
J. N. van Spijk¹, A. Schoster¹, M. M. Wittenbrink², S. Schmitt²

¹Equine Department and ²Institute of Veterinary Bacteriology, Vetsuisse Faculty, University of Zurich, Switzerland

Abstract

Antimicrobial resistance has become an important concern in veterinary medicine. The aim of this study was to describe the rate of antimicrobial resistance in common equine pathogens and to determine the occurrence of multidrug-resistant isolates. A retrospective analysis of all susceptibility testing results from bacterial pathogens cultured from horses at the University of Zurich Equine Hospital (2012–2015) was performed. Strains exhibiting resistance to 3 or more antimicrobial categories were defined as multidrug-resistant. Susceptibility results from 303 bacterial pathogens were analyzed, most commonly Escherichia coli (60/303, 20%) and Staphylococcus aureus (40/303, 13%). High rates of acquired resistance against commonly used antimicrobials were found in most of the frequently isolated equine pathogens. The highest rate of multidrug resistance was found in isolates of Acinetobacter baumannii (23/24, 96%), followed by Enterobacter cloacae complex (24/28, 86%) and Escherichia coli (48/60, 80%). Overall, 60% of Escherichia coli isolates were phenotypically ESBL-producing and 68% of Staphylococcus spp. were phenotypically methicillin-resistant. High rates of acquired antimicrobial resistance towards commonly used antibiotics are concerning and underline the importance of individual bacteriological and antimicrobial susceptibility testing to guide antimicrobial therapy. Minimizing and optimizing antimicrobial therapy in horses is needed.

Keywords: horse, multidrug-resistant (MDR) bacteria, methicillin-resistant staphylococci (MRS), ESBL-producing Enterobacteriaceae, infection

Retrospektive Auswertung der Resistenzsituation bakterieller Pathogene bei hospitalisierten Pferden (2012–2015)


Schlüsselwörter: Pferd, multiresistente Bakterien, Methicillin-resistente Staphylokokken (MRS), ESBL-produzierende Enterobacteriaceae, Infektion
Introduction

Over the last decades, acquired antimicrobial resistance has gained increasing importance in human and veterinary medicine (WHO, 2011; Weese et al., 2015). Highly resistant bacterial isolates increase morbidity, mortality and costs of treatment for horses by increasing the risk of inappropriate and delayed antimicrobial therapy (Weese et al., 2015). In addition, equine multi-resistant bacteria pose a public health concern, as transmission of resistant isolates via human-horse contact and transmission of resistance genes between human and animal isolates has been shown (van Duijkeren et al., 2010; Dolejska et al., 2011).

Methicillin-resistant staphylococci (MRS) and extended-spectrum β-lactamases (ESBL)-producing Enterobacteriaceae are currently the most important multidrug-resistant (MDR) isolates in equine medicine (Maddox et al., 2015). Both acquired resistance towards β-lactam antibiotics, the most important antimicrobial category in veterinary medicine, and therefore substantially complicate antimicrobial therapy (Weese, 2009). Methicillin resistance in Staphylococcus (S.) spp. is conferred by the mec gene. It encodes an altered penicillin-binding protein, rendering virtually all β-lactam antimicrobials used in veterinary medicine ineffective (Poole, 2004). Staphylococci, including their methicillin-resistant subpopulations, are part of the commensal equine flora. Methicillin-resistant S. aureus (MRSA) have been isolated from the nares of up to 40% of hospitalized horses (Van den Eede et al., 2012) and methicillin-resistant coagulase-negative staphylococci (MR-CNS) from up to 80% of healthy horses (Corrente et al., 2009; Moodley and Guardabassi, 2009). Such previous colonization was identified as risk factor for the development of subsequent clinical disease with MRS (Weese et al., 2006). Common infections caused by these opportunistic pathogens include soft tissue, musculoskeletal and infections (Corrente et al., 2009; Maddox et al., 2010; van Spijk et al., 2016 accepted). Production of ESBL in Enterobacteriaceae allows the isolate to open the β-lactam ring of cephalosporins, thereby inactivating them (Paterson and Bonomo, 2005). While infections with ESBL-producing Enterobacteriaceae are well described in humans (Paterson and Bonomo, 2005), only small numbers of ESBL-producing bacteria (mainly Escherichia (E.) coli) have so far been isolated from horses causing wound infections, arthritis and sepsis in foals (Dolejska et al., 2011; Dierikx et al., 2012; Smet et al., 2012; Walther et al., 2014). Additional bacteria of increasing concern are MDR Acinetobacter (A.) baumannii, Enterococcus spp. and Pseudomonas (P.) aeruginosa. Their high level of intrinsic resistance together with their ability to acquire resistance towards a wide range of antimicrobial agents have led to their emergence as important pathogens in human medicine (Weese, 2009). Little is known about the role these highly resistant isolates play in equine infections (Maddox et al., 2015).

