Hepatitis C Virus Nonstructural Protein 5A Inhibits MG132-Induced Apoptosis of Hepatocytes in Line with NF-κB-Nuclear Translocation

Xia Jiang1☯, Tatsuo Kanda1☯*, Shuang Wu1, Shingo Nakamoto2, Masato Nakamura1, Reina Sasaki1, Yuki Haga1, Takaji Wakita3, Hiroshi Shirasawa2, Osamu Yokosuka1

1 Departments of Gastroenterology and Nephrology, Chiba University, Graduate School of Medicine, Chiba, Japan, 2 Departments of Molecular Virology, Chiba University, Graduate School of Medicine, Chiba, Japan, 3 Department of Virology II, National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Tokyo, Japan

☯ These authors contributed equally to this work.
* kandat-cib@umin.ac.jp

Abstract

Background
Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is one of the major causes of cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma. HCV nonstructural protein 5A (NS5A) is an attractive antiviral target and plays an important role in HCV replication as well as hepatocarcinogenesis. The aim of this study was to assess the effect of HCV NS5A protein in the abrogation of apoptotic cell death induced by the proteasome inhibitor MG132.

Methods
Apoptotic responses to MG132 and the expression of molecules involved in NF-κB signaling pathways in human hepatocytes were investigated with or without the expression of HCV NS5A.

Results
HCV NS5A protected HepG2 cells against MG132-induced apoptosis, in line with NF-κB-nuclear translocation. A similar NF-κB-nuclear translocation was observed in Huh7 cells infected with HCV JFH1. In agreement with this, after treatment with MG132, HCV NS5A could elevate the transcription of several NF-κB target genes such as BCL2 and BCLXL to inhibit MG132-induced apoptosis in hepatocytes. HCV NS5A also enhanced phosphorylation of IκBα. Consistent with a conferred prosurvival advantage, HCV NS5A reduced MG132-induced poly(adenosine diphosphate-ribose) polymerase cleavage.

Conclusions
HCV NS5A expression enhances phosphorylation of IκBα, liberates NF-κB for nuclear translocation and downregulates MG132-induced apoptotic pathways in human
hepatocytes. It is possible that the disruption of proteasome-associated apoptosis plays a role in the pathogenesis of HCV infection.

Introduction

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is one of the major risk factors for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) [1,2]. HCV is a global health issue, with more than 185 million individuals chronically infected worldwide [3]. Although HCV drug treatment regimens have depended on HCV genotypes [4], these regimens have been improved, and multiple direct-acting antivirals (DAAs) therapies will soon become globally realistic options [3].

HCV has a positive-strand RNA genome of approximately 9.6 kb, which encodes at least 4 structural (core, E1, E2 and p7) and 6 nonstructural (NS2, NS3, NS4A, NS4B, NS5A and NS5B) proteins. At least 4 of the 10 proteins, namely core, NS3, NS5A and NS5B, play roles in several potentially oncogenic pathways [5]. The HCV NS5A protein is a ~447 amino acid phosphoprotein with an N-terminal amphipathic alpha helix and 3 structural domains [6, 7]. HCV NS5A is important for HCV replication [8] and is involved in multiple cellular processes [9, 10]. HCV NS5A has been shown to block hepatic apoptosis mediated by tumor necrosis factor (TNF) [11, 12], lipopolysaccharide (LPS) [13] or thapsigargin [14], suggesting that the disruption of this apoptosis may play a role in the pathogenesis of HCV infection.

The proteasome inhibitor MG132 has been shown to induce apoptosis in HepG2 cells [15, 16]. MG132 activates c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK), which initiates apoptosis and also inhibits NF-κB activation [17]. MG132 dramatically sensitizes HDAC-inhibitor-mediated apoptosis, at least partly, through the ER stress response [18]. HCV NS5A modulates JNK and activates NF-κB [19, 20]. Alterations in cell survival contribute to the pathogenesis of human liver diseases and viral carcinogenesis [21, 22]. In the present study, we examined the effect of HCV NS5A protein in abrogating apoptotic cell death induced by MG132. Our results demonstrate that HCV NS5A protein suppresses MG132-mediated apoptosis.

