Molecular study of $\text{blaVIM}$ and $\text{blaIMP}$ genes in *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains isolated from burn patients in Duhok City, Iraq

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**Abstract**

Introduction: *Acinetobacter baumannii* (*A. baumannii*) is an opportunistic pathogenic bacterium mainly associated with hospital acquired infections and in immunocompromised individuals who stay in hospitals for a long time. In recent years, it has become increasingly resistant to many different types of antibiotics. The production of the metallo-beta-lactamase (MBL) enzyme is one of the primary causes of this resistance. This study aimed to detect the presence of MBL genes that belong to the verona integrin metallo-beta-lactamase (*bla-VIM*) and imipenemase (*bla-IMP*) groups in the isolates of *A. baumannii* from burn patients.

Methodology: One hundred and seventeen (117) isolates of *A. baumannii* were obtained from patient specimens using traditional methods followed by using the VITEK 2 (BioMérieux, Les Pennes-Mirabeau, France) identification system. Metallo beta-lactamases were detected in the imipenem-resistant strains by using imipenem disks on Muller-Hinton agar. The polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technique was utilized to examine 117 isolates for the detection of MBLs encoding genes such as *bla-VIM*, and *bla-IMP*.

Results: Imipenem resistance was detected in 78.6% of the patients. The PCR assays of the isolates identified *bla-VIM*-1, *bla-VIM*-2, *bla-IMP*-1 and *bla-IMP*-2 genes at the rates of 17%, 40.1%, 29.9% and 4.2%, respectively.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that the majority of *A. baumannii* isolates harbour one or more of the detected genes, signifying that the production of MBLs plays a pivotal role in resistance mechanisms.

**Key words:** *Acinetobacter baumannii*; metallo-beta-lactamases; *bla-VIM*; *bla-IMP*.


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**Introduction**

*Acinetobacter baumannii*, is a member of family Moraxellaceae. It is a Gram-negative coccobacillus and does not undergo fermentation. Although most members of genus *Acinetobacter* are present in the environment and generally do not cause human disease, certain *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains have evolved to exhibit resistance to multiple drugs, leading to the emergence of respiratory, bloodstream, and skin infections in recent years. This particular microorganism poses a significant challenge in hospitals, particularly in the intensive care units (ICU) where managing several infections can be problematic [1,2].

One of the main public health concerns, particularly in developing countries, is the prevalence of infections resulting from burn injuries [3]. It is estimated that infections with *A. baumannii* account for nearly 75% of fatalities among patients with burn injuries [4]. *A. baumannii* is a common hospital-acquired infection that can result in high levels of illness and death among patients who are hospitalized, especially those in burn and intensive care units, and it is estimated that it causes nearly 75% of the fatalities among burn patients [5].

Nowadays bacterial resistance to antibiotics is a major issue worldwide, especially in the case of *A. baumannii*. Carbapenems are currently the primary medications used for the treatment of infections caused by multidrug-resistant *A. baumannii*. Nonetheless, there is growing concern as carbapenem resistance among *A. baumannii* isolates may become more widespread [6]. Resistance of *A. baumannii* to carbapenems could be caused by a variety of factors, such as the development of beta-lactamases, changes in proteins that bind to penicillin and outer membrane proteins, and an excess of efflux pumps [7]. Huang and colleagues [8] reported that the synthesis of beta-lactamase enzymes is a critical factor contributing to the antibiotic resistance observed in *A. baumannii*. The genes encoding these enzymes are located on mobile genetic elements such as integrons.

Beta-lactamases are divided into four groups based on their amino acid sequence (A, B, C, and D). The class B-lactamases (MBLs) and D-type carbapenemase (OXA-type) are frequently linked to carbapenem
resistance [9]. MBLs are of greater significance than other types of β-lactamases because of their capability to break down a broad spectrum of β-lactam antibiotics, specifically carbapenems [10].

