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Glycophorin C (Gerbich Antigen Blood Group) and Band 3 Polymorphisms in Two Malaria Holoendemic Regions of Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

The geographic overlap between the prevalence of erythrocyte polymorphisms and malaria endemicity is thought to be an example of natural selection on human populations. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Gerbich-negative phenotype is caused by an exon 3 deletion in the glycophorin C gene (*GYPCΔex3*) while heterozygosity for a 27-base pair deletion in the *SLC4A1* gene (anion exchanger 1 or erythrocyte membrane protein, band 3), *SLC4A1Δ27*, results in Southeast Asian ovalocytosis. Two geographically and ethnically distinct malaria endemic regions of PNG (the Wosera [East Sepik Province] and Liksul [Madang Province]) were studied to illustrate the distribution of two prominent deletion polymorphisms (*GYPCΔex3* and *SLC4A1Δ27*) and to determine if the genetic load associated with *SLC4A1Δ27* would constrain independent assortment of *GYPCΔex3* heterozygous and homozygous genotypes. The frequency of the *GYPCΔex3* allele was higher in the Wosera (0.463) than Liksul (0.176) (χ^2 ; $P < 0.0001$). Conversely, the frequency of the *SLC4A1Δ27* allele was higher in Liksul (0.0740) than the Wosera (0.0005) (χ^2 ; $P < 0.0001$). No individuals were homozygous for *SLC4A1Δ27*. In 355 Liksul residents, independent assortment of these two deletion polymorphisms resulted in 14 *SLC4A1Δ27* carriers heterozygous for *GYPCΔex3* and one *SLC4A1Δ27* carrier homozygous for *GYPCΔex3* (Fisher's exact test; $P = 0.8040$). While homozygosity for *SLC4A1Δ27* appears to be nonviable, the *GYPCΔex3* allele is not lethal when combined with *SLC4A1Δ27*. Neither mutation was associated with altered susceptibility to asymptomatic *Plasmodium falciparum* or *P. vivax* infection. While these erythrocyte polymorphisms apparently have no effect on blood-stage malaria infection, their contribution to susceptibility to clinical malaria morbidity requires further study.

Keywords

glycophorin C; Gerbich; band 3; Southeast Asian ovalocytosis; malaria; Papua New Guinea

INTRODUCTION

Malaria has been one of the most important environmental influences of natural selection in human populations [1]. The protective effect of various erythrocyte polymorphisms against severe disease caused by *Plasmodium falciparum* infection has been suggested by the epidemiologic association of these mutations in populations where malaria currently or historically has high endemicity [1–5]. Since children who are susceptible to severe malaria die before reproductive age, alleles that offer protection from severe disease would be expected to rise in frequency in these populations. Identifying these alleles could determine which children are at high risk for malaria morbidity while expanding knowledge of the mechanisms of disease and protection from malaria.

The erythrocyte polymorphism referred to as Southeast Asian ovalocytosis (SAO) is found in malaria endemic regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) [6]. It is strongly associated with heterozygosity for a 27-base pair deletion of the anion exchanger 1 or erythrocyte membrane protein, band 3 gene (*SLC4A1*Δ27) on chromosome 17 [7,8]. Band 3 is an integral red blood cell membrane protein that plays an important role in maintaining the erythrocyte cytoskeleton and shape, and functions as the principal exchanger of bicarbonate for chloride in the process of removing carbon dioxide from tissues [9–11]. While associations between heterozygosity for *SLC4A1*Δ27 and prevalence and parasitemia of asymptomatic blood-stage *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* infections may be equivocal, the selective advantage of this mutation is demonstrated by its powerful protection against cerebral malaria [12,13]. This advantage is balanced by presumed nonviability in the homozygous state [6,13].

Another integral red blood cell membrane protein polymorphism found in malaria holoendemic regions of Papua New Guinea is the Gerbich-negative phenotype caused by an exon 3 deletion in the glycophorin C gene (*GYPC*Δex3) on chromosome 2 [14–19]. Our recent studies in the Wosera region of PNG have shown that these residents have ovalocytic red blood cells but do not possess the *SLC4A1*Δ27 mutation [20]. In this population, the proportion of ovalocytes on blood smear progressively increases with the presence of *GYPC*Δex3 so that individuals who are homozygous for the deletion have a greater percentage of ovalocytes than heterozygotes [20]. When malaria infection status was examined at monthly intervals over a 7-month period, we found that blood-stage *P. falciparum* or *P. vivax* infection was not affected by *GYPC*Δex3 [20]. These findings parallel those for *SLC4A1*Δ27 and susceptibility to blood-stage malaria infection.

