

Devriesea agamarum causes dermatitis in bearded dragons (Pogona vitticeps)

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1	Devriesea agamarum causes dermatitis in bearded dragons
2	(Pogona vitticeps)
3	
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24 Abstract – Devriesea agamarum is frequently isolated from dermatitis in 25 lizards, notably from cheilitis in spiny tailed lizards (genus Uromastyx). It was 26 the aim of the present study to assess the role of this bacterium as a causative 27 agent of dermatitis by fulfilling Koch's postulates. First, its association with 28 diseased lizards was demonstrated. The bacterium was isolated from several, 29 mainly desert dwelling squamate species showing symptoms of dermatitis and / 30 or septicaemia. The affected lizards mainly belonged to the family of the 31 Agamidae (genera Pogona, Uromastyx, Agama) and in one case to the 32 Iguanidae (genus Crotaphytus). Secondly, the occurrence of Devriesea 33 agamarum in 66 clinically healthy bearded dragons, 21 clinically healthy 34 Uromastyx species and 40 squamate eggshells was studied. The bacterium was 35 isolated from the oral cavity of 10 bearded dragons but from none of the healthy 36 Uromastyx species. Hence Devriesea agamarum was found to be part of the oral 37 microbiota in *Pogona vitticeps*. Finally, bearded dragons (*Pogona vitticeps*) 38 were experimentally inoculated with Devriesea agamarum by direct application 39 of a bacterial suspension on intact and abraded skin. At the scarified skin of all 40 inoculated lizards, dermatitis was induced from which Devriesea agamarum 41 was reisolated. In conclusion, Devriesea agamarum is a facultative pathogenic 42 bacterium, able to cause dermatitis in agamid lizards when the integrity of the 43 skin is breached.

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46 lizard / Devriesea agamarum / dermatitis / bacterial / hyperkeratosis

47	1. INTRODUCTION
48	
49	Dermatitis is one of the most frequently occurring diseases in captive reptiles
50	and is often associated with bacteria (Chineme and Addo, 1980; Pasmans et al.,
51	2007), fungi (Frank, 1976; Jacobson et al., 2000) and viruses (Raynaud and
52	Adrian, 1976; Herbst et al., 1999).
53	Although a variety of bacteria have been associated with dermal disease in
54	captive lizards, their role as primary etiological agents in the onset of dermatitis
55	is questionable (Jacobson, 1992). Predisposing factors such as environmental
56	mismanagement (humidity, temperature, social stress) or other diseases
57	(gastrointestinal, respiratory, ectoparasites) are thought to be of major
58	importance for the development of dermatitis. An unknown member of the
59	phylum Actinobacterium has been isolated from a number of dermatitis cases,
60	mainly in agamid lizards. It has been particularly associated with chronic
61	hyperkeratosis presented as lip and skin fold dermatitis in spiny tailed lizards
62	(Uromastyx sp.) (Koplos et al., 2000; Pasmans et al., 2004).
63	The aim of the present study was to determine if D. agamarum is a cause of
64	dermatitis in captive lizards. Additionally, we determined whether D.
65	agamarum is a part of the cloaca, skin and/or mouth microbiota of clinically
66	healthy lizards, freshly hatched lizards and squamate eggshells.
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70	2. MATERIALS AND METHODS
71	
72	2.1. Association of <i>Devriesea agamarum</i> with clinical cases of dermatitis in
73	lizards
74	
75	Over a 3 year period, 28 lizards with dermatitis, occasionally associated with
76	septicaemia, were sampled for the presence of D. agamarum. Either swabs
77	(Copan innovation, Italy) from dermal lesions or samples from internal organs
78	and bone marrow were cultured during 24 to 48 hours on colistin nalidixic acid
79	(CNA, Oxoid GmbH, Wesel, Germany) agar at 37°C and 5% CO ₂ . All isolates
80	that formed smooth, mucoid, whitish small colonies and produced small alpha
81	haemolysis as reported by Martel et al. (in press) for D. agamarum, were
82	analysed using API [®] Coryne, API [®] 20 STREP, API [®] 50 CH (bioMérieux,
83	Marcy l'etoile, France) and 16S rRNA gene sequencing, as previously described
84	(Martel et al., in press).
85	
86	
87	2.2. Occurrence of Devriesea agamarum in clinically healthy lizards and
88	squamate eggshells
89	
90	Thirty-eight Pogona vitticeps and 21 Uromastyx (12 U. acanthinura, 7 U. geyri,
91	1 U. ocellata and 1 U. dispar) without dermal lesions were examined for the
92	presence of D. agamarum by dermal sampling using a sterile cotton-tip

