

The molecular epidemiology of *Dientamoeba fragilis*
isolates in an Australian population

by

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Certificate

This study was carried out in the Microbiology Department, St. Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, under the supervision of Professor John T. Ellis, Associate Professor John Harkness, Associate Professor Deborah Marriott, and Dr Nigel Beebe. I certify that no part of this work has been submitted to any other university or institute. I also certify that this thesis has been written by me and that all help received and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Refereed Publications arising from this Thesis

4. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Ellis JT, Harkness J. 2006. Evaluation of three diagnostic methods, including real-time PCR, for the detection of *Dientamoeba fragilis* in stool specimens. J Clin Microbiol. 44(1):232-235.
3. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Ellis JT, Harkness J. 2006. Dientamoebiasis: a review on the clinical importance and recent advances. Trends in Parasitol. 22(2):92-96.
2. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Ellis JT, Harkness J. 2005. A prospective study on the prevalence, genotyping and clinical relevance of *Dientamoeba fragilis* infections in an Australian population. J Clin Microbiol. 43(6):2718-2723.
1. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Ellis JT, Harkness J. 2005. Detection of *Dientamoeba fragilis* in fresh stool specimens using PCR. Int J Parasit. 35(1):57-62.

Conference and Symposia Presentations arising from this Thesis

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2. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Ellis JT, Harkness J. 2005. A prospective study on the prevalence, genotyping and clinical relevance of *Dientamoeba fragilis* infections in an Australian population. Oral presentation. Australian Society of Microbiology, Canberra, Australia, September, 2005.
1. Stark D, Beebe N, Marriott D, Harkness J, Ellis JT. Detection of *Dientamoeba fragilis* in fresh stool samples by PCR. Oral presentation. Australian Society of Microbiology, Sydney, Australia, September, 2004.

Abbreviations

ANGIS	Australian National Genomic Information Service
bp	base pair
BSA	bovine serum albumin
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
dNTP	deoxynucleotide triphosphate
EDTA	ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid
EtBr	ethidium bromide
ICT	Immunochromatographic
kb	kilobases
PBS	phosphate buffered saline
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
RFLP	restriction fragment length polymorphism
RFLP-PCR	restriction fragment length polymorphism – PCR
rDNA	ribosomal DNA
RNA	ribonucleic acid
SAF	sodium acetate acetic acid formalin
SSU rDNA	small-subunit ribosomal DNA
SSU rRNA	small-subunit ribosomal RNA
TBE	tris borate/EDTA
Tris	tris[hydroxymethyl]aminomethane
V	volts

Abstract

Dientamoeba fragilis is a trichomonad parasite that causes human gastrointestinal disease. It has been reported from most parts of the world in both rural and cosmopolitan areas and is a 'neglected cause of diarrhoea' and dysentery with chronic infections common. Current diagnosis of dientameobiasis is by microscopic identification of the trophozoite in stool. However this method is time-consuming and relatively insensitive while PCR technology offers an attractive alternative to conventional diagnosis. A conventional PCR assay based on the small-subunit ribosomal RNA gene of *D. fragilis* for the specific detection of *D. fragilis* DNA in fresh unpreserved stool samples was developed. The *D. fragilis* PCR was positive in 29/31 samples with positive microscopy and did not cross-react with other protozoan parasites. The PCR protocol showed a specificity of 100% and a sensitivity of 93.5% and the entire procedure can be performed in one day. A prospective study was also conducted over a 30 month period, in which 6,750 faecal samples were submitted to the Department of Microbiology at St. Vincent's hospital Sydney, Australia. Trophozoites of *Dientamoeba fragilis* were detected in 60 (0.9%) patients by permanent staining and confirmation was performed by PCR. Gastrointestinal symptoms were present in all patients, with diarrhoea and abdominal pain the most common symptoms. Thirty-two percent of patients presented with chronic symptoms. The average age of infected patients was 39.8 years. No correlation was found between *D. fragilis* and *Enterobius vermicularis*, a proposed vector of transmission for *D. fragilis*. The genetic diversity of 50 *D. fragilis* isolates was examined by PCR and the PCR products were analysed for the presence of a restriction fragment length polymorphism. These results showed no variation in the small subunit rRNA gene and demonstrated a single genotype for all Australian isolates. This study indicates the potential pathogenic properties of *D. fragilis*, and the need for all laboratories to routinely test for this organism. I also developed a 5' nuclease (TaqMan) based real-time PCR assay, targeting the small-subunit ribosomal RNA gene, for the detection of *D. fragilis* in human stool specimens and compared its sensitivity and specificity to the conventional PCR and microscopic examination by a traditional modified iron-haematoxylin staining procedure. Tests were

performed using all three techniques on 200 stool specimens referred for screening on the basis of diarrhea. The real-time PCR assay exhibited 100% sensitivity and specificity compared with microscopy. The detection limit of both PCR tests was compared; real-time PCR was 100 times more sensitive than conventional PCR, with a detection limit of 0.01 trophozoites. In conclusion, all three methods for the detection of *D. fragilis* were highly specific, with real-time PCR being the most sensitive. The use of the real-time assay in a diagnostic laboratory provides a superior sensitive and specific method for the diagnosis of *D. fragilis*.

