KRAS/BRAF mutation status and ERK1/2 activation as biomarkers for MEK1/2 inhibitor therapy in colorectal cancer

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Abstract
Phase II clinical trials of mitogen-activated protein/extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) kinase (MEK) inhibitors are ongoing and ERK1/2 activation is frequently used as a biomarker. In light of the mutational activation of BRAF and KRAS in colorectal cancer, inhibitors of the Raf-MEK-ERK mitogen-activated protein kinase cascade are anticipated to be promising. Previous studies in pancreatic cancer have found little correlation between BRAF/KRAS mutation status and ERK1/2 activation, suggesting that identifying biomarkers of MEK inhibitor response may be more challenging than previously thought. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of MEK inhibitor therapy for colorectal cancer and BRAF/KRAS mutation status and ERK1/2 activation as biomarkers for MEK inhibitor therapy. First, we found that MEK inhibitor treatment impaired the anchorage-independent growth of nearly all KRAS/BRAF mutant, but not wild-type, colorectal cancer cells. There was a correlation between BRAF, but not KRAS, mutation status and ERK1/2 activation. Second, neither elevated ERK1/2 activation nor reduction of ERK1/2 activity correlated with MEK inhibition of anchorage-independent growth. Finally, we validated our cell line observations and found that ERK1/2 activation correlated with BRAF, but not KRAS, mutation status in 190 patient colorectal cancer tissues. Surprisingly, we also found that ERK activation was elevated in normal colonic epithelium, suggesting that normal cell toxicity may be a complication for colorectal cancer treatment. Our results suggest that although MEK inhibitors show promise in colorectal cancer, KRAS/BRAF mutation status, but not ERK activation as previously thought, may be useful biomarkers for MEK inhibitor sensitivity. [Mol Cancer Ther 2009;8(4):834–43]

Introduction
The genetic events that occur in the stepwise progression from benign epithelium to colorectal cancer are well established with mutational inactivation of the APC, TP53, and SMAD4/PDCA tumor suppressor genes and mutational activation of the KRAS, PIK3CA, and BRAF oncogenes (1–3). KRAS mutations occur early and are detected in up to 50% of colorectal cancers (3, 4). Functional studies in cell culture (5) and mouse models (6) support a critical role for KRAS mutation in colorectal cancer progression and maintenance. Therefore, it is widely believed that therapeutic approaches to block Ras will be effective for colorectal cancer treatment. However, to date, efforts to develop effective anti-Ras therapies continue to be elusive.

Recent efforts to develop anti-Ras therapies have focused on Ras downstream effector pathways. The frequent mutational activation of two key effectors with validated roles in Ras-mediated oncogenesis, encoded by BRAF and PIK3CA, support the importance of aberrant effector signaling in mutant K-Ras function in colorectal cancer (7, 8). In particular, the nonoverlapping occurrence of BRAF and KRAS mutations suggested that aberrant B-Raf signaling is the critical mechanism for K-Ras-mediated oncogenesis in colorectal cancer. B-Raf phosphorylates and activates the mitogen-activated protein (MAP)/extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) kinase 1 (MEK1) and MEK2 protein kinases, and activated MEK1/2 phosphorylate and activate the ERK1 and ERK2 MAP kinases (MAPK). Therefore, much emphasis has been placed on treatment strategies that target this protein kinase cascade (9–11). In particular, potent and selective inhibitors of MEK1 and MEK2 have been developed.

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Studies in experimental cell culture models showed that ectopic expression of activated Ras causes ERK activation and ERK-dependent growth transformation (12). Because the only known substrates of Raf are MEK1 and MEK2, and the only known MEK1/2 substrates are ERK1 and ERK2, a logical hypothesis is that MEK1/2 (MEK) inhibitors will be potent inhibitors of Ras- and Raf-mediated activation of ERK. These observations prompt several working hypotheses for the application and effectiveness of MEK inhibitors in colorectal cancer. First, KRAS and BRAF mutation–positive colorectal cancer tumor cells are expected to exhibit elevated ERK activation. Second, colorectal cancer cells with elevated ERK activation should possess ERK-dependent growth transformation; hence, elevated ERK activity should correlate with sensitivity to growth inhibition by MEK inhibitor treatment. Consequently, previous phase I/II trials of the MEK1/2 inhibitor CI-1040 have used ERK1/2 (ERK) inhibition as a biomarker of response to MEK inhibitor treatment (13, 14).

