Plasmid-mediated Quinolone Resistance Determinants in Urinary Isolates of Escherichia coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae in a Large Singapore Hospital

Rama Narayana Deepak,1 MBBS, FRCP A, FAMS, Tse Hsien Koh,1 FRCP A, FRCP A (DABMM), Kian Sing Chan,1 MBBS

Abstract

Introduction: At the time of the study, 3 plasmid-borne qnr determinants (qnrA, qnrB and qnrS) and 1 plasmid-borne aminoglycoside-modifying enzyme determinant that confers quinolone resistance (aac(6')-Ib-cr) had been described in the literature. Materials and Methods: We studied the prevalence of the 3 qnr determinants in a total of 117 nalidixic acid-resistant urinary isolates of Klebsiella pneumoniae (61 isolates) and Escherichia coli (56 isolates) using multiplex polymerase chain reaction (PCR). Further, a subset of the original strains (comprising 14 E. coli and 38 K. pneumoniae) showing reduced susceptibility to the aminoglycosides underwent PCR for aac(6')-Ib-cr, followed by restriction digestion with BtsCI to detect the variant aac(6')-Ib-cr. Results: Twenty-eight of 61 (45.9%) Klebsiella isolates were found to possess at least 1 qnr determinant. Only 1/56 (1.8%) E. coli isolates were found to possess a qnr determinant. Two of the Klebsiella isolates possessed 2 qnr determinants each (qnrB and qnrS). The predominant determinant was qnrB (19 isolates). There were 11 isolates harbouring qnrS, and only 1 with qnrA. Two of 35/38 K. pneumoniae (92.1%) were found to possess aac(6')-Ib-cr. There was pairwise association between each of qnr, aac(6')-Ib-cr and the presence of an extended-spectrum beta-lactamase. Conclusions: A high prevalence of plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance determinants [i.e., qnrS, qnrB and aac(6')-Ib-cr] was found in quinolone-resistant K. pneumoniae isolated in a large hospital in Singapore.

Key words: Aminoglycoside, Ciprofloxacin, qnr, Transferable

Introduction

Plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance is a recently recognised phenomenon. The initial report of this transferable mode of resistance was in 1998 in Birmingham, Alabama, where the first qnr (quinolone-resistance) determinant was described on a conjugative plasmid in a Klebsiella isolate.1 The qnr determinant codes for a 218 amino acid member of the pentapeptide repeat family of proteins, which are thought to protect against DNA gyrase inhibition. While qnr raised the minimal inhibitory concentrations (MICs) of quinolones in all strains, it was not sufficient to yield frank quinolone resistance without an ancillary mechanism like an accompanying outer membrane porin (OMP) loss.2

Subsequently, other workers described finding similar determinants in enterobacterial strains from Asia,3,4 Europe,5,13 Australia,14 and the United States of America.15 In all, a total of 3 distinct qnr determinants had been described prior to the date of the study, designated qnrA, qnrS, qnrB in order of discovery.

Following the discovery of qnr, a novel mechanism of transferable quinolone resistance was reported. The -cr variant of the aminoglycoside acetyltransferase enzyme AAC(6')-Ib conferred reduced susceptibility to ciprofloxacin by N-acetylation of its piperazinyl amine.16 Ours is a 1500-bedded acute tertiary care hospital. Quinolones are the second most commonly prescribed class of antimicrobials in the hospital with a usage of 40.73 DDD/100 patient days in 2006.17 Moreover, resistance to quinolones is alarmingly common with nearly half of all Klebsiella pneumoniae and more than a third of E. coli testing resistant to the quinolones. We therefore embarked on a study to define the prevalence of the known mechanisms of transferable quinolone resistance among the nalidixic acid-resistant urinary isolates of E. coli and Klebsiella in our hospital.

