

SINGLE RECOMBINATION SYSTEM AND METHODS OF USE

The present invention relates to a single recombination system for the cloning of recombinant poxviruses by a single recombination event in a modified poxvirus vector. It further relates to the modified poxvirus vectors, uses thereof and a method for the production
5 of recombinant poxviruses.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Recently, significant effort has been invested in developing and improving recombinant poxvirus-based technologies. Poxvirus-based vectors have been identified as beneficial for a number of uses such as generating immune responses through vaccines, in the development of
10 new vaccine therapies, and use in gene therapy applications. The advantages associated with recombinant poxvirus vectors are well-known and include efficient delivery of genetic material to multiple cell types; generous levels of protein expression; and the ability to elicit cell-mediated immune responses in addition to antibody-based responses.

Poxviruses are well-known cytoplasmic viruses, thus any genetic material carried by such
15 viral vectors normally remains in the cytoplasm without the disadvantage of inadvertent integration into the host cell genome. Poxviruses can be readily genetically engineered to contain and express foreign genes that have been inserted into their genome using, for example, cloning techniques such as homologous recombination. These foreign genes can encode a wide range of proteins, such as antigens that induce protection against one or more infectious agents,
20 immune modulating proteins such as co-stimulatory molecules, or enzymatic proteins. For example, recombinant poxviruses have been engineered to express immunizing antigens of herpes virus, influenza, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

One of the main advantages of poxviruses as vectors is their large genome size, which permits the insertion of a large amount of heterologous genetic material including, for example,
25 multiple genes (i.e., as a multivalent vector). However, the heterologous genetic material must be inserted at an appropriate site within the pox genome for the recombinant virus to remain viable. Thus, the genetic material must be inserted at a site in the viral DNA which is non-essential.

A well-established approach for the cloning of recombinant poxviruses is based on two
30 separate recombination events. During the first recombination step, a gene of interest and a reporter and/or marker cassette are integrated into a viral genome. For the selection process, an

antibiotic resistance gene is commonly used. Following the subsequent isolation of recombinant poxviruses from the pool of recombinant and non-recombinant poxviruses using the selection/marker cassette, the selection and marker cassette should be deleted if the recombinant poxvirus is intended for use as, for example, a vaccine in humans. For this purpose, a second
5 recombination event must be performed involving further passaging and plaque purification of the recombinant poxvirus. Consequently, presently known techniques for cloning recombinant poxviruses are usually time-consuming and laborious endeavors, especially when compared to those procedures commonly used for the cloning of other types of recombinant expression vectors.

10 Accordingly, there is a need in the art for improved cloning systems and methods for the efficient generation of recombinant poxviruses.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is based on a modified poxvirus vector that allows for the generation of recombinant poxviruses by a single recombination event. The modified viral vector of the invention comprises a reporter gene that is deleted if a recombination with the insert of interest successfully occurs.

In a first aspect, the present invention is directed to a modified poxvirus vector comprising at least one reporter gene located between two flanking sequences for homologous recombination. In one embodiment, the modified poxvirus vector further comprises at least one selection component located between the two flanking regions for homologous recombination in a permissive host cell. In another embodiment, the selection component comprises a selection gene that inhibits or slows down poxvirus replication in the host cell or is cytotoxic to the host cell. In another embodiment, the reporter gene and the selection component are located between a single pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination. In yet another embodiment, the reporter gene and the selection component are located between more than one pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination. In a further embodiment, the selection component comprises a selection gene whose expression is inducible. In a specific embodiment, the reporter gene codes for a fluorescent protein, for example, green fluorescent protein. In a further specific embodiment, the selection component comprises a selection gene selected from a gene coding for a DNase, a RNase, or a protease. In a further specific embodiment, expression of the selection gene is under the control of a regulatory sequence, preferably a promoter. In another specific embodiment the selection gene is regulated by an inducible expression system, for example, the tetracycline operator/repressor (TetO2/TetR) system.

In another aspect, the present invention is directed to a recombinant poxvirus generated using a modified poxvirus vector of the present invention.

In another aspect, the present invention is directed to a host cell comprising a modified poxvirus vector of the present invention. In a further aspect, the present invention is directed to a host cell comprising a recombinant poxvirus generated using a modified poxvirus vector of the invention.

In a further aspect, the invention provides a method of using the modified poxvirus vector to generate a recombinant poxvirus. In another aspect, the present invention is directed to a method for the generation of a recombinant poxvirus that comprises infecting a permissive

host cell with a modified poxvirus vector according to the present invention, and subsequent transfection of the host cell with a plasmid comprising heterologous genetic material of interest, under conditions that permit homologous recombination between the vector and plasmid. In one embodiment, the method comprises inducing expression of the selection gene. In a further
5 embodiment, the method comprises separating host cells comprising the recombinant poxvirus from host cells comprising non-recombinant poxvirus. In a further embodiment, the method comprises using permissive host cells comprising the recombinant poxvirus for at least one further passage in previously uninfected permissive host cells.

10 In a further aspect, the present invention is directed to the use of the modified poxvirus vector according to the invention for the generation of a recombinant poxvirus.

In particular embodiments, the modified poxvirus vector according to the invention is a vaccinia virus. In a further particular embodiment, the modified poxvirus vector according to the invention is a Modified Vaccinia Ankara virus (MVA). In a further aspect, the present invention is directed to the modified poxvirus according to the invention, the recombinant
15 poxvirus according to the invention, and a cell according to the invention comprising the modified or recombinant poxvirus as a medicament. In specific embodiments the present invention is directed to the modified poxvirus according to the invention, the recombinant poxvirus according to the invention, and a cell according to the invention comprising the modified or recombinant poxvirus as a therapeutic or prophylactic vaccine for the treatment or
20 prevention of cancer, influenza, hepatitis, AIDS, mumps, rabies, encephalitis, stomach or duodenal ulcers, malaria, sleeping sickness, lyme disease, reactive arthritis, pneumonia, leprosy, diphtheria, candidiasis and/or toxoplasmosis. In a specific embodiment, the medicament is a therapeutic or prophylactic vaccine. In another specific embodiment, the medicament is a therapeutic or prophylactic vaccine for the treatment of cancer.

25 Other embodiments of the invention are provided by the detailed description, the Examples, and the appended claims.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates the reporter/selection cassette of an exemplary modified poxvirus vector according to the invention. The vector is based on the MVA genome (Gene Bank Accession # U94848; Antoine, G., Scheiflinger, F., Dorner, F. and Falkner, F.G. "The complete genomic sequence of the modified vaccinia Ankara strain: comparison with other orthopoxviruses", Virology 244 (2), 365-396 (1998)) into which the reporter/selection cassette was introduced into the insertion site (Deletion III). Flank1 Del3 = flanking sequences upstream of the Deletion III site of the MVA genome; Ps promoter = strong synthetic promoter; TetO2 = Tetracycline Operator (the binding site for TetR); TetR = Tetracycline Repressor; Flank2 Del3 = flanking sequences downstream of the deletion III site of the MVA genome.

FIG. 2 is a schematic representation of the process of homologous recombination in host cells permissive for the poxvirus. For a MVA poxvirus such host cells include, for example, chicken embryo fibroblasts (CEF). Following infection of cells with the modified poxvirus vector of the present invention, the cells are transfected with a plasmid that contains the genetic material of interest (e.g. LacZ) located between two flanking sequences for homologous recombination (Flank 1/2 Del3). A recombinant poxvirus is produced where the homologous flanks recombine resulting in incorporation of the genetic material of interest, and deletion of the reporter/selection cassette.

