RESEARCH NOTE

USE OF DRIED BLOOD SPOTS FOR HIV-1 GENOTYPING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THAILAND EXPERIENCE

Wiriya Rutvisuttinunt, Miguel A Arroyo, Vatcharain Assawadarachai, Kultida Poltavee, Francine E McCutchan, Sodsai Tovanabutra, Gustavo Kijak, Jerome H Kim, Robert M Paris and Mark de Souza

1Department of Retrovirology, Armed Forces Research Institute of Medical Sciences, Bangkok, Thailand; 2US Military HIV Research Program, Henry M Jackson Foundation, MD, USA

Abstract. The multi-region hybridization assay (MHAbce) for genotyping HIV-1 subtypes B, C and circulating recombinant form (CRF01 AE) was evaluated on paired plasma and dried blood spots (DBS) collected from 68 HIV-1 infected individuals in Thailand. CRF01_AE was the predominant subtype identified using plasma samples (51/62) and DBS (24/27). There was no discordance in subtype designations between plasma and DBS.

Keywords: HIV subtyping, dried blood spot

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges facing development of an effective HIV-AIDS vaccine is the extensive sequence diversity of the virus. HIV-1 genotypes surveillance in remote regions of the world is often problematic due to the lack of the necessary infrastructure to process specimens from phlebotomy tubes and maintenance of cold facilities for specimen storage and transport (Quinn et al., 1986; Tovanabutra et al., 2004b). To overcome these difficulties, dried blood spots (DBS) collected on filter papers have been used for HIV-1 serology and molecular studies as this simplifies specimen processing, storage and transportation (Farzadegan et al., 1987; Lindhardt et al., 1987; Leelawiwat et al., 2009). In addition, the use of DBS is more economical than that of plasma for sample preparation and archiving as...
venipuncture is not required.

Several assays for HIV-1 diagnostics, viral load and subtyping have been successfully adapted for use with DBS. Serologic HIV-1 diagnosis from DBS demonstrated equivalent sensitivity to traditional serum and plasma testing (Farzadegan et al., 1987; Lindhardt et al., 1987). HIV-1 DNA obtained from DBS correlated with RNA viral load from plasma and whole blood (Leelawiwat et al., 2009). HIV-1 drug resistance profiles as well as DNA sequencing of the \textit{rt} and \textit{pr} regions could be performed on DNA extracted from DBS (Steegen et al., 2007). HIV-1 subtypes have been assigned from DBS using genetic sequencing (Cassol et al., 1996) and serotyping (Chanbancherd et al., 1999). In addition, drug resistance profiles and diverse HIV-1 genotyping of the HIV-1 \textit{pol} region have been achieved using DBS collected from diverse geographic regions (Yang et al., 2010).

The extensive sequence diversity of HIV-1 and emergence of novel, circulating recombinant forms (CRF) require ongoing surveillance of HIV-1 (Altfeld et al., 2002; Perez-Alvarez et al., 2002; Ramos et al., 2002; Thomson et al., 2002; Tovanabutra et al., 2004a,b). Therefore, an HIV-1 genotyping assay based on multiple regions of the genome facilitated a proper identification of viral stains, helping to characterize transmission within populations and to potentially contribute in HIV-1 vaccine design. In Southeast Asia, the predominant circulating HIV-1 strain is CRF01_AE, with minor representation of subtypes B and C also being reported from Thailand (Tovanabutra et al., 2004a,b). A multi-region hybridization assay (MHA\textit{bce}) for characterization of HIV-1 subtypes B, C and CRF01_AE by quantitative PCR utilizing probes in 8 regions throughout the viral genome for higher resolution genotyping has been developed (Hoelscher et al., 2002; Kijak et al., 2007). An HIV-1 genotype was assigned when the subtype-specific probes react with ≥ 4 out of 8 regions. In order to extend and improve HIV-1 genotype surveillance efforts in remote areas that lack the necessary laboratory infrastructure for specimen processing, we investigated the feasibility of using MHA\textit{bce} on DBS for HIV-1 genotyping of samples from the Southeast Asian region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We evaluated the utility of DBS-MHA\textit{bce} in the previously validated plasma-MHA\textit{bce} of 68 pairs of matched plasma (200 µl of plasma per subject) and DBS (80 µl whole blood per subject) collected on 903 Protein Saver cards (Whatman, Maidstone, UK) and air dried at room temperature and stored at -20°C until testing from anti-retroviral-naive, HIV-1 infected Thai volunteers with different plasma HIV-1 viral loads (Table 1). Total DNA was extracted from DBS using QI\textit{a}amp DNA Blood Mini Kit Spin (QIAGEN, Valencia, CA). DNA was quantified using NanoDrop (Thermo, Wilmington, DE) and gel visualization. HIV-1 viral RNA was extracted from plasma using QI\textit{a}amp MinElute Virus Kit (QIAGEN, Valencia, CA) in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions. IRB approval was obtained in both Thailand and the USA prior to starting the study.

