

Cefiderocol: A Potent Agent against Multidrug-Resistant Infections Facing Diagnostic Challenges in Routine Susceptibility Testing

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Abstract

Cefiderocol is a novel cephalosporin–siderophore conjugate antibiotic with significant potential in combating infections caused by multidrug-resistant (MDR) Gram-negative bacilli. Its antibacterial activity remains largely unaffected by most β -lactamases, including metallo- β -lactamases, and—due to its siderophore-mediated uptake—it demonstrates reduced susceptibility to resistance mechanisms such as porin loss or active efflux, compared to other β -lactam agents. This study aimed to evaluate the *in vitro* susceptibility of carbapenemase-producing Gram-negative bacilli isolated from hospitalized patients to cefiderocol. A total of 102 clinical isolates of carbapenemase-producing *Enterobacterales* and non-fermenting Gram-negative bacteria were collected from hospitals in Łódź, Poland. Antimicrobial susceptibility to cefiderocol was determined using minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) test strips and disc diffusion methods. The findings were inconclusive, as the presence of a technical uncertainty zone made the interpretation of results challenging. The high cost of cefiderocol therapy and the difficulties associated with interpreting susceptibility results currently limit its clinical application. Further research is needed to establish standardized, reliable, and widely accessible methods for determining cefiderocol susceptibility.

Keywords: Cefiderocol, Multidrug resistance, *Enterobacterales*, *Pseudomonas* spp., *Acinetobacter* spp.

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Received: 18 March 2025

Revised: 14 June 2025

Accepted: 16 June 2025

How to Cite This Article: Lozano R, Briones-Buixassa L, Llorente-Alonso M. Cefiderocol: A Potent Agent against Multidrug-Resistant Infections Facing Diagnostic Challenges in Routine Susceptibility Testing. Bull Pioneer Res Med Clin Sci. 2025;5(1):117-25. <https://doi.org/10.51847/lxcS7w161g>

Introduction

Cefiderocol is a cephalosporin antibiotic uniquely linked to a siderophore moiety, enabling it to exploit bacterial iron transport systems for cell entry. Unlike conventional β -lactams, which rely primarily on passive diffusion through porin channels, cefiderocol actively chelates extracellular ferric iron and is transported into the

periplasmic space of Gram-negative bacteria. Once inside, it binds to penicillin-binding proteins (PBPs), disrupting peptidoglycan synthesis and leading to bacterial cell death. Resistance to cefiderocol can arise through various mechanisms, including PBP mutations, β -lactamases capable of hydrolyzing the drug, alterations in iron acquisition pathways, mutations in siderophore transport proteins, and overproduction of native siderophores. Laboratory studies show that cefiderocol retains activity

against most β -lactamase-producing pathogens, including those harboring metallo- β -lactamases, and is less affected by porin loss or efflux pump activity than other β -lactams [1, 2].

Cefiderocol is recommended for infections caused by aerobic Gram-negative bacteria in adults with limited treatment options, under the supervision of an infectious disease specialist. Its activity against Gram-positive and anaerobic bacteria is negligible due to intrinsic resistance [3]. Marketed as Fetroja® or Fetcroja®, it is approved in the EU and USA for complicated urinary tract infections caused by *Enterobacterales*, infections due to *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* when therapeutic options are limited, and for hospital-acquired or ventilator-associated pneumonia caused by *Enterobacterales*, *P. aeruginosa*, or *Acinetobacter baumannii* complex. The safety and efficacy of cefiderocol in pediatric populations remain unestablished [3].

Performing antimicrobial susceptibility testing (AST) for cefiderocol is challenging, primarily because its antibacterial activity is influenced by iron availability in the culture medium, and current interpretive standards differ among CLSI, FDA, and EUCAST guidelines [4–6]. Cefiderocol exhibits potent activity against a wide range of multidrug-resistant Gram-negative pathogens, including both *Enterobacterales* and non-fermenting bacteria [7]. By leveraging iron transport systems, it bypasses common resistance mechanisms and selectively inhibits PBP3, preventing proper cross-linking of peptidoglycan and inducing bacterial death [8]. Consequently, careful consideration of iron concentration is crucial during *in vitro* susceptibility testing [9].

