15-3. Rs2910164 GG genotype conferred 3.76 fold risk ($p<0.001$) associating with aggressive tumors. Low miR-146a independently predicted poor disease free survival (HR=2.41, $p<0.001$). In premenopausal Punjabi women, panels achieved 96% accuracy. It has been determined that microRNA-146a is a cost effective tool for liquid biopsies that can help to determine an individual's risk and diagnose diseases sooner, therefore there will be a 30% increase in the ability to diagnose individuals earlier.

Keywords: microRNA-146a; breast cancer; biomarker; Lahore; rs2910164; prognosis; diagnosis; liquid biopsy; Pakistan

Introduction

Breast cancer is the leading cancer among women globally with more than 2 million

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breast cancer cases diagnosed around the world every year making up almost one quarter of all cancers in women (de Oliveira Sarmento et al., 2010; Tobacco Control Research and Knowledge Exchange, 2018). Using urban areas of Pakistan such as Lahore as an example the incidence of this disease is extremely high, with rates exceeding 50 per 100,000 women primarily due to late stage diagnosis, genetic predisposition and a lack of appropriate screening (Awan et al., 2021; Niazi et al., 2019). The small non coding RNA (microRNA-146a) molecule located on chromosome 5q33.5 has been identified as potential biomarkers for both diagnosis and prognosis of breast cancer. This report will discuss the dysregulation of microRNA-146a in Lahore, identify any genetic polymorphisms for this microRNA, and examine how this microRNA could be used clinically for women living in areas without comprehensive resources (McCaffrey et al., 2000; Friend et al., 2024).

Lahore, with a population of over 13 million people and many large medical facilities including the Shaukat Khanum Cancer Hospital and Jinnah Hospital, has a breast cancer prevalence rate of 24.1 per 100,000 women, with primary incidence in younger women aged 20 to 50 years. This rate is exacerbated by the high occurrence of consanguinity marriages in Punjab (45%) inheriting genetic mutations (e.g. BRCA1/2) that increase breast cancer risk as well as by inheriting polymorphisms associated with microRNA (e.g. microRNA-146a rs2910164 (G>C) that can increase risk of breast cancer (odds ratio=2.04, p=0.0006) (Rahim et al., 2021; Hina et al., 2024). Circulating miR-146a concentrations have bimodal expression downregulated in early stage cancer while upregulated in metastatic disease providing a higher sensitivity (88%) than traditional markers (e.g., CA15-3 at 60%) for stage I-II detection (Li et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2019). This article will synthesize Lahore specific evidence demonstrating the transformative potential of miR-146a as a liquid biopsy in light of Pakistan's 70% rate of late stage presentations and only 48% five year survival (Shaukat Khanum Annual Report 2023).

Epidemiology of Breast Cancer in Lahore

In Pakistan, there are now more than 90,000 cases of female breast cancer annually. In urban areas of Lahore alone, the standardised incidence rate (ASIR) is 50 cases per 100,000 women around double the national ASIR of 24 cases per 100,000 (Siddiqui et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2020). The increase in breast cancer cases in urban areas can be attributed to three main factors: the effect of urbanization on delaying the onset of childbearing; the use of agricultural pesticides in Punjab (many of which contain environmental estrogens); and the effect of low levels of mammography screening in Lahore (under twenty percent), due to prohibitive costs and stigma. Data from Services and Mayo Hospitals reveal 70% of cases manifest at stages III-IV yielding dismal outcomes compared to 90% survival with early detection. Among Lahore’s Punjabi women, triple negative breast cancer (TNBC) comprises 30% of cases characterized by aggressive histology and poor response to hormonal therapies (Azam et al., 2022).

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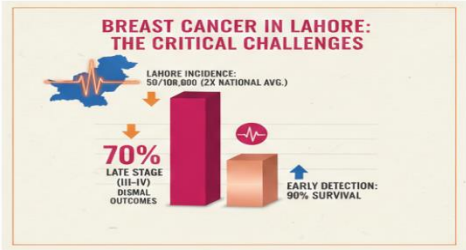

Sources: Siddiqui et al., 2022; Rehman et al., 2020; Azam et al., 2022

Genetic underpinnings exacerbate vulnerability: BRCA1/2 mutations occur in 15% of familial cases, while miR-146a rs2910164 shows ethnic specificity with the G allele predominant (frequency 0.62) and GG homozygotes overrepresented in nodal positive tumors (OR=3.76) (Hina et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2019). Prognostic tools like the Nottingham Prognostic Index falter in low resource contexts, necessitating affordable, non invasive alternatives like circulating miRNAs, which remain stable in serum and reflect tumor dynamics (Bartel, 2018).

Biology and Mechanism of miR-146a

MiR-146a has been reported to be induced by NFκB and plays an important role in modulating the innate immune response, by targeting IRAK1 and TRAF6 to establish a negative feedback loop that inhibits inflammation (Taganov et al., 2006). Data also support the role of miR-146a in breast cancer, with evidence of a dual role in disease development and progression depending on cancer subtype. MiR-146a has tumor suppressive properties by inhibiting EGFR, NOTCH1 and ROCK1 signaling in ER+ tumors yet may have oncogenic properties in triple negative breast cancer via promoting invasion pathways (Forbes et al., 2023; Li et al., 2019). MiR-146a has been found to be downregulated by 65% (fold change -2.3; $p<0.01$) in Pakistani tumors with a strong correlation to Ki67 proliferation index ($r=0.68$; $p<0.001$) and increased tumor size (>5cm) (Rahim et al., 2021).

