A mechanistic model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair suggests molecular targets to potentiate antibiotic effects

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Abstract RNA is susceptible to damage from various internal and external factors. Given the integral role of RNA, its repair is essential for maintaining proper cell function. A highly conserved RNA repair system, the Rtc system, maintains core RNA components of the translational apparatus. Rtc expression is induced upon various stresses, including exposure to ribosome-targeting antibiotics. Its expression enables cells to rescue growth and survive treatment by conferring transient resistance to these antibiotics. The mechanisms by which Rtc-induced resistance arises are largely unknown. Here, we develop and analyse a computational model of Rtc-regulated maintenance of long-lived RNAs that form part of the translational apparatus. We investigate the mechanistic action of Rtc leading to transient resistance and find that its regulatory structure promotes heterogeneity across bacterial populations, where a resistant sub-population can co-exist with non-expressing, susceptible cells. The finding suggests a complex response underlying adaptive resistance conferred by Rtc with individual cell fates determining antibiotic efficacy. We further analyse the molecular determinants that lead to growth rescue vs suppression and identify components within the Rtc system that may be targeted to potentiate antibiotic effects. Our results provide novel tools for the systems analysis of Rtc-regulated RNA repair and pinpoint testable hypotheses to advance knowledge of RNA repair and its physiological implications.

Introduction

RNA is an essential macromolecule in all living cells. Aside from messenger RNA (mRNA), transfer RNA (tRNA) and ribosomal RNA (rRNA), all of which are elemental to protein expression, additional RNA species play significant roles within cells, such as ribozymes, microRNAs and small nuclear RNAs contributing to catalysis, gene regulation and intron splicing, respectively [1]. RNA is susceptible to damage by processes such as alkylation, radiation and oxidation, in addition to RNA-specific damaging agents such as ribonucleases and ribotoxins [2]. As most abundant types of RNA are long-lived [3], damage to them has potentially enduring effects. With repair likely to require less energy than *de novo* synthesis, RNA repair can provide an evolutionary advantage to cells [4]. To maintain vital functions, cells have therefore developed specific RNA repair mechanisms, such as AlkB, which repairs alkylative RNA damage in both humans and *E. coli* [5, 6].

An RNA repair system conserved across all domains of life is the Rtc system, consisting of two RNA repair proteins, an RNA cyclase, RtcA, and an RNA ligase, RtcB [7]. In metazoans and archaea, Rtc plays a well-defined role in tRNA ligation after intron excision and in the unfolded protein response [8, 9]. In bacteria, however, the exact roles of the Rtc system are less known. Previous work on *E. coli* showed that Rtc plays roles in chemotaxis and motility [10]. In addition, Rtc has been shown to be key for maintenance of the translational apparatus of *E. coli*, where expression of Rtc is induced by oxidative damage or impairments to the translation apparatus, specifically, ribosome-targeting antibiotics and other translation-inhibiting agents such as colicin D [10]. In these conditions, the ligase RtcB is crucial for ribosome health through the re-ligation of rRNA, as ribosomal damage accumulates in the absence of RtcB [11, 12]. Increased degradation of tRNA in the absence of functional RtcB moreover suggests that RtcB contributes to the repair of damaged tRNAs [13]. Another target of RtcB, the transfer messenger RNA *ssrA*, is involved in rescuing stalled ribosomes upon translation defects, further highlighting the importance of Rtc in maintaining translational activity [13, 14].

The *E.coli rtcBA* genes are co-expressed from the same promoter under tight control of the regulator protein, RtcR. Transcribed divergently to *rtcBA*, RtcR completes the *rtc* operon [7] (Figure 1A). RtcR is a bacterial enhancer binding protein (bEBP), activation of which precedes *rtcBA* transcription following exposure to inducing conditions [15, 16]. Upon expression, RtcBA can repair damaged RNA in a concerted healing and sealing procedure, where RtcA

cyclizes (heals) damaged RNA ends, and RtcB subsequently ligates (seals) cyclic phosphate termini with 5'-OH termini to repair the RNA perfectly [11] (Figure 1B).

The precise damage inflicted by Rtc-inducing antibiotics has not been fully characterised and may affect ribosomal or transfer RNAs [17, 18, 19]. Repair of the damaged RNA then enables expressing cells to restore translational activity and rescue growth amid antibiotic assault (Figure 1C). The system thus affords cells with an intrinsic antibiotic resistance present only in cells expressing Rtc as a regulated stress response upon RNA damage [20]. The nature of Rtc-induced resistance is transient, as cells acquire resistance as and when Rtc is expressed. Therefore, cells are able to adapt to survive until the antibiotic challenge has passed or a permanent specific resistance mechanism is acquired [21]. Given the widespread use of ribosome-targeting antibiotics, which across England accounted for over 40% of clinical use in 2022 [22], Rtc-induced antibiotic resistance could be contributing to the growing antimicrobial resistance problem.

Despite the importance of RNA repair across all domains of life, there has been little research on RNA repair in comparison to the more widely studied DNA repair systems. Given the uncertainty surrounding the role of Rtc within resistance, we developed a mathematical model of the Rtc system to investigate the mechanistic action of RNA repair proteins in maintaining the translation apparatus and leading to induced antibiotic resistance in *E.coli*. The model provides a computational framework to study Rtc-regulated RNA repair and gain a systemic understanding of its physiological implications.

We perform a comprehensive analysis of the Rtc model, which reveals a previously unknown trait of the Rtc system, namely that the regulatory mechanisms governing Rtc expression promote bistability. Bistability enables cells to adopt distinct expression phenotypes that can coexist across a range of conditions. Bistable responses have been linked with other phenotypes of antibiotic resistance, where isogenic cells can either be susceptible or resistant within the same environment [23]. The model predicts that cells expressing Rtc are able to counteract the damage and recover translational activity, whereas translation collapses in non-expressing cells. The finding suggests that Rtc-induced resistance to ribosome-targeting antibiotics may constitute a form of heteroresistance [24].

Using the Rtc repair model, we computationally screen for molecular targets amenable to suppressing Rtc expression and locking cells in the susceptible state (Figure 1C). Our analysis suggests that inhibition of the ligase RtcB as well as the transcriptional regulator RtcR result in effective suppression of RNA repair and translational recovery. Targeting the cyclase RtcA, in turn, only results in a reduction of Rtc expression, where cells can still recover translational activity.

