**Title Page**

A novel mobile RND-type efflux pump gene cluster, *tmexC3D2-toprJ3*, confers

tigecycline resistance in *Pseudomonas alcaligenes*

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**Abstract**

Tigecycline exhibits promising activity against multidrug-resistant gram-

negative bacteria (MDR-GNB), whose infections are difficult to treat with

antimicrobials. However, mobile tigecycline resistance genes, such as *tmexCD-*

*toprJ*, have emerged in Enterobacterales isolated in China, Vietnam, and possibly

other countries in the world. TMexCD-TOprJ complexes function as RND efflux

pumps for multiple antimicrobials including tigecycline. To date, *tmexCD1-toprJ1*,

*tmexCD2-toprJ2*, and *tmexCD3-toprJ3* have been reported as variants of

*tmexCD-toprJ* genes. Here, we identified a novel hybrid type of *tmexCD-toprJ*

gene cluster, named *tmexC3D2-toprJ3*, in tigecycline- and carbapenem-

nonsusceptible isolates of *Pseudomonas alcaligenes*, a rare opportunistic human

pathogen, obtained from medical sewage in Japan in 2020. Complete genomic

analysis revealed that the *P. alcaligenes* isolate KAM426 co-harbors *tmexC3D2-*

*toprJ3* consisting of *tmexC3*, *tmexD2*, and *toprJ3*, along with two copies of the

carbapenemase gene $bla_{IMP-1}$ on the chromosome. *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* in KAM426

was flanked by the IS*5*/IS*1182* family transposase gene, suggesting that the gene

cluster was acquired by horizontal gene transfer (HGT). Comparative genomic

analysis using the public genome database showed that *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* has

spread to other *Pseudomonas* species such as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* via

HGT mediated by mobile gene elements such as a plasmid. This study suggests

that diverse *tmexCD-toprJ*-like tigecycline resistance genes have spread among

MDR-GNB worldwide and further epidemiological genomic studies are needed.

**Materials and methods**

**Bacterial isolation and antimicrobial susceptibility testing**

Eight cephalosporin-resistant isolates of *P. alcaligenes* (KAM426, KAM428, KAM429, KAM430, KAM432, KAM434, KAM435, and KAM436) were obtained from sewage water from a medical institution in Japan in February, 2020. Environmental water samples were collected and cultured using DHL agar containing 2 mg/L of ceftriaxone. Bacterial species identification was performed using MALDI Biotyper (Bruker). Antimicrobial susceptibility testing (AST) using *Escherichia coli* ATCC 25922 as quality control was performed according to the broth dilution method based on the CLSI 2020 guidelines or according to the Etest (bioMérieux) based on the manufacturer instructions. For tigecycline, AST was additionally performed in the presence or absence of 75 mg/L of the efflux pump inhibitor 1-(1-naphthylmethyl)-piperazine (NMP) as used in the previous study (1).

**Whole-genome sequencing and subsequent bioinformatics analysis**

Whole-genome sequencing of all eight cephalosporin-resistant isolates of *P. alcaligenes* was performed using HiSeq X (Illumina), and the isolate KAM426 was further sequenced MinION [Oxford Nanopore Technologies (ONT)] with the R9.4.1 flow cell. The library for Illumina sequencing (paired-end, insert size of 500-900 bp) was prepared using Nextera XT DNA Library Prep Kit and the library for ONT sequencing was prepared using Rapid Barcoding Kit (SQK-RBK004). Illumina reads were assembled de novo using Shovill v1.1.0 (https://github.com/tseemann/shovill) with default parameters, resulting in the draft genome sequences. For KAM426, ONT reads were basecalled using Guppy

v4.2.2 with the high-accuracy mode, and then both Illumina and ONT reads were

assembled de novo using Unicycler v0.4.8.0 (https://github.com/rrwick/Unicycler)

with default parameters, resulting in the complete circular chromosome sequence

(accession no.: AP024354). CDS annotation and average nucleotide identity

(ANI) analysis were performed using the DFAST server (https://dfast.nig.ac.jp).

