Immunostimulatory virotherapy using recombinant Sendai virus as a new cancer therapeutic regimen

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Abstract
2. Recombinant Sendai virus (rSeV) vector: a cutting edge technology for human gene therapy
   2.1. Brief summary of structural and biological aspects of Sendai virus (SeV)
   2.2. Available rSeV
3. Establishment of rSeV-modified dendritic cell (rSeV/DC) -based cancer immunotherapy
   3.1. Responses of DCs to rSeV infection
   3.2. Potency of rSeV/DC-based cancer immunotherapy
   3.3. Potential mechanism of the antitumor effect of rSeV/DCs
4. Conclusion
5. Acknowledgments
6. References

1. ABSTRACT

The utility of recombinant Sendai virus (rSeV) has been considerably examined over the last decade as a potent gene transfer candidate in a cytoplasmic gene expression system. Such risks as excessive immune responses associated with this virus administration in vivo however have limited its applicability in clinical settings as is the case with other viral vectors including adenoviruses. In consequence of extensive assessment on the mechanisms of immune responses against SeV, we found that ex vivo infection of immature dendritic cells (DCs) with SeV demonstrates their spontaneous maturation and activation. We applied this result to create a unique, representative, and powerful agent to activate DCs, namely rSeV-modified DCs (rSeV/DCs), for use in cancer immunotherapy. Use of this system in vivo resulted in the induction of efficient antitumor immunity against vascularized rodent tumors, including melanoma, hepatocellular carcinoma, neuroblastoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and prostatic cancer, and it even associated with elimination of those tumors. These results indicate that rSeV could be a powerful immune booster for DC-based cancer immunotherapy that is worth investigating further. We propose a conceptual term “immunostimulatory virotherapy” to describe this new method of cancer therapy using the rSeV/DCs system.

2. RECOMBINANT SENDAI VIRUS (rSeV) VECTOR: A CUTTING EDGE TECHNOLOGY FOR HUMAN GENE THERAPY

2.1. Brief summary of structural and biological aspects of Sendai virus (SeV)

Sendai virus (SeV) is a member of the Paramyxoviridae: an enveloped virus with a linear, nonsegmented negative-strand RNA genome that encodes six unique genes for ribonucleotide–protein complex (RNP: NP, P/C/V, and L) and envelope-related proteins (F, HN, and M) (Figure 1). Wild-type SeV (SeV-WT) that is amplified in the chorioallantonic fluid of embryonated chicken eggs autonomously replicates in the presence of trypsin-like protease (identified as factor Xa)-mediated digestion of F-precursor (F0), forming active F-protein (1, 2). SeV-WT detects sialic acid residues on surface glycoproteins or asialoglycoproteins as receptors (3), and yields a broad spectrum of infection. SeV-WT however causes pneumonia in rodents after multiple infections, and of special note is that lungs are the only organs that are infected. This lung-specific tropism is determined by the presence of trypsin-like protease (identified as factor Xa)-mediated digestion of F-precursor (F0), forming active F-protein (1, 2). SeV-WT detects sialic acid residues on surface glycoproteins or asialoglycoproteins as receptors (3), and yields a broad spectrum of infection. SeV-WT however causes pneumonia in rodents after multiple infections, and of special note is that lungs are the only organs that are infected. This lung-specific tropism is determined by the presence of trypsin-like protease in the airway mucus which activates F-precursor (4).

One of the distinguished features of SeV is its rapid process of infection. When SeV is inoculated, the
viral particles adhere to cellular membrane and immediately start to fuse with it; this is also true for SeV-based recombinant vectors (5, 6). In addition, the life-cycle of SeV, including genome replication and transcription, occurs largely in the cellular cytoplasm: this virus does not show a DNA phase in contrast to retroviruses and lentiviruses. Furthermore, the level of gene expression is dramatically high. In the case of rSeV vector, transgene expression is frequently 100,000 times higher compared to the case when adenoviral vectors are used (5). These unique features of SeV prompted us to produce a new class of recombinant vectors based on SeV that would raise opportunities of what we term “cytoplasmic gene therapy” without genotoxicity.

