

Georgia State University

ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

Biology Faculty Publications

Department of Biology

---

2011

## Lack of Processing of the Expressed ORF1 Gene Product of Hepatitis E Virus

Suganthi Suppiah

Yumei Zhou

Georgia State University, yzhou@gsu.edu

Teryl K. Frey

Georgia State University, tfrey@gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/biology\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/biology_facpub)



Part of the [Biology Commons](#), and the [Diseases Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Suppiah *et al.*: Lack of Processing of the Expressed ORF1 Gene Product of Hepatitis E Virus. *Virology Journal* 2011 8:245. doi: 10.1186/1743-422X-8-245

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Biology at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

SHORT REPORT

Open Access

# Lack of Processing of the Expressed ORF1 Gene Product of Hepatitis E Virus

Suganthi Suppiah, Yumei Zhou and Teryl K Frey\*

## Abstract

**Background:** Proteolytic processing is a common mechanism among plus strand RNA viruses and the replicases of all plus strand RNA viruses of animals thus far characterized undergo such processing. The replicase proteins of hepatitis E virus (HEV) are encoded by ORF1. A previous report published by our group [1] provided data that processing potentially occurred when ORF1 (Burma strain; genotype 1) was expressed using a vaccinia virus-based expression system.

**Findings:** To further test for processing and to rule out artifacts associated with the expression system, ORF1 was re-expressed using a plasmid-based expression vector with the result that the previous processing profile could not be confirmed. When ORF1 from an HEV infectious cDNA clone (US swine strain; genotype 3) was expressed using the plasmid-based system, the only species detected was the 185 kDa precursor of ORF1. A putative papain-like cysteine protease [2] had been predicted within ORF1 using the original HEV genomic sequence. However, analysis of subsequent ORF1 sequences from a large number of HEV isolates reveals that this protease motif is not conserved.

**Conclusions:** The expressed HEV ORF1 gene product does not undergo proteolytic processing, indicating that the replicase precursor of HEV is potentially unique in this regard.

