A novel variant in UBE3A in a family with multigenerational intellectual disability and developmental delay

Xuechao Zhao | Yuting Zheng | Li Wang | Yanhong Wang | Shiyue Mei | Xiangdong Kong

1Genetics and Prenatal Diagnosis Center, The Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, The First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, China
2Henan Provincial Key Laboratory of Children's Genetics And Metabolic Diseases, Children's Hospital Affiliated to Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou Children's Hospital, Zhengzhou, China

Correspondence
Xiangdong Kong, Genetics and Prenatal Diagnosis Center, The Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, The First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University, Jianshe Rd, Erqi District, Zhengzhou, Henan 450052, China. Email: kongxd@263.net

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Abstract

Background: Angelman syndrome (AS) is a rare neurodevelopmental disorder and is characterized by severe cognitive disability, motor dysfunction, speech impairment, hyperactivity, and frequent seizures. Although the maternal chromosomal region 15q11.2-q13 deletion is the most common mechanism of AS, ~10% of individuals with AS are caused by the intragenic variants in the maternally inherited UBE3A, which encodes an E3 ubiquitin ligase.

Methods: Clinical diagnoses were based on detailed clinical findings. Trio-based exome sequencing was performed on the proband and her parents to identify the underlying genetic variants. The candidate variants were confirmed by Sanger sequencing following PCR amplification. In silico analyses were conducted to predict the effect of the identified variant on the function of UBE3A protein.

Results: We identified a novel variant c.2029G>C (p. Gly677Arg) in UBE3A as the most promising candidate. In silico analyses showed that p.Gly677Arg in the UBE3A affects a highly conserved residue. Her mother had the variant at this locus. Sanger sequencing results showed that II-2, II-5, II-7, IV-1, III-5, III-7, III-8, and III-9 have the variant c.2029G>C, and all patients inherited maternally variant in UBE3A, while the offsprings of the male carrier were unaffected.

Conclusions: We identified a novel variant (c.2029G>C) in the UBE3A in a Chinese family with multigenerational intellectual disability and developmental delay. Our findings expanded the genotypic spectrum of AS and provided important information for genetic counseling.

KEYWORDS
Angelman syndrome, intellectual disability, missense variant, UBE3A gene
INTRODUCTION

AS is a unique neurodevelopmental disorder caused by the functional loss of the ubiquitin-protein ligase E6-AP (E6-associated Protein) encoded by the UBE3A gene (OMIM:#601623). This syndrome was characterized by intellectual disability, speech impairment, dysmorphic facial features (such as microcephaly with flat occiput and occipital groove, wide mouth), gait ataxia, and/or tremulousness of the limbs, hypopigmentation and seizures with specific EEG pattern abnormalities. The behavioral phenotype includes happy disposition (frequent laughing, smiling), hyperactivity, attention deficit, and frequent disruption of sleep cycles. The incidence of AS is estimated to be 1/15,000 births (Williams et al., 2006; Williams, Angelman, et al., 1995; Williams, Zori, et al., 1995).

The UBE3A gene is located on chromosome 15q11.2-q13 region. In this region, there is a cluster of imprinted genes that show differential expression depending on the parental origin, in a tissue-specific manner. The UBE3A is an imprinted maternally expressed gene in neurons while the paternal allele is silenced by an antisense transcript from the SNURF-SNPRN gene. Loss of functional UBE3A protein and therefore the absence of UBE3A protein in the brain causes AS (Buiting, 2010). Genetic mechanisms of functional loss of the specific maternal expression of UBE3A include 15q11.2-13 deletion, variants in the UBE3A gene, paternal uniparental disomy, and genomic imprinting defects (Buiting, 2010; Ramsden et al., 2010).

The UBE3A gene consists of 10 exons (NM_130838.1) and encodes the ubiquitin-protein ligase E6-AP, belonging to the HECT (homologous to E6-AP C-terminus) class of E3 enzymes which is necessary for the ubiquitination of proteins targeted for degradation. Exons 3-10 of the UBE3A gene encode the 40 kDa COOH-terminal catalytic domain (Dagli et al., 2012).

Variants in the UBE3A gene are widely distributed and there is an absence of variant hot spots (Bird, 2014; Sadikovic et al., 2014). Most cases are sporadic, although familial occurrence is not uncommon (Sadikovic et al., 2014). According to the Human Gene Variant Database (HGMD: http://hgmd.cf.ac.uk, 2020.2), 253 different variants of the UBE3A gene have been reported, 95 of which are missense and nonsense variants. Here, we report six patients from a Chinese family diagnosed with AS due to a missense variant c.2029G>C (p.Gly677Arg) of the UBE3A gene. Our findings expanded the genotypic spectrum of AS and provided important information for genetic counseling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Samples and DNA extraction

Genomic DNA was extracted from EDTA peripheral blood samples using a Lab-Aid® 824 DNA Extraction Kit according to the manufacturer’s protocol (ZEESAN).

