Corrections

CELL BIOLOGY

The authors note that on page 15453, right column, fi fth full paragraph, sentence 2, “Microarray data for HMLE Gsc, Snail, Twist, TGF-β1, and vector control has been deposited in GEO under accession number GSE9691” should instead appear as “Microarray data for HMLE Gsc, Snail, Twist, TGF-β1, and vector control has been deposited in GEO under accession number GSE24202.”

MEDICAL SCIENCES

The authors note that the GenBank Accession Numbers for the gag gene are HM630557–HM630562, and GenBank Accession Numbers for the env gene are HQ157342–HQ157343.
Retraction

MEDICAL SCIENCES


The authors wish to note the following: “Although our published findings were reproducible in our laboratory and while there has been no evidence of contamination using sensitive mouse mitochondrial DNA or IAP assays or in testing coded panels, we have the following concerns:

1. The original chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) patient samples were of insufficient volume to distribute to other laboratories for independent confirmation.
2. Only one (1) of many laboratories has found a similar association between polytropic murine leukemia viruses (pMLV) and CFS and a careful study of 100 CFS patients (2), as well as a coded panel recently constructed by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) (3), have found no evidence for either xenotropic murine leukemia virus-related virus (XMRV) or pMLVs in CFS patient samples.
3. Our attempts, through collaborations, to demonstrate antibody in affected patients, to isolate the virus by culture, or to show integration sites in the human genome have failed to support the initial findings.
4. While recall of eight patients from the original cohort 15 y later showed pMLV gag sequences in seven, the copy number was very low and phylogenetic analysis showed these sequences were not direct descendents of the original dominant strains (4). Still later samples from four of these patients tested negative in the NHLBI panel. While this result could be explained by viral clearance over time, it fails to support a sustained retroviral infection in human cells.

Although a more definitive, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID)-sponsored, coded panel of samples from 150 well-characterized and geographically diverse CFS patients and controls is being assembled for further study, in consideration of the aggregate data from our own laboratory and that of others, it is our current view that the association of murine gamma retroviruses with CFS has not withstood the test of time or of independent verification and that this association is now tenuous. Therefore, we retract the conclusions in our article.”

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www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1119641109
Detection of MLV-related virus gene sequences in blood of patients with chronic fatigue syndrome and healthy blood donors

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Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a debilitating disorder defined solely by clinical symptoms (1) and the exclusion of other diseases; its distribution is wide and its cause is unknown. In many instances, the illness starts suddenly with an infectious-like syndrome. A number of objective immunological and neurological abnormalities have been found more often in patients with CFS than in healthy controls or in patients with fatigue-inducing illnesses (2). Various microbial and viral infections have been implicated as possible triggers of CFS, including human herpesvirus-6, Epstein–Barr virus, enteroviruses, parvovirus B19, and the bacteria that cause Lyme disease and Q fever (2). However, no single agent has been associated with a large fraction of cases.

A recent study reported that a high percentage of patients with CFS are infected with a mouse leukemia retrovirus that has been designated xenotropic murine leukemia virus-related virus (XMRV) (3), a virus first identified in samples of human prostate cancer tissue about 4 y ago (4). However, two subsequent studies failed to find an infectious murine leukemia virus (MLV)-related virus in German prostate cancer patients (5, 6), and four recent studies from Europe and the United States have failed to detect XMRV or an MLV-related viral gene sequence in the blood of CFS patients using PCR (7–10).

In the mid-1990s, we obtained serum and whole-blood samples from CFS patients for the investigation of possible mycoplasmal infections (11). Whole-blood, peripheral blood mononuclear cell (PBMC), and plasma samples from 37 CFS patients in the mycoplasma studies were maintained in frozen storage at −80 °C. Twenty-five patients were from an academic medical center and 12 were referred by community physicians. Repeat blood samples were obtained from the academic medical center patients: four samples were obtained 2 y later and similarly kept in frozen storage, eight were obtained ∼15 y later, in 2010, and processed for XMRV/MLV-related virus testing without being frozen.

