

Table 4. Factors associated with IL28B genotype.

	IL28B major allele n = 345	IL28B minor allele n = 151	p value
Gender: male	166 (48%)	84 (56%)	0.143
Age (years)	57 ± 10	57 ± 10	0.585
ALT (IU/L)	79 ± 60	78 ± 62	0.842
Platelets (10 ⁹ /L)	153 ± 54	155 ± 52	0.761
GGT (IU/L)	51 ± 45	78 ± 91	0.001
Fibrosis: F3-4	76 (22%)	45 (30%)	0.063
Steatosis:			
>10%	16/88 (18%)	13/23 (57%)	0.024
>30%	6/88 (7%)	6/23 (26%)	0.017
HCV-RNA: >600,000 IU/ml	284 (82%)	125 (83%)	1.000

ALT, alanine aminotransferase; GGT, gamma-glutamyltransferase.

Four GWAS studies have shown the association between a genetic polymorphism near the IL28B gene and response to PEG-IFN plus RBV therapy. The SNPs that showed significant association with response were rs12979860 [8] and rs8099917 [6,7,9]. There is a strong linkage-disequilibrium (LD) between these two SNPs as well as several other SNPs near the IL28B gene in Japanese patients [34] but the degree of LD was weaker in Caucasians and Hispanics [8]. Thus, the combination of SNPs is not useful for predicting response in Japanese patients but may improve the predictive value in patients other than Japanese who have weaker LD between SNPs.

Other significant predictors of response independent of IL28B genotype were platelet counts, stage of fibrosis, and HCV RVA load. A previous study reported that platelet count is a predictor of response to therapy [35], and the lower platelet count was related with advanced liver fibrosis in the present study. The association between response to therapy and advanced fibrosis independent of the IL28B polymorphism is consistent with a recent study by Rauch et al. [9].

There is agreement that the viral genotype is significantly associated with the treatment outcome. Moreover, viral factors such as substitutions in the ISDR of the NS5A region [10] or in the amino acid sequence of the HCV core [4] have been studied in relation to the response to IFN treatment. The amino acid Gln or His at Core70 and Met at Core91 are repeatedly reported to be associated with resistance to therapy [4,14,15] in Japanese patients but these data wait to be validated in different populations or other geographical areas. In this study, we confirmed that patients with two or more mutations in the ISDR had a higher rate of undetectable HCV-RNA at each time point during therapy. In addition, the rate of relapse among patients who achieved cEVR was significantly lower in patients with two or more mutations in ISDR compared to those with only one or no mutations (15% vs. 31%, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the ISDR sequence may be used to predict a relapse among patients who achieved virological response during therapy, while the IL28B polymorphism may be used to predict the virological response before therapy. A higher number of mutations in the ISDR are reported to have close association with SVR in Japanese [11–13,15,36] or Asian [37,38] populations but data from Western countries have been controversial [39–42]. A meta-analysis of 1230 patients including 525 patients from Europe has shown that there was a positive

correlation between the SVR and the number of mutations in the ISDR in Japanese as well as in European patients [43] but this correlation was more pronounced in Japanese patients. Thus, geographical factors may account for the different impact of ISDR on treatment response, which may be a potential limitation of our study.

To our surprise, these HCV sequences were associated with the IL28B genotype: HCV sequences with an IFN resistant phenotype were more prevalent in patients with the minor IL28B allele than those with the major allele. This was an unexpected finding, as we initially thought that host genetics and viral sequences were completely independent. A recent study reported that the IL28B polymorphism (rs12979860) was significantly associated with HCV genotype: the IL28B minor allele was more frequent in HCV genotype 1-infected patients compared to patients infected with HCV genotype 2 or 3 [33]. Again, patients with the IL28B minor allele (IFN resistant genotype) were infected with HCV sequences that are linked to an IFN resistant phenotype. The mechanism for this association is unclear, but may be related to an interaction between the IL28B genotype and HCV sequences in the development of chronic HCV infection as discussed by McCarthy et al., since the IL28B polymorphism was associated with the natural clearance of HCV [44]. Alternatively, the HCV sequence within the patient may be selected during the course of chronic infection [45,46]. These hypotheses should be explored through prospective studies of spontaneous HCV clearance or by testing the time-dependent changes in the HCV sequence during the course of chronic infection.

