Antibody Responses in Patients with Staphylococcal Septicemia against Two Staphylococcus aureus Fibrinogen Binding Proteins: Clumping Factor and an Extracellular Fibrinogen Binding Protein

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Received 24 March 1999/Returned for modification 28 June 1999/Accepted 27 September 1999

We analyzed the serum antibody responses against two Staphylococcus aureus fibrinogen binding proteins, the cell-bound clumping factor (Clf) and an extracellular fibrinogen binding protein (Efb). The material consisted of 105 consecutive serum samples from 41 patients suffering from S. aureus septicemia and 72 serum samples from healthy individuals. An enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) was developed. Healthy individuals showed variable levels of antibodies against the studied antigens, and cutoff levels (upper 95th percentile) against these antigens were determined. No correlation was seen between serum antibody levels against Clf and Efb. In acute-phase samples 27% of patients showed positive antibody levels against Clf and 10% showed positive levels against Efb, while in convalescent-phase samples 63% (26 of 41) showed a positive serology against Clf and 49% (20 of 41) showed a positive serology against Efb. Antibody levels against Efb were significantly lower in the acute-phase sera than in sera from healthy individuals (P = 0.002). An antibody response against Clf was most frequent in patients suffering from osteitis plus septic arthritis and from endocarditis (80% positive). The antibody response against Efb appeared to develop later in the course of disease. A possible biological effect of measured antibodies was demonstrated with the help of an inhibition ELISA, in which both high-titer and low-titer sera inhibited the binding of bacteria to fibrinogen. In conclusion, we have demonstrated in vivo production of S. aureus fibrinogen binding proteins during deep S. aureus infections and a possible diagnostic and prophylactic role of the corresponding serum antibodies in such infections.

The serological diagnosis of serious Staphylococcus aureus infections in the routine laboratory presently is based mainly on measuring antibodies against extracellular proteins, such as alpha-toxin or lipase, or against cell wall components, such as peptidoglycan, teichoic acid, or capsular material (4, 7, 19). These antigens have been selected for serological diagnosis partly due to their possible role in bacterial virulence (17, 22). Recently, various surface-associated proteins of S. aureus, which might contribute to virulence and promote adherence to host cells and/or tissue components, have been described (9, 21, 24). Antibodies against these proteins also are formed during infection (3). Among these proteins, five fibrinogen binding proteins have been identified and characterized.

Fibrinogen is a 340-kDa glycoprotein found in high concentrations (3 mg/ml) in blood plasma. It is composed of three kinds of chains, α, β, and γ, which are linked together by disulfide bridges (2). Fibrinogen is proteolytically transformed into fibrin, which deposits in the wound matrix as fibrin fibers, and these also give form and structure to the blood clot. Furthermore, fibrinogen rapidly coats external surfaces of implanted biomaterials and thus contributes to bacterial attachment. Fibrinogen may coat the bacterial cell surface through attachment. It has been suggested that this bacterial coating may contribute to the evasion of host defenses (9).

Another important function of fibrinogen is to act as a cellular agglutinin, promoting interaction between several types of cells, such as staphylococci and streptococci, and also with platelets. These interactions involve binding to specific binding proteins on the cells. S. aureus cells form macroscopic clumps (clumping) when they are suspended in plasma. This reaction is the result of the avid binding of the dimeric plasma protein fibrinogen to the specific binding protein clumping factor (Clf) on the bacterial cell surface (11). Clf has been shown to be the major cause of S. aureus adhesion to fibrinogen (16).

Extracellular fibrinogen binding protein (Efb) is a constitutively produced 15.6-kDa protein and is one of three described fibrinogen binding proteins which are secreted into the medium (2, 21).

With the use of allele replacement mutants in experimental animal infection models, Clf has been shown to be of importance in endocarditis (18) and Efb has shown to play a role in the pathogenesis of wound infection (20). In an experimental mouse mastitis model, immunization with Efb was shown to give protection (15).

