Resistance and Virulence Factor Determinants of Carbapenem-Resistant 
*Escherichia coli* Clinical Isolates in Three Hospitals in Tehran, IR Iran

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Abstract

**Background:** *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) strains are among predominant agents causing nosocomial and community acquired infections. The majority of strains encode numerous virulence factors including fimbrial adhesions, secretory proteins and toxins, siderophores, and capsule. This study aimed to investigate the prevalence rate of virulence encoding genes and carbapenem resistance-encoding genes among imipenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates collected from patients hospitalized in Tehran, IR Iran.

**Materials and Methods:** In this cross-sectional study (April 2015-December 2017), 50 non-duplicated carbapenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates were collected from clinical specimens (stool, urine, blood, and wound) of hospitalized patients in three hospitals in Tehran, Iran. The antibiotic susceptibility profile was determined against 15 antibiotics on Mueller Hinton Agar (MHA) as per CLSI guidelines version 2016. The PCR was used to detect virulence and antibiotic resistance encoding genes.

**Results:** From a total of 50 carbapenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates, the highest resistance rate was observed to ceftazidime (100%), tetracycline (88%), amoxicillin (100%), sulfonamide (60%), and the least resistance rate was observed against amikacin (14%), gentamicin (22%), and fosfomycin (0%). The genes mediating resistance were as follows: beta-lactams OXA-48 (8%), IMP (16%), VIM (0%), NDM-1 (0%), fosA3 (0%), quinolones (qnrA 48%), and colistin mer-1(0%). Furthermore, the prevalence rates of *qnrA*, *hlyA*, *cnf1*, *vat*, *pic*, *clf*, and *papH* were 88, 36, 28, 10, 12, 54, and 88%, respectively.

**Conclusion:** In this study, all imipenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates were susceptible to fosfomycin, and all were fosA3 negative. Among carbapenemases genes, IMP and OXA-48 type enzymes associated with higher MIC levels (8 to 32 µg/mL) were detected. In this study, data suggest the role of these carbapenemases in resistance to carbapenems. Furthermore, the presence of multiple drug resistant strains encoding adhesive and secretory virulence factors is a concern for the infections treatment.

**Keywords:** *Escherichia coli*, Virulence, Carbapenemases

1. Background

*Escherichia coli* strains or pathotypes are genetically diverse groups causing several types of infections. These strains encode a number of adhesions mediating their persistence and colonization in epithelial cells, resulted in destroying the host immune and defense mechanisms and initiating extra-intestinal infections (1). In addition to fimbrial adhesions, toxins, iron uptaking siderophores, and polysaccharide capsule are also involved in the pathogenesis of the isolates. Toxin production following the colonization of *E. coli* strains may induce inflammatory responses (2-3). Alpha hemolysin (HlyA) and cytotoxic necrotizing factor Type 1 (CNF1) are two known toxins which have been demonstrated to cause direct cytotoxicity in host tissues. Three different toxins from the SPATE (serine protease auto-transporters of Enterobacteriaceae) family have been identified in *E. coli* strains from pyelonephritis, Sat (secretory protein), Pic (protease leading to colonization), Vat (vacuolating auto-transporters toxin), and Tsh (the temperature sensitive hemagglutination), all of which are widespread in UPEC but not in commensal strains (4-5). Furthermore, *E. coli* adhesions such as Type 1 fimbriae and pili are important for bacterial colonization (6).

Drug-resistant Enterobacteriaceae, especially those producing extended-spectrum b-lactamas (ESBLs), are typically treated with carbapenems. Increase in imipenem resistance among these species have led to the difficulties in infection eradication (7). Several carbapenemase-encoding genes such as *bla_*NDM, *bla_*VIM, *bla_*OXA-48, *bla_*SDM1, and *bla_*GES have been participated in carbapenem resistance (8-9). In Iran, previous studies have detected some of these genes with various imipenem minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs); however, the relationship between carbapenemases and virulence factors among imipenem-resistant *E. coli* strains has not been fully elucidated.

2. Objective

This study aimed to investigate the prevalence rate of virulence encoding genes and carbapenem resistance-encoding genes among imipenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates collected from patients hospitalized in Tehran, IR Iran. 3. Materials and Methods.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Bacterial isolates

This cross-sectional survey was performed from April 2015 to December 2017. A total of 50 carbapenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates were isolated from patients hospitalized in intensive care units (ICU) (31/50) and in infectious disease (9/50), surgery (7), and internal (3) wards. The specimens included stool, urine, blood, and wound from 3 hospitals in Tehran, Iran. The ages of patients ranged from 49 to 73 years, among them 39 cases were female, and 11 cases were male. The *E. coli* isolates were identified by employing conventional
biochemical tests and stored in Trypticase Soy Broth (TSB) medium containing 30% glycerol at -20°C for further studies.

3.2. Antibiotic susceptibility profile

The antibiotic susceptibility of E. coli strains was done as per CLSI guidelines version 2016. The antibiotic discs (Roscoe-Denmark) used were as follows: amoxicillin (10μg), fosfomycin (200μg), cefoxitin (30μg), cefazidine (30μg), cefotaxime (30μg), cephepe (30μg), gentamicin (10μg), tetracycline (30μg), trimethoprim-sulfaemethoxazole (25μg), imipenem (10μg), meropenem (10μg), ciprofloxacin (5μg), chloramphenicol (30μg), piperacillin- tazobactam (10/100μg), and ciprofloxacin (5 μg) (concentration per disk). The E. coli ATCC 25922 and Staphylococcus aureus ATCC25923 standard strains were used as the quality control for the susceptibility results.

3.3. Carba NP-test

The Carba NP-test was performed for the phenotypic determination of carbapenemase enzymes; especially MBLs. At least CLSI guideline version 2016, a solution consisting of H2O, MgSO4, phenol red, and 6 mg.mL−1 imipenem was prepared, of which 100μL was distributed in each cryo-tube. A loop of each isolate overnight growth was added to each tube and incubated for 1 to 2 hours. An alteration from red to yellow color showed imipenem hydrolysis and positive result.

3.4. Imipenem MIC determination

The MIC of imipenem was performed with the agar dilution method. The range of imipenem dilutions added to the Mueller Hinton agar was from 0.25 to 64 μg.mL−1.

3.5. Detection of antibiotic resistance genes and virulence factors

Specific primers and PCR conditions used for the detection of genes encoding resistance enzymes and virulence factors among isolates are exhibited in Table 1. For all the reactions, the PCR thermal cycler device (BioRad- USA) was employed. The gel electrophoresis containing 1.5% agarose, a 100bp DNA marker, and safe stain (Sinagen, Iran) was used. The annealing temperature for each PCR condition is depicted in Table1.

3.6. Data analysis

Data of this study were analyzed using Graphpad prism 6.1 software and Chi-square test and ANOVA test, and results were considered as significant with a p value <.05 and 95% confidence interval.

4. Results

From a total of 50 imipenem-resistant E. coli isolates isolated from three hospitals, all were susceptible to fosfomycin, and the majority (86%) of them were susceptible to amikacin. The antibiotic resistance rates were as follows: tetracycline 88%, amoxicillin 100%, sulphonamide 60%, trimethoprim 58%, cefoxitin 100%, cefazidine 100%, cefotaxime 100%, cefepe 90%, gentamicin 22%, trimethoprim-sulfaemethoxazole 34%, imipenem 100%, meropenem 100%, ciprofloxacin 32%, chloramphenicol 22%, and piperacillin- tazobactam 54%.

4.1. The imipenem MIC

The imipenem MIC results showed that 24 isolates had MIC=2, 3 isolates had MIC=4, 8 isolates had MIC=8, 3 isolates had MIC=16, and 2 isolates had MIC=32. According to the CLSI guidelines, 13 isolates were carbapenem-resistant E. coli.

The genes mediating resistance were as follows: beta-lactams OXA-48 (8%), KPC-2 (0%), IMP (16%), VIM (0%), NDM-1 (0%), fosA3 (0%), quinolones qnrA (28%), sulphonamide sul1 (48%), and colistin mcr-1(0%).

As shown in Table 2, 5 IMP positive E. coli isolates showing MICs ranging from 8 to 32 μg.mL−1 were detected from 5 male and 3 female patients with the age ranges from 33 to 61 years, 3 of which were OXA-48 producers as well. Five of these isolates were isolated from urinary tract infections, two isolates from stool, and one isolate from wound infections. Most of these isolates were multiple drug-resistant E. coli.

