



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***ROLE OF Burkholderia pseudomallei EXOTOXIN IN THE  
PATHOGENESIS OF MELIOIDOSIS USING MICE MODEL***

**RABIU MUHAMMAD ALIYU**

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UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA  
BERILMU BERBAKTI

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By

**RABIU MUHAMMAD ALIYU**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies University Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**June 2016**

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my late father Alhaji Muhammad Aliyu.



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**June 2016**

**Chairman : Noordin Mohamed Mustapha, PhD**  
**Faculty : Veterinary Medicine**

*Burkholderia pseudomallei* is a gram-negative bacterium and a causative agent of melioidosis, a serious often fatal multisystem disease of man and animals. In Malaysia, *B. pseudomallei* have been isolated from different subjects in the states of Pahang, Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Kedah. Strains of *B. pseudomallei* were known to secrete a range of extracellular enzymes (exotoxins) with different lethal activities such as proteolytic, lipolytic, haemolytic activities. However, little study has been conducted on the characteristic of exotoxins from Malaysian isolates. Similarly, there is scarce of information related to the role of the local *B. pseudomallei* isolates and its associated exotoxins in the pathogenesis of melioidosis. This study is aimed to determine the molecular characteristics of *B. pseudomallei* as well as to study the role of its exotoxin in the pathogenesis of melioidosis. Three *B. pseudomallei* isolates designated UPM/2012/1017, UPM/2013/006 and UPM/2013/577 strains used in this study were obtained from cases of animal melioidosis presented to Universiti Veterinary Hospital (UVH), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The isolates were reconfirmed phenotypically and biochemically followed by confirmation using 16S rRNA sequencing. Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis of the isolates showed that they were closely related to *B. pseudomallei* K96243 and 1026b strains from Thailand as well as *B. pseudomallei* MSHR2543 strain from Australia. *B. pseudomallei* K96243, 1026b and MSHR2543 strains were among highly virulent *B. pseudomallei* strains known globally and most frequently reported from humans, indicating possible zoonotic potentials of these local *B. pseudomallei* strains. This study suggested the existence of fatal animal melioidosis caused by these *B. pseudomallei* strains. Analysis of their extracellular virulence genes (exotoxins) revealed the presence of three genes encoding for phospholipase C and a gene encoding for a protease. Further characterization of the isolated extracellular proteins (exotoxin) by SDS-PAGE analysis indicated the presence of phospholipase C enzyme with a molecular weight of 77 kDa. Following protein characterization, an *in vivo* assay using BALB/c mice was carried out to evaluate the toxigenicity of the extracellular protein isolated. A total of 130 BALB/c mice used in this study were divided into 5

