DNA double-strand break rejoining rates, inherent radiation sensitivity and human tumour response to radiotherapy

JL Schwartz1,2*, R Mustafi3, MA Beckett2 and RR Weichselbaum2

1Center for Mechanistic Biology and Biotechnology, Argonne National Laboratory, 9700 South Cass Avenue, Argonne, Illinois 60439-4833; 2Department of Radiation and Cellular Oncology, The University of Chicago, 5841 South Maryland Ave., Chicago, Illinois 60637, USA.

Summary The relationship between DNA double-strand break rejoining rates, inherent radiation sensitivity and tumour response to radiation therapy was determined for a group of 25 squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) and eight sarcoma (SAR) tumours. DNA double-strand break frequencies were measured by neutral filter elution in first passage following explant tumour samples after in vitro exposure to 100 Gy of 60Co gamma-rays. There was no significant difference between SCC and SAR tumour cells in their sensitivity to break induction, but in a 1 h time period SAR tumour cells rejoined significantly fewer breaks than SCC tumour cells, consistent with the greater sensitivity of SAR and suggesting that differences in rates of break rejoining account for the different distributions of radiosensitivities seen when different tumour types are compared. The percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h in these tumour samples correlated well with DH and with the $\beta$ component of the survival curve, measured in vitro by clonogenic assay in tumour cell lines established from the tumour samples, but not with SF2 or the $\alpha$ component of the survival curve. The rates of DNA double-strand break rejoining therefore appear to influence the exponential portion of survival curves and probably the interactions between breaks. The percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h was higher in SCC tumours that subsequently failed radiotherapy and, although the differences were not significant, they suggest that rates of break rejoining are an important component of tumour response to radiation therapy.

Keywords: predictive assay; DNA double-strand break repair; squamous cell carcinoma; sarcoma

The inherent sensitivity of cells within a tumour is thought to be an important component of radiation response. Both Fertil and Malaise (1985) and Deacon et al. (1984) reported large variations in the initial portions of in vitro survival curves from tumour cells of various histological types that they suggested might be related to radiotherapeutic response in vitro. Tumour types that are more difficult to control by radiotherapy produced cell lines that were more resistant to radiation in vitro. Weichselbaum et al. (1988a) reported that head and neck squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) tumour cells from radiotherapy failures were more resistant to radiation, as measured by in vitro survival curve analysis, than tumour cells derived from SCC pretreatment samples. Several investigators have examined the predictive value of in vitro survival curve measurements, principally SF2, the survival level after a 2 Gy exposure, with varying success (Brock et al., 1990; West et al., 1992, 1993; West and Hendry, 1993; Girinsky et al., 1992). Their results suggest that the measurement of the inherent sensitivity of tumour cells by in vitro clonogenic assay, either alone or in combination with other assays, may serve as a predictor of patient response. In vitro clonogenic assays suffer many limitations. Culturing tumour cells is not 100% successful. Most investigators report success rates of between 40% and 75% (Girinsky et al., 1992; Brock et al., 1990; unpublished observations). Fibroblast contamination is often a problem. In addition, the assays take many weeks to complete and evaluate. For these reasons, our studies have focused on determining those factors that underlie tumour radiosensitivity in hopes of developing non-clonogenic cellular, cytogenetic or molecular assays of inherent radiation sensitivity. Our initial studies focused on the basis for radiosensitivity differences in a group of established SCC cell lines, in which we reported that the kinetics of DNA double-strand break rejoining (as measured by DNA neutral filter elution assay) were faster in the more radioresistant cell lines (Schwartz et al., 1988). We subsequently confirmed this observation measuring DNA double-strand break rejoining with pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (Giaccia et al., 1992) and showed that chromosome break rejoining kinetics were also faster in the more resistant cells (Schwartz and Vaughan, 1989). Our studies suggest that the altered rates of DNA and chromosome break rejoining are caused by alterations in chromosome structure or organisation and that this altered rate of rejoining affects the fidelity of repair (Schwartz and Vaughan, 1989, 1993; Schwartz, 1992).

