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**Prevalence and diversity of Synergistetes taxa in  
periodontal health and disease**

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Complete List of Authors:	You, Meng; The University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Dentistry Mo, Sisu; The University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Dentistry Watt, Rory; The University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Dentistry Leung, W. Keung; The University of Hong Kong, Faculty of Dentistry;
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3 **Prevalence and diversity of *Synergistetes* taxa in periodontal**  
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6 **health and disease**  
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10 **Meng You<sup>1</sup>, Sisu Mo<sup>2</sup>, Rory M. Watt<sup>2\*</sup> and W. Keung Leung<sup>1\*</sup>**  
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15 **Running title: Human subgingival *Synergistetes***  
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19 <sup>1</sup>Oral Diagnosis and Polyclinics and <sup>2</sup>Oral Biosciences, Faculty of Dentistry, The University  
20 of Hong Kong, Prince Philip Dental Hospital, 34 Hospital Road, Sai Ying Pun, Hong Kong  
21 SAR, China  
22  
23  
24

25  
26  
27  
28 \*Corresponding addresses:  
29

30 Rory M. Watt: Oral Biosciences, Faculty of Dentistry, The University of Hong Kong, Prince  
31 Philip Dental Hospital, 34 Hospital Road, Sai Ying Pun, Hong Kong, Tel: (+852) 2859-0482,  
32 Fax: (+852) 2547-6133 E-mail: [rmwatt@hku.hk](mailto:rmwatt@hku.hk)  
33  
34

35  
36  
37 W. Keung Leung: Oral Diagnosis and Polyclinics, Faculty of Dentistry, The University of  
38 Hong Kong, Prince Philip Dental Hospital, 34 Hospital Road, Sai Ying Pun, Hong Kong, Tel:  
39 (+852) 2859-0417, Fax: (+852) 2858-2532, E-mail: [ewkleung@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:ewkleung@hkucc.hku.hk)  
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5 periodontal health and disease. *J Periodont Res*  
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## 9 10 **Abstract**

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12 *Background and Objective:* Members of the phylum *Synergistetes* have previously been  
13  
14 identified within periodontitis subgingival plaque and are considered putative  
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16 periodontopathogens. This study compared the diversity of subgingival *Synergistetes* in a  
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18 cohort of subjects with periodontitis (n=10) versus periodontitis-free controls (n=10).  
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23 *Materials and Methods:* Pooled subgingival plaque samples from all deep periodontal  
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25 pockets or all sulci were collected from the periodontitis and periodontitis-free subjects,  
26  
27 respectively. Bacterial 16S rRNA genes were PCR-amplified from purified subgingival  
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29 plaque DNA using a *Synergistetes* 'selective' primer set. PCR products were cloned and  
30  
31 sequenced to analyze the prevalence and diversity of *Synergistetes* operational taxonomic  
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33 units (OTUs) present in plaque samples of both subject groups.  
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39 *Results:* A total of 1030 non-chimeric 16S rRNA clones were obtained, of which 162  
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41 corresponded to members of the phylum *Synergistetes*. A significantly larger number of  
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43 *Synergistetes* clones were obtained from periodontitis subgingival plaque than from  
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45 periodontitis-free controls (25.4% vs. 5.9%,  $p < 0.001$ ). All *Synergistetes* clones corresponded  
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47 to cluster A oral *Synergistetes*, and fell into 31 OTUs (99% sequence identity cut-off). 29  
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49 *Synergistetes* OTUs were detected in the periodontitis group while 8 were detected in the  
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51 periodontitis-free group ( $p < 0.001$ ). Five *Synergistetes* OTUs; including one OTU  
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53 corresponding to the recently-characterized species *Fretibacterium fastidiosum*, were more  
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55 prevalent in the periodontitis subjects ( $p < 0.05$ ).  
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5 *Conclusion:* OTUs belonging to oral *Synergistetes* cluster A were more readily detectable and  
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7 were more diverse in subgingival plaque from periodontitis subjects compared with  
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9 periodontitis-free controls. Specific *Synergistetes* OTUs appear to be associated with  
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11 periodontitis.  
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3 Periodontitis is a chronic polymicrobial infectious inflammatory disease affecting the  
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5 periodontium; which causes the progressive destruction of the soft and hard tooth supporting  
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7 tissues (1, 2). It is generally considered to result from microbial dysbiosis, i.e. a 'pathogenic  
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9 shift' in the composition of the subgingival microbia that promotes and potentiates  
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11 pathogenic processes (3, 4). Of the 13 bacterial phyla known to inhabit the oral cavity (5), 9  
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13 have been detected in the subgingival plaque from both periodontally healthy (6) and  
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15 diseased subjects (7). The predominant phyla found in the periodontal niches are *Firmicutes*,  
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17 *Proteobacteria*, *Bacteroidetes* and *Actinobacteria*; which have been estimated to account for  
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19 more than 90% of the total bacteria present (6). In surveys of the oral microbiome that have  
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21 utilized 'universal' 16S rRNA molecular detection protocols, *Synergistetes* was defined as a  
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23 'rare' phylum, as it had a relatively low detection frequency of ca. 0.1-2% (6, 8-10). However,  
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25 other estimations based on microscopic fluorescence *in situ* hybridization (FISH) studies  
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27 have indicated that *Synergistetes* taxa may account for as much as 11% of the microbiota  
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29 within deep pockets (11).  
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34 Members of the *Synergistetes* inhabit diverse ecological environments (12, 13). They  
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36 are fastidious, gram-negative anaerobic straight or curved bacilli, some of which are motile  
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38 (14, 15). The *Synergistetes* phylum was only recently described, having 9 component genera  
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40 (16). A significant number of taxa, most of which were previously placed in the phyla  
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42 *Deferribacteres* (7, 10, 17-19) and *Firmicutes* (20, 21), were incorporated into this new  
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44 phylum. In previous culture-independent surveys of oral bacterial diversity, 16S rRNA gene  
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46 sequences corresponding to members of the phylum *Synergistetes* have been detected in a  
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48 variety of oral niches; especially within diseased periodontal pockets, endodontic infections  
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50 and carious dentine (6-9, 22, 23). The oral *Synergistetes* have been divided into two principal  
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52 clusters, based on their phylogenetic origins (11, 14). Cluster A is the larger group  
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54 comprising mainly uncultivated phylotypes, with one member *Fretibacterium fastidiosum*  
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3 (also referred to as SGP1) isolated and characterized recently (24, 25). Cluster B is  
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5 considerably smaller, containing two cultivated species: *Pyramidobacter piscolens* (26) and  
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7 *Jonquetella anthropi* (27).  
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10 The *Synergistetes* population appears to be more diverse in periodontitis niches than  
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12 in dental caries or endodontic infections (14). The presence or (clonal) abundance of certain  
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14 *Synergistetes* taxa have previously been shown to be associated with periodontal disease, and  
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16 consequently certain members of this phylum may be considered putative periodontopathogens  
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18 (7, 11, 28). In a recent UK-based study, Vartoukian *et al.* compared the diversity and  
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20 detection frequency of *Synergistetes* OTUs within several oral sites in a cohort of subjects  
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22 with periodontitis (n=5) versus subjects with good periodontal health (n=5) (11). The authors  
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24 found that the richness of *Synergistetes* OTUs, and the prevalence and abundance of one  
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26 taxon in particular (OTU 4.2), were associated with periodontitis. Notwithstanding these  
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28 results however, we still have a very limited understanding of the genetic diversity,  
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30 distributions and disease-associations of oral *Synergistetes* taxa in global populations.  
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34 To directly address these issues, we employed a 16S rRNA clone library-based  
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36 approach to investigate the diversity and prevalence of members of the *Synergistetes* phylum  
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38 in the subgingival plaque of Chinese subjects with periodontitis, versus periodontitis-free  
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40 controls. We found that *Synergistetes* clones were significantly more prevalent and more  
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42 diverse in periodontitis subgingival plaque compared with periodontitis-free controls. The  
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44 presence of certain *Synergistetes* OTUs (phylotypes) was associated with periodontitis. Our  
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46 results add to the growing body of evidence supporting the putative role of members of this  
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48 phylum in the pathogenesis of periodontal disease.  
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## 51 52 53 54 55 56 **Materials and methods** 57 58 59 60

