Chemical conversion of human lung fibroblasts into neuronal cells

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Abstract. It has been previously reported that human embryonic fibroblasts and mouse embryonic fibroblasts can be converted into neuronal cells using chemical agents, along with forced expression specific transcriptional factors. However, the materials required for reprogramming in these approaches presents major technical difficulties and safety concerns. The current study investigated whether a cocktail of small molecules can convert human lung fibroblasts into cells. The small molecules valproic acid, CHIR99021, DMH1, Repsox, forskolin, Y-27632 and SP600125 (VCHRFYS) were used to induce MRC-5 cells into neuronal cells in vitro. Neuronal markers were analyzed by immunofluorescence staining. The gene profiles were analyzed by reverse transcription-quantitative polymerase chain reaction. MRC-5 is a human lung fibroblast cell line derived from normal lung tissue of a 14-week-old male fetus. The results of the current study demonstrated that MRC-5 fibroblasts can be directly converted into neuronal cells using a cocktail of seven small molecules (VCHRFYS), with a yield of ~90% Tuji-positive cells after 7 days of induction. Following a further maturation period, these chemically-induced neurons possessed neuronal morphology and expressed multiple neuron-specific genes. In conclusion, a cocktail of small molecules that can convert fibroblasts MRC-5 cells into functional neurons without the exogenous genetic factors was identified, which has the potential to be useful in neurological disease therapy.

Introduction

Since Takahashi and Yamanaka (1) demonstrated that a simple combination of four genes could reprogram somatic cells, direct lineage conversion has provided a rich source of somatic cell types for use in translational medicine. As the most commonly used somatic cells for direct conversion, fibroblasts can be directly converted into diverse functional cell types by introduction of known cell-fate-determining transcription factors or microRNAs (2-5). However, a major limitation related to current methods is the required ectopic expression of key developmental genes. Since the target genes often have to be stably integrated into the genome, the genetic modifications may have undesired effects. Chemical-based conversion strategies are gene-free, allowing the generation of cells without genetic modifications, and could be very tightly controlled.

Small molecules specifically modifying key signaling pathways provide a powerful tool to enhance conversion or even replace reprogramming genes. Indeed, a previous study showed that neural progenitor cells could be induced from mouse fibroblasts or human urinary cells with the appropriate chemical cocktail (6). Recently, chemical-promoted transdifferentiation from mouse embryonic fibroblasts or human foreskin fibroblasts to neuronal cells has been reported (7,8). However, it is invasive and difficult to obtain these cells. The MRC-5 cell line was derived from the normal lung tissue of a 14-week-old male fetus (9). The aim of the current study was to convert MRC-5 cells into neuronal cells using a cocktail of small molecules.

Materials and methods

Materials and reagents. The information of the key reagents used in this study is presented in Table I. Small molecules and reagents included: Valproic acid (VPA; V); CHIR99021 (C); Repsox (R); forskolin (F); Y-27632 (Y); SP600125 (S); DMH1 (H); cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP), 100 µM; brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), 20 ng/ml; glial cell-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF), 20 ng/ml; neurotrophin-3 (NT3), 20 ng/ml. Induction medium was composed of a 1:1 ratio of Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM)/F12 (cat. no. 11330032) and Neurobasal medium (cat. no. 21103049) with 0.5% N-2 supplement (cat. no. 17502048), 1% B-27 supplement (cat. no. 17504044; all from Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) and 100 µM cAMP. Maturation medium was composed of DMEM/F12:Neurobasal medium (1:1), 0.5% N-2 supplement, 1% B-27 supplement, 100 µM cAMP, 20 ng/ml BDNF, 20 ng/ml GDNF and 20 ng/ml NT3.

