

On the Origin, Emergence and Pathogenic Patterns of *Acinetobacter baumannii*

Wilson McCord, M.A.

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Wilson McCord Science and Technology

Email: willscience@gmail.com

Correspondence: 511 East 87th Street Apt.4, Manhattan, New York 10128

Abstract

Acinetobacter baumannii is a deadly Gram-negative species of bacteria whose virulence and resistance to antibiotics is threatening the lives of patients in hospitals across the globe. The examination of *Acinetobacter baumannii*'s virulent behaviour patterns in secluded synthetic, as well as ecological environments and; its acquisition of genes responsible for its persistence in sterile synthetic environments and those responsible for its lethality to humans reveal clear evidence of its recent artificial outbreak origin, virulent emergence and spread within healthcare facility populations around the World.

Keywords: *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *Acinetobacter* Complex, *Acinetobacter nosocomialis*, biological engineering, global conflict, multi-drug resistance, nosocomial infection, pathogenic bacterial strains.

Pathogenesis and Evolution of *Acinetobacter baumannii*

Acinetobacter baumannii is a global pathogen causing septicemia, pneumonia and death. As an aerobic bacteria it uses oxygen (O_2) to grow, which is one of the causes for continued infection in health care facilities. Being pleomorphic, it varies in size, a possible adaptive trait allowing it to respond to diverse environmental conditions. With its many survival tactics in place this bacteria also possesses genetic anomalies that have, not only made it a mystery to researchers but, have guaranteed its survival and its success in becoming increasingly more virulent and lethal. A hypothesis is made here to elucidate the origin and the source of virulence of *Acinetobacter baumannii* by tracing its emergence and examining its pathogenic patterns.

In the late 1960s the Genus *Acinetobacter* was determined by Baumann (Baumann et al. 1968). *Acinetobacter baumannii* started to be noticed as a dangerous cause of infection in ICUs in the early 1960s (Henriksen 1973). *Acinetobacter baumannii* is a Gram-negative bacteria without the capacity for motility that has the ability to develop and live in a great temperature range and has been found in natural environments like; soil and water as well as human environments like sewer systems and facilities for healthcare (Baumann et al. 1968). Juni said that there was genetic evidence that *Acinetobacter* was a ubiquitous genus (Juni 1978).

Sahl's study of genes in the complex of species and deadly strains surrounding and focusing on the central *Acinetobacter baumannii* bacteria is important in understanding this deadly pathogen and may be significant for the study of infectious pathogens in the future (Sahl et al. 2013). It should be noted that some of the information from that genetic study has been reinterpreted here while strictly keeping with the data provided. One hundred and thirty six genomes were sequenced using genes from the whole population level to analyze the evolution of the *Acinetobacter* Genus and create a whole genome phylogeny, an evolutionary tree, which details the branching of species and

isolated strains in the Genus *Acinetobacter*. The whole genome phylogeny allowed a genomic comparison on a global scale and was able to highlight the genes that have been lost and genes that have been acquired over evolutionary time. Two sudden punctuated developments are prominent in the evolution of *Acinetobacter* with the first occurring long ago (Diancourt et al. 2010).

From the earliest common ancestor picture three branches: the first having the species *Acinetobacter radioresistens*, the second containing most species in the genus and the third; a complex called *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus-baumannii* (Acb). The *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus-baumannii* Complex (Acb Complex) has two branches; the first branching off to *Acinetobacter pittii* and *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus*; the second branching off to *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* and *Acinetobacter baumannii*. This clearly identifies *Acinetobacter baumannii* as a monophyletic clade within the well-supported monophyletic group *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus-baumannii* (Diancourt et al. 2010). Within the Acb Complex; *Acinetobacter pittii* and *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus* are environmental isolates that are not associated with disease and are not considered to be dangerous (Peleg et al. 2008). *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* and *Acinetobacter baumannii* are deadly.

