



UNIWERSYTET MEDYCZNY IM. PIASTÓW ŚLĄSKICH WE WROCŁAWIU

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Rozprawa doktorska w oparciu o monotematyczny cykl prac w dziedzinie nauk medycznych i nauk o zdrowiu w dyscyplinie nauki farmaceutyczne

Epidemiologia i diagnostyka zakażeń krwi u pacjentów hospitalizowanych, wpływ nowoczesnych technik diagnostycznych na wykrycie czynnika etiologicznego i antybiotykoterapię – analiza jednośrodkowa

Epidemiology and diagnostics of bloodstream infections in hospitalized patients. Impact of advanced diagnostic techniques on detecting the etiological agent and antibiotic therapy – a single-center analysis

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Wrocław 2024

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**WYKAZ PUBLIKACJI NAUKOWYCH WCHODZĄCYCH W SKŁAD CYKLU
BĘDĄCEGO PRZEDMIOTEM ROZPRAWY**

• Publikacja 1 [P1]

Tytuł: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the epidemiology of bloodstream infections in hospitalized patients- experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland.

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Czasopismo: Journal of Clinical Medicine

Wydawnictwo: Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute

ISSN: 2077-0383

Rok wydania: 2023

Tom i numer wydania: 12(18)

Paginacja: 5942

DOI: 10.3390/jcm12185942

Kategoria publikacji: praca oryginalna

Punktacja IF₂₀₂₃: **3.9**

Punktacja MNiSW: **140**

• Publikacja 2 [P2]

Tytuł: Evaluation of the in vitro susceptibility of clinical isolates of NDM-producing *Klebsiella pneumoniae* to new antibiotics included in a treatment regimen for infections.

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Czasopismo: Frontiers in Microbiology

Wydawnictwo: Frontiers Media SA

ISSN: 1664-302X

Rok wydania: 2024

Tom i numer wydania: 15

Paginacja: 1331628

DOI: 10.3389/fmicb.2024.1331628

Kategoria publikacji: praca oryginalna

Punktacja IF₂₀₂₂: **5.2**

Punktacja MNiSW: **100**

- **Publikacja 3 [P3]**

Tytuł: Assessing the interpretation of molecular test results in the diagnosis of bloodstream infections.

Autorzy: Natalia Ślabisz, Patrycja Leśnik, Katarzyna Żybura-Wszoła, Ruth Dudek-Wicher, Urszula Nawrot, Jacek Majda

Czasopismo: Diagnostics

Wydawnictwo: Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute

ISSN: 2075-4418

Rok wydania: 2024

Tom i numer wydania: 14(9)

Paginacja: 915

DOI: 10.3390/diagnostics14090915

Kategoria publikacji: praca oryginalna

Punktacja IF₂₀₂₂: **3.6**

Punktacja MNiSW: **70**

Sumaryczny współczynnik wpływu (IF): **12.7**

Sumaryczna punktacja MEiN: **310**

W przygotowaniu wszystkich prac naukowych wchodzących w skład cyklu stanowiącego rozprawę doktorską, miałam wiodący udział, począwszy od opracowania koncepcji i metodologii badań, zbierania danych, wykonania oznaczeń laboratoryjnych, przeprowadzenia analizy statystycznej, do opracowania manuskryptów.

STRESZCZENIE

Zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego (BSI, ang. bloodstream infections) są istotnym problemem zdrowotnym, szczególnie w kontekście pacjentów w stanach krytycznych. Szacuje się, że globalnie występuje około 30 milionów przypadków BSI rocznie, skutkujących około 6 milionami zgonów. Zakażenia te mogą wynikać z infekcji miejscowych lub obecności cewników naczyniowych, a komplikacje mogą prowadzić do sepsy i wstrząsu septycznego, z wysoką śmiertelnością wynoszącą od 25% do 80%. Pandemia COVID-19 znaczowo wpłynęła na służbę zdrowia, zwiększaając liczbę zakażeń szpitalnych ze względu na dużą liczbę hospitalizacji, nadużywanie antybiotyków i nieprzestrzeganie procedur kontroli zakażeń. Leczenie infekcji wywołanych przez drobnoustroje wielolekooporne wymaga często stosowania kombinacji kilku antybiotyków. Zastosowanie metod biologii molekularnej w diagnostyce BSI może przyspieszyć wdrożenie odpowiedniej terapii. Stosowanie testów molekularnych jest uzasadnione, gdy wyniki są szybko implementowane w ramach programu zarządzania antybiotykami.

Celem pracy była analiza zmian w epidemiologii zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego wywołanych przez pandemię COVID-19, z uwzględnieniem problemu narastającej oporności drobnoustrojów na antybiotyki oraz możliwych korzyści wynikających z zastosowania metod molekularnych w diagnostyce tych zakażeń. Dodatkowym przedmiotem przeprowadzonych badań była ocena skuteczności *in vitro* cefiderokolu, erawacykliny, tigecykliny, plazomycyny, fosfomycyny oraz skojarzenia ceftazydym/awibaktam z aztreonamem wobec izolatów klinicznych *Klebsiella pneumoniae* wytwarzających karbapenemazę typu NDM.

Materiał i metody. W badaniach uwzględniono 4289 pacjentów hospitalizowanych w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu w latach 2018-2022, analizując retrospektwnie ich dane demograficzne, wyniki badań mikrobiologicznych i biochemicznych. Badano także lekowrażliwość 60 izolatów *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM, stosując różne metody oceny wrażliwości, w tym paski z gradientem stężeń, mikrorozcieńczenia w agarze oraz metodę „strip-stacking” umożliwiającą ocenę skuteczności działania skojarzenia dwóch antybiotyków. W trzecim badaniu analizowano 118 pacjentów pod kątem diagnostyki zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego za pomocą hodowli krwi i testów molekularnych BIOFIRE BCID2, wykrywających 33 patogeny oraz geny oporności na antybiotyki. Przeprowadzono analizę wskaźników zapadalności na zakażenia, śmiertelności wśród pacjentów oraz

decyzji terapeutycznych podejmowanych przez lekarzy, zgodnie z rekomendacjami Szpitalnej Polityki Antybiotykowej. Wyniki trzech prac analizowano przy pomocy programu Statistica 13.3 i odpowiednich testów statystycznych.

Wyniki z przeprowadzonych badań wskazują na wzrost zapadalności na zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego w czasie pandemii COVID-19, zwłaszcza u pacjentów zarażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2, oraz na częstsze występowanie drobnoustrojów opornych na antybiotyki w tej grupie chorych. Liczba przypadków wymagających diagnostyki zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego wzrosła o 34%, a dodatnią hodowlę krwi uzyskano u 20% pacjentów w porównaniu do 16% przed pandemią. Zapadalność na bakteryjne zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego wzrosła z 1,13 do 2,05 przypadków na 1000 osobodni, a śmiertelność w okresie pandemii była wyższa (47% vs. 42%), szczególnie u pacjentów z COVID-19 (59%). Analiza etiologii zakażeń wykazała częstsze występowanie gronkowców koagulazo-ujemnych, *Enterococcus* spp oraz wyższy odsetek MRSA u pacjentów z COVID-19 (49% vs. 26%). *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM stanowiły 16% izolowanych pałeczek Gram-ujemnych u pacjentów z COVID-19. Pacjenci z COVID-19 mieli niższe poziomy prokalcytoniny w porównaniu do pacjentów bez infekcji wirusowej. Badane izolaty kliniczne *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM wykazały 100% wrażliwość *in vitro* na cefiderokol, erawacyklinę oraz tygecyklinę, ale tylko 78% na plazomycynę. Porównanie wrażliwości na fosfomycynę oznaczonej metodą pasków z gradientem stężeń oraz komercyjnego testu AD Fosfomycin, wykazało rozbieżności w uzyskanych wynikach (68% vs 83% szczepów wrażliwych). Zastosowanie kombinacji ceftazydym/awibaktam i aztreonam, z wykorzystaniem metody „strip-stacking” wykazało 100% wrażliwość *in vitro* wśród testowanych szczepów. W badaniach molekularnych analizowano retrospektynie wyniki pacjentów hospitalizowanych w latach 2021-2022. Najczęstszymi czynnikami etiologicznymi BSI były *Staphylococcus aureus* (37%) i *Escherichia coli* (21%). Wykryto, że 66% szczepów *S. aureus* było wrażliwych na metycylinę (MSSA), a 26% Gram-ujemnych pałeczek produkowało ESBL, z czego 4 miały geny odpowiedzialne za metalo-β-laktamazy. Wyniki badań molekularnych były w 100% zgodne z wynikiem hodowli oraz identyfikacji i antybiogramu wykonanego metodą fenotypową. Średni czas uzyskania wyniku badania molekularnego wynosił 10 godzin, w porównaniu do 52 godzin dla rutynowej hodowli krwi. Błędne decyzje terapeutyczne podejmowana najczęściej w przypadku wykrycia *S. aureus* MSSA (64,5%).

Podsumowanie. Przeprowadzona analiza wykazała wzrost zapadalności na zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego w okresie pandemii COVID-19, zwłaszcza wśród pacjentów zakażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2. Zaobserwowano również znaczący wzrost występowania drobnoustrojów opornych na antybiotyki, w tym szczególnie *K. pneumoniae* NDM. Badania *in vitro* wykazały dobrą skuteczność cefiderokolu, erawacykliny, tygecykliny oraz skojarzenia ceftazydym/awibaktam z aztreonamem. Metody molekularne wykorzystywane w diagnostyce zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego umożliwiają szybsze podjęcie optymalnych decyzji terapeutycznych, co jest kluczowe dla skutecznej antybiotykoterapii. W praktyce jednak wyniki testów PCR często nie są poprawnie interpretowane, a optymalizacja antybiotykoterapii następuje dopiero po uzyskaniu klasycznego wyniku badania mikrobiologicznego.

ABSTRACT

Bloodstream infections (BSI) are a significant health concern, particularly for critically ill patients. Globally, it is estimated that there are approximately 30 million BSI cases annually, resulting in around 6 million deaths. These infections can stem from local infections or the presence of vascular catheters, and complications can lead to sepsis and septic shock, with a high mortality rate ranging from 25% to 80%. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted healthcare systems, increasing the incidence of hospital-acquired infections due to the high number of hospitalizations, misuse of antibiotics, and non-compliance with infection control procedures. Treating infections caused by multidrug-resistant microorganisms often requires the use of combination antibiotic therapies. The application of molecular biology methods in the diagnosis of BSI can expedite the implementation of appropriate therapy. The use of molecular tests is justified when the results are quickly implemented as part of an antibiotic stewardship program.

Objective: The aim of this study was to analyze changes in the epidemiology of bloodstream infections caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the growing issue of antibiotic resistance, and the potential benefits of using molecular methods in diagnosing these infections. Additionally, the study assessed the *in vitro* efficacy of cefiderocol, eravacycline, tigecycline, plazomicin, fosfomycin, and the combination of ceftazidime/avibactam with aztreonam against clinical isolates of *Klebsiella pneumoniae* producing NDM-type carbapenemase.

Materials and Methods: The study included 4289 patients hospitalized at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław between 2018 and 2022. Demographic data, microbiological and biochemical test results were retrospectively analyzed. The susceptibility of 60 *K. pneumoniae* NDM isolates was tested using various methods, including gradient strip tests, agar microdilution, and the "strip-stacking" method to assess the efficacy of two antibiotic combinations. In a third study, 118 patients were analyzed for BSI diagnostics using blood cultures and BIOFIRE BCID2 molecular tests, which detect 33 pathogens and antibiotic resistance genes. Incidence rates of infections, patient mortality, and therapeutic decisions made by physicians, in accordance with the Hospital Antibiotic Policy recommendations, were analyzed. The results of the three studies were analyzed using Statistica 13.3 software and appropriate statistical tests.

Results: The studies indicated an increase in the incidence of bloodstream infections during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among SARS-CoV-2 infected

patients, and a higher occurrence of antibiotic-resistant microorganisms in this patient group. The number of cases requiring BSI diagnostics increased by 34%, and positive blood cultures were obtained in 20% of patients compared to 16% before the pandemic. The incidence of bacterial bloodstream infections rose from 1.13 to 2.05 cases per 1000 patient-days, and mortality during the pandemic was higher (47% vs. 42%), especially among COVID-19 patients (59%). The analysis of infection etiology showed a higher prevalence of coagulase-negative staphylococci, *Enterococcus* spp., and a higher percentage of MRSA among COVID-19 patients (49% vs. 26%). *K. pneumoniae* NDM constituted 16% of isolated Gram-negative rods in COVID-19 patients. COVID-19 patients had lower procalcitonin levels compared to patients without viral infection. The clinical isolates of *K. pneumoniae* NDM showed 100% *in vitro* susceptibility to cefiderocol, eravacycline, and tigecycline, but only 78% to plazomicin. Comparison of fosfomycin susceptibility using gradient strip tests and the commercial AD Fosfomycin test showed discrepancies (68% vs 83% susceptible strains). The combination of ceftazidime/avibactam and aztreonam using the "strip-stacking" method showed 100% *in vitro* susceptibility among tested strains. Molecular studies retrospectively analyzed the results of patients hospitalized between 2021 and 2022. The most common BSI pathogens were *Staphylococcus aureus* (37%) and *Escherichia coli* (21%). It was found that 66% of *S. aureus* strains were methicillin-susceptible (MSSA), and 26% of Gram-negative rods produced ESBL, with 4 carrying genes responsible for metallo-β-lactamases. The results of molecular tests were 100% consistent with blood culture, identification, and phenotypic antibiogram results. The average time to obtain molecular test results was 10 hours, compared to 52 hours for routine blood cultures. Incorrect therapeutic decisions were most often made in the case of MSSA *S. aureus* detection (64.5%).

Conclusion: The analysis showed an increased incidence of bloodstream infections during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among SARS-CoV-2 infected patients. There was also a significant rise in the occurrence of antibiotic-resistant microorganisms, particularly *K. pneumoniae* NDM. *In vitro* studies demonstrated good efficacy of cefiderocol, eravacycline, tigecycline, and the combination of ceftazidime/avibactam with aztreonam. Molecular methods used in the diagnosis of bloodstream infections enable faster therapeutic decision-making, which is crucial for effective antibiotic therapy. However, in practice, PCR test results are often not correctly interpreted, and optimization of antibiotic therapy occurs only after obtaining classical microbiological test results.

1. Wprowadzenie

Zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego (BSI, ang. bloodstream infections) są jedną z głównych przyczyn zachorowalności oraz śmiertelności pacjentów, szczególnie tych w stanie krytycznym [1]. Szacuje się, że rocznie na świecie dochodzi do 30 milionów BSI i blisko 6 milionów zgonów w wyniku tych zakażeń [2, 3]. W Polsce, z powodu braku oficjalnego raportowania, liczba zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, oceniana jest na podstawie danych europejskich i może wynosić co najmniej 50 000 przypadków rocznie [4, 5]. Zakażenie krwi, może być wtórnym następstwem infekcji miejscowej w obrębie np. układu moczowego, oddechowego bądź też skóry i tkanek miękkich. Może też mieć charakter pierwotny związany z obecnością cewnika naczyniowego [6]. Obecność drobnoustrojów we krwi (bakteriemia) w określonych sytuacjach może, na skutek niekontrolowanej reakcji układu immunologicznego, prowadzić do rozwoju sepsy czy wstrząsu septycznego, obarczonego znacznie większą śmiertelnością, wynikającą z dysfunkcji narządowej w przebiegu zakażenia. W zależności od czynnika etiologicznego, który wywołał infekcję, jego zdolności oraz oporności na antybiotyki, a także od kondycji chorego, śmiertelność w bakteriemii, sepsie czy wstrząsie septycznym wahają się w zakresie 25-80% [7]. Współczynnik zgonów spowodowanych sepsą jest w Polsce wyższy od współczynnika zgonów dla chorób nowotworowych układu oddechowego czy zawału serca (63,6/100 000 osób vs. 58,6/100 000 osób i 49,4/100 000 osób) [4, 5]. Ponad 50% BSI wywoływana jest przez bakterie Gram-dodatnie. Do głównych czynników etiologicznych należą gronkowce koagulazo-ujemne (CoNS), *Staphylococcus aureus* czy *Enterococcus* spp. Z drugiej strony, co najmniej 30% zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego spowodowanych jest przez drobnoustroje Gram-ujemne, a infekcje te, dodatkowo obarczone są większą śmiertelnością (15-29%), związaną z powszechnym występowaniem oporności na antybiotyki wśród tej grupy drobnoustrojów [2, 8].

Pandemia COVID-19 miała ogromny wpływ na służbę zdrowia na całym świecie. Szpitale i placówki opieki medycznej zmagały się z nadzwyczajnym przeciążeniem, zarówno z powodu większej liczby hospitalizacji, wynikającej z leczenia pacjentów zakażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2, jak i z powodu ograniczeń w świadczeniu opieki zdrowotnej w innych obszarach. Niedobór i nadmierne obciążenie personelu oraz problemy z dostępnością środków ochrony osobistej, przy bardzo wysokim wskaźniku hospitalizacji, spowodowały gwałtowne rozprzestrzenianie się zakażeń szpitalnych w jednostkach służby zdrowia. Jednoczesne nadużywanie antybiotyków oraz nieprzestrzeganie procedur kontroli zakażeń, skutkowało wzrostem występowania

zakażeń wywołanych przez drobnoustroje wielolekooporne takie jakie *Staphylococcus aureus* MRSA (ang. methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), czy szczepy pałeczek Gram-ujemnych opornych na karbapenemy. Nieracjonalna antybiotykoterapia oraz stosowanie subterapeutycznych dawek leków powodowało selekcję szczepów opornych [9-12]. Duża metaanaliza, obejmująca 362 976 pacjentów hospitalizowanych w latach 2019-2021, przeprowadzona w 2023 roku, wykazała, że 72,3 % pacjentów zakażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2 otrzymywała antybiotyk, nawet przy braku udokumentowanej koinfekcji bakteryjnej. Ponad 60 % wtórnych zakażeń bakteryjnych u tych chorych, była spowodowana przez drobnoustroje oporne na antybiotyki, w szczególności *Stenotrophomonas* spp, *Acinetobacter* spp oporne na karbapenemy, czy *Klebsiella* spp niewrażliwe na kolistynę lub karbapenemy [13, 14]. Pacjenci krytycznie chorzy, hospitalizowani w oddziałach intensywnej terapii, byli zdecydowanie bardziej podatni na wtórne zakażenia bakteryjne. Częstość występowania zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego była znacznie wyższa u pacjentów z COVID-19, niż w przypadku pacjentów leczonych z innych przyczyn, niż infekcja wirusem SARS-CoV-2. W przeglądzie systematycznym opublikowanym w 2021 roku, wykazano, że zapadalność na BSI u pacjentów z COVID-19 wynosiła 7,3%, przy czym chorzy wymagający hospitalizacji w oddziałach intensywnej terapii, 4-krotnie częściej rozwijali BSI, a zapadalność wśród tej grupy sięgała blisko 30%. Wśród pacjentów leczonych z przyczyn innych niż infekcja wirusem SARS-CoV-2, zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego występowały w niecałych 3% przypadków [11].

Co raz głośniej mówi się o problemie narastającej antybiotykoodporności jako o tzw. „cichej pandemii”, a oporność drobnoustrojów na antybiotyki została uznana przez Światową Organizację Zdrowia za jeden z obecnie 10 najważniejszych globalnych zagrożeń dla zdrowia publicznego [15, 16, 17]. Szacuje się, że w 2050 roku, w związku z zakażeniami wywołanymi przez drobnoustroje wielolekooporne, na świecie będzie się notować ok 10 milionów zgonów rocznie. Ludzie będą umierali częściej z powodu infekcji niż z powodu cukrzycy czy chorób nowotworowych [18]. Leczenie zakażeń, których czynnikiem etiologicznym są bakterie oporne na rutynowo stosowane antybiotyki, stwarza konieczność sięgania przez klinicystów po niekonwencjonalne schematy terapeutyczne, obejmujące skojarzenia dwóch lub nawet trzech środków przeciwdrobnoustrojowych. W niedawno opublikowanych rekomendacjach IDSA (ang. Infectious Diseases Society of America) oraz ESCMID (ang. European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases), dotyczących m.in. leczenia zakażeń

wywołanych przez pałeczki *Enterobacteriales* oporne na karbapenemy, oprócz zaproponowania w terapii nowo zarejestrowanych leków, takich jak plazomycyna, erawacyklinia czy cefiderokol, zwrócono również uwagę na możliwość uzyskania sukcesu terapeutycznego po zastosowaniu skojarzenia aztreonamu z ceftazydymem i awibaktamem [19, 20]. Techniką umożliwiającą ustalenie skumulowanej wartości minimalnego stężenia hamującego (MIC, ang. minimum inhibitory concentration) dla połączenia dwóch antybiotyków jest metoda „strip-stacking”, nie jest to jednak procedura powszechnie stosowana w laboratoriach mikrobiologicznych. Pomimo braku rutynowego oznaczania wrażliwości na skojarzenie tych dwóch antybiotyków, połączenie to, biorąc pod uwagę bezpieczeństwo, koszty oraz szerokie wskazania do stosowania, wydaje się być lekiem pierwszego rzutu w leczeniu zakażeń o etiologii *Enterobacteriales* produkujących karbapenemazy klasy B (metalo-β-laktamazy) [21]. W kwietniu 2024 roku Europejska Agencja Leków (EMA, ang. European Medicines Agency) zarejestrowała nowe połączenie aztreonamu z awibaktamem, w leczeniu zakażeń wywołanych przez Gram-ujemne pałeczki wytwarzające metalo-β-laktamazy, co daje nadzieję na przełom w skutecznym leczeniu zakażeń wywołanych m. in przez szczepy *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM (ang. New Delhi metallo-β-lactamse).

Wysoka śmiertelność w przebiegu zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, przy jednocześnie realnej możliwości wystąpienia drobnoustroju wielolekoopornego jako czynnika etiologicznego, skłania klinicystów do sięgania po metody z zakresu biologii molekularnej, których główną zaletą jest przyspieszenie czasu koniecznego do uzyskania wyniku [22]. Niemniej jednak rutynowa hodowla drobnoustrojów z krwi w dalszym ciągu pozostaje „złotym standardem” w diagnostyce BSI. Kluczowym elementem zwiększającym szanse pacjenta na przeżycie jest szybkie wdrożenie odpowiedniej terapii antybiotykowej, a błędne decyzje terapeutyczne wiążą się z 5-krotnym zmniejszeniem przeżywalności wśród pacjentów z sepsą. W dobie stale narastającej oporności drobnoustrojów, racjonalne zatem wydaje się być stosowanie szerokospektralnej antybiotykoterapii empirycznej, która z jednej strony ma zagwarantować sukces terapeutyczny, ale z drugiej- niesie konsekwencje takie jak: biegunki poantybiotykowe o etiologii *C. difficile* czy selekcja szczepów opornych [23]. W zależności od posiadanych przez laboratorium mikrobiologiczne analizatorów, czas od momentu uzyskania dodatniej hodowli krwi do identyfikacji oraz oznaczenia lekooporności drobnoustroju stanowiącego czynnik etiologiczny, może wynosić od 48 do 168 godzin. Wdrożenie do schematu diagnostycznego zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego metod z zakresu biologii

molekularnej umożliwia znaczne skrócenie czasu potrzebnego na podjęcie optymalnych decyzji terapeutycznych. Testy molekularne przydatne w diagnostyce BSI, ze względu na rodzaj stosowanego materiału, można podzielić na te wykonywane z dodatniej hodowli krwi lub te, w których do badania wykorzystywana jest krew pełna pacjenta. Metody oparte na analizie wykonywanej z krwi pełnej dodatkowo przyspieszają diagnostykę, ponieważ nie wymagają wcześniejszej inkubacji krwi w systemach automatycznych [24]. Systemy wykorzystujące do badania dodatnią hodowlę krwi oparte są najczęściej o metody multiplex PCR, które pozwalają na jednocożasowe wykrywanie wielu gatunków drobnoustrojów oraz genów oporności. Poprawna interpretacja wyników badań PCR wymaga wiedzy z zakresu bakteryjnych genów warunkujących oporność na antybiotyki, a także możliwości wystąpienia oporności wynikającej z innych mechanizmów niż te wykrywane w teście (np. efflux) [25, 26]. Jako jeden z przykładów, w którym zależność pomiędzy występowaniem genów oporności a opornością fenotypową jest jednoznaczna i silnie udokumentowana, można wymienić metycylinooporność *S. aureus*. Gronkowcowa kaseta chromosomalna *mec* (*SCCmec*, ang. staphylococcal cassette chromosome *mec*) niosąca gen *mecA/C* wbudowuje się w określonym regionie genomu *S. aureus*, jej prawidłowa insercja prowadzi do powstania regionu MREJ (połączenia na prawym krańcu *SCCmec*). Jednoczesna detekcja *S. aureus*, *mecA/C* oraz MREJ zapewnia swoistą identyfikację szczepu gronkowca złocistego opornego na metycylinę. Z drugiej strony, niewykrycie tych determinant oporności, stanowiących podstawowy mechanizm warunkujący metycylinooporność, pozwala nam na stwierdzenie szczepu MSSA (ang. methicillin sensitive *Staphylococcus aureus*) [26]. Protokół postępowania z pacjentem, u którego rozpoznano bakterięmię o etiologii *S. aureus*, jasno określa schematy postępowania terapeutycznego, w zależności od tego czy wykryto szczep MSSA, czy MRSA. Lekiem z wyboru w przypadku metycylinowrażliwych izolatów *S. aureus* jest kloksacylina, podawana w dawce 2g iv co 6 godzin. Przeprowadzone badania wykazały, że stosowanie wankomycyny w zakażeniach MSSA wiąże się ze zmniejszoną skutecznością i równocześnie może zwiększać śmiertelność wśród pacjentów [27, 28]. Wiele publikacji wskazuje jednak na fakt, że stosowanie kosztownych testów molekularnych może przynieść wymierne korzyści, w tym finansowe, tylko wtedy, kiedy wyniki te będą konsultowane w ramach zespołu ds. szpitalnej polityki antybiotykowej (ASP; ang. antimicrobial stewardship program), a właściwe decyzje terapeutyczne będą szybko implementowane w praktyce klinicznej [29].

