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SEWAGE ANALYSES FOR ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE WITHIN  
FECAL E. COLI ISOLATES

A THESIS PRESENTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SCIENCE IN  
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## ABSTRACT

This investigation was undertaken to explore possible surveillance methods which might be applied in surveys of the incidence of acquired antibiotic resistance in fecal bacteria being shed by an urban population; the Palmerston North City sewage system served as a sampling device. Fecal *E. coli* was used as an indicator organism by virtue of its inherent sensitivity to several relevant antibiotics and, further, by virtue of the fact that antibiotic resistance in this microorganism can, in general, be attributed to plasmids coding for the resistance character(s).

In the course of these exploratory studies it was observed that fecal *E. coli* accounted for 6 to 14% of the total coliforms present in sewage samples; the number of fecal *E. coli* in any given sewage sample was affected by the flow rate of the sewage and the rainfall.

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## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	vi
LIST OF FIGURES	viii
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	1
1.1 Development of drug resistance	1
(a) Antibiotic use in man	1
(b) Antibiotic use in animals	2
(c) The role of food in the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria	3
(d) The role of sewage and surface waters	3
1.2 Discovery of R factors	4
1.3 General properties of R factors	6
1.4 Evolution of R factors	9
1.5 Distribution of Transferable drug resistance	12
1.6 The biochemical basis of R factor mediated drug resistance	14
(a) Tetracycline resistance	15
(b) Penicillin resistance	15
(c) Aminoglycoside antibiotics	17
(d) Chloramphenicol resistance	18
1.7 Clinical aspects of the relationship between antibiotic usage and resistance	19
(a) The avoidance of the prescription of unnecessary antibiotics in both therapy and prophylaxis	20
(b) General policies for restricted or reserved use of antibiotics	21
(c) Restrictions of antibiotics in animal feeds	21
(d) Adequate dosage	22
(e) Choice of an antibiotic	23
(f) Molecular manipulation of antibiotics	24

	Page
<u>MATERIALS AND METHODS</u>	26
Sewage samples	26
Isolation of resistant bacteria (direct plating)	26
Identification of fecal <i>E. coli</i>	27
(a) Production of indole at 44.5°C	27
(b) Production of acid and gas in MacConkey broth	27
(c) Citrate utilization test	28
Isolation of resistant fecal <i>E. coli</i> (spot method)	28
Further characterization of the Sm-resistant isolates	29
(a) Minimal inhibitory concentration (M.I.C.) determination of streptomycin using nutrient broth	29
(b) Minimal inhibitory concentration determination of streptomycin using MacConkey broth	29
(c) Minimal inhibitory concentration determination of streptomycin using plate method	30
Transmissibility of streptomycin resistance	30
Characterization of the 'recombinant' colonies	31
<u>RESULTS</u>	33
I    Viable counts	33
II   Recovery of resistant fecal <i>E. coli</i>	39
(a) The number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> resistant to single antibiotic	41
(b) Fecal <i>E. coli</i> isolates resistant to two antibiotics	42
(c) Fecal <i>E. coli</i> isolates resistant to three antibiotics	43
III  Streptomycin-resistant fecal <i>E. coli</i>	45
DISCUSSION	54
GENERAL CONCLUSION	67
APPENDIX I	71
APPENDIX II	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY	75

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
1. Distribution of Transferable drug resistance in the enterobacteria-published by some of the investigators throughout the world.	13
2. Counts of lactose fermenters obtained from plates incubated at different temperatures.	33
3. The relationship between rainfall and the number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> in sewage samples	36
4. Incidence of antibiotic-resistant fecal <i>E. coli</i> recovered on MacConkey agar containing antibiotics incubated at 44.3°C.	39
4a. The number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> resistant to single antibiotic.	41
b. The number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> resistant to two antibiotics.	42
c. The number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> resistant to three antibiotics.	43
5. Determinations of the minimal inhibitory concentration of streptomycin for fecal <i>E. coli</i> strains using nutrient broth.	45
6. Determinations of the minimal inhibitory concentration of streptomycin for fecal <i>E. coli</i> strains using nutrient broth.	46
7. Transfer experiment between the streptomycin-resistant isolates and <i>E. coli</i> J62-1 (pro <sup>-</sup> his <sup>-</sup> trp <sup>-</sup> lac <sup>-</sup> Nal <sup>R</sup> ).	48

8. Determinations of the minimal inhibitory concentration of streptomycin for 'recombinants' using nutrient broth and MacConkey broth. 49
9. Determinations of the minimal inhibitory concentration of streptomycin for fecal *E. coli* (donor) strains using nutrient broth and MacConkey broth. 49
10. Determinations of the minimal inhibitory concentration of streptomycin for fecal *E. coli* strains using plate method. 50.

