In silico analyses and design of chimeric proteins containing epitopes of *Bartonella henselae* antigens for the control of cat scratch disease

Jênifer Malheiros Gonçalves¹,² · Thayná Laner Cardoso¹ · Stella Buchhorn de Freitas¹,² · Rafael Woloski² · A Milton Pinto Seixas Neto¹ · Luciano da Silva Pinto² · Elba Sampaio de Lemos³ · Daiane Drawanz Hartwig¹,²,4

Received: 27 June 2022 / Revised: 24 October 2022 / Accepted: 31 October 2022 / Published online: 16 November 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer-Verlag GmbH Germany, part of Springer Nature 2022

Abstract
*Bartonella henselae* is a Gram-negative bacterium that causes cat scratch disease (CSD), as well as bacteremia, endocarditis, and other clinical presentations. CSD remains one of the most common infections caused by bacteria in the genus *Bartonella*, and it is transmitted to humans through a scratch or cat bite. Vaccination and more efficient diagnostic methods would represent a promising and sustainable alternative measure for CSD control in humans and animals. Here, we described the in silico analyses and design of three recombinant chimeric proteins (rC1, rC2, and rC3), for use in the control of CSD. The chimeras were constructed with epitopes identified from the sequences of the GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP 89, and OMP 43, previously described as the most important *B. henselae* antigens. The rC1, rC2, and rC3 were expressed and purified using a heterologous system based on *Escherichia coli* and reacted with antibodies present in the sera of humans naturally infected. The chimeric proteins were used to immunize mice using Freund adjuvant, and the humoral immune response was evaluated. Animals immunized with rC1 and rC3 showed a significant IgG antibodies response from the 28th day (*P* < 0.05), and the animals immunized with the rC2 from the 35th day (*P* < 0.05) remained until the 56th day of experimentation, with a titer of 1:3200 (*P* < 0.05), 1:1600 (*P* < 0.05) and 1:1600 (*P* < 0.05) from rC1, rC2, and rC3, respectively. Significant production of IgA and IgG1 isotype was detected in animals immunized with rC1 and rC2 proteins. Additionally, analysis using 13 serum samples from naturally infected patients showed that the proteins are recognized by antibodies present in sera, reinforcing the possibility of using these chimeras for CSD control.

Key points
- The recombinant chimeras were expressed in *Escherichia coli* with 37 kDa (rC1), 35 kDa (rC2), and 38 kDa (rC3).
- Animals immunized with rC1, rC2, and rC3 showed significant antibody response.
- The chimeras were recognized by the sera of naturally infected patients.

Keywords  In silico analysis · Recombinant protein · Vaccine · Diagnosis

Introduction

*Bartonella henselae* is a Gram-negative, fastidious, facultative intracellular bacterium (Gil et al. 2013). It is considered an important medical species because it infects cats (reservoirs) and humans (accidental hosts) (Breitschwerdt 2017). The transmission of *B. henselae* to cats occurs directly through contact with fleas (*Ctenocephalides felis*) or through stool-infected wounds from these fleas, as well as through ticks (suggested as potential vectors) (Regier et al. 2016; Breitschwerdt 2017). Cats infected with *B. henselae* are often clinically asymptomatic, although they suffer from recurrent bacteremia for long periods. In humans, *B. henselae* is the etiological agent of cat scratch disease (CSD), a frequently self-limiting infection in immunocompetent individuals, but it can be fatal in immunocompromised individuals. Transmission to humans occurs through bites or scratches from flea-infested cats, which eliminate the bacteria in their stool, or directly through contaminated blood (Regier et al. 2016).
Bartonella species are found worldwide and are more pronounced in areas where conditions are more favorable for arthropod vectors, especially fleas (Pennisi et al. 2013). In the USA, CSD is one of the most common zoonoses, resulting in more than 25,000 cases per year. In addition, seropositivity levels in healthy individuals are 19.6% in China, 16% in Sweden, and 8.7% in Spain (Kwon et al. 2017). Although there are some prevalence studies in Brazil, these may be few and may not portray reality in Brazil. However, studies have indicated that the circulation of Bartonella species is common. Serologies show a prevalence of 15–56.6% in cats (Crissiuma et al. 2011; Kitada et al. 2014; Fontalvo et al. 2017) and 3.2–23.5% in humans (Pitassi et al. 2015; Vieira-Damiani et al. 2015). Molecular methods have revealed the prevalence to be 2.2–90.2% in cats (Staggemeier et al. 2014; Malheiro et al. 2016; Drummond et al. 2018) and 3.2–100% in humans (Lamas et al. 2013; Favacho et al. 2014; Pitassi et al. 2015; Vieira-Damiani et al. 2015). With direct detection or antibody research, B. henselae has already been identified in cats in the states of Maranhão (de Oliveira Braga et al. 2012), Pernambuco (Fontalvo et al. 2017); Bahia (Costa et al. 2014), Mato Grosso (Miceli et al. 2013), Mato Grosso do Sul (André et al. 2016), Rio de Janeiro (Crissiuma et al. 2011; Kitada et al. 2014; da Silva et al. 2018), São Paulo (Bortoli et al. 2012; Drummond et al. 2018), and the Rio Grande do Sul (Staggemeier et al. 2014; Malheiro et al. 2016). Similarly, the microorganism has been found in humans in the states of Rio de Janeiro (Lamas et al. 2013; Favacho et al. 2014), São Paulo (Vieira-Damiani et al. 2015; Drummond et al. 2018), and Minas Gerais (Da Costa et al. 2005). Interestingly, studies conducted in Brazil have demonstrated the presence of Bartonella spp. bacteremia in asymptomatic blood donors, reinforcing the need for evaluation of Bartonella blood transmission (Pitassi et al. 2015; Vieira-Damiani et al. 2015).