Our work provides a comprehensive computational toolkit to investigate Rtc-regulated RNA repair. It suggests testable hypotheses regarding the nature of Rtc-induced resistance to ribosome-targeting antibiotics and pinpoints specific molecular targets that may be inhibited in combination with these antibiotics to increase the overall effectiveness of treatment. Considering the high level of conservation of Rtc across bacterial species and the broad use of Rtc-inducing antibiotics, our results pinpoint a potential avenue to address the incidence of antibiotic resistance.

Results

A dynamic model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair

We developed a computational model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair that describes the regulated expression of Rtc proteins and their dynamic action to heal and seal damaged RNA within the translation machinery (Figure 2A). We model the expression of the three *rtc* genes by considering their transcription to mRNA and subsequent translation to proteins. Throughout, we assume that Rtc proteins act to repair damaged rRNA, but we also show that the same conclusions hold when Rtc maintains damaged tRNA (see SI). To this end, we model three distinct species of ribosomes: healthy ribosomes that can obtain breakage within their rRNA and become damaged ribosomes; upon interaction with RtcA, damaged ribosomes convert to what we call 'tagged' ribosomes, which contain cyclized rRNA ends and serve as a substrate to RtcB for full repair to recover healthy ribosomes.

Overall, the model considers nine molecular species, the three mRNAs, m_x, where $x \in \{R, B, A\}$ stands for the different *rtc* genes, their corresponding proteins, p_x, as well as the three ribosomal species r_h, r_d and r_t, denoting healthy, damaged and tagged ribosomes, respectively. We model Rtc expression and the dynamic interaction of the Rtc repair proteins with the translational machinery via a set of ordinary differential equations. Below we detail the mechanistic assumptions we use to derive the rates of change for each of the variables, starting with the regulatory control of Rtc expression and followed by the repair steps underpinning the maintenance of ribosomes.

Rtc-regulated RNA repair The biochemical mechanisms of RtcA and RtcB are well understood; RtcA performs RNA-end healing while RtcB is responsible for sealing RNAs. Despite this comprehensive understanding, the link between these mechanistic actions and their physiological significance in bacteria remains unclear. RtcA converts 3'-phosphate RNA ends to 2',3'-cyclic phosphate termini (Figure 1B). The process of cyclisation is carried out in a three-step reaction mechanism which relies upon the presence of ATP and Mn^{2+} ions [25, 26]. RtcA can also cyclise 2'-phosphate ends and 5'-phosphate ends but at a much slower rate than 3' ends [25]. In the model we therefore only consider the effects of RtcA on 3'-phosphates.

RtcB ligates either 2',3'-cyclic phosphate termini or 3'-phosphate RNA termini with 5'-OH termini to produce a phosphodiester bond and repair the RNA perfectly (Figure 1B), in a process dependent on GTP and Mn^{2+} [27, 28, 29]. We model the action of RtcB only on 2',3'-cyclic phosphate termini, as the co-expression of *rtcBA* means we consider

