



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***ESTABLISHMENT OF OPTIMISE STRATEGIES IN PRODUCTION OF  
RECOMBINANT HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN FOR CHIP-BASED  
ANTIBODY DETECTION APPROACH***

***TAM YEW JOON***

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**By**

**TAM YEW JOON**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

**May 2015**



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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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OF RECOMBINANT HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN FOR CHIP-  
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**TAM YEW JOON**

**May 2015**

**Chairman : Zeenathul Nazariah Allaudin, Ph.D.**  
**Faculty : Institute of Bioscience**

Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) antibody (anti-HBs) has shown to be an important serological marker in monitoring the success in hepatitis B vaccination. In this, the HBsAg protein plays a vital role as the basic component for anti-HBs detection assays due to its high reactivity and specificity. As such, the present thesis focuses on assessing and optimising key areas related to the downstream processing conditions specifically in the production of HBsAg from recombinant *Pichia pastoris* and in the establishment of chip-based anti-HBs detection prototype.

A study of the Mut<sup>+</sup> phenotype for the expression of recombinant hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) in *P. pastoris* strain GS115 with a two-phase fed-batch protocol is described. Expression levels of HBsAg protein of 6.74 g/L Dry Cell Weight (DCW) and 26.07 mg/L of HBsAg concentration were achieved 48 h of expression. The use of the pPIC3.5K-HBsAg plasmid in the Mut<sup>+</sup> phenotype enhanced the expression of HBsAg by a nearly 13 times higher volumetric productivity in the first 24 h and 35 times higher at peak production concentration. Comparison of AOX expression promoters relative to the HBsAg gene in the role of mRNA secondary structure during translation initiation revealed that HBsAg possesses lower folding stability with AOX1 Mut<sup>+</sup> phenotype and was found better suited for HBsAg expression, which correlates with the ease of translation initiation under shake flask conditions.

Subsequently, cell disruption strategies by high pressure homogenizer were optimized using response surface methodology (RSM) to correlate influencing factors affecting cell disruption capability and specific protein release of HBsAg

from *P. pastoris* cells. From the results, an optimised cell disruption strategy with up-scale adaptability consisted of a number of passes set at 20 times, biomass concentration of 7.70 g/L of dry cell weight (DCW) and pulse pressure at 1,029 bar was demonstrated and was shown to increase cell disruption efficiency by 2-fold and 4-fold for specific protein release of HBsAg when compared to glass bead method yielding 75.68% cell disruption rate (CDR) and HBsAg concentration of 29.20 mg/L, respectively.

Following the release of HBsAg from cell disruption, univariate screening approaches on factors affecting the purification performance of HBsAg on ion exchange chromatography (IEC) and size exclusion chromatography (SEC) techniques and the establishment of a two-step purification strategy were performed. The main results drawn showed that the IEC Q Sepharose XL column and optimum conditions of 4 mL sample loading volume, an elution buffer with 1.5 M NaCl concentration at pH 8 with an elution gradient length of 20 column volume and subsequent purification with SEC at a sample volume of 5 mL and a flow rate of 1 mL/min was able to efficiently purify HBsAg. An up-scaled version the established purification strategy comprising of the two techniques further demonstrated adaptability for scale-up operations with a final total PF of  $94.82 \pm 16.20$ , HBsAg purity of 95.48% and recovery yield of 78.07%.

