

## ***Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus infection in *M. rosenbergii* (de Man) with white tail disease cultured in Taiwan**

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### **Abstract**

White tail disease (WTD) is a serious problem in *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* hatcheries and nursery ponds in Asia. The causative agents have been identified as *M. rosenbergii* nodavirus (*MrNV*) and its associated extra small virus. This is the first report demonstrating *MrNV* virus in *M. rosenbergii* displaying WTD signs in Taiwan by reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR). Amplified fragments of 850 and 425 bp for RNA-1 and RNA-2 of *MrNV*, respectively, were obtained by RT-PCR. RT-PCR products of about 850 and 1121 bp for RNA-1 and RNA-2 of *MrNV* were also obtained using different primer pairs. The amplicons were individually cloned into pGEM-T vector and sequenced. Using this recombinant plasmid of *MrNV* RNA-2 as DNA template, the non-radioactive DNA probes were prepared by PCR amplification with DIG-11-dUTP. The probes were used to successfully detect *MrNV* infection in the striated muscle tissues of WTD-diseased prawns using *in situ* hybridization. The 1121 bp genomic fragment of RNA-2 of *MrNV* consisted of a unique open reading frame with 1116 nucleotides, and it encoded a structural protein with 371 amino acids. The nucleotide sequence of the partial genome of *MrNV* RNA-2 revealed a 97% identity with an Indian isolate. A phylogenetic tree constructed using the nucleotide sequence of the viral capsid gene from insect and

fish nodaviruses revealed that the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate could be interpreted as a new genus within the family *Nodaviridae*. However, its position showed more affinity with *Alphanodavirus* than with *Betanodavirus*. The study confirmed the presence of *MrNV* infection in freshwater prawns cultured in Taiwan suffering from WTD.

*Keywords:* *in situ* hybridization, *Macrobrachium rosenbergii*, *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus, reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction, white tail disease.

### **Introduction**

Viral diseases are a major problem for crustacean aquaculture worldwide. The giant freshwater prawn, *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* (de Man), is an economically important crustacean in Taiwan. A new viral disease designated as white tail disease (WTD) has been observed in freshwater prawn hatcheries and nursery ponds since 1992, causing high mortalities and huge economic losses. The affected prawns exhibit white, opaque muscle in the abdominal segments, commonly accompanied by progressive reduction in feeding and swimming. Mortalities may reach between 50% and 70% within 2 weeks after transfer of post-larvae (PL) to grow-out ponds (Tung, Wang & Chen 1999). WTD has recently been reported in the French West Indies (Arcier, Herman, Lightner, Redman, Mari & Bonami 1999), People's Republic of China (Qian, Shi, Zhang, Cao, Liu, Li, Xie, Cambournac & Bonami 2003), India (Sahul Hameed, Yoganandhan, Sri Widada & Bonami 2004; Shekhar,

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Azad & Jithendran 2006) and Thailand (Yoganandhan, Leartvibhas, Sriwongpuk & Limsuwan 2006).

The causative agents of WTD have been identified as *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus (MrNV) associated with extra small virus (XSV) (Qian *et al.* 2003). MrNV is a small icosahedral non-enveloped virus, 26–27 nm in diameter, observed in the cytoplasm of connective tissue cells in infected prawns. The viral genome is composed of two fragments of linear, single-stranded, positive-sense RNAs (RNA-1 and RNA-2), of about 2.9 and 1.3 kb, respectively. The viral capsid contains a single polypeptide of 43 kDa (Bonami, Shi, Qian & Sri Widada 2005). The XSV virus is icosahedral in shape and 15 nm in diameter. Its genome consists of a linear, single-stranded RNA of 796 nucleotides, encoding a single structural protein of 17 kDa (CP-17) (Sri Widada & Bonami 2004). Because the clinical signs of WTD are not specific, other methods are required to screen for the aetiological agents. A number of diagnostic methods have been developed for the detection of MrNV, including dot-blot hybridization, *in situ* hybridization, reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) and ELISA (Romestand & Bonami 2003; Sri Widada, Durand, Cambournac, Qian, Shi, Dejonghe, Richard & Bonami 2003). Dot-blot hybridization and RT-PCR have also been developed for the detection of XSV (Sri Widada, Richard, Shi, Qian & Bonami 2004). A single-tube, one-step multiplex RT-PCR has been developed for MrNV and XSV (Yoganandhan, Sri Widada, Bonami & Sahul Hameed 2005).

