Connective tissue growth factor expression in endocrine tumors is associated with high stromal expression of $\alpha$-smooth muscle actin

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Abstract

Objective: Complications due to fibrosis development are common in patients with well-differentiated endocrine carcinomas in the small intestine (ileal carcinoids). Connective tissue growth factor (CTGF) expression in ileal carcinoids may be related to this fibrosis development. This study aimed to examine CTGF expression in relation to local myofibroblast differentiation in a large series of ileal carcinoids and in different types of endocrine tumors.

Methods: Immunoreactivity (IR) for CTGF and $\alpha$-smooth muscle actin ($\alpha$-SMA), a marker for myofibroblasts, was compared in serial tumor tissue sections from 42 patients with ileal carcinoids and from 80 patients with other endocrine tumors. Western blot was performed on an additional 21 patients with ileal carcinoids.

Results: CTGF IR was present in $\geq 50\%$ of tumor cells in all 42 ileal carcinoids and in 2 out of 14 endocrine pancreatic tumors, 4 out of 6 rectal carcinoids, and 1 out of 5 lung carcinoids. Tumors with abundant CTGF expression also displayed $\alpha$-SMA IR in stromal fibroblast-like cells, whereas other endocrine tumors displayed less or no CTGF and $\alpha$-SMA IR. Protein bands corresponding to full-length CTGF (36–42 kDa) were detected in protein lysates from ileal carcinoids.

Conclusion: CTGF is uniquely prevalent in ileal carcinoids when compared with most other endocrine tumor types. Immunoreactive cells are adjacent areas with increased fibrovascular stroma that express $\alpha$-SMA. This supports a potential role for CTGF in myofibroblast-mediated fibrosis associated with ileal carcinoids, and indicates that CTGF should be investigated as a target for future therapy.
studied in multiple contexts and attributed many functions. The results in different systems are in some ways contradictory. It is becoming apparent that CTGF function is highly dependent on its processing. CTGF stimulation of fibroblast proliferation and collagen synthesis are, for example, separate processes. In vitro experiments demonstrate that the N-terminal region of CTGF stimulates myofibroblast differentiation and collagen production, while the C-terminal stimulates fibroblast cell proliferation (19). The presence of other GHS, such as EGF, IGF2, and TGFβ, also seems to influence the degree to which these different fibrotic processes are active (18).

Our aim was to characterize CTGF expression in primary tumors and metastases from ileal carcinoids in relation to other endocrine tumor types by means of immunohistochemistry (IHC). Furthermore, we studied the possible relationship between CTGF and fibrosis in endocrine tumors by comparing the expression of CTGF and α-smooth muscle actin (α-SMA), a marker for myofibroblast differentiation. We further characterized CTGF in primary tumors and metastases from ileal carcinoids using western immunoblotting.

**Materials and methods**

**Patients**

This study included 124 patients. The tumors were diagnosed histopathologically at the Laboratory of Pathology and Cytology, Uppsala University Hospital, Sweden. Tumors from 47 patients with ileal carcinoids displayed chromogranin A and serotonin immunoreactivity (IR), and the patients had elevated urinary excretion of 5-hydroxy imidazole acetic acid and had metastatic disease at diagnosis. The diagnosis of the other endocrine tumors was based on international recommendations for the classification of endocrine tumors (20, 21).

For IHC analysis, ileal carcinoid tumor material, consisting of 26 primary tumors, 21 mesenterial metastases, and 13 liver metastases, from 42 patients was used. The clinical data for this study also included primary tumors from an additional 80 patients with various endocrine tumors: ECLomas type 1 (n = 5), ECLomas type 3 (n = 3), lung carcinoids (n = 5), functioning endocrine pancreatic tumor (EPTs; n = 8), nonfunctioning EPTs (n = 6), appendix carcinoids (n = 6), L-cell rectal carcinoids (n = 3), serotonin-producing rectal carcinoids (n = 3), simple goiter (n = 2), medullary thyroid cancer (n = 7), adrenocortical adenomas (n = 5), adrenocortical cancer (n = 6), pheochromocytomas (n = 5), neuroblastomas (n = 2), follicular thyroid adenomas (n = 5), follicular thyroid cancer (n = 2), papillary thyroid carcinomas (n = 3), and parathyroid adenomas (n = 4).

For western blot (WB) analysis, protein was isolated from 21 patients with ileal carcinoids comprising 15 primary tumors, 11 mesenterial metastases, and one liver metastasis. Medical records were reviewed in order to establish the presence of fibrosis-related symptoms present at the time of operation. Intestinal obstruction, ischemia, or abdominal adherences were grouped under the term mesenterial fibrosis. Echo-cardiograms were performed on all the patients with ileal carcinoids to evaluate the presence of carcinoid heart disease and heart valve stenosis. Ki67 proliferation index was evaluated in all cases by a pathologist and verified by the author J L C. All the patients had metastases at the time of operation.

