Combination treatment with VPA and MSCs-TRAIL could increase anti-tumor effects against intracranial glioma

SOON A. PARK¹, HYE RIM HAN¹, STEPHEN AHN², CHUNG HEON RYU³ and SIN-SOO JEUN¹,²

¹Department of Biomedicine and Health Sciences, College of Medicine; ²Department of Neurosurgery, Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul 06591; ³Department of Clinical Laboratory Science, Daejeon Health Institute of Technology, Daejeon 34504, Republic of Korea

Received January 10, 2020; Accepted October 2, 2020

DOI: 10.3892/or.2021.7937

Abstract. Human bone marrow-derived mesenchymal stem cells secreting tumor necrosis factor-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (MSCs-TRAIL) have demonstrated effective anti-tumor activity against various tumors including lung, pancreatic and prostate tumors, although several tumor types are not responsive. In such case, other reagents may decrease tumor growth via TRAIL-mediated cell death. The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of valproic acid (VPA) in enhancing the efficacy of TRAIL, which was delivered using MSCs. Moreover, the present study examined the induced tumor tropism of MSCs via cell viability and migration assays. Combination treatment with VPA and MSCs-TRAIL enhanced the glioma therapeutic effect by increasing death receptor 5 and caspase activation. Migration assays identified increased MSC migration in VPA and MSCs-TRAIL-treated glioma cells and in the tumor site in glioma-bearing mice compared with VPA or MSC-TRAIL treatment alone. In vivo experiments demonstrated that MSC-based TRAIL gene delivery to VPA-treated tumors had greater therapeutic efficacy compared with treatment with each agent alone. These findings suggested that VPA treatment increased the therapeutic efficacy of MSC-TRAIL via TRAIL-induced apoptosis and enhanced tropism of MSCs, which may offer a useful strategy for tumor gene therapy.

Introduction

Glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), the most common and aggressive malignant glioma type, has poor therapeutic outcomes, even after surgical resection, radiation and chemotherapy. After treatment using surgical resection, radiation and chemotherapy, the median survival of patients with GBM is 14.6 months for radiotherapy plus temozolomide and 12.1 months for radiotherapy alone (1). GBM can invade or infiltrate areas within or close to functional brain parenchyma (2), and novel strategies are required to improve anti-tumor effects on glioma to overcome these problems.

The tumor necrosis factor-related apoptosis-inducing ligand (TRAIL) triggers apoptosis in tumor cells without damaging healthy cells and tissues, and is used in various types of tumor therapies, including GBM (3,4). Human bone marrow-derived mesenchymal stem cells (hBM-MSCs; MSCs) have tumor-targeting characteristics and can be easily separated and engineered using viral vectors (5,6). In addition, the migratory capacity of MSCs toward the tumor region increases chemokines or growth factors expressed and released by glioma cells, which mediates the tropism of MSCs (7,8). To improve the secretion duration of TRAIL and deliver it to invaded tumor cells, the current study used MSCs (9-12).

TRAIL binds to death receptors (e.g. DR4 and DR5), which activates the caspase cascade (13). The loss of DRs increases the expression levels of caspase inhibitor, cellular FLICE-inhibitory protein and X-linked inhibitor of apoptosis protein, or causes alterations in the expression of the Bcl-2 protein family (13). TRAIL alone may be an insufficient to treat tumor, as multiple types of tumor cells, including most glioma cell, do not respond to TRAIL-induced apoptosis with TRAIL alone (14,15). Previous studies have reported that chemotherapeutic agents or radiotherapy can enhance response to TRAIL by upregulating the TRAIL receptors in gliomas (16-18), suggesting that improved anti-tumor activity may be accomplished with combination treatments.

