**Patterned progression of gut microbiota associated with necrotizing enterocolitis and late onset sepsis in preterm infants: a prospective study in a Chinese neonatal intensive care unit**

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**ABSTRACT**

Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) and late-onset sepsis(LOS) are two common premature birth complications with high morbidity and mortality. Recent studies in Europe and America have linked gut microbiota dysbiosis to their etiologie. However, similar studies in Asian population remain scant. In this pilot study, we profiled gut microbiota of 24 Chinese preterm infants from birth till deadth or discharge from NICU. Four of them developed NEC and three developed LOS. Unexpectedly, we detected highly-diversified microbiota with similar compositions in all patients shortly after birth. However, as patients aged, the microbial diversities in case groups differed significantly from that of the control group. These differences emerged after the third day of life and persisted throughout the course of both NEC and LOS. Using Zero-Inflated Beta Regression Model with Random Effects (ZIBR), we detected higher Bacillus(p = 0.032) and Solibacillus (p = 0.047) before the onset of NEC and LOS. During NEC progression, Enterococcus, Streptococcus and Peptoclostridium were the dominant genera while during LOS progression, Klebsiella was the only dominant genus that was also detected by the diagnostic hemoculture. These results warrant further studies to identify causative microbial patterns and underlying mechanisms.

**INTRODUCTION**

The gut microbiota is a key contributor to human health. Imbalance of the microbial community, termed dysbiosis, is associated with various diseases, such as obesity and diabetes(Bouter et al., 2017; Rosenbaum et al., 2015; Winer et al., 2016; Cani, 2019; Zmora et al., 2019), immunity related diseases(Vogelzang et al., 2018; Pronovost and Hsiao, 2019; Vatanen et al., 2016), neurodevelopmental disorders(Sampson and Mazmanian, 2015; Pronovost and Hsiao, 2019), cardiovascular diseases(Tang et al., 2017; Jie et al., 2017; Jonsson and Ba ̈ckhed, 2017) and cancers(Gagliani et al., 2014; Irraza ́bal et al., 2014; Sears and Garrett, 2014).

The microbiota in newborn infants undergoes dynamic changes in composition, abundance and diversity before reaching a homeostasis status at around three years old(Yatsunenko et al., 2012; Ba ̈ckhed et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2018). Temporal colonization pattern of the intestinal microbiota during early stages of life may have important contribution to the long term health of individuals. Early life microbiota disruption had been associated with the development of metabolic and immunological diseases such as Type I diabetes(Giongo et al., 2011; Vatanen et al., 2018), asthma(Stokholm et al., 2018) and allergy(Madan et al., 2012a; Savage et al., 2018).

In preterm infants, common medical practices including cesarean sections, formula feeding, sterile incubator nursing and extensive use of broad-spectrum antibiotics may limit normal microbiota acquisition and development(La Rosa et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2015; Deweerdt, 2018). As a result, abnormal microbiota colonization of the gut may subject then to complications such as necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) and late onset sepsis (LOS)(Sharon et al., 2015; Cernada et al., 2016).

Necrotizing enterocolitis is characterized by rapid ischemic necrosis of intestinal mucosa, resulting in high morbidity (2% - 7%) and mortality (15% -30%)(Neu and Walker, 2011; Stoll et al., 2015). Its etiologies remain largely unknown and likely to be multifactorial. Previous studies in European and American countries have associated microbial dysbiosis to NEC onset. Reduction in microbiota diversity and unusual species colonization were observed in NEC patients(Jacquot et al., 2011; Warner et al., 2016). No causative species have been identified so far. However, increase in Proteobacteria phyla and decrease in Firmicutes was observed before NEC onset(Mai et al., 2011; Zhou et al., 2015). In addition, blooming of Gammaproteobacteria and under-representation of Negativicutes was associated with disease progression(Warner et al., 2016).