FIG. 3 provides a map of the exemplary plasmid (vEM07; SEQ ID NO: 1) used for inserting genetic material of interest into the MVA genome, as schematically shown in FIG. 2. LacZ = Bacterial gene coding for β -Galactosidase.

FIG. 4 schematically depicts the resulting fusion of the tetracycline operator (TetO2) to the DNase gene achieved by PCR.

FIG. 5 schematically depicts the resulting fusion of the Ps promoter to the TetO2-DNase fragment.

FIG. 6 shows a map of the standard recombination plasmid vEM11 used for cloning recombinant MVA.

FIG. 7 shows a map of the recombination plasmid vEM12. The Ps-TetO2-DNase cassette was cloned in the vEM11 plasmid via the SacI and SpeI restriction sites. BsdR = Blasticidine resistance gene.

FIG. 8 schematically depicts the fusion of the Ps promoter to the tetracycline repressor coding region (TetR).

FIG. 9 shows a map of the recombination plasmid vEM31. The Ps-TetR cassette was cloned in the vEM12 plasmid via the SacI and NheI enzymatic restriction sites.

5 FIG. 10 illustrates the effects of inducible DNase expression on MVA replication. CEF cells were infected with the recombinant MVA mEM07 (7.5 = 7.5 promoter), mEM06 (Ps = Ps promoter), mEM08 (H5 = H5 promoter) and incubated with media containing different concentrations of tetracycline (Tet 0 = no tetracycline; Tet 25 = 25 μ tetracycline per ml). As a control, CEF cells were infected with MVA empty vector (MVA). One set of samples were
10 subsequently transfected with vEM12 (MVA + DNase). After 48 hours of incubation at 37°C, 5% CO₂ cells were harvested and the virus titer was determined. CEF cells infected with MVA empty vector were also incubated with tetracycline (MVA + Tet). TCID₅₀= Tissue Culture Infectious Dose 50.

FIG. 11 depicts the resulting PCR analysis of the Deletion III site. The insertion site for
15 foreign genes in the MVA genome (deletion 3) was investigated using PCR.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention is based on a modified vector derived from a poxvirus that permits the generation of recombinant poxviruses by means of a single recombination event. The modified viral vector of the invention comprises a reporter gene that is deleted if a recombination with the insert of interest successfully takes place. Thus, the modified viral vector of the present invention provides for the detection of a single recombination event which simultaneously deletes the reporter/selection cassette and inserts the heterologous genetic material of interest in the recombinant viral vector.

Definitions

The term “vector” as used herein means any genome or part or fragment thereof of a poxvirus that contains sufficient genetic information to allow reproduction of the poxvirus in a permissive host cell. The vector according to the present invention can be a genetically engineered vector, such that it may only contain part or all of the elements of the poxvirus it is derived from, and/or additional genetic elements. In a specific embodiment, the vector according to the present invention is the genome or part or fragment thereof of the Modified Vaccinia Ankara (MVA) virus. In further specific embodiments, the vector according to the present invention is the genome or part thereof of an MVA virus selected from the group consisting of MVA-F6 (e.g. Lotz *et al.* “Partial tyrosinase-specific self tolerance by HLA-A*0201-restricted cytotoxic T lymphocytes in mice and man”, Intern. J. of Cancer 2003; 108 (4): 571-79), MVA575 (ECACC deposit number V00120707), MVA-M4 (Ober *et al.* “Immunogenicity and safety of defective Vaccinia virus lister: Comparison with modified Vaccinia virus Ankara”, J. Virol 2002; 76 (15): 7713-23), Acam3000 (Accession number AY603355), MVA-ATCC (ATCC VR-1508), MVATGN33.1 (Accession number EF675191), MVA-I721 (Accession number DQ983236).

In another embodiment of the invention, the vector according to the present invention is the genome or part thereof of a poxvirus selected from the group consisting of Vaccinia virus Western Reserve (Accession number NC006998), Vaccinia virus Wyeth (e.g. Fogg *et al.* “Virus induced by Vaccination with multiple recombinant outer membrane proteins of intracellular and extracellular virions”, J. Virol. 2004; 78 (19): 10230-37), Vaccinia virus Lister (Accession number DQ191324), NYCBH (New York City Board of Health); CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Vaccinia (smallpox) vaccine recommendations of the Immunization Practices Advisory Committee (ACIP), *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 40(R14): 1–10, 1991.), Canary

pox (Accession number 005309 and AY318871), Fowlpox (Accession number 581527), Vaccinia virus Copenhagen (Accession number M35027) NYVAC, ALVAC, TROVAC (Paoletti *et al.* "Highly attenuated poxvirus vectors: NYVAC, ALVAC, TROVAC", Dev. Biol. Stand. 1995, 84: 159-63).

5 The term "reporter gene" as used herein means a gene conferring certain characteristics on cells or organisms expressing them which can be readily detected, identified or measured. Reporter genes are commonly used to determine whether a gene of interest has been incorporated or is expressed by a cell or organism population. In the context of the present invention, detection of the expression product from the reporter gene indicates that no
10 homologous recombination has occurred, and that the gene insert of interest has not been successfully inserted into the viral vector. Generally, any reporter gene can be used that permits a separation of cells comprising the original vector of the invention and those cells comprising a vector where homologous recombination has occurred. Non-limiting examples of reporter genes that are suitable for use in the present invention include reporter genes that can induce
15 visually identifiable characteristics (e.g. involving fluorescence), which enables separation by, for example, FACS and luminescent proteins such as the gene coding for jellyfish green fluorescent protein (GFP), the gene coding for the enhanced GFP (eGFP), mPlum, mCherry, tdTomato, mStrawberry, mRaspberry, mRFP1, mTangerine, mYFP (Tsien), J-Red, AceGFP, CopGFP, HcRed-tandem, PhiYFP (Evrogen), DsRed, DsRed2, DsRed-Express, DsRed-monomer,
20 EGFPAcGFP1, AmCyan1, AsRed2, EBFP, HcRed1, ZsYellow1 (Clontech), mKO, Azami-Green, mAG, Kaede, MiCy (MBL Intl.), Venus (Miyawaki), Ypet, CyPer (Dougherty), EYFP, Emerald (Invitrogen), Cerulean (Priston), T-Sapphire (Griesbeck), AQ143 (Lukyanov), cOFp (Stratagene), eqFP611 (Weidenmann), Renilla GFPs (various providers, e.g. Stratagene), the luciferase gene or the lacZ gene. In one embodiment of the invention, the reporter gene is a
25 fluorescence coding gene.

Further non-limiting examples of reporter genes include genes coding for proteins for which specific antibodies exist and that are displayed on the surface on the host cell. Such reporter genes permit the separation of cells comprising the original vector of the invention and cells comprising a vector in which homologous recombination has taken place by affinity
30 purification, for example, by columns comprising antibody covered resin or magnetic beads covered with said antibodies, wherein the antibodies are specific for the protein encoded by the reporter gene. In a specific embodiment, the reporter gene codes for a fusion gene of a cell surface receptor and an affinity tag so that the affinity tag is displayed on the cell surface. The

skilled person is aware of a variety of affinity tags and corresponding ligands that are commonly used. In further specific embodiments, the gene codes for a fusion gene of a cell surface receptor and the fused affinity tag is selected from the group consisting of a FLAG-tag (N-DYKDDDDK-C), an epitope tag, the V5-tag, the c-myc-tag, the His-tag and/or the HA-tag. In
5 a further embodiment, the reporter gene codes for a small viral surface protein selected from the group consisting of Alphavirus E1 and E2, Flavivirus E1 and E2, Coronavirus S, HE, M and E, Arterivirus GP, Rhabdovirus G, Filovirus GP, Paramyxovirus F, HN, H and G, Orthomyxovirus M2, NA, HA and HEF, Bunyavirus Gn and Gc, Arenavirus GP, Bornavirus G, Retrovirus Env, Hepadnavirus S, M and L.

10 The term “selection component” as used herein refers to any nucleic acid that may be utilized to exert a selection pressure on a host cell comprising such a selection component. In one embodiment, selection pressure is exerted by expression of a selection gene that inhibits or retards virus replication in the host cell. In another embodiment, selection pressure is exerted by expression of a selection gene that leads to a dying off of the host cell. In one embodiment, the
15 selection component comprises at least one selection gene whose expression is inducible. In a specific embodiment, the induction of the expression is controlled by means of regulatory sequences, for example, a promoter. In a further embodiment, the selection component further comprises a bacterial inducible system that regulates expression of the selection gene. In one specific embodiment, the bacterial inducible system features the selection gene under the control
20 of a promoter that is fused to a repressor binding site, wherein the selection component further comprises a gene coding for a repressor that binds to the repressor binding site. In a further specific embodiment, the repressor binding site is the tetracycline repressor binding site/operator (TetO2) and the gene coding for a repressor is the tetracycline repressor gene (TetR), which can be isolated from the pcDNA6TR plasmid (available from Invitrogen). In
25 further embodiments, the selection component further comprises a mammalian inducible system that regulates the expression of the selection gene. In a specific embodiment, the mammalian inducible system is the RheoSwitch (New England Biolabs) system. In further specific embodiments, the inducible system is selected from the group consisting of the LentiX system (Clontech), the Q-mate system (Krackeler Scientific, Inc.), the Cumate-inducible expression
30 system (NRC Canada), and/or the Genostat system (Upstate).

In a further embodiment of the invention, the selection gene is a cytotoxic gene. The term “cytotoxic gene” as used herein refers to any gene that, upon expression, will lead to the loss or complete apoptosis of the host cell, wherein said loss or apoptosis of the host cell is

caused by the expressed gene product itself and only involves the direct interactions between the expressed gene product and naturally occurring components of the host cell (e.g. the host cell's DNA, RNA, proteosome, membranes or metabolites). In specific embodiments, the cytotoxic gene codes for a DNase (e.g. available from Invitrogen; ORF clone pENTR221, clone ID IOH23149), an RNase, a protease, an ion channel, or an apoptosis inducer, such as caspase and/or ROS.

The term "insert" or "insert of interest" as used herein refers to any nucleic acid that is to be introduced into the vector of the invention by homologous recombination. In one embodiment, the insert comprises at least one heterologous gene flanked by flanking sequences that allow homologous recombination to take place with the vector of the invention. In a specific embodiment of the invention, at least one heterologous gene is under the control of a regulatory sequence, preferably a promoter.

An example of an insert of interest is depicted in FIG. 2. Here, the insert is comprised of the plasmid vector that is used to transfect the host cell and comprises the two flanking regions and the LacZ gene under control of the lac promoter. In a specific embodiment, the heterologous gene codes for at least one antigen, preferably an antigen that is capable of inducing an immune response in a patient. In specific embodiments, the heterologous gene codes for an antigen selected from the group consisting of an antigen of a heterologous virus, an antigen of a bacterium, an antigen of a prokaryote, an antigen of a fungus, and/or an antigen of a helminth. In particular embodiments, the heterologous gene codes for an antigen of a species selected from the group consisting of Influenza virus A, B, C, Hepatitis virus A, B, C, E, Human Immunodeficiency virus, Rubella virus, Mumps virus, Rabies virus, Human papilloma virus, Epstein Barr virus, Tickborne virus, Crimean Kongo Fever virus, Ebola virus, Nipah virus, Dengue virus, Chikungunya virus, Enterovirus, West Nile virus, Rift Valley Fever virus, Japanese encephalitis virus, Hantavirus, Rotavirus, SARS Coronavirus, New emerging viruses, Chlamydia trachomatis, Clostridium botulinum, Clostridium tetani, Bacillus anthracis, Legionella pneumophila, Neisseria meningitidis (Menigococcus), Yersinia pestis, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, Mycobacterium leprae, Salmonella typhi, Listeria monocytogenes, Vibrio cholerae, Haemophilus influenzae, Bordetella pertussis, Helicobacter pylori, Borrelia spp. (recurrentis, hispanica, parkeri, burgdorferi), Leptospira interrogans, Rickettsia spp., Coxiella burnettii, Mycoplasma pneumonia, Corynebacterium diphtheriae, Treponema pallidum, Plasmodium falciparum, Plasmodium vivax, Plasmodium ovale, Plasmodium malariae, Entamoeba histolytica, Giardia intestinalis, Trypanosoma brucei, Leishmania spp., Histoplasma capsulatum, Aspergillus

spp., *Candida albicans*, *Cryptococcus neoformans*, *Pneumocystis carinii*, *Wuchereria bancrofti*, *Schistosoma mansoni* and/or *Toxoplasma gondii*.

In a further specific embodiment, the heterologous gene codes for at least one antigen that induces a protective or therapeutic immune response against infectious diseases (e.g. viral and bacterial surface proteins) or against cancer cells, for example, cells of cervical carcinoma, melanoma, multiple myeloma, breast cancer, prostate cancer, follicular B-cell non-Hodgkins lymphoma and/or kidney cancer.

Vectors of the present invention

In a first aspect, the present invention relates to a modified poxvirus vector comprising at least one reporter gene located between two flanking sequences for homologous recombination. The reporter gene may be replaced by an insert of interest through homologous recombination in a host cell infected with the modified poxvirus vector. Therefore, host cells comprising a modified poxvirus vector of the present invention, in which homologous recombination has taken place, can be distinguished from those host cells comprising a modified poxvirus vector where such a homologous recombination has not taken place. This can be accomplished by means of detecting the protein coded for by the reporter gene. For example, if the reporter gene encodes the GFP or the azami green protein, then host cells comprising a modified poxvirus vector of the present invention in which homologous recombination has taken place will not produce the GFP or azami green protein, because the genetic information for the GFP or azami green protein has been removed from the vector by the homologous recombination event and has been replaced with the insert of interest. Accordingly, such host cells will not display fluorescence upon excitation and can, for example, be separated from those cells that do fluoresce by fluorescence activated cell sorting (FACS).

In one embodiment, the reporter gene is under the control of a promoter, preferably a virus promoter, more preferably a vaccinia virus promoter or a synthetic promoter. In another embodiment, the promoter is a strong promoter, preferably a strong synthetic promoter. In a specific embodiment, the promoter is the Ps promoter having the sequence AAAAATTGAAATTTTATTTTATTTTGGGAATATAAATA (Sekhar Chakrabarti, Jerry R. Sisler and Bernard Moss: Compact, synthetic, Vaccinia Virus Early/Late Promoter for Protein Expression. *Biotechniques* 23:1094-1097, 1997). In another specific embodiment the promoter is the modified H5 promoter having the sequence AAAAAATGAAAATAAATACAAAGGTT

CTTGAGGGTTGTGTTAAATTGAAAGCGAGAAATAATCATAAATT; Rosel JL, Earl PL, Weir JP, Moss B, "Conserved TAAATG sequence at the transcriptional and translational initiation sites of vaccinia virus late genes deduced by structural and functional analysis of the HindIII H genome fragment", J. Virol. 60 (2): 236-249, 1986).

5 In a further embodiment, the reporter gene encodes a fluorescent protein. "Empty" vectors (i.e., vectors in which no recombination events have taken place) express the reporter gene, and therefore cells comprising such vectors can fluoresce. Homologous recombination in a permissive cell leads to deletion of the reporter gene, and the procedure results in recombinant vectors containing the insert of interest that do not cause fluorescence in the host cell. In
10 specific embodiments, the fluorescent protein is GFP, enhanced GFP (eGFP), or the azami green protein (available from MBL International Inc., Woburn, Massachusetts, USA and distributed by MoBiTec GmbH, Goettingen, Germany).

