Abstract. Vaccine strategies for the treatment of human papillomavirus-induced cervical cancer are based mainly on the human papillomavirus 16 E7 (HPV16 E7) oncoprotein. The immunogenicity of the E7 gene has been enhanced by its fusion to many different genes. Here, we linked a short sequence coding for the E7 peptide (aa 44-60) containing immunodominant epitopes for B and T cells to the 3′ end of the gene coding for the whole coat protein (CP) of the potyvirus, potato virus A (PVA), and its deleted form (CPdel) with a short C-terminal deletion of 5 amino acids (LGVKG). CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 fusion proteins, just like CP alone, spontaneously assembled into virus-like particles in both procaryotic and eucaryotic cells. The CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 fusion genes induced slightly stronger E7-specific cytotoxic T-lymphocyte responses than the whole E7 gene, although they were still lower than those elicited by the previously constructed fusion gene, Sig/E7GGG/LAMP-1. The E7- and CP-specific antibody responses were not detected in mice vaccinated with CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 fusion genes. The CP- E7 and CPdel-E7 fusion genes protected mice against the development of tumors induced by TC-1 cells producing the E7 antigen and were also effective in the therapeutic setting, i.e. when the vaccination was performed after tumor cell administration. Their antitumor effect was comparable to those of the whole E7 gene and Sig/E7GGG/LAMP-1 fusion gene. There was no relevant difference between immune responses elicited by CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 DNA vaccination.

Introduction

Human papillomaviruses (HPVs) are the causative agent of cervical cancer. HPV16 is the most prevalent type of HPV associated with cervical cancer, detected in about 50 percent of cervical cancer. Therefore, it is the most important target for development of both prophylactic and therapeutic anti-HPV vaccines. Preventive immunization is based on the structural L1 and L2 proteins of HPV and should result in the induction of neutralizing antibodies. The L1 monomers assemble spontaneously into virus-like particles and enter the mammalian cells through specific receptors (1). Vaccination with L1 virus-like particles has been shown to be very effective, generating 100% protection against persistent HPV infection (2). Therapeutic vaccination against HPV is aimed at eliciting cellular immune responses to viral E7 and/or E6 oncoproteins that are the only viral proteins constitutively expressed in cells of cervical cancer. The therapeutic vaccines against HPV-associated cancer have appeared promising, but there is still a need for improvement (3). Different strategies have been utilized, including the fusion of the HPV16 E7 protein or the E7-derived peptides to proteins forming virus-like particles (4-6).

VLPs (virus-like particles) are known to induce not only potent antibody responses but also strong cell-mediated responses (6,7). The nature of the induced immune responses against L1 VLPs has been shown to vary with different delivery systems. Monkeys immunized intramuscularly with plasmid DNA or a replicon incompetent adenoviral vector expressing HPV16 L1 developed strong Th1/Tc1 responses, potent humoral responses and only weak neutralizing antibodies, while immunization with HPV16 L1 VLPs led to a potent humoral response with high levels of neutralizing antibodies and a strong L1-specific Th2 response (8). VLPs alone have not proved very efficient at inducing cytotoxic T-lymphocyte (CTL) responses but have become a very powerful vaccine when applied together with adjuvants activating antigen-presenting cells (7). The delivery of DNA vaccines by a gene gun is considered to have such an adjuvant effect. Mild damage caused to the skin by the gold particles may act as maturation and stimulation signals for Langerhans cells and dermal dendritic cells (9).

PVA is a filamentous RNA virus which belongs to the genus Potyvirus (family Potyviridae), the largest group of plant viruses. Potyvirus particles are flexible rods, 680-900 nm long and 11-15 nm wide, consisting of more than 2000 copies of a coat protein subunit and one single-stranded RNA genome (10). The potyvirus CP is a multifunctional protein

Correspondence to: Dr Dana Pokorna, Department of Experimental Virology, Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion, U Nemocnice 1, 128 20 Prague 2, Czech Republic,E-mail: danap@uhkt.cz

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DNA vaccines based on chimeric potyvirus-like particles carrying HPV16 E7 peptide (aa 44-60)

