ENGINEERING 2’O-mRNA METHYLTRANSFERASES FOR INDUSTRIAL BIOCATALYSIS

Pierre-Yves Colin, Department of Biochemical Engineering, University College London, Gordon Street, London, WC1H 0AH, UK
p.colin@ucl.ac.uk
Mary Stahley, Alexion Pharmaceuticals, 100 College St, New Haven, CT 06510, USA
Jared Davis, Alexion Pharmaceuticals, 100 College St, New Haven, CT 06510, USA
Paul A. Dalby, Department of Biochemical Engineering, University College London, Gordon Street, London, WC1H 0AH, UK

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Eukaryotic messenger RNA (mRNA) are universally modified at their 5’ end into a cap 0 structure consisting of an N7-methylguanosine and an inverted 5’-5’ triphosphate bridge linking the penultimate nucleoside. Multicellular eukaryotes possess the capacity to further modify this cap by 2’O-methylating the ribose of the penultimate nucleotide producing a so-called cap 1 structure\(^1\). This methylation seems to be a molecular signature for the discrimination between self and non-self mRNA\(^2\). In order to escape the innate immune system of the infected cell, some viruses have also evolved the ability to methylate their cap structures\(^1\). By analogy, therapeutic mRNAs must be non-immunogenic in order to restore or supplement the function of altered genes by mRNA-based therapy\(^3\). In this context, we propose to exploit the capacity of *Vaccinia virus* to produce non-immunogenic mRNAs. More specifically, VP39 is a 39 kDa enzyme directly involved in the mRNAs’ post-transcriptional modifications. It catalyses the 2’O-methylation in the 5’ cap structure producing the cap 1 mRNA and acts by heterodimerisation as a processivity factor with the poly(A) RNA polymerase\(^4\). However, the low expression level of VP39 in *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) as well as its low in vitro catalytic efficiency have so far limited its use for industrial biocatalysis.

Here, the two above-mentioned limitations are tackled by complementary approaches: \textit{i}) we use a Split-GFP\(^5\) strategy coupled with ultrahigh throughput screening to select for higher soluble expression in *E. coli* and \textit{ii}) we design smart libraries seeking to directly improve the catalytic turnover of the enzyme.