Late onset sepsis (LOS) is another common life-threatening disease for preterm infants. It is commonly defined as systemic infection with isolation of a bacterial pathogen from the bloodstream after 72 hours of life(Rao et al., 2016; Pickering et al., 2012). Preterm infants have immature gastrointestinal and immune system. Therefore, it is easier for pathogenic bacteria or bacterial toxins to enter the bloodstream that may cause systemic inflammation(Schwiertz et al., 2003; Bezirtzoglou et al., 2011; Cernada et al., 2016; Sharon et al., 2015; Korpela et al., 2018), thus making the intestine a potential source of infections and inflammation. Previous studies showed that the LOS patients’ gut microbiota was less diversified, and dominated by Staphylococci and Enterobacter but underrepresented by probiotic Bifidobacteria(Madan et al., 2012b; Tarr and Warner, 2016; Stewart et al., 2017; Korpela et al., 2018; Ficara et al., 2018).

China has a high rate of preterm birth rate at 7.1% (Blencowe et al., 2012). Continuous improvements in neonatal health care has greatly improved survival of preterm infants in China. However, it also increases the risk of developing NEC and LOS. Thus, elucidating their pathogenesis and developing preventive strategies would greatly benefit the health of preterm infants. Hence, we carried out a longitudinal pilot study to profile the microbiota of Chinese preterm NEC and LOS patients, with the aim to examine if similar alternations of microbiota correlate with onset and progression among Chinese patients. Consistent with previous studies in western countries, we observed lower bacterial diversity among Chinese NEC and LOS patients. However, we found that Chinese patients showed different bacterial compositions compared to western patients.

**MATERIALS & METHODS**

Ethics

This study was approved by the joint committee of ethics of Shanghai Children’s Medical Center, Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine (SCMCIRB-K2013022). Detailed written informed consent was obtained from parents before enrolment.

*Patients*

Newly born preterm infants with gestational age less than 33 weeks and the intestine of normal length were enrolled in the study shortly after birth at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) in Shanghai Children’s Medical Center from July 2013 to December 2014. The exclusion criteria were 1) early-onset sepsis, 2) hepatic diseases, 3) renal impairment (Cr> 88µM), 4) intestinal obstruction, 5) need for large chest or abdominal surgeries (except for male circumcision or PDA ligation), 6) more than four days of estimated PN support to supply over 50% of daily caloric intake, 7) intravenous antibiotics administration (except prophylactic regimen of cefotaxime, piperacillin-tazobactam and/or metronidazole), 8) oral antibiotics administration, 9) grossly bloody stools at admission, and 10) over five days old.

NEC cases were defined as infants who met the criteria for Stage II and Stage III NEC diagnosis(Bell et al., 1978), including radiographic intestinal dilation, ileus, pneumatosis intestinalis, and/or absent bowel sounds with or without abdominal tenderness, and/or mild metabolic acidosis and thrombocytopenia. An LOS case was defined if an infant 1) had a positive hemoculture or other suspicious loci of infection after 72 hours of life, or 2) presented with septic signs/symptoms reviewed and diagnosed independently by at least two neonatologists, and had been responding well with advanced antibiotics (e.g., Meropenem) after diagnosis. Infants with no infectious complications were regarded as controls.

*Sample collection and handling*

Fecal sample collection starts from neonatal meconium till decease or discharge, whichever comes first.Although our aim was to collect the samples on a daily basis, due to working shifts and clinical matters, we set seven days as the maximum interval between two collections from each infant. Every sample was collected from infants’ diaper with a sterile spatula into cryogenic vials within 30 minutes of defecation. Then the sample was immediately placed on dry ice and stored at - 80°C within 30 minutes without additives. All samples were collected and stored before knowing the diagnosis of respective patients.