DANA POKORNA1, NOEMI CEROVSKA2, MICHAL SMAHEL1, TOMAS MORAVEC2, VIERA LUDVIKOVA1, JANA MACKOVA1, HELENA SYNKOVA2, MARTINA DUSKOVA1, PAVEL HOZAK3 and JIRI VELEMINSKY2

1Department of Experimental Virology, Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion; 2Institute of Experimental Botany; 3Institute of Experimental Medicine, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic

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which plays a role in virus transmission by aphids (11), virus movement in plants (12) and virion formation. Three regions can be distinguished in the potyviral CP protein. The central core region involves 214-217 amino acids (aa) and is considered to be responsible for particle integrity. Both the N-terminal (29-94 aa) and C-terminal (18-20 aa) regions are surface exposed and are not required for virion assembly (13,14). The expression of potyvirus CP (Johnsongrass mosaic virus, JGMV) in bacteria (Escherichia coli), yeast (Saccharomyces cerevisiae), insect cells or mammalian cell culture has been demonstrated to result in the formation of potyvirus-like particles (PVLPs) (14,15). It has been shown that self-assembly of the particles is not impaired, even by the insertion of a foreign 26 kD protein into the JGMV CP (14,15). Such chimeric PVLPs have been highly immunogenic, even in the absence of any adjuvant (14,16).

The aims of this study were to investigate the ability of DNA vaccines, coding for the PVA CP protein associated with HPV16 E7 peptide (aa 44-60), to elicit E7-specific immune responses and to compare their efficacy with those containing the E7 gene and the previously prepared Sig/E7GGG/LAMP-1 fusion gene (17). Furthermore, we assessed the influence of C-terminal deletion and fusion to the E7 peptide (aa 44-60) on the CP's ability to assemble into VLPs in procaryotic and eucaryotic cells.

Materials and methods

Animals. Female C57BL/6 mice, aged 6-8 weeks (H-2b; Charles River, Germany), were used in the immunization experiments. All animal procedures were performed according to approved protocols and in accordance with the recommendations for the proper use and care of laboratory animals.

Cell lines. The efficacy of DNA vaccines was evaluated using TC-1 tumor cells (18) (kindly provided by T.C. Wu, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD), prepared by transformation of primary C57BL/6 mouse lung cells with HPV16 E6/E7 oncogenes and activated H-ras. To verify the expression of the E7 and CP proteins from constructed plasmids, mouse NIH 3T3 fibroblasts and human embryonic kidney 293T cells (kindly provided by J.A. Kleinschmidt, DKFZ, Heidelberg, Germany) were transfected and production of proteins was determined in cell lysates. All cells were grown in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's medium (PAALaboratories, Linz, Austria) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (PAALaboratories), 2 mM L-glutamine, 100 U/ml penicillin and 100 µg/ml streptomycin.

Plasmids. The constructions of pBSC, pBSC/E7 (19), pBSC/E7GGGLAMP (17) and pMPM4Ω/PVA-CP (20) were described previously. Two fusion genes coding for the HPV16 E7-derived peptide (aa 44-60) fused to the C-terminus of full-length PVA CP (CP-E7) or PVA CP shortened by 5 aa (CPdel-E7) were prepared by two sequential PCR reactions modifying the 3' end of the PVA CP gene by primers with long overhangs coding for the E7 epitope. For the first PCR reaction, the upstream primer, 5'-AAAACCATGGAAACGG GAACCTCTATGCG-3', with the start codon ATG containing Ncol restriction site (underlined) on its 5' end was used. The downstream primers coding for the junction of CP and E7 were 5'-TTGTGTATGGCGCGGTTGGTGCTGGCTGAAC CCCCTTCAGGGCTAGAGGT-3' for the CP-E7 gene and 5'-TTGTGTATGGCGCGGTTGGTGCTGGCTGAAC AGGTATGCGATTTGGCGATTAC-3' for the CPdel-E7 gene. In the second PCR reaction, we used the same primers for construction of both the CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 fusion genes, the upstream primer that had been used in the first PCR reaction and the downstream primer coding for the C-terminus of E7 peptide, 5'-AAAAAGATCTACCTTACGGCAG AAGGTCACGGATTTGGCGATTTGGCGATTAC-3', which contained the BglII restriction site (underlined). The PCR products were cloned into the Ncol and BglII restriction sites of pUC57T/A and pMPM4Ω.

