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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Liposome-mediated RNA transfection should be used with caution

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ABSTRACT

Liposome-mediated RNA transfection appears to present a number of advantages for studying the metabolism of reporter mRNAs in mammalian cells. This method is also widely used to transfect siRNAs. Here we describe results indicating that reporter mRNAs introduced into HeLa cells by liposomes do not present the expected behaviors. Namely, the stability of reporter mRNAs was independent of the presence or absence of an AUUUA instability element, a poly(A) tail, or even a 5' methylated cap. Confocal microscopy showed that fluorescent RNAs introduced by liposome-mediated transfection were present in discrete particles. These observations imply that a number of control experiments are required when using liposome to mediated RNA transfection, and the possible consequences are discussed.

Keywords: lipofection; AU-rich element; EDEN; mRNA degradation; localization

INTRODUCTION

A variety of methods can be used to introduce recombinant genes or gene products into cells. Although plasmid transfection is probably the most common approach, RNA transfection is increasingly being used. Microinjection has been successfully used for many decades to introduce various molecules into embryos of many species. Microinjection of nucleic acids or proteins into cultured cells is also possible with the aid of more specialized equipment. Many other protocols for the transfection of cultured cells with plasmids and RNAs have been developed, of which lipofection (liposome-mediated transfection) is widely used. Lipofection has the advantage that no specialized equipment is required, and as several companies have developed kits, experimental reproducibility can be good. Notably, lipofection is widely used for the transfection of si- and miRNAs. RNA transfection is also potentially interesting for the study of mechanisms controlling mRNA metabolism.

Ongoing research in our laboratory is concerned with the identification of cis-acting elements and trans-acting factors that regulate mRNA stability and translation in Xenopus embryos. To pursue this research using cultured mammalian cells, we initiated a program using HeLa and NIH-3T3 cells transfected either with mRNAs or plasmids. When plasmids encoding reputed stable or unstable mRNAs were transfected, the resulting mRNAs were present in discrete particles. These observations imply that a number of control experiments are required when using liposome to mediated RNA transfection, and the possible consequences are discussed.
Liposome-mediated RNA transfection

FIGURE 1. Aberrant stability of transfected RNAs. (A) The various capped and 32P-labeled mRNAs, indicated on the left, were transfected in vitro from the appropriate plasmids linearized by restriction with EcoRV and using the mMessage mMachine (Ambion) kit with the T7 polymerase: GbORF pA+ and pGbORF (Audic et al. 1997); GbORF-AUUUA pA+, pGbORF-AUUUA, GbORF-junARE pA+, and pGbORF-jun (Paillard et al. 2002); or the SP6 polymerase Cat-EDEN pA+, pCESA 14, Cat-EDENas pA+, and pCEASA 3 (Ezzeddine et al. 2002). The in vitro transcripts were purified and verified by PAGE before use. HeLa cells (12-well culture dish seeded at 10^5 cells per well the day before use) were transfected using the DMRIE-C lipofectant (Invitrogen; 2 mg/mL) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Briefly, 400 μL of opti-MEM supplemented with 10 μL of lipofectant and 2–3 pmol of RNA were added to each well, and the cells were cultured at 37°C/5% CO_2 for 2 h. The lipofectant was then removed by washing with PBS and the culture continued at 37°C/5% CO_2 after adding 1 mL/well of DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum. At the indicated times, the medium was removed and total RNA was extracted by the addition of 400 μL of TRI-Reagent (Medical Research Center Inc.) per well. The extracted RNAs were separated by electrophoresis on a 2% agarose MOPS/formaldehyde gel and transferred onto a Hybond membrane (Amersham), and the fixed membrane was exposed to a phosphoimager screen. The radioactive signals were revealed using a Storm phosphorimager and then quantified by the ImageQuant software. (B) HeLa cells were transfected, as described in A, by GbORF-AUUUA (Fig. 1C, upper panel) or either uncapped or capped (respectively, No cap and Cap; bottom panel). The poly(A)+ mRNA was synthesized using pGbORF-AUUUA restricted with BamHI. To synthesize uncapped mRNA, the cap analog was omitted from the transcription reaction. The radioactive capped and uncapped mRNAs (10 fmol) were either added alone to the lipofectant (w/o carrier) or supplemented with 2.5 pmol of nonradioactive GbORF or GbORF-AUUUA pA+ as appropriate (with carrier). The transfected cells were cultured and the total RNA extracted and analyzed as described in A. (C) HeLa cells were transfected, as described in A, by GbORF pA+ and GbORF-AUUUA pA+ mRNAs as indicated. (Upper panel) After removal of the culture medium, the cells were washed with 1 mL of PBS and then detached from the dish with 100 μL of Trypsin-EDTA solution (Invitrogen). After an incubation for 2 min at 37°C, 900 μL of DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum was added and the cells centrifuged (1500g, 5 min, room temperature). Total RNA was extracted from the cell pellet with 400 μL of TRI-reagent (lane Cells). To determine the amount of 32P-labeled RNA remaining in wells after removal of the cells, 400 μL of TRI-reagent and untransfected cells treated with trypsin (acting as carrier for RNA extraction) were added after removal of the transfected cells (lane Well). The total RNA extracted from the various samples was processed and the 32P-labeled RNA visualized as described in A. (Lower panel) After transfection the cells were cultured for the indicated times. The cells were then detached from the culture dish with trypsin, processed and analyzed as described for the upper panel.
upper panel) showed that although transfected RNAs were extracted from the cells detached by trypsin (lane Cells), a very significant amount was also extracted from the well after removal of the cells (lane Well). Despite the removal of these contaminating RNAs, little degradation of the transfected mRNAs still was observed (Fig. 1C, lower panel). In this experiment, which is representative of the variations in mRNA degradation observed, the GbORF-AUUUA mRNA containing a type II ARE is more stable ($t = 13.5$ h) than is the GbORF mRNA ($t = 5.5$ h).

