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Membrane Channel Connexin 32 Maintains $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ Hematopoietic Progenitor Cell Compartment: Analysis of the Cell Cycle

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Abstract Membrane channel connexin (Cx) forms gap junctions that are implicated in the homeostatic regulation of multicellular systems; thus, hematopoietic cells were assumed not to express Cxs. However, hematopoietic progenitors organize a multicellular system during the primitive stage; thus, the aim of the present study was to determine whether Cx32, a member of the Cx family, may function during the primitive steady-state hematopoiesis in the bone marrow (BM). First, the numbers of mononuclear cells in the peripheral blood and various hematopoietic progenitor compartments in the BM decreased in Cx32-knockout (KO) mice. Second, on the contrary, the number of primitive hematopoietic progenitor cells, specifically the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+/Scal^+$ fraction, the KSL progenitor cell compartment, also increased in Cx32-KO mice. Third, expression of Cx32 was detected in $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ hematopoietic progenitor cells of wild-type mice (0.27% in the BM), whereas it was not detected in unfractionated wild-type BM cells. Furthermore, cell-cycle analysis of the fractionated KSL compartment from Cx32-KO BM showed a higher ratio in the G_2/M fraction. Taken together, all these results imply that Cx32 is expressed solely in the primitive stem cell compartment, which maintains the stemness of the cells, i.e., being quiescent and noncycling; and once Cx32 is knocked out, these progenitor cells are expected to enter the cell cycle, followed by proliferation and differentiation for maintaining the number of peripheral blood cells.

Keywords Connexin 32 · Hematopoiesis · Hematopoietic stem cell · Cx32-knockout mouse

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Introduction

Connexin (Cx) functions in the organization of cell-cell communication via gap junctions in multicellular organisms. Gap junctions have been implicated in the homeostatic regulation of various cellular functions, including growth control and differentiation (Loewenstein, 1979), apoptosis (Wilson, Close & Trosko, 2000) and the synchronization of electrotonic and metabolic functions (Bruzzone, White & Paul, 1996).

The role of Cxs in hematopoietic organs is poorly understood, except that the expression of Cx43 between hematopoietic progenitor cells and bone marrow (BM) stromal cells sustains hematopoiesis (Rosendaal, Gregan & Green, 1991; Ploemacher et al., 2000; Cancelas et al.,

2000; Montecino-Rodriguez, Leathers & Dorshkind, 2000). As Cxs are essential molecules for multicellular organisms, Cxs that organize cell-cell communication within the hematopoietic progenitor cell compartment are surmised to be present in BM tissue. If Cxs are present among hematopoietic progenitor cells, what would be their functions?

Krenacs & Rosendaal (1998) previously reported that Cx32 is not expressed in the BM. Therefore, if Cx32 is expressed in the blood cells, such Cx32-expressing cells would likely be, e.g., solely hematopoietic stem/progenitor cells. Such a specific study was supposed to be supported by the use of knockout (KO) mice for specific Cx molecules. Consequently, we found a functional impairment of the BM in Cx32-KO mice in our benzene exposure experiment (Yoon et al., 2004).

Cx32-KO mice were first established in 1996 by Willecke (Nelles et al., 1996). Using these Cx32-KO mice, an analysis of the possible functions of Cx32 in hematopoietic stem/progenitor cells was conducted using a reverse biological approach. Cx32-KO mice showed decreased numbers of peripheral mononuclear cells, various progenitor cell compartments and an increased primitive stem cell fraction, such as the lineage marker-negative (Lin^-)/c-kit-positive (c-kit^+)/stem cell antigen-1-positive ($Sca1^+$) (=KSL) fraction. On the contrary, in wild-type mice, expression of Cx32 was detected by immunocytochemistry and reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR), although it was not detected in unfractionated wild-type BM cells. Subsequent cell-cycle analyses, one for colony-forming progenitors using the method for evaluation of cycling progenitor cells with incorporation of bromodeoxyuridine (BrdUrd) followed by exposure to ultraviolet A (UVA) (see, BUUV Assay in Materials and Methods) and the other using a cell sorter with Hoechst 33342 for the KSL fraction, showed a significant increase in the ratio of the cell-cycle fraction in both compartments in the BM of Cx32-KO mice. The functions of Cx32, which is expressed in primitive hematopoietic stem/progenitor cells, are likely restoration of stem/progenitor cell quiescence and maintenance of primitive stem cells to prevent exhaustion.

Materials and Methods

Experimental Animals

Cx32-KO mice ($Cx32^{-/-}$ or $Cx32^{-/Y}$) were genetically modified from the F_1 embryonic cell line 129/J and the C57BL/6 strain developed by Willecke (Nelles et al., 1996). Heterozygous mice ($Cx32^{-/+}$) backcrossed with the C57BL/6 strain and maintained at the animal facility of the National Institute of Health Sciences (NIHS), Tokyo, Japan, were used. The pups were genotyped by PCR for screening of DNA from their tails.