How these host and viral factors can be integrated to predict the response to therapy in future clinical practice is an important question. Because various host and viral factors interact in the same patient, predictive analysis should consider these factors in combination. Using the data mining analysis, we constructed a simple decision tree model for the pre-treatment prediction of SVR and NVR to PEG-IFN/RBV therapy. The classification of patients based on the genetic polymorphism of IL28B, mutation in the ISDR, serum levels of HCV-RNA, and platelet counts, identified subgroups of patients who have the lowest probabilities of NVR (0%) with the highest probabilities of SVR (90%) as well as those who have the highest probabilities of NVR (84%) with the lowest probability of SVR (7%). The reproducibility of the model was confirmed by the independent validation based on a second

Research Article

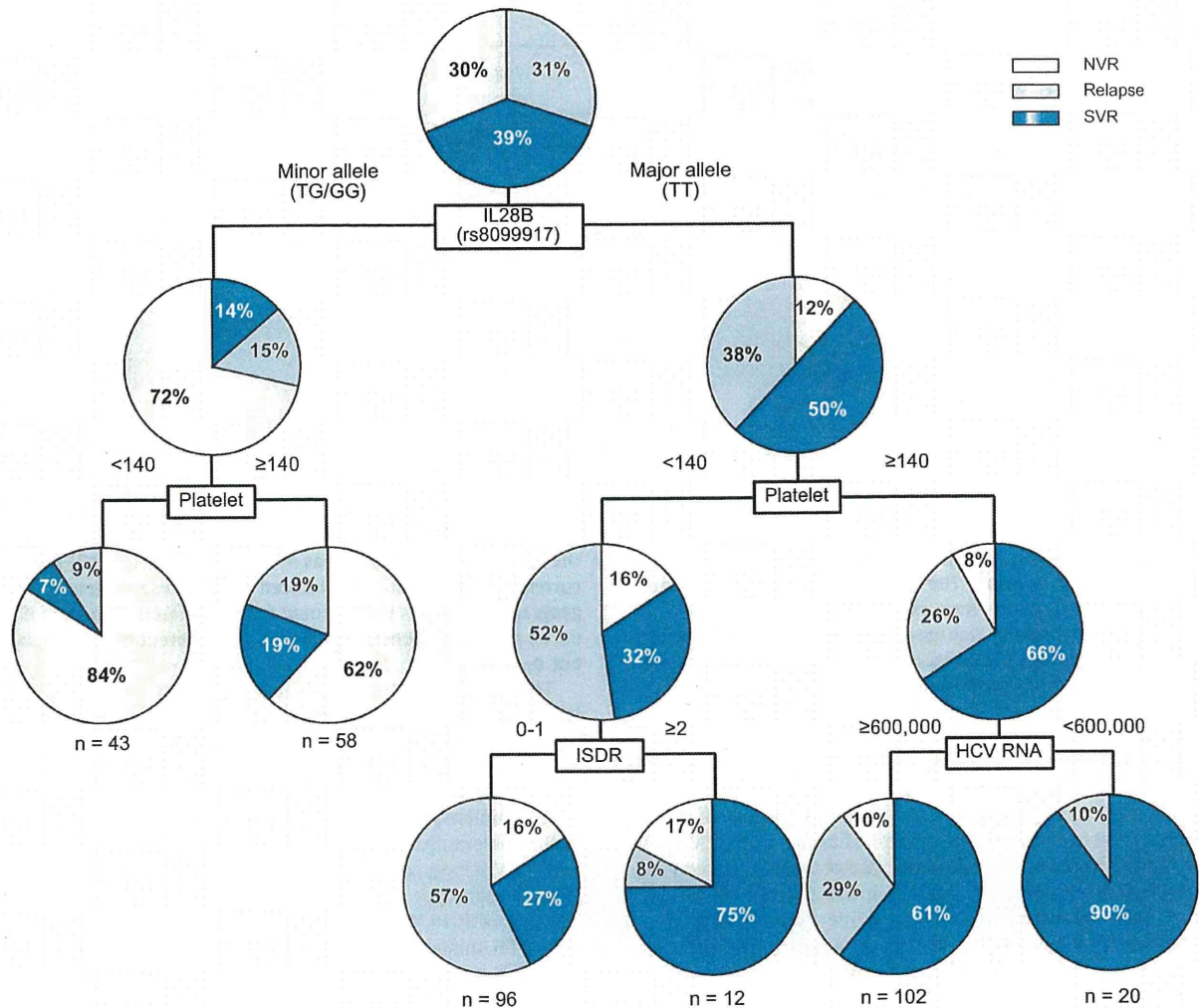


Fig. 5. Decision tree for the prediction of response to therapy. The boxes indicate the factors used for splitting. Pie charts indicate the rate of response for each group of patients after splitting. The rate of null virological response, relapse, and sustained virological response is shown. [This figure appears in colour on the web.]

