H9 avian influenza reassortant with engineered polybasic cleavage site displays a highly pathogenic phenotype in chicken

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In the field, highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses (HPAIV) originate from low-pathogenic strains of the haemagglutinin (HA) serotypes H5 and H7 that have acquired a polybasic HA cleavage site. This observation suggests the presence of a cryptic virulence potential of H5 and H7 low-pathogenic avian influenza viruses (LPAIV). Among all other LPAIV, the H9N2 strains are of particular relevance as they have become widespread across many countries in several avian species and have been transmitted to humans. To assess the potential of these strains to transform into an HPAIV, we introduced a polybasic cleavage site into the HA of a contemporary H9N2 isolate. Whereas the engineered polybasic HA cleavage site mutant remained a low-pathogenic strain like its parent virus, a reassortant expressing the modified H9 HA with engineered polybasic cleavage site and all the other genes from an H5N1 HPAIV became highly pathogenic in chicken with an intravenous pathogenicity index of 1.23. These results suggest that an HPAIV with a subtype other than H5 or H7 would only emerge under conditions where the HA gene could acquire a polybasic cleavage site and the other viral genes carry additional virulence determinants.

INTRODUCTION

Highly pathogenic avian influenza viruses (HPAIV) lead to devastating losses in the poultry industry worldwide and pose a threat for initiating a new pandemic due to repeated transmission to humans. HPAIV have been shown to originate from low-pathogenic precursors of the subtypes H5 and H7 only (Alexander, 2000; Garten & Klenk, 2008). Their haemagglutinin (HA) specifies a polybasic cleavage site (Garten & Klenk, 1999; Garten & Klenk, 2008) and thus is susceptible to proteolytic activation by the ubiquitous protease furin (Stienke-Gröber et al., 1992). Consequently, infection of poultry with HPAIV leads to systemic viral spread and the lethal course of the disease. In contrast, the activation cleavage of HA from low-pathogenic avian influenza viruses (LPAIV) is restricted to trypsin-like proteases with monobasic specificity (Garten & Klenk, 2008). Infection with LPAIV results in a subclinical outcome or mild disease which may lead to drops in egg production, delays in growth, or exacerbation of underlying conditions or other disease (Suarez, 2010). Recent H9N2 viruses have an HA cleavage site (HACS) with dibasic (R-S-S-R) or tribasic (R-S-K/R-R) motifs (Aamir et al., 2007; Guo et al., 2000; Liu et al., 2004; Perk et al., 2006a, b; Xu et al., 2007) resembling the minimal furin motif R-X-R/K-R (Vey et al., 1992). These viruses are of lower pathogenicity in birds, but appropriate mutations could alter the HACS to be recognized by furin, potentially resulting in HPAIV.

Amongst LPAIV, H9N2 strains have attracted particular attention. Since the mid-1990s, infections in poultry, mainly chickens, have occurred in many countries and have reached panzootic proportions (Alexander, 2007). Furthermore, G1-like strains like the prototype strain A/Quail/HongKong/G1/97 (H9N2) carry six internal protein genes closely related to clade 0 H5N1 HPAIV isolated in Hong Kong 1997 (WHO/OIE/FAO H5N1 Evolution Working Group, 2008). Therefore, those strains were presumed to be the donors of the internal protein genes of clade 0 viruses (Guan et al., 1999, 2000, 2003; Guo et al., 2000). This observation suggests the potential for H9N2 strains to transform into highly pathogenic viruses. Besides widespread prevalence in ducks, quails and chickens, H9N2 viruses were also transmitted to pigs and humans (Butt et al., 2005; Cong et al., 2007, 2008; Ducatez et al., 2008; Guo et al., 2000; Lin et al., 2000; Peiris et al., 1999). Some human H9N2 isolates have acquired changes in HA at the receptor binding site, like human H3N2 strains (Matrosovich et al., 2001), suggesting further adaptation
to the human host. Moreover, large numbers of undetected subclinical infections with H9 strains have been suggested by serological surveillance studies among farmers and poultry workers reporting positivity rates from 1.0–15.5% (Jia et al., 2009; Peiris et al., 1999; Wang et al., 2009).