Eight-week-old C57BL/6 male mice from Japan SLC (Hamamatsu, Japan) were used for the colonization assay. All experimental protocols involving laboratory mice in this study were reviewed by a peer review panel, the Interdisciplinary Monitoring Committee for the Right Use and Welfare of Experimental Animals, established at the NIHS, and approved by the Committee for Animal Care and Use at the NIHS with the experimental code 224-37009639415-2002.

Blood and BM Separation

The numbers of peripheral white blood cells, platelets and red blood cells were measured using a Coulter counter (Sysmex K-4500; Sysmex, Kobe, Japan). BM cells were harvested from the femur of each mouse (Yoon et al., 2001) after the animals were killed by cervical dislocation under deep anesthesia with ethyl ether. A 26-gauge needle was inserted into the femoral bone cavity through the proximal and distal ends of the bone shafts, and BM cells were flushed out under pressure by injecting 2 ml of α-minimum essential medium (α-MEM) with ribonucleosides and deoxyribonucleosides (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA).

Antibodies and Immunomagnetic Bead Separation

For the depletion of differentiated (lineage marker-positive) cells from BM cells, immunomagnetic bead separation (BD IMag Mouse Hematopoietic Progenitor Cell Enrichment^{TM} set; BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) or immunobead density gradient separation (SpinSep^{TM}; StemCell Technologies, Vancouver, Canada) was performed. As for lineage (Lin) markers, a biotinylated antibody cocktail (BD Biosciences) containing anti-mouse CD3e (145-2C11), CD11b (M1/70), CD45R/B220 (RA3-6B2), Ly-6G and Ly-6C/Gr-1 (RB6-8C5) and TER-119/erythroid cell (TER-119) antibodies and a monoclonal antibody cocktail (SpinSep) containing anti-CD5/Ly-1, CD45R, CD11b/Mac-1, Ly-6G/Gr-1, TER119 and 7/4/neutrophil antibodies were used. As a secondary antibody for the former biotinylated antibody cocktail, streptavidin (StAv)-coated beads (BD Biosciences) for depletion and StAv-peridinin chlorophyll-a protein (PerCP, BD Biosciences) for visualization were used. For the latter cocktail (SpinSep), an optimized combination antibody cocktail against it that had been coated on dense microparticles, i.e., SpinSep Mouse Dense Particles (StemCell Technologies), was used for immunoprecipitation.

For enrichment of the c-kit^+ fraction by immunomagnetic bead separation, CD117/c-kit-conjugated phycoerythrin (PE, StemCell Technologies) was used as a progenitor

marker and, as a secondary antibody, an anti-PE tetrameric antibody complex (StemCell Technologies) was used.

For detection of Cx32-positive cells by flow cytometry, a mouse anti-Cx32 monoclonal antibody from two sources (Chemicon International, Temecula, CA; Santa Cruz Technology, Santa Cruz, CA) as a primary antibody and an anti-mouse immunoglobulin (Ig) conjugated with fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) as a secondary antibody (BD Biosciences) were used.

For cell-cycle analysis by flow cytometry, as lineage markers, the same antibody cocktails from BD Biosciences were used. In addition, CD117/c-kit conjugated with allophycocyanin (APC), stem cell antigen (Sca1) antibody conjugated with PE and an AT-rich DNA-binding dye, Hoechst 33342 (Sigma, St. Louis, MO), were used.

Immunohistochemical Analysis

The same anti-Cx32 antibody (Chemicon International) was used as the primary antibody. As for the secondary antibody, a biotinylated horse anti-mouse Ig G (Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA) was used, and streptavidin labeled with peroxidase and 3,3′-diaminobenzidine was used to detect immunoreactivity (Vector Laboratories).

Enrichment of BM Cells in $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ Fraction

The $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction is rich in hematopoietic stem cells (HSCs). To obtain a large number of $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ progenitor cell-enriched fraction in BM cells, a combination of immunobead density gradient and immunomagnetic bead separation techniques was carried out. First, for the depletion of lineage-positive BM cells, harvested BM cells were processed through an immunobead density gradient using a density-matched medium and dense microparticles coated with a cocktail of an optimized combination of antibodies called SpinSep (StemCell Technologies). Second, for the selection of the $c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction, immunomagnetic bead separation using magnetic nanoparticles with a magnetic holder was carried out according to the manufacturer's instruction (StemCell Technologies). For each procedure, the antibodies used are described under Antibodies and Immunomagnetic Bead Separation, above.