Whether KRAS mutation status and ERK activity are accurate biomarkers for MEK inhibitor treatment of colorectal cancer has not been rigorously evaluated and validated. Recent observations in other cancer types suggest that the application of MEK inhibitors for colorectal cancer treatment may not be so straightforward. First, in addition to Raf, Ras interacts with multiple downstream effectors with demonstrated roles in Ras-mediated oncogenesis (15). Second, studies in pancreatic cancer cell lines have shown that there is no correlation between KRAS mutational status and ERK activation in some tumors, suggesting that a Raf-independent function of Ras is important or that ERK activation occurs through a Ras-independent mechanism (16, 17). Several recent studies have addressed RAS mutation status and MEK inhibitor sensitivity. One study evaluated primary and established human ovarian tumor cell lines and found that both KRAS and BRAF mutant cells showed preferential sensitivity to CI-1040 inhibition of anchorage-dependent growth (18). In a second study focused on melanoma cell lines, BRAF but not NRAS mutation status correlated with sensitivity to CI-1040 growth inhibition of anchorage-dependent growth (19). In contrast, another study of a panel of human tumor cell lines, including seven colorectal cancer cell lines, found that AZD6244 inhibition of anchorage-dependent proliferation showed a strong but incomplete correlation with BRAF or KRAS mutation status (20). However, ERK activation and inhibition were not evaluated in this study. Finally, a study using CI-1040 suggested that KRAS activation may be a mechanism of resistance to MEK inhibitor therapy in murine colorectal cancer (21). Thus, it remains unclear whether KRAS or BRAF mutation status or ERK activation will correlate with MEK inhibitor activity for colorectal cancer treatment. Determining the appropriate biomarkers for MEK inhibitor activity will be critical for the evaluation of MEK inhibitors in clinical trials.

Because MEK inhibitors remain a potentially effective therapeutic approach for colorectal cancer treatment, with three inhibitors in clinical trials and more in the pipeline, we evaluated colorectal cancer cell lines for sensitivity to two MEK inhibitors, U0126 and CI-1040. U0126 is a highly specific non–ATP-competitive inhibitor of MEK1 and MEK2 and has been widely used in cell culture studies, but its pharmacologic limitations have restricted its use to in vitro analyses. The structurally distinct CI-1040 (PD184352) is also a highly specific noncompetitive MEK1 and MEK2 inhibitor that showed antitumor activity against HT-29 colorectal cancer cell line–induced tumor xenografts (22). CI-1040 evaluation in phase I trials suggested that inhibition of ERK in tumor tissue correlated with antitumor activity (14), leading to its evaluation in phase II trials in patients with colon and other solid tumors (13). However, the limited potency and lack of antitumor activity seen with CI-1040 prompted the generation of a second analogue of CI-1040 (PD0325901), which showed some antitumor efficacy but was terminated due to toxicity (10). Currently, alternate MEK inhibitors, such as AZD6244 (23), an alternate and highly specific MEK1 and MEK2 inhibitor, similar to CI-1040 in structure and function, show promise and are currently in phase I/II clinical trials.6

Because anchorage-independent growth potential may correlate better with tumorigenic growth in vivo, we determined if ERK inhibition correlated with inhibition of tumor cell growth in soft agar rather than on plastic. First, we found that MEK inhibitor treatment impaired soft agar colony formation for a majority of colorectal cancer cell lines. Second, we found that ERK activation correlated with BRAF, but not KRAS, mutation status. However, we found that elevated ERK activity and inhibition of ERK did not reliably predict sensitivity to MEK inhibitor. Finally, unexpectedly, we found that ERK activation was highest in normal and not neoplastic colonic epithelium, suggesting possible concerns with normal cell toxicity for MEK inhibitor therapy.

Materials and Methods

Cell Lines and Culture

All cell lines were obtained from American Type Culture Collection and maintained in either RPMI 1640 or DMEM supplemented with 10% FCS. Cell lines were treated with either U0126 (Promega) or CI-1040 (Pfizer) for 24 h and harvested.

