

FIG. 6. Expression of N-terminally truncated pORF2 in Sf9 and Tn5 cells infected with Ac[n123], Ac[n124], Ac[n125], Ac[n126], Ac[n130], and Ac[n125c59]. A Western blot assay was carried out as described in the legend to Fig. 2. Ac[n111] was included for the expression of the 58K and 53K proteins. M, molecular weight markers; W, wild-type baculovirus-infected cells.

plasm and observed as inclusion-like bodies (one to four structures per cell) by EM (25). In contrast, when Sf9 cells were infected with Ac[n111c52], there were no inclusion-like bodies (data not shown), and the expressed proteins were localized evenly in the cytoplasm. Concomitantly, expressed protein was poorly detected in the culture medium from Ac[n111]-infected Sf9 cells at 3 days p.i., whereas a large amount of the 53K protein was detected in the culture medium from Ac[n111c52]-infected Sf9 cells. These findings suggest that the C-terminal aa of ORF2 might affect the localization, and subsequently the release, of the capsid protein from the insect cells. However, we do not yet know whether the VLPs form before release in infected cells or after release in culture medium.

The presence of Leu601 in pORF2 is important for the formation of HEV VLPs. A protein with a longer (580 to 610) deletion of aa residues was aberrant in protein folding; this may reduce the ORF2 homo-oligomerization (24). The prediction of the secondary structure based on protein sequence suggests two  $\beta$ -strand motifs in the region between aa 580 and 601 (580 to ~589 and 593 to ~601). The failure in the particle assembly with Ac[n111c60] is due to incomplete formation of this  $\beta$ -strand motif. Although aa 111 to 601 and aa 111 to 602 formed VLPs, the yield of each of these was about 10 to 20% of the yields of aa 111 to 660 (data not shown). This is in contrast to the fact that the levels of protein expression inside the cells were similar in these constructs. This observation further confirmed that stability of the C-terminal  $\beta$ -strand motif is essential for VLP assembly.

The N-terminal 111-aa-deletion was found to be essential for cellular membrane dissociation of pORF2 expressed in insect cells (17, 24). We extended the N-terminal deletion up to Val125 without altering the ability to form HEV VLPs (Fig. 6). The ORF2 protein exhibits two-domain folding (25), with a domain organization similar to those of the norovirus (NV) capsid protein (15) and the tomato bushy stunt virus capsid protein (14). The N-terminal aa residues 112 to 125 may be the arm region extending from the S domain into the particle interior. In NV, the N-terminal region appeared to serve as a switch controlling the S domain configuration in the assembly process (3). Removal of the first 20 amino acids did not affect NV-like particle self-assembly, but a longer deletion at the

N-terminal region did (3). Thus, residues 112 to 125 are putatively located in the HEV virion interior and may regulate VLP assembly.

Tn5 and Sf9 are insect cell lines that are commonly used in recombinant protein expression. The Tn5 cell is becoming more and more popular because it yields higher quantities of tissue factor than Sf9. Under optimum conditions, Tn5 cells produce 28-fold more secreted soluble tissue factor than Sf9 cells on a per-cell basis (23). In this paper, we report the difference between Tn5 and Sf9 cells in a protein synthesis system. The ORF2 protein underwent posttranslational cleavage, which is crucial for HEV VLP assembly. Although the HEV virion assembly mechanism remains unclear, our data indicate that the region consisting of ORF2 residues 126 to 601 is the kernel element for the monomer-monomer interaction and thus initiates VLP assembly.

Recombinant HEV VLPs themselves can be candidates for parenteral as well as oral hepatitis E vaccines (9, 10), and these VLPs have potential as mucosal vaccine carrier vehicles for the presentation of foreign antigenic epitopes through oral administration (13). Furthermore, HEV VLPs can be a vector for gene delivery to mucosal tissue for the purposes of DNA vaccination and gene therapy (20). The results of the present study provide the basic tool to construct VLPs having novel functions.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Tomoko Mizoguchi for secretarial work, Thomas Kieselbach for help with the mass spectrometry, and Leif Bergman for building EXPLORER modules.

The study was supported in part by Health and Labor Sciences Research Grants, including Research on Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases, Research on Hepatitis, Research on Human Genome, Tissue Engineering, and Research on Food Safety, from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Japan. This work was sponsored by grants from the Swedish Research Council to R.H.C. and L.X. A grant from the National Science Council, Taiwan, supported the work of J.C.Y.W.

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## Genetic and antigenic diversity among noroviruses

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Human norovirus (NoV) strains cause a considerable number of outbreaks of gastroenteritis worldwide. Based on their capsid gene (VP1) sequence, human NoV strains can be grouped into two genogroups (GI and GII) and at least 14 GI and 17 GII genotypes (GI/1–14 and GII/1–17). Human NoV strains cannot be propagated in cell-culture systems, but expression of recombinant VP1 in insect cells results in the formation of virus-like particles (VLPs). In order to understand NoV antigenic relationships better, cross-reactivity among 26 different NoV VLPs was analysed. Phylogenetic analyses grouped these NoV strains into six GI and 12 GII genotypes. An antibody ELISA using polyclonal antisera raised against these VLPs was used to determine cross-reactivity. Antisera reacted strongly with homologous VLPs; however, a number of novel cross-reactivities among different genotypes was observed. For example, GI/11 antiserum showed a broad-range cross-reactivity, detecting two GI and 10 GII genotypes. Likewise, GII/1, GII/10 and GII/12 antisera showed a broad-range cross-reactivity, detecting several other distinct GII genotypes. Alignment of VP1 amino acid sequences suggested that these broad-range cross-reactivities were due to conserved amino acid residues located within the shell and/or P1-1 domains. However, unusual cross-reactivities among different GII/3 antisera were found, with the results indicating that both conserved amino acid residues and VP1 secondary structures influence antigenicity.

Received 15 September 2005  
Accepted 19 December 2005

The GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ accession numbers of the sequences reported in this paper are AB081723, AB058547, DQ093065, AB195225, DQ093062, DQ093066, DQ093063, AB195226, DQ093064, AB039780, AY237414 and DQ093067.

### INTRODUCTION

Norovirus (NoV) strains are a leading cause of gastroenteritis worldwide and cause outbreaks in various epidemiological settings including hospitals, cruise ships, schools and restaurants (Beuret *et al.*, 2003; Inouye *et al.*,

2000; Johansson *et al.*, 2002; Kapikian *et al.*, 1972; McEvoy *et al.*, 1996; McIntyre *et al.*, 2002; Russo *et al.*, 1997). Numerous molecular epidemiological studies have revealed a global distribution of these viruses (Nakata *et al.*, 1998; Noel *et al.*, 1999; White *et al.*, 2002). Transmission routes include food-borne, person-to-person contact and environmental contamination. Human NoV can be divided into two genetically distinct genogroups, GI and GII. Recently, NoV strains were subdivided into at least 14 GI and 17 GII genotypes (GI/1–14 and GII/1–17) (Kageyama *et al.*, 2004). These viruses cannot be grown in culture and their antigenic relationships are not completely understood. Nevertheless, expression of the major capsid protein (VP1), which usually results in the formation of virus-like particles (VLPs) that are morphologically similar to the native virus, has permitted a better understanding of antigenicity in these viruses (Hansman *et al.*, 2004). Two types of assay have been used to examine cross-reactivity among these VLPs: antibody ELISA and antigen ELISA (Gray *et al.*, 1993; Jiang *et al.*, 1995a, b; Kageyama *et al.*, 2004; Kamata *et al.*, 2005; Kobayashi *et al.*, 2000a, b, c). The antibody ELISA is broadly reactive, but the antigen ELISA is highly specific, only detecting strains that are closely related (>95% identity in the RNA polymerase region). However, detailed information on the cross-reactivity among many of the genetically distinct NoV strains is limited.

NoVs are small round viruses approximately 38 nm in diameter and possess a single-stranded, positive-sense RNA genome of 7.5–7.7 kb. The NoV genome contains three open reading frames (ORFs). ORF1 encodes non-structural proteins, including the RNA-dependent RNA polymerase, ORF2 encodes VP1 and ORF3 encodes a minor capsid protein (VP2) (Jiang *et al.*, 1990). Cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) and X-ray crystallography analyses of NoV VLPs have determined the shell and protruding domains (subdomains P1-1, P1-2 and P2) of the capsid protein (Prasad

*et al.*, 1999). Chen *et al.* (2004) also described strictly and moderately conserved amino acid residues in the capsid protein among the four genera in the family *Caliciviridae*.

The aim of this study was to analyse cross-reactivity among 26 different NoV VLPs in order to understand NoV genetic and antigenic relationships in more detail. An antibody ELISA using polyclonal antisera raised against the VLPs was used to determine cross-reactivities. Our results found broad-range cross-reactivities with antisera raised against a number of distinct NoV strains.