MHA\textit{bce} analysis was performed on the extracted DNA and RNA as previously described (Kijak et al., 2007). In brief, extracted RNA was reverse transcribed, followed by PCR amplification using QIAGEN OneStep RT-PCR kit
Table 1

Relationship between HIV-1 viral load and MHAbce sensitivity from matched plasma and DBS samples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HIV-1 viral load (copies/ml)</th>
<th>No. of samples</th>
<th>No. of PCR positive samples&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>No. of samples genotyped&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Plasma-MHAbce (%) DBS-MHAbce (%)</td>
<td>Plasma-MHAbce (%) DBS-MHAbce (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-99</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (50) 0</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-499&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (100) 0</td>
<td>3 (100) 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500-999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (100) 0</td>
<td>2 (100) 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-4,999</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18 (100) 6 (33)</td>
<td>18 (100) 4 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000-9,999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 (100) 2 (20)</td>
<td>9 (90) 2 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-49,999</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18 (100) 15 (83)</td>
<td>16 (89) 8 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000-99,999&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7 (100) 7 (100)</td>
<td>7 (100) 7 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000≥499,999</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8 (100) 8 (100)</td>
<td>7 (88) 6 (75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Number of PCR positive reactions obtained for at least 4/8 regions; (%), number PCR positive samples/total samples. <sup>b</sup>Number of samples that have probes reactive with at least 4/8 regions; (%), number probe reactive samples/PCR positive samples/total samples. <sup>c</sup>Estimated sensitivity of plasma-MHAbce: 100 copies/ml (100% successful rate for PCR sensitivity). <sup>d</sup>Estimated sensitivity of DBS-MHAbce: 50,000 copies/ml or 4,000 copies/DBS (100% successful rate for PCR sensitivity).

Table 2

Comparison of plasma and DBS-MHAbce performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>MHA evaluation</th>
<th>Overall performance (%)</th>
<th>HIV-1 genome regions&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>p17</td>
<td>pr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCR positive&lt;sup&gt;b,c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Plasma</td>
<td>522/544(96) 67/68(99) 66/68(97) 66/68(97) 67/68(99) 66/68(97) 65/68(96) 62/68(91) 63/68(93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DBS</td>
<td>266/544(49) 28/68(41) 32/68(47) 35/68(51) 40/68(59) 26/68(38) 34/68(50) 36/68(53) 35/68(51)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe positive&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Plasma</td>
<td>416/522(80) 54/67(81) 39/66(59) 60/66(91) 62/67(93) 59/66(89) 50/65(77) 48/62(77) 44/63(70)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DBS</td>
<td>207/266(78) 24/28(86) 25/32(78) 33/35(94) 32/40(80) 22/26(85) 26/34(76) 24/36(67) 21/35(60)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Eight regions of HIV-1 genome analyzed by either plasma or DBS-MHAbce. <sup>b,c</sup>Number of PCR positive reactions based on Syber Green Profile. <sup> (%)</sup>, Number of PCR positive reactions/total number of PCR reactions. <sup>d</sup>Number of probe positive reactions/total number of PCR positive reactions.
Each PCR amplicon was subjected to 8 second-round PCR reactions, each using a different fluorescent subtype-specific probe in a TaqMan Universal PCR Mastermix (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA), and to a quantitative PCR containing TaqMan® Syber Green Mix (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) to determine whether sample amplification had occurred. A specific HIV-1 subtype was assigned when probes reacted with ≥4/8 regions.

RESULTS

Sensitivity of DBS-MHAbce was estimated by conducting MHAbce on DBS containing discarded HIV-1 sero-negative blood spiked with serial dilutions (10-100,000 copies/ml) of the ACH2 cell line, which carries a single integrated copy of subtype B HIV-1 DNA per cell (Clouse et al., 1989). Beta-globin was utilized as an internal standard for DNA loading prior to conducting the MHAbce assay. The results showed that the sensitivity (defined as 100% successful rate for obtaining PCR positive reactions ≥4 out of 8 regions) of the DBS-MHAbce was 50,000 copies of HIV-1 DNA/ml of whole blood or 4,000 copies HIV-1 DNA/80 µl of DBS (data not shown). For the paired plasma and DBS samples, 15/68 contained viral load of ≥50,000 copies/ml of plasma. When plasma viral load was ≥50,000 copies/ml, 15/15 PCR positive amplifications were observed (Table 1). Whereas in DBS, 13/15 samples (87%) with viral load ≥50,000 copies/ml and 14/53 (26%) with viral load <50,000 copies/ml (p < 0.01; Fisher’s exact test) were genotyped successfully by MHAbce.

