Characterization of High-grade Neuroendocrine Tumors of the Lung in Relation to\textit{menin} Mutations

Nobuhiro Haruki,1, 5 Yasushi Yatabe,3 William D. Travis,6 Shuji Nomoto,1 Hirotaka Osada,1, 2 Shigeo Nakamura,1 Akimasa Nakao,4 Yoshitaka Fujii5 and Takashi Takahashi1, 2, 7

1Laboratory of Ultrastructure Research and 2Pathophysiology Unit, Aichi Cancer Center Research Institute, 3Department of Pathology and Clinical Laboratories, Aichi Cancer Center Hospital, 1-1 Kanokoden, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya 464-8681, 4Department of Surgery II, Nagoya University School of Medicine, Tsuroma-cho, Showa-ku, Nagoya 466-8560, 5Department of Surgery II, Nagoya City University School of Medicine, Mizuho-cho, Mizuho-ku, Nagoya 467-8601 and 6Department of Pulmonary and Mediastinal Pathology, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Washington, DC 20306-6000, USA

It has been suggested that mutations in the \textit{menin} gene play a role in the development of multiple endocrine neoplasia type 1 (MEN1)-associated and of sporadic forms of low- and intermediate-grade neuroendocrine tumors of the lung. In the present study, eight tumor specimens of large cell neuroendocrine carcinoma (LCNEC) and 13 of small cell lung cancer (SCLC), which represent a high-grade category of neuroendocrine tumors, were examined for the potential involvement of \textit{menin} alterations as well as for the expression of various neuroendocrine markers and p53 and Rb abnormalities. All specimens expressed multiple neuroendocrine markers as expected and almost invariably carried p53 and Rb alterations. Unexpectedly, however, mutations in the \textit{menin} gene were not detected in any of the high-grade neuroendocrine tumors examined. We thus conclude that \textit{menin} mutations do not play a crucial role in the pathogenesis of high-grade subsets, in contrast to their suggested significant role in the development of low- and intermediate-grade subsets. Interestingly, loss of heterozygosity (LOH) in the \textit{menin} gene appeared to be more prevalent in LCNEC (50\%) than in SCLC (22\%), suggesting a possible distinction between SCLC and LCNEC.

Key words: Large cell neuroendocrine tumor — Small cell lung cancer — Carcinoid tumor — Multiple endocrine neoplasia type 1 — Menin

Neuroendocrine tumors of the lung represent a wide spectrum of morphologic types, ranging from typical carcinoids (TC) with low malignant potential to small cell lung cancer (SCLC) with the most rapid and disseminated growth. In a four-category scheme for classification of neuroendocrine tumors proposed by Travis \textit{et al.,}\textsuperscript{1} lower-grade neuroendocrine tumors with uniform morphology and minimal or no mitotic activity are termed TCs and have excellent prognosis, while atypical carcinoid (AC) tumors are defined as a more malignant variant. The remaining two types of tumors with neuroendocrine morphological characteristics but manifesting marked cellularity, abundant mitotic activity, and prominent necrosis are designated as high grade and are subdivided into either large cell neuroendocrine tumor (LCNEC) or SCLC, depending on cell size and nuclear morphology.

Debelenko \textit{et al.} recently reported that two of eight sporadic TCs and three of four sporadic ACs carried somatic mutations in the \textit{menin} gene,\textsuperscript{2} which had originally been cloned as a tumor suppressor gene responsible for multiple endocrine neoplasia type 1 (MEN1).\textsuperscript{3, 4} MEN1 is an autosomal dominant familial cancer syndrome characterized by parathyroid, enteropancreatic and anterior pituitary tumors as well as other tumor types including carcinoids of the lung.\textsuperscript{5} For this reason, germline \textit{menin} mutations mean extreme risk of occurrence of lung carcinoids in the MEN1 family,\textsuperscript{3, 4, 6} while acquisition of somatic \textit{menin} mutations appears to play a role in the development of sporadic lung carcinoids.\textsuperscript{2} In general, genetic alterations at a given locus are more prevalent in higher-grade than in lower-grade tumors, and show an association with biologically more malignant behavior within a spectrum of tumors.\textsuperscript{7} In view of the higher prevalence of \textit{menin} mutations in AC than in TC,\textsuperscript{2} \textit{menin} alterations could be expected to be present even more frequently in high-grade neuroendocrine tumors of the lung, i.e., LCNEC and SCLC.