Methods

Plasmids, Cells and Virus

Plasmid pCXN2 was generously provided by Prof. J. Miyazaki (Osaka University) [23]. pCXN2-HCV NS5A vectors were described previously [14]. pCXN2-NS5A plasmids with the HCV genotype 1b NS5A, including 2 wide-type, 2 intermediate-type, and 1 mutant-type interferon sensitivity determining region (ISDR, aa2209-aa2248) were named pCXN2-NS5A-W1 and pCXN2-NS5A-W2, pCXN2-NS5A-I1 and pCXN2-NS5A-I2, and pCXN2-NS5A-M1, respectively [14]. The human hepatoma cell HepG2 was cultured in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) containing 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum, 100 units/ml penicillin and 100 μg/ml streptomycin (Sigma, St. Louis, MO, USA) under 5% CO2 at 37°C. Stable HepG2 cell lines as control cells, which expressed pCXN2 [14], and HepG2-NS5A cells, which expressed various HCV genotype 1b NS5A proteins, have been described previously [13, 14]. Huh7 cells were infected with JFH1 genotype 2a as described elsewhere [24, 25].
Treatment of Cells with MG132

HepG2 control or HepG2-NS5A cells were placed in 6-well plates and incubated with 0–10 μM MG132 (Z-Leu-Leu-Leu-al) (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). After 24–48 hours of incubation, cells were fixed for 30 minutes with methanol, washed 3 times with water, stained for 30 minutes with 0.1% crystal violet, and air-dried [13].

Reporter Assays for NF-κB Activity

HepG2 cells were seeded onto a 6-well plate and 24 hours later co-transfected with 0.2 μg reporter plasmid pNFκB-luc (PathDetect Cis-Reporting Systems; Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA, USA) and 0.2 μg pCXN2-HCV NS5A vector or pCXN2 control vector using Effectene transfection reagents (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany). Forty-eight hours after transfection, cells were harvested using reporter lysis buffer (Toyo Ink, Tokyo, Japan), and luciferase activities were determined with a luminometer (Luminescencer-JNR II AB-2300, ATTO, Tokyo, Japan).

RNA Purification, Real-time RT-PCR and Human NF-κB Signaling Targets PCR Array

Cellular RNA was extracted using the RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen). One microgram of RNA was reverse-transcribed with a PrimeScript RT² First Strand Kit (Qiagen). PCR was performed on cDNA templates using primers specific for B-cell CLL/lymphoma (BCL2), BCL2-like 1 (BCL2L1/BCL-X/BCLXL) and glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH), which were purchased from Qiagen. A Human NF-κB Signaling Targets Real-time RT-PCR Array was performed according to the manufacturer’s protocol. The data were analyzed by PCR Array Data Analysis Software (http://www.sabiosciences.com/pcrarraydataanalysis.php).

Western Blot Analysis

Cells were harvested with sodium dodecyl sulfate sample buffer. After sonication, cell lysates were subjected to electrophoresis on 5–20% polyacrylamide gels and transferred onto polyvinylidene difluoride membranes (ATTO). Membranes were probed with specific antibodies for poly(adenosine diphosphate-ribose) polymerase (PARP), nuclear factor of kappa light polypeptide gene enhancer in B cells inhibitor, alpha (IκBα), phosphorylated IκBα (Ser32) (Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA) and GAPDH (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA). After washing, membranes were incubated with secondary horse-radish peroxidase-conjugated antibodies. Signals were detected by means of enhanced chemiluminescence (GE Healthcare Japan, Tokyo, Japan) and scanned with an image analyzer LAS-4000 and Image Gauge (version 3.1) (Fuji Film, Tokyo, Japan). Band intensities were determined by ImageJ software [26].

