Generation of a dual edited human induced pluripotent stem cell Myl7-GFP reporter line with inducible CRISPRi/dCas9

Eyal Metzl-Raz\textsuperscript{a}, Nike Bharucha\textsuperscript{b}, Jennifer Arthur Ataam\textsuperscript{b}, Alexandra A. Gavidia\textsuperscript{b}, William J. Greenleaf\textsuperscript{a}, Ioannis Karakikes\textsuperscript{b}
\textsuperscript{a}Department of Genetics, Stanford University School of Medicine, Stanford, CA, USA
\textsuperscript{b}Department Cardiothoracic Surgery and Stanford Cardiovascular Institute, Stanford, CA, USA

Abstract

Temporal regulation of CRISPRi activity is critical for genetic screens. Here, we present an inducible CRISPRi platform enabling selection of iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes and reversible gene knockdown. We targeted a doxycycline-inducible dCas9-KRAB-mCherry cassette into the AA V51 locus in an MYL7-mGFP reporter iPSC line. A clone with bi-allelic integration displayed minimally leaky CRISPRi activity and strong expression upon addition of doxycycline in iPSCs, iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes, and multilineage differentiated cells. The CRISPRi activity was validated by targeting the MYOCD gene in iPSC cardiomyocytes. In summary, we developed a robust inducible CRISPRi platform to interrogate gene function in human iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes and other cells.

1. Resource utility

The dual edited Myl7-GFP/dCas9 iPSC line can be used for genetic screens in differentiated cardiomyocytes, and other iPSC-derivatives, providing a platform for systematic interrogation of normal and disease states in early fetal heart development.

2. Resource details

Inducible expression of dCas9 without silencing is crucial to successfully implementing CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) systems in functional genomics (Mandegar et al., 2016). Here, we describe the development of a robust inducible CRISPRi system in human induced pluripotent stem cells (CRISPRi-iPSCs) that displays efficient gene repression activity in undifferentiated iPSCs, and importantly, in post-differentiated cells, such as cardiomyocytes. This iPSC line is also endogenously tagged at the MYL7 locus with mEGFP, allowing for purification of iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes as well as live-cell microscopy of sarcomere structure and dynamics. The line has minimally leaky CRISPRi activity and strong, stable,
homogenous induction of dCas9-KRAB expression upon addition of doxycycline both in iPSCs and in differentiated cells, allowing targeted but reversible gene knockdown.

To construct this line, the dCas9-KRAB construct (Addgene #73497) (Mandegar et al., 2016) was integrated at the AAVS1 ‘genomic safe harbor’ locus (Fig. 1A–B) of the WTC11-MYL7eGFP iPSC line (AICS-0052 cl.3) by CRISPR/Cas9-mediated genome editing. The bi-allelic insertion of the transgene in the AAVS1 locus was verified by PCR amplification of the 5′ integration junction (1 kb) (Fig. 1C). Pluripotency was verified by immunostaining for OCT3/4, SOX2, and TRA1-60 (Fig. 1D), and the trilineage potential was confirmed by Scorecard assay at passage 42 (Fig. 1E; A15876, Thermofisher). The cells showed normal karyotype at passage 42 (Fig. 1F). To assess the CRISPRi activation and reversibility, the iPSCs were treated with 1ug/ml Doxycycline. We observed a robust mCherry signal at 24hr after induction. The mCherry signal persisted for four days and was undetectable two days after Doxycycline withdrawal, indicting tunable and reversible expression of the CRISPRi (Fig. 1G). We validated the CRISPRi activity by targeting the MYOCD locus (Table 1, Table 2) in iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes and performing qPCR analysis for relative expression and ATACseq on FACS purified GFP+ cells. Upon adding doxycycline from day three of differentiation, we observed a significant reduction in MYOCD relative expression (about 85%) and accessibility of the MYOCD locus at day 15 of post-differentiation, indicating that the CRISPRi activity is preserved in differentiated cardiomyocytes (Fig. 1H, left and right, respectively). We also observed homogeneous and robust expression of mCherry upon adding doxycycline during tri-lineage Embryoid bodies (EB) mediated differentiation of the CRISPRi-iPSCs, suggesting that dCas9-KRAB expression is not silenced in multiple differentiated cell lineages (Fig. 1I, Day 4 EBs). To verify that the construct was minimally silenced during differentiation and in differentiated cardiomyocytes, we use flow cytometry to sort out GFP+ and GFP− cells at day 15 of cardiomyocyte differentiation. We observed that the vast majority of the GFP+ population were also mCherry+ (Fig. 1J) and verified by fluorescence microscopy (Fig. 1K).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Generation and maintenance of the iPSC line

