Interferon (IFN) is an innate immune response protein that is involved in the antiviral response during viral infection. Treatment of acute viral infections with exogenous interferon may be effective but is generally not feasible for clinical use due to many factors, including cost, stability, and availability. To overcome these limitations, an adenovirus type 5-vected consensus alpha IFN, termed DEF201, was constructed as a potential way to deliver sustained therapeutic levels of systemic IFN. To demonstrate the efficacy of DEF201 against acute flaviviral disease, various concentrations of the construct were administered as a single intranasal dose prior to virus infection, which resulted in a dose-responsive, protective effect in a hamster model of yellow fever virus (YFV) disease. A DEF201 dose of \(5 \times 10^7\) PFU/animal administered intranasally just prior to YFV challenge protected 100% of the animals, while a 10-fold lower DEF201 dose exhibited lower, although significant, levels of protection. Virus titers in the liver and serum and levels of serum alanine aminotransferase were all significantly reduced as a result of DEF201 administration at all doses tested. No toxicity, as indicated by weight loss or gross morbidity, was observed in non-YFV-infected animals treated with DEF201. Protection of YFV-infected animals was observed when DEF201 was delivered as early as 7 days prior to virus challenge and as late as 2 days after virus challenge, demonstrating effective prophylaxis and therapy in a hamster model of disease. Overall, it appears that DEF201 is effective in the treatment of YFV in a hamster model.

Interferon, DEF201, in a Hamster Model

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Yellow fever virus (YFV) is a member of the flavivirus family endemic to tropical regions of Africa and South America, with reported imported cases outside this range (4). YFV causes a visceral disease, primarily targeting the liver and often involving hemorrhagic manifestations, which may result in lethality, with case fatality rates being up to 50% (33, 34). A highly effective vaccine is available, although it is underutilized in many countries with endemic YFV disease (25). No antivirals are approved for the treatment of YFV, and clinical management of disease involves only mitigation of symptoms.

YFV is susceptible to treatment with exogenous interferon (IFN) in cell culture (6, 7) and in animal models (3, 18, 24). Treatment with exogenous IFN has also been shown to be effective in other animal models of flaviviral disease, including disease caused by dengue virus (1), West Nile virus (26), St. Louis encephalitis virus (5), and Modoc virus (22), as well as in human disease cases (9, 14, 21). It has been shown that natural human alpha IFN (IFN-α) preparations are active in human and hamster cell cultures (13). There is also considerable evidence that consensus IFN-α (alfacon-1 IFN) is efficacious against herpesvirus infections in hamsters (12, 13).

IFN is a critical component of host antiviral response mechanisms. Some flaviviruses, such as YFV, evade the host innate immune response through various mechanisms, including activation of negative regulators, stimulation of suppressive cytokines (35), and blocking of interferon signal transduction (20, 23, 28). Therefore, timing and dose of IFN treatment are important. Generally, treatment with exogenous IFN is effective in animal models of flavivirus infection only when it is administered just prior to or shortly after virus challenge (18, 26, 27). In controlled trials with clinically diagnosed Japanese encephalitis virus infection, treatment with IFN alfa-2a was not effective in improving outcome (32). The majority of the patients in this study exhibited disease signs such as vomiting, convulsions, fever, and other symptoms at enrollment and prior to initiation of treatment. Efficacy of IFN treatment in animal models of viral disease is also associated with treatment initiation prior to the onset of disease signs.

IFN has a short half-life, which requires frequent (and expensive) treatment with bolus doses, which generally results in toxic side effects and often leads to patient-instigated cessation of treatment (11, 15). While IFN treatment has been shown to be effective against several flaviviruses in vitro and in vivo, the clinical use of IFN has been restricted during outbreaks of acute flavivirus infection because of high cost and need for repeated dosing. In contrast, an IFN drug which required only a single, inexpensive intranasal (i.n.) administration yet which produced a persistent IFN effect could have value as both a treatment and prophylactic in a yellow fever outbreak.