In a previous study, XSV was detected in WTD-affected *M. rosenbergii* in Taiwan (Wang, Chang, Shi & Chen 2007). The present study is the first confirming MrNV infection by RT-PCR in diseased freshwater prawns showing clinical signs of WTD. The RT-PCR amplified products of MrNV were further cloned and sequenced. The Digoxigenin DNA probes for MrNV were labelled by PCR amplification using the recombinant plasmid as template. Using *in situ* hybridization, the results verified MrNV infection in the white muscle tissue of WTD-diseased prawns. The phylogenetic relationships of MrNV with other nodavirus isolates were investigated by comparing the nucleotide sequences of viral coat protein.

## Materials and methods

### Collection of infected post-larvae

Infected PL of *M. rosenbergii* with WTD were collected from affected hatcheries located in Kaohsiung and Pington in southern Taiwan. More than 30 diseased giant freshwater prawn samples, each consisting of 10–30 individuals, were collected. Healthy animals were obtained from a hatchery with no record of WTD. The PL were washed in sterile distilled water and stored at –20 °C before processing. Some samples were placed in Davidson's fixative for *in situ* hybridization.

### Total RNA extraction

Total RNA was extracted using TRIzol™ reagent (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to the procedure described by Wang *et al.* (2007). Total RNA was dissolved in 50 µL of diethyl pyrocarbonate-treated water and stored at –70 °C.

### RT-PCR for MrNV

Reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction was performed using a Reverse-iT™ one-step RT-PCR kit (ABgene, Surrey, UK), allowing reverse transcription (RT) and amplification to be carried out in a single reaction tube. The details of primer sequences and amplified product sizes are given in Table 1. One primer pair (pair 1) designed from the RNA-1 sequence of MrNV and another primer pair (pair 3) specific to the RNA-2 sequence of MrNV were tested separately for the detection of MrNV infection. The reaction was performed in 50 µL of RT-PCR buffer containing 10 pmol of each primer and RNA template, using the following steps: reverse transcription at 52 °C for 1 h; denaturation at 94 °C for 2 min followed by 35 cycles of denaturation at 94 °C for 40 s; annealing at 55 °C for 40 s and elongation at 72 °C for 1 min, ending with an additional elongation step of 10 min at 72 °C. The amplified product was analysed by electrophoresis on a 1.5% agarose gel.

### Cloning

In order to determine the homology of nucleotide sequence of MrNV isolated from Taiwan with other nodavirus isolates, RT-PCR was carried out with a different primer pair (pair 2) as well primer pair 1 used for the amplification of RNA-1. The RT-PCR

**Table 1** Pairs of primers used in reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction for the amplification of *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus (MrNV) RNA

Pair	Name	Sequence	Size (bp)	Orientation	Reference
1 (RNA-1)	1A775	CCACGTTCTTAGTGGATCCT	850	Upstream primer	Sri Widada <i>et al.</i> (2003)
	1B690	CGTCCGCCTGGTAGTTCC		Downstream primer	
2 (RNA-2)	CapS	ATGGCTAGAGGTAACAAAATTC	1121	Upstream primer	Sri Widada <i>et al.</i> (2003)
	CapC	ACAACCTAATTATTGCCGAC		Downstream primer	
3 (RNA-2)	MrNV2aF	GCGTTATAGATGGCACAAGG	425	Upstream primer	Sahul Hameed <i>et al.</i> (2004)
	MrNV2aR	AGCTGTGAAACTTCAACTGG		Downstream primer	

