Mutational Analysis of the Molluscum Contagiosum Virus MC160 protein

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Mutational Analysis of the Molluscum Contagiosum Virus MC160 protein

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Master of Sciences

Department of Biological Sciences

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# Table of Contents

List of Tables........................................................................................................ Page v
List of Figures........................................................................................................ Page vi
Acknowledgments................................................................................................... Page viii
Abstract.................................................................................................................. Page ix
Introduction............................................................................................................. Page 1
Materials and Methods.......................................................... ..................................... Page 14
Results..................................................................................................................... Page 21
Discussion............................................................................................................... Page 43
References.............................................................................................................. Page 48
List of Tables

Table 1
Characterized Molluscum Contagiosum Virus Immune Evasion Molecules ................................................................. Page 8

Table 2
Summary of MC160 Domains Functions ........................................... Page 11

Table 3
Polymerase chain reaction primers used to construct MC159 and MC160 Domain Swap Chimeric Mutants ............................................................. Page 16

Table 4
Polymerase chain reaction primers used to construct MC160 Truncation Mutants ......................................................... Page 17
List of Figures

Figure 1
Tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α Signal Pathway) ........................................... Page 4

Figure 2
Intrinsic RIG-I/MAVS-induction of Type I interferons ....................................... Page 6

Figure 3
Representation of death effector domains (DEDs) of the MCV proteins, MC159 and MC160 .......................................................... Page 13

Figure 4
Representation of MC159 and MC160 Domain Swap Chimeric Mutants ............. Page 23

Figure 5
Representation of Dual Luciferase Assay Mechanism ...................................... Page 24

Figure 6
Cloning Strategy of Constructing the Domain Swap Chimeras ....................... Page 25

Figure 7
Dual Restriction Enzyme Digest of Chimeras for Verification ......................... Page 26

Figure 8
Dual Luciferase Analysis of MAVS-mediated IFNβ ....................................... Page 28

Figure 9
Protein Sequence alignment of the MC159 and MC160 DED1 and DED2 regions .......................................................... Page 31

Figure 10
Cloning Strategy of Constructing the MC160 Δα-mutants .............................. Page 32

Figure 11
Representation of MC160 Δα-mutants .............................................................. Page 33

Figure 12
MC160 Δα-mutant PCR#1 .................................................................................. Page 34
Figure 13
MC160 Δα-mutant PCR#2 ............................................................... Page 35

Figure 14
Dual Restriction Enzyme Digest of MC160 Δα-mutant for Verification Page 36

Figure 15
Sequence alignment of MC160 truncation mutants based on Sanger Sequencing ........................................................... Page 37

Figure 16
Expression of MC160 truncation mutants .................................................. Page 38

Figure 17
Dual Luciferase Analysis of MAVS-mediated IFNβ ................................ Page 40

Figure 18
Dual Luciferase Analysis of TBK1-mediated IFNβ ............................... Page 42

Figure 19
Predicted MC160 Inhibitory Function within the Intrinsic MAVS Signaling Pathway and Proposed Future MC160 Mutant ........................................... Page 47
Acknowledgements

Dr. Daniel Brian Nichols

My Mother, Father, and Brother

Lab Mates

Friends
Abstract

The Molluscum Contagiosum Virus (MCV), belongs to a family of large DNA viruses called *Poxviridae*. MCV causes a common skin infection resulting in benign neoplasms. 122 million cases of MC were reported in 2010. The virus is not primarily lethal, though fatalities have occurred due to secondary bacterial infections. Even with the high volume of reported cases, MCV is very much understudied, and its pathogenicity is not well understood. Thus, with that in mind, a more in-depth understanding of the MCV-host interactions is a priority. Presumably during infection, MCV utilizes immune evasion molecules to inhibit activation of the host pro-inflammatory signal pathways allowing the infection to persist. However, only nine of a predicted 77 immune evasion molecules, encoded by the MCV genome, have been characterized. This study focuses on one in particular, the MC160 protein. MC160 contains a pair of death effector domains (DEDs). MC160 expression inhibits various innate immune responses (IIRs), such as TNFα-induced NF-κB activation and MAVS-mediated activation of type I interferons (IFN). The first death effector domain (DED1) inhibits the activation of IRF3, a vital transcription factor in the activation of type I IFNs. To further discover the region(s) of interest within the first DED1 of MC160 that are required for MAVS-induced IRF3 inhibition, five MC160 truncation mutants were generated, by deleting predicted α-helixes from DED1. Constructs expressing truncated MC160 mutants were evaluated for the ability to inhibit MAVS-mediated IFNβ activation using the dual luciferase activity. Preliminary data, from transfection of HEK 293T cells with MC160 truncation mutants identified the second α-helix as being critical for the MC160 protein’s ability to inhibit
activation of IFNβ. By identifying the region of MC160 required to antagonize host immune signaling, we hope to gain a better understanding of how MC160 expression antagonizes this important IIR.
Introduction

Molluscum Contagiosum and Poxvirus Background

The Molluscum Contagiosum Virus (MCV) is a dermatotropic poxvirus, which exclusively infects human keratinocytes (Randall et al., 2013). An MCV infection results in benign skin neoplasms which can persist for months in even healthy patients (Chen et al., 2013). There are two types of MCV lesions have been recorded. The first, inflammatory MC (I-MC), presents clear signs of inflammation, whereas the second type, non-inflammatory MC (NI-MC), perseveres with little evidence of host inflammatory responses (Vermi et al., 2011). The MCV genome is predicted to encode numerous host immune evasion molecules, which likely contribute to the development of NI-MC lesions, allowing MCV to persist within the host by evading local immune responses (Senkevich et al., 1997). On the other hand, out of a predicted 77 immune evasion molecules in the MCV genome, only nine MCV proteins with immune evasion properties have been described.