### **Subject recruitment, clinical examination and sampling methods**

Ten periodontitis patients and ten periodontitis-free controls were recruited for this study with informed consent. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Hong Kong/Hospital Authority, Hong Kong West Cluster (UW 11-154). All subjects were non-smokers or former smokers who had quit smoking for more than 6 months. All subjects were ethnically Chinese, who lived in Hong Kong. Exclusion criteria included a history of periodontal or antimicrobial therapy within the past 6 months, any underlying systemic medical conditions; or less than 20 standing teeth. The inclusion criteria for the periodontitis group were four or more posterior teeth with periodontal pockets of  $\geq 6$ mm and clinical attachment level (CAL) of  $\geq 4$ mm, plus radiographic evidence of alveolar bone loss. The periodontitis-free subjects had no probing depths of  $\geq 3$ mm, no detectable clinical attachment loss or radiographic bone loss. Full mouth bleeding on probing (BOP) scores and probing pocket depths (PPD) were recorded to characterize the periodontal status. After scrupulous removal of supragingival plaque, subgingival plaque samples were collected from as many periodontal pockets (sites with PPD  $\geq 5$ mm in periodontitis subjects) or sulci (periodontitis-free subjects) using sterile Gracey or universal curettes, and were pooled to generate a single subgingival plaque sample for each subject ( $n = 20$ ). The collected plaque samples were suspended in 1.0 ml phosphate buffered saline (PBS, pH 8.0), placed on ice, and processed in the laboratory within 30 minutes after collection.

### **DNA extraction, amplification, cloning and sequencing**

Subgingival plaque samples were washed twice (PBS, pH 7.4, 1 ml), and DNA was extracted (Wizard Genomic DNA Purification Kit, Promega) following the manufacturer's protocol. DNA pellets were dissolved in 100  $\mu$ l of rehydration buffer. The universal forward primer TPU1 (5'-AGAGTTTGATCMTGGCTCAG-3') (29) and the C90 reverse primer (5'-

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3 GTTACGACTTCACCCTCCT-3') (5, 19) were used to PCR-amplify ca. 1500bp 16S rRNA  
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5 gene fragments, using the purified DNA from subgingival plaque samples as templates. PCR  
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7 mixtures (50 µl) contained: (5×) PCR buffer (10 µl), template DNA (2 µl, ca. 50 ng), MgCl<sub>2</sub>  
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9 (2.5 mM), dNTPs (0.2 mM each), TPU1 and C90 primers (0.4 µM each), LongAmp DNA  
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11 polymerase (1.5 U, New England Biolabs). PCR reactions were performed using a  
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13 'touchdown' protocol on a GeneAmp PCR System 9700 (Applied Biosystems): initial  
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15 denaturation (94°C, 480s); then 6 cycles of: denaturation (94°C, 30s), annealing (52°C, 30s,  
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17 decreasing 0.5°C every cycle), extension (65°C, 150s); followed 23 cycles of denaturation  
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19 (94°C, 20s), annealing (49°C, 20s), extension (65°C, 120s); final extension (65°C, 600s).  
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21 PCR products of ca. 1500bp were gel purified (QIAquick Gel Extraction Kit, Qiagen).  
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23 Purified PCR amplicons from each subject were individually TOPO-cloned into pCR2.1  
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25 vectors (TOPO TA Cloning Kit, Invitrogen). Ligation mixtures (n=20) were electroporated  
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27 into *Escherichia coli* DH10B, plated onto Luria-Bertani (LB) 1% agar plates supplemented  
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29 with kanamycin (50µg/ml) and X-gal (5-bromo-4-chloro-indolyl-β-D-galactopyranoside,  
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31 20µg/ml), then incubated overnight at 37°C. Plasmid DNA was purified from 45-60 (white)  
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33 colonies from each transformant plate (QIAprep Spin Miniprep Kits, QIAGEN). 45-60  
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35 plasmids from each subject (were subsequently sequenced in both directions using M13  
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37 forward and reverse primers [Beijing Genome Institute (BGI-Hong Kong Co. Ltd), Tai Po,  
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39 Hong Kong].  
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#### 47 **Primer and 16S rRNA gene sequence analysis**

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49 The selectivity and coverage of the C90 reverse primer (5'-GTTACGACTTCACCCTCCT-3')  
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51 for amplifying 16S rRNA gene sequences from members of the *Synergistetes* phylum was  
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53 estimated *in silico*, using the Probe Match programme of the Ribosomal Database Project  
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55 (RDP) 10 online resource (<http://rdp.cme.msu.edu/>) (30). The 16S rRNA gene sequence data  
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3 were assembled and trimmed using CODONCODE ALIGNER 3.7.1 (Codon Code  
4 Corporation, Dedham, MA). Sequences were aligned using the 16S ribosomal SILVA  
5 bacteria dataset (31) as a template, and were manually corrected before further analysis.  
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7 Chimeric sequences were identified using Chimera Slayer and 24 suspicious sequences were  
8 removed. RDP Classifier was used to taxonomically-classify valid sequences to at least the  
9 level of phylum (32).  
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### 18 **Taxonomic assignment Estimates of microbial diversity**

