

Efficient Construction of a Recombinant Adenovirus Vector by an Improved *In Vitro* Ligation Method

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ABSTRACT

An efficient method for constructing a recombinant adenovirus (Ad) vector, based on an *in vitro* ligation, has been developed. To insert the foreign gene into an adenoviral DNA, we introduced three unique restriction sites, *I-CeuI*, *SwaI*, and *PI-SceI*, into the E1 deletion site of the vector plasmid, which contains a complete E1, E3-deleted adenovirus type 5 genome. *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* are intron-encoded endonucleases with a sequence specificity of at least 9–10 and 11 bp, respectively. A shuttle plasmid, pHM3, containing multiple cloning sites between the *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* sites, was constructed. After the gene of interest was inserted into this shuttle plasmid, the plasmid for E1-deleted adenovirus vector could be easily prepared by *in vitro* ligation using the *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* sites. *SwaI* digestion of the ligation products prevented the production of a plasmid containing a parental adenovirus genome (null vector). After transformation into *E. coli*, more than 90% of the transformants had the correct insert. To make the vector, a *PacI*-digested, linearized plasmid was transfected into 293 cells, resulting in a homogeneous population of recombinant virus. The large number and strategic location of the unique restriction sites will not only increase the rapidity of production of new first-generation vectors for gene transfer but will allow for rapid further improvements in the vector DNA backbone.

OVERVIEW SUMMARY

One of the limitations of recombinant adenovirus vectors is their construction, which is a time-consuming procedure. This study demonstrates that the plasmid containing recombinant adenovirus DNA can be prepared by a simple *in vitro* ligation using three unique restriction sites, *I-CeuI*, *SwaI*, and *PI-SceI*, in the E1 deletion region. *PacI* digestion of the recombinant plasmid generates the DNA for adenovirus vector, which has an inverted terminal repeat at both ends of the genome. Homogeneous recombinant virus could be obtained by the transfection of the linearized plasmid into 293 cells. This improved *in vitro* ligation system is a simple and efficient method by which to construct a recombinant adenovirus vector for gene therapy.

INTRODUCTION

RECOMBINANT ADENOVIRUS VECTORS have been shown to have great promise for gene transfer in basic research as well as for clinical treatment of many diseases (Kozarsky and

Wilson, 1993; Kay and Woo, 1994). They can transduce foreign genes efficiently into both cultured cells and many target organs *in vivo*. There are more than 40 serotypes of adenovirus (Ad) identified. The Ad type 5 genome has been used most commonly to make recombinant Ad vector. The genome of human Ad is a linear 36-kb, double-stranded DNA genome that encodes more than 50 gene products. In the first-generation Ad vector, the early region 1 (E1) is replaced by the foreign gene and the virus propagated in an E1-*trans*-complementing cell line such as 293. By deleting E1 and early region 3 (E3) sequences up to about 8 kb of foreign gene can be inserted (Bett *et al.*, 1994). However, *in vitro* manipulation of Ad DNA is difficult. Unique and useful restriction sites are limited because of the large size of the genome, making the construction of Ad vectors relatively labor intensive. Two standard methods to make E1-deleted Ad vectors have been developed: an *in vitro* ligation method (Berkner and Sharp, 1983; Gilardi *et al.*, 1990; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1991) and a homologous recombination method in 293 cells (Bett *et al.* 1994; Miyake *et al.*, 1996). The *in vitro* ligation method uses whole viral DNA genomes and a plasmid containing the left end of the Ad genome with the left inverted terminal repeat (ITR), the packaging signal, and the

