Swine wastewater drives dissemination of high-risk bla_{NDM}-positive *Escherichia coli* clones

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ABSTRACT: Swine wastewater can accelerate the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria among animals, the environment, and humans. Therefore, the molecular epidemiological characteristics of carbapenemase-producing *E. coli* isolates from swine wastewater was investigated. In this study, a total of 100 no-cloning carbapenemase-producing (bla_{NDM-1}, bla_{NDM-5} and bla_{OXA-48}-like) *E. coli* isolates were recovered from 316 swine wastewater samples collected from 29 swine farm in Shandong, China. Of which, two isolates that co-harbored bla_{OXA-48}-like and *mcr-1*, as well as five isolates that co-harbored bla_{NDM-5} and *tet(X4)*. All isolates were multidrug-resistant (MDR), with a majority exhibiting resistance to meropenem, ciprofloxacin, imipenem and gentamicin. Whole genome sequencing (WGS) analysis indicated that these isolates were belonged to 12 distinct sequence types (STs), with the most prevalent STs being ST10 and ST5299. Additionally, Phylogenomic analysis revealed that clonal spread of bla_{NDM}-positive ST10 *E. coli* isolates at swine wastewater in multiple cities, including Binzhou, Dezhou, Heze and Weihai. Meanwhile, a notable divergence in SNPs was observed in isolates from this study and public database, which indicates that these bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates have high genetic diversity. In addition, WGS analysis further revealed that bla_{NDM} co-existed with other antibiotic resistance genes, conferring resistance to twelve classes of antimicrobials. This study underscores the importance of surveillance for bla_{NDM}-harboring microbes in swine wastewater, and continuous monitoring in swine wastewater is essential for ensure human and environmental health.

IMPORTANCE: The study described the NDM-positive *E. coli* strains isolated from swine wastewater, where it was associated with antibiotic exposure. Notably, swine wastewater was increasingly considered to be related to CRE hosts. Pathogens originating from this source can be transmitted to humans via direct and indirect contact, as well as through the ingestion or inhalation of contaminated water or aerosols. In addition, under the selective pressure of antibiotics, the co-harbored of bla_{OXA-48}-like and *mcr-1*, bla_{NDM-5} and *tet(X4)* genes within the same host bacterium signifies the emergence of an extremely MDR pathogen, posing a grave threat to public health. Consequently, the monitoring of bla_{NDM} in swine wastewater is critical for containing the transmission and persistence of carbapenem-resistant pathogens.

Key worlds: Swine wastewater, public health, *E. coli*, bla_{NDM}, MDR

The presence of carbapenem-resistant *Enterobacteriaceae* (CRE) in swine wastewater is

a cause of increasing concern due to its role in environmental contamination and potential

dissemination into human healthcare settings. These organisms often carry genes encoding

intra- and inter-cellular gene mobility, virulence, metal tolerance and antibiotics genes (1).

Such a gene pool can potentially interact with and modify the gene pool of environmental

bacteria, and vice versa (2), and microorganisms resulting from these interactions might pose

a health threat to livestock and poultry and, ultimately, back to humans. Accordingly, CRE in

swine wastewater need more attention.

Swine wastewater, as a major recipient of substantial amounts of antimicrobial residues,

wastewater is recognized as both a primary source and transmission pathway for resistance

determinants (3). In reality, antimicrobial agents used by humans are not fully degraded, and

their metabolites are excreted into the environment, generating adverse impacts on

wastewater contamination and public health. Research has found that the overuse of β-lactam

antibiotics may lead to the rapid evolution and emergence of multidrug-resistant (MDR),

extensively drug-resistant (XDR), and even pandrug-resistant (PDR) Gram-negative

pathogens (4,5). Infact，although carbapenems are prohibited to be used with food-producing

animals, over 4000 tons of β-lactams (mainly amoxicillin) and β-lactamase inhibitors are used

