Expression of the Multidrug Resistance Gene in Human Tumors

Rungsa KIM
Department of Surgery, Research Institute for Nuclear Medicine and Biology, Hiroshima University, 1-2-3, Kasumi, Minami-ku, Hiroshima 734, Japan
(Director: Prof. Tetsuya TOGE)

ABSTRACT

The expression of MDR1 gene was investigated in human solid tumors with respect to adriamycin resistance. Forty fresh human surgical specimens were analyzed by RNA dot blot assay for their expression of the human MDR1 gene and by immunohistological staining using a monoclonal antibody against P-glycoprotein (MDR1 gene product). The MDR1 mRNA level was increased in 11 cases of 40 cancer patients, including three rectal cancers, two breast cancers, two gastric cancers, one colon cancer, one renal cell carcinoma, one gall bladder cancer and one malignant lymphoma of stomach. However, considerable variation of the MDR1 mRNA level was noted among cancers of a specific type. Immunohistochemical studies with the monoclonal antibody were shown to be positive in 18 tumors. In all tumors tested, the MDR1 mRNA level and the immunohistochemical analysis showed a significant correlation. However, two of five tumors which resisted adriamycin treatment were found to be negative in MDR1 transcript, but positive in immunohistological analysis. These results indicate that immunohistochemical analysis would be more sensitive for detecting P-glycoprotein-expression, and that resistance to adriamycin, being multifactorial, can be associated at least, in part with the increased amount of MDR1 gene product.

Key words: Multidrug resistance gene (MDR1), P-glycoprotein, Adriamycin resistance, Human tumors

Multidrug resistance (MDR) of tumor cells is a major problem in cancer chemotherapy. Multidrug resistant cells display cross-resistance to a broad range of anticancer agents, such as anthracyclines, vinca alkaloids, etoposide and actinomycin D. The MDR phenotype is correlated with overexpression of the MDR1 gene which encodes for the transmembrane protein, termed P-glycoprotein, with increased drug efflux of anticancer agents from resistant cells.

The anthracycline antibiotic, adriamycin, has a broad spectrum anticancer activity against various tumor cells, such as: breast cancer, hepatocellular carcinoma, renal cell carcinoma, gall bladder cancer, esophageal cancer, gastric cancer, and malignant lymphoma. Adriamycin-resistant variants of tumor cells which are selected in vitro demonstrate cross-resistance to vinca alkaloids and actinomycin D. However, the relationship between adriamycin resistance and multidrug resistance in cells derived from human tumors is little known. It is reported that resistance to adriamycin in tumors occurs by several different mechanisms including: decreased accumulation of drugs in cells, increased intracellular glutathione, and overexpression of P-glycoprotein. The aim of this study was to investigate whether or not the overexpression of MDR1 mRNA and/or P-glycoprotein would be useful for predicting natural resistance to adriamycin in human solid tumors prior to initial chemotherapy.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell lines

KB C-2 cell of human epidermoid carcinoma, a drug resistant cell line selected by colchicine, and its parental cell line, KB 3-1-2 were used as positive and negative standards for the quantification of MDR1 transcript levels. The cell lines were grown as monolayer culture at 37°C in 5% CO₂ in a-MEM (minimum essential medium) (GIBCO Labo.) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, penicillin (100 units/ml), and streptomycin (100 µg/ml) (Meiji Co., Japan).

Tumor specimens and RNA extraction

Tumor specimens and some of the adjacent normal tissues were obtained at surgery from 40 cancer patients treated between September 1988 and March 1989 (Table 1). All specimens were frozen immediately and stored at -70°C until use. Total cellular RNA was extracted by the guanidium isothiocyanate homogenization of tissues followed by centrifugation through cesium chloride.
RNA dot blot analysis

Nitrocellulose filters were presoaked in $5 \times \text{SSC}$ ($1 \times \text{SSC} = 0.15M \text{NaCl}/15mM \text{sodium citrate}, \text{pH } 7.0$). Two $\mu g$ of total RNA were dissolved in $10mM$ phosphate buffer ($\text{pH } 7.0$) and denatured at $60^\circ\text{C}$ for 7 min in the presence of formaldehyde. The sample was then spotted onto the nitrocellulose filter. After baking at $80^\circ\text{C}$ in a vacuum oven, the filters were prehybridized for 6–8 hours at $42^\circ\text{C}$ in $500\%$ formamide, $5 \times \text{SSC}$, $5 \times$ Denhardt’s solution ($1 \times$ Denhardt’s solution = 0.02% Ficoll, 0.02% Polyvinylpyrrolidone, and 0.02% acetylated bovine serum albumin), $50mM$ sodium phosphate ($\text{pH } 6.5$), and 200 $\mu g/ml$ of salmon sperm DNA. The filters were then hybridized with the $^{32}\text{P}$-labeled $\text{PvuII}$ fragment of pMDR1 overnight at $42^\circ\text{C}$ in $500\%$ formamide, $5 \times \text{SSC}$, $1 \times$ Denhardt’s solution, $1\%$ dextran sulfate, $100 \mu g/ml$ of salmon sperm DNA, and $20mM$ sodium phosphate ($\text{pH } 6.5$). The pMDR1 was labeled by $^{32}\text{P}$ by oligolabelling method[12]. After hybridization, the filters were washed twice for 15 min with $2 \times \text{SSC}/0.1\%$ sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) and twice for 10 min in $0.1 \times \text{SSC}/0.1\%$ SDS at $65^\circ\text{C}$. The autoradiograms were exposed for 1–3 days. Hybridization of the blot with rRNA probe was performed similarly.

