

Changes in cytokeratin expression accompany squamous metaplasia of the human respiratory epithelium

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Summary. To determine the characteristics of metaplastic changes of the nasal respiratory epithelium, the distribution of individual cytokeratins (CKs) was studied immunohistochemically and by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis. The authors define four types of changes of the normal pseudostratified columnar epithelium: (1) transitional pseudostratified epithelium (first unusual CK.: no. 13); (2) stratified columnar epithelium (increased expression of CKs 4 and 13; CKs 7, 8, 18 and 19 reduced); (3) stratified squamous epithelium, non-keratinized (appearance of CK 16); and (4) stratified squamous epithelium, keratinized (expression of CKs 1 and 10, variable CK5 and 14 patterns in basal cells). These phenotypes were found simultaneously within single specimens, resulting in apparent overall variability in the immunohistochemical staining patterns. Spatially, changes in CK expression towards “normal” parts were not abrupt but rather gradual. Biochemical data confirmed the immunohistochemical findings and added CK 6 to the pattern of altered nasal mucosa. The findings of this study suggest a stem cell metaplasia in the nasal epithelium which is based on its inherent bimodal developmental programme. A gradual loss of normal respiratory epithelial differentiation, as seen by the loss of CKs 7, 8, and 18, was paralleled by the appearance of squamous epithelial type CKs, e.g. the expression of CKs 1, 10 and 13. Basal cell types CKs 5, 14, 17 and 19 were maintained during this process. Implications of these results for general concepts of CK expression in the metaplastic process are discussed.

Key words: Respiratory epithelium – Nasal mucosa – Metaplasia – Stem cell – Cytokeratin

Introduction

The term metaplasia (*μεταπλασις*) coined by Rudolf Virchow (1871) means local transformation or metamorphosis of a regularly occurring tissue type. Three principal types of metaplasia are commonly distinguished: (1) direct metaplasia, i.e. transformation of a differentiated cell into another state of differentiation; (2) indirect metaplasia, which represents the development of alternatively differentiated cells via newly formed indifferent cells; and (3) stem cell metaplasia developing via pre-existing pluripotent stem cell. For a recent review, see Leube and Rustad (1991).

Metaplasia has importance not only from the theoretical point of view, but also for practical reasons, since in general, metaplasia means a deviation from the normal differentiation pathway which may have pre-neoplastic significance.

Intermediate filament (IF) distribution pattern in cells and tissues reflects their differentiation or functional specialization state, their histogenesis and their malignant transformation (Franke et al. 1981; Osborn and Weber 1983; Lane and Alexander 1990). In addition to the 20 “typical” epithelial cytokeratins (CKs) a set of 10 “trichocytic” CKs has been demonstrated in the hair follicles and other epithelia (Heid et al. 1988). The different epithelial CKs are expressed in tissue-specific patterns that generally include particular pairs of one type I and one type II keratin (Moll et al. 1982; Sun et al. 1984; Cooper et al. 1985). Therefore, differentiated epithelial cell types can be distinguished from each other by their selective expression of particular sets of CK polypeptides, reflecting their specialization or pathological alteration (Purkis et al. 1990; Stosiek et al. 1990).

The metaplastic squamous change of respiratory epithelium is still a peculiar problem in histopathology. This type of epithelium lines the largest part of the respiratory system. A great number of carcinomas of the respiratory tract may develop from metaplastic cells (Trump et al. 1978).