The iPSCs were cultured in mTeSR1 (STEMCELL Technologies) on Matrigel (BD Biosciences) coated plates at 37 °C and 5%CO2/5%O2. For transgene insertion, 250,000 iPSCs were nucleofected (1200 V, 20 ms, 1 pulse) with 60 pmoles sgRNA (Synthego) targeting the AAVS1 locus, 20 pmoles SpCas9 nuclease (Synthego), and 1 μg CRISPRi plasmid using the Neon Transfection System (ThermoFisher Scientific) per the manufacturer’s instructions. When cells reached 75% confluency, they were dissociated by DPBS-EDTA at 37 °C for 7–10 min and replated in mTeSR1 containing 5 μM Y-27632 (Selleckchem). For selection, the iPSCs were grown in the presence of 50 μg/ml G418 for five days, followed by single-cell seeding. The reversible expression of the dCas9 transgene was confirmed by the addition of 1 μg/ml Doxycycline Hyclate (Calbiochem) for four days and then removed for two days.
3.2. PCR and sequencing

Genomic DNA was extracted using Quick Extract solution (Lucigen) and PCR-amplified with GoTaq HotStart polymerase (Promega). Integration of the pAAVS1-CRISPRi vector at the AA VS1 locus was confirmed with vector-specific (within SA site) and AA VS1 locus-specific primers that amplified the 5’ integration junction (1 kb product). A second primer set (within HA-L and HA-R) did not amplify the WT AA VS1 junction spanning the cut site, indicating biallelic insertion. PCR cycling condition: 95 °C 2 min; 95 °C 15 sec, 60 °C 15 sec, 72 °C 1 min (40 cycles); 72 °C 1 min.

3.3. Immunostaining

The cells were fixed with 4% PFA for 10 min at 37 °C and then washed 3 times for 5 min with DPBS. The cells were then permeabilized in DPBS with 0.1% Triton for 10 min at room temperature, followed by blocking for 1 hr at room temperature with DPBS/0.1% Triton X/1% BSA. Cells were incubated with primary antibodies at 4 °C overnight. The cells were then washed 3 times for 5 min each with DPBS and incubated with a secondary antibody for 1 hr at room temperature. After washing 3 times for 5 min each, a drop of NucBlue was added to counterstain the DNA.

3.4. sgRNA transduction to iPSCs

Individual gRNAs were cloned by synthesizing the complementary sense and antisense strand oligos separately, annealing them, then ligating them into the recipient lentiviral plasmid, pMCP619 (Addgene 171011). Lentivirus was generated by transfection of the lentiviral vector (1000 ng) and packaging plasmids pCMV-dR8.91 (900 ng) and pCMV-VSV-G (100 ng) with 12 μL of polyethyleneimine (PEI, 1 mg/mL; Polysciences 24765–1) into HEK293T cells that had been grown to 60–80% confluence in 6-well plates. Total volume of media was 2 mL per transfection. About 48 hr after transfection, the cell medium containing virus was harvested in 0.5 mL aliquots, and filtered through a 0.45 um filter. The harvested virus was concentrated 10-fold using Lenti-X Concentrator (Takara Bio), following manufacturer’s recommendations, and resuspended in PBS. iPSCs were kept growing in log-phase, plated in 6-well plates, then transduced with virus at 60–80% confluence. 48 hr after transduction, cells were selected with puromycin at 0.4 μg/mL until cells were at least 95% BFP+.

3.5. Validation of CRISPRi-mediated knockdown

Inducible dCas9-mCherry expression was validated by induction of 1μg/ml Doxycycline Hyclate (Calbiochem) followed by fluorescence microscopy capturing mCherry signal from the construct (Fig. 1G). Similarly, mCherry was captured by flow cytometry (Fig. 1J). Knockdown validation was performed by transducing iPSCs using a lentivirus expressing the sgRNAs for MYOCD and “safe” target (Negative control gRNAs that target non-functional, non-genic regions). The transduced iPSCs were then differentiated into cardiomyocytes and inducing the cells with 1μg/ml Dox on days 3–15 of differentiation. The cells were harvested on day 15, sorted for GFP+ signal (MYL7 positive cells), and assayed for accessibility and mRNA expression (Corces et al., 2017).
3.6. Induction of CRISPRi in iPSC-derived cardiomyocytes

The iPSCs were differentiated to cardiomyocytes as previously described (Feyen et al., 2021). Briefly, at about 70% cell confluency, the culture media was changed to 3 mL RPMI with B27 supplement (without Insulin) with 6 μM CHIR90021. On days 1 and 2, 2 and 1 mL RPMI with B27 supplement (without Insulin) were added, receptively. On day 3 of differentiation, the media was changed to RPMI/B27 -Insulin with 3 μM IWP2. Media was refreshed every other day. After Day 9, the media was changed to RPMI/B27 with Insulin and refreshed every other day. On day 3 to 15, Dox was added to the differentiated cells, and then the cells were FACS sorted.

3.7. qPCR assay

Total RNA was harvested from day15 cardiomyocytes after four days of Glucose starvation (RPMI -Glucose supplemented with B27 +insulin, ThermoFisher 11879020, Gibco 17504044). Total RNA amounts from two biological repeats were then measured by Nanodrop (Thermo Scientific, NanoDrop 2000) and 5 ng total RNA was RT and quantitively assayed (Luna Universal One-Step RT-qPCR Kit, New England Biolabs, E3005S) using MYOCD and ACTB primers (see below) on a QuantStudio 3 qPCR machine (Applied Biosystems™). Ct values were extracted using Design & Analysis software (2.6) and transformed to Relative expression (RE) values following standard Comparative Ct analysis calculations.

3.8. Spontaneous differentiation

Embryoid bodies (EB) were formed using the Aggrewell-400 protocol according to the manufacturer’s protocol (STEMCELL Technologies). Briefly, the iPSCs were dissociated with Gentle Cell Dissociation Reagent (100–0485, STEMCELL Technologies) and seeded into the Aggrewell 400 24-well plate pre-coated with the anti-adherence rinsing solution (07010, STEMCELL Technologies) at a density of 1.2e6 cells/well in Aggrewell EB Formation Medium (05893, STEMCELL Technologies). After 24hr, half of the media was replaced with fresh Aggrewell EB Formation Medium. 48 hr after seeding, we harvested EBs and moved them to an ultra-low attachment 6-well plate (CLS3471-24EA, Corning) in TeSR™.E6 media (05946, STEMCELL Technologies). We maintained EBs in culture for 6 days, replacing media every other day.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

References

Mandegar MA, et al. , 2016. CRISPR Interference Efficiently Induces Specific and Reversible Gene Silencing in Human iPSCs. Cell Stem Cell 18 (4), 541–553. [PubMed: 26971820]
Corces MR, et al. , 2017. An improved ATAC-seq protocol reduces background and enables interrogation of frozen tissues. Nat. Meth 14 (10), 959–962.
Feyen DAM, et al. , 2021. Unfolded Protein Response as a Compensatory Mechanism and Potential Therapeutic Target in PLN R14del Cardiomyopathy. Circulation 144 (5), 382–392. [PubMed: 33928785]
Fig. 1.
Generation and characterization of inducible CRISPRi iPSCs.
## Table 1
Characterization and validation.

| Classification                                    | Test                                                           | Result                                                                                         | Data               |
|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| **Morphology**                                    | Photography                                                   | Typical primed pluripotent human stem cell morphology                                           | Fig. IG            |
| **Pluripotency status evidence for the described cell line** | Qualitative analysis (Immunocytochemistry)                     | Positive for pluripotency markers: OCT4, TRA1-60, SOX2                                          | Fig. ID            |
| **Karyotype**                                     | Karyotype (Wicell)                                            | Normal male karyotype (46, XY), no clonal abnormalities detected Resolution: 425–450 bands   | Fig. IF            |
| **Genotyping for the desired genomic alteration/allelic status of the gene of interest** | PCR across the edited site or targeted allele-specific PCR     | Homozygous integration of at the AAVS1 locus                                                    | Fig. IB,C          |
| **Verification of the absence of random plasmid integration events** | Transgene-specific PCR                                         | N/A                                                                                             | N/A                |
| **Parental and modified cell line genetic identity evidence** | PCR/Southern                                                  | N/A                                                                                             | N/A                |
| **Mutagenesis / genetic modification outcome analysis** | Verification of the mGFP-tag in the MYL7 locus of the parental line | PCR                                                                                             | N/A                |
| **PCR-based analyses**                            | ATACseq                                                       | Verified knockdown of the targeted accessible peak in comparison to a Safe targeting guide      | Fig. IH            |
| **Off-target nuclease analysis**                  | PCR across top predicted likely off-target sites               | PCR of predicted off-target site; Sanger sequencing                                             | No off-target effect observed |
| **Specific pathogen-free status**                 | Mycoplasma testing by MycoAlert Detection Kit; passage 35     | Negative                                                                                       | N/A                |
| **Multilineage differentiation potential**         | Embryoid body spontaneous differentiation; RNA isolation RNeasy kit (Quagen); Taqman Scorecard (ThermoFisher Scientific) | Tri-lineage differentiation potential                                                             | Fig. II            |
| **Donor screening (OPTIONAL)**                    | HIV1+2, Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C                               | N/A                                                                                             | N/A                |
| **Genotype - additional histocompatibility info (OPTIONAL)** | Blood group genotyping                                       | N/A                                                                                             | N/A                |
|                                                   | HLA tissue typing                                             | N/A                                                                                             | N/A                |
### Table 2

