Original Article

Mucinous and serous ovarian carcinoma cells interact differently with stromal fibroblasts

Xiao-Yan Zhang1,2,3, Shan-Shan Hong1,2,3, Qing-Qing Cai1,2,3, Ming-Xing Zhang1,2,3, Liang-Qing Yao1,2,3, Cong-Jian Xu1,2,3,4

1Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital, Fudan University, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China; 2Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of Shanghai Medical School, Fudan University, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China; 3Shanghai Key Laboratory of Female Reproductive Endocrine Related Diseases, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China; 4Institute of Biomedical Sciences, Fudan University, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China

Received February 8, 2015; Accepted April 27, 2016; Epub June 1, 2016; Published June 15, 2016

Abstract: The interactions between cancer cells and fibroblasts in the stroma are essential for cancer development and progression. Epithelial ovarian cancer is a heterogeneous disease. Each histological type has different clinical characteristics and molecular mechanisms. A better understanding of the different molecular mechanisms may provide novel approaches for the treatment of ovarian cancer. We analyzed the cytokine profiles found in the interaction between ovarian cancer cells and fibroblasts and compared the results of serous and mucinous ovarian carcinoma. The levels of the epithelial neutrophil-activating protein 78 (ENA-78) were significantly up-regulated in the conditioned media of fibroblasts co-cultured with serous ovarian carcinoma cells. TIMP metallopeptidase inhibitor 1 (TIMP1), TIMP2 and fibroblast growth factor 2 (basic) (FGF2) were significantly up-regulated, and ten other cytokines were down-regulated when fibroblasts were co-cultured with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells. The differential expression of these proteins was mainly related to cell locomotion, migration, communication and stimuli response. These data suggested that the cross-talk between serous ovarian cancer and its stroma might be distinct from that of mucinous ovarian cancer and that the interactions between ovarian cancer cells and fibroblasts caused changes in the expression of autocrine or paracrine signals in these cells, which might in turn contribute to cancer development and progression.

Keywords: Ovarian neoplasms, fibroblast, stroma, serous ovarian carcinoma, mucinous ovarian carcinoma

Introduction

Most patients with epithelial ovarian cancer are diagnosed at an advanced stage because the early disease causes few symptoms and early detection is difficult. Despite extensive cytoreductive surgery, chemotherapies and molecular targeted therapy, the majority of patients will experience recurrence and die from refractory disease. Thus, epithelial ovarian cancer is still the most lethal gynecologic malignancy. Although some abnormal changes of oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes have been found to be involved in the etiology of ovarian cancer [1], the development and progression of the disease have not been clearly elucidated.

Previous studies of ovarian cancer have focused primarily on the ovarian cancer cells individually rather than the tumor tissue as a whole. However, tumors do not consist of a cluster of cancer cells but rather a mixture of tumor cells and the surrounding stroma. Recent studies have shown that the surrounding stroma exerts a crucial function for cancer cells and is not simply a passive bystander [2, 3]. In the development and progression of cancer, cancer cells continuously recruit and reprogram normal stromal cells to create a suitable microenvironment for themselves. In addition, the stroma surrounding cancer cells promotes the initiation, progression and metastasis of cancer [4-6].

In the complex microenvironment of tumor cells, fibroblasts can promote the malignant transformation of epithelial cells, tumor growth, invasion and metastasis [7, 8]. Cancer-
Ovarian carcinoma cells interact with stromal fibroblasts

Table 1. Protein analysis in cytokine antibody array 6

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associated fibroblasts are different from those in the normal stroma with regard to morphology and function. They exhibit the biological characteristics of myofibroblasts [9]. Cancer-associated fibroblasts are stimulated and activated by cancer cells and produce paracrine factors, such as stromal cell-derived factor 1, that influence cancer cells [9, 10]. Consequently, the interactions between cancer cells and fibroblasts lead to their activation and promote tumor growth. However, the cross-talk network between ovarian cancer cells and fibroblasts is not clearly defined.

