Expression of Interferon-γ by a Coronavirus Defective-Interfering RNA Vector and Its Effect on Viral Replication, Spread, and Pathogenicity

Xuming Zhang,* Daniel J. Cua,* Stephen A. Stohlman,* and Michael M. C. Lai*†‡§

*Department of Neurology, †Department of Pathology, ‡Department of Molecular Microbiology and Immunology, and §Howard Hughes Medical Institute, University of Southern California School of Medicine, Los Angeles, California 90033-1054

Received November 13, 1996; returned to author for revision March 12, 1997; accepted May 5, 1997

A defective-interfering (DI) RNA of the murine coronavirus mouse hepatitis virus (MHV) was developed as a vector for expressing interferon-γ (IFN-γ). The murine IFN-γ gene was cloned into the DI vector under the control of an MHV transcriptional promoter and transfected into MHV-infected cells. IFN-γ was secreted into culture medium as early as 6 hr posttransfection and reached a peak level (up to 180 U/ml) at 12 hr posttransfection. The DI-expressed IFN-γ (DE-IFN-γ) exhibited an antiviral activity comparable to that of recombinant IFN-γ and was blocked by a neutralizing monoclonal antibody against IFN-γ. Treatment of macrophages with DE-IFN-γ selectively induced the expression of the cellular inducible nitric oxide synthase and the IFN-γ-inducing factor (IGIF) but did not affect the amounts of the MHV receptor mRNA. Antiviral activity was detected only when cells were pretreated with IFN-γ for 24 hr prior to infection; no inhibition of virus replication was detected when cells were treated with IFN-γ during or after infection. Furthermore, addition of IFN-γ together with MHV did not prevent infection, but appeared to prevent subsequent viral spread. MHV variants with different degrees of neurovirulence in mice had correspondingly different levels of sensitivities to IFN-γ treatment in vitro, with the most virulent strain being most resistant to IFN-γ treatment. Infection of susceptible mice with DE-IFN-γ-containing virus caused significantly milder disease, accompanied by more pronounced mononuclear cell infiltration into the CNS and less virus replication, than that caused by virus containing a control DI vector. This study thus demonstrates the feasibility and usefulness of this MHV DI vector for expressing cytokines and may provide a model for studying the role of cytokines in MHV pathogenesis.

INTRODUCTION

Interferon-γ (IFN-γ) is a pleiotropic cytokine produced by activated CD4+ and CD8+ T cells and natural killer cells (Trinchieri and Perussia, 1985; Pestka and Langer, 1987;ljzermans and Marquet, 1989), which exerts both antiviral and immunomodulatory effects. These include the activation of mononuclear phagocytes, enhancement of the generation of oxygen-free radicals, modulation of class I and II major histocompatibility complex (MHC) antigen expression, and promotion of differentiation of both T and B cells (for reviews, see references by Pestka and Langer, 1987; Benveniste, 1992). It plays an important role in the early phase of many viral infections (Wheelock, 1965; Wong and Goeddel, 1986; Leist et al., 1989; Klavinskis et al., 1989; Feducchi and Carrasco, 1991; Ramsey et al., 1993; Heise and Virgin IV, 1995; Rodriguez et al., 1995), inhibiting the replication of a variety of viruses prior to activation of antiviral effector cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) or antibodies. Because of its antiviral activity, IFN-γ has been implicated in virus clearance and resolution of viral infection (Ramshaw et al., 1992). Resistance to IFN-γ may lead to incomplete viral clearance and contribute to the establishment of persistent infection (Moskophidis et al., 1994). By contrast, IFN-γ is also involved in inflammatory processes. IFN-γ induces the expression of many other inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin-1 (IL-1) and tumor necrosis factor (TNF), and acts synergistically with these cytokines (Wong and Goeddel, 1986). The multitude of immunomodulatory effects of IFN-γ makes it a particularly interesting cytokine for studying viral pathogenesis. In the central nervous system (CNS), no cells constitutively express IFN-γ. During encephalomyelitis, for example as a result of mouse hepatitis virus (MHV) infection, activated NK cells and T cells which pass through the blood–brain barrier into the CNS express IFN-γ (Bukowski et al., 1983; Pearce et al., 1994). In addition to its effects on mononuclear cells, IFN-γ acts upon cells of the CNS, such as astrocytes, microglia, and macrophages (Benveniste, 1992).

