Colonization by *Streptococcus agalactiae* in pregnant women during labor: serotype distribution of the involved strains and performance of PCR assay as a screening test

Dianna Cuello¹, Florencia Guedes de Rezende², María V. Machado², Leonardo Oliva¹, Felipe Schelotto¹, Grazzia Rey² and Gustavo Varela¹,*

¹Departamento de Bacteriología y Virología, Facultad de Medicina, Universidad de la República, Montevideo-Uruguay, Alfredo Navarro 3051, CP 11600, Uruguay; ²Clínica Ginecotológica “B”, Hospital de Clínicas, Facultad de Medicina, Universidad de la República, Montevideo-Uruguay, Avda. Italia s/n., CP 11600, Uruguay.

**ABSTRACT**

Group B *Streptococcus* (GBS) is the leading cause of neonatal sepsis in the developed world. Little is known about the epidemiology and microbiological characteristics of the involved strains in the developing countries, where the majority of deaths from neonatal infections occur. The goals of this study were to assess the prevalence of recto-vaginal colonization with Group B *Streptococcus* (GBS) in pregnant women going into labor; to determine the capsular serotype of the recovered strains; and evaluate the performance of a commercial qualitative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay as a screening test. Between April and November 2012 we studied 87 pregnant women who delivered at the ‘Dr. Manuel Quintela University Hospital’. Recto-vaginal samples were processed by standard microbiological procedures as well as commercial PCR assay for GBS direct detection. Antimicrobial susceptibility tests on the recovered GBS strains were performed by disk-diffusion to penicillin, erythromycin and clindamycin. GBS isolates were serotyped by a previously described PCR procedure which identifies the following serotypes: Ia, Ib, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII and VIII.

We recovered GBS in 9 out of 87 women (10.3%; 95% CI: 3.9-16.7). All the recovered GBS were susceptible to the antibiotics tested. The serotype distribution was as follows: serotype III, 3 isolates; serotypes Ia, Ib, IV and V, one isolate of each. The performance values of the commercial PCR assay applied directly to samples were: sensitivity 100%, specificity 97%, positive predictive value 82%, and negative predictive value 100%. If we take all PCR results as true positives, the performance of this PCR assay would be even better than standard culture method. In this case, the prevalence of GBS carriage in this population rises up to 13.2%. Although results are ready in 45 minutes, PCR assay requires the use of sophisticated laboratory equipment and does not allow the determination of the antimicrobial susceptibility pattern or the determination of the capsular serotype of the involved strains.

**KEYWORDS:** pregnancy, Group B *Streptococcus* colonization, screening assays, PCR, serotypes

**INTRODUCTION**

*Streptococcus agalactiae* or Group B *Streptococcus* (GBS) is one of the most common causes of early-onset neonatal infection. The incidence of these illnesses ranges from 0.80 to 3.06 per 1,000 live births in developing
countr ies [1]. As recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), all pregnant women between 35-37 weeks of gestation should undergo routine microbiological screening for GBS carriage, and those who are colonized with GBS should receive intrapartum prophylaxis with suitable antibiotics (penicillin or ampicillin) to decrease the risk of vertical transmission [2].

However many pregnant women, especially those from low income households with limited access to health services, reach birth-time without performing routine microbiological screening [3]. In these cases, analysis of risk factors for neonatal infection or the use of rapid tests for screening for GBS carriage are useful tools to make therapeutic decisions. The sensitivity of different commercially available rapid tests based on antigen-antibody reaction to directly detect GBS antigens in recto-vaginal samples ranges between 35 to 50% [3, 4]. These figures preclude their use as first-line screening tests. Hence in 1997 FDA issued a safety alert with regard to direct antigenic test kits for GBS producing false-positive and false-negative results.

Furthermore, there are several commercial tests based on DNA amplification that can be used to detect GBS nucleic acid in vaginal and rectal samples. Published studies on the performance of commercially available PCR assays on non-enriched samples have demonstrated varying sensitivities (range: 62.5%-98.5%) and specificities (range: 64.5%-99.6%) compared with the gold standard involving an enrichment step followed by subculture [5, 6, 7, 8].

The aims of this study were to describe the GBS colonization rate in pregnant women going into labor; to determine the capsular serotype distribution of the recovered strains; and to evaluate the performance of a commercial qualitative PCR assay as a rapid screening test.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
Study design
Between April and November 2012 we studied 87 pregnant women who delivered at the ‘Dr. Manuel Quintela University Hospital’, a 350-bed tertiary hospital attending 700 births per year, most of them with high-risk level (e.g., pregnancy at < 18 years of age, short interval between pregnancies, more than five pregnancies, preeclampsia, placental abruption, immaturity or intrauterine growth restriction, drug abuse, etc.). Most people attending the University Hospital live in low or very low income households.

The study was approved by the School of Medicine Ethical Committee and each woman gave written informed consent.

Detection of GBS carriage by culture; characterization of the recovered strains
Vaginal and rectal samples were obtained by a gynecologist during labor. All the specimens were collected using sterile nylon flocked swabs. The vaginal swab was roller round against the vaginal wall at the midportion of the vault. For rectal specimens, a swab was carefully inserted approximately 1.5-2.5 cm beyond the anal sphincter and then gently rotated.

