Effective downregulation of *BCR-ABL* tumorigenicity by RNA targeted CRISPR-

Cas13a

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Abstract

CML is a clonal myeloproliferative disorder of pluripotent stem cells driven by a reciprocal

translocation between chromosome 9 and 22, forming a *BCR-ABL* fusion gene. Tyrosine

kinase inhibitor drugs like imatinib are mainstay of treatment and cases resistant to these

drugs have a poor prognosis in absence of a compatible stem-cell donor. However, with

rapid advancements in the gene editing technologies, most studies are now focusing on

developing a translational model targeting single gene disorders with prospective permanent

cure. The present study explores the potential application of the RNA targeting CRISPR

Cas13a system for effective knockdown of *BCR-ABL* fusion transcript in K562 cell line.

The CRISPR system was successfully able to lower the expression of downstream genes

(pCRKL and *pCRK)* dependent on the activated *BCR-ABL* kinase signal by up-to 4.3 folds.

The time dependent kinetics also highlighted the significant *in-vitro* suppressive activity to

last up to 8 weeks (p-value: 0.025). As per the cDNA sequencing data from Oxford MinION

next generation sequencer, the CRISPR activity was 57.45% resulting in 42.55% wild type,

19.15% stop-gain, 10.64% frameshift and 27.66% base substitution transcripts. These

preliminary results highlight an excellent potential application of RNA targeting CRISPRs

in Hematological neoplasms like CML and should pave way for further research in this

direction.

1. Introduction

Chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) is caused by a reciprocal translocation between chromosome 22 and 9, resulting in a chimeric *BCR-ABL* protein having kinase activity [1]. The translocation is characteristically between band q34 of chromosome 9 bearing Abelson (*ABL*) proto-oncogene and band q11 of chromosome 22 bearing the breakpoint cluster region (*BCR*) gene [2]. The *BCR-ABL* fusion gene protein can vary from 190 kDa to 230 kDa depending upon the breakpoint site on *BCR* gene [3]. Most commonly found *BCR-ABL* fusions carry their breakpoints in the 2.9 kb region between exons 13 and 15 (b2 and b4) of *BCR* region that fuses with the large intronic region of *ABL* between exons 1b and 2b. This forms an 8.5 kb *BCR-ABL* transcript containing *BCR* exon b2/b3 and *ABL* exon 2 (a2). Both of these combinations (b1a2 and b3a2) code for the same 210 kDa protein [3]. However, irrespective of the breakpoint, the *BCR-ABL* chimeric kinase activates downstream proteins like *pCRKL*, *pCRK*, p*STAT5* etc that further modulate expression of target genes to give proliferative advantage to the Philadelphia chromosome (Ph) carrying pluripotent stem cells [4].

With recent advancements in gene editing research, much focus has drifted towards targeting single gene disorders for possible therapeutic cure. In this regard, Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR), has emerged as a highly versatile, flexible and cost-effective tool for gene editing experiments. This tool has circumvented the shortcomings of the previous tools like transcription activator-like effector nucleases (TALENs) and zinc finger nucleases (ZFNs) with improved overall turnaround time [5-8]. In Hematological neoplasms, the chimeric fusion kinase *BCR-ABL* of CML, seems an exciting target for CRISPR as it is the driving force behind the neoplastic pathogenesis. Working on the same idea, in 2017, García-Tuñón *et al*, demonstrated the use of CRISPR *Cas9* for targeting *BCR-ABL* chimeric trans-gene [9] in a synthetically engineered Boff-p210 cell line bearing the transgene coding for the p210 variant of the *BCR-ABL* fusion gene. This extensive work showcased for the first time the application of CRISPR in down regulating

the *BCR-ABL* chimeric gene. However, in actual cases of CML, the breakpoints might differ

at the DNA level due to different intronic breakpoint regions in ABL gene [10]. Hence, using

DNA targeting CRISPR will require a per case targeted sequencing and custom CRISPR

sgRNA/ sgRNAs to effectively knockdown the *BCR-ABL* chimeric gene. This would require

a dedicated research team which will eventually incur substantial costs and increase the

turnaround time per case. Also, the custom target effectiveness might vary over the range of

patients and hence a definitive prognosis might never be established. All these issues can be

circumvented by employing techniques that can target the *BCR-ABL* transcript rather than

the DNA as the former will remain immune to the intronic changes at the DNA level. This

was only possible after the recent development and assessment of RNA targeting CRISPRs

[11]. These CRISPR systems, unlike DNA targeting *Cas9*, are additionally more flexible and

exhibit less off-target and more on-target activities. In current experimental study, we've

explored the use of CRISPR *Cas13a*, a form of RNA targeting CRISPR, in knocking down

the *BCR-ABL* transcript and quantified the downstream gene products (*pCrKL* and *pCrK*)

using flow-cytometry and western blot techniques. The overall activity of CRISPR has been

enumerated by deep sequencing of cDNA by Oxford Nanopore Technologies MinION

system. The developed CRISPR system was found to be effectively down regulating the

levels of downstream genes of the CML pathogenesis pathway. Moreover, we have tried

highlighting the time dependent kinetics of downstream effects of the editing. To the best of

our knowledge, this is the first such *in vitro* experimental study successfully employing

RNA targeting CRISPR-*Cas13a* in knocking down the *BCR-ABL* transcript and is likely to

pave way for further research in the field.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Construction CRISPR plasmids

The CRISPR RNA (crRNA) was designed using CRISPR-RT server [12]. Only the crRNA

designs overlapping *BCR* and *ABL* breakpoint region without any predicted off targets were

considered. The top and bottom crRNA oligos with *BbsI* overhangs were procured from

Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, Missouri, US). The two oligos were phosphorylated using T4

polynucleotide kinase and ligated using T7 polymerase to form a double stranded crRNA as

per the protocol described by Cong *et al,* 2014 [13]. The plasmids *pC016 - LwCas13a guide*

expression backbone with U6 promoter (Addgene #91906) and *pC034 - LwCas13a-*

msfGFP-2A-Blast (Addgene #91924) were obtained as gifts from Dr Feng Zhang. The

plasmid pC034 carries blasticidin resistance and green fluorescent protein (GFP) expression

markers. The plasmid pC016, was digested using *BbsI-HF* (New England Biolabs, MA,

USA, Cat#R3539L) as per the manufacturer's protocol with slight modification of over-

digesting the plasmid in 10U of the enzyme thrice in continuity with 16hrs of incubation

each time without deactivating the enzyme in between ensuring a successful second cut after

the plasmid is linearized by the first cut. The pC016 plasmid with insert (pC016I) was then

transformed into competent *Escherichia coli DH5*☐ cells using heat shock method as

described by Sambrook and Russell [14]. Plasmid was extracted from the positive clone using

QIAprep Spin Miniprep kit as per the manufacturer's protocol.

2.2 Transfection of K562 cells with CRISPR plasmids

Lipofectamine LTX (cat#15338100, Thermo-Fisher Scientific, MA, US) was used for the

co-transfection of the two plasmids, pC016I and pC034 using the manufacturer's protocol in

a six well plate containing approximately 50,00,00 cells from overnight culture of K562

cells in RPMI-1640 medium with 1% Penicillin-Streptomycin at a confluency of 75-80%.

The cells were incubated overnight at 37°C with 5% CO_2. After the overnight incubation,

old media was replaced with fresh and additionally 6 µg/mL of blasticidin antibiotic was

added as the positive selection marker for the plasmid in both test and negative control cells

[15]. Cultures were observed till all negative control cells were killed and GFP expression of

the transfected cells became close to hundred percent. Cells were harvested at passage

number eight, seventeen and thirty-six for downstream analysis and time dependent kinetics

study.