2. Cele pracy

Celem niniejszej rozprawy doktorskiej była analiza zmian w epidemiologii zakażeń łóżyska naczyniowego wywołanych przez pandemię COVID-19, z uwzględnieniem problemu narastającej oporności drobnoustrojów na antybiotyki oraz możliwych korzyści wynikających z zastosowania metod molekularnych w diagnostyce tych zakażeń.

W pierwszej pracy wchodzącej w skład przedmiotowej rozprawy dokonano szczegółowej analizy wyników badań mikrobiologicznych oraz analitycznych pacjentów hospitalizowanych przed, jak i w trakcie trwania pandemii COVID-19. Celem pracy była ocena, czy wśród pacjentów z aktywną, bądź niedawno przebytą infekcją wirusem SARS-CoV-2, zakażenia łóżyska naczyniowego spowodowane były przez inne czynniki etiologiczne niż w przypadku pacjentów hospitalizowanych przed pandemią, a także, czy drobnoustroje te charakteryzowały się zwiększoną opornością na antybiotyki stosowane w terapii. Drugorzędom celem pracy była ocena wpływu zakażenia wirusem SARS-CoV-2 na obraz morfologii krwi oraz na poziom parametrów zapalnych takich jak białko C-reaktywne czy prokalcytonina, oraz próba ewaluacji przydatności tych wskaźników w predykcji wystąpienia wtórnej infekcji bakteryjnej w przebiegu zakażenia wirusowego.

Druga praca będąca częścią cyklu była efektem wyników otrzymanych w pierwszym badaniu. Zanotowany wzrost częstości występowania szczepów wielolekoopornych powoduje konieczność stosowania nowych antybiotyków, a także wdrażania terapii skojarzonej dwóch lub nawet trzech środków przeciwdrobnoustrojowych. Celem tej części była ocena wrażliwości *in vitro* izolatów klinicznych *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM pochodzących od pacjentów hospitalizowanych w trakcie pandemii COVID-19 na nowe antybiotyki oraz skojarzenia leków zaproponowane w schematach terapeutycznych. Celem drugorzędom było porównanie dwóch metod oznaczenia wrażliwości na fosfomycynę, w tym metody referencyjnej mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze.

W trzeciej pracy stanowiącej część niniejszej rozprawy przedstawiono wyniki badań, będących próbą oceny interpretacji wyników testów molekularnych wykorzystywanych w diagnostyce zakażeń łóżyska naczyniowego. Analizie poddano decyzje terapeutyczne podejmowane przez lekarzy klinicystów na podstawie wyników badań PCR. Głównym celem badania było sprawdzenie czy ewentualna zmiana empirycznej terapii antybiotykowej była adekwatna do wyników otrzymanych w ramach molekularnej diagnostyki zakażeń łóżyska naczyniowego. Dodatkowo dokonano

porównania wyników otrzymanych w teście PCR z konwencjonalną hodowlą drobnoustrojów, a także obliczono różnicę w czasie uzyskania rezultatów badania w zależności od zastosowanej metody.

3. Metodyka badań

3.1. Publikacja P1

3.1.1. Charakterystyka grup badanych

Do badania zakwalifikowano łącznie 4289 pacjentów hospitalizowanych w latach 2018-2022 w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu, u których w ramach rutynowej diagnostyki mikrobiologicznej wykonano posiew krwi. Wyodrębniono dwie główne grupy badane. Do grupy „preCOVID-19” włączono pacjentów leczonych w okresie 24 miesięcy przed wybuchem pandemii wirusa SARS-CoV-2, tj. do maja 2020 roku. W grupie „COVID-19” znaleźli się chorzy hospitalizowani podczas trwania pandemii, przy czym w obrębie grupy wydzielono dwie podgrupy w zależności od tego, czy pobyt pacjenta w szpitalu związany był z aktualnym bądź niedawno przebytym zakażeniem wirusem SARS-CoV-2, czy też hospitalizacja wynikała z innych przyczyn.

Badanie zostało przeprowadzone zgodnie z zasadami Deklaracji Helsińskiej i uzyskało pozytywną opinię Komisji Bioetycznej przy Wojskowej Izbie Lekarskiej (Nr 194/22).

3.1.2. Procedury mikrobiologiczne w analizowanym okresie

W latach 2018-2022 w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu rutynowy posiew krwi wykonywany był przy użyciu automatycznego systemu do hodowli krwi BacT/ALERT 3D (bioMérieux, Francja). Stosowano 5-dniowy protokół inkubacji, z wykorzystaniem dedykowanych podłoży hodowlanych BacT/ALERT FN Plus oraz BacT/ALERT FA Plus (bioMérieux, Francja). Po uzyskaniu z analizatora informacji o dodatniej hodowli, próbkę krwi inokulowano na podłożu stałe Columbia Agar, Agar czekoladowy, MacConkey Agar (bioMérieux, Francja) oraz wykonywano preparat barwiony metodą Grama. Identyfikację oraz lekowrażliwość drobnoustroju oceniano z zastosowaniem systemu VITEK 2 (bioMérieux, Francja).

3.1.3. Retrospektywna analiza danych

Analizie szczegółowej poddano zarówno dane demograficzne pacjentów takie jak: płeć, wiek, czynniki ryzyka, choroby współistniejące, jak i wyniki badań mikrobiologicznych, biochemicznych oraz morfologii krwi. Baza danych, zebrana na podstawie analizy historii chorób pacjentów z systemu elektronicznej dokumentacji medycznej (AMMS) oraz wyników badań mikrobiologicznych z Laboratoryjnego Systemu Informatycznego, zawierała oprócz danych demograficznych również wyizolowany w posiewie krwi czynnik etiologiczny zakażenia, lekowrażliwość drobnoustroju oraz informacje o wykrytych mechanizmach oporności na antybiotyki.

Spośród parametrów analitycznych analizowano poziom białka C-reaktywnego (CRP, ang. C- reactive protein), prokalcitoniny (PCT, ang. procalcitonin), mleczanów (LAC, ang. lactate) oraz liczbę białych krwinek w tym neutrofili. Ocenie poddano również wskaźnik zapadalności na zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego w obu grupach badanych oraz śmiertelność wśród pacjentów.

3.1.4. Analiza statystyczna

Analizę statystyczną przeprowadzono, wykorzystując testy Mann-Whitney'ego (dla dwóch zmiennych numerycznych), Kruskala-Wallisa (dla trzech zmiennych numerycznych) oraz Chi-kwadrat Pearsona (dla zmiennych kategorycznych) z poziomem istotności ustalonym na 0,05. Do analizy użyto programu Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO Software Inc., 2017).

3.2. Publikacja P2

3.2.1. Charakterystyka drobnoustrojów

W badaniu oceniano wrażliwość na antybiotyki 60. izolatów klinicznych *K. pneumoniae* produkujących karbapenemazę klasy B typu NDM (New Delhi). Szczepy pochodziły od pacjentów hospitalizowanych w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu w latach 2019-2022, i izolowane były z zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, układu moczowego oraz dolnych dróg oddechowych. Identyfikacja gatunkowa drobnoustrojów została potwierdzona metodą spektrometrii mas MALDI-TOF przy użyciu analizatora VITEK MS (bioMérieux, Francja). Oznaczenie typu wytwarzanej karbapenemazy wykonano z zastosowaniem komercyjnego testu immunochromatograficznego RESIST-5 O.O.K.N.V (CorisBioConcept, Belgia).

Badanie zostało przeprowadzone zgodnie z zasadami Deklaracji Helsińskiej i uzyskało pozytywną opinię Komisji Bioetycznej przy Dolnośląskiej Izbie Lekarskiej (Nr 2/BNR/2023).

3.2.2. Ocena lekowrażliwości badanych szczepów bakteryjnych

Interpretacji uzyskanych wyników lekowrażliwości drobnoustrojów dokonano zgodnie z rekomendacjami Europejskiego Komitetu ds. Oznaczania Lekowrażliwości (EUCAST, ang. European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing), Instytutu Norm Klinicznych i Laboratoryjnych (CLSI, ang. Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute) lub Agencji ds. Żywności i Leków (FDA, ang. Food and Drug Administration), w zależności od dostępności wytycznych dla danego antybiotyku.

3.2.2.1. Metoda z użyciem pasków z gradientem stężeń

Oznaczenie wrażliwości badanych szczepów *K. pneumoniae* NDM na cefiderokol, erawacyklinę, tigecyklinę, plazomycynę, fosfomycynę, ceftazydym/awibaktam oraz aztreonam wykonano przy użyciu pasków z gradientem stężeń MIC Test Strip MTSTM (Liofilchem, Włochy) na podłożu Mueller Hinton Agar (bioMérieux, Francja) zainokulowanym zawiesiną bakteryjną o gęstości 0,5 McFarlanda. Podłoża inkubowano przez 16-20 h w warunkach tlenowych, w temperaturze 35°C. Szczep wzorcowy *Escherichia coli* ATCC 25922 został użyty w kontroli jakości.

3.2.2.2. Metoda mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze

Metodą referencyjną oznaczenia wrażliwości drobnoustrojów na fosfomycynę jest metoda mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze, w tym celu zastosowano test komercyjny AD Fosfomycin 0.25-256 (Liofilchem, Włochy). Odpowiednio przygotowane rozcieńczenie (1:10) wyjściowej zawiesiny bakteryjnej o gęstości 0,5 McFarlanda inokulowano na 12-dołkową płytke, zawierającą szereg rozcieńczeń fosfomycyny w agarze w zakresie 0,25-256 µg/ml. Płytki inkubowano, zgodnie z zaleceniami producenta, w temperaturze 35°C, w warunkach tlenowych, przez 16-20 h. Jako wartość MIC uznawano wartość stężenia fosfomycyny, przy którym nie zaobserwowało zlewnego wzrostu bakteryjnego. Kontrolę jakości oznaczenia wykonano z zastosowaniem szczepu referencyjnego *Escherichia coli* ATCC 25922.

3.2.2.3. Metoda bezpośredniego nakładania pasków z gradientem stężeń („strip-stacking”) wg. Khan i wsp. [21]

Na zaszczepione zawiesiną bakteryjną badanego szczepu o gęstości 0,5 McFarlanda, podłoże Mueller Hinton Agar (bioMérieux, Francja), nakładano pasek z gradientem stężeń pierwszego z testowanych antybiotyków (aztreonam) i pozostawiano w temperaturze pokojowej przez 10 minut. Po tym czasie, usuwano pierwszy pasek, i w dokładnie to samo miejsce, nakładano pasek z gradientem stężeń drugiego z testowanych antybiotyków (ceftazydym/awibaktam). Następnie ponownie naniesiono na płytke pasek z aztreonamem w celu umożliwienia odczytu wartości MIC dla aztreonamu po 16-18 godzinnej inkubacji, w warunkach tlenowych, w temperaturze 35°C.

3.2.3. Analiza statystyczna

Do oceny normalność rozkładu danych, zastosowano test Shapiro-Wilka. Nieparametryczny test Kruskala-Wallisa (z testem post-hoc Dunna) został użyty do porównania ze sobą różnych grup. Dodatkowo, w celu porównania wyników oznaczenia wrażliwości na fosfomycynę metodą pasków z gradientem stężeń w odniesieniu do

metody referencyjnej mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze, zastosowano test U Manna-Whitneya. We wszystkich testach statystycznych wartość p mniejsza niż 0,05 była uznawana za istotność statystyczną. W obliczeniach statystycznych wykorzystano program Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO Software Inc., 2017).

3.3. Publikacja P3

3.3.1. Charakterystyka grupy badanej

Grupę badaną stanowiło 118 pacjentów hospitalizowanych w latach 2021-2022 w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu, u których w ramach diagnostyki zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, oprócz rutynowej hodowli krwi, wykorzystano metody z zakresu biologii molekularnej. Kryteria włączenia były następujące: wiek powyżej 18 lat, pierwszy epizod dodatniej hodowli krwi podczas hospitalizacji, brak konsultacji wyniku badania PCR z Zespołem ds. Szpitalnej Polityki Antybiotykowej (SPA). Jeśli dodatnia hodowla krwi była posiewem kontrolnym lub śmierć pacjenta nastąpiła przed uzyskaniem wyników identyfikacji i lekowrażliwości czynnika etiologicznego odpowiedzialnego za zakażenie krwi, to sytuacje te, stanowiły kryterium wyłączenia z badania.

Badanie zostało przeprowadzone zgodnie z zasadami Deklaracji Helsińskiej i uzyskało pozytywną opinię Komisji Bioetycznej przy Wojskowej Izbie Lekarskiej (Nr 240/22).

3.3.2. Procedury mikrobiologiczne w analizowanym okresie

Rutynowa hodowla krwi wykonywana była przy użyciu automatycznego systemu do posiewu krwi BacT/ALERT 3D (bioMérieux, Francja). Stosowano 5-dniowy protokół inkubacji, z wykorzystaniem dedykowanych podłoży hodowlanych BacT/ALERT FN Plus oraz BacT/ALERT FA Plus (bioMérieux, Francja). Po uzyskaniu z analizatora informacji o dodatniej hodowli, próbce krwi inokulowano na podłożu stałe Columbia Agar, Agar czekoladowy, MacConkey Agar (bioMérieux, Francja) oraz wykonywano preparat barwiony metodą Grama. Identyfikację gatunkową oraz lekowrażliwość drobnoustroju oceniano z zastosowaniem systemu VITEK 2 (bioMérieux, Francja).

Test multiplex PCR BIOFIRE BCID2 (Blood Culture Identification Panel 2) (bioMérieux, Francja) umożliwia wykrycie 33 patogenów odpowiedzialnych za zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego bezpośrednio z dodatniej hodowli krwi. W badaniu wykrywanych jest 11 gatunków bakterii Gram-dodatnich (*Enterococcus faecalis*, *Enterococcus faecium*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Staphylococcus* spp., *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *Staphylococcus lugdunensis*, *Streptococcus* spp.,

Streptococcus agalactiae, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Streptococcus pyogenes*), 15 gatunków bakterii Gram-ujemnych (*Acinetobacter calcoaceticus-baumannii complex*, *Bacteroides fragilis*, *Enterobacterales*, *Enterobacter cloacae complex*, *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella aerogenes*, *Klebsiella oxytoca*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae group*, *Proteus spp.*, *Salmonella spp.*, *Serratia marcescens*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Neisseria meningitidis*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia*) oraz 7 gatunków grzybów drożdżopodobnych (*Candida albicans*, *Candida auris*, *Candida glabrata*, *Candida krusei*, *Candida parapsilosis*, *Candida tropicalis*, *Cryptococcus neoformans/gattii*). Dodatkowo w teście oznaczane są geny warunkujące oporność drobnoustrojów na antybiotyki m.in. gen *mecA/C* odpowiadający za metycylinooporność wśród gronkowców, gen *blaCTX-M* odpowiedzialny za oporność na szerokie spektrum cefalosporyn (ESBL), gen *vanA/B* niosący oporność na wankomycynę u enterokoków, czy geny umożliwiające pałeczkom Gram-ujemnym produkcję karbapenemaz typu NDM, KPC, VIM, IMP, OXA-48.

3.3.3. Retrospektywna analiza testów molekularnych

Wyniki testów molekularnych pacjentów zakwalifikowanych do badania, analizowane były pod kątem wykrytego czynnika etiologicznego oraz ewentualnych genów warunkujących oporność na antybiotyki. Dodatkowo oceniono zgodność rezultatów panelu BCID2 z wynikami identyfikacji i lekowrażliwości pochodząymi z konwencjonalnej hodowli krwi, stanowiącej „złoty standard” w diagnostyce zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego. Odnotowywano również czas, od momentu uzyskania dodatniej hodowli krwi w systemie automatycznym, do otrzymania wyników badań, zarówno dla metod molekularnych jak i rutynowych, obejmujących identyfikację oraz oznaczenie lekowrażliwości wyhodowanych drobnoustrojów.

3.3.4. Retrospektywna analiza podjętych decyzji terapeutycznych

Poprawność decyzji terapeutycznych, podejmowanych przez lekarzy klinicystów po otrzymaniu wyników testu BCID2, oceniana była w oparciu o rekomendacje leczenia zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego funkcjonujące w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu, obejmujące zarówno stosowanie terapii empirycznej, jak i celowanej w leczeniu tych zakażeń. Rekomendacje stanowią element Szpitalnej Polityki Antybiotykowej (SPA) i powstały na bazie krajowych wytycznych dotyczących leczenia zakażeń szpitalnych, szpitalnej listy antybiotyków, a także jako wynik analizy lokalnej sytuacji epidemiologicznej szpitala, na podstawie map mikrobiologicznych. Dane na temat stosowanej terapii antybiotykowej (empirycznej i celowanej) pochodziły z historii

choroby pacjenta prowadzonej w ramach elektronicznej dokumentacji medycznej (AMMS). Jako błędne decyzje terapeutyczne kwalifikowane były sytuacje, w których m.in. nie dokonano deeskalacji stosowanej terapii empirycznej, w przypadku wykrycia szczepu bez genów oporności na antybiotyki, czy też w przypadku drobnoustroju, który posiadał genetyczne markery oporności, a mimo to nie eskalowano terapii do antybiotyków o szerszym spektrum aktywności. W przypadku wykrycia *Staphylococcus aureus* bez genów *mecA/C + MREJ*, warunkujących metycylinooporność, prawidłową decyzją terapeutyczną, zgodnie z zaleceniami Narodowego Programu Ochrony Antybiotyków, dotyczącymi postępowania z pacjentem, u którego stwierdzono bakterиемię o etiologii *Staphylococcus aureus*, było włączenie kloksacyliny.

3.3.5. Analiza statystyczna

Do przeprowadzenia analiz statystycznych zastosowano test Chi-kwadrat lub test dokładny Fishera, w zależności od spełnienia założeń. W przypadkach, gdy liczba kategorii była duża w stosunku do całkowitej liczby obserwacji, co skutkowało wieloma kategoriami z bardzo małą liczbą przypadków, nie stosowano żadnego testu. Przyjęto takie podejście ze względu na ryzyko niewystarczającej mocy statystycznej dostępnych testów do wykrycia różnic oraz potencjalny wpływ na wiarygodność wyników analizy. W obliczeniach statystycznych wykorzystano program Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO Software Inc., 2017).

4. Wyniki

W 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu w czasie pandemii COVID-19 tj. w okresie od czerwca 2020 r. do lipca 2022 r. hospitalizowanych było o ok. 10 000 mniej pacjentów niż w okresie poprzedzającym, przy czym liczba osobodni była porównywalna. Nastąpił blisko 34-procentowy wzrost liczby chorych, u których w trakcie hospitalizacji pojawiły się wskazania do diagnostyki zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego i wykonano posiew krwi. Dodatkowo, dodatnią hodowlę krwi uzyskano u 20% pacjentów hospitalizowanych w okresie pandemicznym, w porównaniu do 16% poddanych leczeniu w latach poprzednich. Zapadalność na bakteryjne zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego wzrosła zatem z 1,13 do 2,05 przypadków na 1000 osobodni pomiędzy jednym a drugim analizowanym okresem. Śmiertelność w okresie pandemii COVID-19 była statystycznie wyższa (47% vs. 42%), zwłaszcza wśród pacjentów hospitalizowanych z powodu infekcji wirusem SARS-CoV-2 (59%). Dodatkowo w dobie pandemii częściej leczeni byli chorzy, u których stwierdzano czynniki ryzyka takie jak: cukrzyca czy przewlekłe choroby nerek. Szczegółowa analiza dotycząca etiologii zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, wykazała istotne różnice, w przypadku częstości występowania BSI powodowanych przez gronkowce koagulazo- ujemne, w tym *Staphylococcus epidermidis*. Statystycznie częściej stanowiły one czynnik etiologiczny zakażeń u chorych hospitalizowanych z powodu infekcji wirusem SARS-CoV-2 ($p=0,023$). Wykazano również większy odsetek *Enterococcus spp* u pacjentów z COVID-19, ale różnice te nie były istotne statystycznie. Zwrócono uwagę na znacienne różnice w proporcji *Staphylococcus aureus* MRSA do MSSA. Odestek izolacji *Staphylococcus aureus* MRSA w przypadku dwóch analizowanych grup (preCOVID-19 i COVID-19) był taki sam i wynosił 34%. Natomiast w obrębie pacjentów hospitalizowanych podczas pandemii proporcja ta uległa zmianie. U chorych hospitalizowanych z powodu COVID-19 oraz tych z infekcją w wywiadzie, odsetek MRSA wynosił 49% w porównaniu do pacjentów leczonych z innych przyczyn, u których MRSA stanowiło 26% wszystkich BSI wywołanych przez *Staphylococcus aureus* ($p=0,009$). Podobna sytuacja miała miejsce w przypadku analizy częstości występowania *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM wśród wszystkich izolowanych pałeczek Gram-ujemnych. Tutaj różnice istotne statystycznie wykazano zarówno pomiędzy grupami preCOVID-19 i COVID-19 (1% vs. 7%, $p=0,017$) oraz w obrębie okresu pandemicznego, w którym u pacjentów z COVID-19 *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM stanowiły 16% wszystkich pałeczek Gram-ujemnych, w przeciwieństwie do 2% u pozostałych chorych ($p<0,001$). Nie stwierdzono istotnych

statystycznie różnic w częstości występowania Gram-ujemnych pałeczek wytwarzających β -laktamazy o rozszerzonym spektrum substratowym (ESBL), oraz pałeczek niefermentujących, takich jak *Acinetobacter baumannii*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* czy *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia*. Spośród analizowanych w obu grupach parametrów zapalnych, istotne statystycznie różnice zostały wykazane w poziomie prokalcyoniny (PCT). Pacjenci z zakażeniem łożyska naczyniowego, hospitalizowani z powodu infekcji wirusem SARS-CoV-2, w badaniach laboratoryjnych osiągali niższe poziomy PCT w porównaniu do chorych bez COVID-19 ($p<0,001$). Pozostałe parametry zapalne (WBC, NTR, CRP, LAC) były porównywalne w obu rozpatrywanych grupach. W zależności od czynnika etiologicznego, wykazano istotne statystycznie różnice, dotyczące poziomu prokalcyoniny oraz mleczanów. W zakażeniach powodowanych przez *Enterobacterales* obserwowano wyższe wartości tych parametrów. Podobne wyniki otrzymano, gdy analizie poddano wszystkie pałeczki Gram-ujemne, zarówno *Enterobacterales* jak i pałeczki niefermentujące *Pseudomonas*, *Acinetobacter*. Poziom prokalcyoniny był niższy u pacjentów z zakażeniem wirusem SARS-CoV-2, niż u pacjentów bez infekcji wirusowej, zarówno w przypadku zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego powodowanego przez drobnoustroje Gram-ujemne jak i Gram- dodatnie [Publikacja P1].

Izolaty kliniczne *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM pochodzące od pacjentów hospitalizowanych w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu w latach 2019-2022, czyli również z okresu pandemii COVID-19, były w następnym kroku użyte do zbadania wrażliwości *in vitro* na wybrane antybiotyki zaproponowane w schematach terapeutycznych. Spośród testowanych antybiotyków, najwyższą wrażliwość (100%) zaobserwowano dla cefiderokolu, erawacykliny (interpretowanej zgodnie z EUCAST) oraz tygecykliny. Tylko 78% testowanych szczepów było wrażliwych na plazomycynę. W badaniu użyto dwóch metod do określania wrażliwości na fosfomycynę. Dla metody opartej na paskach gradientowych wrażliwość testowanych szczepów wynosiła 68%, w porównaniu do 83% przy użyciu komercyjnego testu AD Fosfomycin 0.25-256, wykorzystującego referencyjną metodę mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze. Badane szczepy *Klebsiella pneumoniae* produkujące NDM wykazały 100% oporność na ceftazydym z awibaktarem i 92% oporność na aztreonam, gdy leki te były testowane indywidualnie. Zastosowanie metody „strip-stacking” do określenia skumulowanej wrażliwości na ceftazydym/awibaktam i aztreonam wykazało 100% wrażliwość *in vitro* na tę kombinację wśród testowanych szczepów. Analiza statystyczna pozwoliła na porównanie wartości

MIC dla testowanych antybiotyków w trzech grupach szczepów izolowanych z zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego, dolnych dróg oddechowych oraz układu moczowego. Statystycznie istotnie niższe wartości MIC dla cefiderokolu uzyskano w przypadku szczepów izolowanych z zakażeń dolnych dróg oddechowych ($p=0,002$). Dla izolatów pochodzących z zakażeń układu moczowego, uzyskano statystycznie niższe wartości MIC dla kombinacji aztreonamu z ceftazydymem/awibaktamem ($p=0,004$) oraz dla MIC fosfomycyny oznaczonej metodą referencyjną ($p=0,014$) [Publikacja P2].

