SHORT COMMUNICATION

Endogenous ZAP is associated with altered global cellular gene expression during Zika

virus infection

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Abstract

The zinc finger antiviral protein 1 (ZAP) has broad antiviral activity. Previous RNA-seq analyses

were conducted in uninfected wild-type and ZAP-KO cells; however, the impact of ZAP on

global gene expression during virus infection remains unknown. Here, we characterized global

cellular gene expression in uninfected and Zika virus-infected wild-type and ZAP knockout

VERO cells. ZAP is an interferon (IFN)-stimulated gene, which itself may enhance type I IFN

antiviral response. We found that ZAP was associated with the inhibition of Zika virus in the

absence of a robust type I IFN system (VERO cells are deficient for IFN-alpha and -beta). Also,

during Zika infection in VERO cells endogenous ZAP was associated with amplification of

global transcriptional antiviral responses in the absence of a robust type I IFN system. Further

studies are warranted to elucidate this type I IFN-independent antiviral activity directly or

indirectly mediated by ZAP.

46 **Keywords**: **Flavivirus, Zika virus, Zinc finger antiviral protein, ZAP, interferon, RNA-seq**

INTRODUCTION

The zinc finger CCCH-type antiviral protein 1 (ZAP) is a cellular protein with broad antiviral activity [1-5]. ZAP binds viral RNA mediating degradation and translational inhibition [3]. While ZAP lacks intrinsic RNase activity, it recruits the 5′ and 3′ RNA degradation machinery [6,7]. Using a murine leukemia reporter virus, DDX17 and DHX30 cellular RNA helicases were identified as ZAP co-factors [8,9]. The E3 ubiquitin ligase TRIM25 enhances ZAP activity against alphaviruses [10,11]. ZAP also interacts with the cytoplasmic protein KHNYN to inhibit CpG-enriched human immunodeficiency virus 1 (HIV-1) [12]. Recently, Riplet, a protein known for activating the retinoic acid-inducible gene I, was identified as a ZAP co-factor [13]. Initially characterized to inhibit murine leukemia virus [14], ZAP has shown efficacy against many viruses, including alphaviruses, filoviruses, influenza virus, porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus, hepatitis B virus, human cytomegalovirus, human T-cell lymphotropic virus type 1, and HIV-1 [1,15-24]. However, ZAP's antiviral efficiency is limited against certain RNA viruses, including vesicular stomatitis virus, poliovirus, enterovirus A71, herpes simplex virus type 1, and some flaviviruses [7,15,25]. Emerging flaviviruses constantly threaten public health. A previous study showed the sensitivity of Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV) to overexpressed ectopic and endogenous ZAP [7]. In contrast, yellow fever virus (YFV), dengue virus (DENV), and Zika virus were categorized as ZAP-resistant [7,15]. Zika virus sensitivity was tested by ectopically overexpressing ZAP against the background of endogenous ZAP. Overexpression screening is a powerful approach, but overexpressing individual genes may also miss antiviral effectors that work in multiprotein complexes [26]. Here, we compared Zika virus infection and characterized global cellular gene expression in uninfected and Zika-infected wild-type and ZAP knockout VERO cells.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cells

We maintained wild-type VERO E6 cells (ATCC; VERO-ZAP-WT) and ZAP knockout (ZAP-

KO) derivatives (VERO-ZAP-KO) in DMEM (Fisher; # 11-965-118) supplemented with 10%

heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum (FBS, Fisher; #A5256801), 1x Penicillin-Streptomycin

(Fisher; #15140122), and 2.67 mM sodium bicarbonate (Fisher; # 25080094) at +37°C in a 5%

CO_2 humidified incubator. To generate ZAP-KO cell line, we used the guide RNA (gRNA)

GTCTCTGGCAGTACTTGCGA which targets the first exon of *Chlorocebus sabaeus* (Gene ID:

103226990) ZC3HAV1 gene, which is required for the expression of all ZAP isoforms. We also

used a non-targeting control gRNA ACGGAGGCTAAGCGTCGCAA for control cells. These

gRNAs were transiently transfected into cells using GenCrispr NLS-Cas9-NLS Nuclease

(GenScript). Subsequently, transfected cells were seeded in 96-well plates through limiting

dilution to generate isogenic single clones. Following expansion, the clones were genotyped via

Sanger sequencing, employing primers (ATCGCTGGGCTGGACTAACG,

GCAGAGAAGGGAGTGGCTGAA) to identify indels. The knockout subclone verified by

genotyping was further confirmed by western blot for ZAP expression (**Fig 1A**) as described

below. The negative control cells were not isolated into single clones, but they were validated by

Sanger sequencing to confirm there were no indels. We confirmed the absence of mycoplasma

contamination in cells using the LookOut Mycoplasma PCR Detection Kit (Millipore Sigma).

