miR-7111-5p and miR6870-5p may be Potential Biomarkers for Oral Squamous Cell Carcinoma

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OBJECTIVE
MicroRNAs (miRs) are small, non-coding RNAs that are involved in tumor development and progression in multiple cancers with the action as oncomiRs or tumor suppressor miRs. Therefore, miRNAs have become potential biomarkers in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. The previous studies have revealed that miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p are abnormally expressed in various types of cancer but in oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) has not been elucidated. The main objective of our study was to evaluate the expression alternations of miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p as well as serum response factor (SRF) in OSCC tissues compared with adjacent normal oral epithelial tissues.

METHODS
SRF was identified as a potential target gene of miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p using the TargetScan, Mirwalk, and Mirdb miRNA-target prediction tools. SRF, miR7111-5p, and miR6870-5p expression levels were examined by RT-qPCR in OSCC compared with normal tissues.

RESULTS
Our results showed that miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p were significantly downregulated in 30 pairs of OSCC tissue samples (p<0.05) relative to adjacent normal oral tissues. In the present study, we found that the high expression level of SRF was negatively correlated with the down regulation of miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p and was statistically correlated with the tumor stage.

CONCLUSION
miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and SRF may be potential prognostic biomarkers for OSCC diagnosis and monitoring.

Keywords: miR6870-5p; miR7111-5p; oral squamous cell carcinoma; serum response factor gene.

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Introduction
Oral squamous cell carcinoma (OSCC) is a global public health issue; it is the eighth most common type of oral cavity malignancy for men and the fifth among women worldwide. [1] Delay in the diagnosis and the relatively high tumor recurrence rates cause a 5-year survival rate of <50% among OSCC patients.[2] The disease is the sixth most common cancer in the world, with more than 300,000 new cases reported annually. To date, several studies have reported a strong connection between environmental carcinogens, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and the use of betel quid with increases the risk of OSCC.[3]
Considering the asymptomatic nature of oral cancer at its early stage, early detection of OSCC plays a critical role in prognosis and reduces treatment-related morbidity and mortality.[4] Recent attention has focused on the potential application of biomarkers for patient assessment in multiple clinical stages. Cancer biomarkers can be used to estimate the risk of cancer, screen for occult primary cancers, distinguish benign from malignant tumors, diagnose cancer, develop a prognosis, detect recurrence, and assess response to therapy.[5]

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) have a molecular regulatory role and have emerged as diagnostic biomarkers of various human cancers, including OSCC. Several studies have recently investigated the association between the expression levels of some of these miRNAs and the initiation, progression, survival rate, and metastatic potential of cancer.[6,7] miRNAs are small non-coding RNAs (18-25 nucleotides long) that negatively regulate gene function at the post-transcriptional level of target genes by suppressing translation or degradation of the target mRNA.[6,8] A number of studies have identified that increased expression of miRs in OSCC and OSCC-derived cells compared to normal tissues have known as the most prevalent risk factors in the OSCC development and tumorigenesis.[9-13]

Several miRs are characterized to act as tumor suppressors and/or oncogenes in OSCC. They regulate gene expression through interaction with components in the signaling pathways influencing cell proliferation, differentiation, migration, apoptosis, and other important mechanisms at cancer development.

Identification of miRNA expression patterns in OSCC compared to normal tissues can lead to early-stage diagnosis and prognosis.[14]

Serum response factor (SRF) is a MAD-box containing transcription factor which has an important role in the regulation of many involved-specific genes in cell growth, proliferation, differentiation, and apoptosis.[15] It has been firmly established that SRF is a direct target for regulation by miRNAs and also executes its regulatory role in microRNA expression and biogenesis where miRNAs are direct transcriptional targets of SRF.[16,17] A previous study has reported that miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p were upregulated in OSCC[8] but the role of two miRs in the regulation of SRF expression in OSCC remains elusive.

This study was designed to investigate the expression of miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and SRF as their target gene as well as to identify their possible expression association in OSCC and normal tissue.

