

METHODS IN MOLECULAR BIOLOGY

Series Editor
John M. Walker
School of Life Sciences
University of Hertfordshire
Hatfield, Hertfordshire, AL10 9AB, UK

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Animal Endo-siRNAs

Methods and Protocols

Edited by

Andreas Werner

RNA Biology Group, Institute for Cell and Molecular Biosciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK

 **Humana Press**

Editor

Andreas Werner
RNA Biology Group, Institute for Cell
and Molecular Biosciences
Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK

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Preface

Short interfering RNAs (siRNAs) are widely used in biomedical research to modulate gene expression in a wide spectrum of cell types. The fact that *exogenous* siRNAs elicit a predictable effect when transfected into a cell, usually the knock down of a specific target mRNA, suggests that endogenous pathways utilizing *endogenous* siRNAs are in place. These short RNA oligonucleotides, now called endo-siRNAs, however, proved a rather elusive species in mammalian cells. Only the recently developed RNAseq technologies provided sufficient sequencing depth to comprehensively demonstrate and map endo-siRNAs in vertebrate animal systems. Yet, their biological role is still controversial. In non-vertebrates such as *Caenorhabditis elegans* and the fruit fly *Drosophila melanogaster* the molecular basics of endo-siRNAs are well established, both with regard to their molecular mechanism of synthesis and their biological function(s). As a consequence, researchers from separate research communities may define the term “endo-siRNA” in different ways.

The generally low expression level of endo-siRNAs in specific tissues and their close resemblance to breakdown products of endogenous cellular RNAs represent formidable challenges in this field. Moreover, detection of endo-siRNAs often involves reverse transcription, a step that produces low levels of false positive signals when strand specificity is of experimental importance—which is the case in studies focusing on endo-siRNAs. These difficulties emphasize the importance of established highly sensitive protocols to monitor small RNAs, specifically strategies for high-throughput sequencing, array technologies, and northern blotting (*see* Chapters 8–11 in this book). A further important consideration in the research of endo-siRNAs is the choice of model systems. As indicated above, *C. elegans* is by far the best established model system to study endo-siRNAs: Here, they have distinct structural features (length and defined first base, i.e., 26G siRNAs) and their regulatory role in gene expression is well documented (*see* Chapters 6 and 7 in this book). In the fruit fly *Drosophila* the synthesis of endo-siRNAs involves a specific Dicer molecule (Dicer2) and the pathway is essential to ensure normal fly development under perturbed environmental conditions (*see* Chapters 4 and 5 in this book). However, in vertebrates endo-siRNAs have only recently been detected and their biological role is unclear.

The aim of this book is to present a variety of approaches to investigate endo-siRNAs. Many of the protocols are generally applicable to study short RNAs expressed at a low level. Others highlight model systems that are particularly suitable to investigate specific aspects of endo-siRNAs, their synthesis, their genomics, or regulatory role. Unfortunately, there are no “one fits for all” methods when dealing with endo-siRNAs, especially in vertebrates. Consequently, this book suggests a compilation of applicable strategies for researchers entering the field of endo-siRNAs. Importantly, the book also contains many practical tips that are absent in standard lab manuals. In that sense, I hope the different contributions stimulate research and progress in the field of endo-siRNAs.

To conclude, I would like to sincerely thank all the contributors who shared their knowledge and experience and took their time and effort to realize the book on endo-siRNAs. Moreover, special thanks go to all the helpful individuals who assisted the preparation of this book.

Newcastle, UK

Andreas Werner

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Contributors

- SAMMER ALNUMEIR • *RNA Biology Group, Institute for Cell and Molecular Biosciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK*
- CHRISTOPHE ANTONIEWSKI • *Laboratoire de Biologie du Développement, Drosophila Genetics and Epigenetics, CNRS UMR 7622 and University Paris 6 Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris, France*
- MARIUS VAN DEN BEEK • *Drosophila Genetics and Epigenetics, Université Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris, France*
- MARK CARLILE • *Faculty of Applied Sciences, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK*
- CLÉMENT CARRÉ • *Drosophila Genetics and Epigenetics, Université Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris, France*
- LONG CHEN • *John Curtin School of Medical Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*
- JANE E. DAHLSTROM • *John Curtin School of Medical Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*
- CAIO DAMSKI • *Biotechnology and Biomedical Sciences, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*
- MARTIN DUFVA • *DTU Nanotech, Technical University of Denmark, Lyngby, Denmark*
- KATHARINA ELMER • *Gene Center and Department of Biochemistry, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany*
- KLAUS FÖRSTEMANN • *Gene Center and Department of Biochemistry, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany*
- MONIKA GULLEROVA • *Sir William Dunn School of Pathology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK*
- SARAH E. HALL • *Department of Biology, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA*
- SUNG-JUN HAN • *Drug Biology Group, Institut Pasteur Korea, Seongnam-Si, Gyeonggi-Do, South Korea*
- STEPHANIE HELFER • *Gene Center and Department of Biochemistry, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany*
- KIM HOLMSTRØM • *Bioneer A/S, Hørsholm, Denmark*
- DAVID T. HUMPHREYS • *Molecular, Structural and Computational Biology Division, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, Darlinghurst, Australia*
- CRAIG P. HUNTER • *Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA*
- GYORGY HUTVAGNER • *Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, Centre of Health Technologies, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia*
- JINGMIN JIN • *Division of RNA Biology, New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA, USA*
- BINO JOHN • *Department of Computational and Systems Biology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA, USA*
- SIMON P. KEAM • *Faculty of Engineering and Information Technology, Centre of Health Technologies, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia*

- NOORA KOTAJA • *Department of Physiology, Institute of Biomedicine, University of Turku, Turku, Finland*
- NELSON C. LAU • *Department of Biology, Rosenstiel Center of Basic Biomedical Sciences, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA*
- YOUNG SIK LEE • *College of Life Sciences and Biotechnology, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea*
- ZHIHUA LI • *Department of Computational and Systems Biology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA, USA*
- DO-HWAN LIM • *College of Life Sciences and Biotechnology, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea*
- TERESA T. LIU • *Department of Computational and Systems Biology, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, Pittsburgh, PA, USA*
- LARRY A. McREYNOLDS • *Division of RNA Biology, New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA, USA*
- OLIVER MEIKAR • *Department of Physiology, Institute of Biomedicine, University of Turku, Turku, Finland*
- MILIJANA MIRKOVIC-HÖSLE • *Gene Center and Department of Biochemistry, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Munich, Germany*
- KEVIN V. MORRIS • *Biotechnology and Biomedical Sciences, The University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia; Molecular and Experimental Medicine, The Scripps Research Institute, La Jolla, CA, USA*
- CHUN-TAEK OH • *Drug Biology Group, Institut Pasteur Korea, Seongnam-Si, Gyeonggi-Do, South Korea*
- MARIA C. OW • *Department of Biology, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA*
- DANNY RANGASAMY • *John Curtin School of Medical Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*
- PHILIP K. SHIU • *Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA*
- ANDREW SOBALA • *Department of Infectious Diseases, King's College London School of Medicine, London, UK*
- MARTIN JENSEN SØE • *Bioneer A/S, Hørsholm, Denmark*
- CATHERINE M. SUTER • *Molecular, Structural and Computational Biology Division, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, Darlinghurst, Australia*
- ANDREAS WERNER • *RNA Biology Group, Institute for Cell and Molecular Biosciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK*
- JIMMY J. ZHUANG • *Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA*