Sensitivity of *Brucella* spp to tetracycline and its analogues

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**SYNOPSIS** The sensitivity to eight tetracyclines of 100 strains of *Brucella* comprising strains of *Brucella abortus*, *Br. melitensis*, and *Br. suis*, was determined. Demethylchlortetracycline was the most effective against all the groups of brucellae, whereas oxytetracycline and chlortetracycline were the least effective. The mean MIC value for demethylchlortetracycline, doxycycline, lymecycline, and tetracycline was ≤ 1 μg/ml. Strains of *Br. abortus* biotype 2 and *Br. suis* were the most sensitive strains examined.

Tetracyclines are the most effective of the chemotherapeutic agents in the treatment of brucellosis (Spink, 1964; Rizzo-Naudi *et al*, 1967). Robertson *et al* (1973) have shown that strains of *Brucella abortus* are almost uniformly sensitive to tetracycline, and the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) values are between four and eight times less than the peak plasma levels. Steibigiel *et al* (1968), in an extensive study, found significant differences in the in-vitro antimicrobial activity of tetracycline and its various chemical analogues.

In this investigation the sensitivity of strains of *Br. abortus*, *Br. melitensis*, and *Br. suis* were determined to tetracycline and seven of its analogues. The ditch plate method, described by Robertson *et al* (1973) as a suitable method for determining the MIC of various antibiotics to brucellae, was used after further preliminary investigation.

**Material and methods**

**BRUCELLA STRAINS**

The 100 strains of brucellae used in this study were isolated from human and animal sources. They were classified according to the criteria of Alton and Jones (1967) into 67 strains of *Br. abortus*, 23 strains of *Br. melitensis*, and 10 strains of *Br. suis*, and divided into their biotypes. The strains of *Br. abortus* were either isolated from cow's milk or cultured from the blood of patients with brucellosis in north-west Lancashire, the strains of *Br. melitensis* were isolated from patients infected abroad, and the strains of *Br. suis* were isolated from animal sources abroad.

The strains were grown on serum-dextrose (SD) agar, prepared from blood agar base No. 2 (Oxoid) incorporating 5% horse serum and 1% dextrose. All plates were incubated in air containing 10% CO₂ at 37°C for three days.

**TETRACYCLINE SOLUTION**

Stock solutions of the following eight tetracyclines were prepared in 10% dimethylformamide (DMF): chlortetracycline, demethylchlortetracycline, doxycycline, lymecycline, methacycline, minocycline, oxytetracycline, and tetracycline. They were obtained as powders of known potency from Mast Laboratories, Liverpool.

The solutions were prepared as required and sterilized by membrane filtration.

**MINIMUM INHIBITORY CONCENTRATION OF THE CONTROL STRAIN**

The WHO prototype *Br. abortus* biotype 2 was used as the control strain and the MIC of each tetracycline was determined as follows:

A series of two-fold dilutions of each of the tetracyclines was prepared in SD agar plates ranging from 4 μg/ml to 0·1 μg/ml. Control plates were prepared containing the highest proportion of DMF used in the antibiotic plates, that is, 1 in 200. A primary suspension of the control strain was prepared in 0·1% peptone water from a three-day SD agar plate to give approximately 5 × 10⁸ colony-forming units per ml.

The MIC was taken as the lowest concentration of antibiotic which completely inhibited growth or which allowed only a small number of discrete colonies to grow when the surface of the antibiotic
plate was inoculated with approximately 10^7 brucellae.

**DITCH PLATE METHOD**

**Calibration of regression lines**

SD agar was poured into 90 mm flat-bottomed plastic Petri dishes, and, when set, a 15 mm wide strip of agar was removed along the diameter of each plate. The appropriate concentration of antibiotic was added to molten SD agar at a temperature of 48° to 50° in a ratio of one part antibiotic to 19 parts of medium, and this SD-antibiotic agar was used to fill the ditches.

The suspension of the control strain was inoculated onto a series of ditch plates containing two-fold dilutions in the range 160 µg/ml to 10 µg/ml of oxytetracycline and 20 µg/ml to 0.6 µg/ml of the other tetracyclines.

A regression line of the form y = mx + c, which described the relation between the logarithm of the concentration of antibiotic (y) and the size of the inhibition zone in millimetres (x), was calculated for each tetracycline by the least squares method (Mosteller et al., 1973).

