



## 혈구분석기를 활용한 말라리아 감염 조기진단 시범사업

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### 초 록

**목적:** 말라리아는 모기를 매개로 하는 감염 질환으로, 우리나라에서는 비무장지대 인근 지역에서 주로 발생하고 있다. 질병관리청은 2030년 말라리아 퇴치를 목표로 제2차 말라리아 재퇴치 실행계획(2024-2028)을 추진 중에 있으며, 목표를 달성하기 위해서는 말라리아 감염자에 대한 적극적인 조기진단이 필요하다. 이를 위해 말라리아 무증상자 또는 비의심자에 대한 말라리아 조기진단 시범사업을 기획하고 추진하였다.

**방법:** 말라리아 위험지역 내 47개 의료기관(보건소, 병원, 군병원, 수탁기관)이 시범사업에 참여하였으며, 의료기관 내원(건강검진 포함) 시 혈구분석 과정에서 이상적혈구(infected red blood cells [iRBC] flag)가 검출되면 말라리아 감염 의심자로 분류하고, 말라리아 확진 진단을 실시하도록 하였다. 매월 iRBC 검출수 및 진단건수 등 현황자료를 제출받아 취합하여 분석하였다.

**결과:** 2024년 4-10월까지 총 727만 건의 혈구분석 중 1,359건의 iRBC가 검출되었고, 그중 499건을 대상으로 확진진단이 실시되어 총 239건의 말라리아 양성을 확인하였다.

**결론:** 이번 사업은 기존 의료시스템을 이용하여 추가예산 및 인력 투입없이 말라리아 조기진단의 가능성을 확인했다는 점에서 의의가 있다. 향후에는 말라리아 확진진단을 위한 검사비 지원 등 적정 예산을 투입하여 iRBC 검출건 전체를 대상으로 말라리아 확진진단을 실시한다면 감염자 조기발견의 효과를 극대화시켜 우리나라 말라리아 퇴치목표 달성에 효과적인 수단이 될 것이다.

**주요 검색어:** 말라리아; 이상적혈구; 혈구분석기; 조기진단

### 서 론

말라리아는 얼룩날개모기 속(Genus *Anopheles*) 암컷 모기를 매개로 하는 기생충 감염 질환으로, 주로 열대 및 아열대 지역에서 유행하며, 우리나라에서는 북한과의 경계 지역인 비무장지대(demilitarized zone) 인근에서 유행하고 있다[1].

말라리아는 열원충(*Plasmodium*)의 종류에 따라 질병의 중증도가 다르며, 국내에서는 삼일열말라리아(*Plasmodium vivax*)가 유일한 토착성 말라리아(indigenous malaria)로 알려져 있다[1]. 감염모기에서 사람으로 전달된 열원충은 간세포에서 분열증식하는 잠복기(6-18개월)를 거치게 되는데, 잠복기 이후 초기 증상은 감기와 유사하기 때문에, 삼일열말라리아

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### 핵심요약

#### ① 이전에 알려진 내용은?

최근 연구 결과 혈구분석기를 활용한 이상적혈구(infected red blood cells, iRBC) 검출 사례에서 말라리아 양성률은 80% 이상으로 보고되어, 말라리아 무증상 또는 비의심자에서도 말라리아 조기진단이 가능한 것으로 확인되었다.

#### ② 새로이 알게 된 내용은?

혈구분석기를 활용한 말라리아 감염자 조기선별이라는 새로운 진단 접근의 현장 적용성과 실현 가능성을 확인하였다.

#### ③ 시사점은?

혈구분석기를 활용한 iRBC 검출은 말라리아 조기진단에 효과적이다. 향후에는 iRBC 검체에 대한 말라리아 검사가 모두 이루어질 수 있도록 지원을 확대할 필요가 있다.

아 감염을 바로 의심하기 어렵다[2]. 이러한 이유로 ‘증상 발현-의료기관 방문-진단’까지의 기간이 지연되는 진단지연(diagnostic delay, DD)이 발생하게 된다. 이 기간 동안 인체 내 말라리아 생식모세포(gametocyte)가 증가하게 되고, 감염모기 생산을 증가시킬 가능성이 높아짐에 따라 결과적으로 지역사회로 말라리아가 전파될 위험성이 커진다[3].

