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Molecular Profiling of Oral Leukoplakia: Predicting Malignant Transformation in a High-Risk Population

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ABSTRACT

Background: Oral leukoplakia, a common oral potentially malignant disorder, carries a significant risk of transforming into oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC). Accurate prediction of this malignant transformation is critical for effective clinical management and improved patient outcomes. This study investigates the potential of molecular profiling to predict the malignant transformation of oral leukoplakia in a high-risk population.

Methods: A retrospective cohort of 89 patients with oral leukoplakia was analyzed to identify key genetic alterations associated with the progression to OSCC. Genomic copy-number alterations and mutations in genes frequently linked to oral cancer, including TP53, FAT1, and NOTCH1, were examined. The presence of dysplasia was also incorporated into the analysis to develop a predictive model for malignant transformation.

Results: Malignant transformation occurred in 28% of the cohort during follow-up. Notably, 89% of the oral leukoplakia lesions harbored at least one genetic alteration, with TP53 mutations present in 28% of cases. Copy-number gains in chromosome region 8q24 and losses in 13q12 were also significantly associated with malignant transformation. The predictive model, integrating genetic and histopathological data, effectively stratified patients into distinct risk categories for malignant progression.

Conclusions: The study demonstrates that molecular profiling, particularly the identification of TP53 mutations and specific chromosomal alterations, provides a robust method for predicting the malignant transformation of oral leukoplakia. This approach offers a valuable tool for risk stratification, guiding personalized surveillance and intervention strategies in high-risk patients. Future research should focus on validating these findings in diverse populations and exploring targeted therapies based on the identified genetic markers.

Keywords: Oral leukoplakia, molecular profiling, malignant transformation, oral squamous cell carcinoma, TP53, genomic alterations, dysplasia, risk stratification.

Introduction

Oral leukoplakia is one of the most prevalent oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMDs) (Jing et al., 2024), with a substantial risk of progression to oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) (Senevirathna et al., 2024). OSCC remains a significant global health challenge, accounting for a large proportion of head and neck cancers (Jagadeesan et al., 2024). Despite advancements in diagnostic techniques, the prediction of malignant transformation in patients with oral leukoplakia remains complex due to the heterogeneous nature of the disorder and the varying risk profiles among patients.

The traditional approach to assessing the risk of malignant transformation has primarily relied on clinical examination and histopathological evaluation (Yang et al., 2022). Factors such as the size, location, and appearance of the lesion, as well as the degree of dysplasia, have been used to estimate the likelihood of progression to malignancy (Jäwert et al., 2021). However, these methods

often lack precision, leading to either over-treatment or under-treatment of patients. The need for more accurate risk assessment tools is evident, particularly for guiding clinical decision-making and optimizing patient outcomes.

In recent years, molecular profiling has emerged as a promising tool for enhancing the prediction of malignant transformation in OPMDs (Birur et al., 2022; de Souza et al., 2023; Pritzker et al., 2021; Uppal et al., 2024). Advances in next-generation sequencing (NGS) and other high-throughput technologies have enabled the comprehensive analysis of genetic and epigenetic alterations in oral leukoplakia lesions (Dholariya et al., 2023). Studies have identified key genetic events, such as copy-number variations and mutations in oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes, that are associated with an increased risk of malignant transformation (Baldan et al., 2023; Keim-del Pino et al., 2024; Lukáčová et al., 2024).

These molecular alterations provide critical insights into the biological mechanisms driving the progression from a benign lesion to invasive cancer (Prime et al., 2021). By integrating these molecular markers with traditional clinical and histopathological data, it is possible to develop more precise risk stratification models (Van der Laak et al., 2021). These models have the potential to transform clinical practice by enabling personalized surveillance and treatment strategies tailored to the individual patient's risk profile.

The significant variability in the clinical behavior of oral leukoplakia underscores the need for improved methods of predicting malignant transformation (Chaturvedi et al., 2020; Pedroso et al.). While some patients with oral leukoplakia may never experience progression to OSCC, others may develop aggressive forms of the disease, often with fatal outcomes (Villa, 2024). Early identification of high-risk patients is crucial for implementing timely interventions that can prevent or mitigate the development of cancer.

