Comparison of the relative levels of the 3243 (A→G) mtDNA mutation in heteroplasmic adult and fetal tissues

P M Matthews, J Hopkin, R M Brown, J B P Stephenson, D Hilton-Jones, G K Brown

Abstract
In this report, levels of the 3243 A to G mtDNA mutation associated with the mitochondrial encephalopathy, lactic acidosis, and stroke-like episodes (MELAS) syndrome were measured in different heteroplasmic tissues of subjects in a kindred including adults with variable clinical phenotypes and a fetus. The relative proportions of mutant mtDNA varied widely (0-03 to 0-67) between identical tissues of the six different subjects and between different tissues of the same subjects. In the one adult for whom sufficient data were available there was an apparent correlation between the distribution of mutant mtDNA and clinical presentation. A woman without neurological symptoms who died prematurely with a cardiomyopathy and lactic acidosis had higher proportions of mutant in heart (0-49, SD 0-02), skeletal muscle (0-56, SD 0-01), and liver (0-55, SD 0-12) than in other tissues studied (for example, kidney, 0-03, SD 0-01). A strikingly different result was found in a 24 week old fetus in whom there was little variation in heteroplasm in different tissues (average proportion of mutant mtDNA in six tissues, 0-53, SD 0-02). These observations add cardiomyopathy to the growing list of presenting features of the 3243 mtDNA mutation. The unique results from the fetus suggest also that selection pressures acting on either wild type or 3243 mutant mtDNA (rather than variation from replicative segregation of the heteroplasmic mtDNA) may be responsible primarily for the variable levels of 3243 mutant mtDNA in different heteroplasmic tissues of adults.

Methods
Material for study was obtained from living subjects after informed consent to procedures was obtained. Use of archival materials was approved by living relatives.

Primary skin fibroblasts were cultured in Ham’s F10 medium with 10% fetal calf serum (Gibco BRL, Middlesex, UK). Cells were harvested by trypsinisation after growing to confluence and stored at −70°C before extraction for DNA analysis. White blood cells were pelleted after separation from plasma and red blood cells using Dextran 100 and resuspended in phosphate buffered saline. Buccal mucosal cells were harvested by centrifugation (3000 rpm, 15 minutes) of the second of two 25 ml sterile normal saline mouthwashes. DNA from cells was prepared by standard proteinase K-SDS digestion and phenol-chloroform extraction. Freshly frozen tissues

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Received 25 May 1993 Revised version accepted for publication 5 August 1993
were minced and homogenised, and paraffin embedded or formalin fixed tissues were thinly sliced and extracted three times with xylene, followed by three to six extractions with absolute alcohol before proteinase K-SDS digestion.

For each measurement a segment of mtDNA including bp 3243 was amplified by the polymerase chain reaction (numbered according to the sequence of Anderson et al., forward primer, 3130–3149 bp; reverse primer, 3404–3423; cycle 1, 95° for three minutes, 55° for one minute, 75° for 0-5 minutes, cycles 2–34, 95° for one minute, 55° for one minute, 75° for 0-5 minutes, cycle 35, 95° for one minute, 55° for one minute, 75° for 5-5 minutes) using Taq polymerase (Boehringer Mannheim GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). ApaI (Boehringer) digests (37° for 90 minutes) were performed directly on the PCR products in a reaction mix made from 1 µL PCR product, 2 µL 10 X ApaI modifying buffer (125 mmol/l tris-HCl, 38-8 mmol/l MgCl2, 125 mmol/l KCl, pH 7-4), 2 µL water, and 10 U ApaI. Digestion products were electrophoresed at 80 V through 3% NuSieve/1% agarose gels and bands were visualised under UV and photographed for analysis. Relative intensities of the 293 (I150) and 180 (I160) bp bands were measured densitometrically from film negatives and the proportion of MELAS 3243 mutant (M) was calculated: M = 1/(1 + (I150/163×I160)). In preliminary trials with standard mixes we confirmed that the proportion of mutant mtDNA could be accurately measured in this way.

Results are expressed as mean values where there are two or more replicates with standard deviations calculated for measurements repeated three or more times. A two tailed Student’s t test was used to assess statistical significance.

