

# “Pleomorphic adenoma in salivary glands: Insights from a 100-patient analysis”

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Pleomorphic adenoma (PA) is a benign epithelial tumour originating from the salivary gland, specifically the parotid gland. This study aims to comprehensively analyse the clinical and pathological features of PA by examining the characteristics of the tumour, including its histological structure and immunohistochemical profile.

**Materials and Methods:** Over 8 years, beginning in October 2015 and ending in October 2023, an exhaustive retrospective study was conducted in the Department of Pathology, Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, Manipal University, Karnataka, India. The research focused on 100 cases of pleomorphic adenoma and involved a meticulous examination of the clinical and pathological characteristics obtained by retrieving the pertinent files.

**Results:** Out of all the primary tumours, the majority ( $n = 70$ ) was found in the parotid gland, followed by PA that developed from the minor salivary glands of the palate ( $n = 07$ ), the submandibular gland ( $n = 17$ ), and the lacrimal gland ( $n = 04$ ). Only two cases had a primary tumour located in the lips. Females were more susceptible to these tumours than males. The parotid gland tumours showed a distinct trend in laterality, with 73 cases observed on the right side. In 85%, the initial symptom of the condition was painless swelling.

**Conclusion:** Salivary gland PA is typically a benign tumour. However, a subset of these tumours can exhibit a malignant phenotype. The preferred treatment is surgical excision with adequate margins.

**Keywords:** Benign tumour, parotid, pleomorphic adenoma, salivary glands

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## INTRODUCTION

Salivary gland tumours are rare and account for less than 3% of neoplasms in the head and neck region.<sup>[1]</sup> These tumours possess intricate microscopic features; the

most common type is the pleomorphic adenoma (PA). PA constitutes a significant proportion of tumours in the parotid gland, ranging from 60% to 73%, and in the submandibular and minor salivary glands, ranging from

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40% to 60%.<sup>[2-4]</sup> Pleomorphic adenoma (PA) is a frequently occurring benign tumour in the salivary glands, primarily found in the parotid gland.<sup>[5]</sup> Most tumours typically arise in the superficial lobe, while the deep lobe of the parotid gland and the parapharyngeal space are only occasionally affected.<sup>[6]</sup> The highest incidence of minor salivary gland tumours occurs on the palate, with the lip, cheek, tongue, and floor of the mouth being the subsequent most affected sites.<sup>[7]</sup> PA typically presents as a painless, slow-growing parotid gland swelling without facial nerve involvement.<sup>[8]</sup> Approximately 75% of parotid tumours are PAs; surgical removal is the preferred treatment option.<sup>[9]</sup> However, local recurrence can occur due to inadequate pre-operative diagnostics, surgical techniques, and lesions of the pseudo capsule during surgery.<sup>[10]</sup> Recurrence after primary surgery is difficult to treat, and multiple recurrences are common during long-term follow-up.<sup>[11]</sup> Post-surgical recurrence of PA is a frequently encountered issue, with the recurrence rates varying between 0.5% and 10%. Certain studies have indicated a greater incidence of up to 48%.<sup>[12]</sup>

PA is a tumour that exhibits significant morphological diversity at a microscopic level. The tumour comprises luminal (epithelial) and abluminal (myoepithelial) cells with significant variability in the proportion, and its association with the mesenchymal component results in basal lamina and proteoglycan production. Luminal cells typically take on a polygonal, spindle, or stellate shape and can form duct-like structures, sheets, clumps, or interlacing strands. They are recognisable by their cohesive groupings, which usually include a honeycomb pattern.<sup>[13-15]</sup> When these epithelial cells are present as individual cells, they are indistinguishable from neoplastic myoepithelial cells. Among the parenchymal cells of PA, neoplastic myoepithelial cells are the most relevant in the tumour context because they play a tumour suppressor role with the potential high secretion of tissue inhibitors of metalloproteinases (TIMPs).<sup>[16,17]</sup> These cells accumulate in large quantities in the extra-cellular matrix and have a variety of appearances, including spindle-shaped (most common), epithelioid, clear-cell, and plasmacytoid.<sup>[18]</sup> PA can also lead to malignant tumours in both minor and major salivary glands, specifically carcinoma. The risk of malignant transformation of PA is estimated to be between 3% and 4%.