To reveal the cryptic virulence potential of H9N2 LPAIV, we altered the HACS of the H9N2 strain A/Chicken/Emirates/R66/02 (ChkEmR66) by either changing the dibasic motif RSSR at its HACS to the minimal furin motif RSRR or by extending the HACS with a basic amino acid motif from an H5N1 HPAIV. In addition, we generated two reassortants extending the HACS with a basic amino acid motif from an RSSR at its HACS to the minimal furin motif RSRR or by changing the dibasic motif RSSR of the ChkEmR66 HACS to the minimal furin cleavage motif RSRR (Vey et al., 1992). Using the appropriate plasmids, we rescued the wild-type ChkEmR66 (GenBank accession numbers: CY076720–CY076727); the two HACS mutants, being the tribasic variant ChkEmR66-H9 RSRR and the polybasic variant ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR, and the reassortant viruses ChkEmR66-H5R65, SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR (Table 1).

**RESULTS**

**Recombinant H9N2 viruses with polybasic HACS**

We introduced the polybasic HACS of HPAIV SwanGerR65 (H5N1) into the HA gene of the poultry isolate ChkEmR66 (H9N2) by site-directed mutagenesis (Weber et al., 2007). Furthermore, we changed the dibasic motif RSSR of the ChkEmR66 HACS to the minimal furin cleavage motif RSRR (Vey et al., 1992). Using the appropriate plasmids, we rescued the wild-type ChkEmR66 (GenBank accession numbers: CY076720–CY076727); the two HACS mutants, being the tribasic variant ChkEmR66-H9 RSRR and the polybasic variant ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR, and the reassortant viruses ChkEmR66-H5R65, SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR (Table 1).

**ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR resembles an HPAIV in vitro**

To investigate whether the cleavage site mutants and reassortants are able to undergo multicycle replication in the absence of trypsin, and thus display the phenotype of an HPAIV in vitro, we performed plaque assays on MDCK-H cells in the absence or presence of trypsin. The parental ChkEmR66 and the reassortant SwanGerR65-H9 required trypsin for formation of any visible plaques. Remarkably, the tribasic HACS mutant ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR with minimal furin motif (Vey et al., 1992), was also unable to form any plaques in the absence of trypsin. In contrast, the polybasic HACS mutant ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR and the two reassortants ChkEmR66-H5R65, which carries the HA from HPAIV SwanGerR65, and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR formed plaques in the absence of exogenous trypsin (Fig. 1a).

To investigate the activation cleavage of the HA precursor HA0 directly, we performed Western blots from lysates of infected MDCK-H cells. Corresponding to plaque formation, the HA0 of ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR remained uncleaved in the absence of trypsin, whereas the HA0 of SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKK was processed into the HA1 and HA2 fragments (Fig. 1b).

Growth kinetics in cell culture were in accordance with plaque formation and proteolytic HA activation. The parent virus ChkEmR66 and the tribasic HACS mutant ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR were dependent on trypsin, since in the absence of an exogenous protease they reached similar titres at 8 h but stagnated from then on at 4–5 orders of magnitude lower levels than in the presence of trypsin. However, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR was able to replicate independent of trypsin but reached a 10^3-fold lower titre. This impaired growth could be attributed to incompatibility of the engineered polybasic HACS to the H9 HA as indicated by the Western blot from SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKK-infected cells (Fig. 1c). Furthermore, decreased virus yield may result from premature irreversible conformational changes of the intracellularly processed mutant H9 HA in the acidic milieu of the trans-Golgi network (Grambas & Hay, 1992).

Table 1. Recombinant viruses with their HACS regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virus</th>
<th>Features</th>
<th>HACS region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66</td>
<td>A/Chicken/Emirates/R66/02 (H9N2), monobasic cleavage site</td>
<td>NVPARSSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SwanGerR65</td>
<td>A/Swan/Germany/R65/06 (H5N1), polybasic cleavage site</td>
<td>NSPQGERRRRKKR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRR</td>
<td>A/Chicken/Emirates/R66/02 (H9N2), HACS mutant with minimal furin motif</td>
<td>NVPARSSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRRKKR</td>
<td>A/Chicken/Emirates/R66/02 (H9N2), HACS mutant with cleavage site extended with polybasic motif from SwanGerR65</td>
<td>NVPARSSRRRRRKK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66-H5R65</td>
<td>A/Chicken/Emirates/R66/02 (H9N2), reassortant with HA gene from SwanGerR65</td>
<td>NSPQGERRRRK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRR</td>
<td>A/Swan/Germany/R65/06 (H5N1), reassortant with HA gene from ChkEmR66</td>
<td>NVPARSSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRRKKR</td>
<td>A/Swan/Germany/R65/06 (H5N1), reassortant with mutated ChkEmR66 HA gene carrying an HACS extended with polybasic motif from SwanGerR65 HA</td>
<td>NVPARSSRRRRKKK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken together, these data demonstrate that the introduction of a polybasic HACS into the HA of ChkEmR66...

