Multiplex PCR assay for the identification of eight *Anopheles* species belonging to the Hyrcanus, Barbirostris, and Lindesayi groups (Diptera: Culicidae)

WooJun Bang

Kyungpook National University College of Natural Sciences <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3557-7646>

Heung-Chul Kim

Force Health Protection and Preventive Medicine, Medical Department Activity-Korea/65th Medical Brigade, Unit 15281, APO AP 96271, USA

Jihun Ryu

Kyungpook National University College of Natural Sciences

Hyeon Seung Lee

Kyungpook National University College of Natural Sciences

So Youn Lee

Kyungpook National University College of Natural Sciences

Myung Soon Kim

Force Health Protection and Preventive Medicine, Medical Department Activity-Korea/65th Medical Brigade, Unit 15281, APO AP 96271, USA

Sung Tae Chong

Force Health Protection and Preventive Medicine, Medical Department Activity-Korea/65th Medical Brigade, Unit 15281, APO AP 96271, USA

Terry A. Klein

Force Health Protection and Preventive Medicine, Medical Department Activity-Korea/65th Medical Brigade, Unit 15281, APO AP 96271, USA

Kwang Shik Choi (✉ ksc@knu.ac.kr)

Kyungpook National University

Methodology

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Abstract

Background

Genus *Anopheles* mosquitoes are the primary vectors of human malaria, which is a serious threat to public health worldwide. To reduce the spread of malaria and identify the malaria infection rates in mosquitoes, accurate species identification is needed. Malaria reemerged in 1993 in the Republic of Korea (ROK), with numbers peaking in 2004 before decreasing to current levels. Eight *Anopheles* species (*Anopheles sinensis*, *An. pullus*, *An. belenrae*, *An. lesteri*, *An. kleini*, *An. sineroides*, *An. koreicus*, and *An. lindesayi*) are distributed throughout Korea. Members of the *Anopheles* Hyrcanus Group currently cannot be identified morphologically. The other species of *Anopheles* can be identified morphologically, except when specimens are damaged in traps. The purpose of this study was to develop a rapid and accurate method for simultaneous molecular identification of the eight *Anopheles* species present in the ROK.

Methods

Anopheles spp. used in this study were collected near/in the demilitarized zone in the ROK, where most malaria cases are reported. DNA from 165 of the *Anopheles* specimens was used to develop a multiplex PCR assay. The internal transcribed spacer 2 (ITS2) region of each species was sequenced and analyzed for molecular identification.

Results

DNA from a total of 165 *Anopheles* specimens was identified to species using a multiplex diagnostic system. These included: 20 *An. sinensis*, 21 *An. koreicus*, 17 *An. lindesayi*, 25 *An. kleini*, 11 *An. lesteri*, 22 *An. sineroides*, 23 *An. belenrae*, and 26 *An. pullus*. Molecular weights determined by electrophoresis were 1112 bp for *An. sinensis*, 925 bp for *An. koreicus*, 650 bp for *An. lindesayi*, 527 bp for *An. kleini*, 436 bp for *An. lesteri*, 315 bp for *An. sineroides*, 260 bp for *An. belenrae*, and 157 bp for *An. pullus*.

Conclusion

A multiplex PCR assay was developed to identify *Anopheles* spp. distributed in the ROK. This method can be used to accurately identify *Anopheles* species that are difficult to identify morphologically to determine species distributions and malaria infection rates.

Background

Malaria has a major impact on global public health with more than 200 million people infected and about 400,000 deaths annually [1]. Most malaria is reported in Africa (93%), with the remainder reported in

Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, and South America (7%) [2]. Climate change and the expansion of cross-border trading may have contributed to recent increases in malaria risks worldwide [3, 4].

Members of the genus *Anopheles* are vectors of *Plasmodium* spp., the causative agent of malaria. *Plasmodium* spp. that are considered human pathogens include: *Plasmodium falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale*, *P. malariae*, and *P. knowlesi*, the later previously considered a monkey malaria [5]. In Korea, *P. vivax*, *P. falciparum*, and *P. malariae* were eradicated in 1979 by the National Malaria Eradication Service (NMES) of the Korean government [6], and the WHO declared the malaria free [7]. However, malaria reappeared in 1993 near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) in northern Gyeonggi province [8]. Except for imported malaria cases, only *P. vivax* is present in the ROK and, following its peak of > 4,000 cases in 2010, continues to be responsible for 300->500 cases annually [9–11].

