Determination of the ciprofloxacin-resistant *Escherichia coli* isolated from chicken meat in Turkey

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**ABSTRACT.** In this study, the occurrence of the ciprofloxacin-resistant (CR) *Escherichia coli* in chicken meat was determined, and their clonal relations were investigated by using pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE). Antimicrobial resistance patterns of *E. coli* isolates were determined by using disc diffusion assay, and minimum inhibitory concentration of ciprofloxacin was determined by E-test. Plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance (PMQR) and extended spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBL) resistance genes were also screened through polymerase chain reactions. Sixty chicken meat samples were collected from different supermarkets and butchers in Sivas, Turkey. CR *E. coli* strains were determined in 59 (98.3%) chicken meat samples. By analyzing PFGE fingerprint data, 34 different pulsotypes were determined. All *E. coli* strains were found to be resistant to nalidixic acid, enrofloxacin, and norfloxacin. In addition, isolates were resistant to levofloxacin (40.7%), ampicillin (94.9%), trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (76.3%), tetracycline (69.5%), and chloramphenicol (44.1%). However, isolates were susceptible to imipenem and colistin. In this study, 81.4% of CR *E. coli* isolates were observed to have a multidrug-resistant profile, which is defined as resistance to three or more classes of antibiotics. Through phenotypic confirmation tests, five isolates (8.3%) were determined to be ESBL-producing. The PMQR genes were not determined in any of the isolates. Two isolates (3.4%) possessed the *bla*<sub>CTX-M</sub> and *bla*<sub>TEM</sub> genes, and 40 isolates (67.8%) had the *bla*<sub>TEM</sub> gene. Taken together, retail raw chicken meat is highly contaminated with CR *E. coli*. However, these isolates are not found to be carriers of the PMQR genes, indicating a low public health problem.

**Keywords:** Ciprofloxacin resistance; chicken meat; *E. coli*; plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance

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*Date of initial submission:* 28-08-2019
*Date of revised submission:* 12-06-2020
*Date of acceptance:* 29-07-2020
INTRODUCTION

E. coli are commonly found in the gastrointestinal tract of humans and warm-blooded animals and can cause enteritis, urinary tract infection, septicemia, pneumonia, and meningitis in humans and animals (Allocati et al., 2013; Ray, 2004). The emergence of antimicrobial resistance threatens the treatment of E. coli infections. The higher prevalence of multidrug-resistant (MDR) E. coli strains have increased worldwide in the past few decades (Allocati et al., 2013; EFSA, 2019; Mavroidi et al., 2012). It is a well-known fact that the primary reason for the high prevalence of MDR E. coli is the unregulated use of antimicrobial agents in humans and animals (Seo and Lee, 2019).

Quinolones are broad-spectrum antibiotics widely used against gram-negative bacteria, including E. coli infections in human and veterinary medicines, which has eventually resulted in the rapid emergence of quinolone-resistant bacteria (Borjesson et al., 2016; EFSA, 2019; WHO, 2007). The first generation of quinolone molecules were licensed for use in food animals at the beginning of the 1980s, and fluoroquinolones were licensed during the late 1980s and early 1990s (EMEA, 2006). Since then, new fluoroquinolone molecules have been authorized, and a number of different veterinary medicines are now available on the market (EMEA, 2006; Gouvea et al., 2015).

Two main mechanisms of quinolone resistance have been described: (i) alterations in the targets of quinolones, and (ii) decreased accumulation inside the bacteria due to decreased permeability of the membrane and/or an overexpression of efflux pump systems. Both of these mechanisms are noted to be chromosomally mediated (Ruiz, 2003). Chromosomal mutations located in the quinolone resistance-determining regions (QRDRs) of the gyrA and gyrB genes, which encode for two DNA gyrase (topoisomerase II) subunits, and the ParC and ParE genes, which encode for two topoisomerase IV subunits (Jacoby, 2005). In addition, plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance (PMQR) genes were also noted to contribute to quinolone resistance by either altering the molecular structure of quinolone target enzymes or the enzymatic inhibition of quinolones (Martinez-Martinez et al., 1998). To date, different PMQR determinants have been identified, the qnr families, aac(6’)-Ib-cr (drug modification), and qepA and oqxA/B (active efflux pumps) (Rodriguez-Martinez et al., 2016), and are usually associated with mobile elements on plasmids often found to be incorporated into sull-type integrons. Their sequences have been uploaded into the following web-based database: http://www.lahey.org/qnrStudies/ (Jacoby et al., 2014; Martinez-Martinez et al., 2008). Importantly, mobile genetic elements carrying PMQR genes commonly carry other important antimicrobial resistance traits, such as extended spectrum β-lactamase (ESBL) genes (Robicsek et al., 2006; Allocati et al., 2013).

