

## Letters to the Editor

### Sensitive system for visualising biotinylated DNA probes hybridised in situ

A recent article by Burns *et al*<sup>1</sup> referred to a silver amplification system that was crucial to the success of the demonstration, by in situ hybridisation, of specific sequences of DNA in the sex chromosomes. The silver amplification system was used to visualise complexes of diaminobenzidine (DAB), and uses the principles of a method established by ourselves—namely, that complexes of DAB bind gold salts,<sup>2</sup> and that the avidity of DAB for gold salts (gold chloride in particular) is so great that it can be used to generate an insoluble sulphide on which the silver amplification procedure depends.<sup>3,4</sup>

We were surprised that as we were the first to have used these sequential steps to enhance DAB visualisation no mention was made of our work and that the reference given for the use of gold salts was to a brief letter,<sup>5</sup> which, in fact, makes no mention of the use of gold. In our publications we have acknowledged the earlier work of Siegesmund *et al* who, in an *x* ray microanalysis study, showed the affinity of DAB for gold salts.<sup>6</sup>

We would not like your readers to believe that the application of the silver amplification procedure described by Burns *et al* is confined to in situ hybridisation technology. The method by which the DAB is generated is irrelevant: silver amplification based on the principles that we have described can be used for various applications, ranging from work on artificial materials such as nitrocellulose to tissue sections for the light and electron microscope.

GR NEWMAN  
BJASANI  
ED WILLIAMS

Department of Pathology,  
University of Wales College of Medicine,  
Heath Park,  
Cardiff CF4 4XN

### References

- 1 Burns J, Chan VTW, Jonasson JA, Fleming KA, Taylor S, McGee JO'D. Sensitive system for visualising biotinylated DNA probes hybridised in situ: rapid sex determination of intact cells. *J Clin Pathol* 1985;**38**:1085–92.
- 2 Newman GR, Jasani B, Williams ED. Metal compound intensification of the electron density of diaminobenzidine. *J Histochem Cytochem* 1983;**31**:1430–4.
- 3 Newman GR, Jasani B, Williams ED. The visualisation of trace amounts of diaminobenzidine (DAB) polymer by a novel gold-sulphide-silver method. *J Microsc* 1983;**132**:RP1–2.
- 4 Newman GR, Jasani B, Williams ED. Amplification of trace amounts of DAB in immunocytochemistry. *J Pathol* 1984;**142**:A6–7.
- 5 Adams JC. Heavy metal intensification of DAB-based HRP reaction product. *J Histochem Cytochem* 1981;**29**:775.
- 6 Siegesmund VA, Yorde DE, Dragen R. A quantitative immunoperoxidase procedure employing energy dispersive x ray analysis. *J Histochem Cytochem* 1979;**27**:1226–30.

Dr Burns and colleagues reply as follows:

The objectives of our article were to describe a system for the fast, sensitive detection of biotinylated DNA sequences by in situ hybridisation, and show one of its applications—namely, cell sexing.<sup>1</sup> This system has two components: methodology for hybridisation of cloned biotinylated DNA to complementary nucleic acids in fixed cells and detection of the site of hybridisation of biotinylated DNA by immunoperoxidase histochemistry in which the diaminobenzidine (DAB)/hydrogen peroxide reaction product is amplified by gold and silver precipitation.

It was not our purpose to review methods for enhancing DAB/hydrogen peroxide products. Dr Newman and others claim that the “principles” used in the detection system<sup>1</sup> were first described by them and are surprised that their work was not cited.<sup>2,3</sup> This claim is wrong. For this and other reasons (see below) their work was not referenced. Heavy metals such as osmium have been used to enhance DAB/hydrogen peroxide reaction products since the late 1960s. Gold chloride and other metals were introduced for the same purpose in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>5,6</sup> There is a typographical error in the paper<sup>4</sup> referred to by Dr Newman and others: the formula given for gold chloride is AuCl<sub>2</sub>; gold has a valency of 1 or 3, and AuCl<sub>2</sub> does not exist. Timm<sup>7</sup> showed that “the sulphides of insoluble heavy metals catalyse the deposition of silver in the presence of a reducing reagent”.<sup>2</sup> In fact gold sulphide was visualised by silver in tissue in 1981 and apparently as early as 1935.<sup>8</sup> Gallyas *et al* described a light insensitive silver reagent to amplify DAB/hydrogen peroxide complexes,<sup>9</sup> and a year later Holgate *et al* used a light sensitive developer to amplify colloidal gold immunohistochemically.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the statement made in the first paragraph of Dr Newman and others’ letter is therefore erroneous and misleading.

The protocol described by the Welsh group for gold and silver enhancement of

DAB/hydrogen peroxide products described in “principle” in a letter<sup>2</sup> and abstract.<sup>3</sup> The letter states that “after immunoperoxidase staining, the sections were treated with 0.1% gold chloride immersed in neutralised sodium sulphide and exposed to the silver developing solution of Gallyas *et al*”.<sup>2</sup> Gold chloride is a generic name for sodium chloroaurate (NaAuCl<sub>4</sub>), chloroauric acid (HAuCl<sub>4</sub>), gold monochloride (AuCl), and auric chloride (AuCl<sub>3</sub>): the molecular weights and pH of aqueous solutions of these gold chlorides differ. The chemical formula and pH of gold chloride used by us is detailed.<sup>1</sup> “Neutralised sodium sulphide” is also chemically meaningless: was it 0.1 mol/l, pH 7.5, or 0.1 mol/l, pH 7.0? Additionally, the silver reagent described by Gallyas *et al* is unstable, forms precipitates in a test tube, and is unsuitable for tissue localisation of biotinylated DNA.<sup>1</sup> The modified silver reagent<sup>1</sup> is stable, does not precipitate in a test tube, and is used routinely in this and other laboratories (D Ward, unpublished data).

Dr Newman and others imply that the readers of the *Journal of Clinical Pathology* might not deduce that the amplification procedure could be used in other applications. We assumed this to be self evident. Finally, they refer to the use of silver for amplifying DAB/hydrogen peroxide signals on nitrocellulose filters, which assumes they have unpublished data to support this claim. We advise that gold and silver should not be used for the detection of biotinylated nucleic acids on nitrocellulose filters. Much greater sensitivity (fg quantities of DNA) can be detected on filters by other more sensitive non-radioisotopic methods.<sup>11</sup>

J BURNS  
V TW CHAN  
JA JONASSON  
KA FLEMING  
S TAYLOR  
JO'D MCGEE  
University of Oxford,  
Nuffield Department of Pathology,  
John Radcliffe Hospital,  
Oxford.  
\*Department of Medical Genetics,  
Churchill Hospital,  
Oxford

### References

- 1 Burns J, Chan VTW, Jonasson JA, Fleming KA, Taylor S, McGee JO'D. Sensitive system for visualising biotinylated DNA probes hybridised in situ: rapid sex determination of intact cells. *J Clin Pathol* 1985;**38**:1085–92.