The epidemiology and antimicrobial resistance of cholera cases in Iran during 2013

Hossein Masoumi-Asl1,2, Mohammad Mehdi Gouya1, Mohammad Rahbar2, Roghieh Sabourian2

1Center for Communicable Diseases Control, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Tehran, Iran
2Department of Microbiology, Iranian Reference Health Laboratory Research Center, Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Tehran, Iran
3Food Microbiology Research Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Cholera is an endemic diarrheal disease in Iran, caused by Vibrio Cholerae. The epidemiology, transmission route, environmental determinants and antimicrobial resistant pattern of cholera have been changed during recent years. In this study the epidemiology and antimicrobial resistance of cholera in Iran during 2013 outbreak was investigated.

Materials and Methods: A retrospective, cross-sectional study was carried out using cholera national surveillance system collected data in 2013. Bacterial identification and antimicrobial susceptibility testing were done on 60 Vibrio cholerae isolates, serotype Inaba.

Results: During July to November 2013, 256 confirmed cholera cases were diagnosed by stool culture. Two hundred and eleven out of 256 (83%) cases were imported from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The prevalent age group was 16-30 years old, 90% were male, 98.8% affected by Inaba serotype and case fatality rate was 2.7%. The results of antimicrobial susceptibility testing on 60 V. cholerae, serotype Inaba showed that all isolates were resistant to nalidixic acid, tetracyclin and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole and intermediate resistance to erythromycin but sensitive to ciprofloxacin, cefixime and ampicillin.

Conclusion: Migrants from neighboring countries played a key role in cholera outbreak in Iran during 2013. The results of antimicrobial susceptibility testing on 60 V. cholerae, serotype Inaba showed an increasing resistance rate in comparison with previous years.

Keywords: Cholera, Epidemiology, Antimicrobial resistance, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Cholera is an endemic diarrheal disease in Iran, caused by V. cholerae. The most important symptom of disease is severe acute diarrhea that can result in severe dehydration and electrolyte imbalance, therefore causes a high mortality (1, 2). During recent decades, attention to cholera epidemiology increased, as cholera epidemics became a global health problem. Detailed investigation of V. cholerae interactions with its host and with other environmental determinants suggest that cholera dynamics are much more complex than previously thought (3). Despite of dra-
matically decrease in typhoid fever incidence in Iran during last decades, due to accessibility to safe water (4), poor water sanitation system and inaccessibility to safe water mostly in rural area play a key role in emergence of cholera outbreaks. There is a strong link between cholera outbreaks and climate factors such as temperature and humidity (5). Age can be a risk factor to cholera morbidity, even neonates can be affected to invasive *V. cholerae* infection (6). Children are more affected during non-epidemic cholera years because of first exposure and less immunity, meanwhile, the age group of above 15 year-olds was more affected to cholera during epidemic years (7). In recent years, there were reported large outbreaks in some area, for instance, in 2012, 49% of all reported cases originated from a large outbreak which continued to affect Haiti and the Dominican Republic (8). In 2005, as a cholera epidemic in Iran, 1133 confirmed cases were reported in the country (9-13). Southeastern provinces in Iran such as Sistan-Baluchestan is more affected by cholera especially due to uncontrolled border crossing, threaten the province population (14, 15). The epidemiology, transmission route, environmental determinants and resistant pattern of cholera have been changed during recent years. The aim of this study was to investigate the epidemiology and antimicrobial resistance of cholera in Iran during 2013.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A retrospective, cross-sectional study was carried out using cholera national surveillance system collected data in 2013. All suspected and confirmed cases data and results of sporadic and outbreak epidemiologic investigation have been reported by questionnaire to the department of food-borne and waterborne in Center for Communicable Disease Control from all provincial health centers. Collected data were analyzed using SPSS.18 software.

*Bacterial identification and antimicrobial susceptibility testing.* The *V. cholerae* isolates were received from 11 province of Iran during July to November, 2013. Identification of the isolates was confirmed in reference Laboratory in Ministry of Health and Medical Education using standard biochemical and bacteriological tests. All isolates were examined for specific serogroups by O1 polyvalent and Ogawa/Inaba monospecific antisera (BD, Becton–Dickinson Co.USA). Performance of susceptibility testing all of 60 isolates were tested by MIC test strip method using Liofilchem (CE IVD approved, Italy) against ciprofloxacin, nalidixic acid, cefixime, ampicillin, tetracycline, sulfamethoxazole, trimethoprim (SXT), and erythromycin (Table 2). The definitions of MICs as sensitive, intermediate, and resistant levels are shown in Table 2.

