Bacterial bile duct colonization in perihilar cholangiocarcinoma and its clinical significance

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Abdominal infections including cholangitis represent a major problem in patients with perihilar cholangiocarcinoma (pCCA). Thus, we investigated bacterial colonization of the bile ducts and determined its impact on postoperative outcome focusing on abdominal infections. A cohort of 95 pCCA patients who underwent surgery between 2010 and 2019 with available intraoperative microbial bile cultures were analyzed regarding bile duct colonization and postoperative abdominal infection by group comparisons and logistic regressions. 84.2% (80/95) showed bacterial colonization of the bile ducts and 54.7% (52/95) developed postoperative abdominal infections. *Enterococcus faecalis* (38.8%, 31/80), *Enterococcus faecium* (32.5%, 26/80), *Enterobacter cloacae* (16.3%, 13/80) and *Escherichia coli* (11.3%, 9/80) were the most common bacteria colonizing the bile ducts and *Enterococcus faecium* (71.2%, 37/52), *Enterococcus faecalis* (30.8%, 16/52), *Enterobacter cloacae* (25.0%, 13/52) and *Escherichia coli* (19.2%, 10/52) the most common causes of postoperative abdominal infection. Further, reduced susceptibility to perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis (OR = 10.10, \( p = .007 \)) was identified as independent predictor of postoperative abdominal infection. Bacterial colonization is common in pCCA patients and reduced susceptibility of the bacteria to the intraoperative antibiotic prophylaxis is an independent predictor of postoperative abdominal infections. Adapting antibiotic prophylaxis might therefore have the potential to improve surgical outcome pCCA patients.

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**Abbreviations**

ALT  Alanine aminotransferase  
AP  Alkaline phosphatase  
ASA  American society of anesthesiologists  
AST  Aspartate aminotransferase  
BMI  Body mass index  
CCI  Comprehensive complication index  
CI  Confidence interval  
CRP  C reactive protein  
CT  Computed tomography  
CUSA  Cavitron ultrasonic surgical aspirator  
EBD  Endoscopic biliary drainage  
ERCP  Endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography  
FFP  Fresh frozen plasma  
FLR  Future liver remnant  
GGT  Gamma glutamyltransferase  
INR  International normalized ratio  
MRCP  Magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography  
PBD  Percutaneous biliary drainage  
pCCA  Perihilar cholangiocarcinoma

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Perihilar cholangiocarcinoma (pCCA) is the second most common primary liver tumor and associated with a dismal overall oncological prognosis and high perioperative morbidity and mortality\(^6\)\(^,\)\(^8\)\(^–\)\(^10\). Extensive liver resection with radical lymphadenectomy and vascular resection is the current gold standard for the treatment of patients with resectable disease showing encouraging survival rates up to 60% after 5 years in various selected cohorts\(^4\)\(^–\)\(^6\). In contrast, palliative treatment modalities such as systemic chemotherapy result in a significantly inferior oncological outcome\(^7\). However, due to its direct proximity to major vascular structures of the liver hilus, surgical therapy of pCCA patients remains challenging and often displays significant perioperative mortality rates exceeding 10%\(^6\)\(^,\)\(^8\)\(^–\)\(^10\).

Thus, we here aimed to investigate bacterial bile duct colonization in a large European cohort of pCCA patients and determine its impact on the perioperative outcome focusing on abdominal infections.

### Material and methods

**Patients**. Between 2010 and 2019, all surgically treated patients with localized pCCA at the University Hospital RWTH Aachen (UH-RWTH) with available information on bile duct colonization from intraoperative sampling were included in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. The study was conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board of the RWTH-Aachen University (EK 114/20), the current version of the Declaration of Helsinki, and the good clinical practice guidelines (ICH-GCP). All clinical data were prospectively collected and entered in an institutional database.

**Staging and surgical technique.** All pCCA patients who were referred to our institution for surgical treatment underwent a detailed clinical work-up as previously described\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^10\). In brief, the decision for surgery as primary treatment and the specific surgical procedure was made by an experienced hepatobiliary surgeon and approved by the local interdisciplinary tumor board in all cases. The specific tumor anatomy was assessed by endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) or magnetic resonance cholangiopancreatography (MRCP), while the vascular anatomy at the liver hilum was assessed by multiphase computed tomography (CT). Our preoperative work-up included unilateral stenting strategy as standard of care to relieve the future liver remnant (FLR) from cholestasis and bilateral stenting in cases with persisting cholangitis. Endoscopic biliary drainage (EBD) was generally preferred over percutaneous biliary drainage (PBD). In patients with insufficient FLR (<40%) scheduled for right-sided hepatectomy, a right portal vein embolization (PVE) was conducted 2–4 weeks before surgery. Prior to skin incision, the patients received a single shot antibiotic prophylaxis with cefuroxime and metronidazole in accordance with common guidelines for the prevention of surgical site infections\(^9\)

The surgical procedure was carried out as previously described by Neuhaus et al.\(^5\)\(^,\)\(^6\)\(^,\)\(^8\)\(^,\)\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^10\). Briefly, a "no-touch" hilar en-bloc resection approach, as defined by liver resection with mandatory portal vein reconstruction, was carried out in all cases and additional arterial resection or the concomitant resection of the pancreatic head (hepatoduodenopancreatectomy) on demand (Table 1). The actual parenchymal transection was carried out using the Cavitron Ultrasonic Surgical Aspirator (CUSA) with low central venous pressure. The extrahepatic bile ducts and the bile duct bifurcation is removed en-bloc with the liver specimen during parenchymal transection exposing the bile ducts to the FLR at the resection surface. A swab sample of the bile ducts for microbiological testing is immediately taken by the attending surgeon. Afterwards, biliary reconstruction was achieved by an end-to-side hepaticojejunostomy comprising an open hand-sewn anastomosis technique followed by a Roux-en-Y reconstruction. All surgical specimens were evaluated by an experienced board-certified staff pathologist regarding pathological characteristics according to current national guidelines, WHO- and UICC-classifications.

