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To cite this version:

Sarrah Boukthir, Harold Common, Cédric Arvieux, Vincent Cattoir, Solène Patrat-Delon, et al.. A recurrent prosthetic joint infection caused by Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae: case report and literature review. Journal of Medical Microbiology, 2022, 71 (9), pp.001580. 10.1099/jmm.0.001580 . hal-03800315

HAL Id: hal-03800315

https://hal.science/hal-03800315v1

Submitted on 3 Feb 2023

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A recurrent prosthetic joint infection caused by *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*: Case report and literature review

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Abstract

Prosthetic knee joint infection caused by *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae* is uncommon and only one case of recurrent infection has previously been described. Here, we describe the case of a 77-year-old male patient who was admitted to the teaching hospital of Rennes (France) with bilateral and nocturnal gonalgia evolving for one month. He had bilateral knee prosthesis 10 years ago, and a history of large B-cell lymphoma in remission. The diagnosis of infective endocarditis, with prosthetic knee infection, was performed, with positive cultures of synovial fluids and blood; colonies of *E. rhusiopathiae* were properly identified by MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry. Initial treatment involved debridement, implant retention surgery and intravenous amoxicillin (12g/day) for 6 weeks with gentamicin 3 mg/kg/day added for the first four days. One year later, a second episode of *E. rhusiopathiae* infection occurred, suggesting a recurrence or reinfection due to the same bacterial species. Patient was finally cured after a two-stage exchange with a cemented articulated spacer and a 3-month course of amoxicillin (12g/day, IV). Different characteristics of *E. rhusiopathiae* infection were discussed, with a review of all cases of prosthetic joint infections caused by *Erysipelothrix* spp. It highlights the need for a long-term survey of patients, and a good knowledge of their environment to avoid any risk of reinfection.

Keywords: *E. rhusiopathiae;* prosthetic; knee; endocarditis; infection

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52 **Introduction**

53 *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*, a thin, pleomorphic, nonsporulating, Gram-positive rod,
54 is considered a pathogen of butchers, fishermen and veterinarians because of their exposure
55 to a wide variety of animals [1]. *E. rhusiopathiae* most commonly causes localized (erysipeloid)
56 or diffuse cutaneous disease, which can disseminate, resulting in invasive infections, such as
57 infective endocarditis (IE) or device-related infections [2]. Cases of suppurative arthritis,
58 osteoarthritis or prosthetic joint infections caused by *E. rhusiopathiae* have been reported, as
59 the result of direct inoculation during trauma, surgery, or the presence of a foreign body [3].
60 This bacterium has virulence factors that promote its adhesion, such as adhesins [4,5], which
61 can therefore allow binding and survival on prostheses and thus induce chronic infections [6].
62 This hypothesis has been supported by infection in animal models [7]. Compared to other
63 Gram-positive bacteria, the structure and/or composition of the cell wall of *E. rhusiopathiae*
64 is atypical; it lacks many orthologous genes for the biosynthesis of wall teichoic acids,
65 lipoteichoic acids, and the *dltABCD* operon. EpsG, a putative glycosyltransferase, could be
66 involved in the biosynthesis of the unusual peptidoglycan of the organism [8].

67 Here, we report a case of *E. rhusiopathiae* prosthetic knee infection (with IE) in a 77-
68 year-old man. An infectious recurrence or reinfection, without endocarditis, was observed one
69 year after the end of antimicrobial therapy.

70

71 **Case report**

72 A 77-year-old male patient, with a five-year history of large B-cell lymphoma in
73 remission, was admitted to the emergency department of the tertiary-care hospital of Rennes
74 in July 2018 for faintness, in a context of bilateral and nocturnal gonalgia evolving for one

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75 month. He had had bilateral knee prostheses for 10 years. He had been complaining of fever
76 associated with complete functional disability for 24 hours. The clinical examination was as
77 follows: fever (38.5°C), swelling and inflammatory knees (without cellulitis/erythema) and
78 pain at knee mobilization, predominant on the left knee. A known aortic systolic murmur was
79 present. Physical examination showed no adenopathy and no hemodynamic disorder. The
80 patient was a farmer (in contact with cows, rabbits and chickens), hunter of small game and
81 freshwater fisherman consequently involved in preparation of fish and game.