Pathogenicity in chickens

In order to investigate their virulence, we infected chickens oculonasally with 10^6 p.f.u. of ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRKRKK, ChkEmR66-H5R65, SwanGerR65-H9 and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKRKKK on MDCK-H cells in the presence and absence of trypsin. 

Proteolytic HA activation. Western blots from lysates of MDCK-H cells infected with ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRKRKK, SwanGerR65-H9 or SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKRKKK at an m.o.i. of 0.1 in the presence (+) or absence (−) of trypsin. 

Growth kinetics. MDCK-H cells were inoculated with ChkEmR66 (circles), ChkEmR66-H9RSSRKRKK (diamonds), and ChkEmR66-H9RSSRKRKKK (squares) at an m.o.i. 10^{-3} in the presence (filled symbols) or absence (hollow symbols) of trypsin.

In contrast, the reassortant viruses ChkEmR66-H5R65 and SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKRKKK were pathogenic in chickens. ChkEmR66-H5R65 caused temporary non-lethal disease with notable symptoms from days 3–9 post-inoculation (p.i.), whereas infection with SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKRKKK had already led to signs of disease on day 2. By day 7 p.i., all SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKRKKK-infected chickens had died or were in a moribund state and had to be euthanized (Fig. 2).

To investigate viral shedding, we took oral and cloacal swabs from virus-infected animals (16 from each group) on day 2. Among the ChkEmR66-infected chickens, seven animals shed virus orally and 11 animals cloacally with titres ranging from 1.6 to 2.6 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1}. However,
the polybasic HACS mutant ChkEmR66-H9_{RRRKKR} could be detected in cloacal swabs from nine animals with titres ranging from 1.6 to 2.5 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1}, but not in oral swabs (Fig. 3). Eleven oral swabs (1.6–2.6 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1}) and eight cloacal swabs (1.6–2.6 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1}) were positive in ChkEmR66-H5_{RRRKKR}-infected chickens. Somewhat higher titres were found in the SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR}-infected animals as the oral titres ranged from 1.6 to 3.2 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1} (14 animals) and cloacal titres from 1.6 to 2.4 log_{10} TCID_{50} ml^{-1} (eight animals) (Fig. 3). Taken together, virus shedding on day 2 could be detected to different extents. These data support the conclusion that the polybasic HACS mutation introduced into ChkEmR66 is detrimental for virus replication in vivo. However, this disadvantage is counterbalanced in the reassortant SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR}.

To assess the virulence of SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR} compared with the HPAIV SwanGer65 according to the OIE criteria (Alexander, 2008), we determined the intravenous pathogenicity index (IVPI). The IVPI of SwanGer65 is 2.88 and that of SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR} was determined to be 1.23. Since this value is greater than the internationally accepted threshold of 1.2 (Alexander, 2008), SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR} meets the official definition of an HPAIV. Taken together, these data demonstrate that HPAIV with HA other than H5 or H7 can be generated, provided the other viral proteins carry respective cryptic virulence determinants, e.g. originate from an HPAIV.

Pathology

At necropsy, ChkEmR66-H5_{RR5}-infected animals showed subcutaneous haemorrhages at the shanks and severe atrophy of the thymus (day 3 p.i.), as well as accumulation of mucinous excretions in their larynxx (day 3 p.i.). These symptoms were even more prominent in chickens infected with SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR}.

To study the extent of viral spread and tissue lesions, we investigated samples of brain, trachea, lung, heart, kidney, spleen, pancreas, caecum and duodenum on days 3 and 6 p.i. by histopathology and immunohistochemistry. No microscopic lesions or influenza virus antigen were found in organs from chickens infected with ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9_{RRRKKR} or SwanGerR65-H9. However, ChkEmR66-H5_{RR5}-infected animals acquired focal lesions in brain, lung, heart and spleen, whereas SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR}-infected animals developed multifocal lesions in all organs investigated, coinciding with the presence of influenza virus antigen (Tables 2 and 3, Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