Transfection and Apoptosis Assay

Approximately 1 x 10⁵ HepG2 cells were placed on 6-well tissue culture plates (Iwaki Glass, Tokyo, Japan) 24 hours prior to transfection. Cells were transfected with 0.3 μg of pCXN2 or pCXN2-NS5A vector using Effectene transfection reagents (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. After 48 hours of transfection, cells were treated with 0–10 μM MG132 (Sigma-Aldrich) for 24 hours, and APOPercentage Apoptosis Assay (Biocolor, Belfast, Northern Ireland) was used to quantify apoptosis according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The transfer and exposure of phosphatidylserine to the exterior surface of the membrane has been linked to the onset of apoptosis. Phosphatidylserine transmembrane movement results in the
uptake of APOPercentage dye by apoptotic cells. Purple-red stained cells were identified as apoptotic cells by light microscopy. The number of purple-red cells per 300 cells was counted as previously described [14].

Measurement of Caspase-3/-7 Activities
The caspase-Glo 3/7 assay (Promega, Madison, WI, USA) was used to detect caspase-3 and caspase-7 activities according to the manufacturer’s instructions [14].

Immunofluorescence Study
Cells were washed and fixed with 3.7% formaldehyde, followed by blocking with 3% horse serum albumin. Cells were incubated with an NF-κB P65 (D14E12) antibody (Cell Signaling) for 16 hours at 4°C. Cells were washed and incubated with anti-rabbit immunoglobulin secondary antibody conjugated with Alexa Fluor 555 (Cell Signaling) for 1 hour at room temperature. Nuclear staining was performed with Hoechst 33342, trihydrochloride, trihydrate (Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR, USA). Finally, cells were washed and mounted for confocal microscopy (ECLIPSE TE 2000-U, Nikon, Tokyo, Japan), and the images were superimposed digitally to allow for fine comparisons.

Statistical Analysis
Results were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD). Statistical analyses were performed using Student’s t-test. A P-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. All statistical analyses were performed using DA Stats software (O. Nagata, Nifty Serve: PAF01644).

Results
MG132 reduced cell viabilities in HepG2 control cells more than in HepG2-NS5A cells
HepG2 cells stably transfected with HCV NS5A (HepG2-NS5A) were used to examine its effects on MG132-mediated cell death. We treated HepG2-NS5A and HepG2 control cells with MG132 at various concentrations and analyzed cell death 48 hours later (Fig 1A and 1B). Compared with HepG2-NS5A cells, a much higher level of cell death was observed in HepG2 control cells treated with 10 μM MG132.

HCV NS5A reduced MG132-induced apoptosis
The quantification of apoptosis showed a significant 4.6-fold or 2.5-fold increase in apoptosis in HepG2 cells treated with 1 μM or 10 μM MG132 compared with HepG2-NS5A cells treated with 1μM or 10 μM MG132, respectively (Fig 1C and 1D). We also investigated whether HCV NS5A interfered with apoptosis, using western blot analysis, to detect PARP cleavage, which is thought to be one of the hallmarks of apoptosis. Whereas PARP of HepG2-NS5A cells was expressed at higher levels, cleaved PARP induced by 10 μM MG132 was observed more strongly in HepG2 control cells than in HepG2-NS5A cells (Fig 1E). Caspase-3/-7 activities measured in the presence of MG132 were increased in HepG2 control cells (~1.5-fold) compared with HepG2-NS5A cells. These results showed that HCV NS5A protected the human hepatoma cell line HepG2 from MG132-induced apoptosis.
HCV NS5A enhanced MG132-induced NF-κB-nuclear translocation

