

## REVIEW

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**Islet autoantibodies and their use in predicting insulin-dependent diabetes**

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**Key word** Autoantibodies**Introduction**

Predicting type 1 diabetes mellitus refers to estimation of the probability that an individual will develop the disease in his or her lifetime or within a defined period. Since it is merely probability, certainty cannot be attained. Therefore, while it is possible to provide reasonably precise measures of this probability, we must remember that some individuals with a similar prior risk as determined by the predictive model used will develop the disease and others will not. The objective of studies developing predictive markers, parameters and models is to be increasingly discriminatory in the ability to identify which subjects will develop type 1 diabetes and when they will develop the disease [1]. These studies and in particular the measures of disease probability which they provide are necessary for the design of meaningful, cost-effective clinical trials which test therapies aimed at disease prevention or delay, and also for providing adequate and realistic information to persons to whom the prediction is applied.

We know that the probability of developing type 1 diabetes is affected by a genetic predisposition such that the risk in discordant monozygotic twins is several-fold higher than that in offspring or siblings of type 1 diabetic patients, which in turn is 10–20 times higher than in a person with no immediate family history of disease [1]. Currently, genetic markers can only provide a relatively low estimate of disease probability. Moreover, since the concordance rate

in monozygotic twins is only of the order of 50% [2, 3] it will not be possible to assign disease probabilities greater than this figure using genetic markers alone. The most effective markers for predicting type 1 diabetes have been autoantibodies against the endocrine cells within pancreatic islets [4]. These can be detected in the majority of type 1 diabetic patients at and prior to disease onset. The evaluation of these markers in prospectively followed first-degree relatives of type 1 diabetic patients has provided a reasonably accurate and precise estimation of the disease probability, enabling a good discrimination of 'progressors' to disease [5–8]. Several factors such as age [9, 10] and genetics [11] independently influence the disease probability in first-degree relatives. In persons with no immediate family history of type 1 diabetes, the source of the majority of new cases, we generally believe that we will be able to apply parameters and models derived from families in order to predict disease, but estimates of disease probability in this group [12–20] remain anecdotal, and we cannot yet provide scientifically validated probabilities. The aim here is to discuss the autoantibody markers available for predicting type 1 diabetes, and how they might be used in models and strategies to provide disease probabilities.

**Autoantibody markers of type 1 diabetes**

A marker of disease can be defined as something which is more prevalent in – or prior to – disease than in non-disease. Few markers are totally specific for disease. Most markers are found in both health and disease but with varying degrees of skewness towards disease. Many autoantibodies have been proposed as markers of type 1 diabetes [21], and these will be discussed.

**Islet cell antibodies**

The traditional autoantibody markers of type 1 diabetes, islet cell antibodies (ICA), can be detected in around

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70%–90% of type 1 diabetic patients at and prior to disease onset, and between 0% and 5% of healthy control subjects [7, 14, 16, 18, 22, 23]. They were first identified in patients with autoimmunity to multiple endocrine organs [24] and can also be found in other endocrine autoimmune disorders, though with prevalences much lower than that found in type 1 diabetes. ICA are detected by indirect immunofluorescence on frozen, unfixed human pancreas sections [25]. They generally bind to molecules contained in all islet endocrine cells [26], but there is considerable heterogeneity in the staining patterns of ICA, and this has suggested that the antibodies have multiple and variable target molecules [26–28]. They are predominantly of the immunoglobulin G1 (IgG1) subclass [29], and if of sufficiently high titre, ICA of other IgG subclasses can be detected [30]. Like most IgG antibodies, they can fix complement [31].

The role of ICA as predictive markers has been more extensively studied than other type 1 diabetes-associated autoantibodies. Early prospective studies in first-degree relatives of type 1 diabetic patients showed that ICA could be detected several years prior to the onset of the clinical disease [32]. Later, the probability of developing disease for relatives was shown to be directly related to the titre of ICA; relatives having the highest antibody titres almost always developed the disease, and those with low titres had a much lower risk [9, 10, 33]. Nevertheless, not all those with very high ICA titres develop type 1 diabetes, and estimates from pooled retrospective data in the ICARUS study indicate that the probability that a first-degree relative with high titre ICA (>80 JDF units) will develop type 1 diabetes within 5 years after testing is 53% [10]. While searching for reasons to explain the differences in progression in relatives with similar antibody levels, it was found that not all ICA are identical. Some ICA were shown to also stain islets of both rat and mouse pancreas, while some rat but not mouse islets (restricted ICA) [27]. An independent study found that some ICA had a predominantly beta-cell selective staining pattern on human islets and could be inhibited by a preparation of brain homogenate, while others stained all islet cells and could not be inhibited by brain homogenate [26]. A third study also identified two distinct ICA staining patterns: granular and homogeneous [28]. These studies noted that one of the patterns (restricted, beta-selective or granular) was associated with a greatly reduced likelihood of progression to type 1 diabetes. The antigen specificity of this ICA was found to be the islet and brain autoantigen glutamic acid decarboxylase (GAD) (vide infra). ICA specificity provides, however, only a partial explanation of the heterogeneity in disease progression, since having excluded those with restricted or GAD-specific ICA only, the remainder with high titre ICA do not all develop type 1 diabetes [5].

