Molecular Definition and Sequence Motifs of the 52-kD Component of Human SS-A/Ro Autoantigen

Edward K. L. Chan, John C. Hamel, Jill P. Buyon,* and Eng M. Tan

The W. M. Keck Autoimmune Disease Center, Department of Molecular and Experimental Medicine, Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation, La Jolla, California 92037; and *Hospital for Joint Diseases Orthopedic Institute, New York 10003

Abstract

Serum SS-A/Ro autoantibodies are commonly found in patients with Sjogren's syndrome, systemic lupus erythematosus, neonatal lupus, and subacute cutaneous lupus. Two proteins of 60 and 52 kD have been described as targets for these autoantibodies. To define the 52-kD component unambiguously, cDNA clones were isolated from human HepG2 and MOLT-4 cell cDNA libraries. The identity of cDNA was established by (a) the specificity of the antibody affinity purified from the recombinant protein, (b) the reactivity of the purified recombinant protein with prototype SS-A/Ro sera in immunoblot and ELISA, and (c) two-dimensional gel comigration of MOLT-4 cell 52-kD protein and the recombinant protein. A 1.5-kb cDNA encoded the complete 52-kD protein containing 475 amino acids (M, 54,082). Putative zinc-finger domains and a leucine zipper motif were identified in the amino-terminal half of the 52-kD protein, implicating its possible association with DNA/RNA. Sequence homology detected between the 52-kD protein and human ret transforming protein, and mouse T cell gene expression down-regulatory protein grp-1, may provide leads to the functional role of the 52-kD protein in addition to the possibility that these proteins might constitute members of a subfamily of finger proteins. (J. Clin. Invest. 1991. 87:68-76.) Key words: autoantibody • Sjogren's syndrome • zinc finger protein • systemic lupus erythematosus • autoimmunity

Introduction

The molecular characteristics of SS-A/Ro1 antigens are of special clinical interest because of the relatively high frequency of the SS-A/Ro autoantibody in patients with several rheumatic diseases including systemic lupus erythematosus, Sjogren's syndrome, neonatal lupus syndrome with congenital heart block, and subacute cutaneous lupus (for current reviews, see references 1–3). Various molecular species ranging from 50 to 150 kD have been described for the antigenic component(s) of SS-A/Ro (summarized in reference 4). In 1984 Wolin and Steitz (5) showed that autoantibodies to SS-A/Ro immunoprecipitated small ribonucleoprotein particles composed of hY-RNAs and a 60-kD protein component. The 60-kD protein was defined as the major autoimmune target because SS-A/Ro autoimmune sera did not recognize hY-RNAs alone. Recent work of Boire and Craft (6) reported a subpopulation of autoantibodies recognizing an antigenic epitope restricted to the intact ribonucleoprotein particle composed of hY5 RNA and the 60-kD SS-A/Ro protein. Besides the 60-kD protein, Ben-Chetrit et al. (4) found that most SS-A/Ro-positive sera as defined by immunoprecipitation in Ouchterlony double diffusion assay also recognized another protein of 52 kD. It was not clear whether the 52-kD protein interacted with hY-RNAs directly or via the association with the 60-kD protein that was known to have in vitro RNA-binding activity (5, 7). Indirect immunofluorescence using these specific anti-52-kD reagents gave nuclear punctate staining similar to those observed for antibodies specific to the 60-kD SS-A/Ro component (4). It was also shown by antibody affinity purification that patient sera contained distinct, noncross-reacting antibodies directed to the 60- and 52-kD components (4). Autoantibodies to the 52-kD component were in fact very common in SS-A/Ro autoimmune sera analyzed (> 80%) and the reason the 52-kD component had not been detected earlier was probably a result of coexisting autoantibodies to SS-B/La and to the incomplete separation of the 47-kD SS-B/La antigen from the 52-kD component in the usual gel separation system (8). These two SS-A/Ro components were found in all human cell lines tested including HeLa, MOLT-4, Raji, and Wil-2 (4). Rader et al. (9) also described two human SS-A/Ro species of 60 and 52 kD from lymphocytes and, in addition, two red cell–specific SS-A/Ro components of 60 and 54 kD that were immunologically related to the lymphocyte 60- and 52-kD species, respectively. To define the 52-kD component of SS-A/Ro protein unambiguously, we have cloned the full-length cDNA encoding the 52-kD protein. This report describes the isolation and characterization of cDNA clones using a human autoimmune serum with specific autoantibody to the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein and the special features of the deduced polypeptide that might provide insights into the functional role of the protein.

Methods

Cell extracts. MOLT-4 cells (human T cell lymphoblastic leukemia, ATCC CRL 1582) were cultured in DMEM containing 10% calf serum...
at 37°C in an 8% CO2 incubator. Cultures were supplemented with 2.5 μg/ml gentamicin sulfate and maintained at 106 cells per ml. Cells were harvested and extracted in buffer A (150 mM NaCl, 10 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.2, 0.5% Nonidet P-40) and freed of cell nuclei by centrifugation at 12,000 g for 15 min.

**Immunoblotting.** For high-resolution separation of the 60-kD, 52-kD, and 47-kD SS-A/ Ro-SS-B/La proteins, cell extracts were separated by PAGE as described by Laemmli (10) using 15% gel slabs (20 x 13 x 0.1 cm) and the ratio of acrylamide-bis-acrylamide was changed to 172.4:1 in the separating gel (9). It was shown recently that the standard gel composition used by many laboratories was not optimal for the separation of the 52-kD SS-A/ Ro and 47-kD SS-B/La proteins (8). Proteins were transferred from gel onto nitrocellulose using a constant voltage of 60 V for 2 h (11). The nitrocellulose sheet was air-dried, cut into strips, and incubated for 30 min in 3% nonfat milk diluted in PBS to block nonspecific binding sites. The nitrocellulose strips were incubated with 1 ml of a 1:100 dilution of sera for 1 h and then washed in PBS with 0.05% Tween 20 (PBS-T). 125I-protein A (ICN Biochemicals, Irvine, CA) was used to detect bound human antibodies. The following protein standards (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Richmond, CA) were used to determine molecular weights: phosphorylase B, 92,500; BSA, 66,200; ovalbumin, 45,000; carbonic anhydrase, 31,000; soybean trypsin inhibitor, 21,500; and lysozyme, 14,400.

**Screening of phage libraries for SS-A/Ro cDNA.** A HepG2 cell XZap cDNA library was a kind gift from Dr. Frank R. Jirik, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada. A high titer SS-A/Ro human serum Bo was used for immunoscreening of 106 recombinants. 125I-protein A was used to detect bound human antibodies. One positive clone Cl was identified after multiple screenings and was subcloned in vivo into pBluescript plasmid pC1 using R408 helper phage (Strategene, La Jolla, CA) as recommended in the manufacturers' instructions.

Human T cell lymphoblastoma (MOLT-4) XgtII cDNA library was constructed by Dr. K. Ogata and Dr. D. J. Noonan, Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation. The MOLT-4 library was screened for full-length SS-A/Ro cDNA clones by DNA hybridization. Two partially complementary synthetic oligonucleotides (5′-TGTGAGTGCTGATGGAGAGACCTCACCTG-3′ and 5′-CTCTCTCTCACAGCAAG-AGGTGAAGTCTCTCTTCT-3′) were designed based on the 5′ sequence of pC1 cDNA insert. They were mixed and labeled with [α-32P]-ATP using the standard fill-in reaction of Klenow polymerase (12). All screenings were carried out with duplicate filters and positive phases were plaque purified. The resulting cDNAs were subcloned into pBluescript vectors (Strategene) for further analysis.

**Cloning of rfp protein.** Two partially complementary synthetic oligonucleotides (5′-TGGGCTCCGGGAGGTGGCGAGCTGCC-3′ and 5′-GGTGGTCTCTCGTGACGAGCCTGCCC-3′) were designed based on the 5′ sequence of the rfp cDNA reported (13). They were mixed and labeled with [α-32P]-ATP using the standard fill-in reaction of Klenow polymerase (12) and used to screen 106 recombinant from the MOLT-4 cell cDNA library as described above. Two initial positives were detected and one of these, 2r1, was purified and the cDNA insert subcloned to pBluescript SK plasmid for further analysis. A rabbit anti-rfp reference serum was kindly provided by Dr. M. Takahashi, Aichi Cancer Center Research Institute, Nagoya, Japan.

**Affinity-purified antibodies.** XZap clone Cl phage plaques were induced to produce recombinant protein by overlaying with isopropyl-β-D-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG, Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO) saturated nitrocellulose filters and grown overnight at 37°C. These nitrocellulose filters were washed with PBS-T, incubated with diluted serum for 1 h, washed again with PBS-T before elution of bound antibodies with 0.1% BSA in 0.1 M phosphate buffer, pH 2.2. Affinity-purified antibodies were immediately neutralized by the addition of 1 M Tris-HCl, pH 8.8. The antibodies were concentrated with Centricron 100 microconcentrators (Amicon Corp., Danvers, MA).

**Purification of recombinant protein.** Plasmid pC1 was transformed in *Escherichia coli* strain XL1-Blue (Strategene). A 200-ml culture of the recombinant cells was grown to OD600 = 0.6 at 37°C and IPTG was added to a final concentration of 10 mM. The culture was allowed to resume growth overnight before harvesting by centrifugation. Purification of recombinant protein was performed as described by Adam et al. (14). The final pellet was extracted in 8 M urea for 15 min and the supernatant was stored at -70°C in aliquots.

**ELISA.** Standard protocol for ELISA was employed as described by Rubin (15). Purified recombinant proteins in 8 M urea were diluted 1,000-64,000-fold in PBS for coating Immulon 2 microtiter plates (Dynatech Laboratories, Inc., Alexandria, VA). Peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-human IgG + M reagents (Caltag Laboratories, So. San Francisco, CA) and the substrate 2,2-azino-bis(3-ethylbenzthiazoline sulfonyl acid) (Boehringer Mannheim GmbH, Mannheim, FRG) were used as detecting agents.

**Southern analysis.** For determining the complexity of the gene encoding the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein, human genomic DNA samples (10 μg/lane) from HeLa cells and normal peripheral blood were digested with EcoRI or HindIII restriction enzyme to completion and analyzed essentially according to Southern (16) using labeled pC1 cDNA insert.

**In vitro RNA transcription and translation.** The EcoRI Agt1 cDNA insert of 52FL was subcloned into pBluescript SK vector. The resulting plasmid p52FL with the cDNA insert in the same orientation as α-galactosidase was linearized by restriction enzyme Clal at the 3′ end of the insert. RNA was transcribed in vitro from the linearized plasmid using T3 RNA polymerase and was translated in vitro in a rabbit reticulocyte lysate (Promega, Madison, WI) in the presence of [35S]-methionine (Trans-3S-label, 70% methionine and 15% cysteine, ICN Biochemicals) as described in the manufacturers' instructions. Products of in vitro translation were stored in aliquots for immunoprecipitation (17, 18) and two-dimensional gel analysis (19).

**DNA sequencing and analysis.** The sequence strategy was to combine data derived from restriction fragments subcloned in pBluescript vector and the use of synthetic oligonucleotides for primers. Plasmids were purified by the Chen and Seeberg method (20) and DNA sequencing was performed by the dideoxy chain termination method of Sanger et al. (21). DNA and protein sequences were analyzed by the Genetics Computer Group Sequence Analysis Software Package for VAX computers (22). Alignment of protein sequences was initially achieved with the GAP program that employed the algorithm of Needleman and Wunsch (23). Multiple sequence alignments were performed with CLUSTAL programs (24, 25).

**Results**

**Cloning and characterization of 52-kD SS-A/Ro cDNAs.** In the screening of 106 recombinant phages from the XZap HepG2 cell cDNA library, clone Cl was selected by human serum Bo and was purified with three rounds of plaque purification. To show that Cl encoded the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein, purification of affinity antibody was performed with Cl phase protein and a different human autoimmune serum Cu that recognized both SS-A/Ro and SS-B/La proteins in MOLT-4 cell extracts (Fig. 1, lane 2). Affinity purified antibody from the Cl phase protein was specific in recognizing the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein alone (lane 4). This specific reactivity was consistent with our previous finding that human affinity purified anti-52-kD antibodies did not recognize either the 60-kD SS-A/Ro or SS-B/La proteins (4).

