www.ijarp.com ISSN 2456-9992 Page: 01-07

International Journal Advanced Research Publications

Review Article

Volume: 02
Issue: 07

EVALUATION OF DIFFERENT STAINING TECHNIQUES FOR RAPID DETECTION OF MYCOBACTERIA: A REVIEW

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Article Received: 19 June 2026, Article Revised: 09 July 2026, Published on: 29 July 2026

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Doi: https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.7163

ABSTRACT

Tuberculosis (TB) remains one of the leading causes of infectious-disease mortality worldwide, and rapid, accurate laboratory detection of Mycobacterium tuberculosis is central to disease control. Sputum smear microscopy using acid-fast staining continues to be the most widely used first-line diagnostic approach, particularly in resource-limited settings. This review synthesizes evidence on three commonly used acid-fast staining techniques — Ziehl–Neelsen (ZN) staining, Fluorescent Auramine–Rhodamine staining, and Kinyoun cold staining — drawing on a comparative laboratory-based evaluation of 100 sputum specimens alongside the wider published literature. Across studies, fluorescent staining consistently demonstrates the highest sensitivity and the shortest examination time, ZN staining offers a dependable and economical option for routine diagnosis, and Kinyoun staining provides a safer, heat-free alternative with comparatively lower sensitivity. The review discusses the biological basis of acid-fastness, the historical development of these techniques, their comparative diagnostic performance, and their practical implications for laboratories with differing levels of resources. It concludes that no single method is universally optimal and that technique selection should be guided by laboratory infrastructure, patient load, and cost considerations, with an emerging role for combining microscopy with molecular diagnostics.

KEYWORDS: Tuberculosis; Mycobacteria; Ziehl–Neelsen staining; Fluorescent staining; Kinyoun staining; Acid-fast bacilli; Sputum microscopy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tuberculosis is an airborne infectious disease caused by Mycobacterium tuberculosis, a slow-growing, aerobic, acid-fast bacillus that primarily affects the lungs but can also involve extrapulmonary sites such as bones, lymph nodes, and the central nervous system. According to the World Health Organization, several million new TB cases are reported globally each year, with the highest burden concentrated in developing countries such as India, China, Indonesia, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa (WHO, 2023). Delayed diagnosis contributes directly to increased disease transmission, disease progression, and mortality, whereas rapid detection allows timely initiation of anti-tubercular therapy and supports infection-control efforts.

In many healthcare settings, especially where molecular and culture-based facilities are unavailable, microscopic examination of acid-fast stained sputum smears remains the primary diagnostic tool because it is simple, inexpensive, and rapid. Mycobacteria possess a lipid-rich, mycolic-acid-containing cell wall that resists conventional staining and decolorization, a property known as acid-fastness, which necessitates specialized staining procedures for their visualization (Wayne, 2018). Over the decades, several acid-fast staining methods have been developed and refined, each differing in sensitivity, specificity, staining time, cost, and ease of interpretation. This review brings together the historical development, underlying principles, and comparative diagnostic performance of the three staining techniques most widely used in routine microbiology laboratories: Ziehl–Neelsen staining, Fluorescent Auramine–Rhodamine staining, and Kinyoun cold staining.

2. Historical Background of Acid-Fast Staining

The development of acid-fast staining is closely tied to the discovery of the tubercle bacillus. Robert Koch identified Mycobacterium tuberculosis as the causative agent of tuberculosis in 1882, prompting efforts to visualize the organism microscopically. Paul Ehrlich introduced an early acid-fast staining approach using aniline dyes shortly afterward, and this was subsequently modified by Franz Ziehl and Friedrich Neelsen, who incorporated carbol fuchsin with acid-alcohol decolorization to create what became the Ziehl–Neelsen technique. Kinyoun later adapted this hot-staining method into a cold-staining variant that removed the heating step, improving laboratory safety and simplifying the workflow. In the 1930s, fluorescent staining using auramine-based dyes was introduced, and this approach gained wider acceptance in later decades as fluorescence microscopy improved screening efficiency by allowing larger smear areas to be examined at lower magnification (Smith et al., 2018).

Together, these developments reflect a continuing effort to balance diagnostic sensitivity, operational simplicity, and laboratory safety.

3. Biological Basis of Acid-Fastness

Mycobacteria are non-motile, non-spore-forming, rod-shaped organisms whose cell walls are unusually rich in mycolic acids, waxes, and complex lipids (Murray et al., 2020). This lipid-rich structure confers resistance to drying, common disinfectants, and conventional aqueous stains, and is responsible for the defining acid-fast property: once stained with carbol fuchsin, the bacilli resist decolorization by acid-alcohol. All three staining methods discussed in this review exploit this same underlying principle, differing mainly in the dye system used (carbol fuchsin versus fluorochrome dyes) and in whether heat is applied to aid dye penetration.

4. Staining Techniques Reviewed

4.1 Ziehl–Neelsen Staining

Ziehl–Neelsen (ZN) staining, also known as the hot-staining method, relies on the ability of acid-fast bacilli to retain carbol fuchsin despite acid-alcohol decolorization, causing them to appear red against a blue methylene-blue counterstained background. The procedure is inexpensive, requires only a standard light microscope, and can be performed with minimal training, which has made it the mainstay of TB microscopy in peripheral and resource-limited laboratories (Patel et al., 2020). Its principal limitations are a comparatively longer examination time, dependence on oil-immersion microscopy, and reduced sensitivity in specimens with low bacillary load.

