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Why the Phosphotransferase System of *Escherichia Coli* Escapes the Diffusion Limitation of Signal Transduction, Transport and Metabolism that Confronts Mammalian Cells*

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ABSTRACT

Wherever components of a metabolic pathway act at different locations in the cell, diffusion will cause concentration gradients. Rough estimates suggest that such gradients can be substantial if not prohibitive. We calculated the implications of diffusion for the phosphoenolpyruvate-dependent phosphotransferase system (PTS) of *Escherichia coli* in silicon cells of various magnitudes. For a cell of bacterial size we found no significant diffusion limitation of flux. No significant concentration gradients of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated enzyme species were found except for non-phosphorylated $\mathrm{IIA}^{\mathrm{Glc}}$. Due to its relatively low concentration the concentration gradient for this species was substantial. This should have consequences because the phosphorylation state of $\mathrm{IIA}^{\mathrm{Glc}}$ is an important intracellular signal. For mammalian cell sizes, significant diffusion limitation, as well as strong concentration gradients in many PTS components, and strong effects on glucose and energy signaling were calculated. We calculated that the PTS may sense both extracellular glucose and the intracellular free-energy state. We discuss (i) that in the small bacterial cell the PTS needs 4 enzymes to maintain inward flux and both glucose and free-energy sensing ability, (ii) that the effects of diffusion on cell function should prevent this highly effective bacterial system from functioning in eukaryotic cells, (iii) that in the larger eukaryotic cell any chain of mobile proteins can neither sustain the same volumetric flux as in bacteria nor transmit a signal far into the cell, and (iv) that systems such as these may exhibit spatial differentiation in their sensitivity to different signals.

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Abbreviations: glc: glucose; PEP: phosphoenolpyruvate; PTS: phosphoenolpyruvate:carbohydrate phosphotransferase system.

*Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Pieter W. Postma who died on April 21, 2002.

Introduction

Many cellular processes involve the movement of pathway components to and from a membrane. Kinetic descriptions of such metabolic systems and signal transduction pathways tend to ignore the diffusion process, implicitly assuming that the spatial diffusion is fast relative to the reaction kinetics. However, a relatively straightforward analysis of an imaginary eukaryotic 'two-component system', composed of a membrane-bound kinase and a cytoplasmic phosphatase, revealed that spatial gradients of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated protein can be induced by signal-transducing flux within a mammalian cell (Brown and Kholodenko, 1999). These gradients might have significant control over the flux (Kholodenko et al., 2000). Essential to the phenomenon is the fact that here signal-transfer depends on the shuttling of a mobile protein and not on that of a metabolite.

Bacterial cells are much smaller than eukaryotic cells. A typical *E. coli* B/r cell has dimensions of about 1 by 3 μm (Nanninga, 1998), whereas a small eukaryote like baker's yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) is already 4 μm in diameter (Sherman, 1991). Therefore, we wondered whether one should also expect an effect of diffusion on the functioning of important bacterial 'protein chains'. Instead of studying an imaginary system we investigated the behaviour of the phosphoenolpyruvate: carbohydrate phosphotransferase system (PTS). In many bacteria the PTS is responsible for the uptake and phosphorylation of various carbohydrates (Postma et al., 1993) at a very high rate (Van der Vlag et al., 1995). On top of that the protein components of the system play a diverse yet central role in the regulation of cellular activity in most of these organisms (Lee et al., 2000; Lux et al., 1999; Postma et al., 1993; Saier et al., 1996; Seok et al., 1997; Stülke et al., 1999; Tanaka et al., 2000). Due to its spatial organization the functioning of the PTS depends on diffusion: a phosphoryl-group derived from cytoplasmic phosphoenolpyruvate is transferred by cytoplasmic proteins to a membrane protein which imports and phosphorylates the carbohydrate. This implies that a spatial gradient in the concentration of some of the protein species (be it phosphorylated, non-phosphorylated or complexed) should build up for the pathway to develop flux. The main issue addressed here is how large such a gradient should be and whether it might lead to substantial fractional changes in local concentrations of PTS components, eventually limiting flux or signalling (diffusion limitation). A second issue treated is whether a similar system in a eukaryotic cell should be expected to develop gradients and diffusion limitation.

We set out to calculate this for the glucose-PTS of *E. coli* in a comprehensive manner, taking into account the spatial separation of the pathway components and the diffusion processes that are responsible for the transport to and away from the membrane. The best experimental data available were used for the parameter values, combining the kinetic description of the glucose-PTS by Rohwer et al. (2000) and diffusion measurements in live *E. coli* (Elowitz et al., 1999) into an *in silicon* replica of the PTS. We show how *E. coli* escapes diffusion limitation of the metabolic and transport flux through this system, in ways that are not available to the larger mammalian cell.

$$\mathrm{EI} + \mathrm{PEP} \underset{k_{-1}}{\overset{k_1}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{EI\text{-}PEP} \underset{k_{-2}}{\overset{k_2}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{EI\text{-}P} + \mathrm{pyruvate} \tag{1}$$

$$\mathrm{HPr} + \mathrm{EI\text{-}P} \underset{k_{-3}}{\overset{k_3}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{HPr\text{-}P\text{-}EI} \underset{k_{-4}}{\overset{k_4}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{HPr\text{-}P} + \mathrm{EI} \tag{2}$$

$$\mathrm{IIA^{Glc}} + \mathrm{HPr\text{-}P} \underset{k_{-5}}{\overset{k_5}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{IIA^{Glc}\text{-}P\text{-}HPr} \underset{k_{-6}}{\overset{k_6}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{IIA^{Glc}\text{-}P} + \mathrm{HPr} \tag{3}$$

$$\mathrm{IICB^{Glc}} + \mathrm{IIA^{Glc}\text{-}P} \underset{k_{-7}}{\overset{k_7}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{IICB^{Glc}\text{-}P\text{-}IIA^{Glc}} \underset{k_{-8}}{\overset{k_8}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{IICB^{Glc}\text{-}P} + \mathrm{IIA^{Glc}} \tag{4}$$

$$\mathrm{glucose} + \mathrm{IICB^{Glc}\text{-}P} \underset{k_{-9}}{\overset{k_9}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{glc\text{-}P\text{-}IICB^{Glc}} \underset{k_{-10}}{\overset{k_{10}}{\rightleftarrows}} \mathrm{glc\text{-}6\text{-}P} + \mathrm{IICB^{Glc}} \tag{5}$$

