



Research Article

ECTOPIC VIRAL INTEGRATION SITE-1 (EVI1)-MEDIATED REPRESSION OF CARBONIC ANHYDRASE III (CAIII) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS: ROLE IN ACUTE MYELOID LEUKAEMIA

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ABSTRACT

Ectopic viral integration site-1 (EVI1) is a nuclear zinc finger protein whose increased expression has been associated with poor prognosis in cases of Acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) and myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS). In this study, we showed that expression of EVI1 in Rat fibroblast cells represses carbonic anhydrase III (CAIII), which is involved in protecting cells from oxidative damage. Reporter assays showed that the CAIII promoter activity is 7 times stronger in the absence of enforced expression of EVI1. This demonstrated that the EVI1-mediated repression of CAIII occurred at the level of transcription and could either be due to a direct repression or an indirect repression of the CAIII gene promoter by EVI1. We also showed that CAIII protects cells from apoptosis induced by oxidative stress by knocking down CAIII with Dicer-substrate short inhibitory RNAs and treating CAIII-knockdown cells with hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂). This suggests that EVI1-mediated repression of CAIII may expose cells to death due to oxidative damage by reactive oxygen species (ROS). We conclude that EVI1 represses expression of CAIII at transcriptional level and exposes cells to death by oxidative agents. Taken together, this study provides a possible therapeutic approach of using oxidizing drugs to target disease cells such as in AML with increased expression of EVI1.

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INTRODUCTION

Ectopic viral integration site-1 (EVI1) is a proto-oncogene with a size of over 100kb and 12 exons located on chromosome 3q26.2 (Hinai and Valk, 2016). This gene codes for the nuclear protein, EVI1, having 1051 amino acids and an apparent size of 145kDa (Buonamici et al., 2003). EVI1 is able to recognize and bind to DNA using 2 zinc finger domains: an N-terminal/proximal domain of 7 zinc fingers (ZF1) and a C-terminal/distal domain of 3 zinc fingers (ZF2) (de Braekeleer et al., 2015).

Abnormal expression of the EVI1 gene has been observed in 5-10% cases of Acute Myeloid Leukaemia (AML), a disease characterised by clonal proliferation of haemopoietic progenitor cell; and elevated expression of EVI1 gene has been found in glioblastoma associated with poor prognosis (Yokogami et al., 2016). Microarray analysis shows that carbonic anhydrase III (CAIII) production is repressed in EVI1-expressing cells. This repression may be due to several factors and proteins and have nothing to do with EVI1. This may also be due to the EVI1-mediated repression of CAIII for the fact that the repression occurs in EVI1-expressing cells, which provides motivation for one of the aims of this study.

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This would imply that in cases with overexpression of EVI1 gene, such as in AML and glioblastoma, there would be even further decrease in expression of CAIII.

CAIII is a cytosolic protein of about 30kDa (Harju et al., 2013). It is found primarily in skeletal muscles, the liver and adipocytes, with lower concentrations found in smooth muscle, lungs, heart, prostate, brain and red blood cells (Harju et al., 2013). CAIII belongs to the class of zinc metalloproteases that catalyses the hydration of CO₂ to produce bicarbonate and proton used in maintaining a constant pH and forming proton pump for transport of ions across membranes (Dai et al., 2008). It has been suggested that CAIII acts as an antioxidant and is able to protect cells from oxygen radical-induced damage that leads to apoptosis (Räisänen et al., 1998; Zimmerman et al., 2004).

Even though the physiological functions of CAIII from previous studies are not very clear or definite, repression of CAIII may have many effects. This may include impairment of its putative role as an oxidative scavenger (Monti et al., 2017). This study investigated the possible role of EVI1 in reducing the expression of CAIII in Rat1 fibroblast cells, and if this repression is at the level of its promoter; indicating a transcriptional repression. We also investigated the significance of CAIII repression and its role in protecting cells from oxidative stress-induced apoptosis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell Source and Culture

Rat fibroblasts containing an empty vector control (Rat1neo1 cells) and Rat fibroblasts that contain the vector encoding and expressing the EVI1 gene (Rat5.6 cells) were maintained in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM, Lonza, Slough, UK). *Escherichia coli* strain DH5 α competent cells was used for transformation with plasmid DNA (Invitrogen Corporation, Paisley, UK).