Despite the fact that the quinolones have never been used in Norway livestock production, ciprofloxacin resistance was determined by using selective method. These particular situations paved the way for investigations of PMQR genes in food from animal origins, especially in chicken meat, and were found to be significant from a public health point of view (Slettemeas et al., 2019). Although ciprofloxacin has been widely used in human and veterinary medicines in Turkey (Nazik et al., 2008; Şahintürk et al., 2016). Thus, the main aim of this study was to determine the occurrence of ciprofloxacin resistant E. coli strains by using selective enrichment and molecular characterization of PMQR (qnrA, qnrB, qnrS, qnrC and aac(6’)-Ib-cr) in these isolates. The isolates were further characterized by pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE), and the presence of genes encoding different β-lactamases (blaCTX-M, blaCMY-2, blaTEM and blaSHV) was investigated.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample Collection and Isolation of Ciprofloxacin Resistant E. coli

Sixty chicken meat samples were collected from different supermarkets and butchers from September to December 2018 in Sivas, Turkey. For the E. coli isolation, each chicken meat sample (25 g) was suspended in 225 mL of sterile Buffered peptone water (Oxoid CM0509) and was mixed by paddle blender (Interscience Bag Mixer, France) for 2 min. Then, the homogenate was incubated for 24 h at 37°C. At the end of the incubation, 100 µL of the enrichment was plated on a Tryptone bile x-glucuronide (TBX) agar plate (Oxoid, CM0945), including 0.5 µg/mL ciprofloxacin (Sigma-Aldrich, U.S.A), and incubated for 3 h at 44°C and then 24 h at 41°C. After incuba-
tion, green *E. coli* colonies (one colony per sample) isolated from each sample were subcultured on Columbia blood agar (Oxoid, CM0331). Isolates were stored in Tryptone soya broth (Oxoid CM0129) with 20% glycerol at -20°C. Species identification was performed using a MALDI-TOF (Bruker Daltonik GmbH, Leipzig, Germany). To identify bacterial species, each peak was directly matched against reference libraries and a result was considered valid (accurate identification to the species level) if the score value was ≥ 2.0. When the scores obtained were < 2.0, the samples were reevaluated.

**Pulsed-Field Gel Electrophoresis**

The genetic relatedness of the *E. coli* isolates in the current study was assessed by a PFGE procedure, and band profile analyses were performed by the Public Health Institution of Turkey (Ankara), as described previously (Durmaz et al., 2009), with XbaI restriction of DNA. The DNA band profiles were analyzed by using the BioNumerics software system (Applied Maths, Sinth-Martens-Latem, Belgium). A 1% band tolerance was used for the comparison of DNA profiles. Cluster analysis was done by the unweighted pair group method using with arithmetic mean (UPGMA). The level of the Dice similarity between pair groups was defined at ≥ 85%.

**Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing**

The antimicrobial susceptibilities of all the CR *E. coli* isolates were determined by the disc diffusion method in accordance with the CLSI guidelines (CLSI, 2015). The following discs of antibiotics (Bioanalyse, Turkey) were used: amoxicillin-clavulanic acid (AMC; 20/10 μg), ampicillin (AM; 10 μg), aztreonam (ATM; 30 μg), cefoxitin (FOX; 30 μg), cefuroxime (CXM; 30 μg), cefpodoxime (CPD; 30 μg), colistin (CT; 10 μg), imipenem (IPM; 10 μg), chloramphenicol (C; 30 μg), gentamicin (CN; 10 μg), tetracycline (TE; 30 μg), nalidixic acid (NA; 30 μg), ciprofloxacin (CIP; 5 μg), enrofloxacin (ENR; 30 μg), levofloxacin (LEV; 5 μg), norfloxacin (NOR; 30 μg), trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (SXT; 1.25/23.75 μg), and bacitracin (B; 30 μg). *E. coli* (ATCC 25922) was used as the standard strain in the disc diffusion assay, and the results were interpreted according to CLSI guidelines (CLSI, 2015). In addition, E-tests (Bioanalyse, Ankara, Turkey) determined the minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs) of ciprofloxacin. Briefly, broth suspensions of *E. coli* strains equivalent to a 0.5 McFarland standard were prepared and inoculated on Mueller-Hinton agar (Oxoid CM0337) plate. E-test strips were placed on the dry medium, which was then incubated under aerobic conditions for 24 h at 37°C. The cutoff breakpoints for ciprofloxacin were set at ≥ 4 μg/mL in accordance with the CLSI’s epidemiological cutoff values (CLSI, 2015).

