



Invited critical review

# Serum free light chains in clinical laboratory diagnostics



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 June 2013  
 Received in revised form 22 August 2013  
 Accepted 23 August 2013  
 Available online 30 August 2013

### Keywords:

Free light chains  
 Multiple myeloma  
 AL amyloidosis  
 Immunoassays  
 Serum protein  
 Electrophoresis

## ABSTRACT

Monoclonal free light chains (FLCs) are important disease biomarkers in patients with plasma cell-proliferative disorders. The increasing evidence for clonal diversity and evolution in multiple myeloma highlights the importance of laboratory algorithms that measure both intact immunoglobulins and monoclonal FLCs, at diagnosis and when monitoring response to treatment. A particular focus in the field has been on the utility of serum FLC (sFLC) assays to replace urine electrophoresis for monoclonal FLC measurement. Due to the limited sensitivity and practical constraints of urine analysis, a serum-based algorithm of SPE and sFLC has been adopted by many laboratories as a first line screen in patients with suspected monoclonal gammopathies. This review will discuss the data supporting the use of this simple serum-based algorithm at initial diagnosis, including its utility for the rapid identification of monoclonal FLC in the setting of unexplained acute kidney injury, and provide a comprehensive review of the diagnostic sensitivity of sFLC in patients with multiple myeloma, AL amyloidosis and light chain deposition disease.

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## 1. Introduction

Monoclonal immunoglobulin free light chains (FLC) are an important diagnostic marker for monoclonal gammopathies and, for more than 150 years, the presence of Bence Jones protein (FLCs) in the urine has been the key indicator of monoclonal FLC production. However, during the last decade, there has been a paradigm shift with the availability of automated immunoassays that independently measure kappa ( $\kappa$ ) and lambda ( $\lambda$ ) FLC in the serum (Freelite®).

Serum concentrations of FLCs are dependent upon the balance between production and renal clearance. Serum FLCs (sFLCs) are rapidly cleared through the renal glomeruli with half-lives of between 2 and

Abbreviations: sFLC, serum free light chain;  $\kappa$ , kappa;  $\lambda$ , lambda; sFLC $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio, ratio of  $\kappa$  sFLC to  $\lambda$  sFLC concentration; MM, multiple myeloma; LCMM, light chain MM; IIMM, intact immunoglobulin MM; NSMM, nonsecretory MM; LCDD, light chain deposition disease; MGUS, monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance; WM, Waldenström's macroglobulinaemia; SPE, serum protein electrophoresis; UPE, urine protein electrophoresis; IFE, immunofixation electrophoresis; Mabs, monoclonal antibodies; AKI, acute kidney injury.

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6–h before being metabolised in the proximal tubules of the nephrons. Under normal circumstances, little protein escapes to the urine so sFLC concentrations are a more accurate representation of production levels. When there is increased polyclonal immunoglobulin production and/or renal impairment, both  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  sFLC concentrations can increase 30- to 40-fold. However, the relative concentrations of  $\kappa$  to  $\lambda$  (i.e., the  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio) remain unchanged, or only slightly increase (Section 2.2). In contrast, the production of a monoclonal excess of one FLC type in patients with a plasma cell dyscrasia gives an abnormal serum  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio, providing a numerical indicator of clonality.

The clinical importance of sFLC assays for monoclonal gammopathies is now well established, and their utility for the diagnosis, prognosis and monitoring of these patients is acknowledged in national and international guidelines [1–7]. This article will discuss the different laboratory methods for the measurement of FLC and provide a comprehensive review of the published data supporting the application of sFLC analysis at diagnosis of monoclonal gammopathies, including the use of sFLC assays to screen for nephrotoxic FLC in the setting of myeloma kidney.