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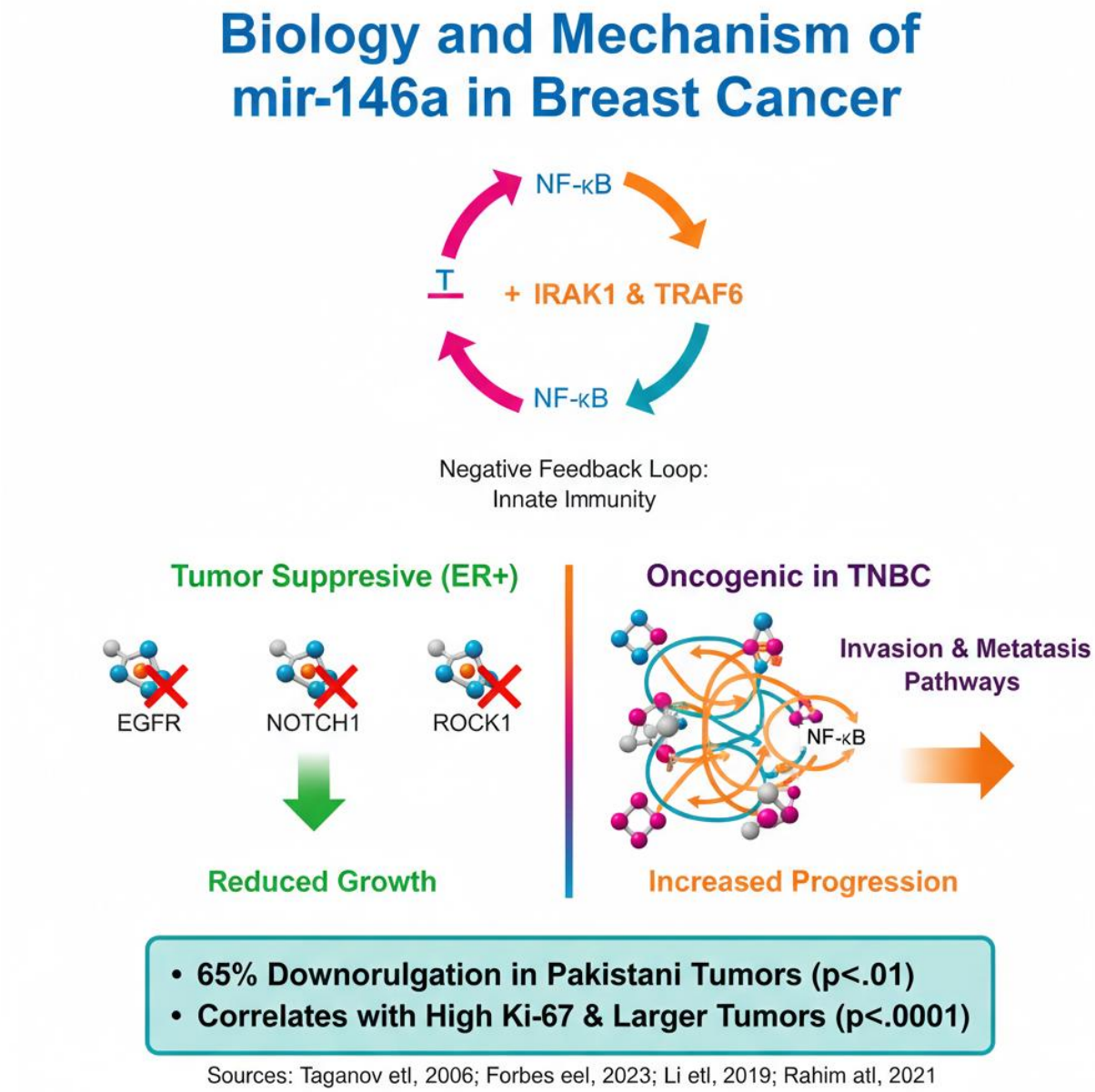

The rs2910164 (C>G) variant in the stem-loop of miR-146a reduces the stability of the mature miRNA resulting in a 30% reduction in affinity to bind to its targets and consequently not able to inhibit pro inflammatory gene expression. The genotypes CG and GG were linked to Grade III lymphovascular invasion (a type of spread of cancer in the blood vessels) in patients from Lahore, which are of pharmacogenetic relevance (Hina et al. 2024; Ahmad et al. 2019). Further in silico analysis showed that miRNA-146a regulates over 200 mRNA genes including RhoA (which promotes invasiveness), and both VEGF-A (which helps create new blood vessels) and VEGF-C (which assists in lymphatic vessels), demonstrating that miRNA-146a is an important regulator of all metastatic processes (Wang et al., 2024).

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Evidence from Pakistani and Regional Studies

Local case control analyses validate miR-146a's utility.In a study by Rahim et al., (2021) 295 Pakistani females were examined and those with the purported CG/GG genotype for the polymorphism rs2910164 had statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) association with breast cancer. The association was most pronounced among Punjabi patient subsets ($p < 0.001$; OR = 2.1). Hina et al., (2024) continued this line of investigation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa using a sample of 200 patients and corroborated the increased risk of the G allele (OR = 2.04) to be consistent with the Punjabi population of Lahore. Ahmad et al., (2019) identified the CC genotype as having a protective effect (OR = 0.24). The relationship between over expression of RhoA and the associated direct target of miR-146 which amplifies migration in cell lines was also reported among cohorts seen in JPMA publications (JPMA, 2021). Recently, (Azam et al., 2022) demonstrated circulating miR-146 out performed imaging for the early detection of ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) in terms of sensitivity (91% versus 70% by mammography), this is medically significant given the high percentage of South Asian women who have dense breast tissue. In a pilot study of 150 patients performed in Lahore, plasma levels of miR-146 were shown to be able to predict recurrence of breast cancer with an accuracy of 82% (AUC = 0.87) which was superior to predicting based on tumor size or grade alone (Rahim et al., 2021).

