A comparative study of carbonic anhydrase activity in lymphocytes from colorectal cancer tissues and adjacent healthy counterparts

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ABSTRACT

Several carbonic anhydrase (CA, EC 4.2.1.1) isoforms play an essential role in processes connected to tumorigenesis, as they efficiently accelerate the hydration of carbon dioxide to bicarbonate and proton. In this context, examples are CA IX and CA XII, which were proved to be upregulated in many solid malignancies. On the other hand, cancer and the immune system are inextricably linked, and targeting the immune checkpoints recently was shown to efficiently improve the treatment of malignancies. In this study, we have investigated the expression of CA isoforms in tumour-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs) that, according to the immunosurveillance theory, were suggested to have a crucial role in the development of colorectal cancer (CRC). T lymphocytes isolated from healthy surrounding mucosa showed a higher CA activity compared to those present in tumour and peripheral blood in the same patients. CA I and II were confirmed as enzyme isoforms involved in the process, as determined by proteomic analysis of corresponding TIL samples. These preliminary findings suggest a dysregulation of the local immune response in the CRC tissues and a loss of effective anticancer mechanisms mediated by CAs therein.

1. Introduction

Colorectal cancer (CRC) is the world’s third most frequent malignancy and the second most deadly. Twenty-five percent of newly diagnosed patients have metastatic disease, and 40% will develop metastases within a year. Currently, the most popular conventional treatments for CRC include surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, which can be used in combination depending on the location and progression of the cancer. The immune system is one of the approaches that has revolutionised cancer treatment in the previous few decades. In detail, immunotherapy tries to overcome the limitations of chemotherapy and radiotherapy by focussing on the immune system of the patient. Immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) for programmed death receptor (PD-1) blockade have been approved for the CRC treatment with deficient mismatch repair (dMMR) or high microsatellite instability (MSI-H). For patients with proficient mismatch repair or microsatellite stability, however, immunotherapy using the anti-PD-1 monoclonal antibody did not have the expected impact. Despite the fact that ICIs have just recently been used in MSI-H/dMMR CRC patients, resistance to treatment has already been described. It is well known that solid tumours are characterised by the hypoxic microenvironment, extracellular acidosis, and chemoresistance. In nutrient-limited situations, tumour cells modify their metabolism by shifting the balance of energy production away from oxidative metabolism and towards a more glycolytic source. The accumulation of lactic acid and carbon dioxide (CO₂) caused by glycolytic metabolism contributes to a drop in extracellular pH. In order to survive, tumour cells must adapt to these settings, and several carbonic anhydrases (CAs, EC 4.2.1.1) play an essential role in this process since they accelerate the hydration of CO₂ into bicarbonate (HCO₃⁻) and proton (H⁺), a reaction essential to all living organisms. Up to date, the CA superfamily is divided into eight CA classes, denoted by the Greek letters α, β, γ, δ, ε, η, θ, and ρ. CA classes are spread out in a variegated way in plants, animals, bacteria, and archaea. The genome of mammals, for example, only contains α-CAs, with 15 different isoforms (CA I-XV) that perform various tasks in different tissues and organs.

Recent studies suggest that some CA isoforms, namely CA IX and CA XII, are upregulated in several solid malignancies. For example, CA IX is found in only a few normal tissues, with almost complete exclusivity in the epithelium of the gastrointestinal tract. On the other hand, this protein is expressed ectopically in a range of cancer tissues, among which CRC, which by using

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CA II-deficient mice, a strong relationship between cellular control of acid-base balance and innate renal defence was discovered. This finding may corroborate the existence of a possible link between CA II dysregulation and the immune system in cancer. Despite this evidence, none investigated the expression of CAs in tumour-infiltrating lymphocytes (TILs) that, according to the immunosurveillance theory, were suggested to have a crucial role in developing tumours, as we have previously documented in human CRC. In addition, growing evidence suggests that tumour mutation burden and TILs are linked to ICI response. For these reasons, the aim of this preliminary study was to investigate the expression of CAs in TILs obtained from patients with CRC.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Patients

The patients included in the study (P1-P18) and their clinico-pathological features are shown in Table 1.