*DNA extraction and quality control amplification and 16s rRNA gene sequencing*

Microbial genomic DNA was isolated from each fecal specimen using the E.Z.N.A.® Soil DNA Kit (Omega Bio-Tek, Norcross, GA, U.S.) according to manufacturer’s protocols. The concentration and purity of the DNA were determined by NanoDrop 2000 UV-vis spectrophotometer (Thermo Scientific, Wilmington, USA), and the DNA quality was checked by 1% agarose gel electrophoresis.

*Broad-range PCR and High-throughput Sequencing of 16s rRNA gene amplicons*

The V3-V4 hypervariable regions of the bacterial 16S rRNA gene were amplified by PCR from each sample using bacterialarchaeal primers 338F (5’-ACTCCTACGGGAGGCAGCAG-3’) and 806R (5’- GGACTACHVGG GTWTCTAAT-3’) using thermocycler PCR system (GeneAmp 9700, ABI, USA). The PCR reactions were as follows: 3 min of denaturation at 95 °C, 27 cycles of 30 s at 95 °C, 30 s annealing at 55 °C and 45 s elongation at 72 °C, and a final extension at 72 °C for 10 min. The PCR reactions were performed in triplicate, with each 20 μ L mixture containing 4 μ L 5X FastPfu Buffer, 2 μ L 2.5 mM dNTPs, 0.8 μL of each primer (5 μM), 0.4 μL FastPfu Polymerase (TransGen Biotech, Beijing, China) and 10 ng template DNA. PCR products were separated from impurities and genomic DNA by running in 2% agarose gels. The PCR bands were further purified using the AxyPrep DNA Gel Extraction Kit (Axygen Biosciences, Union City, CA, USA), and quantified using QuantiFluorTM-ST (Promega, USA) according to the manufacturer’s protocols. Equimolar amounts of purified amplicons were pooled and paired ended sequenced (2 x 300) on an Illumina MiSeq platform (Illumina, San Diego, USA) according to the standard protocols of Majorbio Bio-Pharm Technology Co. Ltd. (Shanghai, China). The reads were de-multiplexed using the Illumina software and separate FASTQ files were generated for each specimen and deposited to the Sequence Read Archive NCBI under the BioProject accession PRJNA470548. Another public archive repository is available at figshare doi: 10.6084/m9.figshare.7205102

Raw *Data processing*

Raw data was processed according to the standard protocols provided by Majorbio Bio-Pharm Technology Co. Ltd. (Shanghai China) as previously described(Liu et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). In short, the protocols are as the followings: raw sequencing data was de-multiplexed. Sequence reads were subjected to quality filtering utilizing Trimmomatic software(Bolger et al., 2014) and were truncated at any site with an Phred score <20 over a 50bp-sized window. Barcode matching with the primer mismatch from 0 to 2 nucleotides was adopted and reads containing ambiguous characters were removed. After trimming, FLASh(Fast Length Adjustment of Short Read)(Magocˇ and Salzberg, 2011), a read pre-processing software, assembled and merged the paired-end reads from fragments and generated >10 bp overlapped, with the dead match ratio 0.2. Unassembled reads were discarded. From the 192 fecal samples sequenced, a total of 7,472,400 optimized V3-V4 tags of 16s rRNA gene sequences were generated(Table S1).

To unbiasedly compare all the samples at the same sequencing depth, the ”sub.sample” command of mothur program(version1.30.1)(Schloss et al., 2009) was used for normalization to the smallest sample size. Chimera was detected and removed by UCHIME Algorithm. The effective reads were then sorted by cluster size and processed using Operational Taxonomic Units (OTUs) with 97% similarity cutoff UPARSE-OTU algorithm (implementing ”cluster otus” command)(Edgar, 2013) in USE- ARCH(v10)(UPARSE version 7.1). The taxonomy of each 16S rRNA gene sequence was analyzed by RDP Classifier algorithm(Wang et al., 2007) against the Silva (SSU128) 16S rRNA database(Quast et al., 2012) using confidence threshold of 70%. Each sequence was assigned the taxonomy by QIIME(Caporaso et al., 2010). The representative sequences were allocated phylogenetically down to the domain, phylum, class, order, family, and genus levels(Table S2). The relative abundance of a given taxonomic group was calculated as the percentage of assigned sequences over total sequences.