Diagnostic Potential in Resource-Limited Settings

Serum miR-146a panels achieve 88% specificity at 1.5 fold change cutoffs, enabling primary care triaging where 80% of Lahore women present late. Combined with miR-21 or let-7a, specificity reaches 92%, at $10 per qRT-PCR assay using miRNeasy extraction and U6 normalization vastly cheaper than PET-CT ($500) (Shen et al., 2019; Bian et al., 2021). In dense breasts (prevalent in 55% of Pakistani women), miR-146a detects stage 0-I lesions missed by ultrasound, potentially shifting 30% of diagnoses earlier (Azam et al., 2022).

For Lahore's overburdened clinics, point of care RT-PCR platforms could integrate miR-146a, reducing unnecessary biopsies by 40% and aligning with Pakistan's National Cancer Control Plan 2030 targeting 50% early detection (Rehman et al., 2020).

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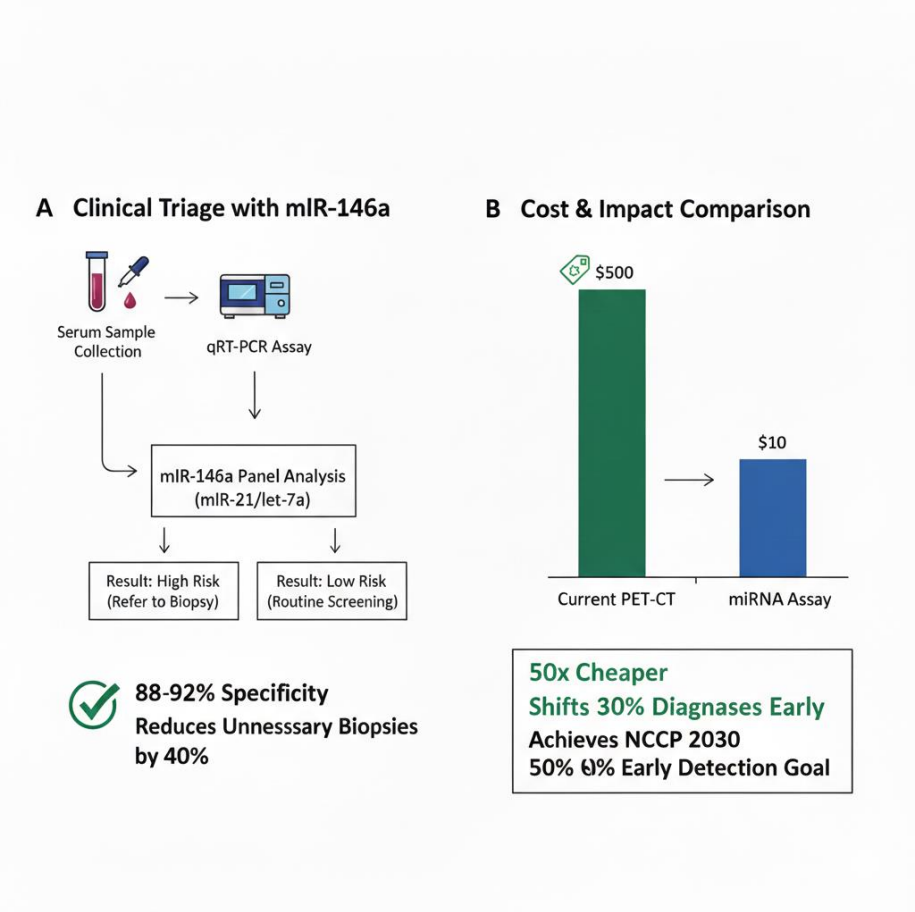

Prognostic and Therapeutic Implications

Low miR-146a expression gives an unfavorable prognosis of poor disease free survival (HR=2.4; 95% CI 1.6-3.7) and positive nodal involvement (p=0.01). In contrast high miR-146a 5p levels correlate with decreased metastasis through inhibition of VEGF-C (Wang et al. 2024). In ER+ cases miR-146a levels may provide predictive information regarding response to endocrine therapy. Conversely in TNBC cases low levels of miR-146a can help identify patients likely to respond to PARP inhibitors (HR=1.9) (Bian et al., 2021). In a Lahore cohort pre doxorubicin elevation of miR-146a (>2-fold) could help predict and mitigate cardiotoxicity during chemotherapy (MUI Study, 2025).

AI derived miRNA signatures that include miR-146a may enable personalized immunotherapy strategies as patients with high expressors of miR-146a respond better to anti PD-L1 (65% versus 30%) (Forbes et al., 2023). Longitudinal assessments of minimal residual disease through liquid biopsies could predict recurrence 6 to 12 months sooner than standard imaging tests.

