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Minimally modified phosphodiester antisense oligodeoxyribonucleotide directed against the multidrug resistance gene *mdr1*

Imane Brigui, Taraneh Djavanbakht-Samani, Béatrice Jollès*, Sophie Pigaglio, Alain Laigle

Laboratoire de Physicochimie Biomoléculaire et cellulaire, CNRS (URA 7033) et Université P. et M. Curie, 4 place Jussieu, case 138, 75005 Paris, France

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Abstract

In the perspective of reversing multidrug resistance through antisense strategy while avoiding non-antisense effects of all-phosphorothioate oligonucleotides which non-specifically bind to proteins, a minimally modified antisense phosphodiester oligodeoxyribonucleotide has been designed against *mdr1*, one of the multidrug resistance genes. Its stability in lysates prepared from NIH/3T3 cells transfected with the human *mdr1* gene has already been demonstrated. Confocal microspectrofluorometry using a fluorescence resonance energy transfer technique allowed its stability inside living cells to be proven. Its internalization into the cells was achieved with different delivery agents (addition of a cholesteryl group, Superfect® or an amphotericin B cationic derivative) and has been followed by fluorescence imaging. For each of the delivery systems, Western blotting allowed its antisense efficiency to be compared to that of an all-phosphorothioate antisense oligonucleotide. No antisense efficiency was demonstrated for the minimally modified ODN when internalized with Superfect®. In both other cases, the best extinction of the P-glycoprotein expression has always been achieved with the all-phosphorothioate antisense. While the difference was significant in the case the amphotericin B derivative was used as delivery agent (20% remaining protein expression with the all-phosphorothioate vs. 40% with the minimally modified antisense), it was negligible for the cholesterol conjugates (2% vs. 6%). It is of great interest to prove that an almost all-phosphodiester oligonucleotide can be an efficient antisense against an overexpressed gene. The reduction of non-antisense effects as non-specific binding to proteins are of importance in the case relatively high ODN concentrations are used, which can prove to be necessary in the case of overexpressed genes.
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Keywords: Multidrug resistance; Minimally modified antisense oligonucleotides; Hairpin; Fluorescence imaging; Fluorescence resonance excitation transfer; Western blot

1. Introduction

While effective chemotherapeutic drugs are available, approximately 70% of patients do not respond to them because of innate or acquired MDR [1]. The reversal of this resistance is one of the present challenges in cancer research. This resistance has been correlated to transmembrane "pumps" which trigger drug efflux. The most well characterized of these transmembrane proteins is the P-gp [2–4] encoded by the *mdr1* gene. One cause of MDR is related to overexpression of this gene. Since the use of chemical inhibitors of the P-gp is restricted because of their toxicity, a lot of work has been achieved intending to modulate the *mdr1* gene expression. Several attempts at reversing the MDR phenotype through antisense strategy have been described [5–11]. Most of the antisense ODNs have been designed against the region of the initiation codon of the *mdr1* mRNA. Antisense ODN have to be protected against serum and cellular nucleases. Since antisense activity on *mdr1* very likely occurs through a mechanism involving RNAse H degradation [5], most of the proposed antisenses have an all-phosphorothioate backbone, which is about the single modification with boranophosphates [12] which maintain RNase H activity [5–10]. A mixed-backbone oligonucleotide with five methoxyethoxy groups at both ends and interior residues with standard phosphorothioates has also been described [11]. However, phosphorothioates cause non-antisense effects due to their non-specific binding to proteins [13,14]. At

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33-144277548; fax: +33-144277560.
E-mail address: jolles@lpbc.jussieu.fr (B. Jollès).

Abbreviations: MDR, multidrug resistance; P-gp, P-glycoprotein; ODN, oligodeoxyribonucleotide; AMA, amphotericin B 3-dimethylamino propyl amide; FRET, fluorescence resonance energy transfer.

