

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Correlation between Serum Heat Shock Protein 90 $\alpha$ and the Diagnosis and Classification of Acute Myeloid Leukemia in Children

Wan Y. Qin<sup>1</sup>, Miao M. Ma<sup>1</sup>, Bin F. Wang<sup>2</sup>, Jing Deng<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Pediatrics, People's Hospital of Tongchuan, Tongchuan City, Shaanxi Province, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of General Surgery, People's Hospital of Tongchuan, Tongchuan City, Shaanxi Province, China

### SUMMARY

**Background:** The purpose of this study was to investigate the correlation between serum heat shock protein 90 $\alpha$  (HSP90 $\alpha$ ) level and disease diagnosis and classification in children with acute myeloid leukemia (AML).

**Methods:** Sixty-six children with treatment-naive AML and 35 healthy controls were enrolled. Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels were measured by ELISA. Serum HSP90 levels were analyzed in relation to AML diagnosis, classification, and prognosis prediction among children.

**Results:** Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  in children with AML was significantly higher than that in healthy controls. The ROC curve showed that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  had excellent diagnostic efficacy for AML, with an AUC of 0.820 (95% CI: 0.737 - 0.902). Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  was differentially expressed in different FAB subtypes of AML, which was significantly increased in M1 and M2 subtypes. Compared with the low HSP90 $\alpha$  level group, the proportion of BM blast (%) in the high HSP90 $\alpha$  level group was significantly increased, and the cytogenetic risk was higher. Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  was positively correlated with BM blast (%), but no correlation was observed with the proportion of BM monocytes, lymphocytes, and red blood cells. Children with high HSP90 $\alpha$  levels tended to have shorter overall survival than those with low HSP90 $\alpha$  levels.

**Conclusions:** HSP90 level in serum may serve as a reliable biomarker for the diagnosis of childhood AML and its subtypes, and abnormal expression may contribute to disease occurrence and progression.

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### Correspondence:

Jing Deng  
Department of Pediatrics  
People's Hospital of Tongchuan  
No. 12 Jiankang Road, Wangyi District  
Tongchuan City, 727000  
Shaanxi Province  
China  
Email: dengjing73245@163.com

### KEYWORDS

diagnosis, classification, HSP90 $\alpha$ , AML

### INTRODUCTION

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) accounts for about 15 - 20% of all acute leukemia in children [1,2]. It is a highly heterogeneous group of hematopoietic malignancies arising from the cloning of hematopoietic stem cells, progenitor cells, and myeloid precursors that carry gene mutations affecting cell proliferation and damaging differentiation [3-6]. It is equally prevalent among boys and girls of all races under the age of 15 and affects children with a median age of about 6 years [5]. In recent decades, with the continuous adjustment of the risk stratification of leukemia, the improvement of MICM

detection technology, especially gene detection, and the development of targeted drugs, the long-term prognosis of children with AML has been improved to a certain extent, but more than one-third of them continue to relapse and experience an unsatisfactory long-term prognosis [5,7].

Heat shock proteins (HSPs) are widely present in organisms from prokaryotes to eukaryotes. They are a group of highly conserved proteins that initiate a series of special genes to encode and synthesize under stress and are called molecular chaperones [8,9]. HSP can be divided into HSP110, HSP90, HSP70, medium molecular weight HSP, and small molecular weight HSP. HSP90 $\alpha$  is encoded by the HSP90AA1 gene and is a stress-inducible subtype of HSP90 [10]. HSP90 $\alpha$  is highly expressed in multiple tumor tissues, and its level is closely related to the occurrence, progression, and drug resistance of malignant tumors [10-13]. Plasma HSP90 $\alpha$  is regarded as a novel diagnostic biomarker for tumors but may be affected by ADAM10 expression [14]. HSP90 $\alpha$  has also been reported as a biomarker in the diagnosis and prognosis of liver cancer and lung cancer [15-20].