Immunohistological staining with MRK16 MoAb

Immunoperoxidase detection of P-glycoprotein with MRK16 MoAb was performed using the streptavidin-biotin method[19]. Briefly, cryostat sections ($4–6 \mu m$) were made on solid tumors. After air drying, they were fixed by immersion in 3.7% formaldehyde for 15 min, washed in PBS, and then MRK16 MoAb were applied (10 $\mu g/ml$) for 30 min. After washing, the samples were treated with biotinylated goat antimouse second antibody, re-washed in PBS, and further stained with the peroxidase conjugated streptavidin (Bio Genex Labo.). Control slides were also treated in the same way. Thereafter, the sections were colored with diaminobenzidine (DAB) for 5 min. After a final wash in PBS, they were counterstained with 3% metyigreen and examined in a light microscope.

Chemosensitivity testing to Adriamycin

In vivo and in vitro sensitivity tests of tumors to Adriamycin were performed with three different ways as described previously[21]. For the in vivo tests, the nude mouse isotope assay (NMIA) and the subrenal capsular assay (SRC) were used. For an in vitro test, the adenosine triphosphate inhibition assay (ATPA) was employed.

RESULTS

MDR1 mRNA expression in tumors

The MDR1 mRNA levels of fresh human solid tumors from 40 cancer patients, relative to the level in the drug resistant KB C-2 cells, are shown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cancer type</th>
<th>No. of patients</th>
<th>No. of positive cases of MDR1 mRNA (%)</th>
<th>No. of positive cases of MRK16 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Esophageal ca.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastric ca.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2 (16.7)</td>
<td>3 (25.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colon ca.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rectal ca.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3 (75.0)</td>
<td>3 (75.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breast ca.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 (33.3)</td>
<td>5 (83.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepatocellular ca.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renal cell ca.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gall bladder ca.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (50.0)</td>
<td>2 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 (20.0)</td>
<td>2 (40.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Others: Metastatic liver ca., metastatic renal ca., two malignant lymphomas of stomach, and malignant schwannoma.

Fig. 1. Distribution of MDR1 mRNA levels in 40 cancer patients.
Quantification of MDR1 expression was measured as relative to the expression of the multidrug-resistant KB C-2 cell line, which was arbitrarily assigned a value of 100U for intensity of 2 $\mu g$ total RNA (dashed line, MDR1 expression of KB 3-1-2).
in Fig. 1. KB C-2 cells were 42 times more resistant to adriamycin and 100 times more resistant to vinblastine as compared with KB 3-1-2 cells. The MDR1 gene was amplified about 7-fold in KB C-2 and expressed at a high level (Fig. 2). In some experiments, expression of MDR1 mRNA between tumor and normal tissues were studied (Fig. 2). The signal intensity of 2 μg of KB C-2 total RNA was assigned as an arbitrary value of 100U. The signal from each tumor was measured by densitometer and quantified against that of KB C-2 RNA. The MDR1 mRNA level of more than 10U, which is approximately the same as that of KB 3-1-2, was designated as a positive for the expression of the gene. The quantity of RNA spotted was calibrated by the amount of rRNA. The expression of MDR1 mRNA was detected in 11 cases of 40 tumors, including three rectal cancers, two breast cancers, two gastric cancers, one colon cancer, one renal cell carcinoma, one gall bladder cancer, and one malignant lymphoma of stomach (Table 1). Typical results of a rectal cancer, a gastric cancer and a liver metastasis of rectal cancer are shown in Fig. 2. Considerable variations in the mRNA level among the tumor group positive for MDR1 expression were observed (Fig. 1).