93	applicator at 3 places: 1) the paramedian midbody area of dorsolateral skin 2)
94	the edge of the upper lip and 3) the pericloacal region. Two of the sampled P .
95	vitticeps were housed together with an U. acanthinura showing marked cheilitis
96	and dermatitis. All remaining P. vitticeps were reared in segregation from other
97	lizard species. Additionally, 28 neonatal P. vitticeps and their eggshells and 12
98	eggshells of U. geyri were sampled to detect the presence of D. agamarum. For
99	this purpose, the eggshells were rinsed in 2 ml of sterile phosphate buffered
100	saline (PBS), followed by culturing swabs, drenched into this suspension, on
101	CNA during 24 to 48 hours at 37 °C and 5% CO ₂ .
102	All colonies, morphologically similar to D. agamarum were further analysed as
103	described above.
104	
105	
106	2.3. Experimental inoculation of Pogona vitticeps with Devriesea agamarum
107	
108	D. agamarum strain IMP 2, isolated from the liver of a dead Agama impalearis,
109	was incubated for 24 hours at 37 °C and 5% CO ₂ . Ten colonies were harvested
110	and transferred in 5 ml of brain heart infusion (BHI) broth. Again, this
111	suspension was incubated for 24 hours at 37 °C and 5% CO ₂ . The inoculum was
112	diluted with PBS to an optic density of 1.015, which equalled 10^8 cfu/ml.
113	Twelve captive bred Pogona vitticeps were used in this study, which was
114	approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Ghent
115	University. All animals were found to be clinically healthy and free of intestinal

116	parasites. The lizards were divided in two groups: one group was inoculated
117	with D. agamarum and the other served as a negative control group. All
118	experimental animals were 6 weeks old, weighed 4 to 10 gram and were
119	randomly assigned to one of both groups. The lizards were housed in a room
120	where temperature reached an average of 28-30 °C during 12 hours a day. Self
121	ballasted bulbs (Powersun [®] , Zoomed) were installed in the enclosures to
122	provide the necessary ultra-violet light and to create a local hot spot.
123	After local disinfection with ethanol, the following lesions were inflicted in 3
124	places at the right side in each animal using a 26 gauge needle (Terume Europe
125	N.V., Leuven, Belgium): 1) 3 scratches in the outside border of the upper lip 2)
126	1 scratch at the medial side of the right knee and 3) 3 parallel dermal
127	perforations in the dorsolateral skin over a distance of 0.5 cm. The bacterial
128	suspension was applied onto the lesions of the lip and the knee, using a swab
129	drenched into the inoculum. A 27 gauge needle (Terume Europe N.V., Leuven,
130	Belgium) was used to infiltrate a total of 200 μ l of the bacterial suspension,
131	containing 2 x 10^7 cfu, into the lesions of the dorsolateral skin. At the left side of
132	each lizard intact skin was inoculated with the bacterial suspension at the 3
133	corresponding sites. The lizards of the negative control group were inflicted
134	similar lesions but sterile PBS was applied instead of the inoculum.
135	Seventeen and 24 days post inoculation (P.I.), swabs were collected from all
136	inoculated sites and examined for the presence of D. agamarum as described
137	above. In all of the challenged and negative control animals, full thickness skin
138	biopsies were taken at 17 days P.I. from the inoculated areas of intact and

139	abraded dorsolateral skin. Tissues were collected in formalin, embedded in
140	paraffin followed by haematoxylin eosin and Gram staining after sectioning.
141	
142	3. RESULTS
143	
144	3.1. Devriesea agamarum is associated with dermatitis, cheilitis and
145	septicaemia in captive lizards
146	
147	During a 3 year period 16 cases of D. agamarum related dermatitis and/or
148	septicaemia in lizards were demonstrated (Table 1). D. agamarum was isolated
149	from proliferative, hyperkeratotic dermal lesions in 1 Agama impalearis, 2
150	Crotaphytus collaris and 2 Uromastyx acanthinura. Other isolates were
151	recovered from cheilitis lesions in 1 C. collaris, 1 Pogona vitticeps, 5 U.
152	acanthinura (Fig. 1) and 2 U. geyri. One strain was isolated from the liver of a
153	dead A. impalearis (IMP 2) and 1 strain from the bone marrow of a dead U.
154	geyri.
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156	
157	3.2. Devriesea agamarum is part of the oral microbiota in healthy bearded
158	dragons (Pogona vitticeps)
159	
160	D. agamarum was isolated from the border of the oral cavity in 8 clinically
161	healthy P. vitticeps reared separately from other lizard species. Moreover, the