Results
The family of a boy (III.4) who died at the age of 13 with the MELAS syndrome was studied. In addition to the boy with MELAS, the kindred includes his mother (II.2), who died suddenly at the age of 42 with cardiomyopathy without a history of previously recognised cardiac or neurological disease, two oligosymptomatic women, one with short stature, deafness, and myopathy (III.5) and one with deafness alone (II.1), and an asymptomatic woman (III.3) (fig 1). After delivery of a 24 week stillborn fetus (IV.1) to patient III.5, multiple tissues were obtained for mtDNA analysis. Pathological study of the fetus failed to show any signs characteristic or even suggestive of mitochondrial disease. Archival cultured skin fibroblasts were available from subject III.4 and multiple paraffin embedded specimens obtained from necropsy of II.2. White blood cells from fresh blood samples were obtained from subjects II.1 and III.3.

All members of the kindred tested were heteroplasmic for the MELAS 3243 mutation. The proportion of mutant mtDNA varied from 0-03 to 0-67 between different subjects and different tissues (table). Comparison of the proportion of mutant mtDNA in the same subject showed differences between subjects, for example, for white blood cells the proportion of mutant mtDNA was 0-39 (SD 0-04) in III.5, 0-19 in III.3, and 0-22 (SD 0-04) in II.1. In II.2 and II.3, II.5 there was large variation in the percentage of mutant mtDNA between different tissues. This was particularly striking in II.2, in whom the mutation was near the limit of detection in gut, spleen, and kidney (0-04), although present at significantly higher levels of between 0-49 and 0-56 in cardiac and skeletal muscle and liver (p < 0-001) (fig 2). A significant difference between the proportions of mutant in cardiac and skeletal muscle was also seen (p < 0-02), although this was small (difference of means, 0-07).

In contrast to these results, in the fetus IV.1 there was either no variation or only a small variation in the percentage of mutant between different tissues: maximum differences of 0-05 in the proportion of mutant mtDNA were found in comparisons of kidney and cultured fibroblasts or optic nerve (p < 0-01) (fig 2). It is notable that extra-embryonic tissue (placenta) had a similar proportion of mutant to the several fetal tissues studied.

To determine whether growth in vitro results in a change in the relative proportions of mutant and wild type mtDNA in fibroblasts, a primary culture from IV.1 was repeatedly split and regrown to confluence through approximately 14 generations. There was no measurable change in the proportion of mutant mtDNA over this period (proportion of mutant after 14 divisions, 0-52 (SD 0-02), n = 4; primary culture, 0-51 (SD 0-03)).

Discussion
Our kindred shows maternal transmission of the A to G transition mutation at bp 3243 in the mtDNA that is associated with the

Figure 1. The pedigree of the family. Solid symbol, MELAS syndrome; half shaded symbol, oligosymptomatic; upper right quadrant shaded, asymptomatic; upper left quadrant shaded, phenotype uncertain; ?, not tested or examined.
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Proportions of MELAS 3243 mutation (standard deviation in brackets) in different tissues of subjects in the kindred shown in fig 1. The number of replicates is in square brackets and the range of measurements for each value is given below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue</th>
<th>Blood</th>
<th>Fibroblasts</th>
<th>Buccal mucosa</th>
<th>Brain</th>
<th>Optic nerve</th>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Muscle</th>
<th>Gut</th>
<th>Spleen</th>
<th>Liver</th>
<th>Kidney</th>
<th>Placenta</th>
<th>Tissues average</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II.1</td>
<td>0.22 (0.04)</td>
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<td>0.14-0.26</td>
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<tr>
<td>II.2</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.49 (0.02)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.56 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.55 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.04)</td>
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<td>0.29 (0.25)</td>
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<td>II.3</td>
<td>0.19</td>
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<td>0.46-0.51</td>
<td>0.55-0.57</td>
<td>0.03-0.05</td>
<td>0.03-0.05</td>
<td>0.52-0.73</td>
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<td>0.15-0.22</td>
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<td>III.4</td>
<td>0.67 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.58-0.84</td>
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<td>0.65 (0.01)</td>
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<tr>
<td>III.5</td>
<td>0.39 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.52 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.48</td>
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<td>0.65 (0.06)</td>
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<td>0.51 (0.09)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IV.1</td>
<td>0.46-0.62</td>
<td>0.4-0.61</td>
<td>0.52-0.63</td>
<td>0.51-0.03</td>
<td>0.51-0.03</td>
<td>0.54-0.03</td>
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MELAS syndrome. It illustrates again that there is a range of clinical phenotypes associated with the 3243 mutation. Cardiomyopathy has been well described in association with MELAS (found, for example, in one of the first reported cases), although we are not aware that it has been reported as the presenting feature of the 3243 mutation before. It may be relevant that the highest levels of mutant mtDNA were found in organs (heart, skeletal muscle, and liver) whose failure figured prominently in the fatal syndrome of cardiomyopathy and lactic acidosis and almost undetectable levels were found in other tissues studied.

