NDM-Producing Enterobacteriaceae Strains among Hospitals in Brasília, Brazil

Abstract

Carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CRE) strains have spread worldwide frequently driven by clonal spread. Additionally, plasmid-borne carbapenemase genes (blaNDM and blaOXA-48) have broadened the variability of species expressing resistance to carbapenems. This study aimed to characterize the susceptibility profile and bla genes in CRE strains recovered between 2012 and early 2014 in hospitals in Brasília, Brazil. Eighty-eight CRE strains recovered from 19 medical settings were analyzed. Klebsiella pneumoniae positive for blaNDM accounted for the most of the CRE isolates (n=47; 53.4%). Seven blaNDM-positive strains (including K. pneumonia, n=4; Proteus mirabilis, n=1; Escherichia coli, n=1; and Providencia rettgeri, n=1) were recovered from patients in six hospitals. The first detected blaNDM-positive strain was P. rettgeri. Thereafter, blaNDM-positive K. pneumoniae strains showing indistinguishable Random Amplified Polymorphic DNA (RAPD) profiles were recovered in three hospitals. The susceptibility profile of blaNDM-positive K. pneumoniae strains was commonly restricted to amikacin, aztreonam and tigecycline. These data highlighted the emergence of blaNDM-positive K. pneumoniae strains marked by a single RAPD type among hospitals in Brasília, Brazil.

Keywords: NDM-producing strains; Carbapenemase; Klebsiella pneumonia; Metallo-β-lactamase

Introduction

The resistance to carbapenems has become a serious worldwide public health issue since the early 2000’s [1]. In that time, the world spread of Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase (KPC)-producing strains was supported by the predominance of a well-adapted clone of K. pneumoniae (ST258) among hospitals around the world. Moreover, the blaNDM gene became easily mobilized by conjugal plasmids among Enterobacteria species [2]. NDM-1 (New Delhi metallo-β-lactamase-1) is the most recently discovered molecular class B β-lactamase encoded on transferable, plasmid-borne genes (blaNDM) [3]. The hydrolysis mechanism of NDM relies on the interactions between β-lactam molecules and zinc ions in the enzyme’s active site. Therefore, NDM enzymes are inhibited by zinc-chelating agents such as EDTA [4]. NDM can hydrolyze all β-lactam antibiotics (penicillins, cephalosporins and carbapenems), excepting monobactams [3]. Additionally, most NDM-positive strains are broadly resistant to other antibiotic classes, and carry a wide diversity of resistance mechanisms against other antibiotics, such as aminoglycosides and fluoroquinolones, rendering these strains extremely resistant to the available treatments [1]. NDM-1 was first described in K. pneumoniae and Escherichia coli strains isolated in Sweden in 2008 from an Indian patient who had been transferred from a hospital in New Delhi, India [5]. Nowadays, NDM has also been detected in a broad variety of other Enterobacteriaceae species including K. oxytoca, Proteus mirabilis, Enterobacter cloacae, Citrobacter freundii and Providencia spp as well as in aerobic bacilli such as Pseudomonas spp. and Stenotrophomonas spp. [3]. This wide distribution of the blaNDM gene reflects its association with promiscuous plasmids [6]. Regardless the purposes, whether medical or otherwise, international travels have played a significant role in the dissemination of NDM producers, given that, most of the first reports on NDM-positive strains were epidemiologically linked to travels to Indian and Pakistani regions [7]. In Brazil, the first NDM-producing strain was isolated in 2013 in the South region state, Rio Grande do Sul [8]. Beside blaKPC and blaNDM other carbapenemase genes, such as blaVIM, blaIMP and blaOXA-48 have been reported in Enterobacteria world-wide, including in Brazil. However, these carbapenemase genes have not been associated with large spreads or epidemic events [9].

The aim of this study was to define the profile of carbapenemase genes in CRE strains assessing whether NDM-producing strains have reached hospitals in Brasília, the federal capital of Brazil. Moreover, the study evaluated the role of bacterial clones in spreading of blaNDM among hospital.

Materials and Methods

From 2012 to 2014, a regional surveillance program was conducted by the Public Health Laboratory (LACEN-DF) in order to assess carbapenem resistance in Enterobacteriaceae isolates recovered from hospitals in Brasilia. We have identified 88 carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae (CRE) strains recovered from patients attended in nineteen medical centers. Identification and antimicrobial susceptibility tests were accomplished using...
The emergence of CRE species has increased in response to the demand on old or outdated antibiotics [16]. In this scenario, the increasing interest in colistin (polymyxin) as an evaluable treatment has driven the emergence of species intrinsically resistant to colistin including Proteus spp., Serratia spp., Morganella spp. and Providencia spp. [17]. In our study, intrinsically colistin-resistant strains accounted for 9.0% of the CRE isolates and they included S. marcescens (n=4/88; 4.5%), P. mirabilis (n=3/88; 3.4%) and P. rettgeri (n=1/88; 1.1%).