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E1A enhancer sequence (map units 0 to 1.3). After the gene of interest is inserted downstream of the viral sequence of the plasmid, the fragment containing viral sequence and the gene of interest is excised and ligated into the unique *ClaI* site (map unit 2.6), replacing a portion of the viral E1 region. Then, the ligated DNA is directly transfected into 293 cells to make recombinant virus. However, this method is rarely used now because the efficiency is low and the recombinant virus requires purification of contaminating wild-type and transgene null viruses related to incomplete restriction digestion and self-religation. One system based on homologous recombination (Bett *et al.*, 1994) uses two plasmids with overlapping fragments that recombine *in vivo*. The first plasmid contains the entire Ad genome with a deletion of the DNA packaging signal and E1 region. The second plasmid contains the left ITR, packaging signal, and overlapping sequence with the first plasmid. After the gene of interest is introduced into the second plasmid, the two plasmids are cotransfected into 293 cells. The virus, which is produced by the recombination in 293 cells, is isolated through plaque purification. The major limitation to this approach is that the recombination event occurs at a low frequency.

Newer methods for adenoviral preparation are based on homologous recombination of two plasmids, using yeast artificial chromosomes (YACs; Ketner *et al.*, 1994) or bacteria (Chartier *et al.*, 1996; Crouzet *et al.*, 1997; He *et al.*, 1998). These methods, while more efficient, are more complex. The YAC system requires yeast culture and manipulation (Ketner *et al.*, 1994), while the *Escherichia coli* system requires three-step transformations using an additional, nonconventional host bacterial strain (BJ5183recBCsbcBC) (Chartier *et al.*, 1996; Crouzet *et al.*, 1997; He *et al.*, 1998).

In this article we report the efficient construction of an E1-deleted Ad vector by an improved *in vitro* ligation method. This system requires a simple *in vitro* ligation using routine molecular biology reagents and transformation in commonly used bacterial strains.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plasmids

Vector plasmids pAdHM1, -2, -3, and -4 were constructed as follows. pHVad2 (provided by HepaVec, Berlin, Germany), which has the left end (bp 1–341 and bp 3524–5790) of the Ad type 5 genome with an E1 deletion, was cut by *ClaI* and *EcoRI*, and ligated with oligonucleotides 1 (5' CGTAACTATAACG-GTCCTAAGGTAGCGA 3') and 2 (5' AATTCTCGCTAC-CITAGGACCGTTATAGTTA 3') (*I-CeuI* recognition sequences are underlined), resulting in pAd4. pAd4 was then cut with *EcoRI* and *Sall*, and then ligated with oligonucleotides 3 (5' AATTATTTAAATATCTATGTCCGGTGCGGAGAAA-GAGGTAATGAAATGGCA 3') and 4 (5' TCGATGC-CATTTCAATTACCTCTTTCTCCGCACCCGACATA-GATATTTAAAT 3') (*PI-SceI* and *Swal* recognition sequences are underlined and italicized, respectively), resulting in pAd18, which contains *I-CeuI*, *Swal*, and *PI-SceI* sites. pAd19, which contains the Ad type 5 genome (bp 1 to 21562), was prepared by the insertion of the *PacI/BamHI* fragment of pTG3602

(Chartier *et al.*, 1996), which has a full-length Ad type 5 genome flanked with a *PacI* site, in the plasmid derived from pGEM7Zf(-) (Promega, Madison, WI). The *PacI/XbaI* fragment of pAd18 and pAd19 were then ligated, resulting in pAd16. The *BamHI/PacI* fragment (bp 21562 to the right end of the genome) of pTG3602 or pHVad1 (provided by HepaVec), both of which have the Ad type 5 genome with a deletion in the E3 region (bp 28133–30818), were introduced into the *ClaI* and *BamHI* sites of pGEM7Zf(-), after the *PacI* site of pTG3602 and pHVad1 was changed into a *ClaI* site by using a *ClaI* linker (New England BioLabs, Beverly, MA), resulting in pAd1 and pAd2, respectively. The fragment of pAd16 digested with *PacI* and *BamHI* was then cloned into the *NsiI* and *BamHI* sites of pAd1 and pAd2, respectively, after the *NsiI* site was changed into a *PacI* site by using a *PacI* linker (New England BioLabs). The resulting plasmids were named pAdHM1 and pAdHM2, respectively. The *ClaI* site of pAdHM1 and pAdHM2 was changed into a *PacI* site by using oligonucleotides 5 (5' CGTTAATTAA 3') and 6 (5' CGTTAATTAA 3') (*PacI* recognition sequences are underlined), resulting in pAdHM3 and pAdHM4, respectively. pAdHM1, -2, -3, and -4 have *I-CeuI*, *Swal*, and *PI-SceI* sites in the E1 deletion region. pAdHM1 and -3 have the Ad genome with a deletion in the E1 region (Δ E1; bp 342–3523), while pAdHM2 and -4 have the Ad genome with a deletion in the E1 and E3 regions (Δ E1, bp 342–3523; Δ E3, bp 28133–30818). pAdHM1 and pAdHM2 have a *PacI* site at the left end of the Ad genome and a *ClaI* site at the right end of the genome. pAdHM3 and pAdHM4 have *PacI* sites at both ends of the Ad genome (Fig. 1A).

