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Published in:
European Journal of Neuroscience

DOI:
10.1111/j.0953-816X.2003.03147.x

2004

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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SHORT COMMUNICATION
Lesion-dependent regulation of transgene expression in the rat brain using a human glial fibrillary acidic protein- lentiviral vector

Johan Jakobsson, Biljana Georgievska, Cecilia Ericson and Cecilia Lundberg
Wallenberg Neuroscience Center, Department of Physiological Sciences, Lund University, BMC A11, 221 84 Lund, Sweden

Keywords: astrocyte, gene therapy, glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor, green fluorescent protein

Abstract
The ability to regulate transgene expression will be crucial for development of gene therapy to the brain. The most commonly used systems are based on a transactivator in combination with a drug, e.g. the tetracycline-regulated system. Here we describe a different method of transgene regulation by the use of the human glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) promoter. We constructed a lentiviral vector that directs transgene expression to astrocytes. Using toxin-induced lesions we investigated to what extent transgene expression could be regulated in accordance with the activation of the endogenous GFAP gene. In animals receiving excitotoxic lesions of the striatum we detected an eightfold increase of green fluorescent protein (GFP)-expressing cells. The vast majority of these cells did not divide, suggesting that the transgene was indeed regulated in a similar fashion as the endogenous GFAP gene. This finding will lead to the development of lentiviral vectors with autoregulatory capacities that may be very useful for gene therapy to the brain.

Introduction
The use of viral vectors to deliver foreign genes to the brain is highly effective and is now a widely used method. There are a number of different vectors that transduce cells in the brain in a slightly different manner (for a review see, e.g. Davidson & Breakefield, 2003). In our laboratory, we have investigated the characteristics of lentiviral vectors. These vectors have a number of appealing features including the abilities to efficiently transduce cells in the central nervous system, maintain long-term expression and direct expression to specific cell populations (Blomer et al., 1997; Kordower et al., 1999; Jakobsson et al., 2003). The therapeutic effects of different genes delivered by lentiviral vectors have been documented in a number of animal models, both in rodents and primates, and examples include delivery of glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF) in models of Parkinson’s disease (Georgievska et al., 2002b; Kordower et al., 2000) and ciliary neurotrophic factor (CNTF) in models of Huntington’s disease (de Almeida et al., 2001).

An aspect of gene delivery to the brain that is currently being developed is the ability to regulate transgene expression. Efforts have been made to develop systems based on different drugs or hormones including tetracycline, rapamycin and progesterone (Clackson, 2000). However, the proteins needed for transcriptional control have been reported to be immunogenic and there is often a substantial leakage in the systems (Clackson, 2000). We, therefore, decided to try another approach to regulate transgenic expression.

Up-regulation of glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) is well documented in several animal models as well as in different pathological states in the human brain (Eng et al., 2000). We, therefore, hypothesized that regulating the transgene with a GFAP promoter in a viral vector would give rise to a high transgenic expression in the lesioned brain and a substantially less pronounced expression in the normal, intact brain. This would provide an option of regulating expression by using the machinery of the host cell instead of depending on recombinant regulatory proteins.

In this study we used a lentiviral vector that drives transgene expression under a human GFAP (hGFAP) promoter. The 2.1-kb element of the hGFAP promoter used here has been extensively studied and found to be up-regulated after several different stimuli both in vitro and in vivo in transgenic mice (Brenner et al., 1994; Eng et al., 2000). We have recently reported that this vector directs transgene expression to glial cells in a highly specific manner when injected into the rat striatum (Jakobsson et al., 2003). Based on these previous findings we argued that this vector would be able to respond to the same transcription factors that regulate the endogenous GFAP expression in a lesioned brain. We, therefore, designed a study to compare the expression of green fluorescent protein (GFP) and GDNF under the control of the hGFAP promoter in the intact brain and after different lesions to the brain.