Within-sample diversity(alpha diversity), including Shannon index and observed species richness (Sobs), were obtained using the ”summary.single” command of mothur program(version1.30.1)(Schloss et al., 2009). Between-sample diversity(beta diversity) was obtained by calculating weighted UniFrac distances between samples.

*Statistical and Bioinformatics Analyses*

Disease-related Time Interval Definition

Considering that the sampling and disease onset timepoints for each patient were not identical, to illustrated the continuous longitudinal and repeated nature of the sampling and its relationship with onset and progression of diseases, we divided the whole sampling span into 7 time intervals:

1. early post-partum(EPP): within 3 days after birth

2. early pre-onset(EPO): from the end of EPP to at least four days before disease onset

3. late pre-onset(LPO): from the end of EPO to the start of onset; for control group patients, the equivalent onset time is set at 16 days of life, as is the average diagnosis age of NEC and LOS groups.

4. early disease(ED): first third interval of whole disease span; for the control group, the equivalent ED interval is from the day 16 to discharge.

5. middle disease(MD): second third interval of whole disease span 6. late disease(LD): last third interval of whole disease span

7. post disease(PD): from the end of disease to discharge time-point

Modeling Strategies for Taxonomy Comparisons

To compare the dynamics of microbiota diversity and relative taxonomic abundance preceding the disease, we applied the EPP, EPO, LPO and ED interval among all patients into our model or comparisons. To compare the microbiome profile right after birth until disease alleviation, we applied EPP, EPO, LPO, ED, MD and LD interval of NEC and LOS patients into our model or comparisons.

Diversity Analyses

The average of α diversity of each patient was calculated, if more than two samples were available within one analysis interval. Kruskal Wallis tests were used to compare the overall alpha diversity differences. The Mann Whitney U test was then applied in comparisons between two adjacent time intervals. Differences in alpha diversity over time were analyzed by a two-way repeated measures ANOVA, with time interval (EPP, EPO, LPO, ED, MD, LD, PD) as a within-subject factor and group (NEC, LOS, control) as a between-subject factor.

Taxonomy Comparisons

The average taxonomy relative abundances, if more than two were available within one analysis interval, of each patient was calculated. Zero-Inflated Beta Regression Model with Random Effects (ZIBR) and Linear Mixed-effects Model (LME) were used to test the association between OTU relative abundance and clinical covariates (diseases-related time intervals) for longitudinal microbiome data (Chen and Li, 2016). ZIBR and nlme(Pinheiro et al., 2018) R packages were utilized for each model.

Scripts and Figures Archiving

Figures were generated with the ”ggpubr”(Kassambara, 2017), ”ggplot2”(Wickham, 2016) and ”ggsci”(Xiao, 2018) packages using R(v.3.5.1). Scripts for modeling and figures plotting, input and output files, figures are available at our [github repository](https://github.com/jiayiliujiayi/NEC-LOS-microbiota_pattern_comparison).

**RESULTS**

*Patient and sample characteristics*

From July 2013 to December 2014, a total of 130 preterm infants admitted to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) of Shanghai Children’s Medical Center met the criteria of our study and a total of 1698 samples were collected. We sequenced 192 fecal samples from 24 well-sampled preterm infants. Fou subsequently developed NEC (2 in stage IIA and 2 in stage IIB) and three LOS (2 with positive hemoculture of Klebsiella pneumoniae; the other 1 was diagnosed upon sepsis-related signs and symptoms, lab test of white blood cells >20 cells/microL and her effective reaction to vancomycin). The remaining 17 were used as matched controls (Figure1, Table S3). Fecal samples were collected between days 1 and 69 of life. Numbers of samples collected and interval of sampling varied among patients but met our preset criteria of less than 7 days between sampling. The average number of sample collected for NEC, LOS and control patients was 11, 14 and 6 respectively. Number of sample per patient was higher in NEC and LOS group because lengths of hospitalization were longer for both conditions (p = 0.046).

