

**An Investigation into the association of plasmid-borne  
*qacAB* and antimicrobial resistance in Meticillin-  
Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus***

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# Abstract

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Meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is globally recognised as a major causative organism of hospital acquired infection (HAI) and continues to present many challenges for infection prevention and control. Once established within hospitals and healthcare centers, the control of spread of MRSA and therapy is difficult due to resistance to otherwise effective antimicrobials. Government initiatives in the United Kingdom (UK) have led to considerable investments in improving infection control practices, with emphasis on improving hand hygiene compliance of healthcare professionals and hospital environmental cleanliness to control the spread and limit the source of MRSA and other HAIs. This has resulted in the subsequent increase in disinfectant and antiseptic usage containing, quaternary ammonium compounds (QACs), cationic biocides such as chlorhexidine and the bisphenol ether, triclosan, for decontamination of surfaces and disinfection of skin. Thus, there is serious concern that as with antibiotic resistance, continual and intensive exposure of MRSA (and other hospital pathogens) to biocides, may result in the emergence of resistance to these agents with further detrimental consequences and substantial burden for prevention, treatment and control of hospital infections.

MRSA carry a number of plasmid-borne *qac* genes, predominantly *qacA*, *qacB* and *smr* that encode resistance to commonly used antiseptics and disinfectants in hospitals, nursing homes and other healthcare establishments. The proteins encoded by *qacA* and *qacB* mediate efflux via active transport; QacA multidrug exporter mediates resistance to monovalent, divalent cationic and lipophilic antimicrobial compounds, whilst the closely related export protein QacB mediates lower levels of resistance to divalent cations.

In this research a “snapshot” study of hospital strains of MRSA stored at the Hospital Infection Research Laboratory (HIRL), City Hospital, Birmingham, was carried out to determine the prevalence and distribution of *qacAB* in these isolates and determine a possible association between presence of these genes and biocide resistance. The intercalating dye, ethidium bromide (EtBr) is a substrate for many *S. aureus* multi-drug resistant (MDR) efflux pumps and was used in the present study as a marker for detection of efflux pump activity. Previous studies have reported that MRSA strains with an MIC of  $\geq 64$  mg/L to EtBr have *qacAB*, however, the present study used a lower baseline value of  $\geq 32$  mg/L resistance to EtBr to capture any isolates with low MICs that may have *qacAB* and may be missed.

Initially 3,400 MRSA strains collected between October 2002 and October 2006 were screened to identify and select isolates with  $\geq 32$  mg/L resistance to EtBr. A second MRSA collection stored at the Antimicrobial Chemotherapy Laboratory, City Hospital, Birmingham, comprised 63 isolates that showed MICs of  $\geq 64$ mg/L, were also included in the study. At this stage the study set (Set A) comprised 112 isolates with varying MIC to EtBr ranging from  $\geq 32$  mg/L to 256 mg/L. At a later date an additional 400 strains were screened from the same stored collection to include strains with lower MICs, i.e.  $< 32$  mg/L. Thus a total of 336 isolates with varying levels of resistance to EtBr were studied.

PCR was carried out on all 336 isolates for detection of *qacAB*, *smr*, *qacG*, *qacH* and *qacJ* to determine the presence and prevalence of the genes. Set A isolates positive for *qacAB* were further investigated to differentiate between *qacA* and *qacB*. Restriction

digestion using the restriction enzyme *Rsa1* was carried out on PCR products followed by PCR using specific primers for detection of the two genes. Urease activity and neomycin sensitivity were used as a means of basic characterization applied to all the study isolates. A select number of samples negative for *qacA* and *qacB* were typed using *spa* typing.

Transfer studies involving, conjugation, plate mating and transformation on selected strains were carried out to attempt transfer of *qacAB* using the marker EtBr from a strain of MRSA with an MIC of  $\geq 256$  mg/L to EtBr and *qacAB* positive to a strain with  $< 32$ mg/L MIC to EtBr and lacking *qacAB*. Unfortunately, conjugation experiments were not successful in this study. Plasmid curing experiments were also carried out to demonstrate loss of plasmid through continual passaging onto selective plates.