By nested PCR assays targeting the MLV-related virus gag gene, using both the previously described primer sets (3, 4) and an in-house–designed primer set with highly conserved sequences from different MLV-like viruses and XMRVs, we examined DNA prepared from the blood samples of these 37 CFS patients for the presence of MLV-like virus gag gene sequences. In addition, RNA was prepared from the deep-frozen plasma samples of these patients and analyzed by RT–PCR assay. DNA extracted from frozen PBMC samples of 44 healthy volunteer blood donors was tested in parallel.

Results

MLV-Related Viral gag Gene Sequences Detected in the Blood of CFS Patients. By nested PCR assays, targeting the mouse retrovirus gag gene using either the previously reported primer sets (first round: 419F/1154R; second round: GAG-I-F/GAG-I-R) (3, 4) or our in-house–designed PCR primer set (first round: 419F/1154R; second round: NP116/NP117) (Fig. 1), we detected a high frequency of MLV-related virus gag gene sequences in patients with CFS. The NP116/NP117 is an internal primer set with highly conserved sequences in different MLV-like viruses and XMRVs (Fig. S1). After the first round of nested PCR using primer set 419F/1154R, gel electrophoresis revealed positive PCR-amplified products with the predicted size of ∼730 bp in 21 of 41 PBMC or whole-blood samples from 37 CFS patients (Fig. L4). The nested PCR results produced by the second round of amplification using either the internal primer set GAG-I-F/GAG-I-R (with a predicted size of an ∼410-bp product) or the internal primer set NP116/NP117 (with a predicted size of an ∼380-bp product) were essentially identical. Overall, samples from 32 of 37 (86.5%) CFS patients revealed positive amplification products with the correct predicted sizes in the nested PCR (Fig. 1B). Of the 25 CFS patients who had been rigorously evaluated at the academic medical center, 23 were positive for both rounds of PCR. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

See Commentary on page 15666.

Author contributions: S.-C.L., N.P., and B.L. designed research; G.-C.H. designed mouse-specific mitochondria PCR assay; N.P. and B.L. performed research; B.L. and R.W. contributed new reagents/analytic tools; S.-C.L., N.P., G.-C.H., and R.W. analyzed data; and S.-C.L., N.P., A.L.K., and H.J.A. wrote the paper.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1006901107/-/DCSupplemental.

See Retraction Published December 27, 2011
Multiple sequence alignment (MSA) and phylogenetic analysis of MLV-related virus gag gene sequences detected in PBMC DNA from CFS patients. (A) Results of PBMC DNA from CFS patient samples 1–25 (of 41 samples examined) amplified after the first round of nested PCR using a previously published primer set 419F/1154R: targeting gag gene. (B) Results of PBMC DNA from the 25 CFS samples after completing the second round of nested PCR using the in-house–designed PCR primer set (NP116/NP117). (C) MLV-related gag gene sequence alignments in plasma of CFS samples by RT-nested PCR. Results of RT-nested PCR for RNA derived from plasma sample of CFS patients 4–17 are shown. The positions of expected sizes of the “positive” PCR amplicons are indicated by arrows. M, DNA ladder size markers. All positive PCR amplicons with the expected size have been confirmed by DNA sequencing.

Medical center, 24 (96%) were positive. On repeated testing 2 y later of four of the academic center patients, all four remained positive. On repeated testing of eight academic center patients 15 y later (in 2010), seven remained positive. All PCR products with the correct predicted size were retrieved from the gel and analyzed by DNA sequencing. Their DNA sequences were all confirmed to be those of MLV-related virus gag genes. The alignments of all of the sequences obtained from PCR products of ∼730 bp are shown in Fig. S1. All of the positive PCR products amplified from the CFS patients’ samples using primer set 419F/1154R were 746 bp in length. All of the positive PCR products amplified from the patients’ blood samples using primer set GAG-I-F/GAG-I-R and primer set NP116/NP117 were 413 and 380 bp in length, respectively.

In 42% of samples, we also detected and sequence–confirmed the presence of MLV-related viral RNA in the frozen plasma samples of these CFS patients, using an RT–PCR assay (Fig. 1C). With one exception, all of the patients who tested positive for viral RNA gag gene sequences in the plasma samples also tested positive in the DNA prepared from PBMCs and/or whole blood. On the other hand, only about half of the patients with MLV-related virus gag gene sequences detected in PBMC DNA also had viral gag RNA sequences detected in the plasma.