A paradox of the relatively low risk associated with GAD-specific ICA is that GAD is also one of the specificities of ICA found in type 1 diabetes [34, 35]. Therefore, whilst on their own GAD-specific ICAs may indicate only a marginal risk for type 1 diabetes, together with other ICAs they are a marker of the disease. What are the other ICAs?

One has been shown to be another islet and brain autoantigen, the protein tyrosine phosphatase-like molecule, insulinoma associated cDNA 2 (IA-2) and its homologue IA-2 $\beta$  (vide infra) [36, 37]. It has been suggested that GAD and IA-2/IA-2 $\beta$  are the major targets of ICAs associated with type 1 diabetes [37]. Inhibition of ICA with GAD and IA-2, however, shows reduction of ICA staining but completely inhibits the ICA found at onset of type 1 diabetes in less than 20% of cases (our unpublished observations). This demonstrates that there is at least one other major ICA target which requires identification.

#### Glutamic acid decarboxylase antibodies

These were originally detected as immunoprecipitating 64-kDa proteins from islet homogenates [38]. One of the proteins within the 64-kDa band immunoprecipitated by sera from type 1 diabetic patients is the 65,000  $M_r$  isoform of GAD [39]. Antibodies to GAD65 are detected in 70%–80% of patients at and prior to onset of disease and in <3% of control subjects [7, 18, 19, 23, 40–42]. Antibodies are also detected in the majority of patients with the rare neurological disorder stiff-man syndrome (SMS) [43], in occasional patients with disorders involving a GABAergic dysfunction [44] and in a minority of patients with endocrine autoimmunity other than type 1 diabetes [45–47]. The identification of GAD65 as an autoantigen of the 64 K antibodies has allowed high throughput sensitive assays for antibody measurement to be developed [41, 42]. The most effective of these are the radiobinding assays which use either  $^{125}\text{I}$ -labelled recombinant GAD65 or  $^{35}\text{S}$ -methionine labelled, *in vitro* translated recombinant GAD65 [48]. There is some cross-reactivity of antibodies with the 67,000  $M_r$  isoform of GAD, but few if any patients have antibodies to GAD67 in the absence of GAD65 reactivity [40, 49, 50]. The major isotype detected is IgG, and GAD antibodies of all IgG subclasses have been reported [51]. In type 1 diabetic patients these antibodies recognise several, predominantly conformational epitopes, while in SMS patients where titres are 10–1000-fold higher, other epitopes are also recognised [52–54]. No studies have adequately reported the probability of type 1 diabetes associated with the detection of GAD antibodies without prior selection with ICA. With the possible exception of those cases where ICA is solely due to the presence of GAD antibodies (restricted or GAD-specific ICA), relatives with ICA who also have GAD antibodies have a higher probability of developing type 1 diabetes than those with ICA alone [5–8, 43]. Moreover, some patients have GAD antibodies in the absence of ICA at or prior to onset of disease [5–8]. GAD antibodies are, therefore, important markers for type 1 diabetes prediction.

#### IA-2 and IA-2 $\beta$ antibodies

Not all that is immunoprecipitated in the 64-kDa band by type 1 diabetic sera is GAD. It was found that mild prote-

