

The unsolved problem of otitis media in indigenous populations: A systematic review of upper respiratory and middle ear microbiota in indigenous children

1 Andrea Coleman, a.coleman2@uq.edu.au^{1,2*}

2 Amanda Wood, Amanda.Wood2@health.qld.gov.au³

3 Seweryn Bialasiewicz, seweryn@uq.edu.au²

4 Robert S Ware, r.ware@griffith.edu.au⁴

5 Robyn L Marsh, Robyn.Marsh@menzies.edu.au⁵

6 Anders Cervin, a.cervin@uq.edu.au^{1,6}

7 ¹Faculty of Medicine, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

8 ²Queensland Pediatric Infectious Disease Laboratory, Centre for Children's Health Research,

9 Children's Health Queensland Hospital & Queensland University of Technology, Child Health

10 Research Centre, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

11 ³The Deadly Ears Program, Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service,

12 Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

13 ⁴Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

14 ⁵Menzies School of Health Research, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory,

15 Australia

16 ⁶Department of Otolaryngology Head & Neck Surgery, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital,
17 Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

18 * **Correspondence:**

19 Dr Andrea Coleman

20 a.coleman2@uq.edu.au

21 Queensland Paediatric Infectious Disease Laboratory

22 Centre for Children's Health Research

23 62 Graham Street, South Brisbane

24 QLD 4101, Australia

25

26 **Abstract**

27 **Background:** Otitis media (OM) imposes a great burden of disease in indigenous populations
28 around the world, despite a variety of treatment and prevention programs. Improved
29 understanding of the pathogenesis of OM in indigenous populations is required to advance
30 treatment and reduce prevalence. We conducted a systematic review of the literature exploring
31 upper airway and middle ear microbiota in relation to OM in indigenous children.

32 **Methods:** Papers targeting microbiota in relation to OM in children <18 years indigenous to
33 Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Greenland were sought. MEDLINE, CINAHL,
34 EMBASE, Cochrane Library, and Informit databases were searched using key words. Two
35 independent reviewers screened titles, abstracts, and then full-text papers against inclusion
36 criteria according to PRISMA guidelines.

37 **Results:** Twenty-five papers considering indigenous Australian, Alaskan and Greenlandic
38 children were included. There were high rates of nasopharyngeal colonization with the three
39 main otopathogens (*Haemophilus influenzae*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, and *Moraxella*
40 *catarrhalis*) in indigenous children with OM. Middle ear samples had lower rates of otopathogen
41 detection, although detection rates increased when molecular methods were used. *Pseudomonas*
42 *aeruginosa* and *Staphylococcus aureus* were commonly detected in middle ear discharge of
43 children with chronic suppurative OM. There was significant heterogeneity between studies,
44 particularly in microbiological methods, which were largely limited to culture-based detection of
45 the main otopathogens.

46 **Conclusions:** There are high rates of otopathogen colonization in indigenous children with OM.
47 Chronic suppurative OM appears to be associated with a different microbial profile. Beyond the

48 main otopathogens, the data are limited. Further research is required to explore the entire upper
49 respiratory tract/ middle ear microbiota in relation to OM, with the inclusion of healthy
50 indigenous peers as controls.

51 Keywords: otitis media, indigenous, microbiota, pediatrics, systematic review

52

53 **Introduction**

54 Otitis media (OM) describes a spectrum of pathologies that involve inflammation and/or
55 infection in the middle ear. This spectrum encompasses a continuum from acute to chronic
56 disease that is clinically characterised by fluid in the middle ear [1-4]. OM is highly prevalent in
57 indigenous populations globally, particularly when compared to non-indigenous peers [5, 6], and
58 often occurs earlier, more frequently and in more severe forms [4, 5, 7]. Prevalence data reports
59 that up to one-third of Greenlandic and Alaskan Inuit, Native American and Australian
60 Indigenous children suffer from chronic suppurative OM (CSOM) [6, 8-11]. The World Health
61 Organization considers CSOM prevalence of $\geq 4\%$ indicative of a public health problem serious
62 enough to require urgent attention [12]. OM-related complications result in approximately
63 21,000 deaths each year worldwide [13]. OM-associated hearing loss can impact significantly on
64 language and social skills development, school attendance and educational outcomes, and
65 downstream effects such as greater contact with the criminal justice system later in life [4, 14,
66 15]. Medical interventions including liberal antibiotic prescription and vaccination programs
67 have limited effectiveness in indigenous populations [16-19], thus new treatment avenues need
68 to be considered.

69 The reasons for high OM prevalence in indigenous populations are likely to be multi-factorial.
70 Risk factors include poverty, inadequate housing, overcrowding, and exposure to environmental
71 tobacco smoke [6, 8, 20, 21]. These risk factors are ubiquitous across indigenous populations
72 worldwide [22]. Genetic susceptibility to OM has not been studied in indigenous populations
73 [23, 24].

74 The microbiota of the upper respiratory tract (URT) is an important OM risk factor across all
75 populations. Most research to date has focused on the role of the three main otopathogens:

76 *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Moraxella catarrhalis*, and non-typeable *Haemophilus influenzae*
77 [25]. It is not currently clear whether commensal bacteria amongst the URT microbiota
78 contribute to, or mitigate, OM risk in indigenous children. In non-indigenous children, 16S
79 ribosomal RNA (rRNA) gene analyses have suggested that a ‘healthy’ nasopharyngeal (NP)
80 microbiota is more diverse than that of children with OM [26-29]. This ‘healthy’ NP microbiota
81 contains bacteria that may be protective or promote microbiota stabilization, including,
82 *Moraxella*, *Corynebacterium*, *Dolosigranulum*, *Propionibacterium* (*Cutibacterium*),
83 *Lactococcus* and *Staphylococcus* [26-29]. It is currently unknown whether these results are
84 generalizable to indigenous populations.

85 While high rates of OM are reported for many developing countries, indigenous populations, as
86 defined by the United Nations [30], share unique challenges in relation to OM. The aim of this
87 systematic review is to assess the data pertaining to the NP and middle ear microbiota in relation
88 to OM affecting indigenous children around the world.