Materials and Methods

Patients and Tissue Samples
In this study, a total of 30 pairs of frozen OSCC tissues and adjacent normal oral epithelial tissues were used. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for the use of clinical specimens and the present study was approved by the Research Medical Ethics Committee of Imam Khomeini Hospital. Patients’ samples were collected from patients with OSCC by the Iran National Tumor Bank, Cancer Institute, Imam Khomeini Hospital, Tehran. The clinico-pathological characteristics of patients are shown in Table 1. Matched adjacent normal tissues were obtained from the OSCC patients after surgery and immediately frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80°C until RNA extraction.

Predicting microRNA Target Genes
The TargetScan (http://www.targetscan.org), Mirwalk (http://mirwalk.uni-hd.de), and miRDB (http://mirdb.org) databases were used to predict potential miRNA target genes. The selected gene for both miRNAs was subjected to analysis.

RNA Extraction and Quantitative RT-PCR (qRT-PCR)
The total RNA was extracted from frozen tissue samples using RiboEx™ reagent (GeneAll Biotechnology, Korea), according to the manufacturer’s instructions. In addition, the extracted RNA was treated with RNase-free DNase to eliminate any genomic DNA contamination. The quality and quantity of extracted RNAs were evaluated using 1.5% agarose gel electrophoresis and Nanodrop (Thermo scientific-Nanodrop 2000) spectrophotometer analyses, respectively. miRNA was reverse transcribed with 1 μg total RNA using BioFACT cDNA Synthesis kit (Daejeon, South Korea), according to the manufacturer’s protocol. PCR was performed on an Exicycler™ 96 thermocycler (Bioneer, Korea) using a SYBR-Green kit (Ampliqon). Quantitative real-time PCR on miRNAs and SRF was conducted with the following thermal cycling profile at 95°C for 2 min, followed by 40 cycles comprising 95°C for 15 s, 60°C for 30 s, and 72°C for 20 s. U6 served as an endogenous control for miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p and GAPDH used as a reference control for SRF target gene. The primer sequences are summarized in Table 2. The formula $2^{\Delta C_q}$ was utilized to determine the expression level of miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and SRF.[18]
Statistical Analysis

All experiments were repeated three times, and numerical data are expressed as the means±standard deviation. Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism software 5.0 (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) and SPSS (GraphPad Prism 5 software (version 18.0; SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Expression data were controlled for normal distribution by one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S test). A one-way ANOVA was used to determine statistically differences in SRF gene expression levels in different tumor sizes. The associations between miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and SRF levels and clinic-pathological parameters of OSCC patients were assessed using independent sample test and independent sample Kruskal-Wallis test. The correlation between miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and SRF expression was performed by Pearson correlation analysis. p<0.05 (≤0.05) was considered to indicate a statistically significant.

Results

MiR7111-5p and miR6870-5p Expression Analysis by RT-qPCR

To further study the association between miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p expression signature in OSCC, miRs expression levels were detected in 30 paired OSCC tissues and adjacent normal oral epithelial tissues using RT-qPCR. In this study, both miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p expressions were markedly downregulated in OSCC tissues compared with in normal tissues (p<0.01) (Figs. 1a, b).

SRF Expression Analysis by RT-qPCR

In the present study, the potential targets of miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p were identified with promising miRNA-target prediction tools (The TargetScan, Mirwalk, and Mirdb). According to conserved seed matching sequence principles, the predicted miRs and potential target gene were selected by identi-
The Correlation between the Expression of miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p and SRF

To study miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p levels positively and negatively correlated to SRF expression in OSCC, a correlation analysis by Pearson method performed in 30 pairs OSCC tissues and adjacent normal tissues. We did not find a significant correlation between down-regulation of miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p, and increased expression of SRF gene in OSCC tissues and adjacent normal tissues (Fig. 3a, b).

