Determining the Origins of Human Immunodeficiency Virus Type 1 Drug-resistant Minority Variants in People Who Are Recently Infected Using Phylogenetic Reconstruction

Jean L. Mbisa,1,2 Peter Kirwan,1 Anna Tostevin,3 Juan Ledesma,1,2 David F. Bibby,1 Alison Brown,1 Richard Myers,1 Amin S. Hassan,4 Gary Murphy,1 David Asboe,5 Anton Pozniak,5 Stuart Kirk,6 O. Noel Gill,1,2 Caroline Sabin,2,3 Valerie Delpech,1,2 and David T. Dunn3; on behalf of the UK HIV Drug Resistance Database

1National Infection Service, Public Health England; 2National Institute for Health Research Health Protection Research Unit in Blood Borne and Sexually Transmitted Infections, and 3Institute for Global Health, University College London, London, United Kingdom; 4HIV/STI Group, Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)/Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Kilifi, Kenya; 5Chelsea and Westminster Hospital; and 6University College London Hospital, London, United Kingdom

Background. Drug-resistant minority variants (DRMinVs) detected in patients who recently acquired human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) can be transmitted, generated de novo through virus replication, or technical errors. The first form is likely to persist and result in treatment failure, while the latter two could be stochastic and transient.

Methods. Ultradeep sequencing of plasma samples from 835 individuals with recent HIV-1 infection in the United Kingdom was performed to detect DRMinVs at a mutation frequency between 2% and 20%. Sequence alignments including >110,000 HIV-1 partial pol consensus sequences from the UK HIV Drug Resistance Database (UK-HDRD), linked to epidemiological and clinical data from the HIV and AIDS Reporting System, were used for transmission cluster analysis. Transmission clusters were identified using Cluster Picker with a clade support of >90% and maximum genetic distances of 4.5% or 1.5%, the latter to limit detection to likely direct transmission events.

Results. Drug-resistant majority variants (DRMajVs) were detected in 66 (7.9%) and DRMinVs in 84 (10.1%) of the recently infected individuals. High levels of clustering to sequences in UK-HDRD were observed for both DRMajV (n = 48; 72.7%) and DRMinV (n = 63; 75.0%) sequences. Of these, 43 (65.2%) with DRMajVs were in a transmission cluster with sequences that harbored the same DR mutation compared to only 3 (3.6%) sequences with DRMinVs (\(P < .00001\), Fisher exact test). Evidence of likely direct transmission of DRMajVs was observed for 25/66 (37.9%), whereas none were observed for the DRMinVs (\(P < .00001\)).

Conclusions. Using a densely sampled HIV-infected population, we show no evidence of DRMinV transmission among recently infected individuals.

Keywords. HIV-1; drug-resistant minority variants; recent infection; transmission cluster; replication fitness.
variants could therefore be of benefit to HIV-infected individuals undergoing ART.

Several factors may contribute to an association between DRMinVs and treatment failure. Mutational load, defined as the absolute copy number of drug-resistant variants per unit volume in an infected individual, is one factor [17]. This is a product of the MF and the patient’s viral load. For example, at 1% MF, the absolute copy number in an individual with a viral load of $10^3$ copies/mL would be $10$ copies/mL compared to $10,000$ copies/mL in an individual with a viral load of $10^6$ copies/mL. The genetic barrier to resistance is often linked to the association of non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor (NNRTI) DRMinVs with virological failure [18]. This is the number of genetic changes required for a virus population to acquire robust resistance against a drug regimen. For most NNRTI regimens it takes only 1 or 2 genetic changes to cause high-level resistance [19, 20]. The genetic linkage of 2 or more drug-resistant mutations (DRMs) directed against different antiretroviral drug classes used in combination ART on a single genome is more likely to result in treatment failure than being present on separate genomes [21]. Other factors, such as adherence, pharmacodynamics, and pharmacokinetics that result in suboptimal drug concentrations, could also favor the outgrowth and subsequent dominance of DRMinVs.

