

1 **Short-form paper**

2 **Role of alanine racemase mutations in *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* D-cycloserine resistance**

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4 Running title: alanine racemase and D-cycloserine

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6 Yoshio Nakatani<sup>1,2,3,21</sup>, Helen K. Opel-Reading<sup>3,21</sup>, Matthias Merker<sup>4,5,21</sup>, Diana Machado<sup>6,21</sup>, Sönke Andres<sup>7,21</sup>, S.

7 Siva Kumar<sup>8,21</sup>, Danesh Moradigaravand<sup>9</sup>, Francesc Coll<sup>10</sup>, João Perdigão<sup>11</sup>, Isabel Portugal<sup>11</sup>, Thomas Schön<sup>12,13</sup>,

8 Dina Nair<sup>8</sup>, K. R. Uma Devi<sup>8</sup>, Thomas A. Kohl<sup>4</sup>, Patrick Beckert<sup>4,5</sup>, Taane G. Clark<sup>10</sup>, Gugu Maphalala<sup>14</sup>, Derrick

9 Khumalo<sup>15</sup>, Roland Diel<sup>16</sup>, Kadri Klaos<sup>17</sup>, Htin Lin Aung<sup>1,2</sup>, Gregory M. Cook<sup>1,2</sup>, Julian Parkhill<sup>9</sup>, Sharon J.

10 Peacock<sup>9,10,18</sup>, Soumya Swaminathan<sup>19</sup>, Miguel Viveiros<sup>6</sup>, Stefan Niemann<sup>4,5</sup>, Kurt L. Krause<sup>3,22</sup> & Claudio U.

11 Köser<sup>20,22</sup>

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13

14 <sup>1</sup>University of Otago, Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Otago School of Medical Sciences, Dunedin,

15 New Zealand

16 <sup>2</sup>Maurice Wilkins Centre for Molecular Biodiscovery, The University of Auckland, Private Bag, Auckland, New

17 Zealand

18 <sup>3</sup>University of Otago, Department of Biochemistry, Otago School of Medical Sciences, Dunedin, New Zealand

19 <sup>4</sup>Molecular and Experimental Mycobacteriology, Research Center Borstel, Borstel, Germany

20 <sup>5</sup>German Center for Infection Research, Partner Site Hamburg-Borstel-Lübeck, Germany

21 <sup>6</sup>Unidade de Microbiologia Médica, Global Health and Tropical Medicine, Instituto de Higiene e Medicina

22 Tropical, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal;

23 <sup>7</sup>Division of Mycobacteriology (National Tuberculosis Reference Laboratory), Research Center Borstel, Borstel,

24 Germany

25 <sup>8</sup>National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis, Chennai, India

26 <sup>9</sup>Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute, Hinxton, UK

27 <sup>10</sup>London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

28 <sup>11</sup>Med.U.Lisboa – Instituto de Investigação do Medicamento, Faculdade de Farmácia, Universidade de Lisboa,

29 Lisbon, Portugal

30 <sup>12</sup>Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine, Division of Medical Microbiology, Linköping University,  
31 Linköping, Sweden

32 <sup>13</sup>Department of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, Kalmar County Hospital, Kalmar, Sweden

33 <sup>14</sup>National Reference Laboratory, Ministry of Health, Mbabane, Swaziland

34 <sup>15</sup>National Tuberculosis Control Program, Ministry of Health, Manzini, Swaziland

35 <sup>16</sup>Institute of Epidemiology, University Hospital Schleswig-Holstein, Campus Kiel, Kiel, Germany

36 <sup>17</sup>Tartu University Hospital, United Laboratories, Mycobacteriology, Tartu, Estonia

37 <sup>18</sup>Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

38 <sup>19</sup>Department of Health Research and Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi, India

39 <sup>20</sup>Department of Genetics, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

40 <sup>21</sup>These authors contributed equally.