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20 A distance matrix was generated and sequences were assigned to Operational Taxonomic  
21 Units (OTUs) at various sequence identity cut-off levels (99%, 97%, 95%) using the furthest  
22 neighbor algorithm in the Mothur software package (32). This algorithm requires that the  
23 distance between every sequence within an OTU lie within the specified identity threshold  
24 (33). Representative sequences for each *Synergistetes* OTU found in this study were  
25 deposited in the NCBI GenBank (accession numbers JX010869 to JX010946, Supplementary  
26 Table S2). Rarefaction curves for OTU were calculated using Mothur.  
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### 38 **Community comparisons**

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40 *Synergistetes* OTU populations in each subject were compared and visualized as  
41 dendrograms according to the Yue and Clayton theta structural diversity measure (34). The  
42 structure of *Synergistetes* communities present in the periodontitis and **periodontitis-free**  
43 groups were compared using  $\beta$ -libshuff (35, 36), unweighted and weighted UniFrac analysis  
44 (37, 38) and Parsimony  $p$ -tests (39). The  $p$ -value threshold was set to 0.05.  
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### 54 **Phylogenetic relationships**

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3 An alignment comprising representative 16S rRNA sequences from each identified non-  
4 *Synergistetes* OTU were used as an input to examine phylogenetic relationships. NJ trees  
5 were constructed following evolutionary distance analysis of aligned sequences, corrected by  
6 the Jukes-Cantor substitution model using MEGA 5 (40), and were supported by 100  
7 bootstrap replicates. The absolute clonal abundance for each OTU was visualized as a heat-  
8 map using ggplot2 from the R statistical computing package (<http://www.r-project.org/>) (41).  
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### 18 **Statistical analysis**

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20 Standard descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to synthesize the clinical data.  
21 Assumption tests for normality and equality of variance were performed prior to all statistical  
22 comparative analyses of datasets obtained from the two cohorts. Non-parametric Mann-  
23 Whitney *U* tests were used for all statistical tests between the two cohorts. The *p*-value  
24 threshold was set to 0.05.  
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## 37 **Results**

### 38 **Clinical evaluation of periodontal health status in the two subject groups**

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40 Subjects with periodontitis who sought treatment at the Prince Philip Dental Hospital and  
41 subjects with periodontitis-free attending regular check-up were recruited for this study, with  
42 informed consent and ethical approval. There was no difference in gender distribution  
43 between periodontitis and periodontitis-free control groups; but the average age of the  
44 periodontitis-free group was slightly higher than that of the periodontitis group (Table 1). The  
45 periodontal health status of all subjects was as summarized in Table 1. The mean percentage  
46 of BOP sites for the periodontitis group was significantly higher than that for the  
47 periodontitis-free group. None of the periodontitis-free group had probing pocket depths  $\geq 4$   
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3 mm, radiographic evidence of bone loss or furcation involvement in multi-rooted teeth (data  
4 not shown), confirming that they had good periodontal status. All subgingival sites in the  
5 periodontitis-free group were sampled to maximize the total amount of plaque collected  
6 (Table 1). Whilst it was possible to collect subgingival plaque from every diseased  
7 periodontal pocket sampled in the periodontitis group, it was not possible to obtain detectable  
8 levels of plaque from every sulcal site in the periodontitis-free group. As may be seen in  
9 Table 1, the sampled sites from the periodontitis subjects had a significantly higher average  
10 probing depth and percentage of BOP.  
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### 20 21 22 23 ***In silico* evaluation of PCR primer amplification specificity**

24 In combination with a 'universal' forward PCR primer [e.g. TPU1 (29)], the C90 reverse  
25 primer (5, 19) has previously been shown to predominantly amplify near-full length 16S  
26 rRNA (*rrs*) gene fragments (corresponding to positions 8-1503 of the *Escherichia coli* 16S  
27 rRNA gene) from members of the *Spirochaetes* (7, 19, 42, 43) and *Synergistetes* phyla  
28 (previously referred to as *Synergistes/Flexistipes/Deferribacteres* taxa) (19). To  
29 systematically evaluate the hybridization specificity of the C90 primer, we used the Probe  
30 match software tool to analyze its sequence homology with 16S rRNA sequences from  
31 representative *Synergistetes* OTUs. Results indicated that the C90 primer should anneal with  
32 cluster B oral *Synergistetes* sequences without mismatches (Supplementary Table S1). The  
33 C90 primer exactly matched some cluster A oral *Synergistetes* sequences, whilst there was a  
34 single G/A nucleotide mismatch with other sequences at position 1485 (*E. coli* numbering).  
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### 51 52 **Construction and analysis of 16S rRNA clone libraries**

53 Using the TPU1 plus C90 primer set, ca. 1500bp 16S rRNA gene fragments were  
54 successfully amplified from DNA template purified from the pooled subgingival plaque  
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3 samples from each of the 20 subjects. Plasmid libraries of 'TOPO-cloned' 16S rRNA genes  
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5 were separately constructed for each subject, and the PCR amplicons within ca. 45-60  
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7 plasmid clones from each subject were sequenced. After poor-quality reads and chimeras  
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9 were filtered out, a total of 1,030 high-quality 16S rRNA sequences were obtained. There  
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11 was no significant difference in the mean number of plasmid clones obtained from the  
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13 periodontitis ( $52 \pm 8.0$ ) and periodontitis-free control ( $51 \pm 8.4$ ) groups. 16S rRNA sequences  
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15 were assigned a taxonomy using RDP classifier (32), with results summarized in Table 2. In  
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17 terms of clonal abundance (i.e. number of plasmid clones obtained), the predominant phyla  
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19 detected were *Spirochaetes* (59.7%), *Synergistetes* (15.7%), *Actinobacteria* (16.2%),  
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21 *Fusobacteria* (3.6%), *Proteobacteria* and *Firmicutes* (2.4%) and *Proteobacteria* (2.3%). This  
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23 indicated that whilst the TPU1 plus C90 primer set predominantly amplified 16S rRNA genes  
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25 from *Spirochaetes*, they exhibited a reasonably-good selectivity for *Synergistetes*. The  
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27 composition of the *Spirochaetes* clones obtained will be discussed elsewhere (You *et al.*,  
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29 manuscript in preparation).  
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34 There were significantly higher numbers of *Synergistetes* clones amplified from  
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36 periodontitis subjects compared with periodontitis-free controls (Table 2). Of the 162  
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38 *Synergistetes* clones detected, 132 (>80%) clones were obtained from the periodontitis  
39  
40 subject group. The mean number of *Synergistetes* clones obtained per subject was 13.2 (range:  
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42 8-21) and 3.0 (range: 0-7) from the periodontitis and periodontitis-free groups, respectively.  
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45 Compared with the periodontitis group, a relatively large proportion of clones  
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47 corresponding to members of the *Actinobacteria*, and a sizable number of clones belonging to  
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49 *Firmicutes*, *Fusobacteria* and *Proteobacteria* phyla were detected in the periodontitis-free  
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51 group (See Table 2). However, as the TPU1 and C90 primers do not have good coverage for  
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53 members of these phyla (data not shown), these findings are probably not representative of  
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55 the actual populations of these bacteria present; and as such, correlations with clinical health  
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3 status was not performed. As has been previously proposed (7, 11, 19), this may possibly  
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5 reflect the low abundance of stringently-matched taxa (e.g. *Spirochaetes*, *Synergistetes*),  
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7 resulting in the amplification of more abundant and less-stringently matched 16S rRNA  
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9 sequences (especially *Actinobacteria* spp.).  
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### 11 12 13 14 **Prevalence of *Synergistetes* taxa within the periodontitis and periodontitis-free subject** 15 16 **groups**

