

Original Research Article

Antibacterial activities of essential oils from three medicinal plants in combination with EDTA against methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*

ABSTRACT

Aims: To determine the antibacterial activity of essential oils (EOs) from *Thymus vulgaris* L, *Origanum vulgare* L and *Minthostachys mollis* (Benth.) Griseb in combination with ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) on methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) from clinical isolates.

Study design: Collection of plant material, extraction, phytochemical analysis and evaluation of antimicrobial activity of the essential oils.

Place and Duration of Study: Clinical Research Institute, Faculty of Medicine, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Pharmacy and Biochemistry, and Department of Microbiology, Hospital Dos de Mayo, Lima, Peru, between February 2014 and February 2015.

Methodology: The EOs' chemical composition was determined by gas chromatography coupled with mass spectroscopy (GC-MS). Clinical isolates of MRSA were obtained from the "Dos de Mayo" National Hospital in Lima, Peru. The inhibitory activity on MRSA was determined by disk diffusion method and Minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) by the microdilution colorimetric method in 96-well plates (State the statistical package used for analysis).

Results: The main components of *Thymus vulgaris* EO were thymol (46.47%), γ -terpinene (20.27%) and p-cymene (15.80%); from *Origanum vulgare* EO were γ -terpinene (21.17%), (-)-4-terpineol (12.61%) and cis- β -terpineol (12.18%); and from *Minthostachys mollis* EO were pulegone (33.48%) and menthone (26.68%). The *Thymus vulgaris* EO presented inhibition halo diameters of 32.23 ± 1.70 mm, and *Thymus vulgaris* + EDTA had inhibition halo diameters of 32.47 ± 2.06 mm, both significantly higher compared to 30 mcg of cefoxitin, which had inhibition halo diameters of 17.60 ± 0.68 mm ($p < .01$). The MIC of *T. vulgaris* against MRSA was 0.625 μ l/mL. *Origanum vulgare* and *Minthostachys mollis* EOs were resistant to MRSA.

Conclusion: This study showed that the *Thymus vulgaris* essential oil had antibacterial activities against MRSA and indicates their potential application in the control of this pathogen commonly known for their resistant activities to most conventional antibiotics.

Keywords: Essential oils, *Thymus vulgaris*, *Origanum vulgare*, *Minthostachys mollis*, MRSA clinical isolates

1. INTRODUCTION

Bacterial resistance to antibiotics is increasing day by day both in the community and in the hospital. It has a significant impact on morbidity and mortality rates and on the financial burden that is associated with it [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), antimicrobial resistance is a global problem that requires urgent action [2]. In addition, the increased commercial trades and the international travels allow resistant microorganisms to spread quickly to other continents in which they were not resistant previously [3].

Staphylococcus aureus causes a variety of infections ranging from skin and soft tissue infections to blood stream infections, pneumonia, meningitis, endocarditis and toxic shock syndrome [4]. Highly resistant bacteria such as methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) or vancomycin-resistant enterococci

(VRE) cause a high percentage of infections contracted in hospitals. Last years, MRSA has appeared out of hospitals more frequently than previous times, and it has been considered as a major public health concern in the world [5].

The resistance of *Staphylococcus aureus* to antibiotics disables available drugs in the market and it produces high morbidity and mortality rates, both in hospitals and community; becoming a significant public health problem worldwide because it is estimated that MRSA kills more people than the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and tuberculosis together [6]. Besides, the few antibiotics that are available to treat MRSA infections are very expensive and they have a strong impact on poor people for whom such treatment is inaccessible. For these reasons, the searching of active agents against MRSA is justified, and natural resources are a potential alternative for the solution of the problem.

