

Seroprevalence of *Coxiella burnetii* and *Brucella abortus* among pregnant women

D. Baud^{1,3}, O. Peter², C. Langel², L. Regan³ and G. Greub¹

1) Center for Research on Intracellular Bacteria, Institute of Microbiology, Faculty of Biology and Medicine, University of Lausanne, Lausanne,

2) Department of Infectious diseases, Central Institute of Valais, Sion, Switzerland and 3) Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, St Mary's Hospital, Imperial College London, London, UK

Abstract

Coxiella burnetii and *Brucella abortus* are two intracellular bacteria implicated in zoonotic miscarriage. In the present study, *C. burnetii* and *B. abortus* seroprevalence was compared among women from London with and without miscarriage. *Coxiella burnetii* seroprevalence was high (4.6%, 95% CI 2.8–7.1) despite the rare apparent exposure of this urban population. Only two patients exhibited anti-*B. abortus* antibodies. As a result of the risk of chronic Q fever with endocarditis and/or hepatitis, the mode of *Coxiella burnetii* infection in this population merits further investigation.

Keywords: *Chlamydia*-like, *Coxiella burnetii*, cross-reaction, miscarriage, *Parachlamydia acanthamoebae*, Q fever, seroprevalence, *Waddlia chondrophila*

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Corresponding author and reprint requests: G. Greub, Center for Research on Intracellular Bacteria (CRIB), Institute of Microbiology, University Hospital Center and University of Lausanne, Bugnon 48, 1011 Lausanne, Switzerland
E-mail: gilbert.greub@chuv.ch

Coxiella burnetii, the agent of Q fever, is an intracellular bacterium that may cause systemic infections in humans. Acute Q fever is often asymptomatic or manifests only as an

influenza-like unrecognized illness [1,2]. It may also present as hepatitis or atypical pneumonia. Blood culture-negative endocarditis, vascular infections, osteoarticular involvement and chronic liver diseases are the main clinical pictures of chronic Q fever, which represents a rare complication of acute *Coxiella* infection [1]. Domestic animals and pets are the most frequent source of *Coxiella* infections in humans [1]. *Brucella abortus* is another zoonotic intracellular bacterium that may cause systemic infection. This infection frequently presents as a sustained fever (91% of cases), rarely associated with hepatomegaly (17%), splenomegaly (16%) and lymphadenopathy (6%) [3,4].

Both bacterial species have been associated with human miscarriage [1–4]. *Coxiella burnetii*, when contracted during human pregnancy, may result in a fatal outcome [5–9]. However, other studies performed in more than 12 000 pregnant women failed to confirm an association of *Coxiella* seropositivity with pregnancy outcome [10]. The reproductive system is the second most common site of brucellosis, being associated with a substantial risk of miscarriage during pregnancy [11,12].

The main aim of the present study was to evaluate *C. burnetii* and *B. abortus* seroprevalence among a population of pregnant women in a non-endemic area. In addition, the role of *Coxiella* and *Brucella* as agents causing miscarriage was also assessed.

Sera were obtained from women attending the Recurrent Miscarriage Clinic of St Mary's Hospital, London. The 438 sera had previously been investigated for *Waddlia chondrophila* and other *Chlamydiae* [13]. This allowed the assessment of any serological cross-reactivity among *C. burnetii*, *B. abortus* and several other previously studied intracellular bacteria, which are listed in Table 1.

Sera were tested for the presence of antibodies directed against *C. burnetii* using indirect immunofluorescence [14]. Briefly, sera were screened using an indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA) at a 1/50 dilution with *C. burnetii* phase I and II antigens (strain Nine Miles, kindly provided by W. Burgdorfer, Rocky Mountain Laboratories, Hamilton, MT, USA). We used fluorescein isothiocyanate goat anti-human specific IgG conjugate (bioMérieux, Marcy-l'Etoile, France). Positive sera were then serially two-fold diluted starting at 1/20.

Serological *B. abortus* diagnosis was established using the Wright's tube agglutination test (*Brucella* Antigen, Sanofi Diagnostics, Marnes-la-Coquette, France). Antibody reactivity against *Toxoplasma gondii* was assessed using a commercial latex agglutination kit, Toxo-Screen DA (bioMérieux). Prevalence and p values were calculated using STATA software (StataCorp, College Station, TX, USA).

TABLE 1. Characteristics of patients according to their *Coxiella burnetii* serostatus

	Coxiella negative (n = 418)		Coxiella positive (n = 20)		p value*
Age					
Median (IQR)	33	(28–38)	33	(29–37)	0.843
Number of pregnancy					
1	115	(27.5%)	7	(35%)	0.239
2	77	(18.4%)	1	(5%)	
>2	226	(54.1%)	12	(60%)	
Parity					
0	159	(38%)	3	(15%)	0.067
1	175	(41.9%)	10	(50%)	
2	50	(12%)	4	(20%)	
>2	34	(8.1%)	3	(15%)	
Miscarriages					
Early ≤12 weeks	242	(57.9%)	9	(45%)	0.355
Late >12 weeks	61	(14.6%)	3	(15%)	1.000
Stillbirth >24 weeks	15	(3.6%)	0	(0%)	1.000
Ethnicity					
White	235	(56.2%)	11	(55%)	1.000
Black	63	(15.1%)	4	(20%)	0.526
Asian	78	(18.7%)	5	(25%)	0.557
Other	42	(10.5%)	0	(0%)	0.241
Born in the UK	224	(53.6%)	10	(50%)	0.821
Contact with animals	106	(25.4%)	4	(20%)	0.793
Cat	57	(13.6%)	3	(15%)	0.745
Dog	46	(11%)	3	(15%)	0.480
Additional serologies					
Waddlia chondrophila (IgG ≥1/64)	93	(22.3%)	4	(20%)	1.000
Parachlamydia (IgG ≥1/64)	7	(1.7%)	0	(0%)	1.000
Chlamydia trachomatis (IgG ≥1/50)	61	(14.6%)	2	(10%)	0.752
Chlamydia pneumoniae (IgG ≥1/64)	187	(44.7%)	12	(60%)	0.250
Chlamydia psittaci (IgG ≥1/64)	26	(6.2%)	0	(0%)	0.622
Brucella abortus (Ig ≥1/20)	2	(0.48%)	0	(0%)	1.000
Toxoplasma gondii (Ig ≥1/20)	96	(22.3%)	4	(20%)	1.000