PVA CP, PVA CP-E7 and PVA CPdel-E7 genes were cut from pMPM4Ω plasmids by Ncol and Sall restriction enzymes and cloned to the corresponding sites in the pUC131 plasmid (kindly provided by J.A. Kleinschmidt). Finally, these three genes were excised from pUC131 by Xhol and SalI restriction enzymes and cloned to the XhoI site in the pBSC plasmid. The accuracy of generated pBSC/CP, pBSC/CP-E7 and pBSC/CPdel-E7 was confirmed by DNA sequencing.

The plasmids were propagated in Escherichia coli XL1-blue or DH5α strains cultured in Luria-Bertani broth with 100 µg/ml ampicillin added, and purified with the Qiagen Plasmid Maxi Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany).

In-gel digestion of proteins for detection of E7 peptide by MALDI. For in-gel digestion with trypsin, a method adapted from Shevchenko et al (21) was used. The gel was washed with water (two times for 10 min) and then the band of interest was excised and cut into 1-mm cubes. The gel particles were washed three times with 0.1 M NH4HCO3/acetoni trile 1:1 (v/v) for 15 min with a volume roughly equal to 3-fold the gel volume. All remaining liquid was removed and the gel pieces were covered with 100% acetonitrile. Acetonitrile was removed after 5 min and the gel was rehydrated with 0.1 M NH4HCO3 and an equal volume of acetonitrile was added. After 15 min, all liquid was removed and the gel particles were vacuum dried. Then reduction with dithiothreitol (DTT) followed by alkylation with iodoacetamide (IAA) was performed and the samples were freeze dried. The gel pieces were covered with trypsin solution from bovine pancreas (10 µg/ml) in 50 mM NH4HCO3, and incubated at 37°C overnight. The peptides were extracted from the gel by addition of a volume of 25 µl NH4HCO3, followed by the same volume of acetonitrile, and sonicated for 10 min. The supernatant was recovered, 100 µl of 30% acetonitrile with 0.1% trifluoro acetic acid (TFA) was added to the gel particles and sonicated again for 15 min. This step was repeated with 50% acetonitrile containing 0.1% TFA. The extracts were pooled and vacuum dried. The samples were purified on ZipTipC18 (Millipore) prior to MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry.

Matrix-assisted laser desorption ionization/time of flight (MALDI-TOF) mass spectrometry. Analyte (tryptic digest (1 µl) was mixed with 3 µl of matrix solution prepared as follows: 10 mg of DHB (2,5-dihydroxybenzoic acid, Sigma) were dissolved in 1 ml of 30% acetonitrile/0.1% TFA (1:2, v/v). The mixture was spotted on a MALDI target plate. The peptide mixture for external calibration was purchased from...
Bruker, Germany. A mass spectrometer BIFLEX IV (Bruker) with reflector was used for analyses. Spectra of the peptide mixtures were recorded in the reflector mode at a laser wavelength of 337 nm. Peptide mass maps were searched against theoretically derived maps of investigated proteins.

Detection of CP proteins by immunoblotting. 293T cells were grown on 6-cm dishes and transfected with 15 µg plasmids by modified calcium-phosphate precipitation (22). After two days, the cells were collected and spun at 1200 rpm for 5 min at 4°C. The cell pellets were washed with 1 ml ice-cold PBS (23) and resuspended in 100 µl of lysis buffer (4% SDS, 20% glycerol, 10% 2-mercaptoethanol, 2 mM EDTA, 100 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8) (24). Cell lysates were then passed five times through a 21-G needle and centrifuged at 13000 rpm for 3 min at 4°C. The last two steps (i.e. passing through a needle and centrifugation) were repeated. The cell lysates were mixed 1:1 with 0.02% bromophenol blue solution and denaturated by incubation at 98°C for 3 min. Proteins were further separated by 10% SDS-PAGE, electroblotted onto a polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane and incubated with mouse anti-CP monoclonal antibody, clone PVA 634 (25) and secondary peroxidase-labelled anti-mouse IgG antibodies (Amersham Biosciences, Little Chalfont, UK). The membranes were stained using the ECL Plus kit (Amersham Biosciences).

