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CONTENTS Arranged by Subject Categories

- MINIREVIEW
- 25059 **The MutT proteins or "nudix" hydrolases, a family of versatile, widely distributed, "house cleaning" enzymes.** Maurice J. Bessman, David N. Frick, and Suzanne F. O'Handley
- CELL BIOLOGY AND METABOLISM
- 25067 **Communication—Calmodulin binds to and inhibits GTP binding of the Ras-like GTPase Kir/Gem.** Roland Fischer, Yu Wei, John Anagli, and Martin W. Berchtold
- 25107 **Site-directed mutagenesis of nm23-H1. Mutation of proline 96 or serine 120 abrogates its motility inhibitory activity upon transfection into human breast carcinoma cells.** Nicholas J. MacDonald, José M. P. Freije, Mary L. Stracke, Richard E. Manrow, and Patricia S. Steeg
- 25117 **Altered regulation of G₁ cyclins in oxidant-induced growth arrest of lung alveolar epithelial cells. Accumulation of inactive cyclin E-CDK2 complexes.** Sophie Corroyer, Bernard Maitre, Véronique Cazals, and Annick Clement
- 25126 **Identification of histone H2A.X as a growth factor secreted by an androgen-independent subline of mouse mammary carcinoma cells.** Yoshio Watabe, Hiroaki Kuramochi, Yuzo Furuya, Nobuya Inagaki, Susumu Seino, Sadao Kimura, and Jun Shimazaki
- 25131 **Function and expression of flavohemoglobin in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. Evidence for a role in the oxidative stress response.** Xiao-Jian Zhao, Desmond Raitt, Patricia V. Burke, Amy S. Clewell, Kurt E. Kuast, and Robert O. Poyton
- 25145 **Specific phospholipid association with apolipoprotein A-I stimulates cholesterol efflux from human fibroblasts. Studies with reconstituted sonicated lipoproteins.** Yuwei Zhao, Daniel L. Sparks, and Yves L. Marcel
- 25157 **Adducin regulation. Definition of the calmodulin-binding domain and sites of phosphorylation by protein kinases A and C.** Yoichiro Matsuoka, Christine A. Hughes, and Vann Bennett
- 25173 ***Clostridium novyi* α -toxin-catalyzed incorporation of GlcNAc into Rho subfamily proteins.** Jörg Selzer, Fred Hofmann, Gundula Rex, Matthias Wilm, Matthias Mann, Ingo Just, and Klaus Aktories
- 25192 **Phosphopleckstrin inhibits G $\beta\gamma$ -activable platelet phosphatidylinositol-4,5-bisphosphate 3-kinase.** Charles S. Abrams, Jin Zhang, C. Peter Downes, Xiu-wen Tang, Wei Zhao, and Susan E. Rittenhouse
- 25198 **p130^{CAS} forms a signaling complex with the adapter protein CRKL in hematopoietic cells transformed by the BCR/ABL oncogene.** Ravi Salgia, Evan Pisick, Martin Sattler, Jian-Liang Li, Naoki Uemura, Wai-Keung Wong, Stephen A. Burky, Hisamaru Hirai, Lan Bo Chen, and James D. Griffin
- 25204 **A tyrosine kinase signaling pathway accounts for the majority of phosphatidylinositol 3,4,5-trisphosphate formation in chemoattractant-stimulated human neutrophils.** Andrzej Ptaszniak, Eric R. Prossnitz, Dan Yoshikawa, Alan Smrcka, Alexis E. Traynor-Kaplan, and Gary M. Bokoch
- 25208 **Covalent attachment of FAD derivatives to a fusion protein consisting of δ -hydroxy-D-nicotine oxidase and a mitochondrial presequence. Folding, enzyme activity, and import of the modified protein into yeast mitochondria.** Michaela Stoltz, Joachim Rassow, Andreas F. Bückmann, and Roderich Brandsch
- 25227 **Overexpression of a constitutively active form of phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase is sufficient to promote Glut 4 translocation in adipocytes.** Jean-François Tanti, Thierry Grémeaux, Sophie Grillo, Véronique Calleja, Anke Klippel, Lewis T. Williams, Emmanuel Van Obberghen, and Yannick Le Marchand-Brustel
- 25240 **A predictive scale for evaluating cyclin-dependent kinase substrates. A comparison of p34^{cdc2} and p33^{cdk2}.** Jennifer K. Holmes and Mark J. Solomon
- 25277 **Secretagogues increase the expression of surfactant protein A receptors on lung type II cells.** Qiping Chen, Sandra R. Bates, and Aron B. Fisher
- 25308 **Interaction of phosphorylated Fc ϵ RI γ immunoglobulin receptor tyrosine activation motif-based peptides with dual and single SH2 domains of p72^{src}. Assessment of binding parameters and real time binding kinetics.** Ting Chen, Barbara Repetto, Richard Chizzonite, Christine Pullar, Charles Burghardt, Elizabeth Dharm, Zhicheng Zhao, Robert Carroll, Perla Nunes, Mitali Basu, Waleed Danho, Mike Visnick, Jarema Kochan, David Waugh, and Alasdair M. Gilfillan
- 25327 **Regulation of *obese* (*ob*) mRNA and plasma leptin levels in rhesus monkeys. Effects of insulin, body weight, and non-insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus.** Kikuko Hotta, Thomas A. Gustafson, Heidi K. Ortmeyer, Noni L. Bodkin, Margery A. Nicolson, and Barbara C. Hansen
- 25369 **The antibiotic bicyclomycin affects the secondary RNA binding site of *Escherichia coli* transcription termination factor Rho.** Attila Magyar, Xiangdong Zhang, Harold Kohn, and William R. Widger
- 25400 **Interleukin-8 (IL-8), melanoma growth-stimulatory activity, and neutrophil-activating peptide selectively mediate priming of the neutrophil NADPH oxidase through the type A or type B IL-8 receptor.** Simon P. Green, Anan Chuntharapai, and John T. Curnutte
- 25406 **Modulation of GDP release from transducin by the conserved Glu¹³⁴, Arg¹³⁵ sequence in rhodopsin.** Shreeta Acharya and Sadashiva S. Karnik
- 25430 **The regulated secretion and vectorial targeting of neurotrophins in neuroendocrine and epithelial cells.** John V. Heymach, Jr., Alex Krüttgen, Ueli Suter, and Eric M. Shooter
- 25446 **Cytosolic and membrane-associated proteins involved in the recruitment of AP-1 adaptors onto the trans-Golgi network.** Matthew N. J. Seaman, Penelope J. Sowerby, and Margaret S. Robinson
- 25452 **Identification of a novel guanine nucleotide exchange factor for the Rho GTPase.** Matthew J. Hart, Sanju Sharma, Nadia elMasry, Rong-Guo Qiu, Peter McCabe, Paul Polakis, and Gideon Bollag
- 25479 **Double-stranded RNA-dependent protein kinase mediates c-Myc suppression induced by type I interferons.** Tal Raveh, Ara G. Hovanessian, Eliane F. Meurs, Nahum Sonenberg, and Adi Kimchi
- 25492 **Hypoxia-inducible protein binding to vascular endothelial growth factor mRNA and its modulation by the von Hippel-Lindau protein.** Andrew P. Levy, Nina S. Levy, and Mark A. Goldberg
- 25506 **Formation of a ligand-binding site for the acetylcholine receptor *in vitro*.** Svetlana S. Shtrom and Zach W. Hall

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- 25533 **Interactions between Src homology (SH) 2/SH3 adapter proteins and the guanylnucleotide exchange factor SOS are differentially regulated by insulin and epidermal growth factor.** *Shuichi Okada and Jeffrey E. Pessin*
- 25569 **Activation of protein-tyrosine phosphatase SH-PTP2 by a tyrosine-based activation motif of a novel brain molecule.** *Hiroshi Ohnishi, Misae Kubota, Atsuko Ohtake, Kazuki Sato, and Shin-ichiro Sano*
- 25598 **$\alpha 7$ integrin mediates cell adhesion and migration on specific laminin isoforms.** *Chung-Chen Yao, Barry L. Ziober, Rachel M. Squillace, and Randall H. Kramer*
- 25630 **Degradation of 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl-CoA reductase in endoplasmic reticulum membranes is accelerated as a result of increased susceptibility to proteolysis.** *Todd P. McGee, Helen H. Cheng, Hidetoshi Kumagai, Satoshi Omura, and Robert D. Simoni*
- 25677 **Phosphorylation of extracellular domains of T-lymphocyte surface proteins. Constitutive serine and threonine phosphorylation of the T cell antigen receptor ectodomains.** *Sergey G. Apasov, Patrick T. Smith, Marie T. Jelonek, David H. Margulies, and Michail V. Sitkovsky*
- 25684 **Cell-surface cytokeratin 8 is the major plasminogen receptor on breast cancer cells and is required for the accelerated activation of cell-associated plasminogen by tissue-type plasminogen activator.** *Todd A. Hembrough, Li Li, and Steven L. Gonias*
- 25692 **The role of phosphatidylcholine biosynthesis in the regulation of the *INO1* gene of yeast.** *Peter Griac, Marci J. Swede, and Susan A. Henry*