## 2. Laboratory methods for the detection of monoclonal FLC

Laboratory methods to screen for monoclonal gammopathies historically comprise serum protein electrophoresis (SPE) and urine protein electrophoresis (UPE). Monoclonal proteins (M-proteins) migrate as discrete bands on an electrophoretic gel, appearing as a peak on a densitometric trace, which provides a semi-quantitative value for the amount of M-protein. Following the identification of an M-protein by SPE, serum immunofixation electrophoresis (sIFE) is required for confirmation of clonality and subsequent typing. With an analytical sensitivity of between 500 and 2000 mg/L [8], a major limitation of SPE is the inability to detect low-level monoclonal proteins, particularly FLCs. Serum IFE is approximately 10-fold more sensitive and may pick up additional monoclonal proteins that are undetected by SPE. However, the serum of patients with oligosecretory diseases, such as light chain multiple myeloma (LCMM), AL-amyloidosis and light chain deposition disease (LCDD) often does not contain monoclonal FLCs at a level sufficient to be detected by either SPE or sIFE [9–11].

For over 150 years, monoclonal FLCs in the urine (Bence Jones protein; BJP) have been an important diagnostic marker for multiple myeloma (MM). UPE and urine IFE (uIFE) are more sensitive than serum electrophoresis techniques for detecting monoclonal FLCs, and FLCs can be detected in the urine at less than 20 mg/L, although most laboratories claim an FLC detection limit of 40–50 mg/L.

Despite the additional sensitivity offered by UPE and uIFE, these techniques are not without their technical and practical limitations. First, FLC levels in the serum must increase significantly before the proximal tubular re-absorptive mechanisms are overwhelmed and the FLCs appear in the urine. Nowrousian et al. [12] reported that the median levels of monoclonal  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  FLC required in the serum before Bence Jones proteinuria occurred were 113 mg/L and 278 mg/L, respectively. Therefore, low-level monoclonal FLCs in the serum may not be detected in the urine, and urine BJP tests are not a direct reflection of the underlying monoclonal FLC production rate. The second important consideration for routine clinical practice is the delay associated with obtaining a urine BJP result. The early detection of monoclonal FLC facilitates the prompt diagnosis and timely initiation of treatment to improve clinical outcome; however, delays can occur due to poor urine compliance, the requirement for 24-h urine collection and batch testing of urine samples by the laboratory. Studies have reported variable urine compliance values of between 5% and 59% [13–17]. The third potential limitation of urine based algorithms for the identification of monoclonal FLCs is the subjective interpretation of electrophoresis results. The detection of low-level monoclonal FLCs is particularly problematic. ‘Ladder banding’ in concentrated urine samples may give the false impression of monoclonality, and heavy proteinuria containing polyclonal FLCs may give high background staining hindering accurate interpretation.

Due to the highlighted limitations of urinalysis, international guidelines now recommend that serum FLC testing replaces urine electrophoresis in the diagnosis of monoclonal gammopathies [7].

### 2.1. Immunoassays for serum monoclonal FLC testing

In 2001, the availability of automated sFLC immunoassays (Freelite, Binding Site, UK) has enabled routine and sensitive laboratory quantification of monoclonal FLC in the serum. The sFLC tests provide an independent measurement of  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  FLC, and the calculation of a  $\kappa/\lambda$  sFLC ratio provides a sensitive numerical indicator of clonality. In patients with plasma cell dyscrasias, the excess clonal production of only one FLC type, frequently with bone marrow suppression of the alternate FLC, leads to often highly abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios. The assays are latex-enhanced immunoassays and allow measurement of FLC concentrations as low as 1.5 mg/L and 3 mg/L for  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  FLCs, respectively, far below normal serum concentrations [18]. The sFLC assays should not be confused with total  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  light chain (TLC) assays, which detect all forms of  $\kappa$  or  $\lambda$  light chains (FLC plus those that form intact immunoglobulins). TLC assays are insensitive for the detection of sFLC [19] and are not recommended by international guidelines.