There are numerous studies from different countries describing antimicrobial resistance in equine pathogens (Clark et al., 2008; Theelen et al., 2014; Toombs-Ruane et al., 2015). Results from these studies aid practitioners in making an evidence based antimicrobial drug choice in cases where prompt therapy is needed and culture and susceptibility testing results cannot be awaited. Bacterial resistance profiles can vary between geographical locations and change rapidly over time (Canton et al., 2008). Therefore, continuous local surveillance is of great importance. Currently, there are very few data on antimicrobial resistance and the occurrence of multidrug resistance in equine pathogens in Switzerland (Panchaud et al., 2010). The objectives of this study were to retrospectively describe the rate of resistance to clinically used antimicrobial drugs in pathogens isolated from horses and to analyze the occurrence of MDR isolates in horses presented to the Equine Hospital of the University of Zurich between 2012 and 2015.

Material and Methods

Data collection

The database of the Institute of Veterinary Bacteriology and the Equine Hospital of the University of Zurich were retrospectively analyzed for susceptibility testing results from bacterial pathogens cultured from horses presented to the Equine Hospital between March 2012 and October 2015. Date of collection, origin of sample, diagnosis, cultured bacteria and susceptibility testing results were recorded.

Classification

Diagnoses were classified into 7 groups based on the origin of the sample. Implant infections, infections of incisions, injection sites and after dental procedures were grouped as post-procedural infections. Synovial infections, osteitis and hoof abscesses were combined to musculoskeletal infections. Soft tissue infections included external abscesses, wounds, cellulitis and infected hematomas. Urinary tract infections contained upper and lower urinary tract infections and omphalitis. Respiratory tract infections included pathogens isolated from the upper and lower airways. Isolates from the uterus and from milk were summarized as reproductive infections. The rest of the samples was classified as ‘diverse’ and included isolates from sepis, dental infections, peritonitis, dermatitis, otitis, neoplasia infections and hepatitis. Bacteria isolated from fecal samples were excluded. Isolates considered non-pathogenic or contamination were excluded based on information on
bacterial species, origin of sample, quantity of growth, the occurrence of mixed cultures and clinical findings. If opportunistic pathogens were isolated, they were only included if a role as causative pathogen seemed reasonable based on clinical findings. When mixed infections occurred in one sample, all isolates were included. When a bacterial strain was isolated more than once within 6 months from the same site in a horse, the isolate was considered to come from a persistent infection and was only counted once in the study.