Western Blot Analyses

Exponentially growing cultures of cells were harvested in a buffer containing a phosphatase (Sigma-Aldrich) and protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) and were resolved by SDS-10% PAGE and transferred to Immobilon-P (Millipore) membranes. Immunoblots were then incubated with antibodies to activated phosphorylated ERK1 and ERK2 (pERK; Cell Signaling) and total ERK1 and ERK2 (total ERK; Santa Cruz Biotechnology). Vinculin (Sigma-Aldrich) or GAPDH (Abcam, Inc.) was used as a control for equivalent loading.
of total protein. Antibodies were detected with the appropriate anti-mouse or anti-rabbit horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibody (Pierce) by enhanced chemiluminescence (Pierce). Densitometry was done using ImageJ.7 The relative intensity of pERK was normalized using total ERK1/2 as the standard. The fold change was then calculated between either MEK inhibitor or vehicle-treated cell sorts and normal tissues.

**MEK Inhibitor Transformation Analyses**

Soft agar colony formation assays were used to evaluate the ability of MEK inhibition to impair the transformed growth properties of colorectal cancer cells. Briefly, 5 × 10^3 cells per well in six-well plates were suspended in soft agar (24). The appearance of colonies >30 cells were scored after 4 wk. Assays were done independently at least two times in triplicate.

Tissue Microarrays

Tissue microarrays (TMA) were prepared from formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded colorectal tissue sections using a 0.6-mm punch as described (25). The arrays contained triplicate cores of normal and tumor tissue from each patient. We prepared 5-μm sections from each TMA block. H&E-stained slides from each TMA block were reviewed by a pathologist (T.R.) to ensure that normal and tumor tissues were cored accurately.

**Mutational Analyses**

We evaluated tissue cores for mutations in KRAS (n = 126) and BRAF (n = 104). DNA was extracted from tumor cores. The regions of interest for each gene were amplified by PCR with specific primers and sequenced (MWG-Biotech). For KRAS, we evaluated DNA from tumor cores for mutations in codons 12 and 13. For BRAF, we evaluated DNA from tumor cores for mutations in exon 15. Samples were scored for the presence or absence of mutation.

### Table 1. Gene mutation and MEK inhibitor profile of human colorectal carcinoma cell lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cell line</th>
<th>MSI*</th>
<th>KRAS</th>
<th>BRAF</th>
<th>TP53</th>
<th>APC</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>MEK inhibitor†</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COLO-320-HSR</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>R248W¹</td>
<td>S811²,³</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNU-C1</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>S166¹,⁵</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>EGFR G2158A²</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW48</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>CTNNB1 S33Y³</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T84</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>G13D⁶</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>PIK3CA E542K³</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HCT-116</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>G13D⁶</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>L1488Fś¹9⁻¹⁴,⁵</td>
<td>Insensitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LoVo</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>G13D⁶</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>R1114⁻¹,⁴ M1431Hś⁴²⁻¹⁴</td>
<td>None**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LS-174T</td>
<td>Unstable</td>
<td>G12D⁶</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>PIK3CA-G1047R³</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW480¹³</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>G12V</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>R273H and P309S¹</td>
<td>Q1338⁻¹,⁵</td>
<td>CTNNB1, EGER WT for CDKN2A, CTNNB1, EGER</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW620</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>G12V¹³</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>P309S¹</td>
<td>R273H¹</td>
<td>Q1338⁻¹,⁵</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaCo-2²²</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>V600E</td>
<td>Q1367⁻¹,⁵</td>
<td>MADOH-D351H³ CTNNB1-G245A/WT</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLO-205</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>V600E⁶</td>
<td>Y103_L111&gt;l I6⁻¹,⁴</td>
<td>T15565ś³⁻¹,³</td>
<td>WT for EGFR</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCI-H508</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>G596R³</td>
<td>R273H¹</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>PIK3CA-E545K³</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HT-29</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>V600E⁵</td>
<td>R273H¹</td>
<td>T15565ś³⁻¹,³</td>
<td>PIK3CA-P449T³</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW1417</td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>V600E⁵</td>
<td>WT</td>
<td>RH50⁶</td>
<td>MADH4-Q351I¹</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Mutation data were compiled from the Cancer Genome Project database (http://www.sanger.ac.uk/genetics/CGP/CellLines/).