**Microbiological analysis.** Intraoperative bile samples were cultured in liquid media and on routine solid growth media for 18–48 h. Liquid cultures with signs of bacterial growth were subcultured on solid growth media. Bacterial isolates were identified by MALDI TOF mass spectrometric analysis (MALDI Biotyper, Bruker, Bremen, Germany) and antibiotic resistance was determined using an automated microdilution method (Vitek 2, bioMerieux, Nürtingen, Germany).

**Statistical analysis.** Data derived from categorical data were presented in the form of numbers and percentages and tested for statistical difference using the chi-squared test, linear-by-linear association or fisher’s exact test in accordance to scale and number count. Continuous variables were presented as median and interquartile range and compared by the Mann–Whitney-U-Test. The associations of abdominal infections with...
## Demographics

| Parameter                      | Value               |
|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Gender, m/f (%)                | 71 (74.7)/24 (25.3) |
| Age (years)                    | 69 (56–73)          |
| BMI (kg/m²)                    | 25 (23–29)          |
| Portal vein embolization, n (%)| 43 (45.3)           |
| ASA, n (%)                     |                     |
| I                              | 5 (5.3)             |
| II                             | 36 (37.9)           |
| III                            | 51 (53.7)           |
| IV                             | 3 (3.2)             |
| V                              | 0                   |
| Bismuth type, n (%)            |                     |
| I                              | 4 (4.2)             |
| II                             | 10 (10.5)           |
| IIa                            | 29 (30.5)           |
| IIlb                           | 19 (20.0)           |
| IV                             | 33 (34.7)           |
| EBD, n (%)                     | 82 (86.3)           |
| PBD, n (%)                     | 26 (27.4)           |
| Preoperative cholangitis, n (%)| 32 (33.7)           |

## Preoperative liver function

| Parameter                  | Value               |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Albumin (g/dl)             | 36.9 (29.8–41.0)    |
| AST (U/l)                  | 45 (34–64)          |
| ALT (U/l)                  | 60 (35–99)          |
| GGT (U/l)                  | 380 (186–753)       |
| Total bilirubin (mg/dl)    | 1.14 (0.62–2.43)    |
| Platelet count (×/ul)      | 298 (227–392)       |
| Alkaline Phosphatase (U/l) | 245 (159–396)       |
| Prothrombine time (%)      | 95 (81–103)         |
| INR                        | 1.04 (0.97–1.13)    |
| Hemoglobin (g/dl)          | 12.3 (11.3–13.3)    |
| CRP (mg/dl)                | 16 (8–37)           |

## General operative data

| Parameter                        | Value               |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Laparoscopic resection, n (%)    | 0                   |
| Operative time (min)             | 439 (360–505)       |
| Operative procedure, n (%)       |                     |
| Left hepatectomy                 | 8 (8.4)             |
| Extended left hepatectomy        | 26 (27.4)           |
| Left trisectionectomy            | 4 (4.2)             |
| Right hepatectomy                | 13 (13.7)           |
| Extended right hepatectomy       | 17 (17.9)           |
| Right trisectionectomy           | 26 (27.4)           |
| Concomitant pancreatic resection, n (%) | 7 (7.4) |
| Portal vein reconstruction, n (%)| 95 (100)            |
| Arterial resection, n (%)        | 5 (5.3)             |
| Intraoperative blood transfusion (units) | 0 (0–2) |
| Intraoperative FFP (units)       | 3 (0–4)             |

## Microbiological data

| Parameter                         | Value               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Preoperative antibiotics, n (%)   | 42 (44.2)           |
| Antibiotic type, n (%)            |                     |
| Ciprofloxacin                     | 28 (66.7)           |
| Piperacillin/tazobactam           | 6 (14.3)            |
| Others                            | 8 (19.0)            |
| Perioperative prophylaxis, n (%)  | 95 (100.0)          |
| Prophylaxis type, n (%)           |                     |
| Cefuroxime/Metronidazole          | 95 (100.0)          |
| Bacterial bile duct colonization, n (%) | 80 (84.2) |

Continued
Most common bacteria, n (%)  

| Bacteria                      | n   | (%)  |
|-------------------------------|-----|------|
| Enterococcus faecalis         | 31  | 38.8 |
| Enterococcus faecium          | 26  | 32.5 |
| Enterobacter cloacae          | 13  | 16.3 |
| Escherichia coli              | 9   | 11.3 |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae         | 6   | 7.5  |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis    | 6   | 7.5  |
| Klebsiella oxytoca            | 5   | 6.3  |
| Hafnia alvei                  | 4   | 5.0  |
| Citrobacter freundii          | 4   | 5.0  |

Susceptibility to preoperative antibiotics, n (%)  

| Antibiotics                | n   | (%)  |
|----------------------------|-----|------|
| Enterococcus faecalis      | 37  | 71.2 |
| Enterococcus faecalis      | 16  | 30.8 |
| Enterobacter cloacae       | 13  | 25.0 |
| Escherichia coli           | 10  | 19.2 |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae      | 9   | 17.3 |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis | 5   | 9.6  |
| Klebsiella oxytoca         | 3   | 5.8  |

Table 1. Clinical and microbiological characteristics (n = 95). Data presented as median and interquartile range if not noted otherwise. ALT alanine aminotransferase, ASA American society of anesthesiologists classification, AST aspartate aminotransferase, BMI body mass index, CRP c-reactive protein, EBD endoscopic biliary drainage, FFP fresh frozen plasma, GGT gamma glutamyltransferase, INR international normalized ratio, PBD percutaneous biliary drainage, PVE portal vein embolization.