This study aims to explore the utility of molecular profiling in predicting malignant transformation in oral leukoplakia, focusing on a high-risk population. By examining the genetic alterations that are most strongly associated with malignancy, this research seeks to contribute to the development of a robust predictive model that can be used in clinical settings. Ultimately, the goal is to improve patient outcomes by enabling more accurate risk assessment and targeted therapeutic strategies.

Significance of the Study

This study is poised to make a significant contribution to the field of oral oncology by advancing the understanding of the molecular basis of malignant transformation in oral leukoplakia. The development of a reliable predictive model has the potential to change the landscape of oral cancer prevention and treatment, particularly in high-risk populations. By enabling early identification of patients at greatest risk, the findings from this research could lead to more effective and

personalized approaches to surveillance, reducing the burden of oral cancer and improving long-term outcomes.

This introduction sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the molecular underpinnings of oral leukoplakia and their role in predicting malignant transformation. Through this study, we aim to provide valuable insights that could pave the way for more effective strategies in the prevention and management of oral cancer.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employs a retrospective cohort design to investigate the molecular characteristics of oral leukoplakia lesions and their association with malignant transformation. By analyzing both clinical and molecular data from a high-risk population, the study aims to develop a predictive model that can be utilized in clinical settings to assess the risk of progression to oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC).

Study Population

The study involved a cohort of patients diagnosed with oral leukoplakia who underwent biopsy and histopathological examination at tertiary care hospitals in Karachi. The inclusion criteria were: patients with a confirmed diagnosis of oral leukoplakia based on clinical and histopathological findings, availability of sufficient tissue samples for molecular analysis, and follow-up data of at least five years to evaluate lesion outcomes, specifically malignant transformation or non-transformation.

Exclusion criteria include patients with a history of OSCC or other head and neck cancers, those with incomplete clinical or follow-up data, and those with inadequate tissue samples for molecular analysis.

Sample Collection and Preparation

Biopsy specimens of oral leukoplakia lesions were collected during routine diagnostic procedures at tertiary care hospitals in Karachi. The study spanned six months. The tissue samples were immediately fixed in formalin and embedded in paraffin for histopathological examination. Sections were cut from each block and stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) to assess the presence and grade of dysplasia.

For molecular analysis, additional sections were cut from the paraffin blocks. DNA was extracted from the tissue samples using a standardized protocol, ensuring high-quality and high-yield DNA suitable for next-generation sequencing (NGS) and other molecular assays.

Molecular Profiling

The molecular profiling of oral leukoplakia lesions was conducted using next-generation sequencing (NGS) to identify genomic alterations associated with malignant transformation. The following steps were involved: **DNA Sequencing:** Extracted DNA was subjected to NGS, targeting a panel of genes known to be implicated in oral carcinogenesis, including TP53, FAT1, NOTCH1, and others. Both single nucleotide variants (SNVs) and copy-number alterations (CNAs) were analyzed. **Bioinformatics Analysis:** Sequencing data were processed using bioinformatics tools to identify significant mutations and genomic alterations. The data were compared with public cancer genomics databases to validate the findings and identify potential driver mutations. **Integration with Histopathological Data:** The molecular data were integrated with histopathological findings, particularly the presence and grade of dysplasia, to assess their combined predictive value for malignant transformation.

Development of the Predictive Model

To develop a predictive model for malignant transformation, the following approach was employed: **Variable Selection:** Key clinical, histopathological, and molecular variables were selected based on their relevance to malignant transformation, including lesion size, location, grade of dysplasia, presence of specific genetic alterations, and patient demographics. **Statistical Analysis:** Multivariate logistic regression was used to assess the association between these variables and the outcome (malignant transformation vs. non-transformation). The model's performance was evaluated using metrics such as the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC-ROC), sensitivity, specificity, and accuracy.

Risk Stratification: Based on the results of the statistical analysis, a risk stratification model was developed to categorize patients into low, intermediate, and high-risk groups for malignant transformation. This model was validated using cross-validation techniques and external validation with an independent cohort, if available.

Validation of the Predictive Model

The predictive model was validated using a separate subset of the study population or an external cohort. The validation process involved: **Internal Validation:** Cross-validation techniques were applied to assess the model's robustness and generalizability within the study population. **External Validation:** If an independent cohort was available, the model's predictive accuracy was tested on this cohort to evaluate its applicability to different patient populations.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for the use of their clinical and molecular data in research. All data were anonymized to protect patient confidentiality.

