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DETECTION OF TICK BITE MARKERS IN SERUM OF BLOOD DONORS

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Summary

Exposure to ticks and the risk of infection with tick-borne pathogens (TBPs) are increasing due to spreading of ticks and activities that bring people more often into contact with them. With the exception of tularemia, no other tick-borne infection is a contraindication to blood collection for transfusion. The absence of clinical symptoms during the incubation period may result in transmission of the pathogens to the blood recipient. Previously reported cases of transfusion-transmitted babesiosis, anaplasmosis, and rickettsiosis raise concerns about what to expect in the future. In this study, we detected serological markers of tick bites in a group of healthy blood donors ($n=20$) who were occupationally exposed to ticks. We used an in-house ELISA assay, with recombinant tick salivary protein AV422 as antigen derived from *Ixodes ricinus*, the most important tick species in Europe as vector of TBPs. We also tested the sera for antibodies to *Borrelia* spp. antigens using a commercial ELISA assay to additionally confirm exposure to ticks. Of those tested, 9/20 (45%) had anti-AV422 IgM antibodies. Seroreactive to *Borrelia* antigens (IgM+IgG) were 4/20 (20%), three of whom were also seroreactive to AV422. The high prevalence of tick bite marker-positive individuals suggests that more attention should be paid to TBPs in the future and that blood donors in endemic areas could be screened for TBPs to prevent transfusion-associated infections. The proposed test, with certain modifications, could also be used in clinical practice and epidemiological studies for timely diagnosis of tick-borne diseases and assessment of exposure to ticks in certain area.

Key words: ticks, tick bite, tick-borne pathogens, tick-borne diseases, ELISA, AV422