



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**PRODUCTION OF THE NUCLEOCAPSID PROTEIN OF A SWINE
NIPAH VIRUS ISOLATE IN ESCHERICHIA COLI**

ONG SWEE TIN

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**PRODUCTION OF THE NUCLEOCAPSID PROTEIN OF A SWINE NIPAH
VIRUS ISOLATE IN *ESCHERICHIA COLI***

By

ONG SWEE TIN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

PRODUCTION OF THE NUCLEOCAPSID PROTEIN OF A SWINE NIPAH VIRUS ISOLATE IN *ESCHERICHIA COLI*

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Nipah virus (NiV) possesses a nonsegmented, single-stranded negative sense RNA genome that contains six structural genes arranged in the order of 3' N-P-M-F-G-L 5'. The nucleocapsid (N) gene of Nipah virus isolated from swine was amplified from the viral RNA by reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR). The nucleocapsid (N) gene of Nipah virus was cloned into the bacterial expression vector, pTrcHis2, for intracellular expression in three *Escherichia coli* strains: TOP 10, BL 21 and SG 935. The N protein was expressed as a 63 kDa fusion protein containing the *myc* epitope and His-tag at its C-terminal end. The amount of the fusion protein expressed in strain SG 935 was significantly higher than the other two strains, and was detected by the anti-*myc* antibody, anti-His and swine anti-NiV serum. The N gene sequence shared 99% homology with that of Nipah virus isolated from human. The coding region of N protein of NiV was cloned into different vectors and subsequently introduced into different *E. coli* strains. The yield of the N protein produced in different vectors and different hosts was compared. It was found that the amount of N protein expressed by the pTrcHis2 vector containing the *trc* promoter in *E. coli* SG 935 was four-fold higher than that of vector pRSETB and pGEX-4T-1 in *E. coli* strain BL 21 series. Deletion of the N- or/and C-terminal



region of the N protein revealed that the N-terminal region plays a role in N protein solubility, but a mutant (MN50_{fus}) containing the second half of the N protein showed the highest expression level in all the three *E. coli* strains. Lowering the growth temperature of *E. coli* cell cultures to 25°C improved the solubility of the full-length and truncated N_{fus} protein from 50% to 80%. This study addresses the fundamental problems encountered in production of Nipah viral N protein in *E. coli* which may be useful as an alternative antigen for the detection of anti-NiV in swine.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PENGHASILAN PROTEIN NUKLEOKAPSID DARIPADA VIRUS NIPAH
ISOLAT KHINZIR DALAM *ESCHERICHIA COLI***

Oleh

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Disember 2002

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Virus Nipah (NiV) mempunyai seutas genom RNA negatif yang tidak berbahagi. Genom ini mengandungi enam gen struktur yang tersusun dalam turutan 3' N-P-M-F-G-L 5'. Gen nukleokapsid (N) daripada virus Nipah yang dipencilkan daripada khinzir telah digandakan daripada RNA virus dengan teknik transkripsi berbalik tindak balas rantaian polymerase (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction). Gen nukleokapsid (N) telah diklonkan ke dalam vektor bakteria, pTrcHis2, untuk pengepresan intrasel dalam tiga strain *Escherichia coli*: TOP 10, BL 21 dan SG 935. Protein N telah diekspres sebagai protein gabungan yang bersaiz 63 kDa dan mengandungi epitope *myc* dan His-tag di hujung C. Jumlah protein gabungan yang diekspres dalam strain SG 935 adalah lebih tinggi daripada dua strain yang lain, dan boleh dikesan dengan antibodi anti-*myc* antibody, anti-His dan serum khinzir anti-NiV. Turutan gen N berkongsi 99% kesamaan dengan virus Nipah yang dipencilkan daripada manusia. Bahagian yang mengekodkan protein N telah diklon ke dalam vektor berlainan and dimasukkan ke dalam strain *E. coli* yang berlainan. Perbandingan jumlah protein N yang terhasil dengan vector dan host yang berlainan telah dijalankan. Jumlah protein N yang diekspres oleh vektor pTrcHis2 yang mengandungi promoter *trc* dalam *E. coli* SG 935 didapati empat kali ganda lebih



