GENE EXPRESSION TECHNOLOGY
at the BCCA Genome Sciences Centre

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Objective and Design

The Genome Sciences Centre has established a Gene Expression Laboratory with the purpose of consolidating high throughput transcriptome analysis platforms and related technology development.

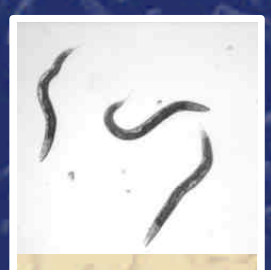
Global gene expression profiling methods are currently being applied to collaborative research in cancer genomics (V. Ling, C. Eaves), mouse development (P. Hoodless, E. Simpson, C. Helgason), *C. elegans* biology (D. Baillie, D. Moerman, D. Riddle, J. McGhee), a variety of embryonic stem cells (K. Humphries, C. Eaves, J. Thomson), transient hypoxia of human tumor cells (R. Durand), and host response to pathogens (R. Brunham, C. Astell).

Our choice and design of experimental platforms addresses the following issues critical to successful gene expression profiling in the wide variety of projects listed above:

1- Isolation and analysis of top quality RNA, including efficient isolation from minute samples.

2- Quantitative global gene expression profiling of both known and novel gene transcripts using Affymetrix *GeneChips* and Serial Analysis of Gene Expression.

3- Accurate validation of selected transcripts via quantitative real-time RT-PCR (ABI *Prism* 7900HT Sequence Detection System).



The nematode *C. elegans* glp-4(bn2ts) gonadless mutant used for manual microdissection of guts for SAGE analysis. An adult worm is about 1 mm long (magnified 30x). Photograph courtesy of Dr. James D. McGhee, University of Calgary.

Methods and Platforms

RNA isolation and analysis:

Harvesting and transport of tissue at ambient temperature is enabled by the use of RNA*later* solution (Ambion).

A PowerGen 125 rotor-stator homogenizer (Fisher Scientific) with 5 mm generator is utilized for shearing samples with volumes as low as 30 microlitres. The use of disposable generators ensures no sample cross-contamination.

Total RNA is usually isolated with TRIzol (Invitrogen), a monophasic solution of phenol and guanidine isothiocyanate, and phase lock gels (Eppendorf). The latter enables clean and quantitative recovery of the RNA-containing upper aqueous phase.

The removal of any contaminating DNA is performed with Ambion's DNA-*free* reagent, a novel method that does not require subsequent organic extraction, alcohol precipitation, heating, or the addition of EDTA to the DNase-treated RNA sample.

All experiments begin with a rigorous analysis of RNA quality and quantitation. A rapid assessment of RNA quality is performed with as little as 5 nanograms of total RNA in a 1 microlitre sample volume. This is achieved using the Agilent 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies) and RNA 6000 Nano *LabChip* kit. We are in the process of testing a new Pico *LabChip* that requires as little as 200 picograms of total RNA in a 1 microlitre sample volume.

RNA 6000 Nano LabChip, Agilent Technologies. Miniaturized fluidics and electrokinetics are combined to allow rapid sizing and quantitation of nucleic acids at the nanogram level. Each LabChip can process twelve samples and the run time is about one minute per sample. Controlling software also outputs amount and ratio of ribosomal RNA bands.

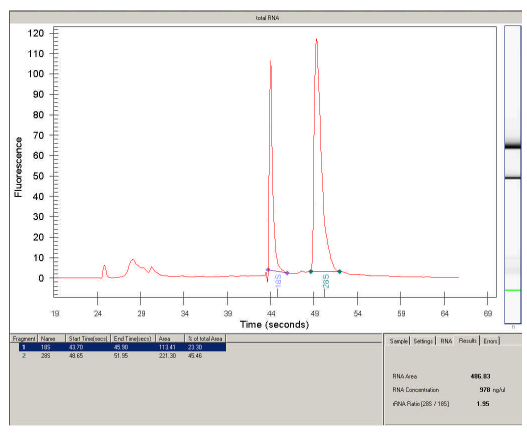


Figure 1. Bioanalyzer electropherogram for total RNA from wild-type *C. elegans* embryos. Note the two distinct small and large subunit ribosomal RNA peaks at 44 and 50 seconds, and small RNA species around 29 seconds. The rRNA ratio is about 2.0, typical of good quality total RNA.

