Endogenous oncornaviral antigen in the bursa of Fabricius of 15B × 72 chickens
(bursa/RNA tumor viruses/immunofluorescence)

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Communicated by Hilary Koprowski, March 14, 1979

ABSTRACT Oncornaviral antigen was detected in the bursal epithelium and in a subpopulation of bursal follicular cells of 15B × 72 chickens. This antigen is present in the bursal epithelium at 11 days of embryogenesis and persists there for at least 3 weeks after hatching. The absence of detectable antigen in the intestinal epithelium contiguos to the bursal epithelium indicates that the accumulation of viral antigen is a specific property of the bursal epithelium. The observation of C-type particles in the intraepithelial spaces suggests that the viral antigen is synthesized and assembled into virions by the bursal epithelial cells. In embryonic bursas, viral antigen-positive cells radiate from the surface epithelium toward the central region of the follicles. In bursas from post-hatch chickens, viral antigen-positive cells, including intrafollicular epithelial cells and cells resembling lymphocytes, are confined to the medullary region of the follicles.

At present it is not known what role, if any, endogenous tumor virus genes play in the normal physiology of animals. In the avian oncornavirus system, it has been determined (1, 2) that a close structural homology exists between the exogenous avian leukemia viruses, which are oncogenic for bursal-derived (B) lymphocytes (3, 4), and the endogenous virus, Rous-associated virus-0 (RAV-0), which has little or no oncogenic potential (5). Because lymphoma induction is associated with an aberrant pattern of B-cell differentiation (6), the structural homology of exogenous and endogenous viruses suggests the possibility that exogenous avian leukemia viruses exert their oncogenic effect by interfering with a physiological function mediated by the endogenous virus.

Because infection of chickens with exogenous leukemia viruses specifically induces a B-cell lymphoma that arises in the bursa of Fabricius (3), we set out to investigate the distribution of endogenous oncornaviral antigen in the bursas of 15B × 72 chickens. These chickens spontaneously produce high levels of RAV-0 (7, 8) and were chosen for analysis on the assumption that this phenotype would facilitate the detection of viral antigen.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Chickens. Embryonated eggs from line 72 chickens and from the mating of line 15B with line 72 chickens (15B × 72) were obtained from the Regional Poultry Research Laboratory (East Lansing, MI). Both 72 and 15B × 72 embryos are positive for RAV-0 production [V(+)], as assayed with fibroblasts in tissue culture. Because cells of 15B × 72 chickens are susceptible to reinfection by RAV-0, the level of RAV-0 production by 15B × 72 cells is amplified to a level approximately 10^6-fold greater than that for 72 cells (8). Spafas-MR49 embryos, which are negative for RAV-0 production [V(−)] as well as for expression of chicken helper factor, were obtained from Spafas Inc. (Norwich, CT).

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Preparation of Immune Sera. To prepare antisera to structural proteins of RAV-0 (anti-RAV-0 sera), rabbits were injected with Nonidet P-40 (NP40; 0.5%)-treated preparations of either RAV-0 or the RAV-0 pseudotype of the Bryan high-titer strain of Rous sarcoma virus [BH-RSV (RAV-0)]. RAV-0 was obtained from fibroblasts cultured from 10-day-old 15B × 72 embryos; BH-RSV(RAV-0) was obtained by the propagation of stock virus on fibroblasts derived from 10-day-old quail embryos, which do not express RAV-0-related antigens but are permissive for RAV-0 replication (7). The RAV-0 used to complement the BH-RSV of the stock preparation was produced by cells of a line 7 embryo (7). Virus preparations for immunization and competition studies were purified on sucrose gradients as described (9). The antisera were serially absorbed twice on phosphate-buffered saline-washed monolayers of fibroblasts derived from 10-day-old Spafas-MR49 embryos and then absorbed as described (10) with an equal volume of a lysate of quail embryo fibroblasts [5 × 10^6 cells/ml in 1% NP40/1% deoxycholate/0.1 M NaCl/0.05 M Tris-HCl, pH 7.6/2 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride/0.05 M iodoacetamide].

Antiserum raised in rabbits against purified nucleoprotein cores of avian myeloblastosis virus (generously provided by Dani Bolognesi, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, NC) was absorbed as described above. Antiserum raised in rabbits against chicken gamma globulin (Antibodies, Inc., Davis CA) was absorbed twice with lysates (prepared as described above) of 15B × 72 embryonic fibroblasts and of quail embryonic fibroblasts. Samples of normal (nonimmune) rabbit serum were absorbed in parallel with each immune serum as described above. Fluorescein-labeled goat anti-rabbit gamma globulin serum was purchased from Antibodies, Inc. and used unabsoled. Purified N-tropic AKR murine leukemia virus (AKR-MuLV) was kindly provided by Nobuo Tsuchida, Wistar Institute (Philadelphia, PA).

