RYAN ELLISON

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Marseilles, France

Supervisor: Dr Eric Cascales

Second year undergraduate, M Molecular and Cellular Biochemistry, Exeter College

PROJECT

My project was concerned with genetically engineering E. coli, with the aim of hijacking their naturally existing Type VI secretion system, essentially a nanoweapon similar to a needle or harpoon, which the bacteria use to compete with each other. The idea was to modify the E. coli such that they would target colorectal cancer cells with this system.

The support I received from the people at the CNRS (where I worked) was incredible, with everyone in the lab being friendly and welcoming, as well as willing to explain and talk about many different aspects of science, from explaining the theory and practice of the procedures I was carrying out in the lab, to what it was like having a career in a research institute, and how the world of publishing scientific literature works. I think that I was incredibly fortunate to have such a kind host group, and thanks to them I was able to learn a lot during my project.

In addition, the members of the lab arranged for me to give a presentation at the end of my stay, based on the work I had done during the project, and the follow-up work that I envisioned to be required. They asked me some questions about my research, and gave me feedback on my presentation, my handling of questions, and a poster that I had produced, all of which was incredibly useful.

DAILY LIFE

The time I headed to work depended on what I was working on that day; for example, bacterial cultures take several hours to grow to a suitable level, and so on those days I would aim to be in work by 9am. Otherwise, I would study for about an hour and instead head into work for 10am. My journey to work was very nice, because I was able to rent an apartment close to my place of work, and so my morning walk to work was only about 15 minutes.

In terms of what I did outside of work, I really only ventured into Marseilles on the weekends. The transport links great, so I had the option of either taking a short bus trip to the national park Calanques (a sort of rocky cliff-like area near the sea which was very beautiful) or walking a little further to catch the metro to go into Marseilles city centre. I lived fairly close to a huge park that was packed with wildlife, so quite frequently I would spend the day there. Typically, Saturday was my day off and Sunday was devoted to study.

My socialising was mostly with my colleagues, since I spent most of my time at work. The atmosphere there was quite relaxed, so everyone was pretty willing to chat, and we always went for lunch together at the on-site canteen. I even went to the beach with some of them on the weekend for a swim, and we also played boules together after work.

LEADERSHIP

The training week that we completed together was fun and insightful, with the opportunity to reflect on and identify important aspects of leadership, as well as meet some very interesting speakers. An important aspect of this week though, was that it was an opportunity for all of the Laidlaw Scholars to get to know each other and each other's projects. One of the key values of the Laidlaw Programme is the importance it places on forming strong and meaningful relationships with the other scholars, and I can genuinely say that I've made some great friends among my fellow scholars.

The leadership training poses important questions that make you think about the key aspects of leadership that will be important in the future, in a wide variety of situations. I think the real importance of this qualification will be the skills that it will bring me, by making me consider leadership in a meaningful way.

IMPACT

The programme has definitely solidified in my mind the idea that I would like a career in research after my degree, and I'm now almost certain that I'd like to do a PhD once I've graduated. It has gone a long way in terms of boosting my confidence, as not only did I manage my own research project for 10 weeks, but I was able to live in a foreign country for ten weeks, where most people outside of my place of work did not speak English.

For the first time, I was responsible for my own research project; the fact that any failures would mean a setback for the project was quite a motivating force, as opposed to an undergraduate teaching lab where the lab work carries on for 4 days at most, meaning that there isn't really such a thing as a major setback.

The programme was not just great for developing my lab skills and giving me insight into the life of a researcher, but I was also able to learn the ways in which research and publishing works around the world and in different journals, as well as the differences in research careers between England, France, and America, since the members of my lab had all taken up placements outside of France at some point. This opened my eyes to a career in the wider world, and to the idea that research is a truly international undertaking where there are no borders.

Hijacking the Type VI Secretion System to develop a Bacterial Anti-Cancer Therapy

Ryan Ellison[1], Eric Cascales[2]

1. University of Oxford, 2. Mediterranean Institute of Microbiology, CNRS – Aix-Marseille University, Marseille, France

Introduction

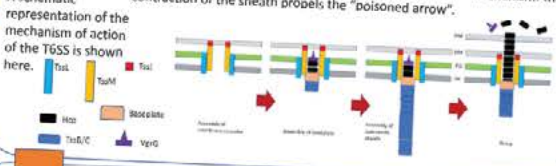
The goal of my project was to engineer a bacterial strain able (i) to colonize the human colon, (ii) to specifically bind to colon cancer cells, and (iii) to deliver a toxin to kill said cancer cells. For this, I need:

1. a disabled strain of a diarrheal *E. coli* species (lacking the main toxin that causes the disease), able to enter and to live in the colon. I used the 17-2 non-pathogenic enteroaggregative *E. coli* (EAEC) strain.
2. to expose at the cell surface an antibody that specifically recognizes the carcino-embryogenic antigen (CEA5), a marker of colorectal cancer cells.
   - I will use the HbpB autotransporter to display an anti-CEA5 nanobody (nbCEA5) on the surface of E. coli – **this recognizes the colorectal cancer cells.**
3. to deliver an eukaryotic-targeting toxin using the EAEC anti-bacterial Type VI secretion system (T6SS) such that it is effective at killing/disabling eukaryotic cells
   - I will fuse an actin crosslinking domain (ACD) to the VgrG spike of the T6SS

Introduction – Type VI Secretion System

The T6SS is a multiprotein apparatus that functions as a "nano-crossbow" [1]. It is used by bacteria to inject toxins or other effectors into target cells using a contractile mechanism: the contraction of the sheath propels the "poisoned arrow".

A schematic representation of the mechanism of action of the T6SS is shown here.

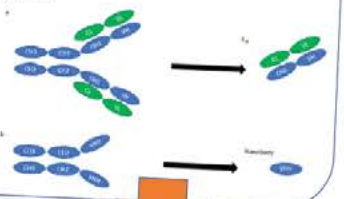


Introduction – Nanobody

Whereas typical antibodies are usually about 150-kDa in size and composed of multiple chains, nanobodies [2] are composed of a single domain and are roughly 15 kDa in size. Nanobodies are the VHH or variable heavy region of the heavy chain of antibodies produced by camels and similar species, and a basic structural comparison with a "typical" antibody is shown here.

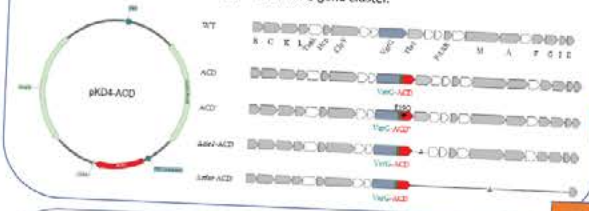
For my project, the use of a nanobody was preferable to any other type of antibody, because the nanobody DNA sequence is short and so relatively easy to insert on the plasmid and chromosome, and also because the simple structure of the antibody makes it likely that *E. coli* will be able to fold and express it correctly.

The CEA5 nanobody being used in my project has already been described [5]



Genetic Constructs

During the course of my research project, I engineered the pKD4-ACD vector that allows chromosomal insertion of the *Vibrio cholerae* ACD toxin-encoding gene. I then constructed 4 new strains of E. coli, using the λ red system encoded on the pKOBEG plasmid (not shown here). These include the VgrG-ACD construct, as well as three controls: a strain with an inactive form of the ACD (mutation of the E19 catalytic residue), and strains with deletion of the Tle1 phospholipase or T6SS genes. The 4 constructs that I created are diagrammed below in comparison with the wild type *E. coli* T6SS gene cluster.



Introduction -Autotransporter

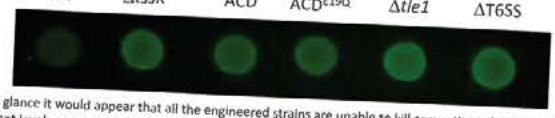
To display the nanobody on the surface of the *E. coli*, I will fuse the nanobody to an **autotransporter**, a bacterial outer membrane protein which has the ability to form a pore in the membrane, and then send a "passenger domain" through the pore for display on the bacterial surface. Thus, the nanobody will be fused to the passenger domain of the autotransporter.

The specific autotransporter I will use is HbpB, which has already been described [6]

Antibacterial Competition assay

I first tested whether the T6SS was functional in the strains that I had engineered. Because the EAEC T6SS has been shown to have anti-bacterial activity (by delivering the anti-bacterial phospholipase Tle1), I performed a fluorescence killing assay using a fluorescent prey strain [3]. The idea is that the fluorescent prey strain is mixed with the predator strain on a spot, and after incubation the fluorescence is measured. The greater the killing activity of the predator strain, the more of the fluorescent prey will killed, and thus the less fluorescence will be observed on the spot.

