Gene Therapy for Neurological Disorders

Methods and Protocols

Edited by

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Humana Press
Preface

Gene therapy of the nervous system, a technique once utilized by a few select laboratories, is now a commonplace research tool used around the world. Not only is gene therapy a useful utility in treating and creating preclinical models, but this technology has also demonstrated success in the clinic, in terms of both safety and efficacy [1, 2].

Gene therapy is a valuable tool that is being increasingly utilized to model neurodegenerative disorders [3]. One reason for this is the inherent ability of gene therapy to control genetic expression in both a spatial and temporal manner. For example, using this precision of gene therapy to model neurodegenerative disorders enables researchers to overcome any developmental compensations that may occur with germline manipulations [4, 5], to create lesions that are restricted to one hemisphere or specific circuits, and to easily titrate the genetic material of interest [6], among other benefits. Of course, these benefits of gene therapy also translate to the use of gene therapy for the delivery of therapeutic genes in preclinical models of neurological disorders [7–11]. That being said, after over 15 years of experience in gene therapy, it has become clear to me that a significant amount of crucial knowledge necessary to design and execute a successful gene therapy experiment often fails to be disseminated in a normal format (i.e., via scientific manuscripts). Rather, this esoteric, yet essential knowledge is either briefly mentioned or solely propagated via word of mouth. Therefore, it is all too common that studies involving gene therapy manipulations produce results that vary between investigators (e.g., Ref. 12). Although such discrepancies are not the result of any wrongdoing, their occurrence adds to the “mysticism” sometimes associated with gene therapy and could serve to reduce the enthusiasm for taking on similar projects in the future. Thus, one purpose of this book is to dispel any confusion and provide a clear and detailed road map of how to successfully design and execute a gene therapy experiment in order to obtain consistent results.

As science progresses and new discoveries are made, the boundaries of gene therapy are rapidly expanding: Gene therapy vehicles are continuously undergoing development and are becoming more readily available, delivery methods are continuously being developed, and transgene cassettes are becoming more and more refined. This leaves the researcher with a plethora of decisions that must be considered before undertaking a gene therapy experiment. In this volume I have invited experts from around the world to share their expertise in finite areas of neurological gene therapy. The compilation of protocols and instructive chapters in this book are intended to give researchers, clinicians, and students of all levels a foundation upon which future gene therapy experiments can be designed. When one designs experiments involving gene therapy of the nervous system, several aspects need to be considered before experiments are designed: What delivery vehicle do you use? Will you produce this vector? How will you ensure that your vector retains stability? What expression system best fits your needs? What route will you choose to deliver your gene therapy agent? How will you model the neurodegenerative disorder that you aim to investigate, and what are the proven methods to treat these disorders in preclinical models? This book is aimed to address all these important considerations as well as to disseminate the
aforementioned bits of arcane information that are very important to consider during the course of experimentation.

Finally, the penultimate goal for many gene therapists is to see their product eventually end up in the clinic as a treatment for neurological disorders. Although gene therapy has progressed to the clinic, this is not a straightforward path as several variables such as age and disease status have to be considered. Several chapters in this volume will also discuss special considerations that need to be addressed when translating experimental approaches to the clinic.


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Contents

Preface .......................................................... v
Contributors ..................................................... xi

PART I  INTRODUCTION

1 Introduction to Viral Vectors and Other Delivery Methods for Gene Therapy of the Nervous System ................................................. 3
Fredric P. Manfredsson

PART II  EXPRESSION CASSETTES

2 Delivering Transgenic DNA Exceeding the Carrying Capacity of AAV Vectors ................................................................. 21
Matthew L. Hirsch, Sonya J. Wolf, and R.J. Samulski

3 Expression of Multiple Functional RNAs or Proteins from One Viral Vector ......................................................... 41
Tomas Björklund

4 Regulated Gene Therapy .............................................. 57
Ludivine Breger, Erika Elgstrand Wettergren, Luis Quintino, and Cecilia Lundberg

5 Design of shRNA and miRNA for Delivery to the CNS ................. 67
Gabriela Toro Cabrera and Christian Mueller

6 Tissue-Specific Promoters in the CNS .................................. 81
Sebastian Kügler

PART III  VIRAL VECTOR PRODUCTION

7 Small-Scale Recombinant Adeno-Associated Virus Purification ................. 95
Corinna Burger and Kevin R. Nash

8 Lentivirus Production and Purification .................................... 107
Matthew J. Benskey and Fredric P. Manfredsson

9 Viral Vector Production: Adenovirus .................................... 115
Julius W. Kim, Ramin A. Morshed, J. Robert Kane, Brenda Auffinger, Jian Qiao, and Maciej S. Lesniak

