Zoonotic transmission of *Streptococcus equi* subsp. *zooepidemicus* from a dog to a handler

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This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first case report to describe the apparent transmission of *Streptococcus equi* subsp. *zooepidemicus* from an infected dog to a handler who subsequently developed severe systemic infection. Characterization of the haemolytic streptococcci isolated from both the patient and the dog, by phenotypic and molecular analysis, confirmed the canine and human isolates were identical.

Introduction

*Streptococcus equi* subsp. *zooepidemicus* (S. *zooepidemicus*) belongs to the Lancefield group C along with *Streptococcus equi* subsp. *equi*, *Streptococcus dysgalactiae* and *Streptococcus dysgalactiae* subsp. *equisimilis* (S. *equisimilis*). It is a commensal organism found on the tonsils, upper respiratory tract, skin and urogenital tract of horses (Anzai et al., 2000; CFSPH, 2005), but is not considered part of the normal tonsillar flora in either dogs (Devriese et al., 1992) or man (Fox et al., 1993). An opportunistic pathogen, it is associated with respiratory infections and supplicative disease in many animal species, including horses, cows, pigs, sheep, monkeys, guinea pigs, mink and gerbils (Barnham et al., 1987; Chanter, 1997). In dogs, *S. zooepidemicus* has been associated with septicaemia, wound infections (Timoney, 2004) and with cases of acute fatal haemorrhagic streptococcal pneumonia (HSP) at dog kennels (BVA, 2008; Pesavento et al., 2008), and more recently in a household pet (Gibson & Richardson, 2008). An increased severity of disease was associated with the presence of *S. zooepidemicus* in a study of canine infectious respiratory disease (Chalker et al., 2003).

In humans, infections caused by *S. zooepidemicus* are a rare event, resulting in meningitis, bacteraemia, acute nephritis, septic arthritis, pneumonia, and in some cases, death of the patient (Barnham et al., 1987; Efstratiou, 1997; Thorley et al., 2007; Ural et al., 2003). In the majority of these cases, consumption of unpasteurized milk or direct contact with horses was considered the most likely source of infection.

Case report

A 1-year-old male Jack Russell terrier presented with a 9 month history of lower respiratory tract problems, pyrexia and bilateral mucopurulent nasal discharge. The dog lived on a farm, which provided short-term accommodation for horses. The dog had free access to all areas of the farm, including the horses and their environment. Clinical examination revealed bilateral mucopurulent nasal discharge, a marked tachypnoea (respiratory rate 80 breaths per min) and harsh lung sounds over both lung fields. The dog was pyrexic, with a rectal temperature of 39.7 °C. Radiographs revealed bilateral symmetrical consolidation of the lung fields. Nasal swabs were taken for routine culture and a transtracheal lavage was performed, with samples submitted for cytology and bacterial culture. In order to help stabilize the respiratory signs, treatment involving placement of a nasal catheter to provide oxygen therapy was provided. During this procedure, the dog sneezed over the handler, spreading mucous secretions into the handler’s eyes, nose and facial area. Saline was used to clean the handler’s face and rinse out the eyes. Blood samples from the dog revealed a white blood cell count of 26.4 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹ (normal range 6–17 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹), mature neutrophils at 19.54 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹ (normal range 3–11.5 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹) and monocytes at 2.38 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹ (normal range 0.2–1.3 x 10⁹ cells l⁻¹). Intravenous fluid therapy was administered along with antibiotic therapy (20 mg intravenous amoxicillin/clavulanic acid kg⁻¹ every 8 h and 5 mg intravenous enrofloxacin kg⁻¹). Cytology on transtracheal lavage samples was consistent with marked supplicative pneumonia. The nasal swabs and transtracheal lavage samples yielded pure growth of a β-haemolytic streptococcus that was identified as *S. zooepidemicus*.
Intravenous antibiotic treatment, fluid therapy and cou- 
page/nebulization were continued until day 5 when the dog 
was discharged with a 2 month course of oral amoxicillin/ 
clavulanic acid at 18.4 mg kg$^{-1}$ to be administered twice 
daily.

Six weeks after the initial presentation, the dog was 
reassessed. There were no abnormalities on clinical 
examination, thoracic radiographs revealed no abnormal-
ities, and complete blood count and serum biochemistry 
were unremarkable. Nasal and oropharyngeal swab cultures 
were negative and there has been no recurrence of the 
clinical signs to date.

