Sequence Note

Near Full-Length Clones and Reference Sequences for Subtype C Isolates of HIV Type 1 from Three Different Continents

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ABSTRACT

Among the major circulating HIV-1 subtypes, subtype C is the most prevalent. To generate full-length subtype C clones and sequences, we selected 13 primary (PBMC-derived) isolates from Zambia, India, Tanzania, South Africa, Brazil, and China, which were identified as subtype C by partial sequence analysis. Near full-length viral genomes were amplified by using a long PCR technique, sequenced in their entirety, and phylogenetically analyzed. Amino acid sequence analysis revealed 10.2, 6.3, and 17.3% diversity in predicted Gag, Pol, and Env protein sequences. Ten of 13 viruses were nonmosaic subtype C genomes, while all three isolates from China represented B/C recombinants. One of them was composed primarily of subtype C sequences with three small subtype B portions in gag, pol, and nef genes. Two others exhibited these same mosaic regions, but contained two additional subtype B portions at the gag/pol overlap and in the accessory gene region, suggesting ongoing B/C recombination in China. All subtype C genomes contained a prematurely truncated second exon of rev, but other previously proposed subtype C signatures, including three potential NF- κ B-binding sites in the viral promoter-enhancer regions, were found in only a subset of these genomes.

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS TYPE 1 has been classified into three major groups: M, O, and N.¹ Group M viruses are responsible for the global AIDS pandemic and have been further subdivided into 10 subtypes or clades (A through H, J, and K).¹.² Compared with group M, group O and N viruses are many fewer in numbers and mainly found in West Central Africa.¹-³ The genetic variation between members of the three different groups is extraordinary: 30 and 47% amino acid sequence variation in Gag and Env proteins, respectively. Variation among members of the different subtypes within group M

is also high: 15 and 22%, on average, for Gag and Env proteins, respectively. Although there is of yet no correlation between genotype and phenotype,^{4–7} this high degree of genetic variation remains a concern for AIDS vaccine development.^{8–9} On the basis of the latest survey, subtype C appears to constitute 56% of all the circulating subtypes of HIV-1 group M viruses in the world.¹⁰ Therefore, it is important to characterize subtype C viruses at the full-length genome level and to generate reference reagents for phylogenetic, biologic, and vaccine development studies.

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Isolate	Gender	Age (years)	City	Country	Year of isolation	Source	Subtype	GenBank Acc. No.
98BR004	M	39	Porto Alegre	Brazil	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	С	AF286228
98CN006	M	25	Gansu	China	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	B/C ^a	AF286229
97CN001	M	24	Wulumuqi	China	1997	UNAIDS/NIAID	B/C ^a	AF286226
98CN009	M	21	Wulumuqi	China	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	B/C ^a	AF286230
98IN012	n/a	40	T'Nagar Madras	India	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286231
98IN022	M	27	Churachandpur	India	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286232
94IN476	n/a	n/a	Pune	India	1994	ADARC	C	AF286223
98IS002	n/a	n/a	n/a	Israel	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286233
98TZ013	F	23	Dar es Salaam	Tanzania	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286234
98TZ017	F	23	Dar es Salaam	Tanzania	1998	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286235
97ZA012	F	29	Durban	South Africa	1997	UNAIDS/NIAID	C	AF286227
96ZM651	M	47	Lusaka	Zambia	1996	ZUHRP	C	AF286224
96ZM751	M	26	Lusaka	Zambia	1996	ZUHRP	C	AF286225

TABLE 1. EPIDEMIOLOGICAL INFORMATION ON HIV-1 ISOLATES

Abbreviations: n/a, Not available; UNAIDS/NIAID, the Joint United Nations programme on HIV/AIDS and National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, NIH; ZUHRP, the Zambian–UAB HIV Research Project; ADARC, Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center; M, male; F, female.

^aB/C recombinant viral strains initially classified as subtype C based on partial p17 and V3 sequence analysis.

Since the first description of near full-length sequences for two subtype C viruses from Ethiopia and Brazil, ^{11,12} only two other studies have reported complete subtype C genomes. One characterized five nonrecombinant subtype C viruses from India and the other analyzed 23 nonrecombinant subtype C viruses from eight individuals in Botswana. ^{13,14} Many other countries, in Africa and elsewhere, also appear to have a high subtype C virus prevalence. To understand more fully the extent of subtype C genetic variation, we studied 13 additional subtype C viruses that were identified as such on the basis of partial *gag* and *env* nucleotide sequences. The samples were collected in seven countries (Zambia, India, Tanzania, South Africa, Brazil, Israel, and China) where subtype C viruses are either known to be predominant or to represent one of the major epidemic strains.