2.3 Downstream gene regulation analysis

Total RNA was extracted using RNeasy kit from QIAGEN (cat#74104) as per the

manufacturer's protocol. A fraction of RNA was reverse transcribed to cDNA using

RevertAid first strand cDNA synthesis kit by Thermo Fisher scientific (cat#K1622) using

the manufacturer's protocol. The *BCR-ABL* cDNA region was amplified using specific

primers, forward 5'-ACAGAATTCCGCTGACCATCAATAAG-3', reverse 5'-

TGTTGACTGGCGTGATGTAGTTGCTTGG-3' [16]. The amplified region was sequenced

using ABI 3500 automated Sanger sequencing platform (cat#4440462). EditR [17] and

PolyPeakParser [18] were used to enumerate base changes in the 28 nucleotide long crRNA

region with *BCR-ABL* cDNA of K562 cells as control. MuPro [19] and I-Mutant [20] were used

to assess the effects of these base changes. For the flow cytometric analysis of *pCRKL*

levels, the *pCRKL (Y207)* specific Alexa Fluor® 647 tagged antibody (cat#560790, Becton,

Dickinson and Company, NJ, US) was used as per the manufacturer's protocol in a

Beckman Coulter Gallios flow cytometer (Beckman Coulter Inc., IN, US). The fold change

was calculated by comparing the mean fluorescence intensity (MFI) using median

population and at least 10,000 events per test between K562 cells as control and K562 cells

bearing CRISPR plasmids (coded as K562-1634). The calculations were done in Kaluza

Analysis software by Beckman Coulter.

Whole cell protein extraction for western blot was done using Radioimmunoprecipitation

assay (RIPA) buffer (cat#89900, Thermo Fisher Scientific, MA, US) using the

manufacturer's protocol. Bicinchoninic acid (BCA) protein assay was done for extracted

protein quantification using Pierce™ BCA Protein assay kit according to the manufacturer's

protocol (cat#23225, Thermo Fisher Scientific, MA, US). For western blotting, primary

rabbit raised antibodies against *pCRKL Y207* (37 kDa) and *pCRK Y221* (34 kDa) (another

downstream target protein) were procured from Abcam plc, Cambridge, UK with catalogue

numbers ab52908 and ab76227 respectively and housekeeping mouse raised *β-tubulin* (51

kDa) primary antibody was procured from Cell Signaling Technologies, MA, US with

catalogue number 2146S. The anti-rabbit and anti-mouse secondary horseradish peroxidase

linked antibodies were procured from Cell Signaling Technologies with catalogue numbers

7074P2 and 7076P2 respectively. Image J software was used for analysis of the western blot

imaging data [21].

2.4 Enumeration of CRISPR activity by NGS

Total RNA from K562-1634 and K562 cells were subjected to cDNA sequencing using

Oxford Nanopore Technologies MinION instrument with SQK-PCS108 library kit along

with barcodes from SQK-PBK004 kit on a FLO-MIN106 R9.4 flow cell according to the

manufacturer's protocol. QCAT tool was used for demultiplexing the barcoded reads

(https://github.com/nanoporetech/qcat), NanoFilt was used to filter the data with minimum

quality cut off of 5 [22]. NCBI local BLAST+ was used to extract raw reads carrying crRNA

sequence [23]. The reads carrying the crRNA sequence were aligned with *BCR-ABL* cDNA

and crRNA sequences using CLC Genomics Workbench v.12 (QIAGEN Aarhus,

Silkeborgvej, Denmark). The nucleotide and protein alignment of control K562 and K562-

1634 cells were compared in the same software.

The study was duly approved by the Institute's Ethics Committee and the Departmental

Review Board.

2.5 Statistical analysis

SPSS Statistics software version 25 (IBM Corp, NY, US) was used to perform statistical

tests. The flow cytometry and western blot data was normalized using maximum value

before performing any statistical tests. Student's t test was used to check for significant

change in expression over the period of time. Pearson's correlation was used to find

significant relation between flow and western blot data.

3. Results

3.1 crRNA Designing

CRISPR-RT suggested a total of 175 target regions, out of which, 14 were overlapping the

BCR-ABL chimeric region. Among these 14 candidate crRNAs, the one 5'-

ATTTAAGCAGAGTTCAAAAGCCCTTCAG-3', which spanned significantly in both

BCR and *ABL1* regions (17 and 12 bases in *BCR* and *ABL1* respectively) with the lowest GC

content of 39% and no predicted off targets was chosen.