Flow-Cytometric Analysis using Anti-Cx32 Antibody

BM cells with or without fractionation for $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC enrichment were stained with the biotinylated antibody cocktail of StAv-PerCP, c-kit-PE, the anti-Cx32 antibody and anti-mouse IgG conjugated with FITC. Flow-cytometric analysis was carried out using FACSVantage and FACSAria (both from BD Biosciences).

Flow-Cytometric Analysis for Cell Cycle of KSL Fraction

Lineage-depleted BM cells were stained with the biotinylated antibody cocktail with StAv-PerCP, c-kit-APC, Sca1-PE and Hoechst 33342. Flow-cytometric analysis was carried out using FACSAria.

BUUV Assay

Hematopoietic progenitor cell-specific kinetic studies were evaluated by continuous labeling by an osmotic minipump (Alza, Palo Alto, CA) of BrdUrd for cycling cells, followed by UVA exposure and hematopoietic colonization assay (BUUV assay, details in Hirabayashi et al., 1998, 2002).

Irradiation

In the assay of hematopoietic progenitor cells, recipient mice were exposed to a lethal radiation dose of 915 cGy, at a dose rate of 124 cGy per minute, using a ^{137}Cs-gamma irradiator (Gammacell 40 Exactor; MDS Nordin, Ottawa, Canada) with a 0.5-mm aluminum-copper filter.

Assay for Colony-Forming Units in Spleen

The Till & McCulloch (1961) method was used to determine the number of hematopoietic spleen colonies, i.e., colony-forming units in spleen (CFU-S), formed by hematopoietic progenitor cells. Aliquots of a BM cell suspension were used for evaluating the numbers of CFU-S. Spleens were harvested 9 or 13 days after BM transplantation for determining the number of CFU-S-9 or CFU-S-13 and then fixed in Bouin's solution. Macroscopic spleen colonies were counted under an inverted microscope at ×5.6. It was previously shown, using the C57BL/6 strain, that all colonies visible on days 9 and 13 originate from transplanted BM cells under the condition that the recipient mice are exposed to a lethal radiation dose of 915 cGy (Hirabayashi et al., 2002).

Assay for Granulocyte-Macrophage Colony-Forming Units

Granulocyte-macrophage colony-forming units (CFU-GM) were assayed in semisolid methylcellulose culture (Yoon et al., 2001; Hirabayashi et al., 2002). Briefly, 8×10^4 BM cells suspended in 100 μl of α-MEM were added to 3.9 ml of culture medium containing 1% methylcellulose (Nakarai-Tesque, Kyoto, Japan), 30% fetal calf serum (HyClone Laboratories, Logan, UT), 1% bovine serum albumin (Sigma), 10^{-4} M mercaptoethanol (Sigma) and 10 ng/ml murine granulocyte-macrophage

colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF; R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). One-milliliter aliquots containing 2×10^4 cells were placed in 35-mm tissue culture wells (Nalgen Nunc International, Rochester, NY) in triplicate and incubated for 6 days in a fully humidified incubator at 37°C with 5% CO_2 in air. Colonies were counted using an inverted microscope at ×40 (Olympus Optical, Tokyo, Japan).

PCR Analysis for Genotyping

To detect Cx32 wild-type and Cx32-KO alleles, PCR analysis was performed using genomic DNA from the tail of each mouse, and synthetic oligonucleotides were used as primers (Nelles et al., 1996). To detect the wild-type allele, a 5′ primer (ccataagtcaggtgtaaaggagc) and a 3′ primer (agataagctgcagggaccatagg) were used; to detect the Cx32-KO allele, a common 5′ primer and a *neo*-primer (atcatgcgaaacgatcctcatcc) were used.

Reverse Transcription and PCR Analysis of Cx32 Expression

Expression of the gene encoding Cx32 was analyzed by reverse transcription followed by PCR. The total RNA from BM cells and other tissues was isolated using a Qiagen RNAeasy kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA).

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained were stored in a computer and processed for statistical analysis using Student's *t*-test to evaluate the significance of differences in blood cell count, BM cellularity and the numbers of progenitor cells, CFU-GM, CFU-S-9 and CFU-S-13 between the wild-type group and the KO group. Differences with $p < 0.05$ were considered significant.

Results

Expression of Cx32 in Bone Marrow

Table 1 shows various blood cell parameters for the wild-type and Cx32-KO mice, with body weight and spleen weight as references. Although the total numbers of BM cells and red blood cells did not significantly differ between the wild-type mice and the Cx32-KO mice, the numbers of white blood cells and platelets from the peripheral blood, CFU-S-13 (primitive hematopoietic progenitor cells), CFU-S-9 (differentiated progenitor cells) and CFU-GM (progenitor cells cultured *in vitro*) were all significantly lower in the Cx32-KO mice than in the wild-type mice. These results suggest that the Cx32-KO mice have a potential disadvantage in hematopoiesis. However, when we studied the expression of Cx32 in BM cells by RT-PCR, as shown in Figure 1, neither the expression of Cx32 in the spleen (*not shown*) nor that in the BM was detected except in the positive known control, the hepatic tissue. Thus, the negative expression of Cx32 in BM cells is in good agreement with a previous observation (Krenacs & Rosendaal, 1998).