Furthermore, the prevalence rate of fimA, hlyA, cysJ, vat, pic, crl, and papH were 88, 36, 28, 10, 12, 44, and 88%, respectively. The distribution of virulence genes among various clinical sites are displayed in Table 2. There was significant difference among infection sites regarding the prevalence rate of virulence genes (95% CI, p values<0.05).

5. Discussion

The increase in drug resistance especially resistance to carbapenem among E. coli pathotypes has led to fatality and difficulty in infections treatment. In this study, all the isolates were susceptible to fosfomycin, and 86% were susceptible to amikacin. In a study by Pullukcu et al. (2007), the microbiological and clinical success of fosfomycin on the drug-resistant isolates was 78.5 (41/52) and 94.3% (49/52), respectively (18). In another study by Oteo et al. (2010), in 231 ESBL-producing E. coli isolates, the rate of fosfomycin resistance had increased 9.1% during the years associated with fosfomycin parallel consumption in the community (19). In this study, from a total of 50 carbapenem-resistant E. coli strains, 13 isolates showed imipenem MIC=8, which place them in the resistance range, and all were positive for fimA and papH genes, indicating virulent and resistant strains. The prevalence rate of carbapenemase and other resistance genes was determined as follows: OXA-48, 8%; KPC-2, 0%; IMP, 16%; VIM, 0%; NDM-1, 0%; fosA3, 0% as beta-lactamases; qnrA, 48%; sul1, 48%; and colistin mcr-1, 0%. It was observed that 8 isolates were able to amplify the IMP gene as the predominant metallo-beta lactamase (MBL) gene. Similarly, in a study by Alizadeh et al. (2015) in Kerman, none of ESBL-producing E. coli isolates were positive for blaIMP and blavim genes (20).

In previous study by Nobari et al. (2014) conducted in Iran, 3 and 5 out of 180 E. coli isolates harbored NDM1 and VIM genes, respectively (21). Of 92 carbapenem-resistant E. coli isolates in Hong Kong, one ST131/blalmp-1 was detected (22). The blaIMP subtypes have been reported worldwide in Europe and United States (23-25). Several of them have been related to special clonal complexes and phylo groups; however, in this study, the clonal complexes were not detected. In this study, none of the isolates were positive for blasato, blavim, and fosA3 genes. The blaNMDM1 has an endemic state in India, but has spread to several other parts of the world such as Europe, East Asia, South America, United States and Iran (26-30).

E. coli strains are the predominant cause of urinary tract and intestinal and even extra-intestinal infections by producing a number of virulence factors facilitating the colonization and invasion of the strains to host cells (31-33). Our data exhibited that the prevalence rate of UTIs was higher in female than in male patients. In addition to a host of factors, other factors such as alterations in the normal
virulence factors of carbapenem-resistant Escherichia coli clinical isolates

vaginal flora in women can be a high-risk factor for developing urinary tract infections. In previous study by Fattahi et al. (2015) conducted in Iran, among UPEC isolates, 94 (94%) cases were fimA positive, this gene was associated with biofilm formation by these isolates (34). In another study, it was shown that colicin and microcin toxins were significantly more common among fimA possessing E. coli isolates (35). The cnf gene which is involved in the renal damage is present in one third of E. coli strains causing pyelonephritis (36). Moreover, cnf1 is responsible for the phagocytosis of polymorpho-nuclear cells and the apoptosis of epithelial cells. The predominant virulence factor produced by UPEC strains is a lipoprotein called hlyA which is involved in ascending the urinary tract infections rate, like pyelonephritis (37). A study from Mexico showed that 62, 7.4, and 6.5% of UPEC strains were positive for papH, hlyA, and cnf1 genes, respectively, which were lower than our results (38). The high prevalence rate of antibiotic resistance and virulence factors determinants among imipenem-resistant E. coli isolates emphasizes the risk of fatal infections with no response to the treatment. In India, the vat toxin was detected in 51% of septicemia and 12% of fecal samples (4) while the prevalence rate of pic gene was 9%, these results were higher and lower than the result of this study, respectively. Another study in Germany demonstrated that 10 (35.7%), 8 (28.6%), and 7 (25%) UPEC strains were positive for vat, hly, and cnf1 genes, respectively (39). The previous study in Zabul, South East Iran, detected the vat toxin in 18% of E. coli isolates (40). The difference in the prevalence rate of toxin and adherence genes among different studies might be due to the epidemiological differences, strains, and clonal complexes. In this study, the prevalence rate of papH was 88%. The strains from UTI and stool were not significantly different regarding the prevalence rate of virulence factors while the difference was significant (p value<.05) compared to wound and blood isolates. It should be taken into account that in this study, the number of isolates was low; thus, for obtaining more valid results, more isolates are needed to be investigated.