ENZYMOLGY

- 25071 **Phospholipase C $\beta 2$ association with phospholipid interfaces assessed by fluorescence resonance energy transfer. G protein $\beta \gamma$ subunit-mediated translocation is not required for enzyme activation.** *Valerie Romoser, Rebecca Ball, and Alan V. Smrcka*
- 25213 **Inhibition of phospholipase D by a protein factor from bovine brain cytosol. Partial purification and characterization of the inhibition mechanism.** *Jae Ho Kim, Yoon Jung Suh, Tae-hoon G. Lee, Yong Kim, Sun Sik Bae, Myung Jong Kim, J. David Lambeth, Pann-Ghill Suh, and Sung Ho Ryu*
- 25316 **Phosphatidylinositol 4,5-bisphosphate binding to the pleckstrin homology domain of phospholipase C- $\delta 1$ enhances enzyme activity.** *Jon W. Lomasney, Hwei-Fang Cheng, Li-Ping Wang, Y.-S. Kuan, S.-M. Liu, Stephen-W. Fesik, and Klim King*
- 25332 **Ca²⁺ binding to the first epidermal growth factor-like domain of human blood coagulation factor IX promotes enzyme activity and factor VIII light chain binding.** *Peter J. Lenting, Olivier D. Christophe, Hans ter Maat, D. Jasper G. Rees, and Koen Mertens*
- 25611 **Allosteric activation of L-lactate dehydrogenase analyzed by hybrid enzymes with effector-sensitive and -insensitive subunits.** *Shinya Fushinobu, Kenji Kamata, So Iwata, Hiroshi Sakai, Takahisa Ohta, and Hiroshi Matsuzawa*
- 25699 **The calmodulin-dependent phosphodiesterase gene *PDE1C* encodes several functionally different splice variants in a tissue-specific manner.** *Chen Yan, Allan Z. Zhao, J. Kelley Bentley, and Joseph A. Beavo*

MEMBRANES AND BIOENERGETICS

- 25079 **Selectivity of the renal collecting duct water channel aquaporin-3.** *Miriam Echevarria, Erich E. Windhager, and Gustavo Frindt*
- 25139 **Transport mechanism of the cloned potato H⁺/sucrose cotransporter StSUT1.** *Kathryn J. Boorer, Donald D. F. Loo, Wolf B. Frommer, and Ernest M. Wright*

- 25167 **The ATP binding cassette transporters Pdr5 and Sng2 of *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* can mediate transport of steroids in vivo.** *Yannick Mahé, Yves Lemoine, and Karl Kuchler*
- 25184 **Function of *Xenopus* cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) Cl⁻ channels and use of human-*Xenopus* chimeras to investigate the pore properties of CFTR.** *Margaret P. Price, Hiroshi Ishihara, David N. Sheppard, and Michael J. Welsh*
- 25247 **Interaction of ATP binding sites in the Arsa ATPase, the catalytic subunit of the Ars pump.** *Jiaxin Li, Shusen Liu, and Barry P. Rosen*
- 25338 **Mechanisms for the transport of α, ω -dicarboxylates through the mitochondrial inner membrane.** *Guoying Liu, Bryan Hinch, and Andrew D. Beavis*
- 25438 **Probing conserved regions of the cytoplasmic LOOP1 segment linking transmembrane segments 2 and 3 of the *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* plasma membrane H⁺-ATPase.** *Genfu Wang, Markus J. Tamás, Michael J. Hall, Amparo Pascual-Ahuir, and David S. Perlin*
- 25582 **Membrane topology of the sodium ion-dependent citrate carrier of *Klebsiella pneumoniae*. Evidence for a new structural class of secondary transporters.** *Marleen van Geest and Juke S. Lolkema*
- 25590 **Determination of the transmembrane topology of yeast Sec61p, an essential component of the endoplasmic reticulum translocation complex.** *Barrie M. Wilkinson, Angela J. Critchley, and Colin J. Stirling*
- 25604 **Mechanism responsible for oligomycin-induced occlusion of Na⁺ within Na/K-ATPase.** *Teruyo Arato-Oshima, Hideo Matsui, Akira Wakizaka, and Haruo Homareda*

NUCLEIC ACIDS, PROTEIN SYNTHESIS, AND MOLECULAR GENETICS

- 25089 **Recognition of DNA adducts by human nucleotide excision repair. Evidence for a thermodynamic probing mechanism.** *Daniela Gunz, Martin T. Hess, and Hanspeter Naegeli*
- 25178 **Molecular design of inhibitors of *in vitro* oriC DNA replication based on the potential to block the ATP binding of DnaA protein.** *Tohru Mizushima, Shigeki Sasaki, Hiroko Ohishi, Masakatsu Kobayashi, Tsutomu Katayama, Takeyoshi Miki, Minoru Maeda, and Kazuhisa Sekimizu*
- 25233 **The chick $\alpha 2(I)$ collagen gene contains two functional promoters, and its expression in chondrocytes is regulated at both transcriptional and post-transcriptional levels.** *Kim M. Pallante, Zeling Niu, Yufeng Zhao, Arthur J. Cohen, Hyun-Duck Nah, and Sherrill L. Adams*
- 25253 **The interferon (IFN)-stimulated gene *Sp100* promoter contains an IFN- γ activation site and an imperfect IFN-stimulated response element which mediate type I IFN inducibility.** *Thilo Grötzinger, Kirsten Jensen, and Hans Will*
- 25269 **Characterization of the human cytochrome P4502D6 promoter. A potential role for antagonistic interactions between members of the nuclear receptor family.** *William Cairns, Christopher A. D. Smith, Aileen W. McLaren, and C. Roland Wolf*
- 25292 **Two distinct promoters drive transcription of the human D_{1A} dopamine receptor gene.** *Sang-Hyeon Lee, Mari T. Minowa, and M. Maral Mouradian*
- 25300 **Molecular characterization of a novel human endothelin receptor splice variant.** *Nabil A. Elshourbagy, John E. Adamou, Alison W. Gagnon, Hsiao-Ling Wu, Mark Pullen, and Ponnal Nambi*
- 25345 **The related molecular chaperones calnexin and calreticulin differentially associate with nascent T cell antigen receptor proteins within the endoplasmic reticulum.** *Jeroen E. M. Van Leeuwen and Kelly P. Kearse*

- 25350 **The v-Ki-Ras oncogene alters cAMP nuclear signaling by regulating the location and the expression of cAMP-dependent protein kinase II β .** A. Feliciello, P. Giuliano, A. Porcellini, C. Garbi, S. Obici, E. Mele, E. Angotti, D. Grieco, G. Amabile, S. Cassano, Y. Li, Anna M. Musti, Charles S. Rubin, Max E. Gottesman, and Enrico V. Avvedimento
- 25360 **A partially functional DNA helicase II mutant defective in forming stable binary complexes with ATP and DNA. A role for helicase motif III.** Robert M. Brosh, Jr. and Steven W. Matson
- 25375 **Inducible cAMP early repressor can modulate tyrosine hydroxylase gene expression after stimulation of cAMP synthesis.** Cristina Tinti, Bruno Conti, Joseph F. Cubells, Kwang-Soo Kim, Harriet Baker, and Tong H. Joh
- 25423 **Identification of the *cpdA* gene encoding cyclic 3',5'-adenosine monophosphate phosphodiesterase in *Escherichia coli*.** Ryu Imamura, Kunitoshi Yamanaka, Teru Ogura, Sota Hiraga, Nobuyuki Fujita, Akira Ishihama, and Hironori Niki
- 25459 **Identification of functional elements of the chicken ϵ -globin promoter involved in stage-specific interaction with the β/ϵ enhancer.** Mark M. Mason, Joseph A. Grasso, Oksana Gavrilova, and Marc Reitman
- 25485 **Characterization of human B creatine kinase gene regulation in the heart *in vitro* and *in vivo*.** Michael E. Ritchie
- 25498 **Structure and characterization of the human tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinases-2 gene.** Khalil Hammani, Andrew Blakis, Delmore Morsette, Anne M. Bowcock, Christoph Schmutte, Patrick Henriot, and Yves A. DeClerck
- 25515 **Molecular cloning and characterization of a novel mouse macrophage gene that encodes a nuclear protein comprising polyglutamine repeats and interspersing histidines.** George W. Cox, Lynn S. Taylor, Jonathan D. Willis, Giovanni Melillo, Robert L. White III, Stephen K. Anderson, and Jih-Jing Lin
- 25524 **Identification of a novel retinoic acid response element in the promoter region of the retinol-binding protein gene.** Luigi Panariello, Loredana Quadro, Sergio Trematerra, and Vittorio Colantuoni
- 25539 **Evidence that a specific interaction between an 18-base *cis*-element in the 5'-untranslated region of human folate receptor- α mRNA and a 46-kDa cytosolic *trans*-factor is critical for translation.** Xin-Lai Sun and Asok C. Antony
- 25548 **Cloning and developmental expression of a membrane-type matrix metalloproteinase from chicken.** Maozhou Yang, Kimiko Hayashi, Masando Hayashi, Joanne T. Fujii, and Markku Kurkinen
- 25555 **Interleukin-4-induced STAT6 recognizes and activates a target site in the promoter of the interleukin-4 receptor gene.** Helen Kotanides and Nancy C. Reich
- 25562 **Characterization of Elongin C functional domains required for interaction with Elongin B and activation of Elongin A.** Yuichiro Takagi, Ronald C. Conaway, and Joan Weliky Conaway
- 25617 **Redox regulation of GA-binding protein- α DNA binding activity.** Mark E. Martin, Yurii Chinenov, Mi Yu, Tonya K. Schmidt, and Xiu-Ying Yang
- 25624 **Different inducibility of expression of the two xylanase genes *xyn1* and *xyn2* in *Trichoderma reesei*.** Susanne Zeilinger, Robert L. Mach, Martin Schindler, Petra Herzog, and Christian P. Kubicek
- 25639 **Enhanced tumorigenic behavior of glioblastoma cells expressing a truncated epidermal growth factor receptor is mediated through the Ras-Shc-Grb2 pathway.** Sally A. Prigent, Motoo Nagane, Hong Lin, Ivana Hugar, Gerry R. Boss, James R. Feramisco, Webster K. Cavenee, and H.-J. Su Huang
- 25657 **Specific mutations near the amino terminus of double-stranded RNA-dependent protein kinase (PKR) differentially affect its double-stranded RNA binding and dimerization properties.** Rekha C. Patel, Paul Stanton, and Ganes C. Sen
- 25671 **Factor VIII C2 domain missense mutations exhibit defective trafficking of biologically functional proteins.** Steven W. Pipe and Randal J. Kaufman
- 25715 **Parathyroid hormone induces *c-fos* promoter activity in osteoblastic cells through phosphorylated cAMP response element (CRE)-binding protein binding to the major CRE.** A. Terrece Pearman, Wan-Yin Chou, Kimberly D. Bergman, Malini R. Pulumati, and Nicola C. Partridge