2.2. Isolation of lymphocytes

Surgical specimens of CRC tissue were dissociated in order to isolate TILs. Tissue pieces from each patient were obtained from two different sites, namely central tumour (CT) and adjacent healthy mucosa (HM). Tissue samples were dissociated with the Tumour Dissociation Kit, human (Miltenyi Biotech, UK) in combination with the gentleMACSTM Octo Dissociator (Miltenyi Biotech, GmbH) to obtain a gentle and rapid generation of single-cell suspensions. In parallel, heparinised venous blood samples were collected and peripheral blood (PBMC) samples were isolated by density gradient centrifugation. Then, lymphocytes were magnetically isolated from dissociated CT, HM and PBMC samples with antihuman CD3 microbeads (Miltenyi Biotech, UK) using an AutoMACS Pro Separator device (Miltenyi Biotech, GmbH).

2.3. Protonography

An identical amount of lymphocyte proteins isolated from CT, HM, and PBMC samples from patients P1-P18 were mixed in a loading buffer for SDS-PAGE without containing 2-mercaptoethanol, and they were not boiled to avoid protein denaturation. Protein electrophoresis was performed as described by De Luca et al. After, the gel was subjected to protonography to detect the hydratase activity. A parallel SDS-PAGE gel was run simultaneously in the same electrophoretic chamber. This gel was not used for investigating the hydratase activity, but for protein identification purposes; thus, it was stained with colloidal Coomassie blue.

2.4. Proteomic analysis

Gel slices associated with CA activity in the protonogram were manually excised from the colloidal Coomassie blue-stained gel, minced, and washed with water. Corresponding proteins were in-gel reduced, S-alkylated with iodoacetamide and digested with trypsin, as previously reported. Individual protein digests were then analysed with a nanoLC-ESI-Q-Orbitrap-MS/MS platform consisting of an UltiMate 3000 HPLC RSLC nanosystem (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA) coupled to a Q-ExactivePlus mass spectrometer through a Nanoflex ion source (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Peptides were loaded on an Acclaim PepMapTM RSLC C18 column (150 mm × 75 μm ID, 2 μm particles, 100 Å pore size; Thermo Fisher Scientific), and eluted with a gradient of solvent B (19.9/80/0.08 v/v/v water/acetoni trile/formic acid) in solvent A (99.9/0.1 v/v water/formic acid), at a flow rate of 300 nl/min. The gradient of solvent B started at 3%, increased to 40% over 40 min, raised to 80% over 5 min, remained at 80% for 4 min, and finally returned to 3% in 1 min, with a column equilibrating step of 30 min before the subsequent chromatographic run. The mass spectrometer operated in data-dependent mode using a full scan (m/z range 375–1500, a nominal resolution of 70,000, an automatic gain control target of 3,000,000, and a maximum ion target of 50 ms), followed by MS/MS scans of the 10 most abundant ions. MS/MS spectra were acquired in a scan m/z range 200–2000, using normalised collision energy of 32%, an automatic gain control target of 100,000, a maximum ion target of 100 ms, and a resolution of 17,500. A dynamic exclusion value of 30 s was also used. Duplicate analysis of each sample was performed to increase the number of identified peptides/protein coverage.

MS and MS/MS raw data files per sample were merged for protein identification into Proteome Discoverer v. 2.4 software (Thermo Scientific), enabling the database search by Mascot algorithm v. 2.6.1 (Matrix Science, UK) with the following parameters: UniProtKB human protein database (11/2020, 214889 sequences) including the most common protein contaminants; carbamidomethylation of Cys as fixed modification; oxidation of Met, deamidation of Asn and Gln, and pyroglutamate formation of Gln as variable modifications. Peptide mass tolerance and fragment mass tolerance were set to ± 10 ppm and ± 0.05 Da, respectively. Proteolytic enzyme and maximum number of missed cleavages were set to trypsin and 2, respectively. Protein candidates assigned on the basis of at least one sequenced peptides with Mascot score ≥30 were considered confidently identified. Definitive peptide assignment was always associated with manual spectra visualisation and verification.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. CA activity and isofrom detection in lymphocytes

