

Metabolomic and proteomic analyses of a quiescent *Escherichia coli* cell factory reveal the mechanisms behind its production efficiency

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1 **1 Abstract**

2 **Quiescent (Q-Cell) *Escherichia coli* cultures can be created by using the signalling**
3 **molecule indole to halt cell division of an *hns* mutant strain. This uncouples metabolism**
4 **from cell growth and allows for more efficient use of carbon feedstocks. However, the**
5 **reason for the increased productivity of cells in this state was previously unknown. We**
6 **show here that Q-cells can maintain metabolic activity in the absence of growth for up to**
7 **24 h, leading to four times greater per-cell productivity of a model metabolite, 3-**
8 **hydroxybutyrate (3HB), than a control. Metabolomic data show that by disrupting the**
9 **proton-motive force, indole interrupts the tricarboxylic acid cycle, leading to the**
10 **accumulation of metabolites in the glycolysis pathway that are excellent starting points**
11 **for high-value chemical production. By comparing protein expression patterns between**
12 **wild-type and Q-cell cultures we show that Q-cells overexpress stress response proteins,**
13 **which prime them to tolerate the metabolic imbalances incurred through indole**
14 **addition. Quiescent cultures produced half the cell biomass of control cultures lacking**
15 **indole, but were still able to produce 39.4 g.L⁻¹ of 3HB compared to 18.6 g.L⁻¹ in the**
16 **control. Therefore, Q-cells have high potential as a platform technology for the efficient**
17 **production of a wide range of commodity and high value chemicals.**

18
19 **Keywords:** Cell factory; Biorefining; Indole; 3-hydroxybutyric acid; Quiescence;

20 *Escherichia coli*

21 **2 Introduction**

22 In *E. coli*, carbon flux through the central carbon metabolism pathways of glycolysis, the
23 pentose phosphate pathway (PPP) and the tricarboxylic acid cycle (TCA) is at a maximum

24 during exponential growth (Meier et al., 2011). This offers abundant opportunities for re-
25 routing of metabolic pathways for the commercial scale production of high value or
26 commodity chemicals from cheap, renewable feedstocks (Chen et al., 2013; Li, 2011;
27 Murphy, 2012; Yu et al., 2011). Consequently, *E. coli*-based bioproduction processes usually
28 aim to extend the exponential phase for as long as possible before nutrient limitation, oxygen
29 deprivation or the accumulation of toxic by-products inhibit further carbon metabolism and
30 cell growth (Choi et al., 2006; Lee, 1996; Singh et al., 2012). The consequential accumulation
31 of biomass (essentially a waste product) requires the diversion of feedstock for maintenance
32 of cell function and production of essential macromolecules (Van Bodegom, 2007).

33

34 Alternatives to high cell density growth are used in certain circumstances, including
35 continuous production using a chemostat (Hoskisson and Hobbs, 2005; Hua et al., 2004) and
36 the use of ‘resting cells’ in an osmotically-balanced but nutrient-limited buffer such as
37 phosphate buffered saline (Cha et al., 1999; Ghazi et al., 1983). However, these approaches
38 are technically more challenging and suffer from problems including vulnerability to
39 contamination in chemostats and limited viable lifespans of resting cells.

40

41 Quiescence is achieved by addition of 2.5 – 3.0 mM indole to cultures of *E. coli* W3110
42 carrying a stop codon after the 93rd codon of the *hns* gene (*hns*Δ93). This mutation causes the
43 production of a truncated Histone-like Nucleoid Structuring protein (H-NS). After indole is
44 added, metabolic activity continues and production of plasmid-encoded proteins is increased,
45 but only in *hns* mutants (Chen et al., 2015; Mukherjee et al., 2004; Rowe and Summers,
46 1999). Indole is a well-studied chemical signal in over 85 species of bacteria (Lee and Lee,
47 2010). It is a proton ionophore and has been shown to reduce the proton-motive force (PMF)
48 of *E. coli* by allowing protons to return to the cytoplasm after their expulsion to the

49 periplasmic space during oxidative phosphorylation (Chimerel et al., 2013). One effect of
50 reducing the PMF is to prevent the formation of the FtsZ ring, which is a prerequisite for cell
51 division. Therefore, at suitable concentrations indole is able to prevent *E. coli* cell division
52 (Chimerel et al., 2012).

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54 Here, we investigated the changes in central carbon metabolism and protein expression that
55 are induced by indole addition in wild-type and Q-cell (*hns*Δ93) cultures under fed-batch
56 conditions. Taking into account the results of these experiments, we designed a simple
57 fermentation strategy for improved production of 3HB.

58 **3 Results**

59 We conducted a time-course study by growing the wild-type or *hns*Δ93 mutant strain of *E.*
60 *coli* W3110 in 3 L aerobic, fed-batch fermentations with or without the addition of indole.
61 The *hns*Δ93 cultures grew slower than the wild-type (Fig. 1a). Therefore, we normalized the
62 early culture conditions by inoculating into modified mineral salts medium (M9GYT)
63 containing 0.4% glucose and growing until the initial carbon supply was exhausted. At this
64 stage, every culture reached the same optical density at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀; overall average 6.69,
65 standard deviation 0.48). The nutrient feed was then started and the time-course was begun 30
66 min later by addition of indole (final concentration of 3 mM from a 1 M stock dissolved in
67 ethanol) or an equivalent volume of pure ethanol. Only *hns*Δ93 cultures entered quiescence,
68 whereas wild-type growth was inhibited but not stopped by indole.

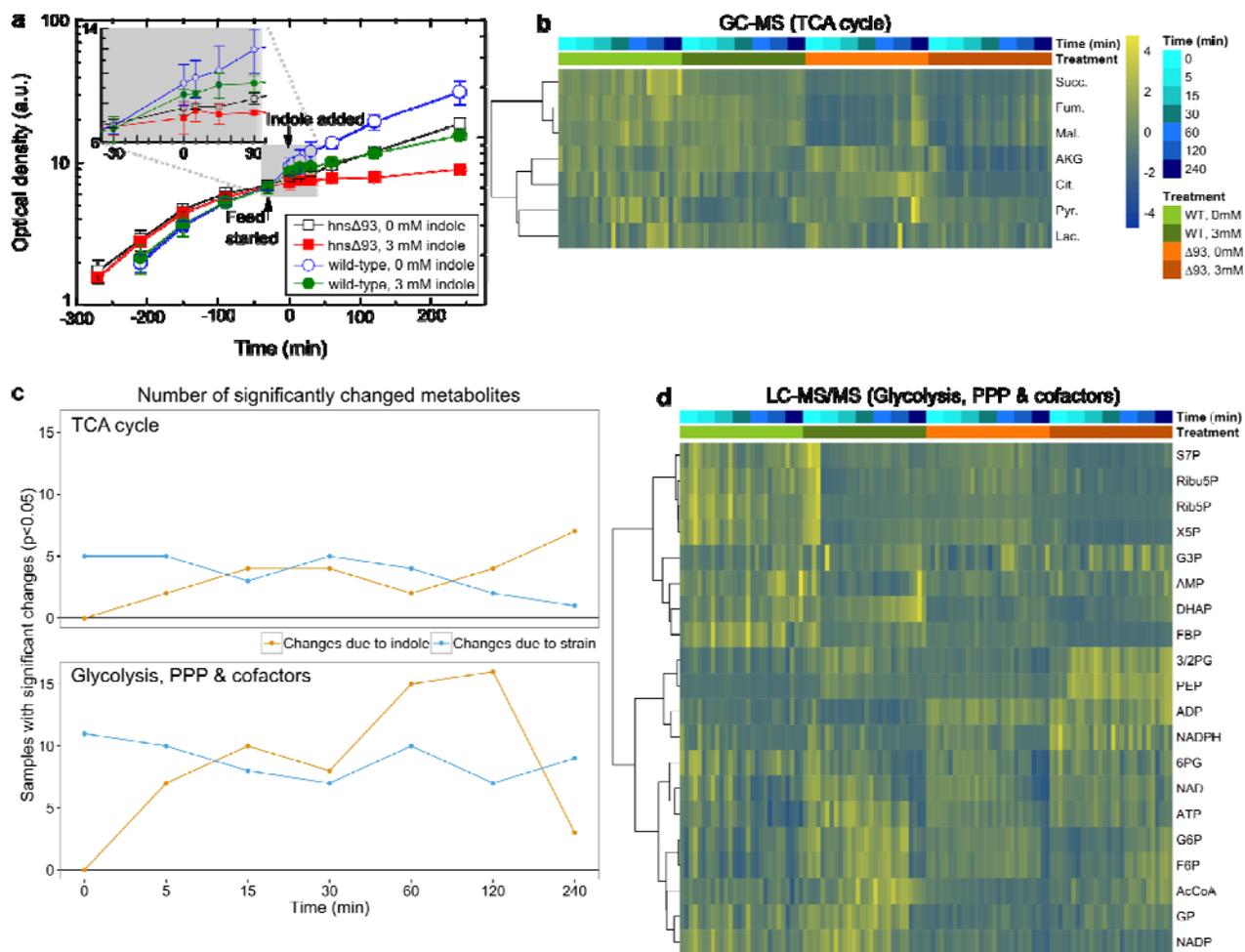
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70 We analyzed 22 cofactors and intermediates of glycolysis and PPP using liquid
71 chromatography – tandem mass spectrometry (LC–MS/MS) and 8 organic acids (pyruvate,
72 lactate and intermediates of TCA) by gas chromatography – mass spectrometry (GC–MS).