The XZap clone Cl was subcloned in vivo into pBluescript plasmid pC1. Recombinant protein derived from pC1 grown in XL1-Blue bacteria had a molecular mass of 46,000 as detected by immunoblotting and was purified as described in Methods. The final preparation was a highly antigenic substrate for the detection of anti-52-kD SS-A/Ro antibody in an
recombinant cloning alone; ELISA format by bodies anti-SS-A/Ro of 1 with gested stein and not also negative were antigens. at least at ELISA comparison. High the immunological data were shown from cDNA clones previously reported (17, 26) were purified similarly and are included in this figure for comparison. High OD readings for the 52-kD SS-A/Ro recombinant protein were only seen in sera with detectable antibodies by immunoblotting. Our data indicated that in most anti-SS-A/Ro sera tested, the reactivities as determined by ELISA were higher for the 52-kD than the 60-kD recombinant antigens. Besides the negative controls shown in Fig. 2 B, 20 normal human sera and standard prototype autoimmune sera were also negative including antibodies to PCNA, Sm, U1-RNP, ribosomal RNP, Jo-1, Scl-70, SL/Ki, and Ku specificities (data not shown).

The immunological data above suggested that pCl encoded at least one immunoreactive region of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein and the next step was to determine if the cDNA insert of pCl encoded the entire 52-kD protein. Plasmid pCl was digested with EcoRI restriction enzyme and a cDNA insert of 1.5 kb was detected after electrophoresis in a standard agarose gel. Northern blot analysis of the mRNA from MOLT-4 and HeLa cells using radiolabeled 1.5-kb fragment showed that there was a single band of ~1.9 kb. This indicated that pCl probably contained only a fraction of the complete cDNA for the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein. To obtain a full-length cDNA, 106 recombinant phages from the MOLT-4 cell cDNA library were screened with a radiolabeled DNA probe corresponding to the 5’ sequence of pCl cDNA insert. Of the two clones selected, clone 52FL had the longest insert of ~1.9 kb and was subcloned into pBlueScript plasmid p52FL for further analysis.

To determine if p52FL cDNA insert encoded the complete 52-kD protein, comparison was made between the in vitro transcription and translation products of p52FL and the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein from MOLT-4 cells. Preliminary data showed that they comigrated in standard one-dimensional gel SDS-PAGE, and therefore two dimensional gels were used for more discriminating analysis (Fig. 3). In vitro [S35]-methionine labeled translation products of p52FL RNA gave a major spot (arrow) and several minor spots that were observed only in an overexposed autoradiogram (Fig. 3 A). Immunoprecipitation of these translation products with human SS-A/Ro sera showed that the major 52-kD product was immunoreactive. Immunoblotting of MOLT-4 cell proteins with serum Ca detected multiple SS-B/La isospecies of different pl migrating at
correspond to the positions of major cell proteins actin and tubulin, respectively. To determine unambiguously the gel migration positions of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein and the recombinant protein, a mixture of MOLT-4 cell proteins and the [35S]-methionine labeled in vitro translation product of p52FL RNA was separated on a single gel and then transferred to nitrocellulose filter. (C) 4-d exposure of the labeled [35S]-methionine on the nitrocellulose filter. (D) 12-h exposure with intensifying screen for the same nitrocellulose after immunoblotting with human serum Ge, which is specific for 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein, and [32P]-protein A. The major spots (arrowhead) in C and D match to the same position showing that p52FL encoded the entire 52-kD protein of SS-A/Ro.

**Southern analysis.** Human genomic DNA samples from HeLa cells and normal peripheral blood were digested with EcoRI or HindIII restriction enzyme to completion. Either restriction site was not found in the complete 52FL sequence. Results of the genomic blot probed with cDNA insert showed a major band of \( \approx 5 \) kb and a minor band of \( \approx 8 \) kb (HindIII) and \( \approx 20 \) kb (EcoRI) (Fig. 4). These data indicated that there was probably only one and at most two genes for the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein in the human genome.

**Sequence analysis.** The nucleotide sequences of the cDNA inserts of CI and 52FL were determined by sequencing both DNA strands as outlined in Fig. 5. Clone CI represented the 3' 80% of clone 52FL and there was no difference detected between CI and 52FL clones in the corresponding regions. The DNA sequence of 52FL and the deduced amino acid sequence are shown in Fig. 6. There is only one large open reading frame composed of 475 amino acids corresponding to a calculated molecular mass of 54,082. The sequence flanking the first ATG codon is in close agreement with the eukaryotic translation initiation consensus sequence (27). In the 5' noncoding region, there are three stop codons that are in-frame with the ATG start codon (Fig. 6). Two polyadenylation signal sequences are found at the end of the 3' noncoding sequence. The consensus sequence for nuclear localization signal has not been detected.

Special features of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein are summarized in Fig. 7. The interesting features are the amino-terminal zinc finger domains, a central domain with a leucine zipper motif, and a carboxy-terminal domain that is highly similar to human protein rfp. Fig. 8 shows the putative zinc-finger structures in the 52-kD protein. The arrangement of the Cys residues for the chelation of metal such as zinc has been found in many DNA/RNA-binding proteins (28, 29) and these zinc finger structures are generally thought to be responsible for the interaction with either DNA or RNA. The proposed finger structures in Fig. 8 are atypical as compared to most known finger protein sequences (28, 29). There is no published data at the present to indicate whether the SS-A/Ro protein binds zinc or other metal ions. However, a single zinc finger motif has also been described in the 60-kD SS-A/Ro protein (7, 17). A leucine zipper motif (residues 211–232) was detected in the center domain of the 52-kD protein. Leucine zippers were originally described in DNA-binding proteins (30) and now these motifs are known to participate in protein–protein interaction or dimer formation that is important for DNA-binding (31–33). This motif in 52-kD SS-A/Ro may be important for interaction with other proteins or for homo-dimer formation.

When the DNA and protein sequences were determined for...
the 52-kD protein, homology search with other known proteins was performed with the WORDSEARCH program available from the Genetics Computer Group Sequence Analysis Software Package (22). Three proteins were identified with high degree of homology to the 52-kD protein and they were the mouse rtp-1 protein (34), human ret transforming protein (35), and its related protein rfp (13). Fig. 9 A shows the alignments among the three protein sequences. Note that the least number of gaps has been introduced to optimize the alignment. There is over 30% identity and 50–60% similarity in sequences at the corresponding amino-terminal halves of these proteins. The cysteine residues of the zinc finger motifs are conserved among all three sequences. The 52-kD protein is more similar to either rfp or rtp-1 than rfp is to rtp-1 (Fig. 9 A). The data suggest that these three protein domains might be related as a subfamily of finger proteins. In addition, the carboxy-terminal halves of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro and rfp proteins are highly similar with >50% of identity and 65% similarity (Fig. 9 B).

rfp cDNA isolation and analysis for antigenic reactivity. Because up to 50% identity in amino acid residues was found between the carboxy-terminal halves of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro and rfp proteins, it was of interest to determine whether (a) anti-52-kD SS-A/Ro autoantibodies could recognize rfp protein, and (b) rfp might be a member of SS-A/Ro proteins. A cDNA clone 2rl was isolated from the same MOLT-4 library and restriction enzyme analysis confirmed its identity to the published rfp cDNA clone (13). This was supported by DNA sequencing data which showed that 2rl was an authentic rfp protein cDNA with 104 extra nucleotides at the 5' end as compared to the original clone described by Takahashi et al. (13). The extra 5' sequence is TCCGCTCGGACCGGCCCACGT-

\[
\text{TGTCTTGCGCCTTGGCCTCTGCTGCTCCCTTCTGCCCAGCCATCGGCTGCGAGCT.}
\]

In vitro [35S]methionine labeled translation product of 2rl-encoded RNA was a protein of ~58 kD. None of the 10 different human anti-SS-A/Ro sera recognized this 58-kD protein in a standard immunoprecipitation assay. In immunoblotting, the rabbit antiserum to recombinant rfp protein recognized a 58-kD MOLT-4 cell protein that was distinct from the 52-kD and 60-kD SS-A/Ro proteins. These data indicated that, although there are significant sequence similarities between the 52-kD SS-A/Ro and rfp proteins, no immunological cross-reaction could be observed between these proteins using autoantibodies. It also reconfirms the general observation that human autoantibodies are highly specific for their antigenic targets and are generally noncross-reactive with related proteins (1).

