



**Development of antiviral therapies for chronic hepatitis
B virus infection**

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**A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
School of Molecular and Biomedical Science
The University of Adelaide
Australia**

July 2009

To my mother and father

*for giving me the opportunity to be who I am and for your boundless love,
care and support*

&

To my brothers and sisters

for your love, care and for being such a strength

Publications and presentations resulting from this thesis

Manuscripts in preparation:

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

Faseeha Noordeen, Qiao Qiao, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of amphipathic DNA polymers against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection.

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Qiao Qiao, Yuao Zhu, Katyna Borroto-Esoda and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of tenofovir and emtricitabine against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection.

Oral presentations:

Faseeha Noordeen, Qiao Qiao, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. 5th Australian Group for Virology Group (AVG) Meeting, Mantra Erskine Beach Resort, Lorne, Victoria, Australia, December 2009.

Faseeha Noordeen, Qiao Qiao, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. International Meeting of the Molecular Biology of Hepatitis B Viruses, Tours, France, August/September 2009. *This abstract was awarded a Travel Grant by HBV International Meeting organizers 2009.*

Faseeha Noordeen. Development of antiviral therapies for chronic HBV infection. Research Seminar Series, Infectious Diseases Laboratories Laboratories (IDL) Seminar Series, SA Pathology, Adelaide, South Australia, June 2009.

Faseeha Noordeen, Qiao Qiao, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. Annual Scientific Meetings of the Australian Centre for HIV and Hepatitis Virology research (ACH²), Terrigal, New South Wales, Australia, June 2009.

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Qiao Qiao, Yuao Zhu, Katyna Borroto-Esoda and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of tenofovir and emtricitabine against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. Annual Scientific Meetings of the Australian Centre for HIV and Hepatitis Virology research (ACH²), Terrigal, New South Wales, Australia, June 2009.

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Yuao Zhu, Katyna Borroto-Esoda and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of tenofovir and emtricitabine against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. International Meeting of the Molecular Biology of Hepatitis B Viruses, San Diego, California, USA, August 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen. Development of antiviral therapies for chronic HBV infection. Research Seminar Series, Infectious Diseases Laboratories Laboratories (IDL) Seminar Series, SA Pathology, Adelaide, South Australia, July 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA Polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. Annual Scientific Meetings of the Australian Centre for HIV and Hepatitis Virology research (ACH²), Barossa Valley, South Australia, June 2008. *This presentation was awarded a Ph.D. Student Research Award sponsored by the Integrated Sciences, Australia.*

Faseeha Noordeen. Development of antiviral therapies for chronic HBV infection. 2nd Ph.D. Review, School of Molecular and Biomedical Science, University of Adelaide, South Australia, February 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus infection *in vivo*. 4th Australian Group for Virology Group (AVG) Meeting, Fraser Island, Queensland, Australia, December 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. International Meeting for Molecular Biology of Hepatitis B Viruses, Rome, Italy, September 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen. Development of antiviral therapies for chronic HBV infection. Research Seminar Series, Infectious Diseases Laboratories Laboratories (IDL) Seminar Series, SA Pathology, Adelaide, South Australia, July 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus infection *in vivo*. Annual Research Sessions of the Australian Society for Microbiology, Adelaide, South Australia, July 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus infection *in vivo*. Annual Scientific Workshop, Australian Centre for Hepatitis Virology (ACHV), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, May 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA Polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vitro*. Annual Scientific Workshop, Australian Centre for Hepatitis Virology (ACHV), Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, May 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen and Allison Jilbert. Is covalently closed circular DNA lost when hepatocytes divide? Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australian Centre for HIV and Hepatitis Virology (ACH²). Mantra Erskine Beach Resort, Lorne, Victoria, Australia, October 2006.

Faseeha Noordeen. Development of antiviral therapies for chronic HBV infection. 1st Ph.D. Major Review, School of Molecular and Biomedical Science, University of Adelaide, South Australia, August 2006.

Poster presentations:

Faseeha Noordeen, Qiao Qiao, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC against persistent duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. HEP DART 2009 frontiers in drug development for viral hepatitis, Hawaii, USA, December 2009.

