

Intra- and Inter-Species Cell-To-Cell Communication in Bacteria

Bonnie L. Bassler

Princeton University, USA

Cell-cell communication in bacteria involves the production, release, and subsequent detection of chemical signaling molecules called autoinducers. This process, called quorum sensing, allows bacteria to regulate gene expression on a population-wide scale. Processes controlled by quorum sensing are usually ones that are unproductive when undertaken by an individual bacterium but become effective when undertaken by the group. For example, quorum sensing controls bioluminescence, secretion of virulence factors, biofilm formation, sporulation, and the exchange of DNA. Thus, quorum sensing allows bacteria to function as multi-cellular organisms. Bacteria make, detect, and integrate information from multiple autoinducers, some of which are used exclusively for intra-species communication while others appear to enable inter-species communication. Multiple small regulatory RNAs act at the hearts of quorum sensing cascades and function as ultrasensitive regulatory switches controlling the transition into and out of quorum sensing mode. Research is now focused on the development of therapies that interfere with quorum sensing to control bacterial virulence.