COMMENTARY

Duplicate growth hormone genes in sheep and goat

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INTRODUCTION

In most mammals a single gene codes for pituitary growth hormone (GH) and is not associated with closely-related genes. An exception occurs in higher primates. In man a cluster of five genes on chromosome 17 codes for GH-like proteins; one of these (at the 5' end of the cluster) codes for pituitary GH, while the other four code for genes expressed in the placenta, including two genes for placental lactogen, one for a placental lactogen-like protein, and one for a GH variant (Chen et al. 1989). In rhesus monkey, studies on cDNA indicate that there are at least five genes that code for GH-like proteins, one expressed in the pituitary and four in the placenta, although these may not be exactly equivalent to the human GH-like genes (Golos et al. 1993). There is also evidence for multiple GH-like genes in a new world monkey (O C Wallis & M Wallis, unpublished observations). These clusters of GH-like genes have presumably arisen as the consequence of duplications of the single GH gene found in most mammals (and other tetrapods), followed by divergent evolution. It is notable that evolution of GH in primates involved a burst of rapid change (contrasting with general conservation of GH structure seen in most mammals) which appears to have occurred before the gene duplications that gave rise to the gene cluster(s) (Wallis 1994, 1996).

Until recently it appeared that duplication of the GH gene in mammals was confined to primates. Placental lactogens are found in some other mammalian groups (ruminants, rodents) but appear to have arisen independently of those found in primates, by duplication of the prolactin gene (Schuler & Kessler 1992, Wallis 1992). However, a number of reports have now appeared indicating that there are duplicate GH genes in at least some caprine ruminants (goats and sheep). These have interesting implications for the evolution of the GH gene in ruminants.

DUPLICATION OF GH GENES IN CAPRINE RUMINANTS

On the basis of studies on a restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP), Valinsky et al. (1990) concluded that there are two alleles at the GH gene locus in sheep and goats. In sheep, in one allele (Gh1), the GH gene is represented by a single copy (GH1 gene), while in the other (Gh2) the GH gene is duplicated (GH2-N (5') and GH2-Z (3') genes). Restriction maps of the sheep Gh1 and Gh2 loci indicated that the GH1, GH2-N and GH2-Z genes are all very similar (Fig. 1). The sequences flanking the 5' ends of the GH1 and GH2-N genes are similar, but differ from that flanking the GH2-Z gene. Individual animals were homozygous for Gh1 and Gh2 loci indicated that the GH1, GH2-N and GH2-Z genes are all very similar (Fig. 1). The sequences flanking the 5' ends of the GH1 and GH2-N genes are similar, but differ from that flanking the GH2-Z gene. Individual animals were homozygous for Gh1 (i.e. possessed 2 GH-like genes) or Gh2 (4 GH-like genes) or heterozygous, with one copy of Gh1 and one of Gh2 (3 GH-like genes). The frequency of the Gh2 allele was greater than that of the Gh1 allele. Subsequently, Gootwine et al. (1993) showed that the GH2-Z gene contains a PvuII polymorphism in the second intron and Goutrine et al. (1996) concluded that, in an animal homozygous for the Gh2 allele, only the GH2-N gene was expressed in the sheep pituitary. Sequence differences between the sheep GH2-N and GH2-Z genes have now been demonstrated by Ofir & Gootwine (1997) (see below). Lacroix et al. (1996) have shown that two forms of GH are expressed at low level in the sheep placenta, one of which is probably identical to pituitary GH while the other differs from it in sequence and is probably the product of the GH2-Z gene.
Yamano et al. (1991) investigated GH genes in a goat genomic library and found two types of fragment, one containing a single GH gene (gGH1) and the other containing two genes arranged in tandem (gGH2 and gGH3). Again this appears to be due to allelic polymorphism, with the allele containing duplicate GH genes predominating. The tandem arrangement of the gGH2 and gGH3 genes is similar to that seen for the ovine GH2-N and GH2-Z genes (Fig. 1) but it is not yet clear whether the situations in goat and sheep are exactly equivalent.

SEQUENCE STUDIES

Alignments of the various sheep and goat GH gene sequences discussed below have been prepared and are available on the World Wide Web at the following address: http://www.biols.susx.ac.uk/Home/Mike_Wallis/GHAlign.