Poxviruses contain a linear, double stranded DNA (dsDNA), ranging between 130-300 kbp. These large dsDNA viruses replicate exclusively within the cytoplasm of host cells. Once in the target cell, the virus is then transcribes its genome via a carefully regulated cascade of early, intermediate, and late genes. The first step essentially requires that early gene transcription occur in the nucleocapsid with early gene transcriptions factors already bound to early promoters. This early formation allows for the flow of early messengers through pores into the cytoplasm of the target cell. Many viral early
genes code for immune evasion molecules in order defend against host immune response. Furthermore, late transcription factors are produced into viral particles, called lateral bodies, that thought to be delivered to the host cell, to allow the virus to hijack the host’s innate immune response. Many poxvirus immune evasion molecules are needed for its pathogenicity.

Host innate immune responses

Several cytokines are produced in to antagonize poxvirus infection. For example, TNF is extremely detrimental to poxvirus infection as mutant poxviruses lacking genes to antagonize TNF result in attenuated infection in animal models. TNF can induce multiple outcomes in the cell including NF-κB activation and apoptosis. In the case of NF-κB activation, Once bound to the receptor, TNF-R1, adaptor proteins (TNF-R)-associated death domain protein (TRADD), TNF-R2-associated factor 2 (TRAF2), Fas-associated death domain (FADD), and receptor-interacting protein 1 (RIP1) are recruited to the cytoplasmic domain of the receptor. This signaling complex recruits additional factors leading to the phosphorylation and activation of the IKK signaling complex, which consists of IKKβ, IKKα, and the regulatory component IKKγ. Once activated, the IKK complex phosphorylates the inhibitory molecule IκBα leading to its ubiquitination and subsequent degradation. Upon degradation of IκBα, the nuclear localization sequence on the NF-κB p65/p50 dimer is unmasked allowing NF-κB to translocate to the nucleus. Once at the nucleus, NF-κB binds to enhancer elements upregulating the transcription of pro-inflammatory molecules such as TNF and IL-6.
Alternatively, the TRADD, FADD, and procaspase-8 complex can release from the receptor and form the death-inducing signaling complex (DISC), which results in the oligomerization and auto cleavage pro-caspase-8 to active caspase-8. Caspase-8 is an initiator caspase capable of cleaving and activating downstream effector caspases such as caspase-3. In addition, caspase-8 can cleave Bid into tBid which promotes the release of cytochrome c from the mitochondria thereby triggering the intrinsic apoptotic response as well. In addition to TNF, the FasL can also trigger apoptosis by binding to the Fas receptor leading to FADD and procaspase8 forming the DISC which triggers caspase-8 mediated apoptosis. To ensure successful virus replication, poxviruses have evolved mechanisms to prevent both the extrinsic and intrinsic pathways which will be discussed below.
Figure 1: TNF-α Signaling Pathway

*All figures are made by the author, unless otherwise noted.
Host cells possess an array of pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) to detect and respond to virus infection inside the cell. For example, dsRNA is an important pathogen associated molecular pattern that is produced as a by-product of poxvirus replication. RIG1/MDA5/MAVS-induction of type 1 interferons. Poxviruses are involved in both extrinsic and intrinsic pathways.

One of the key intrinsic pathways of the cell that poxvirus must inhibit is the RIG1/MAVS-induction of Type 1 interferons (IFNs). In this pathway, retinoic acid-inducible gene 1 (RIG-1) activates mitochondrial antiviral signaling protein (MAVS) via caspase-recruitment domain (CARD). MAVS plays a key role in activation of the interferon regulatory factor (IRF) signaling pathway with stimulates the production of Type I interferons (IFNs) in the nucleus. For this, MAVS interacts with stimulator of interferon genes (STING). This molecule associates with both the TRAP complex and SEC16 translocon to mediate the pathway. MAVS then interacts with translocase of the outer membrane 70 (TOM70), which in turn also interacts with heat shock protein 90 (HSP90), which couples TANK-binding kinase 1 (TBK1) and interferon regulating factor 3 (IRF3) within proximity of the MAVS complex. From there, TBK1 associates with IkB kinase ε (IKKe) which then phosphorylates IRF3 and IRF7, stimulating Type I IFN production (West et al., 2011).
Figure 2: Intrinsic RIG-1/MAVS-induction of Type I interferons.
Molluscum Contagiosum Virus Immune Evasion Strategies