73 Glucose-ADP, isocitrate and NADH were removed from the analysis due to very low
74 abundances. The quantitative (GC-MS and HPLC) and relative ratio (LC-MS/MS)
75 concentrations for the remaining 27 species were normalized against the OD₆₀₀ of the cultures
76 at each time point. Results using each technology were then analyzed in parallel, since direct
77 comparisons between the two concentration reporting modes were not possible.

78 *3.1 The metabolic effects of indole are strongest during exponential growth*

79 Metabolites tended to cluster with neighboring intermediates of their respective pathways
80 (Fig. 1b,d), showing that any metabolic changes tended to affect whole pathways more than
81 individual intermediates. Individual principal component analyses (PCA) for each time-point
82 of the LC-MS/MS data revealed a dynamic interaction between the influences of strain
83 differences and indole (Fig. 2, Supplementary Fig. 1). Before indole addition, the samples
84 were relatively closely clustered with some separation by strain along principal component
85 (PC) 1 (accounting for 56% of the observed difference). Within 5 min of indole addition,
86 indole treatment became the dominant clustering factor, while PC1 became less important
87 (38.3% of observed differences). The influence of indole became more pronounced over the
88 following 60 min, but by 240 min the samples tended to cluster more closely again, with
89 some separation by strain. Untreated culture density was already high by this time and growth
90 may have begun to slow. This suggests that the quiescent metabolic state resembles the late-
91 logarithmic or early stationary phase of batch cultures. The GC-MS data revealed a similar
92 trend for organic acids (Supplementary Fig. 2).



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94 **Figure 1: Growth and changes in metabolite concentration.** **a**, Growth curves of each strain during the time-

95 time-course experiment. The inset graph shows a magnified area of the same data from the time feeding was started

96 until 30 mins into the time-course. Error bars represent the standard deviations (n = 4). **b**, Heat map of

97 concentration changes in intermediates of the TCA cycle plus pyruvate and lactate, analyzed by GC-MS. **c**,

98 Summary of the individual ANOVA analyses for each time-point showing the increasing importance of indole-

99 induced concentration changes over time. **d**, Heat map of concentration changes in cofactors and intermediates

100 of glycolysis and PPP analyzed by LC-MS/MS. Abbreviations for metabolite names: S7P, sedoheptulose-7-

101 phosphate; Ribu5P, ribulose-5-phosphate; Rib5P, ribose-5-phosphate; X5P, xylulose-5-phosphate; G3P,

102 glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate; AMP, adenosine monophosphate; DHAP, dihydroxyacetone phosphate; FBP,

103 fructose-1,6-bisphosphate; 3/2PG, 3-phosphoglycerate & 2-phosphoglycerate; PEP, phosphoenolpyruvate; ADP,

104 adenosine diphosphate; 6PG, 6-phosphogluconate; ATP, adenosine triphosphate; G6P, glucose-6-phosphate;

105 F6P, fructose-6-phosphate; AcCoA, acetyl-Coenzyme A; GP, glucose-1-phosphate; NAD, oxidized nicotinamide

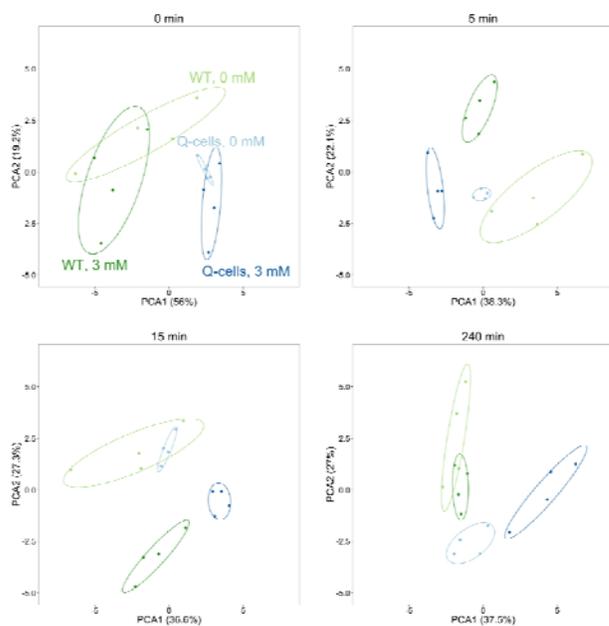
106 adenine dinucleotide (NAD); NADH, reduced (NAD); NADP, oxidized NAD phosphate (NADP); NADPH,

107 reduced NADP; Succ., succinate; Fum., fumarate; Mal., malate; AKG, α -ketoglutarate; Cit., citrate; Pyr.,

108 pyruvate; Lac., lactate.

109

110 We also observed the temporally changing influence of indole by conducting individual
111 ANOVA tests for each time-point (Fig. 1c). The number of metabolites with a significant
112 change due to strain remained fairly constant throughout the time-course, whereas indole-
113 associated changes increased over 120 min before falling again by 240 min.



114 **Figure 2: Individual principal component analyses of four time points for the metabolites analyzed by LC-**
115 **MS/MS.** These time-points were chosen to demonstrate the rapid (< 5 min) but reversible (< 240 min) response
116 to indole addition, which outweighed the differences between the wild-type and *hnsΔ93* strains. Points represent
117 individual fermentations (n = 4) and ellipses represent 95% confidence intervals. The full series of PCA analyses
118 for LC-MS/MS and GC-MS data are shown in Supplementary Fig. 1 and 2.

