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Transcriptomic alterations in *Trypanosoma cruzi***-infected cardiac**

myocytes

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Abstract

Trypanosoma cruzi infection is a major cause of cardiomyopathy. Previous gene profiling studies of infected mouse hearts have revealed prominent changes in gene expression within many functional pathways. This variety of transcriptomic changes in infected mice raises the question of whether gene expression alterations in whole hearts are due to changes in infected cardiac myocytes or other cells or even to systemic effects of the infection on the heart. We employed microarrays to examine infected cardiac myocyte cultures 48 h post-infection. Statistical comparison of gene expression levels of 7624 well annotated unigenes in four independent cultures of infected and uninfected myocytes detected substantial (\geq 1.5 absolute fold changes) in 420 (5.5%) of the sampled genes. Major categories of affected genes included those involved in immune response, extracellular matrix and cell adhesion. These findings on infected cardiac myocytes in culture reveal that alterations in cardiac gene expression described in Chagas disease are the consequence of both direct infection of the myocytes themselves as well as resulting from the presence of other cell types in the myocardium and systemic effects of infection.

Keywords

Trypanosoma cruzi; Chagas disease; Microarray; Cardiomyopathy; Cardiac myocyte culture

1. Introduction

Chagas' disease or American Trypanosomiasis is caused by infection with the protozoan parasite, *Trypanosoma cruzi.* Infection with this parasite causes both an acute myocarditis as well as chronic dilated cardiomyopathy [1]. It is estimated that 15–30 percent of infected individuals develop chronic chagasic cardiomyopathy, which is manifested by conduction disturbances, thrombo-embolic events and congestive heart failure [1]. Blood form trypomastigotes are capable of infecting many cell types in the cardiovascular system, including endothelial and smooth muscle cells, fibroblasts and cardiac myocytes [1]. The

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parasites gain access to cardiac myocytes by first invading the endothelium and then traversing the interstitial areas of the vascular and myocardial wall. Trypomastigotes also traverse the basal laminae areas and the extracellular matrix, which is damaged as a result of parasite proteases and collagenases and by contributions from the host inflammatory response [1]. There then ensues cardiovascular remodeling and replacement of cardiac myocytes and vascular cells by fibrous tissue. This results in thinning of the myocardium and cardiac myocyte hypertrophy and myocardial dysfunction. Importantly, the parasitism of host cells in the cardiovascular system activates a variety of host cell signaling pathways [2–4].

The study of chagasic heart disease has been aided by the use of the mouse model which recapitulates many of the functional and pathological alterations of the human disease. In the myocardium of acutely infected mice, the inflammatory reaction is characterized by the presence of numerous parasite pseudocysts together with an intense inflammatory reaction and an increased expression of inflammatory mediators as well as components of the endothelin-1 pathway [2].

Gene expression microarrays provide a powerful technique to profile genome-wide levels of thousands of mRNA transcripts simultaneously. Microarray technology has been applied in the identification of genes that are altered in infected cells [5,6] and in the hearts of *T. cruzi* infected mice and in human specimens [7–10]. However, microarray analysis of the whole heart detects the sum of changes in many cell types. Because cardiac myocytes themselves are important targets of initial infection, we used primary cultures of cardiac myocytes to examine gene profiling of *T. cruzi*-infected cardiac myocytes. In this way we could examine the effect of infection on cardiac myocytes devoid of any contribution of other cells in the myocardium or of systemic effects of infection. Our findings indicate substanitally altered expression of more than 5% of the sampled genome with major alterations in genes related to inflammation, immunological responses and cell adhesion. Thus, the inflammatory consequences of myocyte infection in the heart result not only from immunological response of the whole heart but also through induction of endogenous pathways in the myocyte. Moreover, patterns of altered genes include those encoding junction-associated proteins that are frequent genetic targets leading to cardiomyopathy.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Preparation of primary cultures of cardiac myocytes

