BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Major Impact of Sampling Methodology on Gene Expression in Estrogen Receptor–Positive Breast Cancer

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Abstract

To investigate the impact of sampling methodology on gene expression data from primary estrogen receptor–positive (ER+) breast cancer biopsies, global gene expression was measured in core-cut biopsies at baseline and surgery from patients randomly assigned to receive either two weeks of presurgical aromatase inhibitor (AI; n = 157) or no presurgical treatment (n = 56). Those genes most markedly altered in the AI group (eg, FOS, DUSP1, RGS1, FOSB) were similarly altered in the no treatment group; some widely investigated genes that were apparently unaffected in the AI group (eg, MYC) were counter-altered in the control group, masking actual AI-dependent changes. In the absence of a control group, these artefactual changes would likely lead to the most affected genes being the erroneous focus of research. The findings are likely relevant to all archival collections of ER+ breast cancer.

Analysis of gene expression in biopsies taken before and after treatment of primary breast cancer (BC) is frequently undertaken to study mechanisms of response and resistance. We and others have identified artefactual changes in gene expression that can result from the study procedures (1,2). Importantly, however, the degree of impact of those changes has not been evaluated in the context of a specific therapy. The current study reveals the potential for profound errors in data interpretation that could occur if such artefacts are not identified or are ignored.

The PeriOperative Endocrine Therapy-Individualising Care (POETIC; CRUK/07/015) (3) trial randomly assigned 4486 postmenopausal women with primary estrogen receptor–positive (ER+) BC 2:1 to receive perioperative aromatase inhibitor (AI; two weeks presurgery + two weeks postsurgery, termed AI-treated) or no perioperative treatment (termed control). Core-cut biopsy samples in RNA later were analyzed from both the baseline and surgical sample from 213 patients (157 were all good-quality available AI-treated and 56 were randomly chosen controls). High-quality genome-wide expression data (GSE105777) were analyzed to identify statistically significant altered gene expression and were compared between the AI-treated and control groups. Classical clinical factors were well balanced between the two groups (Supplementary Table 1). A total of 3269 genes (n = 1504 upregulated, n = 1765 downregulated) from treated tumors and 110 genes (n = 70 upregulated, n = 40 downregulated) from control tumors were...
Table 1. Top ranked genes in control and AI-treated samples. Top 30 regulated genes in control tumors and in AI-treated tumors.

| Symbol       | Rank in control† | Parameter p-value | FDR     | Rank in AI-treated† | Symbol       | Rank in AI-treated† | Parameter p-value | FDR     |
|--------------|------------------|-------------------|---------|---------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------|
| FOS*         | 1                | 3.87              | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 1            | FOS*         | 1                | 4.14              | <1x10^{-7} |
| RGS1*        | 2                | 3.22              | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 3            | DUSP1*       | 2                | 3.36              | <1x10^{-7} |
| DUSP1*       | 3                | 3.06              | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 2            | RGS1*        | 3                | 3.33              | <1x10^{-7} |
| HBA2*        | 4                | -2.94             | 9.10x10^{-4} | 7      | 7            | TFF1         | 4                | -2.94             | <1x10^{-7} |
| HBB*         | 5                | -2.86             | 2.06x10^{-3} | 7      | 5            | FOS*         | 5                | 2.65              | <1x10^{-7} |
| HBA1*        | 6                | -2.50             | 3.21x10^{-3} | 12     | 12           | TOP2A        | 6                | -2.56             | <1x10^{-7} |
| FOSB*        | 7                | 2.30              | 9.10x10^{-4} | 5      | 5            | UBE2C        | 7                | -2.44             | <1x10^{-7} |
| RNY5         | 8                | -2.13             | 1.39x10^{-2} | 83     | 83           | HBB*         | 7                | -2.44             | <1x10^{-7} |
| CYR61*       | 9                | 2.05              | 1.43x10^{-3} | 10     | 10           | HBA2*        | 7                | -2.44             | <1x10^{-7} |
| EGR1*        | 10               | 1.98              | 9.47x10^{-4} | 10     | 10           | EGR1*        | 10               | -2.36             | <1x10^{-7} |
| ZFP36*       | 11               | -1.97             | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 18           | CYR61*       | 10               | -2.36             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SNORD3D12*   | 12               | 1.86              | 4.66x10^{-4} | 30     | 30           | CDC20        | 12               | -2.13             | <1x10^{-7} |
| TRK1         | 13               | -1.72             | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 49           | NUSAP1       | 12               | -2.13             | <1x10^{-7} |
| JUN          | 14               | 1.67              | <1x10^{-7} | <1x10^{-7} | 65           | HBA1*        | 12               | -2.13             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SGK1         | 15               | 1.62              | 1.68x10^{-4} | 32     | 32           | SUSD3        | 15               | -2.04             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SNORD3A      | 16               | 1.62              | 6.10x10^{-3} | 79     | 79           | FGFR3        | 16               | -2.00             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SNORD3C      | 17               | 1.61              | 5.05x10^{-3} | 97     | 97           | NEK2         | 17               | -1.96             | <1x10^{-7} |
| LOC100132564 | 18               | 1.53              | 7.70x10^{-2} | NA     | NA           | ZFP36*       | 18               | -1.94             | <1x10^{-7} |
| RASSD1       | 19               | 1.52              | 4.87x10^{-3} | 39     | 39           | UHRF1        | 19               | 1.92              | <1x10^{-7} |
| RGS2         | 21               | 1.51              | 2.38x10^{-2} | 33     | 33           | PRC1         | 19               | -1.92             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SNORD13      | 22               | 1.49              | 1.49x10^{-2} | 80     | 80           | ASPM         | 19               | -1.92             | <1x10^{-7} |
| CCL3L3       | 23               | 1.48              | 3.21x10^{-3} | 80     | 80           | AGR2         | 19               | -1.92             | <1x10^{-7} |
| KLF6         | 24               | 1.47              | 9.02x10^{-2} | 99     | 99           | PDZK1        | 23               | -1.85             | <1x10^{-7} |
| APOLD1       | 25               | 1.45              | 1.60x10^{-3} | 71     | 71           | PTTG1        | 24               | -1.82             | <1x10^{-7} |
| ATF3         | 26               | 1.43              | 1.12x10^{-2} | 138    | 138          | ADCY1        | 24               | -1.82             | <1x10^{-7} |
| SPRY1        | 27               | 1.43              | 2.38x10^{-2} | 36     | 36           | CDC25        | 26               | -1.79             | <1x10^{-7} |
| MYC          | 28               | 1.41              | 8.23x10^{-3} | NA     | NA           | CCNB2        | 26               | -1.79             | <1x10^{-7} |
| CEBPD        | 29               | 1.39              | 2.68x10^{-3} | 226    | 226          | KIAA10101     | 26               | -1.79             | <1x10^{-7} |
| BTG2         | 29               | 1.39              | 3.77x10^{-3} | 138    | 138          | STC2         | 26               | -1.79             | <1x10^{-7} |
| CD69         | 29               | 1.39              | 3.31x10^{-3} | 65     | 65           | SNORD3D*      | 30               | 1.77              | <1x10^{-7} |

