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**MINIREVIEWS**

- 6974 Applications of time series analysis in epidemiology: Literature review and our experience during COVID-19 pandemic  
*Tomov L, Chervenkov L, Miteva DG, Batselova H, Velikova T*

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****Retrospective Cohort Study**

- 6984 Acute cholangitis: Does malignant biliary obstruction *vs* choledocholithiasis etiology change the clinical presentation and outcomes?  
*Tsou YK, Su YT, Lin CH, Liu NJ*

**Retrospective Study**

- 6995 Usefulness of analyzing endoscopic features in identifying the colorectal serrated sessile lesions with and without dysplasia  
*Wang RG, Ren YT, Jiang X, Wei L, Zhang XF, Liu H, Jiang B*

- 7004 Roles of biochemistry data, lifestyle, and inflammation in identifying abnormal renal function in old Chinese  
*Chen CH, Wang CK, Wang CY, Chang CF, Chu TW*

- 7017 Clinical efficacy and safety of Guipi decoction combined with escitalopram oxalate tablets in patients with depression  
*Yu J, Xu FQ*

- 7026 Artificial intelligence technology and ultrasound-guided nerve block for analgesia in total knee arthroplasty  
*Tong SX, Li RS, Wang D, Xie XM, Ruan Y, Huang L*

- 7034 Axenfeld-Reiger syndrome: A search for the missing links  
*Morya AK, Ramesh PV, Sinha S, Nishant P, Nain N, Ramavath RN, Gone C, Prasad R*

**Observational Study**

- 7043 Self-management of osteoarthritis while waiting for total knee arthroplasty during the COVID-19 pandemic among older Malaysians  
*Mahdzir ANK, Mat S, Seow SR, Abdul Rani R, Che Hasan MK, Mohamad Yahaya NH*

- 7053 "In situ bone flap" combined with vascular pedicled mucous flap to reconstruction of skull base defect  
*Qian M, Chen X, Zhang LY, Wang ZF, Zhang Y, Wang XJ*

- 7061 Reference values of gait parameters in healthy Chinese university students: A cross-sectional observational study  
*Yu JS, Zhuang C, Guo WX, Chen JJ, Wu XK, Xie W, Zhou X, Su H, Chen YX, Wang LK, Li WK, Tian K, Zhuang RJ*

- 7075 Effect of T-regulatory cells and interleukin-35, interleukin-10, and transforming growth factor-beta on diffuse large B-cell lymphoma  
*Wu H, Sun HC, Ouyang GF*

**META-ANALYSIS**

- 7082 Meta-analysis on the effectiveness of parent education for children with disabilities  
*Jang J, Kim G, Jeong H, Lee N, Oh S*
- 7091 Meta-analysis of the efficacy and safety of daratumumab in the treatment of multiple myeloma  
*Wang P, Jin SY*

**CASE REPORT**

- 7101 Varicella-zoster virus meningitis with hypoglycorrhachia: A case report  
*Cao LJ, Zheng YM, Li F, Hao HJ, Gao F*
- 7107 Unusual presentation of penile giant condyloma acuminatum with spontaneous prepuce perforation: A case report  
*Hsu FC, Yu DS, Pu TW, Wu MJ, Meng E*
- 7113 Primary renal lymphoma presenting as renal failure: A case report and review of literature from 1989  
*Lee SB, Yoon YM, Hong R*
- 7127 Intravascular ultrasonography assisted carotid artery stenting for treatment of carotid stenosis: Two case reports  
*Fu PC, Wang JY, Su Y, Liao YQ, Li SL, Xu GL, Huang YJ, Hu MH, Cao LM*
- 7136 Mucoepidermoid carcinoma of the lung with hemoptysis as initial symptom: A case report  
*Xie WX, Liu R, Li Z, Zhou PL, Duan LN, Fu DD*
- 7144 Co-infection of *Chlamydia psittaci* and *Tropheryma whippelii*: A case report  
*Du ZM, Chen P*
- 7150 Surgical treatment of severe anterior capsular organized hard core cataract: A case report  
*Wang LW, Fang SF*
- 7156 First platelet transfusion refractoriness in a patient with acute myelocytic leukemia: A case report  
*Tu SK, Fan HJ, Shi ZW, Li XL, Li M, Song K*
- 7162 Rare finding of primary aortoduodenal fistula on single-photon emission computed tomography/computed tomography of gastrointestinal bleeding: A case report  
*Kuo CL, Chen CF, Su WK, Yang RH, Chang YH*
- 7170 Rituximab combined with Bruton tyrosine kinase inhibitor to treat elderly diffuse large B-cell lymphoma patients: Two case reports  
*Zhang CJ, Zhao ML*