## METHODS

**Specimens.** Positive stool specimens were collected from a number of different sources (see GenBank accession numbers) and RNA was extracted as described previously (Katayama *et al.*, 2002). PCR-generated amplicons or plasmids were excised from the gel and purified by using the QIAquick Gel Extraction kit and Plasmid Purification kit (Qiagen). Nucleotide sequences were prepared with the BigDye Terminator Cycle Sequence kit (version 3.1) (Applied Biosystems) and determined by using the ABI 3100 Avant sequencer (Perkin-Elmer ABI). Nucleotide sequences were aligned with CLUSTAL\_X and distances were calculated using Kimura's two-parameter method. Phylogenetic trees with bootstrap analysis from 1000 replicas were generated by the neighbour-joining method as described previously (Kageyama *et al.*, 2004). Amino acid VP1 secondary structure predictions were made using the PSIPRED secondary structure prediction software (McGuffin *et al.*, 2000).

**Expression of VLPs.** Previously, we expressed four GI NoV strains: GI/1 (strain SeV), GI/2 (strain 258), GI/3 (strain 645) and GI/4 (strain CV), and nine GII NoV strains: GII/3 (strain 809), GII/4 (strain 104), GII/5 (strain 754), GII/6 (strain 7k), GII/7 (strain 10-25), GII/10 (strain 026), GII/12 (strains CHV and 9912-02F; in this study 9912-02F was termed Hiro) and GII/14 (strain 47) (Hansman *et al.*, 2004; Kamata *et al.*, 2005; Kitamoto *et al.*, 2002; Kobayashi *et al.*, 2000a, b, c). Dr Kim Green provided us with the Hawaii virus recombinant baculovirus GII/1 (strain HV) (Green *et al.*, 1997). In this study, we expressed an additional 12 VLPs: GI/8 strain WUG1 (using primers G1SKF and TX30SXN; see Table 1 for primer sequences); GI/11 strain

**Table 1.** Primer sequences used for expression of VLPs

Primer	Sense/antisense	Sequence (5'–3')*
G1SKF	Sense	CTGCCCGAATTYGTAAATGA
TX30SXN	Antisense	GACTAGTTCTAGATCGCGAGCGGCCGCC(T) <sub>30</sub>
G2/F3	Sense	TTGTGAATGAAGATGGCGTCCA
G2R0	Antisense	CCATTACTGAACCCCTTCTACGCC
G2Fb	Sense	TGGGAGGGCGATCGCAATCT
G2R04	Antisense	GGCGTAGAAGGYTTCAYTAAGTC
MVR1	Antisense	AATTATTGAATCCTTCTACGCCCG
G2F2	Sense	GTGAATGAAGATGGCGTCCA
G2R03	Antisense	GGCGTAGAAGGATTCATAATGG
G2F02	Sense	GTGAATGAAGATGGCGTCCAATGA
G2SKF	Sense	CNTGGGAGGGCGATCGCAA
NAL13	Sense	GATCTCGCTCCCGATTTTTGTGA
N235R	Antisense	ATGGCWGGAGCTTTRATAGC

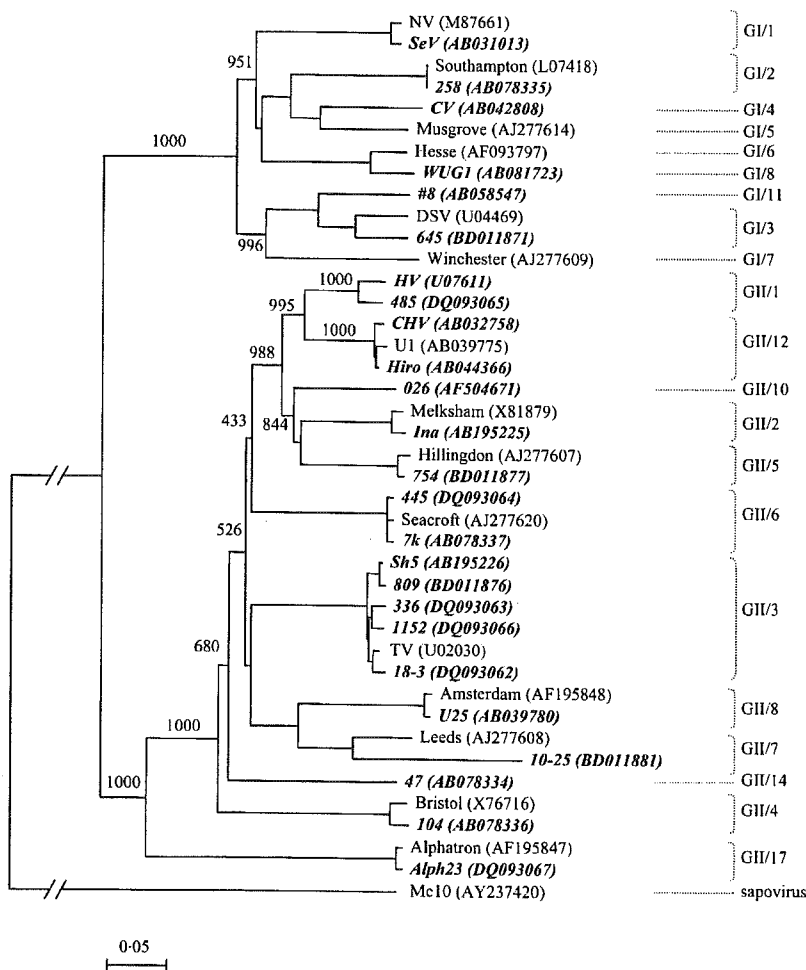
\*Y=C or T; N=A, C, G or T; W=A or T.

#8 (primers G1SKF and TX30SXN); GII/1 strain 485 (primers G2/F3 and G2R0); GII/2 strain Ina (primers G2Fb and G2R04); GII/3 strain 18-3 (primers G2/F3 and MVR1); GII/3 strain 1152 (primers G2F2 and G2R03); GII/3 strain 336 [primers G2/F3 and Oligo-(dT)<sub>33</sub>]; GII/3 strain Sh5 (primers G2F02 and G2R03); GII/6 strain 445 [primers G2/F3 and Oligo-(dT)<sub>33</sub>]; GII/8 strains Mc24 and U25 (primers G2SKF and TX30SXN); and GII/17 strain Alph23 (primers NAL13 and N235R). For expression of the recombinant VP1 in insect cells, all of the NoV constructs were designed to begin from the predicted VP1 AUG start codon. For six of the 12 constructs, the VP2 and poly(A) sequences were included by using either the TX30SXN or Oligo-(dT)<sub>33</sub> reverse primers (strains WUG1, #8, 336, 445 and Mc24). One construct (strain 485) excluded the poly(A) sequence, whereas the remaining five constructs excluded both the VP2 and poly(A) sequences (strains Alph23, Sh5, 1152 and 18-3 and Ina). Four constructs that were amplified with the TX30SXN reverse primer were expressed using the Gateway expression system (strains WUG1, #8, U25 and Mc24) (Hansman *et al.*, 2004), whilst the other eight constructs were expressed in a baculovirus expression system as described previously (Kamata *et al.*, 2005).

**VLP purification and electron microscopy (EM).** Recombinant baculovirus shuttle vectors (bacmids) were transfected into Sf9 cells using Effectene according to the manufacturer's instructions (Qiagen). Sf9 cells were incubated for 5–6 days at 26 °C, after which the culture medium was clarified by low-speed centrifugation and the

supernatant was stored as the seed baculovirus. Tn5 cells were infected with the seed baculovirus at 26 °C and harvested 5–6 days post-infection. VLPs secreted into the cell medium were separated from cells by low-speed centrifugation, concentrated by ultracentrifugation at 30 000 r.p.m. at 4 °C for 2 h (Beckman SW-32 rotor) and then resuspended in 100 µl Grace's medium. VLPs were purified by CsCl equilibrium gradient ultracentrifugation at 45 000 r.p.m. at 15 °C for 18 h (Beckman SW-55 rotor). The harvested culture medium was examined for VLPs by negative-staining EM. Briefly, the samples (diluted 1:10 in distilled water) were applied to a carbon-coated 300-mesh EM grid and stained with 2% uranyl acetate (pH 4). Grids were examined under an electron microscope (JEM-1220; JEOL) operating at 80 kV.

