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Genome-wide expression analysis of peripheral blood identifies candidate biomarkers for schizophrenia

Running title: Candidate biomarkers for schizophrenia

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyze gene expression in blood of patients with newlydiagnosed schizophrenia during their first psychotic episode and subsequent remission. Whole blood samples were obtained from 32 untreated patients presenting with their first psychotic episode suggestive of schizophrenia and 32 age- and gendermatched controls. Using Affymetrix micoarrays, we identified significantly altered expression of 180 gene probes in psychotic patients compared to controls. A subset of 4 significantly changed genes was further confirmed with QRT PCR. The following genes were significantly altered in patients: glucose transporter, $SLC2A3$ ($p<0.001$) and actin assembly factor DAAM2 ($p<0.001$) were increased, whereas translation, zinc metallopeptidase, neurolysin 1 and myosin C were significantly decreased $(p<0.05)$. Expression of these candidate markers was also analyzed in a longitudinal study (12-24 months) in 12 patients who achieved full remission. Interestingly, expression of DAAM2 returned to control levels in patients who were in remission after their first psychotic episode, suggesting that its expression correlates with diseases progression and/or response to treatment. In summary, we identified changes of gene expression from peripheral blood which might help discriminate patients with schizophrenia from controls. While these results are promising, especially for DAAM2 whose polymorphic variants have been found significantly associated with schizophrenia, it will be important to analyze larger cohorts of patients in order to firmly establish changes in gene expression as blood markers of schizophrenia.

Key words: schizophrenia, gene expression, biomarkers, blood, DAAM2

1. INTRODUCTION

Schizophrenia is one of the most disabling psychiatric illnesses, affecting about 1% of population, with no significant differences in its prevalence among countries (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Although the term schizophrenia is used to describe a relatively heterogeneous group of clinical presentations, in majority of cases, schizophrenia is a chronic illness with a recurrent course, characterized by alternating periods of acute psychotic illness and their remission. A prodromal stage which may last for several years prior to presentation of acute psychotic symptoms usually precedes the first acute psychosis. Duration of at least six months of the first episode of psychosis is highly suggestive of schizophrenia. With each new episode of acute psychosis, the patient condition deteriorates further, until a stage with predominately negative and cognitive symptoms is reached.

The pathogenesis of this illness is still largely unknown and the diagnosis of schizophrenia is based on its clinical presentation. In both clinical and research settings, DSM-IV criteria are usually applied (APA, 1994). The severity of symptoms is usually determined using standardized measurement tools, such as positive and negative syndrome scale (PANSS) (Kay et al. 1987). Adequate treatment response of an acute episode is characterized by a 50% reduction of the severity of acute symptoms after 6 weeks (early treatment response) or 12 weeks of treatment (late treatment response) (Kane et al. 2003). Strict remission criteria were proposed by Andreasen et al. (2005).

To objectify the diagnosis and course of treatment of this illness, an effort has been made to identify a biological correlate of schizophrenia (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). For example, the search for biomarkers revealed neuropathological (Shapiro, 1993;

Farrow et al. 2005) and neurophysiologic (Callicott et al. 1999) abnormalities, as well as alterations in neurotransmitter function (Stahl, 2000), neurotrophic factors (Parikh et al. 2003) and gene expression in prefrontal cortex (Mirnics et al. 2001).

For clinical purpose, a biomarker which might be detected by non- invasive methods would be desirable. To this end, several authors identified possible biomarkers for schizophrenia from peripheral blood, including neurotransmitter metabolite levels, stress hormones (Sadock & Sadock, 2003), markers of immune response (Gladkevich et al. 2004) and fatty acids (Fenton et al. 2000). Recently, it has been suggested that gene expression analysis of peripheral blood microarrays might become a potentially useful tool in detecting markers of presence and progression of a variety of neuropsychiatric diseases including schizophrenia (Gladkevich et al. 2004; Middleton et al. 2005).

 The focus of this study has been to examine gene expression changes during the first psychotic episode and subsequent remission in newly-diagnosed patients with schizophrenia. This study design allows for monitoring of changes in gene expression in relation to disease progression and response to treatment.

2. SUBJECTS AND METHODS

2. 1. Subjects

We analyzed 32 previously untreated patients presenting with their first psychotic episode suggestive of schizophrenia, admitted at Zagreb University Hospital Center in the period from 2004 to 2007. All patients were over 18 years, Caucasian, met criteria for a diagnosis for schizophrenia following DSM-IV guidelines (2). The inclusive criteria were as follows: (1) Acute psychosis defined by the score of least 80 on the positive and negative syndrome scale (PANSS) (Kay et al. 1987) and at least graded by moderate severity on at least two positive symptoms (2) DSM - IV criteria met for schizophrenia; (3) no other neurological diseases, mental disorders, drug and alcohol abuse and eating disorders, no other serious somatic illness, including acute infections; (4) normal blood counts; (5) positive family history of schizophrenia.

The severity of illness was assessed using the PANSS scale, by two different psychiatrists. Global functioning was assessed using Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) Scale (DSM-IV). All relevant sociodemographic, including ethnic and geographical background, and clinical data were assessed during the clinical interview (Table 1).

Controls were all age and sex matched healthy subjects of the same ethnic and geographical background as patients, and were matched also in respect to blood count composition.

2. 2. Study protocol

The study was conducted in two steps.

After a careful selection of patients who fulfilled all above mentioned inclusion and exclusion criteria, in the first study point whole blood samples were obtained from all patients prior to the administration of medication. At the same time whole blood samples were obtained from sex- and age- matched controls. After the blood samples were obtained, all patients received a second generation antipsychotic (SGA) according to the standard clinical practice.

The next step of the study design involved the follow up of all subjects for at least one year period, during which all subjects continued the pharmacological treatment. The follow-up consisted of regular outpatient visits which included psychiatric interviews and assessments of the severity of illness using PANSS and GAF. Full remission was determined using strict criteria (Andreasen et al. 2005). Additionally, only those who returned to the previous level of functioning (work, school) assessed using GAF were regarded as remitted. Out of 32 patients, only 14 patients fulfilled the requirements for full remission and returned to the previous level of functioning, and were included in this second part of the study, but two patients refused to participate further in the study. The rest of patients achieved only partial remission even after 2-year follow up $(N=15)$, were lost from the follow up soon after hospital discharge $(N=2)$ whereas one patient committed suicide.

All participants gave informed consent for participation in the study, and they were given explanations and answers about the procedure of the study. The study protocol was approved by the Hospital Ethical Committee of the Zagreb University Hospital Centre.

2. 3. RNA expression analysis

2.3.1. Isolation of the blood samples

In the first step, blood samples from a total of 32 patients with schizophrenia (8 male and 24 female) and 32 sex and age matched controls were obtained. In the second step, blood samples from 12 patients (1 male and 11 female) who achieved full remission after a 12 to 24 month-period were obtained. Blood specimens of cases and controls were collected and assayed in parallel.

Total RNA from blood was extracted by using PAXgene blood RNA kit (Qiagen). All samples were treated with the RNase-free DNase set (Qiagen). The quality of total RNA was analyzed by using the RNA 6000 Nano LabChip on a 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies, Palo Alto, CA). Microarray analysis was performed using U133A GeneChips (Affymetrix) with 22,283 30-mer probes (approximately 11000 genes). Total RNA was processed using Affymetrix protocol: 4 µg of high quality RNA was reverse-transcribed, purified (Invitrogen, Qiagen) and than used as a template for in-vitro transcription by using T7 MEGA script reagents and biotin-11- UTP. Biotin labeled RNA was purified with the RNeasy kit (Qiagen), hybridized to chips, fluorescently tagged and scanned. The regular quality measures for Affymetrix GeneChip were used.

2.2. Quantitative RT-PCR analysis

Reverse transcription was performed using total RNA isolated from blood, processed with the SuperScript II first strand synthesis for RT-PCR following the manufacturers protocol (Invitrogen). For detection in quantitative RT-PCR SYBR green was used. Primers were as follows: catenin (cadherin-associated protein) beta 1 (CTNNB1) F 5' ATGCGTTCTCCTCAGATGGT and R 5' TGGGAAAGGTTATGCAAGGT; RING1 and YY1 binding protein (RYBP) F 5' CGCTCCTCATCGACATCCT and 5' R AGCCCTTGTCTGTGCTCTCT; ring finger protein 10 (RFN10) F 5' GGCAAGTACCCAGAAGTCCA and R 5' GCAGAATCAGAGGAGCAGGT; glucose transporter, SLC2A3 F 5' TGCTTAGGAGAGACCGAGTGA and R 5'

ATATCAGAACCCAAGGGAGGA; neurolysin 1 (NLN-1) F 5' GGCTGAACTTGGTGCTCTTC and R 5' TAGTTTGGCCACCTTGGTTC; myosin C (MYO1C) F 5' ATCCCATTATGAGCCAGTGC and R 5' CATCATTGGGTTTGATGCAG; actin assembly factor (DAAM2) F 5' GCTGCCAAAGTCAACCTAGC and R 5' CTTGTCCCTGGCCTCATTTA; ß-actin (ACTB) F 5' GGACTTCGAGCAAGAGATGG and R 5' AGCACTGTGTTGGCGTACAG. ß-actin was used as an internal control. We used two copies of each sample.