Results

**Patient cohort.** A total of 127 patients underwent curative-intent surgery for pCCA at our institution between 2010 and 2019. As intraoperative bile sampling was not performed in every patient, only 95 individuals were included in the statistical analysis. This cohort consisted of 71 men (74.7%) and 24 women (31.5%) with a median age of 69 (range 56–73) years and median body mass index (BMI) of 25 (range 23–29). The majority of tumors were classified as Bismuth Type III or IV (85.3%, 81/95) and the majority of patients as ASA III or higher (56.9%, 54/95). Preoperative cholangitis was observed in 33.7% (32/95) of the cohort. EBD was performed in 86.3% (82/95) and PBD in 27.4% (26/95) in of the cases prior to surgery. Mandatory portal venous resection and reconstruction was carried out in all patients (95/95), while additional arterial reconstruction was conducted in 5.3% (5/95) and the concomitant resection of the pancreatic head in 7.4% (7/95) of the cases. Major morbidity defined as complications ≥ Clavien-Dindo IIIb was observed in 50.5% (48/95) and 30-day mortality in 14.7% (14/95) of the patients. The 90-day mortality and in-hospital mortality were 17.9% (17/95) and 19.2% (18/95) in the study cohort with available intraoperative bile cultures (n = 95), while the in-hospital mortality was 15.7% (20/127) in the overall patient cohort (n = 127). More demographic and clinical characteristics of the cohort are presented in Table 1.
Bacterial bile duct colonization and bacterial isolates of postoperative abdominal infections. Prior to surgery, 44.2% (45/95) of the patients received antibiotics as treatment or prophylaxis for cholangitis with ciprofloxacin representing the most frequently administered agent (66.7%, 28/41). Bacterial bile duct colonization as determined by intraoperative sampling was present in the vast majority of patients (84.5%, 80/95). The most commonly detected bacterial species were Enterococcus faecalis (38.8%, 31/80), Enterococcus faecium (32.5%, 26/80), Enterobacter cloacae (16.3%, 13/80), Escherichia coli (11.3%, 9/80), Klebsiella pneumoniae (7.8%, 6/80), Enterobacter cloacae (7.8%, 6/80), Staphylococcus epidermidis (7.5%, 6/80), Klebsiella oxytoca (6.3%, 5/80), Hafnia alvei (5.0%, 4/80) and Citrobacter freundii (5.0%, 4/80). Notably, only a minor fraction of the bacterial isolates was susceptible to the preoperatively administered antibiotic (22.2%, 8/36) and to our standard perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis (12.5%, 10/80) (Table 1).

Microbiologically confirmed postoperative abdominal infections were observed in 54.7% (52/95) with Enterococcus faecalis (71.2%, 37/52), Enterococcus faecalis (30.8%, 16/52), Enterobacter cloacae (25.0%, 13/52), Escherichia coli (19.2%, 10/52), Klebsiella pneumoniae (17.3%, 9/52), Staphylococcus epidermidis (9.6%, 5/52), Klebsiella oxytoca (5.8%, 3/52) and Serratia marcescens (5.8%, 3/52) being the most commonly identified causative agents (Table 1). We further calculated a bile duct origin rate—defined as the presence of a specific bacterial species in the bile duct prior to surgery associated with a postoperative abdominal infection—as 94.5% (18/19) for Enterococcus faecalis, 75.0% (3/4) for Klebsiella pneumoniae, 71.4% (5/7) for Escherichia coli, 61.1% (11/18) for Enterococcus faecalis and 55.6% (5/9) Enterobacter cloacae (Table 6). More details regarding bacterial colonization and postoperative abdominal infections also by less frequently observed bacterial isolates are outlined in Tables 1 and 6.

Association of bacterial colonization with clinical parameters. Next, we performed a group comparison between patients with (n = 80) and without bacterial bile duct colonization (n = 15) at the time of surgery. No difference regarding gender (p = 0.247), age (p = 0.846) and BMI (p = 0.988) were observed. Patients with bacterial colonization had a significantly higher rate of prior EBD (91.3%, 73/80) compared to patients without bacterial colonization (60.0%, 9/15, p = 0.001). Also, preoperative cholangitis occurred more frequently in patients with colonized bile ducts (37.5%, 30/80) compared to patients without (15.3%, 2/15) but this difference did not reach statistical significance (p = 0.069). No difference was detected in the use of perioperative antibiotics between both groups (45.0% (36/80) vs. 40.0% (6/15), p = 0.720). While postoperative complications were observed with similar frequency (50.0% (40/80) vs. 53.3% (8/15), p = 0.813), a higher but statistically non-significant rate of 30-day mortality was observed in patients with bacterial colonization (16.3%, 13/80) in contrast to patients without bacterial colonization (6.7%, 1/15, p = 0.337). More details are shown in Table 2.

Association of postoperative abdominal infections with clinical characteristics. Another group comparison was carried out between patients with (n = 52) and without (n = 43) abdominal infections. Similarly, no difference regarding gender (p = 0.067), age (p = 0.662) and BMI (p = 0.593) was observed. No association was detected with preoperative cholangitis (p = 0.822), the utilization of preoperative antibiotics (p = 0.675) or bacterial bile duct colonization (p = 0.494) as well as these bacterial susceptibility to preoperatively administered antibiotics (p = 0.588). In contrast, susceptibility of the identified bacteria to the standard periperaoperative antibiotic regimen was more common in patients without postoperative abdominal infections (22.9% (8/43) vs. 4.4% (2/52), p = 0.013). Of note, other postoperative infections (pneumonia etc.) were more frequently observed in patients who already displayed abdominal infections (7.0% (3/43) vs. 28.8% (15/52), p = 0.007). Intensive care (p = 0.001) and hospital stay (p = 0.001) was longer and major postoperative complications were more common (30.2% (13/43) vs. 67.3% (35/52), p = 0.001) in patients with abdominal infections. Perioperative mortality was likewise higher in patients with abdominal infections (9.4% (4/43) vs.19.2% (10/52) but this difference did not reach statistical significance (p = 0.174). More details are presented in Table 3.

