

Infections, Infertility, and Assisted Reproduction

Assisted reproductive technology (ART) treatment is vulnerable to the hazard of potential infection from many different sources: patients, samples, staff, and the environment. Culture of gametes and embryos in vitro provides multiple targets for transmission of potential infection, including the developing embryo, neighbouring gametes and embryos, the couple undergoing treatment, and other couples being treated during the same period. This unique situation, with multifaceted opportunities for microbial growth and transmission, makes infection and contamination control absolutely crucial in the practice of assisted reproduction, and in the laboratory in particular.

This unique and practical book provides a basic overview of microbiology in the context of ART, providing an up-to-date guide to infections in reproductive medicine. The relevant facets of the complex and vast field of microbiology are condensed and focused, highlighting information that is crucial for safe practice in both clinical and laboratory aspects of ART. This is an essential publication for all ART clinics and laboratories.

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To: our families,

Robbie and Bethany

John and Justin

Paul and Maxwell James

With love and thanks for their patience,
tolerance, and support.

Contents

Foreword	<i>page</i> xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgements	xvii

Part I Overview of microbiology

1	Introduction	3
	History of microbiology	3
	History of assisted reproduction	7
	Artificial insemination	7
	In vitro fertilization	8
	Assisted reproductive technology (ART)	
	and microbiology	10
	Overview of microbiology	11
	References	14
	Further reading	15
	Appendix: glossary of terms	16
2	Bacteriology	21
	Structure and function of bacteria	21
	Bacterial structure	21
	Bacterial growth	26
	Bacterial metabolism	26
	Bacterial classification and identification	27
	Nomenclature	27
	Identification of bacteria	27
	Major groups of organisms	38
	Gram-negative bacilli and	
	coccobacilli	38
	Gram-negative cocci	42
	Gram-positive cocci that are	
	catalase positive	42

viii Contents

Gram-positive cocci that are catalase-negative	43	4 Virology	105
Gram-positive bacilli that are non-branching and catalase positive	44	Introduction	105
Gram-positive bacilli that are non-branching and catalase negative	46	Virus structure	105
Gram-positive bacilli that are branching or partially acid-fast	47	Host range and specificity	106
Anaerobic bacteria	47	Viral replication	106
Mycobacteria and bacteria with unusual growth requirements	50	Growth characteristics	106
Normal flora in humans	54	Lytic growth	107
Further reading	61	Lysogenic growth	107
Appendix	62	Latent infections	107
2.1 Media used for isolation of bacteria	62	Virus classification	107
2.2 Biochemical tests for identification of bacteria	67	Double-stranded DNA	107
2.3 Antibacterial agents	85	Single-stranded DNA	109
Further reading for Appendix 2.3	89	Double-stranded RNA	109
3 Mycology: moulds and yeasts	90	Single-stranded RNA	109
Introduction	90	Single-stranded (+) sense RNA with DNA intermediate	109
Classes of fungi	91	Double-stranded DNA with RNA intermediate	109
Zygomycetes	92	Laboratory diagnosis of viral disease	110
Ascomycetes	92	Direct examination	110
Basidiomycetes	92	Culture	110
Deuteromycetes	92	Antigen detection systems	110
Laboratory classification of fungi	92	Serologic diagnosis	111
Taxonomic classification	92	Molecular diagnostics	111
Clinical classification of fungi	94	Viruses directly relevant to ART	111
Infections	94	Double-stranded DNA viruses	112
Contaminants	98	Hepatitis viruses	115
Laboratory identification of fungi	99	Retroviruses	116
Direct examination	99	Human oncornaviruses	117
Culture	99	Further reading	118
Microscopic examination for fungal structures	100	Appendix: antiviral agents	119
Mycology in ART	100	5 Prions	122
Further reading	100	Prion protein	122
Appendix: antifungal agents	102	Prion diseases	122
		Animal	122
		Human	122
		Prion structure	122
		Replication	124
		Transmission	124
		Clinical presentation	126
		Sporadic Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (nvCJD)	126