PROTEIN CHEMISTRY AND STRUCTURE

- 25063 **Communication—Nucleotides reveal polynucleotide phosphorylase activity from conventionally purified GroEL.** Jesse Ybarra and Paul M. Horowitz
- 25083 **Heterologous expression of three plant serpins with distinct inhibitory specificities.** Søren W. Dahl, Søren K. Rasmussen, and Jørn Hejgaard
- 25099 **A novel activating anti- $\beta 1$ integrin monoclonal antibody binds to the cysteine-rich repeats in the $\beta 1$ chain.** Randall J. Faull, Jian Wang, David I. Leavesley, Wilma Puzon, Graeme R. Russ, Dietmar Vestweber, and Yoshikazu Takada
- 25152 **A recombinant sickle hemoglobin triple mutant with independent inhibitory effects on polymerization.** Juha-Pekka Himanen, Urooj A. Mirza, Brian T. Chait, Robert M. Bookchin, and James M. Manning
- 25220 **Mutations at domain II, loop 3, of *Bacillus thuringiensis* CryIAa and CryIAb δ -endotoxins suggest loop 3 is involved in initial binding to lepidopteran midguts.** Francis Rajamohan, Syed-Rehan A. Hussain, Jeffrey A. Cottrill, Fred Gould, and Donald H. Dean
- 25261 **Modulation of structure and antibacterial and hemolytic activity by ring size in cyclic gramicidin S analogs.** Leslie H. Kondejewski, Susan W. Farmer, David S. Wishart, Cyril M. Kay, Robert E. W. Hancock, and Robert S. Hodges

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- 25284 **Identification of a transferable sorting domain for the regulated pathway in the prohormone convertase PC2.** John W. M. Creemers, Elena F. Usac, Nicholas A. Bright, Jan-Willem Van de Loo, Erik Jansen, Wim J. M. Van de Ven, and John C. Hutton
- 25382 **Subunit structure of rod cGMP-phosphodiesterase.** Nikolai O. Artemyev, Rajendran Surendran, James C. Lee, and Heidi E. Hamm
- 25389 **A novel acidic allergen, Hev b 5, in latex. Purification, cloning and characterization.** Akira Akasawa, Li-Shan Hsieh, Brian M. Martin, Teresa Liu, and Yuan Lin
- 25394 **Identification, cloning, and sequence of a major allergen (Hev b 5) from natural rubber latex (*Hevea brasiliensis*).** Jay E. Slater, Thomas Vedvick, Ann Arthur-Smith, Diane E. Trybul, and Roy G. O. Kekwick
- 25412 **Defining the arachidonic acid binding site of human 15-lipoxygenase. Molecular modeling and mutagenesis.** Qing-Fen Gan, Michelle F. Browner, David L. Sloane, and Elliott Sigal
- 25419 **High resolution crystal structures of the deoxy, oxy, and aquomet forms of cobalt myoglobin.** Eric Allen Brucker, John S. Olson, George N. Phillips, Jr., Yi Dou, and Masao Ikeda-Saito
- 25468 **Regulation of mutant p53 temperature-sensitive DNA binding.** Philip Friedlander, Yann Legros, Thierry Soussi, and Carol Prives
- 25575 **Stonustoxin is a novel lethal factor from stonefish (*Synanceja horrida*) venom. cDNA cloning and characterization.** Farid John Ghadessy, Desong Chen, R. Manjunatha Kini, Maxey C. M. Chung, Kandiah Jeyaseelan, Hoon Eng Khoo, and Raymond Yuen
- 25646 **Identification of Itk/Tsk Src homology 3 domain ligands.** Stephen C. Bunnell, Pamela A. Henry, Rikki Kolluri, Tomas Kirchhausen, Richard J. Rickles, and Leslie J. Berg
- 25664 **Purification and characterization of a novel restricted antigen expressed by normal and transformed human colonic epithelium.** B. Catimel, G. Ritter, S. Welt, L. J. Old, L. Cohen, M. A. Nerrie, S. J. White, J. K. Heath, B. Demediuk, T. Domagala, F. T. Lee, A. M. Scott, G. F. Tu, H. Ji, R. L. Moritz, R. J. Simpson, A. W. Burgess, and E. C. Nice
- 25707 **Mutagenesis analysis of functionally important domains within the C-terminal end of smooth muscle caldesmon.** Ze Wang and Samuel Chacko

ADDITIONS AND CORRECTIONS

- 25722 **Direct or C5a-induced activation of heterotrimeric G₁₂ proteins in human neutrophils is associated with interaction between formyl peptide receptors and the cytoskeleton.** Vol. 271 (1996) 15267-15271. Eva Särndahl, Gary M. Bokoch, François Boulay, Olle Stendahl, and Tommy Andersson

