Increasing prevalence and diversity of ESBL/AmpC-type β-lactamase genes in Escherichia coli isolated from veal calves from 1997 to 2010

Joost Hordijk1,2*, Jaap A. Wagenaar1,2, Arjen van de Giessen3, Cindy Dierikx2, Alieda van Essen-Zandbergen2, Kees Veldman2, Arie Kant2 and Dik Mevius1,2

1Department of Infectious Diseases and Immunology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Utrecht University, PO Box 80.165, 3508 TD Utrecht, The Netherlands; 2Central Veterinary Institute (CVI), part of Wageningen UR, PO Box 65, 8200 AB Lelystad, The Netherlands; 3National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), Centre for Infectious Disease Control (CIb), PO Box 1, 3720 BA Bilthoven, The Netherlands

*Corresponding author. Tel: +31-30-2532459; E-mail: j.hordijk@uu.nl

Received 29 November 2012; returned 20 December 2012; revised 18 March 2013; accepted 20 March 2013

Objectives: Several studies on faecal carriage of extended-spectrum β-lactamase (ESBL)/AmpC-producing Escherichia coli have been performed in cattle, but little is known about faecal carriage in veal calves. This study describes the prevalence and molecular characteristics of ESBL/AmpC genes in E. coli isolated from faecal samples of veal calves from 1997 to 2010.

Methods: Pooled faecal samples were inoculated using selective enrichment broth and subsequently selective MacConkey agar. All isolates with reduced susceptibility to cefotaxime were screened by PCR and sequencing analysis for the presence of ESBL/AmpC genes.

Results: The prevalence of E. coli with reduced susceptibility to cefotaxime showed a discontinuous increasing trend, ranging from 4% in 1998 and 1999 to 39% in 2010. Promoter mutations of the chromosomal ampC gene were present in all years. In 2000, ESBL genes blaCTX-M-1, blaTEM-52 and blaTEM-20 were first observed. Before 2005 the majority of E. coli with reduced susceptibility to cefotaxime harboured ampC promoter mutations. From 2005 onwards the majority harboured blaCTX-M genes, of which blaCTX-M-1 was the most abundant, followed by blaCTX-M-14 and blaCTX-M-15. The diversity of blaCTX-M genes gradually increased from one variant in 2000 to six variants in 2010. The prevalence of blaTEM-52 was relatively low, but it was detected from 2000 onwards. blacMY and blASHV were found sporadically.

Conclusions: The prevalence and molecular diversity of genes encoding cefotaxime resistance in E. coli isolated from veal calves over a 14 year period showed an increasing trend. From 2005 onwards, blaCTX-M genes were most abundant, especially blaCTX-M-1.

Keywords: antimicrobial resistance, cattle, faecal carriage, retrospective

Introduction

Extended-spectrum cephalosporins (ESCs) are used in both human and veterinary medicine. Resistance to ESCs may lead to therapy failure and is therefore of great concern.1 Resistance to ESCs in Enterobacteriaceae is mainly caused by production of extended-spectrum β-lactamases (ESBLs) or AmpC β-lactamases.2

Faecal carriage of ESBL/AmpC-producing bacteria in cattle has been reported previously.3–6 However, cattle are kept for different purposes in livestock production. Dairy farms are predominantly closed production systems, while at veal calf farms virtually all animals originate from different farms. Also, the housing facilities, farm management and the lifespan of the animals differ greatly. Furthermore, dairy cattle are generally less exposed to antimicrobials.7 These differences may lead to differences in prevalence and epidemiology of ESBL/AmpC-producing bacteria. In particular, data on faecal carriage of ESBL/AmpC-producing bacteria in veal calves are limited. The aim of this study was to retrospectively determine the emergence, trends and molecular characteristics of cefotaxime-resistant Escherichia coli in faecal samples obtained from veal calves in the Netherlands from 1997 to 2010.

Materials and methods

Sampling design and method

Faecal samples were collected at farms by the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) from 1997 to 2010 to monitor zoonotic foodborne pathogens in food-producing animals.
Farms were randomly selected by the Foundation for Quality Guarantee of the Veal Sector (SKV), not taking animal age into account. On each farm one herd (a group of animals of similar age and maintained in the same open space) was sampled. Each faecal sample consisted of a fresh pooled sample of at least 100 g, picked from the floor equally distributed over the animal house. Samples collected from 1997 to 2005 were stored at the National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) in a 1:1 (w/v) suspension of faeces in tryptic soy broth with 30% glycerol at −80°C. Samples collected from 2006 to 2010 were stored at the Central Veterinary Institute (CVI) in a 10% (w/v) suspension of faeces in buffered peptone water with 30% glycerol at −20°C.