Materials and methods

Viral vectors
The construction of lentiviral vectors expressing GFP under either a 2.1-kb hGFAP promoter or a 1.5-kb rat neuron-specific enolase (rNSE) promoter (control vector) has been described elsewhere (Jakobsson et al., 2003). In order to produce a lentiviral vector expressing GDNF under the control of the hGFAP promoter, the cDNA for human GDNF was released from a pH.R.CMV.GDNF plasmid (Georgievska et al., 2002b) using BamHI–SacII digestion. This fragment was then ligated...
into the corresponding sites of the hGFAP.GFP vector. All three constructs used in this study contained the central polypiridine tract and the woodchuck hepatitis post-transcriptional regulatory element that have been shown to enhance transduction in the brain (Zafferey et al., 1999; Zennou et al., 2001). Viral vectors were produced using transient cotransfection as previously described (Zafferey et al., 1997).

The titre of the different batches was estimated using an RNA slot blot technique (von Schwedler et al., 1993). A batch of vector (CMV.GFP) with a known titre was used as a standard in order to estimate a functional titre. The titres of the three batches used in this study were estimated to be $1.0 \times 10^9$ TU/mL (hGFAP.GDNF), $1.0 \times 10^8$ TU/mL (hGFAP.GFP) and $1.1 \times 10^8$ TU/mL (nNSE.GFP), where TU are transducing units.

Surgical procedures

All experiments performed on animals were approved by and performed according to the guidelines of the Ethical Committee for Use of Laboratory Animals at Lund University. A total of 28 young female Sprague-Dawley rats (225 g; B & K Universal, Solna, Sweden) were housed two to three per cage with free access to food and water under a 12 h light:dark cycle. The animals were anaesthetized with isoflurane (2% in a 40% oxygen/60% nitrogen mixture) throughout the surgery session. The animals were placed in a stereotaxic frame and the vector suspension was injected using the coordinates listed below.

In the experiment using GFP as the transgene, 1 µL of a three times diluted vector was injected bilaterally into the rat striatum at (coordinates from bregma and dural surface) anterior–posterior (AP), +1.2, medio-lateral (ML), ±2.5 and dorso-ventral (DV), −4.5 mm. A thin glass capillary was attached to a Hamilton syringe in order to produce minimal mechanical damage to the host brain. One group of animals ($n = 11$) was injected with hGFAP.GFP vector while the other group ($n = 9$) received injections of nNSE.GFP vector. The animals were divided into three groups 3 weeks after the vector injection. The first group (hGFAP, $n = 5$; nNSE, $n = 4$) received a unilateral striatal lesion using the excitotoxin ibotenic acid (IBO; Sigma, Stockholm, Sweden), a total of 1.5 µL of 10 µg/mL in 0.1 mL phosphate buffer, pH 7.4, at three sites, coordinates (in mm) as follows: (i) AP, +0.2, ML, −3.0, DV, −5.5; (ii) AP, +0.2, ML, −3.0, DV, −4.0 and (iii) AP, +1.5, ML, +3, DV, −5.6 with the tooth bar set at −2.3 mm (Paxinos & Watson, 1986). The second group (hGFAP, $n = 5$; nNSE, $n = 4$) received a unilateral lesion of the medial forebrain bundle using 6-hydroxy dopamine (6-OHDA), a total of 4.5 µL of 3 mg/mL in 0.02% ascorbic acid) at the following (in mm) coordinates: (i) AP, −4.0, ML, −0.8, DV, −8.0 and (ii) AP, −4.4, ML, −1.2, DV, −7.8 mm. The third group (one animal of each vector) was left intact.

In the experiment using GDNF as the transgene, concentrated viral vector was injected bilaterally into the striatum ($n = 4$) at three sites (1 µL per site) at the following coordinates: (i) AP, +1.4, ML, ±2.6, DV, −5.0, −4.0; (ii) AP, +0.4, ML, ±3.4, DV, −5.0, −4.0 and (iii) AP, −0.8, ML, ±4.4, DV, −5.0, −4.0 and the tooth bar set at 0.0 mm. Four weeks after the vector injections, the animals received injections of a total of 21 µg 6-OHDA (calculated as free base; Sigma) divided into three 7-µg deposits into the right striatum according to Kirik et al. (1998). The injections were made at the following coordinates: (i) AP, +1.0, ML, −3.0, DV, −5.0; (ii) AP, −0.1, ML, −3.7, DV, −5.0 and (iii) AP, −1.2, ML, −4.5, DV, −5.0 and the tooth bar set at 0.0 mm.

