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De-novo expression of CD44 and survival in gastric cancer

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Summary

We have examined the cell surface molecule CD44, which is attracting interest because of reports that isoforms are associated with metastasis. The prognostic value of CD44 expression has yet to be assessed for a solid tumour.

Benign (59) and malignant (primary 61, metastatic 59) gastric tissues were examined with antibodies directed at epitopes common to known CD44 isoforms. Normal mucosa was CD44 negative. In atrophic gastritis and intestinal metaplasia expression was restricted to the epithelial cells of the basal glands and was positively correlated with an increased leucocyte infiltrate and with the expression of HLA DR by mucosal cells. These observations suggest a role for chronic inflammation in the induction of CD44 expression on benign mucosa. No such association was observed between inflammatory infiltrate and CD44 expression on gastric tumours.

CD44 expression, observed in only 49% of primary tumours, was associated with distant metastases at time of diagnosis and, among 31 curatively resected patients, with tumour recurrence (p = 0.0014) and increased mortality (p = 0.001) during follow-up averaging 17 months. When we used an antibody directed against the CD44 variant exon 9v, we found a good correlation between the expression of total CD44 and of exon 9v containing isoforms, and 9v expression in primary tumours was significantly and positively associated with tumour recurrence and mortality.

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Introduction

CD44 is a highly glycosylated cell surface molecule which appears to be involved in cell-cell and cell-matrix interactions. CD44 is a family of molecules encoded by one gene but differing in the number and combination of variant exons inserted into the framework (“standard”) form. Interest has been aroused by the discovery that the expression of one isoform of CD44 distinguished metastatic from non-metastatic adenocarcinoma cell lines in the rat. Proof that CD44 itself has a role in metastasis came from the demonstration that transfection with cDNA encoding this isoform converted non-metastatic carcinoma and sarcoma cell lines to metastatic cells.

Human tumours express a variety of CD44 isoforms and a role for this molecule has been suggested in the development of metastatic potential in man—indeed, high CD44 expression has been shown to correlate with tumour dissemination and poor prognosis in diffuse large-cell lymphoma. Gastric carcinoma seemed an appropriate malignancy in which to look at CD44 expression and progression in a solid tumour because the different histomorphological types differ both in their organotropism to distant metastases and in their prognosis.

Materials and methods

Tissue specimens

Gastric mucosa and primary tumour samples from 60 patients with previously untreated gastric cancer undergoing gastrectomy at the Klinikum Grosshadern, Munich, were obtained up to 30 min after surgical removal, snap frozen in liquid nitrogen, and stored at −80°C. From patients with advanced cancer, samples were also obtained from regional lymph-node metastases (32) and from distant metastases to liver (10) and omentum (17). Cryostat sections (5 μm) of specimens from 1 patient were placed on the same slide to compare directly primary and metastatic tumours with normal.

Clinicopathological indices

All histopathological and prognostic factors were evaluated by pathologists on internationally established criteria. Benign mucosa was assessed for gastritis and intestinal metaplasia. Staining results in primary tumours were correlated with prognostic features, including tumour-node-metastasis (TNM) staging, Borrmann, Lauren, and WHO classifications, grading, tumour localisation, tumour diameter, and lymphatic invasion. Since histology often varied within the same tumour the diagnosis was based on the dominant pattern.

Monoclonal antibodies and immunoperoxidase staining

Monoclonal antibodies NK1-P1 (IgG1, ascites, diluted 1 in 1000) and 25-32 (IgG1, supernatant, diluted 1 in 100) are directed against the CD44 standard form. CD44 9v expression was determined with FW11-24 (IgG1, supernatant, diluted 1 in 50) (unpublished). Epithelial cells were identified with HEA125, directed against a 3 kD molecule common to simple epithelium (IgG1, diluted 1 in 100; Dako) and leucocytes with anti-CD45 M701 clone 2B4 (IgG1, diluted 1 in 100; Dako). HLA DR
expression was evaluated with L243 (IgG2a; ATCC) as undiluted culture supernatant. Isotype-matched myeloma proteins MOPC21 (IgG1) and UPC10 (IgG2), both at 10 μg/mL (Sigma), were negative controls. Tissue sections were stained with an indirect immunoperoxidase technique. The percent of CD44, CD44 9v, and HLA DR positive epithelial cells was estimated together with HEA125 expression pattern on consecutive sections. The degree of leucocyte infiltration was judged by the proportion of cells in the section that were CD45 positive: weak = single dispersed cells between the glands, moderate = under 50% of the cells accumulated in the lamina propria between the glands, strong = over 50% of the cells accumulated in the lamina propria between the glands.

Statistical analysis
The correlation between CD44 expression and clinicopathological indices was analysed by Fisher's exact test. Correlation between the fraction of CD44 positive epithelial cells in gastric mucosa and autologous primary tumours and in primary and autologous metastatic lesions was assessed by the Spearman rank correlation coefficient. The same test was used to correlate CD44 and CD44 9v expression in individual tissues. Overall survival rates were calculated by the Kaplan-Meier method, and for differences between curves the p value was calculated by logrank test.

Results
CD44 in benign gastric mucosa
Despite strong reactivity of a wide variety of different cell types, CD44 expression on epithelial cells was seen only in 34 (58%) of the 59 samples of benign gastric mucosa. Expression was restricted to the gastric glands near the muscularis mucosae and extending up the basal third of the mucosa, the area where epithelial cells also express the HNK-1 (CD57) epitope. Although the fraction of positive glands varied (from below 10% to above 80%), CD44 expression was never observed on the upper part of the glandular area near the gastric pits, on the epithelium lining the pits, or at the laminal surface.