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) genes were detected using ResFinder v4.1

(http://www.genomicepidemiology.org) with default parameters using the

customized AMR gene database including known *tmexCD-toprJ* genes. Linear

comparison of sequence alignment was performed using BLAST and visualized

by Easyfig v.2.2.2 (http://mjsull.github.io/Easyfig/).

**Introduction**

Tigecycline is considered a last-resort antimicrobial against infections caused by multidrug-resistant gram-negative bacteria (MDR-GNB). Recently, mobile tigecycline resistance genes, *tet*(X3), *tet*(X4), and other variants, *tet*(X5) to *tet*(X15), encoding flavin-dependent monooxygenases that catalyze tigecycline degradation have emerged in Enterobacterales and *Acinetobacter* species in China and other countries (2-5). Furthermore, mobile tigecycline resistance gene clusters, *tmexCD1-toprJ1*, *tmexCD2-toprJ2*, and *tmexCD3-toprJ3*, encoding the resistance–nodulation–cell division (RND) efflux pumps that excrete multiple antimicrobials, including tetracyclines such as tigecycline, cephalosporins, fluoroquinolones, and aminoglycosides, have emerged predominantly in Enterobacterales in China and Vietnam (1, 6-10). Mobile *tmexCD-toprJ* genes are estimated to originate from chromosomal *mexCD-oprJ* genes in *Pseudomonas* species (1). Interestingly, however, *tmexCD1-toprJ1* has also been shown to spread to *Pseudomonas putida* by a megaplasmid (7).

Here, we report *Pseudomonas alcaligenes* isolates harboring a novel variant of *tmexCD-toprJ* along with two copies of a metallo-β-lactamase (MBL) gene, *bla*$_{IMP-1}$. *P. alcaligenes* is a gram-negative aerobic rod belonging to the bacterial family Pseudomonadaceae, of which members are common inhabitants of soil and water and are rare opportunistic human pathogens (11). *P. alcaligenes* has also been suggested to be a causative agent of secondary bacterial infection during COVID-19 pneumonia (12). However, little is known about the clinical importance of *P. alcaligenes*, mainly because of the difficulties in identifying and distinguishing this bacterium from closely related *Pseudomonas* species such as

111   *P. aeruginosa*, *P. mendocina,* and *P. pseudoalcaligenes*, in medical settings.

**Results and discussion**

Eight cephalosporin-resistant isolates of *P. alcaligenes* were obtained from medical wastewater in Japan in 2020. Whole-genome sequence analysis of *P. alcaligenes* isolates by Illumina HiSeq X and the core genome phylogeny based on their draft genome sequences showed that these isolates were phylogenetically very similar (Fig. S1). Moreover, all *P. alcaligenes* isolates harbored the same set of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) genes, including *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes, $bla_{\text{IMP-1}}$ (MBL gene conferring carbapenem resistance), *aac(6')-Ib-cr* (aminoglycoside resistance gene), *fosE* (fosfomycin resistance gene), *qacG2* (multidrug resistance gene), and *sul1* (sulfonamide resistance gene), suggesting that these isolates were clonally disseminated (Fig. S1).

One of the *P. alcaligenes* isolates, KAM426, was further sequenced using ONT MinION, and hybrid sequence analysis using both Illumina and ONT reads resulted in the circular complete chromosome sequence (4.68 Mb, accession no. AP024354). Average nucleotide identity (ANI) analysis revealed that KAM426 is 96.5% identical to *P. alcaligenes* strain NCTC 10367$^{\text{T}}$ (type strain, accession no. UGUP00000000), and the isolate harbored *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes along with two copies of $bla_{\text{IMP-1}}$ on its chromosome (Fig. S2). Antimicrobial susceptibility testing showed that *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 was nonsusceptible to tigecycline and broad-spectrum β-lactams, including carbapenems. According to the broth dilution method, the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of tigecycline against KAM426 was 2 mg/L and was decreased to 1 mg/L in the presence of the efflux pump inhibitor NMP. According to the Etest, the MICs of imipenem and meropenem against KAM426 were 8 and >32 mg/L, respectively, and these were

decreased to <1 and 0.19 mg/L, respectively, in the presence of the MBL inhibitor

EDTA. These results suggested that *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes and *bla*$_{IMP-1}$ are

responsible for tigecycline and carbapenem resistance in this isolate.

