

STROBE-Metagenomics: A STROBE/STROME-ID Extension Statement to Guide the Reporting of Studies Applying Metagenomics

Authors

Tehmina Bharucha*^{1,2} MRCP

Clarissa Oeser³ PhD

Francois Balloux⁴ PhD, Professor

Julianne R. Brown⁵ PhD

Ellen Carbo⁶ MSc

Andre Charlett⁷ PhD

Charles Chiu⁸ PhD, Professor

Eric C. J. Claas⁶ PhD

Marcus de Goffau⁹ PhD

Jutte J. C. de Vries⁶ PhD

Marc Eloit¹⁰ PhD, Professor

Susan Hopkins^{11, 12} PhD

Jim F. Huggett^{13, 14} PhD

Duncan MacCannell¹⁵ PhD

Sofia Morfopoulou¹⁶ PhD

Avindra Nath¹⁷ MD, Professor

Denise M. O'Sullivan¹³ PhD

Lauren B. Reoma¹⁷ MD

Liam P. Shaw¹⁸ PhD

Igor Sidorov⁶ PhD

Patricia J. Simner¹⁹ PhD

Le Van Tan²⁰ PhD

Emma C. Thomson²¹ FRCP, Professor

Lucy van Dorp⁴ PhD

Michael R. Wilson²² MD

Judith Breuer^{4,16} MD, Professor

Nigel Field*³ MB PhD

Affiliations:

1. Department of Biochemistry, University of Oxford, Oxford, U.K.
2. Lao-Oxford-Mahosot Hospital-Wellcome Trust Research Unit, Vientiane, Laos
3. Centre for Molecular Epidemiology and Translational Research, University College London, London, U.K.
4. UCL Genetics Institute, University College London, London, U.K.
5. Microbiology, Virology and Infection Prevention and Control, Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust, London, U.K.
6. Department of Medical Microbiology, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands
7. Statistics, Modelling and Economics Department, Public Health England, London, U.K.
8. Department of Laboratory Medicine, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, U.S.A.
9. Wellcome Sanger Institute, Hinxton, U.K.
10. Pathogen discovery laboratory, Institut Pasteur, Paris, France
11. Healthcare-Associated Infection and Antimicrobial Resistance, Public Health England, London, U.K.
12. Infectious diseases unit, Royal Free Hospital, London, U.K.
13. National Measurement Laboratory, LGC, Teddington, U.K.
14. School of Biosciences & Medicine, Faculty of Health & Medical Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK
15. Office of Advanced Molecular Detection, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, U.S.A.
16. Division of Infection and Immunity, University College London, London, UK
17. Section of Infections of the Nervous System, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, U.S.A.
18. Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
19. Department of Pathology, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA
Emerging Infections Group, Oxford University Clinical Research Unit, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam
20. MRC-University of Glasgow Centre for Virus Research, Sir Michael Stoker Building, 464 Bearsden Road, Glasgow, U.K.

21. Weill Institute for Neurosciences and Department of Neurology, University of California, San Francisco, U.S.A.

*Co-corresponding authors. Correspondence details:

Dr Tehmina Bharucha. Institute of Glycobiology, Department of Biochemistry, University of Oxford, South Parks Road, Oxford OX1 3RQ. 01865275723. t.bharucha@doctors.org.uk

Dr Nigel Field. Centre for Molecular Epidemiology and Translational Research, Mortimer Market Centre, Off Capper Street, UCL, London WC1E 6JB. 020 3108 2092. nigel.field@ucl.ac.uk

Background

The term "metagenome" was coined in 1998 to describe the collection of genomes from microbes present in environmental soil samples, using approaches previously employed to study single genomes (1). The sequencing of genetic material recovered directly from samples has now become common practice in research on clinical microorganisms. In this context, 'metagenomics' refers to the application of sequencing methods that can identify coexistent genomic material from any organism present in patient samples (i.e. microorganism as well as host nucleic acid), usually with the aim of pathogen identification for clinical diagnostics or research (2-4). Examples of real-world applications include pathogen detection and discovery, species characterisation or subtyping, antimicrobial resistance (AMR) detection, virulence profiling, and studies of the microbiome and microecological drivers of health and disease (5-12). Metagenomics is also being introduced as a diagnostic tool in aetiological studies of clinical syndromes such as encephalitis (13, 14), for exploring the microbiome (15, 16), and tracking disease outbreaks (17, 18). A topical example of the transformational impact of direct sequencing of clinical samples has been the recent application for rapid investigation and dissemination of information on SARS-CoV-2 (11, 12).

