VEGF-C and TGF-β reciprocally regulate mesenchymal stem cell commitment to differentiation into lymphatic endothelial or osteoblastic phenotypes

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Abstract. The direction of mesenchymal stem cell (MSC) differentiation is regulated by stimulation with various growth factors and cytokines. We recently established MSC lines, [transforming growth factor-β (TGF-β)-responsive SG-2 cells, bone morphogenetic protein (BMP)-responsive SG-3 cells, and TGF-β/BMP-non-responsive SG-5 cells], derived from the bone marrow of green fluorescent protein-transgenic mice. In this study, to compare gene expression profiles in these MSC lines, we used DNA microarray analysis to characterize the specific gene expression profiles observed in the TGF-β-responsive SG-2 cells. Among the genes that were highly expressed in the SG-2 cells, we focused on vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) receptor 3 (VEGFR3), the gene product of FMS-like tyrosine kinase 4 (Flt4). We found that VEGF-C, a specific ligand of VEGFR3, significantly induced the cell proliferative activity, migratory ability (as shown by Transwell migration assay), as well as the phosphorylation of extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK)1/2 and transforming growth factor-β-activated extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) (8,9). In a recent study of ours, we demonstrated that PDGF-induced phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K)-mediated signaling promoted the TGF-β-induced osteogenic differentiation of MSCs in a TGF-β-activated extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) kinase-dependent manner (10). In another recent study, we demonstrated that MSCs-secreted protein, scrapie responsive gene-1 (SCRG1), and its receptor bone marrow stromal cell antigen-1 (BST1), which played important roles in the maintenance of stemness and in the suppression of the osteogenic differentiation of MSCs (11).

VEGF, an important growth factor for bone repair, regulates numerous cellular events associated with angiogenesis and vasculogenesis, such as tissue remodeling during embryonic development and in adults (12). The mammalian VEGF

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signaling pathway consists of 5 glycoprotein ligands from the VEGF family (VEGF-A, -B, -C, -D and placental growth factor), 3 transmembrane receptors [VEGF receptor (VEGFR1, VEGFR2 and VEGFR3) and 2 co-receptors (neuropilin-1 and -2)] (13-22). VEGF-B binding to VEGFR1 promotes the survival of endothelial cells, pericytes, and smooth muscle cells and upregulates the expression of prosurvival genes (24). VEGF-C and VEGF-D bind to the receptors, VEGFR2 and VEGFR3 (22). VEGF-C expression has been shown to be associated with advanced metastasis in colorectal cancer (25) and to play a role in lymphangiogenesis and/or metastasis to lymph nodes in multiple types of cancer, including colorectal (26) and breast cancer (27,28). VEGF-D is also involved in lymphangiogenesis and lymphatic metastasis (29,30). On the other hand, in contrast to the well-studied VEGF signaling in endothelial cells, the VEGF signaling pathways in cells involved in bone repair, such as MSCs and osteoblasts, remains less well known (31). Osteoblasts express VEGFR1, VEGFR2 and the co-receptor, neuropilin (32). The expression of VEGF and its receptors in differentiating osteoblasts has been detected in cultured cells (32,33), and an in vitro cell culture study suggested a role for VEGFR2 in both osteoblast differentiation and survival (34).

In a recent study of ours, we established 3 MSC lines (SG-2, SG-3, and SG-5) derived from the bone marrow of green fluorescent protein (GFP)-transgenic mice (35). These cell lines clearly expressed the mouse MSC markers, stem cells antigen-1 (Sca-1) and CD44, and the SG-2 and SG-5 cells retained their potential for osteogenic and adipogenic differentiation (29,30). On the other hand, in contrast to the well-studied VEGF signaling in endothelial cells, the VEGF signaling pathways in cells involved in bone repair, such as MSCs and osteoblasts, remains less well known (31). Osteoblasts express VEGFR1, VEGFR2 and the co-receptor, neuropilin (32).

DNA microarray analysis. Whole genome expression was analyzed for the bone-marrow derived SG-2, SG-3 and SG-5 MSC lines. Total RNA was extracted using ISOGEN reagent (Nippon Gene Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan). Filgen, Inc. (Nagoya, Japan) performed the DNA microarray analyses, including reverse transcription labeling, microarray hybridization, scanning and raw data analyses. For hybridization, 3 GeneChip Mouse Gene 2.0 ST arrays (Affymetrix, Santa Clara, CA, USA) were used. These analyses were conducted by the Research Institute of Bio-System Informatics (Tohoku Chemical Co., Ltd., Morioka, Japan).

Flow cytometry. Almost confluent SG-2, SG-3 and SG-5 cells (1.0x10^5) were harvested in ice-cold phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) containing 0.5% FBS and 2 mM EDTA. The cells were incubated with phycoerythrin (PE)-conjugated anti-mouse VEGFR3 (CD310) antibody (1:10, clone AFL4, #130-102-216; Miltenyi Biotec, Bergisch Gladbach, Germany) for 1 h at 4°C in the dark. Acquisition was performed with an EPICS XL ADC system (Beckman Coulter, Inc., Brea, CA, USA).

Western blot analysis. The SG-2, SG-3 and SG-5 cells were serum-starved overnight and stimulated with 10 ng/ml VEGF-C (R&D Systems, Inc., Minneapolis, MN, USA) for 1 h at 37°C under hypoxic conditions. The cells were washed twice with ice-cold PBS and then lysed in RIPA buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.2, 150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 0.5% sodium deoxycholate and 0.1% SDS) containing protease and phosphatase inhibitor cocktails (Sigma-Aldrich). Protein content was measured using BCA reagent (Pierce/Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Samples containing equal amounts of protein were separated using 12.5% SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and transferred to a polyvinylidene difluoride membrane (Merck Millipore, Darmstadt, Germany). After blocking with 5% non-fat dry milk in T-TBS (50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.2, 150 mM NaCl and 0.1% Tween-20), the membrane was incubated with primary anti-Akt (#9272), anti-phospho-Akt (Ser473) [p-phosphorylated (p)-Akt; #9271], anti-p44/42 mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK; ERK1/2; #9102), anti-phospho-p44/42 MAPK (Thr202/Tyr204) (p-ERK1/2; #9101), anti-p38 MAPK (p38; #9212), anti-phospho-p38 MAPK (T180/Y182) (p38; #9211), anti-stress-activated protein kinase/c-Jun N-terminal kinase (SAPK/JNK) (JNK; #9252) and anti-phospho-SAPK/JNK (Thr183/Tyr185) (p-JNK; #9251) antibodies (all from Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA) for 1 h at 4°C in the dark. The blots were incubated with an alkaline phosphatase-conjugated secondary antibody and developed using the BCIP/NBT membrane phosphatase substrate system (Kirkegaard & Perry Laboratories, Gaithersburg, MD, USA).

Materials and methods

Mouse MSC lines. In a recent study of ours, we described the establishment process and culture method for all MSC lines derived from the bone marrow of GFP-transgenic mice: TGF-β-responsive SG-2, BMP-responsive SG-3 and TGF-β/BMP-non-responsive SG-5 cells (35). These cell lines were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM; Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; HyClone, GE Healthcare Life Sciences, Logan, UT, USA, Logan, UT, USA) at 37°C under hypoxic conditions (5% O₂, 5% CO₂ and 90% N₂).
First-strand cDNA was synthesized from total RNA using the PrimeScript RT Reagent kit (Takara Bio, Otsu, Japan). RT-qPCR was performed on a Thermal Cycler Dice Real-Time system with SYBR Premix Ex Taq II (both from Takara Bio) and specific oligonucleotide primers (Table I) using a two-step cycle procedure (denaturation at 95°C for 5 sec, annealing and extension at 60°C for 30 sec) for 40 cycles. For each test run, cDNA derived from 50 ng total RNA as a template and 0.4 µM primer pair was used. mRNA expression was normalized to glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (Gapdh), and the relative amounts of each mRNA in each sample were calculated using the ΔΔCq method. The relative mRNA expression levels are expressed as fold increase or decrease relative to the control.