**Antibody production and ELISA.** Hyperimmune sera to newly developed VLPs were prepared in rabbits. The first subcutaneous injection was performed with purified VLPs (between 10 and 500 µg) in Freund's complete adjuvant. After 3 weeks, the animals received two or three booster injections of the same amount of VLPs in Freund's incomplete adjuvant at intervals of 1 week. The animals were bled 1 week after the last booster injection. An antibody ELISA was used to compare cross-reactivities among the VLPs. Then wells of 96-well microtitre plates (Maxisorp; Nunc) were each coated with 100 µl purified VLPs (1.0 µg ml<sup>-1</sup> in carbonate/bicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6; Sigma) and incubated overnight at 4 °C. The wells were washed twice with PBS containing 0.1% (v/v) Tween 20 (PBS-T)



**Fig. 1.** Phylogenetic tree of NoV sequences examined in this study (shown in bold italic). NoV amino acid sequences were constructed using the entire VP1 sequence (the complete sequence for Mc24 was unavailable). Numbers on branches indicate bootstrap values for the clusters; values of 950 or higher were considered statistically significant for the grouping (Katayama *et al.*, 2002). Reference sequences have been reported previously (Kageyama *et al.*, 2004).

and then blocked with PBS containing 5% (w/v) skimmed milk (PBS-SM) for 1 h at room temperature. After the wells had been washed twice with PBS-T, 100  $\mu$ l twofold serially diluted hyper-immune rabbit antiserum from a starting dilution of 1:2000 in PBS-T-SM was added to each well and the plates were incubated for 1 h at 37 °C. The wells were washed six times with PBS-T and 100  $\mu$ l horseradish peroxidase-conjugated anti-rabbit IgG (1:1000 dilution in PBS-T-SM) was added to each well. The plates were incubated for 1 h at 37 °C. The wells were washed six times with PBS-T and 100  $\mu$ l *o*-phenylenediamine substrate and H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> was added to each well. The plates were left in the dark for 30 min at room temperature. The reaction was stopped by the addition of 50  $\mu$ l 1 M H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> to each well and the absorbance was measured at 492 nm. ELISA titres were expressed as the reciprocal of the highest dilution of antiserum giving a value of  $A_{492} > 0.2$ .

## RESULTS

### Sequence analysis

Nucleotide and amino acid sequences were aligned using CLUSTAL\_X and distances were calculated using Kimura's two-parameter method. We divided the 26 strains used in this study into six GI and 12 GII genotypes using partial N-terminal VP1 nucleotide sequences (data not shown). These genotypes were maintained when we grouped the complete VP1 amino acid sequences (Fig. 1). Mc24 was excluded from the amino acid analysis since the full-length capsid sequence was unavailable. Nevertheless, using the partial N-terminal VP1 nucleotide sequence (GenBank accession no. AY237414), Mc24 clustered in GII/8 and was closely related to strain U25. Of the recently described NoV strains (Kageyama *et al.*, 2004), the GI and GII genotypes used in this study represented 43% (6/14) and 76% (13/17),

respectively. For several GII genotypes, we used two or more VLPs in order to clarify antigenicity, including GII/1 (strains HV and 485), GII/3 (strains 809, Sh5, 336, 1152 and 18-3), GII/6 (strains 7k and 445) and GII/12 (strains CHV and Hiro).

### Expression of VP1

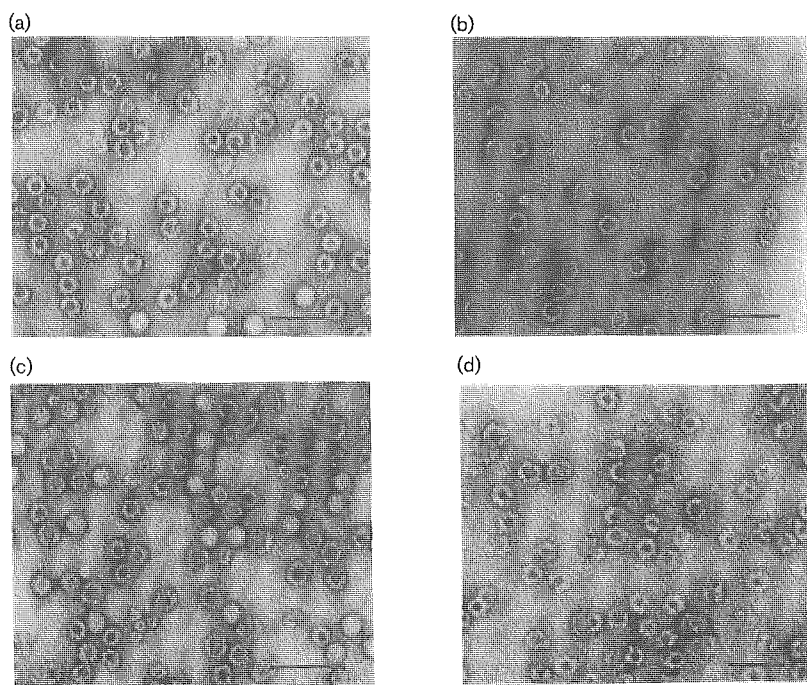
EM confirmed that all strains formed VLPs with morphological features similar to native NoV (Fig. 2), despite the fact that different constructs and expression systems were used to express the recombinant VP1. The VLPs retained their morphological features, even when stored for >6 months at -20 °C (data not shown).

### Homologous antigenic analysis

An antibody ELISA, which uses polyclonal antiserum raised against one type of VLP, was used to determine cross-reactivity among the 26 different NoV VLPs. ELISA titres were expressed as the reciprocal of the highest dilution of antiserum giving a value of  $A_{492} > 0.2$ . A negative control (baculovirus-infected Tn5 cell lysate) was used for all experiments and found to be negligible [i.e.  $A_{492} < 0.05$ , using up to 0.5  $\mu$ g (ml lysate)<sup>-1</sup>]. Antisera reacted strongly against homologous VLPs, with titres ranging from 102 400 to 1 638 400 (Table 2).

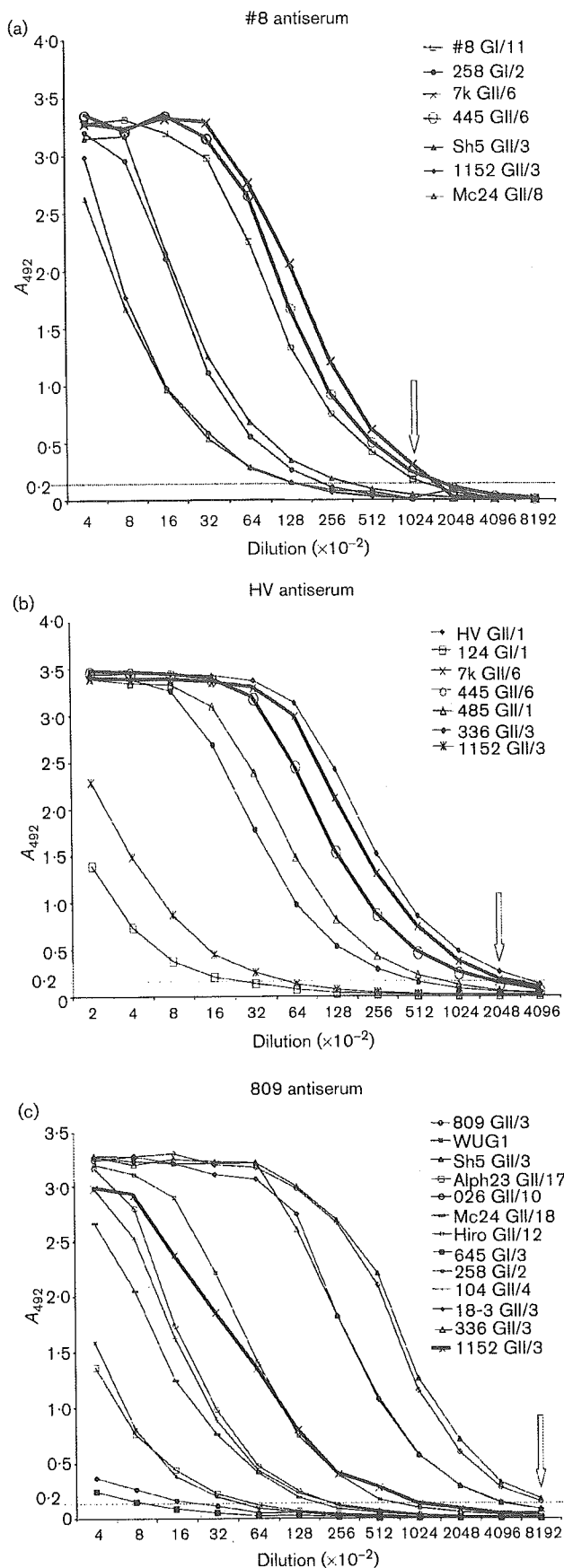
### Heterologous antigenic analysis

We observed a number of novel cross-reactivities among different genotypes. For example, Fig. 3(a) shows the strong cross-reactivity of GI/11 #8 antiserum with both GII/6 7k and GII/6 445 VLPs. We found that GI/11 #8 antiserum cross-reacted with these GII/6 VLPs at titres of 102 400,



**Fig. 2.** EM images of CsCl-purified NoV VLPs negatively stained with 2% uranyl acetate (pH 4). (a) Strain 7k, (b) strain 485, (c) strain 445 and (d) strain 645. Bar, 100 nm.





which was equal to the homologous VLP titre. We also found that GII/1 HV antiserum cross-reacted strongly (i.e. equal to the homologous VLP titre) against GII/6 7k VLPs (titre 204 800) and moderately strongly (i.e. twofold lower than the homologous VLP titre) against GII/6 445 VLPs (titre 102 400) (Fig. 3b and Table 2). We observed several antisera that cross-reacted moderately against different genotypes (i.e. fourfold lower than the homologous VLP titres). For example, GI/11 #8 antiserum cross-reacted moderately with GI/4, GI/8, GII/1, GII/2, GII/3, GII/4, GII/5, GII/7, GII/10, GII/12 and GII/17 VLPs (Fig. 3a and Table 2). GII/1 HV antiserum also cross-reacted moderately with several different genotypes, including GII/1 (strain 485), GII/3, GII/10 and GII/12 (Fig. 3b and Table 2). GII/1 485 antiserum cross-reacted moderately only with GII/1 HV VLPs; GII/6 7k antiserum cross-reacted moderately with GI/11 VLPs; GII/10 026 antiserum cross-reacted moderately with several different genotypes, including GII/1, GII/5, GII/7 and GII/12; and GII/12 CHV antiserum cross-reacted moderately with GII/1 and GII/10 VLPs (Table 2).