MHV, a murine coronavirus, causes a variety of diseases in rodents, such as hepatitis, enteritis, and neurological diseases, depending on the viral strain (Cheever et al., 1949; Gledhill and Niven, 1955; Ishida et al., 1978). Even within the well-studied neuropathogenic JHM strain, different variants cause different disease patterns, ranging from acute fatal encephalitis to chronic demye-
lination (Stohlman et al., 1982; Lai and Stohlman, 1992). The DI variant derived from the parental JHMV causes an acute, fulminant, necrotizing encephalomyelitis with minimal or no demyelination. By contrast, the neuroattenuated variant 2.2-V-1 derived from DL produces a nonfatal encephalomyelitis with extensive demyelination (Fleming et al., 1986, 1987; Wang et al., 1992). Disease outcome also depends on the genetic background, the developmental stage, and the immunological status of the host. Previous studies have shown that immunocompetent mice infected with MHV exhibited increased expression of a number of cytokines, including IL-1, IL-6, TNF-α, and IFN-γ, in the CNS at the time of viral clearance (Pearce et al., 1994). However, the role of these cytokines in MHV pathogenesis is not fully understood. For example, it has been suggested that IFN-γ may not be necessary for induction of the MHC class I molecules on neural cells in vivo (Pearce et al., 1994), a prerequisite to CTL-mediated clearance (Stohlman et al., 1995). However, IFN-γ treatment ameliorates MHV-induced disease (Smith et al., 1991), suggesting that either the antiviral role or the immunomodulatory role of IFN-γ is a critical component of MHV infection.

MHV contains a single-strand, positive-sense RNA genome of 31 kb (Lee et al., 1991). It undergoes rapid recombination, probably due to its large RNA genome and the special properties of its RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (Lai, 1992). Similarly, defective interfering (DI) RNAs are frequently generated in MHV-infected cells. Recently, recombinant DI RNAs have been developed which can replicate in the presence of a helper MHV (Makino et al., 1988a, 1989; Van der Most et al., 1991). We have modified an MHV DI RNA and developed an expression vector. This DI RNA contains both the 5′- and the 3′-ends, an internal region of the parental MHV genome (Makino et al., 1988b), and an intergenic (IG) sequence, which is a recognition signal for subgenomic mRNA transcription, followed by an exogenous gene. Upon transfection of this DI RNA into MHV-infected cells, a subgenomic mRNA is synthesized and the inserted gene expressed. This system has been used to express the chloramphenicol acetyltransferase (CAT) protein and the coronavirus structural protein hemagglutinin/esterase (HE) in MHV-infected cells (Liao and Lai, 1994; Liao et al., 1995). These proteins are expressed only in infected cells during virus replication, thus providing some degree of targeted gene expression. Furthermore, the expressed HE protein can be incorporated into virus particles, and the expression can be detected in serial virus passages (Liao et al., 1995). Thus, this DI RNA expression system provides an alternative to an infectious full-length cDNA clone, which is still not available, for studying the molecular biology and pathogenesis of coronaviruses.

In the present study, we have used this DI RNA system to express the murine IFN-γ gene. The expressed IFN-γ exhibited antiviral activity, prevented virus spread in vitro, and altered viral pathogenesis in mice. This system may allow studies of the interaction between MHV and the host's immune system by expressing immunoregulatory proteins at the foci of viral infection.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Virus and cells**

The following virus strains were used in this study: the neuropathogenic MHV strain JHM isolate (DL), which is a large plaque variant derived from the parental JHM strain (Stohlman et al., 1982); the small plaque variant DS (Stohlman et al., 1982); the neutralization-escape mutant 2.2-V-1 (Fleming et al., 1987; Wang et al., 1992), and strain A59, which is both neurotropic and hepatotropic. The murine astrocytoma cell line (DBT) (Hirano et al., 1974) and J774.1 macrophage cell line (obtained from the American Type Culture Collection) were used for in vitro experiments. DBT cells were also used for plaque assay.

**Plasmid construction**

A previously constructed plasmid p25CAT (Liao and Lai, 1994), which contains the plasmid Bluescript (Promega) sequence with a CAT gene inserted behind an IG sequence in the DIssE cDNA (Makino et al., 1988a), was used as the basic DI vector. For cloning the murine IFN-γ gene into the DI vector, a cDNA fragment containing the complete IFN-γ gene (kindly provided by Dr. J. A. Frelinger, University of Rochester) was generated by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) using a pair of primers. The 5′ sense primer (5′-TAACTAGTATCTAATCTAAACTTTAGGAATGAAGCTACACT-3′) contains a restriction enzyme SpeI site (underlined), the coronavirus intergenic sequence (in boldface), and the first 16 nucleotides of the IFN-γ open reading frame (ORF). The 3′ antisense primer (5′-TCAGATATCAATCAGCAGCAGCTCTCT-3′) contains the last 15 nucleotides of the IFN-γ ORF and a restriction enzyme EcoRI site (underlined). After restriction enzyme digestion of the PCR products with SpeI and EcoRI, a 0.5-kb cDNA fragment was purified by low-melting-point agarose gel electrophoresis and directionally cloned into the SpeI and EcoRI sites of p25CAT, resulting in pDE-IFN-γ (Fig. 1A). The resulting construct contains the IFN-γ gene placed behind the IG sequence between genes 6 and 7 (IG7) of MHV.

