Letters

PorA typing of Neisseria meningitidis isolates from Iranian children for vaccine design

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: As the causative agent of meningitis, Neisseria meningitidis has different serogroups. The purpose of this study was to investigate the molecular properties of N. meningitidis strains among Iranian cases. Methods: 450 samples were collected from children under 5 years of age. Detection of Neisseria genus was done by phenotypic and genotypic methods. Multiplex PCR was used to identify the serogroups of N. meningitides. The sequencing of variable regions of porA gene was performed for detection of the subserogroups. Results: From 137 (30.44%) Neisseria isolates, 4 isolates (0.88%) belonged to N. meningitidis and 133 isolates (29.55%) belonged to other species. Multiplex PCR results showed that one isolate belonged to serogroup A while 3 belonged to serogroup B. The analysis of amplified VR1 and VR2 variable regions of porA showed 100% identity of the serogroup A strain with strain BZ83N and the serogroup B strains with strain 528 of N. meningitidis. In accordance with other findings in Asia, serogroups A and B were the most prevalent serogroups of N. meningitidis. Sequencing of variable regions of porA could identify the subserogroups of the isolates. Conclusion: sequencing of porA could be a valuable method for identification of N. meningitidis strains to be used in epidemiological studies as well as improved vaccine designs.

KEYWORDS: Neisseria meningitidis, porA, sequencing, PCR, typing.

INTRODUCTION

Neisseria meningitidis (meningococcus) are pathogenic Gram-negative bacteria which cause meningitis, especially in children under the age of 5. Meningococcus consists of 13 different serogroups, based on the differences in the structure of their polysaccharide capsule. The serogroups A, B, C, Y, and W-135 are major pathogens in humans whose geographic distribution is different in various parts of the world [1]. The genetic diversity of isolated Neisseria strains is known in many parts of the world as presented in <http://neisseria.org/nm/typing> website, based on Neisseria surface molecules, including Porine Class 1 or PorA protein. PorA is an intramembrane cationic protein, expressed in outer membrane of all N. meningitidis strains. This protein consists of 16 parallel beta strands with conserved amino acid sequences in the strains having 8 extracellular hydrophilic loops. The differences in PorA protein between the strains, which is the basis for of their typing into the serosubtypes are related to loop 1 and loop 4 which contain variable regions of VR1 and VR2 [2-4]. The current method for the detection of asymptomatic carriers of N. meningitidis is culturing of nasopharynx or tonsil samples whereas a PCR-based method is used in epidemiological studies. The purpose of this study was to detect and investigate the molecular properties of N. meningitidis strains among kindergarten-age (i.e. under 5-years old) Iranian children in Tehran.

MATERIALS and METHODS

In the present descriptive cross-sectional study, 450 samples were collected from nasopharynx and tonsils of healthy children under 5 years of age with Dacron swab, in Tehran kindergartens from October 2015 to March 2016. Microbiological and biochemical tests were conducted to detect Neisseria genus in these samples. After culturing the samples in chocolate agar and Mueller Hinton Agar (MHA), some bacterial colonies were dissolved in 400 μl distilled water and cellular suspensions were prepared. Genomic DNA samples were then extracted using purified DNA kit

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(DNPTM Kit, CINAACLON, Iran) and the quality and quantity of the extracted DNA were determined with a NanoDrop device. The 16S rRNA gene sequencing was used to determine Neisseria genus and identification of N. meningitidis species was done based on ctrA gene amplification by PCR. Multiplex PCR was used to identify the serogroups of the isolated N. meningitidis (orf-2 gene for identification of the serogroup A, and siaD (capsule polymerase) gene for detection of serogroups B and C). For detection of the strains, the presence of porA gene was evaluated by PCR among the serogrouped isolates. The primer sequences used to identify genus, species, serogroups, and meningococcal strains are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genus</td>
<td>16S rRNA</td>
<td>GTC ATG AAG CAT ACC GTG GT'</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species</td>
<td>ctrA</td>
<td>CCA GCG GTA TTG TTT GGT GGT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(A)F</td>
<td>CGC AAT AGG TGT ATA TAT TCT TCC'</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(A)R</td>
<td>CGT AAT AGT TTC GTA TGC CTT CTT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(B)F</td>
<td>GGA TCA TTT CAG TGT TTT CCA CCA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(B)R</td>
<td>GCA TGC TGG AGG AAT AAG CAT TAA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(C)F</td>
<td>TCA AAT GAG TTI GCG AAT AGA GG T</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serogroup</td>
<td>Nm(C)R</td>
<td>CAA TCA CGA TTT GCC CAA TG AC</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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**RESULTS**