Metagenomics data are generated using high-throughput sequencing methods, also referred to as deep, next-generation, massively-parallel or shotgun sequencing. Here, for simplicity, we refer to all these approaches as 'sequencing'. For the purposes of this statement, we also include capture probe enrichment-based sequencing methods that use nucleotide 'baits' to increase sensitivity (4), as well as targeted amplicon sequencing (e.g. sequencing the 16S ribosomal ribonucleic acid (rRNA) gene to identify bacteria) (19). Although the latter two approaches might not be viewed as 'true' examples of metagenomics, and are not the focus of our review, some similar considerations about reporting of results apply.

Metagenomic sequencing has advantages for pathogen identification over conventional methods such as culture or targeted PCR because many or most microbial species present within a sample may be detected simultaneously with greater taxonomic resolution. More detailed characterisation of microbial community composition and population dynamics also enables the study of ecological interactions. Furthermore, this avoids culture, thereby

including species that are difficult or time consuming to grow. This is particularly relevant for diagnostic applications, where routine culture is seeing a decline (20, 21).

However, appropriate study design remains in a state of relative infancy and metagenomic technologies raise important technical challenges, ranging from methodological artefacts introduced by wet laboratory methods to the impact of different computational approaches used to analyse and interpret multivariate and complex data. Furthermore, the ethical implications of sequencing are significant, and privacy considerations are increasingly recognised. The multiple steps and different expertise required to generate and interrogate metagenomic sequence data involves numerous decision points, each of which may introduce bias and affect downstream inference about the presence and abundance of species.

A metagenome result should therefore be considered with caution as one possible representation of the true sample composition of a given microbiome. Understanding and reporting the sources of bias and the limitations to valid inference should improve protocol performance, and enable metagenomic research to proceed with transparent recognition of the real-world limitations. However, existing reporting statements for epidemiology studies, including STROBE (STrengthening the Reporting of OBservational studies in Epidemiology) (22) and its infectious disease molecular epidemiology extension, STROME-ID (Strengthening the Reporting of Molecular Epidemiology for Infectious Diseases) (23), do not fully address issues specific to metagenomics. For this reason, journals, and their readers, might not be adequately equipped with a standardised set of guidelines to evaluate and critically appraise clinical and epidemiological studies applying metagenomics.

Aims of the STROBE-metagenomics extension statement

We aimed to improve the clarity and consistency of metagenomics research reporting, ranging from clinical diagnostics to microbiome studies, with suggestions for optimal practice and recommendations for robust and accurate reporting.

Search strategy

A STROBE-metagenomics working group was established in 2018, identified through notable researchers in the field, including a geographically diverse group of epidemiologists, statisticians, bioinformaticians, neurologists, virologists, microbiologists, and specialists in public health and infectious diseases. Participants met to agree the structure and content of the statement, and the proposal was registered with the Equator Network (24). Specific issues to be covered were identified, see Table 1. A systematic approach was taken to gather evidence to support the recommendations, with literature searches performed in PubMed (see appendix A1 for search terms), searching references of articles, and supplemented by expert opinion. Articles were limited to those in English language published between January 2000 and June 2019. Areas that were adequately addressed in existing STROBE (22) and STROME-ID (23) statements were not covered. Iterative versions of the guidelines and manuscript were circulated to develop a consensus.

The STROBE-metagenomics extension has been developed to complement the STROBE and STROME-ID statements, with the new recommendations organised alongside the existing table. The guidelines discussed below therefore cover only the new proposals for reporting.

Table 1 Key issues to be addressed in publications applying metagenomics

STROBE-metagenomics extension statement

1 Title and abstract

1.1 The term metagenomic/s should be included in the title or abstract and the keywords of the study when these methods contribute substantially to the results reported

Clear and concise language incorporating standardised terminology, with references if appropriate, enables the accurate indexing of published studies in recognised databases. This is crucial for easy information retrieval and knowledge dissemination. For example, a systematic literature review conducted for studies applying metagenomics in encephalitis utilising MESH and keyword searches for “sequencing” or “metagenomics” in four databases (PubMed, Embase, Web of Science and Cochrane) (13) failed to identify two relevant studies that did not report the terms (25, 26). In this case, the studies were identified by experts in the field who were directly involved with the studies.

