Prognostic significance of RASSF1A promoter methylation in operable breast cancer

Magdalini Kioulafa, Loukas Kaklamanis, Dimitris Mavroudis, Vassilis Georgoulias, Evi S. Lianidou

Abstract

Objectives: The aim of our study was to evaluate the prognostic significance of RASSF1A promoter methylation status in operable breast cancer.

Design and methods: By using Methylation Specific PCR, we evaluated the specificity of RASSF1A promoter methylation in 10 breast tumors and matching normal tissues, 10 breast fibroadenomas and 11 normal breast tissues. The prognostic significance of RASSF1A methylation was validated in 93 formalin fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tissues obtained from patients with operable breast cancer.

Results: Methylation of RASSF1A promoter was observed in 1/31 (3.2%) non-cancerous breast tissues and 53/93 (57.0%) early stage breast tumors. The only positive sample in the non-cancerous breast tissues group was found in a histological normal tissue surrounding the tumor. During the follow-up period, 24/93 (25.8%) patients relapsed and 19/93 (20.4%) died. Disease-Free-Interval (DFI) was significantly associated with RASSF1A methylation (p = 0.028).

Conclusions: RASSF1A promoter methylation provides important prognostic information in early stage breast cancer patients.

Keywords: RASSF1A; DNA methylation; Operable breast cancer; Epigenetic markers; Prognostic biomarker; Methylation Specific PCR

Introduction

DNA methylation is one of the most frequently occurring epigenetic events taking place in the mammalian genome at cytosine bases that are located 5’ to a guanosine, in a CpG dinucleotide. Short CpG rich regions ranging from 0.5 to 4 kb, known as CpG islands, are found in the proximal promoter regions of almost half of the human genes and are generally unmethylated in normal cells, while most CpGs outside CpG islands are methylated [1,2]. In cancer cells however, methylation pattern includes a loss of global methylation and a gain of methylation at selected promoter CpG islands [3].

Promoter methylation is found in virtually every type of human neoplasm and is associated with transcriptional silencing of hundreds of genes, including several known tumor suppressor genes [4]. In recent years, the list of tumor suppressor genes that are inactivated by epigenetic events rather than classic mutation events has been growing. Unlike mutational inactivation, methylation is reversible and demethylating agents and inhibitors of histone deacetylases are being used in clinical trials. Furthermore, highly sensitive and quantitative assays have been developed to assess methylation in tumor samples, early lesions, and bodily fluids. Hence, gene silencing by promoter methylation has potential clinical benefits in early cancer diagnosis, prognosis and treatment.

The RASSF1 gene locus spans about 11,151 bp of the human genome and is comprised of eight exons. Differential promoter usage and alternative splicing generates seven transcripts (RASSF1A-G). The RASSF1A (RAS-association domain 1 isoform A) gene has been quite recently cloned and characterized [5-7] acting as a tumor suppressor gene that obeys...
Knudson’s two hit model [8]; it is likely that the first hit is epigenetic silencing through methylation of its CpG island promoter and the second hit is 3p loss [9]. Particularly, \textit{RASSF1A} is frequently silenced by promoter methylation in many primary tumors, including breast, lung, kidney, bladder, and other cancers [10]. Furthermore, \textit{RASSF1A} is a member of a new group of Ras effectors, and its functional analysis has revealed an involvement in apoptotic signaling [11], microtubule stabilization [12] and mitotic progression [13].

\textit{RASSF1A} has been previously demonstrated to be inactivated by CpG island methylation in breast cancer cell lines and primary tumor tissues. Despite the fact that methylation of this gene has been shown to have a significant impact on biological characteristics of breast tumors, the relationship between CpG island methylation of this gene and prognosis in breast cancer has not been reported as yet.

In this work we evaluated the prognostic significance of \textit{RASSF1A} promoter methylation in early stage breast cancer. By using Methylation Specific PCR, we first evaluated the specificity of \textit{RASSF1A} promoter methylation in 10 breast tumors and their matching non-cancerous breast tissues, 10 breast fibroadenomas and 11 normal breast tissues. The prognostic significance of \textit{RASSF1A} methylation was validated in 93 formalin fixed paraffin-embedded (FFPE) tissues obtained from early stage breast cancer patients.

