

**Figure 2** Correlation between the undetectable time point and the decrease in viral load from day 7 to 14 (a,b) and correlation between the actual and predicted undetectable time points (c,d). (a,c) Results of analyses for the model preparation group; and (b,d) analyses for the model validation group. Black circles, actual cases; dotted line, (a,c) estimate obtained from the prediction formula; (b,d) equal values of actual and predicted undetectable time points.

undetectable time point are plotted in Figure 2(a), which shows a very strong and a significant correlation ( $r^2 = 0.67$ ,  $P < 0.0005$ ).

The validity of the prediction formula was investigated in the validation group. Analysis was possible in 32 patients, as the other patients were excluded from the analysis due to the following reasons: therapy was discontinued before viral clearance in eight patients, PEG-IFN dosage was reduced before viral clearance in nine patients and viral clearance was achieved before day 14 in two patients. There were six cases of NVR, and incomplete blood collections from 13 patients on day 7 and/or 14. A strong and a significant correlation was demonstrated between the undetectable time points that were predicted using this formula and the actual undetectable time points (Fig. 2c,  $r = 0.53$ ,  $P = 0.005$ ).

Although only one case was predicted to achieve a rapid virological response (undetectable viral load at week 4)<sup>13</sup> in the model validation group, the actual undetectable time point of this patient was week 8 (Fig. 2d). In contrast, all nine cases who were predicted to achieve a complete early virological response (undetected viral load until week 12),<sup>13</sup> the actual undetectable time points of these patients were within week 12. Because the prediction formula was derived by the least squares method, half of the patients, who were predicted not to achieve the complete early virological response, actually achieved it.

## DISCUSSION

NUMEROUS STUDIES HAVE documented that the undetectable time point is related to therapeutic responses, and its usefulness in predicting therapeutic efficacy is clear.<sup>9–13</sup> In the present study, we were able to derive a formula for predicting the undetectable time point for patients with HCV genotype 1b and high serum viral loads during PEG-IFN- $\alpha$ -2b/ribavirin combination therapy. Though the various parameters for the HCV dynamics were investigated, the change in viral load from day 7 to 14 was the only parameter that was useful for predicting the undetectable time point.

The standard length of PEG-IFN/ribavirin combination therapy is 48 weeks for patients with HCV genotype 1b and high serum viral loads; however, a 72-week administration is recommended to improve therapeutic response.<sup>3,13,18</sup> Therefore, when undetectable time points are predicted as from weeks 13–24 by our formula, the SVR rates could be improved by continuing the IFN therapy for longer periods. By prediction of the undetectable time point early during the treatment using our

formula, the physician can make early modification and optimization of currently ongoing therapy.

Another important issue of PEG-IFN/ribavirin treatment is adherence to treatment. Because dose reductions may delay the time until serum viral clearance, patients in whom the dosage of IFN and ribavirin was reduced during therapy were excluded in the present study. However, there are many patients in whom the dosage of drugs has to be reduced during therapy for a wide variety of clinical reasons. If reducing dosage before the predicted undetectable time point, administration of IFN for longer periods should be considered.

In conclusion, we created a formula for predicting the undetectable time point in patients treated with PEG-IFN- $\alpha$ -2b/ribavirin combination therapy. Viral eradication is the ultimate objective of IFN-based therapy, but many patients failed to achieve viral eradication for some reason. Because our prediction formula for the undetectable time point was made with a small population, it is necessary to correct it by further analysis with a larger population. However, an early viral response reflects efficacy of the therapy, and the estimation of an undetectable time point by our formula would be useful for determining the optimal duration of treatment in the early period of the therapy for each chronic hepatitis C patient.

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## Review Article

# Predictors of Virological Response to a Combination Therapy with Pegylated Interferon Plus Ribavirin Including Virus and Host Factors

Namiki Izumi, Yasuhiro Asahina, and Masayuki Kurosaki

*Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Musashino Red-Cross Hospital, Kyonancho 1-26-1, Musashinoshi, 180-8610 Tokyo, Japan*

Correspondence should be addressed to Namiki Izumi, nizumi@musashino.jrc.or.jp

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A combination therapy with pegylated interferon (PEG-IFN) plus ribavirin (RBV) has made it possible to achieve a sustained virological response (SVR) of 50% in refractory cases with genotype 1b and high levels of plasma HCVRNA. Several factors including virus mutation and host factors such as age, gender, fibrosis of the liver, lipid metabolism, innate immunity, and single nucleotide polymorphism (SNPs) are reported to be correlated to therapeutic effects. However, it is difficult to determine which factor is the most important predictor for an individual patient. Data mining analysis is useful for combining all these together to predict the therapeutic effects. It is important to analyze blood tests and to predict therapeutic effects prior to initiating treatment. Since new anti-HCV agents are under development, it will be necessary in the future to select the patients who have a high possibility of achieving SVR if treatment is performed with standard regimen.

## 1. Progress in Virological Response in the Difficult-to-Treat Patients with Genotype 1 Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) Infection and Factors Correlated to the Efficacy

Recently, the average age of the patients with chronic hepatitis C has been increasing in Japan. Incidence of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) in the elderly patients with chronic hepatitis C (65 years or older) has demonstrated to be higher than younger ones when adjusted by the stage of hepatic fibrosis [1]. In Japan, refractory cases with genotype 1b and high HCVRNA levels are seen in as high as 70 percent of chronic hepatitis C patients. The outcome of conventional IFN monotherapy has been an SVR response of 3%–5% after 6 months of treatment in genotype 1b and high HCVRNA patients [2, 3], and virus mutation such as interferon sensitivity-determining region (ISDR) is shown to be correlated with the virological response [2]. The association of ISDR mutations and virological response to IFN monotherapy was denied in an Italian study [4];

however, it was confirmed by a Chinese study [5] and an international meta-analysis [6].

However, pegylated IFN (PEG-IFN) extends the duration of therapy and reduces adverse effects, and for this reason, PEG-IFN has become the cornerstone of therapy. Furthermore, by the combination therapy with PEG-IFN and ribavirin (RBV), the rate of SVR has dramatically improved. Even in the patients with genotype 1b and high HCVRNA level, SVR rate reaches as high as 40%–50%, thereby improving the therapeutic effects both in Western countries [7, 8] and in Japan [9, 10].

It is important to predict the rate of achieving SVR in the individual patient, before initiating treatment. Both virus- and host-related elements have been reported as factors correlated to therapeutic effects of combination therapy [11–13]. A particular focus has been placed on virus mutations, age, gender, fibrosis of the liver, lipid metabolism, and degree of fatty metamorphosis of the liver.

Among these factors related to PEG-IFN and RBV, innate immunity has been shown to be correlated in virological

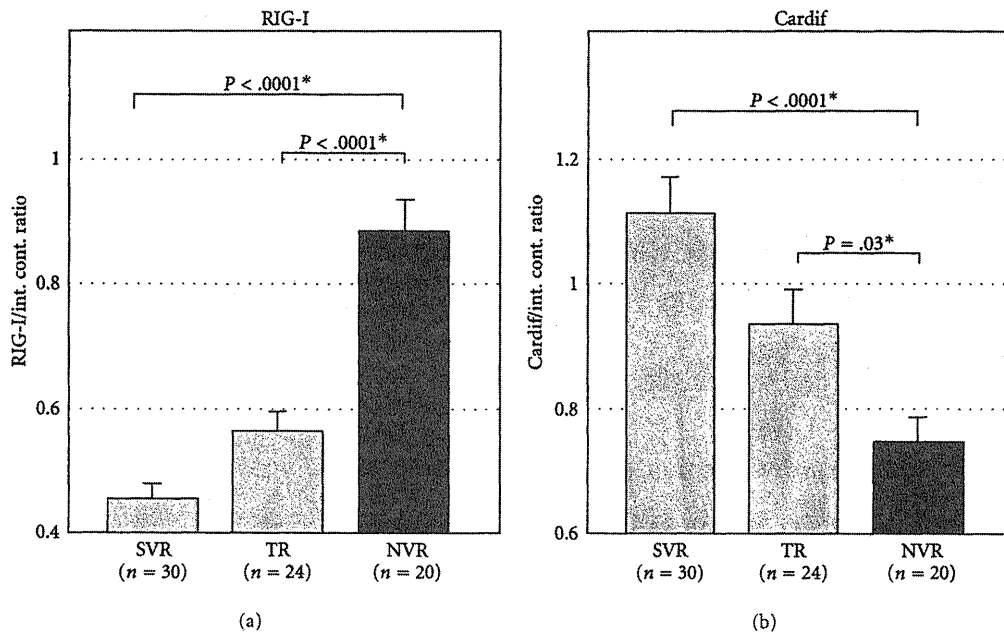


FIGURE 1: Expression of genes correlated to the intrahepatic innate immunity and virological response to PEG-IFN alpha-2b and RBV combination therapy. Open column indicates SVR ( $n = 30$ ), gray column indicates TR ( $n = 24$ ), and closed column indicates NVR ( $n = 20$ ). Error bars indicate the standard error. The  $P$  values were analyzed by the Kruskal-Wallis test. Expression of Rig-I was significantly higher in NVR than in SVR patients, and Cardif expression was higher in SVR than in NVR. The figure was cited from [8].

response. Asahina et al. reported that liver biopsies were performed before the PEG-IFN and RBV combination therapy to examine the correlation between the gene expression involved in innate immunity and the therapeutic effects, and in the patients in whom RIG-I expression is high and the expression of Cardif, an adaptor gene, is low, it was found that there are many nonresponders (NVRs) in which HCVRNA does not become negative during the course of treatment [13]. It was therefore revealed that there are many NVRs among the patients in whom the ratio of RIG-I to Cardif in liver tissue is high and that this ratio is low in the SVR patients. Based on these findings, it has become clear that innate immunity is correlated to therapeutic effects (Figure 1).

Furthermore, it was recently discovered that a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) of the host gene IL28B is significantly involved in the therapeutic response to the PEG-IFN and RBV combination therapy [14, 15]. The possibility of becoming an NVR is high in cases of the minor allele carriers of IL28B. However, it is not possible to routinely measure an SNP of IL28B in the clinical setting. In this paper, factors which can actually be used in real clinical practice are discussed for the prediction of the efficacy of PEG-IFN and RBV combination therapy.