89 **Methods**

90 Methods used for this systematic review were developed with reference to the Preferred
91 Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement. The protocol
92 was registered with the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO)
93 (CRD42016033905) prior to commencement.

94 *Inclusion criteria*

95 All studies exploring the microbiota of the URT (nose, nasopharynx, mouth, oropharynx, throat,
96 tonsils, adenoid, and middle ear) in relation to OM in indigenous children aged 0-18 years old
97 were included. For studies that included children without OM and/or did not report microbiology
98 results specifically for children with OM, either only middle ear data were included, or if only

99 the NP was sampled, the studies were excluded. Indigenous populations from Australia, New
100 Zealand, United States of America, Canada, and Greenland were included.

101 *Search strategy*

102 Literature search strategies were developed in collaboration with a health sciences librarian using
103 medical subject headings (MeSH) and key words (Additional File 1). The following electronic
104 databases were searched from inception until 15 August 2017: MEDLINE (from 1946) and
105 CINAHL (from 1982) via EBSCOhost, EMBASE (from 1966), Cochrane Library (from 1996),
106 and Informit (from 1990- April). To ensure search saturation, we reviewed the reference lists of
107 relevant studies and sought unpublished clinical audits through the Australian Institute of Health
108 and Welfare (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/>) and The Australian Indigenous Health Info Net
109 (<https://healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/>). Two independent reviewers (ACol and AW) revised titles and
110 abstracts, then full text publications with reference to the inclusion criteria. Study selection inter-
111 rater agreement between the two reviewers was calculated as the proportion of positive
112 agreement (PA) [31].

113 *Data extraction*

114 Two independent reviewers (ACol and AW) extracted data in duplicate onto a Microsoft Excel
115 spreadsheet. Publication authors were contacted where data had been represented graphically or
116 data were missing. We screened for multiple reports from the same study, and where multiple
117 reports existed, compared and extracted relevant data; if inconsistencies existed, we contacted
118 the authors for clarification. The following data were extracted for all studies meeting inclusion
119 criteria: publication year, geographical location, study design, number of participants, age range,
120 ethnicity, number of participants with an OM diagnosis, type of OM, number of controls,
121 anatomical location of sample(s), microbiota investigation method, type and quantity of bacteria,

122 viruses, and fungi detected from each anatomic site. For the purpose of the review ‘culture’ is
123 defined as culture targeting the three main otopathogens and ‘extended culture’ is defined as
124 culture used to detect bacteria beyond these otopathogens. Only quantitative PCR (qPCR) data
125 were included when both culture and qPCR were used. For longitudinal studies, data relating to
126 both the number of swabs and number of children were extracted, when there were multiple
127 swabs per child. For data obtained from clinical trials, we included data only from samples
128 collected prior to randomization.

129 *Data analysis*

130 Where there were a sufficient number of studies, meta-analysis of proportions were calculated
131 using random effects analysis via Stata/IC 15, otherwise we synthesized the data into a
132 systematic narrative. We calculated heterogeneity using I^2 statistic.

133 *Risk of bias assessment*

134 Two independent reviewers (ACol and AW) assessed the risk of bias for each study with
135 reference to the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) Cohort Study Checklist [32]. Within
136 the CASP Checklist, we assessed for the following confounding variables: age, overcrowding,
137 antibiotic use, daycare/ school attendance, and concurrent respiratory/ upper respiratory tract
138 infection. Study quality was categorized as 'poor', 'moderate' or 'good' based on the CASP
139 Checklist. The overall quality of evidence was judged as high, moderate, low, and very low [33].

140 **Results**

141 The initial search identified 5592 articles. After screening titles, the abstracts of 956 articles and
142 332 full text publications were reviewed (Figure 1). There was substantial PA between the
143 reviewers of titles (PA = 0.68) and abstracts (PA = 0.79). Twenty-five articles met the inclusion
144 criteria; these were from Australian Indigenous (n=22), Greenlandic (n=2) and Alaskan Inuit

145 (n=1). No papers reported OM otopathogens or microbiota in Native American or New Zealand
146 Maori children.

147 *Risk of bias assessment*

148 According to the CASP risk of bias assessment, most studies (80%) were judged as either ‘poor’
149 or ‘moderate’, largely due to confounding variables not being considered (Table 1). Recruitment
150 bias was difficult to assess, as recruitment processes were often poorly documented. Only one
151 study [34] included healthy indigenous controls and another three [21, 35, 36] included children
152 without OM enrolled in longitudinal studies. Within indigenous populations, participants were
153 recruited from limited geographical regions, making generalization beyond these regions
154 difficult. Overall, the quality of the literature was ‘low’.

155 *Heterogeneity*

156 The literature was limited by methodological and statistical heterogeneity across the studies,
157 including heterogeneity in study design, participant age, OM diagnosis, and laboratory methods
158 (Table 2). Where there were sufficient data to calculate I^2 ; most were >70%, indicating
159 moderate-high heterogeneity (Figure 2-4).

160 *OM clinical definitions and diagnosis*

161 OM definitions used by the studies are outlined in Additional File 2. Acute OM (AOM)
162 definitions were consistently based on otoscopy and tympanometry. OM with effusion (OME)
163 was diagnosed based on a type-B tympanogram in 5/8 studies; the remaining three studies [37-
164 39] reported data from intra-operative middle ear effusion (MEE) samples, without specifying
165 OME diagnostic criteria. CSOM definitions were heterogeneous and included otorrhoea for >2
166 weeks [40, 41], >6 weeks [42], and broad descriptive terms [39, 43]. Three studies did not
167 describe specific OM diagnostic criteria [44-46].

