

Examination of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* expression level of the first Polish azole resistant clinical *Aspergillus fumigatus* isolate*

Anna Brillowska-Dąbrowska¹✉, Martyna Mroczyńska¹, Urszula Nawrot², Katarzyna Włodarczyk² and Ewelina Kurzyk¹

¹Department of Molecular Biotechnology and Microbiology, Gdańsk University of Technology, Gdańsk, Poland; ²Department of Pharmaceutical Microbiology and Parasitology, Faculty of Pharmacy, Wrocław Medical University, Wrocław, Poland

Aspergillus fumigatus is one of the most prevalent airborne fungal pathogens causing infections worldwide. Most *A. fumigatus* strains are susceptible to azoles, which are administered as the first line therapeutics. However, during last decade the acquired resistance to triazoles by these species has been described. There is a number of publications concerning the examination of clinical *A. fumigatus* strains from different countries, however there has been no report from Poland. Here, we describe for the first time, an examination of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* expression level of 11 clinical *A. fumigatus* strains isolated during 2007–2014 period from the collection of Medical University in Wrocław. Their susceptibility to itraconazole, voriconazole and posaconazole has been examined. The MIC values of triazoles for one of the examined isolates were respectively: >8 mg/L for itraconazole, 2 mg/L for voriconazole and 0.5 mg/L for posaconazole. The *cyp51A* gene with its promoter region of all isolates was sequenced. It was found that the resistant isolate harbors the TR₃₄/L98H mutation in the *cyp51A* gene and when cultured on media supplemented with voriconazole exhibits overexpression of both, *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* genes. The level of *cyp51A* gene expression was about 50 times higher than *cyp51B*.

Key words: *Aspergillus fumigatus*, azole resistance, *cyp51A*, *cyp51B*

Received: 30 July, 2015; **revised:** 21 September, 2015; **accepted:** 02 October, 2015; **available on-line:** 04 December, 2015

INTRODUCTION

Aspergillus (A.) fumigatus is a saprophytic, cosmopolitan fungus present in the soil, rotting plant debris, damp walls or in-house dust (Soubani *et al.*, 2002). It plays an important role in the carbon and nitrogen cycle in the environment. However, it is also recorded as the etiological agent of aspergillosis. Modern diagnostics and application of antifungals improved the outcome of aspergillosis treatment, however, mortality of immunocompromised patients with invasive aspergillosis reaches 40–90% (Shapiro *et al.*, 2011). Among all potential antifungal agents for treatment of *A. fumigatus* infections, antibiotics from the group of azoles, polyenes and echinocandins, are being administered. Because of the broad spectrum, relatively low toxic azoles are the first-line therapeutics. (Valiante *et al.*, 2015) The activity of azoles is based on inhibition of lanosterol 14- α -demethylase (Odds *et al.*, 2003). Azoles are a group of antifungal compounds which are applied in clinical medicine and in agriculture (Verweij *et al.*, 2009). In 1997, the first itraconazole re-

sistant *A. fumigatus* strains were identified in the Netherlands (Denning *et al.*, 1997). The number of azole resistant strains still increases for e.g. in the Netherlands from 2% in 2000 to 8% in 2009. In Great Britain the highest increase was observed — 5% in 2004, 14% in 2008 and 20% in 2009. However, the published data are probably underestimated due to the lack of routine testing of susceptibility of *A. fumigatus* isolates (Perlin *et al.*, 2015). Most of the azole resistant strains harbor the TR₃₄/L98H mutation in the *cyp51A* gene, which is related to azole resistance (Mellado *et al.*, 2007). Another suggested mechanism of acquiring the azole resistance is connected to the expression level of the *cyp51* genes (Shapiro *et al.*, 2011; van Ingen *et al.*, 2015). In this paper we present the results of examination of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* genes expression level of 11 clinical *A. fumigatus* isolates grown on Sabouraud agar and Sabouraud agar supplemented with voriconazole.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Isolates. Eleven clinical *A. fumigatus* isolates from the collection of Wrocław Medical University were included in this study. Minimal Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) was assessed for itraconazole (ITR), voriconazole (VOR) and posaconazole (POS) using broth microdilution methods, according to European Committee for Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing E.Def 9.1 (Rodríguez-Tudela *et al.*, 2008). One of the tested isolates (no. 55) has been characterized as VOR and POS intermediate susceptible (MIC for VOR: 2 mg/L and POS: 0.25 mg/L) and resistant to itraconazole (MIC for ITR: 32 mg/L).

PCR. *A. fumigatus* DNA was extracted by an earlier described procedure (Brillowska-Dąbrowska *et al.*, 2010). Briefly, DNA from pieces of mycelium of 3–5 mm diameter was extracted by a 10-min incubation of the sample in 100 μ l of extraction buffer (60 mM sodium bicarbonate (NaHCO₃), 250 mM potassium chloride (KCl) and 50 mM Tris, pH 9.5) at 95°C and subsequent addition of 100 μ l of 2% bovine serum albumin. After vortexing, this DNA-containing solution was used for amplification of ITS1, 5.8S RNA, ITS2 regions (White *et al.*, 1990), a fragment of β -tubulin gene (Alcazar-Fuoli *et al.*, 2008) and the *cyp51A* sequence (cyp51Afor 5' ATGGTGCCGATGCTATG-

✉ e-mail: annbrill@pg.gda.pl

*The results were presented at the 6th International Weigl Conference on Microbiology, Gdańsk, Poland (8–10 July, 2015).

Abbreviations: PCR, polymerase chain reaction; TR, tandem repeat
New sequences: none

GCT 3' and *cyp51A*rev 5' ACCGCTTCTCCCAG-CCGA 3'). PCR products were purified (Clean-up, A&A Biotechnology) and sequenced (Macrogen). The analysis of the sequences was performed by VectorNTI (Informax).

A PCR-based assay was applied to screen for the presence of the 34-bp tandem repeat in the promoter region of the *cyp51A* gene as it was described elsewhere (Bromley *et al.*, 2014). 2x Master Mix HighGC (A&A Biotechnology) was applied for all of the PCR assays performed.

Examination of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* expression level. All isolates were grown on Sabouraud agar plates for 72–96 h at room temperature (with no antimycotics and supplemented with 1 mg/L of voriconazole, respectively). Mycelia from the whole surface of the plate (diameter 900 mm) were placed in 2 ml tubes with zirconia/silica beads (A&A Biotechnology) and 400 µl of de-ionized water was added. The tubes were placed in a bead beater and shaken for 2 min at 2300 rpm. Lysates were then transferred into 1.5 ml tubes. The next steps of RNA extraction were performed by means of Total RNA Mini kit (A&A Biotechnology). Thus obtained RNA was treated by a DNase and further purified with Clean up RNA Concentrator (A&A Biotechnology). The concentration was determined using the NanoDrop1000 (Thermo Scientific). cDNA synthesis was carried out by means of TransScriba kit (A&A Biotechnology) with an oligo(dT)18 solution, 1 µg RNA and the rest of components from the kit.

Quantitative analysis of expression of the *cyp51A*, *cyp51B* (Buied *et al.*, 2013) and reference β -tubulin (Glass N.L., 1995) genes was performed by real-time PCR with a LightCycler Nano PCR Real-Time System (Roche). Real-time PCR was performed in 20 µl reaction volume containing the following reagents: 10 µl RealTime 2 X PCR Master Mix SYBR (A&A Biotechnology), 1 µl each primer solution (10 mM), 1 µl of total cDNA sample and distilled water. All reactions were performed in triplicates. The experiments were also repeated in triplicate for each specimen. Quantitative analysis of the level of expression of the investigated genes was carried out using the $R = 2^{-\Delta\Delta Cq}$ formula, also known as the Livak's method (Livak *et al.*, 2001). The azole resistant *A. fumigatus* strain from

Centraalbureau voor Schimmelcultures (accession number CBS 133436) was applied as a calibrator.