		Contents	ix
	New-variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD)	126	
	Pathology	126	
	Diagnosis	127	
	References	128	
	Further reading	129	
6	Parasitology	131	
	Introduction	131	
	Terminology	131	
	Classification	133	
	Unicellular: protozoa	133	
	Lobosea (amoeba)	134	
	Sarcomastigophora (flagellates)	136	
	Ciliophora (ciliates)	139	
	Apicomplexa (sporozoa)	140	
	Coccidia	141	
	Microsporidia	145	
	Multicellular parasites: helminths and arthropods	145	
	Nemathelminthes	145	
	Platyhelminthes	154	
	Arthropods	163	
	Insecta	163	
	Arachnida	164	
	Crustacea	164	
	Further reading	165	
	Appendix: antiparasitic agents	166	
Part II Infections in reproductive medicine			
7	Genital ulcer diseases	177	
	Herpes simplex virus infections	177	
	Syphilis	185	
	<i>Treponema pallidum</i>	185	
	Chancroid	190	
	<i>Haemophilus ducreyi</i>	190	
	Lymphogranuloma venereum (LGV)	192	
	<i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i>	192	
	Granuloma inguinale (Donovanosis)	193	
	<i>Calymmatobacterium granulomatis</i>	193	
	References	195	
	Further reading	195	
8	Vaginitis syndromes	199	
	<i>Trichomonas vaginalis</i>	200	
	Yeast vaginitis	203	
	<i>Candida</i> spp.	203	
	Bacterial vaginosis	207	
	<i>Gardnerella vaginalis</i>	000	
	Vaginal colonization with Group B Streptococcus (GBS)	209	
	<i>Streptococcus agalactiae</i>	209	
	Further reading	212	
9	Genital human papillomavirus (HPV) infections	215	
	Genital human papillomavirus infections (HPV)	215	
	Genital warts and cervical cancer	215	
	Further reading	219	
10	Urethritis and cervicitis syndromes	220	
	Male urethritis	220	
	Female urethritis/cervicitis	220	
	Gonorrheal disease	221	
	<i>Neisseria gonorrhea</i>	221	
	Chlamydial disease	228	
	<i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i>	229	
	Genital mollicutes	234	
	<i>Mycoplasma</i> and <i>Ureaplasma</i> spp.	234	
	References	238	
	Further reading	238	
11	Pathology of the upper genitourinary tract	243	
	Male upper GU infections	243	
	Epididymitis	243	
	Orchitis	244	
	Prostatitis	244	
	Female upper GU infections	245	
	Salpingitis	245	
	Oophoritis	246	
	Endometritis	246	
	Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)	247	
	Pelvic anaerobic actinomycetes	247	
	Genital tuberculosis	250	

x Contents

Further reading	259	Treatment of HBV seropositive couples	336
References	259	Treatment of HCV seropositive couples	336
12 Cytomegalovirus and blood-borne viruses	262	Treatment of HIV seropositive couples	337
Cytomegalovirus (CMV)	262	Semen washing procedures for HBV/HCV/HIV serodiscordant couples	339
Hepatitis B virus (HBV)	270	Virus decontamination	340
Hepatitis C virus (HCV)	275	Accidental exposure	340
Hepatitis D virus (HDV)	278	HBV prophylaxis	341
HIV and AIDS	281	HCV prophylaxis	341
Human T-lymphotrophic viruses (HTLV)	290	HIV prophylaxis	341
HTLV-I	291	Air transport of biohazardous materials	342
HTLV-II	291	Useful addresses for air transport of hazardous materials	349
References	293	Appendix: general laboratory safety issues	350
Further reading	293	References	350
Appendix to Part II: specimen culture by body site	299	Further reading	351
Part III Infection and the assisted reproductive laboratory		15 Prevention: patient screening and the use of donor gametes	353
13 Infection and contamination control in the ART laboratory	305	Routine screening	353
Sources of infection	305	Prevalence of BBV: geographic distribution	353
Sterilization methods	316	The use of donor gametes	353
Physical methods of sterilization	316	Recruitment of donors	355
Chemical methods of sterilization	318	Screening	356
Disinfection and decontamination	320	Procedures and technical aspects	357
Air quality, classification of cleanrooms and biological safety cabinets	321	Use of gametes for donation	357
Biological safety cabinets (BSCs)	322	Treatment evaluation	358
Microbiological testing and contamination	325	Summary of donor testing practices and proposals in the USA	358
Fungal contamination in the laboratory	325	Cryopreservation and transmission of infection	358
Laboratory cleaning schedules	327	Tissue banking: ovarian and testicular tissue	361
References	330	References	362
Further reading	331	Further reading	363
14 Handling infectious agents in the ART laboratory	332	Index	365
Blood-borne viruses	332		
Biosafety levels	333		
Biosafety for ART	334		

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-17851-8 - Infections, Infertility, and Assisted Reproduction
Kay Elder, Doris J. Baker and Julie A. Ribes
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Foreword

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Wolbachia are gram-negative, intracellular bacteria that shelter in the gonads of invertebrates, and have profound effects on the fertility of their hosts. In some species, infected hosts can only reproduce parthenogenetically, in others cytoplasmic incompatibility prevents infected males from breeding with uninfected females, and in some cases genetically determined male embryos are transformed into females. *Wolbachia* engineers effects, as do all parasites, for selfish ends. Although this bizarre pathology is unknown in medical science, the relationships between microbes and human fertility are nonetheless complex, fascinating and important for the practice of reproductive medicine.

Unfortunately, and usually without advance warning, microbes occasionally enter the clinical laboratory through infected semen or vaginal tissue. When this occurs, a patient's treatment outcome may be seriously compromised because microbes can quickly deplete nutrients in culture media and alter the pH, and it would be irresponsible to knowingly transfer an infected embryo or semen to a patient. Bacterial and fungal growth are often obvious and easily tested, but how often do infectious agents go unrecognized and contribute to the problems of infertility, treatment failure and even possibly affect the child-to-be?