LPAIV of subtype H9N2 belong to the most widespread avian influenza strains in Asia and the Middle East (Alexander, 2007; Ducatez et al., 2008) and have been transmitted to humans (Butt et al., 2005; Guo et al., 2000; Lin et al., 2000; Peiris et al., 1999). Strains of the G1 group carry genes encoding internal proteins closely related to clade 0 H5N1 HPAIV (Guan et al., 1999, 2000). In this study, we analysed whether the introduction of a polybasic HACS into a Middle-East H9N2 strain would give rise to an HPAIV, thereby revealing a cryptic virulence potential of these H9 subtype strains. These studies are particularly important since it is currently not possible to predict the result of the introduction of a polybasic HACS into an LPAIV with any certainty. Whereas such a mutation does not increase the virulence of the reference strain A/Duck/Ukraine/1/1963 (H3N8) for chickens (Stech et al., 2009), a subsequent study revealed that insertion of a polybasic cleavage site into an H6N1 LPAIV field isolate resulted in a highly pathogenic phenotype (Munster et al., 2010). We show here that the engineered polybasic HACS mutant ChkEmR66-H9_{RRRKKR} has a low pathogenic phenotype like its parent ChkEmR66. In contrast, the reassortant SwanGerR65-H9_{RRRKKR}, carrying a modified H9 HA with polybasic cleavage site and all the other genes from HPAIV SwanGer65, is highly pathogenic in chickens. These findings demonstrate that HPAIV of subtype H9 would only emerge if two conditions were met: that a polybasic HACS mutation occurred and some or all of the other viral genes linked to the virulence of H5N1 HPAIV were acquired by reassortment. However, the exact distribution and the precise localization of these additional virulence determinants remain to be mapped. Besides the polybasic HACS, several virulence markers were assigned to the HA, neuraminidase, polymerase basic 2, polymerase basic 1,
polymerase acidic, nucleoprotein (NP), matrix 2 and non-structural 1 proteins (Baigent & McCauley, 2001; Banks et al., 2001; Deshpande et al., 1985; Hoffmann et al., 2000b; Ma et al., 2010; Munier et al., 2010; Suarez, 2010; Wasilenko et al., 2008; Zhirnov & Klenk, 2009). The internal protein genes of ChkEmR66 differ from those of the G1 group (Guan et al., 1999, 2000) and H5N1 clade 0 viruses (WHO/OIE/FAO H5N1 Evolution Working Group, 2008) considerably, as the identity values range from 99 to 90% (3–33 amino acids different per gene segment). These considerable differences correspond to our finding that the virulence of ChkEmR66-H9RSSRKKR in chicken is not increased compared to its low-pathogenic parent virus. Since both H9N2 LPAIV and H5N1 HPAIV are endemic in Asia and the Middle East, respective reassortment events may occur. If such an H9 reassortant acquires a polybasic cleavage site via recombination or polymerase slippage, as has been inferred for several H5 and H7 HPAIV (Garcia et al., 1996; Khatchikian et al., 1989; Pasick et al., 2005; Perdue et al., 1996, 1997; Suarez et al., 2004), it could become virulent for poultry. With an IVPI of 1.23 in chickens, SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKKR meets the official definition of an HPAIV. However, this IVPI is near the lower limit for an HPAIV, and this low value could be attributed to either an incompatibility of the ChkEmR66 H9 HA to the other proteins of SwanGerR65 (H5N1) or an inability of the ChkEmR66 H9 HA to support systemic replication as fully as SwanGerR65 H5 HA does. Correspondingly, the two reassortants SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKKR and ChkEmR66-H5R65 displayed an organ tropism that was more restricted and showed less abundant viral antigen in the respective organs, in contrast to the homologous SwanGerR65 (Gohrbandt et al., 2010) and other H5N1 HPAIV (Perkins & Swayne, 2001; Pfeiffer et al., 2009). In particular, infection of the endothelium was found exclusively in organs of SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKKR-infected chicken on day 3 p.i. Inflammatory alterations in affected organs were considerably more prominent compared with SwanGerR65-infected birds (Gohrbandt et al., 2010), which might be attributed to the prolonged course of disease. Compared with ChkEmR66, the HA reassortant ChkEmR66-H5R65 displays a more extended tissue spread and occasional replication in brain, indicating that the SwanGerR65 H5 HA itself carries virulence determinants and could contribute to neurotropism. On the other hand, the lower virulence and moderate viral spread of SwanGerR65-H9RSSRKKR compared with the homologous HPAIV SwanGerR65 could be attributed to the incompatibility of the ChkEmR66 H9 HA to the engineered polybasic cleavage site and to the remaining seven genes from the H5 strain SwanGerR65.