82 There was a significant biological inflammatory syndrome with neutrophil polynucleosis
83 (white blood cells: 27.1G/L, neutrophils: 24.5 G/L) and high C-reactive protein (CRP) (131.5
84 mg/L). On admission, the knee X-ray showed bipolar osteolysis on both knees, predominantly
85 in the femur suggesting an onset of bipolar loosening. In this context, joint aspirations were
86 performed bringing a purulent liquid from the left knee and a citrus-like liquid from the right
87 knee; two pairs of blood cultures were also collected. Empiric antibiotic therapy was started
88 with amoxicillin-clavulanic acid (200 mg/kg/day, IV). The next day, debridement was
89 performed on both knees (with implants retention), without exchange of removable
90 components of the prostheses. During the operation, the prostheses were not unsealed,
91 contrary to X-ray findings.

92 The two joint fluids collected in the emergency room had a direct examination with
93 many leukocytes (left: 11,000 red cells/mm^3, 62,000 white cells/mm^3 including 85%
94 neutrophils; right: 48,000 red cells/mm^3, 11,000 white cells/mm^3 including 83% neutrophils)
95 and many small nonsporulating Gram-positive bacilli [9]. After one-day incubation, growth
96 subcultures of both knees onto chocolate agar revealed small, flat, greyish and round colonies
97 and subcultures onto sheep blood agar revealed small, convex, α-hemolytic and smooth

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98 colonies. Blood cultures were positive after an average of 15 hours of incubation, the direct
99 examination found the same Gram-positive bacilli. *E. rhusiopathiae* was identified by MALDI-
100 TOF mass spectrometry (Mixcroflex; Brucker Daltonics, Bremen, Germany). The MIC of
101 amoxicillin was determined by Etest (bioMérieux, Marcy-l'Etoile, France) and was at 0.032
102 mg/L. According to bacteriological findings, antibiotic therapy was switched two days after the
103 patient's admission to the combination of intravenous amoxicillin 12 g/day, with gentamicin
104 3 mg/kg/day added for the first four days. The cultures were all positive for the left knee (4/4
105 samples) and all negative for the contralateral joint (4/4), despite the positive culture of the
106 right joint aspiration two days earlier, potentially due to poor sample quantity.

107 Because of patient's bacteremia and the presence of an aortic-stenosis murmur, a trans-
108 thoracic cardiac ultrasound was performed and diagnosed aortic endocarditis on aortic
109 stenosis, without abscess. A subsequent good clinical (apyrexia, decreased gonalgia) and
110 biological (decrease of inflammatory syndrome) outcome was observed, blood cultures
111 collected one week after treatment initiation were negative. Amoxicillin was resumed for 6
112 weeks with optimal amoxicillin blood levels (range: 30 - 57 mg/L). Clinical and biological
113 outcome was favorable at 3 and 6 months despite persistent mild pain in the left knee.

114 In August 2019, the patient was again admitted to the emergency room for chills, left
115 gonalgia associated with edema and functional disability. The clinical examination found:
116 fever, a knee effusion and painful joint mobilization of the left knee, non-inflammatory and
117 non-exuding scars, known aortic systolic murmur and lower limb excoriations. A biological
118 inflammatory syndrome was present (neutrophil cells: 24 G/L and CRP: 103.6 mg/L). The joint
119 aspiration of the left knee brought back purulent fluid, blood cultures were collected before
120 starting intravenous cloxacillin (12 g/day) antibiotic therapy. Direct examination of the joint

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121 fluid of the left knee found Gram-positive bacilli and cultures grew with *E. rhusiopathiae*. Six
122 days after initiation of cloxacillin, a puncture of the right knee was performed and was
123 negative for culture, but 16S rRNA gene amplification was positive for *E. rhusiopathiae.* This
124 species was also found in a pair of initial blood cultures. Antibiotic therapy was changed to
125 intravenous amoxicillin 12 g/day for a total of three months, while the MIC of amoxicillin was
126 still at 0.03 mg/L; amoxicillin blood levels were in the range of 24 to 56 mg/L. Cardiac
127 ultrasound by trans-thoracic and trans-esophageal pathways found no argument for a
128 recurrence of infectious endocarditis. X-rays and scans of both knees showed a bipolar
129 loosening of the two prostheses.