**Statistical analysis.** All experiments were repeated at least 3 times. Representative images or data are shown. The numerical data are presented as the means ± standard deviation (SD). Differences between averages and percentages between control and tests were statistically analyzed using paired two-tailed Student’s t-tests. A P-value <0.05 was considered to indicate a statistically significant difference.

**Results**

**Higher expression of VEGFR3 in SG-2 cells.** To identify the genes that modulate the regenerative ability of MSCs, we used DNA microarrays to characterize the specific gene expression profiles observed in the TGF-β-responsive SG-2 cells. We identified 105 genes that were ≥10-fold more strongly expressed in the SG-2 cells compared to the SG-3 and SG-5 cells (Table II). Among these genes, we focused on VEGF-C and its gene product, since, as a cell surface antigen, it is useful for identifying and sorting MSCs from various tissues. The gene expression level of Flt4 in the SG-2 cells was more than 16.5- and 32.0-fold higher than that in the SG-3 and SG-5 cells, respectively. These results were further confirmed by flow cytometry (Fig. 1) and indicated that the SG-2 cells expressed higher levels of VEGF-C on the cell surface than the SG-3 and SG-5 cells.
Table II. Genes expressed ≥10-fold stronger in the SG-2 cells compared to the SG-3 and SG-5 cells.