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18 The *Synergistetes* clones were divided into distinct taxonomic groups, i.e. OTUs, based on  
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20 the levels of shared 16S rRNA gene sequence identity. The prevalence of OTUs in both  
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22 subject groups were analyzed using three different sequence identity cut-off values: 99%, 97%  
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24 and 95% (Table 3). Rarefaction curves were plotted using this data to estimate the OTU  
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26 richness within the two subject groups at each of these levels (see Supplementary Figure S1).  
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28 Graphs were plotted based on four different parameters: the numbers of subjects sampled  
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30 (Panel A); as well as the total number of clones sampled from both groups (Panel B), the  
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32 periodontitis-free group only (Panel C) or the periodontitis group only (Panel D). In all four  
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34 panels it may be seen that all the rarefaction curves plotted using OTU composition based on  
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36 a 97% or 95% sequence identity cut-off level plateaued-out at low OTU richness values,  
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38 whilst curves plotted used a 99% sequence identity cut-off did not plateau over the range  
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40 shown. When rarefaction curves were respectively plotted for the number of OTUs observed  
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42 versus number of clones sequenced for the two cohorts using a 99% cut-off value, only the  
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44 curve for the periodontitis-free group appeared to reach an asymptote. This result was  
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46 consistent with the Chao 1 diversity estimates described below.  
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52 Using a 99% 16S rRNA sequence identity cut-off, a total of 31 *Synergistetes* OTUs  
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54 were present in the overall dataset (Table 3). These OTUs were given alphanumeric names  
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56 reflecting their origin (1P-10P for the 10 periodontitis subjects, 1H-10H for the periodontitis-  
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3 free subjects). It should be noted that some 'P' OTUs were detectable in both periodontitis  
4 and **periodontitis-free** subjects; with the name indicating the subject group from which the  
5 representative clones were first obtained. Substantially more OTUs were detected in the  
6 periodontitis group (n=29), compared with the periodontitis-free controls (n=8). Twenty three  
7 OTUs were detected exclusively in the periodontitis group, six OTUs were common to both  
8 groups (5H23, 1P28, 7P1, 4P26, 8H6, 4P12), whilst only two OTUs (3H20, 5H10) was found  
9 exclusively in the periodontitis-free group (also see Figure 1). The mean number of  
10 *Synergistetes* OTUs detected per subject was 6.7 (SD  $\pm$  3.0; range: 3-13) in the periodontitis  
11 group and 1.7 (SD  $\pm$  1.4; range: 0-4) in the periodontitis-free group ( $p < 0.001$ , Mann-Whitney  
12 U test). The total estimated number of *Synergistetes* OTUs (as calculated using a Chao 1  
13 index) was 53.8; with a projected 47.5 and 8.5 OTUs present in the periodontitis and  
14 periodontitis-free groups, respectively.

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The prevalence of the 31 *Synergistetes* OTUs within the subjects, and their clonal abundance (i.e. absolute numbers of plasmids encoding 16S rRNA genes that correspond to a specific OTU) were represented using a grey-scale heatmap (Figure 1). The three most widely distributed OTUs were 4P26 (detected in 10 subjects), 7P1 (9 subjects) and 2P9 (7 subjects). Sixteen OTUs were present in two or more subjects, whilst 15 OTUs were only found in one subject. However, it should be noted that individual OTUs defined using a 99% sequence identity cut-off may comprise several closely-related *Synergistetes* 16S rRNA sequences. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests revealed that five *Synergistetes* OTUs were detected with a significantly higher frequency in the periodontitis group, compared with the periodontitis-free group. These were OTUs 2P9 ( $p < 0.01$ ; analogous to *Synergistetes* OTU 2 clone 7.1 (25)); 4P12 ( $p < 0.01$ ; analogous to *F. fastidiosim* SGIP<sup>T</sup> (1435/1440 nt, 99.7%; previously known as *Synergistetes* SGP1) (24, 25) and the '*Deferribacteres*' oral clone W090 clone (1434/1440 nt, 99.6% identity) (17)); 7P1 ( $p < 0.01$ , analogous to '*Deferribacteres*' oral

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3 clone BH007 (1433/1434 nt, 99.9% identity) (7)); 7P22 ( $p<0.05$ ) and 6P18 ( $p<0.05$ ); also  
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5 discussed below.  
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### 9 10 **Phylogenetic relationships between *Synergistetes* OTUs**

11  
12 Phylogenetic relationships between the 31 *Synergistetes* OTUs identified in the clinical  
13  
14 samples were analyzed using a Neighbor-joining (NJ) approach. The overall topology of the  
15  
16 NJ phylogenetic tree generated was generally well-supported with high bootstrap values  
17  
18 (Figure 1). It may be seen that the OTUs belonged to various well-separated genetic lineages  
19  
20 that diverged at an early point in their evolutionary history. Several OTUs appeared to be  
21  
22 quite genetically distinct (e.g. 6P18, 2P9, 3P46), whilst others were part of ‘branches’  
23  
24 containing two or three OTUs that shared reasonably high levels (ca. 98.5-99.5%) of 16S  
25  
26 rRNA gene sequence similarity (e.g. 4P36, 4P12, 3P2).  
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29  
30 Figure 2 shows the phylogenetic relationships between the thirty-one OTUs detected  
31  
32 in the subjects analyzed here and the three named *Synergistetes* species previously isolated  
33  
34 from the oral cavity, as well as the corresponding *Synergistetes* Human Oral Taxa (HOT)  
35  
36 defined in the Human Oral Microbiome Database (HOMD) (5) Twenty-three of the thirty-one  
37  
38 OTUs identified here could be assigned to an existing *Synergistetes* HOT (using a 98.5%  
39  
40 sequence identity cut-off). Eight OTUs (6P48, 4P10, 5P11, 8P65, 4P40, 3H20, 4P23, 7P51)  
41  
42 did not correspond to an existing *Synergistetes* HOT. We did not detect any clones or isolates  
43  
44 corresponding to oral cluster B *Synergistetes* within either of our subject groups.  
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### 49 50 **Community-based analysis of *Synergistetes* OTUs detected in subjects**