Detection of CP proteins by immunofluorescence. NIH 3T3 cells were grown on slides in 24-well plates and transfected with 4 µg of plasmids by modified calcium-phosphate precipitation (22). Two days after transfection, cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 10 min and permeabilized with 0.2% Triton X-100 containing 5 µg/ml DAPI for 3 min. The cell pellets were washed with 1 ml ice-cold PBS (23) and resuspended in 100 µl of lysis buffer (4% SDS, 20% glycerol, 10% 2-mercaptoethanol, 2 mM EDTA, 100 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8) (24). Cell lysates were then passed five times through a 21-G needle and centrifuged at 13000 rpm for 3 min at 4°C. The last two steps (i.e. passing through a needle and centrifugation) were repeated. The cell lysates were mixed 1:1 with 0.02% bromophenol blue solution and denaturated by incubation at 98°C for 3 min. Proteins were further separated by 10% SDS-PAGE, electroblotted onto a polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane and incubated with mouse anti-CP monoclonal antibody, clone PVA 634 (25) and secondary peroxidase-labelled anti-mouse IgG antibodies (Amersham Biosciences, Little Chalfont, UK). The membranes were stained using the ECL Plus kit (Amersham Biosciences).

Electron microscopy of potyvirus-like particles produced in procaryotic cells. Purified recombinant PVA-CP proteins were prepared from E. coli cells transformed with pMPM4Ω-derived plasmids by ultracentrifugation on a CsCl or sucrose gradient (20). The samples were applied directly to the carbonated microscopic grids and negatively stained with uranyl acetate (26).

Electron microscopy of potyvirus-like particles in eucaryotic cells. 293T cells grown on slides in 24-well plates were transfected with 4 µg plasmids by modified calcium-phosphate precipitation (22). Two days after transfection, the slides were flat embedded in LR white resin. In brief, cells were rinsed with Sörensen buffer (SB; 0.1M Na/K phosphate buffer, pH 7.3), fixed with 3% formaldehyde and 0.1% glutaraldehyde in SB, dehydrated through an ethanol series of increasing concentration, embedded in LR white resin and polymerized at 4°C for two days. Sections (80-nm-thick) were contrasted with uranyl acetate and observed with a FEI Morgagni electron microscope operating at 80 kV.

Preparation of gene gun cartridges. Plasmid DNA was coated onto 1-µm gold particles (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA) as described previously (19). Each cartridge contained 1 µg of DNA coated onto 0.5 mg of gold particles. Stimulation of splenocytes for in vitro assays. For in vitro assays, mice (3 per group) were vaccinated using a gene gun with 1 µg of plasmid DNA into the shaven abdomen, at a discharge pressure of 400 psi, and boosted with the same dose two weeks later. Splenocytes from vaccinated mice were isolated two weeks after the second vaccination and restimulated for five or six days with 0.001 µg/ml E7-specific H-2Db CTL epitope, RAHYNIVTF (aa 49-57) (27), or with 10 µg/ml E7-derived peptide, QAEPDRAHYNIVTFCCCKCD (aa 44-62), carrying H-2Db CTL epitope, B cell epitope and T helper cell epitope (28). Control splenocytes were incubated without peptides.