질병관리청은 2030년 말라리아 퇴치를 목표로 제2차 말라리아 재퇴치 실행계획(2024-2028)을 2024년 4월에 발표하여 추진 중에 있다. 현재까지 퇴치인증 국가는 총 44개국(2024년 12월 기준)으로, 퇴치인증 과정에서 말라리아 양성자 1명을 찾기 위해 수천에서 수십만 건의 검사를 실시하는 것으로 알려져 있다[4]. 우리나라의 말라리아 감시체계는 주로 환자신고와 증상 기반 접근에 의존하는 수동감시(passive surveillance)에 치중하고 있으나, 말라리아 퇴치 달성을 위해서는 대규모 스크리닝 검사 시스템과 같은 능동감시(active surveillance)가 필요한 실정이다.

최근 혈구분석기(hematology analyzer)를 이용한 이상적혈구(infected red blood cell, iRBC) 검출 기술이 말라리아 진

단의 보조 도구로 활용될 수 있다는 연구 결과가 발표되었다. Huh 등[5]은 국내 경기도 일산 지역 내 발열 환자 221명(삼일열말라리아 감염자 67명 포함)을 대상으로 iRBC 민감도 83.6%, 특이도 100.0%를 확인하였고, Khodaiji 등[6]은 인도에서 다수 의료기관이 협력한 연구를 통해 575명(삼일열말라리아 187명 포함)에서 iRBC 민감도 88.7%, 특이도 100.0% 결과를 확인할 수 있었다. 이 연구에서는 추가로 타 질환(빈혈, 망상적혈구증, 혈소판감소증, 호산구증가증, 덩기열)의 영향을 받지 않는 것으로 확인되었다. 또한, 최근 메타분석을 통한 총 15편의 연구를 종합하여 혈구분석기를 활용한 말라리아 진단의 정확성을 평가한 연구 결과, 전체 민감도 95.0%, 특이도 99.0%로 매우 높은 진단 정확도를 보인 바 있다[7].

이 결과는 내원 후 말라리아 진단까지 소요되는 의학적 진단 소요일(medical diagnostic delay, MDD)을 단축시켜 조기에 말라리아를 진단할 가능성을 보여준다. 일반적으로 혈구분석은 의료기관에서 실시하는 기본검사로 대규모 혈구분석이 가능하며, 이를 통해 발견된 iRBC 검출건에 대한 확인진단을 통해 말라리아 환자를 조기에 진단할 수 있다.

이에 따라 질병관리청 매개체분석과에서는 혈구분석기를 활용한 말라리아 조기진단 시범사업을 의료기관(보건소, 병원 등)의 협조를 받아 수행하였다. 이 글을 통해 시범사업의 주요 결과와 한계점을 살펴보고, 향후 말라리아 퇴치를 위한 조기진단 사업에 활용하고자 한다.

## 방 법

### 1. 참여기관 모집

2024년 2월 말라리아 위험지역 내 iRBC 검출이 가능한 130개 의료기관을 대상으로 국군의무사령부, 4개 시·도(강원, 경기, 서울, 인천) 및 36개 보건소의 협조를 받아 사업계획서를 전달하고, 참여 협조를 요청하였다.



