

JOURNAL OF HEPATOLOGY

genes (ISGs), such as Myxovirus (influenza virus) resistance 1 (MX), 2',5'-oligoadenylate synthetase (OAS), chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 8 (CCL8), and interferon alpha-inducible protein 27 (IFI 27), were significantly induced (Supplementary Table 1). We designated these genes as *IFN* and *Rib-stimulated genes* (IRS-Gs) and analyzed them further.

Hepatic gene expression and responsiveness to IFN- α 2b and Rib combination therapy

To investigate the relationship between hepatic gene expression and responsiveness to treatment, we applied nonsupervised learning methods, hierarchical clustering analysis using all the expressed genes ($n = 34,988$) from samples taken before and 1 week after initiation of therapy. While hierarchical clustering analysis did not form clusters when done for all patients, it formed two clusters – Rsp and nonRsp – when performed within genotype 1 patient (data not shown).

Fold changes in expression in the 100 most up-regulated IRS-Gs, before and during therapy, were calculated and subjected to hierarchical clustering, and this clearly differentiated Rsp, which exhibited higher IRS-Gs induction, from nonRsp, as shown in Fig. 1A and Supplementary Table 1. Despite the rapid virus decline in genotype 2 patients, IRS-G induction was not so evident in these patients.

Unexpectedly, the hierarchical clustering of IRS-G expression in samples taken before treatment showed a reverse pattern of gene expression (Fig. 2B): IRS-G induction was significantly higher in nonRsp than in Rsp. Upon treatment, the expression of IRS-Gs was more induced in Rsp than in nonRsp (Fig. 1C).

The findings were confirmed in patients who were administered Peg-IFN- α 2b and Rib combination therapy (Table 2). IRS-G expression was induced in CH-C infected livers and substantially up-regulated in nonRsp compared with Rsp (Supplementary Fig. 1). Multivariate logistic analysis including age, sex, fibrosis stage, activity, HCV-RNA, genotype, treatment regime, ALT and

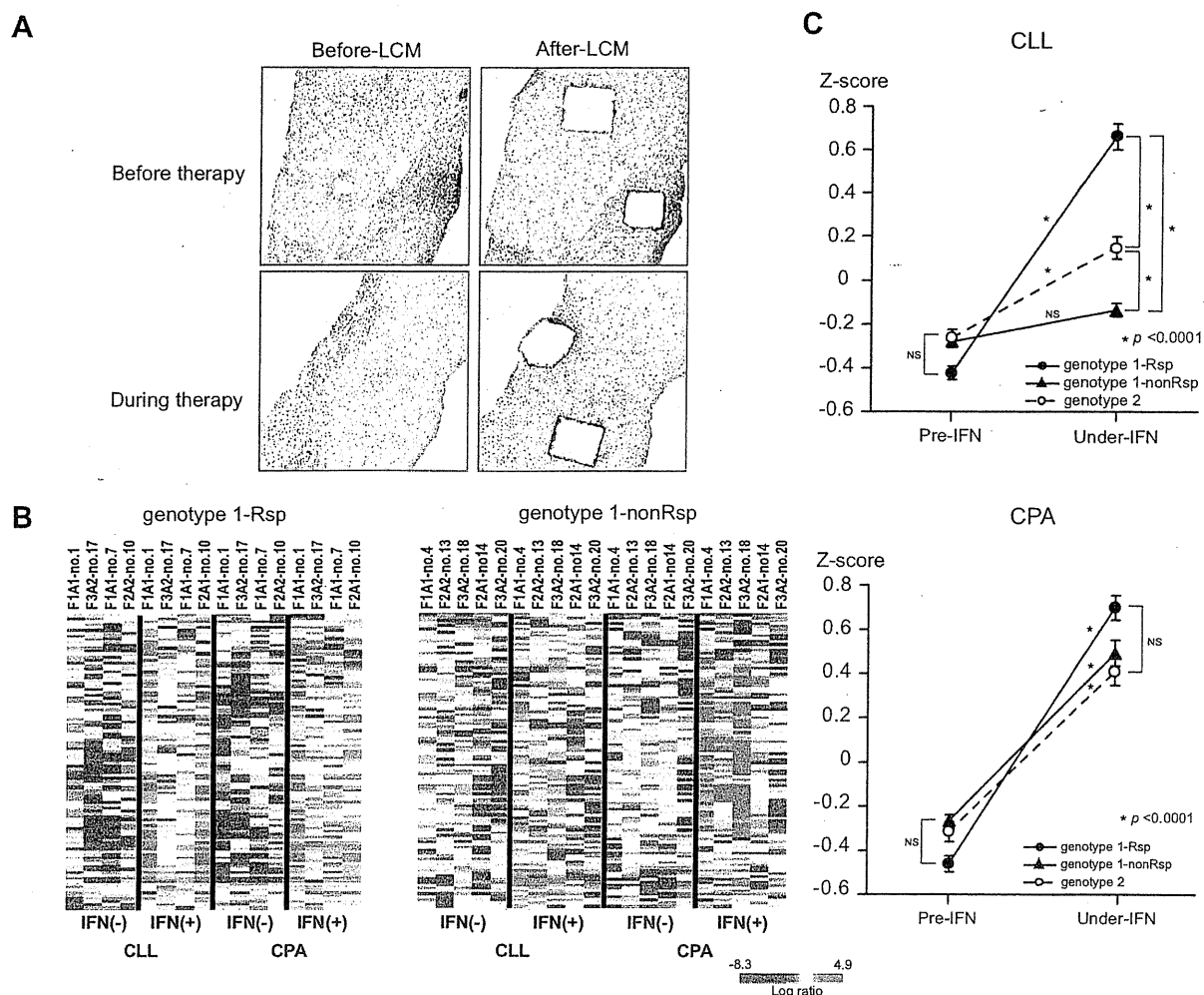


Fig. 2. (A) LCM of liver biopsy samples before and during treatment. (B) Heat map of gene expression of IRS-Gs in CLL and CPA before and during treatment. (C) Serial changes in standardized expression values (Z-score) of IRS-Gs in CLL and CPA from genotype 1-Rsp, genotype 1-nonRsp, and genotype 2 patients before and during treatment.

Research Article

expression pattern of IRSGs (up or down) of the 50 patients before treatment showed that genotype 2 ($p < 0.0001$, Odds = 4×10^7) and down-regulated IRSGs ($p < 0.0001$, Odds = 71.2) are significant variables associated with SVR.

Gene expression analysis in cells in liver lobules (CLL) and portal area (CPA)

To explore these findings in more detail, we examined the gene expression profiles of CLL and CPA that had been isolated separately from whole liver biopsy specimens of 12 patients, using the LCM method before and during treatment (Fig. 2A). The representative differentially expressed genes between CLL and CPA are shown in Supplementary Tables 2-1 and 2-2. In CLL, liver-

specific proteins and enzymes, such as cytochrome P450, apolipoprotein, and transferrin, were all expressed. In CPA, cytokines, chemokines and lymphocyte surface markers, such as chemokine (C-X-C motif) receptor 4, interleukin-7 receptor and CD83 antigen, were all expressed (Supplementary Tables 2-1 and 2-2). The results confirmed our previous speculation that cells from the lobular area were mostly of hepatocyte origin and that those from the portal area were mostly of liver-infiltrating lymphocyte origin [11,19].

IRSG expression in CLL and CPA from genotype 1-Rsp and non-Rsp is shown in Fig. 2B. In genotype 1-Rsp, IRSG expression was significantly induced in both CLL and CPA by the treatment (Fig. 2B and C). On the other hand, in genotype 1-nonRsp and genotype 2, IRSG induction was impaired especially in CLL, while

Table 3. Up- and down-regulated pathways by gene set comparison between Rsp and nonRsp of genotype 1 patients before therapy (BRB-array tool).

Pathway	No. of genes	LS p value	KS p value	Representative Genes	Mean probe intensity of representative genes		
					Rsp (n = 20)	nonRsp (n = 23)	Normal (n = 10)
Up-regulated in slow viral drop							
IFN alpha signaling pathway	21	0.00001	0.00300	STAT1	1608	3117	686
				IRF9	1249	1842	614
				IFNAR2	1892	1988	903
Apoptotic Signaling in Response to DNA Damage	55	0.00001	0.07974	CASP3	675	870	426
				CASP7	1165	1510	1264
				CASP9	355	403	264
				TP53	1465	1797	1028
Toll-like receptor signaling pathway	150	0.00006	0.06659	CXCL10	1922	3979	193
				CXCL11	176	321	51
				MYD88	1022	1372	723
				TIRAP	582	722	447
Wnt signal pathway	55	0.00009	0.16058	EIF2AK2	664	1190	484
				CCND1	2439	3558	1162
				APC	143	186	154
				PIK3R1	1570	1906	682
Antigen processing and presentation	139	0.00117	0.00091	TAP2	169	317	93
				HLA-A	11005	14726	6221
				HLA-B	13144	17942	6823
				HLA-C	1937	3993	783
Jak-STAT signaling pathway	220	0.00180	0.13154	STAT2	716	1065	274
				IL28RA	390	544	204
				IL10RB	398	506	338
Down-regulated in slow viral drop							
Metabolism of xenobiotics by cytochrome P450	98	0.00018	0.00082	CYP3A4	15219	10118	19256
				CYP2E1	29129	24549	30929
				AKR1C4	6126	4898	6671
Fatty acid metabolism	88	0.00480	0.05373	ACADL	826	687	785
				ALDH2	18325	16337	21844
				HSD17B4	9619	8807	10653
				ACAD11	6858	6238	8279
				ACOX1	6988	5862	8279

No. of genes, the number of genes comprising the pathway, Rsp, viral responder, patients with SVR or TR; nonRsp, non-viral responder; patients with NR.

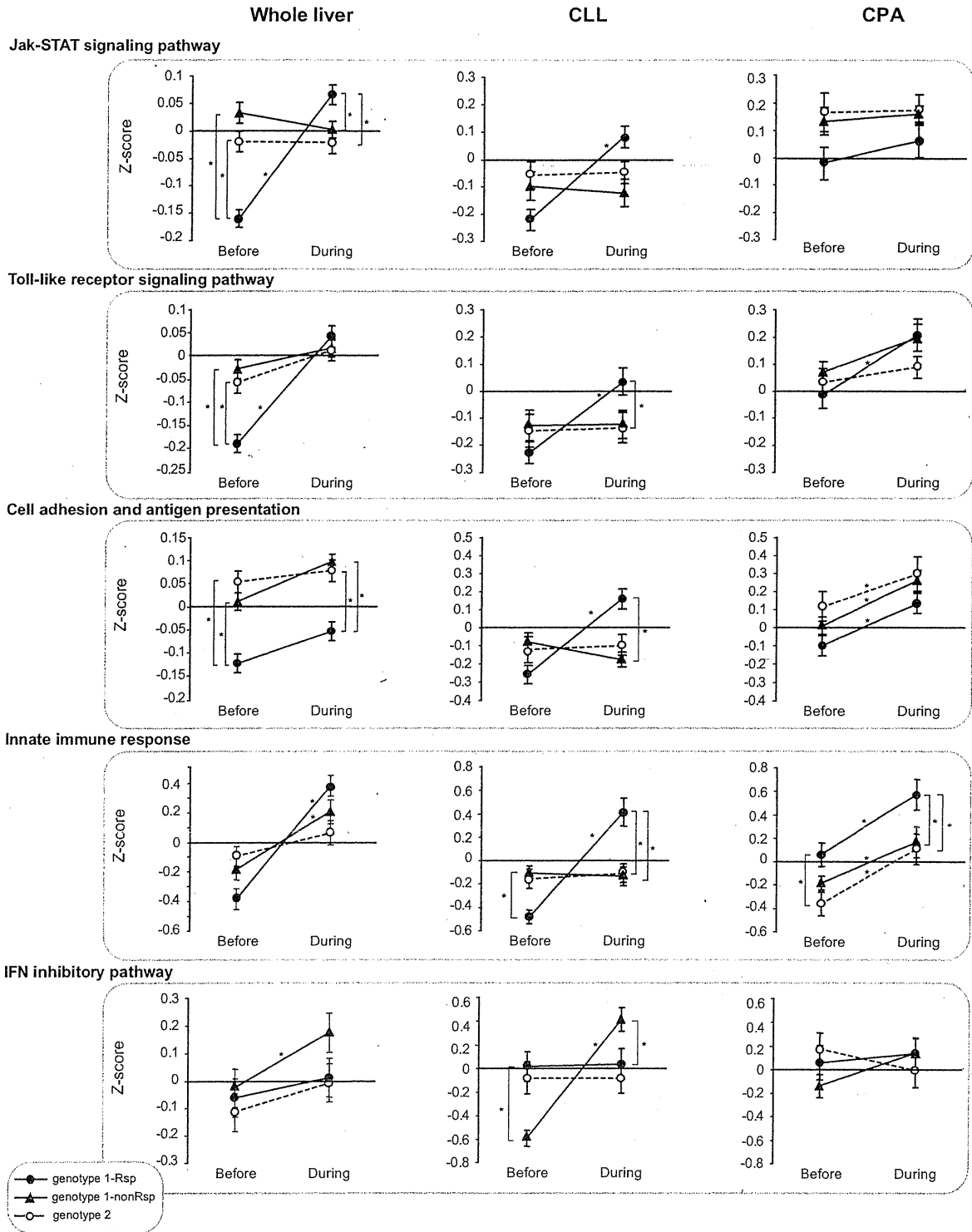


Fig. 3. Serial changes in standardized expression values (Z-score) of differentially expressed pathways from genotype 1-Rsp, genotype 1-nonRsp, and genotype 2 patients before and during treatment in whole liver, CLL, and CPA.