The prevention of B. henselae infection in humans, as well as the reduction of morbidity and mortality, is based on the control of infection in the cat population. However, infection in cats is difficult to control, as most cats are asymptomatic (Greene et al. 1996; Regnery et al. 1996; Kordick and Breitschwerdt 1997). No successful vaccine against B. henselae has been developed to date. The selection of appropriate B. henselae antigens is critical for the development of a successful vaccine. Additionally, the precise diagnosis of infection (reservoirs and hosts) can be challenging, especially in patients with chronic and long-term infections. Conventional techniques for detecting bacteria or antibodies against bacteria, such as Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA), Western blotting (WB), Indirect Immunofluorescence Assay (IFA), and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), have limitations (Breitschwerdt 2017). IFA is the gold standard serological method for detecting antibodies against B. henselae, and it uses antigens from the entire bacterial cell co-cultivated in Vero cells, which have good sensitivity, but are expensive, laborious, and can have cross-reactions (Ferrara et al. 2014) with B. quintana, Coxella burnetti, Chlamydia pneumoniae, Ehrlichia chaffeensis, Mycoplasma pneumoniae, Escherichia coli, Rickettsia spp., Treponema pallidum, Bordetella pertussis, and Borrelia spp. (Jost et al. 2018). In the ELISA test, whole-cell antigens are used, but they have low sensitivity and specificity (Ferrara et al. 2014).

Outer membrane proteins (OMPs), which are an interface between the bacterium and host cells, may be targets in the development of diagnostic tests and vaccines. B. henselae OMP 43 and OMP 89 proteins play an important role in the adherence and invasion of host cells (Li et al. 2011). Adhesin BadA, another OMP, may also be another important target, as this protein is recognized by antibodies from patients infected with B. henselae (Wagner et al. 2008). In addition, the use of recombinant proteins has been evaluated, and known antigenic proteins such as GroEL (McCool et al. 2008), 17 kDa (Loa et al. 2006; Hoey et al. 2009; Ferrara et al. 2014), Pap31 (Angkasekwian et al. 2014), and P26 (Werner et al. 2008) have already been tested in serological assays. However, all evaluated proteins were used isolated, and in some of them, sensitivity was limited. This fact reinforces the need for the development of new alternatives, as chimeric proteins may be more immunogenic antigens than whole antigens. In this study, we identified immunogenic epitopes on the proteins GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP 89, and OMP 43 of the B. henselae, combined them in silico to produce three recombinant chimeras and assessed the use in diagnosis and vaccine development to control of CSD.

**Materials and methods**

**Antigens selection, protein sequences, and epitopes prediction**

For choosing targets, we searched the PubMed database (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/) to identify B. henselae OMPs. The search terms and the number of studies found were as follows: Bartonella henselae proteins (19); Bartonella henselae outer membrane protein (35); Bartonella henselae antigens (151); Bartonella henselae recombinant proteins (30); and Bartonella henselae immunogenic proteins (9). The summary of these studies was read, and all studies that identified B. henselae antigenic proteins were read in full to identify the targets. The criterion adopted for protein selection was the highest frequency of citation in the articles. Thus, the following proteins were selected: GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP 89, and OMP 43.
GroEL (Accession no. CUH91264), 17 kDa (Accession no. AAF00943), P26 (Accession no. ABB8349), BadA (Accession no. AAT69970), Pap31 (Accession no. AAC39274), OMP 89 (Accession no. CAF27432), and OMP 43 (Accession no. CAF27934) protein sequences were recovered from GenBank, NCBI (http://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) in FASTA format and used in further analysis. The InterPro software (http://www.ebi.ac.uk/interpro/search/sequence/) was used for the functional annotation of proteins.

In silico analysis was performed using predictors available online to identify the linear B cell epitopes in antigens of B. henselae. The selected regions contained 1 to 5 epitopes with 11 to 44 amino acids. The predictors used were as follows: Immune Epitope Database and Analysis Resource (www.iedb.org) and Sequential B-Cell Epitope Predictor 2.0 (http://www.cbs.dtu.dk/services/BepiPred/). The choice of two predictors served to increase the reliability of the selected epitopes. The selected epitopes were analyzed for the presence of orthologs in the species affected by B. henselae using the Basic Logical Alignment Search Tool (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/BLAST) and NCBI BLASTP (https://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi).

**Similarity assessment**

To evaluate homologs of GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap 31, OMP 89, and OMP 43 proteins in the proteomes of Homo sapiens (UniProt Proteome: UP000005640) and Felis catus (UniProt Proteome: UP000011712), two of the main species affected by B. henselae, UniProt BLASTP (www.uniprot.org/BLAST) and NCBI BLASTP (https://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi?PAGE=Proteins) were performed. The similarity assessment was performed both for the chimeras and for the entire proteins used in their construction.

**Chimeric design, prediction of the secondary structure of mRNA, and three-dimensional protein structure**

After the selection of the most promising epitopes for the composition of the multi-epitope chimeras, the epitopes were randomly distributed and combined for chimera construction. These were ligated by 3× glycine and 1× serine linkers. The chimeric constructions obtained were sent for chemical synthesis by the company GenOne (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) for chemical synthesis, and the genes were cloned to the expression vector pAE and called as follows: pAE/Chimera1, pAE/Chimera2, and pAE/Chimera3. The vectors were transformed into One Shot™ BL21 Star™ (DE3) chemically competent E. coli by using a support vector machine architecture based on multiple representations of the primary sequence (Magnan et al. 2009).