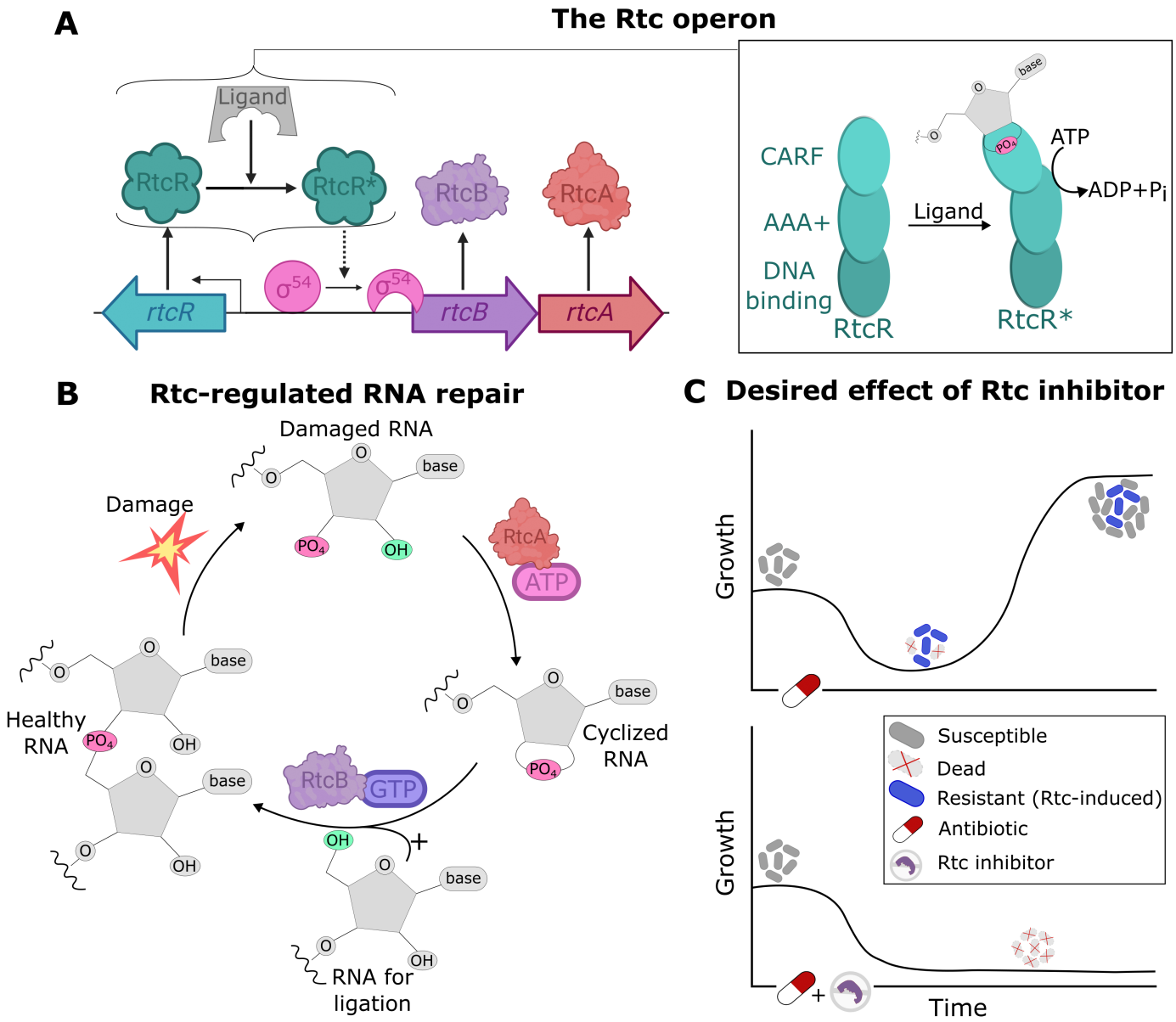


Figure 1: ***rtcBA* expression and Rtc-induced RNA repair via Rtc.** (A) The Rtc operon contains three Rtc genes: *rtcBA* are co-expressed from a σ^{54}-controlled promoter regulated by RtcR. RtcR contains three domains (right side of panel A). The CARF domain imposes negative regulation on the AAA$^+$ domain; binding of an RNA with a 2',3'-phosphate end to the CARF domain causes activation of the intrinsic ATPase activity of the AAA$^+$ domain to produce active RtcR which initiates transcription of *rtcBA*. (B) Healthy RNA, with phosphodiester bonds linking adjacent RNAs, can be damaged to produce RNA with a 3'-phosphate end (damaged RNA). RtcA requires ATP to convert RNA with 3'-phosphate termini to 2'3'-cyclic phosphate termini (cyclized RNA). RtcB requires GTP to ligate 2'3'-cyclic phosphate with RNA 5'-OH termini (RNA for ligation) to complete the cycle and repair the RNA with a perfect phosphodiester bond (healthy RNA). (C) Infections treated with a ribosome-targeting antibiotic will initially cause a reduction in growth but will also cause the onset of Rtc-induced resistance. The resistant cells stay alive despite the antibiotic and resume growth rendering the antibiotic ineffective (upper panel). If these infections could be treated with a ribosome-targeting antibiotic in combination with a Rtc-inhibitor, Rtc-induced resistance would not arise and the treatment would be successful (lower panel).

RtcA necessary to produce the cyclic substrate for RtcB. It has been shown that RtcA is required for RtcR activation, providing further reasoning for our choice to model RtcA as essential in the Rtc repair process [13].

The Rtc system is induced by agents that challenge the translation apparatus, where both tRNA and rRNA may be targeted for damage [10]. Whilst ribosome-targeting antibiotics may not directly damage rRNA, expression of stress-induced genes, such as MazF [12], in response to cellular stress can cause rRNA damage. Similarly, oxidative stress can indirectly damage both tRNA and rRNA [17, 30, 31]. We can therefore model damage and repair on both rRNA within a ribosome and on tRNA. In the case of rRNA repair, RtcB has been shown to only interact with rRNA that

is structurally intact within a ribosome [11, 12], suggesting that RtcB will not repair free rRNA that has been released from collapsed ribosomes. We thus model the repair of rRNA within ribosomes.

Figure 1B shows how we model the presence of three distinct ribosome species, which are controlled by the action of RtcA, RtcB and damage. We assume that healthy ribosomes contain undamaged RNA and are the only ribosome species available for translation. Upon damage, healthy ribosomes become non-functional, damaged ribosomes which are converted to tagged ribosomes via RtcA. Tagged ribosomes are converted back to healthy ones via the action of RtcB.

The dynamics of healthy ribosomes (r_h), damaged ribosomes (r_d) and tagged ribosomes (r_t) are described by the following differential equations:

$$\dot{r}_h = v_{\text{in}} + v_{\text{rep}} - r_h \cdot (\lambda + k_{\text{dam}}), \quad (1)$$

$$\dot{r}_d = r_h \cdot k_{\text{dam}} - v_{\text{tag}} - r_d \cdot (\lambda + d_r), \quad (2)$$

$$\dot{r}_t = v_{\text{tag}} - v_{\text{rep}} - \lambda \cdot r_t, \quad (3)$$

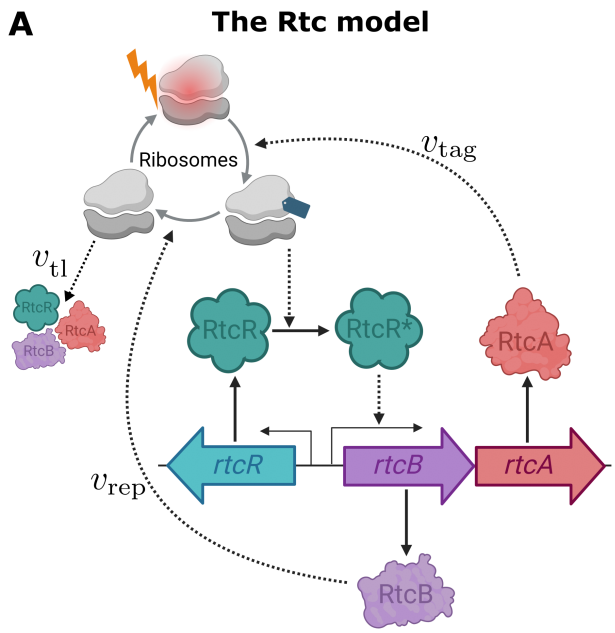
where $\dot{y}$ denotes the rate of change in species y. Rates that further depend on molecular species or parameters we denote by $v^{(y)}_{\text{process}}$, where subscripts indicate the process, and whenever clarification is required, superscripts indicate the affected molecular variable y (see Figure 2B). We assume that there is an influx of healthy ribosomes at rate v_{in} that depends on the translational capacity of the cell, and that ribosome-targeting antibiotics damage healthy ribosomes at a constant rate k_{dam}. Damaged ribosomes contain 3'-phosphate RNA and are converted to tagged ribosomes through the action of RtcA with rate v_{tag}, or degraded with rate d_r. Tagged ribosomes contain RNA with 2',3'-cyclic termini, which is both the product of the RtcA healing reaction and the RtcR-activating ligand. Tagged ribosomes are converted back to healthy ribosomes by the ligating action of RtcB at rate v_{rep}. All species are diluted by growth with rate λ.

Equations (1)-(3) describe a dynamic pool of ribosomes where different ribosomal states are governed by RtcA and RtcB as well as the addition of damage through antibiotic stress. Next we explain the assumptions underlying the dependence of Rtc expression upon ribosomal levels to give the full model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair (Figure 2A).

The *rtc* operon We consider transcription and translation of the three *rtc* genes. We assume that mRNA levels, m_x with $x \in \{A, B, R\}$ for *rtcA*, *rtcB* and *rtcR*, respectively, are governed by production via transcription ($v^{(x)}_{\text{tx}}$) and decay via dilution (λ) as well as mRNA degradation (d_m), giving rise to the differential equations

$$\dot{m}_x = v^{(x)}_{\text{tx}} - m_x \cdot (\lambda + d_m). \quad (4)$$

Bacterial enhancer binding proteins, including RtcR, are often expressed from promoters regulated by σ^{70}, which are a family of σ-factors associated with regulating housekeeping genes [32]. We therefore assume constitutive *rtcR* expression [33], where the transcription rate $v^{(R)}_{\text{tx}}$ only depends on physiological parameters of the cell (see Figure 2B and SI). As *rtcA* and *rtcB* share a joint promoter, we assume that $v^{(A)}_{\text{tx}} = v^{(B)}_{\text{tx}}$ at all times.