Viruses

We utilized the Asian lineage Zika virus H/PF/2013 strain [GenBank: KJ776791.2]. Zika virus

was synthetically rescued using reverse genetics following previously described methods [27].

Subsequently, the virus was propagated in VERO cells cultured in DMEM supplemented with

2% FBS and 1% penicillin/streptomycin (P/S). Supernatants were harvested, centrifuged (12,000

g, 20 min, +4°C), aliquoted, and frozen (-80°C). Infectious virus titers were quantified using

VERO cells via and endpoint dilution assay. The fifty percent tissue culture infective dose

($TCID_{50}$) endpoint titers were calculated as previously described [27-30]. Media from virus-

negative VERO cells was processed in the same manner as the virus stocks and used as control.

The absence of mycoplasma contamination in the virus stocks was confirmed using the LookOut

Mycoplasma PCR Detection Kit (Millipore Sigma; #MP0035).

Comparative RNA-seq analysis in wild-type and ZAP-KO cells

VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells were seeded at $6×10^5$ cells per well in 6-well plates,

with 4 plates per cell line, in DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS for 24 h. Wells in two plates

from each cell line were either mock-inoculated with media from virus-negative cells (4-6 well

replicates for VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO) or inoculated with MOI 1 of Zika virus (6

well replicates for VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO). After 2 h at 37ºC, the inoculum was

removed, cells were washed, and covered with DMEM supplemented with 2% FBS, then

maintained at 37ºC. At 24 h and 72 h post-inoculation, media was removed, cells were washed

with commercial 1× PBS, homogenized in 1 mL of TRI Reagent Solution (Fisher; # AM9738),

and RNA was extracted according to the manufacturer's protocol using the PureLink RNA Mini

Kit (Fisher; 12-183-018A). A total of 4-6 replicate samples were obtained for mock-inoculated

VERO-ZAP-WT, mock-inoculated VERO-ZAP-KO, Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT, and Zika-

infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells, at both 24 and 72 h. RNA quantification was performed using the

Qubit RNA High Sensitivity kit (Fisher; # Q32855) and Qubit 2.0 Fluorometer (Fisher). RNA

quality was assessed using a bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies 2100) to ensure all samples had

RNA Integrity Number (RIN) values above 9.0. DNA contamination was removed using the

TURBO DNA-free Kit (Fisher; # AM1907). mRNA with intact poly(A) tails was enriched using

the NEBNext Poly(A) mRNA Magnetic Isolation Module (NEB; # E7490L) and utilized for

library constructions with the NEBNext Ultra II Directional RNA Library Prep Kit for Illumina

along with NEBNext Multiplex Oligos for Illumina (96 Unique Dual Index Primer Pairs; NEB; #

E7760L). The libraries were sequenced on the NovaSeq platform as paired-end reads using the

S1 v1.5 kit with 300 cycles (Illumina). FASTQ files were trimmed for adaptor sequences and

filtered for low-quality reads using *Trimmomatic*. RNA-seq analysis was conducted as

previously described [30-33] with modifications. Briefly, paired-end reads were processed using

the *Kallisto* pseudo-alignment method [34] and quantified by mapping to a transcripts database

generated from the African Green Monkey (vervet) reference genome assembly (ENSEMBL

Chlorocebus sabaeus 1.1) [35]. The count table for RNA-seq data was assembled using the

tximport::tximport function in R. After importing data to the R environment we removed data for

genes with low expression using the *edgeR::filterByExpr* function [36]. Normalization was then

performed using the *edgeR::calcNormFactors* function, and the *limma::voom* function was used

to convert the data into a normal distribution. We calculated differential expression using the

limma::lmFit function with empirical Bayes moderation via the *limma::eBayes* function (**Table**

S1). Finally, we performed a gene set enrichment analysis using the *limma::camera* function.

Gene set enrichment analysis was conducted using Gene Ontology (GO) annotation for

Chlorocebus sabaeus obtained from g:Profiler [37]. Raw data were deposited to NCBI

BioProject (PRJNA1101086).

The following analytical strategy was chosen to normalize for intrinsic transcriptional

differences (**Tables S2A-D**) and compare RNA-seq data between Zika virus-infected ZAP-WT

cells and Zika virus-infected ZAP-KO cells. Initially, we compared transcriptional responses

between non-infected and infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells. Subsequently, we compared

transcriptional responses between non-infected and infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Finally,

genes and GO processes affected by infection were summarized in **Table S2** and figures, and

pairwise comparison of genes and comparative GO analysis between VERO-ZAP-WT and

VERO-ZAP-KO cells were conducted (**Figs 2-4**; **S2Fig; Table S2**).