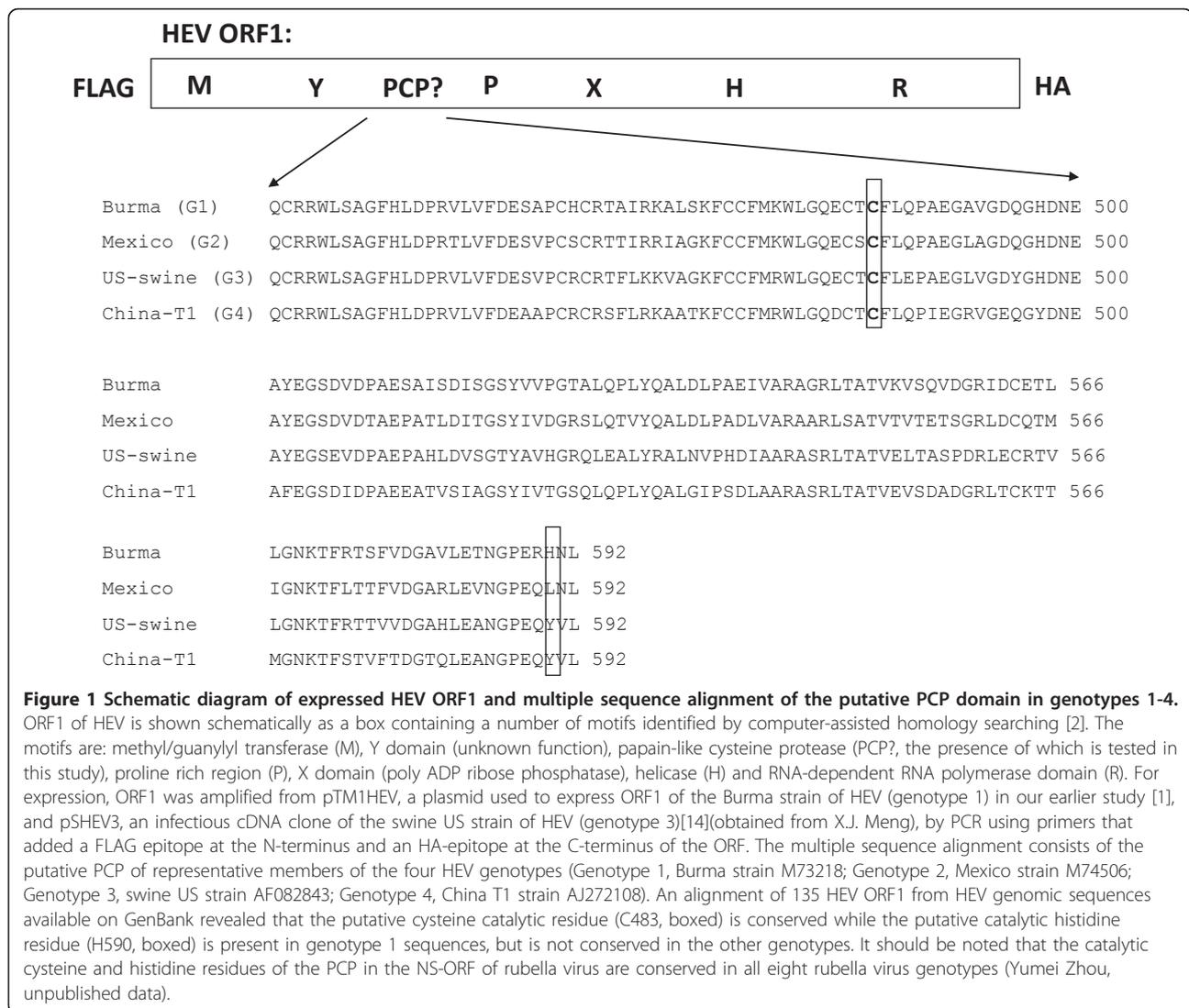
## Findings

Hepatitis E virus (HEV) is the sole member of the genus *Hepevirus* belonging to the family *Hepeviridae* [reviewed in [3]]. HEV is a non-enveloped, plus-sense, single-stranded RNA virus whose genome is approximately 7.2 kb in length and consists of three open reading frames (ORFs): the 5' proximal ORF1 of ~5100 nt which encodes the viral replicase components; the 3' proximal ORF2 of ~2000 nt which encodes the capsid protein; and ORF3 of ~400 nt, which encodes a phosphoprotein of unknown function. ORF2 and ORF3 overlap and are translated from a single subgenomic RNA species. Computer-assisted sequence alignment of the deduced translation product of ORF1 with replicase proteins of other animal and plant plus-strand RNA viruses led to the identification of several common motifs, including putative methyl/guanylyl-transferase, papain-like cysteine protease (PCP), poly ADP ribose phosphatase, helicase and RNA-dependent-RNA-polymerase (RDRP) domains [2](see Figure 1). Of these, activity of the methyl/guanylyl transferase, the helicase,

and the RDRP domains have been experimentally demonstrated [4-7].

Proteolytic processing of replicase polyprotein precursors into mature protein products is a common mechanism among plus-sense RNA viruses and has been demonstrated for all plus-sense RNA viruses of animals. HEV is most closely related to the two genera of the *Togaviridae* family, the alphavirus genus and the rubivirus genus. The replicase precursors of the viruses in these genera are processed into four and two mature proteins, respectively [8,9]. For both of these genera, it has been shown that processing regulates the synthesis of plus- and minus-strand RNA synthesis [10,11]. Because the enzyme responsible for proteolytic processing resides within the precursor, authentic processing occurs when the replicase precursor is expressed. Processing of the primary HEV ORF1 translation product, which has a putative MW of ~185 kDa, has not been resolved. No processing was detected when ORF1 was translated *in vitro* and the main product following expression of ORF1 in a number of mammalian cell lines was the ~185 kDa uncleaved species, however

\* Correspondence: tfrey@gsu.edu  
Department of Biology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