However, it is also thought that the origin of a drug-resistant variant could influence whether it becomes clinically relevant. DRMinVs that arise under drug selection, either in treatment-experienced individuals or by transmission, are more likely to establish a persistent infection and impact treatment outcomes than those generated de novo in the absence of drug selection and as a consequence of viral replication [10, 22–25]. The transmission of DRMinVs, however, contradicts the current understanding that most HIV infections arise from a single virus clone, although it is possible that the drug-resistant variant could be transmitted as the sole virus or a majority population followed by reversion to wild type with residual persistence of the drug-resistant variant as a minority population. Several studies have investigated the origin or transmissibility of HIV-1 DRMinVs with inconsistent findings [10, 26–29].

We performed ultradeep sequencing of a partial HIV-1 pol gene from recently infected individuals in the United Kingdom sampled between 2011 and 2014 to detect sequences harboring DRMinVs. We used a phylogenetic approach to investigate the origin of DRMinVs and determine if they are a result of a transmission event. We performed transmission cluster analysis together with sequences from the UK HIV Drug Resistance Database (UK-HDRD), which contains the pol sequences from the vast majority of genotypic resistance test results performed in the United Kingdom since 1997.
at 4.5% or 1.5% maximum genetic distance threshold between all sequences in the cluster and a 90% minimum clade support threshold (Shimodaira-Hasegawa test).

RESULTS

Population Characteristics

The characteristics of the population of recently infected study participants are listed in Table 1. The majority were white men who acquired HIV through sex with other men. All participants were ART naïve, and the majority were infected with HIV-1 subtype B with a median age of 32 years (interquartile range [IQR], 26–40).

Prevalence of Drug-resistant Majority and Minority Variants in People Recently Infected

Ultradeep sequencing of the HIV-1 pol domain from the 835 recently infected individuals was performed to detect the presence of drug-resistant majority variants (DRMajVs) and DRMinVs. We define DRMajVs as those present at a frequency >20%, the equivalent of the limit of detection of Sanger-based sequencing, and DRMinVs as those present at a frequency between 2% and 20% [30]. Ninety-three DRMinVs were present in 84 of the 835 sequences (10.1%), whereas 80 DRMajVs were present in 66 sequences (7.9%), with a median MF of 99.2% (98.4%–99.5%) and 3.2% (2.5%–5.3%), respectively. The median depth of coverage at DRMinVs positions was 12 556 (IQR, 6769–24 890). Ten sequences had multiple DRMajVs, with 4 (n = 1), 3 (n = 1), and 2 (n = 8) variants, compared to 4 sequences that had multiple DRMinVs, with 3 (n = 1) and 2 (n = 3) variants. By drug class, the most common types of DRMajVs were L90M (n = 14; 63.6%) for protease inhibitors (PIs), T215Yrev (n = 19; 57.6%) for nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs), and K103N (n = 18; 72.0%) for NNRTIs (Figure 1). In contrast, the most common DRMinVs were M46IL (n = 21; 42.9%) for PIs, D67NG (n = 11; 44.0%) for NRTIs, and G190E (n = 6; 31.6%) for NNRTIs. The majority of DRMinVs were against PIs (49/93; 52.7%), whereas DRMajVs were evenly distributed by drug class at 27.5% (n = 22) for PIs, 41.3% (n = 33) for NRTIs, and 31.3% (n = 25) for NNRTIs.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Cohort of People Recently Infected With Human Immunodeficiency Virus

| Characteristic          | Category             | Number of Sequences (% of total) |
|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| Gender                  | Male                 | 784 (93.9)                       |
|                         | Female               | 51 (6.1)                         |
| Risk exposure           | Men who have sex with men | 715 (85.6)                      |
|                         | Heterosexual male    | 50 (5.9)                         |
|                         | Heterosexual female  | 46 (5.5)                         |
|                         | Intravenous drug users | 5 (0.6)                         |
|                         | Other/Unknown        | 19 (2.3)                         |
| Ethnicity               | White                | 600 (71.9)                       |
|                         | Black (African/Caribbean/other) | 55 (6.6)                      |
|                         | Other/Unknown        | 180 (21.6)                       |
| Virus subtype           | B                    | 560 (67.1)                       |
|                         | Non-B (pure subtypes) | 134 (15.0)                       |
|                         | Circulating recombinant forms | 71 (8.5)                     |
|                         | Unique recombinant forms | 70 (8.4)                       |
| Median age, years       | (interquartile range) | 32 (26–40)                       |
Further analysis of NGS data showed that a majority (46/50; 92.0%) of transmitted DRMs had a MF >90% compared to 1/50 (2.0%) with MF between 20% and 90% and 3/50 (8.0%) with MF <20% (Figure 4A). A positive correlation was observed between mutational load and MF (r = 0.51; P < .001, Spearman correlation) for the combined DRMajV and DRMinV dataset (Figure 4B). In contrast, no correlation was observed between mutational load and MF (r = 0.14; P = .321) for the DRMinV dataset alone (Figure 4C). Similar relationships were observed when the analysis was limited to sequences within transmission clusters (Supplementary Figure 1).

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, we used a phylogenetic approach to determine the derivation of HIV-1 DRMinVs in people who were recently HIV infected in the United Kingdom. The presence of DRMs in this population is presumed to be a result of the transmission of a drug-resistant variant. It is thought that a transmitted drug resistance variant is more likely to persist because it was initially selected under drug pressure; however, the transmission of DRMinVs contradicts the current understanding that most sexually transmitted HIV-1 infections result from the transmission of a single clone. The relatively dense sampling of the UK HIV-1 epidemic enabled these analyses to be undertaken with high sensitivity. Unsurprisingly, the recent DRMajV and DRMinV NGS sequences were present in transmission clusters at high percentages of 72.7% and 75.0%, respectively, which is higher than the overall proportion of sequences in the UK HIV database that have previously been shown to be present in a transmission cluster at 52% [35].

We observed a marked difference in the most common types of DRMajVs and DRMinVs in people recently infected, these being L90M and M46IL for PIs, T215rev and D67GN for NRTIs, and K103N and G190E for NNRTIs for DRMajVs and DRMinVs, respectively. Furthermore, there is discordance in the proportion of DRMinVs in people recently infected and DRMs detected in individuals experiencing treatment failure in the United Kingdom by drug class [30]. For example, PI mutations account for the majority of DRMinVs detected at 52%, whereas PI mutations are detected in less than 5% of people experiencing treatment failure in the UK [36]. Correspondingly, we found no significant evidence that DRMinVs in people recently infected are a result of a transmission event as only 3.6% (3/84) of DRMinVs were in a transmission cluster with other sequences with the same DRM.
compared to 65.2% (43/66) of DRMajVs. Most importantly, most of the observed DRMs were against old drugs and did not include DRMs such as K65R and M184V, which are also relevant in the era of preexposure prophylaxis.

It should be emphasized that these analyses do not rule out the possibility of DRMinV-to-DRMinV transmission. However, this is highly unlikely as it contradicts the current understanding that most HIV infections arise from the transmission of a single clone that would favor the transmission of the majority variant in sexual transmissions [13–16]. On the other hand, we did observe 2 DRMinVs containing the D67G RT mutation in the same transmission cluster, suggesting that DRMinV-to-DRMinV transmission could occur. This observation could either be a chance occurrence, as the 2 sequences were not in a likely direct transmission cluster, or the phylogenetic signal for direct relatedness could not reliably be discerned from the majority consensus sequences used in the phylogenetic reconstruction.

It is likely that DRMs are predominantly transmitted as a majority variant in recently infected individuals. The DRMs subsequently decay, albeit at different rates, and are thus more likely to be detected as minority variants in newly diagnosed, treatment-naive individuals with long-standing infections [37, 38].

There was a slight, but not statistically significant, increase in DRMinVs linked to the same DRM in a transmission cluster for those with long-standing infection (11.8%; 2/17) compared to those with recent infection (3.6%; 3/84; \( P = .196 \); Supplementary Figure 2). Of note, DRMinVs linked to transmitted resistance in both recent and long-standing infections were in RT and none were against protease even though the latter constituted the majority of DRMinVs detected in both populations. This suggests that DRMinVs in treatment-naive individuals may not be created equal and only a few mutation types could result from a transmission event. This could also explain the association of NNRTI DRMinVs with virological failure observed in some
studies, whereas none have been reported to be associated with PIs [3, 8].

