Laboratory diagnosis of paediatric tuberculosis in the European Union/European Economic Area: analysis of routine laboratory data, 2007 to 2011

A Sanchini (sanchinia@rki.de)1,2, L Fiebig3, F Drobniewski2, W Haas4, E Richter5, V Katalinic-Jankovic6, E Pimkina7, G Skenders8, D M Cirillo9, European Reference Laboratory Network for TB (ERLN-TB) members10, Y Balabanova1,3
1. Department for Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Robert Koch Institute, Berlin, Germany
2. European Public Health Microbiology Training Programme (EUPHEM), European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Stockholm, Sweden
3. Queen Mary College, Barts and the London School of Medicine, University of London, London, United Kingdom
5. National Reference Center for Mycobacteria, Forschungszentrum Borstel, Borstel, Germany
7. Infectious Diseases and Tuberculosis Hospital, Affiliate of Vilnius University Hospital Santariskiu Klinikos, Vilnius, Lithuania
8. Riga East University Hospital, Centre of Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases, Riga, Latvia
9. San Raffaele Scientific Institute, Milan, Italy
10. Members of the network are listed at the end of the article

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Laboratory confirmation of paediatric tuberculosis (TB) is frequently lacking. We reviewed the range of routine laboratory tests and their performance in different biological samples used to diagnose active TB in children. A questionnaire-based survey was conducted among the European Reference Laboratory Network for TB followed by collection of routine laboratory data on 10,549 paediatric samples tested in 2007 to 2011 at six reference laboratories (in Croatia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania and the United Kingdom (UK)). The questionnaire showed that all laboratories used rapid assays. Non-respiratory samples were collected more often in Germany (135/275, 49.1%) and the UK (490/2,140, 22.9%) compared with Croatia (138/2,792, 4.9%), Latvia (222/2,401, 9.2%) and Lithuania (76/1,549, 4.9%). Overall laboratory positivity rates (isolation of Mycobacterium tuberculosis complex and/or identification of its nucleic acids in a sample) were higher in lymph node and gastric aspirate samples (14/203 (6.9%) and 43/1,231 (3.5%)) than in sputum samples (89/4,684 (1.9%)). Pooled sensitivity, specificity, positive and negative predictive values and accuracy of molecular assays assessed against solid or liquid culture were 79.2%, 93.6%, 67.1%, 96.5% and 91.6%, respectively. A more intensive approach in obtaining gastric aspirate and non-respiratory samples may increase laboratory confirmation of paediatric TB. Major effort is needed in optimisation and validation of molecular tests in these samples.

Introduction
Tuberculosis (TB) affects globally about 490,000 children under 15 years-old, with 64,000 related deaths occurring every year [1]. Paediatric TB is an indicator of recent transmission in the population. Often, children experience more severe forms of the disease, such as miliary or meningeal TB [2,3]. Young children are rarely able to expectorate sputum; therefore, other respiratory samples, such as gastric aspirates (GA) or bronchoalveolar lavages (BAL), can be obtained for diagnostic purposes, although these procedures are more unpleasant for a child than sputum collection [1,3-5]. Collection of non-respiratory samples (lymph node (LN), pus or tissue biopsy) is necessary to diagnose extrapulmonary TB; however, these procedures are relatively invasive [6,7].

TB in children often has a paucibacillar nature, resulting in microscopy smears that are negative [3,4,8]. Culture isolation, a more sensitive method, takes up to 14 days due to slow growth of Mycobacterium tuberculosis complex (MTBC) bacteria; however, even culture is seldom positive in paediatric specimens due to very few bacilli present in a sample [3,4,8]. Further full drug susceptibility testing (DST) can only be done once an isolate is available and takes two more weeks [9,10].

Consequently, the diagnosis of paediatric TB often relies on a combination of clinical judgment and radiological findings, prompting initiation of treatment without clear laboratory evidence [1,8,9,11,12]. Unlike laboratory criteria, there is as yet no universally applied diagnostic algorithm based on clinical and radiological criteria that are objective [8,11,12].
The most important advance in TB diagnosis is the introduction of the internationally endorsed molecular assay Xpert MTB/RIF (Cepheid Inc., Sunnyvale, CA, United States), which identifies MTB and rifampicin resistance from sputum samples [13]. A growing body of evidence supports the adequacy of Xpert MTB/RIF for adult TB diagnosis [14-16].