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52 A hierarchical OTU-based comparison analysis was performed to determine whether the two  
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54 subject groups contained similar or disparate communities of *Synergistetes* OTUs (99% cut-  
55  
56 off). As may be seen in the dendrogram shown in Figure 3, based on their resident  
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3 populations of identified OTUs, the subjects formed two quite distinct clusters that correlated  
4  
5 closely to their periodontal health status. The only notable outlier was periodontitis subject P1,  
6  
7 whose resident *Synergistetes* clones were similar to those present in healthy subjects H7 and  
8  
9 H4. J-libshuff, unweighted and weighted UniFrac and Parsimony *p*-tests were all used to  
10  
11 systematically compare the differences in communities of *Synergistetes* OTUs present in the  
12  
13 periodontitis and periodontitis-free subject sets. All these hypothesis tests (that employ  
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15 different algorithms) indicated that the populations within the two groups were significantly  
16  
17 different, with overall *p*-values of less than 0.001 obtained.  
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## 25 Discussion

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28 In this study, we used a 16S rRNA gene-based approach to systematically analyze and  
29  
30 compare members of the *Synergistetes* phylum that were present in pooled subgingival  
31  
32 plaque sampled from periodontal pockets of 10 periodontitis patients, versus pooled  
33  
34 subgingival plaque collected from the sulci of an equal number of periodontitis-free controls.  
35  
36 Of the 162 *Synergistetes* clones identified, significantly more clones were obtained from the  
37  
38 periodontitis group (n=132, 81.5%) than the periodontitis-free group (n=30, 18.5%; *p*<0.001),  
39  
40 consistent with the hypothesis that certain members are 'periodontopathogens'.  
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44 Subgingival niches in subjects with periodontal or endodontic infections are populated  
45  
46 with anaerobic microbial biofilm communities that are able to produce peptides and free  
47  
48 amino acids through the proteolytic degradation of host tissues (44). Such niches appear to be  
49  
50 ideal environments for members of the *Synergistetes* taxa, which are proposed to acquire  
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52 nutrients predominantly via amino acid metabolism (14). Correspondingly, a significant  
53  
54 number of *Synergistetes* taxa have been detected or isolated from diseased periodontal sites  
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56 (7, 10, 17, 20, 45, 46) and endodontic infections (19, 21, 47-51); as well as dental caries  
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3 lesions (52). Using a similar 16S rRNA clone-based approach, it has previously been shown  
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5 that the *Synergistetes* levels detected in subgingival plaque was associated with periodontal  
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7 health status; constituting ca. 1.5% of all clones obtained from periodontal pockets, but only  
8  
9 0.1% of clones from periodontally-healthy sites (10). Although *Synergistetes* have been  
10  
11 frequently identified in periodontitis subjects, several studies targeting periodontal healthy  
12  
13 subjects have failed to detect taxa belonging to the *Synergistetes* phylum (53, 54). In our  
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15 cohort, *Synergistetes* could be detected, albeit at low frequencies, in 8/10 periodontitis-free  
16  
17 subjects, and in all periodontitis subjects. In agreement with previous reports (6), our results  
18  
19 support the hypothesis that *Synergistetes* are typically present in 'healthy' human oral  
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21 microbiota at low levels.  
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25 Taxa within the *Synergistetes* phylum share less than 75% 16S rRNA sequence  
26  
27 identity with other phyla. *Synergistetes* taxa that have previously been (co)-detected within  
28  
29 specific niches; such as in animal hosts, soil samples, or human subgingival plaque generally  
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31 share only ca. 80% 16S rRNA sequence similarity (12, 16). *Synergistetes* thus far identified  
32  
33 within the oral cavity form two major clusters: A and B, with the majority of taxa belonging  
34  
35 to cluster A (14, 25). To date, only one species of cluster A oral *Synergistetes* has been  
36  
37 isolated and characterized: *Fretibacterium fastidiosum* (24), which was previously referred to  
38  
39 as the SGP1 clone (25). The smaller cluster B includes 2 cultivated species: *Pyramidobacter*  
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41 *piscolens*, with several strains isolated from odontogenic abscesses, inflamed gingival  
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43 crevices or periodontal pockets; and *Jonquetella anthropi*, with strain E3\_33 isolated from an  
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45 endodontic infection (14, 26, 27).  
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50 *Synergistetes* populations within periodontitis subgingival plaque were previously  
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52 reported to be more diverse than those in endodontic infections or dental caries, and certain  
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54 taxa were identified exclusively in periodontal sites (14). Using a '*Synergistetes* specific'  
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56 primer set that amplified a ca. 800bp fragment of the 16S rRNA gene, Vartoukian *et al.* (11)  
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3 detected 12 *Synergistetes* OTUs (using a 99% cut-off value) in plaque sampled from the  
4  
5 periodontal environment in 5 healthy and 5 periodontitis subjects. Here, we used the  
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7 ‘*Synergistetes* selective’ TPU1+C90 primers to PCR-amplify near full-length 16S rRNA  
8  
9 fragments (ca. 1500bp), enabling us to identify 31 *Synergistetes* OTUs. 12 of the  
10  
11 *Synergistetes* OTUs in our dataset corresponded to known cluster A members, and 19  
12  
13 corresponded to previously undescribed OTUs. Analogous to Vartoukian *et al.* (11), we  
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15 defined the *Synergistetes* OTUs using a 99% sequence identity cut-off. Whilst this OTU  
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17 definition gives higher levels of taxonomic resolution, it may over-estimate the numbers of  
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19 ‘species-level’ phylotypes present. We detected 16S rRNA sequences belonging to OTUs that  
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21 corresponded to all 15 of the previously-identified oral *Synergistetes* cluster A taxa listed in  
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23 Supplementary Table S1, even though many of these putatively encode a G/A single  
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25 nucleotide mismatch with the C90 reverse primer. This indicated that we were able to sample  
26  
27 a broad range of oral *Synergistetes* taxa using our approach. It should be noted however, that  
