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Evidence of Influenza A Virus RNA in Siberian Lake Ice

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Influenza A virus infects a large proportion of the human population annually, sometimes leading to the deaths of millions. The biotic cycles of infection are well characterized in the literature, including in studies of populations of humans, poultry, swine, and migratory waterfowl. However, there are few studies of abiotic reservoirs for this virus. Here, we report the preservation of influenza A virus genes in ice and water from high-latitude lakes that are visited by large numbers of migratory birds. The lakes are along the migratory flight paths of birds flying into Asia, North America, Europe, and Africa. The data suggest that influenza A virus, deposited as the birds begin their autumn migration, can be preserved in lake ice. As birds return in the spring, the ice melts, releasing the viruses. Therefore, temporal gene flow is facilitated between the viruses shed during the previous year and the viruses newly acquired by birds during winter months spent in the south. Above the Arctic Circle, the cycles of entrapment in the ice and release by melting can be variable in length, because some ice persists for several years, decades, or longer. This type of temporal gene flow might be a feature common to viruses that can survive entrapment in environmental ice and snow.

Influenza A virus is infamous for its ability to cause seasonal human epidemics; it affects approximately 10 to 20% of the world’s population every year (31). Occasionally, it exhibits extreme virulence in poultry as well, bringing about unparalleled economic losses. Pandemics of influenza A virus in 1918 (subtype H1N1), 1957 (subtype H2N2), and 1968 (subtype H3N2) led to over half a million human deaths in the United States alone. The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continually plan for the threat of a pandemic strain of influenza A virus, deposited as the birds begin their autumn migration, can be preserved in lake ice. As birds return in the spring, the ice melts, releasing the viruses. Therefore, temporal gene flow is facilitated between the viruses shed during the previous year and the viruses newly acquired by birds during winter months spent in the south. Above the Arctic Circle, the cycles of entrapment in the ice and release by melting can be variable in length, because some ice persists for several years, decades, or longer. This type of temporal gene flow might be a feature common to viruses that can survive entrapment in environmental ice and snow.

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ice for more than 6 months annually and are frequented by large populations of migratory waterfowl, some of which travel to North America and others that travel as far as southern Asia, Europe, and Africa.

We sampled ice or water from three northeastern Siberian lakes in the Kolyma River region (Fig. 1) and tested the samples for the presence of influenza A virus using reverse transcription-PCR (RT-PCR) specific for the H1 version of the hemagglutinin gene. The lakes are approximately 100 km from the Arctic Ocean, in an area covered by hundreds of lakes. Ice forms on the lakes early in October and thaws early in June. The lakes sampled in our study do not contain permanent or semipermanent ice cover, as might probably be the case for Siberian lakes located north of 70°N. The significance of the lakes we sampled is for annual virus preservation and for demonstrating the feasibility of viral endurance in environmental ice. Maximum ice thickness ranged from 0.65 to 1.40 m. Lake water temperatures varied from 2.0 to 8.0°C at the bottom to 22.0 to 27°C at the surface during the summer, and from 0.3 to 2.5°C at the bottom to 0.0°C immediately below the ice during winter. Lake Edoma (also called Yedoma) and Lake Shchychie (also called Shuchi) are thermokarst lakes on a Late Pleistocene fluvial plain isolated from the Kolyma River, the primary river in the area. Lake Park also is a thermokarst lake but is within the floodplain of the Kolyma River between two residual outcrops of Late Pleistocene fluvial plain. Periodically, Lake Park is flooded by the Kolyma River. Due to its distance from human settlements, Lake Park is often visited by birds and has large avian nesting areas. Each of the lakes is frequented by migratory birds (although the visitation and nesting frequencies vary [Table 1]). The lakes are along the flight paths of migratory waterfowl, which fly into temperate and tropical Asia, North America, Europe, and Africa for wintering.

Samples (300 to 500 ml each) were collected in September 2001 (water), from Lake Edoma, and March 2002 (ice), from Lake Park and Lake Shchychie. Water samples were collected in autumn during the beginning of mass migration of birds. The water was collected in sterile bottles at stations that were 1.5 to 2.0 m from the lake edge, very close to areas frequented by migratory waterfowl. Samples were kept at temperatures between 1 and 5°C throughout the procedures (10, 11, 12, 17, 19). The sterile culture room and laboratory benches were cleaned with undiluted Clorox (5.25% sodium hypochlorite) and 70% ethanol prior to, and following, a work session. The ice and frozen water samples were melted at room temperature in the sterile laminar flow hood. Rigorous attention to avoidance of contamination was maintained throughout the procedures (10, 11, 12, 17, 19). In the lab, water samples were melted at room temperature in the sterile laminar flow hood. Rigorous attention to avoidance of contamination was maintained throughout the procedures (10, 11, 12, 17, 19).