olysis of the immunoprecipitates yielded fragments of 50-kDa, 40-kDa and 37-kDa [55]. The 50-kDa fragment derived from GAD65, while the others did not [56]. Antibodies to the 40-kDa and/or 37-kDa tryptic fragments are found in 50%–75% of type 1 diabetic patients at and prior to disease onset and in <2% of control subjects [23, 55, 57]. Their detection in individuals with ICA is associated with a markedly increased probability of developing type 1 diabetes [5–8, 45, 57]. The 40-kDa and 37-kDa tryptic fragments derive from the related tyrosine phosphatase-like proteins IA-2 (ICA512) and IA-2 $\beta$  (phogrin, IAR) [58–62]. These are transmembrane proteins expressed in the secretory granule membranes of islet cells and other so-called neuroendocrine cells [63, 64]. Identification of the antigens has enabled assays similar to those for GAD antibodies to be developed [65]. These have confirmed the prevalence to be >50% in type 1 diabetic patients, being highest in those with a disease onset before the age of 15 years [4, 36]. Antibodies to IA-2 have also been detected in a small minority of patients with SMS in the absence of type 1 diabetes [66] but so far remain relatively specific for type 1 diabetes. Antibodies react primarily to IA-2, and most, but not all, of the reactivity to IA-2 $\beta$  is due to binding to epitopes which are shared between IA-2 and IA-2 $\beta$  protein tyrosine phosphatase domains [61, 67]. Studies in sequential samples suggest that the initial epitopes recognised are specific to IA-2, with subsequent spreading to those shared with IA-2 $\beta$  ([67], our unpublished observations). Antibodies recognise several epitopes, but these appear to be exclusively within the cytoplasmic portion of the molecules [68]. As for GAD antibodies, studies of IA-2 antibodies as predictive markers are mainly confined to the probability of disease when detected in combination with other markers such as ICA, GAD antibodies and insulin autoantibodies (IAA) [5–8]. In these studies the probability of disease is higher in subjects also having IA-2 antibodies than those with ICA alone.

### Insulin autoantibodies

Insulin is the only beta-cell-specific autoantigen so far identified. Antibodies to insulin are detected in insulin-naïve (untreated) patients [69], the prevalence being almost 100% in very young individuals and almost absent in patients with adult onset of type 1 diabetes [4, 70]. Measurement is only reliable with liquid phase radiobinding assays [71] and appears to be most sensitive in assays using very large serum volumes and prolonged incubation [72]. Not all binding detected by these assays is due to IgG [73], and measurement with assays using protein A [74] to detect immunocomplexes may be more specific than those using polyethylene glycol (PEG) precipitation. Antibodies to insulin also recognise proinsulin [75], and additional proinsulin-specific antibodies have been detected [76, 77]. Cross-reactivity with insulin-like growth factor has not been reported. Relatives with IAA have an increased probability of developing type 1 diabetes, and this probability is greatest when IAA are detected in combination with ICA [78].

### Islet autoantibodies: the remainder

As outlined above, the ICA reactivity seen in sera from type 1 diabetic patients cannot be totally accounted for by GAD, IA-2 and insulin, and there is clearly at least one other major islet autoantibody marker. A large list of putative targets of islet autoantibodies have been reported, but not all of these have been confirmed. Early biochemical characterisation of ICA targets suggested molecules with glycolipid properties [79, 80], but the major ICA specificities thus far identified are proteins, and the specificity of the biochemical characterisation of the early studies suggesting glycolipid targets has been questioned [81]. Glycolipid molecules which have been thought to be islet autoantigens include sulphatides [82] and the sialoganglioside GM2-1 [83]. Antibodies to GM2-1, which are detected using a solid-phase assay, have been found to be associated with an increased probability of type 1 diabetes when present in relatives with ICA [84]. Their relationship to ICA remains unclear. No specific inhibition studies have been reported, and our own unpublished observations suggest that gangliosides purified from human islets do not inhibit ICA staining.

Apart from antibodies to GAD, IA-2/IA-2 $\beta$  and insulin, few of the putative islet autoantibodies have been detected by liquid-phase immunoprecipitation assays. One exception is 38 K antibodies which immunoprecipitate a 38-kDa membrane glycoprotein from islets [85]. These are found in only a few (less than 20%) patients at and prior to disease onset, but do appear to be associated with an increased probability of disease. Antibodies to a 155-kDa rat insulinoma protein can also be detected in a liquid-phase assay [86]. These antibodies inhibit the binding of a monoclonal antibody (1A2) to antigen and are found in up to 90% of patients and 4% of control subjects, but also in the

**Table 1** Putative targets for autoantibodies in insulin-dependent diabetes (+ reactivity reported by at least one study, + antibodies detected also in liquid phase assays, ? no reports on T cell reactivity)

