HLA haplotypes and differential regional mortality caused by COVID-19 in Brazil: an ecological study based on a large bone marrow donor bank dataset

Juliano André Boquett

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Fernanda Sales Luiz Vianna

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Nelson Jurandi Rosa Fagundes

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Lucas Schroeder

Unisinos: Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos

Marcia Barbian

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Marcelo Zagonel-Oliveira

Unisinos: Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos

Tiago Finger Andreis

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Luis Cristóvão de Moraes Sobrino Pôrto

UERJ: Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

José Artur Bogo Chies

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Lavinia Schuler-Faccini

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Patricia Ashton-Prolla

Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre

CLÉVIA ROSSET (✉ crosset@hcpa.edu.br)

Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1728-4770>

Short Report

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Abstract

The human leukocyte antigen (HLA) genotype may influence in immune responses during the course of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). In this ecological study, we collected HLA genotypes from 4,148,713 Brazilian individuals and compared to COVID-19 data. We found a positive significant correlation between the HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03 haplotype and COVID-19 mortality rate.

Introduction

Brazil surpassed 670,000 deaths due to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by SARS-CoV-2 (WHO, 2022). The mortality rates varied considerably among the Brazilian regions during the course of pandemics (CORONAVIRUS BRASIL, 2020). This variability could be partially explained by the patient clinical profile and unequal access to the health system in different regions (Li et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). In addition to the social and environmental conditions, genetic factors may also influence on susceptibility and immune response to SARS-CoV-2 infection. Many studies are investigating genetic factors that could influence on COVID-19 susceptibility and severity worldwide. Several of them have focused on the variability of the genetic complex of the classic human leukocyte antigen (HLA), a critical component of the antigen presentation pathway. Individuals with different HLA genotypes may trigger different immune responses against SARS-CoV-2 (Dendrou, Petersen, Rossjohn, & Fugger, 2018; Saghazadeh A, 2020). The HLA variability observed worldwide is accentuated in Brazil, since each Brazilian region has a particular admixture history and different genetic backgrounds (Gonzalez-Galarza et al., 2020).

In a recent review, Migliorini et al. (2021) showed that a few HLA alleles or haplotypes may have a protective effect or an increased susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection. However, these studies had a limited number of patients and the associated alleles varied depending on the population under investigation. Additionally, *in silico* studies have analyzed the binding affinity between the SARS-CoV-2 peptides and different HLA class I genotypes (Barquera et al., 2020; Kiyotani, Toyoshima, Nemoto, & Nakamura, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Tomita, Ikeda, Sato, & Sakagami, 2020). In Italy, two studies compared HLA allele prevalence retrieved through the Italian Bone-Marrow Donor Registry with the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 infections in the different geographical regions of the country. This strategy increases the number of analyzed individuals and could be very informative, even though the HLA genotypes are not obtained directly from COVID-19 patients (Correale et al., 2020; Pisanti et al., 2020).

The diverse results obtained from HLA and COVID-19 studies highlight the need for additional analyses in different populations. In the present study, we investigated a large sample of HLA haplotypes from all Brazilian states retrieved from The Brazilian Voluntary Bone Marrow Donors Registry (REDOME, *Registro de Doadores de Medula Óssea*), the third largest bone marrow donors bank in the world, and compared to COVID-19 data in the correspondent region.

Materials And Methods

HLA data was retrieved from a dataset composed by 4,148,713 individuals, who registered at REDOME until September, 2017. This registry includes donors' city of residence and HLA-A, -B, and -DRB1 genotypes at allelic resolution level. Donors came from recruitment centers distributed throughout the country and their DNA was genotyped in Health Ministry accredited Brazilian laboratories. The HLA dataset was subdivided according to state and city of residence (Brazilian territory is divided into 26 states and one Federal District). The study was approved by the Committee of Ethics in Research of Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Brazil.

COVID-19 number of cases and deaths were obtained from the epidemiological bulletins issued by State Health Secretariats via the Ministry of Health of Brazil (Fiocruz, 2022). The COVID-19 incidence and mortality coefficients were calculated for each state. Estimations of HLA allele and haplotype frequencies, and Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium (HWE) test were performed using the GENE [RATE] tools (Boquett et al., 2017; Buhler, Nunes, Nicoloso, Tiercy, & Sanchez-Mazas, 2012; Nunes, 2015). Map of COVID-19 mortality rates were generated in ArcGis v10.3. Spearman's correlation test between the five most frequent haplotypes in Brazil (Torres, da Silva Bouzas, Almada, de Sobrino Porto, & Abdelhay, 2017) *versus* COVID-19 mortality rate in the 26 states and the Federal District was performed using IBM SPSS software, Version 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). P-values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant. The Bonferroni's correction for multiple tests was applied for haplotype correlations ($\alpha_{\text{Bonf}} = 0.01$).

