Activation of YAP1 Is Associated with Poor Prognosis and Response to Taxanes in Ovarian Cancer

WOOJIN JEONG1*, SANG-BAE KIM2,3*, BO HWA SOHN2,3*, YUN-YONG PARK2,3, EUN SUNG PARK4, SANG CHEOL KIM5, SUNG SOO KIM6, RANDY L. JOHNSON7, MICHAEL BIRRER8, DAVID S. L. BOWTELL9, GORDON B. MILLS2,3, ANIL SOOD10,11,12 and JU-SEOG LEE2,3,6

1Department of Life Sciences, Division of Life and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Center for Cell Signaling and Drug Discovery Research, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Republic of Korea; Departments of 2Systems Biology, 7Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, 10Gynecologic Oncology, 11Cancer Biology, and the 3Kleberg Center for Molecular Markers, and 12Center for RNA Interference and Non-coding RNA, The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX, U.S.A.; 4Institute for Medical Convergence, Yonsei University College of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea; 5Samsung Genome Institute, Samsung Medical Center, Gangnam-Gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea; 6Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Medical Research Center and Biomedical Science Institute, School of Medicine, Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Republic of Korea; 8Department of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; 9Peter MacCallum Cancer Center, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Abstract. Aim: We aimed to investigate the clinical significance of the activation of Yes-Associated Protein 1 (YAP1), a key downstream effector of Hippo tumor-suppressor pathway, in ovarian cancer. Materials and Methods: A gene expression signature reflecting activation of YAP1 was developed from gene expression data of 267 samples from patients with ovarian cancer. A refined ovarian cancer YAP1 signature was validated in an independent ovarian cancer cohort (n=185). Associations between the YAP1 signature and prognosis were assessed using Kaplan−Meier plots, the log-rank test, and a Cox proportional hazards model. Results: We identified a 612-gene expression signature reflecting YAP1 activation in ovarian cancer. In multivariate analysis, the signature was an independent predictor of overall survival (hazard ratio=1.66; 95% confidence interval=1.1 to 2.53; p=0.01). In subset analysis, the signature identified patients likely to benefit from taxane-based adjuvant chemotherapy. Conclusion: Activation of YAP1 is significantly associated with prognosis and the YAP1 signature can predict response to taxane-based adjuvant chemotherapy in patients with ovarian cancer.

Ovarian cancer is the most lethal gynecological cancer, and has been predicted to account for an estimated 14,030 deaths in 2013 in the United States, making it the fifth most common cause of cancer death in women (1). The clinical approach to epithelial ovarian cancer is quite uniform, with all patients being treated with standard cytoreductive surgery and adjuvant chemotherapy. However, there is considerable clinicopathological heterogeneity and differential responses among patients (2). Tumors with similar histopathological appearance can follow significantly different clinical courses. Approximately 40 to 60% of patients with advanced ovarian cancer have complete response to adjuvant chemotherapy. However, disease in a significant proportion of patients with complete response will eventually recur. Disease in the remaining patients either does not respond or only responds transiently and subsequently progresses rapidly (3), suggesting heterogeneity of ovarian cancer.

The Hippo pathway represents a novel tumor-suppressor pathway. When Hippo signaling is active, Mammalian STE20-like kinase (MST)1/2, Salvador Homolog 1 (SAV1), Large Tumor-Suppressor Kinase (LATS)1/2, and Mps One Binder Kinase Activator-Like 1 (MOB1) form core complexes that inactivate the Yes-Associated Protein 1 (YAP1) and Transcriptional Coactivator With PDZ-Binding

*These Authors contributed equally to this study.
Motif (TAZ) oncogenes by phosphorylation (4, 5). When Hippo signaling is absent, unphosphorylated YAP1/TAZ enters the nucleus inducing the transcription of genes that promote cell growth and survival. Sav1 and Mst1/2 knockout in mouse leads to the development of liver cancer (6-9), indicating the importance of the Hippo pathway as a key tumor suppressor. Elevated YAP1 mRNA levels have been reported in colon, lung, and ovarian cancer (10, 11).