4 Methods/ study design

4.1 Describe specimen collection, handling and storage processes, and nucleic acid extraction methods

Steps involved in sample collection, handling and processing are frequently poorly reported in publications and yet they will have considerable impact on the results and reproducibility of a study and may introduce method-induced variability artefacts (27-30). In particular, many studies use material banked and collected originally for other purposes. Important potential sources of error are described below and their contribution to bias detailed in section 9.1.

Nucleic acids, particularly RNA, are labile. Consequently, collection methods, the addition of nucleic acid stabilisers, and the time to processing can impact the results obtained (31). To address these issues, reporting should include durations, volumes, temperatures and methods used before, during and after the storage of samples (section 9.1) (32, 33). Extraction methods contribute to another major source of method-induced variation, and can be deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA)- or RNA-specific, or tailored to specific organism types, so should be described (34). Other details of sample preparation methods should also be

reported, including filtration, centrifugation, DNA digestion, rRNA depletion, separation in RNA/DNA or viral/ bacterial workflows or random amplification. Standardized protocols should also be followed, if available and appropriate, and documented clearly in the publication methods. Authors should also consider submitting to standardized protocol repositories (e.g. www.protocols.io/).

4.2 Describe sequencing methods, including sequencing depth

Different metagenomic sequencing platforms may produce different types of reads, for example, single vs. paired-end, and short (100-300 bp) vs. long (>1,000 bp). Sequencing platforms have different error rates, with the probability of a base being read incorrectly ranging from <0.01% for Illumina® (Illumina, Inc.) to >10% for Oxford Nanopore Technologies (current figures as of May 2019 (35)). Additionally, sequencers often cope poorly with large homopolymer repeats, GC-rich, structurally repetitive and other complex regions of the genome. Consequent false positive and false negative errors need consideration when reporting species composition (36) (section 9.1 and 9.2).

Sequencing depth refers to the number of times a particular base is represented within reads, or the redundancy of coverage (37). This has implications for identification of low abundant transcripts, and confidence in sequencing data. However, sequencing depth must be balanced according to the question at hand and the available resources. There are a number of factors that affect sequencing depth, including the sequencing platform and the sequence that is being read (e.g. species diversity of the sample) (37-39).

4.3 Describe methods used for bioinformatics analysis

For the purposes of this statement, the term ‘bioinformatics’ applies to all analysis steps downstream from the raw sequencing data, including base calling, de-multiplexing, trimming and removal of reads (e.g. those of low quality, low complexity, adapters and indexes, or of human origin), as well as read normalisation, alignment/mapping of sequence reads to reference databases, *de novo* assembling of genomes and taxonomic assignment of reads and/or assembled contigs. There are multiple viable options for many of these tasks, with ongoing debate in the community about optimal methods, which may depend on the scientific question at hand. The field is under rapid development and methods considered ‘best practice’ at one stage can be superseded following new analytical advances.

There should be clear descriptions of the bioinformatics methods used, including, at a minimum, the software name, version, and the main commands run with values for the essential parameters/flags. It is also advisable to make data and programming code open access, whether as supplementary files or shared, e.g. via Github or Figshare. Where possible, a version-controlled container, package or easily installable version of the complete analytic pipeline (including all dependencies and required databases) could be made available for download and review. The open source release of bioinformatics workflows should be encouraged wherever possible to improve transparency and reproducibility, and should include adequate validation datasets, meaningful documentation and examples of expected outputs and reports. Appendix A2 provides further discussion of bioinformatic analysis and taxonomic profiling.

4.4 Describe quality assurance methods, including internal and external quality controls

An important strength of metagenomics studies is their ability to detect any genomic material present in a sample. However, detection applies equally to ‘true’ sample material and to any contaminating nucleic acids present in a sample, which may be introduced at any stage from sample collection to processing. For example, contamination may come from the extraction kit, the ‘kitome’ (40), or at the point of specimen collection. Sampling is rarely performed under completely sterile conditions, and tissues obtained from tissue banks are therefore often contaminated. Low biomass, low abundance sites (for example tumors, the brain, and fetal tissues such as the placenta) are particularly prone to the risk of misclassifying contaminants.

