Functional Promoter Variant in Desmocollin-2 Contributes to Arrhythmogenic Right Ventricular Cardiomyopathy

Alex Hørby Christensen, MD, PhD*; Boris Schmitz, PhD*; Claus B. Andersen, MD, PhD; Henning Bundgaard, MD, DMSc; Stefan-Martin Brand, MD, PhD; Jesper Hastrup Svendsen, MD, DMSc

Clinical Case
A 31-year-old white male experienced ventricular fibrillation during exercise. He was successfully resuscitated without cerebral deficits and admitted to the Department of Cardiology, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark. He had no medical history but had trained extensively the past year, including completing a marathon 6 months before the incident. Clinical workup showed a dilated right ventricle (Figure 1A) with segmental hypokinesia, but normal left ventricular size and function and no valvular abnormalities. ECG showed incomplete right bundle branch block with negative T-waves V1–V2. A septal endomyocardial biopsy revealed fatty infiltrations and fibrosis (Figure 1B). On the basis of these findings, the patient was diagnosed with arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy (ARVC) according to Task Force criteria. He was fitted with an implantable cardioverter–defibrillator. After 10 years of follow-up, the patient had received several appropriate implantable cardioverter–defibrillator therapies (Figure 1C). At the time of his diagnosis, the father had negative T-waves in V1–V2. A septal endomyocardial biopsy revealed fatty infiltrations and fibrosis (Figure 1B). On the basis of these findings, the patient was diagnosed with arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy (ARVC) according to Task Force criteria. He was fitted with an implantable cardioverter–defibrillator. After 10 years of follow-up, the patient had received several appropriate implantable cardioverter–defibrillator therapies (Figure 1C). At the time of his diagnosis, no other family members were reported to have signs or symptoms of ARVC although none had been screened before presentation of the index patient. The patient was referred to genetic testing.

Genetic Testing
The index patient was screened in the coding sequences and flanking introns of 65 known cardiomyopathy-associated genes without identification of any disease-causing variants. Variants in desmosomal genes have been identified in approximately 40% of ARVC cases, and the condition is widely regarded as a disease of the desmosome. We therefore chose also to screen a minimum of 1000 base pairs upstream of the transcriptional start site of the 5 desmosomal genes DSC2, DSP, JUP, and PKP2. The upstream screening identified one rare heterozygous variant in the 5'-flanking region of desmocollin-2 (DSC2), –1445G>C (A in ATG = 1). Variants in the coding sequence of DSC2, a desmosome component and member of the transmembrane cadherins, are found in ≤5% of patients, and both dominant and recessive modes of inheritance have been reported. The identified –1445C variant was absent in 1300 ethnically matched Danish control chromosomes. The 1000 Genome project had no report of the –1445C allele in ethnically matched populations, but the allele has been found in individuals of African descent (rs75494355).

Family screening showed that only the index patient and his father carried the rare –1445C variant (Figure 1D), and an ECG revealed that the father had negative T-waves in V1–V2. All other family members (brother, sister, and mother) did not carry the –1445C allele, were asymptomatic, and had a normal clinical workup.

The screening of the DSC2 5'-flanking region also revealed a common variant, –1304T>C (rs1790706), that was reported in an ethnically matched 1000 Genome group (minor allele frequency=allele T=18%).