ELISPOT assay. The ELISPOT assay described by Miyahira et al (29) and Murali-Krishna et al (30) was modified to detect HPV16 E7-specific T cells. The 96-well filtration plates (Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA) were coated with 10 µg/ml rat anti-mouse IFN-γ or IL-4 antibody (BD Biosciences Pharmingen, San Diego, CA) in 50 µl of PBS. After overnight incubation at 4°C, the wells were washed and then blocked with culture medium containing 10% fetal calf serum. Different concentrations of either non-restimulated or restimulated splenocytes from each vaccinated group of mice, starting from 1x10⁶/well, were added to the wells. Cells were incubated at 37°C for 24 h either with or without 0.001 µg/ml E7₄₉₋₅₇ peptide or 10 µg/ml E7₄₄₋₆₂ peptide. The plates were washed and incubated with 5 µg/ml biotinylated anti-INF-γ or anti-IL-4 antibody (BD Pharmingen) in 50 µl of PBS at 4°C overnight. After washing, the avidin-horseradish peroxidase conjugate (BD Pharmingen) was added and the plates were incubated for 2 h at room temperature. After washing, spots were developed by adding 50 µl of 0.5 mg/ml aminoethyl carbazole solution (Fermentas Inc., Hanover, MD) and 0.03% H₂O₂ and incubated at room temperature for 1 h. The spots were counted using a dissecting microscope.

Tetramer staining. E7-specific CD8⁺ CTLs were detected by the tetramer-staining assay in lymphocyte bulk cultures, restimulated in vitro for 6 days with HPV16 E7₄₉₋₅₇ peptide, using the R-phycoerythrin labeled H-2Db/E7₄₉₋₅₇ tetramer reagent, as described previously (31). The stained cells were analyzed on a FACScan instrument, using Cell Quest software (Becton-Dickinson).

Detection of anti-E7 specific antibodies by GST capture ELISA. The enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) was performed as described previously (32,33). Ninety-six-well plates (Dynatech, Chantilly, VA) were coated overnight at 4°C with 200 ng/well of glutathione casein in 50 mM carbonate buffer, pH 9.6. Thereafter, the wells were incubated for 1 h at 37°C with 100 µl of blocking buffer (0.2% casein in PBS with 0.05% Tween-20) and washed 3 times in washing buffer (PBS with 0.05% Tween-20). The cleared lysate from E. coli expressing the glutathion-S-transferase (GST)-E7-tag protein diluted in blocking buffer to 25 µg/100 µl was added to each well for 1 h at 37°C. Unbound material was washed away 5 times in washing buffer. Mouse sera assayed for anti-E7 antibodies were diluted 1:50 in blocking buffer containing 0.25 µg/µl total lysate proteins from the GST-tag-transformed E. coli (to block reactivities of the sera with contaminating proteins).
E. coli proteins) and incubated for 1 h at 37°C. After washing the plates 5 times, bound mouse antibodies were detected by sheep anti-mouse IgG antibodies conjugated to horseradish peroxidase (Amersham Biosciences) diluted 1:2000 in blocking buffer for 1 h at 37°C. The plates were washed 5 times and stained with 100 µl of 10 µg/ml tetramethylbenzidine (Sigma) and 0.003% H2O2 for 5-10 min. The reaction was stopped by adding 50 µl of 1 M sulfuric acid and the absorbance was measured at 450 nm.

Detection of anti-CP specific antibodies by DAS-ELISA. For the detection of PVA CP, the double antibody sandwich enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (DAS-ELISA) was employed using buffers described by Clark and Adams (34) as reported by Filigarova et al (35). The PVA CP expressed in E. coli and also in tobacco leaves infected with PVA isolate Lichte Industrie (kindly provided by Dr Dedic, Potato Research Institute, Havlickuv Brod, Czech Republic) was used as an antigen.

Tumor protection experiment. Mice (eight per group) were twice vaccinated using a gene gun with 1 µg of plasmids at a two-week interval. Two weeks after the second vaccination, mice were subcutaneously challenged into the back with 3x10⁴ TC-1 cells suspended in 0.15 ml PBS and then monitored twice a week for tumor growth.

Tumor therapeutic experiment. Mice (eight per group) were subcutaneously inoculated into the back with 3x10⁴ TC-1 tumor cells suspended in 0.15 ml PBS. Three and ten days later, mice were given 1 µg of plasmids using a gene gun. The mice were monitored twice a week for tumor growth.

Statistical analysis. Tumor formation after DNA immunization was analyzed by the log-rank test using Prism 3 software (GraphPad Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA). A difference between groups was considered significant if P<0.05.