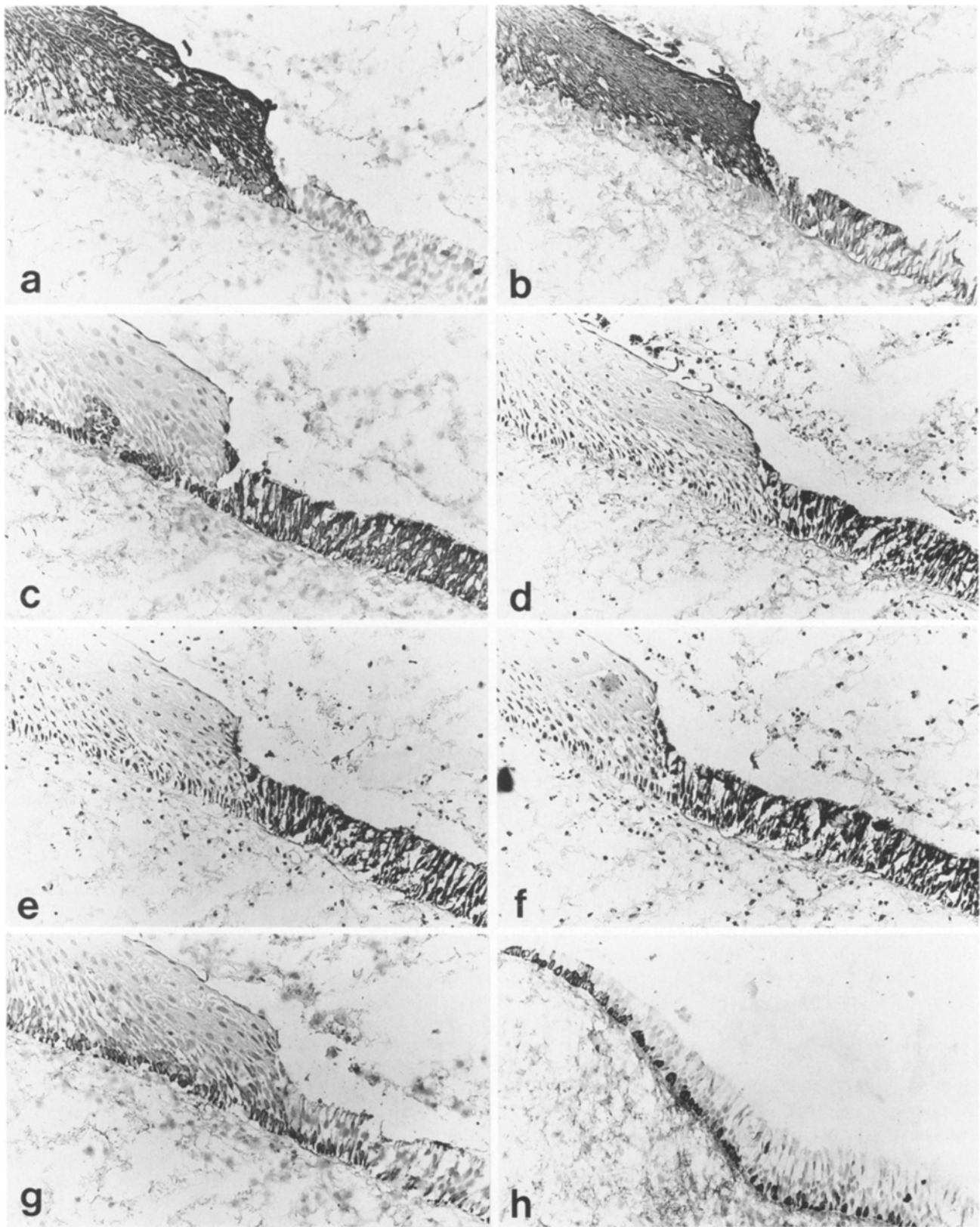


Fig. 1 a–h. “Growth collision” of pseudostratified columnar epithelium (*right*) and stratified, non-keratinized squamous epithelium (*left*). Frozen serial sections immunostained with monoclonal antibodies specific for cytokeratins (CKs) 13 (**a**) and 4 (**b**), 19 (**c**) and

7 (**d**), 8 (**e**), 18 (**f**), and 5 (**g**). **h** Transition of pseudostratified columnar epithelium to transitional (*right*); basal cells are strongly positive with CK 14/17-specific antibody (compare Fig. 3b). **a–h** Immunoperoxidase, $\times 490$