This is the first book on medical microbiology that has been written by experts in reproduction for clinical scientists and physicians in their own field. They are to be congratulated on filling a gap in the

literature between microbiology and assisted reproduction, which they achieve in three sections. The first serves as a primer of medical microbiology for readers who are unfamiliar or rusty on the subject. The second focuses on microbes that have implications for human reproduction, whether by causing infertility (a familiar example being *Chlamydia*) or by jeopardizing reproductive safety (such as HIV).

In the final section, the practical implications of this knowledge are addressed in the context of infertility, and especially the setting of the clinical embryology laboratory. Every embryologist is trained in sterile techniques, filtration of media and prudent use of antibiotics to keep out the bugs, but a deeper knowledge of the foundations of safe and effective practice is an undervalued safeguard for patient care.

Preface

The world of microbes is intrinsically fascinating. Microbes are abundant in every place on earth where larger living creatures exist, and they can also thrive in habitat extremes where no other kind of organism can survive for long: from deep under the sea to the stratosphere – up to 32 km in the atmosphere, in oil formations and in hot telluric water. It is estimated that the total biomass of microbes probably exceeds that of all the plants and animals in the biosphere. This biomass is predominantly composed of bacteria, and these microorganisms play a crucial role in recycling much of the organic material in the biosphere. Despite their minute size, microorganisms carry out all the fundamental processes of biochemistry and molecular biology that are essential to the survival of all living species. Although their size may give them the illusion of being ‘primitive’, their range of biochemical and biophysical capabilities is far wider than that of higher organisms. One of their most important properties is adaptability and versatility, a key feature in their long history of evolution. Fossil records suggest that at least some members of the microbial world, oxygen-producing cyanobacter-like organisms, had evolved 3.46 billion years ago (Schopf, 1993); a viable fungus, *Absidia corymbifera*, was recovered from the right boot that accompanied the frozen, well-preserved prehistoric corpse, ‘Ice Man’, aged approximately 5300 years (Haselwandter & Ebner, 1994).

Records of microbial disease that probably influenced the course of history can be found in archaeological sites of early civilizations, as well as in later

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

periods of history. A hieroglyph from the capital of ancient Egypt dated approximately 3700 BC illustrates a priest (Ruma) with typical clinical signs of a viral infection, paralytic poliomyelitis. The mummified body of the Pharaoh Siptah, who died in 1193 BC, also shows signs of classic paralytic poliomyelitis, and the preserved mummy of Rameses V has facial pustular lesions suggesting that his death in 1143 BC was probably due to smallpox. This virulent disease was endemic in China by 1000 BC, and had reached Europe by 710 AD. Hernando Cortez transferred the disease to the Americas in 1520, and it appears that around 3 500 000 Aztecs died of smallpox within the next two years – arguably precipitating the end of the Aztec empire.

In the early 1330s an outbreak of deadly Bubonic plague occurred in China, one of the busiest of the world's trading nations, and rapidly spread to Western Asia and Europe. Between 1347 and 1352 this plague, 'The Black Death', killed 25 million people – one-third of the population of Europe – with far-reaching social, cultural and economic repercussions.

The world of assisted reproduction is equally fascinating, and is one that also has a long history of evolution. The concept of assisted procreation by human artificial insemination was a topic of discussion between Jewish philosophers as early as the third century AD, and tales exist of fourteenth-century Arab horse breeders obtaining sperm from mated mares belonging to rival groups, using the sperm to inseminate their own mares. Assisted reproduction explores the fundamental principles behind the creation of a new life, the intricate biological mechanisms that are involved when mature gametes come into contact, combine genetically and set in motion a cascade of events leading to the correct expression of genes that form a new individual.

Microbiology and assisted reproduction both deal with a miniature world, magnified for observation

with the help of microscopy. Culture of microorganisms and of preimplantation embryos in vitro requires special media and growth conditions to promote cell division, and both are visualized and assessed at various stages following cell division. A knowledge of microbiology is fundamental to the safety and success of assisted reproductive techniques – but the field of microbiology is vast, and continues to increase in complexity with the discovery of new organisms and implementation of new medical treatments. The field of assisted reproductive technology also continues to expand and develop, particularly in areas of science and biotechnology. Members of an assisted reproduction team are not usually also experts in infectious diseases, and may find it difficult to identify and follow significant areas of microbiology that can impact upon their practice.

The purpose of this book is to select areas and topics in microbiology that are specifically relevant to assisted reproductive technology (ART), in order to provide a very basic background of facts and fundamental principles. A background of understanding can help prevent contamination and transmission of disease in ART, and also limit the opportunities for microbial survival in embryo culture and cryopreservation systems. The book is divided into three Parts:

Part I provides an outline of microorganism classification and identification, as a foundation for understanding the relationships and the differences between the types of organisms that may be encountered in routine ART practice. The microorganisms that are human pathogens or resident flora, and those that are routinely found in the environment are introduced. Each chapter includes an Appendix of antimicrobial drugs and their modes of action.

Part II details organisms that cause disease of the reproductive tract and those that are blood-borne pathogens, describing their

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etiology, pathogenesis, diagnosis, pathology and treatment.

Part III describes the practical application of microbiology principles within an assisted reproduction laboratory.

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