Discussion

It is widely recognized that the dysregulation of miRNAs through different cellular pathways contributes to malignant transformation and tumor progression of different cancer entities.[21] Accumulating evidence indicates that aberrant expression of miRNAs, either overexpression or underexpression, leads to the initiation and progression of OSCC.[22]

Many miRNAs, including miR-10b,[23] miR-21,[24] miR-31,[25] miR-34b/c,[26] miR-146a-5p,[15] miR186,[21] miR-196a/b,[16] miR-223, miR-320, miR-494,[21] miR-543,[27] miR-1179[14], and miR-4513,[28] have been reported to be dysregulated in OSCC. miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p have been confirmed to be upregulated in hepatocellular carcinoma through targeting the KSR2 gene.

To date, no study has attempted to evaluate the expression of MiR7111-5p and miR6870-5p in OSCC, except the research by Chamorro-Petronacci et al.,[8] in which only microarray-based miRNA expression profiling was taken into account and found to be upregulated. In the present study, qRT-PCR was employed to evaluate dysregulated expression levels of miR7111-5p, miR6870-5p in OSCC.
the correlation between clinico-pathological stages of OSCC and SRF expression.

Our results revealed that the miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p expression levels were significantly decreased in OSCC compared with adjacent normal tissues. Moreover, SRF expression was significantly upregulated in OSCC and was not correlated with downregulated expression levels of miR7111-5p and miR6870-5p.

Family history has been reported as an important risk factor for oral cavity cancer and many of cancers. Therefore, understanding the relationship between family history and oral cavity cancer provides great potential in screening and preventive strategies resulting reduce the risk of cancer.[29,30] In our study among investigated clinicopathological characteristics, the upregulation of SRF only was significantly correlated with tumor stage (p=0.020) and family history (p=0.045) probably due to the small sample size and needs to further research in the future.

According to the results of the present study, the expression of SRF gene has increased in higher stages (IV) which may be a potential marker for early detection of OSCC in the future. OSCC is among the most common causes of cancer death in the world, accounting for more than 90% of all oral cancers and has a 5-year survival rate of <50%.

Ghafari et al.[31] revealed that a changing trend of histopathologic pattern with an increasing number of moderately differentiated OSCC and a higher increasing rate in tumor size and vascular, perineural invasion during years of 2006-2015 in Iran. Altered expression miRNAs have been implicated in various forms of cancer. Therefore, identification of miRNAs as a biomarker may provide new insights into clinical diagnosis at earlier stages and treatment of OSCC.[32,33] The identification of OSCC patients in the advanced clinical stage provides the main obstacle to correct treatment and save lives in Iran. Therefore, our findings can be an effective step in creating specific miRNAs signatures in predicting and diagnosing of OSCC.

Our study suggested that downregulation of miR-7111-5p and miR-6870-5p alone and or with other altered expression miRNAs profiles may serve as a prognostic marker to predict and early detection of OSCC. Given that, the relatively small sample size was a major limitation in this study, therefore whether miRs down expression impacted the expression of SRF and or SRF acts as oncogene contributes to OSCC requires further investigation.
Conclusion

In the present study, the expression of SRF target gene as a possible biomarker involved in OSCC was quantitatively examined in OSCC tissues compared with adjacent normal tissues and obtained result was consistent with SRF expression changes in other investigated cancers. Downregulated expression levels of miR-7111-5p and miR-6870-5p as well as SRF overexpression in OSCC patients identified in the present study may serve as biomarkers for the detection and monitoring of OSCC. Further studies with large samples could reflect and confirm more clarifying results.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: All authors declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the Research Medical Ethics Committee of Imam Khomeini Hospital (No: IR.IAU.SRB.REC.1399.099, Date: 19/11/2020).

Financial Support: None declared.

Authorship contributions: Concept – F.J.; Design – F.J.; Supervision – F.J.; Funding – M.S.; Materials – M.S.; Data collection and/or processing – M.S.; Data analysis and/or interpretation – M.S.; Literature search – A.G.; Writing – A.G.; Critical review – A.G.

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