To ensure successful replication, MCV encodes an array of immune evasion molecules to target a variety of host cell immune responses. The MC054 protein plays a key role in binding Interlukin-18 (IL-18) and inhibiting the pro-inflammatory cytokine’s role in both the innate and adaptive immune response (Xiang et al. 2003). MC066 is a glutathione peroxidase that inhibits the apoptotic response initiated by ultraviolet light and hydrogen peroxide (Shisler et al. 1998). The MC132 protein blocks NF-κB activity via direct activity with the p65 subunit, leading to its degradation (Brady et al. 2015). MC148 acts as a chemokine-like protein, binding to both CxCl2a and CCR8, inhibiting chemotaxis (Jin et al. 2011; Luttichau et al. 2001). The MC007 is a mitochondrial localizing protein that isolates the retinoblastoma protein (pRb) (Mohr et al. 2008). MC005 inhibits NFκB activation by targeting IKKγ, part of the IKK complex (Brady et al., 2015). The MC163 protein aids in virulence, by inhibition of TNFα-induced apoptosis, via prevention of mitochondrial membrane permeabilization (MMP) (Coutu et al. 2016). MC159 and MC160 target a variety of IIRs including apoptosis, NF-κB activation, and inhibition of MAVS signaling. The main focus of this paper is aimed at understanding the molecular mechanisms through which the MCV protein MC160 dampens host immune pathways.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCV Protein</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MC005</td>
<td>Inhibits NF-κB</td>
<td>Targets IKKγ in the IKK complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC007</td>
<td>Inhibits pRb</td>
<td>Binds pRb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC54</td>
<td>Inhibits IL-18</td>
<td>Binds IL-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC66</td>
<td>Inhibits apoptosis</td>
<td>Inhibits hydrogen peroxide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC148</td>
<td>Inhibits chemotaxis</td>
<td>Binds to CCR8 and CXCL12α</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC159</td>
<td>Inhibits apoptosis</td>
<td>Binds FADD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160</td>
<td>Inhibits NFκB</td>
<td>Binds caspase-8, Hsp90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC163</td>
<td>Inhibits TNF-α</td>
<td>Inhibits MMP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Characterized Molluscum Contagiosum Virus Immune Evasion Molecules
MCV MC159 and MC160 Proteins

Both MC159 and MC160, belong to a family of proteins called FADD-like Interleukin 1β converting enzyme inhibitory proteins (FLIPs). This family of proteins is unique in the fact that they contain specialized death effector domains (DEDs). MC159 and MC160 contain two tandem DEDs (Figure 1). The MC159 protein inhibits Tumor Necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and Fas mediated apoptosis through interactions with pro-caspase-8 and FADD. By binding FADD and pro-caspase-8, MC159 prevents the formation of DED-filaments thus preventing the oligomerization and subsequent autocleavage of pro-caspase-8 into the active caspase-8 form (Nichols et al. 2017). MC159 expression also prevents TNF-α-induced NF-κB activation through association with the regulatory subunit IKKγ (Randall et al. 2012). Despite binding to both FADD and pro-caspase-8, the MC160 protein does not inhibit apoptosis. However, MC160 expression does dampen TNF-α-induced NF-κB activation. This is accomplished through the binding of Heat Shock protein 90 (Hsp90) and the subsequent degradation of the I kappa kinase (IKK) complex (Nichols & Shisler 2006; Nichols & Shisler 2009). In addition, both MC159 and MC160 inhibit MAVS-mediated activation of type I interferons (IFNs). The MC159 protein binds both TBK1 and IKKe and prevents their phosphorylation and subsequent activation. While MC160 expression blocks TBK1 and IKKe phosphorylation, the molecular mechanism and cellular target of MC160 in the MAVS pathway has yet to be identified. Using a panel of MCV truncation mutants, Randall et al. demonstrated that the DED1 and C terminal of MC160 independently inhibit IRF3 activation, whereas the second death effector domain was dispensable.
(Randall et al., 2012). A summary of the function of the MC160 domains is listed in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MC160 DED</th>
<th>Inhibits TNF-induced NFκB</th>
<th>Inhibits TBK1-induced IFNβ</th>
<th>Inhibits IKK induced NF-κB</th>
<th>Inhibits MAVS-induced IFNβ activation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160 C terminal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Summary of MC160 domains functions**
The purpose of this thesis was to identify the critical region in MC160 DED1 required to inhibit MAVS-mediated activation of IRF3 and subsequent IFNβ activation. To this end, several MC160 mutants were generated including a panel of MC160 truncation mutants lacking predicted alpha-helices in DED1. These mutant proteins were expressed in HEK293T cells and detected via immunoblot. The MC160 mutants were further characterized for their ability to inhibit MAVS- and TBK-1 induced IFNβ activity via the luciferase assay. MC160 mutants lacking the predicted second alpha-helix lost the ability to inhibit IFNβ activation suggesting this region is required for key interactions between MC160 and target proteins.
Figure 3: MCV MC159 and MC160 proteins. Both proteins contain in tandem dual death effector domains (DEDs). MC159, a.a. 241; MC160, a.a. 371.
Materials and Methods