DEF201 is a replication-deficient adenovirus type 5 (Ad5) containing a gene for the production of human consensus IFN-α. After intranasal instillation of DEF201, the Ad5 vector infects (or enters) nasal epithelial cells, driving the expression of the IFN transgene. This transgene is then translated to produce IFN protein, which is secreted into the blood. The expression of mouse IFN using a similar construct resulted in

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systemic levels of protein several hours after infection (37). This article reports on the dose-dependent prophylactic and therapeutic efficacy of single-dose DEF201 in a hamster model of YFV disease.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Animals.** Female Syrian golden hamsters with an average weight of 100 g were used. After a 24-hour quarantine period and 7-day acclimation period, animals were randomly assigned to cages and individually marked with ear tags. All work with these animals was performed in the biosafety level 3 (BSL-3) area of the AAALAC-accredited Laboratory Animal Research Center (LARC) at Utah State University (USU). All animal study protocols were reviewed and approved by the Utah State University Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee.

**Test articles.** The adenovirus-vectored consensus interferon construct human DEF201 (hDEF201) was prepared at the Robert Fitzhenry Vector Laboratory (McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada). The methods of preparation have been described previously (37). Briefly, the human consensus alpha interferon gene was cloned into a replication-deficient Ad5 vector (deletions of E1 and E3 genes), amplified in 293 cells, and purified by cesium chloride gradient centrifugation. Stock solutions of DEF201 were provided at 6 × 10^6 PFU/ml and stored at −80°C. Frozen stocks were thawed on ice and diluted in saline to the appropriate dose just prior to a single administration. Ribavirin was provided by ICN Pharmaceuticals, Inc. (Costa Mesa, CA) and was also prepared in saline. Ribavirin was prepared just prior to initial administration and was stored at 4°C.

**Viruses.** The hamster-adapted Jimenez strain of YFV was obtained as a generous gift from Robert B. Tesh (University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX) and prepared as previously described (18).

**Experimental design for animal studies.** Hamsters were randomly assigned to groups of 10 to 15 compound-treated and 10 to 20 placebo-treated animals. Toxicity controls, consisting of 3 animals per group, were included to measure any apparent toxicity associated with treatment. Vector control (sham-infected, vector-treated) and healthy control (uninfected, untreated) animals were also included. Groups of 10 to 15 compound-treated and 10 to 20 placebo-treated animals.

**RESULTS**

**DEF201 dose-ranging study.** To determine the activity and effective dose of DEF201 in the hamster model of YFV, a single i.n. treatment of DEF201 was administered to hamsters 4 h prior to YFV challenge. Hamsters were treated with a single dose of DEF201 including 1 × 10^6, 5 × 10^5, 5 × 10^4, and 5 × 10^3 PFU/animal to titrate the effect of the DEF201 dose. The positive control, ribavirin, was included at a dose of 50 mg/kg/day given twice daily for 7 days.

Complete protection of hamsters was observed after a single i.n. treatment with the top two doses of 1 × 10^6 and 5 × 10^5 PFU of DEF201 (Fig. 1A). A dose response was seen, with some mortality occurring at lower doses. The lowest DEF201 doses of 5 × 10^4 and 5 × 10^3 protected 90 and 70% of treated hamsters, respectively, which was a significant (P < 0.001) improvement compared with the results achieved with placebo. The mortality curves was also delayed in groups treated with these lower doses of DEF201 (Fig. 1A), with a mean day to death (MDD) of 9 ± 1.0 in the 5 × 10^5-PFU DEF201 group compared with a MDD of 7.5 ± 1.4 in placebo (empty vector)-treated animals. Ribavirin at a dose of 50 mg/kg/day also significantly (P < 0.001) improved survival of infected hamsters, with protection of 90% of treated animals, but required 14 injections over 7 days.

Weight gain was observed in animals treated with DEF201, which increased at between 0 and 5 dpi and remained the same between 5 and 6 dpi, depending on the dose (Fig. 1B). A slightly significant increase (P < 0.05, compared with empty vector treatment) in weight was observed at DEF201 doses of 5 × 10^5 and 5 × 10^4, as well as in animals treated with ribavirin (Fig. 1B). The weight change at between 3 and 6 dpi was similar for all groups treated with DEF201 and did not appear to be dose responsive (data not shown).

