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Cell Death or Survival Promoted by Alternative Isoforms of ErbB4

Maria Sundvall,**‡‡ Ville Veikkolainen,**‡‡ Kari Kurppa,* Zaidoun Salah,‖ Denis Tvorogov,* E. Joop van Zoelen,‖ Rami Aqeilan,‖ and Klaus Elenius**‡‡

*Department of Medical Biochemistry and Genetics, and Medicity Research Laboratory, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; †Department of Oncology, Turku University Hospital, FIN-20520 Turku, Finland; ‡Turku Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, FIN-20520 Turku, Finland; †The Lautenberg Center for Immunology and Cancer Research, IMRIC, Hebrew University, Hadassah Medical School, 91120 Jerusalem, Israel; and ‡Department of Cell Biology, University of Nijmegen, 6525 Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Submitted April 21, 2010; Revised September 30, 2010; Accepted September 30, 2010

Monitoring Editor: Jonathan Chernoff

The significance of ErbB4 in tumor biology is poorly understood. The ERBB4 gene is alternatively spliced producing juxtamembrane (JM-a and JM-b) and cytoplasmic (CYT-1 and CYT-2) isoforms. Here, signaling via the two alternative ErbB4 JM isoforms (JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2) was compared. Fibroblasts expressing ErbB4 JM-a demonstrated enhanced ErbB4 autophosphorylation, growth, and survival. In contrast, cells overexpressing ErbB4 JM-b underwent starvation-induced death. Both pro- and antisurvival responses to the two ErbB4 isoforms were sensitive to an ErbB kinase inhibitor. Platelet-derived growth factor receptor-alpha (PDGFR) was identified as an ErbB4 target gene that was differentially regulated by the two ErbB4 isoforms. The soluble intracellular domain of ErbB4, released from the JM-a but not from the JM-b isoform, associated with the transcription factor AP-2 and promoted its potential to enhance PDGFRα transcription. Survival of cells expressing JM-a was suppressed by targeting either PDGFRα or AP-2, whereas cells expressing JM-b were rescued from cell death by the PDGFRα agonist, PDGF-BB. These findings indicate that two alternative ErbB4 isoforms may promote antagonistic cellular responses and suggest that pharmacological inhibition of ErbB4 kinase activity may lead to either suppression or promotion of cellular growth.

INTRODUCTION

ErbB/HER receptors form the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) subfamily of receptor tyrosine kinases including ErbB1 (EGFR, HER1), ErbB2 (c-Neu, HER2), ErbB3 (HER3), and ErbB4 (HER4). ErbB receptors consist of an extracellular ligand-binding ectodomain, a hydrophobic transmembrane domain, and an intracellular cytoplasmic domain with enzymatic tyrosine kinase activity. Several EGF-like growth factors, such as neuregulins (NRG), bind to ErbB receptors, stimulating receptor dimerization, conformational changes, and subsequent autophosphorylation of tyrosine residues. These phosphorylation events trigger activation of downstream signal transduction molecules that couple ErbBs to cellular responses, such as proliferation, differentiation, apoptosis, and survival. Overexpression and mutations of ErbB receptors have been associated with malignant growth. Moreover, drugs that target ErbB1 or ErbB2 have demonstrated clinical effect as cancer therapeutics. These drugs include anti-ErbB antibodies and small-molecular-weight tyrosine kinase inhibitors (Hynes and MacDonald, 2009).

Relatively little is known about the cancer biology of ErbB4. Overexpression of ErbB4 promotes breast cancer cell proliferation and transforms fibroblasts (Cohen et al., 1996; Tang et al., 1999; Maatta et al., 2006). In contrast, ErbB4 activation has also been suggested to induce differentiation of breast cancer cells, confer cell cycle arrest, or stimulate apoptosis (Chen et al., 1996; Jones et al., 1999; Ni et al., 2001; Williams et al., 2004; Vidal et al., 2005; Muraoka-Cook et al., 2006a,b). Interpretation of published results has been complicated by the existence of four structurally and functionally different ErbB4 isoforms. These isoforms are generated from a single ERBB4 gene by tissue-specific alternative splicing (Junttila et al., 2000, 2003). The isoforms are all functional and tyrosine phosphorylated upon treatment with NRG-1 (Maatta et al., 2006). ErbB4 juxtamembrane (JM) isoforms (JM-a and JM-b) differ in their susceptibility to proteolysis at the extracellular JM domains (Elenius et al., 1997). As a consequence, only JM-a isoforms with 23 unique amino acids within the JM domain undergo ectodomain shedding, whereas JM-b isoforms with 13 alternative amino acids at the JM domain do not (Elenius et al., 1997). ErbB4 cytoplasmic (CYT) isoforms differ at cytoplasmic tails by including (CYT-1) or not (CYT-2) a 16-amino acid stretch containing binding sites for phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3-K; Elenius et al., 1999; Kainulainen et al., 2000), as well as for WW domain-containing proteins such as Nedd-like ubiquitin ligases (Omerovic et al., 2007; Sundvall et al., 2008b; Feng et al., 2009; Zeng et al., 2009).
In addition to activating cascadical signaling pathways such as Ras–Raf–MAP/ERK kinase (MEK) –mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) and PI3K/Akt (Kainulainen et al., 2000), the intracellular domains (ICD) of proteolytically processed ErbB4 isoforms have been shown to directly translocate into the nucleus and regulate transcription (Ni et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2002; Komuro et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2004; Maatta et al., 2006; Sardi et al., 2006). First, ErbB4 JM-a is cleaved by tumor necrosis factor-α converting enzyme (TACE) approximately eight amino acids N-terminal to the transmembrane domain (Elenius et al., 1997; Río et al., 2000; Cheng et al., 2003). Subsequently, the remaining N-terminally truncated receptor undergoes regulated intramembrane proteolysis (RIP) by γ-secretase activity creating a soluble ICD fragment that may function as a transcriptional coregulator for several regulators of transcription, such as STAT5A, estrogen receptor-α, ETC2, and YAP-2 (Jones, 2008).

