Association between epidermal growth factor receptor mutations and the expression of excision repair cross-complementing protein 1 and ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1 mRNA in patients with non-small cell lung cancer

CHUN-WEI XU1*, GANG WANG2*, WU-LONG WANG3, WEN-BIN GAO2, CHUAN-JUN HAN3, JING-SHAN GAO5, YANG LI6, LIN WANG7, LI-YING ZHANG1, YU-PING ZHANG8, YU-WANG TIAN1 and JIN-NV FANG9

1Department of Pathology, The General Military Hospital of Beijing PLA, Beijing 100700; 2Department of Oncology, Affiliated Zhongshan Hospital of Dalian University, Dalian, Liaoning 116001; 3Graduate School of Dalian University, Dalian, Liaoning 116622; 4The Second Affiliated Hospital of Baotou Medical College, Baotou, Inner Mongolia 014030; 5Department of Clinical Medicine, Dalian Medical University, Dalian, Liaoning 116044; 6Department of Oncology, The General Military Hospital of Beijing PLA, Beijing 100700; 7Department of Pathology, Shanxi Da Hospital, Shanxi Academy of Medical Sciences, Taiyuan, Shanxi 030001; 8Department of Pathology, The People's Hospital of Weifang, Weifang, Shandong 261041; 9Department of Medicine, Yanbian University, Yanji, Jilin 133002, P.R. China

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Abstract. The present study aimed to investigate the association between epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) gene mutations and excision repair cross-complementing protein 1 (ERCC1) and ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1 (RRM1) mRNA expression in non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) tissue. The quantitative polymerase chain reaction was used to detect EGFR mutations, and ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA expression in 257 cases of NSCLC. In the NSCLC samples the EGFR mutation rate was 49.03% (126/257). The rate was higher in females and non-smoking patients (P<0.05). High expression of ERCC1 mRNA was observed in 47.47% of the samples (122/257), while a high RRM1 mRNA expression was observed in 61.87% of the samples (159/257). In comparison with patients with NSCLC without EGFR mutations, patients with EGFR mutations had significantly lower levels of ERCC1 mRNA expression (P<0.05); however, EGFR mutations and expression levels of RRM1 mRNA were not correlated in NSCLC tissues (P>0.05). In addition, ERCC1 mRNA expression was not correlated with the expression levels of RRM1 mRNA (P>0.05). In conclusion, patients with NSCLC with EGFR mutations tend to have a low expression of ERCC1 mRNA and may potentially benefit from platinum-based chemotherapy.

Introduction

Globally, lung cancer has the highest rates of morbidity and mortality of all malignancies (1). Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) accounts for 80-85% of lung cancer cases worldwide (2).

Human epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) belongs to the type I receptor family. This family has four cognate family members, including EGFR (HER1), HER2, HER3 and HER4, which mediate the following signal transduction pathways: Ras-Raf-mitogen-activated protein kinase kinase-extracellular signal-regulated kinase-mitogen-activated protein kinase, phospholipase C-γ, phosphatidylinositol-3-kinase/phosphoinositide-dependent kinase 1 and Janus kinase/signal transducers and activators of transcription (3). These receptors regulate cell proliferation, differentiation and apoptosis (4). EGFR mutations in patients with NSCLC occur in the intracellular tyrosine kinase (TK) region above the first four exons (18 to 21). A total of 30 different types of mutations have been identified in the TK region (5), the most common occurring in exons 19 and 21, which account for ~85% of all the mutations (6).

Excision repair cross-complementing gene 1 (ERCC1) is the key gene in two DNA repair pathways: nucleotide excision...
repair (NER) and chain crosslink repair (7). Overexpression of \textit{ERCC1} can rapidly repair damaged DNA at rest in the G2/M phase and cause cells to be resistant to platinum (8). Ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1 (\textit{RRM1}) is involved in DNA synthesis and repair (9). Results from the Iressa® Pan-Asia Study (10) clinical trial indicated that, in Asian populations, patients with \textit{EGFR} mutations were more responsive to chemotherapy than patients with wild-type \textit{EGFR}. Patients with lung cancer with low expression of \textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1} are more responsive to gemcitabine- and platinum-based chemotherapy, respectively (11,12). Patients with NSCLC are generally treated with chemotherapy drugs, including cisplatin and gemcitabine. In the present study, 257 patients with stages I-IV NSCLC from multiple hospitals were analyzed for the presence of \textit{EGFR} mutations and expression levels of \textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1} mRNA. The data were statistically analyzed to determine significant correlations between \textit{EGFR} mutations and expression of these two chemotherapy resistance genes in patients with NSCLC. These data may prove useful in further identifying more effective individualized treatment plans for patients with \textit{EGFR} mutations, particularly for patients with small-molecule \textit{EGFR}-tyrosine kinase inhibitor (\textit{EGFR-TKI}) primary or secondary resistance.