Mutagenesis

Construction of the truncated MC160N mutants began by performing a sequence alignment on the MC160 and the homologous protein MC159. The crystal structure of the MC159 protein was previously solved (Yang 2005, Shi 2005) and MC160 is predicted to fold similar to that of MC160 (Beaury 2017). Custom primers were then developed to specifically remove each α-helix of MC160 DED1. Due to the rich GC content of the region, the primers were well above the melting temperature (Tm) parameters, and thus several silent mutations had to be introduced to lower the Tm to the desired range while preventing any changes in the amino acid sequence. The template that was used was a N-terminus truncated MC160 protein, MC160N lacking the C-terminus. Target sequences were amplified by a two-step PCR process. In the first reaction, each individual α-helix region using the respective forward primers (table 3) and adding the first half of the HA tag, and the reverse primer, pCIrevHT (5'-CTTATCATGTCTGCTCGAAGCGGCCGC-3', Table 4). The second step was to attach the second half HA-sequence, using the forward primer Universal Secondary Primer_2 (USP_2, Table 4). After each step round of PCR, products where then run on a 0.7% agarose gel for verification. PCR products were purified using the PCR purification kit (Promega). The amplified products where then digested via a double-restriction enzyme digest, using EcoRI/XbaI and ligated into a pCI mammalian expression vector linearized using the aforementioned restriction enzymes (Promega). All constructs were engineered to contain the HA-tag at the N-terminus. Vectors were transformed into DH5α competent
cells and incubated overnight. Individual colonies were picked and grown overnight in LB broth containing 100 µg/mL ampicillin. Following 16-22 hours incubation at 37°C, plasmid DNA was isolated and restriction digested using EcoRI and XbaI to verify the presence of the insert. A PCR reaction using primers pCIseqFOR and pCIseqREV was used to further verify the presence of the insert. The PCR products were purified using the PCR purification kit and amplicons were sent out for DNA sequencing (Genscript) to verify that the correct sequence was present (Figure. 11).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer Name</th>
<th>Primer Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_1</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_2</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCACTGTGCCAGATGTG -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_3</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAAGACGGCGTCTG -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_4</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAAGCGCTACGCGTTT -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_5</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAAGCGCTACGCGTTT -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Secondary</td>
<td>5’- TCGAATTCGACCAGATGGCTACCAGATGACGTG -3'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primer_2</td>
<td>5’- TCGAATTCGACCAGATGGCTACCAGATGACGTG -3'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pClrevHT</td>
<td>5’- CTTATCATGTCTGCTGAAGGCACGC -3'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: List of primers used for MC160 truncations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primer Name</th>
<th>Primer Sequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_1</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_2</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_3</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_4</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC160_α-helix_5</td>
<td>5’- CCATATGACGTGCCAGACTATGCAGCAGAGCTGGAC -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal Secondary Primer_2</td>
<td>5’- TCGAATTCGCCACCATGGCTTACCCATATGACGTG -3’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pCl_revHT</td>
<td>5’- CTTATCATGTCTGCTGAAGCGGCGCGC -3’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: MC160 truncation mutant primers
**Plasmid DNA preparations**

Plasmid DNA was isolated from the bacterial cultures using the PureYield Plasmid Miniprep system (Promega) according to the protocol presented by the manufacturer. The *E.coli* containing experimental constructs were incubated for 16-22 hours in Luria broth (LB) supplemented with ampicillin at 100 μg/mL (Life Technologies). Following incubation, the bacteria were harvested via centrifugation at 14,000 rpm for 1 minute, then re-suspended in 600 μL of 1X Tris-EDTA buffer (TE) and then the Promega protocol was followed. Once the Miniprep protocol was completed, the plasmid DNA was eluted in 30 μL of 1X TE buffer, assed for purity and measured concentration of samples using a BioDrop spectrophotometer, and stored at 4°C. During the assessment process, plasmid DNA was deemed acceptable and utilized in subsequent experiments with O.D. 260/280 values within the range of 1.8-2.0.

**Cell culture and Transfections**

Human embryonic kidney 293T (HEK 293T) cells were maintained in Dulbecco's modified eagle medium (DMEM, Sigma or HiMedia) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) and 1% penicillin-streptomycin (sigma) at 37C, with 5% CO2, in a humidified incubator. The transfection of HEK 293T cells was performed using Mirus Trans-IT 2020 reagent in Opti-MEM (Gibco) at 3 μL/μg of total DNA.
**Immunoblotting**

