From polarity in flies to hearts in mice : the wnt-frizzled cascade in cardiac wound healing

Citation for published version (APA):

van Gijn, M. E. (2001). *From polarity in flies to hearts in mice : the wnt-frizzled cascade in cardiac wound healing*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Datawyse / Universitaire Pers Maastricht. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20010920mg>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2001

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20010920mg](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20010920mg)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
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From polarity in flies to hearts in mice

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ISBN 90 5278 311 X

Printed by: Datawyse / Universitaire Pers Maastricht
Cover Design by J. van Gijn-Versfelt

FROM POLARITY IN FLIES TO HEARTS IN MICE

The wnt-frizzled cascade in cardiac wound healing

PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit Maastricht,
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
Prof.dr. A.C. Nieuwenhuijzen Kruseman,
volgens het besluit van het College van Decanen,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op donderdag 20 september 2001 om 12.00 uur

door

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geboren op 21 februari 1970 te Dordrecht

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Financial support by the Netherlands Heart Foundation for the publication of this thesis is gratefully acknowledged.

List of abbreviations

APC	adenomatous polyposis coli	MDCK	madin darby canine kidney cell line
BSA	bovine serum albumine	MoMuLV	moloney murine leukemia virus
CHO	chinese hamster ovary cell line	NBT	nitroblue tetrazolium
COS7	african green monkey kidney cell line	OT	outflow tract
CRD	cystein-rich domain	PBS	phosphate-buffered saline
DAB	diaminobenzidine	PC12	pheochromocytoma derived cell line
DEP	dishevelled-cg1 10-pleckstrin	PCNA	proliferating cell nuclear antigen
DGS	DiGeorge syndrome	PCR	polymerase chain reaction
DIG	digoxigenin	PDZ	PSD-95/SAP90, discs-large, ZO-1
DIX	dishevelled-axin	PECAM	platelet-endothelial cell adhesion molecule
DMEM	dulbecco's modified eagle medium	P-JNK	phosphorylated c-Jun N-terminal kinase
DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid	PKC	protein kinase C
DTT	dithiothreitol	PP	protein phosphatase
DVL	dishevelled	RGS	regulators of G protein signaling
EGF	epidermal growth factor	RNA	ribonucleic acid
EP	epicardium	RT-PCR	reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction
FGF	fibroblast growth factor	RV	right ventricle
FRPs	frizzled related proteins	SAPK	stress activated protein kinase
FZ	frizzled	SARP	secreted apoptosis related protein
GAPDH	glyceraldehyde-3phosphate dehydrogenases	SFRP	secreted frizzled-like protein
GSK3- β	glycogen-synthase kinase 3- β	SHAM	sham operated animals
GT	granulation tissue	SM	smooth muscle
GTP	guanosine triphosphate	SP	substance P
HBL-100	human breast epithelial cell line	TCF	T-cell factor
HE	hematoxylin and eosin	TGF- β	transforming growth factor- β
HIF	hypoxia-inducible factor	TIMP	tissue inhibitors of MMPs
HL-60	human leukoemic cell line	TMB	tetramethyl benzidine
HMG	high mobility group	TNF	tumor necrosis factor
HPLC	high performance liquid chromatography	TUNEL	tdt-mediated dUTP-X nick end labeling
HRP	horseradish peroxidase	UTP	uridine triphosphate
hsFRP	human secreted frizzled related protein	VCFS	velo-cardio-facial syndrome
HUVEC	human umbilical vein endothelial cell	VE	vascular endothelium
IGF	insulin-like growth factor	VEGF	vascular endothelial growth factor
JNK	c-Jun N-terminal kinase	WG	wingless
LAD	left anterior descending (artery)		
LEF	lymphoid enhancing factor		
MI	myocardial infarction		
MMP	matrix metalloproteinase		

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Chapter 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1 General introduction

Myocardial infarction (MI) is one of the main causes of mortality and morbidity in Western countries. It is the result of an interruption of the coronary blood flow, usually resulting from atherosclerosis and thrombotic occlusion of a coronary artery. Because treatment of acute MI with anti-arrhythmic and thrombolytic agents has improved over the years, the number of people that die during the acute phase of MI is decreasing. Patients that have recovered from MI frequently have a reduced cardiac output. This reduction activates cardiac compensatory mechanisms. These mechanisms initially compensate the impaired function, but often result in further deterioration of the heart leading to congestive heart failure¹. Heart failure is a progressive disorder with a poor prognosis². Because little is known about the mechanisms leading to heart failure, current therapy is aimed at relieving the symptoms rather than curing the cause.

Understanding the development of congestive heart failure following MI is important for a rational approach to therapy. Most studies have focused on the limitation of muscle injury and prevention of the progressive dilatation of the viable non-infarcted myocardium, that occurs in the months after MI. Less attention has been paid to the infarct area, which also contributes to the dilatation of the ventricle.

Recent studies indicate that infarct healing is a dynamic process. The granulation tissue, which eventually matures into the scar, is a cellular, vascularized, metabolically active and contractile tissue³. Infarct healing appears to be a well-controlled process, constituting a potential target for therapeutic interventions.

This thesis focuses on genes known to be involved in architectural control, the so-called tissue polarity genes of the frizzled (fz) family, in the heart, with special emphasis on the healing process after MI. In this chapter, the wound healing after MI will be discussed, with focus on the architecture of the developing scar. Attention will be paid to the tissue polarity gene fz and its signal transduction cascade. Furthermore, the role of this cascade in cardiac development and after myocardial infarction will be discussed. Finally, the aim of the present thesis will be outlined.

2 Wound healing after MI

The wound healing process after MI is a complex cascade of events. Cardiomyocyte necrosis and an acute inflammatory response occur in the infarct area. Invaded mononuclear cells differentiate into macrophages, which are responsible for removing the necrotic cells. Fibroblast-like and endothelial cells migrate into the infarct area and start to proliferate. The fibroblast-like cells are responsible for the deposition of extracellular matrix in the granulation tissue, whereas the endothelial cells are involved in the neovascularization to restore the blood supply to the area⁴. In a later phase most of the infiltrated cells disappear and additional extracellular matrix is deposited. This process is referred to as the

Figure 1. Time course of the wound healing response after myocardial infarction in rat and mice. (A) In the first hours cardiomyocytes die due to necrosis or apoptosis. (B) About 24 hours after the onset of the infarct, polymorphonuclear neutrophils infiltrate the necrotic area. (C) After 1-2 weeks the infarct contains granulation tissue with prominent capillaries, myofibroblasts and macrophages. The necrotic debris has been largely removed and collagen has been deposited. (D) Starting at about 3 weeks after MI, the granulation tissue matures into a scar.

A 12-18 hours Cell death

B 1-2 days Inflammation

C 1-2 weeks Granulation tissue formation

D >3 weeks Scar maturation

maturation of the scar. Different aspects of infarct healing are depicted in fig. 1 and will be discussed below.

2.1 Cell death

Cardiomyocytes loss after acute MI has long been thought to result from necrosis. While this form of cell death remains the most important cause of the tissue injury after MI, recent studies have suggested that apoptosis or programmed cell death also contributes to the cell loss⁵⁻⁹. A clear discrimination between apoptosis and necrosis can not be made. Therefore myocardial cell death after MI has been classified in three forms: necrosis or oncosis, apoptosis and a combination of apoptosis and necrosis^{10, 11}. Cardiomyocyte necrosis has been thought to be an irreversible form of cell death, whereas apoptosis is thought to be reversible towards a certain point⁹⁻¹¹.

Another reversible form of cardiomyocyte dysfunction in the borderzone of the infarct area is cardiomyocyte dedifferentiation¹². Dedifferentiation, often referred to as hibernating myocardium, results from hypoxia due to a chronic or repetitive underperfusion accompanied by a limited coronary flow reserve¹². The precise mechanism of cardiomyocyte death and dedifferentiation after MI are beyond the scope of the present thesis and therefore will not be further discussed in this chapter. Apoptosis is also important in later phases of infarct healing; it is involved in the disappearance of infiltrated mono- and leukocytes, endothelial cells and the fibroblast population in the healing infarct¹³.

2.2 Cell proliferation

The loss of viable cardiomyocytes after MI results in an increased workload on the remaining cardiomyocytes. To compensate for the lost cells, the remaining cardiomyocytes undergo hypertrophy as early as three days after MI¹⁴. Although cardiomyocytes are thought to be terminally differentiated cells and therefore have lost their capability to divide, cardiomyocyte hyperplasia has also been described after MI¹⁵.

Experiments in rats and mice have shown that DNA synthesis significantly increases after MI, but less than 2% of the DNA synthesizing cells are cardiomyocytes^{16, 17}. Increased DNA synthesis was exhibited mainly by fibroblasts, whereas endothelial cell DNA synthesis contributed approximately 30% to the

overall increase¹⁶. Four days after infarction fibroblasts start to proliferate, transform into myofibroblasts and migrate into the infarct area. Myofibroblasts have characteristics of both fibroblasts and smooth muscle cells in that they synthesize extracellular matrix proteins but also have contractile properties. These cells have been shown to be predominantly responsible for the collagen formation at the infarct site in the rat heart¹⁸. It has been suggested that the contractile properties of myofibroblasts contribute to the wound healing process by preventing the dilatation of the infarct area^{19,20}. Proliferation of the endothelial cells suggests the formation of new or the remodeling of pre-existing capillaries.

3 Architectural alterations in the infarct area

MI leads to complex architectural alterations, involving ventricular thinning, dilatation, fibrosis and angiogenesis. Expansion of the infarcted myocardium also contributes to dilatation and thinning of the ventricle²¹. During the first week, infarct expansion is characterized by stretching and slippage of cardiomyocytes and is related to degradation of the extracellular matrix. A second phase, lasting for more than 6 weeks, consists of progressive dilatation of the immature scar. Extensive infarct expansion is associated with the development of congestive heart failure, aneurysm formation and myocardial rupture^{1,22}.

Increasing evidence indicates that interference in the healing process after infarction can alter ventricular remodeling^{23,24}. In order to develop a proper therapy to prevent infarct thinning and dilatation it is important to understand the genes and signal transduction pathways that are involved in the architectural control of infarct healing.

3.1 Neovascularization

After MI, new blood vessels penetrate the necrotic area and the surrounding ischemic tissue to restore the blood flow to the infarct area. This neovascularization, comprising of both angiogenesis and arteriogenesis, is a prerequisite for the development of granulation tissue in the infarct area^{25,26}.

The exact mechanism of the neovascularization process is starting to be unraveled. Hypoxia and other, poorly defined, factors stimulate cells to produce angiogenic molecules such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), fibroblast growth factors (FGFs), transforming growth factor- β (TGF- β) and others^{27, 28}. VEGF and FGFs have a direct effect on the endothelial cells, but TGF- β activates the inflammatory cells, which in turn control angiogenesis^{27, 28}. The expression of hypoxia-inducible factor-1 (HIF-1), a transcriptional activator of VEGF, was detected in myocardial tissue with evidence of acute ischemia or early infarction, suggesting a role for this transcription factor after MI²⁹. Studies in animal models of ischemia have proven the feasibility of enhancing collateral function by delivery of angiogenic factors and the field of therapeutic angiogenesis is currently moving from preclinical investigations to clinical trials³⁰.

3.2 The collagen network

The collagen network is a major contributor to the preservation of the myocardial architecture and chamber geometry and plays a role in global ventricular remodeling³¹. Scar formation is the net result of a delicate balance between collagen degradation and synthesis³². Collagen degradation after MI involves a family of genes encoding matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) which mediate degradation of fibrillar collagen^{18, 33}. The expression of MMPs is upregulated during infarct healing³³. The upregulation of MMP expression results in MMP production, but matrix degradation requires the latent enzymes to be activated by proteolytic cleavage. Several activation mechanisms and activators have been described, but the most important mechanism after MI is the activation by plasmin^{34, 35}. Plasmin is generated from plasminogen by plasminogen activators. Activated MMPs can be inhibited by tissue inhibitors of MMPs (TIMPs)³⁶.

In mice, the deletion of the plasminogen³⁴ or uPA³⁵ gene abolishes wound healing following MI and diminishes thinning of the infarcted wall. Furthermore, inhibition of plasminogen activators or MMPs prevents cardiac rupture³⁵. MMP inhibition after MI also reduces the extent of left ventricular dilatation³⁷. Intervention in the MMP cascade could therefore be promising for therapeutic applications. Care should be taken, however, as angiogenesis following MI and cardiac function are also impaired in these mice³⁵.

3.3 Myofibroblast alignment after MI

Apart from the extracellular matrix, myofibroblasts play another important role in the preservation of the myocardial architecture; their contractile properties likely prevent the scar from dilatation. Myofibroblasts are oriented parallel with the force that the scar is subjected to, which is thought to be necessary to cope effectively with the strain. Based on these observations, a large number of myofibroblasts, aligned in the proper orientation, can be anticipated to contribute to the tensile strength of the scar. Little attention, however, has so far been given to the mechanisms that lead to their orientation in the tissue.

Cell alignment or polarity in general means that the cytoskeleton of the cell is directed to an extracellular reference point, for example a neighbor cell. The process implicates several molecular components such as adhesion receptors, cytoskeletal linking proteins, and extracellular matrix ligands. In a previous study, we have found that during the alignment and migration process of myofibroblasts after MI, the expression of a homologue of the tissue polarity gene *fz* was upregulated³⁸. In the following part, *fz* and its mechanism of action will be discussed.

4 Frizzled and its cascade

The *fz* tissue polarity genes consist of a family with multiple members, encoding 7-transmembrane receptors. Their function and signal transduction cascade are far from being completely understood. Most studies have been done in *Drosophila* and *Xenopus*. The downstream elements of the wnt-*fz* signal transduction pathway

have first been identified in *Drosophila* and have been shown to be conserved and to function in the mammalian system^{39, 40}. The homologues of the signal transduction molecules of different species have been given different names. The abbreviations for these members for some species are given in table 1.

The fz proteins, their secreted homologues, ligands and different components of the signal transduction pathway will be discussed below.

Table 1. Nomenclature of Frizzled signal transduction components in different species

	Drosophila	Xenopus	Mammals
Wnt /Wingless	wg	xwnt	wnt
Frizzled	fz or Dfz	xfz	fz or FZD
Dishevelled	dsh	xdsh	dvl
Glycogen Synthase Kinase-3 β / Zeste-white 3	zw3	XGSK-3 β	GSK-3 β
β -catenin/ Armadillo	Arm	β -catenin	β -catenin

4.1 The frizzled genes

The fz genes are named after the *Drosophila* tissue polarity gene fz, which was the first member of the family to be isolated. Epithelial structures, such as the wing hairs and ommatidia in *Drosophila*, are aligned in the plane of the epithelium. This planar polarity requires the coordination of the local orientation of cells with respect to their neighbors. During the development of wing hair-polarity in *Drosophila* fz genes coordinate the alignment process⁴¹. Fz has two different functions; it is responsible for polarization of the cytoskeleton of the cell itself and for relaying the signal to adjacent cells⁴². Fzs can be found in invertebrates and vertebrates. In *Drosophila* four fz homologues have been described. The ten fz homologues so far identified in mammals are listed in table 2.