Statistics

Zika RNA loads, infectious $TCID_{50}$ titers, and CellTiter-Glo Luminescent Assay data in VERO-

ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells were compared using an unpaired t-test. A *P*-value < 0.05

was considered statistically significant.

Experimental details for Zika virus infection kinetics, Western blot, RT-qPCR, cytopathic effect

kinetics, and cell viability assay are in supplemental materials and methods.

RESULTS

ZAP affects Zika virus infection phenotypes

We infected VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO (**Fig 1A**) with an MOI 1 of Zika virus, and

sampled control (4-6 well replicates) and infected (6 well replicates) cells at 24 h and 72 h. We

compared intracellular viral RNA loads between WT and ZAP-KO cells with the Zika-specific

RT-qPCR. At 24 h post-inoculation, there was no significant difference in Zika virus

intracellular RNA loads; however, VERO-ZAP-KO cells showed a trend towards higher RNA

loads (**Fig 1B**). At 72 h post-inoculation, Zika virus intracellular RNA loads were significantly

higher in VERO-ZAP-KO cells (**Fig 1B**). Expression of Zika virus NS5 protein, as determined

by Western blot at 24 h and 72 h (**Fig S1**), corresponded with intracellular RNA loads (**Fig 1B**).

However, the effects of ZAP on infection were more pronounced at the viral protein level (**Fig**

S1). Specifically, at 24 h post-inoculation, Zika NS5 bands were visible in VERO-ZAP-KO

cells, while the assay sensitivity was insufficient to detect NS5 in VERO-ZAP-WT cells. By 72 h

post-inoculation, Zika NS5 was detected in both VERO-ZAP-KO and VERO-ZAP-WT cells,

with protein loads considerably higher in VERO-ZAP-WT cells (**Fig S1**). In addition to Zika

intracellular RNA and NS5 WB assays, infectious Zika virus titers in the supernatants of VERO-

ZAP-KO cells were significantly higher than VERO-ZAP-WT titers at 24, 48, and 96 hours (**Fig**

1C).

ZAP affects global cellular gene expression during Zika virus infection

How ZAP affects global gene expression in response to virus infection was unknown. Initially,

we conducted simple pairwise comparisons of differentially expressed genes (DEGs). First, we

compared global gene expression between mock-infected VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO

cells: 758 and 992 genes were differently expressed between two cell lines at 24 and 72 h (**Fig**

2A; **Tables S2A, B**). Among the top ten affected genes at 24 h and 72 h (**Table S2A, B**) was

only one upregulated gene with known innate immunity or apoptosis function—CXCL12 (**Fig**

2A). This contrasts with affected top genes in infected cells described below.

Second, we compared global gene expression between mock-infected and Zika-infected VERO-

ZAP-WT cells: 40 and 117 genes were affected by infection at 24 h and 72 h (**Fig 2B**; **Tables**

S2E, F). Among the top ten affected genes (**Tables S2E, F**) were four genes with known innate

immunity or apoptosis functions—CXCL10, EGR1, G0S2, and CCL2 at 24 h, and seven

genes—CCL2, G0S2, CXCL10, IFNL1, OASL, CXCL8, and IL1A at 72 h. All these genes were

upregulated in Zika virus-infected ZAP-WT cells (**Fig 2B**).

Third, we compared global gene expression between mock-infected and Zika-infected VERO-

ZAP-KO cells: 14 and 342 genes were affected by infection at 24 h and 72 h (**Fig 2C**; **Tables**

S2I, J). Among the top ten affected genes (**Table S2I, J**) were four genes with known innate

immunity or apoptosis functions— EGR1, IL1A, FOS, and EGR2 at 24 h, and five genes—

G0S2, CCL2, CXCL10, IFNL1, and OASL at 72 h. All these genes were upregulated in Zika

virus-infected ZAP-KO cells (**Fig 2C**).

To further extend analysis beyond pairwise comparisons of top DEGs, we conducted GO

analysis. This method offers high sensitivity due to its robust annotation framework,

standardized terminology, hierarchical structure, integration with biological knowledge,

continuous updates, and statistical rigor where each gene in the entire input set (**Table S1**) is

statistically processed and used for annotation [38,39].

Along with profound gene expression changes, mock-infected VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-

ZAP-KO cells had 92 (24 h) and 178 (72 h) significantly affected GO biological processes

(**Tables S2C, D**). However, when we searched among affected GO biological processes

keywords—"viral/virus", "apoptotic/apoptosis", "immun*", and "interferon," we did not find

affected processes containing these keywords. This sharply contrasts with affected GO biological

processes in infected cells described below. Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells had 303 (24 h)

and 864 (72 h) affected GO biological processes (**Tables S2G, H**). Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-

KO cells had 287 (24 h) and 384 (72 h) affected GO biological processes (**Tables S2K, L**).

