RESEARCH ARTICLE

Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not an entirely safe harbour [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 not approved]

Jamie R. Bhagwan1, Emma Collins1, Diogo Mosqueira1, Mine Bakar1, Benjamin B. Johnson1, Alexander Thompson1, James G.W. Smith2, Chris Denning1

1Department of Stem Cells, Tissue Engineering and Modelling, Centre for Biomolecular Sciences, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
2Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Norwich Medical School, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich, NR4 7UQ, UK

Abstract

Background: Diseases such as hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) can lead to severe outcomes including sudden death. The generation of human induced pluripotent stem cell (hiPSC) reporter lines can be useful for disease modelling and drug screening by providing physiologically relevant in vitro models of disease. The AAVS1 locus is cited as a safe harbour that is permissive for stable transgene expression, and hence is favoured for creating gene targeted reporter lines.

Methods: We generated hiPSC reporters using a plasmid-based CRISPR/Cas9 nickase strategy. The first intron of PPP1R12C, the AAVS1 locus, was targeted with constructs expressing a genetically encoded calcium indicator (R-GECO1.0) or HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet reporter under the control of a pCAG or inducible pTRE promoter, respectively. Transgene expression was compared between clones before, during and/or after directed differentiation to mesodermal lineages.

Results: Successful targeting to AAVS1 was confirmed by PCR and sequencing. Of 24 hiPSC clones targeted with pCAG-R-GECO1.0, only 20 expressed the transgene and in these, the percentage of positive cells ranged from 0% to 99.5%. Differentiation of a subset of clones produced cardiomyocytes, wherein the percentage of cells positive for R-GECO1.0 ranged from 2.1% to 93.1%. In the highest expressing R-GECO1.0 clones, transgene silencing occurred during cardiomyocyte differentiation causing a decrease in expression from 98.93% to 1.3%. In HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet hiPSC reporter lines directed towards mesoderm lineages, doxycycline induced a peak in transgene expression after two days but this reduced by up to ten-thousand-fold over the next 8-10 days. Nevertheless, for R-GECO1.0 lines differentiated into cardiomyocytes, transgene expression was rescued by continuous puromycin drug selection, which allowed the Ca2+ responses associated with HCM to be investigated in vitro using single cell analysis.

Conclusions: Targeted knock-ins to AAVS1 can be used to create reporter...

Open Peer Review

Reviewer Status ✓ ×

Invited Reviewers

1

1

2

version 2
(revision)
10 Jul 2020

version 1
12 Nov 2019

report

report

1 Carolyn Carr, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
2 Catherine M. Verfaillie, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
Yannan Fan, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.
lines but variability between clones and transgene silencing requires careful attention by researchers seeking robust reporter gene expression.

**Keywords**

Human induced pluripotent stem cells; CRISPR/Cas9, stem-cell derived cardiomyocytes, stem-cell derived haematopoietic cells, AAVS1 safe harbour, gene targeting, silencing

**Corresponding authors:** Jamie R. Bhagwan (jbhagwan@axolbio.com), Chris Denning (chris.denning@nottingham.ac.uk)

**Author roles:** Bhagwan JR: Investigation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation; Collins E: Investigation, Resources; Mosqueira D: Investigation, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing; Bakar M: Investigation, Resources; Johnson BB: Investigation; Thompson A: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Supervision; Smith JGW: Investigation, Resources; Denning C: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

**Competing interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Grant information:** This work was supported by the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research [CRACK-IT:35911-259146, NC/K000225/1] and the Britain Israel Research and Academic Exchange Partnership [04BX14CDLG]. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

**Copyright:** © 2019 Bhagwan JR et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

**How to cite this article:** Bhagwan JR, Collins E, Mosqueira D et al. Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not an entirely safe harbour [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 not approved] F1000Research 2019, 8 :1911 https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.19894.1

**First published:** 12 Nov 2019, 8:1911 https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.19894.1
Introduction
A key consideration for targeted gene delivery in human induced pluripotent stem cells (hiPSCs) is the genomic location at which to insert the exogenous DNA sequence to maximise transgene expression and limit disruption of critical endogenous genes and their function. To this end, a number of chromosomal locations that are amenable to integration have been exploited. These regions of the genome are commonly referred to as safe harbour loci, and often share some common properties such as limited disruption to endogenous genes, low proximity to oncogenes and a chromatin structure that is not prone to epigenetic silencing.2,3

Examples of previously utilised genomic safe harbour loci include the chemokine (C-C motif) receptor 5 (CCR5) gene4,5, the human orthologue of the mouse Rosa26 locus (hROSA26)6, and a region within intron 2 of the Citrate Lyase Beta-Like (CLYBL) gene7.

The AAWS1 locus is an area of chromosome 19 (position 19q13.42) that has been found to be a common integration site for exogenous DNA delivered to cultured cells with adeno-associated virus (AAV)8,9. Integration into this site is associated with only limited disruption of endogenous genes. The phosphatase 1 regulatory subunit 12C (PPPR12C) gene codes for a protein with a poorly defined function, and its first intron is disrupted by integration into the AAWS1 site, with no observed deleterious consequences in targeted human pluripotent stem cells (hiPSCs)2,6. DNA sequences inserted at this location are supposedly protected by endogenous insulator regions10. These insulators are considered to contribute to maintaining an open chromatin conformation at the AAWS1 locus, reducing the likelihood of transgene silencing compared to other safe harbour loci such as CCR55,11,11'. However, some reports of DNA methylation dampening transgene expression in hPSC-derived hepatocytes raise questions on whether a ‘perfect’ safe harbour locus exists.2,12 Despite this, AAWS1 has remained popular for gene targeting13-16.

We sought to utilise CRISPR/Cas9 nickase to target the AAWS1 locus in hiPSCs and introduce a genetically encoded calcium indicator, R-GECO1.0, to enable live Ca2+ imaging in hPSC-derived cardiomyocytes (hiPSC-CMs)17,18. This was performed in genome engineered isogenic hiPSC lines we previously described to model the condition, hypertrophic cardio-myopathy (HCM). These included a trio of lines harbouring a C9123T mutation19 and a duo harbouring a ACTC1G301A mutation20.

In addition, CRISPR Cas9 targeting of the AAWS1 locus was used to target a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette into hiPSCs with the aim of modulating HOXA9 during haematopoietic differentiation.

We found that, far from being a safe harbour locus, AAWS1 integration associated with transgene expression that varied between clones and/or was silenced during directed differentiation towards both haematopoietic cells and cardiomyocytes. This suggests that silencing at the AAWS1 locus is not limited to the endoderm lineage as previously described12. Nevertheless, by altering our methods from bulk population analysis to single cell confocal laser line scan microscopy, we used the hiPSC-CMs expressing R-GECO1.0 to investigate the impact of HCM mutations on Ca2+ transients. Abnormalities were found in both HCM-associated mutations MYH7C9123T and ACTC1G301A, and this phenotype was successfully rescued with drug treatment. This demonstrates an in vitro alternative to some aspects of drug testing on animal models of HCM. Finally, we conclude that the AAWS1 locus cannot be considered a true safe harbour. Researchers seeking to target this locus should check clones for transgene expression status both in hiPSCs and in differentiated progeny.