Figure 1. *Reaction mechanism of the glucose-PTS of E. coli*

Methods

Mechanism

The glucose-PTS of *E. coli* (discovered by Kundig et al., 1964) consists of four proteins: the general PTS-proteins enzyme I (EI) and HPr and the carbohydrate-specific proteins IIA^{Glc} and $IICB^{Glc}$. The former three proteins are located in the cytoplasm and relay a phosphoryl-group derived from phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP) in a consecutive manner to the latter membrane-bound protein, which in turn imports glucose and concomitantly phosphorylates it (Meadow et al., 1990; Postma et al., 1993; Robillard and Broos, 1999). Using the *in vivo* uptake rate of α-*D*-methyl glucoside (a glucose analog) reported by Van der Vlag et al. (1995) of about 0.9 $nmol\,s^{-1}$ per mg dry cell weight, an *in vivo* $IICB^{Glc}$ concentration of about 10 μM and a cellular volume of about 2.5 μl per mg dry weight (cf. Rohwer et al., 2000), we calculate that about 37 molecules of glucose are imported and phosphorylated per molecule of $IICB^{Glc}$ per second. Rohwer et al. (2000) made an *in silicon* replica of the glucose-PTS, i.e. a precise model exclusively based on the available literature data on K_m values, equilibrium constants and association constants of the PTS-proteins for their substrates. Basic assumptions of the model were that all elementary reactions in the pathway were bimolecular and that the reacting species were distributed homogeneously. Because the model ignored the spatiality of the pathway, we decided to make a new model that omits the latter assumption.

The explicit form of the modelled pathway is given in Figure 1 and the model parameters in Table 1. The enzymes involved can occur in various 'states'. Enzyme IIA^{Glc}, for instance, can either be non-phosphorylated (IIA^{Glc}), phosphorylated (IIA^{Glc}-P) or complexed (IIA^{Glc}-P-HPr and $IICB^{Glc}$-P-IIA^{Glc}). The term 'enzyme species' will be used to refer to the different 'states' throughout the text.

Diffusion and reaction rates

We assumed that reacting species meet through passive diffusion and that the diffusion process for every molecular species could be characterized by a single constant. The behaviour of the molecules was modelled using a continuous representation (the concentration). The local change in the concentration of protein species 'p' in time was related to the net production rate and diffusion rate by the balance equation:

$$\partial[p]/\partial t = \nu_p + D_p \cdot \nabla^2[p] \tag{6}$$

Equation (6) implies that the increase with time in a local concentration must equal the local net production rate (ν_p) plus the net influx rate through diffusion (diffusion was parametrized by D_p and convection was neglected). ∇ is the operator for the spatial derivative. Here 'local' indicates a certain position in the cellular space for the cytoplasmic enzyme species, or on the membrane surface for the species situated at the membrane boundary.

The rate ν_p represents the sum of all rates that lead to the production of 'p' minus all rates that lead to the consumption of 'p'. Because the concentrations [$IICB^{Glc}$], [$IICB^{Glc}$-P], [$IICB^{Glc}$-P-IIA^{Glc}] and [glc-P-$IICB^{Glc}$] are surface concentrations, their reaction rates were defined per unit of surface area. In the expressions (16 - 19), [IIA^{Glc}], [IIA^{Glc}-P], [glc] and [glc-6-P] are interpreted as the values of the volume concentration at the membrane.

For the mass balance of the cytoplasmic enzyme species the reaction at the membrane represents a source/sink term. The corresponding boundary condition was obtained by equating the source/sink with the local flux near the membrane (direction represented by normal vector ν).

The reaction rate equations (Eqs. (7 - 19)) were (cf. Figure 1):

$$\nu_{[\text{EI-PEP}]} = k_1[\text{EI}][\text{PEP}] - k_{-1}[\text{EI-PEP}] - k_2[\text{EI-PEP}] + k_{-2}[\text{EI-P}][\text{pyr}] \quad (7)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{EI}]} = k_4[\text{HPr-P-EI}] - k_{-4}[\text{HPr-P}][\text{EI}] - k_1[\text{EI}][\text{PEP}] + k_{-1}[\text{EI-PEP}] \quad (8)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{EI-P}]} = k_2[\text{EI-PEP}] - k_{-2}[\text{EI-P}][\text{pyr}] - k_3[\text{HPr}][\text{EI-P}] + k_{-3}[\text{HPr-P-EI}] \quad (9)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{HPr-P-EI}]} = k_3[\text{HPr}][\text{EI-P}] - k_{-3}[\text{HPr-P-EI}] - k_4[\text{HPr-P-EI}] + k_{-4}[\text{HPr-P}][\text{EI}] \quad (10)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{HPr}]} = k_6[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] - k_{-6}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{HPr}] - k_3[\text{HPr}][\text{EI-P}] + k_{-3}[\text{HPr-P-EI}] \quad (11)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{HPr-P}]} = k_4[\text{HPr-P-EI}] - k_{-4}[\text{HPr-P}][\text{EI}] - k_5[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{HPr-P}] + k_{-5}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] \quad (12)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IIA-P-HPr}]} = k_5[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{HPr-P}] - k_{-5}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] - k_6[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] + k_{-6}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{HPr}] \quad (13)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IIA}]} = k_{-5}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] - k_5[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{HPr-P}] \quad (14)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IIA-P}]} = k_6[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-HPr}] - k_{-6}[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{HPr}] \quad (15)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IICB-P-IIA}]} = k_7[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}] - k_{-7}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_8[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] + k_{-8}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] \quad (16)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IICB}]} = k_{10}[\text{glc-P-IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_{-10}[\text{glc-6-P}][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_7[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}] + k_{-7}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] \quad (17)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{IICB-P}]} = k_8[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_{-8}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_9[\text{glc}][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}] + k_{-9}[\text{glc-P-IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] \quad (18)$$
$$\nu_{[\text{glc-P-IICB}]} = k_9[\text{glc}][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}] - k_{-9}[\text{glc-P-IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_{10}[\text{glc-P-IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] + k_{-10}[\text{glc-6-P}][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] \quad (19)$$

