

Genotype Analysis Identifies the Cause of the “Royal Disease”

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DNA variations underlying a specific phenotype or pathology from the past may vanish into history along with carrier individuals or populations. Occasionally, however, these “mutation relics” can be recovered from biological remains and used to reconstruct historical events or solve medical mysteries.

The “royal disease,” a blood disorder transmitted from Queen Victoria (1819–1901) to European royal families, contributed to pivotal events in European history and is one of the most striking examples of X-linked recessive inheritance. Although the disease is widely recognized to be a form of hemophilia (a blood clotting disorder), its molecular basis has never been identified (fig. S1). Genealogical analysis suggests that the royal disease mutation was transmitted from Russian Empress Alexandra (granddaughter of Queen Victoria) to her son, Crown Prince Alexei, who suffered from severe bleeding beginning at infancy (1, 2). Our recent DNA analysis revealed that the remains of all members of the Nicholas II Romanov family murdered in 1918 have been found, including the remains of Alexei (3).

We have now analyzed extracts of degraded DNA from the same remains (skeletal bone specimens) by applying multiplex target amplification and massively parallel sequencing (MPS) methods, which allowed us to retrieve and characterize nuclear gene sequences. We used the Alexandra specimens for initial mutation screening of genes for blood coagulation factor VIII, *F8* (26 exons), and

factor IX, *F9* (8 exons), both located on the X chromosome. Mutations in these two genes are the most common cause of hemophilia. Because the DNA samples were limited in quantity and quality, we designed multiple pairs of primers for short amplicons combined into multiplexing polymerase chain reaction (PCR) sets for the *F8* and *F9* genes (4). We analyzed the amplicons from primary or secondary PCR by using MPS in conjunction with conventional sequencing. In parallel, we included MPS of the complete mitochondrial DNA genome as a control for potential contamination and unambiguous identification of the sample (4).

We found no evidence for nonsynonymous missense or small insertion-deletion mutations in either *F8* or *F9* genes in the specimens. However, we detected an A-to-G intronic mutation located three base pairs upstream of exon 4 (intron-exon boundary IVS3-3A>G) in the *F9* gene that could be pathogenic. Typical for a heterozygous carrier, both wild-type and mutant alleles were detected in specimens from Alexandra. The specimens from Alexei contained only the single mutant allele, indicating that he was hemizygous for the mutation, whereas one of his sisters (presumed to be Anastasia) was a heterozygous carrier (Fig. 1 and figs. S2 and S3). Bioinformatics analysis predicts that the IVS3-3A>G mutation at this evolutionarily conserved nucleotide creates a cryptic splice acceptor site (4), which shifts the open reading frame of the *F9* mRNA, leading to a premature stop codon (Fig. 1B).

To evaluate the effect of the mutation on RNA splicing, we used an in vitro exon trap assay in

combination with MPS (fig. S4). We found that 99.98% of transcripts from the mutant *F9* allele were generated by splicing at the mutant site. Hemophilia manifests in a severe form if less than 1% of factor VIII or IX is functional (5).

We conclude that the royal disease is a severe form of hemophilia B, known also as “Christmas disease,” caused by a mutation creating an abnormal splicing site in the *F9* gene (4).

References and Notes

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- E. I. Rogaev *et al.*, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* **106**, 5258 (2009).
- Materials and methods are available as supporting material on Science Online.
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- Single-letter abbreviations for the amino acid residues are as follows: C, Cys; D, Asp; E, Glu; G, Gly; H, His; I, Ile; K, Lys; L, Leu; M, Met; N, Asn; P, Pro; Q, Gln; S, Ser; V, Val; and Y, Tyr.
- We thank T. Andreeva, A. Goltsov, I. Morozova, A. Tazetdinov for technical support; V. Gromov and N. Nevolin for assistance with the bone samples; S. Denisov and A. Mironov for bioinformatics; and A. Chikunov for general support.

Supporting Online Material

www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/1180660/DC1
Materials and Methods
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References

17 August 2009; accepted 28 September 2009
Published online 8 October 2009;
10.1126/science.1180660
Include this information when citing this paper.

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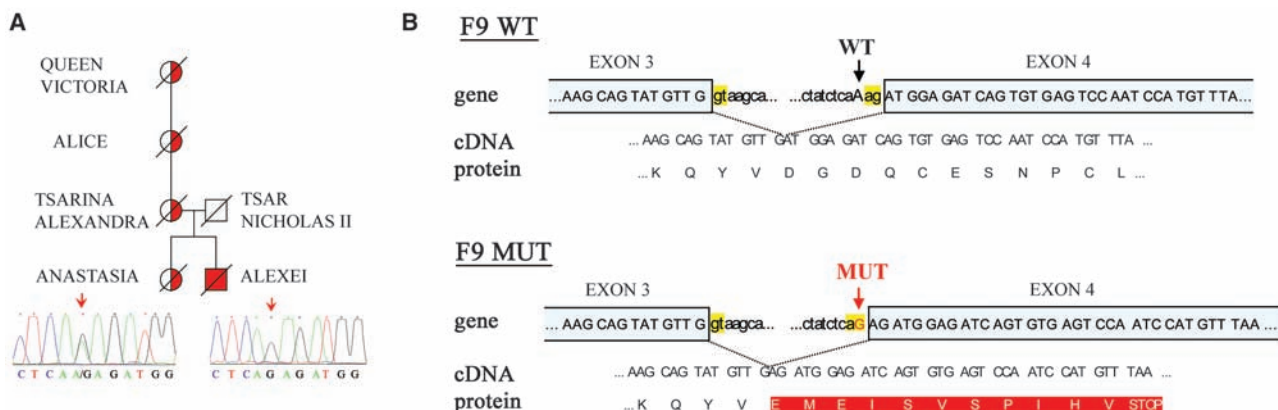


Fig. 1. The royal disease was likely caused by a point mutation in *F9*, a gene on the X chromosome that encodes blood coagulation factor IX. **(A)** Partial pedigree of the royal family, showing transmission of the mutation from Queen Victoria to Empress Alexandra and from Alexandra to Prince Alexei, her hemophilic son. Alexei was hemizygous for the

mutation, whereas Alexandra and one of her daughters, putative Grand Duchess Anastasia, were heterozygous carriers. **(B)** The A-to-G mutation occurs just upstream of exon 4 in the *F9* gene and is predicted to create a new splice acceptor site that could lead to production of a truncated factor IX protein (6). WT indicates wild type.