A variety of antiseptics and disinfectants are used in hospitals for prevention of HAIs. The present study was limited to carrying out minimum bactericidal concentration (MBC) determinations and MIC of four commonly used hospital biocides against randomly selected strains. The strains reflected ranges of MICs to EtBr and presence or absence of *qacAB*. These experiments, determined the efficacy of the biocides tested, to effectively destroy MRSA on skin and environment when used in healthcare settings.

The results suggest that in the majority of strains showing high MICs to EtBr i.e.  $\geq 64$  mg/L, *qacAB* is present and thus, the mechanism of resistance to biocides may be attributed to an efflux protein pump encoded by these genes. Following restriction digestion of *qacAB* positive strains, with the restriction enzyme *Rsa1*, 81 of the 112 *qacAB* positive strains tested positive for *qacA*, i.e. 90% and 9 (11%) for *qacB*. The predominant prevalence of the *qacA* gene indicates that most of these strains are likely to be resistant to organic cationic biocides and intercalating dyes such as EtBr and acriflavine. However, the results of the MIC and MBC determinations carried out on a selection of biocides commonly used in the healthcare environment implies that the four biocides tested are likely to be 99.9% effective at killing the majority of isolates in this study set. However, five isolates demonstrated MBCs to chlorhexidine of  $> 32$  mg/L. Chlorhexidine is a compound that is widely used in hand hygiene and surgical antisepsis products, and the results suggest that solutions containing this compound would be ineffective in removing MRSA from the hands of healthcare workers and skin sites if used.

Molecular *spa* typing of selected samples negative for *qacAB* revealed that Endemic-MRSA (EMRSA) type 15 was the most frequent *spa* type identified in this study, followed by EMRSA-16 and EMRSA-1. Three strains identified jointly as EMRSA-3 and EMRSA-1. One strain identified as the Berlin clone

With regards to the challenges presented to infection prevention and control, MRSA has the potential to develop increased tolerance to biocides commonly used in the hospital environment, due to expression of efflux pumps, although currently there is little evidence of this. Further research is required to understand and learn of the various mechanisms of resistance, supported by adherence to control of infection strategies for prevention and spread of infections in healthcare facilities.

# List of Contents

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	<b>Page</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	i
<b>Contents</b>	iii
<b>List of Tables</b>	xii
<b>List of Figures</b>	xiv
<b>Abbreviations</b>	xvi
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	xx
<b>Dedication</b>	xxii
<b>Declaration</b>	xxiii
 <b>Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION</b>	
1.1 Introduction	2
1.2 Antimicrobials	5
1.3 <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	6
1.3.1 Taxonomy	6
1.3.2 Staphylococcal cell wall	7
1.3.3 Staphylococcus pathogenesis	7
1.3.4 Staphylococcus genome	8
1.4 Meticillin-resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> (MRSA)	9
1.5 Epidemic-meticillin-resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> (EMRSA)	11

1.6	Community-acquired MRSA (CA-MRSA)	14
1.7	<i>S. aureus</i> typing methods	14
1.8	Resistance Mechanisms	16
1.8.1	Genetic basis of meticillin-resistance in <i>S. aureus</i>	16
1.8.2	Intrinsic and extrinsic resistance mechanisms	17
1.8.3	Antimicrobial efflux systems	19
1.8.4	Multiple drug resistance proteins	21
1.8.5	Reserpine and Acriflavine	22
1.9	Resistance transfer methods in MRSA	22
1.9.1	Conjugation	23
1.9.2	Transduction	24
1.9.3	Transformation	24
1.10	Plasmid-encoded antibiotic resistance	24
1.10.1	Staphylococcal multi-resistance plasmids	24
1.11	MRSA Resistance mechanisms to antiseptics and disinfectants	26
1.11.1	Antimicrobial selection pressure	27
1.11.2	Antiseptic and disinfectant resistance <i>qacA</i> and <i>qacB</i> genes	28
1.12	Antiseptics and disinfectants	30
1.13	Quaternary Ammonium Compounds	33
1.13.1	Applications of QAC based compounds	34
1.13.2	Mode of action of QACs	35
1.14	Management and control of MRSA infections	36
1.15	MRSA and Infection Prevention and Control	36