**RESULTS**

Results of analyzed cholera outbreak in 2013 in Iran showed that more than 211 (83%) cases were imported from Afghanistan and Pakistan by epidemiologic investigation of cases (Table 1). They were young immigrants between 16 to 30 years old (66.1%) and were all male who had traveled illegally to Iran for job opportunities (Table 1). During 2013, more than 190000 stool sample from suspected diarrheal patients were tested throughout country. The results of epidemiologic investigation of positive cases and distribution of cases by provinces are shown in Table 1 and Figs 1 and 2. Because of delay in referring to hospital and the severity of their disease, the case fatality rate was high (Table 1) and three died before arriving to hospital. The results of antimicrobial susceptibility testing on 60 *V. cholerae*, serotype Inaba showed an increasing resistance rate than previous years (Table 2). All isolates were resistant to nalidixic acid, tetracyclin and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole.

**DISCUSSION**

Cholera continues to be an important concern in developing countries. Cholera is spread mainly through drinking fecal-contaminated water. When cholera occur in a community, it is essential to ensure three things, namely hygienic disposal of human feces, an adequate supply of safe drinking water, and good food hygiene. The best way to prevent the spread of cholera is the provision of safe drinking water, sanitary disposal of human feces and environmental management (16). As a result of national developmental projects such as increased accessibility to safe water during recent years in Iran, contaminated water is not a main rout of cholera transmission, therefore contaminated

---

**Table 2:** The definitions of MICs as sensitive, intermediate, and resistant levels.

| Antimicrobial Agent | Sensitive | Intermediate | Resistant |
|---------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| Ciprofloxacin       |            |              |           |
| Nalidixic Acid      |            |              |           |
| Cefixime            |            |              |           |
| Ampicillin          |            |              |           |
| Tetracycline        |            |              |           |
| Sulfamethoxazole    |            |              |           |
| Trimethoprim (SXT)  |            |              |           |
| Erythromycin        |            |              |           |

**Table 1:** Results of epidemiologic investigation of positive cases and distribution of cases by provinces.

| Province          | Number of Cases |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| Sistan-Baluchestan | 1133            |
| Other provinces   | 100000          |

**Figure 1:** Distribution of cases by provinces.

**Figure 2:** Graph showing increasing resistance rate than previous years.
food especially vegetables irrigated with raw sewage are concerned (17). Investigations of cholera epidemics in Iran during 2005 showed that consumption of contaminated vegetable was the main route of transmission (12). Based on the result of this study, high risk groups for cholera are rural populations and foreigners. Immigrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan played a key role in cholera outbreak in Iran during 2013 because of poor water sanitation system and inaccessibility to safe water in the immigrant camps (Table 1). Among 256 total confirmed cholera cases in Iran during 2013 more than 211(83%) of cases were

Table 1. Results of analyzed cholera outbreak in Iran, 2013(N=256)

| Frequency of cholera cases by months | N   | %  |
|-------------------------------------|-----|----|
| July                                | 3   | 1.2|
| August                              | 40  | 15.6|
| September                           | 150 | 58.6|
| October                             | 61  | 23.8|
| November                            | 2   | 0.8|

| Frequency of cholera cases by age groups | N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 0-5                                      | 9   | 3.5|
| 6-10                                     | 7   | 2.7|
| 11-15                                    | 5   | 2  |
| 16-20                                    | 55  | 21.5|
| 21-25                                    | 79  | 30.9|
| 26-30                                    | 35  | 13.7|
| 31-35                                    | 21  | 8.2|
| 36-40                                    | 14  | 5.4|
| 41-45                                    | 10  | 3.9|
| 46-50                                    | 5   | 2  |
| 51-55                                    | 6   | 2.3|
| 56-60                                    | 3   | 1.2|
| >60                                      | 7   | 2.7|

| Frequency of cholera cases by gender     | N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Male                                     | 229 | 90 |
| Female                                   | 27  | 10 |

