Differential Expression of the Insulin Gene Transcriptional Repressor CCAAT/Enhancer–binding Protein β and Transactivator Islet Duodenum Homeobox-1 in Rat Pancreatic β Cells During the Development of Diabetes Mellitus

Jochen Seufert,* Gordon C. Weir,† and Joel F. Habener*‡

*Laboratory of Molecular Endocrinology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts 02114; and †Islet Transplantation and Cell Biology Section, Joslin Diabetes Center, Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Abstract

Impairment of insulin secretion due to prolonged hyperglycemia is believed to contribute to the manifestation of diabetes mellitus, often referred to as glucose toxicity of pancreatic β cells. In addition, impaired β cell function has been associated with elevated islet triglyceride content (lipotoxicity). Impaired functions of the transactivating factors islet duodenum homeobox-1 (IDX-1) and RIPE3b-binding proteins have been implicated in the pathological downregulation of insulin gene transcription by high glucose levels in pancreatic β cell lines in vitro, and, similarly, the exposure of pancreatic islets to fatty acids decreases IDX-1 expression. Previously, we identified the basic leucine zipper transcription factor CCAAT/enhancer–binding protein β (C/EBPβ) as an inhibitor of insulin gene transcription in pancreatic β cells and showed that the expression of C/EBPβ is upregulated in insulinoma-derived β cell lines by sustained high glucose concentrations. Here we describe the regulation of the expression of IDX-1, C/EBPβ, and insulin at the mRNA and protein levels in pancreatic islets in animal models of diabetes mellitus. Concomitant with a downregulation of IDX-1 and insulin expression, C/EBPβ is upregulated in association with the manifestation of hyperglycemia during the development of diabetes in the Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rat and in the 90% pancreatectomy rat model of diabetes. This regulation is demonstrated to influence both the amount of cellular protein and the level of steady state messenger RNA. Our findings indicate that the differential dysregulation of both IDX-1 and C/EBPβ, in response to sustained hyperglycemia or hyperlipidemia, may be involved in the impairment of insulin gene expression during the manifestation of diabetes mellitus. (J. Clin. Invest. 1998. 101:2528–2539.) Key words: glucose toxicity • lipotoxicity • insulin gene • transcription factors • diabetes mellitus

Introduction

The disease diabetes mellitus predisposes to premature morbidity and mortality. Diabetes is a result of a failure of the β cells of the endocrine pancreas to produce the amounts of insulin required to dispose of glucose, resulting in elevated blood glucose levels (hyperglycemia). Sustained hyperglycemia leads to a further impairment of insulin production by β cells, so-called glucose toxicity (1, 2). The experimental exposure of insulinoma cell lines and human islets in vitro to elevated glucose concentrations impairs glucose-responsive insulin secretion and insulin biosynthesis (3, 4). Moreover, the lowering of hyperglycemia in diabetic animal models leads to recovery of adequate insulin secretion by pancreatic β cells (5).

In addition to the impairment of glucose-responsive insulin secretion, high glucose concentrations induce a corresponding paradoxical reduction of insulin gene transcription (3). This circumstance has been attributed, at least in part, to a downregulation of the transcription factors islet duodenum homeobox-1 (IDX-1) and the RIPE3b-binding protein(s). Diminished activity of these transactivating proteins on the insulin gene promoter, associated with reduced cellular insulin content, mRNA, and secretion, has been observed in studies of insulinoma cell lines in vitro upon chronic exposure to high glucose levels for several weeks (6–8). These effects were only partially reversible upon subsequent incubation in lower glucose concentrations (9), implying the involvement of other, potentially inhibitory, regulatory factors in the glucotoxic impairment of insulin gene transcription in pancreatic β cells. We have identified the basic leucine zipper transcription factor CCAAT/enhancer–binding protein β (C/EBPβ) as such a negative regulatory factor on insulin gene transcription in pancreatic β cells (10). In addition, a reversible reduction of the specific binding of IDX-1 and the RIPE3b-binding protein to their respective DNA elements was observed as early as 72 h after exposure to high glucose levels in the β cell line INS-1 (11). A downregulation of IDX-1 in response to elevated glucose levels was further demonstrated in vivo in a rat model of diabetes secondary to 90% pancreatectomy (12).

