Comparative Evaluation of the VITEK 2, Disk Diffusion, Etest, Broth Microdilution, and Agar Dilution Susceptibility Testing Methods for Colistin in Clinical Isolates, Including Heteroresistant Enterobacter cloacae and Acinetobacter baumannii Strains

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Increasing antibiotic resistance in gram-negative bacteria has recently renewed interest in colistin as a therapeutic option. The increasing use of colistin necessitates the availability of rapid and reliable methods for colistin susceptibility testing. We compared seven methods of colistin susceptibility testing (disk diffusion, agar dilution on Mueller-Hinton [MH] and Isosensitest agar, Etest on MH and Isosensitest agar, broth microdilution, and VITEK 2) on 102 clinical isolates collected from patient materials during a selective digestive decontamination or selective oral decontamination trial in an intensive-care unit. Disk diffusion is an unreliable method to measure susceptibility to colistin. High error rates and low levels of reproducibility were observed in the disk diffusion test. The colistin Etest, agar dilution, and the VITEK 2 showed a high level of agreement with the broth microdilution reference method. Heteroresistance for colistin was observed in six Enterobacter cloacae isolates and in one Acinetobacter baumannii isolate. This is the first report of heteroresistance to colistin in E. cloacae isolates. Resistance to colistin in these isolates seemed to be induced upon exposure to colistin rather than being caused by stable mutations. Heteroresistant isolates could be detected in the broth microdilution, agar dilution, Etest, or disk diffusion test. The VITEK 2 displayed low sensitivity in the detection of heteroresistant subpopulations of E. cloacae. The VITEK 2 colistin susceptibility test can therefore be considered to be a reliable tool to determine susceptibility to colistin in isolates of genera that are known not to exhibit resistant subpopulations. In isolates of genera known to (occasionally) exhibit heteroresistance, an alternative susceptibility testing method capable of detecting heteroresistance should be used.

The polymyxins are a group of polypeptide antibiotics that were first isolated in 1947 from a spore-bearing soil bacillus (Bacillus polymyxa). Several chemically different polymyxins (A to E) could be isolated from different strains of this bacillus (19). Only polymyxin B and polymyxin E (colistin) have been used clinically. Systemic use of colistin was restricted, mainly because of reports of serious nephrotoxicity and the emergence of alternative, less toxic antibiotics. Polymyxin B use has continued in the topical treatment of skin, ear, and ocular diseases. Increasing antibiotic resistance in gram-negative bacteria has recently renewed interest in colistin as an intravenous therapeutic option. Colistin is now increasingly being used for life-threatening infections with multidrug-resistant gram-negative bacteria (6, 7, 13, 14). The increasing use of colistin necessitates the availability of rapid and reliable methods for colistin susceptibility testing.

Disk diffusion is a commonly used method for measuring colistin susceptibility. However, evaluation of in vitro susceptibility testing methods for colistin has shown testing errors with various disk diffusion methods compared to MIC-based methods (8, 10, 16, 20). Excellent correlations between the Etest and the broth microdilution and agar dilution tests were demonstrated, suggesting that methods based on MICs, rather than disk diffusion methods, should be used to determine susceptibility to colistin (4, 8, 9, 16, 21). Automated systems performing rapid identification and antimicrobial susceptibility testing are increasingly being used. A recent validation study by Tan and Ng evaluated the performance of the colistin susceptibility test contained in the VITEK 2 automated system compared to agar dilution (22). Based on their data, the VITEK 2 colistin test was considered to be an unreliable method for colistin susceptibility testing (22).

In susceptibility testing methods using an agar-based medium, the sizes of the zones of inhibition depend on many variables (e.g., the antimicrobial agent, disk content, and inoculum). One of the most critical variables is the culture medium. From early experiences with the CLSI method, it was clear that different batches of Mueller-Hinton (MH) agar affected the interpretation of susceptibility (17). Significant differences in medium performance were noted for the aminoglycosides, imipenem, and colistin (1). To circumvent this problem, the British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy (BSAC) published a standardized method of disk susceptibility testing...
using a medium (Isosensitest agar) with a semidefined composition (2, 15). However, Isosensitest agar from different manufacturers has also been shown to vary considerably (1, 11).

In the present study, we compared seven methods of colistin/polymyxin B susceptibility testing of clinical isolates from intensive-care units where colistin was routinely administered as part of an ongoing trial using selective decontamination of the gastrointestinal tract.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains.** Gram-negative bacteria were isolated from throat swab, sputum, or rectal-swab cultures from patients in an intensive-care unit during a selective digestive decontamination (SDD) or selective oral decontamination (SOD) trial. In brief, patients receiving SDD were oropharyngally treated only with the (SOD) trial. In brief, patients receiving SDD were treated with intravenous selective digestive decontamination (SDD) or selective oral decontamination (SOD).

**Disk diffusion.** Disk diffusion testing was performed according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Interpretive breakpoints (MIC ≤ 2 µg/ml, susceptible, and MIC ≥ 4 µg/ml, resistant) were used for the VITEK 2.

**RESULTS**

All isolates were tested using the above-mentioned methods, and the results were compared to those of broth microdilution, as this was considered the reference method. The colistin MIC measurements for the tested ATCC reference strains were within the published quality control ranges. Table 1 shows the MIC distribution of the tested isolates using the reference broth microdilution method.

In Table 2, the results of various colistin susceptibility testing methods are compared to those of the broth microdilution reference method. Performing the analysis separately for *Enterobacteriaceae* and *Pseudomonas* species did not reveal significant differences. Table 3 shows a comparison between the broth microdilution reference method and the disk diffusion methods for colistin and polymyxin B.

**Comparison of agar dilution and broth microdilution.** A major difference was found for one *E. cloacae* isolate (MIC of <0.5 µg/ml on MH agar; MIC of >64 µg/ml on Isosensitest agar). This difference was caused by the presence of a relatively resistant subpopulation consisting of 2 to 10 CFU (depending on the colistin concentration in the agar plate) growing on Isosensitest agar and not on MH agar. Minor differences due
to relatively resistant subpopulations were also observed for five *E. cloacae* isolates and one *A. baumannii* isolate. However, these resistant subpopulations were observed growing on both MH and Isosensitest agar plates that contained higher concentrations of colistin. Prior passaging of these resistant colonies on sheep blood agar, followed by repetition of the agar dilution test, yielded an identical result. Directly repeating the agar dilution test with these resistant colonies without prior passaging on sheep blood agar demonstrated complete resistance. For five *E. cloacae* isolates and one *A. baumannii* isolate, resistant colonies growing within the polymyxin B inhibition zone were observed on Isosensitest agar, reflecting the tendency of Isosensitest agar to be a better medium for detecting heteroresistance.

Testing on MH agar showed resistant colonies within the colistin inhibition zone in two *E. cloacae* isolates and one *A. baumannii* isolate. Resistant colonies growing within the colistin inhibition zone were found for six *E. cloacae* isolates and one *A. baumannii* isolate using disk diffusion testing on Isosensitest agar, again reflecting the tendency of Isosensitest agar to be a better medium for detecting heteroresistance.

To compare the disk diffusion test results with those of the broth microdilution reference test, the MICs obtained with the broth microdilution reference test were divided into two categories (≤2 μg/ml and ≥8 μg/ml). If MICs of ≤2 μg/ml are considered sensitive and MICs of ≥8 μg/ml resistant, low levels of agreement were found (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

Infections caused by multi drug-resistant gram-negative bacteria are increasing worldwide. The increasing resistance to many antibiotics limits a lot of therapeutic options and has led to an increase in the use of intravenous colistin (6, 7, 13, 14). Therefore, reliable methods to test susceptibility to colistin are needed in order to predict the clinical response adequately. Breakpoints for colistin resistance are available for the BSAC testing procedures (MIC ≤ 4 μg/ml, susceptible, and MIC ≥ 8 μg/ml, resistant). Other interpretive breakpoints exist. The Société Française de Microbiologie provides different breakpoints (MIC ≤ 2 μg/ml, susceptible, and MIC ≥ 4 μg/ml, resistant) (18). The U.S. CLSI provides interpretive breakpoints for *P. aeruginosa* (5) and *Acinetobacter* spp. (MIC ≤ 2 μg/ml, susceptible, and MIC ≥ 4 μg/ml, resistant) (4). At present, it is still unclear which breakpoints are most appropriate. The currently available breakpoints for colistin are based on colistin sulfate. However, for clinical intravenous applications, colistin methanesulfonate is used.

The objective of our study was to evaluate seven methods of colistin susceptibility testing. We considered the broth microdilution method to be the reference method, as was done previously (3). The CLSI standard testing procedures are firmly established and have been used in many studies. The broth microdilution test was able to detect the heteroresistant isolates. Agar dilution testing using either MH agar or Isosensitest agar was performed. We have also used BSAC testing procedures with semidefined Isosensitest agar, as this has been advocated by some authors (1, 2). Agar dilution methods using
either MH agar or Isosensitest agar showed highly concordant results. We found no significant differences in the performance of either of these test media. Easier detection of resistant subpopulations of *E. cloacae* isolates in our study was an advantage of using the Isosensitest agar. For one *E. cloacae* isolate, the resistant colonies found on Isosensitest agar were not detected using agar dilution testing on MH agar. This reflects the seemingly inherent quality of Isosensitest agar to be more sensitive in the detection of resistant subpopulations.

Polymyxins diffuse poorly in agar, resulting in relatively small zones of inhibition. This complicates the differentiation between susceptible and resistant isolates. Several studies have found disk diffusion to be an unreliable method to measure susceptibility to colistin (8, 16, 20). We have also found high error rates, as well as a low level of reproducibility between subsequent measurements for the same isolate. Both polymyxin B- and colistin-containing disks were used in our study. Since there is complete cross-resistance between colistin and polymyxin B, testing either colistin or polymyxin B is not expected to make a difference. Polymyxin B was used in this study, as well, because we routinely test for polymyxin B sensitivity in our laboratory in clinical situations possibly requiring topical application of polymyxin B. Comparison to the reference broth microdilution method was omitted because it was not clear which breakpoints would be appropriate to use.

In previous studies, the Etest showed excellent agreement with agar dilution (16) and broth microdilution (3) methods. Comparing the colistin Etest method to broth microdilution methods showed concordant results. The Etest on MH agar showed somewhat better results than the Etest on Isosensitest agar. Resistant subpopulations of four *E. cloacae* isolates were missed using MH agar, again reflecting the higher sensitivity of Isosensitest agar to detect resistant subpopulations.

So far, there has been only one report in the literature about the performance of automated systems, such as the VITEK 2, for colistin susceptibility testing (22). Tan and Ng considered the VITEK 2 colistin susceptibility test to be an unreliable method (22). In contrast, the VITEK 2 colistin susceptibility test performed well in our study. We found a high level of agreement with the reference broth microdilution method. The main disadvantage of the VITEK 2 is its low sensitivity to detect resistant subpopulations of *E. cloacae* isolates. However, the resistant subpopulations of the *A. baumannii* isolates were detected in the VITEK 2, as well as in the other methods for colistin susceptibility testing. The VITEK 2 colistin susceptibility test can therefore be considered to be a reliable tool to determine susceptibility to colistin in isolates that do not exhibit resistant subpopulations. Although the VITEK 2 is an easy-to-use susceptibility testing method in the setting of a routine diagnostic microbiology laboratory, care should be taken in the interpretation of the results for genera in which heteroresistance has been described. For genera in which occasional heteroresistance has been described, an alternative testing method capable of detecting resistant subpopulations should be used.

Resistant colonies, representing a colistin-resistant subpopulation, were observed for six *E. cloacae* isolates and for one *A. baumannii* isolate. Assaying these resistant colonies directly for colistin susceptibility showed them to be completely resistant. Prior passage of these resistant colonies on sheep blood agar, followed by retesting, showed an identical result, indicating the resistance to be induced upon exposure to colistin rather than being caused by stable mutations. Heteroresistance to colistin in clinical isolates of *A. baumannii* has been described previously (12). The authors suggested that monotherapy with colistin for treatment of infections caused by heteroresistant *A. baumannii* may be problematic. The achieved concentrations of colistin in plasma may be substantially lower than those required to eradicate the more resistant subpopulations of *A. baumannii*. Therefore, care is required in the use of colistin as monotherapy in infections with *A. baumannii*. Our study is the first to report on heteroresistance in *E. cloacae* isolates. We propose to extend the suggestion of Li et al. to heteroresistant variants of *E. cloacae* isolates, as well. As yet, it is not clear whether these colistin-resistant subpopulations are truly clinically significant or merely represent in vitro artifacts. It remains to be investigated whether colistin-resistant subpopulations exist among other bacteria, as well.

We tested bacterial isolates collected from patient materials during an SDD or SOD trial in an intensive-care unit. The results showed relatively high levels of resistance to colistin. This is probably caused by selection of colistin-resistant bacterial isolates. We have also tested isolates from the same intensive-care unit when no SDD or SOD was applied. In these isolates, no colistin resistance was found, indicating a higher level of resistance during the SDD or SOD trial. Whether previous exposure to colistin in the SDD or SOD trial affected the selection of heteroresistant isolates remains to be elucidated.

In conclusion, the disk diffusion method is an unreliable method to measure susceptibility to colistin. The VITEK 2 colistin susceptibility test is a reliable and easy-to-use tool to determine susceptibility to colistin in isolates of genera that are known not to exhibit heteroresistance. For isolates of genera that are known to (occasionally) exhibit heteroresistance, a testing method that is able to detect heteroresistance should be used. The Etest and agar dilution test are also reliable methods to measure colistin susceptibility and have the advantage that they can detect heteroresistant isolates. Heteroresistance was observed in several *E. cloacae* and *A. baumannii* isolates. Isosensitest agar was a better medium to detect heteroresistance than MH agar. Further investigation is needed to determine the clinical significance of these heteroresistant isolates.

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**REFERENCES**