RESULTS

Species identification and analysis of *cyp51A* sequence

The results of rRNA fragment and β -tubulin gene sequencing confirmed classical identification of the examined isolates as *A. fumigatus*. Amplification of the promoter region of *cyp51A* gene revealed presence of a 34 bp tandem repeat. Sequencing of *cyp51A* gene confirmed point mutation in the azole resistant isolate (no. 55) resulting in L98H substitution.

Examination of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* expression level

The expression level of the *cyp51A* gene of 9/11 *A. fumigatus* isolates grown on Sabouraud agar with voriconazole was higher when compared to isolates cultured without any azoles. Two isolates cultured in the presence of voriconazole exhibited a lower expression level of the *cyp51A* gene. However, the dramatic increase from $R = 0.354$ to $R = 2036$ was detected in the azole resistant isolate no. 55 harboring the TR₃₄/L98H mutation (in comparison, the highest increase of azole susceptible isolate reached $R = 1.777$ from $R = 0.008$). Similar results were obtained for examination of the expression level of the *cyp51B* gene. We observed a change of $R = 0.044$ for the resistant isolate grown without access to voriconazole, to $R = 42.942$ for the same isolate cultured in the presence of voriconazole. However, the increase in expression level of *cyp51B* was lower when compared to an increase in *cyp51A* gene expression (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

The relation between the occurrence of the TR₃₄/L98H mutation and resistance to azoles is well documented (Diaz-Guerra *et al.*, 2003; Howard *et al.*, 2011; Mellado *et al.*, 2007; Snelders *et al.*, 2011). We report here a great difference in expression of *cyp51A* and *cyp51B* genes of the azole resistant *A. fumigatus* isolate

Table 1. Expression level of *A. fumigatus* genes

| Isolate no. | Expression level of the <i>cyp51A</i> gene | | Expression level of the <i>cyp51B</i> gene | |
|-------------|--|---|--|---|
| | Isolates grown on Sabouraud agar | Isolates grown on Sabouraud agar with 1 mg/L voriconazole | Isolates grown on Sabouraud agar | Isolates grown on Sabouraud agar with 1 mg/L voriconazole |
| 2 | 0.127 | 0.03 | 0.369 | 0.36 |
| 6 | 0.008 | 0.401 | 0.01 | 0.305 |
| 22 | 0.012 | 0.415 | 0.012 | 0.616 |
| 31 | 0.103 | 0.12 | 0.031 | 0.183 |
| 34 | 0.105 | 0.937 | 0.043 | 0.521 |
| 39 | 0.125 | 0.098 | 0.243 | 0.122 |
| 47 | 0.079 | 0.123 | 0.034 | 0.231 |
| 49 | 0.012 | 0.21 | 0.018 | 0.324 |
| 55 | 0.354 | 2036.675 | 0.044 | 42.942 |
| 71 | 0.028 | 0.346 | 0.014 | 0.482 |
| 82 | 0.008 | 1.777 | 0.016 | 0.349 |

harboring the TR₃₄/L98H mutation when grown on Sabouraud agar and Sabouraud agar supplemented with 1 mg/L voriconazole respectively. Our findings indirectly confirm the hypothesis of azole resistance induction by the presence of azoles in the environment (Snelders *et al.*, 2009, Snelders *et al.*, 2012, Stensvold *et al.*, 2012, Verweij *et al.*, 2009), as the elevated expression level of *cyp51* genes can be the reason for azole resistance occurrence. However, further examination of other resistance mechanisms is necessary, not only due to a dramatic increase of expression level of *cyp51A* gene in isolate no. 55, but also as most likely the azole resistance is a result of combination of different factors. Beside tandem repeats in the promoter region of the *cyp51A* gene and a point mutation in this gene, some transcription factors can also be involved in upregulation of *cyp51A*. For example, the SrbA protein is a regulating factor from the SREBP family (sterol regulator element binding protein), which is involved in the sterol biosynthesis. It is possible that SrbA can interfere with the *cyp51A* gene and influence its activity (Blosser *et al.*, 2011). Other mechanisms may also induce azole resistance – for e.g. a mutation in the transcription factor HapE which binds the CCAAT sequence (Wei *et al.*, 2015), overexpression of MFS (major facilitator superfamily) transporters (Shapiro *et al.*, 2011) or overexpression of ABC transporters (ATP binding cassette superfamily).