Therefore, this study intended to collect data on serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels in 66 treatment-naïve AML children and 35 healthy controls and to explore the relationship between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels and clinical data such as age, gender, laboratory indicators, and risk stratification in children with AML.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Patients

From 2018 to 2022, 66 newly diagnosed children with AML admitted to People's Hospital of Tongchuan were recruited. In addition, 35 healthy children in the outpatient physical examination at the same time period with age and gender matching were selected as the healthy control group. AML was classified using a standardized MICM classification system, including cell morphology, immunology, cytogenetics, and molecular biology. Inclusion criteria: All children with AML were diagnosed as AML by MICM classification system, and there were no other abnormalities in the healthy control group. All participants were < 15 years of age and had written informed consent from their legal guardians. All participants did not undergo anti-cancer treatment such as radiotherapy, chemotherapy, or surgery, and complete clinical data were obtained.

Exclusion criteria: Those with juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia (JMML), secondary AML, mixed phenotype acute leukemia, Down's syndrome, comorbidity with other malignant tumors, connective tissue disease, infectious diseases and heart, lung, liver, and kidney dysfunction, congenital immunodeficiency, long-term use of immunosuppressive agents, and mental disorders were excluded.

The study protocol was based on the Declaration of

Helsinki. The study was approved by the ethics committee of People's Hospital of Tongchuan. The legal guardians of all participants agreed to provide blood samples for research.

### Sample collection and serum HSP90 $\alpha$ detection

Fasting elbow vein blood samples were obtained from all participants in the early morning, centrifuged at 3,000 r/minute for 10 minutes, and stored at -70°C. HSP90 $\alpha$  level was determined using the human HSP90 $\alpha$  ELISA kit (Yantai Protgen Biotechnology Development Co., Ltd., Shandong, China).

### Diagnostic criteria

The diagnosis was made according to the 2023 NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology [21] and the 5th edition of the World Health Organization Classification of Hematolymphoid Tumors [22].

### French-American-British (FAB) classification

M0 (minimally differentiated AML): bone marrow (BM) blasts accounted for  $\geq 30\%$ , without azurophil granule and Auer bodies, myeloperoxidase- and Sudan black B-positive cells accounted for < 3%.

M1 (undifferentiated AML): myeloblasts (type I [no granules in the cytoplasm] + type II [few granules in the cytoplasm]) account for more than 90% of non-erythroid cells (NEC; karyocytes that do not include plasma cells, lymphocytes, basophilic cells, macrophages, and all erythroid cells).

M2 (partially differentiated AML): myeloblasts (type I + II) accounted for 30 - 89% of NEC, with other granulocytes > 10% and monocytes < 20%.

M3 (acute promyelocytic leukemia): The bone marrow was mainly composed of promyelocyte with increased granules, and these cells were more than 30% in NEC.

M4 (acute myelomonocytic leukemia): BM blasts accounted for more than 30% of NEC, granulocytes accounted for 30 - 80%, and monocytes accounted for more than 20%.

M5 (acute monocytic leukemia): monoblasts, promonocytes, and monocytes in NEC accounted for  $\geq 80\%$ . M5a was classified with protomonocytes  $\geq 80\%$ , and M5b was classified with protomonocytes < 80%.

M6 (erythroleukemia): red blood cells accounted for  $\geq 50\%$ , and myeloblasts (type I + II) in NEC accounted for  $\geq 30\%$ .

M7 (acute megakaryocytic leukemia): megacaryoblast in BM accounted for  $\geq 30\%$ . Platelet antigen and platelet peroxidase were tested for positivity.

### Risk stratification

AML is stratified according to the 2017 European Leukemia Network AML risk stratification [23]. Good prognosis: t (8; 21) (q22; q22.1)/RUNX1-RUNX1T1, inv (16) (p13; q22) or t (16; 16) (p13; q22)/CBFB-MYH11, NPM1 mutation and FLT3-1TD negative or mutation low load, CEBPA biallelic mutation. Moderate prognosis: NPM1 mutation and FLT3-1TD mutation

high load, NPM1 wild type and FLT3-1TD negative or mutation low load (no other adverse prognostic genetic abnormalities), (t 9; 11) (p21,3; q23,3)/MLLT3-KMT1A and other cytogenetic abnormalities with good or poor prognosis. Poor prognosis: (t 6; 9) (p23; q34, 1)/DEK-NUP214, (t v; 11q23,3)/KMT2A rearrangement, (t 9; 22) (q34, 1; q11,2)/BCR-ABL1, TP53/RUNX1/ASXL1 mutation, complex karyotype/monomer karyotype, etc. Children with good prognosis were classified into the low-risk group, those with moderate prognosis into the middle-risk group, and those with poor prognosis into the high-risk group.