In a further aspect, the vector of the present invention further comprises at least one selection component that is similarly located between the two flanking sequences for
15 homologous recombination. In one embodiment, the reporter gene and the selection component are located between more than one pairs of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination. In another embodiment, the selection component comprises a selection gene whose expression is inducible. In a further embodiment, the selection component further comprises a bacterial inducible system that regulates expression of the selection gene. In one
20 specific embodiment, the bacterial inducible system features the selection gene under the control of a promoter that is fused to a repressor binding site, wherein the selection component further comprises a gene coding for a repressor that binds to the repressor binding site. In a further specific embodiment, the repressor binding site is the tetracycline repressor binding site/operator (TetO2) and the gene coding for a repressor is the tetracycline repressor gene
25 (TetR), which can be isolated from the pcDNA6TR plasmid (available from Invitrogen). Upon transfection of the host cell, the repressor is expressed in the cell and binds to the repressor binding site of the selection component upstream to the selection gene to thereby suppress expression of the selection gene. Once tetracycline is added to the system, it binds to the tetracycline repressor and immediately detaches from the binding site on the DNA which, in
30 turn, leads to the expression of the selection gene. Consequently, expression of the selection gene is dependent on the addition of tetracycline and, therefore, expression of the selection gene is rendered inducible. In a further embodiment, the promoter that controls expression of the selection gene and the gene coding for the repressor, is a virus promoter, a vaccinia virus

promoter or, most preferably, a strong synthetic promoter, such as the Ps promoter or the modified H5 promoter.

In a further embodiment of the invention, the selection component comprises a selection gene that, upon expression, inhibits or retards virus replication in the host cell. If the selection gene is induced, this allows for an improved selection of viruses comprising the vector of the invention where homologous recombination has taken place, and the selection component and the reporter gene have been replaced with the insert of interest. Consequently, host cells comprising a vector in which homologous recombination has taken place, harbor more replicated recombinant viruses than those where no homologous recombination has taken place. Furthermore, the inhibitor of viral replication is expressed, leading to a decreased or even complete prohibition of viral replication. Thus, the ratio of produced viruses comprising a genome including the insert of interest to those viruses comprising the genome without said insert of interest is significantly shifted in favor of the former. Accordingly, as a percentage, the system can be manipulated to generate an improved yield of viruses comprising the insert of interest. In particular embodiments, the selection gene is an RNase, an ion channel or, a DNase (available from Invitrogen; ORF clone pENTR221, clone ID IOH23149).

In a further embodiment of the invention, the selection component is a cytotoxic gene, i.e. any gene that, upon expression, will lead to the loss or complete apoptosis of the host cell. In specific embodiments, the cytotoxic gene codes for a DNase, an RNase, a protease, an ion channel, or an apoptosis inducer.

According to the invention, the selection component is an optional embodiment of the invention, since host cells harboring a recombinant vector of the invention comprising the insert of interest can be selected and isolated by means of the reporter gene alone. While the reporter gene is essential for the detection and/or selection of such a recombinant vector, the optional inducible expression of the selection component can be used for, for example, single or multiple passages of vector production.

In particular embodiments, the selection component may, for example, significantly accelerate the generation of recombinant poxviruses comprising the insert of interest, as host cells not harboring a recombinant vector of the invention comprising said insert are directed to produce less or no viruses (or are killed entirely) upon induction of the selection component. In this case, the recombinant vectors of the invention, containing a reporter gene and a selection component result in fluorescence expressing "empty" vectors sensitive against tetracycline and

the tetracycline-insensitive recombinant vectors devoid of any fluorescence. In other words, only cells containing empty vector exhibit fluorescence and thus the non-recombinants can be separated by techniques including plaque picking or FACS sorting. If the expression of the selection component is induced beforehand, the separation can be carried out in a significantly improved manner, since the number of cells harboring “empty” vectors is dramatically and beneficially reduced prior to separation.

In further embodiments of the present invention, flanking regions permit homologous recombination. Homologous recombination generally involves the alignment of similar sequences, formation of a Holliday junction, and breaking and repair (known as resolution) of the nucleic acid resulting in an exchange of material between the strands of the nucleic acids. Therefore, any flanking regions that are similar enough to allow for homologous recombination are encompassed by the present invention. In a specific embodiment, the flanking regions are identical. In a further specific embodiment, the flanking regions have a size of 50 to 1000 bp, preferably they have a size of 100 to 1000 bp.

In particular embodiments, the flanking regions of the recombinant poxvirus vector are flanking regions upstream and downstream of a deletion site of the MVA genome. In a specific embodiment, the flanking regions are flanking regions 50 to 1000 bp, preferably 100 to 1000 bp, upstream and downstream of Deletion sites I, II, III, IV, V, or VI of the MVA genome (MVA genome position: Del I: 7608/7609, Del II: 20718/20719; Del III: 149341/149342; Del IV: 170480; Del V: 19754/19755; Del VI 9831/9832). SEQ ID NOs: 2–7 show the flanking regions of Deletion sites I–VI, respectively, centered around the Deletion site that may be used according to the present invention. As an example, SEQ ID NO: 2 is a sequence of 2002 bp, centered around Deletion site I of the MVA genome (position 7608/7609). Thus, positions 1001/1002 of SEQ ID NO: 2 correspond to positions 7608/7609 of the MVA genome. Accordingly, the flanking regions in one specific embodiment of the invention are 50 to 1000 bp upstream of position 1001 of SEQ ID NO: 2 and 50 to 1000 bp downstream of position 1002 of SEQ ID NO: 2.

In another specific embodiment, the flanking regions of the recombinant poxvirus vector are selected in a way that the insertion site will be positioned within a non-coding region of the poxvirus. Non-coding regions of poxviruses vary in length and may comprise from around 100 to more than 1000 bp. Each of the nucleotides of such a non-coding region may be selected as insertion site. The flanking regions according to the inventions are 50 to 1000 bp, preferably 100

to 1000 bp, upstream and downstream of this selected insertion site located within a non-coding region. If, for example, the non-coding region has a length of 1000 bp and the insertion site would be selected to be between positions 500 and 501 than the flanking regions according to the invention would be 50 to 1000 bp upstream from position 500 and 50 to 1000 bp downstream to position 501. In specific embodiments, the non-coding region is a non-coding region of MVA. In further specific embodiments, the non-coding region is the nucleotide sequence between any of the following genes of MVA (Gen Bank Accession # U94848): 001L-002L, 002L-003L, 005R-006L, 006L-007R, 007R-008L, 017L-018L, 018L-019L, 020L-021L, 023L-024L, 024L-025L, 025L-026L, 028R-029L, 030L-031L, 031L-032L, 032L-033L, 035L-036L, 036L-037L, 037L-038L, 039L-042L, 043L-044L, 044L-045L, 046L-047L, 049L-050L, 050L-051L, 051L-052L, 052R-053R, 053R-054R, 054R-055R, 055R-056L, 056L-057R, 061L-062L, 064L-065L, 065L-066L, 066L-067L, 077L-078R, 078R-079L, 080R-081L, 085R-086R, 086R-087R, 088R-089L, 089L-090R, 094L-095R, 096R-097R, 097R-098R, 101R-102R, 103R-104R, 105L-106R, 108L-109L, 109L-110L, 110L-111L, 113L-114L, 114L-115L, 115L-116R, 117L-118L, 118L-119R, 123L-124L, 124L-125L, 125L-126L, 133R-134R, 134R-135R, 137L-138L, 141L-142R, 143L-144R, 144R-145R, 145R-146R, 146R-147R, 147R-148R, 148R-149L, 152R-153L, 153L-154R, 154R-155R, 156R-157L, 157L-158R, 159R-160L, 160L-161R, 161R-162R, 165R-166R, 166R-167R, 170R-173R, 173R-174R, 174R-175R, 175R-176R, 176R-177R, 178R-179R, 179R-180R, 180R-181R, 183R-184R, 184R-185L, 185L-186R, 186R-187R, 187R-188R and/or 188R-189R.