ALT was measured in serum collected antemortem on 6 dpi from all animals surviving up to that time. The reduction in ALT levels appeared to be dose responsive in DEF201-treated animals, with the mean reduction in ALT level being highly significant (P < 0.001) compared with that achieved with empty vector treatment (Fig. 1C). ALT levels were uniformly reduced to the baseline in animals treated with the highest DEF201 dose and were similar to those in controls not infected with YFV (data not shown). Ribavirin treatment also significantly improved serum ALT levels (P < 0.001 compared with placebo).

Viremia and liver YFV titers were quantified by infectious cell culture assay of samples obtained at necropsy on 4 dpi. A significant reduction of YFV titers in both serum and liver was observed in animals treated with DEF201, as well as in ribavirin-treated animals (Fig. 1D). Treatment with the two highest doses of DEF201 reduced liver virus titers to below detectable limits of the assay, with increasing amounts of YFV in the liver being measured in samples obtained from animals treated with lower doses of DEF201 in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 1D). Liver virus titers were similar in animals treated with the lowest dose of 5 × 10^3 of DEF201 and in ribavirin-treated animals, although a few animals in this DEF201 dose group had titers below the level of detection (Fig. 1D). Viremia showed a similar pattern, with reductions in the animals treated with the two top DEF201 doses to below the levels of detection and increas-
ing numbers of animals with detectable viremia in the groups treated with lower doses of DEF201 and the ribavirin treatment group. Despite serum virus detection in some animals, all groups had a significant improvement in mean viremia compared with that for the placebo group (Fig. 1D).

Therapeutic treatment study. As YFV outbreaks occur randomly and unpredictably, it is important that effective antivirals have activity when they are administered after virus infection. To determine the therapeutic effect of DEF201, animals were treated at various times up to 4 dpi with a single i.n. DEF201 dose of $3.6 \times 10^7$ PFU/animal. DEF201 treatment initiated at 4 h was effective, resulting in 100% protection (Fig. 2A), which confirmed the results of the initial study. Initiation of treatment on 1 or 2 dpi also resulted in protection (100% and 90%, respectively), while treatment on 3 dpi was not protective compared with empty vector treatment, despite a slightly higher overall survival rate and a slight delay in the mortality curve (Fig. 2A). Ribavirin, administered i.p. twice daily for 7 days at a dose of 50 mg/kg/day, also significantly ($P < 0.001$) improved survival of YFV-infected hamsters.

Despite an overall weight loss at between 5 and 6 dpi in all treatment groups, a significant overall improvement in weight change at between 3 and 6 dpi was observed in animals treated beginning at 4 h ($P < 0.001$) and 1 and 2 dpi ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 2B). A trend toward improvement in mean weight change was observed in animals treated with DEF201 on 3 dpi compared to that for animals in the empty vector treatment group, although this improvement was not significant. Ribavirin also significantly improved weight change between 3 and 6 dpi ($P < 0.05$), although the overall percent weight change was similar to that of animals treated on 3 dpi with DEF201 (Fig. 2B). All

![Figure 1](http://aac.asm.org/)

**FIG. 1.** Effect of a single i.n. treatment with various doses of DEF201 on disease of hamsters infected with YFV. Ribavirin was included as a positive control and was administered i.p. b.i.d. for 7 days beginning at −4 h dpi at a dose of 75 mg/kg/day. Disease parameters include survival (A), percent weight change (B), serum ALT level on 6 dpi (C), and virus titer (quantified as CCID$_{50}$/g tissue or ml serum) in the liver and serum on 4 dpi (D). Dashed and solid gray lines in panel D, limits of detection of the liver and serum virus assays, respectively. ***, $P < 0.001$ compared with empty vector treatment; **, $P < 0.01$ compared with empty vector treatment; *, $P < 0.05$ compared with empty vector treatment.
treated animals gained weight at between 3 and 5 dpi, while empty vector control-treated animals lost weight during this time. All groups lost weight at between 5 and 6 days, regardless of treatment initiation time, although the degree was more severe in the group treated with empty vector (Fig. 2B).

Reduction of serum ALT levels occurred in a time-dependent manner, with earlier treatment time resulting in a reduction to baseline levels and an increasing delay resulting in higher levels of ALT (Fig. 2C). Interestingly, despite a high mortality rate and nonsignificance in improvements observed with other disease parameters, treatment with DEF201 on 3 dpi resulted in a significant ($P < 0.01$) reduction of the ALT level on 6 dpi (Fig. 2C). This indicates partial efficacy with treatment even at this later time point.

