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The full details of the published version of the article are as follows:

TITLE: An investigation of polymorphisms in innate and adaptive immune response genes in canine leishmaniosis

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JOURNAL: Veterinary Parasitology

PUBLISHER: Elsevier

PUBLICATION DATE: 26 April 2019 (online)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vetpar.2019.04.011

RVC
Royal Veterinary College
University of London

1 **Original Article**

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4 **An investigation of polymorphisms in innate and adaptive immune response**
5 **genes in canine leishmaniosis**

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26 **Abstract**

27 The outcome of infection with *Leishmania infantum* in dogs is variable, which is
28 thought to be due to the nature of the immune response mounted by the host. As a
29 consequence, the clinical signs and severity of canine leishmaniosis vary between
30 individual dogs. Host immunogenetic factors might play an important role in
31 determining the outcome of infection. The aim of this study was to examine
32 polymorphisms in innate and adaptive immune response genes, to determine whether
33 any of these were associated with susceptibility or resistance to *L. infantum*
34 infection. Genomic DNA was obtained from two groups: pet dogs in endemic
35 regions of Europe and a group of Beagles exposed to sand fly infection as part of a
36 vaccine study. Genotyping was performed using a SNP (single nucleotide
37 polymorphism) array for selected immune response genes. The first part of the study
38 compared 62 clinical cases with 101 clinically unaffected dogs that were
39 seronegative for *Leishmania* antibodies. One SNP in the *CIITA* gene demonstrated a
40 significantly higher minor allele frequency in the case group, compared with the
41 control group at the individual SNP level after permutation, but was not significant
42 after correction for multiple testing. The second part of the study examined 48
43 Beagle dogs exposed to *L. infantum* over two transmission seasons. Twenty-seven
44 dogs with a resistant phenotype (no evidence of clinical disease, seronegative at the
45 end of the study period, negative on lymph node culture and only transiently PCR
46 positive in bone marrow) were compared with 21 dogs demonstrating a susceptible
47 phenotype (clinical disease, seropositive, positive lymph node culture and
48 consistently PCR positive in bone marrow). Three SNPs in *TLR3*, two SNPs in
49 *PTPN22* and one SNP in *TLR4* and *IL1A* were associated with the susceptible

phenotype in the Beagle group at the individual SNP level after permutation analysis, but were not significant after correction for multiple testing. Further validation of these SNPs is required in a larger cohort of dogs, ideally with extreme phenotypes to confirm an association with the outcome of *L. infantum* infection.

Keywords

***Leishmania*, Genetics, Dogs, Innate, Adaptive**

Abbreviations

CIITA: class II major histocompatibility complex transactivator, C6: complement C6, C7: complement C7, CLEC16A: C-type lectin domain family 16 member A, DEXI: dexamethasone-induced protein, DLA: dog leukocyte antigen, EDTA: ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid, ELISA: enzyme linked immuno-absorbant assay, EU: ELISA units, GAPDH: glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase, gDNA: genomic DNA, GSPL: glycosphingophospholipids, GWAS: genome wide association study, HWE: Hardy Weinberg equilibrium, IFAT: indirect immunofluorescence assay, IFN: interferon IgG: immunoglobulin G, IL: interleukin, IL1A: interleukin-1 alpha,IL2RA: interleukin-2 receptor alpha, IL7R: interleukin-7 receptor,IL15RA: interleukin-15 receptor alpha, LIFR: leukemia inhibitor factor receptor alpha, LPS: lipopolysaccharide, MAF: minor allele frequency, MHC: major histocompatability complex, NO: nitric oxide, PTPN22: protein tyrosine phosphatase non-receptor type 22, qPCR: quantitative PCR, SD: standard deviation, SLC11A1: solute carrier family 11 (formally NRAMP), SOCS1: suppressor of cytokine signalling 1, SNP: single nucleotide polymorphism, TLR: toll-like receptor

Introduction

Canine leishmaniosis is caused by the protozoan parasite *Leishmania infantum*, which is also responsible for zoonotic visceral and cutaneous leishmaniosis in humans (Gramiccia and Gradoni, 2005). *L. infantum* is endemic in the Mediterranean basin,

78 Central and South America and parts of Africa and Asia (Palatnik-de-Sousa and Day,
79 2011), with evidence of emerging disease elsewhere (Maia and Cardoso, 2015), as a
80 result of increasing phlebotomine sand fly vector distribution and dogs travelling to
81 and from endemic areas potentially spreading disease to Northern areas of Europe
82 (Shaw et al., 2009).