While the prevalence of *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 has been correlated with malaria endemicity, the distribution of, and genotype–genotype interactions between these two mutations in the Wosera and Liksul regions of PNG has not been investigated [6,14].

Both *SLC4A1* and *GYPC* are integral red blood cell membrane proteins. While it has been suggested that homozygosity for *SLC4A1*Δ27 is lethal, we were interested in learning whether the combination of *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 alleles would have a similar deleterious effect. In order to test this, we first determined the distribution of *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 in two distinct populations residing in different malaria endemic areas of PNG. Second, we determined whether the presence of one polymorphism influenced the distribution of the other. Would the apparent genetic load of *SLC4A1*Δ27 constrain independent assortment of *GYPC*Δex3 heterozygous and homozygous genotypes? Finally, we determined the relationship of *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 genotypes to asymptomatic malaria infection status.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Population

Cross-sectional studies were conducted in villages within the Wosera (East Sepik Province) and Liksul (Madang Province) areas of Papua New Guinea. These are historically isolated populations from two different linguistic groups that are separated by 350 km of rugged terrain [21–23]. There is little migration into and out of either region. Intra-village and intervillage marriages are equally common. Marriages within patrilineal clans are considered taboo. Nearly all of the residents of the study villages volunteered to participate. All four human *Plasmodium* species are transmitted year round in both areas [21–23]. Blood samples were collected from Wosera residents in July 1998 and from Liksul residents in May through August 2000. A subset of the samples included in our previous study in the Wosera was used [20]. The Human Investigations Institutional Review Boards of Case Western Reserve University, University Hospitals of Cleveland, and the Papua New Guinea Medical Research Advisory Committee approved all protocols. Informed consent was obtained from study participants.

Malaria Infection Status

Thick and thin blood films were prepared with 4% Giemsa stain and read by light microscopy [21]. Parasite densities were recorded as the number of parasites per 200 leukocytes (average 8,000 leukocytes/ μ l) [21].

Genotyping for Band 3 and Glycophorin C Polymorphisms

Blood was collected in EDTA Vacutainer tubes and stored at -70°C until DNA extraction was performed with the QIAmp96 DNA blood kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA). Genotyping of band 3 and glycophorin C was performed as previously described [7,20]. All Wosera genotypes are a subset of data presented in our previous study in the area [20].

Statistical Analysis

Categorical variables were analyzed by the chi-square or Fisher's exact test. Continuous variables were analyzed by the Wilcoxon or Kruskal–Wallis test. The Statistical Analysis Systems version 8.1 (SAS, Inc., Cary, NC) software package was used.

RESULTS

Frequency of the *SLC4A1* Δ 27 and *GYPC* Δ ex3 in the Wosera (East Sepik Province) and Liksul (Madang Province)

Only one person of 976 (0.1%) tested from the Wosera carried *SLC4A1* Δ 27 (Table I). In Liksul, 54 of 365 (14.8%) residents carried the mutation. Consistent with previous studies, no homozygous *SLC4A1* Δ 27 individual was identified [6,20]. The allele frequency of *SLC4A1* Δ 27 was significantly higher in Liksul than the Wosera (0.0740 vs. 0.0005, respectively; Fisher's exact, $P < 0.0001$). In the Wosera, 152 of 705 (21.6%) participants were homozygous for *GYPC* Δ ex3. In Liksul, 11 of 357 (3.1%) individuals were *GYPC* Δ ex3 homozygotes (Table II). The allele frequency for *GYPC* Δ ex3 was significantly higher in the Wosera than Liksul (0.463 versus 0.176, respectively; $\chi^2 = 161$; $P < 0.0001$). In both the Wosera and Liksul, these frequencies were in Hardy–Weinberg proportions ($\chi^2 = 0.0151$, $P = 1$ and $\chi^2 = 0.0018$, $P = 1$, respectively).

