Research Article

The Association between Genetic Variants and Gene Expression in RAAS Genes Using Captive-Bred Vervet Monkeys (Chlorocebus aethiops)

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Received 1 August 2022; Revised 27 December 2022; Accepted 1 February 2023; Published 17 February 2023

Academic Editor: Loree Heller

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Mendelian genetics contribute largely to the development of hypertension; therefore, the identification of genetic variants related to blood pressure (BP) regulation remains crucial and may reveal new therapeutic drug targets. The purpose of the present study was to screen the captive-bred Vervet colony for salt-sensitive sequence variants or single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the selected Renin-Angiotensin-Aldosterone System (RAAS) genes associated with salt sensitivity. Blood samples were collected from 16 captive-bred Vervet monkeys for genotyping and gene expression analysis. The impact of the identified sequence variants was determined using online prediction tools. Sanger sequencing analysis revealed 21 sequence variants in AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SCL4A5, of which 19 were novel and two were previously reported in humans. All novel variants were either predicted to be polymorphic, disease-causing, or possibly damaging by prediction tools. Furthermore, the mRNA expression for AGT was significantly higher in the normal BP group (p value = 0.02), and a similar trend was observed for CYP3A5 and GRK4, whereas SCL4A5 was higher in the hypertensive group. The identified salt-sensitive variants specifically in GRK4 may be suggestive to be the attributing factor of the elevated BP levels in these captive-bred Vervet monkeys. Therefore, RAAS variants could be considered as a biomarker to identify the potential risk of developing hypertension in both humans and nonhuman primates.

1. Introduction

Hypertension is a public health concern and can lead to cardiovascular, cerebrovascular, and kidney diseases [1]. The prevalence of hypertension varies with age, sex, and ethnicity. Currently, the population data indicates that the incidence of hypertension ranges from 6.6 to 26 million in developed countries while in developing countries it is 639 million, and it is projected that by 2025, the number of patients with hypertension would be 1.56 billion globally [2, 3]. Excess dietary salt intake has been reported to predominantly contribute to hypertension [4], and this is associated with increased cardiovascular events and mortality irrespective of basal blood pressure (BP) levels [5]. In animal studies, salt-resistant rats do not develop an elevated BP after being fed high-salt diet (8% NaCl), while sensitive rats show elevated BP [6]. This means that a high-sodium diet is deleterious while a low-sodium diet is regarded as part of a healthy lifestyle and treatment of hypertension [7]. Although salt sensitivity, hypertension, and related cardiovascular disease (CVDs) result from the interaction of genes with environmental factors such as stress and diet [8], the underlying mechanism of salt sensitivity is not well understood [9]. Several studies have proved that Mendelian genetics contribute largely to the development of hypertension. Evidence from previous reviews estimated that genes contribute 30–50% to the pathogenesis of BP [10, 11]. Therefore, the identification of genetic variants related to BP regulation remains crucial and may reveal new therapeutic drug targets.

Several Renin-Angiotensin-Aldosterone System (RAAS) genes have been suggested to play a vital role in BP response to salt [12]. These genes include the sodium bicarbonate cotransporter gene (SLC4A5), G protein-coupled receptor
kinase 4 (GRK4), cytochrome P450 3A5 (CYP3A5), and angiotensinogen (AGT). SLC4A5 is a transmembrane protein that functions as an electrogenic cotransporter of bicarbonate and sodium [13], and it is known to be associated with hypertension of which five polymorphisms have been reported [14, 15]. The GRK4 gene regulates dopamine receptors, which are important in regulating sodium transport and BP [16]. In hypertensive patients, three polymorphisms (R65L, A142V, and A486V) have been reported to show an increase in GRK4 activity in the renal tubule and cause phosphorylation and agonist-independent uncoupling of dopamine 1 receptor (D1R) [17, 18]. Additionally, overexpression of GRK4 causing hypertension has been observed in transgenic mice that were fed high-salt diet (A486V) and on a regular diet (A142V) [19, 20]. In South Africa, GRK4 polymorphisms are more common in the African black population and are associated with impaired sodium excretion [21]. Moreover, the CYP3A5 gene has been reported to play a role in sodium reabsorption and BP regulation in the presence of a premature stop codon (rs776746) that influences salt and water retention and reduces its expression [22]. AGT is among the components that are involved in the activation cascade of the RAAS, which act together to regulate BP by maintaining vascular tone and the balance of water and sodium [23].

