


Trachoma strains in Indigenous Australian populations are variants of urogenital *Chlamydia trachomatis*.

Phil Giffard



## Genesis of study

- Approach from Northern Territory Government, Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)
  - SARC responsibilities include:
    - Clinical examination of possible abuse victims
    - Advise child protection and law enforcement authorities
- SARC's problem:
  - Instances of *Chlamydia trachomatis* detection in children with no other evidence indicating sexual abuse e.g. disclosure.
    - What does one conclude?
    - Local guidelines "STI, (the presence of an STI in a preadolescent is most likely the result of sexual abuse and formal assessment should always be initiated)"
    - What does "most likely" mean, numerically?
- Consequences of wrong call are serious.
  - Other conceivable explanations besides sexual abuse? Opinions differ.




## The sociopolitical context

- 2007 "Little Children are Sacred" report
- 2007 "National Emergency Response" from Australian Commonwealth Government:
  - "The Intervention"
- Subsequent "Stronger Futures" program.
  - More police
  - More community services
  - Controls on pornography and alcohol
  - Welfare quarantining measures
  - Suspension of racial discrimination act




- Highly controversial and polarising
- Real extent of sexual abuse unclear
- Investigation of possible sexual abuse in Indigenous communities: socially and politically highly charged



## Basis of overarching experimental design


- If child sexual abuse is inferred from presence of STI, then...
  - an STI test is a diagnostic test for sexual contact
  - Positive diagnostic test in absence of sexual contact
    - False positive
- Conceivable mechanisms of false positivity tested experimentally to determine frequency.
- **Outputs:** confidence limits on false positive frequencies
- Positive predictive value: needs abuse prevalence in tested population, and sensitivity of STI diagnosis for detecting sexual contact.



## One conceivable event that could give rise to false positives

Autoinoculation/contamination/infection of the urogenital site with *C. trachomatis* material from ocular infection.

This is seen as plausible in areas in which trachoma remains endemic.



## Knowledge gaps

A *C. trachomatis* positive urine specimen could arise from autoinoculation from an ocular infection to the urogenital site.....

- **Knowledge gap:** Are "trachoma strains" of *C. trachomatis* ever seen in urogenital specimens?
  - (Study complete, but not being presented here)
  - This question generates another.....
- **Knowledge gap:** So, just what is a trachoma strain in Australia?
  - Nearly all evidence regarding ocular strain tropism is from overseas, primarily Africa.
- **This presentation:** first genome analysis of Australian trachoma strains of *C. trachomatis*.

## C. trachomatis and tropism



- Serovars defined by Momp/ompA
- Immunodominant cell surface protein
  - Trachoma: Serovars A, B, Ba, C;
  - STIs, non-trachoma ocular infections: Serovars D, E, F, G, H, Ia, J, K
  - Invasive STIs: Serovars L1, L2, L3;
- Most or all of non-trachoma serovars able to cause conjunctivitis (adult or perinatal)
- MLST and whole genome studies to date have indicated that the "trachoma strains" form a monophyletic lineage.

## C. trachomatis tropism in remote Australia looks similar to elsewhere... if you look at ompA



Characterization of *Chlamydia trachomatis* ompA Genotypes Detected in Eye Swab Samples from Remote Australian Communities

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TABLE 1. C. trachomatis serovar distribution in 48 remote Australian Indigenous communities

Serovar	No. of samples with the following serovar
A	1
B	1
C	1
D	1
E	1
F	1
G	1
H	1
Ia	1
J	1
K	1
L1	1
L2	1
L3	1
Other	1
Total	16

TABLE 2. Distribution of C. trachomatis serovars among urine and eye swab specimens in Australia

Serovar	Urine specimens (n=100)	Eye swab specimens (n=100)
A	0	0
B	0	0
C	0	0
D	0	0
E	0	0
F	0	0
G	0	0
H	0	0
Ia	0	0
J	0	0
K	0	0
L1	0	0
L2	0	0
L3	0	0
Other	0	0
Total	0	0

Summary of findings from ocular swabs:

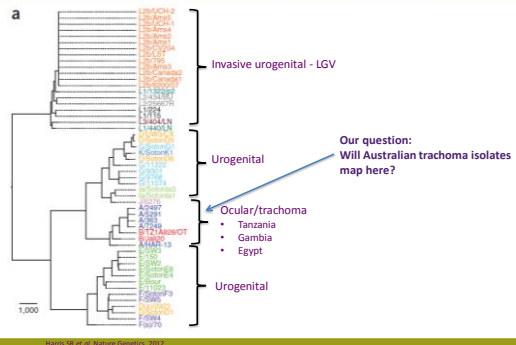
- Serovars C, Ba
- No serovars A or B
- As expected, some urogenital strains in neonates and late teens/adults.
- Urogenital specimens: "normal"