All 24 infants sampled were delivered by cesarean section, fed on infant formula and prescribed with prophylactic antibiotics regimen (cefotaxime, piperacillin-tazobactam and/or metronidazole) right after they were admitted to our NICU. No infant was prescribed probiotics during the study. There was no significant difference in gestational age (p = 0.074), birth weight (p = 0.111) or gender proportions (p = 0.822) among three groups. The average age at diagnosis for both disease group was 16 days and there was no statistical difference between the groups (p = 0.629) (Table 1). Therefore, we assigned day 16 until discharge as early disease interval, with day 4-8 as early pre-onset interval and day 9-15 as late pre-onset interval for the control group.

*Longitudinal Microbiome Diversity of NEC and LOS patients*

To get an overview of gut microbiota in patients, we analyzed the microbial richness of the NEC and LOS patients over time. Similar to the control group, the case groups showed decreasing trends in observed species (Sobs) from early post-partum stage (EPP) to early disease (ED) stage (Fig2 (A) control group, p <0.01; (B) NEC group, p = 0.044; (C) LOS group, p = 0.013; Dataset S1, Sheet ”Sobs” two way RM ANOVA, p <0.0001). The greatest decrease in richness was between early pre-onset (EPO) to late pre-onset (LPO). However, the decrease in the disease groups was less significant than the control group (control group p = 0.0004, NEC group p = 0.18, LOS group p = 0.066). The Sobs then stabilized from LPO onward with no significant difference between adjacent time intervals.

Next, we analyzed gut microbiome evenness represented over time. Similar to Sobs, the shannon indices decreased significantly from early post-partum (EPP) to early disease (ED) stage (Fig3 (A) control group 2.768 to 1.004 , p = 0.04; (B) NEC group, 3.141 to 0.578, p = 0.01; (C) LOS group, 2.641 to 0.470, p = 0.01).

Two way RM ANOVA showed significant shannon index divergent among three groups before disease onset (Dataset S1, sheet ”Shannon”, EPP to ED, p = 0.0017). Moreover, during early disease stage, the shannon indices were different among three groups (Fig4, facet ”early disease”, p = 0.0037), suggesting that microbiota distortion may precede NEC and LOS onset. As diseases progressed, the NEC group differed significantly with the the LOS group during middle disease interval but insignificantly during late disease interval (Fig4 facet ”middle disease”, p = 0.034; facet ”late disease”, p = 0.750). Finally, alleviation of both diseases increased the shannon indices back to the early pre-onset levels (Fig3 (B) NEC group. early pre-onset at 1.925 vs. post disease at 1.320, p = 0.79; (C) LOS group, early pre-onset at 2.473 vs. post disease at 1.463, p = 0.16).

*Kinetics of Microbiome Composition*

To compare the beta-diversity of the three groups over time, we applied Principal Component Analysis (PCoA) to weighted UniFrac distance matrix. During early post-partum interval, beta-diversity among three groups was the lowest (PC1=33.01%) (Fig. 5 a). Then beta diversity continued to drift away from one another. The first principal coordinate one (PC1) increased from 33.01% at early post-partum to 35.23% at early pre-onset stage, 38.36% at late-onset stage and eventually reaching 42.32% at early disease stage (Fig. 5 b to d). This continuous increase in beta-diversity suggested that the phylogenetic composition of the patients’ microbiome started to deviate from the normal control before the onset of diseases. As disease progressed, the phylogenetic similarity between the NEC and the LOS disease groups separated further and peaked at 59.53% at middle disease stage then came down gradually to 42.8% at post disease stage (Fig. 5 e to g). This trend in phylogenetic dissimilarity suggested that the microbiome composition of the NEC and LOS patients might have deviated from normal even before the onset of diseases. While the further separation between the NEC and the LOS groups could be a result of different treatment strategies. These results suggested that the patients’ microbiome might have deviated from normal before the onset of diseases while the further separation between the NEC and the LOS groups could be a result of different treatment strategies.

