Morihara D, Kobayashi M, Ikeda K, Kawamura Y, Saneto H, Yatsuji H, Hosaka T, Sezaki H, Akuta N, Suzuki Y, Suzuki F, Kumada H.	Effectiveness of combination therapy of splenectomy and long-term interferon in patients with hepatitis C virus related cirrhosis and thrombocytopenia.	Hepatol Res	39	439-447	2009
Suzuki Y, Suzuki F, Kawamura Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Hosaka T, Akuta N, Kobayashi M, Saitoh S, Arase Y, Ikeda K, Kobayashi M, Miyakawa Y, Kumada H.	Efficacy of entecavir treatment for lamivudine-resistant hepatitis B over 3 years: Histological improvement or entecavir resistance?	J Gastroenterol Hepatol	24	429-435	2009
Akuta N, Suzuki F, Hirakawa M, Kawamura Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Suzuki Y, Hosaka T, Kobayashi M, Kobayashi M, Saitoh S, Arase Y, Ikeda K, Kumada H.	Association of amino acid substation pattern in core protein of hepatitis C virus Genotype 2a high viral load and virological response to interferon-ribavirin combination therapy.	Intervirology	52	301-309	2009
保坂哲也、鈴木文孝、小林正宏、平川美晴、川村祐介、八辻寛美、瀬崎ひとみ、芥田憲夫、鈴木義之、斉藤聡、荒瀬康司、池田健次、小林万利子、熊田博光.	核酸ｱﾅﾛｸﾞ療法中のB型関連肝癌に対する肝癌再発予測ﾏｰｶｰとしてHBｺｱ関連抗原の有用性	肝臓	50(10)	588-589	2009

Arase Y, Suzuki F, Sezaki H, Kawamura Y, Suzuki Y, Kobayashi M, Akuta N, Hosaka T, Yatsuji H, Hirakawa M, Kobayashi M, Saitou S, Ikeda K Kumada H.	The efficacy of interferon-β monotherapy for elderly patients with type C hepatitis of genotype 2.	Int Med	48	1337-1342	2009
Arase Y, Suzuki F, Suzuki Y, Akuta N, Kobayashi M, Kawamura Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Hosaka T, Hirakawa M, Saitou S, Ikeda K, Kobayashi M, Kumada H, Kobayashi T.	Losartan reduces the onset of type2 diabetes in hypertensive Japanese patients with chronic hepatitis C.	J Med Virol	81	1584-1590	2009
Ogura S, Akuta N, Hirakawa M, Kawamura Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Hosaka T, Kobayashi M, Suzuki F, Suzuki Y, Kobayashi M, Saitoh S, Arase Y, Ikeda K, Kumada H.	Virological and Biochemical Features in Elderly HCV Patients with Hepatocellular Carcinoma: Amino acid substitutions in HCV Core region as Predictors of Mortality after First Treatment	Intervirology	52	179-188	2009
Suzuki F, Akuta N, Suzuki Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Arase Y, Hirakawa M, Kawamura Y, Hosaka T, Kobayashi M, Saitoh S, Ikeda K, Kobayashi M, Watahiki S, Kumada H.	Rapid loss hepatitis C virus genotype 1b from serum in patients receiving a triple treatment with telaprevir (MP-424), pegylated interferon and ribavirin for 12 weeks.	Hepatol Res	39	1056-1063	2009

Kobayashi M, Suzuki F, Akuta N, Hosaka T, Sezaki H, Yatsuji H, Kobayashi M, Suzuki Y, Arase Y, Ikeda K, Watahiki S, Iwasaki S, Kumada H.	Development of hepatocellular carcinoma in elderly patients with chronic hepatitis C with or without elevated aspartate and alanine aminotransferase levels.	Scand J Gastroenterol	44	975-983	2009

研究成果の刊行に関する一覧表

雑誌

発表者氏名	論文タイトル名	発表誌名	巻号	ページ	出版年
Sermasathanasawadi R, Kato N, et al.	Association of IRF-7 gene polymorphism with liver cirrhosis in chronic hepatitis C patients.	Liver Int	28	798-806	2008
Hua R, Kato N, et al.	Rapid detection of the hepatitis B virus YMDD mutant using TaqMan-minor groove binder probes.	Clinica Chemica Acta	395	151-154	2008
加藤直也，他.	B型慢性肝炎の抗ウイルス療法　抗ウイルス薬の将来	日本内科学会雑誌	97巻1号	50-56	2008
Li C-Z, Kato N, et al.	Polymorphism of OAS-1 determines liver fibrosis progression in hepatitis C by reduced ability to inhibit viral replication.	Liver Int	29	1413-1421	2009
Hu Z, Kato N, et al.	Characteristic mutations in hepatitis C virus core gene related to the occurrence of hepatocellular carcinoma.	Cancer Sci	100	2465-2468	2009
Omata M, Kato N, et al.	Hepatocellular carcinoma “epidemics” in Japan.	Hepatitis C virus. International Medical Press Ltd.		5.1-5.10	2009
加藤直也，他.	B型肝炎に対する新たな核酸アナログ療法.	肝胆膵	58巻5号	609-612	2009
加藤直也，他.	ウイルス肝炎の臨床像と遺伝子多型.	肝胆膵	59巻6号	1139-1145	2009

室山良介，加藤直也，他.	IRF7 多型とＣ型肝硬変進展リスク.	肝胆膵	59 巻 6 号	1181-1186	2009
Chang J-H, Kato N, et al.	Double-stranded-RNA activated protein kinase inhibits hepatitis C virus replication but may be not essential in interferon treatment.	Liver Int	30	311-318	2010

Ⅲ．研究成果の刊行物・別冊

Journal of General Virology (2007), **88**, 3323–3333 DOI 10.1099/vir.0.83056-0

Hepatitis C virus non-structural proteins responsible for suppression of the RIG-I/Cardif-induced interferon response

Megumi Tasaka,[1]† Naoya Sakamoto,[1,2]† Yoshie Itakura,[1,3] Mina Nakagawa,[1,2] Yasuhiro Itsui,[1] Yuko Sekine-Osajima,[1] Yuki Nishimura-Sakurai,[1] Cheng-Hsin Chen,[1] Mitsutoshi Yoneyama,[4] Takashi Fujita,[4] Takaji Wakita,[5] Shinya Maekawa,[3] Nobuyuki Enomoto[3] and Mamoru Watanabe[1]

Correspondence
Naoya Sakamoto
nsakamoto.gast@tmd.ac.jp

[1]Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Tokyo Medical and Dental University, Tokyo, Japan

[2]Department for Hepatitis Control, Tokyo Medical and Dental University, Tokyo, Japan

[3]First Department of Internal Medicine, University of Yamanashi, Yamanashi, Japan

[4]Laboratory of Molecular Genetics, Department of Genetics and Molecular Biology, Institute for Virus Research, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan

[5]Department of Virology II, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan

Viral infections activate cellular expression of type I interferons (IFNs). These responses are partly triggered by RIG-I and mediated by Cardif, TBK1, IKKε and IRF-3. This study analysed the mechanisms of dsRNA-induced IFN responses in various cell lines that supported subgenomic hepatitis C virus (HCV) replication. Transfection of dsRNA into Huh7, HeLa and HEK293 cells induced an IFN expression response as shown by IRF-3 dimerization, whilst these responses were abolished in corresponding cell lines that expressed HCV replicons. Similarly, RIG-I-dependent activation of the IFN-stimulated response element (ISRE) was significantly suppressed by cells expressing the HCV replicon and restored in replicon-eliminated cells. Overexpression analyses of individual HCV non-structural proteins revealed that NS4B, as well as NS34A, significantly inhibited RIG-I-triggered ISRE activation. Taken together, HCV replication and protein expression substantially blocked the dsRNA-triggered, RIG-I-mediated IFN expression response and this blockade was partly mediated by HCV NS4B, as well as NS34A. These mechanisms may contribute to the clinical persistence of HCV infection and could constitute a novel antiviral therapeutic target.

Received 4 April 2007
Accepted 27 July 2007

INTRODUCTION

Type I interferon (IFN) plays a central role in eliminating virus, not only following clinical therapeutic application but also as a cellular immune response (Samuel, 2001; Taniguchi & Takaoka, 2002). Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is characterized by persistence and replication of the virus in the liver, despite an intact host immune system (Alter, 1997). Indeed, even after administration of the currently most potent IFN reagents, as many as half of the patients are refractory to the treatment and fail to eradicate the virus (Fried *et al.*, 2002). These features have led to speculation that HCV escapes from or attenuates the host antiviral response (Katze *et al.*, 2002).

Cellular antiviral responses are primarily mediated by IFN and IFN-stimulated genes (ISGs), including 2,5-oligoadenylate synthetase, dsRNA-dependent protein kinase R (PKR) and MxA proteins, as well as by as yet uncharacterized genes (Itsui *et al.*, 2006; Stark *et al.*, 1998). A study of experimental chimpanzee HCV infection has shown that various cytokines and chemokines are induced in the liver during the course of acute HCV infection and its clearance, and that a considerable proportion of the genes is induced by type I IFN (Bigger *et al.*, 2001).

Control of expression of ISGs is mediated by binding of type I IFNs to their receptors. Following receptor binding, STAT1 and STAT2 are phosphorylated to form ISGF-3, which translocates to the nucleus and binds the IFN-stimulated response element (ISRE), located in the promoter/enhancer region of ISGs, and activates transcription of ISGs (Samuel,

†These authors contributed equally to this work.

2001; Taniguchi *et al.*, 2001; Taniguchi & Takaoka, 2002). ISRE-dependent gene expression is also mediated by binding of the ISRE by molecules such as IRF-1, IRF-3 and IRF-7 (Kanazawa *et al.*, 2004). IRF-3 is a transducer of virus-mediated signalling and plays a critical role in the induction of cellular antiviral responses (Lin *et al.*, 1998; Sato *et al.*, 2000; Taniguchi *et al.*, 2001; Yoneyama *et al.*, 1998). Transcriptional activation and suppression of IRF-3 are inversely correlated with the level of HCV replication *in vitro* (Yamashiro *et al.*, 2006). Following virus infection, IRF-3 is phosphorylated by two cytoplasmic kinases, TBK1 and IKKε (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2003; Sharma *et al.*, 2003). The phosphorylated IRF-3 forms a homodimer, translocates to the nucleus and predominantly activates expression of the IFN-β gene and certain ISGs (Doyle *et al.*, 2002; Nakaya *et al.*, 2001; Taniguchi & Takaoka, 2002).