In Poland, data on cefiderocol susceptibility among carbapenemase-producing *Enterobacterales* (CPE) are limited. This study therefore aimed to evaluate the *in vitro* susceptibility of clinical carbapenemase-producing Gram-negative bacilli, including both *Enterobacterales* and non-fermenters, isolated from hospitalized patients [10].

Materials and Methods

A total of 102 carbapenemase-producing isolates—including KPC, metallo- β -lactamase (MBL), and OXA-48 producers—were analyzed. Specimens were obtained from diverse clinical sources, including blood, bronchial alveolar lavage (BAL), other lower respiratory tract samples, urine, surgical swabs, nasal swabs, wound swabs, pressure ulcer swabs, and rectal swabs collected for CPE screening.

Isolates were preserved in Viabank™ beads (Medical Wire and Equipment, Corsham, UK) at -80°C for up to six months. Prior to testing, bacteria were cultured on Columbia Agar supplemented with 5% sheep blood (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA) at 37°C for 18–24 h. Susceptibility to cefiderocol was determined

using both 30 μg disk diffusion (DD) and minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) test strips (MTS) (Liofilchem, Italy) with standardized inocula on Mueller-Hinton Agar (Thermo Fisher Scientific) following EUCAST guidelines [6]. DD zones were read visually at full inhibition from a distance of ~ 30 cm, ignoring colonies within the inhibition zone [11, 12]. Reference strains *E. coli* ATCC 25922 and *P. aeruginosa* ATCC 27853 were included as quality controls [13].

Carbapenemase production was assessed using the carbapenem inactivation method (CIM) [14] and confirmed phenotypically according to EUCAST 2024 [6] and the Polish National Reference Centre for Microbial Susceptibility (KORLD) [15]. The presence of carbapenemase genes—including KPC, OXA-48, NDM, and VIM—was confirmed via PCR at KORLD. Detection of the GES gene was performed at the Department of Microbiology and Laboratory Medical Immunology, Medical University of Łódź, with positive control strains previously validated at KORLD. Genomic DNA was extracted using the Genomic Mini AX Bacteria Spin kit (A&A Biotechnology, Gdansk, Poland) and amplified using HS PCR Kit 1 (A&A Biotechnology). PCR products were analyzed by electrophoresis on 2% agarose gels using the GeneRuler 100 bp DNA Ladder (Thermo Fisher Scientific) as a molecular weight marker.

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel 2019 (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, USA).

Table 1. Cefiderocol clinical breakpoint for *Enterobacterales* and non-fermenting bacilli (following the 2024 EUCAST guidelines [5])

Organism	MIC Breakpoint (mg/L)	Disk Diffusion Zone (mm)	Area of Technical Uncertainty (ATU)
	Susceptible (S) $\leq$	Resistant (R) $>$	Susceptible (S) $\geq$
<i>Enterobacterales</i>	2	2	23
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i>	2	2	22
<i>Stenotrophomonas maltophilia</i>	–	–	20 ^a
<i>Acinetobacter</i> spp.	–	–	17 ^b

Abbreviations: S – susceptible, R – resistant, ATU – area of technical uncertainty, MIC – minimum inhibitory concentration, PK–PD – pharmacokinetic–pharmacodynamic.

^aZone diameters of ≥ 20 mm for the cefiderocol 30 μg disk correspond to MIC values below the PK–PD breakpoint of $S \leq 2$ mg/L.

^bZone diameters of ≥ 17 mm for the cefiderocol 30 μg disk correspond to MIC values below the PK–PD breakpoint of $S \leq 2$ mg/L.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent revisions. Approval from a formal Bioethics Committee was not required, as the study utilized only

anonymized records, making identification of individual patients impossible. All bacterial isolates had been previously archived in our laboratory culture collection and were labeled with consecutive code numbers. Available clinical information was limited to patient sex, age, and the type of biological specimen from which each isolate was obtained.

Results

Among the 102 Gram-negative isolates tested, minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) values determined by the MTS method indicated susceptibility to cefiderocol for all but one strain. The exception was a CIM-positive *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* isolate, which exhibited resistance (MIC = 4 mg/L). Detailed results are provided in **Table 2**.