Correspondence to: Professor Sin-Soo Jeun, Department of Neurosurgery, Seoul St. Mary's Hospital, The Catholic University of Korea, 222 Banpo-daero, Seocho-gu, Seoul 06591, Republic of Korea
E-mail: ssjeun@catholic.ac.kr

Professor Chung Heon Ryu, Department of Clinical Laboratory Science, Daejeon Health Institute of Technology, 21 Chung Jeong Street, Dong-gu, Daejeon 34504, Republic of Korea
E-mail: ryuch@hit.ac.kr

Abbreviations: VPA, valproic acid; TRAIL, tumor necrosis factor-related apoptosis-inducing ligand; MSCs-TRAIL, tumor necrosis factor-related apoptosis-inducing ligand-secreting human bone marrow-derived mesenchymal stem cells; CXCR4, C-X-C chemokine receptor type 4; SDF-1, stromal cell-derived factor-1; GBM, Glioblastoma multiforme

Key words: GBM, VPA, MSCs-TRAIL, CXCR4, SDF-1
Valproic acid (VPA) is a histone deacetylase inhibitor (HDACi) agent used in the treatment of epileptic seizures, bipolar disorders and migraines in clinical research (19-21). VPA exerts an anticancer effect; for instance, it increases the cytotoxicity effect to various cancer cell lines (22-24), as well as can induce apoptosis and growth arrest by activating the DR and caspase pathway (25-27). Therefore, the present study investigated the efficacy of adding VPA to MSCs secreting TRAIL (MSC-TRAIL) to increase the therapeutically effective glioma treatment.

In the current study, it was hypothesized that VPA could enhance MSCs-TRAIL anticancer effect in glioma. To investigate a combined treatment of VPA and MSCs-TRAIL that enhances anticancer effects to glioma compared with each treatment alone, effect of combined treatment VPA and MSCs-TRAIL to glioma was examined using in vitro and in vivo models.

Materials and methods

Cell culture and reagents. All cells were maintained at 37°C in a 5% CO2-humidified atmosphere. MSCs were obtained from the Catholic Institute of Cell Therapy. MSCs were grown in DMEM (Wisent, Inc.) supplemented with 20% FBS (Wisent, Inc.), 10,000 µg/ml penicillin and streptomycin (Gibco; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.), and provided using the Ad-Easy vector system, following the manufacturer's instructions [Quantum Biotechnologies (Pty) Ltd.]. Ad-GFP or Ad-TRAIL MSCs (5x10⁵) were infected at a multiplicity of infection of 50 in OPTI-MEM serum free media for a 3 h incubation in 5% CO2-humidified 37°C chamber. Following incubation for 24 h at 37°C, apoptosis activity in glioma cells was measured using a caspase-Glo 3/7 assay (Promega Corporation). Briefly, an equal volume of caspase-3/7 detection reagent was added 24 h after combination treatment with VPA and TRAIL to glioma cells supernatants, and the mixtures were incubated at 37°C for 3 h. Supernatants were obtained via centrifugation at room temperature and 2,012 x g for 10 min, and were stored at -80°C for -7 days. Each sample was measured with a SpectraMax L luminometer (Molecular Devices, LLC).

Western blotting. Western blot analysis was performed as described previously (24). Cells were lysed in protein extraction buffer (PRO-PREP™ Protein Extraction Solution; Intron Biotechnology, Inc.). Protein concentrations were determined with the Bradford protein assay kit. The protein was subjected to 4-10% gradient gel by loading 15 µg protein per lane, and western blot analysis was then performed. Proteins were transferred onto a nitrocellulose membrane (Invitrogen; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.). Each blot was blocked using PBS containing 5% skim milk and 0.05% Tween-20 at room temperature for 30 min. The membranes were incubated with the appropriate primary antibodies against DR5 (1:500; R&D Systems, Inc.; cat. no. MAB1540), caspase-3 (1:500; Cell Signaling Technology, Inc.; cat. no. 9662S), cleaved caspase-3 (1:500; Cell Signaling Technology, Inc.; cat. no. 9664S), caspase-8 (1:500; Cell Signaling Technology, Inc.; cat. no. 9746S), CXCR4 (1:500; Abcam; cat. no. ab2090) and β-actin (1:1,000; Sigma-Aldrich; Merck KGaA; cat. no. A1978) overnight at 4°C. Subsequently, blots were incubated with secondary antibodies conjugated with horseradish peroxidase (1:1,000; Invitrogen; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc.; monoclonal cat. no. 32430, polyclonal cat. no. 32460) at room temperature for 2,012 x g for 10 min, and were stored at -80°C for 2 h at room temperature. The bands were detected using an enhanced chemiluminescence detection system (Cytiva). Each western blotting test was conducted on different parts using the same gel type and exposure.

