Differential expression of fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2 in cancers of the breast.

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Breast cancer affects women at relatively high frequency¹. We mined published microarray datasets^{2,3} to determine in an unbiased fashion and at the systems level genes most differentially expressed in the primary tumors of patients with breast cancer. We report here significant differential expression of the gene encoding fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2, FLRT2, when comparing primary tumors of the breast to the tissue of origin, the normal breast. FLRT2 mRNA was present at significantly lower quantities in tumors of the breast as compared to normal breast tissue. Analysis of human survival data revealed that expression of FLRT2 in primary tumors of the breast was correlated with overall survival in patients with basal, luminal A, and luminal B subtype breast cancer, but not in HER2+ breast cancer, demonstrating a relationship between primary tumor expression of a differentially expressed gene and patient survival outcomes influenced by molecular subtype. FLRT2 may be of relevance to initiation, maintenance or progression of cancers of the female breast.

Keywords: breast cancer, FLRT2, fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2, systems biology of breast cancer, targeted therapeutics in breast cancer.

Invasive breast cancer is diagnosed in over a quarter of a million women in the United States each year¹ and in 2018, breast cancer was the leading cause of cancer death in women worldwide⁴. While patients with localized breast cancer are provided a 99% 5-year survival rate, patients with regional breast cancer, cancer that has spread to lymph nodes or nearby structures, are provided an 86% 5-year survival rate^{5,6}. Patients with metastasis to distant sites, like the brain, are provided a 27% 5-year survival rate^{5,6}. Understanding how primary tumors are most transcriptionally different from the tissue from which they originate, the breast, can facilitate development of novel diagnostic and therapeutics to promote early detection and enhanced treatment, and contribute to efforts to prevent progression to metastatic stages. We mined published microarray data^{2,3} to understand at the transcriptome level and in an unbiased fashion genes most differentially expressed in primary tumors of the breast as compared to normal breast tissue. fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2 emerged as among the most differentially expressed genes in cancer of the female breast.

Methods

We utilized datasets GSE109169² and GSE42568³ for this differential gene expression analysis of female breast cancer. GSE109169 was generated using Affymetrix Human Exon 1.0 ST Array technology with $n=25$ normal breast tissue and $n=25$ tumors of the breast; analysis was performed using platform GPL5175. The tissues from this first dataset are paired tissues (25 tumors matching 25 breast tissues from 25 patients). 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 majority of patients whose tumors were analyzed were age 50 or older. 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 FLRT2 expression was significantly different between primary breast tumors and breast tissue using a two-tailed t-test. For Kaplan-Meier survival analysis, we used the Kaplan-Meier plotter online tool⁷ for correlation of FLRT2 mRNA expression levels with overall survival (OS) in $n=404$ patients with basal subtype cancer, $n=794$ patients with luminal A subtype cancer, $n=515$ patients with luminal B subtype cancer, and $n=166$ patients with HER2+ cancer.

Results

We performed discovery of genes associated with breast cancer in females by mining two independently published microarray datasets^{2,3}.

FLRT2 is differentially expressed in primary tumors of the breast.

Comparison of 25 normal breast tissues to 25 tumors of the breast² from patients with early-onset breast cancer revealed that the gene encoding fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2, FLRT2, was among the genes most differentially expressed in tumors of the breast in human breast cancer (Chart 1). When sorting each of the genes expressed in tumors of the breast based on significance of difference as compared to normal breast tissue, FLRT2 ranked 134 out of 19076 total transcripts, equating to 99.3% differential expression (Chart 1). Differential expression of FLRT2 in female breast cancer was statistically significant (Chart 1; $p=6.09E-14$).

Analysis of a second microarray dataset³, here in 104 tumors from patients aged 31 to 89 at diagnosis, the majority of which were above age 50, again revealed significant differential expression of FLRT2 in human breast cancer (Chart 2). When sorting each of the genes expressed in the tumors of

patients with breast cancer based on significance of difference as compared to normal breast tissue, FLRT2 ranked 4535 out of 54675 total transcripts, equating to 91.7% differential expression (Chart 2). Differential expression of FLRT2 in the tumors of patients with breast cancer was statistically significant (Chart 2; $p=7.54E-08$). These data suggested that differential expression of FLRT2 was not an artifact of a single microarray dataset, nor was it strictly associated with early-onset breast cancer, rather a general feature of cancers of the breast.

FLRT2 is expressed at significantly lower levels in breast tumors as compared to the breast.

We obtained exact mRNA expression levels for FLRT2 from the breast and from breast tumors to understand the magnitude and direction of FLRT2 expression change. FLRT2 was expressed at lower levels in tumors of the breast as compared to normal breast tissue (Figure 1). Decreased expression of FLRT2 in primary breast tumors was statistically significant (Figure 1: $p<0.0001$). FLRT2 was expressed at 7.60 ± 0.42 arbitrary units (AU) in normal breast tissue, while it was expressed at 6.06 ± 0.65 AU in tumors of the breast. We calculated a mean fold change of 0.80 in FLRT2 mRNA levels when comparing primary tumors of the breast to normal breast tissues.

FLRT2 expression correlates with survival outcomes in basal and luminal A subtype human breast cancer.

