Normal hematopoiesis and neurofibromin-deficient myeloproliferative disease require Erk

Karl Staser, …, Feng-Chun Yang, D. Wade Clapp

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Neurofibromatosis type 1 (NF1) predisposes individuals to the development of juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia (JMML), a fatal myeloproliferative disease (MPD). In genetically engineered murine models, nullizygosity of *Nf1*, a tumor suppressor gene that encodes a Ras-GTPase–activating protein, results in hyperactivity of Raf/Mek/Erk in hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs). Activated Erk1/2 phosphorylate kinases and transcription factors with myriad mitogenic roles in diverse cell types. However, genetic studies examining Erk1/2’s differential and/or combined control of normal and *Nf1*-deficient myelopoiesis are lacking. Moreover, prior studies relying on chemical Mek/Erk inhibitors have reached conflicting conclusions in normal and *Nf1*-deficient mice. Here, we show that while single *Erk1* or *Erk2* disruption did not grossly compromise myelopoiesis, dual *Erk1/2* disruption rapidly ablated granulocyte and monocyte production in vivo, diminished progenitor cell number, and prevented HSPC proliferation in vitro. Genetic disruption of *Erk1/2* in the context of *Nf1* nullizygosity (*Mx1Cre*+*Nf1*<sup>flox/flox</sup>*Erk1<sup>−/−</sup>*Erk2<sup>flox/flox</sup>) fully protects against the development of MPD. Collectively, we identified a fundamental requirement for Erk1/2 signaling in normal and *Nf1*-deficient hematopoiesis, elucidating a critical hematopoietic function for Erk1/2 while genetically validating highly selective Mek/Erk inhibitors in a leukemia that is otherwise resistant to traditional therapy.

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Introduction

Neurofibromatosis type 1 (NF1) is a common genetic disorder predisposing patients to multiple malignancies, including malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumors, plexiform neurofibromas, and juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia (JMML) (1), a universally fatal myeloproliferative disease (MPD) arising from deregulated Ras signaling in GM-CSF, SCF, and IL-3-responsive hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells (HSPCs) (2–5). NF1 results from autosomal dominant mutations in the NF1 tumor suppressor gene, the protein product of which accelerates the intrinsic hydrolysis of active Ras-GTP to inactive Ras-GDP (6). NF1 nullizygosity in HSPCs engenders leukemogenesis, as evidenced in studies of humans with NF1 and in mouse models of NF1-deficient MPD (1, 3). Specifically, hyperactivation of the Raf/Mek/Erk cascade downstream of deregulated Ras appears to modulate NF1-associated leukemogenesis (3, 7, 8). Moreover, a recent study by Chung et al. demonstrated that constitutively active Mek, independent of Nf1 mutations, induces MPD (9). However, it remains unknown whether Nf1-deficient MPD progression requires Mek/Erk signals, and some data have suggested Mek/Erk’s dispensability in the context of cooperating mutations (7).

The coordinated differentiation and proliferation of HSPCs toward mature myeloid cells require multiple cytokines transducing signals via JAK-STAT and receptor tyrosine kinase networks. These networks near-ubiquitously activate Erk1 and Erk2, proline-directed mitogenic kinases that share 83% sequence homology and function to phosphorylate mitogens and transcription factors broadly implicated in cell-cycle control, protein synthesis, survival, and differentiation (10). While prior hematopoietic studies have examined Erk1 and/or Erk2 disruption in lymphocytes (11, 12), no study has examined Erk1/2 disruption in normal or Nf1-deficient myelopoiesis, even though pathologically important cytokines implicated in JMML, including GM-CSF, activate this pathway (4, 5). Given the recent development of pharmacological grade Mek/Erk inhibitors and the unresponsiveness of JMML to traditional chemotherapy, these genetic studies inform future translational studies in children with this malignancy.

Here, we show that normal production of granulocytes and monocytes requires either Erk1 or Erk2. Concomitant Nf1 deficiency cannot overcome the requirement for Mek/Erk signals in driving myelopoiesis. Thus, we clarify critical functions for Erk1/2 in myelopoiesis while genetically validating highly selective new generation Mek/Erk inhibitors for the attenuation of leukemia dependent on hyperactive Ras.

