Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports

Volume 18, Issue 5, Page 80-89, 2024; Article no.AJARR.114714
ISSN: 2582-3248

Detection of Plasmid-mediated *qnr* Genes among the Quinolone Resistant *Salmonella typhi* from Patients Attending University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria

Fasema, R [a*], Ngwai, Y. B [a], Ishaleku, D [a], Nkene, I. H [a], Abimiku, R. H [b], Tama, S. C [a] and Igbawua, I. N [a]

[a] Department of Microbiology, Nasarawa State University, P.M.B. 1022, Keffi, Nigeria.
[b] Institute of Human Virology, Abuja, Nigeria.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author NYB designed the study. Author ID wrote the protocol. Author FR performed the statistical analysis. Author NIH wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors TSC and ARH managed the analyses of the study. Author IIN managed the literature searches. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/AJARR/2024/v18i5634

Open Peer Review History:
This journal follows the Advanced Open Peer Review policy. Identity of the Reviewers, Editor(s) and additional Reviewers, peer review comments, different versions of the manuscript, comments of the editors, etc are available here: https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/114714

Original Research Article

Received: 11/01/2024
Accepted: 20/03/2024
Published: 26/03/2024

ABSTRACT

Aims: The aim of this study was to determine the presence of the *qnr* genes among *S. typhi* isolated from stool of patients with suspected typhoid fever, in University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria.
Study Design: Cross sectional study.
Place and Duration of Study: Department of Microbiology, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, between November 2022 and November 2023.

**Corresponding author: Email: rfaasema@gmail.com;*

Methodology: Stool samples of patients with suspected typhoid fever were collected by standard methods in sterile disposable containers. After analysis of stool, microscopic observations and culture analysis, *Salmonella typhi* was isolated, antibiotic susceptibility testing was carried out, and the bacterial genome was extracted by boiling method. PCR for detection of *qnr* genes including *qnrA*, *qnrB* and *qnrS* was done by specific primers, then PCR products were run using gel electrophoresis and visualized by gel documentation system.
Results: Out of 150 isolates, 13 (8.7%) were positive for *S. typhi*. Antibiotic resistance among the isolates in decreasing order were as follows: imipenems (100.0%), cefuroxime (100.0%), cefotaxime (100.0%), nalidixic acid (92.3%), amoxicillin/ clavulanic acid (84.6%), ceftriaxone/sulbactam (84.6%), ciprofloxacin (84.6%), gentamicin (76.9%), levofloxacin (46.2%) and ofloxacin (46.2%). The most common antibiotic resistant phenotype was AUG- CTX-IMP-OFX-CN-NA-CXM-CRO-CIP-LBC at 30.4%. Multiple antibiotic resistance (MAR) was observed in 100% (13/13) of the isolates with the common MAR indices being 1.0 (30.8%), 0.7 (23.5%), 0.8 (23.1%) and 0.9 (15.4%). The only positive *PMQR* genes were *qnrS* and *aac(6')-Ib-cr* with percentage occurrence of 50.0% respectively
Conclusion: The *S. typhi* isolates showed lower resistance to ofloxacin, levofloxacin, and gentamicin, and all isolates were MAR, with resistance to 10 antibiotics being the most predominant. In addition, *qnr*S resistance gene was the most common gene expressed.

Keywords: Salmonella; typhoid fever; gene; qnrS; ciprofloxacin; nalidixic acid; levofloxacin; phenotypeN; plasmid-mediated.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quinolones are an important class of antibacterial drugs [1]. "Initially, nalidixic acid, ca member of the class of drugs, had limited clinical use. But with chemical modifications, especially the addition of fluorine, fluoroquinolones was birthed. Fluoroquinolones (such as levofloxacin, ciprofloxacin) are more potent, have a broader spectrum of activity, and a lower frequency of resistance as recorded in several studies" [2]. Fluoroquinolones have been used to treat many infections [3], including *Salmonella* infections, which can be dangerous, and even life-threatening [4]. "The introduction of quinolones into human medicine has led to the emergence and increase of resistance to this class of antibiotics" [5,3]. In developing countries like Nigeria, quinolone is also an issue of public health concern. The study of quinolone resistance in *Salmonella typhi* is clinically significant because Ciprofloxacin is the drug of choice in Nigeria, for treating human salmonellosis [6]. Reviews have highlighted several studies on the resistance of *Salmonella* to quinolones antibiotics in Nigeria [6].