RIG-I is a recently identified cytoplasmic DExD/H box RNA helicase that participates in recognition of virus-related dsRNA as a pathogen-related molecular pattern (Yoneyama *et al.*, 2005). RIG-I contains two caspase-recruitment domains (CARDs) in the N terminus and a DExD/H box RNA helicase in the C terminus. MDA5 has been identified as another CARD-containing DExD/H box RNA helicase (Andrejeva *et al.*, 2004). More recently, an adaptor molecule of RIG-I and MDA5, Cardif (also known as IPS-I, MAVS and VISA), has been identified by four independent groups (Kawai *et al.*, 2005; Meylan *et al.*, 2005; Seth *et al.*, 2005; Xu *et al.*, 2005). On association with dsRNA, RIG-I or MDA5 causes conformational changes and homo-oligomerization, and binds the CARD of Cardif (Saito *et al.*, 2007). Cardif subsequently recruits the kinases TBK1 and IKKε, which catalyse phosphorylation and activation of IRF-3 (Yoneyama *et al.*, 1998).

The IRF-3-mediated IFN-β induction pathway could be a target for viruses to counteract antiviral responses and promote their replication in host cells. Ebola virus, bovine viral diarrhea virus (BVDV) and influenza A virus interfere with the activation of IRF-3 through interactions of their virus-encoded proteins (Basler *et al.*, 2003; Schweizer & Peterhans, 2001; Talon *et al.*, 2000). There are several reports that HCV proteins interact with IFN-mediated antiviral systems. The NS5A and E2 proteins have been reported to interfere with the action of IFN by inhibiting the activity of PKR (He & Katze, 2002). It was reported recently that the HCV NS34A protease blocks virus-induced activation of IRF-3, possibly by proteolytic cleavage of Cardif (Foy *et al.*, 2003; Meylan *et al.*, 2005).

The HCV subgenomic replicon is an *in vitro* model that simulates autonomous cellular replication of HCV genomic RNA (Lohmann *et al.*, 1999). Expression of the HCV replicon can be abolished by treatment with small amounts of type I and type II IFNs (Blight *et al.*, 2000; Frese *et al.*, 2002; Guo *et al.*, 2001), suggesting intact IFN receptor-mediated cellular responses. In contrast, viral expression persists in the absence of the exogenous IFN. Baseline expression levels of ISG were substantially decreased in cells expressing the HCV replicon compared with parental Huh7 cells (Kanazawa *et al.*, 2004). These findings led us to speculate that intracellular virus-induced antiviral responses are attenuated or caused to malfunction by the expression of viral proteins.

In this study, we investigated cell lines that support subgenomic HCV replication and HCV cell culture for the dsRNA-induced cellular IFN expression pathway. Here, we report that RIG-I- and Cardif-mediated IFN gene activation is uniformly attenuated in several replicon-expressing cell lines of different lineages and, more importantly, that the HCV NS4B protein is involved in the suppression of antiviral IFN responses.

METHODS

Plasmids. Plasmids pEF-flagRIG-I and ΔRIG-I expressed full-length and C-terminally truncated RIG-I protein, respectively (Yoneyama *et al.*, 2004). The plasmid pER-flagRIG-IKA (RIG-IKA) has a point mutation in the putative ATP-binding site of the RIG-I helicase domain and was used as a negative control for ΔRIG-I and RIG-I full transfection assays. Expression plasmids for full-length Cardif (Cardif), Cardif CARD (CARD) and CARD-truncated Cardif (ΔCARD) were provided by Dr J. Tschopp (University of Lausanne, Switzerland) (Meylan *et al.*, 2005). Expression plasmids for toll-like receptor 3 (TLR3) and TIR domain-containing adaptor inducing IFN-β (TRIF), the transmembrane receptor of dsRNA and the adaptor molecule of TLR3, respectively, were provided by Dr S. Akira (Osaka University, Japan). Plasmids expressing HCV NS345, NS3, NS34A, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B were amplified from HCV pCV-J4-L4S (Yanagi *et al.*, 1997) by PCR and subcloned. The DNA fragments were inserted into the vector pcDNA4/TO/*myc*-His (Invitrogen). Nucleotide sequences were confirmed by sequencing. Plasmids TOPO-NS34A (HCV N), TOPO-NS4B (HCV N) and pcDNA-NS4B (HCV JFH1) expressed Myc-tagged NS34A and NS4B proteins derived from the HCV N (Beard *et al.*, 1999) and HCV JFH1 (Wakita *et al.*, 2005) strains, as indicated. Plasmid pISRE-TA-Luc (Invitrogen) contained five copies of consensus ISRE motifs upstream of the firefly luciferase gene. Plasmid pIFNβ-Fluc was constructed by cloning the human IFN-β promoter region, spanning nt −110 to −36, upstream of the firefly luciferase gene of pGL3 Basic (Promega). Plasmid pcDNA3.1 (Invitrogen) was used as an empty vector for mock transfection. pRL-CMV (Promega), which expressed the *Renilla* luciferase protein, was used for correction of transfection efficiency.

Cell culture. HCV strain JFH1-infected Huh7.5.1, Huh7, Huh7.5.1 (kindly provided by Dr F. Chisari, The Scripps Institute, CA, USA; Zhong *et al.*, 2005), HeLa and HEK293 cells were maintained in Dulbecco's modified minimal essential medium (Sigma) supplemented with 2 mM L-glutamine and 10 % fetal calf serum at 37 °C with 5 % CO_2. Cells expressing the HCV replicon were cultured in medium containing 100 μg G418 (Wako) ml^{-1}.

HCV replicon constructs and transfected cell lines. An HCV subgenomic replicon plasmid, pHCVIbneo-delS (designated pRep-N), was derived from an HCV clone of strain N, genotype 1b, and pSGR-JFH1 was derived from HCV JFH1, genotype 2a (Guo *et al.*, 2001; Wakita *et al.*, 2005). These replicons were reconstructed by substituting the neomycin phosphotransferase gene with a fusion gene comprising *Renilla* luciferase and neomycin phosphotransferase to construct pRep-Reo-1b and pRep-Reo-2a, respectively (Tanabe *et al.*, 2004; Yokota *et al.*, 2003). RNA was synthesized from the replicons using T7 polymerase (Promega) and transfected into Huh7,

HeLa and HEK293 cells. After culture in the presence of G418, cell lines stably expressing the replicon were established (Huh7/1bReo, Huh7/2aReo, HeLa/2aReo and 293/2aReo). We have previously reported that firefly luciferase activities of Feo-replicon-expressing cells correlate well with HCV NS3, NS4A and NS5A protein expression levels and with the levels of replicon RNA (Yokota *et al.*, 2003).

Transient transfection. Transient DNA transfection was performed using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's protocol. ISRE reporter assays were carried out as previously described (Nakagawa et al., 2004). To analyse IFN expression in HCV JFH1 cell cultures, a total of 1×10^5 Huh7.5.1, JFH-1 infected Huh7.5.1 and IFN-treated Huh7.5.1 cells were seeded into 24-well plates the day before transfection. Plasmids pISRE-TA-Luc and ΔRIG-I (200 ng each) were transfected using 1 μl Lipofectamine 2000. RIG-IKA was used as a control. Luciferase assays were performed on day 3 post-transfection.

For further study, 400 ng of each non-structural protein was added to 1×10^4 Huh7 or HEK293 cells that had been seeded into 96-well plates the day before transfection. pISRE-TA-Luc and ΔRIG-I (40 ng each) were transfected using 0.5 μl Lipofectamine 2000. RIG-IKA was used as a control.

Western blotting. Preparation of the cytoplasmic and nuclear fractions of cell lysates was carried out as described previously (Tanabe *et al.*, 2004). Protein (20 μg) was separated using NuPAGE 4–12 % Bis/Tris gels (Invitrogen) and blotted onto an Immobilon PVDF membrane (Roche). The membrane was immunoblotted with anti-IRF-3 (Santa Cruz) and detected by chemiluminescence (BM Chemiluminescence Blotting Substrate; Roche).

RT-PCR. Interleukin (IL)-8 mRNA was detected by RT-PCR as described previously (Itsui *et al.*, 2006). The primers used were IL8-S (5′-GCACAAACTTTCAGAGACAGCAGAGCACAC-3′) and IL8-AS (5′-CAGAGCTGCAGAAATCAGGAAGGCTGCCAA-3′).

Indirect immunofluorescence assay. Cells seeded onto tissue culture chamber slides were fixed with cold acetone. The cells were incubated with anti-protein disulphide isomerase (PDI) or anti-Myc antibodies and subsequently with Alexa 488- or Alexa 568-labelled secondary antibodies. Cells were mounted with VECTA SHIELD Mounting Medium and DAPI (Vector Laboratories) and visualized by fluorescence microscopy (BZ-8000; Keyence).

Luciferase reporter assays. Luciferase activity was measured using a 1420 Multilabel Counter (ARVO MX; PerkinElmer) using a Bright-Glo Luciferase Assay System (Promega) or a Dual Luciferase Assay System (Promega). Assays were carried out in triplicate and the results expressed as means ± SD.

MTS assay. To evaluate cell viabilities, dimethylthiazol carboxymethoxyphenyl sulfophenyl tetrazolium (MTS) assays were performed using a CellTiter 96 AQueous One Solution Cell Proliferation Assay kit (Promega) according to manufacturer's instructions.

Statistical analyses. Statistical analyses were performed using an unpaired, two-tailed Student's *t*-test. *P* values of less than 0.05 were considered to be statistically significant.

RESULTS

IRF-3 dimer formation is attenuated in cells expressing the HCV replicon

In the HCV replicon-expressing cell lines Huh7/Rep-Reo-2a, Hela/Rep-Reo-2a and 293/Rep-Reo-2a, replicon expression levels corresponded well to internal *Renilla* luciferase activities. Expression of the HCV replicon was suppressed by IFN in a dose-dependent manner (data not shown).

Activation of RIG-I or MDA5 induces phosphorylation and homodimerization of IRF-3. Following transfection of poly(I : C) into Huh7, HeLa or HEK293 cells, IRF-3 dimers were detected (Fig. 1). However, in cells supporting HCV replicons, IRF-3 dimer formation was almost completely abolished. These findings showed that expression of HCV proteins blocked activation of dsRNA-mediated IFN expression and that these effects were consistently found in several cell lines of different origin.