All viruses were isolated from patient peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) by cocultivation with normal donor PBMCs. The majority of the HIV-1 isolates were obtained as part of an international collaborative study sponsored by the WHO-UNAIDS and NIAID Virus Networks on Characterization of Globally Prevalent HIV Strains in Relation to HIV Vaccine Development.¹⁵ Available epidemiological information is summarized in Table 1. Genomic DNA was extracted from short-term PBMC cultures and used for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification. Near full-length proviral genomes were amplified as previously reported.¹² PCR products were cloned either directly into vector pCR-XL-TOPO (In-Vitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) or vector pTZ18MluI at the MluI site. In three cases (98BR004, 98CN006, and 98IN022) two overlapping half-genomes were amplified. The complete genome sequences were determined by the primer walking method on both strands of DNA and aligned with a set of reference sequences, using the profile alignment option of CLUSTAL W.¹² The final sequence alignment was manually adjusted for optimal alignment. Columns containing gaps were stripped from the alignment to ensure that an equal number of bases were compared. Phylogenetic trees were constructed using the neighbor-joining algorithm and the Kimura two-parameter model. Nine of the 13 genomes encoded intact open reading frames for all nine genes; the remaining four (98BR004, 94IN476.104, 98TZ013.10, and 96ZM751.3) contained defective genes due to in-frame stop codons, deletions, or insertions. Comparison of amino acid sequences of the newly characterized strains revealed that the average amino acid distances for Gag, Pol, Env, and Nef proteins were 10.2, 6.3, 17.3, and 15.7%, respectively. This variation is within the range of intrasubtype diversity.

A complete genome nucleotide sequence tree depicting the phylogenetic positions of the 13 newly characterized HIV-1 strains is shown in Fig. 1. Of note, only viruses from Brazil and China formed subclusters within subtype C according to their geographic origin, suggesting a relatively more recent introduction of subtype C viruses into these countries. HIV-1 strains from Zambia, India, and Tanzania were highly divergent and did not cluster by country, suggesting a more long-standing epidemic in these areas. Similar findings were reported for subtype C viruses from South Africa, Botswana, and Burundi. 14,16,17 Phylogenetic analysis also showed that viruses from China were more closely related to certain viruses from India, supporting the previous suggestion that subtype C viruses now circulating in China might have been introduced from India. 18,19 Analyses of additional env gene sequences confirmed these observations (Fig. 2). Moreover, the env tree also revealed a third geographic cluster involving viruses from Ethiopia and Djibouti (supported by 97% bootstrap values), suggesting epidemiological linkage of viruses from these neighboring countries (Fig. 2).

Recombination between representatives of different group M subtypes is a frequent occurrence and many HIV-1 sequences in the database (both partial and full length) are known to be mosaic. Most viruses in this study were collected in geographic areas where multiple subtypes are known to cocirculate. To examine whether any of our newly characterized viruses were recombinant, we performed detailed diversity and bootstrap plot analyses as previously described. The results from those analyses revealed that 10 of the 13 genomes represented nonrecombinant subtype C viruses (data not shown). However, the remaining three, all from China, comprised complex B/C

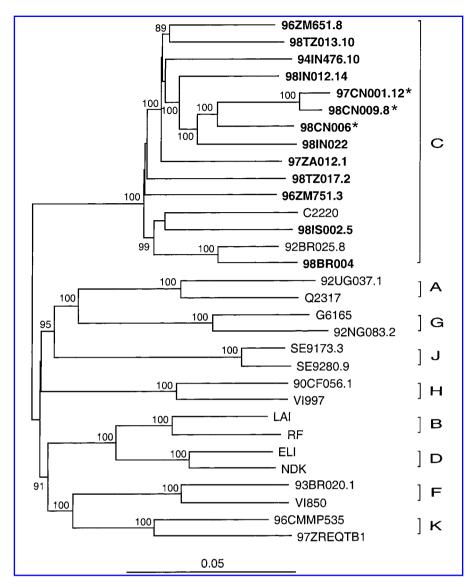


FIG. 1. Phylogenetic relationships of the newly characterized near full-length subtype C viruses with HIV-1 subtype reference sequences from the database. The phylogenetic tree was constructed from nucleotide sequences, using the neighbor-joiningmethod and the Kimura two-parameter model. Branch lengths are drawn to scale. The bootstrap values at each node represent the percentage of 1000 bootstrap replicates that support the branching order. Only bootstrap values of 80% or higher are shown. The new sequences are in boldface. Full-length clones are identified with a number after the period; concatenated sequences lack a clone number. Asterisks denote B/C recombinant viruses.