83 There is a spectrum of clinical leishmaniosis in dogs, varying from mild skin lesions
84 and localised lymphadenomegaly to multi-organ involvement and renal failure
85 (Koutinas et al., 1999). Disease progression and severity of clinical signs, and/or
86 clinicopathological abnormalities observed, vary between individual dogs, which
87 suggests that some dogs might be more resistant to disease than others. Diagnosis of
88 canine leishmaniosis is based on the presence of clinical signs and clinicopathological
89 abnormalities compatible with disease, alongside diagnostic methods of determining
90 infection with *L. infantum* (Solano-Gallego et al., 2009). The most commonly used
91 indirect diagnostic methods are serological tests, including the indirect
92 immunofluorescence assay (IFAT) and enzyme linked immunoabsorbant assay
93 (ELISA), which determine the presence of *Leishmania* antibodies in the serum
94 (Paltrinieri et al., 2010). High anti-*Leishmania* antibody reactivity has been associated
95 with high parasite loads and clinical disease (Solano-Gallego et al., 2001). Direct
96 demonstration of the parasite by cytological examination of affected tissues
97 (Paltrinieri et al., 2010) or detection of *Leishmania* DNA in the tissues, using PCR or
98 quantitative PCR (qPCR), are also used (Cortes et al., 2004; Francino et al., 2006). A
99 definitive diagnosis of canine leishmaniosis can be difficult to achieve, although there
100 is a high index of suspicion for individuals with clinical signs of overt leishmaniosis
101 and a highly positive serology result (Paltrinieri et al., 2010). However, when dogs

102 present with a low clinical suspicion index, or where anti- *Leishmania* antibody
103 reactivity is low, multiple diagnostic tests might be required to confirm the diagnosis
104 (Solano-Gallego et al., 2009; Paltrinieri et al., 2010).

105 A number of host and parasite factors seem to play a role in determining the outcome
106 of infection. The host immune response might be particularly important in disease
107 outcome, with $CD4^{+}$ T helper type 1 (Th1) lymphocytes and their ability to induce
108 macrophages to kill intracellular amastigotes via production of IFN-γ considered to be
109 crucial in controlling infection (Pinelli et al., 1994). Although the immune response in
110 dogs affected with leishmaniosis has been studied in some detail, knowledge gaps still
111 remain in terms of the precise mechanisms involved in disease
112 susceptibility/resistance.

113 It has been suggested that host immunogenetic factors might determine whether the
114 immune response is protective or not. A previous study examined dog leukocyte
115 antigen (DLA) genes, which encode MHC Class II molecules and found an association
116 between one particular DLA haplotype and increased anti-*Leishmania* IgG and
117 presence of *Leishmania* DNA in the bone marrow (Quinnell et al., 2003). Genome
118 wide association studies (GWAS) have also been performed more recently, in which
119 polymorphisms on chromosomes 1 and 4 were found to be significant and a potential
120 locus on chromosome 4 that includes immune response genes (*IL7R, LIFR, C6 a*nd
121 *C7*) (Quilez et al., 2012). Two further SNPs have been associated with leishmaniosis,
122 one located on chromosome 2, proposed to be in linkage with a causal variant in the
123 *IL2RA* or *IL15RA* gene and another on chromosome 1, which might be in linkage with
124 a gene involved in Notch signalling (Utsunomiya et al., 2015). A more recent GWAS
125 identified SNPs on chromosome 20 to be associated with increased TNF-α

126 concentration in *Leishmania* antigen stimulated lymphocytes, whilst SNPs on
127 chromosome 17 were associated with increased IL-10 concentration (Cortes et al.,
128 2012).

129 The aim of this study was to interrogate polymorphisms in candidate innate and
130 adaptive immune response genes in dogs naturally infected with *L. infantum* to
131 determine whether there are associations with clinical disease and/or infection status.