MG132, a compound that can inhibit the activation of NF-κB, initiates apoptosis [17, 27]. To further analyze the underlying mechanisms of this process, we compared the localization of NF-κB p65 in HepG2 control cells with that in HepG2-NS5A cells in the presence or absence of 5 μM MG132 using immunofluorescence (Fig 2A and 2B). After 24 hours, cells were stained with rabbit monoclonal NF-κB p65 antibody. NF-κB nuclear localization was more readily detected in HepG2-NS5A cells than in HepG2 control cells in the presence and absence of 5 μM MG132 (Fig 2A and 2B). In accordance with these results, NF-κB nuclear localization was more readily detected in HepG2-NS5A cells than in HepG2 control cells in the presence and absence of 5 μM MG132 (Fig 2A and 2B). In accordance with these results, NF-κB-nuclear translocation was observed in Huh7 infected with HCV JFH1 (Fig 2C). A reporter assay also revealed that NF-κB transcriptional activity measured in the presence of MG132 was increased in HepG2-NS5A cells (~4.1-fold) compared with HepG2 control cells. We treated both cell lines, HepG2 control and HepG2-NS5A with 0, 5, and 10 μM MG132 for 8 hours, collected samples and subjected them to SDS-PAGE and western blotting by antibody specific for phosphorylated IkBα, phosphorylated IkBα or GAPDH (Fig 2D). Band intensity rates of phosphorylated IkBα/total IkBα were 1.0-, 1.19- and 0.87-fold in HepG2 control, and they were 1.41-, 1.33-, and 1.18-fold in HepG2-NS5A cells. Together, our data demonstrated that HCV NS5A may enhance NF-κB activation, resulting in reduced MG132-induced apoptosis in hepatocytes.

Different amino acid sequences of ISDR have no impact on MG132-induced apoptosis

HCV NS5A ISDR has an association with the treatment response in interferon-including regimens against chronic HCV infection [28]. As we reported previously [14], we made HCV NS5A expression vectors, having 0 (W1 and W2), 1 (I1) or 2 (I2), or 5 amino acid changes (M1) in the HCV NS5A2209-2248 region, compared with those of HCV-J (wild type). We
examined MG132-induced apoptosis after transient transfection of each HCV NS5A expression plasmid into HepG2 cells. After 24 hours, cells were treated with MG132 for 24 hours and apoptosis was evaluated as previously described (Fig 3A and 3B). HCV NS5A containing different sequences in the ISDR region have a similar effect on MG132-induced apoptosis as compared to wild type sequence. It may be possible that NS5A ISDR interacts with host protein and blocks MG132-induced apoptosis.

NF-κB-associated genes upregulated in HepG2-NS5A cells

To obtain further mechanistic insights into HCV NS5A for NF-κB-signaling pathways, we used a pathway-specific gene array to identify HCV NS5A target genes in HepG2-NS5A cells by comparison with HepG2 control cells. We extracted total RNAs from both cell lines for studying the influence of HCV NS5A on NF-κB-signaling pathway-associated gene expression using real-time PCR arrays (Tables 1 and 2). Out of 84 NF-κB-signaling pathway-associated
genes, 6 (7.1%) genes [chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 5 (CCL5/RANTES), chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 2 (CCL2/MCP-1), synaptosomal-associated protein, 25 kDa (SNAP25), colony stimulating factor 1 (macrophage) (CSF1), chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 10 (CXCL10/IP-10) and complement factor B (CFB)] were significantly upregulated by 1.5-fold or greater in Fig 3. HCV NS5A interferon-sensitivity determining region (ISDR) has no impact on MG132-induced apoptosis. A, B, HepG2 cells were transfected with 0.3 μg of each vector as indicated. After 24 hours, cells were treated with 0–10 μM MG132 for 24 hours, and apoptosis was evaluated by the APOPercentage Apoptosis Assay. A, Purple-red-stained cells were identified as apoptotic cells by light microscopy (40X). B, The number of purple-red cells is shown. *P<0.05, compared to HepG2 control cells without MG132 treatment by Student’s t-test.