The coding sequences of *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes in *P. alcaligenes* KAM426

(KAM426_19240, KAM426_19250, and KAM426_19260 in accession no.

AP024354) were highly identical to those of *tmexCD1-toprJ1* in *Klebsiella*

*pneumoniae* strain AH58I (accession no. MK347425) isolated from livestock in

China in 2017 (1), those of *tmexCD2-toprJ2* in *Raoultella ornithinolytica* strain

NC189 (accession no. MN175502) isolated from a human in China in 2018 (8),

and those of *tmexCD3-toprJ3* in *Proteus mirabilis* strain RGF134-1 (accession

no. CP066833) isolated from a pig in China in 2019 (9), respectively. The

identities of the *tmexC*-like gene in KAM426 (KAM426_10690) compared with

*tmexC1*, *tmexC2*, and *tmexC3* were 94.0% (1094/1164 nt), 94.6% (1101/1164 nt),

and 98.6% (1148/1164 nt, the gene product was 98.7% identical to TMexC3 with

five amino acid substitutions), respectively. For the *tmexD*-like gene in KAM426

(KAM426_10700), these identities were 96.5% (3025/3136 nt), 99.1%

(3108/3135 nt, the gene product was perfect match to TMexD2), and 97.1%

(3046/3136 nt), respectively. For the *toprJ*-like gene in KAM426

(KAM426_10710), the identities were 99.9% (1433/1434 nt), 99.9% (1417/1419

nt), and 100% (1434/1434 nt, the gene product was perfect match to TOprJ3),

respectively. Thus, we designated *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes in KAM426 as

*tmexC3D2-toprJ3*.

The *nfxB*-like gene, which has been suggested to be involved in the expression

of the *tmexCD-toprJ*-like gene (1), was found upstream *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* in *P.*

*alcaligenes* KAM426 (KAM426_19230 in accession no. AP024354), and

*tmexC3D2-toprJ3* was flanked by the IS*5*/IS*1182* family transposase gene (Fig.

1A upper). Furthermore, the genomic region containing *nfxB* and *tmexC3D2-*

*toprJ3* in KAM426 was surrounded by many putative mobile gene elements

(MGEs), and this genomic region was not present in *P. alcaligenes* strain NEB

585 (accession no. CP014784) (Fig. 1A). NEB 585 was isolated from a water

environment in the United States in 1989 and is the only other *P. alcaligenes*

strain for which the complete chromosome sequence has been reported (13)

other than KAM426. The genomic recombination regions in KAM426 and NEB

585 encoded a set of common genes (KAM426_19430 to KAM426_19470 in

accession no. AP024354, and A0T30_13575 to A0T30_13555 in accession no.

CP014784) (Fig. 1A), although their functions are unknown. The results suggest

that KAM426 acquired *tmexCD-toprJ*-like genes, which confer resistance to

multiple antimicrobials including tigecycline, via horizontal gene transfer (HGT)

mediated by MGEs.

BLASTn analysis using megablast revealed that two *Pseudomonas* species

strains in the NCBI database of Nucleotide collection (nr/nt) have the exact same

sequence containing the *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* gene cluster along with *nfxB*. A $bla_{\text{DIM-}}$

$_2$-harboring *Pseudomonas* species strain, BJP69, isolated from a human in China

in 2015 (14) carries *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* on its chromosome (accession no.

CP041933) and a $bla_{\text{KPC-2}}$-harboring *P. aeruginosa* strain, NDTH9845, isolated

from a human in China in 2018 carries *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* on plasmid pNDTH9845

(accession no. CP073081) (Fig. 1B). ANI analysis confirmed that BJP69 is 98.0%

identical to *Pseudomonas juntendi* strain BML3$^{\text{T}}$ (type strain, accession no.

