Multidrug Resistance Phenotype in the RMS-GR Human Rhabdomyosarcoma Cell Line Obtained after Polychemotherapy

Jose Prados,1 Consolación Melguizo,1 Juan Antonio Marchal,2 Celia Vélez,1 Luis Alvarez3 and Antonia Aránguena3, 4
1Department of Health Sciences, University of Almería, E-04120 Almería, Spain, 2Department of Health Sciences, University of Jaén, E-23071 Jaén, Spain and 3Basic Cardiovascular Research Section, Department of Morphological Sciences, School of Medicine, University of Granada, E-18071 Granada, Spain

Classical cytotoxic treatment of rhabdomyosarcoma (RMS), the most common soft tissue malignancy in children, is often accompanied by significant morbidity and poor response. Chemotherapy may induce multidrug resistance (MDR) associated with the expression of P-glycoprotein, a drug efflux pump which modifies the sensitivity of tumoral cells to drugs. To analyze MDR in RMS we used the RMS-GR cell line, obtained from an embryonal rhabdomyosarcoma treated in vivo with polychemotherapy. The RMS-GR cells showed cross-resistance to vincristine, doxorubicin and actinomycin D, the drugs of choice in the conventional treatment of RMS. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) analysis showed that these RMS cells overexpressed \textit{mdr1}/P-glycoprotein. The pattern of resistance and the level of P-glycoprotein expression were similar to those found in the resistant RMS TE.32.7.DAC cell line obtained in vitro. Southern blot analysis showed that \textit{mdr1} overexpression was not due to amplification of the gene. Our results showed that the \textit{in vivo} treatment of embryonal RMS may induce an MDR phenotype mediated by \textit{mdr1}/P-glycoprotein in RMS cells.

Key words: Multidrug resistance — \textit{mdr1} — P-Glycoprotein — Rhabdomyosarcoma

Cross-resistance between different cytostatic agents which are structurally and functionally dissimilar is a common phenomenon called multidrug resistance (MDR). This phenomenon can limit the treatment of human cancers with antineoplastic drugs, especially in sarcomas, which are characterized by their frequent refractoriness to chemotherapy. Although the mechanisms responsible for MDR are still not fully understood, classical MDR has often been associated with the expression of the multidrug resistance gene (\textit{mdr1}). The product of this gene, a 170-kDa membrane-associated glycoprotein (P-glycoprotein), is a member of the ABC superfamily of membrane proteins, which alter cellular drug transport and distribution.

Rhabdomyosarcoma (RMS) is the most common soft tissue sarcoma in patients younger than 21 years of age, accounting for 5–8% of all cases of childhood cancer. Although advances in modern multimodal treatment, especially polychemotherapy, have improved the survival rate, RMS is characterized by poor response to cytotoxic treatment and significant morbidity. More recently, the use of differentiation therapy mediated by cytotoxic drugs has been examined in RMS as a new approach to the treatment of these tumors. Cytotoxic treatment of RMS has shown that these tumoral cells can be induced to reenter the differentiation process, supporting the hypothesis that RMS arises from muscle cells which are arrested along the normal myogenic pathway to maturation. However, only partial differentiation has been detected in RMS cells after polychemotherapy \textit{in vivo} and \textit{in vitro}. Because P-glycoprotein acts as an energy-dependent drug efflux pump which lowers intracellular concentrations of the drug to sublethal levels, the failure of cytotoxic drugs to induce cytodestruction or complete differentiation has been related to the development of resistance. However, limited data have been published on drug resistance mechanisms in RMS during cytotoxic treatment.

We recently established a new RMS cell line (RMS-GR) from an embryonal rhabdomyosarcoma treated \textit{in vivo} with polychemotherapy, which showed a moderate degree of myogenic differentiation. Using this RMS cell line, we investigated the mechanism of resistance mediated by P-glycoprotein against cytotoxic drugs. Our results showed that classical cytotoxic therapy used in the treatment of embryonal RMS may induce an MDR phenotype mediated by \textit{mdr1}/P-glycoprotein in these tumoral cells, and that the pattern of resistance was similar to those developed by \textit{in vitro} exposure of RMS cells to drugs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Tissue samples and cell line Tumor tissue samples were obtained before polychemotherapy by intraoperative biopsy from the primary lesion of a tumor which was histopathologically classified as embryonal RMS. The patient was treated with polychemotherapy, had repeated relapses
and died 8 months later. The RMS-GR cell line, established from the treated embryonal RMS, and the resistant TE.32.7.DAC cell line, established by exposure to increasing concentrations of actinomycin D in the culture medium, were obtained in our laboratory. The drug-sensitive RMS cell line TE.32.7 was obtained from the ATCC (Rockville, MD) and used as a control for cytotoxicity experiments. The RMS cell lines were grown at 37°C in an atmosphere containing 5% CO₂, with Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium (MEM) (Gibco, Grand Island, NY), supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) (Gibco), 20 mM L-glutamine, 3.5 mg/μl sodium bicarbonate, 4.5 g/liter glucose, 250 U/ml ampicillin and 20 μg/ml streptomycin. The resistant cell line grew in medium containing 1.2×10⁻⁴ mM actinomycin D.