**RNA transcription and transfection**

Plasmid DNA (pDE-IFN-γ) was linearized with XbaI, and RNA was transcribed in vitro using T7 RNA polymerase according to the manufacturer's recommended procedure (Promega). RNA transfection was carried out using the DOTAP method (Boehringer-Mannheim) as described previously (Zhang et al., 1994). Briefly, monolayers of DBT cells grown at approximately 70% confluence in 60-mm petri dishes were infected with MHV at
A.

![Diagram of IFN-γ expression](image)

**FIG. 1.** Structure of the DI vector containing the IFN-γ gene and its expression. (A) The IFN-γ gene was inserted into the SpeI and EcoRI sites of the DI cDNA in plasmid pBluescript under the control of a coronavirus transcriptional promoter derived from the intergenic sequence (IG7) between genes 6 and 7 of MHV-A59. Restriction enzyme site XbaI was used for digestion of the plasmid DNA for in vitro run-off transcription. Only the DI cDNA and T7 promoter are shown. The IFN-γ-containing subgenomic RNA transcribed from the IG7 site of the genomic DI RNA is indicated. L, leader RNA. (B and C) Expression of IFN-γ by the DI vector. Culture medium was collected at different time points posttransfection from DBT cell cultures infected with JHM (A) or A59 (B) and transfected with DE-IFN-γ RNAs. IFN-γ was assayed by ELISA. The amounts of IFN-γ are the mean values and standard deviation of three independent experiments.

B. **JHM+DE-IFN-γ**

C. **A59+DE-IFN-γ**

a multiplicity of infection (m.o.i.) of 5. At 1 hr postinfection, cells were washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and covered with 2 ml of prewarmed Eagle’s minimum essential medium (MEM) containing 1% newborn calf serum (Intragen). Five to ten micrograms of in vitro transcribed RNAs were mixed slowly with 10 μl of DOTAP (Boehringer-Mannheim) in HBS buffer (20 mM HEPES; 150 mM NaCl; pH 7.4), and incubated at room temperature for 10 min. The mixture was then added to the cell culture. The final concentration of DOTAP was 5 μg/ml.

Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) for IFN-γ

To quantitate expression of IFN-γ, medium was collected at 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and 24 hr posttransfection from DBT cells infected with JHM or A59 and transfected with DE-IFN-γ RNA. Following centrifugation at 4000 g for 30 min, supernatants were tested for IFN-γ using a sandwich ELISA as previously described (Cua et al., 1995). R4-6A2 (anti-IFN-γ) (American Type Culture Collection) serum-free hybridoma supernatant was used to coat 96-well plates. Biotinylated XMG-1.2 (anti-IFN-γ) was obtained from PharMingen. Avidin-peroxidase and o-phenylenediamine (OPD) were obtained from Sigma Chemical Co. Recombinant IFN-γ (rIFN-γ) (Zymogen) was used as ELISA standard, and the concentration of IFN-γ is reported in international units per milliliter (U/ml).

MHV replication in the presence of IFN-γ

DBT cells were seeded at a concentration of 5 × 10^5 cells per well into 24-well plates and incubated for 24 hr.
at 37° in MEM containing 5% newborn calf serum. J774.1 cells were seeded at a concentration of 5 × 10⁴ cells per well into 24-well plates and incubated for 24 hr at 37° in Dulbecco’s modified MEM (DMEM) containing 10% fetal calf serum. Cells were treated with various concentrations of the DI-expressed IFN-γ (DE-IFN-γ) or rIFN-γ and infected with viruses at an m.o.i. of 1, 0.1, 0.01, or 0.001. After virus adsorption for 1 hr, the respective medium with or without IFN-γ was added and the cells were incubated for the indicated periods of time.