There are eight *Anopheles* species (*An. sinensis*, *An. lesteri*, *An. pullus*, *An. kleini*, *An. sineroides*, and *An. belenrae* belonging to the *Anopheles* Hyrcanus Group; *An. koreicus* belonging to the *Anopheles* Barbirostris Group; and *An. lindesayi* belonging to the *Anopheles* Lindesayi Group) reported in the ROK [12–15]. Recently, three species (*An. lesteri* and *An. kleini*) were proposed to be the primary vectors of malaria in the ROK, while *An. sinensis* is considered a poor vector [15–18]. Recent evidence indicates that *An. pullus* and *An. belenrae* are poor to moderate vectors of malaria in the ROK (Ubalee, R., personal communication). While *An. sineroides* has been implicated as a malaria vector, its status is unknown. Although there are no records of malaria infections in *An. koreicus*, several members of the Barbirostris Group are primary vectors of malaria in Southeast Asia [19, 20]. While *An. lindesayi* has not been found positive for malaria in the ROK, it has been implicated as a vector of *P. malariae* in Sri Lanka [21]. Thus, accurate identification of *Anopheles* species to determine their distributions and malaria infection rates in order to develop vector control measures is needed in the ROK.

Accurate species identification and subsequent monitoring of *Anopheles* spp. is necessary to identify their geographic distributions, larval habitats, and population dynamics to manage or conduct epidemiological investigations that identify the most likely sites where infections occurred. Although scales on wings (wing patterns) and spots on legs are used as the primary key characters for species identification, it is extremely difficult if the characters are lost during collections [12, 22]. In addition, *An. sinensis*, *An. lesteri*, *An. kleini*, *An. belenrae*, and *An. pullus* are morphologically very similar and species cannot be identified using current morphological characters [13, 23–25]. Although a multiplex PCR assay to identify six species of the Hyrcanus Group was developed [26], molecular diagnostics for all eight *Anopheles* species in Korea had not yet been developed. In this study, we developed a new multiplex PCR assay to identify all of the *Anopheles* species simultaneously that are present in the ROK.

Methods

1. Sample collection

Eight species of *Anopheles* mosquitoes used in the study were collected at six sites in/near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) where most malaria infections are contracted: (1) NNSC (Neutral Nations

Supervisory Commission camp adjacent to the Panmunjeom, 37°57'17.19"N; 126°40'47.91"E); (2) Daeseongdong (village of approximately 200 residents inside the DMZ, 37°56'28.31"N; 126°40'37.38"E), (3) South Gate (South gate entrance to the DMZ), 37°56'03.53"N; 126°43'15.46"E), (4) Camp Bonifas (US Army installation, 37°55'55.25"N; 126°43'21.73"E), (5) Warrior Base (US Army training sites approximately 3 km from the south gate of DMZ), 37°55'03.96"N; 126°44'29.74"E), and (6) Dagmar North training area (37°58'29.85"N; 126°50'40.88"E). Mosquitoes were collected using Mosquito Magnets® (Woodstream Corp., Lancaster, PA, USA) (**Fig. 1**). Collected mosquitoes were identified morphologically to *Anopheles* spp. [22, 27] and then stored at -70°C until used.

2. Identification and primer design

Genomic DNA used in this study was extracted using the Chelex protocol [28]. Identification of six species (*An. sinensis*, *An. pullus*, *An. belenrae*, *An. lesteri*, *An. kleini*, and *An. sineroides*) was performed using a multiplex PCR assay diagnostic method [26]. The universal primers for the mitochondrial gene cytochrome c oxidase subunit 1 (COI) region (LC01490: 5'-GGT CAA ATC ATA AAG ATA TTG G-3'/ HCO2198: 5'-TAA ACT TCA GGG TGA CCA AAA AAT CA-3') were used as species identifiers for *An. koreicus* and *An. lindesayi* [29]. Each sample was sequenced by Macrogen (Macrogen Daejeon, Korea) and analyzed using BLAST.

Two pairs of universal primers (An-ITS2-U1; forward primer: 5'-ATC GAT GAA GAC CGC AGC TA-3'/ reverse primer: 5'-CAA CAC GAC TCC ATG GTA CG-3'; An-ITS2-U2; forward primer: 5'-AAC GGG AGA AGC TCA GCA C-3'/ reverse primer: 5'-GAC TTC TTG GTC CGT GTT TCA-3') were designed between the 5.8S and 28S regions of the ribosomal DNA (rDNA) to analyze the entire internal transcribed spacer 2 (ITS2) sequences for the eight *Anopheles* species (**Fig. 2**).