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Table 2. Pathology at day 3 p.i.

Histopathology and IHC detection of influenza virus nucleoprotein in infected chickens. Affected organs are listed and the results of immunostaining are given as: +++, multifocal; +, focal; −, negative. HE, haematoxylin and eosin stain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virus and method</th>
<th>Brain</th>
<th>Trachea</th>
<th>Lung</th>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Kidney</th>
<th>Spleen</th>
<th>Pancreas</th>
<th>Caecum</th>
<th>Duodenum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRKKKR</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SwanGerR65-H9</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>IHC (n=3)</td>
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<td>−/−/−</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
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<td>−/−/−</td>
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<tr>
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<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66-H5RSSR55H</td>
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<td>SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRKKKR</td>
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<tr>
<td>IHC (n=3)</td>
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<td>Pneumocytes + II</td>
<td>Cardiac myocytes</td>
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<td>Macrophages</td>
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<tr>
<td>Histopathology (HE)</td>
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<td>Heterophilic pneumonia</td>
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<td>Follicular hyperplasia, apoptotic lymphocytes</td>
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### Table 3. Pathology at day 6 p.i.

Histopathology and IHC detection of influenza virus nucleoprotein in infected chickens. Affected organs are listed and the results of immunostaining are given as: + +, multifocal; + focal; −, negative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Virus and method</th>
<th>Brain</th>
<th>Trachea</th>
<th>Lung</th>
<th>Heart</th>
<th>Kidney</th>
<th>Spleen</th>
<th>Pancreas</th>
<th>Caecum</th>
<th>Duodenum</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-(H_9^{RSSRKKK})</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
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<td>−/−/−</td>
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<td>−/−/−</td>
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<tr>
<td>Histopathology (HE)</td>
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<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>Histopathology (HE)</td>
<td>Neurons, ependymal cells, glial cells proliferation</td>
<td>No lesions</td>
<td>No lesions</td>
<td>Lymphoplasmahistiocytic meningoencephalitis, neuronal degeneration, glial cell proliferation</td>
<td>Interstitial lymphocytic nephritis</td>
<td>No lesions</td>
<td>Mixed cellular pancreatitis, acinar cell degeneration and necrosis</td>
<td>Focal serositis</td>
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<tr>
<td>SwanGerR65-(H_9^{RSSRKKK})</td>
<td>+/+/+/+</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
<td>−/+/+</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
<td>+/+/+/+</td>
<td>−/+/+</td>
<td>−/+/+</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histopathology (HE)</td>
<td>Neurons, glial cells, ependymal cells, choroid plexus</td>
<td>No lesions</td>
<td>Pneumocytes ii, macrophages</td>
<td>Tubular epithelium</td>
<td>Single mononuclear cells</td>
<td>Ainar cells</td>
<td>Mononuclear cells</td>
<td>Intestinal epithelium, neurons (intramural), villus stroma, mononuclear cells</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineered (H_9) highly pathogenic influenza virus</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
<td>−/−/−</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recently, an H9N2 chicken virus with the same HACS, PARSSR/G, like ChkEmR66 (Table 1), was subjected to site-directed mutagenesis, resulting in two point mutations within the modified HACS (PARKKR/G), followed by ten passages in the air sacs of chicks. Prior to passaging, the HACS mutant required trypsin for in vitro replication and

**Fig. 4.** Viral organ tropism in chicken. Immunohistochemical (IHC) detection of influenza A virus nucleoprotein (indicated by a red stain) in lung, heart and brain from chickens sacrificed on day 3 p.i. with 10⁶ p.f.u. of ChkEmR66, ChkEmR66-H9RSSRRRKKKR, ChkEmR66-H5R65 or SwanGerR65-H9RSSRRRKKKR. The extent of IHC staining is given as: ++, multifocal; +, focal; −, negative. Insets show enlarged regions with virus-positive cells; the corresponding area is indicated by a rectangle. Bars, 100 μm.
was not lethal in chickens, after either intranasal or intravenous infection. Remarkably, the passaged progeny virus replicates trypsin-independently and exhibits a highly pathogenic phenotype after intravenous injection but is non-lethal after intranasal inoculation (Soda et al., 2011). In other studies, however (Bogs et al., 2010; Munster et al., 2010), the polybasic HACS mutants were generated by insertions and were highly pathogenic following both intravenous or ocularnasal infection. Taken together, the polybasic motif apparently has to be acquired by an insertion mutation to provide furin-susceptibility for the HA (Ohuchi et al., 1991) and, above all, the polybasic HACS appears to be essential for initiating systemic spread.