tinggi daripada vektor pRSETB dan pGEX-4T-1 dalam siri strain *E. coli* BL 21. Pemotongan bahagian terminus N- atau/dan C- protein N menunjukkan bahawa bahagian hujung N memainkan peranan dalam keterlarutan protein N, tetapi mutan (MN50_{fus}) yang mengandungi bahagian kedua protein N menunjukkan tahap ekspresi tertinggi di antara tiga strain *E. coli*. Apabila suhu pertumbuhan sel *E. coli* diturunkan kepada 25°C, keterlarutan protein N_{fus} berpanjangan penuh atau terpotong bertambah 50% hingga 80%. Kajian ini membincangkan masalah asas yang ditemui dalam penghasilan protein N virus Nipah dalam *E. coli* yang mungkin berguna sebagai antigen gantian untuk mengesan anti-NiV dalam khinzir.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 27th December 2002 to conduct the final examination of Ong Swee Tin on her Master of Science thesis entitled “Production of The Nucleocapsid Protein of a Swine Nipah Virus Isolate in *Escherichia coli*” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981 The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree Members of the Examination Committee are as follows

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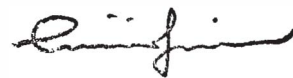
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I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	vii
DECLARATION	ix
LIST OF TABLES	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvi
 CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 General introduction of Nipah virus	4
2.2 Occurrence	4
2.3 Nature of the virus	5
2.3.1 Virus classification	5
2.3.2 Virus morphology	6
2.3.3 Virion and genome structure	6
2.3.4 Viral proteins	9
2.3.4.1 The N protein gene	9
2.3.4.2 The P protein gene	9
2.3.4.3 The M protein gene	10
2.3.4.4 The F protein gene	11
2.3.4.5 The G protein gene	11
2.3.4.6 The L protein gene	12
2.4 Viral proteins expression in bacteria	12
2.5 Approaches to study protein solubility and stability	13
2.5.1 Growth temperature	14
2.5.2 Promoters	15
2.5.3 Periplasmic expression/ secretion strategy	16
2.5.4 Choice of host cells strain	19
2.5.5 Fusion proteins	21
2.5.6 Protein engineering	22
2.5.7 Co-expression of chaperons and/or foldases	24
2.5.8 <i>In vitro</i> denaturation and refolding of the protein	25



3	MATERIALS AND METHODS	26
3.1	General methods	26
3.2	Chemicals and media	26
3.3	Virus isolate	26
3.4	Nuclei acids extraction	27
	3.4.1 Viral RNA extraction	27
	3.4.2 Preparation of DNA	28
	3.4.2.1 Alkaline lysis method	28
	3.4.2.2 Quantitation of DNA	29
3.5	Plasmid vectors and bacterial strains	29
3.6	RT-PCR	30
	3.6.1 Primers	30
	3.6.2 Synthesis of the first and second strand of the cDNA	30
3.7	Analysis of the PCR products	33
3.8	Recovery and purification of DNA fragments	34
3.9	Cloning	35
	3.9.1 TA cloning	35
	3.9.2 Unidirectional cloning	35
	3.9.2.1 Digestion of insert and vector with restriction endonucleases	35
	3.9.2.2 Ligation	37
3.10	Transformation	37
	3.10.1 Preparation of competent cells	37
	3.10.2 Transformation of competent cells	38
3.11	Identification and analysis of recombinants clones	38
	3.11.1 Restriction analysis	38
	3.11.2 Polymerase chain reaction (PCR)	39
3.12	Sequence analysis	39
3.13	SDS polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE)	40
3.14	Western blotting	41
3.15	Protein concentration determination	42
3.16	Solubility analysis	43
	3.16.1 Determination of the solubility of recombinant proteins	43
	3.16.2 Determination of the localization of recombinant proteins	46
	3.16.3 Quantitation of protein pattern	48
3.17	Deletion mutagenesis	48
	3.17.1 Generation of the nested sets of deletion mutants	48
	3.17.2 Analysis of the full-length and truncated N proteins in different <i>E. coli</i> strains	50
	3.17.3 Solubility analysis of the truncated recombinant N protein	50
	3.17.4 Determination of percentage of soluble/insoluble protein	51



4	RESULTS	52
4.1	cDNA synthesis	52
4.1.1	RT-PCR	52
4.1.2	Construction of the recombinant plasmids	52
4.1.3	Production of the N _{fus} protein in <i>E. coli</i>	54
4.1.4	Solubility and localization of N protein in <i>E. coli</i> TOP 10 cells	56
4.2	Sequence analysis of the N gene	56
4.3	Comparison of N _{fus} protein's yield in different <i>E. coli</i> strains	59
4.4	Effect of different promoter on the N _{fus} protein production	61
4.5	Deletion mutagenesis	67
4.5.1	Amplification of truncated mutants coding regions by PCR	67
4.5.2	Construction of plasmids encoding the truncated N proteins	70
4.5.3	Production of the truncated N _{fus} proteins	70
4.5.4	Solubility analysis	73
5	DISCUSSION	79
6	CONCLUSION	97
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	99
	APPENDICES	114
	BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR	117
	PUBLICATIONS	118



LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Recombinant plasmids used in this study	31
2	<i>Escherichia coli</i> strains used in this study	31
3	List of primers used in this study	32
4	Restrictions endonucleases used in this study	36
5	Primers used to amplify the mutants	49
6	Primers used for the construction of deletion mutants	69
7	Combination of restriction enzymes used in the determination of the orientation of the inserts	72
8	Amount of N _{fus} proteins produced by deletion mutants	74
9	Comparison of the yield of truncated N _{fus} proteins in different <i>E. coli</i> strains	74
10	Solubility analysis of the truncated N _{fus} proteins produced in <i>E. coli</i> BL 21 at 25°C	78



LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
2.1 A schematic diagram of a Nipah virus.	7
2.2 A schematic representative of the genome structure of the NiV and the coding capacity of the P gene.	8
2.3 Schematic distributions of <i>E. coli</i> proteases in the cell.	17
3.1 Steps taken for the determination of the solubility of recombinant proteins.	44
3.2 Steps taken for the determination of the localization of the proteins.	47
3.3 Schematic diagram of the truncated N proteins constructed.	49
4.1 Agarose gel (1.2%) electrophoresis of the RT-PCR products of the coding region of N gene.	53
4.2 Agarose gel (1%) electrophoresis of the plasmids extracted from the putative transformants.	53
4.3 Time course study of the production on the recombinant N protein.	55
4.4 Solubility analysis of the N _{fus} protein.	57
4.5 Determination of the localization of the N _{fus} protein.	57
4.6 Nucleotide and deduced amino acid sequences of the N coding region of the swine isolate.	58
4.7 Western blot analysis of the expressed N _{fus} protein in three <i>E. coli</i> strains.	60
4.8 Western blot analysis of the expressed N _{fus} protein in <i>E. coli</i> SG 935.	60
4.9 Agarose gel (1.2%) electrophoresis of the PCR product of the coding region of N gene.	62
4.10 Schematic diagram of the fusion proteins constructed with different promoters.	62
4.11 Agarose gel (1%) electrophoresis of the plasmids extracted from the putative transformants.	63
4.12 Separation of the three different N _{fus} proteins by 12% SDS-PAGE.	65



4.13	Western blot analysis of the expressed N _{fus} protein from three different vectors.	66
4.14	Schematic representation of truncated N _{fus} mutants.	68
4.15	Agarose gel electrophoresis of deletion mutants constructed.	69
4.16	Agarose gel (1.2%) electrophoresis of the plasmids extracted from the putative transformants.	71
4.17	<i>Bgl</i> I analysis of the putative transformants.	71
4.18	Determination of the orientation of the DNA inserts in recombinant plasmids.	72
4.19	Comparison of the truncated N _{fus} proteins' yield in different <i>E. coli</i> strains.	74
4.20	Solubility analysis of the truncated N _{fus} proteins produced in <i>E. coli</i> BL 21.	77



LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A ₅₄₀	absorbance at wavelength 540 nm
A ₆₀₀	absorbance at wavelength 600 nm
ATP	adenosine triphosphate
α	alpha
aa	amino acid
Amp	ampicillin
ATG	start codon
β	beta
BCIP	5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl phosphate
bp	base pair
BSA	bovine serum albumin
°C	degree Celsius
cDNA	complimentary DNA
C-terminus	carboxy terminus
DEPC	diethyl pyrocarbonate
dH ₂ O	distilled water
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
DTT	1,4-dithiothreitol
dNTPs	deoxynucleoside triphosphate
EDTA	ethylenediamine tetraacetic acid
ELISA	enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
h	hour
HCl	hydrochloric acid



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In March 1999, an outbreak of fatal viral encephalitis was reported in Malaysia and Singapore (Harcourt *et al.*, 2000). The causative agent for this disease, Nipah virus (NiV) was isolated and named after the place where the outbreak first occurred. The virus causes respiratory and neurological syndromes and deaths in swine. The outbreak which claimed 105 human lives were controlled only after more than 1 million swine in the affected areas were culled (Chua *et al.*, 2000) which nearly abolished the swine industry in Malaysia.

