Introduction of Three Independent Selection Markers in
Leishmania

Noushin Davoudi¹, Fereidoun Mahboudi*¹, Mohammad Azizi¹, Ahmad Adeli¹ and Robert. W. McMaster²

¹Dept. of Biotechnology, Pasteur Institute of Iran, Tehran, Iran; ²Jack Bell Research Center, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

ABSTRACT

The pLE2SCX vector was developed for the stable expression of exogenous genes in the protozoan parasite Leishmania. The pLE2SCX construct contains three independent selection markers: herpes simplex virus thymidine kinase (HSV-TK), cytosine deaminase (CD) and streptothricin acetyltransferase gene (sat) in multiple cloning site, flanking by 5’ and 3’ untranslated regions of the previously cloned Leishmania major hexa-binding protein gene. Selection was based on resistance to the nourseothricin (Ns) which corresponds to sat gene. The two negative selection; HSV-TK and CD genes, make the transformed cell sensitive to ganciclovir (GCV) and 5-fluorocytosine (5-FC). The vector was introduced into Leishmania promastigotes by electroporation and maintained as circular form. The selected transfecants were not grown on media with GCV or 5-FC. Using two drug sensitive selectable markers together on a vector is a novel strategy in gene cloning in Leishmania. This stable transfection vector has allowed the permanently expression of several different exogenous genes at the same time in Leishmania. Iran. Biomed. J. 7 (1): 13-18, 2003

Keywords: HSV-thymidine kinase (HSV-TK), Cytosine deaminase (CD), ganciclovir (GCV), 5-fluorocytosine (5-FC), nourseothricin (Ns)

INTRODUCTION

Protozoan parasites of the genus Leishmania are the etiologic agents of a spectrum of human disease collectively referred to leishmaniasis. Leishmania is transmitted via the bite of a blood-feeding insect vector and is endemic in many tropical and subtropical areas of the world [1]. During the 1980s, a variety of kinetoplastid genes were cloned and their functions inferred from homology with genes from other organisms, location of the corresponding proteins or expression in heterologous systems. Before the availability of DNA transfection methodology, we could not analyze the function of kinetoplastid genes within the organisms. Since then, it has become possible to create and complement mutants, to over-express foreign proteins in the parasites, to knock out genes and even to switch off essential functions [2]. The breakthrough in transfection technology started with the expression of reporter genes after electro- poration of parasites with circular vectors and then a wide spectrum of methods for functional gene analysis were developed. [3].

Herpes simplex thymidine kinase (HSV-TK) has been the target for drugs such as acyclovir and ganciclovir (GCV) which are acyclic guanosine analogues converted to their monophosphate forms by HSV-TK. Cellular kinases metabolize these into di- and tri-phosphates. The triphosphate forms inhibit DNA-alpha-polymerase [4] and are incorporated into DNA causing chain termination [5].

Cytosine deaminase (CD) is found in a variety of bacteria and fungi. It functions in the salvage pathway during nutritional stress to deaminate cytosine to uracil [6]. Cells expressing these enzymes are sensitive to the drug 5-fluorocytosine (5-FC) which is deaminated to 5-fluorouracil (5-Fu). This metabolite is then acted by cellular enzymes to produce 5-fluorouridine, 5-triphosphate and 5-fluoro-2-deoxyuridine, 5-monophosphate, which interfere with DNA and RNA synthesis, and lead to cell death [7].

The procedures for transfection of Leishmania and other kinetoplastid protozoans have been developed by electroporation [3, 8-10]. This study describes the development of expression vector that contains independent positive and negative selectable markers for transfection of Leishmania. This construct could be used as autonomously...
replicating expression vector or integral form with genomic DNA of *Leishmania*. In present study, we introduced circular form of this construct in *Leishmania* and obtained sensitivity to two drugs; GCV and 5-FC and also resistance to nourseothricin (Ns) antibiotic. These drug-sensitive strains could be exploited for vaccine development.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Plasmid constructs.** I) The thymidine kinase gene of herpes simplex type-1 virus was obtained from vector pET23d:75 (a kind gift from Dr. M. Black) by PCR amplification using the following primers: 5′-ACT AGT GGT ATG GCT TCG T-3′ and 5′-TCT AGA TGT TTC AGT TAG C-3′ that contain the SpeI and XbaI restriction sites, respectively (underlined). This gene is a derivative of the wild type HSV-TK gene that was identified in a screen following random mutagenesis of the putative nucleoside-binding region. The 1100-bp PCR product was digested by SpeI and HindIII, and then cloned into pGEM9zf resulted in plasmid called “pGEMtk75” (Fig. 1A). The intergenic region of the α-tubulin gene of *Leishmania* contained sequences required for gene expression in *Leishmania* [11, 12]. This region was chosen because it was highly expressed in both *Leishmania* life stages [14]. The intergenic α-tubulin region was obtained by PCR amplification on *L. major* genomic DNA using primers based on the published DNA sequence of *L. donovani* α-tubulin [12]. The upstream primer 5′-CGC AAG CTT GGT ACA CTC GTG CCG CGC -3′ and downstream primer 5′-TCT AGA GGC TGA AAA AGA AGA AAG AGG GG -3′ that contain the HindIII and XbaI restriction sites, respectively (underlined) were used for PCR amplification (Fig. 2). The 900-bp PCR product of *L. major* α-tubulin intergenic region was cloned at downstream of HSV-TK gene in pGEMtk75 and named “pGEMtk-tu” (Fig. 1B).