The observation that levels of maternally inherited mutant mtDNA can vary over a broad range between different tissues in heteroplasmic subjects was unexpected given the estimated number of mitochondrial genomes in somatic cells (for example, from no fewer than 500 in fibroblasts to several thousand in myocytes) and zygotes (which may have as many as 100 000 mtDNA molecules). If such large numbers of mitochondrial genomes assorted independently, neutral drift theory would predict a relatively slow change in cytoplasmic genotype during somatic cell differentiation and tissue formation. One possible explanation for the large variation seen in patients such as II.2, therefore, is that the number of independently segregating cytoplasmic units of heredity is much smaller than the number of mitochondrial genomes, that is, that mtDNA molecules do not segregate independently into daughter cells as stochastic models have assumed. An alternative explanation for the large variation in heteroplasmasy between tissues is that relatively strong, tissue specific selection factors act after replicative segregation in the embryo to amplify preferentially the proportion of either mutant or wild type mtDNA.

There is also a growing body of evidence that selection factors in tissues may cause the proportion of mutant mtDNA in a tissue to change with time as previously shown for mtDNA deletion mutations. First, it seems plausible that there is a relationship between the proportion of mutant mtDNA and mitochondrial dysfunction in any given tissue, and clinical studies show that MELAS (which characteristically has onset after birth and normal early development) is a progressive disorder. Second, only a subset of the highly oxidative organ systems of the body are most commonly involved in the MELAS syndrome (notwithstanding less frequent pathology in other oxidative tissues, for example, heart). Third, there is a consistently greater proportion of mutant in muscle than in blood and a trend towards relatively greater accumulation in muscle than in blood with age (J Poulton, unpublished observations). Finally, preferential accumulation of the 3243 mutant mtDNA to levels that lead to impairment of mitochondrial polypeptide synthesis has been shown in rho-0 cells repopulated with heteroplasmic mitochondria.

To our knowledge, this is the first report on the distribution of the 3243 mutation between fetal tissues. There has been only one previous report of any mutant mtDNA distribution in the fetus. The contrast between the remarkable similarity in levels of 3243 mutant mtDNA in the broad range of different tissues from the fetus and the large differences seen between some adult tissues suggests to us that tissue specific selection factors affecting mitochondrial genotype are more important than linked segregation of multiple genomes in determining the pattern of tissue heteroplasmasy in the adult. As the mechanism and strength of selection may vary for different disease associ-
ated mtDNA mutations, the pattern and usual range of variability would probably depend on the nature of the mtDNA mutation together with the genetic background of the subject and environmental effects. Mitochondrial disease therefore may pose unique problems for genetic counselling, as recently discussed by Harding et al.\textsuperscript{25} Our data show that heteroplasmacy for wild type and 3243 mutant mitochondrial genomes can be maintained in culture. As plasmid heteroplasmy was similar to that in other tissues, cytoplasmic genotypy from chorionic villus cells in a developing fetus might be accurately assessed. However, if the variability in tissue genotypes in adults is determined in large measure after birth, then predictions of clinical phenotype on the basis of fetal genotype may be too unreliable to be useful, even if a direct relationship between the proportion of 3243 mutant and biochemical phenotype of a tissue can be established.

We thank Drs Bunting, Graham, and Gould for their generous assistance and support with clinical aspects of this study. We gratefully acknowledge useful discussion and criticism in preparation of the manuscript from Drs J Poulton and K Morten. Funding was provided by the Wellcome Foundation (GKB), MRC (Canada) and NIH (PMM).

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J Med Genet 1994 31: 41-44
doi: 10.1136/jmg.31.1.41

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