To demonstrate attempts to ensure internal validity and reproducibility and identify potential contamination, internal controls for all extraction and sequencing processes should be reported as part of standard operating procedures (4, 27). Positive controls are usually spiked-in DNA/RNA e.g. synthetic nucleic acid standards such as sequins (47), and negative controls are usually a blank/water sample or ideally a similar or identical matrix (tissue, body fluids, etc) that are expected to lack microorganism nucleic acid based on patient factors and test results. For clinical metagenomics, formal laboratory implementation involves a system of external controls. This is more difficult to arrange, however, publicly and commercially available controls and mock community samples are now available, and we recommend that their use should be reported (48, 49).

4.5 Describe use of orthogonal methods to confirm pathogen identity, function and viability

The conventional methods in microbiology for confirming the presence of a pathogen are culture or growth of the pathogen from a clinical sample and immunohistochemistry, the histological localisation of candidate species in tissue biopsies. However, traditional culture can be difficult when antibiotics have been administered before sampling, or for pathogens which are slow-growing, fastidious, present in low-concentration or as-yet undescribed. Sequencing has high discriminative power and may have higher sensitivity than culture-based methods. For example, in a polymicrobial sample, growth can be affected by presence of other competing bacteria or by inadequate growth conditions. Metagenomics methods have consistently demonstrated higher classification accuracy when comparing taxonomic profiles of synthetic polymicrobial samples obtained from extended quantitative culture with nonselective media (50).

Confirmatory assays appropriate to the study setting should be reported, and a justification for the methods employed and a description of their limitations should be provided. For cases in which confirmatory assays are not possible (e.g. due to high cost or low volume of samples) an explanation should be provided. Rigorous validation of the method used, particularly for pathogens and proficiency testing, especially in clinical laboratories should be described. Further explanation is provided in appendix A3.

4.6 Describe the criteria used to assess the role of pathogens in disease aetiology

Confirming the presence of microbial DNA or RNA in association with disease is an important step in establishing a causal relationship between a microorganism and disease (51, 52). A major challenge for metagenomics-based research and diagnostics is distinguishing pathogens from commensals or contaminants (53, 54). Interpretation of microbiome investigations can be further complicated if a misbalance in variation and abundance of different bacteria (sometimes referred to as ‘dysbiosis’) is suspected to be the cause of the condition (55). It is also worth considering that the aetiology of some diseases may involve multiple sequential or interacting species, which may be collectively important (56, 57). Furthermore, sequencing investigations may identify novel organisms, for which the clinical significance will be unknown. These issues are particularly relevant in the investigation of the aetiology of central nervous system (CNS) infections.

A number of criteria to establish causality have been proposed over the years, detailed in Appendix B, including the incorporation of metagenomic technologies (58, 59).

4.7 State the time from collection to results and cost considerations

The time from sample collection to processing ('transport time'), discussed in section 4.1, including cold-chain and transit, can affect the compositional profile of microorganisms inferred from metagenomics. Overgrowth or degradation may occur during the period between collection and (cryo-)storage with the result that the sequencing profile may not accurately reflect the composition of the sample at the time of collection. An extended duration of storage can result in a shift in the relative representation of bacterial taxa and result in significant variability in metagenomics data. For example, faecal samples stored for longer than three months at -80°C experience selective loss of *Bacteroides spp.* (6, 60, 61).

If the sample is obtained post-mortem, it is critical to report the time from death to sample acquisition given extravasation of gut bacteria into the bloodstream that can complicate interpretation of metagenomic data. For some applications, it may be relevant to report the overall turnaround time of the bioinformatic analyses, i.e. including computational time for bioinformatics analysis. For example, Oxford Nanopore technology may be deployed in the field or at point of need, allowing sequencing to be performed rapidly in near 'real-time'; still, actionable results are also dependent on the time required for computational analysis (62, 63). The turnaround time of bioinformatic analyses is critical in the context of clinical applications, when metagenomics is used to help guide or tailor patient treatment. Variables such as sequencing run time and total computational analysis time (with system specifications e.g. number of cores and amount of memory utilised) should be stated clearly, as should the sequencing depth discussed in section 4.2 (64).