Results and Discussion

Following Cre induction, 4 genotypes were initially examined: Erk2floxFlox (WT), Erk1–/–Erk2floxFlox (Erk1-KO), Mx1Cre/Erk2floxFlox (Erk2-KO), and Mx1Cre/Erk1–/–Erk2floxFlox (Erk1/2-KO) (see Methods). From previous lymphocyte-focused studies of Erk1/2 disruption in the hematopoietic system (including excision driven by Mx1Cre in ref. 12), we did not anticipate a gross myeloid phenotype. However, following poly(I:C) induction, Erk1/2-KO marrow showed a 2-fold reduction in total marrow cellularity, which corresponded histologically to vacant marrow space (Figure 1A). Erk1/2-KO marrow demonstrated a prominent reduction in the characteristic myeloid FSC<sup>hi</sup>SSC<sup>hi</sup> population, indicating loss of monocyte
and/or granulocyte progenitors, both in frequency and total cell number (Figure 1B). Further flow cytometry–based analyses of the Erk1/2-KO bone marrow demonstrated prominent reductions in the frequency and absolute number of mixed marrow granulocytes and their immediate progenitors (CD3–B220–Gr1+Mac1+) (Figure 1, C and D). None of these deficiencies manifested in Erk1-KO or Erk2-KO animals.

To ascertain whether this defect originates in primitive progenitor cells, we established low and high proliferative potential cell colony forming cell assays (LPPC-CFU and HPPC-CFU) with saturating concentrations of multiple hematopoietic cytokines in semisolid medium. While progenitor numbers from Erk1-KO and Erk2-KO marrow were comparable to WT marrow, Erk1/2-KO marrow produced few colonies (Figure 2, A and B). To test the possibility that Erk1/2 disruption induces a differentiation block (but permits proliferation), single, primitive HSPCs (CD150+CD48−41−lin−sca1+) were sorted into cytokine-enriched methylcellulose in a single well of a 96-well plate. Erk1/2-KO cells produced no colonies (Figure 2C) or appreciable cell proliferation on Hoechst staining of individual wells (not shown), suggesting, in conjunction with LPPC/HPPC data, that HSPC proliferation in these assays requires Erk1/2.

To test marrow-autonomous Erk deletion in vivo, we transplanted CD45.2+ Erk mutant bone marrow cells mixed with isogenic CD45.1+ WT BoyJ cells into lethally irradiated CD45.1/2+ hosts (Figure 2D), a strategy allowing discrimination among donor, competitor, and residual recipient cell populations. Before poly(I:C) injection, Erk2flox/− and Erk1−/−Erk2flox/−Mx1Cre+ (i.e., essentially Erk1-KO) recipients showed similar chimerism (Figure 2, E and F, −0.5 month). However, Erk1−/−KO CD45.2+ chimerism fell dramatically following Cre induction (Figure 2F). In a separate experiment, secondary transplantation of Erk1−/−KO bone marrow accelerated chimerism loss (Supplemental Figure 1A; supplemental material available online with this article;
doi:10.1172/JCI66167DS1). In contrast, mice reconstituted with Erk1-KO or Erk2-KO bone marrow showed long-term stability and production of both myeloid and lymphoid lineages, and mice competitively reconstituted with Mx1Cre +Erk2flox/flox marrow showed no significant chimerism loss following poly(I:C) injection, thus controlling for possible Cre-related alterations (Supplemental Figure 1, B–E).

In the Erk1/2-KO cohort, flow cytometric analyses of the peripheral blood revealed rapid, near-complete ablation of circulating nonlymphoid cells (CD45.2+CD3–B220–), granulocytes (CD45.2+CD3–B220–Gr1+Mac1+), and monocytes (CD45.2+CD3–B220–Gr1–Mac1+) (Figure 2, G–I). As early as 2 weeks after Cre induction, the majority of the few remaining Erk1/2-KO CD45.2+ cells were T or B cells (not shown). However, given the diminution in overall CD45.2+ chimerism, the Erk1/2-KO peripheral blood showed relatively few lymphocytes, concordant with previous lymphocyte-focused studies (12).