### Observation indicators and follow-up

The gender, age, blood routine, FAB classification, peripheral blood (PB) and BM blast ratio, monocyte, lymphocyte and red blood cell ratio, risk stratification, and overall survival were collected at initial diagnosis. At the same time, hospitalization and outpatient medical records or telephone follow-up were reviewed, and the follow-up was conducted every 3 - 6 months until December 2023. Overall survival (OS) refers to the period from the diagnosis to death or last follow-up due to any cause.

### Statistical analysis

SPSS 22.0 (IBM, NY, USA) and GraphPad Prism 9.0 (GraphPad Software, CA, USA) were used to analyze and plot the data, respectively. In this study, measurement data were expressed as mean + standard deviation (Mean + SD), and normality was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The *t*-test or one-way analysis of variance was used to compare the groups that met the normality. The comparison of the measurement data between groups that did not meet the normality was performed using the independent sample Mann-Whitney U test (Independent sample Mann-Whitney U test). Enumeration data were expressed as n (%), and the chi-squared test or Fisher's exact test was used for comparison. ROC curve and area under the ROC curve (AUC) were used to evaluate the diagnostic value of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level in children with AML. Bivariate correlation analysis was performed using Pearson correlation analysis. Kaplan-Meier method was used to draw the survival curve and calculate the cumulative survival rate. Log-Rank test was used to compare the survival curves between groups.  $p < 0.05$  was corrected by Benjamini-Hochberg false discovery rate with adjusted  $p < 0.05$  representing statistical significance.

## RESULTS

### HSP90 $\alpha$ in serum of children with AML is upregulated and has diagnostic value

A total of 66 children with AML were enrolled in this study, including 36 males (54.5%) and 30 females (45.6%), with a male to female ratio of 1.2:1. The average age was (8.5  $\pm$  3.4) years. In addition, 35 healthy

children, including 20 males (57.1%) and 15 females (42.9%), met the inclusion criteria, with an average age of (7.9  $\pm$  3.2) years. There was no difference in the general data between the two groups ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Figure 1A, B).

ELISA showed that HSP90 $\alpha$  in AML children was 166.38  $\pm$  99.95 (ng/mL), while it was 71.56  $\pm$  24.14 (ng/mL) in healthy children, and the difference was statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Figure 1C). The ROC curve showed that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  had excellent diagnostic efficacy as a diagnostic marker for childhood AML (Figure 1D), and the AUC was 0.820 (95% CI: 0.737 - 0.902). The cutoff value of HSP90 $\alpha$  was 110.5 ng/mL, and the maximum Youden index was 0.685. The sensitivity and specificity of HSP90 $\alpha$  in the diagnosis of AML were 74.2% and 94.3%, respectively.

### The relationship between HSP90 $\alpha$ level and clinical characteristics of children with AML

The relationship between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  and various clinical characteristics of children with AML was further evaluated. According to the cutoff value, 66 children with AML were divided into high HSP90 $\alpha$  level group (n = 18) and low HSP90 $\alpha$  level group (n = 48). BM blasts (%) in the high HSP90 $\alpha$  level group were significantly higher than those in the low HSP90 $\alpha$  level group ( $p < 0.05$ ) and had higher cytogenetic risk ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, there were no significant differences in gender, age, white blood cell count (WBC), hemoglobin, platelet count, and the proportion of blasts in PB between children with high and low HSP90 $\alpha$  levels ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### Serum HSP90 $\alpha$ is differentially expressed in different subtypes of childhood AML

Among the AML children included in this study, there were 1 case (1.5%) of M0 type, 12 cases (18.2%) of M1 type, 25 cases (37.9%) of M2 type, 3 cases (4.5%) of M3 type, 5 cases (7.6%) of M4 type, 4 cases (6.1%) of M5 type, 3 cases (4.5%) of M6 type, 6 cases (9.1%) of M7 type, and 7 cases (10.6%) of unknown type. Fisher's exact test analysis showed that FAB classification was correlated with HSP90 $\alpha$  level ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 1, Supplementary Figure 1).

Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  was differentially expressed in different FAB types of AML in children, and there was a statistical difference between M1 and M2 types and healthy control group ( $p < 0.05$ ), among which HSP90 $\alpha$  expression in M2 type was elevated most obviously. The comparison between FAB subtypes showed that there was a difference in serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels between M2 and M3 and unknown types ( $p < 0.05$ ), and there was a difference in serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels between M1 and M3 types ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Figure 2).

Since FAB classification is mainly based on the observation of cell morphology and histochemical staining of BM smears, further analysis of the correlation between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  and the proportion of BM cells in children with AML showed that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  was posi-

**Table 1. Relationship between clinical data and serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level in children with AML.**

Characteristics		Number (%) / Mean $\pm$ SD			P
		All (n = 66)	HSP90 $\alpha$ -low (n = 17)	HSP90 $\alpha$ -high (n = 49)	
Gender	male	36 (54.5)	8 (12.1)	28 (42.4)	0.575
	female	30 (45.6)	9 (13.6)	21 (31.8)	
Cytogenetic risk	low risk	20 (30.3)	10 (15.2)	10 (15.2)	0.016
	intermediate risk	34 (51.5)	5 (7.6)	29 (43.9)	
	high risk	12 (18.2)	2 (3.0)	10 (15.2)	
Age		8.5 $\pm$ 3.4	7.8 $\pm$ 3.3	8.6 $\pm$ 3.5	0.245
White blood cell count (x 10 <sup>9</sup> /L)		51.6 $\pm$ 54.1	49.0 $\pm$ 37.0	52.6 $\pm$ 59.2	0.541
Hemoglobin (x g/L)		81.3 $\pm$ 22.7	79.7 $\pm$ 22.6	81.9 $\pm$ 23.0	0.747
Platelets (x 10 <sup>9</sup> /L)		51.2 $\pm$ 40.5	45.6 $\pm$ 39.7	53.1 $\pm$ 41.0	0.561
Bone marrow blast (%)		51.2 $\pm$ 19.6	42.2 $\pm$ 17.1	55.2 $\pm$ 19.4	0.019
Peripheral blood blast (%)		53.8 $\pm$ 22.1	60.2 $\pm$ 20.6	51.6 $\pm$ 22.3	0.121
French-American-British classification	M0	1 (1.5)	1 (1.5)	0	0.003
	M1	12 (18.2)	0	12 (18.2)	
	M2	25 (37.9)	4 (6.1)	21 (31.8)	
	M3	3 (4.5)	3 (4.5)	0	
	M4	5 (7.6)	2 (3.0)	3 (4.5)	
	M5	4 (6.1)	2 (3.0)	2 (3.0)	
	M6	3 (4.5)	0	3 (4.5)	
	M7	6 (9.1)	2 (3.0)	4 (6.1)	
Unknown		7 (10.6)	3 (4.5)	4 (6.1)	

Data were expressed as the number of patients, n (%) or mean  $\pm$  standard deviation (Mean  $\pm$  SD). Statistically significant differences were defined as adjusted  $p < 0.05$ .

tively correlated with BM blast (%) ( $r = 0.445$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). There was no correlation between serum and the proportion of monocytes, lymphocytes, and red blood cells ( $p > 0.05$ ).

