In vitro effectiveness of colistin, tigecycline and levofloxacin alone and combined with clarithromycin and/or heparin as lock solutions against embedded Acinetobacter baumannii strains

Berna Ozbek* and Emel Mataraci

Department of Pharmaceutical Microbiology, Faculty of Pharmacy, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Turkey

*Corresponding author. Tel: +90-212-440-00-00; Fax: +90-212-440-02-57; E-mail: bernaozbek@hotmail.com

Received 18 August 2012; returned 24 September 2012; revised 29 October 2012; accepted 31 October 2012

Objectives: To determine the in vitro stability and efficacy of colistin, tigecycline and levofloxacin alone or in combination with clarithromycin and/or heparin as lock solutions against biofilm-embedded Acinetobacter baumannii strains.

Methods: Candidate antibiotics (colistin, tigecycline and levofloxacin) were investigated in vitro, either alone or in combination with clarithromycin and/or heparin in solution. The efficacy of antibiotic lock solutions was tested in an in vitro catheter biofilm model against A. baumannii isolated from catheter-related bacteraemia.

Results: Candidate antibiotics at 400 × MICs combined with clarithromycin (200 mg/mL) and/or heparin (1000 U/mL) were compatible. Colistin, tigecycline and levofloxacin and their combinations with clarithromycin demonstrated bactericidal activity against the biofilm-embedded A. baumannii strains. Compared with other antibiotics alone, the lock solution including only colistin was the best agent to eradicate A. baumannii embedded in the catheter model. When tested antibiotics were used in combination with clarithromycin, the combinations were significantly more effective and more rapid in reducing the live cell number or eliminating A. baumannii colonization in biofilms than each of the antibiotics alone.

Conclusions: Catheter lock solutions containing colistin may have the most promise for treating or preventing biofilm-producing catheter infections caused by A. baumannii. Clarithromycin was ultimately effective with the studied antibiotics to reduce live cell number or eradicate A. baumannii colonization in biofilms and could serve as an antibiotic enhancer. Our in vitro model findings now warrant clinical trials to investigate their real role in the management of catheter-related bacteraemia.

Keywords: Gram-negatives, bacterial biofilms, catheter-related infections, antibiotic therapy, polymyxin B

Introduction

The use of central venous catheters (CVCs) has dramatically increased during the last decade worldwide. Catheter-related bacteraemia (CRB) infections associated with the insertion and maintenance of CVCs are among the most common and dangerous complications that can occur. When CRB is diagnosed, the guidelines recommended that the patients for whom CVCs cannot be removed should be treated for 2 weeks with systemic therapy and antibiotic lock therapy (ALT), as they often suffer from Gram-negative bacteraemia.5 ALT is based on the instillation of high concentrations of an antimicrobial agent into the lumens of infected CVCs for extended periods to overcome the relative antimicrobial resistance of biofilm bacteria.6–8 Although most investigations have focused on CVC infections involving Gram-positive bacteria, Gram-negatives are also important pathogens in catheter-related infections.5–7 Gram-negative bacteria accounted for 19% and 21% of CRBs reported to the CDC8 and the Surveillance and Control of Pathogens of Epidemiological Importance (‘SCOPE’) database,9 respectively. Acinetobacter baumannii is an important organism that causes catheter-related infections and often difficult-to-eradicate bloodstream infections.6,10 Seifert et al.11 showed that of patients with A. baumannii bacteraemia, 91% were hospitalized in an intensive care unit (ICU) and 99% had indwelling vascular catheters.

In the present study, we examined the in vitro activity of ALT using colistin, tigecycline and levofloxacin alone or in combination with clarithromycin and/or heparin, an anticoagulant agent, against biofilm-embedded A. baumannii.
Results

The MICs of the antimicrobial agents for each of the planktonic forms of A. baumannii are shown in Table 1. AB-19606 was susceptible to all antibiotics tested in this study, whereas AB-1 was resistant to levofloxacin. Clarithromycin, which is already not a therapeutic choice for A. baumannii infections, showed high MIC values.

Colistin at 400× MIC completely eradicated the AB-19606 and AB-1 biofilm bacteria within 3 days (Figure 1a and b). In particular, AB-19606 and AB-1 biofilms were sterilized after 2 days of exposure to colistin/clarithromycin combinations. Although the colistin/heparin and colistin/clarithromycin/heparin combinations eradicated AB-1 within 3 days, the same combinations eradicated AB-19606 within 4 days.

Our catheter biofilms were not sterile within 4 days of exposure to 400× MIC tigecycline alone (Figure 1c and d). Although tigecycline/clarithromycin completely eradicated AB-1 within 48 h, the same solution reduced viability >5 log but failed to eradicate AB-19606 bacteria embedded in biofilms. Similarly, tigecycline/clarithromycin/heparin achieved eradication of the biofilm of AB-1 at 96 h, whereas this combination only achieved a >5 log reduction in viable bacteria in AB-19606 biofilms during 2–3 days of the lock period. The tigecycline/heparin combination did not eradicate AB-1 or AB-19606 biofilm bacteria within 4 days. However, bacterial viability in these two biofilms was significantly reduced by the combination compared with the control (P<0.05).

