ZNF248 is a differentially expressed gene in brain metastatic human breast cancer.

Shahan Mamoor, MS¹

¹shahanmamoor@gmail.com

East Islip, NY USA

Metastasis to the brain is a clinical problem in patients with breast cancer¹⁻³. We mined published microarray data^{4,5} to compare primary and metastatic tumor transcriptomes for the discovery of genes associated with brain metastasis in humans with metastatic breast cancer. We found that zinc finger protein 248, encoded by ZNF248, was among the genes whose expression was most different in the brain metastases of patients with metastatic breast cancer as compared to primary tumors of the breast. ZNF248 mRNA was present at decreased quantities in brain metastatic tissues as compared to primary tumors of the breast. Importantly, expression of ZNF248 in primary tumors was significantly correlated with patient overall survival. Modulation of ZNF248 expression may be relevant to the biology by which tumor cells metastasize from the breast to the brain in humans with metastatic breast cancer.

Keywords: breast cancer, metastasis, brain metastases, central nervous system metastases, zinc finger protein 248, ZNF248, systems biology of breast cancer, targeted therapeutics in breast cancer.

One report described a 34% incidence of central nervous system metastases in patients treated with trastuzumab for breast cancer². More recently, the NEfERT-T clinical trial⁶ which compared administration of either neratinib or trastuzumab in conjunction with paclitaxel demonstrated that in a randomized, controlled setting, in breast cancer patients treated with neratinib, not only was the incidence of central nervous system recurrence significantly lower, the time to central nervous system metastasis was significantly delayed as compared to patients administered trastuzumab⁶. The alarmingly high rate of central nervous system metastasis described, as well as data, both anecdotal² and from a randomized, controlled setting⁶ illustrating that treatment with trastuzumab may be associated with these events demands an enhanced understanding of the transcriptional makeup of brain metastatic tissues to support identification of therapeutic targets, whether they are treatment related or not. We performed a global comparative analysis of primary and metastatic tumors in patients with brain metastatic breast cancer^{4,5}. We discovered differential and increased expression of the gene encoding zinc finger protein 248, ZNF248, in brain metastatic tissues of patients with metastatic breast cancer.

Methods

We used datasets GSE10893⁴ and GSE42568⁵ for this global differential gene expression analysis of brain metastatic breast cancer in conjunction with GEO2R. GSE10893 was generated using Agilent-011521 Human 1A Microarray G4110A technology with $n=11$ primary breast tumors and $n=3$ brain metastases from patients with breast cancer; analysis was performed using platform GPL885. GSE42568 was generated using Affymetrix Human Genome U133 Plus 2.0 array technology with $n=17$ normal breast tissue biopsies and $n=104$ primary breast tumor biopsies from patients with breast cancer; analysis was performed using platform GPL570. The Benjamini and Hochberg method of p -value adjustment was used for ranking of differential expression but raw p -values were used to assess statistical significance of global differential expression. Log-transformation of data was auto-detected, and the NCBI generated category of platform annotation was used. A statistical test was performed to evaluate whether ZNF248 gene expression was significantly different between primary tumors of the breast and brain metastases in humans with breast cancer using a two-tailed t-test. For Kaplan-Meier survival analysis, we used the Kaplan-Meier plotter online tool⁷ for correlation of ZNF248 mRNA expression levels with overall survival in $n=1879$ breast cancer patients.

Results

We performed global comparative transcriptome analysis of metastatic and primary tumor tissues of patients with metastatic breast cancer using published microarray data^{4,5} to describe the transcriptional landscape of brain metastasis in human breast cancer in an unbiased fashion and for the discovery of novel therapeutic targets.

ZNF248 is differentially expressed in the brain metastases of patients with brain metastatic breast cancer.

Through blind, systems-level analysis of published microarray data⁴, we identified zinc finger protein 248, encoded by ZNF248, as a differentially expressed gene in the breast metastatic tissues of humans with breast cancer (Table 1). When sorting each of the genes expressed in brain metastases based on significance of difference as compared to primary tumors of the breast in patients with breast cancer, ZNF248 ranked 220 out of 17418 total transcripts (Chart 1), equating to 98.7% differential expression. Differential expression of ZNF248 in the brain metastases of patients with metastatic breast cancer was statistically significant (Chart 1; $p=6.42\text{e-}04$).

