

## ***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 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, colorec-

tal 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/DPC4* 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

Received 10/13/08; revised 12/22/08; accepted 12/31/08.

**Grant support:** Our research was supported by a National Cancer Institute Specialized Programs of Research Excellence in Gastrointestinal Cancer P50 CA106991 (C.J. Der, R.S. Sandler, and T.O. Keku) and RO1 CA042978 (C.J. Der) grants. J.J. Yeh was supported by a career development award (National Cancer Institute Specialized Programs of Research Excellence in Gastrointestinal Cancer P50 CA106991) and NIH K12 HD052191. T.O. Keku was supported by a career development award NCI K01 CA93654. H.J. Kim was supported by a NCI K08-CA098240.

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doi:10.1158/1535-7163.MCT-08-0972

and are currently in phase I/II clinical trials (AZD6244, XL51, and ARRY-162).<sup>6</sup>

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 ap-

propriate 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>

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

Cell line	MSI*	KRAS	BRAF	TP53	APC	Other	MEK inhibitor†
COLO-320-HSR	Stable	WT	WT	R248W‡	S811‡§		Insensitive
SNU-C1	Stable	WT	WT	S166‡§	WT		Insensitive
SW48	Stable	WT	WT	WT	WT	EGFR G2155A <sup>  </sup> CTNNB1 S33Y <sup>  </sup>	Insensitive
T84	Stable	G13D <sup>  </sup>	WT	WT	L1488fs <sup>§</sup> 19‡ <sup>  </sup>	PIK3CA E542K <sup>  </sup>	Sensitive
HCT-116	Unstable	G13D <sup>  </sup>	WT	WT	WT	PIK3CA-H1047R <sup>  </sup> CTNNB1-S45_L46>L <sup>  </sup> -if <sup>  </sup> BRCA2-I2675fs <sup>§</sup> 6 (insertion)‡ CDKN2A-R24fs <sup>§</sup> 20 (insertion) <sup>  </sup>	Insensitive
LoVo	Unstable	G13D <sup>  </sup>	WT	WT	R1114 <sup>§</sup> <sup>  </sup> M1431fs <sup>§</sup> 42 <sup>  </sup> <sup>  </sup>	None**	Sensitive
LS-174T	Unstable	G12D <sup>  </sup>	WT	WT	WT	PIK3CA-H1047R <sup>  </sup> CTNNB1-S45F <sup>  </sup>	Sensitive
SW480 <sup>††</sup>	Stable	G12V	WT	R273H and P309S‡	Q1338 <sup>‡</sup> §	WT for CDKN2A, CTNNB1, EGFR	Sensitive
SW620	Stable	G12V‡	WT	P309S‡ R273H‡	Q1338 <sup>‡</sup> §	None**	ND
CaCo-2 <sup>††</sup>	Stable	WT	V600E	204 <sup>‡</sup> §	Q1367 <sup>‡</sup> §	MADH4-D351H‡ CTNNB1-G245A/WT (Substitution-missense) (?) WT for EGFR	Sensitive
COLO-205	Stable	WT	V600E <sup>  </sup>	Y103_L111>L if <sup>§</sup> <sup>  </sup>	T1556fs <sup>§</sup> 3‡ <sup>  </sup>	None**	Sensitive
NCI-H508	Stable	WT	G596R <sup>  </sup>	R273H‡	WT	PIK3CA-E545K <sup>  </sup>	Sensitive
HT-29	Stable	WT	V600E <sup>  </sup>	R273H‡	T1556fs <sup>§</sup> 3 <sup>  </sup> <sup>  </sup> E853 <sup>§</sup> <sup>  </sup>	PIK3CA-P449T <sup>  </sup> MADH4-Q311 <sup>§</sup>	Sensitive
SW1417	Stable	WT	V600E <sup>  </sup>	WT	R1450 <sup>§</sup>	None	Sensitive

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

Abbreviations: CTNNB1,  $\beta$ -catenin; PIK3CA, p110 $\alpha$ ; 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.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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 cells or tumors 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,  $5 \times 10^3$  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.