Financial support

This work was funded by the National Science Centre grant no 2013/11/B/NZ7/04935.

REFERENCES

- Alcazar-Fuoli L, Mellado E, Alastruey-Izquierdo A, Cuenca-Estrella M, Rodriguez-Tudela JL (2008) *Aspergillus* section Fumigati: antifungal susceptibility patterns and sequence-based identification. *Antimicrob Agents Chemother* **52**: 1244–1251. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AAC.00585-09>.
- Blosser SJ, Cramer RA (2012) SREBP-dependent triazole susceptibility in *Aspergillus fumigatus* is mediated through direct transcriptional regulation of *erg11A* (*cyp51A*). *Antimicrob Agents Chemother* **56**: 248–257. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AAC.05027-11>.
- Brillowska-Dąbrowska A, Nielsen SS, Nielsen HV, Arendrup MC (2010) Optimized 5-h multiplex PCR test for the detection of tinea unguium: performance in a routine PCR laboratory. *Med Mycol* **48**: 828–831. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3109/13693780903531579>.
- Bromley MJ, van Muijlwijk G, Fraczek MG, Robson G, Verweij PE, Denning DW, Bowyer P (2014) *J Glob Antimicrob Res* **4**: 276–279. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.jgar.2014.05.004>.
- Buied A, Moore C, Denning D, Bowyer P (2013). High-level expression of *cyp51B* in azole-resistant clinical *Aspergillus fumigatus* isolates. *J Antimicrob Chemother* **68**: 512–514. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1093/jac/dks451>.
- Denning DW, Venkateswarlu K, Oakley KL, Anderson MJ, Manning NJ, Stevens DA, Warnock DW, Kelly SL (1997) Itraconazole resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus*. *Antimicrob Agents Chemother* **41**: 1364–1368.
- Diaz-Guerra TM, Mellado E, Cuenca-Estrella M, Rodriguez-Tudela JL (2003) A point mutation in the 14 α -sterol demethylase gene *cyp51a* contributes to itraconazole resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus*. *Antimicrob Agents Chemother* **47**: 1120–1224. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AAC.47.3.1120-1124.2003>.
- Glass NL, Donaldson GC (1995) Development of primer sets designed for use with the PCR to amplify conserved genes from filamentous ascomycetes. *Appl Environ Microbiol* **61**: 1323–1330.
- Howard SJ, Arendrup MC (2011) Acquired antifungal drug resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus*: epidemiology and detection. *Med Mycol* **49**: 90–95. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3109/13693786.2010.50846>.
- Livak KJ, Schmittgen TD (2001) Analysis of relative gene expression data using real-time quantitative PCR and the 2^{- $\Delta\Delta$ CT} method. *Methods* **25**: 402–408. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1006/meth.2001.1262>.
- Mellado E, Garcia-Effron G, Alcazar-Fuoli L, Melchers WJG, Verweij PE, Cuenca-Estrella M, Rodriguez-Tudela JL (2007). A new *Aspergillus fumigatus* resistance mechanism conferring *in vitro* cross-resistance to azole antifungals involves a combination of *cyp51A* alterations. *Antimicrob Agents Chemother* **51**: 1897–1904. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AAC.01092-06>.
- Odds FC, Brown AJ, Gow NA (2003). Antifungal agents: mechanisms of action. *Trends Microbiol* **11**: 272–279. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0966-842X\(03\)00117-3](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0966-842X(03)00117-3).
- Perlin DS, Shor E, Zhao Y (2015). Update on antifungal drug resistance. *Curr Clin Microbiol Rep* **2**: 84–95. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s40588-015-0015-1>.