PART IV  VIRAL VECTOR TROPISM

10 Controlling AAV Tropism in the Nervous System with Natural and Engineered Capsids ............................................... 133
Michael J. Castle, Heikki T. Turunen, Luk H. Vandenberghe, and John H. Wolfe
Contents

11 Altering Tropism of rAAV by Directed Evolution .......................... 151
   Damien Marsic and Sergei Zolotukhin

12 Altering Entry Site Preference of Lentiviral Vectors
   into Neuronal Cells by Pseudotyping with Envelope Glycoproteins .... 175
   Kenta Kobayashi, Shigeki Kato, Ken-ichi Inoue, Masahiko Takada,
   and Kazuto Kobayashi

13 Directed Evolution of Adenoviruses ........................................ 187
   Jason G. Smith

PART V DELIVERY METHODS

14 Intraparenchymal Stereotaxic Delivery of rAAV and Special
   Considerations in Vector Handling ........................................... 199
   Matthew J. Benskey and Fredric P. Manfredsson

15 MRI-Guided Delivery of Viral Vectors ...................................... 217
   Ernesto A. Salegio, John Bringas, and Krystof S. Bankiewicz

16 Systemic Gene Therapy for Targeting the CNS .................................. 231
   Sara E. Gombash and Kevin D. Foust

17 Widespread Neuronal Transduction of the Rodent CNS
   via Neonatal Viral Injection .................................................. 239
   Ji-Yoen Kim, Stacy D. Grunke, and Joanna L. Jankowsky

18 AAV-Mediated Gene Transfer to Dorsal Root Ganglion .................. 251
   Hongwei Yu, Gregory Fischer, and Quinn H. Hogan

19 Gene Therapy of the Peripheral Nervous System:
   The Enteric Nervous System .................................................. 263
   Matthew J. Benskey and Fredric P. Manfredsson

20 Gene Therapy of the Peripheral Nervous System: Celiac Ganglia .......... 275
   Bradley Hammond and David L. Kreulen

21 Convection Enhanced Delivery of Recombinant Adeno-associated
   Virus into the Mouse Brain .................................................. 285
   Kevin R. Nash and Marcia N. Gordon

22 Nonviral Gene Therapy of the Nervous System: Electroporation ........ 297
   Xue-Feng Ding and Ming Fan

23 Non-Viral, Lipid-Mediated DNA and mRNA Gene Therapy
   of the Central Nervous System (CNS): Chemical-Based Transfection .... 307
   James G. Hecker

24 Ex Vivo Gene Therapy Using Human Mesenchymal Stem Cells
   to Deliver Growth Factors in the Skeletal Muscle of a Familial
   ALS Rat Model ........................................................................ 325
   Masatoshi Suzuki and Clive N. Svendsen
PART VI  GENE THERAPY BASED MODELING OF NEURODEGENERATIVE DISORDERS

25  Gene Therapy Models of Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias .............. 339
Benjamin Combs, Andrew Kneynsberg, and Nicholas M. Kanaan

26  Viral Vector-Based Modeling of Neurodegenerative Disorders: Parkinson’s Disease ......................................................... 367
D. Luke Fischer, Sara E. Gombash, Christopher J. Kemp, Fredric P. Manfredson, Nicole K. Polinski, Megan F. Duffy, and Caryl E. Sortwell

27  Gene Therapy-Based Modeling of Neurodegenerative Disorders: Huntington’s Disease ............................................................. 383
Deborah Young

PART VII  GENE THERAPY FOR THE TREATMENT OF NEUROLOGICAL DISORDERS

28  Gene Therapy for the Treatment of Neurological Disorders: Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis ...................................................... 399
Zachary T. McEachin, Anthony Donsante, and Nicholas Boulis

29  Stereotaxic Surgical Targeting of the Nonhuman Primate Caudate and Putamen: Gene Therapy for Huntington’s Disease .............. 409
Jodi L. McBride and Randall L. Clark

30  Gene Therapy for the Treatment of Neurological Disorders: Metabolic Disorders ................................................................. 429
Dominic J. Gessler and Guangping Gao

31  Gene Therapy for the Treatment of Neurological Disorders: Central Nervous System Neoplasms ............................................. 467
Neha Kamran, Marianela Candolfi, Gregory J. Baker, Mariela Moreno Ayala, Marta Dzaman, Pedro R. Lowenstein, and Maria G. Castro

PART VIII  CLINICAL TRIALS

32  AAV2-Neurturin for Parkinson’s Disease: What Lessons Have We Learned? ................................................................. 485
Jeffrey H. Kordower

Index ................................................................................................................. 491
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