119 3.2 *Indole provides an increased pool of available metabolites from glycolysis in hnsΔ93* 120 *cells*

121 To identify the metabolites with the most significant changes in concentration during
122 quiescence, we compared the time-courses of each metabolite between the control (wild-type,
123 0 mM indole) and quiescent cultures, and ranked each metabolite by the variation in time-
124 course profile using Multivariate Empirical Bayes Analysis for time-course data (MEBA)
125 (Tai and Speed, 2006). The individual graphs of concentration versus time for each metabolite
126 and cofactor are provided in Supplementary Fig. 3 – 6. Intermediates of PPP were unchanged

127 or reduced in concentration over time under either condition (Table 1). However, glycolysis
 128 intermediates were present at higher concentrations in quiescent cells than in the control. We
 129 noted particularly significant increases in phosphoenolpyruvate (PEP), 3-phosphoglycerate
 130 and 2-PG (3/2-PG), and acetyl-Coenzyme A (Ac-CoA), of which the latter two increased over
 131 time in quiescent cells but decreased in the control.

132 **Table 1: Most significantly changed metabolites during the time-course experiment**

Metabolite	Pathway	Fold change in WT, 0 mM	Fold change in hnsΔ93, 3 mM	Hotelling T ²
<i>LC-MS/MS</i>				
Phosphoenolpyruvate	Glycolysis	1.13	2.91	87.62
Sedoheptulose-7-P	PPP	-1.03	-1.23	58.72
NAD	Cofactor	-1.48	-1.28	53.53
Fructose-1,6-BP	Glycolysis	-1.65	-1.30	50.44
3/2-phosphoglycerate	Glycolysis	-1.01	1.53	48.97
ADP	Cofactor	-1.28	1.09	48.66
Acetyl-CoA	Glycolysis/TCA	-1.27	1.41	42.27
Ribose-5-P	PPP	-2.56	-1.38	35.69
Xylulose-5-P	PPP	-1.76	-1.70	34.58
Ribulose-5-P	PPP	-1.35	-1.76	33.05
<i>GC-MS</i>				
α-ketoglutarate	TCA	-1.13	-1.52	95.42
Malate	TCA	1.03	2.00	73.18
Succinate	TCA	1.72	2.06	72.79
Fumarate	TCA	1.16	1.74	70.56
Citrate	TCA	1.23	-2.81	64.18
Pyruvate	Glycolysis/TCA	1.64	-1.63	49.01
Lactate	Other	1.57	-1.51	42.51

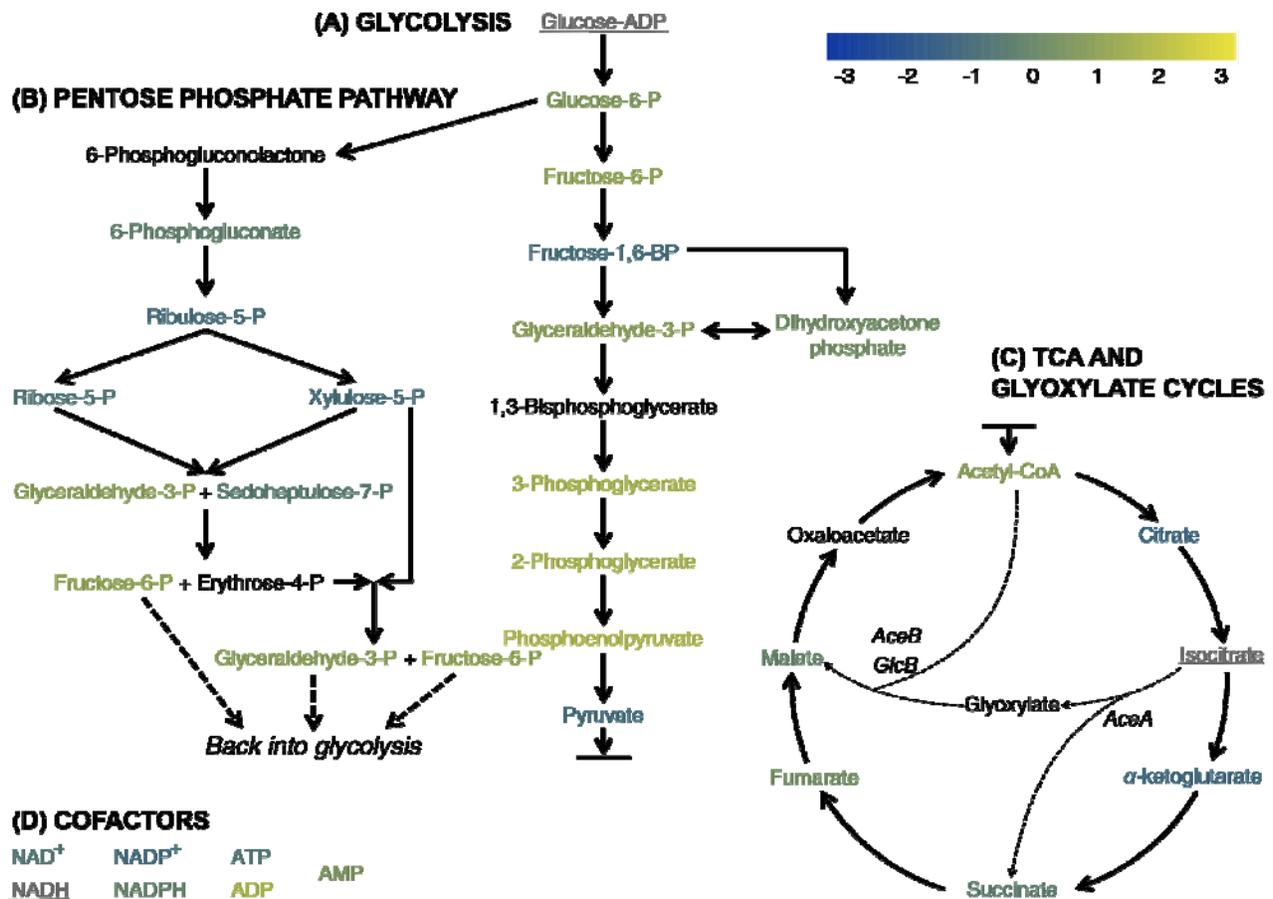
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 134 Both strains had identical flux ratios through glycolysis, PPP and the Entner-Doudoroff
 135 pathway in ¹³C-labelled chemostat experiments without indole (Supplementary Table 1). Due
 136 to its effect on growth, we could not investigate the changes in metabolic flux caused by
 137 indole. However Fig. 1b,d and Table 1 both suggest that indole causes a non-H-NS dependent
 138 re-routing of metabolic flux away from the PPP, which results in a build-up of intermediates
 139 in the glycolysis pathway.

140 3.3 Indole inhibits the TCA cycle

141 MEBA also revealed an effect of quiescence on the TCA cycle (Table 1). In control cultures,
142 TCA intermediates slowly increase in concentration during growth. However, in quiescent
143 cultures pyruvate and acids from the first half of TCA reduced in concentration, whereas
144 those in the second half increased above the levels of the control. With the simultaneous
145 increase in Ac-CoA, this suggests indole inhibits the TCA cycle, possibly by preventing the
146 conversion of Ac-CoA to citrate.