Recent studies have investigated the performance of the Xpert MTB/RIF system in children and showed promising results when the test is applied to sputum, nasopharyngeal aspirates (NPA), GA or non-respiratory samples [4,6,7,17-19]. However, there are limited data on the usefulness of molecular assays for paediatric TB diagnosis in Europe, where TB prevalence is low [20].

The aim of the study was to give an overview of the range of routine diagnostic tests and their performance for different types of samples used to diagnose active TB in children across European laboratories.

**Methods**

**Study design**

The study was planned in two stages. Firstly, we invited all (38) national TB reference laboratories across the European Union (EU)/European Economic Area (EEA) countries that are members of the European Reference Laboratory Network for TB (ERLN-TB) – an initiative supported by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) [21] – to participate in a questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire aimed to determine the variety of algorithms used to diagnose paediatric TB and the type of samples collected from children; it contained 53 questions and was based on an earlier questionnaire used across the ERLN-TB [22].

Secondly, six laboratories of the network (referred to hereafter as study sites) agreed to provide their routine data for all consecutive primary samples and reference cultures referred for diagnosis from children younger than 15 years-old with suspected TB during 2007 to 2011.

Primary samples were defined as specimens referred to a reference laboratory for primary diagnostics, while reference cultures were cultures isolated by local laboratories and referred to a reference laboratory for confirmation, DST or molecular typing.

Low-incidence western and central European settings were represented by the following laboratories: the National Reference Centre for Mycobacteria at Forschungszentrum Borstel, Borstel, Germany; San Raffaele Scientific Institute, in collaboration with the Institute ‘Villa Marelli’, Niguarda Ca’ Granda Hospital, Milan, Italy; the National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory, Public Health England, London, United Kingdom (UK) and the National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory, National Institute of Public Health, Zagreb, Croatia (TB incidence in 2012 being 5.6, 6.7, 15.0 and 14.0 cases per 100,000 population in the respective countries [23]).

The National TB Reference Laboratory at the Latvian Infectology Centre, Upeslejas, Latvia, and the Tuberculosis Bacteriology Laboratory at the Infectious Diseases and Tuberculosis Hospital, Vilnius, Lithuania, represented medium-incidence eastern European countries, with TB incidence in 2012 being 53.0 and 66.0 cases per 100,000 population, respectively [23].

Only partial data were available from the Italian site for 2011; this is the only site that does not have a national reference laboratory function, covering mainly the Lombardy region of Italy. Germany provided data for 2011 only. We did not exclude control samples, as there were only a few of those.

The laboratory data were collected using an Excel-based tool, with line-listing by sample. The Croatian, German, Italian and UK sites received a small proportion of all paediatric samples in the country (estimated by the laboratory directors as less than 10%), while the Lithuanian site covered approximately half and the Latvian site all paediatric samples in their countries.

Laboratory positivity was confirmed by a positive culture (on solid or liquid media) identified as MTB(C) or non-tuberculous mycobacteria (NTM) and/or by the identification of MTB(C) or NTM nucleic acid directly in a sample by a molecular assay.

**Ethics statement**

Routine laboratory data were sent to the Robert Koch Institute, Berlin, Germany, without personal identifiers. The study obtained a waiver of informed consent and ethics review permission from the Robert Koch Institute.

**Data analysis**

Per-sample and per-patient analyses were conducted. Samples were categorised as ‘respiratory’ (sputum, BAL, GA, pleural fluid and other respiratory samples such as NPA), ‘non-respiratory’ (cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), LN, pus, blood, other tissue biopsy, urine and other non-respiratory samples such as pericardial fluid) and ‘unknown’ (where exact information on sample type was missing from the records).

Calculations related to the MTB(C) did not include the Mycobacterium bovis strain used in the BCG vaccine.

The incremental positivity rate, defined as additional sensitivity gained by testing more than one sample from the same patient, was calculated for GA samples.

Associations between correct diagnostic yield and sample type were tested using Pearson’s chi-squared test or Fisher’s exact test. Statistical tests were two-sided at alpha=0.05.
The results of the different types of molecular tests were pooled since the number of samples did not allow stratified analysis of each test. Sensitivity, specificity, positive and negative predictive values (PPV and NPV, respectively) and the accuracy of the pooled molecular assays was assessed against culture and DST results in samples tested by both methods.