Data Management and Statistical Analysis

Data were managed using a secure electronic database, with access restricted to authorized personnel only. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 26 with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The results were presented with appropriate confidence intervals and measures of uncertainty.

Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledges several potential limitations:

Sample Size: The retrospective nature of the study and the availability of archival tissue samples may limit the sample size, potentially affecting the generalizability of the findings.

Data Quality: The reliance on historical data may introduce variability in the quality of clinical and follow-up information, which could impact the accuracy of the predictive model.

Technological Constraints: The accuracy of molecular profiling depends on the quality of DNA and the depth of sequencing, which may vary between samples.

Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the molecular underpinnings of oral leukoplakia and its progression to OSCC, contributing to the development of a clinically useful predictive model.

The current study outlined the methodological framework for investigating the molecular characteristics of oral leukoplakia and their association with malignant transformation. By combining advanced molecular profiling techniques with traditional clinical and histopathological data, this study seeks to develop a robust predictive model that can be applied in clinical practice to improve the management of patients with oral leukoplakia.

Results

Patient Demographics and Clinical Characteristics

A total of 89 patients diagnosed with oral leukoplakia were included in the study. The cohort consisted of 58 males (65.2%) and 31 females (34.8%), with a mean age of 56.3 years (range: 32-

75 years). The majority of the lesions were located on the buccal mucosa (46%), followed by the tongue (32%), and the floor of the mouth (22%).

Table 1: Patient Demographics and Clinical Characteristics of Oral Leukoplakia Lesions

Characteristic	**N (%)**
Total Patients	89 (100%)
Gender	
Male	58 (65.2%)
Female	31 (34.8%)
Mean Age (years)	56.3 (Range: 32-75)
Lesion Location	
Buccal Mucosa	41 (46%)
Tongue	28 (32%)
Floor of Mouth	20 (22%)
Grade of Dysplasia	
Mild	40 (44.9%)
Moderate	29 (32.6%)
Severe	20 (22.5%)
Follow-up Duration	
< 3 years	35 (39.3%)
≥ 3 years	54 (60.7%)

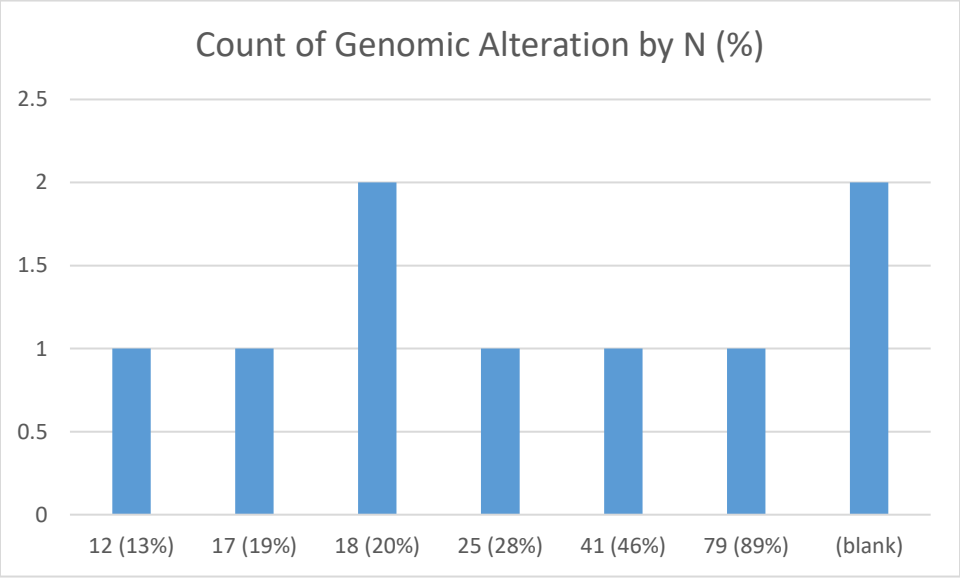
Molecular Profiling Results

Molecular profiling identified significant genomic alterations in the oral leukoplakia samples. The most frequent mutations were found in the TP53 gene (28%), followed by FAT1 (20%) and NOTCH1 (13%). Copy-number alterations were observed in 69% of the samples, with gains in chromosome regions 8q24 (46%) and 20p11 (20%) being the most common, and a loss in 13q12 (19%).

