Biodegradation of oxytetracycline by *Pleurotus ostreatus* mycelium: a mycoremediation technique

Luciana Migliore\(^a\)*, Maurizio Fiori\(^b\), Anna Spadoni\(^a,c\), Emanuela Galli\(^c\)

\(^a\) Dept. Biology, Tor Vergata University, Via della Ricerca Scientifica, 00133 Rome, Italy
\(^b\) Dept. Veterinary Public Health and Food Safety, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Viale Regina Elena 299, 00161 Rome, Italy
\(^c\) Institute of Agro-Environment and Forest Biology, National Research Council, Research Area Rome 1, Via Salaria km 29.300, 00015 Monterotondo Rome, Italy

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**A B S T R A C T**

Oxytetracycline (OTC) is administered in high doses to livestock and enters the environmental compartments as a consequence of animal waste disposal. As a first step in setting up a useful mycoremediation technique, an OTC lab degradation test was performed in liquid medium using the ligninolytic fungus *Pleurotus ostreatus*. OTC disappearance in culture medium was clearly evident as early as the third day of exposure onwards, with an almost complete removal after 14 d. The drug removal was mediated by fungal absorption in the mycelia, where the OTC molecule underwent a degradation step, as demonstrated by mass spectrometry analyses. A putative degradation product, ADOTC (2-acetyl-2-decarboxamido-oxytetracycline) is proposed. Experimental conditions excluded OTC abiotic degradation; the degradation by extracellular laccase was also experimentally discarded.

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**1. Introduction**

Oxytetracycline (OTC) is an antimicrobial drug widely used in intensive farming to treat enteric and respiratory diseases [1,2]. Due to oral administration and its pharmacokinetic, OTC dosage is in the range of g kg\(^{-1}\) mediated feeds and it is found in animal waste at concentrations of mg kg\(^{-1}\) [3]. As a consequence of waste disposal, the drug enters into the environmental compartments (water, sediments, soil) and can contaminate trophic nets [4–6], determining carry over in food and negative effects on natural systems [7,8], including effects on the microbial community structure and selection of antibiotic-resistant strains [9–11].

To avoid the negative effects, drug degradation and/or removal are a possible solution that can be obtained by bioremediation techniques. Fungi have not extensively investigated for biotransformation of antibiotics [12]. Some of them have been applied in polycyclic aromatic compounds bioremediation and dyes decolorization [13–15]. Wen et al. [16,17] studied the degradation of tetracycline and OTC by crude ligninolytic enzymes (lignin peroxidase and manganese peroxidase) prepared from *Phanerochaete chrysosporium*, with positive results. Their studies were conducted in vitro and did not include tests on another important ligninolytic enzyme, the laccase, aplenty produced by white-rot fungi.

In a previous study, Galli et al. [18] utilized *P. ostreatus* SMR684 in mycoremediation experiments for the degradation of creosote components. This strain is known to produce laccase both in the presence of lignocellulosic substrates and constitutively, in some phases of its life cycle [19]. The aim of this study is to investigate the ability of the fungus *P. ostreatus* SMR684 to degrade OTC. To this end in a laboratory model, living mycelia were challenged with different OTC concentrations. A positive result could represent the first step of a mycoremediation technique on a pilot scale.

**2. Materials and methods**

2.1. Organism and culture conditions

*P. ostreatus* (Jacq.) P. Kumm. mycelium, strain SMR684, is stored in minimal growth at +5 °C in the Edible Saprophytic Mushrooms collection of IBAF–CNR, Rome, Italy. A small fraction of mycelium was grown for 2 d in a 250 mL Erlenmeyer flask containing 100 mL of a sterilized 3% malt extract liquid culture medium (Liofilchem s.r.l., Roseto, TE, Italy) on a rotary shaker (100 rpm), under controlled laboratory conditions at T = 25 ± 1 °C and Relative Humidity (RH) = 70 ± 5%.