AUTHOR INDEX

- Abrams, Charles S., 25192
 Acharya, Shreeta, 25406
 Adamou, John E., 25300
 Adams, Sherrill L., 25233
 Akasawa, Akira, 25389
 Aktories, Klaus, 25173
 Amabile, G., 25350
 Anagli, John, 25067
 Anderson, Stephen K., 25515
 Andersson, Tommy, 25722
 Angotti, E., 25350
 Antony, Asook C., 25539
 Apasov, Sergey G., 25677
 Arato-Oshima, Teruyo, 25604
 Artemyev, Nikolai O., 25382
 Arthur-Smith, Ann, 25394
 Avvedimento, Enrico V., 25350
- Bae, Sun Sik, 25213
 Baker, Harriet, 25375
 Ball, Rebecca, 25071
 Basu, Mitali, 25308
 Bates, Sandra R., 25277
 Beavis, Andrew D., 25338
 Beavo, Joseph A., 25699
 Bennett, Vann, 25157
 Bentley, J. Kelley, 25699
 Berchtold, Martin W., 25067
 Berg, Leslie J., 25646
 Bergman, Kimberly D., 25715
 Bessman, Maurice J., 25059
 Blakias, Andrew, 25498
 Bodkin, Noni L., 25327
 Bokoch, Gary M., 25204, 25722
 Bollag, Gideon, 25452
 Bookchin, Robert M., 25152
 Boorer, Kathryn J., 25139
 Boss, Gerry R., 25639
 Boulay, François, 25722
 Bowcock, Anne M., 25498
 Brandsch, Roderich, 25208
 Bright, Nicholas A., 25284
 Brosh, Robert M., Jr., 25360
 Browner, Michelle F., 25412
 Brucker, Eric Allen, 25419
 Bückmann, Andreas F., 25208
 Bunnell, Stephen C., 25646
 Burgess, A. W., 25664
 Burghardt, Charles, 25308
 Burke, Patricia V., 25131
- Burky, Stephen A., 25198
- Cairns, William, 25269
 Calleja, Véronique, 25227
 Carroll, Robert, 25308
 Cassano, S., 25350
 Catimel, B., 25664
 Cavenee, Webster K., 25639
 Cazals, Véronique, 25117
 Chacko, Samuel, 25707
 Chait, Brian T., 25152
 Chen, Desong, 25575
 Chen, Lan Bo, 25198
 Chen, Qiping, 25277
 Chen, Ting, 25308
 Cheng, Helen H., 25630
 Cheng, Hwei-Fang, 25316
 Chinenov, Yuri, 25617
 Chizzonite, Richard, 25308
 Chou, Wan-Yin, 25715
 Christophe, Olivier D., 25332
 Chung, Maxey C. M., 25575
 Chuntharapai, Anan, 25400
 Clement, Annick, 25117
 Clewell, Amy S., 25131
 Cohen, Arthur J., 25233
 Cohen, L., 25664
 Colantuoni, Vittorio, 25524
 Conaway, Joan Weliky, 25562
 Conaway, Ronald C., 25562
 Conti, Bruno, 25375
 Corroyer, Sophie, 25117
 Cottrill, Jeffrey A., 25220
 Cox, George W., 25515
 Creemers, John W. M., 25284
 Critchley, Angela J., 25590
 Cubells, Joseph F., 25375
 Curnutte, John T., 25400
- Dahl, Søren W., 25083
 Danho, Waleed, 25308
 Dean, Donald H., 25220
 DeClerck, Yves A., 25498
 Demediuk, B., 25664
 Dharm, Elizabeth, 25308
 Domagala, T., 25664
 Dou, Yi, 25419
 Downes, C. Peter, 25192
 Echevarria, Miriam, 25079
- elMasry, Nadia, 25452
 Elshourbagy, Nabil A., 25300
- Farmer, Susan W., 25261
 Faull, Randall J., 25099
 Feliciello, A., 25350
 Feramisco, James R., 25639
 Fesik, Stephen W., 25316
 Fischer, Roland, 25067
 Fisher, Aron B., 25277
 Freije, José M. P., 25107
 Frick, David N., 25059
 Friedlander, Philip, 25468
 Frindt, Gustavo, 25079
 Frommer, Wolf B., 25139
 Fujii, Joanne T., 25548
 Fujita, Nobuyuki, 25423
 Furuya, Yuzo, 25126
 Fushinobu, Shinya, 25611
- Gagnon, Alison W., 25300
 Gan, Qing-Fen, 25412
 Garbi, C., 25350
 Gavrilova, Oksana, 25459
 Ghadessy, Farid John, 25575
 Gilfillan, Alasdair M., 25308
 Giuliano, P., 25350
 Goldberg, Mark A., 25492
 Gonias, Steven L., 25684
 Gottesman, Max E., 25350
 Gould, Fred, 25220
 Grasso, Joseph A., 25459
 Green, Simon P., 25400
 Grémeaux, Thierry, 25227
 Griac, Peter, 25692
 Grieco, D., 25350
 Griffin, James D., 25198
 Grillo, Sophie, 25227
 Grötzinger, Thilo, 25253
 Gunz, Daniela, 25089
 Gustafson, Thomas A., 25327
- Hall, Michael J., 25438
 Hall, Zach W., 25506
 Hamm, Heidi E., 25382
 Hammani, Khalil, 25498
 Hancock, Robert E. W., 25261
 Hansen, Barbara C., 25327
 Hart, Matthew J., 25452
 Hayashi, Kimiko, 25548
- Hayashi, Masando, 25548
 Heath, J. K., 25664
 Hejgaard, Jørn, 25083
 Hembrough, Todd A., 25684
 Henriët, Patrick, 25498
 Henry, Pamela A., 25646
 Henry, Susan A., 25692
 Herzog, Petra, 25624
 Hess, Martin T., 25089
 Heymach, John V., Jr., 25430
 Himanen, Juha-Pekka, 25152
 Hinch, Bryan, 25338
 Hiraga, Sota, 25423
 Hirai, Hisamaru, 25198
 Hodges, Robert S., 25261
 Hofmann, Fred, 25173
 Holmes, Jennifer K., 25240
 Homareda, Haruo, 25604
 Horowitz, Paul M., 25063
 Hotta, Kikuko, 25327
 Hovanessian, Ara G., 25479
 Hsieh, Li-Shan, 25389
 Huang, H.-J. Su, 25639
 Hughes, Christine A., 25157
 Hussain, Syed-Rehan A., 25220
 Hutton, John C., 25284
 Huvar, Ivana, 25639
- Ikeda-Saito, Masao, 25419
 Imamura, Ryu, 25423
 Inagaki, Nobuya, 25126
 Ishihama, Akira, 25423
 Ishihara, Hiroshi, 25184
 Iwata, So, 25611
- Jansen, Erik, 25284
 Jelonek, Marie T., 25677
 Jensen, Kirsten, 25253
 Jeyaseelan, Kandiah, 25575
 Ji, H., 25664
 Joh, Tong H., 25375
 Just, Ingo, 25173
- Kamata, Kenji, 25611
 Karnik, Sadashiva S., 25406
 Katayama, Tsutomu, 25178
 Kaufman, Randal J., 25671
 Kay, Cyril M., 25261
 Kearsse, Kelly P., 25345
 Kekwick, Roy G. O., 25394

- Khoo, Hoon Eng, 25575
 Kim, Jae Ho, 25213
 Kim, Kwang-Soo, 25375
 Kim, Myung Jong, 25213
 Kim, Yong, 25213
 Kimchi, Adi, 25479
 Kimura, Sadao, 25126
 King, Klim, 25316
 Kini, R. Manjunatha, 25575
 Kirchhausen, Tomas, 25646
 Klippel, Anke, 25227
 Kobayashi, Masakatsu, 25178
 Kochan, Jarema, 25308
 Kohn, Harold, 25369
 Kolluri, Rikki, 25646
 Kondejewski, Leslie H., 25261
 Kotanides, Helen, 25555
 Kramer, Randall H., 25598
 Krüttgen, Alex, 25430
 Kuan, Y.-S., 25316
 Kubicek, Christian P., 25624
 Kubota, Misae, 25569
 Kuchler, Karl, 25167
 Kumagai, Hidetoshi, 25630
 Kuramochi, Hiroaki, 25126
 Kurkinen, Markku, 25548
 Kwast, Kurt E., 25131

 Lambeth, J. David, 25213
 Leavesley, David I., 25099
 Lee, F. T., 25664
 Lee, James C., 25382
 Lee, Sang-Hyeon, 25292
 Lee, Taehoon G., 25213
 Legros, Yann, 25468
 Le Marchand-Brustel, Yannick, 25227
 Lemoine, Yves, 25167
 Lenting, Peter J., 25332
 Levy, Andrew P., 25492
 Levy, Nina S., 25492
 Li, Jian-Liang, 25198
 Li, Jiaxin, 25247
 Li, Li, 25684
 Li, Y., 25350
 Lin, Hong, 25639
 Lin, Jih-Jing, 25515
 Lin, Yuan, 25389
 Liu, Guoying, 25338
 Liu, Shusen, 25247
 Liu, S.-M., 25316
 Liu, Teresa, 25389
 Lolkema, Juke S., 25582
 Lomasney, Jon W., 25316
 Loo, Donald D. F., 25139

 MacDonald, Nicholas J., 25107
 Mach, Robert L., 25624
 Maeda, Minoru, 25178
 Magyar, Attila, 25369
 Mahé, Yannick, 25167
 Maitre, Bernard, 25117
 Mann, Matthias, 25173
 Manning, James M., 25152
 Manrow, Richard E., 25107
 Marcel, Yves L., 25145
 Margulies, David H., 25677
 Martin, Brian M., 25389
 Martin, Mark E., 25617
 Mason, Mark M., 25459

 Matson, Steven W., 25360
 Matsui, Hideo, 25604
 Matsuoaka, Yoichiro, 25157
 Matsuzawa, Hiroshi, 25611
 McCabe, Peter, 25452
 McGee, Todd P., 25630
 McLaren, Aileen W., 25269
 Mele, E., 25350
 Melillo, Giovanni, 25515
 Mertens, Koen, 25332
 Meurs, Eliane F., 25479
 Miki, Takeyoshi, 25178
 Minowa, Mari T., 25292
 Mirza, Urooj A., 25152
 Mizushima, Tooru, 25178
 Moritz, R. L., 25664
 Morsette, Delmore, 25498
 Mouradian, M. Maral, 25292
 Musti, Anna M., 25350

 Naegeli, Hanspeter, 25089
 Nagane, Motoo, 25639
 Nah, Hyun-Duck, 25233
 Nambi, Ponnal, 25300
 Nerrie, M. A., 25664
 Nice, E. C., 25664
 Nicolson, Margery A., 25327
 Niki, Hironori, 25423
 Niu, Zeling, 25233
 Nunes, Perla, 25308