41 <sup>22</sup>These authors jointly directed this work. Correspondence should be addressed to K.L.K.  
42 (kurt.krause@otago.ac.nz) or C.U.K. (cuk21@cam.ac.uk).

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#### 47 **Abstract**

48 Screening of more than 1,500 drug-resistant strains of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* revealed evolutionary  
49 patterns characteristic of positive selection for three alanine racemase (Alr) mutations. We investigated these  
50 mutations using molecular modeling, *in vitro* MIC testing, as well as direct measurements of enzymatic activity,  
51 which demonstrated that these mutations likely confer resistance to D-cycloserine.

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#### 54 **Manuscript**

55 In 2015, the Global Drug Facility declared that the cost of D-cycloserine (DCS), a group C drug to treat  
56 tuberculosis (TB), would be cut by more than half to as little as \$0.19 per capsule to support the treatment of  
57 multidrug-resistant (MDR) and extensively drug-resistant (XDR) TB, which represent a major threat to public  
58 health (1). In light of this announcement, a better understanding of the resistance mechanisms to this drug is

59 required to facilitate phenotypic as well as genotypic drug-susceptibility testing (DST), both in the context of  
60 surveillance and individual patient treatment to avoid the severe side-effects of this drug (2, 3).

61 Studies of the mode of action of DCS in mycobacteria have produced contradictory results, with some  
62 studies pointing to alanine racemase (Alr) as the primary target and others supporting D-alanine-D-alanine ligase  
63 (DdlA) (4-9). However, molecular data from *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* complex (MTBC) have only implicated  
64 the former gene in DCS resistance, which can also be conferred by mutations in alanine dehydrogenase (*ald*) or a  
65 permease (*cycA*) (10, 11). Using molecular modeling, we had predicted that the *alr* M319T mutation observed in  
66 an XDR strain would likely confer resistance to DCS, which was subsequently confirmed by Desjardins et al. using  
67 the unrelated strain TKK\_04\_0105 (Table S1 (2, 11)). Desjardins et al. described a number of additional *alr*  
68 mutations in strains with elevated DCS MICs, including a C to T nucleotide change 8 base pairs upstream of the  
69 experimentally confirmed start codon of *alr* (strain TKK\_02\_0050 in Table S1 (11, 12)). This was notable as  
70 Merker et al. had previously reported that, compared with the susceptible, parental *alr* wild-type strain, the  
71 acquisition of this mutation during treatment with DCS correlated with DCS resistance, which suggested that *alr*  
72 mutations might be both necessary and sufficient to confer DCS resistance (13).

73 To gain further insights into the impact of *alr* mutations, we first confirmed that the aforementioned *alr*  
74 C-8T promoter mutant that evolved during treatment correlated in MICs above the current World Health  
75 Organization (WHO)-endorsed critical concentration (CC) of 30 µg/ml using the 1% proportion method on  
76 Löwenstein-Jensen (LJ) (strain PBm0 and PBm14 in Table S1; Desjardins et al. and Merker et al. had used 10% as  
77 the critical proportion and therefore had not adhered to the current WHO recommendations (11, 13, 14)). Using  
78 the same method, we also showed that two strains with *alr* M319T or Y364D mutations from XDR TB patients  
79 with a treatment history with DCS had MICs above the CC (Table S1). Moreover, we observed the M319T  
80 mutation in three XDR strains (PT1, PT2 and PT5) from Lisbon, Portugal (15). Although no CC exists for MGIT 960,  
81 this mutation correlated in an MIC increase from 16 to 64 µg/ml compared with three closely related wild-type  
82 control strains (PT3, PT6 and PT7) and one more distantly related control strain (PT4), which supported the role  
83 of this mutation in DCS resistance (Figure 1A and Table S1). By contrast, no or minimal MIC increases were  
84 recorded when testing these Portuguese strains using Sensititre MycoTB plates (Table S1) (16). Finally, a pre-XDR  
85 *alr* R373L mutant from a patient with DCS exposure, which also harbored a deletion in *ald*, tested resistant on LJ  
86 using the 1% proportion method (Tables S1 and S2).

