Letters to the Editor

Frequency of High-Level Mupirocin-Resistant Staphylococcus aureus in a Tertiary Care Facility

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) strains are frequently resistant to multiple antibiotics, antiseptics, and disinfectants (4). Therefore, the presence of MRSA, even as a mere colonizer, presents a serious threat, especially in hospitals and nursing homes (14). The Albuquerque Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center (AVAMC) began using topical mupirocin to eliminate MRSA from the nares of all colonized individuals in 1991. This approach is considered safe and effective and lacks the morbidities, side effects, costs, and effects upon normal flora associated with oral antibiotics (1–3, 12, 13). However, several studies have appeared recently that associate mupirocin usage with increases in high-level mupirocin-resistant MRSA (5–8, 10). To assess the impact of mupirocin usage at the AVAMC, the frequency and the level of mupirocin resistance were measured with 427 S. aureus isolates saved by the microbiology laboratory between 1989 and the first quarter of 1995 (Table 1). The collection included MSSA isolates cultured from invasive sites and all MRSA.

Methicillin and mupirocin resistances were measured in Mueller-Hinton agar by the agar dilution method (11) at two-fold increments from 2 to 64 and 2 to 1,024 μg/ml, respectively. Isolates of S. aureus were considered methicillin resistant if the MIC was ≥2 μg/ml and mupirocin resistant if the MIC was 4 to 64 μg/ml (low-level resistance), 128 to 256 μg/ml (intermediate-level resistance), and ≥500 μg/ml (high-level resistance), respectively (7). Duplicate samples from the same patient were not included in the analysis unless a change in susceptibility occurred. Eighty-two percent (350 of 427) of the isolates were resistant to methicillin, 0.7% (3 of 427) were resistant to mupirocin but not methicillin, and 6.1% (26 of 427) were resistant to both methicillin and mupirocin. Mupirocin resistance was independent of the hospital unit or body site from which the isolate was collected.

S. aureus colonizes mucosa superficially, and very high local doses of mupirocin are achieved when mupirocin is applied as an ointment (20,000 μg/ml). Therefore, the clinical significance of low and intermediate levels of mupirocin resistance is questionable (7). However, four MRSA isolates, all collected between November 1994 and January 1995, displayed high-level resistance. These isolates originated from three patients in three separate units in the hospital who had been treated with mupirocin prior to the collection of the resistant isolate. In one patient, highly resistant isolates were recovered from both a urine culture and a tracheostomy site that had previously been colonized by mupirocin-susceptible MRSA. Approximately 3 weeks later, MRSA with high-level resistance to mupirocin was also isolated from the patient’s nares.

Prevention of MRSA infections requires prompt treatment of critically ill patients and treatment and monitoring of carriers, particularly during outbreaks (14). However, high-level mupirocin resistance can be mediated by conjugative plasmids (9), and so the potential exists for the selection of widespread mupirocin resistance with increased use of mupirocin and a concomitant increase in treatment failure (7). The emergence of high-level mupirocin-resistant MRSA at the AVAMC since November 1994 further suggests that there is rapid selection for high-level mupirocin resistance once established. In this light, it may be prudent to limit the use of mupirocin to de-colonizing patients with documented MRSA infections, individuals at high risk for developing systemic infections, and carriers associated with outbreaks.

REFERENCES


TABLE 1. Frequency of mupirocin-resistant S. aureus from 1989 to 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yr</th>
<th>No. of mupirocin-susceptible and -resistant isolates</th>
<th>Susceptible</th>
<th>Low MIC</th>
<th>Intermediate MIC</th>
<th>High MIC</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>1989–1990</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1991</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>87</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994–1995</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>427</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a The difference between the 3.3 and 0% frequencies of high-level resistance in 1994 to 1995 and 1989 to 1994, respectively, was statistically significant by Fisher’s exact test ($P = 0.010$), the Kruskal-Wallis test ($P = 0.04$), and the Exact JT test for trend overtime ($P = 0.06$).

Lourdes Irizarry
Section of Infectious Disease
Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center
2100 Ridgecrest Drive, SE
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87108

Jennifer Rupp
Department of Medicine

Jeffrey Griffith
Department of Biochemistry
University of New Mexico School of Medicine
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131