**Design and Methods**

**Cell lines and tissues samples**

The study material consisted of a total of 134 breast formalin fixed paraffin-embedded tissues (FFPEs): 93 paraffin-embedded breast carcinomas, obtained from patients with operable breast cancer with a known clinical outcome and a long follow-up period, 10 paraffin-embedded breast carcinomas together with their 10 paired adjacent normal tissues, 10 breast fibroadenomas and 11 normal breast tissues. In total, the 31 non-cancerous paraffin-embedded breast tissues were used as controls for the evaluation of the specificity of \textit{RASSF1A} promoter methylation in tumors. All patients were enrolled to adjuvant chemotherapy research protocols of the Hellenic Oncology Research Group (HORG) [i.e. FEC regimen or sequential docetaxel followed by epirubicin in combination with cyclophosphamide (D/EC regimen) or docetaxel in combination with epirubicin (DE regimen)]; patients with breast conservative surgery also received radiation treatment and those with hormone receptor-positive tumors received adjuvant tamoxifen for 5 years. All patients gave their informed consent and the study has been approved by the Ethical and Scientific Committees of our Institution. Tumor sections of 10 μm containing more than 80% of tumor cells were cut and were used for DNA extraction and Methylation Specific PCR (MSP) analysis. The breast cancer cell line MCF-7 was used as positive control in MSP reactions for the detection of \textit{RASSF1A} methylation.

**Isolation of genomic DNA**

Genomic DNA was isolated from both paraffin tissues and breast cancer cell lines with the High Pure PCR Template Preparation kit (Roche, Germany), according to the manufacturer’s protocol. DNA concentration was determined in the Nanodrop ND-1000 spectrophotometer (Nanodrop Technologies, USA). Before proceeding to the sodium bisulfite conversion and MSP reaction steps, the genomic DNA integrity of all samples was assessed by amplifying BRCA1 exon 20 for mutation analysis by using the same primers as previously described [14].

**Sodium bisulfite conversion**

1 μg of extracted DNA was modified with sodium bisulfite (SB), in order to convert all unmethylated, but not methylated-cytosines to uracil. Bisulfite conversion was carried out using the EZ DNA Methylation Gold Kit (ZYMO Research Co., Orange, CA), according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Briefly, 1 μg of denaturated genomic DNA (gDNA) was treated with sodium bisulfite for 20 min. Subsequently, SB-treated samples were applied to supplied columns, samples were washed again and DNA was subsequently eluted with 10 μL elution buffer. The converted DNA was stored at –70 °C until used. In each sodium bisulfite conversion reaction, dH₂O and MCF-7 were included as a negative and positive control, respectively.

**Methylation Specific PCR (MSP)**

MSP reaction was performed in a total volume of 25 μL. 1 μL of sodium bisulfite converted DNA was added into a 24 μL reaction mixture that contained 0.1 μL of Taq DNA polymerase (5U/μL, Platinum DNA polymerase; Invitrogen), 2.5 μL of the supplied 10×PCR buffer, 1.0 μL of MgCl₂ (50 mmol/L), 0.5 μL of dNTPs (10 mmol/L; Fermentas) and 1 μL of the corresponding forward and reverse primers (10 μmol/L); finally dH₂O was added to a final volume of 25 μL. Thermocycling conditions used were 1 cycle at 95 °C for 5 min, followed by 40 cycles of 95 °C for 30 s, 56 °C for 45 s and 72 °C for 45 s, with a final extension cycle of 72 °C for 5 min. MSP products were fractionated on 2% agarose gels containing 40 mM Tris–acetate/1.0 mM EDTA (pH=8.0) and visualized by ethidium bromide staining. The sequences of primers used in this study were previously described [15]. Human placental genomic DNA (gDNA; Sigma-Aldrich) methylated in vitro with SsSI methylase (NEB, Ipswich, MA) was used, after sodium bisulfite conversion, as a fully methylated (100%) MSP positive control; the same unmethylated placental gDNA, was used, after sodium bisulfite conversion, as a negative MSP control. All MSP reactions were performed in a blinded fashion with regard to the patient’s clinical outcome.
Statistical analysis

