Heterogeneous hydrolytic features for OXA-48-like β-lactamases

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Objectives: Carbapenem-hydrolysing class D β-lactamases of the OXA-48 type are increasingly reported from Enterobacteriaceae. β-Lactamase OXA-48 hydrolyses penicillins very efficiently, but carbapenems only weakly and spares broad-spectrum cephalosporins. Recently, diverse OXA-48-like β-lactamases have been identified worldwide (OXA-162, OXA-181, OXA-163, OXA-204 and OXA-232). They differ by few amino acid substitutions or by amino acid deletions.

Methods: blaOXA-48, blaOXA-162, blaOXA-163, blaOXA-181, blaOXA-204 and blaOXA-232 were cloned into the same expression vector and expressed in the same Escherichia coli background. Kinetic studies were performed with enzymes purified by ion-exchange chromatography. Determination of hydrolytic activities was performed by UV spectrophotometry. MICs were determined for all recombinant strains, using as background either the WT E. coli TOP10 strain or a porin-deficient E. coli strain.

Results: Kinetic studies showed that OXA-162 and OXA-204 shared the same hydrolytic properties as OXA-48. On the other hand, OXA-181 possessed a higher ability to hydrolyse carbapenems, while OXA-232 hydrolysed those substrates less efficiently. In contrast to the other OXA-48-like β-lactamases, OXA-163 hydrolysed broad-spectrum cephalosporins very efficiently, but did not possess significant carbapenemase activity. Although several of these OXA-48-like enzymes possess low activity against carbapenems, MICs of carbapenems were significantly elevated when determined for strains possessing permeability defects.

Conclusions: A detailed comparative analysis of the kinetic properties of the OXA-48-like β-lactamases is provided here. It clarifies the respective features of each OXA-48-like variant and their respective impacts in terms of carbapenem resistance.

Keywords: carbapenemases, class D β-lactamases, enzymatic activity

Introduction

The emerging mechanism of resistance to carbapenems in Enterobacteriaceae is related to the horizontal transfer of plasmid-mediated carbapenemase genes.2,3 Carbapenemases belong to the Ambler class A, B or D β-lactamases.2 OXA-48 and its derivatives are class D β-lactamases and have disseminated widely, but only in Enterobacteriaceae.2,3 They are widespread in particular in Europe, Africa and the Indian subcontinent.1 β-Lactamase OXA-48 hydrolyses penicillins at a high level and carbapenems at a low level, but spares expanded-spectrum cephalosporins such as ceftazidime.5 Due to these properties, OXA-48 producers may be either susceptible or resistant to broad-spectrum cephalosporins (additional production of an ESBL observed in 80% of strains6,7) and to carbapenems. Indeed, additional mechanisms such as permeability defects, efflux overproduction and high-level production of expanded-spectrum β-lactamases (AmpC and ESBLs) have been shown to confer reduced susceptibility to carbapenems when combined.3

Since the first identification of OXA-48,8 different variants have been reported, differing by few amino acid substitutions or deletions.5 Whereas some OXA-48-related enzymes such as OXA-48, OXA-162, OXA-181, OXA-204 and OXA-232 have been reported as conferring a very similar resistance pattern, OXA-163 (with a single amino acid substitution together with a four amino acid...
deletion compared with OXA-48) compromises the efficacy of broad-spectrum cephalosporins and hydrolyses carbapenems only marginally. From a biochemical point of view, these OXA-48-like β-lactamases have not been purified and analysed under the same conditions. This may create misleading interpretations when comparing the respective kinetic data, since values are known to vary under different experimental conditions (e.g., buffer content and concentration for hydrolysis assays, reaction temperature and type of UV spectrophotometer). Similarly, since expression of the different blaOXA-48-like genes has been evaluated using different cloning vectors and different Escherichia coli host strains, MIC interpretations might again be misleading when comparing the susceptibility of the different recombinant strains. Therefore, in order to gain further insights into the relative hydrolytic properties of these different variants, we designed a study aiming to clone and express in the same genetic background a series of blaOXA-48-like genes. Here, we evaluated the susceptibility of the corresponding recombinant clones to β-lactams, including temocillin, which is reported to be a good substrate of OXA-48 and therefore used as a marker for the detection of OXA-48-like producers. Additionally, the relative catalytic activities of purified enzymes and the performance of the Carba NP test were tested for these OXA-48-like β-lactamases.

Materials and methods

Bacterial strains

A series of clinical Klebsiella pneumoniae isolates harbouring blaOXA-48-like genes were used as templates. These isolates respectively harboured genes encoding OXA-162 (France, 2013),7 OXA-163 (Argentina, 2011),8 OXA-181 (France 2013),9 OXA-204 (France, 2013)10 and OXA-232 (India, 2012).11 These variants differed from OXA-48 by a single amino acid substitution or by amino acid deletions (Figure 1). E. coli TOP10 was used as a recipient strain for cloning and expressing the different blaOXA-48-like genes as described previously.12 In addition, E. coli HB4 lacking the major porins OmpF and OmpC was also used as a recipient strain to evaluate the relative impact of the expression of these genes in an E. coli reference strain with low-level outer membrane permeability.14

Cloning and expression of the blaOXA-48-like genes

The entire coding sequences of the β-lactamase genes (blaOXA-162, blaOXA-163, blaOXA-181, blaOXA-204, and blaOXA-232) were obtained by PCR amplification using primers OXA-48A (5′-TTGGTGGCATCGATTATCGG-3′) and OXA-48B (5′-GAGCACTTCTTTTGTGATGGC-3′) and then inserted into plasmid pCR®-Blunt II-TOPO® (Invitrogen, Illkirch, France) for the phenotypic studies and pET9a (Novagen, VWR International, Fontenay-sous-Bois, France) following the manufacturer’s recommendations. Recombinant plasmids obtained with pCR®-Blunt II-TOPO® were transformed into either E. coli strain TOP10 or E. coli strain HB4. The orientation of the respective inserts was checked by sequencing to ensure all genes were under the control of the P lac promoter. Recombinant plasmids constructed in plasmid pET9a (Stratagene, Amsterdam, the Netherlands) used as expression vector and then were transformed into E. coli strain BL21(DE3) (Novagen) following the manufacturer’s recommendations.