- 7179 Use of Ilizarov technique for bilateral knees flexion contracture in Juvenile-onset ankylosing spondylitis: A case report  
*Xia LW, Xu C, Huang JH*
- 7187 Case of takotsubo cardiomyopathy after surgical treatment of liver hydatid cyst: A case report  
*Altaş Y, Abdullayeva Ü*
- 7193 Laparoscopic choledocholithotomy and transductal T-tube insertion with indocyanine green fluorescence imaging and laparoscopic ultrasound: A case report  
*Yoo D*
- 7200 Hematopoietic stem cell transplantation of aplastic anemia by relative with mutations and normal telomere length: A case report  
*Yan J, Jin T, Wang L*
- 7207 Emphysematous thrombophlebitis caused by a misplaced central venous catheter: A case report  
*Chen N, Chen HJ, Chen T, Zhang W, Fu XY, Xing ZX*
- 7214 Aggressive angiomyxoma of the epididymis: A case report  
*Liu XJ, Su JH, Fu QZ, Liu Y*
- 7221 Gastric and intestinal ectopic pancreas: Two case reports  
*Zhang H, Zhao HY, Zhang FH, Liang W*
- 7227 Congenital leukemia: A case report and review of literature  
*Yang CX, Yang Y, Zhang FL, Wang DH, Bian QH, Zhou M, Zhou MX, Yang XY*
- 7234 Imaging misdiagnosis and clinical analysis of significant hepatic atrophy after bilioenteric anastomosis: A case report  
*Liang SY, Lu JG, Wang ZD*
- 7242 Surgical treatment of mixed cervical spondylosis with spontaneous cerebrospinal fluid leakage: A case report  
*Yu Z, Zhang HFZ, Wang YJ*
- 7248 Simultaneous thyroglossal duct cyst with parathyroid cyst: A case report  
*Chen GY, Li T*
- 7253 Submandibular solid-cystic mass as the first and sole manifestation of occult thyroid papillary carcinoma: A case report  
*Chen GY, Li T*

**LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

- 7258 Artificial intelligence and machine learning in motor recovery: A rehabilitation medicine perspective  
*Swarnakar R, Yadav SL*

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## Co-infection of *Chlamydia psittaci* and *Tropheryma whippiei*: A case report

Zhu-Man Du, Pei Chen

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### Abstract

#### BACKGROUND

The co-infection of *Chlamydia psittaci* (*C. psittaci*) and *Tropheryma whippiei* (*T. whippiei*) is unusual, and the detection of pathogenic microorganisms is particularly important for patients with severe diseases or poor experience in treatment. Early identification of pathogens can significantly improve the prognosis of the patients. Targeted next-generation sequencing (tNGS) is currently widely used in clinical practice for various infectious diseases, including respiratory infections, to achieve early, accurate, and rapid microbial diagnosis.

#### CASE SUMMARY

We report a case of a 40-year-old female patient with a history of contact with parrots who was diagnosed with *C. psittaci* and *T. whippiei* infection through bronchial lavage fluid targeted next generation sequencing. After moxifloxacin treatment, the patient's symptoms improved significantly, and the imaging changes were obviously resolved.

#### CONCLUSION

Coinfection with *C. psittaci* and *T. whippiei* is not common. In this case, timely and accurate identification of both pathogens was achieved using tNGS. Moreover, the efficacy of monotherapy with moxifloxacin was confirmed.