The second expansion and current rapid evolutionary dispersal of the *Acinetobacter baumannii* clones has remained unexplained (Diancourt et al. 2010). The strains of community acquired and nosocomial *Acinetobacter baumannii* differ greatly; with the hospital strains containing more virulent genes (Eijkelkamp et al. 2014). There are a number of genes from the *Acinetobacter* Genus that are more conserved (slowly evolving) in the Acb Complex and especially in *Acinetobacter baumannii*. Researchers have said that the acquisition of specific virulence factors has likely contributed to the widespread persistence and virulence of *Acinetobacter baumannii*. Antunes suggests that the acquisition of genes causing resistance to antibiotics in *Acinetobacter baumannii* may have been acquired from other nosocomial bacteria by the horizontal transfer of genes from other strains of *Acinetobacter* or other deadly

bacteria (Antunes et al. 2014). Transcriptional regulators (proteins that regulate the expression of a gene; turn it "On" and "Off") have been found in the Acb Complex that are unique. *Acinetobacter baumannii* and the opportunistic pathogen *Pseudomonas stutzeri* have transcriptional regulators that share distinct characteristics. A number of peptides have also been found in *Acinetobacter baumannii* that share similarities with genes in numerous other pathogens.

Because of its bacterial hydrophilic proteins *Acinetobacter baumannii* is desiccation tolerant and able to survive for long periods of time on dry surfaces and thrives in abiotic environments; not only surfaces that are wet or contain organic materials but it persists on dry glass and plastics (Green et al. 2022; Jawad et al. 1996). It makes this species of bacteria difficult to kill on materials that are usually not conducive to biological growth. And it has been proposed that its pathogenicity is due to its adaptation to hospital environments and its resistance to these and other environmental challenges (Green et al. 2022). While *Acinetobacter baumannii* is non-motile and does not possess flagella, it can spread rapidly through growth. Genes have been found that are important for pilus and biofilm development in *Acinetobacter baumannii* and *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* - the infection most often acquired in health care facilities. Similar to the sex pilus used in conjugation, a short pilus, a fimbria, which covers some bacteria, aids in sticking to surfaces and protects the cell from other organisms' defenses. But it is thought that virulence in a number of strains is not due to the development of this biofilm (Smith et al. 2007). The biofilm produced by *Acinetobacter baumannii* and *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* consist of extra cellular polymers that allow the cells to attach to one another and to surfaces (Marti et al. 2011). This biofilm allows *Acinetobacter baumannii* to attach to human epithelial cells (Brossard and Compagnari 2011). Putative tip adhesion genes are responsible for pilus and biofilm development (Tomaras et al. 2008). And, a putative tip adhesion gene which is involved in the development of these pilus and biofilms was also found by Brossard and Compagnari (Brossard and

Compagnari, 2011). Conservation of this particular gene in the Acb Complex was found to be 92% in *Acinetobacter baumannii*, 100% in *Acinetobacter nosocomialis*, 67% in *Acinetobacter pittii* and 0% in *Acinetobacter calcoaceticus* and those not in the Acb Complex (Sahl et al. 2013). The persistence of its growth in sterile medical environments is attributed to the growth of this biofilm (Tomaras et al. 2003, 2008; Pour et al. 2011). *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* is most closely related to, and probably has evolved from *Acinetobacter baumannii*. It is probable that, over time, the species *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* evolved in hospital environments where it required this gene in order to survive and thrive in the abiotic environment. This evolution reveals the origin and reoccurring nature of these closely related infectious strains of bacteria.

Acinetobacter baumannii exhibits robust antimicrobial resistance. Today, some of these strains are resistant to all antibiotics including the Carbapenem group (Van Looveren and Goosens 2004; Poirel and Nordmann 2006). Primaxin, one of the World's strongest antibiotics, does not work against *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains that have found their way to United States (U.S.) and United Kingdom (U.K.) hospitals. And, this species is more drug resistant than methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, MRSA (Davidson et al. 2011). The mechanisms most associated with persistence in infected individuals are multiple iron acquisition systems that are highly toxic and are thought to have a biochemical advantage over other microbes. In addition to these systems are also Beta-lactamase genes which allow the *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains to persist in the host and resist treatment therapies. These Beta-lactamase genes allow the deadly resistance to broad-spectrum antibiotics (Dijkshoorn et al. 1996). This gene is found in the most deadly infections on the planet. It is also well conserved and unique to *Acinetobacter baumannii* and has not been found in any other *Acinetobacter* species.