"Fluoroquinolones, in their mechanism of action, target 2 essential bacterial enzymes, DNA gyrase and topoisomerase IV. In *Enterobacteriaceae* including *Salmonella*, quinolone resistance is known to develop from the accumulation of chromosomal mutations in the quinolone resistance-determining region (QRDR) of the target enzyme genes (or targeted genes), primarily *gyrA* and *parC"* [7,3]. "Since the late 1990s, 3 interesting types of plasmid-mediated quinolone resistance (PMQR) mechanisms have been identified: *qnr* genes, which protect target enzymes; *aac(6')-Ib-cr* gene, which is known to help in mediation and acetylation of certain quinolones; and *oqxAB* and *qepA* genes, which produce mobile efflux pumps" [8,9]. "A PMQR gene alone usually offers decreased susceptibility to fluoroquinolones and has less effect on nalidixic acid susceptibility" [2,9]. "PMQR (Plasmid-Mediated Quinolone Resistance) genes encode proteins that reduce the susceptibility of bacteria to quinolones, thereby making them less effective in treating infections" [3]. "This happens through mechanisms such as efflux pumps, protection of target sites, and modification of antibiotics" [7]. "Reduced efficacy of antibiotics means prolonged illness or treatment failures. It also means alternative antibiotics have to be considered, and they may be less effective or more expensive" [8]. The implications of PMQR in the treatment of infections and the dissemination of antimicrobial resistance are numerous and important. Plasmids harboring quinolone resistance genes can be horizontally transferred to other bacteria, thus spreading resistance. Information on Salmonella resistance to quinolones in the northern part of Nigeria is scanty. The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of *S. typhi* and expression of qnr genes (*qnrA,qnrB,* and *qnrS*) in *S.typhi* isolated from the stool of patients

in University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Media

Bacteriological media that were used in this study include: Salmonella-Shigella (SSA) Agar; Nutrient agar (NA); Mueller-Hinton agar (MHA); Mueller-Hinton broth (MHB); Bismuth sulfite agar (BSA); Selenite F- Broth (SFB); Xylose Lysine Deoxychocolate agar (XLD); Simmons Citrate agar (SCA); Triple Sugar Iron agar (TSI); Peptone water (PW) all were obtained from Oxoid Ltd (U.K.).

2.2 Antibiotic Discs

The antibiotics discs used in this study and their potency are as follows: Amoxicillin/Clavulanate (AMC: 30 µg), Cefotaxime (CTX: 25 µg), Imipenem/Cilastatin (IMP: 10 µg), Ofloxacin (OFX: 5 µg), Gentamicin (CN: 10 µg), Nalidixic acid (NA: 30 µg), Cefuroxime (CXM: 30 µg), Ceftriaxone/Sulbactam (CRO: 30 µg), Ciprofloxacin (CIP: 5 µg), Levofloxacin (LBC: 5 µg). All the discs were sourced from Oxoid Ltd. UK.

2.3 Chemicals and Reagents

The chemicals and reagents that were used in this study include: Acridine orange, Carbol fuschin, Crystal violet, Ethanol, Xylene solution, Creatinine, Pottasium hydroxide and Kovac's reagents, obtained from BDH Chemical Ltd, England; Ethydium bromide, Iodine solution, EDTA and Glycerol obtained from Sigma Chemical Ltd, England; and Agarose gel, from Schwarz/ Mann Biotech.

2.4 Primers and their Amplicon Sizes

Primers were purchased from Inqaba Biotech (South Africa). The primers, sequences and amplicon sizes are as shown in Table 1.

2.5 Study Location

The study was carried out at the University of Abuja Teaching Hospital (UATH). UATH is a 350 - bed hospital (tertiary health facility) located in, Gwagwalada, a town in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria.

2.6 Sample Collection

A total of 150 stool samples of patients with suspected cases of typhoid fever were collected using sterile container and transported using ice pack to the Microbiology Laboratory, Nasarawa State University, Keffi for analysis.