## We set out to revisit this



- Ensure we were looking for the right strains
  - Previous studies were quite small
- Readily available material
  - Mother-Child Study

## Phylogeny of C. trachomatis from genome-wide SNPs



## Mother-child study



- Performed in 1980s-90 by Menzies researchers
- Unique C. trachomatis survey of children's eyes and mothers' UGT, in Top End communities
  - Snap shot of co-existing ocular and UG C. trachomatis serovar proportions

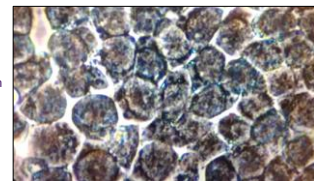
cmty	B eye/naso	B UGT	C eye/naso	C UGT	Ba eye/naso	Ba UGT	UGT serovar, eye/naso	UGT serovar, UGT
1	24 + 4 7 trachoma	2	0	0	11 + 4 4 trachoma	0	3	2
2	0	2	14 8 trachoma	0+1?	0	0	0+1	2
3	0	5+3	0	0	0	0	1	5+3
4	0	4+2	8 3 trachoma	0	0	0	1	10+2
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

## Five frozen Mother-child study isolates were revived into culture.



Sample no	Orig serotype	Age (years)	Trachoma grading
Aus25	Ba	0.51	F <sub>1</sub> P <sub>1</sub> C <sub>1</sub>
Aus28	B	0.73	F <sub>1</sub> P <sub>1</sub> C <sub>1</sub>
Aus30	C	1.22	F <sub>1</sub> P <sub>1</sub> C <sub>1</sub>
Aus33	C	1.21	F <sub>1</sub> P <sub>1</sub> C <sub>1</sub>
Aus36	B	9.25	F <sub>1</sub> P <sub>1</sub> C <sub>1</sub>

Grown in Ian Clarke's lab, University of Southampton

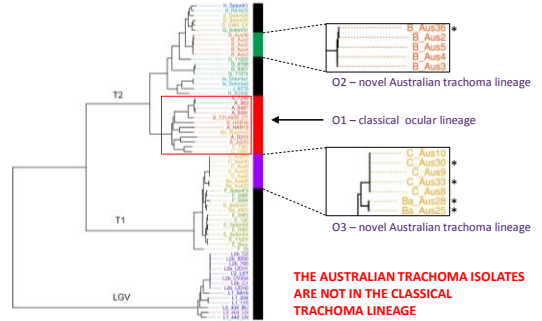


Genome sequenced at the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute 



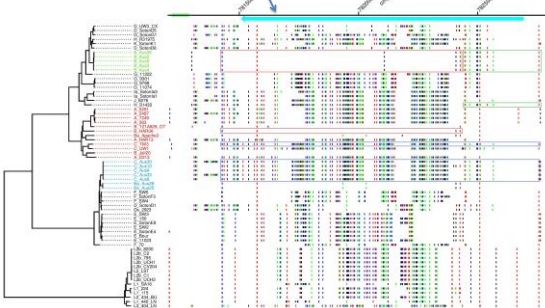
So, where do they fit in the *C. trachomatis* phylogeny?


.... Not with other ocular strains 

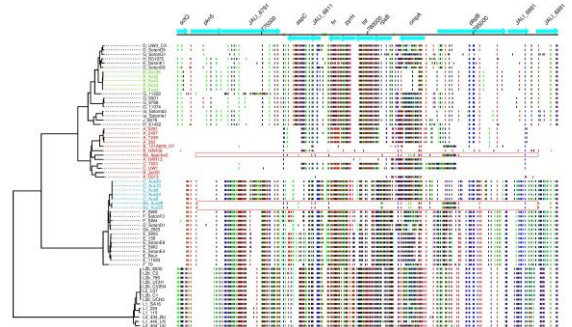


Recombination boundaries near *ompA* defined: Events leading to "B" and "C" lineages involve ~*ompA* only 

Classical trachoma "B\_Jali20" is comparator



Recombination of "Ba" *ompA* variant involves a larger piece of DNA. 