Mintostachys mollis (Lamiaceae) is a sub aromatic shrub restricted to South America's Andes, being known in Peru with the popular name of "muña" [7]. Its species' essential oil showed significant inhibitory effect against gram positive and gram negative bacteria [8] and it had also inhibitory effect against yeast and fungal pathogens [9]. The *Thymus vulgaris* [10] and *Origanum vulgare* EOs [11] also showed antimicrobial activity. However, there is very few information about the antimicrobial effect of these plants against MRSA's patient samples. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate the *Minthostachys mollis*, *Thymus vulgaris* and *Origanum vulgare* EOs effect against 17 strains of MRSA clinical isolates and to determine the influence of its association with EDTA, in an *in-vitro* model.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1 Plant Samples and Microbial Cultures

Thymus vulgaris L., *Minthostachys mollis* (Benth) Griseb and *Origanum vulgare* L., were purchased from spice vendors in Lima, Peru and identified in the Natural History museum of "Universidad Nacional de San Marcos" (No. 184-HSM-USM-2015, No. 185-HSM-USM-2015 and No. 186-HSM-USM-2015, respectively). Clinical strains of MRSA were collected from the Microbiology Laboratory of the National Dos de Mayo Hospital in Lima (Peru). Most of the strains were isolated from patients with skin infections and some from bronchial aspirate, blood samples and sputum. Initial identification was performed in the hospital laboratories by using their routinely techniques [12, 13]. Strains were transported to the Microbiology Institute's laboratory in the Pharmacy and Biochemistry faculty of Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos.

For the inoculum preparation it was used direct colony suspension, which grown overnight in physiological saline solution at a McFarland standardized turbidity density of 0.5 (about $1-2 \times 10^8$ colony forming units per ml, CFU/mL).

2.2 Extraction of Essential Oils

Leaves of *Thymus vulgaris* L., *Minthostachys mollis* (Benth) Griseb and *Origanum vulgare* L. were subjected to a 3 h of hydrodistillation, using a Clevenger type distillation apparatus [14]. The resulting oils were separated and dried over anhydrous sodium sulphate, filtered and stored in an amber glass bottle under refrigeration at a temperature of 4°C until used.

2.3 Phytochemical Determination

The major compounds of EOs were determined by gas chromatography coupled to mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis on Agilent Technologies 5975 C mass spectrometer system. They were diluted 20 µL of the sample in 1 mL of dichloromethane and the injection volume was 1 µl using a DB-5ms column, 325 °C: 60 cm x 250 microns x 0.25 microns; ramp temperature was 50 °C for 5 min, 10 °C/min to 100 °C, 5 °C/min to 150 °C, 15 °C/min to 200 °C for 1 minute and finally 5 °C/min up to 270 °C maintained for 2 minutes. The run time was 40,333 min, Split 50: 1, the carrier gas was helium, 1 mL/min. The detector was mass spectrometer.

2.4 Evaluation of Antistaphylococcal Activity

The disk diffusion assay was carried out according to the European Committee on Antimicrobial Susceptibility Testing (EUCAST) [15] using Mueller Hinton agar which was prepared according to the manufacturer's instructions, adding 25 mL of the agar into plates of 90 mm of diameter. A sterile cotton swab was introduced into the inoculum suspension and it was rotated against the inner wall of the tube to remove the liquid excess. The inoculum was extended over the entire plate's surface by rubbing around 3 directions. 10 µL of oil were placed on sterile filter paper disks of 6 mm, and subsequently, the paper discs were placed firmly on the surface of the plates that were inoculated and dried. Discs with dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) and 30 µg of cefoxitin were used as controls. Plates were **invested** and incubated after 15 minutes of the applications of the discs at 35 ± 1 °C for 16-20 hours. The diameters of the zones of inhibition were measured in millimeters with Vernier.

2.5 Determination of Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC)

Essential oils' MIC against MRSA was performed using the colorimetric microdilution method in 96-wells, according to Sarker **et al.** (italize), 2007 protocol [16]. The EO was diluted in DMSO in serial two-fold dilutions, obtaining 10 doubled concentrated end dilutions between the ranges of 0.078 to 40 µL/mL. The final DMSO concentration was equal to or less than 5% (v/v). Each clinical MRSA's isolate strain was seeded