Isolation and detection of intracellular mRNAs

To study the effects of IFN-γ treatment on the expression of cellular genes [inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), interferon-γ-inducing factor (IGIF), and MHV receptor (MHVR)], macrophage cells (J774.1) were grown to 90% confluence in 60-mm petri dishes and then treated with medium from cells expressing DE-IFN-γ or DE-CAT, both of which had been irradiated with UV to inactivate helper virus. At 24 and 48 hr after treatment, cells were collected and intracellular RNA was isolated as described previously (Zhang et al., 1994). To determine the effects of MHV infection on the expression of cellular genes, J774.1 cells were infected with MHV-JHM virus at an m.o.i. of 0.01 at 24 hr after IFN-γ treatment. RNA was isolated at 24 hr postinfection. The RNA samples were used for synthesis of cDNAs by reverse transcription (RT) with random priming hexamers (Boehringer-Mannheim). To detect individual genes, cDNA pools were subjected to PCR amplification using gene-specific primers (Table 1). The gene encoding the housekeeping enzyme hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase (HPRT) was used as an internal control. The PCR was performed for 20 cycles under the following condition: 95° for 1 min for denaturation, 56° for 1 min for annealing, and 72° for 2 min for extension. PCR products were analyzed by agarose gel electrophoresis.

Dot blot analysis

RT-PCR products were quantitated using the dot blot method previously described (Murphy et al., 1993; Cua et al., 1995). Briefly, PCR-amplified cDNA (10 µl) was denatured in 90 µl of denaturing solution (0.4 N NaOH and 25 mM EDTA) for 10 min and neutralized by the addition of an equal volume of 1 M Tris–HCl, pH 8.0. Samples were transferred to a nylon membrane via a Minifold I Dot Blot apparatus (Schleicher and Schuell), and the wells were washed with 2 × SSC containing 0.1% SDS for 10 min, air dried, and scanned on an Ambis radioanalytic imaging system (Ambis Systems). Total counts of each duplicate sample for iNOS, IGIF, and MHVR at each time point were normalized to the control HPRT. The blots were further autoradiographed.

Mice

C57BL/6 mice were purchased at 7 weeks of age from The Jackson Laboratory. Mice were infected with 1 × 10⁵ PFU of A59 expressing DE-IFN-γ or DE-CAT. Preliminary experiments showed no difference in virus replication in the CNS comparing parental A59 and A59 virus containing the DE-CAT vector.
Tissues and histology

Virus titers in the CNS were determined by homogenization of half of the brain in PBS followed by plaque assay on monolayers of DBT cells as previously described (Stohlman et al., 1995). The remaining half of the brains were fixed in Clark’s solution (75% ethanol, 25% glacial acetic acid), embedded in paraffin, and stained with hematoxylin and eosin to examine the extent of encephalitis or with the immunoperoxidase method (Vectorstain ABC kit; Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA) using the anti-nucleocapsid monoclonal antibody J.3.3. (Fleming et al., 1983) to determine the percentage of virus-infected cells.

RESULTS

Expression of IFN-γ using an MHV DI RNA vector

The murine IFN-γ gene was cloned into the MHV DI RNA vector (Liao et al., 1995) under the control of the MHV IG7 sequence. The resulting RNA, DE-IFN-γ RNA, was transfected into MHV-infected cells, and the production of IFN-γ in the culture medium was detected by ELISA. As shown in Fig. 1B, when MHV-JHM was used as helper virus, IFN-γ was secreted into the medium (20 U/ml) as early as 6 hr posttransfection and increased with time. At 24 hr posttransfection, when cell monolayers were completely lysed, the amount of IFN-γ reached approximately 180 U/ml. When A59 was used as helper virus, the production of IFN-γ was detected at 80 U/ml at 6 hr posttransfection and reached a maximum (approximately 180 U/ml) earlier (at 12 hr posttransfection) (Fig. 1C), consistent with the observation that A59 replicates faster than JHM. These results indicated that MHV DI vector can be used for the production of a secreted cytokine during MHV infection in vitro.

Effects of DI RNA-expressed IFN-γ on MHV replication in vitro

IFN-γ exerts multiple biological functions both in vitro and in vivo (Trinchieri and Perussia, 1985; Pestka and Langer, 1987), but its effects on coronavirus infections have not been extensively examined. We first determined whether DI-expressed IFN-γ had antiviral effects on helper viral replication. Virus titers in the medium of DBT cells infected with JHM and transfected with DE-IFN-γ RNA were determined at various time points after infection and compared to DE-CAT RNA-transfected cells. Figure 2 shows that the virus titers in the presence of DE-IFN-γ were lower by approximately half a log₁₀ compared to cultures transfected with the DE-CAT RNA. This difference was small but reproducible, suggesting that IFN-γ exerts at most a weak antiviral effect. The absence of significant anti-viral effect of IFN-γ in this system could be due to the requirement for interferon to modify host cell metabolism prior to infection or it may be that interferon acts at an early stage of viral replication.