Methods
Ethical statement
Informed patient consent was obtained for all patient-derived hiPSC samples to be used for research purposes. Isolation and use of patient fibroblasts was approved by the Nottingham Research Ethics Committee (License 09/H0408/74), and sample collections are registered with the UK Clinical Research Network under project 8164.

hiPSC culture and differentiation
All cell culture experiments were performed in a type II Biological Safety Cabinet, and cells were incubated in a humidified incubator at 37°C and 5% CO2. hiPSCs were routinely maintained in E8 medium on 1:100 Matrigel (Corning #356235) coated plastic ware (Nunc). Cells were passaged every three days by washing once with Ca2+/Mg2+-free Phosphate Buffer Saline (PBS, Gibco #14190-094), followed by incubation with TrypLE for four minutes. Subsequently, hiPSC were resuspended in E8 supplemented with 10 μM Y-27632 (ROCKi, Tocris Bioscience #1254/10) and seeded into new Matrigel-coated flasks at approximately 20000 cells/cm2. Medium was changed every day.

hiPSC differentiation to cardiomyocytes was performed as previously described19,20. Briefly, culture vessels were seeded at approximately 20–40 thousand cells / cm2, followed by a Matrigel™ overlay step two days later, supplemented with 1 ng/ml BMP4 [R&D #314-BP-050]. 16 hours later, medium was changed to StemPro™/ Serum Free Medium [SP34, Gibco #10639011], supplemented with 8 ng/ml Activin A (ActA, LifeTechnologies #PHC9564) and 10 ng/ml BMP4. After 48 hours medium was changed to RPMI B27 without insulin (LifeTechnologies #A1895601), with 10 μM KY0211 (R&D #4731) and 10 μM XAV939 (R&D #3748). 48 hours later, medium was changed to RPMI B27 (LifeTechnologies #0080085-SA) with 10 μM KY0211 and 10 μM XAV939. Thereafter, medium was changed every 2–3 days with fresh RPMI B27 until day 15 of differentiation, when hiPSC-CMs were dissociated using collagenase, re-plated, and kept in RPMI B27 for another week until phenotypic assays were performed.
hiPSC differentiation to haematopoietic cells was performed by passaging hiPSCs using Gentle Cell Dissociation Reagent (GCDR; Stem Cell Technologies #07174) and Corning cell scrapers (Sigma #CLS3008) when colonies had compacted and wells were 70–80% confluent. Differentiation was performed using STEMDiff™ Haematopoietic Kit according to the supplied protocol (Stem Cell Technologies #05310). Briefly, hiPSCs were dissociated as cell aggregates with GCDR for 7–10 minutes at room temperature, followed by scraping. Cell aggregates (50–200 μm in diameter) were seeded at different ratio densities in E8 media. The following day, only wells that contained 16–40 colonies >50 μm in diameter were selected to continue with differentiation and media was changed to Media A (day 0 of differentiation). On day two, a half Media A change was performed. On day three, media was changed to Media B and half Media B changes were performed on days five, seven and 10. On day 12, suspension cells were harvested for downstream analysis.

CRISPR-Cas9 gene targeting of the AAVS1 locus

In order to target the AAVS1 locus in hiPSCs, a targeting vector was constructed containing either the CAG-R-GECO1.0-IRES-Puro cassette or the doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet-CAG-G418 cassette flanked on each side with 1 kb of homology to the AAVS1 locus\(^3\). 1 μg of AAVS1 targeting vector was transfected into 1 × 10\(^5\) hiPSCs, with 500 ng of each AAVS1 guide RNA pU6 vector and 1 μg of hCas9 D10A nickase plasmid using an Amaza 4D system (Lonza) according to the manufacturer’s instruction. 24 hours after transfection, the medium was supplemented with 0.3 μg/ml puromycin (Life Technologies #A1113802) or 50 μg/ml Geneticin\(^{TM}\) (Life Technologies #10131027) depending on the drug selection cassette for positive selection of clones up to 10 days post-transfection. Drug-resistant clones were then isolated using 0.5 mM EDTA and expanded. Clones were then genotyped using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) on genomic DNA using Phusion® polymerase (NEB Cat# M0530S) and the primers given in Table 1. PCR cycle parameters were 95°C for 2 minutes, 60–64°C for 30 seconds and 72°C for 60 seconds, with a final elongation step of 72°C for 10 minutes.

### Table 1. Primers used for PCR screening of AAVS1 integration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCR screen</th>
<th>Forward primer sequence (5’→3’)</th>
<th>Reverse primer sequence (5’→3’)</th>
<th>Annealing temperature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5’ integration screen (Outside AAVS1 Left Arm Homology – CAG promoter)</td>
<td>TCCCCCTCTCCGATGTTGAG</td>
<td>TGGGCTATGAACTAATGACCCCG</td>
<td>64°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3’ integration screen (IRES/Puromycin – Outside AAVS1 Right Arm Homology)</td>
<td>AGCGTATTCAACAAGGGGCT</td>
<td>ACCCCCGAAGAGTGAGTGG</td>
<td>62°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biallelic targeting screen (Inside AAVS1 Left Arm Homology – Inside AAVS1 Right Arm Homology)</td>
<td>ATGCCGTTCTTACACTCGTGG</td>
<td>GGGGCTTTTCTGCAACCAATCC</td>
<td>64°C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immunocytochemistry

Dissociated hPSC-CMs or hPSCs were cultured in vitronectin- or MT-coated 96-well plates (CellCarrier, Perkin Elmer #6005550), respectively, at approximately 50K cells/cm\(^2\) as described above. Cells were washed with PBS and fixed in 4% Parafomaldehyde (PFA, Sigma) at room temperature (RT) for 15 minutes. Afterwards, cells were washed in 0.1% Tween-20 (Fisher Scientific) in PBS, permeabilized with 0.1% Triton-X (Sigma) in PBS for 15 min at RT, and incubated with 4% goat serum (Sigma) in PBS (blocking solution) for one hour at RT to prevent unspecific antibody binding. Subsequently, primary antibody incubation was performed overnight at 4°C in blocking solution at the following dilutions: mouse monoclonal anti-OCT4-1:200 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology Cat# sc-5279, RRID:AB_628051), rabbit polyclonal anti-RFP-1:1000 (Abcam Cat# ab124754, RRID:AB_10971665), mouse monoclonal anti-α-actinin-1:800 (Sigma-Aldrich Cat# A7811, RRID:AB_476766). Thereafter, samples were washed three times with 0.1% Tween-20 in PBS and incubated with Alexa Fluor secondary antibodies (Life Technologies) in blocking solution for one hour at RT. Afterwards, cells were washed with 0.1% Tween-20 in PBS for 3x five minutes, followed by nuclei and/or whole cell counterstaining with 0.5 μg/ml DAPI (Sigma #D9542) or Cell Mask (1:10000, Invitrogen #H32721) in PBS, respectively, for 30 minutes at RT. Samples were subsequently washed and stored at 4°C in PBS until automated image acquisition was performed in the Operetta\(^{TM}\) high-content imaging system (PerkinElmer) and analysed using Harmony high-content imaging analysis software.

Live imaging mScarlet expression

Live imaging of mScarlet fluorescence in differentiating hiPSCs was performed using Operetta\(^{TM}\) high-content image analysis every two days. All images were taken using a 20x objective. Brightfield images were taken using 100 ms exposure time. mScarlet imaging was performed using 400 ms exposure and an excitation wavelength of 520–550 nm and an emission wavelength of 560–630nm. Data analysis was performed using Columbus\(^{TM}\) software (PerkinElmer) to identify and quantify cell regions expressing mScarlet fluorescence.
Gene expression analysis by qPCR

Real-time qPCR reactions were performed using TaqMan® Gene Expression Assays (Applied Biosystems) following manufacturer’s instructions. Briefly, Taqman® mastermix (#4369016) including the HOXA9 probe was added to a MicroAmp Fast 96-well plate (#4346907). Subsequently, cDNA samples (from initial 500 ng of reverse-transcribed RNA) were added to the plate, which was thereafter sealed with a film (#4311971). Amplification was performed in ABI 7500 Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems). Cycle conditions were 50°C for 2 minutes, 95°C for 10 minutes followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 15 seconds and 60°C for 1 minute). Normalisation was performed using the housekeeping gene B2M or PPIA. Relative quantification was calculated using the ΔΔCT method in Microsoft Excel.