2.2. Available rSeV

We have developed several types of rSeV by a stepwise strategy. rSeV vectors largely retain the features of SeV-WT as described above. The prototype vector has a simple structure with the addition of an exogenous gene (additive type; Figure 1), and most of our knowledge regarding its in vivo gene transfer efficiency has been obtained in studies using this additive type vector (5–10). Cells transfected by this replication-competent vector produce secondary vector particles containing a precursor form of F-protein; therefore, this type of vector evokes pneumonia to the extent comparable to the case when SeV-WT is used.

The first success in producing a non-transmissible rSeV vector was reported in 2000 (11). The genome of the first-generation rSeV vector lacks a gene encoding F-protein (vector rSeV/dF [fusion gene-deleted rSeV]), maintaining the basic characteristics of SeV-WT. Currently, rSeV/dF is being mass-produced according to the good manufacturing practice (GMP) protocol, and the first clinical study using rSeV/dF expressing human basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF/FGF-2) is now under way on therapeutic angiogenesis to treat patients with critical limb ischemia (Gene Therapy Clinical Study Protocols Approved in Japan: http://www.nihs.go.jp/cgtp/cgtp/sect1/gt prtcl/prtcl-e.html). Recent modifications of rSeV/dF to diminish its virus-induced cytopathic effects procreated a temperature-sensitive mutant rSeV/df (ts-rSeV/dF), namely 1.5th generation vector (Figure 1) (12). No significant modification on the vector production system is required to reconstitute ts-rSeV/dF. This vector shows an apparent reduction of cytopathic effects on various types of cell in vitro as well as in mouse lungs in vivo (12).

Advanced designs of rSeV vectors with multiple depletion of envelope-related genes (rSeV/dFM and
rSeV vectors for cancer immunotherapy

Figure 2. Optimization of tumor lysate-pulsed rSeV/dF-GFP-DC vaccine in a rat model of lung metastasis of AT6.3 prostate cancer. *P < 0.01. (A) Treatment regimen. (B) Optimization of dose–efficacy relationship. DCs were administered via a tail vein. The following numbers of animals were used: normal lung, n = 6; No Tx, n = 6; rSeV/dF, n = 17 (3 × 10^4 cells, n = 6; 3 × 10^5 cells, n = 5; 3 × 10^6 cells, n = 6). (C) Optimization of administration route. 3 × 10^6 DCs were used per vaccine. The following numbers of animals were used: normal lung, n = 6; No Tx, n = 9; rSeV/dF, n = 16 (s.c., n = 7; i.v., n = 9).

rSeV/dFdMdHN, or second and third-generation vector, relatively) are being produced on a laboratory scale today. These vectors show almost complete elimination of budding of secondary virus-like particles (13). Multiple deletion of envelope-related genes has contributed to significant reductions in cytotoxic effects and host immune responses particularly in the case of innate immunity (including natural killer cell activity), and modest prolongation of transgene expression has been observed when these advanced vectors were used (13). Succeeding designs of SeV-based vector systems have derived a novel concept of “cytoplasmic gene therapy,” assessing the feasibility to provide more efficient and safer therapy in clinical settings. However, cytoplasmic gene therapy itself also causes a variety of cellular responses related to host immune responses.

3. ESTABLISHMENT OF rSeV/DC-BASED CANCER IMMUNOTHERAPY

3.1. Responses of DCs to rSeV infection

As described above, infection with SeV-WT as well as rSeV evokes a considerable immune response in the host, even though envelope-related genes have been deleted from their genome. To assess this mechanism, we examined the responses of human, rat, and murine DCs to SeV-WT and rSeV. As shown in Figure 2, SeV-WT as well as additive rSeV expressing green fluorescent protein (GFP; SeV-GFP) amplified in chorioallantoic fluid of
Figure 3. Assessment of antitumor activity of rSeV/DCs against low-malignant murine melanoma B16F1. Three days after tumor cell inoculation, DCs were injected intratumorally according to the indicated regimen (an early treatment regimen: a scheme shown at the bottom). Tumor lysate was pulsed to immature DCs, which were subsequently treated with LPS, SeV-GFP, or SeV-mIFN-beta, and these DCs were used for DC immunotherapy eight hours later. DC treatment was done three times. The data are totals of three independent experiments. (A) Experimental design to assess the stimulator-dependent antitumor effect of DCs (upper panel). Survival curve of mice bearing B16F1 melanoma treated with various DCs. Significant prolongation of survival was seen in rSeV/DC groups (bottom). (B) Typical and representative gross observation of mice with B16F1 tumors treated with or without SeV-mIFN-beta/DC/lysate twenty-six days after tumor cell inoculation. Note the complete rejection of tumors after SeV-mIFN-beta/DC/lysate treatment (arrow), which was confirmed by histopathological examination (data not shown). Tumor rejection rate by mice at day 75 is also shown in the right column. Adapted from reference 14.
survival (Figure 3B) compared with the use of LSP-DCs. We then tested the antitumor activity of rSeV/DCs against highly malignant murine melanoma B16F10. In this experiment, we started the treatment on day 10 after the tumor inoculation when the tumor had reached 7–9 mm in diameter (16). As shown in Figure 4, treatment with rSeV/DCs, not with either immature DCs or LPS-activated DCs, significantly improved the survival of tumor-bearing mice; notably, when rSeV/DCs expressing mIFN-beta were used, established B16F10 tumors became dormant. These effects were seen when rSeV/DCs were injected intratumorally and also when any types of rSeVs, including rSeV/dF and ts-rSeV/dF, were used. Furthermore, similar effects and antimetastatic activities have been observed in other tumor types with independent origins including murine hepatocellular carcinoma (MH134), murine neuroblastoma (c-1300), murine squamous cell carcinoma (SCCVII), murine osteoblastoma (LM8), and a rat prostate cancer (Dunning AT6.3). These results suggest the possible utility of rSeV as a new and promising tool for cancer immunotherapy in clinical settings.

### 3.3. Potential mechanism of the antitumor effect of rSeV/DCs

A precise mechanism by which rSeV/DCs therapy has its effects remains largely unknown. The fact that experimental studies indicating that UV-irradiated SeV did not produce any activation/maturation of DCs strongly
rSeV vectors for cancer immunotherapy

suggest that cytoplasmic replication/transcription of the genome may be critical for its antitumor activity. Recent intensive studies by Dr. Akira and his colleagues have demonstrated that TLR-independent recognition of several RNA viruses by RNA helicases activates DCs and other cells; in particular a DExD/H-box RNA helicase, retinoic acid-inducible protein I (RIG-I), is critical for SeV (17–19). These findings prompted us to examine a role of the RIG-I-related signal transduction pathway (unpublished data). To perform this experiment, we newly constructed rSeV/dF expressing caspase-recruiting domain (CARD)-deleted dominant negative inhibitor RIG-IC (19). As expected, transfection of DCs with rSeV-dF stimulated the expression of IFN-beta as well as that of proinflammatory cytokines including interleukin (IL)-1beta, IL-6, tumor necrosis factor-alpha, and IL-12, which was completely disappeared by treatment with rSeV/dF expressing RIG-IC. On the other hand, expression of surface markers of DCs including CD80, CD86, and OX62 (an integrin) was not affected by expression of RIG-IC. Of interest, the antimetastatic effect of rSeV/dF-DCs was not impaired by RIG-IC expression: this implies that the antimetastatic effect of rSeV/DCs does not depend on the RIG-I-related pathway.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Some concerns remain to be clarified. We however believe that lack of information regarding some of the mechanistic aspects of rSeV/DC-based immunostimulatory virotherapy does not diminish its value, because this system shows strong antitumor effects in some tumor models and species even when it is used in highly malignant tumor models (14). Since rSeV/dF is now available for clinical studies and the preparation of rSeV/dF-modified DCs does not require any special techniques or materials, we intend to continue investigating whether the use of this system has a significantly greater antitumor effect than current cancer vaccines in clinical settings.

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6. REFERENCES


rSeV vectors for cancer immunotherapy


**Abbreviations:** DC: dendritic cells; rSeV: recombinant Sendai virus; rSeV/dF: fusion gene-deleted rSeV; LPS: lipopolysaccharide; PB-DC: blood-derived myeloid DC; GFP: green fluorescent protein; RIG-I: retinoic acid-inducible gene I; rSeV/dF-RIGIC: rSeV/dF expressing dominant negative mutant of RIG-I

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