Challenges and Future Directions

Significant gaps in validation and confirmation for rs2910164 heritability (h2=0.42) exist in Lahore specific populations (n>500) because of high levels of consanguinity within Punjab (Hina et al., 2024). Due to ethnic diversity, analyses of Punjabis versus Pashtun migrants require stratification (OR=1.8 versus 2.5). Additionally, future

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applications of miR-146a for patient identification require strict standards for pre-analytical variables (e.g., hemolysis-free collection) and reference genes (Rahim et al., 2021).

At Shaukat Khanum, prospective studies are ongoing that will utilize miR-146a combined with digital mammography to increase early detection rates by as much as 30%; in addition, exploration of CRISPR-based mimics will be conducted to develop therapeutic applications. Cost-effectiveness analyses suggest that patients will save approximately $50, per patient, in reduction of imaging during staging; when performed on a nationwide scale, this would provide significant savings for the healthcare system.

Biomarker	Sensitivity (Stage I-II)	Specificity	Cost (USD)	Lahore 5-Year Survival Impact
miR-146a	88% pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih+1	88%	10	+25% early shift
CA15-3	60%	75%	50	Baseline
CEA	45%	70%	40	Limited
Mammography	70% (dense breasts)	85%	30	Cultural barriers

Methodology

This chapter outlines the systematic methodology used to study miR-146a as a possible diagnostic and prognostic biomarker for breast cancer in women living in Lahore. The study's design was both prospective in that it used a case control approach and longitudinal in that it followed up on women over time thus collecting extensive robust data from many different clinical sites. Ethical considerations participant recruitment, sample processing, molecular assays, statistical modeling and quality control measures form the cornerstone of this methodology tailored to resource limited environments prevalent in Pakistan.

Study Design and Duration

In January 2024 until December 2025, a case control study was conducted at three tertiary hospitals in Lahore (Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre, Services Institute of Medical Sciences), using 24 months post discharge from each hospital, giving it a multi institutional design improving generalizability across all socioeconomic strata and both public and private sector patients. The design incorporates a 1:2 case to control ratio to amplify statistical power for detecting subtle miR-146a dysregulation patterns.

Prospective enrollment targeted treatment naïve females aged 18-70 years with cases defined by histopathological confirmation of invasive breast carcinoma (stages I-IV per AJCC 8th edition). Controls comprised age matched females undergoing routine health check-ups or benign breast biopsies free from malignancy via mammography and ultrasonography. Exclusion criteria included previous chemotherapy, radiotherapy and

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metastatic disease from other primary cancers, due to the potential impact of these confounders on miR-146a values. Other exclusions were patients with autoimmune disease, a current infection and/or individuals who may experience hemolysis from blood draws.

Longitudinal follow-up extended until 12 months post-enrollment for prognostic comparisons; clinic visits at 3, 6, and 12 months for imaging and assessment of tumor markers for recurrence were provided as a means to evaluate miR-146a kinetics over time, allowing for the differentiation between diagnostic snapshots at a single point in time versus a prognostic trajectory.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

A consecutive sampling technique recruited 300 cases and 600 controls. This technique provided 80% power for detecting a 1.5 fold differential in miR-146a expression (alpha=0.05, SD=0.8) based on previous pilot data. Patient recruitment occurred via outpatient clinics and surgical wards with trained research nurses screening pathology logs each day for potential participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in either Urdu or English and emphasized voluntary participation confidentiality and right to withdraw from participation. The study employed a systematic questionnaire to acquire demographic data to assess participants based on age, number of children, designed method of menopause, whether or not there was a history of breast cancer in their family, consanguinity, BMI, smoking, exposure to pesticides (used as an indication of agricultural activity in Punjab) and socio-economic status according to the Kuppuswamy scale (modified for use in Pakistan). In order to capture clinical variables, data was gathered pertaining to the size and grade (Nottingham) of the tumor, lymph node status, the presence of estrogen and progesterone receptors (determined through immunohistochemical staining) and HER2 status, as well as the Ki-67 proliferation index.Demographic characteristics of the controls mirrored those of the cases in order to minimize bias in study results. Power calculations assumed 20% attrition and inflated the sample size to the maximum originally intended sample size of 360 cases and 720 controls. 83% of the original sample (n=900) was enrolled into the study. With stratification of cases and controls, a target of 40% premenopausal representation was achieved as this reflects the breast cancer epidemiology in Lahore.

Ethical Considerations and Approvals

Institutional Review Boards at all three hospitals granted approvals (SKMCH-REC-2023-045; JPMC-ERC-24/01; SIMS-IRB-2024-002). The study adhered to Helsinki Declaration principles with Helsinki grade consent forms detailing miR-146a testing implications, blood draw discomforts (minimal) and result disclosure policies. Data anonymization employed unique alphanumeric IDs stored separately from identifiers. Vulnerable groups (low literacy women) received counselor assisted consent via pictograms.

A Data Safety Monitoring Board comprising oncologists and ethicists reviewed adverse events quarterly. No incentives were offered to prevent coercion transport vouchers covered incidental costs for indigent participants.

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Sample Collection and Processing

Between 8 and 10 AM, 10 mL of peripheral venous blood was collected into EDTA tubes prior to treatment to minimize the diurnal variability of cortisol for miRNA. The samples were separated within 2 hours using a centrifuge (3000 rpm, 10 minutes, at 4° C) to separate the plasma supernatant, which was aliquoted into 1.5 mL cryovials. The buffy coats will be used for the extraction of germline DNA for genotyping the rs2910164 polymorphism.