To validate transcriptome-wide differential expression of ZNF248 in human breast cancer, we queried a second microarray dataset⁵, here comparing normal breast tissues and primary tumors of the breast. Again, we identified ZNF248 as a differentially expressed gene in the tumor tissues of patients with breast cancer (Chart 2). When sorting each of the genes expressed in brain metastases based on significance of difference as compared to normal breast tissues, ZNF248 ranked 11606 out of 54675 total transcripts (Chart 2), equating to 78.8% differential expression. Differential expression of ZNF248 in the primary tumors of patients with breast cancer was statistically significant (Chart 2; $p=1.36e-03$). Thus, differential expression of ZNF248, transcriptome-wide, in the tumor tissues of women with breast cancer was conserved across two independent microarray datasets, both in primary and metastatic tumor tissues.

ZNF248 is expressed at lower levels in the brain metastases of patients with metastatic breast cancer.

We obtained exact mRNA expression levels for ZNF248, in primary tumors of the breast and in brain metastasis of patients with brain metastatic breast cancer to determine direction and statistical significance of change in ZNF248 expression in brain metastatic tissues. We observed significantly lower expression of ZNF248 in the brain metastases of patients with breast cancer as compared to primary tumors of the breast: ZNF248 was expressed at -0.33 ± 0.47 arbitrary units (AU) in primary tumors of the breast, while it was expressed at -1.45 ± 0.43 in brain metastatic tissues (Figure 1). The difference in ZNF248 mRNA levels between primary tumors of the breast and brain metastatic tissues was statistically significant (Figure 1; $p=0.001101$).

ZNF248 expression is significantly correlated with survival outcomes in human breast cancer.

We performed Kaplan-Meier survival analysis⁷ in $n=1879$ breast cancer patients in total, to evaluate whether ZNF248 tumor expression was correlated with survival outcomes in breast cancer. We observed correlation between primary tumor expression of ZNF248 and overall survival (OS) in patients with breast cancer (Figure 2). Patients whose primary tumors expressed low levels of ZNF248 possessed median OS of 76.8 months, while patients whose tumors expressed high levels of ZNF248 possessed median OS of 115 months. This difference in OS based on ZNF248 tumor expression in patients with breast cancer was statistically significant (Figure 2, Chart 3; logrank p -value: 0.03; hazard ratio: 0.81 (0.67-0.98)).

Thus, by mining published microarray data^{4,5} in an unbiased and systematic fashion, we identified zinc finger protein 248, encoded by ZNF248, as among the genes whose expression was most different, transcriptome-wide, in the brain metastases of patients with breast cancer, both when compared to primary tumors of the breast and to normal breast tissues; we observed significantly decreased expression of ZNF248 in brain metastases as compared to primary tumors of the breast. Further, we found a significant correlation between ZNF248 expression and patient survival outcomes, as overall survival was significantly greater in patients whose primary tumors expressed higher levels of ZNF248 as compared to patients whose primary tumors expressed lower levels of ZNF248.

Discussion

We provided evidence here that zinc finger protein 248, encoded by ZNF248, is among the genes whose expression is most different in the brain metastases of patients with brain metastatic breast cancer, that ZNF248 mRNA is present at significantly decreased quantities in brain metastatic tissues as compared to primary tumors of the breast, that ZNF248 is also differentially expressed in primary tumors of patients with breast cancer, and that primary tumor expression of ZNF248 is significantly correlated with

1 overall survival in patients with breast cancer. Evaluation of the effects of genetic depletion of ZNF248 in
2 mouse models of metastatic breast cancer on metastasis to the central nervous system is merited.
3 Modulation of ZNF248 expression may be relevant to the processes by which breast cancer cells exit the
4 breast, enter the vasculature and/or lymphatics, reside in the lymph nodes, evade immune clearance,
5 breach the blood-brain barrier and colonize the brain.
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