Research Article

it was nearly preserved in CPA from three of five patients (Fig. 2B and C). Thus, IRSG induction in CLL could play an essential role in the eradication of the virus in genotype 1 CH-C patients.

Pathway analysis of gene expression in the livers of genotype 1-Rsp, genotype 1-nonRsp and genotype 2

To explore which signaling pathway contributed to the impaired IRSG induction, pathway comparisons between genotype 1-Rsp ($n = 20$) and genotype 1-nonRsp ($n = 23$) before treatment were performed (Table 3). Gene set comparison was analyzed based on the database of BioCarta and KEGG pathways. The Fisher and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were performed for statistical evaluation ($p < 0.005$) (BRB-ArrayTools). The mean probe intensities of representative genes in individual pathways are shown in Table 3. In genotype 1-nonRsp, the signaling pathways of IFN- α , apoptosis, and many of the immune pathways, such as those involved in antigen presentation, and the toll-like receptor (TRL) and Jak-STAT signaling pathways, were generally expressed at significantly higher levels before treatment than genotype 1-Rsp (Table 3 and Fig. 3). During treatment, the immune pathways were significantly up-regulated in genotype 1-Rsp, while they were not up-regulated in genotype 1-nonRsp and genotype

2 (Fig. 3, whole liver). When the CLL and CPA were analyzed separately, significant induction of these pathways was observed in CLL of genotype 1-Rsp but not of genotype 1-nonRsp and genotype 2 (Fig. 3, CLL). However, similar induction patterns were observed in CPA among genotype 1-Rsp, genotype 1-nonRsp, and genotype 2 patients (Fig. 3, CPA). Thus, these immune pathways should be activated in CLL for the elimination of virus.

We then evaluated the extent of the innate immune response to treatment. The expression of 10 innate immune response genes was strongly induced in CLL from patients of genotype 1-Rsp but not from genotype 1-nonRsp and genotype 2 patients, although these genes were similarly induced in CPA among these patients (Supplementary Table 3 and Fig. 3).

To examine which signaling pathways were differentially induced during treatment, we utilized MetaCore™. MetaCore™ is more feasible for pathway analysis using a relatively low number of cases, and was therefore selected to analyze the LCM samples in this study. The network processes involving genes for which the differential expression was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in genotype 1 patients are shown in Fig. 4. Before treatment, many of the immune mediated pathways, such as IFN- α , cell adhesion, IFN- γ , and TCR, were up-regulated in whole liver specimens from genotype 1-nonRsp compared with Rsp. Similar

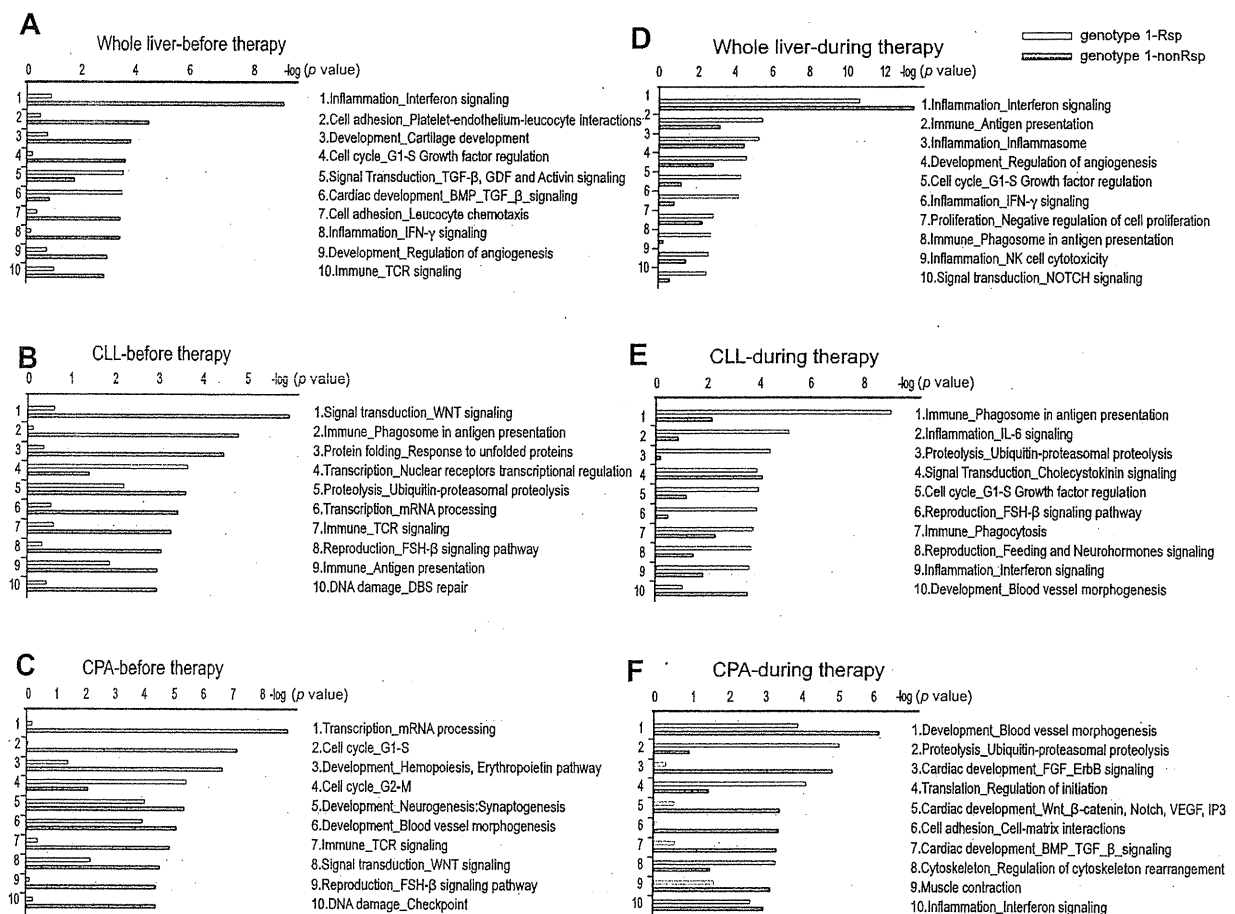


Fig. 4. Functional ontology enrichment analysis of differentially expressed genes ($p < 0.05$) using MetaCore™. GeneGo network process of differentially expressed genes between genotype 1-Rsp (white bar) and genotype 1-nonRsp (blue bar) are listed in order of decreasing statistical significance.

immune-mediated pathways were up-regulated in CLL of genotype 1-nonRsp. In CPA, many of the pathways associated with cell proliferation and DNA damage were up-regulated, reflecting the active inflammatory process in the lymphocytes of genotype 1-nonRsp (Fig. 4A–C). During treatment, many of the immune reactive pathways, such as IFN, NK cell, and antigen presenting, were induced in the whole liver and CLL specimens from genotype 1-Rsp but not in nonRsp (Fig. 4D and E). In contrast, the expression of IFN-inhibitory genes was significantly induced in CLL from nonRsp during treatment (Table 3 and Fig. 4). Interestingly, in CPA, the IFN pathway was induced in genotype 1-Rsp and nonRsp to the same degree; however, signaling pathways related to angiogenesis and fibrogenesis, such as FGF, Wnt, TGF-beta, Nocth, and VEGF signaling, were induced more in CPA from genotype 1-nonRsp than from Rsp (Figs. 3 and 4F). Thus, differential expression of signaling pathways could be observed in CLL and CPA obtained from genotype 1-Rsp and nonRsp.

Discussion

IFN and Rib combination therapy has become a commonly used modality for treating patients with CH-C, although the precise mechanism of treatment resistance is unclear. With the development of methods to quantitatively assess viral kinetics during treatment, studies were able to demonstrate that patients who cleared HCV in the early period showed favorable outcomes, whereas patients who needed a longer time to clear HCV experienced poor outcomes [4,7,17]. Thus, early clearance of virus after initiation of treatment is one of the important determinants for the complete eradication of HCV.

In this study, we analyzed gene expression from liver biopsy samples obtained before and at 1 week after initiation of treatment to investigate the precise mechanisms involved in treatment and treatment resistance. Although global gene expression profiles in the liver and PBMC during IFN treatment in a chimpanzee have been reported [12,13], the relationship between the expression profiles and clinical outcome could not be evaluated.

During the preparation of this study, two reports using a similar approach have been published [6,20]. For example, Feld et al. [6] analyzed gene expression in the livers of CH-C patients on treatment. The authors, however, compared gene expression among different patients at initiation ($n = 19$; 5 rapid responders, 10 slow responders, 4 naive) and during treatment ($n = 11$; 6 rapid responders, 5 slow responders). Because patients were not serially biopsied before and during the treatment, true treatment-related gene induction could not be evaluated. Moreover, half of the on-treatment group was administered Rib alone for three days prior to liver biopsy. In the other report, Sarasin-Filipowicz et al. [20] extensively analyzed serial liver biopsy specimens under the treatment; however, the number of the patients enrolled in their study was relatively low and heterogeneous with respect to the infected genotypes. Our study has extended their findings and provides further insights into the mechanism of IFN resistance by analyzing gene expression in CLL and CPA separately for the first time. The analysis of genotype 2 HCV also enabled us to understand the importance of the differing sensitivities to IFN between strains.

By comparing gene expression in serial liver biopsy specimens obtained at initiation and during treatment, IFN- and Rib-stimulated genes (IRSGs) in the livers of patients with CH-C could be identified (Supplementary Table 1). Our study clearly demonstrated that IRSG induction correlated with the elimination of HCV in patients with genotype 1 in accordance with previous results [6,20]. The patients who did not show a response to treatment had poor induction of IRSGs (Fig. 1A). In contrast, IRSG expression before treatment showed an opposite pattern of expression. IRSGs were induced in genotype 1-nonRsp rather than in genotype 1-Rsp. This finding was first described by Chen et al. [3] and confirmed by others [1,6,20]. Asselah et al. [1] extensively analyzed 58 curated ISGs published previously by RTD-PCR and found that three genes (IFI27, CXCL9 and IFI-6–16) were predictive of treatment outcome. However, only 12 of their 58 curated genes were also included in the 100 most up-regulated genes we observed during treatment (Supplementary Table 1). Therefore, more valuable genes for the prediction of treatment outcome might exist and our gene list could be useful for further selection of predictors of treatment outcome.

We showed that different levels of IRSG induction before treatment was associated with up-regulation of different signaling pathways, such as apoptosis and inflammatory pathways, in genotype 1-nonRsp, although histological assessment of activities and stages could not differentiate the two groups of patients. During treatment, these pathways, including the innate immune response for IFN production, were significantly induced in genotype 1-Rsp but not in genotype 1-nonRsp. The results suggest that previous up-regulation of IRSGs might be linked to impaired induction of IRSGs and contribute to poor treatment response in patients with genotype 1. Interestingly, an impaired IRSG induction was mainly noticeable in CLL, but not in CPA, and the results were confirmed by RTD-PCR (data not shown). These results suggest that IRSG induction in HCV-infected hepatocytes could play an essential role in the eradication of the genotype 1 virus in CH-C patients.