130 A two-stage revision surgery procedure was chosen for the left knee. During the surgery,
131 tibial loosening was observed. A mobile antibiotic-impregnated (gentamicin) cement spacer
132 was implanted. The surgical samples taken during the 1st stage were culture negative after 17
133 days of antibiotic therapy. One month after amoxicillin completion, the patient underwent the
134 2nd stage of reimplantation of the prothesis. Four intraoperative samples of the left knee
135 cultures and 16S rRNA gene amplification remained negative. A tibial reconstruction with
136 trabecular metal was performed with a NexGen LCCK (Legacy Constrained Condylar Knee,
137 ZIMMER). There was no bone loss at the femur. In order to rule out an infection of the
138 contralateral prosthesis, two joint fluids of the right knee were collected and both remained
139 negative. Amoxicillin was restarted after the 2nd stage surgery and stopped at day 7 with the
140 negative results of culture. At one month, there was clinical improvement with an afebrile and
141 pain-free patient but a swollen left knee without inflammatory sign. The CRP dropped to 13.4
142 mg/L. At six months, the patient remained clinically well from an orthopedic point of view,
143 without pain or functional disability on both knees; CRP level decreased to 10 mg/L, and blood

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144 culture remained negative. Because of the known and symptomatic aortic stenosis, he
145 underwent a transcatheter aortic valve implantation in June 2020, with secondary heart block
146 necessitating a pacemaker insertion in November 2020, without any infectious complication.

147 In December 2020, the patient remained without sign of infection but presented right
148 mechanical gonalgia; the left knee was without pain or functional disability. Blood culture
149 remained negative.

150

151 **Review search strategy**

152 We conducted a systematic review of the literature about prosthetic joint infections
153 caused by *Erysipelothrix* spp. Our protocol was drafted using the Preferred Reporting Items
154 for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analysis Protocols (PRISMA—ScR) [10]. We performed an
155 online search of the Medline/PubMed database of all international publications containing
156 "*Erysipelothrix"* published between the period of their first indexation, 1936/09 and
157 2022/02/02 (n=1825). The word *Erysipelothrix"* was crossed with "prosthesis" (n=19) and the
158 references including the word "*endocarditis*" were excluded (n=4). The selected publications
159 were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and organized by authors, sex and age of patients,
160 localization of the prosthesis, debilitating conditions, exposure to animals/ food / water,
161 suspected mechanism causing bacteria to spread/persist to joint, fever/ bacteremia/
162 associated endocarditis, inflammatory parameters, bacterial diagnosis, clinical features
163 (duration before diagnosis), surgical procedures/ antibiotic therapy (duration), recurrence/
164 reinfection and outcome.

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166 **Discussion**

167 There are very few reports of human *E. rhusiopathiae* bone and joint infections, which
168 often follows environmental exposure to farmed or wild animals, or water sources (Table 1).
169 Seven infections were reported in patients with a prosthesis, mainly of the knee (5/7), risk
170 factors were systematically found (especially immunosuppressive therapies), except for one
171 patient. Four patients had a good clinical outcome during the following year. Two patients
172 presented a recurrence or reinfection episode: one within one month of the first episode [6]
173 and the other later, at one year (the reported case). While a bite can be a mechanism of
174 inoculation [11], some infections have been observed without invasive procedures. Any
175 breach of the cutaneous barrier can be the gateway for a secondary infection [12], as knee or
176 hip prostheses, consecutive to injuries with or without associated endocarditis. In our
177 reported case, the patient was in contact with farm animals, but was also a freshwater
178 fisherman and hunter, involved in preparation of fish and game. Historically erysipeloid of
179 Rosenbach has been more strongly associated with fisheries and butchering than with simple
180 animal husbandry. *E. rhusiopathiae* is able to survive for a long time in marine environments
181 and to grow on the exterior mucoid slime of fish, which could also explain their survival on
182 prosthetic materials. *E. rhusiopathiae* can also synthetize capsular polysaccharides, known as
183 virulence factors [8]. *E. rhusiopathiae* has adhesive surface proteins (RspA and RspB), which
184 share some characteristics with those of *Staphylococcus aureus*[13]. These surface proteins
185 can initiate biofilm formation and explain the persistence of bacterial cells in joints or material,
186 until reactivation. The long-term persistence of this bacteria in different morphologic forms
187 may well account for the chronic course of the infection, as demonstrated by Toshkov et al.
188 [14], in experiments in rats. Other adhesins have been recently described as CbpB [4], SpaA

