

252

INVITED

Targeting the protein translation factor eIF4E for cancer therapy

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Eukaryotic Translation Initiation Factor 4E (eIF4E) plays a pivotal role in cellular mRNA translation, binding the cap structure at the 5' end of cellular mRNAs and delivering these mRNAs to the eIF4F translation initiation complex. A substantial body of evidence has accumulated in the past 18 years implicating enhanced eIF4E activity in cellular transformation, tumorigenesis and metastatic progression. In human cancers, eIF4E expression is commonly elevated with disease progression in many tumor types including lymphomas as well as cancers of the head and neck, breast, colon, bladder and lung. We now show that eIF4E activation is universally and significantly increased in human and experimental prostate cancers. In human cancers, elevated eIF4E activation is significantly associated with reduced patient survival.

In experimental models, eIF4E overexpression can drive cellular transformation, tumorigenesis, invasiveness and metastases by selectively and disproportionately enhancing the translation of select mRNAs that code for the critical proteins that promote and sustain the phenotypes necessary for malignancy-uncontrolled growth (c-myc, cyclin D1), angiogenesis (VEGF), survival (BCL-2, survivin), and invasion (MMP-9). In addition, eIF4E overexpression facilitates autocrine growth and survival via activation of both the ras and AKT signaling pathways. Reduction of eIF4E expression in highly metastatic, ras-transformed experimental cancer models effectively blocks tumor growth and invasiveness as well as spontaneous and experimental metastasis, suppressing the expression of MMP-9, CD44v6 and ODC and restoring expression of the metastasis suppressor nm-23. These data clearly implicate eIF4E as an attractive anti-cancer therapeutic target.

Exploiting advances in antisense oligonucleotide (ASO) chemistry, we have developed eIF4E-specific ASOs with the tissue stability and nuclease resistance necessary for systemic, anti-cancer therapy. These ASOs specifically target the eIF4E mRNA for RNase-H mediated destruction, repressing expression of eIF4E and the eIF4E-regulated proteins VEGF, cyclin D1, survivin, c-myc, and Bcl-2. In multiple human cancer cell lines, the 4EASO robustly induces apoptosis independent of cell cycle phase and, in endothelial cells, directly blocks the formation of vessel-like structures. Most importantly, intravenous administration selectively and significantly reduces eIF4E expression in human tumor xenografts, significantly suppressing tumor growth. As in cultured cells, systemic 4EASO administration significantly induced apoptosis in xenograft tissue (8X vs. control) and significantly reduced the number of Ki-67+ cells within the xenograft tumors as well. Because these ASOs also target murine eIF4E, we assessed the impact of eIF4E reduction in normal tissues. Despite reducing eIF4E levels by 80% in mouse liver, eIF4E-ASO administration did not affect body weight, organ weight or liver transaminase levels. Collectively, these data therefore provide the first direct, *in vivo* evidence that tumor tissues would be more sensitive to the effects of eIF4E inhibition than normal tissues, a differential effect consistent with the conceptual understanding that eIF4E activity is elevated in, and required by, tumor tissue to sustain the expression of key growth and survival factors that contribute to malignancy. These data have now prompted eIF4E-ASO clinical trials for the treatment of human cancers.

253

INVITED

Exploring translation initiation as a therapeutic target

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Recruitment of the 40S ribosomal subunit and associated factors (43S pre-initiation complex) to eukaryotic mRNAs during translation initiation is catalyzed by several initiation factors: the eukaryotic initiation factor (eIF) 4F complex, eIF4A, eIF4B, eIF4H, and the poly (A) binding protein (PABP). The eIF4F complex binds to the 5' cap structure and delivers eIF4A, an RNA helicase thought to be required to unwind secondary structure and facilitate access of the 43S pre-initiation complex to mRNA templates. eIF4B and eIF4H stimulate translation by increasing the processivity of eIF4A, whereas PABP interacts with the poly(A) tail and the eIF4G subunit of eIF4F to circularize the mRNA during translation. The ribosome recruitment step of translation initiation is rate-limiting and under regulation of the PI3K/Akt/mTOR signaling axis in normal cells – a target for intercession by several viruses during replication, and deregulated in many cancers. Small molecule modulators of the ribosome recruitment phase of initiation would help to better delineate the role played by individual factors in this process. Until recently, the only compounds capable of

blocking eIF4F activity were cap analogues, such as m7GDP. These act by preventing binding of the eIF4E subunit to mRNA cap structures and only work at high concentrations *in vitro*. A small molecule, called 4EGI-1, has been reported to be capable of blocking the interaction between eIF4E and eIF4G. To expand the repertoire of compounds that target translation initiation, our lab has established several high-throughput assays that score for ribosome recruitment, eIF4E:eIF4G interaction, eIF4H-RNA and PABP-RNA interaction. From screens utilizing these assays, we identified and characterized three natural products that modulate eIF4A activity and affect translation initiation. We will discuss the characterization of the biological properties of these compounds, as well as results from more recent high throughput screening campaigns.

254

INVITED

Small molecule inhibitors of the human MDM2-p53 interaction as anticancer agents

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Background: p53 is a powerful tumor suppressor and is an attractive cancer therapeutic target since it can be functionally activated to eradicate tumors. The p53 gene is mutated or deleted in half of human cancers, which inactivates its tumor suppressor activity. In the remaining cancers with wild-type p53 status, its function is effectively inhibited through direct interaction with the human MDM2 oncoprotein. Design of small-molecule inhibitors to blocking the MDM2-p53 interaction to reactivate the p53 function is a promising cancer therapeutic strategy.

Materials and Methods: Using a structure-based strategy, we have designed and developed a class of potent, specific and orally bioavailable small-molecule inhibitors of the MDM2-p53 interaction. We have investigated their mechanism of action and therapeutic potential *in vitro* using human cancer cell lines, *ex vivo* using patient samples and *in vivo* in xenograft models of human cancer.

Results: Our studies showed that our designed MDM2 inhibitor MI-219 binds to MDM2 protein with an affinity 1000-times higher than the natural p53 peptide and is highly selective for blocking the MDM2-p53 interaction over other protein-protein interactions, including the MDMX-p53 interaction. MI-219 disrupts the cellular MDM2-p53 interaction, activates the p53 pathway in cells with wild-type p53, and leads to induction of cell cycle arrest in all cells and selective apoptosis in tumor cells. MI-219 stimulates rapid but transient p53 activation in established tumor xenograft tissues, resulting in inhibition of cell proliferation and induction of apoptosis, and complete tumor growth inhibition. MI-219 activates p53 in normal tissues with minimal p53 accumulation, is not toxic to animals. Using chronic lymphocytic leukemia samples from patients, we further showed that activation of p53 by MDM2 inhibitors is highly effective in induction of cell death and p53 status is the major determinant factor for the activity of MDM2 inhibitors.

Conclusions: Our present study provides compelling evidence that pharmacological activation of p53 by blocking the MDM2-p53 interaction is a promising cancer therapeutic strategy and MI-219 warrants clinical evaluation as a new cancer therapy.

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Poster Sessions**Apoptosis, necrosis, autophagy**

255

POSTER

Cytostatic effect induced by 2-chloroadenosine sensitises PC3 cells to docetaxel

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Background: 2-Chloroadenosine (2-CADO) is an adenosine analog capable of inducing apoptosis in several cell lines by acting either via adenosine receptors or via uptake that is followed by metabolic transformations leading to nucleotide analogs. DNA-directed nucleotide analogs are antimetabolites effective in the treatment of a variety of malignancies. Docetaxel-based chemotherapy is the only treatment that demonstrated an overall survival benefit in men with hormone refractory prostate cancer.