87 To study the importance of the C-8T, M319T, Y364D and R373L mutations from an evolutionary  
88 perspective, we screened previously published and unpublished genomes of more than 1,500 MDR strains  
89 (mostly from Germany, Eastern Europe, and Swaziland), which identified eight additional strains with mutations  
90 at these *Alr* positions or codons (Table S1). Interrogating the genomes of these 17 strains in the context of a  
91 phylogenetically diverse reference collection that included all major MTBC lineages and species showed that the  
92 mutations had either been acquired multiple times independently and/or that different amino acid changes  
93 were present at the same codons (Figure 1B). These mutation patterns are typically a signal of positive selection,  
94 which could have occurred in response to DCS exposure.

95 Molecular modeling of these coding mutations supported this hypothesis. *Alr* functions as a homodimer,  
96 aided by the co-factor pyridoxal 5'-phosphate (PLP) to which it is covalently bound. DCS inhibits *Alr* irreversibly  
97 by covalently bonding to PLP (4). We generated and analyzed a model of the complex between the *M.*  
98 *tuberculosis* *Alr* and DCS (*Alr<sub>Mtb</sub>*-DCS) (Figure S1) (4, 17). Amino acid residues 319 and 364 were located directly  
99 in the active site (Figure S1B). M319T was positioned close enough to allow interaction with the DCS moiety,  
100 which, given the large change of the character of the side chain, could strongly affect DCS reactivity (Figure S1C).  
101 Y364 is involved in the positioning of the phosphate moiety of PLP and thus represents a prominent active site  
102 residue in the conserved inner layer of the substrate entrance corridor of *Alr* (Figure S1B) (17). Mutation to  
103 aspartic acid introduced a shorter and negatively charged side chain, which could potentially affect PLP  
104 orientation in the active site (Figure S1C). Moreover, it could influence DCS uptake through alteration of the  
105 entrance corridor. Interestingly, M319 is located near Y364 and, as a result, it is possible that the M319T  
106 mutation could alter the interaction with Y364, thereby affecting DCS inhibition. In contrast, the R373L mutation  
107 was not directly located within the active site but near the dimer interface and close to residues M319 and D320,  
108 which play an important role in the makeup of the active site (Figure S1B). Consequently, the replacement of  
109 arginine with the short and hydrophobic side chain of leucine might disrupt molecular interactions at the dimer  
110 interface as well as destabilize the DCS binding site (Figure S1C).

111 To test these predictions experimentally, we expressed and purified the aforementioned *Alr<sub>Mtb</sub>* coding  
112 mutants, along with wild-type *Alr<sub>Mtb</sub>*, and determined their half maximal inhibitory concentration (IC<sub>50</sub>) to  
113 measure the effectiveness of inhibition by DCS (Figure 2). The IC<sub>50</sub> for wild-type *Alr<sub>Mtb</sub>* was 26.4 ± 1.7 μM, which  
114 was in the range previously reported for this compound (18, 19). From our structure-based analysis, we  
115 expected the two mutations located in the active site to show the greatest effect on DCS inhibition. Indeed, the

116 M319T mutant enzyme showed minimal inhibition by DCS, even at 1000  $\mu$ M (Figure 2). Thus, the  $IC_{50}$  of this  
117 mutant could not be determined. The  $IC_{50}$  of the Y364D mutant showed a 50-fold increase to  $1328.0 \pm 340.0 \mu$ M.  
118 The R373L mutation, which was not located directly within the active site, also showed a significant increase in  
119 resistance to DCS with an  $IC_{50}$  of  $712.0 \pm 138.5 \mu$ M (27-fold increase).