2.6.1 Inclusion criteria

Patients included in this study were only those with suspected cases of typhoid fever on visible clinical symptoms namely; Headache, Stomach pain, Diarrhea or constipation chills, and muscle aches, loss of appetite, Weakness and Fatigue in the selected hospitals.

2.6.2 Exclusion criteria

Patients without cases of typhoid fever and those with cases of typhoid fever who are on antibiotics were excluded in this study.

2.7 Isolation and Identification of *Salmonella typhi*

Salmonella typhi was isolated and identified using Gram staining, indole test, methyl red test, Voges-Proskauer test, citrate test and oxidase test as described by Cheesbrough [11] and further identified using KB003HI25 TM identification kits following manufacturer's instruction.

2.8 Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing

"The antibiotic susceptibility test of the isolates was carried out as earlier described by Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute" [11]. Briefly, (3) pure colonies of the isolate from stool samples of patients in the selected hospital was inoculated into 5 ml sterile 0.85% (w/v) NaCl (normal saline) and the turbidity of the bacteria suspension was adjusted to the turbidity equivalent to 0.5 McFarland standard. The McFarland's standard was prepared as follows; 0.5 ml of 1.172% (w/v) $BaCl_2.2H_2O$ was added into 99.5 ml of 1% (w/v) H_2SO_4 [12]. "A sterile swab stick was soaked in the standardized bacteria suspension and streaked o Mueller-Hinton agar plates (MH agar is a non-selective, non-differential medium and it helps mediate rate of diffusion of antimicrobial more effectively) and the antibiotics disc were aseptically placed at the centre of the plates and allowed to stand for 1 h for diffusion. The plates were incubated at

Table 1. Primers and their amplicon sizes

Target gene	Primer Sequence	Annealing Temperature (°C)	Amplicon size (bp)	Reference
qnrA	5'- CCGCTTTTATCAGTGTGACT-5' 3'-ACTCTATGCCAAAGCAGTTG -3'	55	188	[10]
qnrB	5'- GATCGTGAAAGCCAGAAAGG -5'3'-ACGATGCCTGGTAGTTGTCC -3'	54	469	[10]
qnrC	5'-GGGTTGTACATTTATTGAATCG -5'3'-CACCTACCCATTTATTTTCA -3'	54	308	[10]
qnrD	5'-CGAGATCAATTTACGGGGAATA-5'3'-AACAAGCTGAAGCGCCTG - 3'	57	582	[10]
QnrS	5'- ACGACATTCGTCAACTGCAA- 5'3'-TAAATTGGCACCCTGTAGGC- 3'	55	417	[10]
aac(6')-Ib	5'- TTGCGATGCTCTATGAGTGGCTA-5'3'-CTCGAATGCCTGGCGTGTTT- 3'	57	482	[10]
Class1Integron	5'-TCCACGCATCGTCAGGC -5' 3'-CCTCCCGCACGATGATC -3'	55	280	[10]

37°C for 24 h. The diameter zone of inhibition in millimeter was measured and the result of the susceptibility was interpreted in accordance with the susceptibility break point earlier described by Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute" [12].

2.8.1 Determination of multiple antibiotic resistance (MAR) index

The MAR index of the isolates was determined as described previously [13] using the formula:

MAR Index = No antibiotics isolate is resistant to / No. of antibiotics tested.

2.9 Molecular detection of Quinolone resistance genes

2.9.1 DNA extraction

The DNA was extracted by a method as earlier described by Abimiku et al. [14] with minor modification. Ten (10) milliliters of an overnight broth culture of the bacterial isolate in 1 ml Luria-Bertani (LB) were spun at 14000 rpm for 3 min. The supernatant was discarded, and the harvested cell pellet was resuspended in 1 ml sterile distilled water and transferred into 1.5-ml centrifuge tube and centrifuged at 14000 rpm for 10 min. The supernatant was discarded carefully. The pellet was resuspended in 100 µl of sterile distilled water by vortexing. The tube was centrifuged again at 14000 g for 10 min, and the supernatant was discarded carefully. "The cells were re-suspended in 500 µl of normal saline and heated at 95°C for 20 min. The heated bacterial suspension was cooled on ice for 10 min and spun for 3 min at 14000 rpm. The supernatant containing the DNA was transferred to a 1.5-ml micro centrifuge tube and stored at -20ºC for other downstream reactions" [14].