Flow cytometric analysis - FACS. For the flow cytometric analysis of DRs, cells were harvested and incubated with phycoerythrin-conjugated anti human DR5 antibody (1:1,000; cat. no. AF631; R&D Systems, Inc.), as described previously (25,26). Briefly, cells (2.5x10⁵) were stained with the antibody for 30 min at 4°C. After washing with PBS, the expression of DR5 was analyzed via flow cytometry using a FACSVerse SE (Becton, Dickinson and Company). In addition, apoptosis was determined using an Annexin V and PI staining-based fluorescein isothiocyanate Annexin V
Apoptosis Detection kit (BD Biosciences), according to the manufacturer’s instructions, 24 h after treatment of glioma cells with VPA and TRAIL. The FASCanto 2 flow cytometer (BD Biosciences) and FlowJo v8.0.3 (FlowJo LLC) software were used for analysis for early + late apoptotic cells.

**TRAIL expression using ELISA.** The culture supernatant of MSC-TRAIL was analyzed using ELISA according to manufacturer’s procedure (Human TRAIL/TNFSF10 Quantikine ELISA Kit; R&D Systems, Inc.; cat. no. DTRL00). To investigate the persistence of transgene expression *in vitro*, BM-MSCs were seeded at a high density (4x10^6 per well of a 24-well plate). BM-MSCs were transduced with 50 multiplicities of infection of Ad-TRAIL in OPTI-MEM serum-free medium for 3 h in a 5% CO₂ humidified 37°C chamber. The virus-containing medium was removed and additionally incubated in low-serum medium (Eagle’s DMEM containing 2% FBS) at 37°C for ~40 days. Culture supernatants were harvested and fresh medium was changed every 3 day. Then, secreted TRAIL was examined.

**In vitro and in vivo migration assay.** The migratory abilities of MSCs and MSCs-TRAIL were determined using Transwell plates (Costar; Corning, Inc.) that were 6.5-mm in diameter with 8-μm pore filters. U87 and U138 (5x10^3) cells were incubated in serum-free medium (SFM) for 48 h and the resulting conditioned medium (CM) was used as a chemotactant. MSCs or MSCs-TRAIL (2x10⁴) cells were suspended in SFM and plated into the upper well, and 600 μl SDF-1-containing SFM, CM or the CXCRA4 antagonist AMD3100 was used to confirm the migration capacity of MSCs-TRAIL toward glioma cells was placed in the lower well of the Transwell plate. Following incubation for 4 h at 37°C, cells that had not migrated from the upper side of the filter were scraped off with a cotton swab, and filters were stained with the Diff-Quik™ three-step stain set (Sysmex Corporation). The number of cells that migrated to the lower side of the filter was counted under a light microscope at x100 magnification in three randomly-selected fields.

For the *in vivo* migration assay, mice were used in this test (n=6). For the *in vivo* migration assay, 1x10³ red fluorescent PKH26 dye (Sigma-Aldrich; Merck KGaA)-labeled VPA-treated MSCs-TRAIL were mixed with an equal number of green fluorescent PKH67 dye (Sigma-Aldrich; Merck KGaA)-labeled MSCs-TRAIL. Mixed cells were implanted into the contralateral hemisphere at 2 weeks after glioma cell (5x10⁴ cells in 3 μl PBS) inoculation into the right striatum into the contralateral hemisphere at 2 weeks after glioma cell inoculation: i) Those treated with intratumoral injections of saline (3 μl PBS); ii) received intraperitoneal injections of VPA (200 mg/kg); iii) received MSCs infected with Ad-TRAIL (MSCs-TRAIL; 2x10⁵) via intracranial injection (18,28,30); and iv) or combination therapy (VPA and MSCs-TRAIL). VPA was injected 1 day after MSC transplantation and continued every day for 7 days. Mice that exhibited rapid weight loss (≥10% in 3 days) or onset of significant neurological symptoms, such as seizures, impaired balance and hemiplegia, were considered in a moribund condition. Mice were euthanized via CO₂ asphyxiation (10-20%/min) when these symptoms were identified in the glioma mice model (32).