168 *Laboratory methods*

169 Methods used to assess URT and middle ear bacteriology varied across studies (Table 2). Most
170 studies (13/25) used culture conditions specific for detection of the main otopathogens. Nine
171 studies used extended culture to detect a wider range of bacteria. For the culture-based studies,
172 methodological details varied. Most culture-based studies (13/22) described the agar plates used
173 and growth conditions [17, 21, 34, 36-40, 42, 43, 47-49]; however, reporting of phenotypic
174 isolate identification tests varied. The remaining studies used non-specific terms or referred to
175 other papers [44-46, 50-55].

176 Three studies used only molecular methods: two used species-specific qPCR targeting the main
177 otopathogens or *Alloiococcus otitidis* [35, 56], and one used 16S rRNA gene sequencing [57].
178 One study used both culture and qPCR [48]. The three studies using qPCR [35, 48, 56] used the
179 same gene targets for *S. pneumoniae* and *M. catarrhalis*. Two studies used the *hpd* gene to detect
180 *H. influenzae* [35, 56] while another used an alternative gene target, *hpd3* [48]. Only one paper
181 used qPCR to detect *A. otitidis* [56].

182 *Bacteriology*

183 Acute otitis media

184 AOM bacteriology was reported for Australian and Greenlandic indigenous children, with high
185 prevalence of the three main otopathogens in NP/nose and middle ear specimens across both
186 populations (Figure 2 and Additional File 3). Co-infection with >1 otopathogen was common in
187 the NP, although less frequent in MED (Additional File 3). NP colonization by *S. pneumoniae*
188 (both populations) or *M. catarrhalis* (Australian Indigenous) was significantly related to AOM
189 when compared to indigenous peers without OM [34, 35]. Beyond the main otopathogens, *A.*
190 *otitidis*, *Staphylococcus* spp. and β hemolytic streptococcus were also detected in the middle ear

191 discharge (MED) of children with AOM with perforated tympanic membrane (AOMwP)
192 (Additional File 4).

193 Otitis media with effusion

194 The one study investigating NP microbiota, and all but one study exploring MEE in children
195 with OME were from Australian Indigenous children. The three main otopathogens were highly
196 prevalent in the NP in children with OME (Figure 3 and Additional File 3), although only *S.*
197 *pneumoniae* and *M. catarrhalis* were significantly related to OME in the one study that included
198 a control group [35]. Culture-based studies reported a low prevalence of otopathogens in MEE
199 (Figure 3, Additional File 3); however, much higher rates were detected in the single study that
200 used molecular methods [57] (Figure 3). Other bacteria detected in MEE by extended culture
201 included *A. otitidis*, *Corynebacterium* spp., *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *S. aureus* (Additional
202 File 4). The single 16S rRNA gene sequencing analysis (Australian Indigenous children) [57]
203 found high rates of the genera *Dolosigranulum*, *Moraxella*, *Haemophilus* and *Streptococcus*
204 (Mitis group) in the NP, and *Alloiococcus*, *Haemophilus* and *Corynebacterium* in MEE
205 (Additional File 5)

206 Chronic suppurative otitis media

207 All but one study investigating CSOM were from Australian Indigenous children. The most
208 commonly reported bacteria from culture-based studies of MED from children with CSOM were
209 *P. aeruginosa*, *S. aureus*, and *H. influenzae* (Figure 4). *P. aeruginosa* and *H. influenzae* were
210 often detected in Australian Indigenous children, but not in the single study of Greenlandic Inuit
211 children (Figure 4). Yeasts were reported in two Australian Indigenous studies (Additional File
212 4); one study [40] only detected *Candida*, *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, *Alternaria*, *Rhodotorula*,
213 *Auerobasidium* or *Acrinonium* in 5% of MED samples. The other study [43] did not identify or

214 specify the yeasts or fungi detected. No study used molecular methods to explore the URT or
215 middle ear microbiota in CSOM.

216 *Nasopharyngeal carriage as a risk factor for otitis media*

217 Two prospective cohort studies in Australian Indigenous children explored NP carriage of the
218 three main otopathogens as a risk factor for OM (all types) [21, 36]. A birth cohort study by
219 Leach *et al.* found that 31/36 (86%) children with their first episode of OM were colonized with
220 at least one otopathogen [21]. This relationship between NP colonization and OM was stronger
221 when >1 otopathogen was detected in the NP (odds ratio (OR) = 33.6, 95% CI 7.9 to 144) [21].
222 More recently, Sun *et al.* found that in Australian Indigenous children, early colonization (1 to
223 <3 months of age) with *H. influenzae* was associated with OM in the first two years of life (OR =
224 3.71, 95% CI 1.22 to 11.23) [36]. All children (100%) who carried *H. influenzae* with either of
225 the other main otopathogens were subsequently diagnosed with OM [36].

226 *Virology*

227 One Australian [35] and one Greenlandic study [34] tested for viruses in children with OM
228 (Additional File 4). These studies used different methods for viral detection and, aside from
229 rhinovirus, tested for different viruses (Table 2). In Indigenous Australian children, only
230 adenovirus in the NP was related to AOM (19%) and AOMwP (20%) compared to control
231 children (6%) [35]. There was no relationship between the detection of viruses in the NP and
232 OME [35]. In Greenlandic Inuit children, enteroviruses, rhinoviruses or ‘unspecified virus’ in the
233 NP was related to AOM, compared to controls [34]. No studies tested for viruses in middle ear
234 specimens in AOMwP, OME, or CSOM.

235 *Biofilm*

236 One Greenlandic study used PNA-FISH to test for biofilm in middle ear specimens from children
237 with CSOM or OME (obtained via sterile aspiration) [39]. Biofilm was detected in 5/6 (83%)
238 MED samples from children with CSOM using a Eubacterial probe, but not in MEE from seven
239 children with OME [39]. Further testing with species-specific probes found most biofilms (66%)
240 contained *S. aureus*. One further sample contained a *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* biofilm. For
241 *S. aureus* and *S. maltophilia*, there was a 100% agreement between culture, Gram-staining and
242 PNA-FISH results [39]. Species-specific probes targeting the main otopathogens were not tested.