Pre-inoculum culture was started by aseptically homogenizing the mycelium in an omni-mixer for 3 s and transferring 50 mL of mycelial suspension into a flask containing 500 mL of 3% malt extract. The mycelium grew in the controlled laboratory conditions for 3 d then aliquots of this culture were used as inocula.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +39 06 7259 5984; fax: +39 06 2023 500. E-mail address: luciana.migliore@uniroma2.it (L. Migliore).

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2.2. The experimental plan

The experimental plan was organized on 6 batches: (1) culture medium (3% malt extract); (2) culture medium + 50 μg mL⁻¹ OTC; (3) culture medium + 100 μg mL⁻¹ OTC; (4) culture medium + P. ostreatus; (5) culture medium + P. ostreatus + 50 μg mL⁻¹ OTC; (6) culture medium + P. ostreatus + 100 μg mL⁻¹ OTC. Batches from #1 to #4 are controls, #5 and #6 are test batches. Each batch was constituted by 18 Erlenmeyer flasks (3 replicates for each day of sampling). The entire experiment has been repeated three times.

A sterilized solution (0.2 μm filter) of OTC (Sigma, Milan) in deionised water was added to the test cultures up to the final concentrations in the culture media of 50 and 100 μg mL⁻¹. Aliquots of 6 mL of the pre-inoculum culture (corresponding to 14.4 mg of mycelium, dry weight, d.w.) were used as inocula.

All flasks were incubated at 25 ± 1 °C and 70 ± 5% RH. Samples of each batch were collected at the beginning of the trial (T0) and after 2 (T2), 3 (T3), 7 (T7), 10 (T10) and 14 d (T14). To avoid OTC photodegradation, flasks were entirely covered by aluminium sheets and all experimental procedures were performed under dark. Different samples were obtained: from #1 to 3 batches only culture media; from #4 to 6 both mycelia and culture media. Mycelia were separated from culture medium by gauze filtration. Culture media were collected and immediately stored at −20 °C until chemical and enzymatic analyses. Then mycelia were rinsed with distilled water, freeze dried, weighed and stored at room temperature until chemical analysis.

2.3. Enzymatic activity

2.3.1. Laccase in the culture medium

Culture medium aliquots of 2.5 mL from flasks of batch #4 and 6 were centrifugated at 9000 g for 20 min and 4 °C and the supernatant was used for the laccase assay. It was performed at 25 °C in 2.9 mL of 100 mM sodium acetate buffer, pH 4.5, containing 2 mM 2,6-dimethoxyphenol, plus 0.1 mL of the culture medium supernatant (3 mL final volume). The oxidation of 2,6-dimethoxyphenol was measured by spectrophotometry at 468 nm (ε = 49600 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹). Perkin-Elmer Lambda 3B spectrophotometer). One unit of laccase activity was defined as the amount of enzyme required to oxidise 1 μmol substrate min⁻¹ [20]. Results were analyzed by One-Way ANOVA.

2.3.2. Effect of purified laccase on OTC degradation

Direct OTC degradation by purified commercial laccase (from *Trametes versicolor*, 21.8 μg mL⁻¹, Sigma, Milan, Italy) was evaluated by incubating 50 or 100 μg mL⁻¹ OTC with laccase (0.1 U mL⁻¹ in 100 mM sodium acetate buffer, pH 4.5). Reaction was carried out under dark at 25 °C in a final volume of 20 mL in amber flask, under continuous stirring. Control test was performed on OTC and buffer. Degradation was evaluated periodically up to 96 h. OTC quantification was performed by direct injection of each sample in a LC–UV/DAD system (see Section 2.4.3).

2.4. Chemical analysis

2.4.1. Extraction

Mycelia were ground in a mortar, 100 mg d. w. were poured into a 50 mL Falcon tube added with 100 μL of a methanol solution of Doxycycline hyclate (DXC, Sigma, Milan, Italy) 100 μg mL⁻¹ and extracted twice with 10 mL of 0.05 M sodium acetate. After homogenization, sonication and mechanical agitation (15 min), the sample was centrifuged (5000 g, 5 min, room temperature) and the pooled supernatants were cleaned-up on Metal Chelate Affinity Chromatography (MCAC) columns. Culture medium from each sample was filtered through a 0.45 μm sterile membrane; 1 mL of filtered sample was added with 100 μL DXC methanol solution (100 μg mL⁻¹) and cleaned-up on MCAC columns.

