In vivo Emergence of Colistin and Tigecycline Resistance in Carbapenem-Resistant Hypervirulent Klebsiella pneumoniae During Antibiotics Treatment

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Three carbapenem-resistant Klebsiella pneumoniae (CRKP; strains KP-426, KP-C76, and KP-CT77) were isolated from a patient with severe burns during the treatment of colistin and tigecycline. Single-nucleotide polymorphism typing showed that three ST11 CRKP were clonally related. Three isolates harbored the same set of antimicrobial resistance genes. blaKPC-2, blaSHV-12, blaTEM-1, and rmtB genes were located on the same 128,928-bp IncFII/IncR plasmid. Tet(A), catA2, sul2, and dfrA14 genes were located on a plasmid with an unknown Inc-type. blaSHV-11, fosA, and aadA2 were chromosomal genes. An IS1 and an ISKpn14 were found in the promoter region of the mgrB gene of two colistin-resistant CRKP, K. pneumoniae KP-C76, and KP-CT77, respectively. A novel amino acid substitution, G300E, was identified in the type 1 Tet(A) variant of K. pneumoniae KP-CT77 which exhibited high-level tigecycline resistance compared to strains KP-426 and KP-C76 (MIC of 32, 4, and 4 mg/l, respectively). Conjugation and cloning experiments confirmed that the mutated Tet(A) resulted in a 4-fold increase in tigecycline minimal inhibitory concentration (MIC) of Escherichia coli. Three CRKP belonged to the K64 serotype and possessed a similar IncHI1B/repB virulence plasmid carrying rmpA, rmpA2, and iucABCDiutA. The survival rates of Galleria Mellonella injected with K. pneumoniae KP-426, KP-C76, and KP-CT77 were 4.2, 20.8, and 8.3%, respectively. The emergence of colistin and tigecycline resistance in carbapenem-resistant hypervirulent K. pneumoniae posed a serious threat to clinical anti-infective therapy. The type 1 Tet(A) variant carrying G300E mutation, which conferred significantly elevated tigecycline MIC and was located on a conjugative plasmid, needs attention.

Keywords: carbapenem-resistant hypervirulent Klebsiella pneumonia, colistin resistance, mgrB, tigecycline resistance, tet(A)
INTRODUCTION

Carbapenems are important antimicrobial agents for the treatment of infections caused by multidrug-resistant Gram-negative bacteria. The emergence and spread of carbapenem-resistant Enterobacterales (CRE), especially carbapenem-resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (CRKP), pose a great threat to human health (Nordmann, 2014). According to the data of the China Antimicrobial Surveillance Network, the prevalence of CRKP in Chinese tertiary hospitals sharply increased from 3.0% in 2005 to 26.3% in 2018 (Hu et al., 2019). This remarkable increasing trend may be attributed to the dissemination of sequence type (ST) 11 clone that harbored conservative mobile elements carrying *bla*KPC-2 or *bla*TEM gene (Zhang et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2018). More worryingly, carbapenem-resistant hypervirulent *K. pneumoniae* (CR-hvKP) are increasing in recent years and their infections usually led to severe clinical outcomes and even death (Gu et al., 2018; Lan et al., 2021). Currently, the therapeutic options for CRE infections remain very limited. Polymyxins, tigecycline, and ceftazidime/avibactam are considered as last-resort antibiotics in the US and China (Overbeek et al., 2014). Therefore, resistance to these antibiotics is a critical public health problem.

In this study, three clonally related CR-hvKP consecutively isolated from the same patient were investigated. Molecular analysis revealed the in vivo evolution of colistin and tigecycline resistance following the treatment with colistin and tigecycline.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Patient and Bacterial Strains