Of the 58 metallo- β -lactamase (MBL)-positive isolates, six (including three NDM-positive strains) were resistant according to disk diffusion (DD), while 16 (including nine NDM-positive) showed inhibition zones within the area of

technical uncertainty (ATU). Importantly, all MBL-positive isolates were susceptible when assessed by MTS. Among six OXA-48-positive isolates, two were resistant by DD and four fell within the ATU; however, all were susceptible according to MTS results. For the 11 KPC-positive isolates, four were DD-susceptible, and seven exhibited ATU results, yet all were susceptible using MTS. Similarly, of 35 GES-positive isolates, 25 were DD-susceptible and 10 showed ATU measurements, with full susceptibility confirmed via MTS. **Table 3** summarizes growth inhibition zone ranges, MIC ranges, and MIC50 and MIC90 values. **Figures 1 and 2** illustrate the *in vitro* activity of cefiderocol against the studied species.

All *Acinetobacter baumannii* isolates and approximately 87% of *P. aeruginosa* strains were classified as susceptible by DD. Resistance by DD was observed in three *Escherichia coli*, three *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, and one *P. aeruginosa* isolate. ATU results were predominantly associated with Enterobacterales isolates. **Figure 3** presents a visual summary of DD-based susceptibility outcomes.

Table 2. Cefiderocol susceptibility testing results for studied bacterial isolates using MIC test strips and DD methods.

Isolate No.	Organism	Carbapenemase Detected	MTS Method (MIC, mg/L)	DD Method (Zone, mm)
		CIM	MBL	OXA-48
1	Aeromonas sobria	+		
2	Escherichia coli	+		
3	Escherichia coli			
4	Escherichia coli			
5	Escherichia coli		+	
6	Escherichia coli		+	
7	Escherichia coli		+	
8	Escherichia coli		+	
9	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
10	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
11	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
12	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
13	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
14	Klebsiella pneumoniae	+		
15	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
16	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
17	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
18	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
19	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
20	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
21	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
22	Klebsiella pneumoniae	+		
23	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
24	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
25	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
26	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
27	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
28	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
29	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
30	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
31	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
32	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
33	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
34	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
35	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
36	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
37	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
38	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	

39	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
40	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	+
41	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
42	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
43	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
44	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
45	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
46	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
47	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
48	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
49	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
50	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
51	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
52	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
53	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
54	Klebsiella pneumoniae			
55	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
56	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
57	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
58	Klebsiella pneumoniae		+	
59	Klebsiella variicola		+	
60	Pseudomonas aeruginosa	+		
61	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
62	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
63	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
64	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
65	Pseudomonas aeruginosa	+		
66	Pseudomonas aeruginosa	+		
67	Pseudomonas aeruginosa	+		
68	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
69	Pseudomonas aeruginosa	+		
70	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
71	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
72	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
73	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
74	Pseudomonas aeruginosa		+	
75	Pseudomonas alcaligenes		+	
76	Pseudomonas putida	+		
77	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
78	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
79	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
80	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
81	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
82	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
83	Acinetobacter baumannii			
84	Acinetobacter baumannii			
85	Acinetobacter baumannii			
86	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
87	Acinetobacter baumannii			
88	Acinetobacter baumannii			
89	Acinetobacter baumannii			
90	Acinetobacter baumannii			
91	Acinetobacter baumannii			
92	Acinetobacter baumannii		+	
93	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
94	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
95	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
96	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
97	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
98	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
99	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
100	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
101	Acinetobacter baumannii	+		
102	Acinetobacter baumannii			
QC1	ATCC 25922 (E. coli)			
QC2	ATCC 27853 (P. aeruginosa)			

Notes:

- CIM: Carbapenem Inactivation Method
- MBL: Metallo- β -lactamase

- OXA-48: OXA-48-type carbapenemase
- KPC: Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase
- GES: Guiana Extended-Spectrum β -lactamase
- MTS Method: Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) in mg/L
- DD Method: Disk Diffusion method, zone diameter in mm
- "+": Indicates detection of the specified carbapenemase
- Blank cells: No carbapenemase detected for that type
- QC1 and QC2: Quality control strains (ATCC 25922 for *E. coli* and ATCC 27853 for *P. aeruginosa*)