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high concentrations they can even inhibit RNase H [15]. They lead to reduction of the binding affinity to RNA (0.3–0.5° per phosphorothioate linkage) [16]. Therefore, the concept of minimally modified ODN has been proposed [16]. These ODNs are protected at their 3′-end against 3′-exonucleases which are the main serum enzymes [17] and at their 5′-end or at specific internal positions depending on whether the cells are rich in 5′-exonucleases or endonucleases. In a previous work [18] we determined which modifications should be introduced in a phosphodiester oligonucleotide devised from an efficient all-phosphorothioate anti-*mdr1* ODN [5]. We have shown that the self-forming d(GCGAAGC) hairpin at their 3′-end [19,20] efficiently protects the ODN against serum and cellular 3′-exonucleases. Two phosphorothioate at the 5′-end protect the ODN in lysates prepared from NIH-MDR-G185 cells which are rich in 5′-exonucleases whereas a few internal phosphorothioate linkages at specific locations protect them in lysates of K562 cells rich in endonucleases.

In the present work we will check whether a minimally modified ODN whose stability has been demonstrated in lysates of NIH-MDR-G185 cells still remains resistant to nucleases in living cells and keeps the antisense potential of its all-phosphorothioate model. Since the efficient uptake of ODNs to cells require the use of delivery agents, the impact of three of them on the antisense effectiveness has been assessed. It has been shown that, according to the chemical nature of the ODN and the chosen carrier, an antisense is effective or not [21]. We used as delivery agents a cholesterol conjugated at the 5′-end of the ODN [5], a commercial transfectant (Superfect® from Qiagen) or an Amphotericin B derivative, AMA [22].

In order to get comparable results, the amount of ODN, when expressed in concentration terms, was the same whatever the delivery system or the chemical nature of the ODN.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. ODN

The oligonucleotides listed in Table 1 have been synthesized by Eurogentec. AS-ODN and (*CH*)-AS-ODN are the all-phosphorothioate antisense ODN 5995 complementary to the region of the initiation codon of human *mdr1* mRNA [5]. CH is a cholesterol conjugated at the 5′-end. (*CH*)-S-ODN is the corresponding sense ODN; it carries a cholesteryl group at its 5′-end. ODN1 is a phosphodiester ODN designed from AS-ODN with minimal modifications. It is protected against serum nucleases by the self-forming hairpin d(GCGAAGC) at its 3′-end and against NIH-MDR-G185 enzymes by two phosphorothioate groups at its 5′-end. Since the last 3′-terminal bases cannot any more hybridize with the target mRNA [23], three bases complementary to the mRNA (GAT) are then added at the 5′-end of the ODN in order to restore the duplex stability [18]. (*CH*)-ODN1 carries a cholesteryl group at its 5′-end. (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 is labeled with fluorophores (fluorescein and rhodamine as indicated). (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 is the same except it lacks the protection of the two phosphorothioates at its 5′-end. (*CH*,*F*)-ODN1 carries a cholesteryl group and is labeled with fluorescein at its 5′-end. ODN3 is an antisense control of ODN1: it keeps the protections afforded by the two phosphorothioate groups at its 5′-end and the hairpin in 3′ but its stem part has the sense orientation. All oligonucleotides were solubilized in TE (10 mM Tris, 1 mM EDTA) buffer, pH 7.8, containing 20 mM NaCl in the case of hairpins which were then heated for 20 min at 80° then slowly cooled down in order to favor the hairpin formation [19].

2.2. Cells

NIH/3T3 cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC). NIH-MDR-G185 cells transfected with a plasmid containing the human *mdr1* gene (pSK1 MDR) were a gift from M. Gottesman [24]. They were grown in DMEM medium supplemented with 10% decomplemented fetal bovine serum, 50 U/mL penicillin, 50 μg/mL streptomycin in a 5% CO_2 atmosphere. In order to maintain P-glycoprotein expression, the medium of NIH-MDR-G185 cells was supplemented with 60 ng/mL colchicine. The day before transfection, 3×10^5 cells were seeded per 35 mm dish in order to get an exponential growth phase on the day of transfection.

2.3. ODN delivery

Cholesteryl ODN (1 μM) were incubated with NIH-MDR-G185 cells in DMEM medium without serum in order to minimize cell division and therefore optimize antisense effect.