**In vivo bioluminescence imaging analysis and evaluation of tumor region.** In *in vivo* bioluminescence imaging analysis was performed with survival analysis. For *in vivo* bioluminescence imaging, the animals were inoculated with U87-Luc and treated as aforementioned (30). To monitor animal condition, a Maestro device was used to assess the inhibition of tumor growth and monitor the condition of the mice every 4 days after tumor inoculation. The substrate of luciferase, D-luciferin (150 mg/kg; Xenogen Corporation), was delivered via intra-peritoneally injection 15 min before direct visualization using the Maestro *in vivo* Imaging System (CRI, Inc.; http://www.cri-inc.com/products/maestro-2.asp). In brief, mice were anesthetized using gas mixtures of 1.5% isoflurane (dosage 2-5% induction; 0.25-4% maintenance) (33) and then imaged. The bioluminescence signals (photons/sec) emitted from the mice were captured using a high-sensitivity charge-coupled device camera (PerkinElmer, Inc.) and analyzed using Maestro II software (CRI, Inc.). To evaluate the tumor region and *in vivo* fluorescence imaging analysis, mice were divided into four groups (n=12; 3/group): Tumor control group, VPA-treated group, MSC-TRAIL-treated group and VPA with MSC-TRAIL-treated group. The intracranial xenograft mouse model of human glioma was established as previously described (18,28,30). For intracranial implantation of human glioma cells in the brains of mice, mice were deeply anesthetized with ketamine-xylazine cocktail (80 mg/kg ketamine, 10 mg/kg xylazine) (31) and then animals were stereotactically inoculated with 1x10⁵ U87 cells (in 3 μl PBS) into the right frontal lobe (2-mm lateral and 1-mm anterior to bregma, at 2.5-mm depth from the skull base) using a Hamilton syringe (Hamilton Company) and a microinfusion pump (Harvard Apparatus; Harvard Bioscience, Inc.) (18,28,30).

For survival experiments, intracranial glioma-bearing mice were randomly divided into four groups after tumor implantation: i) Those treated with intratumoral injections of saline (3 μl PBS); ii) received intraperitoneal injections of VPA (200 mg/kg); iii) received MSCs infected with Ad-TRAIL (MSCs-TRAIL; 2x10⁵) via intracranial injection (18,28,30); and iv) or combination therapy (VPA and MSCs-TRAIL). VPA was injected 1 day after MSC transplantation and continued every day for 7 days. Mice that exhibited rapid weight loss (≥10% in 3 days) or onset of significant neurological symptoms, such as seizures, impaired balance and hemiplegia, were considered in a moribund condition. Mice were euthanized via CO₂ asphyxiation (10-20%/min) when these symptoms were identified in the glioma mice model (32).

**Intracranial glioma model and treatments.** Nude mice (age, 6-8 weeks; weight, 20 g; Charles River Laboratories, Inc.) were used in accordance with institutional guidelines under approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of The Catholic University of Korea (approval no. 2017-0211-05). The following housing conditions were used: Temperature 22±3°C, relative humidity 60±15%, 12-h light/12-h dark cycle and autonomous intake of food and water. Mice were divided into four groups (n=28, with 7/group): Tumor control group, VPA-treated group, MSC-TRAIL-treated group and VPA with MSC-TRAIL-treated group. The intracranial xenograft mouse model of human glioma was established as previously described (18,28,30). For intracranial implantation of human glioma cells in the brains of mice, mice were deeply anesthetized with ketamine-xylazine cocktail (80 mg/kg ketamine, 10 mg/kg xylazine) (31) and then animals were stereotactically inoculated with 1x10⁵ U87 cells (in 3 μl PBS) into the right frontal lobe (2-mm lateral and 1-mm anterior to bregma, at 2.5-mm depth from the skull base) using a Hamilton syringe (Hamilton Company) and a microinfusion pump (Harvard Apparatus; Harvard Bioscience, Inc.) (18,28,30).