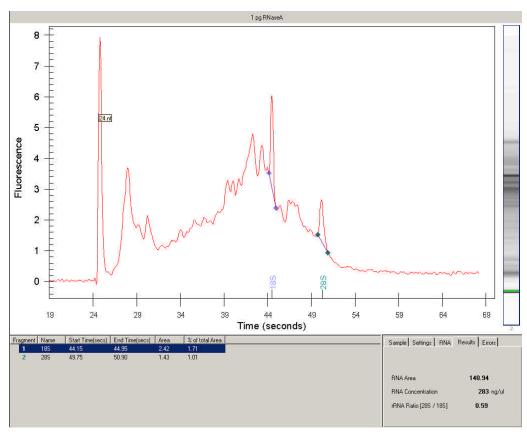
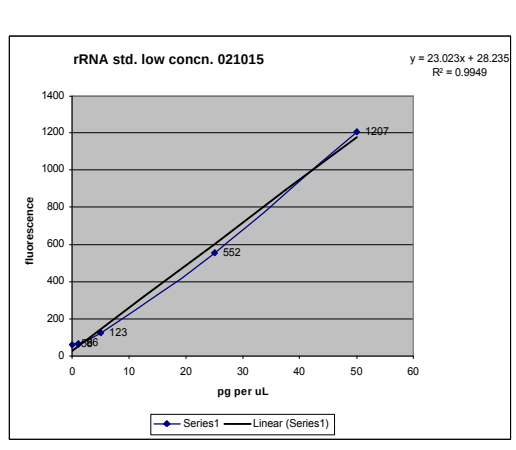


Figure 2. Bioanalyzer electropherogram for degraded total RNA from wild-type *C. elegans* embryos. Note the absence of two distinct small and large subunit ribosomal RNA peaks. The rRNA ratio has dropped to about 0.6. The 24 bp peak is a spiked reference marker.

Quantitation of total RNA at the picogram level is performed with Perkin Elmer's Victor^2 fluorometer coupled with RiboGreen dye (Molecular Probes). This level of sensitivity approaches the RNA content of a single cell.

Figure 3. Standard curve for estimating total RNA via solution fluorometry. Excitation and emission wavelengths are 485 and 535 nm respectively. Sample volume can be as low as 5 microlitres. The linear dynamic range of the assay is from 1 ng/mL to 1 ug/mL.



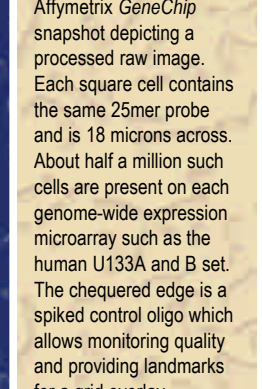
Affymetrix *GeneChip* snapshot depicting a processed raw image. Each square cell contains the same 25mer probe and is 18 microns across. About half a million such cells are present on each genome-wide expression microarray such as the human U133A and B set. The chequered edge is a spiked control oligo which allows monitoring quality and providing landmarks for a grid overlay.

Serial Analysis of Gene Expression:

SAGE is unique in its ability to generate quantitative digital datasets of known and novel transcripts. Making a regular library requires 5 micrograms of good total RNA, and takes eleven working days to construct and validate quality of clones. This is followed by DNA sequencing and bioinformatics analysis. We have established a still-growing production group to achieve an estimated throughput of 120 SAGE libraries per year, for the next three years.

Work is underway to apply modified SAGE procedures (SAGE-Lite and PCR-SAGE) that enable library construction with sub-microgram amounts of total RNA, and the generation of longer SAGE tags (LongSAGE).

We are also poised to make gains on the number of SAGE tags obtained per sequence reaction via our DNA sequencing production group's newly acquired Applied Biosystems 3730*xl* DNA Analyzers, capable of generating 1000 bp read lengths. This will enable us to surpass the current maximum for an in-house made library which averaged 50 tags per read (35 tags at 99% accuracy) and 17,128 useful tags per 384-well plate.



SAGE library tags report from a *C. elegans* longevity mutant. DNA sequence data is automatically processed for SAGE tags extraction and library statistics.

Platforms (continued)

Affymetrix GeneChip technology:

Figure 4. Hardware for the Affymetrix platform. The fluidics station (on the left, for washing and staining) can process up to 4 *GeneChips* simultaneously in about 90 minutes. The epifluorescence scanner (middle) has a maximum resolution of 3 microns and scans each chip twice over 10 minutes. Both machines are software-controlled.

High density oligonucleotide *GeneChips* are produced by Affymetrix using photolithography and solid-phase combinatorial chemistry. These include species-specific genome-wide expression microarrays that simultaneously probe for thousands of transcripts. Regular eukaryotic expression profiles are generated with as little as 5 micrograms of good total RNA and requires five working days. RNA amplification (Eberwine aRNA method) can be performed on smaller eukaryotic samples (100 nanograms) prior to processing for analysis.

We have constructed a web-based interface for submission of sample information and retrieval of data.

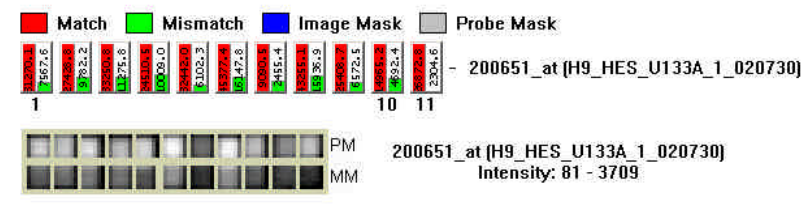


Figure 5. Probeset intensity and image data for GNB2L1 mRNA detected on a human genome-wide U133A expression *GeneChip* from a stem cell sample. Non-specific signal from each mismatch probe (in green) is subtracted from the corresponding perfect match probe (in red) to generate a true signal value. The data from 11 such probe pairs is averaged to give a signal value and quality call for each transcript.