The aim of this study was to investigate whether patients with S. aureus septicemia produce antibodies against two antigen binding proteins, the cell surface-bound Clf and the extracellular Efb. A demonstrable antibody response would actually indicate that these proteins are produced in vivo and that the host immune system is exposed to them. The presence of an antibody response against these proteins may also add di-
agnostic information when patients with putative invasive *S. aureus* infection are being evaluated.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Patients.** Forty-one patients with *S. aureus* septicemia admitted to the Department of Infectious Diseases, Orebro Medical Center Hospital, were included and have been described earlier (18). The clinical diagnosis of *S. aureus* septicemia was verified by at least two positive blood cultures with the Bactec 600 HP system (Becton Dickinson, Paramus, N.J.). The mean age of the septicemic patients was 65 years (range, 13 to 93 years). Serum samples were collected sequentially (n = 105) until analysis. The first-phase samples were drawn 0.8 days and convalescent-phase serum samples were drawn 14 to 30 days after onset of disease. The *S. aureus* septicemia patients were divided according to complicating infections, as follows: all endocarditis cases (n = 10), osteomyelitis cases except those with endocarditis (n = 8), joint infection and septic arthritis (n = 12), abscesses only (n = 4), and uncomplicated cases (n = 7).

Serum samples (n = 38) from 20 patients, 32 to 96 years old (mean, 70 years) with septicemia due to etiological agents other than *S. aureus* were used as controls. The bacteria isolated from these patients were *Serratia marcescens* (n = 5), *Escherichia coli* (n = 6), *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (n = 8), *Escherichia coccoides* (n = 2), *Klebsiella oxytoca* (n = 1), *Staphylococcus epidermidis* (n = 1), an Enterobacter sp. (n = 1), and *Streptococcus pyogenes* group A (n = 1). Serumb samples (n = 36) from healthy controls 21 to 68 years old (mean, 49 years) were used for the determination of antibody levels in a normal population.

**Production of fibrinogen binding proteins.** Clf was purified from *E. coli* XL-1 harboring plasmid pCF33 (kindly supplied by T. J. Foster, Dublin, Ireland), derived from pQE30 (Qiagen, Basel, Switzerland), expressing a His6 fusion harboring plasmid pCF33 (kindly supplied by T. J. Foster, Dublin, Ireland), and *S. oxytoca* moniae controls. The bacteria isolated from these patients were *S. aureus* with septicemia due to etiological agents other than *S. aureus*. One loopful of *S. aureus* strain Newman was inoculated into brain heart infusion overnight at 37°C. The culture was washed and a 1:200 dilution of bacteria in brain heart infusion was incubated for 1 h at 37°C, and the reference serum was titrated like the patient samples. After the incubation period, the bacteria were washed by centrifugation, preincubated with patient sera in the same dilutions for 1 h at 37°C prior to the addition to the fibrinogen-coated wells, after which the bacteria were allowed to adhere for 2 h at 37°C. For both plates, detection of bound bacteria was performed, after washing, with alkaline phosphatase-conjugated goat anti-human antibodies as for the ELISA described above. Thus, the inhibition ELISA measures the difference in attachment of bacterial cells to fibrinogen in the absence and in the presence of serum antibodies.

**RESULTS**

**Antibodies against Clf and Efb in a healthy control population.** Antibody levels against Clf and Efb in a healthy control population (n = 72) were estimated (Fig. 1). No age-correlated variation was found, and therefore a common upper cutoff limit was used without age corrections. The upper limit, corresponding to the 95th percentile, was 440 U for Clf and 750 U for Efb. No correlation between the Clf and Efb antibody levels in this population was seen (r = 0.045) (Fig. 2A).

**Antibodies against Clf in septicemic patients.** In 20 of 41 patients with *S. aureus* septicemia, the antibody levels in the convalescent-phase serum exceeded the cutoff limit, and 16 of 41 patients showed a significant rise in antibody levels. A total of 26 patients (63%) were considered serologically positive. In acute-phase serum samples, high levels were found in 11 of 41 patients (Fig. 2B). Among patients with non-*S. aureus* septicemia, 3 of 16 patients showed a positive antibody response against Clf in their convalescent-phase samples.

The mean antibody level in acute-phase sera (180 U) was higher than the mean level found in the healthy population (129 U) (P = 0.009). The levels during the convalescent phase were significantly higher (360 U) than those during the acute phase (P = 0.0004) (Fig. 3).