The bacteria *Legionella pneumophila* causes Legionnaires disease and, in 1976 one thousand people acquired lung infections from this bacterium at the American Legion Convention. Thirty four of those people died from the infection.

Acinetobacter baumannii has acquired genes that are homologous to *Legionella pneumophila* and *Coxiella burnetii* type I (type IVB) T4SS virulent secretion systems. These systems mediate horizontal gene transfer which contributes greatly to the evolutionary fitness and pathogenicity of the bacteria (Juhas et al. 2008; Peleg et al. 2008; Smith et al. 2008). Nineteen anti-microbial resistant genes have been found by researchers who claim that most of the resistant genes in *Acinetobacter baumannii* have come from the bacteria *Pseudomonas*, *Salmonella* or *Escherichia* (Fournier et al. 2006). Twenty eight gene clusters were found to be unique to *Acinetobacter baumannii* and sixteen that may be a partial cause of its virulence (Smith et al. 2007; Peleg et al. 2008). Early clinical isolates of *Acinetobacter baumannii* were found to share four hundred and seventy five genes that were connected with growth adaptation of the bacteria in humans and were absent in related species of *Acinetobacter* (Adams et al 2008). The horizontal transfer of virulent genes were found in 2008 along with evidence of other pathogenic systems found in *Acinetobacter baumannii* and the ability of this bacteria to continued sharing virulent genes will allow an increasing resistance to antibiotics (Juhas et al. 2008; Harding et al. 2018). Variations of the *Acinetobacter baumannii* strain from Iraq have forty five different drug resistant genes in one locus. Its survival and toxicity is also attributed to acinetobactin, a siderophore system, (an iron-acquisition system) which is well conserved in the species *Acinetobacter baumannii* (Yamamoto et al. 1994). And, there are genes that allow the bacterium to invade sterile synthetic and abiotic surfaces like glass and plastics (Tomaras et al. 2003, 2008; Brossard and Compagnari 2011).

***Acinetobacter baumannii* Outbreak Strains and Environments**

The Genus *Acinetobacter* is a group of soil and water bacteria found in the environments of humans and animals. These organisms require very little to grow and are ecologically robust in their nutritional and biochemical variability.

Henriksen noted that their potential as a pathogen was low but that they were an opportunistic bacteria able to cause infection in humans with low resistance to infection and more often were found in diseased tissues as secondary pathogens (Henriksen 1973). They are also quite able to contaminate pathological material collected from patients.

Being a gram-negative (containing a thin oily membrane which characterizes most pathogenic bacteria), arid, bacillus (rod-like in morphological structure) and opportunistic pathogen the *Acinetobacter baumannii* species is found almost solely in medical facility environments, and its species affects individuals whose resistance is very low and are often patients confined to burn and intensive care units (ICUs) (Antunes et al., 2014). Other *Acinetobacter* species have been identified as causing human infection, but *Acinetobacter baumannii* is the most virulent and widespread in the Genus. *Acinetobacter baumannii*'s sudden emergence during the Iraq conflicts is now a number of outbreak strains which have increased the nosocomial (hospital contracted) infections World wide. Its infections have caused many amputations and in 2017 alone it has caused 8500 infections and 700 deaths (CDC 2019; Peleg et al. 2008). Iraqibacter, as it is called by Military personnel, has spread from Iraq, the Kuwait region and Afghanistan (Davidson, 2011). With its resistance to antibiotics greater than MRSA, Iraqibacter, *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections began to rise in 2003 in the regions of Iraq and Afghanistan after the start of the Iraq War. The infection and colonization of *Acinetobacter baumannii* were initially found in military and civilian casualties returning from Iraq and quickly spread to the United Kingdom, the United States and the U.S. Military base Landstuhl regional Medical Center in Germany (CDC, 2004). Where this organism has come from and its exact source has been unclear. But, its origin could be important in finding a cure and treatment options. *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections isolated from zones of conflict in and around Iraq have evolved into three or more deadly strains of bacteria which are viewed as having all the characteristics of a persistent outbreak strain. The largest number of cases, with those in the United Kingdom

