Severe Morbidity Due to *Opisthorchis viverrini* and *Schistosoma mekongi* Infection in Lao People’s Democratic Republic

Somphou Sayasone,1,3,5 Oroth Rasphone,2 Monely Vanmany,1 Penelope Vounatsou,3,5 Jürg Utzinger,3,5 Marcel Tanner,3,5 Kongsap Akkhavong,1 Christoph Hatz,4,5,6 and Peter Odermatt3,5

1National Institute of Public Health, and 2Department of Radiology, Mahosot Hospital, Vientiane, Lao PDR; 3Departments of Epidemiology and Public Health, Basel; 4Medical Services and Diagnostic, Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, Basel; 5University of Basel, and 6Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Zurich, Switzerland

We assessed morbidity due to *Opisthorchis viverrini* and *Schistosoma mekongi* infections in 243 individuals in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Morbidity was associated with *O. viverrini* infection intensity. Coinfection with *S. mekongi* resulted in excess risk of liver fibrosis and left liver lobe enlargement. The high public health impact of opisthorchiasis warrants control.

Food-borne trematodiasis is of public health importance in Southeast Asia [1]. More than 8 million people are parasitized by the liver fluke *Opisthorchis viverrini*, and an estimated 76 000 individuals have severe clinical manifestation, causing a global burden of 70 000 disability-adjusted life-years [2]. *Opisthorchis viverrini* infection is associated with hepatobiliary morbidity, such as hepatomegaly, jaundice, cholecystitis, cholangitis, and cholangiocarcinoma, a fatal bile duct cancer [3].

In Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR), >70% of the resident population lives in areas where the prevalence of *O. viverrini* exceeds 5%, and almost 2 million people are infected [4]. The highest prevalence rates occur in central-southern Lao PDR [5]. However, detailed information on intestinal and hepatobiliary morbidity due to *O. viverrini* infection is lacking. Furthermore, the effect of coinfection with the blood fluke *Schistosoma mekongi*, endemic in the southern Champasack province [6], has never been assessed.

*Opisthorchis viverrini* is acquired by consumption of insufficiently cooked fish dishes. The adult parasite lives and reproduces in bile ducts. In contrast, *S. mekongi* cercariae penetrate human skin when exposed to infested water. The adult parasite reproduces in the portal vein. Both parasites lead to hepatobiliary pathologies. The most widely used diagnostic approach is the detection of parasite eggs in stool. The objective of this study was to assess the severity of morbidity associated with *O. viverrini* and concurrent *S. mekongi* infection in adults in Lao PDR.

**METHODS**

**Ethics Statement**

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Basel, Switzerland, and the National Ethics Committee, Vientiane, Lao PDR. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Head of households signed for minors (aged <18 years). People infected with *O. viverrini* and/or *S. mekongi* were treated with praziquantel (40 mg/kg, single oral dose). Soil-transmitted helminth infections were treated with albendazole (400 mg, single oral dose) [7]. Antispasmodic treatment and oral rehydration were provided to purged patients with abdominal pain and diarrhea.

**Field and Laboratory Procedures**

Cross-sectional surveys were carried out in hospitals and villages. Hospital investigations were done at the infectious disease ward of Mahosot (largest hospital in the capital city of Vientiane) and Savannakhet provincial hospital (referral hospital for central provinces of Lao PDR) in September–October 2005. Village surveys were conducted in *O. viverrini*-endemic areas in June 2006 (Champheang district, Savannakhet province; and Saravane district, Saravane province), in *O. viverrini*–*S. mekongi* coendemic areas (Mounlapamok and Khong districts, Champasack province), and in an area where neither fluke infection is present (Paksong district, Champasack province) between March and May 2006.

Hospital patients and villagers (aged ≥15 years) who submitted a stool sample for parasitological examination, which revealed the presence of *O. viverrini*-like eggs, were selected and invited to participate in the study. Three stool specimens collected over a period of 5 days were subjected to the
Kato-Katz method (single 41.7-mg-thick smear per specimen) [8]. Helminth eggs were enumerated under a microscope and recorded for each species separately.