The HCV replicon suppresses RIG-I/Cardif-induced IFN responses

ISRE reporter activities did not increase in naïve Huh7, HeLa or HEK293 cells following transfection of poly(I : C), whilst overexpression of full-length RIG-I increased poly(I : C)-mediated ISRE reporter activity in Huh7 and HEK293 cells (data not shown). In RIG-I-overexpressing Huh7 cells, transduction with an HCV replicon abolished the poly(I : C)-induced ISRE activation, and elimination of the replicon by IFN treatment restored these ISRE responses (Fig. 2a). Consistent results were obtained by overexpression of ΔRIG-I, a constitutively active form. Transfection of ΔRIG-I in Huh7 and HEK293 cells induced ISRE activation, whilst these responses were abolished or significantly suppressed in cell lines expressing HCV replicons and were recovered by eliminating the replicon by IFN treatment (data not shown). Similarly, ISRE activation by overexpression of Cardif, an adaptor molecule of RIG-I, was almost completely blocked in replicon-expressing cells and was recovered by eliminating the replicon from the cells (data not shown). The RIG-I-mediated IFN response was

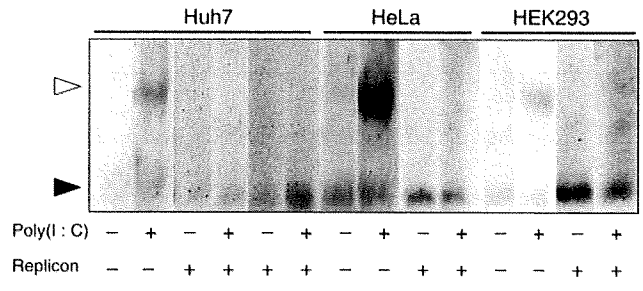

Fig. 1. Double-stranded RNA-induced IRF-3 dimer formation in cell lines that support HCV subgenomic replication. Poly(I : C) was transfected into naïve Huh7, HeLa and HEK293 cells, and into corresponding cell lines expressing the HCV replicon. Six hours after transfection, cell lysates were prepared, separated in polyacrylamide gels and blotted onto PVDF membrane. The membrane was immunoblotted with anti-IRF-3 and visualized by chemiluminescence (see Methods). The positions of the IRF-3 dimer (open arrowhead) and monomer (closed arrowhead) are indicated.

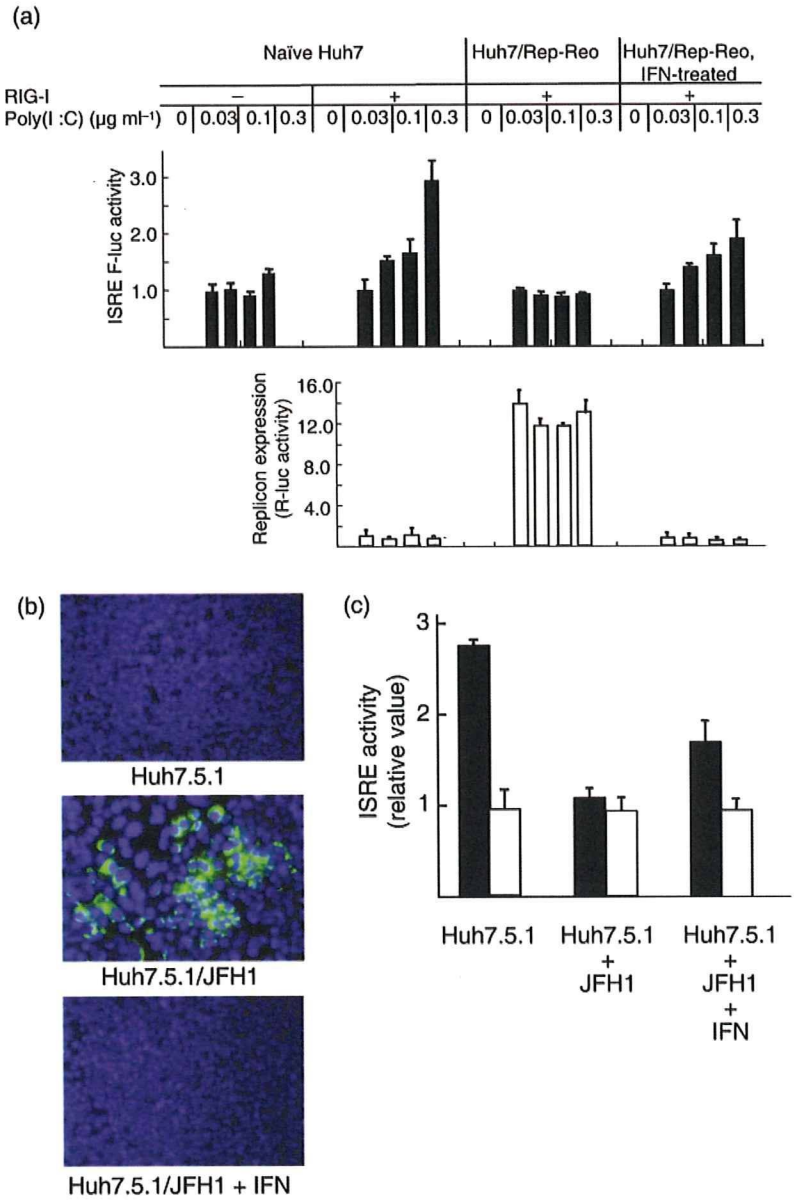

Fig. 2. Suppression of dsRNA-induced, RIG-I-mediated ISRE activation by HCV replication. (a) The HCV replicon suppresses transcriptional activation after poly(I : C) stimulation. The RIG-I expression plasmid and pISRE-TA-Luc were transiently transfected into the cell lines indicated. The following day, the amounts of poly(I : C) indicated were transfected into the corresponding cell lines and dual luciferase assays were carried out 8 h after transfection. Filled bars indicate ISRE-regulated firefly luciferase (F-luc) activities and open bars indicate *Renilla* luciferase (R-luc) activities representing replicon expression levels. In both graphs, scales for the *y*-axis are shown as relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are shown as means ± SD. (b) Immunofluorescence microscopy results. Huh7.5.1 cells infected with HCV JFH1 (Huh7.5.1/JFH1) and JFH1-infected cells from which the virus had been eliminated by IFN treatment (Huh7.5.1/JFH1 + IFN) were incubated with anti-core primary antibodies followed by Alexa Fluor-conjugated secondary antibody (green). Nuclei were stained with DAPI (blue). (c) ISRE activation by ΔRIG-I overexpression. The plasmid pISRE-TA-Luc was co-transfected with ΔRIG-I (filled bars) or RIG-IKA (empty bars) into naïve Huh7.5.1, Huh7.5.1/JFH1 or Huh7.5.1/JFH1 + IFN cells. Luciferase assays were carried out 8 h after transfection. The *y*-axis indicates ISRE-regulated luciferase activity shown as relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are shown as means ± SD.

also suppressed in HCV JFH1 virus cell culture. In JFH1-infected Huh7.5.1 cells, ΔRIG-I-induced ISRE reporter activation was significantly suppressed, but was recovered in IFN-treated, virus-eliminated cells (Fig. 2b and c). These results demonstrated that RIG-I- and Cardif-mediated antiviral responses were substantially suppressed by both subgenomic and genomic viral replication in both hepatocyte- and non-hepatocyte-derived host cells.

NS34A and NS4B are responsible for suppressing RIG-I-mediated IFN responses

We next sought to define which HCV proteins were responsible for inhibition of the RIG-I- and IRF-3-mediated IFN induction pathway. We constructed expression plasmids that expressed the non-structural proteins NS345, NS3, NS34A, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B (Fig. 3a). We transfected each expression plasmid with simultaneous activation of the RIG-I pathway by overexpression of ΔRIG-I, Cardif, TBK1 and IKKε (Fig. 3b–e). Expression of full-length non-structural (NS345) and NS34A proteins inhibited ISRE activation mediated by expression of RIG-I and Cardif but not that mediated by TBK1 and IKKε. Interestingly, it was found that NS4B also inhibited ISRE activation mediated by expression of RIG-I and Cardif, but not by TBK1 and IKKε. Consistent with Fig. 3(b), overexpression of NS4B significantly suppressed ΔRIG-I-induced activation of the authentic IFN-β promoter (Fig. 3f).

Another group has studied IFN antagonism of flavivirus non-structural proteins and has reported that HCV NS4B did not affect IFN responses (Muñoz-Jordán *et al.*, 2005).

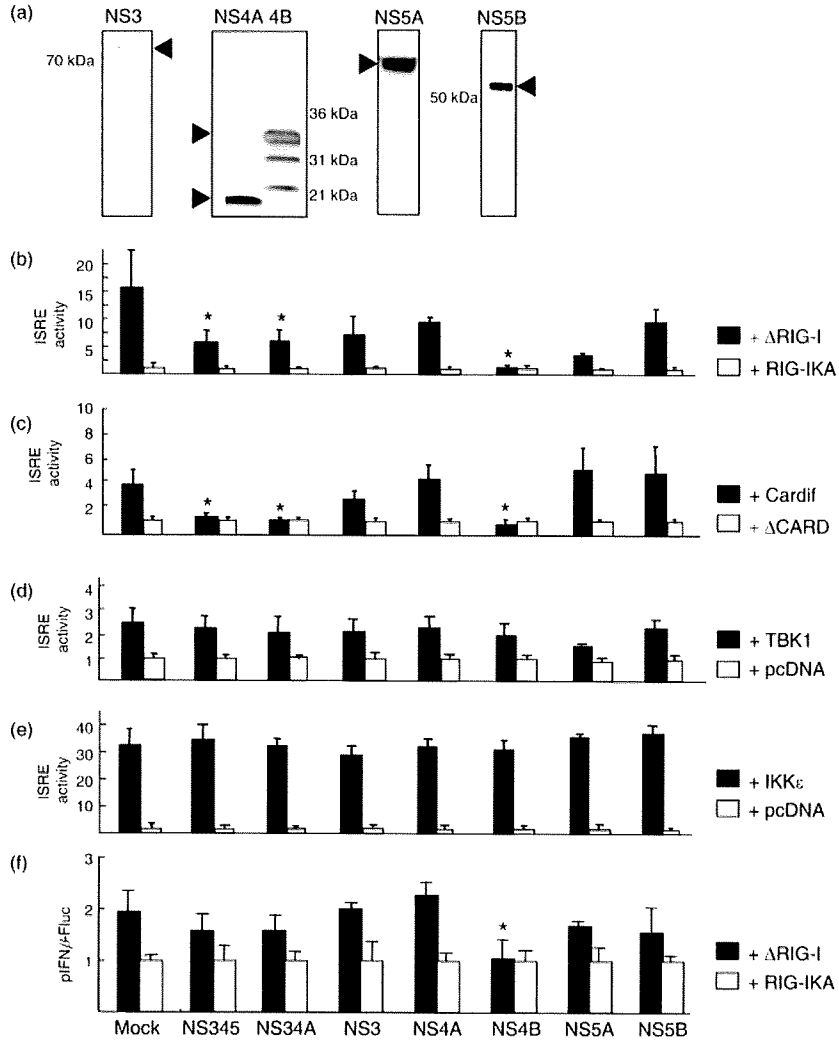

Fig. 3. Co-transfection analyses using plasmids that express individual HCV non-structural proteins. (a) Western blotting. Plasmids expressing the indicated Myc-tagged HCV proteins were transfected into Huh7 cells. Western blotting was carried out using anti-Myc antibody. (b–e) The following plasmids were co-transfected into Huh7 cells: pISRE-TA-Luc, pRL-CMV, the indicated plasmids expressing ΔRIG-I (b), Cardif (c), TBK1 (d) and IKKε (e), and the indicated plasmids expressing individual HCV non-structural proteins. Plasmids RIG-IKA, ΔCARD or pcDNA were used as negative controls as indicated. Twenty-four hours after transfection, luciferase activities were measured. The *y*-axis shows relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are given as means ± SD. *, $P<0.05$. (f) pIFN-β and pRL-CMV were co-transfected into Huh7 cells, with plasmids expressing individual HCV non-structural proteins and plasmid expressing ΔRIG-I. Luciferase activities were measured 24 h after transfection. The *y*-axis shows relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are given as means ± SD. *, $P<0.05$. Plasmid RIG-IKA was used as a negative control.

