


**Gene-expression profiling to classify soft-tissue sarcomas**

See page 1301

Soft-tissue sarcomas are heterogeneous, with several histotypes that all share a putative common mesenchymal origin. Prognosis is determined clinically (size, location, resection-margin status) and pathologically (mitotic activity, necrosis), and the histological subtype is only sometimes a consistent independent prognostic factor. For the common soft-tissue sarcomas, (leiomyosarcomas, liposarcomas, synovial sarcomas, malignant fibrous histiocytomas, malignant peripheral-nerve-sheath tumours), predictable histiotype-specific behaviour remains illusive. The clinical course ranges from slowly growing localised tumours to highly aggressive, rapidly metastatic tumours. These cancers are rare (<1% of all cancers) and studying large groups of individual tumour types is difficult. Wide surgical resection with irradiation ensures optimum local control. Only doxorubicin and ifosfamide are active as chemotherapy.

In this issue of The Lancet, Torsten Nielsen and colleagues report the use of transcriptional profiling with cDNA microarrays. Transcriptional profiling can help diagnosis, explain and predict differences in biological behaviour, predict responsiveness to treatment, and may identify new molecular targets (panel). Routine immunohistochemistry can be considered as a single-gene expression study; expression profiling gives a holistic view, while lacking topographical information.

Nielsen and colleagues analysed 41 soft-tissue tumours, which gave over 1·5 million data points. These profiles were obtained with two different microarrays. Bias from the two arrays was successfully removed by a method known as singular value decomposition. This mathematical technique allows the recognition of the dominant gene (eigengene) and the corresponding array expression (eigenarray), which will facilitate the comparison of data from different arrays. Against the gene-expression profile of 5520 well-measured genes, displaying predefined variation across the different specimens, the 41 sarcomas could be separated into five distinct groups: gastrointestinal stromal tumours, synovial sarcomas, the benign peripheral-nerve-sheath tumours, half the leiomyosarcomas, and a broad group containing all the malignant fibrous histiocytomas, the liposarcomas, and the other leiomyosarcomas. This separation of half the sarcomas, classified morphologically as leiomyosarcomas, into a cluster characterised by 24 highly expressed genes, gives at least three groups previously grouped together: the gastrointestinal stromal tumours, and the calponin-positive and the calponin-negative leiomyosarcomas.

Most gastrointestinal stromal tumours have a gain-of-function mutation in the proto-oncogene KIT, which activates tyrosine kinase. This observation led to the molecular therapy, imatinib mesylate, a KIT-kinase inhibitor. In the Nielsen study a cluster of 125 genes were highly expressed, which separated the gastrointestinal stromal tumours from the other sarcomas. These results and others strengthened the case for separating gastrointestinal stromal tumours from other leiomyosarcomas, and support the hypothesis of phenotypic resemblance between gastrointestinal stromal tumours and the interstitial cells of Cajal. A c-KIT mutation was thought to indicate a more aggressive, worse prognosis gastrointestinal stromal tumour, but more recent data suggest that c-KIT mutation occurs early in the development of the tumour and that many lack a c-KIT
mutation but have increased KIT mRNA levels and expression of CD117 protein. The study by Nielsen and colleagues suggested that, because gastrointestinal stromal tumours relatively underepress proliferation genes, the finding of c-KIT activation is not itself a hallmark for aggressive clinical behaviour. The striking presence of genes counteracting the function of KIT and the homogeneous expression profile observed in Nielsen’s study suggest that gastrointestinal stromal tumours are, as the investigators conclude, “low-grade and of low limited complexity”, which contrasts with the genetic instability in most common epithelial cancers.

The synovial sarcomas account for some 10% of adult soft-tissue sarcomas and they have a monophasic and biphasic subtype, most having a characteristic translocation, t(X;18) (p11;q11), that results in the fusion of the proximal portion of the SYT gene at 18q11 to the distal portion of, primarily, one of two genes, SXX1 or SXX2. The type of gene fusion is clinically important. The type of spotted microarray was not developed to identify these differences. A “sarcomachip”, by analogy to the “lymphochip”, might be developed taking this into account. The observation that a cluster of 104 genes was identified that included retinoic-acid pathways and the epidermal-growth-factor receptor is more important, because it suggests a role for retinoids in this disease and a role for the epidermal-growth-factor receptor as an active growth-promoting pathway. These pathways were apparently unrelated to glandular differentiation because all eight synovial sarcomas in Nielsen’s study were monophasic. Other reports have suggested increased c-KIT and SCF mRNA in most synovial sarcomas, but Nielsen and colleagues did not find this. This difference might highlight another limitation of these arrays: their relative insensitivity for minor upregulations compared with RT-PCR.

Malignant fibrous histiocytoma was until recently considered the most common soft-tissue sarcoma among adults. Histologically, karyotypically, and clinically, this is by far the most heterogeneous group of sarcomas, and the concept of malignant fibrous histiocytoma is a histogenetically separate entity became questioned. An alternative hypothesis considered that malignant fibrous histiocytomas: prognostic relevance of subclassification. A “sarcomachip”, by analogy to the “lymphochip”, might be developed taking this into account. The observation that a cluster of 104 genes was identified that included retinoic-acid pathways and the epidermal-growth-factor receptor is more important, because it suggests a role for retinoids in this disease and a role for the epidermal-growth-factor receptor as an active growth-promoting pathway. These pathways were apparently unrelated to glandular differentiation because all eight synovial sarcomas in Nielsen’s study were monophasic. Other reports have suggested increased c-KIT and SCF mRNA in most synovial sarcomas, but Nielsen and colleagues did not find this. This difference might highlight another limitation of these arrays: their relative insensitivity for minor upregulations compared with RT-PCR.

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