**MIC of the 100 strains under test**

All strains were inoculated onto two ditch plates containing a high and low concentration of antibiotic respectively. This ensured that, whatever the sensitivity of the strain, a measurable zone would be obtained on at least one of the ditch plates. The concentrations in the ditches were 20 µg/ml and 10 µg/ml for chlortetracycline, oxytetracycline, and methacycline and 10 µg/ml and 1.25 µg/ml for the other tetracyclines.

Five brucella strains were inoculated onto each half of the ditch plate by streaking a loopful of inoculum at right-angles to the ditch from the plate periphery to the nearside edge of the ditch. Thus each ditch plate would accommodate 10 strains without mutual interference between adjacent strains growing on the ditch plate.

The MIC for the test strains was calculated using a sensitivity factor, as previously described by Robertson et al. (1973), as follows:

$$\text{MIC test strain} = \text{MIC control strain} \times \text{sensitivity factor}.$$  

The sensitivity factor was obtained by subtracting the zone of inhibition of the test strain from that of the control strain, multiplying by the slope (m) of the regression equation, and taking the antilogarithm.

The MIC values obtained by the conventional agar dilution procedure were compared with those obtained by the ditch plate method for 25 strains of brucellae. Both methods gave comparable results and confirmed that the ditch plate method was appropriate for the present investigation.

**Results**

The extremes and mean of the MIC values of each tetracycline are shown in the table for the brucella strains classified according to their species and biotype. These figures indicate that strains of *Br. abortus* biotype 2 and *Br. suis* are the most sensitive to all eight antibiotics, while for the remaining biotypes the mean MIC values are similar for any one of the antibiotics. The efficacy of the tetracyclines varied significantly *in vitro*; oxytetracycline and chlortetracycline were the least effective of the tetracyclines, even for the more susceptible strains. Demethylchlortetracycline was the most effective agent in that the mean MIC was the lowest for each

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strain</th>
<th>Biotype</th>
<th>No. of strains</th>
<th>Range and mean of MIC values (µg/ml of):</th>
<th>Chlor</th>
<th>Demeth</th>
<th>Doxy</th>
<th>Lyme</th>
<th>Metha</th>
<th>Mino</th>
<th>Oxytet</th>
<th>Tetra</th>
<th>HSD</th>
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<td>11</td>
<td>1-2-0-4</td>
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<td>0-3-1-2</td>
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<td>0-5-2-5</td>
<td>2-0-3-7</td>
<td>0-7-1-1</td>
<td>0-45</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>0-8-1-6</td>
<td>0-04-0-2</td>
<td>0-59-0-9</td>
<td>0-2-0-4</td>
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<td>1-6-2-6</td>
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<td>0-12</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3-0</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>0-9</td>
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<td>3-3</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>1-1-4-4</td>
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<td><em>Br. melitensis</em></td>
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<td>(3-47)</td>
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<td><em>Br. suis</em></td>
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<td>0-7-3-6</td>
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<td>(0-05)</td>
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<td>(0-56)</td>
<td>(2-22)</td>
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Table: Sensitivity of 100 brucella strains to eight tetracyclines

*The mean is shown in parentheses.

HSD = Honestly significant difference; this allows a pair-wise comparison of the mean MIC values for each of the tetracyclines (Haber and Runyon, 1973).
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Figure  Sensitivity of brucella strains to eight tetracyclines

A group of brucellae examined, although the mean MIC values for lymecycline, doxycycline, and tetracycline were always < 1 µg/ml.

The cumulative total of brucella strains sensitive to increasing concentrations of the eight antibiotics is depicted in the figure. It can be seen that the tetracyclines form two groups: the first group includes demethylchlortetracycline, lymecycline, doxycycline, tetracycline, and minocycline, and the second includes chlortetracycline and oxytetracycline, methacycline occupying an intermediate position. In the first group, the concentration of antibiotic to which 50% of the strains were sensitive ranges from 0.2 µg/ml (demethylchlortetracycline) to 0.65 µg/ml (tetracycline), whereas in the second group the range was 2.9 µg/ml (chlortetracycline) to 3.7 µg/ml (oxytetracycline).