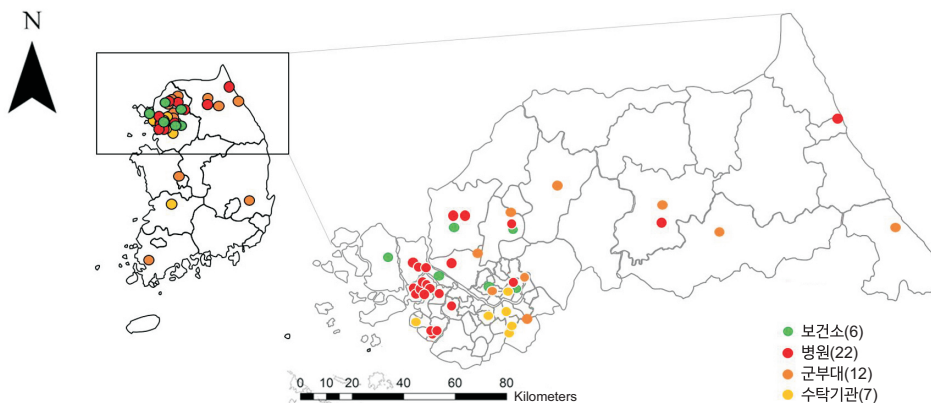


그림 2. 국내 말라리아 감염 조기진단 사업 참여기관

표 1. 기관별 말라리아 검사회율

기관	혈구분석건수	iRBC 검출건수	말라리아 확인진단 시행건수(%)	말라리아 양성건수
보건소	13,281	14	14 (100.0)	2
병원	2,045,012	296	195 (65.9)	93
수탁기관	5,126,021	1,006	247 (24.6)	101
군병원	87,306	43	43 (100.0)	43
합계	7,271,620	1,359	499 (37.0)	239

iRBC=infected red blood cells.

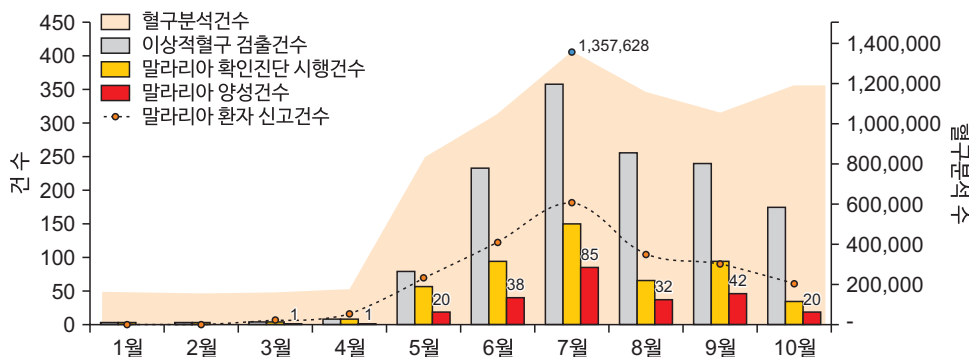


그림 3. 월별 혈구분석 현황(2024년)

건소의 경우 모든 iRBC 검출 사례에 대해 확인진단 검사가 수행되었으나, 병원은 65.9% (195/296건), 수탁기관은 24.6% (247/1,006건) 수준으로 낮은 검사율을 보였다(표 1). 월별 혈구분석 결과, 말라리아가 유행하는 시기인 6-9월에 iRBC 검출이 증가하는 경향을 보였고, 이는 2024년 국내 말라리아 환자 발생과 비슷한 양상을 보였다(그림 3).

추가적으로 iRBC를 통해 말라리아 감염이 확인된 일부 사례에 대해 내원사유를 6개 보건소의 협조를 받아 조사한 결

과, 총 19건 중 11건이 말라리아 무증상 또는 비의심자의 사례였다. 무증상자로부터 진단된 사례는 2건으로 1명은 다리 골절, 다른 1명은 쇼크 증상으로 내원한 환자였다. 나머지 9명은 발열이 주요 증상이었지만 내원 당시 말라리아를 의심하지는 못하였고, 혈구분석에서 iRBC가 검출되면서 확인진단을 통해 말라리아가 양성으로 확인된 사례였다(표 2). 말라리아 양성자는 말라리아 관리지침에 따라 해당 의료기관에서 치료가 이루어졌다[8].

표 2. 말라리아 조기진단사례

보건소	병원	말라리아 양성자	말라리아 의심(%)	말라리아 비의심 또는 무증상(%)	내원사유
서울 강서구	이대서울병원	9	4 (44.4)	5 (55.6)	발열(응급실 내원)
서울 중랑구	서울의료원	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	쇼크 증상(응급실 내원)
인천 서구	검단탑병원	1	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	-
인천 서구	온누리병원	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	다리 골절(응급실 내원)
경기도 파주시	파주병원	2	0 (0.0)	2 (100.0)	발열(응급실 내원)
경기도 부천시	부천세종병원	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	발열(40℃) (응급실 내원)
경기도 의정부시	경기도의료원 의정부병원	1	0 (0.0)	1 (100.0)	발열(응급실 내원) 감기약 처방받고 귀가 이후 혈구분석에서 iRBC 검출
전체		19	8 (42.1)	11 (57.9)	

iRBC=infected red blood cells; -=not available.