BLJG01000000) and that NDTH9845 is 99.2% identical to *P. aeruginosa* DSM

50071$^T$ (type strain, accession no. FUXR01000000). *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* was

determined to be flanked by the IS*5*/IS*1182* family transposase gene in *P.*

*aeruginosa* pNDTH9845, whereas no MGE was found upstream or downstream

of *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* in *P. juntendi* BJP69 (Fig. 1B). Together with *P. alcaligenes*

KAM426 in this study, these three *Pseudomonas* species strains harbor acquired

carbapenemase genes, in addition to *tmexC3D2-toprJ3*, showing that they have

accumulated clinically relevant AMR genes.

The integron-integrase IntI1 catalyzes site-specific recombination between the

*attI1* and *attC* sites (15). The class 1 integron gene cassette consisting of *intI1*

with the *attI1* site, *qacEΔ1* (disrupted form of *qacE*), and *sul1* in *P. alcaligenes*

KAM426 (accession no. AP024354) contain several AMR genes, including *fosE*,

two copies of *aac(6')-Ib-cr*, *bla*$_{IMP-1}$, and *qacG2* with their *attC* sites (Fig. 2A). The

*bla*$_{IMP-1}$-containing integron gene cassette in KAM426 was found to be

surrounded by many putative transposase genes, and this MGE-containing

genomic region was not present in *P. alcaligenes* NEB 585 (accession no.

CP014784) (Fig. 2A). The genomic region around ATP-dependent helicase

genes (KAM426_37950 and KAM426_36180 in accession no. AP024354, and

A0T30_05350 in accession no. CP014784) could be a hot spot for HGT (Fig. 2A),

but there have been no reports to suggest this possibility to date.

The other copy of *bla*$_{IMP-1}$ was contained within a partial structure of the integron

gene cassette consisting of two copies of *aac(6')-Ib-cr* followed by *bla*$_{IMP-1}$, as

described previously herein (Fig. 2A), in a different location in the chromosome

of *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 (Fig. 2B). Interestingly, a comparison between the

*bla*IMP-1-containing genomic region of *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 and the

corresponding genomic region in *P. alcaligenes* NEB 585 revealed the presence

of multiple copies of short repeated sequences (approximately 80 bp), which

were identical to PARs (*P*seudomonas *a*lcaligenes *r*epetitive DNAs) within the

super-integron In*55044* in *P. alcaligenes* strain ATCC 55044 (accession no.

AY038186) (16) (Fig. 2B).

The super-integron, which was first identified in *Vibrio cholerae*, is

distinguished from conventional integrons in several respects, such as size and

the nature of the genes contained within cassettes and contributes to the

acquisition of AMR genes (17-19). The PARs were reported as recombination

sites for the integrase gene (*intl*Pac in accession no. AY038186) in the super-

integron in *P. alcaligenes* (16). The PARs in *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 and *P.*

*alcaligenes* NEB 585 contained conserved sequences of inverted repeats (1L, 2L,

2R, and 1R) with a PAR signature and variable regions between inverted repeats

2L and 2R, as shown in *P. alcaligenes* ATCC 55044 (16) (Fig. S3). Although

KAM426 and NEB 585 lacked the integrase gene flanking the PAR and most of

the contained genes had no known function, these plastic genomic regions in

both strains retained their evolutionary histories of gene acquisitions mediated by

the super-integron. There was no PAR around *bla*IMP-1 in KAM426, suggesting

that the super-integron is not directly involved in the acquisition of *bla*IMP-1, and

this genomic region is likely one of the hot spots for HGT. KAM426 is thought to

have incorporated *bla*IMP-1 into the class 1 integron gene cassette first (Fig. 2A)

and then incorporated the partial structure containing *bla*IMP-1 into the other

genomic region flanked by the super-integron (Fig. 2B), leading to a high level of

resistance by increasing the copy number of AMR genes.

Our study provides a glimpse into environmental bacteria that have been

rapidly and silently becoming resistant to clinically relevant antimicrobials,

including tigecycline and carbapenem, and highlights the importance of AMR

monitoring using wastewater to detect a future clinical crisis before it happens.