The answers from the survey questionnaire were entered into EpiData (EpiData Association, Odense, Denmark) and analysed using STATA (StataCorp. 2011. Stata Statistical Software: Release 12. College Station, TX: StataCorp LP). The routine laboratory data were collected from the study sites using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and analysed in STATA.

## Results

### Questionnaire-based survey

A total of 21 TB reference laboratories from Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy (two laboratories), Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain (two laboratories), Sweden and the UK sent their responses.

The population served by these laboratories varied between 400,000 and 20,000,000 inhabitants. Annually, the laboratories receive a median of 70 (range: 6–950) paediatric primary samples and reference cultures representing a median of 3.1% (range: 0.3–8.3%) of the total laboratory workload.

Of the 21 laboratories, 16 receive primary samples; the Latvian and Lithuanian laboratories receive primary samples only. Five laboratories receive reference cultures only (Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Norway and Spain). The most common sample type received from children is sputum (16 laboratories), followed by GA and BAL (15 laboratories each). A total of 11 laboratories reported receiving more than one type of sample from each child.

All laboratories receiving primary samples perform smear microscopy, molecular identification, culture (solid or liquid media, commercial or in-house) and first- and second-line DST. All undergo international quality assurance, demonstrating satisfactory performance.

The most frequently used direct rapid molecular identification assay included Xpert MTB/RIF (n=10) and GenoType MTBDRplus (Hain Lifescience, GmbH, Germany) (n=8); 10 laboratories used more than one assay. All laboratories rapidly identified MTB(C) from positive culture using GenoType CM/AS (Hain Lifescience, GmbH, Germany) (n=11), BD MGIT Tbc Id (Becton Dickinson, United States) and GenoType MTBDRplus assays (n=8 each). Nine laboratories

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Total number of samples received</th>
<th>Total number of samples</th>
<th>Sample type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total number of samples</td>
<td>Respiratory* n (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia CIPH</td>
<td>2,792</td>
<td>2,650 (94.9)</td>
<td>138 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany NRCM</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>129 (46.9)</td>
<td>135 (49.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy HSR</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia NTRL</td>
<td>2,401</td>
<td>2,167 (90.3)</td>
<td>222 (9.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania TBL</td>
<td>1,549</td>
<td>1,464 (94.5)</td>
<td>76 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom NMRL</td>
<td>2,140</td>
<td>1,643 (76.8)</td>
<td>490 (22.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites</td>
<td>9,157</td>
<td>8,053 (87.9)</td>
<td>1,061 (11.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CIPH: Croatian National Institute of Public Health, National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; HSR: San Raffaele Scientific Institute in collaboration with the Institute ‘Villa Marelli’, Niguarda Ca’ Granda Hospital; NA: data not available; NMRl: National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; NRCM: National Reference Centre for Mycobacteria at Forschungszentrum Borstel; NTRL: National TB Reference Laboratory at the Latvian Infectology Centre; TBL: Tuberculosis Bacteriology Laboratory at the Infectious Diseases and Tuberculosis Hospital.

* Respiratory samples: sputum, gastric aspirate, bronchoalveolar lavage, pleural fluid, other respiratory samples (e.g. nasopharyngeal aspirate). Non-respiratory samples: cerebrospinal fluid, lymph node, pus, other biopsy tissue, urine, other non-respiratory samples (e.g. pericardial fluid).

b Data from 2011 only.

c Does not include the 340 samples from Italy.
routinely used GenoType MTBDRsl (Hain Lifescience, Germany) for rapid second-line DST.

In 17 laboratories, the algorithms used to diagnose paediatric and adult TB did not differ; four laboratories reported the use of extra tests for children. In Latvia and Lithuania, for example, when there was a positive culture from a biopsy sample from a child GenoType MTBC (Hain Lifescience, Germany) was used to distinguish between MTB and \textit{M. bovis} BCG.

**Routine laboratory data**

**Number and range of primary samples received**

A total of 9,157 primary samples and 1,392 reference cultures were received from children across all six study sites within the five-year study period (Table 1).

Of all primary samples, the vast majority (8,053/9,157, 87.9%) were respiratory, including 4,974 sputum (61.8%), 1,467 BAL (18.2%), 1,232 GA (15.3%) and 298 pleural fluid (3.7%) samples; 1,061 samples were non-respiratory, including 230 tissue biopsy samples other than LN (21.7%), 205 LN (19.3%), 182 urine (17.2%), 140 CSF (13.2%) and 118 pus (11.1%) (Figure).