Abbreviations: CTNNB1, β-catenin; PIK3CA, p110α; CDKN2A, cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 2A, isoform 4 (p14ARF) (p19ARF); MADH4, SMAD4;
insertion: fs, frameshift; if, inframe.

*Microsatellite instability.
†Compiled from data presented in the current study where the same sensitivity was seen with either U0126 or CI-1040 treatment except for COLO-320-HSR where data for CI-1040 are summarized.
‡Homozygous.
§Nonsense mutation.
∥Heterozygous.
¶Deletion.
**Reported for known cancer genes.
††Mutation data were compiled from different studies cited in Cancer Genome Project database.
We examined protein expression of pERK from four patients with whole sections and tissue cores from 190 patients in triplicate. First, slides were scored by a technician (J.P. or D.W.) and verified by an investigator (T.O.K.). Second, the slides were scored independently by a blinded pathologist (T.R.). The results of each protein marker were expressed as intensity and proportion of positive epithelial cells and the product of intensity and proportion (26). Each triplicate TMA core was counted separately.

**Statistical Analysis**

The Fisher’s exact test was used to analyze associations between two variables and the Pearson’s $\chi^2$ test was used to analyze association between more than two variables. The independent samples $t$ test was used to analyze associations of ordinal (immunohistochemistry scores) and continuous (soft agar colony formation scores) variables.

### Results

The success of signal transduction target-based anticancer treatment is dependent on the establishment of molecular markers to identify the patient population that will respond to treatment. Thus, we set out to test four hypotheses. First, what colorectal cancer cell lines are sensitive to MEK inhibitor treatment? Second, do colorectal cancer cell lines with KRAS and BRAF mutation or elevated ERK activity show the greatest sensitivity to MEK inhibitor treatment? Third, does the ability of MEK inhibitor treatment to block ERK activity correlate with the ability to block colorectal cancer cell growth? Finally, is ERK activity differentially elevated in human colorectal cancer tumors?

**MEK Inhibitors Impair Anchorage-Independent Growth of the Majority of BRAF/KRAS Mutant Colorectal Cancer Cell Lines**

For our analyses, we obtained a panel of colorectal cancer cell lines from the American Type Culture Collection. Previous studies assessing MEK inhibitor activity monitored antitumor activity by evaluating loss of cell viability when tumor cells were treated on plastic (18–20). Because anchorage-independent growth in vitro remains the best in vitro parameter to predict tumorigenic growth in vivo, for our studies, we used soft agar colony formation assays to monitor the antitumor activity of MEK inhibitors. To determine whether the anchorage-independent growth of colorectal cancer cell lines was also dependent on activation of the
ERK MAPK pathway, we treated colorectal cancer cell lines, when suspended in soft agar, with either U0126 or CI-1040.

To determine if sensitivity to MEK inhibitor treatment correlates with specific molecular alterations, we compiled the KRAS and BRAF mutation status, Western blot analyses with phosphospecific anti-ERK1 and ERK2 antibody were done to evaluate ERK1/2 phosphorylation and activation. Parallel blotting analyses with total anti-vinculin were done to verify equivalent loading of cellular protein. Data shown are representative of at least three independent experiments. WT, KRAS/BRAF wild-type; KRAS, KRAS mutation positive, BRAF, BRAF mutation positive.

**Figure 2.** ERK activity does not seem to be associated with KRAS and BRAF mutation status. Western blot analyses with phosphospecific anti-ERK1 and ERK2 antibody were done to evaluate ERK1/2 phosphorylation and activation. Parallel blotting analyses with total anti-vinculin were done to verify equivalent loading of cellular protein. Data shown are representative of at least three independent experiments. WT, KRAS/BRAF wild-type; KRAS, KRAS mutation positive, BRAF, BRAF mutation positive.

ERK MAPK pathway activity does not seem to be associated with KRAS and BRAF mutation status. Western blot analyses with phosphospecific anti-ERK1 and ERK2 antibody were done to evaluate ERK1/2 phosphorylation and activation. Parallel blotting analyses with total anti-vinculin were done to verify equivalent loading of cellular protein. Data shown are representative of at least three independent experiments. WT, KRAS/BRAF wild-type; KRAS, KRAS mutation positive, BRAF, BRAF mutation positive.