In another specific embodiment, the flanking regions of the recombinant poxvirus vector are selected in a way that the insertion site will be positioned within a non-essential gene of the poxvirus. A gene is considered to be a non-essential gene if it is not required for the productive replication of a given poxvirus. In specific embodiments, the non-essential gene is selected from the group consisting of the Thymidine kinase gene (= Tk; Scheiflinger F. *et al.* "Evaluation of the thymidine kinase (tk) locus as an insertion site in the highly attenuated vaccinia MVA strain", Arch. Virol. 1996, 141(3-4): 663-9.), the hemagglutinin gene (= HA; Antoine G. *et al.* "Characterization of the vaccinia MVA hemagglutinin gene locus and its evaluation as an insertion site for foreign genes", Gene, 1996 Oct 24; 177(1-2): 43-6), the I4L coded ribonucleotide reductase (Howley PM *et al.* "A Vaccinia Virus transfer vector using a GUS reporter gene inserted into the I4L locus", Gene, 1996 Jun 26; 172(2): 233-7), the E3L (Langland JO & Jacobs BL, "The role of the PKR-inhibitory genes, E3L and K3L, in determining vaccinia virus host range", Virology, 2002 Jul 20; 299(1): 133-41), the K1L (Staib C. *et al.* "Recombinant

MVA and method for generation thereof" EP1594970, 2005 November 16) and the ATI gene (Wintersperger S. *et al.* "Vector for integration of heterologous sequences into poxviral genomes", 2002 Feb 20). In further specific embodiments, the non-essential gene is a gene from MVA and selected from 032L (Ribonucleotide reductase), 137L (function not known), 166R (Guanylate kinase fragment), 170 (function not known), 188R (function not known) and 189R (function not known).

In another embodiment of the invention, the poxvirus is a vaccinia virus. In a further embodiment, the poxvirus is MVA.

In a further aspect, the invention relates to a cell harboring the modified poxvirus vector of the present invention. Generally, every cell that is permissive for receiving the modified poxvirus vectors of the present invention is encompassed. Preferably, the cell is a eukaryotic cell. In a particular embodiment, the cell is a mammalian or an avian cell. In a specific embodiment, the cell is a chick embryo fibroblast (CEF) cell. In a further embodiment, the cell is an isolated human cell.

In a further aspect the invention is directed to the novel plasmids and vectors used for the generation of the modified poxvirus vector according to the invention. The present invention thus also encompasses a nucleic acid or its complement selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 15-23 or a fragment or homologous nucleic acid thereto that shares at least 40%, 50%, 55%, 60%, 65%, 70%, 75%, 80%, 95%, 90%, 91 %, 92%, 93%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, 98.5%, 99%, 99.5%, 99.7%, 99.8%, 99.9% sequence identity, wherein the fragment has a length of at least 40%, 50%, 55%, 60%, 65%, 70%, 75%, 80%, 95%, 90%, 91 %, 92%, 93%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, 98.5%, 99%, 99.5%, 99.7%, 99.8%, 99.9% of the respective nucleic acid selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 15-23.

Methods of the present invention

In a further aspect, the invention is directed to a method for generating a recombinant poxvirus, wherein a host cell permissible for the modified poxvirus vector of the present invention is transfected with said vector, and furthermore with a plasmid comprising heterologous genetic material of interest under conditions permitting homologous recombination between the vector and the plasmid within the host cell. Necessarily, both the modified poxvirus vector and the plasmid comprise flanking sequences that are similar enough to allow for such homologous recombination to occur. Furthermore, the modified poxvirus

vector carries the reporter gene and in certain embodiments the selection component as described above between said flanking regions, while the plasmid carries the heterologous genetic material of interest between said flanking regions. Accordingly, homologous recombination between the modified poxvirus vector and the plasmid produces a recombinant vector of the invention through replacement of the reporter gene (and the selection component, if present) by the heterologous genetic material of interest.

In certain embodiments, the method utilizes a modified poxvirus vector of the invention comprising a selection component, and further comprises the additional step of inducing expression of the selection gene in the host cell. The induction of selection gene expression depends on the inducible selection component that is employed. As an example and in a specific embodiment, the selection component comprises a selection gene that encodes the DNase protein which is expressed under the regulatory control of the bacterial inducible tetracycline repressor binding site/operator (TetO2) as described above. Induction is carried out by the addition of tetracycline, which binds to the tetracycline repressor that immediately detaches from the binding site on the DNA and, this in turn allows expression of the DNase that inhibits virus replication. This induction results in a desirable selection of host cells comprising recombinant vector relative to host cells comprising modified poxvirus vector that does not comprise the gene insert of interest.

In a further embodiment, the method of the invention further comprises an additional step of separating host cells comprising the recombinant vector from those host cells comprising non-recombinant modified poxvirus vector. In a particular embodiment, this separation is carried out by means of the gene product of the expressed reporter gene. In one embodiment, the reporter gene codes for a fluorescent protein and the separation is carried out by means of FACS and an attached cell sorter. In another embodiment, the reporter gene is an arbitrary protein that is expressed on the cell surface and to which an antibody exists. Separation is then achieved by coating magnetic beads with said antibodies and contacting the cells with said magnetic beads in order to separate the two cell populations. In another embodiment, the antibodies are attached to a resin and used in a column to separate the two cell populations.

In yet another embodiment, the separated host cells comprising the recombinant vector are used for at least one additional passage on fresh host cells. Accordingly, the number of cells harboring recombinant vector, and thus the number of generated recombinant poxvirus particles, is significantly increased. In particular embodiments, at least 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10

further passages of the recombinant poxvirus are carried out. In a specific embodiment, 6 further passages of the recombinant poxvirus are carried out. In a further embodiment, the method includes the step of inducing expression of the selection gene.

In a further embodiment of the method of the present invention, the poxvirus is vaccinia
5 virus or MVA.

The generated recombinant poxviruses can be isolated using any suitable technique known to the average skilled person, for example, by means of centrifugation.

Medical uses of the present invention

10 In a further aspect, the present invention is directed to the modified poxvirus according to the invention, the recombinant poxvirus according to the invention, or a cell comprising the modified or recombinant poxvirus according to the invention for use as a medicament. In a specific embodiment, the medicaments of the instant invention are advantageous for use as a therapeutic or prophylactic vaccine.