We performed Kaplan-Meier survival analysis in an attempt to correlate FLRT2 mRNA expression levels with survival outcomes in patients with breast cancer, evaluating correlations between molecular subtype and overall survival. We observed a correlation between FLRT2 expression and overall survival (OS) in patients with basal subtype breast cancer which trended towards statistical significance (Figure 2; log rank p -value: 0.084 for overall survival, hazard ratio: 1.4 (0.95-2.05) (Fig. 2)). FLRT2 mRNA levels were a negative prognostic indicator in basal subtype breast cancer patients. Median OS was 68.04 months for basal subtype patients with low tumor expression of FLRT2 while median OS was 52.92 months for basal subtype patients with high tumor expression of FLRT2 (Chart 3). We also observed a correlation between FLRT2 expression and overall survival (OS) in patients with luminal A subtype breast cancer which trended towards statistical significance (Figure 2; log rank p -value: 0.0014 for overall survival, hazard ratio: 0.59 (0.43-0.82) (Fig. 2)). FLRT2 mRNA levels were a positive prognostic indicator in luminal A subtype breast cancer patients. Median OS was 99.6 months for luminal A patients with low tumor expression of FLRT2 while median OS was 175.46 months for luminal A patients with high tumor expression of FLRT2 (Chart 3). FLRT2 primary tumor expression was not correlated with overall survival in HER2+ breast cancer (Figure 2; log rank p -value: 0.79 for OS, hazard ratio: 1.08 (0.61-1.23) (Fig. 2)) or in luminal B subtype breast cancer patients (Figure 2; log rank p -value: 0.44 for OS, hazard ratio: 0.87 (0.62-1.23) (Fig. 2)).

Thus, through comparative transcriptome analysis of primary tumors of the breast and normal breast tissue, we found that differential expression and down-regulation of FLRT2 was among the most significant transcriptional features in primary tumors from patients with breast cancer. FLRT2 expression in primary tumors of the breast was correlated with overall survival in patients with all molecular subtypes save for HER2+, with mRNA levels of FLRT2 a negative prognostic indicator for basal subtype patients but a positive prognostic indicator for luminal A subtype breast cancer patients.

Discussion

Invasive breast cancer is a medical problem with a 27% 5-year survival rate for women whose disease has spread to distant sites^{5,6}. To facilitate understanding of the basic transcriptional differences between primary tumors of the breast and the tissues from which these tumors originate, normal breast tissues, we performed comparative transcriptome analysis using two independently published microarray datasets^{2,3}, providing evidence here that differential expression of fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2, encoded by FLRT2, is a defining transcriptional feature of human breast cancer: in early onset-breast cancer, and in patients diagnosed after age 50. FLRT2 was expressed at significantly lower levels in primary tumors from patients with breast cancer as compared to normal breast tissue. Importantly, in patients with basal and luminal A subtype breast cancers, expression of FLRT2 was correlated with overall survival. Fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2 and the molecular processes to which it pertains to, may be relevant to the initiation or progression of human breast cancer.

References

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Rank: 134
Probe ID: 3546924
p-value: 6.09E-14
t: 1.02E+01
B: 21.550852
Gene: FLRT2
Gene name: fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2

Chart 1: FLRT2 is differentially expressed in the primary tumors of patients with early-onset human breast cancer.

Rank of differential expression, probe ID, p-value of global differential expression, t, a moderated t-statistic, B, the log-odds of differential expression between the groups compared, gene and gene name are listed in this chart.

Rank: 4535
Probe ID: 204359_at
p-value: 7.54E-08
t: 5.73
B: 7.3507457
Gene: LOC100506718///FLRT2
Gene name: uncharacterized LOC100506718///fibronectin leucine rich transmembrane protein 2

Chart 2: FLRT2 is differentially expressed in the primary tumors of patients with breast cancer.

Rank of differential expression, probe ID, p-value of global differential expression, t, a moderated t-statistic, B, the log-odds of differential expression between the groups compared, gene and gene name are listed in this chart.

Figure 1: FLRT2 is expressed at significantly lower levels in primary breast tumors as compared to normal breast tissue.

The mRNA expression level of FLRT2 in normal breast tissue (left) and in primary tumors of the breast (right) is graphically depicted with the result of a statistical test evaluating significance of difference in FLRT2 expression between normal breast tissue and primary tumors of the breast, a *p*-value, is *p*<0.0001.

Figure 2: In human breast cancer, FLRT2 expression correlates with overall survival in patients with basal subtype and luminal A subtype breast cancer, but not in patients with HER2+ cancer.

Depicted in this Kaplan-Meier plot is the probability of overall survival (OS) for $n=404$ patients with basal subtype breast cancer (upper left), $n=166$ patients with HER2+ breast cancer (upper right), $n=794$ patients with luminal A breast cancer (lower left), and $n=515$ patients with luminal B breast cancer (lower right), stratified into two groups, based on low or high expression of FLRT2 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 FLRT2 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.

Basal subtype patients

Low FLRT2 expression: 68.04 months

High FLRT2 expression: 52.92 months

Luminal A subtype patients

Low FLRT2 expression: 99.6 months

High FLRT2 expression: 175.46 months

Chart 3: In basal subtype breast cancer, median overall survival is superior in patients with low primary tumor expression of FLRT2, but in luminal A subtype breast cancer, median overall survival is superior in patients with low primary tumor expression of FLRT2.

The overall survival of $n=404$ basal subtype and $n=794$ luminal A subtype breast cancer patients based on stratification into low or high tumor expression of FLRT2 is listed in this chart.