group of patients. Using this model, we can rapidly develop an estimate of the response before treatment, by simply allocating patients to subgroups by following the flow-chart form, which may facilitate clinical decision making. This is in contrast to the calculating formula, which was constructed by the traditional logistic regression model. This was not widely used in clinical practice as it is abstruse and inconvenient. These results support the evidence based approach of selecting the optimum treatment strategy for individual patients, such as treating patients with a low probability of NVR with current PEG-IFN/RBV combination therapy or advising those with a high probability of NVR to wait for more effective future therapies. Patients with a high probability of relapse may be treated for a longer duration to avoid a relapse. Decisions may be based on the possibility of a response against a potential risk of adverse events and the cost of the therapy, or disease progression while waiting for future therapy.

We have previously reported the predictive model of early virological response to PEG-IFN and RBV in chronic hepatitis C

[26]. The top factor selected as significant was the grade of steatosis, followed by serum level of LDL cholesterol, age, GGT, and blood sugar. The mechanism of association between these factors and treatment response was not clear at that time. To our interest, a recent study by Li et al. [47] has shown that high serum level of LDL cholesterol was linked to the IL28B major allele (CC in rs12979860). High serum level of LDL cholesterol was associated with SVR but it was no longer significant when analyzed together with the IL28B genotype in multivariate analysis. Thus, the association between treatment response and LDL cholesterol levels may reflect the underlining link of LDL cholesterol levels to IL28B genotype. Steatosis is reported to be correlated with low lipid levels [48] which suggest that IL28B genotypes may be also associated with steatosis. In fact, there were significant correlations between the IL28B genotype and the presence of steatosis in the present study (Table 4). In addition, the serum level of GGT, another predictive factor in our previous study, was significantly associated with IL28B genotype in the present study

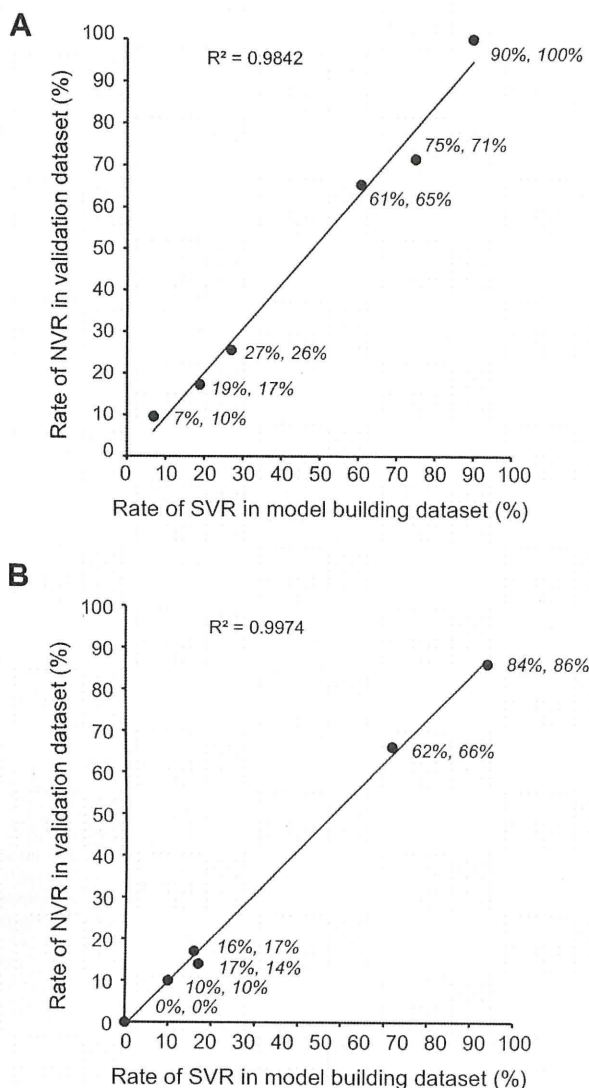


Fig. 6. Validation of the CART analysis. Each patient in the validation group was allocated to one of the six subgroups by following the flow-chart form of the decision tree. The rate of (A) sustained virological response (SVR) and (B) null virological response (NVR) in each subgroup was calculated and plotted. The X-axis represents the rate of SVR or NVR in the model building patients and the Y-axis represents those in the validation patients. The rate of SVR and NVR in each subgroup of patients is closely correlated to the model building and the validation patients (correlation coefficient: $r^2 = 0.98-0.99$).