treatment groups: control (Cx) (n =10), live *B. pseudomallei* (Bp) (n =30); live *B. thailandensis* (Bt) (n =30); *B. pseudomallei* exotoxin (E) (n =30) and *B. thailandensis* supplemented with *B. pseudomallei* exotoxin (Bt + E) (n =30). Live bacteria groups were inoculated with  $5 \times 10^4$ ,  $5 \times 10^3$  and  $5 \times 10^2$  Colony-forming units (CFU) of either *B. pseudomallei* or *B. thailandensis* respectively. The exotoxin groups were inoculated with 50.0 µg, 25.0 µg and 12.5 µg exotoxin either alone or mixed with  $5 \times 10^4$ ,  $5 \times 10^3$  and  $5 \times 10^2$  CFU of *B. thailandensis* respectively. Negative control groups (Cx) received sterile PBS (pH 7.4) only. Clinical signs such as loss of body weight, change in appearance, behaviour and activity of the animal were monitored and recorded for 14 days. Lethal dose-50 (LD<sub>50</sub>) and survival analysis were calculated. Organ bacterial burden, haematological, gross and histopathological analyses were conducted. There was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) dose-dependent increase in the susceptibility of the BALB/c mice treated with the live bacteria (group Bp and Bt) following IN inoculation as compared to SC inoculation. This contrast with the observation in the groups of mice inoculated with exotoxins (E and Bt + E) in which those in the SC groups showed more susceptibility than IN inoculated groups. The most striking finding in this study was the enhancing of *B. thailandensis* pathogenicity following its supplementation with *B. pseudomallei* exotoxin isolated in this study. This was due to the fact that, although group Bt showed significant gross, histopathology, haematology body weight changes over time when compared to the uninfected control, mortality was not recorded, however, in group Bt + E, there was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) morbidity and mortality when compared to the Bt and Cx groups. When these are combined with the findings of this study that showed the abundance of the exotoxin genes in *B. pseudomallei* while absent in *B. thailandensis*, suggested that the *B. pseudomallei* extracellular products (exotoxins) are necessary for virulence and pathogenicity observed in this bacterium. In conclusion, this study showed that the isolates contained exotoxin (phospholipase C) encoded by Plc-1, Plc-2 and plc-3 genes. The exotoxin plays an important role in the pathogenesis of melioidosis as it resulted in morbidity and mortality in mice model. Further studies should focus on cloning of this exotoxin in order to obtain the purest protein to be used in developing toxin (Toxoid) candidate for the use in countermeasures of melioidosis. Similarly, the exotoxin shall be evaluated in other models such as Nematodes models and *in vitro* cell lines in order to gain a wider understanding of its toxicity.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PERANAN EKSOTOKSIN *Burkholderia pseudomallei* DALAM  
PATOGENESIS MELIOIDOSIS MENGGUNAKAN MODEL MICE**

Oleh

**RABIU MUHAMMAD ALIYU**

**Jun 2016**

**Pengerusi : Noordin Mohamed Mustapha, PhD**  
**Fakulti : Perubatan Veterinar**

*Burkholderia pseudomallei* ialah sejenis bakteria Gram-negatif yang merupakan agen penyebab penyakit melioidosis, sejenis penyakit pelbagai sistem yang serius dan sering kali membawa maut yang boleh menjangkiti manusia dan haiwan. Di Malaysia, *B. pseudomallei* telah dipencil daripada pelbagai subjek dari negeri Pahang, Johor, Kuala Lumpur dan Kedah. Strain-strain *B. pseudomallei* diketahui boleh merembes pelbagai enzim ekstrasel (eksotoksin) yang mempunyai aktiviti-aktiviti maut yang berbeza seperti proteolisis, lipolisis, aktiviti-aktiviti hemolisis. Namun, hanya sedikit kajian telah dijalankan tentang ciri-ciri eksotoksin daripada isolat Malaysia. Selain itu, terdapat kekurangan maklumat tentang peranan isolat *B. pseudomallei* tempatan dengan/atau eksotoksin berkaitan dalam patogenesis melioidosis. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti ciri-ciri molekular *B. pseudomallei* serta untuk mengkaji peranan eksotoksin dalam patogenesis melioidosis. Tiga isolat *B. pseudomallei*, strain UPM/2012/1017, UPM/2013/006 and UPM/2013/577 digunakan dalam kajian ini diperolehi dari kes-kes Melioidosis haiwan dibentangkan kepada Hospital Veterinar Universiti (UVH), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Isolat-isolat tersebut mula-mula telah dijalankan proses pencirian secara fenotip dan biokimia, kini diikuti oleh teknik pencirian molekular 16S rRNA PCR, penjujukan serta analisis jujukan menggunakan cara bioinformatik. Ujian-ujian bakteriologi dan biokimia telah mengesahkan semula isolat tersebut sebagai spesies *B. pseudomallei*. Penjujukan dan analisis filogenetik menunjukkan isolat Malaysia berhubung rapat dengan strain *B. pseudomallei* K96243 and 1026b dari Thailand dan juga strain *B. pseudomallei* MSHR2543 dari Australia yang merupakan strain bervirulen tinggi serta dikenali secara global dan kerap dilaporkan dalam manusia, ini menunjukkan kemungkinan potensi zoonosis oleh strain-strain *B. pseudomallei* tempatan. Kajian ini telah cadangkan bahawa kewujudan melioidosis haiwan yang membawa maut disebabkan oleh strain-strain *B. pseudomallei* Malaysia yang secara filogenetiknya berhubung rapat dengan strain-strain berpatogenik dan bervirulen tinggi dari Thailand dan Australia.