It is essential that sFLC immunoassays utilise antibodies that have high specificity and affinity. For assays detecting homogeneous antigens, monoclonal antibodies (Mabs) are very successful. However, a reliable recognition of a full range of monoclonal FLC is hampered due to the heterogeneity of FLC molecules, arising from a combination of genetic recombination, allotypic and isotypic variation and somatic hypermutation of the variable regions after antigen exposure. As a Mab will only recognise a single epitope, individual Mabs will be unable to detect the diverse range of monoclonal FLC produced by patients with monoclonal gammopathies. Hence, the Freelite assays were developed using polyclonal antibodies, raised in sheep. These assays can recognise a wide variety of FLC epitopes, including the diverse range of pathological monoclonal FLC produced by patients with monoclonal gammopathies.

Several groups have developed Mab-based FLC immunoassays [20–25]. A large number of clinical studies are still required to assess their clinical utility, although published data has failed to demonstrate their clinical equivalence to the established polyclonal assays [26,27]. International guidelines for sFLC measurement are based on results obtained with Freelite, and the data discussed in this review has been obtained using these polyclonal assays.

### 2.2. Interpretation of sFLC assay results at diagnosis

For sFLC analysis, both  $\kappa$  and  $\lambda$  FLCs should be measured and  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios calculated. Results are considered abnormal when they are outside published normal ranges [18] (serum  $\kappa$  FLC: 3.3–19.4 mg/L; serum  $\lambda$  FLC: 5.7–26.3 mg/L; serum  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio: 0.26–1.65). If serum  $\kappa$  FLC,  $\lambda$  FLC and  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio are all within the normal ranges, and accompanying serum electrophoretic tests are normal it is unlikely that the patient has a monoclonal gammopathy. Conversely, abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios, along with an increase in either  $\kappa$  or  $\lambda$  FLC, support the diagnosis of a monoclonal gammopathy and require further investigation, although borderline results require careful interpretation. Borderline abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios can occasionally be seen in patients with polyclonal increases in FLC, such as in patients with renal impairment, and in patients with polyclonal hypergammaglobulinaemia, caused by for example infectious or inflammatory disorders [28,29]. This highlights the importance of considering additional clinical and laboratory parameters when interpreting sFLC results.

## 3. FLC incorporation into laboratory diagnostic panels for monoclonal gammopathies

The utility of sFLC assays at diagnosis has been documented for a broad spectrum of monoclonal plasma cell disorders, from the

asymptomatic disorders monoclonal gammopathy of undetermined significance (MGUS) and smouldering multiple myeloma (SMM) to the symptomatic disorders multiple myeloma (MM), Waldenström's macroglobulinaemia (WM), AL amyloidosis, LCDD, solitary plasmacytoma and POEMS. Numerous studies have evaluated the use of sFLC assays alongside other laboratory tests as part of the initial diagnostic screen for patients with a suspected monoclonal gammopathy [13,15,17,28–33].

The most extensive study included 1877 patients (467 MM, 191 SMM, 524 MGUS, 29 plasmacytoma, 26 WM, 581 AL amyloidosis, 18 LCDD and 31 POEMS) who had a complete panel of SPE, sIFE, sFLC, UPE and uIFE results obtained within 30 days of diagnosis [33]. When comparing the combination of SPE and sFLC with SPE, sFLC and sIFE, 58 patients had a negative screen (44 MGUS, 7 POEMS, 5 AL amyloidosis, 1 plasmacytoma and 1 SMM). However, all MM, WM and LCDD patients were detected. Furthermore, the addition of the sFLC assays identified 30 patients (23 AL amyloidosis, 6 MM and 1 LCDD) that were not detected by the traditional panel of serum and urine tests. The omission of urine analysis missed just 23 patients (15 MGUS, 1 extramedullary myeloma, 1 LCDD and 6 AL amyloidosis). As part of their conclusion, Katzmann et al. stated that due to the small incremental sensitivity provided by urine studies and sIFE, the use of SPE with sFLC analysis provides a simple and efficient initial diagnostic screen for high tumour burden monoclonal gammopathies. They observed that urine studies and sIFE may be ordered more selectively.