This research aims to comprehensively examine PA's clinical and pathological features, focusing on details that an expert audience can quickly grasp. The study will review the tumour's histological structure and immunohistochemical profile. By providing a comprehensive understanding of the technicalities of PA, we aim to enhance healthcare practitioners' knowledge. The ultimate goal of this study is

to improve diagnosis, treatment, and outcomes for patients suffering from this ailment.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A comprehensive retrospective study spanning over 8 years, from October 2015 to October 2023, was conducted after approval from the institutional ethical committee in the Department of Pathology at Kasturba Medical College in Mangalore, Karnataka, India. The study focused on 100 PA cases and thoroughly examined the clinical and pathological characteristics retrieved from relevant files. The study focused exclusively on PA cases accompanied by detailed demographic and clinical information and biopsy or specimen samples obtained via excision. Cases lacking such detailed records were excluded from the analysis. The specimens received were fixed in 10% formalin, followed by routine tissue processing and sectioning of 5µ thickness using a paraffin-embedded technique. Haematoxylin and eosin staining was performed on tissue sections and analysed under a light microscope at ×4, ×10, and ×40 magnifications. Multiple sections from different regions were evaluated based on the size of the lesion, with a total of 3–5 sections examined.

Scoring criteria: 0

Based on the proportion of parenchymal and stromal tumour components, the cases were classified into four sub-types as proposed by Foote and Frazell:<sup>[19]</sup>

- Type I: Principally myxoid
- Type II: Myxoid and cellular
- Type III: Predominantly cellular
- Type IV: Extremely cellular

“Morphological patterns”, “cellular patterns”, “capsular alterations”, and “stromal components” were analysed.

## RESULTS

Our study showed that women were more susceptible to parotid gland tumours than men, especially those between 30 and 60 years of age. Among the tumours, the majority ( $n = 70$ ) was found in the parotid gland, followed by a PA, which developed from the minor salivary glands of the palate ( $n = 07$ ), the submandibular gland ( $n = 17$ ), and the lacrimal gland ( $n = 04$ ). Interestingly, there was a distinct trend in laterality for the parotid gland tumours, with 73 cases observed on the right and only 27 on the left. In addition, only two cases had a primary tumour in the lips. The initial symptom of the condition was painless swelling in 85% of cases, followed by a pressure sensation in 10% and pain in 5% of cases across all sites.

This was often associated with pain (5%) and pressure sensation (3%) [Tables 1-5].

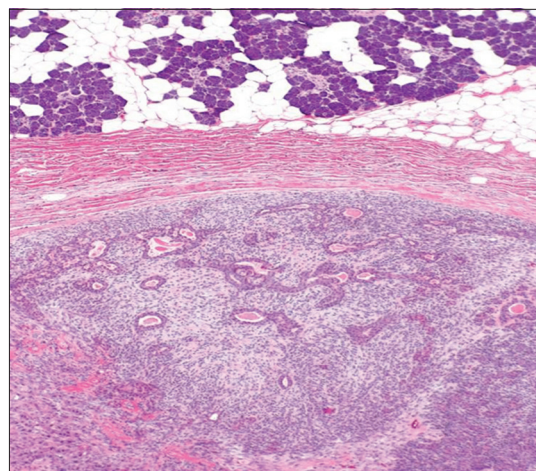
Upon histopathological examination, the cases were categorised into four sub-types based on the Foote and Frazell<sup>[9]</sup> classification system. All cases demonstrated a type II pattern characterised by a myxoid and cellular appearance. The cellular components of the cases were primarily composed of spindle cells (90%), followed by cuboidal cells (85%), plasmacytoid cells (50%), squamous cells (40%), and mucous cells (20%). The ductal morphological pattern was observed in all cases, with 40% demonstrating a cystic pattern and 25% showing a cribriform pattern. The stromal components of the cases were composed of an 85% hyalinised matrix and a 15% chondroid matrix. Encapsulation was observed in 40% of the cases, with 20% demonstrating satellite nodules within the capsule. A summary of the various morphological patterns and cellular and stromal components can be found in Table 6.