B **Model rates and definitions**

Rate	Description	Definition
v_{in}	Influx of healthy ribosomes	$k_{in} \cdot \frac{\gamma_{\text{max}} \cdot \text{ATP}}{\theta_{\text{tl}} + \text{ATP}}$
v_{tag}	Tagging rate by RtcA	$p_A \cdot \frac{r_d \cdot k_{\text{tag}}}{r_d + K_a}$
v_{rep}	Repair rate by RtcB	$p_B \cdot \frac{r_t \cdot k_{\text{rep}}}{r_t + K_b}$
$v^{(R)}_{\text{tx}}$	Transcription rate of *rtcR*	$\frac{\omega_r \cdot \text{ATP}}{\theta_{\text{tx}} + \text{ATP}}$
$v^{(BA)}_{\text{tx}}$	Transcription rate of *rtcBA*	$\sigma_o \cdot \frac{\omega_{\text{ba}} \cdot \text{ATP}}{\theta_{\text{tx}} + \text{ATP}}$
$v^{(x)}_{\text{tl}}$	Translation rate $x \in \{A, B, R\}$	$\frac{1}{n_x} \cdot k_c \cdot r_h \cdot m_x \cdot v_{\text{tl:elong}}$

Figure 2: **Model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair.** (A) Model schematic. The model describes the dynamic interplay of the Rtc operon with a pool of damaged, healthy and tagged ribosomes. Tagged ribosomes, which contain rRNA with 2',3'-cyclic phosphate ends, act as the ligand for RtcR to activate *rtcBA* transcription. RtcA converts damaged ribosomes (containing RNA with 3'-phosphate ends) to tagged ones, and RtcB converts tagged ribosomes to healthy ones. Healthy and tagged ribosomes feed back to Rtc expression via translation and RtcR-activation, respectively. (B) Dependent rates and their definitions. Parameter descriptions and values can be found in the SI.

Transcription of *rtcBA* is regulated by σ^{54} [7]. Unlike σ^{70}-controlled promoters, which can initiate transcription spontaneously, σ^{54}-regulation requires ATP to remodel the holoenzyme (RNAP:σ^{54}) from the closed complex to the open complex so DNA can enter the RNAP active site [34]. RtcR provides ATP for formation of the open complex, but firstly requires its own activation [13]. Figure 1A shows the Rtc operon, including control of *rtcBA* expression through activation of RtcR, followed by the remodelling of the σ-

factor containing holoenyzme.

Similar to the structure of other bacterial enhancer binding proteins, RtcR has three domains: a regulatory CARF (CRISPR-associated Rossman fold) domain, a DNA binding domain and an AAA$^+$ domain [35, 36] (Figure 1A). The CARF domain of RtcR imposes negative regulation on the AAA$^+$ domain, evidenced by over-expression of an N-terminal deletion strain where expression of *rtcBA* was constitutively active [7]. To alleviate RtcR auto-inhibition, an unknown ligand binds the CARF domain to activate the AAA$^+$ domain. This ligand could be a linear RNA molecule, a tRNA fragment or an RNA with 2',3'-cyclic termini, as CARF domains are known to bind cyclic termini [13, 16, 37]. Therefore, in the model we assume that tagged ribosomes r_t, i.e. the product of the RtcA reaction which contains RNA with 2',3'-cyclic termini, act as the ligand for RtcR activation (Figure 1A).

Following ligand binding, RtcR oligomerises to form fully active RtcR with functional ATPase activity to remodel the holoenzyme for full initiation of transcription of *rtcBA* [13]. Consequently, in the model we assume that RtcR acts as a hexamer, as is typical for bEBPs [38], therefore requiring the cooperative binding of six ligands for full activation [16, 39]. We model this cooperative binding with a Monod-Wyman-Changeux (MWC) model which describes the cooperative activation of proteins made up of identical subunits [40] (see SI). By adjusting the MWC parameters, we include spontaneous activation of RtcR, and subsequent leaky transcription of *rtcBA* (see Supplementary Table S1A). Therefore, when there is no damage, there can still be a baseline level of *rtcBA* expression, which accounts for the recent finding that RtcR activation requires the binding of a ligand in addition to the presence of both RtcA and RtcB [13]. The total rate of *rtcBA* transcription, $v_{\text{tx}}^{(\text{BA})}$, thus accounts for the rate of transcriptional initiation via RtcR as well as physiological parameters that can impact the rate of transcriptional elongation (see Table in Figure 2B and derivation in the SI).

Finally, we model each Rtc protein, p_x for $x \in \{A, B, R\}$, independently via

$$\dot{p}_x = v_{\text{tl}}^{(x)} - \lambda \cdot p_x. \tag{5}$$

Here, we assume that protein decay is dominated by dilution and active degradation is negligible. The translation rate $v_{\text{tl}}^{(x)}$ is determined by the availability of healthy ribosomes r_h, their rate of translational elongation, as well as the length of p_x (see SI).

Equations (1)-(5) comprise the model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair. For brevity, we summarize the definition of rates in Figure 2B and their derivation in the SI. Thanks to the mechanistic derivation of the rate equations, we were able to constrain most model parameters using literature values for *E. coli*, (summarized in Supplementary Table S1). Only three parameters – the rate of damage to healthy ribosomes, k_{dam}, as well as the maximal transcription rates, ω_{r} and ω_{ba} – remained unconstrained and formed the basis of the analysis that follows below.

The model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair describes how Rtc expression adapts to ribosomal damage and the subsequent actions of the Rtc proteins in maintaining ribosomal RNA (Figure 2A). It predicts the level of healthy ribosomes available to cells, based on their ability to induce Rtc expression to counter the imposed damage, and thus, the cellular capacity to sustain translational activity. We next set out to characterise the dynamic response landscape of Rtc expression and its consequences for the translational capacity of cells.

The Rtc model displays robust bistability

Activation of the Rtc system is characterised by expression of the RtcBA proteins. We first investigated how Rtc expression adapts to the rate of damage imposed on cells. To this end, we performed a stability analysis of the model to determine the steady-state levels of Rtc and ribosomal species at various damage rates (see Methods).