In this study, we undertook a systems level characterization of genomic data from multiple ovarian cancer cohorts to determine whether the Hippo pathway is a key tumor-suppressor pathway in the ovaries. This approach uncovered molecular classifiers that can stratify patients with ovarian cancer according to the absence or presence of active YAP1.

Materials and Methods

Gene expression and patient data. The gene expression and clinical data are available from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) database (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo). Gene expression data from MCF10A breast epithelial cells overexpressing human YAP1 were collected from two series of experiments (GSE10196 and GSE13218) using the U133 v2.0 platform (12). For discovery and validation of a YAP1-specific signature associated with prognosis of patients with ovarian cancer, gene expression data from two independent cohorts were used. Gene expression data from the Peter MacCallum Cancer Center (PMC cohort, GSE9891, n=267) were used as discovery cohort and for refining the prognostic gene expression signature (13). Gene expression data from the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC cohort, GSE26712, n=185) were used as the validation data set.

All of gene expression data were generated by using Affymetrix microarray platforms (U133A or U133 v2.0). All data were normalized by using robust multi-array average method (14). All patients in the two cohorts had undergone cytoreductive surgery and subsequent platinum-based chemotherapy. Overall survival (OS) and chemotherapy response data are lacking for 7 and 10 patients, respectively. Out of the 275 patients with available chemotherapy response data, 192 had undergone both platinum and taxane treatment, while the remainder (n=65) did not receive taxane-based treatment. Treatment data were not available from the MSKCC cohort.

Patient and gene expression data in Cambridge Translational Cancer Research Ovarian Study 01 (CTCR-OV01) are also publicly available from NCBI (accession ID, GSE15622) (15). Patients in CTCR-OV01 had been recruited from 2002 to 2004 and had histologically-confirmed advanced (stages III and IV) epithelial ovarian cancer. All patients in the two cohorts had undergone cytoreductive surgery and subsequent platinum-based chemotherapy. Overall survival (OS) and chemotherapy response data are lacking for 7 and 10 patients, respectively. Out of the 275 patients with available chemotherapy response data, 192 had undergone both platinum and taxane treatment, while the remainder (n=65) did not receive taxane-based treatment. Treatment data were not available from the MSKCC cohort.

Table I. Clinical and pathological features of patients with ovarian cancer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>PMC</th>
<th>MSKCC</th>
<th>CTCR-OV01</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of patients</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>22-80</td>
<td>26-84</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGO stage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>16 (6%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>14 (5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>212 (79.5%)</td>
<td>149 (80%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>21 (8%)</td>
<td>36 (20%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4 (1.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>11 (4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>97 (36.5%)</td>
<td>40 (22%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>155 (58%)</td>
<td>145 (78%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4 (1.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histological subtype</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serous</td>
<td>246 (92%)</td>
<td>185 (100%)</td>
<td>35 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endometrioid</td>
<td>20 (7.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adenocarcinoma</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of deaths</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical analysis of microarray data. BRB-ArrayTools were primarily used to statistically analyze gene expression data (16), and all other statistical analyses were performed in the R language environment (http://www.r-project.org). We identified genes that were differentially expressed among the two classes using a random-variance t-test (17); genes were considered statistically significant if their p-value was less than 0.001. Cluster analysis was performed using Cluster and Treeview (18).

The strategy used to develop and validate the prediction model on the basis of the gene expression signature and to estimate of predictive accuracy was adopted from previous studies (19-21). Briefly, using the expression patterns of the 612 genes included in the Affymetrix microarray, we used data from the PMC cohort as the training set and data from the MSKCC cohort as the validation set. In brief, expression patterns of the 612 genes from the PMC cohort were combined to form a classifier according to the compound covariate predictor (CCP) algorithm (22). This algorithm estimates the probability that a particular sample belongs to the YAP1 subgroup. The miscalculation rate in this training set was estimated by leave-one-out cross-validation during training. We then directly applied the developed classifier to gene expression data from the MSKCC cohort (test set).