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189 [15] or glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase [16,17] exhibiting binding activity to
190 porcine endothelial cells, and binding to host plasminogen and /or fibronectin. *E.*
191 *rhusiopathiae* serovars 1a, 1b, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15–17 and 23 possess SpaA; *E. rhusiopathiae*
192 serovars 4, 6, 11, 19 and 21 possess SpaB, and a different species (*Erysipelothrix piscisicarius*
193 sp. nov.) possesses SpaC. Tagushi *et al*. [18] recently isolated a *E. rhusiopathiae* strain from a
194 human spondylodiscis, in a patient with diabetes and hepatitis. They performed molecular
195 characterization of this immunogenic surface protective antigen (Spa B), which plays an
196 important role in endothelial cell adherence.

197 Identification of *E. rhusiopathiae* in the microbiology laboratory is largely facilitated by
198 MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry technology. Infection with *E. rhusiopathiae* has probably been
199 underestimated so far and its identification may be easier to achieve now [19]. The 16S rRNA
200 sequencing has shown its usefulness in many clinical cases, particularly in cases of blood
201 culture negative endocarditis [20,21]. The use of a specific PCR has been reported in animal
202 samples specially for species serotyping [22] but seems to be of little use in human samples,
203 due to the low prevalence of *Erysipelothrix* infection, therefore the 16S PCR is plainly more
204 relevant [21].

205 *E. rhusiopathiae* is typically susceptible to penicillins, cephalosporins, carbapenems,
206 fluoroquinolones, daptomycin but resistant to vancomycin (low level), sulphonamides and
207 aminoglycosides [23]. Zhang et al. determined MICs of 11 antimicrobial agents by the broth
208 microdilution method of 46 *E. rhusiopathiae* isolates from 31 pig farms [24]. Seven/46 strains
209 were highly resistant to tiamulin (MICs 32 µg/ml) and clindamycin (MICs 64 µg/ml), with a
210 positive detection of the *lsa*(E), *spw*, *lnu*(B), *aad*E and *aph*A3 genes in strains with the resistant
211 phenotype [24]. After sequencing of the whole assembled circular genome, a multi-drug

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212 strain, isolated from pig, was found to be resistant to tiamulin [minimum inhibitory
213 concentration (MIC) = 64 mg/L], lincomycin (MIC = 64 mg/L), gentamicin (MIC = 64 mg/L),
214 streptomycin (MIC = 512 mg/L), kanamycin (MIC = 256 mg/L), erythromycin (MIC = 8 mg/L)
215 and tetracycline (MIC = 32 mg/L) [25]. Similar resistance data were reported in human strains
216 [23,26,27].

217 For this patient, recurrence is likely: 6 weeks of antibiotics might be too short in the
218 debridement, antibiotics and implant retention (DAIR) procedure, especially when there is no
219 exchange of the removable parts of the prosthesis [28]. After DAIR, the risk of relapse is not
220 the same, depending on causative bacteria, indeed a higher risk has been reported for
221 *Staphylococcus aureus* compared to *Streptococcus* sp. [29]. The presence of minimal
222 loosening could have prompted discussion for prosthesis exchange, with a higher cure rate.
223 Reinfection of the same joint with this very rare pathogen can almost be ruled out, although
224 gene-sequencing was not performed, either on initial sample or on the relapse one.

225

226 **Conclusion**

227 The patient recovered after being treated with a combination of prolonged high
228 doses intravenous amoxicillin with optimal surgical management. This observation and the
229 review of the literature highlight the need of a systematic long-term survey of patients, and a
230 good knowledge of their environment to avoid any risk of reinfection. As the right knee
231 showed few symptoms, complete support was possible without pain. After two years of post-
232 surgical follow-up, the patient does not wish for prosthetic revision, in view of the only
233 radiographic aspect of non-evolutionary loosening.

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Acknowledgement

We thank Adina Pascu and Pascale Ollivier for helping us edit the manuscript.

Funding information

This work received no specific grant from any funding agency.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare

Consent to publish

A statement, saying a consent to publish, has been obtained.