Superfect® (3 mg/mL) was purchased from Qiagen. It is a dendrimeric structure presenting at pH 7 60 positively charged NH_2 groups on its surface. It was used according to the supplier transfection protocol, i.e. complex formation in a medium without serum and transfection in the presence of serum (700 μL final medium volume). ODN (5 μg) was complexed to 6 μL of Superfect® [25] for 3×10^5 cells seeded the day before transfection. This corresponds to a charge ratio $= \pm 2$. In concentration terms [ODN] 1 μM. After a 4-hr incubation (1) 1 mL DMEM was added in order to reduce the serum concentration and minimize cell division or (2) transfection medium was removed and replaced by DMEM.

AMA was kindly provided by Prof. E. Borowski (Department of Pharmaceutical Technology and Biochemistry, Technical University of Gdansk). Its use as antisense delivery agent has already been demonstrated in our laboratory [22]. It is used in a medium without serum at the best charge ratio $= \pm 0.5$ [22]. The concentration of ODN is 1 μM.

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Table 1

AS-ODN	5′C*C*A*T*C*C*C*G*A*C*C*T*C*G*C*G*C*T*C*C3′
(*CH*)-AS-ODN	5′(*CH*)-C*C*A*T*C*C*C*G*A*C*C*T*C*G*C*G*C*T*C*C3′
(*CH*)-S-ODN	5′(*CH*)-C*C*T*C*G*C*G*C*T*C*C*A*G*C*C*C*T*A*C*C3′
ODN1	5′G*A*TCCATCCCGACCTCGCGAAGC3′
(*CH*)-ODN1	5′(*CH*)-G*A*TCCATCCCGACCTCGCGAAGC3′
(*F*,*R*)-ODN1	5′G*A*TCCATCCCGACCTCGCGAAGC3′ Fluorescein Rhodamine
(*F*,*R*)-ODN2	5′GATCCATCCCGACCTCGCGAAGC3′ Fluorescein Rhodamine
(*CH*,*F*)-ODN1	5′(*CH*)-G*A*TCCATCCCGACCTCGCGAAGC3′ Fluorescein
ODN3	5′C*T*CCAGCCCTACCTAGGCGAAGC3′

(*CH*): cholesteryl group, (GCGAAGC): self-forming hairpin.
* Phosphorothioate linkage.

2.4. Measurement of ODN stability by confocal microspectrofluorometry

After a 4-hr incubation time with (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 or (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 internalized with Superfect® (see ODN delivery), NIH-MDR-G185 were washed with DMEM. FRET measurements inside the cells were recorded with a UV-Vis microspectrofluorometer prototype developed in our laboratory [26]. Like in the case of fluorescent imaging, washing the cells is essential to get rid of the fluorescence of non-incorporated ODNs. Despite confocality, about 10% of the signal recorded inside a cell results from external fluorescence. The excitation was the 488 nm wavelength of an Argon laser. The beam power was reduced to about 0.1 μW by the use of neutral density filters. The integration time of a spectrum was 1 s. A water immersion 63× objective was used.

2.5. Measurements of cellular ODN uptake by fluorescence imaging

After a short incubation time (4–5 hr) or a long incubation time (24 hr) with fluorescently labeled ODN ((*CH*,*F*)-ODN1 or (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 internalized with Superfect® or AMA), NIH-MDR-G185 were washed with DMEM and observed by fluorescence microscopy on a Nikon Optiphot-2 epifluorescence microscope. Images were detected with a cooled CCD camera (Micromax, Princeton Instruments) with a 12-bit detector (RTEA-1317 K, Kodack). Standard fluorescein and rhodamine filter sets have been used. Analysis and display were performed using IP Lab software (Scanalytics).