5 Setting

5.1 State whether sample collection was retrospective or prospective

As described in the STAndards for Reporting of Diagnostic accuracy (STARD) guidelines, clarity is needed regarding the sequence of events in diagnostic testing to ensure that sources of bias are addressed (65). Samples analysed long after collection (see section 4.1), as well as the performance of the reference standard assays, may lead to degradation of the analyte. Retrospective sampling may also lead to bias in the samples tested. For instance, when

comparing studies of unidentified encephalitis, samples retrospectively selected for metagenomics may be those that are ‘difficult to diagnose’, for example with a low titre, be taken at later time points in the course of infection, and therefore be more likely to be non-infectious (66).

6 Participants

6.1 Consider factors influencing microbiota compositions when selecting participants

At the time of writing, most routine diagnostic and public health laboratories do not yet use metagenomic technologies routinely. As such, patients included in metagenomics studies are often from tertiary referral or specialist centres, which are unlikely to be representative of the wider population, as discussed in STROBE and STROME-ID (22, 23). This can also introduce challenges for appropriate selection of controls for case-control studies, and for studies assessing the strength of disease associations.

Species composition of human microbiomes are affected by a variety of host factors, including age and sex, as well as behaviour (e.g. diet and lifestyle) and environment (67, 68). Exposure to pharmacological agents may also profoundly influence microbiome composition. For example, a single standard course of antibiotics has been shown to alter species composition of the gut and oral microbiomes for over a year (69, 70). Matching of cases and controls is particularly challenging for metagenomics studies given the broad range of microbes considered (71). Metagenomics studies should aim to minimise and/or statistically control for host-confounders, or at a minimum, list those that may impact the interpretation of results.

9 Bias

Bias is a source of error that remains constant with replication affecting trueness (72); it is separate to random error, which affects the precision of an experiment. Together, these sources of error contribute to measurement uncertainty which, when conducting metagenomics sequencing, has a large number of potential sources (see Figure 1).

Replication, including replication of the whole process, provides a means to estimate random error, which can differ when using different sequencing strategies (72). Adherence to strictly described laboratory protocols may improve random error and reproducibility (21), but it cannot be used alone to remove bias.

9.1 Address potential sources of bias (sampling, transport, storage, library preparation, and sequencing)

Bias can occur at each step of a diagnostic sequencing pipeline (Table 2) and is more difficult to evaluate than random error. When conducting metagenomics studies, different categories of bias may manifest. Selection bias, where researchers unconsciously treat groups of samples differently, can affect many areas of research, and investigator blinding is a simple way to mitigate against this and should be reported where used. For metagenomics studies, microbiological contamination of samples can introduce bias. Experimental bias that is caused at different stages of a metagenomics experiment is more challenging to control for than sources caused by selection bias or contamination. The fact that the microbiome is by definition a composed of multiple different microorganisms means that a given protocol may lead to certain groups being over-represented in the processed samples. For example, enrichment protocols may introduce bias for pathogen detection (73). Capture probe-targeted sequencing will limit detection to targeted sequences, and 16S has limitations with regard to the level of taxonomic classification. While this precise form of bias does not exist in untargeted metagenomics, other experimental bias can occur at different protocol stages, including sampling, nucleic acid extraction (74) or during post-extraction steps (75). Studies using 16S rRNA gene sequencing, should consider that different primers amplify different bacterial families to differing degrees due to mismatches, resulting in potential bias in abundances and diversity metrics (76), which cannot be completely corrected bioinformatically (77).

By reporting the potential sources of bias for a given study, as outlined in Figure 1, their likely influence can be considered with mitigation or compensation strategies suggested or caveats made to interpretation. Due to the complexity and multistep nature of microbiome measurement, it is advisable that any metagenomics experiment should be considered and reported as a representative result, rather than assuming that it perfectly reflects the microbes present and their abundance. It is also why the term ‘unbiased’, which is a popular term when describing metagenomic experiments that do not employ enrichment, should be used with caution (or not at all). ‘Untargeted metagenomics’ could be used instead. Further details are provided in appendix A4.

Table 2. Examples of potential sources of bias in metagenomics studies and implications for result interpretation. This list is not comprehensive, but illustrates how results may be affected by collection, processing and analysis methods.