## 논 의

삼일열말라리아 감염 증상은 경미한 경우가 많아 감기와 혼동되는 경우가 많다. 이러한 이유로 삼일열말라리아 감염자는 증상 발생 이후 자발적으로 의료기관에 방문하기까지 시간이 지연되는 경우가 많은데, 이를 환자지연(patient delay, PD)이라 한다. DD는 말라리아 감염자의 치료 시점을 늦추게 하여, 지역 내 감염 확산 위험성을 증가시킨다[3,9]. 감염자를 조기에 발견하고 적절한 치료를 제공하는 것은 말라리아 퇴치를 위해 매우 중요하다. 따라서 PD와 MDD를 최소화하는 조기진단 체계의 강화는 말라리아의 효과적인 관리를 위한 핵심 전략이라고 판단된다. 혈구분석기를 통한 iRBC 검출은 MDD의 소요일을 획기적으로 단축할 수 있는 하나의 수단으로 이번 조기진단 시범사업을 통해 내원자로부터 말라리아 감염자를 선별하는 역할을 수행하였다.

시범사업은 2024년 국내 말라리아 신고건수 659건의 36.3%에 해당하는 239건의 말라리아 양성 환자를 발견하는 성과가 있었다[8]. 이들 모두가 말라리아를 의심하지 않은 경우로 보기에 무리가 있지만, 말라리아 양성자 19건에 대한 심층역학조사 결과를 보면 상당수에서 진단소요일을 단축시키는 데 기여했을 것으로 판단된다. 이번 시범사업을 통해 혈구분석기를 활용한 말라리아 감염자 조기선별이라는 새로운 진

단 접근의 가능성을 제시했다는 점에서 사업의 의의가 있으며, 인력과 재원을 투입하지 않고 기존 인프라를 활용하여 조기진단의 보조수단으로서 실현 가능성과 현장 적용성을 확인할 수 있었다.

그러나, 예산 및 인력 투입 없이 의료기관의 협조에 의해서만 진행된 만큼 몇 가지 한계점이 도출되었다. 첫 번째, 말라리아 확인진단 의뢰율이 37.0% (499/1,359건)로 조기진단체계의 효과를 충분히 확보하는 데는 어려움이 있었다. 이는 확인진단 검사비 발생 및 담당자 인지부족 등으로 확인 검사의 연계가 부족했던 것으로 보인다. 또한, 수탁기관의 경우에는 iRBC 검출 시 의뢰기관인 병원을 통해 환자 동의 등이 필요하기 때문에, 실제 확인진단으로 이행이 어려웠던 것으로 생각된다. 두 번째, 말라리아 무증상 또는 비의심자의 조기진단 연관성 파악을 위한 내원사유 분석 사례는 19건으로 전체 양성자를 대표하기엔 부족한 표본수였다. 이를 보완하기 위해서는 환자 발생 시 역학조사서에 'iRBC 검출건'을 반드시 표기하는 등 홍보 및 교육을 통해 기존 환자와 구분되도록 하는 것이 중요하다.

향후에는 이러한 시범사업의 한계점을 개선하여, 말라리아 검사비 등 실질적인 예산 지원을 통해 iRBC 검출건 전체를 대상으로 말라리아 확인진단을 실시하고, 역학조사관 교육을 통해 내원사유를 명확히 기술하도록 하여 조기진단 효과를 분

적할 예정이다. 본 시범사업은 말라리아 퇴치인증이라는 국가적 목표 달성을 위해 저비용 고효율로 조기진단-치료를 수행하는 중요한 수단으로 역할을 할 것으로 기대된다.

## Declarations

**Ethics Statement:** Not applicable.

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## Surveillance Report

# Pilot Project for Early Diagnosis of Malaria Infection Using a Hematology Analyzer

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Malaria is a mosquito-borne infectious disease that occurs mainly in areas near the demilitarized zone in the Republic of Korea (ROK). The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency is implementing a second Malaria Re-elimination Action Plan (2024–2028) to achieve malaria elimination by 2030. The active and early diagnosis of malaria is essential to achieve this goal. Therefore, a pilot project using hematological analysis was planned and implemented to enable the early detection of malaria in asymptomatic or unsuspected individuals.