Alternatively, DRMinVs could be a result of technical errors introduced during sample processing or due to de novo virus replication errors [10, 28, 39]. We have previously shown that the effect from the former mostly contributes to variants detected below 2% in our assay and therefore are less likely to be the major source of the DRMinVs in this study as the variant threshold was set at ≥2% [30]. The replication process in HIV-1 is highly error prone and results in approximately 1 nucleotide mutation per genome per round of replication [40, 41]. Coupled with a high viral replication rate that can generate more than 1 billion virions in a single day in untreated individuals, it is postulated that a mutation occurs at every position in the HIV-1 genome every day. Interestingly, the most common DRMinVs were derived by G-A transition mutations, the most common replication error committed by HIV-1 and other lentiviral RTs [41], whereas the DRMajVs were a result of transversion mutations or more than 1 transition/transversion mutation. This suggests a different origin for DRMajVs and DRMinVs and that the latter could primarily be a result of viral and/or reverse-transcription polymerase chain reaction replication errors rather than drug-selection pressure. Of note, 87.5% of DRMajVs had a MF >90%, whereas 90% of DRMinVs had a MF <10%. In addition, there was no correlation between mutational load and MF for DRMinVs, also suggesting that most DRMinVs are likely generated de novo as a result of replication errors. These data indicate that a natural selection process may be at play that results in preservation of DRMs with reduced effect on viral fitness and a purge of DRMs that have a
negative effect on viral fitness. This is in agreement with known effects on viral fitness of the common types of DRMajV and DRMinV described in this study [37, 42, 43] and the hypothesis that the frequency of minority variants is likely higher in recent infections because the effective population size is smaller and thus limits the effect of negative selection, which exponentially increases later during the infection [28].

In conclusion, we find no evidence that DRMinVs detected in people recently infected with HIV are a result of a transmission event, suggesting that their detection to inform first-line treatment is unlikely to be of clinical benefit and might unnecessarily limit treatment options. Most importantly, future longitudinal studies should focus on determining the treatment outcomes in the people identified to harbor the DRMinVs, which would better inform the clinical significance of DRMinVs in this population. This finding does not extend to the detection of DRMinVs in treatment-experienced individuals where the variants would have emerged under drug-selection pressure and could therefore adversely affect treatment outcomes.

Supplementary Data
Supplementary materials are available at Clinical Infectious Diseases online. Consisting of data provided by the authors to benefit the reader, the posted materials are not copyedited and are the sole responsibility of the authors, so questions or comments should be addressed to the corresponding author.

Notes
UK HIV Drug Resistance Database. Steering committee: David Asboe, Anton Pozniak (Chelsea & Westminster Hospital, London); Patricia Cane (Public Health England [PHE], Porton Down); David Chadwick (South Tees Hospitals NHS Trust, Middlesbrough); Duncan Churchill (Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals National Health Service [NHS] Trust); Duncan Clark (Barts Health NHS Trust, London); Simon Collins (HIV i-Base, London); Valerie Delpech (National Infection Foundation, PHE); Samuel Douthwaite (Guy’s and St. Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust, London); David Dunn, Esther Fearnhill, Kholoud Porter, Anna Tostevin, Oliver Stirrup (Institute for Global Health, University College London [UCL]); Christophe Fraser (University of Oxford); Anna Maria Geretti (Institute of Infection and Global Health, University of Liverpool); Rory Gunson (Gartnavel General Hospital, Glasgow); Anthony Hale (Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust); Stéphane Hué (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine); Linda Lazarus (Expert Advisory Group on AIDS and Tropical Medicine); Andrew Nardone (PHE lead), Catherine Mercer, Gwenda Hughes, Jackie Cassell, Greta Rait, Samreen Ijaz, Tim Rhodes, Sema Mandal, Khouloud Porter, and William Rosenberg for reviewing the manuscript. J. L. M. conceived the idea for the study. All authors were involved in collecting the data. G. M. coordinated recent infection testing algorithm testing. J. L. performed the next-generation sequencing experiments and initial sequence data analysis. J. L. M., D. F. B., and R. M. performed the bioinformatics analyses. A. S. H. performed mutational load data analysis. J. L. M. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript and agreed to publish it.

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