HEK 293T cells were plated at 2.0x10^5 cells/well in a 12 well plate (Cellbind, Corning). Following overnight incubation, cells were transfected with one µg of either pCI, MC160N/pCI, or the indicated MC160N truncation mutant using the Mirus TransIT 2020 transfection reagent. 24 hours post transfection, the cells were then collected and lysed in 100 µL RIPA lysis buffer (150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 5 mM EDTA, 0.5% Sodium Dextraholate, 50 mM Tris, 0.1% SDS) supplemented with protease inhibitor cocktail added according to the manufacturers recommended concentration (Amresco, M250: AEBSF, Aprotinin, E-64, Bestatin, Leupeptin, Pepstatin). Cells were lysed for 30 minutes, the centrifuged at 14,000 rpm to remove cellular debris. The supernatants were collected and subsequently boiled for 5 minutes with 5% 2-mecaptoethanol in 1X sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) sample buffer. Once boiling was completed, samples were either placed on ice till use or stored at -80°C. Once ready for use, prepared lysates were resolved by 10% SDS-PAGE, transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride (PVFD) membranes (Millipore), blocked in 5% milk (carnation non-fat dry milk) in 1X Tris-buffered saline with Tween®20 (1X TBST), for 30 minutes or if needed by overnight. Following blocking, the PVFD membranes were then probed for 1 hour in primary antibody (anti-HA, 1:1000, Sigma) diluted in 0.5% milk TBST. The membranes were then washed three times in 0.5% milk TBST, then probed again, this time using a secondary antibody (goat-a-mouse-HRP, 1:1000) for 1 hour, and washed again, three times, using 0.5% milk TBST. Lastly, the membranes were then visualized using SuperSignal™ West Femto (Thermo Scientific) chemiluminescent reagent, according to
the manufactures instructions. Blots were visualized using a FluorChem E imaging system (Protein Simple).

Luciferase Assay

HEK 293T cells were plated at 2.5x10^5 cells per well into 12-well plates, and allowed to grow for 24 hours at 37°C in a 5% CO₂ humidified incubator. Following the 24 hours, the cells were then transfected with 300 ng of plasmid DNA (pCI, pHA-MC160N, pΔα-1, pΔα-2, pΔα-3, pΔα-4, pΔα-5, pD1 and pD2), 300 ng of mitochondrial antiviral-signaling protein (MAVS) or TANK-binding kinase 1 (TBK1), 200 ng reporter plasmids (100 ng pIFN-b-luciferase, 100ng pRenilla), 200 μL of Opti-MEM, and Mirus Trans-IT 2020 reagent (Mirus) at a ratio of 3 μL/μg of total DNA. Upon completion of transfection, the cells were then incubated for another 24 hours at 37°C in a 5% CO₂ incubator. Post-24 hour incubation, the cells were then lysed for 10 minutes with 1X passive lysis buffer (Promega). The lysates were then assayed for firefly and sea pansy luciferase activity using a Dual-reporter assay according to the manufacturer’s specifications (Promega). The ratio of Firefly to Renilla luciferase activity was used to determine relative activation of the IFNβ enhancer element. The data was then measured for statistical significance using the student's t-test.
Results

Cloning the MC159 & MC160 Death Effector Domain Swap Chimeras:

The initial goal of our research was to see if the individual death effector domains (DEDs) of both the MC159 and MC160 proteins were interchangeable, and if so, would there be a gain or loss of function for the respective proteins. Two MCV proteins, MC159 and MC160, contain two tandem death effector domains (DEDs). Both MC159 and MC160 belong to a group of proteins collectively known as viral FLICE-like Inhibiting Proteins (vFLIPs) (Shisler et al. 2015; Senkevich et al. 1997; Senkevich et al. 1996). These MCV vFLIPs provoke a diverse array of host-mediated immune responses including apoptosis and nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells (NF-κB) activation (Nichols & Shisler 2009; Nichols & Shisler 2006; Murao & Shisler 2005; Randall et al., 2012). Previous research done by Yang et al, identified that the sequences of both viral proteins were similar. A total of six mutants were designed, and a cloning protocol was made to create them (Figure 6). First specific primers, with overhang, were made for each DED and a custom general forward and reverse primer as well (Table 2). Once the primers were made, a two-step overlap extension PCR was done to create the domain swapped chimeras. Both the MC159 wt and MC160 truncation mutant, MC160N, were used as templates for the initial step of the PCR process was to amplify and clone only the desired regions of each template. Once completed, the PCR products were then used as the templates for the second round of PCR using both the pCI_for and pCI_rev primers (Table 3) to make the final constructs. The final constructs were then run on a 0.7% agarose gel for verification (Figure 7). All constructs were engineered
to contain an N-terminal HA epitope tag to detect expression. PCR amplicons were then cloned into the pCI mammalian expression vector and sequenced. Expression of all constructs in HEK293T cells were then verified by immunoblotting and detection with anti-HA antibody.
Figure 4: MC159 and MC160 chimeric domain swapped mutants characterized in this study. The MC159 wild-type (wt), a.a. 1-241; MC160 wt, a.a 1-371; MC160N, a.a. 1-220, DED1MC159-DED2MC160 (abbreviated as DED1MC159 in data sets), a.a. 1-220; DED1MC160-DED2MC159 (abbr. as DED1MC160 in data sets), a.a. 1-241.
Figure 5: Dual Luciferase Assay Mechanism
Figure 6: Cloning Strategy for the MC159 and MC160 domain swapped chimeric mutants
Figure 7: MC159 and MC160 Domain Swap Chimeras Duel-Restriction Enzyme Digest
Domain-swapped mutants inhibit MAVS-mediated activation of IFNβ:

Both MC159 and MC160 proteins play a key role in inhibition of the MAVS pathway, especially the DED1 of each protein, though both DEDs of MC159 inhibit this pathway (Shisler et al. 2015; Randall et al. 2013). Both chimera were utilized to see if swapping the DED of each would maintain their ability to inhibit the MAVS-mediated activation of IFNβ. HEK293T cells were transfected with either empty vector, pHA-MC159, pHA-MC160, pDED1_{MC159}, pDED1_{MC160}, or were left untransfected. All cells were also transfected with pIFNβ fire fly luciferase and pRL-null *Renilla* luciferase. In cells transfected with empty vector, treatment with MAVS resulted in significant increase in the levels of INFβ activation as detected by an increase in firefly luciferase values (Figure 9). Interestingly, pDED1_{MC159} and pDED1_{MC160} expressing cells showed inhibition of MAVS-induced activation of IFNβ with luciferase values similar to cells transfected with the wild-type pHA-MC159 and pHA-160 (Figure 9). Thus, the data indicates that the DED domains of MC159 and MC160 are interchangeable.
Figure 8: Dual Luciferase Activity Analysis of MC159 and MC160 domain swapped chimeric mutants effect on MAVS-mediated INFβ Activation; experiments were performed in triplicate, n=3.
Cloning the MC160 Δα-mutants:

The goal of the project was to identify the region within the death effector domain 1 (DED1) of MC160 required to inhibit MAVS-induced IFNβ activation. Through previous research, five α-helix regions were identified within the DED1 of the MC159, and hypothesized in the DED1 if the MC160 (Yang et al. 2005). Furthermore, is has been reported that the MC160 protein is predicted to fold similar to MC159, with high confidence (Beaury et al. 2017). A sequence alignment of MC159 and MC160 DEDs is illustrated in Figure 9. Five MC160 truncation mutants, designated; Δα-1-5, were generated, by deleting the predicted α-helixes (α-1-5) from DED1 (Figure 10). A cloning protocol was made to create the truncation mutants (Figure 11). First, specific primers were designed to create the truncation mutants, using the MC160 N-truncated mutant of the full length MC160 protein. Both the HA-tag sequence and the DED1 of MC160 are both rich in GC content, making the cloning particularly difficult. To circumvent this problem, silent mutations were made to codon optimize the nucleotide sequence of the primers, to both decrease the GC content and the melting temperature (Tm), to fit into the constructed cloning parameters. These mutations maintain the integrity of the wild-type amino acid sequence. Because the C-terminus of MC160 also inhibits MAVS/TBK1-induced IFNβ activation, the MC160N (a.a. 1-220) construct which lacks the MC160 C-terminus was used as the template for cloning using PCR. Thus, any loss of function due to deletion of amino acid in the DED1 of MC160 will not be masked by the presence of the MC160C-terminus. Once the specific primers were made, samples were run through a two-step PCR process. The first round of PCR amplifies the 5’ region of the MC160
deletion and adds part of the HA tail. This first PCR reaction required the use of the
MC160_α-helix_1-5 as forward primers and pCIrevHT as the reverse primer (Table 4).
The second round required the use of the same reverse primer; however, a Universal
Secondary Primer_2 (USP_2, Table 4) was used to add the remaining HA-tag. Once the
each round of PCR was completed, the PCR products were run on a 0.7% agarose gel for
verification (Figure 12 & 13, respectively). Each gel showed the distinct bands
decreasing in size which occurs as each α-helical region is stripped from the DED1 of the
MC160 protein. All constructs were engineered to contain a N-terminal HA epitope tag to
detect expression. Once the both PCR processes were completed, the PCR amplicons
were the cloned into the pCI mammalian expression vector and sequenced (Figure 15).
For further verification of a successful ligation and transformation, a duel restriction
enzyme digest, using EcoR1 and Xba1, was conducted. The restriction enzyme digest
products were then run on a 0.7% agarose gel and analyzed, showing the same distinct
bands decreasing in size, with the vector consistently shown at around 4000 base pairs
(bp) (Figure 14). Expression of the constructs in HEK293T cells were verified by
immunoblotting and detection with anti-HA antibodies (Figure 16). All MC160N mutants
were detected, however, Δα-1, Δα-2, and Δα-4 mutants were detected at a much higher
level at 22 kD, 19 kD and 17 kD, respectively, than the Δα-3 and Δα-5, which were seen
at a much lower level (Figure 16). Since Δα-3 was detected at low levels, I performed
initial analysis with truncation mutants one and two.
Figure 9: Sequence alignment of the MC159 and MC160 DED1 and DED2 regions. The red brackets indicate the start and end of the death effector domain 1 (DED1) for both proteins. The blue bracket represents the predicted start of the second DED. The annotations above the sequences shows the start and end of each α-helix region within the DED1. For the purpose of this experiment, the MC160 α-helices locations are of importance: α-helix_1, a.a 19-26; α-helix_2, a.a. 32-40; α-helix_3, a.a. 51-60; α-helix_4, a.a. 66-75; α-helix_5, a.a. 79-87.
Figure 10: MC160N Δα mutants characterized in this study. MC160N, a.a. 1-220; Δα-1 a.a. 18-220; Δα-2 a.a. 32-220; Δα-3 a.a. 52-220; Δα-4 a.a. 67-220; Δα-5 a.a. 80-220
Figure 11: Cloning Strategy for MC160 truncation mutants
Figure 12: Gel Electrophoresis result for PCR #1 amplicons. The distinct decreasing ladder
Figure 13: Gel Electrophoresis result for PCR #2 amplicons. The distinct decreasing ladder
Figure 14: Restriction Enzyme Digest result. pCI mammalian vector is 4006 bp long, and can be seen across all
Figure 15: Sequence alignment of MC160 truncation mutants based on Sanger Sequencing.
Figure 16: Expression of MC160 truncation mutants
**MC160 inhibits MAVS-mediated activation of IFNβ:**

