

Emergence of plasmid-mediated colistin resistance mechanism MCR-1 in animals and human beings in China: a microbiological and molecular biological study

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Summary

Background

Until now, polymyxin resistance has involved chromosomal mutations but has never been reported via horizontal gene transfer. During a routine surveillance project on antimicrobial resistance in commensal *Escherichia coli* from food animals in China, a major increase of colistin resistance was observed. When an *E coli* strain, SHP45, possessing colistin resistance that could be transferred to another strain, was isolated from a pig, we conducted further analysis of possible plasmid-mediated polymyxin resistance. Herein, we report the emergence of the first plasmid-mediated polymyxin resistance mechanism, MCR-1, in Enterobacteriaceae.

Methods

The *mcr-1* gene in *E coli* strain SHP45 was identified by whole plasmid sequencing and subcloning. MCR-1 mechanistic studies were done with sequence comparisons, homology modelling, and electrospray ionisation mass spectrometry. The prevalence of *mcr-1* was investigated in *E coli* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* strains collected from five provinces between April, 2011, and November, 2014. The ability of MCR-1 to confer polymyxin resistance in vivo was examined in a murine thigh model.

Findings

Polymyxin resistance was shown to be singularly due to the plasmid-mediated *mcr-1* gene. The plasmid carrying *mcr-1* was mobilised to an *E coli* recipient at a frequency of 10^{-1} to 10^{-3} cells per recipient cell by conjugation, and maintained in *K pneumoniae* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. In an in-vivo model, production of MCR-1 negated the efficacy of colistin. MCR-1 is a member of the phosphoethanolamine transferase enzyme family, with expression in *E coli* resulting in the addition of phosphoethanolamine to lipid A. We observed *mcr-1* carriage in *E coli* isolates collected from 78 (15%) of 523 samples of raw meat and 166 (21%) of 804 animals during 2011–14, and 16 (1%) of 1322 samples from inpatients with infection.

Interpretation

The emergence of MCR-1 heralds the breach of the last group of antibiotics, polymyxins, by plasmid-mediated resistance. Although currently confined to China, MCR-1 is likely

to emulate other global resistance mechanisms such as NDM-1. Our findings emphasise the urgent need for coordinated global action in the fight against pan-drug-resistant Gram-negative bacteria.

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