**Antibodies against Efb in septicemic patients.** The antibody response in the patients appeared to be weaker against Efb than against Clf, as compared to the respective antibody levels in the normal population. In acute-phase sera only 4 patients were positive with high levels, and in the convalescent-phase sera only 9 patients showed high levels, in contrast to 20 patients for Clf (P < 0.02) (Fig. 2B).

**Combination of Clf and Efb.** When the results for the two antigens were combined, 29 of 41 patients (71%) were serologically positive to at least one of the studied antigens, and of
these all but 3 (63%) showed a significant rise in antibody levels against at least one of the antigens. One-third of the patients were already positive in their acute-phase sample. Most patients increased their antibody levels to both antigens, as indicated by the statistically significant correlation coefficient for the levels in the convalescent-phase sera ($r = 0.38; P < 0.02$) (Fig. 2C).

**Antibody response in relation to type of infection.** The serological response against Clf was higher and occurred earlier than the response against Efb. About 80% of both patients with osteitis plus septic arthritis and those with endocarditis were positive (Fig. 4). The greatest increase in the percentage of positive patients was found in those with bone and joint infections (0 to 75%) (Fig. 4).

**Inhibition of bacterial binding to fibrinogen.** Bacteria were bound to immobilized fibrinogen with and without preincubation with patient sera, and binding was detected by the same sera. It was evident that both high-titer and low-titer sera inhibited the binding to fibrinogen to various extents (Fig. 5), thus indicating a possible biological effect of the measured antibody levels.

**DISCUSSION**

Surface-associated proteins of *S. aureus* and their possible roles as virulence factors have been studied with various animal models (15, 18, 20). However, knowledge about the serological response against these proteins in patients suffering from deep *S. aureus* infections was lacking (3). Studies on antibody levels against potential vaccine candidates in health and disease are important for the development of an effective multicomponent vaccine against deep infections caused by *S. aureus* (14). In the present study we analyzed the serum immunoglobulin G (IgG) responses against two fibrinogen binding proteins of *S. aureus*: Clf, which is expressed mainly on the bacterial surface, and Efb, which is an extracellular protein.

In a healthy population we found the same pattern as with other *S. aureus* antigens, namely, that healthy individuals show highly variable levels (100-fold variation) of serum antibodies against the studied antigens (Fig. 1), but all individuals had detectable IgG levels. Similar results are found with other staphylococcal antigens, such as alpha-toxin (8, 10), lipase (26), enterotoxins (12), toxic shock syndrome (TSS) toxin (1), teichoic acid (8, 10), and peptidoglycan (4), which indicates previous experience of staphylococcal infections and thereby antibodies raised against these antigens in the population. The presence of detectable antibody levels, both in the normal population and in patients, clearly indicates that these two fibrinogen binding proteins are expressed by *S. aureus* in vivo.

In most of the previous studies on antibody responses to various *S. aureus* antigens, the antibody levels have been expressed as absorbances (titers) in a one-dilution indirect ELISA (8, 10), thus making interlaboratory comparisons and meaningful calculations difficult. In the present study, each serum was titrated in six twofold dilutions, and correlation curves were calculated. They were in turn referred to results for a standard serum given arbitrary units (23). This method facilitates interlaboratory comparisons when the same standard serum is used. Furthermore, the units obtained represent true titers; i.e., they indicate how many times the tested serum can be diluted in order to give the same curve as the standard serum. Such titers are “calculable”; i.e., a doubling of units between acute- and convalescent-phase sera actually indicates that the convalescent-phase serum can be diluted one twofold dilution step further than the acute-phase serum. This can not be stated for absorbance values.

The poor correlation between the IgG levels against Clf and Efb in the normal population (Fig. 2) indicates that the mea-
sured antibodies were independently produced, and thus these two antigens could give us complementary diagnostic serological information. In fact, with alpha-toxin and teichoic acid as antigens with the patients' sera, 73% of the patients were deemed serologically positive (8), and the use of Clf and Efb as antigens resulted in 71% of the patients being deemed positive. Accordingly, combining all four antigens raised the percentage of positive patients to 88% (data not shown).