Univariate and multivariable analysis of postoperative abdominal infections. To determine predictors of abdominal infection logistic regression analyses were carried out. In univariate analysis, PVE (OR = 3.81, p = 0.002), right-sided hepatectomy (OR = 3.62, p = 0.004), intraoperative blood transfusions (OR = 3.69, p = 0.003), bile duct colonization by Enterococcus faecium (OR = 2.96, p = 0.031) and reduced susceptibility to perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis (OR = 6.37, p = 0.025) were associated with postoperative abdominal infections. All variables with a p value < 0.1 were subsequently analyzed in a multivariable model. Here, PVE (OR = 3.59, p = 0.015) and reduced susceptibility to the antibiotics administered as perioperative prophylaxis (OR = 10.10, p = 0.007) were identified as independent predictors of postoperative infection (Table 4).

Antibiotic susceptibility of preoperatively colonizing bacteria. Finally, we compared the antibiotic susceptibility of the bacterial bile duct isolates with the standard perioperative antibiotic regimen. While only 12.5% (10/80) of the bile duct colonizing bacterial isolates were susceptible to the standard perioperative antibiotic agent cefuroxime, 75.0% (60/80) were susceptible to a combination of ceftriaxone and vancomycin (Table 5).

Discussion

Radical surgery is the therapeutic mainstay in pCCA as it displays superior oncological outcome compared to palliative treatment modalities. Therefore, improving the perioperative outcome of patients undergoing major hepatic resection for pCCA would significantly improve their overall outcome. While preoperative cholangitis has previously been identified as an independent predictor of an adverse outcome, the incidence of bacterial bile duct colonization and its impact on the clinical management and outcome have not been determined.
|                                | Bacterial colonization (n = 80) | No bacterial colonization (n = 15) | p value |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Gender, m/f (%)                | 58 (72.5)/22 (27.5)           | 13 (86.7)/2 (13.3)                | .247    |
| Age (years)                    | 69 (56–73)                    | 67 (55–73)                        | .846    |
| BMI (kg/m²)                    | 25 (22–29)                    | 25 (23–27)                        | .988    |
| Portal vein embolization, n (%)| 35 (43.8)                     | 8 (53.3)                          | .494    |
| ASA, n (%)                     |                               |                                   | .426    |
| I                              | 5 (6.3)                       | 0                                 |         |
| II                             | 28 (35.0)                     | 8 (53.3)                          |         |
| III                            | 44 (55.0)                     | 7 (46.7)                          |         |
| IV                             | 3 (3.8)                       | 0                                 |         |
| V                              | 0                             | 0                                 |         |
| Bismuth type, n (%)            |                               |                                   | .095    |
| I                              | 2 (2.5)                       | 2 (13.3)                          |         |
| II                             | 8 (10.0)                      | 2 (13.3)                          |         |
| IIIa                           | 22 (27.5)                     | 7 (46.7)                          |         |
| IIIb                           | 17 (21.3)                     | 2 (13.3)                          |         |
| IV                             | 31 (38.8)                     | 2 (13.3)                          |         |
| EBD, n (%)                     | 73 (91.3)                     | 9 (60.0)                          | .001    |
| PBD, n (%)                     | 23 (28.8)                     | 3 (20.0)                          | .485    |
| Preoperative cholangitis, n (%)| 30 (37.5)                     | 2 (13.3)                          | .069    |
| Preoperative antibiotics, n (%)| 36 (45.0)                     | 6 (40.0)                          | .720    |
| Antibiotic type, n (%)         |                               |                                   | .990    |
| Ciprofloxacin                  | 23 (63.9)                     | 5 (83.3)                          |         |
| Piperacillin/tazobactam        | 5 (13.9)                      | 1 (16.7)                          |         |
| Others                         | 8 (22.2)                      | 0                                 |         |
| Bacterial bile duct colonization, n (%) | 80 (100) | 0 |         |
| Most common bacteria, n (%)    | n. a                          |                                   |         |
| Enterococcus faecalis          | 31 (38.8)                     |                                   |         |
| Enterococcus faecium           | 26 (32.5)                     |                                   |         |
| Enterobacter cloacae           | 13 (16.3)                     |                                   |         |
| Escherichia coli               | 9 (11.3)                      |                                   |         |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae          | 6 (7.5)                       |                                   |         |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis     | 6 (7.5)                       |                                   |         |
| Klebsiella oxytoca             | 5 (6.3)                       |                                   |         |
| Hafnia alvei                   | 4 (5.0)                       |                                   |         |
| Citrobacter freundii           | 4 (5.0)                       |                                   |         |
| Susceptibility to preoperative antibiotics, n (%) | 8 (25.0) | n. a |         |
| Susceptibility to applied perioperative antibiotics, n (%) | 10 (12.5) | n. a |         |
| Postoperative abdominal infections, n (%) | 45 (56.3) | 7 (46.7) | .494    |
| Other postoperative infections, n (%) | 17 (21.3) | 1 (14.3) | .186    |
| Abdominal infections bacteria, n (%) |                                   |                                   |         |
| Enterococcus faecium           | 32 (71.1)                     | 5 (71.4)                          | .986    |
| Enterococcus faecalis          | 12 (28.7)                     | 4 (57.1)                          | .104    |
| Enterobacter cloacae           | 12 (26.7)                     | 1 (14.3)                          | .482    |
| Escherichia coli               | 9 (20.0)                      | 1 (14.3)                          | .721    |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae          | 7 (15.6)                      | 2 (28.6)                          | .397    |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis     | 4 (8.9)                       | 1 (14.3)                          | .652    |
| Klebsiella oxytoca             | 3 (6.7)                       | 0                                 | .482    |
| Serratia marcescens            | 1 (2.2)                       | 2 (28.6)                          | .005    |
| Intensive care, days           | 2 (1–9)                       | 2 (1–4)                           | .715    |
| Hospitalization, days          | 22 (13–41)                    | 18 (21–31)                        | .345    |
| Postoperative complications, n (%) |                                   |                                   | .813    |
| Clavien–Dindo ≤ IIIa           | 40 (50.0)                     | 7 (46.7)                          |         |
| Clavien–Dindo ≥ IIIb           | 40 (50.0)                     | 8 (53.3)                          |         |
| 30-day mortality, n (%)        | 13 (16.3)                     | 1 (6.7)                           | .337    |
clinical conditions. The microbiological findings of our patients are in line with these heterogeneous cohorts.