**Determination and Characterization of PMQR and β-Lactamase Genes**

All primers in this study are listed in Table 1. The genomic DNA was extracted by a standard boiling method, and the presence of the PMQR genes (*qnrA*, *qnrB*, *qnrS*, *qnrC*, *qnrD* and *aac(6’)-Ib-cr*) were determined by PCR (Park et al., 2006; Robicsek et al., 2006). PCR reactions were prepared as 50 μL [5 μL 10x PCR buffer, 5 μL 25 mM MgCl₂, 250 μM from each dNTP, 1.25 U Taq DNA Polymerase (MBI, Fermentas), 50 pmol for each primer, and 25 ng genomic DNA]. The PCR protocol was conducted by using a Bio-Rad T100 gradient thermal cycler device (BioRad, California, USA). The PCR conditions were carried out in the following steps: initial denaturation at 94°C for 45 s (denaturation at 53°C for 45 s and hybridization at 72°C for 60 s) for 32 cycles. Screening for *aac(6’)-Ib-cr* was carried out by PCR amplification, as previously described by Park et al. (2006) PCR conditions were carried out through the following steps: initial denaturation at 94°C for 45 s (denaturation at 55°C for 45 s and hybridization at 72°C for 45 s) for 34 cycles. PCR products were run on electrophoresis in 1.5% (w/v) agarose gel and stained with ethidium bromide (10 mg/mL) for 30 min, and then screened under an ultraviolet transilluminator (Vilber Lourmat Quantum ST4, Marne-la-Vallee Cedex 1, France), using a 100 bp DNA ladder (MBI, Fermentas) as reference. To detect CTX-M, CMY-2, TEM, and SHV type β-lactamase, the *bla*<sub>CTX-M</sub>, *bla*<sub>CMY-2</sub>, *bla*<sub>TEM</sub>, and *bla*<sub>SHV</sub> genes were also amplified by PCR assay, which was conducted as described (Hasman et al., 2005; Leinberger et al., 2010; Mulvey et al., 2003). The β-lactamase genes were confirmed by sequencing the PCR products, as described previously (Ahmed et al., 2007). PCR-positive amplicons were obtained from National Food Institute EURL-AR reference strains collection, Technical University of Denmark were used, and distilled water was used for the negative control. (https://www.eurl-ar.eu/resources.aspx?#refstrains)
Table 1. Primer sequence of the used in PCR

| Genes      | Primer sequence (5’-3’):                                    | Product size (bp) | References       |
|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| qnrA       | F:GGATGCCAGTTTTCGAGGA R:TCGCCAGCACAGATCTTG                 | 492               | Cavaco et al., 2008 |
| qnrB       | F:GGMATHGAAATTCGCCACTG R:TTTGCYGYYCAGCAGCTGGA             | 262               | Cattoir et al., 2007 |
| qnrS       | F:TCGACGTTGCTAACTTGCG R:GATCTAAACCGTGAATCGG               | 466               | Cavaco et al., 2008 |
| qnrC       | F:GGGTTGTCACATATTAGTAATCG R:RACACATCCACCATTATTTCCA        | 307               | Jacoby et al., 2009 |
| qnrD       | F:CGAGATCATTGGGAGGGAATA R:AAACAGCTGAAGCAGCTG              | 582               | Cavaco et al., 2009 |
| aac(6')-Ib-cr | F:TTGCAGGTTCTATGAGTGCTA R:CTCGAATGGCGCCAGTGGTTT    | 482               | Park et al., 2006  |
| blaCTX-M   | F:AGTGTCAGCAGTAAARTKATGGG R:RGGTGTGSRGAGCAGGCG             | 593               | Mulvey et al., 2003 |
| blaCMY-2   | F:GCATTACACTTACAGGCAG R:RGCTTTGAGAATGCGCCAGG             | 758               | Hasman et al., 2005 |
| blaTEM     | F:TGAGTATCATATGACCCATG R:TTACATCTACGACGACG               | 861               | Leinberger et al., 2010 |
| blaSHV     | F:CAACCGGCGGTTAACCC R:TTAGCGTTGCCAGTGCT                  | 937               | Leinberger et al., 2010 |