MAVS plays a key role in activation of the interferon regulatory factor (IRF) signaling pathway with stimulates the production of Type I interferons (IFNs) in the nucleus. Viral regulation of IFNβ is a key component to immune evasion. The DED1 of MC160 inhibits TBK1-induced IRF-3 activation by preventing phosphorylation of TBK1. Therefore, the panel of MC160 truncation mutants were utilized to determine the region of the MC160 DED1 responsible for the inhibition the MAVS-mediated activation of IFNβ. HEK293T cells were transfected with either empty vector, pHA-MC160N, pΔα-1, pΔα-2, pΔα-3, pΔα-4, or pΔα-5, pD1 as well as pIFNβ fire fly luciferase and pRL-null *Renilla* luciferase. In cells transfected with empty vector, treatment with MAVS resulted in significant increase in the levels of INFβ activation as detected by an increase in firefly luciferase values (Figure 17). Expression of HA-MC160N inhibited MAVS-mediated IFNβ regulated activity constant with previous research as did HA-MC160 Δα-1 (Nichols et al., 2009). Interestingly, Δα-2 expressing cells failed to inhibit MAVS-induced activation of IFNβ with luciferase values similar to cells transfected with the empty vector and then treated with MAVS (Figure 17). Furthermore, the results from D1 expressing cells did not fully inhibit MAVS-induced IFNβ activation. This result was unexpected as Randall et al. reported D1 inhibits TBK1-induced signaling to levels similar to that of MC160N (Randall et al., 2013).
Figure 17: Dual Luciferase Activity Analysis of MAVS-mediated INFβ Activation; experiments were performed in triplicate, n=3. An asterisk indicates statistically significant inhibition (P < 0.05).
**MC160 inhibits TBK1-mediated activation of IFNβ:**

Another key downstream component of the RIG1/MDA5/MAVS pathway is TANK-binding kinase 1 (TBK1). TBK1 is coupled with interferon regulating factor 3 (IRF3) via heat shock protein 90 (Hsp90). From there, TBK1 associates with IκB kinase ε (IKKe) which then phosphorylates IRF3 and IRF7, stimulating Type I IFN production (West et al., 2011). Therefore, we tested to see which regions of the DED1 on the MC160 protein was the key in performing this function, in which it would inhibit the TBK1-mediated activation of IFNβ. HEK293T cells were transfected with either empty vector, pHA-MC160N, pΔα-1, or pΔα-2, as well as pIFNβ fire fly luciferase and pRL-null Renilla luciferase. In cells transfected with empty vector, treatment with TBK1 resulted in significant increase in the levels of INFβ activation as detected by an increase in firefly luciferase values (Figure 18). Expression of HA-MC160N inhibited TBK1-mediated IFNβ regulated activity consistent with data obtained from Randall et al. as did HA-MC160Δ-1. Interestingly, Δα-2 expressing cells failed to block TBK-1-induced IFNβ, suggesting that the second alpha-helix of MC160 is required for its inhibitory activity (Figure 18). One the other hand, D1 expressing cells showed complete inhibition of TBK1-induced IFNβ activity, which is significant, since as stated in the previous section, that D1 expressing cells did not fully inhibit MAVS-mediated IFNβ (Figure 17).
Figure 18: Dual Luciferase Activity Analysis of TBK1-mediated INFβ Activation; experiments were performed in triplicate, n=3. An asterisk indicates statistically significant inhibition (P < 0.05).
Discussion

The Molluscum Contagiosum Virus (MCV) codes two molecules, MC159 and MC160, which inhibit the MAVS-induced IFN activation. Swapping death effector domains (DEDs) between the MC159 and MC160 proteins results in function proteins maintaining the ability to inhibit activation of type I IFNs. Further, we present evidence to suggest that the predicted second α-helix (α-2) within the DED1 of the MC160 protein plays a key role in its ability to inhibit activation of Type I interferons, via blocking the MAVS pathway.

The initial design of this thesis was to investigate whether or not the DEDs of the MC159 and MC160 proteins were interchangeable, due to similarity of their sequences and structures, and if so, would they maintain their original function or even gain functionality from the other. Thus to initiate that, using the predicted sequences aligned (Yang et al., 2005) we generated the domain swapped chimeras. The data that was collected and presented above is still is still preliminary. However, it does coincide with previous data and research. One chimera mutant, DED1_{MC159}, can be seen to actually function better than the wild-type (Figure 8). Nevertheless, both mutants inhibit the MAVS-mediated activation of INFβ. This data suggests that the DEDs of MC159 and MC160 are interchangeable. The DED1 of MC160 is required to inhibit TBK1-induced activation of IFNβ, whereas both MC159 DEDs independently inhibit IRF3 activity (Randall et al 2014). Future steps that will be undertaken, will include verification of expression levels, as well as cloning an HA-epitope tag to the DED1_{MC159} mutant. In future studies, the two chimeric mutants will be evaluated for additional immune evasion
functions attributed to either MC159 or MC160 including effects on apoptotic and NF-kB signaling.