In addition to the deleterious effects of high glucose levels on β cell function, elevated serum triglyceride and free fatty acid concentrations, as well as triglyceride accumulation in pancreatic islets during the development of diabetes mellitus, have been associated with impaired β cell secretory responses (13, 14). More recently, alterations in β cell gene regulation have been reported in this context (15).

The production of insulin by pancreatic β cells is highly
regulated at the level of insulin gene transcription (16). The rat genome contains two nonallelic insulin genes (I and II), regulated by distinct promoters and contributing equivalently to insulin gene expression (17). The sequences that account for 90% of the promoter activity of the rat insulin-I gene lie within ~ 400 bp of the proximal 5' untranslated region.

The major transcription factors that regulate basal and glucose-responsive insulin gene transcription are the homeodomain-containing protein IDX-1 (synonym: pancreas duodenum homeobox-1, insulin promoter factor-1, somatostatin transactivating factor-1), binding to the A-elements (far-linked AT-rich, P1) of the insulin gene promoters (18), and transcription factors of the basic helix-loop-helix family that bind to the E-elements (Nir, Far; references 19–21).

The CCAAT/enhancer–binding proteins are a family of basic leucine zipper transcription factors involved in the regulation of genes of the acute phase response (22), tissue development, and differentiation, such as adipogenesis (23), hormonal regulation (24), and hematopoiesis (25). The members of the family identified to this point are C/EBPα, C/EBPβ (NF-IL6, LAP, IL6-DBP, AGP/EBP, CRP2, NF-M), C/EBPγ (Ig/EBP), C/EBPδ (NF-IL6-β, CRP3), C/EBPε, and CHOP-10. Upon phosphorylation and nuclear translocation the C/EBPs bind to specific DNA-recognition sequences as dimers (26). These factors can act as transcriptional activators as well as repressors (27).

In earlier studies we identified the expression of C/EBPβ in pancreatic β cells and in rat islets and demonstrated that the expression of this transcription factor is regulated by glucose in the pancreatic β cell lines HIT-T15 and Ins-1 (10). We found a partial irreversibility of the upregulation of C/EBPβ expression after long-term exposure, and complete reversibility after short-term exposure of insulinoma cell lines to high glucose levels (10), similar to the findings of the downregulation of IDX-1 expression in these same glucose desensitization models (3, 11). In addition we demonstrated that C/EBPβ acts as a transcriptional regulator of the expression of the insulin gene. In particular, opposing actions of C/EBPβ on insulin gene transcription were observed in β cells compared with non-β cells. In non-β cells C/EBPβ stimulated the rat-insulin I promoter through interactions with a novel enhancer element, the CEB box. In contrast, C/EBPβ acts as a transcriptional repressor of the insulin gene in pancreatic β cells via mechanisms involving physical and functional interaction with the basic helix-loop-helix transcription factor E47. Thereby, C/EBPβ inhibits the DNA-binding and transactivation potentials of E47, which leads to reduced insulin promoter activity in pancreatic β cells.

Although information about the regulation of transcription factor expression derived from studies of insulinoma cells in vitro may be useful, it is also limited. The cells are transformed, generally poorly responsive to changes in glucose levels, and, at least in HIT cells, require many weeks of passage to manifest glucotoxicity. Continued passage raises concerns about the clonal selection of cells that may obscure the data obtained. Studies done in vitro beg the question of what happens to the expression of transcription factors during the development of diabetes in intact animal models in vivo. Therefore we examined whether C/EBPβ and IDX-1 expression may also be regulated in the endocrine pancreas in vivo in the context of supraphysiological glucose levels. Here we report on the characterization of C/EBPβ, IDX-1, and insulin expression in two different hyperglycemic animal models, the Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rat (28), and the rat model of 90% pancreatectomy (29), and provide evidence for an involvement of both C/EBPβ and IDX-1 in the pathophysiological pathways of the development of diabetes mellitus as mediators of glucotoxic or lipotoxic impairment of β cell function in vivo.

Methods

Laboratory animals. Male Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rats at the ages of 7, 9, and 12 wk, lean littermates (fa/+), and Wistar rats were obtained from Genetic Models, Inc. (Indianapolis, IN). Animals were maintained on an ad libitum diet with commercial chow (Laboratory rodent diet No. 5001; PMI Nutrition International, St. Louis, MO) with a fat content of 4.5% and a protein content of 23%. Sprague Dawley rats, 4–5 wk of age, were obtained from Taconic Farms, Inc. (Germantown, NY).

