Exclusion Of The Bovine Factor XI Gene As Genetic Background Of Bovine Neonatal Pancytopenia In Calves

K. Krappmann*, R. Weikard*, C. Wolf†, C. Kühn*

Introduction

Recently, several reports about haemorrhagic diathesis in cattle have been published (Shimada et al. 2007, Braun et al. 2008, Friedrich et al. 2009, Kappe et al. 2010). Specifically, an increasing number of cases of bovine neonatal pancytopenia (BNP) have been observed in Germany and many other European countries. However, the background of BNP still remains an open question. While on the one hand immunmodulating external noxes are discussed, genetic factors also have to be considered given the examples of monogenic effects for blood clotting disorders. Prominent candidate genes of bleeding disorders are coagulation factors like factor XI, whose deficiency was verified in Holstein cattle in the USA (Kociba et al. 1969), in Canada (Gentry et al. 1975), Britain (Brush et al. 1987), Japan (Ghanem et al. 2005), in the Czech Republic (Čítek et al. 2008) and in Turkey (Meydan et al. 2009).

Factor XI (plasma thromboplastin precursor), a zymogene of a plasma serine protease, is involved in the early stage of the intrinsic pathway of blood coagulation. The activated form of factor XI is one of the responsible factors for the conversion of factor X into its activated form, which converts prothrombin to thrombin. This reaction transforms soluble fibrinogen into an insoluble fibrin clot (Brush et al. 1987).

Marron et al. (2004) identified the molecular basis of the factor XI deficiency in Holstein cattle as an insertion of a 76-bp segment within exon 12 of the factor XI gene on chromosome 27. The outcome is a truncated protein as a result of the presence of a stop codon. In consequence, the mature factor XI protein would be lacking the functional protease domain encoded by the last three exons (13-15). Because factor XI deficiency is known in Holstein cattle, we sequenced all 15 exons of the factor XI gene to test for mutations causing factor XI deficiency as a potential genetic background of BNP.

Material and methods

Calves treatment and phenotype. The calves (N_{healthy} = 294, N_{affected calves} = 7, born from May 2007 to July 2009) belonged to a F₂ resource population established from an experimental cross between Charolais and German Holstein (SEGFAM resource population, Kühn et al. 2002) at the FBN in Dummerstorf. After birth, all calves were removed from

* Res. Unit Molecular Biology, Leibniz Institute for Farm Animal Biology, 18196 Dummerstorf, Germany
† Landesamt für Landwirtschaft, Lebensmittelsicherheit und Fischerei Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (LALLF), 18059 Rostock, Germany
their mothers within 30 minutes. The calves were housed in a barn with straw bedding and fed a colostrum diet, which was replaced by a milk replacer at day five. The affected calves died within 2 weeks after birth at an average of three days after displaying the first symptoms. They were characterised by fever (40°C), haemorrhages in skin and subcutis (especially in exposed segments, e.g., scapula), various organs (e.g. rumen, abomasum, small intestine, heart) and from injection or tagging sites together with petechiae on visible mucous membranes and haemorrhagic faeces. The symptoms were identical to the clinical picture described in Friedrich et al. 2009 and Kappe et al. 2010. All deceased calves were submitted to a pathologic section in a routine veterinary diagnostic laboratory (LALLF Rostock). Examinations of the carcasses and blood revealed a haemorrhagic diathesis as a result of a thrombocytopenia. In addition, the partial thromboplastin time was prolonged.

**Analysis of factor XI gene variation.** The animals selected for resequencing comprised three affected calves (AC) and 13 healthy cattle (N related to AC = 6, N unrelated to AC = 7). Genomic DNA was extracted either from blood or tissue samples (ear, spleen) via phenol extraction. The sequencing of the factor XI exon sequences was carried out either with the 3130 Genetic Analyzer (Applied Biosystems Inc, Foster City, CA, USA) or the MegaBACE 1000 (GE Healthcare, Munich, Germany). To analyse and compare the exon sequences, BioEdit Sequence Alignment Editor (Version 7.0.5.2) was used. In addition to this comparison, the obtained exon sequences were matched against Btau_4.0 (NC_007328.3). Furthermore, with the help of the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST, NCBI), the bovine protein sequence of factor XI (NP_001008665.1) was aligned with the orthologs of other vertebrate species.

**Pedigree analysis.** For all calves, a full four generation pedigree was available for genetic analysis. A binomial test was performed to test whether there was a significant concordance of affected and unaffected individuals in the two groups of calves originating from the common F1 sire A or not originating from that sire:

$$P(X_1 = a) = \binom{n}{a} p_A^a (1 - p_A)^{n-a}$$

where P(X_1 = a) is the probability of observing calves with BNP descending from sire A assuming a random distribution of cases, n is the total number of calves showing BNP, a is the number of calves from sire A showing BNP, p_A is the probability that a random calf is a descendent of sire A.

**Results and Discussion**

**Sequencing of factor XI gene.** The sequencing of all 15 exons revealed single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in exon 7, 12 and 14. But there was no 76-bp insertion in exon 12 as described by Marron et al. 2004. Instead, we found 4 SNPs within the 176-bp segment of this exon. Three of the SNPs induce an amino acid exchange (Figure 1). In exon 7 (160 bp) and in exon 14 (140 bp) the investigation exhibited 2 SNPs, respectively. One of the SNPs in exon 7 results in an amino acid exchange (Figure 1). None of the amino acid exchanges was specific for the affected calves. Apparently, the results indicate a high variability within the factor XI gene. This is supported by the fact that the amino acid sequence of the bovine factor XI gene differs in many positions from the orthologs of other species, e.g., exon 7, 12 and, 14 (Figure 2). Therefore, an intact and
functional factor XI can be generated from different primary protein sequences without a phenotypically apparent impact on the phenotype.

Figure 1: Structure of the bovine factor XI gene with detected SNPs and amino acid exchanges. Exons are shown as rectangles labelled by exon numbers in roman numerals. The 5'UTR and the 3'UTR are marked in grey, coding sequences are darker coloured.

Figure 2: Amino acid sequence alignments of the factor XI orthologs of cattle (NP_001008665.1), human (NP_000119.1), monkey (XP_001165847.1), mouse (NP_082342.1), rat (XP_224872.4) and fowl (XP_420678.2). A dot indicates the same amino acid. Positions with detected SNPs are underlined in the bovine sequence: bold letters stand for an amino acid exchange; italic font mark the SNP with no impact on the resulting amino acid.
Clustering of cases in specific pedigrees. There was a clustering of cases of BNP in the offspring of a F₁ sire line. All calves affected with BNP belonged to the SEGFAM resource population (Kühn et al. 2002). One calf was a F₂-offspring, while the other six calves were backcrosses generated by mating F₂ females to two different purebred German Holstein sires. Further pedigree analysis revealed that all individuals could be traced back to a single F₁ male ancestor. Statistical analysis revealed that the restriction of affected calves to the progeny of sire A was statistically significant. The likelihood of observing exclusively descendents of sire A as affected was p=0.003.

Conclusion
Although no indication on a simple mode of inheritance of the phenotype was observed, our data suggest that there may be a genetic component involved in the development of the BNP. Currently, several environmental factors e.g., vaccination of the mothers (Friedrich et al. 2009) or virus infections (e.g., circovirus, Kappe et al. 2010) are discussed, however, without clear conclusive evidence for a single causal agent. Our results indicate that epidemiological studies should consider at least an interference of genotype with environmental noxes.

References