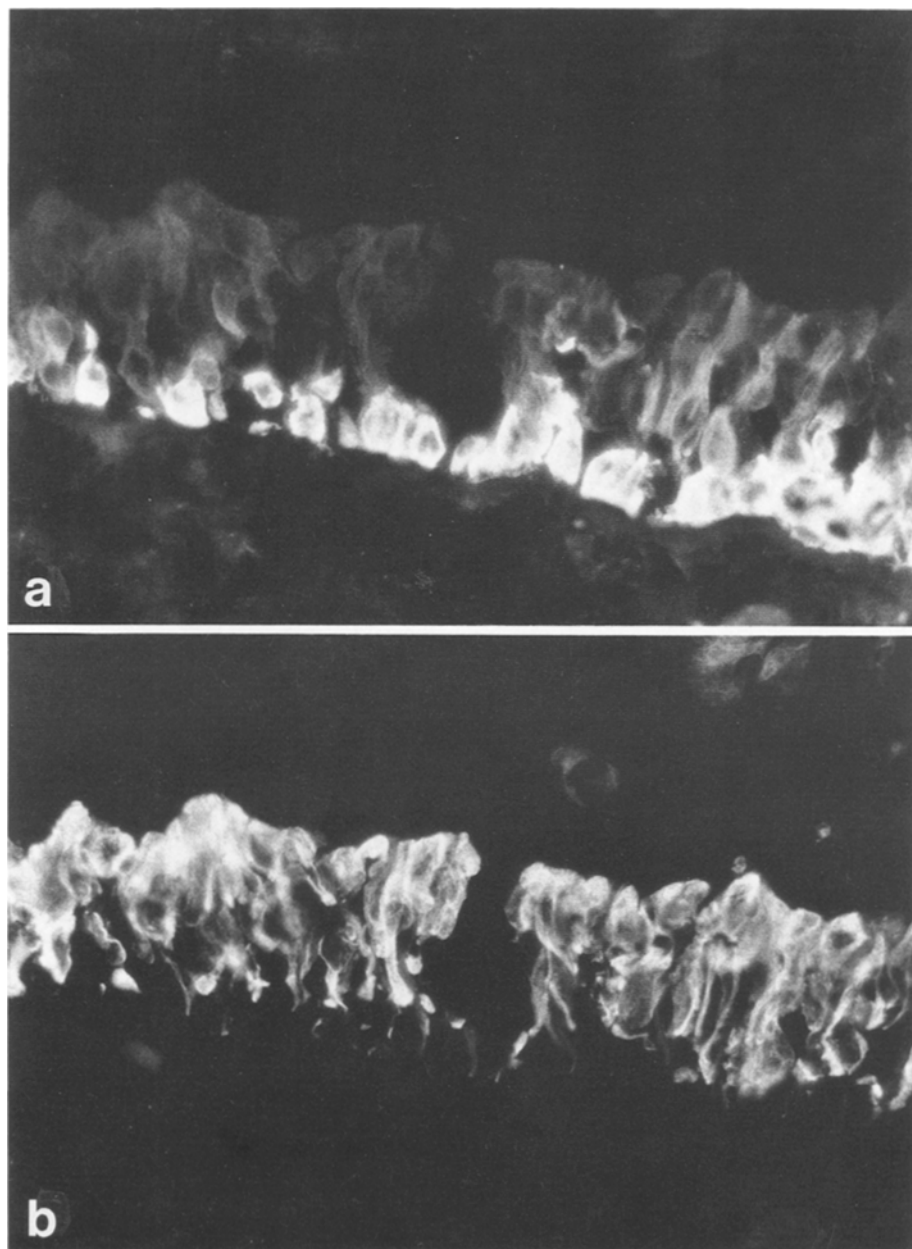


Fig. 2a, b. Double-label immunofluorescence microscopy of pseudostratified columnar epithelium using rabbit antibodies against CK 14 (**a**) and monoclonal antibody LE61 against CK 18. Note that CK 18 expression (**b**) excluded the basal cell layer, which was CK 14 positive (**a**). Immunofluorescence, $\times 280$

Since the diagnosis of metaplastic changes of epithelia located in the lower part of the airways is complicated because of the relative difficulty of obtaining biopsy specimens, we examined the respiratory nasal mucosa in which, when chronically inflamed, metaplastic changes are frequent and can easily be obtained by biopsy.

Materials and methods

Biopsy specimens (fresh tissues) from the nasal and, in some instances, the paranasal sinus mucosa from 27 patients (aged 8–63 years, no sex bias) with chronic inflammatory polyps were immediately embedded in mounting medium (Jung, Heidelberg, FRG) and snap frozen in liquid nitrogen.

The indirect immunoperoxidase technique was performed on unfixed cryostat sections ($4\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ thick; mostly consecutively num-

bered serial sections; for details, see Kasper et al. 1989a). The following monoclonal mouse antibodies to intermediate filament proteins were used:

1. Broad-range anti-CK antibody A45-B/B3 (Karsten et al. 1983; Kasper et al. 1987)
2. Selective antibodies: AE14 specific for CK 5 (Lynch et al. 1986; kindly supplied by Dr. T.-T. Sun, New York, USA); RCK 105 and LP1K against CK 7 (RCK 105: Ramaekers et al. 1987, a gift from Dr. F.C.S. Ramaekers, Maastricht, The Netherlands); LP1K: (Lane et al. 1985; a gift of Dr. E.B. Lane, Dundee, UK); 1C7 reactive for CK 13, and 6B10 specific for CK 4 (Van Muijen et al. 1986; donated by Dr. G.N.P. van Muijen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands); RKSE60, LH2, and LH3, all specific for CK 10 (Lane et al. 1985; Ramaekers et al. 1985); M 20 specific for CK 8 (Schaafsma et al. 1990); LL001 and LL002 specific for CK 14 (Purkis et al. 1990); DC10 and LE61 reactive for CK 18 (Lane 1982; Lauerova et al. 1988); LL025 specific for CK 16, and LL020 specific for CKs 5 and 6 (unpublished; kind gift from Dr. E.B. Lane); E3 specific for CK 17 (Guelstein et al. 1988); SK2-27