Table of Contents

		Page No.
CHAPTER 1	GENERAL INTRODUCTION	
1.1	Historical Aspects	2
1.2	Morphological characteristics	3
1.3	Taxonomy	5
1.4	Clinical aspects and epidemiology	9
1.5	Genetic diversity	16
1.6	Transmission	17
1.7	Pathology	22
1.8	Diagnostic techniques	24
1.9	Therapy	29
1.10	Conclusion	32
1.11	Project aims	33
1.12	Objectives	33
CHAPTER 2	DETECTION OF <i>DIENTAMOEBIA FRAGILIS</i> IN FRESH STOOL SAMPLES USING PCR	
2.1	Introduction	35
2.2	Materials and methods	38
2.2.1	Stool specimens	38
2.2.2	DNA extraction	38

	2.2.3	Small subunit rRNA gene amplification and sequencing	39
	2.2.4	<i>D. fragilis</i> PCR	40
	2.3	Results	41
	2.4	Discussion	50
CHAPTER 3		THE MOLECULAR EPIDEMIOLOGY, GENETIC DIVERSITY AND CLINIAL RELEVANCE OF <i>DIENTAMOEBIA</i> <i>FRAGILIS</i> INFECTIONS	
	3.1	Introduction	55
	3.2	Materials and methods	56
	3.2.1	Stool specimens	56
	3.2.2	Microbiological investigations	56
	3.2.3	PCR for <i>D. fragilis</i>	57
	3.2.4	Restriction fragment length polymorphism	57
	3.2.5	Follow up data	57
	3.2.6	Control group	57
	3.2.7	Questionnaire	57
	3.3	Results	58
	3.4	Discussion	68
CHAPTER 4		EVALUATION OF THREE DIAGNOSTIC METHODS, INCLUDING REAL-TIME PCR, FOR THE DETECTION OF <i>DIENTAMOEBIA</i> <i>FRAGILIS</i> IN STOOL SPECIMENS	
	4.1	Introduction	74
	4.2	Materials and methods	76

4.2.1	Culture of enteric protozoa and extraction of genomic DNA	76
4.2.2	Stool specimens	76
4.2.3	DNA extraction from stool specimens	76
4.2.4	Cloning of small subunit ribosomal DNA from <i>D. fragilis</i>	77
4.2.5	Conventional PCR	77
4.2.6	Real-time PCR	77
4.3	Results	79
4.4	Discussion	84
CHAPTER 5	GENERAL DISCUSSION	88
CHAPTER 6	APPENDIX	99
CHAPTER 6	BIBLIOGRAPHY	115

List of Figures

		Page No.
Figure 1.1	Trophozoite of a binucleate form of <i>Dientamoeba fragilis</i> .	4
Figure 1.2	Life-cycle of <i>D. fragilis</i>	21
Figure 2.1	Nucleotide sequence of the entire SSUrRNA gene of Australia <i>D. fragilis</i> isolates	44
Figure 2.2	Nucleotide sequence alignment of the SSUrRNA gene of <i>D. fragilis</i> (AY730405) vs <i>D. fragilis</i> (U37461).	47
Figure 2.3	Detection of <i>D. fragilis</i> in faeces by PCR with primers DF400 and DF1250	48
Figure 3.1	Prevalence of <i>D. fragilis</i> in different age groups.	64
Figure 3.2	Restriction endonuclease digestion of DF400/DF1250 products.	65
Figure 3.3	Sequence alignment of part of the SSUrRNA gene sequence.	67
Figure 4.1	Evaluation of sensitivity of real-time PCR using cloned DNA	82
Figure 4.2	Detection of <i>D. fragilis</i> in faeces by real-time PCR	83

List of Tables

		Page No.
Table I	World wide prevalence of <i>D. fragilis</i> .	10
Table II	Commercially available kits for the immunodetection of enteric parasites	27
Table III	Efficacy of antimicrobials in patients with <i>D. fragilis</i> infections	31
Table IV	List of specimens containing various other protozoan parasites that were used in this study.	49
Table V	Summary of results from patients with <i>D. fragilis</i> infection.	63
Table VI	Parasites found in 24 patients with <i>D. fragilis</i> infection.	64
Table VII	Comparison of real-time PCR, conventional PCR and microscopy for detection of <i>D. fragilis</i> .	81