## 2. Amount of HCVRNA

In the patients with chronic hepatitis C, it is not possible to directly measure the amount of virus, and the

amount of HCVRNA is measured instead. Currently, a real-time PCR method which has an advantage of wide range and high sensitivity is utilized, and measurements can be taken from a single blood sample of a very small amount, that is, 1.2 log copies/ml, to a very large amount, that is, 8 log copies/ml. This method has a higher level of sensitivity than the conventional Amplicor monitor test and can therefore detect HCVRNA even if only a very small amount exists in the plasma. If the amount of HCVRNA in plasma is less than the range of sensitivity of the real-time PCR method, it is recorded as undetectable level. If the indication is "less than 1.2 log copies/ml of HCVRNA", it means that a very small amount of HCVRNA exists in the plasma. Since the indication of the real-time PCR method is based on log counts, a decrease of 1.0 in the numerical value means that the amount of HCVRNA has decreased to 1/10. With the application of this real-time PCR method, it has become possible to measure amounts of HCVRNA up to 8 log copies/ml, and it has also become possible to predict the efficacy before treatment and to monitor appropriately the reactivity during the course of treatment. However, in the patients in whom a PEG-IFN and RBV combination therapy is performed, SVR can be acquired even when the amount of virus prior to the treatment is quite large. It is therefore difficult to predict the virological response solely from the amount of HCVRNA before starting the treatment. Once treatment has commenced, at what week HCVRNA becomes negative is important for the prediction of therapeutic effects, and this serves as a parameter for deciding the duration of treatment [16].

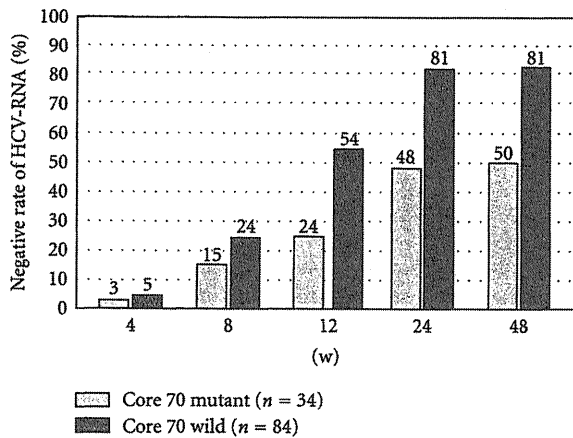


FIGURE 2: Comparison of aa70 mutations in the HCV core region and the rate of HCV-RNA becoming negative during the course of treatment. Compared with the wild type, among the patients of aa70 mutations, there were fewer patients in whom HCV-RNA had become negative during the course of treatment.

Measuring the rate of viral clearance from serum is helpful for predicting the likelihood of a response to PEGIFN and RBV and useful for determining the optimal duration of therapy if the patients start to receive the treatment [17]. In the AASLD practice guideline, response-guided therapy is highly recommended [18]. In two nationwide registration trials conducted in Japan [9, 10], the SVR rate was high, from 76% to 100%, in patients whose HCV-RNA was cleared rapidly from serum by week 4 (rapid virological response; RVR), and 71% to 73% in patients who achieved undetectable HCV-RNA from week 5 to week 12 (early virological response; EVR). In contrast, the SVR rate in patients with late clearance of HCV-RNA from week 13 to week 24 was low at 29% to 36%. No patients without clearance of HCV-RNA by week 24 achieved SVR.

The strategy of extending therapy in patients with delayed virological responses, defined as clearance of HCV-RNA between weeks 12 and 24, was evaluated in five studies [19–23]. These results cannot be compared directly with each other because of the heterogeneous study populations, differences in the baseline characteristics, and the different regimens utilized amongst them. Nevertheless, the results showed a trend toward a higher SVR rate by extending therapy from 48 to 72 weeks in patients with delayed virological response.

### 3. Viral Mutations in Core and NS5A Region

In the patients with genotype 1b HCV infection, the mutations in aa70 and aa91 in the core region have been shown to correlate with early virological response (EVR) during PEG-IFN and RBV combination treatment [11]. If aa70 in the core region is mutated to anything other than arginine and aa91 to anything other than leucine, it is difficult to achieve EVR, and it is thus highly possible that such cases

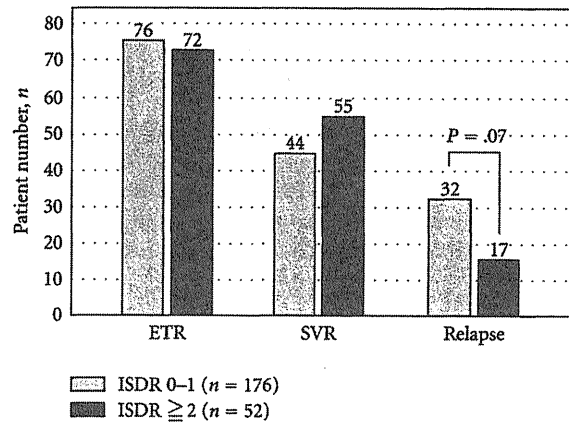


FIGURE 3: Number of ISDR substitutions and the comparison of virological response, SVR, and relapse at the end of the treatment. Compared with the patients with 2 or more sites of substitutions, the rate of SVR was lower and the rate of relapse was higher in the patients in whom there were fewer substitutions in ISDR, that is, 0 or 1 sites.

will become nonresponders. The examination results at our institution including 292 patients with genotype 1b infection demonstrated that, in the cases with mutations in aa70 in the core region, the rate of HCV-RNA becoming negative during the course of combination treatment was low compared to the wild type of aa70 (Figure 2). However, core aa70 mutation is shown to have quasispecies detectable by cloning, and 70Q clone was positively selected during combination treatment with PEGIFN and RBV [24].

Furthermore, Enomoto et al. reported that the patients with 4 or more amino acid mutations were observed in interferon sensitivity-determining region (ISDR) within NS5A region [2]; SVR rate is higher than 90% by IFN monotherapy, and SVR is less than 10% in the patients with no mutation in ISDR. It has also been reported that, in PEG-IFN and RBV combination therapy, the number of ISDR mutations is involved in the SVR [12].

We analyzed the relationship between virological response and ISDR mutations in the patients with genotype 1b infection treated by PEG-IFN alpha-2b and BRV combination therapy. In the patients with 0 or 1 ISDR mutation, even if the rate of HCV-RNA becoming negative at the end of treatment was the same, the rate of SVR would be lower compared with the patients having 2 or more mutations (Figure 3). This demonstrates that there is a higher incidence of relapse after the end of treatment in the patients with 0 or 1 ISDR mutation.

Enomoto and Maekawa reported that mutations both in NS5A-ISDR (interferon sensitivity-determining region) and core 70Q substitution are associated with no early viral response during PEGIFN and RBV combination therapy [25]. Association of core aa70 substitution and mutations in NS5A region is confirmed to be associated with viral response by PEGIFN and RBV combination therapy in a Japanese multicenter cooperative study [26]. The number of

mutations in the interferon sensitivity-determining region was shown to be associated with the viral response to PEGIFN and RBV combination treatment not only in Japan [27], but also in Tunisia [28].

Recently, a consensus has been established that mutations in aa70 in the core region are important for the prediction of HCVRNA becoming negative during the early course of treatment, and the number of ISDR mutations is important for the prediction of relapse after the end of treatment.

#### 4. Adherence

It has been confirmed that it is important to ensure 80% or more of the scheduled dose of both PEG-IFN and RBV in order to improve the rate of SVR, and together with the duration of treatment, the 80 · 80 · 80 rule has been established. However, Schiffman et al. recently reported that the dose of PEG-IFN in the initial stage of administration is important and that, if a sufficient dose of PEG-IFN is administered, then 60% or more of the RBV dose would be enough [29]. It is therefore of primary importance to ensure the dose of PEG-IFN.

In Japan, the average age of patients with chronic hepatitis C is increasing, and achieving good adherence is difficult in many patients. Consequently, the rate of SVR is low in elderly patients. How to improve the rate of SVR in elderly patients is an important issue. With regard to the dose of RBV, reducing the RBV dose based on the calculation of the total body clearance (CL/F) has been proposed to be useful for decreasing the discontinuation and improving the rate of SVR. Although there is no consensus on an appropriate dose of PEG-IFN in elderly patients, if the initial dose is set lower than the usual dose, discontinuation would be reduced. Thus, it is necessary to investigate whether such an initial dose would improve the rate of SVR.

Recently, the risk of hemolytic anemia was clearly demonstrated to correlate with ITAP gene SNP [30]. The predictive implication should be analyzed prospectively in clinical practice.

#### 5. Host Factors

Zeuzem et al. described the factors related to the less response to interferon-based therapy, and he showed that several host factors such as older age, race, and obesity are responsible factors for the poor response to IFN [31]. Recently, insulin resistance which was examined by homeostasis model assessment index (HOMA-IR) was shown to be associated with a lower rate of SVR, and body mass index (BMI) was not identified as a significant factor for the poor response to PEGIFN and ribavirin combination therapy [32]. Insulin resistance was confirmed as a related factor to the nonresponse to interferon-based treatment [33]. However, Charlton et al. reported that obesity itself is an associated factor for decreased efficacy of interferon-based therapies, and they discussed the possible mechanism [34], and obesity was shown to be associated with the increased enhancement

of suppressor of cytokine signaling (SOCS) family in the hepatocytes [35].

#### 6. Data Mining Analysis

Both virus- and host-related factors are correlated to therapeutic effects of PEG-IFN and RBV. One important question is which of these factors should be focused on in order to predict the therapeutic effects in an individual patient. In addition, in each individual patient, the host and virological factors are different. It is therefore difficult to predict the virological response in each case before treatment. Furthermore, although it is important to predict the relapse rate when HCVRNA becomes within an undetectable level in an individual patient, prediction of the rate of SVR including virological and host factors and adherence to the treatment has never been carried out in an individual patient.

A data mining analysis is the process of analyzing a large amount of data by a computer in order to develop an algorithm. Conventional statistics have been used to examine certain hypothesis. Data mining is superior in that it can set an algorithm, using a computer, based on a large amount of data without a hypothesis.