In this study, four RAAS genes (AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SLC4A5) were screened for sequence variants followed by gene expression analysis to investigate the association between salt sensitivity and hypertension development using the captive-bred Vervet monkey model. To date, several studies have demonstrated nonhuman primates (NHPs) to be effective research models to evaluate the diseases afflicting humans. NHP is also known to be an excellent animal model for various noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and shares various characteristics with humans [24]. These include the sodium-lithium counter transport activity (SLC) in their red blood cells which can lead to salt sensitivity [25]. Therefore, the use of the Vervet model is proposed in this study as a model of choice to better understand the genetic contribution of RAAS genes and find new therapeutic approaches to combat hypertension.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Animal Selection. The ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research on Animals at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) (ECRA; Ref 10/18). Sixteen captive-bred Vervet monkeys were selected based on age, gender, BP, and lipogram parameters (Tables 1, S1). Sample collection procedure and housing conditions were according to the Primate Unit Delft Animal Center (SAMRC/PUDAC) standard operating procedures and the revised South African National Standard for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes (South African Bureau of Standards, SANS 10386, 2008).

The pedigree demonstrated two families with half-siblings (Figure S1), in which four animals were from the same family tree, consisting of three half-siblings with normal BP and one half-brother who was hypertensive (family A). Family B had two half-sisters, one with normal BP and another one was hypertensive while the rest of the animals were from independent families (family C, D, E, F, G, and H). Additionally, three animals were wild caught from Modderfontein farm, Potchefstroom, in South Africa before being housed at PUDAC in 2012 and two of these animals were infertile.

2.2. Clinical Assessment, DNA Extraction, and Quantification. Animals were handled after chemical restraint with Ketamine (Kyron Laboratories, South Africa) at 10 mg/kg. Once an animal was fully unconscious, phenotype traits such as BP, peripheral capillary oxygen saturation percentage (SpO2 %), body weight, and heart rate were measured. Thereafter, blood (2–4 mL) was collected via femoral venipuncture into 4 mL Vacutainer® EDTA Tubes for genomic DNA extraction using a NucleoSpin Genomic Blood DNA purification kit (Macherey-Nagel, Germany). The concentration, quantity, and purity of DNA were immediately measured using NanoDrop 2000 spectrophotometer analysis (Vactec, South Africa), and DNA quality was confirmed by standardizing 2% gel electrophoresis that was stained with 2 μL of ethidium bromide (EtBr).

2.3. Candidate Gene Selection and Sequence Retrieval for Genotyping. Bioinformatic research tools such as the NCBI GENBANK, Ensembl, and UCSC genomic browser were used to retrieve the genomic sequences for the selected genes (AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SLC4A5) using the Green monkey (Chlorocebus sabaeus) as a reference sequence (Table S2). Furthermore, NCBI primer BLAST and PrimerQuest Tool (Whitehead Scientific, South Africa) were employed to design primers targeting the coding exons for all the selected genes (Table S3).

2.4. PCR Amplification and DNA Sequencing. Selected genes were amplified by PCR using the Veriti™ 96-Well Thermal Cycler (Applied Biosystems®, USA). Each standard PCR reaction (25 μL) consisted of the following reagents: GoTaq PCR Master Mix (2x) (Promega, USA), 2 mmol/L forward and reverse primer, 50 ng μL⁻¹ DNA, and nuclease-free water. The cycling program was similar to the one that has been previously published [26]. Briefly, cycling conditions included denaturation at 94°C for 5 minutes, followed by 30 cycles at 94°C for 30 seconds, varying annealing (40–70°C) for 30 seconds (Table S3), and extension of 72°C for 1 minute, followed by a final extension of 72°C for 5 minutes. The PCR products were purified using the Wizard SV gel and PCR clean-up kit (Promega, USA). Based on the gel electrophoresis results, purified PCR products were sequenced and analyzed using ClustalW and ExPASy translate tool. The impact of the identified sequence variants was evaluated using online tools such as Polymorphism Phenotyping (PolyPhen-2) [27] and Sorting Intolerant from Tolerant (SIFT) website which is provided by Pauline Ng that predict whether a change in amino acid affects protein function. The Ensembl transcript ID of each gene was selected in MutationTaster [28], Human Splice Site Finder (HSF) [29], and Variant Effect Predictor (VEP) [30] to identify the impact of each variant.
2.5. Statistical Analysis. Data were expressed as means ± standard deviation between the groups. Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism, version 7.05. Statistical significance was calculated by using the Student t-test, and the statistically significant difference was set at p < 0.05.