**Table 1: Antimicrobial categories and agents analyzed for defining multidrug resistance in A. baumannii, Enterobacteriaceae, Enterococcus spp., P. aeruginosa and S. aureus.** Table adapted from Magiorakos et al. (2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacteria</th>
<th>Antimicrobial category</th>
<th>Antimicrobial agents</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acinetobacter baumannii</td>
<td>Aminoglycosides</td>
<td>Gentamicin, Amikacin, Tobramycin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extended-spectrum cephalosporins</td>
<td>Cefpirom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Carbapenems</td>
<td>Imipenem</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fluoroquinolones</td>
<td>Enrofloxacin, Marbofloxacin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Folate pathway inhibitors</td>
<td>Trimethoprim-sulphamethoxazole</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polymyxins</td>
<td>Polymyxin B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterobacteriaceae*</td>
<td>Aminoglycosides</td>
<td>Gentamicin, Amikacin, Tobramycin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penicillins</td>
<td>Ampicillin</td>
<td>E. cloace and Klebsiella spp. intrinsically resistant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carbapenems</td>
<td>Imipenem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extended-spectrum cephalosporins</td>
<td>Cefpodoxim, Ceftiofur, Cefpirom</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fluoroquinolones</td>
<td>Enrofloxacin, Marbofloxacin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Folate pathway inhibitors</td>
<td>Trimethoprim-sulphamethoxazole</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enterococcus spp.</td>
<td>Aminoglycosides</td>
<td>Gentamicin (high level)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Penicillins</td>
<td>Ampicillin</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carbapenems</td>
<td>Imipenem</td>
<td>Entercococcus faecium intrinsically resistant</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fluoroquinolones</td>
<td>Enrofloxacin, Marbofloxacin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Glycopeptides</td>
<td>Vancomycin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tetracyclines</td>
<td>Tetracycline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</td>
<td>Aminoglycosides</td>
<td>Gentamicin, Amikacin, Tobramycin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Antipseudomonal cephalosporins</td>
<td>Cefpirom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Antipseudomonal carbapenems</td>
<td>Imipenem</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Antipseudomonal fluoroquinolones</td>
<td>Enrofloxacin, Marbofloxacin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Polymyxins</td>
<td>Polymyxin B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staphylococcus aureus</td>
<td>Aminoglycosides</td>
<td>Gentamicin</td>
<td>Resistance to either of these predicts MRSA phenotype (non-susceptibility to all categories of β-lactam antimicrobials, except of anti-MRSA cephalosporins)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ansamycins</td>
<td>Rifampicin</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Antistaphylococcal β-lactams</td>
<td>Oxacillin, Cefoxitin</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fluoroquinolones</td>
<td>Enrofloxacin, Marbofloxacin</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Folate pathway inhibitors</td>
<td>Trimethoprim-sulphamethoxazole</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fucidanes</td>
<td>Fusidic acid</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Glycopeptides</td>
<td>Vancomycin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lincosamides</td>
<td>Clindamycin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Macrolides</td>
<td>Erythromycin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Phenicols</td>
<td>Chloramphenicol</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tetracyclines</td>
<td>Tetracycline</td>
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</table>

* Enterobacteriaceae include: Enterobacter cloace complex, E. coli, K. pneumoniae ssp. pneumoniae and Proteus mirabilis
Culture and susceptibility testing

Depending on the isolation site, samples were streaked on standard agars (Columbia blood agar with sheep blood, Gassner agar, Columbia CNA agar, Chocolate agar with vitox, Oxoid AG, Pratteln, Switzerland) and incubated at 37°C for 24–48 hours under aerobic conditions. For culture of obligate anaerobes, samples were streaked on Columbia blood agar with sheep blood and Schaedler KV agar (Oxoid AG, Pratteln, Switzerland) and incubated at 37°C under anaerobic conditions for 48–72 hours. The samples were investigated by standard bacteriological methods using gram staining, catalase test, oxidation-fermentation test, agglutination test to check coagulase activity, agglutination test to classify the Lancefield groups of Streptococcus spp., Staphaurex® plus latex agglutination test (Oxoid AG, Pratteln, Switzerland) and growth performance on different agar (Markey, 2013). Identification to species level and antimicrobial susceptibility testing for aerobic bacteria (microdilution method) was conducted using the automated VITEK® 2 Compact system (bioMérieux, Marcy l’Etoile, France) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The AST-ST01 susceptibility testing card was used for Streptococcus spp., the AST-GP69 susceptibility testing card for all other Gram-positive isolates and the AST-GN38 card for Gram-negative isolates. The advanced expert system (AES) of the VITEK® 2 provided minimal inhibitory concentration (MIC) and susceptibility interpretations, which were automatically edited in some phenotypes (Livermore et al., 2002). Interpretation of results referred to the guidelines from the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI, 2013) and, if information was lacking, guidelines from the European Committee on antimicrobial susceptibility testing (EUCAST, 2016) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA, 2016) were used. Intermediate susceptibility was classified as resistant.

