Organization of the Plasmid *cpe* Locus in *Clostridium perfringens* Type A Isolates

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*Clostridium perfringens* type A isolates causing food poisoning have a chromosomal enterotoxin gene (*cpe*), while *C. perfringens* type A isolates responsible for non-food-borne human gastrointestinal diseases carry a plasmid *cpe* gene. In the present study, the plasmid *cpe* locus of the type A non-food-borne-disease isolate F4969 was sequenced to design primers and probes for comparative PCR and Southern blot studies of the *cpe* locus in other type A isolates. Those analyses determined that the region upstream of the *cpe* gene is highly conserved among type A isolates carrying a *cpe* plasmid. The organization of the type A plasmid *cpe* locus was also found to be unique, as it contains *IS1469* sequences located similarly to those in the chromosomal *cpe* locus but lacks the *IS1470* sequences found upstream of *IS1469* in the chromosomal *cpe* locus. Instead of those upstream *IS1470* sequences, a partial open reading frame potentially encoding cytosine methylase (*dcm*) was identified upstream of *IS1469* in the plasmid *cpe* locus of all type A isolates tested. Similar *dcm* sequences were also detected in several *cpe*-negative *C. perfringens* isolates carrying plasmids but not in type A isolates carrying a chromosomal *cpe* gene. Contrary to previous reports, sequences homologous to *IS1470*, rather than *IS1151*, were found downstream of the plasmid *cpe* gene in most type A isolates tested. Those *IS1470*-like sequences reside in about the same position but are oppositely oriented and defective relative to the *IS1470* sequences found downstream of the chromosomal *cpe* gene. Collectively, these and previous results suggest that the *cpe* plasmid of many type A isolates originated from integration of a *cpe*-containing genetic element near the *dcm* sequences of a *C. perfringens* plasmid. The similarity of the plasmid *cpe* locus in many type A isolates is consistent with horizontal transfer of a common *cpe* plasmid among *C. perfringens* type A strains.

The gram-positive, anaerobic pathogen *Clostridium perfringens* is classified into five biotypes (A to E), based upon production of alpha, beta, epsilon, and iota toxins (14). Approximately 5% of *C. perfringens* isolates, mostly belonging to type A, produce another important toxin named *C. perfringens* enterotoxin (CPE) (12–14, 22). CPE-producing type A isolates are major human gastrointestinal (GI) pathogens, causing *C. perfringens* type A food poisoning (14) and such non-food-borne human GI diseases as antibiotic-associated diarrhea and sporadic diarrhea (15, 16). Enterotoxigenic type A isolates may also be responsible for some veterinary GI illnesses (21). Recent studies with *cpe* knockout mutants confirmed that CPE expression is necessary for the enteric virulence of enterotoxigenic *C. perfringens* type A isolates (20).

The gene encoding *C. perfringens* enterotoxin (*cpe*) can be located on either the chromosome or large plasmids (2–8, 23). Most (if not all) enterotoxigenic *C. perfringens* type A isolates associated with food poisoning carry their *cpe* genes on the chromosome (2–8, 23). Sequencing and Southern blot studies demonstrated that the chromosomal *cpe* gene of type A food poisoning strain NCTC8239 (and, apparently, other *C. perfringens* type A food poisoning strains) is closely associated with insertion sequences (2, 3, 5, 8). In NCTC8239, those *cpe*-associated insertion sequences include a single *IS1469* sequence present ~1.3 kbp upstream of the *cpe* gene and a pair of *IS1470* sequences residing ~3 kb upstream and ~1.2 kbp downstream of the *cpe* gene (5, 8). Based upon this arrangement (see Fig. 1), it was proposed that the chromosomal *cpe* gene of NCTC8239 (and, by extension, other type A food poisoning isolates) is located on a 6.3-kbp transposon with terminal *IS1470* elements (5). More recent results (2) suggest that this putative transposon, named Tn5565, may have several circular intermediate forms. However, actual movement of Tn5565 has not yet been demonstrated.

Interestingly, the *cpe* gene is plasmid localized in most (if not all) enterotoxigenic type A isolates obtained from either CPE-associated non-food-borne human GI disease or veterinary sources (7, 8, 23). The *cpe* plasmids of those type A isolates are large (~100 kbp) and present at low copy numbers (7, 8, 20). The *cpe* plasmid of the type A human sporadic diarrhea isolate F4969 was recently shown to be transferable, via conjugation, to *cpe*-negative *C. perfringens* type A strains (4).

The plasmid *cpe* locus of type A isolates has not yet been sequenced or otherwise studied in comparable detail as the chromosomal *cpe* locus of NCTC8239. To our knowledge, the only information currently available regarding the plasmid *cpe* locus of type A isolates was provided by Southern blot analyses (8) of just three such isolates (only one of which, isolate F3686, was associated with human non-food-borne GI disease). Those limited studies revealed that, as for type A food poisoning isolate NCTC8239, which carries a chromosomal *cpe* gene, *IS1469* sequences appear to be present directly upstream of the plasmid *cpe* gene in the three initially examined type A isolates. However, no *IS1470* sequences were detected near the plasmid *cpe* gene of those isolates. Instead, two of the isolates (includ-
ing the human non-food-borne-GI-disease isolate F3686) apparently carry IS1151 sequences ~260 bp downstream of their plasmid cpe gene.

The limited information now available regarding the organization of the plasmid cpe locus suggests that considerable variation exists between the organization of the chromosomal cpe locus and the plasmid cpe locus of *C. perfringens* type A isolates. To better address that possibility and to assess the diversity of the plasmid cpe locus in different type A isolates, we first cloned and sequenced the plasmid cpe locus of a human sporadic diarrhea strain F4969, a well-studied type A isolate (4, 6, 7, 20). The sequencing results obtained for the F4969 plasmid cpe locus were then used to prepare primers and probes for conducting PCR and Southern blot analyses to further explore the organization of the cpe locus in other type A isolates, including a number of plasmid cpe isolates originating from various sources (including non-food-borne human GI diseases).