MLV-Related Viral gag Gene Sequences Detected in the Blood of Healthy Volunteer Blood Donors. DNA originating from 44 healthy volunteer blood donors was tested in parallel by nested PCR (Fig. 2). The nested PCR testing using the MLV-related virus gag gene–specific primer sets could produce many side products from human DNA (Figs. 1 and 2). We sequenced all of the PCR-amplified DNA bands from the 44 control samples of blood donors having molecular sizes close to that of the predicted PCR products from the target XMRV gag gene in the first round of PCR (Fig. 2A) and in the second round of nested PCR (Fig. 2B). After the first round of amplification in nested PCR, a positive PCR product with the predicted size of ∼730 bp was found in PBMC DNA from 1 of 44 blood donor controls (lane 4, Fig. 2A). This ∼730-bp PCR product amplified from the blood donor (BD22) was confirmed by DNA sequencing as an MLV-related virus gag gene sequence of 745 bp (Fig. S1). Overall, we found 3 of 44 (6.8%) blood donors’ PBMCs (BD22, BD26, and BD28) to be positive for the MLV-related virus gag gene sequences by completing both rounds of nested PCR (Fig. 2B and Fig. S2).

MLV-Related Viral env Gene Sequences Detected in the Blood of a CFS Patient and a Healthy Blood Donor. PBMC DNA from all of the CFS patients and healthy blood donors was also tested by PCR, targeting various regions of the MLV-related viral env gene. The MLV-related viral env gene segment of 240 bp was amplified and confirmed by sequencing from one healthy donor (BD–26) by a semi-nested PCR using the primer set 5′22F/6′233R in the first round of amplification and 5′22F/6′173R in the second round of amplification. The MLV-related viral env gene segment of 206 bp was amplified and confirmed by sequencing from 1 CFS patient by a nested PCR using primer set 5′22F/6′233R in the first round of amplification and 5′22F/6′159R in the second round of amplification (SI Materials and Methods).

Phylogenetic Analyses of MLV-Related Virus gag and env Gene Sequences. Multiple sequence alignment (MSA) and phylogenetic analysis of the MLV-related virus gag gene sequences amplified from 21 CFS patient samples and one blood donor (BD22) are shown in Fig. S1 and Fig. S4, respectively. There were three different MLV-related retroviral gag gene sequences identified by PCR in the blood samples of the CFS patients and a fourth variant was detected in blood donor BD22. The sequences in all four variants were more closely related to the sequences of polytropic mouse endogenous retroviruses (mERVs) than to those of XMRVs. Although variations were observed, the majority (18/21, 86%) of CFS patient samples had the same viral gag gene sequence (CFS type 1), whereas 2/21 had a different, but similar, viral gag gene sequence (CFS type 2), and a third distinct sequence (CFS type 3) was found in the remaining CFS cases. Phylogenetic analysis using the 746-nt sequences obtained revealed that CFS type 1, CFS type 2, and CFS type 3 formed a cluster that is clearly separable from the cluster formed by the newly reported XMRVs (Fig. 34). Interestingly, the 745-nt virus gag gene sequence of donor BD22 (with a 1-nt deletion in the alignment) could not be included in
either the cluster of CFS type 1/CFS type 2 or the cluster of XMRVs. The viral gag gene sequences of CFS type 3 and blood donor BD22 appear to be phylogenetically more closely related to polytropic mERVs or modified polytropic mERVs (Fig. S4).

Sequence analysis of the shorter fragments of the viral gag gene amplified from blood of 36 out of 41 CFS patient samples and 3 out of 44 blood donor samples after the second round of nested PCR similarly confirms that there are significant variations among the MLV-like gag gene sequences. Fig. S2 shows sequence alignment of the 380-nt segments of viral gag genes amplified from three blood donors (BD22, BD26, and BD28), patients with CFS types 1–3, XMRVs, and other closely related mERVs/polytropic MLVs. As an example, the viral gag gene sequence identified in BD28, but not sequences of BD22 and BD26, has a prominent 21-nt deletion that is uniquely present in polytropic mERV clone 51 (Fig. S2). In phylogenetic analysis, the 380-nt segment of the gag gene sequence found in BD28 appears to be closely related to those of CFS types 1 and 2. However, similar to the analytic result with the 746-nt product, the 380-nt gag gene sequences of BD22 and BD28 again cannot be included in either the cluster of CFS type 1/CFS type 2 or the cluster of XMRVs (Fig. 3B). On the other hand, when the protein sequences coded by the gag gene sequences identified in the CFS patients and blood donors are compared with those of a wider range of exogenous and endogenous MLVs, they are most similar to those of polytropic MLVs and XMRVs (Fig. S3). A ClustalW Gag protein tree again reveals that MLV-like virus gag proteins have much more similarity to those of modified-polytropic and polytropic mERVs or to those of XMRVs, but are very different from those of exogenous ecotropic MLVs (Fig. 4).