We narrowed down analysis and compared GO biological processes related to virus infection in

VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells at 24 and 72 h. As expected, no affected "viral" GO

processes were detected in mock-infected control cells (**Fig 3A**). Infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells

showed 5 affected processes at 24 h, and the number increased at 72 h reaching 16 affected

processes (**Fig 3B**). In contrast, infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells showed no affected processes at

24 h, and the number increased at 72 h reaching only 5 affected processes (**Fig 3C**).

We also compared GO biological processes related to immune responses in VERO-ZAP-WT and

VERO-ZAP-KO cells at 24 and 72 h. As expected, no affected "immune*" GO processes were

detected in mock-infected control cells (**Fig 4A**). Infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells showed one

affected process at 24 h, and the number increased at 72 h reaching 16 affected processes (**Fig

4B**). Infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells showed one affected process at 24 h, and the number

increased at 72 h reaching only 4 affected processes (**Fig 4C**).

Affected GO biological processes related to apoptosis in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO

cells (**Fig S2**) had the same patterns as "viral" and "immune" processes (**Figs 3, 4**). No affected

"apoptosis" GO processes were detected in mock-infected control cells (**Fig S2A**). Infected

VERO-ZAP-WT cells showed 5 affected processes at 24 h, and the number increased at 72 h

reaching 24 affected processes (**Fig S2B**). In contrast, infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells showed

only 2 affected processes at 24 h, and the number increased at 72 h reaching only 9 affected

processes (**Fig S2C**).

More aggressive "viral" responses to infection in VERO-ZAP-WT cells than in VERO-ZAP-KO

cells at 24 h identified by GO analysis (**Fig 3B**, **C**) may determine the higher number of affected

"apoptosis" GO processes in VERO-ZAP-WT cells (**Fig S2B**, **C**) because antiviral

transcriptional responses and cell death are interconnected and are critical components of the

host response to virus infection [40,41]. Many innate immune signaling pathways can promote

cell death [40,41]. In contrast to the signaling pathways that promote antiviral transcription,

those that initiate cell death following virus infection remain less understood [40]. To probe

whether ZAP affects cell death during Zika infection in VERO cells, we compared cytopathic

effects (CPE) in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells. We infected VERO-ZAP-WT and

VERO-ZAP-KO in the same way as in the RNA-seq experiment with an MOI 1 of Zika virus. At

24 h, VERO-ZAP-KO cells did not show visible CPE (**Fig S3**). In contrast, VERO-ZAP-WT

cells showed prominent CPE at 24 h—diffuse focies of detached cells (**Fig S3**). At 30 h, the

difference was prominent, CPE in VERO-ZAP-WT aggravated to diffuse cell detachment, but

VERO-ZAP-KO cells did not display visible CPE until 48 h post-infection (**Fig S3**). At 48 h and

72 h, both cell lines had similar diffused cell detachment; however, continuous cell monolayers

were mostly preserved. This CPE pattern aggravated at 96 h, where VERO-ZAP-WT had a lot of

dead cells but still maintained preserved monolayer, and VERO-ZAP-KO had many dead cells

with many spots of disrupted monolayer. At 120 h, the monolayers were mostly disrupted in both

cell lines.

The viability patterns of VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells, as determined by the

CellTiter-Glo® Luminescent Cell Viability Assay (**Fig 1D**), showed temporal shifts compared to

CPE patterns determined with a microscope (**Fig S3**). Differences in CellTiter-Glo viability were

observable starting at 48 h after Zika virus infection, whereas foci of detached cells were visually

detectable as early as 24 hours (**Fig S3**). The difference may be explained by distinct

methodology principles where CPE is assessed visually versus CellTiter-Glo reagent generating

a luminescent signal proportional to the amount of adenosine triphosphate present after chemical

cell lysis. The ongoing cell proliferation at 24 h (**Fig 1D**) could potentially impede the ability of

the CellTiter-Glo assay to detect dying cells early. Different plate format for assays, 96-well

plates for CellTiter-Glo and 6-well plates for CPE, could also contribute to observed differences.

Nevertheless, the CellTiter-Glo® Luminescent Cell Viability Assay confirmed general CPE

patterns where VERO-ZAP-WT cells had higher CellTiter-Glo mortality at earlier infection (at

48 h). Then, mortality between the two cell types equalized (at 72 h), and VERO-ZAP-KO had

higher mortality at later infection (96 h and 120 h; P=0.0265 and P=0.0026) (**Fig 1D**).

Taken together, infection kinetics, RNA-seq data, and cell death patterns support our hypothesis

that a more robust, potentially ZAP-mediated, antiviral response in VERO-ZAP-WT cells

compared to VERO-ZAP-KO cells (**Figs 3, 4; Fig S2**) more effectively controls Zika virus

infection (**Figs 1B, C**; **Fig S1**), but leads to heightened cell death during early infection (24-48 h;

Fig 1D; Fig S3) because many innate immune signaling pathways can promote cell death

[40,41]. Afterward, the less controlled infection in ZAP-KO cells at 72 h (**Figs 1B, C; Fig S1**)

may contribute to more extensive cell lysis at later time infection (96-120 h) (**Fig 1D; Fig S3**).

Further studies are needed to validate this hypothesis and gain a better understanding of the

molecular interplay between ZAP-mediated antiviral responses and cell death.

DISCUSSION

The zinc finger CCCH-type antiviral protein 1 is an interferon (IFN)-stimulated gene (ISG) [1-5]. Also, there are conflicting studies regarding the capacity of ZAP to enhance the type I IFN antiviral response [5,42-44]. Here, we found that during Zika infection, endogenous ZAP was associated with amplification of global transcriptional antiviral and immune responses in VERO cells which are deficient in IFN-α/β [4,45]. We do not know yet how these type I IFN-independent antiviral cellular responses associated with endogenous ZAP work. ZAP knockout also considerably impacted global gene expression in uninfected cells; however, GO processes related to antiviral, immune, and apoptosis events were not identified, suggesting the specificity of findings in Zika-infected cells.

Our study is confined to a single VERO-ZAP-KO clone, and conducting additional tests using multiple clones could yield further insights. Such an endeavor falls beyond the scope of this study; however, our RNA-seq results find indirect support from previous research conducted on different uninfected wild-type and ZAP-KO cell lines. Specifically, global gene expression analysis with Agilent microarrays revealed 1,065 upregulated and 776 downregulated transcripts in uninfected wild-type and ZAP-KO HeLa cells [46]. Another study using RNA-seq identified a number of DEGs between uninfected ZAP-WT and ZAP-KO A549 cells [47]. In the most recent study, the authors demonstrated that ZAP influences hundreds of transcripts in ZAP-WT and ZAP-KO HEK cells [48]. Directly comparing the DEGs between our study and the above studies poses challenges due to variations in cell types, experimental design, and the employed bioinformatics. Nonetheless, the overarching trend in all previous studies strongly corroborates

significant transcriptional differences between non-infected ZAP-WT and ZAP-KO VERO cells

(**Fig 2A; Tables S2A-D**).

The above studies did not use virus infection for RNA-seq comparison between ZAP-WT and

ZAP-KO cells. Thus, our study provides the first high-throughput dataset highlighting the impact

of ZAP on global gene expression during virus infection. During submission of this manuscript,

a study indirectly supporting our findings was published [48]. The authors used RNA-seq in

ZAP-WT and ZAP-KO HEK cells transfected with viral mimetic RNA oligos and mock

transfection to normalize DEGs. From this study, we used the top 16 innate immune response

genes (**Table S2M**) overexpressed in ZAP-WT HEK cells as compared to ZAP-KO for

comparative purposes. At 24 h, two genes in this HEK list (**Table S2M**)—IFIT1 and ISG15—

were upregulated in Zika virus-infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells as compared to mock control

VERO-ZAP-WT cells (**Table S2E;** highlighted). In contrast, no genes from the HEK list were

affected in Zika virus-infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells (**Table S2I**). At 72 h, eight-nine innate

immune response genes in the list (**Table S2M**) were upregulated in both Zika virus-infected

VEO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells (**Table S2F, J**); but comparison at 72 h is not

sufficiently informative because previous HEK study was only conducted at 24 h after

transfection. Nonetheless, this pattern of ZAP-dependent affected genes, where ZAP-WT cells

show innate immune responses earlier than ZAP-KO cells, is in accordance with our GO analysis

(**Figs 3, 4**).

We do not see a complete match between the previous HEK (**Table S2M**) and our VERO

dataset; not all genes identified as upregulated in transfected ZAP-WT HEK cells were

significantly upregulated in infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells (**Table S2E, I, F, J**). This

discrepancy may be explained by different approaches (transfection versus infection), the type I

IFN competency of HEK cells, and the deficiency of VERO cells. Nonetheless, two important

innate immune genes—IFIT1 and ISG15—were upregulated in transfected or infected ZAP-WT

cells in both studies, suggesting their ZAP-mediated augmentation in the absence of the type I

IFN system. Potential type I IFN-independent and -dependent interactions between ZAP and

IFIT1 are of interest because ZAP and IFIT1 together have recently been identified to constitute

the majority of IFN-mediated restriction of alphavirus, specifically Venezuelan equine

encephalitis virus [26].