We therefore conducted at our institute a data mining analysis of the patients with genotype 1b infection having high levels of HCVRNA to whom a PEG-IFN alpha-2b and RBV combination therapy was administered to investigate whether by the 12th week after the commencement of treatment HCVRNA became negative (EVR) (Figure 4) [36]. The most important factor for the prediction of EVR was the steatosis of the liver: when steatosis was observed in 30% or more of hepatocytes, EVR was found to be difficult to achieve. In the patients in whom steatosis was not severe, the second most important factor was the serum LDL cholesterol value. While the rate of EVR was 57% in the patients in whom this value was 100 mg/ml or above, the rate of EVR was 32% in the patients in whom the LDL cholesterol was less than 100 mg/dl.

The higher the LDL cholesterol value, the earlier the HCVRNA became negative. Among the patients with low LDL cholesterol values, while the rate of EVR was 15% in patients 60 years of age or older, the rate was high in the patients under the age of 60 years old, that is, 49%. Among patients under the age of 60, the rate of EVR was low, that is, 31%, in patients with a blood glucose level of 120 mg/dl or above whereas EVR was achieved in 71% of the patients with a blood glucose level of less than 120 mg/dl (Figure 4).

On the other hand, in the patients with high LDL cholesterol values, the next most important factor was age. While the rate of EVR was 50% in patients 50 years of age or older, EVR was achieved in 77% of the patients under the age of 50. Among patients of 50 years of age or older, the next most important factor was the gamma GTP value. While the rate of EVR was 35% in the patients in whom gamma GTP was 40 IU/L or above, EVR was achieved in 60% of the patients where the value was less than 40 IU/L.

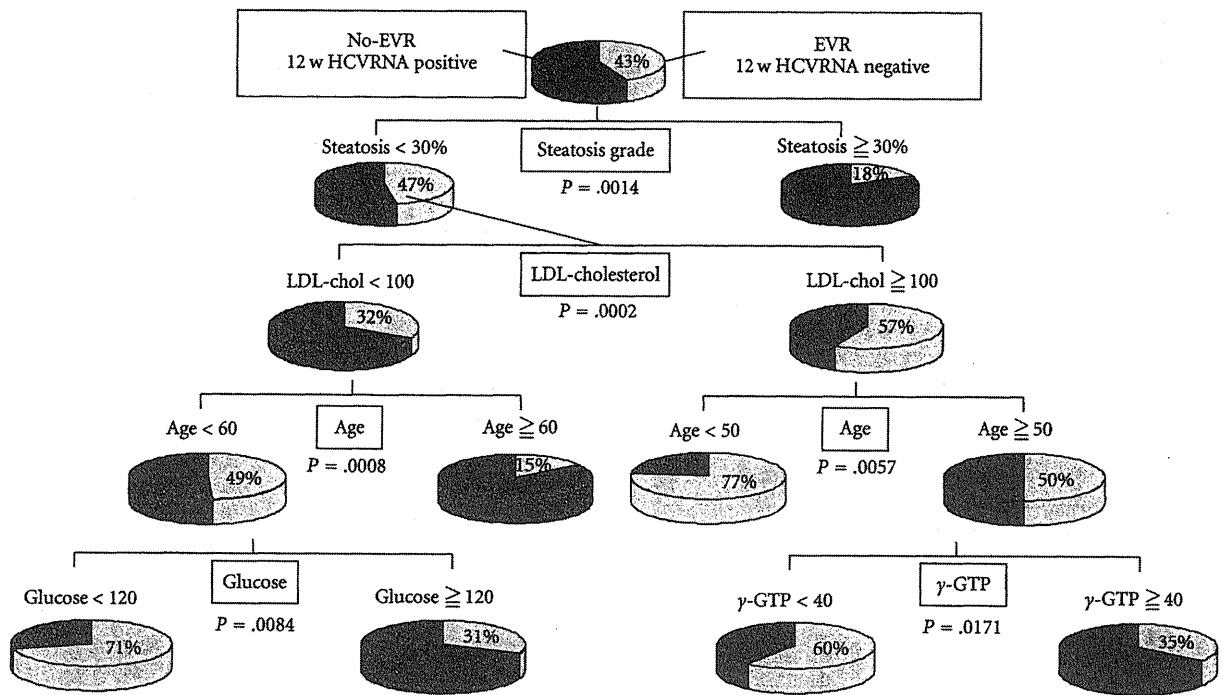


FIGURE 4: HCV RNA negative (EVR) algorithm at 12th week from data mining analysis of PEG-IFN alpha-2b plus RBV combination in the genotype 1b and high levels of HCV RNA. Both virological and host factors were evaluated by data mining analysis software from SPSS. This figure was cited from [36].

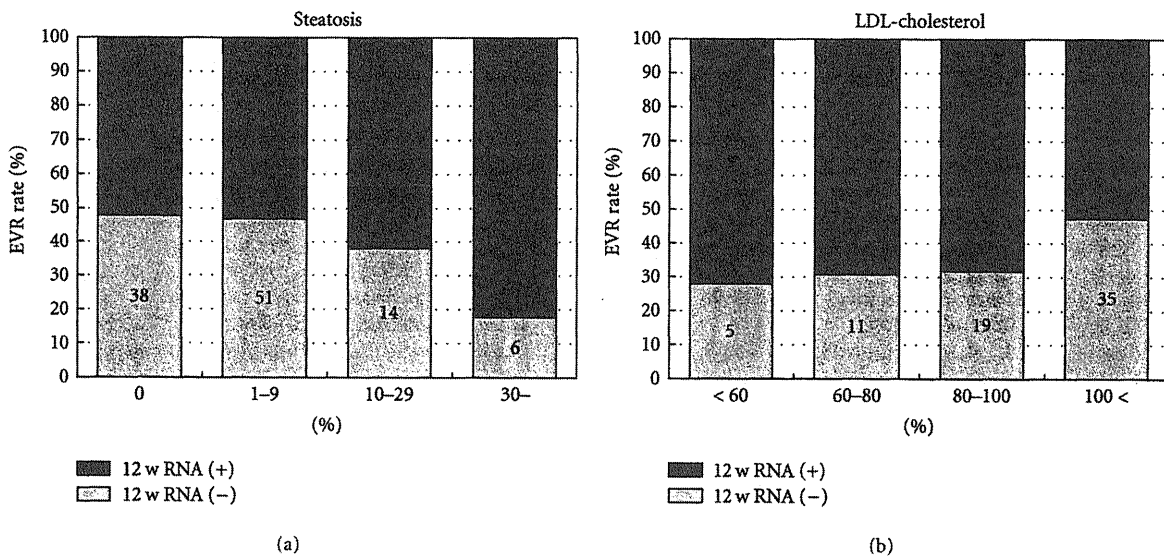


FIGURE 5: The rate of EVR in the patients with genotype 1b and high levels of HCV RNA, based on fatty deposition in the liver (a), and the LDL cholesterol value (b), respectively. EVR was highly achieved in the patients with less steatosis in the liver, and in those with high serum LDL-cholesterol levels. This is univariate analysis, and cited from [36].



We therefore compared these factors based on the original data. A univariate comparison of the fatty infiltration of the liver and the rate of EVR demonstrated that the rate of EVR was higher when the steatosis of the liver was less severe (Figure 5(a)). In addition, a comparison of the LDL cholesterol value and the rate of EVR demonstrated a significant correlation, confirming that the higher the LDL cholesterol value, the higher the rate of EVR (Figure 5(b)). Therefore, it was also proposed by the results of univariate analysis of each factor extracted from the data mining analysis that these factors were correlated to the rate of EVR.

From these observations, it is likely to improve the viral response to PEGIFN and ribavirin by reducing steatosis of the liver through daily walking or abstaining alcohol intake or by refraining from high-fat diet.

By utilizing data mining, it is therefore possible to assess virus- and host-related factors together and to predict the virological response in each patient, and thereby clinically useful information can be obtained. The algorithm should be validated including a large number of the patients.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Hepatitis B virus strains of subgenotype A2 with an identical sequence spreading rapidly from the capital region to all over Japan in patients with acute hepatitis B

Yoko Tamada,<sup>1,2</sup> Hiroshi Yatsushashi,<sup>1,2</sup> Naohiko Masaki,<sup>3</sup> Makoto Nakamura,<sup>4</sup> Eiji Mita,<sup>5</sup> Tatsuji Komatsu,<sup>6</sup> Yukio Watanabe,<sup>7</sup> Toyokichi Muro,<sup>8</sup> Masaaki Shimada,<sup>9</sup> Taizo Hijioka,<sup>10</sup> Takeaki Satoh,<sup>11</sup> Yutaka Mano,<sup>12</sup> Toshiki Komeda,<sup>13</sup> Masahiko Takahashi,<sup>14</sup> Hiroshi Kohno,<sup>15</sup> Hajime Ota,<sup>16</sup> Shigeki Hayashi,<sup>17</sup> Yuzo Miyakawa,<sup>18</sup> Seigo Abiru,<sup>1,2</sup> Hiromi Ishibashi<sup>1,2</sup>

For numbered affiliations see end of article.

## Correspondence to

Professor Hiroshi Yatsushashi, Clinical Research Center, NHO National Nagasaki Medical Center and Department of Hepatology, Nagasaki University Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Address: 2-1001-1 Kubara, Omura, Nagasaki 856-8562, Japan; yatsushashi@nmc.hosp.go.jp

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** To examine recent trends of acute infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV) in Japan by nationwide surveillance and phylogenetic analyses.

**Methods** During 1991 through 2009, a sentinel surveillance was conducted in 28 national hospitals in a prospective cohort study. Genotypes of HBV were determined in 547 patients with acute hepatitis B. Nucleotide sequences in the preS1/S2/S gene of genotype A and B isolates were determined for phylogenetic analyses.

**Results** HBV genotype A was detected in 137 (25% (accompanied by genotype G in one)) patients, B in 48 (9%), C in 359 (66%), and other genotypes in the remaining three (0.5%). HBV persisted in five with genotype A including the one accompanied by genotype G; another was co-infected with HIV type 1. The genotype was A in 4.8% of patients during 1991–1996, 29.3% during 1997–2002, and 50.0% during 2003–2008 in the capital region, as against 6.5%, 8.5% and 33.1%, respectively, in other regions. Of the 114 genotype A isolates, 13 (11.4%) were subgenotype A1, and 101 (88.6%) were A2, whereas of the 43 genotype B isolates, 10 (23.3%) were subgenotype B1, 28 (65.1%) were B2, two (4.7%) were B3, and three (7.0%) were B4. Sequences of 65 (64%) isolates of A2 were identical, as were three (23%) of A1, and five (18%) of B2, but none of the B1, B3 and B4 isolates shared a sequence.