Serum insulin and glucose measurements. Serum insulin concentrations were determined by a specific radioimmunoassay (30). Glucose concentrations were measured in serum on a Glucose Analyzer (2300 STAT; Yellow Springs Instrument Co., Yellow Springs, OH). Values for the Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rat model represent fed values, determined in the late morning, whereas those for the rat model of 90% pancreatectomy were determined after an overnight fast in the early morning.

Semiquantitative fluorescence immunocytochemistry. Animals were anesthetized, weighed, and serum was obtained by heart puncture. Excised pancreata were embedded in cryosection medium (OCT-compound, tissue tek; Miles Laboratories, Inc., Elkhart, IN) and immediately frozen on dry ice. 5-μm sections were double stained in a single series with rabbit antisemirum against C/EBPβ (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Inc., Santa Cruz, CA) or IDX-1 (18), and a guinea pig antisemirum to insulin (31). Fluorescent secondary antisemirum coupled to Cy-3 (iodocarbocyanine) or DTAF (dichlorotriazinylaminofluorescein) were from Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories (West Grove, PA). To minimize variability between different sections, the staining procedures for all sections and antisera were performed simultaneously and in parallel with the same batches of solutions and antisera. In addition the same incubation times for fixation, permeabilization, blocking, and exposure to antisera were employed for all processed sections. After staining, the semiquantitative assessment of fluorescence intensity was performed for all sections in one single series to avoid alterations in signal intensities over time. For fluorescence intensity measurements the microscopic images, obtained with a Nikon epifluorescent microscope, were analyzed by image quantitation software (IP-Lab Spectrum; Signal Analytics Co., Vienna, VA) after digitizing with constant grabbing parameters, i.e., fluorescence sampling time, brightness, contrast and color correction, for all sections by an Optronics TEC-470 CCD camera (Optronics Engineering, Goleta, CA) interfaced with a PowerMac 7100. Intensity calibration was conducted to account for the dynamic range of digitization because of the characteristics of the sensor of the CCD camera and the lighting characteristics, as well as to approximate linearity in fluorescence measurements. This was achieved by linearizing the raw pixel intensities of each grabbed image to floating-point data values according to a function derived from the quantitation of a set of images obtained from one islet over a range of different fluorescent sampling times. In each adjusted image, the islet used for quantitation was defined as region of interest (ROI) by marking the islet border with the freehand tool. The average fluorescent intensity within the ROI was then determined by analysis of pixel intensity and is independent of the area of the measured ROI. The average fluorescent intensity of ten islets per tissue section and three tissue sections for each animal (three animals per group) was determined. The fluorescence values, obtained from sections stained only with secondary antisemirum, were considered to reflect the nonspecific fluorescent background, and were subtracted from the ROI values above. Values are expressed as means±SD.
Western immunoblotting. Whole cell extracts from isolated islets were prepared by lysis in RIPA-buffer (150 mM NaCl, 20 mM Tris Cl, pH 7.5, 1 mM EDTA, 1% NP-40, 1% Deoxycholate, 0.1% SDS, 5 mM NaF). 20 μg of extract per sample were fractionated on a 12% SDS-polyacrylamide gel, transferred to a PVDF-membrane (Immobilon-P; Millipore Corp., Bedford, MA) and probed with a rabbit anti-serum (Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc.) or a rabbit IDX-1 antiserum (characterized previously (18)). Specific bands were visualized by enhanced chemiluminescence (ECL; Amersham International, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, UK).