PCR amplification of the whole ITS2 region was conducted as follows. Each individual reaction mixture (25 µl) included: 0.2 mM each dNTP, 0.4 µM each primer, 1X PCR buffer, 1.5 mM MgCl₂, and 0.5 units *Taq* DNA polymerase (R001AM; TaKaRa, Shiga, Japan) with 1.0 µl genomic DNA extracted from an individual specimen. The PCR cycling conditions were as follows: denaturation at 94°C for 5 min followed by 35 cycles of denaturation at 94°C for 30s, annealing at 55°C for 40s, and extension at 72°C for 60s; and final extension at 72°C for 5 min. Each product was visualized on 1.5% (wt/vol) agarose gels stained with ethidium bromide (VWR Life Science, Radnor, PA, USA), and then sequenced in both directions by Macrogen. Sequence data were analyzed using Bioedit v7.2.6.1 [30] and deposited in the NCBI under the following accession numbers: *An. sinensis* – MW546412, MW546421; *An. pullus* - MW546424, MW546423; *An. lesteri* - MW546426; *An. sineroides* - MW546417, MW546414; *An. kleini* - MW546419, MW546415; *An. belenrae* - MW546422, MW546418; *An. koreicus* - MW546413, MW546416; *An. lindesayi* - MW546425, MW546420.

3. Multiplex PCR assay for eight *Anopheles* species

Table 1 PCR primers for the eight *Anopheles* species

Species	Universal forward primer (5'→3')	Reverse primer (5'→3')	Product length (bp)
	ATC GAT GAA GAC CGC AGC TA		
<i>Anopheles sinensis</i>		TAG GGT CAA GGC ATA CAG AAG G	1112
<i>Anopheles koreicus</i>		TAT CGT GGC CCT CGA CAG	925
<i>Anopheles lindesayi</i>		ACC ATC TAC TGC CTG AAC GTG	650
<i>Anopheles kleini</i>		TTT GTT GAT AAC TTG TAT CGT CCA TC	527
<i>Anopheles lesteri</i>		CAG TCT CTT GCA GCC CAT TC	436
<i>Anopheles sineroides</i>		CGC GCA CGC TCA GAT ATT	315
<i>Anopheles belenrae</i>		TGT CCT AGG CGG TTA TCA ACA	260
<i>Anopheles pullus</i>		CGG CGT AGT TTA TTG TGT ATA ACA TC	157

Universal forward and species-specific reverse primers were designed for the eight species of *Anopheles* present in the ROK. Reverse primers for the three species (*An. sinensis*, *An. koreicus*, and *An. lindesayi*) were designed using the 28S rDNA region, while primers for the remaining species were designed using the ITS2 region (**Table 1**). The multiplex PCR assay was conducted in a 25 µl reaction mixture containing 0.4 µM each primer, 1X PCR buffer, 0.2 mM each dNTP, 0.5 units *Taq* Hotstart DNA polymerase (R007A, TaKaRa), and 1.0 µl genomic DNA from an individual specimen. PCR amplification was performed under conditions of denaturation at 94 °C for 5 min; 35 cycles of denaturation at 94 °C for 30 s, annealing at 55 °C for 30 s, and extension at 72 °C for 2 min; and final extension at 72 °C for 5 min. The PCR products were visualized on ethidium-bromide–stained 2.0% (wt/vol) agarose gels (VWR Life Science).

Results And Discussion

1. Molecular species diagnosis

A total of 165 DNA samples extracted from individual *Anopheles* species were used: *An. sinensis* (20), *An. koreicus* (21), *An. lindesayi* (17), *An. kleini* (25), *An. lesteri* (11), *An. sineroides* (22), *An. belenrae* (23), and *An. pullus* (26). A gel showing the products of multiplex PCR assay separated by agarose gel electrophoresis for the eight species is shown in **Fig. 3** (1,112 bp for *An. sinensis*, 925 bp for *An. koreicus*, 650 bp for *An. lindesayi*, 527 bp for *An. kleini*, 436 bp for *An. lesteri*, 315 bp for *An. sineroides*, 260 bp for *An. belenrae* and 157 bp for *An. pullus*). This method allowed identification of all eight *Anopheles* spp., including *An. koreicus* and *An. lindesayi*, and is comparable to the current molecular diagnosis method applied to identify six *Anopheles* species belonging to members of the *Anopheles* Hyrcanus Group present in the ROK [26].

2. Accurate species identification for the vector control

In Africa and Southeast Asia, where malaria is widespread, multiplex PCR assays have been developed and used to identify species accurately and to investigate malaria vector distributions and infection rates [31-35]. Accurate species identification, using both morphological and molecular methods is important to confirm species identification and monitoring vector populations [36]. Several studies have described accurate species identification as a part of vector surveillance programs. In India, *An. minimus*, a primary malaria vector, was morphologically misidentified as *An. fluviatilis*, while each species was identified correctly using PCR of the ITS2 regions [37]. In South Africa, *An. vanedeni* also was reported as a new malaria vector during a malaria surveillance program using the ITS2 region for specific identification [38]. Molecular diagnostic methods have been used to monitor invasive species, e.g., *Aedes albopictus* and *Ae. aegypti*, to verify morphological identification of specimens, as well as screening for potential new invasive species in Europe [39]. These studies support the importance of accurate species identification for monitoring vector populations and distributions, as well as supporting pathogen surveillance programs.