2.9.2 Amplification of target genes

"The DNA amplification of target plasmid–mediated Quinolone resistant genes in ciprofloxacin resistant *S. typhi* isolates was carried out using single plex method by modification of the method" earlier described by Jang et al. [15]. "Briefly, the reaction was carried out in 25 µl reaction volume in artificial tubes which is made up of 5 µl master mix, 2.4 µl primers (0.4 µl each of forward and reverse primers), 0.5 µl of $MgCl_2$, 1.5 µl of DNA template and 15.6 µl of nuclease free water. The reaction tubes were placed in the holes of the thermal cycler was closed and the door was closed. Then *qnrA, qnrB*, and *qnrS* genes were amplified under the following conditions: Initial denaturation at 94ºC for 5 min followed by 32 cycles of amplification at 94ºC for 45 sec each, annealing at 53ºC for 45 sec, with final extension at 72ºC for 5 min" [15].

"The amplification condition for detection of *aac (6) -1b-cr* was carried out as follows; initial denaturation at 95ºC for 20 min, annealing at 59ºC for 40 sec and initial extension at 70ºC for 30 sec and with final extension at 72ºC for 5 min" [15]. The primers used are listed in Table 1.

2.9.3 Agarose gel electrophoresis

The PCR products (10 µl) were evaluated on a 1.5% (w/v) Agarose gel (Gibco Life Technologies, Paisley, United Kingdom) at 100 mV for 60 min using BIO-RAD Power Pac 3000; and a molecular weight marker (1-kb DNA Ladder) was used as a standard. The DNA bands were then visualized and photographed under UV light using UVitec and Video copy processor after staining the gel with ethidium bromide as described by Aljanaby and Medhat [16].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Isolation and Identification of *Salmonella typhi*

The organism which grew with colorless colonies on Salmonella-Shigella (SSA) Agar, black metallic sheen on Bismuth Sulphite Agar, Gram negative, rod shape, nitrate-positive, Hydrogen sulphide-positive, and Methyl red-positive was identified as *S. typhi*.

3.1.1 Occurrence of *Salmonella typhi*

The isolation rate for *S. typhi* was 8.7 % (13/150). In relation to age of patients, the occurrence of *S. typhi* was highest at age 21-30yrs (16.7%), but lowest in age 41-50(5.7%) as shown in Table 2.

3.2 Antimicrobial Resistance Profile

The Antibiotic Resistance of S.*typhi* isolates from of patients with suspected typhoid fever in University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, is as given in Table 3. The isolates from UATH were more resistant to Cefotaxime (100.0%), imipenem (100.0%), and ceftriaxone/Sulbactam

(100.0%), but were less resistance to Levofloxacin (46.2%), and ofloxacin (46.2%).

Table 2. Occurrence of *Salmonella typhi* from stool of patients with suspected typhoid fever in University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria in relation to age

Age	No of Samples	Number (%) *Salmonella typhi*
≤ 10	10	1(10.0)
11- 20	20	2(10.0)
21- 30	30	5(16.7)
31- 40	40	2(5.0)
41- 50	35	2(5.7)
> 50	15	1(6.7)
Total	150	13 (8.7)

3.3 Multiple Antibiotic Resistance (MAR) Index

Multiple antibiotic resistance (MAR), which is the resistance of microorganisms to at least two (2) antibiotics was observed in all 13 isolates (100.0%). This suggests the possibility that most of the isolates originated from an environment where abuse of antibiotics was regular [12]. The most common indices were 1.0 (30.8%), 0.8 (23.1%), and 0.9 (15.4%).

3.4 Molecular Detection of Plasmid Mediated Quinolone resistant genes

The plasmid mediated quinolone resistant genes detected in quinolone resistant isolates is as shown in table 4. The only positive *PMQR* genes were *qnrS* and *aac(6')-Ib-cr* with percentage occurrence of 50.0% respectively.