Previous findings have supported differential roles for different ErbB4 isoforms in cancer biology. CYT isoforms differ in subcellular targeting and stability (Maatta et al., 2006; Sundvall et al., 2007; Sundvall et al., 2008b) and have opposing effects on mouse mammary epithelium in vivo. ICD of CYT-1 type decreases mammary epithelial growth, whereas ICD of CYT-2 type causes epithelial hyperplasia (Muraoa-Cook et al., 2009). Only cleavable ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 capable of releasing a soluble ICD promotes survival of myeloid cells and growth of breast cancer cells in vitro (Maatta et al., 2006). In addition, nuclear localization of ErbB4 epitope associates with worse survival than localization of ErbB4 at the cell surface (Junttila et al., 2005).

Here, we compared the transforming potential of two ErbB4 isoforms in stably transected mouse NR6 fibroblasts, a well-characterized model of ErbB-induced transformation (Chazin et al., 1992; Carey et al., 2006). Consistent with earlier analyses with other models (Junttila et al., 2005; Maatta et al., 2006), the JM-a CYT-2 isoform promoted proliferation, survival, and anchorage-independent growth. However, cells expressing ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 with an alternative JM domain stimulated, rather than suppressed, apoptosis. Both responses were sensitive to an ErbB kinase inhibitor, indicating that ErbB4 inhibition can either promote or suppress growth, depending on the isoform expressed by the target cell. Further analyses on the mechanisms underlying the responses demonstrated a role for differential regulation of the PDGFRα gene at the transcriptional level. These findings suggest that the two ErbB4 isoforms may stimulate opposite cellular responses and underline the importance of using isoform-specific reagents when analyzing the potential of ErbB4 as a cancer drug target.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Stable Transfectants
NR6 mouse fibroblasts (Pruss and Herschman, 1977) were maintained in DMEM (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (FCS; PromoCell GmbH, Heidelberg, Germany). Cells were transfected with pcDNA3.1ErbB4JM-aCYT-2 or pcDNA3.1ErbB4JM-SCYT-2 expression constructs (Maatta et al., 2006) using Lipofectamine plus transfection reagent (Invitrogen) according to manufacturer's instructions. Stable clones were selected and cultured in the presence of 500 μg/ml G418 (geneticin; Calbiochem, La Jolla, CA). ErbB4 protein expression was analyzed as described below.

Chemical Inhibitors and RNA Interference
Inhibitors for ErbB receptors (AG 1478) and PDGFR (AG 1296) were purchased from Calbiochem, siRNAs targeting AP-2α (Hs_TFAP2A_5), Mek1 (Hs_MAP2K1_6), Erk1/2 (Hs_MAPK1_10), Sp1 (Hs_SP1_5), Oct-1 (Hs_POU2F1_2), or a nonsilencing control siRNA were purchased from Qia-chem (Chatsworth, CA). siRNA sequences are listed in Supplemental Table 1.

For ErbB4 and PDGFR-α protein expression analysis, NR6 transfectants were lysed, and samples equivalent to 75 μg of total protein were separated in 8% SDS-PAGE gels followed by Western blotting with anti-ErbB4 antibody (sc-283; Santa Cruz Technology, Santa Cruz, CA) or polyclonal anti-PDGFR-α antibody (Cell Signaling Technology, Beverly, MA) as previously described (Kainulainen et al., 2000). For analysis of protein phosphorylation status, cells were starved overnight in DMEM containing no FCS and stimulated for 10–40 min with or without recombinant human NGF-1βl (30 ng/ml; R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). For analysis of ErbB4 and PDGFR-α tyrosine phosphorylation, 1 mg of total protein lysate was immunoprecipitated with an anti-ErbB4 antibody (sc-283) or anti-PDGFR-α antibody (Cell Signaling Technology) and analyzed by Western blotting using an anti-phosphotyrosine antibody (4G11; Upstate Biotechnology, Lake Placid, NY), as previously described (Maatta et al., 2006). Filters were rebolted with anti-ErbB4 (sc-283) or anti-PDGFR-α (Cell Signaling Technology) to control loading. For analysis of Erk, Akt, and p38 phosphorylation, samples equivalent to 75 μg of total protein were separated in 8 or 10% SDS-PAGE gels followed by Western blotting with anti-phospho-p44/42 MAPK (Thr202/Tyr204; Cell Signaling Technology), anti-phospho-Akt (Cell Signaling Technology), and anti-phospho-p38 MAPK (Thr180/Tyr182; Zymed Laboratories, South San Francisco, CA) antibodies. To control loading, membranes were stripped and rebolted with anti-p44/42 (Cell Signaling Technology), anti-Akt (sc-1618; Santa Cruz), anti-p38 MAPK (Zymed Laboratories), or anti-actin (sc-1616; Santa Cruz Technology) antibodies.