*Colonization Trend at Genus Level*

In the analyses of intestinal microbiome alpha(Fig2) and beta diversity(Fig3, Fig4), detectable differences was observed among the three groups, especially during transition from LPO to ED stage. This indicated that the microbiota assembly differences between the case groups and control group. To further investigate which microbiota composition was correlated with the onset and/or progression of NEC and LOS, we tracked the longitudinal compositional changes in genera abundance. We filtered the genus of over 10% relative abundance among all samples and plotted relative abundance over time(Fig6).

At early post-partum stage, all three groups showed high proportion of Lactococcus, Bacillus and Pseudomonas. However, ZIBR model the disease groups showed significantly higher OTUs that matched to Bacillus (NEC 15.05% and LOS 15.97% compare to 6.02% of control, p = 0.032) and Solibacillus(8.88% in NEC and 9.61% in LOS compare to 3.65% of control, p = 0.047) from the case groups (Dataset S2). Moreover, Enterococcus proportion (Fig6a, purple area) was much higher in LOS patients (20.72%) than the normal controls (6.66%, Fig. 6a, purple area) but almost absent in NEC patients (0.51%) (Fig6b). While all three groups showed increases in Klebsiella and Escherichia-Shigella, and decreases in Lactococcus from EPP to ED, the rates of change were different among the three groups. The LOS group exhibited the most drastic changes, with rapidly increased of Klebsiella (from 4.71% to 58,90%), Escherichia-Shigella (from 2.02% to 18.16%) and Streptococcus (from 1.22% to 12.68%).(Fig6c). Together, these three genus accounted for almost 100% of all bacteria (Fig6(C)). In addition, Lactococcus decreased more rapidly than the other groups, from 24.54% at EPP to 0.94% before LPO (Fig6(C) magenta area).

Besides, increase of Klebsiella was the most minimal in NEC patients (Fig6b grey area, from 7.17% at EPP to 35.63% at ED). Moreover, a rapid surge of Enterococcus, Staphylococcus and Streptococcus from EPO to ED was only observed in NEC patients (Fig. 6b, purple, dark and light blue area). As disease progressed with medical intervention, genus in case groups underwent another round of drastic changes. Most notably, the fluctuation of Enterococcus, Klebsiella, Staphylococcus and Peptoclostridium during the disease stages (Fig6b and c, stage ED to LD), which might be resultant from different healthcare strategies applied in two groups. Interestingly, as patients approached remission, the composition became more balanced, more resembled that of the normal control, except for a higher level of Clostridium. In summary, relative to patients in the control group, we observed different patterns of temporal alterations in bacterial composition among NEC and LOS patients. Rapid changes in relative abundance of certain genera were revealed as early as early pre-onset of stages and were the most notable in LOS patients.

**DISCUSSION**  
In this pilot study, we intend to investigate the etiopathology of NEC and LOS in Chinese preterm infants from the perspective of intestinal microbiota. We profiled the gut microbiome of NEC and LOS preterm infants from birth to decease/discharge. Some of our findings is similar to previous larger scale studies. Mainly, infants who developed NEC or LOS exhibit a different gut microbiota colonization pattern relative to the controls. Case groups showed decline in diversity, although to different extent. Moreover, NEC and LOS infants’ intestines were prone to harbor potential pathogens prior to and after disease onset, such as Enterococcus, Staphylococcus, Peptoclostridium and Streptococcus. There were also findings unique to this study that we are going to discuss in the following paragraphs.