Shuttle plasmid pHM3 was constructed as follows. pUC18 was cut by *AatII* and *HindIII*, and ligated with oligonucleotides 7 (5' TAACTATAACGGTCCCTAAGGTAGCGA A 3') and 8 (5' AGCTTTCGCTACCTTAGGACCGTTATAGTTAACGT 3') (*I-CeuI* recognition sequences are underlined), resulting in pHM1. pHM1 was cut with *EcoRI* and *PvuII*, and then ligated with oligonucleotides 9 (5' AATTCTGGCAAACAGCTAT-TATGGGTATTATGGGT 3') and 10 (5' ACCCATAATACC-CATAATAGCTGTTTGCCAG 3') (*PI-PspI* recognition sequences are underlined), resulting in pHM2. This plasmid has another intron-coded enzyme (*PI-PspI*) recognition site. The *PI-PspI* fragment of pHM2 was then ligated with oligonucleotides 11 (5' ATCTATGTCCGGTGCGGAGAAAGAG-GTAATGAAATGGCATTAT 3') and 12 (5' TGCCATTT-CATTACCTCTTTCTCCGCACCCGACATA GATATAA 3') (*PI-SceI* recognition sequences are underlined). The resulting plasmid was named pHM3 (Fig. 1B). pHM3 contains the pUC18-derived multicloning site between the *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* sites. All mutations were sequenced with a Sequenase version 2.0 DNA sequencing kit (New England Nuclear, Boston, MA).

Construction of recombinant Ad vector DNA containing human α_1 -antitrypsin expression cassette

The *XhoI* fragment of pBSRSVhAAT (Kay *et al.*, 1992), containing the Rous sarcoma virus long terminal repeat (RSV LTR) promoter, human α_1 -antitrypsin (hAAT) cDNA, and bovine growth hormone polyadenylation signal, was cloned into the *Sall* site of pHM3. Depending on the orientation of the hAAT expression cassette, the resulting plasmids were named pHM3-hAAT1 and pHM3-hAAT2 (Fig. 1C).