recombinants. Since nonrecombinant subtype B and C reference sequences are available, we defined the recombination breakpoints by informative site analysis. 12,20,21 This was done with a four-sequence alignment analyzed in windows of 10 informative sites moving in increments of 1 informative site. Probable breakpoints were found by calculating a maximum χ^2 value for each window and assessing its significance by performing 1000 simulations. Using this approach, we found three subtype B regions in 98CN006 and five subtype B regions in both 97CN001.12 and 98CN009.8. All subtype B regions of 98CN006 were shared by the other two B/C recombinants. However, both 97CN001.12 and 98CN009.8 contained two additional subtype B regions at the gag/pol overlap and in the ac-

cessory gene region (Table 2). Their recombination boundaries were also identical, suggesting that both 97CN001.12 and 98CN009.8 shared a common ancestor and might represent a new circulating recombinant form (CRF). However, it cannot be ruled out that they represent epidemiologically linked viruses, since both were collected from the same city. The inferred structures of 97CN001, 98CN006, and 98CN009.8 are summarized in Fig. 3. Since both subtype B and C viruses have been reported to circulate in China, 18,19,22 the finding of B/C recombinants in this country is not surprising. However, it is of interest that there were two distinguishable yet clearly related B/C mosaic forms, suggesting ongoing recombination between subtypes B and C in China.

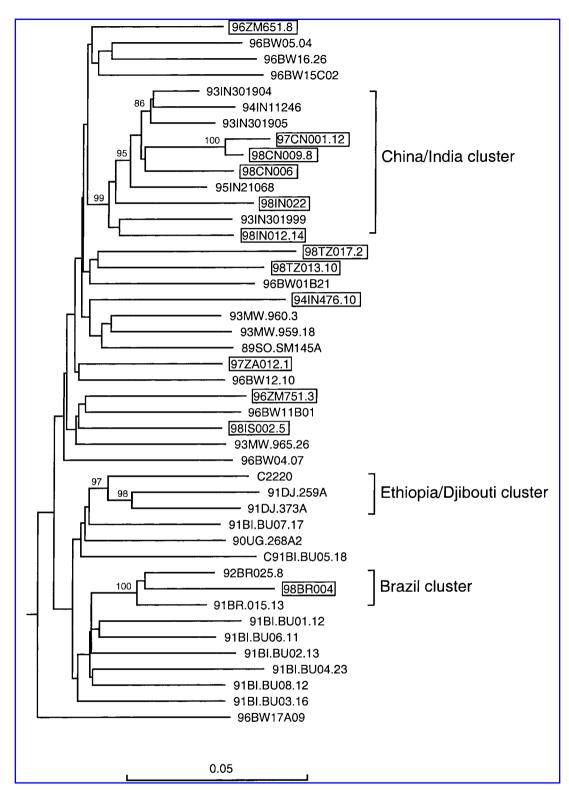


FIG. 2. Phylogenetic tree of complete subtype C envelope nucleotide sequences. The phylogenetic tree was constructed using the neighbor-joining method and the Kimura two-parameter model. Branch lengths are drawn to scale. The bootstrap values at each node represent the percentage of 1000 bootstrap replicates that support the branching order. Only bootstrap values of 80% or higher are shown. The new sequences are boxed. Subclusters supported by significant bootstrap values are indicated with brackets.

TABLE 2 I	NEORMATIVE ST	TE ANALVSIS	OF B/C RECON	ABINANTS FROM CHINA	1

No. of informative sites in:														
98CN006					97CN001.12					98CN009.8				
Region	Subtype	В	С	Outgroup	Region	Subtype	В	С	Outgroup	Region	Subtype	В	С	Outgroup
1–347	С	1	18	0	1–356	С	1	18	0	1–347	С	3	18	0
383-798	В	11	4	1	383-798	В	8	4	2	383-798	В	8	4	2
821-1971	C	5	42	5	821-1188	C	3	14	1	821-1188	C	2	14	1
					1209-1595	В	11	1	1	1209-1595	В	12	1	1
					1607-1971	C	1	16	1	1607-1971	C	1	16	1
1982-2241	В	8	0	2	1982-2246	В	11	1	2	1982-2246	В	11	2	2
2271-7551	C	31	198	50	2271-4742	C	15	78	16	2271-4742	C	15	78	17
					4790-5401	В	27	8	5	4790-5401	В	26	8	7
					5449-7523	C	10	85	23	5449-7523	C	12	84	24
7570–7653	В	10	1	3	7524–7713	В	14	1	2	7524–7713	В	12	1	2
7695-8034	C	2	16	6	7761-8034	C	2	15	4	7761–8034	C	2	14	4

 a To determine the recombination breakpoints, each putative recombinant sequence was compared with two parental sequences (B_LAI and C_92BR025.8) and an outgroup (A_92UG037.1) are reported previously. $^{12,20-21}$ Recombination breakpoints were mapped by examining the linear distribution of phylogenetically informative sites supporting the clustering of the hybrid with each of the two parental subtypes. All recombination breakpoints were evaluated in 1000 simulations.