Results

Generation of pBSC/CP, pBSC/CP-E7 and pBSC/CPdel-E7 DNA vaccines and detection of protein expression by immunoblotting. By modifications of the 3' end of the CP gene, we generated two fusion genes linking the sequence coding for the HPV16 E7-derived peptide (aa 44-60) to the whole CP gene (CP-E7) or to the CP gene with a short C-terminal deletion (CPdel-E7) as described in Materials and methods (Fig. 1). The shortened form of CP was used because we were afraid that the fusion of the E7 peptide to the whole CP could disturb the formation of VLPs. The fusion genes and the CP gene alone were cloned into the mammalian expression plasmid, pBSC, downstream of its immediate early cytomegalovirus promoter. The expression of the CP antigen was detected in transfected 293T cells by immunoblotting. The levels of expression of CP, CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 proteins were comparable (Fig. 2). We observed small differences in the mobility of proteins depending on the size. The presence of the E7-derived peptide in the CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 proteins was further confirmed by MALDI mass spectrometry revealing the presence of 1.298 kD peptide corresponding to a C-terminal fragment of E7 peptide (AHYNIVTFCK) generated after trypsin digestion of CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 proteins (data not shown).

Detection of cellular location of CP proteins by immunofluorescence and visualization of PVA VLPs produced in procaryotic and eucaryotic cells by electron microscopy. Transfection of NIH 3T3 cells and subsequent immunofluorescent staining were used to determine the cellular localization of the CP protein and CP-fusion proteins. The cells transfected with pBSC/CP, pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 showed cytoplasmic localization of the CP antigen (Fig. 3). In some cells, CP protein formed spindle-shaped aggregates, while aggregates of CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 proteins showed spherical morphology. In non-transfected cells no specific staining was detected (data not shown).

Electron microscopy of purified recombinant CP, CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 proteins obtained by centrifugation in a CsCl density gradient or on a sucrose cushion revealed the formation of VLPs in E. coli cells transformed with pMPM4Ω-derived plasmids (Fig. 4). This was the evidence that CP monomers...
of PVA, when expressed in a heterologous host (E. coli), self-assembled to form VLPs. The morphology of CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 VLPs did not differ from that of CP VLPs, shown in Fig. 4.

Electron microscopy of 293T cells transfected with pBSC/CP, pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 revealed the formation of aggregates of VLPs (Fig. 5). While non-modified CP VLPs were aggregated into parallel straight bundles, aggregates of modified CP-E7 VLPs kept globular formation as the individual threads were curved. The CPdel-E7 VLPs also stuck to each other; the aggregates were similar in morphology to both CP and CP-E7 VLPs.

Vaccination with pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 DNA vaccines enhanced an E7-specific CD8+ T cell-mediated immune response. We performed tetramer assays to detect the E7_{49-57} peptide-loaded H-2D^b tetramer positive CD8^+ T cells and ELISPOT assays to assess numbers of E7-specific IFN-γ- or IL-4-secreting cells in splenocytes from mice vaccinated with the set of DNA vaccines that were further investigated for their abilities to induce anti-E7 antibodies, to protect mice
against the growth of TC-1-induced tumors and cure TC-1-induced tumors.

For the tetramer assay, splenocytes were restimulated by 6-day-incubation with the E7 49-57 peptide. About 5% of restimulated splenocytes from mice vaccinated with pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 were both CD8 and tetramer positive, the corresponding figures for pBSC/E7-vaccinated and pBSC/E7GGGLAMP-vaccinated mice were 0.5 and 33%, respectively. No E7-specific responses were detected in mice immunized with either pBSC or pBSC/CP. The results of a representative experiment are shown in Fig. 6A.