| Frequency of cholera cases by locality   | N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Urban area                               | 69  | 27 |
| Rural area                               | 187 | 73 |

| Frequency of cholera cases by nationality| N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Iranian                                  | 45  | 17 |
| Afghani’s                                | 210 | 82 |
| Pakistani                                | 1   | 1  |

| Epidemiological classification of cholera cases | N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Indigenous                                    | 45  | 17 |
| Imported                                      | 211 | 83 |

| Frequency of cholera cases by serotype        | N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Inaba                                          | 253 | 98.8|
| Ogawa                                         | 3   | 1.2|

| Frequency of cholera cases by treatment outcome| N   | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Cured                                          | 249 | 97.3|
| Died                                           | 7   | 2.7|
EPIDEMIOLOGY & ANTIMICROBIAL RESISTANCE OF CHOLERA

Fig. 1. Map of Iran showing distribution of cholera cases, 2013

Fig. 2. Distribution of Cholera cases by provinces, Iran, 2013
Table 2. Results of analyzed V. cholera, serotype Inaba antimicrobial susceptibility testing, Iran, 2013 (N=60)

| Antimicrobial Agent | Result | MIC Interpretive Standard (μg/mL) |
|---------------------|--------|----------------------------------|
|                     | S      | I      | R      | S       | I      | R      |
| Ciprofloxacin       | 100%   | -      | -      | ≤ 1     | 2      | ≥ 4    |
| Nalidixic Acid      | -      | -      | 100%   | ≤ 16    | -      | ≥ 32   |
| Cefixime            | 100%   | -      | -      | ≤ 1     | 2      | ≥ 4    |
| Ampicillin          | 100%   | -      | -      | ≤ 8     | 16     | ≥ 32   |
| Tetracycline        | -      | -      | 100%   | ≤ 4     | 8      | ≥ 16   |
| SXT                 | -      | -      | 100%   | -       | -      | -      |
| Erythromycin        | 23%    | 77%    | -      | ≤ 2     | 4-8    | >8     |

S=Sensitive  I=Intermediate  R=Resistant  SXT=Sulfamethoxazole, Trimethoprim

imported and the remainders were indigenous (18). In study of Khazaei in a six-year study on V. cholerae in southeastern Iran, 18.8% of cases were from neighboring Afghanistan (19). They were young immigrants between 16 to 30 years old (66.1%) and were all male who had traveled long way due to ungovernable border crossing for finding job opportunities (Table 1). The outbreak occurred in warm months from July to November mostly in rural areas of Sistan-Baluchestan and Kerman provinces (Figs 1 and 2). In 2013, case fatality rate (CFRs)<1% were reported by 4 countries and 17 countries reported a CFRs between 1% and 5%. This rate for Iran was 2.7% (18). Because of delay in referring to hospital and the severity of their disease, the case fatality rate was high and three of dead bodies were died before arriving to hospital. Meanwhile, CFRs of cholera in Iran during 2012 was zero (8). Our study showed there is a growing rate of antimicrobial resistance in comparison with previous years (Table 2). The study of Pourshafie et al. showed that 86, 84, 84 and 82% of the isolates were resistant to streptomycin, chloramphenicol, co-trimoxazole and tetracycline, respectively (20). Hajia et al. studied on 61 V. cholerae isolates that showed all of the isolates were susceptible to three antimicrobial agents including ciprofloxacin, cefixime, and ampicillin. The highest rate of resistance was seen to nalidixic acid and co-trimoxazole with 96.7% and 91.8% respectively (21). Increasing rate of antimicrobial resistance will be a great challenge in control of cholera outbreaks in the future. In conclusion, immigrants from neighboring countries played a key role in cholera outbreak in Iran during 2013. The results of antimicrobial susceptibility testing on 60 V. cholerae, serotype Inaba showed an increasing resistance rate in comparison with previous years. Continuing and strengthening of cholera surveillance system and implementation of proper control measures especially for control of antimicrobial resistance are our recommendations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the kind collaboration of all the staff at provincial and district health centers and lab technicians in different provinces for data collection.