Typhoid fever is caused by *Salmonella typhi*, which is known for being resistant to several antibiotics. It is one of the leading causes of death and infections in developing nations, and also a frequent cause illnesses in Africa, particularly Nigeria. A study by Jubair *et al* in Iraq [17], stated a low prevalence of the *S.typhi* strain in Iraq (13%). This isn't consistent with another study by Rahman et al [18] where other Middle Eastern countries had an 80.0% of *S.typhi* - infected patients, suggesting that most *S. typhi* infections originate from the Asian continent, while the remainder is primarily from Africa and Latin America [18].

Table 3. Antimicrobial resistance profile of ***S. typhi* from stool of patients with suspected typhoid fever University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria**

Antibiotics	Disc Content (µg)	No. (%) resistance in S.*typhi* (n=13)
Amoxicillin/Clavulanate (AMC)	30	11 (84.6)
Cefotaxime (CTX)	25	13 (100.0)
Imipenem/Cilastatin (IMP)	10	13(100.0
Ofloxacin (OFX)	5	6(46.2)
Gentamicin (CN)	10	10(76.9)
Nalidixic acid (NA)	30	12(92.3)
Cefuroxime (CXM)	30	11(84.6)
Ceftriaxone/Sulbactam (CRO)	30	13(100.0)
Ciprofloxacin (CIP)	5	11(84.6)
Levofloxacin (LBC)	5	6(46.2)

Table 4. Multiple Antibiotics Resistance (MAR) Index of *Salmonella typhi* isolates from stool of patients from University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria

No. of Antibiotic Resistance (a)	No of Antibiotics Tested (b)	MAR Index (a/b)	No (%) of MAR Isolates (n =17)
10	10	1.0	4(30.8)
9	10	0.9	2(15.4)
8	10	0.8	3(23.1)
7	10	0.7	1(7.7)
6	10	0.6	1(7.7)
5	10	0.5	1(7.7)
4	10	0.4	0(0.0)

Table 5. Molecular Detection of plasmid mediated Quinolone Resistance genes in Quinolone resistant *Salmonella typhi* University of Abuja Teaching Hospital, Abuja, Nigeria

Quinolone resistance Genes	No. (%) of *S. typhi*) (n = 6)
*Qnr*A	1(16.7)
*Qnr*C	1 (16.7)
QnrD	1 (16.7)
*Qnr*S	2 (3.34)
aac(6')-Ib-cr	1 (16.7)
qnrA + qnrC	2 (3.34)
qnrC + qnrD	2 (3.34)
qnrD + qnrS	3 (50.0))
*qnr*S + *aac(6')-Ib-cr*	3 (50.0)
*qnr*A + *qnr*C + *qnr*D +*qnr*S + *aac(6')-Ib-cr*	6 (100.0)