Table 1 Parameters associated with steady-state hematopoiesis

Parameter	Wild-type	Cx32-KO
Body weight (g)	22.6 ± 1.97	22.5 ± 1.77
Spleen weight (mg)	77.8 ± 17.7	88.3 ± 9.6
BM cellularity ($\times 10^7$/femur)	2.28 ± 0.23	2.15 ± 0.08
Peripheral blood cells		
Red ($\times 10^7$/ml)	960 ± 30.8	930 ± 50.4
White ($\times 10^4$/ml)*	7,300 ± 283	5,633 ± 569
Platelets ($\times 10^7$/ml)*	67.6 ± 0.14	48.7 ± 0.93
Hematopoietic progenitor cells		
CFU-GM ($\times 10^2$/femur)*	387 ± 33.5	251 ± 27.4
CFU-S-9 ($\times 10^2$/femur)*	45.8 ± 4.78	32.7 ± 5.23
CFU-S-13 ($\times 10^2$/femur)*	27.7 ± 3.35	21.1 ± 2.85

Each value is expressed as average (n = 6 for each genotype) ± standard deviation except for the value of the hematopoietic progenitor cells. The numbers of hematopoietic progenitor cells in steady-state CFU-GM, day-9 spleen colonies (CFU-S-9) and day-13 spleen colonies (CFU-S-13) are expressed as average (three donor mice were used for each genotype, and six mice were used for each recipient group) ± standard deviation

* The difference calculated by *t*-test between wild-type and Cx32-KO is significant ($p < 0.05$)

We next studied Cx32 expression in colonies developed in the spleen in lethally irradiated wild-type recipient mice after injection of BM cells from wild-type mice or from Cx32-KO mice. Hematopoietic spleen colonies consist of a large number of immature cells rather than cells from the peripheral blood or unfractionated BM cells (Hirabayashi et al., 2002). Expression of Cx32 detected by RT-PCR analysis was only observed in the hematopoietic spleen colonies derived from wild-type BM cells (Fig. 1, lanes A1, A2). Expression of Cx32 was not detected in colonies derived from Cx32-KO BM cells, which are negative controls (Fig. 1, lanes B1, B2). Expression of Cx32 was also detected in spleen colonies from Cx32-KO recipient mice that had been repopulated with wild-type BM cells (Fig. 1, lanes C1, C2).

Immunohistochemical staining with the anti-Cx32 antibody was carried out to examine the hematopoietic spleen colonies originating from BM cells from wild-type mice and from Cx32-KO mice. A colony originating from a wild-type BM cell showed mild and mottled staining in the outer boundary of the spleen colonies, whereas a colony originating from Cx32-KO BM cells showed no staining

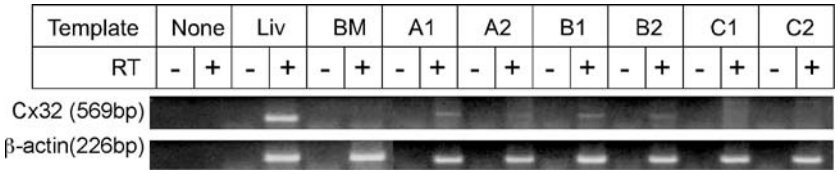

Fig. 1 Expression of Cx32 in BM and hematopoietic spleen colonies. Total RNAs were extracted for RT-PCR from the liver (*Liv*) and BM of wild-type mice and CFU-S-9. Note that Cx32 expression was not detected in the BM but was detected in the liver, which is a positive control (see Materials and Methods). To obtain CFU-S, lethally irradiated wild-type mice were injected with BM cells from wild-type or Cx32-KO donor mice. After 9 days, total RNAs extracted from individual hematopoietic spleen colonies derived from wild-type BM cells or those from Cx32-KO BM cells were reverse-transcribed, followed by PCR and then loaded (lanes *A1, A2, C1* and *C2*). Also, total RNAs extracted from the colonies derived from wild-type BM cells obtained from lethally irradiated Cx32-KO recipient mice followed by repopulation with wild-type BM cells were similarly loaded (lanes *B1* and *B2*). RT(+) and RT(-): with or without avian reverse transcriptase, 2.5 U/20 μl, respectively (see Materials and Methods)