Kinase activity of ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2 in NR6 cells was analyzed using in vitro kinase assays as previously described (Maatta et al., 2006).

Proliferation Analyses
For cell-counting experiments, NR6 transfectants were plated on 24-well plates at a density of 50,000 cells/well in DMEM containing 10% FCS. The following day, the media were replaced by DMEM containing 0–5% FCS supplemented with or without NRG-1 (50 ng/ml; R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). Cell counts were determined at days 2–5 after initial plating, cells were visualized and photographed under a phase-contrast microscope, washed with PBS, removed with trypsin, and counted under a microscope with hemocytometer. Analyses were carried out in triplicates. When inhibitors were used, they were added 24 h after plating in serum-free culture medium.

Differences were statistically analyzed using Student’s t test.

For MTT proliferation assays, NR6 transfectants expressing ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 or JM-b CYT-2 were plated onto 96-well plates in triplicates in DMEM containing 10% FCS. The next day, 150 nM siRNA targeting AP-2α or a nonsilencing control siRNA were transfected to cells. The number of viable cells was estimated 1, 2, or 3 d after initiation of the starvation using a MTT proliferation assay (MTT; Promega, Madison, WI). Data were statistically analyzed using Student’s t test.

Soft Agar Colony Formation Assay
Soft agar colonies were formed in DMEM containing 0.5% agar (Becton-Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ) or 0.33% agar (Bacto-Agar; Difco, Detroit, MI), 10% FCS, and 1% glucose. Bottom layers (2 ml) composed of DMEM containing 0.5% agar (Becton-Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ) or 0.33% agar (Bacto-Agar; Difco, Detroit, MI), 10% FCS, and 1% glucose were poured into 35-mm dishes containing 30,000 NR6 transfectants and DMEM containing 0.33% agar, 10% FCS, 1% G418, and 0 or 100 ng/ml NRG-1 were added onto the solidified bottom layers. After 3 d of incubation, 200 μl per well of fresh DMEM supplemented with 10% FCS and 1% G418 was added on wells to maintain humidity. Cells were incubated at 37°C for up to 7 wk and photographed under a phase-contrast microscope. Data were statistically analyzed using ANOVA (Dunnett T3 posthoc t tests).

Cell Cycle Analyses
NR6 transfectants were starved without serum for 72 h. Subsequently, both adherent and floating cells were harvested, washed with PBS, and fixed with 70% ethanol at −20°C for 20 min. Fixed samples were washed with PBS, and treated with RNase A (0.15 mg/ml; Sigma, St. Louis, MO). DNA was stained with propidium iodine (PI; 40 μg/ml; Sigma). DNA content per particle was determined with FACS Calibur (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA). Data were analyzed using CellQuest Prosoftware (BD).

TUNEL and DAPI Staining
NR6 transfectants were plated onto 13-mm coverslips at a density of 70,000 cells per milliliter in DMEM containing 10% FCS. The next day the cells were washed with DMEM, and the media were replaced by DMEM containing no serum. Cells were starved without serum for 2 d, washed with PBS, and fixed with methanol. DNA strand breaks were stained with TUNEL (TdT-mediated
ErbB4 Promotes Cell Death and Survival

NR6 Transfectants Expressing ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 and ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2

NR6 cells are a population of Swiss 3T3 fibroblasts that was originally selected for a lack of EGF response and are devoid of EGFR (Pruss and Herschman, 1977). NR6 cells also lack endogenous ErbB3 and ErbB4 and express only ErbB2 (data not shown). Moreover, NR6 cells have successfully been used to analyze transforming potential of ErbBs (Chazin et al., 1992; Carey et al., 2006). Because only nonadherent hematopoietic cells totally lack ErbB2 (Maatta et al., 2006), NR6 cells represent a model to analyze transforming activity of ErbB4 isoforms in a cell background with minimal endogenous ErBb expression.