†Highlights the 11 genes regulated in AI-treated group that are among the 12 most regulated genes in control. AI – aromatase inhibitor; B – baseline; FC – fold-change; FDR – false discovery rate; S – surgery.

†Rank by an absolute fold-change.

‡FC (S/B): fold-change of individual genes at surgery compared with baseline.
placement in RNA later. In many cases, the time of ischemia will have been variably extended by the time taken to x-ray the biopsy sample. Our earlier report described the changes that result from that delay in genes such as RGS1 and DUSP1, which are among the most affected genes in the AI-treated and control arms in POETIC. Of note, in support of this explanation, the decrease seen in MYC expression in the POETIC AI-treated group after correction for the artefactual increase in the controls concurs with the statistically significant decrease seen in FAIMoS.

We conclude that the majority of the most upregulated genes (eg, FOS, DUSP1, RGS1, FOSB) and a small number of the most downregulated genes are identified as a result of pre-analytical sample processing. In addition, the true effect of AI treatment on other genes can be hidden by counteractive artefactual change. In the absence of a control group, investigators are likely to focus on the most extensive gene changes, yet these will include many ascribed wrongly to the effect of experimental intervention; some genes that would be the focus will be wrongly ignored because they are apparently unaffected by therapy. It is notable that our observations have been made in the context of withdrawal of estrogen stimulation, the strongest transcriptional drive for ER+ BC. The artefacts are likely to be pronounced relative to true effects in the context of less impactful therapy. Future presurgical studies should ensure that core cuts taken at surgery are either taken in an identical fashion to those at baseline or that a control group of patients is included to identify any process-related changes.

It should also be recognized that the majority of tissue-related studies in BC occur in archival excision specimens that will have been subject to similar or perhaps greater ischemic conditions before fixation than the core-cut samples in POETIC. Investigators should establish that the collection process does not affect expression of the genes of interest prior to assuming that the observed expression reflects the true expression in the tumor in situ.

**FUNDING**

This work was supported by the Mary-Jean Mitchell Green Foundation, Breast Cancer Now, working in partnership with Walk the Walk and the National Institutes of Health Research Royal Marsden/Institute of Cancer Research Biomedical Research Centre. The POETIC trial (C1491/A8671/CRUK/07/015, C1491/A15955, C406/A8962), from which samples were obtained for this study, was supported by Cancer Research UK, as is Institute of Cancer Research- Clinical Trials and Statistical Unit through its core program grant.

**Notes**

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We thank all participating patients and staff at POETIC centers and ICR-CTSU who contributed to trial management and data and sample collection, and the independent data monitoring committee and trial steering committee, for their oversight of the trial.

QG analyzed the data and drafted the manuscript. ELK extracted RNA and drafted the manuscript. MC generated subtypes. JM provided data and composed Supplementary Table 1. KS and DE recorded the samples for the study. VM and AD sectioned and reviewed the histopathology of the samples. AS, HC, EM, EA, and JR were involved in sample acquisition. MD, IS, and JB were involved in conception and design of POETIC. LAM, RR, and MD drafted the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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