Finally, detection and quantification of anti-HBs using direct surface plasmon resonance (SPR) chip-based assay approach with recombinant HBsAg obtained as capturing agent was performed. Recombinant HBsAg derived from *P. pastoris* was immobilized under optimum binding conditions at a concentration of 150 mg/L, sodium acetate buffer at pH 4 and 0.6% Triton X-100 while effective regeneration of sensor surface was able to be done with 20 mM HCl. A dynamic range of detection from  $\sim 0.00098$  to 0.25 mg/L was achieved and no cross-reactivity was found for the other known antibodies tested. Comparison of SPR chip-based assay with ELISA in terms of limit of detection generated an approximate 7-fold increase in sensitivity and a 2-fold increase in accuracy of the replicated results. The ability of the assay to detect anti-HBs in human sera samples was demonstrated with minor differences in comparison to that of the results obtained with ELISA.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMBENTUKAN STRATEGI YANG OPTIMA DALAM  
PENGHASILAN REKOMBINAN HEPATITIS B PERMUKAAN  
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Oleh

**TAM YEW JOON**

**Mei 2015**

**Pengerusi : Zeenathul Nazariah Allaudin, Ph.D.**  
**Fakulti : Institut Biosains**

Hepatitis B antigen permukaan (HBsAg) antibodi (anti-HBs) telah terbukti sebagai penanda rujukan yang penting untuk pemantauan keberkesanan hepatitis B vaksinasi. Dengan ini, protein HBsAg memainkan peranan penting sebagai komponen asas untuk ujian pengesanan anti-HBs berikutan kereaktifan dan spesifikasi yang tinggi terhadap antibodi tersebut. Oleh itu, tesis ini memberi tumpuan kepada penilaian dan pengoptimuman bidang-bidang utama yang berkaitan dengan keadaan pemprosesan hiliran khususnya dalam penghasilan HBsAg dari rekombinan *Pichia pastoris* di samping penubuhan prototaip cip pengesanan terhadap anti-HBs.

Satu kajian terhadap fenotip Mut<sup>+</sup> untuk ekspresi rekombinan HBsAg daripada *P. pastoris* jenis GS115 dengan protokol suapan sesekelompok dua fasa telah dilakukan. Tahap ekspresi protein HBsAg sebanyak 6.74 g/L keberatan sel kering (DCW) dan HBsAg berkepekatan 26.07 mg/L telah dicapai dalam masa 48 jam dari titik permulaan induksi. Penggunaan plasmid pPIC3.5K-HBsAg dalam fenotip Mut<sup>+</sup> mampu meningkatkan ekspresi HBsAg hampir 13 kali lebih tinggi dari segi produktiviti isipadu dalam jangka masa 24 jam yang pertama dan 35 kali lebih tinggi daripada puncak kepekatan pengeluaran. Perbandingan ekspresi promotor *AOX* relatif kepada gen HBsAg dalam peranan mRNA struktur sekunder semasa permulaan terjemahan menunjukkan bahawa HBsAg mempunyai kestabilan lipatan lebih rendah dengan *AOX1* Mut<sup>+</sup> fenotip dan didapati lebih sesuai untuk ekspresi HBsAg, jika dikaitkan dengan kesenangan dalam permulaan terjemahan di bawah keadaan kelalang bergoncang.



Seterusnya, strategi pemecahan sel oleh homogenizer bertekanan tinggi untuk membebaskan rekombinan HBsAg daripada sel *P. pastoris* telah dioptimasikan dengan menggunakan kaedah respon permukaan (RSM) dalam penentuan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kecekapan pemecahan sel dan di dalam pembebasan HBsAg. Daripada keputusan yang didapati, rumusan strategi gangguan sel dengan kebolehan penyesuaian penskalaan naik yang optima terdiri daripada bilangan 20 kali laluan, kepekatan biojisim 7.70 g/L DCW dan tekanan pada 1,029 bar didapati meningkatkan kecekapan pemecahan sel dan pelepasan protein spesifik HBsAg secara ketara dengan masing-masing 2 kali ganda dan 4 kali ganda jika dibandingkan dengan kaedah manik kaca yang menghasilkan 75.68% kadar gangguan sel (CDR) dan kepekatan HBsAg daripada 29.20 mg/L, masing-masing.