120 Taken together, these data suggested that *alr* mutations likely confer DCS resistance, although allelic  
121 exchange experiments are required to formally prove this (particularly for R373L, which coincided with a  
122 deletion in *ald* and, consequently, may not be sufficient to confer resistance on its own). Although the  
123 relationship between MICs and  $IC_{50}$ s can be complex, the observation that MICs increased by only 4-16 fold vs.  
124 at least 25-fold increases for  $IC_{50}$ s supported the notion that DCS inhibits multiple targets, as noted earlier. This  
125 study should be complemented with extensive MIC testing of phylogenetically diverse, pan-susceptible MTBC  
126 strains to define the epidemiological cut-off value given that it is unclear based on which evidence the current  
127 WHO CC on LJ has been set (3, 14, 20, 21). Moreover, further MIC testing of likely DCS-resistant strains is needed  
128 to investigate whether the Sensititre system is less reliable at detecting DCS resistance compared with LJ and  
129 MGIT. Finally, the impact of *alr* mutations on resistance on terizidone remains to be investigated.

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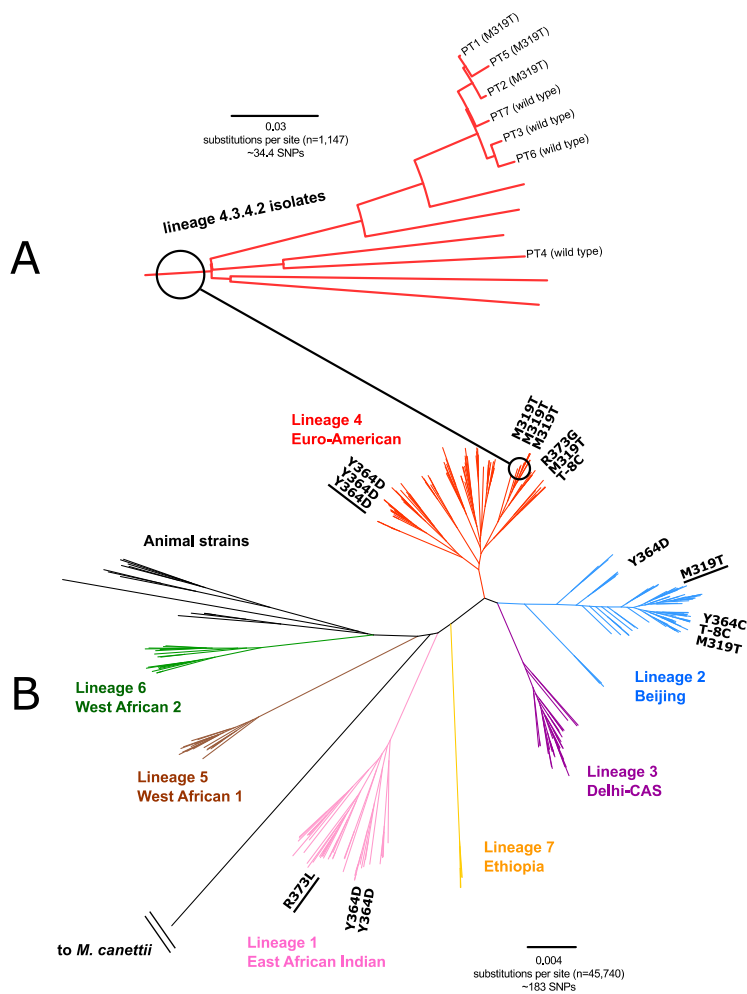
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144 **Conflicts of interest**