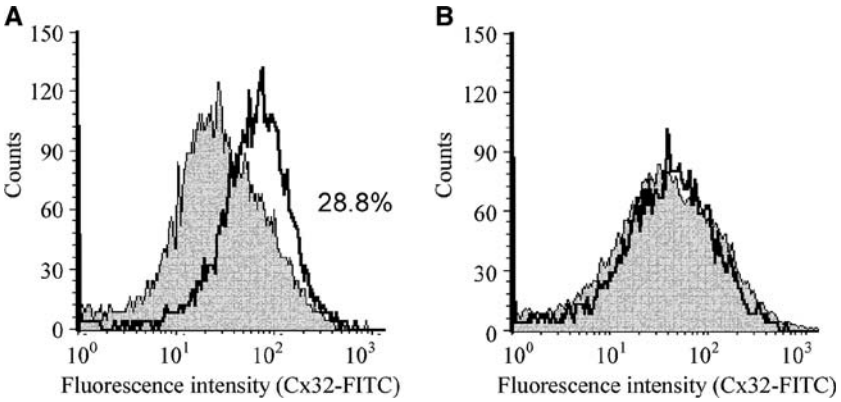

Fig. 2 Flow-cytometric analyses of $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ Cx32-positive cells from wild-type mice. Flow cytometry after BM cell separation was carried out by a combination of immunobead density gradient separation and immunomagnetic bead separation. Histogram of FITC-labeled anti-Cx32 antibody. $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction (**a**) and $Lin^+/c\text{-}kit^-$ fraction (**b**) for wild-type BM cells (*open profile with bold line*) and same fractions for Cx32-KO BM cells (*shaded profile*), negative control. The Cx32-positive fraction shown in **a** calculated for the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction in wild-type BM cells is 28.8%

(*data not shown*). The findings described above suggest expression of Cx32 in the hematopoietic progenitor cells or stem cells alone; thus, further precise experiments were conducted.

Expression of Cx32 in $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ Hematopoietic Progenitor Cell Compartment

We determined whether Cx32-positive cells are consistently found in the HSC compartment. First, the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC-enriched fraction was obtained by the combination of immunobead density gradient separation for depleting lineage-positive cells and immunomagnetic bead separation for selecting $c\text{-}kit^+$ cells, followed by flow-cytometric analysis using the anti-Cx32 antibody. The separated $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC fraction was 0.25% of the original unfractionated wild-type BM cells. The proportion of the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ compartment (HSC compartment) is 90.2% of the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC-enriched preseparated fraction. Furthermore, the number of $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ compartments is 106.9-fold higher than the fraction of the original unfractionated BM cells. To determine which fraction Cx32-positive cells belong to, BM cells from wild-type mice and Cx32-KO mice with or without $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC enrichment were stained with biotinylated antibody cocktail labeled with StAv-PerCP, c-kit-PE and Cx32-FITC. In wild-type BM cells, 28.8% of the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction was found to be Cx32-positive compared with the same fraction of BM cells obtained from Cx32-KO mice, which was used as the negative control (Fig. 2a). Together with the frequency data for the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ HSC-enriched fraction, the fraction of Cx32-positive cells was calculated to be nearly 0.27% of the original unfractionated whole BM cells.

Whether the mature cell fraction, i.e., the $Lin^+/c\text{-}kit^-$ fraction, contains Cx32-positive cells, the fraction of the wild-type BM cells is compared with that of the control profile from the Cx32-KO mice. Because both fractions are nearly identical (Fig. 2b), few cells may be positive for Cx32 in the $Lin^+/c\text{-}kit^-$ fraction. The fraction of Cx32-positive cells is 0.0093% of the original unfractionated whole BM cells (*data not shown*).

