

Development of a database for the rapid and accurate routine identification of Achromobacter species by matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization–time-of-flight mass spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS)

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Original article

Title

- Development of a database for the rapid and accurate routine identification of *Achromobacter* species by
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^oWe need the collaborators to be tagged for PubMed purposes. In print we would like a link to a footnote on the first page.

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Abstract

Objectives:

Achromobacter spp. are emerging bacteria in respiratory samples from cystic fibrosis patients. The current reference methods (*nrdA-*sequencing or MultiLocus Sequence Typing) can identify 18 species which are often misidentified as *A. xylosoxidans* by conventional techniques. Few studies have suggested that MALDI-TOF/MS provides accurate identification of genus but not of species.

The aims of this study were 1) to generate a database for MALDI-TOF/MS Bruker including the 18 species, 2) to evaluate the suitability of the database for routine laboratory identification, and 3) to compare its performance with that of the currently available Bruker default database.

Methods:

A total of 205 isolates belonging to the 18 species identified by *nrdA* sequencing were used to build a local database. Main spectra profiles (MSPs) were created according to Bruker's recommendations for each isolate with the Biotyper software.

Performance of the default Bruker database and ours for routine use were compared by testing 167 strains (including 38 isolates used from MSP creation) belonging to the 18 species identified by *nrdA*-sequencing from direct colonies cultivated on various media.

Results:

50 Our new database accurately identified 99.4% (166/167) of the isolates from the 18 species (score \geq 2.0) *versus* only 50.9% (85/167) with the Bruker database. In the Bruker database 17.4% of the isolates 52 (29/167) were incorrectly identified as another species despite a score \geq 2.0.

Conclusions: The use of MALDI-TOF/MS in combination with a database developed with samples from 18 *Achromobacter* species provides rapid and accurate identification. This tool could be used to help future clinical studies.

Introduction

*Achromobacter s*pp. are increasingly reported in various infections in both immunocompromised and immunocompetent patients [1–3]. They are emerging pathogens in cystic fibrosis (CF) patients [4–6] but their role in the decline of respiratory function is not clear [6,7].

Over the last decade, the taxonomy of the genus *Achromobacter* has been revised.

Two current reference methods can be used to identify *Achromobacter* spp. to the species level: *nrdA* sequencing (765 bp fragment) or MultiLocus Sequence Typing (MLST/MLSA) (5 or 7 gene sequencing) [8-10]. The only available database, developed by Spilker and Lipuma (https://pubmlst.org/achromobacter/), provides online identification for 18 of the 21 described species: *A. xylosoxidans* [11], *A. denitrificans* [12], *A. ruhlandii, A. piechaudii* [13], *A. insolitus, A. spanius* [14], *A. marplatensis* [15], *A. insuavis, A. dolens, A. aegrifaciens, A. anxifer* [16], *A. animicus, A. mucicolens, A. pulmonis* [17], *A. agilis, A. pestifer, A. kerstersii* and *A. deleyi* [18]. These time-consuming techniques are not used for routine identification. Consequently *Achromobacte*r spp. are mostly referred to as *A. xylosoxidans* in studies because conventional methods (biochemical tests, *rrs* sequencing, mass spectrometry (MS)) are not powerful enough to differentiate between species [10, 19-21]. The few studies performed with correct identification of the isolates have revealed that *A. xylosoxidans* was the most frequently encountered species and that the distribution of the other species was variable: from 6 to 14 species among CF patients, and up to 12 species among non-CF patients [10, 22-25].

Given that the intrinsic anti-microbial resistance and probably also virulence properties differ from one species to another, a rapid and accurate method of identification is urgently needed [26].

For this purpose, mass spectrometry is a promising technique. However, the IVD-CE certified databases currently available in France (VITEK® MS bioMerieux and microflex LT Bruker) harbour only 2 (*A. xylosoxidans* and *A. denitrificans* for VITEK® MS V3.0) or 6 species (*A. xylosoxidans*, *A. denitrificans, A. ruhlandii, A. piechaudii, A. insolitus* and *A. spanius* for Bruker MS MBT-IVD-DB-7712)*.*

To date, no study has evaluated the performance of species identification by MS on isolates identified by a reference method. Therefore, we aimed to generate a local database by MALDI-TOF/MS Bruker for routine identification of the 18 species of *Achromobacter* included in the pubMLST database (*nrdA* analysis) when the study started and to compare its performance with that of the currently available Bruker default database.