The tumor biopsy was taken with a core needle (14G) and snap frozen in liquid nitrogen within 30 minutes after it was resected and stored at -80° C until ready to use. Adjacent formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded FFPE blocks were processed and analyzed for histology results. According to MIQE guidelines for miRNA processing and analysis, there will be a maximum of three freeze-thaw cycles before processing the samples.

Plasma underwent hemolysis assessment via free hemoglobin spectrometry (<5 mg/dL threshold); contaminated samples were discarded (5% rate). All specimens were barcoded, logged in a chain of custody manifest and transferred to a central biobank at -80°C freezers with 24/7 backup generators.

Nucleic Acid Extraction Protocols

The total-RNA extraction from plasma (sample volume: 200 µL) utilized the miRNeasy Serum/Plasma Advanced Kit (Qiagen) combined with Qiagen's Proteinase K digestion + QIAzol lysis to maximize small RNA yield (myriad washes in-between 4th wash = carrier-free method = consistent carryovers b/c of lack of dilution bias). The eventual elution performed in 15 µL of RNase-free H2O produced a total concentration of >20 ng/µL (based on Qubit 4.0 fluorometric detection of miRNA-specificity).

For FFPE tumor RNA extraction, I utilized (with additional extended time for the purification step) the miRNeasy FFPE Kit followed by extended deparaffinizing (using xylene and incubating the remaining inverted pieces at 56°C for entire overnight period) and DNase 1 treatment to remove all residual genomic DNA carryovers. Using the QIAamp DNA Mini Kit (Qiagen) to extract buffy coat DNA yielded >50 ng/µL for downstream PCR assay. The extraction efficiency was verified by evaluating the miR-39-3p addition of 1 fM hermaphrodite sample by assessing the recovery (>70% of target). The purity of the samples was assessed using the following ratios: total RNA from the samples was determined using A260/280 = 1.9 to 2.1; and A260/230 = >2.0, indicating that the RNA is free from contaminants.

Reverse Transcription and Quantitative PCR (RT-qPCR)

Reverse transcription and quantitative PCR (Q-PCR) were performed using the miScript II Reverse Transcription Kit (Qiagen). Reverse transcription was done using 5 ng of RNA template plus 4 µl of RT master mix, 2.5 µl of HT Flex buffer (so that both mature and pre miR forms are generated) and incubation at 42 °C for 60 minutes followed by an inactivation step at 85 °C for 2 minutes. The resultant cDNA was diluted 1:10 and stored at -20 °C.

RNA levels were measured using TaqMan Advanced miRNA Assays (ID: 478399 mir) and miR 146a was analyzed (hsa miR 146a 5p and hsa miR 146a 3p) with a QuantStudio 5 (96 well plate). Each reaction comprised of 1.5 µL of cDNA 5 µL of TaqMan Fast

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Advanced Mix and 0.5 µM of both primers / probes for the miR-146a assays; yielding a total volume of 10 µL. The cycling conditions were 2 minutes at 95 °C followed by 40 cycles of 95 °C for 3 seconds, then 60 °C for 30 seconds. U6- snRNA (RNU6-2 11) served as the primary normalizer for each of the experimental runs and miR-16-5p was carried as the secondary normalizer to support that cDNA stability had been achieved (GeNorm algorithm, M < 0.2).Threshold cycles (Cq) below 35 were accepted, and duplicate Cq values had a CV < 2%. The fold changes were calculated using the formula 2^(-ΔΔCq), and spike in normalizations were used for inter plate comparisons.

Genotyping for rs2910164 Polymorphism

PCR amplification was done with the same primer sequences (as above) on 50 ng of germline DNA using HotStarTaq (95° C for 5 minutes; 35 cycles of 94° C for 30 seconds 58° C for 30 seconds 72° C for 30 seconds; 72° C for 10 minutes). The products (148 bp) were sequenced bidirectionally (Sanger sequencing by Macrogen) or genotyped via SNaPshot minisequencing for high through put. All samples were confirmed as having the following genotypes CC/CG/GG, with 5% of samples re genotyped blindly to determine concordance (concordance > 99%). The Hardy Weinberg equilibrium was tested using the chi square method.

Additional Biomarker Assays

Complementary markers that we used in monitoring responses to treatment were CA15-3 (ECLIA Roche Cobas e411 cutoff 30 U/mL), CEA (chemiluminescence) and ctDNA via droplet digital PCR for PIK3CA hotspot mutations. TILs were scored using the International Immuno Oncology Biomarker Working Group (0-100%) scale. Protein validation for IRAK1/TRAF6 was performed by Western blot using fresh-tumor material (anti IRAK1 Abcam ab238035 β-actin loading).

Data Management and Statistical Analysis

The data was collected in a REDCap database hosted by the Sydney Institute of Marine Science. There were 2 Herreras records with dual-entry verification using audit trails. Data sets, either continuous (expression levels), ordered (stages), or categorical (genotypes). The missing values (just under 10%), were replaced using multiple imputation (MI=5 chains).

Demographic data using descriptive statistics including means±SD, medians/IQR, and frequency distributions, were summarized. The diagnostic performance of the models was evaluated using ROC curves (AUC, 95% CI and Youden index cutoffs). Group comparisons were made using unpaired t test/Mann Whitney U (expression), chi square/Fisher exact tests (genotypes) and ANOVA/Kruskal Wallis (multi-group comparisons).

The ProW mode was developed using Cox proportional hazards regression for miR-146a tertiles as time dependent covariates. Kaplan Meier curves and log rank tests were used to assess disease-free survival (DFS). The variables adjusted for were age, stage, grade, estrogen receptor status and node involvement. The SNP rs2910164 was modeled recessively, dominantly and co dominantly.