**PCR evaluation of mdr1 mRNA levels** Total RNA was obtained according to Maniatis et al. Amounts of mdr1 mRNA were estimated relative to β-actin mRNA using a modification of the RNA polymerase chain reaction (PCR) method. Reverse transcription was done with total cellular RNA as follows: each tube contained a total volume of 100 μl, composed of 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.3), 50 mM KCl, 3 mM MgCl₂, 0.01% gelatin, 800 μM each of the four deoxyribonucleotide triphosphates, and 1 μM mdr1 or β-actin primers. The primers used were: mdr1, 5’-primer nt 3007 to 3026, 3’-primer nt 3141 to 3160; and β-actin, 5’-primer nt 1854 to 1873, 3’-primer nt 2151 to 2170. One microgram of total cellular RNA and two units of reverse transcriptase (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA) were added to individual tubes and the reaction was allowed to proceed at 42°C for 45 min. Thermostable DNA polymerase (Pharmacia, Piscataway, NJ) was added to each tube (2.5 units), and mdr1 or β-actin cDNA products, if present, were amplified by PCR. The PCR products were loaded onto 2% agarose gels and visualized by ethidium bromide staining.

**Southern blot analysis of mdr1 gene amplification** Genomic DNA was isolated according to Maniatis et al. Twenty micrograms of DNA was digested with EcoRI (Amersham, Arlington Heights, IL) and electrophoresed on a 0.6% agarose gel. DNA was denatured and transferred to Hybond-N hybridization membranes (Amer sham). Hybridization of nylon membranes was done in 50% formamide, 5×SSC, 20 mM sodium phosphate (pH 6.5), 200 μg/ml sonicated salmon sperm DNA, 10% dextran sulfate plus 32P-labeled oligoprobes (10⁶ dpm/ml) recognizing mdr1 (cDNA sequence 3027–3049) and β-actin sequences (cDNA sequence 1874–1898). Intensity of the autoradiographic bands was determined by densitometry, and the signal of each sample was normalized to adjust for experimental variation in DNA loading by comparisons with the β-actin signal of each sample.

**Preparation of RMS-GR cells for FACScan** Briefly, 10⁶ RMS cells were transferred to universal screw cap tubes containing sterile phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), then washed and centrifuged at 225g for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded, and the washing and centrifugation steps were repeated twice. To determine P-glycoprotein expression, the cells were fixed with 2% formaldehyde for 10 min at -20°C and immediately washed three times in PBS at 4°C. The cells were permeabilized with Triton X-100 (0.05%) at room temperature for 10 min, then washed three times in PBS and once in distilled water. The cells were incubated for 30 min at 4°C with the monoclonal antibody (mAb) JSB-1 (5 μl), then washed twice with cold PBS and reincubated with fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC)-conjugated antimouse immunoglobulin (Sigma, St. Louis, MO) (1:50) for 30 min at 37°C. The expression of P-glycoprotein was assessed using the mAb C-219 according to the basic protocol recommended by the manufacturer (Centacor, Inc., Malvern, PA). The tumor tissue sample was cut into pieces and transferred to universal screw cap tubes containing PBS, then washed and centrifuged at 225g for 5 min; the supernatant was discarded. The washing and centrifugation steps were repeated twice, after which the whole tissue sample was placed in tubes containing 1 ml of 0.5% trypsin solution in PBS. The tubes were cooled on ice to 4°C and incubated for 4–8 h at this temperature, after which the trypsin was carefully removed. The rest of the procedure to determine P-glycoprotein expression with JSB-1 and C-219 was done as described above. The results were expressed as mean fluorescence.

**Cytotoxicity experiment** Briefly, RMS cells (2×10³/ml) were treated with different concentrations of actinomycin D, vincristine or doxorubicin in four replicate samples in the absence or presence of the verapamil at a nontoxic concentration (10 μM) for 1 h. After 72 h, cells were harvested by trypsinization and counted in a model ZBI Coulter counter (Hialeah, FL). Cell viability was determined with trypsin blue dye exclusion. The dose that inhibited 50% of growth (ID₅₀) was calculated from the curve for the percentage of cell survival at different concentrations of the drug.