| Symbol   | Gene name                                                                 | Fold change in SG-2 vs. SG-3 | Fold change in SG-2 vs. SG-5 |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Thrb     | Thyroid hormone receptor beta                                             | 75.7                        | 58.4                          |
| Grhl2    | Grainyhead-like 2 (*Drosophila*)                                          | 72.9                        | 56.5                          |
| Olf1497  | Olfactory receptor 1497                                                   | 69.6                        | 53.1                          |
| Arhgap15 | Rho GTPase activating protein 15                                            | 66.5                        | 51.4                          |
| Hoxd11   | Homeobox D11                                                              | 57.5                        | 44.1                          |
| Cfc1     | Cripto, FRL-1, cryptic family 1                                            | 56.2                        | 43.8                          |
| Kcnq5    | Potassium voltage-gated channel, subfamily Q, member 5                    | 53.5                        | 41.5                          |
| Scgb2b7  | Secretoglobin, family 2B, member 7                                         | 50.6                        | 39.0                          |
| Fn3krp   | Fructosamine 3 kinase related protein                                      | 55.4                        | 36.2                          |
| Tcp10a   | T-complex protein 10a                                                      | 43.5                        | 41.6                          |
| Serpina6 | Serine (or cysteine) peptidase inhibitor, clade A, member 6               | 46.0                        | 35.0                          |
| Cym      | Chymosin                                                                  | 40.4                        | 30.3                          |
| Ppp1r3f0s| Protein phosphatase 1, regulatory subunit 3F, opposite strand              | 39.2                        | 30.6                          |
| Syn3     | Synapsin III                                                              | 69.7                        | 22.7                          |
| Lypd6    | LY6/PLAUR domain containing 6                                              | 38.3                        | 30.4                          |
| Olf772   | Olfactory receptor 772                                                     | 38.6                        | 29.7                          |
| Olftr2   | Olfactory receptor 2                                                       | 38.4                        | 29.4                          |
| Zfp92    | Zinc finger protein 92                                                     | 26.5                        | 43.1                          |
| Fam81b   | Family with sequence similarity 81, member B                              | 38.1                        | 28.8                          |
| Sxxbl    | Synovial sarcoma, X member B, breakpoint 1                                 | 37.4                        | 28.6                          |
| Vmn2r25  | Vomeronasal 2, receptor 25                                                  | 36.7                        | 28.7                          |
| Olf368   | Olfactory receptor 368                                                     | 35.9                        | 28.2                          |
| Arhgef4  | Rho guanine nucleotide exchange factor (GEF) 4                             | 31.8                        | 30.9                          |
| Il21     | Interleukin 21                                                             | 35.7                        | 27.8                          |
| Fpr-rs3  | Formyl peptide receptor, related sequence 3                                | 34.8                        | 27.1                          |
| Cldn13   | Claudin 13                                                                 | 34.4                        | 27.0                          |
| Trim43c  | Tripartite motif-containing 43C                                             | 35.1                        | 26.6                          |
| Caskin1  | CASK interacting protein 1                                                 | 34.4                        | 26.3                          |
| Commd7   | COMM domain containing 7                                                   | 34.1                        | 25.3                          |
| Prom2    | Prominin 2                                                                 | 33.5                        | 25.4                          |
| St6galnac3| ST6 (α-N-acetyl-neuraminyl-2,3-β-galactosyl-1,3)-N-acetyl-galactosaminide α-2,6-sialyltransferase 3 | 32.6 | 25.8 |
| Slc6oc1  | Solute carrier organic anion transporter family, member 6c1               | 30.4                        | 23.6                          |
| Nhlec4   | NHL repeat containing 4                                                    | 29.8                        | 23.7                          |
| Chrd     | Chordin                                                                   | 21.6                        | 33.8                          |
| Olf117   | Olfactory receptor 117                                                     | 31.0                        | 22.5                          |
| Igkv4-53 | Immunoglobulin κ variable 4-53                                            | 26.3                        | 25.3                          |
| Cagg2    | Cancer/testis antigen 2                                                   | 28.8                        | 22.9                          |
| F2rl3    | Coagulation factor II (thrombin) receptor-like 3                          | 28.9                        | 22.6                          |
| Knu      | Kynureninase (L-kynurenine hydrolase)                                      | 28.4                        | 21.2                          |
| Spata22  | Spermatogenesis associated 22                                              | 27.2                        | 21.2                          |
| Vmn1r191 | Vomeronasal 1 receptor 191                                                | 27.1                        | 21.2                          |