Furthermore, *P. alcaligenes* would be considered an important environmental

reservoir that supplies AMR genes to other related *Pseudomonas* species that

are more virulent and likely to cause nosocomial infections, such as *P. aeruginosa*.

**Nucleotide Sequences**

The complete genome sequence of *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 has been

deposited at GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ under the accession number AP024354.

Draft genome sequences of *P. alcaligenes* KAM428, KAM429, KAM430, KAM432,

KAM434, KAM435, and KAM436 have been deposited at GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ

under the accession numbers BPMN00000000, BPMO00000000,

BPMP00000000, BPMQ00000000, BPMR00000000, BPMS00000000, and

BPMT00000000, respectively.

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**Transparency declarations**

None to declare.

 **Legends**

Fig. 1. The *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* gene cluster in *Pseudomonas alcaligenes* KAM426.

(A) Genetic context of the *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* gene cluster in *P. alcaligenes*

KAM426 and its surrounding genomic region (the region between 1,977,208 and

2,027,209 nt in accession no. AP024354), and structural comparison with the

corresponding genomic region in *P. alcaligenes* NEB 585 (the region between

2,990,265 and 2,915,762 nt in accession no. CP014784). (B) Structural

comparison of the *tmexC3D2-toprJ3* gene cluster in *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 (the

region between 1,995,475 and 2,006,928 nt in accession no. AP024354) with that

in the chromosome of *P. juntendi* BJP69 (the region between 3,340,041 and

3,349,533 nt in accession no. CP041933) and in plasmid pNDTH9845 of *P.*

*aeruginosa* NDTH9845 (the region between 225,014 and 215,640 nt in accession

no. CP073081). The strain names of *Pseudomonas* species, along with the

country and year in which bacteria were isolated, are shown. *tmexC3D2-toprJ3*

genes (TRG), other AMR genes (ARG), mobile gene elements (MGE), and other

genes (Other) are highlighted in red, yellow, light blue, and gray, respectively.

Sequence identity is shown as a color scale with the indicated percentages.

Fig. 2. Two copies of $bla_{IMP-1}$ genes in *Pseudomonas alcaligenes* KAM426. (A)

Genetic context of the class I integron gene cassette containing $bla_{IMP-1}$ in *P.*

*alcaligenes* KAM426 and its surrounding genomic region (the region between

3,757,827 and 4,033,855 nt in accession no. AP024354), and structural

comparison with the corresponding genomic region in *P. alcaligenes* NEB 585

(the region between 1,159,724 and 1,200,667 nt in accession no. CP014784).

(B) Genetic context of the partial integron gene cassette containing the other

*bla*IMP-1 gene in *P. alcaligenes* KAM426 and its surrounding genomic region (the

region between 2,181,279 and 2,188,592 nt in accession no. AP024354), and

structural comparison with the corresponding genomic regions in *P. alcaligenes*

NEB 585 (the region between 2,758,939 and 2,768,635 nt in accession no.

CP014784) and in *P. alcaligenes* ATCC 55044 (super-integron In*55044* in

accession no. AY038186). The strain names of *P. alcaligenes*, along with the

country and year in which bacteria were isolated, are shown. *bla*IMP-1 genes

(CRG), other AMR genes (ARG), mobile gene elements (MGE), other genes

(Others), and *P. alcaligenes* repetitive DNA (PAR) are highlighted in red, yellow,

light blue, gray, and khaki green, respectively. Sequence identity is shown as a

color scale with the indicated percentages.

Fig. S1. Core genome phylogeny constructed by Roary v3.13.0

(https://github.com/sanger-pathogens/Roary) with minimum percentage identity

for BLASTp=70% and RAxML v8.2.4 (https://github.com/stamatak/standard-

RAxML), with 1,000 bootstraps using ceftriaxone-resistant *Pseudomonas*

*alcaligenes* isolates in this study and reference strains of *P. alcaligenes* and *P.*

*aeruginosa* (NCTC 10367$^{T}$ and NEB 585 for *P. alcaligenes*, and PAO1 for *P.*

*aeruginosa*). *P. aeruginosa* was used as the outgroup. Bar lengths represent the

number of substitutions per site in the core genome. Genome assembly status

(complete or draft genome sequence, contig numbers if draft), sizes, and

accession numbers are shown.