132 **Methods**

133

134 *Canine population and study design*

135

136 The study dogs consisted of two populations that were analysed separately. The first
137 study comprised of pet dogs from two *Leishmania* endemic regions of Europe
138 consisting of clinical cases and controls. The second study comprised of Beagle dogs
139 kept outdoors in an endemic region and thus exposed to sand flies and *Leishmania*
140 infection for two years and regularly monitored (longitudinal study).

141

142 In Study 1, blood samples were obtained from dogs that presented to first-opinion
143 veterinary practices, one in Paphos, Cyprus and the other in Zaragoza, Spain. Dogs
144 vaccinated with Canileish (Virbac) or with a history of immunosuppressive therapy
145 were excluded. Clinical cases of leishmaniosis were identified based on clinical
146 examination and confirmation testing by PCR and serology. Samples from clinically

147 healthy control dogs, breed and age matched where possible, resident in the same
148 endemic regions were also recruited through these veterinary practices. Signed
149 informed consent was obtained from owners for permission to use any excess blood
150 for clinical research after completion of diagnostic testing. Approval was granted from
151 the Clinical Research Ethics Review Board of the Royal Veterinary College (reference
152 number URN 2014 1292; date of approval 03/09/2014) for use of the samples in
153 research.

154 In Study 2, residual genomic DNA samples were provided from Beagles enrolled in a
155 natural infection model, where dogs were studied over a 2 year period. Clinical and
156 clinicopathological abnormalities were observed over the period of the study and
157 diagnostic testing was performed every 3 months after an initial 6 month exposure
158 period. *Leishmania* testing included Immunofluorescence Antibody Test (IFAT) and
159 nested PCR on the bone marrow and lymph node parasite culture as previously
160 described (Oliva et al., 2014). The study was approved by the Veterinary Board of the
161 Italian Ministry of Health following the European Directive 86/609/EEC, adopted by
162 the Italian Government with the Law 116/1992. Approval was granted from the
163 Clinical Research Ethics Review Board of the Royal Veterinary College (approval
164 number URN 2015 1329; date of approval 05/03/2015) for the use of these samples in
165 research.

166

167 *Diagnostic procedures*

168

169 *i. Culture technique*

170

171 Parasite isolation by culture was performed on lymph node aspirates from dogs in
172 Study 2. Briefly, lymph node aspirates were cultured in Evans' modified Tobie's
173 medium at 22.5°C and were examined for promastigote growth after 1 month (Oliva
174 et al., 2006).

175

176 *ii. Molecular analyses*

177

178 Real-time qPCR for *L. infantum* kinetoplast DNA was performed for Study 1 (Shaw
179 et al., 2009). Genomic DNA (gDNA) was extracted from EDTA blood samples using
180 the GenElute Blood Genomic DNA Kit (Sigma-Aldrich, Dorset, UK) according to the
181 manufacturer's instructions. This was submitted to the Acarus laboratory (Molecular
182 Diagnostic Unit, Langford Vets, Bristol) for qPCR testing. Results were normalised
183 against the median GAPDH reference value for the group. Dogs were categorised as
184 qPCR negative for *Leishmania* kinetoplast DNA if a CT value could not be determined
185 for the sample. Samples were categorised as borderline positive if they had a CT value
186 >35 and considered positive if the CT value ≤35.

187 Nested PCR for *L. infantum* kinetoplast DNA was performed on gDNA extracted from
188 bone marrow samples from dogs in Study 2 as previously described (Oliva et al.,
189 2006). Bone marrow samples from *Leishmania*-free dogs were used as negative
190 controls in each step of the procedure. The amplification products were analysed on

191 1.5% (w/v) agarose gels and visualized under UV light. Positive samples yielded a
192 PCR product of 358 bp.

193

194 *iii. Serological techniques*

195

196 ELISA testing was performed on serum samples from Study 1 dogs to assess the
197 presence of anti-*Leishmania* antibodies as previously described (Solano-Gallego et al.,
198 2014). Results were quantified as ELISA units (EU), relative to the calibrator
199 (arbitrarily set at 100 EU). The positive cut-off value had previously been established
200 at 35 EU (mean + 4 SD of values from 80 dogs from a non- endemic area). Positive
201 sera were classified as borderline (35-≤37 EU), low (37-≤150 EU) medium (150-≤300
202 EU) or high (>300 EU).