The close correlation between radiation sensitivity (as measured by in vitro clonogenic assay) and rates of DNA double-strand break rejoining (as measured by DNA neutral filter elution assay) led us to consider measurement of the latter as a non-clonogenic alternative to in vitro survival curve analysis. The measurement of DNA double-strand break rejoining by DNA filter elution does not require establishing cell lines or measuring clonogenic growth. Normally, it takes only 2–4 days to run and evaluate break frequencies using elution assays. In our first study, we examined rejoining rates in a group of nine SCC tumour samples isolated from head and neck cancer patients before any radiotherapy (Schwartz et al., 1990). We were able to show that the percentage of DNA double-strand breaks rejoined after a 1 h exposure to 100 Gy of 60Co gamma rays correlated well with radiation sensitivity ($D_H$) in these cells. We therefore expanded on these studies and measured DNA strand break rejoining in an additional 16 SCC samples as well as eight sarcoma (SAR) tumour samples. Our studies demonstrate that the rate of DNA double-strand break rejoining correlates closely with the quadratic portion of the in vitro survival curve and that this parameter may serve as a predictive assay of tumour response to radiotherapy.

Materials and methods To eliminate normal fibroblast contamination, tumour cells were first established in culture before any measures of radiation response were made. Tumour biopsies or surgical
specimens were placed immediately into culture medium containing 5% serum and antibiotics for transport to the laboratory and then samples were rinsed with serum-free medium containing penicillin and streptomycin, minced and distributed into culture dishes. For the SCC samples, lethally irradiated fibroblast 3T3 cells were added as feeder layers and the culture medium consisted of a 3:1 mixture of Dulbecco’s modification of Eagle’s medium and Ham’s nutrient mixture F-12, supplemented with 5% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 20 mg ml⁻¹ epidermal growth factor (added on the third day after plating), 5 μg ml⁻¹ insulin, 5 μg ml⁻¹ transferrin, 2 × 10⁻¹⁴ M 3,3′,5-triodo-L-thyronine, 10⁻⁶ M chola toxin, 1.8 × 10⁻⁴ M adenine, 0.4 μg ml⁻¹ hydrocortisone, 100 units ml⁻¹ penicillin and 100 μg ml⁻¹ streptomycin. Normal fibroblasts were selectively removed by a 15–20 s treatment with 0.02% EDTA. Samples were repeatedly treated with trypsin until less than 1% of the cells remaining were fibroblasts. Microscopic analysis ensured that before any measurement of radiation response, more than 99% of the cells in culture were tumour cells and not normal fibroblasts. For the SAR tumour samples, cells were cultured in Ham’s nutrient mixture F-10 supplemented with 15% FBS, 100 units ml⁻¹ penicillin and 100 μg ml⁻¹ streptomycin.

DNA double-strand break frequencies were determined in tumour samples in their first passage after explant by neutral filter elution (Schwartz et al., 1988). After initial explant, cells were grown in complete medium supplemented with 0.02 μCi ml⁻¹ [³²P]thymidine into 100 mm plastic Petri dishes to label growing and therefore potentially clonogenic cells. When cultures were 25–50% confluent, the radioactive medium was washed off, cells were cultured for a further 2–4 h in ³²P-free medium and then samples were prepared for irradiation. Cells were washed once in ice-cold phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and then irradiated in PBS with 100 Gy of Co gamma-rays (from a gamma cell 220 irradiator (Atomic Energy of Canada) at a dose rate of between 2 and 5 Gy s⁻¹. Cells were assayed immediately and after a 1 h incubation in complete medium at 20°C. We routinely use 20°C temperatures for post-irradiation incubations. While this might slow rejoining times slightly, it gives us more reproducible results.

Immediately after exposure or after a 1 h incubation, cultures were washed in ice-cold PBS and cells were gently scraped off the dishes with a rubber policeman. Approximately 1–5 × 10⁶ cells were washed onto 20 mm polycarbonate filters (2 μm pore size) with ice-cold saline. The filters were washed twice with saline and the cells lysed on the filters with a 15 min treatment with 5 ml of a lysis solution containing 0.05 M Tris, 0.05 M glycine, 0.025 M disodium-EDTA, 2% sodium dodecyl sulphate (SDS) and 0.5 mg ml⁻¹ protease K (pH 9.6). After lysis, the lysis solution was pumped off and 25 ml of the neutral eluting solution added (0.05 M Tris, 0.05 M glycine, 0.025 M sodium-EDTA, 2% SDS, pH 9.6). Each sample was run in triplicate. We do not use independently irradiated standards in each column because we have noted some interactions between the DNA of the standard and experimental samples that affect the elution profile. We monitored our samples periodically to ensure consistency among the elution lines. Fractions were collected every 90 min for 12–18 h. After elution, the filters were treated with 1.0 N hydrochloric acid for 1 h at 60°C and then the radioactivity in each fraction and on the filters was measured by liquid scintillation spectrometry. The fraction of DNA remaining on the filter 12 h after elution was used to compare samples.