However, these scenarios did not apply in patients with genotype 2 HCV in this study. Despite the presence of active inflammation before treatment and unsatisfactory IRSG induction during treatment, these patients showed rapid responses to treatment and favorable treatment outcomes. It could be speculated that genotype 2 HCV is far more sensitive to IFN than genotype 1 HCV, and small IRSG induction might be enough to eradicate the virus. Further studies are needed to confirm these results.

We precisely analyzed the expression profiles in CLL and CPA which were obtained using the LCM method. Although IRSGs and other immune regulatory genes were similarly induced in the CPA of genotype 1-Rsp and nonRsp, more of the angiogenic- and fibrogenic-related genes were induced in CPA of genotype 1-nonRsp (Fig. 4C and F). Therefore, growth factors released from CPA might be involved in poor IRSG induction in CLL of genotype 1-nonRsp.

In summary, by comparing the hepatic gene expression in CH-C patients with different treatment outcomes, we identified a gene expression signature characteristic of IFN resistance. Our study is very important for two reasons: first, it will help in the development of new therapeutic strategies, and second, we have identified many of the genes found to be up-regulated between genotype 1-Rsp and nonRsp, which encode molecules secreted

Research Article

in serum (cytokines). Therefore, the study represents a logical functional approach for the development of serum markers as predictors of response to treatment [2]. The precise mechanisms underlying these findings should be clarified further in future studies.

Conflict of interest

The authors who have taken part in this study do not have a relationship with the manufactureres of the drugs involved either in the past or present and did not receive funding from the manufactureres to carry out their research. The authors received support from the Japanese Society of Gastroenterology and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jhep.2010.04.036.

References

- [1] Asselah T, Bieche I, Narguet S, Sabbagh A, Laurendeau I, Ripault MP, et al. Liver gene expression signature to predict response to pegylated interferon plus ribavirin combination therapy in patients with chronic hepatitis C. *Gut* 2008;57:516–524.
- [2] Asselah T, Bieche I, Sabbagh A, Bedossa P, Moreau R, Valla D, et al. Gene expression and hepatitis C virus infection. *Gut* 2009;58:846–858.
- [3] Chen L, Borozan I, Feld J, Sun J, Tannis LL, Coltescu C, et al. Hepatic gene expression discriminates responders and nonresponders in treatment of chronic hepatitis C viral infection. *Gastroenterology* 2005;128:1437–1444.
- [4] Davis GL, Wong JB, McHutchison JG, Manns MP, Harvey J, Albrecht J. Early virologic response to treatment with peginterferon alfa-2b plus ribavirin in patients with chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatology* 2003;38:645–652.
- [5] Desmet VJ, Gerber M, Hoofnagle JH, Manns M, Scheuer PJ. Classification of chronic hepatitis: diagnosis, grading and staging. *Hepatology* 1994;19:1513–1520.
- [6] Feld JJ, Nanda S, Huang Y, Chen W, Cam M, Pusek SN, et al. Hepatic gene expression during treatment with peginterferon and ribavirin: identifying molecular pathways for treatment response. *Hepatology* 2007;46:1548–1563.
- [7] Ferenci P, Fried MW, Shiffman ML, Smith C, Marinos G, Goncalves Jr FL, et al. Predicting sustained virological responses in chronic hepatitis C patients treated with peginterferon alfa-2a (40 kDa)/ribavirin. *J Hepatol* 2005;43:425–433.
- [8] Fried MW, Shiffman ML, Reddy KR, Smith C, Marinos G, Goncalves Jr FL, et al. Peginterferon alfa-2a plus ribavirin for chronic hepatitis C virus infection. *N Engl J Med* 2002;347:975–982.
- [9] Germer JJ, Harmsen WS, Mandrekar JN, Mitchell PS, Yao JD. Evaluation of the COBAS TaqMan HCV test with automated sample processing using the MagNA pure LC instrument. *J Clin Microbiol* 2005;43:293–298.
- [10] He XS, Ji X, Hale MB, Cheung R, Ahmed A, Guo Y, et al. Global transcriptional response to interferon is a determinant of HCV treatment outcome and is modified by race. *Hepatology* 2006;44:352–359.
- [11] Honda M, Yamashita T, Ueda T, Takatori H, Nishino R, Kaneko S. Different signaling pathways in the livers of patients with chronic hepatitis B or chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatology* 2006;44:1122–1138.
- [12] Huang Y, Feld JJ, Sapp RK, Nanda S, Lin JH, Blatt LM, et al. Defective hepatic response to interferon and activation of suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 in chronic hepatitis C. *Gastroenterology* 2007;132:733–744.
- [13] Lanford RE, Guerra B, Bigger CB, Lee H, Chavez D, Brasky KM. Lack of response to exogenous interferon-alpha in the liver of chimpanzees chronically infected with hepatitis C virus. *Hepatology* 2007;46:999–1008.
- [14] Layden TJ, Layden JE, Reddy KR, Levy-Drummer RS, Poulakos J, Neumann AU. Induction therapy with consensus interferon (CIFN) does not improve sustained virologic response in chronic hepatitis C. *J Viral Hepat* 2002;9:334–339.
- [15] Neumann AU, Lam NP, Dahari H, Gretch DR, Wiley TE, Layden TJ, et al. Hepatitis C viral dynamics in vivo and the antiviral efficacy of interferon-alpha therapy. *Science* 1998;282(5386):103–107.
- [16] Okamoto H, Tokita H, Sakamoto M, Horikita M, Kojima M, Iizuka H, et al. Characterization of the genomic sequence of type V (or 3a) hepatitis C virus isolates and PCR primers for specific detection. *J Gen Virol* 1993;74:2385–2390.
- [17] Payan C, Pivert A, Morand P, Fafi-Kremer S, Carrat F, Pol S, et al. Rapid and early virological response to chronic hepatitis C treatment with IFN alpha2b or PEG-IFN alpha2b plus ribavirin in HIV/HCV co-infected patients. *Gut* 2007;56:1111–1116.
- [18] Rosen HR, Ribeiro RR, Weinberger L, Wolf S, Chung M, Gretch DR, et al. Early hepatitis C viral kinetics correlate with long-term outcome in patients receiving high dose induction followed by combination interferon and ribavirin therapy. *J Hepatol* 2002;37:124–130.
- [19] Sakai Y, Honda M, Fujinaga H, Tatsumi I, Mizukoshi E, Nakamoto Y, et al. Common transcriptional signature of tumor-infiltrating mononuclear inflammatory cells and peripheral blood mononuclear cells in hepatocellular carcinoma patients. *Cancer Res* 2008;68:10267–10279.
- [20] Sarasin-Filipowicz M, Oakeley EJ, Duong FH, Christen V, Terracciano L, Filipowicz W, et al. Interferon signaling and treatment outcome in chronic hepatitis C. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2008;105:7034–7039.
- [21] Younossi ZM, Baranova A, Afendy A, Collantes R, Stepanova M, Manyam G, et al. Early gene expression profiles of patients with chronic hepatitis C treated with pegylated interferon-alfa and ribavirin. *Hepatology* 2009;49:763–774.

La Protein Required for Internal Ribosome Entry Site-Directed Translation Is a Potential Therapeutic Target for Hepatitis C Virus Replication

Takayoshi Shirasaki,^{1,2} Masao Honda,^{1,2} Hideki Mizuno,¹ Tetsuro Shimakami,¹ Hikari Okada,¹ Yoshio Sakai,¹ Seishi Murakami,³ Takaji Wakita,⁴ and Shuichi Kaneko¹

¹Department of Gastroenterology, ²Department of Advanced Medical Technology, Division of Health Medicine, Graduate School of Medicine, ³Division of Molecular Cell Signaling, Cancer Research Institute, Kanazawa University, Kanazawa, and ⁴Department of Virology II, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan

Background. Translation of the hepatitis C virus (HCV) is mediated by an internal ribosome entry site (IRES). Here, we analyzed the functional relevance of La protein for replication of HCV using an infectious HCV clone, JFH-1.

Methods. A single-nucleotide mutation from A to U was introduced at the 338th nucleotide in the stem-loop domain IV structure of HCV IRES, which stabilized stem-loop IV and abolished translation and replication of JFH-1 almost completely.

Results. During JFH-1 replication, translation initiation factors required for HCV IRES activity, including La protein, polypyrimidine tract binding protein (PTB), PSMA7, and PCBP2, were significantly induced in Huh-7.5 cells. Interestingly, JFH-1 infection increased telomerase activity and induced the expression of human telomerase RNA (hTR) in Huh-7.5 cells. In 37 tissue specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis C, La protein significantly correlated with the representative essential telomerase components hTR, p23, and HSP90 ($P < .001$). Recombinant adenovirus that expressed short-hairpin RNA against La protein successfully suppressed the levels of La protein and core protein of JFH-1 to 30% of that in the control cells.

Conclusions. HCV infection might be strongly related to telomerase activity in the liver through La protein induction. Inhibition of La protein substantially repressed JFH-1 replication; therefore, La protein is a potential therapeutic target for HCV.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a positive-strand, enveloped RNA virus that belongs to the genus *Hepacivirus* in the family *Flaviviridae*. A human liver infected with HCV develops chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, and in some instances, hepatocellular carcinoma [1]. Although a combination of ribavirin and interferon has become a routine means of treating infected patients, the results are often unsatisfactory, especially in patients with a high

viral load [2]. Identification of host factors that regulate HCV replication in infected patients could be helpful in the development of a novel antiviral treatment strategy. It has been reported that various host factors are associated with HCV infection; however, only a few proteins have been functionally shown with an infectious HCV clone to regulate HCV replication [3].

The translation of HCV is initiated by a highly structured RNA segment, the internal ribosome entry site (IRES), which occupies most of the 5' nontranslated RNA [4]. Many canonical and noncanonical translation initiation factors, such as La protein [5], polypyrimidine tract binding protein (PTB) [6], and eukaryotic initiation factor 3 (eIF3), interact with HCV IRES and might regulate HCV translation. Previously, we reported that HCV IRES activity is highly dependent on these initiation factors, and it correlated with the expression of La protein [7, 8]. However, the functional relevance of these translation initiation factors on HCV

Received 17 September 2009; accepted 6 January 2010; electronically published 24 May 2010.

Potential conflicts of interest: none reported.

Financial support: This study is partially supported by the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (project 17591036).

Reprints or correspondence: Dr Masao Honda, Department of Gastroenterology, Graduate School of Medicine, Kanazawa University, Takara-Machi 13-1, Kanazawa 920-8641, Japan (mhonda@m-kanazawa.jp).

The Journal of Infectious Diseases 2010;202(1):75–85

© 2010 by the Infectious Diseases Society of America. All rights reserved.