Materials and Methods

Sequential isolates of E. coli and K. pneumoniae collected over 3 months (from August to October 2005) from urine
cultures that tested resistant or intermediate to nalidixic acid by CLSI criteria) were archived and used for the study. During this period, a total of 891 E. coli (of which 498 (55.9%) showed reduced susceptibility to nalidixic acid) and 483 K. pneumoniae (of which 297 (61.5%) showed reduced susceptibility to nalidixic acid) were isolated from urine specimens processed in our laboratory.

From the archived isolates, a consecutive selection of 56 isolates of E. coli and 61 isolates of K. pneumoniae were selected for the study. There were 3 patients who had specimens yielding 2 isolates each. These were distinct organisms, namely 1 E. coli and 1 K. pneumoniae in each case. Hence, there were no duplicate isolates tested.

MICs were determined to nalidixic acid and ciprofloxacin using Etest strips (AB Biodisk, Sweden) according to the recommendations of the manufacturer. Testing for extended-spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBLs) was performed using a CLSI recommended method.

The qnr genes were assessed by means of a multiplex polymerase chain reaction (PCR) for the simultaneous detection of qnrA, qnrB and qnrS in a single reaction. A representative selection of PCR amplicons (including 2 instances each of qnrA, qnrB and qnrS) were sequenced by dye-terminator chemistry using the respective primer pairs.

A subset of the original 117 strains was then selected for the detection of the variant aminoglycoside modifying enzyme determinant aac(6′)-Ib-cr. Fourteen quinolone-resistant E. coli and 38 quinolone-resistant K. pneumoniae which showed reduced susceptibility to either or both of our routinely tested aminoglycosides, amikacin and gentamicin, were tested for aac(6′)-Ib by PCR. The amplicons were digested with BtsCI (an isoschizomer of BstF5I). The absence of restriction, suggesting the presence of the -cr variant encoding quinolone acetylating activity, was indicated by the persistence of a solitary 482bp band. Two representative amplicons were sequenced to confirm the -cr variant.

### Results and Discussion

All of the strains had high MICs of nalidixic acid (64–256 μg mL⁻¹). Twenty eight (45.9%) of the 61 K. pneumoniae and only 1 (1.8%) of the 56 E. coli were found to contain qnr type determinants. The breakdown of the determinants detected was as follows: qnrA : 1 isolate (K. pneumoniae), qnrB : 19 isolates (K. pneumoniae), qnrS : 11 isolates (10 K. pneumoniae and 1 E. coli). Two of the Klebsiella isolates possessed 2 qnr determinants each (qnrB and qnrS). Five of the 29 (17.2%) qnr positive strains showed low level resistance to ciprofloxacin (MICs of 4 to 8 μg mL⁻¹). In contrast, only 2 of the 88 (2.3%) qnr negative isolates had lower level resistance with MICs of 4 μg mL⁻¹. The remainder of the strains gave ciprofloxacin MICs of ≥32 μg mL⁻¹. Surprisingly, there was a significant negative association between the presence of qnr and the level of quinolone resistance (Kendall τ-c= -0.110, P = 0.043). An explanation for this finding is not immediately apparent. It is possible that strains with overt quinolone resistance (due to gyrase mutations and drug efflux, for instance) may have less selective pressure to acquire and/or keep qnr-bearing plasmids.

The prevalence of qnr amongst our nalidixic acid-resistant Klebsiella (45.9%) is far higher than the qnr prevalence (11.1%) in Klebsiella found in another study by Wang et al using isolates from Shanghai, China, that used selection

### Table 1. Prevalence of qnr Determinant

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<tr>
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<th>qnr positive (n = 29)</th>
<th>qnr negative (n = 88)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESBL positive (n = 22)</td>
<td>ESBL negative (n = 7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. coli</td>
<td>K. pneumoniae</td>
<td>E. coli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>aac-6′-Ib-cr positive (n = 36)</th>
<th>aac-6′-Ib-cr negative (n = 16)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESBL positive (n = 33)</td>
<td>ESBL negative (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. coli</td>
<td>K. pneumoniae</td>
<td>E. coli</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
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criteria similar to ours. In our survey, the most prevalent determinant was qnrB; qnrS was the second most prevalent and qnrA was the least prevalent with only 1 strain (1/29 = 3.4%) harbouring the determinant. A recent survey by Wu et al. among Enterobacter cloacae in a Taiwanese hospital found a distribution very similar to our own (predominance of qnrB, followed by qnrS and a minority of qnrA).