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains.** The toxin genotype, cpe genotype, and source of each *C. perfringens* isolate examined in this study are listed in Table 1. Our study used six previously uncharacterized *C. perfringens* isolates, including normal human fecal isolates (MR1-1, MR2-2, and MR2-4) and veterinary isolates (316366 D3, 315455 N4, and 297442). These six new isolates were first subjected to multiplex PCR analysis (23), which confirmed their identity as type A isolates and revealed whether they carried cpe sequences. As indicated in Table 1, the three new type A isolates identified as cpe positive by multiplex PCR were then subjected to cpe restriction fragment length polymorphism analysis (23) in order to determine whether they carried a chromosomal or plasmid cpe gene. *Escherichia coli* strain DH5α was grown in tryptic soy broth medium and used for transformation experiments.

**DNA isolation from *C. perfringens* isolates.** *C. perfringens* isolates were cultured for 6 to 8 h at 37°C in TGY medium, as described previously (20). Total DNA was extracted from those TGY cultures using a previously described method (23). Plasmid DNA was isolated from TGY cultures by the method of Roberts et al. (18), except that RNase treatment was omitted.

**Cloning of *Cid* and *XbaI* fragments containing the plasmid cpe gene of *C. perfringens* type A isolate F4969.** Plasmid DNA from isolate F4969 was digested overnight at 37°C with either *Cid* or *XbaI* (Roche). That digested plasmid DNA was electrophoresed on 1% agarose gels, and DNA fragments of ~5 kbp (for *Cid*-digested plasmid DNA) or ~9 kbp (for *XbaI*-digested plasmid DNA) were then extracted with a DNA purification kit (Bio-Rad). A pBlueScript vector was digested with either *Cid* or *XbaI* and then treated with calf intestinal phosphatase (Roche). That dephosphorylated plasmid was ligated, for 16 h at 16°C, with either the isolated ~5-kbp *Cid* or ~9-kbp *XbaI* fragments of F4969 plasmid DNA (19). Ligated plasmids were then transformed into *E. coli* DH5α host cells by using standard techniques (19).

**DNA sequencing of *E. coli* transformants containing F4969 DNA.** Southern blotting with a cpe-specific probe (7, 20, 23) identified several *E. coli* transformants carrying F4969 cpe sequences (data not shown). Two transformant clones, named KCpFC5-1 (containing an ~5-kbp *Cid* insert of F4969 plasmid DNA) and KCpFX28 (containing an ~9-kbp *XbaI* insert of F4969 plasmid DNA), were then used to DNA sequence the plasmid cpe locus of isolate F4969. DNA sequencing was initially performed with universal primers for the pBlueScript

### Table 1. *C. perfringens* isolates used in this study

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</table>

* Like most type E isolates (1), 853 carries silent *cpe* sequences containing nonsense and missense mutations in the *cpe* ORF.
Additional sequencing was performed using primers designed from those initially used for the Southern blotting analyses (Fig. 1). IS1469-cpe PCR. Comparative PCR analysis results obtained for the cpe-containing XbaI and ClaI fragments of KcPeFX28 and KcPeFCS-1, the following primers complementary to IS1469 and cpe gene sequences were designed: 5′-A AGTGTGATATAAGGCCAGC-3′ (IS1469F) and 5′-CTTATATCCACCCA TCTCC-3′ (CPE-epi). These primers (1 μM final concentration) were then included in a PCR utilizing template DNA (total DNA extracted from specified C. perfringens type A isolates), 0.2 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphates (Promega), 2.5 mM MgCl₂, and 5 U of Taq polymerase (Promega). The reaction mixtures, in a total volume of 50 μl, were placed in a thermal cycler (Techne) under the following conditions: 1 cycle at 94°C for 5 min; 33 cycles of 94°C for 30 s, 50°C for 30 s, 68°C for 1 min and 30 s; and 1 cycle at 94°C for 90 s, 50°C for 90 s, and 68°C for 7 min. The resultant PCR products were run on a 2% agarose gel and stained with ethidium bromide.

Cytosine methyltransferase gene (dcm) PCR. After sequencing of the cpe-containing XbaI fragment in KcPeFX28 had revealed the presence of sequences that could encode the C-terminal half of cytosine methyltransferase (dcm sequences), the following primer pair was designed to PCR amplify those putative dcm sequences: 5′-CGATAATCTAAGACCTAGAGAAGC-3′ (MET-F) and 5′-CTTCTGATTATAACTATTCCCAGC-3′ (MET-R). These primers were added (at a 1 μM final concentration) to a PCR mixture utilizing template DNA (total DNA extracted from specified C. perfringens isolates), 0.1 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphates (Promega), 2.5 mM MgCl₂, and 2.5 U of Taq polymerase (Promega). The reaction mixtures, in a total volume of 50 μl, were then placed in a thermal cycler (Techne) under the following conditions: 1 cycle at 94°C for 2 min; 38 cycles at 94°C for 30 s, 50°C for 30 s, and 68°C for 30 s; and 1 cycle at 94°C for 90 s, 50°C for 90 s, and 68°C for 7 min.

To PCR amplify the DNA region lying between dcm sequences and sequences located ~400 bp downstream from those dcm sequences in F4969, a second PCR was performed with MET-F and a primer named UP-IS (see Fig. 1) (5′-ATTGTGCCCACTACTAGAGC-3′). The PCR conditions used with these primers were as described above for amplifying internal dcm sequences. All dcm-based PCR products were electrophoresed on a 2% agarose gel, which was then stained with ethidium bromide.

After agarose gel electrophoresis and transfer to nylon membranes (Roche), PCR products amplified with MET-F and UP-IS from selected C. perfringens isolates (see Fig. 6) were Southern blotted by conventional techniques (20). The blots were hybridized with a digoxigenin (DIG)-labeled PCR probe prepared (9) with a PCR DIG-labeling kit (Roche), KcPeFX28 template DNA, and MET-F and UP-IS.