Fz proteins are receptors that have an N-terminal extracellular cystein-rich domain⁴⁰, seven transmembrane spanning regions and an intracellular C-terminal domain⁴⁰, depicted in fig. 2. The extracellular cystein-rich domain is a conserved domain of 120 amino acids containing 10 invariant cysteins, suggesting that this region contains a number of disulfide bonds⁴⁰. This domain is implicated in ligand binding. In fig. 3 the phylogenetic tree of the cystein-rich domains of different fzs and secreted homologues is shown. Although fz proteins have seven membrane spanning regions like G-proteins, the transmembrane regions of fz show no primary sequence homology with G-protein coupled receptors, and they lack the most conserved motifs that are found in nearly all G-protein coupled receptors⁴⁰.

Figure 2. Schematic representation of the receptor frizzled (FZ) and the secreted frizzled related protein (FRP). CRD=cystein-rich domain, V=variable domain, 7TM=seven -transmembrane domains, (adapted from <http://www.ana.ed.ac.uk/rnusse/wntwindow.html>).

Table 2. Mammalian frizzled homologues and their expression pattern

Gene (mouse)	Human orthologue	Rat orthologue	Wnt interaction	Expression pattern
*fzd1 = fz1	FZD1 ⁴⁵	Rfz1 ⁴⁶		kidney, heart, liver, uterus and ovary ⁴⁶
*fzd2 = Mfz2 ⁴⁰	FZD2 ⁴⁷	Rfz2 ⁴⁶		brain, eye, heart, kidney, lung and testis ⁴⁶
fzd3=Mfz3 ⁴⁰	FZD3 ⁴⁸		no wg binding ⁴⁹	brain, eye, lung and testis ⁴⁰
fzd4=Mfz4 ⁴⁰	FZD4 ⁵⁰		wg binding ⁴⁹	brain, eye, heart, kidney, liver, lung and testis ⁴⁰
fzd5=Mfz5 ⁴⁰	Hfz5 ⁴⁰		wg and Xwnt5a binding ⁵¹	eye, heart(low), kidney, liver, lung, spleen (low) and testis ⁴⁰
fzd6=Mfz6 ⁴⁰	FZD6 ⁵²		no wg binding ⁴⁹	brain, eye, heart, kidney, lung and testis ⁴⁰
fzd7=Mfz7 ⁴⁰	FZD7 ⁴⁵		wg binding ^{49, 53}	brain, eye, heart, kidney, liver, lung and testis ⁴⁰
fzd8=Mfz8 ⁴⁰			wg binding ⁴⁹	not detectable in adult organs ⁴⁰
fzd9=Mfz9 ⁴⁰	FZD9 (previously called FZD3) ⁵⁴			brain, heart, skeletal muscle and testis ⁴⁰
**fzd10=Mfz10 ⁵⁵	FZD10 ⁵⁶			brain, placenta, heart and lung ⁵⁵
	FZE3 (=FZD7?) ⁴⁵			

* The classification of the orthologues of fzd1 and 2 has not been resolved yet (<http://www.ana.ed.ac.uk/rmusse/wntwindow.html>)

**very similar to Mfz2

The C-terminal regions show little or no homology between the different fzs. The lengths of this domain can range from 25 amino acids in Mfz7 to 200 amino acids in Mfz6⁴⁰. The intracellular C-terminal domain is probably involved in signal transduction⁴³. Little is known about the amino acids involved in signal transduction but recently it has been demonstrated that a short conserved C-terminal cytoplasmatic motif (Lys-Thr-X-X-X-Trp) is important for activation of the signaling⁴⁴.

4.2 Frizzled ligands and ligand interaction

Wnts

The proposed ligands for the *fz* receptors are wnts, a family of cysteine-rich glycosylated proteins that bind to the extracellular domain of *fz*. The wnt-family in mammals consists of at least 16 members that are involved in processes as diverse as embryonic induction, generation of cell polarity and specification of cell fate^{57, 58}. Wnts are difficult to obtain in a soluble, biologically active form and tend to stick

Figure 3. Phylogenetic tree of the cysteine-rich domains of different frizzleds (*fz*) and frizzled-related proteins (FRP) in different species. M=mouse, C=C-elegans, H=human, D=Drosophila and R=rat.

to the extracellular matrix⁵⁹. For this reason, in most studies conditioned culture medium obtained from cells transfected with wnt cDNAs has been used instead of purified wnt protein to study the effects of wnts on cell morphology, proliferation, transformation or gene expression.

The apparent functional differences between wnts (table 3) have led to the hypothesis that wnts can be divided into two classes that might employ different signal transduction mechanisms: members of the Xwnt1 class are active in axis duplication assays in *Xenopus*, whereas members of the Xwnt5a class are not. Instead, overexpression of members of the Xwnt5a class affects morphogenetic movements and may antagonize members of the Xwnt1 class^{60, 63}. Also other functional parameters, like the capability of increasing β -catenin and to induce cell transformation, have shown that wnts can be divided into two groups (table 3).

Wnt-Frizzled interaction

Much remains to be learned about the selectivity and specificity of wnt-*fz* interaction. Whereas wnt-*fz* binding specificity may underlie many wnt-class specific effects, it does not reflect the simple division of wnts into two classes. For example *fz7* seems to be able to activate either the β -catenin or the calcium signaling pathway, depending on whether it is expressed alone or together with Xwnt8b⁵³. Furthermore the inability of Xwnt5a to induce a secondary axis in *Xenopus* can be overcome by co-injection of Hfz5. When expressed alone, these two components can not induce a secondary axis⁵¹, which illustrates the synergism of these two components. Moreover, this demonstrates that the lack of activity of a *fz* or wnt protein in activating signaling in a particular context may be due to the absence of an appropriate ligand or receptor.

Table 3. Wnt homologues and their functional differences

Mouse gene	Human orthologue	Axis duplication	Increase β -catenin	Transformation of C57 or RAC cells	Classification	Null-mutants
wnt1 ⁶⁴	WNT1 (INT1) ⁶⁴	yes ⁶⁵	yes ⁶⁵	yes ⁶⁵	Xwnt1	midbrain and cerebellum defects ⁶⁶
wnt2 ⁶⁷	WNT2 (IRP) ⁶⁸	yes ⁶⁹	yes ⁶⁵	yes ⁶⁵	Xwnt1	placental defects ⁷⁰
wnt2B/ wnt13 ^{71, 72}	WNT13 ⁷³					
wnt3 ⁷⁴	WNT3 ⁶⁸		yes ⁶⁵	yes ^{65, 75}	Xwnt1	axis formation defects ⁷⁶
wnt3A ⁷⁷	WNT3A ⁶⁷	yes ⁷⁸	yes ⁶⁵	yes ^{65, 75}	Xwnt1	absence tail bud and truncated rostral to the hindlimbs ⁷⁷
wnt4 ⁷⁹	WNT4 ⁶⁸	no ⁶¹	no ⁶⁵	no ^{65, 75}	Xwnt5a	kidney defects ⁸⁰
wnt5A ⁷⁹	WNT5A ⁸¹	no ⁶³	no ⁶⁵	no ^{65, 75}	Xwnt5a	truncated limbs ⁸²
wnt5B ⁷⁹			no ⁶⁵	yes/no ^{65, 75}	?	
wnt6 ⁷⁹	WNT6 ⁸³		no ⁶⁵	no/yes ^{65, 75}	?	
wnt7A ⁷⁹	WNT7A ⁸⁴		low ⁶⁵	yes ^{65, 75}	Xwnt1	limp polarity defects ⁸⁵
wnt7B ⁷⁹	WNT7B ⁶⁸		no ⁶⁵	yes/no ^{65, 75}	?	
wnt8A ⁸⁶		yes ⁸⁷			Xwnt1	
wnt8B	WNT8B ⁸⁸	yes ⁸⁹			Xwnt1	
wnt10A ⁹⁰						
wnt10B/ wnt12 ⁹⁰	WNT10B ⁹¹					
wnt11 ⁹²	WNT11 ⁹³	yes/no ^{61, 94}		yes ⁹⁵	?	
wnt12 ⁹²						
	WNT14 ⁹⁶					
wnt15 ⁹⁶	WNT15 ⁹⁶					
wnt16 ⁹⁷	WNT16 ⁹⁷					

(<http://www.ana.ed.ac.uk/rnusse/wntwindow.html>)

Table 4. FRP classes, interactions and expression patterns

Mouse genes*	Human genes	Interacts with	Expression pattern ¹⁰³
FRP1 ¹⁰² = Frp1 ⁹⁸ SARP2 ¹⁰⁴ FrzA ¹⁰⁵	SFRP1 ¹⁰⁶		heart, kidney, lung, brain, aorta, otic vesicle, neural crest
FRP2 = ¹⁰² SDF5 ¹⁰⁷ SARP1 ¹⁰⁴	SFRP2 ¹⁰⁶	wg ¹⁰²	gut, eye retina, Lung, brain
FRP3 ¹⁰² = Frzb ¹⁰⁰ Frzb1 ¹⁰⁸ Fritz ¹⁰¹	FRZB ¹⁰⁹	wg ¹⁰² Xwnt8 ⁵⁴ wnt1 ¹⁰⁰	cartilage, anterior and posterior mesoderm, limb bud, kidney, testis
FRP4 = ¹⁰² FrpAP FrpHE	SFRP4 ¹¹⁰		ovary, brain, kidney, lung, endometrium
SARP3 ¹⁰⁴	SFRP5 ¹¹¹		pancreas
Sizzled ¹¹²			ventrolateral mesoderm

*The official nomenclature for FRPs is shown in boldface
(<http://www.ana.ed.ac.uk/rnusse/wntwindow.html>)

FRPs

Recently a family of secreted proteins containing a cystein-rich domain (CRD) similar to that of fzs has been identified in vertebrates^{54, 98-102} (see fig. 2). Many different groups have worked with Frizzled Related Protein (FRPs) and each of them has given different names to the proteins, so the FRP nomenclature is complex: Frizbee, Fritz, SARP, SFRP, Sizzled and SDF have been used to refer to these proteins. In table 4 the different FRPs are classified.

FRPs can bind wnts directly and the CRD is necessary and sufficient for this interaction^{54, 100, 102}. The proposed function for FRPs is to antagonize wnt proteins; different FRPs are able to block xwnt8 induced axis duplication in frogs^{54, 100}. Furthermore, wnt1-mediated accumulation of β -catenin is inhibited by Frzb1¹⁰⁸. Interestingly, although Frzb1 (=FRP3) can also bind to wnt5a, it does not block the activity of wnt5a in *Xenopus*¹⁰⁸.

Apart from modulating β -catenin levels some FRPs have been shown to influence the sensitivity to apoptosis^{104, 113}; overexpression of SARP1 (=FRP2) has been shown to make cells more resistant to apoptosis, but overexpression of SARP2 (=FRP1) has been shown to make cells more susceptible to apoptosis¹⁰⁴. Stimulators of apoptosis, like serum deprivation, have been shown to induce hslFRP (=FRP1) expression in HBL-100 cells¹¹³.

Coreceptors

The complexity of receptor-ligand specificity may be further increased by co-receptors such as proteoglycans^{114, 115}. In analogy with FGF signaling, proteoglycans may be low-affinity coreceptors for wnts, which would serve to increase the local concentration of ligand available for binding to high-affinity receptors¹¹⁵. Alternatively, proteoglycans in the extracellular matrix may directly regulate the formation of wnt-fz complexes¹¹⁴. A third possibility is that the ability of wnt-fz complexes to transduce their signal may be regulated by glycosaminoglycan interactions¹¹⁴.

Figure 4. Examples of proposed frizzled signal transduction pathways

Ligand	wingless/wnt	wingless	xwnt5a
	↓	↓	↓
Receptor	Dfz2	Fz	rfz2
	↓	↓	↓
Coupling molecule	Dishevelled	Dishevelled	G-protein
	↓	↓	↓
Signal transduction molecule	Zeste-white 3	Rho A	Inositol P3
	↓	↓	↓
Second messenger	Armadillo	MAP kinase cascade	Ca ²⁺ release
	↓		
Effector	DTCF		
Species	Drosophila	Drosophila	Zebrafish

4.3 Frizzled signal transduction pathway

Not all fz homologues functionally activate the same signal transduction pathway. In fig. 4 different signal transduction pathways are shown. Even in Drosophila, the situation is complex. Fz and Dfz2 are redundant receptors for the ligand. The cytoplasmic sequence of Dfz2 preferentially activates the Armadillo (arm)/ β -catenin pathway and the cytoplasmic sequence of fz preferentially activates the planar polarity cascade. Both receptors can activate either pathway but with different efficiencies¹¹⁶. In mammals a classification can also be made: rfz1 and

Figure 5. Schematic representation of different signal transduction pathways of frizzled receptors. Proteins from the wnt family can bind to frizzled receptors. This causes activation of the signal transduction molecule dishevelled (dvl) which in turn can activate the JNK pathway and can inhibit the enzyme GSK3- β . This enzyme is responsible for the phosphorylation of β -catenin, a protein that can act as a second messenger in this cascade. β -Catenin is phosphorylated in a complex with, among other components, Axin and adenomatous polyposis coli (APC) protein which is a first step in its degradation by the ubiquitin proteasome pathway. β -Catenin can activate transcription factors from the T-cell factor/lymphocyte enhancer factor (TCF/LEF) family, and can form a complex with cell adhesion molecules of the cadherin family and PECAM.

mfz7 activate the β -catenin pathway and rfz2, mfz3, mfz4 and mfz6 induce protein kinase C (PKC) activation and Ca^{2+} release¹¹⁷. A schematic representation of the best characterized signal transduction pathway for fz is given in fig. 5. The different components of the signal transduction route will be briefly described below.

G-proteins

Although serpentine receptors are generally G-protein coupled, there is no experimental evidence of a direct interaction between fz and G-proteins. They lack the most conserved motifs that are found in nearly all G-protein coupled receptors¹⁰. This does, however, not exclude the involvement of G-proteins in their signaling. In fact, there is increasing evidence that G-proteins are involved in wnt signaling. Rat fz2 cooperates with *Xenopus* wnt5a to activate a G-protein dependent pathway when overexpressed in zebrafish embryos¹¹⁸. Furthermore, in mouse F9 teratocarcinoma cells rat fz1 expression promotes differentiation into endoderm via pathways that require specific G-proteins¹¹⁹. In addition, regulators of G protein signaling (RGS) proteins inhibit embryonic responses to wnt8 in *Xenopus* assays, suggesting that wnt signaling operates via a G-protein-dependent receptor or mechanism¹²⁰.

Dishevelled

The most upstream component of the wnt-fz signal transduction cascade, below fz itself, is dishevelled (dvl). Three murine homologues have been described¹²¹⁻¹²³. The extensive overlap in spatial and temporal expression patterns and the high homologies suggest that these genes have mutually redundant functions. This is in accordance with the observation that dvl1- knockout mice do not show any structural defects and reproduce normally¹²⁴.