ESBL production was evaluated phenotypically (pESBL-producing) in E. coli and Klebsiella (K.) pneumoniae spp. pneumoniae by using the VITEK® 2 ESBL-screen test on the AST-GN38 card, assessing the inhibitory effect of cefotaxime, ceftazidime, and cefepime with and without clavulanic acid (Paterson and Bonomo, 2005). The VITEK® 2 cefoxitin-screen test on the AST-GP69 card was used to detect phenotypically methicillin-resistant (pMR) staphylococci (John et al., 2009). Resistance to cefoxitin (6 µg/ml) indicated resistance to all β-lactam antibiotics (CLSI, 2013).

MDR definition

Intrinsic resistance was adopted according to current knowledge (Hollenbeck and Rice, 2012; Leclercq et al., 2013). MDR isolates were defined as isolates with acquired resistance towards ≥1 agent in ≥3 defined antimicrobial categories, according to an international expert proposal for MDR bacteria in human medicine (Magiorakos et al., 2012). If the antimicrobial category

![Figure 1: Overview of number and origin of bacterial isolates with antimicrobial testing results from horses at the University of Zurich (2012–2015)](image-url)

Abbreviations: E. cloacae – Enterobacter cloacae complex, S. zooepidemicus – Streptococcus equi ssp. zooepidemicus, K. pneumoniae – Klebsiella pneumoniae spp. pneumoniae

Others include: Citrobacter spp. (n=6), Pasteurella spp. (n=3), Proteus vulgaris group (n=2), Pantoea agglomerans (n=2), Streptococcus uberis (n=2), Streptococcus equinus (n=1), Bordetella bronchiseptica (n=1), Streptococcus equi ssp. equi (n=1), Streptococcus dysgalactiae ssp. equisimilis (n=1)
was not evaluated in this study (e.g. glycolcyclines), it was not taken into account for definition of MDR isolates. If available, commonly used equine antimicrobials were used for interpretation, instead of human antimicrobials (e.g. enrofloxacin instead of ciprofloxacin). The complete list of analyzed antimicrobials can be found in Table 1. This approach allowed determination of multidrug resistance prevalence in *A. baumannii, E. coli, Enterobacter cloacae* complex, *K. pneumoniae* spp., *Proteus mirabilis*, *P. aeruginosa*, *Enterococcus* spp. and *S. aureus*.

**Results**

The database included 303 susceptibility testing results from equine pathogens: 53/303 (17%) from 2012, 107/303 (35%) from 2013, 83/303 (27%) from 2014, and 60/303 (20%) from 2015. Most results were available for *E. coli* (60/303, 20%) and *S. aureus* (40/303, 13%), followed by *Enterococcus* (E) spp. (containing *E. faecalis* and *E. faecium*) and coagulase-negative staphylococci (CNS) (each 38/303, 13%). Most isolates were sampled from post-procedural (108/303, 36%), musculoskeletal (54/303, 18%), and soft tissue infections (37/303, 12%). An overview of bacterial isolates and their origin is shown in Figure 1.