W osobnym badaniu przeprowadzono retrospektywną analizę wyników badań molekularnych oraz mikrobiologicznych pochodzących od pacjentów hospitalizowanych w 4. Wojskowym Szpitalu Klinicznym we Wrocławiu w latach 2021-2022, w kontekście poprawności decyzji terapeutycznych podejmowanych przez lekarzy klinicystów. Grupa badana utworzona na potrzeby tego badania, częściowo pokrywała się z grupą COVID-19 wymienioną w publikacji P1. Struktura gatunkowa izolowanych drobnoustrojów była podobna jak w pierwszym badaniu i wykazała, że najczęstszym czynnikiem etiologicznym BSI wśród analizowanych pacjentów był *Staphylococcus aureus* (37%) oraz *Escherichia coli* (21%). W przypadku *S. aureus*, 66% szczepów było wrażliwych na metycylinę (MSSA), natomiast spośród 47 izolatów pałeczek Gram- ujemnych, mechanizm ESBL wykryto u 11 szczepów (26%) z czego 4 posiadały również geny odpowiedzialne za produkcję metalo-β-laktamazy klasy B (NDM). Wszystkie wykryte markery oporności na antybiotyki pokrywały się z fenotypową lekowrażliwością wyhodowanych drobnoustrojów. Rutynowa hodowla, prowadzona równolegle z badaniem molekularnym wykazała także stupercentową zgodność w zakresie wykrytych gatunków drobnoustrojów. W przypadku wykrycia metodą molekularną gronkowca złocistego we krwi badanego pacjenta ponad połowa podejmowanych decyzji terapeutycznych po uzyskaniu wyniku była błędna. Odsetek ten był wyższy (64,5%) jeśli czynnikiem etiologicznym BSI był *Staphylococcus aureus* MSSA, w porównaniu do 25% błędnych decyzji w przypadku wykrycia szczepu MRSA. Leczenie stosowane po otrzymaniu wyniku badania PCR było na ogół prawidłowe, jeśli czynnikiem etiologicznym były Gram- ujemne pałeczki takie jak *Escherichia coli* czy *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (odpowiednio 63 i 67% prawidłowych decyzji terapeutycznych). W sytuacji wykrycia genów warunkujących wystąpienie oporności na cefalosporyny o szerokim spektrum (ESBL) czy karbapenemy, również częściej dokonywano optymalnej zmiany stosowanego leczenia przeciwdrobnoustrojowego. Zakażenia łożyska o etiologii *Enterococcus* stanowiły łącznie ok. 16% (*Enterococcus faecalis* 12%, *Enterococcus*

faecium 7%). Korzystniejszy wynik obserwacji względem podjętej strategii leczenia wykazano w przypadku izolacji *Enterococcus faecium*. U trzech włączonych do badania pacjentów w badaniu molekularnym wykryto obecność grzybów drożdżopodobnych (*Candida albicans*). Wszyscy ci pacjenci otrzymali leczenie przeciwnierzybicze bezpośrednio po otrzymaniu wyniku badania PCR. Średni czas do otrzymania wyniku badania molekularnego od momentu stwierdzenia dodatniej hodowli krwi w systemie automatycznym wynosił 10 h, w porównaniu do 52 h potrzebnych na uzyskanie rezultatów rutynowego posiewu krwi obejmującego identyfikację oraz lekowrażliwość drobnoustroju [**Publikacja P3**].

5. Podsumowanie

Światowa Organizacja Zdrowia ogłosiła w maju 2024 roku, zaktualizowaną listę patogenów bakteryjnych stanowiących szczególne zagrożenie (BPPL, ang. bacterial priority pathogens list). Do grupy drobnoustrojów o priorytecie krytycznym zakwalifikowano *Enterobacterales* oporne na karbapenemy oraz cefalosporyny trzeciej generacji, *Acinetobacter baumannii* oporne na karbapenemy, a także szczepy *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* oporne na rifampicynę. Patogeny te, stanowią poważne zagrożenie dla zdrowia publicznego, ze względu na bardzo ograniczone opcje terapeutyczne, wysoką śmiertelność powodowanych zakażeń oraz dużą zachorowalność. Raport wskazuje na potrzebę globalnego mapowania drobnoustrojów wielolekoopornych i ciągłego monitorowania ich wpływu na sytuację zdrowotną społeczeństwa. BPPL 2024 informuje o konieczności podjęcia interwencji w zakresie globalnego dostępu do środków umożliwiających zapobieganie, diagnozowanie oraz skuteczne leczenie zakażeń. Problemy opisane przez WHO w raporcie z 2024 roku dostrzegalne są również w Polsce, zwłaszcza w okresie postpandemicznym [30].

Niniejszy cykl badań naukowych stanowi próbę kompleksowej oceny lokalnej sytuacji epidemiologicznej oraz możliwości diagnostycznych, zarówno w zakresie technik molekularnych, jak i niekonwencjonalnych metod oznaczania lekowraźliwości. Przeprowadzone analizy wpisują się w bogatą literaturę naukową poświęconą zakażeniom łożyska naczyniowego w dobie pandemii COVID-19. Liczne opracowania wykazały wzrost częstości występowania drobnoustrojów wielolekoopornych u pacjentów zakażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2, szczególnie tych hospitalizowanych w oddziałach intensywnej terapii. Wtórne zakażenia bakteryjne wywołane przez *K. pneumoniae* NDM dotyczyły, w zależności od ośrodka, od 0,35% do nawet 53% chorych i obejmowały najczęściej zakażenia łożyska naczyniowego oraz dolnych dróg oddechowych. Pacjenci hospitalizowani z powodu COVID-19 byli predysponowani do wystąpienia tych zakażeń ze względu na wentylację mechaniczną oraz niedostateczną opiekę nad założonymi liniami centralnymi, wynikającą z nieprzestrzegania procedur zapobiegania zakażeniom szpitalnym w tym okresie. Badania przeprowadzone przez Pasquini i wsp. wykazały ponad siedmiokrotnie wyższączęstość izolacji MRSA z zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego u pacjentów z COVID-19 w porównaniu z pacjentami leczonymi z powodu innych chorób [31]. Wyniki te odpowiadają również rezultatom pierwszej pracy wchodzącej w skład cyklu, w której zauważono statystycznie istotny wzrost izolacji MRSA u pacjentów z BSI i COVID-19 ($p=0,009$). Gromadzenie danych

o epidemiologii zakażeń ma kluczowe znaczenie dla skutecznego monitorowania i kontroli rozprzestrzeniania się patogenów, co pozwala na szybkie wprowadzenie odpowiednich środków zapobiegawczych. Ponadto, szczegółowe analizy epidemiologiczne umożliwiają identyfikację trendów w antybiotykooporności drobnoustrojów, co wspiera racjonalne podejmowanie decyzji terapeutycznych i optymalizację leczenia pacjentów. Dzięki dokładnej analizie lokalnej epidemiologii zakażeń, dystrybucji drobnoustrojów alarmowych, a w przypadku *K. pneumoniae* NDM, również wrażliwość *in vitro* na nowe opcje terapeutyczne, możliwe będzie lepsze ukierunkowanie terapii empirycznej stosowanej w szpitalu. Właściwie dobrane i zwalidowane testy diagnostyczne są podstawą prawidłowej diagnostyki laboratoryjnej, zapewniając uzyskanie wiarygodnych wyników lekowrażliwości drobnoustrojów, co jest kluczowe dla skutecznego leczenia infekcji i zarządzania szpitalną polityką antybiotykową. Przeprowadzone badanie porównawcze wykazało rozbieżności w uzyskanych wynikach wrażliwości na fosfomycynę zależnie od zastosowanej metody, co potwierdza, że oznaczenie wrażliwości drobnoustrojów na fosfomycynę należy wykonywać przy użyciu metody referencyjnej mikrorozcieńczeń w agarze. Skojarzona terapia antybiotykowa jest często konieczna w leczeniu zakażeń wywołanych przez drobnoustroje wielolekooporne, dlatego też istotne jest, aby w warunkach laboratoryjnych możliwe było implementowanie metod umożliwiających określenie efektywności przeciwdrobnoustrojowej leków stosowanych w skojarzeniu. Metoda „strip-stacking” jest stosunkowo prostym testem, który może być wykonany w większości laboratoriów mikrobiologicznych, niemniej jednak brak jest odgórnych rekomendacji dotyczących badania skojarzenia skuteczności działania dwóch antybiotyków. Testy molekularne powoli stają się standardowym elementem całego procesu diagnostycznego, dzięki możliwości wykrycia genów warunkujących oporność, pozwalają na szybkie ukierunkowanie terapii antybiotykowej. Przeprowadzona analiza wskazuje jednak na silną potrzebę udziału w podejmowaniu decyzji terapeutycznych, ekspertów z zakresu mikrobiologii oraz racjonalnej antybiotykoterapii. Wnioski te są spójne z innymi doniesieniami naukowymi oceniającymi wpływ metod molekularnych na diagnostykę oraz leczenie zakażeń łożyska naczyniowego [8, 22, 26, 32, 33]. Współpraca z doświadczonymi mikrobiologami pozwala na precyzyjną identyfikację patogenów oraz ich profili lekowrażliwości, co jest kluczowe dla wyboru najbardziej efektywnych środków terapeutycznych. Dzięki ich wiedzy możliwe jest uniknięcie nieodpowiedniego stosowania antybiotyków, które mogłyby prowadzić do wzrostu

oporności drobnoustrojów. Ponadto, eksperci w dziedzinie racjonalnej antybiotykoterapii mogą doradzać w zakresie optymalizacji schematów leczenia, monitorowania skuteczności terapii oraz modyfikowania jej w odpowiedzi na zmieniające się wzorce oporności. Takie interdyscyplinarne podejście zapewnia kompleksowe i skuteczne leczenie zakażeń, minimalizując ryzyko powikłań i selekcji szczepów opornych, co jest szczególnie istotne w kontekście globalnych problemów związanych z narastaniem lekooporności drobnoustrojów. Dalszy kierunek badań powinien zakładać ocenę wpływu technik PCR na śmiertelność wśród pacjentów z zakażeniem łożyska naczyniowego, czas hospitalizacji oraz występowanie powikłań takich jak uszkodzenie nerek czy biegunka poantybiotykowa o etiologii *C. difficile*.

Rosnąca liczba pacjentów wymagających hospitalizacji, w tym z powodu zakażeń bakteryjnych wywołanych przez szczepy wielolekoporne, przy jednoczesnym braku skutecznej antybiotykoterapii, będzie w przyszłości stanowić jedno z głównych wyzwań dla zdrowia publicznego. Drobnoustroje takie jak: MRSA, pałczki *Enterobacteriales* produkujące karbapenemazy czy szczepy *Acinetobacter baumannii* oporne na karbapenemy stają się coraz bardziej powszechnie i trudne do zwalczania. Zakażenia powodowane przez te patogeny często prowadzą do długotrwałych hospitalizacji, zwiększając ryzyko dalszego ich rozprzestrzeniania się w środowisku szpitalnym. Brak skutecznych terapii antybiotykowych sprawia, że leczenie staje się bardziej skomplikowane, kosztowne i obarczone ryzykiem niepowodzenia terapeutycznego, co może prowadzić do wyższej śmiertelności i większej liczby powikłań. Ponadto, rozwój nowych antybiotyków nie nadąża za szybkim tempem pojawiania się oporności, co podkreśla potrzebę inwestowania w badania nad nowymi lekami. Wprowadzenie rygorystycznych programów monitorowania zakażeń i oporności na antybiotyki na poziomie lokalnym, krajowym i globalnym jest niezbędne, aby szybko identyfikować i reagować na pojawiające się zagrożenia. Wdrażanie nowych metod diagnostycznych, które pozwolą na szybkie i precyzyjne identyfikowanie patogenów oraz ich profili lekowraźliwości może zapewnić odpowiednie i skuteczne leczenie już na wczesnym etapie infekcji. Tylko dzięki skoordynowanym działaniom, łączącym badania naukowe, politykę zdrowotną i edukację, możliwe będzie skuteczne przeciwdziałanie narastającemu problemowi wielolekopornych zakażeń i ochronę zdrowia publicznego w przyszłości.

6. Wnioski

- Zakażenia łyżyska naczyniowego najczęściej powodowane są przez *Staphylococcus aureus* oraz pałeczki *Enterobacterales* takie jak *Escherichia coli* i *Klebsiella pneumoniae* [Publikacja P1 i P3]
- Podczas pandemii COVID-19 zapadalność na zakażenia łyżyska naczyniowego była wyższa, a wśród pacjentów zarażonych wirusem SARS-CoV-2 częściej obserwano występowanie drobnoustrojów opornych na antybiotyki [Publikacja P1]
- Poziom parametrów zapalnych takich jak prokalcitonina wydaje się mieć ograniczoną przydatność w predykcji wystąpienia infekcji bakteryjnej w przebiegu zakażenia wirusem SARS-CoV-2 [Publikacja P1]
- Cefiderokol, erawacykлина oraz tygecykлина wykazały największą skuteczność w badaniu *in vitro* wobec szczepów *Klebsiella pneumoniae* NDM [Publikacja P2]
- Wrażliwości badanych drobnoustrojów na fosfomycynę różniła się w zależności od zastosowanej metody oznaczenia, większy odsetek szepów opornych zaobserwowano w przypadku użycia pasków z gradientem stężeń [Publikacja P2]
- Dzięki metodzie „strip-stacking”, możliwe jest, w warunkach laboratoryjnych, określenie efektywności przeciwdrobnoustrojowej leków stosowanych w skojarzeniu [Publikacja P2]
- Metody molekularne wykorzystywane w diagnostyce zakażeń łyżyska naczyniowego umożliwiają szybsze podjęcie optymalnych decyzji terapeutycznych [Publikacja P3]
- Uzyskanie wymiernych korzyści z wdrożenia metod molekularnych do diagnostyki zakażeń łyżyska naczyniowego, możliwe jest jedynie przy prawidłowej ich interpretacji [Publikacja P3]
- Globalny problem narastania lekooporności powoduje konieczność sięgania przez klinicystów po nowe opcje terapeutyczne oraz skłania ich do stosowania metod molekularnych umożliwiających wcześniejszą optymalizację leczenia [Publikacje P1, P2 i P3]

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OŚWIADCZENIE WSPÓŁAUTORA

Oświadczam, że mój wkład w powstanie publikacji:

- Słabisz N, Dudek-Wicher R, Leśnik P, Majda J, Kujawa K, Nawrot U. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Epidemiology of Bloodstream Infections in Hospitalized Patients-Experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland. *J Clin Med.* 2023 Sep 13;12(18):5942. doi: 10.3390/jcm12185942. PMID: 37762882; PMCID: PMC10531964.

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Jednocześnie wyrażam zgodę, aby wyżej wymienione publikacje zostały przedstawione w formie monograficznego cyklu stanowiącego rozprawę doktorską mgr Natalii Słabisz.

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OŚWIADCZENIE WSPÓŁAUTORA

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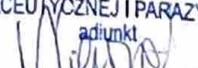
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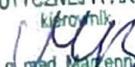
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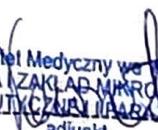
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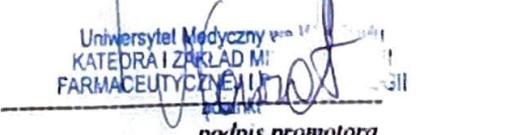
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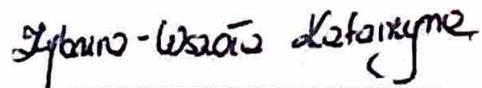
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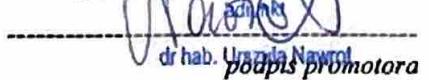
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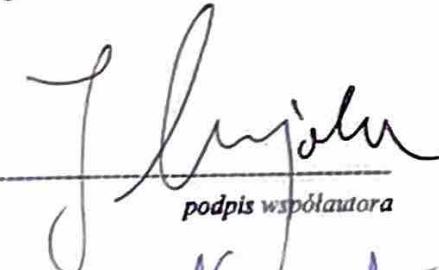
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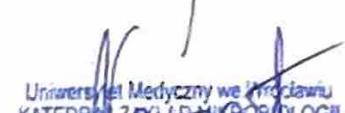
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WYKAZ PUBLIKACJI

1. Publikacje w czasopismach naukowych

1.1. Publikacje w czasopiśmie z IF

Lp.	Opis bibliograficzny	IF	Punkty
1	Słabisz Natalia, Dudek-Wicher Ruth, Leśnik Patrycja, Majda Jacek, Kujawa Krzysztof, Nawrot Urszula: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the epidemiology of bloodstream infections in hospitalized patients—experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland, Journal of Clinical Medicine, 2023, vol. 12, nr 18, art.5942 [16 s.], DOI:10.3390/jcm12185942	3,9*	140
2	Janc Jarosław, Słabisz Natalia, Woźniak Anna, Łysenko Lidia, Chabowski Mariusz, Leśnik Patrycja: Infection with the multidrug-resistant Klebsiella pneumoniae New Delhi metallo-B-lactamase strain in patients with COVID-19: Nec Hercules contra plures?, Frontiers in cellular and infection microbiology, 2024, vol. 14, art.1297312 [12 s.], DOI:10.3389/fcimb.2024.1297312	5,7*	100
3	Słabisz Natalia*, Leśnik Patrycja, Żybura-Wszoła Katarzyna, Dudek-Wicher Ruth, Nawrot Urszula, Majda Jacek: Assessing the interpretation of molecular test results in the diagnosis of bloodstream infections, Diagnostics, 2024, vol. 14, nr 9, art.915 [11 s.], DOI:10.3390/diagnostics14090915	3,6*	70
4	Słabisz Natalia*, Leśnik Patrycja, Janc Jarosław, Fidut Mirosław, Bartoszewicz Marzenna, Dudek-Wicher Ruth, Nawrot Urszula: Evaluation of the in vitro susceptibility of clinical isolates of NDM-producing Klebsiella pneumoniae to new antibiotics included in a treatment regimen for infections, Frontiers in Microbiology, 2024, vol. 15, art.1331628 [10 s.], DOI:10.3389/fmicb.2024.1331628	5,2*	100
5	Woźniak Anna, Janc Jarosław, Łysenko Lidia, Leśnik Patrycja, Słabisz Natalia, Oleksy-Wawrzyniak Monika, Uchmanowicz Izabella: How to defeat multidrug-resistant bacteria in intensive care units. A lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic. prevention, reservoirs, and implications for clinical practice, International Journal of Medical Sciences, 2024, vol. 21, nr 3, s. 530-539, DOI:10.7150/ijms.88519	3,6*	70

*IF 2022

1.2. Publikacje w czasopiśmie bez IF

Lp.	Opis bibliograficzny	Punkty
1	Słabisz Natalia: Metody molekularne przydatne w diagnostyce zakażeń lożyska naczyniowego. Forum Zakażeń, 2022, vol. 13, nr 3, s. 105–110. DOI: dx.doi.org/10.15374/FZ2022012	5

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Punkty ministerialne: 485,0

OSOBA SPORZĄDZAJĄCA: PAULINA OBUCHOWICZ
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**PUBLIKACJE WCHODZĄCE W SKŁAD CYKLU STANOWIĄCEGO
ROZPRAWĘ DOKTORSKĄ**

PUBLIKACJA P1



Article

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Epidemiology of Bloodstream Infections in Hospitalized Patients—Experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland

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Abstract: Bloodstream infections (BSIs) are associated with high mortality and inappropriate or delayed antimicrobial therapy. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the epidemiology of BSIs in hospitalized patients. The research aimed to compare the incidence of BSIs and blood culture results in patients hospitalized before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Methods: Retrospective and prospective data were collected from blood cultures obtained from 4289 patients hospitalized between June 2018 and July 2022. Two groups of patients were distinguished: those with BSIs admitted during the pre-COVID-19 period and those admitted during the COVID-19 surge. Demographic and clinical data, blood cytology, and biochemistry results were analyzed, and the usefulness of PCT was assessed in patients with COVID-19. Results: The study showed a significant increase in the incidence of BSIs during the pandemic compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Positive blood cultures were obtained in 20% of patients hospitalized during the pandemic (vs. 16% in the pre-COVID-19 period). The incidence of BSIs increased from 1.13 to 2.05 cases per 1000 patient days during COVID-19, and blood culture contamination was more frequently observed. The mortality rate was higher for patients hospitalized during the COVID-19 pandemic. An increased frequency of MDRO isolation was observed in the COVID-19 period. Conclusions: The incidence of BSIs increased and the mortality rate was higher in the COVID-19 period compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. The study showed limited usefulness of procalcitonin in patients with COVID-19, likely due to the administered immunosuppressive therapy.



Citation: Słabisz, N.; Dudek-Wicher, R.; Leśnik, P.; Majda, J.; Kujawa, K.; Nawrot, U. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Epidemiology of Bloodstream Infections in Hospitalized Patients—Experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland. *J. Clin. Med.* **2023**, *12*, 5942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12185942>

Academic Editor: Emanuele Pontali

Received: 2 August 2023

Revised: 5 September 2023

Accepted: 11 September 2023

Published: 13 September 2023



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1. Introduction

Bloodstream infections (BSIs) are one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality, especially in critically ill patients. Regardless of whether the infection is community- or hospital-acquired, it complicates hospital stays, is associated with prolonged hospitalization ranging from 2 to 32 days, and is associated with increased costs attributed to BSI [1]. Bacteremia affects nearly 20% of ICU patients and has been associated with negative outcomes as a major contributor to in-hospital mortality. BSIs are defined by the presence of pathogenic microorganisms in the bloodstream, confirmed by one or more positive blood cultures. Primary BSIs occur without any defined nidus of infection, while secondary BSIs are the result of an infection caused by the same pathogen in another

anatomical region, e.g., a urinary tract infection with subsequent bacteremia [2]. The diagnosis of BSI can be complicated due to blood culture contamination. The most common contaminants in blood cultures are coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS), which, on the other hand, are the most important cause of BSIs in patients with implanted devices and indwelling catheters (CLABSI—central line-associated BSI). Conversely, the next most frequent bacteria, *Corynebacterium* spp. and *Propionibacterium* spp., almost always represent contamination [3,4]. Blood cultures are commonly collected when patients have signs of bacteremia or sepsis and should be taken as soon as possible before the administration of antibiotics [5]. Detailed rules for the management of patients with suspected sepsis or septic shock are described in the Surviving Sepsis Campaign (SSC) guidelines [6].

The pandemic of SARS-CoV-2 infection at the beginning of 2020 has severely hit many countries in the world, causing the deaths of more than six million people worldwide by the end of 2022. In the 2020–2022 period, COVID-19 has become one of the main challenges for public healthcare, mainly due to the large number of patients requiring intensive care. Pneumonia outbreaks caused by SARS-CoV-2 can be complicated by secondary bacterial or fungal infections, which are more frequent, especially in critically ill patients treated in the ICU (31.5%) than in standard medical COVID-19 wards (9%) [7–10]. The overlap of clinical manifestations of viral and bacterial infections makes diagnosis very difficult, and consequently, the percentage of bacterial superinfections in COVID can be higher than presumed.

BSIs are another common complication in patients with severe COVID-19, with limited data available, and most studies have been conducted in critically ill patients in the ICU. It has been shown that a total of 7% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients may develop BSIs, with a mortality rate of about 40% [9]. COVID-19 patients are three times more likely to develop BSI compared to patients hospitalized for other reasons than SARS-CoV-2 infection [7]. As shown by several studies, the highest increase in incidence during the surge of COVID-19 was observed for *Acinetobacter baumannii*, carbapenem-resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA), and *Enterococcus* [11–14]. A high proportion of multi-drug-resistant organisms causing BSIs in patients with COVID-19 suggests that the overuse of antibiotics plays a major role in the selection of bacterial strains resistant to pharmacological treatment. In addition, reported statistical data were certainly influenced by healthcare service crises related to the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., absences of medical staff, difficulties in implementation of infection prevention and control programs in hospitals, screening for the carriage of resistant pathogens, and isolation and cohorting of patients [8,9,15,16].