 Obici, S., 25350
 Ogura, Teru, 25423
 O'Handley, Suzanne F., 25059
 Ohishi, Hiroko, 25178
 Ohnishi, Hiroshi, 25569
 Ohta, Takahisa, 25611
 Ohtake, Atsuko, 25569
 Okada, Shuichi, 25533
 Old, L. J., 25664
 Olson, John S., 25419
 Omura, Satoshi, 25630
 Ortmeier, Heidi K., 25327

 Pallante, Kim M., 25233
 Panariello, Luigi, 25524
 Partridge, Nicola C., 25715
 Pascual-Ahuir, Amparo, 25438
 Patel, Rekha C., 25657
 Pearman, A. Terrece, 25715
 Perlin, David S., 25438
 Pessin, Jeffrey E., 25533
 Phillips, George N., Jr., 25419
 Pipe, Steven W., 25671
 Pisick, Evan, 25198
 Polakis, Paul, 25452
 Porcellini, A., 25350
 Poyton, Robert O., 25131
 Price, Margaret P., 25184
 Prigent, Sally A., 25639
 Prives, Carol, 25468
 Prossnitz, Eric R., 25204
 Ptaszniak, Andrzej, 25204
 Pullar, Christine, 25308
 Pullen, Mark, 25300
 Pulumati, Malini R., 25715
 Puzon, Wilma, 25099

 Qiu, Rong-Guo, 25452
 Quadro, Loredana, 25524

 Raitt, Desmond, 25131
 Rajamohan, Francis, 25220
 Rasmussen, Søren K., 25083
 Rassow, Joachim, 25208
 Raveh, Tal, 25479
 Rees, D. Jasper G., 25332
 Reich, Nancy C., 25555
 Reitman, Marc, 25459
 Repetto, Barbara, 25308
 Rex, Gundula, 25173
 Rickles, Richard J., 25646
 Ritchie, Michael E., 25485
 Rittenhouse, Susan E., 25192
 Ritter, G., 25664
 Robinson, Margaret S., 25446
 Romoser, Valerie, 25071
 Rosen, Barry P., 25247
 Rubin, Charles S., 25350
 Russ, Graeme R., 25099
 Ryu, Sung Ho, 25213

 Sakai, Hiroshi, 25611
 Salgia, Ravi, 25198
 Sano, Shin-ichiro, 25569
 Särndahl, Eva, 25722
 Sasaki, Shigeki, 25178
 Sato, Kazuki, 25569
 Sattler, Martin, 25198
 Schindler, Martin, 25624
 Schmidt, Tonya K., 25617
 Schmutte, Christoph, 25498
 Scott, A. M., 25664
 Seaman, Matthew N. J., 25446
 Seino, Susumu, 25126
 Sekimizu, Kazuhisa, 25178
 Selzer, Jörg, 25173
 Sen, Ganes C., 25657
 Sharma, Sanju, 25452
 Sheppard, David N., 25184
 Shimazaki, Jun, 25126
 Shooter, Eric M., 25430
 Shtrom, Svetlana S., 25506
 Sigal, Elliott, 25412
 Simoni, Robert D., 25630
 Simpson, R. J., 25664
 Sitkovsky, Michail V., 25677
 Slater, Jay E., 25394
 Sloane, David L., 25412
 Smith, Christopher A. D., 25269
 Smith, Patrick T., 25677
 Smrcka, Alan, 25204
 Smrcka, Alan V., 25071
 Solomon, Mark J., 25240
 Sonenberg, Nahum, 25479
 Soussi, Thierry, 25468
 Sowerby, Penelope J., 25446
 Sparks, Daniel L., 25145
 Squillace, Rachel M., 25598
 Stanton, Paul, 25657
 Steeg, Patricia S., 25107
 Stendahl, Olle, 25722
 Stirling, Colin J., 25590
 Stoltz, Michaela, 25208
 Stracke, Mary L., 25107
 Suh, Yoon Jung, 25213
 Sun, Xin-Lai, 25539
 Surendran, Rajendran, 25382
 Suter, Ueli, 25430

 Swede, Marci J., 25692
 Takada, Yoshikazu, 25099
 Takagi, Yuichiro, 25562
 Tamás, Markos J., 25438
 Tang, Xiu-wen, 25192
 Tanti, Jean-François, 25227
 Taylor, Lynn S., 25515
 ter Maat, Hans, 25332
 Tinti, Cristina, 25375
 Traynor-Kaplan, Alexis E., 25204
 Trematerra, Sergio, 25524
 Trybul, Diane E., 25394
 Tu, G. F., 25664
 Uemura, Naoki, 25198
 Usac, Elena F., 25284

 Van de Loo, Jan-Willem, 25284
 Van de Ven, Wim J. M., 25284
 Van Geest, Marleen, 25582
 Van Leeuwen, Jeroen E. M., 25345
 Van Obberghen, Emmanuel, 25227
 Vedvick, Thomas, 25394
 Vestweber, Dietmar, 25099
 Visnick, Mike, 25308

 Wakizaka, Akira, 25604
 Wang, Genfu, 25438
 Wang, Jian, 25099
 Wang, Li-Ping, 25316
 Wang, Ze, 25707
 Watabe, Yoshio, 25126
 Waugh, David, 25308
 Wei, Yu, 25067
 Welsh, Michael J., 25184
 Welt, S., 25664
 White, Robert L., III, 25515
 White, S. J., 25664
 Widger, William R., 25369
 Wilkinson, Barrie M., 25590
 Will, Hans, 25253
 Williams, Lewis T., 25227
 Willis, Jonathan D., 25515
 Wilm, Matthias, 25173
 Windhager, Erich E., 25079
 Wishart, David S., 25261
 Wolf, C. Roland, 25269
 Wong, Wai-Keung, 25198
 Wright, Ernest M., 25139
 Wu, Hsiao-Ling, 25300

 Yamanaka, Kunitoshi, 25423
 Yan, Chen, 25699
 Yang, Maozhou, 25548
 Yang, Xiu-Ying, 25617
 Yao, Chung-Chen, 25598
 Ybarra, Jesse, 25063
 Yoshikawa, Dan, 25204
 Yu, Mi, 25617
 Yuen, Raymond, 25575

 Zeilinger, Susanne, 25624
 Zhang, Jin, 25192
 Zhang, Xiangdong, 25369
 Zhao, Allan Z., 25699
 Zhao, Wei, 25192
 Zhao, Xiao-Jian, 25131
 Zhao, Yufeng, 25233
 Zhao, Yuwei, 25145
 Zhao, Zhicheng, 25308
 Ziober, Barry L., 25598

A Recombinant Sickle Hemoglobin Triple Mutant with Independent Inhibitory Effects on Polymerization*

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As part of a comprehensive effort to map the most important regions of sickle hemoglobin that are involved in polymerization, we have determined whether two sites previously shown to be involved, Leu-88(β) and Lys-95(β), had additive effects when substituted. The former site is part of the hydrophobic pocket that binds Val-6(β), the natural mutation of HbS, and the latter site is a prominent part of the hemoglobin exterior. A sickle hemoglobin triple mutant with three amino acid substitutions on the β -chain, E6V/L88A/K95I, has been expressed in yeast and characterized extensively. Its oxygen binding curve, cooperativity, response to allosteric effectors, and the alkaline Bohr effect showed that it was completely functional. The polymer solubility of the deoxy triple mutant, measured by a new micromethod requiring reduced amounts of hemoglobin, was identical to that of the E6V(β)/K95I(β) mutant, *i.e.* when the K95I(β) substitution was present on the same tetramer together with the naturally occurring E6V(β) substitution, the L88A(β) replacement had no additive effect on polymer inhibition. The results suggest that Lys-95(β) on the surface of the tetramer and its complementary binding region on the adjoining tetramer are potential targets for the design of an effective antisickling agent.

Sickle cell anemia results from a single point mutation in the gene encoding β -globin, whereby the Glu-6(β) residue in hemoglobin A (HbA) is substituted by Val in sickle hemoglobin (HbS) (1, 2). This hydrophobic side chain initiates a process by which the densely packed deoxyhemoglobin tetramers inside the red blood cells interact through other sites to form long polymer fibers that distort the cells into a characteristic sickle shape. Although the identity of many of these amino acid sites involved in polymer formation and the extent to which they participate is known (3–8), the quantitative contributions to polymerization of many other sites are unknown. A goal of this study was to provide such information for selected polymerization contact sites for which natural mutants either do not exist or have not been reported. Recombinant sickle double and triple mutants are used for this purpose.