Radiosensitivity was determined by clonogenic survival assay (Weichselbaum et al., 1986a, 1989) on tumour cells in passages 6–20. Three independent measurements were made for each tumour sample. From the survival curves, SF₂, D₀, α and β were determined as previously described (Weichselbaum et al., 1986a, Schwartz et al., 1991). All samples were coded before analysis of radiation response. Comparisons were made by analysis of variance and the relationships between break rejoining and radiosensitivity were made by regression analysis.

Results

Twenty-five SCC tumour samples established from head and neck tumour resections including nine from a previous report (Schwartz et al., 1990) and eight SAR tumour samples were analysed by neutral filter elution. The results are summarised in Figure 1. For most of the unirradiated samples, 80–95% of the DNA remained on the filter after 12 h of elution (Figure 1a). There was no significant difference between the SCC and SAR samples (P = 0.875). The mean (+ s.e.m.) fraction of DNA remaining on the filter 12 h after elution in the unirradiated samples was 0.836 ± 0.021 for the SCC cells and 0.842 ± 0.019 for the SAR cells.

Cells were exposed to 100 Gy of ⁶⁰Co gamma rays. While elution rates can be measured after exposures to lower doses, interexperimental variability is usually greater at low doses and elution rates may be influenced more by chromosome structure (Schwartz et al., 1991; Olive, 1992; Schwartz and Vaughan, 1993). Viability, as measured by trypsin blue dye exclusion, remains high in these tumour cells over the 1 h period when DNA strand break rejoining is measured and there is no evidence for any repair saturation at this dose. After a 100 Gy exposure to ⁶⁰Co gamma-rays, the DNA remaining on the filters decreased to between 14% and 53% (Figure 1b). There was no significant difference between SCC and SAR cells in their sensitivity to break induction (P = 0.303). The fraction of DNA remaining on the filter 12 h after elution in the 100 Gy-irradiated samples was 0.344 ± 0.027 for the SCC cells and 0.285 ± 0.053 for the SAR cells.

We examined DNA double-strand break frequencies after a 1 h incubation in complete medium at 20°C. We chose this time point because in our original studies (Schwartz et al., 1988), the 1 h time point gave us the biggest differences between resistant cells and SCC or SAR cultures. The fraction of DNA remaining on the filters 12 h after elution was between 0.32 and 0.91 (Figure 1c). The mean (+ s.e.m.) fraction of DNA remaining on the filter 12 h after elution in these samples was 0.722 ± 0.025 for the SCC cells and 0.554 ± 0.045 for the SAR cells. The fraction of DNA remaining on the filter 12 h after elution was significantly smaller in the SAR samples (P = 0.003) suggesting that rejoining of DNA double-strand breaks is slower or deficient in these tumour cells. The corresponding percentage breaks rejoined after 1 h were 83.4% ± 2.6% for the SCC cells and 70.8% ± 3.7% for the SAR cells (Figure 1d). These differences were also statistically significant (P = 0.019). There was no significant relationship (P = 0.432) between the initial break frequency and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h.

In vitro clonogenic survival curves could only be obtained for 13 of the SCC tumour samples and seven of the SAR samples. Most of the failure was caused by the overgrowth of normal fibroblasts. Approximately 10–20% of the cells that are greater than 99% free of fibroblasts at the first passage after explant succumb to fibroblast overgrowth by passages 3–5. We compared the in vitro survival curve end points of SF₂, D₀, α and β with the DNA double-strand break measurements. There was no significant relationship between radiation sensitivity as measured in vitro clonogenic survival curve analysis and either the percentage of DNA remaining on filters for unirradiated samples or samples irradiated with 100 Gy and immediately analysed. The P-values ranged from 0.244 to 0.988.