3.2 Transfection and downstream analysis

Pure colonies of K562-1634 transfected cells were selected by day 12 (figure 1). Levels of

pCRKL in control K562 and K562-1634 cells as assessed by flow cytometry at passages

eight, seventeen and thirty-six is given in table I. Flow cytometric analysis was done in

duplicate for each run and the average was used for calculations. At least ten thousand

events per reaction were recorded with maximum events recorded reaching around 85,000

in a single reaction. *pCRKL* level was observed to be 4.30, 4.02 and 1.80 times lower than

the control K562 cell levels at passages eight, seventeen and thirty-six respectively (p-value

0.025) (figure 2A). Western blotting data of *pCRKL* and *pCRK* (table II and figure 2 B) was

found to be synchronous with the flow cytometry data after normalization with a significant

p-value of 0.01 (figure 2 C).

3.3 Sanger and NGS sequencing of transfected and control cell lines

EditR suggested changes in four bases and Poly Peak Parser suggested three different

changes (table III and figure 3). On assessment of all combinations of the nucleotide

changes, a total of four amino acid changes were found. According to MuPro and I-Mutant,

one of these changes, FK(Q/G)SSKALQ, might be causing a very large decrease in stability,

while two changes, FK(Q/K)SSKALQ and FKQ(S/N)SKALQ, were suggested to cause a

large decrease in stability, and one FK(Q/R)SSKALQ, was predicted to be causing only a

minor decrease in stability. The next generation sequencing using Oxford MinION

generated a total of 5,365,731 reads with an average read length of 402.8 bp, median read

length of 253 bp and maximum read length of 232,778 bp. On alignment of the deep

sequencing data with *BCR-ABL* cDNA, we found 61.70% of total 47 aligned reads with

altered bases in the 28-nucleotide long crRNA region (supplementary figure S1). On

translation of these changes, we found sixteen candidate amino acid changes. Among these,

42.55% were of wild type, 27.66% were base substitutions, 19.15% were stop gain and rest

10.64% were frameshift variations. Three out of four amino acid changes suggested by

EditR were found in NGS data too. One of these three has a very high effect on stability of

the protein as predicted by iMutant and MuPro software. The overall efficiency of CRISPR

after accounting for synonymous variants was calculated to be 57.45%

4. Discussion

Tyrosine kinase inhibitor (TKI) drugs, though being the mainstay of treatment in CML,

have been shown in studies to have adverse effects on growth of children in addition to

neoplastic clones developing resistance to their action during long term treatment [24]. In a

retrospective study by Millot *et al.,* in 2014 which included 81 children under 18 years of

age with CML, it was found that imatinib adversely affected growth in the subjected

children [25,26]. Additionally, there are several cases where resistance against these drugs are

forged, these cases then either require a complex treatment regime including trials with

other TKI drugs or ultimately a stem cell transplantation (SCT) [27]. SCT has its own set of

complications and issues. First, it is hard to find a compatible donor, if found, there are

chances of development of graft-versus-host diseases (GVHD) [28]. Even if everything is in

place, treatment costs become unaffordable for most people, especially from developing

countries like India. Gene editing based corrective techniques might prove to be beneficial

in such conditions in long term considering their current efficiency and flexibility. There are

four major genome editing tools, namely, Meganucleases (MNs), ZFNs, TALENs and the

most recent, CRISPR. CRISPR finds its edge in being almost 10 times cheaper than its

closest competitor, TALENs, has widest applications, is freely available and simplest to

design and apply [29]. Earlier, in a study by García-Tuñón *et al,* it was observed that CRISPR

Cas9 was able to effectively control the oncogenic capabilities of *BCR-ABL* chimeric gene

in custom Boff-p210 cell line carrying *BCR-ABL* fusion transgene [9]. In a recent study, Liu *et*

al demonstrated effective down regulation of *BCR-ABL* gene using CRISPR RNA guided

Fokl Nucleases in both cell lines and murine xenograft model [30]. However, García-Tuñón *et*

al, in their other research article on CRISPR, published recently, highlighted the limitation

of CRISPR/Cas9 in effectively knocking out target DNA without a null variation inducing

homology directed repair template in the construct. They went on to demonstrate that

effective knockdown could be achieved if sgRNAs target the splice donor site of the gene [31].