2.2 Trio-based exome sequencing

Trio-based exome sequencing was performed in the proband (IV-2) and her parents (III-1 and III-2). On average, 99% of the exome was covered at least 30-fold. Details of the methodology have been described previously (Zhao et al., 2020). Variants with minor allele frequencies (MAF) <1% in the exonic region or with splicing impact were taken for deep interpretation considering ACMG category, evidence of pathogenicity, and clinical synopsis and inheritance model of the associated disease. The variants were classified into five categories—“pathogenic,” “likely pathogenic,” “uncertain significance,” “likely benign,” and “benign”—according to the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ACMG) guidelines for interpretation of genetic variants (Richards et al., 2015).

2.3 Sanger sequencing

Sanger sequencing was performed for the validation of NGS results in the entire family. DNA was amplified using a standard Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR). Primers of exon 6 of the UBE3A gene (reference sequence NM_130838.1) were as follows: F: 5’-TGTTATGGGGTTTCTCAGCA-3’; R: 5’-TCCTGCTTCATGTCCTCTTT-3’. Amplification was tested by agarose gel electrophoresis and DNA was sequenced by Sangon Biotech.

RESULTS

3.1 Case report

The proband (IV-2) was a 3-year-old girl born uneventfully at a gestational age of 37 weeks. Pregnancy was otherwise uncomplicated. She is the second-born child of healthy non-consanguineous parents. Family history was remarkable. The child exhibited a delay in her gross motor milestones, starting to walk at 15 months of age, and was prone to falls. Regarding communicative behavior, the child utters only two words: “BaBa,” and “MaMa,” and
does not seem to understand simple orders. Neurological examination results presented severe intellectual disability, higher receptive and non-verbal communication abilities than verbal ones, hyperreflexia of the lower extremities, and drooling frequently. She presented with attention deficit, irritability, excessive laughter, and being fascinated with water. But she never had clinical seizures and sleep disorders.

Her brother (IV-1) was an 8-year-old boy born at a gestational age of 36 weeks. He had global developmental delays, particularly in expressive language, though he can understand what others are saying. The child needed help getting dressed, and can only eat with a spoon, not chopsticks. In addition, he presented strabismus in the right eye, hyperreflexia and sleep disorder. Other clinical symptoms were similar to the proband’s (Table 1). Patient III-5 presented with a more severe clinical phenotype, such as the later age of starting to walk (40 months), absence of speech, feeding difficulties. The symptoms of patients III-7, III-8, and III-9 in this family are similar to those of the proband. Detailed clinical characteristics are enlisted in Table 1.

### 3.2 Trio-based exome sequencing revealed a novel variant c.2029G>C (p.Gly677Arg) in UBE3A

The proband (IV-2) was referred to our hospital with developmental delay and intellectual disability. First, chromosomal microarray analysis (CMA) was performed and the result was normal. Then, Trio-based exome sequencing was performed in the proband (IV-2) and her parents (III-1 and III-2), identifying a novel heterozygous missense variant in the UBE3A gene (NM_130838.1) c.2029G>C (p. Gly677Arg). Sanger sequencing confirmed

| Clinical data | Patient 1 | Patient 2 | Patient 3 | Patient 4 | Patient 5 | Patient 6 |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Sex          | F         | M         | M         | F         | M         | F         |
| Age of walk (months) | 18        | 15        | 40        | 26        | 20        | 24        |
| Ataxia of gait/jerky motions | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Frequent laugher/smiling | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Easily excitable personality | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Attention deficit | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Development delay | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Severe intellectual disability | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Speech impairment | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Receptive and non-verbal communication skills higher than verbal ones | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Microcephaly | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Seizures     | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Abnormal EEG | −         | −         | −         | NA        | NA        | NA        |
| Feeding problems | −         | −         | +         | −         | −         | −         |
| Hypopigmented skin, light hair and eye color | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Strabismus   | Right eye (+) | −         | −         | +         | −         | −         |
| Wide mouth   | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Wide-spaced teeth | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Small hands and feet | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Protruding tongue | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Hyperreflexia of the lower extremities | +         | +         | +         | +         | −         | −         |
| Frequent drooling | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         | +         |
| Suck/swallowing disorders | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Abnormal sleep–wake cycle | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
| Attraction to/fascination with water | +         | +         | −         | −         | −         | −         |
the heterozygous c.2029G>C variant inherited from her unaffected mother (III-2) (Figure 1b). We screened the entire family, and the results showed that the unaffected family members II-2, II-5, and II-7 and the affected members IV-1, III-5, III-7, III-8, and III-9 all carried the heterozygous variant, and the other members unaffected in this family were wild type in the UBE3A gene.