24 hours before on trypticase soy agar and it was aerobically incubated at 37 °C. On the assay's day, a small aliquot of the bacteria was transferred to a test tube containing sterile saline solution at 0.85%, until it reached a similar turbidity degree of 0.5 McFarland scale, which is equivalent to 1.5×10^8 CFU/mL (concentrated inoculum); **immediately** after it was prepared a double dilution of 1:50 and 1:20 which was performed with Mueller Hinton agar to obtain an inoculum of $1-5 \times 10^5$ CFU/mL (2x inoculum). Per 20 mL of the inoculum suspension it was added 0.1 mL 2x of the resazurin solution in 20 mg/mL. In each microplate's well it was introduced 100 µL of EOs 2x dilution or the corresponding control, and then it was added 100 µL of 2x inoculum with resazurin indicator placed. On the other hand, they were considered sterility control wells (Mueller Hinton broth only) and growth control wells (Mueller Hinton with the inoculum of MRSA). The microplates were incubated at 37°C for 24 hr under aerobic conditions. The reading of the results were done visually. Any color changes from purple to pink or colorless were recorded as positive result. The lowest concentration at which there was no color change was taken as the MIC value. The average of three values were calculated and reported as the MIC.

2.6 Statistical Analysis

Data from susceptibility testing were expressed as mean $\pm$ standard deviation. Normality and homogeneity of variance was determined by Shapiro-Wilk and Barlett tests, respectively. Comparisons between experimental groups were performed by one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey post-hoc test. A *P*-value < .05 was considered significant.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Phytochemical Analysis of the Essential Oils

Essential oils are a complex mixture of many volatile aromatic secondary metabolites. The *Thymus vulgaris* L essential oil components were identified in a previous study, with 27 compounds which included 100% from the total, and the main ones were thymol (44.19% of m-thymol, 2.28% p-thymol and 46.47% in total), γ -terpinene (20.27%) and p-cymene (15.80%) [17]. In this study, it was found that the most abundant *Minthostachys mollis* essential oil compounds were pulegone (33.48%) and menthone (26.68%) as it is shown in Table 1. These results are consistent with the findings from Cano et al [9] who found 36.7% of pulegone and 24.24% of menthone in a sample from Junin, Peru. Our findings also correlate with other data from the literature [7]; however, in a sample from Venezuela it was found higher percentages: pulegone and trans- menthone (55.2% and 31.5%) [8].

Table 1. Chemical composition of volatiles in the *Minthostachys mollis* (Benth.) Griseb essential oil

Compound	tR (min.)	% of total
α -Pinene	15.56	0.67
β -Phellandrene	16.61	0.26
β -pinene	16.85	0.85
<i>p</i> -Cymene	18.01	0.25
<i>trans</i> - β -Ocimene	18.09	0.13
D-Limonene	18.15	1.00
<i>cis</i> - β -Ocimene	18.42	0.52
γ -Terpinene	18.9	0.36
β -Linalool	19.89	2.94
Unknown (C ₁₀ H ₂₀ O ₂)	20.25	0.43
Menthone	21.59	26.68
Isomenthone	21.8	2.43
Isopulegone	22.03	2.73
Dihydrocarvone	22.49	0.62
Pulegone	23.38	33.48
D-Carvone	23.44	3.20
Piperitone oxide	23.63	5.65
Piperitone	23.68	1.33
Unknown (C ₁₀ H ₁₄ O)	25.33	0.42
Unknown (C ₁₀ H ₁₄ O ₂)	25.67	3.98
Copaene	26.03	0.26
Unknown (C ₁₅ H ₂₄)	26.19	0.20
β -Bourbonene	26.23	0.17
β -Caryophyllene	26.91	5.34
7-methoxy-2,2-dimethyl-2H-1-Benzopyran	27.43	0.24
α -Caryophyllene	27.51	0.78
Germacrene D	27.91	3.74
Bicyclogermacrene	28.15	1.13
δ -cadinene	28.38	0.24

tR = Retention Time

Moreover, we found that the most abundant compounds of the *Origanum vulgare* essential oil were γ -terpinene (21.17%), (-)-4-terpineol (12.61%) and *cis* - β -terpineol (12.18%) (Table 2). In this regard, there has been a great variability in the composition of this essential oil. In a Brazilian sample, the 33.3% of the total was composed of terpin-4-ol and 38% of thymol [18], besides 57.71% was composed of carvacrol, 10.91% was composed of *p*-cymene and 7.18% was composed of γ -terpinene [19]. In Iran, 50.1% of the composition was beta-caryophyllene [20]. In Greece, the 43.6% of the composition was carvacrol, the 23% was composed of *p*-cymene and the 13.9% of the composition was γ -terpinene [21] as well as carvacrol and thymol [22]. In Jordan, 27.19% of the composition was trans-sabineno [23]. In Serbia, 64.5% of the composition was made of carvacrol, 10.9% was composed of *p*-cymene and 10.8% was composed of γ -terpinene [24]. In Portugal, 55% was composed of thymol and 8.66% was composed of γ -