RESULTS

In this study, 59 (98.3%) CR E. coli isolates were obtained from 60 chicken meat samples. Of these 59 isolates, 34 different pulsotypes were obtained when the similarity threshold was taken as ≥ 85%. Among these pulsotypes, 18 isolates were determined as clinically unrelated, and the remaining 41 were found to be related, which resulted in 16 groups with two to four isolates in each group (Fig 1).

The results of the antimicrobial susceptibility tests of the CR E. coli strains from chicken meat samples are shown in Table 2. Fifty-nine CR E. coli isolates and the susceptibility to 12 antimicrobial classes of these isolates were obtained from chicken meat samples. According to the results, all E. coli strains (100%) were determined as resistant to B, NA, ENR, and NOR. However, 40.7% of the strains were determined resistant to LEV, and 94.9%, 76.3%, 69.5%, and 44.1% of the E. coli strains were determined resistant to AM, SXT, TE, and C, respectively. On the other hand, all E. coli strains were susceptible to IPM and CT. Additionally, susceptibility to FOX and ATM were 93.2% and 96.6% among all E. coli strains, respectively. MDR (≥ 3 different antimicrobial classes) was observed in 48 (81.4%) of the 59 isolates (Table 3). MDR profiles were assessed as the following: seven (14.6%) isolates were resistant to three antimicrobial classes, 11 (22.9%) isolates were resistant to four, 15 (31.3%) isolates were resistant to five, nine (18.7%) isolates were resistant to six, five (10.4%) isolates were resistant to seven, and one (2.1%) isolate was resistant to eight antimicrobial classes. MIC values of CIP-resistant E. coli strains were determined as follows: ≥ 32 µg/mL (42 isolates), ≥ 16 µg/mL (three isolates), ≥ 12 µg/mL (two isolates), ≥ 8 µg/mL (seven isolates), and ≥ 6 µg/mL (three isolates; Fig 1).

None of the PMQR genes (qnrA, qnrB, qnrS, qnrC, qnrD, and aac(6')-Ib-cr) were present among the isolates. Forty-six of the 59 CR E. coli isolates carried β-lactamase genes. Table 4 summarizes the results of the β-lactamase genes detected in CR E. coli isolates in this study. The blaTEM gene was observed as predominant in CR E. coli isolates, and β-lactamase gene characterization revealed that 67.8% of the isolates had the blaTEM gene (n = 40), 3.4% of the isolates had the blaCTX-M and blaCMY-2 genes (n = 2), 3.4% of the isolates had the blaTEM and blaCTX-M genes (n = 2), and 3.4% of the isolates had the blaTEM and blaCMY-2 genes (n = 2). None of the E. coli isolates contained the blaSHV gene (Table 4). All the ampicillin-resistant isolates possessed the blaTEM gene.
Table 2. Antimicrobial resistance of ciprofloxacin-resistant *Escherichia coli* isolated from chicken meat by disc diffusion assay (n = 59)