2.6. Western blotting measurement of P-glycoprotein expression

The day before transfection 3×10^5 NIH-MDR-G185 or NIH/3T3 cells were seeded onto 35 mm dishes and incubated for 24 hr in serum containing medium. The day of transfection NIH-MDR-G185 cells were treated with ODNs as described above and incubated for 48 hr in a medium without serum. Non-treated NIH-MDR-G185 and NIH/3T3 cells were used as references of resistant and sensitive cells. Cells were trypsinized, washed in PBS then resuspended in RIPA lysis buffer (50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl, 0.1% SDS, 1% Nonidet-P40, 0.5% deoxycholate) at the ratio of 100 μL buffer for 2×10^6 cells. After 30 min on ice with some vortexing, the lysates were centrifuged at 10,000 *g* for 10 min at 4° and the resulting supernatants were checked for protein content. Equal amounts of proteins (~20 μg) were mixed with concentrated SDS reducing buffer (final concentrations are 60 mM Tris–HCl, pH 6.8, 2% SDS, 10% glycerol, 100 mM DTT, bromophenol blue). Protein samples were separated on 7.5% SDS–PAGE then transferred onto PVDF membrane (Hybond-P, Amersham Pharmacia Biotech). The membrane was blocked with 5% non-fat dry milk in 0.1% Tween-PBS and treated with 0.5 μg/mL C219 anti-P-glycoprotein antibody (DAKO). Detection was carried out by enhanced chemiluminescence (ECL plus® kit with mouse IgG, HRP linked whole antibody from Amersham Pharmacia Biotech). The P-gp expression has been evaluated after densitometric scanning of the films and analysis with NIH Image software. The error has been evaluated to 5%.

3. Results

3.1. Cellular ODN stability

FRET allows nuclease degradation of ODNs inside the cells to be followed. ODN1 is a phosphodiester ODN designed from an efficient *mdr1* antisense [5]. It is protected by a hairpin at its 3′-end and two phosphorothioates at its 5′-end and its resistance in lysates prepared from NIH-MDR-G185 cells which are rich in 5′-exonucleases has already been demonstrated [18]. (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 is

labeled with fluorescein at its 5′-end (G^1) and with rhodamine at T^{15} inside the sequence. (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 is the same as (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 except it lacks the protection of the two phosphorothioates at its 5′-end. Since the fluorescence spectrum of fluorescein overlaps with the absorbance spectrum of rhodamine and since the distance between the two fluorophores is of the order of the Förster distance (about 50 Å for the fluorescein/rhodamine pair, ca. 15-mer) [27], the excitation of fluorescein induces fluorescence of rhodamine (577 nm) while its own fluorescence (520 nm) decreases: this is the FRET process. For a single ODN, FRET disappears at the first enzymatic cleavage between the two fluorophores. It is then possible to follow ODN degradation in cells by FRET disappearance, i.e. increase of the $I_{520\ nm}/I_{577\ nm}$ ratio [20].

Immediately after washing and along the time up to 25 hr, emission spectra of (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 and (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 were recorded inside the cells (Fig. 1(A)). The chosen delivery agent has been Superfect®. One must consider that the quantum yield of fluorescein is strong function of ionic strength, pH and the polarity of the environment surrounding the probe [28]. Its decrease inside the cell has been correlated to the location of the labeled ODN in an acidic environment as in endosomes [29]. Accordingly, spectra registered in the cytoplasm, the nucleus or vesicles (see next part) are very different. There is a strong quenching of fluorescein in the vesicles and the nucleus. The mean value of the $I_{520\ nm}/I_{577\ nm}$ ratio which is 0.4 in the cytoplasm just after washing of the cells is only 0.2 in the vesicles and the nucleus (not shown).This fluorescein quenching can be correlated to the pH decrease in the endocytosis vesicles and the hydrophobic environment due to DNA compaction in the nucleus. It is why the (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 and (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 degradation inside the cells was followed as the increase of the $I_{520\ nm}/I_{577\ nm}$ ratio recorded in cytoplasm at spots devoid of vesicles (Fig. 1(A)). Because of the dispersion of the results, a great number of spectra were registered for each incubation time. Fig. 1(B) shows in insert the fluorescence spectra of intact and fully digested (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 (after 48 hr in 50% serum at 37° [20]). The determined $t_{1/2}$ were, respectively, 130 hr for (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 which is protected by two phosphorothioate groups at its 5′-end and 21 hr in the case of (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 which lacks this protection. Therefore, the protections afforded by, on one hand, the hairpin against the 3′-exonucleases of serum and, on the other hand, two phosphorothioate residues against the 5′-exonucleases of the NIH-MDR-G185 lysates are still effective in living NIH-MDR-G185 cells. The two phosphorothioate at the 5′-end of (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 increase its protection of about a factor of six. The already high level of nuclease resistance of (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 is assigned to the location of fluorescein at its 5′-end.

3.2. Cellular ODN uptake

The impact of the delivery agents on the distribution of ODNs inside the NIH-MDR-G185 cells has been checked. Uptake of (*CH*,*F*)-ODN1 (the same as ODN1 conjugated to a cholesteryl group and a fluorescein at its 5′-end), and of (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 complexed with Superfect® or AMA has been observed by fluorescence imaging. In the first phase of internalization, i.e. after 5 hr incubation, (*CH*,*F*)-ODN1 is localized in membranes and in cytoplasm with a diffuse fluorescence pattern with perinuclear accumulation (Fig. 2(A1)). After a longer incubation time (24 hr),

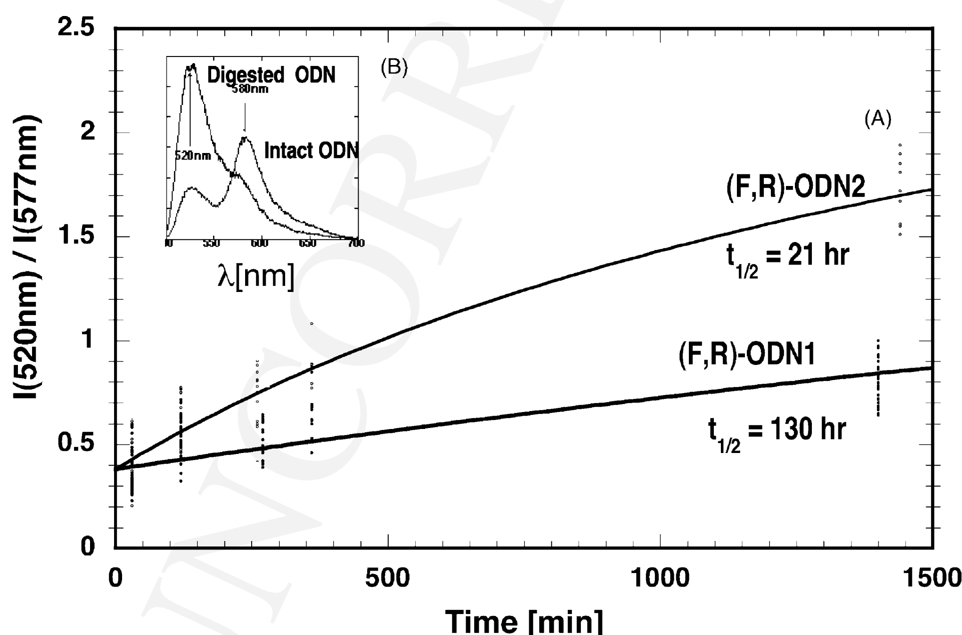

Fig. 1. (A) Kinetics of degradation of (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 and (*F*,*R*)-ODN2 in NIH-MDR-G185 cells. (B) Fluorescence spectra of intact and fully digested (*F*,*R*)-ODN1. $\lambda_{exc} = 488$ nm.

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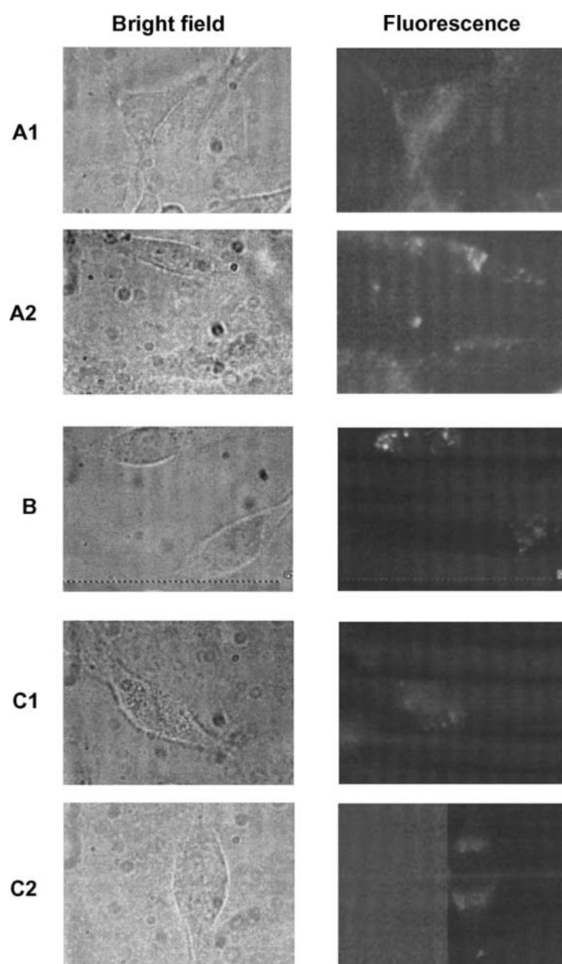

Fig. 2. Fluorescence imaging of (*CH*,*F*)-ODN1 after 5-hr incubation (A1) and 24-hr incubation (A2), (B) (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 internalized with Superfect® after 4-hr incubation; identical distribution was observed after 24-hr incubation, (C) (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 internalized with AMA after 4-hr incubation (C1) and 24-hr incubation (C2).

296 membranes are no longer labeled and fluorescent vesicles
297 are observable besides the diffuse fluorescence of the
298 cytoplasm and the perinuclear fluorescence accumulation
299 (Fig. 2(A2)). Conjugation of ODN with lipophilic substi-
300 tuents as cholesterol enhances their ability to permeate the
301 cell membrane [5]. The presence of fluorescent vesicles
302 suggests that ODNs enter the cells not only by diffusion but
303 also by endocytosis unless sequestration occurs after ODN
304 uptake and these vesicules result from an exocytosis pro-
305 cess.

306 In the case of internalization of (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 through
307 Superfect® complexation, most of the cells have a punc-
308 tuated perinuclear fluorescence beside diffuse cytoplasmic
309 fluorescence (target for the FRET experiments) but some of
310 them demonstrate intranuclear fluorescence. This is
311 observed for both incubation times (4 and 24 hr)
312 (Fig. 2(B)). This is consistent with previous observations
313 [25] according which the intracellular distribution of
314 ODNs vectorized by Superfect® is not time-dependent
315 but function of the cell cycle. The ODNs would be rather
316 localized in endocytosis vesicles during S and G1 phase.
317 Alterations in the nuclear membrane during mitosis would
318 allow ODN penetration into the nucleus.

319 After its vectorization with AMA, (*F*,*R*)-ODN1 led to a
320 diffuse distribution mainly localized in the nucleus with
321 some more intense speckles (Fig. 2(C1)). For a 24-hr
322 incubation time, this fluorescence shifted towards the out-
323 side of cells (Fig. 2(C2)). Since AMA is a derivative of
324 amphotericin B, it is expected to work in a similar way by
325 creating transient membrane pores and favoring ODN
326 uptake into cells [22]. Free ODNs fast diffuse into the
327 nucleus [30]; the fluorescence of this one after a 4-hr
328 incubation is thus not surprising. An exocytosis process
329 could generate the fluorescent speckles and the ODN shift
330 outside the nucleus.

3.3. P-glycoprotein expression 331

332 For each of the delivery systems, the antisense effect of
333 ODN1 on the P-gp expression has been compared to that of
334 the all-phosphorothioate antisense AS-ODN. In that pur-
335 pose, Western blot analysis was carried out after a 48-hr
336 treatment. This time has been shown to be sufficient to
337 readily detect modifications in the level of the protein
338 expression [5].

339 In the case a 5′-conjugated cholesteryl group favors the
340 ODN internalization, the level of P-gp expression of NIH-
341 MDR-G185 cells treated with (*CH*)-ODN1 has been com-
342 pared to that of untreated resistant NIH-MDR-G185 cells
343 (R), untreated sensitive NIH/3T3 cells (S), NIH-MDR-
344 G185 cells treated with the full-phosphorothioate positive
345 (antisense (*CH*)-AS-ODN) and negative (sense (*CH*)-S-
346 ODN) controls (Fig. 3(A)). Sense (*CH*)-S-ODN control did
347 not reduce P-gp expression which was the same as in
348 resistant (R) cells. This expression was not detectable in
349 sensitive (S) cells. It was drastically reduced after treat-
350 ment with the positive control (*CH*)-AS-ODN (only 2% P-
351 gp remaining) and with the minimally modified phospho-
352 diester ODN (*CH*)-ODN1 (6%).

353 Superfect® has been used following two protocols. With
354 protocol (1), the cells were incubated for 48 hr (like for
355 both other internalization systems) with the complex
356 ODN-Superfect®. This led to a strong decrease of the
357 P-gp expression whatever the ODN (results not shown).
358 For instance this expression was only 30% with the control
359 ODN3 (minimally protected with sense orientation). This
360 was attributed to Superfect® cytotoxicity for long incuba-
361 tion times. With protocol (2), Superfect® was eliminated
362 after a 4-hr incubation. In that case, the all-phosphorothio-
363 ate AS-ODN had a strong antisense effect (15% P-gp
364 remaining) whereas the minimally modified ODN1 was
365 without effect (Fig. 3(B)).

366 When AMA allows the ODN internalization, the sense
367 control ODN3 has no effect whereas AS-ODN and ODN1
368 both lead to decrease of the P-gp expression (Fig. 3(C)).
369 The residual amounts are, respectively, 20 and 40%. There

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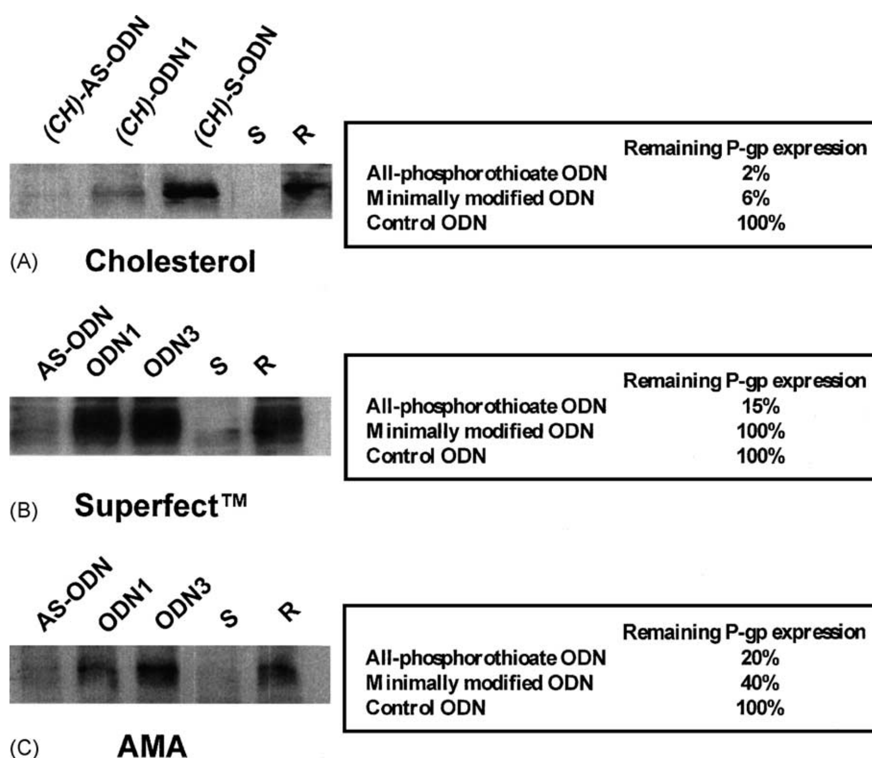

Fig. 3. Detection of total cellular P-gp by Western blotting. Equal amounts of cell lysate protein (20 μg) were run on 7.5% SDS–PAGE gels, transferred on PVDF membranes and detected with c219 monoclonal antibody and enhanced chemiluminescence. Cells had been treated with different ODN internalized with (A) a cholesterol conjugate, (B) Superfect®, (C) AMA. Lane R: lysate from untreated resistant NIH-MDR-G185 cells, lane S: lysate from untreated sensitive NIH/3T3 cells, other lanes: lysate from resistant NIH-MDR-G185 cells treated with the specified ODN.

is antisense effect even if it is smaller than with (*CH*)-AS-ODN and (*CH*)-ODN1.

4. Discussion

Three delivery systems have been checked in this work: a 5′-conjugated cholesteryl group, a commercial dendrimer Superfect® and an amphotericin B derivative, AMA. In order to get comparable results, the amount of ODN, when expressed in concentration terms, was the same whatever the delivery system or the chemical nature of the ODN. One micromolar has been shown to be a good compromise between effective antisense effect and non-specific results [5] in the case of (*CH*)-AS-ODN. Satisfactory antisense effects have already been described with Superfect® [25] or AMA [22] used in these conditions.

The ODN delivery efficiency has been shown by fluorescence imaging. Differences in the ODN distribution inside the cells have been evidenced. For long incubation times, diffuse and punctuated fluorescence are observed in each case. Diffuse fluorescence is mainly located in the cytoplasm for cholesteryl-ODN and in the nucleus when Superfect® or AMA are used. Punctuated fluorescence has been assessed to endocytosis vesicles (Superfect®) or exocytosis vesicles (AMA). Both possibilities have been suggested for (*CH*)-ODNs.

There is not straightforward correlation between ODN distribution and antisense activity. The positive control, i.e. the all-phosphorothioate AS-ODN is effective for all the delivery systems. Most of the P-gp expression is extinct when using a conjugated cholesteryl group (2% remaining expression); only 15 and 20%, respectively, remain with Superfect® or AMA. The antisense activity of AS-ODN had already been demonstrated for its cholesterol conjugate (*CH*)-AS-ODN and to a lesser extent by using Lipofectin as uptake enhancer agent [5] as well as for a peptide-AS-ODN conjugate [31]. In all cases, the negative control ((*CH*)-S-ODN or CH3) is without effect on P-gp. The antisense activity of the minimally modified ODN1 has been demonstrated in this work for only two internalization systems: a 5′-conjugated cholesteryl group and AMA. It is ineffective when internalized with Superfect®. With (*CH*)-ODN1, only 6% P-gp expression remains, to be compared to the 2% measured in the case of the starting antisense (*CH*)-AS-ODN. With AMA, 40% P-gp expression remains after treatment with ODN1, only 20% with AS-ODN. In both cases, the antisense effect is better after treatment with the all-phosphorothioate AS-ODN. While this difference is significant in the case AMA is used, it is negligible for the cholesterol conjugates. Satisfactory antisense effects have already been obtained with ODNs stabilized with a minimum amount of phosphorothioate linkages and internalized with lipocationic uptake enhancers [16] or the

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421 addition of an hydrophobic tail at the 3′-end [32]. However,
422 ODN1 is the less modified phosphodiester antisense ODN
423 since (i) it is protected at its 3′-end by the self-forming
424 hairpin, (ii) it has only two phosphorothioate linkages at its
425 5′-end, which is made acceptable by the fact that the NIH/
426 3T3 cells have a negligible endonuclease activity. The best
427 antisense effect obtained with AS-ODN as compared to
428 ODN1 may result from the shift of three bases on the target
429 *mdr1* mRNA (ODN1 extended on its 5′-side to compensate
430 for the loss of hybridization at the 3′-end of the hairpin, see
431 Section 2). It is well known that the shift of some bases on
432 the mRNA target can modify the antisense efficiency in a
433 negative as well as in a positive way [33].

434 ODN1 is ineffective when internalized with Superfect®.
435 Imaging experiments (Fig. 2) prove it is not the result of
436 lower internalization of ODN, as compared to internaliza-
437 tion with the other delivery systems. This is on no account
438 attributable to fast nuclease degradation of ODN1 in these
439 conditions. Indeed, the stability inside the cells of the
440 minimally modified ODN1 had been controlled by using
441 Superfect® as delivering agent (see cellular ODN stability
442 in Section 3). We find once more that a chosen carrier leads
443 or not to antisense effect, depending on the chemical nature
444 of the ODN [21].

445 Even if it is not effective with all delivering systems, to
446 get an almost all-phosphodiester antisense oligonucleotide
447 efficient against an overexpressed gene as *mdr1* was an
448 important challenge. The enhancement of the binding
449 affinity to RNA of such an ODN and especially the
450 reduction of non-antisense effects as non-specific binding
451 to proteins are of importance in the case relatively high
452 ODN concentrations are used, which can prove to be
453 necessary in the case of overexpressed genes.

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