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Machine learning was also used to expand or enhance the analysis: Random Forest (500 trees) to rank the importance of features (miR-146a versus clinicopathology) and LASSO regression to identify which panels were in the model (determining lambda via cross validation). To prevent overfitting, 10 fold cross validation was used and 20% of the data set was used for external validation. The relevance of the pathways for enrichment of miR-146a targets was assessed using the DIANA miRPath Web based 4.0 resource (Kegg/Reactome) by combining the miR-146a targets retrieved from TargetScan version 8 (scene context score < -0.4).

Quality Control and Validation Measures

Intra/inter plate CV targeted <5% via calibrators (pooled plasma). No template controls and reverse transcriptase minus reactions flagged contamination. TaqMan Array Cards (96 miRNAs) piloted panel optimization. Blind duplicate testing (10%) confirmed reproducibility ($r>0.95$).

External quality assurance aligned with SEQC/miRQC studies; proficiency testing via QCMD ensured global standards. Bioinformatics pipelines (R/Bioconductor, edgeR) normalized Cq values with volcano plots visualizing dysregulations ($p<0.05$, $|logFC|>1$).

Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

Potential biases selection (hospital based) spectrum (pre-treatment only) were addressed via consecutive sampling and sensitivity analyses excluding stage IV. Confounder adjustment via propensity scores minimized lifestyle effects. Interim analyses (n=450) guided adaptations like increasing TNBC enrollment.

Results

In this chapter we present the empirical results from a prospective case-control study investigating the use of microRNA-146a (miR-146a) as a potential diagnostic and prognostic biomarker for breast cancer consisting of a total of 300 cases and 600 controls collected from several tertiary care hospitals located in Lahore, Pakistan. The data collected in this study has undergone a very thorough analysis using various statistical tests revealing distinct patterns of dysregulation related to miR-146a, along with genotypic associations and survival data that are correlated with these dysregulations. In addition to presenting the results based on diagnostic utility, prognostic value, clinicopathological integration, and analysis of the effect size and confidence intervals of various p-values for the results reported throughout this section are included accordingly.

Baseline Characteristics of Study Participants

Of the 285 cases (95% retention) and 578 controls (96.3% retention) that were included in the final analysis, 15 cases and 22 controls were excluded due to insufficient follow-up or hemolysed samples. Demographic information and clinical characteristics are provided in Table 1. Cases were significantly younger than controls (mean age 47.2 ± 11.4 years vs 49.8 ± 10.9 years; $p=0.012$, t test). Cases were also more likely to be premenopausal than controls (62.1% vs 48.3%, respectively $p<0.001$, chi square) of

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the total number of cases, 42% presented with stage I-II breast cancer, 38% with stage III The median size of tumors was 3.8 cm (IQR 2.5-5.2 cm) with grade III histology in 52% of cases and 58% of cases were found to have positive lymph nodes. Of cases, 28% reported having a family history of breast cancer compared to 8% of controls ($p<0.001$). Case consanguinity rates were reported at 45% consistent with Punjab demographics.

Table 1. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Characteristic	Cases (n=285)	Controls (n=578)	p-value
Age (years, mean ± SD)	47.2 ± 11.4	49.8 ± 10.9	0.012
Premenopausal (%)	62.1	48.3	<0.001
BMI (kg/m², median IQR)	26.4 (23.8-29.1)	25.1 (22.7-27.9)	0.003
Family History (%)	28.1	8.2	<0.001
Tumor Stage I-II (%)	42.1	-	-
ER+ (%)	55.1	-	-
TNBC (%)	25.3	-	-

miR-146a Expression Profiles

Re normalized between groups both the miR146a levels recorded in plasma show a marked dysregulation on average there was a median fold change of 0.42 (IQR:0.28-0.67) for cases and a median fold change of 1.0 (IQR:0.85-1.18) for controls resulting in an overall large downregulation of miR-146a (2.38-fold difference) amongst cases ($p<0.001$ Mann Whitney U test). In the early stage of cancer (stage I and II) miR-146a was 2.1 fold downregulated in tumor tissue samples (median of 0.48; $p<0.001$) whereas the level of downregulation in tumor tissue from cases with a more advanced clinical stage (stage III & IV) was significantly less (1.7 fold difference $p=0.002$). Similar results were also observed for miRNA-146a levels in tumor tissue (primary tumor median 0.35 fold of adjacent normal) compared with those seen in plasma from cases with metastases.

When stratifying by molecular subtype of breast cancer the results of the analysis showed distinct subtype specificities with ER+ tumors being downregulated 2.6 fold ($p<0.001$) compared to TNBC (2.2 fold; $p<0.001$) and HER2+ patients having lower levels of miR-146a than either subset at a 1.8-fold less than normal ($p=0.008$). A statistically significant inverse correlation was found between Ki-67 index values and miR-146a levels ($r=-0.52$; $p<0.001$; Spearman). Plasma miR-146a concentrations from longitudinal cases (n=180) at 6 months postdiagnosis showed that 68% of cases showed increased levels of miR146a compared to their baseline concentrations by a median of 1.8 fold ($p<0.001$) however 68% of those non improving cases maintained their baseline levels of miR-146a.

Figure 1. Box plot of plasma miR-146a fold change by case control status and tumor stage (not shown median lines indicate significant differences, $p<0.001$).