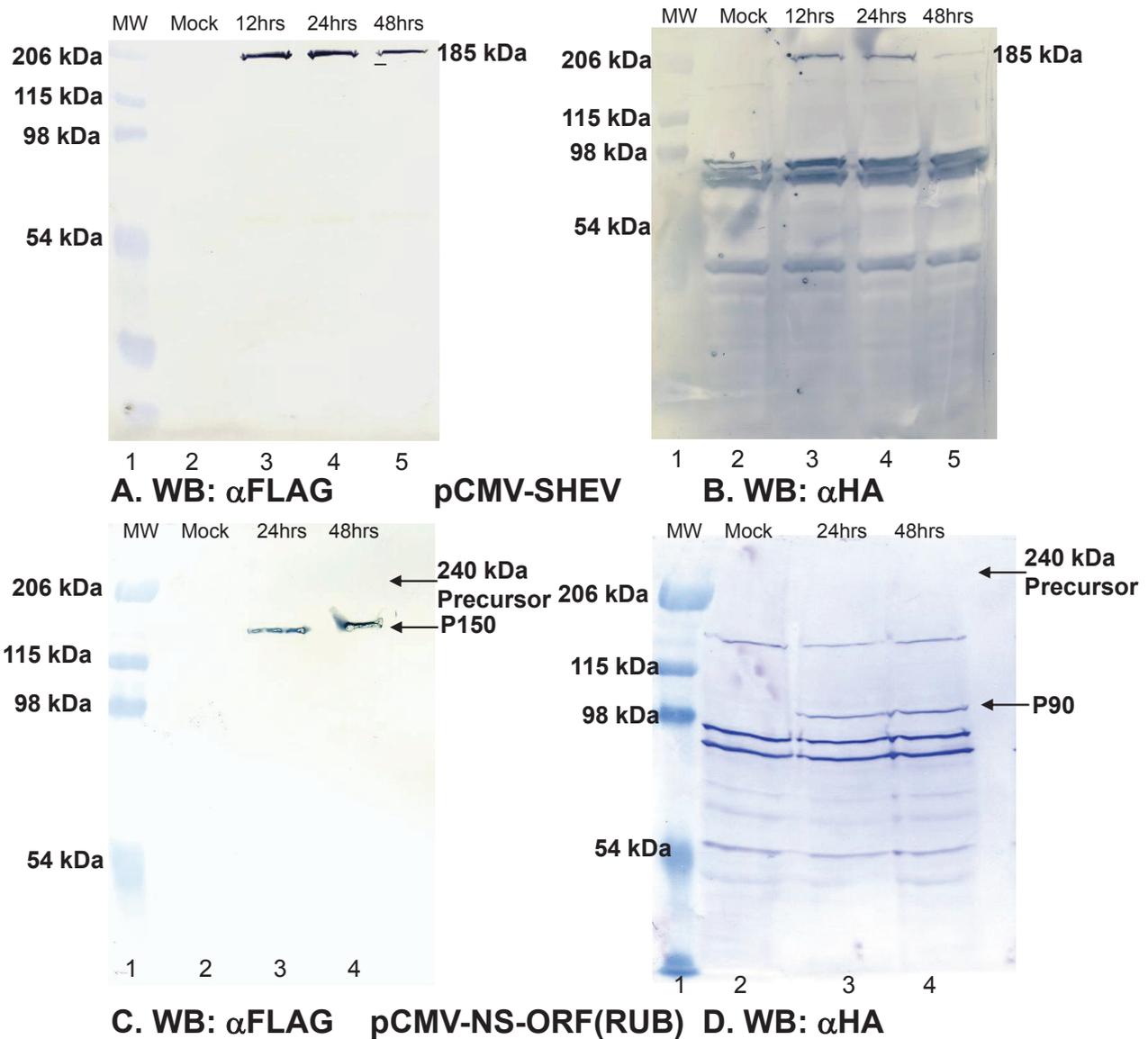


putative processing products were detected [1,12]. Expression of ORF1 by baculovirus in insect cells yielded a putative total of eight cleavages [13].

With respect to our earlier study, vaccinia virus-based expression of ORF1 derived from the human Burma strain of HEV (genotype 1) revealed the presence of putative N- and C-terminal products of 78 kDa and 107 kDa as well as the 185 kDa uncleaved species [1]. However, mutation of the putative catalytic cysteine (C483) of the predicted protease catalytic site within ORF1 did not eliminate these products and thus it could not be ruled out this processing might be due to the expression system employed. Therefore, to begin this follow up study, we tried expression of the Burma strain ORF1 using a protease-free vector, namely a plasmid vector, VR1012 (Vical, Inc., San Diego, CA), in which expression is driven by the human cytomegalovirus (CMV) immediate early promoter. In this construct, ORF1 was tagged at its

N- and C-termini with FLAG and HA epitopes, respectively. This time, the 185 kDa uncleaved product was again the predominant species, however a putative N-terminal product with an apparent molecular weight of 115 kDa was detected with no corresponding putative C-terminal product (data not shown).