**Elevated ERK Activity and Inhibition of ERK Does Not Predict Sensitivity to MEK Inhibitor Growth Inhibition**

One logical hypothesis is that colorectal cancer cell lines with elevated ERK activation are more dependent on the activity of this pathway for growth, and hence, more sensitive to growth inhibition by MEK inhibitors. We therefore determined whether elevated ERK activation (pERK) and sensitivity to ERK inhibition would be reliable molecular determinants to predict a growth-inhibitory response to MEK inhibitor treatment in our panel of colorectal cancer cell lines.

First, we treated colorectal cancer cell lines with either the U0126 or CI-1040 MEK1- and MEK2-specific inhibitors (Fig. 1B and D). We found that both MEK inhibitors showed similar effects, with essentially complete pERK inhibition seen in the majority of lines that expressed activated ERK. Although both inhibitors are highly specific for MEK1 and MEK2, at higher concentrations both may have off-target activities, for example, inhibition of MEK5 (27). However, because the goal of our studies was to evaluate pERK as a biomarker for MEK1 and MEK2 inhibition, we did not evaluate MEK inhibitor reduction of MEK5 activity in our analyses. Our observations are similar to those made recently with CI-1040, where all melanoma and other tumor cell lines, independent of their RAS/BRAF genetic profile, were responsive to MEK inhibition as measured by pERK inhibition (19).

Next, we determined if elevated pERK levels correlated with sensitivity to growth inhibition by MEK inhibitor treatment. Surprisingly, we found inhibition of soft agar colony formation regardless of the level of pERK activity ($P = 0.170$; Fig. 1). In cell lines with little to no detectable levels of pERK (T84 and LS-174T), there was significant growth inhibition when treated with U0126 or CI-1040 (Fig. 1). Yet in cell lines with clear pERK inhibition (SW48, SNU-C1, and HCT-116), there was no inhibition of growth in soft agar (Fig. 1). NCI-H508 showed pERK inhibition with treatment of CI-1040 and to a lesser degree U0126, yet showed no growth inhibition in soft agar (Fig. 1C and data not shown). COLO-320-HSR was growth inhibited by U0126 but not CI-1040 (Fig. 1A and C), suggesting that minor differences exist between the two inhibitors. Thus, neither the level of elevated steady-state pERK nor the sensitivity to pERK inhibition correlated with growth inhibition sensitivity in response to MEK inhibitor treatment.

**Elevated ERK Activation Correlates with BRAF, but not KRAS, Mutation Status of Colorectal Cancer Cell Lines**

Because studies with ectopic stable expression of activated K-Ras and B-Raf causes sustained elevated activation of the ERK MAPK cascade (12), we evaluated the panel of colorectal cancer cell lines for steady-state levels of activated pERK (Fig. 2). Whereas activated ERK was not detected in one colorectal cancer cell line with WT KRAS and BRAF (COLO-320-HSR), the remaining two colorectal cancer lines with WT sequences showed elevated ERK activation (SNU-C1 and SW48). SW48 cells possess a mutant allele of the EGFR (Table 1) that may contribute to ERK activation, but no mutant genes that are known to promote ERK activation have been described for SNU-C1. Surprisingly, only three (HCT-116, SW480, and LoVo) of six KRAS mutant colorectal cancer lines showed greatly elevated levels of activated ERK, compared with BRAF mutant and BRAF/KRAS WT colorectal cancer lines. This result is similar with that seen in KRAS mutation–positive pancreatic carcinoma cell lines and patient tumors, where elevated ERK activity was not...
associated with a majority of KRAS mutant cells (16, 17). In contrast, elevated levels of activated ERK were seen in all five BRAF mutant cell lines. Thus, BRAF but not KRAS mutation status may provide a better genetic marker for elevated activation of the ERK MAPK cascade. Nevertheless, because some colorectal cancer cell lines with WT BRAF possess elevated ERK activation, and overall there was no correlation between ERK activation and BRAF or KRAS mutation status \((P = 0.117)\), we conclude that ERK activation alone may not be a reliable surrogate marker for mutant BRAF or KRAS mutation–positive colorectal cancer tumor cells.