Consistent with initial clonogenic assays, Erk1/2-KO bone marrow demonstrated diminution in the frequency and total number of phenotypically defined multipotent and lineage-restricted progenitors (Table 1). Intriguingly, WT and Erk1/2-KO bone marrow contained the same frequency of phenotypically defined primitive HSPCs (SLAM-LSK: CD150+CD48–41–lin–sca1+c-kit+), revealing a possible linkage between HSPC number and bone marrowcellularity, thus reinforcing a hypothesis of impaired proliferation in the Erk1/2-KO HSPCs. Similar to a recent study relying on Erk1/2 interference in keratinocytes (13), Erk1/2-KO HSPCs showed a nucleic acid profile most consistent with G2/M arrest.
This genetic finding that granulocytopenia and monocytopenia require Erk clarifies recent conflicting studies reliant on chemical Mek/Erk inhibitors, some arguing Erk promotes monocytopenia while suppressing granulocytopenia (14, 15), while others showing that Erk directly regulates granulocyte development (10). Another argued that Erk regulates GM colony formation from HSCs/multipotent progenitors (MPPs) but not from common myeloid progenitors (CMPs), implying its dispensability in later precursors (16). In comparison, our in vivo genetic findings indicate a critical role for Erk1/2 in both granulocytopenia and monocytopenia.

To test whether Nf1 deficiency and consequent constitutive Ras hyperactivation bypass this Erk requirement, we transplanted CD45.1/2+ mice with CD45.1+ WT and CD45.2+ NF1floxFlox/Flox (WT), Mx1Cre NF1floxFlox (Nf1-KO), Mx1Cre Erk1−/−Erk2−/−NF1floxFlox (Erk1/2-KO), or Mx1Cre NF1floxFlox Erk1−/−Erk2−/−floxFlox (Nf1-Erk1/2-KO) HSCs (Figure 3A). After 4 months, we injected the recipients with poly(I:C). At sacrifice, Nf1-KO recipient mice had enlarged spleens (Figure 3B), demonstrating myeloid cell invasion and disruption of the normal splenic architecture, histological features consistent with MPD (Figure 3C). In contrast, Nf1-Erk1/2-KO recipient mice had a spleen size and architecture indistinguishable from the WT and Erk1/2-KO recipient control groups (Figure 3, B and C).

Consistent with previous studies, Nf1-KO peripheral blood showed increased total CD45.2+ cells, total CD45.2+ nonlymphoid cells, and total CD45.2+ granulocytes (Figure 3D). Similarly, Nf1-KO bone marrow showed increased frequency of total myeloid cells, granulocyte precursors, and monocyte precursors (Figure 3E). In contrast, Nf1-Erk1/2-KO recipients showed a rapid and sustained loss of total CD45.2+ blood and marrow cells, a finding analogous to Erk1/2-KO recipients (Figure 3, D and E). In short, Nf1-KO recipient myeloid outgrowth resembles JMML, while combined Nf1, Erk1, and Erk2 disruption parallels the Erk1/2 disrupted hematopoietic phenotype.

**Methods**

**Mice, genotyping, and Mx1Cre induction.** Previously described Erk1−/− (18) and Erk2−/−floxFlox mice (11) were bred with Mx1Cre transgenic mice, each other, and with NF1floxFlox mice (19) and genotyped as described (11, 18, 19). In each experiment, all mice (Mx1Cre+ or Mx1Cre−) received 7 i.p. injections of (poly[I:C], Sigma-Aldrich) dissolved in sterile PBS, using graded doses from 15 to 30 μg/g body weight. Transplanted mice received 6 doses, to approximately 15 μg/g body weight. Erk2 protein levels were detected by Western blot of peripheral blood and/or bone marrow, and Nf1 recombination was detected by PCR of peripheral blood (Supplemental Figure 2).

**Marrow isolation and colony assays.** After Cre induction, femoral marrow was flushed and mononuclear cells isolated, as described (3). LPPC-HPPC assays were performed as described (3) (details in Supplemental Methods). For single HSC colony assays, cells were stained with HSPC surface markers and sorted by FACS (FACS Aria; BD) into a 96-well flat bottom plate containing 100 μl of 1% methylcellulose with 30% FBS, 100 ng/ml SCF, 10 ng/ml IGF-3, 10 ng/ml Flt3-ligand, and 4 U/ml EPO (Amgen) and allowed to grow for 10 days in 5% CO2 at 37°C.