0022-1899/2010/20201-0009\$15.00

DOI: 10.1093/infdis/jiq101

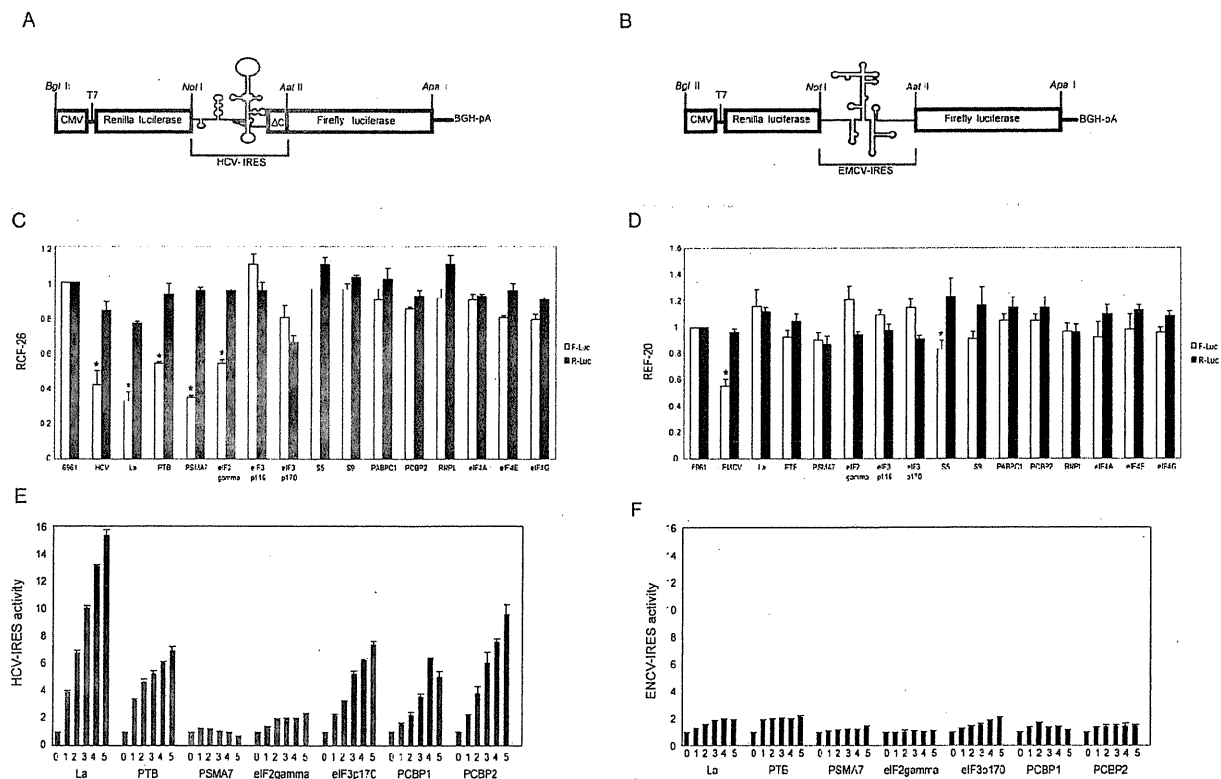


Figure 1. Organization of the transcriptional unit of plasmids pRL-HL (A) and pRL-EL (B). C and D, Suppression of 14 canonical and noncanonical initiation factors by specific antisense oligonucleotides. Changes in *Renilla* luciferase (RL) and firefly luciferase (FL) (hepatitis C virus–internal ribosome entry site [HCV-IRES]–directed translation) activities in RCF-26 (C). Changes in RL and FL (encephalomyocarditis virus [EMCV]–IRES–directed translation) activities in REF-20 (D). * $P < .05$. E and F, In vitro translation of pRL-HL and pRL-EL in rabbit reticulocyte lysate. The plasmids pRL-HL or pRL-EL (0.05 μ g) and increasing amounts of expression vectors (0–0.125 μ g) of La protein, polypyrimidine tract binding protein (PTB), eIF3p 170, eIF2 γ , PSMA7, PCBP1, and PCBP2 were co-translated in rabbit reticulocyte lysate. The fold increases in relative HCV IRES activity (E) and EMCV-IRES activity (F) are shown. * $P < .05$. Lane 0, 0 μ g; lane 1, 0.025 μ g; lane 2, 0.05 μ g; lane 3, 0.075 μ g; lane 4, 0.1 μ g; lane 5, 0.125 μ g. * $P < .05$.

replication had not been fully evaluated. In this study, we found that the expression of La protein is induced by HCV infection, and this induced La protein–activated telomerase activity in a human hepatoma cell line. The results indicate La protein is a potential therapeutic target for HCV infection.

EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES

Expression vector plasmids. The FLAG tag fusion La protein expression vector (pCMV-La-FLAG) was created by polymerase chain reaction (PCR), using the La protein expression vector (pCMV-La) as the template [8]. The forward primer 5′-AAT GAA ATC AGA AGA AA-3′ contains an *Xba* I site, and the reverse primer 5′-TGA TCT AGA TTA CTT ATC GTC GTC ATC CTT GTA ATC CTG GTC TCC AGC ACC ATT TTC TGT TTT CTG TTG -3′ contains *Xba* I and FLAG sites.

Cell lines. Human hepatocellular carcinoma 7 (Huh-7) cells and Huh-7.5 cells (provided by Professor C. M. Rice, Rockefeller University) were maintained in Dulbecco modified

Eagle medium (DMEM; Gibco BRL), which contained 10% fetal bovine serum and 1% penicillin/streptomycin. The RCF-26 was a stably transformed cell line from Huh-7 cells that constitutively expressed dicistronic RNA transcripts containing sequences encoding 2 reporter proteins—*Renilla* luciferase and firefly luciferase—separated by a functional HCV IRES of genotype 1b (Figure 1A) [7]. The REF-20 was a stably transformed cell line from Huh-7 cells that constitutively expressed dicistronic RNA transcripts in which HCV IRES was replaced with encephalomyocarditis virus (EMCV) IRES (Figure 1B).

Antisense oligodeoxynucleotide. The antisense phosphorothioate oligodeoxynucleotides (oligos) designed for HCV IRES, La protein, PTB, eIF3, eIF2 γ , S9, poly(A)-binding protein cytoplasmic 1 (PABPC1), PCBP2, RNPL, and control randomized oligo 6961 were described elsewhere [8]. Antisense oligos for PSMA7, S5, eIF4A, eIF4E, eIF4G, and EMCV IRES were synthesized. The nucleotide sequences of the antisense oligos were 5′-CTC ATG CCG GCG GGC GGC CG-3′ for PSMA7,

5'-GTC ATC CTG AGA ACA CAG CC-3' for S5, 5'-GAC ATG ATC CTT AGA AAC TA-3' for eIF4A, 5'-GCC ATC TTA GAT CGA TCT GA-3' for eIF4E, 5'-GAC ATG ATC TCC TCT GTG AT-3' for eIF4G, and 5'-TCC ATA TTA TCA TCG TGT TT-3' for EMCV IRES. The antisense oligos (1.0 $\mu\text{mol/L}$) were transfected into RCF-26 (Figure 1C) or REF-20 (Figure 1D). After 24 h of transfection, *Renilla* luciferase (cap-dependent translation) and firefly luciferase (HCV or EMCV-directed translation) activities were measured with the Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System (Promega).

In vitro translation of pRL-HL and pRL-EL in rabbit reticulocyte lysate. In vitro translation of pRL-HL and pRL-EL was carried out in transcription and translation-coupled rabbit reticulocyte lysate systems (Promega). In 25 μL of the transcription and translation reaction mixture, 0.05 μg of pRL-HL or pRL-EL was cotranslated with an increasing amount of plasmid DNA (up to 0.125 μg) of La, PTB, PSMA7, eIF2- γ , eIF3p170, PCBP1, and PCBP2, which were cloned using the T7 promoter. A 3- μL aliquot was then used to measure *Renilla* luciferase and firefly luciferase activities using the Dual-Luciferase Reporter Assay System (Promega).

Site-directed mutagenesis. The plasmid pJFH-1 was used as the template for introduction of the site-directed mutation at nucleotide 338 in the 5' nontranslated RNA. The site-directed mutagenesis reaction was performed using the Pfu Turbo DNA polymerase PCR system (Stratagene), according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Transfection of JFH-1 and JFH-1 338U into Huh-7.5 cells. Ten micrograms of synthetic RNA transcribed from pJFH-1 or pJFH-1 338U was used for electroporation. Cells were then pulsed at 260 V and 950 μF using the Gene Pulser II apparatus (Bio-Rad Laboratories).

Infection of Huh-7.5 cells with JFH-1. Seventy-two hours after transfection, the culture medium was collected, cleared by low-speed centrifugation at 2000 revolutions per minute at 760g for 10 min, and passed through a Millipore filter (pore size, 0.45 μm ; Millipore Corporation). Part of the filtered culture medium was diluted 50-fold or 10-fold with DMEM containing 10% fetal bovine serum and 1% penicillin-streptomycin. Diluted culture medium (1 mL) was used for injection of cells into a well of a 6-well plate or a well containing cover slips and incubated for 4 h. At 3 days after infection, inoculated cells grown on cover slips were fixed and stained using anti-core antibody, as described below. The amounts of HCV RNA, La-RNA, and human telomerase RNA (hTR)-RNA in inoculated cells were determined by quantitative real-time detection (RTD)-PCR.

Western blot analysis and immunofluorescence staining. The expression levels of La protein and PTB in cells were evaluated by Western blotting using mouse anti-La antibody (SW5) and rabbit anti-PTB antibody, as described elsewhere [9]. The

expression of HCV core protein, PSMA7, eIF2 γ , PCBP2, and FLAG-tagged La protein was evaluated with mouse anti-core antibody (Affinity BioReagents), mouse anti-PSMA7 antibody (Antibodies Direct), rabbit anti-eIF2 γ antibody (Abcam), mouse anti-huRNP E2 (23-G) antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology), and mouse anti-FLAG antibody (Sigma), respectively. For immunofluorescence staining, anti-core monoclonal antibodies and Alexa Fluor 488 goat anti-mouse immunoglobulin G antibody (Invitrogen) were used.

Quantitative RTD-PCR. The primer pairs and probes for La protein, PTB, eIF3 p170, GAPDH, and HCV were obtained as described elsewhere [8]. The primer pairs and probes for PSMA7, eIF2 γ , PCBP2, hTR, p23, Hps90, and β -actin were obtained from the TaqMan assay reagents library. One microgram of isolated RNA was reverse-transcribed to complementary DNA using SuperScript II RT (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions, and the resulting complementary DNA was amplified with appropriate TaqMan assay reagents [10].

Telomerase activity assay. The plasmids pCMV-La-FLAG and pCR3.1 were transfected into Huh-7 cells using Fugene 6 transfection reagent (Roche Applied Science). Forty-eight hours after transfection, the amounts of hTR-RNA in the transfected cells were determined by RTD-PCR. The expression of the FLAG-tag fusion La protein was evaluated by Western blot analysis. Telomerase activity was measured with a PCR-based telomerase repeat amplification protocol (TRAP) assay, performed with the TRAPEZE kit (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Each reaction product was amplified in the presence of a 36-base pair internal telomerase assay standard. The PCR products were fractionated by electrophoresis on a 10% polyacrylamide gel and then visualized by staining with SYBR Green (Molecular Probes).

Construction of recombinant adenovirus expressing short-hairpin RNA for La protein. The short-hairpin RNA expression plasmid (pSh-La), which expresses short-hairpin RNA for La protein (seq: 5'-CCG GCC AAG GCA GAA CTC ATG GAA ACT CGA GTT TCC ATG AGT TCT GCC TTG GTT TG-3'), was purchased from Sigma. The pSh-La was digested with the enzymes *Hind* III and *Bam*HI, and the excised fragment, including the short-hairpin RNA, was transferred to the adenoviral expression plasmid. The adenoviral expression plasmid and bovine growth hormone plasmid were cotransfected into 293A cells using the CellPfect Transfection kit (GE Healthcare) to produce crude adenoviral stocks. These stocks were purified using the Adeno-X Virus Purification kit (Clontech Laboratories) and stored at -80°C . The titers of the adenoviral stocks were adjusted to 4.0×10^9 PFU/mL.

Twelve hours after JFH-1 RNA transfection, the cells were washed 3 times with phosphate-buffered saline, and then Ad-shLa or Ad-Null was added at a multiplicity of infection of 10.

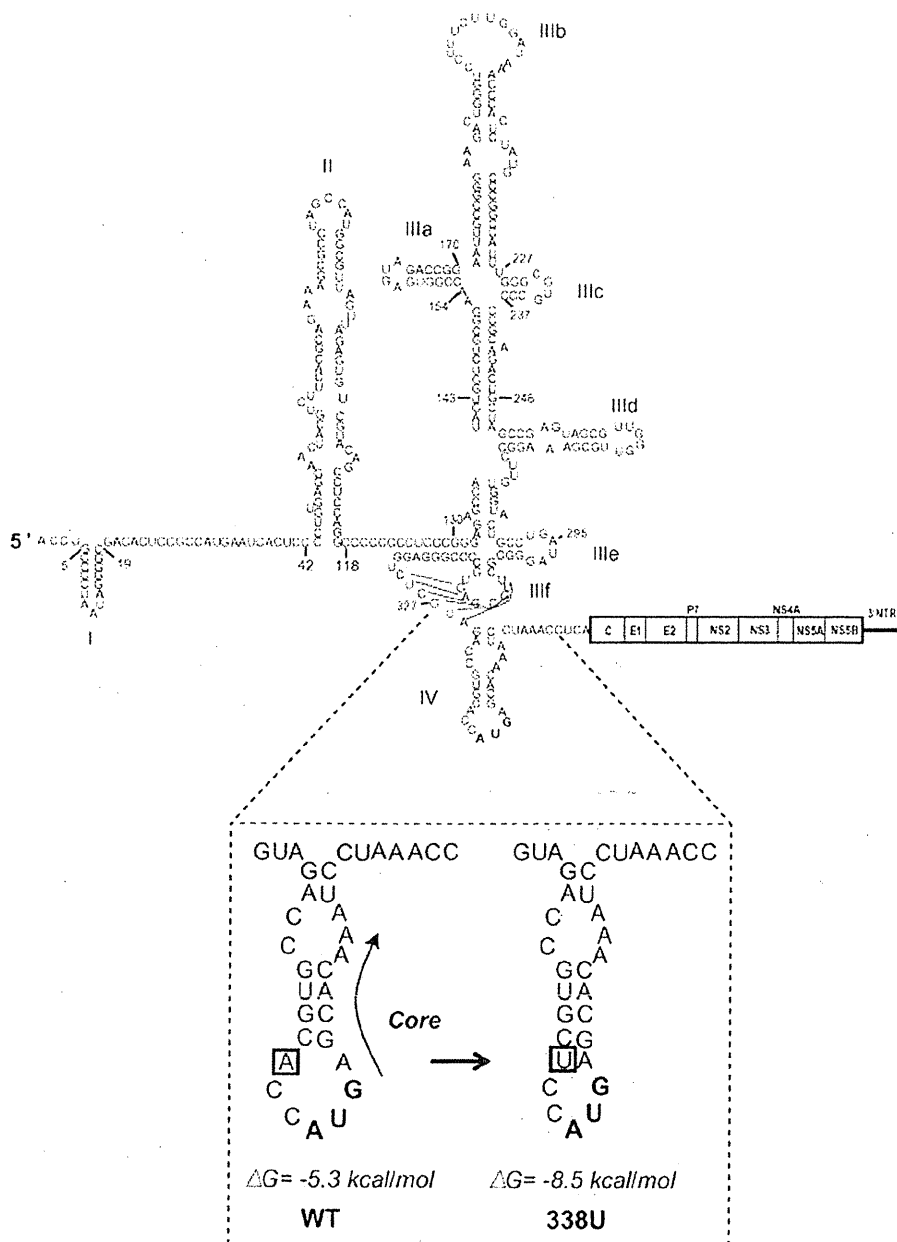


Figure 2. Organization of the full-length JFH-1 and the mutation at nucleotide 338 of stem loop IV.