We consider the absence of damage, i.e. $k_{\text{dam}} = 0$, representative of wild-type *E.coli* where Rtc is not active. When damage rates increase, for example through the addition of a ribosome-targeting antibiotic, the model predicts an initial increase in steady-state RtcBA expression. This expression originates with an increase in tagged ribosomes causing RtcR activation and therefore initiation of transcription of *rtcBA* (Supplementary Figure S5A), which results in the translation of RtcBA proteins due to an adequate availability of healthy ribosomes (Figure 3A). Steady-state expression of RtcBA is predicted to peak when activation levels of RtcR^* saturate (Figure 3A). When damage rates increase further, steady-state RtcBA expression decreases as the levels of healthy ribosomes available for translation decline. Eventually, expression is predicted to collapse at high rates of damage, when there are no longer sufficient healthy ribosomes to sustain translation of the Rtc repair proteins. In the collapsed state there is a build up of damaged ribosomes due to a lack of sufficient RtcBA to carry out repair. RtcR expression, which was assumed to be constitutive, is less affected by the damage rate and follows declining levels of healthy ribosomes (Figure 3A).

Interestingly, the stability analysis revealed that the Rtc model displays bistability across a range of damage rates. Bistability of a dynamical system denotes the co-existence of two stable steady-states for a given condition. When damage rates decrease from initially high levels (rates above the grey range in Figure 3A), the system remains in the collapsed state even for damage rates (rates within the grey range in Figure 3A) that allow Rtc expression in cells which previously experienced low damage (rates below the grey range in Figure 3A). This phenomenon, whereby the system adopts one stable state over the other based upon a memory of previous conditions (in this case damage), is called hysteresis. It is a key feature of bistable systems and often arises from a combination of ultrasensitivity and positive feedback [41], both of which are present in the Rtc system. Ultrasensitivity is exhibited through the cooperative activation of RtcR by tagged ribosomes, and positive feedback is exerted in the model at two stages: 1) through RtcA which is required to activate its own expression, and 2) through

healthy ribosomes which are necessary for translation of the repair proteins.

The presence of bistability suggests that two distinct Rtc expression states are able to co-exist for a range of damage inflicted on cells for Rtc proteins and ribosome species (Figure 3A). These cell states represent an Rtc-on state, where there is expression of *rtcBA* and repair of ribosomes, corresponding to resistant cells, and an Rtc-off state with insufficient healthy ribosomes to sustain protein expression, corresponding to susceptible cells. At damage rates within the bistable region (grey area in Figure 3A), the system will enter the on-state if previous exposure to damage has been lower, and enter the off-state if previous exposure has been higher than levels within the bistable region. The model therefore suggests that for a range of damage conditions the structure of Rtc regulation promotes phenotypic heterogeneity, where resistant and susceptible cells can co-exist within a form of hetero-resistant cell population. This finding is backed-up by gene expression data (Figure S1), where average molecule numbers of the rtc mRNAs are well below one in WT and inducing conditions, suggesting that in a population of cells, not all cells are expressing *rtc*. In inducing conditions, upon exposure to ribosome-targeting antibiotics, this could suggest a heterogeneous response.

We next aimed to identify whether bistability was robust across a range of parameter conditions, or if it was specific to a small subset of conditions. We analysed the sensitivity of model predictions to variation in key parameters (see Methods), including the unknown maximal transcription rates of *rtc* genes, ω_{ba} and ω_{r}, as well as the dilution rate λ and cellular ATP levels, which we could only loosely constrain within a physiological range due to their inherent variation.

Sensitivity analysis suggests that the Rtc system displays bistability robustly throughout a range of parameter conditions (Figure 3B and C). Occurrence of bistability at any damage rate within the range we considered (between 0 and 1.5 min^{-1}) was largely insensitive to ATP concentrations, however, low ATP concentrations affected the dilution rates that support bistability. Dilution rates that support bistability were further predicted to depend on inducibility of the *rtc* repair genes, where higher inducibility increases the range of dilution conditions that support bistable responses (Figure 3B).

We further analysed how Rtc expression levels and the region of bistability, i.e. damage rates where resistant and susceptible cells are predicted to co-exist, depend on individual changes in parameter values. Figure 3C shows the effect of cellular ATP concentration (top), dilution rate (middle), and maximal transcription rate of the *rtcBA* genes ω_{ba} (lower panel) on RtcB expression. Changes in the transcription rate of *rtcR* had qualitatively the same effect as changes in *rtcBA* transcription and are shown in Figure S5C.

Higher ATP concentrations support higher overall expression in the Rtc-on state and widen the region of damage rates where bistability is displayed. The widening of the bistable region at high ATP levels largely resulted from an increase of its upper boundary, whereas the effect on its lower boundary was minor, explaining why bistability occurred at all ATP concentrations in Figure 3B. Conversely, lower dilution rates resulted in higher Rtc-on expression and regions of bistability at higher damage rates. For low dilution rates (grey line), the region of bistability was beyond damage rates of interest (Figure S5C). The system thus robustly displays bistability across the range of physiologically realistic dilution rates, however, not necessarily within the range of damage rates of interest (cf. Figure 3B). Increasing the maximal transcription rates of the *rtc* genes, ω_{ba} and ω_{r}, represents an increase in Rtc inducibility and has qualitatively similar effects on bistability as decreasing dilution.

We also performed a global sensitivity analysis, whereby we varied 9 different parameters according to their recorded standard deviations from the literature (see SI Section S3.1). Bistability was extremely robust, out of 2 million combinations of varied parameter values, 99.7% of them gave a bistable result (Figure S2).

To conclude, the model of Rtc-regulated RNA repair displays bistability, suggesting that isogenic cells can adopt two distinct response phenotypes when faced with the same level of damage inflicted by translation-targeting antibiotics. These phenotypes correspond to an Rtc-off state, where cells are translationally inactive, i.e. susceptible to the inflicted damage, and an Rtc-on state, where cells maintain translational activity and thus exhibit a form of adaptive and transient resistance to the assault. Bistability is displayed robustly across the range of physiologically feasible parameter values, indicating that structural aspects of Rtc-regulation inherently promote this phenotypic heterogeneity. To our knowledge, Rtc-induced resistance to ribosome-targeting antibiotics has so far only been characterised in bulk experiments. Our results suggest that the response may be underpinned by a form of hetero-resistance, and they suggest a granular characterisation, at the level of single cells, will be necessary to test the hypothesis.

Screening for a molecular targets to curb Rtc-induced resistance

Next we investigated how the system might be manipulated such that resistant cells switch to the susceptible state. Since initial conditions determine which stable steady state is adopted, we first analysed the sensitivity of model outcomes to perturbations in initial values by systematically perturbing one variable at a time.