Studies describing the hydrophobicity and stereochemistry of deoxy HbS have shown that Val-6(β) binds tightly between Phe-85 and Leu-88 in the acceptor pocket on an adjacent β -chain. According to computer-generated models, the three-

dimensional fit of the side chain of Val into the acceptor pocket is much better than that of Ala (7), explaining the inability of Hb Makassar with Ala-6(β) to polymerize (8), even though the hydrophobicity of Ala and Val do not differ drastically. Other studies have suggested that substitutions by larger hydrophobic residues at the position 6, readily promote polymerization (9). These findings point out the complexity of the polymerization process, which cannot be explained simply by the hydrophobicity and stereochemistry of the β -6 site and its corresponding acceptor pocket. Indeed, it has been established that other contact sites in the gelation process reinforce the initial contact (3–5, 9, 10). In addition, studies with noncovalent chemical inhibitors have shown that these compounds do not act as predicted by their hydrophobic nature (11), implying a significant contribution of other interactions.

In our efforts to understand the mechanism of sickle hemoglobin gelation and to identify the critical sites in the gelation process, we use a yeast expression system (6, 12–15) to produce HbS double and triple mutants as an adjunct to chemical modification studies (16–18). Unlike the *Escherichia coli* expression system, the yeast system produces a native hemoglobin molecule, as judged by many biochemical criteria (15). In addition, since yeast incorporates its own heme group into globin, there are no time-consuming manipulations, such as reconstituting hemoglobin with exogenous heme. Thus, it is feasible to study the involvement of any site on the hemoglobin molecule in the gelation process and to judge the significance of any differences between the crystal structure (5) and the electron microscope structure (4, 19) of HbS. For example, we recently determined that the contact site Lys-95(β) on the outside of the tetramer distant from the hydrophobic pocket, which was implicated in one structure (4) but not the other (5), was significantly involved in the gelation process (12). Indeed, its substitution by Ile inhibits gelation twice as much as a mutation at a site in the acceptor pocket, L88A(β) (6). The diverse locations of these two sites prompted us to design a recombinant Hb having both K95I(β) and L88A(β) in addition to the Val-6(β) mutation in order to measure whether the influence of the two substitutions on gelation is additive. Such a study may reveal important details of the gelation process and could influence efforts for developing well targeted clinically effective inhibitors. For these studies, we employ a new method based on the drastic decrease in the solubility of hemoglobin S upon addition of dextran (20).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Reagents—The restriction endonucleases, T4 polynucleotide kinase, alkaline phosphatase, and DNA ligase were from Boehringer Mannheim. The DNA sequencing kit and the T7 DNA polymerase (Sequenase version 2.0) were obtained from U. S. Biochemical Corp. The ³⁵S-labeled dATP was from DuPont NEN. The oligonucleotides were synthesized by Operon Technologies (Alameda, CA). CM-cellulose 52 was from What-

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man, and HPLC¹ columns (C-4 and C-18) from Vydac. L-1-tosylamido-2-phenylethyl chloromethyl ketone-treated trypsin, dextran, DPG, and IHP were purchased from Sigma. The construction of pGS189 and pGS389 plasmids is described elsewhere (12, 14). All the other reagents were of analytical purity.

Site-directed Mutagenesis—To prepare the E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) triple mutant, we used the M13mp18 recombinant phage as a template. The construction of this phage containing the β -globin cDNA with the E6V(β) and the L88A(β) coding mutations has been described earlier (6). The oligonucleotide 5'-ATC CAC GTG CAG GAT GTC ACA GTG CAG-3' was used to create the Lys-95(β) \rightarrow Ile mutation by the method of Kunkel (21). The underlined bases were those used to create the desired mutation. The presence of the mutations was screened by partial sequencing of the mutation site. The mutation frequency was increased to 65% by supplementing the reaction mixture with the Gene 32 Protein and by prolonging the reaction time, as described previously.² The mutated β -globin region was subcloned to pGS189sickle, which contains the native α -globin and the Glu-6(β) \rightarrow Val mutated β -globin cDNAs, by digesting with *Sph*I enzyme. Finally, the α - and β -globin gene cassette was isolated as a *Not*I fragment after digesting the newly synthesized pGS189sickle-Ala-88-Ile-95 with *Not*I and *Bgl*II and inserted into pGS389 previously digested with *Not*I. The correct insertional direction was verified by restriction mapping and the entire β -globin gene was sequenced using a fluorescence-based detection system (Perkin-Elmer/Applied Biosystems) to show that the Glu-6(β) \rightarrow Val, Leu-88(β) \rightarrow Ala, and Lys-95(β) \rightarrow Ile were the only mutations in the globin chain.

Yeast Expression System—The yeast cells were transformed by the pGS389sickle-Ala-88-Ile-95 plasmid using the lithium acetate method (22). The transformants were selected and the copy number of the plasmid increased by growing the yeast on a complete minimal medium first without uracil, then without uracil and leucine (14). To express the E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) triple mutant hemoglobin, the yeast was grown in YP medium for 4 days with ethanol as the carbon source. The promoter controlling the transcription of the globin genes was induced by adding 3% galactose 20 h prior to the harvesting of the yeast cells. The cells were disrupted in a Bead Beater homogenizer and the Hb triple mutant was purified in the CO form on a CM-Cellulose 52 column as described earlier (12, 15). The average yield was 3 mg of the purified hemoglobin/liter of culture medium. The preparations of the E6V(β)/L88A(β) and the E6V(β)/K95I(β) recombinant hemoglobins were described earlier (6, 12).

Mass Spectrometry Analysis—Electrospray mass spectrometric analysis was performed with a Finnigan-MAT TSQ-700 triple quadrupole mass spectrometer (23, 24). Seventy pmol of the hemoglobin sample was loaded onto a desalting protein cartridge (Michrom BioResources, Inc., Auburn, CA) and washed with 1 ml of deionized water. The sample was eluted from the cartridge using a solution of water/acetonitrile/acetic acid, 30/67.5/2.5 (v/v/v) and electrosprayed directly into the mass spectrometer. The flow of the eluting solution was maintained at 6 μ l/min through a 100- μ m inner diameter fused silica capillary. The spectrum given in Fig. 1 is an average of 16 scans, obtained at a rate of 3 s/scan.

Analytical Methods—Isoelectric focusing, amino acid analysis, and other procedures were performed as described earlier (12, 15, 25). To isolate the α - and β -globin chains, a Vydac C-4 column was equilibrated with acetonitrile in 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid and eluted as described under "Results." The isolated β -globin chains were digested with trypsin, and the resulting peptides were separated on a Vydac C-18 reversed phase column using an acetonitrile gradient in 0.05% HCl, a modification from previous studies (12, 15, 25).

Functional Studies—The oxygen dissociation curves were determined at 37°C on a modified Hem-O-Scan instrument (Aminco) as described previously in 50 mM bis-Tris, pH 7.4 (26). Before the measurements, the Hb samples were dialyzed, converted from the CO form to the oxy form (27), and concentrated using CentriPrep, Centricon, and MicroCon ultrafiltration devices (Amicon; molecular weight cutoff 10,000). The final protein concentration (0.5–2.2 mM) was established by amino acid analysis on a Beckman 6300 analyzer. The pH dependence of the oxygen affinity (Bohr effect) and the effects of allosteric modulators were determined at a Hb concentration of 0.5 mM in the same buffer.

Determination of C_{sat} —Polymer solubilities of the hemoglobins under study were determined by the "Dextran- C_{sat} " micromethod of Bookchin

¹ The abbreviations used are: HPLC, high performance liquid chromatography; DPG, 2,3-diphosphoglycerate; IHP, inositol hexaphosphate; bis-Tris, 2-[bis(2-hydroxyethyl)amino]-2-(hydroxymethyl)propane-1,3-diol.

² J.P. Himanen, A. M. Popowicz, and J. M. Manning, submitted for publication.

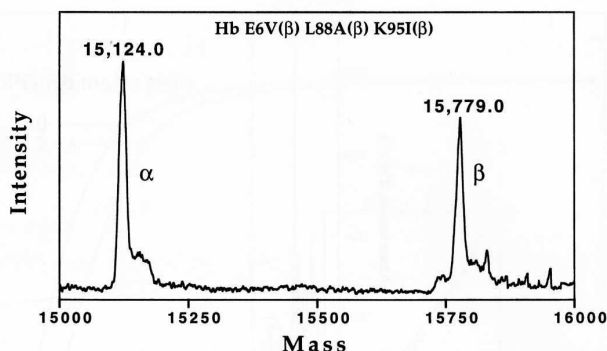


FIG. 1. Reconstituted electrospray ionization mass spectrum of the α - and β -chains of the recombinant E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) triple mutant. Peaks designated α and β represent the protonated α - and β -globin chains of the triple mutant and their molecular masses.

et al. (20), with minor modifications. This method is based on the marked decrease in the solubility of deoxy-HbS on admixture with 70-kDa dextran, at physiological ionic strength and pH (a preliminary account of this method and results is described in Ref. 20; full report in preparation). A comparison of the results found with this procedure with those reported previously using another method is described below. Concentrated solutions of the test hemoglobin in 0.05 M potassium phosphate, pH 7.5, were mixed with concentrated dextran solutions in the same buffer to give a final dextran concentration of 120 mg/ml. The solutions were overlaid with paraffin oil, chilled on ice, and deoxygenated by adding (with a Hamilton syringe) a deoxygenated solution of sodium dithionite to give a final concentration of 50 mM. After stirring and incubation for 30 min in a 37°C water bath, the resulting gel under the oil layer was carefully but vigorously disrupted with a narrow plunger or wire loop, and the tubes were centrifuged at room temperature in a microcentrifuge at 14,000 rpm for 20 min. The gel disruption and centrifugation procedure was repeated twice. After confirming the presence of a solid Hb phase by viewing the tube in front of a bright light, the oil was aspirated. The hemoglobin concentration of the supernatant (C_{sat}) was determined by amino acid analysis in duplicate. Each determination of the gelation concentration was performed three to four times with a precision of +10% or less.