A number of MBLs genes, including verona integrin metallo-β-lactamase (bla-VIM) and imipenemase (bla-IMP), have been found in A. baumannii isolates. Globally, Gram-negative bacteria, including Enterobacterales and non-fermenting microorganisms such as Acinetobacter spp., have been identified as producing different bla-IMP type enzymes [11].

Research conducted recently showed increase in the incidence of MBLs producing A. baumannii isolates globally, though there are variable prevalences in different geographical regions [11].

The goal of the current investigation was to identify MBL-encoding genes in the clinical isolates of A. baumannii from burn patients.

**Methodology**

**Specimens’ collection and identification**

This cross-sectional study was performed on patients with infected burn wounds who were referred to a private medical health centre in Duhok city, Iraq. A total of 117 sterilised swab samples of A. baumannii had been isolated from burn patients between January 2019 and December 2021. These isolates were identified using, Gram staining and MacConkey agar growth. Additionally, standard recommended tests such as catalase and oxidase tests were carried out. Following the manufacturer’s instructions, a VITEK 2 system (BioMérieux, Les Pennes-Mirabeau, France) that uses identification of Gram-negative bacilli card (ID-GNB) to identify bacterial species was used to further confirm the presence of Acinetobacter baumannii. All swabs were taken from patients who were not administered antibiotics for the last 3 days, and those who were taking antibiotics were excluded from the study.

**Imipenem sensitivity tests**

The susceptibility patterns to imipenem were determined using imipenem disks on Muller-Hinton agar and the disk diffusion technique. The results were interpreted according to the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI).

**Molecular methods**

The genomic DNA was extracted using the PrimePrep™ Genomic Extraction Kit for DNA (GeNetBio, Daejeon, South Korea). DNA was measured for determining its concentration and purity with the use of a Nanodrop spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Wilmington, DE, USA) and used for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification. Four different primer pairs were used: bla-VIN1, bla-VIN2, bla-IMP1, and bla-IMP2 (Table 1, Figure 1).

**PCR amplification and gel electrophoresis**

A total of 20 µL reaction mixture were used for the PCR amplification reaction. The reaction mix comprised of 5 µL of the master mix, 2 µL each of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer</th>
<th>Primer sequence</th>
<th>Amplicon size (bp)</th>
<th>Ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM1</td>
<td>F: 5'-TATATGTGAGACACCATACCGATGAT-3'</td>
<td>924</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: 5'-ATAAAGTACCCCCGTAACCACATCGA-3'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bla-VIM2</td>
<td>F: 5'-ACTGTTATCATACCTTCTGAGAT-AAG-3'</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>[25]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: 5'-CTACATCAGATCTGAGAAGG-3'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP1</td>
<td>F: 5'-ATCCGACAGCGACGAACTGCTTGATGCAC-3'</td>
<td>587</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: 5'-ACTCAACTCACGTTATGTCCC-TTGACC-3'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP2</td>
<td>F: 5'-GATTTTCTATGCTGTA-TGACCTAC-C-3'</td>
<td>678</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: 5'AGACCTTTGATTCGGATGATAC-3'</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 1. PCR amplification of the four MBL-genes.](image-url)
primers (with a concentration of 10 pmol/µL), 2 µL of DNA (with a concentration of 25-50 ng/µL), and 9 µL of PCR deionized distilled water. Table 2 presents the conditions under which the amplification was carried out. Following amplification, electrophoresis was used to separate the PCR products using a 1.2% (w/v) agarose solution prepared in 1x Tris-Boric EDTA (TBE) buffer. The molecular weight of the DNA bands was determined using a 50-1000 bp ladder, and the resulting DNA bands on the agarose gel were observed under a UV transilluminator.

Results
A total of 117 A. baumannii isolates were recovered from patients referred to a private medical health centre in Duhok city during three years, of which 73 (62.3%) and 44 (37.6%) were isolated from burn wounds of male and female patients respectively. Out of these isolates, 25 (21.3%) were sensitive to imipenem, while 92 (78.6%) were resistant (Table 3).