Correlation between methylation status and clinicopathological features of the patients was assessed by the Chi-square test. The prognostic significance of RASSF1A promoter methylation was assessed according to our results of the FFPEs samples from the 93 breast cancer patients. Disease free interval (DFI) and overall survival (OS) curves were calculated by using the Kaplan–Meier method and comparisons were performed using the log rank test. A Cox-regression analysis was performed in order to determine the relative contribution of various variables to the assessment of DFI and OS. p values ≤ 0.05 were considered statistically significant. Statistical analysis was performed by using the SPSS Windows version 11.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL).

Results

Sensitivity of RASSF1A promoter Methylation Specific PCR

The sensitivity of the developed MSP assay for RASSF1A was evaluated by using 1 μg of a fully methylated DNA sample as positive control (100% methylation) serially diluted (10-fold dilutions) in 1 μg of sodium bisulfite converted unmethylated DNA. The MSP assay for RASSF1A was performed in duplicate and it was sensitive enough to detect 0.5 ng of the methylated RASSF1A sequence in the presence of 1 μg of unmethylated RASSF1A sequence. The sensitivity was 1:2000, corresponding to 0.05% RASSF1A methylated gDNA (Fig. 1A).

Specificity of RASSF1A promoter methylation

To validate the specificity of the primers used for the methylated sequence of RASSF1A, we first tested these primers in silico and then in PCR reactions, using as a template bisulfite modified human placental gDNA that is not methylated: no amplification of RASSF1A was observed, while the same primers clearly recognized the methylated sequence when we used our fully methylated (100%) positive control (Fig. 1B, lane#12). The specificity of RASSF1A promoter methylation in tumor tissues was further confirmed by the absence of any detectable methylation of the RASSF1A promoter in all normal breast tissues from reduction mammoplasty (0/11), nor in any breast fibroadenoma (0/10); conversely, RASSF1A promoter was methylated in 4 (40%) out of 10 breast tumors and in only 1 (10%) out of 10 matching normal tissues. In total only 1/31 (3.2%) non-cancerous paraffin-embedded breast tissues were positive for RASSF1A promoter methylation (Fig. 1B).

Clinical relevance of RASSF1A methylation status in operable breast cancer patients

The methylation status of RASSF1A was evaluated in paraffin-embedded breast carcinomas from 93 patients diagnosed with early breast cancer in double-blinded experiments. Patients’ clinicopathological characteristics and clinical outcome data became available upon completion of analysis and were compared to the methylation status of RASSF1A (Table 1). RASSF1A promoter was found methylated in 53 (57.0%) out of
Table 1
Correlation of RASSF1A methylation status with clinicopathological features of the patients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient’s characteristics</th>
<th>RASSF1A</th>
<th>Methylation (%)</th>
<th>p&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menopausal status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21 (55.3)</td>
<td>0.780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>32 (58.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor size (cm)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12 (46.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1–5.0</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35 (62.5)</td>
<td>0.346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;5.0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5 (50.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axillary lymph node</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13 (48.1)</td>
<td>0.514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19 (63.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19 (55.9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I, II</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>26 (61.9)</td>
<td>0.906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>24 (57.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobular</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 (60.0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumor stage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12 (50.0)</td>
<td>0.422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>41 (59.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estrogen receptor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>35 (62.5)</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18 (48.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progesterone receptor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17 (56.7)</td>
<td>0.965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>36 (57.1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER2 score</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2+</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>40 (55.5)</td>
<td>0.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3+</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8 (72.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> In cases that the total number of patients is less than 93, this is due to non-available clinical information.
<sup>b</sup> Chi-square test.

