A new pedigree with thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy in which delayed fibrinolysis is partially attenuated by co-inherited TAFI deficiency

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Funding Information
British Heart Foundation, Grant/Award Number: PG/15/82/31721; Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, Grant/Award Number: 1137717N; Medical Research Council, Grant/Award Number: MR/K023489/1

Abstract

Background: Thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy (TM-AC) is a rare bleeding disorder in which a single reported p.Cys537* variant in the thrombomodulin gene THBD causes high plasma thrombomodulin (TM) levels. High TM levels attenuate thrombin generation and delay fibrinolysis.

Objectives: To report the characteristics of pedigree with a novel THBD variant causing TM-AC, and co-inherited deficiency of thrombin-activatable fibrinolysis inhibitor (TAFI).

Patients/methods: Identification of pathogenic variants in hemostasis genes by next-generation sequencing and case recall for deep phenotyping.

Results: Pedigree members with a previously reported THBD variant predicting p.Pro496Argfs*10 and chain truncation in TM transmembrane domain had abnormal bleeding and greatly increased plasma TM levels. Affected cases had attenuated thrombin generation and delayed fibrinolysis similar to previous reported TM_AC cases with THBD p.Cys537*. Coincidentally, some pedigree members also harbored a stop-gain variant in CPB2 encoding TAFI. This reduced plasma TAFI levels but was asymptomatic. Pedigree members with TM-AC caused by the p.Pro496Argfs*10 THBD variant and also TAFI deficiency had a partially attenuated delay in fibrinolysis, but no change in the defective thrombin generation.

Conclusions: These data extend the reported genetic repertoire of TM-AC and establish a common molecular pathogenesis arising from high plasma levels of TM extracellular domain. The data further confirm that the delay in fibrinolysis associated with TM-AC is directly linked to increased TAFI activation. The combination of the
1 | INTRODUCTION

The transmembrane protein thrombomodulin (TM) critically regulates blood coagulation by localizing thrombin to the vascular endothelial surface enabling the activation of several key substrates. The targets of the TM-thrombin complex include protein C, which after conversion to activated protein C (APC) limits further thrombin generation by inactivating coagulation factors Va and VIIIa. TM also acts as a cofactor in thrombin-mediated activation of the procarboxypeptidase thrombin-activatable fibrinolysis inhibitor (TAFI) to activated TAFI (TAFIa). TAFIa attenuates the binding of tissue-type plasminogen activator (tPA) and plasminogen to fibrin by cleaving carboxyterminal lysines from partially degraded fibrin, thereby downregulating fibrinolysis.

The physiological importance of TM is illustrated by the newly recognized autosomal dominant bleeding disorder thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy (TM-AC), which to date has been associated with a single p.Cys537* variant in the thrombomodulin gene THBD. This truncation variant results in excessive shedding of large quantities of the functionally active TM extracellular domain into plasma. This results in a significant bleeding diathesis because the high TM levels promote excessive generation of APC, which suppresses normal thrombin generation. TM-AC is also associated with delayed fibrinolysis that can be corrected by inhibition of TAFI, suggesting that the surplus TM in plasma stimulates thrombin-mediated TAFI activation.

Here we report on a TM-AC pedigree with abnormal bleeding associated with a previously unreported THBD variant. We also describe how some pedigree members also harbor an independently inherited loss-of-function rare variant in CPB2 resulting in reduction in TAFI levels and TAFIa generation and causing amelioration of the delayed fibrinolysis associated with TM-AC.

2 | METHODS

The study pedigree was identified in a systematic inspection of genotypes in the National Institute for Health Research BioResource–Rare Diseases, which included a collection of 1472 index cases with unexplained bleeding or platelet disorders enrolled between 2012 and 2016. Informed consent for enrolment and recall for extended phenotyping was in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (UK Research Ethics Committee approval 13/EE/0325). Procedures for collection of standardized phenotype terms, whole genome sequencing, and variant calling were as previously reported. DNA sequencing for co-segregation analysis was performed using Sanger sequencing and the ThromboGenomics platform. Thrombin generation and measurement of soluble TM, TAFI, and TAFIa concentrations were performed as described previously. Thrombin generation was initiated with 1 pmol/L tissue factor in the presence of 4 µmol/L phospholipids. The clot lysis assays were performed using plasma diluted to 30% in 10 mmol/L Tris, 140 mmol/L NaCl, and 0.01% Tween-20 pH 7.4 and clot formation initiated with 10.6 mmol/L CaCl₂ and 0.1 U/mL thrombin (Sigma Aldrich) in the presence of 16 mmol/L phospholipids (Rossix) and 300 pmol/L tPA (Genentech).