The outer surface appears clearly defined, enclosed, and thin on gross examination. Meanwhile, the inner surface showcases a tan-to-white colouration and a noticeably firm consistency, as depicted in Figure 1. The analysed sample reveals a tumour that originates from a salivary gland. The tumour is clearly defined and consists of both epithelial and myoepithelial elements. The epithelial elements are mainly present in ducts, interspersed with myxoid components in the stromal tissue, as depicted in Figure 2. Upon examination of the smear, it was observed that myoepithelial cells were arranged in sheets. Some of these cells exhibited a clear cytoplasm, as depicted in Figure 3.

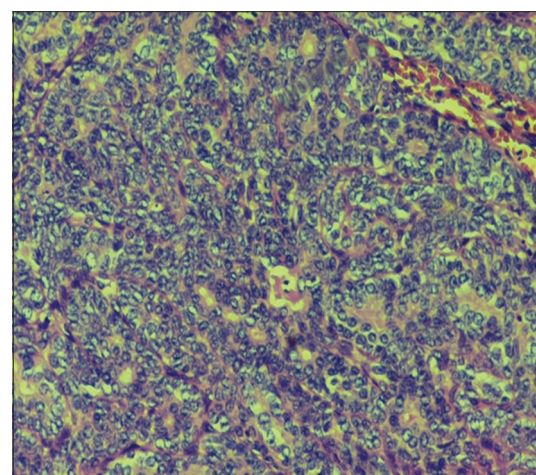
Upon histochemical staining of Pleomorphic Adenoma, it was observed that there were areas positive for Periodic-Acid-Schiff within the duct lumen, which indicates neutral mucins, as depicted in Figure 4. The ductal (epithelial) cells were typically positive for cytokeratins 14, as depicted in Figure 5. Myoepithelial cells were positive for P63, as



**Figure 1:** Gross finding of Pleomorphic Adenoma. Outer Surface - Well circumscribed, encapsulated and thin surface. Cut Surface - Tan to white, firm in consistency



**Figure 2:** Histopathological image shows Histopathological examination of Pleomorphic Adenoma. Sections show a tumour with a salivary gland which is well-circumscribed and composed of epithelial and myoepithelial elements. Epithelial elements are arranged predominantly as ducts along with myxoid components in the stroma



**Figure 3:** Histopathological image shows Histopathological examination of Pleomorphic Adenoma. The studied smear shows myoepithelial cells arranged in sheets. Few of these cells has clear cytoplasm

**Table 1: Gender distribution of PA**

| Gender | No of cases | Percentage |
|--------|-------------|------------|
| Female | 65          | 65%        |
| Male   | 35          | 35%        |