\section*{Materials and methods}

\textbf{Specimens.} For the detection of \textit{EGFR} mutations, as well as \textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1} mRNA expression levels, paraffin tissue specimens were collected from 257 patients from the General Military Hospital of Beijing PLA (Beijing, China; 103 cases), the Affiliated Zhongshan Hospital of Dalian University (Dalian, China; 58 cases) and the People's Hospital of Weifang (Weifang, China; 96 cases). The patients had undergone surgery between 2004 and 2013; the pathological diagnosis was adenocarcinoma, and patients had not received preoperative chemotherapy, radiotherapy or biological immunotherapy. All protocols in the present study were approved by the Human Clinical and Research Ethics Committees of the General Military Hospital of Beijing PLA, the Affiliated Zhongshan Hospital of Dalian University (Dalian, China) and the People's Hospital of Weifang (Weifang, China). Written informed consent was obtained from all of the patients.

\textbf{Reagents and instruments.} The DNA and RNA extraction kits were purchased from Qiagen (Hilden, Germany). The human \textit{EGFR} mutation qualitative detection kit and the tumor-related gene expression relative quantification detection kit (\textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1}) were obtained from Amoy Diagnostics Co., Ltd. (Xiamen, China). The B-500 instrument to measure nucleic acid protein concentrations was purchased from Shanghai Acid Protein Technologies Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). The ABI 7500 quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) instrument was purchased from Applied Biosystems® (Life Technologies, Foster City, CA, USA).

\textbf{qPCR to detect \textit{EGFR} mutations in NSCLC tissues.} Between four and eight 4-µm-thick paraffin tissue sections were obtained and dewaxed. The genomic RNA extraction kit was used to extract RNA from the tissue samples according to the manufacturer's instructions. A spectrophotometer was used to determine the purity and concentration of the extracted RNA, which was used as a template to synthesize the corresponding DNA. The human \textit{EGFR} mutation qualitative detection kit, which contains 29 different fusion mutant primers and probes to amplify \textit{EGFR} exons 18, 19, 20 and 21, was used (ADx-EG09; Amoy Diagnostics Co., Ltd.); the DNA was amplified in an ABI 7500 qPCR instrument (Fig. 1A and B). The qPCR cycling conditions were set as follows: 95°C for 5 min, followed by 45 cycles of 95°C for 30 sec, 60°C for 30 sec and 72°C for 45 sec.

\textbf{qPCR to detect the expression of \textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1} mRNA in NSCLC tissue.} RNA was extracted from 4-µm-thick paraffin tissue sections in accordance with the aforementioned methods. The tumor-associated gene expression detection kit for \textit{ERCC1} (ADx-ER01) and \textit{RRM1} (ADx-RR01) (Amoy Diagnostics Co., Ltd.) was used to determine the mRNA expression level of these genes using the absolute quantitative method; β-actin was used as the reference gene. \textit{ERCC1} had a standard mean of 4.29x10^3, and \textit{RRM1} had a standard mean of 11.37x10^3 (Fig. 1C).

\textbf{Statistical analysis.} The data were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS (version 19.0; IBM SPSS, Armonk, NY, USA) using the χ² and Fisher's exact test with a test level α=0.05. The P-value was set to bilateral distribution and P<0.05 was considered to indicate a statistically significant difference.

\section*{Results}

\textbf{Association between \textit{EGFR} mutations, expression of \textit{ERCC1} and \textit{RRM1} mRNA, and patient clinical characteristics.} Of the 257 cases of NSCLC, \textit{EGFR} mutations were present in 126 cases (49.03%). The \textit{EGFR} mutation rate was higher in non-smoking patients (92/158, 58.23%; P<0.001); however, the \textit{EGFR} mutation rate was not associated with the age, tumor size, lymph-node metastasis or clinical stage of the patient. High expression of \textit{ERCC1} mRNA was observed in 122/257 cases (47.47%). \textit{ERCC1} mRNA expression levels were not associated with the gender, age, smoking status, tumor size, lymph-node metastasis or clinical stage of the patient. High expression of \textit{RRM1} mRNA was observed in 159/257 cases (61.87%). \textit{RRM1} mRNA expression levels were not associated with the gender, age, smoking status, tumor size, lymph-node metastasis or clinical stage of the patient (Table I).

\textbf{Association between \textit{EGFR} mutations and expression levels of \textit{ERCC1} mRNA.} Of the 126 patients with NSCLC with an \textit{EGFR} mutation, 79 (62.70%) showed low expression of \textit{ERCC1}. Of the 131 patients with NSCLC with the wild-type \textit{EGFR} gene, 56 (42.75%) had low expression of \textit{ERCC1} mRNA. These data indicate that patients with NSCLC with an \textit{EGFR} mutation had significantly lower expression of \textit{ERCC1} mRNA (P<0.05) (Table II).