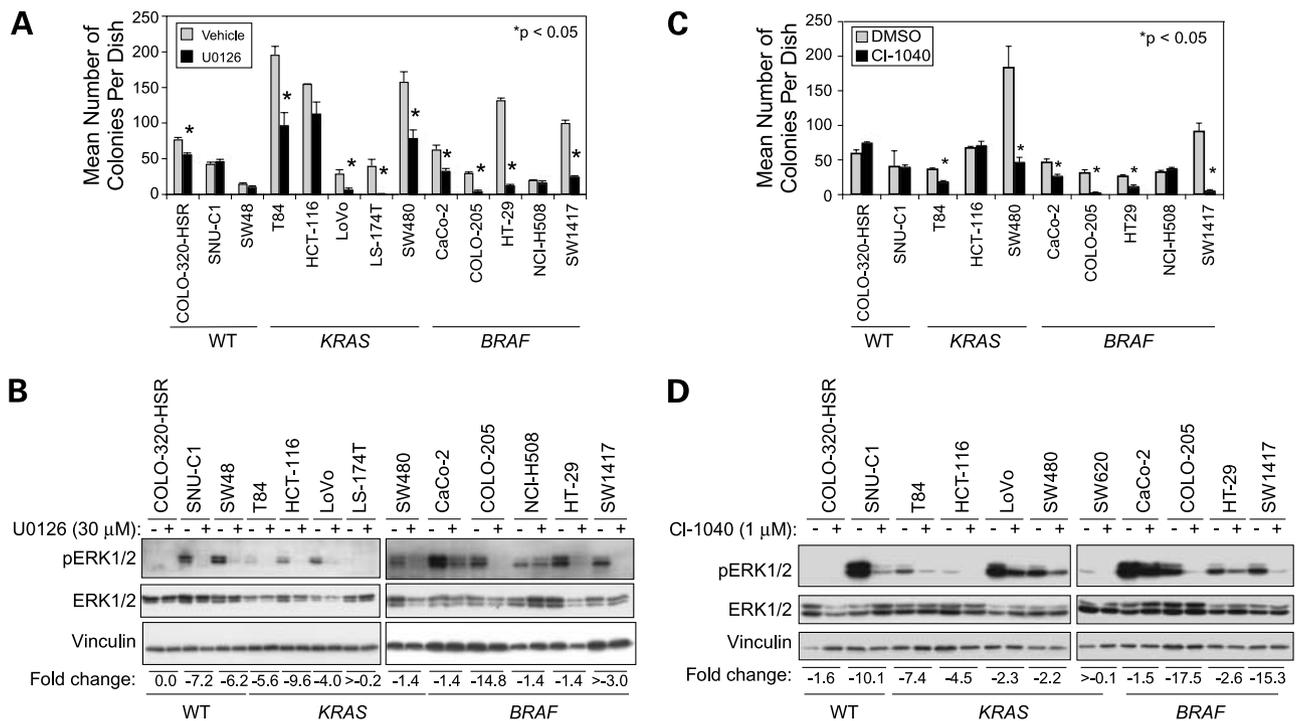
### Tissue Microarrays

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- $\mu$ m 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.