**Table 2: Age distribution of PA**

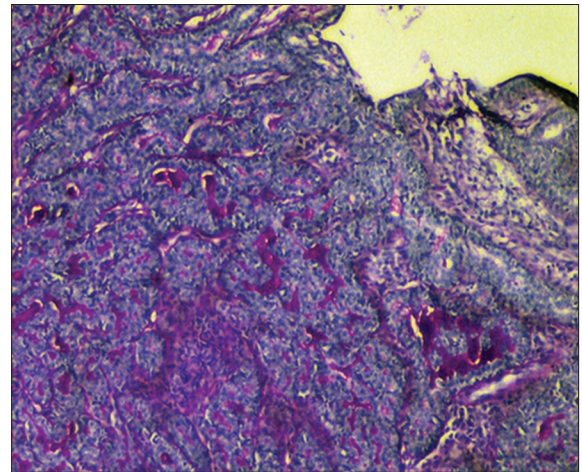
| Age         | No of cases | Percentage |
|-------------|-------------|------------|
| <20 years   | 03          | 03%        |
| 21-30 years | 20          | 20%        |
| 31-40 years | 24          | 24%        |
| 41-50 years | 26          | 26%        |
| 51-60 years | 14          | 14%        |
| 61-70 years | 08          | 08%        |
| >70 years   | 05          | 05%        |

depicted in Figure 6. The ductal component, on the other hand, was positive for the epithelial markers Epithelial Membrane Antigen and Carcinoembryogenic antigen, as depicted in Figure 7. Staining for S100 protein often highlights most abluminal cells and those lying in the matrix, as depicted in Figure 8. Calponin stain highlights the myoepithelial and modified myoepithelial cells, as depicted in Figure 9.

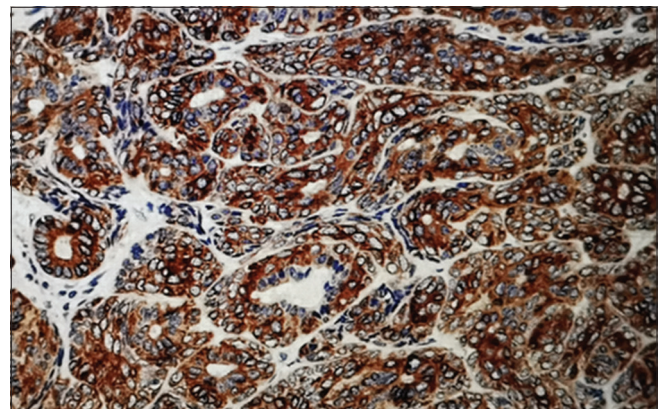
**Recurrence:** Out of the total number of patients, 25 individuals suffered from recurring tumours. Most of these patients (16 individuals) were between 45 and 70. Five patients had a second relapse, while four experienced a third relapse.

Of the patients, 7% were diagnosed with a carcinoma inside a PA, as depicted in Figure 10. The primary therapy for these patients included local resection in five, conservative parotidectomy in one, and partial resection of the soft palate in one. Further interventions were carried out in all cases, including dissection of efferent lymphatics of the neck and additional local resections. Reconstruction was done using various methods such as palatine flaps, pharynx-palatine flaps, microvascular radial forearm flaps,

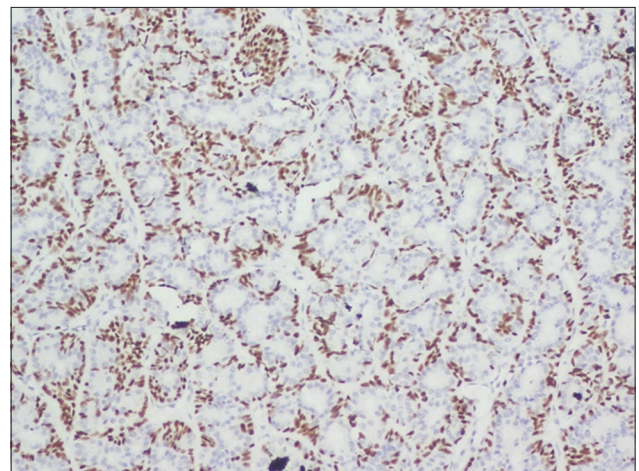
and latissimus dorsi-flaps. In one patient, the facial nerve was adhering to the tumour and had to be removed. Sural



**Figure 4:** Histopathological image shows Periodic-Acid-Schiff – Positive. The histochemical staining of Pleomorphic Adenoma revealed Periodic-Acid-Schiff -positive areas within the lumen of ducts indicative of neutral mucin