Results

Protein expression of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 during the development of diabetes in the Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rat. To examine the expression of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 in pancreatic islets in vivo and to correlate the expression level to glucose homeostasis, we chose an animal model of genetically determined obesity and type 2 diabetes. The Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rat develops a well-defined, age-dependent, phenotype consisting of the onset of obesity at the age of 5–7 wk accompanied by a metabolic state of early diabetes mellitus with hyperinsulinemia, insulin resistance, and moderate hyperglycemia (37). The full syndrome of diabetes develops at the age of 10–12 wk. The features of the pathogenetic manifestations of diabetes in this animal model are in many ways reminiscent of the pathogenesis of type 2 diabetes in humans. The fa/fa genotype consists of a point mutation in the gene for the leptin receptor (Ob-R), leading to an alteration and impairment of the signaling capabilities of this receptor (38–41). The molecular mechanisms, however, that are involved in the development of the obese and diabetic phenotype are not understood. The Wistar strain of rats and the heterozygous (fa+/+) rats do not develop obesity or overt diabetes and serve as control animals. The Wistar strain of rats and the homozygous (fa/fa) rats do not develop obesity or overt diabetes and serve as control animals.
Table I. Characteristics of Wistar Rats, Heterozygous (fa/+), and Homozygous (fa/fa) Zucker Diabetic Fatty Rats at 7 and 12 Wk of Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Wistar 7 wk</th>
<th>fa/+ 7 wk</th>
<th>fa/fa 7 wk</th>
<th>fa/+ 12 wk</th>
<th>fa/fa 12 wk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body weight (g)</td>
<td>208.3±2.9</td>
<td>278.3±22.5</td>
<td>351.7±18.9</td>
<td>281.7±14.4</td>
<td>336.7±25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma glucose (mg/dl)</td>
<td>136.3±4.6</td>
<td>109±9.5</td>
<td>244.3±29.7</td>
<td>130.3±14.6</td>
<td>338±16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasma insulin (µU/ml)</td>
<td>10.6±0.7</td>
<td>10.4±2.2</td>
<td>41.73±6.4</td>
<td>9.6±2.2</td>
<td>49.9±6.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Glucose and insulin represent fed values. Parameters represent the average±SEM of the number of animals per group.

Table I shows the body weights and parameters of glucose homeostasis in the animals of the different groups that were examined. Compared with Wistar rats and heterozygous littermates the homozygous (fa/fa) animals exhibit substantially elevated body weights at 7 and 12 wk of age. Furthermore, the homozygous (fa/fa) animals have markedly elevated serum insulin levels together with a successive rise of blood glucose from 7 to 12 wk as compared with heterozygous littermates and Wistar control rats. Thus the measured parameters validate the expected metabolic state of the animal model used.