Antigen	Anti-bodies	T cells	References
Insulin	+	+	[69–72]
Proinsulin	+	+	[75, 76]
GAD-65	+	+	[39–42]
GAD-67	+	+	[49, 50]
IA-2 (ICA512)	+	+	[36, 58–60]
IA-2 beta/Phogrin	+	?	[61, 62]
38kDa antigen (GLIMA)	+	?	[85]
52kDa antigen	+	?	[100]
155kDa antigen	+	?	[86]
Ganglioside GM2-1	+	?	[83, 84]
Ganglioside GT3	+	?	[101]
Sulphatide	+	?	[82]
ICA69	+	+	[87–90]
Carboxypeptidase H	+	?	[102]
Glucose transporter (GLUT-2)	+	?	[103, 104]
Peripherin	+	?	[105]
Jun B	+	+	[106]
Topoisomerase II	+	?	[107]
ICA12	+	?	[108]

majority of relatives of type 1 diabetic patients. The identity of the target of the 1A2 monoclonal antibody is unknown. The remainder of those reported have been detected in solid phase assays such as Western blot, where binding is to partially denatured antigen at very high concentrations. One of these, ICA69 antibodies [87], has spawned considerable interest due to a region of similarity between the ICA69 protein and the cow milk protein bovine albumin. Antibodies to ICA69, however, cannot be detected by liquid-phase immunoprecipitation assays [88], are not specific for type 1 diabetes [89], and in a workshop were found not to be discriminatory between sera from type 1 diabetic patients and control subjects [90].

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### Islet antibody measurements

Assays used to detect and quantify autoantibodies provide the user with signals which need to be interpreted. It is important to remember that these signals reflect not only the number of antibody molecules, but also other factors, including antibody avidity, the number of epitopes recognised, non-antibody binding molecules, etc. Moreover, it is virtually impossible to quantify how many antibody molecules a signal represents and therefore impossible to determine when there is or is not antibody in the sample tested. This can be illustrated by comparing two assays which measure the same antibody. If we measure GAD antibodies using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), we would detect antibodies in only around 30% of type 1 diabetic patients, while if we used a radiobinding assay (RBA), we would detect antibodies in around 75% of patients [48]. We cannot conclude therefore that the absence of signal in the ELISA equates to no antibodies since we assume that the presence of signal in the RBA does indicate antibodies. Similarly, we cannot conclude that the absence of signal in RBA means no antibodies. We can take this further by saying that the absence of signal in a RBA assay today does not mean an absence of signal in a RBA assay tomorrow since the minimum number of antibody molecules the assay will detect varies from day to day. Rather than be discouraged by this, we need to grasp that our role is not to determine the presence or absence of antibody, but to ascribe to the assay readout diagnostic or prognostic meaning (probability of disease or health).

Much effort is expended on determining thresholds of positivity. This is useful for simplifying risk calculations, but tends to dichotomise the signals of an assay into present or absent, something we know is not true. There are several ways in which thresholds which distinguish the signals obtained in the majority of healthy individuals from those in the majority of patients can be calculated. Parametric methods based on mean and standard deviations in healthy control subjects are common, but the distribution of signals from autoantibody assays are rarely Gaussian, and therefore, unless signals are first transformed so that they fit a normal distribution, these methods are probably inadequate. An alternative method is to plot the distribu-

tion of the signals before or after log-transformation on a normal plot [91]. In that case it is also possible to pool signals from both patients and control subjects. Non-parametric methods are also common and are usually based on the interpolation of results from a distribution histogram to determine, for example, the upper 99th centile of control subjects. Other methods such as receiver-operating characteristics (ROC) plots [92] are very useful for comparing performances between different assays, but are not particularly helpful in determining thresholds. Each method for determining a threshold may not give identical endpoints. When we examined the measurements of IA-2 antibodies in 2801 school children, the mean plus 3SD corresponded to 20.4 units, the mean plus 3SD of log-transformed measurements 1.7 units, and the 99th centile 1.3 units. The proportion of new onset type 1 diabetic cases identified above these levels are 61%, 70% and 72%, respectively. One of the problems in determining thresholds from signals in control subjects for islet antibody measurements is that we cannot be sure that some of the subjects will not develop type 1 diabetes in the future. The use of the normal plot, in which signals falling outside the Gaussian distribution can be distinguished, may partially overcome this problem.