Results

The geographical distribution of the COVID-19 epidemic in Brazil in our analysis was as follows: the states with the highest incidence of COVID-19 cases registered until July 6th, 2022 were Espírito Santo, the Federal District and Roraima, respectively; while the states with the lowest incidence were Maranhão, Pará and Alagoas (Table 1). Regarding COVID-19 mortality, Rio de Janeiro, Mato Grosso and Rondônia had the highest rates, respectively, while the lowest mortality rates were observed in Maranhão, Bahia and Alagoas, respectively (Table 1, Figure 1).

HLA allele frequencies did not deviate from HWE expectations and were used to estimate the haplotypes. The five most frequent HLA-A~B~DRB1 haplotypes found in the analyzed population are presented in Table 2. The most frequent haplotype was HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03, with a frequency ranging from 1.2% in Pará, Maranhão and Amapá, states located in the North (Pará, Amapá) and Northeast (Maranhão) of the country, to 3.1% in Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, both states located in the South. Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina had a high outlier frequency for haplotypes #1 (HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03) and #3 (HLA-A*03~B*07~DRB1*15) (Figure 2).

Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated to test if the regional COVID-19 mortality correlated with any of the five most frequent haplotypes in Brazilian population. We found a strong and significant

correlation ($\rho = 0.687$, $P < 0.001$) between the haplotype HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03 frequency and COVID-19 mortality rates for the 26 states and the Federal District (Table 3). No significant correlation was found in the remaining haplotypes analyzed.

Discussion

Many studies have employed different approaches in investigating the role of the HLA system in COVID-19, such as *in silico* (Barquera *et al.*, 2020; Kiyotani *et al.*, 2020; Nguyen *et al.*, 2020; Tomita *et al.*, 2020), case-control (Kousathanas *et al.*, 2022; Langton *et al.*, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2020) and ecological (Correale *et al.*, 2020; Pisanti *et al.*, 2020). In this ecological study, we found a significant positive correlation between the HLA- A*01~B*08~DRB1*03 haplotype and COVID-19 mortality rates when analyzing data from the 26 states and the Federal District (Table 3). Pisanti *et al.* (2020) also found a significant correlation between the two most frequent haplotypes in the Italian population with both COVID-19 incidence and mortality using a similar ecological approach. In their study, the haplotype HLA-A*01:01g~B*08:01g~C*07:01g~DRB1*03:01g showed a positive correlation with both COVID-19 incidence and mortality.

In Brazil, we observed that the four most common HLA haplotypes had higher frequencies in the South region and lower frequencies in the North (Table 2). These regional differences reflect the different contributions of Native American, European, and African populations across the country after a long history of colonization and immigration (IBGE, 2020). This is the first study in the country evaluating HLA haplotype frequencies and COVID-19 mortality rates. A previous descriptive study in Brazil focused on HLA alleles retrieved from Brazilian exome databases and compared the frequency of these HLA alleles with populations that occupy the top 10 positions for most cases of COVID-19 and the five populations less affected by the disease (Secolin *et al.*, 2021). They found that the HLA alleles *HLA-DQB1*06:02* and *HLA-DRB1*15:01* were frequent in Brazil and in less affected populations.

Together with genetic and immune system variation, environmental and social disparities among Brazilian regions may contribute to the differential burden of COVID-19, affecting disproportionately individuals carrying genetic factors of susceptibility and/or the most vulnerable people regarding social assistance. As the number of reported cases depends on the number and type of diagnostic tests performed by each city and state, and with limited testing it is unlikely that asymptomatic subjects would have been diagnosed for SARS-CoV-2 infection, these numbers should be taken with caution. In this sense, the number of COVID-19 related deaths used in this study could be more reliable.

Distinguishing among genetic, social and environmental variability, though challenging, is essential for building an efficient way to prevent, control and understand the disease (Zhao *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, our study is an important initial step in the understanding of COVID-19 dispersion and behavior in Brazil. Overall, our analysis provided support for the association of HLA haplotype and a severe outcome from COVID-19. An important limitation of our study is that we used HLA data from bone marrow donors instead of directly genotyping individuals affected by COVID-19. However, this approach has some

advantages. Bone marrow donor registries usually include very large sample sizes and a wide geographic coverage, as illustrated by the REDOME registry. Ecological studies based on databases such as this one are a cost-effective and useful alternative for raising hypotheses, which could be tested in further studies with patients. Similar studies have been performed with REDOME and other diseases databases in Brazilian population (Boquett et al., 2018). In addition, because several countries maintain such large banks, statistically significant associations could reveal regions or populations in higher genetic risk for COVID-19, thus representing an additional tool for health policymakers in the fight against COVID-19.

Conclusions

In this ecological approach, we found a significant positive correlation between the HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03 haplotype and COVID-19 mortality rates when analyzing data from the Brazilian 26 states and the Federal District.

Declarations

Acknowledgments

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Statement of contribution for authors

JAB and CR conceived and designed the study; JAB and LS conducted the experiments; JAB, FSLV, NJRF, MB, MZO, TFA and LCMSP analyzed the data, participating in formal analysis and critical review; JAB, LSFCR, JABC, LSF, PAP and CR wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Tables

Table 1. Regional data relative to the impact of COVID-19 on the Brazilian population until July 6th, 2022.