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Evaluation of apoptosis via TUNEL assay. Mouse brains were perfused with PBS, 4% paraformaldehyde and postfixed 4°C overnight. Fixed brains were embedded, snap frozen in liquid nitrogen at -196°C and stored at -70°C until use. TUNEL staining was performed using the TUNEL assay kit (Roche Diagnostics). Terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase in reaction buffer (containing a fixed concentration of digoxigenin-labelled nucleotides) was applied to serial sections for 1 h at 37°C, before the slides were placed in Stop/Wash buffer for 10 min. Apoptotic cells were detected after incubation in the Cy3-conjugated streptavidin (Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories, Inc.) at 1:1,000 dilution for 30 min at room temperature. The slides were counterstained with DAPI (1:1,000; Sigma-Aldrich; Merck KGaA). Coverslips with Kaiser's glycerol gelatin (Merck KGaA; cat. no. 109242) mounting medium were used. Apoptotic cells were also measured via a computer using the MetaMorph (Molecular Devices).

Statistical analysis. Data are presented as the mean ± SD, and were analyzed using SPSS 13.0 (SPSS, Inc.). Statistical differences between different test conditions were determined using unpaired t-test and post hoc Bonferroni test was used following one-way ANOVA analysis for multiple comparison.

Results

Combined treatment with VPA and TRAIL increases the cytotoxic effects. To assess whether VPA would be a useful reagent to increase sensitivity to TRAIL, glioma cells were treated with VPA. VPA increased cell death in glioma cells in a dose-dependent manner, as demonstrated by decreased cell viability (Fig. 1A). Combined treatment with VPA and TRAIL significantly induced cell death in glioma cells (Fig. 1B). To identify apoptotic cell death upon combined treatment in glioma cells, apoptotic cell populations were detected using FACS analysis. A significant increase in apoptotic cells was observed when glioma cells were exposed to combined treatment, compared with VPA or TRAIL alone (Fig. 1C).

Statistical analysis. Data are presented as the mean ± SD, and were analyzed using SPSS 13.0 (SPSS, Inc.). Statistical differences between different test conditions were determined using unpaired t-test and post hoc Bonferroni test was used following one-way ANOVA analysis for multiple comparison.
DR5 expression was increased in a dose-dependent manner in glioma cells (Fig. 2A), and western blot analysis also suggested a dose-dependent increase in DR5 expression after VPA treatment (Fig. 2B). To determine if apoptosis upon combined treatment was associated with DR5, DR5/Fc chimera proteins were used to block DR5 activity. In addition, it was investigated whether VPA-enhanced TRAIL-induced apoptosis was mediated via caspase activation. VPA and TRAIL combination decreased glioma cell viability and increased caspase-3/7 activity (Fig. 2C and D). Glioma cell death and caspase-3/7 activity were inhibited in the presence of DR5/Fc, indicating that apoptosis enhancement, caused by the combined treatment, may be associated with the specific interaction between TRAIL and DR5.