In general, we would discourage the use of thresholds, as they dichotomise results into positive and negative. The information that can be obtained from the assay readouts will be most helpful if we treat the signals as a continuous or semi-continuous variable. We know that the probability of disease differs depending upon the magnitude of the signal. For example, in the ICA assay, a measurement of 5 JDF units is associated with a lower probability of developing type 1 diabetes than is a signal of 20 JDF units, which is in turn lower than that of >80 JDF units [9, 10, 33]. If the assay is a screening assay designed to exclude those with very a low probability of developing type 1 diabetes from further testing, then we would be more likely to choose a low threshold so as to avoid excluding too many subjects who will develop the disease. If, on the other hand, we want to select those with sufficient risk to enter into a clinical trial, a higher threshold is more appropriate so that not too many are treated unnecessarily. The use of several thresholds discriminating different probabilities of developing the disease will provide this flexibility. We would again stress that it is far better to view islet autoantibody measurements in terms of their probability of disease rather than the presence or absence of antibody. Finally, we give a warning to use caution when interpreting autoantibody measurements for purposes other than disease prediction or diagnosis, e.g. determining chronology of antibody appearance. It is tempting to conclude that because one autoantibody is usually detected earlier than another, the autoimmune response also occurs earlier. However, each islet autoantibody marker is measured by unique assays, and these assays will vary considerably in their ability to detect antibody. For example, just as low levels of GAD antibodies are not detected by some ELISAs, the non-GAD, non-IA-2 ICA antibodies which are currently detected in the indirect immunofluorescence assay will very likely be

easier to detect in radiobinding assays with specifically labelled antigen once it becomes available; the IAA assay which uses large serum volumes and several days of incubation may detect fewer antibody molecules than the radiobinding assays measuring GAD and IA-2 antibodies. It is not inconceivable that IAA may be detected earlier than ICA because of the assay used rather than autoimmunity occurring earlier.

### Screening strategies based on autoantibody measurement

Several strategies can be applied. We cannot determine which is best, however, until we know when autoantibodies are first detectable and until sufficient numbers of people have been followed to disease onset. This can only be achieved with a long prospective follow-up of individuals from birth with sequential antibody measurement. These studies are in progress [93–95], and meanwhile we can make educated guesses based upon cross-sectional antibody distributions before and at onset of disease.

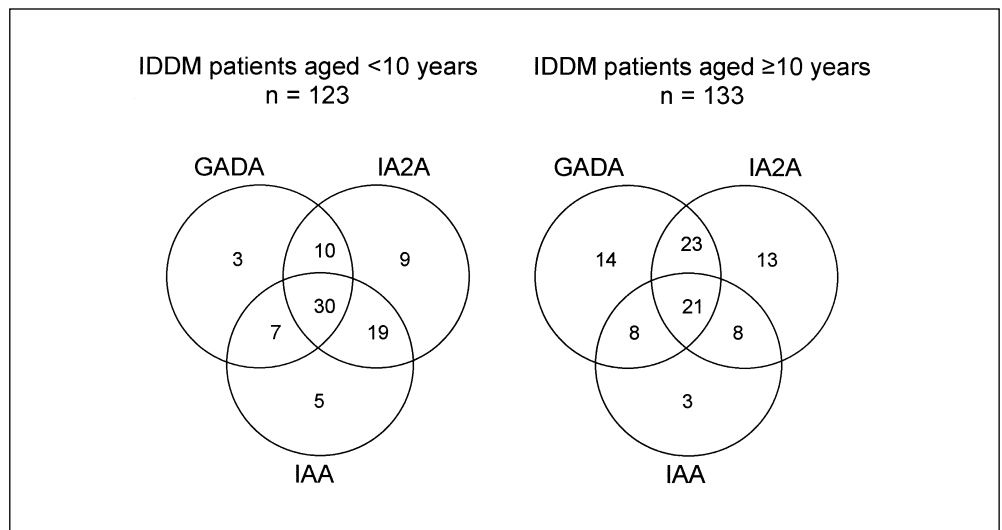
We have already discussed that there are currently four principle antibody markers available: ICA, IAA, GAD antibodies and IA-2/IA-2 $\beta$  antibodies. Studies show that ICA are detected in up to 90% of patients with only minor variations with respect to age or sex [23]. IAA are detected in the majority of patients with very young onset of disease, and are less prevalent in older onset patients [70]. GAD antibodies are detected in around 75% of patients, and are more prevalent in older onset patients, while IA-2 antibodies are detected in around 65% of patients and are more prevalent in younger onset patients (Fig. 1). GAD and IA-2 antibodies are therefore complementary, and one or the other is detected in over 90% of patients [8, 23, 97].