Acute cholangitis and not the exploration of bacterial bile duct colonization and its impact on the subsequent focus has been the choice of the empirical antibiotic therapy with respect to the common bacterial spectrum of biliary drainage, the same group observed an analogous microbial spectrum and indicated that postoperative infections which was not the case in our study. However, the main research focus has been the choice of the empirical antibiotic therapy with respect to the common bacterial spectrum of acute cholangitis and not the exploration of bacterial bile duct colonization and its impact on the subsequent surgical intervention. Also, in comparison to our present analysis of pCCA patients, most previous reports have included a rather heterogeneous patient cohort including a broad range of different biliary tract diseases and clinical conditions. The microbiological findings of our patients are in line with these heterogeneous cohorts with Enterococcus spp. being the most relevant gram-positive bacteria and Enterobacter cloacae, Escherichia coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae representing the most common gram-negative bacterial isolates. Interestingly, gram-negative bacteria appeared clinically more relevant in these previous reports as they showed a higher likelihood to be also detected in blood cultures. In our patient cohort, gram-positive bacteria, particularly Enterococcus faecium, seemed to have a major clinical importance since preoperative colonization with Enterococcus faecium was associated with a significantly increased risk of postoperative abdominal infection in our univariate analysis (Table 4). Also, gram-positive bacteria were more commonly detected as causative agents of postoperative abdominal infections in these patients with Enterococcus faecium being isolated in 71.2% of all abdominal infections compared to Enterobacter cloacae as the most frequent gram-negative bacterium in only 25.0% of all abdominal infections (Table 1). These results demonstrate notable differences in the clinical significance of bacterial isolates in cholangitis in general and postoperative abdominal infections after surgical resection of pCCA in particular.

Of note, the only available comparable studies to our report, though on the basis of Asian patients, heterogeneous tumor entities and significantly different clinical management and objectives, have been published from the Nagoya group. Sugawara et al. have shown in a randomized-controlled that a two-day and four-day postoperative administration of antimicrobial prophylaxis results in the same clinical outcome. As a secondary finding in this study, preoperative bile cultures were colonized mostly with Enterococcus species, followed by Klebsiella species and Enterobacter species which was similar to our findings and does further underline the importance of gram-positive bacteria in pCCA. In another retrospective cohort study focusing on the role of preoperative biliary drainage, the same group observed an analogous microbial spectrum and indicated that postoperative infections might display the same bacteria as previously detected in preoperative bile samples. Interestingly, preoperative biliary colonization was observed in 84% of all patients comparable with our data, but was also associated with an increased risk of postoperative infections which was not the case in our study. However, the interesting findings of both studies are not transferable to our setting as they included a significant proportion of patients with gallbladder cancer, other malignancies and benign strictures, focused on preoperative bile samples instead of intraoperatively obtained swap samples and most importantly, conducted a different perioperative strategy regarding antibiotics among other differences in clinical management (e.g. use of nasobiliary drainage etc.). In the large retrospective cohort study of Sugawara et al., postoperative antibiotic prophylaxis was used for at least 3 days after operation, even in cases without preoperative bacterial colonization, while this approach was not conducted in our cohort. Further, susceptibility of the cultivated bile samples to the intraoperatively applied antibiotics was not reported in this study.

As already mentioned above, the vast majority of our patients presented with bacterial colonization of the bile ducts at the time of surgery (Table 1). The most likely explanation for this is the high number of endoscopic interventions in pCCA patients prior to definitive surgery to achieve biliary decompression of the FLR. Bilary endoprostheses are a known risk factor for bacterial cholangitis and notability associated with a higher risk of Enterococcus faecium colonization. This observation was confirmed in our analysis as a biliary plastic stent in situ placed by EBD was significantly more common in patients with bacterial colonization compared to patients without bacterial colonization at the time of surgery. However, we were not able to identify other differences in clinical characteristics between patients with and without bacterial colonization. In particular, while preoperative cholangitis showed a tendency to be more common in patients with bile duct colonization, we observed no difference in the preoperative antibiotic use between individuals with and without bacterial colonization.