Moreover, it has been shown that in CML, using a DNA targeting CRISPR would mean

designing custom guide RNAs per patient as the breakpoints might differ per case at the

DNA level [10]. Considering above limitations and problems in targeting *BCR-ABL* gene at

DNA level by CRISPR/Cas9, we hypothesized utility of targeting the p210 transcript of

CML with a RNA CRISPR since the p210 transcript wouldn't be likely affected by the

differences in intronic breakpoints. Working on this hypothesis, we designed this study to

explore the potential of RNA targeting CRISPR *Cas13a* in knocking down the

tumorigenicity of the *BCR-ABL* chimeric gene. CRISPR *Cas13a* is a relatively newer form

of CRISPR which targets RNA rather than the DNA and has been shown to have an

efficiency of around 50% [11]. In the current study too, we found the efficiency to be around

57.45%. This RNA targeting CRISPR system was able to lower the expression of

downstream genes of CML pathogenesis as per the KEGG [32] pathway ID hsa05220.

pCRKL levels as calculated through passage numbers 8, 17 and 36 were 23.26, 24.85 and

55.43% respectively by flow cytometric analysis and 15.75, 17.52 and 54.00% respectively

by western blotting experiment. The same for *pCRK* was found to be 37.84, 38.23 and

77.80% through passage numbers 8, 17 and 36 respectively as per the western blotting data.

All the cells were killed in presence of blasticidin antibiotic by passage number 42. This

tells us that the cells started to lose plasmid around passage number 36 and by 42 they had

all lost it. This suggests that the RNA targeting CRISPR *Cas13a* in vitro is likely to persist

till two months with no significant decrease in effectiveness. Post that time, the

effectiveness starts deteriorating which gradually comes down to the cells losing the

plasmid. On the analysis of the *BCR-ABL* transcript changes by both Sanger sequencing and

NGS, we could assert an overall 57.45% shift from the wild type *BCR-ABL* transcript. There

were three potential alternate transcripts that were confirmed by both sequencing methods.

These included one very high, one large and one minor pathogenic variant as predicted by

MuPro and iMutant. We could say that NGS yielded more information than Sanger

sequencing as the later has a higher minimum detection threshold of around 20% [33]. This

assumes importance since certain transcript changes could be at a lower level than the

minimum required threshold of Sanger sequencing. Overall, our study results show that

CRISPR-*Cas13a* efficiency (based on NGS) and down regulation of downstream genes

(*pCRKL* & *pCRK*) go hand in hand *in vitro*. The study is limited by further analysis on

primary culture of multiple CML patients. Utilizing newer, more efficient RNA targeting

CRISPRs like CRISPR *Cas13b* and *Cas13c* with efficiencies going up to 90-9*5%* [34] can

potentially revolutionize the effects further with higher fold reduction in downstream target

protein expression, ultimately reducing the tumorigenic capabilities of *BCR-ABL* chimeric

gene. It is interesting to mention here that imatinib in a dose dependent manner of 10 $\geq$μM

reduces *pCRKL* levels to 16.6% which translates to a 6.05-fold reduction [35], compared to

4.3-fold reduction achieved by the described CRISPR *Cas 13a* RNA machinery. However,

as detailed above, with rapid advancements in the CRISPR technology, this gap might be

filled or even surpassed in near future.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Author Contributions: AS and PB designed the research study. AS performed the

experimental research and wrote the article. PB guided the research and edited the

manuscript with significant inputs.

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Table Title & or Legends

Table I (Title): Fold change of *pCRKL* assessed by flow cytometry.

Table I (Footnote): K562-1634 denotes the K562 cells bearing the CRISPR plasmids.

Numbers after 'K562-1634-' denote passage numbers.

Table II (Title): Western blot analysis data for *pCRKL* and *pCRK*

Table II (Footnote): K562-1634 denotes the K562 cells bearing the CRISPR plasmids.

Numbers after 'K562-1634-' denote passage numbers.