#### Genotype-specific reactivities

We observed weak cross-reactivities among different genotypes (i.e. greater than eightfold dilutions). We found that GI/1, GI/2, GI/3, GI/4 and GI/8 antisera cross-reacted weakly with other genotypes (Table 2). We also observed similar weak cross-reactivities with GII/1 (strain 485), GII/2, GII/3 (all five strains), GII/4, GII/5, GII/6 (strain 445), GII/7, GII/8 (both strains), GII/14 and GII/17 antisera. For several GII genotypes, only one type of antiserum was produced, but for five GII genotypes, we produced two or more different antisera against VLPs belonging to the same genotype (Table 2). Some interesting results were observed. For example, the antigenicities of HV and 485 were considerably different, despite the fact that both strains belong to GII/1 and share approximately 94% amino acid identity. As shown in Fig. 3(b), HV antiserum cross-reacted strongly with GII/6 VLPs, but 485 antiserum showed little cross-reactivity with these GII/6 VLPs (Table 2). This unusual cross-reactivity pattern was also observed with other antisera. For example, for GII/6, we found that 7k antiserum cross-reacted moderately with GI/11 #8 VLPs, whereas 445 antiserum cross-reacted weakly (i.e. 32-fold lower than the homologous VLP titre; Table 2). More uniquely, we found that GII/3 1152 antiserum, which was genotype-specific, had unusual antigenicity. We found that

**Fig. 3.** Antibody ELISAs for NoV VLPs. Wells were coated with 100  $\mu$ l purified VLPs. After washing, hyperimmune rabbit antiserum raised against the VLPs was used to detect antigens. Antisera were diluted twofold in PBS-T-SM from a starting dilution as indicated (dilutions  $\times 10^{-2}$ ). The arrows indicate the endpoint. (a) GI/11 #8 antiserum cross-reacts strongly with GII/6 7k and 445 VLPs. (b) GII/1 HV antiserum cross-reacts strongly with GII/6 7k and moderately strongly with 445 VLPs. (c) GII/3 809 antiserum cross-reacts weakly with GII/3 1152 VLPs.

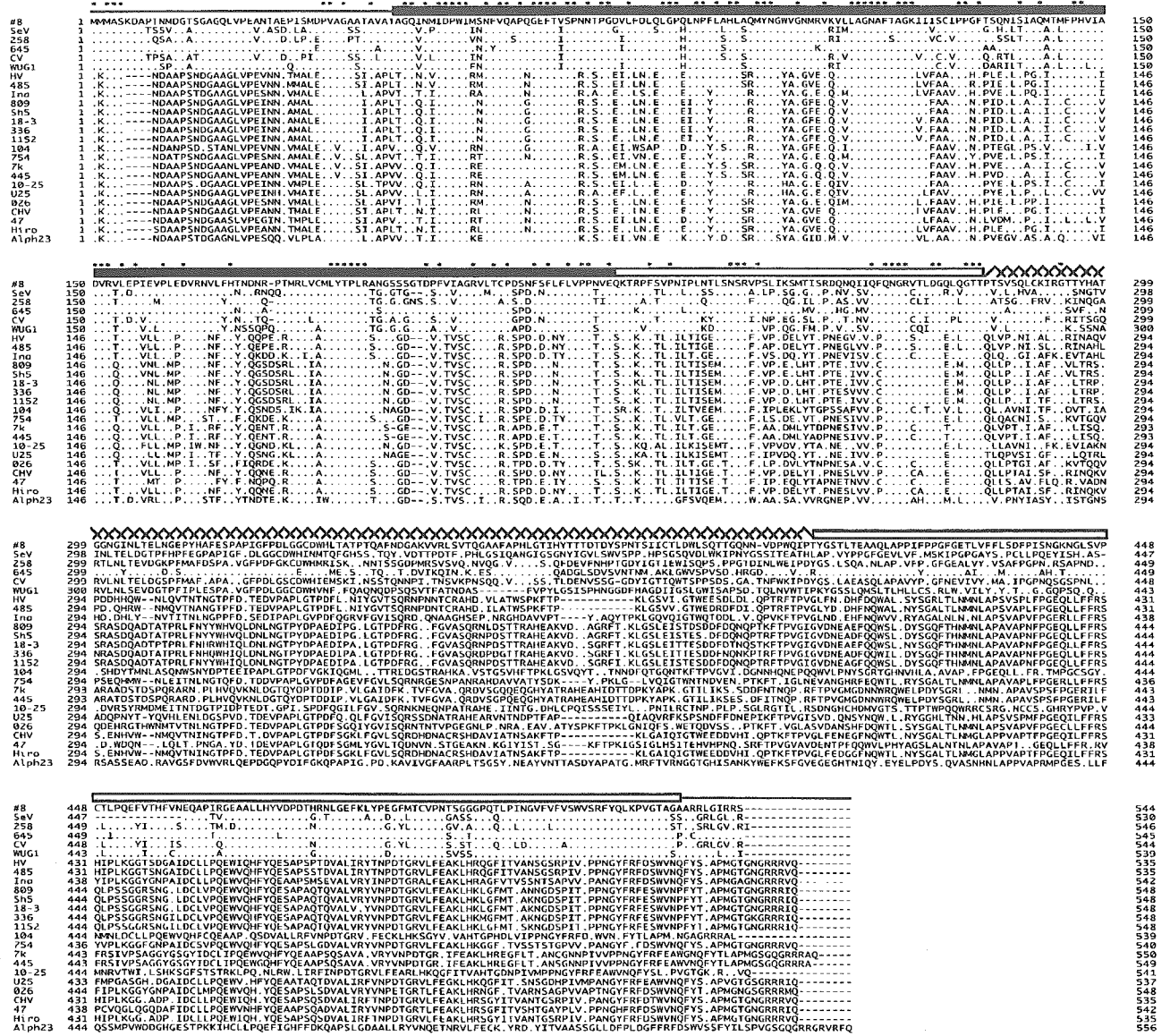


three different GII/3 antisera (strains 809, Sh5 and 18-3) cross-reacted weakly with 1152 VLPs (i.e. eightfold lower than the homologous VLP titre; Table 2 and Fig. 3c). This unusual cross-reactivity result was not evident with the other genotypes in which we produced two different antisera (i.e. GII/1, GII/6, GII/8 and GII/12; see Table 2).

**Amino acid alignment and secondary structure prediction**

An alignment of 25 VP1 amino acid sequences used in this study (Mc24 complete capsid was unavailable) revealed that

the N-terminal region (aa 1–49), shell domain (aa 50–225) and P1-1 domain (aa 226–278) had more conserved short continuous residues than the P2 domain (aa 279–405), P1-2 domain (aa 406–520) and C-terminal region (Fig. 4). These continuous residues may be the reason for the cross-reactivity among different genotypes, in particular, the strong cross-reactivity of #8 antiserum against GII/6 VLPs (Fig. 3a). However, this does not explain why GII/3 1152 VLPs cross-reacted weakly with GII/3 809, Sh5 and 18-3 antisera (i.e. eightfold lower than the homologous VLP titre) and moderately against GII/3 336 antiserum (i.e. fourfold lower than the homologous VLP titre). An amino acid



**Fig. 4.** Amino acid alignment of the VP1 sequences of the NoV sequences examined in this study. The following regions are indicated above the sequences (in order): N-terminal region (line); shell domain (filled box), P1-1 domain (open box); P2 domain (XXX); P1-2 domain (open box) and C-terminal region (line) (Chen et al., 2004). Asterisks indicate conserved amino acids.



**Table 3.** Summary of cross-reactivities among VLPs

Each letter represents one strain. For example, GII/1 antiserum cross-reacted with two GII/6 strains (A and B), where A, strongly (i.e. identical to the homologous VLP titre), B, moderately strongly (i.e. twofold lower than the homologous VLP titre), and C, moderately (i.e. fourfold lower than the homologous VLP titre). For simplicity, we have excluded the homologous reactivities.