147

148 An alternative explanation could be that the glyoxylate cycle is stimulated in the presence of
149 indole (Fig. 3). The glyoxylate cycle is an anabolic pathway that allows growth on simple
150 carbon sources such as acetate in the absence of glucose, relying on isocitrate lyase (*AceA*)
151 and two isozymes of malate synthase (*AceB* and *GlcB*) (Cronan, Jr. and Laporte, 2006;
152 Maharjan et al., 2005). HPLC analysis of culture supernatants showed that acetate was the
153 only organic acid secreted by the cells, and was produced at approximately 30% higher
154 specific concentration by *hmsΔ93* than by wild-type cells. Since acetate stimulates the
155 glyoxylate cycle (Maloy and Nunn, 1982; Ornston and Ornston, 1969) it is plausible that
156 higher concentrations of acetate might result in a higher flux through the glyoxylate cycle
157 even when glucose is present. Using quantitative real-time PCR (qRT-PCR) we measured
158 *aceB* and *glcB* expression levels 1.6-fold ($p < 0.01$) and 1.2-fold ($p < 0.05$) higher in *hmsΔ93*
159 than wild-type, respectively. In addition *aceA* had 1.4-fold higher expression ($p = 0.07$).
160 These results lend some support to the hypothesis that the glyoxylate cycle is more active in
161 the *hmsΔ93* mutant, although further work would be necessary to confirm whether the modest
162 increases in gene expression have a significant effect on metabolic activity.



163

164 **Figure 3: Overview of changes in central carbon metabolism in quiescent *E. coli* at 240 min.** The color of
 165 each metabolite name corresponds to the average mean-centered fold change in concentration ($n = 4$) at the end
 166 of the time-course experiment for quiescent cultures (*hns*Δ93 with 3 mM indole). Metabolites in grey,
 167 underlined text had concentrations below the limit of detection. Those in black text were not possible to detect
 168 with our system. *Italic font* indicates the names of enzymes involved in the glyoxylate pathway.
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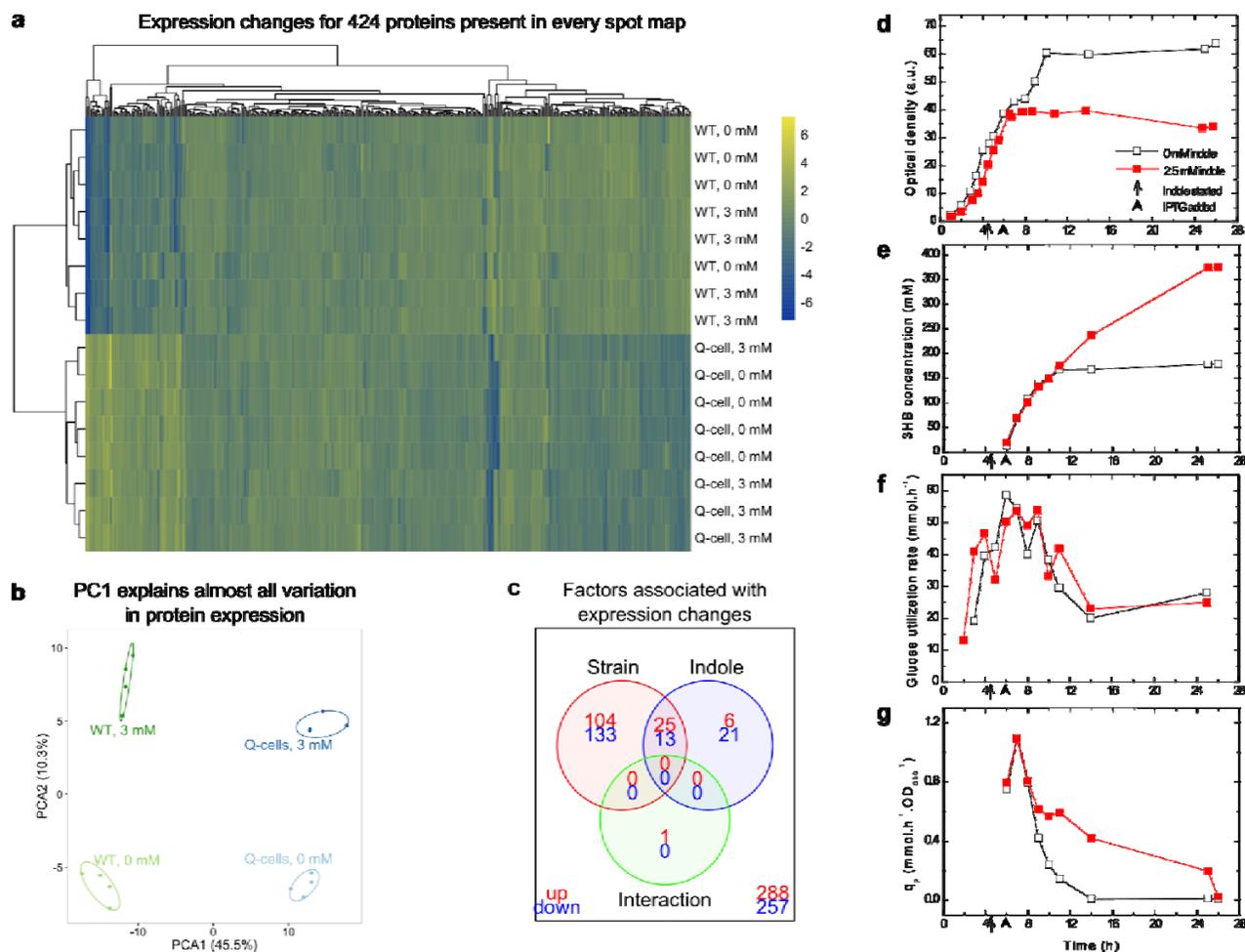
170 A key function of the TCA cycle is to reduce NAD⁺ to NADH, which acts as an electron
 171 donor for the electron transport chain. In our experiment, the concentration of NAD⁺ and the
 172 related molecule NADP⁺ slowly decreased over 4 h under all conditions, but remained highest
 173 for *hns*Δ93 with 3 mM indole (Supplementary Fig. 6). The concentrations of the reduced
 174 forms of both molecules were also lower than the oxidized forms; in the case of NADH,
 175 below the limit of detection. Furthermore, adenosine phosphate concentrations remained more
 176 constant in quiescent cultures than under other conditions. Therefore, the quiescent state must
 177 involve a homeostatic mechanism by which cofactor concentrations are controlled.

178 3.4 Global protein expression changes are primarily due to the *hns* mutation

179 Since H-NS regulates approximately 5% of all gene expression in *E. coli* (Hommais et al.,
180 2001) we speculated that the *hns* Δ 93 mutation might affect the expression of proteins
181 involved in metabolism and stress response. Therefore, we drew samples for protein
182 expression profiling in parallel with samples for metabolite analysis 1 h into the time-course
183 experiment. 2-dimensional differential in-gel electrophoresis (2d-DIGE) showed that almost
184 all the variation in protein expression was due to the strain genotype rather than indole
185 addition (Fig. 4a,b). A total of 424 protein spots were present in every spot map (complete
186 cases), with 32% of those differing significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) due to the strain (Fig. 4c). Using
187 more stringent criteria, we identified 43 protein spots with ≥ 3 -fold increase or decrease in
188 expression compared to the control ($p \leq 0.001$). ANOVA for the 43 selected spots showed
189 that 39 spots varied due to the strain and 2 spots due to indole addition. The remaining 2 spots
190 varied due to a combination of indole and strain, although there was no interaction.

191

192 The 43 selected spots were excised from the gel, digested by trypsin and subjected to peptide
193 fingerprinting analysis via mass spectrometry. The results were queried against the SwissProt
194 database using MASCOT v.2.4.1, and we were able to identify 12 spots with a high certainty
195 of representing a single protein (or, in one case, two) (Table 2). Of the 12 proteins identified,
196 8 are regulated by H-NS (www.ecocyc.org). Of these, 7 are involved in stress response
197 functions and were up-regulated in the *hns* Δ 93 strain. This suggests Q-cells might be ‘primed’
198 for metabolic stresses induced by indole addition to the medium. Interestingly, PyrB
199 expression was also reduced in *hns* Δ 93. We noted earlier that the *hns* Δ 93 mutant grew more
200 slowly than the wild-type in mineral salts medium. PyrB knockout mutants are unable to grow
201 in M9 medium due to a reduction in nucleotide synthesis, so the reduction in PyrB expression
202 in the mutant might explain this observation (Patrick et al., 2007).



