

CONCISE COMMUNICATION

Importation of *Acinetobacter baumannii* Into a Burn Unit: A Recurrent Outbreak of Infection Associated With Widespread Environmental Contamination

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A burn patient was infected with *Acinetobacter baumannii* on transfer to the hospital after a terrorist attack. Two patients experienced cross-infection. Environmental swab samples were negative for *A. baumannii*. Six months later, the bacteria reemerged in 6 patients. Environmental swab samples obtained at this time were inoculated into a minimal mineral broth, and culture results showed widespread contamination. No case of infection occurred after closure of the unit for disinfection.

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Acinetobacter baumannii recently gained interest as a cause of dirty wound infection, particularly in mass casualties.¹⁻⁴ It is also a hospital-acquired pathogen that is predominantly found in the intensive care setting.^{5,6} Its propensity to persistently contaminate the hospital environment⁷ and to become resistant to most available antibiotics is a major concern.^{8,9} We describe an outbreak of infection related to an index patient who was transferred to a burn intensive care unit (BICU). This outbreak was characterized by 2 distinct phases in its evolution and by widespread environmental contamination.

METHODS

The BICU had 3 isolation rooms for burned patients and 1 bay of 4 beds for nonburned surgical intensive care unit patients. No *A. baumannii* had been cultured from BICU patients during the 4 years that preceded the outbreak. From October 2002 to December 2004, the patients involved in the outbreak were identified from the results of microbiology specimens obtained for clinical management. Screening cultures were not formally performed because many specimens were regularly available, independent of any formal screening culture protocol.

To assess environmental contamination during the first phase of the outbreak, we used swab samples inoculated into brain-heart infusion enrichment broth and subcultured onto MacConkey agar. Suspected *A. baumannii* colonies were further identified and their susceptibility patterns were deter-

mined with microbial identification and susceptibility testing systems (Vitek 2; bioMérieux). During the second phase of the outbreak, swab samples were cultured on minimal mineral broth with acetate, a medium selective for *Acinetobacter* species.¹⁰ Because the epidemic strain was resistant to ciprofloxacin, this medium was supplemented with 32 mg/L of ciprofloxacin (Ciproxin; Bayer AG) to further increase its specificity. All *A. baumannii* isolates recovered during the outbreak, from either patients or the hospital environment, were typed by pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) as described elsewhere.¹¹

RESULTS

First phase. The index patient, whose burns resulted from the October 12, 2002, bombing in Bali, was transferred to the BICU 4 days later and isolated under contact precautions (Figure 1). On the day of transfer, *A. baumannii* was cultured from wound biopsy specimens, from the tips of 3 intravascular catheters, and from sputum specimens. The isolate was fully susceptible only to carbapenems and amikacin.

Two of 3 consecutive burned patients became infected with a strain of *A. baumannii* that had the same PFGE profile. This was not the case for 113 nonburned patients who stayed in the BICU during the same period.

We collected environmental swab samples from the hydrotherapy room, because it was shared by burned patients only, but found no *A. baumannii*. Transmission precautions were reinforced. A single cohort of nurses took care of all *A. baumannii*-positive patients. No additional case of infection occurred among the 14 burned patients admitted to the hospital during the 6 following months.

Second phase. After this interruption, 6 of 9 consecutive burned patients were infected with *A. baumannii*, but again none of the 91 nonburned patients was infected. We obtained 161 swab samples from the environment, which this time were cultured on minimal mineral broth with acetate supplemented with ciprofloxacin. *A. baumannii* was recovered from 16 (10%) of 161 swab samples, mostly from the hydrotherapy room and a patient's room. The environmental strains and the patients' strains had a PFGE profile that was indistinguishable from that of the isolate recovered during the first phase of the outbreak (Figure 2).

We implemented more stringent and extensive cleaning procedures, including a ban against stockpiling any material in the rooms and a requirement to replace unused, exposed material after each procedure in the hydrotherapy room and the operating room, and daily in the patients' rooms. Finally, the BICU was closed to new patients until the last *A. baumannii*-positive patient could be discharged to the regular ward (ie, for 2.5 months). As a consequence, admission had to be denied to 9 burned patients who were transferred to

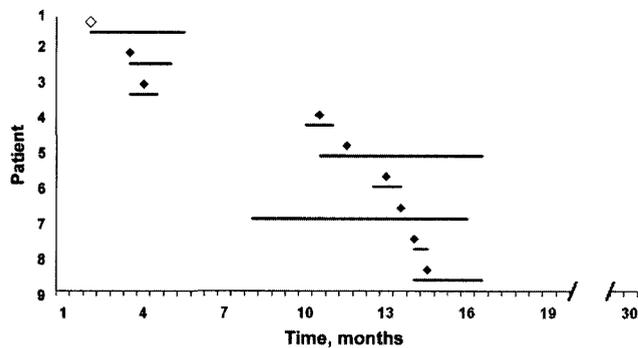


FIGURE 1. Time distribution of *Acinetobacter baumannii* infection in the 9 burn unit patients in the outbreak. Bar, length of stay in the unit for 1 patient involved in the outbreak. Diamonds, first occurrence of *A. baumannii*-positive culture results (open diamond, index case; closed diamonds, secondary cases).

another burn center. Before reopening, the BICU underwent an extensive chemical-mechanical disinfection, and material and equipment were sterilized, disinfected, and/or replaced. Control swab samples collected from environmental surfaces were negative for *A. baumannii* at that time and again 8 months thereafter. No new case of infection due to *A. baumannii* occurred among the 32 burn patients admitted during the 18-month follow-up period after the BICU reopened.