Neonatal mice (C57BL/6, Charles River Laboratories, Wilmington, MA) were killed by decapitation, and the hearts were isolated and placed in 60 mm plastic culture dishes containing sterile ice-cold Dulbecco's phosphate-buffered saline (PBS; GIBCO-BRL, Grand Island, NY). After rinsing with PBS to remove the blood, we thoroughly minced the hearts in the dissociation solution [containing 1.25% pancreatin (GIBCO-BRL) and 300 mg/L bovine serum albumin (BSA; Sigma, St. Louis, MO) diluted in (in g/L) 8.0 NaCl, 0.2 KCl, 0.05 Na₂HPO₄, 1.0 NaHCO₃, and 2.0 dextrose; [pH 7.1–7.2]. The homogenate was then transferred to a 25 ml Ehrlenmeyer flask with 7 ml of the dissociation solution and placed in a water bath (37 °C) for 10 min while continuously stirring. The supernatant fraction containing single cells from each digestion period was collected in a conical 15 ml tube and spun at 500 g for 4 min, and the pellet was re-suspended in 3 ml of Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) [containing 10% fetal bovine serum (GIBCO-BRL) and 1% penicillin/streptomycin (GIBCO-BRL)]. The tube with the dissociated cells was then placed in the incubator (37 °C, 5% CO₂). This procedure was repeated five to seven times or until the heart tissue was totally dissociated. The cells were pooled and preplated, in 100 mm plastic culture dishes for 1 h, to allow the non muscle cells to attach. Then, the remaining unattached cells, highly enriched in myocytes, were plated $(2 \times$ 10⁵ cells/cm²) into 12.5 cm² plastic culture flasks (Falcon, USA), placed in the incubator, and allowed to settle for 24 h. After this period, we washed the flasks with DMEM to remove the

non-adherent cells and fed the cells with 3 ml of DMEM supplemented with cytosine β-Darabino-furanoside (12.2 mg/50 ml media; Sigma) to inhibit fibroblast growth. The cultures were maintained at 37 °C in a 5% $CO₂$ humidified incubator. All animal protocols were approved by our institutional animal care and use committee.

2.2. Infection of the cultures

Four days after the cardiac myocytes were plated, they displayed spontaneous contractility; based upon morphology and fraction of contractile cells, purity of cultures was estimated to be 85–90%, with the remainder being fibroblasts and endothelial cells. Cutlures were then infected with trypomastigotes of the myotropic Brazil strain of *T. cruzi* at a multiplicity of infection of 5:1. Parasites were maintained and harvested from L_6E_9 myoblasts as previously described [11]. After 24 h of incubation, the cultures were washed thoroughly with medium and maintained as described above. At 48 h after infection the percent parasitism was determined by staining replicate dishes in situ with May–Grunwald–Giemsa [12]. The percent parasitism was approximately 75% at the time when the cells were harvested for microarray analysis.

2.3. RNA analysis

Total RNA was extracted in Trizol® according to an established, standardized protocol from four dishes of control (C1, C2, C3, C4) and four infected cultures of cardiac myocytes (I1, I2, I3, I4) to ensure statistical relevance of the study. 3 μg total RNA from each control or infected cell culture was amplified in a single round protocol using Ambion® Amino Allyl MessageAmp™ II aRNA Amplification kit

[\(http://www.ambion.com/techlib/resources/messageamp/chart.html](http://www.ambion.com/techlib/resources/messageamp/chart.html)) to obtain 10 μg Alexa Fluor®_555-labeled (green, g) cDNA or Alexa Fluor®_647-labeled (red, r)cDNAs. Differently labeled biological replicas were then co-hybridized with microarrays printed by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine Microarray Facility with 32k mouse 70-mer oligonucleotides (Operon v.3.0, full technical information in GPL5371). Four microarrays were hybridized overnight at 50 °C with the combinations: $C1(r)C2(g)$, $C3(r)C4(g)$, $I1(r)I2(g)$, $I3(r)I4(g)$ ("multiple yellow" design, [13]). After hybridization, the slides were washed at room temperature, in solutions containing 0.1% sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) and 1% SSC (3 M NaCl + 0.3 M sodium citrate) to remove the nonhybridized cDNAs. Slides were immediately scanned, with the same pair of accelerating voltages in the two channels: $600 V(r)$ and $540 V$ (g).