Preparation of total cellular RNA, cDNA Synthesis and Real-time Quantitative PCR (qPCR)

RNA was prepared from Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 cells using the NucleoSpin columns according to manufacturer's instructions (Machery-Nagel, Germany). The quantity and quality of RNA samples prepared from Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 cells were determined using the Nanodrop spectrophotometer and RNA samples from Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 diluted were to the same concentration. Structural integrity was assessed by running the RNA samples on agarose gel. We used 5 μ l each of total cellular RNA from Rat1neo1 and Rat5.6 cells, both at concentrations of 80.68ng/ μ l, was used to synthesise cDNA according to manufacturer's instructions (Invitrogen, UK). The cDNA samples were diluted by mixing 2 μ l of cDNA with 8 μ l of nuclease free water. The qPCR reaction was set up using 4.3 μ l of 5 μ M CAIII and GAPDH primers and 6.6 μ l of 1 μ M CAIII and GAPDH probes. Samples were amplified in the thermal cycler using the following parameters: 95 $^{\circ}$ C 15 minutes for 1 cycle, 95 $^{\circ}$ C 15 seconds, 60 $^{\circ}$ C 60 seconds for 40 cycles. The Ct values were used to calculate the $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$. The mean and standard deviations of $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$ values were used to construct a histogram

Western Blot Analysis

Total cellular protein was prepared using NucleoSpin columns according to manufacturer's instructions (Machery-Nagel, Germany). A standard calibration curve was produced using dilution series of bovine serum albumin (BSA) and used to determine the protein concentrations in the 2 rat fibroblast cell lines. Protein gel electrophoresis, protein transfer to polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane and Western blotting were performed using anti-EVI1 antibody, anti-glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) antibody and anti-CAIII antibody at 1/1000 dilution. IRDye800CW-conjugated anti-rabbit (LI-COR GmbH, Germany), IRDye680RD-conjugated anti-mouse (LI-COR GmbH, Germany) and IRDye800CW conjugated anti-mouse (LI-COR GmbH, Germany) were used as secondary antibodies for corresponding primary antibodies at a 1/15000 dilution. The activity of the fluorescent tags conjugated to the secondary antibody was measured using the Li-Cor Odyssey FC image analyser.

Dual Luciferase Reporter Activity

To determine if EVI1-mediated repression of CAIII occurs at the level of its transcription, a luciferase reporter assay was conducted. The Firefly luciferase activity was measured to determine relative CAIII promoter activity in Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 cells. Renilla luciferase activity was used to normalise the data. Sub-cultured Rat1 fibroblast cells (50% confluent) were used for plasmid transfection using Fugene 6

(Promega Corporation, Madison, USA). Cells were transfected with pCAIIIuc recombined with Firefly luciferase gene and pRLCMV recombined with Renilla luciferase gene. pBluescriptkSII was used to maintain constant DNA concentrations, with pEGFPused as a transfection control. The plate with the transfected cells was incubated at 37 $^{\circ}$ C in 5% CO $_2$ incubator for 48 hours. The cells were lysed and the luciferase activity was measured using a Fluostar OPTIMA luminometer (BMG LABTECH, Offenburg, Germany).

Caspase 3 Assay

TriFECTaTM siRNA kit (Integrated DNA technologies, Iowa) was used to knockdown expression of CAIII. Rat1neo1 cells were transfected with siRNAs in a 96-well plate: 2 wells were treated with a control siRNA; 2 wells were treated with CAIII siRNA; 2 wells were left untreated serving as controls. The transfection agent used was siLENTfect[®] (BioRad, Hercules, USA). Cells were treated with Hydrogen peroxide (H $_2$ O $_2$) and Caspase-Glo reagent according to manufacturer's instructions (Promega Corporation, UK). Luminescence was measured using Fluostar OPTIMA luminometer (BMG LABTECH, Offenburg, Germany).

RESULTS

The western blot results carried out to assess protein expression is shown in Fig 1. The band sizes for GAPDH after was approximately 37kDa for both Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 lanes. Both band sizes were of approximate thickness indicating equal loading of protein during electrophoresis. The band sizes for EVI1 protein were at about 145kDa for both the Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 cells. However, a thicker band was apparent in the Rat15.61 lane when compared to that in the Rat1neo1 lane (Fig 1). The band sizes for CAIII protein were about 28kDa in both the Rat1neo1 and Rat15.61 lanes as expected. The band size in the Rat15.61 lane was lighter than that in the Rat1neo1 lane (Fig 1).

cDNA generated from the purified RNA samples was used for the qPCR assay as described in Materials and Methods. Fig 2 shows the fold difference in expression of CAIII gene in Rat1neo1 cells and Rat15.61 cells. After normalization, the mean $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$ in Rat1neo1 cells (lane 1) was 1 (s.d. = 0) and that for Rat15.61 cell (lane 2) was 0.246 (s.d. = 0.036). This indicates that CAIII is expressed approximately 4 times more in Rat1neo1 cells than in Rat15.61 cells.