Discussion

Tetracyclines are still the chemotherapeutic agents of choice in the treatment of brucellosis (Garrod et al, 1973) with the possible exception of co-trimoxazole (Hassan et al, 1971; Giunchi et al 1971). In this investigation we have found that the efficacy of the tetracyclines varies significantly in vitro. The method of analysis used was that of one-way analysis of variance, whereby comparison is made between each tetracycline for replicate strains from one brucella type. The honestly significant difference (HSD) is shown in the table for each brucella group. Oxytetracycline and chlortetracycline were the least effective of the tetracyclines, even for the more susceptible strains of Br. abortus biotype 2 and Br. suis. Demethylchlortetracycline was the most effective agent in that the mean MIC value was the lowest for each group of brucella examined. The mean MIC values for lymecycline, doxycycline, and tetracycline were always < 1 µg/ml, whereas methacycline and minocycline appear to hold an intermediate position. The comparative performance of each tetracycline within the entire brucella sample examined is shown graphically in the figure.

The interpretation of in-vitro antibiotic susceptibilities for the in-vivo clinical situation is complex. The albumin fraction of plasma certainly binds many antibacterial agents, and similar reversible binding may occur with proteins of various tissues and with non-protein macromolecules. Plasma binding can be measured experimentally but results vary. Kunin (1967) reported that tetracycline and demethylchlortetracycline were 24% and 41% protein bound respectively, whereas other workers have reported corresponding figures of 65% and 90% respectively (Kucers, 1972). Plasma binding is measured in an in-vitro environment which is comparatively static, and often concentrations of antibiotic in excess of expected therapeutic levels are used. However, the in-vivo situation is a complex dynamic system of many competitive activities. The importance of the
reversibility of plasma binding is reflected in the un-
doubted effectiveness of agents such as cloxacillin
which are known to be highly protein bound. We
have chosen to examine the in-vitro efficacy of the
various tetracyclines on a weight-to-weight basis and
have not attempted to interpret our findings in the
light of reported values for serum binding of tetracy-
clines.

Oxytetracycline was the least effective in our ex-
eriments, and chlorotetacycline, perhaps because of
its instability in vitro, gave similar results. Some of
the more recent tetracyclines compared favourably
with tetracycline itself and could have a place in the
therapy of brucella infections. It is difficult to select
any one of this group as the best for clinical use:
lymecycline has not had extensive clinical trials, and
the reported incidence of photosensitization and
gastrointestinal disturbance associated with de-
methylchlortetracycline may be a disadvantage
despite its effectiveness against brucellae. On the
other hand, doxycycline and minocycline may be of
value because of their slow rate of excretion, which
results in prolonged plasma levels.

We are most grateful to Mrs H. E. Tillett for advice
and the statistical analysis of our results. We are
indebted to Miss A. V. Holt for excellent experi-
mental assistance.

Appendix

SENSITIVITY FACTOR

For any one tetracycline concentration let the in-
hibition zone of the control strain be $S$ millimetres
and the zone of the test strain be $T$ millimetres. Then,
substituting in the regression equation, the logarithm
($y$) of this tetracycline concentration $= mS + c$.

The sensitivity factor is

$$\frac{C_t}{C_s}$$

where $C_t =$ the concentration of tetracycline re-
quired to give a zone of $T$ mm with the
test strain, which is the same as that
concentration giving a zone of $S$ mm
with the control strain, namely, ANTI-
LOG $y$, where $y = mS + c$;

and $C_s =$ the concentration of tetracycline re-
quired to give a zone of $T$ mm with the
control strain, ie, ANTILOG $y$, where
$y = mT + c$.

Therefore

$$\frac{C_t}{C_s} = \frac{\text{ANTILOG} (mS + c)}{\text{ANTILOG} (mT + c)} = \text{ANTILOG} \left[ (mS + c) - (mT + c) \right] = \text{ANTILOG} m (S - T),$$

ie, the sensi-
tivity factor.

Therefore MIC test strain $= \text{ANTILOG} m(S - T) \times$ MIC control strain.

Thus the MIC of a test strain was obtained by sub-
tracting its zone of inhibition from that of the con-
tral strain, multiplying by the slope $m$, taking the
antilogarithm, and multiplying by the MIC of the
control strain.

Regression equations obtained for each of the
tetracyclines with the WHO prototype Br. abortus
biotype 2 were as follows:

- Chlortetacycline $\ y = 0.1 \ x + 0.9$
- Demethylchlortetacycline $\ y = 0.1 \ x - 1.6$
- Doxycycline $\ y = 0.2 \ x - 3.5$
- Lymecycline $\ y = 0.16 \ x - 1.2$
- Methacycline $\ y = 0.17 \ x - 1.7$
- Minocycline $\ y = 0.2 \ x - 2.4$
- Oxytetracycline $\ y = 1.12 \ x + 0.6$
- Tetracycline $\ y = 0.1 \ x - 0.97$

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