REFERENCES

1. Outbreak C. Assessing the outbreak response and improving preparedness, 2004. World Health Organization, Geneva.
2. World Health Organization. Guidelines for the collection of clinical specimens during field investigation of outbreaks. 2000.
3. Codeço CT. Endemic and epidemic dynamics of cholera: the role of the aquatic reservoir. BMC Infect Dis 2001; 1:1.
4. Masoumi- Asl H , Gouya MM, Nabavi M, Aghili N. Epidemiology of typhoid fever in Iran during last five decades from 1962–2011. Iran J Public Health 2013; 42:33.
5. Tavana AM, Fallah Z, Zahraee SM, Asl HM, Rahbar M, Mafi M, et al. Effects of climate on the cholera outbreak in Iran during seven years (2000-2006). ATMPH 2008; 1:43–46.
6. Masoumi -Asl H, Gholami H, Rahbar M, Zahrarai S. Invasive *Vibrio cholerae* 01 El Tor Inaba in a 3-day-old neonate: case report. *Ann Trop Paediatr* 2007; 27:153-154.

7. Masoumi-Asl H, Esteghamati A, Zahrarai SM. The effect of age group under 15 years on cholera morbidity during the past 10 years in Iran (1996-2005). *Iran J Pediatr* 2008; 18 (Suppl 1): 9-14.

8. World Health Organization. *Weekly epidemiological record: relevé épidémiologique hebdomadaire*. WHO; 2013; 31: 321-336.

9. Jafari NJ, Radfar M, Ghofrani H, Asl H. Epidemiological and Bacteriological Features of the Cholera Outbreak in Iran (2005). *J Med Sci* 2007; 7:645-649.

10. Rahbar M, Sabourian R, Saremi M, Abbasi M, Masoumi Asl H, Soroush M. Epidemiological and drug resistant pattern of *Vibrio cholerae* O1 Biotype El Tor, Serotype Inaba during the summer of 2005 outbreak in Iran. *J Ardabil Univ Med Sci* 2007; 7:41-45 [in Persian].

11. Izadi S, Shakiri H, Roham P, Sheikhzadeh K. Cholera outbreak in southeast of Iran: routes of transmission in the situation of good primary health care services and poor individual hygienic practices. *Jpn J Infect Dis* 2006; 59:174-178.

12. Eshrati B, Zahrarai S, Soroush M, Afshani A, Ramezian M, et al. Use of meta-anaglysis to determining the associated factors of an outbreak occurred in the summer 2005 in Iran. *Arak Univ Med Sci* 2008; 11:99-108 [in persian].

13. Zahrarai SM, Afshani Naghadeh M, Soroush M, Masoumi Asl H. Cholera epidemic in Iran, 2005. *Iran J Infect Dis Trop Med* 2007; 12(36) 1-4 [in persian].

14. Sargolzaie N, Kiani M. Cholera Outbreaks Evaluation in Sistan and Baluchestan Province of Iran. *Int J Infect* 2014; 1(1).

15. Rezaei N, Bagheri G-R, Mahmoudi M, Moin A-A, Dankoub M-A, Gazeran A. The epidemiology of vibrio cholerae in Zabol city, southeast of Iran. *Arch Iran Med* 2005; 8:197-201.

16. Shears P. Recent developments in cholera. *Curr Opin Infect Dis* 2001; 14:553-558.

17. Karami M, Masoumi Asl H, Mohammadin M, Raeofi H, Saghafipour A, Noroozi M, Khedmati E. Qom cholera outbreak in 2011: influential and determinant factors. *IJE* 2012; 8(3): 84-92 [in persian].

18. Organization WH. Weekly epidemiological record: relevé épidémiologique hebdomadaire. WHO; 2014; 31, 345-356.

19. Khazaei H-A, Rezaei N, Bagheri G-R, Moin A-A. A six-year study on *Vibrio cholerae* in southeastern Iran. *Jpn J Infect Dis* 2005; 58:8-10.

20. Pourshafie M, Bakhshi B, Ranjbar R, Sedaghat M, Sadeghifard N, Yazdi IZ, et al. Dissemination of a single Vibrio cholerae clone in cholera outbreaks during 2005 in Iran. *J Med Microbiol* 2007; 56:1615-1619.

21. Hajia M, Rahbar M, Farzami MR, Asl HM, Dolatyar A, Imani M, et al. Assessing clonal correlation of epidemic Vibrio cholerae isolates during 2011 in 16 provinces of Iran. *Curr Microbiol* 2015; 70:408-414.