Cetacean Morbillivirus and *Toxoplasma gondii* Co-infection in Mediterranean Monk Seal Pup, Italy

Antonio Petrella, Sandro Mazzariol, Iolanda Padalino, Gabriella Di Francesco, Cristina Casalone, Carla Grattarola, Giovanni Di Guardo, Camilla Smoglica, Cinzia Centelleghe, Claudia Gili

Author affiliations: Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Puglia e della Basilicata, Foggia, Italy (A. Petrella, I. Padalino); University of Padova, Padua, Italy (S. Mazzariol, C. Centelleghe); Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale dell’Abruzzo e del Molise, Teramo, Italy (G. Di Francesco); Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale del Piemonte, Liguria e Valle d’Aosta, Turin, Italy (C. Casalone, C. Grattarola); University of Teramo Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Teramo (G. Di Guardo, C. Smoglica); Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn, Naples, Italy (C. Gili)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2704.204131

A Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) pup from the southern Adriatic coast of Italy showed cetacean morbillivirus (CeMV) and disseminated *Toxoplasma gondii* co-infection, which probably resulted from CeMV-induced immunosuppression. These findings are of concern for the conservation of this critically endangered species.
accession no. MH430938.1): the brain fragment (GenBank accession no. MW266078) was 397 bp long and was 98.25% homologous; the lung fragment (GenBank accession no. MW266077), 402 bp long, was 98.5% homologous; and the spleen fragment (GenBank accession no. MW266079), 152 bp long, was 99.3% homologous. In addition, we detected biomolecular positivity for *T. gondii* in skeletal muscle and lymph nodes, which supports immunohistochemical evidence.

Co-infections by morbilliviruses and *T. gondii* are well known among terrestrial and aquatic mammals, yet they have been rarely described in pinnipeds. Seals are known to be susceptible to CDV as well as to phocine distemper virus (7). CeMV infection has also been reported in monk and harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) (6). In 1997, half of the Mediterranean monk seals inhabiting the shores of Mauritania died and were found to have been infected with a CeMV-like agent; a similar virus was subsequently identified in a few monk seals from Greek waters (6). The cause of the die-off in 1997 remains unclear; biotoxins were also detected in dead seals (8).

The meningoencephalitic and pneumonic lesions found in the monk seal we investigated could also be associated with severe infection by *T. gondii*. Indeed, *T. gondii*–associated deaths have been reported as a significant threat to the health and conservation of Hawaiian monk seals (*Neomonachus schauinslandii*) (9). In the Mediterranean region, no similar cases have been previously reported other than in cetaceans, in which *T. gondii* has been recognized as a possible cause of death either alone or in association with CeMV (6).

Previous *T. gondii* infection seems a plausible explanation for a subsequently acquired CeMV infection causing immunosuppression that led to disseminated toxoplasmosis. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that CeMV acted as a primary pathogen. Previous reports of CeMV in Hawaiian monk seals, coupled with putative vertical transmission of *T. gondii*, indicate the need for careful evaluation of *T. gondii* and CeMV as potential threats to the health and conservation of Mediterranean monk seals. We recommend adequate and thorough seroepidemiologic and postmortem pathologic surveillance to assess the real risk posed by these 2 pathogens (10). An ad hoc infectious risk analysis protocol would enable investigators to address CeMV and *T. gondii* infections either separately or in combination by developing specific immunization protocols, such as those successfully employed on the Hawaiian monk seal population.

**Acknowledgments**

We thank the Italian National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA) for the support in the logistic operations before, during, and after necropsy.

**About the Author**

Dr. Petrella is a veterinary pathologist in the diagnostic laboratory of the Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Puglia e Basilicata, Foggia, Italy, and serves as the regional focal point for the Italian Stranding Network. His research interests include investigations on stranded marine vertebrates.

**References**

1. Karamanlidis AA, Dendrinos P, Larrinoa PF, Gücü AC, Johnson WM, Kirac CO, et al. The Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus*: status, biology, threats, and conservation priorities. Mammal Rev. 2016;46:92–105. https://doi.org/10.1111/mam.12053

2. Centelleghe C, Belfagna G, Zanetti R, Zappulli V, Di Guardo G, Mazzariol S. Molecular analysis of dolphin morbillivirus: a new sensitive detection method based on nested RT-PCR. J Virol Methods. 2016;235:85–91. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jviromet.2016.05.005

3. Belfagna G, Centelleghe C, Franzeo G, Di Guardo G, Mazzariol S. Genomic and structural investigation on dolphin morbillivirus (DMV) in Mediterranean fin whales (*Balaenoptera physalus*). Sci Rep. 2017;7:41554. https://doi.org/10.1038/srep41554
Increased Likelihood of Detecting Ebola Virus RNA in Semen by Using Sample Pelleting

Courtney M. Bozman, Mosoka Fallah, Michael C. Sneller, Catherine Freeman, Lawrence S. Fakoli III, Bode I. Shobayo, Bonnie Dighero-Kemp, Cavan S. Reilly, Jens H. Kuhn, Fatorma Bolay, Elizabeth Higgs, Lisa E. Hensley

Author affiliations: National Institutes of Health, Frederick, Maryland, USA (C.M. Bozman, B. Dighero-Kemp, J.H. Kuhn, L.E. Hensley); National Public Health Institute of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia (M. Fallah, Freeman, L.S. Fakoli III, B.I. Shobayo, F. Bolay); National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland, USA (M.C. Sneller, E. Higgs); University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA (C.S. Reilly)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2704.204175

Ebola virus RNA can reside for months or years in semen of survivors of Ebola virus disease and is probably associated with increased risk for cryptic sexual transmission of the virus. A modified protocol resulted in increased detection of Ebola virus RNA in semen and improved disease surveillance.

During 2013–2016, Ebola virus (EBOV; family Filoviridae, genus Ebola virus, species Zaire ebolavirus) caused an unprecedented outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD) that began in Guinea and subsequently affected Liberia, Sierra Leone, and, to a much lesser degree, several other countries in West Africa. Due in part to the lack of medical infrastructure and response preparedness in these countries, the outbreak ultimately involved 28,652 human infections and 11,325 deaths (1,2).

The large number of EVD survivors enabled detailed studies, such as the Partnership for Research on Ebola Virus (PREVAIL) III study (3), which aimed at characterizing potential EVD sequelae and EBOV persistence in a cohort of 1,144 EVD survivors in Liberia over the course of 5 years. An unexpected observation of these studies was the persistence of EBOV RNA and sometimes-replicating EBOV in the brain, eyes, and semen of survivors (4). EBOV RNA persistence in semen of EVD survivors, measurable up to 40 months (3,5), has been associated with rare events of sexual EBOV transmission and EVD outbreak flareups (6).

Assuming a causal relationship between EBOV RNA and EBOV presence in semen, we collaborated with the overseas response team to initiate an ongoing (and unpublished) trial, PREVAIL IV, to counter sexual EBOV transmission from survivors through reduction of viral RNA concentrations in semen by using the candidate medical countermeasure remdesivir. However, interpretation of data obtained in studies such as PREVAIL IV is crucially dependent on the sensitivity of EBOV RNA detection in semen samples.

The GeneXpert Systems (Cepheid, https://www.cepheid.com) are diagnostic platforms that implement single-use cartridges to simultaneously extract and detect RNA by using reverse transcription PCR. During PREVAIL III (3), the GeneXpert IV System was applied to standard processing of EBOV survivor semen...