Kaplan–Meier plots and the log-rank test were used to estimate patient prognosis, and a multivariate Cox proportional hazard regression analysis was used to evaluate independent prognostic factors associated with survival. Overall survival (OS) was defined as the time interval between the date of histological
diagnosis and the date of death from any cause. Gene signature, tumor stage, and pathological characteristics were used as covariates.

To evaluate the usefulness of dichotomized stratification by the \textit{YAP1} signature for predicting sensitivity to each neoadjuvant chemotherapy, we used ROC curve analysis. For each ROC curve, we calculated the AUC, which ranges from 0.5 (for a noninformative predictive marker) to 1 (for a perfect predictive marker). A bootstrap method was used to calculate the confidence interval (CI) for the AUC. A \textit{p}-value of less than 0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance, and all tests were two-tailed.

Results

Activation of \textit{YAP1} is significantly associated with prognosis of ovarian cancer. Since \textit{YAP1} is the most well-known activated oncogene in the Hippo pathway (23), we analyzed gene expression data generated from MCF10A cells overexpressing human \textit{YAP1} to identify genes whose expression is significantly associated with activation of \textit{YAP1}. This analysis revealed 388 genes under stringent statistical cut-off (\textit{p}<0.001) (Figure 1a). We next sought to
test the clinical relevance of YAP1 activation in human ovarian cancer by cross-comparing the data for 388 genes from the MCF10A cell line with expression data from human ovarian cancer. Gene expression data of 267 ovarian cancer tissues from the PMC cohort were used for this analysis, and hierarchical clustering analysis was applied to stratify patients according to overlap with the YAP1-activated gene expression signature (Figure 1b). When the gene expression data were analyzed, data for 138 patients were tightly co-clustered with that for YAP1-overexpressing cells (hereafter referred to as the YAP1-active or YA-subgroup), while the rest lacked the YAP1-specific signature (hereafter referred to as YAP1-inactive or YI subgroup). Kaplan–Meier plots revealed that the duration of OS of the YA-subgroup was significantly shorter \( p=0.002 \) than that of the YI-subgroup (Figure 1c).

The 388-gene expression signature reflects YAP1 activation in the cell culture condition but may lack the biological characteristics associated with ovarian cancer because it was generated from MCF10A human mammary epithelial cells. Therefore in order to identify genes whose expression is tightly associated with YAP1 activation in ovarian cancer, we used the two-sample \( t \)-test with stringent threshold cut-off \( (p<0.001 \) and two-fold difference) to evaluate gene expression data from 267 patients in the PMC cohort. This approach revealed 612 genes that were differentially expressed between the YA- and YI-subgroups of ovarian cancer in the PMC cohort (Figure 2a). As an example of the utility of this approach, expression of connective tissue growth factor \((CTGF)\), a well-known downstream target of YAP1 (24), was elevated (>2-fold) in the YA subgroup.

Validation that the YAP1 signature is significantly associated with prognosis in an independent ovarian cancer cohort. We next used the 612-gene signature to validate the association between the YA-subgroup with the poorer ovarian cancer prognosis in the MSKCC cohort \((n=185)\). The expression signature of 612 genes from the PMC cohort and CCP algorithm were used to build and train the predictive model. When patients in the MSKCC cohort were stratified according to the refined YAP1 signature, the duration of OS for patients in the YA subgroup was significantly shorter \( p=0.03 \) by log-rank test) than those in the YI subgroup (Figure 2b). Specificity and sensitivity for correctly predicting subgroup YA during leave-one-out cross-validation in the PMC cohort were 0.88 and 0.73, respectively.