being especially high, is caused by the T strain (Turton et al. 2006). T strain isolates in the U.K. come from Iraq region casualties and were not acquired in hospital. The T strain characteristics are similar to the widespread SK clone in South East England and London. Questions about possible contaminants at the scene of infliction have risen. And, it is often thought that these infections are acquired at the health care facilities where patients are treated. The Iraqi soil *Acinetobacter baumannii* generally has not been isolated from patient's wounds immediately or shortly after injury. It has also been noted that it is unlikely that newly infected individuals injured at various sites would all acquire the same outbreak strain this way. But there is overwhelming evidence that military personnel and civilians have acquired the same outbreak strain in various environments of the Middle East conflicts centered around Iraq (Dijkshoorn et al. 1996; Shankar et al. 2007; Davidson 2011). The problem with this infection's resistance to antimicrobials continues to worsen, and with the high rates of carbapenem-resistant medical practitioners continue to search for medicines to treat *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections (Garnacho-Montero and Timsit 2019).

In the 1960s *Acinetobacter* infections in intensive care units (ICUs) were first reported. And, over a decade before the Iraq conflict *Acinetobacter baumannii* had become known as an agent of nosocomial infection. As early as 1990 an outbreak of *Acinetobacter baumannii* was investigated by researchers in a New Jersey Hospital and traced to hospital transducers. Cultures were taken from blood and vasculature catheter tips of seventy five patients in five ICUs and it was found that 21% of those in use and 46% of those in storage were positive for the *Acinetobacter baumannii* bacteria (Beck-Sague et al 1990). In 1991 *Acinetobacter baumannii* was isolated from a patient at Walter Reed Medical Army Hospital in Washington D.C. . *Acinetobacter baumannii* isolates from opportunistic infections include; septicemia, endocarditis, pneumonia, urinary tract infections and others and was found in the inanimate environments of hospitals in 1991 (Bergogne-Berezin and Joly-Guillou 1991).

In 1993 sixty five strains of *Acinetobacter baumannii* were isolated in a

neonatal intensive care unit as well as three other wards for comparison in the same health care facility (Thurm and Ritter 1993). The samples were taken from patients and the indoor environments. Over several months fourteen different electrotypes were determined, including a predominantly multiple resistant clone. The colonization and infection of neonates in the neonatal ICU spread and was colonized by the use of contaminated incubators, medical equipment, the water used to raise the humidity as well as the hands of staff members. Despite the identification of epidemic clones in the neonatal ICU, the genetic diversity of *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains from other wards revealed, over the several months taken for this study, that no spread of the epidemic clones to other wards had occurred. While these epidemic clones had not spread over several months in wards of the same hospital where the neonatal ICU was housed, it is remarkable that identical DNA profiles of *Acinetobacter baumannii* have been found in isolates from the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) that are associated with Iraq conflict casualties. In these two sets of isolates with identical DNA profiles, two additional outbreak strains were common and at least one outbreak strain, associated with soldiers returning to the U.S. and U.K. from Iraq is responsible for continued infection and the persistence of these multi-drug resistant (MDR) strains in hospitals. In the conclusion of another clinical study on 27 wards, which included 118 patients, researchers were not able to find the source of the resistant *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains in Hospital (Abbo et al. 2005).

Bacteria and Genetic Engineering

In the 1950s Joshua Lederberg discovered that bacteria could exchange their genes by using small rings of DNA called plasmids (Lederberg and Lederberg 1952). The gene transfer between bacteria, conjugation, can be initiated by simply introducing two different bacteria that have never been in contact before.

Using two completely different species of bacteria, in some cases from different Genera, the genome can be altered by conjugation alone, resulting in a genetically modified organism (GMO). An artificial introduction can look like a natural occurrence.

Within the cell and the single celled organism, bacteria, sections of DNA are genes. Inside the bacterium, DNA molecules are cut by restriction enzymes at precise locations and complimentary strands of RNA are composed to govern the synthesis of proteins. The transplantation of genes in an organism alters its protein production. In 1955 Frederick Sanger deciphered the amino acid sequence of a protein (Ryle et al. 1955). Proteins can control different aspects of an organism's physiology. Changes in an amino acid sequence will alter the production of specific proteins needed within an organism. Sanger's and other researchers' work led to a means of gene assembly from sections of DNA instead of first isolating their proteins (Sanger et al. 1977).

In 1973 restriction enzymes were used to cut precise locations in DNA by Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer (Cohen et al. 1973). This laboratory method, gene splicing, allows specific sections of DNA in bacteria to be cut open. A ligase, also an enzyme, can then be used to bend the gene fragments into curved sections of DNA that will fit into the bacteria's plasmids (loops of DNA). These new sections of DNA can then be used as vectors to combine that specific section of DNA with a second plasmid that has been opened in another bacterium. The vector, new gene, which is the curved plasmid, slips into the opened plasmid of the second bacterium to form recombinant DNA. Other enzymes bond this new gene into the opened plasmid of the second bacterium. When the new recombinant DNA is formed and absorbed into what was a normal bacterium (the Wild Type) it becomes recombinant bacteria. The newly formed recombinant bacterium will then replicate naturally by binary fission, splitting into two identical cells, with exact copies of the altered genetic material. This new organism, like the manipulated parent cell, is a genetically modified organism (GMO).

Cell to cell communication in a bacterial community requires the production of extra-cellular signaling molecules called autoinducers (Bassler 2002). This allows populations of bacteria to control gene expression as a community - as if it is one organism. It allows synchronization of its behaviour. This communication, quorum sensing, allows the passage of information between cells. In bacteria it occurs across species (between unrelated species) that are non-dangerous and those that are dangerous. Behaviours coordinated in unison controlled by quorum sensing are only initiated when bacteria has acquired cell populations that are high. Ineffective as one bacterium, specific behaviours require a quorum where the simultaneous action is effective in important behaviours such as bioluminescence, virulence factor expression, bio-film formation, sporulation and conjugation. The sufficient number of cells, a quorum, allows cell to cell communication in *Acinetobacter baumannii* which allows conjugation; not only between bacteria and across species in its own Genera but, across species in many genera of bacteria (Xavier and Bassler 2003; Howard et al. 2012). What is most unsettling about *Acinetobacter baumannii* is its ability to acquire genetic material from other genera including those to which it is not related.

Although bacteria have neither eggs nor sperm it is important to note that Ryuzo Yanagimachi developed a sperm injection technique in the 1990's which led to the in-vitro fertilization techniques in humans used in clinics around the World (Wakayama et al. 1998). Eventually, he used this technique to create the first transgenic Green Florescent Protein (GFP) Mouse (Perry et al. 1999). The mouse glows green when the gene responsible for making this protein is transferred from the jelly fish into the mouse egg. This groundbreaking research was accomplished in a small kitchen on the second floor of a modest building on the University of Hawaii campus. All of the techniques described here are used by biologists to create genetically modified organisms and research millions of questions in biology and medicine every day.