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The results from these 20 positive reactions. Lake Park has the highest concentration of birds, including cranes, ducks, geese, gulls, loons, sandpipers, swans, and terns (Table 1). In 40 attempts to amplify (by RT-PCR) H1 genes from Lake Shchychie ice, no amplification was evident. This lake had the lowest bird visitation rate (including no observed visits by geese) of the three lakes (Table 1). Only 1 of the 161 attempts to amplify the H1 gene from Lake Edoma water yielded an amplicon of the expected molecular weight. A single sequence resulted. This lake is only occasionally visited by geese and other birds (Table 1).

In BLAST searches of NCBI databases, the H1 gene ampli-
cons were most similar to those previously isolated with neu-
aminidase gene subtypes N1, N2, and N5. Phylogenetic analy-
ses indicated that while the viruses exhibit genetic diversity (Fig. 2), they form a monophyletic cluster (Fig. 3) in contrast to other H1 sequences. Comparison with a wide variety of H1 gene sequences indicates that the population in the Lake Park ice is most closely related to subtypes that were isolated from both avian and porcine hosts in the 1930s and 1960s (Fig. 3). They are distantly related to the H1 subtype from the 1918 pandemic.

Our results indicate the following: (i) the highest frequencies of detection of influenza A virus RNAs are in the lakes with the highest concentrations of migratory waterfowl; (ii) influenza A virus RNA is preserved in higher concentrations in lake ice than in lake water (also of note is that the fragment we consistently were able to amplify was 610 nucleotides in length, indicating good preservation of the RNA, which implies good preservation of the virus); (iii) the H1 gene population in the lakes is genetically heterogeneous; (iv) the single H1 gene found in Lake Edoma is similar to the H1 genes in Lake Park, indicating that this gene likely is from the same population of virions; (v) the H1 sequences in this study are closest to those found in Europe during the 1930s and in Asia during the 1960s; and (vi) the H1 sequence from an H1N1 specimen (Brevig Mission, Alaska, 1918) (15) is distantly related to all of the H1 genes. It indicates a possible in lake water; (ii) influenza A virus RNA is preserved in higher concentrations in lake ice than in lake water (also of note is that the fragment we consistently were able to amplify was 610 nucleotides in length, indicating good preservation of the RNA, which implies good preservation of the virus); (iii) the H1 gene population in the lakes is genetically heterogeneous; (iv) the single H1 gene found in Lake Edoma is similar to the H1 genes in Lake Park, indicating that this gene likely is from the same population of vi-
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DISCUSSION

This is the first report of the persistence of influenza A virus in lake ice, as reflected by enduring genes. It indicates a potential long-term survival mechanism for the virus. Ice may act as a reservoir for influenza A viruses, preserving them for later release and infection of animals, including migratory waterfowl and humans. Surveillance of Arctic and subarctic lakes for influenza virus may aid health professionals to improve prediction of influenza virus subtypes that are circulating at particular points in time, thus facilitating long-term vaccination strategies. Furthermore, surveillance may shed some light on a fundamental apparatus allowing for abiotic long-term perpetuation of multiform influenza A virus strains.

Cold temperatures and freezing preserve most types of vi-
ruses, including influenza virus (14, 17, 18, 22). Experimentally, the feasibility of influenza A virus endurance in the frozen state has been demonstrated, implying its survivability in frozen lakes. Inactivation of 99% of a virus population occurs in approximately 1 week when water temperatures are between
22 and 25°C. However, 10 weeks is required to inactivate the same proportion of the virus population if the temperature is between 3 and 5°C. The rate of virus degradation slows down to an even greater extent at and below freezing, and it continues to decrease as the temperature is lowered. This trend continues to below −80°C. We have found that viruses and bacteriophage (as prophage) frozen in glaciers can be preserved for well over 100,000 years (3, 4). We previously

FIG. 2. Neighbor-joining phylogram of the influenza virus hemagglutinin H1 gene sequences isolated from Lake Park ice (collected in March 2002) and Lake Edoma water (collected in September 2001). Numbers indicate sequences from clones derived from nested RT-PCR mixtures. The number before the decimal point indicates the RT-PCR number, while the number after the decimal point indicates each unique clone from the reaction. Sequences from the control virus (A/WS/33, clone p1.9) and from the Brevig Mission, Alaska, subtype H1 (accession number AF116575), are also shown. The Brevig Mission sequence was used as the outgroup. LPI indicates cloned sequences from Lake Park ice, while LEW indicates the one clone from Lake Edoma water.
FIG. 3. Maximum parsimony phylogram of a wide selection of hemagglutinin H1 gene sequences, including selected sequences from this study. Gaps were scored as a fifth base. There were more than 2,000 most-parsimonious trees, with placement of several of the sequences varying. Primarily, very closely related sequences shifted relative to one another. However, the relationships of the influenza A virus H1 sequences from this study with the other sequences were consistent in all of the trees. The tree shown has 1,128 steps, with consistency, homoplasy, retention, and rescaled consistency indices equal to 0.5417, 0.4583, 0.8562, and 0.4638, respectively. The H1 genes from Lake Park ice and Lake Edoma water are closest to those from avian strains isolated in Asia in 1933 and 1967. Also, they were related to strains from 1938 and 1939 isolated from swine in the United Kingdom. These are embedded within a large clade that includes a wide range of H1 sequences isolated from humans from the 1930s to the present. There is a more distant relationship with the H1 gene from the 1918 H1 influenza A virus (upper clade) and avian strains from 1976 through 1985 (lower ingroup clade). Sequences from H6 influenza virus strains were used as representatives of the outgroup. Abbreviations for sources: Av, avian; Hu, human; Sw, swine.
reported on viral RNA preserved in ice that was approximately 140,000 years old (4) and have additional unpublished data supporting preservation to many times this age. Therefore, glaciers and ice-covered lakes may be an unrecognized major reservoir of microbes. For pathogens, this is advantageous, since upon reemergence specific genotypes may interact with host populations that may lack resistance or immunity.