Table 1. NF-κB-signaling pathway-associated genes significantly upregulated by more than 1.5-fold in HepG2-NS5A cells compared with HepG2 control cells.

| Symbol | Description | Function | Fold change | p-value |
|--------|-------------|----------|-------------|---------|
| CCL5   | Chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 5 | Anti-apoptotic gene | 4.67 | 0.00005 |
| CCL2   | Chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 2 | Anti-apoptotic gene | 3.4998 | 0.0004 |
| SNAP25 | Synaptosomal-associated protein, 25 kDa | Development and differentiation | 3.3894 | 0.00002 |
| CSF1   | Colony stimulating factor 1 (macrophage) | Development and differentiation | 3.1068 | 0.032 |
| CXCL10 | Chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 10 | Anti-apoptotic gene | 2.6657 | 0.0049 |
| CFB    | Complement factor B | Innate immune response gene | 2.0428 | 0.0003 |

Fold-change is proportional to the ratios of gene expression levels between HepG2-NS5A and HepG2 control cells. Positive numbers indicate that the genes were upregulated in HepG2-NS5A cells. Each experiment was performed at least 3 times independently.
HepG2-NS5A cells compared with HepG2 control cells (n = 3, p < 0.05) (Table 1). Of interest, chemokine genes, such as CCL5, CCL2 and CXCL10, could activate human hepatic stellate cells, which are associated with hepatic fibrosis [29–31], and CXCL10 is an important gene for the treatment response of interferon treatment [32]. CCL5, CCL2 and CXCL10 have anti-apoptotic functions [33–35]. CSF1 and SNAP25 were associated with the development and differentiation of myeloid cells and the nervous system, respectively. CFB is classified as one of the innate immune response genes.

### NF-κB-associated genes downregulated in HepG2-NS5A cells

On the other hand, out of 84 NF-κB-signaling pathway-associated genes, 19 genes were significantly downregulated by 1.5-fold or greater in HepG2-NS5A cells compared with HepG2 control cells (n = 3, p < 0.05) (Table 2). Inflammatory cytokines and chemokines such as tumor necrosis factor (TNF), interleukin 8 (IL8), lymphotoxin beta (TNF superfamily, member 3) (LTB), chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 22 (CCL22), interleukin 1, alpha (IL1A) and chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 2 (CXCL2) were suppressed. Inflammatory-related genes such as coagulation factor III (thromboplastin, tissue factor) (F3), tumor necrosis factor receptor superfamily, member 1B (TNFRSF1B), complement component 3 (C3), and interleukin 2 receptor alpha (IL2RA) were also suppressed. Apoptosis-related genes such as prostaglandin-endoperoxide synthase 2 (prostaglandin G/H synthase and cyclooxygenase) (PTGS2/COX-2), TNFRSF1B, and CDKN1A were downregulated.