For IIA^{Glc} and IIA^{Glc}-P the boundary condition yields Eqs. (20) and (21), and for the other cytoplasmic enzyme species Eq. (22):

$$D_{\text{IIA}}\partial[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}]/\partial\nu = k_8[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_{-8}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] \quad (20)$$
$$D_{\text{IIA-P}}\partial[\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}]/\partial\nu = k_{-7}[\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P-IIA}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_7][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}][\text{IIA}^{\text{Glc}}\text{-P}] \quad (21)$$
$$D_p\partial[p]/\partial\nu = 0 \quad (22)$$

The set of Eqs. described in (6 - 22) forms the core of our reaction diffusion model. The concentrations of the metabolites, PEP, pyruvate, glucose and glucose-6-phosphate, were treated as constant parameters.

Numerical methods and cell size

E. coli cells are small rods. Depending on growth conditions and the strain, their diameter ranges from 0.5 - 1.5 μm and their length from 2 - 4 μm (NANNINGA, 1998; WOLDRINGH and NANNINGA, 1985). In preliminary calculations for a model rod cell and spherical cells, we found that the concentration distribution of the different enzyme species along the radius of the spherical model cell was (nearly) identical to that along the short axes of the rod cell (not shown). To reduce the complexity of the calculations and their interpretation we therefore modelled the rod-like bacterium as if it were a sphere. We took our model bacterial cell to be a sphere with a radius of 0.6 μm. For our model mammalian cell we assumed a radius of 10 μm.

All concentrations of cytoplasmic species were considered to be functions of the spatial variable, and the membrane-bound species were confined to the boundary of the sphere. All solutions of preliminary calculations (not shown) were spherically symmetric. For spherical symmetry, Eq. (6) reduces to a one-dimensional system of reaction-diffusion equations. The concentrations of the cytoplasmic species were calculated using the resulting partial differential equations (PDEs). For the membrane-bound species these reduced to ordinary differential equations (ODEs). The system was solved using the method of lines: the spatial derivatives were discretized on a computational grid and the resulting system of ODEs was integrated in time. We calculated the glucose flux (J) through the membrane with the aid of Eq. (23) when the system had reached a steady state:

$$J = 3/r \cdot (k_{10}[\text{glc-P-IICB}^{\text{Glc}}] - k_{-10}[\text{glc-6-P}][\text{IICB}^{\text{Glc}}]) \quad (23)$$

Note that J is a volume flux, normalized by cell volume. For a more detailed description of the numerical methods used, readers are referred to BLOM and PELETIER (2000).

Parameters and variables

Rate constants and enzyme concentrations were taken from ROHWER et al. (2000) and references cited therein. The membrane concentration of IICB^{Glc} was calculated from the bulk-projected concentration by multiplying the bulk concentration with the volume/surface ratio ($r/3$). We assumed a diffusion

constant for IIA^{Glc} of 5 $\mu m^2 s^{-1}$. The diffusion rate of the Green Fluorescent Protein (GFP, $27kDa$) in the cellular matrix of *E. coli* has been determined experimentally by ELOWITZ et al. (1999). It was measured in elongated *E. coli* cells by means of Fluorescence Recovery After Photo-bleaching and the reported values range from 3.6 to 7.7 $\mu m^2 s^{-1}$. The lower rate was found in cells with a high GFP expression level and probably identifies the diffusion rate of GFP-dimers ($54kDa$). Protein diffusion in the cytoplasm of *E. coli* cells thus was two- to fourfold slower than in the eukaryotic endoplasmatic reticulum or mitochondrion, respectively, and about five times slower than in eukaryotic cytoplasm (DAYEL et al., 1999). To establish the possible effects of diffusion on the behaviour of our bacterial transport system we decided to use the lower number reported by (ELOWITZ et al., 1999) because this value seems to present a lower limit to the rate of 'free' protein diffusion in vivo.

The diffusion coefficients of the other PTS 'enzyme species' were calculated from that of enzyme IIA^{Glc} assuming that: i) all enzyme species are spheres, ii) the diffusion coefficient varies linearly with the inverse of the radius of that sphere, and iii) the volume of the sphere varies proportionally with the mass of the protein species. A situation in which all cytoplasmic enzyme species are distributed homogeneously was simulated by making the diffusion coefficient 2000 $\mu m^2 s^{-1}$ ($\sim$ infinite) for all species.

Table 1. *Parameters of the reaction diffusion model*

Concentration of PTS proteins and 'boundary metabolites' in μM (or in $\mu m \mu M^*$)			
$[EI]_{tot}$, $[HPr]_{tot}$	5, 50	PEP, Pyruvate	2800, 900
$[IIA^{Glc}]_{tot}$, $[IICB^{Glc}]^*_{tot}$	40, $10 \times r/3$	glucose, glc-6-P	500, 50

Rate constants odd, – even: ($\mu M^{-1} s^{-1}$); even, – odd: (s^{-1})							
k_1:	32.7	k_{-1}:	8000	k_6:	73.2	k_{-6}:	56.4
k_2:	1800	k_{-2}:	4.9	k_7:	14.7	k_{-7}:	14.7
k_3:	233.3	k_{-3}:	233.3	k_8:	44	k_{-8}:	16
k_4:	1400	k_{-4}:	56	k_9:	4.33	k_{-9}:	6.48
k_5:	366	k_{-5}:	366	k_{10}:	80	k_{-10}:	$9 \cdot 10^{-5}$

Diffusion coefficients ($\mu m^2 s^{-1}$)			
EI, EI-P(EP)	3.30	IIA^{Glc}-P-HPr	4.37
HPr-P-EI	3.15	IIA^{Glc}, IIA^{Glc}-P	5.00
HPr, HPr-P	6.30	infinite	2000

The protein and 'boundary metabolite' concentrations, and rate constants were best estimates on the basis of the existing experimental data (see ROHWER et al., 2000). The tabulated diffusion coefficient of IIA^{Glc} was based on that found for GFP in *E. coli* by (ELOWITZ et al., 1999). The other values were calculated from that using a molecular mass of 63.5, 9.1 and 18.1 kDa for EI, HPr and IIA^{Glc}, respectively (DE REUSE and DANCHIN, 1988).