In the Croatian, Latvian and Lithuanian sites, less than 10% of all paediatric samples were non-respiratory (138/2,792, 4.9%; 222/2,401, 9.2%; 76/1,549, 4.9%, respectively), whereas in the UK site, this proportion was higher, 490/2,140 (22.9%). The German site received more non-respiratory than respiratory primary samples (135/275, 49.1% and 129/275, 46.9%, respectively), with LN being the most common sample type (58/275, 21.1%) (Table 1, Figure).

**Microscopy, culture and drug susceptibility testing**

Most of the primary samples (8,176/9,157, 89.3%) were subjected to smear microscopy, resulting in a 3.3% (268/8,176) positivity rate (Table 2). More non-respiratory than respiratory samples were positive by microscopy (82/816, 10.0% vs 181/7,320, 2.5%, p<0.0001).
Almost all (8,806/9,157, 96.2%) samples were cultured and a positive culture was obtained in 541 (6.1%) of the 8,806 primary samples. Culture was more often positive from non-respiratory than from respiratory samples (142/1,015, 14.0% vs 392/7,749, 5.1%, p<0.0001 for all positive cultures; 40/1,015, 3.9% vs 149/7,749, 1.9%, p=0.0001 for MTB(C)-positive cultures) (Table 2).

Across all sites, the culture contamination rate (on solid and liquid media) was 169/8,806 (1.9%) (Table 2), ranging from 0/2,884 (0%) at the Croatian to 26/240 (10.8%) at the German site.

Per-sample analysis showed that MTB(C) was detected in 236/8,851 (2.7%) of primary samples with the highest rates at the German and UK sites, 23/275 (8.4%) and 107/2,132 (5.0%), respectively (Table 3). The sample positivity rates for MTB(C) were significantly higher in pus (p=0.0005), LN (p<0.0001), CSF (p=0.002) and other tissue biopsy samples compared with sputum samples. Among respiratory samples, MTB(C) was more commonly detected in GA samples than in sputum samples (43/1,231, 3.5% vs 89/4,684, 1.9%, p=0.002). No statistically significant difference between MTB(C) detection rates in GA or BAL samples was observed. Per-patient analysis showed that MTB(C) was isolated in 156/5,156 (3.0%) of children (Table 4). MTB(C) was detected in 31/643 (4.8%) patients who submitted GA samples; of them, 21/31 patients submitted at least two GA samples. The first GA sample identified 16 positive patients, the second identified an additional four and the third, another positive patient.

Multidrug resistance (MDR), defined as resistance to at least rifampicin and isoniazid, was seen in 10/156 (6.4%) of patients ranging from 0/23 and 0/4 at Austrian
### Table 3
Laboratory diagnosis of paediatric tuberculosis: paediatric primary samples identified as MTB(C) across five study sites, 2007–2011 (n=236)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of samples identified as MTB(C)/total number per sample type (%)</th>
<th>Drug susceptibility testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sputum</td>
<td>GA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia CIPH</td>
<td>6/1,402 (0.4)</td>
<td>20/694 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany NRCM</td>
<td>1/29 (3.4)</td>
<td>9/53 (17.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia NTRL</td>
<td>16/1,219 (1.3)</td>
<td>4/378 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania TBL</td>
<td>13/1,099 (1.2)</td>
<td>0/17 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom NMRL</td>
<td>53/935 (5.7)</td>
<td>10/89 (11.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites</td>
<td>89/4,684 (1.9)</td>
<td>43/1,231 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** BAL: bronchoalveolar lavage; BCG: Bacillus Calmette–Guérin; CIPH: Croatian National Institute of Public Health; National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; CSF: cerebrospinal fluid; GA: gastric aspirate; MTB(C): *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex; NMRL: National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; NRCM: National Reference Centre for Mycobacteria at Forschungszentrum Borstel; NTRL: National TB Reference Laboratory at the Latvian Infectology Centre; TBL: Tuberculosis Bacteriology Laboratory at the Infectious Diseases and Tuberculosis Hospital.