The previous ZAP study showed JEV sensitivity to ectopic ZAP, and insensitivity of Zika virus

[7]. The discrepancy between previous and present studies may be explained by different

experimental approaches. The previous study involved the overexpression of ectopic ZAP in

ZAP-positive cells [7], whereas our study compared Zika RNA loads between ZAP-WT and

ZAP-KO cells. Additionally, different cell lines were used: A549 cells from human cancer lung

tissue in the previous study [7], and VERO cells from a healthy monkey in our study. Antiviral

signaling can vary significantly between different cell types [2,49]. Another potential factor is

that human cells were used previously, and here we used the cell line derived from a healthy

adult African green monkey—a possible natural reservoir host of Zika virus [50]. Moreover,

while the previous study used 10 h and 24 h sampling times, we conducted the RT-qPCR,

Western blot, and end point dilution $TCID_{50}$ assay for infectious titers at 24-120 h after Zika

infection, revealing delayed effects, indicative of indirect ZAP-mediated antiviral activity.

CONCLUSIONS

Altogether, our preliminary study underscores the importance of ZAP in augmenting cellular responses against Zika virus even in the absence of the robust type I IFN system. Further investigations are warranted to elucidate the mechanisms underlying these type I IFN-independent antiviral cellular responses mediated by ZAP. The considerable augmentation of antiviral responses by endogenous ZAP against Zika virus highlights its potential as a therapeutic target. However, comprehensive studies are required to fully understand the intricacies of ZAP-mediated antiviral activity and its implications for combating Zika virus infection.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Raw RNA-seq files are deposited to NCBI BioProject (PRJNA1101086).

FUNDING

PPS received a Scholarship from the School of Public Health, University of Saskatchewan. This work was partially supported by a grant to UK from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR; Project Grant #424307). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or manuscript preparation.

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Fig 1. Infection phenotypes of Zika virus and cell viability in wild-type (VERO-ZAP-WT) and ZAP knockout (VERO-ZAP-KO) cells. (**A**) ZAP western blot. KO status was also confirmed by Sanger sequencing. (**B**) Reduced intracellular Zika virus RNA in VERO-ZAP-WT cells at 24 h and 72 h after inoculation, MOI 1. Determined by the Zika-specific RT-qPCR assay. All mock-infected samples were negative by Zika-specific RT-qPCR. Statistics—an unpaired t-test. (**C**) Zika virus infectious titers in supernatants of VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells at different times after inoculation, MOI 1. The experiment was done in four replicates for each cell line and sampling time. Supernatants from all mock-infected samples were negative. (**D**) The CellTiter-Glo Luminescent Assay. The assay was performed in four biological and three technical replicates. Dots represent biological replicates; each biological replicate represents an average of three technical replicates. Statistics—an unpaired t-test.

Fig 2. Cellular transcriptional gene responses during Zika virus infection. (**A**) Mock-infected
VERO ZAP-WT versus VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: WT/KO. (**B**) Mock-infected
versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected.
(**C**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-
infected/Mock-infected. Plots of the upregulated (red) and downregulated (blue) genes. **FDR**: The
false discovery rate. Genes with FDR < 0.05 and log2 fold change (FC) > 1 were significantly
affected. The top 10 affected genes associated with innate immune response or apoptosis are
shown. Raw data are in **Tables S2A, B, E, F, I, J**.

Fig 3. Biological "viral" processes affected in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells at 24 h and 72 h after Zika virus infection. (**A**) Mock-infected ZAP-WT versus VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: WT/KO. (**B**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. (**C**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. Red bars–upregulated processes. Blue bars–downregulated processes. **FDR**: The false discovery rate. Raw data are in **Tables S2C, D, G, H, K, L**.

Fig 4. Biological "immune*" processes affected in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells at 24 h and 72 h after Zika virus infection. (**A**) Mock-infected ZAP-WT versus VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: WT/KO. (**B**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. (**C**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. Red bars–upregulated processes. Blue bars– downregulated processes. **FDR**: The false discovery rate. Raw data are in **Tables S2C, D, G, H, K, L**.

Fig S1. Zika virus NS5 protein Western blot. Reduced Zika virus NS5 protein loads in VERO-

ZAP-WT cells as compared to VERO-ZAP-KO cells at 24 h and 72 h after inoculation, MOI 1.

Rabbit anti-Zika virus NS5 IgG Abs (1:1,000 dilution; GTX133312, GeneTex), with the specific

NS5 band appearing at 103 kDa, were used. Beta-actin was used as a western blot loading

control (42 kDa, red bands). A normalized 50 μg of protein was used for all samples. Two

biological replicates for each condition are shown.

Fig S2. Biological "apoptosis" processes affected in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO
cells at 24 h and 72 h after Zika virus infection. (**A**) Mock-infected ZAP-WT versus VERO-
ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: WT/KO. (**B**) Mock-infected versus Zika-infected VERO-
ZAP-WT cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. (**C**) Mock-infected versus
Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO cells. Direction of analysis: Zika-infected/Mock-infected. Red
bars–upregulated processes. Blue bars- downregulated processes. **FDR**: The false discovery rate.
Raw data are in **Tables S2C, D, G, H, K, L**.