The sequence alignment and the phylogenetic analysis of the MLV-related virus env gene sequences obtained from both the CFS patient and healthy blood donor revealed that they were also more closely related to those of polytropic or modified polytropic MLVs than to those of XMRVs (Fig. S4).

Testing for the Presence of Mouse DNA in Patient and Blood Donor Samples Positive for MLV-Like gag Gene Sequences. Mouse DNA contains endogenously many closely related proviruses of MLVs. Hence, contamination of the blood samples or reagents by mouse DNA could have produced falsely positive PCR results. Although we took great precautions to prevent potential contamination in the laboratory, and although multiple negative controls were always included in each assay, we took additional steps to confirm that no mouse DNA had contaminated the assays or the clinical samples prepared in this study. We estimated that there were about 200–1,800 mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) copies per mammalian cell. A highly sensitive PCR assay targeting mouse-specific mtDNA was developed (Materials and Methods) to exclude any possible minute mouse DNA contamination in the assay system and in the clinical samples with positive amplified gag gene products.

The first round of the semi-nested PCR (40 cycles) used primer set mt15982F/mi16267R and could detect 10 fg of mouse DNA in the presence of 35 ng of human background DNA. By comparison, when studied in parallel under the same assay conditions, the first round of nested PCR (40 cycles) against the MLV gag gene required ~10 pg of mouse DNA to detect viral gag gene sequences (Fig. S4). Thus, the first round of mouse-specific mtDNA PCR assay could detect a positive mtDNA signal at a mouse DNA concentration 1,000-fold below the concentration required to detect a positive gag signal. The second round of mouse mtDNA semi-nested PCR, using primer set mt1161F/mi16267R, could consistently amplify the target 153-bp amplicon from 2.5 fg of mouse DNA mixed with 35 ng of human DNA (Fig. 5B). By comparison, the second round of the nested gag gene PCR produced positive ~400-bp amplicons from 500 fg of mouse DNA mixed with 35 ng of human background DNA in the reaction. Thus, the second round of mouse mtDNA semi-nested PCR had a sensitivity hundreds-fold higher than that of the second round of the MLV gag gene nested PCR in amplifying mouse DNA.

Using this highly sensitive PCR assay for mouse-specific mtDNA, we examined all of the blood samples that were found positive for MLV-like virus gag gene sequences from both CFS patients and healthy controls for evidence of mouse DNA contamination. PBMC DNA (30–40 ng) from the CFS patients...
and the healthy blood donors, as well as serial dilutions from 50 to 1 fg of mouse DNA mixed with 35 ng of human DNA as the positive templates, were tested in parallel. No mouse DNA was found in the PCR mix nor in the blood samples of CFS patients and blood donors that tested positive for the MLV-like virus gag gene sequences. Fig. 6 shows the results of the two rounds of mouse-specific mtDNA semi-nested PCR testing in DNA from PBMCs of four CFS patients (patients 8, 17, 20, and 25) with positive 746-bp amplicons in the first round of the nested PCR targeting the MLV-like virus gag gene, as well as from three blood donors (BD21, BD26, and BD28) who tested positive and two donors (BD21 and BD23) who tested negative for MLV-like gag gene sequences.

Discussion

Detection of MLV-Related Nucleic Acid Sequences. Our laboratory detected MLV-related virus gag gene sequences in DNA from PBMC and whole-blood samples from 32 of 37 (86.5%) CFS patients, compared with 3 of 44 (6.8%) volunteer blood donors, using a two-round nested PCR. Following only one round of PCR amplification, 21 of the 41 CFS patients’ DNA samples were found positive compared with only 1 of 44 donor samples. In every instance throughout these studies, the “positive” result by PCR (an amplicon of the predicted size) was confirmed by sequencing.