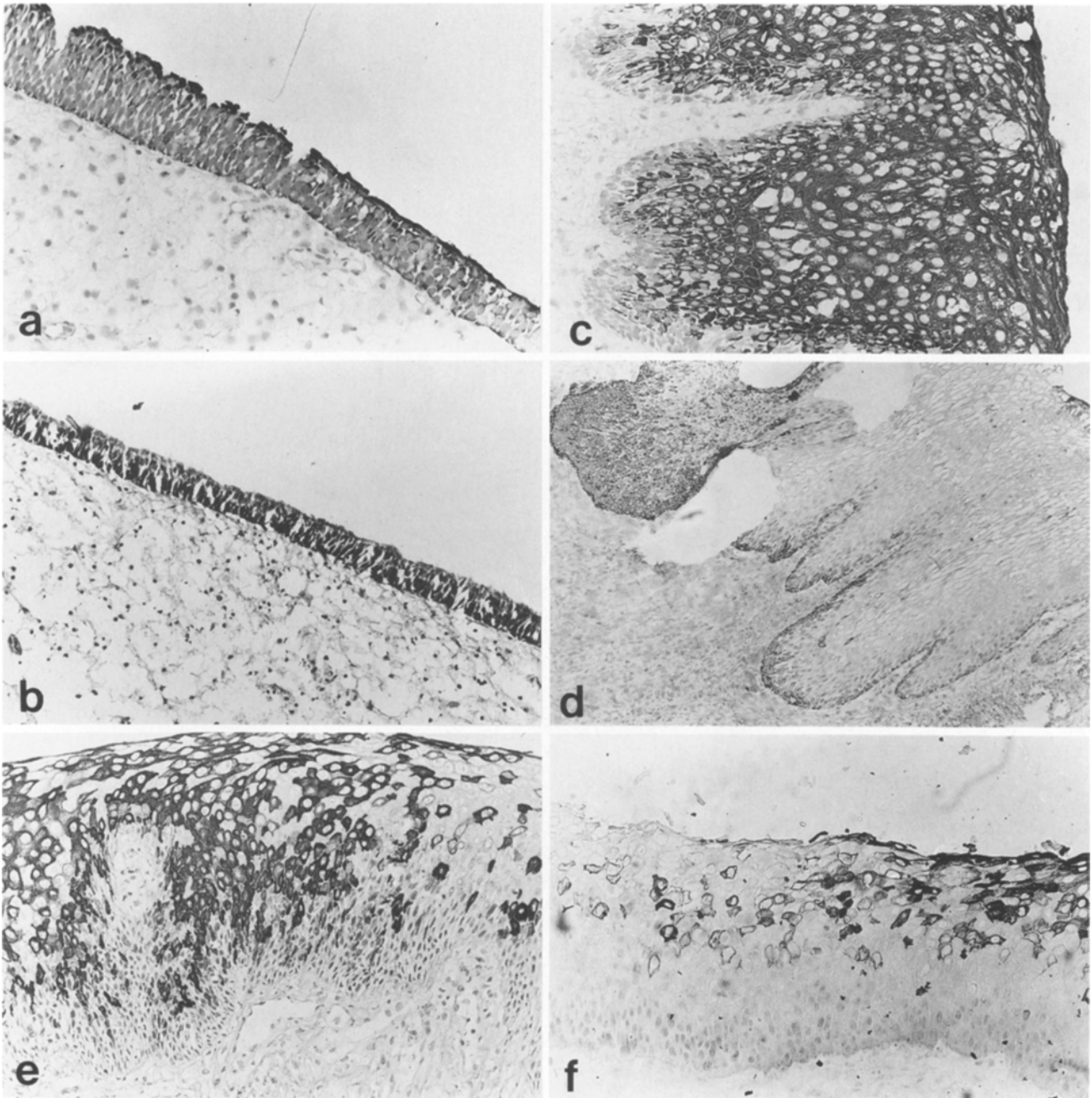


Fig. 3. **a-f.** Transition of pseudostratified columnar epithelium (*right*) to pseudostratified columnar epithelium, transitional (*left*); more luminal expression of CK 13 on the left. **b** Pseudostratified columnar epithelium with unusual staining for CK 17. **c-f** Stratified squamous epithelium. **c** Suprabasal layers in keratinized areas are