3. Application of new diagnostic method

The eight *Anopheles* species present in Korea included in three groups (Hyrceanus Group, Barbirostris Group, and Lindesayi Group) can be identified based on a new multiplex molecular-based method. Morphological identification of these species is challenging, particularly in cases when legs or wing scales used as the primary identification characters are missing or damaged during collections. The method described here enables simple and accurate identification requiring only PCR of individual specimens followed by electrophoresis. It would also be useful to acquire geographic, habitat, and population distributions of *An. koreicus* and *An. lindesayi* that are less frequently collected. Since the reemergence of vivax, malaria in the ROK in 1993, most malaria cases have been attributed to exposure near the DMZ. Identification of species distributions and malaria infection rates would assist in understanding the malaria distribution pattern in the ROK, in addition to developing vector and malaria mitigation strategies. The annual distribution of *P. vivax* cases vary with environment factors that impact on mosquito population densities, which may be further impacted by climate change [40, 41]. Thus, continuous monitoring of malaria vectors is needed. The new multiplex ITS2-28S rDNA-based method eliminates the requirement for multiple PCR analyses and is useful for monitoring *Anopheles* spp. distributions and population densities in the ROK.

Conclusion

In this study, we developed a new molecular diagnostic method for the identification of eight *Anopheles* spp. present in the ROK. This multiplex PCR assay is a simple and accurate method to identify *Anopheles* spp. in the ROK and can be used as a surveillance tool for monitoring malaria vector population distributions in the ROK.

Declarations

Availability of data and materials

All data generated during this study are included in the article. Sequences used in this study are deposited in NCBI database (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/genbank/>) as follow accession numbers: MW546412, MW546421 MW546424 MW546423 MW546426 MW546417 MW546414 MW546419 MW546415 MW546422 MW546418 MW546413 MW546416 MW546425, MW546420.

Author's contributions

WJB developed the new diagnostics for the eight species of *Anopheles* spp. and drafted the manuscript. KSC and HCK designed the study. HCK, JR, HSL, SYL, MSK, STC and TAK collected the mosquitoes from the DMZ area and helped draft the manuscript. KSC helped draft the manuscript with analysis of the data. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Author details

¹School of Life Science, BK21 FOUR KNU Creative BioResearch Group, Kyungpook National University, Daegu 41566, Korea (Woo Jun Bang, Jihun Ryu, Hyeon Seung Lee, So Youn Lee, Kwang Shik Choi)

²Research Institute for Dokdo and Ulleungdo Island, Kyungpook National University, Daegu 41566, Republic of Korea (Woo Jun Bang, Jihun Ryu, Hyeon Seung Lee, So Youn Lee, Kwang Shik Choi)

³Force Health Protection and Preventive Medicine, Medical Department Activity-Korea/65th Medical Brigade, Unit 15281, APO AP 96271-5281, USA (Heung Chul Kim, Myung Soon Kim, Sung Tae Chong,

Terry A. Klein)

⁴ Research Institute for Phylogenomics and Evolution, Kyungpook National University, Daegu 41566, Republic of Korea (Kwang Shik Choi)

Corresponding author

Correspondence to Kwang Shik Choi.

Ethics declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Figures

Figure 1

Map of the northern part of Gyeonggi province denoting *Anopheles* collection sites at (1) NNSC (Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission camp adjacent to the Panmunjeom); (2) Daeseongdong (village of approximately 200 residents inside the DMZ), (3) South Gate (South gate entrance to the DMZ) (4) Camp Bonifas (US Army installation), (5) Warrior Base (US Army training area approximately 3 km from the south gate of DMZ), and (6) Dagmar Noth (US Army training area). Note: The designations employed and the presentation of the material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of Research Square concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. This map has been provided by the authors.

Figure 2

Schematic diagram showing positions of the two pairs of universal primers (An-ITS2-U1 and An-ITS2-U2) between 5.8S and 28S ribosomal DNA.

Figure 3

Representative results of agarose gel electrophoretic separation of multiplex PCR products. M: 100 bp molecular marker; lane 1, *An. pullus*; lane 2, *An. belenrae*; lane 3, *An. sineroides*; lane 4, *An. lesteri*; lane 5, *An. kleini*; lane 6, *An. lindesayi*; lane 7, *An. koreicus*; lane 8, *An. sinensis*; lane 9, negative control.