To estimate the prognostic value of the YAP1 signature with other clinical variables, including patient age at diagnosis, Fédération Internationale de Gynécologie et d’Obstétrique (FIGO) stage and grade, univariate and multivariate Cox proportional hazards regression analysis was undertaken in the PMC cohort, because only in this cohort were all clinical variables available for analysis. On univariate analysis, FIGO stage and the YAP1 signature were significant predictors of OS \( (p<0.0001 \) and \( p=0.003 \), respectively). On multivariate analysis, FIGO stage and the YAP1 signature retained significance \( (p=0.001 \) and 0.01) (Table II).
Sensitivity to taxane treatment. We next carried out a subset analysis in the PMC cohort, for which adjuvant chemotherapy treatment information was available for 257 out of the 267 patients. All patients underwent platinum-based treatment, 192 patients received additional taxane-based treatment. To determine the association between the signature and benefit of taxane-based treatment, we categorized the 257 patients into two subgroups (YA and YI), and independently assessed the OS rate. Taxane-based treatment significantly affected OS for patients in the YA subgroup (3-year rate: 60.3% with taxane vs. 37.9% without taxane, \( p = 0.005 \) by log-rank test; Figure 3a). However, no significant benefit was found for patients in the YI subgroup (3-year rate: 74.4% vs. 60.5%, respectively, \( p = 0.53 \) by log-rank test, Figure 3b). Consistent with the Kaplan–Meier plots, the estimated hazard ratio for death after taxane-based treatment in the YA subgroup was 0.5 (95% CI=0.31-0.82; \( p = 0.005 \)).
To further test the association between the YAP1 subgroup and benefit of taxane treatment, we evaluated gene expression data from advanced ovarian cancer tissues prospectively collected in a randomized phase II clinical trial, CTCR–OV01, that was designed to determine the response to neoadjuvant carboplatin (n=15) or paclitaxel (n=21) monotherapy. The YAP1 signature was highly predictive of sensitivity to paclitaxel, with an AUC of 73.1% (p=0.02; 95% CI=54.9-92.3%) (Figure 3c), but not significantly predictive of sensitivity to carboplatin, with an AUC of 44.4% (p=0.7; 95% CI=22.2-66.7%) (Figure 3d). Together, these results strongly indicate that patients with the YAP1 signature are significantly more sensitive to taxane-based treatment.

Discussion

By incorporating a well-defined gene expression signature reflecting activation of YAP1, we identified a novel subgroup of patients with ovarian cancer with a prognostic gene expression signature. The newly-identified YAP1 gene expression signature was an independent and significant predictor of poor prognosis as evidenced by multivariate analysis (Table II). The clinical significance of YAP1 activation observed in current study is in good agreement with biological characteristics of YAP1. YAP1 and TAZ play key roles in lysophosphatidic acid-induced migration and proliferation of epithelial ovarian cancer cells (25, 26). Mice lacking LATS1, key upstream negative regulator of YAP1 (4, 5), spontaneously developed ovarian cancer (27), further supporting the roles of YAP1 as major oncogene and poor prognostic gene in ovary.

A subset analysis of patients in the PMC cohort revealed significant association between the YAPI signature and taxane-based chemotherapy; this finding was validated in a prospectively collected independent data set (CTCR-OV01). While these data are potentially interesting, the significance and robustness of the YAPI signature as a predictive marker for taxane-based chemotherapy response should be evaluated in large-scale data sets and prospective trials and the molecular mechanisms associated with activation of YAP1 and paclitaxel sensitivity remain to be elucidated.

The standard treatment for patients with ovarian cancer consists of maximal cytoreductive surgery followed by chemotherapy (28). However, 5-year OS durations remain very low. Therefore, alternative therapeutic strategies including novel cytotoxic drugs or targeted therapies are needed. Our results indicated that down-stream effectors of the Hippo pathway such as YAP1 and TAZ might represent good therapeutic targets and the feasibility of targeting YAP1 and TAZ should be tested in future investigations.

In conclusion, we have identified two new prognostic subgroups of ovarian cancer with significant survival differences. Our results clearly demonstrate that the YAPI signature can identify patients with ovarian cancer who have a poor prognosis, particularly in the subset that achieve complete response. Further validation of the signature will be necessary before implementation in clinical practice, but the fact that the signature was validated in two independent patient cohorts suggests that it can contribute to the rational design of future clinical trials by identifying high-risk patients.

Disclosure Statement

The Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

The study was funded by a grant from The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Institute for Personalized Cancer Therapy, Ovarian SPORE (NCI P50CA083639), Bio & Medical Technology Development Program Grant, Korea (M10642040002-07N4204-00210), and Scientific Research Center Program Grant, Korea (2012R1A5A1048236).

References