243 **Discussion**

244 This systematic review found the NP of most indigenous children with OM were colonized with
245 the main otopathogens, particularly those with AOM. In contrast, children with CSOM
246 demonstrate a different middle ear microbial profile compared to children with AOM and OME.
247 Beyond the typical culturable bacteria, data are sparse, limiting our understanding of how the
248 broader microbiota of the URT may contribute to OM pathogenesis and persistence in
249 indigenous populations. The entire OM microbiome across all indigenous populations needs
250 further investigation.

251 Our analysis highlights the important role of *S. pneumoniae* and *H. influenzae* in the
252 pathogenesis of AOM/AOMwP and OME across indigenous populations, consistent with data
253 from non-indigenous populations [58]. These otopathogens were detected at low rates in middle
254 ear samples from children with AOMwP and OME; however, when molecular techniques were
255 employed detection rates were much higher, particularly for *H. influenzae* [57], consistent with
256 the increased sensitivity of molecular methods compared to culture [56, 59]. This suggests that
257 current data, which are predominantly culture-based, may underestimate the prevalence of
258 otopathogen colonisation in middle ear samples from indigenous children.

259 A different pathogen profile was reported from children with CSOM, including, *P. aeruginosa*,
260 *S. aureus*, *H. influenzae* and fungi/ yeasts. Commensurate with this result, culture-based
261 literature from non-indigenous children with CSOM often report *P. aeruginosa* and *S. aureus* in
262 MED [60-65]. 16S rRNA gene sequencing of MED from children and adults with CSOM in New
263 Zealand further detected *Alloiococcus* and *Streptococcus* [66]. In the CSOM studies included in
264 this review, *Alloiococcus* would not have been detected, if present, as the specialist culture
265 conditions or PCR required to detect this species were not used. The chronic perforation of the
266 tympanic membrane in CSOM may allow for secondary infection of the middle ear by microbes
267 present in the external auditory canal and could account for the different microbial profile
268 compared to other types of OM. Confirming this; however, is difficult, particularly where a child
269 has had prolonged otorrhoea with ear discharge draining into the canal. Sampling the canal flora
270 of children with intact tympanic membranes as a comparison, may provide a solution.

271 Biofilms have been reported in middle ear specimens from non-indigenous children with CSOM
272 and OME [41, 59, 67-69]; however, this systematic review uncovered very little data pertaining
273 to biofilm in relation to OM in indigenous children. Considering the high rates of chronic OM,
274 particularly CSOM, this is a noteworthy deficit of the literature.

275 This systematic review suggests other microbes, beyond the main otopathogens, may be
276 contributing to OM in indigenous populations; however, there are few data relating to these taxa.
277 Furthermore, detection of these microbes can require specific laboratory techniques. For
278 example, *A. otitidis* detection requires extended culture methods [37] or molecular methods [56,
279 57]. Where these methods have been used, *A. otitidis* was commonly detected [37, 56, 57];
280 however, it remains controversial whether detection of this species is associated with the middle
281 ear infection or specimen contamination by canal flora [56]. Viruses were seldom investigated in

282 the included studies, and when investigated, different viruses were sought, and detection
283 methods varied. Furthermore, only NP specimens were tested. Viruses are likely to play an
284 important role in OM pathogenesis [70], through numerous potential mechanisms including
285 altering the host immune response [71] and reducing response to antibiotic therapy [72]. Further
286 research is required to determine the contribution of respiratory viruses in OM pathogenesis.

287 *Limitations of the current literature*

288 The current literature is limited by methodological heterogeneity, in both the types of laboratory
289 methods used and the OM definitions and diagnoses. The greatest source of methodological
290 heterogeneity was the diversity of methods used to analyze the samples with varying specificities
291 and sensitivities. Inconsistencies in OM definitions and diagnoses were most apparent in the
292 CSOM data, reflecting the absence of internationally accepted definitions [73]. Other OM
293 diagnoses were more consistent, largely because the data was published from a limited number
294 of research groups. International guidelines on OM definitions, diagnosis and investigation of
295 URT/ middle ear microbiota are needed. This will allow for more meaningful comparison of
296 studies from around the world and facilitate future meta-analysis.

297 The quality of the data included in this review is impacted by the absence of healthy indigenous
298 controls; limited information on participant recruitment; poor consideration of confounding
299 variables; multiple studies where the microbiology is not the primary aim of the study; and
300 population overlap. The absence of healthy indigenous control children may reflect the high
301 burden of disease in many of these populations, for example <10% of Australian Indigenous
302 children living in remote areas have healthy ears [7]. To establish a 'OM microbiota',
303 comparison with healthy indigenous peers is required. Similarly, if samples from the external
304 auditory canal are included when analyzing middle ear specimens, we may be able to delineate

305 the role of microbes as contaminate, pathogen or secondary pathogen (e.g. *A. otitidis*). There
306 was significant population overlap and small geographical area of recruitment for many studies
307 in Australian Indigenous children. There is documented discordance in OM burden and
308 prevalence of otopathogen colonization between urban and remote Australian Indigenous
309 children [74, 75]. Therefore, this limited area of recruitment may impact on generalization of
310 results across Australian Indigenous children.

311 *Future directions*

312 To further our understanding of OM pathogenesis in indigenous populations, and to build upon
313 the current pathogen-based disease model, further research is required to investigate the vast
314 array of microbes that can occupy the URT, and how they relate to the known otopathogens to
315 cause disease. The inclusion of healthy indigenous peers is vital to this goal. Identification of a
316 ‘healthy’ microbiota in indigenous populations may uncover ‘protective’ microbes that can be
317 developed into microbiome/ probiotic therapies to protect children from OM. To achieve this
318 outcome, next generation sequencing can enable deeper exploration of the microbiota without *a*
319 *priori* assumptions about the underlying bacterial community, which is required to guide culture-
320 based methods. 16S rRNA gene sequencing, although limited by poor resolution at the species-
321 level, can be augmented by qPCR to provide species-level identification [76]; however, this
322 requires *a priori* assumptions about the bacteria that should be targeted. Likewise, qPCR for
323 specific viruses is limited by *a priori* assumptions. These limitations may be overcome with
324 metagenomic shotgun sequencing if the method can be optimized to overcome the technical
325 limitations related to high proportions of human DNA in middle ear specimens. Alternatively,
326 extended culture with MALDI-TOF can be used to provide a broader analysis of the microbiota

327 to the species level [77] and has the benefit of providing material for further studies, such as
328 bacterial interference studies.