One hour after injection, the cells were washed 3 times with phosphate-buffered saline, and complete culture medium was added.

Statistical analysis. Results were expressed as mean values \pm standard deviation. Significance was tested by 1-way analysis of variance with Bonferroni methods, and differences were considered statistically significant at $P < .05$.

RESULTS

Dependence of HCV IRES activity on translation initiation factors. To confirm that HCV IRES activity was highly dependent on translation initiation factors, antisense oligonucleotides designed for 14 translation initiation factors were transfected into RCF-26 and REF-20 cells, and HCV or EMCV IRES

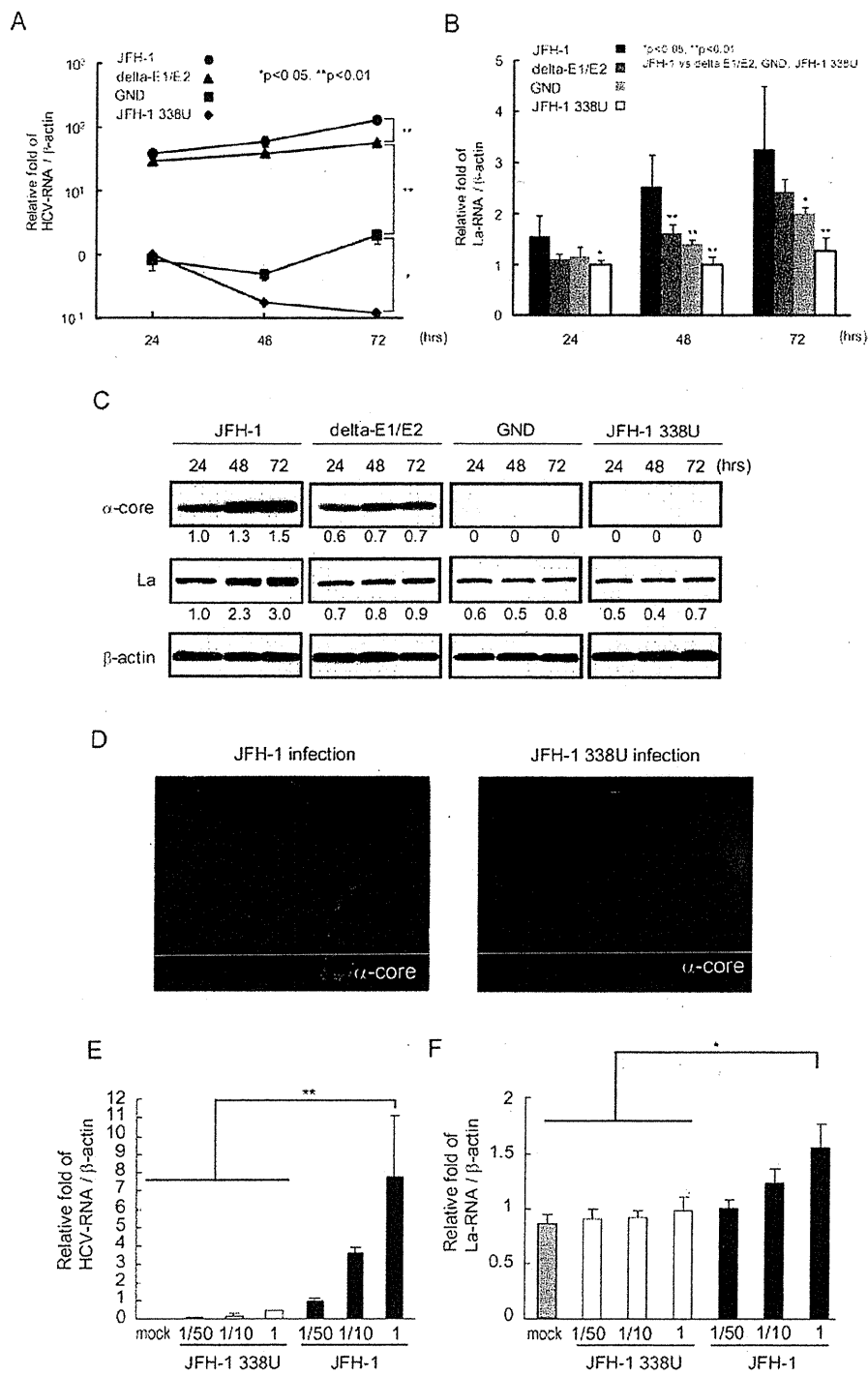
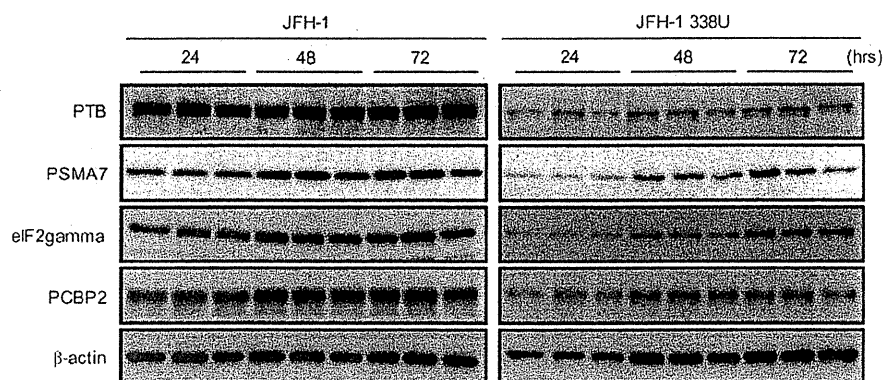


Figure 3. A, Hepatitis C virus (HCV) RNA replication determined by real-time detection-polymerase chain reaction (RTD-PCR) in JFH-1, JFH-1/delta E1-E2, JFH-1/GND, and JFH-1 338U transfected cells. * $P < .05$. ** $P < .01$. B, La RNA expression determined by RTD-PCR in JFH-1, JFH-1/delta E1-E2, JFH-1/GND, and JFH-1 338U transfected cells. * $P < .05$. ** $P < .01$. C, Western blots for detection of HCV core protein and La protein in JFH-1, JFH-1/delta E1-E2, JFH-1/GND and JFH-1 338U transfected cells. D, Immunofluorescence staining of core protein in Huh-7.5 cells infected with JFH-1 or JFH-1 338U. E and F, HCV RNA and La RNA determined by RTD-PCR in Huh-7.5 cells infected with serial dilution of JFH-1 or JFH-1 338U. * $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$.

A



B

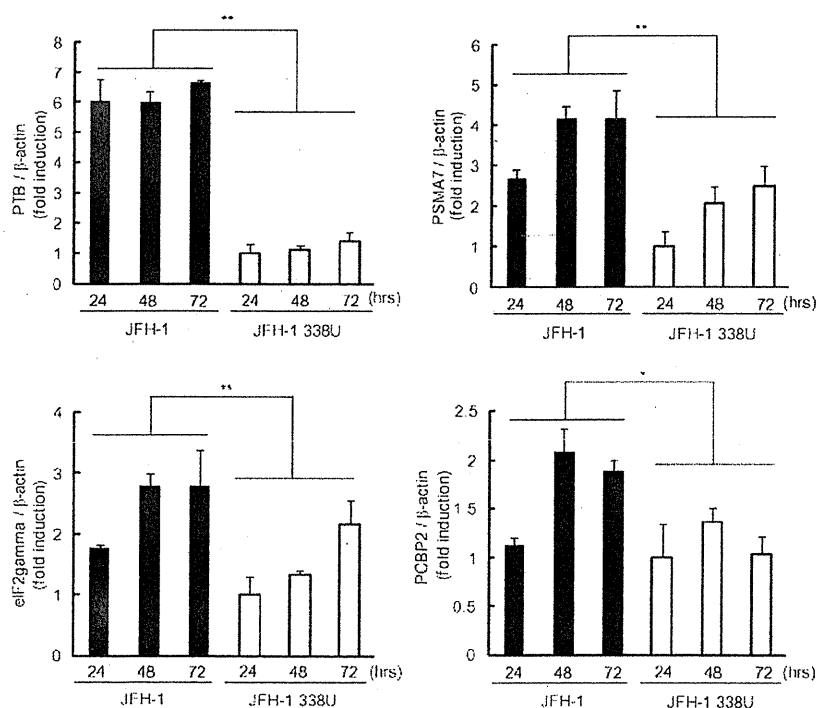


Figure 4. A, Protein expression of PTB, PSMA7, eIF2 γ , and PCBP2 determined with Western blotting in Huh-7.5 cells after transfection with JFH-1 RNA and JFH-1 338U RNA. B, Quantitative densitometric analysis of protein expression. * $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$.

activity was evaluated. The activities of *Renilla* luciferase and firefly luciferase expressed in these cells reflect cap-dependent and HCV or EMCV IRES directed translation, respectively (Figure 1B and 1C). The suppression of La protein, PTB, PSMA7, and eIF2 γ by the antisense oligonucleotides in RCF-26 significantly repressed firefly luciferase activities, whereas *Renilla* luciferase activities were mostly maintained (Figure 1C). In con-

trast, these translation initiation factors did not affect EMCV IRES activity in REF-20 cells (Figure 1D).