Confocal analysis and ClampFit identification of abnormal Ca²⁺ transients

hiPSCs were differentiated as previously described in RPMI B27 without phenol red and dissociated on day 15 by collagenase treatment. On day 30, hiPSC-CMs were seeded at a density of 150,000 cells per well in vitronectin-N coated MatTek dishes. Intracellular Ca²⁺ transient measurements were made using an LSM 880confocal microscope (Carl Zeiss) in the line-scan mode as previously described. CMs were located using a 40x objective and a longitudinal line was drawn across a single CM. The R-GECO fluorophore was excited with a 561 nm laser at 0.8% power, with a detection range of 579 – 639 nm. Line-scan images were taken every 75 milliseconds, with a pixel dwell time of 4.12 μsec, for a total of 4000 cycles resulting in a five minute scan. CMs were kept at 37°C and 5% CO₂ throughout data acquisition.

Confocal line scan images were analysed in Fiji software, a version of ImageJ (National Institute of Health). The average fluorescence intensity of each line was calculated against time to give a confocal line-scan trace. Using the ‘multi kymograph’ function, a corresponding kymograph image was produced. In order to calculate beat rate and arrhythmic events, data was fed into pClamp software (Molecular Devices). Baselines were adjusted to account for photobleaching and Ca²⁺ transients were counted and analysed using the ‘event detection’ function. Using the event viewer, any Ca²⁺ transients that did not return to baseline and gave a ‘double peak’, or did not return to at least 75% of the previous Ca²⁺ transient amplitude, were considered ‘abnormal’, as described in 20.

Statistical analysis

All data presented as mean with standard deviation unless otherwise stated. Statistical analysis of multiple data sets was performed using GraphPad software (version 7.04). For multiple comparisons between data sets a one-way ANOVA with Tukey’s multiple comparison test was chosen. For comparing multiple data sets to a single control column, one-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s multiple comparison test was chosen. Significance tests were based on p-values as follows: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001; **** p < 0.0001.

Results

Knock-in of transgenes into the AAHS1 locus

Our overarching goal was to create two isogenic sets of hiPSC lines in order to study Ca²⁺ handling in the context of in vitro models of the disease HCM. One isogenic trio comprised lines that were wild-type (MYH7WT/WT), heterozygous (MYH7WT/MT) and homozygous (MYH7WT/WT) for the c.MYH7p912T mutation. The other comprised a pair that were heterozygous (ACTC1WT/MT) and corrected (ACTC1WT/WT) for the c.ACTC1p80A mutation.

The AAHS1 locus, located within the first intron of PPP1R12C on chromosome 19 (Figure 1A), is a well characterised safe harbour locus. Using the five lines above, we targeted a cassette containing R-GECO1.0 reporter and a puromycin resistance cassette, driven by the CAG promoter, into the AAHS1 locus (Figure 1A)22. This was achieved by using a CRISPR-Cas9 nickase approach based on two sgRNAs. Nucleofection of the HCM-associated hiPSCs with the R-GECO1.0 construct, bidirectional sgRNAs and Cas9 D10A nickase plasmids produced puromycin-resistant clones. PCR-based screening and sequencing were used to examine the regions upstream (Figure 1B) and downstream (Figure 1C) of the insertion site, and hence identify clones that were successfully targeted in one or both alleles (Figure 2B, C).

In addition, the MYH7WT/WT hiPSC line was used to introduce a HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette driven by a doxycycline-inducible pTRE promoter into the AAHS1 locus using the same CRISPR-Cas9 nickase approach (Figure 1A). Both 5’ (Figure 1D) and 3’ integration (Figure 1E) to AAHS1 was assessed using the same PCR genotyping approach on genomic DNA to identify successfully targeted clones.

Variability in transgene expression in the AAHS1 locus

In order to quantify R-GECO1.0 expression across the targeted clones, high content image analysis was used on hiPSCs that were dual-stained with anti-RFP antibody, which identifies R-GECO1.0 (Figure 1F). From the 96-well plate, which was thereafter sealed with a film (#4311971). Amplification was performed in ABI 7500 Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems). Cycle conditions were 50°C for 2 minutes, 95°C for 10 minutes followed by 40 cycles of 95°C for 15 seconds and 60°C for 1 minute). Normalisation was performed using the housekeeping gene B2M or PPIA. Relative quantification was calculated using the ΔΔCT method in Microsoft Excel.

For multiple comparisons between data sets a one-way ANOVA with Tukey’s multiple comparison test was chosen. For comparing multiple data sets to a single control column, one-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s multiple comparison test was chosen. Significance tests were based on p-values as follows: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001; **** p < 0.0001.

This variability could not be explained by the incidence of biallelic targeting, as determined by PCR screening. Both alleles were targeted in ACTC1WT/WT clones three and six, which exhibited high R-GECO1.0 expression as hiPSCs of 91.1% and 85.4%, respectively. This was comparable with the 95.6% and 96.4% expression observed in the monoallelically targeted clones 11 and 12, respectively (Figure 2A and 2B).
Figure 1. Generation of AAVS1-targeted hiPSC clones in an isogenic MYH7 C9123T background and an isogenic ACTC1 G301A background. (A) Schematic illustrating the chromosomal location of the AAVS1 safe harbour locus. This site was targeted using two sgRNAs in a CRISPR Cas9 nickase strategy. PAM site #1 was silently mutated (G→C) in the targeting construct to prevent it being cut by Cas9 nuclease during targeting. The inserted cassette consists of R-GECO1.0 IRES-Puromycin driven by the CAG promoter. This is flanked on each side by 1 kb of homology to the AAVS1 locus. In (B) and (C) confirmatory 5’ and 3’ targeting PCR screen is shown using genomic DNA isolated from the MYH7 C9123T RGECO1.0 isogenic trio (left) and the ACTC1 G301A RGECO duo (right) hiPSCs. Correct 5’ targeting is indicated with a 1221bp product, with sequencing confirming the fidelity of the junction between the AAVS1 left arm homology and the start of the CAG promoter. Correct 3’ targeting is indicated with an 1186bp product, with sequencing confirming the fidelity of the junction between the puromycin-SV40 pA sequence and the AAVS1 right arm homology. (D, E) Confirmatory PCR and sequencing of hiPSC clones to check 5’ and 3’ targeting of the AAVS1 locus with the HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette.
Figure 2. Immunocytochemistry-based screening of AAVS1-targeted clones showing differential expression of R-GECO1.0 between and within cell lines. (A) AAVS1 targeted hiPSC clones dual-stained for OCT4 (green) and R-GECO (red) to find the highest R-GECO-expressing clone within the five cell line genotypes. High content image analysis identified that ACTC<sup>WT/WT</sup> clone 3 had the highest percentage of pluripotent (94.53% OCT4+) and R-GECO (91.06% ±1.73%) hiPSCs. ACTC<sup>WT/MUT</sup> clone 12 clone had the highest expression of R-GECO (49.37% ±1.33%). Mean ±SD, n = 3 wells. One-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s multiple comparison test, * p ≤ 0.0259; ** p < 0.0045; **** p < 0.0001. Scale bars = 50 µm. (B) Biallelic targeting PCR screen on isolated gDNA from targeted ACTC<sup>WT/WT</sup> hiPSC clones showing homozygous clones failure to generate the 517bp PCR product. (C) Biallelic targeting PCR screen showing that all ACTC<sup>WT/MUT</sup> clones tested resulted in a 517bp product and were therefore heterozygous for AAVS1 targeting. L – 1kb ladder; N – no template control; U – untargeted cell line; + - AAVS1 biallelic positive control. (D) Screening MYH7<sup>MUT/MUT</sup> clones using immunocytochemistry on differentiated hiPSC-CMs reveals a significant increase in R-GECO1.0 expression in the MYH7<sup>MUT/MUT</sup> Hom 2 clone. Mean ±SD, n = 3 technical replicates. One-way ANOVA with Tukey’s multiple comparison test, ** p ≤ 0.006; **** p < 0.0001. Scale bars = 50 µm.
Variability between clones was also seen upon differentiation, with a MYH7MUT/MUT Hom 2 clone showing 93.1% R-GECO1.0 expression as hiPSC-CMs, significantly greater than the 2.1% expression observed in the MYH7MUT/MUT Hom 3 clone (**** p = < 0.0001) (Figure 2D).

Taken together, these results highlight that expression levels of transgenes seen in hiPSCs can vary significantly between AAVS1-targeted clones, which continued to be observed upon differentiation. Importantly, the level of variability could not be predicted and needed to be tested empirically.

**Transgene silencing upon mesoderm differentiation**

Three AAVS1-targeted clones of each c.MYH7C9123T genotype were identified with greater than 98.3% R-GECO1.0 expression as hiPSCs (Figure 3A and 3C). However, upon differentiation to cardiomyocytes, R-GECO1.0 expression significantly reduced in the biallelically targeted MYH7WT/WT clone (** p = 0.0015). The monoallelically targeted MYH7WT/MUT and MYH7MUT/MUT clones experienced considerable silencing of R-GECO1.0 expression upon differentiation, with only 13.03% of MYH7WT/MUT hiPSC-CMs and 1.33% of MYH7MUT/MUT hiPSC-CMs expressing R-GECO1.0 (**** p < 0.0001) (Figure 3A-C). Nevertheless, to enhance the utility of these lines, particularly the low expressing MYH7WT/MUT clone, puromycin enrichment of the hiPSCs over three passages was used to significantly increase the number of R-GECO1.0 expressing hiPSC-CMs from 1.3% to 18.9% (** p = 0.0003) (Figure 3D). These results show that high transgene expression from the AAVS1 locus as hiPSCs is not a guarantee of continued high expression upon differentiation, and points towards some extent of silencing upon cardiac differentiation.

Next, we sought to investigate the time at which silencing occurs during differentiation. To do this, we used the AAVS1-targeted doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet line and differentiated the hiPSCs towards either cardiomyocyte or haematopoietic fate. As expected, the addition of 1 μg/ml doxycycline every 48 hours induced expression of HOXA9 and mScarlet during directed cardiac and haematopoietic differentiation. qRT-PCR analysis of HOXA9 and mScarlet during directed cardiac and haematopoietic differentiation shows the utility of the AAVS1-targeted R-GECO1.0 cell lines for in vitro disease modelling and phenotyping as a credible alternative to the use of animal models.

We then attempted to rescue the aberrant Ca²⁺ transient phenotype in our HCM models with the use of a combination treatment of ranolazine, a late sodium channel blocker, and dantrolene, a ryanodine receptor antagonist. In combination at 10 μM with 24 hours incubation, these two drugs significantly reduced the frequency of aberrant Ca²⁺ transient events in MYH7 mutant hiPSC-CMs. In MYH7WT/MUT hiPSC-CMs aberrant Ca²⁺ transient event frequency was reduced from 6.32% (±3.4%) in vehicle control to 2.18% (±1.9%) with drug treatment (p = 0.0068) (Figure 5H-I).

These results show that abnormalities in Ca²⁺ transients caused by the sarcomeric mutations c.MYH7C9123T or c.ACTC1G301A can be identified with AAVS1-targeted R-GECO1.0 expression, and this phenotype can be subsequently rescued with targeted pharmacological intervention aimed at reducing intracellular Na⁺ and Ca²⁺.

**Discussion**

Precise integration of exogenous DNA into the genome is often performed by targeting a genomic ‘safe harbour’ locus that can tolerate gene insertion with few deleterious effects and limited transgene silencing. The AAVS1 locus is a popular choice for targeted knock in of exogenous DNA. This region of the genome is claimed to facilitate robust and persistent transgene expression, aided by flanking insulator regions. Here, we show variable success targeting the AAVS1 locus with...
**Figure 3. Changes in transgene expression during differentiation and antibiotic selection.**

**A** Immunocytochemistry using an anti-RFP antibody to detect R-GECO1.0 expression shows a reduction in signal in MYH7\(^{WT/MUT}\) 8 and MYH7\(^{MUT/MUT}\) 15 cell lines upon differentiation from hiPSCs to hiPSC-CMs. Mean ±SD, n = 3 technical replicates. One-way ANOVA with Sidak’s multiple comparison test, ** p = 0.0015; **** p ≤ 0.0001.

**B** Percentage purity data for cardiomyocytes determined by alpha-actinin staining (red), for R-GECO1.0 by RFP staining (green). Mean ±SD, n = 3 technical replicates. One-way ANOVA with Sidak’s multiple comparison test, **** p ≤ 0.0001.

**C** Targeted hiPSC lines show variations in expression of R-GECO1.0 protein upon differentiation. hiPSC lines, identified by OCT4 staining (green, top row) show high R-GECO1.0 expression (red). Upon differentiation to cardiomyocytes, identified by  \(\alpha\)-actinin staining (red, bottom row), MYH7\(^{WT/MUT}\) 8 and MYH7\(^{MUT/MUT}\) 15 hiPSC-CMs show lower R-GECO1.0 expression (green). Scale bars = 50 µm.

**D** R-GECO1.0 expression in MYH7\(^{MUT/MUT}\) 15 cardiomyocytes after puromycin enrichment

Mean ±SD, n = 3 technical replicates. Unpaired t-test, *** p = 0.0003.
Figure 4. Differentiation towards cardiomyocytes or haematopoietic cells results in silencing of AAVS1-targeted transgene after mesoderm induction. (A) qRT-PCR performed on hiPSCs targeted at the AAVS1 locus with a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet construct undergoing cardiomyocyte differentiation. Relative expression to untargeted hiPSCs. Reduced expression of the transgene is observed from day two onwards. (B) Live imaging of AAVS1-targeted hiPSCs undergoing cardiomyocyte differentiation at different timepoints. mScarlet expression peaks on day 0 and reduces throughout the differentiation, despite repeated doxycycline treatment. Scale bars = 50 µm. (C) Quantification of mScarlet expression using high content image analysis at different timepoints during cardiomyocyte differentiation. (D) qRT-PCR performed on hiPSCs targeted at the AAVS1 locus with a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet construct undergoing haematopoietic differentiation. Relative expression to untargeted hiPSCs. Reduced expression of the transgene is observed from day four onwards. (E) Live imaging of AAVS1-targeted hiPSCs undergoing haematopoietic differentiation at different timepoints. Scale bars = 50 µm. (F) Quantification of mScarlet expression using high content image analysis shows peak expression on day two and reduced expression thereafter. Mean ±SD, n = 2 differentiations. One-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s multiple comparison test, *p = 0.0036; **** p ≤ 0.0001. (G, H) The mesoderm markers MIXL1 and Brachyury (T) show peak expression at day two of haematopoietic differentiation.
Figure 5. Functional application of AAVS1-targeted R-GECO1.0 expressing clones for in vitro disease modelling of HCM and phenotypic rescue with drug treatment. (A–C) Representative 25-second confocal laser line scan traces and kymographs for isogenic trio of c.MYH7<sup>C9123T</sup> R-GECO1.0 expressing hiPSC-CMs at day 30. Abnormal Ca<sup>2+</sup> transient events (red arrows) increase in frequency with mutation load. (D) Ca<sup>2+</sup> transient event detection and quantification showing percentage of Ca<sup>2+</sup> transients deemed abnormal. Data presented as mean ±SD, n = 6 scans across three differentiations. Kruskal-Wallis test with Dunn’s multiple comparison test; ** p = 0.0018, **** p < 0.0001. (E–F) Representative 25-second confocal laser line scan traces and kymographs for isogenic pair of c.ACTC1<sup>G301A</sup> R-GECO1.0 expressing hiPSC-CMs at day 30. Abnormal Ca<sup>2+</sup> transient events (red arrows) increase in frequency with mutation load. (G) Box-plot showing % of total Ca<sup>2+</sup> transient events detected deemed abnormal by event detection software. Data presented as mean ±SD, n = 5 scans from three differentiations. Unpaired t-test; * p = 0.0118. (H–L) Representative line scans and event detection quantification showing a reduction in abnormal Ca<sup>2+</sup> transient events upon treatment with 10 µM ranolazine and 10 µM dantrolene compared to 0.1% DMSO vehicle control. Data presented as mean ±SD, n > 4 cells across minimum of two differentiations. Kruskal-Wallis test with Dunn’s multiple comparison test; ** p = 0.0068.
the genetically encoded calcium indicator R-GECO1.0 or a
doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette using a
CRISPR Cas9 nickase approach.

Variability in R-GECO1.0 expression between AAVS1-targeted
clones as hiPSCs was observed, highlighting the importance
of thorough screening of clones. Unsurprisingly, clones that
had undergone biallelic targeting retained high R-GECO1.0
expression as hiPSCs, yet monoallelically targeted clones ranged
from high expression to significantly reduced R-GECO1.0
expression. These incidences of low expression as hiPSCs
may be due to clone-specific silencing, or some clones favouring
expression from the untargeted allele. It has been shown
that some genes within cells favour monoallelic expression19.
Indeed, our own studies using an antibody for the
C.ACTCI$^{G301A}$ mutation have shown that cells heterozygous
for the mutation only express mutant protein in ~50% of the
population20. These results highlight the heterogeneity that can
exist between clones once they have been generated.

Even with the identification of AAVS1-targeted clones that
exhibited robust R-GECO1.0 expression, there were instances of
silencing upon differentiation to hiPSC-CMs. Transgene
silencing at the AAVS1 locus has previously been shown upon
differentiation towards hepatocyte-like cells, with de novo
methylation of the locus found to be responsible21. However,
the aforementioned report claims that this silencing effect is
restricted to endoderm differentiations. With the use of the
AAVS1-targeted HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cell line, we show that
in two mesoderm-specific differentiations towards car
diomyocytes and haematopoietic cells, silencing of expression
occurs immediately after mesoderm specification and peak
expression of MIXL1 and Brachyury. We therefore postulate
that AAVS1-mediated silencing, likely as a result of de novo
methylation, can occur upon differentiation to various germ
layers, and therefore AAVS1 cannot be considered a true safe
harbour locus.

The choice of promoter may also play a role in AAVS1-mediated
silencing, as a previous report has shown AAVS1 silencing of
eGFP expression when using the EF1a promoter that was
overcome with the use of the stronger CAG promoter22. This
influenced our decision to opt for the CAG promoter over the
EF1a promoter in our constructs. Indeed, the CAG promoter
appears to exhibit some insulation from methylation of
transgenes at the AAVS1 locus22.

When attempting to express two separate transgenes from
the same cassette at the AAVS1 locus, the choice of peptide
cleavage sequence is also important. We observed inefficient
peptide cleavage when using the P2A sequence, as deter
mined by Western Blot (see Extended data)22. This informed our
choice of using the T2A or IRES sequences for translation of
multicistronic cassettes in subsequent targeting constructs. It has
been claimed that the P2A cleavage sequence is the most effi
cient self-cleaving peptide, followed by T2A and E2A, when
used to cleave a bicistronic vector in three different human
cell lines, including HeLa23. We cannot reconcile this with our
data, as co-expression of multicistronic cassette elements
from the AAVS1 locus in hiPSCs has been achieved using the
IRES and T2A sequence, but not the P2A sequence.

Depending on the application of the targeted cell lines, some
AAVS1-mediated silencing can be tolerated. For the
R-GECO1.0 expressing lines, maintaining puromycin selec
tion and using a single cell confocal laser line scan assay to
study Ca$^{2+}$ transients meant that abnormalities in Ca$^{2+}$ handling
could be identified in cell lines harbouring the c.MYH$^{C9012T}$
or c.ACTCI$^{G301A}$ mutations. This represents an in vitro model of
HCM that can offer an alternative to the use of animal models.
Furthermore, this phenotype could be rescued with combination
treatment with dantrolene and ranolazine19,20. However,
the aim with the doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet
cell line was to modulate HOXA9 expression at different time
points throughout haematopoietic differentiation. Clearly, the
close described herein is not suitable for this task.

In conclusion, one must carefully select AAVS1-targeted
clones depending on their application due to the risk of trans
gene silencing upon differentiation. Other potential safe har
bour loci, such as CLPB, have been claimed to deliver five- to ten-fold higher fluorescent transgene expression than
AAVS122. However, as silencing cannot be predicted, multiple
clones must be thoroughly checked for expression level and
chosen according to their application. Our results dispute the
claims of robust and persistent transgene expression from
AAVS122, and complements reports that show silencing at AAVS1
upon differentiation to endoderm lineage22, by showing similar
silencing upon mesoderm differentiation.

**Data availability**

**Underlying data**

FigShare: Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-
Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not
c.4573316.v222

This project contains the following underlying data:

- Figure 1 – data (raw PCR integration gel images in TIF
  format; and sequencing chromatograms underlying
  Figure 1 as AB1 files)
- Figure 2 – data (raw immunocytochemistry images in
  PNG format; PCR gel images in TIF and PNG
  format; and XLS files containing immunocytochemistry
  expression quantification data underlying Figure 2)
- Figure 3 – data (raw immunocytochemistry images in
  PNG format; and XLS files containing expression
  quantification data underlying Figure 3)
- Figure 4 – data (raw live imaging images in PNG
  format; XLS files containing qPCR data underlying
  Figure 4)
- Figure 4 data – Raw qPCR data (XLS files containing
  raw qPCR data)
Extended data

FigShare: Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not an entirely safe harbour. https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.c.4573316.v22

This project contains the following extended data:
- Figure 6. Western Blot to show incomplete cleavage of multicistronic cassette when using the P2A peptide cleavage sequence (TIFF image file)

- Protocol for CRISPR Cas9 knock-in at the AAVS1 locus and subsequent screening (a step-by-step procedure for performing CRISPR Cas9 knock-in at the AAVS1 locus of hiPSCs, followed by subsequent screening techniques in DOCX format)

Data are available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

Acknowledgements

The original Myc-P2A-R-GECo1.0 construct plasmid was received as a kind gift from Dr Matt Daniels at The University of Manchester1. hCas9_D10A was a gift from Professor George Church (Addgene plasmid #41816).

References


PubMed Abstract | Publisher Full Text | Free Full Text
In this paper, the authors aim to investigate the effect of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy associated
mutations MYH7C<sup>G9123T</sup> and ACTC1<sup>G301A</sup> on Ca<sup>2+</sup> transients using hiPSCs- derived cardiomyocytes.
To this end, the authors established hiPSCs reporters by introducing a CAG promotor-controlled calcium
indicator (R-GECO1.0) into the AAVS1 locus through CRISPR/Cas9 nickase-mediated genome editing.
Among 24 clones, 20 were found to successfully express the transgene with variation from about 0 to
99.5%. Upon differentiation to cardiomyocytes, even clones with high expression levels demonstrated
significant silencing of the transgene to 13.03% or 1.33%. By creating also an AAVS1 targeted
doxycycline inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet iPSCs reporter, the authors investigated the silencing over
the time course during mesoderm lineage commitment. It was shown that both mRNA and protein levels
of the transgenes were relatively high on day 2 and abruptly decreased from day 4 during both
cardiomyocyte and hematopoietic differentiation.

Despite the silencing of R-GECO1.0 in the AAVS1 locus, Ca<sup>2+</sup> live image by confocal laser line scan
microscopy at the single cell level detected abnormal Ca<sup>2+</sup> transients in cardiomyocytes derived from
hiPSCs reporters harboring MYH7C or ACTC1 mutations compared to wildtype or isogenic control. In
addition, this abnormality could be rescued by pharmacological inhibiting intercellular level of Na<sup>+</sup> and Ca
2+. This study shows that iPSC reporter line is of importance for disease modelling. This study presented an
important issue in AAVS1-targeted transgene expression in iPSCs and mesoderm lineage although the
mechanisms for the silencing are not clear. The variable expression and silencing in mesoderm
differentiation shown here are in line with previous reports that the AAVS1 is not a true safe harbor for
cells differentiated to hematopoietic cells (e.g. PMID: 31773990) and endoderm (e.g. PMID: 26455413);
and, hence, the findings are not fully novel.

Specific comments:
1. The authors did not mention why for they compared wild-type (MYH7<sup>WT/WT</sup>), heterozygous (MYH7
   WT/MUT) and homozygous (MYH7<sup>MUT/MUT</sup>) for the c.MYH7<sup>G9123T</sup> mutation, but no homozygous
mutant line for \textit{ACTC1}^{G301A}.

2. In Fig 2A, the expression of R-GECO in \textit{ACTC1}^{WT/MUT} clones (1/5 with about 50% cells) was lower than in \textit{ACTC1}^{WT/WT} clones. Is this chance or due to the mutation?

3. In Fig 2A, it would be better to show R-GECO in red and OCT4 in green to retain consistency with other images.

4. In Fig 3C, immunostaining in the upper images showed R-GECO in red while in the lower ones R-GECO is stained in green, which is difficult to follow.

5. It is interesting to see that puromycin enrichment of the iPSCs over 3 passages increased R-GECO1.0 expression in \textit{MYH7}^{MUT/MUT} 15, did the author also tried puromycin enrichment in \textit{MYH7}^{WT/MUT}?

6. In the introduction, the authors mention that a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette targeted in the \textit{AAVS1} locus of hiPSCs is used for modulating HOXA9 during hematopoietic differentiation. However, this iPSC reporter is also used for cardiomyocyte differentiation (Fig 4A). It is unclear whether there is specific reason why this reporter line is used instead of \textit{AAVS1}-CAG R-GECO iPSCs.

7. It is better to present RTqPCR result using a \Delta Ct method for Fig. 4 as fold changes are confusing especially in the context of transgene expression (the biological relevance of fold change is unclear unless one knows the base line transcript levels before gene activation).

8. In Fig 6 - Western Blot (Extended data), to test the peptide cleavage of P2A and T2A, the authors state that P2A is less efficient than T2A, as NpHR expression (following a P2A) was barely visible. The authors should provide positive control to exclude that the antibody for NpHR did not work.

9. Southern blots should be performed to make sure that clones tested in this study were targeted in the corrected locus, and silencing was not due to random integration.

\textbf{Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?}
Partly

\textbf{Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?}
Yes

\textbf{Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?}
Yes

\textbf{If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?}
Yes

\textbf{Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?}
Yes
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** iPSC, differentiation, genome editing

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to state that we do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 21 May 2020

Jamie Bhagwan, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Dear Reviewer,

Thank you for your comments on our manuscript entitled *Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not an entirely safe harbour.*

We have endeavoured to respond to your comments and suggestions as outlined below in bold font.

In this paper, the authors aim to investigate the effect of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy associated mutations *MYH7C*<sup>9123T</sup> and *ACTC1*<sup>G301A</sup> on Ca<sup>2+</sup> transients using hiPSCs-derived cardiomyocytes.

To this end, the authors established hiPSCs reporters by introducing a CAG promoter-controlled calcium indicator (R-GECO1.0) into the AAVS1 locus through CRISPR/Cas9 nickase-mediated genome editing. Among 24 clones, 20 were found to successfully express the transgene with variation from about 0 to 99.5%. Upon differentiation to cardiomyocytes, even clones with high expression levels demonstrated significant silencing of the transgene to 13.03% or 1.33%. By creating also an AAVS1 targeted doxycycline inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet iPSCs reporter, the authors investigated the silencing over the time course during mesoderm lineage commitment. It was shown that both mRNA and protein levels of the transgenes were relatively high on day 2 and abruptly decreased from day 4 during both cardiomyocyte and hematopoietic differentiation.

Despite the silencing of R-GECO1.0 in the AAVS1 locus, Ca<sup>2+</sup> live image by confocal laser line scan microscopy at the single cell level detected abnormal Ca<sup>2+</sup> transients in cardiomyocytes derived from hiPSCs reporters harboring *MYH7C* or *ACTC1* mutations compared to wildtype or isogenic control. In addition, this abnormality could be rescued by pharmacological inhibiting intercellular level of Na<sup>+</sup> and Ca<sup>2+</sup>.

This study shows that iPSC reporter line is of importance for disease modelling. This study presented an important issue in AAVS1-targeted transgene expression in iPSCs and mesoderm lineage although the mechanisms for the silencing are not clear. The variable expression and silencing in mesoderm differentiation shown here are in line with previous reports that the AAVS1 is not a true safe harbor for cells differentiated to hematopoietic cells (e.g. PMID: 31773990) and endoderm (e.g. PMID: 26455413); and, hence, the findings are not fully novel.

We note the reviewer’s comments regarding novelty of the findings. However, the Klatt et al. paper (PMID: 31773990) was published after the submission of this manuscript. The Klatt et al. paper was first published online on 27 November 2019, whilst this manuscript
was first published on 12 November 2019, so the variable expression and silencing upon hematopoietic differentiation was undocumented prior to the submission of this manuscript. Nonetheless, the Klatt et al paper adds weight to the notion of AAVS1 silencing, and elegantly demonstrates the contextual methylation of AAVS1-targeted transgenes depending on the promoter inserted into the site. We also note the Luo et al 2014 paper (PMID: 24833591) which showed silencing of eGFP expression at the AAVS1 site when using the EF1α promoter that was overcome by replacing it with the CAG promoter. Indeed, this paper informed our choice of promoter for the RGECO targeting construct.

The penultimate sentence of the third paragraph in the Introduction now reads: “However, some reports of DNA methylation dampening transgene expression in both hPSC-derived hepatocytes (Ordovás et al., 2015) and iPSC-derived myeloid progenitors (Klatt et al., 2020) raise questions on whether a 'perfect' safe harbour locus exists”

The Discussion now reads:

“Transgene silencing at the AAVS1 locus has previously been shown upon differentiation towards hepatocyte-like cells, with de novo methylation of the locus found to be responsible (Ordovás et al., 2015). However, the aforementioned report claims that this silencing effect is restricted to endoderm differentiations. With the use of the AAVS1-targeted HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cell line, we show that in two mesoderm-specific differentiations towards cardiomyocytes and haematopoietic cells, silencing of expression occurs immediately after mesoderm specification and peak expression of MIXL1 and Brachyury. This is in agreement with a recent report which demonstrated differential transgene methylation in AAVS1-targeted iPSC-derived myeloid cells (Klatt et al., 2020).”

And

“Indeed, the CAG promoter appears to exhibit some insulation from methylation of transgenes at the AAVS1 locus (Ordovás et al., 2015). In addition, a recent report elegantly demonstrated that contextual silencing at the AAVS1 locus of iPSC-derived myeloid precursors can occur with varying efficiency depending on the chosen promoter (Klatt et al., 2020).”

The authors recognise and acknowledge that this phenomenon has been shown in endoderm and this is referred to in the manuscript.

