Streptococcus suis Meningitis with Bilateral Sensorineural Hearing Loss

Hee Jae Huh, M.D.1, Kyoung-Jin Park, M.D.1, Ja-Hyun Jang, M.D.1, Mina Lee, M.D.1, Jang Ho Lee, M.T.1, Yoon Hee Ahn, M.T.1, Cheol-In Kang, M.D.2, Chang-Seok Ki, M.D.1, and Nam Yong Lee, M.D.1

Departments of Laboratory Medicine and Genetics1 and Infectious Diseases2, Samsung Medical Center, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, Seoul, Korea

Streptococcus suis infection is an emerging zoonosis in Asia. The most common disease manifestation is meningitis, which is often associated with hearing loss and cochleovestibular signs. S. suis infection in humans mainly occurs among risk groups that have frequent exposure to pigs or raw pork. Here, we report a case of S. suis meningitis in a 67-yr-old pig carcass handler, who presented with dizziness and sensorineural hearing loss followed by headaches. Gram-positive diplococci were isolated from cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and blood cultures and showed gray-white colonies with α-hemolysis. S. suis was identified from CSF and blood cultures by using a Vitek 2 system (bioMérieux, France), API 20 STREP (bioMérieux), and performing 16S rRNA and tuf gene sequencing. Even after receiving antibiotic treatment, patients with S. suis infection frequently show complications such as hearing impairment and vestibular dysfunction. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first case of S. suis meningitis in Korea. Prevention through public health surveillance is recommended, especially for individuals who have occupational exposures to swine and raw pork.

Key Words: Streptococcus suis, Meningitis, Hearing loss, Korea

INTRODUCTION

Streptococcus suis is an important swine pathogen associated with a wide range of diseases in pigs. The upper respiratory tract, genital, and alimentary tracts are the natural habitats of the pathogen in pigs [1]. S. suis is mainly transmitted to human beings by cutaneous contact with infected pigs or raw pork, especially when the skin has cuts and abrasions [2]. Human infection presents predominantly as acute meningitis or arthritis, but may also present with pneumonia, endophthalmitis, endocarditis, and fatal septicemia. Patients with S. suis meningitis can develop permanent hearing loss [1, 3, 4]. Since the first human case was reported in Denmark in 1968, over 700 cases have been reported worldwide; most are from the European and Asian countries [2, 5]. Here, we report the first case of S. suis meningitis in Korea.

CASE REPORT

Sixty-seven-year-old man, working as a pig carcass handler, presented with hearing difficulty and dizziness followed by nausea and headache for 5 days. He had a history of hypertension and diabetes mellitus. On admission, his temperature was 35.1°C, blood pressure was 86/65 mm Hg, pulse rate was 61 beats per min, and respiratory rate was 19 breaths per min. Although he was alert and oriented, physical examination revealed neck stiffness and limb and gait ataxia. Laboratory investigation showed a leukocyte count of 10,190/mm³ with 90% polymorphonuclear cells and a platelet count of 87,000/mm³. The serum glucose level was 257 mg/dL, and the serum creatinine level had increased to 1.69 mg/dL. The patient’s cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) was turbid and had 2,350 leukocytes/μL (polymorphonuclear cells, 81%), he had a protein concentration of 349.9 mg/dL, and a glu-
cose concentration of 10 mg/dL (serum glucose level of 257 mg/dL). Therefore, bacterial meningitis was immediately suspected. After performing CSF analysis and 2 sets of peripheral blood cultures, empirical antibiotic treatment with intravenous ampicillin, ceftriaxone, and vancomycin was initiated.

Computed tomographic (CT) scans of the head and temporal bone showed normal results. However, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain showed abnormal enhancement of the leptomeninges in both the cerebral hemispheres (Fig. 1). Pure-tone audiometry showed profound bilateral sensorineural hearing loss.