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Figure 4: Global changes in protein expression, and increased production of 3HB in quiescent cultures. **a**, Heat map of fold-changes in protein expression determined by 2d-DIGE for 424 complete cases. **b**, Principal component analysis on the protein expression data confirms a single principal component accounted for the majority of variation, with separation primarily by strain. **c**, Significantly up- and down-regulated proteins from the complete cases, grouped by the cause(s) of the change in expression, as determined by ANOVA (adj. $p < 0.05$). **d - g**, Fed-batch cultures of *E. coli* W3110*hms* Δ 93 producing 3HB, with or without the addition of indole (2.5 mM), showing that as cells enter quiescence their metabolic effort is diverted away from biomass production and can be harnessed for the production of 3HB by metabolic pathway engineering. We show here the results of the experiment in which 2.5 mM indole was used. Similar results were achieved with other indole concentrations but are not directly comparable. **d**, Indole addition (arrows) caused the culture to become quiescent within 2 h. **e**, Cumulative 3HB production following induction with IPTG (arrow heads). While the quiescent culture remained productive, the control stopped producing 3HB upon entry into stationary phase. **f**, Glucose utilization rates were the same for both strains throughout the experiment. **g**, Specific 3HB formation rates (q_p) were initially the same, but reduced in the control during stationary phase.

219 **Table 2: Identities and properties of proteins with greater than 3-fold change in concentration from the**
 220 **control (p < 0.001)**

Spot ID	Protein Name	Gene	Theoretical M _r	Fold Change [†]	Change due to:	Pathway / function
877	NADP-specific glutamate dehydrogenase	gdhA	48,778	-4.14	Strain	Glutamate synthesis
1319	Aspartate carbamoyltransferase	pyrB	34,463	-6.23	Strain	Pyrimidine nucleotide synthesis
1932*	Protein YciF	yciF	18,643	14.90	Strain	Osmotic shock
1988*	Aspartate carbamoyltransferase regulatory chain	pyrI	17,338	-4.59	Strain	Regulatory partner of PyrB
2090*	Protein YciE	yciE	19,007	14.67	Strain	Osmotic shock
2050*	DNA protection during starvation protein	dps	18,684	5.82	Strain	DNA protection
2121*	50S ribosomal protein L10	rlpJ	17,757	6.94	Strain	Ribosome component
2145*	Uncharacterised protein YgaU	ygaU	16,053	3.68	Strain	Osmotic shock
2153*	Peroxioredoxin	osmC	15,193	4.70	Strain	Oxidative stress
2235	1) 50S Ribosomal protein L9	1) rplI	1) 12,149	3.40	Indole	1) Ribosome component
	2) Outer membrane assembly factor	2) bamE	2) 12,408			2) Unknown
2314	Thioredoxin-1	trxA	11,913	3.25	Strain	Control of redox potential
2375*	Protein YjbJ	yjbJ	8,320	8.90	Strain	Osmotic shock

221 * Regulated by H-NS

222 † Average fold change in expression level (n = 4) 1 h into the time-course experiment. Positive numbers
 223 represent increased concentration and negative numbers represent a decrease.

224 3.5 Application of Q-cells to the production of 3-hydroxybutyrate

225 The build-up of glycolysis intermediates, and the fact that fewer resources are diverted
 226 towards growth, potentially make Q-cells an ideal cell factory for small molecule production.
 227 3HB was chosen as a model for metabolite production as it requires the expression of only
 228 three heterologous enzymes for its production from Ac-CoA and its presence in the growth
 229 medium can be assayed simply with commercially-available kits. To produce 3HB, two
 230 molecules of Ac-CoA are condensed by a β -ketothiolase (PhaA from *Cupriavidus necator*)
 231 and reduced at the β -position by an acetoacetyl-CoA reductase (PhaB from *C. necator*),
 232 before the CoA moiety is removed by an overexpressed *E. coli* thioesterase B (TesB) (Liu et
 233 al., 2007; Tseng et al., 2009), as illustrated in Supplementary Fig. 7. We expected that this

234 biosynthetic pathway would exploit the large accumulation of PEP and Ac-CoA in quiescent
235 cultures (Fig. 1d and Table 1).

236

237 We introduced plasmid pTrctesBphaAB into *E. coli* W3110*hns*Δ93 to enable it to produce 3-
238 hydroxybutyrate (3HB) in an IPTG-inducible manner. Terrific broth (TB) with glucose as the
239 carbon source was chosen as the culture medium to avoid the slow growth of the *hns*Δ93
240 strain in M9GYT (Fig. 1a) (Tartof and Hobbs, 1987). Pilot experiments demonstrated that
241 quiescence could be achieved with 2.5 mM indole so we used this concentration to minimize
242 the potential for indole toxicity. After 26 h the quiescent culture reached an OD₆₀₀ of 34.0,
243 compared to 63.7 for a control culture with ethanol added in place of the indole solution (Fig.
244 4d). This corresponded to dried cell weights (DCW) of 13.3 g.L⁻¹ and 24.8 g.L⁻¹ respectively.
245 Growth of the cultures was almost identical until indole addition, after which the Q-cell
246 culture ceased growing almost immediately. Despite the reduced cell density, the 3HB
247 concentration in the Q-cell culture reached 374.8 mM (39.4 g.L⁻¹) at 26 h compared to 178.4
248 mM (18.6 g.L⁻¹) for the control (Fig. 4e). Therefore, over the course of the experiment, the
249 product yield (grams of product formed per liter divided by grams of cells formed per liter) of
250 the quiescent culture was 4.0-fold greater than for the control (2.97 against 0.75), while the
251 absolute concentration in the culture supernatant was 2.1-fold greater.

252

253 Importantly, the rates of substrate (glucose, S) utilization (dS/dt) were very similar for both
254 cultures at all stages of the fermentation (Fig. 4f). On the other hand, the specific product
255 (3HB, P) formation rates (given by 1/X(dP/dt), where X is biomass), representing the amount
256 of 3HB produced per unit of time per unit of biomass, were initially similar but diverged 9 h
257 into the experiment (Fig. 4g). Comparison with Fig. 4d demonstrates that the divergence
258 corresponds with entry of the control culture into stationary phase. 3HB production is linked

259 to the metabolic rate of the cell. Therefore, the control culture became unproductive as
260 metabolism slowed upon entry into stationary phase, whereas the quiescent culture continued
261 to produce 3HB. It is this extended production period that accounts for the superior
262 productivity of quiescent cultures. Ceasing growth clearly allows quiescent cultures to take
263 advantage of the large pool of available metabolites that were revealed by our metabolomics
264 analysis.

265 **4 Discussion**

266 We show here that the *hns* Δ 93 mutation leads to wide-scale changes in protein expression.
267 These changes did not greatly affect the balance or concentration of metabolites between the
268 strains. Most significantly, stress response genes were upregulated, in agreement with
269 previous characterization of protein expression changes in an *hns* knockout strain (Laurent-
270 Winter et al., 1997). A detailed survey of expression changes due to indole has not been
271 carried out in *E. coli*, but it has been suggested that proteins involved in drug and acid
272 resistance (Hirakawa et al., 2010, 2005; Lee et al., 2010), biofilm formation (Di Martino et
273 al., 2003; Lee et al., 2007; Wood, 2009), amino acid metabolism (Wang et al., 2001),
274 virulence (Hirakawa et al., 2009), and even inter-species communication (Lee and Lee, 2010;
275 Vega et al., 2013) are all affected by indole. A microarray study of indole-induced expression
276 changes in *Salmonella* found 77 differentially expressed proteins (Nikaido et al., 2012).
277 Although we imposed more stringent cut-off parameters for the selection of significant
278 expression changes, our results are in agreement that indole does not affect the expression of a
279 large number of genes.