**Conclusions** Acute infection with HBV of genotype A, subgenotype A2 in particular, appear to be increasing, mainly through sexual contact, and spreading from the capital region to other regions in Japan nationwide. Infection persisted in 4% of the patients with genotype A, and HBV strains with an identical sequence prevailed in subgenotype A2 infections. This study indicates the need for universal vaccination of young people to prevent increases in HBV infection in Japan.

## Significance of this study

### What is already known about this subject?

- ▶ In Japan, a national prevention programme was started in 1986 with selective vaccination of babies born to mothers who carry hepatitis B virus (HBV). Since then, the prevalence of hepatitis B surface antigen among younger generations has decreased sharply.
- ▶ However, retrospective studies indicate that the frequency of HBV genotype A is increasing among patients with acute hepatitis B (AHB) within the capital region of Japan.
- ▶ Infection with genotype A more often persists than infection with other genotypes.
- ▶ Because there is no reliable and comprehensive surveillance system for AHB in Japan, the incidence of AHB and factors responsible for changes over many years are not known.

### What are the new findings?

- ▶ This is a prospective cohort study for surveillance of AHB throughout Japan in a national research programme.
- ▶ The incidence of AHB in Japan has not decreased, because genotype A infections have increased over time.
- ▶ Genotype A infections started to increase in the capital region of Japan, and then spread to other regions 5–6 years later.
- ▶ About 90% of genotype A found in AHB patients in Japan is subgenotype A2.
- ▶ Subgenotype A2 isolates from patients with AHB tend to preserve sequence identity over time, indicating that particular subgenotype A2 strains have been transmitted without undergoing mutations.

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) has been classified into 10 genotypes, designated A–J, based on a >8% divergence in the full-genome sequence.<sup>1–7</sup> Different genotypes are associated with distinct clinical manifestations, such as severity and progression of

liver disease, as well as response to antiviral treatments.<sup>8–10</sup> Some genotypes are subclassified: genotype A into at least two subgenotypes, A1 (Asian/African type) and A2 (European type)<sup>11–13</sup>,

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### Significance of this study

#### How might it impact on clinical practice in the foreseeable future?

- ▶ It needs to be noted that subgenotype A2 infections are spreading among sexually active generations in Japan.
- ▶ Although selective vaccination has prevented mother-to-baby transmission of HBV since 1986, it does not contain sporadic infections in Japan.
- ▶ Herd vaccination of younger generations needs to be considered in Japan.

B into B1 (Japanese type) and B2 (Asian type)<sup>14 15</sup>; and C into C1 (Southeast-Asian type) and C2 (East-Asian type).<sup>16</sup> Subgenotypes also influence the replication of HBV and clinical manifestation.<sup>15 17 18</sup>

According to a report from Japan in 2001,<sup>19</sup> genotype C was the most prevalent (84.7%), followed by genotype B (12.2%) and A (1.7%), among patients with chronic hepatitis B. In 2002, genotype A became the most prevalent in patients with acute hepatitis B (AHB) around Tokyo, the capital region of Japan.<sup>20 21</sup> Several reports have shown that infection with HBV genotype A is associated with particular sexual behaviours, such as homosexual activity and promiscuous sexual contacts, and tends to persist longer than that with HBV genotype C.<sup>22 23</sup> These reports have raised concerns about the horizontal HBV infection in adults, which, in general, is considered to resolve spontaneously. However, adult-acquired HBV infection may result in chronic HBV infection in some instances.

Information on changes in genotype distribution over time, as well as genotype-specific clinical manifestations, may help in planning preventive measures and antiviral therapy strategies. Therefore it is important to examine how genotype A infection has spread in Japan, and what clinical and virological characteristics it possesses.

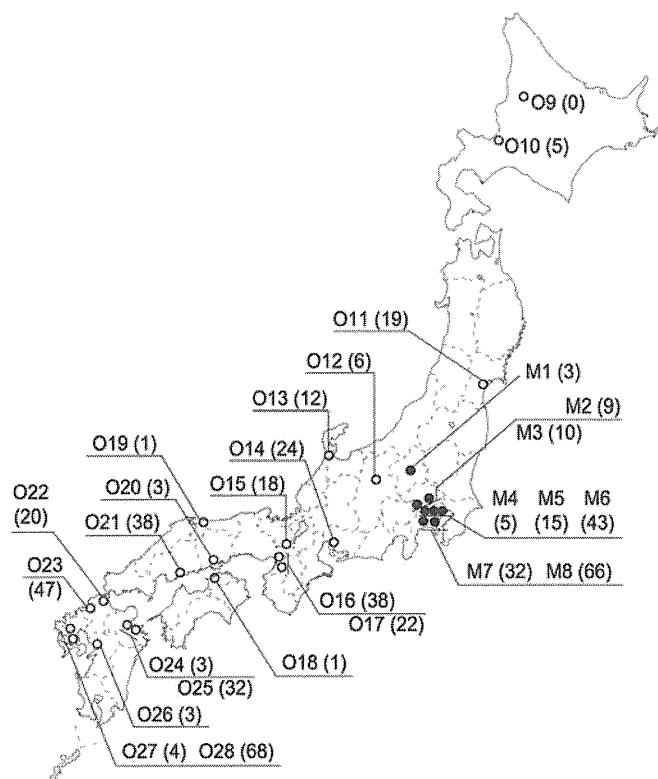
We have been conducting a nationwide, sentinel surveillance on acute viral hepatitis for more than 30 years. As part of this surveillance, a prospective cohort study has been conducted on 547 patients with AHB in 28 medical centres over the 19 years from 1991 to 2009. Geographical and longitudinal distributions of HBV genotypes/subgenotypes were surveyed, and their influence on clinical outcome was evaluated.

## PATIENTS AND METHODS

### Patients

A total of 681 patients with sporadic AHB were enrolled consecutively in a survey carried out by the Japan National Hospital Acute Hepatitis Study Group (JNHAHSG). They were admitted to 28 national hospitals from January 1991 to the end of December 2009. They were grouped geographically into two areas: the capital region (Gunma, Saitama, Tokyo and Kanagawa) and other regions (figure 1). Patients were also longitudinally categorised into three periods: 1st (1991–1996), 2nd (1997–2002) and 3rd (2003–2008). In addition, the year 2009 provided the most recent data. Of the 681 patients, 547 (80.3%) entered the study, for whom serum samples were available on admission and had been stored at  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

The diagnosis of AHB was based on the following criteria: (1) acute onset of liver injury without a history of liver dysfunction; (2) detection of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) in the



**Figure 1** Locations of participating hospitals in Japan. Hospitals in the capital region (M1–M8) are indicated by eight closed circles, and those in other regions (O9–O28) by 20 open circles. Numbers in parentheses indicate the total number of enrolled subjects for each site. The hospitals are: M1, Nishigunma Hospital, Gunma; M2, Nishisaitama-Chuo Hospital, Saitama; M3, National Disaster Medical Center, Tokyo; M4, Tokyo Hospital, Tokyo; M5, Tokyo Medical Center, Tokyo; M6, National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Tokyo; M7, Sagami Hospital, Kanagawa; M8, Yokohama Medical Center, Kanagawa; O9, Asahikawa Medical Center, Hokkaido; O10, Hokkaido Medical Center, Hokkaido; O11, Sendai Medical Center, Miyagi; O12, Matsumoto Medical Center, Nagano; O13, Kanazawa Medical Center, Ishikawa; O14, Nagoya Medical Center, Aichi; O15, Kyoto Medical Center, Kyoto; O16, Osaka National Hospital, Osaka; O17, Osaka-Minami Medical Center, Osaka; O18, Zentsuji Hospital, Kagawa; O19, Yonago Medical Center, Tottori; O20, Okayama Medical Center, Okayama; O21, Kure Medical Center and Chugoku Cancer Center, Hiroshima; O22, Kokura Medical Center, Fukuoka; O23, Kyushu Medical Center, Fukuoka; O24, Beppu Medical Center, Oita; O25, Oita Medical Center, Oita; O26, Kumamoto Medical Center, Kumamoto; O27, Ureshino Medical Center, Saga; and O28, Nagasaki Medical Center, Nagasaki.

serum; (3) positivity for IgM antibody to HBV-core antigen (IgM anti-HBc) in high titres (detectable in sera diluted 10-fold); and (4) absence of past or family history of chronic HBV infection. Severe acute hepatitis (SAH) was defined as prothrombin time (PT)  $\leq 40\%$  and hepatic encephalopathy of grade  $\leq \text{I}$ . Fulminant hepatitis (FH) was diagnosed from PT  $\leq 40\%$  and hepatic encephalopathy of grade  $\geq \text{II}$ . Patients in whom HBsAg remained in the serum for  $>6$  months after onset were considered to have acquired chronic HBV infection. The following information was collected from each patient: year and age at onset, gender, residential area, HBsAg, IgM anti-HBc, alanine aminotransferase, total bilirubin, PT, severity of liver disease, mortality, routes of transmission, sexual behaviours, travelling abroad in recent past, HBV genotype, mutations in precore (PreC) and core promoter (CP) regions, and RNA of hepatitis D virus. Antibody to HIV type 1 (anti-HIV) was

determined in patients who were at high risk and gave consent to testing.

Informed consent was obtained from each patient. The study protocol conforms to the ethical guidelines of the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science and Technology of Japan, and was approved by the ethics committee of each institution.

### Extraction of HBV DNA

HBV DNA was extracted from serum (100 µl) by the SMITEST EX-R&D Nucleic Acid Extraction Kit (MBL Co, Nagoya, Japan) and used for genotyping/subgenotyping and detecting mutations in PreC and CP regions.

### HBV genotypes

Genotypes were determined in Nagasaki Medical Center with the SMITEST HBV Genotyping Kit (MBL) by hybridisation with type-specific probes immobilised on a solid-phase support.<sup>24</sup>

### Determination of HBV subgenotypes

For subgenotyping, HBV DNA was amplified by PCR with TaKaRa Ex Taq (Takara Bio, Shiga, Japan). PCR was performed with appropriate nested primers to amplify a ~1.2 kb sequence in the preS1/S2/S gene (nucleotides 2854–835 in the reference isolate (AB116077)). PCR products were purified, subjected to cycle sequencing reaction with the BigDye Terminator v1.1 (Applied Biosystems, Tokyo, Japan), and applied to the DNA sequencer (3100-Avant; Applied Biosystems).