<sup>7</sup> <http://rsbweb.nih.gov/ij/>



**Figure 1.** Colorectal cancer cell lines exhibit differential sensitivity to ERK and anchorage-independent growth inhibition by MEK inhibitor treatment. **A**, inhibition of anchorage-independent growth of colorectal cancer cell lines by treatment with the U0126 MEK1/2 inhibitor. The indicated cells were suspended in soft agar with vehicle (DMSO) or 30 μmol/L U0126. The number of colonies of proliferating cells was quantitated after 30 d. **B**, inhibition of ERK1/2 activation in colorectal cancer cell lines by U0126 MEK inhibitor treatment. Cells were treated for 24 h with vehicle (DMSO) or 30 μmol/L U0126, then lysed and immunoblotted with anti-pERK1/2, anti-total ERK1/2, or anti-vinculin sera. **C**, inhibition of anchorage-independent growth of colorectal cancer cells by treatment with the CI-1040 MEK inhibitor. The indicated cells were suspended in soft agar with vehicle (DMSO) or 1 μmol/L CI-1040. The number of colonies of proliferating cells was quantitated after 30 d. **D**, inhibition of ERK activation in colorectal cancer cell lines by CI-1040 MEK inhibitor treatment. Cells were treated for 24 h with vehicle (DMSO) or 1 μmol/L CI-1040, then lysed and immunoblotted with anti-pERK, anti-total ERK, or anti-vinculin sera. Analyses with total anti-vinculin were done to verify equivalent loading of cellular protein. Fold change in the relative intensity of pERK was calculated for MEK inhibitor treatment compared with vehicle control (+/-) using total ERK1/2 as the standard. Data shown are representative of at least three independent experiments. WT, KRAS/BRAF wild-type; KRAS, KRAS mutation positive; BRAF, BRAF mutation positive.

### Immunohistochemistry

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 between ordinal (immunohistochemistry scores) and continuous (soft agar colony formation scores) variables.

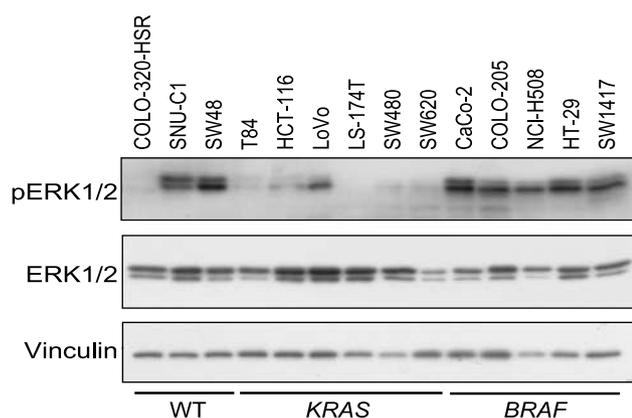
## Results

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



**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, 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, as well as the mutation status of the *TP53* and *APC* tumor suppressor genes, and the epidermal growth factor receptor (*EGFR*) from the Cancer Genome Project tumor cell line database (Table 1).<sup>8</sup> We first evaluated cell lines treated with U0126 and then selected a subset of representative cell lines for our studies with CI-1040. All cell lines except COLO-320-HSR showed similar responses to treatment with each inhibitor (Fig. 1A and C). COLO-320-HSR showed limited growth inhibition with U0126, but not CI-1040, treatment. *KRAS/BRAF* wild-type (WT) cell lines exhibited limited to no inhibition of colony formation, using either U0126 (SW48 and SNU-C1) or CI-1040 (COLO-320-HSR and SNU-C1; Fig. 1A and C). We did not use SW48 in our studies of CI-1040 due to its poor growth in soft agar. All *BRAF* mutation-positive cell lines except NCI-H508 showed growth inhibition with either MEK inhibitor (Fig. 1A and C). Similarly, *KRAS* mutation-positive cell lines except HCT-116 showed growth inhibition in soft agar (Fig. 1A and C). Therefore, *KRAS* or *BRAF* mutation status was associated with sensitivity to one or both MEK inhibitors ( $P = 0.027$ ).

#### 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 activity 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 sensi-

tivity 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.

