Indigenous Plasmodium ovale Malaria in Bangladesh

Hans-Peter Fuehrer, Peter Starzengruber, Paul Swoboda, Wasif Ali Khan, Julia Matt, Benedikt Ley, Kamala Triemer, Rashidul Haque, Emran Bin Yunus, Shah Monir Hossain, Julia Walochnik, and Harald Noedl*

Department of Specific Prophylaxis and Tropical Medicine, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria; MARIB - Malaria Research Initiative Bandarban, Bandarban, Bangladesh; International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Chittagong Medical College, Chittagong, Bangladesh; Directorate General, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract. In spite of the high prevalence of malaria in Southeastern Bangladesh, there remains a significant shortage of information regarding the presence of five human malaria parasites: Plasmodium ovale, P. malariae, and P. knowlesi. The presence of P. ovale and P. knowlesi has previously never been reported from Bangladesh. We used a genus- and species-specific nested polymerase chain reaction, targeting highly conserved regions of the small subunit ribosomal RNA (SSU rRNA) gene, to investigate the presence of malaria parasites in a total number of 379 patient samples in a survey of patients with febrile illnesses in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Southeastern Bangladesh. We identified the first cases of P. ovale in Bangladesh. They were confirmed by sequence analysis; 189 of 379 samples (49.9%; 95% confidence interval = 44.9–54.9%) were positive for Plasmodium sp. by PCR. P. falciparum monoinfections accounted for 68.3% (61.3–74.5%), followed by P. vivax (15.3%; 10.9–21.2%), P. malariae (1.6%; 0.5–4.6%), P. ovale (1.6%; 0.5–4.6%), and mixed infections (13.2%; 9.1–18.8%). We found no evidence of P. knowlesi in this region.

INTRODUCTION

Almost 1 million people die of malaria every year, and recent reports of emerging artemisinin resistance in Southeast Asia will add another challenge to malaria control efforts.1–3 High standards in the diagnosis of the malaria-causing Plasmodium species are essential to control and adequately treat malaria. Despite its known limitations, microscopy remains the gold standard of malaria diagnosis in the field and frequently, not even microscopy is available in resource-limited environments. This may lead to a significant underestimation of the true malaria burden, especially of less prevalent and less documented species such as P. ovale, P. malariae, and P. knowlesi in Asia.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts in Southeastern Bangladesh are known to be highly endemic for P. falciparum with reported resistance to chloroquine and sulfadoxine/pyrimethamine.4 Virtually all malaria infections were previously attributed either to P. falciparum or P. vivax.5–8 Recent surveillance studies based on the diagnosis with rapid diagnostic tests (RDTs) indicate P. falciparum as the dominant species in malaria-endemic districts of Bangladesh with a country-wide prevalence of 3.58% (compared with only 0.21% for P. vivax).9 The existence of infections with P. malariae with a prevalence of 1% in Bangladesh was first reported from a study conducted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.10 Both P. ovale and P. malariae are typically found at very low prevalence in Southeast Asia,11 P. ovale is known to be endemic in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Irian Jaya, and Papua New Guinea, but using the availability of polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based techniques for the diagnosis of malaria, this parasite has recently also been reported from a number of countries in South and Southeast Asia.12–16 So far, infections with P. ovale have not been reported from Bangladesh.

In recent years, human cases of P. knowlesi infections have been reported from Southeast Asia, especially by the Kuching group in Malaysia, and although originally classified as a sim-
RESULTS

A total number of 189 of 379 [49.9%; 95% confidence interval (CI) = 44.9–54.9%] filter papers from patients with febrile illnesses gave positive results for *Plasmodium* spp. with genus-specific primers by nested PCR. All 159 samples classified as positive by microscopic examination were confirmed as being positive. In addition, 30 samples that were diagnosed as negative by microscopy were positive in the genus-specific nested PCR. Species-specific PCR showed that of 189 *Plasmodium* spp. positive samples, 154 (81.5%; 95% CI = 75.3–86.4%) were positive for *P. falciparum*, 50 (26.5%; 95% CI = 20.7–33.2%) were positive for *P. vivax*, 7 (3.7%; 95% CI = 1.8–7.4%) were positive for *P. malariae*, and 3 (1.6%; 95% CI = 0.5–4.6%) were positive for *P. ovale*. All samples tested negative for *P. knowlesi*.

We found 164 (86.8%; 95% CI = 81.2–91.1%) monoinfections and 25 (13.2%; 95% CI = 9.1–18.8%) mixed infections; 129 (68.3%; 95% CI = 61.3–74.5%) patients presented with *P. falciparum*, 29 (15.3%; 95% CI = 10.9–21.2%) with *P. vivax*, 3 (1.6%; 95% CI = 0.5–4.6%) with *P. malariae*, and 2 (1.1%; 95% CI = 0.3–3.8%) triple infections with *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, and *P. malariae* (Table 1). One patient presented with *P. ovale* two times in the course of this study. Based on the PCR results, 30 (7.9%; 95% CI = 5.5–10.8%) microscopy slides were classified as false negative, and none were false positive. Compared with the 25 PCR-confirmed samples with mixed malaria infections, only 9 (36%) were read as positive for mixed infections in microscopy, and only 6 (24%) were diagnosed as mixed infections by RDT.