3. Results

The selected animals showed no symptoms of being unwell or distressed. As indicated in Table 1, lipogram parameters for triglycerides and LDL cholesterol were not statistically different except for HDL-C (p = 0.04) which was significantly higher in the hypertensive group compared to the normal group. Phenotype traits such as body weight were also not statistically significant between the groups.

Systolic BP was significantly high in the hypertensive group compared to the normal group (p < 0.0001), and a similar trend was observed in diastolic BP (p = 0.04) (Figure 1).

Screening of RAAS genes such as AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SLC4A5 revealed 21 sequence variants in captive-bred Vervet monkeys (Table 2). The protein sequence alignment of the AGT gene showed that the identified sequence variants were located in a conserved region and predicted to be polymorphisms (V89A, P65P, T76T, and T318T) and

**Table 1: Clinical parameters.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Normal group</th>
<th>Hypertensive group</th>
<th>p values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>&gt;3–10 years</td>
<td>&gt;3–10 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>4 M and 4 F</td>
<td>4 M and 4 F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systolic BP (mmHg)</td>
<td>103.2 ± 5.343</td>
<td>167.6 ± 10.53</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic BP (mmHg)</td>
<td>46.31 ± 8.094</td>
<td>72.81 ± 8.52</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cholesterol (mmol/L)</td>
<td>4.05 ± 0.2353</td>
<td>3.6 ± 0.2659</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides (mmol/L)</td>
<td>0.5125 ± 0.1015</td>
<td>0.4025 ± 0.05081</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL cholesterol (mmol/L)</td>
<td>1.575 ± 0.1688</td>
<td>1.475 ± 0.2016</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL cholesterol (mmol/L)</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.1282</td>
<td>1.8 ± 0.1268</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean ± standard deviation; p < 0.05 is considered significant. BP: blood pressure; LDL: low-density lipoprotein; HDL: high-density lipoprotein; M: males; F: females.

**Figure 1**: Captive-bred Vervet monkeys’ systolic blood pressure (BP) and diastolic BP. The normal group had systolic BP less than 120 mmHg, while the hypertensive group had systolic BP above 130 mmHg. ***Significant difference (p < 0.0001) and *significant difference (p < 0.05).
disease-causing (R477R) when blasted on the MutationTaster tool (Table 2). Genotyping findings further showed that the selected captive-bred Vervet monkeys shared the novel E125Q sequence variant in the CYP3A5 gene which was regarded as SNP and two silent mutations (L295L and V296V) in exon 10, which were predicted to be polymorphisms and disease-causing, respectively (Table 2). Out of five sequence variants identified in the GRK4 gene, two of these variants (L102R and A178V) were predicted by HSF to have the potential of interfering with splicing. Moreover, five silent variants (S61S, T180T, S580S, G648G, and T939T) and one SNP were observed in the conserved region of the SLC4A5 gene.