To distinguish these possibilities, the culture medium harvested from JHM-infected and DE-IFN-γ-transfected cells late in infection was used to infect DBT cells. This medium contained not only JHM virus but also IFN-γ (180 U/ml) (Fig. 1). Therefore, IFN-γ present throughout the infection, beginning with the initiation of viral infection. No significant differences in virus titer released from the DE-IFN-γ- and DE-CAT-infected cells were detected (both yielded approximately 10⁶ PFU/ml) (data not shown). Thus, IFN-γ has little antiviral effect even when present at the initiation of viral infection.

In view of the known mechanisms of action of IFN-α and IFN-β, whose antiviral activities require preadsorption to cells prior to viral infection (Bianzani and Autonelli, 1989), we examined the effects of pretreatment of cells with IFN-γ prior to infection. For this study, the culture medium from JHM-infected and DE-IFN-γ-transfected cells was UV-irradiated to inactivate infectious virus and then used as a source of IFN-γ to pretreat DBT cells. Twenty-four hours later, cells were infected with JHM or A59 virus at m.o.i.’s ranging from 0.1 to 0.001 in the continual presence of DE-IFN-γ. Virus titers were determined at 24 hr postinfection. As shown in Fig. 3A, DE-IFN-γ exhibited a slight inhibitory effect on JHM replication (approximately 1 log₁₀ reduction in virus titer), when an m.o.i. of 0.001 was used; similar results were obtained with A59 virus (Fig. 3A), suggesting that pretreatment of cells with IFN-γ prior to viral infection induces an antiviral state. This inhibitory effect was less pronounced when higher m.o.i.’s were used (data not shown), suggesting that the observed antiviral activity was weak and could be overcome by a higher virus titer.

To further establish that the antiviral effect was due to the specific effects of IFN-γ, the UV-inactivated DE-IFN-γ preparation was preincubated for 2 hr with a hamster neutralizing monoclonal antibody specific for rIFN-γ. Antiviral effects were completely blocked by this treat-
FIG. 3. Effects and specificity of DE-IFN-γ pretreatment on MHV infection. (A) Supernatants from DBT cell cultures infected with JHM virus and transfected with either DE-IFN-γ or DE-CAT RNA were harvested at 24 hr posttransfection and subjected to UV irradiation to inactivate virus. The UV-irradiated supernatants were used either as a source of IFN-γ or as a control (CAT) to pretreat cells for 24 hr, and the cells were then infected with either JHM or A59 at an m.o.i. of 0.001. After virus adsorption, cells were incubated with the same supernatants for 24 hr, and the virus titers in culture medium at 24 hr postinfection were determined by a standard plaque assay. (B) Neutralization assay of IFN-γ. Both UV-irradiated supernatants (IFN-γ and CAT) were incubated with 1 μg/ml of a hamster anti-IFN-γ neutralizing monoclonal antibody for 2 hr at room temperature prior to being used for pretreatment of cells. Subsequent procedures were the same as in (A).

ment (Fig. 3B), demonstrating that IFN-γ, but not the replication of the DI vector itself, was responsible for the antiviral activity. These combined results suggest that IFN-γ has a weak antiviral effect, which was evident only when cells were pretreated with IFN-γ prior to infection.

The relatively weak antiviral effects of IFN-γ also could be due to the possibility that DBT cells do not respond well to IFN-γ. Since it is known that macrophages are particularly sensitive to IFN-γ treatment (Ijzermans and Marquet, 1989), we further determined the inhibitory effects of IFN-γ on MHV replication in an MHV-susceptible macrophage cell line (J774.1). J774.1 cells were pretreated with various concentrations of rIFN-γ for 24 hr before and throughout virus infection. As shown in Fig. 4, both A59 and JHM were inhibited by rIFN-γ by 1 to 2 log10, similar to the data obtained with DBT cells. Thus, the absence of strong antiviral effects of IFN-γ is not due to nonresponsiveness of cells to IFN-γ.