3 | RESULTS/DISCUSSION

3.1 Detection and annotation of the THBD and CPB2 variants

Within the study collection, there was a single index case (II.2, Figure 1A) with a previously unreported high-impact THBD variant, similar to the variant in previously reported pedigrees with TM-AC. This was a monoallelic single nucleotide deletion annotated as THBD c.1487delC, p.Pro496Argfs*10 relative to canonical transcript ENST00000377103.2. This predicted frameshift from codon 496 and a stop gain at codon 505 will result in loss of the final 11 residues of the TM extracellular domain, as well as the transmembrane domain and the intracellular domain (UniProtKB P07204; Figure 1B). Inspection of the coding regions of genes encoding known interactors of TM within the fibrinolysis pathway revealed that case II.2 also harbored a monoallelic variant in CPB2, encoding TAFI, annotated as c.340G>A; p.Arg114* relative to the canonical transcript

KEYWORDS
bleeding, fibrinolysis, genomics, TAFI (carboxypeptidase B2 [CPB2]/procarboxypeptidase U [proCPU]), thrombomodulin
ENST00000181383.10, which was absent in reference datasets. This variant predicts premature truncation of the TAFI protein from residue 114, before the catalytic domain (residues 115-423), thereby preventing functional TAFI expression from this allele (Figure 1C). The THBD variant p.Pro496Argfs*10 was identified in five further pedigree members (II.3, III.2, III.3, IV.1, and IV.2; Figure 1A). Only case II.3 also harbored CPB2 p.Arg114*. A single pedigree member (III.4) harbored CPB2 p.Arg114* but not THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 (Figure 1A).

3.2 Characteristics of the TM-AC cases

The adult cases with THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 (II.2, II.3, III.2, and III.3) all reported bleeding (median International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis [ISTH] bleeding score 6 versus 0 in the unaffected adult pedigree member, Figure 1D), predominantly after dental procedures and trauma similar to previously reported TM-AC pedigrees, but also after childbirth. Abnormal bleeding was not reported for the two cases in generation IV who were all aged 14 years or younger at enrolment and who had not undergone invasive dental or surgical procedures. Coinheritance of CPB2 p.Arg114* (cases II.2 and II.3) had no discernible effect on the frequency or severity of bleeding. Plasma coagulation times, clotting factor levels, and platelet function testing in the THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 cases were normal (data not shown). Consistent with previous reports of TM-AC, plasma TM levels were increased by at least two orders of magnitude in all pedigree members with THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 (Figure 1D). Plasma TAFI levels were
almost two-fold lower in the three cases harboring CPB2 p.Arg114* compared to cases without this genotype (mean ± standard error of the mean [SEM] 542 ± 81 versus 1025 ± 113 U/L, Figure 1D), consistent with absent expression of the CPB2 allele harboring the p.Arg114* variant.

To investigate potential interactions between the THBD and CPB2 genotypes, we compared thrombin generation in plasma from adult pedigree members and control plasma (National Institute for Biological Standards and Control standard plasma) as previously reported.3 The TM-AC cases (II.2, III.2, and III.3) demonstrated a reduction in endogenous thrombin potential and reduced peak thrombin concentration (Figure 1D). The differences in thrombin generation between cases and controls were smaller following initiation with 5 pmol/L tissue factor but the overall trend was the same (data not shown). These data with THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 echo those of the previous descriptions of TM-AC associated with the p.Cys537* variant and are consistent with increased generation of APC and excessive suppression of thrombin generation.3-6 The presence of the additional CPB2 p.Arg114* variant in the TM-AC case II.2 had no discernible effect on thrombin generation.