**Immunohistochemistry**

Tumor specimens were fixed in buffered formalin for 1–2 days, dehydrated, and embedded in paraffin wax. Sections, ~4 µm thick, were placed on positively charged glass superfrost slides (Menzel-Gläser, Braunschweig, Germany). They were deparaffinized in xylene and rehydrated using decreasing concentrations of ethanol. Antigen retrieval was performed using microwave treatment at 700 W for 14 min and 350 W for 10 min in Tris pH 8 for CTGF and in citrate buffer pH 6 for α-SMA respectively.

To detect CTGF, sections were first incubated for 30 min with 0.1% H2O2 to quench endogenous peroxidase, washed with PBS, and then with normal horse serum (Vector Laboratories, CA, USA); redistilled water (1:5), which was tapped off after 30 min incubation. Sections were then incubated overnight at 4 °C with polyclonal goat-anti-human CTGF (L: 20 Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA; sc-14939) diluted 1:1000 in PBS with 2% BSA then with biotinylated anti-goat antibody (Vector BA-9500). Sections were then incubated for 30 min with avidin–biotin–HRP (Vectastain ABC PK-6100).

Detection of α-SMA was performed using EnVision+ System–HRP (DakoCytomation K4011, Glostrup, Denmark) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. In short, after a 5 min incubation with peroxidase block, the slides were then incubated for 1 h at room temperature with monoclonal mouse anti-human α-SMA (DakoCytomation) diluted 1:50 in PBS with 2% BSA then with HRP-labeled EnVision polymer for 30 min.

For both CTGF and α-SMA detection, sections were washed thrice in PBS pH 7.4 after each step with the exception of after horse serum application. DAB chromogen was applied for 5 min. Counter staining was done using Meyer’s hematoxylin, and the sections were then dehydrated with increasing concentrations of ethanol, followed by xylene and then mounted using Pertex mounting medium (Histolab Products AB, Göteborg, Sweden).

The immunostained sections were evaluated in areas with highest number of tumor cells using Zeiss light microscope and graded by independent reviewers (J C, A T, and L G) using the following criteria: nonimmunoreactive (−); 1–25%, (+); 25–50% (+ +);
and more than 50% (+ + +) immunoreactive cells. CTGF IR was examined in tumor cells, while α-SMA IR was evaluated in the fibroblasts component of intratumoral stroma. α-SMA IR in vascular smooth muscle and capsule when present was not evaluated.

**Western blot**

Cytoplasmic extracts were prepared from frozen tissue from 21 patients with ileal carcinoids (15 primary tumors, 11 mesenterial metastases, and 1 liver metastasis) according to the instructions of the NE-PER nuclear and cytoplasmic extraction kit (Pierce Protein Research Products, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Rockford, IL, USA) in the presence of protease inhibitors. The protein content of the cytoplasmic lysates was measured using the BCA Protein assay kit (Pierce). Samples were boiled for 5 min in Laemmli Buffer (Bio-Rad) containing 5% β-mercaptoethanol and resolved on 10–20% Tris–HCl gradient gel (Bio-Rad). Proteins (40 μg) were then transferred onto a nitrocellulose membrane and blocked overnight in buffer containing 1% bovine serum albumin and 5% nonfat dry milk.

Immunodetection was performed by incubating the blots with polyclonal goat-anti-CTGF (L: 20 Santa Cruz Biotechnology sc-14939) diluted 1:1000 in buffer (1 X TBS, 0.1% Tween 20, and 5% milk) for 3 h at room temperature. Blots were then washed six times with washing buffer (1 X TBS and 0.1% Tween 20) and incubated with secondary HRP-conjugated antibodies (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) for 1 h at room temperature. After washings, Amersham ECL plus system was used for detection. Prestained molecular weight standards (Dual Color, Bio-Rad) were used to monitor protein migration. Coomassie blue staining was performed on membranes to verify equal sample loading and transfer.

**Controls**

To control for non-specific immunostaining, anti-CTGF (L-20) was preincubated with both 10 and 1 nmol/ml of the respective peptide (Santa Cruz Biotechnology sc-14939P).

**Ethics**

The study was reviewed and approved by the local Medical Ethics Committee at Uppsala University Hospital (DiarNr: 2007/006).

**Results**

**CTGF IR in endocrine tumors**

CTGF expression was detected in all lung carcinoids, medullary thyroid cancer, and gastroenteropancreatic tumors. The number of CTGF-immunoreactive cells, however, varied considerably (see Table 1 and Fig. 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tumor</th>
<th>Cases (CTGF (&gt;50%)</th>
<th>α-SMA (α-SMA (&gt;50%))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forerug</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ECLoma type 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECLoma type 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lung carcinoid</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Endocrine pancreatic tumor</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Midgut</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appendix carcinoid</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ileal carcinoid</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hindgut</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rectal carcinoid</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other endocrine tumors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adrenocortical adenoma</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adrenocortical cancer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follicular thyroid cancer</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parathyroid adenoma</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papillary thyroid cancer</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</table>

*Cases with >50% CTGF-immunoreactive tumor cells.
*Cases with >50% α-SMA-immunoreactive cells in fibroblast component of intratumoral stroma.