Table 1. The specific primers used in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer</th>
<th>Sequence 5' → 3'</th>
<th>Amplicon size</th>
<th>Annealing T (°C)</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| foxA3  | F: GCCGTCAGGGTCGAGAAA  
         | R: GGGTCAAGCGGTGGCATT | 282            | 56              | (10)      |
| KPC-2  | F: TTCCGGGTCTGGTCTTCTTTTAT  
         | R: GGGCGCGCGTCAATCAATGTA  | 282            | 65              | This study |
| OXA-48 | F: CGCCCGGTCGAGCACTCAAGAT  
         | R: TCGGCCACCGAGCGGATAGAC  | 484            | 65              | This study |
| IMP    | F: GGTTGGGGCGGTGTTCCTTA  
         | R: TCTATTCGGGCGGTCTGTC  | 182            | 61              | This study |
| VIM    | F: CATTGCTCGGATGTTAGTGATG  
         | R: GGGTCGCGAGCGGTGAG  | 205            | 60              | This study |
| NDM-1  | F: CGACCCCTCATGTGGAGATTCGCC  
         | R: GTGCCAAAAGCCCGATCGTCCG  | 1015           | 63              | (11)      |
| qnrA   | F: TCAGCAAGAGGATTTCACTCA  
         | R: GGCAAGCATATTACTCUCA  | 627            | 60              | (12)      |
| mcr-1  | F: CCCGAGCGCAGCACTTACCC  
         | R: CCAATGGGCGCAATCAACCC  | 396            | 61              | This study |
| fimA   | F: GCAACCGCGTGAAGACGG  
         | R: CGAAGGTGGTGGCCATCCAG  | 132            | 61              | This study |
| hlyA   | F: GGT GCA GCA GAA AAA GTTG TAG  
         | R: TCT CGC CTG ATA GTG TTT GTG  | 1551           | 59              | (13)      |
| cnf1   | F: GGGGGAAGATCGACGAAGAAATTA  
         | R: TTGCGGCCACCTCTCACAGT  | 1112           | 60              | (14)      |
| vat    | F: TCCTGGGACATAATTGGCTAG  
         | R: GTGTCGAGCAACGGAATTGTGC  | 930            | 61              | (15)      |
| pic    | F: ACTGGATCTTAAGGCTCACAG  
         | R: TGGATAATCGGCGTGGCGCA  | 410            | 58              | (15)      |
| crl    | F: TTTCAGATTGCCTGGCTATG  
         | R: CTTCAAGAT TTCGACTGCGTC  | 250            | 59              | (16)      |
| papH   | F: TTAAGAATAATCGGCGTCAT  
         | R: GGAATCAGGAGAAAAGTT  | 858            | 59              | (17)      |

Table 2. The presence of virulence genes among five strains with high (>8µg.mL⁻¹) MIC against imipenem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isolate</th>
<th>Infection site</th>
<th>MIC{IMI} µg.mL⁻¹</th>
<th>fimA</th>
<th>hlyA</th>
<th>cnf1</th>
<th>vat</th>
<th>pic</th>
<th>crl</th>
<th>papH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stool</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Stool</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UTI</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>UTI</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UTI</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

In this study, all impenem-resistant *E. coli* isolates were susceptible to fosfomycin, and all were negative for *fosA3* gene. Among carbapenemase genes, IMP and OXA-48 type enzymes were detected, which were associated with higher MIC levels (8 to 32 µg/mL). In this study, data suggest the role of these carbapenemases in resistance to carbapenems. Furthermore, the presence of multiple drug resistance (high level MICs) strains encoding adhesin and secretory virulence factors is a concern for the infections treatment.

Conflict of interest

The authors note no conflict of interest.

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Authors’ Contributions

The study was designed and performed by Farshad Nojoomi and Abdolmajid Ghasemirian.

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