References

1. Lin, N.U., Amiri-Kordestani, L., Palmieri, D., Liewehr, D.J. and Steeg, P.S., 2013. CNS metastases in breast cancer: old challenge, new frontiers.
2. Bendell, J.C., Domchek, S.M., Burstein, H.J., Harris, L., Younger, J., Kuter, I., Bunnell, C., Rue, M., Gelman, R. and Winer, E., 2003. Central nervous system metastases in women who receive trastuzumab-based therapy for metastatic breast carcinoma. *Cancer*, 97(12), pp.2972-2977.
3. Tsukada, Y., Fouad, A., Pickren, J.W. and Lane, W.W., 1983. Central nervous system metastasis from breast carcinoma autopsy study. *Cancer*, 52(12), pp.2349-2354.
4. Weigman, V.J., Chao, H.H., Shabalin, A.A., He, X., Parker, J.S., Nordgard, S.H., Grushko, T., Huo, D., Nwachukwu, C., Nobel, A. and Kristensen, V.N., 2012. Basal-like Breast cancer DNA copy number losses identify genes involved in genomic instability, response to therapy, and patient survival. *Breast cancer research and treatment*, 133(3), pp.865-880.
5. Clarke, C., Madden, S.F., Doolan, P., Aherne, S.T., Joyce, H., O'driscoll, L., Gallagher, W.M., Hennessy, B.T., Moriarty, M., Crown, J. and Kennedy, S., 2013. Correlating transcriptional networks to breast cancer survival: a large-scale coexpression analysis. *Carcinogenesis*, 34(10), pp.2300-2308.
6. Awada, A., Colomer, R., Inoue, K., Bondarenko, I., Badwe, R.A., Demetriou, G., Lee, S.C., Mehta, A.O., Kim, S.B., Bachelot, T. and Goswami, C., 2016. Neratinib plus paclitaxel vs trastuzumab plus paclitaxel in previously untreated metastatic ERBB2-positive breast cancer: the NEfERT-T randomized clinical trial. *JAMA oncology*, 2(12), pp.1557-1564.
7. Györfy, B., Lanczky, A., Eklund, A.C., Denkert, C., Budczies, J., Li, Q. and Szallasi, Z., 2010. An online survival analysis tool to rapidly assess the effect of 22,277 genes on breast cancer prognosis using microarray data of 1,809 patients. *Breast cancer research and treatment*, 123(3), pp.725-731.

Rank: 220
Probe ID: 719
p-value: 6.42e-04
t: 4.24
B: -0.183264
Gene: ZNF248
Gene name: zinc finger protein 248

Chart 1: ZNF248 is differentially expressed in brain metastatic breast cancer when comparing brain metastases to primary tumors of the breast.

The rank of global differential expression, the probe/transcript ID, the *p*-value with respect to differential expression transcriptome-wide, *t*, a moderated *t*-statistic, *B*, the log-odds of differential expression between the groups compared, the gene and gene name are listed in this chart.

Rank: 11606
probe ID: 213269_at
p-value: 1.36e-03
t: -3.28
B: -2.0324496
Gene: ZNF248
Gene name: zinc finger protein 248

Chart 2: ZNF248 is differentially expressed in human breast cancer when comparing primary tumors of the breast to normal breast tissues.

The rank of global differential expression, probe/transcript ID, the *p*-value with respect to differential expression transcriptome-wide, *t*, a moderated *t*-statistic, *B*, the log-odds of differential expression between the groups compared, the gene and gene name are listed in this chart.

Figure 1: ZNF248 is expressed at significantly lower levels in the brain metastases of patients with metastatic breast cancer when compared to primary tumors of the breast.

The mRNA expression level of ZNF248 in primary tumors of the breast (left) and in brain metastases of women with metastatic breast cancer (right) is graphically depicted; the result of a statistical ZNF248 evaluating significance of difference in ZNF248 expression between primary tumors of the breast and brain metastases is $p=0.001101$.

Figure 2: ZNF248 primary tumor expression is significantly correlated with overall survival in patients with breast cancer.

Depicted in this Kaplan-Meier plot is the probability of overall survival for $n=1879$ total patients stratified into two groups, based on low or high expression of ZNF248 in patient primary tumors. The log rank p -value denoting statistical significance of difference in overall survival when comparing the two groups, as well as hazard ratio for this comparison is listed above. Listed below is the number of patients at risk (number of patients alive) per interval, after stratification based on ZNF248 expression; in the first interval, number at risk is number of patients alive; in each subsequent interval, number at risk is the number at risk less those who have expired or are censored.

1 Low ZNF248 expression: 76.8 months

2 High ZNF248 expression: 115 months

3
4 **Chart 3: Median overall survival is inferior in patients with low primary tumor expression of ZNF248.**

5 The median OS (overall survival) of patients with low primary tumor expression of ZNF248 and high
6 primary tumor expression of ZNF248 is listed in this chart, for $n=1879$ breast cancer patients.