The images were acquired and initially analyzed with GenePix Pro 4.1 software. Raw data were further normalized and mined through in-house-developed algorithms that incorporate standard procedures [13,14]. Locally corrupted or saturated spots, as well as those for which the foreground median fluorescence did not exceed twice the median local background fluorescence in one sample were eliminated from the analysis in all samples. The net fluorescence, i.e. the background subtracted from the foreground signal, of each validated spot was transformed through intra- and inter-chip normalization, aiming to obtain biologically meaningful comparisons between the studied specimens. Intrachip normalization balances the averages of net fluorescence values in the two channels within each pin domain (subset of spots printed by the same pin), corrects the intensity-dependent bias (usually referred to as Lowess normalization), and forces the standard distribution (mean 0 and standard deviation 1) of $log₂$ ratios (scale normalization) of net fluorescent values in the two channels for each array. Inter-chip normalization assigns a ratio between the corrected net fluorescence of each valid spot and the average net fluorescence of all valid spots in both control (C1, C2, C3, C4) and experimental (11, I2, I3, I4) arrays. The spots probing the same gene were organized into redundancy groups and their background subtracted fluorescence replaced by a weighted average value.

2.4. Real time PCR determinations

For real time PCR (qPCR) determinations RNA was isolated from infected myocytes using the Trizol reagent following the manufacturer's protocol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). RNA was reverse-transcribed from 100 ng of total RNA in a final volume of 20 μl using Superscript II reverse transcriptase according to the manufacturer's protocol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). The reverse transcription mixture consisted of 0.5 mM dNTPs, 20 mM dithiothritol, 30 mM Tris HCl pH 8.3, 75 mM KCl, 3 mM MgCl2, 500 ng oligo dT and 200 U of superscript RT RNase H-reverse transcriptase (Invitrogen). The reaction was incubated for 50 min at 42 °C. The primers used for amplification of qPCR were as follows:

Aquaporin-1 (269 bp)

Aqp Forward: CAATTACCCACTGGAGGAGAAAC

Aqp Reverse: CAAGTGAATTGTCGACTAGGG

Profilin-1 (202 bp)

Pfn Forward: GGAAGACCTTCGTTAGCATTAC

Pfn Reverse: GTGACAGTGACATTGAA

MMP12 (267 bp)

Mmp12 Forward: ACAACTTAGTACCAGAGCCACAC

Mmp12 Reverse: CTCCTTGGAAGATGTAGTAGTGTC

Bst2 (138 bp)

Bst2 Forward: AGGAGCTTGAGAATGAAGTCAC

Bst2 Reverse: GTGACACTTTGAGCACCAGTAG

The qPCR was run using PCR Sybr Green Master Mix (Roche Applied Science, Indianapolis, IN) and magnesium chloride in the Light Cycler (Roche Applied Science, Indianapolis, IN). The reaction conditions and analysis employed in the quantification of mRNA level by qPCR were performed as previously described by our laboratory [15]. The results were normalized by dividing number of copies of target mRNA by number of copies of GAPDH mRNA for each sample.

2.5. Immunocytochemistry

Neonatal cardiac myocytes were plated on glass coverslips and fixed with 70% ethanol for 20 min at −20 °C. In short, cells were first incubated for 30 min at room temperature with 2% IgG-free bovine serum albumin (BSA) to reduce nonspecific binding. This was followed by incubation with either polyclonal anti-rabbit antibody for laminin (Sigma Chemicals, L9393, diluted 1:50) or for cadherin (Sigma Chemicals, C3678, diluted 1:100) for 1 h at room temperature. For laminin and cadherin detection the cells were incubated for 1 h at room temperature with a goat anti-rabbit secondary antibody (Molecular Probes, A11008, diluted 1:400) conjugated to Alexa 488 or to Cy3 (Sigma Chemicals, 70202, diluted 1:800) respectively. The coverslips were then washed four times for 10 min each with PBS and mounted in medium for fluorescence VECTASHIELD® H-1000 (Vector Laboratories, Inc. Burlingame, CA). Fluorescence was observed on a Zeiss Axi-overt 200 M microscope (Carl Zeiss, Oberkochen, Germany).

The nuclei of the cardiac myocytes and parasites were labeled with DAPI (Sigma Chemicals; diluted 1:10000) for 5 min at 37 °C. The specificity of the immunofluorescent staining was

assessed for each experimental condition by performing the reaction in the absence of primary antibodies. No staining was observed under such conditions.