Resistance rates against common antimicrobials for bacteria with at least 7 isolates are shown in Table 2. High rates of acquired antimicrobial resistance were found in Gram-negative isolates. Marbofloxacin resistance was rare in Gram-negative isolates, except for *A. baumannii*. *A. baumannii* generally showed high resistance rates and the highest multidrug prevalence of all bacteria (23/24, 96%). *Enterobacter cloacae* complex isolates and *E. coli* also had high multidrug resistance rates of 86% (n=24/28) and 80% (n=48/60), respectively. The ESBL screen test was positive in 36/60 (60%) *E. coli*.

Minimal changes in this percentage were seen between years (55–67%). Only a small number of *K. pneumoniae* spp. *pneumoniae* was tested and 3/7 (43%) were pESBL-producing; all of them isolated from post-procedural infections. Prevalence of pESBL-producing *E. coli* and *K. pneumoniae* spp. *pneumoniae* in different organ systems is shown in Figure 2. *P. aeruginosa* is intrinsically resistant to a wide range of antimicrobials, but resistance towards other drugs, with the exception of enrofloxacin, was moderate.

In Gram-positive isolates, high resistance rates were found in *Staphylococcus* spp. and *Enterococcus* spp., while *Streptococcus equi* spp. *zooepidemicus* showed low resistance rates towards most tested antimicrobials, especially towards β-lactam antibiotics. *Staphylococcus* spp. had high resistance rates to penicillin, ampicillin, ampicillin/sulbactam, cephalexins and tetracycline. Rifampicin and chloramphenicol were effective in inhibiting growth in a high percentage of staphylococci. In addition, most *S. aureus* were susceptible towards erythromycin and fluoroquinolones, while CNS were more commonly susceptible to gentamicin. Multidrug-resistance prevalence in *S. aureus* was 65% (n=26/40). The cefoxitin-screen test was positive for 53/78 (68%) tested *Staphylococcus* spp. CNS were more commonly pMR (27/38, 71%, 50–75% during study period) than *S. aureus* (26/40, 65%, 50–80% during study period). A disproportionately high percentage of *Staphylococcus* spp. from post-procedural infections was pMR (14/15, 93% of CNS and 18/21, 86% of *S. aureus*). In Figure 2 occurrence of pMR staphylococci in different organ systems is presented. *Enterococcus* spp. are intrinsically resistant towards all cephalexins, trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (TMPs) and erythromycin. In addition, acquired resistance was common for fluoroquinolones and tetracyclines. Ampicillin and ampicillin/sulbactam, followed by chloramphenicol, were most effective against *Enterococcus* spp.

**Table 2: Resistance rate towards common antimicrobials and prevalence of multidrug resistance in bacterial pathogens from horses at the University of Zurich (2012–2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gram Negative</th>
<th>Ampicillin</th>
<th>Amox/Clav</th>
<th>Gentamicin</th>
<th>TMPS</th>
<th>Enroflox.</th>
<th>Chloramph.</th>
<th>MDR rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A. baumannii</em></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3rd Gen</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>E. coli</em></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st Gen</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Acinetobacter</em></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st Gen</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>P. aeruginosa</em></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1st Gen</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Cefotaxim and Ceftriaxone tested

Abbreviations: for bacteria see Figure 1; Amox/Clav – amoxicillin/clavulanic acid, Amp/Subl – ampicillin/sulbactam, 1st Gen – first generation cephalosporin, 3rd Gen – third generation cephalosporin, 4th Gen – fourth generation cephalosporin, TMPS – trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole, Enroflox. – enrofloxacin, Marboflox. – marbofloxacin, Erythro. – erythromycin, Tetrac. – tetracyclin, Chloramph. – chloramphenicol, MDR – multidrug-resistant


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Discussion

The results of this study show a high level of antimicrobial resistance in common bacterial pathogens and a high prevalence of MDR pathogens isolated from patients at the Equine Hospital of the University of Zurich. Production of β-lactamase enzymes is the major mechanism of β-lactam resistance in Enterobacteriaceae (Poole, 2004). High prevalence rates (up to 100%) of ESBL-producing E. coli in feces of hospitalized horses treated with extended-spectrum cephalosporins are present (Dolejska et al., 2011; Damborg et al., 2012). Few studies have reported isolation of ESBL-producing Enterobacteriaceae from equine infections such as infected wounds, septic arthritis and sepsis (Dolejska et al., 2011; Dierikx et al., 2012; Smet et al., 2012; Walther et al., 2014). Resistance rates against 3rd or 4th generation cephalosporins in Enterobacteriaceae from clinical samples are 5–14% and an increase over time was noted (Clark et al., 2008; Dierikx et al., 2012; Theelen et al., 2014). In our collection, the prevalence of pESBL-producing E. coli and K. pneumoniae ssp. pneumoniae was 60% and 43%, respectively.

In this study Staphylococcus spp. showed high resistance rates against β-lactam antimicrobials. Resistance towards penicillin is frequent in equine isolates (Clark et al., 2008; Theelen et al., 2014), while resistance towards other β-lactams, especially cephalosporins, is rarely reported (Clark et al., 2008; Theelen et al., 2014). Here, 68% of staphylococci showed cephalosporin resistance due to methicillin resistance. Methicillin resistance excludes therapy with all β-lactam antimicrobials, including all penicillins, cephalosporins and carbapenems (Poole, 2004). In previous equine studies MRSA prevalence was 25–37% (Cuny et al., 2006; van Duijkeren et al., 2010), but in our study it was 65% MRSA and 71% MR-CNS. An outbreak of infections with a MDR S. aureus as reported in another hospital (Panchaud et al., 2010) did not occur and isolation rate remained stable between 2012 and 2015. Possible reasons for the increased prevalence include population and environmental factors, antimicrobial treatment practices and diagnostic methods. In another study an increase in prevalence of MRSA was noted over time and therefore a higher occurrence can be expected in more recent data (van Duijkeren et al., 2010). Additionally, several staphylococcal species with different prevalence of methicillin resistance are included in the MR-CNS group (Becker et al., 2014). Members of this group are increasingly important opportunistic pathogens in human medicine (Becker et al., 2014), but there are few reports of equine infections (Trostle et al., 2001; Corrente et al., 2009). The increasing number of CNS in clinical samples at our hospital (van Spijk et al., 2016 accepted) indicates that these species are potentially emerging in equine disease.
Acinetobacter spp., especially A. baumannii, are opportunistic pathogens involved in various equine infections (Weese, 2009). In recent years, they gained attention because of their ability to acquire high rates of antimicrobial resistance and the occurrence of pan-resistant A. baumannii (Valencia et al., 2009; Weese, 2009). An increasing occurrence of Acinetobacter spp. from equine infections was recently shown in our hospital (van Spijk et al., 2016 accepted) and isolates showed very high resistance rates (96% MDR). Amikacin, enrofloxacin and imipenem are generally thought to remain effective (Weese, 2009). While fluoroquinolones showed poor efficacy in our isolates, no amikacin resistance was observed and only a single isolate was imipenem-resistant (data not shown). Only little is known about the clinical importance of MDR A. baumannii infections in horses. Together with case reports of horses with similar infections (Jokisalo et al., 2010) and human literature, our results suggest that clinicians should be aware of this highly resistant pathogen, especially in hospitalized horses.

An increase in resistant enterococci was recently found in foal sepsis isolates and cases of MDR Enterococcus spp. causing musculoskeletal infections have been reported (Herdan et al., 2012; Theelen et al., 2014). Ampicillin alone or in combination with sulbactam and chloramphenicol remain reasonable treatment options (Weese, 2009; Theelen et al., 2014). Low-level resistance towards penicillin and gentamicin is intrinsic to enterococci, but combinations of both drugs can remain effective (Weese, 2009; Hollenbeck and Rice, 2012). However, very high MICs for gentamicin, so-called high level gentamicin resistance, in 68% of our enterococci isolates precludes such a therapeutic approach (data not shown). Resistance towards vancomycin is of critical concern in Enterococcus spp. in human medicine (Giguère et al., 2013; Maddox et al., 2015). Fortunately, vancomycin-resistant enterococci were not present in our samples (data not shown).