Table 2
Incidence of disease-relapse and disease-related death according to the methylation status of RASSF1A promoter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>Methylation status</th>
<th>Relapses (%)</th>
<th>p&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Median DFI (range)</th>
<th>Deaths (%)</th>
<th>p&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Median OS (range)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RASSF1A</td>
<td>M&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt; (n=53)</td>
<td>19 (35.8)</td>
<td><strong>0.011</strong></td>
<td>90 (80–101)</td>
<td>15 (28.3)</td>
<td><strong>0.030</strong></td>
<td>102 (93–110)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>U&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt; (n=40)</td>
<td>5 (12.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>97 (90–104)</td>
<td>4 (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td>114 (106–122)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> Methylated.
<sup>b</sup> Unmethylated.
<sup>c</sup> Chi square test.

39 breast tumor samples. As can be seen in Table 1, there was no correlation between the RASSF1A promoter methylation and the major characteristics of the patients.

After a median follow-up period of 76 months (range 12–116 months), 24 (25.8%) out of 93 patients relapsed. The incidence of relapses was significantly higher in patients with methylated (35.8%) than in those with unmethylated RASSF1A promoter (12.5%; Table 2; p=0.011). The Kaplan–Meier estimates of the cumulative DFI for patients with methylated and non-methylated RASSF1A promoter were significantly different in favor of patients with non-methylated RASSF1A promoter (p=0.028; Fig. 2A).

During the follow-up period, 19 (20.4%) patients died as a consequence of disease progression. The incidence of deaths was higher in patients with methylated (28.3%) than in patients with unmethylated RASSF1A promoter (10.0%; Table 2; p=0.030). Nevertheless, there was no difference in survival for patients with methylated or unmethylated RASSF1A promoter (p=0.128; Fig. 2B).

Univariate and multivariate analysis

RASSF1A promoter methylation, menopausal and axillary lymph node status, tumor size, stage and grade, estrogen and progesterone receptor status and HER2 score were tested in univariate analysis for association with DFI. Detection of RASSF1A promoter was significantly associated with decreased DFI (p=0.028); in addition, tumor stage and grade, number of involved axillary lymph nodes and HER2 score were significantly associated with decreased DFI (p=0.038, p=0.025, p=0.002 and p=0.038, respectively). The same clinical and epigenetic variables were also tested in univariate analysis for OS. Estrogen receptor-negative tumors, number of involved axillary lymph nodes and tumor grade were significantly associated with a decreased OS (p=0.013, p=0.037 and p=0.001, respectively).

Multivariate analysis demonstrated that the number of involved axillary lymph nodes was independently associated with a high risk of relapse (HR =5.982; 95% CI: 1.338 to 26.739 p=0.019). Similarly, the absence of estrogen receptor positivity (HR =3.406; 95% CI: 1.215 to 9.547p =0.020) was independently associated with an increased risk of death due to the disease.

Discussion

Epigenetic silencing due to DNA hypermethylation often leads to inactivation of the wild-type allele at sites of LOH that introduces one hit in the well-known Knudson’s model for tumorigenesis that accounts for loss-of-function of tumor suppressor genes [8]. The potential of DNA methylation as a novel area of new biomarkers discovery is very promising. A number of interesting tumor suppressor genes, whose silencing through DNA methylation occurs has been evaluated in many types of cancer and especially in breast cancer as novel prognostic and predictive biomarkers [9,16,17].

In the present study the methylation status of RASSF1A promoter was evaluated as prognostic biomarker in operable
breast cancer by MSP. MSP can reliably detect, as verified by our own experiments in serial dilutions, 1 methylated allele in a total of 2,000 unmethylated alleles [18]. The presented data show for the first time that the detection of methylation of this gene in FFPEs has significant prognostic implications in operable breast cancer patients.