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**Table 4**
Laboratory-confirmed paediatric cases across the six study sites (with primary samples only), 2007–2011 (n=156)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Type of primary sample</th>
<th>Identification of MTB(C)</th>
<th>Drug susceptibility testing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n samples/ N patients (ratio)</td>
<td>n MTB(C)-positive patients/ N patients (%)</td>
<td>n with MDR/ N MTB(C)-positive patients (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sputum</td>
<td>Gastric aspirate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia CIPH</td>
<td>1,402/1,006 (1.4)</td>
<td>23/1,681 (1.4)</td>
<td>0/23 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany NRCM</td>
<td>29/21 (1.4)</td>
<td>7/152 (4.6)</td>
<td>1/7 (14.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy HSR</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4/200 (2.0)</td>
<td>0/4 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia NTRL</td>
<td>1,219/504 (2.4)</td>
<td>40/1,151 (3.5)</td>
<td>3/40 (7.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania TBL</td>
<td>1,385/774 (1.8)</td>
<td>17/886 (1.9)</td>
<td>3/17 (17.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom NMRL</td>
<td>939/382 (2.5)</td>
<td>65/1,086 (6.0)</td>
<td>3/65 (4.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites</td>
<td>4,974/2,687 (1.9)</td>
<td>156/5,156 (3.0)</td>
<td>10/156 (6.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** CIPH: Croatian National Institute of Public Health, National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; HSR: San Raffaele Scientific Institute in collaboration with the Institute ‘Villa Marelli’, NiguardaCa’Granda Hospital; MDR: multidrug resistance (resistant to rifampicin and isoniazid); NA: data not available; NMRL: National Mycobacterium Reference Laboratory; MTB(C): *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex; NRCM: National Reference Centre for Mycobacteria at Forschungszentrum Borstel; NTRL: National TB Reference Laboratory at the Latvia Infectiology Centre; TBL: Tuberculosis Bacteriology Laboratory at the Infectious Diseases and Tuberculosis Hospital.

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**By isolation of MTB(C) culture or identification of MTB(C) nucleic acid from any of the patient’s samples.**

**Data from 2011 only.**

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**By isolation of MTB(C) culture or identification of MTB(C) nucleic acid from any of the patient’s samples.**

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**M. bovis BCG not included.**
and Italian sites to 3/17 of cases at the Lithuanian site (Table 4).

Rapid molecular test performance for *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex and drug-resistance detection

Routine use of NAAT was initiated in 1996 at the Croatian, in 1994 at the German and Italian, in 2010 at the Latvian, in 2008 at the Lithuanian and in 1999 at the UK sites. A variety of commercial and in-house assays were used on 578/9,157 (6.3%) of samples.

The bacteria in respiratory samples were more often directly identified as MTB(C) than those in non-respiratory samples (64/308, 20.8% vs 28/258, 10.9%, p=0.001). The rate of indeterminate results was higher among non-respiratory samples (12/258, 4.7% vs 2/308, 0.6%, p=0.0024) (Table 2).

A total of 511 primary samples were tested by both molecular assay and culture for MTB(C) identification. Compared with liquid or solid culture, a rapid molecular test – based on the pooled data analysis – had an overall (for all samples types) sensitivity of

