Latest research on acute hepatopancreatic necrosis disease (AHPND) of penaeid shrimps

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Addressing acute hepatopancreatic necrosis disease (AHPND) and other transboundary diseases for improved aquatic animal health in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Acute hepatopancreatic necrosis disease (AHPND) is caused by unique strains of Vibrio parahaemolyticus (VP_AHPND) and V. harveyi that have transferrable plasmid carrying the virulent PirAB-like toxin genes. The genomes of VP_AHPND strains and V. harveyi from Thailand and Viet Nam, respectively, have been characterized by our group. The genome of VP_AHPND strains from Mexico, Viet Nam, and China have also been studied by other groups. We have developed a conventional polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) methods for the detection of AHPND using a primer set that targets the PirAB-like toxin genes of VP_AHPND. We have characterized the toxin genes of VP_AHPND strains and also constructed a recombinant plasmid (broad host range) carrying PirAB-like toxin genes. Non-VP_AHPND strain N7 which does not carry the plasmid and strain FP11 which is carrying a plasmid not coding for the toxin genes were transformed with the plasmid carrying PirAB-like toxin genes. As a result, the transformed N7 and FP11 strains became virulent and killed whiteleg shrimp (Penaeus vannamei) similar to or at par with the virulence of VP_AHPND strain. We then fed the whiteleg shrimp with commercial feed containing the formalin-killed VP_AHPND strain. After 2 days of feeding, all of the whiteleg shrimp died. These results clearly indicate that the PirAB-like toxin is the virulence factor of VP_AHPND.

We have been investigating the virulence mechanism of the PirAB-like toxin produced by VP_AHPND strains. First, we calculated the copy number of plasmid encoding the PirAB-like toxin genes of several VP_AHPND strains. The copy number of the plasmid varied, ranging from 1 to 36 copies. Interestingly, VP_AHPND strains carrying low copy number of plasmid were more virulent than VP_AHPND strains carrying high copy number of the plasmid. These results imply that the copy number of toxin genes is not an important factor responsible for the degree of virulence of the VP_AHPND strains. We are also studying other factors associated with the virulence of PirAB-like toxin. Likewise, we are developing prevention methods against AHPND including the use of formalin-killed cell vaccine, IgY additive in feed, and nano-bubble treatment of rearing water. This paper summarizes the current R&D on the disease.

Introduction

Acute hepatopancreatic necrosis disease (AHPND), formerly known as early mortality syndrome (EMS), is a devastating disease that has been implicated in mass mortality of cultivated penaeid shrimps in China (2009), Viet Nam (2010), Malaysia (2011), Thailand (2012), Mexico (2014), and recently in the Philippines (2015) (Tran et al., 2013; Joshi et al., 2014; Soto-Rodriguez et al., 2015; Dabu et al., 2015; dela Peña et al., 2015). AHPND induces necrosis in the hepatopancreas of the infected shrimp causing them to become lethargic and anorexic. The disease was first referred to as early mortality syndrome (EMS) because it was typified by shrimp mortality occurring within 30 days after stocking shrimp postlarvae (PL) in grow-out ponds (Lightner et al., 2012). However, there was confusion regarding the usage of the term EMS as mortalities during the early phase of shrimp cultivation could also be attributed to other etiologies, hence, the more precise name AHPND was adapted after the group of D.V. Lightner discovered in 2013 that unique strains
of *V. parahaemolyticus* (VP_AHPND) colonizing the stomach of shrimp produced toxin responsible for the sloughing of hepatopancreatic tubule epithelial cells of the hepatopancreas (Tran et al., 2013). By employing an infection bioassay, i.e. through an immersion challenge using *V. parahaemolyticus* isolated from ponds with AHPND outbreak, 100% mortality was obtained in naive shrimp; as the dead shrimp exhibited sloughing of the tubule epithelial cells of the hepatopancreas, thereby satisfying Koch’s postulates (Tran et al., 2013). Moreover, they also documented that cell-free broth cultures of VP_AHPND could induce the massive sloughing of the hepatopancreatic tubule cells even in the absence of bacterial cells (Tran et al., 2013). Fortunately, all VP_AHPND isolates tested did not possess the pathogenicity island (human pathogen markers *tdh* and *trh*) associated with human infections (Nishibuchi et al., 1985; Nishibuchi et al., 1989).