Analisis gen virulen ekstrasel (eksotoksin) menunjukkan kehadiran tiga gen pengekodan bagi phospholipase C dan pengekodan gen keempat bagi protease. Pencirian lanjutan protein ekstrasel (eksotoksin) oleh analisis SDS-PAGE telah menunjukkan kehadiran enzim phospholipase C dengan berat molekular sebanyak 77 kDa. Selepas pencirian protein, satu assay *in vivo* menggunakan BALB/c mice telah dijalankan bagi menilai ketoksigenan protein ekstrasel yang dipencil. Sebanyak 130 BALB/c mencit telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Mencit-mencit tersebut telah dibahagikan kepada 5 kumpulan rawatan: kawalan (Cx) (n =10), *B. pseudomallei* (Bp) hidup (n =30); *B. thailandensis* (Bt) hidup (n =30); *B. pseudomallei* eksotoksin (E) (n =30) and *B. thailandensis* ditambah dengan eksotoksin *B. pseudomallei* (Bt + E) (n =30). Kumpulan bakteria hidup masing-masing telah diinokulasi dengan  $5 \times 10^4$ ,  $5 \times 10^3$  and  $5 \times 10^2$  unit pembentuk koloni (CFU) sama ada dengan *B. pseudomallei* atau *B. thailandensis*. Kumpulan eksotoksin masing-masing telah diinokulasi dengan 50.0 µg, 25.0 µg dan 12.5 µg eksotoksin sama ada sendirian atau dicampur dengan  $5 \times 10^4$ ,  $5 \times 10^3$  dan  $5 \times 10^2$  CFU *B. thailandensis*. Kumpulan kawalan negatif hanya menerima PBS (pH 7.4) steril. Petanda klinikal seperti susut berat badan, perubahan, tingkah laku dan aktiviti haiwan tersebut diperhatikan dan direkod selama 14 hari. Nilai LD<sub>50</sub> and analisis kemandirian telah dikira. Analisis beban bakteria dalam organ, hematologi, pemeriksaan kasar dan histopatologi telah dijalankan. Terdapat perbezaan ketara ( $p < 0.05$ ) antara peningkatan bergantung pada dos dalam pendedahan mencit BALB/c dirawat dengan bakteria hidup (group Bp and Bt) selepas diinokulasi IN berbanding dengan inokulasi melalui SC. Ini bertentangan dengan apa yang dilihat dalam kumpulan tikus diinokulasi dengan eksotoksin (E and Bt + E) dimana kumpulan SC menunjukkan lebih terdedah daripada kumpulan diinokulasi secara IN. Dapatan yang paling menarik ialah perubahan *B. thailandensis* menunjukkan atribut virulen selepas ditambah dengan eksotoksin *B. pseudomallei* yang dipencil dalam kajian ini. Ini disebabkan oleh, walaupun mencit diinokulasi dengan *B. thailandensis* (group Bt) menunjukkan perubahan ketara dalam patologi kasar, histopatologi, hematologi dan berat badan dalam tempoh masa bila dibanding dengan kumpulan kawalan, namun kematian tidak direkod, tetapi, dalam kumpulan yang diinokulasi dengan *B. thailandensis* ditambah dengan eksotoksin *B. pseudomallei* (group Bt + E), terdapat perbezaan ketara ( $p < 0.05$ ) dalam morbiditi and kematian apabila dibanding dengan kumpulan Bt and Cx. Hasil gabungan fakta bahawa terdapat banyak gen eksotoksin dalam *B. pseudomallei* namun tiada dalam *B. thailandensis* dalam kajian ini, membuktikan bahawa produk ekstrasel (eksotoksin) *B. pseudomallei* adalah penting untuk virulen dan kepatogenan diperhatikan dalam bakteria. Kesimpulannya, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa pencilan terkandung eksotoksin (Phospholipase C) pengekodan oleh Plc - 1, Plc - 2 dan PLC - 3 gen. Eksotoksin memainkan peranan penting patogenesis Melioidosis kerana ia mengakibatkan morbiditi dan kematian dalam model mice. Kajian mendatang sepatutnya fokus pada pengklonan eksotoksin ini bagi mendapat protein tulen bagi menggunakannya dalam membangunkan calon toksin (toksoid) sebagai cara menangani melioidosis. Selain itu, eksotoksin sepatutnya dinilai dalam model lain seperti model Nematoda dan garisan sel *in vitro* bagi mengetahui lebih meluas tentang ketoksikannya.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BHI	Brain-heart infusion
Bp	<i>Burkholderia pseudomallei</i>
Bt	<i>Burkholderia thailandensis</i>
Bt + E	<i>Burkholderia thailandensis</i> + Exotoxin
bwt	Body weight
CFU	Colony-forming unit
CI	Confidence Interval
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic Acid
E	Exotoxin
IACUC	Institutional Animal Care and Usage committee
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
µg	Microgram
µl	Microlitre
PI	Post-infection
UVH	University Veterinary Hospital