The swabs were placed in Todd Hewitt broth (TH) and Todd Hewitt broth with 5% sheep blood (TH-B), both supplemented with gentamicin (8 μg/ml) and nalidixic acid (15 μg/ml) [2]. The samples were rapidly transported at room temperature to the Bacteriology and Virology department.

After 24 hours incubation at 37 °C all the broths were sub-cultured onto 5% sheep blood agar plates. Suspicious colonies were identified by conventional phenotypic procedures (e.g. colony morphology, β-haemolysis, Gram stain, catalase and CAMP (Christie Atkins Munch-Petersen) tests). Detection of carbohydrate specific group was carried out using a commercial latex agglutination assay kit (SlideX® Strept Plus B, bioMérieux, Marcy l‘Étoile, France).

Antimicrobial susceptibility testing was performed by disk-diffusion for penicillin, erythromycin and clindamycin (Oxoid Ltd., Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK) [9].

Capsular serotype was determined by a previously described PCR assay which identifies the following serotypes: Ia, Ib, II, III, IV, V, VI, VII and VIII [10]. Briefly, 4 or 5 individual GBS colonies were suspended in 1 ml of digestion buffer (10 mM Tris-HCl [pH 8.0], 0.45% Triton X-100, 0.1 mg/ml Tween 80, 0.1 mg/ml Bovine Serum Albumin) and 2 μl of each colony were added. Reactions were performed on a thermocycler (Pyrocycler, Biotage, Sweden) using the following steps: 10 min at 95 °C, 30 sec at 95 °C × 25 cycles, 1 min at 72 °C × 25 cycles, 7 min at 72 °C, 10 min at 4 °C.

The PCR products were electrophoresed in 1% agarose gel stained with ethidium bromide and visualized under UV light. The bands were compared with a PCR product of known strains (control strains).

The PCR products of the GBS strains were purified using a Gel Extraction Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) and sequenced directly using primers previously described [11]. The sequences were compared with those reported in the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database using blastn and blastx.

The PCR assay has two major advantages: it is faster compared with the conventional method, and it is more specific, as it identifies only the GBS strains and not other streptococci.
X-100, 0.45% Tween-20) in 1.5 ml tubes. The tubes containing GBS suspensions were heated at 100 °C for 10 min in a water bath and then quenched on ice for 10 min, and centrifuged at 16,000 X g in a micro-centrifuge for 2 min to pellet the cell debris. A 4 μL aliquot of the supernatant was added to 21 μL of the PCR mixture reaction (50 mM KCl, 10 mM Tris-HCl [pH 8.3], 1.5 mM MgCl₂, 2 mM of each deoxynucleoside triphosphate), 1.25 U of Taq DNA polymerase (HybriPol™, Bioline, UK), and 0.4 μM of each primer (SBS Genetech Co., Ltd) shown in Table 1. The reactions were run in a thermal cycler (Gene Amp® PCR System 2700 Applied Biosystem) with the following cycling conditions: 94 °C for 5 min; 35 cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 1 min, annealing for 1 min (see Table 1 for annealing temperature) and extension at 72 °C for 1 min; followed by a final extension at 72 °C for 10 min. PCR products were visualized after electrophoresis in 2% agarose gels in 0.5X TBE buffer and ethidium bromide staining.

**Direct detection of GBS carriage by PCR**

PCR samples were obtained strictly following the manufacturer’s instructions and rapidly transported to the Bacteriology and Virology department. DNA extraction was performed directly from swabs (recto-vaginal non-enriched samples) soaked in 0.5 ml of Virceill® kit sample solution for 10 seconds, heated at 100 °C for 10 min, and then centrifuged to pellet the cell debris, according to manufacturer’s instructions. The obtained DNA was stored at -20 °C. We performed a commercial PCR assay (Oligo-EGB Speed, Virceill®), following manufacturer’s instructions. The reactions were

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**Table 1. Oligonucleotide primers used in this study for molecular serotype identification of GBS strains.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target serotype</th>
<th>Primer</th>
<th>Oligonucleotide sequence (5’-3’)</th>
<th>Product length (bp)</th>
<th>Annealing temperature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ia</td>
<td>IacpsHS</td>
<td>ATACAGTTTGTCGTAAGAAGAAAC</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>55 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IacpsHA</td>
<td>TGTTTAGCTTTCTACCAATATAG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ib</td>
<td>IbcpsHS</td>
<td>TTTAGAAGTCCAGAATTTCATAGAGTC</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>57 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IbcpsHA</td>
<td>CAAAGAAGCCATTGCTCTCTG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>IIcpsKS</td>
<td>CTCCAGATGGTTGGTGGAC</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>55 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IIcpsKA</td>
<td>AAAATGGTATATTCTCCTTGGAC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>IIIcpsHS</td>
<td>CCACATGAGAAATAGACTTG</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>56 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IIIcpsHA</td>
<td>CCTAGTGATAGTCTTTGTTCTG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>IVcpsHS</td>
<td>ATAGCCTTTGACAGTGTAGTT</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>55 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IVcpsHA</td>
<td>TGAAATCATCTACACCCCC</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>VcpsHS</td>
<td>GATGTCTTTTTAACAGGTTAGATTACAC</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>55 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VcpsHA</td>
<td>CTTTTTATAGGTTTCGATACCATC</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>VIcpsHS</td>
<td>TGGTTTTTCTCAAAAGTGGAAGTC</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>55 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VIcpsHA</td>
<td>CCTGTTTTGATAGCTTCTG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>VIIcpsMS</td>
<td>GTGCAATATAGGACAAAAATTCA</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>56 °C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VIIcpsMA</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>VIIIcpsJS</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VIIIcpsJA</td>
<td>CATTCAATAACAAATCTATTG</td>
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DISCUSSION