329 **Conclusions**

330 The URT microbiology in OM is highly complex and dynamic. Through this systematic review
331 we demonstrated that the three main otopathogens are important in the pathogenesis of AOM
332 across the indigenous populations included, and in non-indigenous peers. There is; however, a
333 vast community of microbes present in the URT. How these microbes interact to promote or,
334 perhaps more importantly protect, indigenous children from OM requires further investigation.
335 With a more wholistic understanding of the microbial pathogenesis of OM in indigenous
336 populations, we will be better equipped to develop new methods to prevent and treat OM in these
337 populations.

338 **Competing interests**

339 The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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568

569

570 **Table 1: Risk of bias assessment**

	Reference	Focused aim?	Cohort recruitment acceptable?	Exposure accurately measured?	Outcome accurately measured?	Confounding factors identified?	Confounding factors accounted for?	Are the results precise?	Are the results believable?	Do results fit with other available data	Overall quality score
1972, Stuart*	[46]	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	Poor
1975, Copeman	[44]	-	-	-	-	-	-	?	-	-	Poor
1975, Stuart	[45]	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Poor
1985, Dawson	[55]	+	-	+	+	-	-	?	-	-	Poor
1994, Leach	[21]	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	Mod
1996, Homøe	[34]	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Good
1999, Parkinson	[38]	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2003, Couzos*	[40]	+	?	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Good
2003, Stuart	[49]	+	?	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	Mod
2005, Gibney	[50]	+	+	+	?	-	-	+	+	+	Poor
2006, Leach*	[51]	+	?	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	Poor
2007, Ashhurst-Smith	[37]	+	?	+	+	-	-	?	+	-	Mod
2008, Leach*	[43]	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2008, Leach*	[54]	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Poor
2009, Homøe*	[39]	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	Poor
2009, Mackenzie*	[52]	+	?	-	+	-	-	+	-	+	Poor
2010, Morris *	[53]	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Good
2011, Binks	[35]	+	?	?	+	-	-	+	+	+	Poor
2012, Marsh	[56]	+	?	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2012, Sun	[36]	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Good
2013, Smith-Vaughan	[48]	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2013, Stephen*	[42]	+	?	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2015, Jarvis-Bardy	[57]	+	?	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Good
2015, Leach*	[47]	+	?	+	+	-	-	+	+	+	Mod
2016, Leach*	[17]	+	?	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	Mod

571 Data based on CASP-based risk of bias assessment. Assessment of bias pertained to the

572 microbiology data, and not to clinical data.

573 * Indicates studies where microbiological outcomes were not the primary outcome. ? indicates

574 that this variable was unable to be assessed.

575 **Table 2: Characteristics of included studies**

Study	Reference	Total no. participants	Age (years)	Study type				Sample site			Type of OM					Analysis technique					
				Cross-sectional	Retrospective cross-sectional	Prospective longitudinal	Retrospective longitudinal	Nasopharynx	Nose	Middle ear fluid	AOM	AOMwP	OME	CSOM	All types of OM	Culture	Extended culture	qPCR	Viral testing*	Chlamydia testing [†]	16S r RNA gene sequencing
Australian Indigenous																					
1972, Stuart	[46]	100	5-14	✓						✓		✓		✓		✓					
1975, Stuart	[45]	219	<2.5		✓					✓		✓			✓						
1975, Copeman	[44]	187	<15	✓						✓		✓			✓						
1985, Dawson	[55]	131	2-15	✓						✓			✓			✓			✓		
1994, Leach	[21]	41	<0.75		✓		✓							✓		✓					
2003, Couzos	[40]	147	<15	✓						✓				✓		✓					
2003, Stuart	[49]	27	1-10	✓						✓			✓			✓					
2005, Gibney [^]	[50]	31	<8		✓		✓			✓	✓				✓						
2006, Leach [^]	[51]	21	<1.5				✓			✓		✓			✓						
2007, Ashhurst-Smith	[37]	50	1-10	✓						✓			✓			✓	✓				
2008, Leach	[43]	97	1-15	✓					✓	✓					✓						
2008, Leach [^]	[54]	103	NR	✓			✓						✓		✓						
2009, Mackenzie [^]	[52]	148	<2		✓					✓		✓			✓						
2010, Morris [±]	[53]	320	0.5-6	✓					✓	✓		✓			✓						
2011, Binks [^]	[35]	115	<2				✓	✓			✓	✓	✓				✓				
2012, Marsh [±]	[56]	27	0.5-4		✓			✓		✓		✓					✓				
2013, Smith-Vaughan	[48]	51	0.25-3.8		✓			✓		✓		✓			✓		✓				
2013, Stephen	[42]	89	5-12	✓				✓		✓			✓		✓						
2012, Sun	[36]	66	<2			✓		✓						✓		✓					
2015, Jervis-Bardy	[57]	11	3-10	✓			✓			✓			✓							✓	
2015, Leach	[47]	60	<6	✓						✓			✓		✓						
2016, Leach	[17]	651	<6	✓						✓			✓		✓						

Study	Reference	Total no. participants	Age (years)	Study type				Sample site			Type of OM				Analysis technique					
				Cross-sectional	Retrospective cross-sectional	Prospective longitudinal	Retrospective longitudinal	Nasopharynx	Nose	Middle ear fluid	AOM	AOMwP	OME	CSOM	All types of OM	Culture	Extended culture	qPCR	Viral testing*	Chlamydia testing [†]
Greenlandic Inuit																				
1996, Homøe	[34]	255	<10	✓				✓		✓	✓					✓		✓	✓	
2009, Homøe	[39]	10	2-5	✓					✓			✓	✓		✓					✓
Alaskan Inuit																				
1999, Parkinson	[38]	128	<5	✓					✓			✓			✓					

576 AOM, acute otitis media; AOMwP, acute otitis media with perforated tympanic membrane;

577 CSOM, chronic suppurative otitis media; OME, otitis media with effusion; No, number.

578 * viral testing by qPCR [35] or PCR and immunofluorescent anti-body testing[11]; [†] *Chlamydia*

579 spp. testing by qPCR [11] and immunofluorescent anti-body testing[55]; [°] biofilm testing by

580 immersion microscopy Gram-staining, PNA-FISH (for *S. aureus*, coagulase negative

581 staphylococcus, *Escherichia coli*, and eubacterial probe) and confocal laser scanning

582 microscopy; [^] Overlapping participants; [±] Overlapping participants.