**Methods:** A total of 47 medical institutions (including public health centers, hospitals, military hospitals, and commercial reference laboratories) in malaria-risk areas participated in this pilot project. When infected red blood cells (iRBC) were identified through hematological analysis, individuals were classified as suspected cases and referred for confirmatory malaria testing. Monthly data were collected and analyzed to determine the number of iRBC detections, confirmatory tests for malaria, and malaria-positive cases.

**Results:** Between April and October 2024, among 7.27 million hematologic analyses, 1,359 cases of iRBC were detected. Among the 499 cases referred for confirmatory diagnosis, 239 were confirmed as malaria positive.

**Conclusions:** In terms of improving malaria control, it is important to confirm the possibility of an early malaria diagnosis using the existing medical systems without additional budget and human resources. Proactive confirmatory testing for individuals with iRBC, along with the appropriate funding support, can significantly enhance the early detection of infections and serve as an effective strategy for achieving malaria elimination goals in ROK.

**Key words:** Malaria; Infected red blood cell; Hematology analyzer; Early diagnosis

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## Introduction

Malaria is a parasitic infection transmitted by female mosquitoes of the genus *Anopheles* and considered endemic in tropical and subtropical regions. In the Republic of Korea

(ROK), malaria is prevalent near the demilitarized zone, the border area with North Korea [1].

The severity of malaria varies depending on the *Plasmodium* species. *Plasmodium vivax* is known to be the only endemic species causing malaria in the ROK [1]. *P. vivax* is transmitted

**Key messages**

## ① What is known previously?

Recent studies have shown that hematology analyzers detect infected red blood cells (iRBC) with a malaria-positivity rate of over 80%, enabling an early diagnosis, even in asymptomatic or non-suspected individuals.

## ② What new information is presented?

This study confirmed the field applicability and feasibility of early malaria detection using hematology analyzers to screen for potential infections.

## ③ What are implications?

The detection of iRBC using hematology analyzers is an effective method for early malaria diagnosis. With increased financial support, confirmatory tests for malaria could be conducted for all iRBC-positive cases.

from infected mosquitoes to humans. It undergoes an incubation period during which it divides and multiplies in hepatocytes. The initial symptoms of malaria is similar to common cold, making it difficult to immediately suspect a *P. vivax* infection [2]. This leads to a diagnostic delay (DD), where the time from “symptom onset to medical institution visit and ultimately to diagnosis” is delayed. During this period, the number of malaria gametocytes in the body rises, which in turn leads to an increased probability of occurrence of infectious mosquitoes and, consequently, an elevated risk of malaria transmission to the community [3].

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) released “The Second Malaria Re-elimination Action Plan (2024–2028)” in April 2024, with the goal of eliminating malaria by 2030. A total of 44 countries have been certified of malaria elimination to date (as of December, 2024), and it is known that the eradication certification process requires

thousands to hundreds of thousands of tests to find a positive case [4]. In the ROK, passive surveillance of malaria detection is the primary method, relying mainly on patient reporting and symptom-based approaches. Achieving malaria elimination necessitates the implementation of active surveillance strategies, such as the establishment of large-scale screening systems.

A recent study has demonstrated that the detection of infected red blood cells (iRBCs) using hematology analyzers can serve as an adjunct to malaria diagnosis. Huh et al. [5] reported an iRBC sensitivity of 83.6% and specificity of 100.0% in 221 febrile patients (including 67 with *P. vivax* infection) in Ilsan, Gyeonggi-do, ROK. Khodaiji et al. [6] found an iRBC sensitivity of 88.7% and specificity of 100.0% in 575 patients (including 187 with *P. vivax*) in a multicenter collaborative study in India. They further confirmed that the iRBC detection was not affected by other conditions (anemia, reticulocytosis, thrombocytopenia, eosinophilia, or dengue fever). In addition, a recent meta-analysis of 15 studies evaluating the accuracy of diagnosing malaria using a hematology analyzer showed very high diagnostic accuracy, with an overall sensitivity of 95.0% and specificity of 99.0% [7].

These findings indicate the feasibility of expediting malaria diagnosis by diminishing the medical diagnostic delay (MDD) period between patient visits and malaria diagnosis. Complete blood count testing is commonly performed in medical institutions as a routine diagnostic procedure and enables large-scale hematological test. Confirmatory diagnosis of iRBCs can be used to promptly identify patients with malaria.

