Transfer of Carbapenem-Resistant Plasmid from *Klebsiella pneumoniae* ST258 to *Escherichia coli* in Patient


*Klebsiella pneumoniae* carbapenemase (KPC) 3–producing *Escherichia coli* was isolated from a carrier of KPC-3–producing *K. pneumoniae*. The KPC-3 plasmid was identical in isolates of both species. The patient’s gut flora contained a carbapenem-susceptible *E. coli* strain isogenic with the KPC-3–producing isolate, which suggests horizontal interspecies plasmid transfer.

Over the past 2 years, the extremely drug-resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae* carbapenemase (KPC)–producing *K. pneumoniae* sequence type 258 (KpnST258) has emerged as an important nosocomial pathogen worldwide. It has spread in the United States and in various countries in Europe and Asia (1–3). The high level of antimicrobial drug resistance in this bacterium is conferred by a plasmid-encoded KPC, which confers resistance to all cephalosporins, monobactams, and carbapenems (4). Infection with carbapenem-resistant *K. pneumoniae* is associated with an increased proportion of deaths compared to carbapenem-susceptible *K. pneumoniae* (5). Although *Klebsiella* with plasmid-mediated carbapenem resistance is a major risk to hospitalized patients, spread of these resistance plasmids into *Escherichia coli* poses an even greater public health threat because resistant *E. coli* may become part of the normal gut flora and thereby become a notable source of infections among sick and the healthy persons in healthcare settings and in the community (6).

In 2008, a carbapenem-nonsusceptible *E. coli*–producing KPC-3 isolate (Eco2) was identified in Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center in Israel. Until this case, carbapenem resistance in *E. coli* at the hospital was related exclusively to KPC-2 production (7). KPC production in *E. coli* remains rare worldwide, even in areas where KPC-producing *K. pneumoniae* isolates are identified. We aimed to investigate the origin of KPC-3 in this *E. coli* isolate and to explore a possible molecular and epidemiologic link between the presence of *bla*<sub>KPC-3</sub> in this species and in the KpnST258 strain prevalent in our hospital.

The Study

In April 2008 a carbapenem-nonsusceptible *E. coli* strain, marked as Eco2, was recovered from the gall bladder drainage of a 91-year-old man with dialysis-dependent end-stage renal disease, congestive heart failure, anemia, and peptic ulcer disease. A month earlier, the patient had been hospitalized with sepsis that developed after an infected heel wound had required amputation of the left leg below the knee. The patient was treated with ertapenem, metronidazole, colistin, and vancomycin. Acute cholecystitis developed, and the patient underwent cholecystectomy. During his hospital stay, the patient underwent screening for carriage of carbapenem-resistant *Enterobacteriaceae* (CRE) as part of a routine infection control program aimed at limiting the spread of CRE. Two rectal swabs were collected 1 week apart. The first swallow specimen was negative for CRE by culture, and the second swallow specimen showed a carbapenem-resistant *K. pneumoniae* strain (marked Kpn1), which was PCR positive for *bla*<sub>KPC</sub>. One month after the patient’s admission, a carbapenem-nonsusceptible *E. coli* (Eco2) was isolated from drainage at the cholecystectomy site, which prompted this study.

Microbiologic and molecular investigations (pulsed-field gel electrophoresis [PFGE], DNA isolation, isoelectric focusing analysis [IEF], PCR detection of resistance genes, plasmid isolation, transformation, and Southern analysis) were performed as described (2,4,7). The carbapenem-nonsusceptible *E. coli* strain (Eco2) isolated from the clinical specimen (Eco2) was initially identified by Vitek-2 (bioMérieux, Marcy-l’Étoile, France) as resistant to imipenem (MIC>16 mg/L). Further antimicrobial-drug susceptibility testing of the strain by using agar dilution and Etest (AB Biodisk, Solna, Sweden) showed MICs in the resistant range for ceftriaxone and aztreonam; in the intermediate range for cefazidime and piperacillin/tazobactam; and in the susceptible range for cefepime, ertapenem, meropenem, imipenem, aminoglycosides, quinolones, tigecycline, and colistin (online Appendix Table, www.cdc.gov/EID/content/16/6/1014-appT.htm). IEF identified 2 β-lactamases with isoelectric pH values of 5.4 and 6.7, corresponding to those of TEM-type and KPC. β-lactamase gene PCR screening and sequencing indicated the presence of *bla*<sub>TEM-1</sub> and *bla*<sub>KPC-3</sub>. Results of screening for other β-lactamase genes were negative.
Transformation of plasmids purified from Eco2 into an
E. coli DH10B recipient strain (Eco2-T) indicated transfer
of a single plasmid that encoded these blaTEM-1 and
blaKPC-3 (Figure 1, panel A), and increased the MICs of the recipient
strains to broad-spectrum cephalosporins and carbapenems
(online Appendix Table). PFGE identified the ge-
netic similarity between the colonizing Klebsiella (Kpn1)
and a representative KpnST258 (isolate Kpn557 described
previously [4]) (Figure 2). Susceptibility testing of Kpn1
reflected the extremely drug-resistant phenotype character-
istic of isolates belonging to this clone (12) (online Ap-
pendix Table).