**Transplantation and blood isolation.** For competitive transplantation, CD45.2+ Erk2 mutant and CD45.1+ WT BoyJ marrow cells were mixed at indicated ratios and injected i.v. into lethally irradiated (1100 cGy, split dose) CD45.1/2+ WT mice, each receiving 2 × 106 cells in 200 μl PBS. At indicated times after transplantation, peripheral white blood cells were isolated by incubating (15 minutes, 23°C) 50–100 μl of blood extracted.
obtained during each experiment using polystyrene microbeads (BD Biosciences). Compensation matrices were calculated and analyses performed with FlowJo 7.6.3 software (TreeStar). Gates were determined using fluorescence minus-one controls. Cell-cycle analysis staining protocol can be found in the Supplemental Methods.

Statistics. All analyses were performed with GraphPad Prism 5.0. Data represent mean ± SEM. One- or 2-way ANOVA was performed, as appropriate, with Bonferroni’s or Dunnett’s post-hoc corrections. For 2 variable comparisons, unpaired 2-tailed Student’s t tests were used. Specific from the tail veins of transplant recipients in rbc lysis buffer (QIAGEN), followed by washing twice in PBS.

Flow cytometry. Peripheral white blood cells or bone marrow cells were incubated at 4°C for 45 minutes with saturating concentrations of anti-mouse antibodies in approximately 100 μl of 3% FBS/0.09% NaN₃ in PBS with 0.25 μg anti-mouse CD16/CD32 (Fc Block). All antibodies were purchased from BD Biosciences or eBiosciences (see Supplemental Methods). Data were acquired on an LSR II 407 flow cytometer outfitted with red 633 nm, 488 nm, and 407 nm lasers. Single-color compensation controls were

Figure 3
*Nf1-deficient MPD requires Erk. (A) CD45.2+ bone marrow cells harvested from Mx1Cre+If1flox/flox/Erk1−/−Erk2flox/flox mice were mixed with CD45.1+ WT bone marrow cells and transplanted into lethally irradiated CD45.1+ recipients, alongside control groups, as shown. After 4 months, all mice received poly(I:C) and were then killed approximately 6 months later. (B and C) Erk1, Erk2, and Nf1 disruption in the hematopoietic system protects against the phenotype observed in Nf1-KO recipients, which have enlarged spleens with effacement of the regular white pulp cellular architecture. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001, all vs. Nf1-KO; all other comparisons P > 0.05, 1-way ANOVA with Bonferroni’s correction. Original magnification, x100 (top panels); x300 (bottom panels). (D) Similarly, the Nf1-Erk1/2-KO recipients show ablated CD45.2+ populations in the peripheral blood, similar to the Erk1/2-KO cohort. **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001, all vs. Nf1-KO, 1-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s correction. In comparison, the Nf1-KO recipients show expansion of total CD45.2+ cells, total CD45.2+ myeloid cells, and total CD45.2+ granulocytes in the peripheral blood. (E) In the bone marrow, the Nf1-Erk1/2-KO recipients show few CD45.2+ myeloid cells, including both CD45.2+CD3−B220−Gr1+Mac1+ and CD45.2+CD3−B220−Gr1−Mac+ populations, which contrasts with the increased frequency observed in the Nf1-KO cohort. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001, all vs. Nf1-KO, 1-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s correction.
tests and significance levels are found in figure legends. \(P < 0.05\) was considered significant.

**Study approval.** Mice were maintained at Indiana University School of Medicine according to the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee and Institutional Review Board guidelines. The IACUC and the IRB approved all animal methods used in this study.

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Address correspondence to: D. Wade Clapp, Cancer Research Institute, 1044 West Walnut Street, R-4, Room 402B, Indianapolis, Indiana 46202, USA. Phone: 317.278.9290; Fax: 317.274.8679; E-mail: dclapp@iupui.edu.