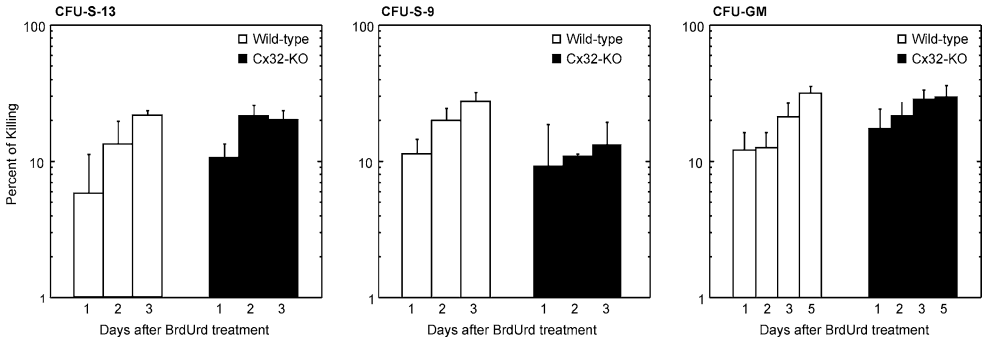

Fig. 3 The BrdUrd-labeled cells with an osmotic minipump purged by UVA light (BUUV) assay for evaluating the cycling fractions of the hematopoietic colonizing progenitor cells. Percent decreases in number of colonies compared with nonexposed control are shown along the ordinate axis (log.) vs. days for continuous labeling of BrdUrd with osmotic minipumps shown along the horizontal axis. CFU-S-13 (primitive hematopoietic progenitor cells), CFU-S-9 (differentiated progenitor cells) and CFU-GM (progenitor cells assayed by *in vitro* colonization) are shown. Each column represents 10 mice assayed for CFU-S-13 and six mice assayed for CFU-S-9

Function of Cx32 in Cell-Cycle Regulation in Hematopoietic Progenitor/Stem Cells

A significant decrease in the number of hematopoietic progenitor cells was observed in the Cx32-KO mice but without any significant difference in the decrease in BM cell number (Table 1), suggesting cell-cycle perturbation in the hematopoietic progenitor cells or stem cell compartment. Whether cell cycles are accelerated or decelerated in either the hematopoietic progenitor cell fractions or the hematopoietic stem cell compartment or both is not known. To characterize hematopoietic progenitor-specific cell cycle, the BUUV assay was conducted. To observe possible changes in the cell cycle in the hematopoietic stem cell compartment, the KSL fraction was assayed with Hoechst 33342 and possible changes in the ratio of G_0/G_1 were evaluated.

BUUV assay Hematopoietic stem cell-specific kinetics evaluation by continuous infusion of BrdUrd for cycling cells including hematopoietic progenitor cells followed by UVA exposure and hematopoietic progenitor colonization assay was conducted.

Results are shown in Figure 3. For CFU-S-13 (primitive hematopoietic progenitor cells), the incorporation of BrdUrd starts from a higher percentage with rapid increase in Cx32-KO mice, suggesting suppression of the cell cycle in these primitive hematopoietic progenitor cells with Cx32-mediated cell-cycle regulation in the wild-type steady state. This suppression may be attenuated in CFU-S-9, a differentiated progenitor cell compartment. For CFU-GM, the progenitor cells assayed by *in vitro* colonization also showed an accelerated cell cycle in Cx32-KO mice. The population doubling time calculated for each progenitor cell compartment is shown in Table 2.

Flow-cytometric analysis of KSL fraction Following the incorporation of the bioactive AT-rich DNA-binding dye Hoechst 33342, the lineage-depleted BM cells were analyzed by flow cytometry. The sizes of the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+/Sca1^+$ (KSL) fraction obtained were 0.052% in the Cx32-KO BM cell compartment and 0.035% in wild-type BM cells (Table 3, Fig. 4a; $p = 0.0458 < 0.05$). The lineage-depleted BM cells were analyzed for their cell-cycle patterns by flow cytometry (Fig. 4b,c), and then G_0/G_1 was calculated for the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ and KSL fractions for both the Cx32-KO and wild-type mice. The percentage of G_0/G_1 calculated for the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ and KSL fractions were slightly lower in Cx32-KO mice (Table 4; 83.3% vs. 87.2% for Cx32-KO vs. wild-type for the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction, 89.2% vs. 91.5% for Cx32-KO vs. wild-type for

Table 2 Doubling times of hematopoietic progenitor cells

Progenitor cell	Genotype	Slope (%killing/day)[a]	*y* intercept (%)[a]	Population doubling[b] (h)	*r*
CFU-GM	Wild-type	0.255	9.09	28.3	0.973
	Cx32-KO	0.244	13.54	29.6	0.995
CFU-S9	Wild-type	0.440	7.62	16.4	0.986
	Cx32-KO	0.179	7.82	40.3	0.999
CFU-S13	Wild-type	0.659	3.16	11.0	0.988
	Cx32-KO	0.694	5.35	10.4	0.999

[a] Regression line: $y = b\ 10^{(ax)}$, where x is the duration after BrdUrd treatment (days), y is the percentage of killing, a is cell cycle velocity (coefficient) and b is the cycling ratio/unit time (coefficient)

[b] Doubling time (h) = (log2/a) × 24

Table 3 Incidence of hematopoietic stem cell fraction/femoral BM cells

Hematopoietic stem cell fraction	Wild-type	Cx32-KO	p*
Lin^--c-kit^+ fraction (%)	0.316 ± 0.007	0.412 ± 0.022	0.0010
KSL fraction (%)	0.035 ± 0.008	0.052 ± 0.011	0.0458

Each value is expressed as average (n = 3 for each genotype) ± standard deviation

* The difference between wild-type and Cx32-KO was calculated by t-test

the KSL fraction; $p = 0.0126$ and $p = 0.0556$, respectively). The results suggest that Cx32 may have a suppressive function on such a hematopoietic stem cell compartment, KSL, under the physiological condition of Cx32.