**Figure 5:** Histopathological image shows Immunohistochemistry: Cytokeratin 14 – Positive. The ductal (epithelial) cells are typically positive for cytokeratins



**Figure 6:** Histopathological image shows Immunohistochemistry: P63 –Positive. Myoepithelial cells are positive for P63

**Table 3: Laterality of PA**

| Laterality  | No of cases | Percentage |
|-------------|-------------|------------|
| Right-sided | 73          | 73%        |
| Left-sided  | 27          | 27%        |
| Total       | 100         | 100%       |

**Table 4: Site distribution of PA**

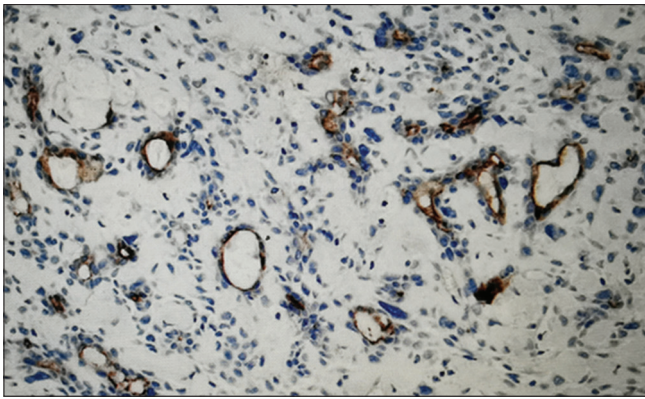
| Site                | No of cases | Percentage |
|---------------------|-------------|------------|
| Parotid gland       | 70          | 70%        |
| Submandibular gland | 17          | 17%        |
| Palate              | 07          | 07%        |
| Lacrimal gland      | 04          | 04%        |
| Lip                 | 02          | 02%        |
| Total               | 100         | 100%       |

**Table 5: Presenting complaints in PA**

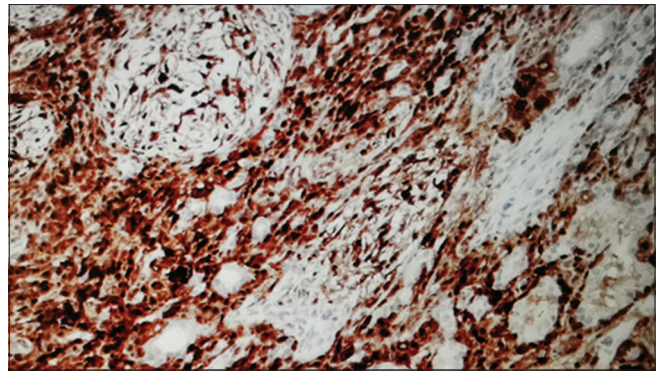
| Presenting complaints | No of cases | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-------------|------------|
| Painless swelling     | 85          | 85%        |
| Pressure sensation    | 10          | 10%        |
| Pain                  | 05          | 05%        |
| Total                 | 100         | 100%       |

**Table 6: Various morphological patterns and cellular and stromal components**

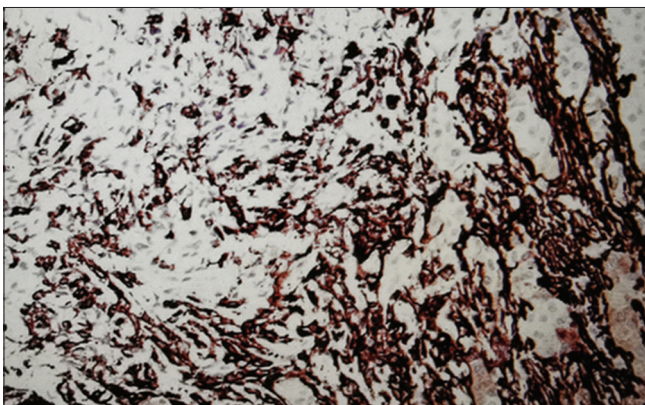
| Cellular component | Morphological pattern | Stromal component |
|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Category Percent   | Category Percent      | Category Percent  |
| Plasmacytoid 50    | Ductal 100            | Hyalinised 85     |
| Spindle 90         | Myxoid 100            | Trabecular 20     |
| Cuboidal 85        | Cystic 40             | Chondroid 15      |
| Squamous 40        | Cribriform 25         | Osteoid 20        |
| Mucous 20          | Solid 05              | -                 |



