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van Senten, J.R.

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

# Characterizing human cytomegalovirus-encoded G protein-coupled receptors UL33 and US28

*From oncomodulation to virus dissemination*

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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door

**Jeffrey Roy van Senten**

geboren te De Ronde Venen

promotor: **prof.dr. M.J. Smit**

copromotor: **dr. M.H. Siderius**

**Prof.dr. P. Jennings**

Molecular and Computational Toxicology  
Amsterdam Institute of Molecules, Medicines and Systems  
VU University Amsterdam

**Prof.dr. W. Moolenaar**

Division of Cell Biology  
Netherlands Cancer Institute

**Prof.dr. M. Schmidt**

Department of Molecular Pharmacology  
University of Groningen

**Dr. R. van Amerongen**

Stem Cell and Cancer Biology  
Swammerdam Institute for Life Sciences  
University of Amsterdam

**Dr. D.M. Pegtel**

Department of Pathology  
Amsterdam UMC  
VU University Amsterdam



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## Abstract

Human cytomegalovirus (HCMV) is widespread in the human population. Infections are usually well controlled by the host immune system and therefore asymptomatic, after which the virus resides in a latent state to avoid elimination. Upon suppression or dysfunction of the immune system, virus reactivation can cause pathologies ranging from developmental defects, organ dysfunction and graft rejection to vascular and proliferative diseases. HCMV infection is associated with several malignancies, of which the link with glioblastoma is the best described, and HCMV is considered an oncomodulatory virus that aggravates the malignant potential of tumor cells.

Like all  $\beta$ - and  $\gamma$ -herpesviruses, HCMV encodes G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) derived from host chemokine receptors; UL33, UL78, US27 and US28. UL33 and US28 have been demonstrated to possess constitutive activity and promiscuous G protein coupling. These characteristics discriminate them from cellular receptor homologs but are shared with the oncogenic Kaposi's sarcoma-associated herpesvirus-encoded GPCR ORF74. Where human chemokine receptors depend on agonist binding for activation, triggering activation of one class of G proteins ( $G\alpha_i$ ), the three viral GPCRs reside in active conformations, even in the absence of external stimulation, and couple to G proteins from multiple classes. In this way, viral GPCRs modulate cellular signalling networks and change the biology of host cells.

Although our current understanding of UL33, UL78 and US27 is rather limited, the cellular effects of US28 have been extensively studied. US28 can activate proliferative, proangiogenic and pro-inflammatory signalling networks resulting in tumor formation in animal models. Receptor protein and mRNA have furthermore been detected in glioblastoma tissue samples. Nonetheless, oncomodulatory properties of US28 have mainly been evaluated in disease-irrelevant cellular backgrounds, often not in context of viral infection.

In our first study we show that UL33, like US28, possesses oncomodulatory potential by constitutively activating multiple proliferative, angiogenic and inflammatory signaling pathways. Furthermore, *in vitro* spheroid growth and *in vivo* tumor growth were accelerated upon expression of this receptor in glioblastoma cells. Signaling and cellular effects stimulated by UL33 are mostly similar to US28, besides a few notable differences.

In our second study we report that the oncomodulatory properties of US28 in glioblastoma cells are driven by activation of the sphingosine kinase 1 (SK1)/sphingosine-1-phosphate receptor 1 (S1P<sub>1</sub>) signalling axis. This route diverged into activation of AKT, cMYC, STAT3 and upregulation of CIP2A, and contains several feed-forward loops. Moreover, US28-mediated activation of STAT3 and increased SK1 and CIP2A abundance were confirmed in HCMV-Merlin infected glioblastoma cells.

In our third study we describe a growth defect in fibroblast cultures for HCMV Merlin mutant virus deficient of UL33, but not US28-deficient virus. UL33 facilitates virus spread mainly via the extracellular route, where both UL33 and US28 contribute to cell-associated dissemination of HCMV. Interestingly, UL33-deficient mutants of HCMV AD169, TB40/E and Towne strains have previously been reported to grow similar to their WT counterparts, which could suggest a strain-dependent role.

Altogether, the research described in this thesis expands our understanding of the pathological function of HCMV-encoded GPCRs UL33 and US28 in relation to oncomodulation as well as virus dissemination.



## Nederlandse samenvatting

Humaan cytomegalovirus (HCMV) is wijdverspreid onder de menselijke populatie. Infecties worden doorgaans gecontroleerd door het immuunsysteem en zijn daarom asymptomatisch, waarna het virus in een latente toestand verblijft om eliminatie door het immuunsysteem van de gastheer te voorkomen. In geval van onderdrukking of verstoring van het immuunsysteem kan het virus reacteren en ziektes veroorzaken, variërend van ontwikkelingsstoornissen, orgaanstoornissen en transplantaatafstoting tot vasculaire en proliferatieve ziekten. HCMV infectie wordt geassocieerd met verschillende kankertypes, waarvan het verband met glioblastoom het best beschreven is, en HCMV wordt beschouwd als een oncomodulerend virus dat de kwaadaardigheid van tumorcellen verergert.