The aim of this study was to try to answer the question of how much the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the incidence of BSIs in patients hospitalized at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wroclaw, Poland. To reach this goal, we compared the incidence of BSIs and blood culture results in patients hospitalized two years before and two years during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the usefulness of CRP and PCT in diagnosing secondary BSI infections in the course of COVID-19 was assessed.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The data analysis was started at the end of 2022 and was utterly retrospective. The results of blood cultures obtained from 4289 patients in the period from June 2018 to July 2022 were collected and analyzed. The subject of the analysis were the results of blood cultures and biochemical tests performed as part of routine diagnostics at the Department of Laboratory Diagnostic, 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wroclaw, a 500-bed medical center in Wroclaw, Poland. The study protocol was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Military Medical Chamber, Poland (approval no. 194/22).

2.2. Data Collections

Blood samples collected from adult hospitalized patients in the period between June 2018 and July 2022 were included in the study. Two groups of patients were distinguished. One group included patients with BSIs admitted during so-called “preCOVID-19” (June 2018 to May 2020) and the second group during the SARS-CoV-2 surge called “COVID-19” (June 2020 to July 2022). The patient’s demographic and clinical data were recorded in the electronic medical database. There are two IT systems in the hospital that communicate with each other. The master program is the AMMS system (Asseco Medical Management Solutions), designed to support medical facilities and generate electronic medical records. The cooperating system is laboratory software Marcel CENTRUM, which sends the results of all laboratory tests to the AMMS system. Demographic data such as age, sex, comorbidities (diabetes, chronic kidney disease, chronic cardiovascular disease, cancer), overweight ($\text{BMI} \geq 25$), and information about the patient’s death were obtained from the AMMS database, considering the medical history. Selected data of blood cytology and biochemistry (a white blood cell count (WBC; cells $\times 10^3/\mu\text{L}$), blood neutrophil count (NEUTR; cells $\times 10^3/\mu\text{L}$), serum lactate level (LAC; mmol/L), serum C-reactive protein level (CRP; mg/L), and serum procalcitonin level (PCT; ng/mL)) from the same day as the collection of the first blood sample that resulted in a positive culture were extracted from the electronic laboratory database.

2.3. Definitions

BSI was defined when at least one positive blood culture for bacteria or fungi was obtained. For coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS) and other common skin residents (*Corynebacterium* spp., *Cutibacterium* spp.), at least two consecutive blood cultures set positive for the same pathogen were required to define BSI [17]. *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Enterobacteriales*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Candida albicans* were regarded as predictive for true BSI even if grown from a single culture bottle. Multiple positive blood cultures for the same organism in the same patient were considered one BSI episode. Contamination was defined as the detection of microbes considered non-pathogenic and likely to be introduced into the culture during specimen collection in a single blood culture bottle [3,4].

Patients were assigned to the COVID-19 group when at least one real-time polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay positive for SARS-CoV-2 in a respiratory specimen (nasopharyngeal swab) was obtained. Patients treated due to COVID-19 within 6 months prior to hospital admission were also included in this group. In these cases, data on past infections was taken from the medical history. The patient’s death was defined as a death during hospitalization.

BSI suspicion and blood cultures. According to the guidelines of the Surviving Sepsis Campaign [6], in cases of suspicion of sepsis or septic shock, 2–3 blood cultures, collected in bottles with medium intended for the cultivation of aerobic and anaerobic organisms, should be secured each time before the administration of the antibiotic. Indications for blood culture collection include suspected bacterial endocarditis, the presence of a catheter, and a fever $>39.4^\circ\text{C}$. In the case of fever $>38.3^\circ\text{C}$, patient age >65 years, chills, vomiting, systolic blood pressure drops $<90\text{ mmHg}$, significant leukocytosis, or creatinine increase $>2\text{ mg/dL}$, blood collection for culture should be performed when a minimum of two of these factors exist. Then, within one hour of diagnosis, start empiric antibiotic therapy. If a blood infection of MRSA or MDRO etiology is suspected, e.g., related to previous carriage, broad-spectrum antibiotic therapy should be used, considering these microorganisms.

2.4. Microbiology Procedure

In accordance with the hospital’s procedure for collecting material for microbiological tests, two to three sets of blood specimens should be collected from independent venipuncture sites, and, for adult patients, each set (aerobic and anaerobic bottles) should consist of 20 mL of blood. Blood culture bottles BacT/ALERT FN PLUS and BacT/ALERT FA

PLUS (bioMérieux, Craponne, France) were incubated in a BacT/ALERT 3D instrument (bioMérieux, France) at 37 °C for 5 days. After the growth was detected, the positive blood cultures were Gram-stained and streaked onto Columbia Agar (bioMérieux, France), Chocolate Agar (bioMérieux, France), MacConkey (bioMérieux, France) and Schaedler Agar (bioMérieux, France) for incubation in 5% carbon dioxide at 37 °C overnight. The VITEK-2 automated system (bioMérieux, France) was used for isolate identification and antimicrobial susceptibility testing. VITEK2 AST-N331 and AST-N332 (AST—antimicrobial susceptibility testing) panels were used for antibiotic susceptibility testing of Gram-negative rods, AST-P643, AST-P643, AST-ST01 for Gram-positive cocci, and AST-YS08 for fungi. Phenotypic detection of carbapenemases was performed by an immunochemical test (RESIST-5 O.O.K.N.V, CorisBioConcept, Gembloux, Belgium). The results of the susceptibility tests were interpreted according to the current criteria of the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST) [18]. The analysis of the drug susceptibility of strains isolated from BSI was limited to a comparison of the prevalence of the most relevant resistance mechanisms, i.e., MRSA, MRCNS, VRE, KPC, and NDM.

2.5. Statistics

The statistical significance of the differences in demographic data, selected blood biochemistry results, mortality, and the distribution of causative BSI pathogens between the patient groups was calculated with the use of the Mann–Whitney test (when two numerical variables were compared), the Kruskal–Wallis test (three numerical variables were compared), and Pearson’s Chi-squared test (for categorical variables). When the term “significant/significantly” is used, it refers to statistical significance at the threshold value of 0.05. The statistical analysis was performed using Statistica 13.3 (TIBCO, Software Inc., Palo Alto, CA, USA, 2017).

3. Results

In the analyzed period at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wroclaw, more than 83,500 patients were hospitalized. Within two years prior to the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic (June 2018 to May 2020—preCOVID-19), the number of hospitalizations was 46,849, while during the pandemic (June 2020 to July 2022—COVID-19), it decreased to 36,733. Despite the decline in admissions during COVID-19, the number of individual hospitalization days in both analyzed periods was comparable—262,174 and 233,447, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. General data about hospitalization within the analyzed periods.

	preCOVID-19	COVID-19
Number of hospitalizations	46,849	36,733
Patient days, n	262,174	233,447
Number of patients with blood culture performed, n	1836	2452
Number of patients with positive blood culture, n (%)	298 (16)	479 (20)
Number of patients with negative blood culture, n (%)	1297 (71)	1557 (64)
Number of patients with possible contamination in blood culture, n (%)	241 (13)	386 (16)
Incidence (BSI/1000 patient days)	1.13	2.05

Noteworthy, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a nearly 34% increase in the number of patients with indications for blood infection diagnostics. Positive blood cultures were obtained in 20% of patients hospitalized during the pandemic period compared to 16% treated in preCOVID-19, and the difference is statistically significant (χ^2 test: $df = 1$, $p = 0.005$). Comparing the studied periods, the incidence of BSIs increased from 1.13 to 2.05 cases per 1000 patient-days during COVID-19. Also, in this period, blood sample contamination was observed more frequently (16% vs. 13%, χ^2 test: $df = 1$, $p = 0.016$) (Figure 1).

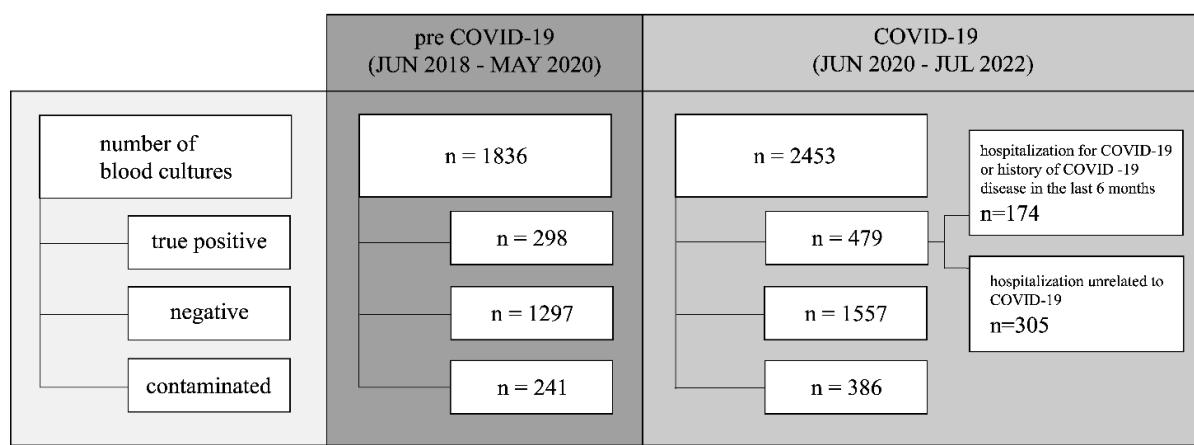


Figure 1. Blood cultures performed during pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 periods.

The median age in both groups was 73 years, and the percentage of male sex was almost 57% (pre-COVID-19) and 60% (COVID-19). Both the differences in age and gender between the analyzed groups were statistically insignificant (Table 2). In both groups of patients with BSI, statistically significant differences were observed in the frequency of certain co-morbidities. During the pandemic, there were fewer patients with chronic cardiovascular disease (32% vs. 52%) but more with diabetes (31% vs. 24%) and renal failure (21% vs. 10%) (Table 2). Mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic was higher compared to previous years, especially in patients hospitalized due to SARS-CoV-2 infection (47% vs. 42%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Frequency of co-existing diseases and blood biochemistry results in patient groups under study (A—patients hospitalized for COVID-19 or history of COVID-19 disease in the last 6 months; B—patient's hospitalization unrelated to COVID-19; *p*—statistical significance; the *p*-value refers to a comparison of the pre-COVID-19, group A, and group B; ^C—Chi-squared test; ^K—Kruskal-Wallis test).

Patient Characteristics	preCOVID-19 n = 298	COVID-19 n = 479			H/χ^2	<i>p</i>
		A n = 174	B n = 305	A + B n = 479		
Age, median (IQR), years	73 (63.3–81)	73 (66–81)	74 (64–83)	73 (65–82)	0.611	0.737 ^K
Males, n (%)	168 (57)	106 (61)	182 (60)	288 (60)	1.078	0.583 ^C
Diabetes, n (%)	71 (24)	62 (36)	87 (29)	149 (31)	7.556	0.023 ^C
Chronic kidney disease, n (%)	31 (10)	37 (21)	62 (20)	99 (21)	13.965	<0.001 ^C
Chronic cardiovascular disease, n (%)	155 (52)	54 (31)	97 (32)	151 (32)	32.334	<0.001 ^C
Cancer, n (%)	46 (15)	21 (12)	47 (15)	68 (14)	1.213	0.543 ^C
Obesity, n (%)	30 (10)	23 (13)	30 (10)	53 (11)	1.520	0.468 ^C
Death, n (%)	124 (42)	103 (59)	121 (40)	224 (47)	17.644	<0.001 ^C

Table 2. Cont.

Patient Characteristics	preCOVID-19 n = 298	COVID-19 n = 479			H/ χ^2	p
		A n = 174	B n = 305	A + B n = 479		
WBC [$\times 10^3/\mu\text{L}$], median (IQR)	13.5 (9.5–17.8)	13.8 (8.9–21)	13.3 (8.3–19.9)	13.4 (8.7–20.4)	0.749	0.688 K
NEUTR [$\times 10^3/\mu\text{L}$], median (IQR)	11.71 (7.56–16.01)	12.4 (7.93–18.71)	11.09 (6.41–17.15)	11.47 (6.85–17.96)	2.062	0.357 K
CRP [mg/L], median (IQR)	163.5 (102–228)	159.9 (108.1–240.9)	168.1 (108.4–252.5)	164.4 (107.9–246.3)	1.594	0.451 K
PCT [ng/mL], median (IQR)	5.87 (0.88–30.36)	2.35 (0.43–10.82)	4.62 (0.9–21.32)	3.43 (0.78–16.62)	14.613	<0.001 K
LAC [mmol/L], median (IQR)	2.2 (1.5–3.68)	2.1 (1.45–2.85)	2.35 (1.4–4.4)	2.25 (1.4–3.93)	1.848	0.397 K

Co-morbidities such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, obesity, and chronic kidney disease were associated with a high risk of death, but in the pre-COVID-19 period, greater risk was connected with the co-existence of cardiovascular disease, while during the pandemic, it was connected with the co-existence of kidney failure. In patients hospitalized in the COVID-19 period, multiple infections were statistically more frequent, and the isolation of two species of microorganisms was associated with an increased risk of death. All the listed differences were statistically significant (Table S1).

Among the inflammatory parameters analyzed in both groups, statistically significant differences were observed in the level of PCT. Patients with BSI that were hospitalized due to SARS-CoV-2 infection showed lower levels of PCT compared to patients without COVID-19. The level of other inflammatory parameters (WBC, NEUTR, CRP, and LAC) did not differ statistically significantly between both groups (Table 2). Additional analysis of the relationship between the production of inflammatory markers and the etiological agent of BSI (Mann–Whitney test) showed some statistically significant differences in PCT and LAC levels (Table S2). Higher values of these parameters were observed in cases of infections caused by Gram-negative rods, including both *Enterobacteriales* and non-fermenting rods such as *Pseudomonas* spp. and *Acinetobacter* spp. In the case of infections caused by CoNS, the values of all inflammatory parameters were significantly lower when compared to infections caused by other etiological factors ($p < 0.05$) (Table S2). Patients with COVID-19 produced lower levels of PCT than patients without SARS-CoV-2 infection, both in relation to infections caused by Gram-negative and Gram-positive bacteria (Figure 2).

The distribution of species isolated from blood in the patient groups studied is shown in Table 3 and Figure 3. Significant differences were observed in the prevalence of CoNS, including *Staphylococcus epidermidis*. CoNS-caused BSIs were more frequent in patients hospitalized during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic when compared to the pre-COVID period (17% vs. 11%) and were the highest in the subpopulation of patients hospitalized due to COVID-19 (19%). There was also a higher percentage of *Enterococcus* spp.-caused BSIs in COVID-19 patients, but these differences were not statistically significant (Table 3, Figure 3). The percentage of MRSA isolation for the two analyzed groups (preCOVID-19 and COVID-19) was the same—34%; however, significant differences in the proportion of MRSA to methicillin-sensitive *S. aureus* (MSSA) were noted. Among *S. aureus* isolated from patients with COVID-19, nearly half (49%) were MRSA, while among those isolated from patients treated for reasons other than COVID-19, the percentage of MRSA isolation was 26% (Table 4, Figure 3). A similar situation occurred in the analysis of the frequency of BSIs caused by *K. pneumoniae* NDM (New Delhi metallo-beta-lactamases). Statistically significant differences were shown both between the preCOVID-19 and COVID-19 groups

(1% vs. 7%) as well as within the pandemic period, in which the percentage of patients with COVID-19 and *K. pneumoniae* NDM-caused BSIs was 16% of all Gram-negative rods, while in the case of other patients hospitalized, *K. pneumoniae* NDM-caused BSIs were responsible for 2% of BSIs (Table 4). There were no statistically significant differences in the isolation of Gram-negative rods producing extended spectrum β -lactamases (ESBL) and non-fermenting rods such as *A. baumannii*, *P. aeruginosa*, or *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* (Table 3, Figure 3).

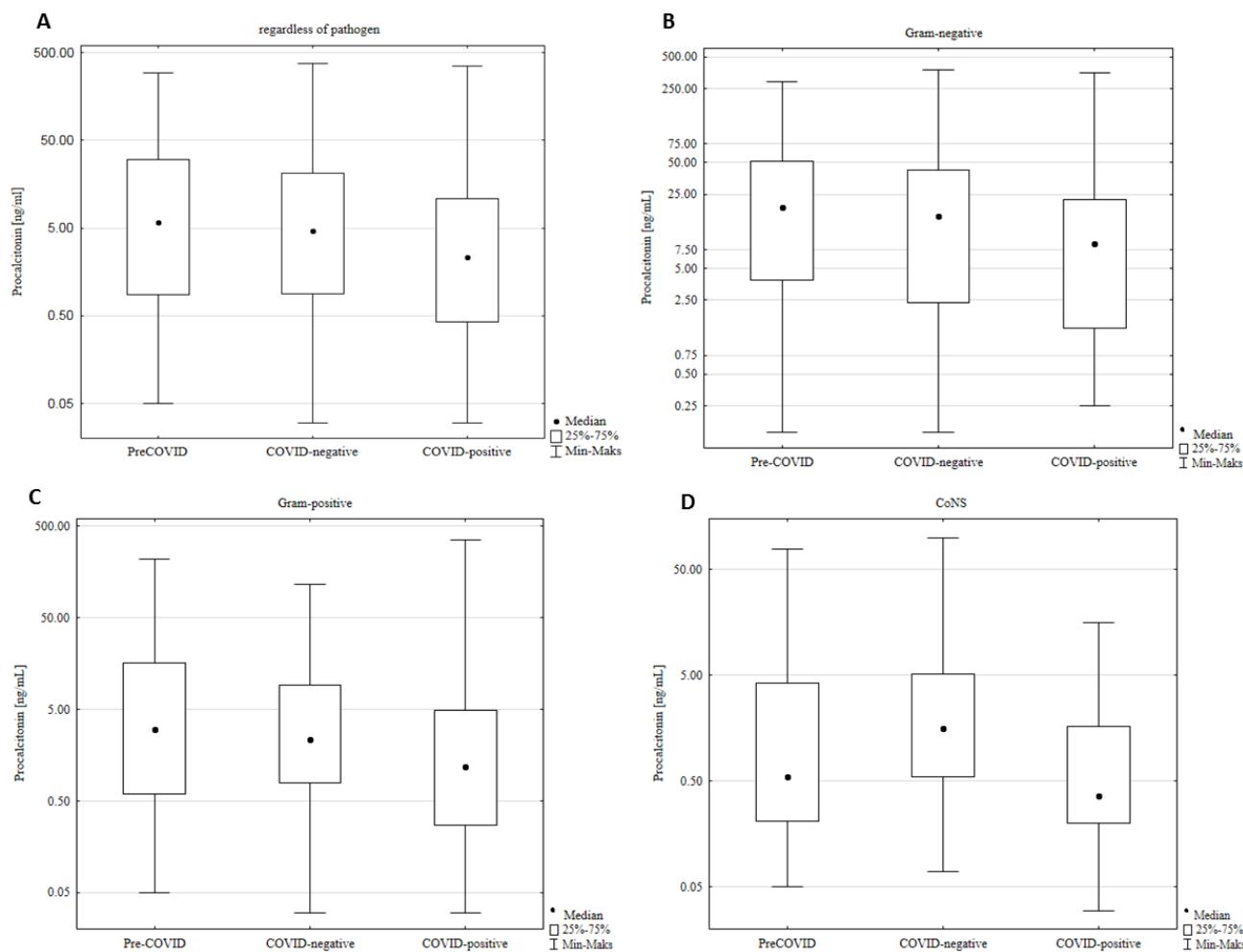


Figure 2. Procalcitonin (PCT) level in different patient subpopulations. A/COVID-positive patients with BSI showed a significantly lower level of PCT than patients with BSI and without SARS-CoV-2 infection, including those hospitalized in pre-COVID-19 ($p = 0.0005$) and COVID-19 pandemic periods ($p = 0.01$) (Kruskal–Wallis test) (A). Differences in PCT levels were also significant when patient groups with/without SARS-CoV2 infection and concomitantly infected with Gram-negative bacteria (B) ($p = 0.03$), Gram-positive bacteria (C) ($p = 0.028$; $p = 0.002$), or CoNS ($p = 0.002$) (D) were analyzed separately.

Table 3. Species distribution among patients diagnosed with BSI, with or without COVID-19 (A—patients hospitalized for COVID-19 or history of COVID-19 disease in the last 6 months; B—patient's hospitalization unrelated to COVID-19; *p*—statistical significance; the *p*-value refers to a comparison of the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 (A + B) using the Chi-squared test; NT—not tested).

Species Structure	Number (%) of Isolates *				<i>p</i> **	
	preCOVID-19	COVID-19				
		A	B	A + B		
Gram (+)	184 (60.5)	111 (59.4)	178 (56)	289 (57.2)	0.63	
<i>Enterococcus faecalis</i>	13	12	16	28	0.44	
<i>Enterococcus faecium</i>	13	11	10	21	0.98	
<i>Enterococcus gallinarum</i>	0	2	0	2	NT #	
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	101	45	87	132	0.07	
CoNS *	35	38	51	89	0.023	
<i>Staphylococcus epidermidis</i>	20	24	36	60	0.009	
<i>Listeria monocytogenes</i>	0	0	1	1	NT #	
<i>Streptococcus agalactiae</i>	3	0	1	1		
<i>Streptococcus dysgalactiae</i>	3	0	1	1		
<i>Streptococcus pneumoniae</i>	8	1	4	5	0.56	
<i>Streptococcus pyogenes</i>	2	0	0	0		
<i>Streptococcus</i> spp.	6	2	7	9		
Gram (-)	107 (35.2)	67 (35.8)	128 (40.3)	195 (38.6)	0.90	
<i>Enterobacteriales</i>	92 (86)	58 (86.6)	112 (87.5)	170 (87.2)	0.399	
<i>Escherichia coli</i>	57	26	61	87	0.736	
<i>Enterobacter cloacae</i>	5	3	11	14	0.27	
<i>Klebsiella pneumoniae</i>	18	22	23	45	0.095	
<i>Leclercia ade carboxylata</i>	0	0	1	1	NT #	
<i>Morganella morgannii</i>	0	0	5	5	NT #	
<i>Proteus mirabilis</i>	10	4	8	12	NT #	
<i>Salmonella Enteritidis</i>	0	1	1	2	NT #	
<i>Serratia marcescens</i>	2	2	2	4	NT #	
Non-fermentative bacilli	15 (14)	9 (13.4)	16 (12.5)	25 (12.8)	0.909	
<i>Acinetobacter baumannii</i>	7	6	6	12	0.89	
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i>	8	3	9	12	0.87	
<i>Stenotrophomonas maltophilia</i>	0	0	1	1	NT #	
Yeast-like fungi	9 (3)	8 (4.3)	7 (2.2)	15 (3)	0.53	
<i>Candida albicans</i>	5	7	3	10	0.686	
<i>Candida glabrata</i>	4	1	1	2	NT #	
<i>Candida</i> spp.	0	0	3	3	NT #	
Anaerobic	4 (1.3)	1 (0.5)	5 (1.6)	6 (1.2)	NT #	
<i>Bacteroides</i> spp.	4	0	4	4	NT #	
<i>Fusobacterium nucleatum</i>	0	1	0	1	NT #	
<i>Veilonella</i> spp.	0	0	1	1	NT #	
Total number of isolates	319	196	334	530		

* percentages are for subgroups; ** *p* refers to all tested isolates; # not tested due to a small sample size.