NR6 cells were stably transduced to overexpress two ErbB4 isoforms with the same CYT-2 domain but different JM domains (JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2). The JM-a CYT-2 isoform was chosen as it has previously been shown to be the most potent ErbB4 isoform in stimulating ligand-independent survival of myeloid 32D cells (Maatta et al., 2006) and growth of MCF-7 breast cancer cells (Junttila et al., 2005; Maatta et al., 2006). As the ligand-independent responses to JM-a CYT-2 expression have been shown to be partially dependent on cleavage of a soluble ICD by RIP (Maatta et al., 2006), the noncleavable JM-b CYT-2 was included in the experiments for comparison. Several independent transfection clones were established and screened for ErbB4 expression by Western blotting (Figure 1A; Supplementary Figure 1). In all ErbB4 transfectants a 180-kDa band representing the full-length ErbB4 was visible. An 80-kDa fragment representing the carboxy-terminal cleavage product of ErbB4 was constitutively generated in cells expressing ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2, but not in cells expressing ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2. Both ErbB4 isoforms were tyrosine-phosphorylated upon NRG-1 stimulation, but only JM-a CYT-2 demonstrated efficient constitutive phosphorylation in the absence of ligand stimulation (Figures 1B and 5B). Furthermore, the 80-kDa fragment of ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 demonstrated high basal tyrosine phosphorylation (Figures 1B

RESULTS

ErbB4 signaling on PGDFRA promoter activity was analyzed in MCF-7 cells, which endogenously express ErbB4 JM-a CYT-1 and JM-a CYT-2 isoforms (Maatta et al., 2006). The cells were plated on 24-well plates and cotransfected with pEGFP-C3 (polymeric enhanced green fluorescent protein [pEGFP]; Clontech, Palo Alto, CA) and constructs expressing luciferase reporter driven by PGDFRA promoter fragments of different sizes (pGL4P2DGFLuc−441+/118, pGL4P2DGFLuc−944+/118, and pGL4P2DGFLuc−1253+/118; Aftik et al., 1995) using Lipofectamine 2000 (Invitrogen). Starting 30 h after transfection, the cells were starved in the absence of serum for 16 h and stimulated for 2 h with 80 ng/ml NRG-1 or for 18 h with 10 μM retinoic acid (RA). The fluorescence signal of EGFP was used to normalize the luminescence signal generated by the luciferase reporters as previously reported (Sundvall et al., 2007). To assess the effect of AP-2 and ErbB4 ICD overexpression on PGDFRA promoter, vector control, pCMVHA-AP2a, pCMVHA-AP2b, pCMVHA-AP2c, (Aqeilan et al., 2004a), and/or pCDNA3.ErbB4ICD2 (Sundvall et al., 2007), constructs were expressed with pSLA4P2DGFLuc−1253+/118, pGL4P2DGFLuc−944+/118, or pGL4P2DGFLuc−441+/118. The constructs were expressed in COS-7 cells, and the reporters were human embryonic kidney (HEK)-293T cells. Dual Luciferase Reporter Assay (Promega) was used to measure luciferase activities. For RNA interference analyses, siRNAs were transfected to cells as above after

transfecting the luciferase and EGFP constructs. A minimum of six independent experiments was carried out for all promoter assays, and the statistical significance was determined with one-way ANOVA (Dunnett two-sided or Dunnett T3 posthoc t tests).

Confocal Microscopy

COG-7 cells were transiently transfected with constructs encoding hemagglutinin (HA)-tagged ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 or the sole intracellular domain of the CYT-2-type, fixed 24 h after transfection, and stained with rat anti-HA antibody (epitope 12CA5; Zymed) and mouse monoclonal anti-AP-2a antibody (sc-25343; Santa Cruz Biotechnology), as previously described (Sundvall et al., 2008b). Constructs encoding HA-tagged ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 or the sole intracellular domain of the CYT-2-type (Sundvall et al., 2007) and Myc-tagged AP-2a or AP-2y (Aqeilan et al., 2004a) were used.

Glutathione S-transferase Pulldown Assay

To generate glutathione S-transferase (GST) fusion constructs encoding either ICD of the CYT-2-type (ICD2), N-terminally truncated ICD2 (ICD−ΔN, including amino acids 997-1292) or C-terminally truncated ICD2 (ICD−ΔC; amino acids 676-996), pCDNAS.1ErfB4ICD2 (Sundvall et al., 2007) was amplified with primers (Supplemental Table 1) including sites for restriction enzymes. The PCR products were ligated into a pGEX6p-1 vector (GE Healthcare-Waukesha, WI) using Sall and Nof restriction sites. For GST pulldown assays, Myc-tagged AP-2y (Aqeilan et al., 2004a) or Myc-tagged Wwox (Aqeilan et al., 2004b) was expressed in COS-7 cells and the interaction between AP-2y or Wwox and the GST fusion proteins was analyzed as previously described (Sundvall et al., 2008b).
and 5B). These findings are consistent with our previous observations in other cell backgrounds (Maatta et al., 2006) and demonstrate that JM-a CYT-2 but not JM-b CYT-2 is constitutively processed to generate an 80-kDa phosphorylated carboxy-terminal fragment in NR6 cells.

**ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 Has Efficient Autokinease Activity**

Differential tyrosine phosphorylation of the two isoforms could result from differences in intrinsic kinase activities between the two proteins. To address the relative kinase activities, both isoforms were immunoprecipitated from NR6 cells and subjected to in vitro kinase assay in the presence of ATP. Both isoforms demonstrated basal autokinase activity (Figure 1C). However, the activity of the 180-kDa JM-a CYT-2 was on average twice the activity observed for 180-kDa JM-b CYT-2, after normalizing for ErbB4 protein expression. In addition, enhanced autokinase-stimulated phosphotyrosine content of the 80-kDa JM-a CYT-2 fragment was observed. However, chemical inhibition of ErbB4 cleavage by blocking either TACE or γ-secretase activity did not reduce the basal 180-kDa JM-a CYT-2 tyrosine phosphorylation, suggesting that proteolytic production of an active 80-kDa fragment was not necessary for phosphorylation of the full-length receptor (data not shown). These findings demonstrate a difference between kinase activities of the two ErbB4 isoforms.

**Signal Transduction Pathways Activated by JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2**

Differences in the activation patterns and kinetics of signaling pathways, such as Mek/Erk pathway associate with different cellular responses, such as proliferation versus differentiation (Marshall, 1995). To test whether isoform-specific characteristics associated with differential intracellular signaling, NR6 transfectants were stimulated with NRG-1 and analyzed by Western blotting using phospho-specific antibodies for the MAPKs Erk1/2, and p38, as well as Akt (Figure 1D). Both isoforms were capable of activating Erk1/2, although the phosphorylation stimulated by JM-a CYT-2 seemed to be sustained somewhat longer. Neither of the isoforms activated p38. In line with earlier findings (Kainulainen et al., 2000), activation of Akt, a downstream target of PI3-K, was relatively weak by both of the CYT-2 isoforms lacking the direct PI3-K docking site (Elenius et al., 1999). These findings suggest that, with the exception of differences in the kinetics of Erk activation, the two ErbB4s did not significantly differ in stimulating some of the major signal transduction pathways involved in ErbB-regulated proliferation and survival.

**ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 Promotes Proliferation and Anchorage-independent Growth**

To test whether JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2 expression affected proliferation, growth curves were generated for transfectants maintained in DMEM containing 5% FCS. An increase in proliferation was evident in cells expressing JM-a CYT-2 when compared with vector transfectants (Figure 2A). JM-b CYT-2 expression had no effect on cell numbers in the presence of 5% FCS (Figure 2A). To analyze the potential of the isoforms to induce anchorage-independent growth, transfectants were seeded in soft agar. Cells expressing JM-a
Cytokine-activated cell sorting (FACS). After 3 d of starvation, DNA content of transfectants was analyzed by fluorescence-activated cell sorting (FACS). After 3 d of starvation, the subG1 population with small DNA content was considerably greater in cells expressing JM-b CYT-2 when compared with other transfectants (Figure 4A), consistent with apoptosis. Within 2 d after serum deprivation the nuclei in 43% of the vector control cells gained morphological characteristics of apoptosis (Figure 4, B and C). The percentage of cells with apoptotic changes was more than doubled to 91% in cells expressing JM-b CYT-2, but was only 13% in cells expressing JM-a CYT-2 (Figure 4, B and C). Condensed nuclei demonstrated by bright DAPI staining were also almost exclusively TUNEL positive (Figure 4B). These data indicate that cells expressing ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 die because of apoptosis-like mechanisms in response to serum deprivation.

**Chemical ErbB Kinase Inhibitor Reverses Both ErbB4 Isoform-specific Responses to Serum Deprivation**

To test whether ErbB4 kinase activity was necessary for the two opposite cellular responses stimulated by the two ErbB4 isoforms upon starvation, NR6 transfectants were cultured under serum-free conditions in the presence and absence of a chemical ErbB kinase inhibitor AG 1478. Addition of AG 1478 significantly inhibited the growth of cells expressing JM-a CYT-2 (Figure 5A). No significant effect on growth was observed in vector control cells (data not shown). Significantly, adding AG 1478 into cells expressing JM-b CYT-2 partially rescued them from apoptosis (Figure 5A). The effect of AG 1478 on blocking both basal and ligand-induced tyrosine phosphorylation of both ErbB4 isoforms was demonstrated by Western analysis (Figure 5B). These findings suggest that both the pro- and antisurvival responses were at least partially dependent on ErbB4 kinase activity. The observation also indicates that inhibition of ErbB4 kinase activity may result in either promotion or suppression of apoptosis, depending on the isoforms present on the targeted cell. Similar findings with AG 1478 were also made in analyses of MCF-7 breast cancer cell transfectants expressing either JM-a CYT-2 or JM-b CYT-2 isoforms (data not shown).

**Regulation of PDGFRA Expression by ErbB Isoforms**

To identify molecular mechanisms underlying the different cellular responses promoted by the two ErbB4 isoforms, a cDNA microarray including 15,000 mouse cDNAs was screened for genes regulated in an ErbB4 isoform-specific manner. The cDNA array analysis indicated that ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 and ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 indeed regulated different sets of genes (Supplemental Table 2). One of the identified genes, **PDGFRA**, was up-regulated by JM-a CYT-2 but down-regulated by JM-b CYT-2. The finding was confirmed by RT-PCR analysis of **PDGFRA** mRNA (Figure 6A) and Western analysis of PDGFRA protein (Figure 6C). Consistent with
the regulation taking place at the level of transcription, no differences in the relative degradation rate of the PDGFR-α protein, or the expression of the known PDGFR E3 ubiquitin ligase, Cbl, were observed between the transfectants (data not shown).