Fig S3. Cytopathic effect patterns during Zika virus infection in VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells, MOI 1. Arrows show diffuse small focies of detached cells. The experiment was done in three replicates for each cell line. Images represent the typical pattern in all replicates.

Table S1 Raw RNAseq data (DEGs).

Table S2 Significantly affected DEGs and GO processes.

Supplemental Materials and Methods

Endogenous ZAP is associated with altered global cellular gene expression during Zika

virus infection

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Zika virus infection kinetics

VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells were seeded in 6-well plates in DMEM

supplemented with 10% inactivated fetal bovine serum for 24 h. Four wells for each cell line,

representing four biological replicates, were inoculated with Zika virus at a multiplicity of

infection (MOI) of 1. After 2 h at 37ºC, the inoculum was removed, the cells were washed three

times, covered with 3 ml of DMEM supplemented with 2% FBS, and maintained at 37ºC. At 2,

24, 48, 72, 96, and 120 h post-inoculation, 150 µl of media supernatants were collected, cleared

by centrifugation, and frozen at -80°C for the end-point dilution $TCID_{50}$ assay [1-6].

Western blot

Not manipulated, mock-infected, or Zika-infected (MOI 1) VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-

KO cells cultured in T-75 or T-175 flasks were washed, pelletized, and lysed in 300 µL of RIPA

buffer (Fisher; # PI89900) supplemented with 1× Halt protease inhibitor cocktail (Fisher;

#PI87786) and 1× EDTA (Fisher; #BP2473100). The lysates were then incubated on wet ice for

10 minutes, gently vortexed, and centrifuged (12,000g, 10 min, +4 °C). Supernatants were

aliquoted into prechilled low protein-binding (Sarstedt; #72.706.600) and stored at -80°C. After

quantifying protein concentration with the Pierce BCA Protein Assay Kit (Fisher; # PI23227), 50

µg of protein extract was diluted in 4× reducing Laemmli SDS sample buffer (Fisher;

#AAJ60015AC), heated at 95ºC for 10 min, and resolved on 10% Mini-PROTEAN TGX precast

protein gels (Bio-Rad; # 4561035) in 1× Tris/Glycine/SDS running buffer (Bio-Rad; #1610732)

at a voltage of 125V for 70 min. Proteins were transferred on methanol-activated 0.45 µm

Immun-Blot Low Fluorescence polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) membranes using the Trans-

Blot Turbo RTA Mini 0.45 µm LF PVDF Transfer Kit (Bio-Rad; #1704274). The PVDF

membranes were blocked with 1× VWR Life Science Rapidblock Blocking Solution (VWR;

#97064-124) for 1 h at room temperature. Subsequently, the membranes were incubated

overnight at +4°C with primary antibody diluted in blocking solution. The membranes were

washed four times with TBST (1× Bio-Rad Tris Buffered Saline containing 0.1% Tween-20) and

then incubated with secondary antibody, along with hFAB Rhodamine Anti-Actin Primary

Antibody (Recombinant human β-actin), diluted in Blocking Solution for 1 h at room

temperature, and washed four times with TBST. Fluorescent blots were imaged on the

ChemiDoc MP Imaging system using an appropriate detection channel with Image Lab Touch

Software (Bio-Rad).

We used antibodies (Abs): Rabbit anti-ZAP IgG Abs (1:1,000 dilution; ANTI-ZC3HAV1;

#HPA059096-100UL, Sigma-Aldrich), Rabbit anti-Zika virus NS5 IgG Abs (1:1,000 dilution;

#GTX133312, GeneTex), hFAB Rhodamine Anti-Actin Primary Abs (1:2,500; #12004164, Bio-

Rad), and IRDye 680RD Goat anti-Rabbit IgG secondary Abs (1:10,000; #926-68071; LI-COR).

Reverse transcriptase quantitative polymerase chain reaction assays (RT-qPCR)

The portion of RNA from all RNA-seq samples described above was used to quantify

intracellular Zika virus RNA with a virus-specific RT-qPCR assay. All RT-qPCR reactions were

performed on the QuantStudio 3 real-time PCR system (Applied Biosystems) and analyzed using

QuantStudio Design & Analysis Software v1.5.2.