Previous studies on the genome sequences of *V. parahaemolyticus* strains that caused and did not cause AHPND were established to identify the virulence genes that might be involved in the pathogenicity of VP_AHPND strains to cultured penaeids (Kondo et al., 2014; Yang et al., 2014; Gomez-Gil et al., 2014). These studies revealed that VP_AHPND strains possess a unique 69-kbp plasmid carrying the suspected genes homologous to PirAB toxins that encodes for the *Photorhabdus* insect-related (Pir) toxins (Lee et al., 2015), indicating that the PirAB-like toxins are the virulence factors of VP_AHPND strains.

**Figure 1. Structure of the toxin genes region of VP_AHPND.**

AHPND is caused by unique strains of *V. parahaemolyticus* (VP_AHPND) and *V. harveyi* that have a transferrable virulent plasmid carrying the PirAB-like toxin genes (Figure 1). However, non-VP_AHPND strains also possess the plasmid (Figure 2). To ascertain that shrimps are indeed infected with AHPND, the target region for detection employing the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) method should be the toxin region. The genomes of VP_AHPND strains from Thailand, Mexico, and China, as well as *V. harveyi* from Viet Nam and *V. owensii* from China have been studied by several research groups (Kondo et al., 2014, 2015; Yang et al., 2014, Gomez-Gil et al., 2014, Liu et al., 2015). The findings indicate that spreading of the plasmid coding for the PirAB toxin genes among several bacterial species in the shrimp pond is feasible. This finding further indicates that in worst case scenarios, plasmid transfer from VP_AHPND to normal bacterial microbiota in the shrimp pond may inadvertently occur and could result in unwarranted outbreaks of AHPND among pond-cultivated shrimps (Figure 3).

We have developed the conventional PCR method using a primer set that targets the PirA-like toxin gene of *V. parahaemolyticus* (Tinwongger et al., 2014). At present, the
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The accuracy of our diagnostic methods for AHPND is 100%. We have also developed a loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) method for the detection of VP_AHPND strains (Koiwai et al., 2016).

We have also confirmed the virulence of PirA-like and PirB-like toxins by using transformant of non-VP_AHPND carrying the toxin genes in the broad host range plasmid (Tinwongger et al., 2016, unpublished data). The transformant of non-VP_AHPND strain showed virulence to whiteleg (P. vannamei) and kuruma (Marsupenaeus japonicus) shrimps. The virulence level of this transformed strain was similar to that of VP_AHPND strain. In addition, we studied the virulence of a natural mutant from highly virulent VP_AHPND strain. Because a major part of the toxin genes of this mutant strain was naturally deleted during the course of culture in nutrient broth, our results clearly show that this strain lost its virulence to whiteleg shrimp (Tinwongger et al., 2016, unpublished data). Moreover, these results indicate that the toxins are the virulence factors of VP_AHPND strain.

The region encoding the toxin genes is composed of approximately 6 kbp and exhibits...
terminal inverted repeats of about 1.2 kbp (Tinwongger et al., 2016, unpublished data). The repeats encode insertion sequence (IS). The IS encodes transposase and is identical to other reported strains of *V. parahaemolyticus* (Kamruzzaman and Nishibuchi, 2008). The non-virulent strains carrying the plasmid completely lack the toxin region, but possess an IS. Interestingly, we found that the virulent strains also possess the region lacking toxin genes but have a single IS. These results suggest that the IS might have transposase activity which is involved in deletion and/or insertion of the toxin genes (Figure 4). Importantly, these results denote that several colonies will be necessary for PCR diagnosis of AHPND especially when using bacteria grown on agar plates.

We compared the virulence of five different VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains to shrimp (Tinwongger et al., 2016, unpublished data). We also studied the copy number of plasmids in these five VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains. Two of these strains have a low copy number of the plasmid and toxin genes. The other three strains have more than 30 copies of the plasmid and toxin genes. Interestingly, VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains carrying low copy number of plasmid were more virulent than VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains carrying high copy number of the plasmid. These results imply that the copy number of toxin genes is not an important factor responsible for the degree of virulence of the VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains. We further studied the secretion of toxin of these five VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains. The most virulent strain secreted the highest amount of toxin compared to other VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains, suggesting that virulence of VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strains corresponded to the amount of secreted toxin.

**Development of prevention methods against AHPND**

With regard to the development of pragmatic, effective, and economically-sound prevention and control methods against AHPND, we have been investigating the potential use of VP<sub>AHPND</sub> formalin-killed cells (FKC) as vaccine immunogen, IgY additive in feed, nano-bubble technology, phage therapy, and the isolation and characterization of toxin receptors in the host.

![Figure 4. Insertion sequence-mediated production of several types of AHPND plasmid during culture of VP<sub>AHPND</sub>](image-url)
Formalin-killed cell vaccine trials

Shrimps do not have a known adaptive immune system. However, there have been several reports showing the efficacy of vaccines targeted for infectious diseases of shrimp. Based on these reports, it was suggested that shrimp may have an unknown and unique adaptive immune system which may be completely different from the vertebrate’s adaptive immune system.