strongly positive with CK-13-specific antibody; basal cells are unstained. **d** In parakeratotic areas basal cells lack detectable CK 19 (*right*). **e** In such areas CK 4 was only sparsely expressed in suprabasal cells (*right*). **f** Parakeratotic cells expressed CK 10, $\times 490$

against CKs 14 and 17 (Cintorino et al. 1988) and A53-B/A2 and BA17 against CK 19 (Bartek et al. 1985; Karsten et al. 1985). In all cases, undiluted hybridoma supernatants were used.

3. A monoclonal antibody against vimentin, VIM-3B4 (Progen, Heidelberg, FRG; 1:200 diluted).

Negative controls included omission of the primary antibody and replacement with hybridoma culture medium or phosphate-buffered saline. Human conjunctival epithelium and liver taken from our frozen section bank were used for squamous and simple epithelium type CKs as positive control. For double label immunofluorescence (Kasper 1991) a polyclonal CK 14 antiserum (kind gift from Dr. E.B. Lane), diluted 1:20, and TRITC-labelled anti-

rabbit immunoglobulin (Cappel, Cochranville, Pa., USA), diluted 1:40, were used in conjunction with the monoclonal antibodies LP1K, LE61 and M 20 and fluorescence isothiocyanate-conjugated goat anti-mouse immunoglobulin (Cappel), diluted 1:80.

For biochemical analysis of CK polypeptide patterns, the epithelium of interest (e.g. squamous metaplastic foci) was microdissected from 20- μ m-thick cryostat sections. After extraction using a high-salt-Triton -X-100 buffer, proteins of the insoluble cytoskeletal residue were separated by two-dimensional gel electrophoresis, using non-equilibrium pH gradient (NEPHG) electrophoresis in the first dimension and SDS polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) in the second dimension. Proteins were visualized

using a silver staining procedure. These methods have been described previously (Moll et al. 1982; Achtstätter et al. 1986).

Results

Pseudostratified columnar epithelium

In all cases studied, histologically normal-appearing areas of the respiratory epithelium (pseudostratified columnar epithelium) without any pathological changes were detectable. In immunoperoxidase staining, the typical two- to three-layered columnar epithelium exhibited a uniform staining pattern for CKs 7, 8, 18 and 19 (Fig. 1c–f). While immunoreactivity for these CKs was clearly present in the columnar cells, including their foot processes, the small basal cells situated between these processes were negative for CKs 7, 8 and 18, as could be particularly clearly demonstrated using double immunofluorescence (Fig. 2). In contrast, these cells were positive for CK 19 (Fig. 1c). In addition, CKs 5, 14 and 17 were expressed predominantly in basal cells (Figs. 1g, h, 2A). In some cases, an unusual uniform staining pattern has been detected (Fig. 3b). CK 4 could be detected in single basal and in a number of columnar cells. Some columnar cells were, in addition, positive for vimentin (not shown; Kasper and Stosiek 1990).

Pseudostratified columnar epithelium, transitional

In some areas, particularly at the transition zones to the stratified areas, the pseudostratified columnar epithelium exhibited three to four layers of epithelial cells, due to hyperplasia of columnar cells. In general, the same immunohistochemical patterns as described above for the pseudostratified columnar epithelium were found; however, many columnar cells were also immunoreactive for CK13 (Fig. 3a).

Stratified columnar epithelium

The first step in the process of squamous metaplasia was represented by the appearance of stratified columnar epithelium which exhibited morphological signs of true stratification. This was accompanied by prominent changes of the CK pattern. In particular, a strong positivity of mainly suprabasal epithelial cells for CKs 4 and 13 could be seen (Figs. 1a, b, 3c), whereas the expression of CKs 7, 8, 18, and 19 was reduced or even absent (Fig. 1c–g). However, the basal cells showed a CK pattern similar to that of basal cells of the normal pseudostratified columnar epithelium, including prominent expression of CKs 5, 14, and 17 as well as CK 19 (Figs. 1g, 3d).

Stratified squamous epithelium, non-keratinized

These areas are distinguishable from the previously described type of epithelium only by the shape of the su-

prabasal cells, which exhibited a typical squamous morphology. The CK pattern was quite similar to that of the above-mentioned columnar variant. In addition, a CK16 expression was noted in a subset of suprabasal cells.