3. Results and discussion

Data complying with the "**M**inimum **I**nformation **A**bout **M**icroarray **E**xperiments" (MIAME) were deposited as GSE17330 in the National Center for Biotechnology Information Gene Expression Omnibus database

[\(http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE17330](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE17330)). In total, 7624 nonredundant, well annotated genes were adequately quantified on all eight samples after each redundancy group was reduced to one weighted value. Of these, 420 (5.5%) were substantially different (>1.5 fold up or down-regulated) when comparing control and *T. cruzi* infected myocyte cultures. A selection of 80 up and 80 down-regulated genes is presented in Table 1. Among the immune response genes, chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 5 (*Ccl5*), chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 10 (*Cxcl10*), guanylate nucleotide binding protein 2 (*Gbp2*), interferoninduced with helicase C domain 1 (*Ifih1*), proteosome (prosome, macropain) subunit, beta type 8 (*Psmb8*) and receptor (TNFRSF)-interacting serine–threonine kinase 2 (*Ripk2*) were found as up-regulated. Other immune response genes such are: complement component 1, q subcomponent, alpha polypeptide (*C1qa*) and NK2 transcription factor related, locus 3 (*Nkx2-3*) were found as down-regulated. Down-regulation of matrix metalloprotease 12 (*Mmp12)* and aquaporin-1 (*Aqp1)*, and up-regulation of bone marrow stromal cell antigen 2 (*Bst2)* and profilin-1 (*Pfn1)* were validated by qRT-PCR as illustrated in Fig. 1.

In order to identify pathways differentially up- or down-regulated in the cardiac myocytes as a consequence of *T. cruzi* infection, we applied the program GenMAPP to the dataset (Gladstone Institute: [http://www.genmapp.org/\)](http://www.genmapp.org/). Gene Ontology (GO) terms with highest Z scores ($p < 0.05$) are listed in Table 2 for both up- and down-regulated genes. Among the pathways most affected in the list of up-regulated genes in the infected myocytes were those involved in enzymatic activity (in particular, scavenger receptor, exonucleases, proteases and caspases), immune, defense and stress responses, apoptosis and activation of the proteasome, and calcium-activated potassium channel activity. Down-regulated pathways included calcium and second messenger signaling, cytoskeleton elements (actin filaments, stress fibers, myosin), enzymatic degradation (lysozyme, trypsin, metallopeptidases) and extracellular matrix. Genes regulated within each of these pathways, and possible implications of these regulations, are considered below.

3.1. Immune response genes represent a major altered pathway in infected myocytes

Virtually all immune response genes represented on the arrays were regulated in the infected myocytes. The leukocyte chemokine *Cxcl12* (also termed stromal cell-derived factor-1, *Sdf*1) was down-regulated, while *Cxcl16* (which functions as scavenger receptor in macrophages and is a powerful chemoattractant for T cells) as well as *Ccl7, Cxcl1* and *Cxcl16* were up-regulated. Also up-regulated were: histocompatibility 2, T region locus 10 (*H2-T10*) and interferoninduced protein with tetratricopeptide repeats 3 (*Ifit3*),. In previous microarray experiments by others and us on hearts of *T. cruzi* infected mice [7–9], similar immune response genes were found to be a major transcriptomic consequence of the infection. Strikingly, results of the present study provide evidence for autonomous activation of these pathways in the cardiac myocytes per se, implying a concerted action of immune cells infiltrating the heart and the infected myocytes themselves.

3.2. Regulated genes in other over-represented pathways

Down-regulated genes related to apoptosis included the apoptosis inhibitory proteins *Birc1b* (−3.4x) and *Birc5* (−2.8x), and up-regulated genes included the possible tumor suppressor

Axud1, the initiation factor *Eif5a*, as well as the histocompatibility complex genes listed above. Down-regulated calcium mediated signaling genes included those encoding the calcium binding protein calmodulin (*Cam1*); and the *calcineurin* interacting proteins *Dscr1* and *Dscr1l1.* Down-regulated ion channel/transporter genes included those encoding the gap junction protein Cx45 (*Gjc1*), the water channel aquaporin-1 (*Aqp1)*, and the high affinity aspartate/glutamate transporter (*Slc1A6*). Up-regulated genes in this category included the large conductance potassium channel (Kcnmb1) and the sodium/bile acid co-transporter (*Slc10a2*). Down-regulated cytoskeleton genes included the thick filament gene *Myh11* and the myosin light chain (*Myl2*), the Z-disc protein junctophilin (*Jph2*), the actin binding protein anillin (*Anln*).