Figure 4A shows the effect of perturbing initial concentrations of the RtcB and RtcR proteins away from their stable 'on' levels. Perturbing initial concentrations of RtcB was most effective at 'switching off' Rtc expression, and thus, at rendering the system susceptible. At high damage rates within the bistable region, the switch only requires a small decrease from the steady-state RtcB level to switch expression off. For lower damage rates, however, switching requires a more substantial decrease in RtcB levels, and for damage below a certain rate, the system was locked in the Rtc-on state, i.e. perturbation of RtcB alone was insufficient to switch expression off. Perturbation of initial RtcR concentration was also able to switch expression off, but only within a small range of high-damage conditions. We also

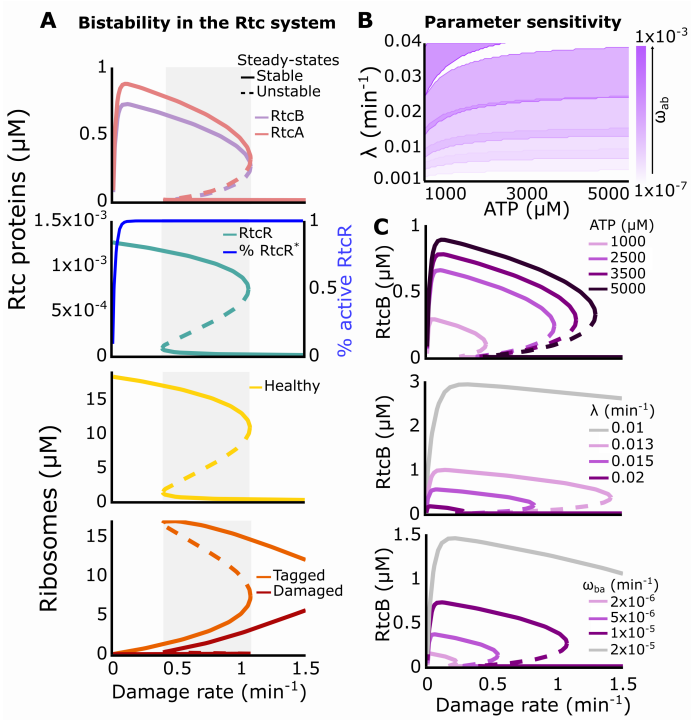


Figure 3: **Steady-state responses of the Rtc system.** (A) Stability analysis: Bifurcation diagrams for the Rtc proteins (top) and ribosome species (bottom) show a range of damage rates (grey region) in which two stable cell states (solid lines) and one unstable steady-state (dashed lines) co-exist. Which stable state is reached depends on previous damage exposure: if the rate of damage increases from initially low levels, below the grey region, cells are predicted to enter the 'Rtc-on', *resistant* state (upper solid branch for all species but damaged and tagged ribosomes, lower solid branch for latter) that enables ribosome repair, and consequently, maintenance of sufficiently high levels of healthy ribosomes to sustain translational activity. Cells that have previously been exposed to high levels of damage, above the grey region, are predicted to remain in an 'Rtc-off' state (lower solid branch except for damaged and tagged ribosomes), where ribosomal damage levels exceed the capacity of repair and prevent translation of Rtc proteins. (B) The system displays bistability across a range of parameter combinations. Purple regions represent combinations of ATP concentrations and dilution rates, that display bistability within the range of damage rates considered (0 to $1.5\mathrm{min}^{-1}$). Different shades of purple indicate how the regions depend on the inducibility, i.e. the maximal transcription rate ω_{ba}, of the *rtcBA* genes, where higher inducibility supports bistability across a wider and increasing range of dilution conditions. (C) Parameter sensitivity: ATP-availability (top), dilution rate (middle) and maximal *rtcBA* transcription rate (bottom) impact the magnitude of Rtc expression and the region of bistability. Higher ATP concentrations and *rtcBA* transcription yield higher expression states, whereas dilution lowers expression. The region of bistability widens for higher ATP concentrations, and it shifts towards higher ranges of damage rates for lower rates of dilution and higher transcription. Grey lines indicate conditions, where the region of bistability has shifted beyond damage rates of interest, and so the system is monostable within the considered range of damage.

investigated the impact of perturbations in initial RtcA concentrations but found that, regardless of the magnitude of perturbations, they were in all cases insufficient to switch Rtc expression off (see Figure S5D).

Driven by the results of the above sensitivity analysis, we wondered whether inhibition of RtcB might be effective at rendering cells more susceptible to damage. Here, we hypothesise that an inhibitor could be used in combination with an antibiotic to successfully treat bacterial infections without Rtc induction and therefore without Rtc-induced resistance (Figure 1C). To this end, we introduced a new parameter in the model, representing an inhibitor that can reversibly bind RtcB and prevent its sealing action to repair ribosomes (see SI Section S1.4). Figure 4B (top) shows that RtcB inhibition is predicted not only to cause a reduction in the concentration of free (unbound) RtcB but also a considerable reduction in the range of damage conditions that induce Rtc expression. Effects are amplified the stronger the inhibitor binds RtcB (see SI Table S1B for inhibition parameters). Notably, reduction of free RtcB is accompanied by a substantial reduction in translational capacity, in terms of levels of healthy ribosomes, suggesting reduced resistance to damage.

We also tested inhibition of the other two Rtc proteins, RtcR and RtcA. The effects of inhibiting RtcR were comparable to those of inhibiting RtcB in terms of reducing Rtc induction and the range of inducing damage conditions, as was the effect on translational capacity (Figure 4B, middle). Inhibiting RtcA, however, had a much weaker effect. While levels of free RtcA were reduced, similar to those of RtcB when RtcB was the target of inhibition, the range of inducing damage conditions was almost unchanged compared to the case of no inhibition (Figure 4B, bottom). Importantly, the effect on translational capacity was also minor, suggesting that inhibition of RtcA would be ineffective at reducing levels of resistance.

Figure 4C summarizes the effects of inhibiting the different Rtc proteins on suppressing Rtc induction and associated resistance in terms of rescued translational capacity. Our analysis suggests that both RtcB and RtcR, but not RtcA, may be potent targets to prevent induction of Rtc and Rtc-induced resistance to translation-targeting antibiotics. Our results motivate further characterisation of the Rtc system, in particular of RtcB and RtcR, to identify suitable inhibitors and test their efficacy in rendering bacterial cells susceptible to ribosome-targeting antibiotics. Given their wide use and the strong conservation of Rtc across bacterial pathogens, the hypotheses generated here, if validated, may constitute a vigorous route to potentiate treatments and reduce levels of resistance.