P-glycoprotein expression assayed with MRK16 MoAb

The surgical specimens from 40 cancer patients, representing 12 tumor types, were surveyed for P-glycoprotein expression by immunohistochemical analysis with MRK16 MoAb. None of them received the anticancer agents. The intensity of MRK16 staining was arbitrarily classified according to three categories: negative, intermediate; less than 50% of the tissues were stained positively, and strong; most of the tissues were stained positively. Multidrug resistant cell line of KB C-2 reacted strongly with MRK16 MoAb, while KB 3-1-2 cells, a parental cell line did weakly (Fig. 3; a, b). It was found that 18 tumors reacted positively with MRK16 MoAb, although some of these tumors showed low levels of MDR1 mRNA, including one of 3 gastric cancers, three of 5 breast cancers, one hepatocellular carcinoma, one of 2 gall bladder cancers, and one malignant lymphoma of stomach (Table 1). The correlation between MDR1 mRNA level and intensity of MRK16 staining was statistically significant (Fig. 4).

MDR1 mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and resistance to adriamycin in chemosensitivity testing

Among the 40 tumors studied above, the individual chemosensitivity tests were performed on 30 tumor samples. The resistance to adriamycin was observed in 23 of 25 cases (92.0%) tested by NMIA, 23 of 25 cases (92.0%) by ATPA, and 13 of 17 cases (76.5%) by SRCA, respectively. Of these sensitivity negative cases, MDR1 gene expression at the level of mRNA was observed in 30.4% for NMIA, 30.4% for ATPA, and 38.5% for SRCA, respectively. P-glycoprotein expression was detected in 34.8% by NMIA, 46.2% by SRCA, and 36.4% by ATPA, respectively (Table 2). There was no significant correlation between MDR1 mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and resistance to adriamycin in each assay.

MDR1 mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and clinical response to adriamycin

Clinical response was evaluated according to criteria of the Japanese Society for Cancer Therapy, retrospectively. Among 40 cancer patients tested, five patients showed no clinical response to adiamycin treatment. The relationship between MDR1 mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and the clinical response to adriamycin in these 5 patients is summarized in Table 3. Among them, One patient (No.1) was observed in MDR1 mRNA expression. Three (No.1-3) were stained positively with MRK16 MoAb (Fig. 3; No.1, No.3), whereas the MDR1 mRNA expression could not be observed in two patients (No.2,3). Although the MDR1 mRNA and P-glycoprotein expression were not detected in the other two patients
Fig. 3. Immunohistochemical staining of P-glycoprotein on the KB cell lines and untreated human tumors by MRK16 MoAb. a; KB C-2 cells, b; KB 3-1-2 cells, c; breast cancer, d; negative control, e; hepatocellular carcinoma, f; negative control, original magnification × 500
Fig. 4. Correlation between MDRI mRNA level and intensity of MRK16 staining. The intensity of MRK16 staining is classified as follows: negative, intermediate; less than 50% of the tissues were stained positively; strong; most of the tissues were stained positively.

Table 2. Correlation between MDRI mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and resistance to adriamycin asayed with three chemosensitivity tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assays</th>
<th>+/P</th>
<th>-/P</th>
<th>+/N</th>
<th>-/N</th>
<th>Expression of MDRI mRNA or P-glycoprotein/N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NMIA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7/23 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRCA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5/13 (38.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATPA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7/23 (30.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ ] : assayed with MRK16 MoAb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMIA       : nude mouse isotope assay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRCA      : subrenal capsule assay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Correlation between MDRI mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein expression and clinical response to adriamycin in 5 cancer patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient no.</th>
<th>Cancer type</th>
<th>Response*</th>
<th>MDRI1 mRNA expression</th>
<th>P-glycoprotein expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Breast ca.</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Breast ca.</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Hepatocellular ca.</td>
<td>PD</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Metastatic liver ca. (breast)</td>
<td>PD</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hepatocellular ca.</td>
<td>PD</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Clinical response: NC (no change), PD (progressive disease)

DISCUSSION

The resistance to anthracyclines such as adriamycin presents a major problem for the successful treatment of many human cancers. This is particularly important clinically, because in addition to the development of anthracycline resistance, patients often simultaneously develop resistance to other classes of anticancer agents (multiple drug resistance; MDR). Multidrug resistance has been studied extensively in rodent and human tumor cell lines. A number of MDR cell lines have been isolated to show a good correlation between the level of MDRI gene amplification, the increased MDRI mRNA expression, and the degree of MDR. However, exceptions have been reported. Overexpression without gene amplification can also be observed. Overexpression of P-glycoprotein without MDRI gene amplification has been reported in MDR human sarcoma cells and human breast cancer cells. In the previous study, in order to predict natural resistance to adriamycin, we investigated 50 fresh human surgical specimens using Southern blot analysis, and found that there was no amplification of the MDRI gene in any of the tumors tested. Five of these cancer patients showed no response to adriamycin clinically. Our data suggested that MDRI gene amplification is rarely seen among clinical samples with natural (No.4,5), these failed to respond to adriamycin treatment.
resistance to adriamycin. These results suggest that
the level of P-glycoprotein is transcriptionally or
translationally regulated[9], and in clinical applica-
tion, MDR1 mRNA level was more significant than
MDR1 gene amplification. Thus, overexpression of
P-glycoprotein has been proposed as a major cause of
multidrug resistance in clinical cases[3,5,6,9,11].