Epithelial ovarian cancer is a heterogeneous disease. Each histological type has different clinical characteristics and molecular mechanisms. A better understanding of the different molecular mechanisms may provide novel approaches for the treatment of ovarian cancer. Therefore, in this study, the cytokine profiles for the interaction between serous or mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells and fibroblasts were detected using cytokine antibody arrays containing 120 cytokines. Moreover, the potential biological relevance of the differentially expressed cytokines was analyzed using bioinformatics tools.

Materials and methods

Cell culture

The human serous ovarian carcinoma cell line Caov-3 was purchased from the China Center for Type Culture Collection (Wuhan, China). The human mucinous ovarian carcinoma cell line OMC685 was obtained from Zunyi Medical College (Zunyi, China). The human fetal lung fibroblast cell line MRC-5 was purchased from the Cell Bank of the Chinese Academy of Science (Shanghai, China). Caov-3 cells were grown in DMEM medium, OMC685 cells in RPMI 1640 medium, and MRC-5 cells in MEM medium. The media were supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, and the cells were cultured at 37°C in a 5% CO₂ environment.

Conditioned media collection

The MRC-5 fibroblasts were seeded in 6-well plates at a density of 1 × 10⁵ cells per well and cultured to 60% confluence. The ovarian cancer cells Caov-3 and OMC685 were seeded in cell culture inserts for 6-well plates at a density of 1 × 10⁵ cells per well and cultured overnight. The cells were then washed twice in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and incubated in serum-free fibroblast medium. For the co-culture experiments, the inserts with ovarian cancer cells (upper chamber) were transferred to the wells with fibroblasts (lower chamber). Inserts without ovarian cancer cells were also placed in the wells with fibroblasts as a control. The pore size of the cell culture insert was 1 μm, which is sufficient for basolateral diffusion to allow communication between two cell types. After 48 h of incubation, the conditioned media of MRC-5 co-cultured with Caov-3 or OMC685, MRC-5 cultured alone, and Caov-3 or OMC685 cultured alone were collected, centrifuged and frozen at -80°C.

Cytokine array analysis

To evaluate the levels of cytokines in the different conditioned media, the RayBio Human Cytokine Antibody Arrays 6 and 7 (RayBiotech Inc., Norcross, USA) were used. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Cytokine Antibody Arrays 6 and 7 allow the expression levels of 120 different cytokines to be determined. The co-culture
### Table 2. Protein analysis in cytokine antibody array 7

<table>
<thead>
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Ovarian carcinoma cells interact with stromal fibroblasts

conditioned media of MRC-5 with Caov-3 or OMC685 were analyzed according to the manufacturer's instructions. The mixtures of the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cultured alone and of Caov-3 or OMC685 cultured alone were analyzed as controls. In brief, the array membranes were blocked with blocking buffer for 30 min and then incubated with different conditioned media at room temperature for 2 h. After washing, the array membranes were incubated with diluted biotin-conjugated anti-cytokine antibodies at 4°C overnight. After washing, horseradish peroxidase-conjugated streptavidin was added to the membranes. After incubation and washing, the array membranes were incubated with the detection buffers. The chemiluminescence signal was then measured on the array membranes. For all membranes, the biotin-conjugated IgG was used as a positive control to normalize the expression levels among the different membranes.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using Student's t test, and a P value <0.05 was considered significant. The interacting network of differentially expressed proteins was built using the STRING search tool (version 9.1, http://string.embl.de). The high level of confidence of 0.7 was used as the value for edge confidence, and 20 was used as the maximal number of predicted interactions. Gene ontology (GO) was analyzed using the WEB-based GEnE SeT AnaLysis Toolkit (WebGestalt, http://bioinfo.vanderbilt.edu/webgestalt/).