The biochemical mechanism through which dvl transduces the wnt signal remains unclear, but it has been suggested that, in response to the wnt signal, dvl becomes hyperphosphorylated and translocates to the membrane, where the activated dvl transduces the signal to the next signaling molecule^{39, 125}. Affinity purification of a complex containing dvl and several associated proteins revealed the association of dvl with Casein Kinase 2 (CK2). In vitro and in vivo, CK2 efficiently phosphorylates dvl but the functional significance of this phosphorylation is not clear¹²⁶.

Dvl structure

Dvl encodes a ubiquitously expressed cytoplasmatic protein containing 4 domains that are highly conserved among all known homologues. At the N terminus, dvl contains a *Dishevelled-Axin* (DIX) domain similar to a region of Axin, a protein implicated in wnt signaling in vertebrates¹²⁷. The central region contains a short

Figure 6. A schematic representation of dvl with the four conserved domains. A DIX domain similar to a region of Axin¹²⁷, a short basic domain with so far no described function, a PDZ domain that binds to specific C-terminal sequences of membrane proteins and/or to other PDZ domains¹²⁸. The DEP domain is also found in GTPase-activating protein families¹²⁹. (For an explanation of the abbreviations see text)

basic domain and a *PSD-95/SAP90, discs-large, ZO-1* (PDZ) domain, that has been described to be a modular protein-protein interaction domain that binds to specific C-terminal sequences of membrane proteins and/or to other PDZ domains that have a role in protein-protein interactions¹²⁸. The C-terminal region contains a *dishevelled-egl 10-pleckstrin* (DEP) domain, which is also found in GTPase-activating protein families, and is thought to function in G-protein signaling¹³⁰. A schematic representation of the structure of dvl is given in fig. 6.

Dvl signaling pathways

Activation of dvl proteins in *Drosophila* can induce two signal transduction pathways; 1. Dvl inhibits the degradation of arm/ β -catenin by inhibiting glycogen synthase kinase 3 β (GSK-3 β), which will be further explained below, and 2. Dvl is able to induce planar polarity by activating c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) and RhoA^{130, 131}. Also in mammalian cells dvl is able to activate JNK¹³². The DEP domain of dvl is essential for JNK activation, whereas for the upregulation of β -catenin all domains of dvl are necessary^{131, 132}. Recently, has been found that the

small G-proteins cdc42 or Rac, which are involved in JNK activation by many stimuli, do not play a major role in dvl-mediated JNK activation¹³².

β-Catenin

β-Catenin is a member of the *Armadillo* repeat protein family¹³³. It is present at the plasma membrane, the cytoplasm and in the nucleus¹³⁴⁻¹³⁶. The wnt pathway is an important regulator of cytoplasmatic β-catenin by controlling the β-catenin degradation. Increasing steady state levels of endogenous β-catenin result in its accumulation in the nucleus. There, β-catenin can bind to transcription factors such as lymphoid enhancing factor (LEF) and T-cell factor (TCF) which regulate gene transcription^{137, 138}. The expression of several genes has been described to be regulated by β-catenin (see table 5).

The β-catenin at the plasma membrane is involved in cell-adhesion by linking cadherins to the actin cytoskeleton. Cadherins are Ca²⁺-dependent adhesion molecules that mediate cell-cell interactions at adherens junctions¹³⁹. β-Catenin

Table 5. Genes shown to be regulated by the β-catenin/TCF-LEF complex

Gene	Organism/system	Up/down
C-myc ¹⁴²	human colon cancer	up
Cyclin D ¹⁴³	human colon cancer	up
Tcf-I ¹⁴⁴	human colon cancer	up
C-jun ¹⁴⁵	human colon cancer	up
Fra-I ¹⁴⁵	human colon cancer	up
UPAR ¹⁴⁵	human colon cancer	up
Matrix metalloproteinase MMP-7 ¹⁴⁶	human colon cancer	up
CD44 ¹⁴⁷	human colon cancer	up
Fibronectin ¹⁴⁸	xenopus	up
BMP4 ¹⁴⁹	xenopus	down
Connexin 43 ^{150, 151}	rat cardiomyocytes and xenopus	up
Connexin 30 ¹⁵²	xenopus	up
Retinoic acid receptor gamma ¹⁵²	xenopus	up
Nacre ¹⁵³	zebrafish	up
WISP ¹⁵⁴	wnt-1 transformed mouse cells	up
Cyclooxygenase-2 ¹⁵⁵	mouse (wnt1)	up
sFRP2 ¹⁵⁶	mouse (wnt4)	up

(<http://www.ana.ed.ac.uk/rnusse/wntwindow.html>)

links the cytoplasmatic tail of cadherin molecules to α -catenin, which in turn is linked to actin filaments. Apart from its interaction with cadherins at the plasma membrane, β -catenin can also bind to platelet-endothelial cell adhesion molecule-1 (PECAM-1)¹⁴⁰. This glycoprotein is commonly used as an endothelium-specific marker. It has been demonstrated that the PECAM-1/ β -catenin association functions to regulate β -catenin localization and, moreover, to modulate β -catenin tyrosine phosphorylation levels¹⁴¹ (see fig. 5).

Interaction of β -catenin pools

Analysis of mutant forms of β -catenin in *Drosophila* and *Xenopus* has demonstrated that the β -catenin at the plasma membrane and the β -catenin in the cytoplasm and nucleus are in distinguishable pools^{157, 158}. However, recent data indicate that regulation of cytoplasmatic β -catenin can influence β -catenin at the membrane and vice versa^{63, 157, 159}. Therefore a dual role can be anticipated for the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway; on the one hand the nuclear β -catenin regulates the cell cycle by turning on oncogenes and other cell cycle regulators, and on the other hand β -catenin at the cell membrane regulates cell adhesion and polarity by modifying the cytoskeleton.

β -catenin degradation complex

In the absence of activated dvl, cytoplasmic β -catenin levels are low. GSK-3 β phosphorylates the serine and threonine residues at the N-terminus of β -catenin¹⁶⁰. Phosphorylation of β -catenin is promoted in the quaternary complex between these two proteins and other proteins like the scaffold protein Axin,^{161, 162} and the adenomatous polyposis coli protein (APC)^{163, 164}. In uncomplexed form β -catenin appears to be a poor substrate for GSK-3 β ^{160, 165}. The phosphorylated β -catenin is degraded by the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway^{166, 167}. Activation of dvl inhibits GSK-3 β activity, thereby promoting the elevation of intracellular β -catenin levels and accumulation of β -catenin in the nucleus.

Axin

Axin serves as a scaffold protein to coordinate the regulation of β -catenin levels. It possesses a regulator of G-protein signaling domain for APC binding, a β -catenin binding domain and a DIX domain^{161, 162}. In addition Axin binds to protein phosphatases 2A (PP2A) and 2C (PP2C), which modulate the phosphorylation of APC and Axin respectively¹⁶⁸⁻¹⁷⁰.

Apart from its role in the wnt-fz signal transduction, it has recently been reported that Axin also functions as a JNK activator, like dvl itself¹⁷¹.

APC

APC is a component of the β -catenin degradation complex as it binds directly to β -catenin by two sets of related repeats towards the centre of the molecule¹⁷². APC

is a good substrate for GSK-3 β in vitro and association of β -catenin with APC appears to depend on phosphorylation of APC by GSK-3 β ^{173, 174}. Two APC genes and several protein isoforms have been described^{175, 178}.

Based on its role in β -catenin degradation, APC can be predicted to act as a functional antagonist for β -catenin, but the opposite has been found in *Xenopus*¹⁷⁹. Axis duplication in *Xenopus* embryos is known to be induced by β -catenin overexpression but also by APC overexpression¹⁷⁹. APC might have additional functions in the wnt signaling independent of its role in the downregulation of β -catenin^{173, 174}.

In mammals APC was discovered as a tumor suppressor gene before it was known to be involved in β -catenin degradation. Mutations in this gene not only lead to the development of familial colon cancer, but also to other sporadic colorectal cancers¹⁸⁰. The activation of β -catenin signaling, either by APC inactivation but also by mutations in β -catenin, plays a key role in both colon cancer and melanoma¹⁸¹⁻¹⁸³.

Plakoglobin

Plakoglobin is a structural component of desmosomes, a cell adhesion complex. In addition, like β -catenin it is a component of the cadherin-catenin complexes in another type of cell adhesion complex, the adherens junctions. Furthermore, both β -catenin and plakoglobin are able to bind to PECAM-1¹⁴¹. β -catenin and plakoglobin (which is also called γ -catenin) are highly homologous proteins. In PC12 cells wnt1 expression results in an increase of plakoglobin¹⁸⁴. It has been suggested that plakoglobin, like β -catenin, can act as a transcription factor in the wnt cascade¹⁸⁵. Plakoglobin can bind to LEF-1, and, when overexpressed in mammalian cells, enhances LEF-1 directed gene transcription¹⁸⁶. However, in vitro the formation of a plakoglobin-LEF/TCF DNA complex is very inefficient compared to a complex containing β -catenin-LEF DNA. Moreover, in plakoglobin-transfected cells plakoglobin-LEF/TCF-DNA complexes were not formed; rather, endogenous β -catenin, which is upregulated by plakoglobin transfection, formed a β -catenin-LEF DNA complex¹⁸⁶. This indicates that, although theoretically possible, plakoglobin is not likely to replace β -catenin in the wnt signaling.

4.4 Potential involvement of the frizzled cascade in other signal transduction pathways

Members of the wnt-fz cascade are able to influence other signaling pathways. The Notch gene encodes a receptor implicated in a signaling pathway essential for many developmental processes in *Drosophila* and vertebrates. The N-terminal part of dvl binds to the C-terminus of Notch, providing a mechanism by which Notch and wnt interact. Genetic experiments in *Drosophila* have revealed that wnt, through dvl, can inhibit Notch signaling, while an increase in Notch gene also dose-dependently reduced the action of dvl¹⁸⁷. In other systems, however, Notch and

wnt signals do not appear to interact¹⁸⁸. The Notch pathway has been described to be involved in the development of Alzheimer disease¹⁸⁹. The wnt-fz cascade is also directly involved in Alzheimers disease through β -catenin. The Alzheimers disease gene presenilin has been found to interact with β -catenin¹⁹⁰. The function of this interaction is not yet clarified, but presenilin mutations alter the intracellular trafficking of β -catenin after activation of the wnt-fz cascade¹⁹¹. Epidermal growth factor (EGF) and insulin-like growth factor (IGF) signaling can also interact with β -catenin, since EGF¹ and IGF¹ signaling promote its tyrosine phosphorylation and increase cytoplasmatic β -catenin levels^{192, 193}.

5 Frizzled cascade in development of the heart

In several studies it has been shown that genes that are expressed during cardiac development are re-expressed during remodeling of the heart. This phenomenon is called a re-expression of the fetal gene expression pattern¹⁹⁴. Wnt-fz signaling is involved in a variety of developmental processes, including cell proliferation, differentiation and epithelial-mesenchymal interactions, through which it contributes to the development of tissues and organs such as the limbs, the brain, the reproductive tract and the kidney^{195, 196}.

In *Drosophila* wg, the homologue for wnt, is required for heart development. In absence of the wg function, overexpression of dvl can restore heart formation, indicating a role for the wg-fz cascade in this process¹⁹⁷. Although cardiac morphogenesis in *Drosophila* and vertebrates is different, the wnt-fz cascade might also play a role in vertebrate heart formation.

5.1 Expression of frizzled cascade during vertebrate heart development

Members of the wnt cascade are expressed in the heart during embryogenesis and are able to modulate cardiogenesis. During mouse heart morphogenesis, wnt8 is expressed in cardiomyocytes from 8.5 until 17.5 days after conception¹⁹⁸. Wnt5a is expressed in neonatal rat hearts¹⁵⁹. In birds, wnts also play a role in cardiac development; wnt11 is expressed in precardiac mesoderm, and is able to induce cardiac differentiation in noncardiac tissue¹⁹⁹.

Several fz homologues are expressed in the heart during development. In neonatal rat hearts fz1, fz2 and the rat homologue of mouse fz4^{16, 159} are expressed. fz7 expression is found in the embryonic *Xenopus* heart²⁰⁰ and mouse fz10 RNA has been found in the mouse heart during late embryonic development⁵⁵. Fzrp1 is also expressed during murine cardiomorphogenesis¹⁹⁸. These expression patterns indicate a role for the pathway in cardiac development, but the mechanism remains to be elucidated.

5.2 Proposed working mechanisms for the frizzled cascade during cardiac development

Wnt-cascade in neural crest

The neural crest plays an important role in cardiovascular development. It participates in outflow tract septation, media formation of the pharyngeal arch arteries and it contributes to parasympathetic cardiac innervation^{124, 201-203}. Wnt1 and wnt3a are expressed in neural crest cells and have been found to play a role in cardiac morphogenesis^{153, 204}. In cultured mouse embryos, the inhibition of wnt1 expression has been described to be associated with abnormal cardiac development, probably mediated by neural crest cell disruption²⁰⁴. In *Xenopus* FrzA, a secreted homologue of fz, has been shown to antagonize the function of xwnt8¹⁰⁵. XfzA is expressed in *Xenopus* in neural crest cells, neural crest-derived tissues and in the developing heart¹⁰⁵. Furthermore, the mouse fz4 gene is localized in a region deleted in mice with cardiac neural crest-derived abnormalities²⁰⁵. These findings indicate a role for the wnt-fz cascade during neural crest cell patterning.

A possible role for the wnt-fz cascade in neural crest could be the regulation of connexin-43 expression. Gap junction channels composed of connexin-43 are essential for normal heart function. The analysis of transgenic and knockout mice with perturbations in connexin-43 function has revealed its important role in cardiac development. This probably involves the modulation of cardiac crest migration and function^{206, 207}. Wnt1 is able to induce connexin-43 expression in cultured PC12 cells¹⁵⁰ and in rat neonatal cardiomyocytes¹⁵¹. The inductive effect of wnt is transcriptionally mediated, as was shown by transfecting a connexin-43 promotor construct^{150, 151}. Enhanced expression of connexin-43 increased cardiomyocyte cell coupling¹⁵¹. These findings indicate a possible mechanism by which the wnt cascade can affect heart morphogenesis.