The number of O. viverrini flukes was quantified by purgation. Study participants were treated with praziquantel (40 mg/kg) after dinner. Albendazole (400 mg) was added if the patient was coinfected with soil-transmitted helminths. The following morning a purgative (45 mL of monosodium sulphate solution, Swiff, Berlin Pharmaceutical Industry Co, Ltd, Berlin, Germany) was administered. All stools produced within 24 hours (usually 6–8 bowel movements) were collected and quantitatively examined for adult O. viverrini worms (length 5.5–9.5 mm, width 0.7–1.6 mm).

Morbidity data were obtained from each participant by interview (ie, right upper quadrant [RUQ] pain and abdominal discomfort [ADC]) and by physical examination (ie, hepatomegaly, jaundice, splenomegaly, and RUQ pain at palpation), conducted by a general physician. Examining the level of left liver lobe (hepatomegaly) and of spleen was done in the standing position from xiphoid to liver or spleen edge. Additionally, an experienced radiologist performed an abdominal ultrasoundography in all enrolled persons to assess left liver lobe enlargement measuring from cranial to the caudal margin, destruction surrounding intrahepatic bile duct (periductal fibrosis), common bile duct dilatation (CBD), and intrahepatic bile duct dilatation (IHBD). The radiologist was unaware of stool examination results.

**Statistical Analysis**

Data were double-entered in EpiData (www.epidata.ch) and analyzed using Stata software (version 10.1). Data were summarized using proportions (categorical variables) and arithmetic mean (worm counts). Negative binomial regression was used to calculate the intensity rate ratio (IRR) and to associate adult worms counts with the clinical indicators (presence or absence). Multivariate logistic regressions were used to compare clinical outcomes of noninfected individuals with categories of infected individuals. Left liver lobe size was classified into normal (size ≤2 SD) and enlarged (size >2 SD) using height-adjusted measures from a Chinese reference population [9]. A P value of <.05 was considered statistically significant.

**RESULTS**

Two hundred forty-three individuals were enrolled: 15 from hospitals, 80 from O. viverrini–endemic areas, 49 from O. viverrini–S. mekongi coendemic areas, and 99 from an area where neither parasite is endemic (uninfected). One hundred twenty-three participants (50.6%) had an O. viverrini infection, whereas 21 individuals (8.6%) were concurrently infected with O. viverrini and S. mekongi. All individuals with S. mekongi infections were restricted to the Kong and Mounlapamok districts, and they were all coinfected with O. viverrini. There were 117 females (48.2%); median age was 38 years (range, 15–81 years).

Most participants reported ADC (65.8%), whereas one-third reported RUQ pain (13.6%). Upon physical examination, jaundice was diagnosed in 9 patients (3.7%). Ultrasoundography revealed CBD (4.1%), any liver fibrosis (10.7%), and gallbladder stones (7.3%). IHBD was diagnosed in 3 patients (1.2%).

**Opisthorchis viverrini** infection intensity was significantly higher in males than in females (IRR, 1.9; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.1–3.5) and increased with age (IRR, 1.2; 95% CI, 1.1–1.5). Positive associations were observed between morbidity and O. viverrini infection intensity, the latter quantified by the number of adult O. viverrini worms after purging (Table 1). Patients with RUQ pain (IRR, 2.6; 95% CI, 1.1–6.3), ADC (IRR, 2.7; 95% CI, 1.4–5.2), and jaundice (IRR, 2.3; 95% CI, 1.1–5.9) had an almost 3 times higher O. viverrini worm burden than those without. Hepatobiliary pathology was positively associated with O. viverrini infection intensity. The strongest association was found in patients with IHBD (IRR, 12.9; 95% CI, 5.2–20.2).