State	Region	Cases/100,000 inhabitants	Deaths/100,000 inhabitants
Distrito Federal	CW	26613.95	385.81
Goiás	CW	21400.72	378.77
Mato Grosso	CW	21781.43	418.01
Mato Grosso do Sul	CW	19691.29	378.91
Alagoas	NE	9196.61	207.87
Bahia	NE	10657.9	201.26
Ceará	NE	13848.91	296.34
Maranhão	NE	6241.42	153.19
Paraíba	NE	15433.28	254.23
Pernambuco	NE	10260.47	227.64
Piauí	NE	11404.34	237.02
Rio Grande do Norte	NE	15014.35	234.23
Sergipe	NE	14304.63	274.3
Acre	NO	14277.17	224.16
Amapá	NO	18836.4	248.44
Amazonas	NO	13957.96	336.98
Pará	NO	9027.44	212.56
Rondônia	NO	23436.59	403.63
Roraima	NO	25859.62	341.11
Tocantins	NO	20400.84	262.1
Espírito Santo	SE	28007.49	357.43
Minas Gerais	SE	17191.25	292.28
Rio de Janeiro	SE	13641.74	427.45
São Paulo	SE	12430.68	369.86
Paraná	SO	22898.3	380.86
Rio Grande do Sul	SO	22421.23	351.05
Santa Catarina	SO	24827.46	304.21

CW: Central-West; NE: Northeast; NO: North; SE: Southeast; SO: South.

Table 2. Frequencies (%) of the five most common haplotypes observed in the Brazilian population.						
State	Region	#1 HLA-A*01~B*08 ~DRB1*03	#2 HLA-A*29~B*44 ~DRB1*07	#3 HLA-A*03~B*07 ~DRB1*15	#4 HLA-A*02~B*44 ~DRB1*04	#5 HLA-A*33~B*14 ~DRB1*01
Distrito Federal	CW	1,97	1,53	0,97	0,83	0,92
Goiás	CW	2,16	1,69	0,81	0,90	0,76
Mato Grosso	CW	2,13	1,38	0,95	0,87	0,80
Mato Grosso do Sul	CW	2,03	1,39	0,97	0,86	0,73
Alagoas	NE	1,71	1,29	0,98	0,95	0,93
Bahia	NE	1,50	1,19	0,77	0,87	0,82
Ceará	NE	1,73	1,55	0,86	0,75	0,85
Maranhão	NE	1,27	1,25	0,75	0,79	0,74
Paraíba	NE	1,53	1,49	1,21	1,01	0,80
Pernambuco	NE	1,39	1,28	0,96	0,82	0,91
Piauí	NE	1,52	1,38	0,90	0,77	0,85
Rio Grande do Norte	NE	1,71	1,42	0,90	1,17	0,62
Sergipe	NE	1,65	1,22	0,61	0,87	0,59
Acre	NO	1,67	1,41	0,81	0,76	0,72
Amazonas	NO	1,30	1,26	0,61	0,65	0,79
Amapá	NO	1,29	1,31	0,63	0,77	0,46
Pará	NO	1,26	1,29	0,68	0,76	0,60
Rondônia	NO	2,05	1,39	1,01	0,84	0,85
Roraima	NO	1,52	1,25	0,77	0,67	0,80
Tocantins	NO	1,61	1,58	0,87	0,82	0,75
Espírito Santo	SE	2,12	1,39	1,02	0,79	0,80
Minas Gerais	SE	2,11	1,65	0,89	0,96	0,85
Rio de Janeiro	SE	1,91	1,54	1,03	0,93	0,83
São Paulo	SE	2,18	1,46	0,93	0,74	0,83

Paraná	SO	2,69	1,39	1,27	0,75	0,79
Rio Grande do Sul	SO	3,16	1,64	1,48	0,98	0,61
Santa Catarina	SO	3,13	1,72	1,66	1,18	0,70
CW: Central-West; NE: Northeast; NO: North; SE: Southeast; SO: South.						

Table 3. Bivariate correlation analysis among regional haplotypes estimated frequency in the population and COVID-19 and mortality (N° deaths/100,000 inhabitants) in Brazilian states until July 6th, 2022

Haplotypes	<i>rho</i>	P
A*01~B*08~DRB1*03	0,687	0,0001*
A*29~B*44~DRB1*07	0,422	0,0284
A*03~B*07~DRB1*15	0,463	0,0149
A*02~B*44~DRB1*04	-0,002	0,9940
A*33~B*14~DRB1*01	0,157	0,4345

rho = Spearman Correlation Coefficient. *Remained significant after Bonferroni's correction.

Figures

A

B

Figure 1

COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in different Brazilian states until July 6th, 2022, and HLA-A*01~B*08~DRB1*03 haplotype frequency in the 26 Brazilian states and Federal District.

Figure 2

Box-and-whisker plots with the five most frequent HLA-A~B~DRB1 haplotypes in Brazil. AP: Amapá; RN: Rio Grande do Norte; RS: Rio Grande do Sul; SC Santa Catarina.

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