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281 DNA replication and gene transcription in *E. coli* are coordinated throughout the growth cycle
282 by controlling the topological structure of the chromosome (Balke and Gralla, 1987; Hsieh et

283 al., 1991; Ohniwa et al., 2006). It has also been suggested that a high density of DNA gyrase
284 binding sites (and consequently high superhelical density) near to the replication origin is
285 correlated with genes that are expressed early in the growth cycle (Lau et al., 2004; Sobetzko
286 et al., 2012). Indole inhibits DNA gyrase, but is not thought to have a strong effect at 3 mM
287 (Field and Summers, 2012). Therefore, the protein expression and metabolic effects we
288 observed are unlikely to be a consequence of DNA gyrase inhibition by indole. As noted
289 before, other mutations in *hns* do not allow the induction of quiescence (Rowe and Summers,
290 1999). Therefore, we conclude that the *hns* Δ 93 mutation affects the binding of H-NS to DNA
291 in a way that loosens its control over the expression of a subset of the genes which it inhibits,
292 and that this subset includes a large number of stress response genes.

293

294 It is not necessary for indole to affect protein expression in order to influence metabolite
295 concentrations since metabolic balance is controlled largely through modulation of enzyme
296 activity (Ishii et al., 2007). As a protonophore, indole reduces the PMF, leading to increased
297 proton pumping by the electron transfer chain (Korshunov et al., 1997). This stimulates a
298 demand for NADH from the TCA cycle, leading to an increased rate of respiration. However,
299 in our experiments the TCA cycle was disrupted. Continued supply of glucose into glycolysis
300 but reduced activity in the TCA cycle led to the build-up of glycolytic intermediates,
301 particularly at the junction between glycolysis and the TCA cycle.

302

303 Our results suggest that the *hns* Δ 93 mutation essentially ‘primes’ cells for the effect of indole
304 on metabolism and prepares the cells for quiescence. When indole is present, metabolism
305 proceeds in a redox-imbalanced fashion, resulting in a reduction in NAD⁺ and NADP⁺
306 concentrations as the pathways that regenerate them are inhibited (Fig. 3). In the wild-type
307 strain this soon leads to oxidative damage by reactive oxygen species (ROS) (Cabisco et al.,

308 2000; Krapp et al., 2011). However, in *hns* Δ 93, elevated concentrations of stress-response
309 proteins may enable the ROS to be neutralized, partly by oxidizing NADH and NADPH.
310 Therefore, the increased defense against oxidative stress in Q-cells may also act to regenerate
311 cofactors, allowing for continued glucose metabolism. This model of indole action could shed
312 further light on the metabolic shift that takes place as wild-type cells transition from
313 exponential to stationary phase (Gaimster and Summers, 2015). For example, it might be of
314 benefit for cells to repress the TCA cycle when less energy is required to power cell growth
315 and division, and divert metabolic energy towards cell maintenance pathways leading from
316 the PPP and glycolysis.

317

318 As an example of the productive capacity of the Q-cell system we demonstrated enhanced
319 production of 3HB. Other than adjusting the indole concentration, we made no attempt to
320 optimize the production conditions. However, the 39.4 g.L⁻¹ of 3HB produced here was still
321 greater than the highest previously reported productivity of 3HB of 12.2 g.L⁻¹ from 16.7 g.L⁻¹
322 DCW (Liu et al., 2007).

323

324 By better understanding the mechanism of entry into quiescence we have been able to identify
325 promising starting points for metabolic engineering to improve the *hns* Δ 93 strain for the
326 production of commercially significant products through exploitation of the accumulated
327 glycolysis intermediates. The uncoupling of production from biomass generation clearly leads
328 to large increases in efficiency. Therefore, we believe that with additional metabolic
329 engineering and optimization of growth conditions, the Q-cell system will become a powerful
330 and flexible tool for industrial-scale production of a variety of high value chemicals.

331 **5 Methods**

332 **Strains and growth conditions.** The wild-type strain used as the control was *E. coli* W3110 (ATCC 27325). To
333 create the Q-cell strain, the *hns*Δ93 mutation was introduced to the wild-type strain using the lambda Red
334 recombinase system, as described previously (Chen et al., 2015). Strains were stored with glycerol at -80 °C and
335 streaked onto Luria-Bertani (LB) agar plates before use. A 5 ml starter culture was then grown in LB liquid
336 medium for 8 h at 37 °C and used to inoculate further cultures for the experiments. The *hns*Δ93 mutation confers
337 kanamycin resistance to the Q-cell strain. For selection purposes, Q-cell plates and starter cultures contained
338 kanamycin (30 μg.mL⁻¹). However, to keep the conditions used for each strain as similar as possible, no
339 antibiotics were used for experimental cultures, except when necessary for maintenance of the 3-
340 hydroxybutyrate production plasmid.

341

342 For the metabolome and proteome studies, cultures were grown in M9 medium (12.8 g.L⁻¹ Na₂HPO₄.7H₂O, 3
343 g.L⁻¹ KH₂PO₄, 0.5 g.L⁻¹ NaCl, 1 g.L⁻¹ NH₄Cl and 0.24 g.L⁻¹ MgSO₄) supplemented with 4 g.L⁻¹ glucose, 2 g.L⁻¹
344 yeast extract and 1 mL.L⁻¹ of a trace elements solution (9.7 g.L⁻¹ FeCl₃, 7.8 g.L⁻¹ CaCl₂, 0.218 g.L⁻¹ CoCl₂.6H₂O,
345 0.156 g.L⁻¹ CuSO₄.5H₂O, 0.118 g.L⁻¹ NiCl₃.6H₂O and 0.105 g.L⁻¹ CrCl₃.6H₂O dissolved in 0.1 M HCl). Seed
346 cultures (300 mL) were inoculated with 3 mL of LB starter culture in 1 L baffled Erlenmeyer flasks and grown
347 for 16 h overnight with shaking at 300 rpm.

348

349 Following inoculation of the fermentor (final volume of 3 L in a 10 L vessel), cultures were grown in batch
350 mode until the glucose supply was exhausted, indicated by a rise in dissolved oxygen (DO) and pH, and
351 confirmed by testing with a hand-held FreeStyle Optium glucose meter (Abbott Laboratories, UK). Feed
352 solution (180 g.L⁻¹ glucose, 22 g.L⁻¹ NH₄Cl, 5.42 g.L⁻¹ MgSO₄) was then introduced at 1.5 mL min⁻¹ by
353 peristaltic pump. Throughout the experiment, the temperature was controlled at 37 °C, agitation speed was a
354 constant 500 rpm (sufficient to maintain DO above 40 %) and pH was maintained at 7.0 by addition of 5 M
355 NaOH as necessary. Control of foaming was only necessary for wild-type cultures without indole, and was
356 achieved by automatic addition of antifoam agent A (Sigma-Aldrich, US) controlled by a foam level probe.

