and Carlos Eduardo Melo for support for viral load determination, and the blood donors who kindly consented to participate in this study.

This study was supported by Fundação de Amparo a Pesquisa do Estado do Amazonas, Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico, Fundação de Hematologia e Hemoterapia do Amazonas, and Instituto de Medicina Tropical de São Paulo.

Kátia Luz Torres, Adriana Malheiro, Adriana Tateno, Tatiane Amabile de Lima, Laura Patrícia Viana Maia, João Paulo Diniz Pimentel, Márcia Poinho Encarnação de Morais, Christiane Santana de Melo Usui, Flavia de Oliveira Braga, Igor Araújo Ferreira Silva, Felicien Vasquez, and José Eduardo Levi

Author affiliations: Fundação de Hematologia e Hemoterapia do Amazonas, Manaus, Amazon, Brazil (K.L. Torres, A. Malheiro, T.A. de Lima, L.P.V. Maia, J.P.D. Pimentel, M.P.E. de Morais, C.S. de Melo Usui, F. Vasquez); Universidade Federal do Amazonas, Manaus (A. Malheiro, F. de Oliveira Braga, I.A.F. Silva); and Instituto de Medicina Tropical de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil (J.E. Levi)

DOI: 10.3201/eid1504.081288

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Address for correspondence: Kátia Luz Torres, Research Division, Fundação de Hematologia e Hemoterapia do Amazonas, Av Constantino Nery, 4397-Manaus, AM, Brazil; email: katia.torres@hemoam.am.gov.br

Leishmaniasis in Chaparé, Bolivia

To the Editor: In Bolivia, most cases of leishmaniasis are caused by Leishmania (Viannia) braziliensis (1). The parasite is transmitted zoonotically by several sandfly species and, when transmitted to humans, may cause cutaneous leishmaniasis (CL), and potentially, mucosal leishmaniasis (ML) (2).

Data on the prevalence and effects of CL in Bolivia have been scarce, even though anecdotal and official reports indicate a dramatic increase in the number of human CL cases in Bolivia in the past decade (1,3). Also, although CL was originally a sylvatic disease in Bolivia, some evidence indicates that the transmission cycle has adapted to the peridomestic habitat. However, this evidence is largely based on individual case reports. No information is available on parasite species, vectors, and reservoirs in such a peridomestic transmission cycle.

A preliminary study to guide future research focus and assist in immediate leishmaniasis prevention and control policy decision making is underway in Isiboro-Secure National Park, Chaparé, Bolivia. Our objectives were to collect data on the prevalence of leishmaniasis in that area and evidence for peridomestic Leishmania transmission.

A survey was carried out during April–July 2007 in 2 communities in Isiboro-Secure National Park, San Gabriel (16°40’31"S and 65°37’38"W) and San Julian (16°41’59"S and 65°38’10"W). These 2 communities were selected because of local knowledge of disease in the community, their moderate degree of urbanization (i.e., ≈50% of the communities’ houses are clustered along the main access road), and the accessibility of the sites to the field team. In this area, CL is transmitted from April through October.
Households in both communities were visited by a team of experienced medical staff who interviewed heads of household to collect demographic data (sex, age) and diagnose the clinical condition of all present household members (presence/absence of CL lesions or scars, number of lesions, date of lesion onset) by using a standardized, pretested questionnaire. The study protocol was approved by the Ethical Committee Review Board of the World Health Organization (WHO). All patients with active cases were treated with meglumine antimoniate according to the standard protocol (2).

We surveyed 133 and 52 households in San Gabriel and San Julian, which represented 86% and 80% of the total households of the respective communities; 21 and 13 households, respectively, were visited but did not participate because the owners refused or were not present. Of the 965 persons surveyed, 488 (50.6%) were male and 476 (49.3%) were female; 62 (6.4%) had CL lesions and 3 had evidence of past ML; all ML patients were male. One person had ML, and 3 had evidence of past CL. Those with CL lesions, all had 1 lesion only. The mean lesion size was 2.3 cm (range 1.5–3 cm), and the mean lesion duration (to survey date) was 5.6 months (range 1–11 months). The clinical CL lesions were parasitologically confirmed by microscopy (n = 4) or PCR (n = 8). Parasite culture was performed on patient isolates (n = 6), and L. (V.) braziliensis was identified and characterized as the etiologic agent of these CL cases.

Active lesion and scar prevalence were associated with male sex (lesions: Fisher exact test, odds ratio [OR] = 7.90 [95% confidence interval (CI) 1.01–169.09], p = 0.05; scars: Yates-corrected $\chi^2$ test, OR = 3.05 [95% CI 1.65–5.71], p < 0.001). Children ≤15 years of age were at lower risk of contracting the disease than those >15 years (lesions: Fisher exact test, OR = 0.19 [95% CI 0.01–1.46], p = 0.094; scars: Yates-corrected $\chi^2$ test, OR = 0.09 [95% CI 0.03–0.27], p < 0.001) (Figure). Active lesion and scar prevalence were also associated with prolonged migration into the forest before the survey (lesions: Fisher exact test, OR = 28.10 [95% CI 13.49–93.53], p < 0.001).

Whether the surveyed population is representative of the total population living in the study area is debatable. However on the basis of current population figures (i.e., 16,000) and observed prevalence of CL, we estimate up to 1,440 CL cases in Isiboro-Secure currently. The low prevalence of active disease and scars indicates that L. (V.) braziliensis was introduced into Isiboro-Secure fairly recently, which is corroborated by the short median time since the cure of persons with CL scars (i.e., 7.5 years, range 0.4–30.5 years). Combined with the association of CL with male sex, age, and migration to the forest, we conclude that in Isiboro-Secure, most L. (V.) braziliensis transmission is sylvatic rather than peridomestic. This transmission pattern implies that prevention and control approaches that focus on the person (e.g., use of repellents, early treatment seeking) will most likely be more effective than approaches that focus on the household (e.g., indoor residual spraying with insecticides, insecticide-treated bednets). Current analyses are underway to establish CL risk factors. Additionally, a prevention and control strategy adapted to the local context is being planned to minimize the population’s exposure to sandflies, prepare health professionals for adequate (per protocol) management of cases, and minimize the likelihood that L. (V.) braziliensis transmission becomes peridomestic.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the logistical support of local Ministry of Health staff and community leaders in facilitating the survey.

This work was supported by a Research Capacity Strengthening Program grant to A.L.G. from the UNICEF/UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Program for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (no. A50990A).
THE AMAZON REGION

Ernesto Rojas, Rudy Parrado, Raúl Delgado, Richard Reithinger, and Ana L. Garcia

Author affiliations: Universidad Mayor de San Simón, Cochabamba, Bolivia (E. Rojas, R. Parrado, R. Delgado, A.L. Garcia); London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK (R. Reithinger); and George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Science, Washington, DC, USA (R. Reithinger)

DOI: 10.3201/eid1504.081257

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Address for correspondence: Ana L. Garcia, Facultad de Medicina Instituto de Investigaciones Biomédicas e Interacción Social–Centro Universitario de Medicina Tropical, Universidad Mayor de San Simón, Av Aniceto Arce no. 371, Cochabamba, Bolivia; email: lineth.garcia@gmail.com

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Erratum—Vol. 15, No. 2

The name of Vasanthi Thevanesam should have been included in the author list for the article Severe Dengue Epidemics in Sri Lanka, 2003–2006 (N. Kanakaratne et al.). Prof Thevanesam is affiliated with the University of Peradeniya Faculty of Medicine, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. The article has been corrected online (www.cdc.gov/eid/content/15/2/192.htm).