To investigate strain-specific differences in the characteristics of NS4B proteins, we performed co-transfection assays using NS4B expression constructs from HCV N (Beard *et al.*, 1999) and JFH1 (Wakita *et al.*, 2005) strains, as well as HCV strain J4 (Fig. 4a and b). All NS4B constructs suppressed ΔRIG-I- or Cardif-mediated ISRE activation. These results suggested that the above-described effects of NS4B were independent of HCV strain.

NS4B has been reported to induce an unfolded protein response or endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress through ATF6 or IRE1-X box protein (XBP1) pathways (Zheng *et al.*, 2005). The ER stress induces production of IL-8, which has been reported to interfere with the IFN system (Polyak *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, we detected expression of IL-8 using RT-PCR in cells with and without overexpression of NS4B. As shown in Fig. 4(c), no significant difference was observed in IL-8 mRNA levels among mock-, NS34A- and NS4B-transfected cells. These results showed that NS4B overexpression in the present study did not induce expression of IL-8 and that the IFN-antagonizing effects of NS4B were independent of IL-8.

It has been reported that NS34A suppresses the TLR3-mediated IFN response (Breiman *et al.*, 2005; Ferreon *et al.*, 2005). However, overexpression of HCV non-structural proteins did not suppress ISRE activation that was induced by overexpression of TLR-3 or TRIF (Fig. 5a and b), nor did NS34A from two different HCV strains, J4 and N, show significant suppression of TRIF-mediated ISRE activation (Fig. 5c). Although strain-specific differences might be involved, these data suggest that neither NS34A nor NS4B affect the TLR3-triggered, TRIF-mediated IFN expression signalling pathway.

The NS4B N terminus is involved in inhibition of the RIG-I-mediated pathway

Given the result that NS4B suppressed the RIG-I-mediated IFN expression pathway, we next investigated which domain of NS4B was responsible. We constructed plasmids that expressed truncated NS4B in which the protein-coding frame was truncated at four positions corresponding to the five transmembrane domains (Lundin *et al.*, 2003) (Fig. 6a).

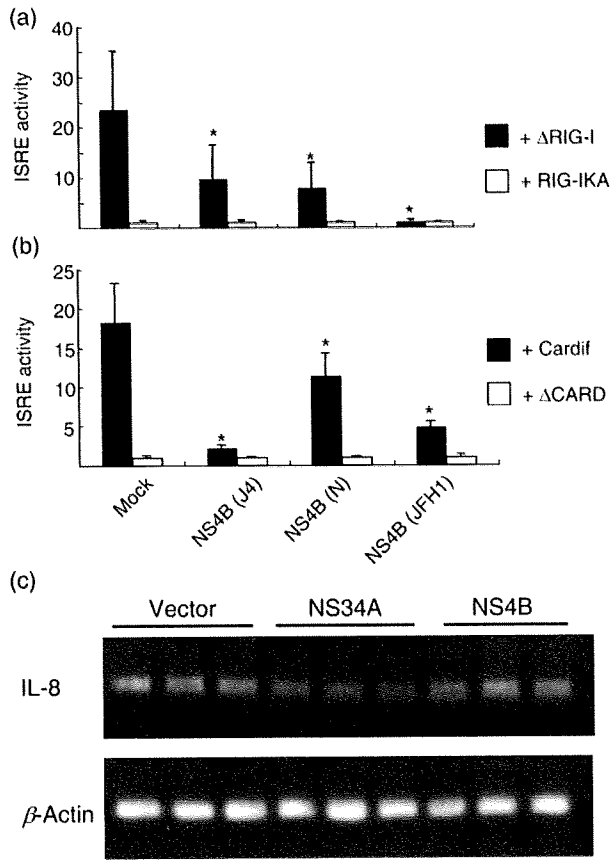

Fig. 4. Co-transfection analyses of HCV NS4B proteins of different origins. NS4B (J4), NS4B (N) and NS4B (JFH1) denote HCV NS4B proteins that were cloned from HCV strains J4, N and JFH1, respectively. The NS4B plasmids indicated were co-transfected with plasmids expressing ΔRIG-I (a) or Cardif (b). Luciferase activities were measured 24 h after transfection. The *y*-axis shows relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are given as means ± SD. *, $P<0.05$. (c) Semi-quantitative detection of IL-8 mRNA by RT-PCR. cDNA was prepared from Huh7 cells transfected with empty vector or with NS34A or NS4B expression plasmid.

Expression and subcellular localization of NS4B truncated proteins were visualized by indirect immunofluorescence assays (Fig. 7). Each of the NS4B truncated proteins was localized predominantly to the perinuclear rim as dense spots. Some of the spots were similar to the staining of the ER-resident host protein PDI, consistent with previous reports (Lindström *et al.*, 2006; Lundin *et al.*, 2006). These truncated expression plasmids were co-transfected with Cardif expression plasmids into Huh7 cells. As shown in Fig. 6(b), Cardif-mediated ISRE activation was significantly suppressed by co-transfection of NS4Bt1–156 and NS4Bt1–186, as well as full-length NS4B, whilst transfection of NS4Bt90–260 and NS4Bt110–260 did not significantly suppress Cardif-mediated ISRE activation. The shortest construct, NS4Bt131–260, partially retained the ability to reduce ISRE activity. These results suggested that the N-terminal domain of NS4B, which includes aa 1–110, might function directly to suppress RIG-I-mediated IFN expression responses.

DISCUSSION

The recent discovery of cytoplasmic dsRNA sensor molecules has resulted in rapid expansion of knowledge about the IFN-mediated virus defence pathway (Yoneyama *et al.*, 2004). Several reports suggest that viruses target the IFN system to establish replication in the host cells (Kato *et al.*, 2006). We have confirmed that the dsRNA-triggered, IRF-3-mediated IFN activation pathway was blocked in several replicon-supporting cell lines (Fig. 1). Similarly, the dsRNA responses were substantially suppressed in HCV JFH-1 cell culture compared with parental Huh7 cells (Fig. 2b and c). Overexpression analyses showed that RIG-I- and Cardif-mediated ISRE activation was significantly suppressed in HCV replicon-expressing cells, which recovered after elimination of the replicon by IFN treatment (Fig. 2a). In contrast, TBK1- or IKKε-mediated ISRE activation was not suppressed in replicon-expressing cells. Overexpression of individual HCV non-structural proteins revealed that not only NS34A but also NS4B inhibited the ISRE activation signal (Figs 3, 4 and 5). These results suggested that HCV non-structural proteins suppress the IFN induction pathway and that the target host molecule could be Cardif or an unknown adaptor molecule acting between Cardif and TBK1/IKKε.

NS4B protein is a 27 kDa hydrophobic integral membrane protein that is localized in the ER with other non-structural proteins. Studies on other flaviviruses such as Kunjin virus and BVDV support the notion that NS4B may indeed be an essential part of the replication mechanism (Grassmann *et al.*, 2001; Khromykh *et al.*, 2000; Li & McNally, 2001; Qu *et al.*, 2001). These systems have demonstrated that intact NS4B is necessary in a *cis* configuration in the polyprotein for maintaining viral replication (Grassmann *et al.*, 2001; Khromykh *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, single mutations in NS4B alter the cytopathic effects of BVDV and even mediate changes in the cellular tropism of Dengue virus (Hanley *et al.*, 2003; Qu *et al.*, 2001). In HCV, the search for cell-culture-adaptive mutations in HCV subgenomic replicons has led to the generation of mutations in the NS4B region that confer higher replication levels and resistance to IFNs, as well as broadening the tropism for different cell lines (Lohmann *et al.*, 2003; Sumpter *et al.*, 2004; Zhu *et al.*, 2003). These pieces of evidence may imply that NS4B is not only part of the replication machinery but may also have other functions that enable establishment of viral replication.