In the present study, we examined eight LCNEC and 13 SCLC tumor specimens for the potential involvement of \textit{menin} alterations in the pathogenesis of high-grade neuroendocrine tumors of the lung. In addition, we immunohistochemically examined LCNEC and SCLC tumors for the presence of neuroendocrine marker expression and other genetic changes, including p53 and Rb abnormalities, to make our study more comprehensive.
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Histologic examination Histologic slides were independently reviewed by two pathologists (Y.Y. and W.D.T.), and were classified as SCLC or LCNEC according to the modified criteria proposed by Travis et al.8) DNAs were then extracted from the tumor specimens, which had been stored at −80°C until use. In addition, DNAs of three MEN1-associated tumors (one insulinoma of the pancreas and two parathyroid tumors) were extracted from archival, formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded tissues.

Polymerase chain reaction-single strand conformational polymorphism (PCR-SSCP) analysis The entire coding sequence and exon-intron junctions of the menin gene were examined by means of PCR-SSCP analysis, as described previously.9) Oligonucleotide primer sequences and conditions for PCR amplification are given in Table I. Following PCR amplification in the presence of [32P]-dCTP, PCR products were electrophoretically separated on 6% non-denaturing polyacrylamide gels both at 4°C without glycerol and at room temperature in the presence of 5% glycerol. Distinctly shifted bands were excised from the PCR-SSCP gels, amplified by PCR, polished and then cloned into the EcoRV site of pBluescript SKII(−) (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA), and the resultant plasmid DNAs prepared from multiple clones were sequenced. PCR products of the corresponding normal lung DNAs were also subjected to PCR-SSCP and sequencing analyses.

Immunohistological examination Immunohistochemical examination was carried out by applying the standard avidin-biotin-peroxidase complex method, as described previously.10) The antibodies used were: anti-CD56 monoclonal antibody (mAb) (123C3) (Zymed, South San Francisco, CA); anti-synaptophysin polyclonal antibody (Dako); anti-chromogranin A polyclonal antibody (Dako); anti-p53 mAb (DO-7) (Dako); anti-Rb (3H9) mAb (Medical and Biological Laboratories, Nagoya); and anti-Ki-67 (MIB1) mAb (Medical and Biological Laboratories). Antigens were retrieved, except for synaptophysin and chromogranin A, by means of microwave treatment in citrate buffer (pH 6.8).

RESULTS

The present study identified eight cases as LCNEC and 13 as SCLC (Table II). In addition to the morphologic examination, immunohistological analysis of the expression of neuroendocrine markers and tumor suppressor proteins was also performed in a total of 19 cases. The majority of the cases showed expression of both CD56 and synaptophysin, while expression of chromogranin A was detected in seven of the 17 cases examined. Aberrant p53 expression was present in seven of eight LCNEC and in six of eight SCLC, while all but one LCNEC tumor lacked the Rb protein. These immunohistochemical findings were consistent with the neuroendocrine morphologies of the tumors examined and their highly aggressive nature.

