Chlamydia trachomatis infection of human fallopian tube organ cultures

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The pathogenic events that precede Chlamydia trachomatis salpingitis in the human fallopian tube have not been fully described. We used a model of human fallopian tubes in organ culture (HFTOC) infected with strain E/UW-5/CX of C. trachomatis to study these events. The model supported sustained C. trachomatis infection as demonstrated by recovery of viable C. trachomatis from medium and tissue over 5-7 d. However, the level of infectivity was low. Maximal infection occurred at 72 h after initial inoculation. In contrast to gonococcal infection of the HFTOC, C. trachomatis did not damage overall ciliary function of HFTOC. However, a local direct cytotoxic effect characterized by loss of microvilli and disruption of cell junctions was noted when multiple chlamydial elementary bodies attached to mucosal cells. Beginning at 24 h, and continuing throughout the course of C. trachomatis infection of HFTOC, ruptured epithelial cells releasing elementary bodies were noted. Chlamydial inclusions were seen in the mucosa by 72 h in ~6% of both ciliated and nonciliated epithelial cells. Mucosal inclusions contained all forms of the C. trachomatis developmental cycle. These data suggest that factors present in the human fallopian tube may limit susceptibility to chlamydial infection but support the use of the HFTOC model in the study of the pathogenesis of C. trachomatis salpingitis.

Introduction

Chlamydia trachomatis has emerged as the most common sexually transmitted bacterial pathogen in developed countries (Washington et al., 1987; Aral & Holmes, 1990). In women, genital infection due to C. trachomatis may be asymptomatic or result in mucocervicitis, acute urethritis or salpingitis. Salpingitis is potentially the most devastating of these infections. Damage to the fallopian tube caused by C. trachomatis may lead to recurrent salpingitis, tubo-ovarian abscess, ectopic pregnancy and infertility. A knowledge of the steps by which C. trachomatis causes salpingitis is critical to the development of strategies for controlling and preventing this infection.

Although the human fallopian tube organ culture (HFTOC) model has been used to define the pathogenesis of gonococcal salpingitis (McGee et al., 1976; Ward et al., 1974), only one study has used this model to study C. trachomatis pathogenesis. Hutchinson et al. (1979) used fallopian tube organ cultures of both bovine and human origin to study infection by C. trachomatis. They noted that HFTOCs in vitro could be infected with recovery of C. trachomatis during the third to fifth day of infection. However, chlamydial inclusions could not be detected in the HFTOCs and the microscopic events occurring during the infection were not determined. In the current study we used light and electron microscopy as well as quantitative culturing to define events in the infection of HFTOCs with C. trachomatis.

Methods

Micro-organisms and culture techniques. The C. trachomatis strain used in this study was serotype E/UW-5/CX. The E strain of C. trachomatis is well characterized (Kuo et al., 1972) and has previously been shown to be capable of infecting explants from primate and human fallopian tubes of endometrial and ectocervical epithelium in...
culture (Patton, 1985; Patton et al., 1983, 1987a, b). To maintain stocks of this strain, it was passaged in HeLa 229 cells for nine passages, concentrated to $1 \times 10^8$ inclusion-forming units (IFU) ml$^{-1}$ and stored at $-80$ °C in HEPES-sucrose-calcium (HSC) buffer (Bird & Forrester, 1981).

The monolayer of HeLa cells was infected by pretreating these cells with DEAE-Dextran (30 pg ml$^{-1}$ in HSC buffer) for 20 min at room temperature. The monolayer was then rinsed with Hanks’ balanced salt solution and incubated with 1-2 ml of the serotype E inoculum (10$^8$ IFU). The inoculum was prepared by rapidly thawing the chlamydiae and briefly sonicating them to eliminate clumping of elementary bodies (EBs). The flasks containing the infected monolayers were then incubated at 37 °C for 1 h with the flasks being rotated every 5-10 min. The inoculum was then removed, and the monolayer was rinsed with Hanks’ balanced salt solution and was covered with 20-40 ml of medium containing cycloheximide and glucose. The flasks were then incubated at 37 °C in 5% CO$_2$ for 1 h with the flasks being rotated for prolonged uterine bleeding or fibroid tumours as well as from nonpregnant, premenopausal women undergoing hysterectomy (Bird et al., 1976). Briefly, fallopian tubes were obtained from women undergoing hysterectomy for previous undiagnosed chlamydia infection. Both culture medium and HFTOC homogenates were cultured to quantify C. trachomatis. The inoculum was prepared by rapidly thawing the original inoculum was 5 $\times$ 10$^6$ IFU ml$^{-1}$. At 24 h post-infection there were 1.3 $\times$ 10$^2$ IFU ml$^{-1}$ in the HFTOC culture medium. More IFU (5-2 $\times$ 10$^5$) were recovered at 48 h, with the maximum number (1.86 $\times$ 10$^6$) recovered at 72 h. Chlamydiae were recovered at 5 d post-infection (3.9 $\times$ 10$^3$) and up to 7 d post-infection. Infection in HFTOC to be examined by TEM were fixed in 0.1 M-phosphate buffer (pH 7.2). After fixation for 1-2 h in 1-5% osmium tetroxide, dehydrated in graded solutions of ethanol and embedded in Spurr resin (Electron Microscopy Scientific). Sections of tissue 1-2 μm thick were stained with 2.5% (w/v) toluidine blue in 1% (w/v) borax for 15 to 30 s; the stained sections were examined by LM. Sections 40-60 nm thick were stained with uranyl acetate and lead citrate before examination in a transmission electron microscope (model 300; Philips Electronics).