### Table 5

Laboratory diagnosis of paediatric tuberculosis: performance of molecular assays compared with culture in detecting MTB(C) in primary samples across the six study sites, 2007–2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample type and smear results</th>
<th>Sensitivity&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Specificity&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Positive predictive value&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Negative predictive value&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Accuracy&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n/N</td>
<td>% (95% CI)</td>
<td>n/N</td>
<td>% (95% CI)</td>
<td>n/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All&lt;sup&gt;h&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>57/72</td>
<td>79.2 (68.0–87.8)</td>
<td>411/439</td>
<td>93.6 (90.9–95.7)</td>
<td>57/85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All smear positives</td>
<td>42/46</td>
<td>91.3 (79.2–97.6)</td>
<td>41/56</td>
<td>73.2 (59.7–84.2)</td>
<td>42/67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All smear negatives</td>
<td>11/21</td>
<td>52.4 (29.8–74.3)</td>
<td>287/299</td>
<td>96.0 (93.1–97.9)</td>
<td>11/23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>48/54</td>
<td>88.9 (77.4–95.8)</td>
<td>224/236</td>
<td>94.9 (91.3–97.3)</td>
<td>48/60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory smear positives</td>
<td>40/42</td>
<td>95.2 (83.8–99.4)</td>
<td>15/20</td>
<td>75.0 (50.9–91.3)</td>
<td>40/45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respiratory smear negatives</td>
<td>5/8</td>
<td>62.5 (24.5–91.5)</td>
<td>161/168</td>
<td>95.8 (91.6–98.3)</td>
<td>5/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-respiratory&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7/16</td>
<td>43.8 (19.8–70.1)</td>
<td>177/192</td>
<td>92.2 (87.4–95.6)</td>
<td>7/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-respiratory smear positives</td>
<td>2/4</td>
<td>50.0 (6.8–93.2)</td>
<td>24/34</td>
<td>70.6 (52.5–84.9)</td>
<td>2/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-respiratory smear negatives</td>
<td>5/12</td>
<td>41.7 (15.2–72.3)</td>
<td>118/123</td>
<td>95.9 (90.8–98.7)</td>
<td>5/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sputum&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>34/37</td>
<td>91.9 (79.1–95.8)</td>
<td>54/57</td>
<td>94.7 (85.4–98.9)</td>
<td>34/37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sputum smear positives</td>
<td>32/33</td>
<td>97.0 (84.2–99.9)</td>
<td>6/9</td>
<td>66.7 (29.9–92.5)</td>
<td>32/35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sputum smear negatives</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>33.3 (0.8–90.6)</td>
<td>48/48</td>
<td>100 (92.6–100)</td>
<td>1/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastric aspirates&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8/10</td>
<td>80.0 (44.4–97.5)</td>
<td>95/99</td>
<td>96.0 (90.0–98.9)</td>
<td>8/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bronchoalveolar lavage&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>85.7 (42.1–99.6)</td>
<td>55/59</td>
<td>93.2 (83.5–98.1)</td>
<td>6/10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CI: confidence interval; MTB(C): *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex.

<sup>a</sup> Number of true positives/number of true positives + number of false negatives.

<sup>b</sup> Number of true negatives/number of true negatives + number of false positives.

<sup>c</sup> Number of true positives/number of true positives + number of false positives.

<sup>d</sup> Number of true negatives/number of true negatives.

<sup>e</sup> Number of respiratory samples + number of non-respiratory samples + number of samples of unknown type.

<sup>f</sup> Number of true positives + number of true negatives/total number of tested samples.

<sup>g</sup> Number of smear negatives + number of smear positives + number with smear result unknown.

<sup>h</sup> Number of respiratory samples + number of non-respiratory samples + number of samples of unknown type.
The molecular tests detected MTB(C) in 48/54 (88.9%) of respiratory and 7/16 (43.8%) of non-respiratory samples (p=0.0004); the specificity was 224/236 (94.9%) and 177/192 (92.2%), respectively. For both respiratory and non-respiratory samples, the sensitivity was again higher for smear-positive than for smear-negative samples; however, the specificity was higher for smear-negative samples for both groups of samples (Table 5). Molecular assays produced 15/511 (2.9%) of false-negative results and 28/511 (5.5%) of false-positive results for MTB(C) identification; discordant results were related to all types of samples. Mutations coding resistance to rifampicin were detected in 7/93 (7.5%) of all primary samples tested by rapid assays (Table 2). Molecular and phenotypic assays were fully concordant with DST.

Non-tuberculous mycobacteria and Mycobacterium bovis BCG

Approximately half (989/1,903, 52.0%) of all positive isolates (grown from primary samples and those received as reference cultures) were identified as NTMs at the Croatian (43/94), German (54/90), Italian (26/50) and UK (862/1,564, 55.1%) sites. NTMs were less common at the Latvian (1/67) and Lithuanian (3/38) sites. A proportion of all positive isolates (224/1,903, 11.8%) were identified as M. bovis BCG.

NTMs were isolated at the highest rate from LN samples (27/203, 13.3%). NTMs were seen in 136/4,958 (2.7%) of all paediatric patients, with M. abscessus as the most frequently identified.

Discussion

This large study reviewed the analysis of over 10,000 samples tested across a number of European TB reference laboratories and showed the availability and use of all conventional and modern diagnostic techniques across these settings. Although the diagnostic algorithms were similar across laboratories, approaches towards collecting paediatric non-respiratory samples differ between European sites, with very few samples other than sputum obtained from children in Latvia and Lithuania.