1.16	The role of Hospital Infection Research Laboratory and HAIs	38
1.17	Aim and Objectives of Study	40
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	<b>METHODS AND MATERIALS</b>	<b>41</b>
2.1	Introduction	42
2.2	Study isolates	43
2.3	Storage and retrieval of study isolates	44
2.4	Ethidium bromide screening of isolates	44
2.5	Minimum inhibitory concentration determinations	45
2.6	Minimum bactericidal concentration determinations	46
2.7	Antibiotic susceptibility testing	48
2.8	Characterisation of isolates	50
2.9	Plasmid curing experiments	50
2.9.1	Preparation of Novobiocin selective plates	50
2.9.2	Inoculation of Novobiocin selective plates	51
2.10	Molecular Assays	53
2.10.1	Preparation of bacterial DNA template for PCR	53
2.10.2	DNA Extraction Method 1	53
2.10.3	DNA Extraction Method 2	53
2.10.4	PCR for <i>qacAB</i> gene	54
2.10.5	PCR using pre-prepared Mastermix (Promega)	54
2.10.6	Agarose gel electrophoresis	56
2.10.7	Gradient PCR	56

2.10.8	Purification of DNA PCR products	57
2.10.9	Restriction digestion of PCR products	58
2.10.10	PCR for other biocide resistance genes	58
2.10.11	Multiplex PCR for detection of <i>mecA</i> and <i>nuc</i> gene	62
2.11	Effect of Reserpine in presence of Ethidium bromide and Acriflavine	63
2.11.1	Preparation of samples	63
2.11.2	Preparation and inoculation of selective media	63
2.12	<i>Staphylococcus</i> Protein A ( <i>spa</i> ) typing	64
2.13	Transfer studies – Conjugation	65
2.13.1	Isolates selected for transfer studies	65
2.13.2	Increasing MIC to Triclosan of recipient cells	65
2.13.3	Preparation of donor and recipient cells	66
2.13.4	Preparation of selective media	67
2.13.5	Conjugation studies following new protocol	67
2.13.6	Confirmation of Trans-conjugants	69
2.13.7	Mixed culture transfer (MCT)	69
2.13.8	MCT with added Calcium chloride	69
2.14	Transformation Studies	70
2.14.1	Preparation of bacteria for plasmid preparation	70
2.14.2	Transfer by Electroporation	70
2.14.3	Samples tested	71
2.14.4	Preparation of Electrocompetent cells	71
2.14.5	Electroporation process	71

2.14.6	Control samples	71
2.15	Determination of transmission by Phage Transduction	72
2.16	Plate Mating Transfer	73
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	<b>RESULTS</b>	74
	Results of Set A	75
3.1	Screening for Ethidium bromide susceptibility	75
3.2	Ethidium bromide minimum inhibitory concentration determinations	75
3.3	HIRL isolates eliminated from further investigations	76
3.4	Ethidium bromide MIC determinations of Set B	78
3.5	PCR for <i>qacAB</i> in Set A	79
3.6	Restriction Digestion with <i>RsaI</i> of <i>qacAB</i> positive isolates from Set A	80
3.7	PCR for <i>qacAB</i> in Set B	82
3.8	Purification of DNA from PCR products for <i>qacAB</i> (Set A)	84
3.9	PCR for other biocide resistance genes	85
3.10	Multiplex PCR for confirmation of MRSA (Set A)	85
3.11	Effect of efflux pump inhibitor Reserpine	86
3.12	<i>spa</i> typing of <i>qacAB</i> Negative samples	86
3.13	Characterisation of isolates	88
3.14	Statistical analysis of data	88
3.14.1	EtBr susceptibility and prevalence of <i>qacAB</i>	89
3.14.2	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC and Prevalence of <i>qacAB</i>	90
3.14.3	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC and Urease Activity	90