Distribution of Band 3 and Glycophorin C Genotypes in Liksul

Because the *SLC4A1* Δ 27 and *GYPC* Δ ex3 allele frequencies were both elevated in Liksul, we were able to investigate the interactions between these two erythrocyte membrane

protein deletion polymorphisms. For this analysis the distribution of *SLC4A1* and *GYPC* alleles was examined in 355 Liksul residents (Table III). Based on *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 allele frequencies and assuming independent assortment, the expected number of individuals calculated for each genotype combination was similar to the number observed in the study population (Fisher's exact, $P = 0.8040$). In addition, as predicted by allele frequencies, 15 individuals carried both the *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 polymorphisms.

Association of Band 3 and Glycophorin C Genotypes to Malaria Infection Status

Next, we determined whether the presence of both *SLC4A1* and *GYPC* polymorphisms would influence susceptibility to asymptomatic blood-stage malaria infection. Baseline characteristics of the two study populations were similar with respect to age, gender, and hemoglobin levels. In the Wosera ($n = 1,690$), the median age was 17.5 years, with 53% females and median hemoglobin 10.7 g/dl. In Liksul ($n = 1,024$), the median age was 18 years, with 48% females and median hemoglobin 11.1 g/dl. The prevalence of *P. falciparum* infection by blood smear was also similar (20.2% in the Wosera vs. 21.8% in Liksul). The prevalence of *P. vivax* infection was twice as high in the Wosera (17.7%) versus Liksul (8.8%).

The prevalence and density of *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* infections was examined in relation to different *SLC4A1* and *GYPC* genotypes in Liksul (Table IV). For both *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax*, different genotypic combinations did not influence the mean log₁₀ transformed parasitemia or prevalence rates in the population. In both populations, glycophorin C genotype alone did not influence *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* parasitemia and prevalence rates.

DISCUSSION

Epidemiologic evidence suggests that erythrocyte polymorphisms have arisen in malaria endemic regions to protect an individual from severe malaria [1,2,4]. We studied genetic polymorphisms of two integral red blood cell membrane proteins that have reached a high frequency in malaria endemic regions of Papua New Guinea. Our results show that the allele frequencies for both *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 polymorphisms differed in two ethnically and geographically distinct populations. Consistent with previous reports, *SLC4A1*Δ27 was rare in the Wosera and no *SLC4A1*Δ27 homozygous individuals were identified in either population [6,20]. *SLC4A1*Δ27 is considered to be a balanced polymorphism, where the selective advantage against severe malaria for heterozygotes outweighs the disadvantage of lethality in homozygous persons at the population level [12,13]. In contrast, while allele frequencies for *GYPC*Δex3 were higher in the Wosera than Liksul, the distribution of these alleles was in Hardy–Weinberg proportions in both populations and suggests that *GYPC*Δex3 alone does not confer a selective disadvantage.

While both *SLC4A1* and *GYPC* play an important role in red blood cell morphology and function, the genes that encode these proteins are located on different chromosomes [7,19,20]. This would suggest that the *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 alleles should assort independently, if the apparent genetic load represented by *SLC4A1*Δ27 is not increased past a viable threshold by the addition of another significant erythrocyte membrane protein polymorphism.

In Liksul, the *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 allele frequencies were high, thus allowing us to examine the interactions of both band 3 and glycophorin C genotypes. The observed and expected frequencies of these genotypes were similar, indicating that *SLC4A1*Δ27 and *GYPC*Δex3 are independently distributed as would be expected under Mendel's law of independent assortment. This finding suggests that, despite the fact homozygosity for

SLC4A1Δ27 appears to represent a genetic load that is not viable, neither heterozygosity nor homozygosity for *GYPCΔex3* leads to a readily apparent deleterious effect. It is interesting to note that similar findings with regard to *SLC4A1Δ27* and α -globin deletions (located on chromosome 16 and associated with α -thalassemia) have been reported in earlier studies in Madang [24].

The relationship of glycophorin C or band 3 mutations to malaria susceptibility has been investigated [13,20,24]. Neither mutation alone has been shown to significantly influence asymptomatic asexual parasitemia by *P. falciparum* or *P. vivax* [13,20,24]. Our preliminary analysis of the relationship of both *GYPCΔex3* and *SLC4A1Δ27* to malaria susceptibility in Liksul revealed no association with the prevalence of *P. falciparum* or *P. vivax* prevalence or parasite density. These results parallel findings of other red blood cell polymorphisms where genotypic differences are observed at the level of severe malaria morbidity with no discernable effect on susceptibility to blood-stage infection [13].