357

358 After a 30 min equilibration period, indole dissolved in ethanol (1 M) was added in a single shot to a final
359 concentration of 3 mM. An equivalent volume of pure ethanol was added for no-indole controls. The growth of
360 each culture was monitored by measuring the optical density at 600 nm (OD₆₀₀) of samples. W3110*hns*Δ93

361 cultures grew slower than the wild-type both before and after indole addition. Despite the different growth rates,
362 the OD₆₀₀ at the start of the feeding stage was the same for all cultures.
363
364 For the production of 3-hydroxybutyrate (3HB), a similar strategy was followed to that described above.
365 However, a complex medium could be used as it was no longer necessary to avoid activating alternative
366 metabolic pathways, as in the metabolome study. This also allowed both strains to grow at equal rates. We used
367 terrific broth (TB) at all stages of the 3HB production experiments. TB medium consists of 24 g.L⁻¹ yeast extract,
368 12 g.L⁻¹ peptone, 9.4 g.L⁻¹ K₂HPO₄, 2.2 g.L⁻¹ KH₂PO₄, 4 g.L⁻¹ glucose and 2.4 g.L⁻¹ MgSO₄. A 100 mL pre-
369 culture of *E. coli* W3110*hms*Δ93/pTrctesBphaAB was grown overnight in TB medium at 37 °C then used to
370 inoculate the fermentor (5 L vessel), which contained a further 1.9 L of fresh TB medium. Ampicillin (100
371 μg/mL) was included in all growth media and the nutrient feed, to select for cells containing the plasmid.
372
373 When the original glucose supply was depleted (signaled by a rise in pH), a feed medium consisting of 190 g.L⁻¹
374 glucose, 108 g.L⁻¹ peptone, 84 g.L⁻¹ yeast extract, 9.4 g.L⁻¹ K₂HPO₄, 2.2 g.L⁻¹ KH₂PO₄ and 1.2 g.L⁻¹ MgSO₄ was
375 pumped into the fermentor at an initial flow rate of 0.28 mL.min⁻¹. The ratio of glucose to complex nitrogen in
376 this feed was kept much higher than TB medium to provide a better stoichiometric balance. The flow rate was
377 increased exponentially so as to double every 2 h pre-induction to keep pace with the growth rate of the cells.
378 Indole was dissolved in ethanol to 150 mM and pumped into the fermentor at a rate of 0.28 mL.min⁻¹ for 2 h,
379 through a tube that exited below the level of the medium to ensure good dissolution. Induction was done with
380 IPTG (1 mM final concentration) 30 min after the start of the indole feed. The feed rate post induction was kept
381 constant since we observed a drop in the growth rate of the cells.
382
383 Cell growth was measured as OD₆₀₀ following appropriate dilution and as cell dry weight (CDW) by collecting
384 the cells from two 1 mL samples through centrifugation and drying in an oven until constant weight. The
385 average of the two weights was reported. Glucose concentrations were recorded using a medical glucose meter
386 and disposable enzyme assay strips. Substrate consumption rates (with respect to glucose) were calculated from
387 a material balance on the amount fed per unit time and the residual glucose concentration in the culture medium.
388 Following centrifugation at 17,000 × g for 2 minutes to remove the cells, samples of the supernatant (1 mL) were
389 kept at -80 °C before testing for 3HB concentrations using a β-hydroxybutyrate colorimetric assay kit (Cayman
390 Chemicals, US).

391

392 **3-hydroxybutyrate production plasmid construction.** Plasmid pTrctesBphaAB was constructed from plasmid
393 pTrcphaCAB_{Re} which was generously provided by Dr. Takeharu Tsuge (Tokyo Institute of Technology, Japan)
394 (Kahar et al., 2005), by replacing the *phaC* gene with *tesB*. The artificial operon thus created encoded for a 3-
395 enzyme pathway in which 3-hydroxybutyryl-CoA is produced from acetyl-CoA by PhaA and PhaB, and the
396 CoA moiety is then removed by TesB to leave 3-HB. The *tesB* gene was amplified by PCR from plasmid
397 pCA24N:TesB (Kitagawa et al., 2005) and the product was purified using a QIAQuick PCR purification column
398 (Qiagen, USA). Plasmid pTrcphaCAB_{Re} was linearized by digestion with EcoRI and Sall and the plasmid
399 backbone was then ligated with the *tesB* fragment by Gibson Assembly according to the manufacturer's
400 instructions of a kit provided by New England Biolabs (US). The primers used for Gibson Assembly were:

401

402 Forward: AACAAATTTACACAGGAAACAGACCATGGAATTCAGATCTTTTCG

403 AATAGTGACGGCAGAGAGACAATCAAATCATG

404

405 Reverse: CAAAACAGCCAAGCTTGCATGCCTGCAGGTCGACTCTAGAGGAT

406 CCAAACCCGGTGAATTGGCGCA

407

408 **Time-course study of metabolomics changes.** Samples were taken immediately before indole addition and at
409 six other points over the next 4 hours (5, 15, 30, 60, 120 and 240 min after indole addition). Approximately 20
410 mL samples were drawn aseptically from the fermentor, 1 mL aliquots of which were used for the metabolomics
411 study. The OD₆₀₀ of each sample was measured with appropriate dilution and recorded, and later used to
412 normalize the metabolite concentrations. We obtained samples for metabolite quantification by vacuum filtering
413 1 mL of each culture and quenching the cells by immersion in cold (-80 °C) methanol within 30 sec of
414 withdrawal. The samples were stored in methanol at -80 °C until preparation for analysis.

415

416 **LC-MS/MS analysis of metabolites.** Prior to analysis, metabolites were extracted using a previously described
417 method with modifications (Soga, 2007; Yoshida et al., 2008). Briefly, the metabolites were extracted into a
418 1.2 mL solvent mixture (CHCl₃:H₂O, 1:1, v/v) containing 10 µg.L⁻¹ of D-(+)-camphor-10-sulfonic acid as an
419 internal standard for semi-quantitative analysis. After centrifugation at 15,000 × g at 4 °C for 5 min, 10 µL of
420 the upper phase was used for quantification of intracellular metabolites by high-performance liquid

421 chromatography coupled with electrospray ionization tandem mass spectrometry (LCMS-8040 triple quadrupole
422 LC-MS/MS spectrometer; Shimadzu, Japan) as described previously (Luo et al., 2007).

423

424 **GC-MS analysis of metabolites.** For GC-MS analysis, 70 μ L of the upper phase, as for LC-MS/MS analysis,
425 was transferred to a new tube and vacuum dried. The dried residue was derivatized for 90 min at 30 °C in 20
426 mg.mL⁻¹ methoxyamine hydrochloride in pyridine (20 μ L). Subsequently, trimethylsilylation (TMS
427 derivatization) was performed for 30 min at 37 °C and then for 2 h at room temperature with N-methyl-N-
428 (trimethylsilyl)trifluoroacetamide (MSTFA, 50 μ L) (Roessner et al., 2000; Strelkov et al., 2004). GC-MS was
429 carried out using a GCMS-QP2010 Ultra (Shimadzu, Japan) equipped with a CP-Sil 8 CB-MS capillary column
430 (30 m \times 0.25 mm \times 0.25 μ m; Agilent, USA). Helium was used as the carrier gas with a flow rate of 2.1 mL.min⁻¹.
431 The injection volume was 1 μ L with a split ratio of 1:10. An initial oven temperature of 60°C was maintained
432 for 10 min, then raised to 315 °C at 15 °C.min⁻¹, and maintained for 6 min. The total running time was 33 min.
433 The other settings were as follows: 250 °C interface temperature, 200 °C ion source temperature, and electron
434 impact (EI) ionization at 70 eV.