| Cmad1    | Catenin (cadherin associated protein), delta 1                            | 26.0                        | 20.5                          |
| Vmn1r234 | Vomeronasal 1 receptor 234                                                | 26.2                        | 19.8                          |
| Zfp174   | Zinc finger protein 174                                                    | 26.4                        | 19.5                          |
| Dgat2l6  | Diacylglycerol O-acyltransferase 2-like 6                                  | 25.7                        | 19.7                          |
| Nud12os  | Nudix (nucleoside diphosphate linked moiety X)-type motif 12, opposite strand | 25.3 | 19.6 |
| Zap70    | Zeta-chain (TCR) associated protein kinase                                 | 25.3                        | 19.1                          |
| Flt4     | FMS-like tyrosine kinase 4                                                 | 16.5                        | 32.0                          |
| Hes3     | Hairy and enhancer of split 3 (*Drosophila*)                               | 24.8                        | 19.3                          |
| Semi6d   | Sema domain, transmembrane domain (TM), and cytoplasmic domain, (semaphorin) 6D | 15.8 | 33.9 |
| Slc17a4  | Solute carrier family 17 (sodium phosphate), member 4                     | 16.9                        | 29.5                          |
| Tbx2     | T-box 2                                                                   | 24.0                        | 18.1                          |
| Wdr95    | WD40 repeat domain 95                                                     | 22.7                        | 17.6                          |
| Fer115   | Fer-1-like 5 (*C. elegans*)                                                | 22.4                        | 17.8                          |
| Symbol   | Gene name                                    | vs. SG-3 | vs. SG-5 |
|----------|----------------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Gbx2     | Gastrulation brain homeobox 2                | 15.0     | 29.1     |
| Cd33     | CD33 antigen                                  | 22.4     | 17.6     |
| Tdrd5    | Tudor domain containing 5                    | 22.8     | 17.0     |
| Lix1     | Limb expression 1 homolog (chicken)          | 21.4     | 16.7     |
| Lgal5s4  | Lectin, galactose binding, soluble 4         | 21.5     | 16.2     |
| Pip5k1b  | Phosphatidylinositol-4-phosphate 5-kinase, type 1β | 21.4     | 15.9     |
| Gsdma2   | Gasdermin A2                                 | 21.3     | 15.9     |
| If2712b  | Interferon, α-inducible protein 27 like 2 beta | 16.0    | 19.8     |
| Zcchc18  | Zinc finger, CCHC domain containing 18       | 17.2     | 17.8     |
| Ofrr384  | Olfactory receptor 384                       | 19.5     | 15.5     |
| Ofrr1123 | Olfactory receptor 1123                     | 11.4     | 33.8     |
| Myo18b   | Myosin XVIIIb                                | 11.8     | 29.6     |
| Ss18     | Synovial sarcoma translocation, Chromosome 18 | 23.4   | 13.0     |
| Plxna4os1| Plexin A4, opposite strand 1                 | 19.5   | 14.4     |
| Fam115e  | Family with sequence similarity 115, member E | 19.1   | 14.5     |
| Fbxl5    | F-box and leucine-rich repeat protein 5       | 13.7    | 20.1     |
| Megf10   | Multiple EGF-like-domains 10                 | 18.5    | 14.3     |
| Robo3    | Roundabout homolog 3 (Drosophila)            | 18.3    | 14.3     |
| Igk4-91  | Immunoglobulin kappa chain variable 4-91     | 18.3    | 14.2     |
| Elavl3   | ELAV (embryonic lethal, abnormal vision, Drosophila)-like 3 (Hu antigen C) | 15.7 | 16.1 |
| Scl17a8  | Solute carrier family 17 (sodium-dependent inorganic phosphate cotransporter), member 8 | 11.7 | 24.4 |
| Gpr39    | G protein-coupled receptor 39                | 15.7    | 15.8     |
| Catsper1 | Cation channel, sperm associated 1           | 18.3    | 13.6     |
| Zscan4a  | Zinc finger and SCAN domain containing 4A    | 17.4    | 13.8     |
| Ceanam14 | Carcinoembryonic antigen-related cell adhesion molecule 14 | 17.8 | 13.3 |
| Acnat1   | Acyl-coenzyme A amino acid N-acyltransferase 1 | 12.4  | 17.8     |
| Arhgap26 | Rho GTPase activating protein 26             | 17.4    | 12.6     |
| Olfr1270 | Olfactory receptor 1270                     | 16.6    | 13.0     |
| Lrcr25   | Leucine rich repeat containing 25            | 11.4    | 19.1     |
| Capsl    | Calcycphosine-like                           | 16.5    | 12.5     |
| Gln2     | Guanine nucleotide binding protein-like 2 (nucleolar) | 16.1  | 12.8     |
| Ctna3    | Catenin (cadherin associated protein), alpha 3 | 16.4   | 12.6     |
| Itm2a    | Integral membrane protein 2A                 | 16.4    | 12.4     |
| Sema5b   | Sema domain, seven thrombospondin repeats (type 1 and type 1-like), transmembrane domain (TM) and short cytoplasmic domain, (semaphorin) 5B | 20.5 | 10.6 |
| Il17c    | Interleukin 17C                              | 15.7    | 12.2     |
| Chrna9   | Cholinergic receptor, nicotinic, alpha polypeptide 9 | 15.4 | 12.1 |
| Acp1     | ArfGAP with coiled-coil, ankyrin repeat and PH domains 1 | 10.8 | 17.0 |
| Spin5    | Serine protease inhibitor, Kunitz type 5     | 15.1    | 11.4     |
| Rab5b    | RAB5B, member RAS oncogene family            | 12.5    | 13.3     |
| Ofrr1122 | Olfactory receptor 1122                     | 10.5    | 16.4     |
| Grm8     | Glutamate receptor, metabotropic 8           | 17.6    | 10.1     |
| Igk-VJ558| Immunoglobulin heavy chain (J558 family)     | 14.4    | 11.2     |
| Ptprz1   | Protein tyrosine phosphatase, receptor type Z, polypeptide 1 | 14.4 | 11.1 |
| Cd300lh  | CD300 antigen-like family member H           | 15.2    | 10.4     |
| Mcoln1   | Mucolipin 1                                 | 11.7    | 12.8     |
| Olfr649  | Olfactory receptor 649                      | 13.9    | 10.9     |
| Trl8     | Toll-like receptor 8                         | 13.9    | 10.7     |
| Mb21d1   | Mab-21 domain containing 1                   | 10.8    | 13.2     |
| Itgb1bp2 | Integrin beta 1 binding protein 2            | 13.5    | 10.5     |
| Defb28   | Defensin beta 24                             | 13.3    | 10.4     |
| Crypt2   | Cysteine-rich perinuclear theca 2            | 13.4    | 10.3     |
IGARASHI et al.: VEGF-C AND TGF-β RECIPROCALLY REGULATE THE DIRECTION OF MSC DIFFERENTIATION