The maintenance of influenza viruses in bird populations would not necessarily require systemic spread within the infected organism but rather viral shedding that promotes efficient transmission to other susceptible animals. In contrast to its parent virus, ChkEmR66-H9RSSR efficient transmission to other susceptible animals. In infected organism but rather viral shedding that promotes both intravenous or ocularnasal infection. Taken together, the polybasic motif apparently has to be acquired by an insertion mutation to provide furin-susceptibility for the HA (Ohuchi et al., 1991) and, above all, the polybasic HACS appears to be essential for initiating systemic spread.

In H9 strains, the natural acquisition of a polybasic cleavage site appears rather unlikely since naturally occurring HPAIV observed to date exhibit only HA subtypes H5 or H7 (Alexander, 2000; Garten & Klenk, 2008). However, we demonstrate here that an H9 HA with an artificial polybasic cleavage site can result in a highly pathogenic phenotype. This finding emphasizes that a polybasic cleavage-site mutation could result from a unique mutability of the H5 or H7 HA (Garcia et al., 1996; Khatckjian et al., 1989; Pasick et al., 2005; Perdue et al., 1996, 1997; Suarez et al., 2004). Overall, the inability of circulating H9N2 or other non-H5/H7 strains to acquire a polybasic HACS or of HPAIV origin were handled under BSL3 + conditions.

Plaque assay and growth curves. Plaque assays were performed on MDCK and MDCK-H cells either in the presence of 2 μg ml⁻¹ N-tosyl-L-phenylalanine chloromethyl ketone (TPCK)-treated trypsin (Sigma) or in the absence of any exogenous protease. The volume of the inoculum was 400 μl. Growth curves were performed in duplicate on MDCK-H cells in the presence (2 μg ml⁻¹) or absence of TPCK-treated trypsin with an m.o.i. of 10⁻¹. Virus titre in the supernatant was determined by plaque assay on MDCK cells in the presence of 2 μg ml⁻¹ TPCK-treated trypsin at 0, 8, 24, 48, 72 and 96 h p.i.

Western blots. MDCK-H cells were infected at an m.o.i. of 0.1 in the presence of 2 μg ml⁻¹ TPCK-treated trypsin or without any exogenous protease. After 24 h cell lysates were obtained. Proteins were separated by SDS-PAGE on 10% polyacrylamide gels and electrotransferred to nitrocellulose membranes. For the detection of HA, in-house polyclonal rabbit anti-H5 (Pavlova et al., 2009) and polyclonal rabbit anti-H9 sera were used. For secondary antibody, we used a goat-anti-rabbit antibody (BioVision) conjugated with HRP (1: 10 000 for 1 h at room temperature), followed by detection by chemiluminescence (Supersignal West Pico chemiluminescent sub-strate kit; Pierce).

Animal experiments. The animal experiments were evaluated by the responsible ethics committee of the State Office for Agriculture, Food Safety and Fishery in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (LAGALF M-V) and gained governmental approval (registration number LALLF M-V/TSD/7221.3-1.1-018/07).

Two-week-old white Leghorn specific-pathogen-free chickens (Lohmann, Cuxhaven, Germany) (16 animals per group) were infected oculonasally, observed daily for clinical symptoms and scored: 0, healthy, 1, ill, 2, severely ill and 3, dead, according to the OIE guidelines (Alexander, 2008). Moribund birds which were too sick to eat or drink were euthanised and scored as dead on the next observation day according to OIE guidelines (Alexander, 2008). On day 2 p.i., oral and cloacal swabs (16 animals per group) were taken; the virus titres were determined by TCID50 assay (Kalthoff et al., 2008) on MDCK cells in the presence of 2 μg ml⁻¹ TPCK-treated trypsin (starting dilution 10⁻¹). After 3 and 6 days p.i., respectively, three chickens from each group were sacrificed for histopathological examination. The IVPI was determined as described by Alexander, (2008).

Histopathology. From sacrificed birds, tissue samples of brain, trachea, lung, heart, kidney, spleen, pancreas, caecum and duodenum were taken on days 3 and 6 p.i. (three animals per group). Tissues were formalin-fixed and processed for paraffin-wax embedding according to standardized procedures. Immunohistochemical detection of influenza virus A NP was performed as described (Kalthoff et al., 2008).

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