The 5′-UTR of *L. major* hexa-binding protein (HEXBP) gene [14] was cloned in SpeI site, upstream of HSV-TK in pGEMtk-tu and resulted in plasmid named “pGEM (5′-utr-tk-tu)” (Fig. 1C).

II) CD gene was the second suicide gene or negative selectable marker for our gene cassette. *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* CD gene was obtained by PCR amplification from yeast genomic DNA using primers based on the published DNA sequence [6, 15]. The primers 5′-GCG ACT AGT TAC CAC TGT CCC CCT TAC CGT and 5′-GCG AAG CTT GAT GAG TGG TTA TAG AAG TTT were used for amplification. The amplification conditions were as follows: 30 cycles of 1 min at 94°C, 1 min at 55°C and 1 min at 72°C and the last cycle 1 min at 94°C, 2 min 55°C and 7 min 72°C. The 500-bp PCR product of the CD gene, with SpeI/HindIII restriction sites (underlined), was cloned in upstream of α-tubulin intergenic region in pGEM-tu (Fig. 1D). In the pBSK(-) plasmid, Ns resistance gene; streptomycin acetyltransferase (sat) [15] was cloned in SpeI/EcorV and then 3′-UTR of *L. major* HEXBP gene [14] was subcloned downstream of sat gene in EcorV/Sall restriction sites. The fragment contained CD and α-tubulin intergenic region exised by SpeI/XbaI enzymes from pGEM(cd-tu) and subsequently subcloned at the upstream of sat gene in pBSK (-). This plasmid named pBSK-(cd-tu-sat-3′utr) (Fig. 1E).

**Development of pLE2SCX vector.** The fragment containing: “5′-UTR-Tk-α-tubulin” from pGEM-(5′-utr-tk-tu) was digested by SpeI/XbaI and subcloned at upstream of CD gene in SpeI site in pBSK (cd-tu-sat-3′utr). The resulted plasmid called pLE2SCX (tk-cd), that is a novel construct and carries 3 independent selection markers (Fig. 3). The total size of our vector (inserts and pBSK vector) is 9.8 kb.

**Sequencing of construct.** The 5′ end of each gene in each construct was sequenced to define in-frame sequence by Sanger method [16] and was done using oligonucleotides matching to the upstream and downstream of each gene. The final construct also was sequenced using pBSK (M13) primers.

**Cell line, culture and transfection.** *L. major* MHor/IR/76 strain was obtained from Razi Institute (Iran). The strain was grown in M199 medium (Gibco, BRL, Germany) supplemented with 10% FCS [Life Technology Inc.] and 50 IU/ml of penicillin and 50 μg/ml of streptomycin. Log phase promastigotes were transfected by electroporation and cultured on semi-solid M199 medium supplemented with Ns (Clonat Co., Germany) [9]. For transfection we used Bio-Rad electroporation unit with 0.2 cm cuvette. Cells resuspended in 200 1 electroporation buffer and the pLE2SCX construct added to cells before transfection [10].
Colonies appeared on plates after 5 to 10 days and then transferred to fresh media with Ns as regular culturing.

**Drug sensitivity assay.** To measure the cytotoxicity of GCV and 5-FC to the transfected *L. major* promastigotes, the MTT (3-[4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide: thiazol blue) colorimetric assay was used [17]. This assay involves the conversion of MTT by living cells to formazan, the concentration of that can be measured spectrophotometrically. Promastigotes were grown at a concentration of $5 \times 10^5$/ml. Cells were seeded ($10^4$/well) into 96-well plates (Costar, Corning) and incubated in the presence of different concentrations of GCV and 5-FC. After 72 h incubation at 27°C, 10 µl of MTT (5 mg/ml) was added to wells and cells were further incubated at 37°C for 4 h. Following incubation, the medium was removed and the converted dye (formazan) was solubilized with 150 µl of acidic isopropanol (0.1 N HCl in absolute isopropanol). The absorbance of the converted dye was measured at 570 nm, with background subtraction at 630-690 nm.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As described in materials and methods, development of final construct was done in sequential stages and all resulted plasmids have been shown in Figure 1. Construct pLE2SCX vector obtained by integration of the fragment “5’-UTR-tk-α-tubulin” (Fig. 1C) at upstream of CD gene in pBSK (Fig. 1E).