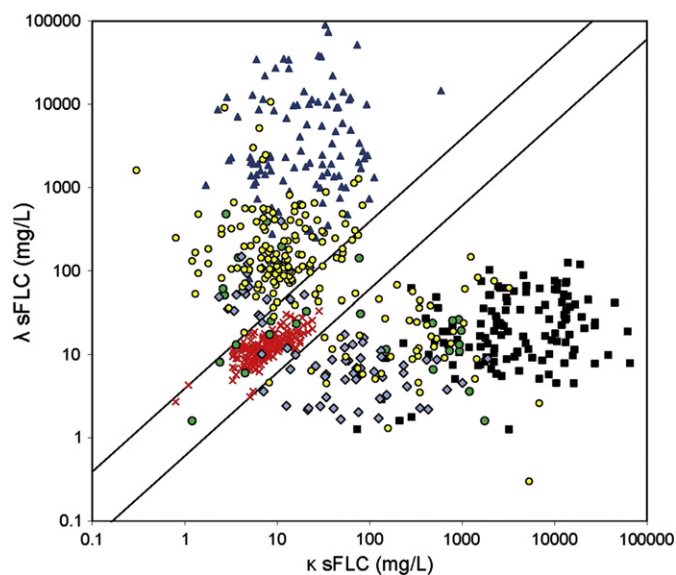
Based on the available published data, the International Myeloma Working Group (IMWG) conclude that in the context of screening for the presence of MM or related disorders, the sFLC assay in combination with SPE and sIFE yields high sensitivity and negates the requirement for 24-h urine studies for diagnosis other than for AL amyloidosis [7]. In their most recent guidelines, the IMWG recommend sFLC analysis as part of the standard investigative workup in newly diagnosed patients with plasma cell dyscrasias [6], a recommendation advocated in guidelines published by the US National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) [1]. This also provides valuable prognostic information; the prognostic utility of sFLC concentrations and ratios at disease presentation and following treatment has been demonstrated by a number of groups [34–37]. International guidelines recommend that the sFLC assay is performed at diagnosis as a prognostic marker for all patients with MM, as well as for patients with MGUS, SMM, solitary plasmacytoma and AL amyloidosis [7].

#### 4. Diagnostic sensitivity of sFLC assays for monoclonal gammopathies

The frequency of abnormal sFLC  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios that can be expected in patients with MM (including light chain MM (LCMM), nonsecretory MM (NSMM) and intact immunoglobulin MM (IIMM)) and AL amyloidosis is shown in Fig. 1.

##### 4.1. Light chain multiple myeloma

LCMM accounts for around 20% of all cases of MM. Its clinical diagnosis is confirmed by the presence of monoclonal FLCs in the serum or urine, in the absence of intact monoclonal immunoglobulins, alongside clonal bone marrow plasma cells and the presence of end organ damage. Screening with SPE alone may fail to detect over 40% of cases of LCMM [38], and considering the limitations associated with detecting monoclonal FLC in the urine, sFLC analysis forms an important part of the diagnostic algorithm for these patients. All 224 patients with LCMM in a study by Bradwell et al. [39] had abnormal concentrations of the appropriate sFLC and abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios at the time of diagnosis (Fig. 1). The same 100% diagnostic sensitivity of sFLC ratios for LCMM has been found in numerous studies, which, in total, have included over 600 patients [12,16,28,38–45].



**Fig. 1.** Dotplot of sFLC concentrations in patients with monoclonal gammopathies. The normal 100% reference range for the sFLC  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratio (0.26–1.65) is represented by the diagonal lines. Serum samples with abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios lie outside of these lines. Normal sera: red crosses;  $\kappa$  LCMM: black squares;  $\lambda$  LCMM: blue triangles; NSMM: green circles; IIMM: blue diamonds; AL amyloidosis: yellow circles. Data adapted from [11,39,51].

##### 4.2. Nonsecretory multiple myeloma

Accounting for 1–5% of all MM patients, NSMM is characterised by the absence of monoclonal proteins in serum and urine by IFE [9,10,46,47]. However, some NSMM patients produce monoclonal immunoglobulins that, despite being undetected in the serum, can be detected immunohistochemically in bone marrow plasma cells, and it is considered that only 10–15% of NSMM patients are true 'non-producers' [48], in whom tumour plasma cells contain no detectable immunoglobulins.