Fig 3 shows the results of the dual luciferase assay carried out to ascertain if EVI1 represses CAIII at the level of transcription. Luminescence, indicating the expression of Firefly luciferase, was approximately 7 times more in Rat1neo1 cells (lane 1) than in Rat15.61 cells (lane 2). Caspase-Glo 3 assay was carried out to determine the significance of transcriptional repression of CAIII by EVI1. The results are presented in Fig 4. In the cells transfected with control siRNA, siRNA CAIII, and cells left untransfected, there was higher caspase 3 activity when they were treated with H $_2$ O $_2$ (lanes 2, 4 and 6) than when left untreated (lanes 1, 3 and 5). The results showed a higher caspase 3 activity in CAIII-knockdown cells treated with H $_2$ O $_2$ (lane 6) than the other lanes, indicating a greater rate of cell death when compared with control cells expressing CAIII normally as shown in Fig. 4.

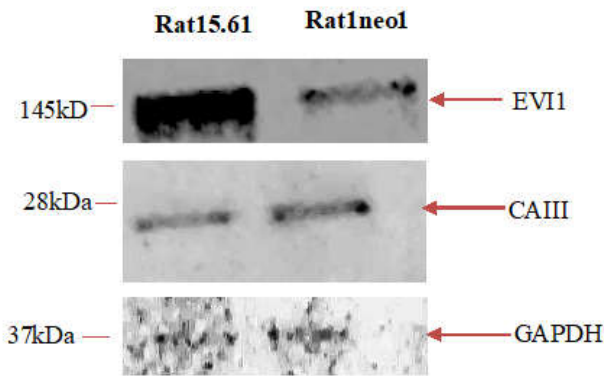


Fig 1 Western blot analysis of protein extracts from Rat15.61 and Rat1neo1 cells using EVI1, CAIII and GAPDH antibodies

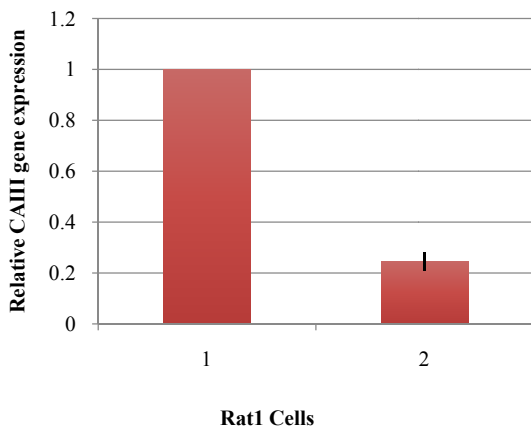


Fig 2 A bar graph showing the mean $2^{-\Delta C_t}$ values of CAIII in Rat1neo1 cells and Rat15.61 cells after qPCR. Bar 1 represents that for Rat1neo1 cells and Bar 2 represents that for Rat15.61 cells. CAIII expression in Rat1neo1 cells were used to normalise the data.

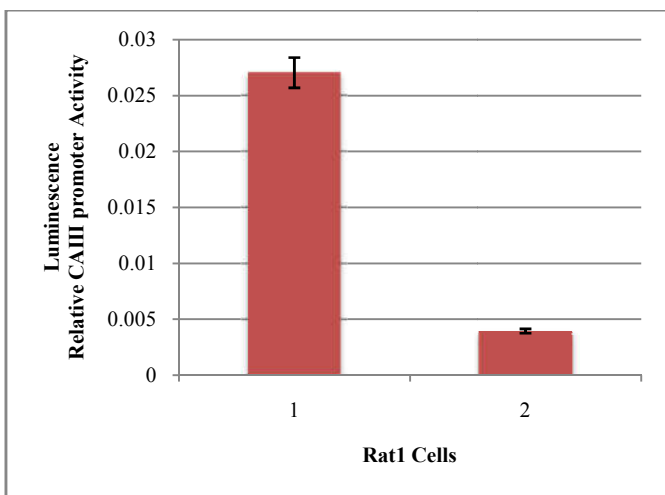


Fig 3 A bar graph showing the luminescence activity of firefly luciferase whose expression is driven by CAIII promoter in Rat1 cells. Each column shows the mean of the experiment done in duplicate, and the error bars represent the standard deviation. Bar 1 represents that for Rat1neo1 cells and Bar 2 for Rat15.61 cells.