### Mutations in the PreC and CP regions

The A1896 mutation in the PreC region was detected by the enzyme-linked minisequence assay (SMITEST HBV PreC ELMA; Roche Diagnostics, Tokyo, Japan), and mutations in the CP region for T1762/A1764 by the enzyme-linked specific probe assay (SMITEST HBV Core Promoter Mutation Detection Kit; Roche Diagnostics). The results were recorded as 'wild-type' and 'mutant types' dominantly expressed by HBV isolates.<sup>25</sup>

### Phylogenetic analyses

Nucleotide sequences were aligned, and phylogenetic trees were constructed by the CLUSTAL W program v1.83 (DDBJ homepage: <http://clustalw.ddbj.nig.ac.jp/top-j.html>). The statistical validity was assessed by bootstrap resampling with 1000 replicates. Reference HBV strains were retrieved from the GenBank database.

### Statistical analysis

Results were expressed as percentage or mean ± SD. Statistical differences were evaluated by  $\chi^2$  and Fisher exact tests for categorical variables, and analysis of variance and Scheffe's test for quantitative variables, using the SPSS software. The 95% CI, for the difference in means, was calculated in analyses for quantitative variables.  $p < 0.05$  was considered significant.

## RESULTS

### Distribution of HV genotypes

HBV genotypes were determined in the 547 patients with AHB. The genotype was A in 137 (25.0%) patients (accompanied by G in one (0.2%)), B in 48 (8.8%), C in 359 (65.6%), D in one (0.2%), E in one (0.2%), and H in one (0.2%). Because HBV genotype G is a defective virus and cannot replicate by itself,<sup>26 27</sup> the single patient with mixed genotypes A and G was included in the 137 patients with genotype A in further analyses. RNA of hepatitis

D virus was detected in three of the 453 (0.7%) patients. Anti-HIV was examined in patients at high risk of infection and detected in 14 of the 53 (26.4%) who gave consent to testing.

### Demographic and clinical differences among patients infected with HBV of distinct genotypes

Demographic and clinical characteristics of patients with different genotypes are compared in table 1. There was no difference in mean age among patients with genotypes A, B and C. The proportion of men was higher in patients with genotype A than B or C (94.2% vs 79.2%,  $p < 0.05$ ; or 56.0%,  $p < 0.0001$ ), and in those with genotype B than C (79.2% vs 56.0%,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Maximum levels of total bilirubin were higher in patients with genotype A than C ( $9.6 \pm 7.6$  vs  $7.1 \pm 6.2$  mg/dl,  $p < 0.05$ ), with a difference of 2.5 mg/dl (95% CI 0.93 to 4.08), whereas the highest alanine aminotransferase activity and lowest PT values did not differ among patients with distinct genotypes.

SAH developed in four (2.9%) patients with genotype A, four (8.3%) with genotype B, and 26 (7.2%) with genotype C. FH developed in one (2.1%) patient with genotype B and eight (2.2%) with genotype C; no patients with genotype A developed FH. Eight (1.5%) patients died, including one with genotype B and seven with genotype C. There were no significant differences among patients with different genotypes in the frequency of SAH or FH or mortality.

The outcome of AHB was traceable in 514 of the 547 (94.0%) patients. Chronic infection with persistence of HBsAg for >6 months developed in five of the 123 (4.1%) patients with genotype A (including the one accompanied by genotype G), none of the 46 (0%) with genotype B, and none of the 342 (0%) with genotype C; it was more common in patients with genotype A than C ( $p < 0.05$ ). HBV infection persisted exclusively in the patients with genotype A, either alone (four patients) or together with genotype G (one).

Among the five patients who acquired chronic HBV infection, four (three with genotype A and one with mixed genotypes A and G) were examined for anti-HIV, and one with genotype A was found to be positive. HBV infection persisted in three (including the one with anti-HIV) of the five patients for >1 year after the onset, and the remaining two (both without anti-HIV) cleared HBsAg from the serum after retaining it for >6 months.

Mutations in the PreC and/or CP region were detected in 3.7% (4/109) of patients with genotype A, 15.4% (6/39) of those with genotype B, and 25.5% (79/310) of those with genotype C. They were significantly less common in patients with genotype A than B or C (A vs B,  $p < 0.05$ ; A vs C,  $p < 0.0001$ ). The only patient with genotype A who had the PreC mutation was simultaneously infected with genotype G.

Routes of transmission were identifiable in 275 of the 547 (50%) patients, and the main route was heterosexual contacts; those in the remaining patients could not be disclosed. The frequency of heterosexual activity did not differ among patients with distinct genotypes. However, homosexual activity was more common in patients with genotype A than B or C (21.2%, 0% and 0.8%, respectively (A vs B,  $p < 0.001$ ; A vs C,  $p < 0.0001$ )). Among the 32 homosexual men, HBV genotype A was detected in 29 (91%). Consent to anti-HIV testing was given by 10 of the 29 patients, and four of these (40%) were positive.

### Longitudinal changes in the distribution of genotypes

Figure 2 illustrates changes in the distribution of HBV genotypes through three 6-year periods over 18 years (1991–2008). In addition, data from 2009 are shown. HBV genotype A accounted

## Viral hepatitis

**Table 1** Demographic and clinical characteristics of patients with acute hepatitis who were infected with HBV of different genotypes (1991–2009)

| Feature                    | Total (n=547)  | HBV genotypes           |                  |                   |                      |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
|                            |                | A (n=137)† (25.0%)      | B (n=48) (8.8%)  | C (n=359) (65.6%) | Others (n=3)‡ (0.5%) |
| Age (years)                | 35.6±14.8      | 35.2±12.2               | 39.6±15.6        | 35.1±15.5         | 49.7±13.6            |
| Male                       | 367 (67.1%)    | 129 (94.2%)¶ * †† ***   | 38 (79.2%)†† *   | 201 (56.0%)       | 3 (100%)             |
| ALT (IU/l)§                | 2553±1563      | 2289±1069               | 2557±1412        | 2342±1728         | 3333±2406            |
| T-Bil (mg/dl)§             | 7.8±6.7        | 9.6±7.6††*              | 7.7±7.4          | 7.1±6.2           | 9.0±2.5              |
| PT (%)§                    | 74.6±22.6      | 75.2±15.9               | 73.8±24.5        | 74.7±24.5         | 15.8‡‡               |
| Severe hepatitis           | 34 (6.2%)      | 4 (2.9%)                | 4 (8.3%)         | 26 (7.2%)         | 0 (0.0%)             |
| Fulminant hepatitis        | 10 (1.8%)      | 0 (0.0%)                | 1 (2.1%)         | 8 (2.2%)          | 1 (33.3%)            |
| Mortality                  | 8 (1.5%)       | 0 (0.0%)                | 1 (2.1%)         | 7 (1.9%)          | 0 (0.0%)             |
| HBsAg persisting >6 months | 5/514 (1.0%)   | 5/123 (4.1%)††† *       | 0/46 (0.0%)      | 0/342 (0%)        | 0/3 (0.0%)           |
| PreC/CP mutations          |                |                         |                  |                   |                      |
| PreC                       | 43/461 (9.3%)  | 1/109 (0.9%)¶ * †† *    | 6/39 (15.4%)     | 34/310 (11.0%)    | 2/3 (66.7%)          |
| CP                         | 69/461 (15.0%) | 3/109 (2.8%)††† ***     | 0/39 (0.0%)††† * | 63/310 (20.3%)    | 3/3 (100%)           |
| PreC and/or CP             | 92/461 (20.0%) | 4/109 (3.7%)¶ * ††† *** | 6/39 (15.4%)     | 79/310 (25.5%)    | 3/3 (100%)           |
| Transmission route         |                |                         |                  |                   |                      |
| Homosexual                 | 32 (5.9%)      | 29 (21.2%)¶ * ††† ***   | 0 (0.0%)         | 3 (0.8%)          | 0 (0.0%)             |
| Heterosexual               | 217 (39.5%)    | 52 (38.0%)              | 25 (52.1%)       | 139 (39.6%)       | 1 (33.3%)            |
| Medical procedure          | 16 (2.9%)      | 2 (1.5%)                | 2 (4.2%)         | 12 (3.3%)         | 0 (0.0%)             |
| Other                      | 10 (1.8%)      | 1 (0.7%)                | 1 (2.1%)         | 7 (1.9%)          | 1 (33.3%)            |
| Undetermined               | 272 (49.7%)    | 53 (38.7%)††† *         | 20 (41.7%)       | 198 (55.2%)       | 1 (33.3%)            |
| Anti-HIV                   | 14/53 (26.4%)  | 11/35 (31.4%)           | 0/3 (0.0%)       | 3/15 (20.0%)      | 0/0                  |

Values are mean±SD or number (%).

†One patient with genotype A was simultaneously infected with genotype G.

‡Each patient was infected with genotype D, E or H.

§Highest values during the clinical course are shown for ALT and T-Bil, and lowest values for PT.

Statistical analysis was performed to compare genotypes A, B and C.

¶Significantly different compared with genotype B.

††Significantly different compared with genotype C.

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.001, \*\*\*p<0.0001.

‡‡Data from the patient with genotype E only.

ALT, alanine aminotransferase; CP, core promoter; HBsAg, hepatitis B surface antigen; HBV, hepatitis B virus; PreC, precore; PT, prothrombin time; T-Bil, total bilirubin.

for 6% (9/150) in the 1st period, 15.4% (19/123) in the 2nd, and 39.4% (89/226) in the 3rd, with significant differences between 1st and 2nd (p<0.05), 2nd and 3rd (p<0.0001), and 1st and 3rd (p<0.0001). Conversely, AHB associated with genotype C decreased through three periods with significant differences, while AHB associated with genotype B did not change appreciably.

On the basis of these results, the yearly incidence in each of the three 6-year periods is calculated to be: 25.0 cases including 1.5 with genotype A in the 1st period; 20.5 cases including 3.2 with genotype A in the 2nd; and 37.7 cases including 14.8 with genotype A in the 3rd. Hence, the incidence of AHB had not changed markedly over the 12 years from 1991 to 2002, but increased thereafter until 2008. Of the increment in the 3rd period of 17.2 (37.7 minus 20.5) cases, there were 11.6 (14.8 minus 3.2) with genotype A; they accounted for 67% (11.6/17.2) of the recent increase in AHB.