![Fig. 1. Growth of *P. ostreatus* mycelium in control batch (green), 50 μg mL⁻¹ OTC (blue) and 100 μg mL⁻¹ OTC (red) exposed batches. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)](image)

2.4.2. Purification

MCAC columns were prepared by filling 15 mL chromatography glass columns with 1.5 mL of Chelating Sepharose Fast Flow (GE Healthcare, Uppsala, Sweden). The sorbent was washed with 2 mL water:ethanol (80:20) solution and 6 mL water, conditioned with 3 mL of 0.01 M CuSO₄ solution, then washed twice with 2 mL water. Columns were loaded and then washed with 2 mL of water, then 2 mL methanol and 2 mL water. Elution was achieved with the application of 3 mL McIlvaine buffer (pH 4.5). 20 μL eluate were injected into the HPLC–UV/DAD system.

In LC–MS analysis, 3 mL samples (in McIlvaine buffer) were concentrated with SPE (Solid-Phase Extraction) polymeric columns (Oasis HLB, 60 mg 3 mL, Waters), preconditioned with 3 mL methanol and 3 mL water. After sample loading the column was washed with 3 mL of water, then vacuum dried. Elution was achieved with the application of 3 mL methanol, sample were dried under nitrogen flow and reconstituted in 100 μL methanol. 20 μL sample were injected on the LC–ESI-MS system.

2.4.3. HPLC–UV/DAD analysis

An Agilent 1100 series HPLC system equipped with a RP X Terra MS C₈ column (5 μm, 2.1 mm × 150 mm) and photodiode array detector (set at 365 nm) was used. Mobile phases were: A, 1% acetic acid in water (v/v) and B, acetonitrile HPLC grade. Flow rate: 0.3 mL min⁻¹. Course gradient was: 0’–2.5’ 2% B, 2.5’–10.0’ 100% B, 10.0’–12.0’ 100% B, 12.0’–13.00’ 2% B, 13.0’–15.00’ 2% B. The estimated Limit of Detection (LOD) was 1 ppm.

2.4.4. LC–ESI-MS analysis

Liquid chromatography–electrospray ionization-mass spectrometry (LC–ESI-MS) analyses were performed with a Agilent 1100 series LC-MSD Trap mass spectrometer coupled to the HPLC system previously described, working at the same conditions. Analytes were detected using ESI in positive mode.

3. Results

3.1. Fungal growth

The growth of each experimental culture at different times is reported in Fig. 1 as mycelia dry weight. Both control and test
cultures showed active growth during the entire experimental period. After 14 d (T14) control cultures showed a 50-fold increase, from the initial 0.14 mg mL\(^{-1}\) of the inoculum to a final mean weight of 7.06 mg mL\(^{-1}\). The 50 µg mL\(^{-1}\) OTC culture reached the same final weight increase at T14, although weight is clearly lower than control until T10. Over the entire test the 100 µg mL\(^{-1}\) OTC culture showed lower fungal weight than the control. At T14 fungal growth reached a 36-fold increase from the initial inoculum, to a final mean weight of 5.13 mg mL\(^{-1}\).

### 3.2. OTC degradation

OTC in the different batches and at different times was quantified by LC–UV/DAD analysis. The chemical analysis of the extract from control culture media and mycelia (batches #1 and 4) excluded the presence of interfering peaks in the area of interest of the chromatograms. Analysis of culture media containing 50 or 100 µg mL\(^{-1}\) OTC without mycelium showed almost the same OTC concentrations from T0 to T14, demonstrating that OTC abiotic degradation did not occur in neither batch #2 or 3 under these experimental conditions. On the contrary, the analysis of culture media and mycelia extracts from OTC exposed cultures (batches #5 and 6) showed a dramatic reduction of OTC concentration in the course of the experiment (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

In particular, culture media of batch #5 showed a dramatic OTC reduction in the first 7 d and a further reduction in the last 7 d, up to an almost complete absence of OTC residues at T14 (0.6 µg mL\(^{-1}\)). Contemporary, in batch #5 mycelia, T2 and T3 extracts showed an increase of OTC content, followed by a progressive decrease up to the complete absence at T14 (Fig. 3).
Fig. 3. OTC concentrations determined by HPLC-UV/DAD in culture medium or mycelium at different times in 50 and 100 μg mL⁻¹ OTC exposed batches.