It was not clear why putative processing of ORF1 of the Burma strain differed between the two expression systems. However an infectious cDNA clone was never assembled from the Burma strain of HEV and therefore to guard against artifacts due to potential mutations in the ORF1 construct assembled from this strain, we expressed ORF1 from pSHEV3, a cDNA clone of the US swine strain (genotype 3) that was shown to be infectious [14]. ORF1 from pSHEV3 was introduced into the plasmid vector with N-terminal FLAG and C-terminal HA epitope tags, resulting in a construct termed pCMV-SHEV. As shown in Figure 2A and 2B, expression of the



**Figure 2 Expression of US swine HEV ORF1 and rubella virus non-structural ORF.** 293T cells were transfected with 5 µg of pCMV-SHEV DNA using Lipofectamine-2000 (as recommended by manufacturer's protocol) and harvested 12, 24, and 48 hours post-transfection. Mock transfected cells were processed similarly as a negative control. The cells were washed twice with PBS and lysed with 1X NP-40 buffer (1% NP-40, 150 mM NaCl, 50 mM Tris-HCl at pH 7.4 and 2 mM EDTA) in the presence of 1X complete mini, EDTA-free protease inhibitors (Roche). The lysates were resolved on 8% SDS-PAGE gels followed by transfer of the contents to nitrocellulose membranes and immunoblotted with for 1 h with anti-FLAG antibody-peroxidase conjugate from Sigma (Panel A) or anti-HA antibody- peroxidase conjugate from Roche (Panel B). Membranes were washed 5 times with 0.05% T-TBS (0.5 ml Tween-20 in 1 L 1X TBS [20 mM Tris-HCl at pH 7.5 and 175 mM NaCl]). The peroxidase was detected using BM Blue POD substrate (Roche). Lane1: Broad range molecular weight standard marker ( $M_r$ 's in kDa given on left margin); Lane2: Mock transfected cells; Lanes 3-5: pCMV-SHEV-transfected cells harvested at 12, 24, and 48 hrs post-transfection (the 185 kDa ORF1 translation product is denoted on the right margin). As a control, the nonstructural protein ORF (NS-ORF) of rubella virus was amplified from Robo502, an infectious cDNA clone (18), by PCR using primers that added a FLAG epitope at the N-terminus and an HA-epitope at the C-terminus of the ORF and cloned into VR1012 plasmid vector; the resulting construct was termed pCMV-NS-ORF. 293T cells were transfected with 5 µg of pCMV-NS-ORF DNA using Lipofectamine-2000 (as recommended by manufacturer's protocol) and harvested 24 and 48 hours post-transfection. Mock transfected cells were processed similarly as a negative control. Western blotting and probing of lysates was done as described in the legend to Figure 2. Lane 1: Broad range molecular weight standard marker ( $M_r$ 's in kDa given on left margin); Lane 2: Mock transfected cells; Lanes 3-4: pCMV-NS-ORF-transfected cells harvested at 24 and 48 hrs post-transfection. The 240 kDa precursor (N-terminal) and P90 (C-terminal) products are denoted in the right margin.

185 kDa product was detected with both anti-FLAG and anti-HA antibody but no other ORF1-specific products were apparent (background bands of ~95, 90, and 55 kDa were detected by the anti-HA antibody).

As a positive control to determine if processing of a virus nonstructural replicase protein precursor could be detected using this expression system, the rubella virus nonstructural protein ORF (which corresponds to ORF1 of HEV) from an infectious cDNA clone of rubella virus [15] was also provided with N-terminal FLAG and C-terminal HA tags and cloned into the VR1012 vector, yielding a construct termed pCMV-NS-ORF. As shown in Figure 2C and 2D, when this construct was expressed, the N-terminal P150 protein was detected with anti-FLAG antibody and the C-terminal P90 protein was detected with anti-HA antibody. No 240 kDa precursor product was detected with either antibody, indicating that processing was complete.