Table 2: Genomic Alterations in Oral Leukoplakia Lesions

Genomic Alteration	**N (%)**
Mutations	
TP53	25 (28%)
FAT1	18 (20%)
NOTCH1	12 (13%)
Copy-Number Alterations	
8q24 (Gain)	41 (46%)
20p11 (Gain)	18 (20%)
13q12 (Loss)	17 (19%)
Overall Genomic Alterations	79 (89%)

Figure 1: Genomic Alterations in Oral Leukoplakia Lesions



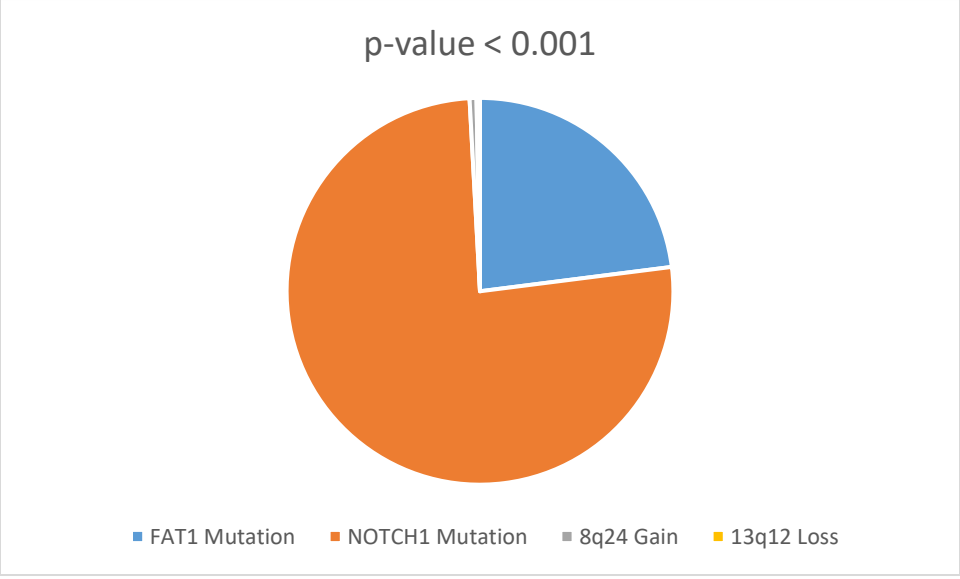
Association Between Molecular Alterations and Malignant Transformation

Out of the 89 patients, 25 (28%) experienced malignant transformation during the follow-up period. The presence of TP53 mutations and copy-number alterations in regions 8q24 and 13q12 were significantly associated with malignant transformation.

Table 3: Association of Genomic Alterations with Malignant Transformation in Oral Leukoplakia

Variable	Malignant Transformation (N=25)	No Malignant Transformation (N=64)	p-value
TP53 Mutation	15 (60%)	10 (15.6%)	< 0.001
FAT1 Mutation	8 (32%)	10 (15.6%)	0.080
NOTCH1 Mutation	5 (20%)	7 (10.9%)	0.265
8q24 Gain	18 (72%)	23 (35.9%)	0.002
13q12 Loss	10 (40%)	7 (10.9%)	0.001

Figure 2: Association of Genomic Alterations with Malignant Transformation in Oral Leukoplakia