We compared plasmids of Kpn1 and Eco2. Kpn1 car-
ried 4 different plasmids, whereas Eco2 carried 1 plasmid
that correlated with the 105-kb plasmid of Kpn1. Experi-
ments to transform Eco2 and Kpn1 plasmids into an E. coli
DH10B recipient, followed by selection on plates containing
100 μg/mL ampicillin and screening for
blaKPC-positive col-
onies, showed that DH10B was transformed with the 105-kb
KPC-3–encoding plasmid (Figure 1, panel A). This plasmid
correlated in size with that of pKpQIL, the KPC-3-encoding
plasmid of Klebsiella in Israel (13). Plasmid DNA
restriction fragment length polymorphism showed that band
patterns of the 2 KPC-3–encoding plasmids of Kpn1 and
Eco2 were highly similar (98% similarity) (Figure 1, panel
B), and Southern analysis with a blaKPC probe showed the
same hybridization pattern (Figure 1, panel C).

We aimed to determine whether the patient’s gut was
colonized with a carbapenem-susceptible E. coli strain,
which would ultimately serve as the in vivo recipient of
the blaKPC-3–encoding plasmid. Thus, the first broth culture
prepared (obtained before the patient was colonized with
KPC-3–producing E. coli) was processed. Aliquots (0.1
mL) were directly plated onto a MacConkey agar plate (Hy-
labs, Rehovot, Israel). E. coli colonies isolated from the
plate were restreaked onto a MacConkey agar plate, yield-
ing an E. coli strain 7364 (Eco1) that was susceptible to all
antimicrobial drugs tested (online Appendix Table). PFGE
DNA fingerprinting showed that Eco1 was 100% identi-
cal to the KPC-3–producing clinical strain Eco2, isolated
from the clinical specimen (Figure 2). Plasmid analysis of
this strain, however, proved that it lacked plasmid pKpQIL
(results not shown).

Elements belonging to KPC transposon Tn4401, in-
cluding tspA, tspR, ISKpn6, and ISKpn7 (14), were iden-
tified by PCR and sequencing on both KPC-3–encoding
plasmids originating from Kpn1 and Eco2. These genetic
determinants were absent in the susceptible Eco1. These
data suggest that Eco1 has acquired pKpQIL from Kpn1
in the patient’s gut, leading to the formation of Eco2. Al-
though acquisition of the plasmid increased MICs for imi-
penem, meropenem, and ertapenem considerably, it did not
confer full resistance (online Appendix Table) presumably
due to copy number of the plasmid or the expression level

Figure 1. A) Analysis of Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase (KPC)–encoding plasmids in isolates Kpn1 (1), Eco2 (3), Kpn1-T (2),
and Eco2-T (4), Israel, 2008. Plasmid size estimation was performed by digestion of DNA with S1 nuclease (20 U; Promega, Madison,
WI, USA) followed by pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) with the CHEF-DR III apparatus (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Inc., Hercules, CA,
USA), as described (8–11). Lambda ladder PFG marker (New England Biolabs, Beverly, MA, USA) was used as a molecular size marker
(lane M). B) Restriction fragment length polymorphism of the KPC-3–encoding plasmid from Kpn1-T (K) and Eco2-T (E). Plasmid DNA
was digested with BamH I, BglII, EcoRI, and SacI endonucleases (New England Biolabs) and underwent PFGE on a 0.7% agarose gel. The
level of similarity between restriction patterns was calculated by using Gelcompar II software version 5 (Applied Maths, Kortrijk, Belgium).
Lane M, 1-kb DNA ladder (New England Biolab). C) Southern blot analysis of plasmid DNA hybridized with blaKPC-labeled probe. Plasmid
restriction products were transferred to a Hybond N+ membrane (Amersham Biosciences, Little Chalfont, United Kingdom), cross-linked
with UV light, and hybridized with a blaKPC-labeled probe (892-bp product of blaKPC).
of bla\textsubscript{KPC-3} in \textit{E. coli}. Curing of pKpQIL from Eco2 was performed by sequential transfers at an elevated temperature (42°C). The cured strain, which lacked the KPC-encoding plasmid, showed full susceptibility to all antimicrobial drugs tested, similar to the Eco1 strain isolated from the patient’s gut flora.