We analyzed the methylation pattern of the 15q11.2-q13 region and the dosage of UBE3A gene by methylation-specific multiplex ligation-dependent probe amplification (MS-MLPA) in our laboratory using a specific kit, SALSA MS-MLPA ME028-B2 Prader Willi/Angelman, (MRC Holland, Amsterdam, The Netherlands), and the result was normal (data not shown).
highly conserved residue

The p.Gly677Arg variant is located in the HECT functional domain and amino acid sequence alignment showed that it occurs at a highly conserved residue in UBE3A with surrounding amino acid residues being conserved between orthologs (Figure 2). The conservation of the Gly677 amino acid residue and pathogenicity of the p.Gly677Arg variant was predicted by multiple in silico analysis techniques (Table 2). The scores from PhyloP (Pollard et al., 2010) (http://compugen.cshl.edu/phastweb/runtool.php), phastCons (Siepel et al., 2005) and GERP (Davydov et al., 2010) (http://mendel.stanford.edu/sidowlab/downloads/gerp/index.html) demonstrated that the Gly677 amino acid residue is highly evolutionarily constrained and Polyphen2 (Adzhubei et al., 2010) (http://genetics.bwh.harvard.edu/pph2/) and MutationTaster (Schwarz et al., 2014) (http://mutationtaster.org/) scores indicated that the functional effect of the p.Gly677Arg variant was damaging (Table 2). This variant can be classified as “Variant of Uncertain significance” according to guidelines determined by the ACMG (PM2 + PP1 + PP3 + PP4).

The UBE3A variants are associated with AS, autism spectrum disorder, epileptic encephalopathy and other neurodevelopmental disorder (Ali et al., 2020; Papuc et al., 2019; Rossi et al., 2017) and 253 different variants of the UBE3A gene have been reported (204 variants for AS; 49 variants for others) in HGMD (Figure 3b). Among 204 different variants of the UBE3A gene, there are 86 missense/nonsense variants, 58 small deletions, 36 small insertions, 1 small indel, 7 splicing variants, 2 cross duplications, 13 cross deletions, and 1 rearrangement. Variants in the UBE3A gene are widely distributed (Figure 3c).

According to the clinical manifestations, genetic testing report, and the typical pedigree, the proband in this family was diagnosed as AS resulting from a UBE3A c.2029G>C variant. In this family, the six patients all show neurodevelopmental disorders such as intellectual disability, speech impairment, attention deficit, frequent laughter, and drooling, and never had any clinical seizures, while the patient III-5 displayed more severe clinical phenotypes with later onset age of walk, absence of speech and cannot take care of himself. Thus, our results indicate that patients with the same UBE3A variant may show intrafamilial phenotypic variability. Because of the atypical genetic pattern of AS, gene diagnosis and genetic testing play an important role in the diagnosis. The proband's mother, almost 35, plans to perform the preimplantation genetic diagnosis after genetic counseling.

In conclusion, we identified a novel variant (c.2029G>C) in the UBE3A in a Chinese family with six AS patients. Our findings expanded the genotypic spectrum of AS and provided important information for genetic counseling.

### Table 2 The pathogenicity of the UBE3A gene c.2029G>C (p.Gly677Arg) variant are supported by multiple in silico analyses

| Method            | Score  | Prediction         |
|-------------------|--------|--------------------|
| PhyloP            | 7.905  | Conserved          |
| phastCons         | 1.000  | Conserved          |
| GERP++            | 5.76   | Conserved          |
| Polyphen-2_HDIV   | 1.0    | Probably_damaging  |
| Polyphen-2_HVAR   | 1.0    | Probably_damaging  |
| Mutation taster   | 1      | Disease_causing    |
| SIFT              | 0.0    | Damaging           |
| PROVEAN           | −7.73  | Damaging           |
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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no competing interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
X. Zhao and X. Kong designed the study, Y. Zheng and L. Wang undertook the molecular work, S Mei and Y. Wang collected and analyzed the data, X. Zhao and Y. Zheng wrote the manuscript. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE
The study and procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Zhengzhou University. All subjects gave informed signed consent forms, and the consents of the patients (<18 years) was obtained from their patents.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

FIGURE 3 (a) Schematic representation of the structure of the UBE3A mRNA and protein. Square indicates the point variants identified in the six AS patients. AZUL, the zinc-finger domain. (b) The number of reported UBE3A exon 1–10 variants in the HGMD. (c) The number of reported UBE3A exon 1–10 variants associated with AS (small deletions, small insertions, small indels, and missense/ nonsense variants) in the HGMD

ORCID
Xiangdong Kong https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0030-7638

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