Two A. baumannii catheter biofilms were not eradicated by 400× MIC levofloxacin alone within 4 days of exposure (Figure 1e and f). Levofloxacin at 400× MIC could kill AB-19606 and AB-1 by >5 log at 72 and 96 h, respectively, compared with the control (P<0.05). Although A. baumannii AB-1 was successfully eradicated by levofloxacin/clarithromycin and levofloxacin/clarithromycin/heparin combinations at 72 h, the same strain was not eradicated by the levofloxacin/heparin combination. On the other hand, for AB-19606, a >5 log reduction was achieved with the combination of levofloxacin/clarithromycin at 72 h and an approx. 5 log reduction was achieved with levofloxacin/clarithromycin/heparin and levofloxacin/heparin within 3 days of the lock period compared with the control (P<0.05).

Discussion

Although CVCs are increasingly used to save lives in ICUs and to administer medicine and fluids,1 the use of CVCs may result in serious bloodstream infections. According to a clinical study by Krishnasami et al.,7 ALT was successful in achieving a clinical and bacteriological cure of dialysis CRB in 64.5% of patients, without requiring catheter replacement. Similarly, Fundeiras et al.14 suggested that ALT combined with a systemic antibiotic provided a 95% cure rate for 37 patients with Gram-negative bacteraemia.

According to our results, colistin alone was significantly more effective than tigecycline or levofloxacin for inhibiting A. baumannii organisms embedded in a biofilm (P<0.05). Colistin
at 400× MIC for a sufficient dwell time may be an option in catheters to prevent colonization and biofilm formation or to eliminate biofilm-embedded microorganisms. However, the use of tigecycline or levofloxacin alone might be associated with the regrowth of A. baumannii, so these drugs alone are not fully effective for preventing or eliminating the microbial burden of A. baumannii colonization in biofilms.

On the other hand, clarithromycin was found to be highly active in reducing A. baumannii colonization in biofilms on catheter segments compared with the control (P<0.05). Notably, clarithromycin was highly efficacious in enhancing the activities of all the antibiotics tested. These combinations involving clarithromycin acted more rapidly in reducing or eradicating both of the tested A. baumannii strains compared with the antibiotics tested alone. Figure 1 shows that colistin/clarithromycin killed biofilms of both A. baumannii strains within 2 days (3 days alone) and that tigecycline/clarithromycin and levofloxacin/clarithromycin could eradicate AB-1, which is an antimicrobial-resistant pathogen, within 2 and 3 days, respectively (no eradication when alone). Similarly, enhancement of the antibacterial activities of

![Figure 1. In vitro activity of ALT including the tested agents—colistin (CST), tigecycline (TGC), levofloxacin (LVX), clarithromycin (CLR) and heparin (HEP)—against biofilms formed by a representative strain of A. baumannii, AB-19606 (a, c and e), and a clinical strain of A. baumannii, AB-1, (b, d and f).](https://academic.oup.com/jac/article-abstract/68/4/827/702789)
other antibiotics when combined with clarithromycin has previously been demonstrated against *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Staphylococcus epidermidis* bacteria embedded in biofilms.\(^1\)\(^{15-17}\) Additionally, Kandemir et al.\(^1\)\(^{18}\) have shown that clarithromycin was the most common constituent of antibiotic combinations active against *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* in biofilms. Because this is the first investigation in which clarithromycin combinations were more effective in a lock solution to eradicate or reduce live cell numbers in biofilm formation in *A. baumannii* compared with the antibiotics used alone, additional studies are needed to investigate the mechanism of action of clarithromycin against *A. baumannii* biofilms.

Generally, ALT is used in conjunction with the administration of systemic antibacterial and/or anticoagulant agents to prevent thrombosis or obstruction of the catheter.\(^7\)\(^{19,20}\) However, bacteria such as staphylococci may survive and grow in heparin-locked catheters.\(^1\)\(^{19}\) We found that when heparin is included, combinations of colistin, tigecycline or levofloxacin were less effective than antibiotics used alone in ALT for *A. baumannii* biofilms (P > 0.05). On the other hand, because ALT use also increases the frequency of catheter thrombosis, we evaluated our three antibiotics in combination with a clarithromycin/heparin solution to assess the change in antimicrobial activity. Clarithromycin/heparin rarely reduced the antimicrobial effect of the antibiotics compared with when they were used alone. The interaction between the used antibiotics and heparin in catheter lock solutions needs to be evaluated in future studies.

In conclusion, colistin was significantly more active than tigecycline and levofloxacin against *A. baumannii* embedded in biofilms. Colistin, alone or in combination, eliminated and prevented the regrowth of organisms embedded in biofilms for 96 h and could be considered a most effective therapeutic option for the treatment or prevention of catheter-related infections due to *A. baumannii*.

Clarithromycin was highly effective when combined with the used antibiotics to reduce the number of live cells of *A. baumannii* in biofilms. Notably, clarithromycin was efficacious in enhancing the activities of all the antibiotics tested. Our in vitro model findings about these solutions warrant clinical trials to investigate their real role in the management of CRB.

**Funding**

This work was supported by a grant from the Research Fund of the University of Istanbul. Project number: 4566.

**Transparency declarations**

None to declare.

**References**