**Key Words:** Infectious diseases; *Chlamydia psittaci*; *Tropheryma whippiei*; Targeted next generation sequencing; Case report

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**Core Tip:** The co-infection of *Chlamydia psittaci* and *Tropheryma whippelii* is not common. Due to its ability to cause severe infections, timely and reliable diagnosis is crucial for improving prognosis. In recent years, the development of targeted next-generation sequencing has made the diagnosis of pathogenic microorganisms more economical and efficient.

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## INTRODUCTION

Psittacosis is a zoonotic infectious disease caused by *Chlamydia psittaci* (*C. psittaci*), which is a gram-negative bacterium belonging to the *Chlamydia* spp. This pathogen mainly parasitizes parrots, pigeons, poultry, etc. Humans are mainly affected by direct contact with birds and poultry excrement and respiratory secretions. Handling the feathers, tissues, or corpses of infected birds also carries a risk of infection[1]. The first description of psittacosis in the medical literature was in 1879[2], and according to subsequent reports, psittacosis may be the cause of one percent of cases among community-acquired pneumonia[3]. Clinical manifestations of psittacosis vary from asymptomatic infection to severe systemic symptoms and may even lead to fatal systemic illness. Symptoms of infected individuals may include headache, chills, fever (even high fever), myalgia, and dry cough during the course of the disease, which may be accompanied by dyspnoea and chest tightness[4]. *Tropheryma whippelii* (*T. whippelii*) is a gram-positive bacterium first described by American pathologist George Hoyt Whipple in 1907 and belongs to the trophozoite genus[5]. The most obvious symptoms include arthralgia, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, and weight loss, and reports of endocarditis, nervous system infection, uveitis, arthritis and osteoarthritis infection can also be seen[6]. However, there are few reports about pneumonia caused by *T. whippelii*. A previous study found that the respiratory infection rate was only 13%-14%[7], of which only approximately 30% of patients had respiratory symptoms[8], but the symptoms were not typical and included dyspnoea, cough, chest pain, and vital capacity reduction[9]. Reports of coinfection of *C. psittaci* and *T. whippelii* are extremely rare, but due to their ability to cause severe infections, rapid progression, and life-threatening conditions, timely and reliable diagnosis is crucial for treatment.

In recent years, high-throughput sequencing methods have developed rapidly, mainly including whole genome sequencing (WGS), metagenomic next-generation sequencing (mNGS), and targeted next-generation sequencing (tNGS). Among them, WGS is less directly applied in clinical practice and is generally used in epidemiological investigations and research on the evolution of drug-resistant strains. MNGS can detect all pathogens in the sample without discrimination, while tNGS mainly focuses on common infectious pathogens in clinical practice. TNGS designs specific primers, uses a super multiplex polymerase chain reaction (PCR) library system to target and amplify the target sequence, and then uses high-throughput sequencing for synchronous detection of amplification products, achieving a new method of broad-spectrum accurate detection of pathogens. In this report, tNGS was used to confirm the clinical rarity of pneumonia caused by *C. psittaci* and *T. whippelii*.

## CASE PRESENTATION

### Chief complaints

A 40-year-old female patient was admitted to the hospital for fever on November 6, 2022.

### History of present illness

The patient had a fever for 10 d and a maximum body temperature of 39.6 °C, accompanied by dizziness and headache, but she had no other symptoms, such as cough, abdominal pain, or diarrhea.

### History of past illness

The patient had previously been physically fit, but she had bought three parrots one week before the onset of symptoms, one of which was sick.

### Personal and family history

The patient had no special history of personal history or family history.

### Physical examination

On examination, body temperature was 36.0 °C; heart rate was 94 beats/min; respiratory rate was 21 breaths/min; blood pressure was 100/72 mmHg; and pulse oxygen saturation was 96%. The patient was well built and cooperative, had no pharyngeal hyperaemia, and had no enlargement or purulent discharge of the tonsils. Breath sounds in both lungs were rough, and moist rales could be heard in the lower lobe of the right lung. Heart and abdominal examinations showed no

significant findings.