**Production of recombinant chimeras**

Sequences of the identified epitopes were used for three-chimera in silico design. These sequences were later sent to GenOne (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) for chemical synthesis, and the genes were cloned to the expression vector pAE and called as follows: pAE/Chimera1, pAE/Chimera2, and pAE/Chimera3. The vectors were transformed into One Shot™ BL21 Star™ (DE3) chemically competent E. coli (catalog number: C601003, Invitrogen) strains and cultivated in 500 mL of Luria–Bertani broth at 37 °C at 200 rpm until reaching DO600nm = 0.5–0.7. Expression was then induced with 1 mM of isopropyl-β-D-thiogalactopyranosid. The cultures were kept under the same incubation conditions for another 3.5 h and then subjected to centrifugation (7000×g, 4 °C, 15 min). The cells were then suspended in a solubilization buffer (8 M urea, 200 mM NaH2PO4, 0.5 M NaCl, and 5 mM imidazole, pH 8.0) and incubated at room temperature at 60 rpm for 18 h. Purification was performed by chromatography by using HisTrap FF (GE Healthcare) columns loaded with nickel. The purified proteins were dialyzed against phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) 1X in 16 steps for five days at 4 °C. The concentration of proteins was determined through the BCA Protein Assay kit (Pierce, USA), and the proteins were stored at −20 °C.
The purity and size of proteins were analyzed in sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE 15%) stained with Coomassie Blue. The expression of recombinant chimeras was confirmed by WB, by employing an anti-6×His-tag monoclonal antibody (Sigma-Aldrich, USA). Briefly, the chimeric proteins were separated by 15% SDS-PAGE and electro-transferred onto HybondTM ECLTM (Amersham Biosciences) nitrocellulose membranes. The membranes were blocked with PBS-FBS 1% (PBS with 1% [v/v] fetal bovine serum) and reacted with the anti-6×His-tag monoclonal antibody (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) at 1:100 dilution in PBS. Then, a goat anti-mouse Ig peroxidase conjugate (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) was added at 1:4000 dilution. Incubations were performed for 1 h at room temperature in agitation (50 rpm), and washes with PBS-T (PBS with 0.05% [v/v] Tween 20) were performed between all steps. Then, reactions were developed with a chromogen/substrate solution (6 mg dianinobenzidine, 0.03% nickel sulfate, 50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8.0, and 0.03% hydrogen peroxide) for the visualization of protein bands.

**Evaluation of antigenicity of recombinant chimeras**

A serum sample of a human naturally infected with *B. henselae* and previously tested by IFA for *B. henselae* was provided by the Division of Dermatology, Department of Medicine of the State University of Campinas, Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. This serum sample was used for evaluating the antigenicity of recombinant chimeras produced by Western blotting (WB). Briefly, the purified chimeras were submitted to 15% SDS-PAGE and electro-transferred onto a Hybond™ ECLTM (Amersham Biosciences) nitrocellulose membrane. The membranes were blocked with PBS-FBS 1% at 4 °C overnight and washed three times with PBS-T and incubated with human serum at 1:50 dilution (at room temperature for 1 h, under the agitation of 50 rpm). The membrane was then washed three times with PBS-T and incubated with the secondary human anti-IgG antibody conjugated to peroxidase at 1:1000 dilution in PBS-T. Reactions were developed with a chromogen/substrate solution (6 mg dianinobenzidine, 0.03% nickel sulfate, 50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8.0, and 0.03% hydrogen peroxide) for the visualization of protein bands.

**Immunization of mice**

Eight male BALB/C mice, 6–8 weeks old, were used in this study. All animals were accommodated in polypropylene boxes, with two animals per box. To experiment, the animals were separated into four groups with two animals each. The groups were (1) animals immunized with rC1 plus adjuvant, (2) animals immunized with rC2 plus adjuvant, (3) animals immunized with rC3 plus adjuvant, and (4) animals inoculated with the protein diluent (PBS 1X) plus adjuvant. The mice immunization was carried out with the intraperitoneal inoculation of 100 µg of rC1, rC2, and rC3 in the animals on days 0, 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, 49, and 56. Animals inoculated with PBS were submitted to the same immunization protocol applied to animals immunized with recombinant chimera. The first dose was performed with the addition of complete Freund’s adjuvant (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) in a 1:1 ratio, while for the following doses Freund’s incomplete adjuvant (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) was used. Before each inoculation, blood samples were collected through retro-orbital bleeding from the animals and subjected to centrifugation (3,000× g, 5 min) to obtain the serum. On the 56th day of experimentation, all animals were euthanized to obtain whole blood via cardiac puncture, and the serum was obtained as described. All serum samples collected were maintained at −20 °C.

**Evaluation of the humoral immune response in mice**

Antibody responses were monitored by indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) using rC1, rC2, and rC3 as antigens. Each well was coated with 50 ng of each antigen diluted in carbonate-bicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6. The ELISA plates were washed three times with PBST (PBS with 0.05% [v/v] Tween 20) and then blocked. Mice sera (diluted 1:100) was added for 1 h at 37 °C, and then the plates were washed three times with PBST. Anti-mouse IgG antibody peroxidase-conjugated (Sigma-Aldrich), at 1:6,000 dilution, was added, incubated at 37 °C for 1 h, washed five times with PBST, and the reaction was visualized with o-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride (Sigma-Aldrich) as well as hydrogen peroxide. The reaction was stopped by the addition of 0.1 M sulfuric acid, and absorbance was determined at 492 nm using a Multiskan MCC/340 ELISA plate reader (Titertek Instruments, USA).

**Antibodies titration**

An indirect ELISA assay was performed to standardize the antibody production in mice. The 96-well polystyrene plates (Cralplast, Brazil) were coated with 50 µg of rC1, rC2, or rC3 per well and maintained at 4 °C, overnight. The addition of the sera anti-chimeras collected on the 56th day of experimentation was carried out employing a twofold serial dilution, varying from 1:50 to 1:1640. The sera of the animals were analyzed in pools for all the groups. After incubation (1 h, 37 °C), an anti-mouse IgG monoclonal antibody peroxidase-conjugated (Invitrogen, EUA) was added at 1:6000 dilution. The reaction was visualized using a developing buffer (0.1 M citrate phosphate pH 4 buffer, 0.2 mg/mL o-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride (OPD), and 0.03% hydrogen peroxide) and it was stopped with the addition.
of 2 M H₂SO₄ solution. The optical density reading was performed on EZ read 400 Microplate Reader (Biochrom, England) with a wavelength of 492 nm.

**Antibodies isotyping**

The antibodies produced were evaluated for the different isotypes using a Mouse Monoclonal Antibody Isotyping Reagents kit (Invitrogen, USA). The following isotypes were evaluated: IgM, IgA, IgG1, IgG2a, IgG2b, and IgG3. For this, 96-well polystyrene plates (Cralplast, Brazil) were coated with 100 µl of rC1, rC2, or rC3 diluted in carbonate-bicarbonate buffer (pH 9.6), totaling 50 µg of proteins per well. The plate was incubated overnight (4 °C) and, after the end of the incubation, 60 µl of the pool of sera (1:1 diluted in PBS 1X) from the immunized animals (day 56) was added. Pools of sera from animals collected on day 0 and animals inoculated with PBS were used as controls. The sera were incubated for 1 h at 37 °C, and after the incubation period, 100 µl of each of the specific isotype reagents was added (1:1000 in PBS, 30 min at room temperature). At the end of incubation, the anti-goat IgG antibody peroxidase-conjugated was added (1:5000 in PBS, 15 min at room temperature). The reaction development was done using 0.1 M citrate phosphate buffer (pH 4.0), 0.2 mg/mL o-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride (OPD), and 0.03% hydrogen peroxide. The reaction was stopped with a 2 M H₂SO₄ solution. Between each step, the wells were washed with PBS-T solution. The results were determined on EZ read 400 Microplate Reader (Biochrom, England) at 492 nm.