Stratified squamous epithelium, keratinized (parakeratosis)

With the onset of keratinization (parakeratosis) a further marked change in the CK composition was observed. The basal cells showed a still prominent CK 17 staining whereas CKs 5 and 14 were only variably detectable. Many suprabasal cells exhibited strong immunostaining for CKs 1 and 10 (Fig. 3f). Interestingly, CKs 4 and 13 disappeared partially, mainly in the parakeratotic areas (Fig. 3e). Vimentin was detected in some metaplastic areas of the respiratory mucosa, in addition to CKs, in a scattered pattern (not shown).

Two-dimensional gel electrophoresis of cytoskeletal proteins of microdissected stratified columnar epithelium revealed the presence of CKs 5, 6, 13, 14, 17, and 19 in high, and CKs 7, 8, and 15 in low proportion (Fig. 4a). Gels of metaplastic non-keratinizing stratified squamous epithelium disclosed the presence of CKs 5, 6, 13, 14, and 17 in major amounts, together with small amounts of CK 19 (Fig. 4b). These biochemical data independently confirm the immunohistochemical results and demonstrate the presence of CK 6, a hyperproliferation-associated component (Weiss et al. 1984), in altered respiratory epithelium.

In general, these phenotypes were often found simultaneously within a given specimen. Thus, the immunohistochemical staining patterns varied considerably throughout the mucosal epithelium. Longitudinal examination along the epithelial lining showed that the changes in CK expression were not abrupt but rather gradual. This suggests that a sequence of morphological and immunohistochemical patterns, as shown schemati-

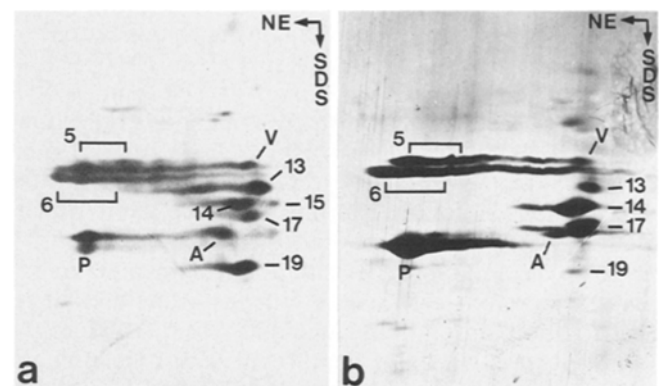


Fig. 4a, b. Two-dimensional gel electrophoresis of cytoskeletal proteins from stratified columnar epithelium (a) and metaplastic non-keratinizing stratified squamous epithelium (b; from polyp of ethmoid sinus). CKs are denoted by numbers according to Moll et al. (1982). NE, Direction of second-dimension SDS-PAGE; V, vimentin (mainly from stromal cells); A, endogenous actin; P, 3-phosphoglycerokinase from yeast added as a marker polypeptide