162	bacterium was demonstrated in the oral cavity of 2 healthy bearded dragons
163	cohabiting for several years with an U. acanthinura showing severe dermal
164	lesions from which D. agamarum was isolated. D. agamarum could not be
165	detected in any of the 21 clinically healthy lizards of the genus Uromastyx, 28
166	neonatal bearded dragons or 40 eggshells.
167	
168	3.3. Devriesea agamarum causes dermal lesions in bearded dragons (Pogona
169	vitticeps)
170	
171	None of the negative control animals developed dermal pathology. The applied
172	lesions healed in a few days time.
173	At 5 days post infection (P.I.) all 6 inoculated lizards had developed a
174	macroscopic dermatitis in the area of the applied dorsolateral skin lesions. In 2
175	lizards the development of multiple plaques was noted and in 4 out the 6
176	inoculated lizards nodular lesions were observed. These nodules had an average,
177	maximal diameter of 3 mm and height of 2.5 mm at the end of the trial. All
178	these dorsolateral lesions showed a discoloured, irregular and scabby superficial
179	aspect at the end of the observation period.
180	At 9 days P.I., 3 challenged lizards showed clearly distinguishable crusts at the
181	scratches made in the right upper lip. This was accompanied by a discrete but
182	diffuse swelling of the right edge of the oral cavity during the last days of the
183	trial. In one inoculated animal a scabby lesion was noted at the left edge of the
184	mouth where the inoculum was applied onto intact skin.

185	At the medial surface of the knee, a distinctive crust was observed at 7 days P.I.
186	in 5 inoculated lizards.

- From all of the lesions at the right side dorsolateral region *D. agamarum* could be isolated during the last week of the trial. From the inoculated sites at the right side lips and knees, *D. agamarum* could be isolated in 3 and 4 lizards, respectively. The bacterium could not be isolated from inoculation sites without applied lesions, not even from the scabby lesion at the left edge of the mouth that was observed in one inoculated animal.
- 193 In all 6 inoculated lizards but in none of the negative control animals, 194 pathological changes were observed in the skin biopsies (Fig. 2 a, b). These 195 consisted of mild to severe epidermal hyperplasia with ortho- and parakeratosis. 196 In one section epidermal spongiosis was noted. Serocellular crust formation, 197 due to exudation of inflammatory proteins and degenerated inflammatory cells 198 was apparent in 4 out of 6 samples. In all of the sections extensive colonisation 199 of the superficial corneal layers by rod-shaped, Gram positive bacteria was 200 observed. Hyperaemia, moderate edema and the perivascular influx of 201 heterophils were present in the dermis.
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208	4. DISCUSSION
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210	D. agamarum was recently designated to a novel genus and species on the basis
211	of morphological, chemotaxonomic and phylogenetic differences from other
212	coryneform bacteria. For this Gram positive, rod shaped and non sporulating
213	bacterium, Brachybacterium faecium (95%) and Dermabacter hominis (95%)
214	were determined as nearest phylogenetic neighbours based on 16S rRNA gene
215	sequence analysis (Martel et al., in press). The occurrence of dermal disease in
216	reptiles has also been associated with other members of the phylum
217	Actinobacterium, such as Dermatophilus and Mycobacterium species (Chineme
218	and Addo, 1980; Greer et al., 2003; Wellehan et al., 2004).
219	D. agamarum was isolated from several clinical cases of naturally infected
220	lizards indicating this bacterium to be involved in chronic dermatitis that can
221	result in septicaemia. Especially desert dwelling species seem to be more
222	susceptible to the development of D. agamarum associated dermatitis.
223	Particularly in Uromastyx lizards, the bacterium was isolated from all cheilitis
224	and dermatitis cases included in this study. In fact, cheilitis in Uromastyx
225	lizards, often combined with dermatitis, is one of the most frequently occurring
226	diseases in these lizards in captivity.
227	D. agamarum was isolated from the oral cavity in 8 clinically healthy P.
228	vitticeps reared isolated from other lizard species as well as in 2 healthy P.
229	vitticeps cohabiting with a D. agamarum infected Uromastyx. Therefore D.
230	agamarum can be considered a common constituent of the oral microbiota of

231	captive P. vitticeps. Despite the relatively high occurrence in this species,
232	isolation of <i>D. agamarum</i> could only be achieved at one occasion from a <i>P</i> .
233	vitticeps with cheilitis. On the other hand, the bacterium was not isolated from
234	any of the clinically healthy Uromastyx lizards. Combined with the high
235	occurrence of D. agamarum in diseased Uromastyx, this finding suggests a
236	species dependent sensitivity to D. agamarum associated disease. Moreover,
237	bearded dragons might represent a reservoir of the bacterium for squamate
238	species highly sensitive to <i>D. agamarum</i> associated disease.
239	Strain IMP 2 of D. agamarum isolated from the liver of a dead A. impalearis
240	induced dermatitis in all of the 6 inoculated animals during a 24 day observation
241	period and the agent was re-isolated from these lesions. Hence Koch's
242	postulates were fulfilled (Evans, 1976; 1977).
243	Despite using a strain isolated from the liver of an animal that died due to
244	septicaemia, in none of the challenged lizards signs related to systemic spread of
245	D. agamarum were seen. Variation in length of the observation period or the
246	inoculated lizard species could influence the outcome of infection with D .
247	agamarum.
248	D. agamarum associated dermatitis could only be provoked after inoculation of
249	skin lesions. Dermatitis could not be induced by inoculating intact skin.
250	Therefore, skin lesions appear to be necessary to develop D. agamarum related

251 dermatitis.

252	In conclusion, this study demonstrates that D. agamarum is part of the oral
253	microbiota of P. vitticeps and is able to cause cheilitis, dermatitis and
254	septicaemia in lizards using skin lesions as a portal of entry.
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343	Figure 1. Spiny tailed lizard (Uromastyx
344	acanthinura) with Devriesea agamarum
345	associated cheilitis presented as chronic
346	hyperkeratosis.
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348	
349	Figure 2. HE stained sections of dorsolateral
350	skin collected in bearded dragons (Pogona
351	vitticeps), 17 days after inoculating dermal
352	perforations either with PBS (a) or Devriesea
353	agamarum strain IMP 2 (b).
354	(a) A relatively thin Stratum germinativum
355	and Stratum corneum, melanocytes and
356	normal dermis with loose connective tissue
357	are apparent. Scale bar = $50 \ \mu m$.
358	(b) Note the epidermal hyperplasia with
359	orthokeratosis, serocellular crust formation and
360	hyperaemia. Scale bar = $50 \ \mu m$.
361	sg, Stratum germinativum; sc, Stratum corneum;
362	mc, melanocyt; d, dermis; hp, epidermal
363	hyperplasia; ok, orthokeratosis; s, serocellular
364	crust; h, hyperaemia.

Table 1. Bacteria and/or fungi isolated as pure and/or abundant cultures from28 clinical dermatitis cases in lizards.

Wild caught (WC)	Lizard species	Lesions	Bacteriological
or captive bred	•		and/or mycological
(CB)			agent identified
СВ	Pogona vitticeps	Dermatitis	No
СВ	Pogona vitticeps	Cheilitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	Agama impalearis	Dermatitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	Agama impalearis	Dermatitis/Septicaemia	Devriesea agamarum
WC	Physignathus	Dermatitis	Dermatophilus
	concincinus		congolensis
CB	Physignathus	Dermatitis	Staphylococcus aureus
	concincinus		
CB	Physignathus	Dermatitis	Staphylococcus aureus
	concincinus	C	
CB	Physignathus	Dermatitis	Staphylococcus aureus
	concincinus		
WC	Uromastyx	Dermatitis	Devriesea agamarum
	acanthinura		
WC	Uromastyx	Dermatitis	Devriesea agamarum
	acanthinura		
WC	Uromastyx	Cheilitis	Devriesea agamarum
	acanthinura		
WC	Uromastyx	Cheilitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	acanthinura		D .
WC	Uromastyx	Cheilitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	acanthinura	01 1111	
wC	Uromastyx	Cheilitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	<i>acanininura</i>	Chailitia	
wc	Uromastyx	Chellitis	Devriesea agamarum
WC	Unomastry gavri	Dormatitis/Sontiagomia	Damiasaa agamamum
WC	Unomastyx geyri	Chailitig	Devriesea agamamum
WC	Uromastyx geyri	Chailitia	Devriesea agamarum
CD	Cromastyx geyri	Dormotitia	Devriesea agamarum
CB	Crotaphytus collaris	Dermatitia	Devriesea agamarum
CB	Crotaphytus collaris	Chailitia	Devriesea agamarum
CD		Dermentitie	Devriesea agamarum
	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	Ivannizziopsis vriesii
	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	INO No
CB	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	INO Nu
CB	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	INO
CB	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	Staphylococcus aureus
CB	Iguana iguana	Dermatitis	Staphylococcus aureus
WC	Cyclura nubila	Dermatitis	NO