Genogroup			VLPs												
			GI			GII									
			Genotype	4	8	11	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	10	12
Antiserum	GI	11 (strain #8)	C	C	C	C	CCCC	C	C	AA	C	C	C	C	
	GII	1 (strain HV)					CC			AB		C	CC		
		6 (strain 7k)			C										
		10 (strain 026)				CC			C		C		CC		
		12 (strain CHV)				CC							C		

alignment of these five GII/3 VP1 sequences showed no unusual insertions, deletions or recombination sites; in fact, the shell domain was highly conserved among the GII/3 sequences (data not shown). However, the 1152 VP1 sequence had three unique amino acid residues (Thr-285, Ile-372 and Ser-508) when compared with the other four GII/3 VP1 sequences. The first two residues were located in the outermost region of the P2 domain, whilst the third residue was located within the P1 domain (data not shown). We used the PSIPRED secondary structure prediction software (McGuffin *et al.*, 2000) to compare the five GII/3 VP1 structures. We found that the predicted VP1 structures for 809, Sh5, 18-3 and 336 had a helix between residues 219 and 237, whereas this helix structure was absent for 1152 (Fig 5). These data suggested that the helix structure may play an important role in influencing the cross-reactivity among the GII/3 VLPs and antisera.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we analysed NoV capsid-based grouping and cross-reactivity among 26 different VLPs belonging to six GI and 12 GII genotypes. Using an antibody ELISA, we found that the antisera reacted strongly against the homologous VLPs with titres ranging from 102 400 to 1 638 400. As summarized in Table 3, we also observed strong, moderately strong and moderate cross-reactivities among different genotypes (i.e. equal to the homologous VLP titre and to twofold and fourfold dilutions, respectively). For example, GI/11 antiserum had a broad range of cross-reactivities, detecting

two GI genotypes (GI/4 and GI/8) and 10 GII genotypes (GII/1–7, GII/10, GII/12 and GII/17); GII/1 antiserum (strain HV) had a broad range of cross-reactivities, detecting four GII genotypes (GII/3, GII/6, GII/10 and GII/12); GII/10 antisera also had a broad range of cross-reactivities, detecting four GII genotypes (GII/1, GII/5, GII/7 and GII/12); GII/6 antiserum detected GI/11 VLPs; and GII/12 antiserum (strain CHV) detected GII/1 and GII/10 VLPs.

Although antigen ELISAs are generally broadly reactive (Jiang *et al.*, 2000), this is the first report of a GI (strain #8) polyclonal antiserum cross-reacting strongly with other GII genotypes and the first report of a GII (strain HV) polyclonal antiserum cross-reacting strongly with other GII genotypes (Jiang *et al.*, 2002; Kamata *et al.*, 2005; Kitamoto *et al.*, 2002). These broad-range cross-reactivities may be due to unfolded VLPs on the microtitre plates at the high pH used (carbonate/bicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6) (White *et al.*, 1997). However, we have not found such broad-range cross-reactivities in any of our other studies (Kamata *et al.*, 2005). Conserved continuous residues in the shell and/or P1-1 domains may be the reason for these cross-reactivities against different genotypes (Fig. 4 and Table 2). However, we found that several antisera were genotype-specific, indicating that VLPs have unique epitopes.

Interestingly, we found that four types of GII/3 antisera (strains 809, Sh5, 18-3 and 336) cross-reacted moderately to weakly against GII/3 1152 VLPs (i.e. up to eightfold lower than the homologous VLP titre; Table 2). Amino acid alignments of these five GII/3 sequences revealed that 1152

**Fig. 5.** Schematic representations of the complete predicted secondary structures of VP1 of NoV (GII/3) strains 1152, 18-3, 336, 809 and Sh5. The level of confidence of prediction (Conf) is shown on the first line, where a tall box represents a high confidence of prediction and a short box represents a low confidence of prediction. The predicted secondary structure (Pred) is shown on the second line, where a helix is represented by a cylinder, a  $\beta$ -strand by an arrow and a coil by a line. The third line also shows the predicted secondary structure (Pred), where H represents a helix, E a  $\beta$ -strand and C a coil. The amino acid sequence (AA) is shown on the bottom line. The boxed regions in 18-3, 336, 809 and Sh5 VP1 indicate a helix structure that is absent in 1152 VP1. The amino acid residues that are unique to the 1152 sequence when compared with the other four GII/3 sequences are indicated by arrows.

had three unique amino acid residues compared with the other four GII/3 sequences (Thr-285, Ile-372 and Ser-508), two of which were located within the P2 domain (Thr-285 and Ile-372). Amino acid secondary structure predictions made using the PSIPRED secondary structural prediction software revealed that the VP1 secondary structures for 809, Sh5, 18-3 and 336 had a helix structure between residues 219 and 237; this helix structure was absent for 1152 (Fig. 5). This helix structure may, in part, influence the cross-reactivity among the GII/3 VLPs (i.e. without the helix structure); GII/3 1152 VLPs cross-reacted weakly with the other four GII/3 antisera. This suggestion may also explain NoV virulence in which some strains appear to infect a certain population over an extended period of time (Dingle, 2004; Noel *et al.*, 1999). In a recent report, single amino acid changes were suggested to represent a possible way for the virus to evade the host immunity (Dingle, 2004). In addition, one report suggested that a change in VP1 secondary structure (i.e. the disappearance of a helix structure) was responsible for a chronic NoV infection in an immunocompromised patient for over 2 years (Nilsson *et al.*, 2003).

Almost half of our constructs (strains SeV, 645, CV, HV, Ina, 809, Sh5, 18-3, 1152, 104, 754, CHV and Alph23) did not include the ORF3 sequence, which encodes a minor capsid protein (VP2) thought to increase the stability of NoV VLPs and may function in RNA genome packaging (Bertolotti-Ciarlet *et al.*, 2003). For rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus, VP2 is essential for the production of infectious virus (Sosnovtsev & Green, 2000). Nevertheless, we found that all constructs with or without ORF3 sequences expressed VLPs that were morphologically similar to native NoV (Fig. 2). Further studies are needed to determine whether VP2 has some influence on antigenicity.

In conclusion, this cross-reactivity study represents the most extensive undertaken for any genera in the family *Caliciviridae*. Since human NoV strains cannot be propagated in cell culture systems and human serological studies have found that VLPs and native virions share similar antigenic properties, VLPs have been used to understand antigenic relationships in more detail. Further studies, such as high-resolution structural analysis of other NoV genotypes and antigenic mapping, are needed in order to explain the complex NoV antigenicity, as previously suggested (Chen *et al.*, 2004). Finally, the results and reagents from this study can be used to design detection systems capable of detecting a broad-range of genotypes in clinical specimens; in particular, GI/11 antisera may be capable of detecting at least 32% (12/37) of the recently described NoV genotypes (Kageyama *et al.*, 2004).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported in part by a grant for Research on Emerging and Reemerging Infectious Diseases from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare of Japan, and a grant for Research on Health Science

Focusing on Drug Innovation from The Japan Health Science Foundation. We also thank Dr Kim Green for providing the Hawaii virus recombinant baculovirus.

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## Expression and Antigenicity of Virus-Like Particles of Norovirus and Their Application for Detection of Noroviruses in Stool Samples

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Human noroviruses (NoVs), members of the genus *Norovirus* in the family *Caliciviridae*, are the leading agents of nonbacterial acute gastroenteritis worldwide. Human NoVs are currently divided into at least two genogroups, genogroup I (GI) and genogroup II (GII), each of which contains at least 14 and 17 genotypes. To explore the genetic and antigenic relationship among NoVs, we expressed the capsid protein of four genetically distinct NoVs, the GI/3 Kashiwa645 virus, the GI/3 Sanbu809 virus, the GI/5 Ichikawa754 virus, and the GI/7 Osaka10-25 virus in baculovirus expression system. An antigen enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) with hyperimmune serum against the four recombinant capsid proteins and characterized previously three capsid proteins derived from GI/1, GI/4, and GI/12 was developed to detect the NoVs antigen in stools. The antigen ELISA was highly specific to the homotypic strains, allowing assignment of a strain to a Norovirus genetic cluster within a genogroup. *J. Med. Virol.* **76:129–136, 2005.** © 2005 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

**KEY WORDS:** norovirus; ELISA; gastroenteritis; virus-like particle; calicivirus

### INTRODUCTION

*Norovirus* (NoV), a member of one of four genera in the family *Caliciviridae* [Atmar and Estes, 2001; Green et al., 2001a], is a major cause of water and food-borne acute nonbacterial gastroenteritis, and is composed of many genetically distinct viruses. [Kapikian, 1994;

Kapikian et al., 1996; Estes et al., 1997]. The detection and molecular characterization of NoV have been hampered due to the lack of cell culture and small animal models [Duizer et al., 2004]. However, recent progress in molecular cloning and the sequence determination of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase and capsid protein genes of the NoVs has enabled us to classify NoVs into at least two genogroups: genogroup I (GI) and genogroup II (GII) [Green et al., 2001b]. In a previous study, a scheme for genotyping based on the N-terminal capsid protein was demonstrated [Katayama et al., 2002], and a recent report proposed that GI and GII contain at least 14 and 17 genotypes, respectively [Kageyama et al., 2004].