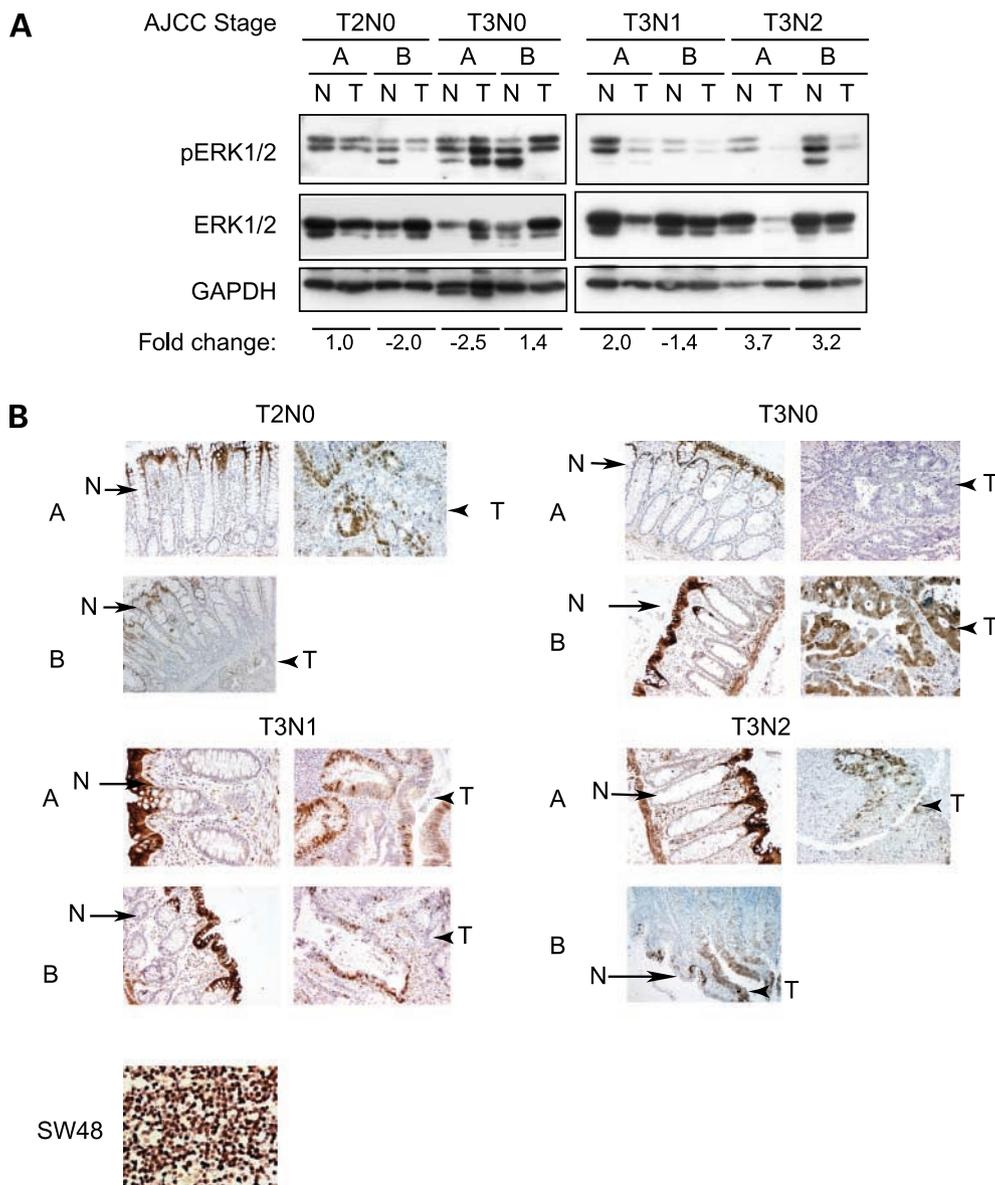
First, we treated colorectal cancer cell lines with either the U0126 or CI-1040 MEK1- and MEK2-specific inhibitors (Fig. 1B and D). We found that both MEK inhibitors showed similar effects, with essentially complete pERK inhibition seen in the majority of lines that expressed activated ERK. Although 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