| Symbol   | Description                                                                 | Function                      | Fold change | p-value  |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| TRAF2    | TNF receptor-associated factor 2                                            | Apoptosis-related gene        | -1.54       | 0.00029  |
| BCL2L1   | BCL2-like 1                                                                 | Anti-apoptotic gene           | -1.63       | 0.00038  |
| CXCL2    | Chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 2                                            | Inflammatory chemokine        | -1.72       | 0.0044   |
| IL1A     | Interleukin 1, alpha                                                         | Inflammatory cytokine         | -1.74       | 0.039    |
| IL2RA    | Interleukin 2 receptor, alpha                                               | Apoptosis-related gene        | -1.79       | 0.0499   |
| CD83     | CD83 molecule                                                                | Innate immune response gene   | -1.85       | 0.003    |
| CDKN1A   | Cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1A (p21, Cip1)                             | Type I interferon-response gene | -1.88       | 0.00003  |
| C3       | Complement component 3                                                       | Inflammatory-related gene     | -1.89       | 0.000004 |
| CCND1    | Cyclin D1                                                                   | Stress response gene          | -1.95       | 0.00007  |
| BIRC3    | Baculoviral IAP repeat containing 3                                         | Anti-apoptotic gene           | -2.00       | 0.000007 |
| TNFRSF1B | Tumor necrosis factor receptor superfamily, member 1B                        | Apoptosis-related gene        | -2.11       | 0.0086   |
| RELB     | V-rel reticuloendotheliosis viral oncogene homolog B                         | NF-κB pathway                 | -2.33       | 0.00017  |
| PTGS2    | Prostaglandin-endoperoxide synthase 2 (prostaglandin G/H synthase and cyclooxygenase) | Apoptosis-related gene        | -2.87       | 0.000001 |
| PDGFB    | Platelet-derived growth factor beta polypeptide                             | Stress response gene          | -3.07       | 0.0007   |
| F3       | Coagulation factor III (thromboplastin, tissue factor)                       | Inflammatory-related gene     | -4.41       | 0.000001 |
| CCL22    | Chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 22                                              | Inflammatory chemokine        | -6.62       | 0.00097  |
| LTB      | Lymphotoxin beta (TNF superfamily, member 3)                                 | Inflammatory cytokine         | -12.47      | 0.0027   |
| IL8      | Interleukin 8                                                                | Inflammatory cytokine         | -16.42      | 0.00068  |
| TNF      | Tumor necrosis factor                                                        | Inflammatory cytokine         | -109.94     | 0.0040   |

Fold-change is proportional to the ratios of gene expression levels between HepG2-NS5A and HepG2 control cells. Negative numbers indicate that the genes were downregulated in HepG2-NS5A cells. Each experiment was performed at least 3 times independently.

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Table 2. NF-κB-signaling pathway-associated genes significantly downregulated by more than 1.5-fold in HepG2-NS5A cells compared with HepG2 control cells.

HepG2-NS5A cells compared with HepG2 control cells (n = 3, p < 0.05) (Table 1). Of interest, chemokine genes, such as CCL5, CCL2 and CXCL10, could activate human hepatic stellate cells, which are associated with hepatic fibrosis [29–31], and CXCL10 is an important gene for the treatment response of interferon treatment [32]. CCL5, CCL2 and CXCL10 have anti-apoptotic functions [33–35]. CSF1 and SNAP25 were associated with the development and differentiation of myeloid cells and the nervous system, respectively. CFB is classified as one of the innate immune response genes.

NF-κB-associated genes downregulated in HepG2-NS5A cells

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IL2RA and TNF receptor-associated factor 2 (TRAF2) were suppressed, although anti-apoptotic genes such as BCLXL and baculoviral IAP repeat containing 3 (BIRC3/c-IAP1) were also suppressed. Type I interferon-response gene, cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1A (p21, Cip1) (CDKN1A), and innate immune response gene, CD83, were also inhibited. Stress response genes such as platelet-derived growth factor beta polypeptide (PDGFB) and cyclin D1 (CCND1) were also suppressed. In the NF-κB pathway, transcription factor V-rel reticuloendotheliosis viral oncogene homolog B (RELB) was suppressed (Table 2).

Although HCV NS5A had an impact on several NF-κB-associated genes in hepatocytes, we also found that the expression of BCL2 mRNA and BCLXL mRNA were up-regulated approximately 1.46-fold and 1.98-fold, respectively, in HepG2-NS5A cells, compared to HepG2 control cells after 8 hours of treatment with 10 μM MG132. These results also suggested that HCV NS5A protein could elevate the transcription of several NF-κB target genes, such as BCL2 and BCLXL, to inhibit MG132-induced apoptosis in hepatocytes.