VPA increases the therapeutic effects of MSCs-TRAIL against glioma cells. Based on the effects of combined VPA and TRAIL treatment on glioma cells, MSCs were used as a TRAIL delivery vehicle to increase efficacy. VPA was added to MSCs or MSC-TRAIL to examine how to avoid the induction of MSC-TRAIL inhibition. In media containing various concentrations of VPA, the viability of MSCs or MSC-TRAIL was not changed (Fig. 3A). In addition, VPA did not affect the duration of TRAIL secretion in MSC-TRAIL (Fig. 3B). Glioma cells were treated with MSC-TRAIL and VPA at different doses, then the viability and the expression and cleavage of caspase-8, an initiator caspase, and caspase-3, a major effector caspase (34), were investigated. DR5/Fc was used to verify the specific interaction between DR5 and the combination treatment. Glioma cell death and cleavage of caspase-8 and caspase-3 were increased upon combined treatment with VPA and MSC-TRAIL, while DR5/Fc blocked glioma cell death and caspase-8 and caspase-3 cleavage (Fig. 3C and D).

VPA treatment increases the migration of MSC-TRAIL via CXCR4 upregulation. The CXCR4/SDF-1 interaction serves a key role in MSC migration (35). The current study examined whether VPA treatment enhanced CXCR4 expression in MSC-TRAIL. It was found that CXCR4 expression was increased in MSCs and MSC-TRAIL following VPA treatment in a dose-dependent manner (0-4 mM) (Fig. 4A). Moreover, VPA increased MSC-TRAIL migration in a dose-dependent manner toward SDF-1, a ligand of CXCR4, but migration of VPA-treated MSC-TRAIL decreased after
treatment with AMD3100, a CXCR4 antagonist (Fig. 4B). The migration of MSCs toward CM from glioma cells was examined. Combined treatment with VPA and MSCs-TRAIL significantly enhanced the migration of MSCs toward CM from glioma cells (Fig. 4C). To assess the in vivo migratory capacity of VPA or MSC-TRAIL alone, PKH-26-labeled VPA-treated MSCs-TRAIL were injected together with PKH-67-labeled control MSCs-TRAIL into the contralateral hemisphere of tumors in a U-87MG glioma model. VPA increased the MSC-TRAIL migratory activity compared with MSC-TRAIL alone (Fig. 4D). These observations indicated that CXCR4/SDF-1 was involved in the migration of MSCs toward gliomas both in vitro and in vivo.

**Combined treatment with VPA and MSCs-TRAIL enhances the therapeutic potential in intracranial xenografted models.** The therapeutic effects of the combined treatment were investigated in an intracranial xenograft mouse model after inoculation with glioma cells. To observe tumor growth using in vivo bioluminescent imaging analysis, tumor-bearing mice with U87-Luc cells were established. A total of 7 days after tumor inoculation mice were treated with MSCs-TRAIL, and then VPA was injected into the animal model (Fig. 5A). H&E staining (upper panel) demonstrated that the tumor size was smaller in mice treated with MSC-TRAIL and VPA in combination compared with in those treated with VPA or MSC-TRAIL alone (Fig. 5B). Moreover, the survival rate (bottom panel; Fig. 5B) was prolonged in mice that received the combination treatment compared with those treated with VPA or MSC-TRAIL alone and the control mice. At day 7 after U87 inoculation, tumors were injected intratumorally with MSCs-TRAIL. Moreover, VPA was injected 1 day after MSC transplantation and continued every day for 7 days (n=7/group). Analysis of survival was conducted using a log-rank test based on the Kaplan-Meier method. The survival of VPA and MSCs-TRAIL treated mice was significantly improved survival compared with each of the other three groups (P<0.05; Fig. 5B).

Tumor-bearing mice were established using U87-Luc cells, and tumor growth was measured. A notable decrease in bioluminescence was observed in mice treated with the
combined treatment compared with those treated with VPA or MSC-TRAIL alone (Fig. 5C). Furthermore, TUNEL assay was performed to evaluate the MSC-TRAIL-induced apoptosis in VPA-treated glioma cells. Increased apoptotic activity was detected in MSC-TRAIL and VPA-treated glioma tumor regions compared with each treatment alone (Fig. 5D).