Susulan pembebasan HBsAg secara pemecahan sel, pendekatan saringan secara univariat telah digunakan dalam mengkaji kesan daripada faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi prestasi penulenan HBsAg pada teknik kromatografi pertukaran cas (IEC) dan teknik kromatografi penyisihan saiz (SEC) serta pembentukan strategi penulenan dua langkah telah dilaksanakan. Keputusan yang diperolehi membuktikan bahawa IEC penjerap Q Sepharose XL berserta dengan syarat optima 4 mL isipadu sampel pemuatan, kepekatan garam 1.5 M NaCl pada pH 8 dengan tempoh elusi kecerunan linear 20 isipadu penjerap dan penulenan selanjutnya dengan SEC pada syarat optima isipadu sampel 5 mL dan kadar aliran 1 mL / min berkesan untuk menulenan HBsAg. Strategi penulenan versi penskalaan naik yang terdiri daripada gabungan teknik IEC dan SEC menunjukkan keupayaan adaptasi terhadap operasi penskalaan naik dalam mencapai jumlah akhir PF sebanyak  $94.82 \pm 16.20$  dengan ketulenan HBsAg 95.48% dan hasil pengutipan 78.07%.

Akhir sekali, satu kaedah untuk pengesanan dan kuantifikasi anti-HBs berdasarkan cip plasmon permukaan resonans (SPR) yang langsung dengan menggunakan rekombinan HBsAg yang diperolehi telah dibentuk. Rekombinan HBsAg daripada *P. pastoris* telah ditetapkan di atas permukaan dengan keadaan optima pada kepekatan 150 mg/L, natrium asetat penampakan pada pH 4 dan 0.6% Triton X-100 manakala penjanaan semula permukaan pengesanan secara berkesan dapat dilakukan dengan 20 mM HCl. Rangkaian pengesanan yang linear dianggarkan pada 0.00098 hingga 0.25 mg/L telah dicapai dan tiada tindak balas silang dapat diperhatikan terhadap antibody-antibodi lain yang diuji. Perbandingan kaedah ujian pengesanan berasaskan cip SPR dengan ujikaji ELISA dari segi had pengesanan dapat meningkatkan sensitiviti ujian lebih kurang 7 kali ganda dan peningkatan sebanyak 2 kali ganda dari segi ketepatan pengulangan keputusan. Kaedah ini telah diaplikasikan kepada analisis yang lebih meluas dengan menggunakan sampel sera manusia yang mengandungi anti-HBs, memberikan data bersamaan dengan ujikaji ELISA.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 14 May 2015 to conduct the final examination of Tam Yew Joon on his thesis entitled "Establishment of Optimise Strategies in Production of Recombinant Hepatitis B Surface Antigen for Chip-Based Antibody Detection Approach" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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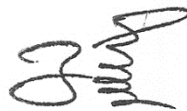
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>ABSTRAK</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>APPROVAL</b>	<b>VIII</b>
<b>DECLARATION</b>	<b>IX</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	<b>XV</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	<b>XVI</b>
<b>LIST OF APPENDICES</b>	<b>XX</b>
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>XXI</b>
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Objectives	2
1.3 Null hypotheses:	3
<b>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Hepatitis B	5
2.1.1 Epidemiology and route of infection	5
2.1.2 Hepatitis B in Malaysia	6
2.1.3 Stages and serological changes of hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection	7
2.1.4 Biological characteristics of hepatitis B virus (HBV)	9
2.1.5 Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)	10
2.2 <i>Pichia pastoris</i> expression system	12
2.2.1 Choice of promoter	13
2.3 Cell disruption and its classification	14
2.3.1 Key factors in cell disruption	15
2.3.2 Cell disruption by homogenization	16
2.4 Purification strategies for hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)	18
2.4.1 Ion exchange chromatography (IEC)	18
2.4.2 Size exclusion chromatography (SEC)	19
2.5 Detection and quantification of antibody against hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)	19
2.5.1 Chip based technology	20
2.5.2 Surface plasmon resonance (SPR)	21
2.5.3 Application of surface plasmon resonance (SPR)	22
2.6 Concluding remarks	22