The last paragraph of the Introduction contains the following sentence:

“This suggests that silencing at the AAVS1 locus is not limited to the endoderm lineage as previously described (Ordovás et al., 2015).”

The Discussion states that:

“Our results dispute the claims of robust and persistent transgene expression from AAVS1, and complements reports that show silencing at AAVS1 upon differentiation to endoderm lineage (Ordovás et al., 2015)”
Specific comments:

1. The authors did not mention why for they compared wild-type (MYH7WT/WT), heterozygous (MYH7WT/MUT) and homozygous (MYH7MUT/MUT) for the c.MYH7C9123T mutation, but no homozygous mutant line for ACTC1G301A. The authors apologise for not making this clearer in the text. The discrepancy between the range of genetically-engineered lines exhibiting the MYH7- or ACTC1- mutations is due to the source of the cells and their subsequent CRISPR/Cas9 targeting strategy. The MYH7-mutant hiPSC lines were generated by targeting the WT allele of unrelated healthy cell lines or origin (Mosqueira et al., 2018), enabling the generation of heterozygous and homozygous clones. In contrast, the isogenic set of ACTC1 lines was generated by genomic correction of the mutant allele of the starting hiPSC line derived from a heterozygous patient (using a donor vector containing the WT allele only) (Smith et al., 2018, Kondrashov et al., 2018). As such, homozygous mutant clones could not be generated by employing this strategy. Notwithstanding, the vast majority of HCM-causing mutations in the sarcomeric genes are heterozygous (Lopes et al, 2013), as homozygous mutations tend to be lethal. In particular, the mutations under study (p.R453C-βMHC and p.E99K-ACTC1) have never reported to be homozygous in patients, to the best of our knowledge. Therefore, the cellular models generated already encompass the patient-relevant genotypic status and as such provide an accurate characterization of HCM in vitro. Homozygous mutant lines were included to provide extra readout sensitivity for the phenotypic assays developed (as seen by more severe phenotypes in Figure 5). The first paragraph of the Results section now reads: “Our overarching goal was to create two isogenic sets of hiPSC lines in order to study Ca²⁺ handling in the context of in vitro models of the disease HCM. One isogenic trio comprised lines that were originally wild-type (MYH7 WT/WT) and then CRISPR Cas9 edited to generate heterozygous (MYH7 WT/MUT) and homozygous (MYH7 MUT/MUT) mutants for the c. MYH7 C9123T mutation (Mosqueira et al., 2018). The other comprised a pair that were originally patient-derived heterozygous (ACTC1 WT/MUT) for the c. ACTC1 G301A mutation and CRISPR Cas9 corrected (ACTC1 WT/WT) (Smith et al., 2018, Kondrashov et al., 2018).

2. In Fig 2A, the expression of R-GECO in ACTC1WT/MUT clones (1/5 with about 50% cells) was lower than in ACTC1WT/WT clones. Is this chance or due to the mutation? We believe that this is unlikely to be due to the ACTC1 mutation but simply highlights the variability between different cell lines. Each cell line, and subsequently, each clone seemingly has varying levels of transgene silencing and extensive screening is therefore required, as we have performed.

3. In Fig 2A, it would be better to show R-GECO in red and OCT4 in green to retain consistency with other images. Agreed. The images in Figure 2A for MYH7MUT/MUT clone 1 and MYH7MUT/MUT clone 4 have now been pseudocoloured to match the other images in the panel.

4. In Fig 3C, immunostaining in the upper images showed R-GECO in red while in the lower ones R-GECO is stained in green, which is difficult to follow. Agreed. To retain consistency, the upper images in Figure 3C have been pseudocoloured so that R-GECO is always represented as red. Figure 2D and all accompanying graphs have also been changed to aid consistency.
5. It is interesting to see that puromycin enrichment of the iPSCs over 3 passages increased R-GECO1.0 expression in MYH7$^{WT/MUT}$ 15, did the author also tried puromycin enrichment in MYH7$^{MUT/MUT}$? Our aim was to have a high enough percentage of cardiomyocytes expressing R-GECO so that confocal line scan analysis was technically feasible. The MYH7$^{MUT/MUT}$ 15 clone was originally enriched due to the extremely low level of cardiomyocyte R-GECO expression making it difficult to perform single cell analysis. In contrast, the 13.03% R-GECO expression in the MYH7$^{WT/MUT}$ clone was sufficient to find R-GECO expressing cardiomyocytes in a single field of view. Therefore, antibiotic selection of the MYH7$^{WT/MUT}$ line was not necessary. The purpose of Figure 3D is to provide a technical solution to lower levels or R-GECO expression, when required.

6. In the introduction, the authors mention that a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette targeted in the AAVS1 locus of hiPSCs is used for modulating HOXA9 during hematopoietic differentiation. However, this iPSC reporter is also used for cardiomyocyte differentiation (Fig 4A). It is unclear whether there is specific reason why this reporter line is used instead of AAVS1-CAG R-GECO iPSCs. We acknowledge the Reviewer’s point. As cardiomyocyte and haematopoietic differentiation share developmental stages (e.g., mesoderm induction), and given that HOXA9 was also shown to be expressed in early cardiac progenitor cells of the cardiac crescent (Behrens et al., 2013), we opted to perform both cardiomyocyte and haematopoietic differentiations using the HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet line. The introduction has been amended to clarify the overall purpose of the HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet line:

“In addition, CRISPR Cas9 targeting of the AAVS1 locus was used to target a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette into hiPSCs. HOXA9 is a transcription factor regulated spatio-temporally during haematopoietic or cardiac development (Behrens et al., 2013) and the aim was to examine if controlled supplemental expression of HOXA9 resulted in more efficient production of mature cells.”

1. It is better to present RTqPCR result using a ΔCt method for Fig. 4 as fold changes are confusing especially in the context of transgene expression (the biological relevance of fold change is unclear unless one knows the base line transcript levels before gene activation). We believe that the ΔΔCt method gives a better visualisation of the changes in transgene expression. The data in Figure 4 is presented as relative expression compared to untargeted iPSCs. Nevertheless, graphical presentation of ΔCt values are provided in Extended data (Figure 9 Delta Ct representation of HOXA9 expression in AAVS1-targeted hiPSCs).

2. In Fig 6 - Western Blot (Extended data), to test the peptide cleavage of P2A and T2A, the authors state that P2A is less efficient than T2A, as NpHR expression (following a P2A) was barely visible. The authors should provide positive control to exclude that the antibody for NpHR did not work. While the authors agree that this could enhance the data, our initial assessment was based on the 60kDa protein being, in all likelihood, a fusion of ChR2 (30kDa) and NpHR (30kDa). The anti-eNpHR antibody (catalog #AS12 1851; Agrisera) has been validated for use in Western Blot applications but unfortunately is not provided with a positive control sample.

3. Southern blots should be performed to make sure that clones tested in this study were targeted in the corrected locus, and silencing was not due to random integration. The authors agree that integration of the cassette into the AAVS1 locus is vital. This was tested using PCR genotyping from outside the arms of homology and into the...
cassette as shown in Figure 1. As an alternative to southern blots, we have now included original PCR screening gels as extended data (Figure 7 – PCR screening of hiPSC clones to check for AAVS1 integration). In addition, we have included details of the sgRNA design (Figure 8 – sgRNA design) and show that all off-target locations occur in introns (Table 2.1 Guide 2 off-targets and Table 2.2 Guide 3 off-targets).

References


Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.
Carolyn Carr

There are two arms to this manuscript. The authors aimed to determine the reliability of introducing a transgene containing a calcium indicator (R-GECO1.0) or a fluorescent reporter (HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet) into the AAVS1 locus using CRISPR-Cas9 and then subsequently investigate the effect of mutations in MYH7 or ACTC1 on calcium handling.