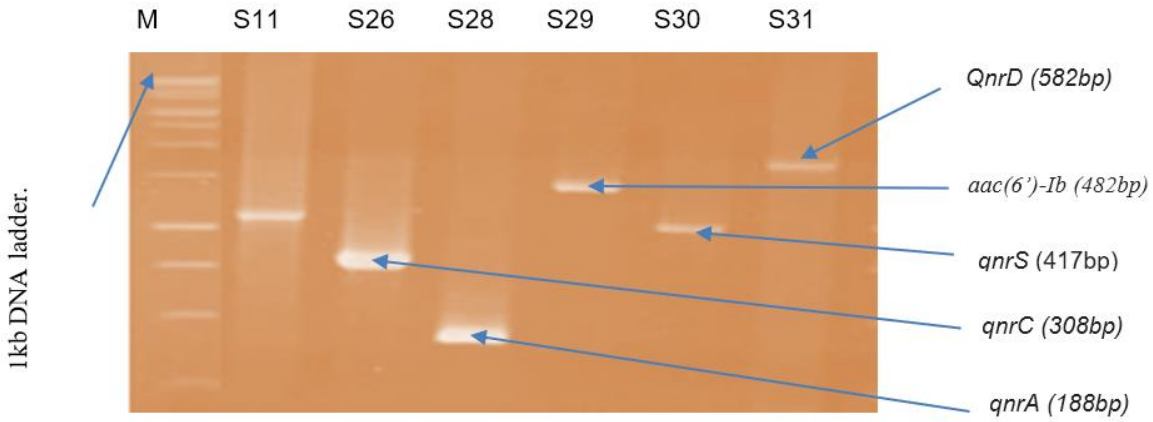

Fig. 1. Agarose gel electrophoresis of the amplified quinolones resistance *genes* of *Salmonella typhi*. Lane S11 and Lane S30 represent the expression of the *qnrS (417bp)* gene; Lane S26 represent the expression of the *qnrC* (308bp) gene; Lane S28 represent the expression of the *qnrA (188bp)* gene; Lane S29 represent the expression of the *aac(6')-Ib (482bp)* gene; Lane S30 represent the expression of the *qnrS (417bp)* gene and Lane S31 represent the expression of the *QnrD (582bp)* gene; while Lane M represents 1kb DNA molecular ladder

"This study used 150 stool samples collected from patients with suspected typhoid fever to isolate and diagnose *S.typhi*. In the current study, only 13(8.7%) positive samples identified as *S.typhi* based on colony morphology on culture medium, biochemical testing amongst others, This is lower than reports from a study of hospitals in Najaf, Iraq, where a higher rate of culture-positive typhoid fever isolates was reported in 2017 and 2020" [19,20].

"The occurrence of *S. typhi* from stool of patients in relationship to their age was higher at age 21-30 years, and this is in agreement with a study which reported high occurrence of *S. typhi* in patients of age > 10-41 years [17] and 21-31 years" [21].

The high resistance of the isolates to antibiotics such as cefotaxime, imipenem, and ceftriaxone/ Sulbactam as observed in this study was not surprising and may be due to abuse of the antibiotics. The high resistance of the isolates to imipenem, cefotaxime and ceftriaxone/ Sulbactam (all 100.0%) was similar to findings from a study in Abuja by Fasema et al [22]. Furthermore, the low resistance of the isolates to antibiotics including Ofloxacin (46.2%), and levofloxacin (46.2%) is higher than findings by Dong et al [23], but lower than reports from a study in Iraq and Iran [24,25]. The low resistance of these isolates to antibiotics makes a case for them to be presented as the foremost option for treatment of infections caused by *S. typhi* in this region.

"Quinolones were the best option for antibiotics when classical MDR *S.typhi* first appeared, However, *S.typhi* isolates that are resistant to quinolones have emerged due to the extensive use of quinolones to treat typhoid fever" [26]. "This is no surprise as the Multiple antibiotic resistance (MAR), which is the resistance of microorganisms to at least two (2) antibiotics was observed in all 13 isolates (100.0%). The three most common PMQR genes (qnrA, qnrB, and qnrs) that have led to the persistent spread of quinolone-resistant *S.typhi* were chosen in this study. However, the only positive *PMQR* genes were *qnrS* and *aac(6')-Ib-cr* with percentage occurrence of 50.0% respectively**.** A study on *qnr* genes in *S.typhi* isolates from South Korea found that *qnrB* was the most common *qnr* gene" [27]. "In India, the *qnrB* gene was amplified in 70.0% of *S.typhi* strains isolated" [28]. In Iran, *qnrA* was found in 30.4% of the *S.typhi* isolates, *qnrS* was detected in 56.5%, while qnrB was detected in 1.1% [21].

4. CONCLUSION

This study showed that *S. typhi* is a cause of infection among typhoid patients, ofloxacin, and levofloxacin are fully effective against *S.typhi* clinical isolates from typhoid fever patients. All isolates considered were multiple drug resistant, and this is significant. The *qnrS* gene was present in some isolates. This gene may contribute to the quinolone resistance of *S. Typhi*. The appearance of a PMQR gene in *S. typhi* means it is necessary for there to be a limit to the use of quinolones to reduce the spread of resistant strains.

CONSENT

All authors declare that 'written informed consent was obtained from the patient (or other approved parties) for publication of this case report and accompanying images. A copy of the written consent is available for review by the Editorial office/Chief Editor/Editorial Board members of this journal.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Appropriate ethical committee approval was obtained prior to start of the research and is available for review. Ethical approval number is FHREC/2022/01/36/25-03-02.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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DOI: 10.1016/j.drup.2016.09.001
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