The NoV contains a single-stranded positive-sense RNA genome of 7.6 kb excluding the poly-A tail that encodes three open reading frames (ORFs) [Jiang et al., 1993; Lambden et al., 1993]. ORF1 encodes a nonstructural polyprotein, which is cleaved into functional proteins by a virus-encoded 3C-like protease, and ORF2 and ORF3 encode the major capsid protein VP1 and minor capsid protein VP2, respectively [Jiang et al., 1992; Glass et al., 2000]. When the ORF2 gene alone or the 3' end of 2.3 kb, including ORF2, ORF3, and the 3' noncoding region is expressed by a recombinant

Grant sponsor: Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan.

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Accepted 10 January 2005

DOI 10.1002/jmv.20334

Published online in Wiley InterScience  
(www.interscience.wiley.com)

baculovirus, the recombinant protein spontaneously self-assembles into virus-like particles (VLPs) which are antigenically and morphologically similar to the native virion [Jiang et al., 1992, 2002; Lew et al., 1994a,b; Dingle et al., 1995; Hale et al., 1999; Kobayashi et al., 2000a,b,c; Belliot et al., 2001]. The VLPs have been used successfully for in structural studies [Prasad et al., 1994, 1999], as well as the development of enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) for serological diagnosis of NoV infection [Gray et al., 1993; Green et al., 1993; Parker et al., 1993, 1994, 1995]. Though antigen ELISA using hyperimmune antisera raised against the VLPs has been developed to detect NoV in stools [Graham et al., 1994; Jiang et al., 1995a,b,c; Hale et al., 1999], the sensitivity is low due to the ability of the ELISA to detect only strains closely related to one used to produce the hyperimmune serum [Numata et al., 1994; Jiang et al., 1995a,b,c]. The expression of antigenically distinct more VLPs and the preparation of antisera to them are needed to clarify the antigenic relationship among NoVs.

The expression of four capsid proteins from the GI/3, GII/3, GII/5 and GII/7 NoVs and the preparation of the VLPs are described and the antigenic relationship among seven VLPs, including three NoV VLPs from GI/1, G1/4, and GII/12 prepared previously [Kobayashi et al., 2000a,b,c], and the detection of NoVs in fecal specimens by using an ELISA are described.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Viruses, RT-PCR, and molecular cloning. Hu/NV/GI/Kashiwa645/1999/JP (Kashiwa645, sequence accession number BD011871), Hu/NV/GII/Sanbu809/1998/JP (Sanbu809, BD011876), and Hu/NV/GII/Ichikawa745/1998/JP (Ichikawa745, BD011877) were associated with outbreaks of acute gastroenteritis as reported by the Kashiwa, Sanbu, and Ichikawa Health Centers in Chiba prefecture, Japan in 1989–1999. Hu/NV/GII/Osaka10-25/1999/JP (Osaka10-25, BD011881) was associated with an outbreak of acute gastroenteritis in Osaka Prefecture, Japan, in 1999. Stool samples containing these viruses were homogenized in phosphate buffered saline (PBS), and a 10% suspension was prepared. After centrifugation at 3,000g for 10min, the supernatant was used for RNA extraction with Trizol<sup>TM</sup> (Gibco BRL, Gaithersburg, MD) [Kobayashi et al., 2000a]. The cDNA synthesis was performed with an oligo-dT15 (Promega Co., Madison, WI) and reverse transcriptase from the Molony murine leukemia virus (Gibco BRL) as described by Green et al. [1997]. An approximately 1.6 kb fragment that encodes the entire VP1 of Kashiwa645,

Sanbu809 and Ichikawa745, and a 2.3 kb fragment that encodes the VP1, VP2, 3' noncoding region, and poly-A of Osaka10-25 were amplified with the primers shown in Table I. The PCR was performed in 100 µl of the reaction mixture containing 2.5 U of Takara Ex Taq (TaKaRa Shuzo Co., Ltd., Kyoto), 10 µl of 10 × PCR buffer, 8 µl of 25 mM dNTPs, 1 µl of 50 µM of each primer, and 5 µl of cDNA. After an initial denaturation at 94 °C for 5 min, 35 cycles of amplification were performed using the GeneAmp PCR System 9600 (PE Biosystems, Foster City, CA). Each cycle consisted of denaturation at 94 °C for 1 min, primer annealing at 55 °C for 1 min, and extension reaction at 72 °C for 2 min followed by final extension at 72 °C for 7 min. The amplified fragments were cloned into a pCR2.1 plasmid (Invitrogen, San Diego, CA). The nucleotide sequences were determined with an ABI PRISM 310 Genetic Analyzer (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) and phylogenetically analyzed as described previously [Katayama et al., 2002; Kageyama et al., 2004].

#### Recombinant VLPs

The amplified fragment was isolated from the vector by digestion with the appropriate restriction endonucleases, and inserted into a baculovirus transfer vector pVL1392 (Pharming, San Diego, CA), which was used to cotransfect the Sf9 cells (Riken Cell Bank, Tsukuba) with linearized wild-type *Autographa californica* nuclear polyhedrosis virus DNA (Pharming) by the lipofectin-mediated method, as described by the manufacturer (Invitrogen). Recombinant baculoviruses thus obtained were selected by two rounds of plaque purification and used to prepare the seed viruses. Tn5 cells (Invitrogen) were infected with the seed virus at a multiplicity of infection (m.o.i.) of 10, incubated at 26.5 °C, and the culture medium was harvested at 5–6 days post infection (p.i.). Leupeptin 10 µM (Sigma Chemicals, St. Louis, MO) and 2 µM pepstatin A (Sigma Chemicals) were added to the medium at 3 days p.i. The expression of the recombinant protein in the medium was monitored by sodium dodecyl sulfate-10% polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) followed by staining with Coomassie brilliant blue. The culture medium was clarified by centrifugation at 10,000g for 30 min, and then the VLPs in the supernatant were concentrated by centrifugation at 100,000g for 4 hr in a Beckman SW27 rotor. The pellet was resuspended in Grace's medium (DIFCO, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey) and examined by electron microscopy (EM). The VLPs were further purified by CsCl<sub>2</sub> equilibrium gradient density gradient centrifugation at 100,000g for 24 hr at

TABLE I. Primer Sequences

NoV	Forward primer	Reverse primer
Kashiwa 645	G1/F2 (5'-AATGATGATGGCGTCTAAAGGA-3')	707R1 (5'-TGAGCCATTATGATCTTCTGATGC-3')
Sanbu 809	G2/F3 (5'-TTGTGAATGAAGATGGCGTCTCGA-3')	MVR1 (5'-AATTATTGAATCCTTCTACGCCCG-3')
Ichikawa 754	G2/F3 (5'-TTGTGAATGAAGATGGCGTCTCGA-3')	SMVR1 (5'-AATTACTGAACCTTCTACGCCCATTTTC-3')
Osaka 10-25	G2FCR7 (5'-ATGAAGATGGCGTCTGAATGACG-3')	Oligo-dT(33)

16°C. The purified VLPs were used to immunize the animals.

### Hyperimmune Sera

Hyperimmune sera to recombinant Kashiwa645 VLPs (r645), Sanbu809 VLPs (r809), Ichikawa754 VLPs (r754), and Osaka10-25 VLPs (r10-25) were prepared in rabbits. The first subcutaneous injection was performed with the purified 500 µg VLPs in Freund's complete adjuvant. After 3 weeks, the animals received two or three booster injections of 250 µg of the VLPs in Freund's incomplete adjuvant at intervals of 1 week. The animals were bled 1 week after the last booster injection. The antibody titers of rabbit hyperimmune sera to VLPs were tested in parallel by an indirect ELISA, as described previously for rSeto 124 VLPs [Kobayashi et al., 2000b] except that a VLP concentration of 0.5 µg/ml was used to coat the ELISA plate. ELISA titers were expressed as the reciprocal of the highest dilution of antiserum giving an optical density (OD) at 450 nm of >0.2.

### Antigen ELISA

An antigen detection ELISA was developed using the rabbit hyperimmune sera to four recombinant capsid proteins (r645, r809, r754, and r10-25), and three previously characterized VLPs, Seto 124 VLPs (rSeto) [Kobayashi et al., 2000b], Chiba 407 VLPs (rChiba) [Kobayashi et al., 2000a], and Chitta 1876 VLPs (rChitta) [Kobayashi et al., 2000c]. Microtiter plates (96-well) (Maxisorp, Nunc, Denmark) were coated with 100 µl (0.5 µg of IgG/ml) of the rabbit preimmune (1:8,800 dilution) or hyperimmune sera (1:8,800–12,000 dilutions) in a coating buffer (0.05M carbonate-bicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6) overnight at 4°C. The well was washed twice with PBS containing Tween 20 (PBS-T), and then blocked with 0.5% bovine serum albumin in PBS overnight at 4°C. One-hundred microliter of a 10% stool sample was added to the well and incubated 1 hr at room temperature. After washing the well four times with PBS-T, 100 µl of peroxidase-conjugated rabbit antiserum to VLPs were added to the well and incubated for 1 hr at room temperature. The microplate was washed four times with PBS-T, and then 100 µl of substrate, tetramethyl bentijin (TMB), was added. The plate was left for 30 min at room temperature, and the reaction was stopped with 100 µl of 0.6N H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>. The OD<sub>450</sub> value of the reactions at both the hyperimmune and preimmune sera was measured. The sample was considered positive when the difference between the OD<sub>450</sub> values for the hyperimmune and preimmune sera was >0.15 and the ratio was >2 [Kobayashi et al., 2000c].

### Detection of NoV in Stool Specimens by RT-PCR

Extraction of viral RNA from the stools and cDNA synthesis were performed as described above. A forward primer G1F1 and a reverse primer G1R1 were used to amplify the N-terminal VP1 of GI NoV, and a forward

primer G2F1 and a reverse primer G2R1 were used to amplify the same region of the GII NoV as previously described [Kobayashi et al., 2000c; Kojima et al., 2002]. The reaction was carried out in 50 µl of the solution containing 1.25 U of Ex Taq polymerase (TaKaRa), 5 µl of 10 × PCR buffer (100 mM Tris-HCl, 15 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 500 mM KCl), 5 µl of 25 mM deoxynucleotide mixture, 0.5 µM of each primer, and 2 µl of cDNA. After an initial denaturation at 94°C for 5 min, 35 cycles of amplification were performed using the GeneAmp PCR System 9600 (PE Biosystems). The nucleotide sequence and phylogenetic analyses were performed as described above.

### Phylogenetic Analysis

Nucleotide sequences of the entire VP1 capsid protein and N-terminal VP1 were aligned with Clustal X (<http://www.igbmc.u-strasbg.fr/BioInfo/>). The genetic distances were calculated by Kimura's two parameter method [Kimura, 1980], and a distance matrix file was created as described previously [Katayama et al., 2002]. The phylogenetic dendrogram was constructed by the neighbor-joining method [Saitou and Nei, 1987] with 1,000 times of bootstrap resampling [Feisenstein, 1985] as described previously [Katayama et al., 2002].

### Genome Sequences

The GenBank accession numbers of the entire VP1 sequences of the strains used in this study are as follows: Aichi124-89 (Seto), accession no. AB031013; Alphontron, AF195847; Amsterdam, AF195848; Appalachian, AF414406; Arg320, AF190817; Auckland, U46039; M7, AY130761; Birmingham, AJ277612; Boxer, AF538679; Bristol, X76716; BS5, AF093797; Burwash Landing, AF414425; Camberwell, AF145896; Chiba, AB022679; Chitta, AB032758; Desert Shield, U04469; Dijon, AF472623; Erfurt, AF427118; Florida, AF414407; Girlington, AJ277606; Grimsby, AJ004864; Gwynedd, AF414408; Hawaii, U07611; Hillingdon, AJ277607; Honolulu, AF414403; Hesse, AF414406; Idaho Falls, AY054299; Kashiwa47, AB078334; LittleRock, AF414405; Leeds, AJ277608; Manchester, X86560; Mexico, U22498; Melksham, X81879; Miami, AF414410; Musgrove, AJ277614; NewOrleans, AF414422; Norwalk/68, M87661; QueenArms, AJ313030; SaintCloud, AF414427; SaitamaU1, AB039775; SaitamaU16, AB067539; SaitamaU25, AB067543; Saitama SzUG1; AB039774; Seacroft, AJ277620; Sindlesham, AJ277615; Snow Mountain, U70059; Southampton, L07418; Stavanger, AF145709; Toronto, U02030; Valetta, AJ277616; Virginia, AY038599; White River, AF414423; WhiteRose, AJ277610; Winchester, AJ277609; Wortley, AJ277618; Mc37, AY237415; WUG1, AB081723; Kashiwa 645, BD011871; Sanbu 809, BD011876; Ichikawa 754, BD011877, and Osaka 10-25, BD011881.

## RESULTS

### Characterization of Four NoV Strains

To classify genetically the four NoVs, the entire VP1 genes were amplified by RT-PCR and the nucleotide





protein band with a molecular mass of 58–60 kDa was observed in the infected cells 2 days p.i., and the expression reached to a maximum 6 days p.i. The size of the proteins were in agreement with the molecular mass calculated from the 545, 548, 540, and 541 amino acids of Kashiwa 645, Sanbu 809, Ichikawa 754, and the Osaka 10–25 capsid proteins, respectively. The supernatant was collected at 6 days p.i., centrifuged at 100,000g for 2 hr in a Beckman TLA-45 rotor, and then the pellet was examined by EM. Uniform, round-shaped empty VLPs with a 38 nm diameter were observed at over 100 particles per EM field at a magnification of 20,000 $\times$  (data not shown).

#### Antigenic Relationships of Newly Expressed Four VLPs With Previously Characterized Three VLPs

Rabbit hyperimmune antisera raised against purified r645, r809, r754, and r10–25 had titers as high as 1:409,600–1:819,200. The hyperimmune serum was not adsorbed with the wild baculovirus-infected Tn5 cell lysate, because the OD values in the antibody ELISA were negligible even when 0.5  $\mu$ g protein/ml of the lysate was used to coat the microplate wells (data not shown).

The antigenic relationship of the four NoV strains was examined with three previously characterized VLPs (Table II). The highest antibody titers were detected in hyperimmune sera against homologous recombinant capsid antigens for all seven strains. Although variable cross-reactivity was detected among different recombinant antigens, higher cross-reactivity was observed with the intra-genogroup strains than with the inter-genogroup strains. For example, GI Kashiwa 645 is genetically closer to two GI NoVs, Seto 124, and Chiba 407, than the other four GII NoVs. The anti-r645 hyperimmune serum had higher antibody titers to rSeto and rChiba than to the other four GII VLPs. The hyperimmune sera to rSeto and rChiba also had higher antibody titers to the other two GI VLPs than to the other four GII VLPs. Conversely, the four GII NoVs were genetically closer to each other than to the three GI NoVs, and each GII hyperimmune serum had a higher antibody titer to the other three GII VLPs. Thus, NoVs

in the same genogroup were not only genetically but also antigenically closer to one another than to those in the different genogroup.

To test further the specificity of hyperimmune serum to seven recombinant capsid proteins, an antigen ELISA was developed. In this experiment, hyperimmune sera (50 ng/well) were used to coat microplate wells to capture the recombinant VLPs. As shown in Table III, the OD values in the homologous reaction decreased in a dose-dependent manner. Little cross-reactions between different genotypes were observed. In contrast, high sensitivity was found in the homologous reactions although the limit of detection is 0.4 ng/ml as observed in the reaction with rChiba and r809, and this corresponds to  $2.5 \times 10^6$  particles of NoVs.

#### Detection of NoV Antigen in Stool Specimens

To test the performance of the antigen ELISA, NoVs detection was carried out with stool specimens from acute gastroenteritis patients. Microplates were coated with the rabbit preimmune or hyperimmune sera to capture the antigen in the stool specimens, and peroxidase-conjugated antiserum was used as the detector antibody. In control experiments, antisera against recombinant VLPs efficiently captured at least 4 ng of the homologous antigen but not the heterologous antigen (Table III). The preimmune sera did not capture any of the VLPs at any concentration (the OD value was usually less than 0.05). Two to three representative stool specimens were selected from outbreaks associated with the GI/1, GI/3, GI/4, GII/3, GII/5, GII/7, and GII/12 genotypes to evaluate the antigen ELISA. All specimens were positive by RT-PCR targeting the N-terminal capsid region, and the amplified fragments were genotyped by sequencing analyses followed by phylogenetic analyses (Table IV). All hyperimmune sera except GI/1 Seto reacted only to the homologous genotype samples. In Seto virus detection, all three GI/3 and one of the three GI/4 samples were positive by ELISA. Interestingly, stool samples 98-MC4 (GI/1) and 2000K-518 (GI/3) were negative by EM but positive by the ELISA, suggesting that the antigen ELISA established in this study is capable of detecting disrupted NoV

TABLE II. ELISA Titers of Seven Hyperimmune Antisera Against VLPs

VLPs <sup>a</sup>		Hyperimmune sera against VLP antigens						
		GI/1 Seto	GI/3 645	GI/4 Chiba	GI/3 809	GI/5 754	GI/7 10–25	GI/12 Chitta
GI/1	rSeto	<b>819200</b> <sup>b</sup>	25600	12800	200	12800	1600	3200
GI/3	r645	102400	<b>819200</b>	25600	400	12800	6400	6400
GI/4	rChiba	102400	25600	<b>819200</b>	800	6400	6400	6400
GI/3	r809	25600	6400	6400	<b>819200</b>	51200	51200	25600
GI/5	r754	25600	6400	3200	25600	<b>819200</b>	25600	51200
GI/7	r10-25	12800	12800	6400	25600	51200	<b>819200</b>	25600
GI/12	rChitta	25600	1600	1600	25600	51200	25600	<b>409600</b>

<sup>a</sup>Four VLPs: r645, r809, r754, and r10-25 and their hyperimmune sera were prepared in this study, and three VLPs: rSeto, rChiba, and rChitta and their hyperimmune sera were prepared in our previous studies [Kobayashi et al., 2000a,b,c].