Abbreviations: *Aero.* – Aeromonas; *Esch.* – Escherichia; *Kleb.* – Klebsiella; *Pseud.* – Pseudomonas; *Acin.* – Acinetobacter; MIC – minimum inhibitory concentration; MTS – MIC test strips; DD – disk diffusion; CIM – carbapenem inactivation method; MBL – metallo- β -lactamase; OXA-48 – oxacillinase-48; KPC – Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase; GES – Guiana Extended-Spectrum.

Table 3. Antimicrobial *in vitro* activity of cefiderocol against carbapenemase-producing species depending on the method used

Resistance mechanism	DD method		MTS method			
	Growth inhibition zone range [mm]	Susceptible	MIC ₅₀ [mg/L]	MIC ₉₀ [mg/L]	MIC range [mg/L]	Susceptible
CIM	10–28	94%	0.25	0.38	0.016–4	97%
MBL	10–28	62%	0.125	1	≤0.016–2	100%
OXA-48	10–22	0%	0.5	1	0.023–1	100%
KPC	19–23	36%	0.064	0.19	≤0.016–0.25	100%
GES	19–28	71%	0.125	0.25	0.016–1.5	100%
NDM	10–27	56%	0.125	1	0.047–1.5	100%

Abbreviations: DD – disk diffusion; MIC – minimum inhibitory concentration; MIC₅₀ – MIC required to inhibit the growth of 50% of bacteria; MIC₉₀ – MIC required to inhibit the growth of 90% of bacteria; CIM – carbapenem inactivation method; MBL – metallo- β -lactamase; OXA-48 – oxacillinase-48; KPC – Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase; GES – Guiana extended-spectrum; NDM – New Delhi metallo- β -lactamase.

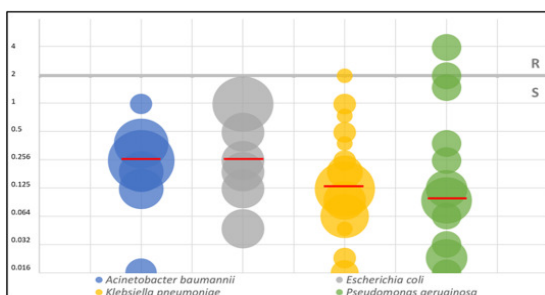


Figure 1. Antimicrobial *in vitro* activity of cefiderocol against carbapenemase-producing bacteria depending on species – MIC test strip method. The size of the bubble depends on the percentage of strains with a given MIC value, the grey line indicates the breakpoint between susceptible-resistant, the red lines indicate the average MIC values.

Abbreviations: R – resistant; S – susceptible.

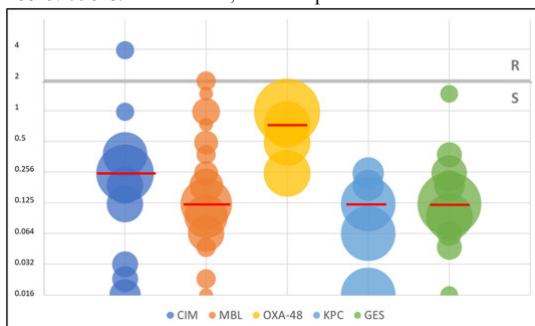


Figure 2. Antimicrobial *in vitro* activity of cefiderocol against carbapenemase-producing bacteria depending on resistance mechanism – MIC test strip method. The

size of the bubble depends on the percentage of strains with a given MIC value, the grey line indicates the breakpoint between susceptible-resistant, the red lines indicate the average MIC values.

Abbreviations: KPC – Klebsiella pneumoniae carbapenemase; OXA-48 – oxacillinase-48; GES – Guiana extended-spectrum; MBL – metallo- β -lactamase; CIM – carbapenem inactivation method; R – resistant; S – susceptible.