in animals, which accounts for 12.5% (rank 3rd) of all animal antibiotics used in China

mainland in 2020 (6). However, the overuse of β-lactam antibiotics has promoted the

enrichment of CRE in livestock and poultry (5). The most common mechanism of CRE is the

expression of β-lactam-hydrolysing enzymes e.g, such as New NDM and KPC, encoded by

bla_{NDM} and bla_{KPC}, respectively. Unlike bla_{KPC} mainly found in bacteria from human

infections; bla_{NDM} can be found across both humans and animal sectors, the same as the swine

wastewater environment (7-9). In addition, the recent discoveries of plasmid-mediated bla_{NDM}

or bla_{OXA-48}-like genes co-harboring *mcr* and/or the *tet(X)* among *Enterobacteriaceae*, predict

a return to the pre-antibiotic era and pose a severe threat to public health, which requires

urgent monitoring in terms of its prevalence.

In this context, the present study aimed to conduct the surveillance of MDR *E. coli* from

swine wastewater in Shandong, China through the phenotypic and molecular evaluation of the

co-harboring bla_{NDM-5} and *tet(X4)*, bla_{OXA-48}-like and *mcr-1* gene cluster genes involved to

assess the possible role of the swine wastewater as a reservoir and dissemination pathway of

such resistance mechanisms.

RESULTS

Prevalence of carbapenemase-producing *E. coli* isolates

In this study, a total of 100 bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates were recovered from 316

wastewater samples from swine wastewater in Shandong, China. Of these, two isolates

carried both bla_{NDM} and bla_{OXA-48}, and no other carbapenemase-encoding genes were detected

among these carbapenem-resistant isolates. Among the 2 bla_{NDM} variants, bla_{NDM-5} was the

dominant, constituting (96.6%), followed by bla_{NDM-1} (3.44%). The highest detection rate of

bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates was observed in Dongying (100%), followed by Heze (77.8%),

Weifang (57.1%) and Dezhou (26.8%). In contrast, Taian (21.4%), Yantai (21.4%), Binzhou

(20%), Weihai (16.7%), Jinan (10.7%) and Liaocheng (7.8%) displayed the lowest detection

rates (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of Carbapenemase-positive *E. coli* isolates in Shandong

Province, China.

Antibiotic resistance phenotypes

We obtained all of 100 non-clonal carbapenemase-producing *E. coli* strains exhibited

resistance to meropenem, cefotaxime, ceftazidime, tetracycline, and trimethoprim-

sulfamethoxazole (Figure 2). In addition, the majority of these isolates remained resistant to

meropenem (100%), ciprofloxacin (75.9%), imipenem (72.4%) and gentamicin (44.8%). In

contrast, lower prevalence of resistance phenotypes was observed for colistin (10.3%),

amikacin (6.9%), tigecycline (1%), of note, none of isolates showed resistance to amtronam

and fosfomycin.

Figure 2. Minimum inhibitory concentrations of tested antimicrobial agents for the

studied bacterial isolates.

Note: CTX, cefotaxime; CAZ, ceftazidime; ATM, aztreonam; AMK, amikacin; GEN,

gentamicin; CIP, ciprofloxacin; TET, tetracycline; TIG, tigecycline; FOS, fosfomycin; S/T,

sulfamethoxazole/trimethoprim; IMP, imipenem; MEM, meropenem; CS, colistin; FFC,

florfenicol.