| Antimicrobial Class | Antimicrobials                          | Number of isolates (%) |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------|
|                     |                                        | Resistant  | Intermediate | Susceptible |
| Quinolones          | Nalidixic acid                         | 59 (100)  | 0            | 0           |
|                     | Ciprofloxacin                          | 56 (94.9) | 3 (5.1)      | 0           |
|                     | Enrofloxacin                           | 59 (100)  | 0            | 0           |
|                     | Levofloxacin                           | 24 (40.7) | 17 (28.8)    | 18 (30.5)   |
|                     | Norfloxacin                            | 59 (100)  | 0            | 0           |
| Polipeptid          | Bacitracin                              | 59 (100)  | 0            | 0           |
| Tetracyclines       | Tetracycline                            | 41 (69.5) | 2 (3.4)      | 16 (27.1)   |
| Folate pathway inhibitors | Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole       | 45 (76.3) | 1 (1.7)      | 13 (22)     |
| Aminoglycosides     | Gentamicin                              | 15 (25.4) | 0            | 44 (74.6)   |
| Phenicols           | Chloramphenicol                         | 26 (44.1) | 4 (6.8)      | 29 (49.2)   |
|                     | Amoxicillin-clavulanic acid            | 5 (8.5)   | 5 (8.5)      | 49 (83.1)   |
| β-lactam/β-lactamase inhibitor combinations | | | |
| Penicillins         | Ampicillin                              | 56 (94.9) | 0            | 3 (5.1)     |
| Cepheems            | Cefoxitin                               | 1 (1.7)   | 3 (5.1)      | 55 (93.2)   |
|                     | Cefpodoxime                             | 9 (15.3)  | 0            | 50 (84.7)   |
|                     | Cefuroxime                              | 5 (8.5)   | 5 (8.5)      | 49 (83.1)   |
| Monobactams         | Aztreonam                               | 1 (1.7)   | 1 (1.7)      | 57 (96.6)   |
| Penems              | Imipenem                                | 0         | 0            | 59 (100)    |
| Lipopeptides        | Colistin                                | 0         | 0            | 59 (100)    |

Table 3. Antimicrobial resistance class pattern distribution for 48 multidrug-resistant *Escherichia coli* isolates from chicken meat

| Antimicrobial resistance class patterns | No. of classes | Frequency | No. of multidrug-resistant *E. coli* (%) |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|----------------------------------------|
| PCNs, PPs, FPIs                        | 3              | 3         | 6.3                                    |
| PCNs, PPs, TETs                        | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PPs, FPIs, TETs                        | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, PPs, TETs                        | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, PPs, AMGs                        | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, PPs, AMGs, FPIs                 | 4              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, PPs, FPIs, TETs                 | 9              | 1         | 18.6                                   |
| PCNs, PPs, PHs, FPIs                  | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNS, PPs, AMGs, FPIs, TETs           | 5              | 2         | 4.2                                    |
| PCNS, PPs, PHs, FPIs, TETs            | 11             | 1         | 22.9                                   |
| PCNS, PPs, PHs, AMGs, FPIs            | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| BL/BLICs, PCNs, CEPs, PPs, FPIs       | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, CEPs, PPs, FPIs, TETs           | 6              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, CEPs, PPs, PHs, AMGs, FPIs      | 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, CEPs, PPs, PHs, AMGs, FPIs, TETs| 7              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| PCNs, CEPs, PPs, PHs, AMGs, FPIs, TETs| 1              | 1         | 2.1                                    |
| BL/BLICs, PCNs, CEPs, PPs, FPIs, TETs | 2              | 1         | 4.1                                    |
| BL/BLICs, PCNs, CEPs, PPs, AMGs, FPIs, TETs | 8 | 1 | 2.1 |
| **Total**                             | **48**         | **100**   |                                         |

AMGs, aminoglycosides; BL/BLICs, β-lactam/β-lactamase inhibitor combinations; CEPs, cepheems; FPIs, folate pathway inhibitors; FPIs; PCNs, penicillins; MONs, monobactams; PHs, phenicols; TETs, tetracyclines; PPs, Polipeptids.
*AMC, amoxicillin-clavulanic acid; AM, ampicillin; ATM, aztreonam; FOX, cefoxitin; CXM, cefuroxime; CPD, cefpodoxime; C, chloramphenicol; CN, gentamicin; TE, tetracycline; NA, nalidixic acid; CIP, ciprofloxacin; ENR, enrofloxacin; LEV, levofloxacin; NOR, norfloxacin; SXT, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole; B, bacitracin. All E. coli strains were susceptible to imipenem and colistin, these two antimicrobials were not shown in the resistant profiles. - Not detected.

**Figure 1.** PFGE analysis of ciprofloxacin-resistant *Escherichia coli* isolates.
Table 4. Molecular characterization of bla and PMQR genes among ciprofloxacin-resistant Escherichia coli isolates (n = 59)

| bla gene and PMQR                                      | No. of isolates n (%) |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| TEM                                                    | 40 (67.8)             |
| TEM and CTX-M                                          | 2 (3.4)               |
| TEM and CMY-2                                          | 2 (3.4)               |
| CTX-M and CMY-2                                        | 2 (3.4)               |
| SHV                                                    | -                     |
| qnr A, B, S, C and aac (6’-lb-cr)                       | -                     |