203 The IFAT was performed on serum samples from Study 2 dogs. Briefly, *L. infantum*
204 parasites (MHOM/TN/1980/IPT-1) were fixed to microscope slides. Serial dilutions
205 of serum were added to the slides and incubated for 30 min at 35-37°C. Serum
206 antibody reactivity to parasites was detected using a fluorescent secondary rabbit anti-
207 dog IgG antibody (Sigma-Aldrich). The antibody titre represents the final dilution at
208 which at least 50% of the parasites were visible by fluorescence. Titres ≥ 1:160 were
209 considered to be positive for infection (Oliva et al., 2014).

210

211 *Genotyping of candidate canine immune response genes and data analysis*

Sequenom MassARRAY genotyping was performed at the Centre for Integrated Genomic Medical Research, University of Manchester as previously described (Short et al., 2007). Twenty-four candidate genes were selected, consisting of both innate and adaptive immune response genes across different chromosomes (Supplementary Table 1). Sixty-five SNPs had been reported previously (Supplementary Table 2) and a further 47 SNPs had been identified by sequence-based typing for other genetic studies undertaken at the Royal Veterinary College (Supplementary Table 3).

The data was analysed using PLINK whole genome data analysis toolset version 1.07 (http://pngu.mgh.harvard.edu/~purcell/plink/) (Purcell et al., 2007). Results were filtered according to the following criteria for quality control purposes: SNPs with a minor allele frequency (MAF) below 5% and a call rate below 90% were excluded from the analysis. Individuals with more than 10% of the SNP information missing (low genotyping rate) were also excluded from the study. Hardy Weinberg equilibrium (HWE) was assessed for each SNP. Whilst HWE amongst the case population can be indicative of selection, deviation from HWE in the controls can be a result of poor genotyping of these SNPs and HWE was therefore assessed in the Study 1 control population.

Information about the chromosomal location of each SNP included in the array was included in the map document provided with the analysis results. This was based on the NCBI dog genome assembly, version 3.1 (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genome/85).

234 SNPs were tested for association using Chi square analysis or Fisher's exact test.
235 SNPs were considered as candidate for further investigation if the p value was below
236 the significance cut-off $p<0.05$. Corrected p values for multiple testing were obtained
237 after 1000 permutations. For each permutation the maximum statistic across all SNPs
238 was recorded and from this distribution of maximum statistics, the statistic in the top
239 5% is used to give the corrected p value. Linkage disequilibrium and haplotype
240 assignment was performed in Haploview 4.2 (Barrett et al., 2005). Haplotypes were
241 tested for association using logistic regression in PLINK.

242

243 Results

244

245 *Diagnostic testing and case definition*

246

247 The first study examined a heterogenous group of dogs that presented to first opinion
248 practices in two geographically distinct regions where *L. infantum* is endemic. Sixty-
249 two cases of leishmaniosis were recruited (50 dogs from Cyprus and 12 dogs from
250 Spain). One hundred and one controls were recruited (90 dogs from Cyprus and 11
251 dogs from Spain). The clinical signs observed in the cases were variable
252 (Supplementary Figure 1). The most common clinical abnormalities observed were
253 lymphadenomegaly (enlargement of the peripheral lymph nodes), weight loss and skin
254 lesions. Qualitative assessment of clinicopathological abnormalities as assessed by
255 veterinarians from endemic regions based on in-house biochemistry, complete blood

256 count and urinalysis was available (Supplementary figure 2) and anaemia and
257 hyperproteinaemia, hyperglobulinaemia and hypoalbuminaemia were the most
258 commonly described abnormalities.

259 Serological testing revealed that all leishmaniosis cases (n=62) were highly positive
260 (>350 EU) using the ELISA. Fifty-five of the 62 dogs were qPCR positive for
261 *Leishmania* kinetoplast DNA in the blood, 4 dogs were borderline positive and 3 dogs
262 were qPCR negative (Figure 1). The majority of dogs (85/101) in the control group
263 were negative in both ELISA and qPCR tests. Two control dogs were borderline
264 positive for *Leishmania* antibodies by ELISA but qPCR negative and serum was not
265 available for testing in 4 dogs, but these were qPCR negative. Ten dogs were positive
266 by qPCR (7 of which were borderline) but were all ELISA negative.