CD44 expression on glandular cells was associated with moderate or strong leucocyte infiltration (table 1). Pits, however, were CD44 negative even in the presence of strong leucocyte infiltration. With two exceptions, CD44-positive gastric mucosa also expressed HLA DR, indicating activation of epithelial cells. In contrast to the spatially restricted pattern of CD44 expression, HLA DR positive cells were found throughout the mucosal cells, from the basal part of the glands up to the epithelial surface.

These histological observations suggest that CD44 expression on benign mucosa is associated with inflammation. A significant correlation was seen between

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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intestinal metaplasia</td>
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*Variation in numbers reflects fact that not all information was available for every patient.

Table 1: CD44 expression in benign gastric mucosa correlated with histopathological and prognostic indices

the presence of CD44 positive glandular cells and both atrophic gastritis and intestinal metaplasia, a condition always accompanied by atrophic gastritis. Specimens classified as normal or as only superficial gastritis were CD44 negative (table 1).

CD44 in primary gastric cancer
CD44 expression was observed in 30 (49%) of 61 primary gastric carcinomas. The fraction of CD44 positive cells ranged from 15% to more than 80%. However, leucocyte infiltration was not associated with CD44 positive tumours and co-expression of CD44 and HLA DR antigens was not found (table 2).

Despite a correlation between CD44 in primary tumours and autologous gastric mucosa (table 2), there was no correlation between the extent of CD44 expression in the two specimens (figure 1). 14 patients with CD44 positive tumours had negative mucosae and 17 patients with CD44 negative tumours had positive mucosae.

CD44 expression was correlated with tissue differentiation (Lauren and WHO classifications). Differentiated tumours with glandular structures were more often CD44 positive than were undifferentiated carcinomas consisting of diffusely arranged tumour cells (table 2). Evaluation of other prognostic factors (table 2) revealed a significant correlation only between CD44 expression and M-stage. Patients with distant metastases apparent at the time of surgery had CD44 positive primary tumours more often than patients without detectable distant metastases.

CD44 expression in metastatic lesions
CD44 expression was observed in 45 (76%) of 59 metastatic lesions (lymph node 32, liver 10, omentum 17) but no differences in CD44 expression were found for metastatic lesions at the three locations. As in the primary tumours no correlation was found between CD44 expression and leucocytes (p = 0.09), and there was no co-expression of CD44 and HLA DR antigens (p = 0.32).

In most cases CD44 positive metastases derived from patients with CD44 positive primary tumours and CD44
negative metastases derived from CD44 negative primaries, but the correlation was not strong (Spearman's \( r = 0.349 \), \( p = 0.009 \)) (figure 2). 10 patients with CD44 negative primary tumours had CD44 positive metastases (15-80% positive cells) and 5 patients with CD44 positive tumours developed CD44 negative metastatic lesions.

Expression of CD44 exon 9v

The antibodies used to examine CD44 expression react with several isoforms. To obtain information on CD44 isoform expression in gastric epithelial cells, tissue sections still available from the non-isoform-specific studies were stained with a monoclonal antibody directed against the variant exon 9v. In contrast to total CD44 reactivity, 9v expression was restricted to epithelial cells. Lymphoid cells, connective tissue, endothelial cells, and smooth muscle cells were 9v negative.

31 benign gastric mucosa specimens and 35 primary and 44 metastatic lesions were examined for reactivity with anti-CD44 9v. In all cases a good correlation was observed between reactivity with anti-CD44 and with anti-CD44 9v in terms both of the number of positive lesions and the percent of positive cells (benign mucosae, \( r = 0.846 \), \( p = 0.0001 \); primary lesions, \( r = 0.863 \), \( p = 0.0001 \); metastatic lesions, \( r = 0.341 \), \( p = 0.01 \)). Even so in some lesions, the fraction of 9v positive cells appeared to be less than the fraction of CD44 positive cells. This was especially true for

![Figure 2: CD44 expression in primary and in autologous metastatic tumours in individual patients](image)

Closed circles represent lymph node, triangles liver, and open circles omental metastases. Correlation significant (Spearman's \( r = 0.349 \), \( p = 0.009 \)).

the metastatic lesions, where 3 CD44 positive lymph-node metastases (over 70% cells) appeared to be 9v negative.

CD44 and prognosis

CD44 expression on primary gastric tumours was examined for its correlation with recurrence and with tumour-induced mortality in 31 curatively resected patients. During follow-up of 6–39 months (mean 17 months) 10 of 13 patients with CD44 positive primaries had local recurrence or distant metastases, while in CD44 negative patients tumour recurrence was less frequent (3/18, \( p = 0.001 \)). Moreover, tumour-induced mortality was more frequent in CD44 positive patients (11/13 vs 2/18, \( p = 0.003 \)). The Kaplan-Meier curves (figure 3) show that patients with CD44 positive primary tumours had a shorter survival time than those with CD44 negative tumours. Only 22 curatively resected patients were examined for CD44 9v expression, but the same association was seen between expression of this variant and survival (\( p = 0.005 \)).

![Figure 3: Kaplan-Meier survival curves for 31 curatively resected gastric cancer patients, subdivided according to CD44 expression](image)
Clinical findings presented here provide evidence for a close correlation between CD44 expression and poor prognosis in solid tumours too.

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