Selective medium for isolating Arcanobacterium haemolyticum

*Arcanobacterium haemolyticum* is a facultatively anaerobic Gram positive bacillus previously known as *Corynebacterium haemolyticum*. It is most commonly isolated from the upper respiratory tract of patients with pharyngitis, but has also been isolated from skin lesions and occasionally from systemic infections. Isolation of *A. haemolyticum* from healthy subjects is rare.

The only medium previously described for the isolation of *A. haemolyticum* is an enriched agar containing human blood or horse blood. After 48 hours of incubation on this medium, *A. haemolyticum* produces colonies which, when examined, have a central pit and are surrounded by a zone of complete haemolysis. Despite the use of enriched media, isolation of *A. haemolyticum* can be difficult as the organism is slow growing and is easily masked by commensal flora. The organism may therefore be a more common cause of pharyngitis than is currently recognised. We have developed a selective medium suitable for its isolation.

A study of the antimicrobial susceptibilities of *A. haemolyticum* we found that all 26 strains examined were resistant to mupirocin (minimum inhibitory concentrations > 128 mg/l). Mupirocin is highly active against commensal staphylococci and streptococci. Aztreonam and amphotericin B were used to inhibit the growth of Gram negative bacteria and yeasts, respectively. The complete medium consisted of a blood agar base (Oxoid No 2) containing 5%, horse blood, 8 mg/l mupirocin (Beecham), 4 mg/ml aztreonam (Squibb) and 1 mg/l amphotericin B (Sigma).

Strains from the National Collection of Type Cultures and clinical isolates of *A. haemolyticum* grew well on the selective medium and produced characteristic colonies with narrow zones of complete haemolysis and a central pit.

The efficacy of this medium for the isolation of *A. haemolyticum* from clinical specimens was investigated during February and March 1989. All throat swabs received by Chelmsford Public Health Laboratory were inoculated on to the selective medium and on to conventional horse blood agar. The inoculated media were incubated for 48 hours at 37°C in an anaerobic atmosphere containing 10% carbon dioxide. Both media were examined for characteristic colonies of *A. haemolyticum*. Identification was confirmed biochemically.

*A. haemolyticum* was isolated from nine of 673 specimens (table). Isolation was much better with the selective medium as only two of the nine isolates were found on conventional blood agar. The selective medium greatly reduced the growth of commensal organisms, thus permitting easier recognition of *A. haemolyticum*. In the group aged 11-20 years the organism was isolated from eight (6.3%) of the 126 specimens. A similar age association has been noted by others.

The selective medium would therefore be of most value for the culture of throat swabs from teenagers or young adults. Lancefield group A streptococci were isolated from 18 (14.3%) of the 126 specimens from patients aged 11-20 years, so *A. haemolyticum* seems to be a relatively important pathogen in this age group.

Erythromycin is the antibiotic of choice for treatment. With the recent concern over erythromycin resistance in Lancefield group A streptococci, however, it may not be the initial choice for the empirical treatment of pharyngitis. Precise identification of the infecting organism would seem desirable. Use of a selective medium such as that described would clearly facilitate recognition.

**MATTERS ARISING**

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