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sanger.ac.uk/genetics/CGP/>



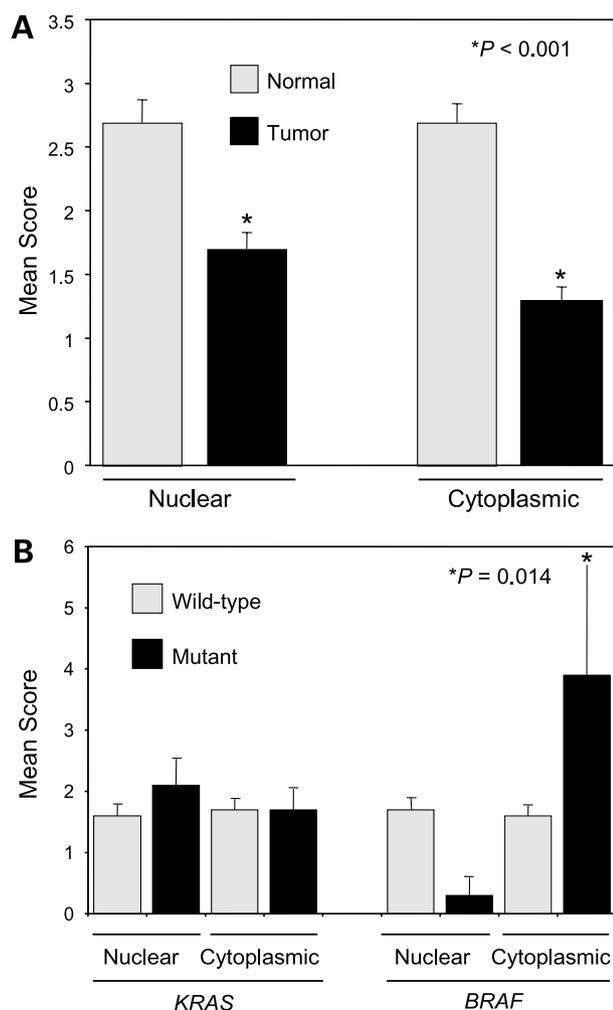
**Figure 3.** ERK activation in matched normal tissues and tumors from colorectal cancer patients. **A**, ERK is activated in normal tissue. Total cell lysates of matched normal (*N*) and tumors (*T*), identified by AJCC stage, were immunoblotted with anti-pERK and anti-GAPDH sera. Fold change in the relative intensity of pERK was calculated for matched tumors compared with normals (*T/N*) using total ERK as the standard. **B**, ERK is activated in normal colonic epithelial cells. Colorectal cancer tissues, identified by AJCC stage, were immunohistochemically stained with anti-pERK serum. *Arrows*, pERK staining in normal adjacent colonic epithelial cells. *Arrowheads*, pERK staining in tumor. Paraffin-embedded SW48 cell lines with high levels of pERK are shown as a positive control.

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



**Figure 4.** ERK activation in colorectal cancer patient normal and tumor tissues. Tissue microarrays of 190 matched normal colon and tumors were prepared as described in Materials and Methods and immunohistochemically stained with anti-pERK serum. Mean scores were expressed as the product of intensity and proportion of positive epithelial staining. **A**, ERK activation in matched normal mucosa and colorectal tumors. **B**, ERK activation in patients with *KRAS* and *BRAF* mutations.

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 TMAs (Fig. 4A). Complete AJCC staging was not available for the colorectal cancer TMAs. 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 TMAs. 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.

## Acknowledgments

We thank the members of Der Lab for helpful discussions, Lanika DeGraffenreid for assistance in figure preparation, and Dustin Cashman for excellent technical assistance; Lauren Burcal, Caroline Mpande, and Michelle Wolfe for assistance with processing TMAs for DNA extraction; and Xiaoyu Ding for immunohistochemistry assistance.

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# Molecular Cancer Therapeutics

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*Mol Cancer Ther* 2009;8:834-843.

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