Discussion

A cDNA encoding the complete 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein described by Ben-Chetrit et al. (4) was cloned from a human T-cell (MOLT-4) cDNA library. A partial clone was also obtained from a human liver (HepG2) cDNA library and there was no difference detected between their overlapping regions. The nucleotide and deduced amino acid sequences for the 52-kD protein showed no homology with the corresponding sequences for the related 60-kD SS-A/Ro (7, 17) and 47-kD SS-B/La antigens (26). DNA hybridization experiments using the cDNAs from all three antigens above also showed no cross-hybridization (data not shown). Human SS-A/Ro autoantibodies recognized epitope(s) expressed on the recombinant proteins derived from the initial λZap phage and the subcloned pBlue-script plasmid. The partially purified recombinant protein was a specific substrate for the sensitive detection of anti-SS-A/Ro antibodies in an ELISA format. In addition, in vitro translation product derived from cDNA clone could be immunoprecipitated by anti-SS-A/Ro sera and was found to comigrate with the cellular 52-kD protein as determined by immunoblotting and two-dimensional gel electrophoresis. Because data from mRNA blotting indicated that there was only one band of ~1.9 kb in MOLT-4 cells, the 1.9-kb cDNA insert of p52FL probably represented the full-length mRNA. The presence of putative zinc fingers and a leucine zipper in the 52-kD protein
Figure 6. Nucleotide sequence of 52FL cDNA insert and deduced amino acid sequence of the encoded 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein. Three in-frame stop codons at the 5'-untranslated region and two polyadenylation signal sequences are underlined. A leucine zipper motif is also underlined with the leucine residues marked with arrowheads. These sequences have been submitted to EMBL/Genbank under accession No. M35041.

Figure 7. Diagrammatic summary of the features of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein. The entire 52-kD protein sequence shows high degree of homology with human rfp protein. In addition, the amino-terminal half of the 52-kD protein is similar to the corresponding halves of human ret transforming protein and mouse rfp-1 gene regulatory protein (see Fig. 9).

Figure 8. Putative zinc fingers in the amino-terminal domain of 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein. These finger structures are arranged based on the proposed finger structures in rfp-1 by Patarca et al. (34) and are further modified for the 52-kD protein. In the region encompassing residues 16–54, either one of two possible zinc fingers can be formed in the configurations depicted in A and B. Another possibility (C) was considered (also see text).

Human 52-kD SS-A/Ro Autoantigen 73
sequence might suggest DNA and/or RNA binding activities although experimental evidence for the direct association of the 52-kD protein with DNA/RNA is still lacking. The molecular characteristics and cDNA sequence described in this report provides a precise definition for the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein. It is necessary to mention that due to a sequencing error, an in-frame carboxy-terminal region rich in Ser/Thr/Pro amino acids was reported to be present in the 52-kD clone (36). The error was detected and the corrected sequence is presented in this report.

Other SS-A/Ro protein sequences. There were three previous cDNA sequences reported for proteins of the SS-A/Ro complex. Deutscher et al. (7) and Ben-Chetrit et al. (17) both described the cloning and sequence of cDNA for the 60-kD SS-A/Ro protein. Their corresponding deduced protein sequences were identical except for short regions in their carboxy-termini. Both recombinant proteins were recognized by human autoantibodies in several different immunoassay formats (7, 17, unpublished data). The common region between the two deduced protein sequences contained a putative zinc finger and a RNA-binding protein consensus motif that could account for the direct interaction with hY-RNAs. Deutscher et al. (7) were able to reconstitute in vitro ribonucleoprotein complexes composed of hY1 RNA and recombinant 60-kD SS-A/Ro protein. Because the two cDNAs were obtained from different human cells, the differences in sequence could be a result of differential expression of separate SS-A/Ro genes or differential mRNA splicing. A third sequence was reported initially by Lue et al. (37) describing the amino-terminal 24 residues determined by standard protein sequencing of a purified 60-kD protein from Wil-2 cells. A synthetic peptide corresponding to this amino-terminal region was reported to be recognized by SS-A/Ro positive autoimmune sera (37); it was thus proposed that a major autoepitope resides within this amino-terminal region (37). McCauliffe et al. (38) from the same laboratory recently described a cDNA encoding this protein. The deduced amino acid sequence appears to be a human analogue of the rabbit and mouse calreticulin (calregulin), a high-affinity calcium binding protein present in the lumen of endoplasmic reticulum (39). It is unclear whether the protein of McCauliffe et al. (38) is another species of SS-A/Ro antigen because the reactivity of the recombinant protein with human anti-SS-A/Ro sera was not presented (38). The 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein described in this report is distinct from the cDNA sequence reported by McCauliffe and from other sequences reported to date.