The primer pair specific to RNA-1 or RNA-2 of MrNV is given in parentheses.

was performed under the same conditions as described previously; the amplified products were separately extracted from agarose gels, and purified using a PCR clean-up system (Promega Corporation, Madison, WI, USA). The DNA fragments were individually ligated into pGEM-T Easy Vector (Promega Corporation) and transformed into *Escherichia coli* DH-5 $\alpha$ . The clones were designated as DMNV-1 and DMNV-2 for RNA-1 and RNA-2 of MrNV, respectively. The recombinant plasmid DNA from the two clones were separately extracted, and automatic sequencing was performed commercially (Protech Technology Enterprise Co., Ltd, Tapei, Taiwan).

### DNA probe labelling

The DIG-labelled probe for RNA-2 of MrNV was generated with a PCR DIG Probe Synthesis Kit (Roche Molecular Biochemicals, Mannheim, Germany) following the manufacturer's instructions with slight modifications. Briefly, a 0.5-mL reaction tube was added to the following final concentration of reagents: 1X PCR buffer (10 mM Tris-HCl, 50 mM KCl, 2.5 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>), 200  $\mu$ M PCR DIG probe synthesis mix, 0.5  $\mu$ M of primer MrNV2aF and MrNV2aR, 1 unit *Taq* DNA polymerase, recombinant plasmid template derived from the clone DMNV-2 and distilled water to a final volume of 50  $\mu$ L. The PCR was carried out in a thermal cycler (Thermo Hybaid, Needham Heights, MA, USA) with 35 cycles of 94 °C for 40 s, 55 °C for 40 s and 72 °C for 1 min. The resulting DIG-labelled DNA probe was extracted from agarose gel and purified using a PCR clean-up system (Promega Corporation).

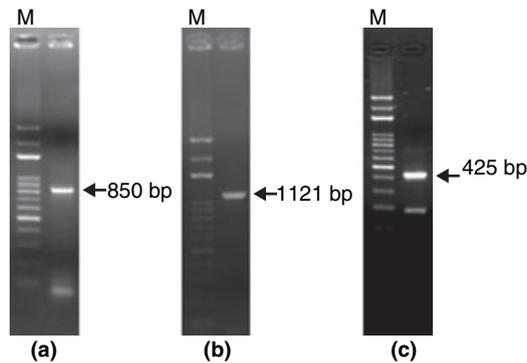
### In situ hybridization

All histological processing and staining followed standard procedures, as described by Bell &

Lightner (1988). Sections, 5–7  $\mu$ m thick, were used for *in situ* hybridization using DIG-labelled probe according to the manufacturer's manual (Roche Molecular Biochemicals). The sections were deparaffined and rehydrated in a series of graded ethanol, followed by digestion with proteinase K (100  $\mu$ g mL<sup>-1</sup>) and then fixed in cold 4% formaldehyde. The sections were heated to 95 °C for 10 min and allowed to hybridize for 12 h at 42 °C in the probe hybridization solution containing 50% formamide, 1  $\mu$ g mL<sup>-1</sup> DIG-labelled probe, 0.2 mg mL<sup>-1</sup> sonicated salmon sperm DNA and 5% dextran sulphate, and 4X SSC (0.6 M sodium chloride, 60 mM sodium citrate, pH 7.0). The detection was performed using an alkaline phosphatase-conjugated anti-DIG antibody and substrate solution (nitroblue tetrazolium and bromo-4-chloro-3-indolylphosphate). After counterstaining with 0.1% eosin Y, the sections were dehydrated and mounted with Entellan (Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany) and then examined under bright field microscopy (Olympus BX51, Tokyo, Japan).