**Prophylactic efficacy study.** Prophylactic efficacy may also play a role in the prevention of yellow fever during an outbreak. To measure the effect of early administration, a dose of $3.6 \times 10^7$ PFU/ml of DEF201 was administered i.n. to hamsters at various times prior to i.p. challenge with YFV. Times of administration included −28, −21, −14, and −7 dpi, in addition to positive-control treatment with DEF201 at 4 h prior to virus challenge.

The effect of treatment with DEF201 administered at 4 h prior to virus challenge was similar to results obtained in the previous experiments in regard to survival (Fig. 3A). Single-dose administration of DEF201 on −7 dpi resulted in significant ($P < 0.001$) improvement of survival (Fig. 3A), with 90% survival of treated animals, which was similar to that achieved with treatment at −4 h or treatment with ribavirin for 7 days beginning at −4 h. Unfortunately, despite improvements in other disease parameters (described below), DEF201 did not significantly improve the survival of infected hamsters when it was administered at −14 dpi (Fig. 3A). Treatment at earlier time points of −21 or −28 dpi did not statistically improve any disease parameter, although there was a trend toward improvement of survival in animals treated at −28 dpi, which had a survival rate of 60%, compared with 20% survival for animals treated with the empty vector control (Fig. 3A). This is likely an artifact of model variability, as no other disease parameters were improved.

Treatment at −4 h showed a trend toward weight loss, which was not previously observed and which resulted in a nonsignificant improvement at between 3 and 6 dpi (Fig. 3B). Interestingly, despite the weight loss observed after treatment at −4 h, the weight change at between 3 and 6 dpi in animals treated on −7 dpi was significantly improved ($P < 0.001$) and similar to that seen in uninfected, toxicity controls. Trends in weight change also supported partial prophylactic protection after administration of DEF201 at −14 dpi, as weights increased at between 0 and 5 dpi, and despite a decline at between 5 and 6 dpi, a slightly significant ($P < 0.05$) improvement in weight change from 3 to 6 dpi compared with that with empty vector control treatment was observed (Fig. 3B).

Reduction of serum ALT levels to the baseline was observed in the −4 h as well as −7 dpi DEF201 treatment groups (Fig. 3C), which was consistent with survival data. Despite no protection against mortality, treatment administered on −14 dpi showed some indication of efficacy, as evidenced by a reduction in serum ALT levels on 6 dpi (Fig. 3C).

Ribavirin served as a suitable positive control. Treatment i.p.
with ribavirin administered twice a day (b.i.d.) for 7 days beginning 4 h before virus challenge resulted in protection from mortality, with a 90% survival rate (Fig. 3A). Ribavirin treatment also significantly ($P < 0.001$) improved weight change (Fig. 3B) and serum levels of ALT (Fig. 3C), which were similar to results from previous studies.

**DISCUSSION**

When it was administered as a single intranasal treatment at −4 h, DEF201 offered protection against death at all tested doses, with efficacy being similar to or greater than that of the positive control, ribavirin, which was given 14 times over a 7-day period. Similar results were seen after daily treatment for 7 days with consensus alfacon-1 IFN (Infergen), which also displayed a dose response at doses between 0.5 and 5 μg/kg/day (18). The antiviral effect depended on the amount of DEF201 administered. The production of a steady-state level of IFN may bypass the need for the regular bolus dosing associated with traditional IFN treatment. The present study demonstrates that i.n.-delivered DEF201 protects animals against an i.p. YFV challenge both prophylactically and as a treatment. It is apparent that therapeutic doses of interferon can be produced by a transient gene therapy approach, which ameliorates the liver disease associated with YFV infection, as evidenced by reduction of virus titers in the serum and liver. Treatment with DEF201 resulted in positive weight gain at between 3 and 5 dpi, which is likely due to the animals feeling well enough to eat and drink normally or prevention of weight loss through another mode of action. This improvement, however, was not equivalent to the weight gain in uninfected controls, which gained weight steadily at between 0 and 6 dpi.

