Cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) regulates embryonic organizer formation during zebrafish early embryogenesis

YANYAN LIU¹, ZIYUAN LIN² and HUAQIN SUN*,²

¹Prenatal Diagnosis Center, Department of Obstetrics & Gynecologic, and ²SCU-CUHK Joint Laboratory for Reproductive Medicine, Key Laboratory of Birth Defects and Related Diseases of Women and Children, Ministry of Education, Department of Pediatrics, West China Second University Hospital, Sichuan University, Chengdu, People’s Republic of China

ABSTRACT Cystic fibrosis (CF) is associated with the manifestation of a number of medical conditions throughout the body. This prompted us to investigate the etiology of CF from the viewpoint of the embryonic organizer, which is responsible for steering the movement of surrounding cells into specific organs and tissues. In our previous work, we found that a cftr mutant had decreased nuclear β-catenin levels in the early embryo at 5 hours post-fertilization (hpf), when the organizer forms. It is known that nuclear β-catenin signaling is essential for the induction of the dorsal organizer. Therefore, we explored the role of cftr in the formation of the embryonic organizer in this work. Indeed, the expression of organizer and germ layer markers was significantly affected in cftr mutant embryos dependent on Wnt/β-catenin signaling. Furthermore, quantitative proteome analysis revealed that the cftr mutant induced significant alteration in the expression of proteins related to many critical biological processes, cellular components, molecular functions, and signaling pathways, except for the Wnt/β-catenin pathway. These findings demonstrate the function of cftr in embryonic organizer formation and provide an explanation for why many abnormalities occur in the bodies of CF patients.

KEY WORDS: CFTR, organizer, early embryogenesis

Introduction

Cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) is a cAMP-activated anion channel protein that belongs to ATP-binding cassette (ABC) transporter superfamily (Gadsby et al., 2006). It was first found to be expressed in a wide variety of epithelial tissues (Tizzano et al., 1993). Mutations of CFTR cause cystic fibrosis (CF), the most common lethal congenital disease in Caucasians (Quinton, 1999, Riordan, 2008). The hallmark of CF is a defect in electrolyte and fluid transport affecting multiple organ systems with a multitude of clinical manifestations (Quinton, 1999, Riordan, 2008), such as obstructive lung disease (Johannesson et al., 2012, Pezzulo et al., 2012), pancreas exocrine deficiency (Wilschanski and Novak, 2013), CF-related diabetes (Guo et al., 2014), and abnormal gonad function and infertility (Chen et al., 2012, Lu et al., 2012, Xu et al., 2007), which is characterized by progressive organ dysfunction with the development of scarring and fibrosis (Bright-Thomas and Webb, 2002, Labombarda et al., 2016).

Organizers, which comprise groups of cells with the ability to instruct adjacent cells into specific states, represent a key principle in developmental biology. In the context of an embryo, an ‘organizer’ refers to a group of cells that harbor the ability to instruct fates and morphogenesis in surrounding cells, steering their development into specific organs and tissues. As a result, organizers can position specific tissues and organs relative to each other (Martinez Arias and Stentefont, 2018). Therefore, CF patients encountering various additional health issues inspired us to investigate the etiology from the viewpoint of embryonic organizer.

Importantly, in our previous work, we showed that defective cftr results in accelerated Dpr1 induced Dvl2 degradation, and thus nuclear β-catenin expression reduction, leading to inactivation

Abbreviations used in this paper: CF, cystic fibrosis; CFTR, cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator.
of Wnt signaling at the beginning of gastrula period (5 hpf) and impaired hematopoiesis during zebrafish early embryogenesis (Sun et al., 2018). β-catenin is the key effector of canonical Wnt signals in the future dorsal blastomeres and it induces the formation of the organizer, which acts as a signaling center for correct embryonic patterning and gastrulation cell movements (Yan et al., 2018). So, we ask whether CFTR regulates embryonic organizer formation during early embryogenesis.

In this study, we used a zebrafish cftr mutant model established by us to investigate the function of cftr in organizer formation during embryo development. Our results showed that the formation of embryonic organizer and germ layers was impaired in cftr mutant embryos, suggesting an important role of cftr in early embryogenesis and providing an explanation for the multitude of clinical manifestations that occur throughout the body in CF patients.

