IN VITRO PROPAGATION OF TOXOPLASMA GONDII IN PC-1 SERUM-FREE MEDIUM

So far, in vitro cultivation of Toxoplasma gondii (Nicolle et Manceaux, 1908) has always been performed in serum or yeast-extract enriched media, thereby introducing an uncontrolled set of proteins into the parasites environment. Moreover, serum containing propagation techniques always include the risk of introducing (diaplacentarily transmitted) anti-Toxoplasma antibodies. Until now, one notice has only been published describing the cultivation of T. gondii in host cells raised in serum-free media (SHITE and Iscove’s medium) (Hermantin et al. 1987: J. Parasitol. 73: 1276–1277). However, these media had to be enriched with growth-stimulating supplements, making serum-free Toxoplasma cultivation complicated and expensive. Thus, we searched for an easy-to-use serum-free nutrition medium which would enable the simultaneous multiplication of both host tissues and Toxoplasma parasites. We cultivated the parasites (strain BK, virulent) in HEP-2 host cells (CCI 23 ATCC; 2 × 10⁶ tachyzoites to 5 × 10⁵ host cells in 25 cm² flasks) raised in the ready-to-use, serum-free and low-protein medium Ventrex PC-1 (Ventrex Laboratories Inc; Portland; ME) on one hand (sf culture technique) and in Earl’s medium with 10% heat inactivated fetal calf serum on the other (conventional (conv.) culture technique) according to the technique described by Hermantin et al. (1987: Zbl. Bakt. Hyg. A 267: 272–276). All cultures were harvested on day 4 p.i.; all data of three consecutive experiments were evaluated. For comparison, T. gondii trophozoites were also routinely maintained in the usual way by continuous intraperitoneal passages in SPF-mice (OF 1-Swiss, n = 20, three experiments) (43 h cycle).

On day 4 p.i. about 8 × 10⁷ tachyzoites were harvested in both tissue cultures, the Toxoplasma trophozoites had multiplied about 40-fold (conv: x = 42, SD 2.5; sf: x = 40, SD 1.76; statistically NS, t-test). The multiplication rate of the parasites in the mouse peritoneal cavity was about 15-fold within 43 hours. Although there is almost the same quantity of parasites maturing in both types of tissue cultures, there is a statistically highly significant (n > 90; p < 0.0005; Welch-test) difference in the parasite size (length: conv: x = 4.01 µm, SD 0.44; sf: x = 5.74 µm, SD 1.0; mouse: x = 5.0 µm, SD 0.71); size measurement done with an ocular micrometer. The trophozoites increases in the average size by about 40% in PC-1 medium, they even become more voluminous than those grown in the mouse peritoneal cavity. It seems that the parasite “feels quite comfortable” during its multiplication in the PC-1 medium poor of any inhibiting factors.

As Toxoplasma trophozoites seem to adsorb some environmental proteins, especially antibodies, to their surface (e.g. Budzko et al. 1989: J. Clin. Microbiol. 27: 959–961) the antigen composition of the surface may change considerably during any serum-free propagation. Thus, we compared the major proteins of T. gondii in a reducing SDS-PAGE (2 × 10⁶/ml trophozoites, gradient gel 10–15, PhastSystem; Pharmacia LKB Biotechnology; Vienna; staining with Coomassie blue; all done according to the manufacturer’s recommendations). As can be seen in the image (Fig. 1) from the gel, scanned in a PhastImage and redrawn with a graphic software, protein composition of the parasites grown under different environmental conditions do not change considerably, except in the low molecular weight area (mw < 30 kD). Yet, this coincidence might be due to differences in the protein shattering during preparation. Noteworthy, the peak with a molecular weight of about 30 kD in conventional tissue culture shifts; just this protein is a very prominent Toxoplasma surface antigen (e.g., Kasper et al. 1983: J. Immunol. 130: 2407–2412). Thus, before using this in vitro propagation technique for an antigen production for serotests the diagnostic relevance of such serological assays has to be verified.

So far, this is the first report of a propagation of T. gondii in Ventrex PC-1 medium, a serum-free, low-protein tissue culture medium, which is – according to the producer – a modified DME:F12 base with less than 530 µg proteins/ml (further details are not available). No adaption either of
the HEP-2 cells or of the parasites to the serum-
free environment by a gradual decrease of serum
concentration in the nutrition medium has been
necessary for their propagation. Thus, a very con-
venient and reproducible technique for an in vitro
multiplication of T. gondii is offered, which pro-
duces rich yields of remarkably large parasites.

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