### Laboratory examinations

A preliminary hematological examination (Table 1) showed that the hypersensitive C-reactive protein was significantly increased, transaminase and direct bilirubin were slightly increased, and electrolyte metabolism was deranged. The white blood cells and their respective classification ratios were normal, and procalcitonin was normal. In addition, during coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), we tested the patient for COVID-19 nucleic acid, and the results were negative.

### Imaging examinations

A computed tomography (CT) scan on November 6, 2022 (Figure 1A-C) revealed multiple large uneven ground glass shadows in the lower lobe of the right lung, with grid shadows visible inside, close to the pleura, and special pathogen infections could not be ruled out.

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## FINAL DIAGNOSIS

The patient received fiber bronchoscopy examination, and fiber bronchoscopy reached the lower lobe bronchus of the right lung. The lower lobe bronchus of the right lung was repeatedly irrigated. The collected samples were then sent to the laboratory for tNGS testing and analysis, which revealed *C. psittaci* and *T. whipplei* infection.

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## TREATMENT

The patient was treated with moxifloxacin 0.4 g once daily for 10 d.

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## OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

During hospitalization, the patient experienced coughing, phlegm, and diarrhea. Following treatment, the body temperature returned to normal, and the above symptoms disappeared completely. Hypersensitive C-reactive protein, transaminase and direct bilirubin returned to normal values. After 10 d of anti-infection treatment with moxifloxacin, a CT scan on November 16, 2022 (Figure 1D-F) showed that patch shadows and ground glass shadows in the right lower lobe lesions were obviously resolved. After discharge, the patient insisted on taking moxifloxacin orally for one week, but she was unwilling to undergo a recheck chest CT again for a review as her physical condition was good.

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## DISCUSSION

This article reports a rare case of co-infection caused by *C. psittaci* and *T. whipplei*. There are no specific clinical manifestations of psittacosis, and routine detection methods lack sensitivity and specificity, making it difficult to determine the epidemiology of psittacosis. Before 2013, some literature mentioned the occurrence of psittacosis cases, but with the increasing number of poultry raised in households and farms, large-scale outbreaks of psittacosis have frequently occurred, especially since 2020. The majority of transmission modes of psittacosis are limited to human exposure to contaminated birds and their excreta. However, some literature has reported the possibility of human-to-human transmission, and there is no definitive conclusion on whether there is human-to-human transmission in the second and third generations[4]. The diagnosis and treatment of Whipple's disease in the digestive system is relatively mature, but reports of infection in the respiratory system are rare. In addition, strong evidence shows that *T. whipplei* is a pathogen of acute pneumonia. Previous studies have found that *T. whipplei* is detected in the alveolar lavage fluid of patients with immune deficiency and patients with pneumonia who were admitted to intensive care units[10,11]. This evidence strongly supports a link between *T. whipplei* and pulmonary infection. It is noteworthy that *T. whipplei* can also exist in the saliva of asymptomatic patients[12], who inhale pathogenic bacteria from the mouth, leading to pneumonia[13]. In this case, the patient had a clear history of contact with sick parrots, with fever symptoms initially appearing and headache and respiratory symptoms gradually developing during the course of the disease. Hematological examination showed that the hypersensitive C-reactive protein was significantly increased, and transaminase and direct bilirubin were slightly increased. These symptoms and examinations are consistent with psittacosis and *T. whipplei* pneumonia, and tNGS testing confirmed the presence of *C. psittaci* and *T. whipplei* in the alveolar lavage fluid.