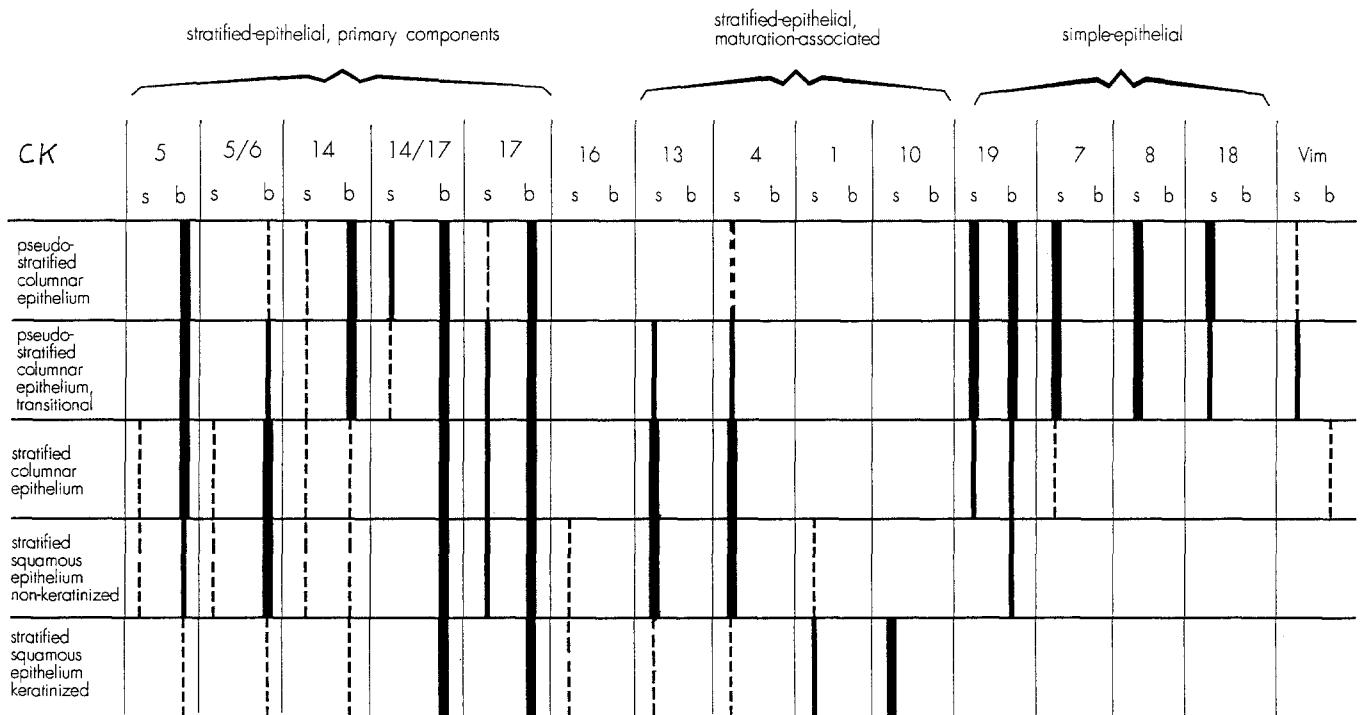


Fig. 5. Schematic representation of the keratin distribution patterns as detected by the different monoclonal antibodies. *Thick line* indicates strong reaction; *thin line* indicates weak reaction; *broken line* indicates inconstant/discontinuous reaction. *s*, suprabasal cells; *b*, basal cells

cally in Fig. 5, is characteristic for the metaplastic process. Abrupt transitions from respiratory to squamous epithelium occurred only rarely and, if so, developed obviously at the borderline between epithelia of extremely different growth rates ("growth collision", Fig. 1 a–g).

Discussion

The respiratory epithelium lining the nasal cavity and paranasal sinuses is of ectodermal origin. Nevertheless, it does not differ morphologically from its endodermally derived prolongation in the bronchial tree (Boenig 1971; Rhodin 1975; Krstic 1984). Metaplastic changes are frequent (Boysen et al. 1986; Carson et al. 1981, 1985; Rossmann et al. 1984; Hosemann and Wigand 1985) and, in general, directed towards squamous epithelium (Zuckerkindl 1892; Hajek 1926; Boysen et al. 1982; Krstic 1984).

The question for the normal cell type from which squamous metaplasia arises is still a matter of controversy. Some authors believe that direct metaplasia of cilia-less secretory cells (small mucous granule cells) is the main mechanism (Wang and Ying 1977; Trump et al. 1978; Boysen et al. 1986; Evans et al. 1986; Sigler et al. 1988). Others consider the metaplastic foci as derivatives of undifferentiated basal cells with bimodal potency (stem cell metaplasia) (Mossmann and Craighead 1975; Reid and Jones 1979; Chopra 1982; Niimi et al. 1987). Finally, both mechanisms or cell types may be responsible for the induction of squamous epithelial metaplasia (Rutten et al. 1988).

The present study firstly reports on the CK composition of ectodermally derived nasal respiratory epithelium. It shows that it is similar to that of endodermally derived bronchial and tracheal respiratory epithelial described previously (Klein-Szanto et al. 1987; for review, see Moll 1987). In addition, CK polypeptides 4 and 14 were found as normal components. Broers et al. (1989) already noted a varying expression of CK4 in columnar cells and of CK14 in basal cells of the respiratory bronchial epithelium. The complex CK pattern of both simple epithelial-type CKs 7, 8, 18 and 19 and stratified-epithelial-type CKs 4, 5, 14, and 17 indicate the bimodality of the respiratory epithelium seen at the tissue level (Moll 1988). At the cellular level, however, these CKs are differentially distributed, the simple-epithelial CKs being expressed predominantly in the columnar cells while the stratified-epithelial CKs prevail in the basal cells. This last fact would support the notion that squamous metaplasia indeed originates from basal cells and is also in line with the experience that the metaplastic potential of the respiratory epithelium is essentially restricted to the squamous type, in contrast to the broader metaplastic potency of the urothelium (Moll 1988; Goertchen et al. 1990) and the gastrointestinal character of the metaplasias observed in the corpus mucosa of the stomach (Stosiek and Kasper 1990). One should note, however, that the CK phenotype of respiratory basal cells is not purely of the squamous type but also includes CK 19, which is a main component of many simple epithelia (Moll et al. 1982), and of respiratory columnar cells. Using certain antibodies, evidence for a limited expression also of CKs 8 and 18 has been