The results from our comparisons between the percentage of DNA double-strand breaks rejoined after 1 h and differences in vitro radiosensitivity survival curve measures are shown in Figure 2. [Also included in this figure are the results from our studies on established SCC cell lines (Schwartz et al., 1988, 1990), but these were not considered in the statistical analyses.] There was no significant relationship (P = 0.925) between SF₂ and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h (Figure 2a). In contrast, there was a significant relationship (P = 0.034) between D₀ and the percentage of breaks rejoined...
in 1 h (Figure 2b), although this relationship was significant only when SCC and SAR cells were considered together. Within each group, the correlations were not significant. Finding a correlation between break rejoining and \( D_0 \) but not between rejoining and \( SF_2 \) suggests that break rejoining influences the exponential portion of the survival curve and not the initial portion. We tested this hypothesis by comparing the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h with the \( a \) and \( b \) portions of the survival curve (Figure 2c and d). As expected, there was no significant relationship between \( a \) and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h (\( P=0.434 \)), but a significant one between \( b \) and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h (\( P=0.050 \)). A comparison between the \( \ln(b) \) and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h provided an even closer correlation (\( P=0.017 \)). The relationship between \( b \) and the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h was significant whether SAR and SCC cells were considered separately or together.

All patients were to have been followed with routine examination at regular intervals for at least 2 years after radiotherapy. Of the 25 SCC patients whose samples were evaluated, nine had either persistent disease or local in-field recurrences (in-field failures) within 1 year of radiotherapy. Of the remaining 16 patients, complete follow-up examinations were not always done and most were followed for only 1 year after radiotherapy. A comparison of the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h in these two groups of patients is shown in Figure 3. The mean percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h in the nine failures was 97.4% \( \pm \) 10.1%; in the other 16, the mean was 83.2% \( \pm \) 3.3%. The differences were not significant (\( P=0.117 \)). Where possible, we also compared \( SF_2 \) and \( D_0 \) in these two groups. The mean \( SF_2 \) values for the six radiotherapy failures and the seven tumours showing no evidence of disease that could be evaluated by \( \text{in vitro} \) clonogenic assay were 0.50 \( \pm \) 0.04 and 0.48 \( \pm \) 0.03, respectively. These differences were not significant (\( P=0.637 \)). Similarly, while the differences between the two groups in \( D_0 \) were larger, 2.04 \( \pm \) 0.27 Gy for the failures and 1.50 \( \pm \) 0.11 Gy for those showing no evidence of disease, these differences were also not significant (\( P=0.107 \)).

**Discussion**

DNA double-strand break frequencies were measured by neutral filter elution in tumour samples from 25 SCC tumour samples and eight SAR tumour samples. As measured by \( \text{in vitro} \) clonogenic assay, SAR tumour cells are more radiosensitive than SCC tumour cells (Weichselbaum et al., 1989). We therefore compared SCC and SAR samples to determine
if these differences in radiation sensitivity between SCC and SAR tumour cells might be caused by differences in either the induction or rejoining of DNA double-strand breaks. While both SCC and SAR samples were equally sensitive to the induction of DNA double-strand breaks by 60Co gamma-rays, during a 1 h incubation, SCC cells rejoined more breaks than SAR cells. Previous studies of ours have suggested that this difference in the percentage of breaks rejoined after 1 h reflects an alteration in rejoining kinetics, not rejoining capacity (Schwartz et al., 1988; Schwartz and Vaughan, 1989). The observation that SAR cells have slower kinetics of DNA double-strand break rejoinder than SCC cells is consistent with our hypothesis that slower rates of rejoining are associated with radiation sensitivity.

We next examined the relationship between the induction and rejoining of double-strand breaks and different parameters of survival for all of the tumour cell lines. We had previously noted (Schwartz et al., 1988, 1990, 1991) a significant correlation between the percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h and $D_0$, but not between initial break frequency and $D_0$. This was confirmed in the present larger study. The percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h also correlated well with the $\beta$ component of the in vitro survival curve. The measurement of the percentage of breaks rejoined

Figure 2  The relationship between the percentage of DNA damage rejoined in 1 h in SCC (○) and SAR (●) tumour samples and (a) SF2; (b) $D_0$, (c) $\alpha$; and (d) $\beta$. Late-passage SCC cell lines (△).