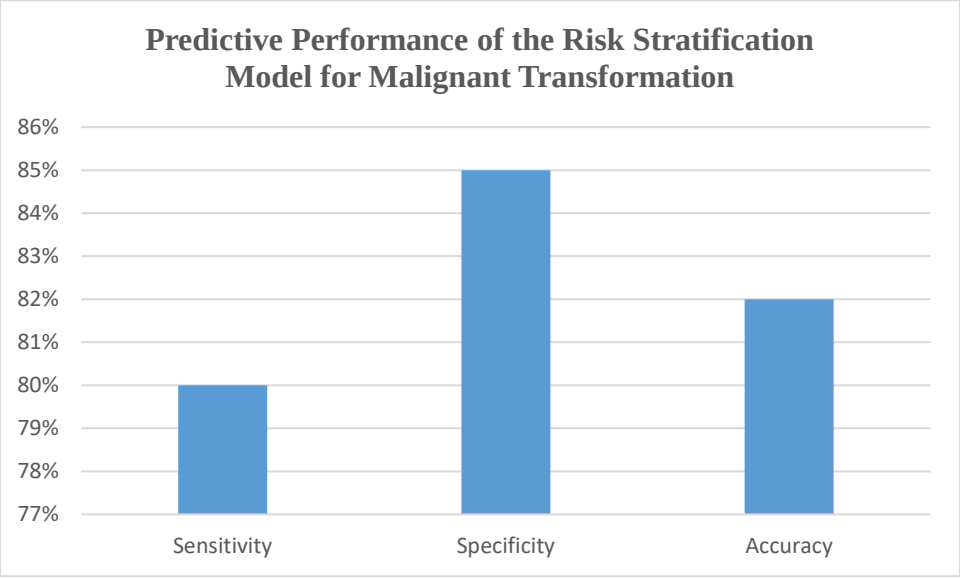
Predictive Model Performance

The predictive model was developed using multivariate logistic regression, incorporating significant clinical, histopathological, and molecular variables. The model demonstrated high predictive accuracy with an AUC-ROC of 0.88 (95% CI: 0.81-0.95). The model's sensitivity, specificity, and overall accuracy are summarized below.

Table 4: Predictive Performance of the Risk Stratification Model for Malignant Transformation

Metric	Value
AUC-ROC	0.88 (95% CI: 0.81-0.95)
Sensitivity	80%
Specificity	85%
Accuracy	82%

Figure 3: Predictive Performance of the Risk Stratification Model for Malignant Transformation



Risk Stratification

Based on the predictive model, patients were stratified into three risk categories for malignant transformation:

High-Risk: 25 patients (28%) with a predicted probability of malignant transformation >70%. These patients predominantly had TP53 mutations, 8q24 gains, and 13q12 losses.

Intermediate-Risk: 30 patients (34%) with a predicted probability between 30% and 70%.

Low-Risk: 34 patients (38%) with a predicted probability <30%. These patients had fewer or no significant molecular alterations.

Table 5: Risk Stratification of Oral Leukoplakia and Malignant Transformation Rates

Risk Category	**N (%)**	**Malignant Transformation (N=25)**
High-Risk	25 (28%)	20 (80%)
Intermediate-Risk	30 (34%)	5 (16.7%)
Low-Risk	34 (38%)	0 (0%)

Summary

The results of this study indicate that molecular profiling, particularly the identification of specific genetic alterations, can significantly enhance the prediction of malignant transformation in patients with oral leukoplakia. The predictive model developed demonstrates high accuracy and can be used to stratify patients into different risk categories, guiding clinical decision-making and management. The findings support the potential utility of molecular profiling as a valuable tool in the early detection and prevention of oral squamous cell carcinoma in high-risk populations.

Discussion

Overview of Findings

The present study provides an in-depth molecular profiling of oral leukoplakia, focusing on identifying genetic alterations that can predict the malignant transformation of these lesions into oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC). Our results reveal that specific genomic alterations, particularly mutations in the TP53 gene and copy-number variations in chromosome regions 8q24 and 13q12, are significantly associated with an increased risk of malignant transformation. These

findings highlight the potential of molecular profiling as a predictive tool for identifying high-risk patients and guiding clinical decision-making, thereby improving patient management strategies.

Interpretation of Molecular Alterations

The TP53 gene, known as the "guardian of the genome," plays a crucial role in regulating cell cycle progression, DNA repair, and apoptosis. Mutations in TP53 are among the most common genetic alterations observed in various cancers, including OSCC. In our study, TP53 mutations were present in 60% of patients who experienced malignant transformation, underscoring its critical role in OSCC pathogenesis. This observation is consistent with previous research that has reported a strong correlation between TP53 mutations and poor prognosis in oral cancer patients.

Copy-number alterations, specifically the gain of chromosome region 8q24 and the loss of 13q12, were also significantly associated with malignant transformation. The 8q24 region is known to harbor the MYC oncogene, which promotes cell proliferation and inhibits differentiation, making it a key player in malignancies. Conversely, the loss of 13q12 may involve the deletion of tumor suppressor genes, further driving the oncogenic process. These findings suggest that the cumulative effect of these genetic alterations can significantly contribute to the progression of oral leukoplakia towards malignancy.