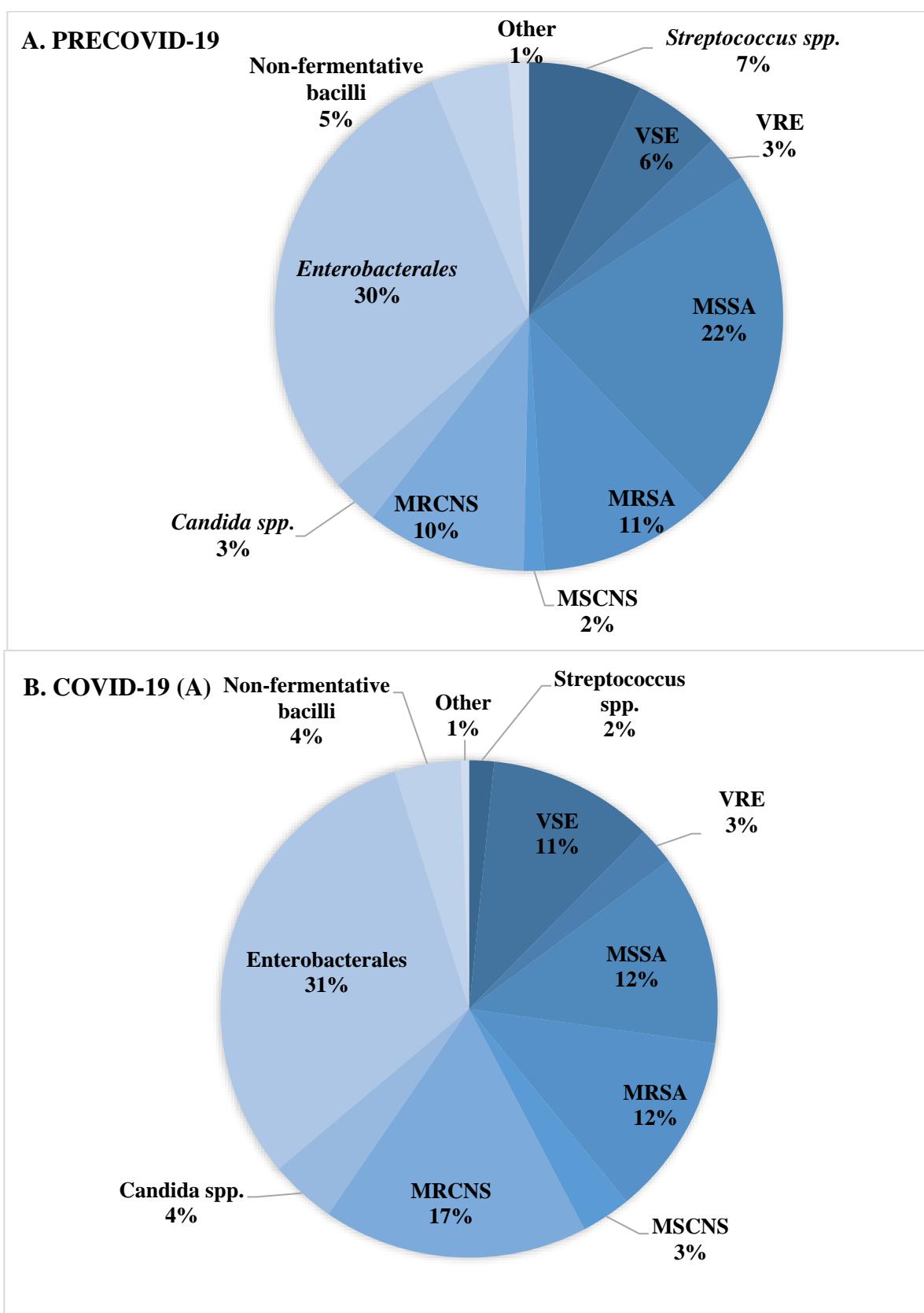


Figure 3. Cont.

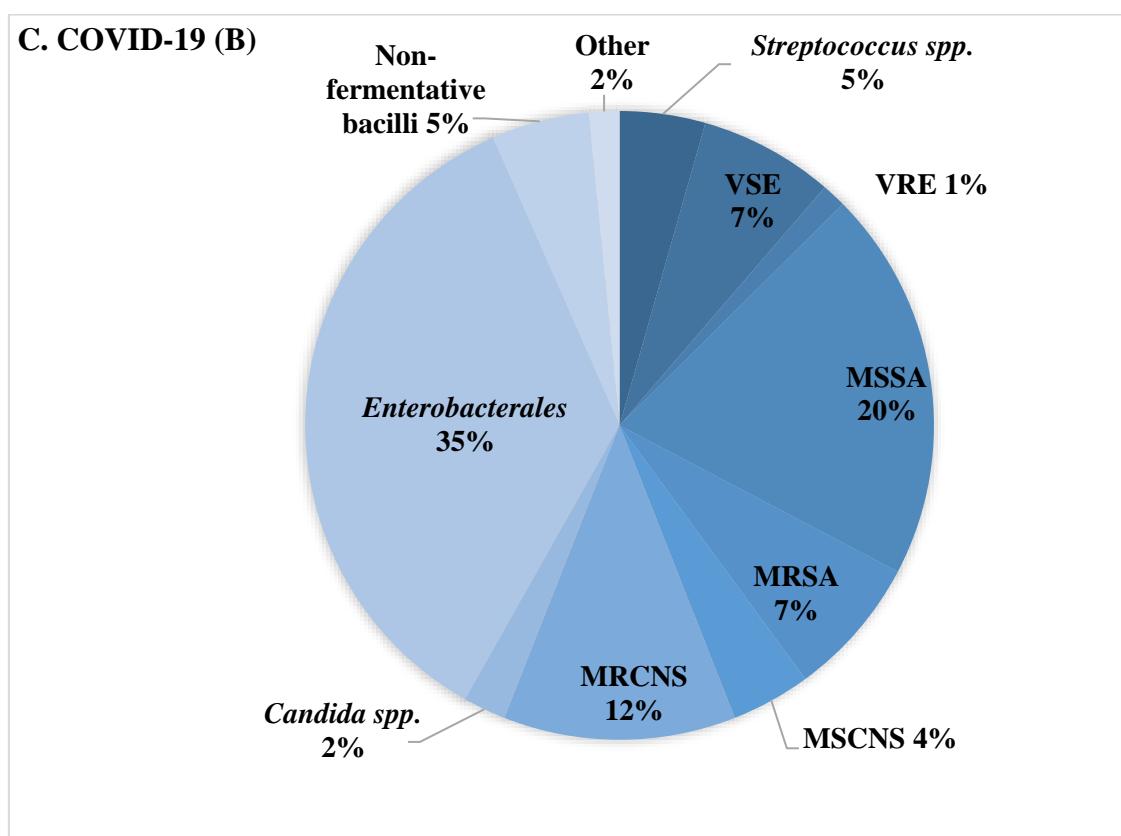


Figure 3. Distribution of species detected in blood cultures in patients with BSI. (A)—species isolated during the pre-COVID-19 period. (B)—species isolated during the COVID-19 period from patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection. (C)—species isolated during the COVID-19 period from patients without SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Table 4. Distribution of antibiotic-resistant microorganisms in patients diagnosed with BSI, with or without COVID-19 (A—patients hospitalized for COVID-19 or with a history of COVID-19 disease in the last 6 months; B—patients hospitalized unrelated to COVID-19). *p*—statistical significance; the *p*-value refers to a comparison between the defined groups using the Chi-squared test.

Pathogen	Number (%) of Isolates			<i>p</i>		
	preCOVID-19	COVID-19			A vs. B	
		A	B	A + B	preCOVID-19 vs. A + B	
Gram (+)						
MRSA/MSSA + MRSA	34/101 (34)	22/45 (49)	23/87 (26)	45/132 (34)	0.009	0.945
MRCNS/MSCNS + MRCNS	31/35 (89)	32/38 (84)	38/51 (75)	70/89 (79)	0.269	0.201
VRE/VRE + VSE	9/26 (35)	5/25 (20)	4/26 (15)	9/51 (18)	0.665	0.096
Gram (-)						
ESBL/Gram (-)	25/107 (23)	15/67 (22)	26/128 (20)	41/195 (21)	0.735	0.638
NDM/Gram (-)	1/107 (0.9)	11/67 (16)	3/128 (2)	14/195 (7)	0.0003	0.017

(X)—% of resistant strains within isolated species. ESBL—Gram-negative rods producing extended-spectrum beta-lactamases. MSCNS—methicillin-sensitive coagulase-negative *Staphylococcus* spp.; MRCNS—methicillin-resistant coagulase-negative *Staphylococcus* spp.; MSSA—methicillin-sensitive *S. aureus*. MRSA—methicillin-resistant *S. aureus*; NDM—Gram-negative rods producing New Delhi metallo-β-lactamases; VRE—Vancomycin resistant *Enterococcus* spp.

4. Discussion

In the four-year observational study, a comparative analysis of BSIs that occurred during the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 periods is presented.

The incidence of BSIs during the pandemic period was higher (2.05/1000 patient days) compared to pre-COVID-19 phase, which was probably associated with the hospitalization of a large number of patients suffering from COVID-19. These data are in line with other literature reports that indicate numerous risk factors predisposing patients infected with SARS-CoV-2 to secondary infections. The most important are, among others, the deregulation of immune response to viral infection through the cytokine storm (hypercytokinemia) and the reduced production of IFN- γ as a consequence of a decrease in CD4+ lymphocyte to Th1 subtype differentiation. Further, it has been shown that COVID-19 patients more often required an extension of hospitalization, including a stay in the intensive care unit (ICU), and were therefore more likely to acquire a nosocomial infection. Immunosuppressive therapy such as corticosteroids or interleukin-6 inhibitors used in the course of the disease is also crucial [16,19].

However, the calculated COVID-19 pandemic period number of BSI incidence (2.05/1000 patient-days) does not reflect the prevalence of infections only among patients hospitalized due to SARS-CoV-2 infection. This number also includes patients treated for other reasons, which is one of the limitations of this study. It was not possible to determine the number of person-days generated only by COVID-19 patients. The literature data about BSI frequency from the pandemic period often come from intensive care units only, where due to the severe condition of patients, a significantly higher index (23.56–47) was obtained per 1000 patient-days compared to our observations. The BSI incidence for the normal ward and ICU overall was close to the results obtained in our study (3.05 vs. 2.05 per 100 patient-days) [8,16,17,20]. However, the epidemiology of BSIs was similar in both studied groups, but an increased frequency of MDR (multidrug-resistant) strain isolation was observed in the case of COVID-19 patients.

Among the factors contributing to the rise in the number of healthcare-associated infections (HAI) are the transmission of hospital pathogens by medical staff and the abuse of antibiotics. Subsequent waves of COVID-19 caused an increased inflow of patients to health care institutions. Medical staff was overwhelmed with work, and staff shortages among doctors and nurses led to an increase in the number of patients per medical professional. Frequent rotation of medical staff between departments and even individual units was observed, which could have a relationship with pathogen circulation. Amid limited supply and difficult access to personal protective equipment (PPE), it was spared by medical staff. Paradoxically, PPE such as overalls, glasses, masks, or double gloves, while protecting against SARS-CoV-2 infection, contributed to the spread of MDR strains. The use of urinary catheters, central lines, and respirators increased, but concomitant HAI prevention procedures such as central injection care were neglected. This has led to a particular increase in the number of central line-associated blood stream infections (CLABSI), which has been observed in both the United States and Europe [20,21]. In this study, a statistically significant ($p = 0.023$) increase in the frequency of CoNS isolation from COVID-19 patients' blood samples was demonstrated. The limitation of the conducted research may be the fact that, from the retrospectively analyzed medical documentation, it was not possible to obtain information on whether, in each case, the isolation of CoNS from blood was univocal with the qualification of infection as CLABSI. Due to the frequent lack of a comprehensive diagnosis of CLABSI consisting of simultaneous blood samples collected from the central injection, peripheral blood, and the tip of the removed central injection, it was not possible to classify the case as laboratory-confirmed CLABSI.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant increase in antibiotic consumption and, thus, in the frequency of hospital infections caused by MDR strains. The initial concerns about bacterial coinfections, a lack of evidence-based treatment options, and severe clinical conditions resulted in the inclusion of antibiotic therapy in more than 60% of patients with COVID-19 [21,22]. A particular rise in antibiotic consumption was noted

for broad-spectrum antibiotics such as cephalosporins, carbapenems, and aminoglycosides [23].

In our study, a statistically significant increase in the isolation of *K. pneumoniae* NDM strains was shown in patients with BSIs hospitalized due to SARS-CoV-2 infection. Among this group, the proportion of NDM strains accounted for 16% of all isolated Gram-negative rods. In the case of patients hospitalized for reasons other than COVID-19, this percentage was 2%.

The reviews concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the epidemiology of hospital infections and the drug resistance of microorganisms differ significantly and indicate that the incidence of secondary infections caused by carbapenem-resistant *K. pneumoniae* strains in COVID-19 patients is between 0.35 and 53%. The most commonly observed types of carbapenemases were KPC, OXA-48, and NDM, and infections were mainly related to pneumonia and BSIs. This is most likely due to mechanical ventilation and the presence of central lines, together with the neglect of nosocomial infection prevention procedures [22,24,25]. Also, broad meta-analyses confirmed MRSA as an important etiological factor of secondary infections, including ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP) and severe blood infections, in people hospitalized for respiratory failure in the course of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Significant effects of MRSA coinfection on mortality due to COVID-19 have also been shown, especially among patients requiring hospitalization in intensive care units [22,25–27]. In the study conducted in 4 hospitals by Pasquini et al., it was described as having a more than seven times higher rate of MRSA isolation from BSIs in COVID-19 patients compared to those treated for other than COVID-19 conditions [16]. This observation corresponds to our results, where a statistically significant increase in MRSA isolation was noticed for patients with BSIs and COVID-19 ($p = 0.009$). MRSA was isolated from all BSI caused by *S. aureus*, almost twice as often in COVID-19 patients than non-COVID-19 patients.

Moreover, in this study, we present a high proportion of BSIs caused by *Enterococcus* spp. in patients with COVID-19. This is consistent with a retrospective cohort study of 89 patients hospitalized in the Intensive Care Unit for SARS-CoV-2 infection conducted by Bonazzetti et al. [28]. However, in our study, the statistical significance of *Enterococcus* spp. prevalence was not demonstrated, probably due to the much larger number of patients included in the analysis compared to the abovementioned study. As a possible reason for the increase in the number of BSIs caused by *Enterococcus* spp., researchers report the initial colonization of the respiratory tract of mechanically ventilated patients and then the occurrence of BSIs as a result of a worsening of the clinical condition [28].

Procalcitonin (PCT), a precursor of the hormone calcitonin, is an important inflammatory biomarker that is synthesized mainly in response to bacterial infections, reflecting the extent of the systemic inflammatory response. Bacterial toxins are crucial in the induction of the synthesis of this protein, which is also stimulated by high levels of tumor necrosis factor (TNF- α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), produced in response to infection [29]. Procalcitonin is considered a useful diagnostic marker, allowing to distinguish bacterial infection from viral infection and as a prognostic determinant of the severity of infection and effectiveness of applied antibiotic therapy [30]. Initially, for severely ill patients with COVID-19, procalcitonin levels were used to assess the probability of secondary bacterial infection development. Since the standard treatment protocol for COVID-19 patients in critical condition has been accompanied by immunomodulators such as dexamethasone or tocilizumab (an IL-6 inhibitor), the usefulness of inflammatory biomarkers in predicting secondary bacterial infections has been unclear and has required further research.

In a research paper published in Critical Care assessing the impact of immunomodulatory therapy on the kinetics of PCT and CRP in COVID-19 patients and their usefulness in early detection of secondary bacterial infections, it was shown that the value of these two inflammatory markers was significantly reduced in patients with immunomodulation. However, dexamethasone therapy caused only a drop in CRP values. In addition, the occurrence of the so-called “rebound effect” was observed after discontinuation of immuno-

suppressive therapy, but the further increase of PCT and CRP in the course of secondary bacterial infections was limited. Therefore, these biomarkers have lost their diagnostic applicability for detecting secondary infections. Prolonged suppression of both PCT and CRP levels and no “rebound effect” were observed in patients treated with tocilizumab, which has a longer half-life compared to dexamethasone. Therefore, it appears that the strong and long-term anti-inflammatory effects of immunomodulatory drugs can directly impair the production of PCT and CRP to the extent that they are no longer sufficiently induced in response to a bacterial infection [31]. In our study, a similar relationship was shown, but only in the case of levels of PCT. Patients hospitalized for COVID-19 who had a history of BSIs had significantly lower PCT levels compared to patients hospitalized for other reasons where immunomodulatory drugs were not applied. An undoubted limitation of this analysis is the lack of data on the treatment of dexamethasone or tocilizumab in patients included in the study, as well as the use of levels of inflammatory markers obtained only on the day of blood sample collection for microbiological diagnostics without observing the kinetics of PCT in subsequent days. In the light of previous literature reports, we suspect that low PCT values in patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection were due to the immunosuppressive therapy that was used concomitantly, which became at some point the standard of care in the case of COVID-19 patients [31].

The analysis in terms of BSI etiology and the level of inflammatory parameters revealed another important conclusion. BSIs with the etiology of Gram-negative bacteria, including *Enterobacteriales* but also *P. aeruginosa* or *A. baumannii*, have been shown to have significantly higher PCT values and LAC levels than those observed in cases of Gram-positive-caused BSIs, regardless of the occurrence of COVID-19 disease. For PCT, this dependence was also observed when the analysis was limited to patients with COVID-19 only. These observations are consistent with other scientific outcomes and are the consequence of differences in inflammatory cascade initiation between Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria. Gram-negative bacteria lipopolysaccharide is the main antigen that activates neutrophils through TLR-4 receptors, while the lipoic acids of Gram-positive bacteria, stimulate immune cells by TLR-2 receptors. During an infection caused by Gram-negative bacteria, the synthesis of proinflammatory cytokines such as TNF- α and IL-1, IL-6, IL-8, and IL-10 is also more frequent [32]. In addition, in the case of BSIs caused by Gram-negative rods, septic shock is much more common, which is the result of a multi-organ dysfunction caused by a generalized inflammatory reaction. This bacteremia is associated with a severe course and clinical implications and is characterized by high levels of inflammatory parameters [33].

In Polish healthcare units, the functioning of the team for the hospital antibiotic policy is a requirement imposed by the regulation of the Minister of Health of 2010, in which the head of the healthcare facility is obliged to control, among others, the scope of assessing the correctness and effectiveness of prophylaxis and antibiotic therapy. Due to the growing resistance of microorganisms to antibiotics and the need for rational antibiotic use, guidelines created by Antimicrobial Stewardship (AMS) teams should be based on local microbiological results.

The AMS in the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław, where the study was carried out, has been operating for four years. Its task is to create empirical treatment guidelines, conduct consultations, and help optimize antimicrobial treatment. The AMS's analysis of microbiological maps showing the local epidemiological situation from the years before the COVID-19 pandemic did not show an increased frequency of MDRO isolation. The consumption of antibiotics, including broad-spectrum antibiotics, also remained similar. Only the data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a significant increase, both in the presence of alarm microbes and in the consumption of antibiotics. The results of this study are extremely useful in the context of updating the internal guidelines. Initially, infectious disease specialists, in their recommendations for the treatment of patients with COVID-19, recommended prophylactic use of third-generation cephalosporins to reduce the risk of bacterial superinfection in the course of viral disease. These practices directly

contributed to the increase in the frequency of strains producing ESBL, and the necessity to use carbapenems in the treatment of infections of this etiology resulted in a sudden increase in the isolation of carbapenemase-producing microorganisms (CPE). In addition, the health service's problems resulting from its overload during the pandemic prevented proper isolation or cohorting of patients colonized with MDRO, which contributed to the outbreak of local mono-focal epidemics.

Moreover, based on the results obtained, it is clear that no increase in BSI caused by VRE strains has been observed in the hospital, nor has a single case of vancomycin-resistant staphylococci been detected. At the same time, MRSA still accounts for many blood infections. According to the obtained results, vancomycin is still the drug of choice for suspected gram-positive infections or empirical antibiotic therapy in septic shock and sepsis. In addition, due to the results obtained, where a significant increase in BSI caused by CPE rods was demonstrated, the emphasis on a thorough analysis of the patient's medical history and the results of previous cultures, including the results of CPE carrier status, was increased. The standard of therapeutic management in a patient with a suspected infection caused by bacteria-producing NDM metallo-beta-lactamase was also established.

Studying the local situation and the etiological factors of BSI, their variability, and drug susceptibility has positively reduced the use of antibiotics, including carbapenems, and has helped AMSs teams update guidelines.

5. Conclusions

In this single-center clinical study focused on BSIs in patients before and during COVID-19, an increased frequency of BSIs was shown for COVID-19 patients. Moreover, in this group, a high rate of MDR strain isolation has been described. This was most likely due to the problems faced by health care units at that time, which concerned shortages among medical staff, severe working conditions, and a large number of patients admitted to hospitals. In addition, a significant increase in antibiotic consumption, especially those with a broad spectrum of activity, contributed to the induction of selection pressure and caused the rapid spread of MDR species such as NDM or MRSA in the hospital environment. All these factors, in combination with severe clinical conditions and overlapping secondary bacterial infections, resulted in increased mortality in the COVID-19 patient population. Due to the use of immunosuppressive therapy in patients with respiratory failure in the course of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the diagnostic value of proinflammatory markers such as PCT in the early detection of secondary bacterial infections may be limited.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/jcm12185942/s1>, Table S1: Association between occurrence of particular comorbidities, number of pathogens causing BSI, and mortality—comparison between pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 periods. P—statistical significance; the *p*-value refers to a comparison of the preCOVID-19, group A, and group B using the Chi-squared test; Table S2: Relation between causative blood-stream pathogen and blood biochemistry results. The *p*-value was calculated using the Mann–Whitney test. Status: 1/0—pathogen presence/pathogen absence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, N.S. and U.N.; methodology, N.S. and P.L.; software, K.K. and U.N.; validation, N.S., R.D.-W. and U.N.; formal analysis, U.N.; investigation, N.S. and P.L.; resources, N.S. and P.L.; data curation, K.K.; writing—original draft preparation, N.S.; writing—review and editing, R.D.-W. and U.N.; visualization, J.M.; supervision, U.N.; project administration, J.M. and R.D.-W.; funding acquisition, U.N. and R.D.-W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by Wroclaw Medical University statutory funding SUBZ.D230.23.030.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of Military Medical Chamber, Poland (protocol code 194/22, date of approval 18 February 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the first author Natalia Ślabisz upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Supplementary

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Epidemiology of Bloodstream Infections in Hospitalized Patients—Experience from a 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Poland

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Table S1. Association between occurrence of particular comorbidities, number of pathogens causing BSI and mortality- comparison between preCOVID-19 and COVID-19 periods. P – statistical significance; the p-value refers to a comparison of the preCOVID-19, group A, and group B using Chi-squared test

Patient characteristics	preCOVID-19 n=298	Number of patients/number of deaths				p	
		COVID-19					
		n=479	n=174	n=305	n=479		
Diabetes 220/172	71 /30	62 /43	87/28	149/71		0.506	
Chronic kidney disease, n (%)	31 /12	37/26	62 /30	99 /56		0.079	
Chronic cardiovascular disease, n (%)	155/77	54 /36	97 /49	151 (85)		0.041	
Cancer, n (%)	46 /21	21 /15	47/24	68 /39		0.057	
Obesity, n (%)	30/8	23 /10	30 /11	53 /21		0.044	
BSI due to 1 species	292/121 (41.4)	161/93 (57.7)	292/114 (39.0)				
BSI due to 2 species	6/3 (50%)	14/7 (50)	13/10 (76)			0.028	

Table S2. Relation between causative blood-stream pathogen and blood biochemistry results. The P-value calculated using Mann-Whitney test. Status: 1/0 – pathogen presence/pathogen absence.

Varia-ble	Gram-negative		Enterobacteriales		Gram-positive		CoNS		Candida spp.	
		Median [Q1;Q3]		Median [Q1;Q3]		Median [Q1;Q3]		Median [Q1;Q3]		Median [Q1;Q3]
WBC	1	14.1 [9.0; 21.8]		14 [8.7; 21.8]		13.2 [9.1; 18.4]		11.4 [7.8; 16.5]		11.1 [9.0; 17.2]
	0	13.1 [9.1; 18.3]		13.1 [9.1; 18.4]		13.8 [9.0; 21.7]		13.8 [9.4; 20.1]		13.5 [9.1; 19.5]
	P	0.109		0.156		0.178		0.001		0.333
NEUTR	1	12.1 [6.8; 18.8]		12.3 [6.8; 18.9]		11.3 [7.4; 16.7]		9.5 [5.7; 13.0]		10 [7.4; 14.9]
	0	11.2 [7.4; 16.5]		11.2 [7.4; 16.5]		11.8 [7.0; 18.7]		12.1 [7.4; 17.9]		11.6 [7.2; 17.4]
	P	0.229		0.246		0.543		0.000		0.349
CRP	1	176.2 [109.8; 242.9]		175.2 [109.5; 240.0]		159.7 [103; 234.7]		136.5 [74.0; 181.4]		136 [103.3; 263.1]
	0	156.3 [103.3; 234.7]		159.9 [104; 236.0]		171.1 [109.8; 242.4]		169 [111.0; 246.8]		165 [106.0; 236.6]
	P	0.055		0.161		0.118		0.000		0.565
PTC	1	14.2 [2.4; 42.3]		15.6 [2.6; 42.5]		2.3 [0.6; 9.9]		0.8 [0.2; 3.4]		2.5 [0.5; 15.5]
	0	2.2 [0.5; 9.4]		2.3 [0.6; 10.5]		12.2 [2.0; 39]		6.1 [1.0; 26.4]		4.2 [0.8; 20.9]
	P	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.334
LAC	1	2.7 [1.6; 5.3]		2.9 [1.7; 5.6]		2.1 [1.4; 3.3]		1.6 [1.1; 2.2]		2.1 [1.0; 11.1]
	0	2.1 [1.4; 3.4]		2.1 [1.4; 3.2]		2.7 [1.6; 5.2]		2.4 [1.6; 4.1]		2.2 [1.5; 3.9]
	P	0.012		0.002		0.024		0.000		0.879

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RECEIVED 01 November 2023

ACCEPTED 26 March 2024

PUBLISHED 05 April 2024

CITATION

Stabisz N, Leśnik P, Janc J, Fidut M, Bartoszewicz M, Dudek-Wicher R and Nawrot U (2024) Evaluation of the *in vitro* susceptibility of clinical isolates of NDM-producing *Klebsiella pneumoniae* to new antibiotics included in a treatment regimen for infections. *Front. Microbiol.* 15:1331628.
doi: 10.3389/fmicb.2024.1331628

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Evaluation of the *in vitro* susceptibility of clinical isolates of NDM-producing *Klebsiella pneumoniae* to new antibiotics included in a treatment regimen for infections

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Background: Due to the growing resistance to routinely used antibiotics, the search for new antibiotics or their combinations with effective inhibitors against multidrug-resistant microorganisms is ongoing. In our study, we assessed the *in vitro* drug susceptibility of *Klebsiella pneumoniae* strains producing New Delhi metallo-β-lactamases (NDM) to antibiotics included in the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) and European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) recommendations.