DI RNA-expressed IFN-γ prevents virus spread

The results described above indicated that antiviral effects of IFN-γ could be demonstrated only when cells were pretreated with IFN-γ before viral infection and when a low m.o.i. was used. They suggested the possibility that IFN-γ could prevent virus spread, if virus initially infects only a small number of cells. To establish an in vitro model for studying the potential effects of IFN-γ in preventing virus spread, UV-irradiated culture medium from DE-IFN-γ-transfected cells, which contained IFN-γ at 180 U/ml, was mixed with a very low titer of JHM virus at approximately one infectious particle in each well of a 24-well plate. Cells were observed for cytopathic effects daily for 4 days and the number of fusion plaques was counted. Results of these experiments are presented in Table 2. The number of plaques increased more slowly when the DE-IFN-γ was present (for example, from 1 plaque on Day 1 to 12 plaques on Day 4), as compared to those in the control wells, in which DI-expressed CAT preparation was used (i.e., from 1 plaque on Day 1 to 30 plaques on Day 2 and too numerous to count by Day 3) (Table 2). Initially, the plaque sizes in the presence of IFN-γ were indistinguishable from those of the control wells (data not shown); however, by Day 3 or 4 postinfection, while all plaques in the IFN-γ-treated cultures remained of uniform size, plaques in the absence of IFN-γ became numerous and heterogeneous in size (Fig. 5). These data suggest that the cells were infected at different time points throughout the incubation period and that DE-IFN-γ prevents virus spread to neighboring uninfected cells. However, these differences were not observed when a higher m.o.i. was tested, possibly...
Selective induction of cellular genes by MHV DI RNA-expressed IFN-γ

It has been suggested that IFN-γ induces a number of cellular proteins and enzymes which either act as endoribonucleases to degrade viral RNAs or interfere with viral protein synthesis by blocking the initiation of translation of virus-specific mRNAs (Pestka and Langer, 1987). To investigate whether the MHV DI RNA-expressed IFN-γ can modify the expression of specific cellular proteins, we analyzed the expression of three cellular genes in J774.1 cells before and after IFN-γ treatment. iNOS is a cellular enzyme associated with the antiviral function of TNF and IFN, both of which induce iNOS expression in macrophages (Lyons et al., 1992). IGIF (IL-1γ) is a cytokine secreted from Kupffer cells and activated macrophages, and it induces IFN-γ expression in T cells (Okamura et al., 1995). MHVR is a member of the biliary glycoprotein (BGP)/carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) family and serves as a receptor for MHV infection (Williams et al., 1991). Treatment of cells with DI-expressed IFN-γ for 24 hr increased the expression of iNOS and IGIF mRNAs. MHV infection did not affect the expression due to the rapid spread of progeny virus before IFN-γ exhibited its antiviral effect (data not shown). Similar results were obtained when various concentrations of rIFN-γ (50, 100, and 150 U/ml) were used, suggesting that 50 U/ml rIFN-γ is sufficient to prevent virus spread in vitro (data not shown).

Comparison of MHV variants for sensitivity to IFN-γ treatment

Sensitivity of different JHM variants to IFN-γ treatment in vitro was assessed in an effort to determine whether the IFN-γ sensitivity correlates with the pathogenicity of the virus in vivo. Three JHM variants with different degrees of neurovirulence were used: DL (LD50 1 – 5 PFU), DS (LD50 100 – 200 PFU), and 2.2-V-1 (LD50 2000 – 10,000 PFU) (Stohlmaker et al., 1982, 1995; Fleming et al., 1986, 1987). DL causes little demyelination and infects predominantly neurons whereas variant 2.2-V-1 causes extensive demyelination and infects predominantly glial cells with a particular tropism for oligodendrocytes. Variant DS causes less demyelination than variant 2.2-V-1. DBT cells pretreated with IFN-γ (180 U/ml) for 24 hr were infected, and the same concentrations of IFN-γ were maintained throughout the infection. At 24 hr postinfection, culture medium was collected and virus titer determined by plaque assay. As shown in Fig. 6, a reduction of approximately 2.5 log10 in virus titer was found for 2.2-V-1, 2 log10 for DS, and 1 log10 for DL. Therefore, variant 2.2-V-1 is most sensitive to IFN-γ treatment whereas variant DL is most resistant, suggesting a rough correlation between the virulence of these JHM variants and sensitivity to IFN-γ.

![AID VY 8598 / 6a3b$$$$83 06-06-97 13:05:36 vira AP: Virology](image-url)
sion of either gene. In contrast, the level of MHVR mRNA was not significantly affected by the IFN-γ treatment nor by MHV infection (Fig. 7C). Therefore, the MHV DI RNA-expressed IFN-γ is biologically active and selectively induces the expression of some cellular genes. Furthermore, the antiviral effect of IFN-γ is not mediated by alteration of MHVR expression.