4.2 Fluorescent Auramine–Rhodamine Staining

Fluorescent staining uses fluorochrome dyes such as Auramine O or Auramine–Rhodamine, which bind to mycolic acids in the bacterial cell wall and fluoresce brightly under ultraviolet or LED-based fluorescence microscopy, appearing as yellow-orange rods against a dark background. Because bacilli can be detected at lower magnification, larger areas of the smear can be screened more quickly, improving both sensitivity and throughput (Reddy et al., 2022). Reported trade-offs include the need for a fluorescence microscope, higher equipment and maintenance costs, and the requirement for trained personnel, which can limit adoption in smaller or peripheral laboratories.

4.3 Kinyoun Cold Staining

Kinyoun staining modifies the ZN protocol by increasing the phenol and carbol fuchsin concentration so that adequate dye penetration is achieved without heating. This eliminates

the aerosol-generation risk associated with the heating step in ZN staining, improving laboratory biosafety (Brown & Allen, 2019). However, several comparative studies report that the absence of heat-assisted penetration is associated with weaker staining intensity and correspondingly lower sensitivity, particularly for specimens with a low bacillary count.

5. Comparative Diagnostic Performance

Across the reviewed literature and a comparative laboratory evaluation of 100 sputum specimens, Fluorescent Auramine–Rhodamine staining consistently produced the highest diagnostic yield, detecting 46 positive cases with a sensitivity of 92% and specificity of 97%, and requiring the shortest examination time (approximately 5 minutes per slide). Ziehl–Neelsen staining detected 42 positive cases (sensitivity 84%, specificity 95%) and required roughly 12 minutes per slide, while Kinyoun cold staining detected 39 positive cases (sensitivity 78%, specificity 93%). These findings are broadly consistent with earlier comparative work: Singh et al. (2021) reported sensitivities of 82% and 93% for ZN and fluorescent staining respectively across 200 samples, and Ahmed et al. (2022) similarly found that fluorescent microscopy improved detection of paucibacillary cases and reduced false-negative results relative to ZN staining. Verma and Singh (2020) found that although ZN staining gave clearer visualization of bacilli than Kinyoun staining in some specimens, Kinyoun staining was safer and easier to perform because it removed the heating step.

Table 1. Comparative diagnostic performance of acid-fast staining techniques (adapted from comparative laboratory data and reviewed literature).

Staining Method	Sensitivity	Specificity	Time/Slide	Detection Rate
Ziehl–Neelsen	84%	95%	~12 min	42/100
Fluorescent (Auramine–Rhodamine)	92%	97%	~5 min	46/100
Kinyoun Cold Staining	78%	93%	~10 min	39/100

Beyond diagnostic accuracy, cost-effectiveness studies indicate a trade-off between performance and affordability: Joseph and Thomas (2019) found that although fluorescent staining required a higher initial investment in equipment, it reduced overall manpower and screening time, potentially offsetting costs in high-volume settings, whereas ZN staining remained the more economical choice for laboratories with lower throughput. Molecular methods such as GeneXpert MTB/RIF offer even greater sensitivity and can additionally detect rifampicin resistance within about two hours (Boehme et al., 2017), but their cost and infrastructure requirements mean that smear microscopy continues to serve as the frontline test in most high-burden, low-resource settings (Cheesbrough, 2018).

6. DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed here indicates that the choice of acid-fast staining technique involves a consistent trade-off between diagnostic sensitivity and operational feasibility. Fluorescent staining offers the clearest advantage in sensitivity and speed, making it well suited to high-volume diagnostic centers and settings where paucibacillary cases are common, since delayed diagnosis has significant consequences for both individual outcomes and community transmission (Nicol & Wilkinson, 2020). However, its dependence on specialized fluorescence microscopy and trained staff restricts its feasibility in peripheral or poorly resourced laboratories. Ziehl–Neelsen staining, despite its comparatively lower sensitivity, remains the practical backbone of TB microscopy in such settings because of its low cost, simplicity, and minimal equipment requirements. Kinyoun staining occupies an intermediate niche: its principal value lies not in diagnostic performance but in laboratory safety, since eliminating the heating step reduces aerosol generation and the associated occupational exposure risk.

A recurring theme across the literature is that no single staining method is universally superior; rather, the appropriate choice depends on laboratory infrastructure, patient volume, available technical expertise, and financial resources (Gupta & Khanna, 2021; Kapoor & Verma, 2021). This suggests that TB control strategies should not aim for uniform adoption of a single technique but should instead match staining methods to the operational realities of individual laboratories, while working toward wider availability of confirmatory molecular testing where resources permit. Relatively few studies have comprehensively compared all three techniques simultaneously under identical conditions with respect to cost, time, and ease of interpretation together, which represents a gap that comparative studies of this kind help to address.

7. CONCLUSION

Rapid and accurate laboratory detection of Mycobacteria continues to depend heavily on acid-fast smear microscopy, particularly in resource-limited settings. Among the three staining techniques reviewed, Fluorescent Auramine–Rhodamine staining demonstrates the highest sensitivity, specificity, and speed, making it the preferred option where fluorescence microscopy is available. Ziehl–Neelsen staining remains a dependable, economical, and widely accessible method suitable for routine use in peripheral laboratories, while Kinyoun cold staining offers a safer, heat-free alternative at some cost to sensitivity. Selecting an appropriate technique requires balancing diagnostic performance against infrastructure, cost,

and staffing constraints, and future TB control efforts may benefit from combining smear microscopy with molecular diagnostics, automated fluorescent detection systems, and strengthened laboratory quality-control practices to improve overall detection rates.

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