Methods: A total of 60 strains of NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* were obtained from different patients hospitalized at the 4th Military Hospital in Wrocław between 2019 and 2022 and subjected to drug susceptibility to selected antibiotics, including the effects of drug combinations.

Results: Among the tested antibiotics, the highest sensitivity (100%) was observed for cefiderocol, eravacycline (interpreted according to the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing [EUCAST]), and tigecycline. Sensitivity to intravenous fosfomycin varied depending on the method used. Using the "strip stacking" method, determining cumulative sensitivity to ceftazidime/avibactam and aztreonam demonstrated 100% *in vitro* sensitivity to this combination among the tested strains.

Conclusion: The *in vitro* susceptibility assessment demonstrated that, the best therapeutic option for treating infections caused by carbapenemase-producing strains seems to be a combination of ceftazidime/avibactam with aztreonam. Due to the safety of using both drugs, cost effectiveness, and the broadest indications for use among the tested antibiotics, this therapy should be the first-line treatment for carbapenemase-producing *Enterobacteriales* infections. Nevertheless, a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of treating infections caused by NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* strains should include not only *in vitro* susceptibility assessment but also an analysis of clinical cases.

KEYWORDS

Klebsiella pneumoniae, metallo-beta-lactamase, NDM, susceptibility, aztreonam, eravacycline, fosfomycin, tigecycline

1 Introduction

Recently, a rapid spread of carbapenemase-producing *Enterobacteriales* (CPE) strains has been observed worldwide, including in Poland, which represents a severe epidemiological and therapeutic problem. CPE most often colonizes the gastrointestinal tract but can also cause urinary tract infections (UTIs), pneumonia, or blood stream infection. Antimicrobial resistance genes are included in mobile elements such as plasmids, transposons, and integrons. The importance of these elements lies in their role in the vertical transmission of genes from *Klebsiella pneumoniae* to its descendants, as well as the horizontal transmission of genes from a specific *K. pneumoniae* strain to another (Karampatakis et al., 2023). These microorganisms spread very quickly in the hospital environment, primarily through direct contact with another patient who is a carrier of CPE or through the hands of medical staff. Screening of patients from risk groups during admission to the hospital, adherence to hand hygiene procedures by medical staff, and the application of rational antibiotic therapy in healthcare units, constitute the primary tool in the fight against spreading of CPE infections (Otter et al., 2020).

Most CPE strains are completely resistance to commonly used antibiotics, that is why, treating infections caused by these microorganisms often requires new, unconventional antibiotics or combination antibiotic therapy based on two or even three drugs. Unfortunately, in the case of CPE strains, there are often only one or two therapeutic options left for treatment, and there are also situations in which the strain is entirely resistant to all known antibiotics. Therefore, both laboratories and clinicians are forced to look for combinations of "old" and "new" antibiotics, the combined action of which may provide a chance for therapeutic success (Karaiskos et al., 2019; Ontong et al., 2021). Recently registered new antibiotics such as plazomicin, eravacycline or cefiderocol, may be an effective remedy in the fight against infections caused by CPE strains (Castanheira et al., 2020; McCreary et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2023).

In 2021, the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infection Diseases (ESCMID) published recommendations containing proposed treatment regimens for infections caused by third-generation cephalosporins-resistant microorganisms and *Enterobacteriales*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Acinetobacter baumannii* that are resistance to carbapenems (Paul et al., 2022).

In the case of enterobacterial rod-producing metallo-β-lactamases, in patient with severe infections, it is recommended to use cefiderocol or combination of aztreonam with ceftazidime/avibactam. In particular, the synergistic effects of a variety of aztreonam combined with ceftazidime/avibactam deserves attention. Further, the sensitivity of CRE-MBL to old antibiotics, including polymyxins, tigecycline, or fosfomycin IV, has been reported. In each of these cases, the drug susceptibility of the individual strains should be determined. In 2021 and 2023, similar recommendations were made by the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA; Tamma et al., 2023).

The minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) method is commonly employed in microbiological diagnostics to determine the lowest concentration of an antimicrobial agent that effectively inhibits the growth of a specific microorganism. There are also more specialized diagnostic tools to assess the interaction of two different antibiotics. This effect may be synergistic, additive, neutral, or antagonistic. Choosing this reciprocal relationship between the two drugs is a crucial therapeutic clue in treating infections caused by carbapenemase-producing *Enterobacteriales* (Massoni-Cristante et al., 2003; Avery and Nicolau, 2018; Maraki et al., 2021; Terbothakun et al., 2021).

Among carbapenemases such as IMP (active against imipenem; imipenemase), VIM (Verona integron-encoded metallo-β-lactamase), KPC (*K. pneumoniae* carbapenemase), New Delhi metallo-β-lactamases (NDM), and OXA-48-like, NDM constitutes a critical medical issue. The effectiveness of almost all β-lactams, including carbapenems, is compromised by this enzyme, except for aztreonam and cefiderocol. Given that, there are very few antibiotics available as therapeutic options. The objective of this study was to assess the susceptibility of clinical isolates of NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae*, recognized as a significant threat to public health and a common factor in nosocomial infections, to new antibiotics, including drugs recommended by U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2023), IDSA, and ESCMID for treatment of nosocomial and complicated infections, presented in Table 1.

The study aimed to evaluate the sensitivity of *K. pneumoniae* NDM isolates obtained from patients with UTI, VAP, and BSI infections in the 4th Military Hospital of Wroclaw from 2019 to 2022 to new antibiotics included in the IDSA and ESCMID recommendations.

2 Methods

The study was carried out in the Microbiology Laboratory of the Laboratory Diagnostics Department of the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wroclaw, based on material obtained in the Clinical Department of Anesthesiology and Intensive Care and other departments. *K. pneumoniae* NDM strains were obtained from patients' cultures of clinical materials collected for routine microbiological tests, which were subjected to drug susceptibility to selected antibiotics, including the effects of drug combinations.

2.1 Ethics

The study protocol was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Lower Silesian Medical Chamber, Poland (approval no. 2/BNR/2023). Confidentiality and privacy were considered with regard to personal, laboratory, and clinical data. The study was carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and

TABLE 1 Antibiotics recommended by FDA, IDSA, and ESCMID for the treatment of CPE infections (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2018; Paul et al., 2022; Tamma et al., 2023).

Antibiotics	Mechanism of action	Indications ^a
Cefiderocol (Fetcroja*) (siderophore cephalosporin)	Cefiderocol binds to extracellular free iron via its siderophore side chain, allowing active transport into the periplasmic space of Gram-negative bacteria through siderophore uptake systems. subsequently binds to penicillin-binding proteins (PBPs), inhibiting bacterial peptidoglycan cell wall synthesis, which leads to cell lysis and death.	cUTI caused by susceptible strains of <i>E. coli</i> , <i>K. pneumoniae</i> , <i>P. mirabilis</i> , <i>P. aeruginosa</i> , <i>E. cloacae</i> HAP, VAP caused by <i>A. baumanii</i> complex, <i>E. coli</i> , <i>E. cloacae</i> complex, <i>K. pneumoniae</i> , <i>P. aeruginosa</i> , <i>S. marcescens</i> Bacteremia Should be used to treat patients who have limited treatment options only after consultation with a physician with appropriate experience in the management of infectious diseases.
Eravacycline (Xerava*) (synthetic fluocycline tetracycline)	The mechanism of action of eravacycline involves the disruption of bacterial protein synthesis by binding to the 30S ribosomal subunit thus preventing the incorporation of amino acid residues into elongating peptide chains.	cIAI caused by <i>E. coli</i> , <i>K. pneumoniae</i> , <i>E. faecalis</i> , <i>E. faecium</i> , <i>S. aureus</i> , <i>Viridans streptococcus</i> spp.
Plazomicin (Zemdri*) (semisynthetic aminoglycoside derived from sisomicin)	plazomicin binds to the 16S rRNA at the aminoacyl-tRNA site (A-site) of the 30S ribosomal subunit, interfering with protein translation.	cUTI caused by <i>E. coli</i> , <i>K. pneumoniae</i> , <i>P. mirabilis</i> , <i>E. cloacae</i> Active against <i>Enterobacteriales</i> resistant to β-lactams and other classes of antibacterials May cause nephrotoxicity, ototoxicity and neuromuscular blockade.
Aztreonam (Cayston*) (monobactam β-lactam)	Aztreonam is a bactericidal agent that acts by inhibition of bacterial cell wall synthesis.	UTI (complicated and uncomplicated) Cystic fibrosis Lower respiratory tract infections (pneumoniae, bronchitis) Skin infections IAI Gynecologic infections Systematic infection: severe or life-threatening.
Ceftazidim/avibactam (Zavicefta*) (cephalosporin combined with non-β-lactam β-lactamase inhibitor)	The bactericidal action of ceftazidime is mediated through binding to essential penicillin-binding proteins (PBPs). Avibactam is a non-β lactam β-lactamase inhibitor that inactivates some β-lactamases and protects ceftazidime from degradation by certain β-lactamases.	cUTI cIAI HAP VAP
Fosfomycin IV (InfectoFos*) (phosphonic acid)	Fosfomycin IV inhibits the enzyme phosphoenolpyruvate transferase, which catalyzes the formation of n-acetyl muramic acid from n-acetyl aminoglucose and phosphoenolpyruvate. N-acetyl muramic acid is required for the buildup of peptidoglycan, an essential component of the bacterial cell wall.	cUTI Endocarditis ^b HAP, VAP ^b cSSI ^b Osteomyelitis ^b cIAI ^b meningitis ^b
Tigecycline (derivative of Minocycline)	Tigecycline, a glycylcycline, inhibits protein translation in bacteria by binding to the 30S ribosomal subunit and blocking entry of amino-acyl tRNA molecules into the A site of the ribosome. This prevents the incorporation of amino acid residues into elongating peptide chains.	cSSI cIAI CAP

^aFDA, approved; ^bEMA, approved (available in Europe, Australia and Canada). cUTI, complicated urinary tract infection; HAP, hospital-acquired pneumonia; VAP, ventilatory-associated pneumonia; cIAI, complicated intra-abdominal infection; UTI, urinary tract infection; IAI, complicated intra-abdominal infection; cSSI, complicated surgical site infection; CAP, community-acquired pneumonia.

Good Clinical Practice. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study.

2.2 Microorganisms

A total of 60 strains of NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* were obtained from different patients hospitalized in the 4th Military

Hospital in Wroclaw between 2019 and 2022 and used for the study: 20 strains originating from bloodstream infections, 20 strains isolated from urinary tract infections, and 20 strains from lower respiratory tract specimens (BAL- bronchoalveolar lavage, tracheal aspirates). The bacterial strains all originated from different patients. In the case of infection with the same bacterial strain across multiple systems, only a single isolate was used for testing.

2.3 Identification

All *K. pneumoniae* strains were identified using the VITEK MS system (bioMérieux, France), according to the manufacturer's instructions. The confidence interval for identification of all *K. pneumoniae* strains was 99.9%. *Escherichia coli* ATCC 8739 was used as the quality control strain.

2.4 Carbapenemase detection

Phenotypic detection of carbapenemases was performed using the immunochromatography test RESIST-5 O.O.K.N.V (CorisBioConcept, Belgium). This kit aims to detect and identify carbapenemases from a bacterial colony. Lateral-flow tests are based on membrane technology with colloidal gold nanoparticles. Quality control of this method was performed using the reference strain *E. coli* ATCC 25922.

2.5 Susceptibility testing

2.5.1 Gradient strip-based method

MIC Test Strip MTSTM (Liofilchem, Italy) is a quantitative method for *in vitro* susceptibility testing. MIC is the minimum inhibitory concentration of an antibiotic that inhibits the growth of bacteria under standardized *in vitro* conditions. MTSTM consists of special porous paper impregnated with a pre-defined concentration gradient of an antimicrobial agent, used to determine the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) in µg/mL of antimicrobial agents against bacteria. MTSTM strip tests were performed on Mueller Hinton Agar (bioMérieux, France). Liofilchem™ MTSTM Fosfomycin includes glucose-6-phosphate. The results were read after 16–20 h incubation at 35°C in ambient air. *Escherichia coli* ATCC 25922 was used as the quality control strain.

2.5.2 Agar dilution method (reference method)

Agar dilution is considered the best method for fosfomycin susceptibility testing, as recommended by CLSI and EUCAST standards. AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256 (Liofilchem, Italy) is a 12-well

panel containing the antibiotic incorporated into an agar medium in different concentrations (11 two-fold dilutions, growth control). The tested microorganism was first isolated on a suitable non-selective culture medium- Columbia Agar (bioMérieux, France). The standardized suspension of a density of 0.5 McFarland was subsequently diluted 1:10 in saline, and 2 µL of the inoculum solution was inoculated into each well (final inoculum concentration should be approximately 10⁴CFU per spot). Test setups were incubated at 35°C for 16–20 h in ambient air. According to EUCAST, the MIC was recorded at the minimum concentration where there was non-confluent growth. Single colonies, pinpoint colonies, and a thin film of growth were ignored. Quality control of AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256 (Liofilchem, Italy) was performed using the *E. coli* ATCC 25922 strain ([Croughs et al., 2022](#)).

2.5.3 Gradient strip-stacking method

Susceptibility testing of the aztreonam plus ceftazidime/avibactam combination was performed on MH agar (bioMérieux, France) using the MIC Test Strip MTSTM (Liofilchem, Italy). Aztreonam (AZT) strips were placed on culture-inoculated agar surfaces and allowed to diffuse for 10 min. After 10 min, the aztreonam strips were removed, and the ceftazidime/aztreonam (CAZ/AVI) strips were placed at the same location. The aztreonam strips were then placed over the ceftazidime/avibactam strips to help read the MIC values of aztreonam after 16–18 h of incubation in ambient air ([Khan et al., 2021](#); [Bakthavatchalam et al., 2022](#)). The cumulative MIC was interpreted against the Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI) criteria for aztreonam ([Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute, 2018](#)).

2.5.4 Interpretation of the results

MIC breakpoints for selected antibiotics according to the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST), Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI) and FDA are shown in [Table 2](#).

2.5.5 Quality control

Escherichia coli ATCC 25922 strain was used for gradient strip-based method quality control according to the recommendations of EUCAST.

TABLE 2 MIC breakpoints for selected antibiotics according to EUCAST, CLSI and FDA ([Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute, 2018](#); [European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing, 2023](#); [U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2023](#)).

Antibiotic	Interpretative criteria	MIC breakpoints (mg/L)	
		S≤	R>
Cefiderocol (CDR)	EUCAST	2	2
Eravacycline (ERV)	EUCAST (ECOFF)	2	2
	FDA	0.5	0.5
Tigecycline (TIG)	EUCAST (ECOFF)	2	2
	FDA	2	8 (≥)
Plazomycin (PLZ)	CLSI	2	8 (≥)
Fosfomycin iv (FOS)	EUCAST	32	32
Ceftazidime/avibactam (CAZ/AVI)	EUCAST	8	8
Aztreonam (AZT)	EUCAST	1	4
Ceftazidime/avibactam + aztreonam (CAZ/AVI + AZT)	CLSI	4	16

2.5.6 Statistics

In this study, the statistical analyses were conducted using the STATISTICA 13 (TIBCO Software Inc. Palo Alto, United States) software package. To assess the normality of the data distribution, the Shapiro–Wilk test was employed. For the comparison between different groups, the non-parametric, Kruskal–Wallis test was used (with Dunn's *post-hoc* test). Additionally, to compare the results of FOS (MTSTM) with FOS (AD FOSF®) as the reference method, the Mann–Whitney *U*-test was applied. In all statistical tests, a $p < 0.05$ was considered to indicate statistical significance.

3 Results

Among the tested antibiotics, the highest sensitivity (100%) was observed for cefiderocol, eravacycline (interpreted according to EUCAST), and tigecycline. Only 78% of tested strains were susceptibility to plazomycin. Two methods for determining susceptibility to fosfomycin were used in this study. For the gradient strip-based method, susceptibility of tested strains was 68%, compared to 83% using the commercial test AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256 (Liofilchem, Italy) in which the reference method was employed (Figure 1).

The studied NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* strains showed 100% resistance to ceftazidime with avibactam and 92% resistance to aztreonam when these drugs were tested individually (Table 3; Figure 2; Supplementary Table S1). Using the “strip stacking” method to determine the cumulative sensitivity to ceftazidime/avibactam and aztreonam demonstrated 100% *in vitro* sensitivity to this combination among the tested strains (Figure 2).

The statistical analysis compared the MIC values for the tested antibiotics in the three groups of strains (strains originating from bloodstream infections, strains isolated from urinary tract infections, and 20 strains from lower respiratory tract specimens; bronchoalveolar lavage [BAL], tracheal aspirates). Statistically significant lower MIC values for cefiderocol were obtained in the case of strains isolated from lower respiratory tract infections ($p=0.002$). MIC values for the combination of aztreonam with ceftazidime/avibactam were lower for isolates originating from urinary tract infections ($p=0.004$). The last group in which statistical significance was demonstrated, is the MIC value for fosfomycin for *K. pneumoniae* NDM isolated from urine samples, determined by the reference method ($p=0.014$; Table 4).

4 Discussion

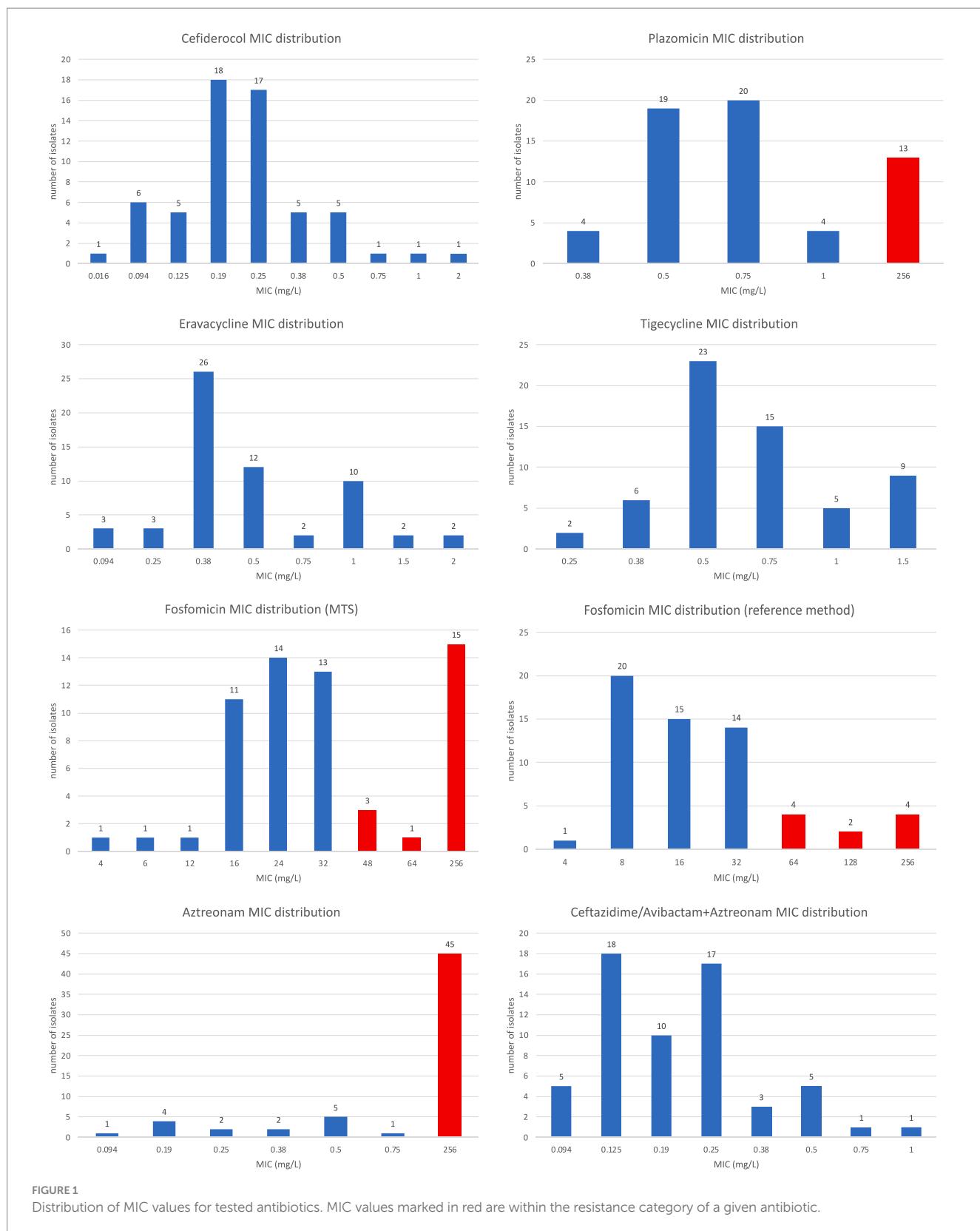
The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed a notable rise in the prevalence of multidrug-resistant strains, especially within the *Enterobacteriales* family. An earlier investigation examined bacterial bloodstream infections in patients hospitalized before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Slabisz et al., 2023) demonstrated a statistically significant increase in the frequency of BSIs caused by NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae*. A report by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published in 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022) on the epidemiological situation in European countries from 2016 to 2020 confirmed the presence of a growing antimicrobial resistance problem among microorganisms, including carbapenem-resistant strains of *K. pneumoniae*. The number

of unique cases of CPE strains in Poland from 2019 to 2021, confirmed by the National Reference Center for Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing of Microorganisms, increased from 2064 to 4,172. In 2019, 1,527 cases of NDM strains were confirmed. In 2021, this number increased to 3,036. These isolates originated only from infection cases and not from intestinal carriages (Hrynewicz et al., 2022). Due to the growing number of patients colonized with CPE strains, not only in the gastrointestinal tract but also in the urinary tract, it is necessary to establish guidelines for empirical treatment and drug susceptibility assessment in patients with suspected MDR strains, including CPE. Single-focal epidemics were frequently observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the hospital as well as in the post-pandemic period. Patients with rectal colonization of NDM *K. pneumoniae* had a higher risk of bacteremia than those with KPC *K. pneumoniae* (Pereira et al., 2023).

Our study analyzed the *in vitro* activity of new antibiotics recommended in the IDSA and ESCMID guidelines for treating CPE strains. Currently, the broadest registered antibiotics indicated for the treatment of the source of infection are fosfomycin IV, aztreonam, and ceftazidime in combination with avibactam. Plazomicin and eravacycline have narrow indications for use, with the former registered for the treatment of complicated urinary tract infections and the latter for complicated infections within the abdominal cavity. Cefiderocol, a new broad-spectrum cephalosporin, is also an attractive alternative. Our study assessed the drug susceptibility of 60 strains of NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae*. Due to the high toxicity of colistin and increasing resistance, new antibiotics are useful alternatives in treating infections.

Our study demonstrated the highest sensitivity of 100% for cefiderocol, eravacycline, tigecycline, and a combination of ceftazidime/avibactam with aztreonam. When B-lactamase inhibitors (BLI) are combined with known B-lactams, they demonstrate excellent activity against MBLs. Avibactam forms a stable and hydrolysis-resistant complex with the β-lactamase molecule, causing inhibition of β-lactamases of classes A, B, and partially D (according to Ambler's classification), including β-lactamases with a highly extended spectrum of activity (KPC and OXA-38), as well as the chromosomal cephalosporinase AmpC (Behzadi et al., 2020). Due to the narrow indications for using eravacycline, ceftazidime/avibactam and aztreonam are the drugs of choice for bacteremia or pneumonia (Zhanel et al., 2016; Falcone et al., 2021; Sanz Herrero, 2022; Brauncajs et al., 2023). In July 2023, Mark G. Wise reported data on the evaluation of the *in vitro* activity of aztreonam/avibactam, a new antibiotic, against *Enterobacteriales* isolates. In total, 24,937 isolates from 27 countries were assessed. Aztreonam/avibactam inhibited 99.1% of CRE isolates (European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing, 2023). The study demonstrated 100% effectiveness of ceftazidime/avibactam in combination with aztreonam. The advantage of this combination of antibiotics is their synergism of action and the ease of determining drug susceptibility using the “strip-stacking” method. The results of this study suggest that most clinical laboratories, using routinely applied methods, can perform the sensitivity determination for combinations of two drugs.