Methods

1) Bacterial isolates (supplementary data, Table S1 and S2 and S3)

A total of 334 isolates belonging to 18 *Achromobacter* species were included. All had been previously identified to the species level by a reference method: sequencing 765 bp of the housekeeping gene *nrdA* [10] using the pubMLST database (https://pubmlst.org/) which contained 18 species. For each *nrdA*-765 allele not matching an allele listed in the database, we had contacted T. Spilker to ensure a correct identification [4, 23]. The number of strains and alleles by species are listed in the Table S3 (total of 92 alleles). Of 334 isolates, 192 were collected from the sputum of CF patients (96 from our CF centre (Dijon), 48 from 9 other French centres, 25 from Belgium, 9 from Denmark, and 14 from the USA), 71 from various samples from non-CF patients and 53 from environmental samples (domestic, hospital, natural environments). Isolates of the various sources were included for both MSP (Main Spectra Profile) creation and database verification.

Type strains from the 18 *Achromobacter* species were also included.

2) Generation of a local database (MSP creation) (supplementary data, Table S1)

A total of 205 *Achromobacter* isolates, including the 18 type strains, were used to generate the local database (MSP creation): *A. aegrifaciens* (n=9), *A. agilis* (n=1), *A. animicus* (n=5), *A. anxifer* (n=1), *A. deleyi* (n=3), *A. denitrificans* (n=3), *A. dolens* (n=5), *A. insolitus* (n=8), *A. insuavis* (n=17), *A. kerstersii* (n=1), *A. marplatensis* (n=10), *A. mucicolens* (n=12), *A. pestifer* (n=1), *A. piechaudii* (n=1), *A. pulmonis* (n=4), *A. ruhlandii* (n=8), *A. spanius* (n=9), *A. xylosoxidans* (n=101), and 6 isolates belonging to a new *Achromobacter* species not characterized to date (novel species according to MLST analysis and confirmed by Dr P. Vandamme, personal communication) [4,23].

All isolates were cultivated on Mueller Hinton (MH) agar (Bio-Rad®) overnight at 37°C. MH is adapted to the culture of non-fastidious bacteria like *Achromobacter.* Extraction was performed according to Bruker instructions (MSP creation protocol V1.1). Briefly, one microliter loop of bacteria was suspended

in 300µl ultrapure water (HPLC-grade) then mixed with 900µl of 90% ethanol and centrifuged (12000 g for 2 min). The pellet was dried, resuspended in 50µl of 70% formic acid (Optima™, Fisher chemical)/acetonitrile (Carlo Erba Reagents) (V/V) and centrifuged again. The supernatant was used for further analysis.

Data acquisition was performed according to Bruker instructions (Maldi Biotyper protocol V.2.4). For 115 each extract, the supernatant was spotted 8 times $(1\mu l)$ on a disposable target, coated with 1 μ l HCCA matrix solution (a-cyano-4-hydroxy-cinnamic acid, Bruker Daltonics) and air -dried. The target was inserted in MALDI-TOF/MS Microflex LT (Bruker Daltonics), and FlexControl software (version 3.3, Bruker Daltonics) was used. Each spot was measured 3 times, resulting in 24 spectra by extract.

Each spectrum was generated with 240 laser shots (6 series of 40 laser shots) using linear positive mode with mass range m/z 2,000 to 20,000, an acceleration voltage of 20kV in FlexControl software. Calibration was performed with the Bacterial Test Standard calibrant (BTS) (Bruker Daltonics, Germany).

The resulting 24 spectra were carefully inspected using flexAnalysis software (version 3.4 Bruker Daltonics), according to Bruker's recommendations. At least 20 spectra were selected to generate a single MSP onto the MALDI Biotyper 4.1 software (Bruker Daltonics) using the Biotyper MSP Creation Standard Method with default parameters (25% desired peak frequency minimum and 70 maximum desired peak number for the MSP). The MSPs were used to generate a new local database. After constitution of the novel *Achromobacter* database, each individually created MSP was analysed against the database itself to check if the best match was obtained with one MSP belonging to the same species.

3) Evaluation for routine identification by direct colony transfer (supplementary data, Table S1)

Fifty isolates used for MSP creation (the 18 type strains and representative strains of all species) were selected to test the direct colony transfer method and assess the potential influence of culture media widely used for clinical samples analyses (sheep blood agar and Drigalski agar, bioMérieux). Isolates were tested in duplicate by direct colony transfer: colony fragments from overnight cultures at 37°C were

spotted onto the target and overlaid with 1µl of HCCA-matrix. MS analysis was performed as described above but with a single measure of each spot. The spectra obtained were compared to the newly generated database. The algorithm generated a log score value ranging from 0 to 3.0. We used the criteria provided 140 by Bruker to interpret the score: a log score ≥ 2.0 indicated "high confidence identification" at the species level, a score value between 1.7 and 2.0 indicated "low confidence identification" and a score value < 1.7 "no organism identification possible".