Because the antagonistic cellular responses stimulated by the two ErbB4 isoforms were both sensitive to AG 1478, the effect of the kinase inhibitor was also tested on isoform-regulated PDGFRA mRNA expression (Figure 6B). As expected, AG 1478 reduced PDGFRA mRNA expression in cells expressing JM-a CYT-2 but induced PDGFRA expression in cells expressing JM-b CYT-2. Analysis of PDGFR-α protein expression in transfectants cultured overnight in the presence or absence of FCS also demonstrated that starvation alone induced PDGFR-α expression, and expression of JM-a CYT-2 facilitated this induction, whereas expression of JM-b CYT-2 suppressed it (Figure 6C). These data suggest that ErbB4 isoforms regulate different sets of genes and identify PDGFRA as one gene that is regulated in opposite directions by ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2.

**PDGFR-α Has a Functional Role on the Pathway Leading to Different Cellular Responses Downstream of the Two ErbB4 Isoforms**

The amount of tyrosine phosphorylated PDGFR-α followed the changes in total PDGFR-α expression in the transfectants (Figure 6D), suggesting functional significance. To further evaluate the functional contribution of PDGFR-α in regul-
ing different cellular responses to the two ErbB4 isoforms, serum-starved NR6 transfectants were treated with the PDGFR kinase inhibitor AG 1296 or with the PDGFR ligand PDGF-BB (Figure 6E). AG 1296 reduced the number of cells expressing JM-a CYT-2, whereas PDGF-BB rescued cells expressing ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 from starvation-induced death. The effect of AG 1296 on blocking the tyrosine phosphorylation of PDGFR-a but not of ErbB4 JM-a was confirmed by Western analysis (Figure 6F).

Taken together, these findings indicate that ErbB4 isoforms may mediate opposite cellular responses. The data also suggest that differential regulation of PDGFR gene is a central mechanism involved in isoform-specific regulation of cell behavior in fibroblasts.

Regulation of PDGFRα Promoter Activity by ErbB4

Targeting ERBB4 by RNA interference (73% knockdown as estimated by real-time RT-PCR from parallel samples) significantly suppressed the expression of PDGFA mRNA in SK-N-MC neuroblastoma cells that naturally overexpress constitutively active ErbB4 JM-a isoforms (Figure 7A), demonstrating transcriptional regulation of PDGFA expression also by endogenous ErbB4. To address the mechanism by which stimulation of endogenous ErbB4 JM-a regulates PDGFA promoter activity, MCF-7 breast cancer cells (that express JM-a CYT-1 and JM-a CYT-2; Maatta et al., 2006) were transfected with luciferase reporter gene constructs encoding PDGFA promoter fragments of different sizes. NRG-1 stimulation enhanced the promoter activity of the longest construct (1253 base pairs upstream of the transcription start site) by ~50% (Figure 7B). An increase ranging between 45 and 85% was achieved with all the promoter constructs when cells were stimulated with 10 μM retinoic acid, a positive control known to promote PDGFA expression (Figure 7B; Wang et al., 1990). The NRG-1–induced
PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells was blocked to the level of nonstimulated control by siRNA targeting endogenous ErbB4 (JM-a isoform-specific siRNA, 63% knockdown) but not by control siRNA (Figure 7C).

To determine factors involved in ErbB4-mediated PDGFRα regulation, the effects of specific siRNAs were tested on NRG-1–stimulated PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells (Figure 7D). siRNA targeting Oct-1 did not test on NRG-1–stimulated PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells (Figure 7D). The cleavable ErbB4 isoform was unique in regulating PDGFRα expression by RT-PCR. (B) NR6 transfectants were treated with or without 10 μM AG 1478 for 8 h in the absence of serum. PDGFRα mRNA expression was analyzed by RT-PCR. (C) Cells were cultured overnight in the presence or absence of 10% FCS. PDGFRα protein expression was analyzed by Western blotting with anti-PDGFRα antibody. n.s., nonspecific band also present in the vector control lanes. (D) Cells were starved overnight without serum and stimulated for 10 min with 0 or 50 ng/ml PDGF-BB. PDGFRα tyrosine phosphorylation was analyzed by immunoprecipitation with an anti-PDGFRα antibody followed by Western blotting with an anti-phosphotyrosine antibody. Membrane was reblotted with an anti-PDGFRα antibody. ErbB4 tyrosine phosphorylation was analyzed by Western blotting with a phospho-specific anti-ErbB4 antibody followed by reblotting with an anti-ErbB4 antibody.