Previous analysis of subtype C viruses revealed unique sequence signatures that were not observed among members of other subtypes. 11-14,23 The newly characterized subtype C viruses thus provided an opportunity to examine whether these signatures were also conserved among geographically more representative virus strains. One of the proposed subtype C sequence signatures is an additional NF-kB-binding site in the long terminal repeat (LTR) promoter-enhancerregion. Only two $NF-\kappa B$ sites have been identified in the majority of subtypes, except for members of subtype A and CRF01_AE viruses, in which only one NF-κB site is generally observed. By contrast, almost all subtype C viruses thus far characterized have three NF- κ B sites. This finding, along with gene expression studies demonstrating increased reporter gene expression for LTR promoter-enhancer elements containing three NF-κB-binding sites, ^{23,24} has led to the notion that three NF-κB sites might be one of the reasons why subtype C viruses are spreading more rapidly than other subtypes.²⁴ When we compared the newly characterized subtype C viral LTR sequences with other full-length subtype C sequences, we noticed that the putative third NF-κB site frequently contained deletions or mutations that changed its consensus sequence (GGGRNNYYCC), suggesting that this site may not be functional. Since about half of the subtype C LTRs contained only two consensus NF-κB sites (13 of 28; Fig. 4), the suggested causal role of the extra NF-κB site for the explosive epidemic of subtype C viruses requires further study.

A five-amino acid insertion in the Vpu transmembrane domain has also been described in all previously reported subtype C sequences. 12,14 However, in our newly derived data set, 10 of 27 subtype C sequences did not have this insertion. For example, of nine subtype C sequences from India, eight lacked this insertion. One other Chinese isolate also did not have this insertion, further strengthening the close relationship between

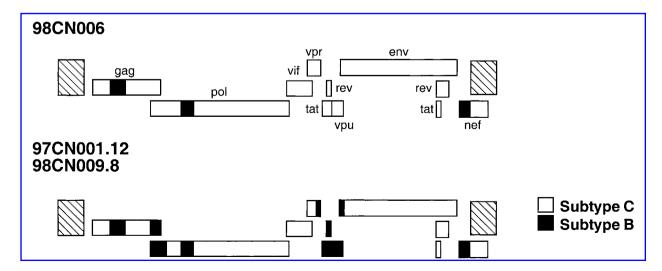


FIG. 3. Schematic representation of the inferred structures of the B/C recombinant HIV-1 genomes from China. LTR regions (hatched) were not analyzed.

				No. of
	NFkB	NFkB	NFkB	NFkB sites
C2220	GGGACTTTCC .	.GCC <u>GGGACTTTCC</u> ACT	. GGGGCGTTCC	
93IN301904		T		3
93IN301905		T		3
93IN301999		• -	. <u> </u> G	2
94IN11246		T	. <u></u>	3 2
95IN21068			. <u></u>	
96BW05.04	- .	T	•	3
96BW01B21		GG-	. 	3
96BW04.07 96BW15C02		T		3 I n
96BW11B01		T	·	3 2 3
96BW17A09		T	A	3
96BW16.26	•	. — Т — — — — — — — — — — — — — — — — —		3
96BW12.10	•	T	A	2
92BR025.8	ACTGGA-AC			2
96ZM651.8		T	.F	2
96ZM751.3		T		3
94IN476.104				2
98IN012.14		T	. G	2
98TZ017.2		• •	. <u></u> G	2
98TZ013.10		TC		2
97CN001.12		G	<u>T</u>	2
98CN009.8		•G	. <u>T</u>	1 2
97ZA012.1	G	;.C-T		2 3 3
98IS002.5				
98BR004 98IN022		C-T-A		2 3
981N022		.A-T	.	3 3
SOCMOOD				3

FIG. 4. Alignment of HIV-1 subtype C LTR nucleotide sequences in the promoter-enhancer region. The newly characterized sequences are in boldface and listed at the bottom. NF- κ B sites that do not conform to the GGGRNNYYCC consensus are boxed. Sequences were compared with the C2220 reference strain. Dashes indicate sequence identity. Periods denote gaps introduced to improve the alignment.

the viruses from India and China. While two of the previously reported subtype C sequence signatures were not conserved, truncated *rev* genes were highly conserved in every single new subtype C isolate. 12–14 This signature thus remains a reliable subtype C sequence marker.

Subtype C viruses have become predominant epidemic strains in the world and thus a main target for vaccine development. They also have been reported to differ from viruses of other subtypes in some of their biological properties, e.g., preferential usage of CCR5. ^{25,26} To elucidate whether subtype C viruses indeed differ from other group M subtypes in biologically important ways, a comprehensive set of well-defined reference reagents is required. The newly characterized near full-length subtype C virus clones reported here have been deposited into the AIDS Research and Reference Reagent Program.

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APPENDIX

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