These findings were also evaluated in rabbit reticulocyte lysates (RRL). With increasing amounts of expression vectors or La protein, PTB and eIF3 p170, the HCV IRES activity increased significantly (7-fold to 16-fold) (Figure 1E). Although the depletion of PCBP2 did not affect HCV IRES activity in the RCF-

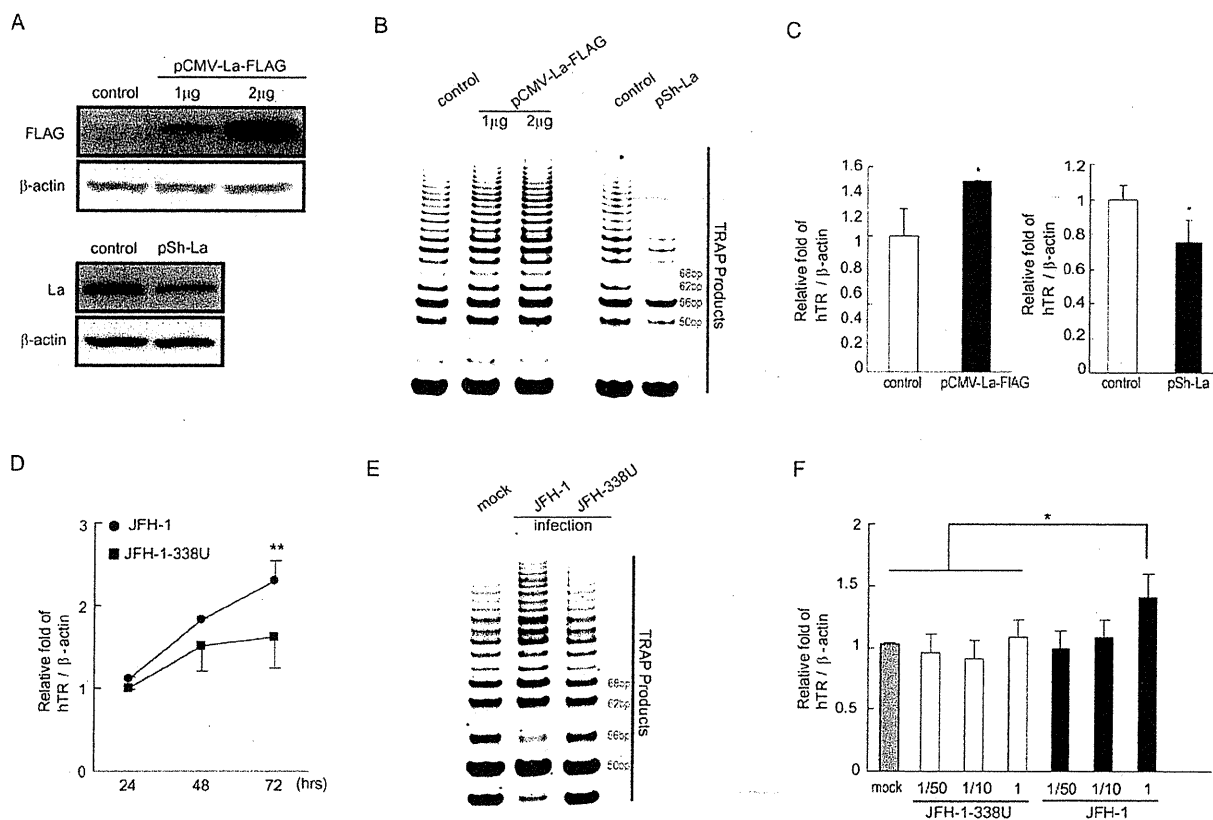


Figure 5. A, Western blot analysis of pCMV-La-FLAG or pSh-La transfected Huh-7 cells. B, The telomerase repeat amplification protocol (TRAP) assay in pCMV-La-FLAG or pSh-La transfected Huh-7 cells. C, Human telomerase RNA (hTR) expression in pCMV-La-FLAG or pSh-La transfected Huh-7 cells by real-time detection–polymerase chain reaction (RTD-PCR). * $P < .05$. D, The hTR expression in JFH-1 or JFH-1 338U RNA-transfected Huh-7.5 cells by RTD-PCR. ** $P < .01$. E, The TRAP assay in JFH-1 or JFH-1 338U infected Huh-7 cells. F, Effect of JFH-1 or JFH-338U infection on hTR expression in Huh-7.5 by RTD-PCR. * $P < .05$.

26 cells, it stimulated HCV IRES activity up to 10-fold in the RRL (Figure 1E). On the other hand, EMCV IRES activity increased modestly by up to 2-fold (Figure 1F). These findings confirmed previous findings that HCV IRES activity is highly dependent on cellular factors.

Construction of translation incompetent full-length infectious HCV clone. JFH-1 is a genotype 2a-derived full length infectious HCV clone [11]. To evaluate the essential role played by IRES activity in HCV replication, we constructed a translation incompetent JFH-1 by introducing a single-nucleotide mutation from adenine to uracil at the position of nucleotide 338 (the third nucleotide upstream of the initiation codon of the core protein) in the 5' nontranslated RNA (JFH-1 338U) (Figure 2). This mutation decreased the free energy ($\Delta G = 5.3$ to -8.5 kcal/mol) and stabilized the folding structure of stem-loop domain IV that includes the initiation codon of the core protein. This mutation impairs ribosomal access to the AUG codon for translation initiation of viral proteins, as reported elsewhere [12].

Transfection of JFH-1 RNA into Huh-7.5 cells resulted in a substantial increase in viral RNA and core protein, as determined with RTD-PCR (Figure 3A), indirect immunofluorescence staining (data not shown), and Western blot analysis (Figure 3C). In contrast, translation-incompetent JFH-1 338U resulted in no evidence of viral replication or protein translation (as shown in Figure 3A and 3C). This indicated the functional importance of stem-loop IV not only for translation initiation but also for viral replication. Therefore, we used JFH-1 338U as an appropriate negative control in additional experiments.

Expression of La protein induced by JFH-1 in Huh-7.5 cells.

Previously, we reported that expression of La protein was induced in the livers of patients with chronic hepatitis C, and the expression of La protein showed significant correlation with HCV RNA in tissue specimens from these patients [8]. In this study, we explored whether HCV might directly induce expression of La protein. The synthetic RNAs of JFH-1, JFH-1/delta E1-E2, JFH-1/GND [11], and JFH-1 338U were transfected into Huh-7.5 cells, and the expression of La RNA was

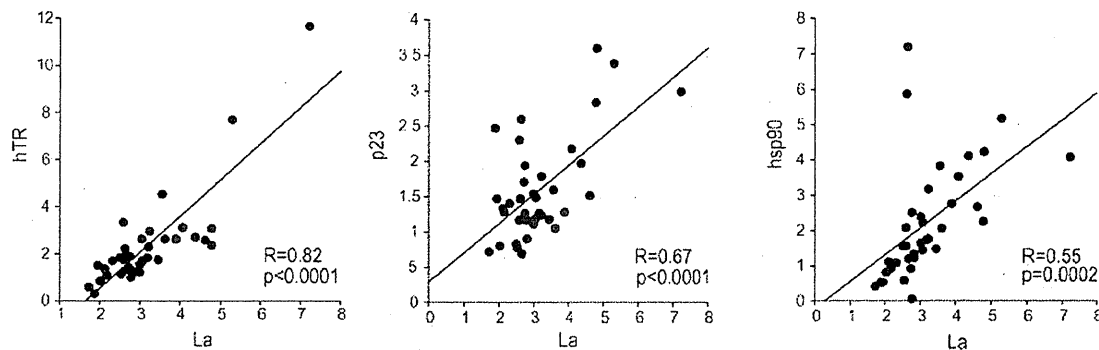


Figure 6. Correlation between expression of La protein and activity of human telomerase RNA (hTR), p23, and Hsp90 in liver biopsy specimens obtained from 37 patients with chronic hepatitis C.

evaluated after transfection by RTD-PCR and Western blot analysis. JFH-1 RNA peaked at 72 h after transfection (Figure 3A), as did the level of HCV core protein (Figure 3C). The JFH-1/delta E1-E2 RNA peak was significantly hampered compared with JFH-1 owing to the defective feature of infection. JFH-1 338U RNA and JFH-1/GND RNA was almost negligible at 72 h after transfection (Figure 3A) and a significant decline in JFH-1 338U RNA was noted. Under these conditions, La RNA was mostly induced in Huh-7.5 cells transfected with JFH-1, compared with JFH-1/delta E1-E2, JFH-1/GND, and JFH-1 338U (Figure 3B).

Similarly, expression of La protein was significantly increased after JFH-1 replication in Huh-7.5 cells, whereas only a slight increase was noticed in Huh-7.5 cells transfected with JFH-1/GND or JFH-1 338U (Figure 3C). The results indicated that JFH-1 replication induced La protein in Huh-7.5 cells.

To examine these findings further, the culture medium of the Huh-7.5 cells that included infectious HCV particles was collected and used to infect fresh Huh-7.5 cells at dilutions of 1:1, 1:10, and 1:50. HCV infection in the Huh-7.5 cells was confirmed by the expression of core protein (Figure 3D) and the presence of HCV RNA (Figure 3E). HCV infection was dependent on the amount of inoculated virus, as shown in Figure 3E. In contrast, there was no evidence of infection when using culture medium from Huh-7.5 cells transfected with JFH-1 338U RNA (Figure 3D, 3E). La RNA was significantly increased by the infection of virus derived from JFH-1 but not that derived from JFH-1 338U (Figure 3F). These results suggest that HCV infection itself could induce La protein in Huh-7.5 cells.

As for other initiation factors such as PTB, PSMA7, eIF2 γ , and PCBP2, which were shown to be essential factors for HCV IRES activity (Figure 1), we also evaluated their gene expression according to the replication of JFH-1 (Figure 4). Western blotting of each initiation factor after JFH-1 RNA transfection showed significantly increased PTB, PSMA7, eIF2 γ , and

PCBP2. The increase was significantly greater in JFH-1 RNA transfected cells than in JFH-1 338U RNA transfected cells. Thus, HCV induces these initiation factors, and in turn, they served for HCV replication. Importantly, these relationships might be true in the tissue lesions of chronic hepatitis C. There were also significant correlations between the expression of these initiation factors and HCV RNA in the tissue specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis C, although the correlation between PTB, eIF3 p170, and HCV RNA was less than La protein, PSMA7, eIF2 γ , PCBP2, and HCV RNA (data not shown) [8].

Activation of telomerase activity by La protein through the increase of human telomerase RNA. We next investigated the functional relevance of induced La protein in hepatocytes. Human telomerase plays an important role in cellular senescence and carcinogenesis. Human telomerase reverse transcriptase and hTR, as an RNA template, are core components of telomerase activity. In addition, other telomerase components, such as Hsp90 and p23 [13], have been reported to be essential for telomerase activity. There is a report that La protein is one of the telomerase components interacting with hTR [14]; however, the functional relevance of La protein for telomerase activity has not yet been validated.

The FLAG-tagged La protein expression vector pCMV-La-FLAG or short-hairpin RNA for La protein expression vector pSh-La was transfected into Huh-7 cells, and transduction was confirmed by Western blotting using anti-FLAG antibody or anti-La protein antibody (Figure 5A). Telomerase activity detected by the TRAP assay in cells overexpressing La protein was significantly higher than that found in control cells. In contrast, telomerase activity was repressed in La protein-repressed Huh-7 cells (Figure 5B). To reveal the mechanism underlying the up-regulation of telomerase activity by La protein, we measured the changes in the expression of human telomerase reverse transcriptase and hTR by RTD-PCR. Although no significant changes were observed in the expression of human telomerase

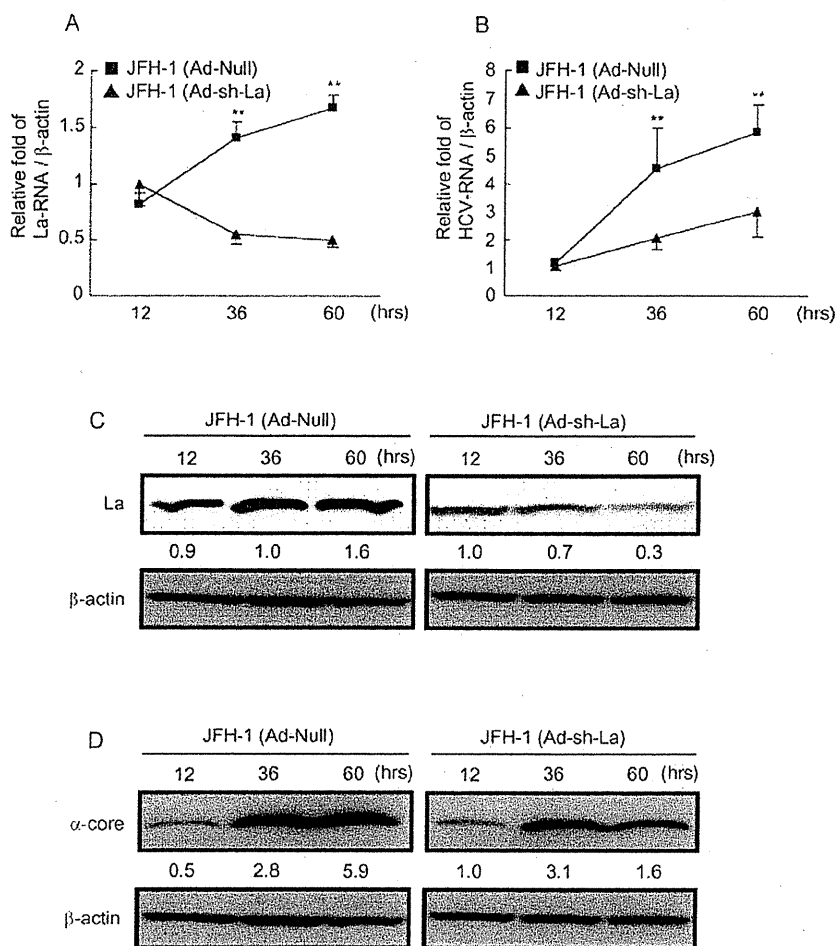


Figure 7. Suppression of La protein expression and its effect on hepatitis C Virus (HCV) replication. *A*, Effect of Ad-shLa on La protein expression in JFH-1-transfected cells. $**P < .01$. *B*, Effect of Ad-shLa on HCV replication. $**P < .01$. *C*, Western blotting of La protein in JFH-1-transfected Huh-7.5 cells after infection with Ad-Null or Ad-shLa. *D*, Western blotting of HCV core protein in JFH-1-transfected Huh-7.5 cells after infection with Ad-Null or Ad-shLa.

reverse transcriptase, the expression of hTR was modestly but significantly increased by the overexpression of La protein and decreased by the repression of La protein, respectively (Figure 5C).