**Elevated ERK Activation in 190 Colorectal Cancer Matched Normal and Tumor Tissues Does Not Correlate with KRAS Mutation Status**

To date, analyses of ERK activation have been done with patient tumors but with mixed conclusions. In a previous clinical trial with CI-1040, patient archival pathology samples were evaluated for pERK expression and a general trend of elevated activity was seen in colon, pancreas, and
other tumor tissues, although a broad range of activities was seen (13). However, no comparison of pERK activity in nontumor tissue was done nor was pERK activity correlated with KRAS or BRAF mutation status. More recently, Haigis et al. (6) found that no pERK was detected in 18 of 18 primary human colorectal cancers, although KRAS and BRAF mutation status was not determined. Another study evaluated pERK activity and KRAS, but not BRAF mutation, in 135 colorectal cancer tumors, but no comparison with nontumor tissue was done (28). As these were limited to archival specimens, the degree of pERK activity may have been underestimated. Therefore, we first used Western blot analyses and examined a panel of eight frozen colorectal cancer tumors with matched normal tissues across different American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) stages (Fig. 3A). Although levels of pERK activation varied and our sample size was limited, there seemed to be a trend toward decreased ERK activation with advanced stage. Most surprisingly, the matched normal mucosa also exhibited high levels of pERK that in some cases were much higher than that seen in tumor tissue. We also found high pERK expression in the normal colon mucosa of a patient without colorectal cancer (data not shown).

Because macrodissected frozen tumors may not be reflective of a pure population of colonic epithelial cells, and our findings of pERK activation may be in stroma, we examined these matched samples for pERK using immunohistochemistry. We found that for the most part, the pERK staining in these matched samples (Fig. 3B) correlated with pERK protein expression in snap-frozen tumors determined by blot analyses (Fig. 3A). In normal colonic tissue, strong pERK immunostaining was noted in the terminally differentiated cells in the superficial epithelial layer, similar to a recent report by Haigis et al. (6). In the majority of tumors, pERK immunoreactivity was less intense and more variably distributed throughout the tissue compared with the normal colonic epithelium. Thus, we found high pERK expression in both normal and tumor colonic tissue but the intensity and distribution of immunoreactivity was variable.

Because detection of pERK activity in normal tissue to this degree was not expected, to further quantify and determine whether pERK activity was indeed elevated in normal colonic epithelium, we examined pERK activity in a larger sample set of 190 patients using colorectal cancer TMA (Fig. 4A). Complete AJCC staging was not available for the colorectal cancer TMA. pERK staining and intensity was evaluated and scored by a blinded colorectal pathologist (T.R.). We found that both nuclear and cytoplasmic pERK activity was significantly elevated in normal colonic epithelium in patients with colorectal cancer compared with the patient tumors \( P < 0.001 \).

Finally, we determined whether mutations in BRAF or KRAS were associated with ERK MAPK pathway activation in patient-derived tissues. We evaluated 126 patient tumors for KRAS mutations and 104 tumors for BRAF mutations and pERK activation using colorectal cancer TMA. We found that 21% (26 of 126) of colorectal cancers had KRAS and 4% (4 of 104) of colorectal cancers had BRAF mutations. We found that pERK was significantly elevated in tumors with BRAF and not KRAS mutations (Fig. 4B; \( P = 0.014 \)). Tumors without BRAF mutations had a mean cytoplasmic and nuclear score of 1.9 compared with a mean cytoplasmic score of 2.7 and nuclear score of 0.2 in tumors with BRAF mutations.

Discussion

Despite intensive effort, to date no anti-Ras therapy has shown clinical efficacy. Currently, one promising approach involves small-molecule kinase inhibitors of MEK and the Ras-Raf-MEK-ERK effector pathway (9, 11). A key requirement for successful development of MEK inhibitors
will be the identification of molecular determinants that identify patient tumors that will be responsive to MEK inhibition and to establish reliable biomarkers to monitor drug efficacy. Therefore, we evaluated a panel of colorectal cancer cell lines for their response to MEK inhibitor treatment and whether ERK activation and sensitivity to ERK inhibition or KRAS or BRAF mutation status are accurate biomarkers for MEK inhibitor treatment and response. We determined that the majority of colorectal cancer cell lines show growth inhibition using MEK inhibitors, specifically those that are BRAF or KRAS mutation positive. However, ERK activation did not correlate reliably with BRAF and KRAS mutation status. In addition, MEK inhibitor suppression of ERK activity did not correlate with suppression of anchorage-independent growth. Finally, we found that ERK is not differentially activated in tumor tissue. Our results reveal complexities that will need to be considered and overcome for successful development of MEK inhibitors as anti-Ras therapy.