When the overall performance of DBS-MHAbce was compared to that of plasma-MHAbce, using total of 544 MHAbce reactions (68 samples x 8 regions), that of DBS-MHAbce showed a lower overall PCR amplification frequency (49%) but comparable probe reactivity (78%) in all regions compared to plasma (80%) (Table 2). The frequency of PCR amplification in the 8 regions throughout the HIV-1 genome ranged from 62 - 67 of 68 (91 - 99%) for plasma and 26 - 40 of 68 (38 - 59%) for DBS, likely due to the lower volume of specimen in the latter. In addition, probe sensitivity in the 8 regions of the HIV-1 genome for plasma- and DBS-MHAbce varied from 59 - 93% (39/66 and 62/67) and 60 - 94% (21/35 and 33/35), respectively (Table 2). However, the MHAbce probes showed comparable performance between plasma and DBS regardless of subtype once there were adequate regions of the HIV-1 genome amplified to perform the assay (Table 3).

A total of 62/67 (93%) samples were genotyped using plasma compared with 27/38 (71%) for DBS (Table 3). A total of 5/67 (7%) plasma versus 11/38 (29%) DBS were non-typeable by MHAbce (p < 0.01). The 62 samples assigned a genotype using plasma represented HIV-1 infections with CRF01_AE (82%), subtype B (6%) and others (11%). Despite the PCR amplification of only 38/68 (56%) DBS samples allowing MHA genotyping compared to 67/68 (99%) of plasma samples, the overall HIV-1 subtype distributions were comparable: CRF01_AE, (89% versus 82%); subtype B, (7% for both specimen types); and others, (4% versus 11%).

Dual probe infections were detected in 1/27 (4%) of the genotyped DBS samples in comparison to 2/62 (3%) of the genotyped plasma samples. The subtype assignments using DBS were concordant with those using plasma (Table 4).
The results from our study agreed with other observations that CRF01_AE is the predominant form of HIV-1 circulating in Thailand (Tovanabutra et al., 2004 a,b; Kijak et al., 2007; Arroyo et al., 2010).

The major limitation of our study was the limited sensitivity of the DBS genotyping method at a viral load below 50,000 copies/ml of blood. Plasma allowed a 2-fold higher number of samples to be genotyped by the MHAbce compared to DBS, due to the larger sample volume used as template. Ongoing studies in our laboratory are focusing on optimizing the DNA extraction from DBS.

The performance of the DBS-MHAbce demonstrated a lower PCR sensitivity than plasma-based genotyping, limiting the number of regions that could potentially react to one of the HIV-1 subtype specific probes used in MHA. The overall

DISCUSSION

The results from our study agreed with other observations that CRF01_AE is the predominant form of HIV-1 circulating in Thailand (Tovanabutra et al., 2004 a,b; Kijak et al., 2007; Arroyo et al., 2010). The major limitation of our study was the limited sensitivity of the DBS genotyping method at a viral load below 50,000 copies/ml of blood. Plasma allowed a 2-fold higher number of samples to be genotyped by the MHAbce compared to DBS, due to the larger sample volume used as template. Ongoing studies in our laboratory are focusing on optimizing the DNA extraction from DBS.

The performance of the DBS-MHAbce demonstrated a lower PCR sensitivity than plasma-based genotyping, limiting the number of regions that could potentially react to one of the HIV-1 subtype specific probes used in MHA. The overall

Table 3
Comparison of plasma and DBS-MHAbce genotype distributions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample source</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>No. of samples used for MHAbce (%)</th>
<th>No. of samples genotyped by MHAbce (%)</th>
<th>Genotypes (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CRF01_AE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>67 (99)</td>
<td>62 (93)</td>
<td>51 (82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBS</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>38 (56)</td>
<td>27 (71)</td>
<td>24 (89)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aPCR positive reactions obtained for at least 4/8 analyzed regions.
bNumber of samples genotyped by MHAbce; (%), No. of samples genotyped by MHAbce/No. of samples used for MHAbce.
cOthers defined as either CRF01_AE/B recombinant or CRF01_AE/B dual infection.
dNon-typeable defined as samples with probe reactivity in less than 4 regions.
eNumber of samples that have probes reactive with at least 4 regions.
f$p < 0.01$ compared to plasma.

dbNumber of samples.

cEither CRF01_AE/B recombinant or CRF01_AE/B dual infection.
dNon-typeable due to either un-amplifiable or insufficient probe reactivity for subtyping (N < 4).
subtype distribution based on the DBS was similar when compared to the previously validated plasma specimens despite the lower PCR sensitivity of the former (Kijak et al, 2007; Arroyo et al, 2010). The result suggests that the DBS-MHAbce provided a similar HIV-1 subtype distribution. The DBS-MHAbce technique could be a practical tool for characterizing the predominant HIV-1 strains in remote areas in Asia but the assay requires further refinement, with particular emphasis on improving the efficiency in extracting HIV-1 DNA from DBS, thereby increasing viral template amount and assay sensitivity.

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