To correlate the expression levels of the transcription factors C/EBPβ and IDX-1 to the status of insulin biosynthesis in pancreatic β cells during the development of diabetes, we examined the expression of IDX-1, C/EBPβ, and insulin by semiquantitative fluorescence immunocytochemistry in islets of fa/ fa rats at 7 and 12 wk of age, and compared the results to control rats consisting of age-matched heterozygous (fa+/−) lean littermates and Wistar rats. We included the analysis of expression levels of the homeobox transcription factor IDX-1 to determine whether the activity of this factor is also altered during the development of diabetes in vivo as it has been shown in vitro studies. On pancreatic tissue sections stained with hematoxylin and eosin, the islet morphology showed the expected hyperplasia in the Zucker rats as reported previously (reference 37, and data not shown). Fig. 1, A–E shows representative sections of pancreatic islets, double stained for either C/EBPβ or IDX-1 and insulin. The results of the semiquantitative analysis of the average fluorescent intensity of pancreatic islets within each group of animals are summarized in Fig. 1 F. When the average fluorescent intensity of the islets, stained for C/EBPβ, IDX-1, and insulin in the different groups of animals (Fig. 1 F) were compared, a marked induction of C/EBPβ expression in the hyperglycemic fa/fa animals at 7 wk (Fig. 1 C) and an even more pronounced elevation at 12 wk of age (Fig. 1 E) was detected. This correlated with the higher degree of hyperglycemia at week 12 compared with week 7. In contrast normoglycemic Wistar rats at 7 wk of age (Fig. 1 A) and fa/− littermates at 7 wk (Fig. 1 B) and 12 wk (Fig. 1 D) maintained constant low levels of C/EBPβ expression. Levels of the homeobox transcription factor IDX-1 were diminished in the homozygous animals in the prediabetic (7 wk, Fig. 1 C) as well as the diabetic state (12 wk, Fig. 1 E), as compared with the control animals. These observations on the regulation of IDX-1 in vivo support the findings obtained from studies of β-cell lines in vitro (3, 7, 8). The alterations in the expression levels of the transcription factors C/EBPβ and IDX-1, as assessed by semiquantitative immunocytochemistry, were accompanied by changes in the cellular protein levels of insulin. The islets of the fully diabetic fa/fa animals at the age of 12 wk showed a marked decrease in the fluorescence signal for cellular insulin (Fig. 1, E and F), reflecting the reduction of the cellular insulin content in fa/fa animals at 12 wk of age (37). Notably the relative cellular insulin levels as measured by fluorescence immunocytochemistry (Fig. 1 F) were discordant from the serum insulin levels in the homozygous Zucker rats (Table I). Whereas fa/ rats had significant hyperinsulinemia at both 7 and 12 wk of age, the average fluorescent intensity for insulin in the islets at 7 wk of age was not significantly higher than in control animals (Fig. 1 F) supporting the existence of relative insulin hypersecretion in response to the increased demand based on insulin resistance leading to relative depletion of insulin stores, but balanced maintenance of replenishment. In contrast, in 12-wk-old fa/ fa rats, the fluorescent intensity for insulin was markedly diminished (Fig. 1, E and F), although these animals still exhibited hyperinsulinemia (Table I), providing evidence for the inability of the β cells to maintain a constant insulin storage pool at this stage. These findings underscore the dysregulation of β cell function at this stage in the development of diabetes mellitus and support earlier findings showing overlapping features of β cell hypersecretion in response to insulin resistance and impaired insulin production and storage that have been reported in the Zucker diabetic fatty rat and other hyperglycemic animal models (37).
Expression of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 in pancreatic islets of Zucker diabetic fatty (fa/fa) rats is regulated at the mRNA level. To determine whether, during the development of diabetes in the fa/fa rat, C/EBPβ and IDX-1 are mainly regulated by way of translational mechanisms or at the transcriptional level, we compared steady state amounts of mRNA in the islets of control and fa/fa animals. A semiquantitative competitive assay using RT-PCR was established for the quantitation...
of the very small amounts of RNA that can be extracted from pancreatic islets. Fig. 3 shows the results of mRNA quantitation obtained by RT-PCR for C/EBP\(\beta\), IDX-1 and insulin in total RNA isolated from islets of 9-wk-old Wistar rats, \(fa/1\) and \(fa/f\) Zucker rats, representing the same animals for which the data of the Western immunoblotting analysis are shown in Fig. 2. Upregulation of the mRNA for C/EBP\(\beta\) and downregulation of IDX-1 mRNA in \(fa/f\) animals reveals that the expression of both DNA-binding proteins during the development of diabetes in this animal model is regulated by mechanisms affecting either gene transcription or mRNA stability.

Expression of C/EBP\(\beta\) in the animal model of 90% pancreatectomy. Because of the possibility that the upregulation of C/EBP\(\beta\) and downregulation of IDX-1 and insulin in pancreatic \(\beta\) cells during the development of diabetes might be attributable to the unique genetic background of the Zucker diabetic fatty rat model, and not generally attributable to sustained supraphysiological glucose levels, we examined an animal model of nongenetically determined diabetes mellitus. We chose the well-studied rat model of partial pancreatectomy for analysis of steady state mRNA levels encoding these proteins in pancreatic islets by quantitative RT-PCR. The animals underwent 90% pancreatectomy (Px), which induced the development of diabetes mellitus due to insulin deficiency starting around two weeks after the operation (Table II). Sham operated (Sham) and unoperated (unopened) animals were used as controls. RT-PCR analysis was performed at 1, 2, and 4 wk after surgery. Table II shows the body weights and blood glucose levels of the animals that underwent surgery, as well as the control sham-operated and unopened animals. On average the operated animals had the same rate of weight gain as the sham-operated or unopened rats. Hyperglycemia developed by 2 wk after the operation and increased further at 4 wk. Sham operated and unopened rats maintained normoglycemia. Similar to the Zucker diabetic fatty rat model, only the animals that were hyperglycemic displayed an upregulation of C/EBP\(\beta\) mRNA after 2 wk and a more pronounced elevation after 4 wk after partial pancreatectomy (Fig. 4A). This upregulation of C/EBP\(\beta\) was accompanied by a downregulation of IDX-1 and insulin (Fig. 4, B and C), indicating that high glucose concentrations may predominantly affect the steady state levels of mRNAs of these transcription factors in pancreatic \(\beta\) cells. Thus similar findings of regulation of C/EBP\(\beta\) and IDX-1 expression at the mRNA levels were obtained in both the iatrogenic rat model of 90% pancreatectomy and the genetically determined Zucker diabetic fatty rat model. In addition, these changes in the regulation of the transcription factors are followed by a downregulation of insulin mRNA. The findings further demonstrate the effectiveness of supraphysiological glucose levels to alter gene expression in vivo in pancreatic \(\beta\) cells, and extend the basis for the glucotoxic influence to the level of gene regulation.