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Generation of chemical induced-neurons. The MRC-5 cells (American Type Culture Collection, Manassas, VA, USA) were seeded onto 6-well culture plates and cultured in Eagle’s minimum essential medium (Gibco, Carlsbad, CA, USA).
containing 10% fetal bovine serum (Gibco) at 37°C with
5% CO₂ in a humidified atmosphere for 48 h. The induction
medium with the chemical cocktail VCHRFYS was used
to induce these primary cells when the cell confluence was
50-70%. The concentration of chemicals used was as follows:
VPA, 1 mM; CHIR99021, 3 µM; R, Repsox, 1 µM; forskolin,
10 µM; Y-27632, 5 µM; SP600125, 10 µM; DAPT, 5 µM and
DMH1, 2 µM. Medium containing chemical compounds was
half-changed every three days. After 5 days, cells were switched
to maturation medium with CFS (CHIR99021, 3 µM; forskolin,
10 µM; and SP600125, 10 µM) for 7 days. Maturation medium
was half-changed every 2 day. Conversion efficiency was calcu-
lated as previously described (4,8). Briefly, 10 fields of view
were randomly selected for each sample on a Nikon Ti-E microscope
(Nikon Corporation, Tokyo, Japan) at indicated time points,
and the total cell number of tubulin β 3 class III (Tuj1), Tuj1+/microtubule-associated protein 2 (Map2)+, Map2+/RNA binding
fox-1 homolog 3 (NeuN)+, or Tuj1+/Tau+ cells with neuron
morphology were counted following immunofluorescence
staining. The conversion efficiency was calculated as the ratio
of Tuj1, Tuj1+/Map2+, Map2+/NeuN+, or Tuj1+/Tau+ cells to the
initial seeding cells in each visual field. The purity represented
the percentage of induced Tuj1, Tuj1+/Map2+, Map2+/NeuN+, or
Tuj1+/Tau+ neuronal cells in the total number of cells stained
with DAPI. Quantitative data are presented as the mean ± stan-
dard error of at least three independent experiments.

Immunofluorescence staining. Immunostaining of cells were
performed as previously described (10). Briefly, cells were
washed with PBS twice and then fixed with 4% paraformalde-
hyde for 10 min at room temperature. Then cells were blocked
with 5% bovine serum albumin (MP Biomedicals, Auckland,
New Zealand) containing 0.5% Triton X-100 for 30 min at
room temperature. Subsequently, samples were incubated
with primary antibodies (dilutions 1:100) at 4°C overnight and
then with appropriate fluorescent probe-conjugated secondary
antibodies for 1 h at room temperature. Nuclei were counter-
stained with DAPI. Images were captured using a fluorescence
microscope (DM6000; Leica Microsystems GmbH, Wetzlar,
Germany). The primary antibodies were used at the following
dilutions: Tuj1, 1:100; Map2, 1:100; NeuN, 1:50; and Tau,
1:200.
Reverse transcription-quantitative polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR). RNA was extracted with the RNeasy mini kit (cat. no. 74104; Qiagen GmbH Hilden, Germany) according to the manufacturer's protocol. For each reaction, 1 µg RNA was reverse-transcribed to cDNA using a High Capacity cDNA RT kit (Applied Biosystems; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.). qPCR was subsequently conducted with specific primers and SYBR-Green Universal Master Mix kit (Applied Biosystems; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.) in a Pikoreal PCR machine (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.). The relative expression levels were normalized against hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase as the internal control. All reactions were repeated three times. The primers used are listed in Table II.

Statistical analysis. All quantified data were statistically analyzed and presented as the mean ± standard error. For comparisons between two groups, a Student's t-test was used. For multiple group comparisons, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to calculate statistical significance followed by Fisher's post hoc test. P<0.05 was considered to indicate a statistically significant difference.