On day 2, the dog handler began to feel unwell, 
experiencing symptoms of stiffness in the neck and chest 
area, fever, headache and general malaise. On day 3 the 
patient attended a general practitioner and was prescribed 
penicillin for 5 days. Nasal and oropharyngeal swabs were 
taken and submitted for culture. However, the patient’s 
condition did not improve, and on day 8 the patient was 
referred to hospital for further investigation. On ad-
mission, the patient’s pulse rate was 67 beats per min and 
temperature was 36.2 °C. Blood pressure was 85/45 mmHg 
initially, which later recovered. O$_2$ saturations were 97 % 
on room air. First and second heart sounds were audible, 
with no added sounds and no murmur. The patient’s chest 
was clinically clear, with no crepitations and no rhonchi. 
Palpation of the abdomen presented no tenderness and no 
organomegaly. Conjunctivitis was evident, with neck 
stiffness and headache. Blood results on admission were 
as follows: 13.1 g haemoglobin dl$^{-1}$ (normal range 13–17 g 
dl$^{-1}$), white cell count 6.6 × 10$^9$ cells l$^{-1}$ (normal range 4– 
10 × 10$^9$ cells l$^{-1}$), platelets 226 × 10$^9$ cells l$^{-1}$ (normal 
range 150–350 × 10$^9$ cells l$^{-1}$), 86 µmol creatinine l$^{-1}$ 
(normal range 44–80 µmol l$^{-1}$), 1.67 ng C reactive protein 
l$^{-1}$ (normal value <5 ng l$^{-1}$), 44 U γ-glutamyl transpep-
tidase l$^{-1}$ (normal range 12–64 U l$^{-1}$), 129 U lactate 
dehydrogenase l$^{-1}$ (normal range 125–243 U l$^{-1}$) and the 
erythrocyte sedimentation rate was 10 mm h$^{-1}$ (normal 
range 0–20 mm h$^{-1}$). A computed tomography brain scan 
was performed and found to be normal, with no evidence 
of raised intracranial pressure. A lumbar puncture was 
performed and a cerebral spinal fluid sample was obtained.
Analysis demonstrated that no white cells were present, 
and no bacteria were evident in the direct Gram-stain or 
following culture. Blood and urine cultures were also clear. 
The nasal and throat samples taken on day 3 yielded heavy 
growths of β-haemolytic streptococci that were identified 
as *S. zooepidemicus*. The patient was treated with cefalexin, 
administered intravenously for the first 5 days, followed by 
oral administration for a further 7 days. Tests for other 
infectious causes, such as Epstein–Barr virus, cytomegalov-
irus and human immunodeficiency virus, were all 
negative. It was considered that the symptoms were likely 
to be associated with the *S. zooepidemicus* isolated from 
the patient’s throat and nose. The penicillin treatment may 
have accounted for the negative blood culture result. The 
patient was discharged after 5 days, and throat and nasal 
swabs taken a month later were negative.

A prospective study was carried out on the farm several 
weeks after the initial case to ascertain the possible source 
of this particular strain of *S. zooepidemicus*. Oropharyngeal 
swabs from horses present on the farm, nasal and 
opharyngeal samples taken from the owners, as well as 
environmental samples, all cultured negative. However, an 
opharyngeal swab collected from a companion dog in the 
household was found to be positive for *S. zooepidemicus*. 
The second dog, an 8 year old cross breed, had no evidence 
of any abnormalities on clinical examination, and was 
perceived as being healthy by the owners. This investiga-
tion was approved by the University College Dublin 
Human Research Ethics Committee.

**Microbiological methods**

All specimens were cultured directly onto blood agar (BA) 
[Columbia blood agar base (Oxoid) supplemented with 
5% defibrinated sheep blood] and then enriched in Todd– 
Hewitt broth (Oxoid). Plates and broths were incubated 
for 18 h at 37 °C. Broths were then subcultured onto BA 
containing Staph/Strep selective supplement (Oxoid; 
SR70E), which contains colistin and nalidixic acid, and 
were incubated overnight at 37 °C. Colonies were iden-
tified as group C *Streptococcus* species by colony morpho-
logy, haemolysis, Gram-stain and catalase and 
agglutination reaction with streptococcal grouping reagents 
(Streptococcoc Grouping kit; Oxoid). The group C 
streptococci were identified to the species level using the 
API Rapid ID 32 Strep kit (bioMérieux). Antimicrobial 
susceptibility testing carried out according to the recom-
endations of the Clinical and Laboratory Standards 
Institute (CLSI, 2005) revealed all isolates to be sensitive to 
the following antimicrobial agents: cefalotin, amoxicillin/ 
clavulanic acid, tetracycline, trimethoprim/sulfadiazine, 
enrofloxacin, marbofloxacin and penicillin G.

Comparison of the two canine and the human *S. 
zooepidemicus* isolates, by PFGE (Leonard & Carroll, 
1997) was carried out, with 40 U Smal and a restriction 
time of 24 h. Previously isolated but unrelated clinical 
equine strains, equine A, B and C, were also included for 
comparison. The banding patterns revealed that the isolates 
from the handler were indistinguishable, whilst the pattern 
from the infected dog’s isolate had a one band difference to 
these strains. The isolate from the asymptomatic dog 
differed significantly from the infected dog and human 
strains. These isolates were also dissimilar to the clinical 
equine strains used for comparison (Fig. 1).