Histology

At 1 week postlesion the animals in the GFP experiment were deeply anaesthetized (1 mL/225 g pentobarbital i.p.; Apoteksbolaget, Sweden) and transcardially perfused with 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer, pH 7.4. The brains were postfixed in paraformalde-
native up-regulation of GFAP (Fig. 2A–C), which was massive in an area surrounding the lesion while the necrotic centre of the lesion displayed almost no immunoreactivity against GFAP. On the contralateral side of the lesion, GFAP expression could only be found in a very limited area surrounding the injection site and also here GFP expression colocalized with an up-regulated GFAP expression as a result of the mechanical injury by the injection needle (Fig. 2G–I). The GFP-positive cells found in animals injected with the hGFAP vector had glia-like morphologies and confocal analysis confirmed that a large proportion of these cells colocalized with native GFAP expression. When examining double labelling of GFP and PCNA, a few double-labelled cells (<5%) were found, indicating that the increase in GFP-positive cells could, to some extent, be explained by cell division (Fig. 2J–L). However, the majority of GFP-positive cells were negative for PCNA. The PCNA expression pattern was very similar to OX-19 staining (and, to some extent, OX-42 immunoreactivity) suggesting that the majority of newly formed cells were microglial cells or cells penetrating from the blood system (data not shown).

**GFP expression after 6-hydroxy dopamine lesion to the medial forebrain bundle**

In the animals that were lesioned in the medial forebrain bundle using 6-OHDA no increase in the number of GFP-expressing cells was found on the lesioned side in animals injected with the hGFAP vector (842 ± 281, n = 5 compared with 1092 ± 459 cells, n = 5, P = 0.62; Fig. 1A and C). In contrast to the animals lesioned with IBO, only a small increase of endogenous GFAP expression was found (Fig. 2D–F). Tyrosine hydroxylase immunohistochemistry showed that there was an almost complete loss of the nigrostriatal fibre innervation. The GFP-positive cells that were found were mainly situated around the injection site and colocalized with endogenous GFAP expression as seen in the specimens from the IBO group (Fig. 2D–F).

**Glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor expression after intrastriatal 6-hydroxy dopamine lesion**

At 1 week after the intrastriatal 6-OHDA lesions, we found a threefold up-regulation of GDNF levels in the striatum as compared with the intact side (Table 1, P < 0.01). Interestingly, we also detected low levels of GDNF in the SN pars reticulata (SNpr; ~0.1 ng/mg tissue; Table 1). This indicates that there was an anterograde transport of GDNF protein to the SNpr, which may be a consequence of a small subset of neurons expressing unspecifically from the hGFAP promoter in the striatum. The GDNF levels were, however, not up-regulated in the SNpr ipsilateral to the lesion (see Table 1) indicating that the increased levels of GDNF in the lesioned striatum were due to an increased GFAP expression in astrocytes in the damaged striatum.

**Discussion**

In this study we have taken advantage of the up-regulated GFAP expression that is found after a lesion to the brain. By driving transgenic expression from a lentiviral vector using a 2.1-kb DNA element taken from upstream of the hGFAP gene we found that transgene expression was regulated in a similar manner as the endogenous GFAP expression. This is a novel way of regulating transgene expression from a viral vector in the brain and has the advantage that
no inducing molecule, such as doxycycline, has to be added and that no recombinant regulatory protein has to be coexpressed.

The fact that we were able to regulate two independent transgenes using two different lesion models demonstrates a solid proof of principle. However, when using high doses of viral vectors as in the GDNF experiment there is also substantial expression in the nonlesioned striatum. Further studies will confirm if it is possible to remove this background expression and to what levels the induced GFAP promoter will be able to express a transgene. It will also be of importance to analyse whether or not expression is codown-regulated with the endogenous GFAP expression at later time points.