Association between morbidity and O. viverrini infection (infected vs noninfected) and coinfection with S. mekongi showed strong associations but distinctly different patterns. Whereas patients with a single O. viverrini infection had a highly increased risk for RUQ pain (odds ratio [OR], 3.6; 95% CI, 1.5–8.3) and ADC (OR, 6.3; 95% CI, 3.4–11.5) compared with their noninfected counterparts, patients coinfected with O. viverrini and S. mekongi had an increased risk for liver pathology. Compared with the uninfected control group, they had an almost 12-fold (OR, 11.7; 95% CI, 4.3–31.7) and 14-fold (OR, 13.6; 95% CI, 3.9–47.7) higher risk for liver fibrosis and left liver lobe enlargement, respectively.

**DISCUSSION**

This report highlights the severe intestinal and hepatobiliary morbidity that may be associated with O. viverrini and S. mekongi coinfection. We investigated patients from different settings of central and southern Lao PDR and found severe morbidity associated with O. viverrini single infection and with O. viverrini–S. mekongi coinfection. Strikingly, the O. viverrini worm burden, as determined after purging, is strongly associated with self-reported morbidity and with clinical and ultrasound investigations. Purgation is the only direct method of worm burden assessment, but this procedure is rarely performed [10]. Hence, this investigation provides new evidence that O. viverrini infection causes substantial morbidity in Lao
The widespread distribution of this liver fluke in Lao PDR and in northeastern Thailand and adjacent countries of Southeast Asia, and the high morbidity it causes, calls for concerted action [3, 5, 11, 12].

Ultrasonographic examinations revealed that individuals with concurrent infections with *O. viverrini* and *S. mekongi* were frequently diagnosed with liver fibrosis and hepatomega-ly. However, the liver fibrosis frequency reported (10.7%) was considerably lower than in the endemic area in northeast Thailand (23.6%) [13]. *Schistosoma mekongi* can cause liver (eg, advanced liver fibrosis and portal hypertension) and spleen morbidity [6]. The current study included 1 group of patients coinfected with *S. mekongi* and *O. viverrini*. Our findings suggest that concurrent infection with both flukes aggravates morbidity, compared with single infection, supporting earlier reports suggesting that multiple helminth infections, even at low-intensity levels, may elicit important morbidity [14].

In future research, it will be crucial to compare the current findings with a patient group infected with *S. mekongi* alone. Other infection factors related to hepatic morbidity, such as viral hepatitis, might have contributed to morbidity, and this needs further scientific inquiry.

We adhered to a rigorous diagnostic approach. Study participants had multiple stool samples examined with the quantitative Kato-Katz technique, supplemented with purging to determine the worm burden. Usually, the number of eggs found in the stools is taken as proxy for the number of adult parasites. Purging allows direct counting of adult *O. viverrini* worms and enables differential diagnosis with intestinal fluke infections, also prevalent in Lao PDR. We showed that...
substantial hepatobiliary pathologies are induced by O. viverrini infection in Lao PDR; it is therefore conceivable that morbidity attributable to O. viverrini is currently underestimated [2]. Community-based investigations, including the assessment of precursors of cholangiocarcinoma, are warranted. In particular, S. mekongi–induced morbidity is of importance and needs urgent attention and public health action.

Notes

Acknowledgments. We are grateful for the participation of the patients and communities and for the support of the curative and preventive health authorities of the various locations. We thank Isabelle Grilli for examining stool samples; the facilitators from Research Institute for Tropical Medicine; and the World Health Organization, Western Pacific Office, Manila, Philippines, for their support on the data analysis during a scientific writing workshop.

Financial support. This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (project number NF3270B0-110020), and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (to M. T.).

Potential conflicts of interest. J. U. is an editor for PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases. M. T. is a board member of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative and UBS-Optimus Foundation, and a member of the scientific advisory board for the Novartis Institute for Tropical Diseases. All other authors report no potential conflicts.

All authors have submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

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