Taken together, there is no consistent evidence that the HEV ORF1 primary translation product undergoes proteolytic processing. Expressed ORF1 from an Indian strain of HEV (genotype 1) and US swine strain (genotype 3) exhibited no processing while potential processing products of the ORF1 of the human Burma strain (genotype 1) were not consistent between different expression systems and therefore are likely artifactual [1,12]. ORF1 of the Indian strain underwent a complex processing scheme when in expressed by baculovirus in insect cells [13], but it must be considered that insects are not the natural hosts for HEV. HEV *in vitro* genomic and replicon (constructs in which the structural proteins are replaced with reporter genes) RNA transcripts that are infectious in both cell culture and animals have been available for several years [14,16-20]. Despite the potential of these systems to resolve whether ORF1 processing occurs during replication, convincing evidence one way or the other has yet to be reported. Thus, HEV potentially is unique among plus-sense RNA viruses of animals in the feature of lacking proteolytic processing of its replicase precursor. In this regard, the catalytic residues of the putative PCP that was postulated to mediate processing of ORF1 were predicted on the basis of the original HEV sequence (genotype 1 Burma strain)[2]. Since that time, numerous additional sequences of HEV have been reported and four genotypes have been distinguished. A search of GenBank yielded 135 complete genomic sequences of HEV and alignment of ORF1 from these sequences revealed that while the putative catalytic cysteine residue (C483) of the predicted PCP is conserved across these sequences, the putative catalytic histidine residue is not (Figure 1). In fact the residue at position 590 of ORF1 is genotype specific: H in genotype 1, L in genotype 2, and predominantly Y in genotypes 3 and 4. Additionally, in

the recently described avian HEV the region of ORF1 containing the predicted PCP is not present, consistent with lack of processing of ORF1 [21].

### Author information

The research described in this report was conducted by SS as part of her PhD dissertation. SS is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Pathology, Emory University School of Medicine.

### Acknowledgements

The research was supported by a grant from NIH (AI21389) to TKF. SS was a Fellow of the Molecular Basis of Disease Area of Focus, Georgia State University.

### Authors' contributions

SS carried out the research and participated in drafting of the manuscript. YMZ conducted the ORF1 alignments and participated in drafting of the manuscript. TKF, as senior author, advised SS on the research, participated in drafting of the manuscript, and serves as corresponding author. All three authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 22 April 2011 Accepted: 20 May 2011 Published: 20 May 2011

### References

1. Ropp SL, Tam AW, Beames B, Purdy M, Frey TK: Expression of the hepatitis E virus ORF1. *Arch Virol* 2000, **145**:1321-1337.
2. Koonin EV, Gorbalenya AE, Purdy MA, Rozanov MN, Reyes GR, Bradley DW: Computer-assisted assignment of functional domains in the nonstructural polyprotein of hepatitis E virus: delineation of an additional group of positive-strand RNA plant and animal viruses. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 1992, **89**:8259-8263.
3. Meng XJ: Recent advances in Hepatitis E virus. *J Viral Hepat* 2010, **17**:153-161.
4. Karpe YA, Lole KS: RNA 5'-triphosphatase activity of the hepatitis E virus helicase domain. *J Virol* 2010, **84**:9637-9641.
5. Karpe YA, Lole KS: NTPase and 5' to 3' RNA duplex-unwinding activities of the hepatitis E virus helicase domain. *J Virol* 2010, **84**:3595-3602.
6. Magden J, Takeda N, Li T, Auvinen P, Ahola T, Miyamura T, Merits A, Kaariainen L: Virus-specific mRNA capping enzyme encoded by hepatitis E virus. *J Virol* 2001, **75**:6249-6255.
7. Rehman S, Kapur N, Durgapal H, Panda SK: Subcellular localization of hepatitis E virus (HEV) replicase. *Virology* 2008, **370**:77-92.
8. Collins PL, Fuller FJ, Marcus PI, Hightower LE, Ball LA: Synthesis and processing of Sindbis virus nonstructural proteins in vitro. *Virology* 1982, **118**:363-379.
9. Marr LD, Wang CY, Frey TK: Expression of the rubella virus nonstructural protein ORF and demonstration of proteolytic processing. *Virology* 1994, **198**:586-592.
10. Liang Y, Gillam S: Mutational analysis of the rubella virus nonstructural polyprotein and its cleavage products in virus replication and RNA synthesis. *J Virol* 2000, **74**:5133-5141.
11. Shirako Y, Strauss JH: Regulation of Sindbis virus RNA replication: uncleaved P123 and nsP4 function in minus-strand RNA synthesis, whereas cleaved products from P123 are required for efficient plus-strand RNA synthesis. *J Virol* 1994, **68**:1874-1885.
12. Ansari IH, Nanda SK, Durgapal H, Agrawal S, Mohanty SK, Gupta D, Jameel S, Panda SK: Cloning, sequencing, and expression of the hepatitis E virus (HEV) nonstructural open reading frame 1 (ORF1). *J Med Virol* 2000, **60**:275-283.
13. Sehgal D, Thomas S, Chakraborty M, Jameel S: Expression and processing of the Hepatitis E virus ORF1 nonstructural polyprotein. *Viral J* 2006, **3**:38.
14. Huang YW, Haqshenas G, Kasorndorkbua C, Halbur PG, Emerson SU, Meng XJ: Capped RNA transcripts of full-length cDNA clones of swine