“Strip-stacking” method is relatively easy to perform, fast and shows high correlation with the reference method of microdilution in broth (Khan et al., 2021). In our study, all isolates were sensitive to cefiderocol, but one exhibited borderline susceptibility (MIC = 2 µg/mL). In the latest update of the IDSA guidance, cefiderocol and CAZ/



AVI plus AZT are recommended antibiotic for treating NDM-producing *Enterobacteriales* with (Tamma et al., 2023).

In the Phase III, open-label study (CREDIBLE-CR), an elevated all-cause mortality rate was demonstrated in patients treated with

cefiderocol for infections caused by carbapenem-resistant Gram-negative bacilli compared to patients treated with the best available therapy, which was based on colistin (34% vs. 18%; Bassetti et al., 2021). Mortality difference was recorded for infections of *Acinetobacter*

TABLE 3 Number of susceptible isolates, MIC range, MIC 50, MIC 90 ($\mu\text{g/ml}$) values of the tested antibiotics.

Antibiotic	No of sensitive strains (%)	MIC range [$\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$]	MIC50	MIC90
CDR	60 (100)	0.16–2	0.19	0.5
ERV (EUCAST)	60 (100)	0.094–2	0.38	1
ERV (FDA)	44 (73)	0.094–0.5	0.38	0.5
PLZ	47 (78)	0.38–1	0.75	0.75
TIG	60 (100)	0.25–1.5	0.5	1.5
FOS (MTS™) ^a	41 (68)	4–32	24	32
FOS (AD FOSF*) ^b	50 (83)	4–32	16	32
CAZ/AVI	0 (0)	–	–	–
AZT	15 (25)	0.094–0.75	0.38	0.5
CAZ/AVI + AZT	60 (100)	0.94–1	0.19	0.5

The interpretation criteria or the susceptibility testing method used are given in brackets. ^aDetermination by the gradient strip method. ^bDetermination by the reference microdilution method in agar using a commercial test AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256 (Liofilchem, Italy).

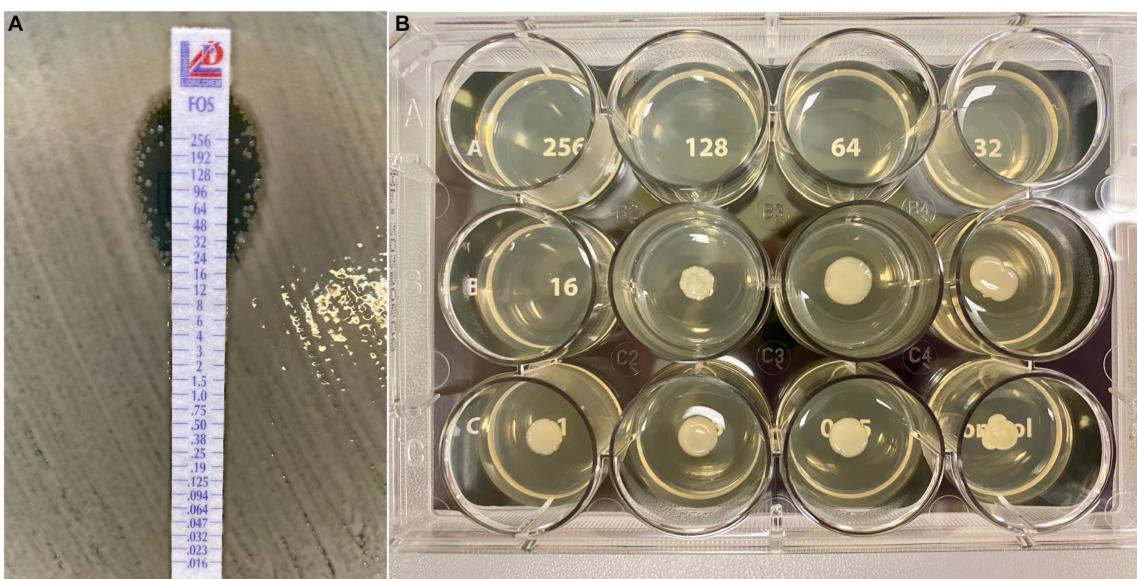


FIGURE 2

A comparison of susceptibility testing for fosfomycin with (A) gradient-strip based method (MIC Test Strip MTS™, Liofilchem, Italy) and with (B) reference agar dilution method (AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256, Liofilchem, Italy). In the case of the reference method, the interpretation of the MIC value for the tested strain is straightforward (MIC = 16), whereas the presence of micro and macro colonies within the inhibition zone, when using a gradient strip method, can pose challenges in determining the correct MIC value.

spp. and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and there was no difference in patients with no *Acinetobacter* spp. infection. In light of this evidence, the use of cefiderocol appears to be uncertain compared to therapy based on the combination of CAZ/AVI and AZT. There are still lacking od the clinical data, that would enable the analysis for comparing the effectiveness of treatment between both therapeutic regimens.

Eravacycline was approved in 2014 by the US FDA and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) to treat complicated intra-abdominal infections (Thakare et al., 2018; Scott, 2019). In Zou et al. (2023) demonstrated the antibacterial activity of eravacycline against CRE. In the study group, 48 strains of *E. coli* were carriers of the NDM gene, and two were KPC. The sensitivity to eravacycline in this group

was 92% (Zou et al., 2023). The susceptibility of the tested NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* strains to eravacycline varied depending on the interpretation criteria applied. The FDA's breakpoints are more stringent than those of EUCAST, where epidemiological cut-off values (ECOFF) have been proposed. Based on EUCAST, 100% of the tested strains showed susceptibility to eravacycline. By contrast, when interpreting the results according to FDA criteria, only 73% of the strains could be classified as susceptible to eravacycline.

Irrespective of the interpretation criteria, 100% sensitivity to tigecycline has been demonstrated. In the case of the EUCAST criteria, due to the lack of a breakpoint for *K. pneumoniae*, it was necessary to use the ECOFF value for interpretation, which is the same as the MIC

TABLE 4 Inter-group comparison of assessed variables (MIC value).

Antibiotic	Group I "B" (n = 20)			Group II "U" (n = 20)			Group III "P" (n = 20)			<i>p</i> value*
	Me	Q1	Q3	Me	Q1	Q3	Me	Q1	Q3	
CDR	0.25	0.19	0.25	0.25	0.19	0.50	0.19 ^a	0.09	0.19	0.002
ERAV	0.38	0.38	0.44	0.50	0.38	1	0.50	0.38	0.75	0.09
PLZ	0.63	0.50	0.88	0.75	0.75	1	0.75	0.50	128.50	0.36
TIG	0.50	0.44	0.75	0.75	0.63	1	0.50	0.50	0.88	0.06
FOS (MTSTM) ^a	32	24	256	32	16	256	24	24	32	0.47
FOS (AD FOSF*) ^b	32	16	64	8 ^c	8	24	16	8	32	0.014
CAZ/AVI+AZT	0.25	0.16	0.25	0.13 ^d	0.13	0.19	0.25	0.19	0.25	0.004

Group I "B", strains isolated from blood; Group II "U", strains isolated from urine; Group III "P", strains isolated from bronchoalveolar lavage/tracheal aspirate; Me, median; Q1, first quartile; Q3, third quartile. *Kruskal–Wallis test. ^aDetermination by the gradient strip method. ^bDetermination by the reference microdilution method in agar using a commercial test AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256 (Liofilchem, Italy). ^cStatistically significantly lower result compared to group I (*post-hoc* test). ^dThe statistically significant lowest result compared to the other two groups (*post-hoc* test). Bold values indicate statistically significant values.

adopted by the FDA. However, tigecycline is a bacteriostatic antibiotic with the primary indication for intra-abdominal, skin, and soft tissue infections. High doses are required for nosocomial pneumonia, with an increased risk of toxicity, according to the latest information from the FDA (FDA Drug Safety Communication, 2017).

FDA approved in 2018 plazomicin, which is an aminoglycoside. Plazomicin is registered for the treatment of infections such as: urinary tract infections, including pyelonephritis, bloodstream infections (BSI), and ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP; Clark and Burgess, 2020). Plazomicin has a registration for two indications: complicated urinary tract infections in a phase 2 trial and EPIC trial and severe infections caused by CRE (BSI, hospital-acquired pneumonia, and VAP) in the CARE trial (Wagenlehner et al., 2019). Plazomicin received FDA approval with a black box warning for potential aminoglycoside class effects, including nephrotoxicity, ototoxicity, neuromuscular blockade, and risks during pregnancy (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2018). The balance between side effects and the benefits of antibiotic therapy with plazomicin underscores the drug's safety in comparison to traditional aminoglycosides. The reported renal toxicity is comparable to that induced by meropenem. While 3% of patients treated with plazomicin experienced renal function impairment, the renal damage associated with plazomicin is reversible. In a study, approximately 80% of patients demonstrated complete renal function at the discharge visit following treatment (Alfieri et al., 2022). In our study, we had 78% susceptibility to plazomicin.

Patients with severe infections caused by carbapenem-resistant *Enterobacteriales* who are susceptible to polymyxins, aminoglycosides, tigecycline, or fosfomycin can use intravenous fosfomycin for combined therapy, as suggested by ESCMID guidelines, or if antibiotics combined with β -lactam inhibitors are not available (Paul et al., 2022). This study demonstrated differences in intravenous fosfomycin sensitivity depending on the applied determination method, with 83% sensitivity for the reference method. These data align with reports from the global SENTRY surveillance program, where an 82.6% sensitivity to fosfomycin was shown among *K. pneumoniae* and *E. coli* strains producing carbapenemases (Flamm et al., 2019). In a study by Banerjee et al. (2017), the sensitivity among NDM strains was 92.9%, although it dates back to 2017 and utilized the disk diffusion method. Studies conducted in Poland between 2011 and 2020 revealed a lower sensitivity among carbapenemase-positive strains (55%; Mączyńska et al., 2021).

The critical factor in categorizing a strain into a specific sensitivity category is choosing the appropriate determination method. According to the recommendations, the quantitative agar dilution method is considered the reference method (European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing, 2023). Its advantages include ease of interpretation and high repeatability of the results. However, challenges lie in the time-consuming preparation of substrates, the potential for inaccurate drug dilution, and antibiotic inactivation due to high temperatures. Performing the determination using automated systems (BD Phoenix) or E-tests with a gradient diffusion method can result in distortion. One of the reasons for in the absence of comprehensive data on the level of resistance of strains to intravenous fosfomycin in relation to the local epidemiological situation, is the necessity for a simple and reliable method (Kowalska-Krochmal et al., 2022). Commercial kits (AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256, Liofilchem, Italy) significantly facilitate interpretation and leave no doubt about the sensitivity or resistance of the tested strain (Figure 2). In this study, a commercial test (AD Fosfomycin 0.25–256, Liofilchem, Italy) caused a change in the sensitivity category from resistant to sensitive for 12 strains. This undoubtedly resulted from the difficulty of interpreting the determination using the gradient diffusion method, in which numerous growth increments in the zone of inhibition make it impossible to read the MIC value unambiguously and instead lead to its overestimation. Therefore, using a commercial test is advantageous for fosfomycin, enabling its more frequent consideration in treating CPE infections. Statistically lower MIC values for fosfomycin obtained using the reference method confirm the necessity of employing the agar microdilution method to avoid false results. Similar findings have been presented in other literature reports (Croughs et al., 2022; Pereira et al., 2023).

4.1 Limitations of the study

The study was conducted in a single center and was based on *in vitro* evidence of antimicrobial activity, meaning that the effects of application on humans were not determined. The reported effects have not been confirmed in humans, and the number of cases and specimens is not representative of the entire population, which indicates the need for further studies.

5 Conclusion

The best therapeutic option for treating infections caused by carbapenemase-producing strains seems to be a combination of ceftazidime/avibactam with aztreonam. Due to the safety of using both drugs, cost effectiveness, and the broadest indications for use among the tested antibiotics, this therapy should be the first-line treatment for CPE infections. The second option, with 100% sensitivity of the tested strains, is cefiderocol, but it remains expensive with limited availability. Despite its high *in vitro* sensitivity, eravacycline has limited use due to narrow indications and is restricted only to complicated intra-abdominal infections. The finding of fosfomycin-resistant NDM-positive *K. pneumoniae* confirms the need to perform drug susceptibility testing using the reference agar microdilution method before implementing intravenous fosfomycin therapy. Nevertheless, a comprehensive evaluation of the efficacy of treating infections caused by NDM-producing *K. pneumoniae* strains should include not only *in vitro* susceptibility assessment but also an analysis of clinical cases.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Lower Silesian Medical Chamber, Poland (approval no. 2/BNR/2023). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

NS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. PL: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. JJ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis,

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Funding acquisition, Investigation, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. MF: Conceptualization, Data curation, Software, Writing – review & editing. MB: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. RD-W: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. UN: Formal analysis, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declare that no financial support was received for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The statistical analysis was conducted with the collaboration of the Regional Digital Medicine Centre at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław, Poland (Project No. 2023/ABM/02/00005 - 00; Medical Research Agency).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmicb.2024.1331628/full#supplementary-material>

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Supplementary Table 1.

Strain No.*	CDR		ERAV			PLZ		TIG		FOS (MTS™)		AD FOSF 0.25-256		CAZ/AVI		AZT		(CAZ/AVI+AZT) strip-stacking	
	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	EUCAST	FDA	MIC	CLSI	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	EUCAST	MIC	CLSI
1B	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.38	S	16	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
2B	0.016	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.38	S	16	S	16	S	256	R	0.25	S	0.25	S
3B	0.19	S	0.094	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	24	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
4B	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	256	R	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
5B	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	24	S	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
6B	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	48	R	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
7B	0.38	S	0.5	S	S	0.5	S	0.75	S	256	R	256	R	256	R	256	R	0.5	S
8B	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.38	S	0.5	S	32	S	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.38	S
9B	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	16	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
10B	0.38	S	1.5	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	256	R	64	R	256	R	0.75	S	1.0	S
11B	0.25	S	1	S	-	256	R	1	S	64	R	32	S	256	R	0.5	S	0.19	S
12B	0.25	S	0.25	S	S	0.5	S	0.38	S	32	S	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
13B	0.25	S	0.25	S	S	0.38	S	0.38	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
14B	0.25	S	0.25	S	S	0.38	S	0.5	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
15B	0.38	S	0.75	S	-	0.75	S	0.75	S	256	R	128	R	256	R	256	R	0.75	S
16B	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	256	R	0.38	S	48	R	32	S	256	R	0.5	S	0.25	S
17B	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	256	R	64	R	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
18B	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	32	S	128	R	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
19B	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	1	S	0.75	S	16	S	64	R	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
20B	0.5	S	1	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	256	R	32	S	256	R	0.5	S	0.25	S
1U	0.25	S	0.5	S	S	0.5	S	0.75	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
2U	0.25	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.75	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
3U	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.38	S	0.75	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
4U	0.19	S	0.5	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	24	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.094	S
5U	0.19	S	1.0	S	-	0.75	S	0.5	S	256	R	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
6U	0.38	S	1.0	S	-	0.75	S	1	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
7U	0.25	S	0.75	S	-	0.75	S	0.75	S	256	R	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
8U	2	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	16	S	4	S	256	R	256	R	0.094	S
9U	0.5	S	1.0	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	256	R	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.38	S
10U	0.125	S	1	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	256	R	64	S	256	R	256	R	0.5	S
11U	0.38	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	16	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
12U	0.75	S	0.094	S	S	0.75	S	0.25	S	16	S	8	S	256	R	0.19	S	0.125	S
13U	0.125	S	0.5	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
14U	0.5	S	2	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	16	S	16	S	256	R	0.25	S	0.19	S
15U	0.125	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	16	S	16	S	256	R	0.19	S	0.125	S

16U	0.25	S	0.5	S	S	1	S	0.75	S	24	S	8	S	256	R	0.19	S	0.094	S
17U	1.0	S	0.5	S	S	1	S	1	S	256	R	256	R	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
18U	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	24	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
19U	0.5	S	0.094	S	S	0.5	S	0.25	S	16	S	8	S	256	R	0.094	S	0.125	S
20U	0.25	S	1	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	256	R	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
1P	0.25	S	0.5	S	S	256	R	0.5	S	256	R	256	R	256	R	256	R	0.125	S
2P	0.25	S	0.5	S	S	0.5	S	0.75	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.094	S
3P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.094	S
4P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
5P	0.19	S	0.5	S	S	0.75	S	1	S	32	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
6P	0.125	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.38	S	24	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
7P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	24	S	32	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
8P	0.5	S	2	S	-	256	R	1	S	256	R	32	S	256	R	0.38	S	0.5	S
9P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	32	S	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
10P	0.19	S	1	S	-	0.5	S	0.5	S	48	R	16	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
11P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	256	R	256	R	256	R	256	R	0.38	S
12P	0.19	S	0.38	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	32	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
13P	0.25	S	1	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	32	S	32	S	256	R	0.5	S	0.5	S
14P	0.094	S	1	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	32	S	32	S	256	R	0.38	S	0.25	S
15P	0.125	S	1.5	S	-	256	R	1.5	S	24	S	32	S	256	R	0.5	S	0.5	S
16P	0.094	S	0.5	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	24	S	8	S	256	R	0.19	S	0.125	S
17P	0.094	S	0.38	S	S	0.75	S	0.75	S	4	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
18P	0.094	S	0.38	S	S	1	S	0.5	S	12	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.25	S
19P	0.094	S	0.5	S	S	0.75	S	0.5	S	6	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S
20P	0.094	S	0.5	S	S	0.5	S	0.5	S	16	S	8	S	256	R	256	R	0.19	S

* Strain identifier composed of a sequential number and a material symbol, with 'B' for blood, 'U' for urine, and 'P' for bronchoalveolar lavage fluid/tracheal aspirate.

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Article

Assessing the Interpretation of Molecular Test Results in the Diagnosis of Bloodstream Infections

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Abstract: A retrospective study at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław, Poland, assessed PCR testing alongside blood cultures to guide antimicrobial therapy decisions in hospitalized patients, to determine how much time the results of the molecular tests preceded conventional methods. Among 118 patients, *Staphylococcus aureus* (37%) and *Escherichia coli* (21%) were the most common bloodstream infection agents. Blood cultures utilized the BacT/ALERT 3D system, and molecular diagnostics were conducted using the FilmArray platform with the BIOFIRE BCID2 panel. Methicillin susceptibility was observed in 66% of *S. aureus* strains, while 26% of Gram-negative bacilli exhibited an ESBL phenotype. Therapeutic decisions based on molecular test results were often incorrect for *S. aureus* infections, particularly MSSA (64.5%), but generally accurate for Gram-negative bacilli. The median times from positive blood culture to BCID2 and pathogen identification/susceptibility were 10 h and 52 h, respectively. Molecular diagnostics facilitated faster initiation of appropriate antibiotic therapy, highlighting the need to educate medical staff on proper interpretation. Consulting within an antimicrobial stewardship program (ASP) could enhance the benefits of implementing molecular methods in bloodstream infection diagnostics.

Keywords: molecular diagnostic; bloodstream infections; sepsis; antimicrobial stewardship program; antibiotics



Citation: Ślabisz, N.; Leśnik, P.; Żybura-Wszoła, K.; Dudek-Wicher, R.; Nawrot, U.; Majda, J. Assessing the Interpretation of Molecular Test Results in the Diagnosis of Bloodstream Infections. *Diagnostics* **2024**, *14*, 915. <https://doi.org/10.3390/diagnostics14090915>

Academic Editor: Alessandro Russo

Received: 12 March 2024

Revised: 22 April 2024

Accepted: 26 April 2024

Published: 27 April 2024



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1. Introduction

Systemic infections in the form of bacteremia, sepsis, or septic shock are associated with high mortality rates, ranging from 25–80%. It is estimated that there are approximately 30 million cases of bloodstream infections (BSIs) and approximately 6 million deaths worldwide, every year [1,2]. According to European data, 1.2 million BSIs are registered annually [3]. It should be highlighted that these statistics may be significantly underestimated, due to the frequent lack of official reporting of cases. Due to the lack of official reporting, the number of sepsis cases in Poland does not reflect the actual situation and is assessed based only on epidemiological data from other European countries [4,5]. The prognosis and the course of the disease depend on many factors. The patient's age and comorbidities will constitute risk factors for a severe course of the infection, as will the virulence or antibiotic resistance of the microorganism itself [6]. Gram (+) bacteria cause more than 50% of all BSI cases; the main etiological factors include coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS), *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Enterococcus* spp. [1]. On the other hand, at least 30% of BSIs are

caused by Gram (–) microorganisms. These infections are associated with higher mortality rates (15–29%) related to the occurrence of antibiotic resistance [6]. The key element that increases the patient's chances of survival is the quick implementation of appropriate antibiotic therapy. Incorrect therapeutic decisions are associated with a five-fold reduction in survival among patients with sepsis. In the era of constantly increasing microbial resistance, it seems rational to use broad-spectrum empirical antibiotic therapy, which, on the one hand, guarantees therapeutic success but, on the other hand, has consequences such as post-antibiotic diarrhea of *Clostridioides difficile* etiology or resistant strain selection [7–9]. Swift identification of the causative pathogens and potential resistance markers in blood cultures is essential for administering optimal therapy promptly, thereby enhancing patient survival. Research indicates that any delay in providing appropriate antimicrobial therapy, whether due to prolonged time for pathogen identification or antimicrobial resistance, leads to heightened mortality rates [10]. Conventional culture of microorganisms from blood using automatic systems remains the gold standard for diagnosing BSIs. However, the main disadvantage of this method is the long waiting time for the final result. Depending on the analyzers owned by the microbiological laboratory, the time from obtaining a positive blood culture to the identification and determination of drug resistance in the microorganism constituting the etiological agent may range from 48–168 h [9,11]. The current IDSA (Infectious Diseases Society of America) guidelines advocate for incorporating rapid diagnostic testing into a comprehensive antimicrobial stewardship program (ASP). Implementing molecular biology methods into the diagnostic scheme of BSIs significantly reduces the time needed to make optimal therapeutic decisions [12]. According to the Shah et al. study, the median time to molecular test results was 21 h from a positive blood culture. The time to pathogen identification using MALDI-ToF, but not directly from the blood culture, was 42 h. Susceptibility was performed using Vitek2 (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France), and the median time to result was 49 h [13].

Systems using a positive blood culture for testing are often based on multiplex PCR (polymerase chain reaction) methods, which allow for the simultaneous detection of many species of microorganisms and resistance genes. The BCID2 (Blood Culture Identification Panel 2) (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France) septic panel enables the detection of 33 pathogens (26 species/genera of bacteria, seven species of yeast-like fungi) associated with BSIs, as well as the detection of ten antibiotic resistance genes, determining, among others, production of carbapenemases, extended-spectrum β-lactamases (ESBL), or methicillin resistance in staphylococci [14–16]. The meta-analysis conducted by Peri et al. assessing the BCID2 performance for pathogen identification and resistance markers detection, compared to culture methods, remains the gold standard in diagnosing BSIs. The combined specificity of the assay was outstanding (>97%) across most investigated target subgroups. Additionally, the combined sensitivity was notably high for the primary determinants of bloodstream infection, including *Enterobacteriales* (98.2%), *S. aureus* (96.0%), *Streptococcus* spp. (96.7%), *P. aeruginosa* (92.7%), and *E. faecalis* (92.3%), as well as *bla_{CTX-M}* (94.9%), carbapenemases (94.9%), and *mecA/C* and MREJ (93.9%). The potential inconsistency between genotypic and phenotypic resistance is a limitation of the BCID test's applications. Situations can arise where, despite the presence of a resistance gene, it may not be expressed, resulting in the strain being phenotypically susceptible to a particular antibiotic. Conversely, the strain's resistance may stem from different resistance genes than those detected in the BCID2 panel. However, there are situations in which obtaining a specific result should not raise doubts regarding further therapeutic decisions. An example of this could be the detection of *mecA/C* + MREJ in *Staphylococcus aureus*, where the association between the presence of the resistance gene and phenotypic resistance is clear and very well documented [16]. Therefore, many publications indicate that expensive molecular tests can bring tangible benefits, including financial ones, only when these results will be consulted within the team for the hospital antibiotic policy program and appropriate therapeutic decisions will be quickly implemented. The correct interpretation of PCR test results requires knowledge of bacterial genes that determine antibiotic resistance and the

possibility of resistance resulting from mechanisms other than those genetically encoded. An essential role in the team for hospital antibiotic policy is played by a clinical microbiologist who, having the appropriate knowledge, can correctly assess the obtained result and communicate their interpretation to clinical teams [9,12,17,18].