The first step in developing a screening strategy is to identify the initial screening test. This test will be applied to a very large number of samples and therefore should be

cheap, relatively easy to perform and able to identify the majority of those who will develop type 1 diabetes. From the cross-sectional observations it is tempting to conclude that most patients have IAA early in life and that these gradually disappear over time. We cannot, however, be certain of this, and the most effective screening test is likely to be a combined GAD/IA-2 antibody test. The advantage of this is that both antibodies can be screened for in the same test [20, 36, 97, 98], and that measurement can be performed on whole capillary blood samples equally well as on serum [98, 99]. Currently, IAA cannot be incorporated into the same test, and even if its addition will lead to the detection of more cases early in life, it remains unclear how cost effective its addition in the initial screening will be.

The second step is to identify tests which can be applied to those selected by the screening test. After creating antigen-specific autoantibody assays, it has become clear that the probability of developing type 1 diabetes is not only related to the amount of antibody detected, but probably more so to the number of autoantibody markers detected [5–8]. Studies in type 1 diabetic families, schoolchildren and patients at and prior to disease onset show that in most patients or individuals who develop type 1 diabetes, two or more of the antibody markers are detected, and only a few have just one marker [4–8, 17, 85]. In contrast, most relatives or schoolchildren selected on the basis of elevated levels of either ICA or GAD/IA-2 antibodies have only a single marker. Therefore, those relatives, neonates, infants or schoolchildren in whom none or only one of the markers is detected have a low probability of developing type 1 diabetes. The presence of at least two markers is associated with a relatively high probability [50% or more) of disease [4–8], and the highest risk is found in those with three or four antibody markers. From these studies, it is clear that measurement of IAA and ICA in those selected on the basis of elevated levels of GAD and/or IA-2 antibodies in the screening test will provide a useful discrimination of type 1 diabetes probability. IAA is essential if

**Fig. 1** The prevalence (%) of glutamicacid decarboxylase (GAD) antibodies, IA-2 antibodies and insulin autoantibodies (IAA) above the 99th centile of control subjects and antibody combinations at onset of disease in 256 type 1 diabetic patients from the Oxford region



type 1 diabetes prediction is performed in young individuals. The additional benefit of measuring ICA early in life is not clear. Vice versa, the benefit of measuring IAA in individuals over 15 years old is questionable because of their low prevalence at this age, and here ICA are still essential. Whether ICA should be considered an additional marker has been questioned [6] since in some cases the ICA is due entirely to the presence of GAD antibodies [26, 34, 35]. We would argue that this is uncommon and that in the majority of cases ICA recognising additional antigens is also present as demonstrated by competition studies (Bonifacio, unpublished observations). In addition, relatives with only ICA and GAD antibodies in the Barts-Oxford family study do have a probability of developing type 1 diabetes which is greater than those with just elevated GAD antibodies or ICA alone (Bingley, unpublished observations), and a substantial number (5 of 24) of relatives who develop type 1 diabetes had only ICA plus GAD antibodies or ICA plus IA-2 antibodies in samples prior to disease onset (Bingley, unpublished observations).

Another consideration is when and how often should autoantibody screening be performed. Data from prospective studies from birth onwards indicate that autoantibodies can be detected in the first years of life [93, 94], and therefore screening could start as early as 1 year of age. How often thereafter and for how long remains uncertain. We must also remember that the levels of antibody markers, and therefore also the number of markers detected in a single individual, can change over time. Other considerations such as whether antibody screening should be restricted to those in whom an a priori selection using genetic markers [95] has already been done are also unresolved. Clearly, this may have the benefit of reducing antibody screening costs, but how efficient this will be depends upon how effective (sensitive and specific) the genetic screen is.

In conclusion, whilst several islet autoantibodies have been reported, not all of them are associated with type 1 diabetes, and fewer still will be useful in its prediction. Currently, ICA, IAA, GAD antibodies and IA-2/IA-2 $\beta$  antibodies are the only established antibody markers for this purpose. Their combined use has improved our ability to predict type 1 diabetes and will allow the probability of developing the disease to be quantified based on the level and number of antibody markers detected. Useful screening strategies for both type 1 diabetic families and the general population can be proposed which first take advantage of a single test such as the combined GAD/IA-2 antibody test which has a high sensitivity to exclude those with a very low probability of developing type 1 diabetes from further testing, and second apply ICA and/or IAA to the remainder in order to discriminate those with the highest probability of disease. Prediction and prediction strategies should improve when the remainder of the ICA specificities are identified and when studies of autoantibody and genetic markers in sequential samples starting with birth are completed.

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