Results

Infection of HFTOCs by C. trachomatis

Both culture medium and HFTOC homogenates were cultured to quantify C. trachomatis infection of HFTOC. Because C. trachomatis is an obligate intracellular parasite, medium and tissue assayed after the first 24 h of infection should reflect active intracellular multiplication.

Fig. 1(a) shows the number of C. trachomatis IFU recovered from the medium of infected HFTOC. The original inoculum was 5 $\times$ 10$^6$ IFU ml$^{-1}$. At 24 h post-infection there were 1.3 $\times$ 10$^2$ IFU ml$^{-1}$ in the HFTOC culture medium. More IFU (5-2 $\times$ 10$^5$) were recovered at 48 h, with the maximum number (1.86 $\times$ 10$^6$) recovered at 72 h. Chlamydiae were recovered at 5 d post-infection (3.9 $\times$ 10$^3$) and up to 7 d post-infection. Culture medium from unaffected HFTOC did not yield C. trachomatis, indicating the absence of concomitant natural infection.

Recovery of C. trachomatis from homogenates of HFTOC is shown in Fig. 1(b). Following infection with 5 $\times$ 10$^6$ IFU ml$^{-1}$, the counts of IFU (mg tissue)$^{-1}$ were 1.2 $\times$ 10$^4$ at 24 h, 4.3 $\times$ 10$^4$ at 48 h, 2.6 $\times$ 10$^5$ at 72 h and 2.6 $\times$ 10$^5$ at 5 d post-infection. Infection in HFTOC persisted for at least 5 d.
Fig. 1. Recovery of *C. trachomatis* from (a) the culture medium and (b) homogenates of infected HFTOC. The initial infection contained $5 \times 10^6$ IFU ml$^{-1}$.

**Effect of *C. trachomatis* infection on ciliary activity of HFTOC**

Ciliary activity as monitored by percentage peripheral ciliary activity and ciliary vigour was assessed (McGee *et al.*, 1976) during the course of *C. trachomatis* infection of HFTOC. In three separate experiments no loss of ciliary activity was detected by either criterion when *C. trachomatis*-infected HFTOC were compared with uninfected cultures (data not shown). These data are in sharp contrast to gonococcal infections of HFTOC, which show marked damage to ciliary activity using identical assays (McGee *et al.*, 1976).

**Events in the interactions of *C. trachomatis* and human fallopian tube mucosa as noted by SEM**

Microscopic events during *C. trachomatis* infection of HFTOC were studied with techniques previously used to define gonococcal infection of this model. Fig. 2 shows uninfected HFTOC after 7 d incubation. The mucosal surface was undisturbed, showing numerous ciliated and nonciliated cells. The microvilli of the nonciliated cells were prominent and uniform. The ciliated cells were intact. These characteristics of the mucosa were maintained in uninfected HFTOC through 7-10 d of incubation.

Strikingly different results were observed during *C. trachomatis* infections of HFTOC. Fig. 3 illustrates the cytotoxic effects seen at 4 h following attachment of multiple *C. trachomatis* EBs. Nonciliated cells, with multiple EBs attached, began to lose surface integrity as noted by the lack of microvilli and the disruption of...
cellular junctions. Also noted were residual strands (arrowed in Fig. 3) connecting the infected cell to the rest of the mucosa.

Associated with the initial attachment and infection of HFTOC was the formation of bundles of fused microvilli (not shown) on nonciliated epithelial cells. These bundles of microvilli were not seen in uninfected HFTOC that were processed under identical conditions at the corresponding time period. The role of these aggregated microvilli in C. trachomatis infection of the human fallopian tube is unclear.

Fig. 4 illustrates an HVTOC 72 h after infection. Cavities in the mucosa, presumably left by rupturing of the chlamydial inclusions, were noted. These cavities were first seen at 72 h and were present throughout the remaining course of infection. EBs could be seen in some of the ruptured cells.

