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Tania Afzal
Northeastern Illinois University

Timothy L. Turner
Northwestern University

Sumitra D. Mitra
Northwestern University

Travis J. Kochan
Northwestern University

Joanne J. H. Lee
Northwestern University

See next page for additional authors

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Presenter Information

Tania Afzal, Timothy L. Turner, Sumitra D. Mitra, Travis J. Kochan, Joanne J. H. Lee, Cindy Voisine, and Alan Hauser

USE OF *GALLERIA MELLONELLA* LARVAE FOR ASSESSING *PSEUDOMONAS AERUGINOSA* VIRULENCE

Tania Afzal[1], Timothy L. Turner[2], Sumitra D. Mitra[2], Travis J. Kochan[2], Joanne J. H. Lee[4], Cindy Voisine[1], and Alan R. Hauser[2,3]

[1]Department of Biology, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL 60625
[2]Department of Microbiology-Immunology and [3]Department of Medicine, Division of Infectious Diseases, Northwestern University, Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL 60611
[4]Department of Biology and Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, Evanston, IL 60201

Pseudomonas aeruginosa is a gram-negative opportunistic pathogen that is ubiquitous in the environment. Due to its multi-drug resistance mechanisms and virulence factors, *P. aeruginosa* has become a growing concern in the health care community and can be life-threatening in compromised individuals. High-throughput *in vivo* models are needed to assess the virulence of the wide variety of *P. aeruginosa* strains. *Galleria mellonella* has several advantages as a model organism in bacterial virulence studies, such as its affordability, minimal ethical restrictions, and ease of use. Our preliminary data indicated a low correlation (R^2: 0.33) between the lethal dose for 50% mortality in mice (mLD_{50}) and 50% mortality at 18 hours post-infection in *G. mellonella* (gLD_{50}) infected with *P. aeruginosa* bloodstream isolates. Also, poor correlation ($R^2 = 0.34$) was noted between the preliminary data's two biological replicates, indicating a problem with reproducibility. In this study, the protocol for virulence assays using *G. mellonella* as a model for *P. aeruginosa* infections was optimized and the sources of variability and unintended deaths in negative controls of preliminary studies were investigated. Injection site and depth, microbial contamination, and the impact of *G. mellonella* weight were investigated to determine if these factors created variation in preliminary experimentation. Mortality checks were changed to a 24-hour time course starting at 8 hours post-infection and continuing every hour until 24 hours post-infection or until 100% mortality was achieved. Five bacterial doses were checked, and the lethal time to achieve 50% mortality in *G. mellonella* (gLT_{50}) was determined for each dose. Exponential decay curves were fit to colony-forming units (CFUs) vs. gLT_{50}s plots, allowing for an accurate strain to strain comparisons at ~2,000 CFUs. The new methodology was then used to assess the relative gLT_{50} of ~49 strains of *P. aeruginosa.* The virulence assay retest demonstrated an increase in correlation between gLT_{50} and mLD_{50} (R^2: 0.61). These findings suggest that *G. mellonella* is a promising model organism for studying bacterial infections when utilizing our time course and dose-response curve protocol.