#### High expression of HSP90 $\alpha$ in serum predicts poor OS in children with AML

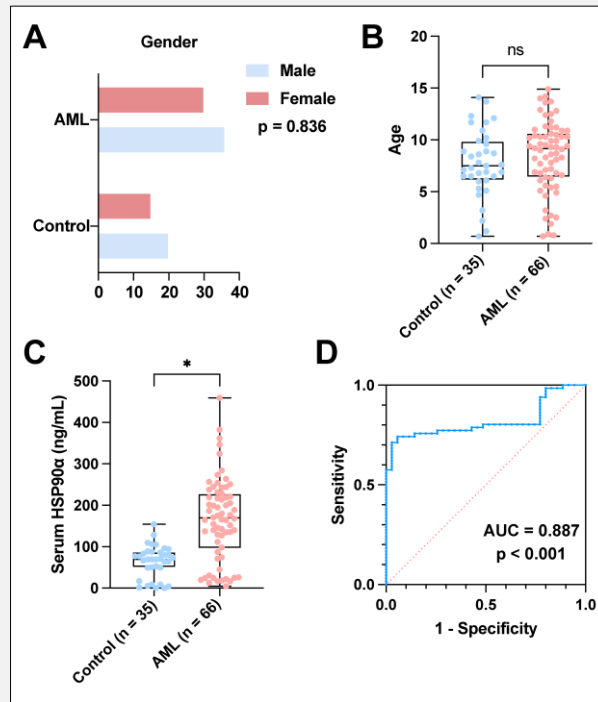
Sixty-six children with AML were followed up for 6 - 36 months, with a median follow-up period of 24 months. There was no loss of follow-up, and 20 patients died. The OS rate at 36 months was 69.7% (46/66). Kaplan-Meier survival curve analysis showed that OS in children with high serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels was shorter than that in children with low serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels ( $p = 0.038$ ) (Figure 3).

## DISCUSSION

HSP90 can promote cancer by maintaining a variety of cancer characteristics, including cell death resistance, tumor immunity, angiogenesis, invasion, and metastasis [9]. Therefore, HSP90 is considered to be necessary for malignant progression. In AML, HSP90 plays a central

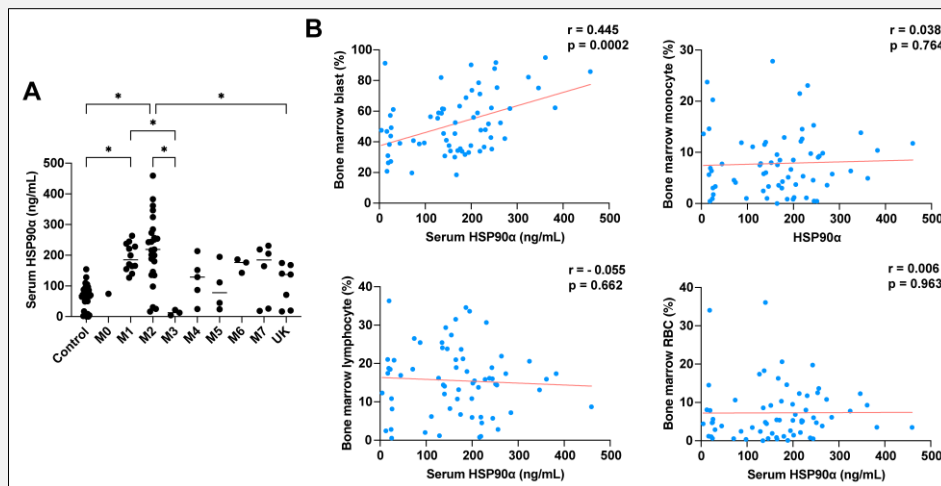
role in regulating apoptosis and cell proliferation through client proteins, including growth factor receptors and cyclin-dependent kinases [24]. It has been noted that [25] HSPs, including HSP90, can be detected in all AML cases, and the positive expression rate (56%) of HSP90 in AML (M5 subtype) is higher. However, in children with AML, there is no study to elucidate the abnormal expression or effect of HSP90 $\alpha$ .