Promotion of the migratory ability and proliferative activity of SG-2 cells by VEGF-C. Subsequently, we examined the effects of VEGF-C, a specific ligand of VEGFR3, on the MSC lines (SG-2, SG-3 and SG-5). Indeed, VEGF-C significantly stimulated SG-2 cell proliferation (Fig. 2A) and cell migration (Fig. 2B), but had no effect on the SG-3 or SG-5 cells. These results strongly suggest that VEGF-C specifically promotes the proliferative activity and migratory ability of the SG-2 cells through VEGFR3.

Phosphorylation of ERK1/2 in SG-2 cells by stimulation with VEGF-C. To clarify the signaling pathways activated by VEGF-C in SG-2 cells, we evaluated the phosphorylation status of molecules in the PI3K/Akt- and MAPK-mediated pathways. ERK1/2 phosphorylation was markedly upregulated in the SG-2 cells upon VEGF-C stimulation, whereas that in the SG-3 and SG-5 cells was unaffected (Fig. 3). These results suggest that VEGF-C enhances the proliferative activity and migratory ability of the MSCs through the ERK1/2 pathway in Flt4-positive SG-2 cells.

Increase in the expression of lymphatic endothelial differentiation marker genes following stimulation of SG-2 cells with VEGF-C. The VEGF-C gene encodes a ligand for VEGFR3 that is expressed mainly in lymphatic endothelia (18). Furthermore, the VEGF-C/VEGFR3 pathway was the first critical pathway described for the development of the lymphatic vascular tree (36). As the SG-2 cells respond to both TGF-β and VEGF-C, we examined the effects of TGF-β or VEGF-C stimulation on their multi-differentiation potential. VEGF-C clearly and significantly increased the mRNA expression levels of the lymphatic endothelial cell markers, prospero homeobox 1 (Prox1) and lymphatic vessel endothelial hyaluronan receptor 1 (Lyve1) (p<0.01), in the SG-2 cells, whereas the levels were clearly and significantly decreased following stimulation of the cells with TGF-β (p<0.05; Fig. 4A and B). We previously reported that TGF-β promotes the osteogenic
differentiation of bone marrow-derived MSCs (10). Therefore, in this study, we further investigated the mRNA expression of osteogenic differentiation markers in the SG-2 cells following TGF-β or VEGF-C stimulation. TGF-β clearly and significantly increased the expression of the early-stage osteogenic differentiation marker genes, Runt-related transcription factor 2 (Runx2) and alkaline phosphatase, liver/bone/kidney (Alpl) (p<0.01), in the SG-2 cells; by contrast, VEGF-C clearly and significantly decreased the expression of these early-stage osteogenic differentiation markers (p<0.05; Fig. 4C and D). Of note, TGF-β unexpectedly decreased the expression of the late-stage osteogenic differentiation markers, integrin-binding sialoprotein (Ibsp) and bone gamma-carboxyglutamate (Gla) protein (Bglap) (p<0.05; Fig. 4E and F). On the other hand, as expected, VEGF-C suppressed the expression of these late-stage differentiation markers (p<0.01; Fig. 4E and F). These results suggest that VEGF-C and TGF-β reciprocally regulate the commitment of MSCs to differentiate into lymphatic endothelial or osteoblastic phenotypes, respectively. On the other hand, both TGF-β and VEGF-C appear to suppress the final maturation of osteoblastic MSC differentiation during late-stage osteogenesis.