3.3. Cardiac myocyte infection affects expression of extracellular matrix components

Down-regulated extracellular matrix genes included the matrix metalloproteinases *Adamts5, Mmp12*, and *Mmp23*, elastin (*Eln*), the metalloprotease inhibitor *Timp3*, the complement component *C1ga*, the collagens *Col4a2* and *Col6a*1, cathepsin S (*Ctss*), the chemokine *Cxcl12*, the immunosuppressive molecule *Fkbp7*, laminin-γ-1 (*Lamc1*), lysozyme (*Lyzs*) and its precursor *Lzp-s*, the microfibril associated protein *Mfap4*, the collagenase protease enhancer *Pcolce2*, the transmembrane glycoprotein *Pmp22*, the serine protease *Prss11,* prosaposin (*Psap)* and the component of elastic fibers fibulin 5 (*Fbln5*). Up-regulated genes included *H2- B1, H2-T23*, the macrophage lectin binding protein *Lgals3* bp, the metalloprotease inhibitor (*Timp1)*, and the protein C receptor *Procr*.

The matrix metalloproteinases (*Mmp*s) belong to a family of zinc- and calcium-dependent proteases responsible for the degradation of the extracellular matrix proteins. Concomitantly they can degrade virtually all components of the extracellular matrix [15]. Their action is counterbalanced by the tissue inhibitor matrix metalloproteinases (*Timps*) [16]. Together they play a major role in tissue remodeling processes, including cardiac remodeling [17]. In our present study we found a down-regulation of the *Mmp12* gene, which is associated with degradation of elastin and basement membrane, and an increased expression of *Timp1*. The ADAM (A disintegrin and metalloprotease) family of transmembrane proteases displays diverse functions. *ADAM* with thrombospondin-like motifs (*Adamts)* is a secreted protease characterized by thrombospondin (*TS)* motifs in their C-terminal domain [18]. During acute inflammatory states the decreased expression of both *Adamst5* and *Timp3* mRNA have been reported [19]. This is consistent with our data (both *Timp3* and *Adamst5* genes were downregulated by 4.6 and −13.2 fold, respectively).

The ability of *T. cruzi* to degrade proteins of the extracellular matrix and the blockade of the expression of its components at the transcriptional level is critical for the establishment of the host infection. We observed this degradation of extracellular matrix protein in immunofluorescence experiments using an anti-Laminin antibody (Fig. 2D,E and F). A previous report identified an increased expression of laminin modulated by the parasite transialidase, *gp83* [20]. These authors reported that silencing of the *laminin gamma 1* gene blocked *T. cruzi* infection. Our finding of laminin gamma 1 decreased expression in infected myocyte cultures is therefore highly significant, since it suggests a paracrine defense response of the infected cardiomyocytes. The labeling for this protein disappears in infected cells when *T. cruzi* penetrates host cells by an active process [21] in a unique endocytosis fashion which involves disruption of host cell actin filaments and recruitment and fusion with lysozomes [22]. Our data show a down-regulation (6.2 fold) of the *Ctss* gene which encodes cathepsin, a lysozomal cysteine proteinase that may participate in the degradation of antigenic proteins for presentation on MHC class II molecule [23]. This may facilitate the evasion of the protozoan from the parasitophorous vacuole into the cytoplasm.

3.4. Alterations in junction-associated genes

Our previous data demonstrated that cell-cell communication through Cx43 gap junction channels virtually disappears 48 h after *T. cruzi* infection in primary myocyte cultures [24– 26]. As confirmed by the present study, in which the encoding gene *Gja1* was down-regulated by 2.8 fold, at longer times of infection Cx43 levels decline [27]. The decreased intercellular coupling in the infected myocytes raises the question of whether altered expression of genes representing other components of junctional communication might be responsible for this functional alteration.

