Clinical/Scientific Notes

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C9ORF72 TRANSCRIPTION IN A FRONTOTEMPORAL DEMENTIA CASE WITH TWO EXPANDED ALLELES

Discovery of intronic hexanucleotide repeat expansions of the C9ORF72 gene in a significant proportion of patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and frontotemporal dementia (FTD)\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^2\) was an important step for research into these disorders. The C9ORF72 genetic variant is more common than other described mutations, and, unlike patients with mutations in SOD1, C9ORF72-ALS clinically and pathologically resembles the more numerous sporadic form.\(^3\) However, progress has been limited by lack of understanding of the function of the C9ORF72 locus in health and disease. It is unknown whether the expansion causes disease by a gain of toxicity, whether it disrupts expression of the wild-type protein encoded by the C9ORF72 gene, or some combination of both mechanisms.\(^1\)\(^-\)\(^4\)

Case. Our case is a woman who presented with deteriorating handwriting at age 58 years. Later she developed features of frontal dysfunction and parkinsonism; she received a formal diagnosis of behavioral-variant FTD from a consultant neurologist. Two years after diagnosis, she has not developed motor weakness or denervation changes on EMG. The patient had a brother who died of ALS at age 63 years; no other family members are known to have had neurologic disease, although available information is limited. Several relatives died relatively young (<50 years) from non-neurologic causes, including her parents; she has no children.

Detection of 2 expanded C9ORF72 alleles. PCR analysis of genomic DNA extracted from our patient’s venous blood did not detect a normal-length C9ORF72 allele (figure, A); similarly, Southern hybridization analysis\(^5\) revealed no normal-length C9ORF72 allele in venous blood or saliva (figure, B). Instead, 2 expanded alleles were detected of 50 ± 5 repeats and >2,000 repeats (figure, C).

Investigation of C9ORF72 mRNA expression. qRT-PCR analysis of RNA extracted from venous blood cells in our patient and several patients with expansions of >2,000 repeats in 1 C9ORF72 allele and the absence of expansion (i.e., <20 repeats) in another allele revealed similar levels of C9ORF72 mRNA in all samples (figure, D). Southern hybridization identified a lymphoblastoid cell line derived from a C9ORF72-ALS patient with one expanded C9ORF72 allele of similar size (45 ± 5 repeats) to the smaller expansion in our case (figure, E). qRT-PCR of RNA extracted from this cell line and other lines with expansions of >2,000 repeats in 1 C9ORF72 allele revealed that C9ORF72 mRNA levels were twice as high in the line with the smaller expansion (figure, F). Ethics committee approval and written consent was obtained for all biosamples.

Discussion and conclusions. Identification of a patient with 2 expanded C9ORF72 alleles is an important step in the study of C9ORF72 disease. Her disease severity, defined by age at onset and disease duration, is not remarkably different from other C9ORF72-positive patients.\(^6\) Notably, the length of expansion is different in her 2 C9ORF72 alleles, which allowed us to explore the effect of shorter expansions on C9ORF72 mRNA expression. We and others have shown that the majority of C9ORF72 neurodegeneration patients carry a repeat expansion of >2,000 repeats,\(^7\) although it has been suggested that more than 30\(^6\)\(^-\)\(^7\) or even as little as 20 to 22 repeats in 1 C9ORF72 allele are pathogenic.\(^8\) A recent study has reported hypermethylation of a CpG island 5’ to the repeat sequence, which did not occur in samples with intermediate-length expansions of up to 43 repeats.\(^8\) If this is the mechanism underlying reduced mRNA expression, then it should not affect smaller repeat sizes.

Previously published\(^8\) and our own data (figure, G) demonstrate that the level of C9ORF72 mRNA is reduced in blood cells from patients with long expansions of >2,000 repeats, suggesting that expression of RNA from the expanded allele is compromised. In a lymphoblastoid cell line from a patient with a short expansion in 1 C9ORF72 allele, estimated as 45 ± 5 repeats by Southern hybridization, the level of C9ORF72 mRNA was approximately double the level in cell lines from patients with long expansions (figure, F). This suggests that an allele with a short pathogenic expansion is normally expressed, but this finding might reflect a compensatory increase in transcription of the normal allele. However, since our patient with 2 expansions does not possess a normal allele, such
(A) Genotyping PCR of a wild-type control and our patient. The shaded lines represent numbers of repeats from 1 to 30. Thus the upper panel shows a heterozygous control with 2 normal-length alleles of 1 and 4 repeats. No normal-length allele of less than 30 repeats is detected in our patient, as shown in the lower panel. (B, C) Southern hybridization–based detection of the C9ORF72 allele. (B) Analysis of DNA extracted from venous blood of 5 C9ORF72-positive patients and 1 control. The 1.33-kb band corresponds to an EcoRI/Xbol fragment derived from a nonexpanded locus. This band is present in patients with a single C9ORF72 expansion (lanes 3–6, ++−−) and in normal controls without an expansion (lane 2, −−−−) but is absent in the patient with 2 expanded alleles (lanes 1 and 7, ++++) in both venous blood (lane 1) and saliva (lane 7). The 1.05-kb band is an internal control to show that the absence of 1.33-kb band is not due to a low amount of DNA loaded or its inability to hybridize with the labeled probe. (C) A longer gel allows sizing of both the alleles in the patient with 2 expanded alleles in venous blood. Bands are seen at ~1.6 kb and ~1.2 kb, suggesting that 1 C9ORF72 allele of the patient carried 50±5 repeats and the other ~2,000 repeats. (D) qRT-PCR for C9ORF72 mRNA in venous blood cells from C9ORF72-positive patients; error bars illustrate 95% confidence intervals. Concentration is plotted relative to the concentration in the case with 2 expanded alleles (+ + +). (E) Southern hybridization–based detection of small-size expansion in the C9ORF72 allele. DNA was extracted from venous blood derived from our case with 2 expanded alleles (left lane), a normal control (middle lane), and a patient with expansion in 1 C9ORF72 allele of similar length to the
compensation could not explain why C9ORF72 mRNA expression in her blood cells is equivalent to patients carrying 1 normal allele (figure, D). Thus we conclude that the presence of ~50 copies of the repeat does not significantly affect C9ORF72 gene transcription or mRNA stability in vivo. If shorter repeats are indeed pathogenic, our evidence suggests that this is unlikely to be mediated by haploinsufficiency.

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