**Figure 6.** Regulation of PDGFRα expression by ErbB4 isoforms. (A) NR6 transfectants were cultured for 8 h in the absence of serum, stimulated for 2 h with or without 50 ng/ml NRG-1, and analyzed for PDGFRα mRNA expression by RT-PCR. (B) NR6 transfectants were treated with or without 10 μM AG 1478 for 8 h in the absence of serum. PDGFRα mRNA expression was analyzed by RT-PCR. (C) Cells were cultured overnight in the presence or absence of 10% FCS. PDGFRα protein expression was analyzed by Western blotting with anti-PDGFRα antibody. n.s., nonspecific band also present in the vector control lanes. (D) Cells were starved overnight without serum and stimulated for 10 min with 0 or 50 ng/ml PDGF-BB. PDGFRα tyrosine phosphorylation was analyzed by immunoprecipitation with an anti-PDGFRα antibody followed by Western blotting with an anti-phosphotyrosine antibody. Membrane was reblotted with an anti-PDGFRα antibody. ErbB4 tyrosine phosphorylation was analyzed by Western blotting with a phospho-specific anti-ErbB4 antibody followed by reblotting with an anti-ErbB4 antibody.

**Figure 7.** PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells was blocked to the level of nonstimulated control by siRNA targeting endogenous ErbB4 (JM-a isoform-specific siRNA, 63% knockdown) but not by control siRNA (Figure 7C).

**Figure 7C.** PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells was blocked to the level of nonstimulated control by siRNA targeting endogenous ErbB4 (JM-a isoform-specific siRNA, 63% knockdown) but not by control siRNA (Figure 7C).

**Figure 7D.** PDGFRα promoter activity in MCF-7 cells was blocked to the level of nonstimulated control by siRNA targeting endogenous ErbB4 (JM-a isoform-specific siRNA, 63% knockdown) but not by control siRNA (Figure 7C).
also provide a mechanistic explanation for the observation that only the cleavable JM-a CYT-2 isoform promoted PDGFRα transcription.

**DISCUSSION**

ErbB1 and ErbB2 receptors have successfully been used as cancer drug targets in the clinic (Hynes and MacDonald, 2009). However, the biological role of ErbB4 and its potential applicability as a cancer drug target has remained unclear (Sundvall et al., 2008a; Hollmen and Elenius, 2010). Currently, there is no consensus about the cellular responses stimulated via ErbB4. Several lines of evidence suggest that ErbB4 induces differentiation (Chen et al., 2009). However, the known functional difference between the JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2 isoforms is that the 23 unique amino acids present in the extracellular juxtamembrane region of JM-a provide a proteolytic cleavage site that is missing from the alternative JM-b isoforms isotypes (Junttila et al., 2005; Naresh et al., 2006). However, ErbB4 has also been documented to promote proliferation and tumor growth (Tang et al., 1999; Alaoui-Jamali et al., 2003; Hollmen et al., 2009). One possible explanation for the different conclusions is that the JM-b gene is spliced into four functionally unique isoforms (Junttila et al., 2003; Maatta et al., 2006; Muraoka-Cook et al., 2009), and most available data has been produced using undefined reagents or analyzing different isoforms.

Here, two of the ErbB4 isoforms, JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2, were overexpressed in NR6 cells, and their signaling responses were compared. JM-a CYT-2 has previously been shown to promote survival and proliferation in myeloid and breast cancer cells (Junttila et al., 2005; Maatta et al., 2006). JM-a CYT-2 promoted survival also in NR6 fibroblasts upon serum deprivation, but interestingly, JM-b CYT-2 induced cell death. Consistent with differential roles also in vivo,
isoform cleavage in promoting growth, however, an antibody specifically recognizing the JM-a isoform and preventing its cleavage suppresses the growth of breast cancer cells (Hollmen et al., 2009).

To further characterize the molecular mechanisms underlying the functional differences between the cleavable and noncleavable ErbB4 isoforms, gene expression patterns of NR6 transfectants were compared using cDNA microarrays.