Discussion

The role of Cx32 in steady-state hematopoiesis was analyzed in this study. This is the first observation of a Cx gene, namely *Cx32*, that is expressed in hematopoietic stem/progenitor cells. The functions of Cx32 in hematopoiesis were also investigated. In Cx32-KO mice, the numbers of various hematopoietic progenitor cells in the BM were lower than those in wild-type mice, suggesting a beneficial role of Cx32 for maintaining hematopoiesis during the steady state. Because the cell-cycle analyses of the hematopoietic stem cells, namely, the Lin^-/c-kit^+/$Sca1^+$ KSL, or the progenitor cells, Lin^-/c-kit^+ fractions, suggested a slightly but significantly higher incidence of a dormant stem cell fraction in wild-type mice, the physiological role of Cx32 is probably to maintain

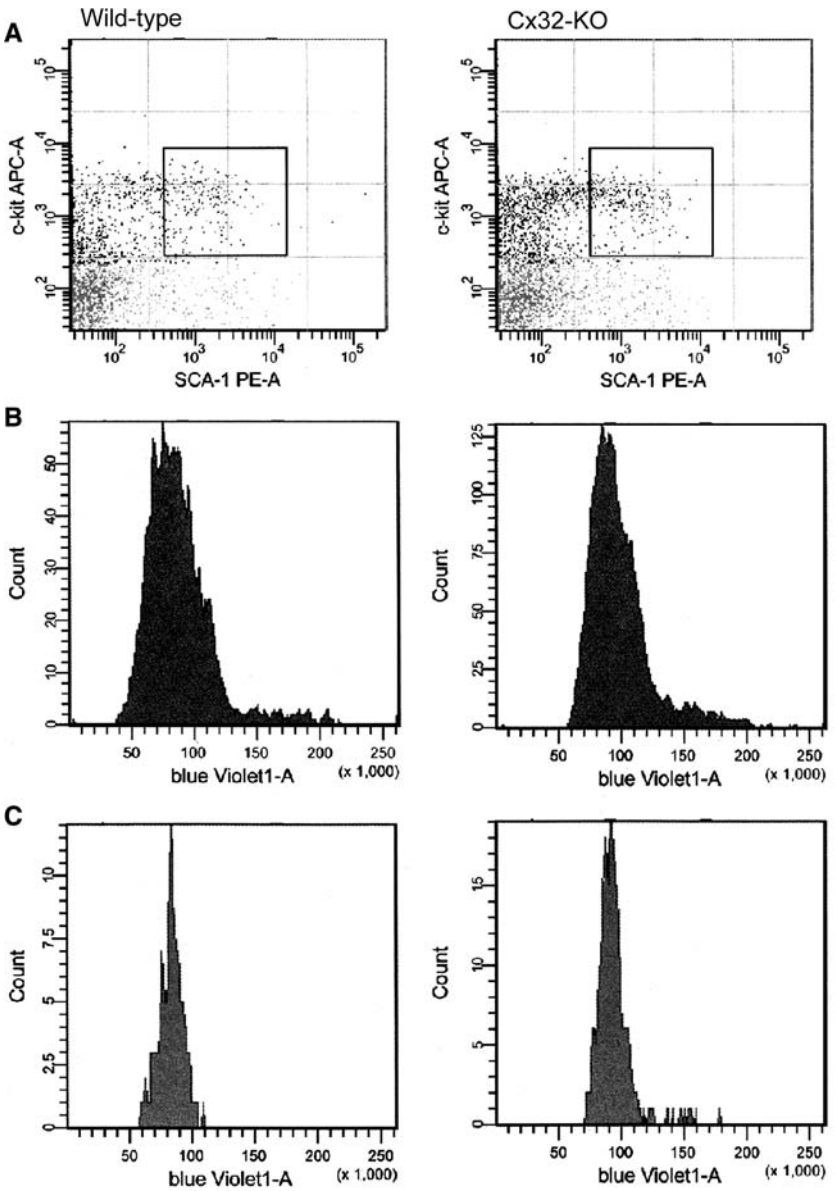

Fig. 4 **a** Two-dimensional expression shown by flow-cytometric analysis between c-kit and Sca1 expression on cells gated by lineage-negative fractions: wild-type and Cx32-KO mice. *Box* represents the c-kit^+/$Sca1^+$ fraction; thus, it is equivalent to the KSL fraction. **b**, **c** Flow-cytometric histograms showing reaction to Hoechst 33342 for Lin^-/c-kit^+ fraction (**b**) and Lin^-/c-kit^+/$Sca1^+$ (=KSL) fraction (**c**)