A similar study was conducted using an intramuscularly delivered Ad5-vectored mouse interferon for the protection of mice from i.n. challenge with western equine encephalitis virus (WEEV) at 24 h after DEF201 treatment (37). Similar results were also seen in a mouse model of Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus (VEEV) infection, with 24 h pretreatment protecting against a lethal challenge (29). In addition, it has been demonstrated that the murine form of DEF201 has efficacy in a mouse model of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), as DEF201 provided complete survival benefit up to 14 days prior to lethal challenge (19). Taken together, use of *in situ* production and secretion of IFN by an Ad5-vectored human IFN gene appears to be an effective way to treat a broad spectrum of viral infections.

One potential concern associated with adenovirus-vectored gene therapy is the potential for adverse reactions in people with preexisting immunity to adenovirus as a result of natural infection, which is estimated to be the case for 30 to 70% of the human population, depending on serotype (16). Indeed, a recent study with an investigational human immunodeficiency virus vaccine vectored by adenovirus failed, which was thought to be mainly due to preexisting adenovirus immunity in trial participants (31, 36). Intranasal administration of DEF201, which has been shown to bypass many of the negative effects associated with preexisting immunity to adenovirus, was utilized in the present study (8). Future studies will investigate the effect of i.n. treatment with DEF201 in the presence of neutralizing antibody to adenovirus type 5. Another potential con-
cern is the development of antibody to IFN in treated animals. Anti-interferon antibodies have been detected in patients undergoing prolonged treatment with IFN. The reported percentage of patients who develop antibodies varies widely (0 to 95%), depending on dosages, treatment schedules, and method of testing (2, 10). With short-term therapy with DEF201, such as treatment of infection with an acute flavivirus such as YFV, it can be expected that antibody development would be lower, but it will certainly be monitored in future animal experiments and eventual clinical work. Importantly, it has been determined that when antibodies to exogenous interferon do develop, they do not preclude the activity of native interferon (2).

Treatment with DEF201 initiated at 1 or 2 dpi offered significant protection compared with that offered by the empty vector control, while initiation on 3 dpi did not result in a significant increase in survival in this study, although the serum ALT level was significantly improved and a trend toward improved survival and weight change was observed. This treatment window is similar to that observed with the administration of exogenous recombinant interferon, which was given daily for 7 days beginning at 3 dpi and which was found to be effective in significantly improving survival (J. Julander, unpublished results). This is of particular interest, because although there is a YFV vaccine currently available, it is poorly utilized, resulting in a need for treatment options.

After infection of hamsters with YFV, virus is detectable in the serum during the course of disease, while virus is found in the liver at as early as 3 dpi, with peak titers occurring at 4 dpi (18). Some serum chemistry profiles are significantly affected at 2 to 3 dpi, but the majority of important changes in blood chemistry occur later during the course of infection (5 to 7 dpi), just prior to death. It appears that treatment with DEF201 on 3 dpi, while improving ALT levels, may be too late to impact mortality, while treatment on 2 dpi was highly effective in improving survival and affecting other symptoms of disease.

Other models of acute viral infection have been used to demonstrate the efficacy of DEF201. Treatment at 6 h after virus challenge in a mouse model of WEEV infection resulted in significantly improved survival (37). While efficacy after prophylactic treatment was demonstrated in a model of VEEV infection, therapeutic efficacy was not observed with AdS-vectorized mouse IFN, where delay of treatment to 6 h after virus challenge did not protect mice from death (29). Finally, it has been demonstrated that when antibodies to exogenous interferon do develop, they do not preclude the activity of native interferon (2).

Thus, DEF201 illustrates antiviral efficacy similar to that of IFN protein in the YFV model, with the added benefits of a single dose versus repeated daily dosing and the potential for self-administration intranasally. These benefits, if they are extrapolated to a clinical setting, allow rapid prophylaxis of people entering a suspected YFV-infected area and its use as a postexposure prophylactic or treatment in an outbreak scenario, as it may be quickly and easily distributed to an at-risk population, such as medical chain workers. More broadly, given the efficacy profile of DEF201 shown here and that in WEE (37), VEE (29), and SARS (19) models, DEF201 has significant potential as a broad-spectrum, host-directed antiviral.

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