Signal

In the PTS not only the protein components diffuse between membrane surface and cytoplasm, but also the phosphoryl group. The latter does this by playing 'piggy back' on the components of the PTS. Looking at the PTS as a signal relay chain, we define the local concentration of the PTS signal (σ) as the sum of local concentrations of the phosphorylated mobile PTS components minus the sum of the local concentrations of the non-phosphorylated mobile PTS components:

$$[\sigma] = [\text{EI-P}] + [\text{HPr-P}] + [\text{IIA}^{Glc}\text{-P}] - [\text{EI}] - [\text{HPr}] - [\text{IIA}^{Glc}] \tag{24}$$

For signal to transfer at steady state, a phosphorylated protein must diffuse to the membrane and a non-phosphorylated protein must diffuse back. Because the intermediary protein complexes can be considered to carry both a phosphorylated as well as a non-phosphorylated enzyme, diffusion of these complexes does not contribute to the signal diffusion.

Results

Estimated concentration gradients

Brown and Kholodenko (1999) showed that in mammalian cells gradients of active forms of signal transduction proteins may arise. Their approximate argument can be recalculated for the case of the *E. coli* PTS. If the signal protein is dephosphorylated at the plasma membrane and rephosphorylated in the centre of the cell, a gradient of the non-phosphorylated form of the protein must exist to drive the diffusion. The concentration difference ($\Delta[p]$) and the flux (J) are then related by Fick's first diffusion equation. For a spherical cell this reads:

$$\Delta[p] = \frac{1}{3} J r^2 / D \tag{25}$$

Inserting a flux of 0.37 $mM\,s^{-1}$ (Rohwer et al., 2000), a diffusion coefficient (D) of 5 $\mu m^2 s^{-1}$ and a radius (r) of 0.6 μm, one finds a concentration difference between cell centre and membrane surface of 9 μM. Such a gradient should be quite significant for PTS proteins, which occur at concentrations between 5 and 50 μM (see Table 1). A cell radius of 10 μm leads, in the case of similar flux, to the enormous concentration gradient of about 2.5 mM (over 10 μm) by the same calculation, and of about 0.5 mM if diffusion is assumed to be five times faster (Dayel et al., 1999) in the larger cells. These estimated concentration differences are much higher than the total concentration of the PTS proteins, which amounts to only 0.1 mM. The difference in signal concentration, as expressed in σ (Eq. (24)), between membrane surface and the cell centre should be even double these numbers, since an inverse gradient will exist for the phosphorylated proteins. This indicates that in larger cells diffusion should interfere with the functioning of a system such as the PTS.

The above estimations (cf. Figure 3A, open triangles) suggested that substantial gradients will be present in the active PTS. The PTS is a multi-component system however, in which both phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated forms of each protein may diffuse. The concentrations of these forms depend on the PTS activity. In addition, not all rephosphorylation of EI occurs in the centre of the cell; PEP diffuses throughout the cytoplasm. Consequently, a more comprehensive calculation was required to see whether spatial limitations are indeed as prohibitive as suggested by the preliminary calculations described in this section.

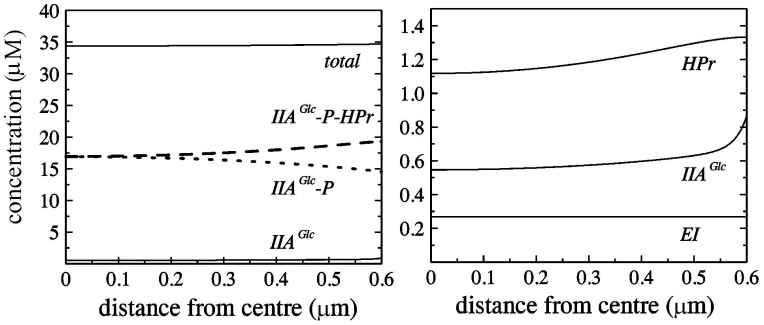

Figure 2. *The concentration distribution of the IIA^{Glc}-related (first panel) and non-phosphorylated cytoplasmic enzyme species (second panel) in a cell with radius 0.6 μm in the presence of both PEP (2.8 mM) and glucose (500 μM)*

Calculated gradients for bacterial cells

As a point of reference we first calculated both the PTS flux and the concentration distribution of the four PTS enzymes over their different 'states' in the case of extremely fast diffusion of the cytoplasmic species. The results are listed in column 2 of Table 2 and are identical to those reported in Rohwer et al. (2000).

We then recalculated the flux and spatial distribution of the enzyme species for cells with a radius of 0.6 μm using realistic values for the diffusion coefficients. The results are shown in columns 5 and 6 of Table 2 and in Figure 2. The effect of the less than infinitely fast diffusion on the flux was remarkably small, i.e. less than 1%. Likewise, the gradients that developed in the concentrations of components of EI of the PTS were small, concentration differences between the centre of the cell and close to the membrane remaining below 4%. Defining the signal in terms of the concentration difference of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated uncomplexed PTS protein (Eq. (24)), the signal concentration difference between membrane surface and cell centre was approximately 5 μM. This was some 4 times smaller than the first-order estimate of 20 μM using Fick's diffusion equation (see earlier). An important reason for this difference is that rephosphorylation of EI occurred throughout the cell rather than being confined to the cell centre. The signal concentration difference was mainly distributed over HPr and IIA^{Glc}, the proteins present at higher concentrations.