Immunofluorescence Assays. The bursa of Fabricius and other organs were dissected from embryonic and post-hatch chickens and immediately frozen at –70°C. Frozen sections (6 μm) of tissue were cut and fixed with acetone for 10 min at –20°C.

The sections were hydrated in phosphate-buffered saline; exposed to an appropriate dilution (at least 1/40) in phosphate-buffered saline of anti-RAV-0, anti-chicken gamma globulin, or normal rabbit serum for 30 min at 37°C; washed thoroughly in phosphate-buffered saline; exposed to a 1/40 dilution in phosphate-buffered saline of fluorescein-labeled goat anti-rabbit gamma globulin serum; washed thoroughly in phosphate-buffered saline; and mounted in 25% glycerol in phosphate-buffered saline. The two anti-RAV-0 sera (elicited

Abbreviations: AKR-MuLV, N-tropic AKR murine leukemia virus; B-cells, bursal-derived lymphocytes; BH-RSV(RAV-0), RAV-0 pseudotype of the Bryan high-titer strain of Rous sarcoma virus; NP40, Nonidet P-40; RAV-0, Rous-associated virus-0, V(+) and V(−), phenotypes of chickens whose fibroblasts do and do not spontaneously produce endogenous virus, respectively.
to either RAV-0 or BH-RSV(RAV-0) yielded identical results in the immunofluorescence assays and were used interchangeably for these assays. The stained sections were examined with a Leitz-Orthoplan microscope with epi-illumination and photographed on Kodak Tri-X film.

Electron Microscopy. Bursas from 18-day-old 15B × 72 and Spafas-MR49 embryos, which had been quick-frozen at -70°C, were bisected. One-half of each bursa was examined by immunofluorescence and the other half, still frozen, was fixed in 3% glutaraldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), post-fixed in 1% osmium tetroxide, stained en bloc with uranyl acetate, and embedded in Epon resin according to standard procedures. Thin sections were stained with lead citrate and examined in a Zeiss electron microscope.

RESULTS

Distribution of Viral Antigen in the Bursa of 15B × 72 Chickens. Patches of cells in the bursal epithelium of 11- to 12-day-old 15B × 72 embryos reacted strongly with anti-RAV-0 serum in an indirect immunofluorescence assay (Fig. 1a). Only a low level of background fluorescence was detected with normal rabbit serum (Fig. 1b).

Fluorescence due to the reactivity of the anti-RAV-0 serum became uniformly distributed in the bursal epithelium by day 17 of embryogenesis, similar to the pattern shown here for the bursa of 19-day-old embryos (Fig. 1c). Only background fluorescence was detected in the bursal epithelium with normal rabbit serum (see Figs. 2d and 3b) and with anti-chicken gamma globulin serum, although the latter stained intrafollicular cells (Fig. 1d). The level of fluorescence mediated by anti-RAV-0 serum in the bursal epithelium remained significantly above the background level (defined as that obtained with normal rabbit serum) for at least 3 weeks after hatching (data not shown). In general, the cytoplasm of the epithelial cells was diffusely stained, and punctate accumulations of stain were observed at the periphery; the nuclei appeared unstained. In contrast, the nonfollicular cells subjacent to the epithelium exhibited only a low level of anti-RAV-0 serum-mediated fluorescence approximately equivalent to that detected with normal rabbit serum.

In addition to the bursal epithelium, a population of cells located in the central region of the bursal follicles of embryos 17 days old or older reacted with anti-RAV-0 serum (Fig. 1e) but not with normal rabbit serum (data not shown). In sections in which the junction between the follicle and epithelium was seen, the intrafollicular cells that reacted with anti-RAV-0 serum radiated out from the epithelium (Fig. 1e). In contrast, lymphocytes that reacted with anti-gamma globulin serum were distributed throughout the bursal follicles of 19-day-old embryos (Fig. 1f). Although the limited resolution of the immunofluorescence technique precludes an unambiguous determination of which intrafollicular cell types react with anti-RAV-0 serum, the nonidentical distributions of cells that reacted with anti-RAV-0 serum (Fig. 1c) or anti-gamma globulin serum (Fig. 1d) indicate that, at most, only a subpopulation of lymphocytes in 15B × 72 embryos react with anti-RAV-0 serum.

In post-hatch chickens, the cortical and medullary follicular regions are demarcated by an epithelium; and, as shown here, cells in the medullary region of the follicles exhibited a high level of anti-RAV-0 serum-mediated fluorescence, whereas cells in the cortical region exhibited only a background level of staining. The epithelium that demarcates the cortex and medulla reacted with anti-RAV-0 serum, as did the great majority of the medullary cells, including many that morphologically resemble lymphocytes. The intensity of the anti-RAV-0-mediated fluorescence was not uniform among the medullary cells (Fig. 1f). Bursal lymphocytes that reacted to anti-chicken gamma globulin serum were confined to the medullary region of the follicle; the level of this reactivity was also not uniform among the medullary lymphocytes (refs. 11 and 12 and data not shown).