**Discussion**

In the present study, the MG132-induced apoptotic pathway is inhibited in HCV NS5A-expressing HepG2 cells by activation of NF-κB. HCV NS5A influences NF-κB-targeting gene expression and blocks PARP cleavage and apoptosis induced by MG132, leading to hepatocyte survival. The present study supported the previous observation that MG132 reduced the viability of HepG2 cells in a time- and dose-dependent manner and that the effect was in tight connection with the induction of apoptosis [15]. Emanuele et al. [15] also reported that MG132 caused the degradation of PARP and that protease inhibitors could have potential as a treatment against HCC.

HCV NS5A has anti-apoptotic properties [9–14]. Our results (Fig 2D) supported the previous observation that HCV NS5A could activate NF-κB via phosphorylation of IκBα [36]. The hyperphosphorylated form of IκBα is targeted for degradation, releasing p50/p65 (or Rel) complex to translocate to the nucleus [37]. HCV NS5A also controls the interferon (IFN)-induced double-stranded RNA (dsRNA)-activated protein kinase, PKR [38], and PKR as a eukaryotic initiation factor 2, alpha subunit (eIF2α) kinase, regulates the NF-κB, p38MAPK and insulin pathways [39]. In the present study, we observed that HCV NS5A enhanced NF-κB-nuclear translocation in the presence or absence of MG132 (Fig 2). Although the PKR-binding region of HCV NS5A includes ISDR [38], HCV NS5A containing different sequences in the ISDR region have a similar effect on MG132-induced apoptosis as compared to wild type sequence (Fig 3). It may be possible that NS5A ISDR interacts with host protein and blocks MG132-induced apoptosis.

NF-κB activation was blocked by either adenovirus-mediated overexpression of IκB0042α suppressor or pretreatment with MG132 in lung cancer cells [40]. NF-κB activation confers resistance to TNF-mediated apoptosis in hepatocytes, as TNF is one of the important cytokines for eradication of HCV from the liver [41]. HCV NS5A could play a role in the activation of NF-κB. In the present study, TNF expression was also suppressed in HepG2-NS5A cells, compared with HepG2 control cells (Table 2). These results are in agreement with the previous reports of HCV NS5A-transgenic animals [41]. NF-κB is also critical for the apoptosis of HCC and plays a role in the sensitivity to sorafenib [42]. Further studies will be needed for this issue.

Intracellular protein degradation is an important mechanism, which includes ubiquitin-proteasome and ubiquitin-independent proteasome pathways for the modulation of certain proteins and the elimination of damaged proteins. MG132 effectively blocks the proteolytic activity of the 26S proteasome complex [43]. It is evident that several viruses are able to manipulate the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway by redirecting the cellular ubiquitin machinery to
enable replication. Growing evidence suggests that ubiquitin-proteasome and ubiquitin-independent proteasome pathways are also involved in controlling the stability of HCV proteins such as core [43, 44], p7 [45], NS2 [46] and NS5A [47]. Of interest, it has been reported that, in the presence of HCV, STAT1 and STAT3 proteins were ubiquitinated and that the degradation was blocked by MG132 [48, 49]. HCV may inhibit interferon responses via proteasomal degradation of JAK/STAT pathway components [49]. It is possible that HCV NS5A may interact with intracellular protein degradation pathways [47]. Although proteasome inhibition elevates IκBα levels and leads to inhibition of NF-κB activity [50,51], we observed that HCV NS5A expression enhances phosphorylation of IκBα and liberates NF-κB for nuclear translocation in the present study (Fig 2D).

In conclusion, HCV NS5A enhances the phosphorylation of IκBα, which in turn enhances NF-κB-nuclear translocation and down-regulates MG132-induced apoptotic pathways in human hepatocytes. Together, the disruption of proteasome-associated apoptosis may play a role in the pathogenesis of HCV infection.

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Author Contributions
Conceived and designed the experiments: XJ TK. Performed the experiments: XJ SW TK. Analyzed the data: XJ SW TK. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: XJ TK SW SN MN RS YH TW HS OY. Wrote the paper: XJ TK SW SN MN RS YH TW HS OY.

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