Because young children can rarely expectorate but instead swallow their sputum, aspiration of the gastric content is the best (and the least unpleasant) procedure for obtaining a sputum sample suitable for further diagnostics [4,5,19,24]. Our study showed that, compared with sputum samples, testing GA more often results in positive findings. Recent data by Fiebig et al. support this evidence [25]: they report widespread use of GA in Germany and a high (63%) yield of culture and NAAT in paediatric specimens, confirming that it is possible to reliably diagnose TB in children and disagreeing with the common notion of ‘difficulties’ in laboratory confirmation of paediatric disease.

Our data suggest that collection of several GA samples might help identify further cases, in line with previously published data [5]. Larger studies are needed to assess the differences in diagnostic yield in serial samples.

Extrapulmonary samples also tested positive more frequently than sputum samples did, placing emphasis on the usefulness of collecting non-respiratory materials, in line with some previously published results that showed a good performance of fine-needle aspiration biopsy of LN in confirming TB [26]. Considering the observed small proportion of non-respiratory samples received at the Latvian and Lithuanian sites, it would seem reasonable to expect a low incidence of extrapulmonary TB there. However, crude comparison with World Health Organization (WHO) surveillance data for 2011 showed that while in Croatia, Germany, Italy and the UK extrapulmonary TB represented the minority of paediatric cases (15%, 17%, 19% and 37%, respectively), the majority of notified cases in Latvia and Lithuania were, in contrast, extrapulmonary (59% and 92%, respectively) [23], pointing towards predominantly non-laboratory based diagnosing. Within the framework of our study, infrequent collection of samples other than sputum might be explained by differences in the referral population, with a large number of asymptomatic children being screened for TB as part of contact tracing in medium-incidence settings, such as those of the participating Baltic countries [23]. Relatively low MTB(C)-positivity rates at the Latvian and Lithuanian sites also reflect this screening strategy. There, a lower level of clinical suspicion might be the reason for not carrying out more invasive procedures. Another explanation might be a more cautious attitude of eastern European physicians in Latvia and Lithuania in collecting GA or non-respiratory samples from children, related to the higher invasiveness of these procedures compared with sputum collection, and lack of confidence in the success of laboratory diagnosis. The rates of notified extrapulmonary TB across the EU/EEA vary between 4% and 48% (37.7% in children during 2002 to 2011), possibly reflecting the challenges and differences in diagnosis and confirming the urgent need for improvement [27,28].
Analysis of the performance of the pooled molecular tests showed that the sensitivity was comparable to that reported for the Xpert MTB/RIF in children in other studies: 79.5% for sputum and GA in Vietnam, 90.0 and 68.8% for sputum and GA samples in Zambia, 73.6% and 75.9% in South Africa using NPA and sputum samples, 54.7% in Tanzania [4,6,17-19]. The molecular tests were more sensitive in detecting MTBC in respiratory samples than in non-respiratory samples as previously described [17,29] which may be explained by the design of the molecular tests originally aimed to work in respiratory samples. We observed no differences in sensitivity and specificity for sputum, GA, or BAL samples, as previously observed [19].

The specificity was lower in smear-positive samples than in smear-negative samples. It might be an artefact resulting from the pooling of different molecular methods or the low specificity of molecular tests for the DNA target or the use of an imperfect gold standard method. Although culture is the recognised current gold standard for TB diagnosis, it still might be an imperfect comparator, possibly leading to failure to diagnose some cases [17].

Similar performance characteristics of INNO-LIPA Rif, TB and Xpert MTB/RIF used for the diagnosis of TB in adults were reported in Italy and the UK [7,29]; however, these results were primarily evaluating a single rapid method (Xpert MTB/RIF) on a single type of sample. High incidence of TB may explain the higher PPV observed in studies conducted outside Europe (100% for sputum and GA in Vietnam, 81.8% and 86.8% for sputum and GA samples respectively in Zambia, 92.8% and 89.7% in South Africa using NPA and sputum samples) [6,17-19], compared with our study.

Our study showed that NTMs were more frequently isolated from children than MTBC. M. bovis BCG was frequently isolated in Latvia and Lithuania where BCG vaccination is a national policy. Our data showed that M. abscessus was the predominant NTM isolated from children while previously was the M. avium complex [30].