In summary, we found that the frequency of *GYPCΔex3* and *SLC4A1Δ27* differs in the two study populations. These mutations are independently distributed and heterozygosity for *SLC4A1Δ27* does not influence heterozygosity or homozygosity for *GYPCΔex3*. In addition, we did not observe an association between these erythrocyte membrane protein deletion mutations and alterations in the prevalence or density of asymptomatic blood-stage malaria infection. A prospective longitudinal study examining both parasitemia and malaria morbidity in children would better elucidate a potential protective role of *GYPCΔex3* and *SLC4A1Δ27* in PNG and other Melanesian populations.

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TABLE I

Band 3 Genotype in the Wosera and Liksul Areas *

Band 3 genotype	<u>Wosera (n = 976)</u>	<u>Liksul (n = 365)</u>
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
wt/wt ^a	975 (99.9)	311 (85.2)
wt/Δ27 ^{b,c}	1 (0.1)	54 (14.8)

* All Wosera genotypes are a subset of data presented in Patel et al. [20].

^a Homozygous wild type individuals.

^b Heterozygotes for band 3 deletion.

^c No homozygote for the band 3 deletion was identified.

TABLE II

Glycophorin C Genotype in the Wosera and Liksul Areas^{*}

Glycophorin C genotype	Wosera (n = 705)	Liksul (n = 357)
	n (%)	n (%)
wt/wt ^a	204 (28.9)	242 (67.8)
wt/ Δ ex3 ^b	349 (49.5)	104 (29.1)
Δ ex3/ Δ ex3 ^c	152 (21.6)	11 (3.1)

^{*} All Wosera genotypes are a subset of data presented in Patel et al. [20].

^a Homozygous wild type individuals.

^b Heterozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.

^c Homozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.

TABLE III

Observed and Expected Distribution of Glycophorin C and Band 3 Genotypes in 355 Liksul Residents

Glycophorin C genotype	Band 3 genotype	
	wt/wt ^a	wt/ Δ 27 ^b
	Observed ^c (expected) ^d	Observed (expected)
wt/wt ^e	203 (207)	39 (34)
wt/ Δ ex3 ^f	88 (88)	14 (14)
Δ ex3/ Δ ex3 ^g	10 (9)	1 (1)

^aHomozygous wild type individuals.^bHeterozygotes for band 3 deletion.^cNumber of individuals observed with genotype.^dNumber of individuals predicted to have genotype.^eHomozygous wild type individuals.^fHeterozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.^gHomozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.

TABLE IV
Glycophorin C, Band 3, and Susceptibility to Malaria Infection in Liksul, Papua New Guinea

Genotype		<i>P. falciparum</i>		<i>P. vivax</i>	
Glycophorin C	Band 3	n	Mean parasitemia ^a Prevalence (%)	Mean parasitemia ^a Prevalence (%)	Prevalence (%)
wt/wt ^b	wt/wt ^b	203	0.5619 ± 1.0914 46 (22.7)	0.2687 ± 0.7702 24 (11.8)	24 (11.8)
wt/wt	wt/Δ27 ^c	39	0.3652 ± 1.0086 5 (12.8)	0.2227 ± 0.7168 4 (10.3)	4 (10.3)
wt/Δex3 ^d	wt/wt	88	0.7803 ± 1.3428 24 (27.3)	0.2396 ± 0.6944 10 (11.4)	10 (11.4)
wt/Δex3	wt/Δ27	14	1.1840 ± 1.4470 6 (42.9)	0.1152 ± 0.4310 1 (7.1)	1 (7.1)
Δex3/Δex3 ^e	wt/wt	10	0.3226 ± 0.6800 2 (20.0)	0.2807 ± 0.8876 1 (10.0)	1 (10.0)
Δex3/Δex3	wt/Δ27	1	0 0 (0)	0 0 (0)	0 (0)
		P value	0.1880 ^f 0.2352 ^g	0.9894 ^f 1.0000 ^g	1.0000 ^g

^aLog10 parasites/μl blood.

^bHomozygous wild type individuals.

^cHeterozygotes for band 3 deletion.

^dHeterozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.

^eHomozygotes for glycophorin C exon 3 deletion.

^fKruskal–Wallis test.

^gχ² analysis.