3.14.4	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC and Neomycin Susceptibility	92
3.15	Antibiogram Analysis	93
3.15.1	Collation and grading of susceptibility results	94
3.16	Analysis of Prevalence of <i>qacAB</i> and Antibiotic Resistance Profile	95
3.17	Statistical Analysis of Antibiotic Susceptibility	97
3.17.1	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Erythromycin Susceptibility	97
3.17.2	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Fusidic acid Susceptibility	98
3.17.3	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Tetracycline Susceptibility	99
3.17.4	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Trimethoprim Susceptibility	101
3.17.5	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Mupirocin Susceptibility	102
3.17.6	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Gentamicin Susceptibility	103
3.17.7	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Kanamycin Susceptibility	104
3.17.8	High, Medium and Low EtBr MIC Association with Rifampicin Susceptibility	105
3.18	Conjugation Studies	107
3.18.1	Cell-to-cell Contact Method	107
3.19	Transformation Studies	111
3.19.1	Plasmid Preps	111
3.19.2	Electroporation	112

3.19.3	Phage Transduction	113
3.20	Plasmid Curing	114
3.21	Plate Mating	116
3.22	Minimum Bactericidal Concentration (MBC) Determinations	118
3.22.1	MBC to Four Commonly Used Hospital Biocides	118
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	<b>DISCUSSION</b>	120
	Outcomes of Research	121
4.1	MRSA strains	122
4.2	Set A and B MRSA strains	124
4.3	Investigation for antiseptic and disinfectant resistance <i>qacAB</i>	125
4.3.1	DNA Extraction and PCR	125
4.3.2	Set A	126
4.3.3	Set B	127
4.4	PCR screening for other biocide resistance genes	130
4.5	Effect of Reserpine on EtBr and Acriflavine	130
4.6	<i>spa</i> typing of <i>qacAB</i> negative strains from Set A	131
4.7	Resistance profiles and characterisation of strains	133
4.8	Phenotypic characterisation of MRSA isolates	135
4.9	Statistical significance of prevalence and distribution of <i>qacAB</i> and EtBr susceptibility	136
4.10	Summation of significant findings for <i>qacAB</i> and other biocide resistance genes	137
4.11	Transfer studies	138

4.12	Plasmid curing	140
4.13	Biocide MBCs	141
4.14	Conclusion	142
4.15	Further work and recommendations	143

**Chapter 5: DISCUSSION OF PROFESSIONAL IMPACT OF RESULTS 145**

Influencing attitudes and perceptions of local Biomedical Scientists and Infection Prevention Teams

	Aim of Chapter	146
5.1	Introduction	146
5.2	The Role of the Microbiology Laboratory and Infection Prevention and Control ~ “A Crucial Symbiosis”	147
5.3	Epidemiological typing to aid infection prevention	149
5.4	Impact on therapy	149
5.5	Professional applications of main research findings	150
5.6	Significance of study results to infection prevention and control	151
5.7	Prevalence and distribution of <i>qacAB</i> and biocide resistance	152
5.8	The advantage of a molecular-based bench-top kit for identification of <i>qacAB</i> in the diagnostic laboratory?	153
5.9	Preventing infections	154
5.10	Disinfectant use and staff education	155
5.11	Staff perceptions and education	157
5.12	Conclusion	158

<b>Chapter 6: PERSONAL REFLECTION</b>	159
Introduction	160
6.1 My Father, My Inspiration, My Motivation	162
6.2 Personal reflection of my learning and professional development	163
6.3 Reflection of my Doctoral Journey	164
<b>Reference List</b>	169
<b>Appendices</b>	185
1. Selective method for storage and retrieval of control organism	
2. Raw Statistical Analysis Data	