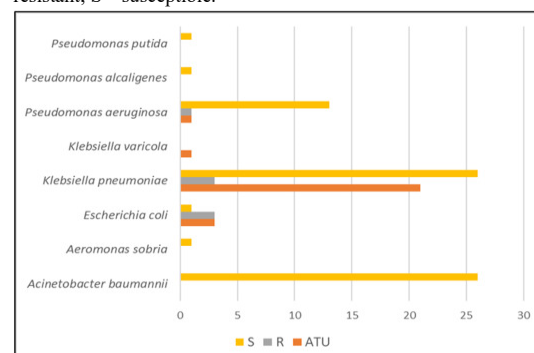


Figure 3. Susceptibility interpretations of antimicrobial *in vitro* activity of cefiderocol against carbapenemase-producing bacteria depending on resistance mechanism – disk diffusion method

Abbreviations: R – resistant; S – susceptible; ATU – area of technical uncertainty

Discussion

In 2017, the World Health Organization highlighted the urgent need for new antimicrobials targeting multidrug-resistant Gram-negative bacteria, particularly

carbapenemase-producing Enterobacterales (CPE) [16]. Since then, several broad-spectrum agents have been approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), including novel carbapenem- β -lactamase inhibitor combinations—relebactam/imipenem and vaborbactam/meropenem—designed to combat certain carbapenemase types. Cefiderocol, a siderophore-conjugated cephalosporin, represents a distinct class with a unique mechanism of bacterial entry, enabling it to evade carbapenemase-mediated hydrolysis [17, 18].

Antimicrobial susceptibility testing (AST) of cefiderocol remains challenging due to its dependence on iron-depleted conditions for optimal activity and the differing interpretive criteria established by CLSI and EUCAST [1, 4, 6, 19]. Matuschek *et al.* [20] demonstrated that disk diffusion (DD) is generally reliable for cefiderocol, with quality control data indicating reproducibility. However, results falling within the area of technical uncertainty (ATU) require careful consideration, as they may be retested, assessed with alternative methods, or reported as “unreliable.” Currently, EUCAST defines ATU zones only for Enterobacterales (21–23 mm) and *P. aeruginosa* (20–21 mm) [6]. Failure to retest ATU isolates risks misclassifying susceptible strains (MIC ≤ 2 mg/L) as resistant, which could limit therapeutic options, particularly for patients intolerant to polymyxin-based regimens [1].

Cefiderocol overcomes common β -lactam resistance mechanisms, including porin loss, efflux pump overexpression, and β -lactamase production. Nonetheless, high MICs (128 to >256 mg/L) have been reported in *A. baumannii*, *Enterobacter cloacae*, *Proteus mirabilis*, *Providencia rettgeri*, and *Morganella morganii* [21, 22]. Surveillance programs such as SIDERO-WT have noted elevated cefiderocol MICs (>4 mg/L) in a minority of isolates, particularly *A. baumannii* and certain Enterobacterales [23, 24].

Bianco *et al.* [25, 26] evaluated broth microdilution and DD methods for cefiderocol and found high concordance in detecting resistant isolates (~ 95 – 96%), but a substantial proportion of Enterobacterales (37.8%) and *P. aeruginosa* (40%) fell within ATU, supporting the combined use of both methods in routine laboratories. Reports of cefiderocol resistance are emerging; Wang *et al.* [27] identified 30 resistant isolates among 1,158 carbapenemase-producing strains, most notably NDM-positive *E. coli*. Similarly, Nurjadi *et al.* [28] and Isler *et al.* [29] highlighted the role of NDM in facilitating cefiderocol resistance, underscoring the importance of resistance monitoring.

Resistance in *A. baumannii* has been linked to ESBLs such as PER and VEB, whereas in *E. cloacae* and *K. pneumoniae*, NDM is implicated [9]. Importantly, the mere presence of these enzymes does not guarantee

resistance, as some isolates remain susceptible. Mutations affecting iron transport systems (e.g., *pvdS*, *fecI*) have been associated with cefiderocol resistance in *P. aeruginosa*, while elevated MICs have also been reported for *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* [30]. In our study, one carbapenemase-producing *P. aeruginosa* isolate demonstrated both quantitative (MIC = 4 mg/L) and qualitative (DD inhibition zone = 10 mm) resistance.