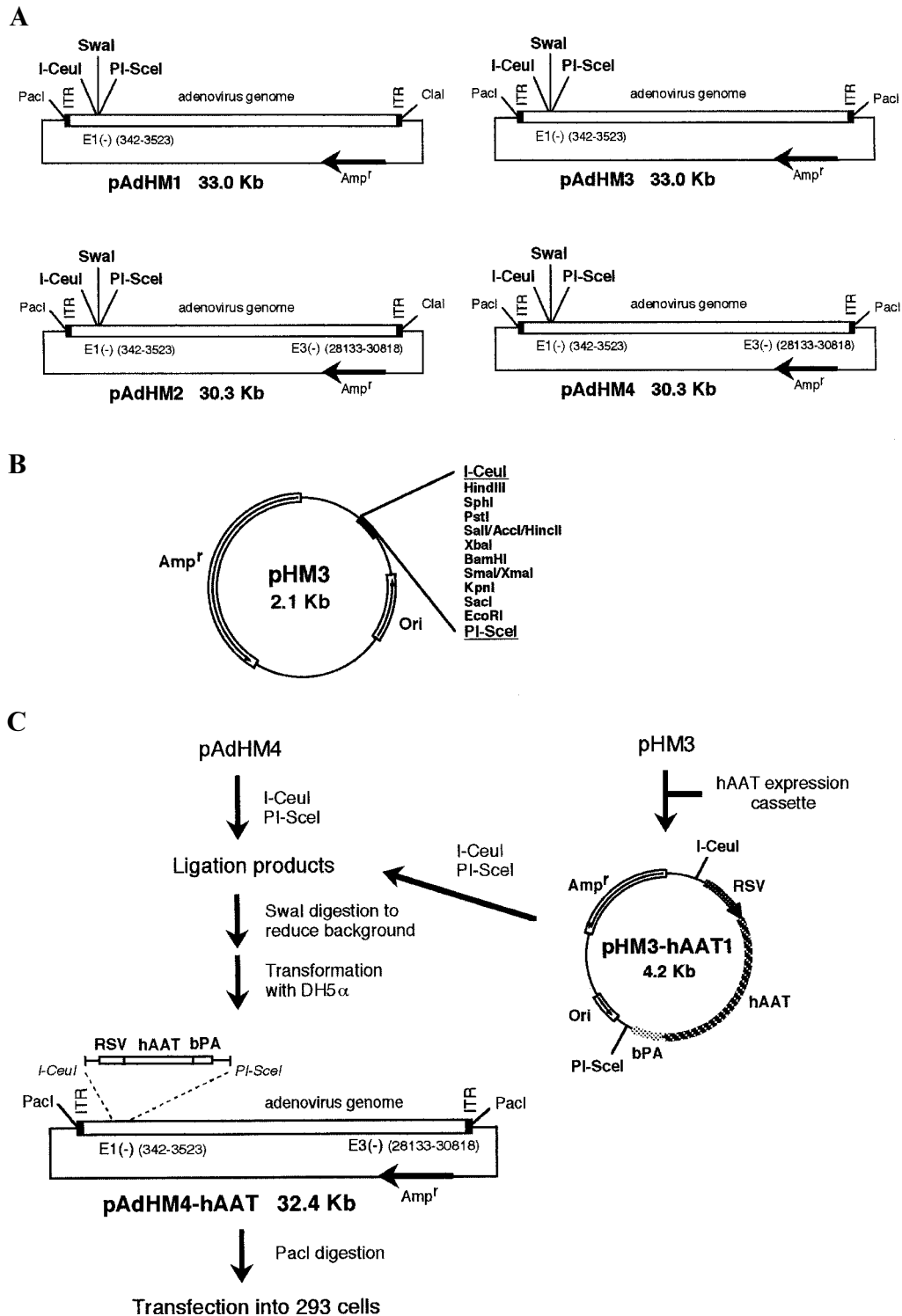


FIG. 1. Construction of recombinant adenovirus vectors by a simple *in vitro* ligation method. **(A)** Vector plasmids pAdHM1, -2, -3, and -4. **(B)** Shuttle plasmid pHM3. **(C)** The strategy for construction of E1- and E3-deleted adenovirus vector. The expression cassette of interest (RSVhAATbPA) was inserted into the *SalI* site of the multicloning site of pHM3, and the resulting plasmid, pHM3-hAAT1, was digested with *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI*. The fragment containing the hAAT expression cassette was ligated with pAdHM4 digested with *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI*. Transformation into *DH5α* was performed after the ligation samples were digested with *SwaI* to reduce the formation of colonies containing parental vector plasmid (pAdHM4).