The sensitivity of sFLC immunoassays has proved particularly beneficial for detecting monoclonal FLCs in patients previously deemed nonsecretory according to electrophoresis. In a study of 28 NSMM patients [10], 68% had elevated  $\kappa$  or  $\lambda$  sFLC concentrations and abnormal  $\kappa/\lambda$  ratios (Fig. 1). Surprisingly, in 9 of the 28 patients, no monoclonal bands were seen by IFE even though the immunoassays indicated sFLC concentrations of  $>200$  mg/L, greater than the detection limit of IFE. Further investigation of 2 samples (with 931 mg/L and 978 mg/L monoclonal  $\kappa$ FLC) revealed polymerised FLC, which act as multi-antigenic targets in immunoassays, leading to overestimation of antigen concentrations, and could also account for their absence or diffuse appearance by IFE.

Measurement of sFLC at diagnosis for many NSMM patients has produced clear benefits for the patient, avoiding diagnostic delays [49], and sFLC analysis is therefore recommended by the IMWG for patients with NSMM [7].

##### 4.3. Intact immunoglobulin multiple myeloma

IIMM comprises around 80% of all cases of MM. Since this type of MM is characterised by the secretion of monoclonal intact immunoglobulins, SPE and sIFE play an essential role in the diagnosis of these patients. However, in around 95% of patients with IIMM monoclonal FLCs are also secreted [33,36,50–52]. In these patients, the utility of sFLC analysis lies in disease monitoring and patient prognosis. The short serum half-life of FLCs make them useful markers of clonal disease and the monitoring of monoclonal sFLC levels can provide a more accurate assessment of the rate of treatment responses than that provided

by intact immunoglobulins, whose half-lives are considerably longer [53].

Importantly, the serological diagnosis of disease relapse in IIMM patients cannot be relied upon by measuring monoclonal intact immunoglobulins alone. Clonal evolution in MM is increasingly being recognised [2,54–57] and is associated with a change in the monoclonal protein(s) being produced. For example, patients with IIMM at diagnosis may relapse with monoclonal FLCs only, a phenomenon termed light chain escape [58,59] (Fig. 2). Due to high monoclonal FLC concentrations, these patients are prone to renal complications, and regular assessment of sFLCs during patient monitoring can provide early indications of renal impairment and any risk of renal failure. In light of the complex clonal dynamics involved in MM, it is advisable that both monoclonal intact immunoglobulins and sFLCs are measured. Interestingly, one study demonstrated that the monoclonal protein type in patients with LCMM does not alter at disease relapse [59] (Fig. 2).

#### 4.4. AL amyloidosis and light chain deposition disease

AL amyloidosis and LCDD are two disorders caused by the extracellular precipitation of monoclonal light chains which disrupt the structure and function of multiple organs. In AL amyloidosis, light chain fragments, most commonly  $\lambda$  type, accumulate as insoluble amyloid fibrils and frequently affect the kidney and heart. The monoclonal light chains most often involved in LCDD are  $\kappa$  type and are precipitated on the basement membranes of cells in the kidneys and various other organs. While a definitive diagnosis of AL amyloidosis or LCDD is established by a tissue biopsy and histological examination, the detection of the monoclonal protein provides important supportive evidence of an underlying plasma cell dyscrasia.

Studies evaluating the diagnostic performance of the sFLC ratio in AL amyloidosis have documented a diagnostic sensitivity ranging from 75% to 98% [11,33,60–64]. The observation that an abnormal sFLC ratio has a greater diagnostic sensitivity than the combination of serum or urine IFE (98% vs. 79%) [11] has been supported by some studies [60] but not by others [61–63]. However, in all published studies to date, sFLC analysis has proven to be an important complementary technique to electrophoresis, which is reflected in IMWG guidelines that recommend sFLC analysis alongside sIFE and uIFE to screen patients with suspected AL amyloidosis [7]. Abnormal sFLC ratios are also found in 88–100% of patients with LCDD, of which approximately 1/3 of patients are negative by sIFE [33,65,66]. As such, sFLC analysis is a useful addition to electrophoretic tests when screening for and monitoring LCDD and is recommended by the IMWG [7].