3.3 | The CPB2 p.Arg114* variant downregulates fibrinolysis

The effect of the THBD and CPB2 variants on tPA-mediated fibrinolysis was analyzed by monitoring the turbidity of plasma samples after clot formation with 0.1 U/mL thrombin and calcium. In vitro plasma clot lysis was significantly delayed in samples from TM-AC cases III.2 and III.3 harboring the THBD variant alone (mean ± SEM time to 50% lysis [CLT] 223 ± 5.2 and 221 ± 5.9 minutes respectively versus 85 ± 1.9 minutes in control; P < .0001; Figure 2A, B), similar to previously reported cases with TM-AC.3 In the TM-AC case II.2, who also harbors the CPB2 p.Arg114* variant, fibrinolysis was delayed compared to control plasma, but to a lesser extent than the TM-AC cases without CPB2 p.Arg114* (CLT 127 ± 1.6 minutes, respectively versus 85 ± 1.9 minutes in control; P < .0001; Figure 2A, B).

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2** Delayed fibrinolysis in thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy. A, Representative turbidity curves showing clot lysis in platelet-free plasma from controls or thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy (TM-AC) cases. B, 50% lysis times were calculated from triplicate plasma samples using Shiny App for calculating clot lysis times.17 Experiments were performed with and without 25 µg/mL potato tuber carboxypeptidase inhibitor (PTCI, Sigma Aldrich) or 65 µg/mL MA-T12D11.11 Data shown represent the mean ± standard error of the mean of the turbidity measurements. ***P < .001 ****P < .0001 case versus control in plasma without thrombin-activatable fibrinolysis inhibitor (TAFI) inhibitors. Statistical significance was determined by one-way analysis of variance with Bonferroni’s post hoc test. C, Representative profiles of biphasic activated TAFI (TAFIa) generation during in vitro clot lysis from controls or TM-AC cases. Clot lysis was performed as in (A) and simultaneously a second identical experiment was performed where at defined time points samples were collected and aprotinin (130 µg/mL) and trifluoroacetate salt (PPACK; 5 µmol/L) were added to stop TAFIa generation, after which the samples were placed on ice. Peak 1 (P1) and peak 2 (P2) correspond to thrombin-thrombomodulin-mediated and plasmin-mediated TAFIa generation respectively. D, TAFIa activity levels for P1 and P2 of TAFI generation during in vitro clot lysis for all adult pedigree members. Data represents mean ± standard deviation (n = 6).
Clot lysis was enhanced in case III.4 who had the CPB2 p.Arg114* variant but did not carry the THBD mutation (CLT 66 ± 0.4 versus 85 ± 1.9 minutes in control, P < .0001; Figure 2A, B).

To explore whether the modulatory effect of CPB2 p.Arg114* on fibrinolysis was a consequence of a reduction in the TAFI level, TAFIa concentration was measured during in vitro clot lysis. This model enabled clear resolution of two peaks of TAFIa formation, generated first by TM/thrombin (P1) and subsequently by plasmin (P2; Figure 2C). In the TM-AC cases III.2 and III.3 who had the THBD variant alone, P1 was dramatically elevated almost 50-fold over controls. In pedigree members II.2 and II.3 that harbor both the THBD and CPB2 p.Arg114* there was approximately a 50% reduction in P1 in the TAFIa generation curves compared to those members of the pedigree with THBD only (Figure 2C, D). P2 was diminished in all TM-AC cases, reflecting consumption of plasma TAFI in the first peak by excessive TM/thrombin-dependent activation. Both phases of TAFIa generation were significantly reduced in case III.4 with the CPB2 p.Arg114* variant alone compared to the control, consistent with reduced plasma TAFI levels (Figure 2C, D). Pharmacological inhibition of TAFI activity with potato tuber carboxypeptidase inhibitor (PTCI) or direct inhibition of thrombin-thrombomodulin mediated TAFI activation with the specific antibody MA-T12D11 partially corrected the delayed fibrinolysis in the TM-AC cases III.2 and III.3 with the THBD variant (Figure 2B). The concentrations of inhibitors included here had previously been used to overcome TAFIa activity in plasma.3,13,14

However, in this study the exceptionally high concentrations of TM in the plasma of the case studies precluded the complete correction of clot lysis time. Higher concentrations of inhibitor were able to reduce levels further (data not shown). In TM-AC case II.2, who also harbors CPB2 p.Arg114*, the same concentrations of inhibitor permitted more complete correction of the fibrinolytic abnormalities, with clot lysis times similar to those of control plasma (Figure 2B). These data are the first to describe a genetic deficiency of TAFI and emphasize the key role of TAFI in attenuating fibrinolysis in TM-AC.