Expression of IFN-γ alters MHV pathogenicity in mice

To determine if the DE-IFN-γ vector could alter MHV pathogenicity in vivo, groups of C57BL/6 mice were infected with 1 × 10^5 PFU of A59 virus containing either DE-IFN-γ or DE-CAT. Preliminary experiments showed no difference in virus replication in CNS between mice infected with parental A59 virus and those infected with A59-DE-CAT (data not shown). At 6 days postinfection, four mice in each group were sacrificed and the brains were examined for MHV titer and histological changes. The remaining mice in each group were monitored daily for survival. Table 3 shows that there was approximately 2.4 log_{10} less virus in the CNS of mice infected with A59 expressing DE-IFN-γ vector compared to the mice infected with A59 expressing DE-CAT vector. Correspondingly, all the mice infected with DE-IFN-γ-expressing A59 survived the entire 21-day observation period. By contrast, only one mouse in the group receiving DE-CAT survived to 21 days postinfection. Histological examination showed that there was much less viral antigen in the CNS of mice infected with the DE-IFN-γ-containing virus (Fig. 8). This finding and the lower virus titer in the CNS in this group of mice are consistent with the antiviral effect of IFN-γ. However, both DE-IFN-γ- and DE-CAT-expressing viruses infected the same cell types, i.e., neuron, glial cell, and microglial cell populations. Significantly, while the brains of the DE-CAT-expressing group showed only small numbers of perivascular and subarachnoid mononuclear cells, the brains of the DE-IFN-γ-expressing group showed widespread meningoencephalitis with prominent perivascular cuffs, infiltration of mononuclear cells into the parenchyma, and subarachnoid infiltrates (Fig. 8). This result supports the immunostimulatory effects of IFN-γ. Although this experiment used only a small number of mice, the data suggest that expression of immunomodulatory molecules from the DI vector can alter the pathogenesis of MHV-induced disease.

### TABLE 3

**Effects of DI-Expressed IFN-γ on Viral Pathogenesis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inoculum^a</th>
<th>Virus titer^b</th>
<th>Live/Dead^c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A59-DE-IFN-γ</td>
<td>2.71 ± 1.92</td>
<td>4/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A59-DE-CAT</td>
<td>5.28 ± 1.25</td>
<td>1/3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a Mice were infected intracerebrally with 1 × 10^5 PFU in a volume of 32 μl.
^b Virus titer × log_{10} PFU/g brain at Day 6 postinfection.
^c Live/Dead determined at 21 days postinfection.
FIG. 8. The effect of DE-IFN-γ vector on the pathogenicity of MHV. C57BL/6 mice were infected with $1 \times 10^5$ PFU of A59 virus pools containing DE-IFN-γ or DE-CAT. Four mice from each group were sacrificed at Day 6 post-infection and half of each brain was fixed and embedded in paraffin for histology. Hematoxylin and eosin stained sections (A, B) show that there is prominent encephalitis in the DE-IFN-γ mice (A), which is characterized by the presence of multifocal perivascular and parenchymal mononuclear cell infiltrates (arrowheads), while the DE-CAT mice (B) show only rare mild perivascular infiltrates (arrowheads). Immunoperoxidase-stained (ABC method) sections for viral antigen using anti-N antibody J.3.3 in the DE-IFN-γ mice (C) demonstrate only occasional small foci of antigen-containing cells within the brain (arrowheads), while numerous foci of antigen-containing cells are present throughout the brain in the DE-CAT mice (D). (Bar, 400 μm).
DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the MHV DI RNA system can be utilized as a vector to express the IFN-γ gene and that the IFN-γ protein is translated and secreted from infected cells as a biologically active molecule. These data represent the first successful attempt to express a mammalian cellular gene product using a coronavirus DI RNA vector. Thus far, we have demonstrated the feasibility of this DI RNA system for expressing a prokaryotic bacterial gene CAT (Liao and Lai, 1994), a viral structural protein gene HE (Liao et al., 1995), and the mammalian cellular gene IFN-γ (this report). These studies showed a broad range of usage of this DI RNA system for expressing various genes of interest.

Currently, an infectious, full-length cDNA clone of MHV RNA is not available; therefore, it is difficult to unequivocally elucidate the mechanism of pathogenesis of MHV at the molecular level. The development of a DI RNA expression system thus provides an alternative approach, allowing the expression of both viral and cellular genes to be manipulated. Further, this system allows expression of heterologous gene products at the site of viral replication. This system has an advantage over the passive administration of cytokines for studying viral pathogenesis, since cytokines usually have a short half-life, making it difficult to maintain high local concentrations at the site of infection. One drawback of the DI system, however, is its limited expression. The DI RNA cannot be packaged beyond the fourth passage in vitro (data not shown). We have attempted to increase retention of the DI RNA via incorporation of a packaging signal. However, the expression level of the gene product was reduced; no significant retention was found (Lin and Lai, 1993). Nevertheless, our data indicated that, during the first several passages, the expression level of IFN-γ was such that a sufficiently high level of IFN-γ can be maintained locally at the beginning of viral infection.