The PCR findings showed that 20 (17.1%), 47 (40.1%), 35 (29.9%), and 5 (4.2%) of the isolates carried VIM-1, VIM-2, IMP-1, and IMP-2 genes, respectively. Out of the 117 isolates analyzed, there were 9 (7.6%) that harboured both bla-VIM1 and bla-VIM2 genes, 18 (15.3%) that carried both bla-IMP1 and bla-VIM2 genes, 3 (2.5%) that had both bla-IMP2 and bla-VIM1 genes, and 31 (26.4%) that lacked all of these genes (Table 4).

Discussion
Acinetobacter baumannii, is a Gram-negative bacterium, frequently isolated from ICU patients with burn wounds. It poses a significant risk due to its potential for opportunistic infections, high mortality rates, and its ability to develop resistance to multiple drugs. In recent years, the clinical relevance of A. baumannii has grown considerably, largely because of its capacity to acquire resistance quickly, which further exacerbates the challenge of treating patients infected with this bacterium. β-lactamases production is the most significant contributor to the development of resistance against β-lactam antibiotic in this bacterium [12].

Acinetobacter baumannii has been found to be resistant to the majority of lactamases, making imipenem a relatively ineffective antibiotic against this pathogen. A hindrance to this mechanism, however, comes in the form of a group of enzymes called MBLs, which have been identified in only a limited number of bacterial species such as P. aeruginosa and A. baumannii.

Gordon and Wareham noted that resistance to imipenem is becoming increasingly common in Acinetobacter, and one of the ways in which this bacterium becomes resistant is by acquiring genes that encode MBLs [1]. These genes include VIM-1, VIM-2, IMP-1, and IMP-2.

The present study findings indicate that the frequency of resistance to imipenem among A. baumannii strains at a private clinical health centre was 78.6%. This high prevalence of resistance against imipenem is in accordance to the results of numerous other studies such as, Smail and AL-otrachi in Erbil [13] who stated that 100% of their isolates were resistant to imipenem and meropenem. Another study performed by Abd El-Hady and Abdelhadi [14] in Egypt demonstrated that 82.8% of the patient’s exhibited resistance to imipenem. Similarly, Das et al.

### Table 2. Amplification cycle conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Initial denaturation</th>
<th>Denaturation</th>
<th>Annealing</th>
<th>Extension</th>
<th>Final extension</th>
<th>Cycles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM1</td>
<td>95 ºC, 4 min</td>
<td>95 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>55 ºC, 30 sec</td>
<td>72 ºC, 45 sec</td>
<td>72 ºC, 7 min</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM2</td>
<td>95 ºC, 4 min</td>
<td>95 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>53 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>72 ºC, 1.5 min</td>
<td>72 ºC, 7 min</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP1</td>
<td>95 ºC, 4 min</td>
<td>95 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>53 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>72 ºC, 1.5 min</td>
<td>72 ºC, 7 min</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP2</td>
<td>95 ºC, 4 min</td>
<td>95 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>53 ºC, 1 min</td>
<td>72 ºC, 1.5 in.</td>
<td>72 ºC, 7 min</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Distribution among genders and imipenem susceptibility of A. baumannii isolates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>73 (62.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44 (37.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imipenem susceptibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td>25 (21.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant</td>
<td>92 (78.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>117 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. Distribution patterns of bla-VIM-1, bla-VIM-2, bla-IMP-1 and bla-IMP-2 genes among A. baumannii isolates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genes</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM1</td>
<td>20 (17.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM2</td>
<td>47 (40.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP1</td>
<td>35 (29.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-IMP2</td>
<td>4 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM1 + bla-VIM2</td>
<td>9 (7.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM2 + bla-IMP1</td>
<td>18 (15.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bla-VIM1 + bla-IMP2</td>
<td>3 (2.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of them</td>
<td>31 (26.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
[15] recorded that 71.21% of *A. baumannii* isolates collected were resistant to imipenem. In another study, Hoang et al. [16], found that more than 80% of *A. baumannii* isolates were resistant to carbapenem. Furthermore, a cross-sectional study performed by Nikibakhsh et al. [17] in Iran showed that 100% of the *A. baumannii* isolates examined exhibited resistance to imipenem. Moreover, the current results contradict with those of Scott et al. [18] as they found that 10% of *A. baumannii* strains isolated from American service members who had been hurt in Iraq in 2007 were carbapenem-resistant. Furthermore, Hawley et al. [19] discovered that 37% of the 142 strains of *A. baumannii* isolated from American service members wounded in Iraq during 2007 were resistant to imipenem. In addition, a thorough investigation conducted by Unal and Garcia-Rodriguez in Latin America between 2002 and 2004 concluded that meropenem or imipenem resistance was evident in 29% of *Acinetobacter* isolates [20].