In relation to carbapenemerase genes, bla_{KPC} was the most frequently detected gene in the tested CRE strains (n=59/88; 67.0%), followed by bla_{NDM} (n=7/88; 8.0%). Additionally, carbapenemase genes with minor epidemiological relevance were also tested (bla_{KPC} and bla_{ bla_{OXA-48}}, but they were not detected among the CRE isolates. Focusing on NDM genes, we firstly isolated a bla_{NDM}-positive P. rettgeri strain from a necrotic ulcer affecting a 75-year-old male patient in May 2013. The patient had received treatment in two hospitals, both located in Brasilia, and had not reported travelling abroad in the six previous years. The P. rettgeri strain showed in vitro resistance to all tested antimicrobial agents with the exception of gentamicin. The sequence analysis (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool) of the bla_{NDM} amplicon showed an identity of 100% (435/435 base-pairs) with previous reported bla_{NDM}-positive genes (GeneBank Number: KJ150691.1). Additionally, two distinct bands of plasmid DNA were found in the P. rettgeri strain (data not shown). PCR assays carried out with purified plasmid DNA showed that bla_{NDM} gene was located on the high-molecular-weight plasmid (molecular weight >50 Kb). Interestingly, Carvalho-Assel et al. [8] also recovered a NDM-producing P. rettgeri strain from a diabetic foot infection in early 2013, but differently, the bla_{NDM} gene was chromosomally integrated.

Thereafter the first detection of bla_{NDM} six other bla_{NDM}-positive strains (K. pneumoniae, n=4; P. mirabilis, n=1; E. coli, n=1) were isolated in three hospitals. All isolates were resistant to β-lactams (with exception of aztreonam and cefotetan), quinolones, nitrofurantoin and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole; and showed variable susceptibility profiles against aminoglycosides, tetracycline and tigecycline (Table 1). Interestingly, all NDM-producing strains showed negative results for the carbapenemase expression assay MHT. However, NDM-producing strains are positive in the EDTA test confirming the production of metallo-β-lactamas (Table 1). Negative or weakly positive results in MHT have been already reported for NDM-producing strains [18]. However, these findings are worrisome once phenotypic detection of carbapenemase in MHT is recommended for the clinical microbiology laboratories as epidemiological screening assay for detection of CRE isolates [10].

Four strains of NDM-producing K. pneumoniae were isolated from patients treated in three hospitals; therefore, it was tested if these strains were clonally unrelated as commonly reported for bla_{NDM}-positive strains [19-21]. However, all NDM-producing K. pneumoniae strains tested in this study were considered as genetically indistinguishable on RAPD analyses, showing the same amplified polymorphic DNA pattern (Figure 1B & 1C). Two of these strains were isolated from two patients (patients 2 and 3) assisted in the same hospital (hospital B), warning for the possibility of cross infections (Table 1 & Figure 1). The other two clonal strains of K. pneumoniae were isolated from two patients (patients 5 and 6) treated in two different hospitals (hospital C and D) (Table 1 & Figure 1). Moreover, because of a prolonged colonization period (2 months and 10 days) with bla_{NDM}-positive strains (K. pneumoniae and E. coli), the patient 6 had the opportunity of transmitting two NDM-producing enterobacterial species into two different hospitals (Table 1). Additionally, the isolation of different bacterial species positive for bla_{NDM} from the patient 6 (Table 1) endorses the idea of the promiscuous nature of mobile genetic elements carrying bla_{NDM} genes [3]. These findings reinforce the role of patient transfer in spreading NDM-producing bacteria among hospitals [22], and endorses the need of rapid communication that alerts about the presence of infected or colonized patients with NDM-producing strains in Brazilian hospitals.
Figure 1: Distribution of cases of NDM-producing Enterobacteriaceae strains in Brasília and genetic relatedness of blaNDM-producing K. pneumoniae strains. A) Geographic distribution of the occurrence of NDM-producing strains. Symbols: Stars correspond to the cases associated with blaNDM-positive K. pneumoniae (small star - 1 case; large star - 2 cases). Circles indicate cases associated with other blaNDM-positive strains (Providencia rettgeri, P. mirabilis and Escherichia coli). B) RAPD profiles of the carbapenem-resistant K. pneumoniae strains. blaNDM-positive K. pneumoniae showed the same RAPD profile (samples 8-11) and were named KPBSB clone. Sample 1, K. pneumoniae IOC4955; sample 2, K. pneumoniae ATCC700603; samples 3 to 7 and 12 blaKPC-positive strains isolated in different hospitals in Brasília (enrolled to examine the discriminatory power of the RAPD assay); samples 8 and 9, blaNDM-positive strains isolated in hospital B; sample 10, blaNDM-positive strain isolated in hospital D; and, sample 11, blaNDM-positive strain isolated in hospital C. C) Dendrogram of the RAPD profiles as analyzed with PyElph software system (version 2.6.5). (see description of figure 1B for sample consultation).
As occurs in Brasília, Brazilian hospitals have frequently reported outbreaks involving CRE strains mainly associated with \( \text{bla}_{\text{KPC}} \)-positive \( K. \text{pneumoniae} \) strains belonging to the clonal complex 258 (ST 11) [23,24]. The clone ST11 of \( K. \text{pneumoniae} \) has been characterized for causing large outbreaks [25], and has also been responsible for spreading \( \text{bla}_{\text{NDM}} \) gene in Greece [26]. Taken together, these data warn about the possibility of a worst-case scenario, in which, the epidemic clone ST11 would acquire the \( \text{bla}_{\text{NDM}} \) gene and spread among Brazilian hospital.

**Conclusion**

Hospitals in Brazil have reported the isolation of several species of CRE positive for \( \text{bla}_{\text{KPC}} \) and, more recently, for \( \text{bla}_{\text{NDM}} \) as well. Additionally, the initial spread of \( \text{bla}_{\text{NDM}} \)-positive \( K. \text{pneumoniae} \) strains has been driven by a single clone. Our findings suggest that \( \text{bla}_{\text{NDM}} \)-positive strains are been transported among hospitals by inpatient transfers and that they are spreading throughout patient cross infections. Finally, the present results call for an improved surveillance on inpatient transfers, for the molecular detection of CRE strains, and for enforcements in infection control measures.

**Conflict of Interest**

All authors declare to have no conflict of interest.

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