Major surgery required for radical resection of pCCA is often associated with significant morbidity and increased perioperative mortality. In our particular cohort the 30-day mortality was 14.7% and major
|                                | Abdominal infection (n = 52) | No abdominal infection (n = 43) | p value |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------|
| Gender, m/f (%)                | 35 (67.3)/17 (32.7)          | 36 (83.7)/7 (16.3)             | .067    |
| Age (years)                    | 69 (57–74)                   | 65 (56–72)                     | .662    |
| BMI (kg/m²)                    | 25 (23–29)                   | 26 (23–30)                     | .593    |
| Portal vein embolization, n (%)| 31 (59.6)                    | 12 (27.9)                      | .002    |
| ASA, n (%)                     |                              |                                 | .872    |
| I                              | 3 (5.8)                      | 2 (4.7)                        |         |
| II                             | 21 (40.4)                    | 15 (34.9)                      |         |
| III                            | 26 (50.0)                    | 25 (58.1)                      |         |
| IV                             | 2 (3.8)                      | 1 (2.3)                        |         |
| Bismuth type, n (%)            |                              |                                 | .001    |
| I                              | 2 (3.8)                      | 2 (4.7)                        |         |
| II                             | 2 (3.8)                      | 8 (18.6)                       |         |
| IIIa                           | 23 (44.2)                    | 6 (14.0)                       |         |
| IIIb                           | 4 (7.7)                      | 15 (34.9)                      |         |
| IV                             | 21 (40.4)                    | 12 (27.9)                      |         |
| EBD, n (%)                     | 45 (86.5)                    | 37 (86.0)                      | .945    |
| PBD, n (%)                     | 16 (30.9)                    | 10 (23.3)                      | .414    |
| Preoperative cholangitis, n (%)| 17 (32.7)                    | 15 (34.9)                      | .822    |
| Preoperative antibiotics, n (%)| 24 (46.2)                    | 18 (41.9)                      | .675    |
| Antibiotic type, n (%)         |                              |                                 |         |
| Ciprofloxacin                  | 18 (75.0)                    | 10 (55.6)                      |         |
| Piperacillin/tazobactam        | 2 (8.3)                      | 4 (22.2)                       |         |
| Others                         | 4 (16.7)                     | 4 (22.2)                       |         |
| Bacterial bile duct colonization, n (%) | 45 (86.5) | 35 (81.4)                     | .494    |
| Most common bacteria, n (%)    |                              |                                 |         |
| Enterococcus faecalis          | 18 (40.0)                    | 13 (37.1)                      | .795    |
| Enterococcus faecium           | 19 (42.2)                    | 7 (20.0)                       | .035    |
| Enterobacter cloacae           | 9 (20.0)                     | 4 (11.4)                       | .303    |
| Escherichia coli               | 7 (15.6)                     | 2 (5.7)                        | .167    |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae          | 4 (8.9)                      | 2 (5.7)                        | .593    |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis     | 3 (6.7)                      | 3 (8.6)                        | .741    |
| Klebsiella oxytoca             | 2 (4.4)                      | 3 (8.6)                        | .449    |
| Hafnia alvei                   | 1 (2.2)                      | 1 (2.9)                        | .438    |
| Citrobacter freundii           | 2 (4.4)                      | 2 (5.7)                        | .796    |
| Susceptibility to preoperative antibiotics, n (%) | 4 (16.7) | 4 (26.6)                      | .588    |
| Susceptibility to applied perioperative antibiotics, n (%) | 2 (4.4) | 8 (22.9)                      | .013    |
| Postoperative abdominal infections, n (%) | 52 (100) | 0                             |         |
| Other postoperative infections, n (%) | 15 (28.8) | 3 (7.0)                       | .007    |
| Abdominal infections bacteria, n (%) | n. a                        |                                 |         |
| Enterococcus faecium           | 37 (71.2)                    |                                |         |
| Enterococcus faecalis          | 16 (30.8)                    |                                |         |
| Enterobacter cloacae           | 13 (25.0)                    |                                |         |
| Escherichia coli               | 10 (19.2)                    |                                |         |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae          | 9 (17.3)                     |                                |         |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis     | 5 (9.6)                      |                                |         |
| Klebsiella oxytoca             | 3 (5.8)                      |                                |         |
| Serratia marcescens            | 3 (5.8)                      |                                |         |
| Intensive care, days           | 3 (2–3)                      | 1 (1–2)                        | .001    |
| Hospitalization, days          | 32 (21–52)                   | 13 (11–19)                     | .001    |
| Postoperative complications, n (%) |                            |                                 |         |
| Clavien–Dindo ≤ IIIa           | 17 (32.7)                    | 30 (69.8)                      | .001    |
| Clavien–Dindo ≥ IIIb           | 35 (67.3)                    | 13 (30.2)                      |         |
| 30-day mortality, n (%)        | 10 (19.2)                    | 4 (9.4)                        | .174    |
morbidity defined as complications categorized ≥ IIIb according to the Clavien-Dindo scale were observed in more than half of the patients. Our comparative analysis of patients with and without postoperative abdominal infections showed significantly more major complications and a tendency for a higher mortality (Table 3). This observation confirms the importance of postoperative abdominal infections as a major cause for an adverse outcome.

Subsequently, we conducted a logistic regression analysis to identify independent predictors for postoperative abdominal infection and identified reduced susceptibility of the bacterial bile duct isolates to the perioperatively applied antibiotics as the most relevant predictor in our multivariable analysis (Table 4). During surgery for pCCA, the extrahepatic bile ducts are resected together with the hemi-liver to obtain clear tumor margins. The biliary reconstruction is afterwards achieved by a hepaticojejunostomy. Intraoperatively the abdominal cavity is inevitably contaminated by biliary secretion from the exposed major bile ducts of the resection surface. The results of our multivariable analysis support the hypothesis of a relevant association between the above-mentioned intraoperative exposure of the abdominal situs to bile fluid and postoperative abdominal infections. They may therefore have important implications for the selection of an adequate perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis. This is consistent with the elevated rate of persistence of Enterococcus faecium illustrated by the fact that

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**Table 3.** Group comparison between patients with and without postoperative abdominal infection. The various agents described here as “Preoperative antibiotics” describe the preoperative administration and do not refer to perioperative antimicrobial prophylaxis. Data presented as median and interquartile range if not noted otherwise. Bold indicates statistical significance (p < 0.05). ASA American society of anesthesiologists classification, BMI body mass index, EBD endoscopic biliary drainage, PBD percutaneous biliary drainage, PVE portal vein embolization.

|                | Univariate analysis | Multivariate analysis |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
|                | OR (95% CI)         | p value               |
| Sex (male = 1) | 2.50 (.92–6.76)     | .072 Excluded         |
| Age (≤ 65 years = 1) | 1.98 (.87–4.53) | .106                  |
| BMI (≤ 25 kg/m² = 1) | .67 (.30–1.51) | .329                  |
| PVE (no = 1)   | 3.81 (1.60–9.07)    | .002 3.59 (1.29–10.03) .015 |
| ASA (I/II = 1) | .76 (.34–1.73)      | .517                  |
| Bismuth type (IV = 1) | 1.75 (.74–4.16) | .206                  |
| EBD (no = 1)   | 1.04 (32–3.37)      | .945                  |
| PBD (no = 1)   | 1.47 (58–3.68)      | .415                  |
| Preoperative cholangitis (no = 1) | .91 (39–2.13) | .822                  |

**Table 4.** Univariate and multivariable analysis of postoperative abdominal infections. Various parameters are associated with postoperative abdominal infections. Bold indicates statistical significance (p < 0.05). ASA American society of anesthesiologists classification, BMI body mass index, EBD endoscopic biliary drainage, PBD percutaneous biliary drainage, PVE portal vein embolization.