Reagents details.

| Antibodies and stains used for immunocytochemistry/flow-cytometry |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Antibody** | **Company Cat # and RRID** |
| Pluripotency Markers | Mouse anti-OCT3/4, mouse anti-TRA-1–60, rabbit anti-NANOG, mouse anti-SOX2 1:200 | Santa Cruz Cat #SC-5279, Millipore Cat #MAB4360, Santa Cruz Cat #SC-33759, Cell Signaling Cat #4900S |
| Differentiation markers | N/A | N/A |
| Secondary antibodies | Goat Anti-Mouse IgG Alexa fluor 594, Goat Anti-Rabbit IgG Alexa fluor 488 1:800, 1:400 | Invitrogen Cat #A1032, Invitrogen Cat #A1070 |
| Nuclear stain | DAPI 1 drop | Invitrogen Cat #R37606 |

**Site-specific nuclease**

| Nuclease information | SpCas9 | Synthego |
| Delivery method | Nucleofection | Neon Transfection System (ThermoFisher) |
| Selection/enrichment strategy | 50 μg/ml G418 |

**Primers and Oligonucleotides used in this study**

| Target | Forward/Reverse primer (5'-3') |
|--------|--------------------------------|
| AAVS1 gRNA sequence | AAVS1 locus gRNA TCCCTAGTGCGCCACTGTG |
| Junction PCR | Integration at AAVS1 locus Fw: TTGAGCTCTACTGGCTTCTGCGCRv: GCCCTGTGGAGGAAGAGAAGAGG (1 kb amplicon) |
| WT allele | AAVS1 locus Fw: CGGTTAATGTGGCTCTGGTTRv: AGGATCCTCTCTGGCTCCAT (250 bp amplicon) |
| Off-target locus | Chr22: 48335634–48335655 Fw: GGAGAGGAGAAGAAGATACAGAC Rv: TCCAGAAGCCTGCAGGCTGA |
| MYOCYD qPCR primer | MYOCYD i:dtdna.com, PrimeTime primers, Assay ID: Hs.PT.58.23073756 |
| ACTB qPCR primer | ACTB Fw: TTCTACAATGAGCTGCGTGTG Rv: GGGGTGTTGAAGGTCTCAAA |
| sgRNA sequences | Safe guide gRNA MYOCYD gRNA GGAATTGCTTCTGGTTTAT |
|                | GAGGTGTGCAAGGACAGCG |

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| Resource Table |
|----------------|
| Unique stem cell line identifier | SCVIi038-A |
| Alternative name(s) of stem cell line | AICS-0052-003-iKRABdCas9 |
| Institution | Stanford University |
| Contact information of the reported cell line distributor | Ioannis Karakikes |
| Type of cell line | iPSC |
| Origin | Human |
| Additional origin info (applicable for human ESC or iPSC) | Age: 30–34<br>Sex: Male<br>Ethnicity: Asian<br>Limited clinical information: EKG |
| Cell Source | Skin fibroblasts |
| Method of reprogramming | Non-integrating, episomal |
| Clonality | Clonal |
| Evidence of the reprogramming transgene loss (including genomic copy if applicable) | N/A |
| Cell culture system used | Matrigel-coated feeder-free culture, mTeSR1 media |
| Type of Genetic Modification | Transgene generation |
| Associated disease | N/A |
| Gene/locus | AAVS1 (OMIM 102699)/19q13 |
| Method of modification/site-specific nuclease used | CRISPR/Cas9 |
| Site-specific nuclease (SSN) delivery method | RNP |
| All genetic material introduced into the cells | pAAVS1-NDs-CRISPRi (Gen1) Plasmid #73497 |
| Analysis of the nuclease-targeted allele status | PCR for WT allele and confirmation of integration by junction PCR and Sanger sequencing |
| Method of the off-target nuclease activity surveillance | In silico prediction and targeted PCR with Sanger sequencing |
| Name of transgene | CRISPRi/dCas9-KRAB |
| Eukaryotic selective agent resistance (including inducible/gene expressing cell-specific) | Positive (neomycin) |
| Inducible/constitutive system details | TET-On |
| Date archived/stock date | 08/20/20 |
| Cell line repository/bank | https://hpscreg.eu/user/cellline/edit/SCVIi038-A |
| Ethical/GMO work approvals | N/A |
| Addgene/public access repository recombinant DNA sources’ disclaimers (if applicable) | pAAVS1-NDs-CRISPRi (Gen1) was a gift from Bruce Conklin (Addgene plasmid # 73497; https://n2t.net/addgene:73497; RRID: Addgene_73497) Dox-inducible CRISPR interference (CRISPRi) knock-in construct into the AAVS1 locus with mCherry marker. |