DISCUSSION

This case series illustrates that hospitals are vulnerable to importation of *A. baumannii* when patients are transferred from other hospitals,¹² from a battlefield, or from the scene of a mass catastrophe.²⁻⁴ Similar to the index patient, several survivors of the terrorist attack in Bali were colonized with *A. baumannii*.¹

The patients who were infected with *A. baumannii* in this outbreak were hospitalized for significantly longer periods because of delayed wound healing. Three patients experienced septic shock-related bowel perforation, which was fatal for one of them (data not shown).

Most outbreaks caused by *A. baumannii* have involved intensive care unit patients,⁷ particularly burn patients.¹³⁻¹⁵ In our series, *A. baumannii* not only did not cause infection outside the BICU, but it was never recovered from nonburned surgical ICU patients treated in the BICU. This observation suggested the hypothesis that the burned patients shared a common exposure. Indeed, debridement surgery and hydrotherapy were examples of invasive procedures that these patients underwent in the same rooms.

We were unable to demonstrate contamination of the environment during the first phase of the outbreak, similar to 26 (51%) of 51 *A. baumannii* epidemics described in the literature from 1977 through 2000.⁵ Environmental contamination may have been absent or minimal during this phase. Alternatively, it is possible that this contamination was not

documented because the first-phase investigation was less intensive than that during the second phase or because the brain-heart infusion enrichment broth that was used during the first phase was not sufficiently sensitive to detect *A. baumannii* in the environment. We eventually found a fairly disseminated contamination of the environment when we used minimal mineral broth with acetate¹⁰ during the second phase. Contamination of material and surfaces was obvious in patients' rooms and in the hydrotherapy room. One may consider patients undergoing hydrotherapy at high risk for environmental contamination, because hydrotherapy is associated with moisture and high temperature in the room, droplet dispersion, and intensive handling of anesthetized patients with large, contaminated wounds, which create numerous opportunities for breakdowns in contact precautions. The receipt of hydrotherapy was indeed an independent risk factor for *A. baumannii* bloodstream infection in burn patients in a study by Wisplinghoff et al.¹⁵ The presence of *A. baumannii* on boxes of an emergency drug (norepinephrine) illustrates the importance of complying with isolation precautions even under critical circumstances.

We have no clear explanation of how and where the *A. baumannii* epidemic strain persisted between the 2 phases of the outbreak. We could not find any change in care procedures or in the population of either patients or healthcare workers that could represent reexposure to a persisting source. A persisting environmental source was not looked for during the interval between the 2 phases, because we assumed that the problem was resolved at that time. The known propensity of *A. baumannii* to persistently contaminate surfaces is a likely explanation for the resurgence of the outbreak.^{16,17}

Events of this kind illustrate that even hospitals without endemic *A. baumannii* are at risk of importing this bacterium via transfer of patients. Microbiological screening is advisable for patients transferred from endemic areas, battlefields, or the scenes of mass catastrophes, along with strict infection

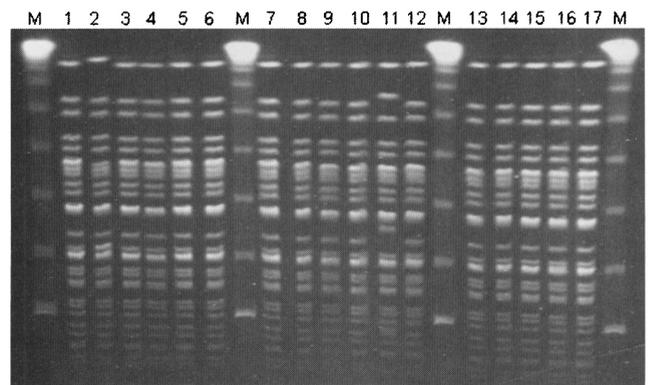


FIGURE 2. Pulsed-field gel electrophoresis patterns after digestion with restriction enzyme *ApaI* of DNA from *Acinetobacter baumannii* isolates from 6 of the 9 patients (lanes 1-6) and from the environment (lanes 7-17). M, molecular markers.

control measures. If secondary cases occur, the detection of environmental contamination by use of a minimal mineral broth with acetate may help guide measures to interrupt transmission.

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