Figure 1. Uncertainty (fishbone) diagram describing potential contributing sources of uncertainty in the multistep protocol required for metagenomics experiment.

9.2 Address potential bias introduced by bioinformatics analysis

Classification algorithms rely on alignment of sequencing reads and/or contigs obtained from overlapping reads against reference genomes (see Section 4.3). In the case of the alignment of assembled contigs, in principle, reads that cannot be built into contigs (unassigned reads) are discarded, leading to a potential loss of information (78). Classification of reads may be slow, and a smaller database may be built with unique sequences representing certain taxa (79). However, this may lead to bias in the assignment of homologous sequences and should be clearly reported.

Samples containing low abundance pathogens may give rise to false negatives by not classifying something as relevant, or false positives if reads are non-specific (80). Subsequent alignment of sequence reads against a reference genome of the candidate pathogen(s) identified by the metagenomics analysis can provide necessary further validation: wide and distributed coverage of the reference genome and high mapping identity is unlikely to be a false positive. The level of coverage may be limited in samples with low pathogen load, but still can be a true positive result. Sufficient read depth is not always available for metagenomics data from clinical samples, which often contain a majority of reads from the host. Additionally, high read depth can generally be achieved only for microbes present at high-copy number. Authors should report where these considerations are relevant.

Assessing the quality of reads before downstream classification is crucial for ensuring accuracy of taxonomic assignment. This quality control usually includes removal of adapters, human/host/known background sequences, low-complexity sequence reads, trimming of low-quality bases at the ends of reads, and removal of primer sequences. The total number of reads in each sample can be affected by factors including DNA extraction methods, sample handling, library-prep, differences in sequencing depth, etc (see section 9.1). As such, it is generally advisable to normalise read abundance between samples prior to any analysis and

report where this is done (81). More sophisticated statistical modelling approaches can deal with variation in read numbers between samples without loss of data (e.g. DESeq2 (82)).

9.3 Describe/address limitations of reference database(s)

The use of reference databases should be clearly described. It is critical that the reference database used is clearly presented, together with a genomic data download date, and a description of the procedures behind the inclusion of reference sequences and their indexing. Limitations of reference databases may interfere with correct assignment of sequences, as illustrated in Figure 2. Curated reference databases may not include all the relevant microbial diversity. Conversely, non-curated databases may comprise incorrectly named, incomplete, low sequencing quality or artefactual sequences (83). Studies have shown that contamination from various sources or incompleteness (e.g. of a region of a genome that contains an important mutation) are frequent features of reference databases, particularly when draft genomes are included. For example, over 1,000 published microbial genome sequences have been identified as contaminated with PhiX174, a bacteriophage used as a control in Illumina sequencing (24), and 2,250 NCBI GenBank draft bacterial and archaeal genomes contain spurious human sequences (84). Additionally, false negatives may occur due to a focal species missing taxonomic representation in the databases, which have an inherent curatorial bias to known human associated pathogens (85). This is elaborated in appendix A5.

Figure 2: The importance of reference database choice, design and versioning in taxonomic profiling of clinical metagenomics samples..

10 Study size

10.1 Describe clearly how power calculations were undertaken

Whenever comparisons in metagenomic species composition between two or more groups are performed, authors should report relevant parameters such as significance level and power threshold, sequencing depth, effect size, number of comparisons and methods used to correct for multiple comparisons, and provide details of the statistical methods used to perform power calculations. It should be clearly stated how an effect size was derived and a rationale for the clinical relevance of the specific effect size should be given. If no power calculation

was performed, an explanation should be given about why this was not considered feasible or useful. This section is elaborated in appendix A6.

12 Statistical methods

12.1 State the limit of detection, including analytical sensitivity and specificity

The limit of detection (LOD) refers to the minimum quantity of genomic material from an organism required for its detection and should be stated. Determination of the LOD for a metagenomics study is dependent on the sequencing technology, sequencing depth, read length, representation of genomes related to the taxa of interest in the reference database, as well as the complexity of the community and amount of host nucleic acid in the sample. Simple calculations give estimates for the LOD e.g. for 10^6 reads per sample, the LOD is one read per sample which corresponds to a relative abundance of the order of magnitude of 10^{-6} i.e. $\sim 0.0001\%$. Formal calculations of LOD that are needed for clinical validation should be performed using probit analysis (86). In practice, the LOD will be considerably higher because a single read from a taxon (a 'singleton') is very likely to be due to contamination or misclassification. Rather than trusting such calculations, the use of positive spike-in controls and negative controls in the sequencing run allows assessment of sensitivity and specificity (also see section 9.1). With a single infection, the number of on-target reads will be correlated with the signal in the sample, but mixed infections and co-infections will influence sensitivity (87). Experimentally validating these for model organisms that represent the specific pathogens of interest (e.g. a DNA virus, an RNA virus, Gram-negative and Gram-positive bacteria, etc) is recommended, particularly for diagnostic tests.