The virulence of several MHV variants correlates with their resistance to IFN-γ treatment, suggesting that IFN-γ may play a role in the pathogenesis of MHV. An earlier study analyzed the effects of IFN-γ during JHM infection using passive transfer of an anti-IFN-γ antibody (Smith et al., 1991). This treatment significantly enhanced virus replication and resulted in a higher mortality with decreased survival times. IFN-γ treatment of macrophages from A/J mice rendered them partially resistant to MHV3 infection, whereas the macrophages from susceptible BALB/c mice did not respond to IFN-γ, suggesting that the resistance of mice to MHV3 infection involves the sensitivity of macrophages to IFN-γ (Lucchiari et al., 1991; Vassao et al., 1994a,b). IFN-γ was also shown to be more effective than IFN-α/β in inducing an antiviral state in macrophages infected with MHV (Vassao et al., 1994a). These reports support the notion that IFN-γ may play a role in MHV infection.

The molecular basis for the relative IFN resistance of different MHV strains is not yet known. Previous studies have shown that the neutralization-escape mutant 2.2-V-1 of JHM strain has a single nucleotide mutation at position 3340 of the S gene, which results in a leucine to phenylalanine substitution (Wang et al., 1992). Whether this single mutation affects the sensitivity of the virus to IFN-γ remains unclear. In lymphocytic choriomeningitis virus, resistance of various virus strains to IFN-α/β or IFN-γ in vitro correlates with their ability to establish persistent infections in adult immunocompetent mice (Moskophidis et al., 1994). One possibility is that IFN resistance allows enhanced viral replication and spread, facilitating exhaustion of antiviral CTL, thereby resulting in virus persistence. Whether MHV utilizes a similar mechanism to modulate its infection in mice is an interesting issue. Correlation between IFN resistance and viral pathogenicity has also been documented for measles virus, adenovirus, and herpes simplex virus type I (Carrigan and Kehl-Knox, 1990; Su et al., 1990; Kalvakulanu et al., 1991).

The in vitro experiments showed that the DI-expressed IFN-γ had inhibitory effects on virus spread from initially infected cells to neighboring uninfected cells. The inhibitory effect was more pronounced at a lower m.o.i., which apparently allowed sufficient time for IFN-γ to activate an antiviral state in adjacent uninfected cells. Pretreatment of cells (astrocytoma and macrophages) with IFN-γ is required to induce an antiviral state (Figs. 3 and 4), consistent with previous findings from studies of primary mouse macrophages (Lucchiari et al., 1991) and other target cells (Lewis, 1982). Expression of both iNOS and IFIG mRNA in macrophages was induced by IFN-γ. However, whether these molecules mediate the antiviral effects of IFN-γ is not clear. Recently, it was demonstrated that iNOS expression did not play a significant role in the pathogenesis of the MHV OBLV60 strain (Lane et al., 1997). Nevertheless, we can conclude from our study that the antiviral effects of IFN-γ are not mediated by down-regulation of MHVR. The precise mechanism of the antiviral effects of IFN-γ will require additional studies, as there appears to be discordance between the antiviral effects of NO in vivo and its effects in vitro (Lane et al., 1997).

The alteration of A59 neuropathogenesis by DE-IFN-γ provides further support for the significance of IFN-γ in MHV infection. Inhibition of IFN-γ action by passive transfer of antibody (Smith et al., 1991) enhanced virus replication and increased mortality, suggesting that local production of IFN-γ by infiltrating leukocytes is a critical component of the host response to MHV infection. In our experiments, the production of IFN-γ by DE-IFN-γ resulted in an exaggeration of the host response with more prominent encephalitis, improved viral clearance, and decreased mortality. The increased encephalitis may, in turn, induce local cytokine production and CTL
activity. Altogether, these data demonstrated that IFN-γ plays a critical role at least early in A59 infection. The longer-term consequences of DE-IFN-γ expression, however, cannot be definitively determined from this study because most of the DE-CAT-infected mice died. Examination of the single DE-CAT survivor and the four surviving DE-IFN-γ mice at 21 days postinfection showed no apparent differences, with both groups exhibiting mild encephalitis, moderate demyelination, and focally residual viral antigen (data not shown). The absence of differences was probably due to the fact that IFN-γ was expressed from the DI vector for only a brief period of time. The current studies confirm the validity of using the DI vector system for studying MHV pathogenesis in vivo. Expressing immune regulatory proteins at the site of viral infection may provide insights into the pathogenesis of MHV infection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
This work was supported by Public Health Service Grant NS 18146 from the National Institutes of Health. We thank Steve Ho and Wenqiang Wei for excellent technical assistance. D. Cua is supported by PHS Training Grant NS 07149. M. M. C. Lai is an investigator of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

REFERENCES