583 Note: For the longitudinal studies, data included in this review was per specimen, not per child.

584

Figure 1: Literature search and selection

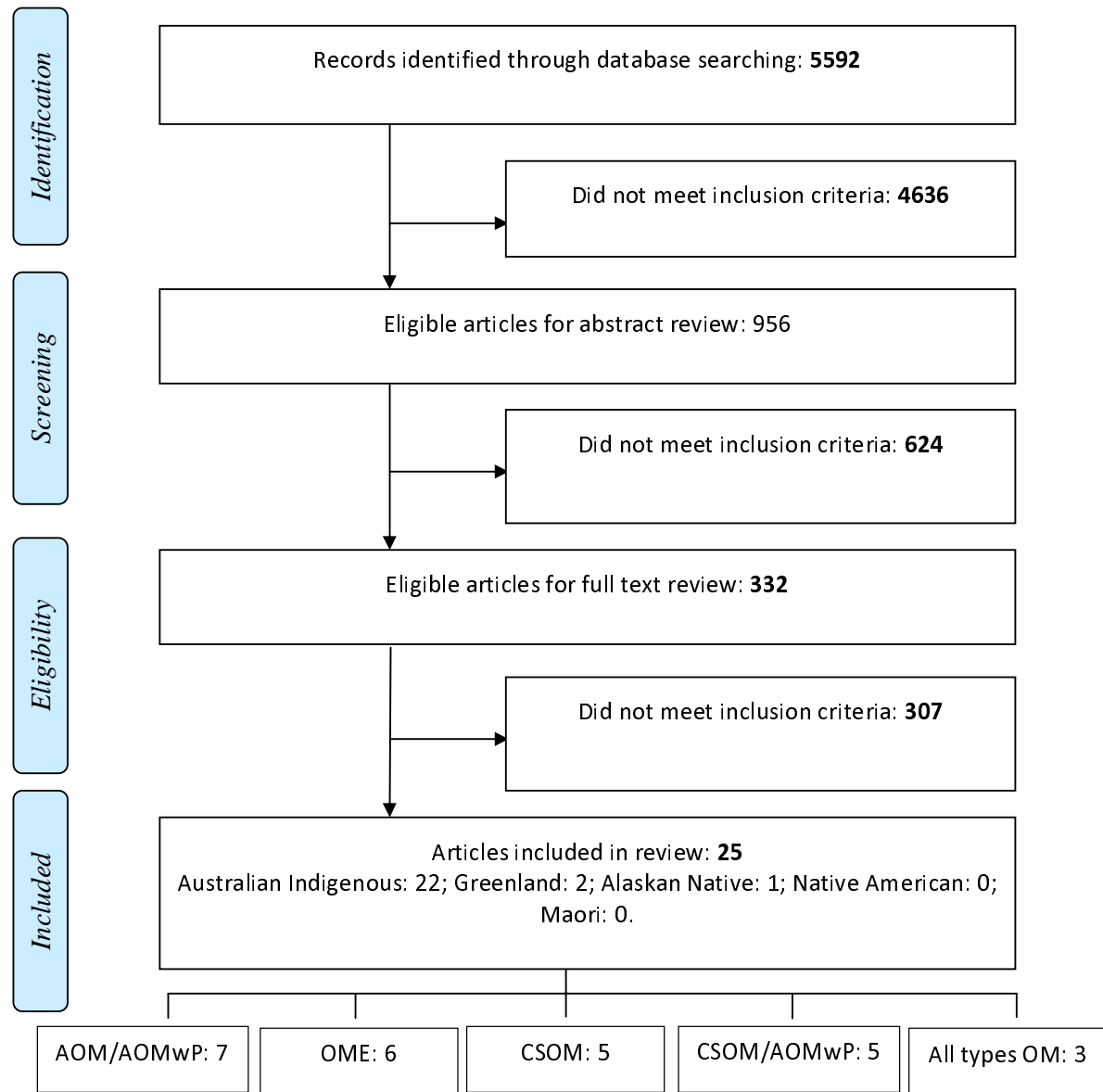
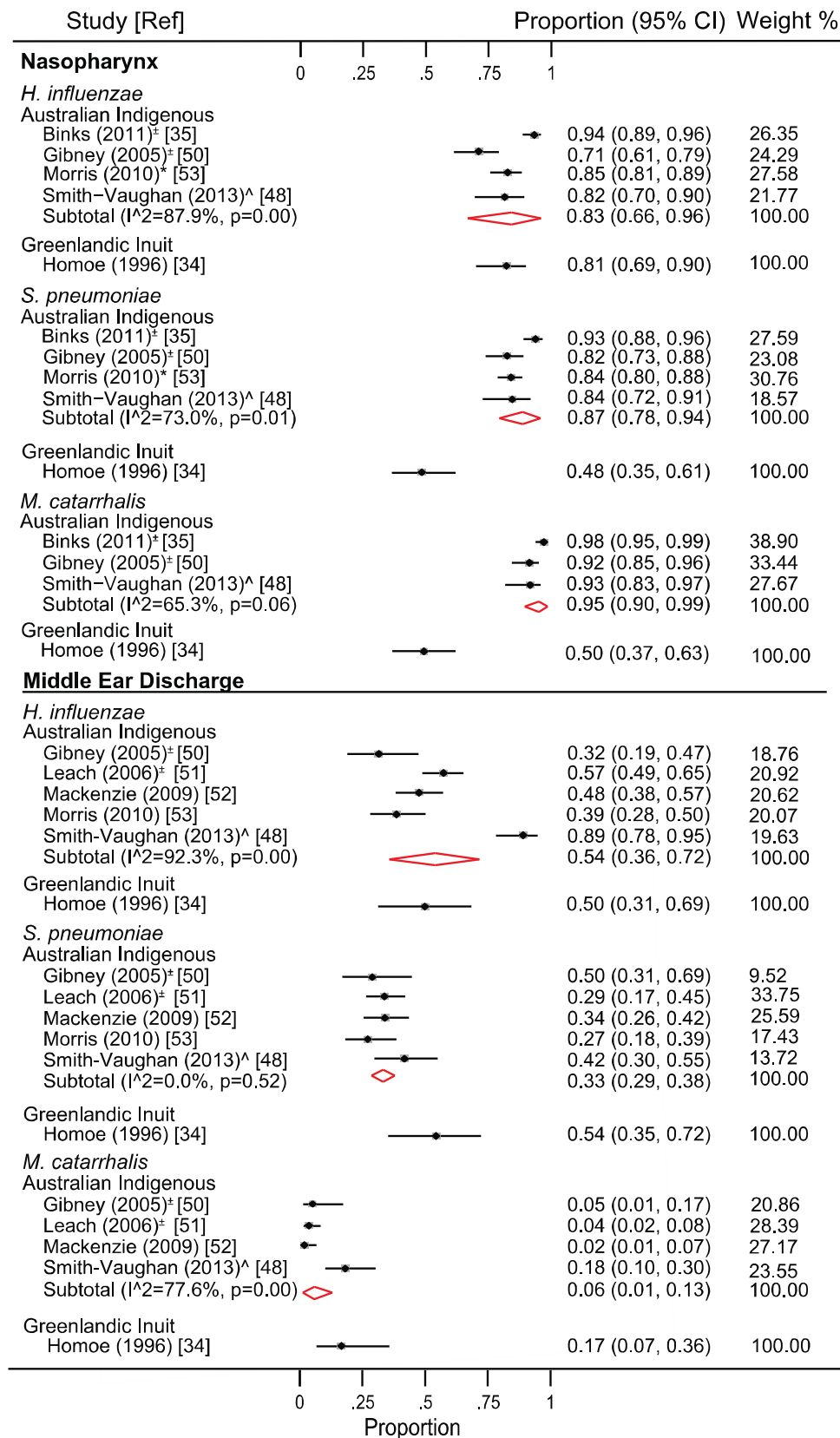
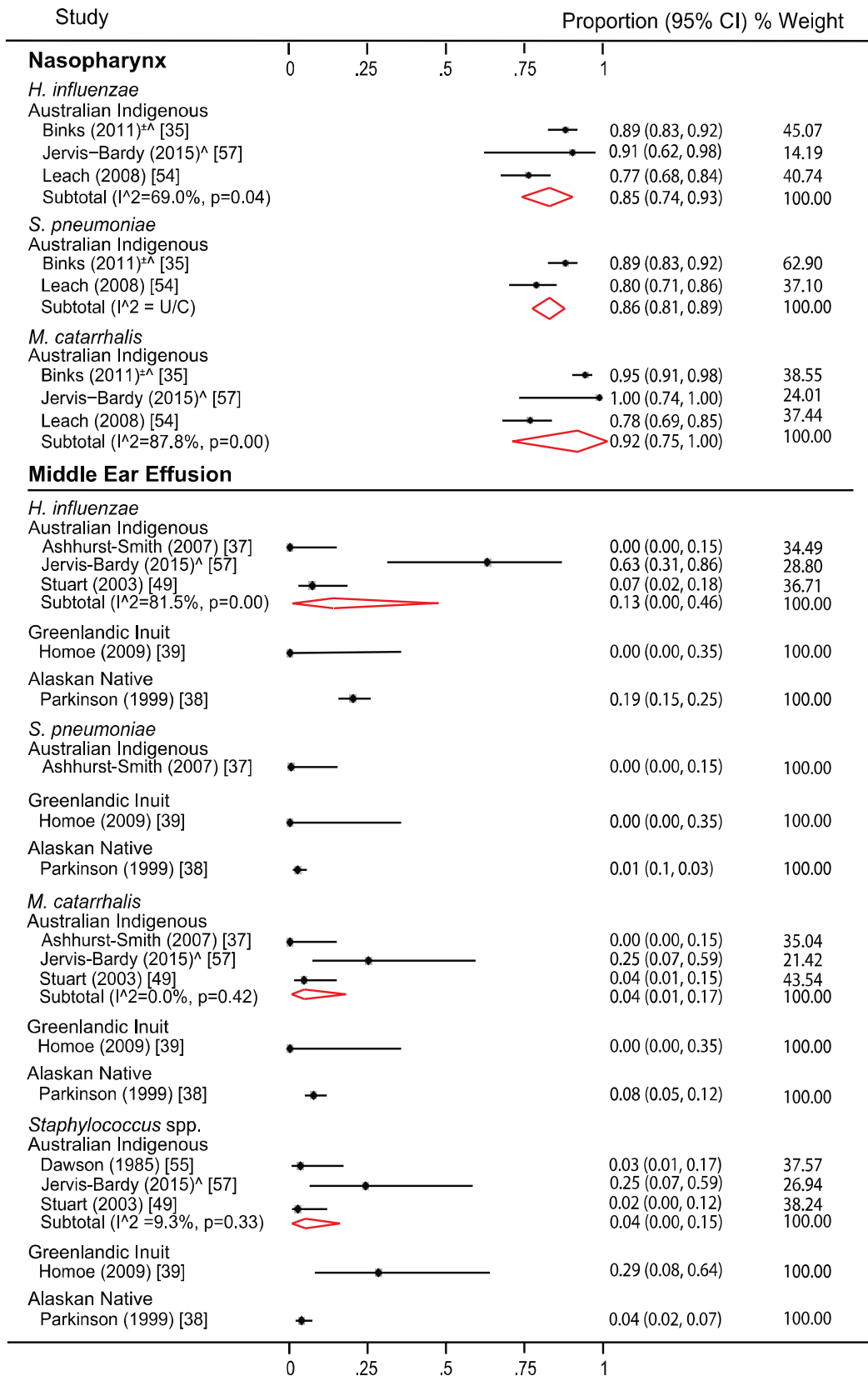


