Short Communication

LEPTOTROMBIDIUM DELIENSE INFESTATION IN DOMESTIC DOGS FROM INDIA, A VECTOR OF SCRUB TYPHUS: A CASE REPORT

G. E. Chethan1*, Kalyan Sarma1, Nikitasha Bora1, H. V. Manjunathachar2$, Neeraj Thakur3, Snehil Gupta4, Champak Deka1, S. N. Chaithra5, Vijayakumar Jawalagatti6, J. B. Rajesh1, Kuldeep Dhama7

ABSTRACT: Scrub typhus is a vector-borne, zoonotic disease caused by Orientia tsutsugamushi. Several members of the genus Leptotrombidium have gained importance due to their potential role as vectors as well as reservoirs for O. tsutsugamushi. The larvae of Leptotrombidium species are primary parasites of ground-dwelling rodents. However, changes in climate, host specificity makes them to adapt to other animals and play a role in the perpetuation of various (re)-emerging pathogens between animals and humans. Two male mongrel dogs aged six months were presented to the College of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry, Central Agricultural University, Mizoram, India with a history of skin lesions and intense pruritus. Routine skin scraping examination of samples revealed the presence of Leptotrombidium deliense larvae. Considering the public health importance of L. deliense infestation, an attempt was made to screen the dogs for O. tsutsugamushi and other haemoprotozoans. Microscopic and molecular tests were negative for haemoprotozoan parasites and O. tsutsugamushi, respectively. Both the dogs were successfully treated with parenteral ivermectin and topical fipronil spray.

Key words: Leptotrombidium deliense, Scrub typhus, Dogs, India, Orientia tsutsugamushi.

Leptotrombidium is the infestation caused by the larval stages of ectoparasites from Trombiculidae family. Trombiculids, also known as berry bugs, scrub-itch mites, harvest mites, or chigger mites, are generally primary parasites of ground-dwelling rodents. However, due to climatic variations and other ecological factors, several infestation cases have been reported in other vertebrate animals like deer, cat and humans from different regions of the world (Santibáñez et al. 2015, Ramilo et al. 2019). Leptotrombidium deliense is a species of chigger mite belonging to the family Trombuculidae. The life cycle of L. deliense consists of 7 stages (Fig. 1); only the larval stage is parasitic on warm-blooded mammals (Lv et al. 2018). This chigger mite acts as a potent vector for zoonotic Gram-negative bacteria Orientia tsutsugamushi, which causes scrub typhus, the second most common febrile disease next to malaria that is posing a serious public health concern in many parts of the Asia-Pacific regions, threatening nearly one billion people globally with one million new cases being reported annually (Xu et al. 2015, Ramilo et al. 2019).
et al. 2017, Lv et al. 2018, Crecelius and Burnett 2020). In India, several states have encountered outbreaks of scrub typhus and its associated mortality in humans (Gill et al. 2017, Banerjee and Kulkarni 2021, Manjunathachar et al. 2021). Increase in vector population is directly related to the increase in the number of scrub typhus cases. Furthermore, high rainfall and humidity provide a conducive climate for vector propagation in Northeast India.

Mizoram is a Northeast state of India which falls within the high rainfall zone and the climate varies from subtropical to alpine. The average state rainfall is 254 cm per annum (https://des.mizoram.gov.in/uploads/attachments/08c05856c0c242a40870ed28fdadc342/pages-200-meteorological-data-of-mizoram-2020-converted.pdf). Scrub typhus, a vector borne disease is considered as one of the major public health issues in the state due to its associated mortality in humans (Lalrinkima et al. 2017, Lalchhandama 2018, Lalthazuali et al. 2020). To the best of our knowledge upon literature search, there are no reports of L. deliense infestation in dogs from India. Hence, we report for the first time an infestation of L. deliense in domestic dogs from Mizoram, India. With an interest, an attempt was made to screen the dog samples to explore any host role of dogs in relation to the occurrence of scrub typhus in human beings.

The study
Clinical examination and sampling of animals
A dog owner aged 30 years with a family size of five members having history of fever for 3-4 days presented two male mongrel dogs aged six months to the Teaching Veterinary Clinical Complex, College of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry, Central Agricultural University, Selesih, Aizawl, Mizoram, India. The dogs were presented with a history of skin lesions along with intense pruritus for three weeks. Similar clinical signs had been noticed previously in October and November before presentation. Physical examination of animals revealed the presence of crusts, erythematous, papular and pustular lesions on the body. The lesions were more pronounced on the dorsal aspect of head, ventral abdomen, inguinal region and limbs (Fig. 2). Superficial and deep skin scrapings were done from lesions with the help of scalpel blade and the wandering mite larvae on animal body were collected. Approximately 4.0 mL of blood sample was collected from each dog by venipuncture of the cephalic vein for molecular and haematological examinations. The blood without anticoagulant was allowed to clot and centrifuged at 2000 rpm for 10 min at 4°C to separate serum, and the serum was used for the analysis of biochemical parameters. As a routine examination, vital parameters of the animals were also recorded. Since the dog owner was suffering with fever, she was advised to visit physician to rule out the possibility of scrub typhus.