Discussion

As demonstrated in our previous study, the TGF-β-responsive, Flt4-positive SG-2 MSC line retained both osteogenic and adipogenic differentiation potentials (35). Herein, we focused on SG-2-specific membrane protein expression and identified high expression levels of VEGFR3, the Flt4 gene product (Table II and Fig. 1). Furthermore, we found that the VEGFR3-specific ligand, VEGF-C, significantly increased the proliferative activity and migratory ability of the SG-2 cells (Fig. 2). VEGF potently promotes angiogenesis and is indispensable for vascular development (37,38), and the tyrosine kinase receptor, VEGFR2, is the primary transmitter of VEGF signals in endothelial cells (39,40). The binding of VEGF-A to VEGFR2 activates downstream signaling, including the MAPK pathways (41,42). Other VEGF family members and other signaling mediators affect and overlap with the function of VEGF-A (22,43,44). VEGFR3 is activated by the VEGF homologues, VEGF-C and VEGF-D, which, when fully proteolytically processed, also stimulate VEGFR2 and induce the formation and activation of VEGFR2-VEGFR3 heterodimers (36,45,46). Since in this study VEGF-C stimulation induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation in the SG-2 cells, the promotion of the migratory ability and proliferative activity of Flt4-positive MSCs appears to depend on the activation of the MAPK cascade (Fig. 3).

The VEGF-C/VEGFR3 pathway was the first critical pathway described for the development of the lymphatic vascular tree (36). It has been demonstrated that VEGFR3 expression starts during mouse embryonic day 8.5 in developing blood vessels, and VEGFR3-deficient embryos die at midgestation from defects in the remodeling of primary vascular networks (47). In adult tissues, VEGFR3 expression occurs mainly in lymphatic endothelial cells (47-50), and VEGFR3-positive lymphatic vessels appear concurrently with blood vessels during wound healing, but regress rapidly (51). However, VEGFR3-expressing endothelial cells may also be found in the fenestrated capillaries of several adult organs, including the bone marrow, splenic and hepatic sinusoids, kidney glomeruli and endocrine glands (50). Notably, in human cancer, VEGFR3-expressing vascular endothelial cells are detected in angiogenic capillaries (52,53), and the inactivation of VEGFR3 signaling with blocking antibodies in nude mice has been shown to suppress tumor growth by inhibiting angiogenesis (54).

MSCs have been reported to home towards hypoxic microenvironments in vivo, and hypoxic tumor cells specifically...
recruit MSCs by activating survival pathways that facilitate tumor progression (55). Based on these findings, the results of our study suggest that Flt4-positive MSCs play an important role in tumor angiogenesis and lymphatic vessel formation. Previous studies have demonstrated the VEGF-mediated differentiation of lymphatic endothelial cells from bone marrow-derived MSCs (56,57).

In this study, our results indicated that stimulation with VEGF-C increased the expression of lymphatic endothelial cell marker genes in Flt4-positive SC-2 cells (Fig. 4A and B). More interestingly, VEGF-C suppressed the expression of osteogenic differentiation marker genes (Fig. 4C and D). On the other hand, TGF-β suppressed the lymphatic endothelial commitment of SC-2 cells (Fig. 4A and B). Thus, we concluded that VEGF-C and TGF-β reciprocally regulate MSC commitment to differentiation into lymphatic endothelial or osteoblastic phenotypes, respectively. However, TGF-β and VEGF-C both seem to suppress the maturation of osteoblastic osteosarcoma differentiation at the late stage of the osteogenic process, suggesting that additional cellular signals must be necessary for the progression of osteoblastic differentiation of some types of MSCs. In addition, VEGF-C positively regulated the migration and proliferation of the Flt4-positive SC-2 cells (Fig. 2). The migratory ability and the proliferative activity are necessary conditions of MSCs, suggesting the novel possibility that VEGF-C plays an important role in determining MSC characteristics.

Our findings provide new insight into the molecular mechanisms underlying the regenerative activity of MSCs. In future studies, we aim to determine whether these results are reproducible in vivo by transplanting GFp-expressing SC-2 cells into suitable animal experimental models to facilitate their discrimination from the surrounding donor cells.

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