3. Statistical analysis

MAS (version 5.0) was used for the calculation of signal values on microarrays and ACCESS for filtering the statistically significant genes. Calculation of maximal values of expression, t-tests (two sided) and ratios of change were performed using EXCEL, Microsoft office. In the further analysis of the microarray data, only genes that fulfilled three conditions were included: 1. MAS "signal intensity" above the "target intensity" of 100 to reduce the possibility of the error due to technical noise; 2. expression ratio of average psychosis/control >1.8 or < 0.6 ; 3. p < 0.05 on two sided student t-test. *P* values were corrected for multiple testing using a false discovery rate approach. Affymetrix microarrays were normalized using Robust Multi-array Averaging. Analysis was performed using R version 2.3 and the Bioconductor packages affy and limma (http://www.bioconductor.org) (Gentleman et al. 2004). Where multiple probe sets were assigned to the same gene only the statistics from the probe with the greatest evidence for differential expression were retained. Affymetrix annotations(version 24) were used for probe-set-to-gene assignments.

For QRT-PCR data, the differences in the Δ Ct between the genes and B-actin were used for t-test statistics. Differences in expression levels of each gene between patients and controls were analyzed using t-test for independent samples, two sided, whereas differences in expression levels of each gene between patients in acute psychosis and their remission were analyzed using t-test for dependent samples, two sided. The average fold change = $2^{-(average \Delta Ct)}$ was computed using the average $\Delta \Delta$ Ct between patients and controls and between patients in acute psychosis and their remission. Mean standard error SEM was calculated using Δ Ct.

We used descriptive statistics for showing clinical features at baseline. The associations of expression levels of each gene (Δ Ct between the genes and ß-actin) and a variety of clinical features were studied using multivariate analysis. No changes were observed in beta-actin among various groups examined.

For all clinical and QRT-PCR data analysis EXCEL, Microsoft office and SPSS 13.0 were used. P value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Clinical features

Description of clinical features of the patients is shown in Table 1.

3.2. Microarray analysis

Using Affymetric micorarray platform we identified 180 gene probes that were significantly changed in patients with schizophrenia compared to healthy controls and fulfilled all three requirements ($p<0.05$, expression level 100, average expression ratio >1.8 or < 0.6). 115 gene probes were down-regulated, whereas 65 were upregulated compared to controls (Supplementary table). Genes with altered expression include genes from different functional groups: transcription/RNA processing, ubiquitin, lipid/glucose/protein metabolism, signal transduction, cytoskeleton and others (analyzed with GeneOntology).

3.3. QRT-PCR analysis

Out of 180 significantly altered gene probes we selected a subset of 7 potential markers for further confirmation with QRT PCR: catenin (cadherin-associated protein), beta 1 (CTNNB1), RING1 and YY1 binding protein (RYBP), ring finger protein 10 (RFN10), glucose transporter (SLC2A3), zinc metallopeptidase, neurolysin 1 (NLN-1), myosin C (MYO1C) and actin assembly factor (DAAM2). Potential genetic markers were selected based on their expression levels (MAF), significance of changes between psychosis vs. controls (p-values), expression ratios of psychosis vs. controls and their function, as reported in the literature.

In total, 32 patients and 32 age- and sex- matched controls were tested. Using this approach, the following 4 genes were validated as significantly altered in patients compared to controls: glucose transporter, $SLC2A3$ (t=-4.678, p<0.001) and actin assembly factor DAAM2 $(t=3.709, p<0.001)$ were increased, whereas zinc metallopeptidase, neurolysin 1 ($t=2.838$, $p=0.006$) and myosin C ($t=2.148$, $p=0.036$) were significantly decreased (Figure 1). It is important to note that our PCR primers for SLC2A3 cannot distinguish SLC2A3 from another glucose transporter SLC2A14. Nevertheless, our microarray datasets showed that only SLC2A3-specific probe gave significant result, suggesting that SLC2A3 is the likely gene altered in patients. We found no significant associations of sociodemoghraphic features (including age, sex, duration of untreated psychosis and family history of psychiatric disorders) with gene expression in the additional univariate analysis (data not shown).