Furthermore, we investigated the ability of the tested DNA vaccines to induce E7-specific IFN-γ-secreting splenocytes by ELISPOT assay after 5-day restimulation with the E7 49-57 peptide (Fig. 6B). About 200 and 100 E7-specific CD8+ T cells were detected per 10^5 splenocytes isolated from the pBSC/CP-E7-vaccinated and pBSC/CPdel-E7-vaccinated mice, respectively. These counts were comparable to that of E7-specific CD8+ T cells detected in pBSC/E7-vaccinated mice (about 100/10^5), but were approximately ten times lower than that in pBSC/E7GGGLAMP-vaccinated mice (about 1300/10^5). No E7-specific splenocytes were revealed in mice vaccinated with either pBSC or pBSC/CP. The results of a representative experiment are shown in Fig. 6A.

We did not detect any E7-specific IL-4-secreting splenocytes by ELISPOT assay. Numbers of IL-4-secreting splenocytes did not exceed 12 per 10^5 regardless of whether or not they had been restimulated with the E7 44-62 peptide and, thus, neither E7-specific responses nor relevant differences among the tested groups could be observed (Fig. 6C). As a positive control, splenocytes stimulated with concanavalin A were used.
Vaccination with the pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 DNA vaccines did not induce production of either anti-E7 or anti-CP antibodies. ELISA was used to quantitate anti-E7 and anti-CP antibodies in sera of vaccinated mice (Fig. 7). Blood samples for ELISPOT assay were obtained simultaneously with splenocytes from the same mice. No anti-E7 or anti-CP antibodies were detected in sera of mice vaccinated with pBSC or pBSC-derived plasmids containing CP-E7, CPdel-E7 or E7 genes. The pBSC/E7GGGLAMP plasmid induced the production of anti-E7 antibodies in all three mice. One out of three mice immunized with the pBSC/CP plasmid was positive for anti-CP antibodies.

Vaccination with the pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 DNA vaccines protected mice against the growth of E7-expressing TC-1 cells. To determine whether vaccination with the CP-E7 or CPdel-E7 fusion genes protects mice against E7-expressing tumors, animals (8 per group) were immunized twice with pBSC or pBSC-derived plasmids containing CP-E7, CPdel-E7 or E7 genes. The pBSC/E7GGGLAMP plasmid induced the production of anti-E7 antibodies in all three mice. One out of three mice immunized with the pBSC/CP plasmid was positive for anti-CP antibodies.

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The potential of DNA vaccines was also assessed by therapeutic immunization that was initiated three days after TC-1 inoculation (Fig. 8B). While all mice in control groups vaccinated with pBSC or pBSC/CP plasmids developed tumors within 25 days, 37.5% (3/8) of mice immunized with the pBSC/CP-E7 or pBSC/CPdel-E7 plasmids remained tumor-free for 80 days after inoculation of tumor cells. Both CP-E7 and CPdel-E7 cured mice with a similar efficacy to E7 (25%) or Sig/E7GGG/LAMP-1 (50%).

The model of three-dimensional structure of intact PVA particles has revealed that the N- and C-terminal surface-exposed regions are exposed on the surface of VLPs (38) just like in another potyvirus - JGMV (14). The JGMV VLPs carrying peptides of up to 27 aa have been shown to generate formations of parallel-laying VLPs in cells (15,16). In this study, we observed that the ‘threads’ of PVA CP VLPs aggregated into parallel bundles, while PVA CP-E7 VLPs formed spherical aggregates. The formation of both types of aggregates was observed with CPdel-E7 VLPs. These data suggested that the expression of the E7 epitope on the surface of PVA VLPs disturbed the laying of one VLP to another, resulting in the formation of morphologically different aggregates.
The induction of protective immunity against tumor development and low levels of antibody responses has been shown in the A31 lymphoma model for the DNA vaccine delivered by injection, comprising the fusion gene coding for the coat protein of potexvirus, linked to the modified idioype, scFv (4). We found that the DNA vaccine coding for PVA CP, fused to the immunodominant E7 epitope and delivered by a gene gun, induced protection against the development of tumors expressing E7, but neither anti-E7 nor anti-CP antibodies were detected. The difference may result from a variation in the routes of vaccine delivery and/or the nature of both the E7-derived antigen and the CP.

In summary, we showed the potential of fusion genes linking the sequence coding for the HPV16 E7 immunodominant epitope to the PVA CP gene to induce E7-specific cellular immune responses in the mouse model.

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