Determination of the distribution of lentogenic vaccine and virulent Newcastle disease virus antigen in the oviduct of SPF and commercial hen using immunohistochemistry

Dauda G. Bwala a,c,⇑, Sarah Clift b, Neil M. Duncan b, Shahn P.R. Bisschop a, Fasina F. Oludayo a

⇑ Corresponding author at: Virology Division, National Veterinary Research Institute, PMB 01, Vom, Plateau State 930010, Nigeria. Tel.: +234 08137755661. E-mail address: dgbwala@yahoo.com (D.G. Bwala).

Keywords:
GPMV
Hens
Immunohistochemistry
La Sota vaccine
Newcastle disease

a b s t r a c t

The control of Newcastle disease (ND) in South Africa has proved difficult since 2002 following the introduction of lineage 5d/VIIId Newcastle disease virus (NDV) strain (‘‘goose paramyxovirus’’ – GPMV) to which commercially available ND vaccines appeared less effective. Most of the ND infections, even in fully vaccinated hens were characterized consistently by a drop in egg production. In this study, commercial and SPF hens-in-lay were vaccinated with La Sota vaccine and challenged with a GPMV isolate. Immunohistochemical labeling was used to determine the distribution of viral antigen in the oviduct of the hens. Following reports that cloacal vaccination offered better protection against egg production losses than the oro-nasal route, the efficacy of cloacal and ocular routes of vaccination against challenge were compared. Results showed that La Sota vaccine offered birds 100% protection against the virulent ND (GPMV) virus challenge from clinical disease and death, but not against infection and replication of the GPMV, as birds showed varying degrees of macropathology. Histopathology of the oviduct of infected birds revealed multifocal lymphocytic inflammation in the interstitium as well as mild glandular ectasia and mild edema. Finely granular NDV-specific immunolabeling was demonstrated in the cytoplasm of epithelial cells and mononuclear (lymphohistiocytic) cells in the interstitium of the oviduct. Both vaccine and virulent GPMV showed greatest tropism for the uterus (versus the magnum and isthmus). There was no clear difference in the protection of the oviduct and in the distribution of oviductal GPMV antigens between the two routes of vaccination.

1. Introduction

Newcastle disease (ND) is a highly contagious and widespread disease of avian species causing severe economic losses in domestic poultry, especially chickens (Alexander, 2000). This disease is still one of the most important in poultry production worldwide, and remains a serious problem in spite of control measures, including vaccination applied since the 1950s (Czeglédi et al., 2006). Vaccination as a control measure has been used to keep the disease under control in most countries where poultry is raised commercially and where the disease is endemic (Alexander, 2001). However, several reports had indicated that the sub-optimal performance of commercially available ND vaccines against virulent Newcastle disease virus (NDV) exists (Burridge et al., 1975; Kapczynski and King, 2005; Miller et al., 2007).

Immunohistochemistry (IHC), as a diagnostic tool has been used to diagnose and study the pathogenesis of Newcastle disease in tissues from various avian species (Lockaby et al., 1993; Ojok and Brown, 1996; Al-Garib et al., 2003; Oldoni et al., 2005). Generally regarded as a fairly sensitive alternative to virus isolation (the gold standard in Newcastle disease diagnosis) and serology, IHC offers a rapid means of identifying various pathogens, including viruses (OIE, 2010). IHC is performed on formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tissues and in many cases viral antigen can be detected in autolyzed tissues. The advantage is that diagnosis can still be made in cases where fresh sera or tissues are unavailable (Lockaby et al., 1993; Shi et al., 2001). Its diagnostic sensitivity and specificity is also comparable to those of RT-PCR and in-situ hybridization (Wakamatsu et al., 2007). Similarly, IHC has been found to be more sensitive in early detection of Newcastle disease viral antigen in...
visceral tissues of birds within 2 days of infection. However, no statistical significant difference exists between the probability of diagnosing Newcastle disease by virus isolation and immunohistochemistry in tissues generally (Kuiken et al., 1999). Despite the fact that virulent strains of NDV are known to induce pathology in the reproductive tract of infected poultry, only two prior studies looked at the reproductive pathology associated with NDV (Biswal and Morrill, 1954; Rao et al., 2002).

As Kapczynski and King (2005) and Czeglédi et al. (2006) had previously proved that the currently available vaccines induced better protection against viruses that were isolated in past epizootics (1950s) than against most of the viruses currently circulating in the poultry industry, and field observations suggested suboptimal performance of commercially available vaccines in the field, the efficacy study of the commercially available ND vaccines against infection by currently circulating ND viruses was undertaken. This study also determined the pattern of tissue tropism by ND (vaccine and virulent ND virus) in the reproductive tract of laying hens following viral introduction into the host through vaccination or challenge. This work also disproved the assumption that superior immunity against ND might be achieved in the oviduct through cloacal application of ND vaccine.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Virus

The challenge virus used was a local (South African) velogenic Newcastle disease virus (NDV) strain, but locally known as goose paramyxovirus (GPMV). The Mean Death Time (MDT) and intracerebral pathogenicity index (ICPI) were determined previously to be 48 h and 1.85, respectively. Based on polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and molecular sequencing, it was classified as highly pathogenic and of the genotype 5d/Vild (GenBank Ref. # FJ985978). The virus challenge dose used was 10^{10.5} EID_{50}/0.1 mL/bird.

2.2. Experimental design

Eighty two (82) week-old specific pathogen-free (SPF) White Leghorns (n = 40) and 52 week-old commercial Hyline Brown hens (n = 40) were procured from two reputable poultry establishments and assigned randomly into eight groups (groups 1–4 for SPF and groups 5–8 for commercial hens; Table 1a) of 10 hens per isolator/group. 12 extra SPF birds were also procured for the control experiment (Table 1a). The birds were allowed to acclimatize for 2 days after which they were vaccinated with NEW VAC-LS\textsuperscript{®} Newcastle disease vaccine (La Sota strain, live virus – Forte Dodge, Brazil; FD6033A; Batch No: 002/07) at the manufacturer’s recommended dose. Birds in groups 1, 3, 5 and 7 were vaccinated via the cloacal route while birds in groups 2, 4, 6 and 8 were vaccinated via eyedrop. A chicken each was removed from each group and euthanized for pathological examination on days 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 post-vaccination (PV). On day 12 PV, the remaining birds were challenged via eyedrop with the NDV challenge virus. Ten White Leghorn SPF birds were used as the positive control. The positive control birds were not vaccinated but challenged with the same NDV at the same dose and by the same route. Two SPF birds were kept as negative control birds. They were neither vaccinated nor challenged. Serological responses were monitored in the groups through the use of NDV ELISA and manufacturers instruction (Newcastle Disease Virus Antibody Test Kit – FlockChek\textsuperscript{®}; IDEXX Laboratories Inc., Maine, USA).

2.3. Clinical observations, euthanasia and tissue sampling

All birds were observed twice daily throughout the trial, at intervals of not less than 8 h. One bird from each of the eight groups was humanely euthanized on days 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 post-vaccination (PV) and post-challenge (PC) and the various parts of the oviduct sectioned. Birds were monitored according to the Poultry Reference Centre’s Standard Operating Procedure (PAS/PRC/035). Euthanasia was done by asphyxiation with carbon dioxide (CO\textsubscript{2}) according to the Poultry Reference Centre’s Standard Operating Procedure (SOP 0104) which was previously reviewed and approved by the Animal Use and Care Committee (AUCC); University of Pretoria.

All the birds were necropsied immediately after death (due to challenge or by euthanasia). Organs were examined for signs of ND such as tracheitis, necrohemorrhagic foci in cecal tonsils, proventriculi, etc. One to two centimeters (1–2 cm) of each part of the oviduct (magnum, isthmus and uterus) were collected in 10\% neutral buffered formalin (NBF) in pre-labeled containers and allowed to fix for 24 h. Experimental birds were identified by routes of vaccination, date of euthanasia and the tissue sampled. At sectioning and histological processing of tissues, sample (S) numbers and the year of processing were added to the earlier identifications. Date/days of euthanasia were identified as: 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 PV (post-vaccination) and 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 PC (post-challenge), while organs were identified as either uterus, magnum or isthmus.

2.4. Histopathology

Tissues fixed in NBF were routinely processed into paraffin blocks, and 4 μm-thick sections were cut for hematoxylin-and-eosin staining (HE) according to the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of the Histopathology Laboratory, Pathology Section, Department of Paraclinical Sciences, University of Pretoria (Bancroft and Gamble, 2002).

2.5. Immunohistochemistry

Three-micrometer thick paraffin-embedded tissue sections were cut, mounted on positively charged Superfrost\textsuperscript{®} Plus glass slides, dried overnight in a 58 °C oven, and labeled using a standard IHC protocol (California Animal Health and Food Safety, Paramyxo-
counterstained (for 1–2 min) with Mayer’s hematoxylin and covered with Balsam oil for permanent record purposes.

For negative reagent control purposes, a mAb against Wesselsbron disease replaced the NDV mAb, keeping all other variables constant including the concentration and incubation time of the NDV mAb. This was done to assess the specificity of the NDV mAb.

2.6. The nature of positive labeling and target cells for NDV

Pattern of positive labeling in NDV IHC is usually stippled to granular, red to brownish depending upon the intensity of counterstaining, while labeling are mostly intracytoplasmic or not clearly cell-associated. Target cells are mostly epithelial cells (surface and glandular), mononuclear cells in the interstitium and in lymphoplasmacytic foci – possibly histocytes and lymphoid cells. Proper identification of the mononuclear cells will need double-immunolabeling procedures.

2.7. Slide examination and statistics

Labeled slides were examined at 400× magnifications, using an Olympus BH-2 light microscope. Positive labeling was noted either intracellularly or extracellularly (not clearly cell-associated) in the oviduct. Per section, one “hot spot” was identified (defined as the field with the greatest amount of immunolabeling) and within the “hot spot”, cells were counted and grading was performed according to Brown et al. (1999) as follows (Table 1b):

The numerical scores of 0, 1, 2, and 3 were entered into an Excel Spreadsheet (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, Washington, USA) and added to get a cumulative score for each group. Mean scores for groups and vaccination routes including standard deviations (see Tables 2b and 3b) were calculated at 95% confidence level by selecting parametric methods and using Graphpad Quickcalcs® (Free Online Statistical Calculator, 2010). The different routes of

vaccination were compared for each section of the oviduct and the whole oviduct using unpaired Student t-test and significant result was fixed at p-value of 0.05. Shapiro–Wilk test was used to test for normality of data with a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.2620 and a critical value of 0.9715 (Harwell et al., 1992; Lix et al., 1996).

3. Results

3.1. Clinical signs and mortality

All vaccinated birds appeared healthy post-vaccination and post-challenge. However, there appeared to be a transitory drop in egg production immediately following vaccination. Two birds (one SPF and one commercial) died on day 2 PV from causes not associated with the trial and were therefore not included in the analysis. Subsequent to challenge, egg production dropped sharply to almost no production and was associated with the production of abnormally formed eggs. Given the small number of birds in the trial and the removal of birds on a daily basis for sampling – these results were not statistically significant, but were consistent with the expected effect of the vaccination and the challenge on egg production. There was no death from ND-related causes.

The positive control birds (unvaccinated but challenged) showed ND-related clinical signs on day 1 PC. Four of the birds had ruffled feathers and passed greenish feces on day 1 PC. Two birds had anorexic at the second observation on day 2 PC. By the second day of observation, remaining eight (100%) positive control birds appeared depressed and showed ND-related clinical signs on day 1 PC. Four of the birds showed ND-related clinical signs on day 1 PC. Five more of the positive control birds died on day 4 PC, one on day 5 PC, and by the morning of day 6 PC, all the positive control birds were euthanized according to the research design while the remaining eight (100%) positive control birds appeared depressed and anorexic at the second observation on day 2 PC. By the second observation on day 3 PC, one positive control bird was found dead.

Table 2a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day Euth</th>
<th>Sample No.</th>
<th>Uterus</th>
<th>Magnum</th>
<th>Isthmus</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2PV(6)</td>
<td>CV5 S2060-08</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2PV(6)</td>
<td>CV7 S2061-08</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2PV(6)</td>
<td>EV6 S2064-08</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
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<td>EV8 S2065-08</td>
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<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>++</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4PV(7)</td>
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<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
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<tr>
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<td>+</td>
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<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>10PV(10)</td>
<td>EV6 S2203-08</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
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<td>EV8 S2204-08</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2b

Statistical analysis of mean scores for experimental chickens post-vaccination.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oviduct (all parts)</th>
<th>Uterus</th>
<th>Magnum</th>
<th>Isthmus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CV</td>
<td>EV</td>
<td>CV</td>
<td>EV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean score</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CV is cloacal-vaccinated birds and EV is eyedrop-vaccinated birds.

were dead from viral challenge-associated causes. Egg production dropped to 0% by day 5 PC.

The two negative control birds (neither vaccinated nor challenged) did not manifest any signs of disease throughout the vaccination trial period, nor was egg production affected.

3.2. Serology (ELISA)

Prior to vaccination, all the SPF experimental birds had no detectable antibody to NDV while the commercial birds had titers of between 2^3 and 2^17. Post-vaccination titers of the SPF birds that were bled remained at undetectable levels for the first six days PV, and gradually rose to between 2^5 and 2^8 and sometimes ≥ 2^12, an indication of seroconversion in the SPF groups (data not shown). For the commercial birds (PV COMM), the PV titers fluctuated between 2^11 and 2^16 (data not shown).

Post-challenge, the antibody titers in SPF birds were between 2^3 and 2^16 while they fluctuated between 2^8 and 2^18 in commercial birds.

3.3. Gross pathology

None of the birds euthanized after vaccination showed any gross pathology.

Eight days after challenge one of the vaccinated hens had necrohemorrhagic foci in the cecal tonsils, while five hens showed similar lesions on day 10 post-challenge. Four of the affected hens had been vaccinated by the ocular route and two by the cloacal route. Four of the five hens that had necrohemorrhagic foci in cecal tonsils on day 10 PC were commercial hens with a history of multiple ND vaccinations, while only one was an SPF hen that had received only a single ND vaccination.

At necropsy, two of the SPF hens were found to have uterine adenocarcinoma which made it impossible to sample the oviduct; these birds had to be removed from the trial. Seven others SPF hens appeared degenerated. Similar lesions were observed in the last bird that died on day 6 PC. In this bird there was also severe splenomegaly due to widespread hemorrhage.

3.4. Histopathology

Histopathological findings in all the three sections of oviducts (PV and PC) were variable but the lesions were generally mild in nature and mostly observed in the oviduct of post-challenge birds. They included: mild interstitial edema; focal to dispersed interstitial accumulations of lymphocytes and plasma cells (Fig. 1a); sporadic glandular ectasia with occasional pink granular intraluminal content (Fig. 1a); mild interstitial fibrosis with noticeable, widespread glandular drop-out/atrophy. The listed changes were observed throughout the oviduct but were most pronounced in the uterus with only few of these lesions seen in the magnum and the isthmus. Sections of the oviduct from the positive control birds revealed similar but more severe lesions compared to those observed in the oviducts of the post-challenge birds.

3.5. Immunohistochemistry (IHC)

Sections were obtained from a total of 83 birds – (38 birds post-vaccination, 38 birds post-challenge, two negative control birds and five positive control birds, Tables 2a and 3a). The use of the mAb to investigate viral distribution/tropism in the reproductive tract resulted in the observation of both intracellular and extracellular distribution in the uterine content (or not clearly cell-associated) NDV-specific positive labeling, visualized as red-orange to tan-colored, finely granular/stippled labeling that tended to be focally clustered (Figs. 1b–d). Of the 76 trial hens (excluding the controls), 56 (73.68%) were positive and 20 (26.32%) were negative for NDV-specific labeling in their oviducts. A total of 20/38 (52.63%) hens euthanized post-vaccination, and 36/38 (94.74%) euthanized post-challenge were positive for NDV-specific labeling in their oviducts. Intracellular labeling was clearly intracytoplasmic (Fig. 1c and d) with a definite tropism for epithelial cells (surface and glandular) throughout the oviduct (Fig. 1c and d). Positive labeling was also frequently associated with mononuclear cells (macrophages/histocytes and/or lymphocytes) within focal or dispersed mononuclear infiltrates throughout the oviductal interstitium (Fig. 1a–d). Occasional fibroblast-
like connective tissues cells also appeared to contain NDV-specific labeling.

The distribution of NDV-specific positive labeling within the oviduct was similar for both the vaccinated and challenged birds. However, specific labeling was more prevalent in the oviduct of the challenged hens compared to the hens that were only vaccinated (Tables 2a and 3a). Positive labeling was not observed in any part of the oviduct from the negative control hens. In addition, no specific labeling was observed in sections of the oviducts from positive hens where the NDV mAb was replaced with the mAb against Wesselsbron disease virus. These results affirm the specificity of the NDV mAb utilized in the present study.

3.6. IHC labeling of the oviduct of hens post-vaccination (unchallenged hens)

The distribution of NDV-specific positive labeling in the oviduct of commercial and SPF hens vaccinated with La Sota vaccine is presented in Table 2a. Within the 10-day post-vaccination period, positive labeling was demonstrated in the oviduct of 20 (52.63%) hens, while the oviducts of 18 (47.37%) hens were negative for NDV-specific labeling, majority of which are SPF hens (10 SPF hens). Of the 20 positive hens, 11 (57.89%) were commercial and 9 (47.37%) were SPF. The mean range IHC labeling scores for the uterus, magnum and isthmus, increased from 0.6 to 1; 0.2 to 0.63 and 0.2 to 0.5, respectively from day 2PV to day 10PV (Fig. 4). The greatest amount of labeling was consistently observed in the uterus, 44.74% (17/38), followed by the magnum 31.58% (12/38) and the isthmus 23.68% (9/38) (Table 2a). Specific labeling was observed in the oviduct of commercial hens as early as day 2 PV. The mean range IHC labeling scores for the uterus, magnum and isthmus, increased from 0.6 to 1; 0.2 to 0.63 and 0.2 to 0.5, respectively from day 2PV to day 10PV (Fig. 4). The greatest amount of labeling was consistently observed in the uterus, 44.74% (17/38), followed by the magnum 31.58% (12/38) and the isthmus 23.68% (9/38) (Table 2a). Specific labeling was observed in the oviduct of commercial hens as early as day 2 PV. The SPF birds first showed NDV-specific positive labeling in oviductal tissues on day 4 PV averaging 0.25, and the mean score increased gradually to 3.0 on day 8 PV before it declined to an average of 2.25 by 10 PV (Figs. 2 and 3).

Cloacally-vaccinated SPF birds showed slightly more positive IHC labeling in the oviduct compared to SPF birds vaccinated via...
Hens were not significantly higher in the uterus (cumulative score of 163 versus 62 respectively). Scores in SPF positive labeling scores were also higher than after vaccination, but this higher than the proportion positive after vaccination, but generally they remained high with mean scores of above 0.5 throughout the 10 days post-challenge period (Fig. 4). Positive labeling in the uterus was more extensive than in the magnum and isthmus (Table 3a). This pattern was maintained throughout the post-challenge period.

4. Discussion

In this study, vaccination with La Sota protected all the trial birds (both SPF and commercial laying hens) from clinical disease and death related to NDV challenge using GPMV. The fact that most of the birds (immunologically naïve SPF and routinely vaccinated commercial laying hens) had high NDV antibody titer after vaccination and prior to challenge indicated that seroconversion had occurred. The unvaccinated control birds were not protected and all died from NDV within six days post-challenge. They displayed clinical signs and lesions that are consistent with velogenic NDV infection in non-immunized birds (Biswal and Morrill, 1954; McMerran and McCracken, 1988; Parede and Young, 1990; Hamid et al., 1991; Ojok and Brown, 1996).

Biswal and Morrill (1954) and Rao et al. (2002) showed that the reproductive tract is targeted by both vaccine strain and field isolates of NDV. Therefore, the mild temporary drop in egg production witnessed post-vaccination in this study indicated that vaccination with La Sota vaccine did have a transient negative effect on egg production. Vaccine and vaccination have been reported as “stressors” and can affect Follicular Stimulating Hormone/Luteniz- ing Hormone (FSH/LH) secretion (hormonal control) possibly through the stress-corticosterone pathway (Mészáros, 1983; Allan and Borland, 1979). The findings in this study agreed with this postulation.

The high post-challenge NDV-specific positive labeling in the tissues of the oviduct indicated that the infected cells could be impeded from performing their specialized functions (Sharma and Adalakha, 1995), and in this case, production of poor quality eggs could be the end results. Since both the lining and glandular epithelium of both the uterus and magnum of birds exposed to the virulent NDV challenge virus were affected, as evidenced by the presence of ND viral antigen in these tissues, the oviductal dynamics (cilia movements) and mineral balances were severely affected in the ND-infected birds (Rao et al., 2002; Holm et al., 2003).

Within the 10-day post-challenge, positive labeling was demonstrated in the oviduct of 36 (94.74%) hens, while the oviducts of 2 (5.26%) hens were negative for NDV-specific labeling. Not only was this higher than the proportion positive after vaccination, but positive labeling scores were also higher than after vaccination (cumulative score of 163 versus 62 respectively). Scores in SPF hens were not significantly higher in the uterus (p = 0.0931) and eye-drop (cumulative score of 21 versus 14 respectively, p-value = 0.5188). A similar bias was observed in the commercial hens (cumulative score of 17 versus 11 respectively, p-value = 0.4338). These trends were not statistically significant in the uterus (p = 0.8621); magnum (p = 0.6146) and the isthmus (p = 0.1511) of commercial hens.

3.7. IHC labeling of the oviduct of hens post-challenge (challenged hens)

Within the 10-day post-challenge, positive labeling was demonstrated in the oviduct of 36 (94.74%) hens, while the oviducts of 2 (5.26%) hens were negative for NDV-specific labeling. Not only was this higher than the proportion positive after vaccination, but positive labeling scores were also higher than after vaccination (cumulative score of 163 versus 62 respectively). Scores in SPF hens were not significantly higher in the uterus (p = 0.0931) and eye-drop (cumulative score of 21 versus 14 respectively, p-value = 0.5188). A similar bias was observed in the commercial hens (cumulative score of 17 versus 11 respectively, p-value = 0.4338). These trends were not statistically significant in the uterus (p = 0.8621); magnum (p = 0.6146) and the isthmus (p = 0.1511) of commercial hens.
by ND-infected birds through inadequate production of steroid hormones was confirmed in this study as challenged control birds had follicular degeneration and yolk resorption which lead to the production of soft-shelled and shell-less eggs with watery albumen; a similar reports had been presented previously by Biswal and Morrill (1954) and McFerran and McCracken (1988). Drop in egg production and degeneration of follicles which lead to arrested ovulation and delayed or no-oviposition, as recorded in the positive control hens have been reported as a consistent feature of infection with all pathotypes of ND (Biswal and Morrill, 1954; Al-Garib et al., 2003).

Other studies have suggested that if properly applied, La Sota vaccine confer greater protection against NDV challenge than other lentogenic ND vaccines such as Ulster 2C, B1 and F (Thornton et al., 1980; Rehmani, 1996). The level of protection offered by La Sota vaccine in SPF and commercial hens in the present study concurs with findings from previous studies although no effort was made to compare La Sota with other lentogenic vaccines in this study (Parede and Young, 1990; Beard et al., 1993; Kapczynski and King, 2005; Miller et al., 2007; Perozo et al., 2008). A single application of La Sota ND vaccine conferred protection against clinical ND in the present study since none of the immunologically naïve SPF birds manifested clinical signs or died after challenge (Rehmani, 1996). However, whether a single La Sota vaccination will protects against other more virulent NDV apart from the one used in this study cannot be confirmed in this report.

Previous studies had indicated that vaccination of poultry against ND can only protect birds from the more serious consequence of virulent NDV infection (severe clinical signs and mortality) but not infection and replication of the virulent strains of the virus (Parede and Young, 1990; Hamid et al., 1991; Alexander, 2001; Kapczynski and King, 2005; Miller et al., 2007). Indeed, in the present study, despite the level of protection afforded by vaccination, challenge virus did infect and replicate in host tissues and organs as was indicated by the gross pathology observed in clinically healthy challenged birds necropsied at the termination of the trial.

In this study, intraclcloal and intraocular routes of vaccination were compared in order to assess their effectiveness in conferring protection against infection and decreased egg production. Though previous reports have shown that the route of vaccination can influence the level of protection conferred by the same vaccine against challenge (Kojonok et al., 1977; Rehmani, 1996), the present study showed no significant difference in protection of the oviduct against NDV infection, between the two application routes. However, slightly more NDV-specific positive labeling was observed in the oviducts of cloacally-vaccinated (CV) birds, an indication that the vaccine virus can infect and replicate in tissues without a corresponding higher antibody titer. This observation could not be linked to superior protection from challenge, in this study. Furthermore, earlier works indicated that NDV antigen cannot be detected earlier than 3 days PV (Rao et al., 2002; Perozo et al., 2008), viral antigen was evidently demonstrated on day 2 PV in commercial birds (probably this was associated with prior NDV vaccination) and on day 4 PV in SPF birds (Table 2a).

In this study, more vaccine and the virulent challenge viral antigen was detected in sections of uterus than in sections of magnum and isthmus. Biswal and Morrill (1954) had confirmed that functional damage was more severe in the uterus than in other parts of the oviduct in past studies. The magnum appeared to be more susceptible than the isthmus region, a possible reason for the poor albumen quality of eggs laid by ND-infected birds. The distribution of NDV antigen in the oviduct of trial hens in the present study confirmed that the reproductive tract of vaccinated birds is susceptible to viral infection and replication. Target cells included lining and glandular epithelial cells, fibroblast-like cells in the interstitium and mononuclear cells (macrophages/lymphocytes and lymphocytes) in the oviductal tissues (Fig. 1d). The fibroblast-like and mononuclear cells could not be identified with certainty in the present study, because double-staining immunodetection techniques were not applied to facilitate the conclusive identification of these cells. However, epithelial cells, fibroblast, macrophages and lymphoid cells have been identified as target cells for infection and replication of NDV by other workers (Lockaby et al., 1993; Lam et al., 1996; Ojok and Brown, 1996; Al-Garib et al., 2003; Oldoni et al., 2005). Other workers have reported variable pathology in the oviduct of ND-infected birds, ranging from infiltration of inflammatory cells and the formation of lymphoid aggregates, to degenerative changes in ciliated epithelium, atrophy and necrosis of glandular epithelium and edema of submesothelium in most of the tissues (Biswal and Morrill, 1954; Rao et al., 2002).

In conclusion, the fact that ND viruses can infect well-immunized flocks remains a continuing threat to the poultry industry. The susceptibility and colonization of the reproductive tract by both vaccine and virulent field NDV isolates and the resulting pathologies from the activity of the infecting virus explains the effect of NDV on egg production. The development of improved vaccines against ND that will more effectively reduce the infectivity and shedding of virulent viruses during infection in vaccinated flocks will be essential for the long term control of this disease.

Acknowledgment

We wish to thank the Management of the Poultry Reference Centre, University of Pretoria for funding this research and National Veterinary Research Institute, Vom-Nigeria for granting the permission for the principal investigator to undertake further study. We also want to thank Dr. Celia Abolnik (Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Institute, Pretoria) Antonette van Wyk (Poultry Reference Center, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria) and Mrs Marie Smit (Immunohistochemistry Laboratory, University of Pretoria) for technical support.

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