terpinene [25], besides 14.5% was composed of carvacrol, 12.8% was made of β -fenchyl alcohol, thymol was present in 12.6% and 11.6% of the total was composed of γ -terpinene [26]. In Italy, there were found 3 chemotypes: carvacrol/thymol, thymol/ α -terpineol, and linalyl acetate/linalool [10]. Chemotypes are "biochemical variety" or "physiological forms" of botanical species; each one of them have a specific enzymatic equipment. These species are genetically encoded and they guide their biosynthesis to a defined compound's making. In a specific geographic area, the most important factors on the chemotypes' differentiation are mainly related to intrinsic factors such as sexual polymorphism or genetic mechanism, but when it is about phenolic essences, environmental conditions such as altitude, temperature, season and remarkable stress are able to influence the biosynthetic pathway [10, 14].

Table 2. Chemical composition of volatiles in the *Origanum vulgare* L essential oil

Compound	tR (min.)	% of total
Origanene	15.26	0.72
α -Pineno	15.54	0.50
Sabinene	16.60	5.45
β -Myrcene	16.85	2.05
α -Phellandrene	17.51	0.21
α -Terpinolene	17.79	7.51
p-Cymene	18.00	4.78
β -trans-Ocimene	18.08	4.38
D-Limonene	18.14	1.52
β -Phellandrene	18.24	1.12
cis- β -Ocimene	18.40	0.59
12-Terpinene	18.91	21.17
(1 α ,2 β ,5 α)-2-methyl-5-(1-methylethyl) bicyclo [3.1.0] hexan-2-ol	19.28	1.82
(+)-4-Carene	19.67	2.20
Linalool	19.89	2.54
cis- β -Terpineole	20.17	12.18
Unknown (C ₁₀ H ₁₈ O)	20.77	0.66
(-)-4-Terpineol	22.14	12.61
α -Terpineol	22.40	1.61
Thymol methyl ether	22.95	0.73
2-methoxy-4-methyl-1-(1-methylethyl)-Benzene	23.16	2.18
Linalool Anthranilate	23.25	3.24
Thymol	24.13	5.48
β -Caryophyllene	26.88	2.43
α -Caryophyllene	27.50	0.21
Germacrene D	27.89	1.21
Bicyclogermacrene	28.13	0.90

tR = Retention Time

3.2. Antistaphylococcal Activity Assessment

The alarming *Staphylococcus aureus* resistance to antibiotics has led to a permanent searching for new antibiotics. In an effort to explore the potential use of *Thymus vulgaris*, *Origanum vulgare* and *Mintosthachys mollis* essential oils against MRSA, there were used 17 clinical isolates for this study. The results are shown in the Figure 1 and Table 3. The only essential oil that showed significant inhibitory effect on MRSA when tested by disk diffusion was the one from *Thymus vulgaris*, which had inhibition halo of 32.23 ± 1.70 mm compared with cefoxitin 30 μ g which had inhibition halo of 17.60 ± 0.68 mm ($P < .01$). The MIC of the *Thymus vulgaris* essential oil was 0.625 μ l/mL with the dilution method (Figure 2). Similarly, an Iran study also showed that *Thymus vulgaris* EO had inhibitory effect against MRSA clinical isolates [27]. The same result was found in Poland [28], Spain [9] and Brazil [18]. It is likely that the significant effect of *T.vulgaris* against MRSA, was due to its main component, thymol, whose chemical composition was determined in a previous paper [17]. Like in other studies that observed inhibitory effect against *S. aureus*, thymol was the major compound of the essential oils [10, 18, 27, 28]. In addition, pure thymol has showed inhibitory effect on *S. aureus* [29, 30]. It has been shown that EOs bacterial cell targets include the cell wall and membrane, thereby disturbing ATP production and pH homeostasis; EOs can affect the celular transcriptome, proteome, and the quorum-sensing system. Treatment with EOs leads to increased bacterial cell permeability, resulting in loss of celular material, and it is important to note that injury to a cellular structure can result in many downstream effects on cellular functions. Ultrastructural analysis by atomic force microscopy, scanning electron microscopy, and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) has shown severe-to-moderate changes in the surface of several bacterial pathogens. Besides, diminished enzymatic activity and the appearance of coagulated material have been reported to result from EO activity [31].