This study has several limitations. The analysis was based on subnational data, leading to possible selection bias and restriction of the geographical representativeness of the study. A diagnostic bias resulting from more invasive samples being taken when there is a higher level of clinical suspicion may cause the higher positivity rates in non-respiratory samples. Two sites could provide 2011 data only. Small case numbers forced ‘pooling’ of the NAAT results and our approach ignores the possible heterogeneity of results or differences in ROC curve of various tests. The retrospective laboratory-based approach did not allow the investigators to obtain data on HIV status, clinical/radiological findings and TB treatment. A more comprehensive assessment of the success of diagnosing TB in children in Europe is needed. Ideally, new studies should be led by key organisations in the field of infectious diseases control and prevention, such as ECDC or WHO Regional Office for Europe, and result in effective recommendations.

As long as available evidence for paediatric TB diagnosis remains limited, however, this study is of public health importance as it reviewed routine molecular work in a non-clinical trial context, allowing conclusions to be drawn based on real-life scenarios. Moreover, the study sites represent the largest laboratories with reference functions. This work has also demonstrated that data from the ERLN-TB can be used to conduct operational research.

Despite the relative success in diagnosing TB when using non-respiratory or GA samples, the level of laboratory confirmation in children remains low, resulting in treatment initiation based on a set of subjective parameters. TB treatment is long and antituberculosis drugs have potential toxicity; therefore while it is important not to risk failing to diagnose TB, overdiagnosis may result in unnecessary psychological or physical stress for children [26]. With this in mind, a more intensive approach to obtaining paediatric samples, including samples other than sputum (in particular GA and non-respiratory samples), is advisable in order to increase the number of laboratory-confirmed cases and give physicians a much greater degree of confidence when administering antituberculosis treatment. Additionally, a major effort is needed to optimise and evaluate molecular assays for analysis of GA or non-respiratory samples, thus making the diagnosis of paediatic TB more accurate.

**European Reference Laboratory Network (ERLN-TB) members**

Vanessa Mathys, National Reference Centre of Tuberculosis and Mycobacteria, Communicable & Infectious Diseases, Scientific Institute of Public Health, Brussels, Belgium; Elizabeta Bachyiska, National Center of Infectious and Parasitic Diseases, Sofia, Bulgaria; Despo Pieridou-Bagatzouli, National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria, Nicosia General Hospital, Cyprus; Iliana Zemanova, Mycobacteriology Unit and National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria NIPH, Prague, Czech Republic; Tiina Kummik, TB Reference Laboratory, Department of Mycobacteriology, Tartu University Hospital, Tartu, Estonia; Merja Marjamäki, National Reference Centre of Tuberculosis, Institute of Public Health, Helsinki, Finland; Sabine Rüsch-Gerdes, National Reference Center for Mycobacteria, Forschungszentrum Borstel, Borstel, Germany; Dimitrios Papaventsis, National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria (NRLM), Sotiria Chest Diseases Hospital, Athens, Greece; Panayotis Ioannidis, National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria (NRLM), Sotiria Chest Diseases Hospital, Athens, Greece; Nóra Szabó, National TB Reference Laboratory, Department of Mycobacteriology, National TB Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria, Forschungszentrum Borstel, Borstel, Germany; Luigi Codecasa, Regional Reference Centre for Tuberculosis, Institute "Villa Marelli", Niguarda Ca’ Granda Hospital, Milan, Italy; Esté Mazzola, Regional Reference Laboratory for Tuberculosis, Niguarda Ca’ Granda Hospital, Milan, Italy; Turid Mannsåker, National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria, Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Division of Infectious Disease
Control, Oslo, Norway; Anabela Santos-Silva, National Tuberculosis Reference Laboratory, National Institute of Health (INSA), Porto, Portugal; Manca Žolnir-Dovč, National Reference Laboratory for Mycobacteria, University Clinic for Respiratory and Allergic Diseases, Golnik, Slovenia; Sofia Samper, Hospital Universitario Miguel Servet, IIS Aragón, Zaragoza, Spain; Maria Soledad-Jimenez, Mycobacterial Reference Laboratory, Servicio de Bacteriología, Centro Nacional de Microbiología, Instituto de Salud Carlos III, Madrid, Spain; Kristian Åberg, Clinical Microbiology, MTC, Karolinska Institute, Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden.

Conflict of interest
None declared.

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Authors’ contributions
Conceived and designed the study: AS, LF, FD, WH, CDM, YB. Collected data: AS, LF, WH, FD, ER, VKJ, EP, GS, CDM, ERLN-TB members, YB. Analysed the data: AS, LF, WH, FD, ER, VKJ, EP, GS, CDM, YB. Wrote the paper: AS, YB. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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