RESULTS

Mass Spectrometry—The expected molecular mass (15,779.0 Da) was obtained for the purified E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) Hb mutant β -chain by matrix-assisted laser desorption mass spectrometry (Fig. 1). This value agrees well with the calculated value of 15,781.2 for a β -chain having the three substitutions, *i.e.* the difference of 89.3 mass units between the mass of the β -chain of HbA (15,868.3 Da) is within the experimental error of the combined calculated differences of 87.1 mass units for the substitutions Glu \rightarrow Val, Leu \rightarrow Ala, and Lys \rightarrow Ile (30.0, 15.0, and 42.1 mass units difference, respectively). The measured molecular mass for the α -chain of E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) (15,124.0) is in accord with the calculated value (15,126.4 Da) for the natural α -chain of HbA within the experimental error.

Isoelectric Focusing—This analysis was performed for the triple mutant by the method described previously (15). The triple mutant showed a similar pI value as the E6V(β)/K95I(β) mutant (12) in agreement with the expected mutations, since the L88A(β) mutation has previously been shown not to have an altered pI value (6).

HPLC Separation of Globin Chains—The α - and β -globin chains were separated by reversed phase HPLC on a Vydac C4 column using acetonitrile in 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid as the mobile phase. With an acetonitrile gradient from 40 to 45%, the α - and β -chains did not separate due to the combined effects of the slightly increased elution of the β -chain having the L88A(β) mutation (6) and the considerably decreased elution of the β -chain with the K95I(β) mutation (12). The chains were suc-

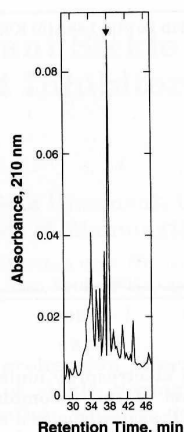


FIG. 2. Tryptic peptide map of the β -globin chain of the triple mutant. The isolated β -globin chain of E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) was carboxymethylated and digested with trypsin as described in the text. The resulting peptides were chromatographed on a Vydac C-18 column using a linear acetonitrile gradient of 12–44% in 0.05% HCl.

cessfully separated by using an isocratic elution with 38.8% acetonitrile. Each had the expected amino acid composition relative to Pro (set at 7.0): Asx (12.1), Thr (6.4), Ser (5.3), Glx (10.0), Gly (12.7), Ala (15.6), Val (18.3), Ile (0.9), Leu (16.7), Tyr (1.9), Phe (6.4), His (8.0), Lys (9.5), Arg (3.1). Cys, Met, and Trp are destroyed partially or completely during acid hydrolysis in non-evacuated hydrolysis tubes.

Peptide Mapping—Tryptic peptide mapping of the isolated β -chain was performed as described previously (6, 15, 25, 26) to verify the expected mutations. The peptides were separated on a Vydac C-18 column using a shallow gradient of acetonitrile (from 12 to 44% in 50 min) in 0.05% HCl (Fig. 2). The major peak eluting at about 38 min was collected and its amino acid composition was found to be consistent with that of the expected 22-residue mutant peptide comprising β 83–104 within experimental error. The values relative to Val (set at 1.0) were: Asx (3.0), Thr (1.3), Ser (1.8), Glx (1.6), Gly (1.9), Ala (1.5), Cys (0.5), Ile (0.5), Leu (1.9), Phe (2.6), His (0.7); however, Pro and Arg were not detected.

Tetramer-Dimer Dissociation Constant—Considerable dimerization may occur in hemoglobin even when the Hill coefficient shows high cooperativity, as discussed by Forsen and Linse (28). Using a method recently developed in our laboratory (29), we determined that the tetramer-dimer dissociation constant for the triple mutant was 0.4 μ M as compared with the K_d value of 0.7 μ M for HbS, indicating that the newly produced mutant hemoglobin did not undergo increased dissociation, *i.e.* at the Hb concentrations used for the functional studies (0.5–2.2 mM) the hemoglobin is predominantly tetrameric.

Functional Properties—The oxygen affinity of the triple mutant at a hemoglobin concentration of 0.5 mM showed an average P_{50} value of 10 mm Hg with a Hill coefficient of 2.7, indicating that the triple mutant retained full cooperativity (Fig. 3). DPG at a 1.2:1 ratio to Hb shows a significant response. The effects of two other anionic effectors, chloride and inositol hexaphosphate, were comparable with those measured earlier for HbS (15), for E6V(β)/L88A(β) (6), and for E6V(β)/K95I(β) (12): the maximum P_{50} value was 22 mm Hg in the presence of 1000 mM Cl⁻, and 58 mm Hg using an [IHP]:[Hb] ratio of 1.2 (Table I).

Bohr Effect—A plot of the change in P_{50} versus pH for the triple mutant had a slope of 0.37 (correlation coefficient, $r = 0.972$) (Fig. 4), compared with the value of 0.41 ($r = 0.995$) found for HbA. Thus, within experimental error, the alkaline

Bohr coefficient was unchanged compared with HbA, consistent with the native structure of the recombinant hemoglobin.

Polymerization—Comparison of the new micromethod used for direct measurement of gelation in these studies with the previous procedure using oxygen affinity changes (6, 12) indicates similar effectiveness of each mutation on inhibition of polymerization, even though the absolute values differ. Thus, ratios of 1.36 and 1.27 for the gelation concentrations of K95I/L88A recombinant hemoglobins were calculated for the oxygen affinity method and the present method, respectively. The dextran- C_{sat} determinations of the following deoxyhemoglobins are shown in Fig. 5, natural HbS, the double mutant E6V(β)/L88A(β), the double mutant E6V(β)/K95I(β) and the triple mutant E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β). The results shown are an average of three to four determinations with a precision of + 10% or less. At initial concentrations below the C_{sat} , the final concentrations of each Hb at equilibrium, when plotted as a function of the initial concentrations, fell on a line with a slope of 1.03, indicating that the procedure itself did not result in precipitation (denaturation) of the hemoglobins. When initial Hb concentrations exceeded the C_{sat} , the final supernatant Hb concentrations (C_{sat} values) remained constant, independent of further increases in initial Hb concentrations over the ranges tested. The mean dextran- C_{sat} value of the triple mutant was 91 mg/ml, indicating that it requires a considerably higher concentration than deoxy-HbS (mean: 34 mg/ml) for polymerization. The C_{sat} of the triple mutant was not significantly different from the value found for E6V(β)/K95I(β) double mutant (90 mg/ml); the value for the E6V(β)/L88A(β) (67 mg/ml) was between those of deoxy-HbS and those containing the Lys-95(β) substitutions. Deoxy HbA remained soluble at concentrations up to 149 mg/ml with no evidence of precipitation during the procedure. Thus, the new micromethod described here measures the true gelation of deoxy HbS.

DISCUSSION

In this study the recombinant triple mutant E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) produced in yeast was shown to have the predicted amino acid composition, molecular mass, isoelectric point, and trypsin cleavage sites. Its oxygen affinity, cooperativity, response to negatively charged effectors, alkaline Bohr effect, and the tetramer/dimer dissociation constant were the same as those for HbS. These results, together with extensive characterization of recombinant hemoglobins by a variety of biochemical criteria (15, 25, 26, 29), are consistent with the expression by the yeast system of a native hemoglobin molecule with the correct N-terminal processing. Thus, we have no evidence for any misfolding of the triple mutant as reported for other recombinant hemoglobins made using *E. coli* as a production host (30). Hence, the gelation of the native HbS and the recombinant double and triple mutants by the procedure described here can be taken as reliable measurements of the gelation concentrations.

We reported previously that Lys-95(β), which is distant from the hydrophobic pocket in the region of Phe-85(β)-Leu-88(β) comprising the acceptor site for Val-6(β), inhibits gelation much more than the substitution of a residue in the pocket itself (6, 12). Our results agreed with some previous reports implicating Lys-95(β) in the gelation process (33) and as an intermolecular contact site in the polymer (3, 4), although this site was not involved in the Wishner-Love double strand crystal of deoxy-HbS (5). The strong influence of the β -95 site, which is located on the exterior of the tetramer at the lateral contact site of the HbS tetramer, on gelation strongly suggests that the K95I(β) mutant of HbS has different protein self-assembly properties than HbS itself (32). The role of the Val-6(β) and its hydrophobic acceptor pocket may be to provide a

FIG. 3. The oxygen binding curve of E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β). The oxygen binding of the triple mutant (0.5 mM in 50 mM bis-Tris buffer, pH 7.4) in oxy form in the presence or absence of DPG was measured at 37°C using a modified Hemo-Scan instrument. The n value is an average of the two determinations.