To construct the plasmid for a recombinant Ad vector expressing hAAT, pHM3-hAAT1 was digested with *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI*, and the fragment containing the hAAT expression cassette was isolated by gel extraction after agarose gel electrophoresis. pAdHM4 was also digested with *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI*, but the digested DNA was purified by phenol-chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation. Digested pAdHM4 (0.1 μ g) was then ligated to the pHM3 fragment containing the hAAT expression cassette at 16°C for more than 2 hr. To reduce the background with the parental plasmid, pAdHM4, the ligation products were treated at 65°C for 20 min to inactivate T4 DNA ligase, and then digested with *SwaI*. *SwaI* cuts the parental plasmid (pAdHM4), but not the recombinant plasmid. Finally, the DNAs were transformed with electrocompetent DH5 α (chemical-competent DH5 α can be also used), and the individual clones were screened by restriction analysis (Fig. 1C). Large-scale preparation of plasmid pAdHM4-hAAT was performed by using a Qiagen Plasmid Maxi-kit (Qiagen, Chatsworth, CA). No rearrangement of the plasmid during amplification was observed.

Generation of adenovirus vector

pAdHM4-hAAT was linearized by the digestion with *PacI* and purified by phenol-chloroform extraction and ethanol pre-

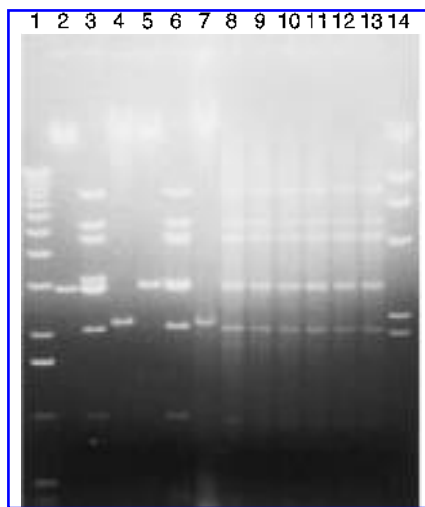


FIG. 2. Restriction endonuclease analysis. pAdHM4, pAdHM4-hAAT plasmid, or recombinant adenovirus AdhAAT DNA was digested by *PacI*, *PacI/HindIII*, *HindIII*, or *I-CeuI/PI-SceI*, separated in a 0.8% agarose gel, and ethidium bromide stained. Lane 1, 1 kb DNA ladder marker; Lane 2, *PacI*-digested pAdHM4 plasmid DNA; lane 3, *PacI/HindIII*-digested pAdHM4 plasmid DNA; lane 4, *I-CeuI/PI-SceI*-digested pAdHM4-hAAT plasmid DNA; lane 5, *PacI*-digested pAdHM4-hAAT plasmid DNA; lane 6, *PacI/HindIII*-digested pAdHM4-hAAT plasmid DNA; lane 7, *I-CeuI/PI-SceI*-digested AdhAAT (pool) viral DNA; lane 8, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (pool) viral DNA; lane 9, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (clone 1) viral DNA; lane 10, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (clone 2) viral DNA; lane 11, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (clone 3) viral DNA; lane 12, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (clone 4) viral DNA; lane 13, *HindIII*-digested AdhAAT (clone 5) viral DNA; lane 14, *HindIII*-digested λ marker.

cipitation. The DNA was transfected into subconfluent 293 cells plated in a 60-mm dish with SuperFect (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The cells were cultured with Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) (GIBCO, Grand Island, NY) containing 10% fetal calf serum (FCS) or with 0.5% overlaid agarose-DMEM containing 10% FCS. Ten days later, the cells were harvested and five independent plaques were isolated. The virus was released by four cycles of freezing and thawing, and amplified in 293 cells. Recombinant virus expressing hAAT was referred to as AdhAAT. The titer of the virus was measured by standard plaque assay in 293 cells (Kay *et al.*, 1995).