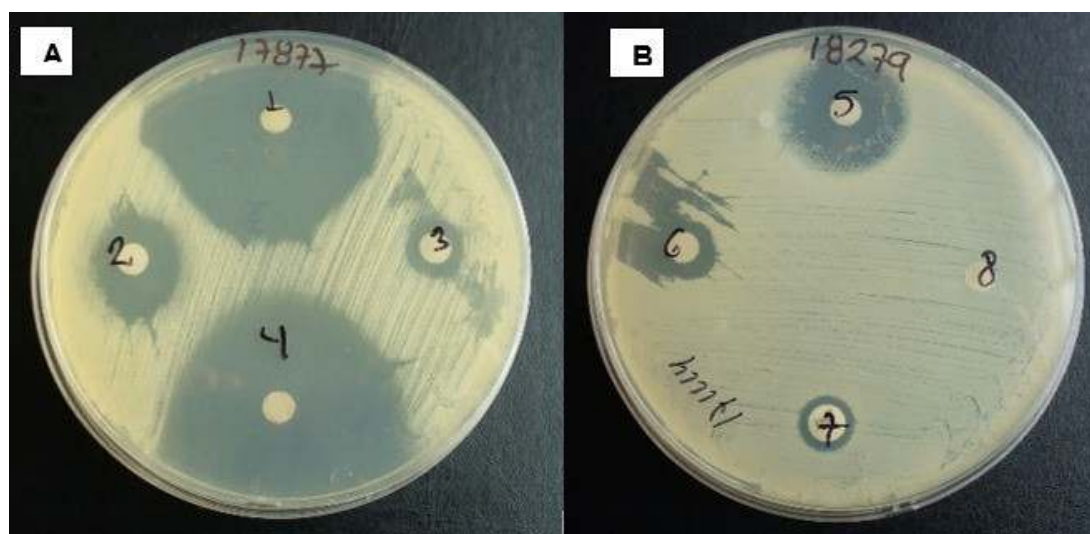


Figure 1. Plates with Inhibition zones produced by essential oils on MRSA A: 1 = *Thymus vulgaris*, 2 = *Origanum vulgare*, 3 = *Mintosthachys mollis*, 4 = *Thymus vulgaris* + EDTA. B: 5 = *Origanum vulgare* + EDTA, 6 = *Mintosthachys mollis* + EDTA, 7 = Cefoxitin 30 μ g, 8 = DMSO (negative control).

Table 3. Inhibition zones diameter (mm) produced by essential oils from *T. vulgaris*, *M. mollis* and *O. vulgare* in 17 clinical isolates of MRSA

Grupo	Inhibition zones (mm)	P value
<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	32.23 ± 1.70	0.001*
<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	12.88 ± 1.13	0.872

<i>Mintostachys mollis</i>	8.71 ± 0.57	0.202
<i>Thymus vulgaris</i> + EDTA	32.47 ± 2.06	0.001*
<i>Origanum vulgare</i> + EDTA	14.47 ± 1.10	0.982
<i>Mintostachys mollis</i> + EDTA	12.65 ± 1.70	0.843
Cefoxitin 30 µg	17.60 ± 0.68	
DMSO (negative control)	0	