Fz-cascade and the β -catenin/N-cadherin complex

During early vertebrate heart development the expression pattern of the β -catenin/N-cadherin complex suggests its involvement in morphoregulation and the stabilization of cardiomyocyte differentiation. It has also been shown that perturbation of N-cadherin inhibits normal early heart development²⁰⁸. A mechanism by which the wnt cascade could be involved in this process has been studied in neonatal rat cardiomyocytes and fibroblasts in culture¹⁵⁹. Media containing wnt3a or wnt5a both induced aggregation of cardiomyocytes co-cultured with fibroblasts. In the absence of fibroblasts the cardiomyocytes did not aggregate. Media containing wnt3a or wnt5a induced increased levels of both β -catenin/N-cadherin complexes and free β -catenin in the cardiomyocytes. The transcription of β -catenin and N-cadherin RNA was not upregulated, indicating that wnt inhibited the degradation of the proteins. Free β -catenin is able to bind to TCF proteins and induce gene transcription. TCF-mediated gene transcription was, however, not involved in the aggregation process since overexpression of neither a dominant positive nor a dominant negative construct of TCF influenced cardiomyocyte aggregation. The formation of cardiomyocyte aggregates was

dependent on N-cadherin-mediated cell-cell adhesion, as perturbation of N-cadherin disrupted the aggregates. These findings suggest that the wnt cascade could be involved in the architectural arrangement of cardiomyocytes during cardiac development through the stabilization of the β -catenin/cadherin complex.

Plakoglobin and cardiac development

Plakoglobin is essential for heart development, as demonstrated in the plakoglobin null mutant mice^{209, 210}. These mice die from embryonic day 10.5 onward, due to severe heart defects. The cardiac ventricle often ruptures and blood is found between the cardiomyocytes. This tissue instability correlates with the absence of desmosomes in heart. Extra adherens junctions are formed in the heart, which contain desmosomal proteins, but apparently this is not sufficient to maintain the architecture of intercalated discs and stabilization of heart tissue^{209, 210}. The expression of plakoglobin can not be detected before stage 13 in the myocardium of the developing chick heart²⁰⁸, indicating an important role at the later stages of heart development for the desmosomes and plakoglobin. β -Catenin expression has been found at much earlier stages in heart development, but because null mutant mice do not live beyond the gastrula stage, the role of β -catenin in heart development can not be studied²¹¹.

6 Frizzled cascade in cardiac disease

6.1 Functions of the frizzled cascade in cells relevant for the cardiovascular system.

Frizzled signaling in endothelial cells

Neovascularization is important in ischemic heart disease. It requires endothelial cell proliferation as well as endothelial cell migration. Endothelial cell culture experiments suggest that the wnt cascade is involved in the proliferation of endothelial cells^{212, 213}. Wnt1 expression in primary endothelial cells induced an increase in the pool of free β -catenin and increased LIF/TCF mediated gene transcription. Moreover, wnt1 was capable of stimulating proliferation of these cells²¹². FrzA (FRP1), a secreted homologue of fz, which is expressed in highly differentiated cells like neurons and cardiomyocytes, has been found to reduce the proliferation of endothelial cells. It was suggested that this reduction in proliferation resulted from antagonism of wnt family members²¹⁴. These findings suggest that wnt signaling might be involved in neovascularization.

VEGF is a major modulator of angiogenesis and is known to play a role during the development of new blood vessels after MI^{28, 215}. In vitro, VEGF is able to stimulate tyrosine phosphorylation of β -catenin in endothelial cells²¹⁵. It has been demonstrated that tyrosine phosphorylation of β -catenin is associated with disruption of the β -catenin/ cadherin complex²¹⁶. This suggests that the stimulation of blood vessel formation after MI by VEGF may, at least in part, be β -catenin-dependent.

β -Catenin in cardiomyocytes

Cell adhesion

Cardiomyocytes are terminally differentiated cells that have a rate of proliferation that has been estimated by different researchers between very low and completely absent. A role for the wnt-fz signaling pathway in their proliferation seems therefore unlikely. However, β -catenin is also present in the adherens junctions, which are located in the intercalated discs. These intercalated discs are situated at the junction of two neighboring cardiomyocytes and are, besides in cell-cell adhesion, also involved in the electrical coupling between the cells. In a guinea pig model of congestive heart failure it was demonstrated that, although the level of β -catenin remained unchanged, it was relocated from the intercalated discs to the cytoplasm in a large fraction of left ventricular cardiomyocytes. Both the amount and distribution of N-cadherin remained unchanged in this model²¹⁷.

Cardiomyocyte cell culture experiments have demonstrated that both wnt3a and wnt5a can stabilize the β -catenin/N-cadherin complexes¹⁵⁹, so the relocation of β -catenin away from intercalated discs in failing cardiomyocytes may be induced by a change of wnt signaling.

Electrical coupling

Apart from adherens junctions, gap junctions are also important for cardiac function. Connexin-43 is necessary for the electrical coupling of cardiomyocytes. Wnt1 is able to induce connexin-43 expression in cultured rat neonatal cardiomyocytes¹⁵¹. The accumulating connexin-43 was observed to be colocalized with β -catenin in the junctional membrane in response to wnt1 signaling; moreover, forced expression of connexin-43 reduced the transcription activity of β -catenin¹⁵¹. This suggests mutual regulation of both proteins.

6.2 Frizzled and frizzled like proteins in cardiovascular disease

Fz2 expression is upregulated in the rat heart during hypertrophy²¹⁸. One of the proto-oncogenes that are considered to be regulators of the development of cardiac hypertrophy is c-jun¹⁹⁴. In colorectal carcinomas, it has been shown that β -catenin acts as a regulator of the expression of c-jun¹⁴⁵. This suggests that the wnt-fz cascade is involved in the regulation of the development of cardiac hypertrophy. Fz2 is also expressed by the fibroblast-like cells during their migration and proliferation after MI but this expression is restricted to the migratory phase³⁸, suggesting a role for the wnt-fz cascade in this process.

Schumann and coworkers have reported the expression levels of sLRP3 and sLRP4 to be elevated in hearts of patients with dilated cardiomyopathy and coronary heart disease compared to non-failing donor hearts¹¹⁰. β -Catenin levels tended to be decreased in myocardial samples with high sLRP3 and 4 expression levels, suggesting an active role for the wnt-fz cascade in failing myocardium¹¹⁰.

7 Hypotheses

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, the wnt-fz cascade plays an important role in developmental and pathological processes as diverse as organogenesis and cancer. There is increasing evidence that the wnt-fz cascade is also implicated in cardiac development and the repair process after MI.

In a previous study we have demonstrated that fz2 expression was upregulated in the myofibroblasts during their migration and proliferation in the infarct. Because genes that are expressed in the heart during cardiac remodeling often are involved in cardiac development, the first hypothesis of the present thesis is that the fz2 receptor plays a role during the development of the heart.

The wnt-fz cascade has been shown to have a role in architectural control in several processes. The second hypothesis is that the wnt-fz cascade has a role in the architectural control of infarct healing, which includes cell proliferation, migration, alignment and apoptosis.

In vitro experiments suggest a role for the wnt-fz cascade in endothelial cell proliferation. Therefore the third hypothesis is that this signal transduction pathway is involved in neovascularization during infarct healing.

Outline of this thesis

This thesis is divided into four parts; in the first part, expression of the wnt-fz cascade in the heart after MI and during cardiac development will be described. In the second part, the signal transduction of fz will be further examined in in vivo and in vitro experiments. In the third part, the function of the wnt-fz cascade during infarct healing will be discussed. In the final part, the findings of the experimental chapters are discussed and put into a broader context.

Chapter 2

FRIZZLED EXPRESSION IN THE MOUSE HEART AFTER MI

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Abstract

Fz proteins constitute a large family of seven-transmembrane receptors that function in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway. They are widely expressed in different tissues in vertebrates. Recently a family of secreted frizzled homologues (FRPs) has been described. Several frizzled proteins and FRPs are expressed during cardiac development. It is known that genes that play a role during heart development can be upregulated during cardiac remodeling due to pathology. In a previous study we reported the expression of fz2 in the myofibroblasts in the early wound healing phase after MI in rats. In the present study we demonstrate the upregulation of the fz1, 2 and 7 and the FRP1, 2 and 3 gene expression seven days after MI in mice. Furthermore, we demonstrate that in mice, like in rats, the fz2 expression is localized to the borderzone of the infarct 7 days after MI, indicating that the mouse is a suitable animal model for these studies. These findings further suggest a role for the wnt-fz cascade in the wound healing after MI.

Introduction

The fz proteins constitute a large family of seven-transmembrane receptors with at least 10 members in mammals^{40, 46, 55}. These serpentine receptors function in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway. All fz proteins share the following features; a signal sequence at the N-terminus, a conserved motif of 10 invariantly spaced CRD, a seven transmembrane region and a cytoplasmatic tail⁴⁰. Most family members are widely expressed in a variety of tissues, with overlapping patterns⁴⁰. The fz and the wnts consist both of extensive families in vertebrates, and although it is likely that each member has a specific function, this raises questions regarding specificity and function of the wnt-fz interaction, which still remains unclear. Recently, a family of secreted Frizzled-Like-Proteins (FRPs) has been described. Five FRPs have been identified so far. These proteins are proposed to scavenge wnt proteins and thereby antagonize their function.

Several fzs and FRPs are expressed in the heart during vertebrate development^{46, 55, 198, 200}. In a number of studies it was shown that genes, which are expressed during cardiac development, are re-expressed during remodeling of the heart. This phenomenon is called a re-expression of the fetal gene expression pattern¹⁹⁴. The expression of fzs and FRPs during cardiac development could suggest a role for these genes in cardiac pathology.

In previous studies we have found the upregulation of fz2 during cardiac hypertrophy and after MI in rats^{38, 218}. Furthermore it was reported that the expression levels of FRP3 and FRP4 were elevated in hearts of patients with dilated cardiomyopathy and coronary heart disease¹¹⁰. In order to achieve a more complete understanding of the role of frizzled and FRP genes during cardiac remodeling a characterization of the expression of these families is necessary. The present study was undertaken to study the expression of fz and FRP homologues in a mouse model of MI with RT-PCR. Furthermore we wanted to localize the fz2 expression

at 7 days after MI using in situ hybridization, to study if this was similar to the pattern found in the rat model for MI³⁸.

Material and methods

Animals and surgery

Adult male Swiss mice were used in this study. MI was induced as described previously³⁸. The infarcted hearts were used if the infarct area was approximately 30% or more of the left ventricle.

Reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction

The expression of the genes was determined in left ventricles of SHAM operated animals and of left ventricles containing the infarct area, 7 days after the induction of MI as described previously and RNA samples obtained from three different hearts were used. Briefly, total RNA was isolated from left ventricles, which contained the infarct area, and sham left ventricles by LiCl/urea method²¹⁹. Aliquots of 500 ng of total RNA were reverse-transcribed using 100 units of Moloney murine leukemia virus (MoMuLV) reverse transcriptase. After amplification by PCR with the primers described in table 1 (1 min at 94 °C, 1 min at 55 °C and 1 minute at 72 °C for 30 cycles), the PCR fragments were separated on ethidium bromide-containing agarose gel.

Table 1. Primer-sets for the fz PCRs

Gene	Upper primer	Lower primer
Mfz1	GCCCTGCGAACCCACTAAAGTATA	CCCGTCCTCTGCAAACCTGTCGTT
Mfz2	GTTTCTGGGTGAGGCGATTGT	CAGCAGGAAGGATGAACCGAT
Mfz3	TGTCGGCCTCTACGACG	CTGAAACACCAATCCGG
Mfz4	CGCTCATCCAGTACGGC	CAGCCATCCAAATATCCG
Mfz5	GTCACACCCGCTCTACAACAAGGT	CTCGTAGTGATGTGGTTGTGCTC
Mfz6	GGTTCCTTAAGCGAAACCG	TTTTCTTCAAGCGTCGGA
Mfz7	TGGTGCTTGCTCTTCTGGGCG	CACGGAGGAATGGCTTGGTCG
Mfz8	TGCCAAGAGATCACGGTGCCG	AGTGTCCGGGTTGCCCTGCTC
MFRP1	CAGCATTTCAAAGACTAACGTCG	TGAAACATCTCCTCGGATAG
MFRP2	TTACAAGCTGAACGGCGT	GCAACCTAAGTGCACGGTA
MFRP3	CAGACCCAGGCTAACGC	TTACATTTGCAACGTTCCG
MFRP4	CGATGAGCTGCCGGTCTA	GAGTTTAACCAGGGCGATAC
GAPDH	ACGGATTTGGCCGTATTG	CGTCAGATCCACGACGGA

In situ hybridization

The expression of the *fz2* gene was studied by in situ hybridization. These experiments were performed on paraffin sections (5 μ m) from formalin-fixed infarcted rat hearts. The in situ hybridizations were performed as described previously³⁸. Briefly, a radiolabeled riboprobe was transcribed from a 566-bp *fz2* polymerase chain reaction product, obtained by amplification of reverse-transcribed RNA isolated from rat heart as previously described³⁸ (primer set *fz2* upper GCCTCAACAGGCTGGACCCG, lower GGTGCACCCCCCTCCCGAGT) and cloned into a pCRII cloning vector (Invitrogen Corp., San Diego, CA). The identity and orientation of the polymerase chain reaction products were verified by sequencing. RNA transcription was performed using an RNA labeling kit (Amersham, Little Chalfond, UK) in the presence of [³⁵S]-UTP. The sections were hybridized overnight at 55°C with the radiolabeled probes. After washing the sections, unbound probe was digested with RNase (20 μ g/ml; Promega), the sections were dehydrated, dried, dipped in photographic emulsion (Kodak NTB2; Technorama, Zürich, Switzerland) and exposed for 1 to 2 weeks in the dark at 4°C. After development, the sections were briefly stained with hematoxylin (1:500; DAKO).

Figure 1. The RT-PCR reaction of different *fz* homologues in the left ventricle 7 days after MI visualized on an ethidium bromide containing agarose gel. The expression of *fz1*, 2 and to a lesser extent 7 appeared to be upregulated after MI compared to the SHAM.

Figure 2. The RT-PCR reaction of different FRP homologues 7 days after MI. The expression of FRP1, 2 and 3 appeared to be upregulated after MI compared to the SHAM.

Results

Using RT-PCR, the expression of fz homologues was studied in the mouse model for MI. The transcripts of all fz homologues could be detected in the adult mouse heart (fig. 1). The expression of fz1 and 2 was clearly upregulated seven days after MI compared to the SHAM operated controls. To a lesser extent the expression of fz7 was also upregulated. The other fz homologues (fz3-fz6 and fz8) showed no regulation of their expression after MI.

The expression of the FRPs was also studied in the mouse model for MI. Fig. 2 shows that FRP1, and to a lesser extent FRP2 and 3 were upregulated seven days after MI, compared to the SHAM operated controls. FRP4 was only weakly expressed in the adult heart and its expression was not regulated after MI.

In a previous study we localized the fz2 expression to the myofibroblasts in the granulation tissue after MI in rats. To confirm that in mice this expression pattern was similar, we performed in situ hybridization on infarcted mouse hearts seven days after infarction (n=2). At this timepoint the necrotic area is still present in the infarcted left ventricular wall. The expression signal of fz2 was mainly localized over the border zone around the area of necrosis, but some signal could also be observed over the viable cardiomyocytes (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Dark field image of the in situ hybridization of fz2 on a mouse left ventricle 7 days after MI (A). The white spots represent the expression signal. Signal could clearly be observed over the borderzone of the infarct (BZ). Over the necrotic area some background signal could be observed (N) (magnification x200). Dark field image of the in situ hybridization of fz2 on a second mouse left ventricle 7 days after MI (B). The white spots represent the expression signal. Intense signal could be seen in the borderzone (BZ) between the viable myocytes (VM) and the necrotic area (N). Some signal could also be observed above the viable myocytes (magnification x200).