These various observations led us to conclude that the reporter mRNAs transfected into the cells by lipofection are probably in a cellular compartment that protects the bulk from the degradation machinery of the cell. To visualize the transfected mRNAs, HeLa cells were transfected with fluorescent-labeled (Cy3) RNAs and then fixed either immediately after removal of the lipofectant solution or 3 h later. After staining the cells with a fluorescent membrane marker (Alexa Fluor 488 labeled wheat germ agglutinin) and the nuclear stain DAPI, the cells were observed by confocal microscopy. The images obtained from the cells at 0 h and 3 h after transfection were not significantly different. The membrane marker clearly delimited the cells and also revealed a number of punctuate structures both inside and outside the cells (Fig. 2, left column). Surprisingly, the RNA-associated fluorescence was also concentrated in punctuate structures (Fig. 2, middle column), a small and variable number of which were associated with the plasma membrane. Superposition of the membrane and RNA fluorescence images (Fig. 2, right lane) showed that the vast majority of the RNA-associated fluorescence colocalized with the punctuate membrane structures.

Our interpretation of these data is that most of the transfected RNAs are confined in a cellular compartment that sequesters the molecules away from the cytoplasmic machineries responsible for mRNA degradation and probably translation. The sequestering of the majority of the transfected RNA molecules would explain the unexpected stability of mRNAs containing either type II and III AREs or devoid of either a poly(A) tail or a 5’ cap. However, some of the transfected RNAs must be released into the cytoplasm as the production of a fluorescent reporter protein, encoded by the transfected mRNA, was observed with the transfection protocol used here (data not shown). The proportion of transfected mRNA that is released into the cytoplasm, relative to the sequestered mRNA, is probably low and dependent on many parameters, which could explain the variability we observed in the half-lives of the reporter mRNAs. Furthermore, liposome-mediated transfection of mi- or si-RNAs can, respectively, inhibit the translation or cause the degradation of the targeted mRNA, again an observation that we have confirmed (data not shown).

The presence of the transfected mRNA in two cellular compartments could lead to an apparent, but probably artifactual, uncoupling of the functional (translation) and physical (stability) half-lives of the transfected mRNA. A lack of correlation between translational arrest and degradation has been clearly demonstrated in early embryos of several species (for review, see Vasudevan et al. 2006) and also when mRNAs are sequestered in stress granules.
(for review, see Kedersha and Anderson 2002). These are different situations from the one we describe here. Although a clear identification of the cellular compartment or structure containing the transfected RNAs can only be obtained by determining their colocalization with specific markers, we note that the sequestered transfected mRNAs appear to be associated with membranes, and to our knowledge, stress granules are not membrane-bound structures (see Gilks et al. 2004).

Recently, several publications have used lipofection of reporters to study the mechanisms by which miRNAs repress the translation of target mRNAs. The reporter mRNAs were either expressed from transfected plasmids (Pillai et al. 2005; Petersen et al. 2006) or directly transfected (Humphreys et al. 2005; Pillai et al. 2005). In the present context, it is interesting to note that although the miRNA-mediated translational repression was not proportional to mRNA degradation, the repressed reporter mRNAs were more unstable when expressed from a plasmid (Pillai et al. 2005; Petersen et al. 2006) than when transfected directly (Humphreys et al. 2005). Furthermore, miRNAs did not affect the IRES-dependent translation of transfected RNAs (Pillai et al. 2005) but did repress this translation when the mRNA was expressed from a plasmid (Petersen et al. 2006). Whether this was due to the fate of the transfected mRNA or the nuclear history of the mRNA expressed from the plasmid is not clear. The measurement of mRNA stability was not the major objective of these studies, and it is not clear in what way the sequestering of a large part of the transfected mRNAs could affect the many observations reported in these publications. Despite these considerations and in light of the results we describe here, we believe that these and any similar results should be re-evaluated.

In conclusion, our observations indicate that using lipofection to transflect mammalian cells with RNA is highly inefficient with respect to the proportion of the cell-associated molecules that are really functional. In addition, the large proportion of “unused” RNA molecules could become toxic for the cell or trigger a response such as stress that could change cell metabolism. Based on these observations, several recommendations can be made. First, for RNAs, methods such as electroporation or microinjection should be preferred to lipofection. Second, if lipofection is the only method available to an experimenter to achieve RNA transfection, then the transfected RNA should be spiked with a fluorescent RNA to verify the intracellular destiny of the RNA or, at least, a positive control of degradation such as an RNA without a cap, should be added. Last, the use of lipofection protocols with siRNAs to achieve RNA interference may need to be re-evaluated. This could be particularly relevant to cases where it is suspected that the “unused” transfected RNAs may interfere with the observed effects. Accordingly, in certain cases, the use of plasmids or viruses encoding shRNA may be preferable to the lipofection of siRNAs.

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