**RESULTS**

**Determination of mdr1 expression by PCR** As shown in Fig. 1A, cell line RMS-GR clearly showed a high level of mdr1 mRNA expression, in contrast with the embryonal RMS tissue sample, in which no expression was found. RMS-GR cells yielded a slightly larger PCR product for mdr1 than those found in the resistant line TE.32.7.DAC, which was developed in vitro and used as a control. To demonstrate the integrity of the RNA preparations, PCR was done using β-actin primers. In all cases the expected product was easily identified, indicating that the absence of mdr1 transcripts in the RMS tissue and normal striated...
Determination of mdr1 gene amplification by Southern blot

Blot analyses of DNA from RMS-GR cells were compared with those of the tumor tissue to see whether gene amplification had occurred. Densitometric analyses of the Southern blot bands did not show mdr1 gene amplification in RMS-GR cells in comparison with DNA obtained from a biopsy of tumor tissue (Fig. 2A). Moreover, when we compared the genomes of the RMS-GR cells and TE.32.7.DAC resistant cells, the number of copies of the mdr1 gene was similar. The finding of identical amounts of DNA in all lanes was verified by hybridization of the filter with an oligoprobe that recognized β-actin (Fig. 2B).

Fig. 1. PCR analysis of mdr1 expression. A, Agarose gel electrophoresis with ethidium bromide staining of PCR products using primers for the amplification of an mdr1 fragment (154 bp) of cDNA. B, Agarose gel electrophoresis with ethidium bromide staining of PCR products using primers for the amplification of a β-actin fragment (317 bp) of cDNA. The lanes correspond to: 1, embryonal RMS tissue sample; 2, RMS-GR cell line; 3, TE.32.7.DAC resistant cell line.

Fig. 2. Southern blot analysis of the mdr1 gene. A, Hybridization of the blot with the mdr1 oligoprobe. B, Hybridization of the blot with the β-actin oligoprobe. The lanes correspond to: 1, embryonal RMS tissue sample; 2, RMS-GR cell line; 3, TE.32.7.DAC resistant cell line.

Fig. 3. Determination of P-glycoprotein expression by FACScan using the mAbs JSB-1 (■) and C-219 (□). A, embryonal RMS tissue sample; B, RMS-GR cell line; C, TE.32.7.DAC resistant cell line. JSB-1 and C-219 staining confirmed the MDR phenotype of cell lines RMS-GR and TE.32.7.DAC.
resistant TE.32.7.DAC cells, whereas the ID₅₀ for doxorubicin was one-ninth of this value. Both cell lines showed a higher degree of resistance to actinomycin-D in comparison with cell lines induced in vitro from an embryonal RMS treated with conventional chemotherapy.¹³) The RMS-GR cells showed a pattern of cross-resistance to chemically unrelated compounds, such as the antibiotics actinomycin-D and doxorubicin and the vinca alkaloid vincristine, which were used to treat the primary tumor. This pattern of resistance was similar to those found in the resistant TE.32.7.DAC cell line used as a control (Fig. 3). Analyses with the C-219 mAb confirmed the high expression of P-glycoprotein in both RMS-GR and TE.32.7.DAC cell lines. In contrast, P-glycoprotein expression was practically undetectable with both JSB-1 and C-219 mAbs in the tumor tissue (Fig. 3).

**Level of drug resistance in RMS-GR cells** Cytotoxicity experiments with the drugs used to treat the primary tumor (doxorubicin, vincristine and actinomycin-D) were done to determine the ID₅₀ of RMS-GR cells. Cultures of TE.32.7 and TE.32.7.DAC cell lines were used as controls. RMS-GR cells showed a pattern of cross-resistance similar to those found in the resistant RMS TE.32.7.DAC cell line obtained in vitro (Table I). However, RMS-GR cells showed an ID₅₀ for actinomycin-D six-fold as high as the resistant TE.32.7.DAC cells, whereas the ID₅₀ for doxorubicin was one-ninth of this value. Both cell lines showed a similar ID₅₀ for vincristine (Table I).

**Effect of the pharmacologic blockade of P-glycoprotein in RMS cells** To determine the action of P-glycoprotein as a drug efflux pump, we evaluated the change in drug cytotoxicity in RMS-GR cells after blockade with verapamil. An approximately 53-, 77-, and 9-fold increase in the effect of actinomycin-D, vincristine and doxorubicin, respectively, occurred in RMS-GR cells with verapamil as compared to the ID₅₀ values (Table I). Verapamil at the same nontoxic concentration greatly enhanced the cytotoxicity of drugs for resistant TE.32.7.DAC cell line. In contrast, slight modifications in drug cytotoxicity were found in the drug-sensitive TE.32.7 cell line (Table I).