Discussion

Seven days after MI the expression of fz1, 2 and to a lesser extent fz7 are upregulated in the murine heart. We localized the fz2 expression to the borderzone of the necrotic area. Furthermore, FRP1 and 2 and to a lesser extent FRP3 were also upregulated 7 days after MI in mice. The fz1 and fz2 genes in mice and rat are very similar. The expression similarity of fz2 after MI in rats³⁸ and in mice suggest that both the experimental rat and mouse model can be used to study the role for fz2 during infarct healing. The regulation of the fz1 expression seems, however, to be different between the species; in rat the fz1 expression is not upregulated after MI³⁸, whereas we did observe upregulation of the fz1 expression after MI in mice.

So far the only frizzled genes described in rats are *fz1* and *fz2*⁴⁶, therefore no comparison could be made for the expression of other frizzled genes in rats and mice. In humans *fz1*, 2 and 7 are also expressed in adult hearts⁴⁵. These genes might participate in the cardiac wound healing process following MI in humans.

The FRP homologues are proposed to function as antagonists for the *fz* proteins. The CRD domains of *fzs* and FRPs are proposed to be involved in wnt binding^{54, 100, 102}. The CRDs of the FRPs can be divided into two groups; FRP1 and 2 are very similar and FRP3 and FRP4 are very similar (see chapter 1). FRP1 and 2 are more upregulated after MI. Their CRDs are very different from the CRDs of the *fz1*, 2 and 7, the upregulated *fzs* after MI. Although the precise mechanism of the wnt-*fz* and wnt-FRP interaction still has to be clarified, this might suggest that the upregulated FRPs interact with different wnts as *fz1*, 2 and 7. So far the expression or role of wnt proteins in cardiac remodeling has not been studied, but the expression of wnt1, 8 and 11 during vertebrate cardiac development^{198, 199, 204} suggest a role for these wnts during the wound healing after MI.

Another study in humans reported that the expression levels of FRP1 and 2 were not elevated in hearts of patients with dilated cardiomyopathy and coronary heart disease compared to non-failing donor hearts, in contrast to FRP3 and 4, whose expression levels were upregulated¹¹⁰. These findings are not in agreement with our observations. This difference could be explained by the species studied. Moreover, both studies investigated different cardiac remodeling processes.

FRPs have been shown to influence the sensitivity to apoptosis^{104, 113}. Overexpression of SARP1 (=FRP2) has been shown to make cells more resistant to apoptosis, but overexpression of SARP2 (=FRP1) has been shown to make cells more susceptible to apoptosis¹⁰⁴. Apoptosis is involved in the healing process after MI; it contributes to the death of cardiomyocytes and other cells like endothelial cells and fibroblasts. A role for FRP1 and 2 in the apoptotic process after MI could therefore be anticipated. Opposite roles in apoptosis have been described for FRP1 and FRP2¹⁰⁴, but both FRPs were upregulated seven days after MI. The exact functions and interaction patterns of the FRP family still have to be clarified, but an explanation might be that FRP1 and 2 exhibit effects on different cells in the infarct area. No expression localization studies were done to verify this theory.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates the expression of *fz1*, 2 and 7 and FRP1, 2 and 3, seven days after MI in mice, suggesting a role for the wnt-*fz* signal transduction pathway in the remodeling process after MI. Furthermore we localized the *fz2* expression to the borderzone of the infarct area, which is similar to the *fz2* expression in the rat model for MI. This indicates that also the mouse model for MI can be used to study the role for *fz2* in the healing process after MI.

Chapter 3

FRIZZLED 2 RNA EXPRESSION AND PROTEIN LOCALIZATION IN INTESTINAL EPITHELIAL CELLS DURING THEIR MIGRATION ALONG THE VILLI.

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Submitted

Abstract

Fz2, a homologue of the *Drosophila* tissue polarity gene *frizzled*, is expressed in myofibroblasts migrating into the granulation tissue in the heart after myocardial infarction, a highly organized process. In order to study if the family of frizzled receptors is also expressed in other highly organized proliferation/migration processes, we studied the fz expression in the crypt villus units of the rat and mouse intestine. The proliferation and migration of epithelial cells in the crypt-villus units is also highly organized. Furthermore an antibody was produced against the third extracellular loop of fz2 in order to study the receptor at protein level. We demonstrated that in the mouse intestine fz1-7 were expressed and that the expression of fz2 was predominantly localized in the crypts, but that the fz2 protein was localized at the membrane of the villus epithelial cells. The presence of fz2 expression in this highly organized cellular proliferation and migration model suggests that fz2 expression is not unique for migrating cardiac myofibroblasts, but is a more general phenomenon in proliferating and migrating cells.

Introduction

Fz is a family of seven-transmembrane receptors that is involved in the control of planar polarity in *Drosophila*. In a previous study we have observed that fz2 was expressed in myofibroblasts in the rat heart after myocardial infarction during their proliferation and migration into the necrotic area³⁸. After alignment of the cells the expression was found to be decreased. The migration of the myofibroblasts is a highly organized process: after migration the myofibroblasts in the granulation tissue are orientated parallel with the epi- and endocardium. We suggested that fz2 might have a role in the control of the migration.

Another process that involves highly organized migration and proliferation can be found in the intestine. In the crypt-villus units of the intestine, the epithelial cells proliferate in the crypts of Lieberkühn after which they differentiate during a highly organized, rapid migration to the top of the villi. Cells on the villus tip undergo apoptosis and are removed by extrusion into the lumen. In healthy intestine β -catenin and APC protein, proteins involved in the signal transduction in the wnt-fz cascade²²⁰, are expressed in the cells distributed along the length of the crypt-villus units and involved in intestinal epithelial homeostasis²²¹⁻²²³. A dysfunctional degradation of β -catenin can lead to uncontrolled intestinal epithelial cell proliferation and migration. Mutations in APC and β -catenin itself, which influence the stabilization of β -catenin, lead to intestinal adenomas and adenocarcinomas in humans and mice^{180-183, 224, 225}. Therefore it can be anticipated that the wnt-fz cascade plays a role in the control of the migration and proliferation of the intestinal epithelial cells.

So far is not clear which member of the fz family is involved in the control of epithelial cell proliferation and migration. The fz family is large with already more than 10 members described. Human fz1, rat fz1 and 2 and to a lesser extend mouse

fz10 have been found to be expressed in intestinal tissue^{45, 46, 55}, but localization of the expression has not been studied. Moreover, it has not been possible so far to study fz at protein level due to the lack of antibodies. To characterize the fzs in mouse and rat intestine we performed RT-PCR for the different mouse fzs, and we localized the fz2 expression in the rat intestine with in situ hybridization. Furthermore a polyclonal rabbit antibody was produced against a synthetic peptide corresponding to the third extracellular loop of rat fz2, which was used in immunohistochemistry to detect fz2 in the rat intestine.

Methods

Animals and tissue preparation

Adult male Wistar rats, rat embryos of a gestational age of 17 days (Winkelmann, Borcheln, Germany) and adult male mice (Swiss, Charles River Laboratories, Maastricht, The Netherlands) were used in this study. They were housed in groups of 3 to 4 animals with free access to food and tap water. The embryos and the adult intestine were fixed overnight with 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), dehydrated and embedded in paraffin. The mouse intestine was rinsed in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), frozen in liquid nitrogen and kept at -80°C until RNA isolation.

Reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction

RNA was isolated from the small intestine by LiCl/urea method²¹⁹. Aliquots of 500 ng of total RNA were reverse-transcribed using ready-To-Go RT-PCR beads (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden). After amplification by PCR using the primer sets shown in table 1 (1 min at 94 °C 1 min at 55 °C and 1 minute at 72 °C, 30 and 35 cycles), the PCR fragments were separated on ethidium bromide containing agarose gel.

Table 1. Primer sets for the fz PCR reactions

Gene	Upper primer	Lower primer
Mfz1	GCCCTGCGAACCCACTAAAGTATA	CCCCTCTCTGCAAACCTGTCGTT
Mfz2	GTTTCTGGGTGAGGCGATTGT	CAGCAGGAAGGATGAACCGAT
Mfz3	TGTCGGCCTCTACGACG	CTGAAACACCAATCCGG
Mfz4	CGCTCATCCAGTACGGC	CAGCCATCCAAATATCCG
Mfz5	GTCACACCCGCTCTACAACAAGGT	CTCGTAGTGGATGTGGTTGTGCTC
Mfz6	GGTCTTTTAAGCGAAACCG	TTTTCTTCAAGCGTCGGA
Mfz7	TGGTGCTTGCTCTTCTGGGCG	CACGGAGGAATGGCTTGGTCG
Mfz8	TGCCAAGAGATCACGGTGCCG	AGTGTC CGGGTTGCCCTGCTC
GAPDH	ACGGATTGGCCGTATTG	CGTCAGATCCACGACGGA

Radioactive in situ hybridization

The probe used for in situ hybridization was derived from a 566 bp PCR fragment of rfz2. The PCR fragment was cloned into the pCII vector (Invitrogen Corp., San Diego, CA), and the correct orientation of the insert was confirmed by sequencing. The plasmid was linearized with *Sma*I (Pharmacia), that cuts at a unique site in the sequence of the PCR fragment, resulting in a 327-base RNA transcript. RNA transcripts of the digested insert were made with SP6 RNA polymerase by using [³⁵S] UTP and the RNA labeling kit (Amersham, Little Chalfond, UK). Hybridization of 5 µm paraffin embedded sections and visualization of the in situ signal were done as described previously³⁸.

Non-radiocative in situ hybridization

Sense and antisense digoxigenin (DIG) labeled RNA probes derived from a 566 bp PCR fragment of rat fz2 were generated, cloned in pTZ18 (Pharmacia) in both orientations. After linearization with BamH1, DIG labeled RNA was transcribed from the T7 promoter. Hybridization of 5 µm paraffin embedded sections, and visualization with alkaline phosphatase coupled anti-DIG antibodies and indoxil-nitroblue tetrazolium (NBT/BCIP) substrate were done essentially as described previously²²⁶. Sections were counterstained with nuclear red.

Peptide

A peptide was synthesized corresponding to the sequence of the third extracellular loop of rat fz2: WERSWVSOHCKSLAIPC(AcM)PAHYTPRTSPDF (W29F peptide)

The underlined part corresponds to the predicted T helper cell epitope²²⁷; the part that is not underlined encompasses B-cell epitopes, involved in the humoral response. AcM is an acetomethoxy group, blocking the sulhydryl group of the cystein.

The peptide was synthesized by the solid phase method using Fmoc reagents in a 430A automated peptide synthesizer (Applied Biosystems, Foster City CA, USA) and its purity was checked by HPLC after cleavage and desalting on a P2 (Biorad, Hercules CA, USA) column and by mass spectrometry.

Immunization schedule

A rabbit was immunized subcutaneously with 250µg peptide + 3 mg methylated bovine serum albumine (BSA) (Calbiochem-Nevabiochem Corporation, San Diego CA, USA). Primo-injections were performed in Complete Freund's adjuvant and three booster injections at three week intervals in Incomplete Freund's adjuvant. Serum was collected one week after the last booster injection.

Antibody purification

The rabbit IgG fraction was precipitated at 40% (NH₄)₂SO₄ saturation and redissolved in PBS (pH=7.4) at 1:1 dilution. The W29F peptide was coupled to an activated EAH-Sepharose column (Pharmacia), according to the manufacturer's

instructions. The immunoglobulins of the rabbit were diluted 5 times in PBS (pH=7.4) and centrifuged at 200g for 5 min. They were then passed through the column with a flow of 6 ml/h for 3 h at 4°C. Finally the absorbed antibodies were eluted with 3 ml KSCN 3M and dialysed directly against 6 l PBS overnight at 4 °C. The final concentration was 3.9 mg/ml. They were stored at -20°C.

Enzyme immunoassay

W29F peptide was coated in 100mM Na₂CO₃ (1µg/ml) at pH=9.6 for 1 h on microtiter plates (Falcon 3912, Microtest III, Oxnard, Canada) at 37°C. After four washes with PBS supplemented with 0.1% Tween 20 (PBS-T) (Merck), the wells were saturated with PBS-T and 1% BSA for 1 h at 37°C. Fifty µl of serum (1:500 to 1:256000) or affinity-purified antibody (1:250 to 1:32000) were added to the saturated microplates and incubated for 1 h at 37°C. After washing the wells four times with PBS-T, affinity purified goat anti-rabbit IgG (1:33000) conjugated to horseradish peroxidase (HRP) (Jackson Immunoresearch Laboratoria, USA) were allowed to react for 1 h at 37°C. The wells were washed three times with PBS-T and two times with PBS before the color reaction with 3,3',5,5'-tetramethyl benzidine (TMB) in the presence of H₂O₂ took place.

Immunohistochemistry

Paraffin sections (5 µm) were deparaffinized and submerged in methanol to which 0.3 % H₂O₂ was added to inhibit endogenous peroxidase activity. Then they were rehydrated and pretreated with 1mg/ml pepsine in 0.1M HCl. Sections were incubated with the polyclonal frizzled antibody (1:25) for 1 h at room temperature or incubated with the antibody (1:25) that was pre-incubated with the blocking peptide (50 µg/ml) for 1 h (negative control). Subsequently, the sections were incubated with a biotinylated goat anti rabbit antibody (1:400, Dako Corporation, Carpinteria, CA USA) for 30 min, followed by a 30 min incubation with a peroxidase coupled ABC reagent (1:100, Dako). The staining reaction was performed by exposing the slides to diaminobenzidine (DAB) diluted in 0.05 M Tris for 5 minutes, to which 0.005 % H₂O₂ was added, followed by rinsing in water. Finally, the sections were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin, dehydrated, and coverslips were mounted using entellan (Merck)

Results

Fz expression in the small intestine

The expression of different fz homologues in the mouse was studied using RT-PCR (fig. 1). The expression of all the fz isoforms, except fz8, could be detected in the small intestine. Although the RT-PCR was only a semi-quantitative method, the most abundant signal could be observed for fz5, which was clearly detected with 30 PCR- cycles. For fz4 and fz7 a band was also demonstrated at 30 cycles. The expression signal of fz1, fz2, fz3 and fz6 could be detected at 35 cycles,

Figure 1. The expression of different fz homologues in the adult mouse intestine studied by RT-PCR. The PCR products were analyzed after 30 and 35 cycles. In lane 2 and 3, PCR products with the GAPDH primer set are shown. In lane 2, the RNA was not subjected to an RT reaction (negative control), whereas in lane 3, the PCR reaction was performed on RNA reverse transcribed into DNA. In lane 4-10 the RT-PCR of fz1-fz7 are shown.

but the expression signal of fz1 and fz3 appeared to be low in the intestine. Fz8 could not be detected in the intestine (not shown). To analyze the RNA for potential contamination with genomic DNA, we performed a PCR reaction on a sample of RNA, which was not transcribed into cDNA. After 35 cycles a very faint signal could be detected with the GAPDH primer set, pointing to a slight contamination of the RNA sample with genomic DNA. The signal obtained with the fz primer sets, however, was considerably stronger, which suggests that this signal can not be attributed to amplification of genomic DNA rather than cDNA.