**Evaluation of the antigenicity of recombinant chimeras by ELISA**

To prove that the recombinant chimeric proteins are antigenic, the recognition of the chimeras by the antibodies present in the serum of naturally infected patients was evaluated. For this, an indirect ELISA was performed with the recombinant chimeras, which were confronted with 13 human sera positive for *B. henselae*, previously tested by IFA, with titers ranging between 64 and 8192, all of the convalescent phase. These sera were provided by the Laboratory of Hantaviruses and Rickettsiosis (LHR) of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ, RJ, Brazil). For the ELISA, 96-well plates were sensitized with 50 ng of each recombinant chimeras. Afterward, the plates were incubated at 4 °C for 16–18 h. At the end of the incubation, the wells were blocked with PBS-T/BSA solution [1X PBS plus 0.05% (v/v) Tween 20 and 1% (w/v) bovine serum albumin] for 1 h. Subsequently, the sera were diluted in PBS-T 1X (pH 7.4) at a ratio of 1:100 and added to the wells, and the plates were kept at 37 °C for 1 h. Peroxidase-conjugated anti-human IgG antibodies (Sigma-Aldrich, USA) were added at a 1:10,000 dilution. The plates were kept at 37 °C for 1 h. Visualization of the result occurred through the addition of phosphate-citrate buffer (pH 5.3) plus 0.2 mg/mL of o-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride (OPD) and 0.03% of H₂O₂. A 2 M H₂SO₄ solution was used to stop the reaction. The quantification of the reaction was performed in a spectrophotometer with a wavelength of 492 nm. Between each of the described ELISA steps, the plates were washed four times with PBS-T solution (PBS plus 0.05% Tween 20). As a positive control, a human serum positive for *B. henselae* was used, and as a negative control, a human serum negative for *B. henselae* was used. The tests were repeated twice, on different days and in duplicate.

**Statistical analysis**

All assays were performed at least in triplicate. Data were analyzed using the software GraphPad Prism version 6.01 (GraphPad Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) by two-way ANOVA and Tukey test. A P < 0.05 was considered statistically significant and the results are expressed as mean ± standard deviation.

**Results**

**In silico analyses**

Among the several antigenic proteins reported in the literature, we selected seven from in silico analyses and determined their function through the InterPro software (Table 1). Subsequently, in silico analyses of the proteins were performed to seek epitopes involved in antibody production. Through alignment and search for similarity with the BLAST tool, we identified that these epitopes had 100% identity with those from *B. henselae*. Next, all the selected epitopes were randomly distributed and combined for chimera construction (Table 2) to form three distinct

| Antigen | Molecular function/Biological process |
|---------|--------------------------------------|
| GroEL   | Protein refolding and folding/ATP-binding protein |
| 17 kDa  | UNK                                 |
| P26     | UNK                                 |
| BadA    | Pathogenesis                        |
| Pap31   | Transmembrane transport/porin activity |
| OMP 43  | UNK                                 |
| OMP 89  | Assembly membrane                   |

*GroEL*, chaperone; *P26*, major immunodominant antigen; *BadA*, * Bartonella* adhesin A; *Pap31*, heme-binding protein; *OMP*, outer membrane protein; *UNK*, unknown
recombinant chimeric proteins: chimera 1 (rC1), chimera 2 (rC2), and chimera 3 (rC3) (Fig. 1).

The RNAfold software was used for predicting the secondary structures of the mRNA of each chimera. The minimum free energy of the secondary mRNA structure was ΔG = −278.00, −328.00, and −299.00 kcal/mol for rC1, rC2, and rC3, respectively. All structures lacked hairpins or pseudo-nodes on the side of the 5’ ends (Fig. 1).

For evaluating physicochemical properties, we used the ProtParam online server to evaluate amino acid composition, theoretical isoelectric point, molecular weight, in vivo half-life, aliphatic index, instability index, extinction coefficient, grand average of hydropathicity, and the total number of positive and negative residues. Solubility was evaluated by using the Solpro server. The antigenic potential was evaluated by using the VaxyJen server; it is the first server for alignment-independent prediction of protective antigens of bacterial, viral, and tumor origin. All these parameters are presented in Table 3.

Table 4 presents the quality analysis of the model generated for the chimeras. The RMSD and TM-score values were calculated during modeling by the I-TASSER server. QMEAN6-score, Ramachandran plot, Z-score, and DFIRE-energy values were calculated in the QMEAN analysis program hosted by the SwissProt database. QMEAN analysis program also provides visual quality analysis of the evaluated model. The analysis of local error by residue showed a general predominance of residues, indicating a low-quality prediction of the three-dimensional position (data not shown). The least reliable regions are the loopings and the 6×His tail, places that are difficult to predict because of the lack of a defined standard secondary structure.
Conservation assessment

The chimera containing epitopes of GroEL, 17 kDa, and P26 proteins (rC1) has 33.78% similarity with the human HSPD1 60 kDa heat shock protein and 34.22% with the cat HSPD1 protein. When individually comparing each of the proteins that constitute the rC1 against the proteome of these two organisms, only the GroEL protein presents...
identity, with a similarity of more than 50%, being these similarities again for the HSPD1 heat shock proteins from humans (ALQ33597.1) and cats (XP_019693975.1). These results were similar for the rC2 chimera containing epitopes of BadA, Pap31, and GroEL proteins since the similarity are only for the portion of the chimera referring to the fragment of the GroEL protein. No significant similarity was found for the portions of the BadA and Pap31 proteins used in the construction of the chimera when evaluated individually. No significant similarity was found for the rC3 chimera that contained epitopes of OMP 89, OMP 43, and P26 proteins and for any of the proteins evaluated individually.