On day 2 at the hospital, aerobic bottles of both blood culture sets grew gram-positive diplococci after 8 hr of incubation in the BacT/Alert 3D system (bioMérieux Inc; Durham, NC, USA). CSF samples cultured in the thioglycollate broth also grew the same organisms (Fig. 2). Subinoculation on sheep blood agar plates was performed for both the CSF and blood cultures. After 24 hr of incubation at 35°C in the presence of 5% CO₂, we observed small gray-white colonies that showed catalase negativity, optochin resistance, and α-hemolytic activity. After prolonged incubation for 48 hr, large colonies were visible and the α-hemolysis was more pronounced (Fig. 3). This organism was identified as S. suis bio-type II using the Vitek 2 Gram-Positive Identification (GPI) card (probability, 99.0%; which represents excellent identification [ID]); (bioMérieux; Marcy-l’Etoile, France) and the API 20 STREP (profile code 4771473, % ID 99.7%, T index...
Fig. 4. Molecular phylogenetic tree constructed by neighbor-joining method using the 16s rRNA (A) and tuf gene (B) sequences of our S. suis isolate and various Streptococcus species. Reference sequences were from the type strains of the species and accession numbers are given in parentheses. All names and accession numbers are given as cited in the GenBank database. (Continued to the next page)
We performed 16S rRNA gene sequencing for the CSF isolate. The 16S rRNA gene fragments were amplified by standard methods according to CLSI guidelines [6]. Two subregions of the 16S rRNA gene were amplified using the following primer pairs: forward, 4F: 5’-TTG GAG AGT TTG ATC CTG GCT C-3’ and reverse, 534R: 5’-TAC CGC GGC TGC TGC TGG CTC AG-3’ and reverse, 801R: 5’-AGA GTT TCA TCM TGG CTC AG-3’. The tuf gene fragments were amplified with the forward (55C-F: 5’-GCC AGT TGA GGA CGT ATT CT-3’) and reverse (55C-R: 5’-CCA TTT CAG TAC CTT CTG GTA A-3’) primers. Puriﬁed PCR products were sequenced directly by using the BigDye Terminator Cycle Sequencing Kit 3.1 (Applied Biosystems; Foster City, CA, USA) on an ABI Prism 3100 ge-

Fig. 4. (Continued from the previous page) Molecular phylogenetic tree constructed by neighbor-joining method using the 16s rRNA (A) and tuf gene (B) sequences of our S. suis isolate and various Streptococcus species. Reference sequences were from the type strains of the species and accession numbers are given in parentheses. All names and accession numbers are given as cited in the GenBank database.
S. suis is a gram-positive facultative anaerobe, which is coccoid or ovoid in shape and occurs as single cells, in pairs, or in short chains. On the basis of the capsular polysaccharides, 35 serotypes of S. suis have been identified. Although the serotype was not identified in this case, serotype 2 is most commonly associated with diseases in pigs and human beings and is the most frequently reported serotype worldwide [1, 11, 12]. Most S. suis strains produce narrow zones of α-hemolysis on sheep blood agar plates. S. suis serotype 2 colonies show α- and β-hemolysis on sheep and horse blood agar plates, respectively [13]. Because the growth of S. suis on sheep blood agar plates is commonly used to identify the species in routine diagnostic laboratories, this species may be mistaken for viridans streptococci. Although bacteriological diagnosis was made using commercial identification systems in this case, S. suis infections are often misidentified, or may remain undiagnosed [2]. S. suis is commonly misidentified and reported as Streptococcus species, α-hemolytic or viridans streptococci, Enterococcus fecalis, Aerococcus viridans, or even Streptococcus pneumoniae [2, 14]. An S. suis infection should be considered in regions with pig-farming industries or in patients who are in contact with pigs or raw pork, if optochin-resistant Streptococcus are cultured from a CSF sample obtained from a patient with meningitis. Further microbiological investigations are required for the identification of α-hemolytic streptococci other than S. pneumoniae.

Molecular techniques with PCR have improved the rate of detection of S. suis. The 16S RNA gene sequencing technique is a useful and definitive method for most Streptococcus spp. For certain genera or groups of microorganisms, the use of alternative gene targets such as the tuf gene is necessary, because some species may share 99% to 100% 16S rRNA sequence identity [6]. Thus, 16S RNA and tuf gene sequencing were performed in this case. In phylogenetic analysis, the CSF isolate presented here was homologous with S. suis type strains based on 16S rRNA (GenBank accession number, AF009477.1) and tuf gene sequencing (AF274744.1), respectively (Fig. 4). Serotype-specific PCR assays and serological tests can be useful tools for the identification of S. suis serotypes [1, 15, 16]. Some commercial biochemical identification systems also report the biotype of S. suis (biotype I or II) [2]. Wertheim et al. suggested that the S. suis biotype should not be mistaken for serotype 1 or 2, as was done in some previous reports [2, 17, 18].

S. suis infections have been reported worldwide. However, the majority of human cases have occurred in Asia (China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan) [1, 2, 19]. S. suis infections in humans rarely occur in Korea. To date, only one S. suis infection in humans has been reported in Korea [20]. However, the possibility of undiagnosed S. suis infections...
cannot be excluded. Although most reports of *S. suis* infections are sporadic cases, outbreaks of human *S. suis* infections are infrequently reported. Of note, the 2005 outbreak that occurred in Sichuan Province, China, involved 215 cases and caused 38 deaths, emphasizing the importance of *S. suis* as an emerging zoonosis [21].

*S. suis* infections in humans are most often reported from countries where pig rearing is common, and the people who are in daily contact with pigs are usually affected. The relatively high mean-patient age, the almost complete absence of children in the case series, and the high male-to-female patient ratio support the notion that *S. suis* infection is principally an occupational disease [2, 4, 21-23]. In our case, the patient was exposed to *S. suis* through infected tissues of pig carcasses, which were handled without proper protection, such as gloves. Besides occupational exposure, processing or consuming uncooked or partially cooked pork products is also a risk factor for infection [2, 22-24]. Patients are generally healthy prior to infection with *S. suis*, although predisposing factors, such as diabetes mellitus, alcoholism, and malignancy have been reported [25].

*S. suis* infection is typically manifested as meningitis. One remarkable symptom of *S. suis* meningitis is sensorineural hearing loss, which may be reported by up to half of the patients either at presentation or a few days later. This hearing loss is often bilateral, profound, and permanent [3, 22]. Deafness with or without vestibular dysfunction is thought to be attributed to direct infection of the cochlea. *S. suis* is believed to enter the perilymph via the cochlear aqueduct through the lytic action of exotoxins [3]. Patients with *S. suis* meningitis may also show permanent incapacitation by vertigo and gait instability because of vestibular dysfunction. Such patients should immediately receive vestibular rehabilitation to improve their independence in daily activities [3, 26].

Analogous to protocols for any case of with suspected bacterial meningitis, immediate antibiotic administration is the first step in the treatment of bacterial meningitis. For empirical treatment, ceftriaxone with vancomycin (the same treatment dose and duration that is used for pneumococcal meningitis) is a good choice until the diagnosis is confirmed. *S. suis* is sensitive to many antibiotics [1, 2]. Thus, once *S. suis* is verified as an infectious agent, antibiotic treatment accompanied with other associated treatments is very effective. After the confirmation of the presence of an *S. suis* infection, patients are generally treated with penicillin G, accompanied by one or more other antibiotics including ceftriaxone, gentamicin, chloramphenicol, and ampicillin. Penicillin G (24 million units over 24 hr for at least 10 days) or ceftriaxone (2 g every 12 hr for at least 10 days) has been used successfully for the treatment of *S. suis* meningitis. Relapse of *S. suis* meningitis has been reported after 2 weeks of treatment with penicillin or ceftriaxone. However, the patients responded to a prolonged antibiotic treatment for 4-6 weeks [1, 2, 23, 27]. The use of dexamethasone as an adjunctive treatment to reduce mortality and improve the outcome of bacterial meningitis remains controversial [28]. Quick diagnosis and early antibiotic treatment are the most important factors in decreasing the damage caused by *S. suis* infection. Therefore, in patients presenting with meningitis, if characteristic features such as prominent and early hearing loss are observed, *S. suis* should be considered regardless of the patient’s occupational background.

Currently, there is no human *S. suis* vaccine. Therefore, prevention of transmission to humans depends on the control of spread of *S. suis* from infected pigs. Improvement of pig-raising conditions and pig vaccination are both effective methods to reduce the risk of human infection. Furthermore, increasing awareness of the disease by educating high-risk populations is also expected to help avoid human infection. Individuals with open wounds should wear gloves when handling raw or uncooked pork, and anyone who prepares pork should wash his or her hands and clean all the utensils thoroughly after contact [1, 29].

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report of *S. suis* meningitis in humans in Korea. This case should remind clinicians that *S. suis* meningitis affects people who are in daily contact with pigs. During diagnosis, *S. suis* infection should not be confused with infections caused by other *Streptococcus* species. Prevention through public health surveillance is needed, and people with occupational exposures to swine and/or pork products should be educated. Increased awareness among both clinicians and microbiologists is required to fully appreciate the importance of *S. suis* infection as an emerging zoonosis and to promote early diagnosis and prevention of sequelae.

Authors’ Disclosures of Potential Conflicts of Interest
No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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