# List of Tables

---

	<b>Page</b>	
1.1	EMRSA strains isolated in the UK (1980s and 1990s)	13
1.2	Important biocide efflux pumps identified in <i>S. aureus</i>	20
1.3	Biocide characteristics and intended use	31
1.4	Commonly used hospital biocides, uses, bacterial targets and known mechanisms of action	32
2.1	Strains used in MIC/MBC studies	47
2.2	Strains used in plasmid curing experiments	51
2.3	PCR primers and primer sequences for <i>qacAB</i>	55
2.4	PCR programme for amplification of <i>qacAB</i>	55
2.5	Parameters for gradient PCR	56
2.6	Samples selected and properties	57
2.7	List of <i>qac</i> control strains	59
2.8	PCR primers and primer sequences for amplification of <i>smr</i> , <i>qacEΔ1</i> , <i>qacG</i> , <i>qacH</i> and <i>qacJ</i>	60
2.9	PCR amplification conditions for <i>smr</i> , <i>qacEΔ1</i> , <i>qacG</i> , <i>qacH</i> and <i>qacJ</i>	61
2.10	PCR primers and primer sequences for amplification of <i>mecA</i> and <i>nuc</i> gene	62
2.11	Characteristics of strains used for transfer studies	65
3.1	<i>spa</i> type results for MRSA strains negative for all <i>qac</i> genes	87
3.2	Results of urease activity and neomycin susceptibility testing	88
3.3	Frequency of antibiogram profiles and prevalence of <i>qacA</i> and <i>qacB</i>	95
3.4a	Results of conjugation studies	109

3.4b	Control set results (spontaneous mutation check)	110
3.5	Conjugation results of all isolates tested	110
3.6	Sub-culture results of probable transconjugants on EtBr selective plates	116
3.7	Antibiogram results of clone and parent strains	117
3.8	MIC/MBC determinations to four hospital biocides	118
3.9	MIC/MBC determinations to Novobiocin and Fusidic acid	119
4.1	Guide for classification of study isolates	136

# List of Figures

---

	<b>Page</b>
1.1 <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i> SCCmec types (i-viii)	17
1.2 Diagrammatic expression of representative transporters from the five major multidrug resistant transport families	21
1.3 Horizontal and vertical gene transfer	23
1.4 Resistance gene transfer methods to susceptible strains	26
1.5 Structural formulae of a quaternary ammonium salt	33
1.6 Formation of oil monolayer repelling water, and extension outwards from surface	34
3.1 HIRL isolates for inclusion in Set A	76
3.2 Elimination of isolates to obtain 112 strains comprising Set A	77
3.3 Total MRSA isolates screened and proportion of varying MICs	79
3.4 Agarose gel <i>qacAB</i> PCR results for Set A	80
3.5 Agarose gel PCR result of <i>qacA</i> and <i>qacB</i> differentiation	81
3.6 Agarose gel <i>qacAB</i> PCR of Set B	82
3.7 Distribution of <i>qacAB</i> and varying levels of EtBr MIC	89
3.8 Distribution of <i>qacAB</i> in MRSA strains within high, medium and low EtBr classifications	90
3.9 Prevalence and distribution of urea hydrolysing MRSA strains within the high, medium and low EtBr classification	91
3.10 Prevalence and distribution of neomycin susceptibility and correlation with varying EtBr MIC	93

3.11	Prevalence and distribution of erythromycin susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	98
3.12	Prevalence and distribution of fusidic acid susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	99
3.13	Prevalence and distribution of tetracycline susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	100
3.14	Prevalence and distribution of trimethoprim susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	101
3.15	Prevalence and distribution of mupirocin susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	102
3.16	Prevalence and distribution of gentamicin susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	103
3.17	Prevalence and distribution of kanamycin susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	104
3.18	Prevalence and distribution of rifampicin susceptibility and varying EtBr MIC	106
3.19	Agarose gel showing plasmid prep result	111
3.20	Results of plasmid cure experiment of two strains of MRSA	115