The kinetics of the antibody responses against the two studied antigens were different. Clf showed the expected kinetics, with a rapid onset of antibody production, seen as high levels in the acute-phase sera, and an expected further rise in antibody levels during the disease. In contrast, antibody levels to Efb were significantly lower in the acute-phase sera than in the normal population, and only four patients, who were suffering from endocarditis, showed serum IgG levels above the cutoff level (Fig. 3 and 4). Although the IgG levels increased during disease, the average level in the convalescent-phase sera still barely reached that of the normal population (Fig. 3).

These differences might be due to a weaker stimulation of the immune system by the Efb antigen than by the Clf antigen, but this explanation seems less probable since the antigens appear to induce similar levels of antibodies in the normal population. Alternatively, the formed antibodies may form complexes with freely circulating antigen. This complex formation may cause a consumption of serum antibodies, rendering them not detectable in the ordinary ELISA. This consumption might be more pronounced for the extracellularly released Efb than for the cell-bound Clf, a phenomenon which would result

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**FIG. 2.** Comparisons of antibody levels against Clf and Efb in a healthy control population (A), in acute-phase samples from septicemic patients (B), and in convalescent-phase samples from the same patients (C). Dashed lines indicate upper 95th percentiles.

**FIG. 3.** Box plots of antibody levels against Clf (top) and Efb (bottom) in healthy and septicemic individuals. The box comprises 50% of the individuals, and the vertical lines comprise the individuals within the area representing twice that of the box height. The horizontal line in each box represents the median value.
in the observed differences in antibody levels during an active infection. However, the difference may also reflect the fact that individuals with a weaker antibody production against Efb are more prone to develop deep (or serious) staphylococcal infections. Such a possible relation between infection susceptibility and antibody formation was reported earlier for *S. aureus* alpha-toxin (8), and a recognized correlation between low antibody levels and disease susceptibility exists for TSS toxin and TSS (1, 5). The polysaccharide capsules of certain *S. aureus* strains have been implicated as a virulence factor that is neutralized by specific antibodies (13).

The earlier response against Clf than against Efb during the course of disease reminds one of the fact that Clf may be produced to anchor the cell to fibrinogen (and fibrin) deposits, probably early in the infectious phase, while Efb is constitutively produced and reaches larger amounts at a later phase, probably inhibiting attachment by Clf and thereby facilitating the spread of bacteria (22). The most probable reason is that...
patients with lower antibody levels, whether or not they reflect a decreased ability to produce the particular antibodies, are at a higher risk to develop a deep infection with *S. aureus* (14). Although the number of samples is too small for division into subgroups, Fig. 4 indicates that certain complications give rise to a more pronounced antibody response than others. Uncomplicated sepsis was shown by Colque-Navarro and co-workers, using the same patients, to give rise to comparatively higher antibody titers against alpha-toxin and teichoic acid (8), but against the fibrinogen binding antigen, the response was opposite. Instead, patients suffering from osteitis in connection with arthritis and patients with endocarditis showed the most evident serological response (83 and 80%, respectively, with both antigens). Patients with osteitis only and with abscesses showed a weaker response (63 and 50%, respectively), which is in concordance with earlier observations on other antigens (10).

Thus, this study has shown that the two fibrinogen binding proteins Clf and Efβ are produced in vivo, that antibodies against them are present to various extents in the normal population, and that increased levels are achieved upon *S. aureus* infections in many cases. During the disease, such an increase in antibody levels is seen earlier for Clf than for Efβ. In fact, acute-phase sera from patients show lower mean IgG levels against Efβ than in the normal population. The patient sera inhibited the binding of *S. aureus* bacterial cells to immobilized fibrinogen in parallel with the measured IgG levels, a finding which indicates a possible biological effect of these antibodies. Furthermore, the antibodies against Clf were measured against a recombinant molecule representing mainly the fibrinogen binding domain. The studies indicate that Clf and Efβ should be considered in future work with immunoprophylactic tools against deep infections with *S. aureus*. The opsonizing effect of IgG against cell-bound fibrinogen binding proteins is considered to be of outmost importance in the host defense against *S. aureus* infections (14), and it is conceivable that antibodies against cell-bound fibrinogen binding proteins, like Clf, would act as such.

**REFERENCES**