15 In another embodiment, the present invention is directed to the modified poxvirus according to the invention, the recombinant poxvirus according to the invention, or a cell comprising the modified or recombinant poxvirus according to the invention for use as a medicament for the treatment and/or prevention of an infection in a species selected from the group consisting of Influenza virus A, B, C, Hepatitis virus A, B, C, E, Human
20 Immunodeficiency virus, Rubella virus, Mumps virus, Rabies virus, Human papilloma virus, Epstein Barr virus, Tickborne virus, Crimean Kongo Fever virus, Ebola virus, Nipah virus, Dengue virus, Chikungunya virus, Enterovirus, West Nile virus, Rift Valley Fever virus, Japanese encephalitis virus, Hantavirus, Rotavirus, SARS Coronavirus, Emerging viruses, Chlamydia trachomatis, Clostridium botulinum, Clostridium tetani, Bacillus anthracis, Legionella
25 pneumophila, Neisseria meningitidis (Menigococcus), Yersinia pestis, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, Mycobacterium leprae, Salmonella typhi, Listeria monocytogenes, Vibrio cholerae, Haemophilus influenzae, Bordetella pertussis, Helicobacter pylori, Borrelia spp. (recurrentis, hispanica, parkeri, burgdorferi), Leptospira interrogans, Rickettsia spp., Coxiella burnettii, Mycoplasma pneumonia, Corynebacterium diphtheriae, Treponema pallidum, Plasmodium
30 falciparum, Plasmodium vivax, Plasmodium ovale, Plasmodium malariae, Entamoeba histolytica, Giardia intestinalis, Trypanosoma brucei, Leishmania spp., Histoplasma capsulatum, Aspergillus spp., Candida albicans, Cryptococcus neoformans, Pneumocystis carinii, Wuchereria bancrofti,

Schistosoma mansoni and/or Toxoplasma gondii. In further specific embodiments, the medicament is used for the treatment of a disease or the symptoms caused by any of these species. In particular embodiments, this disease is influenza, hepatitis, AIDS, mumps, rabies, encephalitis, stomach or duodenal ulcers, malaria, sleeping sickness, Lyme disease, reactive arthritis, pneumonia, leprosy, diphtheria, candidiasis and/or toxoplasmosis.

In a further embodiment, the present invention is directed to the modified poxvirus according to the invention, the recombinant poxvirus according to the invention, or a cell comprising the modified or recombinant poxvirus according to the invention for use as a medicament for the treatment and/or prevention of cancer. In specific embodiments, the cancer is selected from the group consisting of cervical carcinoma, melanoma, multiple myeloma, breast cancer, prostate cancer, follicular B-cell non-Hodgkins lymphoma and/or kidney cancer.

In one embodiment of the invention, the medicament is used to treat a patient in need of a vaccination. In another embodiment of the invention, the recombinant poxvirus of the invention or the cell comprising said recombinant poxvirus comprises at least one gene coding for an antigen that is capable of inducing an immune response in a patient requiring a vaccination. In specific embodiments, the antigen is selected from the group consisting of an antigen of a heterologous virus, an antigen of a bacterium, an antigen of a prokaryote, an antigen of a fungus, and/or an antigen of a helminth. In particular embodiments, the antigen is an antigen of a species selected from the group consisting of Influenza virus A, B, C, Hepatitis virus A, B, C, E, Human Immunodeficiency virus, Rubella virus, Mumps virus, Rabies virus, Human papilloma virus, Epstein Barr virus, Tickborne virus, Crimean Kongo Fever virus, Ebola virus, Nipah virus, Dengue virus, Chikungunya virus, Enterovirus, West Nile virus, Rift Valley Fever virus, Japanese encephalitis virus, Hantavirus, Rotavirus, SARS Coronavirus, Emerging viruses, Chlamydia trachomatis, Clostridium botulinum, Clostridium tetani, Bacillus anthracis, Legionella pneumophila, Neisseria meningitidis (Menigococcus), Yersinia pestis, Mycobacterium tuberculosis, Mycobacterium leprae, Salmonella typhi, Listeria monocytogenes, Vibrio cholerae, Haemophilus influenzae, Bordetella pertussis, Helicobacter pylori, Borrelia spp. (recurrentis, hispanica, parkeri, burgdorferi), Leptospira interrogans, Rickettsia spp., Coxiella burnettii, Mycoplasma pneumonia, Corynebacterium diphtheriae, Treponema pallidum, Plasmodium falciparum, Plasmodium vivax, Plasmodium ovale, Plasmodium malariae, Entamoeba histolytica, Giardia intestinalis, Trypanosoma brucei, Leishmania spp., Histoplasma capsulatum, Aspergillus spp., Candida albicans, Cryptococcus neoformans, Pneumocystis carinii, Wuchereria bancrofti, Schistosoma mansoni and/or Toxoplasma gondii. In a further specific embodiment, the antigen

is a protein expressed by a cancer cell. In another specific embodiment, the antigen is a protein that is expressed by and displayed on the surface of a cancer cell.

In further specific embodiments, the recombinant poxvirus of the invention, or the cell comprising said recombinant poxvirus comprises an antigen expressed by a cancerous cell.

5 Examples of such an antigen expressed by a cancerous cell include, but are not limited to, alpha-fetoprotein (AFP); prostate specific antigen (PSA); carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA); disialosyl LEA antigen; Melan-A/MART-1; SART3; multidrug resistance-associated protein 3 (MRP3); polycomb group protein enhancer of zeste homolog 2 (EZH2); ALDH1; Her-2; Nectin-4; gp96 heat shock protein; gp100; tyrosinase; GM2; MAGE-A3; and NY-ESO-1. In a further
10 embodiment the recombinant poxvirus of the invention or the cell comprising said recombinant poxvirus comprises a gene encoding an antibody. In specific embodiments, such antibodies are specific for cell markers expressed on tumor cells.

The medicaments of the present invention can be administered to a patient by means known to the skilled person. In some embodiments of the invention, the medicaments are
15 administered by injection.

EXAMPLES

For assessing the efficacy of the modified poxvirus vectors of the present invention, several foundational MVA vectors were created. These MVA vectors contain a fluorescence coding reporter gene under the control of a strong vaccinia virus promoter, and a selection component comprising a DNase selection gene under the control of a strong vaccinia virus promoter and the Tetracycline operator (TetO2) element, and the Tetracycline repressor (TetR) coding gene under the control of different promoters.

As shown in FIG. 1, the basic MVA genome was modified by the introduction of a reporter gene/selection component cassette into the insertion site (Deletion III or Del3) of the MVA genome: adjacent to the upstream flanking region of Deletion III (Flank1 Del3) a reporter gene, for example, a green fluorescence protein (GFP) gene was inserted under the control of a strong synthetic vaccinia virus promoter (Ps) as a reporter system. This reporter, for example, GFP, optimally allows the detection of the MVA that contains the cassette insert. Downstream of the reporter gene (adjacent to Flank2 Del3), a selection component was inserted into the genome. This consists of, for example, a DNase gene under the control of a strong synthetic vaccinia virus promoter (Ps), which is controlled by a bacterial operator element (TetO2) that interacts with a repressor (TetR). The repressor interaction is in turn controlled by tetracycline. In the absence of tetracycline, TetR binds to the TetO2 control sequence to thereby inhibit the expression of the DNase gene. However, in the presence of tetracycline, TetR is released from the TetO2 site to thereby allow expression of the DNase gene. The expressed DNase protein then inhibits the amplification of the viral DNA in the cytoplasm of the infected cell.

For the isolation of recombinant MVA comprising the heterologous genetic material of interest, the reporter gene/selection component cassette is deleted by means of homologous recombination. Subsequently, the resulting virus is passaged in the presence of tetracycline. Cells comprising non-recombinant modified MVA are detectable by fluorescence, and DNase expression inhibits the growth of MVA. Cells comprising recombinant MVA lack the reporter gene/selection component cassette, and therefore they do not exhibit fluorescence, and their MVA growth is not inhibited since DNase expression does not occur. The isolation of the recombinant and the non-recombinant MVA can be performed by separation of the fluorescing and the non-fluorescing cells.

A bacterial plasmid containing the flanking sequences of the MVA Deletion III is used (FIG. 2 and 3) as a shuttle for the insertion of the heterologous genetic material of interest into

the modified MVA vector. The plasmid further comprises a LacZ expression cassette flanked by a plurality of single cutter restriction sites. The heterologous genetic material of interest that is to be inserted in the modified MVA vector is cloned into the bacterial vector vEM07 (SEQ ID NO: 1) by means of one or more single cutter restriction sites. The LacZ gene is deleted and the plasmid containing the heterologous genetic material of interest can be detected by blue white selection using X-Gal. The resulting plasmid is then used for the insertion of the heterologous genetic material of interest in the modified MVA vector by means of homologous recombination.