A 39-year-old male with a burn injury (80% total burn surface area) received an emergency operation after admission to a hospital in Hangzhou, China, in 2020. Empirical antibiotic therapy with ceftazidime/sulbactam (1:1, 2 g IV every 12 h) was immediately initiated. A high fever (39.2°C) occurred on the 3rd day and ceftazidime/sulbactam was replaced with tigecycline (100 mg IV every 12 h) and teicoplanin (400 mg IV once a day). The second debridement was done on the next day. A CRKP (strain KP-426) was isolated from the burn wound during the operation. On the 7th day, blood culture suggested CRKP bloodstream infection, and polymyxin B (500,000 IU IV every 8 h) was added. Polymyxin B was withdrawn on Day 13 due to the negative result of the subsequent blood cultures. However, CRKP did not cleared from the patient’s burn wound and *Acinetobacter baumannii* (CRAB) emerged. On Day 23, a debridement was performed and a high fever (40°C) occurred on the same day. Thus, in addition to the continued use of tigecycline, polymyxin B was added to the treatment regimen until Day 32. During this period, CRKP and CRAB persisted in the patient’s burn wound and central venous catheter. After an operation on Day 36, vancomycin (2 g IV every 6 h) was added for anti-infection subsequently. Later on, a colistin-resistant CRKP (strain KP-C76) and a colistin- and tigecycline-resistant CRKP (strain KP-CT77) were isolated from the wound and urine samples, respectively. The anti-infective strategies were modified to ceftazidime/avibactam (2.5 g IV every 8 h) according to the antimicrobial susceptibility results. Both colistin-resistant CRKP were subsequently cleared; however, CRKP and CRAB could be detected occasionally from the central venous catheter and wound samples during the rest of the treatment. The patient received multiple operations, including wound debridement, closed drainage, negative-pressure wound therapy, flap repair, autologous dermal scaffold graft, and skin grafts. When he was discharged, most of the wounds healed. The routine antimicrobial susceptibility testing for CRKP isolates from multiple samples showed the same antimicrobial susceptibility profile. Therefore, only the initial CRKP (strain KP-426) was collected and used as colistin- and tigecycline-susceptible strain in this study. To investigate the evolutionary route of colistin and tigecycline resistance, three CRKP isolates of KP-426, KP-C76, and KP-CT77 were subjected to whole-genome sequencing (WGS) and further analysis. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Second Affiliated Hospital of Zhejiang University School of Medicine (approval number 2020–734), and consent was given by the patient.

Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing

The minimal inhibitory concentrations (MICs) of 16 antimicrobial agents were determined using the broth microdilution method and interpreted according to the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI) guidelines (Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute, 2018, 2020). The susceptibility breakpoint for cepheperazone was applied for cefoperazone/sulbactam. Tigecycline susceptibility was interpreted using breakpoints for Enterobacterales recommended by United States Food and Drug Administration (≤2 mg/l, susceptible; 4 mg/l, intermediate; ≥8 mg/l, resistant).1

WGS and Genome Analysis

Three CRKP were sequenced using the Illuma NovaSeq 6,000 platform and the Nanopore PromethION 48. Hybrid assembly of short and long reads was conducted with Unicycler v0.4.4 (Wick et al., 2017). The sequence types and antimicrobial resistance genes of three isolates were identified at the Center for Genomic Epidemiology (CGE) using MLST and ResFinder 4.1, respectively2 (Larsen et al., 2012; Zankari et al., 2012). The plasmids carrying *tet*(A), *bla*KPC-2, and virulence genes were annotated with both the RAST server3 and BLAST program,4 respectively (Overbeek et al., 2014). The plasmid types were identified by using PlasmidFinder 2.1 available at CGE (Carattoli et al., 2014). Comparison of sequences of plasmids carrying *tet*(A), *bla*KPC-2, and virulence genes was conducted using BRIG (v0.95), respectively (Alikhan et al., 2011). The Harvest suite was applied to run core-genome alignment and single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) calling (Treangen et al., 2014). The phylogenetic tree was constructed using Parsnp and was edited

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1 https://www.fda.gov/drugs/development-resources/tigecycline-injection-products
2 https://cge.cbs.dtu.dk/services/
3 http://ra.st.nmpdr.org/
4 https://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi
and visualized by iTOL (v3; Letunic and Bork, 2016). To investigate the mechanism of colistin resistance, the mgrB genes and their genetic context and the PmrA/PmrB and PhoP/PhoQ two-component regulatory systems among three CRKP were compared. The insertion sequences (ISs) were identified using ISfinder. Virulence genes were identified using Kleborate (v0.3.0). Capsular typing on the assembled sequences was conducted using Kaptive (v0.5.1; Wyres et al., 2016).