4 | CONCLUSION

The pedigree described herein harbors a variant in THBD that marks only the second worldwide reported genetic variant to result in the rare bleeding disorder TM-AC. The variant identified, THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10, predicts protein chain truncation close to the transmembrane domain, thereby promoting excessive shedding of the TM extracellular domain. The marked elevation in plasma TM attenuates thrombin generation and delays fibrinolysis. This is a similar consequence to the THBD p.Cys537* variant associated with all previously described cases of TM-AC.5–6 The reported results suggest a common pathogenic mechanism in both THBD variants in which the chain truncation promotes shedding of a functionally active TM extracellular domain into plasma.15

Remarkably, some pedigree members also harbor a pathogenic variant in CPB2 predicting p.Arg114* in TAFI, resulting in partial deficiency of plasma TAFI levels. To our knowledge this is the first known case of a genetic deficiency in TAFI to be described in humans. We show that TAFI deficiency is clinically asymptomatic, but that the reduction of procarnboxypeptidase activity in plasma accelerates fibrinolysis in vitro. Coinheritance of the CPB2 p.Arg114* with THBD p.Pro496Argfs*10 partially ameliorates the delayed fibrinolytic profile associated with TM-AC, clearly demonstrating a crucial role for TAFI in this laboratory feature of TM-AC. The effect of this variant was similar to pharmacological inhibition of TAFI in members of the pedigree with TM-AC. Analysis of this pedigree, in which members have highly impactful variants affecting two interacting coagulation pathway genes, enhances our understanding of ultra-rare human hemostatic disorders. The different combinations of the variants in the pedigree family members is a unique platform to allow insights into the regulation of the TM/thrombin system and TAFI activation that is highly relevant to a broad range of hemostatic disorders and therapies. The asymptomatic nature of genetic depletion of human TAFI underscores the potential to exploit inhibition of TAFI pharmacologically without bleeding complications.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank NIHR BioResource volunteers for their participation, and gratefully acknowledge NIHR BioResource centers, NHS Trusts, and staff for their contribution. We thank the National Institute for Health Research and NHS Blood and Transplant. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care. SKW was supported during this work by the Medical Research Council (MR/K023489/1) and is now funded through an NIHR-funded Academic Clinical Lectureship. KD is supported as a HSTT trainee by NHS Health Education England. NJM and CSW are supported by the British Heart Foundation (PG/15/82/31721). JCM is a fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO Vlaanderen; 1137717N). ADM is supported by the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at the University Hospitals Bristol National Health Service Foundation Trust and the University of Bristol. We thank Prof Paul Declerck and Prof Ann Gils, University Leuven, Belgium for the kind gift of the MA-T12D11 antibody. We acknowledge technical assistance from Dorien Leenaerts, University of Antwerp, Belgium and Michela Donnarumma, University of Aberdeen, UK.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no relevant conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

S. K. Westbury analyzed sequencing and laboratory data and cowrote the manuscript; C. S. Whyte, J. C. Mertens, K. Claesen, and E. Leishman designed and performed experiments; J. Stephens performed DNA sequencing; E. Turro was chief analyst for the BioResource; K. Downes oversaw the genetic analysis in the pedigrees. R. C. Tait enrolled study participants; D. Mumford oversaw the study and cowrote the manuscript; C. S. Whyte, J. C. Mertens, K. Claesen, and S. K. Westbury analyzed sequencing and laboratory data and cowrote the manuscript; E. Leishman designed and performed experiments; J. Stephens performed DNA sequencing; E. Turro was chief analyst for the BioResource; K. Downes oversaw the genetic analysis in the pedigrees. R. C. Tait enrolled study participants; D. Mumford oversaw the study and cowrote the manuscript.
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How to cite this article: Westbury SK, Whyte CS, Stephens J, et al; NIHR BioResource. A new pedigree with thrombomodulin-associated coagulopathy in which delayed fibrinolysis is partially attenuated by co-inherited TAFI deficiency. J Thromb Haemost. 2020;18:2209-2214. https://doi.org/10.1111/jth.14990