According to our results, the frequency of collected samples in boys (n = 276, 61.2%) was more than girls (n = 174, 38.8%). After performing phenotypic and molecular tests, 137 (30.44%) of Neisseria was isolated from the 450 tested samples and verified as Neisseria genus, of which, 81 (59.1%) were from boys and 56 (40.9%) were from girls, including 51 (37.2%) in the age range of 4-5 years. The greatest number of Neisseria genus was from Nabi Bagh-e Ghonche kindergarten (15 cases) and the least number was from Shabir, Bagh-e Ghonche and Roghayee kindergartens (each one 3 cases). Of these, 4 (0.88%) were positive for ctrA gene and belonged to other species. Multiplex PCR results showed that one isolate out of 4 belonged to serogroup A and 3 to serogroup B. It was found that all 3 strains of the B serogroup were isolated from Amene kindergarten and the serogroup A strain was from Sama kindergarten. Each of the 4 isolates was collected from the tonsils. The PCR results with primers designed based on VR1 and VR2 variable regions of porA gene showed the presence of this gene in serogroup A and B. The obtained sequences were analyzed by NCBI BLAST and 100% identity was observed between the serogroup A strain and BZ283N strain as well as the serogroup B strains and strain 528 of N. meningitidis.

**DISCUSSION**

Based on 16s rRNA gene amplification, we detected 137 Neisseria genus among the 450 tested isolates. Greisen et al. in Ireland designed the primer sequence of 16S rRNA for detection of Neisseria [5]. Various researches in different locations of Iran have reported the prevalence of Neisseria genus from 0 to 33%. Also, different rates of Neisseria are reported from other countries [6]. The main reason for the discrepancies in these studies could be related to the type of sample, sample size and the geographic area [7-9]. Using a PCR method, we could identify 4 N. meningitidis among the 137 Neisseria genus (2.9 %) that was close to another report from Spain (5%) [10]. In another study in which the bacterial flora of the nasopharynx was examined, a higher rate of N. meningitidis (9%) had been isolated [6]. Although, detailed and comprehensive studies have not been conducted on the prevalence of N. meningitidis in Asia, especially in the Middle East, sporadic studies point to increased prevalence of serogroups A and B [6, 11]. We were able to isolate these two serogroups in the present study and achieved the same results. In another study in England [12], the PCR results showed that serogroups B and C were accounted for the most carriers. In addition, a study in Mexico on the prevalence of Neisseria has shown that 2.9% of the isolates were positive for N. meningitidis while the most frequent of which was related to serotype Y [13]. The sequencing of important genes such as porA in different N. meningitidis serogroups could identify subserogroups among the isolates [14], Schuurman, also used the PCR and sequencing of N. meningitidis for their typing among 267 CSF specimens [15].

In conclusion, a low rate of N. meningitidis was isolated from Iranian children. Sequencing of porA could be a valuable method for identification of N. meningitidis strains in epidemiological studies. Considering that many studies have used PorA antigen as a vaccine, the collected typing information can potentially be used to design enhanced vaccines against the most prevalent pathogen in different geographical regions.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This study was part of a Ph.D. fellowship project (No. B9109) and was funded by Pasteur Institute of Iran, Tehran, Iran.

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
REFERENCES