The isolates were further characterized using multilocus 
sequence typing (MLST), as previously described (Webb 
et al., 2008). The strains from the infected dog and human 
were both sequence type (ST) 178, whilst the clinical 
equine strains A, B and C, were ST-180, ST-5 and ST-39, 
respectively, and the companion dog isolate was ST-173.
Discussion

This is believed to be the first report to describe the apparent transmission of *S. zooepidemicus* from an infected dog to a human, demonstrating the communicability of this zoonotic species and the possibility of acquiring infection from dogs.

*S. zooepidemicus* has been reported as an opportunistic pathogen associated with invasive infections in laboratory and domestic animals (Francis et al., 1993). A commensal organism in horses, it is also associated with respiratory tract infections in foals and young horses (Chanter, 1997; Downar et al., 2001) and with equine abortion (Giles et al., 1993). In cattle, *S. zooepidemicus* has been described as an occasional cause of mastitis (Edwards et al., 1988), and in dogs is associated with respiratory conditions such as canine infectious respiratory disease and HSP (Chalker et al., 2003; Pesavento et al., 2008). It is not, however, normally associated with chronic respiratory infection in dogs. Infection is uncommon in man (Francis et al., 1993) and *S. zooepidemicus* accounts for less than 1% of all bacteraemias (CFSPH, 2005), but has been described as the most virulent of the Lancefield Group C streptococci that infect humans (Bradley et al., 1991). Mortality rates following infections with *S. zooepidemicus* are twice as high as those associated with cases of *S. equisimilis* (Bradley et al., 1991).

Reports describing human infections by *S. zooepidemicus* appear as sporadic individual reports (Boucher et al., 2002; Thorley et al., 2007) or as occasional reports of large epidemic outbreaks affecting numerous individuals following ingestion of contaminated cheese (Sesso et al., 2005). Clinical presentations are variable, and may include mild upper respiratory tract signs, pneumonia, septic arthritis, septicaemia and meningitis (Barnham et al., 1987; Ghoneim & Cooke, 1980; Downar et al., 2001). In the majority of cases, the likely routes of transmission have included close contact with an infected horse or the drinking of unpasteurized milk (Efstratiou, 1997; Francis et al., 1993; Low et al., 1980).

The dog involved in this case appears to have developed chronic respiratory tract infection following acquisition of this zoonotic pathogen, probably as a result of contact with horses. Comparison of the isolates from the dog and the handler by PFGE indicated that they were very similar, differing by a single band, which might be related to the acquisition or loss of a plasmid or bacteriophage, which could be clarified on genome sequencing. Similar reports, investigating transmission of *S. zooepidemicus* from other animals to humans, have also used PFGE when comparing strains (Downar et al., 2001; Jovanovic et al., 2008; Kuusi et al., 2006). However, it is difficult to compare PFGE results between these studies. The *S. zooepidemicus* MLST scheme permits the identification of different alleles directly from the nucleotide sequences of ~400–500 bp internal fragments of seven housekeeping genes (Webb et al., 2008). The scheme is fully portable and data can be readily compared with those of previous studies through the use of an electronic database (http://pubmlst.org/szooepidemicus/). MLST confirmed that the canine and human isolates shared an identical ST, ST-178. A strain sharing this ST was previously isolated from a case of equine abortion in the UK during 2003, but this ST appears unrelated to other strains previously isolated from dogs (http://pubmlst.org/szooepidemicus/), and to the isolates recovered from the horses and the healthy companion dog in this study.

It therefore appears that transmission of this strain from the affected dog to the handler occurred, and resulted in clinical illness. Whilst none of the horses present on the farm at the time of screening were found to be carriers of *S. zooepidemicus*, based on clinical history, it is conceivable that the dog may have been infected many months previously from a horse that subsequently left the farm or resolved its infection. The asymptomatic carriage of a different strain of *S. zooepidemicus* (ST-173) in a healthy companion dog, resident on the same farm, suggests that transmission from horses to dogs may commonly occur. Interestingly, strains of ST-173 have also been isolated from a severe outbreak of HSP in dogs in the USA during 2006 (Pesavento et al., 2008), and a single locus variant of ST-173, ST-18, was recovered from four greyhounds affected in a UK outbreak of HSP during 2008 (Webb et al., 2008), suggesting that *S. zooepidemicus* strains of these related types may be particularly adept at infecting dogs. The future analysis of the genome sequences of these isolates may reveal the genetic basis behind this apparent increased ability to infect dogs. The equine isolates identified in this study shared STs with other equine isolates previously listed in the MLST database (http://pubmlst.org/szooepidemicus/). In light of this report, the authors would advise animal handlers and veterinary clinicians to wear appropriate protective equip-

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**Fig. 1.** PFGE analysis of *S. zooepidemicus* isolates following macrorestriction of genomic DNA with Smal. M, DNA size marker (kb); 1, sample from infected dog; 2, human nasal sample; 3, sample from human throat; 4, equine A sample; 5, equine B sample; 6, equine C sample; 7, sample from companion dog.
ment (safety glasses and face masks) when dealing with animals presenting with respiratory symptoms.

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References