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329 **Table 1.**

330 Cases and clinical characteristics of prosthetic joint infections caused by *Erysipelothrix*

331 *rhusiopathiae.*

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Reference	Patient	Sex	Age	Localisation	Debilitating conditions	Exposure to animals/ Food/ Water	Suspected mechanism causing bacteria to spread/persist to joint	Fever/ bacteremia/ associated endocarditis	Inflammatory parameters	Bacterial diagnosis	Clinical features (duration before diagnosis)	Surgical procedures/ antibiotherapy (duration)	Recurence/ reinfection	Outcome
Reported case	1	M	77	Knee	Renal and cardiac insufficiency. Large cell B lymphoma (Rituximab Cyclophosphamide Hydroxy Doxorubicine Vincristine Prednisone)	The patient was a farmer (cows, rabbits and chickens), hunter of small game and freshwater fisherman.	NP	Positive blood cultures. Endocarditis.	CRP= 100 mg/L	**2018** Positive blood cultures (n=6) Positive culture of synovial fluid (n=6)(left knee) Identification by mass spectrometry **2019 (August)** No positive blood culture Positive culture of synovial fluid (left knee) Identification by mass spectrometry 16S rRNA sequencing (right knee) : negative PCR **2019 (December)** No positive blood culture Culture of peroperative samples (left knee) and 16S rRNA sequencing : negative Puncture of the painful right knee: negative culture	Bilateral prosthetic knee infection + endocarditis	Amoxicillin (12g/day) for 12 weeks	Yes: one year after antibiotic therapy	Clinically well two years after the last surgery

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Groeschel et al. 2019 (20)	2	F	69	Knee	Obesity, hypertension, gastroesophageal reflux disease Total arthroplasty of the right knee with a *Brucella suis* PJI (12 years prior)	Exposure to multiple wild host species in the Canadian Arctic	Consumption of raw caribou, muskox, seal and fish?	No fever Negative blood cultures Echocardiogram not performed	CRP=171.4 mg/L No leukocytosis or neutrophilia in blood	Positive 16S rRNA sequecing on the pre-operative knee aspirate. Positive cultures of intra-operative tissues (5/5)		After intra-operative tissue specimen collection: 2 g of cefazolin IV Intravenous ceftriaxone 1 g daily was switched to intravenous penicillin G and completed 6 weeks of intravenous antibiotic therapy and an additional 6 weeks of oral amoxicillin 1 g three times daily.	No	Clinically well 1 year after the last surgery
Gazeau et al. 2018 (6)	3	M	82	Knee	No medical history	NP	NP	NP	Hihg CRP level	Positive synovial fluid (n=4/5)	Four arthroplasties and loosening, local pains, and hematoma	High doses of IV amoxicillin Ceftriaxone (2 g daily) for three months Knee prosthesis removal surgery and replacement with a gentamicin-loaded spacer Ceftriaxone (2 g) and levofloxacin (500 mg) twice a day for a total duration of 12 weeks. Re-implantation of a hinged knee prosthesis	Yes: one month after antibiotic therapy completion, the patient presented with a new episode of arthritis.	After two years, no new infectious or surgical problem
Troelsen et al. 2010 (11); Hocqueloux et al. 2010 (3)	4	F	73	Hip	Chronic wound on the heel Total teeth extraction.	Exposure to a healthy dog, which is used for hunting No visits to farms or contact with birds or fish. No remembrance of wounds or cuts on the hands being infected.	Carrying wild animals in the dog's mouth	NP	CRP = 167 nmol/L)	Negative culture of the preoperative aspiration Positive culture of intraoperative tissue samples (n=5/5) and from the sonicated sample of the prosthetic material.	Persistent groin pain and lateral thigh pain after hip arthroplasty	Debridement, implant evacuation, and extensive lavage. Antibiotic loaded (Gentamicin and Clindamycin) cement spacer. Dicloxacillin IV was changed to benzylpenicillin 3 weeks, followed by oral administration of Amoxicillin for another 2 months	No	16 weeks postoperatively, there were no signs of recurring infection and no pain