**rC1, rC2, and rC3 proteins production and antigenicity**

The three recombinant chimeras (rC1, rC2, and rC3) were efficiently expressed and purified using *E. coli* as a heterologous system. All proteins were expressed in insoluble form and recovered with a denaturing agent. WB assay using anti-histidine antibodies confirmed that the chimeric proteins present the expected mass of 37 kDa (rC1), 35 kDa (rC2), and 38 kDa (rC3) (Fig. 2). The antigenicity of the chimeric proteins was evaluated in a WB assay with the serum of a human naturally infected with *B. henselae*, demonstrating that the chimeras reacted with antibodies generated against native proteins (Fig. 2).

**Anti-rC1, rC2, and rC3 antibodies response**

Sera collected from animals on days 0, 14, 21, 28, 35, 42, 49, and 56 were evaluated in an ELISA assay using
rC1, rC2, and rC3 as antigens, and the results are shown in Fig. 3. The animals immunized with the rC1 and rC3 showed a significant immune response from the 28th day ($P < 0.05$), and the animals immunized with the rC2 from the 35th day ($P < 0.05$). A significant IgG antibody response in animals remained until the 56th day of experimentation. Animals immunized with PBS + adjuvant did not show a significant immune response in this assay (data do not show). Animals immunized with seven doses (day 56) of rC1, rC2, and rC3 had a titer of 1:3200 ($P < 0.05$), 1:1600 ($P < 0.05$), and 1:1600 ($P < 0.05$), respectively, compared to pre-immune serum (day 0) (Fig. 4). Sera collected from immunized animals were evaluated for antibody isotypes generated during immunizations. For this purpose, a pool of immune sera collected on day 56 was used in an ELISA. A significant presence of IgA and IgG1 isotype was detected in animals immunized with rC1 and rC2 proteins, compared to the control group (PBS + adjuvant) (Fig. 5).

**Antigenicity of chimeras**

The antigenicity of the three chimeric proteins produced was evaluated by an ELISA assay, using 13 sera from naturally infected humans with *B. henselae*, confirmed by the IFA technique, with different titers, and in the convalescent phase. The results are shown in Table 5. Of the 13 positive sera evaluated, 10 (76.9%) had a significant reaction ($P < 0.05$) with rC1, 11 (90.9%) with rC2, and 4 (30.8%) with rC3, when compared to the negative control. The antibodies present in the positive control sera showed a statistically different reaction from the negative control for the three chimeras.
Based on our similarity analysis, the sequence of the chimeras and the entire proteins used in their construction presented no significant similarity (0 to 34.22%) when compared to the hosts \textit{Homo sapiens} (human) and \textit{Felis catus} (cat) proteomes by BLAST. Based on the proposed criteria, these alignments are in the “twilight zone” of sequence alignment significance (Rost 1999). As an exception, when we evaluated the similarity of the entire GroEL protein, it showed 50% similarity with the HSPD1 heat shock protein of the two species evaluated. However, when composing the rC1 and rC2 chimeras, there was no significant similarity. Evaluation of the quality of protein structures is an important part of experimental structure validation, playing a valuable role in predicting protein structure. Because predicted models may contain substantial errors, reliable estimates of absolute quality are crucial to assess the suitability of a model for specific biotechnological applications (Berkert et al. 2011). In the quality analysis provided by the QMEAN6 program, which provides information on maintaining the native protein structure through positive scores, the scores obtained for chimeras 1, 2, and 3 were $-13.1$, $-8.77$, and $-17.31$, respectively. These scores show that all chimeras obtained low scores (negative values), with rC2 being slightly better than the others. In the quality analysis of the models obtained for the three-dimensional structures predicted by the I-TASSER server (data not shown), performed by the QMEAN6 program, it was possible to observe the local error per residue, configuring potentially unreliable regions, which represents a low-quality indicator prediction of the three-dimensional position of these residues in the predicted model for the protein. In addition, the graphs for the Z-score for each component considered in the QMEAN6-score calculation revealed the predominance of red color, indicating a bad score for all proteins. Only rC2 had a slightly better score than the others. The TM-score, which assesses the structural similarity of proteins, had values of $0.29$ (rC1 and rC3) and $0.13$ (rC2), meaning less structural similarity, instead of models with correct topology. In addition, the score values obtained by the RMSD for rC1 and rC3 were 16, whereas that for rC2 was 7.1, meaning that rC2 has a greater structural similarity with the others.

**Discussion**

In this study, we reported the production of recombinant chimeric proteins containing epitopes of \textit{B. henselae}. This was possible by using bioinformatics tools, widely used worldwide, which reduce time and costs in laboratory analysis. These tools are advantageous because conventional methods require the cultivation of pathogens to extract their antigenic proteins. Although some bacteria grow fast (\textit{B. henselae} has fastidious growth), the large-scale extraction and testing of bacterial proteins are expensive and laborious (Tomar and De 2010).

Several proteins have been reported in the literature as \textit{B. henselae} antigens, demonstrating a great possibility of research that can be done for the development of new diagnostic and vaccine inputs. We chose seven proteins (GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP 43, and OMP 89), whose antigenicity was proven in at least one study. In addition, some of the proteins used have great importance during \textit{B. henselae} infection and are reported as important antigens. The GroEL family of proteins is considered one of the main antigens of pathogenic bacteria (Haake et al. 1997). The 17 kDa antigen can be expressed at considerable levels during \textit{B. henselae} infection (Anderson et al. 1995). The P26 protein is the largest immunodominant antigen expressed in experimentally infected cats (Eberhardt et al. 2009), and OMP89 is one of the most immunogenic proteins of \textit{B. henselae} (Chenoweth et al. 2004). In this context, GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP 43, and OMP 89 proteins are promising molecules for the development of new tools for the control of CSD.
for effective translation. Greater stability consequently leads to a higher expression rate. Although the expression levels seem to be the same as seen in Fig. 2, in WB analysis, it is not possible to check the same efficiency.