Eight LCNEC and 13 SCLC tumor specimens were then examined for the presence of menin mutations with the aid of 12 overlapping sets of PCR primers, which covered the entire coding exons and adjacent splicing junctions. A distinct mobility shift was detected in the analysis of fragment 10 in a single case (case 2, Fig. 1). Subsequent sequence analysis revealed that the mobility shift in this case was due to a nucleotide substitution at codon 503 (GGC to GAC), which resulted in an amino acid substitution of aspartic acid for glycine (Table III). This change was also detected in normal lung DNA of case 2. Results of an additional screening of 143 normal lung DNAs indicated that none of them exhibited the same mobility shift as case 2, which suggests that it may represent either a
very rare polymorphism or a germline mutation. In addition, we observed mobility shifts in fragments 1, 9 and 11 at relatively high frequency. Sequence analysis showed the presence of nucleotide substitutions in intron 1, exon 9 and exon 10, which corresponded to common polymorphisms known to exist within the examined genomic regions in the Japanese population (Table III).

To ascertain that our PCR-SSCP analysis had sufficient sensitivity, we also analyzed three MEN1-associated tumors, all of which showed distinct mobility shifts (Fig. 1), thus suggesting the presence of mutations in the menin gene. Sequence analysis revealed that these distinct mobility shifts were the result of a missense mutation at codon 45 in the case of MEN1-2, a nonsense mutation at codon 312 in MEN1-3, and a 1-bp deletion mutation at codons 397–398 in MEN1-1 (Table IV). It should be noted that the MEN1-associated germline mutation in MEN1-1, which has not been reported previously in the Japanese population,

### DISCUSSION

The present study was initiated to gain an insight into the molecular pathogenesis of high-grade neuroendocrine lung tumors. The pathological classification itself of pulmonary neuroendocrine tumors is often difficult and needs to be executed with care, while extensive studies of this tumor type have been hampered by the rarity of LCNEC. The 13 SCLC and eight LCNEC analyzed in the present study were defined by strict application of the modified diagnostic criteria proposed by Travis et al. in 1998 to ensure reproducibility of the results obtained for this complex subject.

**Table II. Immunohistological Characterization of High-grade Neuroendocrine Tumors**

| Case | Histology | NE differentiation | TSG status | Proliferation index |
|------|-----------|--------------------|------------|--------------------|
|      |           | CD56   | Syn<sup>b</sup> | ChgA<sup>d</sup> | p53<sup>e</sup> | Rb | Mitosis | MIB1 (%) |
| 1    | LCNEC     | ++<sup>o</sup> | ++<sup>o</sup> | +<sup>o</sup> | +<sup>o</sup> | –<sup>o</sup> | 76<sup>b</sup> | 55 |
| 2    | LCNEC     | ++     | ++     | –     | +     | –     | 70 | 43 |
| 3    | LCNEC     | ++     | ++     | –     | +     | –     | 80 | 57 |
| 4    | LCNEC     | +      | –      | –     | +     | –     | 65 | 78 |
| 5    | LCNEC     | +      | +      | –     | –     | +     | 21 | 17 |
| 6    | LCNEC     | ++     | ++     | +     | –     | –     | 24 | 16 |
| 7    | LCNEC     | ++     | ++     | ++    | –     | –     | 72 | 52 |
| 8    | LCNEC     | +      | –      | –     | +     | –     | 45 | 31 |
| 9    | SCLC      | ND<sup>i</sup> | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND |
| 10   | SCLC      | ++     | +      | +     | –     | –     | 81 | 62 |
| 11   | SCLC      | ++     | +      | –     | –     | –     | 76 | 58 |
| 12   | SCLC      | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND | 92 | ND |
| 13   | SCLC      | –      | +      | –     | ND | ND | 79 | ND |
| 14   | SCLC      | ++     | ND     | ND | –     | –     | 120 | 59 |
| 15   | SCLC      | ++     | ++     | –     | +     | –     | ND | 76 |
| 16   | SCLC      | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND | ND |
| 17   | SCLC      | ++     | ++     | ++    | +     | –     | 68 | 44 |
| 18   | SCLC      | +      | +      | –     | +     | –     | 98 | 58 |
| 19   | SCLC      | ++     | ++     | –     | –     | –     | 48 | 49 |
| 20   | SCLC      | ++     | +      | –     | –     | –     | 59 | 48 |
| 21   | SCLC      | ++     | ++     | +     | –     | –     | 64 | 42 |