### Sequence analysis

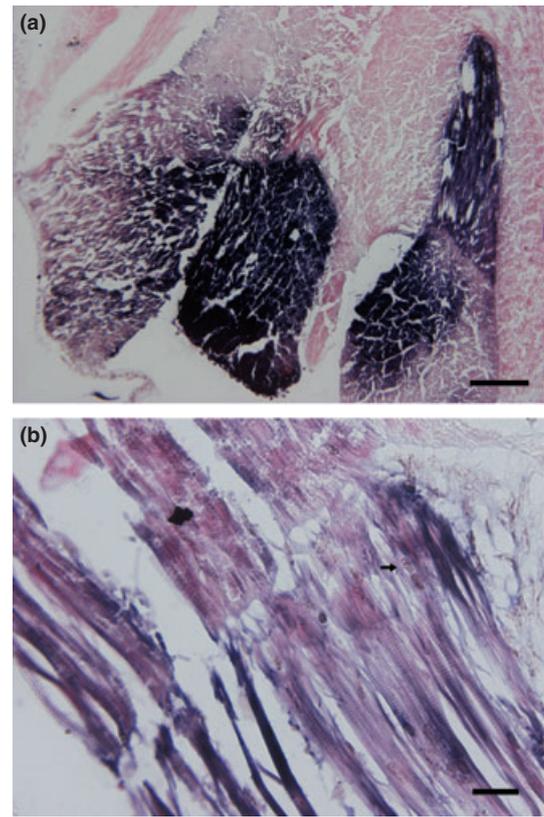
Nucleotide sequence analysis for the partial genome of RNA-2 of MrNV was performed with other nodavirus isolates including Indian MrNV (AY222840), black beetle virus (NC002037), Boolarra virus (NC004145), greasy grouper nervous necrosis virus (AF318942), Nodamura virus (AF174534), red spotted grouper nervous necrosis virus (RGNNV) (NC008041), Pariacoto virus (NC003692) and striped jack nervous necrosis virus (SJNNV) (AB056572) using BLAST (Altschul, Madden, Schäffer, Zhang, Zhang, Miller & Lipman 1997) and CLUSTAL W (Thompson, Higgins & Gibson 1994). The phylogenetic analysis was performed using the neighbour-joining method (Saitou & Nei 1987).



**Figure 1** Agarose gels showing reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction products of *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus (*MrNV*) extracted from post-larvae of white tail disease infected *M. rosenbergii* using different primer pairs. (a) 850 bp amplified product using primer pair 1 for RNA-1 of *MrNV*; (b) 1121 bp amplified product using primer pair 2 for RNA-2 of *MrNV*; (c) 425 bp amplified product using primer pair 3 for RNA-2 of *MrNV*. M: 100-bp DNA ladder marker.

## Results

Diseased 24 to 32 day old post-larvae with whitish muscle were collected from different hatcheries in southern Taiwan. All WTD-affected cases were confirmed with *MrNV* virus infection by RT-PCR analysis. As shown in Fig. 1a & c, the 850 and 425 bp amplified products were obtained using primer pairs 1 and 3 specific to the genome of the RNA-1 and RNA-2 of *MrNV* virus, respectively. Samples obtained from the unaffected hatchery were negative for *MrNV*. Using different primers (pairs 1 and 2), 850 and 1121 bp amplified products were obtained by RT-PCR (Fig. 1a & b). The nucleotide sequence for the partial viral genome have been deposited in GenBank (GenBank accession no. DQ521574 for RNA-1 of *MrNV*; DQ521575 for RNA-2 of *MrNV*). The DIG DNA probes for *MrNV* were labelled by PCR amplification using the recombinant plasmid as template. Using *in situ* hybridization, the results showed that the *MrNV* genome could be successfully detected in the striated muscle of WTD-affected prawns. Positive reactions were recognized by a blue purple precipitate in the myofibrils but not in the nuclei of the muscle tissues (Fig. 2). However, no labelling was observed in the gill, hepatopancreas, nerve cord or stomach. No *MrNV* infection was found in the muscle tissue of healthy prawns using *in situ* hybridization.