Engineered Pathogens

Louis Pasteur's work and the foundation of microbiology led to the affirmation that microorganisms cause disease (Pasteur 1878). Unfortunately, with many great breakthroughs in science there are those who use its insight and power as a destructive means. In the 1980s the hospital use of growth medium in Iraq was claimed to be about 200 kilograms (440 pounds) per year. Yet in 1988, Iraq imported 39 tons (85,980 pounds) of growth medium used for the germination and determination of bacteria. Using this medium the Hussein Regime grew 19000 liters of botulism toxin, 8000 liters of anthrax, 2000 liters of aflatoxins which cause liver cancer, *Clostridium perfringens* bacteria which causes gas gangrene, ricin which kills by inhibiting protein synthesis as well as cholera, foot and mouth disease, salmonella and camelpox (Ritter 1999).

On August 2nd, 1990 the United States, took retaliatory measures against Iraq when the Hussein regime invaded Kuwait and this "Gulf War" lasted until the end of February of 1991. On departure the U.S. led coalition left Saddam Hussein as the Head of State in Iraq. And, in 1995 an additional 10 tons of biological growth medium was purchased from the company Oxoid of Great Britain by the Hussein regime.

A little over a decade later the United States and the United Kingdom entered into a war with Iraq, after the U.S. homeland was attacked by terrorists on September 11th 2001, on the premise that Saddam Hussein had amassed weapons of mass destruction (nuclear bombs), chemical and biological weapons. Before the start of the war in Iraq in 2003 an Iraqi told German and American Intelligent Services that he had worked as a scientist in Iraq's biological weapons program during the Hussein regime. He later retracted the statement saying it was not true. But, it is probable that he told the truth the first time. The significance of this is that he claimed the biological weapons program in Iraq was housed in mobile laboratories; trucks that could be moved. With the announcements that the U.S. was going to invade Iraq in 2003, these trucks

could have been moved out of Iraq before anyone could have found them.

Clear evidence that Saddam Hussein had a biological weapons program has come from United Nations (U.N.) weapons inspectors and confessions by the microbiologist who set up a biological weaponization program in Iraq that made over 200 weapons including; warheads, bombs and missiles (UNSCOM, 1999). During the Iraq war that began in 2003, neither weapons of mass destruction, chemical nor biological weapons were found. But there is evidence that Saddam Hussein did indeed have a biological weapons program and there is overwhelming evidence that one of these weapons was first deployed during the Gulf War.

Conclusion and Discussion

While the genetic mechanisms explaining the emergence of *Acinetobacter baumannii* as a deadly pathogen and its widespread virulence from the *Acinetobacter* Genera have not been fully understood, all of the factors outlined here suggest, and it is theorized, that this bacteria has been, during the course of its evolution, artificially modified. The source of these virulent species strains have been a mystery because researchers have been looking in nature for the answer to its sudden emergence and deadly evolution. If examined closely, it is no mystery. The sudden emergence of the deadly pathogen *Acinetobacter baumannii* during the Iraq conflict is due to its laboratory manipulation as a biological weapon.

The modification of a bacterium through conjugation can make a bacterium resistant to antibiotics. So too in a laboratory would the countless introduction of other bacteria species and growth of a single deadly strain of bacteria cause extreme antibiotic resistance. Bacteria can be modified, not only with disease resistant genes but also with disease causing genes. Using its own unique characteristics and behaviours, the introduction of numerous lethal bacteria would allow the communication and sharing of genetic information. Stock piles of

