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New Scientist: ET Bacteria Cause Of Human Diseases?

From: Stig Agermose <Stig_Agermose@online.pol.dk>
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Stig

[Archive: 11 July 1998]

News

Mean microbes

By Michael Day

Tiny bacteria may cause kidney stones, a scientist in Finland claims. Olavi Kajander of Kuopio University says these enigmatic "nanobacteria" surround themselves with mineral shells that could cause harmful calcium deposits in the body. He even speculates that the bacteria may have arrived on Earth from elsewhere in the Universe.

Kajander found the bacteria, which are less than 0.7 micrometres long, in the blood of humans and cows. He says they are genetically similar to other established types of bacteria such as Brucella and Bartonella.

In the latest issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (vol 95, p 8274), Kajander and his colleague Neva Ciftiglu say the bacteria erect mineral coatings. "They probably provide excellent shelter," says Kajander. Because the mineral coatings are similar to the aggregates found in kidney stones, he suspected they might be the cause of the stones. Sure enough, he found that cells infected with the nanobacteria developed mineral deposits both inside and outside. And tests on 30 human kidney stones showed they all contained the bacteria. "This isn't proof that the nanobacteria cause kidney stones, but it's very strong evidence," says Kajander.

In a commentary on the research in the same journal (vol 95, p 7846), Dennis Carson of the University of California at San Diego says that these bacteria or their close relatives may figure in a host of other human diseases. These include heart disease, some tumours and dementia due to abnormal calcium deposition in the brain.

Killing these bacteria would take some time because they are protected by their mineral coats. But Kajander suggests that long courses of the antibiotic tetracycline might eradicate them.

John Postgate, emeritus professor of microbiology at Sussex University, says the nanobacteria may be common bacteria that have shrunk due to lack of nutrients. However, he would be surprised if they exist in blood. "Cow's blood doesn't sound like a very nutrient-deficient diet," he says. "But we have to keep an open mind on this."

But microbiologist David Roberts of the Natural History Museum in London argues that these shrunken bacteria could be near starvation in blood, which can be difficult for some microbes to metabolise. He suspects there may well be such unusual bugs in the "nanoscopic" world. "People often fail to realise that life on a microscopic scale is much more varied than life on a macroscopic scale. It's been around a lot longer."

Kajander suggests the nanobacteria may have come from space. Unlike other bacteria, he argues, they could survive the ultraviolet radiation in space thanks to their mineral coats. "I guess a shell like that would help bacteria floating around in space," says David Mackay of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston. But he adds that the idea is wildly speculative at this stage.

Nonetheless, NASA has invited Kajander and his colleagues to join its Astrobiology Institute, an interdisciplinary collaboration between scientists all over the globe whose aim is to investigate the possibility of extraterrestrial life and its implications.

NASA hopes to learn from Kajander's technique for culturing nanobacteria. They are similar to small bacteria found in hot springs, where many scientists believe life arose (but see New Scientist, print edition, 11 July 1998, p 10). Nanobacteria may have been among the earliest life forms on Earth, and possibly on other planets.

>From New Scientist, 11 July 1998

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