Discussion

We developed a computational model of Rtc-induced maintenance of long-lived RNAs involved in translation. The model incorporates key aspects of the current body of knowledge around Rtc regulation and its role in invoking adaptive resistance to translation-targeting antibiotics. It considers transcription and translation of the three Rtc pro-

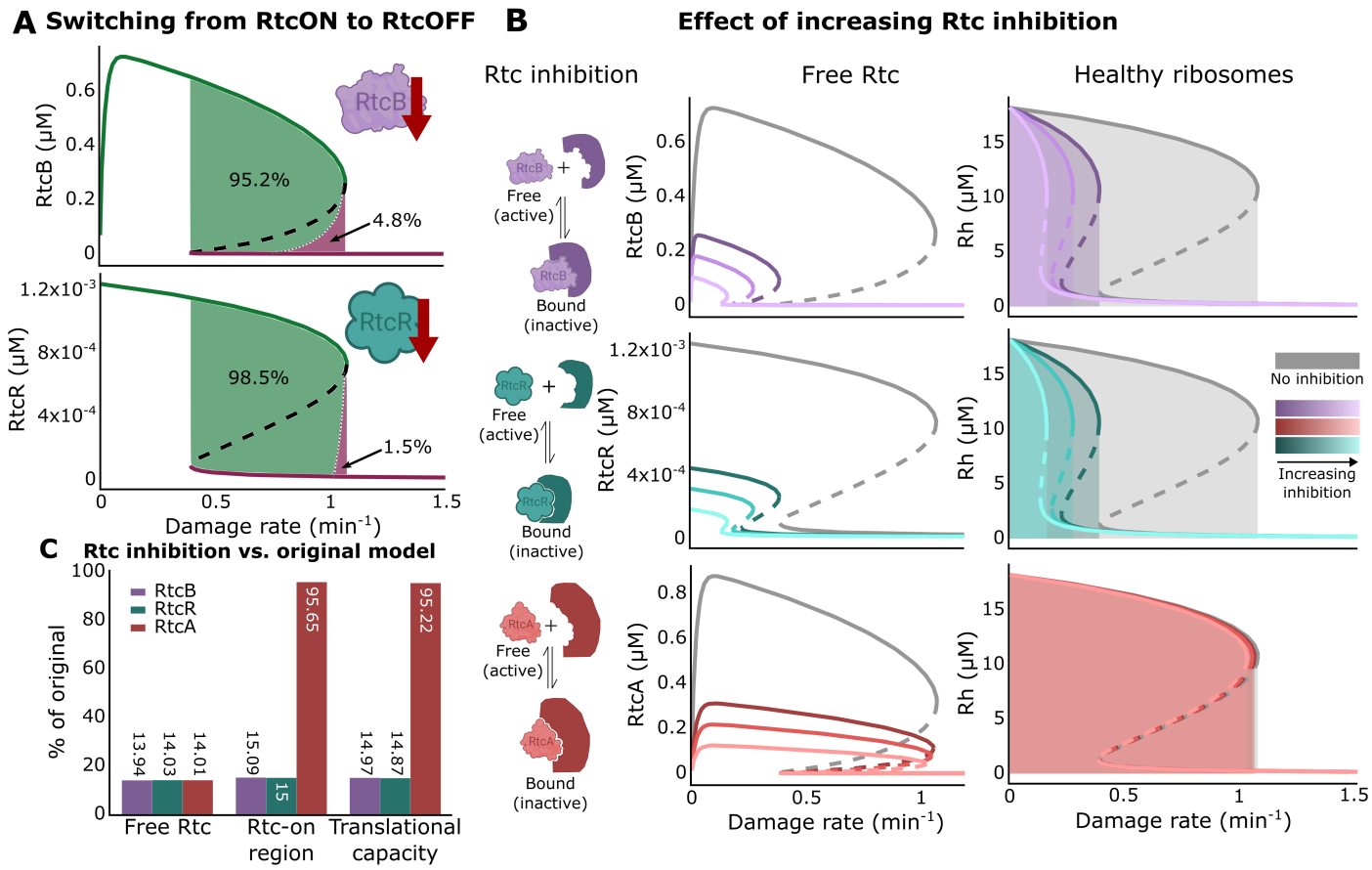


Figure 4: **Inhibiting Rtc proteins is predicted to reduce levels of resistance.** (A) Perturbing the initial conditions of one molecular species at a time shows that decreasing initial conditions of RtcB (top) and RtcR (bottom) from their 'on' steady-state values, can 'switch off' Rtc expression, i.e. the system will adopt the susceptible or Rtc-off state. Green areas mark initial values that are insufficient to cause a switch, and purple areas values that drive the system to adopt the susceptible, Rtc-off state. For both species, switching is only possible for high damage rates within the bistable region. RtcB can cause a switch for a wider range of damage rates. Perturbing RtcR has an effect in a smaller range of damage, with only perturbations within the very top section of the bistable region able to produce the switch to the 'off' state. (B) Inhibiting Rtc proteins decreases predicted concentrations of free Rtc (left panes). Inhibiting RtcB (top row) or RtcR (middle) reduces the range of damage conditions, where Rtc is expressed and resistance to damage is possible. Inhibiting RtcA decreases the concentration of free RtcA but barely changes the range of inducing damage conditions (bottom row). Levels of healthy ribosomes (right panes), which determine the translational capacity of cells, display substantial reduction upon inhibition of both RtcB and RtcR but not upon inhibition of RtcA. (C) Summary of Rtc inhibition comparing the effects of the strongest level of inhibition (see SI Table S1B) when targeting RtcB, RtcR or RtcA to outcomes without inhibition. Free Rtc concentration was obtained by calculating the average percentage difference for all values of damage across the curve. Targeting either Rtc protein has a similar effect on free Rtc protein concentrations. The Rtc-on/resistant cell state metric was obtained by taking the size of the Rtc-on region and calculating the percentage difference to the size of the original Rtc-on region without inhibition. The range of damage conditions that enable the Rtc-on/resistant cell state is substantially reduced when inhibiting RtcB and RtcR but not when inhibiting RtcA. Similarly, inhibiting RtcA has minor effects on translational capacity compared to RtcB and RtcR. We quantify translational capacity by the shaded area under the on-curve of healthy ribosomes in (B) relative to that without inhibition.

teins and their mechanisms of action to aid research into determining the role of Rtc in antibiotic resistance.