Results

Generation of neuronal cells from human MRC-5 lung fibroblasts using small molecules. Previous studies reported that a combination of small chemicals, VCRF, had important effects on the neural differentiation of mouse and human somatic cells, and neuronal cell survival (6-8). We hypothesized that the combination of VCRF may facilitate the conversion of human MRC-5 lung fibroblast cells into neuronal cells. The small molecules Y-27632 [Rho-associated, coiled-coil containing protein kinase (ROCK) inhibitor; Y] and SP600125 [c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) inhibitor; S] were previously reported to promote neuronal conversion (11,12). It was reported that DMH1, a highly selective small molecule bone morphogenic protein (BMP) inhibitor, has been demonstrated to promote neurogenesis of human-induced pluripotent stem cells (13). Thus, in the current study, MRC-5 cells were treated with a neuronal induction medium containing VCHRFYS for 7 days (Fig. 1A). VCHRFYS treatment induced a large fraction of the live cells to exhibit typical neuronal morphology, and expression of neuronal markers, including Tuj1, Map2, Tau and NeuN (Figs. 1B-D and 2). It was observed that the majority of the induced cells survived until day 8-10, and failed to become more mature neurons. The CFS chemical cocktail was then used to promote neuron survival and maturation. Indeed, neuronal cell survival and maturation were significantly improved after replacing the induction medium with the neuronal maturation medium supplemented with CFS and extra neurotropic factors (BDNF, GDNF and NT3). After 7 days of maturation, the cells were stained positive for neuronal markers Tau and NeuN (Fig. 2).
Chemical-induced cells exhibit a neuronal gene expression pattern. To further characterize the induced neuronal cells phenotype, the expression of nine neuronal genes and three fibroblastic genes were quantitatively analyzed using RT-qPCR. Several representative neuronal-specific genes, including achaete-scute family bHLH transcription factor 1, POU class 3 homeobox 2, myelin transcription factor 1 like, NeuroD1, neuronal differentiation 1, Ngn2, neurogenin 2, Foxa2, forkhead box A2, Sox2, SRY-box 2, Pax6, paired box 6, Foxg1, forkhead box G1, Ctgf, connective tissue growth factor; Colla1, collagen type I α 1 chain; Thy1, Thy-1 cell surface antigen.

Table III. Small molecule compounds used in this study reported to affect neural cells reprogramming.

| Small molecules | Effects on neural cells conversion | Refs. |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Valproic acid,  | Promote neurons differentiation and survival | (14,15) |
| HDAC inhibitors | of neural progenitor cells | |
| CHIR99021       | Improve conversion of human into neurons and induce | |
| GSK-3 inhibitor | pluripotent stem cells into nociceptors | (16,17) |
| Repsox          | Improve generation of neural progenitor cells | (6) |
| TGF-β inhibitor | from pluripotent stem cells | |
| Forskolin       | Promote neuronal conversion of human fibroblasts | |
| cAMP activator  | Induce neural crest-like cells derived from human neural progenitors | (18,19) |
| Y-27632, ROCK inhibitor | | (11) |
| SP600125        | Increases survival of transplanted dopamine neurons in Parkinsonian rats | (12) |
| JNK inhibitor   | Increases neurogenesis of human-induced pluripotent stem cells | (13) |
| DMH1, BMP inhibitor | | |

HDAC, histone deacetylase; GSK-3, glycogen synthase kinase-3; cAMP, cyclic adenosine monophosphate; TGF-β, transforming growth factor-β; ROCK, Rho-associated, coiled-coil containing protein kinase; JNK, c-Jun N-terminal kinase; BMP, bone morphogenetic protein.

Discussion

Direct lineage conversion provides a rich source of somatic cell types for use in regenerative medicine. Direct conversion
of non-neural cells to functional neurons is a promising strategy for cell-based therapy in the treatment of neurological disease. In recent years, several studies have demonstrated that somatic cells, and even terminally differentiated cells, could be reprogrammed into other cell types. It has been recently reported that ectopic expression of miR-9/9* and miR-124 (miR-9/9*-124) could promote direct conversion of human fibroblasts into neurons using viral vectors (5,20). However, they may have effects on genetic modifications.

A previous study showed that a chemical cocktail VCR could induce neural progenitor cells from mouse embryonic fibroblasts and human urinary cells under a hypoxic condition (6). Another report showed that chemical VCRFSGY (miR-9/9*-124) could promote direct conversion of human fibroblasts into neurons quickly (8). In the present approach, generation could convert the fibroblasts from human foreskin or skin into neuronal cells from MRC‑5 cells was induced by sequential treatment (6). Another report showed that chemical VCRFSGY (miR‑9/9*‑124) could promote direct conversion of human fibroblasts into neurons using viral vectors (5,20). However, they may have effects on genetic modifications.

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