**Figure 2** *In situ* hybridization of *M. rosenbergii* nodavirus (*MrNV*)-infected *M. rosenbergii* with white tail disease using a DIG-labelled probe. (a) The striated muscle of an *MrNV*-infected prawn showing a positive reaction in the affected muscle tissue (eosin Y as counterstain; bar = 100  $\mu$ m). (b) A higher magnification of the necrotic muscle showing dark purple colouration in the myofibrils; the nuclei are negative (arrow) (eosin Y as counterstain; bar = 25  $\mu$ m).

The nucleotide and deduced amino acid sequences of *MrNV* RNA-2 partial genome are shown in Fig. 3. It contained a unique open reading frame with 1116 nucleotides and encoded a structural protein with 371 amino acids. A comparison of the sequence of the RNA-2 of the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate showed a 97% identity BLAST analysis with the *MrNV* Indian isolate (AY222840). In addition, the deduced amino acid sequences of the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate showed strong homology with the Indian isolate with five deduced amino acid substitutions at positions 84 (T  $\rightarrow$  I), 248 (T  $\rightarrow$  S), 291 (V  $\rightarrow$  I), 321 (F  $\rightarrow$  S) and 333 (S  $\rightarrow$  L). In order to more precisely establish the systemic position of *MrNV*, a phylogenetic tree was constructed using the amino acid sequences deduced from the viral capsid gene of insect and fish nodaviruses. The results showed that the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate had more affinity with

1	atggctagaggttaacaaaaattctaatcagattcaaaataatagtaacgcaaacggcaag	
	M A R G K Q N S N Q I Q N N S N A N G K	20
60	cgccgtaagcgtaatcgaaggaatcgtaatccgagacgggttccaactttaacccatt	
	R R K R N R R N R N P Q T V P N F N P I	40
120	gtcgcaagccgacgggtgccccacttcaaactaacattagaagtgtaggagtgacgtt	
	V A K P T V A P L Q T N I R S A R S D V	60
180	aatgccatcacggttttaaatggcagcagatttccttacaactgcaagtcagggttct	
	N A I T V L N G S D F L T T V K V R G S	80
240	aataacttaattgattccaagtctagaatcttggttaagcaaccaatttctgcgagttct	
	N N L I D S K S R I L V K Q P I S A S S	100
300	tttctgtgaccagaatttctggtctatcgcaatttgggagcgttatagatggcacaaag	
	F L G T R I S G L S Q F W E R Y R W H K	120
360	gtgcagtcagatatgttctcagtcagtaaccaactttagcttccaacttattggttac	
	A A V R Y V P A V P N T L A C Q L I G Y	140
420	atcgatacagatccaactagatgaccctaacgttatcctcagtggtgatcagttactagg	
	I D T D P L D D P N V I L D V D Q L L R	160
480	cagccacgtcacaagtggtgctggcagtggaatcttctgatacaacaactattcca	
	Q A T S Q V G A R Q W N F S D T T T I P	180
540	ttgattgtcaggcgtgatgatcaattgtactatactggccaagataaggagaacgttcgt	
	L I V R R D D Q L Y Y T G Q D K E N V R	200
600	ttctctcaacaggggtatatttacctctgcaagtgactacactcaatattagtggt	
	F S Q Q G V F Y L L Q V T T L L N I S G	220
660	gaagccattacaaatgatttgatttcaggtcactatatttagattgggtctgtgattt	
	E A I T N D L I S G S L Y L D W V C G F	240
720	tccatgccacaaataatccttcaccagtggaagttcacagtaactataatgcggat	
	S M P Q I N P S P V E V S Q L T Y N A D	260
780	actattggcaattgggtccaccaacagaactcaagcaaaactataactcaagatattact	
	T I G N W V P P T E L K Q T Y T Q D I T	280
840	ggtttgaagccaaattcctaatttattatacttatatggatagagtaagttctgaa	
	G L K P N S K F I I I P Y M D R V S S E	300
900	gtactgcagaagtcacaattacttgtaatgaggttgacgccgttggttcaatctcaat	
	V L Q K C T I T C N E V D A V G S I S Y	320
960	tccgatactagecgtatcaaatgtgatgggtacatattatttcagcccaatagcattggt	
	S D T S A I K C D G Y I L F Q A N S I G	340
1020	gaagcaaccttcaccttagtgaccgattatcaggtgacgggtgaccctaaacctatcag	
	E A T F T L V T D Y Q G A V D P K P Y Q	360
1080	tataggattatcagagctatcgtcggaataattaggttgt	
	Y R I I R A I V G N N *	371