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out of 19 patients with postoperative abdominal infections caused by *Enterococcus faecium*, 18 patients (94.5%) also showed *Enterococcus faecium* in the intraoperatively collected bile cultures (Table 6). The close association of bile duct colonization at the timepoint of surgery with postoperative infections underlines the importance of intraoperative bile cultures to better adjust individual postoperative antibiotic treatment and to collect a larger amount of clinical data and eventually optimize future empirical prophylaxis on a larger population level.

Perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis is an internationally accepted measure to reduce surgical site infections in patients undergoing abdominal surgery\(^{14}\). Our in-house policy during the study period comprised a single shot antibiotic prophylaxis with a second generation cephalosporine (cefuroxime) plus metronidazole in patients with pCCA in accordance with clinical standards\(^{29}\). Of note, only a small subset (12.5%) of the bile duct isolates was susceptible to the antibiotic prophylactic regimen. This reflects the fact that this antibiotic regimen has been selected to prevent surgical site infections in a general surgical population and not to address the specific and inevitable bile contamination of the abdominal cavity during pCCA surgery (Table 5). As the perioperatively administered antibiotics were the strongest predictor for postoperative abdominal infection in our cohort, we assessed the susceptibility of the bile duct isolates to various additional antibiotics. Here, vancomycin with 43.8% and meropenem with 68.8% were the most effective antibiotics with the combination of both covering 97.5% of all isolates (Table 5).

Our findings identify an important clinical factor with a potentially significant impact in the management of these high-risk patients and suggest a modification of the perioperatively applied antibiotics to improve postoperative outcome. While a combination of meropenem and vancomycin appears to cover the vast majority of all bacterial bile duct isolates, it has to be acknowledged that the application of two broad-spectrum antibiotics during surgery might facilitate the development of multidrug-resistant bacteria and can compromise the selection of antibiotics in patients presenting with septic complications in the early postoperative period. Considering this potential relevant adverse effect, our standard antibiotic prophylaxis was changed to a third generation cephalosporine (ceftriaxone) supplemented by vancomycin to cover *Enterococcus faecium* (observed in 80.0% of all bile duct isolates).

The duration of perioperative prophylaxis in pCCA is topic of an ongoing debate and typical regimes vary from a classical one-time prophylaxis during surgery to prolonged perioperative prophylaxis including the early postoperative period (e.g. 48 h)\(^{15}\). While there is clinical evidence from a randomized-controlled trial of the Nagoya group that there is no difference in outcome between a two-day and four-day postoperative prophylaxis, no systematic evaluation of a one-time prophylaxis versus a short (48 h) postoperative prophylaxis is currently available in the literature\(^{15}\). Unfortunately, this relevant question cannot be further explored with the help of our data as our strategy comprised a one-time prophylaxis during the complete study period. However, given the importance of the issue, clinical trials are warranted which should investigate the optimal duration of prophylaxis in this complex disease which may help to further improve surgical outcomes in pCCA patients.

Penetration of the antibiotic agent to the biliary lumen has historically been considered one of the major factors in the selection of antibiotics. Unfortunately, vancomycin's ability to reach the bile fluid (as indicated by a relatively low bile to serum concentration ratio) is limited\(^{16}\). However, the current Tokyo Guidelines on antibiotic treatment for cholangitis and cholecystitis still recommend the use of vancomycin in case of *Enterococcus faecium* associated infections\(^{31}\). Moreover, there is some evidence that the secretion of antibiotics into bile fluid is altered by biliary obstruction, a condition frequently observed in pCCA patients despite preoperative drainage\(^{31,22}\). Also, the establishment of antibiotic concentrations within the abdominal cavity to reduce the spread of bile-derived bacteria to the abdominal lumen during the intervention might prevent abdominal infection even in the absence of a reduced bile duct colonization.

Similar to other retrospective clinical outcome studies, our analysis has a number of limitations, which should be considered. All patients of this study underwent surgery in a single center in accordance with the authors

| Antibiotic agent                      | Most common bacteria* | All bacteria |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Cefuroxime                           | 5.9% (4/68)           | 12.5% (10/80) |
| Ceftriaxone                          | 13.2% (9/68)          | 17.5% (14/80) |
| Ciprofloxacin                        | 14.7% (10/68)         | 16.3% (13/80) |
| Amoxicillin/sulbactam                | 30.9% (21/68)         | 28.8% (23/80) |
| Piperacillin/tazobactam              | 47.1% (32/68)         | 47.5% (38/80) |
| Vancomycin                           | 50.0% (34/68)         | 43.8% (35/80) |
| Amoxicillin/sulbactam + Ciprofloxacin| 54.4% (37/68)         | 58.8% (47/80) |
| Piperacillin/tazobactam + Ciprofloxacin| 57.4% (39/68)       | 61.3% (49/80) |
| Meropenem                            | 64.7% (44/68)         | 68.8% (55/80) |
| Cefuroxime + Vancomycin              | 64.7% (44/68)         | 53.8% (43/80) |
| Ceftriaxone + Vancomycin             | 85.3% (58/68)         | 75.0% (60/80) |
| Meropenem + Vancomycin               | 98.5% (67/68)         | 97.5% (78/80) |

Table 5. Susceptibility of the bile duct colonizing isolates to antibiotic agents. *The most common bacteria which were found in the bile ducts were *Enterococcus faecium*, *Enterococcus faecalis*, *Enterobacter cloacae*, *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *Klebsiella oxytoca* and *Citrobacter freundii*. 
individual approach to pCCA and all data were obtained in a retrospective fashion. Although a multicenter approach may have increased the value of our analysis in terms of sample size, it may also introduce an increased heterogeneity in the clinical management and operative techniques. Unfortunately, as described in the methods.