<sup>a</sup>) NE, neuroendocrine.  
<sup>b</sup>) TSG, tumor suppressor gene.  
<sup>c</sup>) Syn, synaptophysin.  
<sup>d</sup>) ChgA, chromogranin A.  
<sup>e</sup>) +, strongly positive; +, positive; –, negative.  
<sup>f</sup>) +, >10% positivity; –, <10% positivity.  
<sup>g</sup>) +, presence of positive cells; –, absence of positive cells.  
<sup>h</sup>) Mitotic figures per 10 high power fields.  
<sup>i</sup>) ND, not determined.
In general, genetic alterations present in less malignant subsets are more prevalent in higher-grade subsets of the same tumor spectrum, and this appears to be true also in neuroendocrine tumors of the lung. Abnormal p53 expression and Rb inactivation were previously reported to be rare in low- and intermediate-grade neuroendocrine tumors. In contrast, and consistent with previous notions, we observed very frequent alterations in these tumor suppressor genes in both LCNEC and SCLC high-grade neuroendocrine tumors. Inactivation of the menin gene has been reported to be present in low- and intermediate-grade neuroendocrine lung tumors. Interestingly, however, the present study yielded unexpected results for the frequencies of menin mutations, i.e., mutations in the menin gene were not detected in 21 high-grade neuroendocrine tumors. The present finding thus indicates that in contrast to the previously reported high incidence in lower-grade neuroendocrine tumors, menin mutations are rare, if present at all, in high-grade neuroendocrine tumors, although epigenetic down-regulation of menin remains to be studied in such tumors. It can be assumed that our PCR-SSCP analysis was sufficiently sensitive for the detection of nucleotide substitutions in the menin gene, since it could detect all common polymorphisms known in the Japanese population. In addition, germline mutations, including a previously unreported one in the case of MEN1-1, were detected in all of the MEN1-associated tumors examined here. As to the extremely rare (1 in 328) allele identified in case 2 (LCNEC), we note that this substitution has never been reported in the Japanese population thus far, although it remains to be determined whether this rare allele reflects a germline mutation resulting in the impairment of menin functioning. We thus conclude that menin mutations do not play a crucial role in the pathogenesis of high-grade subsets, in contrast to the significant role in the development of low- and intermediate-grade subsets as stated by Debelenko et al.

The present findings consequently imply that, from the genetic point of view, LCNEC and SCLC may be regarded as a distinct subgroup within the spectrum of neuroendocrine tumors of the lung, while TC and AC form the other subgroup. Using polymorphisms within the coding region of the menin gene, we could detect LOH at 11q13 in only two of nine (22%) SCLC (data not shown), which is consistent with the previously reported results of a comparative genomic hybridization analysis, although the observed low incidence contradicts the results reported by Onuki et al. Our finding is unlikely to be the result of contamination with normal cells, since we could clearly detect LOH on 3p in all but one SCLC tumor (unpublished observation). Although the number of LCNEC studied was not sufficiently large to draw any definitive conclusions, it is interesting to note that LOH in the menin gene was present in three of six (50%) LCNEC cases heterozygous for the polymorphisms of the menin gene, suggesting a possible distinction between SCLC and LCNEC. In this regard, it has been suggested that an as yet unidentified tumor suppressor gene may reside in the region telomeric...
to the menin locus, based on an analysis of parathyroid tumors\textsuperscript{24}) and gastrinomas\textsuperscript{25}) occurring in MEN1 families as well as of both MEN1-associated and sporadic endocrine tumors.\textsuperscript{26, 27})

In summary, accumulating evidence including the present observations suggests the presence of both homo- and heterogeneity within the spectrum of neuroendocrine tumors of the lung. Further studies are warranted to better understand the biology and the molecular pathogenesis of this interesting type of lung tumor.

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