(Table 4). The serum level of GGT was significantly associated with NVR when examined independently but was no longer significant when analyzed together with the IL28B genotype. These observations indicate that some of the factors that we have previously identified may be associated with virological response to therapy through the underlining link to the IL28B genotype.

In conclusion, the present study highlighted the impact of the IL28B polymorphism and mutation in the ISDR on the pre-treatment prediction of response to PEG-IFN/RBV therapy. A decision model including these host and viral factors has the potential to

support selection of the optimum treatment strategy for individual patients, which may enable personalized treatment.

Conflicts of interest

The authors who have taken part in this study declare that they do not have anything to disclose regarding funding or conflict of interest with respect to this manuscript.

Financial support

This study was supported by a grant-in-aid from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Japan, (H19-kannen-013), (H20-kannen-006).

References

- Ray Kim W. Global epidemiology and burden of hepatitis C. *Microbes Infect* 2002;4 (12):1219-1225.
- 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 (13):975-982.
- Manns MP, McHutchison JG, Gordon SC, Rustgi VK, Shiffman M, Reindollar R, et al. Peginterferon alfa-2b plus ribavirin compared with interferon alfa-2b plus ribavirin for initial treatment of chronic hepatitis C: a randomised trial. *Lancet* 2001;358 (9286):958-965.
- Akuta N, Suzuki F, Sezaki H, Suzuki Y, Hosaka T, Someya T, et al. Association of amino acid substitution pattern in core protein of hepatitis C virus genotype 1b high viral load and non-virological response to interferon-ribavirin combination therapy. *Intervirology* 2005;48 (6):372-380.
- 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 (3):645-652.
- Tanaka Y, Nishida N, Sugiyama M, Kurosaki M, Matsuura K, Sakamoto N, et al. Genome-wide association of IL28B with response to pegylated interferon-alpha and ribavirin therapy for chronic hepatitis C. *Nat Genet* 2009;41:1105-1109.
- Suppiah V, Moldovan M, Ahlenstiel G, Berg T, Weltman M, Abate ML, et al. IL28B is associated with response to chronic hepatitis C interferon-alpha and ribavirin therapy. *Nat Genet* 2009;41:1100-1104.
- Ge D, Fellay J, Thompson AJ, Simon JS, Shianna KV, Urban TJ, et al. Genetic variation in IL28B predicts hepatitis C treatment-induced viral clearance. *Nature* 2009;461 (7262):399-401.
- Rauch A, Kutalik Z, Descombes P, Cai T, Di Iulio J, Mueller T, et al. Genetic variation in IL28B is associated with chronic hepatitis C and treatment failure: a genome-wide association study. *Gastroenterology* 2010;138 (4):1338-1345.
- Enomoto N, Sakuma I, Asahina Y, Kurosaki M, Murakami T, Yamamoto C, et al. Comparison of full-length sequences of interferon-sensitive and resistant hepatitis C virus 1b. Sensitivity to interferon is conferred by amino acid substitutions in the NS5A region. *J Clin Invest* 1995;96 (1):224-230.
- Enomoto N, Sakuma I, Asahina Y, Kurosaki M, Murakami T, Yamamoto C, et al. Mutations in the nonstructural protein 5A gene and response to interferon in patients with chronic hepatitis C virus 1b infection. *N Engl J Med* 1996;334 (2):77-81.
- Kurosaki M, Enomoto N, Murakami T, Sakuma I, Asahina Y, Yamamoto C, et al. Analysis of genotypes and amino acid residues 2209 to 2248 of the NS5A region of hepatitis C virus in relation to the response to interferon-beta therapy. *Hepatology* 1997;25 (3):750-753.
- Shirakawa H, Matsumoto A, Joshita S, Komatsu M, Tanaka N, Umemura T, et al. Pretreatment prediction of virological response to peginterferon plus ribavirin therapy in chronic hepatitis C patients using viral and host factors. *Hepatology* 2008;48 (6):1753-1760.
- Akuta N, Suzuki F, Kawamura Y, Yatsuji H, Sezaki H, Suzuki Y, et al. Predictive factors of early and sustained responses to peginterferon plus ribavirin combination therapy in Japanese patients infected with hepatitis C virus genotype 1b: amino acid substitutions in the core region and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels. *J Hepatol* 2007;46 (3):403-410.