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*Burkholderia pseudomallei* is aerobic, motile, gram-negative bacilli that are frequently isolated from damp soil, especially in rice paddies and stagnant water in the endemic regions of the world (Brett and Woods, 2000). This pathogen is non-fastidious and therefore able to grow relatively fast in conventional culture media such as nutrient agar, blood agar and macConkey agar. It can also selectively grow on Ashdown's medium with varied colonial morphology ranging from wrinkle to smooth and from creamy to orange with characteristic earthy odour (Gilad *et al.*, 2007a).

The organism infects both humans and animals through inhalation, ingestion and percutaneous inoculation of a wound, burn or abscess with contaminated water or wet soil to cause a disease called melioidosis. This disease is endemic primarily in regions of Southeast Asia and Northern Australia, but reported to occur sporadically in other regions in the world (Gilad *et al.*, 2007a). Previous studies review that the prevalence of *B. pseudomallei* has gone beyond these known areas of endemicity to other locations around the globe (Dance, 1991).

Documented epidemiological findings showed that soil and water are the major reservoirs of *B. pseudomallei*, however, various animals could also serve as maintenance reservoirs for the sustenance of epizootic infections (Gilad *et al.*, 2007b). Both domestic and wild animals that are susceptible to melioidosis including camels, cattle, horses, sheep, goats, cats, dogs, kangaroos, koalas, Alpacas, deer and few cases reported in birds (Cheng and Currie, 2005). Similarly, mouse, rats, chicken, guinea pigs and nematodes have been used as experimental animal models in studying pathogenesis of the disease (Cheng and Currie, 2005).

More recently, *B. pseudomallei* was listed under category B bioterrorism agent and reviewed to Tier 1 select agent by the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This is because of its increasing incidence, rate of infectivity and increasing fear of use as a potential biowarfare/bioterrorism agent, since its equine-adopted biotype (*B. mallei*) has previously been used in this manner (CDC, 2015). Melioidosis were reported in French troops who actively serve in French-Indochina war in 1950's and shortly after the world war II in American soldiers fought in Vietnam (White, 2003). Though many of the military cases are chronic, cases of reactivation after years of initial exposure were described (Currie *et al.*, 2000).

In Malaysia, the report of animal melioidosis has been published as far back as 1932 by Stolon and Fletcher of Medical Research Institute of then Malay state (Cheng and Currie, 2005). Similarly, human melioidosis has been reported in the states of Pahang, Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Kedah representing the eastern,

southern, middle and the northern region of the country respectively (Hassan *et al.*, 2010; Sopian *et al.*, 2012). Afterwards, cases of animal and human melioidosis were being continuously reported in both Peninsular and East Malaysia.

Although studies have shown that host immune responses play a significant role in the pathogenesis of melioidosis, however, the relative contribution of different bacterial product-such as exotoxin and endotoxin-in the pathogenesis and evasion of the immune system is still lacking. This dearth of knowledge might be partly responsible for inability to develop vaccines to protect humans and susceptible animal species despite several trials (Iliukhin *et al.*, 1999; Warawa and Woods, 2002; Peacock *et al.*, 2012).

Information on the virulence of *B. pseudomallei* is scanty (Cheng and Currie, 2005). The bacteria produced an array of extracellular products (protease, catalase, lipase, peroxidase, superoxidase dismutase, haemolysin, siderophore and lecithinase) which express a variety of toxic features, some of which include dermonecrotic effect, haemolytic and lethal toxicity. However, it is still unclear whether melioidosis is a toxin-mediated. Few studies have been conducted on the role of these exoproducts as virulent factors, among which only protease has been confirmed to aid in the pathogenesis of the disease (Sexton *et al.*, 1994).

Understanding the partial contribution of aforementioned bacterial exoproducts to the resultant pathogenesis, colonization and perseverance of the host immune system by this bacteria will pave the way in designing proper and effective therapeutic measures in controlling this endemic disease. Despite the endemicity of melioidosis in Malaysia, there is no effective vaccine available against the disease and the organism is not only resistant to most available and affordable antibiotics (Radu *et al.*, 2000; Podin *et al.*, 2014), but also the molecular mechanisms that underlie the pathway of disease progression is extremely unclear (Ulett *et al.*, 2001).

The organism expressed an array of biological/toxic activities, some of which include dermonecrotic effect, lethal toxicity, and various enzyme activities (protease, catalase, lipase, peroxidase, superoxidase dismutase, haemolysin, siderophore and lecithinase). However, it is still unclear whether melioidosis is toxin mediated.

In view of the importance of the disease and the aforementioned problems, there is the need for an in-depth investigation on the role of *B. pseudomallei* exotoxins in the pathogenic indices of melioidosis in animal models. There is also the need to examine if there is a significant difference between the isolates in respect of their pathogenicity.

Several studies highlighted the interactions of *B. pseudomallei* with the host immune system at cellular and molecular level (Razak and Ismail, 1982; Brett and

Woods, 2000; Wongratanacheewin *et al.*, 2004; Wikraiphat *et al.*, 2009). However, there is the need to explore further on this pathogenic interaction in relation to the ability of the bacteria to adhere, invade, survive and replicate within the susceptible host model.

Because of this gap of knowledge, this work might therefore be relevant in exploring this area of pathogenicity using animal model assay. It is also hoped that the data that will emanate from this study will elucidates the variation in relation to the pattern and severity of melioidosis among bacterial strains/isolates. This will help in designing appropriate control measures through understanding the mechanisms that interplay between the host and the bacterial exoproducts.

### 1.1 Research questions

1. Do *B. pseudomallei* and its non-pathogenic biotype *B. thailandensis* contain the same number of extracellular virulence determinant genes?
2. Is the non-virulence nature of *B. thailandensis* when compared to *B. pseudomallei* due to the absence of exotoxin?
3. Can the pathogenicity of *B. thailandensis* be enhanced when it is supplemented with exotoxin isolated from *B. pseudomallei*?
4. Is there any difference between the pathogenicity/lethality indexes (such as LD<sub>50</sub>, survival values, haematology, gross pathology and histopathology) when BALB/c mice was inoculated via different routes with *B. pseudomallei*, its exotoxin, *B. thailandensis* and *B. thailandensis* supplemented with *B. pseudomallei* exotoxin?

### 1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- i. to characterise *B. pseudomallei* isolates from Malaysia using molecular techniques.
- ii. to identify exotoxin genes among the *B. pseudomallei* strains characterised and *B. thailandensis* strain using molecular techniques.
- iii. to isolate, characterise and compare exotoxin produced by *B. pseudomallei* strains and *B. thailandensis* strain.
- iv. to investigate the role of exotoxin from *B. pseudomallei* in the pathogenesis of melioidosis in mice model.

### 1.3 Research hypothesis

*Burkholderia thailandensis* supplemented with exotoxin of *B. pseudomallei* will have an enhanced pathogenicity and will display virulence equivalent or close to that of *B. pseudomallei*.



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