Localization of the fz2 expression

The fz2 expression in the adult rat intestine was localized with non-radioactive in situ hybridization (fig. 2). The signal obtained with the antisense probe was most abundant in the crypt cells, although some signal still could be detected in the epithelial cells in the villi (fig. 2a). No signal could be detected with the sense probe (fig. 2b). Apart from fz2 expression in the adult intestine, fz2 expression could also be detected with radioactive in situ hybridization in the rat fetal intestine. At the gestational age of 17 days, the expression could predominantly be detected in the intestinal crypts (fig. 3), similar to the adult expression pattern.

RF 22	WERSWVSQHCKSLAIPCP ----- AHYTPR -- TSPDF
HF 22	WERSWVSQHCKSLAIPCP ----- AHYTPR -- MS PDE
HF 21	WERSWVAQSCKSYAIPCP HLQAGGGAPPHPPMSPDF
MF 21	WERSWVAQSCKSYAIPCP HLQAGGGVPPHPPMSPDF
RF 21	WERSWVAQSCKSYAIPCP HLQAGGGVPPHPPMSPDF
HF 23	WETTWTQIERCREYHIPCP ----- YQVTQMSRPD
MF 23	WETTWTQIERCREYHIPCP ----- YQVTQMSRPD
HF 24	FRYSADDSNMAV -----
MF 24	FRYSADDSNMAV -----
HF 25	WEAALTCACPGHDTGQPR ---- AK ----- PEY
HF 26	WEITWVSDHCRQYHIPCP ----- YQAKAKARPEL
MF 26	WEMTWFS DHCHQYRI PCP ----- YQANPKARPEL
HF 27	WERTWLLQTCKSYAVPCP ---- PGHFP PM-- SPDF
MF 27	WERTWLLQTCKSYAVPCP ---- PRHFS EM-- SPDF
HF 28	WEATHNCPCLRLDQPDQA ---- RR ----- PDY
MF 28	WEATHNCPCLRLDQPDQA ---- RR ----- PDY
HF 29	WRLRATEQPCAAAGPGG ---- RRDCSL PGGSGVPTV
MF 29	WRLRATEQPCTAATVPGG ---- RRDCSL PGGSGVPTV
HF 210	WKILAAQHKCKM -- NNQTK ---- TLDC -- LMAASIPAV
DF 2	WMIQWHRDICKPFSIPCPAARAPGS ---- PEARPIF
DF 22	WIKALACPCAQVK -- GPGKK ----- PLY

Figure 4. Part of the third extracellular loops of several fz homologues are shown. The bold printed amino acids represent the peptide (W29F) towards which the antibodies were directed. The amino acids in italic represent the predicted T cell epitope.

Figure 5a+5b. Enzyme immunoassay on the serum of a rabbit, immunized with the W29F peptide (5a). Blood samples were taken after the different W29F peptide injections. Enzyme immunoassay on the purified antibodies is shown in fig. (5b). The KSCN4 fraction is the fraction that bound to the W29F column, the "flow through" is the fraction that did not bind to the W29F column, furthermore the crude serum is shown. The response (absorbance at 405 nm) is shown as a function of the dilution.

Production and purification of antibody directed against fz2

A peptide (W29F) corresponding to the third extracellular loop of fz2 was synthesized. The sequence of the B cell epitope, which is responsible for the functional recognition by the antibodies, has a minor homology to other fzs (fig. 4). Therefore, the developed antibody is likely to be specific for fz2 and not to cross-react with other members of the fz family.

The immunized rabbit produced high titres of anti-peptide W29F antibody. The ELISA test using serum (fig. 5a) and purified antibody (fig. 5b) revealed a positive response even up to 1:100.000 dilutions.

Immunohistochemistry with the antibody directed against fz2

In fig. 6a and b the detection of the fz2 protein using the antibody directed against the W29F peptide is shown. At the membrane of the crypts cells no fz2 could be detected, but in the villi the epithelial cells showed a clear staining at the membrane. Some cytoplasmic staining was visible in the epithelial cells in the crypt and the villi. This staining, however, did not disappear after incubation with the blocking peptide, suggesting it to be non-specific staining. The staining at the cell membrane disappeared when a pre-incubation step with the blocking peptide (W29F) was performed (fig. 6c), indicating that the signal at the cell membrane was specific.

Discussion

In this study the different fzs that are expressed in the small intestine were characterized. In the mouse, expression of fz1-fz7, but not fz8, could be detected, although there were differences in expression levels. With RT-PCR we have found an abundant expression of fz5 but fz1 expression was low. The expression of different fz homologues suggests that the wnt-fz cascade plays a role in normal intestinal epithelial homeostasis. Furthermore we localized the fz2 expression in the intestine. The RNA expression was most abundant in the crypts in the adult intestine as well as the fetal intestine.

We developed a polyclonal rabbit antibody directed against the third extracellular loop of fz2. The synthetic fz2 peptide was very potent in inducing an immune response, as shown by the high titer of the antibodies. The fz2 protein in the intestine was visualized at the membrane of the epithelial cells in the villi in the rat, which could be expected, as fz2 is a seven-transmembrane receptor. Although the antibody induced background staining in the cytoplasm, the staining at the membrane was specific for fz2, as this signal could be blocked by a pre-incubation step with the blocking peptide. The B cell epitopes of the peptide, involved in the humoral response, had only minor homologies with other fzs, while the sequence of the T cell epitope had similarities with fz1. Although the T cell epitope is involved in B cell stimulation rather than in antibody recognition, we can not exclude that the antibody cross-reacts with fz1. Since the expression of fz1 in the intestine in the mouse was lower than fz2 and potential cross-reactive antibodies will be less efficient in fz1 immunolocalization, we expect the contribution of fz1 to the signal to be small or neglectable.

In the small intestine processes such as cellular proliferation, differentiation, migration/adhesion, and death can be found in well-defined domains of the anatomically distinct crypt-villus units. The cells proliferate in the crypts of Lieberkühn and differentiate during a highly organized rapid migration to the top of the villus. The fz protein could be detected in the villi, where the epithelial cells are in a differentiation/migration phase, which suggests a role for fz2 in these processes. Interestingly, while mRNA was most abundant in the crypt cells, the receptor protein was mainly expressed in the epithelial cells of the villi where mRNA expression was much lower. The dissociation between the sites of transcription and translation might be explained by the migration of the cells from crypts to villi.

In this respect we suggest a parallel with the migrating and proliferating myofibroblasts in the heart after myocardial infarction, which also express fz2 during their migration phase³⁸. The migration and proliferation of myofibroblasts is a highly organized process. The finding that proliferating and migrating myofibroblasts as well as proliferating and migrating intestinal epithelial cells express fz2 suggests that the proposed role for fz2 in organized migration and proliferation is a more general phenomena and not restricted to only a single cell type.

Recently the fz5 expression in the adult mouse intestine has been localized to the crypts, but unfortunately no protein data were available²²⁸. Further experiments are necessary to see if this expression pattern is shared between more fz receptors. The expression of wnts, the proposed ligands for the fz receptors, has been studied as well. Wnt2, 4, 5b and 13 have been found to be expressed in the human colon^{72, 229, 230}. Furthermore wnt2 and 5a have been hypothesized to play a role in tumor progression in human colorectal cancer^{229, 230}. These findings are in agreement with the hypothesis that the wnt-fz cascade is involved in the control of the migration and proliferation of the epithelial cells of the intestinal tract.

In conclusion, the expression of fz1-fz7 in adult mouse intestine suggests an important role for the wnt-fz cascade in intestinal physiology. The expression of

fz2 was predominantly localized to the crypt epithelial cells, but could also be observed in the epithelial cells in the villi. Furthermore, we have produced a polyclonal antibody against fz2. This is the first described antibody that reacts with the fz2 protein. So far it has been difficult to study the wnt-fz cascade due to the lack of antibodies and purified ligands for wnt and fz proteins. Our antibody can be a useful tool in studies that involve fz2 proteins. Moreover, the peptide sequence, to which the antibody was directed, is identical to the third extracellular loop of the human fz2, so we expect that the antibody could also be used in human tissues. The observation that fz2 is expressed in two models of highly organized cell migration and proliferation strengthens our hypothesis that fz2 is involved in the control of cell migration and proliferation.

Figure 2. In situ hybridization with the antisense fz2 probe (A). Note that the purple signal was more prominent in the crypts than in the villi. No signal could be observed in the in situ hybridization with the sense probe (B) (magnification $\times 200$).

Figure 3. Dark field image of the radioactive in situ hybridization of fz2 on fetal rat (17 days gestational age) intestine. The white spots represent the photographic grains. More signal was observed over the crypts than over the villi (magnification $\times 100$).

Figure 6. Immunohistochemistry of sections of rat intestine with the fz2 antibody. (A) no signal at the membrane of the crypt cells could be detected, but an intense brown signal was observed at the membranes of the epithelial cells in the villi (see arrows) (magnification $\times 400$). (B) higher magnification ($\times 800$) of the villi, where signal at the membranes was observed (see arrow). (C) When the antibody was pre-incubated with the blocking peptide the fz2-specific signal at the membrane of the epithelial cells disappeared, although some non-specific cytoplasmic signal remained present (magnification $\times 800$).

Chapter 4

FRIZZLED 2 IS TRANSIENTLY EXPRESSED IN NEURAL CREST CONTAINING AREAS DURING DEVELOPMENT OF THE HEART AND GREAT ARTERIES IN THE MOUSE

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adapted from Anat Embryol 2001; 203: 185-192

Abstract

Frizzled 2 (fz2) acts as a 7-transmembrane receptor in the wnt-fz signal transduction cascade. Among others, this cascade has been associated with neural crest cell proliferation and early migration during development in mammals. The genes for some components of this cascade are located in chromosomal regions that are deleted in human syndromes associated with neural crest cell defects, like DiGeorge and Velo-Cardio-Facial Syndrome. These syndromes are often accompanied by abnormalities in cardiac morphology. Furthermore, we have reported in previous studies the upregulation of the tissue polarity gene fz2 in myofibroblasts during their migration into the necrotic area after myocardial infarction in the adult heart. It is known that genes that are upregulated during cardiac remodeling due to pathology often play a role during development. To investigate whether fz2 can be associated with the process of cardiac morphogenesis we studied its expression in the thoracic arterial system and heart of mouse embryo's of 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 days after conception by means of in situ hybridization. At day 10 after conception signal could be found in the pharyngeal arches and arch arteries. The outflow tract, the ascending aorta and the pulmonary trunk were positive for fz2 from day 12 on. This expression decreased with time and at day 18 only some signal could be detected in the aorta and pulmonary trunk. In contrast, in coronary and pulmonary arteries no expression was observed at any time point. Minor myocardial expression was observed in the ventricular septum at day 12 and 14. Atrial expression, although considerably lower than ventricular expression, could be detected somewhat later at days 14 and 16. Our results indicate that there is transient expression of fz2 in areas that are invested by neural crest cells. This expression is downregulated upon neural crest cell differentiation. The fz2 expression supports a role for the wnt-fz pathway in neural crest related disorders.

Introduction

The mammalian homologues of *Drosophila* tissue polarity gene 'frizzled' consist of a family with multiple members, all encoding seven transmembrane receptor proteins⁴¹. In developing *Drosophila* wings, transcripts of the 'frizzled' gene have been demonstrated to transduce and translate polarity signals for hair and bristle development on the epidermal cells, probably through an interaction with the cytoskeleton²³¹. This involvement in the spatial control of wing hair polarity during development may suggest a similar role in architectural control in mammals. The current theory about the function of the fz proteins is that they act as receptors for the wnt proteins³⁹. The function of the wnt family has already been studied during mammalian embryology. It was observed that wnt1 and wnt3a signaling can regulate the dorsal-ventral patterning in mammalian CNS through the control of cell proliferation²⁰¹. Furthermore, in in vitro assays that aimed at investigating neural crest induction by surface ectoderm, a correlation between appearance of

wnt1 expression and migration of neural crest cells was found²³². The expression of the wnt1 in early migrating neural crest cells and the observation that this gene is not expressed afterwards in any other place during development²³³ has been used to construct a Cre/lox neural crest reporter mouse²³⁴. This mouse model shows the fate of neural crest cells after homing to the target organs. These data indicate that members of the wnt family are involved in neural crest migration. The role of fz proteins in this process, however, has not been studied.

In recent years, a relation between the wnt-fz pathway and several birth defect syndromes has been suggested. The Williams-Beuren syndrome is a neurodevelopmental disorder with multiple manifestations, including supravalvar aortic or pulmonic stenosis. It is associated, with a deletion on chromosome 7, known to contain a fz homologue⁴⁷. Furthermore, syndromes associated with neural crest defects, like the 22q11 deletion associated DiGeorge (DGS) and Velo-Cardio-Facial syndrome (VCFS), are often accompanied by abnormalities in cardiac morphology. Several deletions on chromosome 22, known to contain homologues of dvl and β -catenin, which are both members of the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway, have been described^{235, 236}. These findings suggest a relation between the syndromes and the wnt-fz cascade.

The expression of the wnt-fz cascade is not strictly a developmental process, since fz is also expressed during tissue repair. In previous studies, our group has found that the expression of a rat homologue of fz, fz2 is upregulated in the heart after left ventricular hypertrophy²¹⁸. Furthermore we have found that the fz2 expression is upregulated in the myofibroblasts after myocardial infarction during the proliferation and migration of these cells in the necrotic area³⁸.

In this study we investigated in mouse embryos the hypothesis that fz2 has a role during cardiac morphogenesis and more specifically during the migration and proliferation of neural crest cells into the heart during development.

Materials and methods

Tissue preparation

Mouse embryos (Albino Swiss CF-1) were collected at day 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 after fertilization. Whole embryos were fixed overnight with 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), dehydrated and imbedded in paraffin. Sections of 5 μ m were made of the thoracic region and serially mounted; because of the size of the embryo of 10 days after conception, the complete embryo was cut for this stage.

In situ hybridization

The sense and antisense cRNA probe used for in situ hybridization were derived from a 566 bp PCR fragment of rat fz2. The PCR fragment was cloned into the pCII vector (Invitrogen Corp., San Diego, CA), and the correct orientation of the insert was confirmed by sequencing. The plasmid was linearized with *Sma*I (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden), that cuts at a unique site in the sequence of the PCR

fragment, resulting in a 327-base RNA transcript. RNA transcripts of the digested insert were made with SP6 RNA polymerase by using [³⁵S] UTP and the RNA labeling kit (Amersham, Little Chalfond, UK).