Initial experiments showed that although the AAVS1 could be targeted successfully in 20/24 clones, the expression of the transgene was highly variable. Furthermore, on differentiation of the more successfully transfected clones to cardiomyocytes, the transgene was silenced with almost complete removal of expression of the fluorescent reporter. A similar degree of silencing was observed during haematopoietic differentiation.

Using the mScarlet reporter the authors investigated the timecourse of downregulation and found that with both cardiomyocyte and haematopoietic differentiation, increased transgene expression was observed at day 2 but then decreased substantially over time, at both the mRNA and protein level. Nevertheless, using puromycin selection, it was possible to isolate single cardiomyocytes expressing the R-GECO reporter and these were used to show that mutations in both MYH7 and ACTC1 resulted in abnormal calcium transient events which could be corrected in part using ranolazine and dantrolene.

This is a valuable piece of work which demonstrates shortfalls in what was expected to be a fairly reliable transfection protocol and that the AAVS1 locus is not as foolproof a site for transfection as may have been thought. The addition of the calcium transient measurements is interesting in that it shows that something can be rescued from such a large body of work, but it does come as rather an afterthought in the manuscript.

I have a few minor comments to aid clarity:

- The introduction needs to be expanded somewhat. The paragraph on modulating HOXA9 is very brief and the rationale needs to be explained. In the results section this appears to be merely a way of monitoring transgene expression, but the short paragraph in the introduction implies some sort of mechanistic approach.

- It is not entirely clear to me what the difference is between the data shown in Fig 2D and 3B apart from different clones.

- In the section on HOXA9-T2A targeting it says in results that doxycycline was administered every 48 hours. This is not mentioned in the methods or the extended information. The authors state that transgene induction decreased after day 2. Was this reduction despite further addition of doxycycline?

- In figure 5, the timing on the x axis is given in parts H and I but not in other plots. In some others there is a bar but this is not explained. Is the scale the same throughout? If so, some comment...
should be made as to why the wild type MYH7 cells have a slower beat rate than the ACTC1 wild type cells. The same formatting should be used on all the graphs.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Yes

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Cardiac physiology and cardiac stem cells for regeneration, disease phenotyping and drug testing.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

---

**Author Response 21 May 2020**

**Jamie Bhagwan,** University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Dear Reviewer,

Thank you for your comments on our manuscript entitled *Variable expression and silencing of CRISPR-Cas9 targeted transgenes identifies the AAVS1 locus as not an entirely safe harbour.*

We have endeavoured to respond to your comments and suggestions as outlined below in bold font.

There are two arms to this manuscript. The authors aimed to determine the reliability of introducing a transgene containing a calcium indicator (R-GECO1.0) or a fluorescent reporter (HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet) into the AAVS1 locus using CRISPR-Cas9 and then subsequently investigate the effect of mutations in MYH7 or ACTC1 on calcium handling. Initial experiments showed that although the AAVS1 could be targeted successfully in 20/24 clones, the expression of the transgene was highly variable. Furthermore, on differentiation of the more successfully transfected clones to cardiomyocytes, the transgene was silenced with almost
complete removal of expression of the fluorescent reporter. A similar degree of silencing was observed during haematopoietic differentiation.

Using the mScarlet reporter the authors investigated the timecourse of downregulation and found that with both cardiomyocyte and haematopoietic differentiation, increased transgene expression was observed at day 2 but then decreased substantially over time, at both the mRNA and protein level.

Nevertheless, using puromycin selection, it was possible to isolate single cardiomyocytes expressing the R-GECO reporter and these were used to show that mutations in both MYH7 and ACTC1 resulted in abnormal calcium transient events which could be corrected in part using ranolazine and dantrolene.

This is a valuable piece of work which demonstrates shortfalls in what was expected to be a fairly reliable transfection protocol and that the AAVS1 locus is not as foolproof a site for transfection as may have been thought. The addition of the calcium transient measurements is interesting in that it shows that something can be rescued from such a large body of work, but it does come as rather an afterthought in the manuscript.

I have a few minor comments to aid clarity:

- The introduction needs to be expanded somewhat. The paragraph on modulating HOXA9 is very brief and the rationale needs to be explained. In the results section this appears to be merely a way of monitoring transgene expression, but the short paragraph in the introduction implies some sort of mechanistic approach.

  For the purposes of this paper the HOXA9 model is simply used a tool to monitor transgene expression. However, its overall purpose in the context of haematopoiesis is now described in the introduction for completeness. The penultimate paragraph of the Introduction now reads:

  “In addition, CRISPR Cas9 targeting of the AAVS1 locus was used to target a doxycycline-inducible HOXA9-T2A-mScarlet cassette into hiPSCs. HOXA9 is a transcription factor regulated spatio-temporally during haematopoietic or cardiac development (Behrens et al., 2013) and the aim was to examine if controlled supplemental expression of HOXA9 resulted in more efficient production of mature cells.”

- It is not entirely clear to me what the difference is between the data shown in Fig 2D and 3B apart from different clones.

  Yes, we concede that these experiments are similar. However, Fig 2D is intended to show variability within an isogenic set of clones differentiated to cardiomyocytes, whereas Fig 3B is intended as a comparison between isogenic sets of clones and complements the data in Fig 3A.

- In the section on HOXA9-T2A targeting it says in results that doxycycline was administered every 48 hours. This is not mentioned in the methods or the extended information. The authors state that transgene induction decreased after day 2. Was this reduction despite further addition of doxycycline?

  Yes, this reduction did occur despite further addition of doxycycline every 2 days. In addition to text in the results and the figure legend for Figure 3, the methods have now been clarified with a sentence in the ‘Live imaging of mScarlet’ section.
which now reads:

“HOXA9 and mScarlet expression was induced with the addition of 1 µg/ml doxycycline every 48 hours.”

In figure 5, the timing on the x axis is given in parts H and I but not in other plots. In some others there is a bar but this is not explained. Is the scale the same throughout? If so, some comment should be made as to why the wild type MYH7 cells have a slower beat rate than the ACTC1 wild type cells. The same formatting should be used on all the graphs.

The authors apologise for the error. The x axis scale bar relates to time (5 seconds) and the y-axis scale bar relates to the length of the laser line drawn across the cell to perform the confocal line scan. All panels now contain both scale bars and the legend for Figure 5 has been corrected to include this information. The methods have also been clarified to state that these line scans are performed on spontaneously beating cardiomyocytes, hence their slightly varied beat rate. The end of the first paragraph of the ‘confocal analysis’ methods sections now reads:

“Line-scan images were taken every 75 milliseconds, with a pixel dwell time of 4.12 µsec, for a total of 4000 cycles resulting in a five minute scan. CMs were kept at 37°C and 5% CO2 and allowed to spontaneously beat throughout data acquisition.”

Differences in beat rate and action potential duration between healthy hiPSC-CMs are common, as previously reviewed (Sala et al., 2017). This further advocates the need for isogenic lines in order to ensure that the impact of the mutation studied is accurately investigated. The fourth sentence of the section entitled “AAVS1-targeted R-GECO1.0 expressing clones as a tool for in vitro disease modelling and drug screening” now reads:

“Despite some expected variability in spontaneous beat rate between wild-type hiPSC-CMs (Figure 5A and 5E) (Sala et al., 2017), for both the c. MYH7 C9123T and c. ACTC1 G301A mutations, increasing mutation load resulted in an increased incidence of abnormal Ca^{2+} transient events.”

References
10.1089/scd.2012.0611

10.1111/bph.13577

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.
The benefits of publishing with F1000Research:

- Your article is published within days, with no editorial bias
- You can publish traditional articles, null/negative results, case reports, data notes and more
- The peer review process is transparent and collaborative
- Your article is indexed in PubMed after passing peer review
- Dedicated customer support at every stage

For pre-submission enquiries, contact research@f1000.com