Homology with ret, rfp, and rtp-1 proteins. In 1985, the activation of a transforming gene ret was first detected during transfection of NIH 3T3 cells with DNA from a human T lymphoma (40). The ret gene was cloned from transformed NIH cells by hybridization with human sequence probes and was shown to be a result of DNA rearrangement (40). Later, it was found that the ret gene was a fusion between two unlinked segments of human DNA encoding for an amino-terminal finger domain and a carboxy-terminal tyrosine kinase domain, respectively (35). This kinase domain was preceded by a hydrophobic transmembrane sequence and thus the ret protein was thought to be a cell surface receptor (35). A cellular homologue corresponding to the amino-terminal half of ret was cloned and named rfp (ret finger protein) and we show that the latter has a high degree of homology with the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein (Fig. 9). A novel localization signal sequence was found in the rfp sequence, suggesting that it might be a nuclear protein. Its mRNA level was 20 times higher in testis than in liver and kidney and this observation led to a proposed functional role in male germ cell development (13). It was also noted that the
mRNA level was highest in 11.5-d mouse embryos as compared to other stages (13). The fact that rfp is part of a transforming gene ret raises the question whether the 52-kD protein might have similar transforming potential. The second protein that the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein was found to share similarity with was rpt-1 (for regulatory protein of T-lymphocyte [1]). Rpt-1 was first described by Patarca et al. (34) as a protein selectively expressed by resting but not activated CD4+ inducer T cells. Rpt-1 is a 41-kD nuclear protein that down-regulates gene expression of IL-2 receptor α-chain gene and human immunodeficiency virus type 1 genes. Sequence similarities among the 52-kD SS-A/Ro, rfp, and rpt-1 proteins can be useful when the function of an index protein such as the 52-kD SS-A/Ro is unknown, but it is well acknowledged that such interpretations should be taken with caution. Nevertheless, it provides new avenues for future investigations into the possible functional roles of the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein.

Because the report of Ben-Chetrit et al. (4) showing that SS-A/Ro autoantibody targets consisted of at least two components of 52 and 60 kD, the results of many studies based on the assumption that the 60-kD protein was the only SS-A/Ro autoantigen would have to be reevaluated. Buyon et al. (41) recently showed that in neonatal lupus syndrome with congenital heart block, all 20 mothers of permanently affected infants had antibodies to either SS-A/Ro or SS-B/La antigens. The predominant antibody response was to the 52-kD SS-A/Ro antigen (41). In another report by Ben-Chetrit et al. (42), it was shown that although most SS-A/Ro-positive autoimmune sera had reactivity to both the 52- and 60-kD antigens in immunoblotting, antibody to the 52-kD antigen without concomitant antibody to the 60-kD antigen was seen only in patients with primary Sjogren’s syndrome whereas antibody to the 60-kD antigen without concomitant antibody to the 52-kD antigen was seen only in patients with systemic lupus erythematosus (42).

The latter observation that there was a dissociation of immune responses to the two SS-A/Ro components might suggest different events stimulating the autoimmune process in these diseases. The current report on the sequence and molecular characteristics of the 52-kD protein establishes its identity and might be useful in elucidating its function and that of the multicomponent SS-A/Ro complex. Such information could contribute to understanding some features of this autoimmune reaction.

Acknowledgments

This is publication 6400-MEM from the Research Institute of Scripps Clinic. This work is supported by Grants AR32063 and AI10386 from the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Chan is a recipient of an Arthritis Foundation Investigator Award.

Note added in proof: Recently we have detected protein sequence similarity between the 52-kD SS-A/Ro protein and the 55-kD RAD18 gene product of Saccharomyces cerevisiae (Chen et al. 1988. Gene (Amst.). 74:543–547). The region of similarity is restricted to N-terminal 54 amino acid residues, and the Cys residues of the zinc finger domain are conserved.

References