**DISCUSSION**

Drug resistance remains a formidable obstacle to the successful treatment of different tumors. There have consequently been many attempts to produce cell lines resistant to antineoplastic agents as in vitro models to study MDR.²⁰) The in vitro exposure to progressively increasing amounts of a drug to obtain resistant cell lines induces cross-resistance to chemotherapeutic agents that differ in their chemical structure. However, the in vitro selection of these resistant cell lines may not be representative of the clinical situation.²⁰)

To analyze the effect of classical in vivo treatment in RMS, we used the RMS-GR cell line obtained in our laboratory from an embryonal RMS treated with conventional chemotherapy.¹³) The RMS-GR cells showed a pattern of cross-resistance to chemically unrelated compounds, such as the antibiotics actinomycin-D and doxorubicin and the vinca alkaloid vincristine, which were used to treat the primary tumor. This pattern of resistance was similar to those found in the resistant RMS TE.32.7.DAC cell line obtained in vitro,²⁴) and was also described in resistant lines derived from other tumor tissues.²⁰, ²¹) However, RMS-GR cells showed a higher degree of resistance to actinomycin-D in comparison with cell lines induced in vitro, and the resistance to this drug was always greater than resistance to vincristine or doxorubicin. The different levels of drug resistance may be related with the different in vivo²⁵) and in vitro²⁰) drug exposures, or with other mechanisms such as multidrug resistance-associated protein (MRP), which has been detected together with mdr 1 in a few resistant cell lines.²⁰) In fact, the MDR phenotype alone does not completely account for the resistance of human sarcomas.²⁴) However, our results support the hypothesis that after drug treatment of RMS in vivo, many cancer cells take advantage of their ability to develop a resistant phenotype characterized by mdr 1 overexpression.

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**Table I.** Comparison of the ID₅₀ in RMS-GR, TE.32.7.DAC and TE.32.7 Cells. Effect of Verapamil Treatment (10 µM) on Drug Cytotoxicity

| Drugs           | RMS-GR  | TE.32.7.DAC | TE.32.7 |
|-----------------|---------|-------------|---------|
|                 | Without verapamil | With verapamil | Without verapamil | With verapamil | Without verapamil | With verapamil |
| Actinomycin-D   | 175±13  | 3.3±0.35 (53) | 30.14±0.42 (77) | 0.9±0.09 (33.4) | 1.53±0.15 (1.9) | 0.8±0.07 (1.9) |
| Vincristine     | 5.8±0.51 | 0.075±0.01 (77) | 7.45±0.90 (4.3) | 1.7±0.08 (4.3) | 0.12±0.003 (1.4) | 0.085±0.02 (1.4) |
| Doxorubicin     | 17.2±3.6 | 1.8±0.17 (9) | 162.4±15 (70.4) | 2.3±0.026 (70.4) | 4.01±0.06 (2.4) | 1.62±0.21 (2.4) |

The values are means±SEM of four separate experiments. Values in parentheses, decrease (x-fold) in the ID₅₀ values as compared to the ID₅₀ obtained in the absence of verapamil.
sion and a pattern of resistance similar to those observed in vitro.

Analyses of the RMS-GR cell line indicated that mdr1 mRNA overexpression was slightly greater than that found in the resistant TE.32.7.DAC cell line obtained in vitro. The overexpression of P-glycoprotein has been widely described in solid tumors26, including sarcomas27, 28, as the mechanism which explains the decrease in the amount of drug that accumulates in the tumor cell cytoplasm. Our findings showed that mdr1 was involved in the resistance mechanism of RMS-GR cells, and strongly suggest that this mechanism may be responsible for the failure of treatment of primary embryonal RMS with classical cycles of cytotoxics. The demonstrated interrelationship between mdr1 and genes implicated in cellular differentiation29, 30 suggests that the presence of this resistance mechanism in RMS cells may be related to the failure of complete re-entry in the myogenic differentiation process induced by cytotoxic drugs (differentiation therapy). In fact, previous immunohistochemical analysis of RMS-GR cells showed only partial differentiation,31 whereas we have recently shown that low concentrations of actinomycin-D, which do not induce mdr1 overexpression, led to a terminal process of myogenic differentiation in RMS cells.31 The mechanism that leads to overexpression of P-glycoprotein may involve amplification, increased stability of the protein, or increased transcription without amplification.32 Studies in resistant tumor cells induced in vitro showed that mdr1 is often amplified.30, 33 However, analyses of the mechanism of drug resistance in RMS-GR cells demonstrated that the high expression of mdr1/P-glycoprotein was not due to gene amplification.

We showed that in vivo treatment of embryonal RMS may induce an MDR phenotype mediated by mdr1/P-glycoprotein in RMS cells. This phenotype decreases the cytotoxicity of the different drugs used in classical RMS therapy. This pattern of cross-resistance, which was similar to patterns found in resistant cell lines that developed in vitro, suggests that resistance mediated by mdr1 may be the mechanism responsible for the failure of embryonal RMS treatment with cytotoxics. This resistance mechanism may also be related to the partial differentiation found in RMS treated with cytotoxic drugs, although this hypothesis needs further investigation.

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