β-Lactamase purification

An overnight culture of E. coli strain BL21 harbouring pET9a-derived recombinant plasmids was used to inoculate 2 L of LB medium broth containing 50 mg/L kanamycin. Bacteria were cultured at 37°C until reaching

![Figure 1. Amino acid alignment of OXA-48 and six other variants. Dashes indicate identical residues among all amino acid sequences. Slashes indicate the absence of amino acids. Amino acid motifs that are well conserved among class D β-lactamases are indicated by boxes. Numbering is according to class D β-lactamase (DBL nomenclature).](http://doc.rero.ch)
Susceptibility testing

The susceptibility pattern was determined by the disc diffusion method and MICs by the microbroth dilution method. Results were interpreted according to CLSI guidelines. MICs were determined only for clones harbouring recombinant pCR plasmids and transformed into either E. coli TOP10 or E. coli HB4 strains.

Table 1. MICs of β-lactams

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**Impact of the OXA-48-like β-lactamas in a porin-deficient E. coli background**

Expression of the bla_{OXA-48}-like genes in *E. coli* HB4 gave rise to higher MICs of carbapenems compared with those MICs obtained for *E. coli* TOP10 (Table 1). Notably, production of OXA-163 increased the MIC of imipenem only slightly although those of other carbapenems, in particular ertapenem, increased more significantly. This result further confirms that OXA-163 is a very weak carbapenemase that does impact the activity of carbapenems only slightly in the absence of additional mechanisms of resistance.

Notably, despite conferring similar resistance patterns, discrepancies among the different OXA-48-like enzymes were highlighted here. For example, MICs of carbapenems were much higher for OXA-181 than for OXA-232 when produced in *E. coli* HB4 (128 versus 16 mg/L) (Table 1).

**Hydrolytic properties of OXA-48-like β-lactamas**

Kinetic studies were performed with purified OXA-48-like β-lactamas in order to compare their relative catalytic properties. The hydrolysis rates of purified OXA-162, OXA-181 and OXA-204 enzymes for all β-lactams tested were very similar to those obtained with OXA-48 (Table 2). These results are in accordance with MIC data showing very similar susceptibility patterns for the different *E. coli* clones producing OXA-48, OXA-162, OXA-181 and OXA-204, respectively (Table 2). Unlike other variants, OXA-232 had a catalytic activity for temocillin that was ~10-fold lower than that of OXA-48, while hydrolysis of temocillin by OXA-163 remained undetectable. The hydrolysis rates of carbapenems by OXA-232 were significantly lower than those obtained for OXA-48, OXA-162, OXA-181 and OXA-204 (Table 2).

Biochemical analysis of the hydrolytic properties of OXA-163 confirmed that it is an ESBL hydrolysing cefotaxime and ceftazidime efficiently, but carbapenems only marginally.

**Conclusions**

Several biochemical features of the different OXA-48-like β-lactamas were compared. The results showed that this group of enzymes, although being quite homogeneous in terms of protein sequence, is rather heterogeneous in terms of hydrolytic profile. Indeed, and as opposed to what was initially considered, this group of enzymes does not encompass only carbapenemas. It was shown that subtle amino acid changes may basically confer different substrate specificities, with some variants being either ESBLs or true carbapenemas. Therefore, detection of those genes encoding OXA-48-like enzymes possessing carbapenemase activities only cannot rely on PCR-based amplification of those genes only. Complete sequencing of the corresponding genes is therefore required to extrapolate the kinetic profile of the corresponding enzymes.

In addition, we showed here that additional non-enzymatic resistance mechanisms are required in order to achieve high MIC values of carbapenems for most OXA-48-like producers and that the resistance levels obtained in a porin-deficient *E. coli* background are variable depending on the nature of the OXA-48-like variant.

Additionally, we showed that high-level resistance to temocillin is not a common feature for all OXA-48-like producers.
However, resistance to carbapenems correlates well with the carbapenemase activity of these different enzymes. OXA-163 (without any significant carbapenemase activity) and OXA-232 (with weaker carbapenemase activity compared with other OXA-48-like enzymes) hydrolysed temocillin weakly and corresponding producers did not exhibit high MICs of that antibiotic. This suggests that detection and screening strategies based on temocillin resistance are valid for OXA-48-like enzymes with significant carbapenemase activity only. On the other hand, the Carba NP test\(^{16}\) is an excellent tool for evaluating the carbapenemase activity of these OXA-48-like enzymes.

**Funding**

This work was funded by a grant from the INSERM (UMR914), by the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) and by a grant from ANR (ANR-10-LABX-33) as members of the Laboratory of Excellence LERMIT.

**Transparency declarations**

An international patent form for the Carba NP test has been deposited on behalf of INSERM Transfert (Paris, France).

**References**