In this study, the level of MDR1 mRNA and P-
glycoprotein was measured in 40 human solid tumor
samples, and compared to that of drug resistant
KB C-2 and its parental cells. Some of these results
were also compared with those of chemosensitivi-
ty tests and clinical response to adriamycin of the
corresponding patients. There was no correlation
between MDR1 mRNA expression, P-glycoprotein
expression and natural resistance to adriamycin in
the chemosensitivity tests. This might suggest that
there is another mechanism of adriamycin
resistance apart from the case of P-glycoprotein
overexpression. The discrepancy between the
expression of MDR1 mRNA and P-glycoprotein could
be mainly due to the low sensitivity of dot blot
analysis to detect the expression of MDR1 mRNA
because of variable amounts of stromal cells in
cancer tissues.

Clinically, five patients displayed no response to
adriamycin. One of 2 breast cancers in which
MDR1 mRNA level was not detected, showed P-
glycoprotein expressing cancer cells histologically.
Moreover, one of 2 hepatocellular carcinoma
showed a low level of MDR1 mRNA, while it had
P-glycoprotein expression detected by MRK16 MoAb. These results indicate that the natural
resistance to adriamycin is associated at least in
part with the increased expression of MDR1 gene,
and the expression of P-glycoprotein rather than
MDR1 mRNA level show better clinical relevance
to natural resistance to adriamycin in these tumors.
Furthermore, we observed that two patients, whose
tumors had extremely low expression of MDR1
mRNA and P-glycoprotein, were refractory to adri-
amycin treatment. This evidence suggests that
there might be other mechanisms responsible for
adriamycin resistance, such as an increase in
intracellular levels of glutathione[7], a rapid onset of
DNA repair[8], or a decrease in topoisomerase II
activity[10].

The MDR1 gene expression has been reported in
various normal human tissues; high or intermediate
levels in adrenal gland, kidney, lung, liver, jeju-
num, colon and rectum, and low in many other
organs[10]. However, within the group of cancers
with high or intermediate MDR1 mRNA levels, it
was reported that there were considerable varia-
tions of MDR1 mRNA levels in these tumors[11].
Our data also showed that there was considerable
variation from cancer to cancer with high or inter-
mediate MDR1 mRNA levels. These variations in
MDR1 mRNA expression may be due to several
factors, such as tumor heterogeneity, tissue origin,
histological type, and resistant subpopulations in
cancer tissues. Therefore, to investigate the exis-
tence of heterogeneous expression of MDR1 gene,
immunohistochemical studies of tumor specimens
may be useful in distinguishing the differential ex-
pression of various cell subpopulations.

Interestingly, MDR1 gene expression was ob-
erved at lower levels in breast and gastric cancers.
However, our data showed that the level of MDR1
eexpression in some breast and gastric cancers were
higher than those in the adjacent normal tissues.
It has been previously reported that the overexpres-
sion of P-glycoprotein RNA was demonstrated in
carcinogen-induced, preneoplastic and neoplastic rat
liver nodules[11,29]. Thus, when some normal cells
were transformed, the activation of an oncogene
and MDR1 RNA expression may occur simultane-
ously.

In conclusion, we can say that the natural
resistance to adriamycin in human solid tumors may
be multifactorial. The ultimate clinical significance
of P-glycoprotein will require more extensive and
controlled studies. Such investigations should com-
pare the levels of P-glycoprotein expression with
the disease outcome and with defined chemothera-
py in a prospective clinical protocol. Our own data
suggest that natural resistance to adriamycin ap-
parently exists in many human solid tumors and
that it could be associated, at least in part, with
the increased amount of MDR1 gene product.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Professor Tetsuya Toge,
Professor K. Yokoro and Dr. O. Niwa for their
helpful guidance. I would like to also thank Dr. T.
Tsuruo (Cancer Chemotherapy Center, Japanese
Foundation for Cancer Research) and Dr. S.
Akiyama (Institute of Cancer Research, Kagoshima
University) for kindly providing monoclonal anti-
body (MRK16), cells and DNA probes.

(Received May 22, 1990)
(Accepted July 19, 1990)

REFERENCES

1. Batist, G., Tulpule, A., Shinha, B. K., Katki,
Overexpression of a novel anionic glutathione trans-
erase in multidrug resistant human breast cancer
3. Bourhis, J., Goldstein, L. J., Riou, G., Pastan, I.,
of a human multidrug resistance gene in ovari-
Mechanism of multidrug resistance. Biochimica.
glycoprotein expression in multidrug-resistant human
Multidrug Resistance Gene Expression in Human Tumors