The sections were deparaffinized and rehydrated, followed by an incubation of 20 minutes with 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS on ice. Then the sections were treated with proteinase K (20 mg/ml) for 5 minutes at room temperature. After this step a second incubation with 4% paraformaldehyde for 5 minutes and a 10 minute incubation with 0.1 mol/l triethanolamine (pH 8.0) plus 25 mmol/l acetic anhydride was performed. Then the sections were dehydrated and hybridized overnight at 55°C. The hybridization mix consisted of 50% formamide, 0.3 mol/l 7 NaCl, 20 mol/l Tris-HCl pH 8.0, 5 mmol/l EDTA, 10 % Dextran sulfate, 1x Denhardt's, 0.5 mg/ml calf t-RNA and 100 mmol/l DTT. The probe (10⁶ cpm/μl) was diluted 1:10 in the hybridization mix. After incubation with the probe for 16-18 hours, the sections were washed for 15 minutes at 55°C with 5x SSC/10 mmol/l DTT, followed by a wash of 45 minutes at 65°C with 50% formamide/2x SSC/100 mmol/l DTT. Then the unbound ribonucleotides were digested (20 μg/ml RNase-A in 0.5 mol/l NaCl, 10 mmol/l Tris pH 8.0 and 5 mmol/l EDTA) for 30 minutes at 37°C. After a second wash of 45 minutes at 65°C with 50% formamide/ 2xSSC/100 mmol/l DTT, the sections were washed 15 minutes at 37°C with 2x SSC and 15 minutes at 37°C at 0.1X SSC, followed by dehydration and drying. The sections were dipped in photographic emulsion (Ilford G5 emulsion, Ilford, Mobberley, England) and exposed for one week in the dark at 4°C. Exposed slides were developed in Kodak D19 developing solution (Kodak, Rochester MD, USA) for 3 min at room temperature, rinsed in distilled water, and fixed in a solution containing 20 g K₂S₂O₄ and 200 g Na₂S₂O₃ per liter water. Finally, the sections were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin, dehydrated, and embedded in entellan.

Whole-mount in situ hybridization

Embryos for whole-mount ISH were fixed at embryonic day 10 in 4% paraformaldehyde. Embryos were bleached in 6% H₂O₂, permeabilized with 10 μg/ml proteinase-K, and re-fixed in a 0.2% glutaraldehyde/4% paraformaldehyde solution. An antisense and sense cRNA probe (see previous section) was labeled with digoxigenin using a DIG RNA labeling kit (Roche/Boehringer Mannheim), according to the manufacturer's protocol. Hybridization was performed in a 50% formamid solution, containing 5x SSC, 1% SDS, 50 μg/ml tRNA, and 50 μg/ml Heparin, at 55 °C. DIG detection with an alkaline phosphatase-conjugated monoclonal antibody (Roche) followed posthybridization washes. Staining in a NBT/BCIP solution was performed until sufficient signal was obtained. Negative control embryos were made omitting the cRNA probes in the procedure.

Immuno-histochemistry with the anti smooth muscle actin antibody 1A4

The sections were deparaffinized and rehydrated, followed by incubation at 121°C

(microwave) in 0.01 M citrate buffer pH 6.4 for 20 minutes. After rinsing twice in PBS, the sections were submerged in PBS, pH 7.4 to which 0.3 % H_2O_2 was added to inhibit endogenous peroxidase activity. After rinsing twice in PBS for 10 minutes and once in PBS with 0.05% tween-20 (PBS-tween, Sigma, St. Louis MO, USA) for 10 minutes, overnight incubation (at room temperature) took place with the 1A4 antibody [Sigma, St. Louis MO, USA]. The antibody was diluted in a solution of 1% ovalbumine in PBS-Tween. After rinsing twice in PBS for 10 minutes and once in PBS-tween for 10 minutes, the second incubation was performed for at least 2.5 h with the rabbit anti-mouse peroxidase conjugated antibody, diluted 1:200. Subsequently, all sections were rinsed twice in PBS, 10 minutes and once in 0.05 M Tris-maleic acid (Tris-mal) pH 7.6, 10 min. The staining reaction was performed by exposing the slides to DAB diluted in Tris-mal for 10 minutes, to which 0.006 % H_2O_2 was added, followed by rinsing in water. Finally, the sections were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin, dehydrated, and embedded in entellan (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany).

Apoptosis (TUNEL)

The sections were deparaffinized and rehydrated. The sections were treated with 0,020 mg /l proteinase K in 0,01 mol/l Tris HCl at 37°C for 20 minutes. After rinsing three times in PBS the sections were immersed in PBS, pH 7.4 to which 0.3 % H_2O_2 was added to inhibit endogenous peroxidase activity. After rinsing three times in PBS the Tdt-mediated dUTP-X nick end labeling (TUNEL) reaction was performed at 37°C for 90 minutes (Boehringer, Mannheim, Germany). After rinsing three times with PBS, the sections were incubated with go/HRP- α -FITC at 37°C for 45 minutes. Subsequently, all sections were rinsed twice in PBS, 10 minutes and once in 0.05 mol/l Tris-maleic acid (Tris-mal), pH 7.6, 10 min. The staining reaction was performed by exposing the slides 10 minutes to DAB diluted in Tris-mal, to which 0.006 % H_2O_2 was added, followed by rinsing in water. Finally, the sections were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin, dehydrated, and embedded in entellan (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany)

Results

The localization of the expression of the *fz2* gene during cardiac and thoracic arterial development was investigated by means of in situ hybridization. At day 10 after conception (fig. 1) the signal in the pharyngeal arch mesenchyme and the pharyngeal arch artery condensations was abundant, especially in the first and second arch. The signal in the aortic sac was lower than that of the pharyngeal arches. In contrast, the signal in the ventricles, atria and outflow tract was not distinct from the background. The signal in the veins in the neck region was above background levels (not shown), but the veins in the thoracic region showed no signal.

At E12 expression patterns resemble those at E10. Additional signal was found in the aorta, pulmonary trunk, and mesenchyme of the outflow tract of the heart

(fig. 2), where neural crest cells²³⁴ are embedded in the now fused endocardial outflow tract cushions. The ventricular myocardium showed some expression but the signal in the atria was similar to background levels (fig. 2). Moreover, photographic grains were detected over the carotid arteries but the veins in the thoracic region and the subclavian arteries did not show any signal (not shown).

At 14 days after conception a marked *fz2* signal in the aorta (fig. 3a), the pulmonary trunk and the condensed mesenchyme of the outflow tract was still present, although less pronounced than at 12 days after conception. There was some labeling of the ventricular myocardium as well as in the epicardium. The atria showed hardly any *fz2* expression. An anti smooth muscle antibody recognizes smooth muscle cells of the arteries as well as cardiomyocytes. In the outflow tract it shows a low level of staining in the condensed mesenchyme of the outflow tract indicative of neural crest cells in that area (fig. 3b). This area also shows marked apoptosis by TUNEL staining (fig. 3c). In chicken embryos, in which neural crest cells were retrovirally traced it has been shown that many of the labeled cells in the outflow tract undergo apoptosis, upon the stage of completion of septation²³⁷. Combination of the data on smooth muscle cell markers, the occurrence of apoptosis and the expression of *fz2* in the same location in the condensed mesenchym, as well as the results of the *wnt1* neural crest reporter mouse²³⁴ support a relation with neural crest derived cells (fig. 3a, b, c).

The amount of labeling for *fz2* at 16 days after conception was intermediate between 14 and 18 days after conception, therefore the results are not shown. At 16 days still a marked *fz2* expression in the aorta, the pulmonary trunk and the descending aorta could be observed. The atria showed little signal. The ventricles showed only a low level of staining in the trabecular myocardium. The coronary arteries, which are present at this stage, did not show a marked staining.

At the stage of 18 days after conception in the pulmonary trunk and the ascending aorta the *in situ* signal, although diminished, could still be detected (fig. 4). No photographic grains could be observed above the atria and ventricles. The pulmonary arteries and the descending aorta did not show any signal (fig. 4).

At all time points investigated in this study the *fz2* signal was not exclusive for the arteries and heart, but labeling was also detected in the trachea, around the ribcartilage and in the muscle forming mesenchyme.

Discussion

In this study the expression of *fz2* during the development of the thoracic arterial system and the heart was investigated. At 10 days after conception, abundant *fz2* expression could be observed in the pharyngeal mesenchyme. The cardiac region showed only background levels of signal. At 12 days after conception *fz2* expression could, apart from the wall of the great arteries, also be observed in the still mesenchymal part of the outflow tract septum. At 14 days the expression pattern was similar to 12 days, although less pronounced. Finally, at day 16 and 18, the signal gradually disappeared; only in the media of the aorta and pulmonary

Figure 1. Whole mount in situ of a 10-day mouse embryo with the *fz2* anti-sense probe (**a, b** detail of **a**) and a control embryo (**c, d**). **a**. The *fz* expression is marked in the first (I) and second (II) pharyngeal arches. The third arch (III) as well as the heart have no detectable levels at this stage (H). The expression in the limb bud (L) is not specific as it is present in both *fz* stained and control embryos (**c, d** detail of **c**). E: eye

Figure 2. Transverse section of a 12-day mouse embryo (haematoxylin staining). The in situ anti-sense *fz2*- staining shows the grains in red. In the aorta and the mesenchyme of the outflow tract septum a marked expression is seen. The free ventricular wall has a moderate expression, next to an almost absent expression in the atrial wall. (OE: oesophagus, PT: pulmonary trunk, T: trachea, RA: right atrium, LA: left atrium)

trunk expression could be observed at day 18. This expression pattern for *fz2* is similar to the migration pattern for neural crest cells during development as described for the chick embryo^{201, 203}. Recently, there were reports on neural crest cell tracing in transgenic mice using the promoter sequence for connexin 43 linked to a *lacZ* reporter²⁰⁷ as well as a *Cre/lox* system in which the *wnt-1* gene expression was used to drive a *lacZ* reporter²³⁴. These studies show that neural crest cells migrate into the first to sixth pharyngeal arches where they contribute to pharyngeal and aortic arch structure^{201, 203, 207, 234}. Here they also contribute to the condensed mesenchyme of the outflow tract that is involved in the septation of the truncus arteriosus into the pulmonary trunk and ascending aorta as well as in the separation of the right and left ventricular outflow tract^{234, 237}. *Fz2* expression was still observed at 14 days in the outflow tract of the heart, in the area where the formation of the outflow tract septum (or conotruncal septum) occurs. From retroviral-*lacZ* neural crest cell tracing experiments in chicken and chimeric studies it is known that the labeled cells in this region show apoptosis as well as a moderate 1A4 staining as compared to the vessel wall and the myocardium^{203, 237}. The TUNEL and 1A4 staining in our study of the mouse embryo were performed on serial sections, and showed signal in the outflow tract, which is in agreement with the above mentioned findings in the chicken embryo. From detailed studies in chicken embryos on the contribution of neural crest cells to the vascular wall it was evident that the coronary and pulmonary arteries and the descending aorta remained devoid of neural crest cells²⁰³. These findings are confirmed by the neural crest cell reporter studies in mice with exception of the proximal part of the main coronary arteries^{207, 234}. The expression pattern found for *fz2* in the mouse arteries correlates with the neural crest cell contribution in the circulatory system, as described for the chick embryo as well as for the mouse embryo, in that the distal coronary arteries (proximal part not studied), the pulmonary arteries and the descending aorta did not express *fz2*.

In our study we have focussed on the *fz2* expression in the thoracic arteries and the heart. However, the *fz2* expression was not restricted to these regions, since we observed a strong *fz2* expression in the lungs and in the bone forming regions, as well as expression in the muscle forming mesenchyme. These results are consistent with the previously published fetal expression of *fz1* and *fz2* in the rat⁴⁶.

The human homologue of *fz2* is located on chromosome 17q21.1, but until now no neural crest defect has been related to this region⁴⁷. Another human homologue of *fz*, *FZD3*, recently renamed as *FZD9*²³⁸, has been localized to a 2 Mb region on chromosome 7q11.23, which is associated with the Williams syndrome⁵⁴. Although not a typical neural crest disorder, this elastin-related syndrome has a high incidence of stenosis predominantly in neural crest derived arteries, like supravalvular aortic stenosis⁵⁴. Human homologues of *dvl* and β -catenin, members of the *wnt-fz* signal transduction pathway^{235, 236} are located in the region on chromosome 22q11, which is deleted in neural crest related syndromes like DiGeorge and Velo Cardio Facial syndrome. These syndromes are accompanied by conotruncal cardiac defects^{236, 239}. Moreover, *wnt* proteins, the

ligands for the fz receptors, are involved in neural crest patterning^{234, 240}. These findings are in agreement with the hypothesis that fz plays a role in cardiac neural crest patterning during development in the mouse.

Fz2 has been hypothesized to have a role in the architectural control of migration and proliferation of myofibroblast during cardiac healing after myocardial infarction³⁸. The myofibroblasts after infarction can be found in arrays completely aligned with the epi- and endocardium³⁸. Because it has been found that fibroblast-like cells migrate from the epicardium into the myocardium during development²⁴¹⁻²⁴³, a similar role for fz2 during cardiac healing and development could be anticipated. We observed a moderate fz2 expression in the epicardium overlying the ventricles. It remains to be investigated whether these cells play a role in the adult cardiofibroblast behaviour. Regions that are known to contain neural crest cells were positive for fz2, but no neural crest contribution for cardiofibroblasts has been found so far^{201-203, 237}. This suggests that fz2 expression is linked to migrating cells during development as well as to pathology in the adult heart, but that these cells do not necessarily have to be from the same developmental origin.

Neural crest cells contribute importantly to morphogenesis of the heart, forming the smooth muscle cell population of the ascending aorta, pulmonary trunk and main arch arteries^{203, 207, 234}. Also, septation of the pulmonary and systemic outflow tract depends on the contribution of neural crest cells^{201, 237}. The results from this study are consistent with the concept that fz2 is involved in the migration and patterning of neural crest cells. The conotruncal and aortic arch abnormalities seen in the neural crest associated 22q11 deletion-associated syndromes²⁴⁴ support this finding. The option that the wnt-fz cascade is involved in the regulation of cardiac morphology during development deserves further research.

Figure 3. Transverse section of the outflow tract of a 14-day mouse embryo; subsequent sections of the embryo show specific staining patterns indicative for neural crest cell presence. (a) In situ hybridisation with the fz2 anti-sense probe shows marked expression in the condensed mesenchyme of the outflow tract (see actin staining in b) as well as in the aortic wall. There is also some staining in the epicardium (EP) overlying the ventricles. (b) Staining with the anti smooth muscle antibody (1A4) that markedly stains cardiomyocytes of the ventricles as well as the smooth muscle cells of the aortic wall. It is also positive in the mesenchyme, which contains a population of neural crest cells of the outflow tract septum. (c) In the mesenchyme there is marked apoptosis as detected by the TUNEL technique. (OT: outflow tract mesenchyme, RV: right ventricle, Oe: oesophagus)

Figure 4. Transverse section of the heart of an 18-day mouse embryo with computer modulated expression of the anti-sense fz2 probe. The expression is still present in the wall of the ascending aorta (Ao) and the pulmonary trunk (PT). The pulmonary arteries and the descending aorta (DAo) have no marked expression in their wall. This also counts for the left and right atria (RA, LA) and the myocardium of the right ventricle (RV) and the mesenchyme of the pulmonary valves situated between the PT and the RV.