The study aimed to assess the ability to interpret the results of PCR tests performed on positive blood cultures, based on therapeutic decisions made by clinicians, and the potential impact of antibiotic therapy management.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The results of PCR tests from positive blood cultures and the disease history of adult patients hospitalized in 2021–2022 at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital, a 500-bed medical center in Wroclaw, Poland, were retrospectively assessed. The inclusion criteria were: age above 18 years, first episode of positive blood culture during hospitalization, and absence of consultation regarding the molecular test results within the hospital antimicrobial stewardship. The exclusion criteria were: positive blood culture was a control culture, patient's demise before the identification, and antibiotic susceptibility test results from routine blood culture. The study's retrospective nature will allow for the evaluation of molecular test interpretation assessments in relation to studies conducted in subsequent years. Such a comparison will enable an evaluation of the effectiveness of the molecular methods training conducted in the meantime for the diagnosis of bloodstream infections. Among patients enrolled in the study, blood culture was performed as part of routine microbiological diagnostics, and then, after obtaining a positive culture using automatic systems, the study was extended to include molecular diagnostics. Information on the empirical antibiotic therapy used and its possible changes after obtaining the PCR test result was obtained from the patient's medical history in the electronic medical records (EMR) system. All analyzed results were not consulted within the hospital's antimicrobial stewardship, and their interpretation and further therapeutic decisions were made only by the attending physician.

2.2. Blood Culture

Blood culture was performed in an automated BacT/ALERT 3D instrument system (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France) at 37 °C as part of a 5-day incubation protocol. The patient's blood was inoculated into culture media containing an antibiotic inactivator dedicated to the BacT/ALERT system (BacT/ALERT FN PLUS, BacT/ALERT FA PLUS (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France). The positive blood cultures were Gram-stained, then streaked onto Columbia Agar (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France), Chocolate agar (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France), and MacConkey (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France) for overnight incubation in 5% carbon dioxide at 37 °C. The VITEK-2 automated system (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France) was used for isolates identification and antimicrobial susceptibility testing.

2.3. Pathogen Identification and Susceptibility Testing

The identification and susceptibility testing of microorganisms cultured from the blood cultures were performed using the Vitek2 system (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France). The VITEK2 AST-N331 and AST-N332 panels were employed for testing the antibiotic susceptibility of Gram-negative bacilli, while AST-P643, AST-P644, and AST-ST01 were utilized for Gram-positive cocci. Additionally, AST-YS08 was utilized for fungi. The detection of carbapenemases was conducted using an immunochromatography test (RESIST-5 O.O.K.N.V, CorisBioConcept, Gembloux, Belgium). Susceptibility test results were interpreted based on the current criteria established by the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST) [19].

2.4. Molecular Test

A molecular study was conducted on the FilmArray platform (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France), using the BIOFIRE Blood Culture Identification Panel 2 (BCID2) (bioMérieux, Marcy l'Etoile, France) by the manufacturer's instructions provided in the leaflet. A positive blood

culture from the BacT/ALERT 3D system was used for the study. The BCID2 panel is a multiplexed nucleic acid test designed to detect and identify 33 targets associated with BSIs, including 11 Gram-positive bacteria (*Enterococcus faecalis*, *Enterococcus faecium*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Staphylococcus* spp., *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *Staphylococcus lugdunensis*, *Streptococcus* spp., *Streptococcus agalactiae*, *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Streptococcus pyogenes*), 15 Gram-negative bacteria (*Acinetobacter calcoaceticus-baumannii complex*, *Bacteroides fragilis*, *Enterobacteriales*, *Enterobacter cloacae* complex, *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella aerogenes*, *Klebsiella oxytoca*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae group*, *Proteus* spp., *Salmonella* spp., *Serratia marcescens*, *Haemophilus influenzae*, *Neisseria meningitidis*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia*) and seven yeast species (*Candida albicans*, *Candida auris*, *Candida glabrata*, *Candida krusei*, *Candida parapsilosis*, *Candida tropicalis*, *Cryptococcus neoformans/gattii*). The BCID2 panel includes tests designed for the targeted identification of various genetic markers associated with resistance to multiple antibiotic classes present in specific Gram-positive (*mecA/C*, *mecA/C*, and MREJ, and *vanA/B*) or Gram-negative bacteria (CTX-M, IMP, KPC, *mcr-1*, NDM, OXA-48, and VIM). Reports on antimicrobial resistance (AMR) genes are only provided if a relevant bacterium is detected. Table 1 summarizes the resistance markers possible to detect using the BCID2 panel, along with the expected resistance phenotype.

Table 1. Resistance markers possible to detect with the BCID2 test.

Gram-Positive Resistance Markers	
Gene	Resistance Phenotype
<i>vanA/B</i>	Marker for vancomycin-resistant Enterococcus (VRE).
<i>mecA/C</i> <i>mecA/C + MREJ</i>	<i>mecA/C</i> is a marker for methicillin resistance in non- <i>S. aureus</i> <i>Staphylococci</i> (MRCoNS) but reported only in <i>Staphylococcus epidermidis</i> and <i>Staphylococcus lugdunensis</i> . MREJ is only evaluated in <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> and when detected with <i>mecA/C</i> , is specific for MRSA.
Gram-Negative Resistance Markers	
Gene	Resistance Phenotype
CTX-M (<i>bla</i> _{CTX-M})	The marker for the most common extended spectrum β-lactamase (ESBL) frequently identified in gram-negative pathogens, especially <i>Escherichia coli</i> and <i>Klebsiella</i> spp., is outlined. ESBLs are enzymes capable of hydrolyzing extended-spectrum cephalosporins (e.g., ceftriaxone, cefepime) and piperacilllin/tazobactam. It is important to note that a negative result does not necessarily exclude the presence of other ESBL enzymes or alternative beta-lactamases.
KPC (<i>bla</i> _{KPC}) NDM (<i>bla</i> _{NDM}), VIM (<i>bla</i> _{VIM}), IMP (<i>bla</i> _{IMP}) OXA-48 like (<i>bla</i> _{OXA-48-like})	Markers for carbapenemases producing Gram-negative bacilli.
<i>mcr-1</i>	Marker for colistin resistance

2.5. Assessment of Therapeutic Decisions

At the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław, Poland, there is an antimicrobial stewardship team responsible for hospital antibiotic policy which issued recommendations regarding empirical and targeted therapy for bloodstream infections, based on national recommendations regarding the hospital's antibiotic list [20], treatment of nosocomial infections [21], and the local epidemiological situation developed from microbiological maps and cumulative antibiograms. Based on these recommendations, a retrospective assessment was made of the correctness of therapeutic decisions made by attending physicians after receiving BCID2 test results. Table 2 details possible BCID2 results, and the preferred therapeutic decisions made depending on the species/resistance marker detected by the molecular test. After obtaining the molecular test result, the therapeutic decisions were considered correct if the treatment applied matched the data in Table 2. Incorrect therapeutic decisions included, for example, failure to de-escalate empirical therapy from carbapenem to third-generation cephalosporin

in the case of detecting Gram-negative bacilli without resistance genes, and vice versa in the case of detecting the *bla*_{CTX-M} gene, where the incorrect decision was the failure to escalate therapy to carbapenem. If *Staphylococcus aureus* without the *mecA/C* + MREJ gene has been detected in the BCID2 test, only cloxacillin was considered a valid therapeutic decision, except for patients with a history of penicillin allergy.

Table 2. Preferred therapeutic decisions based on possible BCID2 test results.

Microorganism	Possible BCID2 Result	Preferred Therapy	
<i>Enterococcus faecalis</i>	<i>vanA/B</i>	not detected	ampicillin
		detected	ampicillin
<i>Enterococcus faecium</i>	<i>vanA/B</i>	not detected	vancomycin
		detected	linezolid
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	<i>mecA/C</i> + MREJ	not detected	cloxacillin
		detected	vancomycin
CoNS	<i>mecA/C</i>	not detected	cloxacillin
		detected	vancomycin
<i>Streptococcus pneumoniae</i>	-		III generation cephalosporin
<i>Listeria monocytogenes</i>	-		ampicillin
<i>Streptococcus pyogenes</i>	-		penicillin
<i>Streptococcus agalactiae</i>	-		penicillin
<i>Enterobacteriales orders only</i> or <i>Enterobacter cloacae complex</i> <i>Klebsiella (Enterobacter) aerogenes</i> <i>Serratia marcescens</i>	CTX-M	not detected	cefepime
		detected	meropenem
	KPC	detected	ceftazidime/avibactam
	IMP	detected	
	NDM	detected	colistin + aminoglycoside
	VIM	detected	
<i>Escherichia coli</i> <i>Klebsiella pneumoniae group</i> <i>Klebsiella oxytoca</i> <i>Proteus</i> spp. <i>Salmonella</i> spp.	OXA-48	detected	ceftazidime/avibactam
		not detected	III generation cephalosporin
	CTX-M	detected	meropenem
		detected	ceftazidime/avibactam
	KPC	detected	
	IMP	detected	
<i>Acinetobacter baumannii</i> <i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i> <i>Stenotrophomonas maltophilia</i> <i>Bacteroides fragilis</i> <i>Haemophilus influenzae</i> <i>Neisseria meningitidis</i>	NDM	detected	colistin + aminoglycoside
		detected	
	VIM	detected	
		detected	
	OXA-48	detected	ceftazidime/avibactam
	-		colistin + meropenem
<i>Candida</i> spp.	-		ceftazidime
	-		trimethoprim/sulfamethoxazole
<i>Cryptococcus neoformans</i>	-		metronidazole
	-		III generation cephalosporin
<i>Neisseria meningitidis</i>	-		III generation cephalosporin
	-		echinocandin alternative: fluconazole as an initial therapy in selected patients who are not critically ill, and who are considered unlikely to have a fluconazole-resistant <i>Candida</i> species

CoNS—coagulase-negative staphylococci.

2.6. Statistics

The Chi-square test or Fisher's exact test was used to conduct statistical analyses, depending on the fulfillment of assumptions. In cases where the number of categories was large relative to the total number of observations, resulting in many categories having very few cases, no test was applied. Adopting such an approach was due to the risk of insufficient statistical power of each available test to detect differences and the potential impact on the credibility of the analysis results.

2.7. Ethics

The study protocol was approved by the Bioethics Committee of the Military Medical Chamber (resolution no. 240/22). The study was carried out according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and good clinical practice.

3. Results

A total of 118 patients (45 women, 73 men) with a median age of 76 years were enrolled in the study. Patients were hospitalized in observation, surgical, and intensive care units. The most examined patients were treated in the Department of Internal Medicine (Figure 1).

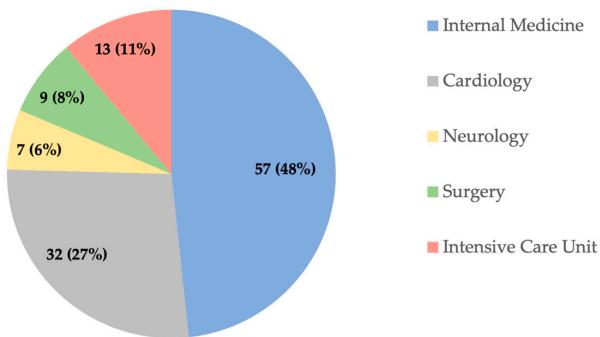


Figure 1. Hospital wards where the examined patients were hospitalized.

The species structure of isolated microorganisms showed that the most common etiological agents of BSIs in the studied group/population were *Staphylococcus aureus* (37%) and *Escherichia coli* (21%) (Figure 2).

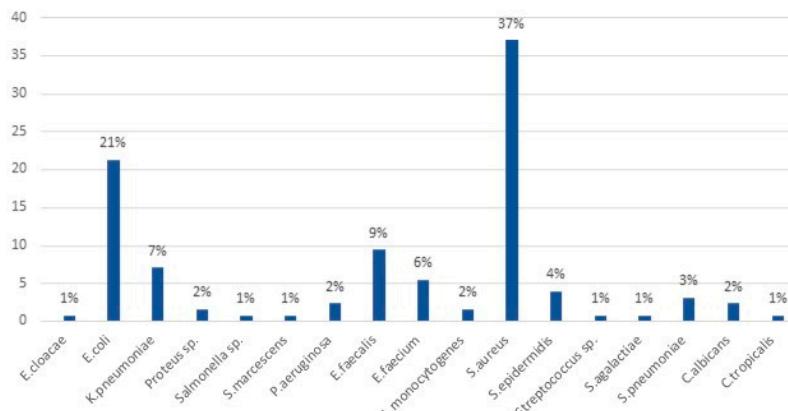


Figure 2. Species structure of isolated microorganisms.

In the case of *S. aureus*, 66% of the strains were sensitive to methicillin (MSSA), while among 47 isolates of Gram (–) bacilli, the ESBL mechanism was detected in 11 strains (26%), three of which also had genes responsible for producing New Delhi metallo-β-lactamases (NDM). All detected antibiotic resistance markers coincided with the phenotypic drugs susceptibility to the cultured microorganisms. Routine culture, conducted in parallel with molecular testing, also showed 100% consistency in the detected microbial species. In detecting *Staphylococcus aureus* in the blood of the examined patient using the molecular method, more than half of the therapeutic decisions made after obtaining the results were incorrect. This percentage was statistically higher (64.5%) if the etiological agent of the BSI was MSSA, compared to 25% of incorrect decisions in detecting the MRSA strain ($p = 0.01$). After receiving the PCR test result, the treatment was generally correct if the etiological factor was Gram (–) bacilli, such as *Escherichia coli* or *Klebsiella pneumoniae* (63 and 67% of correct therapeutic decisions, respectively). In the group where Gram (–) bacilli were the etiological factor of the BSI, statistical significance could not be demonstrated

regarding the correctness of therapeutic decision, depending on whether antibiotic resistance genes were detected or not ($p > 0.05$). Bloodstream infections caused by *Enterococcus* spp. accounted for approximately 16% (*Enterococcus faecalis*, 9%; *Enterococcus faecium*, 6%). A more favorable analysis result from the treatment strategy undertaken was demonstrated in the case of the isolation of *E. faecium*. *Streptococcus pneumoniae* was the etiological factor of the BSI in only four patients. In three patients included in the study, the presence of yeast-like fungi (*Candida albicans*) was detected in the molecular test, so all these patients received antifungal treatment immediately after obtaining the PCR test result. Statistical analysis for Gram (+) microorganisms, other than *Staphylococcus aureus*, was not possible due to a small sample size. The molecular test results have triggered a change in the previously implemented empirical treatment in 54 patients (46%). The antibiotic therapy was corrected after obtaining the final blood culture report, including identifying the microorganism and its drug susceptibility, in 28 patients (24%). Median time from positive blood culture to BCID2 and pathogen identification/susceptibility was 10 h (Q1–Q3, 8–12 h) and 52 h (Q1–Q3, 38–60 h), respectively.

The detailed compilation of detected microorganisms, their resistance mechanisms, and therapeutic decisions is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Analysis of isolated microorganisms and therapeutic decisions made after obtaining the molecular test result. A. Change of empiric therapy after obtaining molecular test results. B. Change of empiric therapy after obtaining the culture results.

	Number of Cases <i>n</i>	A <i>n</i> (%)	B <i>n</i> (%)	Therapeutic Decision after Obtaining Molecular Test Results		<i>p</i> Value
				Correct <i>n</i> (%)	Incorrect <i>n</i> (%)	
<i>S. aureus</i>	47	23(49)	16(34)	23(49)	24(51)	-
MSSA	31	15(48)	14(45)	11(35.5)	20(64.5)	0.01
MRSA	16	11(69)	2(12.5)	12(75)	4(25)	
<i>E. coli</i>	27	6(22)	2(7)	17(63)	10(37)	-
CTX-M (+)	3	1(33)	1(33)	2(67)	1(33)	
No resistance gene detected	24	5(21)	1(4)	15(62.5)	9(37.5)	0.88
<i>K. pneumoniae</i>	9	4(44)	1(11)	6(67)	3(33)	-
CTX-M (+)	4	2(50)	1(25)	3(75)	1(25)	
CTX-M (+) NDM (+)	3	1(33)	0	2(67)	1(33)	0.83
No resistance gene detected	2	1(50)	0	1(50)	1(50)	
<i>P. aeruginosa</i>	3	2(67)	0	0	3(100)	-
<i>Proteus</i> spp.	2	1(50)	0	1(50)	1(50)	-
<i>Salmonella</i> spp.	1	0	0	1(100)	0	-
<i>S. marcescens</i>	1	1(100)	0	0	1(100)	-
Gram (−) bacilli	43	37(86)	19(44)	25(58)	18(42)	-
CTX-M (+)	7	3(43)	2(29)	5(71)	2(29)	
CTX-M (+) NDM (+)	3	1(33)	0	2(67)	1(33)	0.68
No resistance gene detected	33	10(30)	1(3)	18(55)	15(45)	
<i>E. faecalis</i>	12	9(75)	5(42)	7(58)	5(42)	-
<i>E. faecium</i>	7	5(71)	4(57)	5(71)	2(29)	-
<i>S. epidermidis</i>	5		1(20)			-
MRCNS	5	4(80)		3(60)	2(40)	
<i>S. pneumoniae</i>	4	0	1(25)	3(75)	1(25)	-
<i>C. albicans</i>	3	3(100)	1(33)	3(100)	0	-
<i>L. monocytogenes</i>	2	1(50)	0	1(50)	1(50)	-
<i>S. agalactiae</i>	1	0	0	0	1(100)	-
<i>Streptococcus</i> spp.	1	0	0	1(100)	0	-

MSSA, methicillin-sensitive *Staphylococcus aureus*; MRSA, methicillin-resistance *Staphylococcus aureus*; CTX-M, extended-spectrum β-lactamases (ESBL); NDM, New Delhi metallo-β-lactamases; MRCNS, methicillin-resistant coagulase-negative staphylococci.

4. Discussion

Molecular methods are increasingly becoming an element of routine microbiological diagnostics and have recently revolutionized the approach to managing bloodstream infections. Automation has simplified the PCR procedure, making advanced molecular biology techniques readily available for obtaining standardized results quickly. However, the interpretation of a test performed using the PCR method requires knowledge of the molecular patterns determining the occurrence of bacterial resistance to specific antibiotics [6,9,14,15,22]. Staphylococcal resistance to methicillin is acquired primarily through the *mecA* gene, which encodes a penicillin-binding protein (PBP2a). The *mecA* gene is transferred to the staphylococcal chromosomal cassette *mec* (SCCmec). The SCCmec cassette integrates into a specific region of the *Staphylococcus* spp. genome, which leads to the formation of MREJ (SCCmec right-end junction). Molecular determination of the area of this junction enables the identification of *S. aureus* MRSA. At the same time, the absence of the *mecA/C* gene will be synonymous with the occurrence of the MSSA phenotype [23,24]. In the case of *S. aureus*-caused BSIs, molecular testing may bring tangible results in the context of faster implementation of targeted antibiotic therapy and earlier abandonment of broad-spectrum empirical treatment.

This is particularly significant due to the high frequency of bloodstream infections (BSIs) caused by *Staphylococcus aureus* in this study. Similar results were obtained in a previous study regarding the etiology of bloodstream infections before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, where *S. aureus* was also the most common etiological agent of BSIs [25]. MSSA accounted for 66% of all detected *Staphylococcus aureus* and was simultaneously the most common etiological factor of BSIs in this study; however, clinicians often made incorrect interpretations of the obtained result and made inappropriate therapeutic decisions when this microorganism was detected. In a situation where, on one hand, we have very strong evidence indicating the presence of MSSA phenotype in the absence of *mecA/C* gene detection and, on the other hand, clear treatment guidelines for infections caused by methicillin-sensitive *Staphylococcus aureus*, the incorrect interpretation of molecular test results seems concerning. This may be due to the need for knowledge of the molecular basis of methicillin resistance in staphylococci. Additionally, it has been shown that it is much more difficult for doctors to decide on the de-escalation of broad-spectrum empirical therapy because of the fear of limiting antibiotic therapy to cloxacillin, i.e., antistaphylococcal penicillin, which should be the treatment of choice in the case of MSSA infections [26]. In cases where the *mecA/C* gene associated with the MRSA phenotype was detected, statistically clinicians less frequently made incorrect therapeutic decisions compared to with MSSA (25% vs. 64.5%; $p = 0.01$). On the one hand, this may be due to a more suggestive molecular test result prompting the physician to suspect an infection caused by a methicillin-resistant strain. On the other hand, it may also be attributed to the ease of making the decision to escalate antibiotic therapy, compared to its de-escalation. Half of the incorrect therapeutic decisions made regarding MSSA in this study were due to continuing empirically-initiated ceftriaxone therapy. In the case of five patients, empirical treatment with vancomycin was continued, and de-escalation to cloxacillin was only performed after receiving the susceptibility test results. A multicenter, retrospective study published in 2023, which analyzed 223 patients with MSSA bacteremia, of which 37 (16.6%) were treated with ceftriaxone, showed that such therapy was associated with a higher risk of treatment failure within 90 days compared to cefazolin or antistaphylococcal penicillin (cloxacillin) [27]. In turn, using glycopeptides to treat infections caused by MSSA is less effective and may even increase mortality [26,28]. The study performed by McDanel et al. showed that in patients with MSSA bloodstream infection, continuation of empirical treatment with vancomycin resulted in increased mortality compared to patients who received targeted beta-lactam antibiotic therapy [29]. The studies conducted by Wong et al. also confirmed these findings and demonstrated that empirical use of vancomycin in suspected *Staphylococcus aureus* infections is appropriate and does not increase mortality, provided that targeted therapy with cloxacillin or cefazolin is initiated within three days of

identifying the MSSA strain [30]. Considering the potential nephrotoxicity and reduced effectiveness of vancomycin against MSSA strains, it seems justified to reserve its use for the treatment of infections caused by MRSA [31].

When genes causing resistance to broad-spectrum cephalosporins (ESBL) or carbapenems were detected, optimal changes in antimicrobial treatment were more often made than when a strain without resistance mechanisms was detected. The most common mistake in the case of Gram (−) bacilli was the escalation of empirical therapy, and switching from ceftriaxone to piperacillin with tazobactam or meropenem in the absence of detection of genes responsible for multidrug resistance. This observation also confirms that doctors, in their daily clinical practice, make decisions about escalation rather than de-escalation of antibiotic therapy more easily. Infections of *Enterococcus* spp. etiology are also those in which the species of the detected microorganism strongly determines the appropriate antibiotic therapy. The treatment of choice for *E. faecalis* is ampicillin, while the isolation of *E. faecium* requires vancomycin [32]. In our study, more correct therapeutic decisions were observed if the etiological factor of placental infection was *E. faecium* than *E. faecalis* (71% vs. 58%). As with other microorganisms, the decision to de-escalate therapy to ampicillin was more difficult for the clinician, due to fear of treatment failure.

This analysis indicates a significant need for the possibility of consulting PCR test results within the hospital antimicrobial stewardship. At the same time, it emphasizes that only the correct interpretation of the obtained result can contribute to the limitation of broad-spectrum antibiotic use in therapy, which often causes post-antibiotic complications, such as diarrhea caused by *C. difficile*, and leads to the selection of resistant strains [9]. A study conducted in 2015 by Banerjee et al. showed that measurable benefits from using molecular methods in the diagnosis of BSIs could only be guaranteed by combining them with a hospital antibiotic policy program (ASP). The timing of de-escalation of empiric therapy was strongly dependent on the outcome of the consultation within the ASP. In the group of patients for which antibiotic therapy was intervened, de-escalation occurred on average 20 h (6–36 h) after obtaining a positive blood culture, compared to 39 h (19–56 h) in the control group (without the use of molecular methods), and 36 h (22–61 h) in the group in which the PCR test results were not consulted by the ASP [33].

5. Conclusions

In the era of constantly increasing microbial resistance, molecular diagnostic methods enabling earlier implementation of optimal therapeutic decisions should be used, in parallel with classic cultures, followed by identification and antibiogram of the microorganism constituting the etiological factor of the infection. Considering the frequency of bloodstream infections (BSIs) caused by *Staphylococcus aureus*, the 100% concordance of molecular test results with routine microbial culture, and the results of this observation, the conclusion should be drawn that only correct and conscious interpretation of molecular tests can have a measurable impact on the protection of antibiotics and the improvement of treatment effects. Due to the high rate of incorrect interpretations of molecular test results in this study, it seems that only consultation within an antimicrobial stewardship program enables full use of the potential of these tests. Additionally, it is necessary to continuously educate medical staff on the mechanisms that determine bacterial resistance to antibiotics and the principles of their rational use.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, N.S. and P.L.; methodology, N.S., K.Ż.-W. and J.M.; investigation, N.S., P.L., K.Ż.-W., R.D.-W., U.N. and J.M.; visualization, N.S., P.L., K.Ż.-W. and R.D.-W.; project administration, N.S., P.L., K.Ż.-W., R.D.-W., U.N. and J.M.; supervision, R.D.-W., U.N. and J.M.; writing—original draft, N.S., P.L. and K.Ż.-W.; writing—review and editing: N.S., P.L., K.Ż.-W., R.D.-W., U.N. and J.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Wroclaw Medical University statutory grant number SUBZ.D230.24.001.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of Military Medical Chamber, Poland (resolution no. 240/22, date of approval 29 July 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the first author Natalia Ślabisz upon request.

Acknowledgments: The statistical analysis was conducted with the collaboration of the Regional Digital Medicine Centre at the 4th Military Clinical Hospital in Wrocław, Poland (Project No. 2023/ABM/02/0005-00; Medical Research Agency).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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