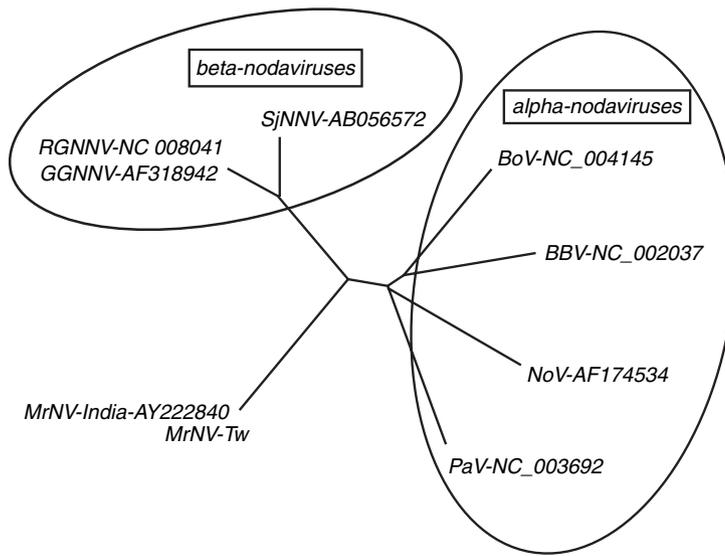
**Figure 3** Nucleotide sequences and deduced amino acid sequences of the partial genome of *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus RNA-2. The numbering for the nucleotide sequences is given on the left and the numbering for the sequences of deduced amino acid is on the right.

*Alphanodavirus* than with *Betanodavirus*, although its position could be interpreted as a new genus within the family *Nodaviridae* (Fig. 4).

### Discussion

Outbreaks of WTD in PL of *M. rosenbergii* had previously been reported in Taiwan (Tung *et al.* 1999). That histopathological study showed progressive segmental myofibre degeneration of muscles and necrotic myopathy. Dense viral inclusion bodies were observed in ultra-thin sections of

affected muscle. Non-enveloped virions with a mean size of 23 nm were found in the cytoplasm of infected cells in the prawns, and were tentatively named as *Macrobrachium* muscle virus (MMV). Although MMV was not isolated and characterized, in its morphology, cytoplasmic location and striated muscle affinity, and in the clinical gross signs displayed by infected animals, it appears very similar to MrNV. The present study is the first report confirming MrNV virus infection associated with WTD of *M. rosenbergii* cultured in Taiwan by RT-PCR and *in situ* hybridization.



**Figure 4** Phylogenetic un-rooted neighbour-joining tree deduced from analysis of nucleotide sequences of the complete gene of *Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus (*MrNV*) capsid protein (Taiwan isolates) compared with other nodavirus isolates; Indian *MrNV* strain (AY222840), black beetle virus (BBV) (NC002037), Boolarra virus (BoV) (NC004145), greasy grouper nervous necrosis virus (GGNNV) (AF318942), Nodamura virus (NoV) (AF174534), red spotted grouper nervous necrosis virus (RGNNV) (NC008041), Pariacoto virus (PaV) (NC003692), striped jack nervous necrosis virus (SJNNV) (AB056572).