Similar to our observations with pancreatic cancer cell lines and tumors (16), we found that ERK activation did not correlate strongly with the presence of a KRAS mutation in colorectal cancer cell lines or tumors. Our conclusion may seem to contrast that of Schmitz et al. (28), who concluded that ERK activation was associated with KRAS mutation. However, they found that 10 of 20 (50%) high pERK expression tumors lacked KRAS mutations, and 26 of 114 (23%) KRAS mutation–positive tumors had low pERK activity. The authors also found that there was a significant correlation with high pERK expression and poor survival; however, this association was not seen with KRAS mutation status, suggesting that KRAS-independent activation of the Raf-MEK-ERK pathway may occur. In a second study, Sakakura et al. (29) found that ERK activation was found in only 4 of 21 advanced colorectal cancers, with no correlation with KRAS mutation status. Consequently, these observations are consistent with our conclusion that ERK activation is not a reliable biomarker for KRAS mutational activation. We evaluated codon 12 and 13 mutations in KRAS and therefore may be underestimating the frequency of KRAS mutations in our study. However, genome-wide studies in colorectal cancer have found that less than 3% of KRAS mutations are outside of codons 12 and 13 (4). Therefore, the frequency of non–codon 12 and 13 mutations would not affect our findings.

The biochemical basis for our findings that ERK activation does not correlate with KRAS mutational activation is not clear and may reflect the fact that the Ras-Raf-MEK-ERK cascade is not a simple linear pathway, with a multitude of positive and negative regulatory components operating at all levels of this protein kinase cascade (30). For example, up-regulated ERK phosphatase activity was determined to account, in part, for the lack of a direct relationship between KRAS mutation and ERK activation in pancreatic and murine colonic tumor cells (6, 31). Alternatively, it may be possible that activated K-Ras does not engage this effector pathway in some colorectal cancer tumor cells, and instead, preferentially activates other effector pathways to promote oncogenesis.

We did find that BRAF mutation correlated strongly with ERK activation in colorectal cancer cell lines and patient tumors. The significance of the change in pERK localization from the nucleus to cytoplasm in BRAF mutation–positive tumors is interesting and will require further investigation. We have previously shown that in the BRAF mutant CaCo-2 line, ERK activation is BRAF independent (32). Furthermore, ERK activation was also associated with WT KRAS/BRAF colorectal cancer cell lines. Thus, although ERK activation is associated with the presence of BRAF mutation in colorectal cancer, both BRAF- and KRAS-independent mechanisms of ERK activation exist. Therefore, it remains to be determined whether ERK activation will be a reliable biomarker for mutant B-Raf function in colorectal cancer.

Similar to the findings of Rosen and colleagues (19) where BRAF mutant melanoma cell lines exhibited exquisite sensitivity to CI-1040 when compared with some NRAS mutant and all WT lines, we also found that four of five BRAF mutant colorectal cancer cell lines were sensitive to MEK inhibitor suppression of anchorage-independent growth. Similarly, all except one KRAS mutant colorectal cancer cell lines showed sensitivity to MEK inhibitor treatment. Therefore, we did find that KRAS and BRAF mutation status provided a strong, but incomplete, correlation with sensitivity to MEK inhibitor treatment growth inhibition.

A logical hypothesis is that colorectal cancer cell lines with elevated ERK activity are more dependent on the activity of this pathway for growth, and hence, more sensitive to growth inhibition by MEK inhibitors. An earlier study with a small number of human tumor cell lines, including two colorectal cancer cell lines, supported this possibility (22). However, we found that cell lines with little or no evidence of ERK activation (COLO-320-HSR, T84, and LS-174T) were sensitive to MEK inhibition, yet cell lines with elevated pERK (HCT-116, NCI-H508, SNU-C1, and SW48) were resistant to MEK inhibition of anchorage-independent growth. Similar observations in cell culture were made by Rosen and colleagues, who found that WT RAS/BRAF tumor cell lines showed elevated ERK activity and were sensitive to CI-1040 inhibition of ERK activity, yet showed resistance to growth inhibition (19). Therefore, ERK activation may not be a reliable biomarker to predict a therapeutic response to MEK inhibitor treatment. Limited analyses of patients treated with AZD6244 suggest that this will be the case where the level of activated pERK, as well as the degree of inhibitor reduction of pERK, did not correlate with clinical benefit (23). Because it has been reported that MEK inhibitors may inhibit ERK5 (12), perhaps off-target activities of these inhibitors may contribute to their growth-inhibitory activities.