Predator: WT | Δ*tssK* | ACD | ACD^{E19Q} | ACD Δ*tle1* | ACD ΔT6SS



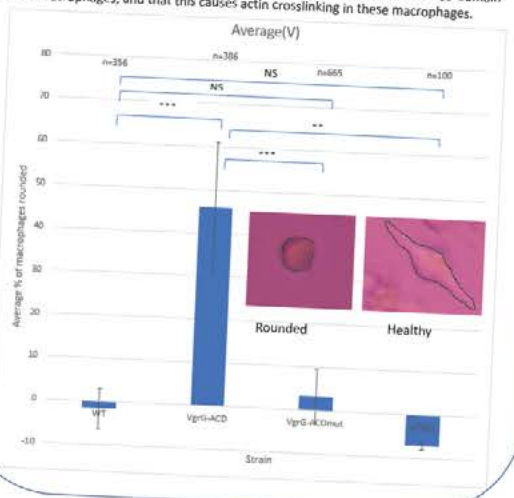
At a first glance it would appear that all the engineered strains are unable to kill competitors, because they have fluorescent levels comparable to the T6SS inactive mutant (Δ*tssK*). However, this could be due to (i) an inactive T6SS, or (ii) the inability of the T6SS to deliver the Tle1 toxin because I have inserted the ACD domain at the normal position of Tle1 on the VgrG spike. Note that ACD-Δ*tle1* not expected to display any killing activity against bacteria.

Another way of testing whether the T6SS is functional would be to test the medium for the presence of secreted T6SS effectors or to visualize sheath dynamics by fluorescence microscopy.

Macrophage Rounding assay

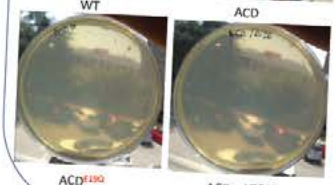
In this assay, the predator strains were incubated with macrophages. The idea here is that if the bacteria have a functional T6SS, then the bacteria should translocate the ACD domain into the macrophages, resulting in actin cross-linking. Since macrophages use actin to maintain their shape, this would result in an observable phenotype where the macrophages lose their "rough" appearance and become rounded [4].

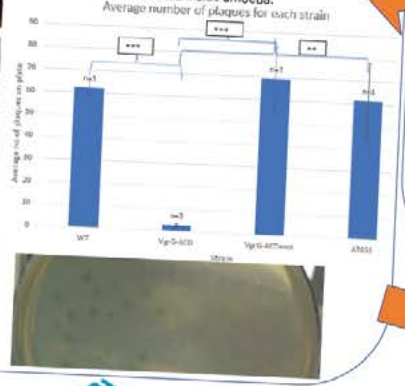
The results shown below demonstrate that only the wild-type strain with the ACD insert causes macrophage rounding. The observation that the ΔT6SS and ACDE19Q strains do not cause macrophage rounding further highlights that rounding requires both an active T6SS and functional ACD toxin. Thus, I conclude that the T6SS delivers the ACD domain inside macrophages, and that this causes actin crosslinking in these macrophages.



Amoeba Predation assay

After the promising results of the macrophage rounding assay, I further investigated the anti-eukaryotic activity of the VgrG-ACD strain by testing its ability to resist predation by amoeba. I first created a lawn of bacteria on the agar plate, then spread a solution of amoeba over the top of this, and incubated overnight. In the WT condition, the amoeba predate the bacteria and thus plaques appear in the bacterial lawn. However, if the ACD strain has anti-eukaryotic activity, then it should be able to kill the amoeba and thus there will be no or few plaques in the bacterial lawn after overnight growth. Here again, I showed that only the strain with an active T6SS and an active ACD is capable of killing amoeba, and therefore that the ACD domain is translocated inside amoeba.





What next?

VgrG-ACD construct

- Test constructed strains for actin labelling in fibroblasts
- Test strains for virulence towards *C. elegans* and mice.

Autotransporter-nanobody construct

- Insert nanobody into pKD4-Sci1 Autotransporter plasmid
- Continue to work with construct

1. Zoued A. et al. Biochimica et Biophysica Acta 2004
2. Vincke C., Muyldermans S. (2012) Introduction to Heavy Chain Antibodies and Derived Nanobodies. In: Saerens D., Muyldermans S. (eds) Single Domain Antibodies. Methods in Molecular Biology (Methods and Protocols), vol 911. Humana Press, Totowa, NJ
3. Flaugnatti et al. Mol Microbiol 2016
4. Durand E. et al. Journal of Biol. Chem 2012
5. Vaneycken et al. Journal of Nuclear Medicine 2010
6. Wouter S. P. Jong et al. Plos One 2018

Laidlaw Scholars
Undergraduate Research and Leadership Programme

Aix*Marseille université

cnrs

THE CAREERS SERVICE

This project was completed thanks to the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research & Leadership Programme at the University of Oxford