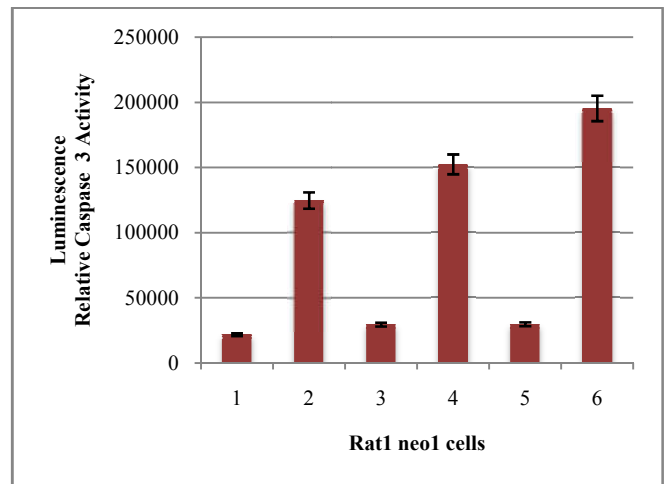


Fig 4 A bar graph showing relative Caspase 3 activity in Rat1neo1 cells. (1) Untransfected cells without treatment of H_2O_2 (2) Untransfected cells with treatment of H_2O_2 (3) Transfected control siRNA cells without treatment of H_2O_2 (4) Transfected control siRNA cells with treatment of H_2O_2 (5) Transfected siRNACAIII cells without treatment of H_2O_2 (6) Transfected siRNACAIII cells with treatment of H_2O_2 .

DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to determine if EVI1 represses CAIII and to understand the nature of its repression if so. We also sought to understand the implication of an EVI1-mediated CAIII repression, particularly in acute myeloid leukaemia. The Western blot analysis showed that the quantity of CAIII is reduced in EVI1-expressing Rat15.61 cells when compared to CAIII in Rat1neo1 cells (Fig 1). qPCR also showed that CAIII mRNA transcripts were more expressed in Rat1neo1 cells than in Rat15.61 cells expressing EVI1 (Fig 2). These results taken together indicate that EVI1 suppresses expression of CAIII. Similar results have been described stating that CAIII expression was repressed up to 97% in cells overexpressing EVI1 (Roy et al., 2010). The inference from this study affirms that overexpression of EVI1 is possibly responsible for suppressing the expression of CAIII. However, it may be possible that some isoforms of EVI1 are involved in repressing expression of CAIII while others either have no effect or possibly opposing roles.

The dual luciferase assay showed that the CAIII promoter activity is almost 7 times stronger in Rat1neo1 cells than in Rat15.61 cells, characterised by increased expression of firefly luciferase gene in Rat1neo1 cells, as shown in Fig 3. Not only does this confirm that EVI1 represses expression of CAIII, it also shows that this repression occurs at the level of transcription involving the CAIII promoter, confirming similar reports (Roy et al., 2010). However, this does not exclude the chance of translational repression, such as mRNA repression, as some genes are known to be both transcriptionally and translationally repressed such as p53 (Fernando et al., 2013). Therefore, further investigations are required to determine if EVI1-mediated repression of CAIII is strictly transcriptional or both transcriptional and translational.

MATINSPECTOR analysis of the CAIII murine promoter sequence revealed multiple potential binding sites for EVI1 suggesting that EVI1 directly binds to CAIII to repress its transcription (Roy et al., 2010). Repression of CAIII expression could also be indirect as EVI1 has been shown to be involved in either repressing or activating signalling pathways such as Transforming growth factor- β (TGF β) and Jak-Stat signalling

pathways (Liu *et al.*, 2006; Glass *et al.*, 2013). EVI1 is also thought to be able to alter gene expression by recruiting and binding to transcriptional/epigenetic regulators such as CBP, HDAC, HMT, and GATA1/2; and also influences transcriptional repression by recruiting CTBP1/2, indicating that this may be an underlying mechanism in its role in inducing TGF β signalling-pathway suppression (de Braekeleer *et al.*, 2015). It is therefore possible that EVI1 represses expression of *CAIII* by its involvement in these signalling pathways or by binding to a transcription factor that is important for the expression of *CAIII*.