<sup>b</sup>ELISA titers were expressed as the reciprocal of the highest dilution of antiserum giving an optical density (OD) at 450 nm of >0.2. Homologous titers are shown in boldface.

TABLE III. Reactivity Between VLPs and Hyperimmune Antisera as Determined by Antigen ELISA

VLPs (ng/mL)	Hyperimmune sera							
	GI/1 Seto	GI/3 645	GI/4 Chiba	GII/3 809	GII/5 754	GII/7 10-25	GII/12 Chitta	
rSeto	40	<b>4.007</b>	0.075	0.063	0.011	0.010	0.012	0.011
	4	<b>1.430</b>	0.034	0.023	0.009	0.011	0.014	0.010
	0.4	0.192	0.028	0.023	0.009	0.010	0.013	0.011
	0	0.010	0.028	0.013	0.008	0.011	0.012	0.011
r645	40	0.173	<b>3.235</b>	0.047	0.009	0.014	0.010	0.020
	4	0.061	<b>0.893</b>	0.035	0.010	0.010	0.009	0.013
	0.4	0.023	0.114	0.010	0.009	0.011	0.010	0.013
	0	0.010	0.030	0.010	0.009	0.014	0.010	0.015
r Chiba	40	0.105	0.034	<b>4.259</b>	0.009	0.012	0.010	0.011
	4	0.048	0.029	<b>1.408</b>	0.010	0.011	0.013	0.010
	0.4	0.011	0.026	<b>0.209</b>	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010
	0	0.011	0.026	0.026	0.009	0.011	0.010	0.010
r809	40	0.060	0.028	0.023	<b>3.650</b>	0.075	0.056	0.066
	4	0.018	0.031	0.010	<b>1.271</b>	0.029	0.023	0.024
	0.4	0.013	0.034	0.007	<b>0.209</b>	0.015	0.013	0.014
	0	0.012	0.032	0.010	0.008	0.012	0.010	0.016
r754	40	0.011	0.030	0.025	0.014	<b>3.994</b>	0.041	0.083
	4	0.010	0.028	0.024	0.010	<b>1.329</b>	0.020	0.039
	0.4	0.010	0.029	0.025	0.010	0.184	0.012	0.015
	0	0.011	0.031	0.025	0.009	0.011	0.010	0.016
r10-25	40	0.018	0.049	0.025	0.016	0.107	<b>4.326</b>	0.100
	4	0.015	0.048	0.027	0.011	0.049	<b>1.343</b>	0.058
	0.4	0.010	0.038	0.025	0.010	0.017	0.160	0.021
	0	0.010	0.037	0.027	0.010	0.010	0.011	0.010
r Chitta	40	0.014	0.034	0.030	0.011	0.061	0.019	<b>3.356</b>
	4	0.011	0.031	0.026	0.010	0.022	0.012	<b>0.819</b>
	0.4	0.013	0.032	0.025	0.009	0.013	0.012	0.124
	0	0.014	0.024	0.024	0.009	0.012	0.011	0.025

The reaction was considered to be positive when the difference between the OD<sub>450</sub> values for the hyperimmune and preimmune sera was >0.15 and the ratio was >2. Positive reactions were shown in boldface.

TABLE IV. Detection of NoV Antigens in Fecal Specimens by Antigen ELISA

Fecal Samples	Hyperimmune sera							EM	RT-PCR	Genotype
	GI/1	GI/3	GI/4	GII/3	GII/5	GII/7	GII/12			
	Seto	645	Chiba	809	754	10-25	Chitta			
2000K-600	<b>1.921<sup>a</sup></b>	0.052	0.028	0.015	0.013	0.016	0.014	N/A <sup>b</sup>	+	GI/1
98-MC3	<b>1.407</b>	0.155	0.060	0.023	0.017	0.018	0.018	+	+	GI/1
98-MC4	<b>0.596</b>	0.086	0.056	0.029	0.017	0.018	0.017	-	+	GI/1
2000K-514	<b>0.498</b>	<b>1.521</b>	0.035	0.029	0.015	0.017	0.017	+	+	GI/3
2000K-518	<b>0.225</b>	<b>0.597</b>	0.033	0.017	0.012	0.015	0.016	-	+	GI/3
Se1	<b>0.450</b>	<b>2.641</b>	0.029	0.016	0.012	0.015	0.015	N/A	+	GI/3
2000K-691	0.038	0.040	<b>0.446</b>	0.017	0.013	0.015	0.015	+	+	GI/4
2000K-694	<b>0.358</b>	0.080	<b>4.899</b>	0.049	0.016	0.016	0.017	+	+	GI/4
96-844	0.166	0.071	<b>2.171</b>	0.017	0.014	0.015	0.017	+	+	GI/4
98K-826	0.022	0.051	0.065	<b>1.369</b>	0.016	0.039	0.066	+	+	GII/3
98K-836	0.018	0.037	0.032	<b>1.296</b>	0.015	0.042	0.030	+	+	GII/3
98-249	0.016	0.063	0.030	<b>1.083</b>	0.020	0.043	0.034	+	+	GII/3
95-277	0.016	0.034	0.023	0.015	<b>1.696</b>	0.024	0.029	+	+	GII/5
00-683	0.011	0.036	0.031	0.090	<b>0.428</b>	0.012	0.018	+	+	GII/5
00-684	0.012	0.025	0.015	0.039	<b>2.994</b>	0.041	0.136	+	+	GII/5
S99-75	0.037	0.041	0.071	0.101	0.147	<b>0.426</b>	0.168	N/A	+	GII/7
S99-21	0.008	0.021	0.035	0.021	0.082	<b>1.712</b>	0.010	N/A	+	GII/7
98-41	0.021	0.035	0.031	0.023	0.013	0.028	<b>1.433</b>	+	+	GII/12
98-2345	0.019	0.037	0.026	0.020	0.013	0.023	<b>0.453</b>	+	+	GII/12
99-1007	0.021	0.055	0.036	0.130	0.014	0.031	<b>2.722</b>	+	+	GII/12

<sup>a</sup>The reaction was considered to be positive when the difference between the OD<sub>450</sub> values for the hyperimmune and preimmune sera was >0.15 and the ratio was >2. Positive reactions were shown in boldface.

<sup>b</sup>Not applicable.

antigen, although the titers were relatively low even in the homologous reaction. Another possible (even more likely) explanation is that the antigen ELISA is more sensitive than EM as described previously [Graham et al., 1994].

## DISCUSSION

This study describes the cloning, sequencing, and expression of the capsid proteins of four currently circulating NoV strains and their genetic and antigenic relationships with three previously characterized strains. The phylogenetic analyses indicated that these seven strains belong to GI/1, GI/3, GI/4, GII/3, GII/5, GII/7, and GII/12. In contrast to the rapid accumulation of information for genetic diversity, at least 14 in the GI and 17 in the GII genotypes, studies on the determination of antigenic type have been relatively slow [Kageyama et al., 2004]. This is because generation of the VLPs antigen is not an easy task, and a comparative study with a panel of a large number of VLPs antigens and their antisera is difficult to be performed at the moment. Continued preparation and characterization of more VLPs antigens and their hyperimmune sera are highly useful to refine the panel.

Although the seven antigenic types were distinguishable by the hyperimmune antisera generated against the VLPs, low levels of cross-reaction were observed among these strains when the antibody ELISA was used. Because no NoV specific antibody was detected in the preimmune animal sera, the cross-reactive antibodies in the hyperimmune antisera originated from common antigenic epitopes among NoVs. In fact, Kitamoto et al. [2002] obtained not only genogroup-specific, but also common cross-reactive monoclonal antibodies (MAbs) for four GI and six GII VLPs. Further characterization of antigenic epitopes using MAbs for the antigenic type-specific diagnosis of NoV is needed. In antibody ELISA (Table II), higher responses were observed between the intra-genogroup strains than between the inter-genogroup strains. This observation is worth noting, because it indicates that GI and GII are not only genetically, but also antigenically distinct.

Previous observations of the immune responses of patients involved in outbreaks have also explained the common antigenic epitopes. Immune responses to multiple antigenic types, most of which were caused by a single NoV strain, are often detected in outbreaks of gastroenteritis [Vipond et al., 2004]. Higher responses to homotypic than to heterotypic strains may allow us to make a seroresponse-based diagnosis of NoV infection. Indeed, we recently identified a GII/4 infection in a hospital based on the immune responses of the patients (data not shown).

As has been shown in the case of the Norwalk virus, Mexico virus, Grimsby virus, Seto virus, Chiba virus, and Chitta virus, the antigen ELISA for NoV was highly genotype-specific [Numata et al., 1994; Hale et al., 1996, 1999; Kobayashi et al., 2000a,b,c]. Further generation of VLPs antigens and hyperimmune sera against each

genotype VLPs and the subsequent development of both antibody and antigen ELISAs are necessary for the detection of NoVs, for the antigenic relationship among NoVs, and for the classification of NoVs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported in part by a grant for Research on Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases, a grant for Special Research, a grant for Research on Food Safety, and a grant for Research on Health Sciences focusing on Drug Innovation from the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare of Japan.

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