Therefore, the Division of Vectors and Parasitic Diseases at the KDCA conducted a pilot program for early malaria diagnosis using hematology analyzers in cooperation with medical institutions. This article aims to summarize the key outcomes

and limitations of the pilot program, which can be used for future early diagnosis projects to eliminate malaria.

## Methods

### 1. Recruitment of Participating Organizations

In February 2024, a project plan was shared with 130 medical institutions in malaria-risk areas, requesting their participation in the pilot project. This was carried out with the support of four cities and provinces (Gangwon, Gyeonggi, Seoul and Incheon), and the Armed Forces Medical Command.

### 2. Operation System of the Program

The program commenced with business briefings and public health center training in March. If iRBC were detected in blood samples from visitors (including those undergoing medical examinations), a microscopic examination was conducted at medical institutions to confirm malaria. If a definitive diagnosis could not be made, a genetic test was referred to the KDCA or Institute of Health and Environment. The test request and result notification were made through the integrated disease control information system (eid.kdca.go.kr). The KDCA analyzed the results by aggregating the number of blood cell analyses, abnormal blood cell detections, confirmed

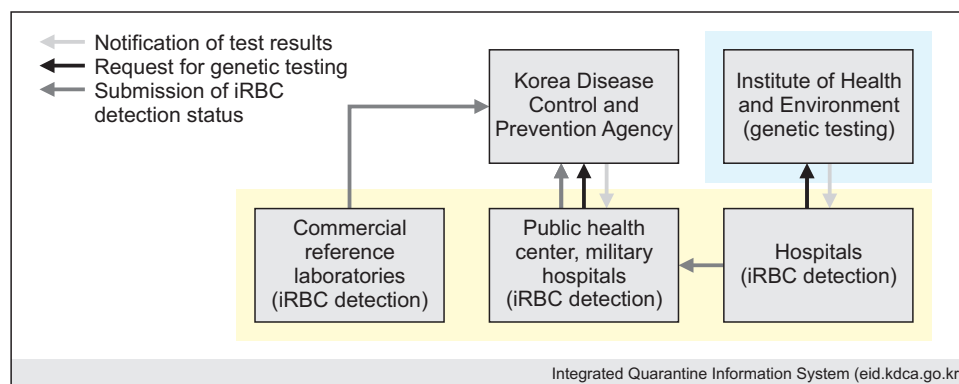
malaria diagnoses, and positive malaria cases for each month from April to October 2024 (Figure 1).

### 3. Detection of Infected Red Blood Cells

The detection of iRBCs was performed through the implementation of flow cytometry, utilizing sysmex hematology analyzers (XN-550, 1000, 1500, 2000, 9000, and 9100). The hematology analyzer measurement modalities include side fluorescence light, forward scattered light, and side scattered light. Notably, the iRBCs are measured and classified through the white cell nucleated channel (WNR) and white cell differential channel (WDF). When specific abnormalities were identified in the WNR and WDF scatterplot, iRBC flags were automatically generated. It was determined as an iRBC if the number of flags equaled or exceeded 100 [4,5].

### 4. Diagnosis of Malaria

Microscopic and genetic tests are used to confirm malaria. Microscopic tests were performed by preparing tongue-shaped thin smear slide, staining with Giemsa or a commercially available Hemacolor® Rapid Staining Kit (Merck Millipore), and performing species identification at high magnification (×100). Genetic tests were performed by extracting DNA from blood, followed by nested polymerase chain reaction to determine