Electron microscopic analysis of the NiV isolated from a human tissue revealed that it has structural features that similar to those of the family *Paramyxoviridae* (Chua *et al.*, 2000). In terms of nucleotide sequence, NiV and Hendra virus (HV) are closely related to each other but they could not be grouped within any of the established genera of the subfamily *Paramyxovirinae* and thus these viruses were suggested to be grouped as members of a new genus within the subfamily (Harcourt *et al.*, 2000).

NiV has a nonsegmented, single-stranded negative sense RNA genome of approximately 18.2 kb (Wang *et al.*, 2001). The virion is enveloped by a lipid bilayer containing two transmembrane glycoproteins: a cell receptor binding protein known as G, and a separate fusion (F) protein (Chua *et al.*, 2000). Lining the interior surface of the viral envelope is the matrix (M) protein, which is believed to link the



glycoproteins to the viral nucleocapsid or ribonucleoprotein (RNP) complex. The latter is made up of many copies of nucleoprotein (N) that encapsidates the RNA genome. Associated with the RNP are the phosphoprotein (P) and the large protein or RNA polymerase (L). These three components are believed to be involved in replication as well as transcription of viral RNA (vRNA) (Lamb & Kolakofsky, 1996). The N protein is the most abundant structural protein and the essential component of the helical nucleocapsid (Yu *et al.*, 1998).

NiV is classified internationally as a biosecurity level 4 (BSL4) agent (Daniels *et al.*, 2001) which is defined as a biological agent that causes severe human disease and is a serious hazard to employees; it is likely to spread to the community and there is usually no effective prophylaxis or treatment available. Hence propagation of the NiV can only be conducted under physical containment level 4 (PC4) conditions. The strict application of this guideline has made the propagation of the NiV difficult in Malaysia. Therefore, it is of important to produce the viral antigens via recombinant DNA technology.

The *Escherichia coli* system was chosen for expressing the recombinant N protein because *E. coli* has rapid doubling time and the ability to grow in inexpensive media. Furthermore, *E. coli* is one of the best understood organisms that has been applied in the development of many molecular cloning techniques. Thus, the objectives of this study were as follows:



- (I) to determine the nucleotide sequence of the nucleocapsid gene (N) of the Nipah virus (NiV) swine isolate VRI 2794/99;
- (II) to clone the N gene into an *E. coli* vector;
- (III) to produce the nucleocapsid protein in *E. coli* and;
- (IV) to study the solubility of the N protein in *E. coli*.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 General introduction of Nipah virus

Nipah virus (NiV) is a newly recognized zoonotic virus. The virus was first isolated in 1999 during an outbreak of viral encephalitis in several parts of Malaysia. It has caused disease in animals and humans, through direct contact with infectious animals. The NiV was named after a village, Sungai Nipah, where it was first isolated (Chua *et al.*, 2000). NiV is closely related to another newly emergent virus, the Hendra virus (HeV; Yu *et al.*, 1998). Both of these viruses are members of the *Paramyxoviridae* family (Wang *et al.*, 2001).

2.2 Occurrence

The outbreaks of encephalitis in pigs and humans in several states of Peninsular Malaysia (Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Selangor), which were reported between September 1998 and April 1999, resulted in the death of 105 humans (Nor *et al.*, 1999; Chua *et al.*, 2000) and in culling of about 1.1 million pigs (Eaton, 2001; Field *et al.*, 2001). During March 1999, 11 abattoir workers in Singapore developed a febrile illness (1 fatality) caused by NiV, following close contact with pigs imported from the outbreak areas in Malaysia (Paton *et al.*, 1999).

2.3 Nature of the virus

2.3.1 Virus classification

NiV is a novel, unclassified member of the family *Paramyxoviridae*. Members of *Paramyxoviridae* possess intermediate genome sizes from 15.1 to 15.9 kb, and have traditionally been described as having a ‘uniform genome size’ (Pringle, 1991; Rima *et al.*, 1995). The universality of this family feature is now challenged with the discovery of the larger genomes found in NiV and HeV (Harcourt *et al.*, 2000; Wang *et al.*, 2001). HeV and NiV have a genome size of 18.2 kb, which is much larger than the relatively uniform genome sizes of all other known members of the *Paramyxovirinae*. When more sequence data became available, detailed phylogenetic analyses of the HeV and NiV genes indicated that the overall sequence homology of these two viruses with other members of the family was limited (Wang *et al.*, 2001). Indeed the homology detected was lower than that observed among most existing members of any single genus (Gould, 1996; Wang *et al.*, 1998; Yu *et al.*, 1998; Harcourt *et al.*, 2000; Wang *et al.*, 2000;).

Phylogenetic analysis of the nucleotide sequence of the N, P, M, F, G and L open reading frames (ORFs) from representatives of the subfamily *Paramyxovirinae* showed that NiV consistently formed a unique cluster which was more closely related to the morbiliviruses and the respiroviruses than to the rubulaviruses (Wang *et al.*, 2001). These observations suggested that NiV and HeV should be considered as members of a new genus Henipavirus (Hendra + Nipah) within the *Paramyxoviridae* (Wang *et al.*, 2000; Chan *et al.*, 2001).



2.3.2 Virus morphology

NiV is pleomorphic and enveloped virus with a long helical nucleocapsid. The virus particles vary in size from 120 to 500 nm (Chua *et al.*, 2000). A schematic diagram of the NiV virion is shown in Figure 2.1. There are glycoprotein spikes with the length of approximately 8-12 nm protruding out from the surface of the enveloped virus and these spikes can be readily visualised by electron microscopy (Lamb & Kolakofsky, 1996). The envelope contains two transmembrane glycoproteins, a cell receptor binding protein (G) and a separate fusion (F) protein. Typical “herringbone” nucleocapsid structures, approximately $1.67 \pm 0.07 \mu\text{m}$ in length and with an average diameter of 21 nm were observed in infected cells by means of negative stain preparations (Chua *et al.*, 2000).

2.3.3 Virion and genome structure

The complete genome sequence of NiV has been determined (Harcourt *et al.*, 2000). It comprises a negative single stranded, nonsegmented RNA of approximately 18.2 kb in length. As with other *Paramyxovirinae*, there are six major transcription units (Figure 2.2) in the order 3'-N-P-M-F-G-L-5' (Wang *et al.*, 2001) encoding six major structural proteins; nucleocapsid protein (N), phosphoprotein (P), matrix protein (M), fusion protein (F) and glycoprotein (G) or attachment protein, and large protein (L) or RNA polymerase.