Table II. Characteristics of Non-operated Rats (Unopened) and Rats after 90% Pancreatectomy (Px) or Sham Operation at Time Points Preoperative, 1, 2, and 4 Wk after Surgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time point</th>
<th>Preop. (g)</th>
<th>1 Wk (g)</th>
<th>2 Wk (g)</th>
<th>4 Wk (g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body weight</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Px</td>
<td>106.9±8.4 (17)</td>
<td>145.0±10.1 (4)</td>
<td>182.0±6.3 (8)</td>
<td>287.5±4.4 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sham</td>
<td>108.2±6.5 (10)</td>
<td>151.0±7.2 (3)</td>
<td>226.8±8.3 (4)</td>
<td>289.7±2.1 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unopened</td>
<td>98.5±1.9 (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>298.0±39.9 (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glucose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Px</td>
<td>86.5±8.4 (17)</td>
<td>96.0±16.8 (4)</td>
<td>175.0±42.7 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sham</td>
<td>80.2±10 (10)</td>
<td>84.0±7.0 (3)</td>
<td>91.5±23.5 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unopened</td>
<td>86.3± (4)</td>
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Parameters for glucose represent fasted values. Parameters represent the average±SEM. Parameters in parentheses represent the number of animals in each group.
Type 2 diabetes is characterized by a gradual deterioration of β cell function leading to both an impairment in glucose-stimulated insulin secretion and a degranulation of β cells (43). This phenomenon has been attributed to the influence of chronic hyperglycemia and the ensuing metabolic alterations that occur in the diabetic state, thereby preventing the β cells from maintaining their physiological response. According to the concept of glucotoxicity, a sustained elevated glucose level in and of itself is believed to exert deleterious effects on pancreatic β cells (1). In fact, impaired β cell function has been demonstrated in several model systems in which β cells were exposed to high glucose levels (5, 44–46). At the cellular level sustained high glucose alters insulin biosynthesis as well as insulin secretion (47). More recently a downregulation of insulin mRNA by high glucose concentrations was demonstrated suggesting an effect of high glucose on insulin gene expression. This effect of glucose on insulin mRNA levels has been proposed to be mediated by transcription factors acting on the promoter of the insulin gene (6–8). In addition to the reported downregulation of the insulin gene transactivators IDX-1 and RIPE3b1-binding proteins by high glucose, we described earlier a glucose stress-mediated upregulation of C/EBPβ that acts as a transcriptional repressor of insulin gene transcription (10). We observed an upregulation of C/EBPβ in vitro in cul-

**Figure 3.** Semiquantitative competitive RT-PCR for C/EBPβ, IDX-1, and insulin mRNA from islets of 9-wk-old Wistar rats, Zucker lean littermates (fa/+/), and Zucker diabetic (fa/fa) rats. Total RNA from pooled islet preparations of each group were reverse transcribed in triplicate and identical amounts of cDNAs were subjected to PCR. Each reaction contained equal amounts of competitor templates, which were designed to be amplified by the same primer oligonucleotides as the target sequences. The intensity of the bands of the target sequence was quantitated in relation to the competitor. Values are presented as relative expression calculated from the means of the triplicate samples in each group. The error bars represent SEM. The insert plots denote the comparison of the effectiveness of amplification of target and competitor sequences. All competitors displayed almost identical amplification kinetics as the target sequences. C/EBPβ mRNA is upregulated in the islets of hyperglycemic (fa/fa) animals (4). This is accompanied by a downregulation of IDX-1 (B) and insulin mRNA (C).
Regulation of Insulin Gene Transcription Factors in Diabetes Mellitus

It is worth noting that all of the experiments performed so far on the regulation of transcription factor expression in response to glucotoxicity have been done in vitro, mostly using transformed insulinoma cells that are poorly responsive to glucose. In the studies using HIT cells, several weeks of passage were required to manifest changes in IDX-1 levels raising the possibility that clonal selection could take place. Therefore we examined the roles of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 in vivo and provide evidence for the implication of both of these transcription factors in the pathogenesis of diabetes mellitus.