The findings of this study demonstrated a different level of imipenem resistance in *A. baumannii* compared to previous studies. These variations could be attributed to geographical differences, variations in medical facilities, and the use of diverse antibiotic regimens.

In the current study, the percentages of *VIM-1*, *IMP-2*, *IMP-1*, and *IMP-2* genes in *A. baumannii* were 17.1%, 40.1%, 29.9%, and 4.2%, respectively. However, in a study conducted by Abd El-Hady and Abdelhadi in Egypt, *bla-VIM* gene expression was found to be higher than other genes, while *bla-IMP* gene expression was not found [14]. Variable rates of *VIM-I* and *IMP-I* genes were reported in a number of studies in Iran, as 17.44 and 3.48%, 18.18% and 5.3% and 96.2% and 58.5% [4, 11, 17], respectively.

In contrast, Ruiz et al. examined 83 *A. baumannii* isolates in Spain and found that none of them had *VIM* and *IMP* genes [21]. In addition, Shahcheraghi et al. examined 100 *A. baumannii* strains from more than one hospital in Tehran, Iran, and did not detect any *bla-VIM* or *bla-IMP* genes MBL-encoding genes [22]. Furthermore, a study conducted by Ikonomidis et al. in Greece, identified only 2 (2.3%) isolates carrying *bla-VIM1* gene among the 87 isolates of *A. baumannii* examined [23]. On the other hand, Azim et al. conducted a study in India, by investigating 38 *Acinetobacter baumannii* isolates, and reported that 20 (52.6%) of the isolates carried *bla-IMP* genes and 14 (36.8%) had *bla-VIM* genes [23].

It is evident that significant variations are present in the frequency of *bla-VIM* and *bla-IMP* type MBL encoding genes across different areas and years. These differences may be attributed to several factors including geographical locations, antibiotic therapies, and the number of analyzed isolates. In order to address this discrepancy and to obtain an accurate statistic on the occurrence of MBL expression genes, an overall study is suggested. This study should encompass samples from multiple countries, collected at a specific time interval, and with complete patient and specimen data including the location of collection, hospitalization ward, and antibiotic action protocol. A consistent and well-defined methodology should be employed for data collection and analysis.

In this study, it was found that 91.3% of the strains had at least one of the four mentioned genes, representing that MBL production is one of the primary methods of resistance to imipenem by *A. baumannii* in the hospitals. However, 8.7% of the isolates in this study did not have these genes, and it is possible that other mechanisms of resistance were responsible for their imipenem resistance. It is also possible that other MBL enzymes, which were not studied in this research, may have caused resistance in the isolates lacking these four genes.

**Conclusions**

In order to prevent the dissemination of imipenem-resistant bacteria in hospitals it is crucial to reduce the use of key antibiotics like imipenem, implement accurate health protocols for preventing transmission through personnel or hospital equipment, and regularly estimate the incidence of MBL-expression genes and resistance to imipenem among *A. baumannii* strains.

Additionally, the high prevalence of MBL-coding genes and the potential for resistance transfer between different bacteria and strains underscores the importance of taking proactive measures to combat antibiotic resistance.

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**Ethics approval**

All specimens involving participants were approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Zakho (Approval no.: BSCUoz/03/01/2023).

**References**


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