To analyze the viral DNA, Ad DNA was isolated from the cells with full cytopathic effect (CPE) as described previously (Lieber *et al.*, 1996). Briefly, 293 cells with full CPE were digested with 0.1% pronase in 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.5)-1% sodium dodecyl sulfate-10 mM EDTA overnight at 37°C. After phenol-chloroform extraction, DNA was ethanol precipitated, dissolved in TE (10 mM Tris [pH 7.5], 1 mM EDTA), and digested with *HindIII* or *I-CeuI/PI-SceI*, and analyzed in a 0.8% agarose gel stained with ethidium bromide.

hAAT expression in HeLa cells infected with AdhAAT

HeLa cells (8×10^5 cells) were seeded into a 60-mm dish, and the next day they were treated with AdhAAT (at a multiplicity of infection [MOI] of 20 or 100). The cells were cultured with DMEM containing 10% FCS and 2 days later hAAT concentrations in the medium were determined by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay as previously described (Kay *et al.*, 1995).

RESULTS

Construction and characterization of E1-deleted adenovirus vector DNA

To construct the plasmid with recombinant Ad vector DNA containing a foreign gene at the E1 deletion site by a single *in vitro* ligation, three unique restriction sites (*I-CeuI*, *SwaI*, and *PI-SceI*) were introduced into the E1 deletion site of the vector plasmid containing a complete vector genome. *I-CeuI* (Marshall and Lemieux, 1991) and *PI-SceI* (Gimble and Thorner, 1992) are intron-encoded endonucleases that recognize at least 9-10 and 11 bp, respectively. *SwaI* is a rare-cutting restriction enzyme with a sequence specificity of 8 bp. The *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* sites were used for the insertion of foreign gene, while the *SwaI* site was used to reduce the generation of parental, nonrecombined plasmid. The resulting vector plasmids, pAdHM1, -2, -3, and -4, contain the complete Ad genome minus the E1 (pAdHM1, -3) or E1/E3 region (pAdHM2, -4), have *PacI* (pAdHM3, -4) or *PacI/ClaI* (pAdHM1, -2) sites at both ends of the Ad genome, and have *I-CeuI*, *SwaI*, and *PI-SceI* sites in the E1 deletion site (Fig. 1A). *HindIII* and *PacI* treatment of pAdHM4 produced the expected fragments shown in Fig. 2 (lanes 2 and 3).

A shuttle plasmid, pHM3, containing a pUC18-derived multicloning site between the *I-CeuI* and *PI-SceI* sites was constructed (Fig. 1B) and used for cloning an expression cassette containing human α_1 -antitrypsin cDNA under the transcriptional control of the RSV LTR promoter (RSVhAATbPA); the

TABLE 1. HUMAN α 1-ANTITRYPSIN EXPRESSION IN HeLa CELLS INFECTED WITH AdhAAT^a

MOI	hAAT concentration (μ g/dish/24 hr)
20	2.44 \pm 0.65
100	12.6 \pm 0.8

^aHeLa cells were infected with AdhAAT (MOIs of 20 and 100), and hAAT concentration in the medium was determined 48 hr postinfection. Data represent means \pm SD for four experiments.

product was called pHM3-hAAT1. The corresponding Ad vector DNA, pAdHM4-hAAT (Fig. 1C), was produced by *in vitro* ligation of I-CeuI/PI-SceI-digested pAdHM4 and pHM3-hAAT1 (Fig. 1C). I-CeuI and PI-SceI digestion of pAdHM4-hAAT produced the expected 2.1-kb DNA fragment corresponding to an hAAT expression cassette in addition to the expected adenoviral fragments (Fig. 2, lane 4). The expected DNA fragments were also detected with either *PacI* or *PacI/HindIII* digestion (Fig. 2, lanes 5 and 6). More than 90% (15 of 16 clones) of the transformants had the correct restriction pattern.