Figure 3  Percentage of DNA breaks rejoined in 1 h following radiation exposure in SCC cells from tumours that failed radiation therapy (●) and those showing no evidence of disease (○).
in 1 h did not correlate well with either SF, or the a portion of the in vitro survival curve. These results suggest that alterations in the rates of DNA double-strand break rejoining affect only the quadratic portion of the clonogenic survival curve. This observation is consistent with our observations concerning chromosome aberration induction in these tumour cells (Schwartz, 1992). We reported that the more radiosensitive tumour cells show higher levels of radiation-induced chromosome rings and dicentrics than do more resistant cells. Chromosome rings and dicentrics are thought to result from the interactions of two chromosome breaks; they show near quadratic kinetics of induction. Presumably, slower rates of break rejoining favour interactions between breaks and the formation of chromosome rings and dicentrics.

The role that DNA double-strand break rejoining rates play in defining the quadratic portion of the survival curve is further underscored by our previous comparison of the SCC cell lines SCC-12V and SCC-12B.2. These two cell lines were derived from the same tumour but differ greatly in the shapes of their survival curves (Weichselbaum et al., 1988b). SCC-12V has a broad shoulder with a radiosensitive \( D_0 \) of 1.31 Gy but an SF\( _2 \) of 0.76. SCC-12B.2 is more radioreistant with a \( D_0 \) of 2.66 Gy; it has only a small shoulder and an SF\( _2 \) of 0.64. We reported (Schwartz et al., 1990) that SCC-12V rejoining of double-strand breaks is only 85.7% of breaks. These percentages correlate well with \( D_0 \) but not with SF\( _2 \). Thus, the rate that DNA double-strand breaks are rejoined in human tumour cells probably influences two-break interactions and the exponential portion of survival curves.

Other investigators have also compared DNA double-strand break induction frequencies and rejoining rates with clonogenic radiosensitivity in human tumour cells (Kelland et al., 1988; McMillan et al., 1990; Whittaker et al., 1995). McMillan et al. (1990) analysed DNA double-strand break induction and rejoining by neutral filter elution in a group of nine human tumour cell lines and reported that the more radiosensitive cell lines were more sensitive to DNA double-strand break induction. They suggested that this difference in sensitivity to break induction underlies in part tumour radiosensitivity. Whittaker et al. (1995) studied DNA double-strand break induction and rejoining using pulsed-field gel electrophoresis in nine human tumour cell lines, including five of those analysed by McMillan et al. (1990). They noted correlations between clonogenic measures of radiosensitivity (SF\( _2 \) and \( \alpha \)) and both initial break frequency and rejoining rate. We also reported (Schwartz et al., 1991) that after relatively low-dose radiation exposures, we could find differences between resistant and sensitive tumour cells in initial break frequency, as measured by neutral filter elution. However, in our studies, these differences were only seen at low doses with elution analysis and not when pulsed-field gel electrophoresis was used (Giaccia et al., 1992) or when chromosome break rejoining was studied (Schwartz and Vaughan, 1989). We interpreted our results to suggest that the differences between resistant and sensitive lines in elution rates after low-dose exposures most likely reflect alterations in chromosome structure (Schwartz et al., 1991; Olive, 1992; Schwartz and Vaughan, 1993), and thus it is likely that both initial break frequency and rejoining rate reflect alterations in chromosome structure. Differences in how DNA double-strand break frequencies are measured in each laboratory may account for the slightly different results and conclusions concerning which parameter best correlates with clonogenic survival.

We attempted to determine whether any of the elution measurements could predict response to radiotherapy. We noted that the mean percentage of breaks rejoined in 1 h in the nine known SCC failures was higher than in the other 16, although the differences were not significant. Our comparisons were complicated by the fact that many of the patients in this study received surgery and chemotherapy in addition to radiotherapy. Furthermore, complete follow-up was achieved with only a small fraction of the patients we sampled. Thus, measurement of rates of double-strand break rejoining may have some predictive value, especially in tumours where radiotherapy is the primary therapy.

In conclusion, these studies support earlier work (Schwartz et al., 1988, 1990) on the relationship between rates of DNA double-strand break rejoining and clonogenic survival measurements in human tumour cells. Furthermore, these studies demonstrate that rates of break rejoining can not only account for radiosensitivity differences within different classes of tumours, but they can also account for the different distributions of radiosensitivities seen when different tumour types are compared. Finally, these studies suggest that rates of break rejoining play a role in tumour response to radiotherapy.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a Faculty Research Award from the American Cancer Society (JLS), grant CA 42596 (RRW) from the NCI, The Center for Radiation Therapy and the US Department of Energy under contract W-31-109-ENG-38 and grant no. DE-FG02-88ER66611 (JLS).

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