19 Discussion/ limitations

19.1 Attempt, or acknowledge the need for functional and/or phenotypic validation

Genotypic data do not always correlate with clinical phenotype; for instance, mechanisms that involve inducible resistance, gene expression and regulation or post-translational modifications. In studies investigating mixed microbial communities it may not always be possible to determine which taxon a particular gene belongs to (88, 89). This is also relevant in the establishment of causality, as discussed in section 4.6.

Efforts should be made to undertake phenotypic and functional validation to assess the inferred results. If this is not possible, or beyond the scope of the study, the limitations of inferring results solely from genotypic data should be acknowledged and discussed, including known caveats and restrictions on making key assumptions.

19.2 Consider the need for species or strain resolution

Different strains or lineages within a species can differ widely in regard to their phenotypic characteristics. For example, sequencing with strain-level resolution enabled identification of specific strains of *E. coli* associated with necrotizing enterocolitis in preterm newborns (90) and lineages of *S. enterica* associated with varying clinical phenotypes (91). Therefore, profiling microbial communities with sub-species resolution can be useful, although *de novo* assembly of metagenomic reads remains a methodological challenge.

The strain and species resolution capacity of the assay used should be clearly stated with consideration of how this level of resolution yields relevant epidemiological or clinical information for the study in question. In particular, microbial community profiling using 16S rRNA gene PCR cannot identify individual species within some genera, and should never be used to identify to the strain level. As recommended in STROME-ID, a definition or reference to published definitions of a strain should be provided (23).

23 Other information

23.1 Report any ethical considerations with specific implications for metagenomics

Metagenomics produces a vast amount of host and pathogen data, which is untargeted and sometimes not of immediate interest (92). Molecular methods to deplete human genomic material exist, however they remain imperfect and may lead to bias. Alternatively, it may be sufficient to detail in a protocol that the host data will be removed, and not analysed, although this may also lead to bias in microbial reads caused by the *in silico* host-depletion method; host genomes can contain viable viral genomes as well as non-viable genetic material derived from or shared with microorganisms. In these cases, the method used to identify and exclude host reads, for example through mapping of all reads to the host reference genome, should be detailed, including the choice of mapping algorithm and program parameters.

Even if data analysis is restricted to non-human reads, it may still unveil potentially sensitive information (93), such as a new diagnosis of HIV. It has also been demonstrated that >80% of individuals can be identified from populations of hundreds using their gut microbiome alone (94). These issues pose real concerns, particularly with the increasing requirement for data to be made publicly available. For all these reasons, specific ethical implications relating to metagenomics data and corresponding approvals should be stated, and appropriate ethical approval should be obtained.

Conclusions

Metagenomics has already made a significant impact on pathogen detection and characterisation, and we probably still underestimate its full potential. Increasing use of metagenomics has been accompanied by recognition of complex issues at every stage in the pipeline. Standards for reporting are therefore needed, to ensure clarity, consistency and robustness of research. The guidance given in this paper constitutes a set of recommendations, and we recognise that research studies need to be pragmatic, utilising resources available. Nonetheless, reporting known and potential limitations should minimise misrepresentation. It is inevitable that the field will continue to advance steadily, and these guidelines will need to be updated.

Contributors

TB and NF conceived the idea and, together with CO, co-ordinated the review. All authors were involved in the study design, literature review, writing the manuscript and editing successive drafts. DOS and JH designed Figure 1 and LvD and FB designed Figure 2.

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Conflicts of interest

Dr. Eloit reports personal fees and other from PATHOQUEST, none received during the conduct of the study. Dr. Wilson has a patent issued for Depletion of Abundant Sequences by Hybridization. None of the other authors declare any conflict of interests .

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