Similarly to other studies, P. aeruginosa isolates showed low resistance towards gentamicin, amikacin, and marbofloxacin, but high resistance rates towards enrofloxacin (Clark et al., 2008; Theelen et al., 2014). The use of fluoroquinolones in general should be minimized because of their classification as critically important drugs in human medicine (WHO, 2011).

A low-level of antimicrobial resistance was seen in S. equi ssp. zooepidemicus isolates. In accordance to other studies, full susceptibility towards b-lactam antibiotics was seen and they remain the most important drugs in treating infections caused by streptococci (Erol et al., 2012; Theelen et al., 2014). In order to reduce the use of critically important antimicrobials for human medicine (WHO, 2011), penicillin should be preferred to later-generation cephalosporins in these cases. Combinations of penicillin with streptomycin are contraindicated due to widespread resistance against streptomycin and its common side effects (Giguère et al., 2013).

A disproportionally high rate of pMR staphylococci (89%) was isolated from post-procedural infections, compared to 68% in staphylococci from all samples. MDR A. baumannii and pESBL-producing Enterobacteriaceae were other frequent pathogens from post-procedural infections. Factors like antimicrobial therapy, hospitalization, duration of therapy and hospitalization, as well as local or systemic immunosuppression favor the development of resistant isolates in these infections (Struelens, 1998). Bacteriological culture and susceptibility testing are particularly important to guide antimicrobial therapy in these cases.

The high resistance rates against commonly used antimicrobials found in this study, would suggest a high percentage of prophylactic and therapeutic treatment failure. However, prevalence of post-operative infections at our hospital is comparable to other studies, e.g. confirmed bacterial incisional infections occurred in 7.4% of colic surgeries (data not shown) compared to 9.3% in other studies (Torfs et al., 2010). Furthermore, the general clinical perception at our hospital is that bacterial infections, other than sepsis, are not generally associated with a high mortality rate, although outcome was not specifically analyzed in this study. Results of the present study show that antimicrobial therapy is frequently ineffective and likely unnecessary as no increase in therapy failure seemed to occur. Depending on the affected organ, additional therapy such as local therapy is considered to be of major importance to successfully treat bacterial infections.

Caution needs to be applied when comparing to results from older studies, which mainly used formerly common disc diffusion testing methods and out-dated CLSI guidelines. In this study only samples from hospitalized horses were included and extrapolation of results to the field is difficult. Our hospital population is frequently treated with antimicrobials prior to referral and samples from complicated cases might be overrepresented. However, primary cases were also included. Definition of MDR isolates is inconsistent in medical literature, precluding reliable comparison of data. In order to reach a standardized definition, we implemented the multidrug resistance definition from human medicine (Magiorakos et al., 2012). This adaption was limited by unavailability of certain susceptibility results and differing antimicrobial agents in human and veterinary medicine. Therefore, establishment of a standard definition of MDR bacteria in veterinary medicine should be sup-

A retrospective analysis of antimicrobial resistance in bacterial pathogens in an equine hospital (2012-2015)

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Identification of ESBL-producing *Enterobacteriaceae* and MRS was limited to phenotypical analysis. Genotypic analysis is not common for routine clinical diagnostics, but would allow confirmation of results and provide epidemiological information.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, high levels of resistance in equine pathogens were present, complicating therapy with commonly used antimicrobial agents, like penicillins, cephalosporins, gentamicin or TMPS. This underlines the importance of individual bacteriological and antimicrobial susceptibility testing as well as minimizing and optimizing the antimicrobial therapy in horses to reduce further development of resistance.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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**Analyse rétrospective des résistances rencontrées chez les bactéries pathogènes isolées sur des chevaux hospitalisés (2012–2015)**

Les résistances aux antibiotiques font partie des plus grands défis rencontrés par la médecine vétérinaire de notre temps. Le but de la présente étude était d’étudier la situation des résistances chez les bactéries pathogènes les plus communes ainsi que la survenance de germes multi-résistants. On a procédé à une analyse rétrospective de tous les tests de sensibilité effectués sur des germes pathogènes isolés sur des chevaux à l’Hôpital vétérinaire de Zürich entre 2012 et 2015. Les isolats présentant des résistances vis-à-vis de trois classes d’antibiotiques ou plus ont été définis comme multi-résistants. Au total on a exploité les résultats de 303 tests de sensibilité, parmi lesquels on trouvait particulièrement des résultats concernant *Escherichia coli* (60/303, 20%) et *Staphylococcus aureus* (40/303, 13%). La grande majorité des germes pathogènes isolés sur des chevaux présentaient un taux de résistances élevé face aux antibiotiques usuels, *Acinetobacter baumannii* (23/24, 96%), suivi par des isolats complexes d’*Enterobacter cloacae* (24/28, 86%) et par *Escherichia coli* (48/60, 80%) montrant la plus haute proportion de résistances multiples. En outre, 60% des isolats d’*Escherichia coli* étaient phénotypiquement producteurs d’ESBL et 68% des staphylocoques étaient phénotypiquement résistant à la méthicilline. Ces taux élevés de résistances vis-à-vis des antibiotiques usuels sont inquiétants et soulignent l’importance d’une culture avec test de sensibilité pour pouvoir mettre en œuvre un traitement ciblé. La réduction et l’optimisation de l’usage des antibiotiques chez le cheval sont d’une grande importance.

**Valutazione retrospettiva della prevalenza della resistenza ai batteri patogeni nei cavalli ricoverati (2012–2015)**

La resistenza agli antibiotici fa parte delle più grandi sfide nel campo della medicina veterinaria ai nostri giorni. Lo scopo di questo studio era di valutare la prevalenza della resistenza dei batteri patogeni più comuni e la presenza di germi multi-resistenti. Un’analisi retrospettiva di tutti i test di sensibilità dei batteri patogeni nei cavalli è stata eseguita presso l’Ospedale veterinario di Zurigo (2012–2015). Gli isolati che mostrano resistenze verso tre o più classi di antibiotici sono stati definiti come multi-resistenti. Complessivamente, sono stati valutati i risultati di 303 prove di resistenza, tra cui ricorrevano di frequente *Escherichia coli* (60/303, 20%), e *Staphylococcus aureus* (40/303, 13%). La grande maggioranza degli agenti infettivi isolati dei cavalli hanno mostrato alti tassi di resistenza agli antibiotici usati comunemente, quali *Acinetobacter baumannii* (23/24, 96%), seguito da *Enterobacter cloacae* isolati complessi (24/28, 86%) e *Escherichia coli* (48/60, 80%) che ha ottenuto il più alto tasso di resistenza. Inoltre, il 60% degli isolati di *Escherichia coli* erano fenotipicamente produttori di ESBL e il 68% degli stafilococchi erano fenotipicamente meticillino-resistenti. Gli alti tassi di resistenza agli antibiotici usati comunemente sono preoccupanti e sottolineano l’importanza di una cultura con test di sensibilità dell’agente infettivo, al fine di avviare una terapia mirata. La minimizzazione e l’ottimizzazione dell’uso di antibiotici nel cavallo sono della massima importanza.
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**Corresponding author**
Dr. med. vet. Sarah Schmitt
FVH (Bakteriologie), Fachtierärztin für Mikrobiologie
Laborleiterin, Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin
Institut für Veterinärbakteriologie
Vetsuisse-Fakultät Universität Zürich
Winterhurstrasse 270
8057 Zürich
Tel.: +41 44 635 86 09
Fax: +41 44 635 89 12
E-Mail: sarah.schmitt@vetbakt.uzh.ch