Analysis of the physicochemical parameters by the ProtParam server indicated that rC1 and rC2 were soluble. However, they proved to be insoluble in vitro, which perhaps can be attributed to the wrong pH used in protein purification. The isoelectric points of rC1 and rC2 were 6.57 and 5.12, indicating that the proteins are acidic, and that of rC3 was 9.14, indicating that the protein is basic. The instability indices of the three proteins were 32.3, 34.3, and 23.67, indicating that the proteins were stable. The aliphatic indices of the three proteins were 80.27, 67.77, and 71.39: the greater the value, the higher protein thermostability. The GRAVY values of the three proteins were 80.27, 67.77, and 71.39: the greater the value, the greater stability consequently leads to a higher expression rate. Greater stability consequently leads to a higher expression rate. Although the expression levels seem to be the same as seen in Fig. 2, in WB analysis, it is not possible to check the same efficiency.

In this study, the WB performed with the samples of humans naturally infected with B. henselae showed a reaction with the three recombinant chimeras. However, compared with rC2 and rC3, rC1 reacted weakly. In the ELISA assays using 13 different human sera positive for B. henselae, characterized by IFA, the rC2 (n = 11; 90.9%) protein reacted with most of them, followed by rC1 (n = 10; 76.9%) and rC3 (n = 4; 30.8%). The recognition of the recombinant chimeras by positive human sera evidenced that the constructions were able to maintain epitopes that are like the ones found on native GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP43, and OMP89 proteins. Thus, these results showed that the recombinant chimeras can be potentially used as antigens for the detection of specific antibodies of B. henselae in ELISA tests and/or in vaccine research against CSD. Additionally, the rC1, rC2, and rC3 induce a significant IgG antibody response in mice from the 28th day of immunization using Freund adjuvant, which remained until the 56th day of experimentation. A significant presence of IgA and IgG1 isotype was detected in animals immunized with rC1 and rC2 proteins.

Despite the importance of B. henselae as an emergent pathogen, prevention of the diseases caused by this agent in cats, dogs, and humans mostly rely on the use of ectoparasiticides that kill or inhibit the growth of cat fleas (André et al. 2022). There is no commercial vaccine to control CSD, and few experimental studies in this regard. GroEL, 17 kDa, P26, BadA, Pap31, OMP43, and OMP89 proteins are important antigens of B. henselae as described in the literature and should be tested for diagnostic and vaccine use. We reported for the first time the development of three chimeric proteins containing multi-epitopes of B. henselae obtained in a recombinant form. These recombinant chimeric antigens, built from in silico analysis, were recognized by antibodies generated during natural infection and can serve as biotechnological inputs for use in the diagnosis and control of CSD.

Acknowledgements The authors thank the Division of Dermatology, Department of Medicine of the State University of Campinas, Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil, for providing a serum sample.

Author contribution JMG and TLC – participated in the experiments and wrote the manuscript; SBF – participated in the experiments; ACPSN – supervised and participated in animal experiments; RW and LSP – performed the in silico analysis; ESL – characterized and provided the sera samples; DDH – coordinator, wrote and reviewed the manuscript.

Funding This work was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES, http://www.capes.gov.br/)—Finance Code 001 and Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq, http://www.cnpq.br/) which provided research and scholarship.

Data availability All relevant data have been included in the manuscript.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics approval All animal procedures were performed at the animal facility of the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPel) and approved by the Ethics Committee for Animal Experimentation (CEEA) of UFPel. The CEEA at UFPel is accredited by the Brazilian National Council for Animal Experimentation Control (CONCEA). The animal experiments were conducted under international guidelines.

Consent to participate All authors consented to participate in the research.

Consent for publication All authors read and approved the final manuscript and agreed to publish the research data.

Conflicts of interest DDH, JMG, and SBF are inventors of a patent protecting the recombinant chimeric proteins (Instituto Nacional de Propriedade Industrial—BR1020190275740).

References

Anderson B, Lu E, Jones D, Regnery R (1995) Characterization of a 17-kilodalton antigen of Bartonella henselae reactive with sera from patients with cat scratch disease. J Clin Microbiol 33:2358–2365. https://doi.org/10.1128/jcm.33.9.2358-2365.1995

André MR, Dumler JS, Herrera HM, Gonçalves LR, de Sousa KCM, Scorpino DG, de Santis ACGA, Domingos IH, de Macedo GC, Machado RZ (2016) Assessment of a quantitative 5’ nucleic acid real-time polymerase chain reaction using the nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide dehydrogenase gamma subunit (nuoG) for Bartonella species in domiciled and stray cats in Brazil. J Feline Med Surg 18:783–790. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098612X15593787

André MR, Neupane P, Lappin M, Herrin B, Smith V, Williams TI, Collins L, Bai H, Jorge GL, Balbuena TS, Bradley J, Maggi RG, Breitschwerdt EB (2022) Using proteomic approaches to unravel the response of Ctenocephalides felis felis to blood feeding and infection with Bartonella henselae. Front Cell Infect Microbiol 12:828082. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcimb.2022.828082
Doytchinova IA, Atkins EH, Romero S, Greco J, Chao CC, Ching WM (2014) An evaluation study of Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) using recombinant protein Pap31 for detection of antibody against Bartonella bacilliformis infection among the Peruvian population. Am J Trop Med Hyg 90:690–696. https://doi.org/10.4269/ajtmh.13-0131

Arnold K, Bordoli L, Kopp J, Schwede T (2006) The SWISS-MODEL workspace: a web-based environment for protein structure homology modelling. Bioinformatics 22:195–201. https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/bti770

Benkert P, Biasini M, Schwede T (2011) Toward the estimation of the absolute quality of individual protein structure models. Bioinformatics 27:343–350. https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btq662

Bortoli CP, André MR, Seki MC, Pinto AA, Machado SDTZ, Machado RZ (2012) Detection of hemoplasma and Bartonella species and co-infection with retroviruses in cats subjected to a spaying/neutering program in Jaboticabal, SP, Brazil. Rev Bras Parasitol Veterinária 21:219–223. https://doi.org/10.1590/s1984-29612012000300008

Breitwieser EB (2017) Bartonellosis, One Health and all creatures great and small. Vet Dermatol 28:96-e21. https://doi.org/10.1111/vde.12413

Chenoweth MR, Greene CE, Krause DC, Gherardini FC (2004) Predominant outer membrane antigens of Bartonella henselae. Infect Immun 72:3097–3105. https://doi.org/10.1128/IAI.72.6.3097-3105.2004