The patient received a combination of 4 antimicrobial agents concomitantly (ertapenem, metronidazole, colistin, and vancomycin) during the period in which Eco1 acquired in vivo the plasmid pKpQIL, thereby becoming Eco2. We believe that the selection pressure imposed by these antimicrobial agents contributed to the sequence of events that led to plasmid transfer. We hypothesize that interspecies conjugation and antimicrobial pressure led to the preferential selection of Eco2, rather than Eco1, as a determinant of infection in this patient.

Interspecies KPC transfer can presumably occur through the dissemination of mobile genetic elements as has been described for transfer of the mec\textsubscript{A} gene between strains of \textit{Staphylococcus aureus} (15). bla\textsubscript{KPC} may spread through transfer by virtue of its location on the Tn\textit{4401} transposon (14), or by dissemination of the intact KPC-encoding plasmid, likely through natural conjugation. Multiple attempts to mimic the natural transfer of pKpQIL, the KPC-3-encoding plasmid from Kpn1 into Eco1 by using conjugation experiments were not successful. The isolation of an isogenic, antimicrobial drug–susceptible \textit{E. coli} clone enabled us to decipher the natural order of the interspecies genetic transfer event.

**Conclusions**

With increasing global spread of KPC-producing \textit{K. pneumoniae} ST258, the likelihood increases of interspecies transfer of drug-resistance determinants into a highly fit \textit{E. coli} clone. Such an event may have severe public health consequences, leading to elimination of any effective antimicrobial drug treatment against the most common human bacterial pathogens.

This work was performed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MS degree of M.G.G., Sackler Faculty of Medicine, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

Mrs Goren is a researcher and master’s degree candidate in the Molecular Epidemiology and Antibiotic Resistance Laboratory in Tel Aviv Medical Center. Her primary research focus is characterization of the molecular epidemiology of carbapenem resistance among \textit{Escherichia coli} clinical isolates.

**References**


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## Appendix Table. Patient’s bacterial isolates and *Escherichia coli* DH10B transformed with their KPC-3–encoding plasmids, Israel, 2008*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacteria</th>
<th>Date of isolation</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>KPC-3 β-lactamase</th>
<th>MIC (mg/L)†</th>
<th>CTX</th>
<th>CAZ</th>
<th>FEP</th>
<th>AZT</th>
<th>TZP</th>
<th>AMK</th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>CIP</th>
<th>LFX</th>
<th>IMI‡</th>
<th>MER‡</th>
<th>ETP‡</th>
<th>TCG§</th>
<th>COL§</th>
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<tr>
<td>Eco2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>0.125</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco2-T¶</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td>+</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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<td>&lt;0.25</td>
<td>&lt;0.5</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kpn1</td>
<td>2008 Mar</td>
<td>Rectal swab</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
<td>&gt;64</td>
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<tr>
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*KPC, Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase; CTX, ceftriaxone; CAZ, ceftazidime; FEP, cefepime; AZT, aztreonam; TZP, piperacillin tazobactam; AMK, amikacin; GEN, gentamicin; CIP, ciprofloxacin; LFX, levofloxacin; IMI, imipenem; MER, meropenem; ETP, ertapenem; TGC, tigecycline; COL, colistin.

†Susceptibility testing was performed by Vitek-2 (bioMérieux, Marcy-l’Etoile, France), unless stated otherwise.

‡MICs of carbapenems were tested by agar dilution. MICs <0.5 mg/L were determined by Etest (AB Biodisk, Solna, Sweden).

§MICs of colistin and tigecycline were determined by Etest.

¶Eco2-T that acquired the KPC-3-encoding plasmid from Eco2.

#Kpn1-T that acquired the KPC-3-encoding plasmid from Kpn1.

**The recipient *E. coli* strain used in the transformation experiments.