Characterization of the Reactivity to Anti-RAV-0 Sera. In competition experiments, lysates of BH-RSV(RAV-0) (Fig. 2b; compare Fig. 2a) but not of an unrelated oncornavirus, AKR-MuLV (Fig. 2c), decreased the level of staining mediated by anti-RAV-0 serum in the bursas of 15B × 72 embryos to the
background level obtained with normal rabbit serum (Fig. 2d). To minimize the possibility that in the competition experiments antigenerically related nonviral components might be present in the immunizing and competing viral preparations, the antiserum had been raised against RAV-0 propagated in 15B × 72 fibroblasts whereas the competing BH-RSV-(RAV-0) was propagated in quail fibroblasts.

Identical results in competition experiments were obtained with antisera raised against BH-RSV(RAV-0) propagated in quail fibroblasts and antisera raised against purified nucleoprotein cores of avian myelobastosis virus (data not shown). In addition competition experiments, purified chicken gamma globulin did not diminish the staining mediated by anti-RAV-0 serum but eliminated the staining mediated by anti-chicken gamma globulin serum (data not shown). These data, taken together, indicate that the anti-RAV-0 serum-mediated reactivity in the bursas of 15B × 72 embryos is due to avian tumor viral antigen.

A similar analysis applied to the bursas or cultured fibroblasts from Spafas-MR49 and line 72 chicken embryos, whose fibroblasts score as V(–) and low V(+), respectively, failed to demonstrate detectable levels of avian tumor viral antigen (data not shown).

**Distribution of Viral Antigen in Intestinal Epithelia.** In order to determine whether the presence of viral antigen in the

bursal epithelium is a general property of the intestinal epithelia of 15B × 72 chickens, we examined histological sections that contained both the bursa and a portion of the large intestine that is contiguous with the bursa. In a comparison of bursal (Fig. 3 a and b) and intestinal (Fig. 3 c and d) epithelia, each of which was exposed to both anti-RAV-0 serum and normal rabbit serum, significant reactivity was detected only with the combination of bursal epithelium and anti-RAV-0 serum (Fig. 3a).

**Electron Microscopic Detection of Virions.** The presence of oncornaviral antigen in the bursal epithelium of 15B × 72 chickens could represent accumulation due either to uptake or to synthesis by the epithelial cells themselves. An electron microscopic analysis was undertaken to test the latter possibility. In an examination of the bursal epithelium of 15B × 72 embryos, particles with a C-type morphology were found in the intraepithelial spaces (Fig. 4). Because the intraepithelial spaces are bounded on the luminal aspect by junctional complexes and on the basal aspect by a basement membrane, the most reasonable interpretation of the above results is that the bursal epithelial cells of 15B × 72 embryos produce endogenous viral particles and thus synthesize viral antigen. No particles were seen in bursas of Spafas-MR49 embryos (data not shown).

**DISCUSSION**

An analysis based on immunofluorescence has shown that anti-RAV-0 sera react specifically with tissue components localized in the bursal epithelium and in the central portion of the bursal follicles of 15B × 72 chickens. On the basis of the specificity of this reaction and the results of competition ex-
comitant of hemopoiesis in general (15–18) and of antigen-driven B-lymphocyte differentiation in particular (19, 20). Because, in the present study, no reaction with anti-RAV-0 serum was detectable with bursas from V(−) chickens, the interpretation that endogenous virus expression is required for bursal development presupposes that the observed level of viral antigen in 15B × T2 chickens is an amplification of viral antigen expression that is functional in other chickens at a level below the limit of detection of our immunofluorescence assay. Assays based on more sensitive detection techniques may serve to resolve whether viral gene expression occurs in developing bursas of V(−) chickens.

Regardless of the possible role of endogenous virus in normal physiology, the observation that viral antigen is preferentially expressed in the bursal epithelium leads to questions about the nature of the interaction between the bursal epithelium and exogenous avian tumor virus, and the role, if any, this interaction plays in the induction of lymphoid leukemia. In the murine oncornavirus system, Waksal et al. (21) have presented evidence that murine leukemia virus expression in the thymic epithelium is involved in the induction of thymic lymphoma. Experiments are planned to ascertain whether the pattern of immunofluorescence detected in the bursal epithelium and intrafollicular cells of 15B × T2 chickens is recapitulated in the bursas of V(−) chickens infected with oncogenic leukemia viruses.

We thank Robert Friis, William Mason, and Richard Franklin for helpful discussions during the course of this work. We also thank Lorna Blum and Elza Aglow for providing excellent technical assistance and Josef Weibel for the electron microscopy. This investigation was supported by U.S. Public Health Service Research Grants CA 21069 and CA 10815 from the National Institutes of Health and Grant IM 119 from the American Cancer Society.