**Figure 1.** Malaria early diagnosis pilot project system diagram  
iRBC=infected red blood cells.

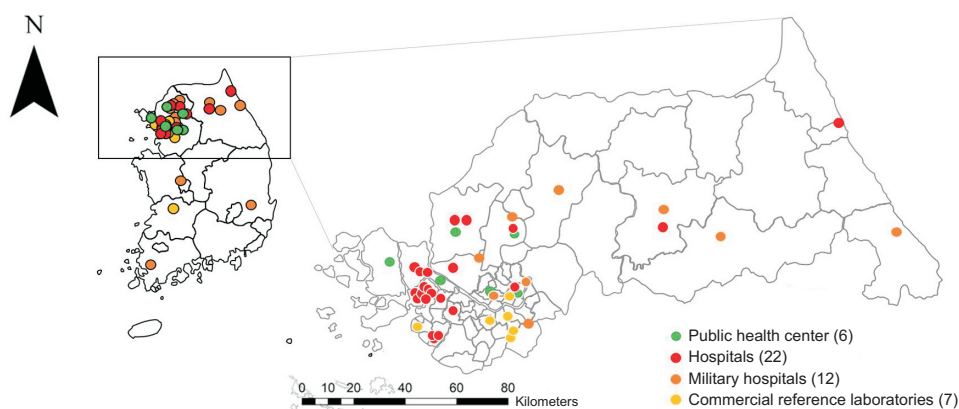
positivity and negativity via an automated electrophoresis system (QIAxcel; QIAGEN).

## Results

The pilot program involved 47 medical institutions (6 health centers, 22 hospitals, 12 military hospitals, and 7 commercial reference laboratories) out of 130 that have hematology analyzers capable of detecting iRBCs in malaria-endemic areas. The participating health centers and hospitals were distributed as follows: 46.4% (13) in Gyeonggi-do, 28.6% (8) in Incheon, 17.9% (5) in Seoul, and 7.1% (2) in Gangwon-do, while all 12 military hospitals participated nationwide. The commercial referral laboratories were mostly located in the Seoul metropolitan area (Figure 2).

A total of 7.27 million hematology analyses were performed during the pilot project, detecting 1,359 iRBCs. The number of referrals for confirmatory diagnostic testing was 499, of which 239 were actually confirmed positive for malaria. In the public health centers, all cases with iRBCs referred for malaria confirmatory diagnostic testing. However, the hospitals and commercial reference laboratories had low referral rates of 65.9% (195/296 cases) and 24.6% (247/1,006 cases), respectively (Table 1). A monthly hematology analysis revealed an increase in the detection of iRBCs from June to September, which corresponded to the peak malaria season. This finding was similar to the 2024 malaria outbreak pattern in ROK (Figure 3).

In addition, as a result of investigating the reason for the visit with the cooperation of six public health centers for some



**Figure 2.** Participating institutions in the malaria early diagnosis program in the Republic of Korea

**Table 1.** Malaria test referral rate by institution

Institution	No. of blood cell analyses	No. of iRBC detections	No. of confirmatory tests for malaria (%)	No. of malaria positive cases
Public health centers	13,281	14	14 (100.0)	2
Hospitals	2,045,012	296	195 (65.9)	93
Commercial reference laboratories	5,126,021	1,006	247 (24.6)	101
Military hospitals	87,306	43	43 (100.0)	43
Total	7,271,620	1,359	499 (37.0)	239

iRBC=infected red blood cells.

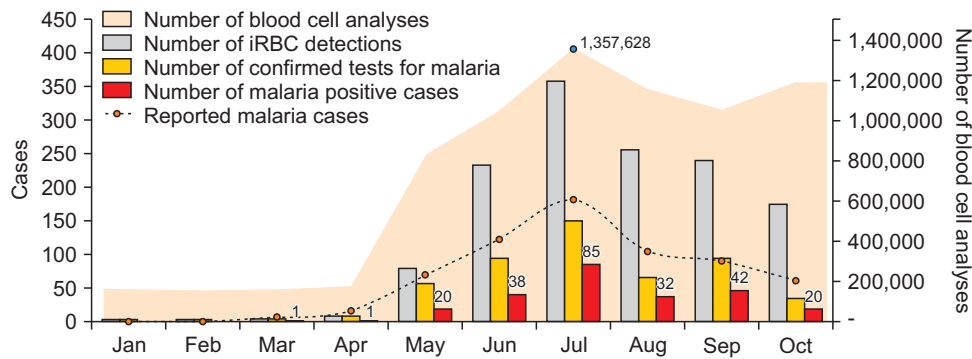


Figure 3. Monthly blood cell analysis status (2024)  
iRBC=infected red blood cells.

Table 2. Malaria early diagnosis cases

Public health center	Hospital	Malaria positive cases	Suspected malaria symptoms (%)	Non-suspected or asymptomatic (%)	Reason for visit
Gangseo-gu, Seoul	Ewha Womans University Medical Center	9	4 (44.4)	5 (55.6)	Fever (ED visit)
Jungnang-gu, Seoul	Seoul Medical Center	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	Shock (ED visit)
Seo-gu, Incheon	Geomdan Top Hospital	1	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	-
Seo-gu, Incheon	Onnuri Hospital	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	Leg fracture (ED visit)
Paju, Gyeonggi-do	Paju Hospital	2	0 (0.0)	2 (100.0)	Fever (ED visit)
Bucheon, Gyeonggi-do	Bucheon Sejong Hospital	2	1 (50.0)	1 (50.0)	Fever 40°C (ED visit)
Uijeongbu, Gyeonggi-do	Gyeonggi Provincial Medical Center Uijeongbu Hospital	1	0 (0.0)	1 (100.0)	Fever (ED visit) Discharged with cold medication; iRBC later detected via hematology.
<b>Total</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>8 (42.1)</b>	<b>11 (57.9)</b>	

ED=emergency department; iRBC=infected red blood cells; -=not available.

cases where malaria infection was confirmed through iRBCs, 11 out of 19 cases were asymptomatic or unsuspected cases of malaria. Two cases were diagnosed in asymptomatic individuals, one with a leg fracture and another with shock. The remaining nine cases exhibited fever as the primary symptom; however, malaria was not suspected at the time of presentation. These cases were confirmed to be malaria-positive through confirmatory diagnosis following the detection of infected iRBC in hematology analysis (Table 2). Those who tested positive for malaria were treated at the medical institution according to the malaria control guideline [8].

## Discussion

The symptoms associated with *P. vivax* infection are often mild and can be confused with common cold. Consequently, individuals infected with *P. vivax* frequently experience a delay between the onset of symptoms and their voluntary visit to a medical institution, referred to as patient delay (PD). DDs cause delays treatment for malaria-infected individuals, increasing the risk of spreading infection in the community [3,9]. Early detection of infected individuals and the provision of appropriate treatment are critical to the elimination of

malaria. Therefore, minimizing PD and MDD is considered a key strategy for the effective management of malaria. Detection of iRBCs using hematology analyzers effectively reduced the turnaround time for MDD and contributed to identifying malaria-infected individuals among patients visiting medical institutions.

The pilot program detected 239 malaria-positive patients, representing 36.3% of the 659 malaria cases reported nationwide in 2024 [8]. Although it is difficult to assume that all of these cases were entirely unsuspected of malaria, the results of the in-depth epidemiologic investigation of the 19 malaria-positive cases suggest that the pilot program contributed to reducing the time to diagnosis in a significant number of cases. This pilot project demonstrated a new approach for the early detection of malaria using hematology analyzers and confirmed its feasibility and field applicability by utilizing existing medical systems without requiring additional budget and human resources.

However, there were some limitations, as it was conducted only with the cooperation of medical institutions. First, the referral rate for confirmed malaria diagnoses was 37.0% (499/1,359 cases), which was insufficient to ensure the effectiveness of the early diagnosis system. The low referral rates may be due to the cost burden of testing and a lack of awareness among healthcare providers. In addition, it may have been difficult to implement confirmatory diagnostic tests in commercial reference laboratories as the detection of iRBC required patient consent through the referring hospital. Second, the number of cases analyzed for reasons for visiting medical institutions to identify associations with early diagnosis among asymptomatic or unsuspected malaria patients was limited to 19, which was insufficient to represent all malaria-positive

cases. To address this, asymptomatic or unsuspected cases should be distinguished from suspected malaria cases by accurately recording “iRBC detection” in epidemiological reports.

In the future, the limitations of these pilot projects will be improved, and confirmatory diagnosis of malaria will be conducted for all cases of iRBC detection through budget support such as malaria testing costs. The effect of early diagnosis will be analyzed by ensuring accurate documentation of the reason for the visit through the education of epidemiological investigators. This pilot project may contribute to achieving the national goal of malaria eradication certification by conducting early diagnosis and treatment of malaria using hematology analyzers.

## Declarations

**Ethics Statement:** Not applicable.

**Funding Source:** None.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization: HIL. Funding acquisition: HIL. Investigation: HIS. Data analysis: HES, MRL, HIS. Visualization: HES, HIS. Writing – original draft: HES. Writing – review & editing: MRL, JWJ, HIL.

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