NS4B truncation assays showed that RIG-I/Cardif-mediated ISRE activation was significantly suppressed by expression of N terminus-containing constructs (Fig. 6). These results imply that the N-terminal domain of NS4B, which is located between positions 1 and 110, may be essential for suppressing IFN expression responses in host

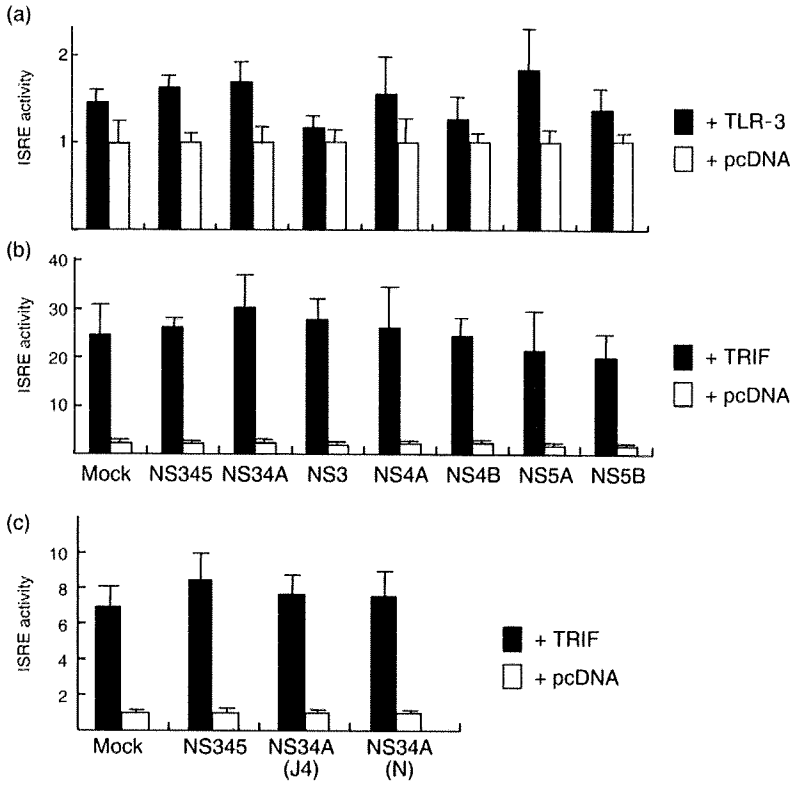

Fig. 5. Co-transfection analyses of HCV non-structural proteins and plasmid expressing TLR-3 or TRIF. (a, b). The following plasmids were co-transfected into Huh7 cells: pISRE-TA-Luc, pRL-CMV, plasmids expressing TLR-3 or TRIF and plasmids expressing individual HCV non-structural proteins, as indicated. Luciferase activities were measured 24 h after transfection. The *y*-axis shows relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are given as means ± SD. (c) NS34A (J4) and NS34A (N) denote plasmids expressing HCV NS34A derived from HCV strains J4 and N, respectively. The NS4B plasmids indicated were co-transfected with pISRE-TA-Luc, pRL-CMV and plasmids expressing TRIF or pcDNA. Luciferase activities were measured 24 h after transfection. The *y*-axis shows relative values. Assays were carried out in triplicate and results are given as means ± SD.

cells. Lindström *et al.*, (2006) investigated single point mutations in NS4B that negatively affected expression efficiency of the HCV replicon and reported that most of the active mutations were located around the N-terminal domain. A distinctive feature of NS4B is that it requires membrane rearrangement to form its native structure

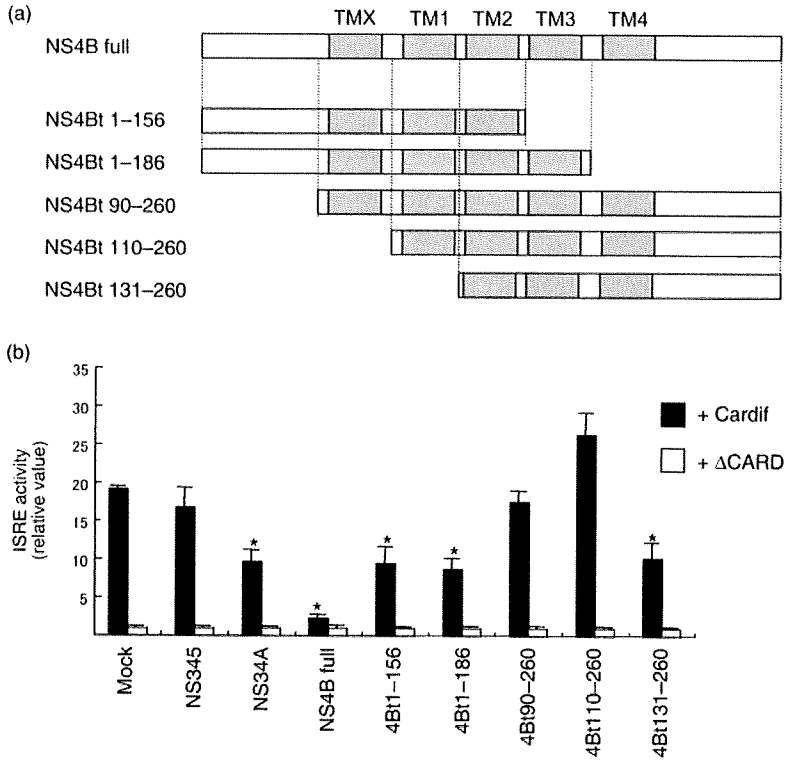

Fig. 6. Co-transfection analyses using truncated NS4B expression constructs. (a) Truncated constructs of NS4B. The protein-coding frame of NS4B was truncated in five constructs corresponding to the five transmembrane domains, as reported by Lundin *et al.* (2003). (b) The truncated NS4B plasmids, pISRE-TA-Luc and the Cardif- or ΔCARD-expressing plasmids indicated were co-transfected into Huh7 cells. Luciferase activities were measured 24 h after transfection. Results are given as means ± SD.

(Lindström *et al.*, 2006; Lundin *et al.*, 2006). The HCV polyprotein is translated from a single reading frame and subjected to proteolytic cleavage by the host signal peptidase and two viral proteases (Grakoui *et al.*, 1993). The mature form of NS4B is localized in the ER and constitutes a subcellular structure called the membrane-associated focus (MAF) (Gretton *et al.*, 2005). Once the NS4B is cleaved, the N-terminal peptide of NS4B is translocated from the cytoplasmic to the luminal side, giving it a fifth transmembrane region (Lundin *et al.*, 2006). The N-terminal amphipathic helix (AH) 1 of NS4B is necessary for this translocation and for MAF formation; NS4B molecules that were truncated at the AH1 lacked the ability to create the MAF, to translocate and to replicate (Elazar *et al.*, 2004; Lindström *et al.*, 2006).

In our assay, NS4Bt131–260 regained the ability to reduce ISRE activity. As we confirmed that all mutants co-localized with the ER, there may be some effect of the N-terminal localization of this mutant. The precise mechanism of NS4B suppression is still not clear and further experiments are needed.

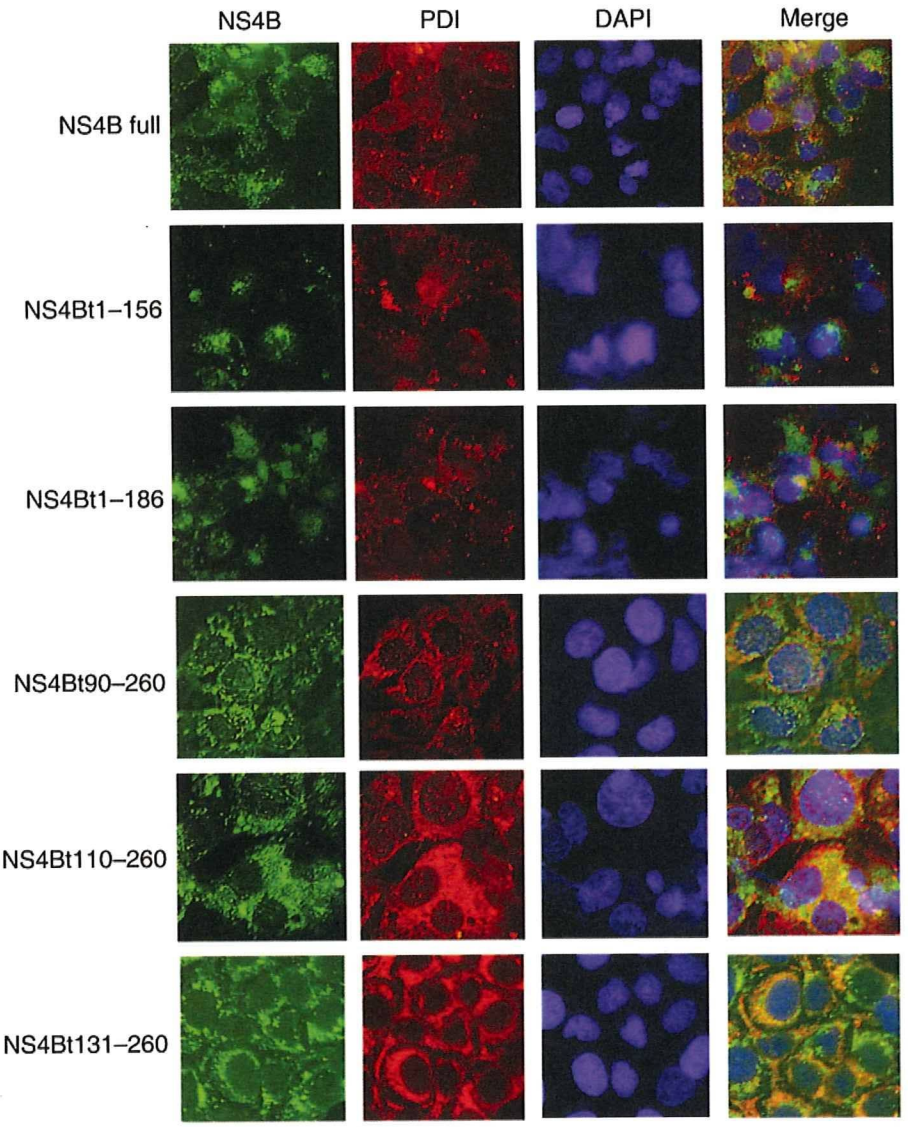

Fig. 7. Indirect immunofluorescence analysis of truncated NS4B proteins. The NS4B constructs indicated were transiently transfected into Huh7 cells. After 48 h, cells were labelled with anti-Myc or anti-PDI antibody. NS4B proteins were immunostained with Alexa Fluor 488-labelled goat anti-mouse IgG, whilst PDI was stained with Alexa Fluor 568-labelled goat anti-rabbit IgG. DAPI staining revealed the nuclear chromatin. Representative immunofluorescence images derived from a number of experiments are shown as four images of a single focal plane of Huh7 cells, showing NS4B proteins (green), PDI (red), DAPI staining (blue) and the superimposed images (merge).

NS4B has been reported to induce an unfolded protein response or ER stress (Zheng *et al.*, 2005). Accumulation of unfolded or misfolded proteins in the ER is detected by three ER sensor proteins, ATF6, IRE-1 and PKR-like ER kinase (PERK), and triggers the unfolded protein response as a stress response and induces expression of molecular chaperon proteins, global shut-off of protein translation and apoptotic cell death (Mori, 2000). Therefore, it may be possible that transgenic overexpression of NS4B induces ER stress and suppresses overall protein synthesis, including that of IFNs. In our experiments, however, NS4B suppressed the ISRE-mediated IFN gene activation but did not suppress non-specific protein expression, as demonstrated by *Renilla* luciferase activity in the control plasmid driven by the herpes simplex thymidine kinase promoter. In addition, the growth and viability of cells that overexpressed NS4B did not differ from untransfected cells or from those transfected with the other HCV proteins. IL-8 overproduction induced by ER stress was not observed in our NS4B-overexpressing cells (Fig. 4c). These findings indicated that the inhibitory effect of NS4B is specific to the IFN induction pathway and is not a non-specific effect through ER stress.