145 K. L. K., Y. N. and H. K. O. R have received funding for alanine racemase related projects from L2 Diagnostics LLC,  
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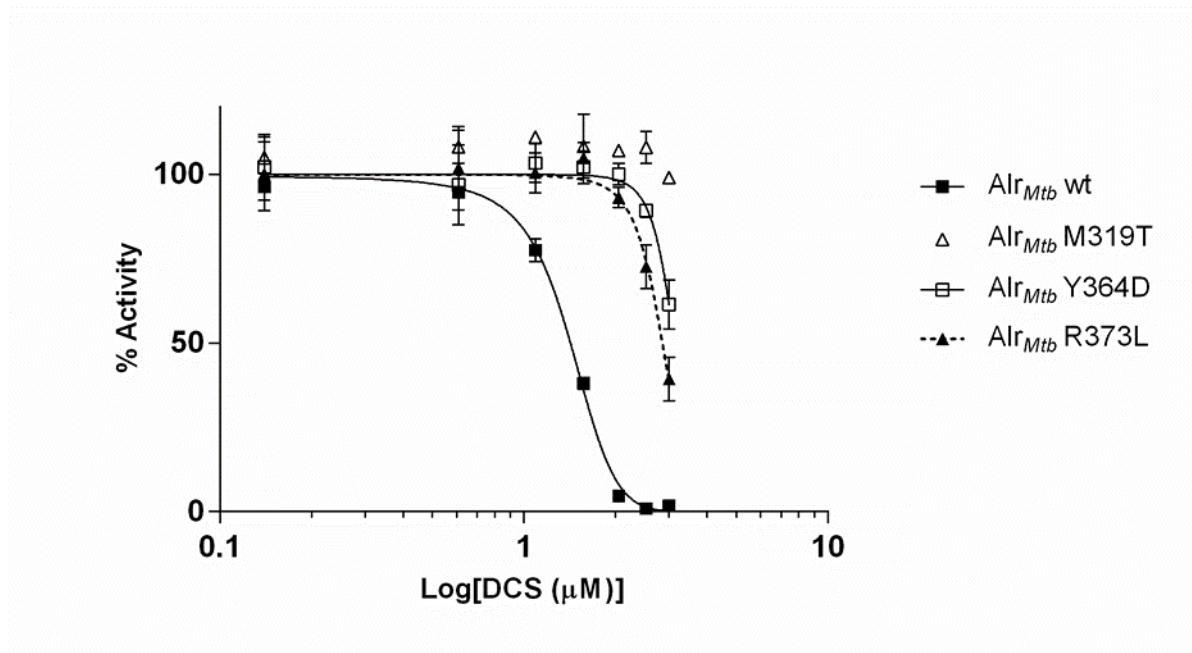
152 **Figure 1.**

153 Maximum likelihood tree based on a concatenated sequence alignment of 45,740 variable sites (1,000  
154 resamplings, GTR nucleotide substitution model) showing the *alr* mutants from Table S1 in the context of a  
155 globally representative reference collection of 287 MTBC strains. Inset A, a zoomed-in part of the overall tree B,  
156 shows the phylogenetic relationship between the three Portuguese M319T mutants (PT1, PT5 and PT2) and the  
157 control strains (PT7, PT3, PT6 and PT4) tested in MGIT and Sensititre. The three Indian M319T, R364D and R373G  
158 mutants that were tested with the 1% proportion LJ method in this study are underlined. The T-8C, M319T and  
159 R364D mutations were homoplastic (i.e. they were acquired multiple times independently) and two different  
160 amino acid changes were observed at codon 373 (i.e. R373L, and. R373G). Thus, all mutations show evolutionary  
161 patterns of positive selection.



162

163 **Figure 2.** Determination of DCS  $IC_{50}$  for wild-type (wt)  $Alr_{Mtb}$  and the M319T, Y364D and R373L mutants. The activity  
164 was normalized against a control with no DCS present in the assay mix. The activity assay at each concentration  
165 was performed in triplicate, resulting in the error bars, which represent 95% CI. A variable slope model was fitted  
166 to determine the  $IC_{50}$  values, which were  $26.4 \pm 1.7$ ,  $1328.0 \pm 340.0$ ,  $712.0 \pm 138.5 \mu M$  for the wild-type, Y364D, and  
167 R373L enzymes, respectively. The inhibition of M319T was too weak to allow for  $IC_{50}$  determination.



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