UICC
global cancer control

Database of misidentified cell lines

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Dear Sir,

Much of current cancer and cell biology research depends on the use of cell lines cultured from normal and malignant tissue. However, ever since the time when continuous cell lines were first established, there has been a problem of the more vigorous lines contaminating and overgrowing more slowly growing cultures. This has been compounded by confusion of one cell line with another by mislabeling in routine culture or during and after cryopreservation. The result is that some 15–20% of cell lines in current use may not be what they are claimed to be. This has prompted a number of recent reports in the literature[1–7] and discussions at scientific meetings. One of the main conclusions is that there needs to be a way to alert scientists using established and frequently propagated cell lines that there is a significant risk that they may be using cell lines which are not what they need them to be. This issue of International Journal of Cancer will address this problem and wants to increase the awareness of authors submitting their work for publication and of reviewers considering the merit of the work. Restrictions and conditions will be imposed regarding proof of authentication of cell lines used and advice given on how to authenticate cell lines (see editorial and letter by W. Dirks). My purpose in this letter is to notify the scientific community of the existence and free availability of a list of cell lines which are known or suspected to be falsely identified or cross contaminated. This will allow scientists embarking on a project or reviewers considering the work for publication, to have access to a data source which will advise them on the respective cell line's authenticity. This list is available for download from: http://www.hpacultures.org.uk/services/celllineidentityverification/misidentifiedcelllines.jsp by following the link after my and Amanda Capes-Davis's names. It has been compiled from quality assurance carried out by a number of cell banks (ATCC, CellBank Australia, sDSMZ, ECACC, JCRB, and RIKEN) and published on their websites, from an entry in Wikipedia, and from reports in the scientific literature. It must be emphasized that while many of the cell lines listed are clearly and incontrovertibly not what they are supposed to be, original and authentic stocks of other lines may yet exist. Where this is believed to be the case the line is included in the second table. This list will be published (Capes-Davis *et al.*, ms in preparation).

I would request that anyone who uses this list and finds that some misidentified cell lines have been omitted or that some cell lines reported as misidentified do have authentic stocks available should contact me (i.freshney@ntlworld.com), and I will arrange to have the database updated.

The recommended procedure for anyone contemplating the use of cell lines is as follows:

- Check that the cell line that you intend to use is not listed in the above database.
- Ensure that the cell line is obtained from a properly authenticated source (and that may not be the originator), preferably from one of the recognized cell banks.
- Authenticate cell lines received from a nonauthenticated source on receipt (see letter of W. Dirks, this issue, and instruction for authors of IJC).
- Repeat authentication at intervals of 3–6 months for cell lines used for an extended study, before cryopreservation, and after thawing for further use.

It may not be possible to eliminate misidentification entirely, as new examples will continue to appear, but following these precautions should reduce the frequency and minimize the spread of the problem.

Yours sincerely,
R. Ian Freshney

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Cell line cross-contamination initiative: an interactive reference database of STR profiles covering common cancer cell lines

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Dear Sir,

Recent reports[1–4] demonstrate the growing perception in the scientific community that cross contamination (CC) of mammalian cell lines represents a major risk for generating false scientific data. The level to which research has been compromised by the use of contaminated or misidentified cell lines has become a major concern for scientists, granting agencies, and, increasingly, scientific journals. In 2007, a group of cell biologists led by Roland M. Nardone petitioned the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services to develop an active program for cell line authentication.[5] They stressed that research and teaching tools in diverse fields of science and industry would be unimaginable without cell cultures. Despite the key importance of cell cultures, only little consensus exists regarding the technical means by which cell line identity can be controlled and how to follow through the results of any such testing.

The key problems of CC are known and chronic in nature: neglecting guidelines for quality control and disregarding adequate cell culture techniques are the main reasons why cell lines have been misidentified or cross contaminated. The incidence of CC in directly and indirectly provenanced cell lines alike[1,3] implies that the majority of false cell lines are perpetrated in originators' own laboratories, presumably by failures during the establishment of new cell lines. A plethora of reports unmasking bogus cancer cell lines, including members of the NCI-60 panel used to generate reference baseline transcriptional drug responses has triggered calls for remedial action.[5,6] Nevertheless, standard authentication procedures for testing cell line identity have yet to be defined.

Short tandem repeat (STR) microsatellite sequences are highly polymorphic in human populations, and their stability throughout the lifespan of individuals renders STR profiling (typing) ideal for forensic use. STR typing has served as a reference technique for identity control of human cell lines at Biological Resource Centers (BRCs) since the turn of the millennium.[7] Ideally, authentication involves coincident STR typing of paired donor and derived cell line samples. However, this ideal is met by a few recently established cell lines only. Most widely used cell lines are decades old and their identification is largely retrospective and multidisciplinary, combining diverse criteria such as uniqueness and the congruence of STR profiles across independent samples with the consistency of observed karyotypes with those reported by the originators.

The DSMZ as well as the ATCC, JCRB, and RIKEN repositories have generated large databases of STR cell line profiles. By using the same microsatellite loci at these BRCs, individual databases could be merged, thereby facilitating interactive searches. This work was piloted at the DSMZ to generate an international reference STR profile database for human cell lines. To render it user friendly, a simple search engine for interrogating STR cell line profiles has now been made available on the homepages of JCRB and DSMZ (http://cellbank.nibio.go.jp/cellbank_e.html, http://www.dsmz.de/STRanalysis). Registered users simply login at the search-site on the DSMZ homepage and will be guided. Aided by simple prompts, users can input their own cell line STR data to retrieve best matches with authenticated cell lines listed on the database.

Once the problem of false negatives due to discrepant representation of single STR alleles, *e.g.*, by losses of heterozygosity and bottlenecking selection—has been tackled and unambiguous search results are produced, human cell lines will need to be consistent with consensus STR reference data sets. STR profiles of all human cell lines distributed by DSMZ, JCRB, and RIKEN and one-third of the cell lines distributed by ATCC are now publicly accessible on interactive databases where match criteria have been arbitrarily set to 95%. Inevitably, reference profiles remain subject to revision until all commonly held cell lines have been STR typed across participating repositories. At present, about 2,342 such cell lines have been STR typed and are represented as reference sets on the database.

The authors of this article are currently participating in an international workgroup organized by the ATCC Standards Development Organization, (ATCC SDO) to develop a standardized methodology (protocols and procedures for STR analysis) for authenticating human cell lines. An additional

goal of the workgroup is to establish a global database for STR profiles of human cell lines. The development of the consensus standard offers a new tool to the cell biology community that will foster reproducibility and comparability of cell lines used in different laboratories. Armed with these tools, online verification of cell line identity should prove a vital weapon to combat the havoc of cell line cross contamination which has dogged cancer research since inception.

Yours sincerely,
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