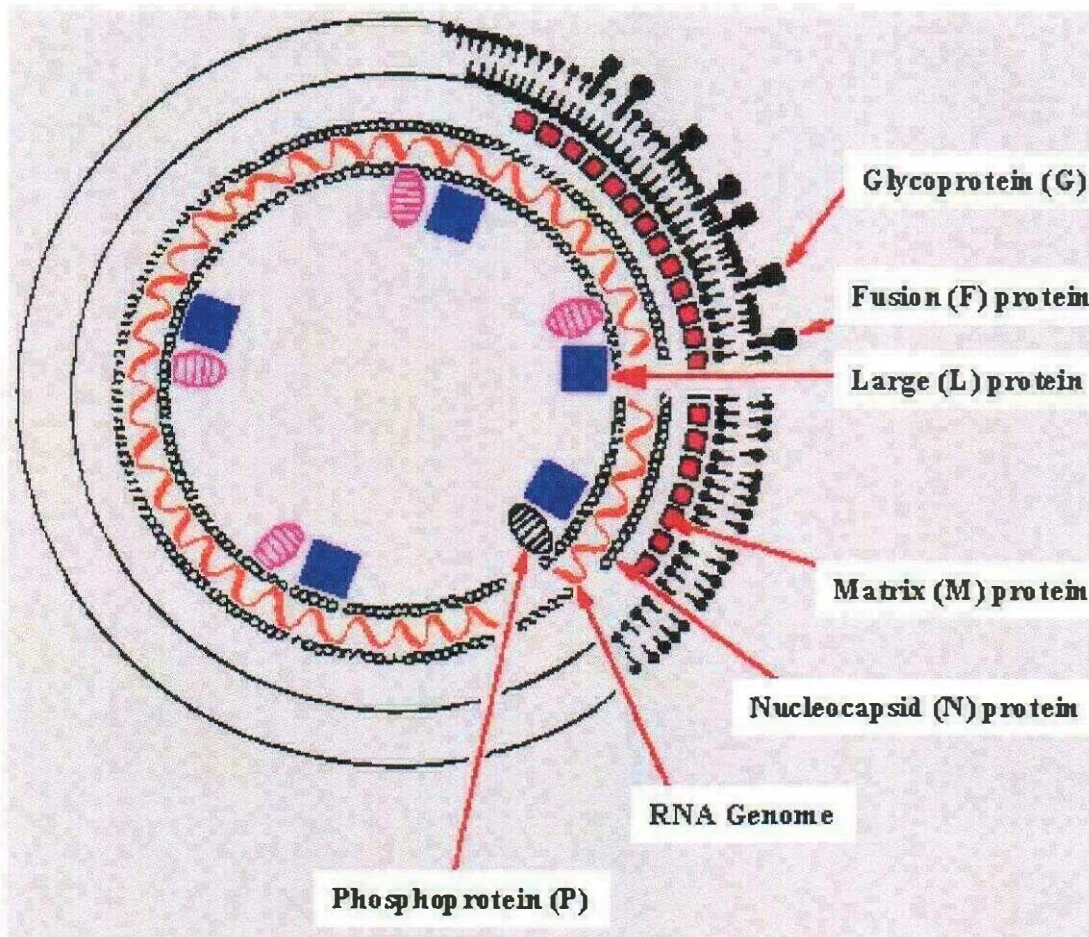


Figure 2.1: A schematic diagram of a Nipah virus (modified from Lamb and Kolakofsky, 1996).

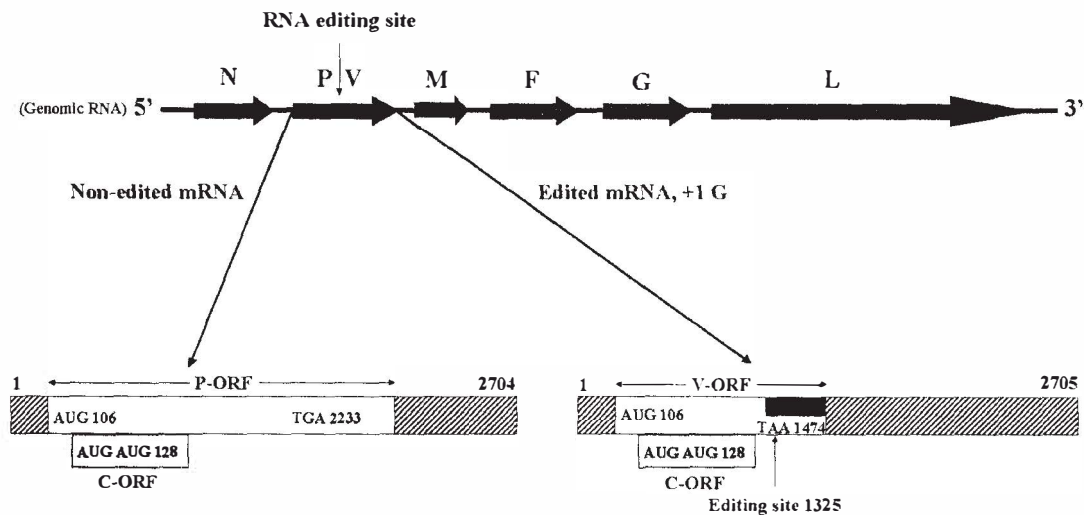


Figure 2.2: A schematic representative of the genome structure of NiV and the coding capacity of the P gene. The upper part represents the NiV genome (18.2 kb) and the location and order of the six major structural protein genes encoded by the anti-genome from 5' (left) to 3' end (right). The lower part contains the enlarged diagram showing the P gene coding strategy. The predicted P mRNA is 2704 nucleotides in length. The P protein is encoded by a faithful transcript of the viral genomic RNA from an ORF beginning at nucleotide 106 of the mRNA. A process known as pseudotemplated addition of G nucleotides or RNA editing generates the mRNA coding for the V protein. The RNA editing sites (vertical arrows) in the P genes of the paramyxoviruses are highly conserved. The addition of a G nucleotide at the RNA editing site (nucleotide 1325) allows access to a different reading frame (-1 relative to P). Therefore, the V protein contains the amino-terminal domain of the P protein joined to the cysteine-rich domain that is unique to the V protein (black box). The C protein (grey box) is expressed from an ORF that begins at nucleotide 128 (or 131) and overlaps P in the +1 frame. Hatched boxes indicate nontranslated regions of the mRNA (modified from Chua *et al.*, 2000; Wang *et al.*, 2001).