The sequence of cDNA corresponding to sheep pituitary GH was reported by Warwick & Wallis (1984) and subsequently confirmed (Warwick et al. 1989, Lacroix et al. 1996). The protein sequence predicted from this agrees with the known sequence for sheep GH. Orian et al. (1988) presented a sequence for the sheep GH gene; the coding sequence predicted from this corresponds to the cDNA sequence for pituitary GH, and this gene presumably codes for the hormone expressed in the pituitary. This was confirmed by Ofir & Gootwine (1997) who showed that the sequence of the single GH1 gene (Gh1 allele) is identical to the sequence described by Orian et al. (1988) and that the (partial) sequence of the GH2-N gene is also very similar to this, although there is some variation between strains of sheep. Lacroix et al. (1996) described sequences for three GH-related cDNAs derived from sheep placenta. One of these, coding for a protein identical to pituitary preGH, corresponds to the product of the GH1 or GH2-N gene. The other two are very similar and code for a protein differing from pituitary preGH at three amino acid residues, which appears to correspond to the product of the GH2-Z gene. Byrne et al. (1987) provided a rather different sequence for a GH-like gene in sheep, which differs at about 44 nucleotides from the sequence of Orian et al. (1988); in some respects this resembles the GH2-Z gene, but the match is far from complete. This may reflect variation between sheep strains of the kind noted by Ofir & Gootwine (1997). Neither Orian et al. (1988) nor Byrne et al. (1987) reported the presence of two GH genes in the gene libraries that they screened. However, it is notable that Southern blotting of DNA from several individual animals led Byrne et al. (1987) to detect a GH-linked RFLP very similar to that which led Valinsky et al. (1990) to conclude that duplicated GH genes are present in some sheep.

The situation in goat is less clear. The sequence of goat pituitary GH cDNA was reported by Yamano et al. (1988) and Yato et al. (1988) and the GH gene sequence was described by Kioka et al. (1989). The coding sequence predicted from the gene sequence corresponds to the goat GH cDNA sequence and this gene was subsequently shown to be the gGH1 gene. Sequence information for the gGH2 and gGH3 genes (i.e. the duplicate genes in the second allele) is not yet available.

STRUCTURE–FUNCTION ASPECTS

The sequence of the second GH expressed in the sheep placenta (probably the product of the GH2-Z gene), codes for a protein that differs from pituitary GH at three sites, one (Pro→Leu at position -7) in the signal peptide, and two (Gly→Arg at position 9 and Gly→Ser at position 63) in mature GH (Lacroix et al. 1996) (the numbering is based on N-terminal Ala as residue 1). The substitution at residue 9 is in the second receptor-binding site on
Residue 63 (Gly→Ser substitution in the placental GH) is located in binding site 1 in human GH (Cunningham & Wells 1989, de Vos et al. 1992). The corresponding residue in human GH is Asn, and conversion of this to Ala (Cunningham & Wells 1989) led to some decrease in receptor binding. The effect of the Gly→Ser substitution is difficult to predict, and modelling studies suggest that it would not be great. However, it should be noted that the substitution at residue 63 might introduce a glycosylation site into the protein (a Ser residue in a serine-rich loop); this would accord with the observation of Lacroix et al. (1996) that the second placental GH-like protein that they observed was substantially larger than normal pituitary GH. Introduction of a bulky carbohydrate moiety in the region of binding site 1 might be expected to interfere with receptor binding. Combining this with enhanced binding affinity at binding site 2 might give a GH variant which could form non-productive hormone–receptor complexes – in effect an inhibitor. There is clearly a need for studies on the biological properties of this placental protein.

**EVOLUTIONARY SIGNIFICANCE**

How widespread is the GH gene duplication in ruminants? On the whole it seems likely that the duplication occurred during the evolution of the caprine ruminants after divergence of these from other bovid groups. Gene sequences have been reported for GH from ox (Woychik et al. 1982, Gordon et al. 1983) and red deer (Lioupis et al. 1997); in neither case was a second gene isolated, although Southern blotting of restriction digests of bovine genomic DNA did provide some evidence for a second GH-related gene (Woychik et al. 1982, Gordon et al. 1983). It is notable that the sheep GH2-N and GH2-Z genes are very similar – much more similar in non-coding sequence than the sheep GH2-N (or GH1) gene and the bovine GH gene – suggesting that the duplication arose rather recently, although gene conversion may have homogenised the two diverging gene sequences as is thought to have happened in the case of human placental lactogens (Chen et al. 1989).

One of the most intriguing aspects of the GH gene duplication in both goat and sheep is that the duplicate genes exist as an allelic polymorphism with the single (presumably ancestral) form; in neither species has the allele corresponding to the duplication completely replaced that corresponding to the single gene. It seems likely that the two GH genes arose as the consequence of a single
gene-duplication event, predate the divergence of sheep and goat. The polymorphism seen in sheep and goat must therefore also have arisen before the divergence of these two species and have been sustained through speciation and during the following 5–7 million years. Such long-lived polymorphism is not completely unprecedented—for example it has been shown that polymorphism of MHC proteins extends across mouse and rat species (Figueroa et al. 1988)—but it is certainly unusual. It implies the existence of strong selective forces, presumably involving heterozygote advantage, to maintain it. The nature of such selective forces remains to be elucidated—as yet major physiological differences between sheep of Gh1/Gh1, Gh1/Gh2 and Gh2/Gh2 genotypes have not been detected. Ram lambs with these three genotypes showed no differences with regard to body weight, body composition or most aspects of GH expression, storage or secretion, although subtle differences were found with respect to pituitary GH content and responsiveness to GH releasing hormone (Fleming et al. 1997, Gootwine et al. 1997). Detailed physiological studies on goat, pregnant sheep and wild animals remain to be reported. Increased understanding of the basis of this GH polymorphism may have relevance both for our understanding of molecular evolution in general and for animal husbandry/production.

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