**Escherichia coli isolates**

Each faecal sample was inoculated in 1 mL of Luria–Bertani broth (Becton Dickinson) supplemented with 1 mg/L cefotaxime (Sigma–Aldrich, Germany) (LB+) using a sterile cotton swab and incubated overnight at 37°C. From these overnight cultures MacConkey agar plates (product number 212123, Becton Dickinson) supplemented with 1 mg/L cefotaxime (MC+) were inoculated and incubated overnight at 37°C. From each MC+ plate showing growth, one typical pink colony was selected for further analysis, and confirmed as *E. coli* by a check for tryptophan hydrolysis and subsequently by analysis on a MALDI Biotyper (Bruker Daltonics).

**ESBL/AmpC gene identification**

All isolates were screened by PCR and sequence analysis for the presence of *blaCTX-M*, *blaTEM*, *blaSHV*, and *blaCMY* and mutations in the promoter region of the chromosomally encoded *ampC* gene using primers and conditions as described previously.8 The isolates were also screened for *blaOXA* group 1, 2, and 10.9 All positive PCR products were sequenced using a Big Dye Terminator v1.1 cycle Sequencing Kit (Applied Biosystems, USA) with additional primers for *blaTEM* (TEM-Fseq, 5′-GCAACTTACCTTTGCAACG) and *blaCMY* (CMY-F-838, 5′-TGCCGTATTTGGCAGATGTA; CMY-R-857, 5′-TACATTGCACATAGCCCA). All sequences were analysed using Sequencher v4.9 (Gene Codes Corporation, USA) and BioNumerics v6.6 (Applied Maths, Belgium). All mutations in the promoter region of the chromosomally encoded *ampC* gene were identified as described by Mulvey et al.10 All isolates for which no ESBL/AmpC gene could be determined were screened on the Check-MDR CT-101 array platform (Check-Points, The Netherlands) according to the manufacturer’s protocol.

**Statistical analysis**

Prevalence data were analysed by a linear regression model with intercept and slope using the open source R statistics software.

**Results**

The prevalence of cefotaxime-resistant *E. coli* in both datasets (1997–2005 and 2006–10) showed a discontinuous increasing trend, ranging from 4% in 1998 and 1999 to 39% in 2010 (Table 1). A relatively high prevalence of ≥24% was observed in 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009 and 2010. In contrast, a relatively low prevalence of ≤10% was observed in 1997–99, in 2003 and in 2008. The first sample set (1997–2005) showed an increase of 3.6% per year (*P*= 0.004). The second set (2006–10) showed an increasing trend of 6% per year (*P*= 0.09).

The diversity of ESBL/AmpC genes isolated from veal calves from 1997 to 2010 gradually increased (Table 1). Both the number of gene families and the diversity within gene families increased. In all years from 1997 to 2010, promoter mutations of the chromosomal *ampC* gene were found. The most commonly found *ampC* promoter mutation was *ampC* type 3 (Table 1).

The vast majority of ESBL genes found in veal calves from 2000 onwards belonged to the *blaCTX-M* gene family (Table 1). In 2010, 65% of all isolates with non-wild-type cefotaxime susceptibility carried genes of the *blaCTX-M* gene family, of which *blaCTX-M1* was most abundant (39% of all non-wild-type isolates). Other resistance genes belonging to the gene families of *blaTEM*, *blaSHV* and *blaCMY* were found with a relatively low prevalence (Table 1).

In three isolates no ESBL/AmpC resistance gene could be determined. In these isolates, only the narrow-spectrum β-lactamase *blaOXA-1* was identified. Additional testing using the Check-MDR CT101 array also gave a negative result. These isolates were therefore designated ‘unknown’ (Table 1).

**Discussion**

This study showed an increase in the prevalence and molecular diversity of genes encoding cefotaxime resistance in *E. coli* from veal calves over a 14 year period. Since the two sets of faecal samples were stored under different conditions, we cannot fully exclude a possible bias between the two sets of samples.