3.4. QRT-PCR analysis for disease progression

The second step involved testing gene expression of the 4 validated candidate markers in 12 out of 32 patients who achieved full remission during a longitudinal study (12- 24 months). Interestingly, expression of DAAM2 significantly decreased in patients who were in remission after their first psychotic episode $(t=3.007, p=0.012)$, and returned to almost control levels (Figure 2). There were no significant changes of expression of other 3 genes in patients in their state of acute psychosis compared to their state of remission (Figure 2). While there was significant difference in the expression of neurolysin 1 in remission compared to controls ($t=3.172$, $p=0.003$), we found no significant differences in the expression of other genes in these groups (Figure 2).

4. DISCUSSION

In this study we used microarrays to detect alterations of gene expression in blood samples from patients with acute psychosis compared to healthy controls. Using realtime PCR, we confirmed altered expression of a subset of 4 genes, of which one gene (DAAM2) returned to controls levels in patients who achieved complete clinical remission. These results suggest that expression of DAAM2 correlated with disease progression and/or response to treatment.

Interestingly, Proitsi et al. (2008) found significant associations of polymorphic variants of DAAM2 gene and schizophrenia in a family trios (two haplotypic associations) and combined family trios and case control sample (single marker association), although the authors did not confirm this finding in the case - control sample. Although their findings are inconclusive, it might suggest that DAAM2 polymorphic loci might be associated with a greater risk for schizophrenia. In light of our findings, it would be of interest to examine whether these polymorphisms are associated with altered expression of DAAM2 observed in our study. Although DAAM2 is expressed in brain tissues, and it may have a role in neuronal cell differentiation (Kida et al. 2004), it precise function remains unknown. Interestingly, we observed that alteration in expression of DAAM2 in psychotic patients returned to baseline levels upon complete clinical remission, suggesting that DAAM2 may represent *a state* marker of the disease. Alternatively, changes in DAAM2 expression may be due to treatment with the antipsychotics. Although there were no significant differences in DAAM2 expression in regard to the type of antipsychotic used (data not shown), the influence of medication on DAAM2 expression cannot be completely excluded. It would be of interest to examine expression of DAAM2 in extended

follow-up studies and include patients who discontinue the treatment after a prolonged period of full remission.

In contrast to DAAM2, NLN-1 expression in patients with schizophrenia is consistently decreased compared to controls, regardless of the state of the illness. Pollio et al. (2008) reported that the overexpression of NLN-1 was neuroprotective against toxicity of amyloid ß and also observed it in brain of humans with Alzheimer disease. Considering the neurodegeneration observed in patients with schizophrenia (Benes, 2000), it would be of interest to examine the expression of NLN-1 in blood and brain of patients in schizophrenia as well in follow up studies also involving patients with chronic illness.

Gene expression analysis of peripheral blood using microarray have become increasingly accepted as a potentially useful tool in detecting markers of presence and progression of a variety of neuropsychiatric diseases. Several previous reports found differentially expressed genes in peripheral blood of patients with schizophrenia compared to their unaffected siblings (Vawter et al. 2004; Middleton et al. 2005; Kakiuchi et al. 2008) or to controls (Glatt et al. 2005; Tsuang et al. 2005; Numata et al. 2007). The usual confounders include methodological differences in data collection, heterogeneity of clinical presentations of the illness (Numata et al. 2007) and medications used by study subjects (Colantuoni et al. 2008). In addition, differences in data analysis arise from the type of microarray assays and the methodology of analysis applied (Ludwig and Weinstein, 2005).

Newer studies tried to overcome these confounders by including patients with first episode psychosis who were drug free prior to their study enrollments (Zvara el al. 2005; Numata et al. 2007; Numata et al. 2008; Suzuki et al. 2008; Zhang et al. 2008).

However, with the exception of the recent studies, all other studies were cross sectional - blood samples were drawn from patients only in their acute psychotic state, and did not address the episodic nature of the illness.

Zhang et al. (2008), found decreased expression of neuregulin1 in the blood of patients with schizophrenia compared to controls, which increased with 4-week antipsychotic treatment. Although we observed similar but non-significant trend in our datasets (data not shown), neuregulin 1 was not selected for further validation also since its MAS "signal intensity" was below 100.