![Fig. 1. Schematic diagram of developed constructs for generating pLE2SCX expression vector. (A), pGEM9zf was digested and TK gene cloned in SpeI/HindIII site; (B), an intergenic region from the *L. major* α-tubulin, tandem array was amplified by PCR. The 850-bp PCR product was cloned in pUC19 and digested by XbaI/HindIII (not shown), the digested fragment was subcloned in downstream of TK, to generate pGEM(tk-tu); (C), the 5’-UTR of HEXBP (white frag.) was cloned at upstream of TK gene to make pGEM(5’-utr-tk-tu); (D), in another pGEM9zf plasmid the CD and α-tubulin genes were cloned in indicated sites; (E), The Ns$^R$ gene (sat) obtained from pLEXsat by digestion and subcloned in pBSK(-). Then, 3’-UTR of HEXBP was cloned at downstream of sat gene. The (cd-α-tubulin) fragment digested by SpeI/XbaI and subcloned at upstream of sat gene in pBSK(D) to generate pBSK(cd-tu-sat-3’utr).](image-url)
In our construct, the two drug sensitivity genes (TK and CD) are flanked by specific L. major sequence corresponding to the 900-bp intergenic region of the α-tubulin gene (Fig. 2). As shown previously in Leishmania, such intergenic fragments from loci composed of tandemly repeated genes provide sufficient information required for polyadenylation and trans-splicing for expression of the upstream and the downstream genes [13, 18].

Better expression can often be obtained if the reporter gene is followed by a 3′-untranslated regions (3′-UTR) from highly expressed gene. Because polyadenylation and trans-splicing are coupled, the 3′-UTR should be followed by a second trans-splicing signal [12]. Promoters and RNA processing signals from higher eukaryotes do not function at all in trypanosomatids. Processing and expression are most efficient when 5′- and 3′-segments from the homologous species are used [2]. To demonstrate the expression of exogenous genes in Leishmania, the final construct (Fig. 3) used for transfection, the transfectants were plated onto media containing Ns. The growth rate of the transfectants was not inhibited at the highest concentration of Ns (400 μg/ml) and therefore it may be possible to attain higher levels of expression from pLE2SCX construct by further increasing the concentration of selective drug in the growth media [15]. This observation implies that pLE2SCX vector is maintained as circular molecules. Similar increase in copy number-linked expression levels has been observed for pLEX [15] and for the pX and pTEX kinetoplastid expression vector constructs [10, 19].

In order to determine whether the HSV-TK/GCV and CD/5-FC [20-22] negative selection systems inhibit the growth of promastigotes, the transfectants and mock transfected cells (electroporated in the absence of added DNA) were expanded in media with each drug (ganciclovir and 5-FC). Transfected promastigotes did not grow on solid M199 media containing 50 M ganciclovir or 40 M 5-FC. This shows that the TK, CD and sat genes, were expressed in L. major transfectants and all were sensitive to GCV and 5-FC compared to the control lacking the pLE2SCX.

**Cytotoxic effect of GCV and 5-FC on L. major promastigotes expressing the HSV-TK and CD genes.** To test whether the GCV or 5-FC affects transfected promastigotes, we used MTT assay (described in Materials and Methods). Cells were cultured on 96-well plates in the presence of different concentration of each drug. Following GCV treatment for 72 h a non-toxic dose for the cells (35 μM), the growth of promastigotes was inhibited and caused cell death (with estimated EC50 of 25 μM) (Fig. 4). To test the cytotoxicity of 5-FC, different concentrations of drug were used.
The 30 M of 5-FC caused cell death in culture media (two fold the EC50) (Fig. 5). The controls, mock-transfected promastigotes, were not affected.

LeBowitz et al. [21] and Muyombwe et al. [22] described the expression of the HSV-TK gene in L. major for the creation of GCV-sensitive strains. We showed that, under control of α-tubulin intergenic region of L. major the HSV-TK and CD genes could be expressed. As expected, the expression of the HSV-TK and yeast CD genes in transfected promastigotes resulted in sensitivity to nucleoside analogues, such as the anti-herpes drug GCV[22] and the anti-fungi drug 5-FC [20]. However, because of using mutant HSV-TK that is 40-fold more sensitive than native TK gene, the sensitivity of our strain is more than previous reports.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Dr. G.R. Habibi and Dr. A.R. Moeen for their contribution to this research. This research has been supported by TDR and the Pasteur Institute of Iran.

REFERENCES