*Significant from cefoxitin 30 µg

Mean ± S.E.M = Mean values ± Standard error of means of three experiments

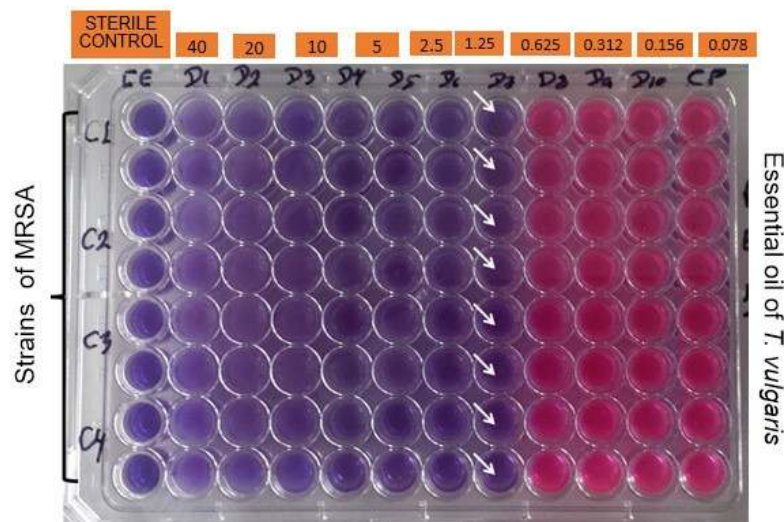


Figure 2. Minimum inhibitory concentration assay of *T. vulgaris* against MRSA clinical isolates. C1-C4 = Strains of MRSA, CE = sterility control, D1-D10 = dilutions of essential oil, CP = positive control. Arrows indicates the MIC value

In the present study, the *Mintostachys mollis* and *Origanum vulgare* essential oils showed little inhibition halos (Figure 1), which indicated resistance to MRSA. This result is consistent to the information provided by Bussmann et al [32] who used *Mintostachys mollis* ethanolic extract and he did not found activity against *Staphylococcus aureus*. In Turkey, Karakaya et al [33] reported that *Origanum vulgare* had no influence on *Staphylococcus aureus* survival; however, De Souza et al [34] showed total suppression of *Staphylococcus aureus* enterotoxin production at concentrations of 0.3 to 0.15 µL/mL; it also showed alteration on membrane permeability, the smearing formation on cell surface, and loss of cytoplasmic material. Likewise, other researchers also showed the significant effect of *Origanum vulgare* essential oils on *Staphylococcus aureus* [19, 24, 29]. This difference could be due to the essential oil chemical composition, because in the articles in which it was found antimicrobial effect against *Staphylococcus aureus*, carvacrol was the major component (about 60%), while in this study, the presence of carvacrol was zero (Table 2).

At the same time, during this investigation it was explored the influence of EDTA in association with EOs, being observed a slight increase in the inhibition zone diameter of the three plants used in the investigation, compared to the effect of EOs alone with none association (Figure 1). Although EDTA is a chelating agent with widely known anticoagulant activity [35], it was also introduced into endodontics to chemically soften the root canal dentine and dissolve the smear layer, as well as to increase dentine permeability [36]. Some research like Judah M et al [37] showed that the *Staphylococcus epidermidis*

adhesion and formation on Nelaton biofilaments and on central venous catheters (CVC) was inhibited by EDTA at low concentrations (1-2 mmol/L), and for its eradication it was required higher concentrations (> 32 mmol / L), which showed it has effect as a bacteriostatic agent. Root JL et al [38] showed that a solution of 20 mg/mL of disodium EDTA, has an in vitro bactericidal effect against an initial inoculum of 10³ CFU/ml of *Staphylococcus epidermidis* in a period of 24 hours. Percival et al [39] found that if tetrasodium EDTA is applied during 21 to 25 hours at a concentration of 40 mg/ml it reduces colonization of *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, *Escherichia coli* and *Candida albicans* on CVC segments. EDTA also disrupts ionic crosslinking mediated by lipid A in the cell membrane, producing that the lipidic bilayer becomes more permeable, this fact was demonstrated in *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *E. coli* [40].

It is affirmed that EOs can be used as effective antiseptics against many species, including multidrug-resistant bacteria (MDR), such as MRSA, vancomycin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (VRSA), and vancomycin resistant enterococci (VRE); Besides, they can enhance antibiotics effectiveness against MDR bacteria, with the advantage that it allows to reduce the antibiotic doses and consequently, it contributes to the presentation of fewer side effects [30, 41]. This fact could be applied to *Thymus vulgaris* essential oil.

4. CONCLUSION

The *Thymus vulgaris* essential oil had *in-vitro* antibacterial activities against MRSA from clinical isolates and indicates their potential application in the control of this pathogen commonly known for their resistant activities to most conventional antibiotics. The association with EDTA has not a synergistic effect.

CONSENT

It is not applicable.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

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