267 In Study 2, clinical and diagnostic test information was provided for 48 Beagle dogs
268 selected from a larger research study designed to investigate susceptibility to *L.*
269 *infantum* infection over a two-year period. Twenty-seven dogs were considered to
270 have a resistant phenotype as they did not display any clinical or clinicopathological
271 abnormalities for the duration of the study, were only transiently *Leishmania* DNA
272 positive in the bone marrow, were negative on lymph node culture and IFAT negative
273 at the end of the study period. In contrast, 21 dogs were considered to have a
274 susceptible phenotype as they demonstrated clinical and clinicopathological
275 abnormalities compatible with leishmaniosis, first detected 6 to 20 months from
276 commencement of the study, remained consistently *Leishmania* DNA positive in the
277 bone marrow, were positive on lymph node culture and were IFAT positive at the end
278 of the study period.

279

280 *SNP array analysis*

281

282 Seventy-three SNPs were included in the final analysis after exclusions for low MAF
283 (<5%), call rate below 90% or lack of variability. Four SNPs significantly deviated
284 from HWE (*P*<0.00001) in the control population; *TLR1* c.1665T>C, *TLR1*
285 c.1776T>C, *IL6* c.572A>G and *IL10* c.-1330G>A.

286 Linkage disequilibrium between SNPs was estimated using D', a normalised
287 measure of allele association and by r2, the correlation coefficient between 2 SNPs.
288 Multiple SNPs appeared to be in linkage disequilibrium and haplotype blocks were
289 assigned in Haploview based on D' confidence intervals as described previously
290 (Gabriel et al., 2002).

291

292 *Case-control association study: Study 1*

293

294 After initial analysis, 6 individuals were excluded due to a genotyping rate of less than
295 90% (2 cases, 4 controls). The genotyping rate in the remaining individuals was
296 95.2%. The final analysis was therefore performed on 60 clinical cases and 97
297 controls. Two SNPs showed significantly higher MAFs in the case group compared
298 with the control group; *CIITA* c.2595C>T (p=0.008) and *IL6* c.572A>G (p=0.008)
299 (Table 2). The SNP *IL6* c.572A>G was not in HWE and no dogs were found to be
300 heterozygous at that position in our study population. After permutation was

performed, only one SNP was significant at the individual SNP level, *CIITA* c.2595C>T (p=0.036) and neither SNP was significant after the correction for multiple testing, implemented during permutation (p>0.05).

There were no significant differences in genotype frequencies between case and control group for any of the SNPs and no evidence of a significant dominant or recessive penetrance model for any of the SNPs (significance level p<0.05). The *CIITA* c.2595C>T SNP did not demonstrate a significant difference in genotypes between cases and controls (p=0.080). A recessive model for this SNP appeared to be the best fit, but there was no significant difference in frequency of the TT genotype or in the combined frequency of CT and CC genotypes between cases and controls (p=0.053).

Case-control association study: Study 2

Three individuals were excluded from the genetic analysis, due to having a genotyping rate <90% (1 susceptible, 2 resistant phenotypes). Four SNPs showed significantly different MAFs in the susceptible phenotype group compared with the resistant phenotype group (Table 2). Two SNPs had significantly higher MAFs in the susceptible group; *TLR3* c.369C>T (p=0.020) and *TLR4* c.1795G>A (p=0.036). In contrast, two SNPs had significantly higher MAFs in the resistant group; *TLR3* c.1380T>C (p=0.015) and *TLR3* c.1104T>C (p=0.015). After permutation, all four SNPs were still significant at the individual SNP level (p<0.01) and three more SNPs were significant comparing the two groups; *PTPN22* c.88-39G>A (p=0.040), *PTPN22*

324 c.915+87T>C (p=0.047) and *IL1A* c.-151A>C (p=0.048). However, after correction
325 for multiple testing implemented during permutation, there was no significant
326 difference seen in any of these SNPs comparing the two groups (p>0.05).

327 The SNPs in *TLR3* and *TLR4* that demonstrated significantly different allele
328 frequencies were also significant when genotype frequencies were assessed between
329 the two groups (Table 3); *TLR3* c.369C>T (p=0.015), *TLR3* c.1104T>C (p=0.011),
330 *TLR3* c.1380T>C (p=0.011) and *TLR4* c.1795G>A (p=0.033). Two SNPs in *PTPN22*
331 also demonstrated significant differences in genotype frequency between groups;
332 *PTPN22* c.-515T>C (p=0.016) and *PTPN22* c.88-39G>A (p=0.035). After
333 permutation all five SNPs were still significant at the individual SNP level (p<0.05).
334 However, after the correction for multiple testing implemented during permutation
335 there was no significant difference between groups for any of these SNPs (p>0.05).