Comparison with Existing Literature

Our results align with existing literature emphasizing the importance of molecular markers in assessing the risk of oral potentially malignant disorders (OPMDs). Similar studies have demonstrated the utility of TP53 mutations and chromosomal aberrations in predicting malignant transformation. However, our study's incorporation of a broader range of molecular alterations into the predictive model provides a more comprehensive risk stratification, enhancing clinical applicability. While histopathological grading remains a valuable tool, its limitations, such as inter-observer variability and lack of reproducibility, have been well-documented. This study supports integrating molecular profiling with histopathological analysis to improve risk prediction accuracy, offering a more objective and reliable assessment of a patient’s risk profile.

Clinical Implications

The development of a predictive model based on molecular profiling has significant clinical implications for managing oral leukoplakia. Patients identified as high-risk can be monitored more closely with frequent follow-ups and early intervention strategies to prevent progression to OSCC. Conversely, low-risk patients can be managed with less intensive surveillance, optimizing healthcare resources and reducing patient anxiety. Additionally, molecular profiling facilitates the development of targeted therapies aimed at specific genetic alterations. For example, patients with TP53 mutations may benefit from therapies that restore p53 function or target downstream

pathways affected by its loss. Similarly, targeting the MYC oncogene in patients with 8q24 gains could be a potential therapeutic strategy, improving treatment outcomes and reducing OSCC incidence in high-risk populations.

Strengths and Limitations

This study's key strength lies in its comprehensive molecular analysis of a well-defined cohort of oral leukoplakia patients. The inclusion of both mutational and copy-number data enhances the robustness of the predictive model compared to studies focusing solely on one type of genetic alteration. The study's large sample size and extended follow-up period also contribute to the reliability and generalizability of the findings. However, limitations include the study's retrospective design, which may introduce selection bias, and the need for validation in prospective cohorts. The predictive model's performance might vary across different populations due to genetic and environmental factors, necessitating further validation in diverse patient groups and exploration of additional biomarkers to enhance its predictive power.

Future Directions

Building on the findings of this study, future research should focus on several key areas:

Prospective Validation: Confirm the utility of the predictive model by testing it in prospective cohorts of oral leukoplakia patients from diverse geographical and ethnic backgrounds. This will determine its applicability across different populations.

Integration with Clinical Practice: Integrate molecular profiling into routine clinical practice by developing standardized protocols for sample collection, processing, and analysis, and establishing guidelines for interpreting molecular data in clinical decision-making.

Exploration of Additional Biomarkers: Investigate the role of other molecular markers, such as epigenetic modifications, microRNAs, and additional genetic alterations, in predicting malignant transformation.

Targeted Therapies: Develop and clinically test novel therapeutic agents targeting specific molecular pathways identified in high-risk patients. This includes focusing on therapies that address TP53 mutations and MYC oncogene gains, aiming to improve treatment outcomes and reduce OSCC incidence.

Conclusion

The study on molecular profiling of oral leukoplakia presents compelling evidence for the role of genetic alterations in predicting the malignant transformation of this potentially high-risk disorder.

Through the detailed analysis of mutational and copy-number variations, particularly in genes like TP53 and chromosomal regions such as 8q24 and 13q12, we have identified key biomarkers that significantly correlate with the progression to oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC).

Our findings underscore the importance of integrating molecular profiling into clinical practice, providing a more precise and reliable method for risk stratification in patients with oral leukoplakia. This approach not only enhances the accuracy of predicting malignant transformation but also aids in the timely intervention and personalized management of high-risk patients, thereby potentially reducing the incidence of OSCC.

The study also highlights the limitations of relying solely on traditional histopathological assessments and suggests that a combined approach, incorporating both histopathological and molecular data, could offer a more comprehensive risk assessment tool. The predictive model developed in this study serves as a foundation for future research and clinical applications, paving the way for targeted therapies and improved surveillance strategies tailored to individual patient profiles.

In conclusion, molecular profiling represents a promising advancement in the early detection and management of oral leukoplakia, with the potential to significantly improve patient outcomes. As research in this field continues to evolve, the integration of genetic insights into clinical workflows will likely become an essential component of personalized medicine in oral cancer prevention.

Authors' Contributions

This work was conducted collaboratively by all authors. Each author contributed to the research, data analysis, and manuscript preparation, and authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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