\textbf{Association between \textit{EGFR} mutations and the expression level of \textit{RRM1} mRNA.} Of the 126 patients with NSCLC with an \textit{EGFR} gene mutation, 51 (40.48%) had low expression of \textit{RRM1} mRNA, while 47 out of the 131 patients (35.88%)
Figure 1. Mutations of the EGFR gene and the expression of ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA. (A) Positive control, positive sample and negative control of the EGFR gene. (B) Positive control, negative sample and negative control of the EGFR gene. (C) Expression of ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA. EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; ERCC1, excision repair cross-complementing protein 1; RRM1, ribonucleotide reductase subunit M1.
Table II. Association between EGFR mutations and the expression level of ERCC1 mRNA.

| EGFR     | ERCC1 mRNA expression | Total (n) |
|----------|-----------------------|-----------|
| Mutant   | High (n)              | Low (n)   | 126 |
| Wild-type| 47                    | 79        | |
|          |                       |           | 131 |
| Total    | 122                   | 135       | 257 |

Table III. Association between EGFR mutations and the expression level of RRM1 mRNA.

| EGFR     | RRM1 mRNA expression | Total (n) |
|----------|----------------------|-----------|
| Mutant   | High (n)             | Low (n)   | 126 |
| Wild-type| 75                   | 51        | |
|          |                       |           | 131 |
| Total    | 159                  | 98        | 257 |

Table IV. Association between the expression levels of ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA.

| ERCC1 mRNA expression | RRM1 mRNA expression | Total (n) |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| High                  | High (n)             | Low (n)   | 122 |
|                       | 72                   | 50        | |
| Low                   |                       |           | 135 |
|                       | 87                   | 48        | |
| Total                 | 159                  | 98        | 257 |

Discussion

EGFR mutations and the responsiveness of NSCLC to the molecular targeted drugs gefitinib (trade name, Iressa) and erlotinib (trade name, Tarceva) have a close association (13,14). Small-molecule TKIs have been shown to have a high efficiency in patients with an exon 19 deletion in the EGFR gene (15); however, patients with NSCLC with EGFR mutations in exon 20 are resistant to drug treatment with TKIs (16). Other studies have reported that the NER complex prognosis is good but not suitable for receiving platinum-based chemotherapy (17,18).

The results of the present study showed that the EGFR mutation rate was 48.03% (126/257) in patients with stages I-IV NSCLC, which is consistent with previously reported data (14,19). A higher percentage of patients with NSCLC (47.47%; 122/257) showed high mRNA expression levels of ERCC1 compared with data from a previous study (20), while the percentage of patients with NSCLC with a high RRM1 mRNA expression level (61.87%; 159/257) was consistent with data presented in a previous study (21). The expression levels of ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA were not associated with the gender, age, smoking status, tumor size, lymph node metastasis, pathological staging or other clinical characteristics of the patient.

The current study found that the mutational status of EGFR was associated with ERCC1 mRNA expression levels in patients with NSCLC; patients with EGFR mutations had a significantly lower expression of ERCC1 mRNA (P<0.05). EGFR mutations did not, however, significantly correlate with RRM1 expression levels (P>0.05) in patients with NSCLC. A previous study has shown that EGFR mutations in patients with NSCLC were correlated with expression levels of ERCC1 (P<0.001). Furthermore, EGFR mutations in the adenocarcinoma subgroup were correlated with ERCC1 expression levels (P<0.001) (22). It has also been shown that NER enzymes in cells can lead to cell damage, resulting in genomic instability and an increased mutation rate (23). Cancer cells with low expression of ERCC1 have a decreased ability to repair DNA damage, an increase in the number of EGFR mutations and increased sensitivity to platinum-based chemotherapy, which may be why patients with NSCLC with EGFR mutations have a higher response rate to chemotherapy.

The present study also found that, in NSCLC tissues, mRNA expression levels of ERCC1 and RRM1 were not correlated (P>0.05), which is inconsistent with data presented by Reynolds et al (24). The association between the expression of ERCC1 and RRM1 mRNA remains controversial and warrants further research. At present, numerous studies have confirmed that therapy can be selected based on patient expression levels of ERCC1 and RRM1, and this can be extended to patients with NSCLC (25,26).

In conclusion, the current study has demonstrated that patients with EGFR mutations tend to have lower expression levels of ERCC1 mRNA. We hypothesize that patients with EGFR mutations may be more responsive to cisplatin-based chemotherapy.
chemotherapy, although the molecular mechanisms require further study. No difference in the expression levels of \textit{RRM1} mRNA was observed between patients with NSCLC with \textit{EGFR} mutations and those without mutations. In the present study, we have determined the first-line chemotherapy for tumors involving platinum and gemcitabine drug resistance genes and \textit{EGFR} mutations but not the microtubule drug resistance gene \textit{TUBB3} or the thymidylate synthase resistance gene \textit{TYMS}. Future studies, therefore, are likely to focus on \textit{EGFR}, \textit{TUBB3} and \textit{TYMS} mutations to better identify effective individualized treatment plans, particularly individualized treatment plans for EGFR-TKI (e.g. imatinib) primary or secondary resistance observed in certain patients.

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