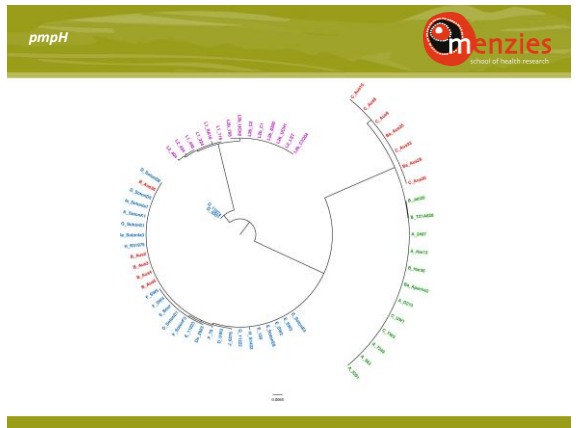
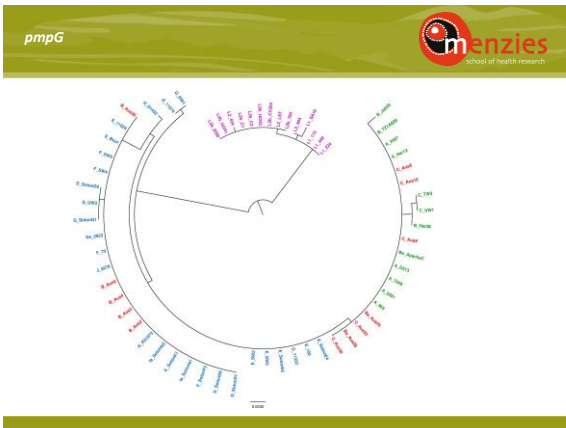
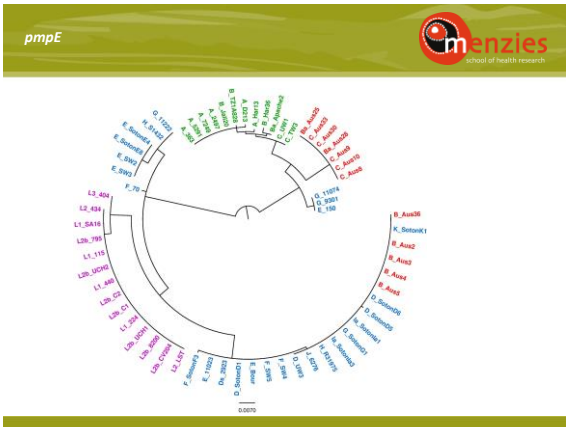
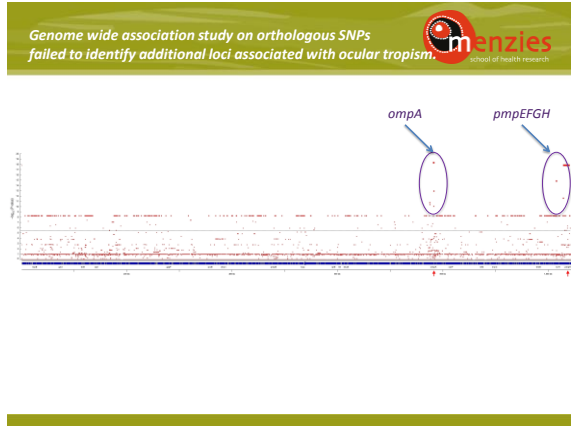
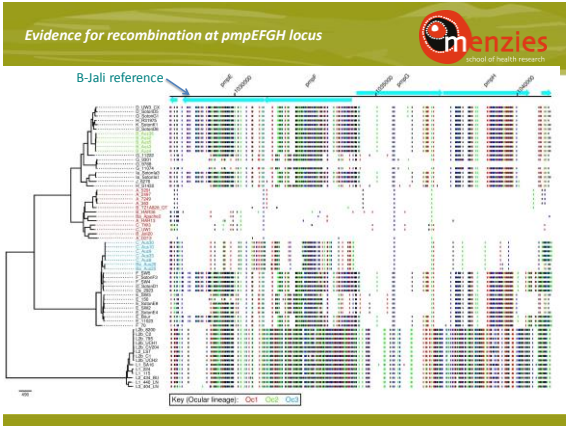
*OmpA* sequences 

ompA genotype (n)	Closest GenBank match	Nucleotide change	Amino acid change
B (5)	B Tunisia864 (D0064280)	C129T*	synonymous
		A154G*	Thr 52 Ala
		A184G*	Met 82 Val
		G186T*	Met 62 Val
		T195C*	synonymous
		T198A*	synonymous
		A228T*	synonymous
Ba (2)	Ba Apache2 (AF063194)	A511G*	Ser 171 Gly
		C662T*	Pro 221 Leu
C (5)	C TW3 (AF352789)	T592C*	Ile 198 Thr
		A571G*	Asn 191 Asp
		G972A*	synonymous
		G1003T*	Ala 335 Ser
		A1063C*	Met 356 Leu