435

436 **HPLC analysis for measurement of organic acids in medium.** Supernatant of the cell broth, recovered after
437 centrifugation, was used for HPLC using a Prominence HPLC System (Shimadzu, Japan) with a conductivity
438 detector and two Shim-pack SCR-102H columns (300 mm x 8.0 mm; I.D., 7 μ m; Shimadzu, Japan). The column
439 temperature was 48 °C and the flow rate of the mobile phase (5 mM p-toluenesulfonic acid; p-TSA) was 0.8
440 mL.min⁻¹. The flow rate of the pH buffering solution for the detector (5 mM p-TSA, 20 mM Bis-Tris, and 0.1
441 mM EDTA-4H) was 0.5 mL.min⁻¹.

442

443 **2d-DIGE comparison of protein expression.** The same 20 mL samples from the fermentation cultures as
444 described for the metabolomics study were used for the proteomic study. A 10 mL aliquot of each sample was
445 centrifuged at 4000 \times g for 15 min to recover the cells. The pellet was then washed 3 times by repeated
446 suspension and centrifugation, in an ice-cold buffer consisting of 10 mM Tris (pH 8.0) and 5 mM magnesium
447 acetate. Washed pellets were stored at -80 °C until all samples had been collected, and then prepared for analysis
448 simultaneously.

449

450 Cells were resuspended in lysis buffer (7 M urea, 2 M thiourea, 30 mM Tris and 4% (w/v) CHAPS) and lysed by
451 sonication on ice. The sonication protocol consisted of 12 cycles of 10 sec with 10 sec rest periods between. The
452 pulse amplitude was set to 15 Amp resulting in a pulse power of 8 – 9 W. After complete lysis, the protein
453 concentration was measured using a Bradford microplate assay procedure. Controls consisting of bovine serum
454 albumin were prepared in the same lysis buffer to prepare a standard curve. The pH of each sample was also
455 checked and found to be close to pH 8.5, which is optimal for the labelling procedure.

456

457 An internal standard was created by pooling equal amounts of protein from every sample. For the test samples,
458 50 µg of protein was labelled for each sample. Labelling was carried out with the CyDye DIGE Fluor minimal
459 labelling kit (GE Healthcare, US) using Cy2 for the internal standard and Cy3 and Cy5 for test samples. Groups
460 of two test samples were then combined together with an internal standard sample, and mixed with an equal
461 volume of 2× sample buffer (7M urea, 2 M thiourea, 2% (w/v) CHAPS, 0.5% IPG buffer (pH 3 – 11 NL) and
462 De-streak reagent). Finally, the volume was made up to 450 µL with rehydration solution (7 M urea, 2 M
463 thiourea, 2% (w/v) CHAPS). Each sample was loaded onto a 24 cm Immobiline DryStrip (pH 3 – 11 NL) using
464 the rehydration method, with rehydration proceeding for 12 h at 20 °C. Isoelectric focusing then proceeded with
465 an initial step of 500 mV for 1 h, followed by a gradient to 100 mV over 8 h, a gradient to 8000 mV over 3 h and
466 a final step with the voltage held at 8000 mV for 3.75 h.

467

468 The second dimension electrophoresis was conducted using the Ettan DALT gel and electrophoresis system (GE
469 Healthcare, USA). 24 cm pre-casted gels were used following equilibration of the focused IEF strips. 8 gels were
470 run simultaneously with 12 mA per gel, with a recirculating pump and chiller to maintain the buffer temperature
471 at 15 °C, for 17 h until the bromophenol blue dye front just reached the end of the gel. The gels were then
472 immediately scanned using a Typhoon 9400 variable mode imager (Amersham Biosciences, UK) and following
473 the manufacturer's recommended settings. The images were analyzed to detect changes in protein concentrations
474 using DeCyder 2-D v.6.5 image analysis software.

475

476 **Protein digestion and identification.** A preparatory gel containing 500 µg of unlabeled, pooled samples was
477 run under the same conditions as for the analytical gel, and post-stained using SYPRO Ruby (Fisher Scientific,
478 Japan). Following spot matching in DeCyder 2-D, the selected spots were excised using an Ettan spot picker
479 (Amersham Biosciences, UK). The spots were de-stained in 50 mM ammonium bicarbonate containing 50%

480 acetonitrile (50 μ L) for 10 min at 37 °C, dehydrated with acetonitrile (25 μ L) then dried in a vacuum centrifuge.
481 To reduce cysteine residues, 100 mM ammonium bicarbonate with 10 mM dithiothreitol (25 μ L) was added for
482 15 min at 50 °C, then 250 mM iodoacetamide in 100 mM ammonium bicarbonate (2 μ L) was then added and the
483 spots were incubated for 15 min at room temperature in the dark for alkylation. After washing and dehydration
484 as before, the protein in the dried gel debris was digested at 37 °C overnight with 100 ng/10 μ L modified trypsin
485 solution. The digested protein fragments were collected from the supernatant and extracted from the gel debris
486 by the addition of 50-80% acetonitrile containing 1% trifluoroacetic acid ($3 \times 25 \mu$ L).

487

488 The resulting protein sample was resolved in 2% acetonitrile containing 0.1% trifluoroacetic acid and applied to
489 the liquid chromatography (LC) system (Advance nanoLC; Bruker-Michrom, USA) coupled to an LTQ linear
490 ion trap mass spectrometer (ThermoFisher, USA) with a nanospray ion source in positive mode. The peptides
491 were separated on a NANO-HPLC C18 capillary column (0.075 mm ID \times 150 mm length, 3 mm particle size,
492 Nikkyo Technos, Japan) using a linear gradient (25 min, 5-35% acetonitrile containing 0.1% formic acid) at a
493 flow rate of 300 nL/min. The LTQ-MS was operated in top-3 data-dependent scan mode. The precursor ions
494 were selected automatically for MS/MS analysis on the basis of their signal intensities. The parameters of LTQ
495 were as follows: spray voltage, 2.3 kV; capillary temperature, 250 °C; mass range (m/z), 400-1800; collision
496 energy, 35%. Raw data was acquired by Xcalibur software. The MS/MS data were searched against the
497 SwissProt 2014_10 database using MASCOT v.2.4.1 software (Matrix Science, UK). The MASCOT search
498 parameters were as follows: enzyme, trypsin; fixed modifications, carbamidomethyl (Cys); variable
499 modifications, oxidation (Met); peptide mass tolerance, ± 1.5 Da; fragment mass tolerance, ± 0.8 Da; max.
500 missed cleavages, 1. Significant MASCOT scores were defined with $p \leq 0.05$.

501 **Acknowledgments**

502 We would like to thank Dr Kenji Ohtawa (Riken Support Unit for Biomaterial Analysis, Japan) for technical
503 assistance with 2D-DIGE, Dr Masaya Usui (Riken Support Unit for Biomaterial Analysis, Japan) for technical
504 assistance with identification of protein spots, Dr Matthew Davey (Plant Sciences Department, University of
505 Cambridge, UK) for helpful discussions about data analysis and Dr Antonio De León Rodríguez (IPICYT,
506 Mexico) for critical reading of the manuscript. This project was funded by the Riken Foreign Postdoctoral
507 Researcher program.

508 **Competing interests**

509 D.K.S. is named as an inventor on U.S., European and other patents (see: US 2009/0004700 A1: *Chemical*
510 *Induction In Quiescence In Bacteria*: Jan. 1, 2009) covering the Q-Cell system. The IP is owned by Cambridge
511 Enterprise (Cambridge University). D.K.S. stands to benefit from earnings arising from exploitation of Q-Cells
512 under the standard Cambridge University policy for income distribution. All other authors declare no financial or
513 commercial conflict of interest.

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