The up-regulation of transgene expression can be explained in two ways. On one hand it is known that there is cell division in the glial cell population in a lesioned brain area (Bignami & Dahl, 1995). In our case we studied this by performing immunohistochemistry for the cell cycle marker PCNA. Proliferating cell nuclear antigen is expressed during S-phase in dividing cells and its expression correlates well with other markers of mitosis such as Ki-67 and bromodeoxyuridine labelling (Abadie et al., 1999; Kato et al., 2003). On the other hand, our findings indicate that only a small minority of GFP-labelled cells (<5%) were double labelled for PCNA, suggesting that it is unlikely that the increase in GFP-positive cells (eightfold) after excitotoxic lesion is due only to self-renewal of GFP-positive cells. In brain trauma models astrocytes have been shown to increase 1.8-fold 1 week after injury (Kato et al., 2003), which is much less than the eightfold increase of GFP-expressing cells detected here. Therefore,

TABLE 1. Expression of GDNF from the hGFAP:GDNF vector in the intact nigrostriatal system and 1 week after an intrastriatal 6-OHDA lesion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Striatum</th>
<th>Substantia nigra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intact</td>
<td>1.74 ± 0.29</td>
<td>0.13 ± 0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-OHDA</td>
<td>5.22 ± 0.84*</td>
<td>0.10 ± 0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Values are presented as ng/mg tissue ± SEM (n = 4). *Significantly different from intact striatum (P < 0.01).
we believe that it is more likely that silent or near silent proviral copies integrated into the genome of host cells have been reactivated by the same cellular signals that activate the endogenous GFAP gene after a lesion.

In a previous study we found that the hGFAP:GFP vector directed transgene expression to astrocytes in a highly specific manner (Jakobsson et al., 2003). In the present study when GDNF was used as the transgene and protein levels were measured using ELISA we were able to detect levels of the transgene in the SN. This correlates with previous studies in our laboratory where anterograde transport to the SNp was found using a CMV promoter-based lentiviral vector (Georgievska et al., 2002a,b). Explanations for this include a small subset of neurons expressing the GDNF transgene nonspecifically from the hGFAP promoter, possibly due to the random integration of the provirus leading to influence from surrounding enhancers and/or promoters (Lai et al., 2002), or GDNF being taken up by striatal projection neurons and transported to the SN. In this study we could not detect any cells with neuronal profiles expressing the GFP transgene, which is in keeping with our previous results (Jakobsson et al., 2003). The discrepancy between the two transgenes may also be due to the use of more virus vector (approx. 10 times more) in the GDNF experiments. However, the levels of GDNF were not up-regulated in the SNp ipsilateral to the striatal lesion indicating that the up-regulation of transgene expression was specific to astrocytes.

The fact that transgenic expression was not up-regulated after the medial forebrain bundle lesion may be explained by the lack of a significant up-regulation of endogenous GFAP exceeding the pure mechanical trauma that takes place when the injection needle is inserted and the viral vector is injected. In the case of the up-regulated transgenic GDNF expression found after an intrastriatal 6-OHDA lesion, it should be kept in mind that this lesion is, in fact, a combined mechanical (injection needle) and toxin-specific effect.

It will be critical to develop efficient means of regulating transgene expression if gene therapy is to be used clinically in certain brain disorders. We report here a novel strategy that uses the host cell’s own machinery to regulate expression in a lesion-dependent manner. Although further evaluation is necessary this may provide an alternative to systems that include inducer molecules and transgenic transactivators.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Ulla Jarl, AnnKarin Oldén and Anneli Josefsson for excellent technical support. This study was supported by the Swedish MRC (grant nos 13479 and 13285) and by the Segerfalk, Kock, Wiberg and Bergvall Foundations.

Abbreviations

AP, anterior–posterior; DV, dorso-ventral; GDNF, glial cell line-derived trophic factor; GFAP, glial fibrillary acidic protein; GFP, green fluorescent protein; hGFAP, human GFAP; IBO, ibotenic acid; ML, medio-lateral; NSE, neuron specific enolase; 6-OHDA, 6-hydroxy dopamine; PCNA, proliferating cell nuclear antigen; rNSE, rat NSE; SN, substantia nigra; SNpr, SN pars reticulata.

References