All three samples positive for *P. ovale* in PCR were proven by DNA sequencing (GenBank Accession numbers: HM196277, HM196278) and after unblinding, were also found positive for *P. ovale* on microscopic reexamination.

DISCUSSION

For 2006, the World Health Organization estimated almost 3 million malaria cases and 15,000 deaths in Bangladesh in mostly unconfirmed cases. Among microscopy-confirmed malaria infections, *P. falciparum* was the dominant species, causing more than 70% of all malaria cases. A recent report based on microscopic diagnosis indicated that 70.3% of all malaria cases in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were caused by *P. falciparum*, 29.6% were caused by *P. vivax*, and only 0.01% were read as mixed infections. A study using microscopic and molecular methods for diagnosis conducted between 2000 and 2002 revealed that of those slides considered positive for *Plasmodium* spp., 84% were *P. falciparum* monoinfections or mixed infections, 15% were *P. vivax*, and 1% were *P. malariae*. Our study shows comparable results for *P. falciparum*...
with 81.5% (of which 68.3% were monoinfections) and *P. vivax* with 26.5% (of which 15.3% were monoinfections). However, none of the earlier studies ever reported any cases of *P. ovale*.

We report the first three cases of *P. ovale* in Bangladesh. All of them were monoinfections and originated from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Two of the positive samples found in this survey were seen in the same patient who originally tested negative in the RDT but was diagnosed with *P. malariae* based on microscopy (assuming that *P. ovale* was not an option, because it had never been seen in Bangladesh before). Two months after being treated for his suspected *P. malariae* infection, the patient returned with signs and symptoms consistent with malaria. This sample was confirmed to be *P. ovale* by molecular techniques, suggesting a relapse with *P. ovale*.

The nested PCR assay used in this study is highly sensitive with a documented limit of detection of 6 parasites/µL. *P. ovale* was found in 1.6% of the Plasmodium-positive samples. *P. ovale* had previously been reported from nearby Rakhine State in Myanmar. It has also been reported from other parts of Myanmar and a surprisingly high prevalence of up to 6.1% in Tanintharyi Division in 1996.\(^{11,13}\) In the same study, *P. malariae* was reported from 15.2% of all cases. Other PCR-based studies in Southeast Asia report up to 4% of *P. ovale* malaria in Northeastern Cambodia and 1.03% in Thailand.\(^{16,22,34}\)

The impact of newly emerging pathogens in public health is increasing. Although our data do not confirm the presence of *P. knowlesi* in Bangladesh, our knowledge of the reservoir, vectors, and ecology of this malaria parasite indicates that Southeastern Bangladesh may be a an environment in which *P. knowlesi* is likely to be found. Human infections are easily missed for *P. falciparum* infections when the parasites are in the stage of young trophozoites.\(^{27}\) In studies based on microscopic diagnosis, it may also easily be missed for the morphologically similar parasite *P. malariae*.\(^{24}\) This parasite should, therefore, always be considered whenever patients are from or report a travel history to remote areas of Southeast Asia and are diagnosed with *P. malariae* malaria based on microscopic examination.\(^{9,16,36}\)

Relative to molecular cytok, molecular methods not only tend to improve the sensitivity and specificity of diagnostic studies, but they also result in higher estimates of malaria prevalence, particularly for the rare species *P. malariae* and *P. ovale*, and higher rates of mixed infections.\(^{8,23}\) Studies conducted in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) (23.1%) and Northwestern Thailand (23–24%) in which molecular techniques were used all suggested the presence of high numbers of mixed infections.\(^{22,24}\)

In our survey, we found 25 cases (13.2% of all positive samples) of mixed infections, of which the combination of *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* was most frequently seen. Triple infections with *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, and *P. malariae* are rare and were found in only two patients coming from the same small village (Nathogri, Rowanchari Subdistrict).

Accurate diagnosis of *Plasmodium* spp. is essential for optimizing malaria-treatment guidelines. Further studies assessing the prevalence of the rare species *P. ovale*, *P. malariae*, and *P. knowlesi* in South Asia are, therefore, urgently needed to better understand the species distribution and to allow for adapting treatment strategies.

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Authors’ addresses: Hans-Peter Fuehrer, Peter Starzengruber, Paul Swoboda, Julia Matt, Benedikt Ley, Kamala Thriemer, Julia Walochnik, and Harald Noedl, Department of Specific Prophylaxis and Tropical Medicine, Medical University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria, E-mail: harald.noedl@meduniwien.ac.at. Wasil Ali Khan and Rashidul Haque, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Emran Bin Yunus, Chittagong Medical College, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Shah Monir Hossain, Directorate General of Health Services, Bangladesh Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Mohakhali, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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