In four CFS patients from whom two samples were obtained, 2 y apart, the gag gene sequences were detected on both occasions. Further, gag gene sequences were still detectable in seven of eight CFS patients from whom fresh samples were obtained ~15 y after they were initially found to be MLV gag gene positive. In one gag-positive CFS patient and one gag-positive blood donor, MLV-related env gene sequences also were detected by PCR. However, we were unable to PCR amplify and determine the MLV-related env gene sequences in the majority CFS patients, possibly because of the low copy number and the greater genetic variability in the env gene compared with the gag gene.

In the CFS patients, plasma samples revealed MLV-related virus gag gene sequences in 42% when tested by RT–PCR for viral RNA. Whereas all but one patient whose plasma tested positive for viral RNA also tested positive in PBMCs for viral DNA, only half of the cases in which MLV-related virus gag gene sequences were detected in PBMCs had detectable RNA sequences in plasma. Thus, accurate determination of the prevalence of these agents in patients and donors requires cellular DNA for analysis.

Sequence Variability. Previous reports of XMRV isolates from patients with CFS and with prostate cancer and from individuals in different geographic locations have described very similar nucleic acid sequences (3, 4, 12), a feature believed to be a unique characteristic of XMRVs (13). However, our analysis revealed three different types of MLV-related virus gag gene sequences in CFS patients. In all three groups, the sequences were more closely related to the sequences of polytropic mERVs than to XMRVs and were more distant from the sequences of ecotropic MLVs (Fig. 3). Moreover, viral gag gene sequences with significant variations from both the cluster of CFS type 1/CFS type 2 and the cluster of XMRVs were identified in at least two blood donors (BD22 and BD28); phylogenetic analysis revealed the latter sequences to be more closely related to those of polytropic or xenotropic mERVs (Fig. 3B). It is unclear whether the sequence variations of the viral genes identified in the CFS patients and healthy blood donors have any significance in viral pathogenesis or disease development.

The MLV-like virus gag gene sequences in the CFS patients and blood donors had a deletion of 9 nt in the 5′ gag leader region and did not have the 24-nt deletion in this region reported in XMRVs. Internal deletions of 9 nt similar to what we have identified in the CFS patients and the blood donors are known to be present in the region that encodes the glycosylated Gag protein (GlycoGag) in some infectious endogenous (ecotropic) MLVs and exogenous (xenotropic) MLVs, such as AKV and DG-75 (14, 15). Many previous studies have shown that the nonstructural GlycoGag of MLVs plays a critical role in viral pathogenesis and in vivo infectivity (16–19). In this context, the MLV-like virus gag gene sequences identified in most of our CFS patients (both CFS type 1 and CFS type 2) appear to have an intact GlycoGag inframe with the matrix and are consistent with the gene sequences of infectious MLVs. Unfortunately, the sequences presently obtained in the study are still a bit short and lack the alternative start codon CUG. Slight extension of the 5′ leader sequence will be needed to confirm the intact nature of GlycoGag.

Could Our PCR Results Have Been Falsely Positive? Voisset and coauthors (20) recently reviewed the pitfalls encountered in the identification of new retroviruses (“rumor viruses”). False-positive results can occur for a variety of reasons. Viral gene sequence-specific PCR primers can nonspecifically amplify nucleic acid sequences that differ from the target sequence. For this reason, we sequenced every positive PCR product (every amplicon of the predicted size) and confirmed MLV-related gene sequences in every instance.

Although contamination must always be a concern for any PCR-based study, several pieces of evidence argue against the
During this study more than 300 negative controls set up for multiple PCR amplification assays targeting the MLV gag gene were performed, and all were negative.

Finally, a new set of blood samples was recently obtained from 8 of the original 25 patients followed in an academic medical center. Testing of the repeat blood samples, ~15 y after the index sample, showed that seven of eight patients examined had detectable MLV-gag gene sequences. Significant variations of MLV-like virus gag gene sequences amplified from the freshly obtained blood samples were identified as would be expected in retroviral infections, but not from contamination.