Knowledge of this EVI1-mediated repression of *CAIII* can be considered in designing future experiments exploiting some of the functions of *CAIII*, though putative, to advance medical innovations. It has been demonstrated that leptin is able to decrease expression of *CAIII*, and that the decreased expression of *CAIII* in obesity may be due to hyperleptinaemia (Alver *et al.*, 2004). Though this possibility may be correct, it should also be taken into consideration that, by increasing the levels of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor γ 2 (PPAR γ 2), EVI1 is able to convert nonadipogenic cells to adipocytes (Ishibashi *et al.*, 2012). As evidenced in our study, the decreased expression of *CAIII* seen in obesity may therefore also be as a result of elevated expression of EVI1, whose gene product represses expression of *CAIII* as opposed to hyperleptinaemia.

In a remarkable discovery at a time when detection of myoepithelial cells by light microscopy was difficult, it was demonstrated that *CAIII* present in myoepithelial cells could be used as a diagnostic marker for some rare forms of myoepithelial breast cancer (Vaananen and Autio-harminen, 1987). In light of results from our study, it can be seen that in conditions leading to increased amounts of EVI1, diagnosis of myoepithelial breast cancer using *CAIII* as a diagnostic marker could lead to false negative results. Also, it was demonstrated that *CAIII* increases the invasiveness of hepatocellular carcinoma by elevating focal adhesion kinase activity (Dai *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, research focussed on gene therapeutic approach using EVI1 in a viral or non-viral vector should, in theory, lead to repression of *CAIII* and most likely reduce the invasiveness of hepatocellular carcinoma cells, bearing in mind however that EVI1 is an oncogene.

CAIII is involved in maintaining a constant pH (Dai *et al.*, 2008). This role of *CAIII* was further demonstrated in another study showing that *CAIII* levels are markedly increased after episodes of GORD (Min *et al.*, 2016). This correlates with a study in which microarray analysis indicated higher levels of expression of EVI1 in other forms of high grade dysplasia when compared to Barrett's oesophagus (Quante *et al.*, 2012). Barrett's oesophagus is a complication of GORD (Liu *et al.*, 2013) and the increased levels of *CAIII* in GORD may be due to decreased expression of EVI1 leading to a decreased-repression of *CAIII*.

In this study, we chose to assess the significance of EVI1-mediated repression of *CAIII* in its role acting as an antioxidant, protecting cells from H₂O₂-induced apoptosis as suggested by Räsänen *et al.*, (1998). Fig. 4 shows higher caspase 3 activity in *CAIII* knock-down cells treated with H₂O₂ when compared to control cells. This confirms the role of *CAIII* in protecting cells from oxygen-induced cell death.

Knowledge of this EVI1-mediated repression of *CAIII* and its role in H₂O₂-induced apoptosis may have a very useful application in treatment of AML. Perhaps in almost all types of cancer, the ability of cancerous cells to expand lies not only in their acquired proliferative abilities but also in their ability to avoid the normal cell death program, apoptosis, making 'evasion of apoptosis' one of the hallmarks of cancer (Hanahan and Weinberg, 2011). EVI1 has been shown to be markedly elevated in AML and is used as a prognostic marker for the disease (Hinai and Valk, 2016). Several studies have shown that EVI1 protects cells from apoptosis. EVI1 inhibits the gene coding for the anti-apoptotic protein, B-cell lymphoma-extra large (Bcl-xL), thereby preventing release of cytochrome c that activates caspase 3 (Pradhan *et al.*, 2011). EVI1 has been shown to repress the pro-apoptotic effects of interferon- α (INF α) and TGF β signalling pathway (Buonamici *et al.*, 2005; Elliott and Blobe, 2005). These previous studies demonstrate ways in which EVI1 helps cancerous cells evade apoptosis. However, this present study illustrates EVI1-mediated repression of *CAIII* and its significance in H₂O₂ apoptosis, suggesting that oxidising agents may be attractive chemotherapeutic agents in cancers mediated by EVI1, taking advantage of the repression of *CAIII*, whose gene-product protects cells from oxidative stress and ultimately cell death.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that EVI1 represses *CAIII* at the level of its promoter and that this repression exposes acute myeloid leukaemic cells to death by oxygen-induced stress, providing a novel means for AML therapy.

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