Results

Our resources for RNA work have enabled successful RNA isolation and analysis from samples as minute as a few *C. elegans* guts, a nematode 1 mm in length. Fine instrumentation and fluorescent dye combinations allow for minimal sacrifice of precious samples harvested by tedious manual or laser-capture microdissection, and fluorescence-assisted cell sorting.

We have constructed our first comprehensive set of SAGE libraries, which investigate the genetic specification of life span in *C. elegans*. A second set compares expression profiles of human and mouse ES cells. Our third set of libraries were constructed from human tumor cells subject to differing levels of transient hypoxia in vitro.

Genome-wide *GeneChip* expression arrays have been applied to the same human and mouse ES cells' RNA utilized for SAGE library construction. These datasets will provide a comparison of the two platforms.

Preliminary work in the study of host response to pathogens involved *GeneChip* expression profiling of human lymphocytes challenged with inactivated influenza virus. We identified distinct transcriptome signatures of two lymphocyte groups characterized as strongly or weakly responsive to the viral challenge via a measure of cytokines secretion. Furthermore, we observed the characteristic up-regulation of metallothioneins, which was shown previously to occur in influenza-challenged cells in culture (Geiss, G. K. *et al*, J. Virology, vol. 75, 2001). This induction is believed to be the host cells' response to virus-driven oxidative stress. Interestingly, the clinical administration of zinc lozenges to combat the onset of cold-like symptoms has its basis in the metal's ability to induce metallothionein gene expression (Marshall, S., Can. Fam. Phys., vol. 44, 1998).

Reproducibility of expression data by this technology has been achieved with technical replicates for human ES cells' RNA differing by no more than 0.15-0.46 % (59-179 transcripts) for a two-chip assay of 39,000 transcripts.

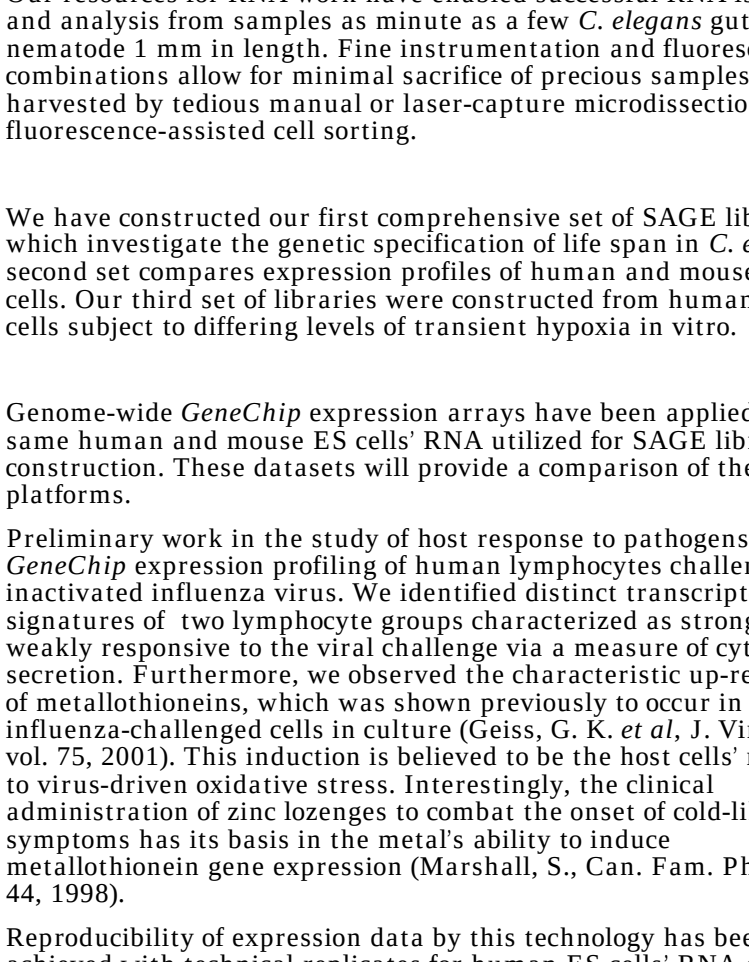


Figure 6. *GeneSpring* 5.0 (Silicon Genetics) chromosomal view showing location of strongly induced transcripts (in blue and red) from a human lymphocytes sample challenged with influenza virus.

Conclusion

Combining the latest in laboratory instrumentation and select molecular biology techniques has positioned us to routinely perform transcriptome-wide gene expression analyses and is preparing us for tackling minute samples using the same high throughput platforms.

Acknowledgements

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