Results

Dorsal organizer formation and early embryogenesis are impaired in cftr mutant embryos

In our previous work, we showed that cftr deficiency caused by the mutation or knockdown of this gene results in reduced nuclear β-catenin expression induced by Dvl2 degradation at the beginning of gastrula period (5hpf) (Sun et al., 2018). Stage of 50% epiboly (5hpf) is not only the starting time of the zebrafish gastrula period to produce mesoderm and hematopoietic progenitors, but also the key time to induce the formation of embryonic organizer (Thisse and Thisse, 2015).

To determine whether cftr plays an important role in organizer development during zebrafish embryogenesis, we continued to perform analysis on our existing cftr mutant zebrafish lines cftr<sup>cu102</sup> (http://zfin.org/action/feature/view/ZDB-ALT-190307-1). cftr<sup>cu102</sup> carried a 2-bp deletion in Exon 6, causing a frameshift mutation leading to a premature stop codon at 219 AA (Sun et al., 2018).

As revealed by whole-mount in situ hybridization (WISH), the dorsal organizer markers gsc and chd are reduced significantly in cftr<sup>cu102</sup> mutants at the shield stage. Meanwhile, the ventral markers bmp4 and eve1 and the epidermis marker gata2a also showed decreased expression in mutants at this stage. Furthermore, similarly to the marker genes detected at the shield stage, the mesodermal marker gene ntla, the endodermal marker gene sox17, and the anterior neuroectoderm marker gene otx2 were expressed at lower levels at the 70% epiboly stage. Notably, both endoderm (indicated with arrow) and forerunner cell group (indicated with arrowhead) marked by sox17 showed reduced expression pattern in cftr<sup>cu102</sup> mutant (Fig. 1).

Interestingly, expression of the myogenic marker myod was also reduced in mutants at 24 hpf, however, the notochord mesodermal marker ntla and the central nervous system marker sox3 did not show any obvious changes (Fig. 2). These data suggest that in the absence of cftr, the development of early embryos is impaired.

Cftr function on embryonic organizer is dependent on Wnt/β-catenin signaling

Given that Cftr deficiency impairs Wnt/β-catenin signaling and hematopoiesis in our previous work (Sun et al., 2018), we investigated the functional relationship between Cftr and Wnt/β-catenin on organizer formation. Thus, it appears plausible that the impaired organizer in cftr mutant could be due to a deficiency in Wnt/β-catenin. Indeed, injection with dvl2 or β-catenin mRNA ameliorated the impaired organizer caused by deficient Cftr: embryos with normal gsc and chd expression pattern appeared in cftr mutant (Fig. 3). These data suggest that Cftr functions through Wnt/β-catenin on organizer formation.

Proteomics analysis shows aberrant expression of proteins essential for embryo development in cftr mutant embryos at shield stage

Although the reduced nuclear β-catenin levels in cftr mutants could provide an explanation for why embryonic organizer formation was impaired, we still need to uncover the underlying molecular mechanism. So, we performed an integrated approach involving TMT labeling and LC-MS/MS to quantify the dynamic changes of the whole proteome of zebrafish embryos at shield stage (6 hpf) (cftr<sup>cu102</sup> mutant vs WT).

In total, 3,381 proteins from embryos were identified in response to cftr<sup>cu102</sup> mutant and WT embryos, among which 2,836 proteins were quantified. All the annotation and quantification

Fig. 1. Embryonic organizer and germ layer marker expression detected by WISH during gastrulation. Orientation: ntla and sox17, dorsal views with animal pole to the top; otx2, side views with dorsal to the right at 70% epiboly stage; others, top views (gsc, chd, bmp4, eve1 and gata2a) with dorsal to the right at shield stage. Arrowheads indicate the expression sites of each marker gene.
Relative quantitation of proteins was divided into two categories. Quantitative ratio over 1.2 was considered up-regulation while quantitative ratio less than 1/1.2 was considered as down-regulation. Results showed that cftr^{scu102} mutant induced 190 differentially expressed proteins (117 up-regulated and 73 down-regulated) (Supplemental Table S2).

To characterize the function of these altered proteins, a Gene Ontology (GO)-based classification analysis of the ontology of biological processes, cellular components and molecular functions was performed, and it revealed widely different distributions between cftr^{scu102} mutant and WT embryos (Fig. 4A and Supplemental Table S3). With regard to biological processes, we discovered that the proteins in response to cftr^{scu102} mutant showed enrichment of cellular processes, single-organism processes, metabolic processes, biological regulation, developmental processes, multicellular organismal process, response to stimulus, cellular component organization or biogenesis, localization, etc. Molecular function-based enrichment results revealed that binding, catalytic activity, molecular function regulators, structural molecule activity, transporter activity, etc. in regulated proteins were enriched in cftr^{scu102} mutant embryos. In the cellular component category, cytoplasm, extracellular, nucleus, mitochondria, plasma membrane, endoplasmic reticulum, cytoskeleton, etc. were enriched in the regulated proteins (Fig. 4B and Supplemental Table S4).