For Zika virus RNA quantification, a previously validated SYBR one-step RT-qPCR assay was

used [7]. The reaction mixture (20 μL) of the Luna Universal One-Step RT-qPCR Kit (NEB; #

E3005L) comprised 10 μL Luna Universal One-Step Reaction Mix, 1 μL Luna WarmStart RT

Enzyme Mix, 0.8 μL (10 μM) each of forward (ZIKV-F-SYBR: 5′-

AGGATCATAGGTGATGAAGAAAAGT-3′) and reverse (ZIKV-R-SYBR: 5′-

CCTGACAACACTAAGATTGGTGC-3′) primers, 3.4 μL nuclease-free water, and 4 μL of

RNA template. The reverse transcription and enzyme activation steps of 10 min at 55°C and 1

min at 95°C were followed by 40 amplification cycles (10 s at 95°C and 60 s at 60°C). For a

standard curve, we generated complementary DNA fragment using viral RNA as a template and

primers (T7-F3- TAATACGACTCACTATAGGGCACCACCTGGGCTG; R3-

ACAGGCTGCACAGCTTTCCC) containing the T7 promoter. Afterward, the DNA template

was transcribed with the MAXIscript™ T7 Transcription Kit (Fisher; #10430355) to generate

Zika virus RNA. DNA was removed with the TURBO DNase (Fisher; # AM2238) and was

purified with RNA Clean & Concentrator-5 kit (ZYMO; # R1016) following Qubit RNA High

Sensitivity Kit (Fisher; # Q32855) quantification. The purified RNA was used to generate the

standard curve and quantify Zika RNA loads as we previously described [6,8]. Zika virus RNA

copies were expressed per 100 ng of total RNA quantified with the Qubit RNA High Sensitivity

Kit. Strict precautions were taken to prevent PCR contamination. All master mix preparations

were done in the dedicated PCR cabinet. Aerosol-resistant filter pipette tips and disposable

gloves were used. Kit reagent controls were included in every RNA extraction and PCR run.

Cytopathic effect kinetics in wild-type and ZAP knockout cells

VERO-ZAP-WT and VERO-ZAP-KO cells were seeded in 6-well plates in DMEM

supplemented with 10% FBS. After 24 h, the cell culture medium was removed, and monolayers

were gently washed twice with $1\times$ PBS. Cell monolayers were then mock-infected or infected (3

replicates) with wild-type Zika virus H/2013/PF at an MOI of 1 in 1 mL of DMEM and plates

were incubated at 37 °C for 2 h in a 5% CO_2 incubator. Following the incubation period, the

inoculum was removed, and monolayers were washed twice with 1× PBS. Subsequently, 3 mL

of DMEM supplemented with 2% FBS was added to each well, and plates were further incubated

at 37°C in a 5% CO_2 incubator. Cells were observed under a light microscope for any visible

cytopathic effect.

Cell viability assay

Wild-type and VERO-ZAP-KO cells were mock-inoculated or Zika virus-inoculated in suspension

at an MOI of 1 in 200 µL of DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS. Tubes with inoculated cells

were incubated at 37 °C for 1 h and shaken gently every 10 min. Then, cells were washed with cell

culture media, and 50 µL of cell suspension was seeded in 96-well plates prefilled with 50 µL of

medium. The final seeding concentration was $5×10^4$ cells per well. Plates corresponding to

different experimental time points were infected at the same initial time. Mock-infected cells and

medium-only wells were also included as controls in each plate. The assay was performed in four

biological and three technical replicates.

At 24 h, 48 h, 72 h, 96 h, and 120 h, cells were analyzed with the CellTiter-Glo Luminescent Assay

(Promega; # G7572) according to the manufacturer's instructions. For analysis, 96-well black

plates (PerkinElmer) and CellTiter-Glo reagent were equilibrated to room temperature for 15 min.

Then, 20 µL of CellTiter-Glo reagent was added to each well with cells, and plates were placed on

an orbital shaker at 60 rpm for 12 min. The cells containing CellTiter-Glo reagent were mixed well

and were transferred to 96-well black plates. Luminescence was quantified on the Promega

GloMax Explorer microplate reader (Promega; # GM3500). At each sampling, luminescence data

from virus-inoculated cells were normalized by data from mock-inoculated cells to express relative

viability.

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A

Mock-infected VERO-ZAP-WT vs. VERO-ZAP-KO, 24h

193 genes   565 genes

CXCL12

Mock-infected VERO-ZAP-WT vs. VERO-ZAP-KO, 72h

363 genes   629 genes

CXCL12

B

Mock-infected vs. Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT, 24h

0 genes   40 genes

EGR1

G0S2

CXCL10

CCL2

Mock-infected vs. Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-WT, 72h

25 genes   92 genes

IFNL1   G0S2

IL1A   OASL

CXCL8   CXCL10

CCL2

C

Mock-infected vs. Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO, 24h

0 genes   14 genes

EGR1

FOS

EGR2

IL1A

Mock-infected vs. Zika-infected VERO-ZAP-KO, 72h

64 genes   278 genes

IFNL1

G0S2

CXCL10

OASL

CCL2

A

B

C