Genome-based detection methods have been developed to detect *MrNV*, among which RT-PCR is considered one of the most sensitive diagnostic methods in routine health monitoring (Sri Widada *et al.* 2003). In the present study, two primer pairs specific to *MrNV* were used; 850 and 425 bp amplified products were obtained with primer pairs specific to RNA-1 and RNA-2, respectively, confirming that *MrNV* was associated with WTD of *M. rosenbergii* cultured in Taiwan. In addition, the striated muscle of WTD-affected prawns was shown to be positive for *MrNV* by *in situ* hybridization. Precipitation was only observed in the cytoplasm of necrotic muscle. The absence of any precipitate in tissues not infected by *MrNV* suggested that this DIG probe does not cross-react with prawn tissue. *In situ* hybridization can accurately provide the precise location of the nuclei acids present in tissue sections as a result of the highly specific interaction between the probe and target sequence of viral nuclei acids. The techniques can be used to investigate the transmission route of *MrNV* and help produce specific pathogen-free larvae of freshwater prawns in the future.

*Macrobrachium rosenbergii* nodavirus is classified as a member of the family *Nodaviridae* by its morphological and biochemical characteristics (Qian *et al.* 2003). Nodaviruses were first isolated from insects (Garzon & Charpentier 1991) and recently have been found in the larvae or juveniles of some marine fish (Munday, Kwang & Moody

2002). Because a highly conserved region was observed on the coat protein genes of fish nodaviruses, comparison with the variable region of the gene sequences could elucidate their evolutionary relationships. Based on the partial sequences of coat proteins from 25 isolates, fish nodaviruses are classified into four genotypes: barfin flounder nervous necrosis virus, tiger puffer nervous necrosis virus, SJNNV and RGNNV (Nishizawa, Furuhashi, Nagai, Nakai & Muroga 1997). In the present study, RT-PCR amplified products of the viral capsid gene of *MrNV* were sequenced and compared using BLAST analysis with the nucleotide sequence of insect and fish nodaviruses. The results showed that the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate did not belong to any genus within the family *Nodaviridae*, but has more affinity with the genus *Alphanodavirus* than with *Betanodavirus*. The phylogenetic relationships between *MrNV* and other nodaviruses were in agreement with previous reports which compared the amino acid sequences deduced from the partial gene of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (Bonami *et al.* 2005).

Sequence analysis of the partial genome of *MrNV* RNA-2 demonstrated that it contained a unique open reading frame with 1116 nucleotides and encoded a structural protein with 371 amino acids. These results are similar to previous reports for an Indian isolate. The nucleotide sequence of RNA-2 of the *MrNV* Taiwan isolate showed 97% homology with an Indian isolate by BLAST analysis. In addition, the deduced amino acid sequence of

the MrNV Taiwan isolate showed similar homology. Only five deduced amino acid substitutions were observed compared with the Indian isolate. The conserved sequences indicate that MrNV from different geographical regions are closely related.

White tail disease has been associated with MrNV and its associated XSV. Although the role of the two viruses in the development of WTD is unknown, it is hypothesized that XSV represents a new species of satellite virus (Sri Widada & Bonami 2004). Using real-time RT-PCR, these authors concluded that the higher the infection dose of MrNV, the higher the yield of both MrNV and XSV. Furthermore, the linear correlation between MrNV and XSV genome copies in infected prawns demonstrated that XSV is a satellite virus dependent on MrNV (Zhang, Wang, Yuan, Li, Zhang, Bonami & Shi 2006). The present study demonstrated MrNV infection in WTD-infected PL of freshwater prawns in Taiwan. The same specimens also showed XSV co-infection as demonstrated by RT-PCR and *in situ* hybridization (data not shown). The pathogenicity of MrNV and the associated XSV virus and their relationship to WTD merit further study.

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*Received: 30 November 2006*

*Revision received: 13 July 2007*

*Accepted: 2 August 2007*