336 The *TLR3* SNPs, *TLR3* c.1380T>C and *TLR3* c.1104T>C were in linkage
337 disequilibrium (D'=1) and formed a haplotype. There was a significant difference in
338 the frequency of the *TLR3* CC haplotype in the resistant phenotype dogs compared
339 with the susceptible phenotype dogs, with the CC haplotype showing decreased odds
340 of disease (OR= 0.207, p=0.010) (Table 4). Haplotypes were still significant at the
341 individual haplotype level after permutation (p=0.005). However, after correction
342 for multiple testing implemented during permutation, there was no significant
343 difference seen between groups (p=0.092).

344 The two *PTPN22* SNPs, *PTPN22* c.88-39G>A and *PTPN22* c.915+87T>C were also
345 in linkage disequilibrium (D'=1) and formed a haplotype with one other SNP,
346 *PTPN22* c.-515T>C, which did not appear to be associated at the individual SNP

347 level. The TAT haplotype showed decreased odds of disease (OR= 0.231, p=0.033),
348 whilst the CGT and CGC haplotypes were not significantly associated with disease
349 (p>0.05). The TAT haplotype was significant at the individual haplotype level after
350 permutation was implemented (p=0.039) but not after correction for multiple testing
351 (p=0.326).

352

353 **Discussion**

354

355 Polymorphisms in innate and adaptive immune response genes were examined in
356 different dog populations exposed to *L. infantum* infection to determine whether any
357 of these were associated with disease susceptibility. Although some SNPs showed a
358 significant association with the disease phenotype, these did not reach statistical
359 significance after correction for multiple testing.

360 A case-control study, performed using samples from a heterogeneous population of
361 client-owned dogs, revealed a SNP (c.2595C>T) in the *CIITA* gene to be associated
362 with canine leishmaniosis. *CIITA* is a key transcriptional activator of MHC Class II,
363 with studies in *CIITA* knockout mice demonstrating significantly lower MHC Class II
364 expression in lymphoid tissues compared with wild type mice (Itoh-Lindstrom et al.,
365 1999). There is evidence of *CIITA* gene variation influencing susceptibility to other
366 infectious diseases in humans, with promoter polymorphisms being associated with
367 persistent infection with hepatitis B virus (Zhang et al., 2007). Furthermore, a recent
368 GWAS identified *CIITA* as a susceptibility gene for leprosy, which, like *L. infantum,*
369 is an intracellular pathogen (Liu et al., 2015).

The *CIITA* c.2595C>T SNP could be in linkage disequilibrium with an as yet unidentified polymorphism in the *CIITA* gene or another gene located nearby on chromosome 6. Other genes, on the same chromosome, which might contain causal variants include *CLEC16A*, encoding a membrane associated endosomal protein, *DEXI*, which encodes a protein of unknown function and *SOCS1*, a suppressor of cytokine signalling; all of which have been found to be associated with immune-mediated disease in humans (Davison et al., 2012). Future studies should interrogate multiple SNPs in this region, to understand which genes, if any, might be of importance in susceptibility to canine leishmaniosis.

Three SNPs in *TLR3* were found to be associated with the disease phenotype in Beagle dogs; two of which were in linkage disequilibrium and did not appear to have independent effects. A significant association with disease was also observed for a SNP in *TLR4*. Although TLR3 recognises double stranded RNA, and is thus important for recognition of viral pathogens, there is some evidence that TLR3 might also recognise *Leishmania* parasites. One study indicated that by inhibiting expression of *TLR3* by RNA interference production of nitric oxide (NO) and TNF-α by macrophages infected *in vitro* with *L. donovani* promastigotes was reduced (Flandin et al., 2006). Furthermore, a recent study revealed a positive correlation between *TLR3* expression and parasite density in the skin of dogs in early experimental infection with *L. infantum* (Hosein et al., 2015).