This finding was confirmed in Huh-7.5 cells transfected with JFH-1 RNA, which showed significantly higher expression of hTR than those transfected with translation-replication incompetent JFH-1 338U (Figure 5D). Moreover, JFH-1 infection similarly activated telomerase activity (Figure 5E) and induced hTR (Figure 5F) in Huh-7.5 cells, whereas JFH-1 338U infection did not activate telomerase activity or induce hTR. Therefore, the data strongly suggest that HCV infection could activate telomerase activity by increasing La protein and hTR.

When the relationship between La protein and telomerase components was evaluated in tissue biopsy specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis C, the expression of La protein

strongly correlated with hTR. Moreover, it correlated significantly with the representative telomerase components p23 and HSP90 (Figure 6).

Repression of replication of JFH-1 in Huh-7.5 cells by recombinant adenovirus expressing short-hairpin RNA against La protein. Expression of La protein is induced by HCV infection, and it activates telomerase activity in Huh-7.5 cells. Therefore, it could be important to suppress La protein not only for the inhibition of HCV, but also for reducing the oncogenic potential of hepatocytes infected with HCV.

We constructed recombinant adenovirus expressing short-hairpin RNA against La protein (Ad-shLa). JFH-1 RNA was transfected into Huh-7.5 cells and 12 h after transfection, cells were exposed with Ad-shLa or control adenovirus (Ad-Null) for 1 h. At 12, 36, and 60 h after injection, changes in the levels of HCV RNA and La protein were evaluated by RTD-PCR and

Western blotting (Figure 7). At 60 h after injection, Ad-shLa repressed the level of La protein to 30% of that in the control cells (Figure 7A, 7C). Under these conditions, JFH-1 replication was significantly repressed to 50% at the RNA level (Figure 7B) and to 30% at the protein level (Figure 7D) of the control.

DISCUSSION

The translation machinery of HCV is simple and requires only the ribosomal 40s subunit, eIF2/GTP/Met-tRNA complex, and eIF3 to initiate translation [15]. However, many other canonical and noncanonical translation initiation factors interact with the HCV IRES and might regulate HCV translation [15]. However, the functional relevance of these factors for HCV replication has not yet been fully clarified.

Among 14 canonical and noncanonical translation initiation factors, we confirmed that La protein, PTB, eIF2 γ , and PSMA7 had functional relevance for HCV IRES activity in RCF-26 cells. In the rabbit reticulocyte lysate, La protein, PTB, eIF3 p170, PCBP1, and PCBP2 significantly increased HCV IRES activity.

To evaluate the role of IRES activity in HCV replication, we constructed a translation incompetent infectious HCV clone, JFH-1 338U, by introducing a single-nucleotide mutation from A to U at nucleotide 338 in the 5' nontranslated RNA that stabilized the stem-loop domain IV structure and impaired HCV translation, as reported elsewhere [12]. The La protein binds stem-loop IV, relaxes the stem-loop structure, and enhances HCV IRES activity [5].

Transfection of JFH-1 338U RNA into Huh-7.5 cells resulted in the production of neither HCV RNA nor HCV core protein. La protein overexpression could not overcome the replication defect by the 338U mutation (data not shown). These results indicate that JFH-1 338U was not only translation incompetent but also replication incompetent.

Interestingly, when the relationship between these initiation factors and HCV replication was investigated, we found that the initiation factors were induced by JFH-1 replication in Huh-7.5 cells. The relationship between these initiation factors and HCV replication was also evaluated in liver biopsy specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis C.

La protein has been reported to be one of the components of telomerase [14]; therefore, we evaluated the functional role of La protein on telomerase activity. Overexpression of La protein in Huh-7 cells increased telomerase activity significantly, as evaluated by the TRAP assay. The expression of hTR, an RNA template of human telomerase reverse transcriptase was increased. La protein could bind to the double-stranded RNA structure and possibly stabilize hTR. Importantly, JFH-1 infection activated telomerase activity and induced hTR in Huh-7.5 cells.

Interestingly, La protein significantly correlated with hTR, p23, and HSP90, representative telomerase components, in the

tissue specimens from patients with chronic hepatitis C. Several reports have also shown a low but significant level of expression of human telomerase reverse transcriptase in regenerating hepatocytes in cirrhotic livers [16]. These hepatocytes could overcome cellular senescence and transform into tumor cells if the associated genetic or epigenetic changes occurred during the course of chronic hepatitis C infection.

In this study, we constructed recombinant adenovirus expressing short-hairpin RNA against La protein and successfully suppressed the replication of the infectious HCV clone JFH-1 for the first time, to our knowledge. The virological significance of La protein for HCV replication using infectious HCV clone has not been reported before to our knowledge [17].

Because La protein is essentially involved in HCV IRES activity, its production is induced by HCV itself, and it potentially activates telomerase activity, it might be an exceptionally good candidate therapeutic target. Additional research into the development of small molecules, such as small peptides and chemical compounds, that are active against La protein could be useful for the development of novel anti-HCV therapeutic agents.

Acknowledgments

We thank Mikiko Nakamura and Nami Nishiyama for excellent technical assistance. We also thank Professor C. M. Rice, of Rockefeller University, for kindly providing the Huh-7.5 cells.

References

1. Kiyosawa K, Sodeyama T, Tanaka E, et al. Interrelationship of blood transfusion, non-A, non-B hepatitis and hepatocellular carcinoma: analysis by detection of antibody to hepatitis C virus. *Hepatology* 1990; 12: 671-675.
2. Fried MW, Shiffman ML, Reddy KR, et al. Peginterferon alfa-2a plus ribavirin for chronic hepatitis C virus infection. *N Engl J Med* 2002; 347:975-982.
3. Hara H, Aizaki H, Matsuda M, et al. Involvement of creatine kinase B in hepatitis C virus genome replication through interaction with the viral NS4A protein. *J Virol* 2009; 83:5137-5147.
4. Tsukiyama-Kohara K, Iizuka N, Kohara M, Nomoto A. Internal ribosome entry site within hepatitis C virus RNA. *J Virol* 1992; 66: 1476-1483.
5. Ali N, Siddiqui A. The La antigen binds 5' noncoding region of the hepatitis C virus RNA in the context of the initiator AUG codon and stimulates internal ribosome entry site-mediated translation. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 1997; 94:2249-2254.
6. Ali N, Siddiqui A. Interaction of polypyrimidine tract-binding protein with the 5' noncoding region of the hepatitis C virus RNA genome and its functional requirement in internal initiation of translation. *J Virol* 1995; 69:6367-6375.
7. Honda M, Kaneko S, Matsushita E, Kobayashi K, Abell GA, Lemon SM. Cell cycle regulation of hepatitis C virus internal ribosomal entry site-directed translation. *Gastroenterology* 2000; 118:152-162.
8. Honda M, Shimazaki T, Kaneko S. La protein is a potent regulator of replication of hepatitis C virus in patients with chronic hepatitis C through internal ribosomal entry site-directed translation. *Gastroenterology* 2005; 128:449-462.
9. Shimazaki T, Honda M, Kaneko S, Kobayashi K. Inhibition of internal

- ribosomal entry site-directed translation of HCV by recombinant IFN- α correlates with a reduced La protein. *Hepatology* 2002;35:199–208.
10. Honda M, Kaneko S, Kawai H, Shirota Y, Kobayashi K. Differential gene expression between chronic hepatitis B and C hepatic lesion. *Gastroenterology* 2001;120:955–966.
 11. Wakita T, Pietschmann T, Kato T, et al. Production of infectious hepatitis C virus in tissue culture from a cloned viral genome. *Nat Med* 2005;11:791–796.
 12. Honda M, Brown EA, Lemon SM. Stability of a stem-loop involving the initiator AUG controls the efficiency of internal initiation of translation on hepatitis C virus RNA. *RNA* 1996;2:955–968.
 13. Forsythe HL, Jarvis JL, Turner JW, Elmore LW, Holt SE. Stable association of hsp90 and p23, but not hsp70, with active human telomerase. *J Biol Chem* 2001;276:15571–15574.
 14. Ford LP, Shay JW, Wright WE. The La antigen associates with the human telomerase ribonucleoprotein and influences telomere length in vivo. *RNA* 2001;7:1068–1075.
 15. Pestova TV, Shatsky IN, Fletcher SP, Jackson RJ, Hellen CU. A prokaryotic-like mode of cytoplasmic eukaryotic ribosome binding to the initiation codon during internal translation initiation of hepatitis C and classical swine fever virus RNAs. *Genes Dev* 1998;12:67–83.
 16. Kawakami Y, Kitamoto M, Nakanishi T, et al. Immuno-histochemical detection of human telomerase reverse transcriptase in human liver tissues. *Oncogene* 2000;19:3888–3893.
 17. Xue Q, Ding H, Liu M, et al. Inhibition of hepatitis C virus replication and expression by small interfering RNA targeting host cellular genes. *Arch Virol* 2007;152:955–962.

Hepatic ISG Expression Is Associated With Genetic Variation in Interleukin 28B and the Outcome of IFN Therapy for Chronic Hepatitis C

MASAO HONDA,^{*,‡} AKITO SAKAI,^{*} TATSUYA YAMASHITA,^{*} YASUNARI NAKAMOTO,^{*} EISHIRO MIZUKOSHI,^{*} YOSHIO SAKAI,^{*} TARO YAMASHITA,^{*} MIKIKO NAKAMURA,^{*} TAKAYOSHI SHIRASAKI,[‡] KATSUHISA HORIMOTO,[§] YASUHITO TANAKA,^{||} KATSUSHI TOKUNAGA,^{||} MASASHI MIZOKAMI,[#] SHUICHI KANEKO,^{*} and the Hokuriku Liver Study Group

^{*}Department of Gastroenterology, Kanazawa University Graduate School of Medicine, Kanazawa; [‡]Department of Advanced Medical Technology, Kanazawa University Graduate School of Health Medicine, Kanazawa; [§]Biological Network Team, Computational Biology Research Center, National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, Tokyo; ^{||}Department of Virology and Liver Unit, Nagoya City University Graduate School of Medicine, Nagoya; ^{||}Department of Human Genetics, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo, Tokyo; and [#]Research Center for Hepatitis and Immunology, Kohnodai Hospital, National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Ichikawa, Japan

See related article, Younossi and Stepanova, on page 718 in *CGH*.

BACKGROUND & AIMS: Multiple viral and host factors are related to the treatment response to pegylated-interferon and ribavirin combination therapy; however, the clinical relevance and relationship of these factors have not yet been fully evaluated. **METHODS:** We studied 168 patients with chronic hepatitis C who received pegylated-interferon and ribavirin combination therapy. Gene expression profiles in the livers of 91 patients were analyzed using an Affymetrix genechip (Affymetrix, Santa Clara, CA). The expression of interferon-stimulated genes (ISGs) was evaluated in all samples by real-time polymerase chain reaction. Genetic variation in interleukin 28B (IL28B; rs8099917) was determined in 91 patients. **RESULTS:** Gene expression profiling of the liver differentiated patients into 2 groups: patients with up-regulated ISGs and patients with down-regulated ISGs. A high proportion of patients with no response to treatment was found in the up-regulated ISGs group ($P = .002$). Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that ISGs (<3.5) (odds ratio [OR], 16.2; $P < .001$), fibrosis stage (F1-F2) (OR, 4.18; $P = .003$), and ISDR mutation (≥ 2) (OR, 5.09; $P = .003$) were strongly associated with the viral response. The IL28B polymorphism of 91 patients showed that 66% were major homozygotes (TT), 30% were heterozygotes (TG), and 4% were minor homozygotes (GG). Interestingly, hepatic ISGs were associated with the IL28B polymorphism (OR, 18.1; $P < .001$), and its expression was significantly higher in patients with the minor genotype (TG or GG) than in those with the major genotype (TT). **CONCLUSIONS:** The expression of hepatic ISGs is strongly associated with treatment response and genetic variation of IL28B. The differential role of host and viral factors as predicting factors may also be present.

Keywords: Pegylated Interferon, Ribavirin; Gene Expression; Single Nucleotide Polymorphism.

A human liver infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV) develops chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, and, in some instances, hepatocellular carcinoma.¹ Interferon (IFN) and ribavirin (RBV) combination therapy is a popular modality for treating patients with chronic hepatitis C (CH-C); approximately 50% of patients usually relapse, particularly those with HCV genotype 1b and a high viral load.^{2,3} Therefore, it is beneficial to predict the response of patients with the 1b genotype and a high viral load to pegylated-IFN (Peg-IFN) and RBV combination therapy before starting treatment because therapy can be long, costly, and have many adverse effects. Amino acid (aa) substitutions in the interferon sensitivity determining region (ISDR), located in the HCV nonstructural region 5A, are useful for predicting the response of patients with genotype 1b to IFN therapy.⁴ However, viral factors alone do not sufficiently predict the outcome of treatment in every case.⁵

In addition to viral factors, hepatic gene expression before and during IFN treatment has been examined to determine host factors associated with the response to treatment.^{6,7} Interferon-stimulated genes (ISGs) up-regulated in the liver prior to treatment might be related to the poor induction of ISGs and the impaired eradication of HCV during treatment.⁶⁻⁹ This may be because the ISGs have already been maximally induced before treat-

Abbreviations used in this paper: aa, amino acid; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; cDNA, complementary DNA; CH-C, chronic hepatitis C; Down-ISGs, down-regulated ISGs; EVR, early virologic response; GWAS, genome-wide association studies; HCV, hepatitis C virus; IFN, interferon; IFI44, interferon-induced protein 44; IFIT1, interferon-induced protein with tetratricopeptide repeats 1; IL, interleukin; IL28B, interleukin 28B; ISDR, interferon sensitivity determining region; ISGs, interferon stimulated genes; Mx1, myxovirus (influenza virus) resistance 1 interferon-inducible protein p78 (mouse); NR, no response; Peg, pegylated; RBV, ribavirin; ROC, receiver operating characteristic; RTD, real-time detection; PCR, polymerase chain reaction; RTD-PCR, real-time detection-polymerase chain reaction; SNP, single nucleotide polymorphism; SVR, sustained viral response; TR, transient response; Up-ISGs, up-regulated ISGs.

© 2010 by the AGA Institute

0016-5085/\$36.00

doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2010.04.049

CLINICAL LIVER, PANCREAS, AND BILIARY TRACT

ment. However, the clinical relevance of the expression of ISGs as predictive factors for the outcome of treatment has not yet been fully evaluated.

In parallel to gene expression analysis, genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have been used to identify loci associated with the response to treatment; genetic variation in interleukin 28B (IL28B) was found to predict hepatitis C treatment-induced viral clearance.¹⁰⁻¹²

In this study, with a relatively large cohort of CH-C patients treated with Peg-IFN and RBV, we validated the clinical relevance of the expression of hepatic ISGs as predictive factors for the outcome of treatment. In addition,

we demonstrated that the expression of hepatic ISGs was closely related to genetic variation in IL28B.

Materials and Methods

Patients

We enrolled 168 patients with CH-C at the Graduate School of Medicine, Kanazawa University Hospital and its related hospitals, Japan (Table 1, Supplementary Table 1). The cohort included 92 men and 76 women, ranging from 21 to 73 years of age, who were registered prospectively in 2005 and 2007. All patients had HCV

Table 1. Comparison of Clinical Factors Between Patients With and Without NR

Clinical category	SVR+TR	NR	Univariate P value	Multivariate odds (95% CI)	Multivariate P value
No. of patients	n = 125	n = 43		—	
Age and sex					
Age, y	57 (30-72)	56 (30-73)	.927	—	
Sex (M vs F)	68 vs 57	24 vs 19	.872	—	
Liver factors					
F stage (F1-2 vs F3-4)	95 vs 30	20 vs 23	.001	4.18 (1.61-11.5)	.003
A grade (A0-1 vs A2-3)	68 vs 57	19 vs 24	.248	—	
ISGs (Mx, IFI44, IFIT1) (<3.5 vs ≥3.5)	103 vs 22	12 vs 31	<.001	16.2 (6.21-47.8)	<.001
Laboratory parameters					
HCV-RNA (KIU/mL)	2300 (126-5000)	1930 (140-5000)	.725	—	
BMI (kg/m ²)	23.2 (16.3-34.7)	23.4 (19.5-40.6)	.439	—	.107
AST (IU/L)	46 (18-258)	64 (21-283)	.017	—	
ALT (IU/L)	60 (16-376)	82 (18-345)	.052	—	
γ-GTP (IU/L)	36 (4-367)	75 (26-392)	<.001	—	
WBC (/mm ³)	4800 (2100-11,100)	4800 (2500-8200)	.551	—	
Hb (g/dL)	14 (9.3-16.6)	14.4 (11.2-17.2)	.099	—	
PLT (×10 ⁴ /mm ³)	15.7 (7-39.4)	15.2 (7.6-27.8)	.378	—	
TG (mg/dL)	98 (30-323)	116 (45-276)	.058	—	
T-Chol (mg/dL)	167 (90-237)	160 (81-214)	.680	—	
LDL-Chol (mg/dL)	82 (36-134)	73 (29-123)	.019	—	
HDL-Chol (mg/dL)	42 (20-71)	47 (18-82)	.098	—	
FBS (mg/dL)	94 (60-291)	96 (67-196)	.139	—	
Insulin (μU/mL)	6.6 (0.7-23.7)	6.8 (2-23.7)	.039	—	
HOMA-IR	1.2 (0.3-11.7)	1.2 (0.4-7.2)	.697	—	
Viral factors					
ISDR mutations ≤1 vs ≥2	80 vs 44	34 vs 9	.070	5.09 (1.69-17.8)	.003
Treatment factors					
Total dose administered					
Peg-IFN (μg)	3840 (960-7200)	3840 (1920-2880)	.916	—	
RBV (g)	202 (134-336)	202 (36-336)	.531	—	
Achieved administration rate					
Peg-IFN (%)					
≥80%	84	28	.975	—	
<80%	42	14			
RBV (%)					
≥80%	76	24	.745	—	
<80%	50	18			
Achievement of EVR	101/125 (81%)	0/43 (0%)	<.001	—	

BMI, body mass index; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; IFI44, interferon-induced protein 44; IFIT1, interferon-induced protein with tetratricopeptide repeats 1; EVR, early virologic response; γ-GTP, γ-glutamyl transpeptidase; ISDR, interferon sensitivity determining region; Mx1, myxovirus (influenza virus) resistance 1 interferon-inducible protein p78 (mouse); WBC, leukocytes; HOMA-IR, homeostasis model assessment of insulin resistance; Hb, hemoglobin; RBV, ribavirin; PLT, platelets; TG, triglycerides; TR, transient response; T-chol, total cholesterol; LDL-chol, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; HDL-chol, high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; FBS, fasting blood sugar; CI, confidence interval.

genotype 1b and high viral loads (≥ 100 K IU/mL) measured by quantitative Cobas Amplicor assays (Roche Diagnostics Co Ltd, Tokyo, Japan). All patients had undergone liver biopsy before combination therapy. Exclusion criteria for patients not eligible for Peg-IFN and RBV combination therapy were as follows: (1) pregnant women or women of childbearing potential, nursing mothers, or male patients whose partner might become pregnant; (2) patients with hepatocellular carcinoma; (3) patients with serious complications in the heart, kidneys, or lungs; (4) patients with autoimmune diseases, such as autoimmune hepatitis, and primary biliary cirrhosis; and (5) patients infected with the hepatitis B virus. Informed consent was obtained from all patients, and ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Human Genome/Gene Analysis Research at Kanazawa University Graduate School of Medical Science.

All patients were administered Peg-IFN- α 2b (Schering-Plough KK, Tokyo, Japan) and RBV combination therapy for 48 weeks. Peg-IFN was given in weekly doses and adjusted to body weight according to the manufacturer's instructions (45 kg or less, 60 μ g/dose; 46–60 kg, 80 μ g/dose; 61–75 kg, 100 μ g/dose; 76–90 kg, 120 μ g/dose; and 91 kg or more, 150 μ g/dose). Similarly, RBV (Schering-Plough KK) was administered in daily doses adjusted to body weight according to the manufacturer's instructions (60 kg or less, 600 mg/day; 61–80 kg, 800 mg/day; and 81 kg or more, 1000 mg/day).

The final outcome of treatment was assessed 24 weeks after the cessation of combination therapy. We defined treatment outcomes according to the decrease in viremia as follows: sustained viral response (SVR), clearance of HCV viremia 24 weeks after the cessation of therapy; transient response (TR), no detectable HCV viremia at the cessation of therapy but relapsed during the follow-up period; and no response (NR), HCV viremia detected at the cessation of therapy. An early virologic response (EVR) (complete EVR) was defined as undetectable HCV-RNA in the serum by 12 weeks. HCV genotypes were determined according to the method of Okamoto et al. Serum HCV RNA was determined using qualitative and quantitative COBAS Amplicor assays (Roche Diagnostics Co, Ltd, Tokyo, Japan). The grading and staging of chronic hepatitis were histologically assessed according to the method of Desmet et al (Table 1).¹³

Preparation of Liver Tissue Samples

Liver biopsy samples were taken from all patients before treatment. The biopsy samples were divided into 2 parts: the first part was immersed in formalin for histologic assessment, and the second was immediately immersed in RNAlater (QIAGEN, Valencia, CA) for RNA isolation. Liver tissue RNA was isolated using the RNeasy Mini kit (QIAGEN) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Isolated RNA was stored at -70°C until use.

Affymetrix Genechip Analysis

The quality of the isolated RNA was estimated after electrophoresis using an Agilent 2001 Bioanalyzer (Agilent, Santa Clara, CA). Aliquots of total RNA (50 ng) isolated from the liver biopsy specimens were subjected to amplification using the WT-Ovation Pico RNA Amplification System (NuGen, San Carlos, CA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Approximately 10 μ g of complementary DNA (cDNA) was amplified from 50 ng of total RNA, and 5 μ g of cDNA was used for fragmentation and biotin labeling using the FL-Ovation cDNA Biotin Module V2 (NuGen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Biotin-labeled cDNA was suspended in 220 μ L of hybridization cocktail (NuGen), and 200 μ L was used for hybridization to the Affymetrix Human 133U Plus 2.0 GeneChip (Affymetrix, Santa Clara, CA) containing 54,675 probes. After stringent washing, the microarray chips were stained with streptavidin-phycoerythrin, and probe hybridization was determined using a GeneChip Scanner 3000 (Affymetrix). Data files (CEL) were obtained using the GeneChip Operating Software 1.4 (Affymetrix).

Hierarchical Clustering and Pathway Analysis of Genechip Data

Genechip data analysis was performed using BRB-Array Tools (<http://linus.nci.nih.gov/BRB-ArrayTools.htm>). The data were log transferred, normalized, centered, and applied to the average linkage hierarchical clustering with centered correlation.

For genechip analysis, we selected 37 representative ISGs. Hepatic gene expression profiling was obtained from 30 CH-C patients before and 1 week after the initiation of IFN and RBV combination therapy and the 100 most up-regulated genes were selected (submitted for publication). ISGs were suppressed in patients with a rapid viral response and up-regulated in patients with a slow viral response before treatment. Using the 100 treatment-induced genes, we evaluated hepatic gene expression in 30 patients before treatment. Hierarchical clustering analysis showed that a cluster of 37 ISGs was up-regulated in patients with a slow viral response.

Pathway analysis was performed using MetaCore (GeneGo, St. Joseph, MI). Functional ontology enrichment analysis was performed to compare the gene ontology process distribution of differentially expressed genes ($P < .01$).

Quantitative Real-time Detection-Polymerase Chain Reaction

We performed quantitative real-time detection (RTD)-polymerase chain reaction (PCR) (RTD-PCR) using TaqMan Universal Master Mix (PE Applied Biosystems, Carlsbad, CA). Primer pairs and probes for myxovirus (influenza virus) resistance 1 interferon-inducible protein p78 (mouse) (Mx1), 2'-5'-oligoadenylate synthetase 3 (OAS3), interferon-induced protein 44 (IFI44),