Investigation of the Noncoding DSC2 Variant
Because the effect of regulatory DSC2 promoter variants in ARVC is completely unknown, we performed molecular investigations of the detected –1445C variant. Multiple orthologous sequence alignment showed that DSC2 position –1445 is evolutionary conserved (Figure 2A). In silico evaluation using web-based algorithms accessing the TRANSFAC database of transcription factors (TF) revealed an AT-rich promoter sequence around position –1445 and suggested altered binding of POU homeodomain TF OCT1 of the minor C allele (Figure 2B). The analysis also revealed a second conserved OCT1 binding site in close proximity to position –1445. In addition, a potential binding site for the myocyte-specific enhancer factor-2 (MEF2A) was detected at this AT-rich promoter sequence.
Luciferase gene reporter assays were conducted to characterize the functional effect of the –1445C allele. The experiments revealed sufficient transcriptional activity of the DSC2 wild-type –1445G construct under basic conditions (Figure 2C). Insertion of the mutant –1445C allele into the active DSC2 construct resulted in a strong 5-fold reduction of DSC2 promoter activity \((P<0.001)\). Because the transforming growth factor (TGF)-\(\beta\) pathway has been linked to ARVC,\(^6\) DSC2 expression is impaired in TGF-\(\beta\)1 receptor II knockout mice,\(^7\) and loss of desmosome components affects TGF-\(\beta\)1/p38 mitogen-activated protein kinases signaling,\(^8\) we applied TGF-\(\beta\)1 to cells transfected with the DSC2 promoter fragments. Although we observed a significant \(\approx 1.5\)-fold activation \((P<0.001)\) of the DSC2 wild-type construct, TGF-\(\beta\)1 stimulation could not rescue the inhibitory effect of the mutant –1445C allele \((P<0.001\) for –1445G/TGF-\(\beta\)1 versus –1445C/TGF-\(\beta\)1).

To evaluate the effect of DSC2 –1445G>C on interaction of human myocardial TFs, electrophoretic mobility shift assays were performed. Using human nonfailing heart nuclear extracts and labeled oligonucleotides resembling the 5' sequence of DSC2 harbouring position –1445, we detected altered TF binding in the presence of the mutant C allele (Figure 2D). Although 2 specific band shifts were detected for the wild-type G allele, 1 specific shift was lost in presence of the mutant C allele. The allele-specific difference in TF binding was also observed using HEK293T nuclear extracts serving as an additional control (Figure 2E).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This clinical case highlights the complexity of genetic variants involved in ARVC. Reduced levels of myocardial desmocollin-2 expression have been mechanistically linked to ARVC, consistent with the generally accepted disease mechanism: desmosomal gene variants cause ARVC by lowering the amount of functional protein (loss-of-function or dominant-negative mutations) and thereby possibly altering Wnt/\(\beta\)-catenin signaling causing upregulation of fibrotic and adipogenic genes.\(^9\) Furthermore, knockdown of the DSC orthologue in zebrafish caused a cardiomyopathy phenotype.\(^4\) However, in our small family, we did not observe cosegregation with full expressivity. DSC2 –1445C alone may not be sufficient to cause a complete ARVC phenotype, suggesting that additional genetic, epigenetic, or environmental factors are necessary for a full phenotype. Our findings are in line with reports on disease-modifying noncoding sequence variants for several other inherited cardiac diseases, including Brugada syndrome\(^10\) and long-QT syndrome type 1.\(^11\)

Interestingly, our in silico analyses suggest that –1445C interferes with OCT1 binding at this AT-rich promoter.
fragment. We also detected a potential binding site of MEF2A in close proximity. It has been shown that OCT1 interacts with MEF2A in cardiomyocytes to regulate expression of genes such as cardiac troponin I (cTNI). In cTNI, MEF2A and OCT1 bind to a conserved AT-rich promoter sequence, and MEF2A transactivates the cTNI promoter.12 Furthermore, MEF2-binding sites have also been described in the promoters of other cardiomyopathy-associated genes, including desmin and α-myosin heavy chain.13,14

To our knowledge, this is the first report implicating regulatory desmosomal variants in the pathogenesis of ARVC. The presented data show a functional role of DSC2 –1445G>C but does not allow classification of the variant as a definite monogenic cause of ARVC. Our case adds to the complexity of ARVC genetics, underlines the difficulty in defining causality of identified sequence variants even in known cardiomyopathy-associated genes, and the growing understanding that noncoding sequence variants also may contribute to the clinically observed phenotype.

Acknowledgments

IHKE cells were a kind gift of E. Schlatter, University Hospital Muenster, Germany. Nonfailing human heart samples were kindly provided by T. Eschenhagen, University Hospital Hamburg, Germany.

Disclosures

None.

References

1. Marcus FI, McKenna WJ, Sherrill D, Basso C, Bauce B, Bluemke DA, et al. Diagnosis of arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy/dysplasia: proposed modification of the Task Force Criteria. Eur Heart J. 2010;31:806–814. doi: 10.1093/eurheartj/ehq025.