Potential *Leishmania* ligands for TLR4 are glycosphingophospholipids (GSPL), which have been shown to induce a TLR4 mediated inflammatory response and parasite clearance of *L.donovani* in mice (Karmakar et al., 2012). In mouse models, TLR4 is key to controlling the number of *L.major* parasites (Kropf et al., 2004a;

394 2004b). In dogs infected with *L. infantum*, the role of TLR4 is unclear; a recent study
395 demonstrated *TLR4* expression in the lymph node and spleen was reduced in infected
396 dogs, compared with uninfected controls (Hosein et al., 2015).

397 Two SNPs in the *PTPN22* gene appeared to be associated with disease at the individual
398 SNP level, and one other *PTPN22* SNP was significant at the genotype level. *PTPN22*
399 is a susceptibility gene for immune-mediated diseases in humans (Criswell et al.,
400 2005) and with Type 1 diabetes and hypoadrenocorticism in the dog (Short et al., 2007;
401 2013). PTPN22 is believed to inhibit activation of T cells by dephosphorylation of
402 signal transduction mediators (Stanford and Bottini, 2014), however, the role of
403 PTPN22 has not been investigated with respect to leishmaniosis.

404 The SNPs associated with disease susceptibility, and the genes in which they were
405 located, were different between the two studies. These differences could be due to the
406 breed profiles and nature of the two studies. Furthermore, in Study 1, the control group
407 of dogs were mostly negative by both ELISA and qPCR testing. These dogs are
408 assumed to have been exposed to *L. infantum* infected sand flies, since they lived in
409 endemic regions, however exposure to sand flies was likely variable due to differences
410 in owner lifestyle. Test sensitivity for *Leishmania* DNA is thought to be low in
411 peripheral blood, when compared with other tissues (Maia and Campino, 2008) and it
412 is therefore possible that these dogs were infected at a low level that could not be
413 detected. An ELISA for the detection of IgG antibodies against sand fly saliva
414 antigens has been shown to correlate with the number of feeding events (Hostomska
415 et al., 2008; Vlkova et al., 2011) and could have been used to confirm exposure to sand
416 flies if not exposure to *L. infantum*. A small number of dogs within the control group
417 were positive by either ELISA or by qPCR, but did not display any clinical signs and

418 were possibly more representative of resistant dogs provided they remained
419 asymptomatic. Disease progression for these infected but clinically healthy dogs is
420 variable, with longitudinal studies suggesting that some dogs develop severe disease
421 in the short to medium term whereas other dogs remain free from clinical signs for
422 long periods or even indefinitely (Quinnell et al., 2001; Oliva et al., 2006). There are
423 other limitations to this genetic study in terms of the sample size and potential
424 population stratification, which were difficult to overcome in terms of the availability
425 of suitable samples from dogs in endemic regions. Use of a larger number of control
426 dogs might have increased the power and reduced stratification effects (Cardon and
427 Bell, 2001). The Beagle dogs were selected from a larger trial population and were
428 considered to represent extreme phenotypes in terms of resistance and susceptibility
429 to *Leishmania* infection.

430

431 **Conclusions**

432 Although the study was likely to be underpowered, as a result of small sample size,
433 several genes of interest have been identified that could be involved in susceptibility
434 to canine leishmaniosis. Identification of immune response genes involved in disease
435 susceptibility could inform breeding and disease prevention strategies in the future, as
436 well as more targeted selection of dogs for vaccine challenge studies. Furthermore,
437 these susceptibility genes might represent good targets for manipulation (e.g. via use
438 of specific adjuvants) in development of immunomodulatory therapies and vaccines.

439

440 **Declaration of interest**

441 **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

442 Samples from Study 1 were residual samples taken under the Veterinary Surgeons
443 Act (1966). Signed informed consent was obtained from owners for permission to
444 use any excess blood for clinical research after completion of diagnostic testing.
445 Approval was granted from the Royal Veterinary College Ethics Committee,
446 reference number URN 2014 1292 for sampling the dogs and for use of the samples
447 in research.

448 Samples from Study 2 were residual samples provided from studies previously
449 undertaken and approved by the Veterinary Board of the Italian Ministry of Health
450 following the European Directive 86/609/EEC, adopted by the Italian Government
451 with the Law 116/1992. Approval was granted from the Royal Veterinary College
452 Ethics Committee, reference number URN 2015 1329 for the use of the samples in
453 research.