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Hocqueloux et al. 2010 (3)	5	F	68	Knee	Alcoholism, gout, systemic steroids against skin lesions	Feeding pigs	Percutaneous penetration through abrased skin	Afebrile No sign of endocarditis	Peripheral white blood cell count = 6,100 cells/mm3 CRP =74 mg/liter	All Gram staining tests were negative Blood cultures remained sterile Positive culture of peroperative samples (n=4/11) Identification by API-Ana and sequencing of the 16S rRNA-encoding gene *rrs*.	Severe internal condyle osteonecrosis extending to femur, tibia, and patella	Tricompartmental posterior stabilized cemented knee arthroplasty, containing gentamicin Amoxicillin-clavulanate Twelve months after right knee arthroplasty: surgical arthrotomy Prosthesis was removed and replaced by a vancomycin- and gentamicin-impregnated spacer Rifampin and vancomycin IV treatment Imipenem and ofloxacin IV for 2 weeks, followed by oral clindamycin and ofloxacin (total duration = 6 months)	No	32 months after knee arthrodesis: no problems
Traer et al. 2008 (12); Hocqueloux et al. 2010 (3)	6	M	76	Knee	Rheumatoid arthritis Lupus Interstitial nephritis Long-term steroid treatment	Exposure to hides of pigs, cows, deer, kangaroos, and penguins	Worker in a tanning factory with frequent cuts and abrasions	NP	Normal white cell count CRP level = 27 mg/L Histology: capsule and synovial membrane with fibrosis, extensive fibrinoid necrosis, and signs of chronic inflammation.	Negative direct Gram staining Histology: 4 and 8 neutrophil polymorphonuclear leukocytes per high-power field Positive fluid and synovium (n=4/9)	Pain with infection 14 months after a total knee arthroplasty	Washout, debridement, and complete synovectomy Two chains of 30 gentamycin-loaded beads were placed in the tibial cavity. Temporary articulating polymethylmethacrylate knee spacer (+1.7 g of gentamycin) A 3-week course of high dose IV benzyl penicillin and levofloxacin, followed by 7 weeks of oral clindamycin and levofloxacin. Vancomycin and levofloxacin	No	12 months after second-stage surgery, the patient was clinically well, with a pain free knee

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Mahon et al. 2021 (19)	7	M	65	right-sided hip	Seronegative rheumatoid arthritis diagnosed 10 years previously. Treatments: methotrexate, baricitinib, for 5 months, tocilizumab, for 6 months, anti–tumor necrosis factor-alpha monoclonal antibody certolizumab pegol for 7 years.	Gardener, who regularly handles chicken manure pellets without gloves	Erythema affecting his hands and fingers consistent with localized cutaneous *E. rhusiopathiae* infection	The patient was febrile at presentation, but initial blood cultures produced no growth	White cell count: 15.9 x 109/L (normal range 4.5-11 · 109/L); CRP 389 mg/L (normal range 0-5 mg/L); erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) 101 mm/hours (normal range 0-20 mm/hours).	**Initially** Joint aspirate: *E. rhusiopathiae* identified by MALDI-TOF Pus: 2/6 were positive to *E. rhusiopathiae* **Revision surgery 5 months after presentation** 3/4 positive peroperative samples **Follow-up arthrocentesis performed before restarting immunosuppressive therapy 1 year postoperatively** Sterile	A 3-month history of right-sided hip pain and swelling with difficulty in weight-bearing and a 2-week history of intermittent febrile episodes was reported by the patient.	Washout, debridement, and implant retention of the right THR 4 days after presentation. Empiric intravenous (IV) vancomycin was commenced after arthrocentesis, and changed by benzylpenicillin and gentamicin IV (after microbiological results). Metronidazole IV was then added for anaerobic coverage (after specialist infectious disease consultation). Patient was discharged on ciprofloxacin monotherapy, because the associated-amoxicillin was discontinued (urticarial skin reaction). First-stage complex revision surgery was performed through posterior approach 5 months after presentation. During second stage revision, a spacer containing 2% gentamicin sulfate and 1% benzoyl peroxide, and impregnated with 3 grams of vancomycin intraoperatively was implanted.		No further signs of infection and a clinically successful outcome after first-stage revision surgery. The patient continues a suppressive regimen of ciprofloxacin 500 mg once daily, and ambulates with a stick at present. He has declined second stage revision surgery, but remains under orthopedic follow up. He complains of ongoing pain and stiffness because of his inflammatory arthritis (immunomodulatory drugs have been restarted).

Abbreviations: M, male; F, female; IV intraveinous; NP information not provided; CRP C-reactive protein; MALDI_TOF, Matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization time-of-flight mass spectrometry

Table 1: Cases and clinical characteristics of prosthetic joint infections caused by *Erysipelothrix rhusiopathiae*.

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