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29 the recently-reported M98 *Spirochaetes* and *Synergistetes* selective reverse primer (5)  
30  
31 contains a degenerate Y (C/T) residue in place of a T residue which is present in the C90  
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33 primer, and should theoretically have a better range of coverage.  
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39 Consistent with previous reports (11), we did not detect any oral cluster B taxa in our  
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41 subject groups. Other molecular analyses of oral (especially periodontitis) microbiota have  
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43 similarly noted that the vast majority of *Synergistetes* taxa (previously referred to as  
44  
45 *Deferibacterres/Flexistipes/Synergistes*) corresponded to cluster A, with relatively few  
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47 cluster B taxa detected (7, 10, 17, 45). Sequence analysis indicated that the C90 reverse  
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49 primer can perfectly complement all previously-identified cluster B OTUs, indicating that  
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51 they should be detected if present at levels comparable to those of the cluster A taxa (see  
52  
53 Supplementary Table S1). Consequently, it is not possible to state whether oral cluster B  
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55 *Synergistetes* are absent, or are present at very low levels within our subject set.  
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3 The communities of *Synergistetes* were significantly more OTU-rich in the  
4 periodontitis subjects (mean: 6.7 OTUs, range: 3-13) compared with the periodontitis-free  
5 subjects (mean: 1.7, range: 0-4). This is in good agreement with the results of Vartoukian *et*  
6 *al.* (11), who noted that periodontitis cases (mean: 7.8 OTUs, range: 7-10) also had  
7 significantly higher OTU-richness than controls (mean, 3.4, range 0-6). These authors also  
8 noted that certain individuals could be 'dominated' with a specific *Synergistetes* OTU (up to  
9 64% relative clonal abundance), whilst others contained a greater OTU diversity with a fairly  
10 even prevalence. Similarly, in our data, control subject H7 contained 7 clones corresponding  
11 to a single OTU (1P28), whilst periodontitis subject P6 harbored 13 different OTUs, which  
12 were each present on 1-6 plasmid clones.  
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25 In their landmark (US-based) study published in 2001, Paster and co-workers  
26 identified *Synergistetes* clones BH017, D084, W028 and W090 as putative periodontal  
27 pathogens on the basis of their prevalence in diseased subjects, and absence in healthy  
28 subjects (7). Using primer sets specific for clones BH017/D084 and clone W090, Kumar and  
29 co-workers subsequently found that the BH017 and D084 clones, but not W090, were  
30 associated with chronic periodontitis in a US cohort (17). Based on results from a 16S rRNA  
31 clone-based investigation, Kumar *et al.* later found that the occurrence and prevalence of  
32 *Synergistetes* clones BH007 and W090, but not BH017, were strongly associated with  
33 periodontal disease (10). In a UK-based study, Vartoukian *et al.* (11) subsequently found that  
34 a previously undescribed *Synergistetes* taxon (OTU 4.2) was significantly associated with  
35 periodontitis; whilst other phylotypes including: BH007, W090 and W028 had no significant  
36 correlation with disease. **Notably, we did not detect a sequence corresponding to OTU 4.2**  
37 **within our cohort.** Therefore, despite consistent results linking members of the *Synergistetes*  
38 phylum with (chronic) periodontitis, the association between specific *Synergistetes* clones  
39 and periodontal disease remains somewhat inconclusive.  
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3 Here, we found that the increased prevalence of 5 *Synergistetes* OTUs were  
4 associated with periodontitis: 7P1, 2P9 and 4P12 ( $p < 0.01$ ); and 7P22 and 6P18 ( $p < 0.05$ ).  
5  
6 Whilst OTUs 7P22 and 6P18 are novel; OTU 7P1 corresponds to clone BH007 (10); 2P9  
7 corresponds to clone 7.1 (25). OTU 4P12 shares >99.6% sequence identity with clone W090  
8 (7, 10) and *F. fastidiosum* SGIP<sup>T</sup> (24, 25), which may both be designated as Human Oral  
9 Taxon 363 (*Synergistetes* [G-3] sp.) according to the Human Oral Microbiome Database  
10 (HOMD) classification scheme (5). Although our understanding of taxonomy in the  
11 *Synergistetes* phylum is rudimentary, it seems probable that both the 4P12 and W090 clones  
12 correspond to *F. fastidiosum* strains. Our results suggest that certain *Synergistetes* taxa  
13 belonging to cluster A may be widely distributed in global populations, as they have now  
14 been detected in the oral cavities of subjects residing in the UK, US and China. Whilst our  
15 finding that 4P12 and 7P1 OTUs are strongly associated with periodontitis is consistent with  
16 two previous studies performed in the US (7, 10), they are not consistent with results from  
17 two other studies performed in the UK (11) and US (17). This highlights the fact that the  
18 phylogeny, global distributions and disease-associations of oral *Synergistetes* taxa require  
19 further detailed investigation.  
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38 In brief conclusion, there was a greater diversity and clonal abundance of OTUs  
39 belonging to cluster A oral *Synergistetes* detected in subgingival plaque from periodontitis  
40 patients, compared to periodontitis-free controls. Five *Synergistetes* OTUs were found  
41 predominantly or exclusively in the periodontitis group. Our results are consistent with the  
42 hypothesis that members of the phylum *Synergistetes* play a role in the occurrence or  
43 pathogenesis of periodontal disease.  
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## Legends

*Fig. 1.* Phylogenetic relationships and clonal abundance of *Synergistetes* OTUs identified in this study. Left hand side: NJ phylogenetic tree composed of the *Synergistetes* OTUs identified in this study. Bootstrap values  $\geq 50\%$  are shown beside branch points. Right hand side: The absolute clonal abundance of the *Synergistetes* OTUs detected in each subject is displayed using a heat map with grey-scale boxes; with corresponding values indicated in the key shown near the base of the figure. The names of previously reported oral *Synergistetes* clones or isolates that correspond to the OTUs defined here are indicated. The statistical significance of the differences in clonal abundances of specific OTUs between the periodontitis (P) and periodontitis-free (H) subject groups are indicated (\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , Mann-Whitney U test).

*Fig. 2.* Phylogenetic relationships between *Synergistetes* OTUs detected here and previously identified species of oral *Synergistetes* species and Human Oral Taxon (HOT) numbers listed in the Human Oral Microbiome Database (HOMD). The phylogenetic tree was constructed from corresponding 16S rRNA gene sequences using a Neighbour-joining method (Jukes-Cantor model), and was rooted against *Treponema socranskii* subsp. *socranskii* ATCC 35536. Bootstrap values greater than 50% are shown beside the branch points. *Synergistetes* OTUs were assigned to HOTs using a 98.5% sequence identity cut-off value. The eight OTUs that do not correspond to existing *Synergistetes* HOTs are indicated in bold text.

*Fig. 3.* Similarities in the composition of *Synergistetes* OTUs detected in the 20 subjects (H1-H10, P1-P10) included in the study. The dendrogram indicates the similarity of *Synergistetes* communities detected in each subject according to the structure-based Yue and Clayton theta

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3 coefficient, using a 99% 16S rRNA sequence identity cut-off for defining OTUs. P:  
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5 Periodontitis, H: Periodontitis-free (control) subject groups.  
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10 *Fig. S1.* Rarefaction curves for *Synergistetes* OTUs defined using 99%, 97% and 95% 16S  
11 rRNA sequence similarity cut-off values. Rarefaction curves for the number of *Synergistetes*  
12 OTUs were plotted using four different parameters for the x-axis, shown in Panels A-D. The  
13 rarefaction curves for the three defined OTU cut-off values were plotted on each panel: 99%  
14 (black), 97% (dark grey) and 95% (light grey). Panel A: rarefaction curves for the numbers of  
15 *Synergistetes* OTUs, constructed by sub-sampling the pool of subjects analyzed. Panel B:  
16 rarefaction curves for OTU numbers based on the total number of *Synergistetes* 16S rRNA  
17 clones analyzed. Panel C: rarefaction curves for OTU numbers based on the *Synergistetes*  
18 16S rRNA clones analyzed from the periodontitis subjects only. Panel D: rarefaction curves  
19 for OTU numbers based on the *Synergistetes* 16S rRNA clones analyzed from the  
20 periodontitis-free subjects only.  
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Table 1. Demography and clinical profile of study subjects

Characteristics	Categories	Periodontal status		Statistics <sup>a</sup>	p-value
		Periodontitis (n = 10)	Periodontitis- free (n = 10)		
Age (Mean ±SD, year)		40.7 ± 10.6	54.0 ± 10.6	U	0.014
Gender	Male	3	3	$\chi^2$	NS
	Female	7	7		
<i>Full mouth periodontal profile</i>					
Standing teeth		28.0 ± 2.2	27.5 ± 1.1	U	NS
% BOP		88.6 ± 10.3	30.4 ± 12.7	U	<0.001
% PPD = 4-5 mm		22.0 ± 8.8	0	NA	
% PPD ≥ 6 mm		15.8 ± 15.0	0	NA	
<i>Profile of sample sites</i>					
No. of sites sampled	mean	42.7 ± 31.2	165.0 ± 6.5	U	<0.001
	range	8 - 81	156 - 180		
% BOP	mean	99.8 ± 0.5	30.4 ± 12.7	U	<0.001
	range	98.3 – 100.0	11.0 – 48.2		
Mean PPD (mm)	mean	6.2 ± 0.5	1.9 ± 0.6	U	<0.001
	range	5.21 – 6.63	1.3 – 2.4		

Results are Number unless otherwise indicated; BOP = bleeding on probing; NS = not significant; NA: not applicable; PPD: probing pocket depth

<sup>a</sup>U: Mann-Whitney U test;  $\chi^2$ : chi square test.

Table 2. Absolute and relative clonal abundance at the phylum level

Phylum	Periodontitis-			<i>p</i> -value <sup>a</sup>
	Periodontitis	free	Total	
<i>Spirochaetes</i>	365 (70.2%)	250 (49.0%)	615 (59.7%)	<0.05
<i>Synergistetes</i>	132 (25.4%)	30 (5.9%)	162 (15.7%)	<0.001
<i>Actinobacteria</i>	20 (3.8%)	147 (28.8%)	167 (16.2%)	<0.05
<i>Firmicutes</i>	NA	25 (4.9%)	25 (2.4%)	<0.05
<i>Fusobacteria</i>	3 (0.6%)	34 (6.7%)	37 (3.6%)	NS
<i>Proteobacteria</i>	NA	24 (4.7%)	24 (2.3%)	<0.05
Total	520 (100%)	510 (100%)	1030 (100%)	NS

NA: not applicable; NS: not significant

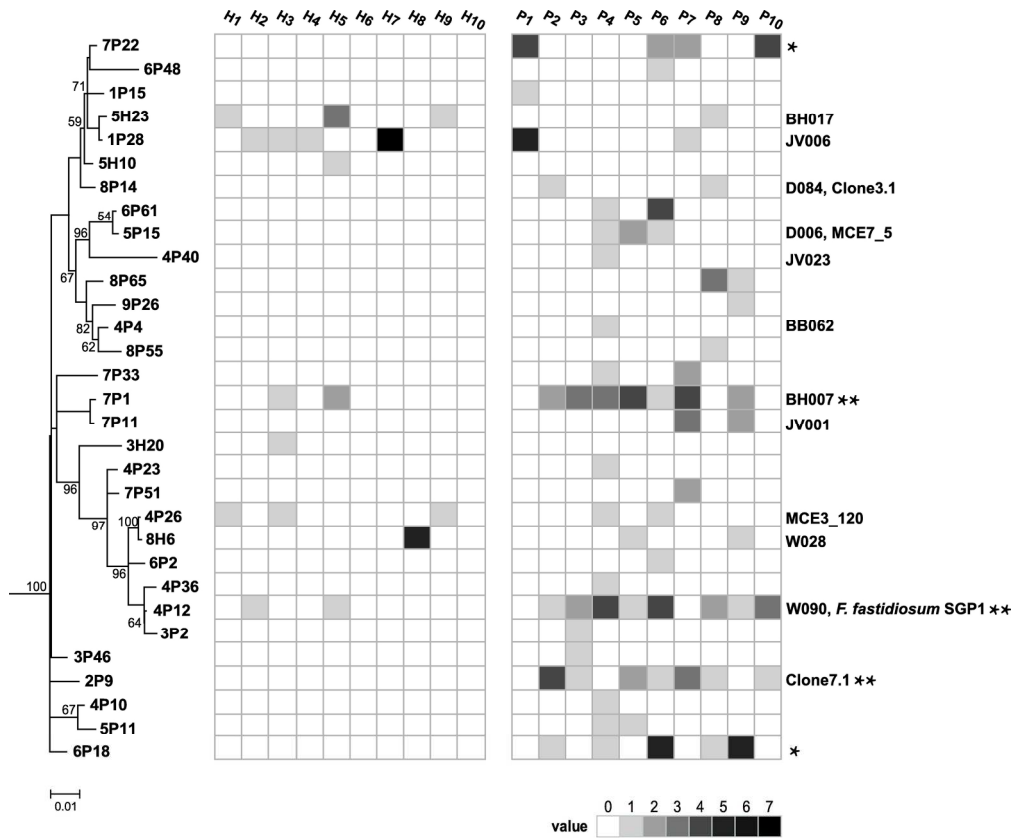
<sup>a</sup>Mann-Whitney U test

Table 3. The number of observed *Synergistetes* OTUs

Level	Periodontitis	Periodontitis-free	Total
Unique sequences	119	24	143
OTU (99%)	29	8	31
OTU (97%)	8	3	8
OTU (95%)	5	2	5