Costa F, Porter FH, Rodrigues G, Farias H, De Faria MT, Wunder EA, Osikowicz LM, Kosoy MY, Reis MG, Ko AI, Childs JE (2014) Infections by Leptospira interrogans, Seoul virus, and Bartonella spp. among norway rats (Rattus norvegicus) from the Urban slum environment in Brazil. Vector-Borne Zoonotic Dis 14:33–40. https://doi.org/10.1089/vbz.2013.1378

Crisiumma A, Favacho A, Gershony L, Mendes-de-Almeida F, Gomes R, Mares-Guia A, Rozental T, Barreira J, Lemos E, Labarthe N (2010) Molecular characterisation of Bartonella species in cats with Bartonella henselae DNA detection in cat blood samples from a state park in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rev Inst Med Trop Sao Paulo 52:219–223. https://doi.org/10.1590/s1984-29612010000300008

da Silva BTOG, de Souza AM, Campos SDE, de Lemos ERS, Favacho ARM, Almosny NRP (2018) Presence of Bartonella spp. in domestic cats from a state park in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rev Inst Med Trop Sao Paulo 8:60-e14. https://doi.org/10.1590/s1678-9946201860014

de Oliveira Braga MSC, de Paiva Diniz PPV, André MR, de Bortoli CP, Machado RZ (2012) Molecular characterisation of Bartonella species in cats from São Luís, state of Maranhão, north-eastern Brazil. Mem Inst Oswaldo Cruz 107:772–777. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0070-02762012000600011

DoychinoVA IA, Flower DR (2007) VaxiJen: A server for prediction of protective antigens, tumour antigens and subunit vaccines. BMC Bioinformatics 8:4. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2105-8-4

Drummond MR, Lania BG, De Paiva Diniz PPV, Gilioli R, Demo lin DMR, Scropio DG, Breitwieser EB, Velho PENV (2018) Improvement of Bartonella henselae DNA detection in cat blood samples by combining molecular and culture methods. J Clin Microbiol 56:e01732-e1817. https://doi.org/10.1128/JCM.01732-17

Eberhardt C, Engelmann S, Kusch H, Albrecht D, Hecker M, Autenrieth IB, Kempf VAJ (2009) Proteomic analysis of the bacterial pathogen Bartonella henselae and identification of immunogenic proteins for serodiagnosis. Proteomics 9:1967–1981. https://doi.org/10.1002/prot.20706670

Favacho AR, Roger I, Akemi AK, Pessoa JR AA, Varon AG, Gomes R, Godoy DT, Pereira S, Lemos ER (2014) Molecular identification of Bartonella henselae in a seronegative cat scratch disease patient with AIDS in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rev Inst Med Trop Sao Paulo 56:363–5. https://doi.org/10.1590/s0364-466520140000400017

Ferrara F, Di Niro R, D’Angelo S, Busetti M, Marzari R, Not T, Sblat tero D (2014) Development of an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay for Bartonella henselae infection detection. Lett Appl Microbiol 59:253–262. https://doi.org/10.1111/lam.12286

Fontalvo MC, Favacho ARM, Araujo AC, dos Santos NM, de Oliveira GMB, Aguilar DM, de Lemos ERS, Horta MC (2017) Bartonella species pathogenic for humans infect pets, free-ranging wild mammals and their ectoparasites in the Caatinga biome, Northeastern Brazil: a serological and molecular study. Brazilian J Infect Dis 21:290–296. https://doi.org/10.1016/j bjid.2017.02.002

Gil H, Escudero R, Pons I, Rodríguez-Vargas M, García-Esteban C, Rodríguez-Moreno I, García-Amil C, Lobo B, Valcárcel F, Pérez A, Jiménez S, Jado I, Juste R, Segura F, Anda P (2013) Distribution of Bartonella henselae variants in patients, reservoir hosts and vectors in Spain. PLoS ONE 8:e68248. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0068248

Greene CE, Mcderrmott M, Jameson PH, Atkins CL, Marks AM (1996) Bartonella henselae infection in cats: evaluation during primary infection, treatment, and rechallenge infection. J Clin Microbiol 34:1682–1685. https://doi.org/10.1128/JCIM.34.7.1682-1685.1996

Haake DA, Summers TA, McCoy AM, Schwartzman W (1997) Heat shock response and GroEL sequence of Bartonella henselae and Bartonella quintana. Microbiology 143:2807–2815. https://doi.org/10.1099/0021287-143-8-2807

Hoey JG, Valois-Cruz F, Goldenberg H, Voskoboynik Y, Pfiffner J, Tilton RC, Mordechai E, Adelson ME (2009) Development of an immunoglobulin M capture-based enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay for diagnosis of acute infections with Bartonella henselae. Clin Vaccine Immunol 16:282–284. https://doi.org/10.1128/CVI.00305-08

Janson G, Zhang C, Prado MG, Paiardini A (2017) PyMod 2.0: improvements in protein sequence-structure analysis and homology modeling within PyMOL. Bioinformatics 33:444–446. https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btw638

Jost M, Latz A, Ballhorn W, Kempf VAJ (2018) Development of a specific and sensitive enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay as an in vitro diagnostic tool for detection of Bartonella henselae antibodies in human serum. J Clin Microbiol 56:e01329-e1418. https://doi.org/10.1128/JCM.01329-18

Kitada AAB, Favacho ARM, Oliveira RVC, Pessoa AA, Gomes R, Horne CS, Gremião IDF, Lemos ER (2014) Detection of serum antibodies against Bartonella species in cats with sporotrichosis from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. J Feline Med Surg 16:308–311. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098612X13058193

Kordick DL, Breitwieser EB (1997) Relapsing bacteremia after blood transmission of Bartonella henselae to cats. Am J Vet Res 58:492–497

Kwon HY, Im JH, Lee SM, Baek JH, Durey A, Park SG, Kang JS, Lee JS (2017) The seroprevalence of Bartonella henselae in healthy adults in Korea. Korean J Intern Med 32:530–535. https://doi.org/10.3904/kjim.2016.010

Lamas CC, Ramos RG, Lopes GQ, Santos MS, Golebiowski VF, We kler C, Ferrariuoli GHDA, Fournier PÉ, Lepidi H, Raoult D (2013) Bartonella and Coxiella infective endocarditis in Brazil: Molecular evidence from excised valves from a cardiac surgery referral center in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1998 to 2009. Int J Infect Dis 17:e65-6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2012.10.009