The ultimate proof of low-grade infection by MLV-related viruses in humans may rely on demonstrating the integration of the viral genes into the human genome (20). The identification of provirus integration sites will take more time and effort to investigate, given that we estimate only one virus gene copy in every 400–4,000 nucleated PBMCs. Also, previous work with XMRV indicates that integration sites are quite variable (21) and the same may be true for the polytropic mouse endogenous retroviruses, which are predominant in this study.

Why Have Other Studies Come to Different Conclusions? Although we find evidence of a broader group of MLV-related viruses, rather than just XMRV, in patients with CFS and healthy blood donors, our results clearly support the central argument by Lombardi et al. (3) that MLV-related viruses are associated with CFS and are present in some blood donors. However, four recent studies have failed to confirm the PCR results reported by Lombardi (7–10). There are various possible explanations for this disparity. As stated in the reports, there could be a difference in the prevalence of these infectious agents in CFS patient populations in different geographic areas. This argument is somewhat less plausible since the publication of a recent negative study with subjects from the United States (10). Nevertheless, the heterogeneity in gag gene sequences that we observed suggests that geographic differences in different MLV-related viruses may be considerable and could affect both the sensitivity and the specificity of molecular amplification using standard primer sets.

Indeed, it is possible that the PCR primers used in various studies may have different sensitivity in detecting the diverse group of MLV-related virus gag gene sequences that we found in the clinical samples. The 5′ gag leader sequence of previously described XMRVs represents the most divergent segment of the XMRV genome in comparison with the genomes of the other MLVs (4). In particular, there is evidently a unique 15-nt deletion in the 5′ gag leader region in all of the XMRVs previously identified in patients with prostate cancer and CFS (3, 4). To detect XMRVs in human samples with better sensitivity and specificity, some studies used a PCR primer spanning this unique deletion as the “XMRV-specific” primer (6). However, none of the viral gag gene sequences amplified from the blood samples of CFS patients and blood donors in our study has this particular deletion (Fig. S1). As a consequence, such primers might have been insensitive in detecting the MLV-related gag gene sequences that we have identified.

Finally, it is also quite possible that there is heterogeneity in the patients diagnosed with CFS in different studies. CFS is a syndrome defined exclusively by a group of nonspecific symptoms and thus has an ill-defined phenotype. Future studies should adhere to consensus case definitions such as that developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (1). Conversely, putative “healthy” control subjects should explicitly deny the presence of those symptoms that constitute the case definition of CFS. Furthermore, even bona fide cases of CFS may have different viral or other etiologies.

Further Considerations. The finding of XMRV or MLV sequences in persons with CFS or other diseases does not constitute definitive proof of viral infection. However, in the study of Lombardi et al. (3) and studies reviewed subsequently by Silverman et al. (22) the evidence for XMRV infection in humans not only involved detection of viral nucleic acids using PCR, but also reported the detection of
viral antigens, detection of anti-viral antibodies, the ability to culture the virus in a prostate cancer cell line, the detection of gamma retrovirus particles by electron microscopy, and transmission of infection to macaques. In sum, none of the four studies that have failed to confirm the PCR evidence reported by Lombardi et al. (3), nor our own study, has attempted to fully replicate that study.

It remains to be shown that the association that we have found, using the methods that we have described, can be generalized to a larger group of patients with CFS. Indeed, we suspect that the association will be lower in CFS cases identified through community-based surveys, as contrasted to cases seen at academic medical centers. Even if subsequent studies confirm an association between MLV-like viruses and CFS, that will not establish a causal role for these viruses in the pathogenesis of this illness. For example, such a high frequency of infections with MLV-related viruses in patients with CFS could reflect an increased susceptibility to viral infections due to an underlying CFS-related immune dysfunction, rather than a primary role for these viruses in the pathogenesis of CFS.

Finally, the finding of MLV-related virus gag gene sequences in nearly 7% of healthy volunteer blood donors in our study and of XMRV in 3.7% of healthy controls in the study of Lombardi et al. (3) raises additional issues. The possibility that these agents might be widespread in the general population and pathogenic in blood recipient warrants extensive research investigations of appropriately linked donor–recipient cohorts.