To our knowledge, similar studies on faecal carriage covering a large number of years have not been performed in other countries. In contrast to other studies, we used an enrichment supplemented with cefotaxime to increase the sensitivity of the isolation method. Using different sampling methods and different populations (e.g. dairy cows, veal calves or a mixed population) makes comparing prevalence data rather difficult. The best comparable study was performed in Switzerland, where 63 calves (maximum of 2 per farm) were included in the study and sampled at slaughter in 2009, 2010 and 2011. In that study 25% of the faecal samples were positive for *blaCTX-M1* producing *E. coli*, using EE broth enrichment and subsequently Brilliance ESBL agar.11 This is similar to the prevalence we found in 2009. In contrast, the prevalence in other cattle (young cows, fattening bulls and bullocks) in this Swiss study was 1.6%, confirming the possible differences in prevalence between different kinds of cattle. Furthermore, in the UK in 2007–08, 7% of farms (mixed cattle population) that submitted faecal samples for diagnostic purposes were positive for *blaCTX-M1* producing *E. coli*.6 These samples were cultured on selective plates that did not include a selective enrichment broth. In Poland no ESBL/AmpC-producing *E. coli* were found in 2009 (no enrichment; agar supplemented with 2 mg/L cefotaxime; cattle not further specified).12 In a study performed in France in 2009, a prevalence of 5% was shown in a mixed population of healthy adults and diseased calves (ESBL screening agar supplemented with 4 mg/L cefotaxime or 4 mg/L ceftazidime).13

Mutations in the promoter region of the chromosomal *ampC* were found in all examined years (Table 1). All *ampC* variants except that from 2009 harboured mutations at one or more positions that have been previously described to cause a ‘strong’ promoter (−42, −32, −18, −11, −1, +17 to +37 or +58). Mutations at positions −42 and −32 are especially thought to have a large effect on promoter strength.14 Our data show that, of all mutations in the chromosomal *ampC*, *ampC* type 3
Table 1. ESBL/AmpC genes detected in E. coli isolated from faecal samples from veal calves

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aNumber and percentage of isolates with non-wild-type cefotaxime susceptibility harbouring this resistance gene.
bampC types are designated as described by Mulvey et al.10

cNo ESBL/AmpC gene was found; only the narrow-spectrum β-lactamase gene bla\_OXA-1 was identified.
dND, not defined, as described by Mulvey et al.10 All ND variants, except from 2007 and 2009, harboured a mutation at position –42 or –32. The following mutations were observed in the ND variants from 2007 and 2009: 2007, –18 G→A, –11 C→T, –1 C→T and +58 C→T; and 2009, +57 C→G.

eBased on the primers used in this study, no distinction could be made between these two variants.
was most abundant. This was similar to a Canadian study in which samples of human clinical origin were analysed. 10

This study also showed an increasing diversity in plasmid-mediated ESBL/AmpC gene families, as well as an increasing number of gene variants within a gene family (Table 1). The first ESBL genes in this study were found in 2000. These were \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M-1}}, \text{bla}_{\text{TEM-52}} \) and \( \text{bla}_{\text{TEM-20}} \). To our knowledge, in other countries \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M-1}} \) was not found in cattle until 2003. 15,16 Furthermore, \( \text{bla}_{\text{TEM-52}} \) was not reported in cattle until 2004, isolated from Danish cattle meat products imported from Germany, and \( \text{bla}_{\text{TEM-20}} \) was reported in cattle meat from Tunisia in 2007. 17,18 From 2007 to 2010 the vast majority of ESBLs in our study were \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M-1}} \), followed by either \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M-15}} \) in 2008 or \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M-14}} \) in 2009 and 2010. The high prevalence of these three \( \text{bla}_{\text{CTX-M}} \) gene variants is in agreement with what is found in cattle in the rest of Europe, as has been summarized by Ewers et al. 19 In contrast to the low prevalence of TEM ESBLs, TEM \( \beta \)-lactamases, especially \( \text{bla}_{\text{TEM-1}} \), were highly dispersed (not shown).

In summary, in the years 1997–2010 both the prevalence and the diversity of different ESBL/AmpC-producing \( E. \text{coli} \) in veal calves increased. Further research is required to assess transmission between animals in relation to the health risks for the animals themselves, and to assess the relative importance of the food transmission route towards humans.

Acknowledgements

We thank the research committee of the Task Force MRGA/MRSA for their constructive support for this project, and Dr Arno Swart (RIVM) for his statistical support. We also thank Dr Hans Kusters (University Medical Centre Utrecht) for facilitating analysis on the MALDI Biotyper. Furthermore, we would like to thank the NVWA for collecting the samples and SKV for the selection of farms.

Funding

This study was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs (projects 3201949 and WOT-01-002-03.02) and the Product Boards for Livestock and Meat (project 08.30.002).

Transparency declarations

None to declare.

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