Net als alle  $\beta$ - en  $\gamma$ -herpesvirussen codeert HCMV voor G eiwit-gekoppelde receptoren (GPCRs) die zijn afgeleid van chemokinereceptoren van de gastheer; UL33, UL78, US27 en US28. UL33 en US28 zijn constitutief actief en koppelen promiscueus aan G eiwitten. Deze kenmerken onderscheiden ze van cellulaire receptorhomologen maar worden gedeeld met ORF74, de oncogene GPCR gecodeerd door Kaposi's sarcoom-geassocieerd herpesvirus. Waar menselijke chemokinereceptoren voor activering afhankelijk zijn van agonist stimulatie, resulterend in activatie van één klasse van G-eiwitten ( $G\alpha_i$ ), bevinden de drie virale GPCRs zich in actieve conformaties, zelfs in afwezigheid van externe stimulatie, en koppelen ze aan G-eiwitten uit meerdere klassen. Op deze manier moduleren virale GPCRs cellulaire signaleringsnetwerken en veranderen ze de biologie van gastheercellen.

Hoewel ons huidige begrip van UL33, UL78 en US27 nogal beperkt is, zijn de cellulaire effecten van US28 uitgebreid bestudeerd. US28 kan proliferatieve, proangiogene en pro-inflammatoire signaalnetwerken activeren, resulterend in tumor vorming in diermodellen. Receptor eiwit en mRNA zijn bovendien gedetecteerd in weefselmonsters van glioblastoom. Desalniettemin zijn oncomodulerende eigenschappen van US28 voornamelijk geëvalueerd in celtypen irrelevant voor HCMV pathologie, en vaak niet in de context van virale infectie.

In onze eerste studie laten we zien dat UL33, net als US28, oncomodulerende eigenschappen bezit door constitutief meerdere proliferatieve, angiogene en inflammatoire signaalroutes te activeren. Bovendien werden *in vitro* sferoïdegroei en *in vivo* tumorgroei versneld na expressie van deze receptor in glioblastoomcellen. De door UL33 gestimuleerde signalering en cellulaire effecten zijn grotendeels vergelijkbaar met US28, op een paar opmerkelijke verschillen na.

In onze tweede studie rapporteren we dat de oncomodulerende eigenschappen van US28 in glioblastoomcellen worden aangestuurd door activering van het sфingosinekinase 1 (SK1) / sфingosine-1-fosfaatreceptor 1 (S1P1) signaaltraject. Deze route divergeerde in activering van AKT, cMYC, STAT3 en opregulatie van CIP2A, en bevat verschillende feed-forward lussen. US28 gemedieerde activering van STAT3 en verhoogde SK1 en CIP2A eiwitwaardes werden bevestigd in glioblastoomcellen geïnfecteerd met HCMV-Merlin virus.

In onze derde studie beschrijven we een groeidefect in fibroblastkweken voor HCMV Merlin mutantvirus dat deficiënt is voor UL33, maar niet voor US28-deficiënt virus. UL33 bevordert de virusverspreiding voornamelijk via de extracellulaire route, terwijl zowel UL33 als US28 bijdragen aan cel-geassocieerde verspreiding van HCMV. Opmerkelijk genoeg is eerder gemeld dat de groei van UL33-deficiënte mutanten van HCMV AD169-, TB40/E- en

Towne-stammen vergelijkbaar is aan hun WT-tegenhangers, wat een stamafhankelijke rol zou kunnen suggereren.

Het onderzoek dat in dit proefschrift wordt beschreven vergroot ons begrip van de pathologische functie van HCMV-gecodeerde GPCRs UL33 en US28 in relatie tot oncomodulatie en virusverspreiding.



## Aim and outline of the thesis

My PhD research was primarily aimed to evaluate whether UL33 possesses oncomodulatory properties and further characterize the cellular signalling mechanisms employed by US28 in context of glioblastoma. To facilitate this research, I generated several tools, including recombinant mutant viruses of the clinically relevant HCMV Merlin strain. The secondary aim of my research was to determine the role of UL33 and US28 in HCMV dissemination, which stems from the serendipitous observation of a pronounced growth defect for UL33-deficient HCMV Merlin virus.

In **Chapter I**, I provide a general introduction to GPCRs, HCMV, HCMV-encoded GPCRs and the role of these receptor proteins in the viral life-cycle. **Chapter II** reviews current knowledge regarding herpesviral GPCRs and how they may contribute to cancer biology. In **Chapter III**, we report the oncomodulatory potential of UL33 in glioblastoma cells and other model systems, which is mostly similar to US28 with some remarkable differences. In **Chapter IV** we describe our efforts to delineate molecular mechanisms underlying oncomodulation by US28 in glioblastoma. Although NF- $\kappa$ B has been considered a key component in US28's signalling network, evaluating US28 in U251 glioblastoma cells revealed no US28-mediated activation of this transcription factor, highlighting the importance of cellular context. Initiated by transcriptome analysis, we identified sphingosine kinase 1 (SK1)/sphingosine-1-phosphate receptor 1 (S1P<sub>1</sub>) signalling axis as an important effector of US28. In **Chapter V**, the contribution of UL33 and US28 to HCMV Merlin dissemination in fibroblast cultures is reported. Finally, in **Chapter VI**, I contextualized our results and provide perspectives for future studies.