Concerning the specificity, RASSF1A promoter was not found methylated in histologically normal breast tissue obtained by reduction mammoplasty, nor in breast fibroadenomas. Conversely, it was found methylated in 4 (40%) out of 10 breast tumors and in only 1 (10%) sample of matching normal breast tissues. In total, methylation of RASSF1A promoter was observed in 1/31 (3.2%) non-cancerous breast tissues while in 53/93 (57.0%) operable breast tumors. The only positive sample in the non-cancerous breast tissues group was found in a histological normal tissue surrounding the tumor. This result is in accordance to a previous report by Dammann et al. [16] who detected RASSF1A promoter methylation in 7.5% of samples that were classified as normal tissue removed during the tumor excision; this finding was attributed to methylation which may occur as part of the aging process [19], or to the contamination of the normal samples by tumor cells.

In our study RASSF1A was identified as a target of methylation and silencing in 57% of tumors of early breast cancer patients, suggesting that inactivation of this gene is a frequent event in the process of mammary tumorigenesis. It is also interesting to note that according to our data, presented in Table 1 there was no difference in the methylation status of RASSF1A between groups of premenopausal and postmenopausal women. In breast cancer, the incidence of RASSF1A methylation, among independent studies, is around 60% [10] and our results are in agreement with such a high incidence of RASSF1A methylation. Particularly, Damman et al. [16] detected RASSF1A promoter methylation in 62% of primary mammary carcinomas, Honorio et al. [20] demonstrated that RASSF1A promoter was methylated in 65% of invasive breast carcinomas and in 42% of corresponding ductal carcinoma in situ (DCIS) and Burbee et al. [21] reported that 49% of primary breast tumors exhibited the methylated RASSF1A allele. Furthermore, Fackler et al. [15] demonstrated that RASSF1A was methylated in 62% of lobular carcinoma in situ (LCIS), in 84% of invasive lobular carcinoma (ILC), in 88%, 58% and 78% of DCIS grade 1, 2 and 3, respectively, and in 70% of invasive ductal carcinoma (IDC), while Yeo et al. [22] reported one of the highest frequencies of RASSF1A methylation (95%) in breast tumor tissues. It was very recently shown that ER-positive and ER-negative status relates to epigenetic changes in breast cancer-related genes including RASSF1A [23]. The importance of epigenetic silencing of RASSF1A is investigated in many types of cancer [24–26].

However, despite the fact that RASSF1A methylation has been shown to have a significant impact on the biological characteristics of breast tumors, the relationship between CpG island methylation of this gene and prognosis in breast cancer FFPE tissues has not been reported as yet. The prognostic value of RASSF1A aberrant methylation in breast cancer has only been shown in cell-free DNA circulating in pretherapeutic serum and was found among 39 genes to be of prognostic significance and independently associated with poor outcome [27]. In accordance to that study, our results demonstrate that RASSF1A methylation in FFPEs provides also important prognostic information, since patients with RASSF1A promoter methylation had shorter DFI than those without. It is probable that RASSF1A gene silencing due to promoter methylation deactivates its tumor suppressor role and can thus possibly contribute to a shorter survival in breast cancer patients.

In conclusion, our data demonstrate that RASSF1A promoter methylation provides important prognostic information in operable breast cancer patients and that this methylation plays an important role in the clinical behavior of breast tumors. Nevertheless, the methylation status of this gene should be

Fig. 2. (A) Kaplan–Meier estimates of DFI for operable breast cancer patients with or without RASSF1A methylation (p = 0.028). (B) Kaplan–Meier estimates of OS for operable breast cancer patients with or without RASSF1A methylation (p = 0.128).
prospectively evaluated as a promising prognostic biomarker in a large cohort of patients with operable breast cancer.

**Conflict of interest**
None declared.

**Disclaimers**
None declared.

**Acknowledgments**

This work was supported by the Special Account for Research Grants (SARG) of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, as well as a Research Grant on Oncology from the Greek Ministry of Health. M. Kioulafa is as recipient of a PhD studentship from the Hellenic Oncology Research Group (HORG). We would like to thank Alexandros Xyrafas, MSc, for the assistance in the statistical evaluation of our data.

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