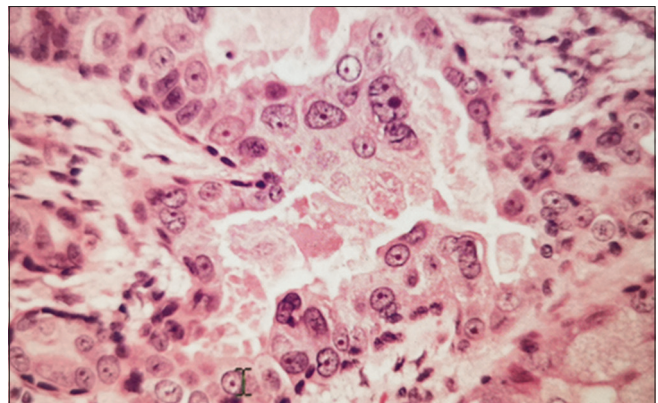
**Figure 7:** Histopathological image shows Immunohistochemistry: Epithelial Membrane Antigen – Positive. The luminal cells are Epithelial Membrane Antigen positive and, consistent with an epithelial origin. This is a benign lesion



**Figure 8:** Histopathological image shows S-100 Positive. Staining for S100 protein often highlights most abluminal cells, as well as those lying in the matrix



**Figure 9:** Histopathological image shows staining for calponin Positive. Calponin stain highlights the myoepithelial and modified myoepithelial cells



**Figure 10:** Histopathological image shows carcinoma *in situ* ex PA. The preexisting pleomorphic adenoma's luminal (ductal) cells are replaced by atypical large cells with apocrine cytoplasm

nerve interposition grafts were employed to restore facial animation. None of the patients were given post-operative radiation therapy.

## DISCUSSION

The research study highlights a crucial observation that PA, a type of tumour found in the salivary gland, can lead to the development of carcinoma, a cancerous tumour.<sup>[9]</sup> PA is a benign tumour that consists of cells capable of differentiating into multiple types of cells, including epithelial and mesenchymal cells. According to Dardick I *et al.*,<sup>[20]</sup> neoplastically altered myoepithelial cells with multi-directional differentiation properties may be responsible for the histogenesis of this tumour. Additionally, the mucin 1 gene (MUC1) is associated with the recurrence of PA and its malignant transformation, with carcinoma cells overexpressing mucin 1 gene.<sup>[21,22]</sup> Immunohistochemistry markers such as cytokeratin, Epithelial Membrane Antigen, P63, alpha smooth-muscle actin, calponin, h-caldesmon, vimentin, and S-100-protein

can aid in diagnosing this tumour.<sup>[23,24]</sup> The study on the proportion of parenchymal and stromal tumour components revealed that all the cases belonged to Type II (myxoid and cellular variant), which is inconsistent with Satpathy Y *et al.*'s findings in 2014.<sup>[25]</sup> This could be due to geographic differences. Usually, PA of the major salivary glands falls under the type I or II categories, while minor salivary gland tumours are more cellular in nature.<sup>[26]</sup> The epithelial component of the studied cases displayed a range of patterns, including ductal, trabecular, tubular, solid, cystic, and papillary architectures. In all cases with ductal patterns, two layers of cells merged with the stromal component, and the myoepithelial cells modified the stromal component, sometimes undergoing osteoid or chondroid metaplasia, as noted in Dardick I *et al.*'s 1982 study.<sup>[20]</sup> The present study revealed that 40% of cases exhibited cystic areas with squamous metaplasia, leading to diagnostic challenges similar to those observed in Nonitha S *et al.*'s 2019 study.<sup>[27]</sup> It is important to note that extensive squamous metaplasia does not necessarily indicate malignant transformation unless accompanied by capsular invasion, haemorrhage, and necrosis. Misdiagnosis

as malignant tumours can occur, leading to unnecessary aggressive therapy.<sup>[27]</sup>