### Regional distributions and longitudinal changes in genotype A

Among the 183 patients from the capital region, the genotype was A in 65 (35.5%), B in 22 (12.0%), C in 94 (51.4%), E in one (0.5%), and H in one (0.5%) (table 2). Of the remaining 364 (66.5%) patients from other regions, by contrast, the genotype was A in 72 (19.8%), B in 26 (7.1%), C in 265 (72.8%), and D in one (0.3%). Genotype A was significantly more common in the capital than in other regions (35.5% vs 19.8%, p<0.0001). In the capital region, genotype A accounted for 4.8% (2/42) in the 1st period, 29.3% (12/41) in the 2nd, and 50.0% (42/84) in the 3rd. There were significant differences between the 1st and 2nd periods (p<0.05), 2nd and 3rd (p<0.05), and 1st and 3rd (p<0.0001). In other regions, by contrast, genotype A accounted for 6.5% (7/108) in the 1st period, 8.5% (7/182) in the 2nd, and

33.1% (47/142) in the 3rd. For the first time in other regions, genotype A increased in the 3rd period, in comparison with the 1st and 2nd (1st vs 3rd, p<0.0001; 2nd vs 3rd, p<0.0001).

### Subgenotypes of genotype A

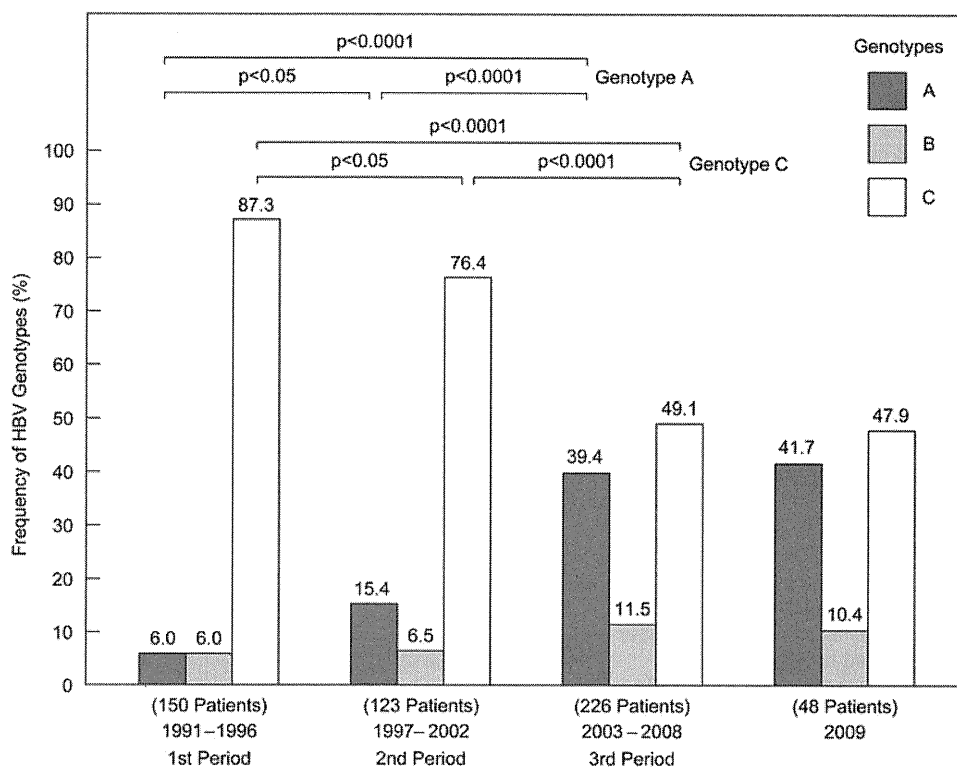
Of the 137 genotype A isolates, amplification and sequencing of HBV DNA were feasible in 114 (83.2%); the isolate from the single patient with genotypes A and G was excluded. A phylogenetic tree was constructed, on the entire preS1/S2/S genes of ~1.2 kb, for these 114 isolates along with 34 genotype A isolates retrieved from the database (figure 3).

Of the 114 isolates in this study, 101 (88.6%) were subgenotype A2, and the remaining 13 (11.4%) were subgenotype A1. In a pair-wise comparison, the sequence divergence among the 101 subgenotype A2 isolates was 0–1.3%, and that among the 13 subgenotype A1 isolates spanned 0% to 2.3%. The sequence divergence between subgenotype A2 and A1 isolates ranged from 2.6% to 4.7%.

A sequence of 1203 nucleotides was possessed in common by three of the 101 (3%) isolates of subgenotype A2. For convenience, the group comprising these three isolates was labelled 'identical group I'. Likewise, an additional six 'identical groups' were found, and numbered from 'II' to 'VII'. They comprised 35 (35%), seven (7%), two (2%), three (3%), 12 (12%) and three (3%) of the 101 isolates of subgenotype A2. In contrast, only one identical group, designated 'VIII', was constructed by three of the 13 (23%) isolates of subgenotype A1.

Some isolates of subgenotype A1 and A2 were obtained from patients who had travelled to foreign countries in the recent past (5/13 (38.5%) patients with A1 to Africa, Philippines, Myanmar and China; and 5/101 (5.0%) patients with A2 to Europe, Thailand, Brazil and the USA).



**Figure 2** Distribution of hepatitis B virus (HBV) genotypes in three periods.**Subgenotypes of genotype B**

Of the 48 isolates of genotype B, subgenotyping was feasible in 43 (90.0%). A phylogenetic tree was constructed on preS1/S2/S-gene sequences from these 43 isolates, along with those from 25 isolates of genotype B retrieved from the database (figure 4). Of the 43 isolates in this study, 10 (23.3%) were subgenotype B1, 28 (65.1%) were B2, two (4.7%) were B3, and three (7.0%) were B4. In a pair-wise comparison, the sequence divergence among 10 subgenotype B1 isolates ranged from 0.4% to 1.4%, and that among 28, two and three isolates of subgenotypes B2, B3 and B4 spanned 0–1.7%, 0.5% and 0.6–0.8%, respectively. The inter-subgenotype divergence among B1–B4 ranged from 0.6% to 4.4%.

One 'identical group' made up of five isolates was detected among the 28 of subgenotype B2; it was named 'IX'. In contrast, no 'identical group' was found in 10, two or three isolates of subgenotype B1, B3 or B4.

Some isolates of subgenotypes B2, B3 and B4 were obtained from patients who had travelled to foreign countries in the recent past (7/28 (25.0%) patients with B2 to China and other countries; 1/2 (50.0%) patients with B3 to a country unknown; and 1/3 (33.3%) patients with B4 to Vietnam). However, none of the 10 subgenotype B1 isolates was associated with travel to foreign countries.

**Identical groups**

The proportion of isolates that shared a sequence in identical groups was higher for subgenotype A2 (64.4%) than for A1, B1, B2, B3 or B4 (23.1%, 0%, 17.9%, 0% or 0%, respectively (A2 vs A1,  $p<0.001$ ; A2 vs B1,  $p<0.0001$ ; A2 vs B2,  $p<0.0001$ )).

Homosexual activity was more common in patients belonging to the seven identical groups than the non-identical group of subgenotype A2 (17/65 (26.2%) vs 3/36 (8.3%),  $p<0.05$ ). Among the isolates in the seven identical groups of subgenotype A2, those in groups I, III and VII clustered locally during short periods of 2–7 years. In contrast, subgenotype A2 isolates in groups II and VI were scattered widely over longer periods of 11–16 years.

**DISCUSSION**

In Japan, as in most Asian countries, the persistent HBV carrier state had been established mainly through perinatal transmission from mother to baby and horizontal infection during infancy. In 1986, a national prevention programme was launched in Japan with selective vaccination of babies born to carrier mothers with hepatitis B e antigen (HBeAg). In 1995, this was extended to babies born to HBeAg-negative carrier mothers. As a result, the prevalence of HBsAg among younger people born since 1986 has decreased dramatically.<sup>28 29</sup> However, there are an

**Table 2** Changes in the distribution of genotype A compared between the capital region and other regions over three periods

| Area           | n                  | 1st Period (1991–1996) | 2nd Period (1997–2002) | 3rd Period (2003–2008) | 2009          |
|----------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Capital region | 65/183 (35.5%)†*** | 2/42 (4.8%)‡* S***     | 12/41 (29.3%)†* S*     | 42/84 (50.0%)†*        | 9/16 (56.3%)  |
| Other regions  | 72/364 (19.8%)     | 7/108 (6.5%)§***       | 7/82 (8.5%)§***        | 47/142 (33.1%)         | 11/32 (34.4%) |
| Total          | 137/547 (25.0%)    | 9/150 (6.0%)‡* S***    | 19/123 (15.4%)§***     | 89/226 (39.4%)         | 20/48 (41.7%) |

Statistical analysis of the differences between the capital and other regions was performed, as well as through the 1st, 2nd and 3rd periods.

†Significantly different compared with other regions.