lethal bacteria kept by the Iraqi biological weapons program could have easily been used to manipulate *Acinetobacter baumannii*. With its growth factor of five billion trillion in twenty four hours from a single bacterium; its adaptation and evolution could have been pushed over a very short period of time. The artificial introduction of genes in *Acinetobacter baumannii* look natural but there are genes that noticeably should not be present. Engineered with the knowledge of its specific needs for survival in a dry climate; in abiotic environments and within a host, it could have been made in a truck or a small room and later grown in large quantities. The horizontal transfer of genes allow the rapid spread of antibiotic resistance and may be responsible for the emergence of many new antibiotic resistant strains (Leungtongkam et al. 2018). The horizontal transfer of many genes in *Acinetobacter baumannii* from unrelated bacteria were probably executed in a laboratory and genes like Beta-lactamase were probably inserted along with other genes and regulators to insure its lethality and survival. It has been grown with adaptations that allow the uncommon ability of a bacterium to stick to metal door knobs, cotton and polyester pillow cases as well as plastics generally found in hospital settings around the World. Its ability to rapidly infect patients and contaminate everything in hospital settings allows it to persist and it can survive for long periods on clothing. These behaviours are associated with systems in *Acinetobacter baumannii* that are required for pili formation, attachment to plastics and biofilm development which have been acquired from unrelated sources. And, the system used for the attachment to plastic has been found in food-borne pathogens (Tomaras et al. 2003). It could be widespread among unrelated bacteria but it may have been acquired from these food-borne pathogens in a lab.

After six hundred and nine days of starvation *Acinetobacter baumannii* was found to adapt to rapid temperature changes and the resources (i.e. food) that are available. (Chapartegui-Gonzalez et al. 2018). These *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains last for long periods in dry conditions as well as in the human host because it was given these genes. And, this bacteria was specifically

designed to spread to the countries of those who invaded Iraq by way of casualties. The Gulf War lasted from 1990 to 1991 and outbreaks in the United States began with an outbreak in New York City in 1991 (Go et al. 1994). Countries, in different areas of the World, who fought in the Gulf War show signs of an outbreak of Carbapenem-resistant *Acinetobacter baumannii* before 2006 (Map p550, Peleg et al. 2008). While *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections have been a problem since the 1980s these new strains and the increase of infections World wide are overwhelmingly noticeable after the Gulf and Iraq Wars. And there was a large increase in *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections after 2003 when the Iraq War began.

With identical DNA profiles of isolated strains spread to two continents this pathogen seems to have been seeded or spread mechanically - as though Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and their surrounding regions were one origin. This is not possible unless it were moved and transported systematically to each location. Researchers have noted that injured soldiers with *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections were coming from these conflict areas in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan (Dijkshoorn et al. 1996; Shankar et al. 2007; Davidson 2011). Some researchers have also questioned whether there are contaminants at the scene where the casualty occurs or whether it is acquired at health care facilities where the injured are treated. The answer seems to be both.

Proof of the manipulation and weaponization of *Acinetobacter baumannii* can be readily identified; in the fragments on the gear, clothing or anatomy of the wounded, as well as the surrounding area, where an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) has injured someone who has also acquire the *Acinetobacter baumannii* infection shortly after that injury. This means that *Acinetobacter baumannii* was present at the site. When the infection takes place after hospitalization patients should be screened for *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* as the primary cause of infection but also examined for *Acinetobacter baumannii* because its level of contagion may have increased. Evidence of the weaponization of *Acinetobacter baumannii* can also be found in undetonated

IEDs where bacteria is discovered. This is the proof that the *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains have come from a weaponized biological engineered pathogen.

As early as 1995 the Hussein regime in Iraq had been suspected of biological agent experimentation and biological weapons testing on humans. Clear evidence that these types of agents were used on large animals, including donkeys and beagles was found by United Nations (U. N.) weapon inspectors (UNSCOM 1999). With all of the disease causing bacteria produced in Iraq's bioweapons program it is conceivable that the scientists involved took a bacterium, known for causing infections in patients with low resistance, and made it lethal. If the Iraqis wanted to increase the probability of death in soldiers wounded in combat, this is the bacteria they would manipulate and use. An invisible weapon in plain sight - any known biological weapon would have been discovered immediately after deployment. And, infection by any other biological means would alert Military physicians and surgeons, while disease would be widespread, leading Governments around the globe to learn of the use of biological weapons in Iraq over night. It is probable that *Acinetobacter baumannii* is now and has been a bio-weapon, and it has remained hidden and has continued to evolve and spread. And, the persistence and spread of the *Acinetobacter baumannii* bacterial infection is due to the persistence of human conflict, including terrorism, in the region, with its Global spread due to the movement of injured humans.