# List of Abbreviations

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ABC	Adenosine Triphosphate-Binding Cassette
ATP	Adenosine Triphosphate
BAC	Bacitracin
BHIA	Brain Heart Infusion Agar
BHIB	Brain Heart Infusion Broth
BMS	Biomedical Scientist
BSAC	British Society of Antimicrobial Resistance
BSc (Hons)	Bachelor of Science (Honours)
BZC	Benzalkonium chloride
CA	Community Acquired
CaCl <sub>2</sub>	Calcium Chloride
CA-MRSA	Community-Acquired Meticillin-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
CCC DNA	Covalently Closed Circles Deoxyribonucleic acid
CDR	Communicable Disease Report
Cip	Ciprofloxacin
CoNS	Coagulase Negative Staphylococci
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
DNase	Deoxyribonuclease
DoH	Department of Health
dNTP(s)	Deoxyribonucleic triphosphate(s)
EARSS	European Antimicrobial Surveillance System

EARSS-NET	European Antimicrobial Surveillance Network
EMRSA	Epidemic Meticillin-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
Ery	Erythromycin
<i>E. coli</i>	<i>Escherichia coli</i>
EtBr	Ethidium Bromide
Fus	Fusidic acid
Gm	Gentamicin
HAI(s)	Healthcare Associated Infection(s)
HA-MRSA	Hospital Acquired Meticillin-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
HCW	Healthcare Worker
HDCPM	Hexadecylpyridinium chloride monohydrate
HIRL	Hospital Infection Research Laboratory
HIS	Healthcare Infection Society
ICNA	Infection Control Nurses Association
ICU(s)	Intensive Care Unit(s)
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
IPS	Infection Prevention Society
K	Kanamycin
MgCl <sub>2</sub>	Magnesium Chloride
MATE	Multi-drug and Toxic Compound Extrusion
Mb	Megabase
MBC	Minimum Bactericidal Concentration
MCT	Mixed Culture Technique

MFS	Major Facilitator Superfamily
MgCl <sub>2</sub>	Magnesium chloride
MGE	Mobile Genetic Element
MIC	Minimum Inhibitory Concentration
MLST	Multi-Locus Sequence Type
MR-MRSA	Multi-drug-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
MRSA	Meticillin-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
MSSA	Meticillin-Sensitive <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
mM	Micro moles
MSc	Master of Science
NHS	National Health Service
OC DNA	Open Circles Deoxyribonucleic acid
PBP2a	Penicillin Binding Protein
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction
PEG	Poly Ethylene Glycol
PMF	Proton Motive Force
pmol	Pico mole
PVL	Panton-Valentine Leucocidin
QAC(s)	Quaternary Ammonium Compound(s)
RC	Rolling Circle
Rif	Rifampicin
<i>S. aureus</i>	<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
SCC	Staphylococcal Cassette Chromosome

SMR	Small Multi-drug Resistance
ST	Sequence Type
<i>Taq</i> -polymerase	<i>Thermos-aquaticus</i> polymerase (enzyme)
TBE buffer	Tris/borate/EDTA/buffer
Tet	Tetracycline
TSB	Tryptone Soya Broth
UK	United Kingdom
μL	Micro litre
UV	Ultra violet
VRSA	Vancomycin-Resistant <i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>
v/v	Volume to Volume
WHO	World Health Organisation
w/v	Weight per volume

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# Dedication

---

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my beloved father, who always encouraged all his children to embrace education and knowledge as a very precious “gift”, to strive to achieve excellence in our studies and to confront all life’s challenges with courage and perseverance. He instilled in us the merits of education through, example, encouragement and advice. He himself held high personal and professional ethics and he was very much admired and respected for those qualities by his family, friends, colleagues and students. “My dearest papa, my aspiration to achieve this highest qualification came from you and was for you, to keep your memory alive and for you to be proud of me. I hope you are”.

I also dedicate this to my darling mother and I thank her for all her prayers, support and love throughout my studies and in all aspects of my life.

# Declaration

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I declare that whilst studying for the Doctorate in Biomedical Science at the University of Portsmouth, I have not been registered for any other award at another University. The work undertaken for this degree has not been submitted elsewhere for any other award. The work contained within this submission is my own work and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgment has been made in the text.

Azra Khan

September 2013