## 5. Serum FLC assays for early detection of myeloma kidney

The clonal production of nephrotoxic FLCs is the predominant cause of the renal injury associated with MM and related monoclonal gammopathies. Monoclonal FLCs can induce a number of different pathologies within the kidney, which in turn can result in different clinical presentations. Of these, the most common presentation of FLC-induced renal injury is acute kidney injury (AKI) secondary to the tubular interstitial pathology cast nephropathy. In cast nephropathy, also known as myeloma kidney, waxy casts form in the distal tubules of the nephron due to the aggregation of FLC with Tamm Horsfall protein, causing interstitial inflammation and fibrosis. Found in approximately 90% of dialysis-dependent MM patients [16], myeloma kidney is the most common cause of AKI in MM.

A timely diagnosis is critically important in order to initiate treatment regimens to rapidly reduce FLC concentrations in patients with myeloma kidney. Such early FLC reductions are associated with improved survival [67]. Therefore, a screening algorithm designed to enable the rapid diagnosis of myeloma kidney as the cause of AKI has recently been proposed by the International Kidney and Monoclonal Gammopathy Research Group [68]. This algorithm proposes that the first priority in assessing a patient with unexplained AKI is to determine if monoclonal FLCs are present. To enable this, either sFLC assays or uIFE can be utilised, but given the limitations of urine analyses described in Section 2, many laboratories now use sFLC assays first line. When monoclonal FLCs are present, the serum concentration of the involved FLCs can provide significant guidance as to the likelihood of myeloma kidney as the renal pathology. Patients with myeloma kidney have baseline monoclonal sFLC concentrations that are typically above 500 mg/L [16,67,69–74], and a cutoff of 500 mg/L is commonly used as the level above which cast nephropathy is the likely pathology. A small number of patients with a high concentration of monoclonal FLC may have an alternative diagnosis to cast nephropathy [75] and so a renal biopsy should be considered for confirmation.

## 6. Conclusion

The incorporation of sFLC assays into diagnostic algorithms for plasma cell disorders had led to a paradigm shift in the understanding of these diseases. There has been a particular focus on the utility of sFLC analysis in AL amyloidosis, LCMM and NSMM, and recently for the rapid identification of myeloma kidney as a cause of unexplained AKI. As it becomes increasingly understood that MM is a multi-clonal disease, moving forward it is likely that serum-based tests for the measurement of monoclonal FLCs will become a greater adjunct to traditional measurements to identify all clones and monitor clonal evolution in patients with MM.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Josie Evans, Kelly Endean, Richard Hughes and Stephen Harding for their assistance in preparing and proof reading the manuscript.

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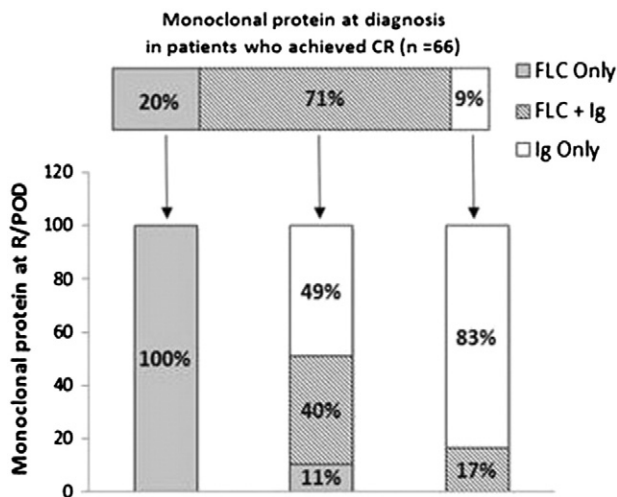


Fig. 2. Changes in monoclonal protein type at relapse or progression of disease (R/POD). Reprinted with permission from Macmillan Publishers Ltd, nature.com [59].

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