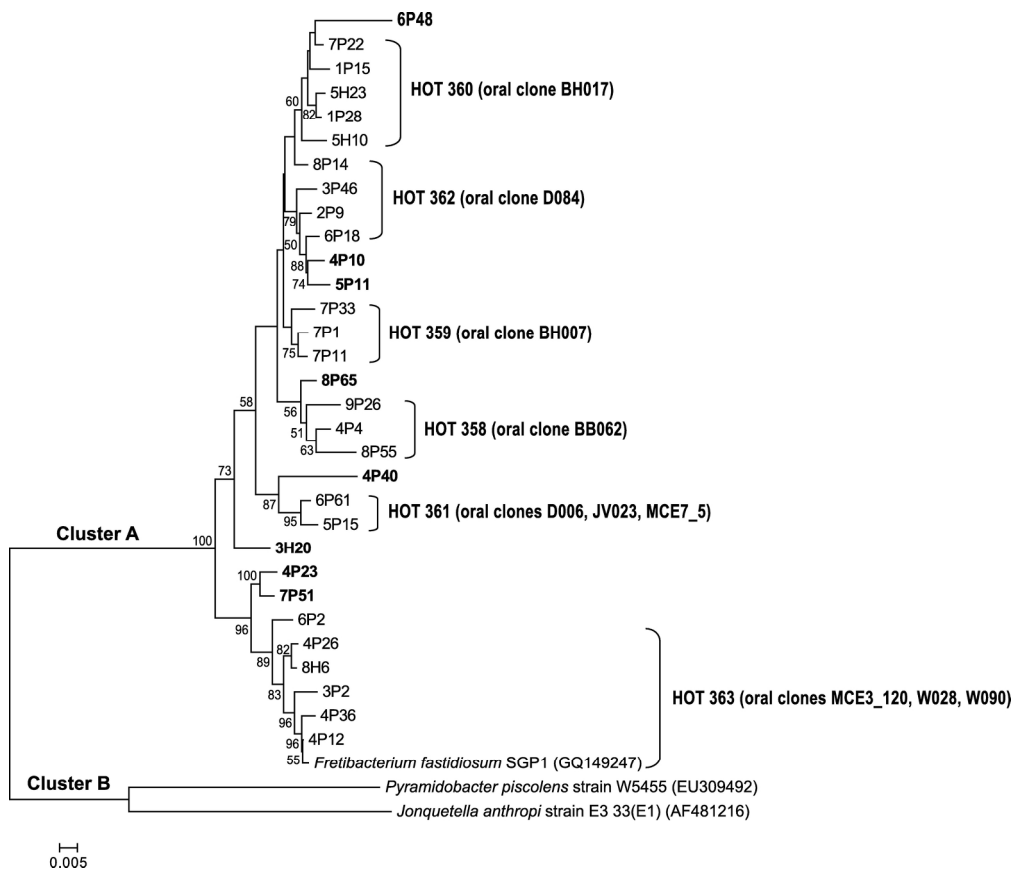
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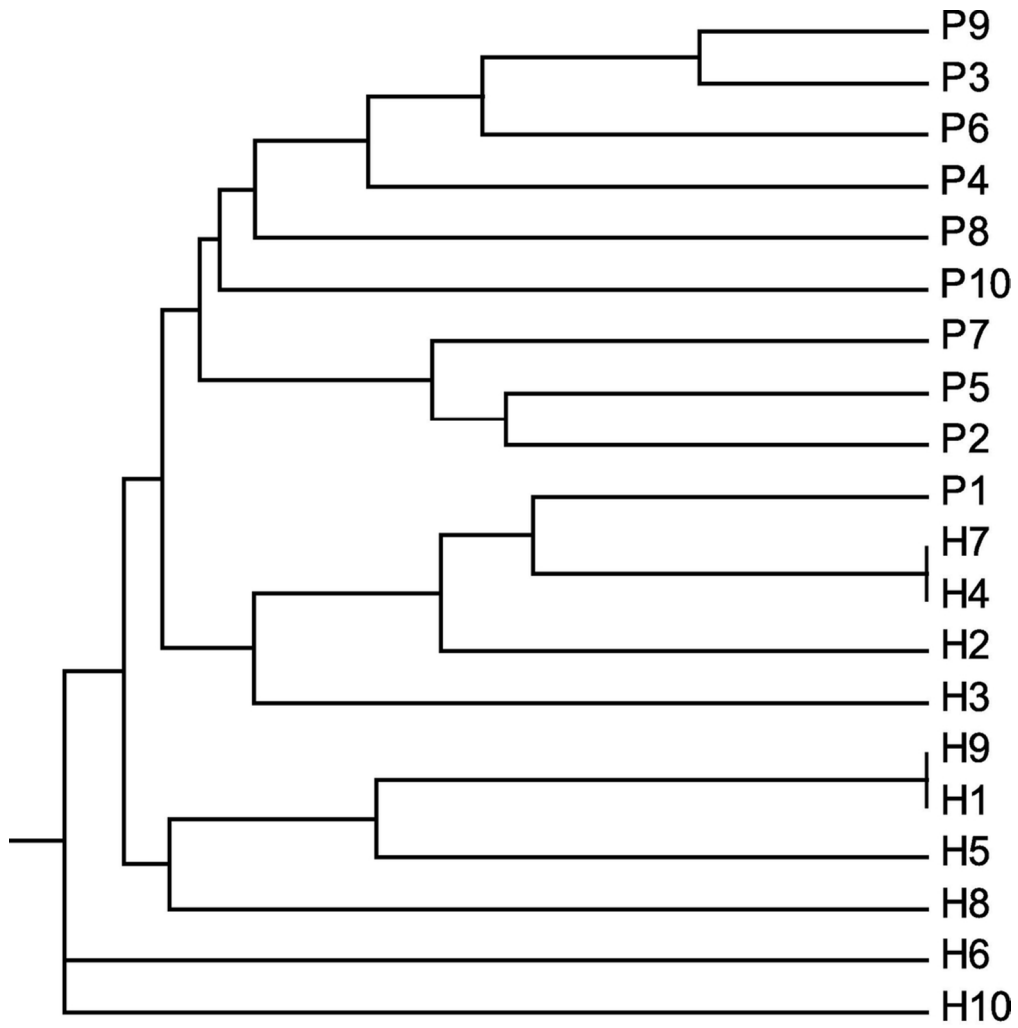


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