Figure 1. Differential expression of cytokines in the conditioned medium of MRC-5 co-cultured with Caov-3 cells. A. Array 6 incubated with the mixture of the medium of MRC-5 or Caov-3 cells cultured separately. B. Array 6 incubated with the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cells co-cultured with Caov-3 cells. C. Array 7 incubated with the mixture of the medium of MRC-5 or Caov-3 cells cultured separately. D. Array 7 incubated with the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cells co-cultured with Caov-3 cells.
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Table 3. Differentially expressed proteins in the conditioned media of MRC-5 co-cultured with Caov-3 or OMC685 cells

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Results

**Differentially expressed cytokines identified in the conditioned media of fibroblasts co-cultured with serous ovarian carcinoma cells**

To identify the cytokine profile of the interaction between serous ovarian carcinoma cells and their stroma, the co-culture conditioned medium of MRC-5 (fibroblast cell line) with Caov-3 (serous ovarian carcinoma cell line) was analyzed using cytokine antibody arrays for 120 cytokines. The mixtures of the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cultured alone and of Caov-3 cultured alone were used as controls. The cytokine expression levels were compared between the co-culture group and the control (Figure 1). The level of only one cytokine, epithelial neutrophil-activating protein 78 (ENA-78), was significantly up-regulated with a ratio of 2.11 in the co-culture group (Table 3), which suggested that ENA-78 could be involved in the interaction between MRC-5 and Caov-3 cells. Although the expression changes of 112 cytokines were ≥1.3-fold or ≤0.77-fold, the changes did not reach statistical significance with P values >0.05.

**Differentially expressed cytokines identified in the conditioned media of fibroblasts co-cultured with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells**

The clinicopathological features of mucinous ovarian carcinoma differ from those of serous ovarian carcinoma. Therefore, the co-culture conditioned medium of MRC-5 with OMC685 (mucinous ovarian carcinoma cell line) was also analyzed using cytokine antibody arrays in this study (Figure 2). The mixtures of the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cultured alone and of OMC685 cultured alone were used as controls. Overall, changes in the expression of 93 cytokines were ≥1.3-fold or ≤0.77-fold compared with the control. However, only 13 cytokines were shown to be significantly up-regulated or down-regulated. TIMP metalloproteinase inhibitor 1 (TIMP1), TIMP2 and fibroblast growth factor 2 (basic) (FGF2) were significantly increased, whereas chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 16 (CCL16), colony stimulating factor 1 (macrophage) (CSF1), bone morphogenetic protein 4 (BMP4), transforming growth factor β-3 (TGFβ3), chemokine (C-C motif) ligand 22 (CCL22), angiogenin (ANG), insulin-like growth factor binding protein 1 (IGFBP1), glial cell-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF), chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 6 (CXCL6) and chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 13 (CXCL13) were significantly decreased in the co-culture group (Table 3). These results suggested that these 13 cytokines could be involved in the interaction between MRC-5 and OMC685 cells.

Pathways and biological interaction networks involved in the interaction of fibroblasts and ovarian carcinoma cells

To further investigate the potential biological relevance of the differentially expressed cytokine...
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Angiogenesis (ANG, FGF2, CSF1, CXCL6, CCL22, GDNF and BMP4), chemotaxis (CCL22, GDNF, BMP4, CCL16, CXCL13, FGF2 and CXCL6), response to chemical stimulus (TIMP2, CCL16, CXCL13, TIMP1, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, TGFB3, CXCL6, CCL22, GDNF and BMP4), response to wounding (CCL16, CXCL13, TIMP1, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1, TGFB3, CXCL6 and CCL22), positive regulation of catalytic activity (CXCL13, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1, TGFB3, GDNF and BMP4), positive regulation of protein kinase and transferase activity (BMP4, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1 and TGFB3), regulation of multicellular organismal development (TIMP2, CXCL13, TIMP1, FGF2, CSF1, TGFB3, GDNF and BMP4), cell communication and cell-cell signaling (TIMP2, CCL16, CXCL13, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1,

Figure 2. Differential expression of cytokines in the conditioned medium of MRC-5 co-cultured with OMC685 cells. A. Array 6 incubated with the mixture of the medium of MRC-5 or OMC685 cells cultured separately. B. Array 6 incubated with the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cells co-cultured with OMC685 cells. C. Array 7 incubated with the mixture of the medium of MRC-5 or OMC685 cells cultured separately. D. Array 7 incubated with the conditioned medium of MRC-5 cells co-cultured with OMC685 cells.

These proteins were found to be associated with biological process categories related to cell locomotion, stimuli response, cell communication and biological regulation. The main biological processes were as follows: locomotion and migration (CCL16, CXCL13, TIMP1, ANG, FGF2, CSF1, CXCL6, CCL22, GDNF and BMP4), chemotaxis (CCL22, GDNF, BMP4, CCL16, CXCL13, FGF2 and CXCL6), response to chemical stimulus (TIMP2, CCL16, CXCL13, TIMP1, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, TGFB3, CXCL6, CCL22, GDNF and BMP4), response to wounding (CCL16, CXCL13, TIMP1, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1, TGFB3, CXCL6 and CCL22), positive regulation of catalytic activity (CXCL13, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1, TGFB3, GDNF and BMP4), positive regulation of protein kinase and transferase activity (BMP4, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1, CSF1 and TGFB3), regulation of multicellular organismal development (TIMP2, CXCL13, TIMP1, FGF2, CSF1, TGFB3, GDNF and BMP4), cell communication and cell-cell signaling (TIMP2, CCL16, CXCL13, ANG, FGF2, IGFBP1,
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CSF1, TGFB3, CXCL6, CCL22, GDNF and BMP4) and negative regulation of cell death (GDNF, BMP4, CXCL13, TIMP1, FGF2 and TGFB3). The interacting network between ovarian carcinoma cells and their stroma was then constructed using the STRING search tool (Figure 3). The network used the differentially expressed proteins identified in the MRC-5 and OMC685 coculture group as seed nodes and also included the predicted functional partners.

Discussion

In the present study, we investigated the cytokine profiles involved in the interaction between serous or mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells and fibroblasts using cytokine antibody arrays for 120 cytokines. Statistical analyses indicated that the level of ENA-78 was significantly increased in the conditioned media of the fibroblasts co-cultured with serous ovarian carcinoma cells. However, the differentiated proteins identified in the conditioned media of the fibroblasts co-cultured with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells were different than those of serous ovarian cancer. TIMP1, TIMP2 and FGF2 were significantly up-regulated, whereas CCL16, CSF1, BMP4, TGFB3, CCL22, ANG, IGFBP1, GDNF, CXCL6 and CXCL13 were significantly down-regulated.

ENA-78, also known as chemokine (C-X-C Motif) ligand 5, can recruit neutrophils and promote angiogenesis. ENA-78 has been reported to be over-expressed and to promote the proliferation, migration, invasion and angiogenesis of cancer cells [11-14]. The expression of ENA-78 by cancer cells could be enhanced by the interaction between the tumor and its stroma [15]. In addition, fibroblasts activated by platelet...
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derived growth factor B secreted ENA-78 at an enhanced level [16]. In our study, the amount of ENA-78 that was secreted was up-regulated in the co-cultures of serous ovarian carcinoma cells with fibroblasts. This elevated level of ENA-78 could be derived from ovarian cancer cells and/or the activated fibroblasts. ENA-78 has also been found to be up-regulated in ovarian cancer and endometriosis tissues, suggesting that ENA-78 is involved in inflammation and carcinogenesis of the ovary [17].

TIMPs are the natural inhibitors of matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs), which participate in the degradation of the extracellular matrix (ECM). In addition to regulating ECM homeostasis, MMPs and TIMPs are also involved in tumor development and progression. Elevated levels of TIMP1 have been found in ovarian cancer tissues, plasma and serum and are associated with the aggressive behavior and poor prognosis of ovarian cancer [18-21]. However, conflicting results have been reported regarding the down-regulation TIMP1 in ovarian cancer tissues [22, 23]. Here, we showed that the secretion of TIMP1 was significantly up-regulated in co-cultures of fibroblasts with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells. TIMP1 has also been reported to be up-regulated in the cystic fluids of mucinous ovarian carcinoma, prostate cancer stroma, and lung cancer-associated fibroblasts and in co-cultures of oral squamous carcinoma cells and fibroblasts [24-27]. The high level of TIMP1 promotes the accumulation, proliferation and migration of cancer-associated fibroblasts [25].