10 **EXAMPLE 1: Cloning of the modified MVA vector selection component**

The reporter gene/selection component cassette was inserted into the MVA genome by homologous recombination. For this purpose, the single components of (i) reporter gene, (ii) Ps-TetO2-DNAse, and (iii) TetR were cloned in a stepwise fashion into a bacterial plasmid.

Cloning of the DNase gene

15 The DNase fragment (SpeI-Ps-TetO2-DNAse-SacI) was synthesized via a two-step PCR process and cloned in the vector vEM11 (SpeI/SacI) (SEQ ID NO: 15), resulting in the production of vEM12 (SEQ ID NO: 16).

For the first PCR step, the following oligonucleotides were used:

- 1) oEM167: TetO2-DNAse start; TCCCTATCAGTGATAGAGATCTCCCTATCAGTG
20 ATAGAGATATGAGGGGCATGAAGCTGCTG (SEQ ID NO: 8)
- 2) oEM168: DNase end – SacI; GAGCTCCTACTTCAGCATCACC (SEQ ID NO: 9)

The template for this PCR process was the plasmid pENTR-DNAse (Invitrogen ORF Clone collection, clone ID IOH23149) that contained a human DNase open reading frame. This first PCR step resulted in the fragment depicted in FIG. 4.

25 For the second stage of the PCR, the purified PCR product of the first PCR step, and following oligonucleotides were used:

- 1) oEM169: SpeI-Ps-TetO2; GACTAGTAAAAATTGAAATTTTATTTTTTTTTTTTGG
AATATAAATATCCCTATCAGTGATAGAG (SEQ ID NO: 10)
- 2) oEM168: DNase end – SacI; GAGCTCCTACTTCAGCATCACC (SEQ ID NO: 9)

This second PCR step resulted in the fragment shown in FIG. 5.

The resulting fragment was then cloned into the recombination vector vEM11 (FIG. 6) through use of the SpeI and SacI restriction sites. This cloning step resulted in vector vEM12 (FIG. 7).

5 Cloning of TetR

During the next cloning step, the TetR coding region was inserted into vector vEM12. The amount of expressed TetR is an important experimental parameter, as it has to be sufficiently expressed in order to cover all TetO2 sequences present in the cell (about 200 copies per cell), but should not be expressed in excess as this would require an excess of tetracycline in
10 order to induce the expression of the DNase. Therefore, the TetR expression was assessed under the control of three different promoters: the Ps (strong expression), the H5 (medium expression) and the p7.5 (low expression).

Cloning of Cloning of TetR with the Ps promoter

The Ps - Tetracycline repressor (TetR) cassette was synthesized by PCR. The template
15 was the pcDNA6/TR plasmid (Invitrogen), and the following oligonucleotides were used for the fusion of the Ps promoter and the amplification:

- 1) oEM163: SacI-Ps-TetRstart; GGGAGCTCAAAAATTGAAATTTTATTTTTTTTTTTT
TGGAATATAAATAATGTCTAGATTAGATAAAAG (SEQ ID NO: 11)
- 2) oEM164: TetRend-NheI; GCTAGCTTAATAAGATCTGAATTCC (SEQ ID NO: 12)

20 The resulting PCR fragment (FIG. 8) was cloned using SacI and NheI in vector vEM12. This cloning step resulted in vector vEM31, SEQ ID NO: 17 (FIG. 9).

Cloning of TetR with the p7.5/H5 promoter

The p7.5 and H5 promoter are present in the plasmids pVIV06 (SEQ ID NO:18) and pVIV07 (SEQ ID NO: 19), and TetR was amplified for insertion into these vectors by PCR
25 using the following oligonucleotides:

- 1) oEM165: XhoI-TetRstart; CTCGAGATGTCTAGATTAGATAAAAG (SEQ ID NO: 13)
- 2) oEM166: TetRend-ApaI; CCGGGCCCTTAATAAGATCTGAATTCC (SEQ ID NO: 14)

For appropriate fusion of the TetR coding region to the promoters, PCR fragments were cloned via *ApaI* and *XhoI* in vector pVIV06 (p7.5) and vector pVIV07 (H5).

The cloning of the TetR in pVIV06 resulted in vector pEM12 (7.5) (SEQ ID NO:20), and the cloning in pVIV07 resulted in vector pEM13 (H5) (SEQ ID NO: 21). The TetR expression cassettes were then extracted using *SacI* and *ApaI* and then cloned in vEM12. This resulted in vector vEM32 (7.5) (SEQ ID NO: 22) and vector vEM33 (H5) (SEQ ID NO: 23), which were identical to vector vEM31 (FIG. 9), except for the promoter that is used to express the TetR gene.

10 **EXAMPLE 2: Cloning of the modified MVA vector**

vEM31, 32 and 33 were each employed to create modified MVA vectors. For this purpose, CEF cells were infected with MVA (moi 0.05) and then transfected with vEM31, 32 or 33, individually. The MVA particles released by the infected CEF cells were then passaged three times using fresh CEF cells and under selective conditions (e.g. blasticidine containing medium; 5µg/ml), since cells containing recombinant MVA (i.e., the modified MVA vectors) are resistant to this antibiotic. The recombinant MVA particles were subsequently purified by plaque purification and using a FACS unit (fluorescence activated cell sorter).

Following amplification and characterization of the resulting modified MVA vectors resulting from recombination of MVA with vEM31 (mEM06, Ps-TetR), with vEM32 (mEM07, 7.5-TetR) and with vEM33 (mEM08, H5-TetR), the tetracycline/DNAse system was used for testing.

EXAMPLE 3: Assessment of the tetracycline/DNAse system

For testing the inducible reverse selection system, cells were infected with modified MVA viruses mEM06, 07 and 08 individually and incubated in tetracycline-containing medium. Different concentrations of tetracycline were used for analysis (0-500 µg/ml).

In order to assess the influence of the inducible DNAse expression on the replication of unmodified MVA, MVA-infected cells were transfected with (vEM12) to facilitate the transient expression of DNAse. Furthermore, the influence of tetracycline on the replication of unmodified MVA was analyzed by incubating MVA-infected cells with tetracycline only. Additionally, for monitoring the influence of tetracycline on the growth and status of cells, MVA

infected and uninfected CEF cells were incubated with the identical tetracycline concentrations used for testing of the modified virus vectors.

Briefly, CEF cells were infected with the modified MVA viruses mEM07 (7.5 = 7.5 promoter), mEM06 (Ps = Ps promoter), mEM08 (H5 = H5 promoter) and incubated with media containing different concentrations of tetracycline (Tet 0 = no tetracycline; Tet 25 = 25 µg tetracycline per ml). For controls, CEF cells were infected with unmodified MVA empty vector (MVA), and some MVA infected cells were also subsequently transfected with vEM12 (MVA + DNase). CEF cells infected with unmodified MVA empty vector were also incubated with tetracycline (MVA + Tet). After 48 hours of incubation at 37°C (5% CO₂), cells were harvested and the virus titer was determined. FIG. 10 provides a summary of the results obtained.

The unmodified MVA control (FIG. 10, MVA) resulted in a titer of 8.75×10^6 TCID₅₀. Consequently, this is the titer that can be achieved by infection with unmodified MVA without any the presence of any inhibiting substances under these conditions. The expression of DNase resulted in a titer reduced by 2 log scales (FIG. 10, MVA + DNase, 6.56×10^4 TCID₅₀/ml). However, since MVA infection was established by inoculation with 1.00×10^5 TCID₅₀/ml of unmodified MVA, this treatment did not result in an increase in amount of virus (i.e. no productive replication), and therefore DNase expression does inhibit viral replication effectively.