In light of the substantial experimental evidence that ERK activation is associated with mitogenic stimulation, we were surprised to find that ERK activation more consistently associated with normal rather than tumor colonic epithelium. The issue of whether ERK activity is elevated...
in colorectal cancer has been addressed in previous studies but with contrasting conclusions. Brenner and colleagues (33) found greatly elevated ERK activity in carcinogen-induced tumor but not normal rat intestinal tissue. However, their later analyses using an in vitro kinase assay to monitor Elk phosphorylation did not find greater ERK activity in the majority of human colorectal cancer tumor tissue when compared with matched nontumor tissue (34). Using in vitro kinase assays, Hoshino et al. (35) found that ERK activation was consistently high in only a subset of colorectal cancer cell lines and tissues and that ERK activation was frequently higher in adjacent nontumor tissue. Eggstein et al. (36) used both pERK and in vitro kinase analyses and evaluated paired samples of colorectal mucosa and adenocarcinoma derived from 22 patients and concluded that ERK was inactivated in tumor tissue. Wang et al. (37) evaluated colorectal cancer and adjacent normal mucosa from 21 patients by in vitro ERK activity and concluded that kinase activity was reduced in tumor tissue. More recently, Nemoto et al. (38) determined that pERK levels in paired colorectal tumor and adjacent nontumor tissue and found elevated ERK in only 9 of 33 (27%) tumors. Similarly, Schmitz et al. (28) recently reported that ERK activation was found in only 20 of 115 (15%) colorectal cancer tumors and noted that ERK activation was seen in normal colonic epithelium. Finally, Haigis et al. (6) found that no pERK was detected in 18 of 18 primary human colorectal cancers, but 4 of 18 (22%) normal adjacent colonic crypts showed pERK staining. The different conclusions reached in these studies may reflect differences in how ERK activation was determined and in sample preparation to avoid contamination by noncolonic epithelial tissue, as well as differences in the size and nature of the patient population evaluated.

Taken together, these studies show that there is increasing evidence to suggest that ERK activation is elevated in normal colonic epithelium compared with colorectal cancer tumors. Our study is the first to quantify ERK activation in a large number of matched normal and tumor tissues in colorectal cancer patients and provides definitive evidence that ERK activation is significantly higher in normal colonic epithelium compared with matched tumors. Our findings of elevated ERK activation in the normal colonic mucosa of a noncolorectal cancer patient and colorectal cancer patients are consistent in both frozen and archival specimens, suggesting that this is not a fixation artifact. This suggests that normal colonic tissue toxicity may be a concern in patients receiving MEK inhibitor therapy and may therefore compromise the therapeutic efficacy of these inhibitors. However, it remains to be determined whether ERK activity is critical for normal colonic epithelial cell proliferation and survival, and consequently, whether normal cell toxicity will be seen with MEK inhibitor therapy.

In summary, our results suggest that KRAS or BRAF mutation status may correlate with colorectal cancer sensitivity to MEK inhibitor treatment. Our in vitro analyses together with similar observations with AZD6244 (20), and the colon tumor xenograft analyses described previously (22), support the possibility that this subset of colorectal cancers will be responsive to MEK inhibitor treatment. Our results together with those of other studies (19) indicate that although the degree of ERK activation and inhibition will not provide useful biomarkers to reliably predict patient response to MEK inhibitor therapy, KRAS and BRAF mutation status may. Our studies suggest that tumors of colorectal cancer patients currently enrolled in clinical trials of MEK inhibitor therapy should be tested for KRAS and BRAF mutation status. Finally, although the presence of differentially high levels of activated ERK in normal colonic epithelium in patients with colorectal cancer tumors is concerning, the theoretical toxicity to normal tissues remains to be seen in the clinical setting.

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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KRAS/BRAF mutation status and ERK1/2 activation as biomarkers for MEK1/2 inhibitor therapy in colorectal cancer

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