The present study demonstrates that at 48 h after infection of cultured cardiac myocytes, there is about 3 fold repression of the gene *Gjc1* encoding another gap junction protein (Cx45, a major component of gap junctions in the cardiac conduction system) and of two other genes encoding cell junction proteins: cadherin 11 (*Cdh11*) and junctophilin 2 (*Jph2*). Alteration of *Cdh11* was confirmed in immunofluorescence experiments, where infected neonatal cardiac myocytes demonstrated a dramatic reduction in expression of cadherin (Fig. 3D, E and F). Cadherins represent a major transmembrane component of adherens junctions and junctophilins represent a class of transmembrane proteins that participate in the macromolecular plasma membrane/sarcoplasmic reticulum junctional complex. Thus, cadherin or junctophilin expression might influence the degree of coupling and gap junction formation between cardiac myocytes. In addition, there may be downstream effects as a result of this altered expression. For example, *RhoA* expression was found to be 2.4x down-regulated in infected myocytes, consistent with its regulation by cadherin; because altering *RhoA* signaling may alter cardiac rhythm and conduction [28], this expression may play a role in altered cardiac electrical activity in the chagasic heart.

Plectin 1 (*Plec1*) was also found to be up-regulated, which may be of interest because of the role of this molecule in inter-linking intermediate filaments with microtubules and microfilaments, anchoring intermediate filaments to the plasma membrane and its presence in hemidesmosome multiprotein complexes that facilitate adhesion of epithelia to the basement membrane, thereby providing linkage of the intra-cellular keratin filaments to the laminins of the extracellular matrix [32].

There is increasing recognition that the intercalated disk between cardiac myocytes represents a site of both mechanical and electrical coupling [29,30]. Mouse models and human genetic mutations targeting membrane-spanning components of the intercalated disk result in cardiopathic phenotypes, as do those targeting molecules linking the junctional molecules to the cytoskeleton and even to the cytoskeleton itself [31]. Regulation of genes encoding these junctional proteins in the infected cardiac myocytes likely alters both the electrical transmission between the cells and the mechanical coupling required for optimal contraction of the heart.

The pathogenesis of chagasic heart disease represents interplay of many host factors. There are contributions by fibroblasts, the cells of the vasculature and infiltrating inflammatory cells. However, our data clearly demonstrate that the cardiac myocyte *per se* also contributes to the remodeling process even in the absence of other confounding factors.

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Goldenberg et al. Page 10

Fig. 1.

Real-time PCR validation of expression changes in four genes that were found to be altered in microarray analysis (Mmp12, Aqp1, Pfn, Bst2). Fold changes as determined by each method for each gene indicate that expression changes determined by each method are positively correlated for these sampled genes.

Fig. 2.

Spatial distribution of laminin in control (A–C) and *T. cruzi*-infected (D-F) neonatal cardiac myocytes. A,D: DAPI labeling; B,E: anti-laminin immunofluorescence; C, F: Merged micrographs. Note that laminin labeling is dramatically reduced in cardiac myocytes infected with the parasites (arrows in D and F). This reduction in immunolabeling is highlighted in the insets of the marked areas in C and F (G and H), where the presence of the parasites can be identified by the DAPI label (H). Bar in A: 50 μm.

Fig. 3.

Spatial distribution of cadherin in control (A-C) and *T. cruzi*-infected (D-F) neonatal cardiac myocytes. A,D: DAPI labeling, B, E: anti-cadherin immunofluorescence; C, F: merged micrographs. Note that Cadherin labeling is dramatically reduced in cardiac myocytes infected with parasite (arrows in D and F). Bar in A: 20 μm.

Table 1

Examples of significantly up- and down-regulated genes in acutely *T. cruzi* infected cardiomyocytes (CHR = chromosomal location, $X =$ fold-change). Note that the regulated genes are distributed in all chromosomes.

NM_010757 V-maf musculoaponeurotic fibrosarcoma oncogene family,

protein K (avian)

÷, $\overline{}$

Table 2

Gene ontology (GO) categories of up- and down-regulated genes with highest Z scores (C = cellular location, F $=$ molecular function, $P =$ biological process).