Intensive CTGF IR in more than 50% of tumor cells was detected in all ileal carcinoids. In the other endocrine tumors, comparable relative incidence of CTGF IR was only present in two EPTs, one lung carcinoid and four rectal carcinoids (Table 1). CTGF IR in the remaining tumors ranged from none to <50% of tumor cells. CTGF IR was not detected in adrenocortical cancer, pheochromocytomas, neuroblastomas, follicular thyroid adenomas, simple goiters, and parathyroid adenomas. In CTGF-expressing tumors, stroma displayed weak CTGF IR. CTGF IR was strongest in tumor cells adjacent to surrounding fibrovascular stroma.

A correlation was observed between CTGF and serotonin production in endocrine tumors even when ileal carcinoids were excluded from the analysis. This was observed when both absolute presence and absence of CTGF/serotonin IR in tumors (excluding ileal carcinoids) were analyzed (P < 0.05) and pronounced when presence and absence > 50% expression of CTGF/serotonin were analyzed (P < 0.0001, Fisher’s exact test).

**α-SMA IR in endocrine tumors**

α-SMA-immunoreactive stromal cells were found in nearly all endocrine tumors studied (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). The highest relative incidence of α-SMA IR was present in ileal carcinoids, in which over 83% of the tumors expressed α-SMA in > 50% of fibroblast-like stromal cells (see Table 1 and Fig. 1). In these tumors, areas of fibrosis were extensive and well vascularized. Comparable α-SMA IR was observed in 1 out of 6 rectal carcinoid tumors and 2 out of 14 EPTs (producing
serotonin and gastrin respectively). Expression of α-SMA in more than 25% of fibroblast-like stromal cells was only noted in tumors where at least more than 25% of tumor cells were CTGF immunoreactive. α-SMA IR was not detected in parathyroid adenomas but was displayed in <25% of fibroblast-like stromal cells in appendiceal carcinoids, medullary thyroid cancer, adrenocortical cancer, pheochromocytomas, and follicular thyroid adenomas.

**Western immunoblotting of CTGF in ileal carcinoids**

WB of protein extracts from ileal carcinoids using a thrombospondin-1 (TSP-1 or THBS1 as listed in Hugo Database) motif-specific antibody, anti-CTGF L-20, visualized pronounced bands in all the samples that migrated with an apparent molecular weight of 50 and 38–36 kDa (see Fig. 2). A weaker band migrating with an apparent molecular weight of 20 kDa was observed in the majority of tumors. As differences between generally high levels of CTGF in the tumors were subtle, they could not be separated from variations in tumor content. Therefore, no attempt to quantify the relative amounts of CTGF was made. In all 21 cases, local stroma was extensive, and IR of CTGF and α-SMA was over 50 and 40% respectively. Nineteen cases had stage IV, and two had stage IIIb diseases. Fibrosis and adherences surrounding the tumor and in the peritoneal cavity are described in 16 out of 21 patients in the surgical report. In six patients, this fibrosis caused surgically verified intestinal obstruction. Proliferation index, Ki67%, in the ileal carcinoids studied ranged from <1 to 8% (median <1%). Four of twenty-one patients were diagnosed with carcinoid heart disease. These clinicopathological factors, including the presence of distal fibrosis, were not correlated to local CTGF levels, which were generally high.

**Controls**

CTGF immunoblotting was completely blocked when anti-CTGF (L-20) was preincubated with 1 nmol of blocking peptide (Santa Cruz Biotechnology sc-14939P or sc-34772P).

**Discussion**

CTGF is known to regulate myofibroblast differentiation and collagen production, which are both key mechanisms in fibrosis development. We confirm, in a large series, that ileal carcinoids as a rule show abundant expression of CTGF in both primary tumors.
and metastases. We also show that the majority of fibroblasts-like cells surrounding ileal carcinoid tumor cells express α-SMA, indicating myofibroblast differentiation. These results are in agreement with a role for CTGF in ileal carcinoid fibrosis.

In the other endocrine tumors, CTGF IR was less prominent. CTGF IR was found in most gastroenteropancreatic tumors, in medullary thyroid cancer, and in lung carcinoids. Intensive CTGF IR in more than 50% of tumor cells was noted, apart from ileal carcinoids, in 2 out of 14 EPTs, 1 out of 5 lung carcinoids, and 4 out of 6 rectal carcinoids. CTGF expression in endocrine tumors, apart from ileal carcinoids, is more frequent (P < 0.05) but not exclusive to tumors simultaneously producing serotonin. Serotonin-independent mechanisms for CTGF production must, therefore, exist. Serotonin administration induces carcinoid heart disease in rats through a TGFβ-mediated mechanism (2), and the presence of serotonin and perhaps other specific hormones likely modulate CTGF function.