Some influenza virus strains have appeared, disappeared, and then reemerged decades later virtually unchanged (13, 20). This may indicate the presence of an abiotic mode of preservation. For example, the Russian influenza virus subtype (H1N1) that caused an epidemic in 1977 was nearly identical to the subtype (H1N1) that caused an epidemic in 1950. Other strains, most notably specific genotypes of H2N2 and H3N2 and several H1 variants, have made similar returns. Since influenza virus is an RNA virus, the rates of mutation should have been rapid if the viruses had been reproducing in biotic hosts during those years. A possible explanation for the slow rates of mutation is that the strains may have been preserved in some way during the decades between the epidemics. Preservation in ice is a possible explanation (2, 14, 18, 22, 23). Ice and ice-covered lakes (as well as glaciers) may act as huge reservoirs of preserved viruses. Therefore, annually and perennially frozen lakes (some are frozen continuously for decades or longer) along the paths of waterfowl migration routes have the potential for being major sources of viruses that cause pandemics and epizootics in birds and other animals. Virological surveillance of these lakes is needed in order to assess the relationships between the prevalence of current as well as earlier influenza A virus subtypes (including sequence characteristics) and endemic and epidemic occurrence of disease. This probably relates to other diseases as well, but this awaits thorough examination. One expectation in relation to this phenomenon would be an increased rate of release of these microbes during times of global (or local) warming events and a decrease during cooler periods.

Bird populations maintain extensive, long-term contact with the most northerly bodies of water, particularly in remote Siberian lakes, which represent perennial freezing-thawing periodicities of high variability, reaching, at the maximum, intervals of decades or longer. This means that influenza A viruses may be preserved in those lakes for years or perhaps much longer (e.g., the viability of microbes encased in ice for hundreds of thousands of years has been demonstrated in many studies [1–6, 9–12, 16, 17, 24, 28]). Thawing releases entrapped viruses of various age and thus seeds the water with concurrent strains regularly harbored by nearby sojourning birds. Until refreezing takes place, viruses of both present and past strains may be contracted by the waterfowl, whereas the remaining viruses would again be encapsulated by the subsequent formation of ice. Conceivably, such ongoing perpetual mechanisms have been operating cyclically throughout the virus’s evolution, enabling recurrent emergence of past genes and genomes.

Most of the birds that carry influenza A virus are migratory, such that the disease readily moves within the bird population from one locale to another. During the spring they move northward as the frozen lakes thaw. Starting in fall they move southward as the lakes freeze. The Kolyma River lowland birds travel along major migration paths to Southeast Asia, North America, or the northwestern Pacific Ocean, while some travel to Europe and North Africa. As the birds visit lakes along their paths they shed viruses into the lakes and onto the ice (when present) and drink water containing viruses discharged by other birds or released from the ice by thawing. Therefore, these lakes become abiotic mixing pools for the viruses, while the birds are the biotic vessels where mixing occurs (including replication and recombination). Since there are susceptible hosts along their migration path, they may pass the viruses to other birds as well as to swine, humans, or other animals. Our results support the hypothesis that ice acts as a long-term abiotic storage matrix for influenza virus and other microbes, including pathogens (18, 21–23). Furthermore, the cold lake water is also capable of preserving the virus, although presumably for shorter time periods.

Although the findings of this study are limited to the testing of three lakes, they point to a principal mechanism that may underlie a wider natural apparatus of abiotic long-term preservation of avian influenza viruses. The prevalence and extent of such a mechanism, which may bear a wealth of implications, should be further demonstrated through additional studies, including the exploration of more geographical sites, assays for related genes, and examination of viral endurance. At present, we describe the feasibility of the mechanism and supportive evidence at the level of gene recovery and analysis.

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REFERENCES


ERRATUM

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Page 12233, Fig. 3. Sequences U38242 (Tokyo/3/67) and U08904 (A/WS/33) were isolated from humans; therefore, they should
have the Hu prefix rather than the Av prefix.
Page 12233, legend to Fig. 3, line 6. “avian strains isolated in Asia in 1933 and 1967” should read “human and swine strains
isolated in the UK during the 1930s and from a human in Asia in 1967.”