- Not detected

DISCUSSION

The use of antimicrobials as growth promotion agents in food-producing animals has been prohibited in Turkey since 2006 (RG, 2006). Recently, Turkish Poultry Meat Producers and Breeders Association data also highlighted the decreasing trend in the use of antimicrobial drugs in poultry production in Turkey (Elmas et al., 2019). However, the occurrence of CR E. coli was determined as 98.3% in the current study, clearly showing a high level of contamination for chicken meat on the retail market in Turkey. The results obtained in the present study are not surprising because Ghodousi et al. (2015) reported 88.8% of CR E. coli isolates from chicken meat in Italy. For example, even though quinolone-based antibiotics have been not in use for poultry production, an increase in quinolone-resistant E. coli rates in broiler production processes were reported in Sweden (Borjesson et al., 2016). However, the results of this study were found to be much higher than the results from other countries, for example 37.4% in China (Xu et al., 2014) and 26% in the Czech Republic (Literak et al., 2013).

According to the PFGE analysis, CR E. coli isolates from chicken meat were clonally different. Such a difference can be attributed to the movements of humans, chickens, and vectors, and indicates that the contamination might not originate from a single source (Jakobsen et al., 2010; Sola-Gines et al., 2015). For example, in a study of E. coli isolated from slaughter animals in Poland, Wasyl et al. (2014) identified quinolone resistance mechanisms and noted chromosome-encoded quinolone resistance did not result from the spread of a single resistant clone, rather this was due to antimicrobial pressure leading to the selection of random gyr and par mutants.

In the present study, CR E. coli isolates from chicken meat samples were extremely resistant to AM (100%), SXT (76.3%), and TE (69.5%). For instance, in a previous study conducted by Ghodousi et al. (2015) in Italy, 134 E. coli were isolated from 109 chicken meat samples, and their resistance patterns were found for CIP (88.8%), CN (14.1%), SXT (79.1%), and TE (91.8%). In a study conducted by Soufi et al. (2011), 166 E. coli isolates were obtained from poultry meat (whole carcasses of chickens and turkeys) in Tunisia, and a significantly high percentage of resistance to ampicillin, nalidixic acid, sulfonamides, and tetracycline (66-95%) were observed among the isolates from poultry meat. Moreover, in another study performed by Xu et al. (2014) in China, all of the E. coli isolates were also resistant to AM (100%), SXT (94.3%), and TE (94.3%). High rates of resistance were observed for tetracycline (69.5%) in this study and were similar to the results reported from other countries (Soufi et al., 2011; Ghodousi et al., 2015; Xu et al. 2014). This finding is not surprising, as quinolone-resistant E. coli isolates were found from broilers in Sweden, which never approved these antimicrobials in the poultry industry.

In the current study, the CR E. coli isolates were mostly resistant to quinolone antibiotics, except for LEV. This resistance could be related to the levofloxacin molecule’s C-8 methoxy group and the fluorinated quinolico acid cores, which is different than the ciprofloxacin (Fu et al., 2013; Lu et al., 2001).

In this study, data showed that all 59 CR E. coli isolates had high levels of phenotypical MDR profiles (81.4%; n = 48) for the chicken meat in Turkey, which were resistant to three to eight classes of antimicrobial agents. Similar studies from the Czech Republic, Italy, and China found MDR E. coli in retail chicken meat at 82%, 66.9% and 59.4%, respectively (Ghodousi et al., 2015; Literak et al., 2013; Xu et al., 2014). In a study performed by Seo and Lee (2019) in Korea with 248 chicken meat samples, 152 isolates were observed to be positive for E.coli; 75 were identified as MDR E. coli. Of the MDR E. coli isolates, 13.3% were observed to be positive for PMQR genes, and 41.3% of the MDR E. coli isolates were found to be carrying class 1 integrons. The authors suggested
that PMQR genes and class 1 integrons were widely distributed in *E. coli* isolates from chicken meat and were contributed to resistance to diverse antimicrobial agents. In contrast, no PMQR genes (*qnrA, qnrB, qnrS, qnrC, qnrD*, and *aac(6')-Ib-cr*) were detected in this study. The PMQR genes were rare for Turkey (Kürekci et al., 2018; Müştak et al., 2012). However, CR *E. coli* was found with high rates in this study, and the occurrence of PMQR determinants was not always related with quinolone resistance. Yang et al. (2014) reported an increased prevalence of PMQR traits from 6.2–28.1% in 2004/2005 to 23.2–50.4% in 2010/2011, while ciprofloxacin resistance was relatively stable during the study period in China.