The myoepithelial tumour cells can take on different shapes, including spindle-shaped, epithelioid, clear-cell, and plasmacytoid.<sup>[18]</sup> Similar to the present study, studies showed the most common cellular pattern was spindle cell in all the cases, followed by cuboidal cells (85%) and plasmacytoid cells (50%); this was not in concordance with Fabio Augusto Ito FA *et al.* 2009 and Ellis and Auclair 1996, stating that plasmacytoid cells are more common, followed by spindle cells which appear to be in transition from one form to the others.<sup>[28,29]</sup> Cuboidal cells are typically epithelial and found in less dense tumour areas. The tumour stroma or supportive tissue is essential for tumour growth and can have varying compositions, such as increased collagen synthesis, blood vessel growth, and myofibroblast production.<sup>[30]</sup> The mesenchymal component, derived from modified myoepithelial cells, can take several forms, including myxoid, hyaline, chondroid, myxochondroid, or osseous. This study found myxoid to be the most common variant, followed by hyalinised stroma and chondroid. This finding is similar to a hypothesis that myxoid variants may express more acidic mucins and, due to lack of differentiation, have a higher recurrence rate and poorer prognosis. Some studies have suggested that hyalinised stroma may have a greater propensity for malignant change.<sup>[31]</sup> Our study observed that excisional PA had a thick fibrous capsule in 40% of cases. This may be due to the complete excision of the tumour as a treatment plan. Additionally, 20% of the cases had satellite nodules within their capsule, which may suggest that recurrence of the tumour may occur if simple enucleation is performed. In some rare cases, the PA can coexist with other salivary gland tumours or develop in different sites simultaneously, adding complexity to investigating and managing such cases.<sup>[11]</sup> Therefore, surgical therapy should consider the possibility of multi-focal origin and the potential for a transformed phenotype. The insights presented in the preceding text are important for identifying and treating PA.<sup>[12]</sup> These observations underscore the critical significance of scrupulous scrutiny and tumour management to forestall the onset of further complications. The findings shed light on the need for careful and comprehensive assessment and management of this type of tumour for successful outcomes.<sup>[32-35]</sup>

## CONCLUSION

PA is a neoplasm that arises from the salivary gland and is characterised by a heterogeneous mixture of epithelial and mesenchymal elements. Despite being classified as

a benign tumour, it has been reported to display local invasiveness and poses a significant risk of re-occurrence in cases where the removal is incomplete. Therefore, it is imperative to exercise caution when managing such cases and prioritise complete surgical resection. In addition, surgical treatment planning should consider the potential for malignant transformation in PA, which further highlights the importance of careful monitoring and follow-up.

## Abbreviations

O/S = Outer surface

C/S = Cut surface

HPE = Histopathological examination

PA = Pleomorphic adenoma

PAS = Periodic-Acid-Schiff

EMA = Epithelial membrane antigen

CK = Cytokeratin

H and E = Haematoxylin and eosin

IHC = Immunohistochemistry

## Author contribution

Shazima Sheereen: Wrote the largest share of report; Mohnish Zulfikar Manva: Drafting the work; Shamama Sheereen: Assisted in writing the manuscript; Namrata N Patil: Final approval of the version; Rawa Kamal Abdelrahim: Contributed towards the manuscript revision; Mohammed Malik Afroz: Substantial contributions to the revisions of the report.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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