- Rodriguez-Tudela JL, Donnelly JP, Arendrup MC, Arian S, Barchiesi F, Bille J, Chryssanthou E, Cuenca-Estrella M, Dannaoui E, Denning D, Fegeler W, Gaustad P, Lass-Flörl C, Moore C, Richardson M, Schmalreck A, Velegriaki A, Verweij P (2008) Subcommittee on Antifungal Susceptibility Testing (AFST) of the ESCMID European Committee for Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing, EUCAST Technical Note on the method for the determination of broth dilution minimum inhibitory concentrations of antifungal agents for conidia-forming moulds. *Clin Microbiol Infect* **14**: 982–984. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-0691.2008.02086.x>.
- Shapiro RS, Robbins N, Cowen LE (2011) Regulatory circuitry governing fungal development, drug resistance, and disease. *Microbiol Mol Biol Rev* **75**: 213–267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/MMBR.00045-10>.
- Snelders E, Rijs AJ, Kema GH, Melchers WJ, Verweij PE (2009) Possible environmental origin of resistance of *Aspergillus fumigatus* to medical triazoles. *Appl Environ Microbiol* **75**: 4053–4057. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1128/AEM.00231-09>.
- Snelders E, Karawajczyk A, Verhoeven RJ, Venselaar H, Schaftenaar G, Verweij PE, Melchers WJ (2011). The structure–function relationship of the *Aspergillus fumigatus* *cyp51A* L98H conversion by site-directed mutagenesis: The mechanism of L98H azole resistance. *Fungal Gen Biol* **48**: 1062–1070. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.fgb.2011.08.002>.
- Snelders E, Camps SM, Karawajczyk A, Schaftenaar G, Kema GH, Van der Lee HA, Verweij PE (2012) Triazole fungicides can induce cross-resistance to medical triazoles in *Aspergillus fumigatus*. *PLoS One* **7**: e31801. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0031801>.
- Soubani AO, Chandrasekar PH (2002) The clinical spectrum of pulmonary aspergillosis. *CHEST Journal* **121**: 1988–1999. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1378/chest.121.6.1988>.
- Stensvold CR, Jørgensen LN, Arendrup MC (2012) Azole-resistant invasive aspergillosis: relationship to agriculture. *Curr Fungal Infect Rep* **6**: 178–191. <http://dx.doi.org/DOI 10.1007/s12281-012-0097-7>.
- Valiante V, Macheleidt J, Föge M, Brakhage AA (2015) The *Aspergillus fumigatus* cell wall integrity signaling pathway: drug target, compensatory pathways, and virulence. *Front Microbiol* **6**: 325. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2015.00325>.
- van Ingen J, van der Lee HA, Rijs TA, Zoll J, Leenstra T, Melchers WJ, Verweij PE (2015) Azole, polyene and echinocandin MIC distributions for wild-type, TR34/L98H and TR46/Y121F/T289A *Aspergillus fumigatus* isolates in the Netherlands. *J Antimicrob Chemother* **70**: 178–181. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/jac/dku364>.
- Verweij PE, Snelders E, Kema GH, Mellado E, Melchers WJ (2009). Azole resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus*: a side-effect of environmental fungicide use? *The Lancet Infect Dis* **9**: 789–795. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099\(09\)70265-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(09)70265-8).
- Wei X, Zhang Y, Lu L (2015). The molecular mechanism of azole resistance in *Aspergillus fumigatus*: from bedside to bench and back. *J Microbiol* **53**: 91–99. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12275-015-5014-7>.
- White TJ, Bruns T, Lee S, Taylor JW (1990) Amplification and direct sequencing of fungal ribosomal RNA genes for phylogenetics. In *PCR Protocols: A Guide to Methods and Applications*. Innis MA, Gel-fand DH, Sninsky JJ, White TJ, eds, pp 315–322. Academic Press, Inc., New York.