Although the concentration of both enzymes HPr and IIA^{Glc} was high with respect to that of the signal, the phenomenon that each PTS protein was rather unevenly distributed over its sub-forms meant that some of those sub-forms could be subject to significant concentration gradients. Quite notably, this was the case for non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc}: its concentration was more than 35% higher near the membrane than in the cell centre or than the cell average. The steady state concentration of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} did not vary linearly with distance from the membrane, but increased sharply near the membrane (see Figure 2B). The ratio of IIA^{Glc}-P/IIA^{Glc} changed even more drastically.

We explored the role of the individual diffusion constants by reducing them one by one several-fold (not shown). When we looked at the effect on flux we saw that reduction in the movement of IIA^{Glc}-P brought about a decrease in the flux: a 10-fold slowing down led to a 7% flux reduction. A 10-fold decrease of the other diffusion constants did not influence the flux markedly. Similar changes in the diffusion rate of the HPr and IIA^{Glc}-related species led to significant concentration gradients for those species whose diffusion was being retarded and for non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc}, whereas for EI-related species nothing happened upon reduction of the diffusion rates.

Gradients and diffusion limitation in cells of various sizes

We next modified the radius of our model cell to 0.3 and 10 μm, keeping the volume-averaged concentrations of total EI, HPr, IIA^{Glc} and $IICB^{Glc}$ constant. We again calculated the flux through the pathway and the concentration distribution of the four enzymes over their different 'states' and over the cellular space (cf. columns 3/4 and 7/8 of Table 2, respectively). As expected, decreasing the radius of the cell from 0.6 to 0.3 μm, did not affect the flux through the glucose-PTS. The concentration difference between non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} in the centre of the cell and non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} near the membrane lost significance by decreasing to 15%. This is in line with the squared dependence of the concentration gradients on the radius of the cell predicted by Eq. (25).

Clearly in the smallest cell considered, diffusion limitation lacked significance. This pinpointed that cell size might be a major factor determining whether or not concentration gradients and flux limitation by diffusion arise in the bacterial PTS. That this was indeed the case is illustrated by Figure 3A, where the PTS flux is represented as a function of the radius of our spherical model cell. The dark and light grey areas indicate the regions of the plot that may be relevant for bacterial and mammalian cells, respectively. Figure 3A also shows the corresponding signal concentration difference between membrane and bulk. Figure 3B shows the concentration of IIA^{Glc} in the cell centre relative to that near the membrane (open circles) and vice versa for IIA^{Glc}-P (closed circles). From Figure 3 it is apparent that whereas the cell radius only affected the flux due to diffusion limitation at the highest cell sizes, an effect on signal transduction through the concentrations of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} (and their ratio) should already be expected for cells the size of *E. coli* or only slightly larger, or with only slightly hampered diffusion.

As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 3B, in cells with a radius of 10 μm, non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} was subject to a dramatic concentration gradient; its concentration at the membrane surface

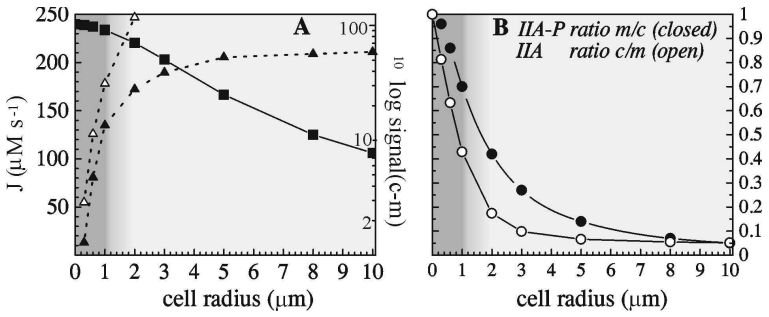

Figure 3. *Cell size affects flux and concentration gradients*
A) Flux through the PTS (left ordinate, squares), and the difference in signal concentration between cell centre and inner membrane as a function of cell radius (right ordinate, triangles). The open triangles represent a rough estimate based on Eq. (25) and the calculated flux, and the closed triangles represent the result of the precise calculation using Eq. (24) (note that the scale is logarithmic). B) The concentration ratio of phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} (closed circles; membrane/centre) and of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} (open circles; centre/membrane). The dark grey area is relevant for bacterial dimensions, the light gray area for eukaryotic cells.

was almost 20 times that in the cell centre. For HPr a 13-fold, for HPr-P a 0.4-fold, for IIA^{Glc}-P-HPr a 4.5-fold and for IIA^{Glc}-P a 0.05-fold concentration ratio was calculated between the membrane and the centre of the cell. In these cells the flux was reduced by about 55%. The difference in signal concentration between membrane surface and cell centre amounted to 59 μM, getting closer to its theoretical maximum of 95 μM, i.e. the total cell-averaged concentration of PTS components. Again the diffusion gradients were distributed over more than one component and concentrated in components that were present at higher total concentrations. EI-related enzyme species were not subject to concentration gradients of any significance, with the exception of its complex with HPr. Of $IICB^{Glc}$ the amount of non-phosphorylated enzyme began to rise and the amount of phosphorylated species and complexes began to drop as the cell radius exceeded 0.6 μm. These changes correlated with the decrease in flux.

Phosphorylation state of IIA^{Glc}: glucose and free-energy sensing
Enzyme IIA^{Glc} and IIA^{Glc}-P are considered sensors for glucose (Postma et al., 1993; Saier et al., 1996; Stülke and Hillen, 1999). We mimicked the absence of glucose by lowering its concentration from 500 to 0.5 μM. In case diffusion was infinitely fast and in the presence of PEP, the concentration of IIA^{Glc}-P rose twofold and that of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} more than halved when glucose was removed, thus confirming that the concentration of these species responded significantly to the glucose signal. Changes in the cellular free-energy state, as reflected in the PEP concentration, induced a similar yet inverse 'response'. The low PEP concentration applied (90 μM) has been found in cells about 15 s after *E. coli* cells started importing glucose (Hogema et al., 1998).

When we used realistic values for the diffusion constants both non-phosphorylated and phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} continued to respond to changes in extracellular glucose concentration as well as to changes in PEP levels (as depicted in Figure 4A). In addition, concentration gradients for both phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} were found. The same 'response' was calculated for mammalian model cells but only within a micron distance from the membrane (depicted in Figure 4B). Further away from the membrane it looked as if the concentrations of non-phosphorylated and phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} were influenced only by the concentration of PEP. Thus in fact, in these larger cells the glucose signal ceased to exist after about 1 μm on its way into the cell. When we assumed diffusion to be 5 times faster, as is the case in eukaryotic cytoplasm (Dayel et al., 1999), this distance increased only to about 1.5 μm (not shown).

IIA^{Glc} 'senses' the concentration of PEP via two intermediate proteins, i.e. EI and HPr. We won-

dered what would happen when these would be removed. The model was therefore slightly adjusted by fixing the concentrations of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated HPr and setting their concentrations to 2.8 and 0.9 mM, respectively, identical to those of the original phosphoryl donor PEP and pyruvate. Therewith our model became representative of a two-protein PTS. However, such a system hardly phosphorylated glucose because of the relatively high affinity of IIA^{Glc}-P for HPr and the twenty-fold higher concentration of the latter, leaving nearly no free IIA^{Glc}-P. Therefore we changed the rates of the association and dissociation reactions between HPr and IIA^{Glc} so that they became equivalent to those between EI and PEP, i.e. k_5, k_{-5}, k_6 and k_{-6} were replaced by k_1, k_{-1}, k_2 and k_{-2}, respectively (cf. Table 1). In this way a high glucose phosphorylation flux was restored but in turn the concentrations of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} became insensitive to the glucose concentration and only responded to changes in the PEP concentration. We tried to re-sensitise IIA^{Glc} for glucose by making changes in the various association and dissociation constants yet maintaining a reasonable flux, but failed. We conclude that it may be impossible to achieve the above objective due to the large concentration differences between the main actors PEP, glucose and enzyme IIA^{Glc}.

Table 2. *Flux and distribution of the glucose-PTS protein species in cells of different radii*

		$r = 0.3\mu m$		$r = 0.6\mu m$		$r = 10.0\mu m$	
	$D_c = \infty$	c	m	c	m	c	m
EI	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27	0.27
EI-PEP	3.05	3.05	3.05	3.05	3.05	3.06	2.95
EI-P	1.19	1.19	1.19	1.20	1.19	1.25	1.01
HPr-P-EI	0.49	0.49	0.49	0.48	0.50	0.43	0.79
HPr	1.28	1.25	1.28	1.12	1.33	0.34	4.53
HPr	29.8	30.1	29.7	31.0	29.2	40.1	16.7
IIA^{Glc}-P-HPr	18.5	18.0	18.6	16.9	19.3	7.69	35.1
IIA^{Glc}	0.64	0.60	0.74	0.55	0.87	0.19	3.69
IIA^{Glc}-P	15.4	15.9	15.2	16.9	14.5	29.1	1.58
$IICB^{Glc}$-P-IIA^{Glc}	5.47		5.46		5.43		2.48
$IICB^{Glc}$	1.41		1.43		1.49		6.14
$IICB^{Glc}$-P	0.12		0.12		0.12		0.05
glc-P-$IICB^{Glc}$	2.99		2.99		2.97		1.33
σ(signal)		45.1	43.8	47.2	42.4	69.6	10.8
$-\Delta\sigma(m-c)$			1.3		4.8		58.8
J	240		239		237		106

Column two was obtained assuming a diffusion constant of 2000 $\mu m^2 s^{-1}$ for all species. For realistic diffusion coefficients we arrived at the numbers of columns three to eight. For every radius the first column gives the concentrations near the centre of the cell and the second one those near the membrane boundary. The concentrations are given in μM, the flux in $\mu M\, s^{-1}$.

Discussion

Most models of metabolic and signal-transduction pathways describe the cell as a 'well stirred reactor', its soluble components distributed homogeneously throughout. To investigate whether this is actually to be expected we developed a three-dimensional reaction diffusion model of the glucose-PTS of *E. coli*, a well-characterized multi-component transport and signal transduction system exhibiting a very high membrane flux.

For a cell of bacterial size (diameter of 0.6 μm or smaller) we found that neither glucose flux nor the spatial distribution of most PTS enzyme species were affected when relaxing the usual assumption that diffusion was infinitely fast. This lack of effect was at first unexpected, because a simplified calculation suggested that a concentration gradient much in excess of the concentration of EI should arise. Our model revealed that the actual concentration gradient in signal was some three times

smaller, still close to the total concentration of EI. However, most of the concentration gradient was carried by the more abundant enzymes HPr and IIA^{Glc}. Apparently potential diffusion limitation in a phospho-relay chain can be prevented by having one or more of the participating proteins present at a sufficiently high concentration.

The relationship we found between flux and the total concentration of the different enzymes (not shown) was similar to that reported *in vivo* (VAN DER VLAG et al., 1995) and obtained with the kinetic model of ROHWER et al. (2000; cf. Figure 1 of this reference). When we compared the individual enzyme species we saw that the diffusion of EI, HPr and related species hardly affected the behaviour of the glucose-PTS. It seemed as if non-phosphorylated and phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} performed nearly all of the diffusion labour. In this, non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} was most apt to form concentration gradients and phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} was by far the most important species sustaining the inward flux of glucose and the delivery of the phosphoryl-groups toward the membrane. In fact, this role for IIA^{Glc} was not without consequences. Already in cells with radius 0.6 μm the concentration of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} was subject to diffusion limitations: An appreciable concentration difference developed between the membrane and the cell centre due to the influx of glucose. Contrary to what is generally assumed (POSTMA et al., 1993; SAIER et al., 1996), the calculations also suggest that in the presence of both glucose and PEP there should be relatively little non-phosphorylated EI, HPr and IIA^{Glc}. The presence of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} at such relatively low concentrations (as compared to IIA^{Glc}-P) made it more susceptible to concentration changes/gradients.

