

Exploring Mycobacteria Beyond Tuberculosis: Lesser-Known Yet Significant Threats

Belda Prats*

Department of Tuberculosis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

DESCRIPTION

While *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* rightfully commands attention as the primary culprit behind Tuberculosis (TB), it's essential not to overlook the diverse array of mycobacterial species that can cause a spectrum of diseases in humans. These lesser-known mycobacteria pose unique challenges in diagnosis, treatment, and public health management. This article delves into the world of mycobacteria beyond *M. tuberculosis* illuminate on their clinical significance, epidemiology, and management strategies.

Mycobacteria diversity

The genus *Mycobacterium* encompasses a vast array of species, with over 190 identified to date. While *M. tuberculosis* garners the most attention due to its global impact on TB, several other mycobacterial species are known to cause diseases in humans. These include *Mycobacterium leprae*, *Mycobacterium Avium* Complex (MAC), *Mycobacterium ulcerans*, and *Mycobacterium abscessus*, among others.

***Mycobacterium leprae*:** *Mycobacterium leprae* is the etiological agent of leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease. Despite its historical significance, leprosy remains a public health concern in several regions, particularly in endemic countries such as India, Brazil, and Indonesia. Leprosy presents with a spectrum of clinical manifestations, ranging from mild skin lesions to severe nerve damage and deformities. Early diagnosis and multi-drug therapy are crucial for preventing disabilities and interrupting transmission.

***Mycobacterium Avium* Complex (MAC):** The *Mycobacterium avium* complex comprises several species, including *M. avium* and *M. intracellulare*, which primarily affect individuals with compromised immune systems. These opportunistic pathogens cause a spectrum of diseases collectively referred to as MAC disease. In immunocompromised individuals, such as those living with HIV/AIDS or undergoing immunosuppressive therapy, MAC infections can manifest as disseminated disease,

leading to severe morbidity and mortality. Treatment typically involves prolonged antibiotic regimens tailored to the specific species and antimicrobial susceptibility patterns.

***Mycobacterium ulcerans*:** *Mycobacterium ulcerans* is the causative agent of Buruli ulcer, a neglected tropical disease prevalent in certain regions of Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia. This debilitating skin infection progresses from nodules to ulcerative lesions, often leading to extensive tissue destruction and disability if left untreated. Early diagnosis and treatment with antibiotics, combined with surgical intervention in advanced cases, are essential for preventing long-term disabilities and deformities.

***Mycobacterium abscessus*:** *Mycobacterium abscessus* is an emerging pathogen associated with opportunistic infections in both immunocompetent and immunocompromised individuals. This rapidly growing mycobacterium can cause a range of infections, including skin and soft tissue infections, pulmonary disease, and disseminated infections in vulnerable populations. Its inherent resistance to many antibiotics poses significant challenges in treatment, often requiring a combination of antimicrobial agents and surgical interventions for successful management.

Diagnostic challenges and management strategies

Diagnosing mycobacterial diseases other than TB presents unique challenges due to their diverse clinical presentations, slow growth characteristics, and limited accessibility to specialized diagnostic tools in resource-limited settings. Molecular techniques, such as Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and nucleic acid amplification tests, have revolutionized the rapid and accurate identification of mycobacterial species, aiding in early diagnosis and appropriate treatment initiation. Management of non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections often involves multidisciplinary approaches, including infectious disease specialists, pulmonologists, dermatologists, and surgeons, depending on the site and severity of infection. Antimicrobial susceptibility testing is crucial for guiding antibiotic selection,

Correspondence to: Belda Prats, Department of Tuberculosis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, E-mail: Prats.b@edu.in

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given the variable drug susceptibility patterns observed among different mycobacterial species.

Public health implications

While TB remains a global health priority, the rising incidence of non-tuberculous mycobacterial infections warrants attention from public health authorities and policymakers. Strengthening surveillance systems, improving laboratory capacity for accurate diagnosis, and implementing targeted interventions are essential for mitigating the burden of these often-neglected diseases.

CONCLUSION

Mycobacterial infections, particularly TB, have evolved and adapted in the modern era, presenting new challenges and

opportunities for progress in their prevention and treatment. While TB remains a global health priority, emerging mycobacterial infections, drug resistance, and co-infections require sustained efforts and innovative strategies to mitigate their impact. In conclusion, mycobacterial diseases extend beyond *M. tuberculosis* and encompass a diverse array of pathogens with significant clinical and public health implications. Enhancing awareness, improving diagnostic capabilities, and implementing evidence-based management strategies are crucial for addressing the challenges posed by these lesser-known yet consequential mycobacterial infections.