Phylogenetic analysis of NDM and OXA-48-like-positive *E. coli* isolates

Twenty-nine non-clonal *bla*_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates were picked for whole-genome

sequencing (WGS), and results revealed that these isolates were categorized into 12 distinct

STs, with 4 isolates classified as unclassified STs. Overall, ST10 (20.7%, 6/29) was the most

prevalent in Binzhou, Dezhou, Heze and Weihai, followed by ST5299 (17.2%, 5/29) in

Dongying and Dezhou. These findings suggest a distinct predilection for specific geographic

distributions (Figure 3). A phylogenetic tree was established using these carbapenemase-

producing *E. coli* isolates, and revealed that all the *E. coli* isolates were classified into 3

distinct lineages. In the lineages I mainly belonged to ST5409 and were sourced from Taian, with these isolates sharing only 0~2 core-genome SNP (cgSNP) among themselves. It is worth noting that all isolates in the lineages II mainly belonged to ST5229 and were sourced from Dongying and Dezhou. However, they exhibited significant SNP differences (1314 SNP), and the same as the strains from Dezhou carried bla_{OXA-48}-like gene sharing 36 cgSNP. In addition, isolates in lineages III mainly belonged to ST10 and originated from Weifang, Bingzhou, Dezhou and Heze, and 3 new strains that failed to be classified as ST sharing only one SNP from the strains in Tai'an and Weifang. Our phylogenomic analysis demonstrated that the majority of bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates exhibited a significant degree of variation in core-genome sequences, suggesting a high genetic diversity of bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates from swine wastewater in Shandong Province, China.

To further assess the relationship between the isolates from the current study and other resources in China. A total of 397 bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates, obtained from 32 provincial-level administrative divisions across China, were randomly collected via the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database (as April 2024) (Figure 4). Then, a maximum likelihood phylogenetic tree was constructed using these 426 bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates, which were grouped into 6 clades, among which the 29 isolates from this study distributed across 5 clades. In addition, a notable divergence in SNPs was observed in bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates between those analyzed in this study and those sourced from the NCBI database, which indicates that these bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* isolates have high genetic diversity.

Figure 3. Phylogenetic analysis of Carbapenemase-producing *E. coli* isolates in this study.

Bayesian evolutionary tree was constructed using core-genome SNPs. Each isolate is labeled

with the city of isolation year and ST. The red-filled squares indicate the possession of the

indicated ARGs.

Figure 4. Phylogenetic structures of the*bla*NDM- and *bla*OXA-48-like- positive *E. coli*

isolates from this study and the GenBank database. Strain hosts and country of origin are

indicated in the inner and outer rings, respectively.

The genetic environments of *bla*$_{NDM}$ and *bla*$_{OXA-48}$-like

A total of 5 genetic contexts (type I to type V) were found in 27 *bla*$_{NDM}$-positive isolates

(Figure 5). The type IV genetic contexts was novel in the GenBank database. Notably, *bla*$_{NDM-}$

$_5$ was found in 2 out of the 3 genetic context types. In all types, *bla*$_{NDM-5}$ was directly

associated with the *ble*$_{MBL}$-*trpF-tat* genes. In addition, we found that the type I genomic

context was the most prevalent *bla*$_{NDM}$ genetic environment in this study (63%, 17/27), which

is identical to a *bla*$_{NDM-5}$-carrying plasmid of carbapenem-resistant *Enterobacteriaceae*

isolates from humans in China (10). Meanwhile, the backbone structure of *bla*$_{NDM-5}$ including

the IS*Aba125*-IS*5*-*bla*$_{NDM-5}$-*ble*$_{MBL}$-*trpF-tat*-IS*6* was usually carrying the IncX3-type plasmid

and highly conserved (11). In contrast, *bla*$_{NDM-1}$ was linked to IS*5* and IS*3000* (Type IV and

V). In type IV, *bla*$_{NDM-1}$ is flanked by IS*3000* and IS*5* within the backbone region of IncY

plasmids. In type V, the backbone carrying *bla*$_{NDM-1}$ simultaneously harbors multiple virulence

genes (*virB1-11* and virD4). Type II and Type III share a core resistance gene cluster (*ant(3″)-*

Ia-qacE-sul-bla$_{NDM-5}$). However, Type III acquires unique evolutionary traits due to the

insertion of the *yheS* gene (ABC transporter, ATP-binding protein) mediated by the Tn*3*

transposon. In addition, two OXA-48-like-positive bacterial strains identified in this study

share an identical genetic environment (*bla*$_{OXA-48}$-like-IS*Kpn19*).

Figure 5. Genomic environments of bla_{NDM} and bla_{OAX-48}-like of *E. coli* isolates. The figure was generated using Easyfig. Regions of homology are marked by shading and regions of $\geq$ 99.0 % nucleotide sequence identity are shaded grey. Arrows indicate the direction of transcription of the genes. In addition, red represents resistance gene, blue represents mobile genetic elements, black represents transfer gene tra clusters and yellow represents other coding sequence (CDS).

Analysis of antibiotic resistance genes

We conducted a comprehensive antimicrobial analysis on all of the *E. coli* isolates that

revealed the presence of the β-lactam resistance genes (bla_{NDM-1}, bla_{NDM-5}, bla_{OXA-10}, bla_{OXA-}

$_{48}$-like, bla_{CTX-M}, ble_O, bla_{CMY-2} and $bla_{TEM,}$). Other important resistance determinants that

conferring resistance to quinolones (*oqxA/B*, *qnr*), aminoglycosides (*rmtB*, *aadA*, *aph*, *ant* and

aac), fosfomycin (*fosA*), chloramphenicol/florfenicol (*floR* and *catB*), sulfonamides (*sul*),

macrolide (*erm*, *msr(E)* and *mph(A)*), rifampicin (*ARR-3*), phenicols (*cmlA*), lincomycin (*lnu*),

tetracycline (*tet*) and trimethoprim (*dfrA*). Additionally, we identified two isolates that co-

harbored bla_{OXA-48}-like and *mcr-1*, as well as five isolates that co-harbored bla_{NDM-5} and *tet(X4)*

(Figure 3).

Plasmid analysis

A total of 13 incompatible group plasmid replicon types were detected among the 29

carbapenemase-producing *E. coli* isolates including Col (69%, 20/29), IncB/O/K/Z (10%,

3/29), IncFIA (52%, 15/29), IncFIB (41%, 12/29), IncFIC (14%, 4/29), IncFII (34%, 10/29),

IncHI (52%, 15/29), IncI (31%, 9/29), IncQ (41%, 12/29), IncXI (52%, 15/29), IncX3 (24%,

7/29), IncY (34%, 10/29) and p0111 (7%, 2/29). It is worth noting that the cloning strains W1,

W2 and TA10-2 from Weifang and Yantai only carry the IncHI plasmid, suggesting that this

plasmid type represents a multidrug-resistant (MDR) plasmid harboring resistance

determinants including bla_{NDM}.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, we investigated the prevalence of carbapenemases-producing *E. coli*

isolates from swine wastewater in Shandong, China. Our results revealed a wide

contamination of bla_{NDM}- and bla_{OXA-48}-like-producing *Enterobacteriaceae* from the

environmental. Previous studies have also shown the detection of these species causing

infections in the livestock production environment (12,13). Researches show that gram-

negative bacteria, including *Enterobacteriaceae*, are able to survive on abiotic surfaces which

present a pathogenic transmitter from one surface to another, or even from the environmental

area to patients and to staff (14). and most likely exacerbate the transmission of bla_{NDM} and

bla_{OXA-48}-like.

More importantly, we detected bla_{NDM}-positive *E. coli* with relatively high prevalence

from environmental samples (31%, 98/316), and 2 OXA-48-like-producing *E. coli*. A high

prevalence of bla_{NDM}-positive and bla_{OXA-48}-like positive was reported for all food animals

with prevalence rates of chicken, cattle, and swine (3,15). Together with the current findings,

these data strongly indicated that the Chinese poultry farm environment is likely to be an

important reservoir for bla_{NDM} and bla_{OXA-48}-like carrying bacteria. Importantly, carbapenems

are not used in food animal production. Consequently, we surmise that the high prevalence of

bla_{NDM}-carrying bacteria in the present study may have originated from the use of amoxicillin

on the farm, which probably provided a direct selection pressure for bla_{NDM} maintenance.

This hypothesis has been supported by recent research evidence (5). In addition, the swine

wastewater was an open space suitable, and this made it difficult to perform complete

disinfection and sterilization of the farm environment. There was widespread contamination

by bla_{NDM}-positive *Enterobacteriaceae* in farm environments. In this study, bla_{NDM-5} was the

predominant variant, consistent with previous reports identifying *E. coli* as the primary

Enterobacteriaceae species carrying bla_{NDM-5} in both farm animals and their environments

(8,16).

The genetic background analysis shows In type VI, was found a fusion plasmid was

found that was recombined from an IncX3 plasmid carrying bla_{NDM-5} and an IncF plasmid

carrying *ant(3″)-Ia*, *qacE* and *sul*.This finding is consistent with our recent study, with the

difference being that the previous study sampled retail chicken markets (17). It's worth noting

that bla_{NDM-1} is flanked by IS3000 and IS5 within the backbone region of IncY and IncX3

plasmids. A few reports of bla_{NDM-1} transmission via IncY plasmids, and there was only one

report of bla_{NDM-1} transmission via IncY plasmids (18).

WGS analysis revealed that bla_{NDM} coexisted with other 29 other types of ARGs, 12 of

which ARGs were highly prevalent with detection rates >50%. This diversity of ARGs

confirms their role as potential sources of determinants of drug resistance (19). These ARGs

encoded resistance to aminoglycosides, β-Lactam and tetracycline and can further exacerbate

the spread of carbapenemases-resistant isolates in swine wastewater as well as among

surrounding animals, humans and environments in pig farm. To date, indeed, there are only

very limited findings on OXA-48 and OXA-48-like producing and *mcr-1* producing *E. coli* in

livestock (20,21). In this study, WGS analysis revealed that bla_{OXA-48}-like and *mcr-1* coexisted

with other 14 other types of ARGs. The widespread presence of carbapenem-resistant

Enterobacteriaceae (CRE) and *mcr*-positive *E. coli* poses a huge threat to both animal and

human health (22). In fact, for now, the *tet(X4)*-positive isolates were mostly reported in

animals such as pigs, chickens, cows and ducks, and *tet(X4)* has been previously identified in

pigs and chickens at slaughters, from soil and dust in animal farms, and even pork from

markets (23-25). However, despite the *tet(X4)* and bla_{NDM-5} genes being reported as co-

harboured in *E coli* (26), it is unknown whether *tet(X4)* and bla_{NDM-5} could co-exist in ST5409

and ST877. Here we report the first identification of a carbapenem- and tigecycline-resistant *E.*

coli isolate recovered from pig farm in China harbouring the *tet(X4)* and bla_{NDM-5} genes on

different ST. This strain of *E. coli* carries a large number of plasmids. The *tet(X4)*-positive *E.*

coli carries different replicon types including Col, IncFIA, IncFIC, IncHI, IncI and IncX1, and

harbouring multiple antimicrobial resistance genes, including *tet(X4)* and bla_{NDM-5} along with

aadA, bla_{TEM-1B}, *sul*, *floR* and *qnrS1 et, al.*.

CONCLUSION

As far as we know, this study identified the ST5299 *E. coli* strain co-harboring bla_{OXA-48}-

like and *mcr-1*, and the ST5409 and ST877 *E. coli* strain co-harboring bla_{NDM-5} and *tet(X4)*

gene cluster for the first time. Regardless of their low prevalence rate in environment-

associated sources, the mobile plasmid-mediated resistance genes in such superbugs can pose

a significant threat to public health. Therefore, continuous monitoring of such MDR bacteria

in humans, animals, and the environment should be considered and to guide the deployment

of public health interventions before clinical cases increase.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Isolates collection

A total of 316 samples of swine wastewater were collected from 29 swine farm in

Shandong, China. The samples were cultured by inoculation onto MacConkey plates

containing 2.0 mg/L meropenem. A red colony was selected from each plate for identification.

Cultures were identified using MALDI-TOF MS Axima™ (Shimadzu-Biotech Corp., Kyoto,

Japan) and 16S rRNA sequencing. For the carbapenem-resistant isolates, five major

carbapenemase resistance genes (bla_{KPC}, bla_{NDM}, bla_{IMP}, bla_{OXA-48}-like and bla_{VIM}) were

detected for in carbapenem-resistant isolates by PCR using previously described primers (27).

Antimicrobial susceptibility testing

The MICs of 14 antibiotics (cefotaxime, ceftazidime, aztreonam, amikacin, gentamicin,

ciprofloxacin, tetracycline, tigecycline, fosfomycin, sulfamethoxazole/trimethoprim,

imipenem, meropenem, colistin, and florfenicol) for all recovery isolates were determined by

agar dilution and interpreted according to the CLSI guidelines (CLSI, 2024). The breakpoints

of colistin and tigecycline for *Enterobacteriaceae* were interpreted according to the EUCAST

criteria ("European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing. Breakpoint tables for

interpretation of MICs and zone diameters, 2024"). *E. coli* ATCC 25922 served as a quality

control strain for susceptibility testing.

Conjugation assay testing

To determine the transferability of the resistance genes, streptomycin resistant *E. coli* strain

C600 was used as the recipient and the conjugation assay was performed using a filter mating

method. Transconjugants were selected using MacConkey agar plates containing both 1.0 mg/L

meropenem and 1,500 mg/L streptomycin. The identification of the transconjugants used PCR

(28).

WGS and phylogenetic analysis

Clonal relatedness of all of the *Enterobacteriaceae* was analyzed by ERIC-PCR as

described previously (29). The genomic DNA of all Non-clonal bla_{NDM}-positive

Enterobacteriaceae was subjected to 250 bp paired-end WGS using the Illumina MiSeq system

(30), and the paired-end Illumina reads were assembled by SPAdes v3.6.2.18 MLST (31),

antibiotic resistance genes (ARGs), plasmid replicon types was analysed using the CGE server

(https:// cge.cbs.dtu.dk/services/).

The hosts and countries of 196 *E. coli* isolates were retrieved from NCBI

(https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pathogens) and the assembly genomes of the 196 isolates

downloaded from the NCBI database (as of Sep. 2024). All assembly genomes were used for

core-genome alignments to produce a phylogenetic tree using the Parsnp software of the

Harvest suite (32). In this pipeline, bases that have likely undergone recombination are

removed using PhiPack and only columns passing a set of filters based on these criteria are considered reliable core-genome SNPs (33). The final set of core-genome SNPs was submitted to FastTree 2 for reconstructing a maximum likelihood phylogenetic tree using default parameters (34). The VCF file of all variants identified by Parsnp was then used to determine pair-wise single nucleotide variant distances between the core genomes of all strains. For the phylogenetic tree, a reference genome was randomly selected using the '-r!' switch. The lineages of the phylogenetic tree were defined using rhierbaps version 6.0 (35). The heat map was generated using R 3.3.2 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing) and was used to construct the tree that was visualized using FigTree v1.4.2 and iTOL v4 (36). Generation of plasmid maps were performed with BRIG.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

All authors approved the manuscript and gave their consent for submission and publication.

Ying Chu: Writing – original draft, Writing-review & editing. **Lan Yang:** Writing-original draft. **Yujie Miao:** Data curation, Software. **Liya Huang:** Validation, Visualization. **Rong Wang:** Methodology, Visualization. **Fengting Liao:** Visualization. **Xiang Luo:** Validation. **Shuancheng Bai:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision.**Yubao Li:** Conceptualization, Resources

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DATA AVAILABILITY

All WGS data have been deposited in the NCBI (Sequence Read Archive (SRA) submission: SUB15732648).

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