Southern blotting analyses for the presence of cpe, dcm sequences, IS1470-like sequences, and IS1151-like sequences in C. perfringens isolates. For additional Southern blotting analyses, four more DIG-labeled probes were also generated with the PCR DIG-labeling kit. A dcm sequence-specific probe was prepared in a PCR using the plasmid present in KcPeFX28 as the template DNA, along with MET-F and MET-R primers. A cpe-specific probe was prepared in a PCR using F4969 DNA and primers 2F (5′-GTGACTCTTTAGGCACTA-3′) and 5R (5′-TGCGATCTAACTTAAATGAGATG-3′), which are specific for KcPeFX28 cpe sequences.

To prepare a probe for internal IS1470-like sequences, PCR was performed with the primers IS1470-likeF (5′-GATATCACTATGAGGTACTA-3′) and IS1470- likeR (5′-GCACTTGAATGATC-3′), with KcPeFX28 as the template DNA. Finally, a probe for internal IS1151-like sequences was prepared from F4013 DNA by using the primers IS1151-1F (5′-TCCGATATCTTGGCA TCCGCTC-3′) and IS1151-1R (5′-AGAGCCAATATAGATCAGTAAG-3′), which are complementary to the previously reported (11) IS1151 sequence.

For Southern blotting analyses to detect the presence of cpe, dcm sequences, IS1470-like sequences, and IS1151-like sequences, plasmid preparations isolated from specified C. perfringens isolates were digested overnight with XbaI at 37°C. To detect the presence of dcm sequences in C. perfringens food poisoning isolates, total DNA was obtained from each isolate and digested overnight with XbaI at 37°C. Digested plasmid or total DNAs were electrophoresed on a 1% agarose gel (Bio-Rad) and then transferred with a vacuum blower (Bio-Rad) onto a nylon membrane. The membranes were hybridized, as previously described (20), with one of the probes described above.

Comparative PCR analyses of the DNA region upstream of plasmid or chromosomal cpe genes in C. perfringens type A isolates. Based upon the KcPeFX28 sequencing results, the DNA region between cpe sequences and IS1469 was amplified using the primers IS1469F (5′-CCCGCATACTTCTTTACTGGC-3′), a primer specific for IS1469 sequences. These primers (1 μM final concentration) were used in a PCR with template DNA (total DNA extracted from specified C. perfringens isolates), 0.2 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphates, and 1 μl of Advantage 2 Taq polymerase (Clontech). The reaction mixtures, in a total volume of 50 μl, were placed in a thermal cycler (Techne) under the following conditions: 1 cycle at 94°C for 5 min; 33 cycles at 94°C for 30 s, 50°C for 30 s, 68°C for 1 min and 30 s; and 1 cycle at 94°C for 90 s, 50°C for 90 s, and 68°C for 7 min. The products were run on a 2% agarose gel and stained with ethidium bromide.

A second PCR to amplify the DNA region between dcm sequences and the cpe gene was also performed with the primers MET-F and CPE-epi, along with Advantage 2 Taq polymerase, under the following conditions: 1 cycle at 94°C for 2 min; 34 cycles at 94°C for 30 s; 60°C for 60 s, and 68°C for 180 s; and 1 cycle at 94°C for 90 s, 60°C for 90 s, and 68°C for 7 min.

Products of both the dcm-IS1469 and dcm-cpe PCRs were electrophoresed on a 2% agarose gel and then stained with ethidium bromide.

Comparative PCR analysis of the DNA region downstream of plasmid versus chromosomal cpe genes in C. perfringens type A isolates. Primers complementary to sequences present in cpe (CPE-epi, 5′-CAGTCCTTTAGGGATTGGA-3′) or the IS1470-like sequences of F4969 (IS1470-likeR) were used to investigate the DNA region downstream of the plasmid or chromosomal cpe gene in C. perfringens type A isolates. This PCR utilized total DNA extracted from specified type A isolates as the template and also included each primer (1 μM final concentration), 0.2 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphates (Promega), and 1 μl of Advantage 2 Taq polymerase (Clontech). The reaction mixtures, in a total volume of 50 μl, were placed in a thermal cycler (Techne) and amplified under the conditions described above for the dcm-cpe PCR. PCR products were run on a 2% agarose gel and stained with ethidium bromide.

A second PCR to amplify internal IS1470-like sequences was also performed with both the IS1470-likeF and -R primers. These primers were added (at a 1 μM final concentration) to a PCR utilizing template DNA (total DNA extracted from specified C. perfringens isolates), 0.1 mM deoxynucleotide triphosphates (Promega), 2.5 mM MgCl₂, and 2.5 U of Taq polymerase. The reaction mixtures, in a total volume of 50 μl, were then placed in a thermal cycler (Techne) under the following conditions: 1 cycle at 94°C for 2 min; 38 cycles at 94°C for 30 s, 44°C for 60 s, and 72°C for 60 s; and 1 cycle at 94°C for 90 s, 44°C for 90 s, and 72°C for 10 min.

PCR analysis for IS1151 sequences. To amplify internal IS1151 sequences, a PCR was performed with IS1151-F and -R primers, which are complementary to the previously reported (11) IS1151 sequence. These primers were used in a PCR under amplification conditions described earlier for detecting dcm sequences.

A final PCR assay to evaluate the location of IS1151 sequences relative to the cpe gene was performed using either CPE-4.5F and CPE-dlf (5′-CTACCACTACCCCTGGAACCTC-3′), along with the IS1151-R primer, in a PCR run under conditions described above for amplifying internal IS1151 sequences.

Nucleotide sequence accession number. The sequence of the ~9-kbp XbaI fragment in KcPeFX28 was submitted to GenBank under accession number AF416450. The sequences obtained for the PCR products described below were submitted to GenBank under accession numbers AF506816 to -18 and AF511071.

RESULTS

Cloning and sequencing of Clai and XbaI fragments carrying the plasmid cpe gene of F4969, a C. perfringens type A human sporadic-diarrhea isolate. Initial Southern blotting results (data not shown) indicated that the plasmid cpe gene of type A isolate F4969 is present on an ~5-kbp Clai fragment and an ~9-kbp XbaI fragment. Therefore, those two cpe-containing fragments were separately cloned into a pSK vector. The resultant plasmids were then used to transform E. coli, as described in Materials and Methods. Southern blotting with cpe probes (data not shown) confirmed the presence of cpe sequences in two transformants, named KcPeFCS-1 and KcPeFX28, which carry (respectively) an ~5-kbp Clai fragment and an ~9-kbp XbaI fragment.

DNA sequencing of KcPeFCS-1 and KcPeFX28 confirmed a previous report (6) that the cpe open reading frame (ORF) of isolate F4969 is completely homologous to the chromosomal cpe ORF of type A food poisoning strain NCTC8239 (10). Sequences downstream or upstream of the cpe ORF had not yet been examined for any type A isolate carrying a cpe plasmid.
mid. However, our KCpeFC5-1 and KCpeFX28 sequencing data indicate that, with the exception of a few nucleotide differences, the putative stem-loop structure located ~40 bp downstream of the chromosomal cpe stop codon in NCTC8239 DNA (10) is similarly present downstream of the plasmid cpe ORF of isolate F4969. As also noted in the chromosomal cpe locus of NCTC8239 (10), the putative stem-loop structure downstream of the F4969 cpe ORF is immediately followed by an oligo(T) tract, which is consistent with the idea that stem-loop–oligo(T) region functions as a rho-independent transcription terminator of cpe transcription in sporulating F4969 cells (10).

These sequencing analyses also revealed that, except for a few single-nucleotide differences, the downstream DNA of F4969 and NCTC8239 remain homologous for ~1 kb past their cpe ORF. Significant downstream sequence divergence occurs beyond that conserved region (Fig. 1), with the cpe plasmid of F4969 having a defective ORF that shares partial homology (Fig. 2) with an IS1470 element present, in about the same location, downstream of the NTCT8239 chromosomal cpe gene (5). However, relative to the IS1470 sequences downstream of the NCTC8239 cpe gene (10), the IS1470-like element of F4969 contains many nucleotide replacements (some introducing nonsense mutations), is oppositely oriented, and has a 84-bp deletion and a 88-bp insertion (Fig. 2).

With respect to sequences upstream of the F4969 plasmid cpe ORF, our KCpeFC5-1 and KCpeFX28 sequencing results revealed that the Shine-Dalgarno sequence and four putative promoters of F4969 are identical, in location and sequence, to those identified previously in the NCTC8239 chromosomal cpe gene (3, 5, 17, 24). However, about 250 bp upstream of the F4969 cpe gene, a 45-bp insertion was detected. That insertion is absent from the chromosomal cpe locus of NCTC8239 but completely matches an insertion found, in the same location, upstream of the chromosomal cpe gene of another type A food poisoning strain, NCTC10240 (17).

Further (1.3 kbp) upstream of the F4969 plasmid cpe gene, IS1469 sequences were detected (Fig. 1). Except for two nucleotide changes, those insertion sequences were found to match IS1469 sequences located, in the same position and orientation, upstream of the NCTC8239 chromosomal cpe gene. The putative Shine-Dalgarno sequence for the F4969 IS1469 sequences was determined to be identical to that of NCTC8239 (3). Upstream of IS1469, the plasmid cpe locus of

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**I. Plasmid cpe strains**

(A) F4969

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(B) F4013

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**II. Chromosomal cpe Strain NCTC8239**

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**FIG. 1.** Genetic organization of the cpe locus in C. perfringens type A isolates. (I) Type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid, including the sequenced ~9-kbp XbaI cpe-containing fragment of the cpe plasmid from sporadic diarrhea isolate F4969 (A) and the deduced plasmid cpe locus of isolates F4013 (B). (II) The previously described (5) chromosomal cpe locus of food poisoning strain NCTC8239 is shown for comparison. Broad bars show ORFs; arrows under ORFs indicate orientation. Numbers shown for F4969 indicate nucleotide bases. Long thin bars depict the PCR products amplified with each primer pair (see the text).
isolate F4969 was found to share homology, for another 200 bp, with the previously sequenced (3, 5) chromosomal cpe locus of strain NCTC8239. Beyond that conserved upstream region, significant sequence differences between these two cpe-positive type A isolates were detected. Notably, the IS1470 sequences present directly upstream of the NCTC8239 cpe gene and the IS1470-like sequence of isolate F4969, *, missing nucleotide.

FIG. 2. Comparison of IS1470-like sequence in isolate F4969 and the downstream IS1470 sequence in the type A chromosomal-cpe food poisoning strain NCTC8239. #, putative start codon; +, putative stop codon. Underlined nucleotides are homologous between the IS1470 sequences downstream of the NCTC8239 cpe gene and the IS1470-like sequence of isolate F4969.
extreme 5′ end of the cpe-containing XbaI fragment cloned from F4969 (Fig. 1). That partial ORF, absent from the chromosomal cpe locus of NCTC8239 (3, 5), is predicted to encode the C-terminal half of a protein sharing partial amino acid homology with the cytosine methyltransferase encoded by Bacillus subtilis phage SPBc2.

Finally, our sequencing analyses also identified six sequences near the plasmid cpe gene of strain F4969 that resemble consensus binding sequences for the Hpr (hyperprotease-producing) regulatory protein of B. subtilis (3, 5). Five of those putative Hpr-binding sequences were found to share complete homology with the previously detected putative Hpr-binding sequences present near the chromosomal cpe gene of NCTC8239 (3, 5). However, the upstream Hpr-binding sequence nearest the F4969 cpe gene has a single nucleotide replacement (AATAGTGTT is present instead of AATAGTGTT).

Detection of cytosine methyltransferase gene sequences (dcm sequences) in other C perfringens strains. To further investigate previous suggestions (5, 8) that IS1469 sequences are consistently associated with the cpe gene of C. perfringens type A isolates, comparative PCR analyses were performed with a varied collection of cpe-positive, type A isolates (Table 1). Those analyses, using one primer specific for cpe ORF sequences and a second primer specific for IS1469 sequences, amplified an ~1.7-kbp product using template DNA prepared from either F4969 or NCTC8239 (data not shown), which is fully consistent with expectations from KCpeFC5-1, KCpeFX28, and NCTC8239 sequencing results (3, 5; this study). A similar-sized PCR product was also amplified from all 16 other tested type A cpe-positive isolates (data not shown), regardless of their origin or cpe genotype (plasmid or chromosomal). However, no PCR product was amplified from the cpe-negative type A isolate MR2-2 (data not shown).

FIG. 3. PCR analyses of sequences upstream of the plasmid cpe gene of type A isolates. (A) Results of a dcm-specific PCR assay (expected ~0.4-kbp product marked by arrow) with primers internal to F4969 dcm sequences. (B) Results of a PCR assay performed with primers designed to amplify a product from the DNA region between dcm sequences and sequences ~400 bp downstream of them (based upon sequencing of the cpe-containing XbaI fragment of F4969). In this PCR assay, F4969 DNA yields an ~0.9-kbp PCR product (small arrow), which is consistent with sequencing results for the F4969 plasmid cpe locus; note that one cpe-negative type A isolate, 297442, gave an ~2.0-kbp product (large arrow). (C) PCR analysis of the association between dcm gene and IS1469 genes. An ~2.1-kbp product (arrow) was detected in all type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene. (D) PCR analysis of the association between dcm sequences and the cpe gene, which is consistent with sequencing results for the plasmid cpe locus of F4969. An ~3.5-kbp product (arrow) was detected in all type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene, which is consistent with sequencing results for the plasmid cpe locus of F4969. Numbers on the left indicate migration of molecular size markers.

To further confirm the presence of dcm sequences in many C. perfringens type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid, Southern blotting analysis was performed with a probe specific for F4969 dcm sequences. This probe hybridized with XbaI-digested DNA from all 10 type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene (including isolate F5603, which had tested negative by our dcm-specific PCR assay). In all cases, the dcm probe hybridized to an XbaI fragment similar in size to a fragment that hybridized with a cpe-specific probe (Fig. 4A and B). DNA from type A isolate 452, which carries a cpe plasmid, also had a second band hybridizing with the dcm-specific probe; however, this band did not hybridize with the cpe probe (Fig. 4A and B).

In contrast to the apparently widespread presence of dcm sequences in type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene, tem-
DNA isolated from any of those five food poisoning isolates (Fig. 5). Finally, a PCR using \textit{dcm}-specific primers and template DNA from three \textit{cpe}-negative isolates (from both human and veterinary sources) amplified an \(\sim 0.4\)-kbp product from two of three template DNAs of those type A isolates (Fig. 3A).

A second PCR assay (using primers to F4969 \textit{dcm} sequences and \textit{dcm}-specfic primers and template DNA from three \textit{cpe}-negative isolates (from both human and veterinary sources) amplified an \(/H11011\) 0.4-kbp product from two of three template DNAs of those type A isolates (Fig. 3A).

A second PCR assay (using primers to F4969 \textit{dcm} sequences and \textit{dcm}-specific primers and template DNA from three \textit{cpe}-negative isolates (from both human and veterinary sources) amplified an \(/{H11011}\) 0.4-kbp product from two of three template DNAs of those type A isolates (Fig. 3A).

and F4969 sequences \(\sim 400\) bp downstream of \textit{dcm}) was then performed to further investigate the similarity of type A isolates carrying \textit{dcm} sequences. As expected from KCpeFX28 sequencing results, this PCR amplified an \(\sim 0.9\)-kbp product by using F4969 template DNA (Fig. 3B). A similar product was also amplified with template DNA from 11 of 12 other type A isolates carrying a plasmid \textit{cpe} (Fig. 3B). Interestingly, template DNA from plasmid \textit{cpe} type A isolate F5603, which had tested negative with the \textit{dcm}-specific PCR but positive by Southern blotting with a \textit{dcm} probe, did amplify the expected 0.9-kbp product of our second PCR. In contrast, template DNA from type A plasmid \textit{cpe} strain F4013, which tested positive by \textit{dcm}-specific PCR, gave no PCR product with that second PCR.

Our second PCR using one primer to F4969 \textit{dcm} sequences and a second primer to F4969 sequences downstream of \textit{dcm} also failed to amplify any product from five type A food poisoning strains carrying a chromosomal \textit{cpe} gene or from MR1-1, a \textit{cpe}-negative type A isolate (Fig. 3B). DNA from another \textit{cpe}-negative type A isolate (canine diarrhea isolate 297442) did amplify a larger (\(\sim 2\)-kbp) product in this second PCR (Fig. 3B).

The possible presence of similar \textit{dcm} sequences in other \textit{C. perfringens} types was also investigated with representative (Table 1) type B, C, D, and E isolates. Template DNA prepared from isolates belonging to each \textit{C. perfringens} type gave an \(\sim 0.4\)-kbp PCR product using primers specific for F4969 \textit{dcm} sequences (Fig. 6A). Our second PCR, using primers to the \textit{dcm} sequences and adjacent downstream sequences of F4969 plasmid DNA, amplified an \(\sim 2\)-kbp product with template DNA prepared from the representative type B, D, and E isolates (Fig. 6B). Both the \(\sim 0.4\) and \(\sim 2\)-kbp PCR products from the type B, D, and E isolates also hybridized a \textit{dcm}-specific probe (Fig. 6C and D).

The \(\sim 2\)-kbp PCR products amplified by using template DNA from the tested type B and E isolates as well as from
cpe-negative type A isolate 297442 were directly sequenced to determine the basis for these unexpectedly larger (~2- versus 0.9-kbp) PCR products amplified with primers to dcm sequences and sequences downstream of dcm in F4969. The results confirmed the presence of similar dcm sequences in each of those isolates but also revealed the presence of an insertion containing an ~0.7-kbp ORF that is predicted to encode a protein with partial homology to a hypothetical protein of Streptococcus pneumoniae bacteriophage MM1.

Comparative PCR analyses of DNA upstream of the plasmid cpe gene in type A isolates. The relationship between dcm sequences and IS1469 in type A isolates was investigated with a PCR using one primer complementary to F4969 dcm sequences and a second primer specific for internal dcm sequences in C. perfringens types A to E which is similar in size to the PCR product this primer pair generates with most type A strains (Fig. 3); those PCR products also hybridized to a dcm-specific probe (C). (B) PCR analysis using primers based on dcm sequences and sequences ~400 bp downstream from dcm sequences; (D) Southern blotting analysis with a dcm-specific probe. An ~0.9-kbp product was detected in type A isolate F4969 (single arrow); otherwise, ~2.0-kbp products were detected in type B, D, and E isolates (double arrow). Those products also hybridized with an F4969 dcm-specific probe. Numbers on the left indicate migration of molecular size markers.

A second PCR was then performed using one primer complementary to dcm sequences and a second primer specific for cpe sequences (Fig. 3D). That PCR amplified a clear ~3.5-kbp band using F4969 template DNA, consistent with KCpeFX28 sequencing results. A similar PCR product was also amplified with template DNA isolated from all 12 other type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene, although the amplification was again weaker with template DNA from isolate F4013. However, five type A chromosomal-cpe strains and one type A cpe-negative strain failed to amplify any product in this PCR.

Comparative PCR and Southern blot analyses of the association between cpe and downstream IS1470-like sequences in C. perfringens type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid. To investigate possible similarity in the region downstream of the plasmid cpe gene among type A isolates, a PCR was performed with a primer pair specific for cpe sequences and the IS1470-like sequence present in F4969 (Fig. 7A). As expected from KCpeFX28 sequencing results, this PCR amplified a product of ~2.2 kbp using F4969 template DNA. A similar product was also amplified with template DNA prepared from 8 of 12 other type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene. By comparison, a chromosomal-cpe food poisoning isolate (not shown) and a type A cpe-negative isolate (Fig. 7A) both failed to amplify any product in this PCR.

To further investigate the association between IS1470-like sequences and the cpe gene in type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid, Southern blotting analyses were performed with a probe specific for the IS1470-like sequences of F4969. Those experiments (Fig. 4C) detected hybridization of the IS1470-like probe to XbaI-digested DNA isolated from five of nine type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene. For each of those five isolates, a similar-sized XbaI fragment always hybridized to both the cpe and IS1470-like probes. The four type A isolates (F4013, F5603, B40, and NB16) carrying a plasmid cpe gene whose DNA failed to hybridize with the IS1470-like probe in

FIG. 6. PCR and Southern blotting analyses of putative cytosine methyltransferase gene sequences (dcm sequences) in other C. perfringens types. (A) PCR analyses with primers to internal dcm sequences; (C) Southern blotting results with a F4969 dcm-specific probe generated with the same primer pair and pKCpeFX28 template DNA. (A) This PCR assay generated an ~0.4 kbp product (arrow) in C. perfringens types A to E which is similar in size to the PCR product this primer pair generates with most type A strains (Fig. 3); those PCR products also hybridized to a dcm-specific probe (C). (B) PCR analysis using primers based on dcm sequences and sequences ~400 bp downstream from dcm sequences; (D) Southern blotting analysis with a dcm-specific probe. An ~0.9-kbp product was detected in type A isolate F4969 (single arrow); otherwise, ~2.0-kbp products were detected in type B, D, and E isolates (double arrow). Those products also hybridized with an F4969 dcm-specific probe. Numbers on the left indicate migration of molecular size markers.

FIG. 7. PCR analyses of the region between the cpe gene and downstream IS1470-like sequences. (A) PCR product amplified from specified type A isolates using primers for cpe gene sequences and sequences present in IS1470-like sequences of F4969, which generate an ~2.2-kbp product (arrow at right) with DNA from F4969. Numbers on the left indicate migration of molecular size markers.
the Southern blots (Fig. 4) were also unable to amplify a *cpe*-IS1470-like PCR product (Fig. 7A).

As a final assessment of the presence of IS1470-like sequences in type A isolates carrying a *cpe* gene, a second PCR was performed with primers to internal IS1470-like sequences (Fig. 7B). With those internal IS1470-like primers, template DNA from F4969 amplified the expected ~0.9-kbp PCR product. The eight other type A plasmid *cpe* isolates whose DNA had amplified (Fig. 7A) a PCR product with *cpe* and IS1470-like primers also gave a similar ~0.9-kbp PCR product with the internal IS1470-like primers. However, those same primers failed to support amplification of any PCR product (Fig. 7B) with template DNA from F4013, F5603, B40, or NB16, which is consistent with the fact that DNA from those four isolates failed to either hybridize an IS1470-like probe or amplify a *cpe*-IS1470-like PCR product (Fig. 4 and 7).

**PCR detection of IS1151 sequences.** Since previous studies had detected IS1151 sequences near the plasmid *cpe* gene in two of three type A isolates (8), a PCR assay was performed with IS1151-specific primers and template DNAs prepared from our collection of type A isolates carrying a plasmid *cpe* gene. As shown in Fig. 8A, the internal IS1151 primers amplified a PCR product of ~0.6 kbp using template DNA from type E isolate 853, consistent with previous sequencing results (1). A similar-sized PCR product was also detected when the same reaction was performed with template DNA prepared from type A plasmid *cpe* isolate F4013 (Fig. 8A). However, this PCR failed to amplify any product using template DNA from F4969 (Fig. 8A), the 11 other type A strains carrying a plasmid *cpe* gene that had also been tested in analyses whose results are shown in Fig. 7 (data not shown), or one type A *cpe*-negative strain (data not shown).

To evaluate the proximity of the *cpe* gene to the putative IS1151 sequences of isolate F4013 and to further confirm the absence of IS1151 sequences in the other 12 type A isolates carrying a plasmid *cpe* gene examined by the internal IS1151 PCR, a second PCR was performed with one primer specific for *cpe* sequences and a second primer specific to IS1151 sequences. As shown in Fig. 8B, these primers amplified a PCR product using DNA from a single type A isolate carrying a *cpe* plasmid, i.e., F4013. No product was amplified from F4969 (Fig. 8B) or from the other 12 type A isolates also testing negative with the internal IS1151 PCR assay (data not shown). Sequencing of the ~1.1-kb *cpe*-IS1151 PCR product amplified from isolate F4013 DNA confirmed the presence of sequences resembling IS1151 (~0.3 kbp downstream of the F4013 plasmid *cpe* gene (Fig. 1). The amplified F4013 sequences were determined to be ~90% homologous to IS1151 but appear to be defective, as they contain several nonsense mutations. In addition, this sequencing analysis revealed that the region of F4013 DNA containing IS1151-like sequences also has an overlapping ORF (in a different reading frame from IS1151) sharing partial amino acid homology with transposase 11.

To further evaluate the presence of sequences with homology to IS1151 in the plasmid *cpe* locus of type A isolates, a Southern blot experiment was performed with a probe specific for internal IS1151-like sequences of isolate F4013. These analyses (Fig. 8C) demonstrated hybridization of the IS1151-like probe to a single *Xba*I DNA fragment from the type A plasmid *cpe* isolates F4013, F5603, B40, and NB16. For each of these isolates, a *cpe* probe also apparently hybridized to the *Xba*I fragment hybridizing to the IS1151-like probe. Coupling this observation with the apparent presence (Fig. 3) in these isolates of an F4969-like DNA region upstream of *cpe* (which should include the *Xba*I site of *dem* sequences), the IS1151-like sequences of F5603, B40, and NB16 (like isolate F4013) appear to be located downstream of their *cpe* gene. No hybridization of the IS1151-like probe was observed with DNA prepared from any other type A isolates carrying a *cpe* plasmid (Fig. 8C), which all carry IS1470-like sequences downstream of their *cpe* gene (Fig. 7).
DISCUSSION

Recent studies (2, 3, 5–8, 23) established that most (or all) C. perfringens type A food poisoning isolates carry their enterotoxin gene (cpe) on the chromosome. Sequencing studies suggested that the chromosomal cpe gene of type A food poisoning isolate NCTC8239 (2, 3, 5, 10) may be present on Tn5565, a putative 6.3-kbp transposon with terminal IS1140 elements. Tn5565 has apparently inserted onto the C. perfringens chromosome between the purine permease (uapC) and quinolinate phosphorlyrribosyltransferase (nadC) genes (Fig. 1). Southern blot results suggest that other type A food poisoning strains have a similarly arranged chromosomal cpe locus (5, 8).

In contrast, most (if not all) enterotoxigenic C. perfringens type A isolates from non-food-borne human GI diseases or veterinary sources carry their cpe gene on a large plasmid. Prior to the present study, the organization of the plasmid cpe locus in type A isolates had not yet been thoroughly investigated, although an initial Southern blot study (8) suggested that the plasmid cpe locus of type A isolates substantially differs from the well-studied chromosomal cpe locus of NCTC8239. That study did not detect IS1140 sequences in the plasmid cpe locus of three tested type A isolates but instead found IS1151 sequences downstream of the cpe gene in two of those three isolates. Since those initial findings, the IS1151-containing cpe locus of F3686 (the only previously examined type A plasmid cpe isolate associated with human disease) has been considered representative of type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid.

However, the apparent presence of IS1151 sequences in only two of the three initially examined isolates indicated that some variation must exist between the plasmid cpe loci of different type A isolates. To better evaluate the organization and diversity of the plasmid cpe locus in type A isolates, we first sequenced the plasmid cpe locus of F4969, a type A isolate from non-food-borne human GI disease used previously in both pathogenesis and genetic studies (4, 20). The arrangement determined for the plasmid cpe locus of F4969 (Fig. 1) was then compared, by PCR and Southern blotting, against the organization of the cpe locus in other type A strains carrying a cpe plasmid.

The results of this study are important for several reasons. First, the availability of sequence data for the F4969 plasmid cpe locus permits direct, detailed comparison of the plasmid cpe locus of a type A isolate against the previously sequenced (3, 5, 8) that IS1140 sequences are present immediately upstream of the plasmid cpe gene in most (or all) type A isolates (see further discussion below). Approximately 250 bp beyond those shared IS1140 sequences, significant sequence divergence was detected between the cpe locus of F4969 and that of NCTC8239. In that divergent upstream region, F4969 lacks the IS1170 sequences present immediately upstream of the NCTC8239 IS1140 element (Fig. 1). Instead, sequences including the 3’ half of a putative cytosine methyltransferase gene (dcn) were identified ~1.2 kbp upstream of the IS1140 element in isolate F4969 (Fig. 1).

This study also offers an improved assessment of plasmid cpe locus diversity among type A isolates. Using a collection of 13 type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene from varied geographic and host or disease origins, it was determined that (as for all chromosomal-cpe isolates thus far examined (3, 5, 8; this study)) IS1140 sequences are present immediately upstream of the plasmid cpe gene in type A isolates. This finding further supports the already-mentioned proposals (3, 5, 8) of a consistent association between the cpe gene and IS1140. Additionally, dcm sequences (which are absent from chromosomal-cpe isolates) were localized to the same position upstream of the cpe gene in all 13 tested type A isolates carrying a plasmid cpe gene. Thus, results of this study strongly suggest that, for at least 3.5 kbp, sequences upstream of the cpe gene are conserved in most (or all) type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid.

Our results also indicate that dcm sequences (when present) are not restricted to type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid. Two of three cpe-negative type A strains from normal human and veterinary sources were also determined to carry dcm sequences, as were representative type B, C, D, and E isolates. Interestingly, a primer pair specific for dcm sequences and sequences located 400 bp downstream of dcm in strain F4969 DNA was able to amplify a larger (relative to the product generated with F4969 DNA) PCR product using template DNA from type A cpe-negative strain 297442 or representative type B, D, and E isolates, which carry plasmids (21). Sequencing demonstrated that this larger PCR product has an insert containing an ORF with partial homology to a protein encoded by S. pneumoniae bacteriophage MM1. Since the dcm sequences of the F4969 cpe plasmid (and, by inference, other dcm-positive C. perfringens isolates) also share partial homology with a dcm gene found in B. subtilis phage SPBc2, future studies might explore whether some C. perfringens plasmids have a phage origin or have recombined with phage DNA. Further study is also warranted to examine whether dcm sequences are present on the virulence plasmids encoding beta, epsilon, and iota toxins in type B to E isolates. It also should be determined whether the detected dcm sequences actually express a functional cytosine methylase and, if so, whether that methylase plays any role in C. perfringens gene regulation.

The diversity of the DNA region downstream of the plasmid cpe gene of type A isolates was also addressed by the present study. When 13 randomly chosen type A plasmid cpe isolates from varied geographic and host or disease sources were surveyed, only 4 (~30%) were found to carry IS1151-like sequences (which are defective) downstream of their cpe gene. Thus, contrary to initial indications (8), it now appears that...
organization of the plasmid cpe locus found in IS151-like carrying type A isolates such as F3686 and F4013 is less representative than the IS1470-like containing plasmid cpe locus found in isolates such as F4969. The inability of our PCR assays to amplify a product from F5603, B40, or NB16 template DNA using primers specific for the IS151-like sequences of F4013 suggests that diversity exists among the IS151-like sequences of different type A isolates carrying a cpe plasmid.

Finally, the failure of the present study to find more than two distinctly different types of organization in the plasmid cpe locus of type A isolates among 13 isolates suggests that that locus has only limited diversity.

The ever-increasing evidence for a close association between IS1469 sequences and the cpe gene in most (or all) type A isolates (3, 5, 8; this study) supports the possibility of chromosomal and plasmid cpe genes sharing a common origin. Since the NCTC8239 cpe gene is apparently (2, 5) located on Tn5655, a putative transposon with terminal IS1470 sequences that reportedly forms several circular intermediates (including an IS1469-cpe species without any IS1470 sequences), previous proposals (2, 5) that the cpe locus of type A isolates originated from integration of an IS1469-cpe genetic element into one or more C. perfringens plasmids remain viable. If so, the IS1470-like and IS151-like sequences now present downstream of the cpe gene in type A isolates (8; this study) could reflect insertion events occurring after integration of the IS1469-cpe element onto plasmids.

Alternatively, discovery of IS1470-like sequences downstream of the plasmid cpe gene in F4969 and many other type A isolates opens the possibility of independent origins for the F4969-like and F4013-like plasmid cpe loci. A possible origin of the F4013-like plasmid cpe locus is discussed above, i.e., integration of an IS1469-cpe genetic element followed by a subsequent integration of an IS1151 element downstream of the cpe gene. In contrast, the F4969-like plasmid cpe locus could reflect integration of another cpe-containing genetic element (consisting of IS1469, cpe, and a single IS1470 sequence) onto a different C. perfringens plasmid. This hypothesis receives some support from previous PCR studies (2) purportedly identifying an IS1469-cpe-IS1470 circular intermediate in NCTC8239 DNA (2). However, for the F4969-like plasmid cpe locus to have this independent origin, some DNA rearrangements must have occurred during transposition to account for the reversed orientation of the IS1470-like sequences present in the F4969-like plasmid cpe locus. Finally, if IS1469-cpe and IS1469-cpe-IS1470 genetic elements have independently inserted onto different C. perfringens plasmids, the conserved nature of the upstream region of the plasmid cpe locus in most or all C. perfringens type A isolates, and the presence of dcm sequences in some cpe-negative isolates carrying plasmids, could suggest that plasmid DNA sequences downstream of dcm represent an insertional hot spot.

Regardless of how many different cpe-carrying genetic elements have integrated into C. perfringens plasmids, our results show that functional upstream and downstream IS1470 sequences are missing from the plasmid cpe locus of most (or all) type A isolates. If IS1470 insertion sequences are necessary for transposing the cpe gene of NCTC8239, as proposed elsewhere (2, 5), it is possible that the plasmid cpe gene of most type A isolates can no longer be mobilized from resident plasmids.

This putative loss of function (i.e., mobilization of the cpe gene) could explain why large numbers of mutations, including nonsense mutations, are now present in the IS1470-like sequences of type A isolates carrying a plasmid with the F4969 type of plasmid cpe locus.

Finally, it is notable that an F4969-like plasmid cpe locus is also present in isolate 452, which was previously shown to lack a clonal relationship with F4969 (6). The presence of a similar plasmid cpe locus in two nonrelated type A isolates, from very different origins, is consistent with the possibility of these two type A isolates now sharing the same cpe plasmid. If true, this situation could reflect horizontal spread of a common plasmid carrying an F4969-like cpe locus to many other C. perfringens type A isolates, converting the recipients to enteric virulence. This hypothesis is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that the cpe plasmid of type A strain F4969 can transfer via conjugation (4). Studies are now under way to further assess the similarities between the cpe plasmids in different C. perfringens type A isolates and to evaluate if plasmids with the F4013 type of cpe locus organization can also transfer via conjugation.

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AUTHOR’S CORRECTION

Organization of the Plasmid cpe Locus in *Clostridium perfringens* Type A Isolates

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Volume 70, no. 8, p. 4261–4272, 2002. Repeated sequencing has determined that the IS1151 sequences associated with the plasmid cpe gene of some type A isolates are not defective; therefore, the following corrections should be made.

Page 4269, column 1, lines 6–15 from bottom: “Sequencing of the ~1.1-kb cpe-IS1151 PCR product amplified from isolate F4013 DNA confirmed the presence of sequences resembling IS1151 ~0.3 kbp downstream of the F4013 plasmid cpe gene (Fig. 1). The amplified F4013 sequences were determined to be ~90% homologous to IS1151 but appear to be defective, as they contain several nonsense mutations. In addition, this sequencing analysis revealed that the region of F4013 DNA containing IS1151-like sequences also has an overlapping ORF (in a different reading frame from IS1151) sharing partial amino acid homology with transposase 11” should read “Sequencing of the ~1.1-kb cpe-IS1151 PCR product amplified from isolate F4013 DNA confirmed the presence of sequences resembling IS1151 ~0.3 kbp downstream of the F4013 plasmid cpe gene (Fig. 1). The amplified F4013 sequences were determined to be ~90% homologous to IS1151.”

Page 4270, column 2, line 2 from bottom: “(which are defective)” should be deleted.