<b>3.</b>	<b>TWO-PHASE FED-BATCH MODIFICATION FOR 48 HOUR PEAK EXPRESSION HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN EXPRESSION IN <i>PICHIA PASTORIS</i> SHAKE FLASK SYSTEM</b>	<b>25</b>
3.1	Introduction	25
3.2	Materials and methods	27
3.2.1	Strain and vector	27
3.2.2	Transformation of <i>Pichia pastoris</i>	27
3.2.3	Shake flask culture conditions	28
3.2.4	High pressure cell disruption	28
3.2.5	Sodium dodecyl sulphate polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS PAGE)	28
3.2.6	Western blotting	29
3.2.7	Enzyme linked immuno-sorbent assay	29
3.2.8	Biomass concentration	30
3.2.9	Protein quantification	30
3.2.10	Analysis of mRNA secondary structure	30
3.3	Results	31
3.3.1	Construction of HBsAg (AOX) <i>Pichia</i> clones	31
3.3.2	Fed-batch production of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) in shake flasks	32
3.3.3	Relationship between Mut phenotype and expression levels	35
3.3.4	mRNA secondary structure and minimum free energy prediction	36
3.4	Discussion	37
3.5	Conclusion	42
<b>4.</b>	<b>ENHANCED CELL DISRUPTION STRATEGY IN THE RELEASE OF RECOMBINANT HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN FROM <i>PICHIA PASTORIS</i> USING RESPONSE SURFACE METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>43</b>
4.1	Introduction	43
4.2	Materials and methods	45
4.2.1	Fermentation of culture	45
4.2.2	Glass bead disruption	45
4.2.3	High pressure cell disruption	45
4.2.4	Experimental design and optimization using response surface methodology (RSM)	49
4.2.5	Analytical procedures	50
4.2.6	Measurement of cell disruption rate (CDR)	50
4.3	Results	52
4.3.1	Central composite design experimental run and statistical analysis	52
4.3.2	Effects of independent factors and their interaction on cell disruption capability by high pressure homogenizer and specific protein release of hepatitis	



	B surface antigen protein from <i>Pichia pastoris</i> by cell disruption	55
4.3.3	Effect of three variables in cell disruption process of <i>Pichia pastoris</i> cells corresponding to the response of total soluble protein released and selective product recovery	59
4.3.4	Optimization of cell disruption process	62
4.3.5	Scale-up of the optimized cell disruption process	62
4.4	Discussion	64
4.5	Conclusion	70
<b>5.</b>	<b>SCREENING AND ESTABLISHMENT OF PURIFICATION STRATEGY FOR THE RECOVERY OF RECOMBINANT HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN FROM <i>PICHIA PASTORIS</i> FOR ASSAY DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>71</b>
5.1	Introduction	71
5.2	Materials and methods	73
5.2.1	Preparation of post-induction cell biomass and cell disruption	73
5.2.2	Analytical procedures	73
5.2.3	Purification strategies and chromatographic equipment	73
5.2.4	Cleaning-in-place (CIP) procedures	76
5.2.5	Screening for significant factors influencing the purification performance of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)	76
5.2.6	Strategy for up-scaling of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) purification	76
5.2.7	Data analysis	77
5.3	Results	79
5.3.1	Characterization of crude extract from cell disruption and pre-purification	79
5.3.2	Influence of binding buffer pH on protein adsorption of ion exchange chromatography (IEC)	79
5.3.3	Influence of salt ionic strength on elution gradient behaviour of ion exchange chromatography (IEC)	80
5.3.4	Influence of polyethylene glycol (PEG) on ion exchange chromatography (IEC) purification performance	81
5.3.5	Influence of sample loading volume and elution gradient length on the purification behaviour of ion exchange chromatography (IEC)	82
5.3.6	Influence of sample volume and flow rate on chromatographic behaviour of size exclusion chromatography (SEC)	87
5.3.7	Up-scaling of purification strategy of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) and analysis	90

5.3.8	Characteristics of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) aliquots during purification	96
5.4	Discussion	99
5.5	Conclusion	106
<b>6.</b>	<b>ANTI-HEPATITIS B SURFACE ANTIGEN ANTIBODY ASSAY DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION USING SURFACE PLASMON RESONANCE</b>	<b>107</b>
6.1	Introduction	107
6.2	Materials and methods	109
6.2.1	Materials and reagents	109
6.2.2	Biosensor system	109
6.2.3	Screening for optimum hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) immobilization conditions	109
6.2.4	Immobilization of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)	110
6.2.5	Regeneration studies	110
6.2.6	Validation studies on the established chip-based assay	111
6.2.7	Determination of antibody reactivity	111
6.2.8	Quantification of hepatitis B surface antigen antibody (anti-HBs)	111
6.2.9	Calculation of limit of detection (LOD) and quantification (LOQ)	112
6.3	Results	114
6.3.1	Optimization of hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) binding conditions on sensor surface scouting	114
6.3.2	Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) immobilization on surface of sensor chip CM5	116
6.3.3	Surface regeneration	117
6.3.4	Assay calibration and determination of limit of detection (LOD) and quantification (LOQ)	119
6.3.5	Specificity of the assay	121
6.3.6	Antibody concentration analysis in remnant serum samples	122
6.4	Discussion	124
6.5	Conclusion	128
<b>7.</b>	<b>SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH</b>	<b>129</b>
7.1	Summary	129
7.2	Conclusions	132
7.3	Recommendations for future research	134
	<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>136</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>161</b>

**BIODATA OF STUDENT**  
**LIST OF PUBLICATIONS**  
**AWARDS**

**180**  
**181**  
**182**



## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
2.1	Advantages and disadvantages of using <i>AOXI</i> promoter.	13
2.2	Performance of cell homogenization.	17
3.1	List of specific HBsAg primers used in the detection of HBsAg gene insert.	28
4.1	Full factorial CCD matrix for the three significant variables and experimental and predicted values of cell disruption capability measured by cell disruption rate (CDR) and specific protein release measured by ELISA for HBsAg concentration.	47
4.2	Values of independent variables at different levels of CCD design.	49
4.3	ANOVA for quadratic model on the cell disruption capability and specific protein release activity of HBsAg from the result of CCD.	54
4.4	Cell disruption conditions predicted by RSM and validation of the experimental data for cell disruption capability and specific protein release of HBsAg by optimal cell disruption strategy.	62
5.1	Properties of IEC and SEC columns.	75
5.2	Upscale purification strategy of recombinant HBsAg protein from <i>P. pastoris</i> .	93
6.1	Relative responses generated by different concentrations and %CV for analysis of monoclonal anti-HBs.	121

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	Serological profile for A) Acute and B) Chronic hepatitis B infection.	8
2.2	The structure of HBV and genome organization.	10
2.3	Schematic representation of different forms of HBsAg products.	11
2.4	Classification of cell disruption techniques.	15
2.5	Principles of SPR.	21
3.1	The map of pPIC3.5K-HBsAg expression vector with HBsAg gene insertion.	31
3.2	Screening of <i>Pichia</i> transformants by PCR amplification.	32
3.3	Expression of recombinant HBsAg protein in A) Mut <sup>+</sup> and B) Mut <sup>S</sup> phenotypes.	33
3.4	SDS-PAGE analysis of crude extract containing recombinant HBsAg.	34
3.5	Western blot analysis of expressed recombinant HBsAg from (A) Mut <sup>+</sup> phenotype and (B) Mut <sup>S</sup> phenotype.	34
3.6	Correlation of volumetric productivity in A) Mut <sup>+</sup> phenotype and B) Mut <sup>S</sup> phenotype.	35
3.7	Minimum free energy and mRNA secondary structure predicted for A) <i>AOX1</i> (Mut <sup>+</sup> ) and B) <i>AOX2</i> (Mut <sup>S</sup> ) promoter region incorporating HBsAg gene taken from Vienna RNA package software.	36
4.1	Plot indicating the predicted values against experimental values for A) cell disruption capability and B) specific protein release of HBsAg.	53