IQR, interquartile range.
*Fisher's exact chi-squared test.

Among the 438 women enrolled in the study [13], 20 (4.6%, 95% CI 2.8–7.1) were positive for *C. burnetii* phase II IgG antibodies. None was positive for *C. burnetii* phase I IgG antibodies. Only two (0.5%, 95% CI 0.1–1.7) also exhibited IgM antibodies against *C. burnetii*. No statistical differences were observed between *C. burnetii* IgG seroprevalences in women with sporadic (1/69, 1.4%, 95% CI 0.1–8.1, p 0.188) or recurrent miscarriage (8/200, 4%, 95% CI 1.7–7.9%, p 0.346) compared to controls (11/169, 6.5%, 95% CI 3.2–11.6).

The demographic characteristics and potential risk factors for IgG seropositivity for *C. burnetii* are shown in Table 1. Although outbreaks of Q fever in humans result from inhalation of aerosols from infected parturient animals, the frequency of animal contacts was similar between women who were *C. burnetii* IgG positive and those who were *C. burnetii* IgG negative. *Toxoplasma gondii* seroprevalence was similar in women with and without anti-*Coxiella* antibodies, suggesting that *Coxiella* and the protozoon do not have similar modes of transmission (i.e. contact with cats). One healthy control woman, who was a cat and dog owner, and one woman with recurrent miscarriage were *C. burnetii* IgM positive. Both were UK-born Caucasians.

Serological cross-reactions with zoonotic (*W. chondrophila*, *Parachlamydia acanthamoebae*, *Chlamydia psittaci*, *B. abortus*) and human (*Chlamydia trachomatis*) potential agents of miscarriage were also studied. None of these organisms showed evidence of cross-reaction with *Coxiella*.

The serum of only two women (0.5%, 95% CI 0.1–1.6) contained antibodies directed against *Brucella*. Both were immigrants from Sudan. One was healthy, with an at-term pregnancy, whereas the other recurrently miscarried, a total of five times, and no other aetiology of miscarriage was identified.

In conclusion, exposure to *C. burnetii* is common and exposure to *B. abortus* is uncommon in women in London, with a seroprevalence of 4.6% and 0.5%, respectively.

Coxiella burnetii serosurveys, mainly conducted in endemic areas, are difficult to compare because of the different methods and cut-off values employed [2]. In the present study, an IgG anti-phase II *C. burnetii* cut-off of 1/50 was chosen, as recommended elsewhere [1]. Surprisingly, the overall *Coxiella* IgG seroprevalence of 4.6% observed in this urban population from an area considered to be non-endemic was similar to the seroprevalence reported from endemic areas [1]. In an endemic area of France, 0.15% of 12 716 pregnant women had serum anti-*Coxiella* IgG titres ≥1/100 [10]. In an

endemic area of Canada, 3.8% (291/7658) of pregnant women exhibited a phase II titre $\geq 1/32$ [7]. Moreover, among 200 healthy Japanese pregnant women, only four (2%) had anti-*Coxiella* IgG antibodies $\geq 1/16$ [9].

Q fever is frequently under-diagnosed because of the intracellular nature of *C. burnetii*, and because as many as 60% of infections remain asymptomatic [1]. Among 2% of patients requiring hospitalization, approximately 10% develop chronic Q fever, including endocarditis and/or chronic hepatitis [2,15]. Considering the 4.5% prevalence observed in the present study, we estimate that, among the 7.5 million inhabitants of London [16], 300 000 have serological evidence of prior *Coxiella* infection, 6000 will require hospitalization, and 600 may develop chronic Q fever if left untreated.

The present study failed to show an association between *Coxiella*-positive serology and contact with domestic animals. Other modes of transmission, including person-to-person contact [2], or via arthropod exposure [1], raw milk or *Coxiella*-infected amoebae in water [17,18], should be investigated in an attempt to understand infection with *Coxiella* in an urban area such as London. We found no association between *Coxiella*-positive serology and miscarriage. However, the small sample size limits conclusions concerning this issue. The present study also showed the absence of serological cross-reactivity between *Coxiella* and other agents of miscarriage, such as *W. chondrophila*. Only two women exhibited evidence of previous infection with *Brucella* spp., which is consistent with previously obtained data [3,4]. Q fever might be under-reported in London. As a result of the considerable morbidity associated with Q fever, physicians should be aware of the relatively common exposure to this bacterium, even in urban, non-endemic settings.

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