We tested the efficacy of the formalin-killed cell (FKC)-VP_{AHPN}D vaccine using whiteleg shrimps weighing 5 to 7 g. VP_{AHPN}D was cultured in a broth at 30°C for 18 hours. After incubation, cultured VP_{AHPN}D was treated with formalin for 24 hours at 4°C. When FKC-VP_{AHPN}D was fed to shrimp, many shrimps died within few days post-feeding. This result suggests that the VP_{AHPN}D toxin was stable in formalin and heating at 60°C. We conducted bath vaccinations using 3 different formalin-killed cells (FKC)-VP_{AHPN}D strains (TUMSAT-N1, A1 and FP1) as vaccine immunogen. We added 200 mL of the FKC-VP_{AHPN}D to 20 L of sea water. Then shrimp were immersed in FKC-VP_{AHPN}D-seawater mixture for 2 hrs. After the bath vaccination, shrimp were transferred to another tank for periodic observation. Representative result of the VP_{AHPN}D challenge test conducted at post-bath vaccination with the FKC-VP_{AHPN}D is shown in Figure 5. One of the FKC-VP_{AHPN}D vaccines, i.e. TUMSAT-FP1, conferred good protection in shrimp experimentally challenged with VP_{AHPN}D. This result indicates that not all VP_{AHPN}D strains have protective antigens against the homologous VP_{AHPN}D strains. In another experiment, we used small shrimps with a mean body weight of 0.8 g. FKC-VP_{AHPN}D vaccine did not confer protection to small shrimp experimentally challenged with VP_{AHPN}D indicating that the immune system of small shrimp may not have developed yet.

IgY: Immunoglobulin in egg yolk

IgY is a specific antibody of birds especially present in their eggs. When a female chicken was immunized with recombinant VP_{AHPN}D toxins, it produced eggs containing high titers of IgY specific for VP_{AHPN}D toxins. Furthermore, we used the egg yolk extract as feed additive and successfully demonstrated its efficacy in conferring protection in shrimp experimentally challenged with VP_{AHPN}D strain. In addition,
our data clearly indicate the potential of incorporating IgY in feed as a practical strategy to prevent AHPND outbreaks in shrimp most particularly during the early stage (first 20-30 days) of culture.

**Receptors of toxins**

Proteins with high homology to VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxins in other bacteria have been well characterized. These toxins bind to some receptors of host insects causing some damages to the host’s digestive system. However, several reports revealed that toxin-resistant individuals exist in nature. Such toxin-resistant individuals have a mutated receptor for the specified toxins. It is therefore seemingly evident that in nature, there are certain individual shrimps that are resistant to the VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin. To find an AHPND-resistant individual and/or family, it is prudent to identify their receptors for VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin in shrimp. We are currently conducting some experiments focusing on the receptors for VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin in penaeid shrimps by using next generation sequencing and immunological methods using anti-toxin antibody.

**Nano-bubble water**

Treatment with ozone-nano-bubble water could reduce mortality of shrimps infected with VP<sub>AHPND</sub> strain. In addition, ozone-nano-bubble water treatment of shrimp could confer protection against WSSV infection. However, we still have to conduct more experiments to thoroughly elucidate the efficacy of nano-bubble water technology for the prevention and/or treatment of microbial infections in penaeid shrimps. Likewise, its practical application in grow-out cultivation ponds needs to be looked into.

**Way forward**

Our completed and ongoing studies aim to generate information geared at preventing and controlling AHPND in cultivated shrimps. Experiments focusing on the virulence mechanisms of the VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin and effects on the immune responses of shrimp are being carried out. Experiments aimed at elucidating the receptors for VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin in the host’s cells are likewise being conducted. Notably, we have observed that a low percentage of shrimp could survive after exposure to VP<sub>AHPND</sub> toxin, indicating that these surviving shrimp might be resistant to AHPND. However, more data need to be generated to substantiate this speculation.

Hepatopancreatic microsporidiosis (HPM) caused by the microsporidian parasite *Enterocytozoon hepatopenaei* (EHP) has also been recently recognized as an economically important parasitic disease of cultured shrimps. However, information on HPM-EHP is scarce. We have already started analyzing the genome of EHP. We believe that the data that will be generated from our ongoing EHP genome analysis will be pivotal in the establishment of accurate diagnostic methods needed in the formulation of effective, pragmatic, and economically-sound approaches against HPM in cultured penaeids.

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