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that MSC-based TRAIL gene therapy, combined with VPA, was a more effective treatment against glioma compared with a single treatment. It was also identified that the therapeutic capacity of MSC-TRAIL was improved due to the increased number of DRs and the migratory ability of MSCs in response to VPA. Enhancement in MSC tropism appeared to be mediated by the increased CXCR4 release from MSCs in VPA-treated tumors. These findings suggested that VPA increased the anti-tumor activity of MSC-based TRAIL therapy by enhancing MSC tropism and TRAIL-induced apoptosis.

A HDACi, VPA, has been reported to enhance TRAIL sensitivity by inducing DR expression in several types of tumors, which can provide a positive anti-tumor effect against glioma by activating DR pathways (36-39). Although the current study did not demonstrated whether VPA with TRAIL affects healthy cells, the results suggested that VPA with TRAIL decreased viability of glioma cell lines (U87 and U138), as well as increased the apoptotic effect...
in FACS and caspase3/7 activity. Thus, the present findings provide evidence for testing combination treatments in glioma cells, which may serve an important role in improving efficacy in glioma cell lines. The current study examined whether MSC-TRAIL treatment, combined with VPA, enhanced the potential therapeutic effect in glioma cells and an orthotopic xenograft mice model. Combined treatment with VPA and MSC-TRAIL significantly increased cytotoxicity in human glioma cells via TRAIL-induced apoptosis by upregulating DR5. However, treatment with individual agents weakly induced glioma cell cytotoxicity and DR5 upregulation. These results indicated that the VPA and MSC-TRAIL combination has the potential to increase cytotoxicity in glioma cells, overcoming the limitation of treatment with either alone.

In the present study, using MSCs as a delivery vehicle for TRAIL, along with VPA, it was observed that MSC viability and TRAIL secretion were affected. MSC viability or TRAIL release from engineered MSCs did not decrease significantly after exposure to TRAIL, even after combined treatment with VPA. These observations suggested that MSC-TRAIL released substantial quantities of TRAIL protein, so that the therapeutic gene was activated continuously and the effect was increased by VPA. The use of MSCs as delivery tools of anti-tumor agents has been reported for the treatment of gliomas (40,41). The migration of MSCs toward various tumor sites is associated with the release of several cytokines (9). The enhanced migration of MSCs toward tumors makes them a potential combination strategy for anti-tumor therapy; however, accomplishing a
sufficient number of tumor-targeted MSCs remains a problem. Recently, VPA was revealed to respond to SDF-1 and its receptor CXCR4, which are associated with bone marrow-derived cell migration, in a pathologic environment (42). The present study indicated that VPA treatment may be a potential a method to overcome the aforementioned-mentioned limitations of MSCs. The current results suggested that tumor treatment with VPA and MSC-TRAIL may enhance the migration of MSC-TRAIL toward glioma cells by enhancing CXCR4 expression in vitro. Furthermore, the in vivo observations demonstrated that VPA treatment with MSC-TRAIL increased migratory capacity toward tumor sites. Collectively, it was indicated that the increased expression of CXCR4 affected the migratory ability of MSCs; therefore, it may improve the therapeutic potential of MSC-based gene therapy.

In conclusion, the present results suggested that combining VPA and MSC-TRAIL may be an effective strategy in the treatment of malignant gliomas by enhancing apoptosis and migration. Therefore, the combination of VPA and MSC-TRAIL represents a potential therapeutic candidate for treating glioma. However, while the current study tested several possible means to increase TRAIL-induced apoptosis, the specific mechanism of sensitization were not identified. Thus, additional experiments are required to discover the specific mechanism of sensitization.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Funding

This research was supported by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Republic of Korea (grant no. HI18C2148) and the Basic Science Research Program through the National Research Foundation of Korea funded by the Ministry of Education (grant no. 2016R1D1A1B03931146).

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or evaluated during this study are included in this article.

Authors’ contributions

SAP performed experiments described in the study and collected the data. HRH analyzed the results and wrote the manuscript. SA prepared the BM-MSCs and edited the manuscript. CHR and SSJ contributed to the conception and design of the study. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Animal experiments were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of The Catholic University of Korea (approval no. 2017-0211-05).

Patient consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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