454 **Competing interests**

455

456 ST and CH work for the Diagnostic Laboratories, Langford Vets, University of
457 Bristol. The Laboratories provide a range of commercial diagnostic services
458 including ELISA and qPCR testing for canine leishmaniosis.

459 **Funding**

460 This study was supported by a Biotechnology and Biological Sciences
461 Research Council (BBSRC) Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering
462 (CASE) studentship (BB/I015655/1) in partnership with Zoetis.

463

464 **Authors contributions**

465 FS, LSG and BC were involved in study conception and design and co-ordinated the
466 experiments. LSG and FS designed a collection protocol and CA collected samples
467 for Group 1. LG designed a collection protocol, collected samples and performed
468 cultures for Group 2; EF extracted DNA and performed PCR and IFAT for this
469 group. VFM and GO collected and evaluated clinical and clinicopathological
470 parameters from Group 2. FS extracted the DNA and performed ELISA analysis for
471 study 1 and performed the genetic and statistical analysis for both studies. CH and
472 ST co-ordinated the qPCR work for study 1. FS and BC wrote the manuscript with
473 input from all the authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

474

475 **Acknowledgements**

476 The authors would like to thank the veterinarians in Cyprus and Spain who helped
477 with sample collection. They would also like to thank Sergio Villanueva Saz who
478 helped facilitate sample collection in Spain and Dave Morris who ran the Leishmania
479 qPCR for study 1. Thanks also to Lorna Kennedy, Bill Ollier, Andrea Short and
480 Hazel Platt at the University of Manchester for their help with the SNP array.

481

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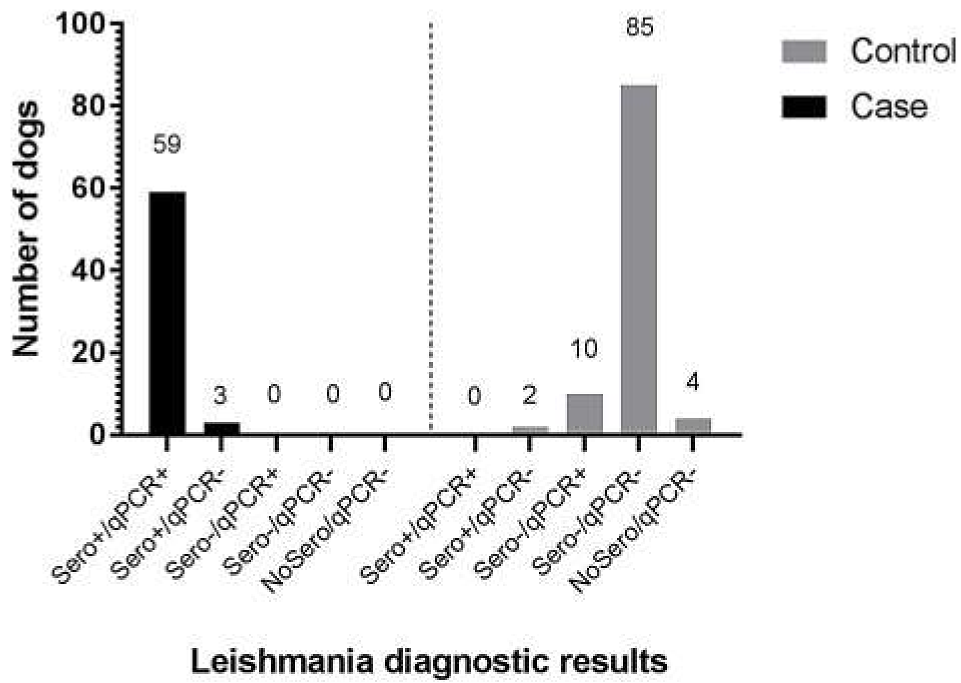
628

629 **Figure Legends**

630 **Figure 1**

631 *Leishmania* diagnostic summary for Study 1 clinical cases and controls. Clinical
632 case (n=62) and control (n=101) dogs were tested for *Leishmania* antibodies by
633 ELISA and *Leishmania* DNA in the peripheral blood was assessed by qPCR. +/- =
634 positive/negative result, Sero = ELISA result, qPCR = qPCR result. Cases are
635 indicated by black bars and controls are indicated by grey bars.



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