**RESULTS**

**Antimicrobial Susceptibility Results**

Three *K. pneumoniae* isolates exhibited almost the same susceptibility profile except for colistin and tigecycline (Table 1). These isolates were resistant to β-lactams, ciprofloxacin, amikacin, and tetracycline but were susceptible to ceftazidime/avibactam. The initial CRKP KP-426 isolated from the wound sample was susceptible to colistin (MIC of 1 mg/l) and intermediate to tigecycline (MIC of 4 mg/l). *K. pneumoniae* KP-C76 and KP-CT77, isolated from wound and urine samples on Day 36, respectively, were resistant to colistin with MIC of 4 mg/l and 8 mg/l, respectively. Moreover, *K. pneumoniae* KP-CT77 showed much higher tigecycline MIC than those of strains KP-426 and KP-C76 (32 mg/l/V.S. 4 mg/l).

**Genomic Analysis of CRKP**

Genomes of three *K. pneumoniae* isolates with similar size of approximately 5.9 Mbp were obtained. Each CRKP contained several plasmids (Table 2). All three isolates belonged to ST11, which is the predominant ST of CRKP in China (Zhang et al., 2017). Pairwise SNP analysis showed that the number of SNPs between each *K. pneumoniae* isolate ranged from 11 to 14, suggesting that these strains belonged to the same clone according to the previous definition (Schurch et al., 2018). Antimicrobial resistance genes screening revealed the presence of the same set of resistance determinants, which conferred resistance to β-lactams including carbapenems (*bla*<sub>KPC-2</sub>, *bla*<sub>TEC-1</sub>, *bla*<sub>AVI-1</sub>, and *bla*<sub>HVR-12</sub>), fosfomycin (*fosA*), tetracycline [tet(A)], chloramphenicol (*catA2*), trimethoprim (*draF14*), sulfonamides (*sul2*), and aminoglycosides (*rmtB* and *aadA2*), in three CRKP.

Sequence analysis showed that the Tet(A) in *K. pneumoniae* KP-426 and KP-C76 with a mutation profile of I5R, V55M, I75V, T84A, S201A, F202S, and V203F belonged to unknown Inc-type. Three *E. coli* transconjugants showed high-level resistance to tetracycline (MICs of 64 mg/l or 128 mg/l) and various-level elevated tigecycline MIC. The tigecycline MIC of the transconjugant of *K. pneumoniae* KP-CT77 showed much higher tigecycline MIC than those of strains KP-426 and KP-C76.

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| Strain                     | IPM  | MEM  | ETP  | CAZ  | CTX  | TZP  | SCF  | CZA  | FEP  | ATM  | CMZ  | CIP  | AK   | TET  | COL  | TGC  |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| K. pneumoniae KP-426      | 64   | 128  | 128  | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | 1    | 4    |
| K. pneumoniae KP-C76      | 64   | 128  | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | 4    | 4    |
| K. pneumoniae KP-CT77     | 64   | 64   | 128  | 128  | 128  | 128/64 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | >128 | 8    | 32   |
| E. coli EO600             | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 1    | ≤0.25 | ≤0.5 | 1    | 0.125 |
| E. coli EO600 transconjugant of KP-426 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 1    | ≤0.25 | ≤0.5 | 64   | 1    | 0.25 |
| E. coli EO600 transconjugant of KP-C76 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 1    | ≤0.25 | ≤0.5 | 128  | 1    | 1    |
| E. coli DH55x             | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 1    | ≤0.25 | ≤0.5 | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.125 |
| E. coli DH55x/pUC18       | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 4    | 64   | 0.5  | 0.25 |
| E. coli DH55x/pUC18-tet(A)| ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≤4/4 | 1    | ≤0.5/4 | ≤0.5 | ≤0.5 | ≥0.5 | 0.5  | 0.5  | 0.5  | 128  | 0.5  | 1    |

*IPM, imipenem; MEM, meropenem; ETP, ertapenem; CAZ, ceftazidime; CTX, cefotaxime; TZP, piperacillin/tazobactam; SCF, cefoperazone/sulbactam; CZA, ceftazidime/avibactam; FEP, cefepime; ATM, aztreonam; CMZ, cefmetazole; CIP, ciprofloxacin; AK, amikacin; TET, tetracycline; COL, colistin, and TGC, tigecycline. For piperacillin/tazobactam and ceftazidime/avibactam, the tazobactam and avibactam were tested at a fixed concentration of 4 mg/l. For cefoperazone/sulbactam, the combination was tested with concentrations of 2:1 ratio (antibiotic: inhibitor).*
**TABLE 2 |** The genomes and their sizes of three CRKP.

| Strain      | Chromosome* | Plasmid 1               | Plasmid 2              | Plasmid 3              | Plasmid 4 | Plasmid 5 | Plasmid 6 | BioSample accession no. |
|-------------|-------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| K. pneumoniae KP-426 | 5,472,713bp (bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1, fosA, aadA2) | 188,058bp (IncHI1/IncR; mmpA, mmpA2, iucABC; iutA) | 128,928bp (IncFII/IncI1; iucABCD; iutA) | 80,673bp [tet(A), catA2, su2, dfrA14] | 31,808bp (IncX4) | 11,970bp (ColRNAI) | 5,596bp | SAMN20373013 |
| K. pneumoniae KP-C76 | 5,469,888bp (bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1, fosA, aadA2) | 197,407bp (IncHI1/IncR; mmpA, mmpA2, iucABC; iutA) | 128,928bp (IncFII/IncI1; iucABCD; iutA) | 80,673bp [tet(A), catA2, su2, dfrA14] | - | - | - | SAMN20373014 |
| K. pneumoniae KP-CT77 | 5,470,680bp (bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1, fosA, aadA2) | 186,446bp (IncHI1/IncR; mmpA, mmpA2, iucABC; iutA) | 128,928bp (IncFII/IncI1; iucABCD; iutA) | 92,645bp [tet(A), catA2, su2, dfrA14] | 31,808bp (IncX4) | - | - | SAMN20375149 |

*The plasmid Inc-type, antimicrobial resistance genes, and virulence genes were indicated in brackets if applicable.

determinants (QnrS1 and LAP-2), was found in a CRKP isolate from a sputum sample from a hospital in Hangzhou city. The same 128,928-bp IncFII/IncR plasmid carrying bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1, mmpA, mmpA2, and rmtB genes was identified in three CRKP. The DNA sequence was extremely similar to that of a bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1-bearing plasmid p3_L39 (GenBank accession no. CP033956.1) from a fecal CRKP isolate from another hospital in Hangzhou city except for the presence of bla<sub>CTX-M-4</sub> gene in the latter (Figure 1B).

Alignment of the mgrB genes and their genetic context from three CRKP revealed an insertion of a 777-bp DNA fragment in the two colistin-resistant CRKP. An IS1 and an ISKpn14, both belong to the IS1 family, were identified between nucleotide positions −29 and −30 when referring to the mgrB start codon as +1, in K. pneumoniae KP-C76 and KP-CT77, respectively. This insertion was considered to inactivate the promoter concerning the mgrB expression and led to the acquired resistance to colistin (Poirel et al., 2015).

**Effects of Tet(A) and Tet(A) Carrying G300E Substitution on Tigecycline Resistance**

Cloning experiments were performed to check whether the G300E substitution in the type 1 Tet(A) variant could lead to the development of tigecycline resistance. The susceptibility profile of E. coli DH5α carrying recombinant plasmid pUC18-tet(A) or pUC18-tet(A)-G300E was almost the same as that of transconjugants of K. pneumoniae KP-C76 or KP-CT77, respectively. The type 1 Tet(A) variant slightly increased the tigecycline MIC in the E. coli transformant (2-fold). Surprisingly, the transformant harboring the type 1 Tet(A) variant with G300E substitution showed an 8-fold increase in tigecycline MIC. These results confirmed that the G300E substitution was responsible for mediating the significantly elevated tigecycline MIC.

**Virulence Analysis**

Three CRKP belonged to the K64 serotype, which was the most common serotype among KPC-2-producing K. pneumoniae in China (Zhang et al., 2020). Multiple virulence-associated determinants encoding the regulators of mucoid phenotype (rmpA and rmpA2 genes) and siderophores (iucABCDiutA cluster) were identified in an IncHI1B/repB plasmid. These virulence genes were predicted to be the best markers of hvKP (Russo and Marr, 2019), thus three CRKP were classified as CR-hvKP. Three virulence plasmids shared a similar nucleotide sequence and aligned well with the plasmid pKP58-1 (GenBank accession no. CP041374.1) which harbored in a CRKP isolate from a urine sample from a hospital in Hangzhou city (Figure 1C). The hypervirulent phenotype in three CR-hvKP was observed in the G. mellonella infection model. The survival rates of the larvae injected with KP-426, KP-C76, and KP-CT77 (an inoculum of 1 × 10<sup>8</sup> CFU) at 48 h after infection were significantly lower than that of negative control isolate K. pneumoniae FJ8 (4.2, 20.8, and 8.4% VS. 83.3%; Figure 2).

**DISCUSSION**

Colistin and tigecycline are the few therapies for serious infections caused by CRE. This study described the in vivo development of resistance to both antibiotics in CR-hvKP during the treatment, which greatly limited the choice of antibiotics. Ceftazidime/avibactam is the only antibiotic available in China presently that showed activity against such isolates. Worryingly, surveillance data from China showed that the bla<sub>TEM</sub>-1 gene, the majority of which was located on IncX3 plasmid with high conjugation efficiencies, was responsible for phenotypic resistance in 32% of the CRE (Zhang et al., 2017). What’s worse, CR-hvKP was more frequently detected than previously assumed in China (Zhang et al., 2020). These factors threatened the high risk of the acquisition of colistin, tigecycline, and ceftazidime/avibactam resistance in CR-hvKP, which would lead to serious clinical outcomes. The management and appropriate application of antibiotics are crucial to prevent this troublesome trend. Fortunately, the patient in this study has recovered after wound repair and effective anti-infection therapies.
To clear CRKP from the bloodstream and burn wound, colistin was used in combination with tigecycline for 3 weeks, and two colistin-resistant CRKP were subsequently recovered from the wound and urine samples, respectively. It has been reported that alterations of the *mgrB* gene are common mechanisms of colistin resistance in *K. pneumoniae* (Cannatelli et al., 2014; Poirel et al., 2015). Interestingly, insertional inactivation of the *mgrB* gene by different insertion sequences (IS1 and IS*Kpn14*) was identified among these two clonally related isolates, suggesting the evolution of colistin resistance in two isolates was an independent event. These findings show that prolonged use of colistin could lead to the development of colistin-resistant CRKP through IS element-mediated inactivation of the *mgrB* gene.

The type 1 Tet(A) variant was frequently detected (75%) in the tigecycline-resistant CRKP in Taiwan and was found to play an important role in tigecycline resistance (Chiu et al., 2017). In this study, *E. coli* containing the type 1 Tet(A) variant showed an only 2-fold increase in the tigecycline MIC. CRKP could not be completely cleared from the bloodstream or burn wound although tigecycline was used throughout the patient’s treatment. This phenomenon may be due to the presence of the type 1 tet(A) variant in these CRKP isolates (exhibiting reduced susceptibility to tigecycline in the routine antimicrobial susceptibility testing but not included in this study). Worse, a CRKP (strain KP-CT77) showed high-level tigecycline resistance mediated by a novel tet(A) variant carrying a G300E mutation was selected after 32 days of tigecycline treatment. The G300E substitution was initially identified in the type 1 Tet(A) variant
of tigecycline-resistant mutants obtained by in vitro selection (Linkevicius et al., 2016); however, to our best knowledge, no natural G300E mutation has been detected in clinical isolate. Plasmids analysis showed that the 92,648-bp pCT77-tetA from K. pneumoniae KP-CT77 was a hybrid of an 80,673-bp tet(A)-carrying plasmid and an 11,970-bp ColRNAI plasmid observed in both strains KP-426 and KP-C76, suggesting the evolution of tet(A)-carrying plasmid in K. pneumoniae in the presence of selective pressure in vivo. Since tet(A) and mutated tet(A) genes can spread through horizontal plasmid transfer, further investigations will be necessary to understand the epidemiology and evolution of tet(A)-carrying plasmids.

CONCLUSION

We reported the in vivo evolution of colistin- and tigecycline-resistant CR-hvKP associated with antibiotics therapy in a Chinese patient. A novel amino acid substitution, G300E, which conferred significantly elevated tigecycline MIC, was identified in the type 1 Tet(A) variant.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The genomes of three K. pneumoniae isolates have been submitted to NCBI GenBank under BioSample accession numbers SAMN20373013, SAMN20373014, and SAMN20375149.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Second Affiliated Hospital of Zhejiang University School of Medicine. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

JCa and RZ conceived and designed the work and reviewed and improved the manuscript. JCa collected and provided the isolates. JCh, YZ, and JCa performed the experiments and analyzed the data. JCh drafted the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

The work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (81971988) and the Zhejiang Provincial Natural Science Foundation of China (LY18H200001).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Dr. Nanxia Xuan for her guidance on the patient’s treatment description.
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