In clinical practice, traditional microbial culture methods and empirical diagnosis are still the mainstream, and the efficiency of traditional pathogen diagnosis methods is not high. Bacterial cultivation takes a long time, and in clinical practice, it is usually not possible to wait until the pathogenic microorganisms have been reported before taking medication. In addition, the positive rate of microbial culture is relatively low, resulting in many pathogenic infections that cannot obtain microorganisms. The emergence of high-throughput sequencing technology has improved this situation to some extent. At present, a variety of high-throughput sequencing technology have been used for the identification of pathogenic microorganisms in clinical infectious diseases, especially when there is a lack of diagnostic clues, it

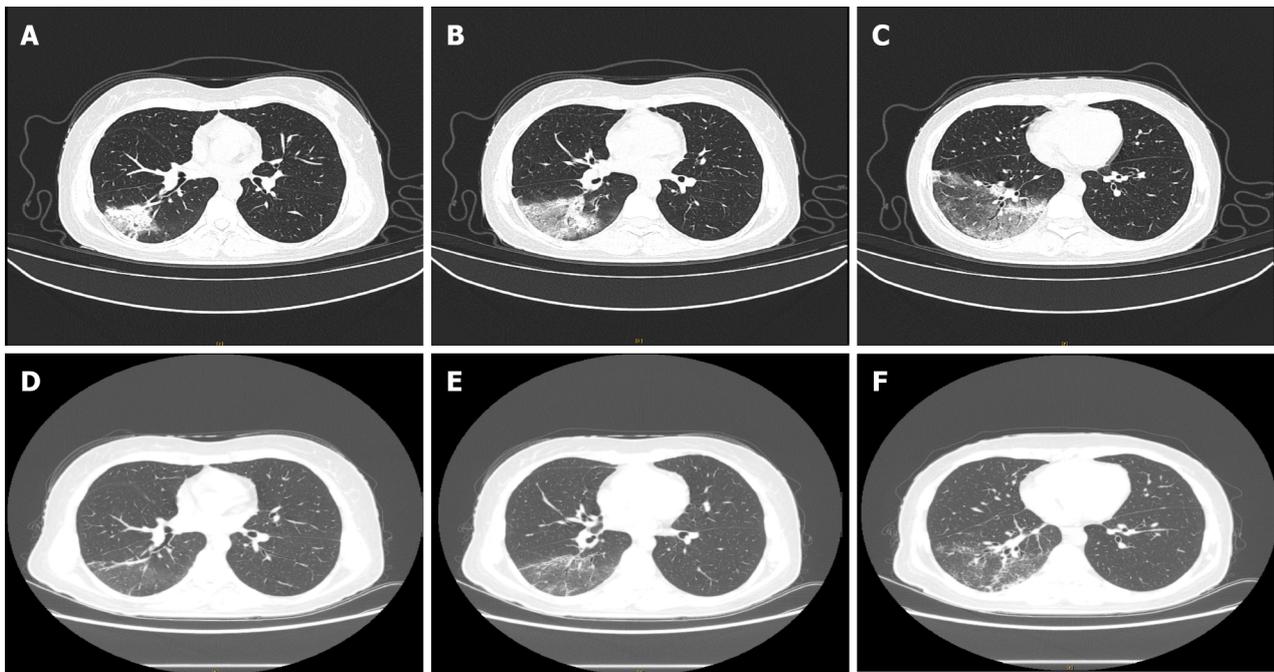
**Table 1 Results of blood tests on admission**

Blood tests	Results	Normal range
White blood cells (/L)	$5.78 \times 10^9$	$3.5 \times 10^9$ - $9.5 \times 10^9$
Neutrophils (%)	70.5	40.0-75.0
Lymphocytes (%)	22.2	20.0-50.0
Red blood cells (/L)	$4.2 \times 10^{12}$	$3.8 \times 10^{12}$ - $5.1 \times 10^{12}$
Haemoglobin (g/L)	119	115-150
Platelets (/L)	$186 \times 10^9$	$125 \times 10^9$ - $350 \times 10^9$
Total protein (g/L)	68.9	65.0-85.0
Albumin (g/L)	42.0	40.0-55.0
Total bilirubin (umol/L)	16.3	< 23.0
Direct bilirubin (umol/L)	9.4	< 6.8
Aspartate aminotransferase (IU/L)	53	13.0-35.0
Alanine aminotransferase (IU/L)	61	7.0-40.0
Lactate dehydrogenase (IU/L)	431.2	120.0-250.0
Creatinine (umol/L)	48.1	41.0-73.0
Sodium (mmol/L)	128	137.0-147.0
Potassium (mmol/L)	3.08	3.5-5.5
Chloride (mmol/L)	92.4	99-110
Hypersensitive C-reactive (mg/L)	165.75	0.5-10
Procalcitonin (ng/mL)	< 0.05	< 0.5
Prothrombin time (s)	13.5	9-14
Activated partial thromboplastin time (s)	28.9	20-40