Fig. S2. Circular representation of the chromosome of *Pseudomonas alcaligenes*

KAM426 (accession no. AP024354) harboring *tmexC3D2-toprJ3*, along with two

copies of *bla*$_{IMP-1}$ (shown in Figs. 1, 2A, and 2B), isolated in Japan in 2020. This

was visualized with the CGView server (http://cgview.ca). Gray, green, purple,

black, red, yellow, cyan, light green, and orange indicate coding sequences

(CDS), GC skew+, GC skew-, GC content, tigecycline or carbapenem resistance

genes (TRG/CRG), other AMR genes (ARG), mobile gene elements (MGE), type

IV secretion system (T4SS)-associated genes, and type VI secretion system

(T6SS)-associated genes, respectively. T4SS- and T6SS-associated genes were

detected by TXSScan v1.0.5 (https://research.pasteur.fr/en/tool/txsscan-models-

and-profiles-for-protein-secretion-systems/).

Fig. S3. Alignment of *Pseudomonas alcaligenes* repetitive DNAs (PARs) in *P.*

*alcaligenes* strains. One PAR in *P. alcaligenes* ATCC 55044 (super-integron

In*55044* in accession no. AY038186), two PARs in *P. alcaligenes* KAM426

(accession no. AP024354), and 11 PARs in *P. alcaligenes* NEB 585 (accession

no. CP014784) are shown. The multiple alignment comparison was performed

and visualized using MAFFT v7 (https://mafft.cbrc.jp/alignment/software/). The

PAR signature sequence and variable region are shown. Open boxes and arrows

represent consensus sequences of inverted repeats (1L, 2L, 2R, and 1R), as

described previously (16).

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# Fig. 1

## A

**P. alcaligenes KAM426**
(1,977,208 - 2,027,209 nt)
Japan, 2020

**P. alcaligenes NEB 585**
(2,990,265 - 2,915,762 nt)
USA, 1989

## B

**P. alcaligenes KAM426**
(1,995,475 - 2,006,928 nt)
Japan, 2020

**P. juntendi BJP69**
(3,340,041 - 3,349,533 nt)
China, 2015

**P. aeruginosa pNDTH9845**
(225,014 - 215,640 nt)
China, 2018

TRG   ARG   MGE   Other

# Fig. 2

## A

**Tn3-like element TnAs1 family transposase**     **recombinase family protein**    **transposase**    *intI1*   *fosE*   *aac(6')-Ib-cr*   *aac(6')-Ib-cr*   **bla**<sub>IMP-1</sub>   *qacG2*   *qacEΔ1*   *sul1*    **TniB family trans-transposase posase**

*attI1*   *attC*   *attC*   *attC*   *attC*    integron cassette    **1 kb**

**ATP-dependent helicase hrpB-like protein**   KAM426_37950    **ATP-dependent helicase hrpB-like protein**   KAM426_36180

*P. alcaligenes* **KAM426** (3,757,827 - 4,033,855 nt) Japan, 2020

**ATP-dependent helicase hrpB-like protein**   A0T30_05350

*P. alcaligenes* **NEB 585** (1,159,724 - 1,200,667 nt) USA, 1989

100%   67%    10 kbp

## B

*P. alcaligenes* **KAM426** (2,181,279 - 2,188,592 nt) Japan, 2020

KAM426_21090   KAM426_21080   *aac(6')-Ib-cr*   *aac(6')-Ib-cr*   **bla**<sub>IMP-1</sub>    **IS4-like element ISPa1635 family transposase**    KAM426_21000

*attC*   *attC*   *attC*    integron cassette (partial)

A0T30_12670   A0T30_12675    A0T30_12690

*P. alcaligenes* **NEB 585** (2,758,939 - 2,768,635 nt) USA, 1989

*P. alcaligenes* **ATCC 55044** (super-integron In*55044*) USA

integrase    *attI*

100%   69%    1 kbp

■ **CRG**    ■ **ARG**    ■ **MGE**    ■ **Other**    ○ **PAR**