In conclusion, we have shown that dsRNA-induced IFN expression was suppressed by NS4B. These virus–host interactions probably contribute to HCV persistence and to the pathogenesis of HCV-associated liver disease.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Dr Jürg Tschopp for providing Cardif, ΔCARD and CARD, and to Dr Frank Chisari for providing the Huh7.5.1 cell line. This study was supported by grants from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Miyakawa Memorial Research Foundation and Viral Hepatitis Research Foundation of Japan.

REFERENCES

Alter, M. J. (1997). Epidemiology of hepatitis C. *Hepatology* **26**, 62S–65S.

Andrejeva, J., Childs, K. S., Young, D. F., Carlos, T. S., Stock, N., Goodbourn, S. & Randall, R. E. (2004). The V proteins of paramyxoviruses bind the IFN-inducible RNA helicase, mda-5, and inhibit its activation of the *IFN-β* promoter. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* **101**, 17264–17269.

Basler, C. F., Mikulasova, A., Martinez-Sobrido, L., Paragas, J., Muhlberger, E., Bray, M., Klenk, H. D., Palese, P. & Garcia-Sastre, A. (2003). The Ebola virus VP35 protein inhibits activation of interferon regulatory factor 3. *J Virol* **77**, 7945–7956.

Beard, M. R., Abell, G., Honda, M., Carroll, A., Gartland, M., Clarke, B., Suzuki, K., Lanford, R., Sangar, D. V. & Lemon, S. M. (1999). An infectious molecular clone of a Japanese genotype 1b hepatitis C virus. *Hepatology* **30**, 316–324.

Bigger, C. B., Brasky, K. M. & Lanford, R. E. (2001). DNA microarray analysis of chimpanzee liver during acute resolving hepatitis C virus infection. *J Virol* **75**, 7059–7066.

Blight, K. J., Kolykhalov, A. A. & Rice, C. M. (2000). Efficient initiation of HCV RNA replication in cell culture. *Science* **290**, 1972–1974.

Breiman, A., Grandvaux, N., Lin, R., Ottone, C., Akira, S., Yoneyama, M., Fujita, T., Hiscott, J. & Meurs, E. F. (2005). Inhibition of RIG-I-dependent signaling to the interferon pathway during hepatitis C virus expression and restoration of signaling by IKKε. *J Virol* **79**, 3969–3978.

Doyle, S., Vaidya, S., O'Connell, R., Dadgostar, H., Dempsey, P., Wu, T., Rao, G., Sun, R., Haberland, M. & other authors (2002). IRF3 mediates a TLR3/TLR4-specific antiviral gene program. *Immunity* **17**, 251–263.

Elazar, M., Liu, P., Rice, C. M. & Glenn, J. S. (2004). An N-terminal amphipathic helix in hepatitis C virus (HCV) NS4B mediates membrane association, correct localization of replication complex proteins, and HCV RNA replication. *J Virol* **78**, 11393–11400.

Ferreon, J. C., Ferreon, A. C., Li, K. & Lemon, S. M. (2005). Molecular determinants of TRIF proteolysis mediated by the hepatitis C virus NS3/4A protease. *J Biol Chem* **280**, 20483–20492.

Fitzgerald, K. A., McWhirter, S. M., Faia, K. L., Rowe, D. C., Latz, E., Golenbock, D. T., Coyle, A. J., Liao, S. M. & Maniatis, T. (2003). IKKε and TBK1 are essential components of the IRF3 signaling pathway. *Nat Immunol* **4**, 491–496.

Foy, E., Li, K., Wang, C., Sumpter, R., Jr, Ikeda, M., Lemon, S. M. & Gale, M., Jr (2003). Regulation of interferon regulatory factor-3 by the hepatitis C virus serine protease. *Science* **300**, 1145–1148.

Frese, M., Schwärzle, V., Barth, K., Krieger, N., Lohmann, V., Mihm, S., Haller, O. & Bartenschlager, R. (2002). Interferon-γ inhibits replication of subgenomic and genomic hepatitis C virus RNAs. *Hepatology* **35**, 694–703.

Fried, M. W., Shiffman, M. L., Reddy, K. R., Smith, C., Marionos, G., Goncales, F. L., Häussinger, D., Diago, M., Garosi, G. & other authors (2002). Peginterferon α-2a plus ribavirin for chronic hepatitis C virus infection. *N Engl J Med* **347**, 975–982.

Grakoui, A., Wychowski, C., Lin, C., Feinstone, S. M. & Rice, C. M. (1993). Expression and identification of hepatitis C virus polyprotein cleavage products. *J Virol* **67**, 1385–1395.

Grassmann, C. W., Isken, O., Tautz, N. & Behrens, S. E. (2001). Genetic analysis of the pestivirus nonstructural coding region: defects in the NS5A unit can be complemented in *trans*. *J Virol* **75**, 7791–7802.

Gretton, S. N., Taylor, A. I. & McLauchlan, J. (2005). Mobility of the hepatitis C virus NS4B protein on the endoplasmic reticulum membrane and membrane-associated foci. *J Gen Virol* **86**, 1415–1421.

Guo, J. T., Bichko, V. V. & Seeger, C. (2001). Effect of alpha interferon on the hepatitis C virus replicon. *J Virol* **75**, 8516–8523.

Hanley, K. A., Manlucu, L. R., Gilmore, L. E., Blaney, J. E., Jr, Hanson, C. T., Murphy, B. R. & Whitehead, S. S. (2003). A trade-off in replication in mosquito versus mammalian systems conferred by a point mutation in the NS4B protein of dengue virus type 4. *Virology* **312**, 222–232.

He, Y. & Katze, M. G. (2002). To interfere and to anti-interfere: the interplay between hepatitis C virus and interferon. *Viral Immunol* **15**, 95–119.

Itsui, Y., Sakamoto, N., Kurosaki, M., Kanazawa, N., Tanabe, Y., Koyama, T., Takeda, Y., Nakagawa, M., Kakinuma, S. & other authors (2006). Expressional screening of interferon-stimulated genes for antiviral activity against hepatitis C virus replication. *J Viral Hepat* **13**, 690–700.

Kanazawa, N., Kurosaki, M., Sakamoto, N., Enomoto, N., Itsui, Y., Yamashiro, T., Tanabe, Y., Maekawa, S., Nakagawa, M. & other authors (2004). Regulation of hepatitis C virus replication by interferon regulatory factor 1. *J Virol* **78**, 9713–9720.

Kato, H., Takeuchi, O., Sato, S., Yoneyama, M., Yamamoto, M., Matsui, K., Uematsu, S., Jung, A., Kawai, T. & other authors (2006). Differential roles of MDA5 and RIG-I helicases in the recognition of RNA viruses. *Nature* **441**, 101–105.

Katze, M. G., He, Y. & Gale, M. (2002). Viruses and interferon: a fight for supremacy. *Nature Reviews* **2**, 675–687.

Kawai, T., Takahashi, K., Sato, S., Coban, C., Kumar, H., Kato, H., Ishii, K. J., Takeuchi, O. & Akira, S. (2005). IPS-1, an adaptor triggering RIG-I- and Mda5-mediated type I interferon induction. *Nat Immunol* **6**, 981–988.

Khromykh, A. A., Sedlak, P. L. & Westaway, E. G. (2000). *cis*- and *trans*-acting elements in flavivirus RNA replication. *J Virol* **74**, 3253–3263.

Li, Y. & McNally, J. (2001). Characterization of RNA synthesis and translation of bovine viral diarrhea virus (BVDV). *Virus Genes* **23**, 149–155.

Lin, R., Heylbroeck, C., Pitha, P. M. & Hiscott, J. (1998). Virus-dependent phosphorylation of the IRF-3 transcription factor regulates nuclear translocation, transactivation potential, and proteasome-mediated degradation. *Mol Cell Biol* **18**, 2986–2996.

Lindström, H., Lundin, M., Häggström, S. & Persson, M. A. (2006). Mutations of the hepatitis C virus protein NS4B on either side of the ER membrane affect the efficiency of subgenomic replicons. *Virus Res* **121**, 169–178.

Lohmann, V., Körner, F., Koch, J., Herian, U., Theilmann, L. & Bartenschlager, R. (1999). Replication of subgenomic hepatitis C virus RNAs in a hepatoma cell line. *Science* **285**, 110–113.

Lohmann, V., Hoffmann, S., Herian, U., Penin, F. & Bartenschlager, R. (2003). Viral and cellular determinants of hepatitis C virus RNA replication in cell culture. *J Virol* **77**, 3007–3019.

Lundin, M., Monné, M., Widell, A., Von Heijne, G. & Persson, M. A. (2003). Topology of the membrane-associated hepatitis C virus protein NS4B. *J Virol* **77**, 5428–5438.

Lundin, M., Lindström, H., Grönwall, C. & Persson, M. A. (2006). Dual topology of the processed hepatitis C virus protein NS4B is influenced by the NS5A protein. *J Gen Virol* **87**, 3263–3272.

Meylan, E., Curran, J., Hofmann, K., Moradpour, D., Binder, M., Bartenschlager, R. & Tschopp, J. (2005). Cardif is an adaptor protein in the RIG-I antiviral pathway and is targeted by hepatitis C virus. *Nature* **437**, 1167–1172.

Mori, K. (2000). Tripartite management of unfolded proteins in the endoplasmic reticulum. *Cell* **101**, 451–454.

Muñoz-Jordán, J. L., Laurent-Rolle, M., Ashour, J., Martínez-Sobrido, L., Ashok, M., Lipkin, W. I. & García-Sastre, A. (2005). Inhibition of alpha/beta interferon signaling by the NS4B protein of flaviviruses. *J Virol* **79**, 8004–8013.

Nakagawa, M., Sakamoto, N., Enomoto, N., Tanabe, Y., Kanazawa, N., Koyama, T., Kurosaki, M., Maekawa, S., Yamashiro, T. & other authors (2004). Specific inhibition of hepatitis C virus replication by cyclosporin A. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun* **313**, 42–47.

Nakaya, T., Sato, M., Hata, N., Asagiri, M., Suemori, H., Noguchi, S., Tanaka, N. & Taniguchi, T. (2001). Gene induction pathways mediated by distinct IRFs during viral infection. *Biochem Biophys Res Commun* **283**, 1150–1156.

Polyak, S. J., Khabar, K. S., Paschal, D. M., Ezelle, H. J., Duverlie, G., Barber, G. N., Levy, D. E., Mukaida, N. & Gretch, D. R. (2001). Hepatitis C virus nonstructural 5A protein induces interleukin-8, leading to partial inhibition of the interferon-induced antiviral response. *J Virol* **75**, 6095–6106.