Microscopic and molecular analysis
The skin scraping samples collected were processed with 10% potassium hydroxide (KOH) and observed under the microscope for presence of external parasites (Pereira et al. 2012). The microscopic examination of skin scraping samples revealed the presence of trombiculid mite larvae. The larvae were confirmed as L. deliense based on morphological characteristic traits such as oval-shaped idiosoma, red ocelli on each side of rectangular scutum and five plumose setae on scutum (Fig. 3) as described earlier (Lv et al. 2018). The peripheral blood smears were prepared on clean grease free glass slides and fixed with methanol for 1 min. The smears were stained with Giemsa stain as per the standard procedure and examined under oil immersion objective for haemoproteozoon parasites (Jain 1986). The collected mite larvae (twenty five) from two dogs were pooled and made into five samples for downstream process. Genomic DNA was extracted from pooled mite samples and blood samples of dogs using DNA Sure Mini Kit (GENETIX, India) as per the manufacture’s protocol with slight modifications. Amplification of 56 kDa gene of O. tsutsugamushi was carried out by using two sets of primers. For primary polymerase chain reaction (PCR), forward- 5’ATTGCTAGTGCAATGTCTGC3’ and
reverse-5’CTGCTGCTGCTTGTGCTGC3’ primers pair was used. For secondary PCR, forward-5’CCTCAGCCTACTATAATGCC3’ and reverse-5’CGACAGATGCACTATTAGGC3’ primers pair was used. The primary PCR was carried out in a 20 µL reaction mixture containing 5 µL template, 2 µL of 10X Taq Buffer, 2 mM MgCl₂, 4 mM of dNTPs mixture, 0.4 µL each 10 pmol/mL primer (forward and reverse primer), 1 U of Taq DNA polymerase (Bangalore Genei, India) and the volume was made up to 20 µL by adding nuclease free water (Manjunathachar et al. 2021).

**Haematological and serum biochemical analysis**

Haematological parameters such as total erythrocyte count (TEC), packed cell volume (PCV), haemoglobin (Hb), mean corpuscular volume (MCV), mean corpuscular haemoglobin (MCH), and mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration (MCHC), total leukocyte count (TLC) and total platelet count were measured by using a semi-automated blood cell counter (MS4-e, France) as per manufacturer’s instructions. Differential leukocyte count (DLC) was performed manually as per the method described earlier (Jain 1986). Serum biochemical parameters such as total protein, albumin, alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), blood urea nitrogen (BUN) and creatinine were estimated as per manufacturer’s instructions by using commercially available kits (Coral Clinical Systems, Goa, India). Serum globulin level was derived from the serum total protein and serum albumin concentrations using Fried-Wald’s equation. Both haematological and serum biochemical parameters were evaluated before and after the treatment period, and values were compared.

**Analysis of the results**

Trombiculosis is a neglected and under-reported ectoparasitosis characterized by intense pruritic dermatitis. In the present study, both the dogs were showing severe signs of pruritic dermatitis and the microscopic examination of skin scraping samples revealed the presence of *L. deliense* larvae (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 2. Day 0: Presence of crusts, erythematous, papular and pustular lesions on head, ventral aspect of abdomen, inguinal region and limbs, Day 28: Completely healed skin lesions on the head, ventral aspect of abdomen, inguinal region and limbs.](image-url)
Around 25 larvae were harvested from two dogs. Six legged larvae are responsible for the several clinical signs such as acute dermatitis with intense irritation (Giannoulopoulos et al. 2012). In trombiculid mite infested animals, erythema, macules, papules, vesicles, wheals, scales, crusts and nodules with or without pruritus are typically found in body areas (head, ear pinnae, ventral abdomen, perineum and legs) which are in close contact with soil and vegetation (Ramírez et al. 2009, Giannoulopoulos et al. 2012).