4) Accuracy of the newly generated database and comparison with default Bruker database (supplementary data, Table S2)

A total of 167 *Achromobacter* isolates (clinical and environmental) belonging to the 18 species were tested for database verification and comparison with the Bruker default database: *A. aegrifaciens* (n=7), *A. agilis* (n=1), *A. animicus* (n=2), *A. anxifer* (n=1), *A. deleyi* (n=3), *A. denitrificans* (n=3), *A. dolens* (n=6), *A. insolitus* (n=8), *A. insuavis* (n=18), *A. kerstersii* (n=1), *A. marplatensis* (n=5), *A. mucicolens* (n=14), *A. pestifer* (n=1), *A. piechaudii* (n=1), *A. pulmonis* (n=3), *A. ruhlandii* (n=13), *A. spanius* (n=6) and *A. xylosoxidans* (n=74). Among these 167 isolates, 38 had already been used for the creation of the MSPs (Table S2, Figure S1). All isolates were cultivated (overnight at 37°C) on sheep blood agar, and 48 of them also on MH and Drigalski agar (although MH and Drigalski are not approved media for the use of IVD-CE Bruker database).

Each isolate was tested in duplicate by direct colony transfer. Each spectrum was compared by the MALDI Biotyper software both to the default Bruker database (DB-7712 MSP) and to our database and the best matches and scores were gathered.

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- **Results**

1) Verification of the newly generated database

When analysing each individual MSP against the newly generated database, the best match corresponded 162 to an MSP belonging to the same species and a score ≥ 2.0 in 94.6% (194/205) of cases (including the 6 MSPs of the novel species 1).

The remaining cases involved the 5 species represented only once in the database (2.4%, 5/205), 2 165 isolates not matching with a score ≥ 2.0 , and 4 isolates matching with another species (score ≥ 2.0), including one *A. ruhlandii* isolate that matched with *A. xylosoxidans.*

Identification performed by direct colony transfer of the 50 isolates led to 100% matching with their own 169 corresponding MSP or another MSP from the same species. with an excellent degree (scores ≥ 2.0), indicating that direct transfer method is suitable. This identification occurred with colonies picked from 171 sheep blood agar. Colonies picked from Drigalski agar yielded scores ≥ 2.0 for 78.0% (39/50) of the isolates.

2) Accuracy of species identification by default Bruker database (Table 1)

175 Briefly, the default Bruker database resulted in a correct identification (i.e. score ≥ 2.0 and concordance with *nrdA*-sequencing) in only 50.9% of the isolates (85/167). Surprisingly, the species was misidentified 177 in 17.4% of the isolates (29/167) despite high confidence scores (\geq 2.0). All of these erroneously matched with *A. xylosoxidans* except for one strain of *A. piechaudii* that was identified as *A. spanius*. These errors mostly involved species not included in the database, with the exception of *A. ruhlandii* and *A. piechaudii.*

The other isolates led to scores < 2.0 (25.1% (42/167) low confidence, and 6.6% (11/167) no match). The isolates not identified (score < 1.7) belonged to species not found in the Bruker database.

3) Accuracy of species identification with the local database (Table 1)

185 Overall, 99.4% (166/167) of the isolates were correctly identified with our local database (i.e. score ≥ 2.0 and concordance with *nrdA*-sequencing). The only discrepancy observed involved a single isolate out of 167 (0.6%), corresponding to one *A. ruhlandii* isolate for which the best match was obtained once with *A. xylosoxidans* (with *A. ruhlandii* as the second-best match with score \geq 2.0). We therefore reiterated spots for all of the 13 *A. ruhlandii* isolates and observed that *A. xylosoxidans* erratically matched with high confidence scores as best or second-best match for 4 strains. For these 13 isolates, we also tested the extraction method (used for database creation), which did not improve the results obtained. We did not detect any species-specific peaks in the spectra. In particular, none could be used to distinguish *A. xylosoxidans* from *A. ruhlandii*. The "10 % difference rule" proposed by several authors states that "any species scoring >10% below the top-scoring match may be excluded".[27–29]. We observed that 11 out of 167 isolates failed this rule: 2 *A. mucicolens*, 1 *A. insolitus* and 2 *A. dolens* and interestingly 6 *A. ruhlandii* isolates.

Concerning the culture media used, high confidence scores were obtained for all isolates whether picked 198 on MH or sheep blood agar. The scores were lower on Drigalski agar, and no score ≥ 2.0 was obtained for species other than *A. xylosoxidans.*

Discussion

In this study, we constructed the first MALDI-TOF database to include 18 species currently described within the genus *Achromobacter* using a wide collection of isolates identified with a reference method 204 (*nrdA* sequencing). Because the pathogenicity of these bacteria remains controversial in CF patients, there is a strong need for developing rapid and accurate *Achromobacter* species identification methods that are currently not available for routine laboratory analysis. Concerning MALDI-TOF-MS, the commercially available libraries are incomplete: MALDI Biotyper® (Bruker) and VITEK® MS databases include respectively only 6 and 2 *Achromobacter* species.