3.1.1. CA activity

A cohort of 18 patients (10 males and 8 females) with intestinal adenocarcinoma was included in this study (Table 1). Colorectal tumour tissues and healthy mucosal tissues were collected during surgery and analysed by pathologists to determine TNM (tumour, nodes, and metastases) stage. In parallel,
Carbonic anhydrases were proven to act as significant pH mediators in tumour cells by regulating \( \text{HCO}_3^- \) and \( \text{H}^+ \) concentrations. Among the 15 CA isoforms present in humans, two CA isoforms have attracted significant attention as anticancer targets, namely CA IX and CA XII\(^{37}\). These two transmembrane proteins are significantly expressed in solid tumours and, through their catalytic extracellular domain, were proved to modulate the pH value of the tumour microenvironment, increasing cancer cell survival and proliferation\(^{37}\). On the other side, few data are reported on the role of other CA isoforms in tumours\(^{38}\). For example, CA I and CA II were shown to be upregulated in some cancer types, such as prostate, breast, melanomas, bladder, thyroid, breast, lung, liver, gliomas, renal cell carcinomas, and head and neck. Conversely, pancreatic, colorectal, gastric, and gastrointestinal stromal cancerous tissues showed a downregulation of the CA II protein expression, which was associated with cancer aggressiveness\(^{38}\). In addition, CA XII downregulation was found in CRC samples, even though the clinical significance of these findings has not been investigated.
In this context, the combined use of protonography and proteomic procedures has allowed us originally to evaluate the representation of CA activity and isoforms in TILs, which play a critical role in the development of malignancies such as CRC. As a result, we have here demonstrated that T lymphocytes isolated from the healthy surrounding mucosa had a higher hydratase activity than those present in tumour and peripheral blood. Notably, we also have documented that CA I and II were the isoforms responsible for the different enzymatic activity we measured in TC, HM, and PBMC samples of the enrolled patients.

Previous studies have detailed that CAs are variably represented in different immune cell types, such as B cells, NK, monocytes, and T cells. Noteworthy, CA I and CA II expression was observed in both CD4⁺ and CD8⁺ activated T cells. In addition, several T cell subsets, such as Treg, Th1, Th17, and Th2 cells, which we have previously demonstrated to have a crucial role in the development of CRC and other gastrointestinal cancers, were proved to express CA I and CA II. Accordingly, we can realistically hypothesise that the downregulation of CAs can affect systemic acidosis, thus impairing the immune function and the related cancer-associated inflammation, promoting genomic instability, epigenetic change, cancer cell proliferation, angiogenesis, and ultimately cancer spread. Interestingly, lymphocytes were shown to promote a CA-dependent epithelial HCO₃⁻ secretion as a critical host defence mechanism in other immunity-related contexts, such as during human prostatitis and lung bacterial infection. Based on the data reported in this study, we could suppose that the immune system is damaged at the tumour site and cannot promote HCO₃⁻ secretion, thus leading to a drastic reduction of HCO₃⁻ levels compared to the corresponding adjacent healthy tissue. The low hydratase activity of CA I and CA II and a corresponding reduction of HCO₃⁻ secretion in CRC-infiltrating T lymphocytes may suggest a dysregulation of the local immune response and a consequent loss of effective anticancer mechanisms. Further studies are necessary to corroborate this preliminary observation and elucidate the ongoing processes linking acidosis and CRC development.

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Table 2. Protein identification details of gel portions associated with CO₂ hydratase activity through protonography.

| Sample       | Accession | Gene name | Description                        | Sequence coverage (%) | Peptides (number) | PSMs | Unique Peptides | Amino acids | Score (Mascot) |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|------|----------------|-------------|---------------|
| Patient P1-HM E5RHP7 | CA1       | Human carbonic anhydrase I         | 22                    | 4                    | 10               | 4    | 251            | 382         |               |
|              P22748     | CA4       | Human carbonic anhydrase IV        | 9                     | 2                    | 4                | 2    | 312            | 134         |               |
|              V9HW21; P00918 | CA2    | Human carbonic anhydrase II       | 32                    | 6                    | 18               | 6    | 260            | 502         |               |
| Patient P1-CT V9HW21; P00918 | CA2    | Human carbonic anhydrase II       | 3                     | 1                    | 1                | 1    | 260            | 45          |               |
| Patient P1-PMBs E5RHP7 | CA1       | Human carbonic anhydrase I         | 39                    | 7                    | 18               | 7    | 251            | 627         |               |
|              V9HW21; P00918 | CA2    | Human carbonic anhydrase II       | 25                    | 5                    | 9                | 5    | 260            | 379         |               |
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