Surveillance of sentinel animals to detect and monitor the circulation of pathogens in the environment and other biological threats is a globally established method (Halliday 2010). Rodents are used as a sentinel animal for few important diseases including plague. Dogs own a special place as pets and companion animals, both in developed and developing countries and they share the same environment with owners, co-exposed to the same arthropod vectors and pathogens. Canine seroprevalence studies are easier to conduct than rodent studies because dogs live in close proximity to humans, are easy to identify and access, and sampling is simple and can be replicated for follow-up studies. Hence, dogs can be used as suitable sentinel animals for the detection of zoonotic pathogens, such as the plague pathogen (Halliday 2010, Hilborn and Beasley 2015, Neo and Tan 2017). Recently, Tay et al. (2013) demonstrated that the owners who have close contact with dogs and other pets were more likely to be exposed to the O. tsutsugamushi and concluded that dogs may serve as transport hosts for infected chigger mites, increasing the risk of scrub typhus in their owners. Following confirmation of L. deliense infestation in dogs, the blood samples were screened for haemoproteozoan parasites and O. tsutsugamushi. The pooled mite samples were also processed for the detection of O. tsutsugamushi.

Microscopic and 56 kDa gene-based PCR tests were negative for haemoproteozoan parasites and O. tsutsugamushi, respectively. In addition to this, the dog owner and family members were also negative for anti-Orientia IgM antibodies using a rapid immunochromatographic test (ImmuneMed scrub typhus rapid test kit, South Korea) as well as for IgM ELISA (InBios International, Inc.). Dogs are also susceptible to O. tsutsugamushi infection and their suitability to gain insight into human exposure has been suggested in previous reports from endemic areas in Asia (Huxsoll et al. 1977, Nanayakkara et al. 2013). Because of their susceptibility, dogs may play an important role in O. tsutsugamushi life cycle (Namikawa et al. 2014). India is considered as one of the key hotspots in the ‘tsutsugamushi triangle’ (Lalrinkima et al. 2017, Elliott et al. 2019). Hence, in order to clearly depict the role of dogs in scrub typhus epidemiology, planned comprehensive investigations are needed, particularly in endemic states of India.

The haemogram revealed slight eosinophilia in both affected dogs while the serum biochemical parameters were all within normal range. Eosinophilia in affected dogs could be due to hypersensitivity reaction to the mite. Chigger mites induce various degrees of inflammatory reactions in the form of hypersensitivity and bacterial infections in affected animals and humans (Giannoulopoulos et al. 2012). The larva of L. deliense attaches to the moist skin of the host by means of its sharp mouth parts (chelicerae) and develops a characteristic feeding tube (stylostome) to feed on lymph, tissue fluid and blood of host (Lv et al. 2018, Elliott et al. 2019). Clusters of allergens including trypsin-like serine protease, papain-like cysteine protease, enolase have been found in L. deliense which may be associated with pruritic dermatitis and eosinophilia (Dong et al. 2018).

The dogs were treated with parenteral ivermectin at 200 µg/Kg body weight, subcutaneously, once in every two weeks; topical fipronil spray, once in a week; omega 3 and omega 6 fatty acids syrup at 5 mL/10 kg body weight, orally, twice a day, for four weeks; chlorhexidine gluconate spray (0.25% w/v) for topical application, twice a day; and cetirizine at 0.5 mg/Kg body weight, orally, twice a day, for one week. Moreover, the owner was advised to keep the dogs confined to a clean indoor environment. Dogs showed improvement in the condition after one week of therapy. The complete recovery from skin lesions was noticed after four weeks and the subsequent skin scraping examination was negative for L. deliense infestation. Two more skin scraping

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**Fig. 3. Demonstration of Leptotrombidium deliense larvae by microscopic examination of skin scraping samples.**
examinations were performed at a two weeks interval to rule out *L. deliense* re-infestation. The following regime of treatment was undertaken due to recurrence of pruritus and symptoms of allergic dermatitis in dogs. Ivermectin and fipronil have been used successfully in the management of trombiculid mite induced dermatitis in dogs and cats (Giannoulopoulos et al. 2012, Ramilo et al. 2019, Sharun et al. 2019). The dogs were supplemented with polyunsaturated fatty acids (omega 3 and 6 fatty acids), which help to preserve cell membrane fluidity, flexibility and functionality, and are required for the biosynthesis of intercellular lipids in the stratum corneum layer of skin (Thakur et al. 2019). Cetrizine was given to combat the hypersensitivity reaction due to larval feeding.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report of *L. deliense* infestation in domestic dogs from India. Since this was only a preliminary investigation and India is one of the hot spots under ‘tsutsugamushi triangle’, further studies are essential to explore the implications of our findings and to find the role of dogs as transport or sentinel animals for *O. tsutsugamushi* pathogen in India.

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