Several studies have shown the prevalence of PMQR genes in *E. coli* isolates from chicken meat products (Ghodousi et al., 2015; Literak et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2015). In this study, none of the PMQR genes (*qnrA, qnrB, qnrS, qnrC, qnrD*, and *aac(6')-Ib-cr*) were determined to be present in the 59 *E. coli* isolates. The prevalence of the PMQR genes (*qnrA*) in Italy was determined as 91% in nearly all of the *E. coli* isolates from the chicken meat samples (Ghodousi et al., 2015). On the other hand, PMQR genes were reported as 4% and 7.8% in the Czech Republic and China, respectively (Literak et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2015). Additionally, in other studies carried out in Turkey, a low-level presence of the PMQR gene was reported (Kürekci et al., 2018; Műştak et al., 2012). Previously in Turkey, Műştak et al. (2012) reported the presence of only the *qnrA* of the PMQR gene in five (5.3%) samples of 94 isolated chicken *E. coli* cloacal swaps. More recently, *qnrS* (*n* = 5) and *qnrB* (*n* = 8) of the PMQR genes from chicken meat were reported among the ESBL-producing *E. coli* strains obtained from chicken meat samples; however, *qnrA, qnrC, qnrD*, and *aac(6')-Ib-cr* genes were not found (Kürekci et al., 2018).

Quinolones are known to occur mainly through the accumulation of target enzyme point mutations. DNA gyrase (*gyrA* and *gyrB*) tend to be the primary target of quinolone in gram-negative bacteria, including *E. coli*, whereas in gram-positive bacteria, topoisomerase IV (*parC* and *parE*) is the primary target (Vanni et al., 2014). However, in the current study, *E. coli* isolates were not examined for chromosomal mutations. In addition, only PMQR genes were investigated in *E. coli* isolates, and PMQR genes were found in none of the isolates. In a study conducted by Xu et al. (2014), four topoisomerase point mutations showed ciprofloxacin MIC ≥ 32 µg/mL in all *E. coli* isolates, and the authors noted that higher ciprofloxacin MIC usually had more complex quinolone-resistant determinants, including PMQR mechanisms. In the same study (Xu et al., 2014), PMQR determinants were identified in more than 60% of the *E. coli* isolates. Xu et al. (2014) also noted the MIC value of ciprofloxacin was highly related to the accumulation of a resistance mechanism.

A meaningful correlation has been reported between ESBL (together with CTX-M types) and PMQR genes (Branger et al., 2005; Nordmann and Poirel, 2005). In a recent study of ESBL *E. coli* in milk and chicken meat samples by Kürekci et al. (2018), a significantly high rate of ESBL (86.7%) *E. coli* strains were reported to be isolated, and the authors noted that the CTX-M gene was quite prevalent (62.3%) in these isolates. In this study, 8.3% of the isolated CR *E. coli* was determined to be ESBL-positive, and two isolates (3.4%) possessed the *bla*<sub>CTX-M</sub> and *bla*<sub>C</sub><sub>MY2</sub> genes, whereas 40 isolates (67.8%) possessed the *bla*<sub>TEM</sub> gene. Similar findings were reported from other studies (Cohen Stuart et al., 2012; Xu et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2015). Moreover, all ampicillin-resistant isolates were positive for the presence of the *bla*<sub>TEM</sub> gene. Literak et al. (2013) reported similar results for broiler samples in the Czech Republic.

**CONCLUSION**

The current study showed high rates of CR *E. coli* among retail chicken meat samples. Therefore, the prudent use of antimicrobial agents is an important issue to poultry farmers in Turkey. Although MDR was found to be high, the absence of the PMQR gene was favorable in terms of a public health concern. Hence, continuously investigating the MDR level and the feasibility of the limitations of antibiotics and the restrictions is essential.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None declared by the authors.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank Assoc. Prof. Dr. Cemil Kürekci (Hatay Mustafa Kemal University) for reviewing and discussing the results. I also would like to thank Dr. Özlem Ünalı (Public Health Institution of Turkey, Ankara) for helping me to analyze PFGE banding pattern on software. This research was supported by the Scientific Research Project Fund of Sivas Cumhuriyet University (Project Number: CUBAP V-083).
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