Table III (Title): List of predicted variants by EditR and PolyPeakParser. Bases in red

color highlights are the predicted changes

Table III (Footnote): Variant names with "PPP" were predicted by PolyPeakParser

Figure Title & or legends

Figure 1: Blasticidin selection of K562-1634 cells over different passages in contrast with

wild type K562 cells**.** A1-A3 and B1-B3 Inverted microscopy images taken at 10x

magnification on days 08, 10 and 12 for control K562 and 1634 plasmid bearing K562 cells

respectively. C: Final resulting cell population of 1634 plasmid bearing cells at 10x

magnification showing widespread GFP expression.

Figure 2: Flow cytometry and western blot data for control vs K562-1634 cells. A: Flow

cytometry data for comparative *pCRKL* expression levels. P08, P17 & P36 denote passage

numbers 8, 17 and 36 for K562 cells bearing CRISPR plasmids (K562-1634 cells). B:

Comparative western blot data for *pCRK* and *pCRKL* expression levels. K- K562 cells

without plasmids (control). P08, P17 & P36 denote passage numbers 8, 17 and 36 for K562

cells bearing CRISPR plasmids (K562-1634 cells). C: Comparative trends between western

blot and flow cytometry data after normalization.

Figure 3: EditR predictions. Highlighted region is the area where EditR calculates a

significant edit. Top picture is of the chromatogram. Middle one shows the noise bars

generated by EditR and bottom picture illustrates the probable base edits as per the software.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Figure S1: cDNA Reads aligned to reference *BCR-ABL* region following

analysis of Oxford MinION sequencing data. A: Control K562 reads. B: Reads from K562

cells bearing the CRISPR plasmids.

Table I: Fold change of *pCRKL* assessed by flow cytometry.

Passage No.	Control mean MFI	K562-1634 mean MFI	Mean fold Change
08	35524.43	8263.72	4.30
17	38175.67	9489.39	4.02
36	24464.225	13560.96	1.80

388 *K562-1634 denotes the K562 cells bearing the CRISPR plasmids. Numbers after '1634-'
389 denote passage numbers.

390 **Table II:** Western blot analysis data for *pCRKL* and *pCRK*

Sample	*β-tubulin*	*pCRKL*	*pCRKL* ratio	*pCRK*	*pCRK* ratio
K562-1634-17	1.19	0.19	0.16	0.49	0.42
K562-1634-36	1.14	0.63	0.56	0.85	0.75
K562-1634-08	1.05	0.19	0.18	0.39	0.38
K562	1	1	1	1	1

391 *K562-1634 denotes the K562 cells bearing the CRISPR plasmids. Numbers after 'K562-
392 1634-' denote passage numbers.

393 **Table III:** List of predicted variants by EditR and PolyPeakParser. Bases in red colour

394 highlights are the predicted changes

S.No.	Type	Nucelotide	Amino Acid	Destability
0.	Wild	atttaagcagagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKQSSKALQ	-
1.	Var 1	atttaaAcagagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKQSSKALQ	Unchanged
2.	Var 2	atttaagAagagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKKSSKALQ	Large
3.	Var 3	atttaagcGgagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
4.	Var 4	atttaagcagaAttcaaaagcccttcag	FKQNSKALQ	Large
5.	Var 1-4	atttaaAAGAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
6.	Var 1,2	atttaaAAagagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKKSSKALQ	Large
7.	Var 1,3	atttaaAcGgagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
8.	Var 1,4	atttaaAcaAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKQSSKALQ	Unchanged
9.	Var 1-3	atttaaAAGgagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
10.	Var 2,3	atttaagAGgagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
11.	Var 2,4	atttaagAaAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKKSSKALQ	Large
12.	Var 2-4	atttaagAGAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
13.	Var 3,4	atttaagcGAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
14.	Var PPP-C	atttaaAcgaagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
15.	Var PPP-A	atttaaAAgaagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKRSSKALQ	Minor
16.	Var PPP-G	atttaaAGGAagttcaaaagcccttcag	FKGSSKALQ	Very High

395 * Variant names with "PPP" were predicted by PolyPeakParser

| Day 08 | Day 10 | Day 12 | Day 16 |

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3