We made various assumptions to keep the model simple yet realistic. Based on information available about other bEBPs, we assumed that RtcR is constitutively expressed and that negative auto-regulation of RtcR prevents oligomerisation of its subunits. As RtcR has been shown to form apparent hexamers, similar to other bEBPs [13, 38], we assume cooperative binding of the activating ligand, which based on current evidence [16], we assumed to be RNA ends that have been cyclysed by RtcA. We model all energy-dependent reactions using standard mass action and Michaelis-Menten kinetics. Although RtcA and RtcB are dependent on different NTPs, we consider ATP in the model as a general measure of cellular energy, hence it accounts for other NTPs in addition to ATP. We assumed that enzyme reactions for the mechanisms of action of RtcA, RtcB and RtcR are in quasi-steady state allowing derivation of net rates for healing, sealing and transcription initiation, respectively. Given the affinities for ATP of both RtcA and RtcB we assumed their repair reactions are saturated with ATP (see SI) [7, 42]. We further assumed that ribosome-targeting antibi-

otics, or oxidative stress inducing agents, indirectly damage rRNA or tRNA. Finally, we assumed that the rate of influx of healthy ribosomes is proportional to the rate of translational activity exerted by ribosomes themselves.

Based on previous findings that the Rtc system is induced upon both ribosome-targeting antibiotics as well as agents that cause oxidative damage, we also considered the damage and repair of tRNA species which directly replace the ribosome species in the model (see SI Section S1.3). Compared to maintenance of ribosomal RNA, we consider the key difference that healthy tRNA contributes towards translation elongation only, which then feeds into the overall translation rate, whereas healthy ribosomes contribute directly to the overall translation rate. Whilst rRNA and tRNA affect translation in different ways, we did not observe qualitative differences in the predicted phenotypes following Rtc-regulated maintenance of rRNA vs. tRNA, or its inhibition (Supplementary Figures S3 and S4).

Our model analysis suggests that the Rtc system displays bistability, i.e. that distinct phenotypes representing Rtc-off or susceptible and Rtc-on or resistant cell states can stably co-exist, and that bistability is displayed robustly across a wide range of physiologically plausible parameter combinations. Bistability has been linked to antibiotic tolerance and persistence, where isogenic cells can adopt one of two stable steady-states and switch between them, as has been observed in expression of virulence genes in *Salmonella* and in *E.coli's* central carbon metabolism [43, 44]. Our computational results propose that, through bistability, Rtc expression may be underpinned by considerable levels of cell-to-cell heterogeneity, and consequently, that induced levels of resistance may in fact form a type of hetero-resistance. Further investigation will be required to validate this hypothesis.

Insights into the mechanisms promoting heterogeneity of Rtc expression allowed us to explore potential molecular targets aimed at suppressing Rtc expression and rendering cells more susceptible to translational assaults by antibiotics. We computationally screened the Rtc model for molecular targets which revealed that RtcB or RtcR would be the preferred targets for Rtc inhibition and that inhibition of RtcA was not predicted to achieve the same level of resistance suppression. Comparing the predicted efficacies of inhibiting RtcA vs. RtcB or RtcR, we hypothesize that differences may result from their complementary roles in exerting positive feedback onto RtcBA expression. RtcB directly affects the availability of functional (ribosomal or transfer) RNAs that are essential for translation, and RtcR controls the expression of RtcB, potentially explaining why their inhibition has similar effects in terms of RtcBA induction. RtcA, in turn, does not directly affect the pool of healthy RNAs, and its inhibition, despite impacting the Rtc-inducing ligand, appears insufficient to render cells susceptible to damage to the same extent as RtcB and RtcR. Furthermore, RtcA processes damaged RNAs at a considerably faster rate than RtcB, suggesting that the sealing action by RtcB may constitute a rate-limiting step in RNA repair.

We propose targeting RtcB or RtcR with an inhibitor in combination with translation-targeting antibiotics as a promising strategy to suppress the activation of Rtc and alleviate levels of resistance seen upon exposure. Whilst these targets provide convincing results *in silico*, we recognise the difficulties associated with finding effective inhibitors and targeting RtcR and RtcB *in vivo*. Firstly, as a regulator of gene expression, RtcR may be more prone to resistance mutations [45, 46, 47], which could enable bacteria to counteract the inhibition of RtcR. Secondly, the highly conserved nature of the Rtc system means that RtcB is not just an essential protein for bacterial pathogens but also for their host organisms. Its inhibition in combination with an antibiotic could thus have adverse affects on the infected organism, and an ideal inhibitor may therefore be required to target regions of RtcB that make the inhibition unique to bacteria. In view of these caveats, our results motivate a host of experiments to assess the feasibility of targeting components of the Rtc system to potentiate antibiotic effects.

We presented a computational approach that provided insights and explanation into previously observed phenomena around Rtc-regulated RNA repair. Our analysis uncovered how known aspects of Rtc regulation may have previously unknown and potentially decisive implications for the nature of resistance conferred by Rtc, and it pinpointed potential strategies to alleviate it. Possible limitations of the model we presented include the static nature of some of its physiological parameters, which are known to vary over time. Future work may therefore build on this prototype model to investigate the role of dynamic environments in shaping the adaptive resistance conferred by Rtc. RNA repair is an area of research that holds crucial insights into the maintenance of living cells. Our work advocates a systemic grasp of the physiological role of RNA repair via Rtc, and it provides rigorous tools to accelerate future discoveries.

Methods

Model simulations

The model has been coded in Julia v1.9 using the ModelingToolkit.jl package. Full details of the model, including all equations and derivations, can be found in the SI. Code for defining and solving models can be found here: `https://github.com/hhindley/rtc_model`. We used the Julia package DifferentialEquations.jl for all model simulations and simulate the model using the Rodas4 solver, with default tolerances.

Stability analysis

BifurcationKit.jl was used to perform the stability analysis. Some parameters that were important in solving the system with the package include 'ds' and 'dsmax' in the ContinuationPar settings. Finally, in the continuation function the parameter 'θ' was also very sensitive to solving the model correctly. The required parameters for the bifurcation kit in Julia that were used to solve the model can be found in the provided code.

Perturbation analysis

For our parameter perturbation analysis we studied parameter ranges that we found relevant from literature sources. The full set of parameters used in the model can be found in the SI. We varied ATP over the range 1000-5000 μM according to known concentrations of ATP in *E.coli* [48]; λ was varied between 0.01-0.02 $\min^{-1}$, corresponding to doubling times between approximately 30-70 $\min$, and so representative of intermediate to fast growth in *E.coli* [49].

Author contributions

HJH executed the research, AYW conceived and supervised the work, and HJH and AYW wrote the manuscript. IKL, MB and CE contributed to the model development and to interpretation of results. All authors read and revised the manuscript.

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