Li DM, Liu QY, Zhao F, Hu Y, Xiao D, Gu XY, Song XP, Zhang JZ (2011) Proteomic and bioinformatic analysis of outer membrane proteins of the protobacterium Bartonella henselae (Barton elaeceae). Genet Mol Res 10:1789–1818. https://doi.org/10.4238/ vol10-3gmr1153
Loa CC, Mordechai E, Tilton RC, Adelson ME (2006) Production of recombinant Bartonella henselae 17-kDa protein for antibody-capture enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. Diagn Microbiol Infect Dis 55:1–7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diagmicrobio.2005.10.020

Magnan CN, Randall A, Baldi P (2009) SOLpro: Accurate sequence-based prediction of protein solubility. Bioinformatics 25:2200–2207. https://doi.org/10.1093/bioinformatics/btp386

Malheiro J, Costa MM, do Amaral RB, de Sousa KC, Mordechai E, Adelson ME (2008) Discovery and analysis of Bartonella henselae antigens for use in clinical serologic assays. Diagn Microbiol Infect Dis 60:17–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diagmicrobio.2007.07.017

McCool TL, Hoey JG, Montileone F, Goldenberg HB, Mordechai E, Adelson ME (2008) Identification of vector-borne pathogens in dogs and cats from Southern Brazil. Ticks Tick Borne Dis 9:1563–1569. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijmm/013000

Miceli NG, Gavioli FA, Gonçalves LR, André MR, Sousa VRF, de Sousa KC, Machado RZ (2013) Molecular detection of feline arthropod-borne pathogens in cats in Cuiabá, state of Mato Grosso, central-western region of Brazil. Rev Bras Parasitol Vet 22:385–390. https://doi.org/10.1590/s1984-29612013000300011

Pennisi MG, Marsilio F, Hartmann K, Lloret A, Addie D, Belák S, Bouroua-Baral C, Egberink H, Fruymus T, Gruffydd-Jones T, Hosie MJ, Lutz H, Möstl K, Radford AD, Thiry E, Truyen U, Horzinek MC (2013) Bartonella species infection in cats: ABCD guidelines on prevention and management. J Feline Med Surg 15:563–569. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098612X13489214

Pitassi LHU, de Paiva Diniz PPV, Scorpio DG, Drummond MR, Lania BG, Barjas-Castro ML, Gilori R, Colombo S, Sowy S, Breitschwerdt EB, Nicholson WL, Velho PENF (2015) Bartonella spp. bacteremia in blood donors from Campinas, Brazil. PLoS Negl Trop Dis 9:e0003467. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pntd.0003467

Regier Y, Örouke F, Kempf VAJ (2016) Bartonella spp. - A chance to establish One Health concepts in veterinary and human medicine. Parasites and Vectors 9:261. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13071-016-1546-x

Regney RL, Rooney JA, Johnson AM, Nesby SL, Manzewitsch P, Beaver K, Olson JG (1996) Experimentally induced Bartonella henselae infections followed by challenge exposure and antimicrobial therapy in cats. Am J Vet Res 57:1714–1719

Reuter JS, Mathews DH (2010) RNAstructure: Software for RNA secondary structure prediction and analysis. BMC Bioinformatics 11:129. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2105-11-129

Rost B (1999) Twilight zone of protein sequence alignments. Protein Eng 12:85–94. https://doi.org/10.1093/protein/12.2.85

Staggeemer R, Pilger DA, Spilki FR, Cantarelli VV (2014) Multiplex Sybr® Green-real time PCR (qPCR) assay for the detection and differentiation of Bartonella henselae and Bartonella clarridgeiae in cats. Rev Inst Med Trop Sao Paulo 56:93–95. https://doi.org/10.1590/s0036-46652014002000001

Tomar N, De RK (2010) Immunoinformatics: an integrated scenario. Immunology 131:153–168. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2567.2010.03330.x

Vieira-Damiani G, De Paiva Diniz PPV, Urso Pitassi LH, Sowy S, Scorpio DG, Lania BG, Drummond MR, Benetti Soares TC, Barjas-Castro ML, Breitschwerdt EB, Nicholson WL, Ferreira Velho PEN (2015) Bartonella clarridgeiae bacteremia detected in an asymptomatic blood donor. J Clin Microbiol 53:352–356. https://doi.org/10.1128/JCM.00934-14

Wagner CL, Riess T, Linke D, Eberhardt C, Schäfer A, Reutter S, Maggi RG, Kempf VAJ (2008) Use of Bartonella adhesin A (BadA) immunoblotting in the serodiagnosis of Bartonella henselae infections. Int J Med Microbiol 298:579–590. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijmm.2008.01.013

Werner JC, Bensig F, Chomel BB, Hodzic E, Kasten RW, Barthold SW (2008) P26-based serodiagnosis for Bartonella spp. infection in cats. Comp Med 58:375–380

Yang J, Yan R, Roy A, Xu D, Poisson J, Zhang Y (2014) The I-TASSER suite: protein structure and function prediction. Nat Methods 12:7–8. https://doi.org/10.1038/nmeth.3213

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

Authors and Affiliations

Jênifer Malheiro Gonçalves1,2 · Thaynã Laner Cardoso1 · Stella Buchhorn de Freitas1,2 · Rafael Woloski2 · Ailton Clair Pinto Seixas Neto1 · Luciano da Silva Pinto2 · Elba Sampaio de Lemos3 · Daiane Drawanz Hartwig1,2,4

1 Laboratório de Bacteriologia E Bioensaio (LaBBio), Departamento de Microbiologia E Parasitologia, Instituto de Biologia, Universidade Federal de Pelotas, Capão Do Leão, Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazil

2 Núcleo de Biotecnologia, Centro de Desenvolvimento Tecnológico (CDTec), Universidade Federal Pelotas, Capão Do Leão, Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazil

3 Laboratório de Hantaviruses E Rickettsioses (LHR), Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (FIOCRUZ), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil

4 Biology Institute, Federal University of Pelotas, Pelotas, RS CEP 96010–900, Brazil