Generation of adenovirus vector expressing hAAT

To demonstrate that pAdHM4-hAAT was able to produce Ad vector in 293 cells, *PacI*-linearized pAdHM4-hAAT DNA

was transfected into 293 cells and the cells were cultured for 10 days. The cell lysates were used to infect fresh 293 cells, followed by routine adenovirus preparation. The correctness of the viral DNA was verified by double digestion with I-CeuI and PI-SceI (Fig. 2, lane 7) or *HindIII* digestion (Fig. 2, lane 8) and found to have the same pattern as *PacI/HindIII*-digested pAdHM4-hAAT plasmid DNA. For further confirmation, 17 independent plaques were found to have identical DNA restriction patterns (results for 5 clones are shown in Fig. 2, lanes 9–13). Virus was not produced by the transfection of circular plasmid (pAdHM4-hAAT) into 293 cells, consistent with previous reports (Chartier *et al.*, 1996; He *et al.*, 1998). Finally, to confirm the functionality of the vector, robust hAAT expression was detected in AdhAAT-infected HeLa cells (Table 1).

DISCUSSION

We have developed a simple and efficient method for constructing recombinant E1-deleted adenoviral vectors by *in vitro* ligation. Previously, it has been difficult to manipulate Ad DNA *in vitro* because of the paucity of unique useful restriction sites. Thus, by insertion of unique I-CeuI, *SwaI*, and PI-SceI sites in the E1-deleted region of the plasmid with an E1-deleted Ad genome, we could easily produce a vector by a simple *in vitro* ligation. The shuttle plasmid pHM3, which has multicloning sites between the I-CeuI and PI-SceI sites, allowed for the gene of interest to be easily introduced into the E1 deletion region