The intrapartum use of antibiotics in pregnant women colonized with GBS has been shown to be very successful at reducing the incidence of GBS early-onset neonatal disease. However, detection of the appropriate candidates for prophylaxis has been a major challenge. Although a clinical risk-based approach appeared to be easier for gynecologists/obstetricians to implement, demonstration of recto-vaginal GBS carriage at the time of delivery is by far the most powerful indicator of risk for early-onset neonatal disease.

The prevalence of GBS carriage determined by culture method in this subpopulation of pregnant women (10.3%, 95% CI: 3.9-16.7) was similar to that reported previously in our country and neighboring Argentina [11, 12].

There is very little published data on the susceptibility pattern of the recovered GBS strains in Uruguay; and no information was available about the serotype distribution [11]. All the recovered GBS strains were susceptible to the antibiotics tested.

The serotype distribution was as follows: serotype III, 3 isolates; serotypes Ia, Ib, IV and V, one isolate of each. We could not establish the serotype of 2 strains.

Commercial qualitative PCR assay detected 2 additional GBS-colonized women.

The performance values of commercial qualitative PCR assay compared with enriched culture for detecting GBS found in this study were: sensitivity 100%, specificity 97%, positive predictive value 82% and negative predictive value 100% (see Table 2).

None of the infants born from GBS-colonized women developed infectious complications. Also, none of the colonized women developed complications after birth.

Table 2. Performance of a commercial qualitative PCR assay compared with conventional microbiological methods to detect GBS in recto-vaginal samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCR results</th>
<th>Culture results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
screening test in populations with GBS carriage prevalence close to 10%.

Considering the above mentioned criteria, PCR assay results were interpreted as false positive in 2 cases (see Table 2). However, these results could be truly positive due to the presence of GBS in very low amounts (below the sensitivity of the conventional culture methods); colonization with non-hemolytic GBS strains; suppression of the growth of GBS by the enterococci present in the vaginal and rectal flora; or revealing remains of DNA of dead bacteria in the samples. In that sense, one of the women who showed positive PCR assay and negative culture results had received ampicillin for urinary tract infection a few days before delivery.

Considering all these facts, the performance of PCR assay would be even better than standard culture methods used in this study. If we take all PCR assay results as true positives, prevalence of GBS carriage would be slightly higher. In this population the prevalence of GBS carriage was found to be 10.3% by culture method and rises up to 13.2% by PCR assay. In that sense, some researchers claim that the culture method showed lower sensitivity, given that studies of confirmed early neonatal GBS infection have demonstrated disease in neonates born from mothers yielding negative tests for GBS by culture method [14, 15].

Hypothetically, the use of a procedure with increased sensitivity, like quantitative or qualitative PCR assays, would result in an increase in the number of pregnant women receiving antibiotic prophylaxis and, above all, could further reduce the incidence of early-onset neonatal GBS disease beyond the reduction seen by use of the standard culture [16].

PCR assay results are ready in 45 min, allowing health personnel to make therapeutic decisions quickly. However, the assay does not allow the determination of the antimicrobial susceptibility or the determination of the capsular serotype of the involved strains. Also it requires the use of expensive and sophisticated laboratory equipments. This last fact precludes its universal application for direct screening of GBS carriage in pregnant women treated in public health hospitals of developing countries, because for them the economic resources for purchasing reagents and equipment are scarce. As suggested by Rallu et al., an alternative to this situation is to apply rapid tests based on antigen-antibody reactions to detect GBS on incubated broths. These procedures are more sensitive than the standard culture-subculture method, easy to perform, inexpensive, results are ready in 15-20 minutes, and they do not require the use of sophisticated laboratory equipment [17]. However, as it is the case with PCR assays, these procedures do not allow the determination of the antimicrobial susceptibility pattern or the capsular serotypes of the involved strains.

CONCLUSIONS
The prevalence of GBS colonization in this subpopulation was similar to that previously reported in the region. All the recovered GBS strains were susceptible to penicillin, erythromycin and clindamycin. The capsular serotype III was the most frequently found. Our results support the use of qualitative PCR assays as a rapid tool for direct screening of GBS carriage in pregnant women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
All the authors agree with this publication and declare that they don’t have conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES