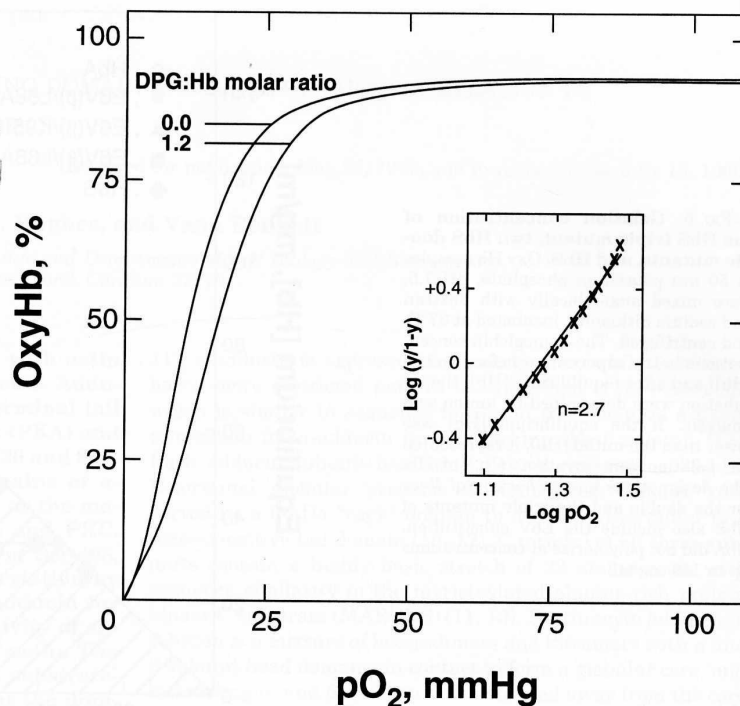


TABLE I
The influence of allosteric effectors on the oxygen affinity of E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β) triple mutant
The Hb concentration was 0.5 mM in 50 mM bis-Tris, pH 7.4.

	P_{50} , E6V/L88A/K95I	HbS ^a
[Cl ⁻] (mM)		
0	11	10
50	14	
100		15
200	17	16
500	19	21
1000	22	25
[IHP]/[Hb]		
0.4	13	16
0.8	39	37
1.2	58	80
1.6	55	80
2.0	55	

^a The values for the effect of Cl⁻ on HbS are from Ref. 15.

molecular switch to turn the gelation either on or off. If this position is mutated to Ala (Hb Makassar), no gelation occurs because Ala prevents sufficient stabilization of the primary nuclei. Our results on the gelation of E6V(β)/L88A(β) mutant (6, 34) also suggest that the Leu to Ala substitution in the acceptor pocket mainly affects the initial nucleation process, but once nucleation has taken place other residues stabilize the polymer. These findings also further emphasize the importance of certain ionizable surface amino acids. Their potential importance as well as that of their complementary sites on adjacent tetramers lies in the possible development of clinical intervention against sickle cell disease. The results presented here demonstrate that two sites on the HbS tetramer exert significantly different and independent effects on the inhibition of polymerization.

Since the polymer solubility of the triple mutant was the same as that of the double mutant without the L88A(β) substitution, *i.e.* E6V(β)/K95I(β), the present results demonstrate that the inhibitory effects of the two β -chain substitutions (L88A and K95I) on HbS, are not additive. Although the

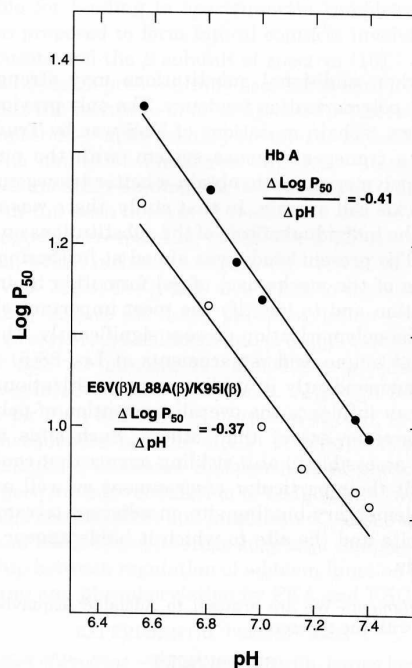
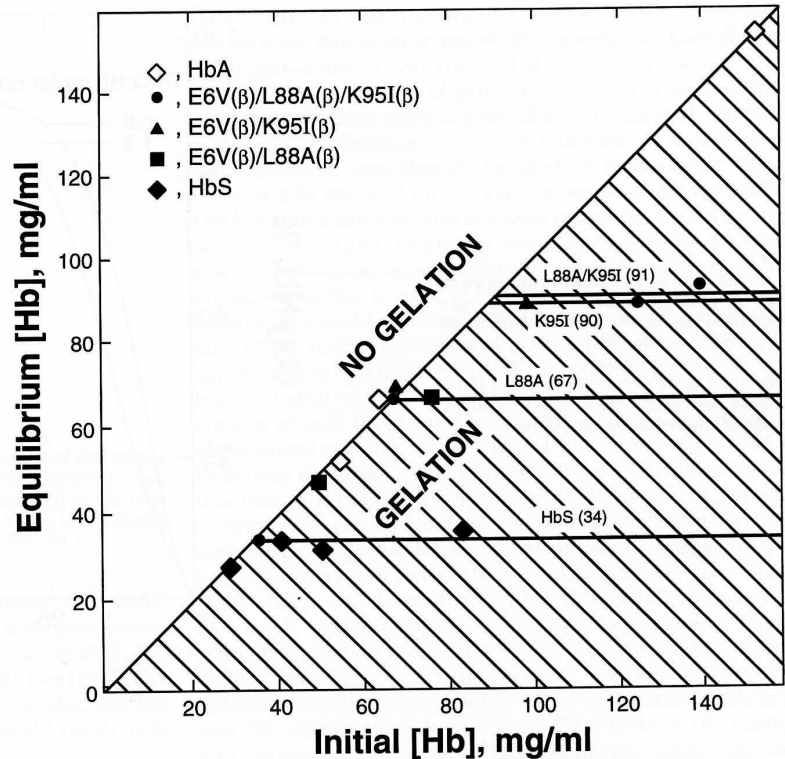


FIG. 4. The alkaline Bohr effect of E6V(β)/L88A(β)/K95I(β). The purified triple mutant in oxy form was diluted with bis-Tris buffers of different pH values to a final concentration of 0.5 mM Hb in 50 mM bis-Tris, and the P_{50} values were determined.

L88A(β) mutant, in which the substitution is in the hydrophobic acceptor pocket, has a gelation concentration about midway between the K95I(β) mutant and HbS itself, it does not appear to influence the overall behavior of the triple mutant.

The results of recent studies on recombinant mutants are consistent with the notion that once the initial contact site is established by the Glu-6 \rightarrow Val substitution in the sickle Hb

FIG. 5. Gelation concentration of the HbS triple mutant, two HbS double mutants, and HbS. Oxy Hb samples in 50 mM potassium phosphate, pH 7.5, were mixed anaerobically with dextran and sodium dithionite, incubated at 37°C, and centrifuged. The hemoglobin concentrations in the supernatant before (initial [Hb]) and after (equilibrium [Hb]) the incubation were determined by amino acid analysis. If the equilibrium [Hb] was lower than the initial [Hb], it represented the gelation concentration (C_{sat}) of Hb. The designations on the horizontal lines for the double and the triple mutants of HbS also include the E6V substitution. HbA did not polymerize at concentrations up to 149 mg/ml.



tetramer, then additional substitutions may strengthen or weaken the polymerization tendency. The only previous study involving two β -chain mutations of HbS was by Trudel *et al.* (13) using a transgenic mouse system, with the purpose of promoting polymerization to obtain a better transgenic mouse model of sickle cell anemia. In that study, there was no quantitation of the individual effects of the substitutions on polymer solubility. The present study was aimed at furthering our understanding of the mechanism of gel formation by inhibiting polymerization and to identify the most important sites that influence the polymerization process significantly. The results indicate that amino acid replacements at Leu-88(β) and Lys-95(β) act independently in inhibiting polymerization, *i.e.* certain sites can influence the overall prevention of polymerization to a greater extent than others. Such sites might be potentially accessible to anti-sickling agents that could be designed to fit their particular environment as well as that of their complementary binding site on adjacent tetramers. The Lys-95(β) site and the site to which it binds appear to fulfill such criteria.

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