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Histopathological Evaluation of Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Current Trends and Challenges

Miller Dregulo*

Department of Pathology, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Introduction

The histopathological evaluation of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), encompassing both Ulcerative Colitis (UC) and Crohn's Disease (CD), plays a pivotal role in diagnosis, disease monitoring and therapeutic decision-making. As IBD continues to emerge as a global health challenge, particularly with increasing incidence in newly industrialized regions, the histopathological assessment of intestinal tissue remains a cornerstone in the multidisciplinary approach to managing these chronic inflammatory disorders. Over the years, the histological criteria for diagnosing IBD have evolved, increasingly relying on standardization and objectivity in reporting, yet significant challenges persist in achieving consistent interpretation and in differentiating between disease subtypes. Traditionally, histopathological assessment in IBD has been based on examining routine hematoxylin and eosin (H&E)-stained sections for features such as crypt architectural distortion, basal plasmacytosis, mucin depletion and cryptitis or crypt abscesses. While these features are reliable indicators of chronic and active inflammation, distinguishing between UC and CD can be difficult, particularly in early disease stages or in cases of indeterminate colitis. The patchy nature of CD and the continuous involvement seen in UC offer important clues, but overlap occurs, necessitating the integration of clinical, endoscopic, radiologic and pathologic data. Granulomas, when identified, are highly suggestive of CD but are not universally present, further complicating differential diagnosis [1,2].

Description

Current trends in histopathological practice have emphasized the use of scoring systems to quantify disease activity and chronicity. Systems such as the Nancy index, Geboes score and Robarts Histopathology Index provide structured frameworks for grading inflammation, with the goal of enhancing reproducibility and facilitating communication between pathologists and clinicians. These scoring systems have gained prominence in clinical trials and research studies, especially in the context of mucosal healing as a treatment goal. However, their application in routine clinical practice remains limited due to variability in interobserver agreement and the time-consuming nature of detailed scoring. Advancements in immunohistochemistry and molecular pathology have expanded the diagnostic arsenal available to pathologists evaluating IBD. Markers such as pANCA and ASCA, although not definitive, provide supplementary evidence and may aid in subclassifying disease in ambiguous cases. Moreover, immunohistochemical stains for lymphocytic subsets, cytokines and epithelial markers offer insights into the immunopathogenesis of IBD and help elucidate the microenvironment of inflammation. Chromogenic In Situ Hybridization (CISH) and newer multiplex immunostaining techniques have been applied to detect specific immune cell populations and signaling pathways, paving the way for a more personalized approach to diagnosis and therapy [3].

Despite these technological advancements, pathologists face several enduring challenges. A major concern is sampling variability, particularly in biopsies that may not be representative of the most severely affected areas. Proper orientation, adequate number of samples and standardized protocols for tissue processing are essential for accurate interpretation. Additionally, postoperative histopathological evaluation, especially in colectomy specimens, reveals complexities such as disease-related dysplasia, cancer risk and therapeutic side effects that must be distinguished from primary disease activity. Another pressing issue is the detection and grading of dysplasia in IBD patients. Long-standing IBD is associated with an increased risk of colorectal carcinoma, making surveillance and early dysplasia detection critical. However, differentiating reactive atypia from true dysplastic changes remains notoriously difficult, even for experienced gastrointestinal pathologists. Adjunct techniques such as immunostaining for p53 or Ki-67 and molecular profiling are being explored to improve diagnostic certainty. Moreover, the definition of low-grade dysplasia and its risk of progression remains an area of ongoing research and debate [4].

Digital pathology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are emerging tools with the potential to transform histopathological evaluation in IBD. AI-based image analysis can standardize the assessment of inflammatory activity, detect subtle changes and potentially flag dysplastic areas with greater sensitivity. These technologies are being trained on large datasets and are showing promise in early trials, although integration into everyday clinical workflows is still at an early stage. Nonetheless, the prospect of computer-aided diagnosis offers hope for improving diagnostic accuracy and reducing interobserver variability. In addition to technical advancements, there is a growing emphasis on the integration of histopathological data with clinical and endoscopic findings. The concept of "histological remission," where the absence of microscopic inflammation is considered an endpoint, is gaining traction as a treatment goal alongside clinical and endoscopic remission. Studies suggest that histological healing is associated with lower relapse rates and better long-term outcomes. As a result, there is increased pressure on pathologists to provide detailed and standardized reports that capture subtle histological changes. Finally, the global expansion of IBD presents new challenges in histopathological evaluation. In regions where IBD was previously rare, such as parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East, the diagnostic infrastructure and expertise may be limited, leading to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis. Moreover, infectious colitis must often be excluded, especially in tropical regions, complicating the histopathological landscape. Training initiatives, international collaborations and the dissemination of consensus guidelines are necessary to ensure consistency and quality of care across diverse healthcare settings [5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the histopathological evaluation of IBD is undergoing rapid evolution, driven by advances in technology, a deeper understanding of disease mechanisms and the push for personalized medicine. While scoring systems, immunohistochemical tools and digital innovations offer promising solutions, practical challenges such as diagnostic ambiguity, sampling limitations and interobserver variability persist. As the role of histopathology expands from

***Address for Correspondence:** Miller Dregulo, Department of Pathology, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; E-mail: dregulo.miller@melbourne.au*

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mere diagnosis to guiding therapy and predicting outcomes, it becomes imperative to bridge the gap between emerging research and everyday practice. Standardization, collaboration and ongoing education remain the key to navigating the complexities of IBD pathology and improving patient care in this challenging and dynamic field.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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