2. Christensen AH, Benn M, Bundgaard H, Tyhjaerg-Hansen A, Haunso S, Svendsen JH. Wide spectrum of desmosomal mutations in Danish patients with arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy. J Med Genet. 2010;47:736–744. doi: 10.1136/jmg.2010.077891.

3. Xu T, Yang Z, Vatta M, Rampazzo A, Beffagna G, Pilichou K, et al; Multidisciplinary Study of Right Ventricular Dysplasia Investigators. Compound and digenic heterozygosity contributes to arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy. J Am Coll Cardiol. 2010;55:587–597. doi: 10.1016/j.jacc.2009.11.020.
4. Heuser A, Plovie ER, Ellinor PT, Grossmann KS, Shin JT, Wichter T, et al. Mutant desmocollin-2 causes arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy. *Am J Hum Genet*. 2006;79:1081–1088. doi: 10.1086/509044.

5. Simpson MA, Mansour S, Ahnood D, Kalidas K, Patton MA, McKenna WI, et al. Homozygous mutation of desmocollin-2 in arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy with mild palmoplantar keratoderma and woolly hair. *Cardiology*. 2009;113:28–34. doi: 10.1159/000165696.

6. Beffagna G, Occhi G, Nava A, Vitiello L, Ditadi A, Basso C, et al. Regulatory mutations in transforming growth factor-beta3 gene cause arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy type 1. *Cardiovasc Res*. 2005;65:366–373. doi: 10.1016/j.cardiores.2004.10.005.

7. Matise LA, Palmer TD, Ashby WJ, Nashabi A, Chytil A, Aakre M, et al. Lack of transforming growth factor-beta signaling promotes collective cancer cell invasion through tumor-stromal crosstalk. *Breast Cancer Res*. 2012;14:R98. doi: 10.1186/bcr3217.

8. Dubash AD, Kam CY, Aguado BA, Patel DM, Delmar M, Shea LD, et al. Plakophilin-2 loss promotes TGF-beta1/p38 MAPK-dependent fibrotic gene expression in cardiomyocytes. *J Cell Biol*. 2016;212:425–438. doi: 10.1083/jcb.201507018.

9. Garcia-Gras E, Lombardi R, Giocondo MJ, Willerson JT, Schneider MD, Khoury DS, et al. Suppression of canonical Wnt/beta-catenin signaling by nuclear plakoglobin recapitulates phenotype of arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy. *J Clin Invest*. 2006;116:2012–2021. doi: 10.1172/JCI27751.

10. van den Boogaard M, Smemo S, Burnicka-Turek O, Arnolds DE, van de Werken HJ, Klous P, et al. A common genetic variant within SCN10A modulates cardiac SCN5A expression. *J Clin Invest*. 2014;124:1844–1852. doi: 10.1172/JCI73140.

11. Amin AS, Giudicessi JR, Tijsen AJ, Spanjaart AM, Reckman YJ, Kleemens CA, et al. Variants in the 3’ untranslated region of the KCNQ1-encoded Kv7.1 potassium channel modify disease severity in patients with type 1 long QT syndrome in an allele-specific manner. *Eur Heart J*. 2012;33:714–723. doi: 10.1093/eurheartj/ehr473.

12. Di Lisi R, Millino C, Calabria E, Altruda F, Schiaffino S, Ausoni S. Combinatorial cis-acting elements control tissue-specific activation of the cardiac troponin I gene *in vitro* and *in vivo*. *J Biol Chem*. 1998;273:25371–25380.

13. Molkentin JD, Markham BE. Myocyte-specific enhancer-binding factor (MEF-2) regulates alpha-cardiac myosin heavy chain gene expression *in vitro* and *in vivo*. *J Biol Chem*. 1993;268:19512–19520.

14. Kuisk IR, Li H, Tran D, Capetanaki Y. A single MEF2 site governs desmin transcription in both heart and skeletal muscle during mouse embryogenesis. *Dev Biol*. 1996;174:1–13. doi: 10.1006/dbio.1996.0046.