Our study showed that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  in children with AML was significantly higher than that in healthy control group. According to the ROC curve, serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level had a satisfactory diagnostic effect on children with AML, suggesting that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level may be a sensitive tumor biomarker for the diagnosis or monitoring of AML in children. Further analysis of the relationship between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels and various clinical features of children with AML showed that BM blast (%) in children with high HSP90 $\alpha$  levels was significantly higher than that in children with low HSP90 $\alpha$  levels and had higher cytogenetic risk, suggesting that high serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels were associated with malignant clinical features in children with AML. The proportion of BM blasts is crucial for the diagnosis of AML [26,27]. We confirmed that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels



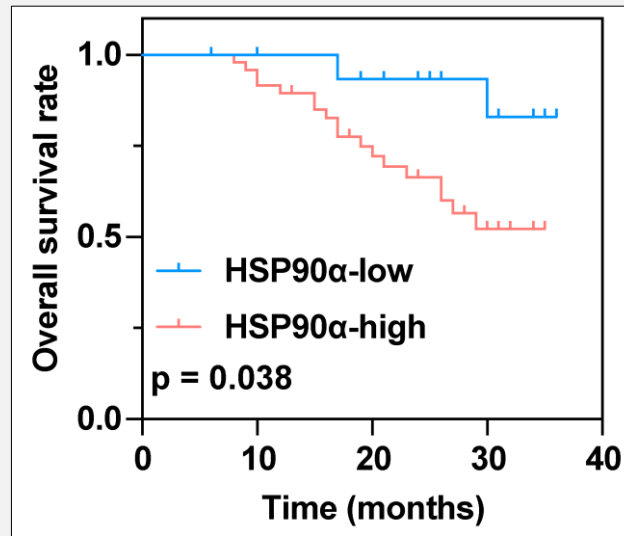
**Figure 1. HSP90 $\alpha$  is upregulated in the serum of children with AML and has diagnostic value.**

**A - B:** Comparison of gender and age between AML children and healthy control group; **C:** comparison of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels in children with AML and healthy controls; **D:** the diagnostic value of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level in children with AML. \*  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 2. Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  shows differential expression in different subtypes of AML in children.**

**A:** Comparison of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels in children with AML of different FAB types; **B:** correlation between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level and the proportion of BM blasts, monocytes, lymphocytes, and red blood cells. \*  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 3.** Kaplan-Meier survival curve analyzes the effect of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level on OS in children with AML ( $p = 0.038$ ).

were positively correlated with BM blasts in children with AML by Pearson correlation analysis ( $r = 0.445$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and this further verified the diagnostic value of serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels in children with AML.

At present, there are two main classification methods for AML, namely FAB classification and WHO classification [28]. FAB classification is the earliest established classification standard. The FAB classification system divides AML into 8 subtypes of M0 - M7. This study found that serum HSP90 $\alpha$  was differentially expressed in different FAB types of AML in children, especially in M1 and M2 types compared with the healthy control group, and HSP90 $\alpha$  was elevated in M2 type most obviously. Statistical analysis showed that FAB classification was significantly correlated with HSP90 $\alpha$  level, but further analysis did not observe the correlation between serum HSP90 $\alpha$  and the proportion of monocytes, lymphocytes, and red blood cells. This may be related to the small number of samples and the wide difference between the included FAB subtype patients. Increased HSP90 $\alpha$  levels can be observed in leukemia and are associated with disease prognosis [29,30]. However, the expression level of HSP90 $\alpha$  in serum of children with AML and its correlation with the prognosis of children with AML have not been studied. In this study, OS in children with high serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level was shorter than that in children with low serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level, and high HSP90 $\alpha$  level indicated poor prognosis in children with AML. However, whether serum HSP90 $\alpha$  is an independent factor for the prognosis of children with AML remains to be uncertain.

This study is single-centered with small sample size. It

is therefore imperative that more centers are involved and larger samples are collected in the future to confirm serum HSP90's value in diagnosing, classifying, and prognosticating AML in children in the future.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, serum HSP90 $\alpha$  levels are significantly up-regulated in children with AML, which can be used as a reliable biomarker for the diagnosis of AML and its subtypes in children. Serum HSP90 $\alpha$  level is an influencing factor but not an independent factor affecting prognosis in children with AML.

### Data Availability Statement:

Data is available from the corresponding author on request.

### Ethical Approval Statement:

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. All subjects were approved by People's Hospital of Tongchuan (no. 201706TC-5).

**Declaration of Interest:**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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