Our findings also highlight limitations of the MTS strips, which underestimated MICs for Enterobacterales, while DD correctly categorized 81.7% of isolates in a study of 827 carbapenem-resistant strains [31]. Mutational resistance mechanisms include alterations in siderophore synthesis and regulation, iron uptake, two-component systems, and PBPs [7]. Structural changes in AmpC β -lactamase (e.g., R2 loop deletion in *E. cloacae*) can reduce susceptibility to both cefiderocol and ceftazidime-avibactam [32], suggesting that further molecular studies on our isolates could elucidate resistance mechanisms.

In line with Zalas-Więcek *et al.* [10], our study confirms that MTS testing identifies nearly all MDR isolates as susceptible, while DD often classifies a substantial proportion as resistant or within ATU. For *E. coli*, MTS showed full susceptibility (MIC <0.047 –1 mg/L), whereas DD categorized $\sim 43\%$ as resistant, 43% as ATU, and only $\sim 14\%$ as susceptible. A similar trend was observed for *K. pneumoniae*, where MTS confirmed universal susceptibility (MIC <0.016 –2 mg/L), while DD indicated 6% resistance, 42% ATU, and 52% susceptibility. These findings underscore the importance of method selection and careful interpretation when evaluating cefiderocol activity in MDR Gram-negative pathogens.

Discrepancies in susceptibility testing

Interpretation of cefiderocol susceptibility across different methods—broth microdilution, MTS, and disk diffusion (DD)—is currently under review by EUCAST [33]. In August 2022, it was reported that commercially available MTS strips do not reliably ensure accuracy or reproducibility, complicating the interpretation of results for isolates within the area of technical uncertainty (ATU). Given these limitations and the critical need to test multidrug-resistant bacteria, EUCAST recommends using microdilution and DD methods until confirmatory MIC results can be obtained.

Laboratories are advised to begin testing cefiderocol using the DD method. With rising β -lactam resistance and limited therapeutic options, properly performed DD assays—using high-quality materials and adhering to quality control guidelines—can provide reliable predictions of susceptibility, even for isolates in the ATU. Template zone diameter distributions for relevant species allow laboratories to calibrate internal results [34]. When alternative interpretive methods are unavailable, EUCAST advises that ATU results can be interpreted using the

standard breakpoint diameter cutoffs [6]. As with all AST methods, outcomes are dependent on the quality of reagents and procedural rigor. The use of MTS strips is not recommended, as they tend to underestimate MIC values; DD should be preferred for initial screening [35].

Study limitations

This study included 102 isolates, a relatively small sample size. However, the strains were collected from multiple hospital centers in a large urban area in central Poland, and carbapenem-resistant isolates are uncommon in routine clinical practice. Some species were represented by only a few isolates, so antimicrobial susceptibility analysis focused on the four most frequently identified species.

To avoid duplication and ensure isolate uniqueness, only the first isolate from each patient with a distinct resistance profile was included. Clonality of the isolates was not verified due to logistical constraints. Additionally, the MIC test strips used were designed specifically for *P. aeruginosa*, limiting their reliability for other species. While DD provides useful screening data, confirmatory microdilution testing remains necessary for most CPE strains [31]. Importantly, the reference standard for antimicrobial susceptibility testing—the microdilution method—was not employed in this study.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that carbapenemase-producing Gram-negative bacilli remain largely susceptible to cefiderocol *in vitro*. The data confirm its potential as a potent treatment option against a broad range of multidrug-resistant pathogens, although susceptibility outcomes varied depending on the testing method. Discrepancies between DD and MTS methods underscore the need for standardized susceptibility testing protocols for cefiderocol.

Continuous surveillance of antimicrobial susceptibility is essential to preserve cefiderocol's clinical effectiveness, as resistance may emerge over time. Overall, these findings provide important insights into the utility of cefiderocol for treating infections caused by carbapenem-resistant *Enterobacterales* and non-fermenters. While cefiderocol represents a promising therapeutic alternative amid rising antibiotic resistance, careful implementation of susceptibility testing and further research are needed to optimize its clinical use.

Acknowledgments: None.

Conflict of interest: None.

Financial support: None.

Ethics statement: None.

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