- hepatitis E virus are replication competent when transfected into Huh7 cells and infectious when intrahepatically inoculated into pigs. *J Virol* 2005, **79**:1552-1558.
15. Pugachev KV, Abernathy ES, Frey TK: **Improvement of the specific infectivity of the rubella virus (RUB) infectious clone: determinants of cytopathogenicity induced by RUB map to the nonstructural proteins.** *J Virol* 1997, **71**:562-568.
  16. Emerson SU, Nguyen H, Graff J, Stephany DA, Brockington A, Purcell RH: **In vitro replication of hepatitis E virus (HEV) genomes and of an HEV replicon expressing green fluorescent protein.** *J Virol* 2004, **78**:4838-4846.
  17. Panda SK, Ansari IH, Durgapal H, Agrawal S, Jameel S: **The in vitro-synthesized RNA from a cDNA clone of hepatitis E virus is infectious.** *J Virol* 2000, **74**:2430-2437.
  18. Huang FF, Pierson FW, Toth TE, Meng XJ: **Construction and characterization of infectious cDNA clones of a chicken strain of hepatitis E virus (HEV), avian HEV.** *J Gen Virol* 2005, **86**:2585-2593.
  19. Yamada K, Takahashi M, Hoshino Y, Takahashi H, Ichiyama K, Tanaka T, Okamoto H: **Construction of an infectious cDNA clone of hepatitis E virus strain JE03-1760F that can propagate efficiently in cultured cells.** *J Gen Virol* 2009, **90**:457-462.
  20. Thakral D, Nayak B, Rehman S, Durgapal H, Panda SK: **Replication of a recombinant hepatitis E virus genome tagged with reporter genes and generation of a short-term cell line producing viral RNA and proteins.** *J Gen Virol* 2005, **86**:1189-1200.
  21. Huang FF, Sun ZF, Emerson SU, Purcell RH, Shivaprasad HL, Pierson FW, Toth TE, Meng XJ: **Determination and analysis of the complete genomic sequence of avian hepatitis E virus (avian HEV) and attempts to infect rhesus monkeys with avian HEV.** *J Gen Virol* 2004, **85**:1609-1618.

doi:10.1186/1743-422X-8-245

**Cite this article as:** Suppiah et al.: Lack of Processing of the Expressed ORF1 Gene Product of Hepatitis E Virus. *Virology Journal* 2011 **8**:245.

**Submit your next manuscript to BioMed Central  
and take full advantage of:**

- Convenient online submission
- Thorough peer review
- No space constraints or color figure charges
- Immediate publication on acceptance
- Inclusion in PubMed, CAS, Scopus and Google Scholar
- Research which is freely available for redistribution

Submit your manuscript at  
www.biomedcentral.com/submit