The Zucker diabetic fatty (ZDF) rat is a well-established animal model of obesity and diabetes in which the metabolic...
alterations have been characterized extensively (37). Recently, the genetic defect of the ZDF rat was mapped to a point mutation within the receptor for the obesity protein (leptin) resulting in an impairment of leptin receptor signaling (38–40). Although the ZDF rat model has limitations when examining the genetic basis responsible for the development of type 2 diabetes, the metabolic sequelae and phenotypic features resemble those manifested in human non–insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus. In particular a prediabetic interval occurs during the development of obesity, in which hyperinsulinemia and moderately impaired glucose tolerance (5–6 wk of age) can be distinguished from fully-developed diabetes with marked hyperglycemia and impaired insulin secretion at an older age (12–18 wk). The finding of a marked upregulation of C/EBPβ and a downregulation of IDX-1 in the islets of these ZDF animals in the course of the evolution of the onset of diabetes and later fully developed diabetic state suggests a potentially important role of both transcription factors in promoting alterations of gene expression in pancreatic β cells in response to changes in serum glucose concentrations. Furthermore, our data in the ZDF rat model confirm previous findings in this model showing a downregulation of insulin gene expression during the course of the development of the diabetic state despite the initial persistence of hyperinsulinemia (37). In addition it has been shown that the insulin content of the islets is markedly decreased in the diabetic ZDF rats at 12 wk of age. This obvious contradiction, however, can be explained by the strong increase in the number of β cells per islet (islet hyperplasia) in the diabetic ZDF rats (37). The increased mass of β cells maintains the hyperinsulinemia necessary to counteract the peripheral insulin resistance that is present in these animals despite the decrease of insulin gene expression, insulin biosynthesis and insulin content within the single β cell.

To determine whether the upregulation of C/EBPβ and downregulation of IDX-1 in pancreatic β cells is a unique feature of the ZDF rats, we examined the 90% pancreatectomy rat as another well established model of diabetes. In this model elevated glucose levels are a prerequisite for the evolution of β cell dysfunction (48). By demonstrating the regulation of both transcription factors at the mRNA level in vivo 2–4 wk after partial pancreatectomy, we defined high glucose levels as a major factor driving transcription, and provide evidence that the findings obtained from the ZDF rat model may be more generally applicable to the pathogenesis of the development of diabetes.

In addition to the documented deleterious effects of supraphysiological glucose levels on β cell function there is a growing body of evidence that high serum lipid levels and in particular fat accumulation in the islets may play a role in altering β cell function during the development of diabetes mellitus, so called lipotoxicity (49, 50). Exposure of pancreatic islets to fatty acids (FFA) inhibits glucose-induced insulin secretion and biosynthesis in vitro and in vivo (14, 51) and specific LDL binding and uptake by pancreatic islet β cells has been demonstrated recently (52). In contrast, low levels of free FFA are proposed as a signal from the adipose tissue to the pancreatic β cell to increase insulin secretion in response to rising insulin resistance (53). This mechanism was reported to be defective in islets of ZDF rats (13), which are defective in leptin signaling. The accumulation of triglycerides during the development of diabetes in ZDF rat islets is associated with impaired insulin biosynthesis and secretion. This has been attributed to enhanced intracellular esterification and reduced oxidation of FFA in the islets because of the lack of leptin signaling (54, 55). Consequently, reconstituting leptin effects in islets of ZDF rats reverses the diabetogenic phenotype by reducing the formation of triglycerides from FFA and restoring the response of insulin gene transcription to low levels of FFA (56, 57). In contrast, overexpression of leptin by adenovirus mediated gene transfer in normal rats leads to complete disappearance of body fat (58) and depletion of FFA and triglycerides from pancreatic islets (59), which also causes impaired β cell function.

The β cell dysfunction associated with defective leptin signaling in ZDF rats has been attributed to the stimulation of nitric oxide production via induction of the inducible form of nitric oxide synthase by FFA (60); a mechanism which is similar to the effects of IL-1β in pancreatic islets. This notion is supported by the finding that the depletion of islet triglyceride
stores by leptin or troglitazone treatment leads to resistance of β cells to IL-1β induced cytotoxicity (61).

More recently, a decrease in IDX-1 associated with a reduced expression of insulin, glucokinase and glucose transporter type 2 was reported in rat pancreatic islets upon exposure to palmitic acid in vitro. These effects were dependent on mitochondrial oxidation of the fatty acid (15). These findings imply that lipotoxic effects may also alter islet cell gene expression by affecting the activity of transcription factors regulating these islet genes.

Our data obtained from the rat model of 90% pancreatectomy, and earlier from insulinoma cell lines, provide strong evidence that glucose is a major regulator of the expression of both IDX-1 and C/EBPβ in pancreatic β cells. It has been reported that β cell dysfunction antedates the development of overt hyperglycemia and coincides with the onset of hyperlipidemia in the ZDF rat model (37). Thus, in this animal, model lipotoxic effects may already contribute to a dysregulation of transcription factors which control β cell gene transcription before the development of hyperglycemia. A more detailed analysis of the time courses of the expression of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 during the development of diabetes in different diabetic animal models may provide evidence for this circumstance. Additional studies will be required to determine the relative contributions of glucotoxicity versus lipotoxicity (if any) to the alterations of β cell functions in the partial pancreatectomy diabetic rat.

Based on our current knowledge of the function of C/EBPβ and IDX-1 in pancreatic β cells, we can not yet determine the relative contributions of the two proteins to the impaired insulin gene expression in diabetes mellitus. Recent in vitro data, however, suggest that transactivation of the insulin gene promoter by IDX-1 may only be partially responsible for the overall transcriptional activity of this promoter in pancreatic β cells (9). In studies in which the hamster insulinoma cell line HIT-T15 was cultured chronically in high glucose levels and consequently backshifted to low glucose levels, the decreased insulin gene expression seen in high glucose was restored despite the persistence of lowered levels of IDX-1. Moreover, when the expression of IDX-1 in the β cell line MIN6 was suppressed by antisense oligonucleotides down to a level of 14% of control, no decrease in insulin mRNA was detected (62). Although these findings may be specific to the model systems of clonal cell lines and are not necessarily applicable to the in vivo situation, they suggest the involvement of other transcription factors in the glucotoxic alterations of insulin gene transcription. In addition to the potential involvement of RIPE3β1-binding proteins (7), C/EBPβ, which is induced by the metabolic stress of supraphysiological glucose levels in pancreatic β cells, may serve as a transcription factor with potential implications in the dysregulation of insulin gene expression in diabetes. Clearly, insulin gene transcription is regulated in a complex manner and other transcription factors are likely to be involved as well.

In addition to the regulation of insulin gene transcription, IDX-1 transactivates the promoters of other genes in pancreatic β cells, such as the genes for glucokinase, islet amyloid polypeptide, and glucose transporter type 2 (63–65). Moreover, IDX-1 expression is associated with both the development and the maintenance of β cell phenotype (66, 67). Recently, an inactivating mutation in the IDX-1 gene has been linked to pancreatic development and diabetes mellitus (68). A child homozygous for the mutation was born without a pancreas (pancreatic agenesis; reference 67). Heterozygous carriers of the mutation develop early onset diabetes (MODY4; reference 68). Therefore the loss of IDX-1 expression during the development of diabetes mellitus in vivo may lead to impaired pancreatic β cell function by affecting cellular events different from insulin gene transcription, such as glucose sensing, glucose metabolism or differentiation status of the pancreatic β cell. Similarly, other target genes than the insulin gene for the transcription factor C/EBPβ in the pancreatic β cell may be characterized in the future.

Although these studies cannot prove cause and effect, they are consistent with the hypothesis that chronic hyperglycemia, possibly accompanied by lipotoxic effects, resets the levels of transcriptional activators and suppressors of insulin gene expression in β cells and thereby contributes to the dysregulated production of insulin in diabetes.

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