To further characterize the mechanism of these altered proteins, KEGG pathway-based classification analysis on the signaling pathways was performed, and it revealed a widely different distribution in cftr^{scu102} mutant embryos compared to WT, including metabolic pathways, biosynthesis of amino acids, glycolysis/gluconeogenesis, amino sugar and nucleotide sugar metabolism, carbon metabolism, ECM-receptor interaction, pentose phosphate pathway, pentose and glucuronate interconversions, glutathione metabolism, fructose and mannose metabolism, AGE-RAGE signaling pathway in diabetic complications, fatty acid metabolism and metabolism of xenobiotics by cytochrome (Fig. 4C and Supplemental Table S5).

In conclusion, quantitative analysis of the global proteome between cftr^{scu102} mutant and WT embryos indicated that cftr mutation significantly impacts embryos, resulting in a remarkable alteration of many critical biological processes, cellular components, molecular functions and signaling pathways, except for the Wnt/β-catenin pathway.

**Discussion**

WISH detected both maternal and zygotic cftr expression throughout early development. This expression patterns suggest that cftr plays a role in early axis formation (Sun et al., 2018). Loss of cftr function in zebrafish model leads to destruction of the embryonic hematopoiesis (Sun et al., 2018), the migration of primordial germ cells (Liao et al., 2018), cardiac development (our submitted data), the organ laterality defects, the lumen expansion, function of Kupffer’s vesicle (Navis et al., 2013), exocrine pancreas (Navis and Bagnat, 2015) and the gut tube (Bagnat et al., 2010). These cystic fibrosis phenotypes mirror the symptoms in the human disease.

While raising cftr mutants to adulthood, a large percentage of the mutants are lost beginning around 10 dpf (Liao et al., 2018). Furthermore, the cftr mutants begin to experience growth restriction coincident with the decreased survival (Navis and Bagnat, 2015), suggesting the impaired body development at early embryogenesis.
Navis et al., described that proper midline expression of not and lefty1 indicates that midline integrity is not perturbed in their cftr mutants. In addition, the notochord and floorplate of their cftr mutants appeared to be completely intact at 24 hours post-fertilization (hpf) as judged by DIC microscopy (Navis et al., 2013). Consistently, we also observed that the midline, notochord and floorplate marked by ntla and sox3 were not impaired in embryos at 24 hpf.

Unfortunately, the identified quantitative proteins were fewer than expected in the embryonic proteomics analysis, because of high proportion of yolk proteins in early embryos. Even so, we identified 3,381 proteins and quantified 2,836 proteins and found 190 differentially expressed proteins. GO function classification analysis revealed that a wide range of proteins is regulated by cftr_scu102 mutants, affecting many critical biological processes, cellular components, molecular functions, and signaling pathways except for the Wnt/β-catenin pathway.

Materials and Methods

Ethical approval and ethics statement
All experiments in this study were in accordance with the “Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals” (Eighth Edition, 2011. ILARCLS, National Research Council, Washington, D.C.) and were approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee of West China Second University Hospital, Sichuan University (Approval ID: HXDEYY20131021).

Zebrafish lines and embryos
Wildtype (WT) AB strain, cftr_scu102 (http://zfin.org/action/feature/view/ZDB-ALT-190307-1) fish lines were utilized. Staging of the embryos was carried out as previously described (Sun et al., 2018).

Proteomics analysis of embryos
Quantitative proteome analysis was performed by PTM-Biolabs (HangZhou) Co., Ltd., detailed materials and methods was same to our...
previous work (Liu et al., 2017).

Assays and statistics

Zebrfish embryo whole-mount in situ hybridization, grayscale measurement, and statistics were performed as previously described (Sun et al., 2018).

Declaration of interest

All the authors listed declare no competing financial interests and have approved the manuscript that is enclosed.

Availability of data and materials statements

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

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Author Contributions statement

H.S. and Y.L. conceived and designed the experiments; H.S. and Y.L. wrote the paper.

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