Of the 52 strains selected for detection of aac(6')-Ib-cr, 35 of 38 K. pneumoniae (91.2%) and 1 of 14 E. coli (7.1%) were positive for aac(6')-Ib. The amplicons were not susceptible to restriction digestion by BtsCI, implying that all 36 strains possessed the variant aac(6')-Ib-cr. This is in contrast to a study in the United States which found aac(6')-Ib-cr more common in E. coli than in Klebsiella. However, strain selection criteria were somewhat different (in the latter study inclusion was based on ceftazidime resistance without considering aminoglycoside resistance). Of the 36 strains positive for aac(6')-Ib-cr, 2 (5.6%) showed low level resistance (MIC = 4 μg/mL) to ciprofloxacin. Amongst the 16 strains that were negative for the aminoglycoside resistance trait, 1 (6.3%) had a ciprofloxacin MIC of 4 μg/mL. No association was found between the presence of aac(6')-Ib-cr and quantitative quinolone resistance (Kendall τ-c= 0.006, P = 0.923). This may indicate either a lack of power (small sample size) or the greater relative importance of other determinants in quinolone resistance.

Among the aac(6')-Ib-cr positive strains, there were 16 (44.4%) which were also qnr positive. Of the 16 strains that tested negative for the aminoglycoside modifying enzyme, there were 2 qnr positive strains (12.5%). Association between the 2 determinants was significant at the 5% level (16/36 vs. 2/16, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test, P = 0.031). The combination of qnr and aac(6')-Ib-cr had no discernible additive effect on quinolone susceptibility.

Twenty-two of the 29 (75.9%) qnr positive strains possessed an ESBL by phenotypic testing. This is in contrast to 40 of the remaining 88 (45.5%) qnr negative strains which possessed an ESBL. (22/29 vs. 40/88, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test P = 0.005). Thirty-three of the 36 (91.7%) strains positive for aac(6')-Ib-cr also possessed an ESBL, in contrast to 5 ESBL-producers out of the 16 (31.3%) that tested negative for the aminoglycoside modifying enzyme (33/36 vs. 5/16, 2-tailed Fisher’s exact test P < 0.001). The association between ESBL-producers and qnr has been well documented but is less well described with aac(6')-Ib-cr. It cannot be definitively determined from our data whether any of the qnr, aac(6')-Ib-cr or ESBL-determinants were co-located on the same plasmid, but the pairwise association between the determinants is consistent with the possibility.

A summary of the prevalence of the determinants and their association with ESBLs is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

While most of the 29 qnr positive strains came from our hospital inpatients, 9 were derived from other sources (3 from our outpatient clinics and specialty outpatient centres, 3 from a Community Hospital, 2 from different government run clinics and 1 from a volunteer-staffed Nursing Home). The presence of these determinants in the outpatient and chronic-care settings is worrisome, because of the potential for spread of the plasmid in a background of high oral quinolone usage. Further work should be carried out to track the evolution of these determinants in our local and regional population.

It should be noted that 2 new qnr determinants (qnrC and qnrD), and a novel plasmid-mediated quinolone efflux pump (QepA) have been described since the completion of our study.

The GenBank/EMBL/DBJ accession numbers for the partial gene sequences of qnrB, qnrS and qnrA in K. pneumoniae and E. coli are EF421178-83. The GenBank/EMBL/DBJ accession numbers for the partial gene sequences of aac(6')-Ib-cr in K. pneumoniae are EF542812-3.

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REFERENCES