Circulating Dickkof-1 as a potential biomarker associated with the prognosis of patients with rheumatoid arthritis-associated interstitial lung disease

Jing Xue1, Yu-Jiao Wang2, He-Chun Xia3, Xue-Yun Liang1, Jie-Da Cui2, Min Yu4, Xiao-Ming Liu5, Shu-Hong Chi6, Juan Chen2

1Institute of Human Stem Cell Research, General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750004, China;
2Department of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750004, China;
3Department of Neurosurgery, General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750004, China;
4Department of Nephrology, General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750004, China;
5College of Life Science, Ningxia University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750021, China;
6Department of Rheumatology, General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, Yinchuan, Ningxia 750004, China.

To the Editor: Interstitial lung disease (ILD) is a common extra-articular manifestation in patients with connective tissue diseases (CTDs), including rheumatoid arthritis (RA), which contributes significantly to the disease burden and excess mortality. It has been well-recognized that RA-associated ILD (RA-ILD) patients have a threefold higher risk of death than RA patients without ILD. However, among approximately 30% of ILD patients, the specific diagnosis cannot be made from clinical findings and high-resolution computed tomography features, resulting in diagnostic and management uncertainty. Noninvasive blood biomarkers with diagnostic and prognostic utility may, therefore, provide alternative information for identifying vulnerable patients, especially in clinical settings with limited medical resources. Dickkof-1 (DKK1) protein level was found to increase in lung tissue specimens from donors and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF) patients. In this context, the DKK1 was able to alter Wnt-induced epithelial cell proliferation in a dose-dependent manner, implying clinical relevance of DKK1 in both ILD and RA.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, and written informed consent was received prior to examination.

In this study, 102 patients (34 males and 68 females) with RA, including 35 RA patients with ILD patients and 67 RA patients without ILD, according to the criteria classification were recruited. All the patients visited the General Hospital of Ningxia Medical University, China from December 2010 to January 2019. The clinical, laboratory, radiographic, and outcome data of all enrollments were collected from medical records and the survival status was obtained from medical records and/or telephone interview.

Concentration of serum DKK1 was measured using commercially available enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kits per manufacturer’s instructions. The ELISA kit for DKK1 was a product of Elsbio Inc. (Wuhan, China). For detection of DKK1 protein, the undiluted serum was directly detected with stock suspension.

Statistical analysis of data was performed using PRISM (version 5; GraphPad Software, La Jolla, CA, USA) and/or SPSS for Windows (version 18.0; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). One-way analysis of variance or Kruskal–Wallis test was employed for comparing the means of more than two groups, and the t-test was conducted for comparison between two groups. Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was used to determine the best cut-off value and validity of certain variable. The multivariate logistic regression analysis was employed with SPSS software.

Out of the 35 patients with RA-ILD, the mean age was 60.4 ± 1.6 years (range: 50.0–80.0 years), 18 (51.4%) females and 17 males (48.6%), and the average duration of diseases was 10.1 ± 1.6 years (range: 0.4–40.0 years) at the time of sample collected (mean [SEM]). The majority of...
5.9 ± average 28-joint disease activity score (DAS28) was
ethnic population was Chinese Han (95%). Out of the
patients, 22 were current smokers (55.0%), and the
average 28-joint disease activity score (DAS28) was
5.9 ± 1.1 (range: 4.0–7.7). The average swollen joint
count and arthralgic count were 6 (range: 3–12) and
8 (range: 4–12), respectively. At the time of the ILD
diagnosed, patients were treated with conventional
synthetic and biologic agents: nonsteroidal anti-inflamma-

tory drugs (NSAIDs) \( n = 7, 20\% [7/35] \), glucocorticoids
\( n = 4, 11.4\% [4/35] \), MTX \( n = 7, 20.0\% [7/35] \), and
DMARDs \( n = 17, 48.6\% [17/35] \). Patients with ILD were
significantly more likely to have ever smoked and/or were
current smokers, regardless of gender or RA duration.

To determine whether circulating DKK1 protein was
correlated with RA-ILD patients, the concentration of
DKK1 protein was evaluated. DKK1 concentrations in sera
of patients with RA-ILD (mean [SEM] 0.90 [0.17] ng/ml)
were significantly increased as compared with RA patients
without ILD (mean [SEM] 0.34 [0.03] ng/ml, \( P < 0.0001 \))
and healthy subjects (mean [SEM] 0.28 [0.03] ng/ml,
\( P < 0.0001 \)).

The above-mentioned data showed that plasma DKK1
protein was more abundant in RA-ILD patients in
comparison with that of RA patients without ILD and
healthy subjects, the correlation of DKK1 protein and
serologic features were analyzed. Interestingly, the DKK1
protein was positively correlated with CRP \( (r = 0.4837,
P = 0.0032) \). Notably, the mean CRP level \( (45.5 ± 7.90
\text{mg/L vs.} 20.89 ± 4.03 \text{mg/L,} P = 0.0086, n = 15 \) in the RA
with ILD group over the 9-year follow-up period was
significantly higher than that in the RA control group.

An increased circulating DKK1 protein was detected in
RA-ILD patients than in non-ILD RA patients and healthy
subjects, suggesting DKK1 may have a clinical value in
identifying ILD and monitoring ILD progression in RA
patients. To evaluate the significance of serum DKK1
protein in clinical settings, we analyzed the sensitivities
and specificities of DKK1 for identifying RA patients with
ILD. The area under the curve (AUC) was 0.726 (SE:
0.053; range: 0.622–0.830; threshold: 0.78) for DKK1

Collectively, this study analyzed the correlation of
circulating DKK1 and clinical manifestations in 35
RA-ILD patients. These data suggest that the circulating
DKK1 protein may serological biomarker with predicting
values in RA-ILD, which warrants further investigation in
clinical settings. However, this study has several limita-
tions, including the small size of RA-ILD samples studied,
the lack of complete follow-up data, such as pulmonary
function and/or BALF testing. Additionally, most RA-ILD
patients do not undergo surgical lung biopsy to confirm
the pathological type. These limitations may partially
explain the discrepancies between our study and other
studies. Therefore, these findings require further con-
firmation in a larger and more selected population in the
future.

Figure 1: Risk factors for mortality in RA with ILD in uni- and multi-variate analysis. (A) Threshold and AUC values of DKK1 level from the area under the receiver-operating characteristic curves, ordered by decreasing adjusted odds ratio. (B) A forest plot showing the association of clinical risk factors and mortality in rheumatoid arthritis–interstitial lung disease (ILD) patients analyzed by binary logistic regression analysis. (C) Kaplan-Meier survival curves of DKK1 positive group (red, \( n = 15 \)) and DKK1 negative group (blue, \( n = 12 \)) showing that comparisons across two groups demonstrated significant differences in survival estimates between groups (\( n = 27, P = 0.04 \)). Statistical differences were observed between DKK1 positive and DKK1 negative groups (2.7 vs. 5.1 years, \( P < 0.001 \)). OR: odds ratio; CI: confidence interval.
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Conflicts of interest

None.

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