Table 4 G_0/G_1 ratio of hematopoietic stem cell fraction

Hematopoietic stem cell fraction	Wild-type	Cx32-KO	p*
$Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction (%)	87.2 ± 0.76	83.3 ± 1.75	0.0126
KSL fraction (%)	91.5± 2.53	89.2 ± 1.82	0.0556

Each value is expressed as average (n = 3 for each genotype) ± standard deviation

* The difference between wild-type and Cx32-KO was calculated by t-test

the quiescence of the primitive hematopoietic stem cell compartment, thereby maintaining the stemness of the cells in the fraction.

Various Cxs are expressed in the stromal cells of the fetal liver (i.e., Cxs 43, 45, 30.3, 31 and 31.1) and the BM (i.e., Cxs 43, 45 and 31) (Cancelas et al., 2000). However, the contribution of Cxs to hematopoiesis was determined only on the basis of the effect of Cxs via stromal cell dependence; consequently, no Cxs were previously found in hematopoietic stem cells or progenitor cells (Krenacs & Rosendaal, 1998). However, in our recent study, interestingly, Cx32-KO mice exposed to benzene showed hematopoietic impairment more than wild-type mice; furthermore, the site of this impairment was not identified in either hematopoietic progenitor cells or stromal cells (Yoon et al., 2004).

Thus, we first determined whether hematopoietic progenitor cells express Cx32 molecules. As reported elsewhere (Yoon et al., 2004; Nelles et al., 1996), no Cx32 was detected in unfractionated BM cells by either RT-PCR or cell sorter analysis with an immunofluorescence antibody against Cx32 in this study (Figs. 1, 2). However, interestingly, hematopoietic spleen colonies, derived from hematopoietic progenitor cells and consisting of relatively immature hematopoietic cells, were found to express Cx32. This observation was also consistent with the immunohistochemical reaction of cells in the colonies with the anti-Cx32 antibody, in which Cx32-positive cells were only found along the border of each colony (*data not shown*). Subsequent flow-cytometric analysis using the anti-Cx32 antibody after performing the combination of immunobead density gradient separation and immunomagnetic bead separation showed that the most Cx32-positive fraction belonged to the HSC-enriched fraction, i.e., the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction (28.8% of the fraction) (Fig. 2a). It was calculated as only 0.27% with respect to the unseparated BM cells. Because RT-PCR or Northern blotting possibly detects >1% of expressing cells, these findings are in good agreement with a previous report on the absence of Cx32 expression in unseparated BM tissue (Cancelas et al., 2000). A hematopoietic disadvantage in progenitor cells associated with Cx32 deficiency was further evident because all progenitor cells from the BM of Cx32-KO mice showed ~20% decrease in the numbers of CFU-S-13, CFU-S-9 and CFU-GM. Thus, it can be concluded that Cx32 is required for maintaining normal hematopoiesis, specifically during the maturation of hematopoietic stem cells to progenitor cells.

BM transplantation in different combinations of the donor and recipient, which were repopulated with BM cells from either wild-type or Cx32-KO mice, showed a small number of spleen colonies in the groups repopulated with Cx32-KO BM cells (*data not shown*). Interestingly, the colonies derived from the same Cx32-KO BM cells were significantly smaller, regardless of the genotype of the recipients, i.e., wild-type or Cx32-KO mice, presumably owing to the lack of Cx32 expression in the hematopoietic progenitor cells.

Whether Cx32 is also functional in differentiated mature blood cells is, however, questionable despite the observation that the numbers of white blood cells and platelets in the peripheral blood were significantly lower in Cx32-KO than in wild-type mice (Table 1). It is interesting to calculate the probability of Cx32-positive cells on the basis of the ratio of the number of Cx32-positive BM cells to the $Lin^+/c\text{-}kit^-$ fraction, i.e., only 0.0093% of the unfractionated original BM cells (*data not shown*). Because our repeated analysis failed to detect Cx32 expression in mature blood cells, the decreased numbers of white blood cells and platelets in the Cx32-KO mice may reflect the shortage of immature progenitor cell compartments, possibly due to the lack of Cx32 at the level of the stem and progenitor cells.

Flow-cytometric cell cycle analyses of the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+/Sca1^+$, KSL fraction with Hoechst 33342 and the BUUV assay for colony-forming progenitor cells showed that the cell cycle of the hemopoietic stem cell fractions, i.e., the $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+/Sca1^+$, KSL or $Lin^-/c\text{-}kit^+$ fraction, seems to be maintained in the quiescence state, thereby maintaining the stemness of the cells, although consequent molecular regulations of these fractions are not yet known.

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