Discussion

The sequence of events that occurs during infection of the human fallopian tube with C. trachomatis has been assumed to be similar to the events seen in C. trachomatis infection of animals or tissue culture and in vivo chlamydial conjunctival infection. Tuffrey and co-workers (Tuffrey & Taylor-Robinson, 1981; Tuffrey et al., 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986) developed a mouse model of chlamydial genital tract infection using a variety of human isolates of C. trachomatis. They found that infection was enhanced by progesterone, which is thought to maintain epithelial cells on the uterine surface. The murine model also offers advantages for immunological studies. Their studies implied that T-cell impairment may play a role in the severity of chlamydial infections and concluded that genetic differences in mice altered their resistance to infection as well as their susceptibility to inflammatory changes. Further, different human isolates do not have equal abilities to produce salpingitis in mice, implying a genetic component to the infectivity of these isolates. Intravaginal inoculation of mice with the agent of mouse pneumonitis (MoPn; a C. trachomatis biovar) results in cervical infection, and chlamydial inclusions are found in superficial cervical epithelial cells (Barron et al., 1981). Recently it has been shown that inoculation directly into the ovarian bursa of these mice consistently results in salpingitis (Swenson et al., 1983). Inclusions were readily demonstrated in the oviductal and uterine epithelium. Permanent tubal damage and infertility occurred in the majority of infected mice.

Patton et al. (1983) studied acute C. trachomatis salpingitis in pig-tailed macaque monkeys. In these studies, a single inoculation caused self-limiting tubal inflammation and little residual damage was demon-
Fig. 5. (a) Transmission electron micrograph of a rupturing epithelial cell at 72 h post-infection. Note that all forms (EBs, reticulate bodies and intermediate forms) of the developmental cycle are visible in the cytoplasm. Bar, 2 μm. (b) Higher magnification of the rupturing cell, illustrating the release of the EBs and intermediate forms, and the disruption of the cell membrane. Bar, 1 μm.

Fig. 6. Transmission electron micrograph of an infected ciliated epithelial cell at 72 h post-infection. Various forms of the developmental cycle are present. Bar, 2 μm.
strated on long-term follow-up. In infected subcutaneous fimbrial transplants in cynomolgus and rhesus monkeys, *C. trachomatis* inclusions were detected within fimbrial epithelial cells up to 7 d post-inoculation by both fluorescent-antibody staining and immunoperoxidase techniques using *C. trachomatis*-specific monoclonal antibodies. *C. trachomatis* was recovered from the autografts up to 5 d after infection.

Swanson *et al.* (1975) demonstrated typical chlamydial inclusions in the columnar epithelium of cervical biopsy specimens obtained from patients who were culture positive for *C. trachomatis* and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. Moller *et al.* (1979) studied fallopian tubes removed from two patients with *C. trachomatis* salpingitis. TEM studies failed to reveal inclusions consistent with those produced by *C. trachomatis*. However, immunofluorescence studies showed intracytoplasmic chlamydial inclusions in some of the epithelial cells.

In an effort to further define the interactions between *C. trachomatis* and human fallopian tube mucosa, we performed a detailed microbiological and microscopic study of HFTOC infected with an E serovar of *C. trachomatis*. The data demonstrated that a sustained, albeit low-level, *C. trachomatis* infection occurs in the model. In contrast to gonococcal infection of HFTOC, where lipopolysacharides and peptidoglycan monomers released from rapidly dividing gonococci extensively damage both ciliated and nonciliated epithelial cells (Stephens, 1989), infection of HFTOC with *C. trachomatis* had no overall effect on mucosal architecture or ciliary activity. These data support the results of Hutchinson *et al.* (1979), who found that ciliary activity of fallopian tube mucosa was not diminished by *C. trachomatis* infection. However, studies of human fallopian tubes removed during active chlamydial salpingitis demonstrate marked inflammation, loss of cilia, oedema and extensive disruption of the mucosal surface. Taken together, these data suggest that selectivity of *C. trachomatis* attachment and replication in epithelial cells of HFTOC. The low level of infectivity (~6%) of the epithelial cells may indicate that host factors may limit susceptibility of HFTOC to infection. Maslow *et al.* (1988) found that *C. trachomatis* would attach to approximately 50% of cultured human endometrial gland epithelial cells. The addition of oestrogen increased attachment rates to approximately 80%, while progesterone in combination with oestrogen reduced chlamydial attachment in a dose-dependent fashion. Together these studies suggest a cellular specificity with respect to the attachment and replication of *C. trachomatis* and that these events may be under hormonal influence.

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In this study, we were unable to completely identify the events of entry of *C. trachomatis* into HFTOC mucosal cells or the events leading to formation of inclusions. However, LM of infected HFTOC revealed inclusions which were consistent with those seen in human cervical biopsy material (Swanson *et al.*, 1975). Further, this study is the first to demonstrate by electron microscopy all developmental forms of *C. trachomatis* within an infected human fallopian tube mucosal cell. It is interesting that in some of our TEM studies apparent rupture of the inclusion occurred prior to release of *C. trachomatis* from the epithelial cells.

We believe that HFTOC is a unique and relevant model to study the pathogenesis of *C. trachomatis* salpingitis. Hormonal influence on *C. trachomatis* infectivity, effects of antibiotics, role of local immunocompetent cells, and evaluation of mutants with specific genetic lesions are among some of the studies possible using this model.
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