CTGF protein bands with an approximate molecular weight of 38, 36, 23, and 20 kDa were found in protein lysates from ileal carcinoids. Full-length glycosylated CTGF has an estimated molecular weight of 36–42 kDa. The presence of proteolytic fragments, with an estimated molecular weight of 23 kDa, were detected using anti-bodies directed against the C-terminal domains indicating that CTGF is cleaved in the hinge region (19). It has been speculated that CTGF fragments may have specific biological functions (19, 22). High levels of N-terminal CTGF were found in patients with fibrotic scleroderma (23) and in diabetic patients with nephropathy (24). Our preliminary results from WB using anti-N-CTGF (G-14), specific for the N-terminal IGF-binding protein motif, visualized a band migrating at an apparent molecular weight of 50 kDa and, in a subgroup of ileal carcinoids metastases, an additional band at 20 kDa. The 20 kDa bands could represent truncated N-terminal CTGF domains, and its presence appears to vary between patients (data not shown). Measurement of circulating N-terminal CTGF levels in plasma and/or in peritoneal fluid in patients with ileal carcinoid may help to understand the relation to extent of fibrosis development seen in individuals.

CTGF is shown to mediate TGFβ-induced myofibroblast differentiation (18, 19). α-SMA-positive fibroblast-like stromal cells were present in all tumors included in our study; however, their prevalence varied. The majority of ileal carcinoids displayed very high proportion of α-SMA-immunoreactive fibroblast-like cells in an extensive stroma. The term ‘fibroblast-like’ is used to guard for potential error resulting from α-SMA expression in lengthwise-sectioned smooth muscle cells surrounding stromal vascular structures, which can be difficult to distinguish from fibroblasts in some cases. Differentiated α-SMA expressing myofibroblasts produce collagen, whereas proliferating fibroblasts neither express α-SMA nor produce collagen (18). Our results indicate that it is likely that myofibroblasts contribute to the excessive local fibrosis that is often present in ileal carcinoids and CTGF may be involved in mediating this process. Myofibroblasts in these tumors may also be involved in tumor vascularization, invasiveness, and early metastases formation, which are also features of ileal carcinoids (25–27). This potential mechanism may not be unique for ileal carcinoids as it can be noted that stromal α-SMA IR was relatively high ( > 25%) in the other endocrine tumors that displayed CTGF IR in > 50% of tumor cells. Both EPTs (producing serotonin and gastrin respectively) and the lung carcinoid had formed metastases, while only one of the four rectal carcinoids had formed lymph node metastases.

A multifunctional role for CTGF in tumorigenesis is emerging. CTGF is expressed at high levels in other human cancers and is reported to correlate with both tumor stage and survival. The results, however, are contradictory. CTGF is associated with increased proliferation and bad prognosis in glioblastomas (28), while in colorectal cancer and non-small cell lung cancer, high CTGF expression is associated with improved survival (29, 30). Likewise, CTGF is thought to contribute to tumor invasiveness in glioblastomas (31) and in osteolytic breast cancer (32). While overexpression of CTGF inhibits metastases and invasion of human lung cancer cells (29), and attenuates the growth and tumorigenicity of squamous cell carcinoma cells (33). The biology behind the different roles has not been explained, but it is becoming apparent that other signaling molecules act in concert with CTGF in combinatorial signal pathways with different outcomes (18). It seems, however, that CTGF may play a role in the development of certain tumors and could be a target for future therapy. A study reports that a human CTGF-specific MAB decreases tumor growth and metastases, and attenuates tumor angiogenesis and cancer cell proliferation in an orthotopic mouse model of pancreatic cancer (34).

The role of CTGF in ileal carcinoids is unknown. CTGF has been shown to stimulate proliferation of cells isolated from a ECL cell tumor but not of ECL cells isolated from normal mucosa (35). Ileal carcinoids display generally low proliferation index (36), and CTGF expression was not associated with tumor proliferation index in this study. A potential proliferative role for CTGF in these tumors is, therefore, likely dependent on the presence of other factors.

CTGF expression is generally high in ileal carcinoids especially in tumor areas adjacent to extensive α-SMA-expressing stroma. This supports a role for CTGF in ileal carcinoid fibrosis. CTGF is also expressed in other gastroenteropancreatic and lung endocrine tumors, however, most often at lower relative incidence. Complications due to fibrosis are a major concern for patients with ileal carcinoids, and CTGF may provide a target for future treatment.
Declaration of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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