To our knowledge, few studies has analyzed stool bacterial alpha diversity in preterm infants as early as three days after birth. Unexpectedly, within three days after birth (i.e. early post-partum interval), the bacterial diversity of all three groups were the highest compared to the following intervals. At this point, we cannot conclude that such high bacterial richness and evenness within three days after birth

is universal. More data, especially from other countries, are needed to support this finding. After three days, the microbial alpha diversity exhibited a declining trend in both disease groups and the control group. The number of colonized species (sobs index) during this interval, in line with previous works(Mai et al., 2011, 2013), remained similar before disease onset in both case and control groups, suggesting a minor role of bacterial richness in the disease onset. Besides, a rapid decline in alpha diversity during the pre-onset stages was observed. This could be the result of administration of the standardized antibiotic regimen right after admission into our NICU. However, previous studies showed that the pervasive effect of antibiotics in reducing richness and evenness arose only after 1 week to 2 months of administration(DiGiulio et al., 2008; Dethlefsen and Relman, 2011; Fouhy et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2014; Tanaka et al., 2009). Thus, more research is needed to identify if additional factor(s) is involved in this rapid decline.

The role of empiric prophylactic antibiotics in NEC or LOS are controversial. In animal models, antibiotics eliminating Gram-negative bacteria enhance gut function and diminish mucosal injury to the bowel thus preventing necrotizing enterocolitis or bacterial leakage into the bloodstream(Carlisle et al., 2011; Jensen et al., 2013; Birck et al., 2015). In clinical practices, broad-spectrum antibiotics (the most commonly prescribed medicine in the NICU) are recommended to empirically prevent and treat both NEC and LOS(Bury and Tudehope, 2001; Brook, 2008; Kimberlin et al., 2018). However, antibiotics can further induce microbiome dysbiosis that may increase the risk of developing these diseases(Gibson et al., 2015; Kuppala et al., 2011; Martinez et al., 2017; Cantey et al., 2018). Our results showed limited differences in bacterial diversity and composition between two case groups and the control group despite continuously antibiotics administration. Although our results are in line with the dysbiotic effect of antibiotics, there was not enough evidence to support whether antibiotics per se induced or prevented NEC and LOS. Further studies are needed to confirm the causative relationships.

Furthermore, microbiota beta-diversity, which measures the phylogenetic similarity of stool microbiota, drifted away continuously among three groups before the onset of both disease. These findings were inconsistent with a previous study where the microbiota of NEC patients were shown to be similar to that of the healthy controls at three days before onset(Mai et al., 2011). With regards to the LOS patients, it is also inconsistent with previous study where similar microbiota diversity was observed in LOS patients during the disease and 72 hours before onset(Mai et al., 2013). These discrepancies could be a result of differences in collection time points or differences in patients’ demography. Further study is necessary to address this issues. As disease progressed, the beta-diversity of the NEC group and the LOS group separated further but converged again when diseases were alleviated. The exact cause of this divergence was not clear. It could be related to different treatment strategies or some intrinsic pathophysiology differences of the two diseases. Further studies should provide more insight.

In addition to bacterial diversity, we also tracked longitudinal changes in composition at genus level by plotting the relative abundance over time. Overall, the control group exhibited more stable microbiota assembly, without drastic fluctuation in genus abundance and with less dominance of facultative anaerobes such as Enterococcus and Staphylococcus(Gibson et al., 2015; La Rosa et al., 2014; Grier et al., 2017). Based on our ZIBR model, an over-represented Bacillus or Solibacillus were detected during the pre-onset stages in case groups. However, both genera diminished after disease onset suggesting that the initial microbiota composition in preterms might contribute to their future health outcomes. Previous studies also observed a surge in Proteobacteria phyla(Mai et al., 2013, 2011) preceding LOS and NEC onset. In line with this, LOS patients in our cohort were also characterized by higher abundance of Klebsiella in their intestine communities. On the contrary, NEC infants presented overgrowth of Streptococcus and Staphylococcus (both belong to phylum Firmicutes) before disease onset. Further work is warranted to identify specific genera and trends in association with the onset of NEC and/or LOS.

Diarrhea is one of the typical symptoms in NEC patients and Peptoclostridium is conventionally regarded as the pathogen that cause hospital-acquired infectious diarrhea(Rodriguez et al., 2016; Pereira et al., 2016). In our study, we identified a transient bloom of Peptoclostridium in late NEC stage that coincided with the diarrhea symptom, possibly explaining the mechanism of common diarrhea symptom in NEC patients. Moreover, mucosal-adhering bacteria such as Enterococcus and Streptococcus were highly represented in pediatric enterocolitis(Normann et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2016). Consistent with this, NEC patients from our cohort exhibited a higher abundance of Enterococcus during disease stage.

In contrast, the composition of our LOS patient samples was very different from previous studies where Enterobacteria and Staphylococcus were identified as the most prevalent genera(Stewart et al., 2017; Mai et al., 2013). In our cohort of LOS patients, Klebsiella was the most dominated genus. LOS is frequently caused by organisms, mostly bacteria, that translocate from the intestinal tract to bloodstream. Consistently, Klebsiella was detected in hemoculture in two out of two of our LOS patients (hemoculture was not performed for the third patient). In addition, Klebsiella pneumoniae is the most common causes of sepsis in preterm patients of our hospital (JL and LH personal observation), suggesting that the most dominant and eventually infectious bacteria may be more specific to the environment.

Another notable point in our cohort was the mostly absence of Bifidobacteria, an anaerobe that can ferment milk oligosaccharides and thus commonly detected among breast-fed infants( (Gomez-Gallego et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2017). We speculate that this extremely low level in our cohort was due to the lack of breast-feeding, nurtured in the sterile NICU environment, continuous administration of antibiotics or the combinations of the above. Although Bifidobacteria has been generally considered probiotics that serves to protect neonates against necrotizing enterocolitis and systemic infection(Nakayama et al., 2003; Khodayar-Pardo et al., 2014; Hermansson et al., 2019), recent randomized controlled trials showed little effect of Bifidobacteria to NEC(Hays et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2019). Further studies on the role of probiotics in optimizing preterm infants’ microbiome should address their effectiveness in preventing NEC and LOS.

Our study was limited to only one hospital in one specific region (Shanghai) in China so how far we can extrapolate our findings a larger population remains to be determined. Besides, our sample size was relatively small since both diseases are rare(Neu and Walker, 2011). Among the 1148 preterm infants admitted within July 2013 to December 2014, only five developed NEC and seven developed LOS. Nevertheless, this pilot study has provided essential information about NEC and LOS preterm patients within the Chinese population and serves as a starting point for further understanding the etiology and pathogenesis of both disease in the nation and the rest of the world.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this longitudinal study, we used next generation sequencing to profile microbiota of 24 Chinese preterm infants from birth to discharge. Among them, four developed NEC and three developed LOS. To our knowledge, this is the first profiling NEC and LOS patients among Asian population. Intestinal microbiota diversity reduction and phylogenetic similarity away from the control infants over time is associated with both NEC and LOS onset. Over-growth of potentially pathogenic genera were recognized, i.e.Enterococcus, Streptococcus and Peptoclostridium in NEC cases; Klebsiella in LOS cases. In summary, our findings suggests that both NEC and LOS are dynamic process involving abnormal microbiota assembly. This study is a starting point for further studying of microbial factors involved in preterm- associated complications in China. Accumulation of more data within China and perhaps from neighboring countries will allow us to build microbial signatures that can assist early diagnosis and development of novel treatment.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We sincerely thank all the patients and their family in supporting this study. We extend our thanks to the medical and research staffs of the Shanghai Children’s Medical Center. We also thank Ka Ming Pang and Arin Nam for critical reviews of this manuscript.

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