IU: International unit.

has significant advantages in identifying pathogenic microorganisms. According to different detection strategies, high-throughput sequencing methods are mainly divided into tNGS, mNGS and WGS. MNGS technology is to directly conduct unbiased detection and sequence analysis of all nucleic acids in the specimen, including but not limited to the detection of pathogenic bacteria nucleic acids, and also includes the nucleic acid detection of other pathogens and a large number of human host cells[14]. Due to the complex and time-consuming data processing of mNGS, it has the characteristics of high cost. In particular, mNGS is greatly influenced by human genes making the results easily misunderstood and interfered with. TNGS is a combination of multiplex PCR amplification and sequencing technology, which can detect dozens to hundreds of common pathogenic microorganisms and their virulence and drug resistance genes in samples. Through targeted amplification, it can improve the reliability of pathogen detection. At the same time, it can also provide personalized medication tips for suspected pathogenic microorganisms according to different infection sites. Because only specific target regions need to be sequenced, data processing and analysis are usually easier, making it faster and more economical. However, as mentioned earlier, due to the high cost and time-consuming nature of mNGS, the clinical application of pathogen metagenome sequencing is still limited to a small range, leaving a collaborative space for tNGS. But rather than replacing the application space of mNGS in clinical practice with tNGS, the two complement each other and jointly improve the efficiency of hospital pathogen diagnosis. An article published in 2022 pointed out that there is no significant difference in the detection efficiency of bacteria, fungi, and viruses between mNGS and tNGS, but the removal of human genetic background by tNGS may affect the detection rate of G-negative bacteria, viruses, and intracellular bacteria, leading to higher false-negatives[15].

The guidelines are consistent with the literature recommendations for psittacosis. The first-line medication is tetracyclines, with a duration of at least 7-14 d, and the second choice of antibiotics include azithromycin, clarithromycin, erythromycin, and chloramphenicol[1]. There is not much evidence for the clinical use of quinolones alone. However, there are also studies suggesting that moxifloxacin has an anti-chlamydia effect, and moxifloxacin in this case has shown a good therapeutic effect, so first-line treatment is not used. This case also provides new evidence for the use of quinolones for psittacosis. The drugs for the treatment of *T. whipplei* mainly include penicillin, streptomycin, tetracycline, ceftriaxone, meropenem, compound trimethoprim, doxycycline and hydroxychloroquine. In the past, tetracycline was once listed as a first-line treatment drug, but a high recurrence rate was observed after treatment[16]. However, most of the treatments target digestive disorders caused by *T. whipplei*, and there are few reports on the treatment experience of



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**Figure 1 Chronological computed tomography of the chest demonstrating changes in the lungs.** A-C: Multiple large uneven ground glass shadows in the lower lobe of the right lung, with grid shadows visible inside, close to the pleura, as shown on a computed tomography on November 6, 2022; D-F: The patchy and ground glass shadows in the lesion of the lower lobe of the right lung were clearly resolved on November 16, 2022.

pneumonia related to Whipple's disease. Therefore, there is still no broad consensus on the treatment of Whipple's disease-related pneumonia, and there is a lack of clinical treatment experience for a large number of cases. The anti-infection treatment plans are all empirical treatments, lacking sufficient evidence support.

## CONCLUSION

Collectively, we believe that tNGS is promising in the diagnosis of unexplained pneumonia, and quinolones are effective in the treatment of psittacosis and Whipple's disease, which deserves more clinical attention.

## FOOTNOTES

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