Research Article

- [15] Okanoue T, Itoh Y, Hashimoto H, Yasui K, Minami M, Takehara T, et al. Predictive values of amino acid sequences of the core and NS5A regions in antiviral therapy for hepatitis C: a Japanese multi-center study. *J Gastroenterol* 2009;44 (9):952-963.
- [16] Segal MR, Bloch DA. A comparison of estimated proportional hazards models and regression trees. *Stat Med* 1989;8 (5):539-550.
- [17] LeBlanc M, Crowley J. A review of tree-based prognostic models. *Cancer Treat Res* 1995;75:113-124.
- [18] Garzotto M, Beer TM, Hudson RG, Peters L, Hsieh YC, Barrera E, et al. Improved detection of prostate cancer using classification and regression tree analysis. *J Clin Oncol* 2005;23 (19):4322-4329.
- [19] Averbuch BJ, Fu P, Rao JS, Mansour EG. A long-term analysis of 1018 patients with melanoma by classic Cox regression and tree-structured survival analysis at a major referral center: implications on the future of cancer staging. *Surgery* 2002;132 (4):589-602.
- [20] Leiter U, Buettner PG, Eigentler TK, Garbe C. Prognostic factors of thin cutaneous melanoma: an analysis of the central malignant melanoma registry of the German dermatological society. *J Clin Oncol* 2004;22 (18):3660-3667.
- [21] Valera VA, Walter BA, Yokoyama N, Koyama Y, Iiai T, Okamoto H, et al. Prognostic groups in colorectal carcinoma patients based on tumor cell proliferation and classification and regression tree (CART) survival analysis. *Ann Surg Oncol* 2007;14 (1):34-40.
- [22] Zlobec I, Steele R, Nigam N, Compton CC. A predictive model of rectal tumor response to preoperative radiotherapy using classification and regression tree methods. *Clin Cancer Res* 2005;11 (15):5440-5443.
- [23] Thabane M, Simunovic M, Akhtar-Danesh N, Marshall JK. Development and validation of a risk score for post-infectious irritable bowel syndrome. *Am J Gastroenterol* 2009;104 (9):2267-2274.
- [24] Wu BU, Johannes RS, Sun X, Tabak Y, Conwell DL, Banks PA. The early prediction of mortality in acute pancreatitis: a large population-based study. *Gut* 2008;57 (12):1698-1703.
- [25] Fonarow GC, Adams Jr KF, Abraham WT, Yancy CW, Boscardin WJ. Risk stratification for in-hospital mortality in acutely decompensated heart failure: classification and regression tree analysis. *Jama* 2005;293 (5):572-580.
- [26] Kurosaki M, Matsunaga K, Hirayama I, Tanaka T, Sato M, Yasui Y, et al. A predictive model of response to peginterferon ribavirin in chronic hepatitis C using classification and regression tree analysis. *Hepatol Res* 2010;40 (3):251-260.
- [27] Nishida N, Tanabe T, Takasu M, Suyama A, Tokunaga K. Further development of multiplex single nucleotide polymorphism typing method, the DigiTag2 assay. *Anal Biochem* 2007;364 (1):78-85.
- [28] Hezode C, Forestier N, Dusheiko G, Ferenci P, Pol S, Goeser T, et al. Telaprevir and peginterferon with or without ribavirin for chronic HCV infection. *N Engl J Med* 2009;360 (18):1839-1850.
- [29] McHutchison JG, Everson GT, Gordon SC, Jacobson IM, Sulkowski M, Kauffman R, et al. Telaprevir with peginterferon and ribavirin for chronic HCV genotype 1 infection. *N Engl J Med* 2009;360 (18):1827-1838.
- [30] Rossignol JF, Elfert A, El-Gohary Y, Keeffe EB. Improved virologic response in chronic hepatitis C genotype 4 treated with nitazoxanide, peginterferon, and ribavirin. *Gastroenterology* 2009;136 (3):856-862.
- [31] Marcello T, Grakoui A, Barba-Spaeth G, Machlin ES, Kottenko SV, MacDonald MR, et al. Interferons alpha and lambda inhibit hepatitis C virus replication with distinct signal transduction and gene regulation kinetics. *Gastroenterology* 2006;131 (6):1887-1898.
- [32] Robek MD, Boyd BS, Chisari FV. Lambda interferon inhibits hepatitis B and C virus replication. *J Virol* 2005;79 (6):3851-3854.
- [33] McCarthy JJ, Li JH, Thompson A, Suchindran S, Lao XQ, Patel K, et al. Replicated association between an IL28B Gene Variant and a Sustained Response to Pegylated Interferon and Ribavirin. *Gastroenterology* 2010;138:2307-2314.
- [34] Tanaka Y, Nishida N, Sugiyama M, Tokunaga K, Mizokami M. A-interferons and the single nucleotide polymorphisms: a milestone to tailor-made therapy for chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatol Res* 2010;40:449-460.
- [35] Backus LI, Boothroyd DB, Phillips BR, Mole LA. Predictors of response of US veterans to treatment for the hepatitis C virus. *Hepatology* 2007;46 (1):37-47.
- [36] Mori N, Imamura M, Kawakami Y, Saneto H, Kawaoka T, Takaki S, et al. Randomized trial of high-dose interferon-alpha-2b combined with ribavirin in patients with chronic hepatitis C: correlation between amino acid substitutions in the core/NS5A region and virological response to interferon therapy. *J Med Virol* 2009;81 (4):640-649.
- [37] Hung CH, Lee CM, Lu SN, Lee JF, Wang JH, Tung HD, et al. Mutations in the NS5A and E2-PePHD region of hepatitis C virus type 1b and correlation with the response to combination therapy with interferon and ribavirin. *J Viral Hepat* 2003;10 (2):87-94.
- [38] Yen YH, Hung CH, Hu TH, Chen CH, Wu CM, Wang JH, et al. Mutations in the interferon sensitivity-determining region (nonstructural 5A amino acid 2209-2248) in patients with hepatitis C-1b infection and correlating response to combined therapy of pegylated interferon and ribavirin. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther* 2008;22 (1):72-79.
- [39] Zeuzem S, Lee JH, Roth WK. Mutations in the nonstructural 5A gene of European hepatitis C virus isolates and response to interferon alfa. *Hepatology* 1997;25 (3):740-744.
- [40] Squadrito G, Leone F, Sartori M, Nalpas B, Berthelot P, Raimondo G, et al. Mutations in the nonstructural 5A region of hepatitis C virus and response of chronic hepatitis C to interferon alfa. *Gastroenterology* 1997;113 (2):567-572.
- [41] Sarrazin C, Berg T, Lee JH, Teuber G, Dietrich CF, Roth WK, et al. Improved correlation between multiple mutations within the NS5A region and virological response in European patients chronically infected with hepatitis C virus type 1b undergoing combination therapy. *J Hepatol* 1999;30 (6):1004-1013.
- [42] Murphy MD, Rosen HR, Marousek GI, Chou S. Analysis of sequence configurations of the ISDR, PKR-binding domain, and V3 region as predictors of response to induction interferon-alpha and ribavirin therapy in chronic hepatitis C infection. *Dig Dis Sci* 2002;47 (6):1195-1205.
- [43] Pascu M, Martus P, Hohne M, Wiedenmann B, Hopf U, Schreier E, et al. Sustained virological response in hepatitis C virus type 1b infected patients is predicted by the number of mutations within the NS5A-ISDR: a meta-analysis focused on geographical differences. *Gut* 2004;53 (9):1345-1351.
- [44] Thomas DL, Thio CL, Martin MP, Qi Y, Ge D, O'Huigin C, et al. Genetic variation in IL28B and spontaneous clearance of hepatitis C virus. *Nature* 2009;461 (7265):798-801.
- [45] Kurosaki M, Enomoto N, Marumo F, Sato C. Evolution and selection of hepatitis C virus variants in patients with chronic hepatitis C. *Virology* 1994;205 (1):161-169.
- [46] Enomoto N, Kurosaki M, Tanaka Y, Marumo F, Sato C. Fluctuation of hepatitis C virus quasispecies in persistent infection and interferon treatment revealed by single-strand conformation polymorphism analysis. *J Gen Virol* 1994;75 (Pt 6):1361-1369.
- [47] Li JH, Lao XQ, Tillmann HL, Rowell J, Patel K, Thompson A, et al. Interferon-lambda genotype and low serum low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels in patients with chronic hepatitis C infection. *Hepatology* 1904;51 (6):1904-1911.
- [48] Serfaty L, Andreani T, Giral P, Carbonell N, Chazouilleres O, Poupon R. Hepatitis C virus induced hypobetalipoproteinemia: a possible mechanism for steatosis in chronic hepatitis C. *J Hepatol* 2001;34 (3):428-434.