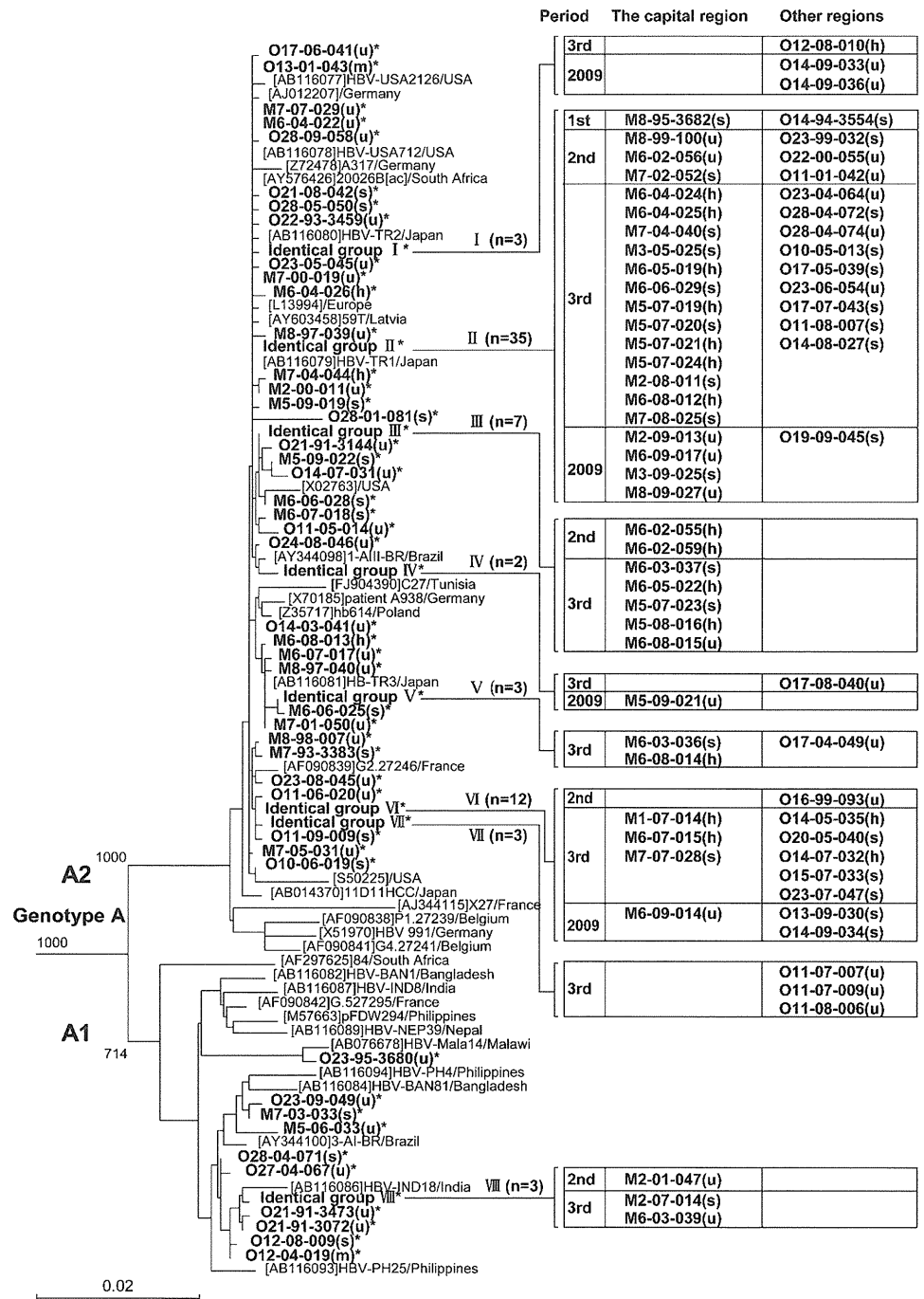
‡Significantly different compared with the 2nd period.

§Significantly different compared with the 3rd period.

\* $p<0.05$ , \*\*\* $p<0.0001$ .

## Viral hepatitis

**Figure 3** Phylogenetic analysis of genotype A strains by the neighbour-joining method. Isolates obtained in this study are shown in bold with asterisks. Hospitals in the capital region are labelled M1–M8 and those in other regions O9–O28 (corresponding to those in figure 1). Year of onset is indicated by the last two digits after the first hyphen. Numbers after the second hyphen represent the identification numbers of patients in each year (not always consecutive). Transmission routes are shown in lower-case letters in parentheses: h, homosexual; s, heterosexual; m, medical procedure; o, others; and u, undetermined. Isolates with identical sequences are bracketed in 'Identical groups I through VIII' on the tree. Each bracket is divided by areas and periods. Reference hepatitis B virus (HBV) isolates, including 12 of subgenotype A1 and 22 of subgenotype A2, were obtained from the database and specified by their accession numbers, isolate names and countries of origin. Bootstrap values are indicated on major phylogenetic branches.



estimated one million HBV carriers in Japan at present.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, many Japanese remain at increased risk of horizontal infection with HBV, because they have not received selective vaccination and therefore do not have the antibody to HBsAg. Because AHB is extremely under-reported and no national surveillance data are available in Japan, the incidence has not been determined accurately. In the USA, the incidence of AHB has decreased markedly since the adoption of a comprehensive immunisation strategy in 1991.<sup>31 32</sup>

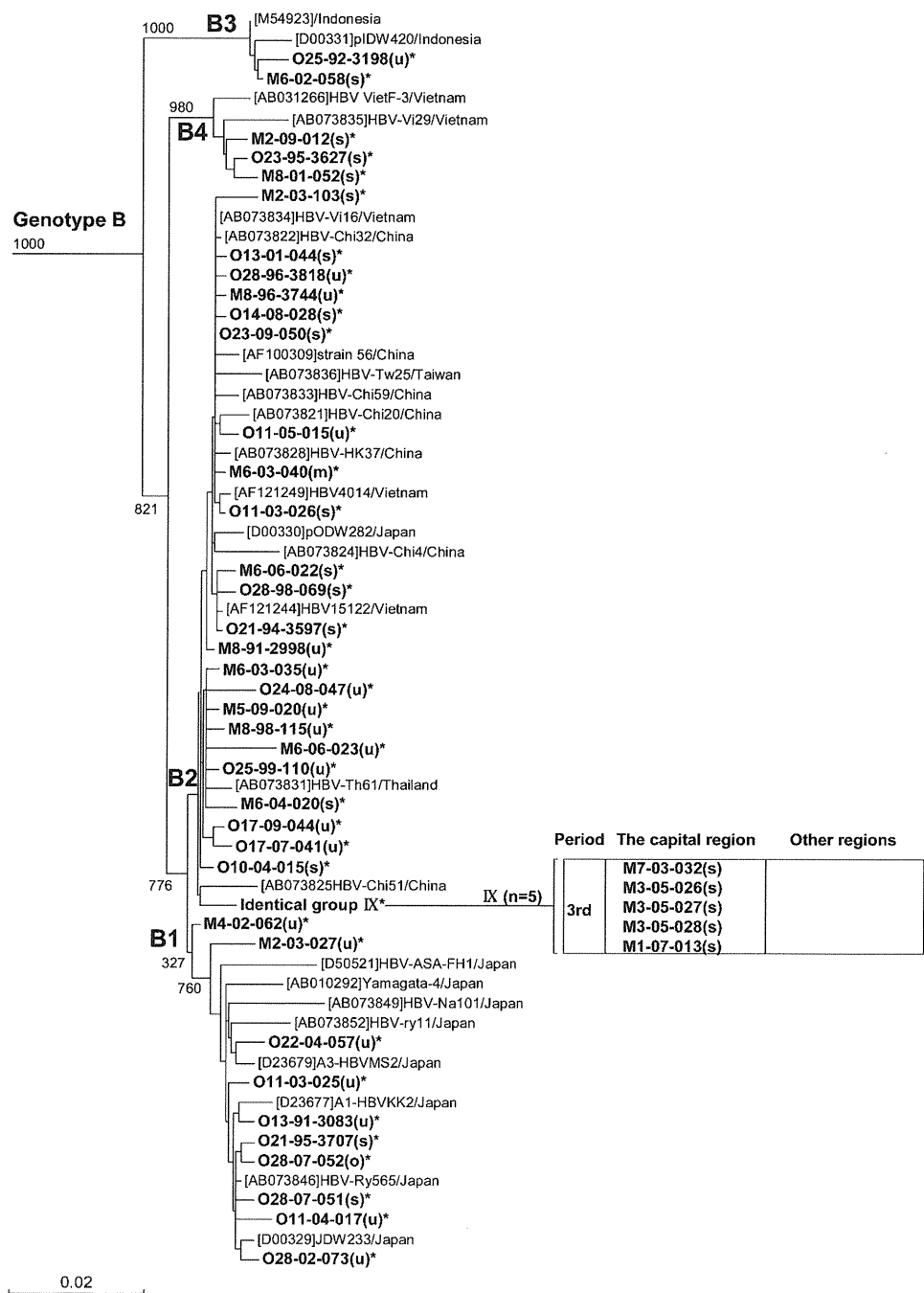
In the present study over 1991–2009, we conducted a nationwide, sentinel surveillance on AHB in Japan. In the 547 patients recruited over 19 years, genotype C was the most prevalent (65.6%), followed by genotype A (25.0%) and genotype B (8.8%). Demographic and clinical differences were observed among patients with genotypes A, B and C (table 1).

The proportion of men reached 94.2% for genotype A infection, higher than that for genotype B (79.2%) or C (56.0%) infection. In the analysis of the route of transmission, homosexual activity was reported by 21.2% of patients with genotype A; all were male. In general, sexual activity tends to be higher in men than women. The predominance of genotype A in men may be attributable to a high frequency of homosexual activity among men.

Although adult-acquired HBV infection persists at a high frequency of ~10% in European countries and the USA,<sup>33</sup> it rarely, if ever, becomes chronic in Japan. Recent studies suggest that the chance of a chronic outcome of AHB may differ by HBV genotype<sup>21 34</sup>; it is more common for genotype A than other genotypes.<sup>22 35 36</sup> In the present study, HBV infection persisted in 4.1% of patients with genotype A, in comparison with 0% of



**Figure 4** Phylogenetic analysis of genotype B strains by the neighbour-joining method. Hepatitis B virus (HBV) isolates obtained in the present study are specified in the same manner as in figure 3, and isolates with an identical sequence are bracketed in 'Identical group IX' on the tree. Of them, 10 reference isolates of subgenotype B1 and 13, two and two of those of B2, B3 and B4, respectively, were retrieved from the database; they are specified as in figure 3.



those with genotype C. Remarkably, all five patients with AHB who acquired chronic infection possessed HBV genotype A, either alone (four patients) or together with HBV genotype G (one). Increasing genotype A infections may have changed the genotype distribution in patients with AHB and those with chronic HBV infection. In Japanese patients with chronic hepatitis B, the proportion of genotype A has doubled, from 1.7% in 1999–2000 to 3.5% in 2005–2006.<sup>37</sup>

The genotype was A in 29 of the 32 (91%) homosexual men. Of the 29 homosexuals with genotype A, 10 gave consent to anti-HIV testing, and four of these (40%) were found to be positive. Of the five patients who acquired chronic HBV infection, anti-HIV was tested in four (three with genotype A and one with genotypes A and G), and one with genotype A was found to be positive. There is a possibility that co-infecting HIV in this patient with genotype A may have promoted chronic

HBV infection; HIV is known to prolong and aggravate HBV infection by compromising immune responses.<sup>38</sup>

Patients with FH in this study were infected with either HBV genotype B (1/48 (2.1%)) or C (8/359 (2.2%)); no patients with genotype A developed FH. PreC and/or CP mutations were significantly less common in genotype A (1/109 (3.7%)) than B (6/39 (15.4%)) or C (279/310 (5.5%)) infection. The single patient with genotype A who had PreC mutation was simultaneously infected with HBV genotype G. There is a possibility that the PreC mutation in this patient was from HBV genotype G.<sup>25</sup> FH did not develop in any patients with genotype A, which may be attributable, at least in part, to the lack of PreC mutation in genotype A infections.<sup>39</sup>

Previous reports have shown that genotype A is common in patients with AHB in Metropolitan Tokyo,<sup>20 21 40</sup> as well as around Aichi located in the middle of Mainland Japan.<sup>22</sup>

## Viral hepatitis

Yotsuyanagi *et al*<sup>23</sup> reported that genotype A is more common in patients with AHB in the metropolitan region than in other regions. Sugauchi *et al*<sup>41</sup> found that, in patients with AHB, the proportion with genotype A has increased over time. The present study indicates that the number of patients with AHB in Japan would not have decreased. We found that the proportion of patients with genotype A infection is increasing in the 28 national hospitals in Japan (6.0% in the 1st period, 15.4% in the 2nd, and 39.4% in the 3rd (figure 2)), with the prevalence much higher in the capital than other regions (35.5% vs 19.8% (table 2)).