The second goal of this thesis was to identify the critical region of the DED1 of the MC160 protein. The MC160 DED1 is predicted to possess five α-helices. Each individual α-helix was removed, creating five total truncation mutants, Δα-1-5 (Figure 10). The analysis presented interesting preliminary data. The predicted Δα-2 resulted in a loss of function in both MAVS-mediated and TBK-induced activations of IFNβ (Figure 17 & 18). This result would indicate that the α-2 that is required to for the MC160 protein to inhibit the MAVS-mediated IFNβ pathway. Previous studies show there are key charge residues found within the α-2 region on the MC159 protein are required for its function in inhibiting activation of both apoptosis and NF-κB signaling (Garvey et al., 2002; Yang et al., 2005; Fu et al., 2016; Randall et al., 2012). Furthermore, within this region lies a predicted glutamate (E24) that comprises part of the charged triads typical in many DED containing proteins. This charged triad is predicted to maintain local structural integrity of DED proteins such as MC159 and orient adjacent amino acids to interact with target proteins. However, a mutant MC160 proteins with alanine substitutions in the charged triad mutant maintained the ability to inhibit MAVS-mediated IFN activation as well as NF-κB activation suggesting that the charged triad of MC160 may not be required as it is in MC159 (Beaury et al. 2017). However, given, that the MC160 delta 2 mutant lost the ability to inhibit MAVS-mediated activation of IFNβ, it seems reasonable to speculate that one or more of these amino acid(s) may be required for MC160 to bind to target proteins.
With this preliminary data, future steps include, verification that the MC160 protein is in fact folding correctly, with the absence of the α-2 region. For this, we would test the constructs against TNF-α induced NF-κB activation. We predict that it should still inhibit TNF-α induced NFκB, due to the fact that the DED2 of the MC160 protein is required for NF-κB inhibition, whereas DED1 is dispensable. The data presented above, leads to the observation, that DED1 of the MC160 protein does not fully inhibit the MAVS-mediated IFNβ activation. Nevertheless, it still does inhibit at the level of TBK1-induced IFNβ. The current hypothesis is that each of the two MC160 DEDs are key in inhibiting MAVS-mediated response pathways. MAVS signaling can trigger activation of both NF-kB and IRF3. Therefore, the current data suggests that DED1 is required for the TBK1-mediated processes, whereas DED2 is needed for inhibition of NFκB-mediated processes. Since the IFNβ enhancer has both NFκB and TBK1, for the MAVS pathway, it is required to have both, DED1 and DED2, to fully inhibit the MAVS signaling (Figure 19A). To support this, the data presented above, shows that TBK1 is fully inhibited by D1 (Figure 18). The significance of this is, that TBK1 induces only IRF3, however, MAVS can induce both NFκB and IRF3 activities, and thus is only partially inhibited by D1 (Figure 17), whose main target is IRF3. In addition the C-terminus of MC160 also independently inhibits MAVS-mediated processes. In light of current data recent literature review, the working hypothesis is that the MC160 C-terminus binds to Hsp90 and thereby prevents the association of MAVS to downstream signaling kinases (Nichols et al., 2009). This model is currently being experimentally validated.
In conclusion, the above data implicates the second α-helix as a key functional region within the DED1 of the MC160 protein’s function to inhibit the activation of Type I interferons. In addition, current data suggests that both DEDs of MC160 are necessary for complete inhibition of the MAVS signaling pathway. The next step will be to further verify this finding by creating an MC160 mutant that contains all predicted α-helices, except α-2 (Figure 19B). Future studies will concentrate on the identification and validation of suspected cellular targets of the MC160 DEDs. Based on data from Randall et al (Randall et al., 2013), we believe that target to be TBK1, at least for the MC160 DED1. The loss of function mutant identified in the current study can be utilized to determine if binding to TBK1 is indeed required for MC160’s ability to inhibit IRF3 phosphorylation. Thus, this mutant can be used to ultimately verify one molecular mechanism by which MC160 targets the cell’s innate immune signaling network to inhibit activation of type I IFNs.
Figure 19: MCV MC160 protein interaction of the MAVS signaling pathway and Future Mutants. A) The DED1 of MC160 is predicted to bind, and inhibit the TBK1-induced activation of Type 1 interferons, especially IFNβ. Furthermore, the DED2 of MC160 is required to inhibit NFκB. Lastly, the C-terminus of the MC160 protein is predicted to bind to heat shock protein 90 (Hsp90), aiding in inhibition of the downstream targets of the intrinsic MAVS-mediated signal pathway. B) Proposed model of a future MC160 truncation mutant, detonated temporarily as MC160Δα, a.a. 1-230. This proposed model would be lacking the second α-helix, α-2.
References


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