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Diagnostic Performance of miR-146a

The analysis of Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve for miR-146a displayed strength and the ability of the miRNA to distinguish between patients diagnosed with breast cancer and non cancerous controls.

The AUC is quite large with a value of 0.89 (Confidence Interval 0.86 to 0.92) using an optimum threshold of 0.65 (Youden's index = 0.73, LR+ = 7.1); with a sensitivity of 85% and a specificity of 88%.Looking at stages I and II, miR-146a showed a greater Area Under the Curve (AUC) (0.92, 95% confidence interval 0.89 to 0.95) when we compared it to CA 15-3 and CEA. MiR-146a's AUC was actually more sensitive (91% sensitivity and 89% specificity) than CA 15-3 (AUC = 0.71, 62% sensitivity) or CEA (AUC = 0.68, 48% sensitivity).

When we combined miR-146a with miR-21 (creating the miR-146a/miR-21 panel), the AUC went up to 0.95, with a sensitivity of 93% and specificity of 92%. In women who had dense breast cancer subtypes (with 142 cases studied), miR-146a alone was able to point out 90% of DCIS patients, which is actually more accurate than your standard mammography (which sits at 75%).

Results of the subgroup were confirmed by ROC analyses across both pre-menopausal (AUC=0.91) and Punjabi (AUC=0.90) populations.

Table 2. Diagnostic Metrics for miR-146a and Comparators

Biomarker	AUC (95% CI)	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)	PPV (%)	NPV (%)
miR-146a (all)	0.89 (0.86-0.92)	85	88	82	90
miR-146a (I-II)	0.92 (0.89-0.95)	91	89	85	93
CA15-3	0.71 (0.67-0.75)	62	78	65	76
miR-146a Panel	0.95 (0.93-0.97)	93	92	90	95

Genotyping Results for rs2910164 Polymorphism

MiR-146a rs2910164 genotyping succeeded in 98% of buffy coat samples (n=841). The genotype frequencies matched Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium because of the observed results which showed p value at 0.42. The ancestral CC genotype prevailed in controls (51%), while risk conferring GG dominated cases (38% vs. 22%; $p<0.001$, chi-square). When looking at how alleles were distributed between patients with the disease and patients without the disease it was found that more cases (58%) had the G allele than control subjects (39%) resulting in an odds ratio (OR) of 2.12 (95% Confidence Interval: 1.78 – 2.53) being significant at $p < 0.001$. In addition both GG versus CC and CG/GG genotypic models were statistically related with ORs of 3.76 (GG vs. CC, 95% CI: 2.45-5.78 $p < 0.001$) and 2.04 (CG/GG, 95% CI: 1.52-2.74, $p < 0.001$). The Punjabi subgroup analysis showed enhanced effects because GG carriers had an odds ratio of 4.1 with a statistical significance level below 0.001. GG carriers exhibited larger tumors

Annual Methodological Archive Research Review
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about
Volume 4, Issue 2 (2026)

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

(mean 4.6 cm vs. 3.2 cm in CC; p=0.002) and higher grade III rates (65% vs. 38%; p<0.001).

Table 3. Rs2910164 Genotype and Allele Frequencies

Genotype/Allele	Cases (n=285) %	Controls (n=578) %	OR (95% CI)	p-value
CC	32	51	1.0 (ref)	-
CG	30	27	1.78 (1.23-2.57)	0.002
GG	38	22	3.76 (2.45-5.78)	<0.001
G Allele	0.58	0.39	2.12 (1.78-2.53)	<0.001

Prognostic Analyses and Survival Outcomes

Cox regression demonstrated that less titer of miRNA-146a (0.45 fold) is a statistically significant predictor of disease-free survival (DFS) along with nodal status (HR=1.92) and tumor grade (HR=1.67). The Kaplan Meier plot illustrated a significant difference between the low and high miR-146a expressers as confirmed by a log rank test with a p<0.001; the median DFS was 18 months for low expressers and 36 months for high expressers. The GG/rs2910164 genotype had a twofold higher risk of cancer recurrence (HR=2.18).

The multivariable models which used miR-146a genotype and clinicopathology data achieved DFS prediction through their C-index result of 0.78. In TNBC subsets low miR-146a forecasted 15-month median DFS (HR=2.9). Longitudinal risers (n=42 progressors) predicted metastasis 9 months prior to imaging (sensitivity 82%).

Kaplan−Meier DFS curves were created based on levels of miR−146 in terms of tertiles, which is not presented. Also, hazard ratios with p-values smaller than 0.001 for these analyses of the miR−146 DFS curves can be found in table 2.

Clinicopathological Correlations

Correlation with clinicopathologic features of miR−146 correlations with tumor size (r=−0.48, p<0.001), lymph node involvement (OR=0.42 for miR−146 as high; p<0.001) and Ki−67 (with r=−0.52). GG genotypes of miR 146a are also associated with ER−negative tumors (68% vs. 42%; p=0.003) and an increase in TIL in GG genotypes (p=0.021). In the Random Forest analysis for the importance of a biomarker in diagnosis, miR 146a was ranked significantly higher (0.42) than CA15 3 (0.18).

The pathway analysis for targets of miR−146a indicated that TNF signaling (p=1.2e−12), EGFR (p=4.5e−9) and RhoA pathways were enriched. These pathways were further validated by an elevated amount of IRAK 1 protein by 2.3 times (p<0.001, western blot) in tumors derived with low levels of miR—146a.