In this study, there was a time lag in the increase in genotype A infection between the capital region and other regions of Japan (table 2). In the capital region, the prevalence of genotype A started to increase in the late 1990s, and kept increasing through the early 2000s (4.8% in the 1st period, 29.3% in the 2nd, 50.0% in the 3rd, and 56.3% in 2009). In other regions, by contrast, the frequency of genotype A did not change during the late 1990s, and increased significantly in the 2000s (6.5% in the 1st period, 8.5% in the 2nd, 33.1% in the 3rd, and 34.4% in 2009). Thus infiltration of genotype A infection into other regions occurred 5–6 years behind the epidemic in the capital region. This indicates that genotype A infection originated in the capital region and then spread to other areas of Japan.

Some genotypes are classified into several subgenotypes, and they have distinct geographical distributions.<sup>42</sup> Hence, subgenotypes are useful in tracing the route of HBV infection. By phylogenetic analysis (figures 3 and 4), 88.6% of genotype A isolates had the European–American type (A2), and the remaining 11.4% possessed the Asian–African type (A1). Likewise, 76.7% of genotype B isolates had Asian types (B2–B4), and the remaining 23.3% possessed the type endemic to Japan (B1). Of the 157 HBV isolates of genotype A or B, 147 (93.6%) had subgenotypes foreign to Japan. They are thought to have been transmitted from foreign sex workers, and spread among certain populations who share particular sexual behaviours in Japan.<sup>41</sup>

Of note, some HBV isolates of distinct subgenotypes possessed an identical sequence in the preS1/S2/S gene. The isolates of subgenotype A2 were prominent in this regard, and more often had the same sequence than those of other subgenotypes, such as A1, B1 and B2. The high prevalence of subgenotype A2 isolates with an identical sequence would not have been caused by cross-contamination. If cross-contamination had occurred, it would have affected isolates of all subgenotypes, and not influenced subgenotype A2 isolates preferentially. As many as 35% of subgenotype A2 isolates had an identical sequence, and those with the same sequence increased to 56.3% in the recent 2009 survey in Metropolitan Tokyo. Furthermore, some subgenotype A2 isolates in groups I, III and VII clustered locally within short periods, whereas others in groups II and VI were scattered widely over a long period of time. On the basis of these results, it is tempting to speculate that some subgenotype A2 strains would have been transmitted from person to person without undergoing mutations for many years.

In summary, the present study indicates the following. (1) AHB in the 28 national hospitals in Japan has not decreased, because genotype A infections are increasing. (2) Genotype A infections started to increase in the capital region, and then spread to local areas 5–6 years later. (3) Approximately 90% of genotype A in patients with AHB is subgenotype A2. (4) Subgenotype A2 strains with an identical sequence are spreading among younger generations with high sexual activity. (5) On the basis of the results obtained, AHB in Japan is not decreasing, because HBV of subgenotype A2 is prevailing in particular

subpopulations at high risk. Finally, in order to prevent further increases in AHB in Japan, universal vaccination of young people deserves consideration.

### Author affiliations

- <sup>1</sup>Clinical Research Center, NHO Nagasaki Medical Center, Nagasaki, Japan
- <sup>2</sup>Department of Hepatology, Nagasaki University Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Nagasaki, Japan
- <sup>3</sup>National Center for Global Health and Medicine, Tokyo, Japan
- <sup>4</sup>NHO Kyushu Medical Center, Fukuoka, Japan
- <sup>5</sup>NHO Osaka National Hospital, Osaka, Japan
- <sup>6</sup>NHO Yokohama Medical Center, Kanagawa, Japan
- <sup>7</sup>NHO Sagami Hospital, Kanagawa, Japan
- <sup>8</sup>NHO Oita Medical Center, Oita, Japan
- <sup>9</sup>NHO Nagoya Medical Center, Aichi, Japan
- <sup>10</sup>NHO Osaka-Minami Medical Center, Osaka, Japan
- <sup>11</sup>NHO Kokura Medical Center, Fukuoka, Japan
- <sup>12</sup>NHO Sendai Medical Center, Miyagi, Japan
- <sup>13</sup>NHO Kyoto Medical Center, Kyoto, Japan
- <sup>14</sup>NHO Tokyo Medical Center, Tokyo, Japan
- <sup>15</sup>NHO Kure Medical Center and Chugoku Cancer Center, Hiroshima, Japan
- <sup>16</sup>NHO Kanazawa Medical Center, Ishikawa, Japan
- <sup>17</sup>NHO National Disaster Medical Center, Tokyo, Japan
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**Ethics approval** Approved by the ethics committee of each institution.

**Contributors** YT, HY and HI designed data collection tools, monitored data collection for the whole study, wrote the statistical analysis plan, cleaned and analysed the data. YT, HY and YM drafted and revised the paper. HY, NM, MN, EM, TK, YW, TM, MS, TH, TS, YM, TK, MT, HK, HO, SH and SA collaborated in data and sample collection.

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## Original Article

## Suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 and IL28 genetic variation predict the viral response to peginterferon and ribavirin

Hisamitsu Miyaaki,<sup>1</sup> Tatsuki Ichikawa,<sup>1</sup> Hiroshi Yatsuhashi,<sup>3</sup> Naota Taura,<sup>1</sup> Satoshi Miuma,<sup>1</sup> Tetsuya Usui,<sup>2</sup> Sayaka Mori,<sup>2</sup> Shimeru Kamihira,<sup>2</sup> Yasuhito Tanaka,<sup>4</sup> Masashi Mizokami<sup>5</sup> and Kazuhiko Nakao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Nagasaki University School of Medicine, and <sup>2</sup>Central Diagnostic Laboratory of Nagasaki University Hospital, Nagasaki, and <sup>3</sup>Clinical Research Center, National Hospital Organization (NHO) Nagasaki Medical Center, Omura, and <sup>4</sup>Department of Virology and Liver Unit, Nagoya City University Graduate School of Medical Sciences, Nagoya, and <sup>5</sup>Research Center for Hepatitis and Immunology, International Medical Center of Japan, Konodai Hospital, Ichikawa, Japan

**Aim:** The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship among the expression of suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 (SOCS 3) in the liver, the SNPs in the IL28B locus, and the outcome of interferon therapy.

**Methods:** Prior to interferon treatment, we immunostained 67 liver specimens from chronic hepatitis C (CHC) patients who were receiving peginterferon alpha-2b/ribavirin therapy for suppressor of cytokine signaling 3 (SOCS3), and compared the expression of SOCS3, IL28 polymorphisms and other clinical factors between the patients and compared their eventual outcomes.

**Results:** Significant differences between the low SOCS3 group and high SOCS3 group were found in age, as well as in the platelet, transaminase, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase levels. The incidence of high SOCS3 was not significantly different between subjects with the TT genotype and the TG

genotype (TT : TG = 71%:29%,  $P = 0.250$ ). In a multivariate analysis, age ( $\geq 65$  years old) (odds ratio 0.221 [0.120–0.966],  $P = 0.045$ ), IL28B gene (genotype TT) (odds ratio 5.422 [1.254–23.617],  $P = 0.024$ ) and SOCS3 (high) (odds ratio 0.308 [0.104–0.948],  $P = 0.040$ ) were significant predictors of the interferon response. In patients with the TT genotype, those with low SOCS3 immunostaining showed a high sustained virological response (69%), while the sustained virological rate was low (27%) in the patients with high SOCS3 immunostaining.

**Conclusions:** Using a combination of the SOCS3 immunostained area in the liver and the expression of IL28B single nucleotide polymorphisms might be a useful predictor of hepatitis C virus clearance by interferon therapy.

**Key words:** hepatitis C virus, IL28B, interferon, suppressor of cytokine signaling 3

## INTRODUCTION

APPROXIMATELY 200 MILLION people worldwide are infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV). In Japan, about 2 million people are chronically infected, and HCV is the leading cause of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). The current standard care for chronic hepatitis C (CHC) is a combination of peginterferon- $\alpha$  (PEG-IFN) and ribavirin. This treatment is effective in approximately 40–50% of CHC patients with a high viral load

of genotype 1.<sup>1–5</sup> This therapy is costly and frequently associated with side effects. Therefore, predicting the outcome of interferon therapy is important.

Several factors, such as gender, body mass index, the presence of steatosis and liver fibrosis, drug adherence and viral factors including the serum quantity of HCV RNA and HCV genotype have been reported to be significantly associated with the treatment outcome.<sup>2,6–11</sup> Among viral factors, Akuta *et al.* recently reported that the substitution of the HCV core amino acid was a predictor for the effect of interferon and ribavirin combination therapy.<sup>2,12</sup> Among the host factors, recent reports showed that genetic variations near the IL28 gene (rs8099917, rs1297860) on chromosome 19 were predictors of the virological response to 48-week PEG-IFN plus ribavirin combination therapy in individuals

Correspondence: Dr Hisamitsu Miyaaki, Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Nagasaki University School of Medicine, 1-7-1 Sakamoto, Nagasaki 852-8501, Japan. Email: miyaaki-hi@umin.ac.jp

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