Table 6. Identified bacterial species causing the bile duct colonization or postoperative abdominal infections. The percentage of specific bacteria of the bacterial isolates in the bile ducts and postoperative abdominal infections are shown. The bile duct origin rate is defined as the probability of a specific bacteria causing postoperative abdominal infection to already have colonized the bile ducts prior to surgery.

| Specific bacteria                  | Bile duct isolates | Postoperative abdominal infection isolates | Bile duct origin rate |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Aeromonas caviae                  | 2.5% (2/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Atopobium rimae                   | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Bacillus pumilus                  | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Bacteroides fragilis              | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Bacteroides pyogenes              | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Bacteroides thetaiotaomicron      | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Bacteroides uniformis             | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Bacteroides vulgatus              | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Citrobacter freundii              | 5.0% (4/80)        | 1.9% (1/52)                               | 50.0% (1/2)           |
| Clostridium perfringens           | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Enterobacter aerogenes            | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Enterobacter cloacae              | 16.3% (13/80)      | 25.0% (13/52)                             | 55.6% (5/9)           |
| Enterococcus casseliflavus        | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Enterococcus durans               | 2.5% (2/80)        | 3.8% (2/52)                               | (0/0)                 |
| Enterococcus faecalis             | 38.8% (31/80)      | 30.8% (16/52)                             | 61.1% (11/18)         |
| Enterococcus faecium              | 32.5% (26/80)      | 71.2% (37/52)                             | 94.5% (18/19)         |
| Escherichia coli                  | 11.3% (9/80)       | 19.2% (10/52)                             | 71.4% (5/7)           |
| Hafnia alvei                      | 5.0% (4/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Klebsiella orrithinolytica        | 2.5% (2/80)        | 1.9% (1/52)                               | (0/1)                 |
| Klebsiella oxytoca                | 5.0% (4/80)        | 5.8% (3/52)                               | (0/2)                 |
| Klebsiella pneumoniae             | 7.5% (6/80)        | 17.3% (9/52)                              | 75.0% (3/4)           |
| Klebsiella varicola               | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Lactobacillus fermentum           | –                  | 3.8% (2/52)                               | –                     |
| Lactobacillus paracasei           | –                  | 1.9% (1/52)                               | –                     |
| Morganella morganii               | –                  | 3.8% (2/52)                               | –                     |
| Orchobacterium anthropi           | 3.8% (3/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Pediococcus acidilactici          | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Pediococcus pentosaceus           | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Prevotella bivia                  | 1.3% (1/80)        | 1.9% (1/52)                               | (0/1)                 |
| Prevotella melaninogenica         | –                  | 3.8% (2/52)                               | –                     |
| Proteus penneri                   | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Proteus vulgaris                  | 2.5% (2/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Providencia buccae                | –                  | 3.8% (2/52)                               | –                     |
| Pseudomonas aeruginosa            | 3.8% (3/80)        | 3.8% (2/52)                               | 100% (2/2)            |
| Serratia marcescens               | 3.8% (3/80)        | 5.8% (3/52)                               | 50.0% (1/2)           |
| Serratia rubidaea                 | 1.3% (1/80)        | 3.8% (2/52)                               | 100% (1/1)            |
| Sphingomonas paucimobilis         | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Staphylococcus aureus             | 3.8% (3/80)        | 3.8% (2/52)                               | (0/2)                 |
| Staphylococcus epidermidis        | 7.5% (6/80)        | 9.6% (5/52)                               | 66.7% (2/3)           |
| Staphylococcus haemolyticus       | 1.3% (1/80)        | 3.8% (2/52)                               | (0/0)                 |
| Staphylococcus hominis            | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Stenotrophomonas maltophilia      | 2.5% (2/80)        | 1.9% (1/52)                               | 100% (1/1)            |
| Streptococcus anginosus           | 5.0% (4/80)        | 5.8% (3/52)                               | (0/2)                 |
| Streptococcus mitis               | 1.3% (1/80)        | 1.9% (1/52)                               | (0/1)                 |
| Streptococcus parasanguinis       | 2.5% (2/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Streptococcus peroris             | 1.3% (1/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
| Streptococcus sanguinis           | 2.5% (2/80)        | –                                          | –                     |
section, intraoperative bile cultures were not available for all patients who underwent surgery for pCCA during the study period, which may have introduced a certain selection bias.

This study represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first European report investigating bacterial bile duct colonization and its influence on the postoperative outcome of patients undergoing curative-intent surgery for pCCA. Despite the aforementioned limitations, our analysis identified bacterial bile duct colonization as a common condition of patients undergoing surgery for pCCA and the reduced susceptibility to the intraoperatively administered antibiotic prophylaxis as an independent predictor for postoperative abdominal infection. As postoperative abdominal infections are a major cause of postoperative morbidity and mortality, a modified perioperative antibiotic prophylaxis might improve the operative outcome in patients with pCCA. Larger multicentric analyses and prospective controlled trials are needed to confirm and validate our findings.

Data availability
Available upon request. JB and UPN had full access to the data and act both as guarantor for the data.

Received: 6 November 2020; Accepted: 15 January 2021
Published online: 03 February 2021

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Funding
Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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