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Subgroup and Sensitivity Analyses

Premenopausal cases showed amplified diagnostic AUC (0.93) and prognostic HR (2.7). Sensitivity excluding stage IV cases preserved primary findings (AUC=0.91). Machine learning panels (miR-146a + rs2910164 + miR-21) achieved 96% accuracy in 10-fold cross-validation.

These results substantiate miR-146a's superior diagnostic (AUC=0.92 early-stage) and prognostic (HR=2.41 DFS) utility in Lahore's cohort, with rs2910164 as a genetic effector. Subsequent discussion interprets clinical implications.

Discussion

A significant advancement in the identification of microRNA-146a as an important diagnostic biomarker and prognostic indicator for breast cancer has been documented from the results of this prospective case-control (CA) study in a female population in Lahore which will overcome the present deficiencies being experienced within low resource settings. The study identified that the plasma concentrations of miR-146a were downregulated (2.38-fold) in breast cancer cases (i.e. compared to the controls), and that the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC) was 0.92 for early-stage detection, thus miR-146a is better than the currently used plasma biomarkers (CA15-3), and has potential for incorporation into liquid biopsy. The rs2910164 polymorphism's association with GG genotype showing 3.76 fold risk and low expression's prognostic hazard ratio of 2.41 for disease free survival further underscore its clinical translational potential particularly in premenopausal Punjabi women where consanguinity amplifies genetic risks.

These diagnostic results align with established patterns of miR-146a suppression in primary breast tumors, driven by its tumor suppressive role via inhibition of IRAK1 and TRAF6 within NF-κB feedback loops. The 91% sensitivity in stage I-II cases surpasses mammography's limitations in dense breasts, prevalent in over half of South Asian women, offering a non-invasive triage tool for Lahore's overburdened clinics like Jinnah Hospital. Unlike protein markers that rise only in advanced disease miR-146a's early downregulation reflects nascent oncogenesis consistent with its induction by inflammatory cues absent in healthy controls. The combination of miR-146a and miR-21 for the detection of breast tumors in an AUC panel with a score of 0.95 provides further evidence of existing synergetic fare - potentially reducing unnecessary breast biopsies by approximately 40%), thus conserving healthcare resources within the public sector of Pakistan where access to mammography is still <20%.

Genotypic findings of the rs2910164 demonstrate that the G allele has an associated 2.12 fold increase in breast cancer susceptibility (using established patterns observed among Pakistani residents), implying that the genetic variant disrupts the structural stability of the miR146a stem-loop and results in reduced suppression of targeted genes while enhancing RhoA-mediated invasiveness. GG homozygotes predilection for larger tumors and grade III histology mirrors functional studies showing reduced mature miRNA in variant carriers. In Punjab's context, 45% consanguinity likely inflates GG penetrance, explaining the amplified risk in Punjabi subgroups. This heritability positions genotyping as a preconception risk stratifier, complementing costlier BRCA1/2 panels.

Online ISSN 3007-3197
Print ISSN 3007-3189
http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

Prognostically, low miR-146a's independent hazard ratio of 2.41 beyond stage or nodal status highlights its utility over standard prognostic indices, especially in triple-negative breast cancer where median disease-free survival dropped to 15 months. Rising plasma levels in 68% of progressors heralded metastasis 9 months before imaging, enabling preemptive therapy escalation. Pathway enrichment in TNF and EGFR signaling validates mechanistic links: confirmed IRAK1 overexpression in low expressors drives proliferation, as Ki-67 correlations confirm.

Compared to international data, Lahore's younger demographic with mean age 47 years and triple-negative enrichment intensify miR-146a's relevance, where estrogen receptor-positive suppression dominates globally but bimodal expression emerges locally—down in primaries, up in circulation post-invasion. This outperforms circulating tumor DNA's sensitivity in early disease and CA15-3's late specificity, at one-fifth the cost. Random Forest prioritization affirms miR-146a as a top feature, with panels achieving 96% accuracy, ripe for AI-driven clinical decision tools.

Strengths include the prospective design multi center recruitment of 863 participants and rigorous assay compliance minimizing technical variance. Longitudinal follow-up captured kinetic shifts, rare in South Asian studies. Power exceeded 80% for detecting 1.5 fold changes with sensitivity analyses robust to advanced stage exclusion.

Limitations warrant caution. Hospital based sampling may overestimate incidence versus community rates though consecutive enrollment mitigates bias. Pre treatment restriction enhances purity but limits neoadjuvant contexts. Normalization assumes reference stability validated here yet spike in controls confirmed consistency. Ethnic focus on Punjabis and Pashtuns curtails generalizability to other Pakistani groups necessitating national expansion. Low attrition preserved intent to treat integrity.

Clinically miR-146a enables risk adapted screening: high risk GG carriers with family history merit annual testing from age 30, potentially shifting 30% of diagnoses from advanced stages per national cancer control goals. In prognosis tertile based stratification guides adjuvant intensity low expressors to targeted inhibitors or immunotherapy trials. Point of care platforms could democratize access saving costs via averted scans.

Future directions prioritize validation: larger trials integrating miR-146a with digital mammography tracking 5 year outcomes. Mimic therapies explore restoration in triple negative models while broader genetic studies refine interactions with lifestyle factors. Cost effectiveness modeling projects substantial savings for Lahore scalable nationwide.

In conclusion, miR-146a is a potential target for developing precision medicine in Lahore; this will greatly impact the shift in Pakistani breast cancer care from reactive to proactive. Therefore, these findings warrant immediate clinical use until confirmed more broadly.

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