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
1. Counts of lactose fermenters obtained from plates incubated at different temperatures.	34
2. The relationship between rainfall and the number of fecal <i>E. coli</i> in sewage samples.	36
3. The effect of rainfall on the rate of sewage flow.	38
4. Percentage of resistant fecal <i>E. coli</i> to four antibiotics.	40

## INTRODUCTION

Microbial resistance has been described as the ability of a microbial cell and its progeny to survive and multiply under environmental conditions that would inhibit or destroy other organisms (Tepper, 1969). Recognised to be present in nature long before the introduction of antibiotics in chemotherapy, bacterial resistance to drugs have received increasing attention as the list of resistant organisms has continued to expand ahead of the rapid development of newer antibiotics (Takafuji, 1977).

### 1.1 DEVELOPMENT OF DRUG RESISTANCE

Resistance to drugs e.g. to arsenicals by trypanosomes, was known for many years, but it was not until 1935 that bacterial resistance was recognised as a growing problem. In the 1930s, *Neisseria gonorrhoea* infections were adequately treated with sulphonamides, but by the late 1940s greater than 80% of the strains were resistant to 100 mg% or more (Takafuji, 1977). Other organisms such as *Strep pyogenes*, *N. meningitidis* and members of the *Enterobacteriaceae* also developed similar resistance to sulphonamides, rendering a once very satisfactory antibacterial drug ineffective in the treatment of serious infections.

Presently, the factors contributing to the emergence and spread of antibiotic resistance include the following: -

#### a) Antibiotic use in man

The appearance of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria is closely linked to antibiotic use in the treatment of human infections (Mouton et al, 1976). Resistance may appear rapidly or slowly, depending on the organism concerned, the volume and type of antibiotic used, and the method of application.

The most clear-cut evidence relating antibiotic use and resistance has come from hospital studies in which outbreaks of resistant nosocomial infections were related to the extensive use of antibiotics, e.g. infections with *Klebsiella* related to the use of ampicillin in a neurosurgical unit (Price and Sleigh, 1970), infections with pseudomonads resistant to carbenicillin in a burns unit (Lowbury et al, 1972), and resistant infections with *Serratia* associated with the use of gentamicin in an intensive care unit.

In community infections, data from Japan showed that a rise in tetracycline resistance in *pneumococci* was closely associated with an increase in tetracycline use. Again, there was a sharp increase in macrolide use in Japan from 1967 onwards, the quantities used had risen from 50,000 kgs/year to almost 200,000 kgs/year by 1973. Macrolide-resistant strains of group A hemolytic *streptococci* were first recognised in Japan during the early 1970s and, by 1974, 75% of the strains isolated were resistant to erythromycin and linconycin. Resistance to the tetracyclines and that to chloramphenicol were at a level of 90% and 75% respectively (WHO Technical Report, 1978).

b) Antibiotic use in animals

The use of antibiotics as feed additives for growth promotion is widespread (Linton, 1977; Hartley & Richmond, 1975). The commonest drugs currently used for this purpose are the tetracyclines - one of the most potent agents for provoking the emergence and selection of resistance plasmids and at the same time a very useful therapeutic agent.

The rapid emergence and spread of drug-resistant *Salmonellae*, during the 1960s resulted from antibiotic use in animals (Anderson, 1968). Transmission of these *Salmonellae* to man resulted in many human infections, and

the resistances of such strains, plasmid borne and chromosomal, were acquired in the animal host.

c) The role of food in the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria

The presence of antibiotic-resistant nonpathogenic enterobacteria in food is of public health significance. Although some food containing resistant bacteria is decontaminated during cooking, before being cooked it may contaminate other cooked or uncooked food in the kitchen and so transmit drug-resistant enterobacteria to man. Multiresistant nonpathogenic bacteria may add to the number of drug-resistant bacteria, with their plasmids, in the human intestine, but when the organisms concerned are pathogenic they may also produce foodborne diseases (WHO Technical Report, 1976).

d) The role of sewage and surface waters

Sewage and surface waters contribute to the distribution and circulation of resistant organisms. They represent a natural medium in which R-plasmid transfer can occur under certain physical, chemical or biological conditions. Sewage and surface waters contain resistant bacteria from human and animal wastes and can be regarded as a source of all plasmid types, which circulate and are selected under appropriate environmental conditions. These resistant bacteria from sewage and surface waters can be transferred under some circumstances to food and drinking water, which leads to a recycling to man and animals (Smith, 1970; Richmond, 1972).