4.2	Response surface 3D contour plots showing the combined effects of A) Number of passes and Biomass concentration; B) Number of passes and Pulse pressure; and C) Biomass concentration and Pulse pressure on the disruption of <i>P. pastoris</i> cells containing expressed HBsAg.	56
4.3	Response surface 3D contour plots showing the combined effects of A) Number of passes and Biomass concentration; B) Number of passes and Pulse pressure and C) Biomass concentration and Pulse pressure on specific protein release of HBsAg from cell disruption of <i>P. pastoris</i> cells.	57
4.4	Total soluble protein (g/L) and selective product recovery (mg/g) obtained following pre-determined experimental runs by RSM.	59
4.5	SDS PAGE of total protein released from disrupted <i>P. pastoris</i> cells containing expressed HBsAg derived from various experimental runs of disruption.	61
4.6	Western blot of recombinant HBsAg released from cell disrupted samples using optimized conditions by high pressure homogenizer.	63
5.1	Effect of pH on protein adsorption of HBsAg protein.	80
5.2	Effect of salt concentration in elution buffers on EE and their purification folds.	81
5.3	Chromatograms illustrating purification of HBsAg with IEC in A) presence of 1% PEG 10,000 in binding and elution buffer B) presence of 1% PEG 10,000 in binding buffer only and C) absence of 1% PEG 10,000.	83
5.4	Sample loading volume breakthrough curves of HBsAg protein onto IEC Q Sepharose XL column corresponding to A) Peak height and peak area, as well as B) HBsAg recovery yield and PF.	84
5.5	The influences of elution length on purification behaviour of IEC.	85

5.6	Chromatograms representing elution of HBsAg with linear gradient with different elution length at A) 2.5 CV B) 5 CV C) 10 CV D) 20 CV and E) 30 CV of IEC.	86
5.7	Sample loading volume breakthrough curves of HBsAg protein onto SEC Superdex column corresponding to A) Peak height and peak area, as well as B) HBsAg recovery yield and PF.	88
5.8	Influences of flow rate on the performance of HBsAg purification with SEC.	89
5.9	Chromatograms comparing separations on HiTrap™ Q Sepharose XL columns with CV size of A) 5 mL, B) 10 mL and C) 15 mL.	91
5.10	Separation profiles of HBsAg protein during the purification strategy.	92
5.11	Chromatograms displaying purity of HBsAg from different purification steps using HPLC.	94
5.12	SDS PAGE gel visualization by A) Coomassie blue and B) Silver staining of HBsAg purification profiles of samples collected at different purification steps.	95
5.13	Western blotting of samples collected after A) IEC and B) SEC purification of HBsAg protein on nitrocellulose membrane probed with monoclonal anti-HBs (Meridian Life Science, USA).	96
5.14	Formation of insoluble particulates in clarified disrupted samples after prolonged storage.	97
5.15	Comparison of separation profiles on the purification performance by IEC with A) prolonged storage and B) freshly prepared disrupted samples containing HBsAg.	98
6.1	pH scouting of HBsAg binding conditions.	115
6.2	Effects of Triton X-100 on HBsAg binding conditions.	115
6.3	Concentration scouting of HBsAg.	116

6.4	HBsAg immobilization onto sensor chip CM5.	117
6.5	Surface performance test of regeneration and surface stability.	118
6.6	Standard calibration curve of anti-HBs.	119
6.7	Double reciprocal plot in the determination of maximum anti-HBs mass bound to immobilized HBsAg.	120
6.8	Linearity range of SPR detection assay.	120
6.9	Cross-reactivity studies in the determination of specificity.	122
6.10	Distribution of human remnant sera samples correlated to their % deviation between ELISA and chip-based assay in the quantification of anti-HBs from human remnant sera samples.	123



## LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix		Page
A	<i>E. coli</i> media recipes	161
B	<i>Pichia</i> media recipes	161
C	<i>Pichia</i> expression vector pPIC3.5K	164
D	<i>Pichia</i> expression vector pA0815	165
E	Restriction enzyme analysis of the recombinant pPIC3.5K-HBsAg	166
F	Sequence alignment of recombinant pPIC3.5K-HBsAg with HBsAg gene from ATCC (Accession number 31518)	167
G	Solutions used in sodium dodecyl sulphate polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS PAGE)	169
H	Solutions used in Western blotting	170
I	Complete western blotting result in the determination of protein profile of HBsAg by performed by using ABTS-HRP conjugated monoclonal anti-HBs staining.	172
J	Calculations for adsorption efficiency, recovery yield of HBsAg concentration, total protein yield concentration, elution efficiency, purification factor, recovery yield and HBsAg purity of purification process	173
K	National Institutes of Health approval for conducting research in the ministry of health Malaysia	175
L	Calculations for limit of detection, limit of quantification, theoretical maximum response and fitting of Langmuir equation	176
M	Fitting of chip-based assay calibration curve with Langmuir modelling	177
N	Calculated values obtained from chip-based assay and their respective relative responses RU	178

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABTS	2,2'-azino-bis(3-ethylbenzothiazoline-6-sulphonic acid)
AE	adsorption efficiency
ALT	alanine aminotransferase
ANOVA	analysis of variance
AOX	alcohol oxidase
BSA	bovine serum albumin
CCD	central composite design
CDR	cell disruption rate
CV	column volume
DCW	dry cell weight
EDC	1-ethyl-3-(3-dimethylaminopropyl) carbodiimide hydrochloride
EE	elution efficiency
EGF	epidermal growth factor
ELISA	enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay
HBsAg	hepatitis B surface antigen
HBV	hepatitis B virus
HCC	hepatocellular carcinoma
ICD	intact cell density
IEC	ion exchange chromatography
IFN	interferon
LOD	limit of detection
LOQ	limit of quantification
mAU	milli absorbance unit
mfe	minimum free energy
MIT	molecular imprinted technology
Mut	methanol utilization pathway
NHS	N-hydroxysuccinimide
OD	optical density
PF	purification factor
PHEMAT	poly(hydroxyethyl methacrylate-N-methacryloyl-L-tyrosine methyl ester)
PMSF	phenylmethanesulfonyl fluoride
RSM	research surface methodology
RU	response unit
SEC	size exclusion chromatography
SPR	surface plasmon resonance
TMB	3, 3', 5, 5'-tetramethylbenzidine
WCW	wet cell weight
YH	recovery yield of HBsAg concentration
YP	total protein yield concentration



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background

Hepatitis B disease poses a major public health problem in many parts of the world, particularly developing countries in Asia, which comprises populations that show high endemicity of chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection (Yap, 1994; Liaw, 2009). Although HBV is regarded as non-pathogenic, on its own, the virus does not trigger innate immunity and the outcome of its infection in causing liver diseases, often leads to fatality (Lavanchy, 2005). In Malaysia, significant numbers of chronic HBV carriers have been detected amongst the different ethnic groups with an increasing trend on the incidence rate of Hepatitis B infection in recent years especially in the productive age group (Ministry of Health, 2012; Ministry of Health, 2014). Apart from vaccination, constant screening for anti-HBs is an essential measurement needed to be taken to help in lowering infection cases (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011). Notably, anti-HBs serves as an important serological marker in monitoring the success of hepatitis B vaccination and as an indicator for disease resolution as well as in determination of the recovery of hepatitis B infected individuals (Bauer and Jilg, 2006). Presently, a variety of anti-HBs detection assays have been developed such as immuno-chromatography assay (ICA) (Li *et al.*, 2009), chemiluminescence assay (CL) (Zhang *et al.*, 2007), protein microarray (Xu *et al.*, 2007) and more importantly, enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), which has been the gold standard assay for anti-HBs detection in the last 3 decades (Tsitsilonis *et al.*, 2004; World Health Organization, 2014b).