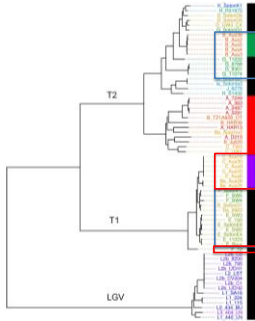
\* Correspond with *ompA* genotype H  
 \* Observed previously in trachoma strains from Australia

Can recombination between the Australian isolates and the classical trachoma lineage be identified anywhere else in the genome? 

- Searched for where our isolates more similar to ocular lineage than other lineages.
  - 1000 bp window
- Only one locus identified: *pmpEFGH*
  - Novel sequence in Ba and C isolates
  - Elevated similarity with classical ocular lineage.
  - Suggests recombination involving unknown strain allied to classical ocular lineage
- No non-*ompA* recombined loci identified in the "B" Australian isolates.



### Trp operons of Australian isolates: Typical for UGT strains

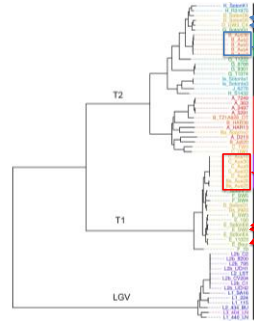


Colour of rectangle indicates  
trp operon sequence

AusB identical to most T2 genotype H  
isolates and diverse T1 UGT isolates

AusBa and AusC identical to F\_70.

### Tarp genes also, consistent with genome-wide phylogeny



Closest relatives to Aus B isolates at *Tarp*

Closest relatives to Aus Ba and AusC  
isolates  
at *Tarp*

### A hint of involvement of *pmpEFGH* in tropism has been seen before...



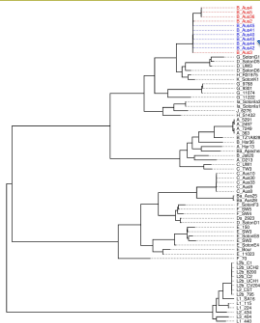
- Isolate TW-448: "trachoma" isolate from Taiwan
  - Genotype Da
  - Arguably only convincing non-A,Ba,C,D trachoma isolate... ever
  - Yeh, L.J. et al. Studies of trachoma in families on Taiwan. *Zhonghua Min Guo Wei Sheng Wu Xue Za Zhi* 8, 120-32 (1975).
- Subjected to expanded MLST (Nunes, A., Borrego, M.J. & Gomes, J.P. Genomic features beyond *Chlamydia trachomatis* phenotypes: what do we think we know? *Infect Genet Evol* 16, 392-400 (2013).)
- Has identical *pmpEFGH* locus to TW-3: "Genotype C" trachoma isolate from Taiwan
- We think that both *ompA* and *pmpEFGH* can contribute to anatomical tropism.

### Conclusions



- The model of a monophyletic ocular lineage of *C. trachomatis* is disproved
  - Lineage appears to be sampling artefact
- Australian genotype Ba and Genotype C:
  - Form monophyletic group
  - closest relatives, in T1 lineage: F-SotonF3, F\_SW-5, F\_SW-4, D-SotonD1, Ds-2923
  - Appearance of having acquired *ompA* and *pmpEFGH* from "classical ocular lineage"
    - Separate *ompA* recombination events for Ba and C.
- Australian genotype B:
  - Closest relatives, in T2 lineage: G-SotonG1, D-UW3\_CX, D-SotonD5, D-SotonD6, H\_R31975, K\_SotonK1.
  - Appearance of having acquired *ompA* from classical ocular lineage
- The association between *ompA* allelic state and tropism is not disproved
  - ompA* based genotyping can be used to look for trachoma serovars in UGT samples in Australia
- Ockham's Razor suggests that *ompA* and *pmpEFGH* confer/assist tropism.
- No sign of selection for mutation in *trp* operon or *Tarp* gene in Australian isolates.

### Stop Press: Mother child study UGT B's virtually identical to trachoma B



Red = trachoma isolate or isolate of  
unknown anatomical source  
Blue = UGT isolate

Is this intermediate tropism  
consistent with acquiring ocular  
*ompA* and not acquiring ocular  
*pmpEFGH*?



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