Figure 2: Bacteriology in relation to acute otitis media



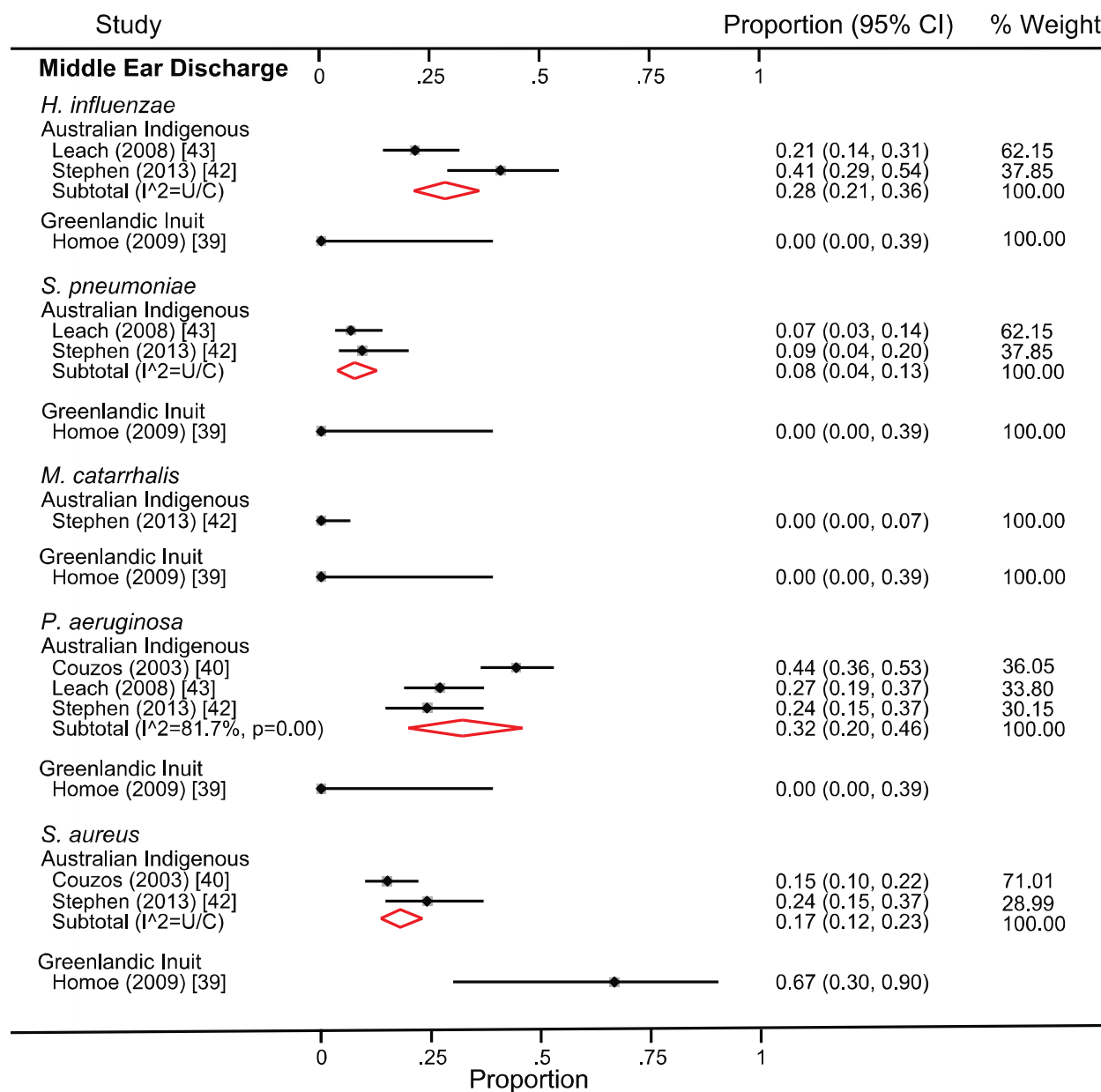
Note: Binks *et al*, 2011 combines AOM and AOMwP. * nasal swabs. ^ PCR analysis; U/C, unable to calculate.

Figure 3: Bacteriology in relation to otitis media with effusion



Note: ^A PCR/ next generation sequencing; U/C, unable to calculate.

Figure 4: Bacteriology in relation to chronic suppurative otitis media



Note: U/C, unable to calculate.

Figure 5: Recommendations for future research of OM microbiology in indigenous children

- Exploration of entire URT microbiota in indigenous populations. Understanding the entire microbiota can explore the hypothesis of dysbiosis in these populations. This can be achieved using either:
 - Metagenomic shot gun sequencing if techniques to remove human DNA advance;
 - 16S rRNA gene sequencing with adjunct qPCR; or
 - Extended culture with MALDI-TOF and adjunct qPCR – creates microbial resources for further studies, such as bacterial interference.
- Inclusion of healthy indigenous peers in microbiota studies to increase knowledge of the ‘healthy’ URT microbiota and identification of possible ‘protective’ microbes
- Inclusion of indigenous participants from diverse geographical, climactic and socioeconomic backgrounds to facilitate generalisation of results.
- Internationally standardised OM diagnostic criteria are needed to enable comparison of data amongst studies from different populations.
- Healthy indigenous control groups
- New therapies to prevent/ reduce colonisation with otopathogens in indigenous populations, including microbiome/ probiotic therapies.