presented for the bronchial epithelium (Broers et al. 1989; Leube and Rustad 1991). Therefore, the CK expression would also be in line with the bimodal potency of the basal cells and with their proposed stem cell character, i.e. their ability to give rise to simple epithelial columnar cells (Inayama et al. 1988; for a different model of respiratory epithelial regeneration, see, for example, Sigler et al. 1988). In the present study, we could distinguish, both morphologically and in terms of CK expression, several epithelial entities which we interpret as sequential temporal steps towards squamous metaplasia.

The earliest recognizable differentiation change appears to have taken place in areas which we have designated the "respiratory transitional zone" and which seemingly have not yet been described as a morphological entity. In these areas, the pseudostratified morphology is still maintained but the epithelium is slightly thickened due to columnar cell hyperplasia. Morphologically, the respiratory transitional zone is comparable with the first metaplastic changes described by Sigler et al. (1988) in serum-free organ explantation cultures of tracheal epithelium. The changes in CK expression are only minor. Since the basal cells maintain their typical CK set and the basic structure of the epithelium remains unchanged, we consider this epithelial lesion as reparative and reversible and as the initial stage of squamous metaplasia originating in basal cells. The subsequent two steps, however, are characterized by profound changes both in morphology, including loss of cilia (Carson et al. 1981) and development of true stratification (i.e. loss of basal membrane contact of suprabasal cells), and in terms of CK expression. A stepwise loss of simple epithelial-type CKs and neo-expression of CKs which are typical of stratified squamous differentiation has already been found at other sites. Examples are the expression of CKs 4 and 13 in the non-cornifying stratified squamous epithelium at the upper digestive tract, or of CKs 1 and 10 in the cornifying epithelium of the epidermis (for references, see Moll 1987; Morgan et al. 1987).

Throughout all stages of metaplasia, the basal cells more or less maintain their characteristic CK pattern (CKs 5, 14, 17, 19). This means that the putative stem cells themselves are essentially excluded from the changes of the remaining epithelium although minor changes may occur, such as focal reduction of staining for CK 5 (for reduction of CK 17 in some foci of squamous metaplasia of the bronchial mucosa see Leube and Rustad 1991). The relatively high degree of concordance in CK expression between respiratory basal cells and squamous metaplastic basal cells further supports the stem cell nature of the respiratory basal cells and the origin of squamous metaplasia from these cells. The lack of maturation-associated CKs in basal cells underlines their low degree of differentiation. All these observations support the concept of stem cell metaplasia originating from basal cells. Similarly, for the tracheobronchial epithelium, the basal cell origin of squamous metaplasia has been suggested by several authors (Niimi et al. 1987; Rutten et al. 1988; Fukuda et al. 1989).

The analysis of CK expression allows deeper insights into the actual cell differentiation as compared to the

conventional histology. Thus, differences in the expression of certain CK polypeptides between metaplastic stratified squamous epithelium and neighbouring morphologically identical non-metaplastic stratified squamous epithelium may become obvious (cf. Morgan et al. 1987). Moreover, different metaplastic foci may differ with regard to certain CK components which may be related to differences in the degree of differentiation and maturation (non-keratinized versus keratinized; Fig. 5) but, possibly, also to other types of changes. For example, in a recent study on bronchial squamous metaplasia, a tendency for increased expression of simple-epithelial CKs (in addition to those of stratified epithelium-type) in metaplastic foci with dysplastic changes was noted (Leube and Rustad 1991; Moll 1992). Related tendencies have been described to occur during dysplastic changes of the stratified squamous epithelium of the cervix uteri which is often of metaplastic origin (Smedts et al. 1990), and during premalignant changes of the oral mucosa (Lindberg and Rheinwald 1989).

Squamous metaplasia of the respiratory mucosa is considered as an important step in the development of squamous cell carcinomas (WHO 1978; Boysen and Reith 1983). It remains to be determined in further studies whether the analysis of individual CK patterns may be of diagnostic value in determining the malignant potential of metaplastic lesions.

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