The effect of diffusion on the concentration of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} is potentially important, as it is this enzyme species that is responsible in *E. coli* for much of one of the most pleiotropic regulatory effects in bacteria, i.e. 'glucose' or catabolite repression (STÜLKE and HILLEN, 1999). Non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} interacts with various non-PTS sugar 'transport' proteins in a process called inducer exclusion (MISKO et al., 1987; NELSON et al., 1982; NOVOTNY et al., 1985; OSUMI and SAIER, 1982; POSTMA et al., 1984; SAIER et al., 1983). Upon binding of IIA^{Glc} the activity of the transport protein is reduced and the import of several non-PTS carbon sources as well as the consequent induction of gene expression of genes related to their transport and metabolism is prevented (see POSTMA et al., 1993). Because these proteins are mostly, if not all (VOEGELE et al., 1993), located at the membrane, the effect of diffusion will be that it enhances the inhibition of these proteins under flux conditions, by raising the concentration of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} near the membrane.

'Normally' the relative amounts of IIA^{Glc} and proteins binding IIA^{Glc} are such that the flux through the PTS is maximal. But on the rare occasion that the relative amount of IIA^{Glc} is low, the flux can be reduced by its binding to non-PTS proteins a phenomenon that is called 'reverse inducer exclusion' (VAN DER VLAG et al., 1994; ROHWER et al., 1998a). When the majority of the IIA^{Glc} is bound, its effective diffusion coefficient should be reduced and then even in very small cells flux could cause concentration gradients.

Including the effects of macromolecular crowding on the PTS (as reported by ROHWER et al., 1998b), should lead to a further decrease in the concentrations of uncomplexed PTS components such as IIA^{Glc}. Assuming then that non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc}, and not any of its complexes, is responsible for inducer exclusion, this should mean that the effects of diffusion limitation on inducer exclusion should be even stronger in crowded reality than in our uncrowded model.

Enzyme IIA^{Glc} of *E. coli* mediates another signal transduction route also effecting glucose repression. At low glucose (and high PEP) non glycolytic catabolic operons are activated by the action of cAMP (Botsford and Harman, 1992). The cAMP is produced by adenylate cyclase and that enzyme is activated by phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} (SAIER et al., 1996). In our calculations the effects of diffusional limitation on the concentration of phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} are much smaller, in relative terms, than the effects on non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc}. As a consequence diffusion limitation may affect the inducer exclusion mechanism of catabolite repression more strongly than the cAMP mediated mechanism.

A point of concern might be that the results of our calculations depended to some extent on the diffusion coefficient that was applied. Because the effects of diffusion are inversely proportional to

the square of the cell radius, increasing the diffusion coefficient is phenomenologically equivalent to reducing the cell radius. Behaviour displayed by the PTS in a cell at a certain rate of diffusion will be observable in a proportionally bigger cell at a higher diffusion rate. The above implies that our findings will hold irrespective of the precise choice of the diffusion coefficient. In fact, the results appeared not very sensitive to the precise magnitude of the diffusion coefficient, only order of magnitude changes induced marked effects.

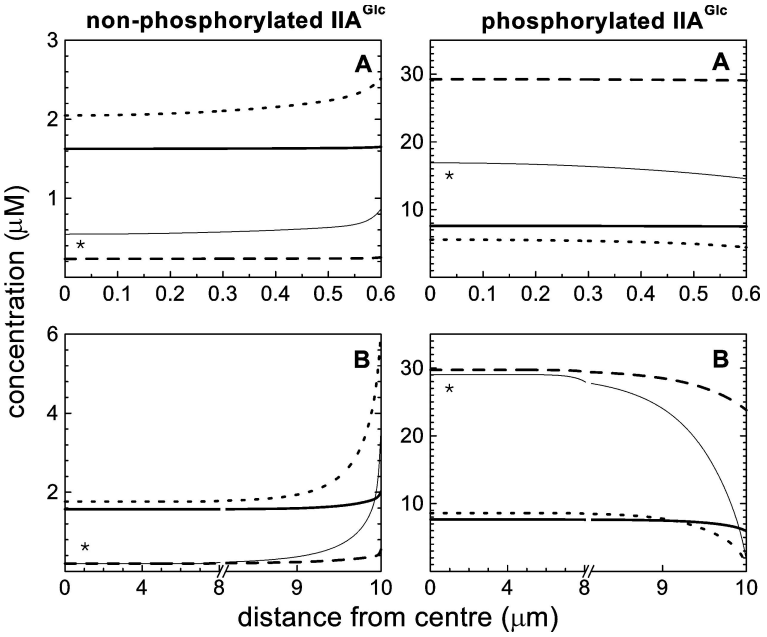

Figure 4. *Position dependent response to glucose and 'free-energy'*

The concentration distribution of non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} and phosphorylated IIA^{Glc} in cells with radius 0.6 μm (A) and 10 μm (B) under various conditions of metabolite availability; 2800 μM PEP and 0.5 μM glucose (dashed line); 2800 μM PEP and 500 μM glucose (thin solid line, indicated by *); 90 μM PEP and 500 μM glucose (dotted line); 90 μM PEP and 0.5 μM glucose (thick solid line).

Our calculations show that in a bacterial cell the phosphorylation state of IIA^{Glc} is sensitive to both the presence of glucose and the free-energy status of the cell (in the form of PEP), and thus presents sort of a dual sensing mechanism. 'Starved' *E. coli* cells have an elevated PEP concentration (Hogema et al., 1998). This 'standby' condition is the one that gives rise to the dashed lines in Figure 4. As a consequence of this condition, 'glucose' repression should be minimal along either of its routes (e.g. mediated via inducer exclusion or via cAMP). In this way the cell is able to take up and metabolize any carbohydrate that happens to be available. Addition of glucose should activate both repression mechanisms somewhat, although incompletely, and this is illustrated by the thin solid* lines of Figure 4. Whereas in the cAMP mediated 'glucose' repression, effects of the cellular free-energy state have been invoked (e.g. through cAMP efflux at high free-energy states (Makman and Sutherland, 1965; Saier et al., 1975)), inducer exclusion was mainly perceived as a sugar mediated repression mechanism and not as a free-energy checking mechanism (Postma et al., 1993; Saier et al., 1996; Stülke et al., 1999). Consequently, the calculated result that free-energy (or rather PEP) depletion (dotted and thick solid lines) in itself should cause stronger inducer exclusion than glucose addition might come as a surprise. On the other hand, both the PEP/pyruvate ratio (Weigel et al., 1982) and the ATP/ADP ratio (Rohwer et al. 1996) were implied in the regulation of PTS activity. And Hogema et al. (1998) established a correlation between the phosphorylation state of IIA^{Glc} and the PEP/pyruvate ratio. In fact, the strong inducer exclusion effect consequent to glucose addition to

starved cells (POSTMA et al., 1993; SAIER et al., 1996) may consist of a direct effect of glucose plus an indirect effect through a reduction in the intracellular PEP concentrations.

The right hand panel of Fig. 4A showed that also the phosphorylated form of IIA^{Glc}, which directs the cAMP mediated glucose repression mechanism is sensitive to both glucose and loss of free-energy in the form of PEP. In terms of absolute concentrations the response of IIA^{Glc}-P was some 5 times stronger than that of IIA^{Glc}.

In larger cells, we observed rather curious phenomena, i.e. spatial differentiation of the dual sensing mechanism: Close to the membrane IIA^{Glc} and IIA^{Glc}-P became primarily responsive to glucose, whereas away from the membrane both became exclusively responsive to the cellular free energy state as projected into the PEP concentration. The explanation for this is the long diffusion path, semi-isolating the membrane part of the PTS from the cytosolic part. In cells of bacterial size there is some tendency towards the same phenomena and any additional diffusion limitation due to for instance macromolecular crowding near that membrane should enhance the effect.

The glucose sensing properties disappeared the moment we turned the 4-enzyme PTS into a 2-enzyme PTS, consisting of only enzymes IIA^{Glc} and $IICB^{Glc}$. This was probably due to incompatibility between the flux requirements and the large concentration differences between the metabolites and the enzymes. The outcome suggests that EI and HPr function as some sort of attenuator for the intracellular energy signal, such that IIA^{Glc} can respond to concentration changes in both glucose and PEP in a concerted manner, rather than that it responds to PEP only. It is interesting in this respect that our calculations for the 'normal' PTS also show that the concentrations of phosphorylated and non-phosphorylated EI react solely to changes in the PEP concentration, whereas LUX et al. (1999) suggest that the chemotactic response towards PTS sugars, which is supposedly triggered by dephosphorylation of EI (LENGELER and JAHREIS, 1996), is an immediate effect of the presence of the sugar. Assuming our model is right, this can only be when PEP levels are compromised simultaneously.

According to our model, ordinarily the effects of diffusion on the PTS flux should be negligible in cells the size of *E. coli*. For cells with diameters exceeding 2 μm, however, the control by diffusion on flux became significant. Also many of the PTS proteins began to differ in concentration between membrane surface and cell centre. Thus, considering the fact that most enzyme species are involved in other pathways, variable cellular activities can be envisaged in such cells, mediated by the large local concentration differences of these species. It may be telling that possibly the largest organism that contains a PTS, *Bacillus megatherium*, with an average size of 4 $\mu m \times 1.5$ μm (GORDON, 1974) still falls within the range of cells that should not be subject to PTS flux limitation, or substantial gradients in species other than non-phosphorylated IIA^{Glc}.

Most eukaryotic cells are much larger than bacteria and completely lack the PTS. Until now it has remained unclear why these larger organisms lack this highly effective carbohydrate import system. For glucose uptake many eukaryotes rely on a facilitated diffusion carrier, intracellular glucose carrying out the required diffusion. Perhaps the limitation by diffusion on PTS performance in larger cells is what prevents its effective use in eukaryotes. Here we should make a reservation. In our calculations we increased the cell diameter whilst keeping the volumetric flux of the PTS constant, i.e. we increased the flux per cell with the third power of the radius (in case diffusion was neglected).

The PTS has the triple function of catalysing carbohydrate phosphorylation and uptake, as well as mediating glucose signalling. The former two processes require high flux capacity, the third much less so. Accordingly, it is only the flux function of the PTS that may be incompatible with eukaryotic cell size, not the signal transduction function. Indeed, whilst in eukaryotes metabolic flux and signalling seem to have been separated and metabolic phosphoryl flux is mediated by low molecular mass carriers such as creatine and ADP rather than by proteins, signal transduction is still mediated by proteins. However, the mechanism of this signal transduction is catalytic in terms of activating kinases that take the signal phosphate from ATP. Only little of the 'amount' of signal generated in for instance the nucleus actually has diffused from the plasma membrane through these kinase chains, whereas in phospho-relay chains such as the PTS all the signal would have so diffused. Our results (cf. Figure 4B) make it clear that a PTS-like phospho-relay chain would fail miserably in transferring a signal

from the membrane to the inside of a large cell because already within a relatively short travelling distance ($\sim \mu m$) the signal related to the 'status' near the membrane should be lost and replaced by a signal that is representative of the 'status' inside the cell. For quite a while the function of the protein kinase cascades has been assumed to be signal amplification in terms of high response coefficients (GOLDBETER and KOSHLAND, 1981), but the rationale for this has recently been put into question (ORTEGA et al., 2002). Perhaps the primary functionality of the kinase cascade structure of these chains is their ability to prevent this loss of signal, in a way that resembles action potential propagation or the signal transport along telephone networks.

Model calculations are only as valid as the underlying kinetic scheme and its assumed parameter values are. Consequently, our results should be taken as indicative only for the implications of diffusion for signal transduction by phospho-relay chains such as the PTS. Yet, the results are as good as can be obtained with the current knowledge of this type of system, and the glucose-PTS of *E. coli* is one of the best studied system of its sort. The parameter values we used did not result from fitting procedures, in line with the silicon cell philosophy (WESTERHOFF, 2001). Therefore, our results are the mere implications of all biochemical knowledge of the system that exists today.

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