In 2017, when I began this epidemiological study of *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) did not require *Acinetobacter baumannii* cases to be reported (Davidson, 2011). Reporting *Acinetobacter baumannii* cases, the collection of contaminated fragment samples, isolation and screening of all incoming wounded for contaminated material (i.e. gear and clothing); to be sent to officials at the CDC and U.N. bioweapons inspectors, allow *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains to be identified as a bioweapon. Sampling infectious strains received after hospitalization will not

only determine if the bacteria is *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* species, but document the rate of spread within hospital settings for *Acinetobacter baumannii*. This will also help determine the origin of these species strains of bacteria and answer numerous pressing questions about the *Acinetobacter* Complex. *Acinetobacter baumannii*'s natural habitat has not been established by researchers (Peleg et al. 2008). This is because these infectious *Acinetobacter baumannii* strains began in an artificial setting. It is also likely that *Acinetobacter nosocomialis* species has evolved over time in the artificial settings of medical facilities across the World. *Acinetobacter baumannii*'s antibiotic resistance, its ability to thrive in sterile environments and the human host, continues today and there are still no answers to antibiotic resistance (Whiteway et al. 2021; Roy et al. 2022).

While treatment options prove to be a great difficulty and the role of all the acquired genes uncovered in *Acinetobacter baumannii* have not yet been described, there have been numerous research efforts to cure the *Acinetobacter baumannii* infection. Like Bassler's early suggestion that cell-cell signaling be investigated for targeting virulent bacterial infections, anti cell-cell signaling has recently been suggested as a target for combating this infection (Sarshar et al. 2021). By targeting biofilm production, bacterial hydrophilins (which promote desiccation ability) and the RNase T2 family protein (a positive regulator used to colonize inanimate surfaces and promote motile functionality) it may be possible to stop *Acinetobacter baumannii* persistence in the human host. (Sitthisak et al. 2023; Green et al. 2022; Jacobs et al. 2014). The use of a virus that infects bacteria (a phage) called phage therapy has also been sought in place of antibiotics (Ibrahim et al. 2021). Using lytic bacteria phages have shown researchers that treatment of the *Acinetobacter baumannii* infection in-vitro can lead to positive in-vivo research results (Liu M et al. 2022). It has also recently been demonstrated that In-vitro phage-antibiotic treatment on *Acinetobacter baumannii* leads to antimicrobial resensitization. And, the use of phage-antibiotic therapy in animals (in-vivo) with *Acinetobacter baumannii* infections has allowed

phage resistance in 96% of the animals in a study that increased antibiotic sensitivity (Gordillo-Altamirano et al. 2022). But, in the past, it has not been clear if phage therapies, that have been attempted in humans, are working (LaVergne et al., 2018). Caution should also be used when introducing a virus into the cellular environment of an *Acinetobacter baumannii* infection, especially if this bacteria has been modified artificially. Recently, methods of artificial intelligence (AI) were used to screen over 7000 molecules to find inhibitors that could stop *Acinetobacter baumannii* growth in-vitro (Liu G. et al. 2023). Shankar's attempt at bacterial gene transfer therapy is the only treatment to work against *Acinetobacter baumannii* and has come from another engineered bacterium (Shankar et al. 2007). The delivery of vectors containing bactericidal genes was initiated and, through bacterial conjugation, the transfer of those genes using attenuated *E. coli* as a vector to disrupt protein synthesis in *Acinetobacter baumannii* was successful. By transferring an in-vitro method to an in-vivo burn sepsis model in mice, this treatment led to the death of *Acinetobacter baumannii* cells, where 90% of the animals under investigation survived with the treatment. Like Shankar's research, it seems that the greatest possibility for a cure will be one that involves the genetic modification of another bacteria that can kill *Acinetobacter baumannii* - a solution that must be bioengineered.

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Footnotes

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