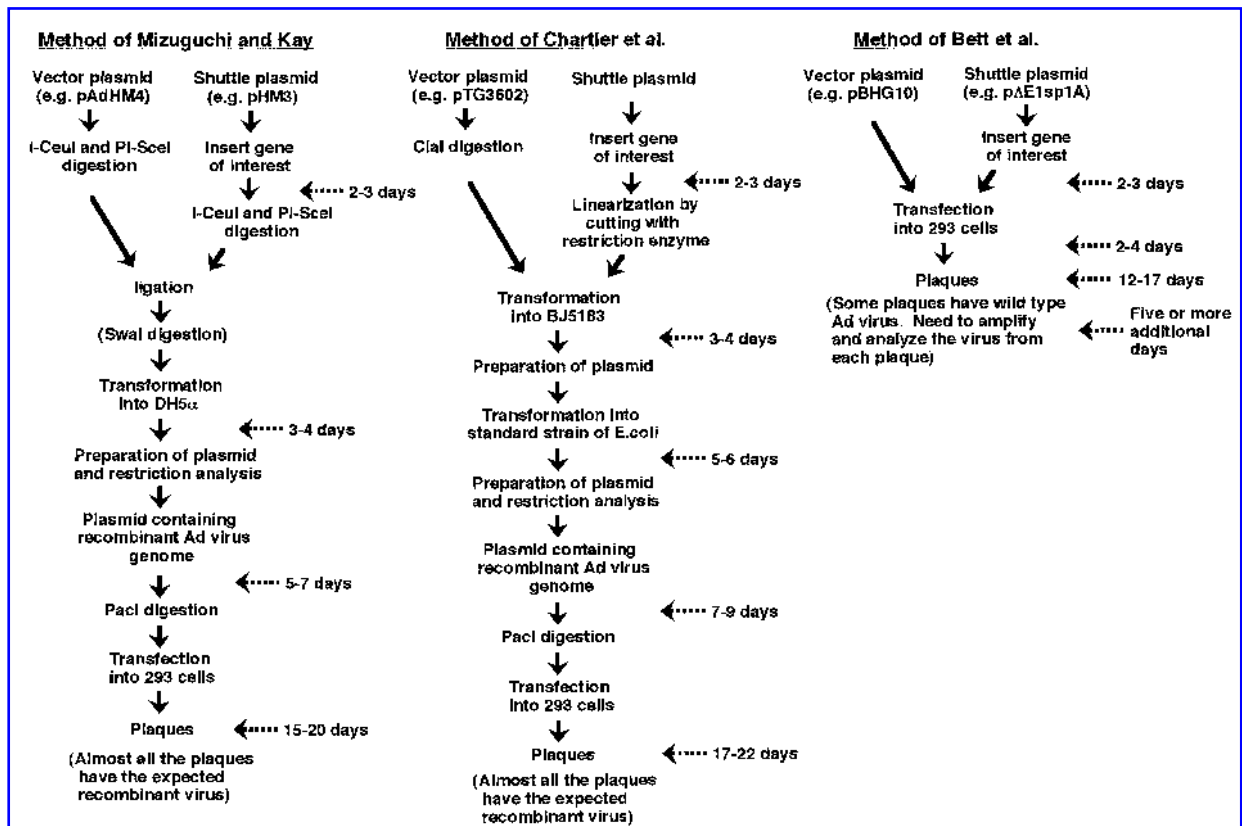


FIG. 3. A comparison flow chart of the *in vitro* ligation and homologous recombination methods in *E. coli* or 293 cells.

of the vector. The *Swa*I site of the vector plasmid nearly eliminated the possibility of generating a null cassette (nontransgene)-containing vector owing to the presence of the parental plasmid DNA.

The conventional *in vitro* ligation method (Berkner and Sharp, 1983; Gilardi *et al.*, 1990; Rosenfeld *et al.*, 1991) has a number of disadvantages. Recombinant DNA cannot be recovered as a plasmid, because the viral DNA is used as a vector and the ligation products are directly transfected into 293 cells. Therefore, in addition to the low efficiency, there is the generation of null vector and wild-type virus because of incomplete digestion and/or religation of the DNAs.

Although several other improved methods to make recombinant Ad vectors have been reported (Bett *et al.*, 1994; Chartier *et al.*, 1996; Miyake *et al.*, 1996; Crouzet *et al.*, 1997; Fu and Deisseroth, 1997; He *et al.*, 1998), they are based on inefficient homologous recombination in 293 cells (Bett *et al.*, 1994; Miyake *et al.*, 1996) or require additional steps. Miyake *et al.* (1996) reported an efficient method of vector production based on homologous recombination in 293 cells, but this required an extra step of λ packaging and wild-type adenoviral genome generation was observed. The homologous recombination method in yeast (Ketner *et al.*, 1994) and *E. coli* (Chartier *et al.*, 1996; Crouzet *et al.*, 1997; He *et al.*, 1998) is probably as efficient in terms of recombinant viral production as the method described here; however, the *E. coli* system requires a three-step transformation, including the use of two different *E. coli* strains. This system does allow easy insertion of foreign genes into the E3 region as well as the E1 region. A cosmid Ad vector plasmid cloning strategy requires an additional λ packaging step (Fu and Deisseroth, 1997). A flow chart comparing the properties of the different homologous recombination systems is shown in Fig. 3.

The major advantage of our system is its simplicity; it requires only a routine two-step transformation protocol that is familiar to any molecular biologist. Because of the paucity of generation of wild-type or null vectors, the time-consuming plaque purification procedure is not absolutely required to produce virus. Furthermore, the system will allow for the easy modification of vector DNA backbone, or for addition of various expression cassettes, by routine cloning because of the many unique restriction sites in pAdHM1 and pAdHM2. These include *Pac*I (left end of the genome); *I-Ceu*I, *Swa*I, and *PI-Sce*I; *Xba*I (bp 5764, in the case of pAdHM2); *Pme*I (bp 13255); *Bam*HI (bp 21562); *Spe*I (bp 27082); *Srf*I (bp 27527); and *Clal* (right end of the genome). In addition, this system may allow for the production of vectors that have proven difficult to make because they produce a protein that interferes with DNA recombination, or because they reduce cell viability because of their prolonged expression in mammalian cells. In general, the use of this system should facilitate the construction of additional Ad vectors for gene transfer in basic research as well as gene therapy.

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