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC for the treatment of duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. Annual Symposium of the School of Molecular and Biomedical Science, University of Adelaide, South Australia, December, 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus infection *in vitro*. Annual Symposium of the School of Molecular and Biomedical Science, University of Adelaide, South Australia, December, 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen, Arend Grosse, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Antiviral efficacy of REP 9AC for the treatment of duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vivo*. International Meeting of the Molecular Biology of Hepatitis B Viruses, San Diego, California, USA, August 2008.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Preclinical development of the amphipathic DNA polymer REP 9AC for the treatment of HBV infection. HEP DART 2007 frontiers in drug development for viral hepatitis, Lahaina, Hawaii, USA, December 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus infection *in vitro*. International Meeting for Molecular Biology of Hepatitis B Viruses, Rome, Italy, September 2007.

Faseeha Noordeen, Andrew Vaillant Jean-Marc Juteau and Allison Jilbert. Amphipathic DNA Polymers inhibit duck hepatitis B virus (DHBV) infection *in vitro*. Annual Scientific Meeting of the Australian Society for Microbiology, Adelaide, South Australia, July 2007.

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Abstract

Acute hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection is self-limiting but leaves a residual infection that can become active in an individual under conditions of immunosuppression. In chronic HBV infection, the virus persistently replicates in hepatocytes and this leads to immune mediated hepatocyte damage. Chronic HBV infection, which occurs worldwide in more than 400 million people, is associated with liver disease, fibrosis, cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) (Hepatitis B Fact Sheet 2009). There is a significant need for treatment intervention in chronic HBV infection.

Despite the inability to remove the virus in more than 70% of patients, current treatments for chronic HBV infection, which include interferon alpha (IFN- α) and antiviral nucleotide/nucleoside analogues (NAs), aim to reduce levels of viral replication and to prevent or at least delay the progression of disease and the development of cirrhosis and HCC. Current NA therapy involves monotherapy with a conventional NA as a single antiviral agent (Sasadeusz *et al.* 2007). In the recent past, poor response to monotherapies with NAs and adverse effects to IFN- α have stimulated research into novel therapeutic strategies and enhancing the efficacy of existing NA therapy.

The duck HBV (DHBV) in its natural host, the Pekin duck (*Anas domestica platyrhynchos*), has been used as an animal model to study treatment outcomes and antiviral studies at the pre-clinical level. Much of what is known about viral replication and outcomes of hepadnavirus infection has been discovered using the DHBV model (Schultz *et al.* 2004; Zoulim *et al.* 2008) and several immunotherapeutic and antiviral studies have been performed recently in our laboratory (Foster *et al.* 2003; Miller *et al.* 2004; Foster *et al.* 2005; Miller *et al.* 2006a; Miller *et al.* 2006b; Miller *et al.* 2008).

The studies described in this Ph.D. thesis focused on the development and testing of novel therapies for chronic HBV infection using the DHBV model. The first approach involved the use of novel amphipathic DNA polymers (APDPs) developed by REPLICor Inc. The second approach tested a combination of NAs developed by Gilead Sciences Pty. Ltd.

APDPs developed by REPLICor Inc. have been used as a novel therapeutic approach against human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) and have been shown to inhibit HIV-1-mediated membrane fusion and HIV-1 replication in a size dependent but sequence independent manner (Vaillant *et al.* 2006). HIV-1 entry is well characterised and involves fusion of the virus to its target cells using a type 1 fusion protein. APDPs are thought to inhibit HIV-1 infection by acting as fusion inhibitors that bind to the V3 loop of the HIV-1 gp41 domain preventing its interaction with the T cell receptor, CD4.

Phosphorothioation of oligonucleotides increases their hydrophobicity (amphipathicity) and also makes them more resistant to degradation by nucleases. The amphipathicity of APDPs plays a major role in their antiviral activity. Longer APDPs with lengths of ≥ 30 bases have a greater amphipathicity and were shown to be more potent in blocking the amphipathic interactions involved in the HIV-1 mediated membrane fusion than shorter APDPs with lengths of < 30 bases (Vaillant *et al.* 2006). This novel antiviral mechanism of action of APDPs with ≥ 30 bases has future applications for therapy against infection with HIV-1 and other enveloped viruses.

In contrast to HIV, the entry mechanisms used by HBV are not well understood although HBV is thought to enter through receptor mediated endocytosis (RME). In RME fusion occurs between the virus and the cell membrane as a late event. We hypothesise that the late fusion of HBV with the cell membrane can be blocked by APDPs that are amphipathic.

As a first step in evaluating APDPs as a novel treatment for chronic HBV infection, the APDPs, REP 2006 and REP 2031 and a non-APDP, REP 2086, were tested in primary duck hepatocytes (PDH) for cytotoxicity and antiviral activity. REP 2006, a 40mer PS-ON with a completely degenerate sequence (random ATCG), REP 2031, a 40 mer PS-ON with a poly C sequence, and the non-APDP control, REP 2086, were all found to be non-cytotoxic in PDH. Treatment of PDH with REP 2006 inhibited DHBV infection at concentrations as low as 0.01 μM , while REP 2031 had a lower anti-DHBV activity. The antiviral activity of both APDPs, REP 2006 and 2031, was also found to be length and chemistry dependent and sequence independent.

Studies were then conducted to test the antiviral efficacy of REP 2006 and REP 2031 *in vivo* using 14-day-old ducks infected with 5×10^8 DHBV DNA genomes. Ducks in 4 Groups were treated with either REP 2006 or REP 2031 or the Bristol-Myers Squibb NA, entecavir (ETV), or normal saline (NS) starting from 1 day prior to DHBV infection for 15 days. REP 2006 showed an excellent anti-DHBV activity but treatment cause some side effects. In contrast, treatment of ducks with REP 2031 was well tolerated. However, REP 2031 again showed less anti-DHBV activity than REP 2006. We hypothesised that the increased side effects in the REP 2006-treated ducks were due to CpG motifs present in the random ATCG sequence (Krieg 2000; Agrawal and Kandimalla 2001; Shen *et al.* 2002; Isogawa *et al.* 2005; Wilson *et al.* 2006; Plitas *et al.* 2008; Wang *et al.* 2008). The lack of side effects with REP 2031 (which has no CpG motifs) was consistent with this hypothesis. The reason for the lower antiviral activity of REP 2031 is unclear. The subsequent testing of REP 2055 (a 40mer PS-ON with a poly AC sequence), which has no CpG motifs and also has an interrupted C nucleotide composition, showed an excellent recovery of antiviral activity without any observable side effects.

The antiviral efficacy of REP 2055 was tested *in vivo* followed by dose optimisation studies using a range of dose regimens (0.5, 2, 3, 5 and 10 mg/kg). REP 2055 demonstrated excellent anti-DHBV activity with a dose as low as 2 mg/kg body weight.

The ability of REP 2055 to prevent the rebound of DHBV infection was next tested. Treatment with REP 2055 for 14 days prevented the rebound of DHBV infection after the cessation of treatment. This effect was observed if REP 2055 treatment was initiated one day prior to, or at an early phase (4 days p.i.) of DHBV infection, and continued for 14 days. In these 2 Groups, 4 out of 5 ducks were protected from the rebound of DHBV infection.

The therapeutic efficacy and the ability of REP 2055 to prevent the rebound of DHBV infection were then tested. REP 2055 treatment (10 mg/kg) was started at a late stage of DHBV infection when the liver was fully infected and treatment was continued for 28 days. A control Group of DHBV-infected ducks treated with NS was monitored for comparison. Liver enzymes and a complete blood evaluation (CBE) were performed prior to, during, at treatment endpoint and at the end of follow up, 16 weeks after the cessation of treatment. The results showed that 56% of ducks treated with REP 2055 were protected

from rebound of DHBV infection and had developed an anti-DHBV surface antibody response, suggesting that they had resolved DHBV their infection. We concluded from this work that the APDP REP 2055 showed excellent anti-DHBV activity and has the ability to prevent the rebound of DHBV infection, making it suitable for further evaluation and possible clinical trials for the treatment of chronic HBV infection in humans.

Although the need for combination NA therapy has been suggested by many as a way to combat the development of antiviral resistance, very few studies have investigated the effectiveness of combination therapy using NAs. In a pre-clinical study using HepG2 hepatoma cells, the additive effect of adefovir (AFV) with ETV, emtricitabine (FTC), lamivudine (3TC) and telbivudine (TLB) has been reported (Delaney *et al.* 2004). AFV with all other NAs in dual combination provided an additive effect. AFV and 3TC combined had a better additive effect than other combinations (Delaney *et al.* 2004). We hypothesised that the combination of either tenofovir (TFV) or tenofovir disoproxil fumarate (TDF) and FTC is more likely to have a better therapeutic efficacy against chronic DHBV infection than either TDF or FTC alone.

As a first step the pharmacokinetics (PK) of TFV and TDF were investigated. This was followed by testing of the antiviral efficacy of TFV and FTC alone and in combination in ducks with persistent DHBV infection. PK studies of TFV and TDF showed that TFV has a half-life of 6 h when administered via the IP route whereas TDF had a half life of 4 h and required twice daily administration. TFV was chosen for the study for practical reasons of once daily administration. Next persistently DHBV infected ducks were treated daily with IP administration of 5 or 25 or 50 mg/kg of TFV or 100 or 200 mg/kg of FTC. The study showed that 5, 25 and 50 mg/kg of TFV suppressed serum levels of DHBV DNA by 3-logs compared to untreated ducks. FTC showed a dose dependent serum DHBV DNA suppression with 1-log reduction for a dose of 100 mg/kg, and a 2-log reduction for a dose of 200 mg/kg.

In the next experiment, two different combinations of TFV and FTC were tested. The combination of 5 mg/kg TFV + 200 mg/kg FTC was able to suppress levels of serum DHBV DNA by 5-logs whereas the combination of 5 mg/kg TFV + 100 mg/kg FTC reduced the levels of serum DHBV DNA by 3-logs.

In conclusion, a combination of TFV and FTC was superior to either of these drugs alone in suppressing serum DHBV DNA levels in ducks with chronic DHBV infection. Further studies are warranted to test the ability of combinations of TFV and FTC to prevent the rebound of DHBV infection.

Declaration

NAME: Faseeha Noordeen

PROGRAM: Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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DATE: 1st of July 2009.

Abbreviations

AA	amino acid/s
AFV	adefovir
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ALT	alanine amino transferase
APC	antigen presenting cells
APDP	amphipathic DNA polymer
ASHV	Arctic squirrel hepatitis virus
AST	aspartate aminotransferase
CBE	complete blood evaluation
cccDNA	covalently closed circular DNA
CDC	Centre for Disease Control
CHB	chronically HBV infected
CHBV	crane hepatitis B virus
CMI	cell mediated immune response
CMV	cytomegalo virus
CTL	cytotoxic T lymphocytes
CV	cumulative variance
DHBV	duck hepatitis B virus
DHBcAg	duck hepatitis B virus core antigen
DHBcAg	duck hepatitis B virus e antigen
DHBsAg	duck hepatitis B virus surface antigen
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
DR1	direct repeat 1
DR2	direct repeat 2
DW	distilled water
EBV	Epstein-Barr virus
EDTA	ethylene-diamine-tetra-acetic-acid disodium salt
ER	endoplasmic reticulum
ETV	entecavir
FDA	Food and Drug Administration

FCS	foetal calf serum
FTC	emtricitabine
GGT	gamma glutamyl transferase
GMP	good manufacturing practice
GSHV	ground squirrel hepatitis virus
HBcAg	hepatitis B virus core antigen
HBeAg	hepatitis B virus e antigen
HBsAg	hepatitis B virus surface antigen
HBV	hepatitis B virus
HBV DNA	hepatitis B virus DNA
HCC	hepatocellular carcinoma
HCV	hepatitis C virus
HHBV	heron hepatitis B virus
HHV 6	human herpes virus 6
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HSV	herpes simplex virus
IFN- α	interferon alpha
IFN- β	interferon beta
IL-2	interleukin-2
IP	intraperitoneally
IMVS	Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science
IV	intravenously
L-FMAU	clevudine
MHC	major histocompatibility complex
MOI	multiplicity of infection
mRNA	messenger RNA
NA/s	nucleot/side analogue/s
ND	not detected
NDS	normal duck serum
NK	natural killer cells
NS	normal saline
NSS	normal sheep serum

O/N	overnight
OD	optical density
OPD	<i>o</i> -phenylenediamine
ORF	open reading frame
PAMPs	pathogen specific molecular patterns
PBS	phosphate buffered saline
PCNA	proliferating cell nuclear antigen
PCR	polymerase chain reaction
PDH	primary duck hepatocytes
PegIFN- α	pegylated interferon alpha
PEN	penciclovir
pgRNA	pregenomic RNA
PHH	primary human hepatocytes
PK	pharmacokinetics
Pol	polymerase
PolyA	polyadenylene signal
pre-S/S	small and large envelope proteins
PS-ON/s	phosphorothioated oligodeoxynucleotide/s
rcDNA	relaxed circular DNA
RGHBV	Ross goose hepatitis B virus
RME	receptor mediated endocytosis
RNA	ribonucleic acid
RT	room temperature
SD	standard deviation
SDH	sorbitol dehydrogenase
SDS	sodium dodecyl sulphate
SEM	standard error of mean
SGHBV	snow goose hepatitis B virus
SS	sodium salts
STHBV	stork hepatitis B virus
SVR	sustained virological response
TAE	tris-acetate EDTA buffer

TDF	tenofovir disoproxil fumarate
TFV	tenofovir
TLB	telbivudine
3TC	lamivudine
TLR	toll-like receptors
TNF- α	tumour necrosis factor alpha
Tyr-63	tyrosine residue in 63 rd position
Tyr-96	tyrosine residue in 96 th position
UC	untreated control
VLP	virus-like particles
VZV	varicella zoster virus
WHO	World Health Organisation
WHV	woodchuck hepatitis virus
WMHBV	woolly monkey hepatitis B virus
$^{\circ}\text{C}$	degrees Celsius
ϵ	stem looped encapsidation signal
μg	microgram/s
$\mu\text{L}/\mu\text{l}$	microlitre/s
μm	micrometre/s
μM	micromoles
g	relative centrifugal force
bp	base pairs
gL^{-1}	grams per litre
h	hour/s
H_2SO_4	sulfuric acid
kb	kilobase/s
kDA	kilodalton/s
kg	kilogram/s
L	litre/s
LD_{50}	lethal dose to 50% of the population
M	molar

mg	milligram/s
min	minute/s
mL	millilitre/s
mM	millimoles
ng	nanograms
nm	nanometres

Acknowledgements

On no soul God places a burden greater than it can bear (Quran: 2, 286). Your speech has been the courage, strength and motivation to continue to strive. All praises are due to the almighty God for his guidance to learn and understand to reflect.

The research presented in this thesis was carried out in the Hepatitis Research Laboratory in the Discipline of Microbiology and Immunology, University of Adelaide, Australia. I wish to thank the University of Adelaide for awarding me the International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (IPRS) to pursue my Doctorate.

My sincere and utmost gratitude to my principal supervisor Assoc. Prof Allison Jilbert for her encouragement, constructive comments and friendly support throughout these years. You are an inspiration to many students like me.

My co-supervisor Dr Michael Beard is acknowledged for his constructive comments during major review meetings.

Dr William Mason, Fox Chase Cancer Center, Philadelphia, USA is highly appreciated for spending his valuable time on my thesis, especially the last 3 chapters were completed with his help and assistance.

My thanks also go to Dr Andrew Vaillant from REPLICor Inc. Canada for useful discussions and his critical comments on some aspects of the research presented in this thesis. Drs Katyna Epsoda and Yuao Zhu, Gilead Sciences, USA, are greatly acknowledged for their critical comments on the research presented in Chapter 8 of this thesis.

I also wish to extend my sincere thanks to Professor Chris Burrell for being a fantastic postgraduate co-ordinator, hosting useful discussions at annual review meetings and constructive comments during Major PhD review meetings and at scientific meetings.

I wish to thank Professors Vasanthi Thevanesam and Thula Wijewradana of University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka for their understanding and trust in me and University of Peradeniya for granting me study leave to complete my Ph.D.

My special thanks to Dr Behzad Bradaran-without whom I wouldn't have done all these animal experiments and also for being such a good friend; Huey Low and CQ Teoh -

you two were always there whenever I needed help and above all for your friendship; Catherine Scougall - your assistance in everything from when I started till the end, your specific expertise in P32 work and for listening to me whenever I needed help; Arend Grosse for his assistance in qPCR work; Eric Qiao for helping me especially during the latter stages of my lab work and also for his fascinating questions that helped me to expand my understanding on HBV research; Georget Reaiche, Thomas Tu, Michael Thorpe, Feng Feng, Dieu Dang and Uwe Strocher for useful discussions and help whenever needed.

I am also indebted to my colleagues in the Hepatitis C Research Laboratory for making the lab atmosphere and long hours much more enjoyable. I owe a big thank you to Dr Ghaffar Sarvestani from the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science for his assistance on confocal microscopy.

Drs Jaliya Kumaratilake, Luxmy Kumaratilake and Aruna Kodituwakku are thanked for their help during my stay in Australia. Mr Phillip Thomas is greatly acknowledged for agreeing to proof-read my thesis at such short notice.

I am also indebted to all the Ph.D. students and the staff of the Discipline of Microbiology and Immunology for their help and chats. Every one of you did something that comforted me during this long ride. Dr Connor Thomas is thanked for his assistance and help in compiling this work using a standard thesis template. Thanks are due to Dr Chris Wong and Soki Wake who helped me in printing all the photographic and colour figures.

Last but not least my family and friends for being there for me and for listening to me for talk for hours. You comforted me whenever I needed it and without you I wouldn't have achieved academically or otherwise.