Qu, L., McMullan, L. K. & Rice, C. M. (2001). Isolation and characterization of noncytopathic pestivirus mutants reveals a role for nonstructural protein NS4B in viral cytopathogenicity. *J Virol* **75**, 10651–10662.

Saito, T., Hirai, R., Loo, Y. M., Owen, D., Johnson, C. L., Sinha, S. C., Akira, S., Fujita, T. & Gale, M., Jr (2007). Regulation of innate antiviral defenses through a shared repressor domain in RIG-I and LGP2. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* **104**, 582–587.

Samuel, C. E. (2001). Antiviral actions of interferons. *Clin Microbiol Rev* **14**, 778–809 (Table of Contents).

Sato, M., Suemori, H., Hata, N., Asagiri, M., Ogasawara, K., Nakao, K., Nakaya, T., Katsuki, M., Noguchi, S. & other authors (2000). Distinct and essential roles of transcription factors IRF-3 and IRF-7 in response to viruses for IFN-α/β gene induction. *Immunity* **13**, 539–548.

Schweizer, M. & Peterhans, E. (2001). Noncytopathic bovine viral diarrhea virus inhibits double-stranded RNA-induced apoptosis and interferon synthesis. *J Virol* **75**, 4692–4698.

Seth, R. B., Sun, L., Ea, C. K. & Chen, Z. J. (2005). Identification and characterization of MAVS, a mitochondrial antiviral signaling protein that activates NF-κB and IRF 3. *Cell* **122**, 669–682.

Sharma, S., tenOever, B. R., Grandvaux, N., Zhou, G. P., Lin, R. & Hiscott, J. (2003). Triggering the interferon antiviral response through an IKK-related pathway. *Science* **300**, 1148–1151.

Stark, G. R., Kerr, I. M., Williams, B. R., Silverman, R. H. & Schreiber, R. D. (1998). How cells respond to interferons. *Annu Rev Biochem* **67**, 227–264.

Sumpter, R., Jr, Wang, C., Foy, E., Loo, Y. M. & Gale, M., Jr (2004). Viral evolution and interferon resistance of hepatitis C virus RNA replication in a cell culture model. *J Virol* **78**, 11591–11604.

Talon, J., Horvath, C. M., Polley, R., Basler, C. F., Muster, T., Palese, P. & García-Sastre, A. (2000). Activation of interferon regulatory factor 3 is inhibited by the influenza A virus NS1 protein. *J Virol* **74**, 7989–7996.

Tanabe, Y., Sakamoto, N., Enomoto, N., Kurosaki, M., Ueda, E., Maekawa, S., Yamashiro, T., Nakagawa, M., Chen, C. H. & other authors (2004). Synergistic inhibition of intracellular hepatitis C virus replication by combination of ribavirin and interferon-α. *J Infect Dis* **189**, 1129–1139.

Taniguchi, T. & Takaoka, A. (2002). The interferon-α/β system in antiviral responses: a multimodal machinery of gene regulation by the IRF family of transcription factors. *Curr Opin Immunol* **14**, 111–116.

Taniguchi, T., Ogasawara, K., Takaoka, A. & Tanaka, N. (2001). IRF family of transcription factors as regulators of host defense. *Annu Rev Immunol* **19**, 623–655.

Wakita, T., Pietschmann, T., Kato, T., Date, T., Miyamoto, M., Zhao, Z., Murthy, K., Habermann, A., Krausslich, H. G. & other authors (2005). Production of infectious hepatitis C virus in tissue culture from a cloned viral genome. *Nat Med* **11**, 791–796.

Xu, L. G., Wang, Y. Y., Han, K. J., Li, L. Y., Zhai, Z. & Shu, H. B. (2005). VISA is an adapter protein required for virus-triggered IFN-β signaling. *Mol Cell* **19**, 727–740.

Yamashiro, T., Sakamoto, N., Kurosaki, M., Kanazawa, N., Tanabe, Y., Nakagawa, M., Chen, C. H., Itsui, Y., Koyama, T. & other authors (2006). Negative regulation of intracellular hepatitis C virus replication by interferon regulatory factor 3. *J Gastroenterol* **41**, 750–757.

Yanagi, M., Purcell, R. H., Emerson, S. U. & Bukh, J. (1997). Transcripts from a single full-length cDNA clone of hepatitis C virus are infectious when directly transfected into the liver of a chimpanzee. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* **94**, 8738–8743.

Yokota, T., Sakamoto, N., Enomoto, N., Tanabe, Y., Miyagishi, M., Maekawa, S., Yi, L., Kurosaki, M., Taira, K. & other authors (2003). Inhibition of intracellular hepatitis C virus replication by synthetic and vector-derived small interfering RNAs. *EMBO Rep* **4**, 602–608.

Yoneyama, M., Suhara, W., Fukuhara, Y., Fukuda, M., Nishida, E. & Fujita, T. (1998). Direct triggering of the type I interferon system by

virus infection: activation of a transcription factor complex containing IRF-3 and CBP/p300. *EMBO J* **17**, 1087–1095.

Yoneyama, M., Kikuchi, M., Natsukawa, T., Shinobu, N., Imaizumi, T., Miyagishi, M., Taira, K., Akira, S. & Fujita, T. (2004). The RNA helicase RIG-I has an essential function in double-stranded RNA-induced innate antiviral responses. *Nat Immunol* **5**, 730–737.

Yoneyama, M., Kikuchi, M., Matsumoto, K., Imaizumi, T., Miyagishi, M., Taira, K., Foy, E., Loo, Y. M., Gale, M., Jr & other authors (2005). Shared and unique functions of the DExD/H-box helicases RIG-I, MDA5, and LGP2 in antiviral innate immunity. *J Immunol* **175**, 2851–2858.

Zheng, Y., Gao, B., Ye, L., Kong, L., Jing, W., Yang, X., Wu, Z. & Ye, L. (2005). Hepatitis C virus non-structural protein NS4B can modulate an unfolded protein response. *J Microbiol* **43**, 529–536.

Zhong, J., Gastaminza, P., Cheng, G., Kapadia, S., Kato, T., Burton, D. R., Wieland, S. F., Uprichard, S. L., Wakita, T. & Chisari, F. V. (2005). Robust hepatitis C virus infection *in vitro*. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* **102**, 9294–9299.

Zhu, Q., Guo, J. T. & Seeger, C. (2003). Replication of hepatitis C virus subgenomes in nonhepatic epithelial and mouse hepatoma cells. *J Virol* **77**, 9204–9210.

doi:10.1111/j.1440-1746.2007.05076.x

HEPATOLOGY

Inhibition of hepatitis C virus infection and expression *in vitro* and *in vivo* by recombinant adenovirus expressing short hairpin RNA

Naoya Sakamoto,*,† Yoko Tanabe,* Takanori Yokota,‡ Kenichi Satoh,§ Yuko Sekine-Osajima,* Mina Nakagawa,*,† Yasuhiro Itsui,* Megumi Tasaka,* Yuki Sakurai,* Chen Cheng-Hsin,* Masahiko Yano,¶ Shogo Ohkoshi,¶ Yutaka Aoyagi,¶ Shinya Maekawa,†† Nobuyuki Enomoto,†† Michinori Kohara§ and Mamoru Watanabe*

Departments of *Gastroenterology and Hepatology, †Hepatitis Control, and ‡Neurology and Neurological Science, Tokyo Medical and Dental University, §Department of Microbiology and Cell Biology, The Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Medical Science, Tokyo, ¶Gastroenterology and Hepatology Division, Graduate School of Medical and Dental Sciences, Niigata University, Niigata, and ††First Department of Medicine, Yamanashi University, Yamanashi, Japan

Key words
adenovirus vector, hepatitis C virus, RNA interference.

Accepted for publication 12 April 2007.

Correspondence
Dr Naoya Sakamoto, Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Tokyo Medical and Dental University, 1-5-45 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113-8519, Japan.
Email: nsakamoto.gast@tmd.ac.jp

NS and YT have contributed equally to this paper.

Abstract

Background and Aim: We have reported previously that synthetic small interfering RNA (siRNA) and DNA-based siRNA expression vectors efficiently and specifically suppress hepatitis C virus (HCV) replication *in vitro*. In this study, we investigated the effects of the siRNA targeting HCV-RNA *in vivo*.

Methods: We constructed recombinant retrovirus and adenovirus expressing short hairpin RNA (shRNA), and transfected into replicon-expressing cells *in vitro* and transgenic mice *in vivo*.

Results: Retroviral transduction of Huh7 cells to express shRNA and subsequent transfection of an HCV replicon into the cells showed that the cells had acquired resistance to HCV replication. Infection of cells expressing the HCV replicon with an adenovirus expressing shRNA resulted in efficient vector delivery and expression of shRNA, leading to suppression of the replicon in the cells by ~10^{-3}. Intravenous delivery of the adenovirus expressing shRNA into transgenic mice that can be induced to express HCV structural proteins by the Cre/*lox*P switching system resulted in specific suppression of virus protein synthesis in the liver.

Conclusion: Taken together, our results support the feasibility of utilizing gene targeting therapy based on siRNA and/or shRNA expression to counteract HCV replication, which might prove valuable in the treatment of hepatitis C.

Introduction

Hepatitis C virus (HCV), which affects 170 million people worldwide, is one of the most important pathogens causing liver-related morbidity and mortality.[1] The difficulty in eradicating HCV is attributable to limited treatment options against the virus and their unsatisfactory efficacies. Even with the most effective regimen with pegylated interferon (IFN) and ribavirin in combination, the efficacies are limited to less than half of the patients treated.[2] Given this situation, the development of safe and effective anti-HCV therapies is one of our high-priority goals.

RNA interference (RNAi) is a process of sequence-specific, post-transcriptional gene silencing that is initiated by double-stranded RNA.[3,4] Because of its potency and specificity, RNAi rapidly has become a powerful tool for basic research to analyze gene functions and for potential therapeutic applications. Recently, successful suppression of various human pathogens by RNAi have been reported, including human immunodeficiency viruses,[5,6] poliovirus,[7] influenza virus,[8] severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus[9] and hepatitis B virus (HBV).[10–13]

We and other researchers have reported that appropriately designed small interfering RNA (siRNA) targeting HCV genomic RNA can efficiently and specifically suppress HCV replication *in vitro*.[14–19] We have tested siRNA designed to target the well-conserved 5′-untranslated region (5′-UTR) of HCV-RNA, and identified the most effective target, just upstream of the translation initiation codon. Furthermore, transfection of DNA-based vectors expressing siRNA was as effective as that of synthetic siRNA in suppressing HCV replication.[14]

In this study, we explored the further possibility that efficient delivery and expression of siRNA may be effective in suppression and elimination of HCV replication and that delivery of such

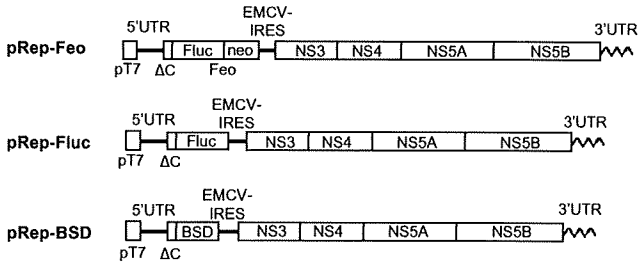

Figure 1 Structures of HCV replicon plasmids. The pRep-Feo expressed a chimeric reporter protein of firefly luciferase (Fluc) and neomycin phosphotransferase (GenBank accession No. AB119282).[14,20] The pRep-Fluc expressed the Fluc protein. The pRep-BSD expressed the blasticidin S (BSD) resistance gene. pT7, T7 promoter; 5'UTR, HCV 5'-untranslated region; ΔC, truncated HCV core region (nt. 342–377); neo, neomycin phosphotransferase gene; EMCV, encephalomyocarditis virus; NS3, NS4, NS5A and NS5B, genes that encode HCV non-structural proteins; 3'UTR, HCV 3'-untranslated region.

HCV-directed siRNA *in vivo* may be effective in silencing viral protein expression in the liver. Here, we report that HCV replication was suppressed *in vitro* by recombinant retrovirus and adenovirus vectors expressing short hairpin RNA (shRNA) and that the delivery of the adenovirus vector to mice *in vivo* specifically inhibited viral protein synthesis in the liver.

Methods

Cells and cell culture

Huh7 and Retro Pack PT67 cells (Clontech, Palo Alto, CA, USA) were maintained in Dulbecco's modified minimal essential medium (Sigma, St. Louis, MO, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum at 37°C under 5% CO_2. To maintain cell lines carrying the HCV replicon, G418 (Wako, Osaka, Japan) was added to the culture medium to a final concentration of 500 μg/mL.

HCV replicon constructs and transfection

HCV replicon plasmids, pRep-Feo, pRep-Fluc and pRep-BSD were constructed from were constructed from a virus, HCV-N strain, genotype 1b.[21] The pRep-Feo expressed a chimeric reporter protein of firefly luciferase (Fluc) and neomycin phosphotransferase.[14,20] The pRep-Fluc and the pRep-BSD expressed the Fluc and blasticidin S (BSD) resistance genes, respectively (Fig. 1). The replicon RNA synthesis and the transfection protocol have been described previously.[22]

Synthetic siRNA and siRNA-expression plasmid

The design and construction of HCV-directed siRNA vectors have been described.[14] Briefly, five siRNA targeting the 5'-UTR of HCV RNA were tested for their efficiency to inhibit HCV replication, and the most effective sequence, which targeted nucleotide position of 331 though 351, was used in the present study. To construct shRNA-expressing DNA cassettes, oligonucleotide inserts were synthesized that contained the loop sequence (5'-TTC AAG AGA-3') flanked by sense and antisense siRNA sequences (Fig. 2a). These were inserted immediately downstream of the human U6 promoter. To avoid a problem in transcribing shRNA because of instability of the DNA strands arising from the tight palindrome structure, several C-to-T point mutations, which retained completely the silencing activity of the shRNA, were introduced into the sense strand of the shRNA sequences (referred to as 'm').[23] A control plasmid, pUC19-shRNA-Control, expressed shRNA directed towards the Machado–Joseph disease gene, which is a mutant of ataxin-3 gene and is not normally expressed. We have previously described the sequence specific activity of the shRNA-Control.[24]

Prior to construction of the virus vectors, we tested silencing efficiency of five shRNA constructs of different lengths that covered the target sequence (Fig. 2a). The shRNA-HCV-19, shRNA-HCV-21 and shRNA-HCV-27 had target sequences of 19, 21 and 27 nucleotides, respectively. Transfection of these shRNA constructs into Huh7/pRep-Feo showed that shRNA with longer target sequences had better suppressive effects (Fig. 2b). Therefore, we used shRNA-HCV-27m (abbreviated as shRNA-HCV) in the following study.

Recombinant retrovirus vectors

The U6-shRNA expression cassettes were inserted into the *StuI*/*Hin*dIII site of a retrovirus vector, pLNCX2 (Clontech) to construct pLNCshRNA-HCV and pLNCshRNA-Control (Fig. 2c). The plasmids were transfected into the packaging cells, Retro Pack PT67. The culture supernatant was filtered and added onto Huh7 cells with 4 μg/mL of polybrene. Huh7 cell lines stably expressing shRNA were established by culture in the presence of 500 μg/mL of G418.

Recombinant adenovirus

Recombinant adenoviruses expressing shRNA were constructed using an Adenovirus Expression Vector Kit (Takara, Otsu, Japan). The U6-shRNA expression DNA cassette was inserted into the *SwaI* site of pAxcw to construct pAxshRNA-HCV and pAxshRNA-Control. The adenoviruses were propagated according to the manufacturer's protocol (AxshRNA-HCV and AxshRNA-Control; Fig. 2c). A 'multiplicity of infection' (MOI) was used to standardize infecting doses of adenovirus. The MOI stands for the ratio of infectious virus particles to the number of cells being infected. An MOI = 1 represents equivalent dose to introduce one infectious virus particle to every host cell that is present in the culture.

Plasmids for assays of interferon responses

pISRE-TA-Luc (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) contained five copies of the consensus interferon stimulated response element (ISRE) motifs upstream of the Fluc gene. pTA-Luc (Invitrogen), which lacks the enhancer element, was used for background determination. The pcDNA3.1 (Invitrogen) was used as an empty vector for mock transfection. pRL-CMV (Promega, Madison, WI, USA), which expresses the *Renilla* luciferase protein, was used for normalization of transfection efficiency.[25] A plasmid, peGFPneo (Invitrogen), was used to monitor percentages of transduced cells.

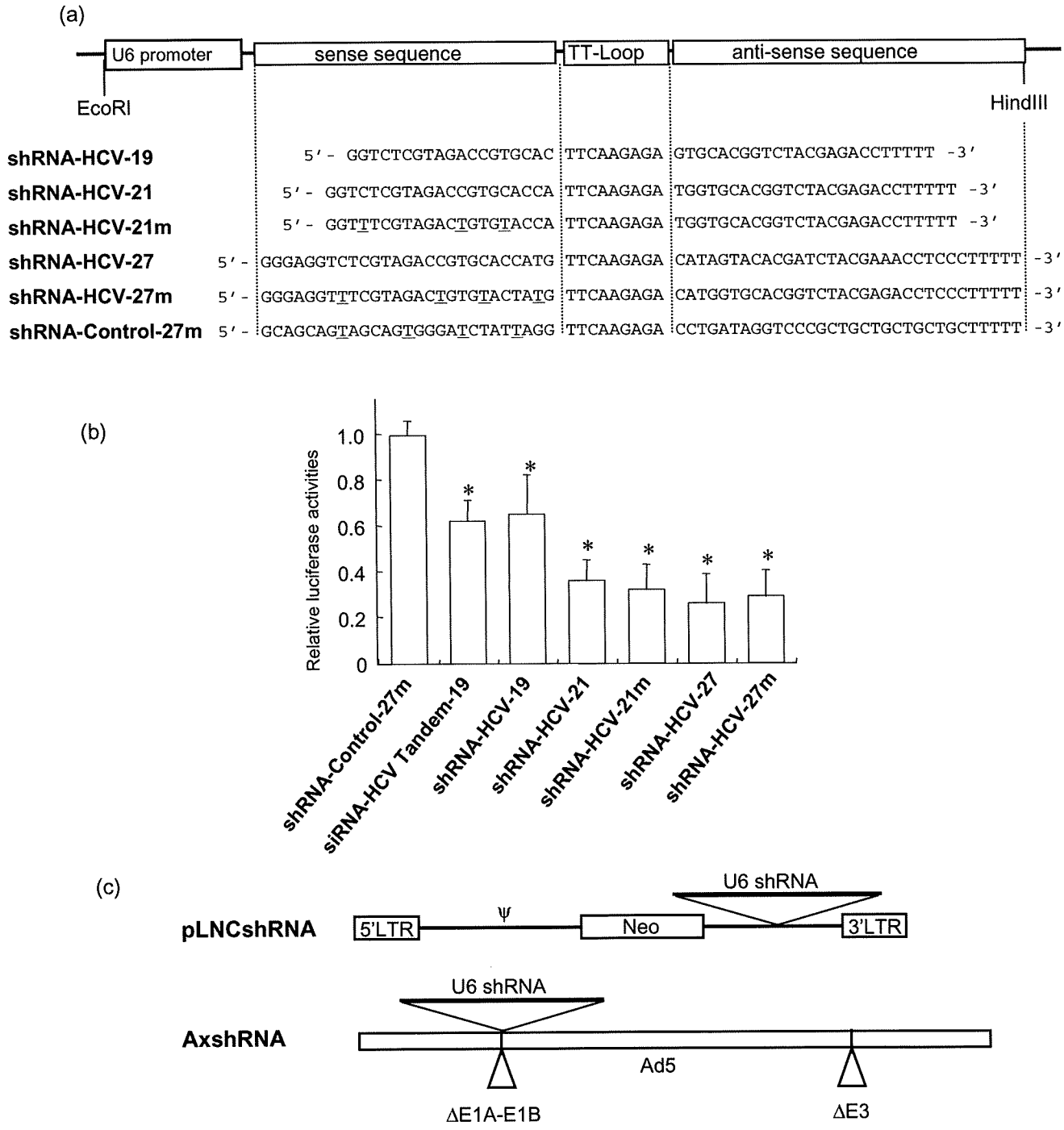

Figure 2 Structure of shRNA-expression constructs and shRNA sequences. (a) Structure of shRNA-expression cassette and shRNA sequences. TT-Loop, the loop sequence. The shRNA-Control was directed toward an unrelated target, Machado–Joseph disease gene. Underlined letters indicate C-to-T point mutations in the sense strand. (b) The shRNA-expression plasmids were transfected into Huh7/pRep-Feo cells, and internal luciferase activities were measured at 48 h of transfection. Each assay was done in triplicate, and the values are displayed as mean + SD. $*P < 0.05$. (c) pLNCshRNA, structure of a recombinant retrovirus expressing shRNA. Ψ, the retroviral packaging signal sequence. AxshRNA, structure of a recombinant adenovirus expressing shRNA.