In addition to inhibiting the activation of MMPs, TIMP2 is associated with tumor development and progression by MMP-dependent and independent mechanisms [28]. However, paradoxical results have been reported, such as decreased levels of TIMP2 expression and the antitumor and antiangiogenic roles of TIMP2 in cancer [28-30]. High levels of TIMP2 have been detected in the plasma and tissues of patients with ovarian cancer, which may favor tumorigenesis [20, 31]. Conflicting results showed that the levels of TIMP2 were decreased in ovarian cancer tissues, except for clear cell carcinoma, and less abundant in mucinous carcinoma/borderline cystic fluids than in adenoma fluids [24, 32]. TIMP2 is known to be localized to both epithelial tumor cells and stromal cells [31, 33]. The expression of stromal and epithelial TIMP2 is higher in malignant ovarian tumors than in borderline tumors, either serous or mucinous tumors [23]. The overexpression of TIMP2 in the stromal compartment and simultaneous overexpression in the stromal and tumor compartments are associated with a favorable prognosis of ovarian cancer [34]. In this study, the level of secreted TIMP2 was significantly increased in co-cultures of fibroblasts with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells. Consistently, TIMP2 was also actively secreted by cancer-associated fibroblasts or myofibroblasts in lung and gastric cancer [27, 35]. The overexpression might be stimulated by tumor-host crosstalk between cancer cells and stroma, which contributes to ECM degradation and cancer dissemination and metastasis [35].

FGF2 has mitogenic and proangiogenic roles and is reported to be involved in tumor growth, angiogenesis and metastasis [36]. The role of FGF2 in ovarian cancer remains controversial. High levels of FGF2 in the tissues, ascites and serum of malignant tumors, including ovarian cancer, have been reported and contribute to cancer development [37-39]. In contrast, Szubert et al. indicated that the expression of FGF2 is lower in ovarian cancer than benign ovarian tumors and normal ovaries [40]. In our study, the expression of FGF2 was significantly elevated in co-cultures of fibroblasts with mucinous ovarian carcinoma cells. Recent studies have consistently shown that hepatocellular carcinoma cells stimulate cancer-associated fibroblasts to produce FGF2 [41]. In turn, FGF2 enables normal fibroblasts to acquire the capacities of cancer-associated fibroblasts, which are vital for cancer development [42].

In addition, this study showed the down-regulation of such cytokines as CCL16, CSF1, BMP4, TGFB3, CCL22, ANG, IGFBP1, GDNF, CXCL6 and CXCL13. These cytokines are mainly related to cell locomotion, migration, motility and chemotaxis. The decrease in the levels of these cytokines might contribute to degradation or ligand-receptor binding and internalization.

Conclusions

Taken together, our data suggested that the interaction between ovarian cancer cells and fibroblasts caused changes in the expression of autocrine or paracrine signals in these cells.
These changes might contribute to cancer development and progression by regulating ECM degradation, angiogenesis, cell proliferation and migration. Additionally, our data indicated that the cross-talk between serous ovarian cancer cells and their stroma might be distinct from that of mucinous ovarian cancer cells. However, the details of these differences need to be studied. This example of the molecular mechanisms involved in different histological types of ovarian cancer may promote the development of targeted therapeutics and the application of individualized treatment in ovarian cancer patients.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by funding from National Natural Sciences Foundation of China (81472424), Rising-Star Program of Shanghai Science and Technology Commission (10QA1401000), Youth Talent Foundation of Shanghai Health System (XYQ2011054), and Shanghai Talent Developing Foundation (2012047).

Disclosure of conflict of interest

None.

Address correspondence to: Cong-Jian Xu and Xiao-Yan Zhang, Shanghai Key Laboratory of Female Reproductive Endocrine Related Diseases, Shanghai 200011, People’s Republic of China. Tel: +86-21-33189900, E-mail: xucongjian@gmail.com (CJX); xyzhang80@gmail.com (XYZ)

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