Figure 8. Selective and functional association of soluble ErbB4 ICD with AP-2. (A) COS-7 cells were transfected with pcDNA3.1ICD2-HA or pcDNA3.1ErbB4JM-bCYT-2-HA, stained with anti-HA (green) and anti-AP-2α (red) antibodies. The nuclei were stained with DAPI (blue). The cells were visualized by confocal microscopy. Bar, 10 µm. (B) COS-7 cells were transiently transfected with constructs encoding HA-tagged ErbB4 JM-b CYT-2 or ErbB4 ICD2 and Myc-tagged AP-2α or AP-2γ. Lysates were immunoprecipitated with anti-Myc antibody and anti-HA antibody was used in Western blotting. Expression levels were controlled by Western analysis with anti-HA and anti-Myc antibodies. Material precipitating with glutathione Sepharose beads was analyzed by Western blotting with anti-Myc antibody. Membranes were reblotted with anti-GST antibody. (D) HEK-293T cells were cotransfected with the PDGFRα promoter-luciferase construct pSLA4PDGFRα-1253/+118 and a construct encoding Renilla luciferase together with an empty vector, constructs encoding the ErbB4 ICD of CYT-2-type (ICD), AP-2α, or AP-2γ, or a combination of constructs encoding ICD and AP-2. Columns represent relative luciferase activity of the PDGFRα promoter construct normalized by fluorescence signal from the Renilla luciferase. (E) NR6 cells stably expressing JM-a CYT-2 or JM-b CYT-2 were transfected with siRNA targeting AP-2α or with a nonsilencing control siRNA. After siRNA transfection the cells were starved for 3 d, and the number of viable cells was determined with MTT assay. *p < 0.05.
The analysis indicated PDGFRα as one of the target genes that was differentially regulated by JM-a CYT-2 and JM-b CYT-2. Experiments with a chemical inhibitor of the PDGFRα kinase that suppressed the survival effect of JM-a CYT-2 further suggested a functional link between PDGFRα up-regulation and ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2 expression. In addition, PDGF-BB, an agonist of PDGFRα, rescued cells from JM-b CYT-2-induced death. Interestingly, FCS used to supplement cell culture media is known to be a rich source of PDGF ligands (Ross et al., 1974). This may indicate that the survival effects of ErbB4 isoforms were only observed after serum starvation as the lack of medium-derived PDGF sensitized cells to regulated PDGFR expression. Serum starvation alone also up-regulated PDGFRα expression in the vector control NR6 cells, putatively as an adaptation to low extracellular ligand concentration (Lih et al., 1996), and this up-regulation was further enhanced by the presence of ErbB4 JM-a CYT-2, but was reversed by JM-b CYT-2. Previously NRG-1 has been shown to inhibit PDGFB-B-stimulated vascular smooth muscle cell functions (Clement et al., 2007), but a direct role of ErbB4 in regulation of PDGFRα has not been described. Our data indicate PDGFRα as one of the target molecules differently regulated by ErbB4 isoforms and suggest a major role for it in ErbB4 isoform specific signaling responses leading to distinct behavior of the NR6 transfectants.

PDGFRα promoter assays in the presence and absence of siRNAs targeting transcription factors with suggested interactions with the PDGFRα promoter (Afink et al., 1995; Kawagishi et al., 1995) identified AP-2 as a factor positively regulating PDGFRα transcription. The specific association of AP-2 with the cleaved ICD derived from ErbB4 JM-a was indicated as the soluble ICD but not full-length ErbB4 1) partially colocalized with AP-2 in the nucleus, 2) interacted with AP-2 in coprecipitation and GST pull-down assays, and 3) had a synergistic effect with AP-2 on enhancing PDGFRα promoter activity. Moreover, 4) siRNA targeting AP-2 efficiently blocked the survival of cells expressing the cleavable JM-a CYT-2 but not of cells expressing JM-b CYT-2. Both AP-2α and AP-2γ associated with ErbB4 ICD, although the transcriptional synergism between the ICD and AP-2γ seemed to be stronger compared with AP-2α. In contrast, full-length ErbB4 JM-b not capable of releasing a soluble ICD fragment, did not demonstrate colocalization or association with AP-2, and the viability of cells expressing the JM-b isoform was not significantly affected by siRNA targeting AP-2. These findings support a model in which the survival-promoting effect of the JM-a CYT-2 isoform involves up-regulation of PDGFRα transcription via a unique and direct interaction of the released ICD fragment in the nucleus with AP-2. The observations also imply that the survival-promoting activity of the soluble ICD may, in the case of cleavable ErbB4 JM-a, counterbalance death-promoting signaling pathways, such as the Mek/Erk pathway, stimulated by all full-length ErbB4 forms at the cell surface. Indeed, our unpublished observations indicate that targeting of Mek significantly rescues cells expressing ErbB4 JM-b from starvation-induced death.

In conclusion, we provide evidence of opposite cellular functions promoted by alternatively spliced JM isoforms of ErbB4. Recently, similar observations of dramatically different cellular responses were reported for another pair of ErbB4 isoforms, the CYT isoforms, which promote either proliferation or differentiation in the mouse mammary gland (Muraoka-Cook et al., 2009). Our findings with the AG 1478 compound indicated that a wide-spectrum ErbB kinase inhibitor could promote either cell death or survival depending on the type of ErbB4 isoform present. These data underline the importance of investigating the basic biology of ErbB4 isoforms. Moreover, the findings indicate that differential consequences of blocking different ErbB4 isoforms should be taken into consideration when developing novel diagnostic tests and therapeutics for targeting ErbB receptors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Maria Tuominen, Minna Santanen, and Mika Savisaalo for excellent technical assistance and Ilkka Pastero for help with RNA interference experiments. This work has been supported by the Academy of Finland, Emil Aaltonen Foundation, EU-Marie Curie Reintegration Grant, Finnish Cancer Organizations, Finnish Medical Society Duodecim, Foundation for the Finnish Cancer Institute, Jenny ja Antti Wihuri Foundation, K. Albin Johansson Foundation, Sigrid Juselius Foundation, Paulo Foundation, Turku University Central Hospital, and Turku University Foundation.

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