Furthermore, mRNA expression of the selected RAAS genes was determined between the groups (Figure 2) and gender (Figure 3, Table S5). Statistical significance was only observed for AGT (p = 0.04, difference = −0.4 ± 0.1803); however, GRK4 and SLC4A5 had a similar trend whereby the hypertensive was highly expressed while CYP3A5 was elevated in the normal group (Figure 2). Moreover, gender analysis only showed a significant difference in GRK4 between Vervet males and females (p = 0.004, difference = 0.9288 ± 0.2722), and the same trend was observed for AGT (p = 0.82, difference = −0.08304 ± 0.3598) and SLC4A5 (p = 0.06, difference = 0.5764 ± 0.2771), although not significant (Figure 3). There

### Table 2: Sequence variants identified in the colony of captive-bred Vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus aethiops).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Exon</th>
<th>Nucleotide change</th>
<th>Type of change</th>
<th>AA change</th>
<th>Type of mutation</th>
<th>MutationTaster</th>
<th>PolyPhen-2</th>
<th>SIFT</th>
<th>VEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGT</td>
<td>Exon 2</td>
<td>C195&gt;T</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>P65P</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A228&gt;G</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>T76T</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Polymorphism</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T266&gt;C</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>V89A</td>
<td>Missense</td>
<td>Polymorphism</td>
<td>Benign</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C954&gt;A</td>
<td>Transversion</td>
<td>T318T</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Polymorphism</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C1431&gt;T</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>R477R</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Disease-causing</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CYP3A5</td>
<td>Exon 5</td>
<td>G373&gt;C</td>
<td>Transversion</td>
<td>E125Q</td>
<td>SNPs</td>
<td>Polymorphism</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Transversion</td>
<td>L295L</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Disease-causing</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G888&gt;A</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>V296V</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GRK4</td>
<td>Exon 3</td>
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<td>L102R</td>
<td>SNP</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G333&gt;T</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>A178V</td>
<td>SNP</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A587&gt;G</td>
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<td>Q196R</td>
<td>SNP</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G588&gt;C</td>
<td>Transversion</td>
<td>Q196R</td>
<td>SNP</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Missense variant</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLC4A5</td>
<td>Exon 11</td>
<td>G1241&gt;A</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>S414N</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
<td>Deleterious</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G540&gt;T</td>
<td>Transversion</td>
<td>T180T</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>Disease-causing</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C705&gt;T</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>R235R</td>
<td>Silent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G1740&gt;A</td>
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<td>S580S</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C&gt;1944T</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>G648G</td>
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<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Silent variant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>L649F</td>
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<td>Benign</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Modifier</td>
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<td></td>
<td>G2892&gt;A</td>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>V964V</td>
<td>Silent</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>ND</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

AA: amino acids; PD: possibly damaging; ND: not determined; SNP: single nucleotide polymorphism; SIFT: Sorting Intolerant from Tolerant; VEP: Variant Effect Predictor.
was no significant difference in mRNA expression level between animals with R477R variants in AGT and T180T in SLC4A5 against wild-type animals.

4. Discussion

About 30–50% of genetic elements contribute to hypertension [11], and these include genetic variation in RAAS genes such as AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SLC4A5 which are known to play a significant role in BP regulation [32]. The sequence variants identified in this study were all located in the conserved regions and anticipated to be polymorphisms, benign, and neutral by MutationTaster, PolyPhen-2, and SIFT (Table 2). Furthermore, AGT mRNA expression was significantly higher in the hypertensive compared to the normal group (Figure 2). Consequently, the hypertensive group had significant high level of systolic and diastolic BP compared to normal groups (Figure 1), and this may be correlated with the fact that hypertension is associated with high AGT expression [33, 34]. A similar trend was also observed in GRK4 and SLC4A5, and this can be linked with lipid accumulation in the blood vessels that are known to enhance the expression of renal angiotensin system components [35]. This may also be related to the fact that elevated RAAS gene expression contributes to an increase in AngII receptors in the kidney, leading to the development of hypertension [36, 37]. Moreover, AGT variants are associated with a higher prevalence of hypertension [23].

Evidence that links genetic variation of CYP3A5 was identified in this study and all selected animals had E125Q variant, which was anticipated to be possibly damaging by the PolyPhen-2 (Table 2) and alteration of an exonic splicing enhancer (ESE) site by HSF. These predictions suggested that the E125Q variant might lead to the introduction of a new splice site within the exon, thereby stimulating the imbalance of CYP3A5 metabolism activity, which enhances hypertension development. Although the L295L variant was regarded as a silent mutation in exon 10 of CYP3A5, it was anticipated to be disease-causing by the MutationTaster. This revealed that silent mutations can affect nucleic acid
stability, slow down translation rates, and change the structure of the protein without causing a change in amino acid [38]. A study by [39] which was conducted in the black population highlighted that CYP3A5 variations linked to higher BP may influence salt sensitivity in hypertensive individuals. Consequently, CYP3A5 gene expression showed higher expression in Vervet females compared to males, although this change was not significant ($p = 0.09$, difference $= -0.4171 \pm 0.2346$) (Figure 2). This was correlated to the previous studies in the human population, which showed that the CYP3A5 gene is significantly higher in females than in males [40, 41].

To further expand on the identified mutations, two out of the five identified GRK4 variants have been reported in human studies. These variants include L102R (Human: L65R) and A178V (Human: A142V). A study on average African Americans has reported that L65R (Vervet: L102R) and A142V (Vervet: A178V) in GRK4 are associated with high BP levels especially in men compared to women [17]. These findings were also confirmed by a separate study conducted in South Africa [16, 21]. Additionally, another study reported that men with A142V mutation showed a statistically significant increase in diastolic BP and an increasing trend in systolic BP [21]. The GRK4 A142V causes abnormalities in dopamine receptors due to high serine phosphorylation [20]. Similarly, the Vervet males had elevated BP levels (133.75/67.13 mmHg) and significantly higher GRK4 expression compared to females (Figure 2). Therefore, it was speculated that GRK4 A178V might have a similar impact in selected Vervet monkeys. The same gene expression pattern was observed in Vervet males that were highly expressing SLC4A5. Based on the BP, genotyping, and gene expression findings, this study further confirms the role of sequence variants and agrees with previous literature that RAAS polymorphisms are linked to hypertension and salt sensitivity.

5. Conclusion

Most of the identified sequence variants in this study were novel and predicted to have a significant impact such as disease-causing, possibly damaging, or deleterious effects. The genotyping results were further correlated with high BP and gene expression levels (AGT, GRK4, and SLC4A5) in hypertensive compared to the normal group. Based on these findings, there is a possibility that these Vervet sequence variants and gender differences affected the functioning of the RAAS genes. Since this is the first study that used RAAS gene variants and gene expression analysis as biomarkers of hypertension in NHPs, more research is required to further expand these findings and strengthen the use of the Vervet monkey model for cardiovascular therapy.

Data Availability

The data analysis results are included in the manuscript and the supporting documents are provided on a separate document.

Disclosure

Part of this work has been presented at the South African Association for Laboratory Animal Science (SAALAS) Conference, which was held at Northwest University Sports Village, Potchefstroom, South Africa, from 15 to 18 March 2022.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

Acknowledgments

The authors are thankful for the financial support from the National Research Council Thuthuka (NRF Grant no. 113583, ZE Magwebu), Primate Unit and Delft Animal Centre (SAMRC/PUDAC), and Division of Research Capacity Development (RCD) (Grant recipient: Sanele Khoza) under internship scholarship program of the South African Medical Research Council. Extended gratitude is due to the SAMRC/PUDAC Animal Technicians/Technologists: Mr. Timothy Collop, Mr. Mbuyiseli Billy, Mrs. Philida Beukes, and Mrs. Joritha van Heerden for their excellent technical assistance and expertise in NHP management.

Supplementary Materials

Table S1: Clinical measurements of the captive-bred Vervet monkeys. Figure S1: the pedigree diagram of captive-bred Vervet monkeys. * indicates animals with normal blood pressure, and + indicates hypertensive animals. The circles represent females, and the square represents males. [ ] denotes wild animals that were taken from the Modderfontein farm in Potchefstroom before being housed at PUDAC. Table S2: Green monkey (Chlorocebus sабаeus) reference sequence for selected genes. Table S3: Designed PCR primers for AGT, CYP3A5, GRK4, and SLC4A5 genes, Table S4: qRT-PCR primer assays (Homo sapiens) for selected genes. Table S5: genetic variation analysis for Vervet monkeys. (Supplementary Materials)

References