Here we underscore the high number of erroneous identifications obtained with the Bruker database, despite high confidence scores, leading mostly to the misidentification of certain isolates as *A. xylosoxidans,* as already described [24]*.* One might assume that the spectra from isolates belonging to species not included in the database would not find a match but this this was not the case for isolates belonging to *A. insuavis, A. dolens* and *A. pestifer*. In these cases, it was not possible to determine a score cut-off for distinguishing erroneous and correct "*A. xylosoxidans"* identifications. Users should be aware of the risk of misidentification.

Moreover, the isolates belonging to species present in the Bruker database were not always correctly identified. Surprisingly none of the 13 *A. ruhlandii* isolates was correctly identified. This issue has already been pointed out by Rodrigues *et al*. in a study including 9 isolates of *A. ruhlandii* [21].

Finally, 6.6% (11/167) of the isolates led to scores < 1.7, preventing genus identification. There may be several reasons for the issues with the Bruker database. Firstly, the number of isolates included in the database is limited and some species are absent, as already highlighted by Papalia *et al*. [24]. Secondly, with the exception of the type strains, the method of species identification of the isolates is not provided 223 by the manufacturer, making it difficult to ascertain reliability. This also applies to VITEK® MS system. To overcome the weaknesses found in the existing databases, first we included only isolates identified by reference methods using the pubMLST database [10] and representatives of 18 species (corresponding to all the species that could be identified with this database at the beginning of the study. Second, the database was built up with a large number of MSPs (205) created with a wide variety of clinical and environmental isolates, either from our collection or from other collections in Denmark, Belgium, France, or the USA.

We built MSP dendrograms, but we noticed that the results depended on the parameters and the set of strains included for their construction (data not shown) despite the excellent results of species identification obtained with our database. This might be explained by the fact that Bruker algorithms for dendrogram construction and bacterial identification are not based on the same parameters.

With the use of our database, the rate of correct identifications jumped from 50.9% (85/167) (Bruker 235 default database) to 99.4% (166/167) with high confidence scores (score \geq 2.0) for all 167 isolates tested by direct colony transfer from sheep-blood agar. The use of Drigalski agar, which is not validated by Bruker, yielded lower scores, which could be explained by the drier texture of the colonies.

We recognize that our database has certain limitations.

Firstly, some species are rarely found in clinical samples [10, 22–25] and therefore not easily available from laboratory collections. As a result, few isolates were included in the database for some species: only 1 representative *A. agilis, A. anxifer, A. kerstersii, A. pestifer, and A. piechaudii.* In addition, accuracy was verified with less than 3 isolates for the 5 species listed above as well as for *A. animicus*. In the future, additional strains belonging to these species or to novel species should be included when available to expand the database.

Secondly, the results were not satisfactory for some *A. ruhlandii* isolates. Indeed, the only incorrect species identification with our database (0.6%, 1/167) involved a single isolate of *A. ruhlandii* erroneously identified as *A. xylosoxidans*, and we observed this possible misidentification in the MSP evaluation step). Gomila also noticed that "*A. xylosoxidans* and *A. ruhlandii* showed a close relationship by MALDI-TOF MS analysis" in a study including 10 *A. ruhlandii* isolates [30]. The inclusion of more strains of *A. ruhlandii* in our database might help to rectify this problem. On the contrary, for the 74 *A. xylosoxidans* isolates identified with our database, *A. ruhlandii* was never proposed with a high confidence score. Therefore, another method (*nrdA*-analysis or MLST) should be used when both *A. ruhlandii* and *A. xylosoxidans* are presented as the best and second-best match with high confidence scores.

In conclusion, we built a reliable database for the identification of clinical or environmental *Achromobacter*. This database has several valuable potential uses, including the enrichment of epidemiological data and the improvement of current understanding of the clinical impact of the various species of *Achromobacter*, which is particularly important for patients with CF.

Transparency declaration

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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²⁶⁸**Table 1 : Comparison of the results of species identification of 167 isolates by Bruker default database and the newly generated database**.

269 C: result of identification concordant with *nrdA* sequencing

- 270 NC: result of identification non-concordant with *nrdA* sequencing
- 271 * Species included in Bruker default database.

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Table 1 : Comparison of the results of species identification of 167 isolates by Bruker

default database and the newly generated database.

C: result of identification concordant with *nrdA* sequencing

NC: result of identification non-concordant with *nrdA* sequencing

* Species included in Bruker default database.

A. insuavis A. pestifer **51% 17,4% 31,6%** *A. ruhlandii* 0,6% ■ Concordant identification with score > 2 **99,4%** *A. piechaudii A. ruhlandii* \blacksquare Misidentification with score > 2 \blacksquare Score < 2 *A. dolens*

Identification by Bruker default database Identification by our newly generated database