In this, the basic component for the detection of anti-HBs, hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) has shown to play a vital role in meeting the quality control requirements of these assays in terms of sensitivity, specificity and accuracy as it has highly antigenic properties as well as the highest density of epitomes against anti-HBs (Bruss and Ganem, 1991; Kouichi *et al.*, 1991; Zhang *et al.*, 2001). As a diagnostic antigen, particularly the recombinant HBsAg, has been reported to possess high reactivity and specificity towards anti-HBs, with additional benefit as a safe and stable reagent for the development of qualitative and quantitative immunoassays (Bo *et al.*, 2005; Tan *et al.*, 2005; Ottone *et al.*, 2007). However, although these assays performed well in providing accuracy and reliable results, current short comings including time factor, indirect format, labour intensity, cost and the need for multiple washing steps which could lead to increased risk of contamination remain. Thus, there is still a continuous demand for more specific and effective alternative assays for anti-HBs detection. In addition, the current commercially produced HBsAg is still considered relatively expensive with limitations to downstream processing. These limitations were identified to be caused by low and prolonged expression levels, inefficiency in HBsAg release

from host cells and low recovery yield of the protein during purification (Hardy *et al.*, 2000; Kumar *et al.*, 2003). The impact of the limitations, affects the viability of detection assay development.

As such, with the realization on the economic importance of recombinant HBsAg as well as the need for alternative assay for the detection of anti-HBs, the general objective of this study was directed towards optimising the production route for *P. pastoris* derived HBsAg and in the establishment of chip-based assay specific for anti-HBs detection for the purpose of achieving self-sufficiency in sustaining production of the chip-based assay in the long run. It is hypothesized that by assessing process parameters and coming up with alternative optimised strategies in crucial areas of production comprising of HBsAg expression, cell disruption and purification, the overall production process efficiency can be improved while attaining the biological activity of the protein applicable for the use as a diagnostic agent. Using the HBsAg produce, it is also hypothesized that the protein can be integrated into an SPR chip-based assay as a recognition element for the detection of anti-HBs through similar means of assessment and optimisation. Ideally, the success criteria of established prototype would be able to detect and quantitate anti-HBs in human remnant sera samples without major interference. This is important to omit additional steps needed in sample preparation which could allow a higher risk of false interpretation due to increased risk of exposure to contamination.

## 1.2 Objectives

The main objectives of the present study were as follows:

- 1) to develop a HBsAg expression strategy using Mut<sup>+</sup> phenotype of *P. pastoris* strain and study its feasibility as an alternative to Mut<sup>S</sup> phenotype expression in the production of recombinant HBsAg protein.
- 2) to assess the characteristics of cell disruption for the release of recombinant HBsAg performed with a high pressure homogenizer based on the effects influenced by important variables and their correlation to each other and optimisation of the process strategy with the possibility of process scale-up.
- 3) to determine the significant factors influencing the purification performance of recombinant HBsAg for assay development and develop an optimum purification strategy for a better recovery yield of the purified protein.
- 4) to develop and evaluate a chip-based SPR detection assay for the quantification of anti-HBs using purified *P. pastoris* derived HBsAg as the recognition element.

### 1.3 Null hypotheses:

- 1) Optimizing process parameters in the area of HBsAg expression, cell disruption of *P. pastoris* host cells and purification of HBsAg could not improve overall process efficiency.
- 2) The established recovery strategies would not be feasible for up-scaled processes.
- 3) The integration of HBsAg produce onto the sensor surface of SPR chip-based assay would be unsuccessful.
- 4) The established SPR chip-based assay was unable to detect anti-HBs from human remnant sera samples.

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