

The Italian Multicentric Study on Legionnaires' disease

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Abstract

The general objective of the Italian Multicentric Study on Legionnaires' disease is the investigation of some of the critical aspects of this emerging disease, with a specific interest in the Italian situation. An epidemiological study is being conducted in different Italian localities to evaluate the diffusion of *Legionella* spp in the environment and the efficiency of some of the control strategies to detect cases, study their related risk factors and to establish the frequency of infection within groups at different exposure levels. The first results obtained from the research project are presented below.

Introduction

From a public health point of view, the key issues concerning Legionnaires' disease are: insufficient knowledge regarding the prevalence of infection/disease, difficulties in detecting and associating cases with the environmental sources, poor identification of risk factors involved in infection/disease, scant information on environmental risk factors and events allowing the survival of *Legionella* spp in the environmental reservoirs and finally, problems in controlling the microorganism by applying long-term efficient disinfecting methods.[1-9]

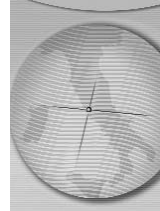
In response to this the Italian Multicentric project aims to: a) to deepen the knowledge on *Legionella* spp diffusion in water systems, the most common source of infection in Italy and to evaluate the efficacy of the control measures; b) to investigate the prevalence of anti-legionella spp antibodies within subgroups exposed at different risk levels; c) to evaluate the frequency of nosocomial and community-acquired legionellosis among patients with pneumonia from large hospitals located in various Italian localities (a case-control study is used to define both exposure and personal risk factors associated with the disease, with special reference to the basal immune situation and genetic markers involved in host resistance/progression to infection); d) to draw an epidemiological map of *Legionella* serotypes and genotypes collected throughout the epidemiological survey, identifying the diversity in *Legionella* strains and the degree of correlation between serotypes, genotype and virulence.[10-14]

Methods

A multicentric survey of public and private buildings (hospitals, hotels, homes) was conducted to search, isolate and subtype *Legionella* strains from hot water systems. The sampling sessions included a detailed investigation of the environmental and structural factors associated with the presence of *Legionella*. The prevalence of anti-legionella antibodies (Indirect Fluorescent Antibody test, IFA test) within subgroups exposed at different risk level was investigated and subjects working in contaminated structures were recruited. Since 2001, a surveillance protocol was activated to evaluate the frequency of nosocomial and community-acquired legionellosis among patients with pneumonia from large hospitals located in Milan, Reggio Emilia, Bologna, Rome, Naples, and Bari. This active surveillance is based on the search for the urinary antigen *L. pneumophila* (Enzyme Immuno Assay, EIA), followed (when possible) by isolation of the germ from a sputum culture, and sero-conversion as the confirming test on a substantial and representative number of the patients. Subjects are included in a case-control study to evaluate environmental, clinical and personal characteristics associated with the disease and are compared with both healthy subjects and patients affected by other types of pneumonia.

Results

Legionella spp, predominantly *L.pneumophila*, was detected in 22.4% of domestic hot water systems, in 69% of hotels and in all the examined hospitals. The main risk factors for contamination



were structural, such as to have a centralised and old water distribution system, instead of a more recent one with high copper levels in the water were protective against *Legionella* contamination.

By conducting a large surveillance of pneumonia cases between 2002 and 2003, the study detected 165 cases of legionellosis from 4340 examined patients with a frequency of 3.8% for community acquired case and 5% for nosocomial cases.

In the first group of patients recruited for the case-control study, only pre-existing immunopathologies were found to be associated with the disease, whereas smoking habits and co-morbidity were risk factors for all pneumonia. A significant decrease in CD16 (natural killer) cell numbers was found in the affected patients in comparison to the control group. Furthermore, significant alterations in iron metabolism were associated with the disease.

We also documented that workers of a contaminated hospital have a higher frequency of antibodies against *Legionella* spp compared with a control group. However, no subject declared the disease and no association was found between seropositivity and the known risk factors for Legionnaires' disease.

Conclusions

Our active clinical surveillance scheme was able to detect numerous cases between 2002 and 2003, thus contributing to the increase in reported cases from Italy. The rate of infection amongst pneumonia cases was about 4%, confirming results of other similar surveys. The preliminary results of the case-control study show that cases have peculiar although not sufficiently studied alterations in both immune and biochemical parameters.

The identification of environmental, immune, genetic and personal risk factors and the quantification of their role in determining the infection/disease will offer a relevant scientific contribution, so far scarcely studied by other research programmes. The project is also focused on the mechanisms of transmission and control from the environment to human subjects, with particular attention being paid to the risk for communities such as hospitals.

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