Materials and Methods

Samples from CFS Patients and Healthy Controls. Initially, we tested 41 whole-blood samples that had been obtained for culture isolation of mycoplasmal agents in the mid-1990s. We maintained whole-blood, PBMC, and plasma samples from 41 CFS patients in frozen storage at −80 °C. Of the 41 patient samples, 29 were collected from 25 patients by one of us (A.L.K.) at the Chronic Fatigue Research Center, Brigham and Women’s Hospital (Boston, MA). Four of the CFS patients also had blood obtained on a second occasion ~2 y later. Most of the patients were from the New England area; none were related, and virtually none had any regular social contact. Each of the 25 patients was systematically evaluated with a standardized history (supplemented by a patient questionnaire), physical examination, and battery of laboratory tests. Each met the 1988 CDC criteria for CFS, and 21 also met the 1994 CDC criteria. The average age of the patients at the time of venepuncture was 44.4 y; 4 were male and 21 were female. All of the patients signed informed consent documents approved by the Institutional Review Board of Brigham and Women’s Hospital. A new set of blood samples was obtained in 2010 from 8 of the original 25 patients followed in the academic medical center. The blood samples were processed for PCR study without first being frozen. The other 12 samples from CFS patients were sent by individual clinicians taking care of patients in the mid-1990s who were given the diagnosis of CFS. We do not have information about the methodology by which the referring clinicians established the diagnosis of CFS. The samples had also been sent in the mid-1990s and stored at ~80 °C. Frozen PBMC samples from 44 normal blood donors from the Washington, DC, area were collected in 2003–2006 and stored at the Department of Transfusion Medicine, Clinical Center, National Institutes of Health. All patient and control samples were coded and tested in parallel. Details of the preparation of blood samples and DNA/RNA isolation are described in SI Materials and Methods.

XMRV/MLV gag Nested PCR. The nested PCR for the gag gene was performed according to the protocols described previously (4) with minor modifications. Three primer sets used in the study are as follows: 419F and 1154R (3), GAG-I-F and GAG-I-R (4), NP116 forward, and NP117 reverse. The NP116/ NP117 was an in-house–designed primer set based on the highly conserved sequences found in different MLV-like viruses and XMRVs (Fig. S1). Primer sequences and details of PCR sensitivity and specificity quality controls can be found in SI Materials and Methods.

Phylogenetic Analysis. To generate the neighbor-joining phylogenetic tree, the viral gag gene sequences obtained from blood samples of patients with CFS, normal blood donors, as well as all of the closely related MLV gag gene sequences selected from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database by BLAST querying with the gag gene sequences obtained in the PCR study (SI Materials and Methods) were aligned with ClustalW2 (http://www.ebi.ac.uk/tools/clustalw2) using default settings. The analysis produced the same phylogenetic trees with or without consideration of the sequence gaps in alignment.

Mouse Mitochondrial DNA Assay. The complete mtDNA sequences of humans and mice were downloaded from GenBank and aligned using ClustalW. Sequence alignment revealed the 439 bp of the 3′ end of mouse mtDNA (beyond 15,862 bp, according to the coordinates of BALB/c mouse; accession no. AJ512208) were not present in human mtDNA. Primer sets were designed for a semi-nested, mouse-specific mtDNA PCR based on the sequence in this region of mtDNA from the mouse leukemia virus XMRV strain (Fig. S4). The external PCR primers (SI Materials and Methods) were designated as mt1589F and mt16267R, which would provide a predicted amplicon of 286 bp. The internal primers of the semi-nested PCR were designated as mt16115F and mt16267R, which would produce a predicted amplicon of 153 bp from mouse mtDNA. PCR system and setup were the same as for the gag gene-nested PCR study. However, PCR conditions were slightly different: 4 min at 94 °C (30 s at 94 °C, 30 s at 55 °C, 1 min at 72 °C) x 40-45 cycles; 10 min at 72 °C.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We thank Richard Schacterle, Ph.D., and Jennifer Redd, who helped collect the specimens and clinical data. Drs. Jakob Reiser and Paolo Lusso kindly helped to review the manuscript. Support for this work was provided in part by National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Grants R01-A127318 and U01-A132246 and by a gift from the De Young Foundation to A.L.K.


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