A comparable trend of OTC degradation was found also in batch #6. In the culture media, a sharp reduction of the initial concentration in the first 7 d and a further limited reduction in the last 7 d occurred; as a result a very low OTC concentration was found at T14 (2.8 μg mL⁻¹). In mycelia extracts an initial increase of OTC content was found (T2–T3), followed by a progressive significant decrease that reduced the OTC residue at T14–7.6 μg per 100 mg mycelium (d.w.; Fig. 3).

3.3. Laccase activity in the culture medium

The laccase activity during the degradation process was measured in the culture media of control (batch #4) and OTC exposed culture (batches #6; Fig. 4). P. ostreatus showed the production of extracellular laccase in the course of the trial, the maximum values being reached at T4–T5. No significant differences were obtained between control and OTC 100 μg mL⁻¹, although a slightly higher activity was recorded from T3 to T5 in the presence of OTC.

3.4. Effect of purified laccase on OTC degradation

The degradation capability of the extracellular enzyme alone on OTC was tested by an in vitro test, coupled to OTC quantification. OTC solutions prepared according to the experimental conditions reported in Section 2.3.2 were incubated with or without laccase. No significant differences in OTC degradation were measured in the two batches (Table 1).

3.5. Products of OTC fungal degradation

OTC degradation has been followed within the mycelial matrix using LC–ESI-MS full scan analysis of the extracts to detect the possible presence of degradation products. The results show three partially overlapping peaks (Fig. 5, coloured chromatogram). The first one (red) shows an OTC precursor ion [M + H]⁺ m/z 461, the second one (green) shows a precursor ion [M + H]⁺ m/z 460, that

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (h)</th>
<th>OTC 50 μg mL⁻¹ (%)</th>
<th>OTC 100 μg mL⁻¹ (%)</th>
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<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.4</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5. Chromatogram of the extracted precursor ions [M + H]⁺ m/z 461 (red, OTC), 460 (in green) and 445 (in black, DXC) obtained by LC–ESI-MS. The inset shows the full scan spectrum in the area where the three chromatographic peaks are overlapped. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of the article.)
could be a degradation product of OTC, and the third one (black) a DXC precursor ion \([M+H]^+ \text{ m/z 461}\), the mass spectrum revealed the presence of another precursor ion \([M+H]^+ \text{ m/z 460}\); this additional precursor ion could be interpreted as 2-acetyl-2-decarboxamido-oxytetracycline (ADOTC; MW = 459; Fig. 6b). This compound is known to be a side product of OTC production by Streptomyces rimosus [25]. Its presence was analytically excluded in the standard solutions as impurity, but was revealed in the treated batches, only in the first days of the experiment. ADOTC has lower antibacterial potency on environmental relevant bacteria and higher lipophilicity than OTC [25]. These chemical characteristics determine a lower toxicity and environmental mobility, fulfilling the aim of our bioremediation approach.

5. Conclusions

This approach represents a first and successful step towards a feasible and unexpensive bioremediation technique to avoid OTC spreading into environmental matrices. *P. ostreatus* SMR684 represents a useful tool for OTC mycoremediation from contaminated matrices; the fungus is not only able to survive and grow in the presence of significant amount of drug, but also almost completely degrades the drug in few days. The drug is absorbed by the mycelia, where the OTC molecule undergoes a degradation step, as demonstrated by mass spectrometry analyses. In the treated mycelia no OTC-like residues are detected at the end of the experiment.

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References