Similarly, we did not observe significant differences in the expression levels of transforming grow factor-ß receptor 2 (TGFBR2), as reported by Numata et al., (2008). They found that TGFBR2 mRNA levels in medication free patients with schizophrenia were significantly higher than those of control subjects and decreased to control levels after several week of antipsychotic treatment. However, TGFBR2 mRNA levels did not correlate with the severity of illness measured with Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS). Suzuki et al. (2008) found that levels of very low density lipoprotein receptor (VLDLR) mRNA in drug-naive patients with schizophrenia were significantly lower than those of controls and showed significant increases with respect to baseline after six months of antipsychotic treatment, with a negative correlation between VLDLR mRNA levels and the severity of clinical symptoms, measured with BPRS. In our study, VDLDR was also not selected for QRT-PCR validation since its MAS "signal intensity" was below 100.

Although we used a study design which makes our results comparable to the study of Numata et al. (2008), Suzuki et al. (2008) and Zhang et al. (2008) (inclusion of only drug- naive patients and follow up of the patients), we took further steps to reduce the heterogeneity of the samples by selecting only patients with a severe acute episode of

psychosis, and having at least one close relative affected with schizophrenia. Also, to further confirm the correlations of potential markers with disease progression, the second blood draw was determined by the clinical presentation and not by a predefined time frame - we analyzed gene expression in blood of the same patients after they have achieved full remission following very strict criteria (Andreasen et al. 2005) and returned to their previous level of functioning.

Although we found no significant differences in gene expression of the investigated markers in association with patient gender, the predominance of the female patients especially in our validation studies might have masked possible gender differences. Despite the fact that our results are promising it will be critically important to validate these findings in larger cohorts of patients in a follow up design in order to firmly establish changes in gene expression as blood markers of schizophrenia.

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Feature	Value	
Sex $(N (%))$	Male	8(25%)
	Female	24 (75%)
Age (years+/-SD)	$28.15 + (-7.9)$	
Education (years+/-SD)	$11.93+/9.67$	
Duration of untreated illness	$20.61 + (-23.15)$	
$(months+/SD)$		
Family history of psychiatric	Schizophrenia-related in close relatives	$20(62.4\%)$
disorders $(N(\%))$	Schizophrenia-related multiple members	$6(18.8\%)$
	Schizophrenia-related in distant relatives	$3(9.4\%)$
	Schizophrenia-related in distant relatives and other	$3(9.4\%)$
	psyciatric disorder in close relatives (alcholol addictions)	
Positive PANSS (mean+/-SD)	$32+/-5.5$	
Negative PANSS (mean+/-SD)	$24+/-5.5$	
General PANSS (mean+/-SD)	$46 + (-8.9)$	
Total PANSS (mean+/-SD)	$102+/-16.5$	
GAF (mean+/-SD)	$26.68 + -8$	

Table 1. Clinical features of the patients (N=32) at the time of their hospital admission

Figure 1. Fold changes in expression of 7 marker genes in 32 patients with psychosis compared to matched controls. Columns represent the average fold change $= 2^{-(average)}$ Δ Ct) of expression of the genes analyzed with QRT-PCR. SEM was calculated using Δ Ct. The difference in mean Δ Ct between patients and controls was tested using t-tests for independent samples, 2-sided.

* $p<0.05$

** p<0.001

Figure 2. Fold changes in expression of 4 validated marker genes in 12 patients in the state of acute psychosis relative to controls and patients in remission relative to controls. Columns represent the average fold change = $2^{-(average \Delta Ct)}$ of expression of the 4 genes analyzed with QRT-PCR.

a* p<0.05, patients in acute psychosis vs. controls (t-tests for independent samples, 2 sided: NLN1: $t=2.593$, $p=0.013$; DAAM2: $t=-2.671$, $p=0.011$; SLC2A3: $t=-3.559$, p=0.001)

b* p=0.003, patients in remission vs. controls (t-tests for independent samples, 2 sided)

*p=0.012, patients in acute psychosis vs. remission (t-tests for dependent samples, 2 sided)

Supplementary table. Differential RNA expression levels in patients with psychosis and healthy matched control obtained with Affymetric micorarray platform. 180 gene probes are shown that were significantly changed in patients with acute psychosis compared to healthy controls (p<0.05, expression level 100, average expression ratio >1.8 or <0.6).