Cells infected with unmodified MVA and incubated with tetracycline demonstrated that tetracycline itself has an influence on MVA replication, likely due to a cytotoxic effect. If 25 – 50 µg tetracycline/ml were used, there was no detectable influence on MVA replication, while using a concentration of 100 µg/ml reduced the MVA replication by 1 log; furthermore, a concentration of 250 µg/ml inhibited the viral replication comparable to the observed effect of transiently expressed DNase (FIG. 10, MVA + Tet). Treatment of cells infected by modified MVA vectors mEM06 and mEM08 with 75 µg/ml tetracycline resulted in a reduced viral replication through induced DNase expression (FIG. 10, mEM06 and mEM08), and this was not due to direct tetracycline exclusively, as the viral titer was reduced even more significantly. This same effect can be observed using 100 µg tetracycline per ml. Concentrations of 150 µg/ml result in a pronounced cytotoxic effect of tetracycline such that the modified MVA viruses do not replicate at all. Accordingly, for further testing purposes, a narrow concentration window of 75 to 100 µg tetracycline per ml was used. Modified MVA vector mEM07 expresses TetR with a weak p7.5 promoter clearly produces an insufficient amount of TetR for inhibiting the DNase expression in any quantitative amount. Therefore, the viral replication is markedly reduced in all

experimental arrangements, and the virus itself is not applicable as a basic virus for the cloning of recombinant viruses with a single recombination vector.

EXAMPLE 4: Cloning of a recombinant poxvirus vector using the single recombination system

Since modified MVA viruses mEM06 and mEM08 demonstrated similar replication patterns, additional experiments were performed using mEM06.

Cells were infected with modified MVA virus mEM06 and transfected with vEM07 (FIG. 3). Due to homologous recombination, the LacZ gene was inserted in select modified MVA virus genomes and the reporter/selection cassette was deleted. The released virus particles were passaged on fresh CEF cells in medium containing tetracycline (100 µg/ml), and then passaged by serial dilution on cells without selective conditions. Infected cells were sorted using a FACS to select non-fluorescing cells. Once the settings for the sorting process were optimized, the sorted cells were homogenized and passaged again on CEF cells. The infected cells were sorted and the virus was amplified once more on fresh CEF cells. The cells were clearly infected and exhibited no fluorescence, meaning that they contained purified recombinant MVA virus. Recombinant virus purity was confirmed by a PCR procedure that amplified the insertion site of the modified MVA vector (FIG. 11). The PCR produced a 3.0 kb signal for the modified MVA vector, and a smaller 0.76 kb fragment for the recombinant MVA containing LacZ which had replaced the reporter/selection cassette by homologous recombination.

The recombinant MVA virus samples provided a clear signal at 0.76 kb (FIG. 11, rec MVA), but no signal for modified MVA (mEM06) or unmodified MVA (MVA). The recombination vector vEM07 also produced the expected signal of 0.76 kb (FIG. 11, vEM07). The modified MVA containing the selection/reporter cassette within the deletion site was used as a control, and this showed the expected signal of 3.0 kb (mEM06). The unmodified MVA vector also resulted in the expected signal of about 200 base pairs (MVA).

In order to confirm the robust results achieved by the present system, the cloning process was repeated using the procedures described above. A recombinant MVA was again readily isolated using the described single recombination system.

EXAMPLE 5: Cloning of a further recombinant poxvirus vector using the single recombination system

A recombinant poxvirus is cloned using the single recombination system according to the invention using a modified poxvirus vector comprising a reporter gene located between a pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination is used.

Cells are infected with the modified MVA virus and then transfected with vEM07 (FIG. 3). Due to homologous recombination, the LacZ gene is inserted in select modified MVA virus genomes and consequently the reporter cassette is deleted. The released virus particles are then passaged at least once on fresh CEF cells in medium containing tetracycline (100 µg/ml).

Infected cells are then sorted using FACS to select non-fluorescing cells as described above. After the infected cells have been sorted the virus is amplified once more on fresh CEF cells.

The recombinant virus purity is confirmed by a PCR procedure that amplifies the insertion site of the modified MVA vector (FIG. 11). The PCR produces a fragment for the recombinant MVA containing LacZ which has replaced the reporter cassette by homologous recombination.

CLAIMS

1. A modified poxvirus vector comprising a reporter gene located between a pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination.
2. The modified poxvirus vector of claim 1 wherein the reporter gene encodes a fluorescent protein.
3. The modified poxvirus vector of claim 1, further comprising at least one selection component located between a pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination.
4. The modified poxvirus vector of claim 3, wherein the selection component comprises a selection gene that inhibits or slows down poxvirus replication in the host cell or is cytotoxic to the host cell.
5. The modified poxvirus vector of claim 3 wherein the reporter gene and the selection component are located between a single pair of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination.
6. The modified poxvirus vector of claim 3 wherein the reporter gene and the selection component are located between more than one pairs of flanking sequences allowing for homologous recombination.
7. The modified poxvirus vector of claims 1 – 6, wherein the poxvirus is vaccinia virus or Modified Vaccinia Ankara virus.
8. A cell comprising the modified poxvirus vector of claims 1 – 7.
9. Use of the modified poxvirus vector of claims 1 – 7 or the cell of claim 8 to generate a recombinant poxvirus.
10. A method for generating a recombinant poxvirus capable of expressing a gene of interest comprising the steps of:
 - 1) infecting a permissive host cell with the modified poxvirus vector of claim 1 – 7; and
 - (2) transfecting said infected permissive host cell with a plasmid comprising said gene of interest under conditions that permit homologous recombination between said vector and said plasmid,

whereby a recombinant poxvirus is produced.

11. The method of claim 10, further comprising the step of:

enhancing the production of recombinant poxvirus by selecting against the presence of the selection component.

- 5 12. The method of claims 10 – 11, further comprising the step of:

separating permissive host cells comprising recombinant poxvirus from permissive host cells comprising the modified poxvirus vector that has not undergone homologous recombination with the vector comprising the gene of interest.

- 10 13. The method of claims 10 – 12, further comprising the step of:

using the permissive host cells comprising the recombinant virus for at least one further passage in previously uninfected permissive host cells.

14. The method of claims 10 – 13, wherein the poxvirus is vaccinia virus or Modified Vaccinia Ankara virus.

- 15 15. A cell comprising a recombinant poxvirus generated by the method of claims 10 – 14.

16. Use of the method of claims 10 – 14 or the cell of claim 15 to generate a recombinant poxvirus.

17. A recombinant poxvirus generated using the method of claims 10 – 14 or the cell of claim 15.

- 20 18. The modified poxvirus of claims 1 – 7, the cell of claim 8 or 15 or the recombinant poxvirus according to claim 17 as a medicament.

19. The modified poxvirus of claims 1 – 7, the cell of claim 8 or 15 or the recombinant poxvirus according to claim 17 as a therapeutic or prophylactic vaccine for the treatment or prevention of cancer, influenza, hepatitis, AIDS, mumps, rabies, encephalitis, stomach or duodenal ulcers, malaria, sleeping sickness, lyme disease, reactive arthritis, pneumonia, 25 leprosy, diphtheria, candidiasis and/or toxoplasmosis.

20. A nucleic acid or its complement selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 15-23 or a fragment or homologous nucleic acid thereto that shares at least 40% sequence identity, wherein the fragment has a length of at least 40% of the respective 30 nucleic acid.