Chapter 5

POSSIBLE SIGNAL TRANSDUCTION PATHWAYS OF FRIZZLED 2 IN MYOFIBROBLASTS IN THE HEALING INFARCT

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Abstract

The seven-transmembrane receptors of the fz family are involved in wnt signaling. Several signal transduction pathways for these receptors have been described, although the picture still is far from complete. From studies in *Drosophila* it is known that one of the pathways involves β -catenin stabilization and another pathway involves JNK and the small G-protein RhoA. In mammalian cells, both signal transduction pathways have been conserved. In a previous study we have observed elevated fz2 expression in the myofibroblasts after MI. In order to characterize the signal transduction route activated by fz2 in the myofibroblasts, the expression of several possible signal transduction molecules for the fz2 receptor, like dvl, β -catenin, cdc42, and phosphorylated JNK (P-JNK) were studied by immunohistochemistry and in situ hybridization. The expression of dvl1, together with the previously described expression of fz2 in the myofibroblasts during their migration into the infarct area, suggests that a wnt-fz signal transduction route is activated. However, we have not been able to demonstrate β -catenin, P-JNK or cdc42 in the myofibroblasts after MI. Therefore the signal transduction pathways downstream of dvl remain to be clarified.

Introduction

Fz proteins are well-conserved receptors that function in wnt signaling. Although the signal transduction mechanism for these receptors has not been completely elucidated several signal transduction routes have been described. In *Drosophila*, two signal transduction pathways have been found. The first involves Dfz2 and preferentially activates the Armadillo (Arm)/ β -catenin pathway leading to cell fate determination. The second involves fz, another *Drosophila* frizzled homologue, and preferentially activates the planar polarity cascade, which involves JNK and the small G-protein RhoA^{130, 131}. The signal transduction molecule dvl is suggested to be the branch-point for the two pathways as activated dvl inhibits the degradation of Arm/ β -catenin and dvl is able to induce planar polarity by activating JNK and RhoA^{130, 131}. In mammalian cells both signal transduction pathways have been conserved^{132, 245}.

In a previous study we have observed elevated fz2 expression in the myofibroblasts after MI³⁸. Although a role for this receptor in the myofibroblast alignment was suggested, the exact function for fz2 in the myofibroblasts has not been clarified. Therefore, in a first step towards the elucidation of the function of this receptor we have studied the possible the signal transduction route activated by fz2 in the myofibroblasts in the infarct area after MI. The expression of several possible signal transduction molecules for the frizzled receptor, like dvl, β -catenin and the phosphorylated form of JNK (P-JNK) was studied using immunohistochemistry, Western blotting and in situ hybridization, in the myofibroblasts after MI. The small GTP-binding protein cdc42 has been described to act in several

pathways leading to JNK activation²⁴⁶⁻²⁴⁸. For this reason, the localization of the cdc42 protein was also studied.

Material and methods

Animals and surgery

Adult male Wistar rats (250 to 300 g; Winkelmann, Borcheln, Germany) were used in this study. They were housed in groups of 3 to 4 rats with free access to food and tap water. MI was induced as described previously³⁸. Infarcted hearts were used if the infarct area was approximately 30% of the left ventricle or more.

In situ hybridization for dvl-homologues

The expression of the three dvl genes was studied by in situ hybridization. These experiments were performed on paraffin sections (5 µm) from formalin-fixed infarcted rat hearts. The in situ hybridizations were performed as described previously³⁸. Briefly, radiolabeled riboprobes were transcribed from polymerase chain reaction products of dvl1, dvl2, and dvl3, obtained by amplification of reverse-transcribed RNA isolated from rat heart as previously described²¹⁸ and cloned into a pGEM-T cloning vector (Promega, Madison, WI). The identity and

Table 1. Primer sets for the fz PCR reactions

Gene	Upper primer	Lower primer
dvl1	CAGGGCACTGACAGCCAC	CAGTAGATGCACTGTCTGGAGG
dvl2	AAGAGCGTTTTGCAGCGG	GACACAAGCCAGGAGACAAC
dvl3	CCCCTTCTGTGCTGACAAC	GCTCAATCCGGGAGACCTT

orientation of the polymerase chain reaction products were verified by sequencing. RNA transcription was performed using an RNA labeling kit (Amersham, Little Chalfond, UK) in the presence of [³⁵S]-UTP. The sections were hybridized overnight at 55°C with the radiolabeled probes. After washing the sections, unbound probe was digested with RNase (20 µg/ml; Promega), the sections were dehydrated, dried, dipped in photographic emulsion (Kodak NTB2; Technorama, Zürich, Switzerland) and exposed for 1 to 2 weeks in the dark at 4°C. After development, the sections were briefly stained with hematoxylin, dehydrated and embedded in entellan (Merck, Darmstad, Germany).

Immunohistochemistry

Immunohistochemistry was performed according to routine procedures. Paraffin sections were mounted on aminopropyltriethoxysilane-coated slides. A monoclonal mouse antibody against P-JNK was obtained from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA USA). After blocking the endogenous peroxidase, sections were pretreated with 1 mg/ml of pepsin (Boehringer,

Figure 1. A, B and C are dark-field images of the in situ hybridizations of *dvl1* at 7, 14 and 21 days after MI, respectively. The white spots represent the photographic grains. The white spots in (A) were abundant in the border zone of the infarct area where the myofibroblasts are localized, whereas the cardiomyocytes express *dvl1* to a lesser extent. At 14 days after MI (B) abundant signal could be observed in the scar tissue that had replaced the death cardiomyocytes in the center of the necrotic area. At 21 days after MI (C) signal could still be observed in the scar tissue, although less intense than on 14 days after MI. D and E are dark-field images of the in situ hybridization of *dvl2* and *dvl3* respectively 7 days after MI. In (D) only background signal could be observed and in (E) only low expression signal was seen. (N=necrotic area, BZ=borderzone, MY=cardiomyocytes and ST=scar tissue) (magnification $\times 400$).

Figure 2. In (A) the β -catenin staining of the border zone of the infarct area 7 days after MI is shown. The vascular endothelial cells stained positive (arrowheads) but the myofibroblasts (spindle shaped nuclei) in the granulation tissue remained negative (magnification $\times 800$). In (B) the staining for *cdc42* in the border zone of the infarct area 7 days after MI is shown. No staining could be observed in the granulation tissue, only some endothelial cells were positive (arrowhead) (magnification $\times 800$). In (C) P-JNK staining is shown for the border zone in the infarct area 7 days after MI. No P-JNK staining could be detected in the myofibroblasts, but the smooth muscle cells (SM) in the artery did stain positive for P-JNK (magnification $\times 400$). (GT= granulation tissue containing, among others, (myo)fibroblasts and inflammatory cells)

Mannheim, Germany) and incubated overnight with the primary antibody in a 1:25 dilution at room temperature. Biotinylated sheep anti mouse IgG (1:250, Amersham, Life Science, Little Chalfont, Buckinghamshire, UK) was used as secondary antibody. After incubation with an alkaline phosphatase-coupled avidin-biotin complex (ABC complex, Dako), the binding of the primary antibody was visualized with an alkaline substrate kit I (Vector SK-5100, Vector Laboratories, Inc., Burlingame, CA, USA). Immunohistochemistry for cdc42 was performed using a rabbit polyclonal antibody against cdc42 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology). The sections were pretreated with 1 mg/ml pepsin and incubated with the primary antibody in a 1:100 dilution and for 1 hour at room temperature. A monoclonal mouse antibody against β -catenin was obtained from Transduction Labs (Lexington, KY, USA). After blocking the endogenous peroxidase, sections were boiled twice for 5 minutes in 10 mM citrate buffer (pH 6.0) and incubated with the primary antibody in a 1:500 dilution overnight at room temperature.

Biotinylated multilink swine antibody directed against goat, mouse and rabbit primary antibodies (dilution 1:100; DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) and the Vectastain ABC kit (Vector, Burlingame CA) were used according to the manufacturers' instructions to visualize the binding of the primary β -catenin and cdc42 antibody. All sections were briefly counterstained with hematoxylin and mounted with entellan (Merck).

Western blotting

Protein was extracted from the borderzone and the infarct area of the left ventricles of rat hearts (MI) or complete left ventricles (SHAM). The left ventricles, frozen in liquid nitrogen immediately after removal from the animal, were crushed in a liquid nitrogen-cooled mortar. The protein was suspended in a buffer containing 0.5% Triton, 0.5% Nonidet P-40, 10 mM Tris (pH 7.5), 2.5 mM KCl, 150 mM NaCl, 20 mM β -glycerol phosphate, 50 mM NaF, 1 mM orthovanadate, 10 μ g/ml leupeptin, 1 mM dithiothreitol, 10 μ g/ml soybean trypsin inhibitor, and 200 mM benzamidine. The protein mixture was further homogenized with an Ultra-Turrax, and centrifuged for 10 minutes at 14,000 rpm. The supernatant was transferred to a new tube and stored at -20°C in different aliquots. For Western blotting 20 μ g protein per lane was used.

The Western blotting was performed using the PhosphoPlus SAPK/JNK (Thr183/Tyr185) Antibody kit (New England Biolabs Inc., Beverly, MA, USA) following the manufacturer's protocol.

Results

The localization of the expression of the *dvl* genes in the heart after MI was studied using the in situ hybridization technique. Seven days after MI abundant *dvl1* signal could be observed in the granulation tissue around the necrotic area (fig. 1a). The cardiomyocytes also expressed *dvl1*, although the signal was considerably lower than that observed in the granulation tissue. At 14 days after MI abundant *dvl1*

expression signal could be detected in the scar tissue that had replaced the necrotic area (fig. 1b). At 21 days after MI *dvl1* expression signal could still be detected in the scar tissue, although the detected expression was lower than the expression observed at 14 days (fig. 1c). Expression signal of *dvl2* could not be detected in the granulation tissue seven days after MI (fig. 1d), and only low levels of signal of the *dvl3* gene could be detected in the infarct area (fig. 1e).

Immunohistochemistry was used to localize the β -catenin protein in the heart at 4, 7, 14 and 21 days after infarction. β -Catenin staining was observed in the intercalated discs of the viable cardiomyocytes at all time points (not shown). In the infarct area β -catenin staining could be observed at 4 and 7 days after MI in the endothelial cells of newly formed blood vessels. The myofibroblasts did not show β -catenin staining at any time point. Fig. 2a shows the β -catenin expression in the granulation tissue 7 days after MI.

The immunohistochemical staining for *cdc42* of a section of an infarct area 7 days after MI is shown in fig. 2b. Seven days after infarction *cdc42* could be observed in the cardiomyocytes and several endothelial cells in the granulation tissue. Again, the myofibroblasts were negative.

Another possible signal transduction molecule is JNK: therefore the phosphorylation of JNK in the borderzone of the infarcted area was determined with Western blotting (fig. 3) and immunohistochemistry (fig. 2c). Seven days after MI the level of total JNK in the left ventricle does not differ between MI and sham operated rats. The levels of P-JNK, however, were diminished in the infarct group (fig. 3). Immunohistochemistry with an antibody against P-JNK was performed on sections of hearts 7, 14 and 21 days after infarction. At all time points the smooth muscle cells of the coronary arteries stained positive for P-JNK. At seven days after infarction (fig. 2c) the inflammatory cells and some endothelial cells in the infarct area also stained positive for P-JNK. In contrast, the myo-fibroblasts were negative at all time points for P-JNK (fig. 2c).

Figure 3. Western blot of the expression of JNK and P-JNK in infarct and sham left ventricles. No difference in JNK signal was detected between the sham-operated group (left ventricle) and the MI group (infarct area and borderzone) 7 days after MI. The P-JNK signal in the sham-operated group was stronger than in the infarcted group 7 days after MI.

Discussion

In this study we attempted to delineate the possible signal transduction pathway of *fz2* in the myofibroblasts after MI. The most upstream signal transduction molecules described for the *wnt-fz* cascade are the *dvl* proteins. The expression of *dvl1* was elevated in the borderzone seven days after MI, whereas no *dvl2* and only

low levels of *dvl3* expression could be detected. At 14 and 21 days the *dvl1* expression was localized in the center of the infarct area where the necrotic myocytes had been replaced by granulation tissue. We have previously found a similar expression pattern for *fz2*³⁸. The co-localization of the *fz2* and the *dvl1* expression suggests a role for *dvl1* in the signal transduction of *fz2*.

The activation of the wnt-*fz* signal transduction pathway can lead to elevated cytoplasmatic β -catenin levels. For this reason we studied the localization of β -catenin using immunohistochemistry. No β -catenin protein could be detected in the cytoplasm of the myofibroblasts at any time point after MI. Cytoplasmatic β -catenin could be detected in the vascular endothelial cells at 4 and 7 days after MI (see chapter 8), suggesting that the method would have been adequate to detect cytoplasmatic β -catenin in myofibroblasts. *Rfz2* RNA injection in *Xenopus* embryos does not lead to the expression of *Xnr3* and *siamois*, target genes of β -catenin, whereas *rfz1* RNA injection did²⁴⁹. Although the lack of target gene expression could be caused by a lack of appropriate ligand in the *Xenopus* study, these findings are in agreement with our observations which suggest that β -catenin is not a second messenger for *fz2* in myofibroblasts after MI.

A second possible signal transduction mechanism for the receptor *fz2* involves the activation of JNK. The small GTP-binding protein *cdc42*, which is involved in JNK activation by many stimuli²⁴⁶⁻²⁴⁸, could not be observed in the myofibroblasts seven days after MI. In the mean time, it has been demonstrated in COS1 cells that the small G-protein *cdc42* does not play a major role in *dvl*-mediated JNK activation¹³². Therefore a role for *cdc42* in the wnt-*fz* signaling seems unlikely.

The levels of P-JNK were lower in the infarct area as compared to the left ventricles of sham operated rats seven days after infarction, as determined with Western blotting. Granulation tissue and viable heart tissue consist of different cell types. Using immunohistochemistry, we have observed that P-JNK was mainly localized in the vascular smooth muscle cells of arteries. Therefore the difference in the P-JNK levels as seen on Western blot could be explained by the fact that healthy heart tissue contains much more arteries than the infarct tissue. P-JNK, however, could not be demonstrated in the myofibroblasts at any time point after MI. Although *dvl1*, the homologue suggested to be implicated in the *fz2* signaling in our study, has been described to activate JNK in COS1 cells¹³², our findings do not point to a role for the activation of JNK in the *fz2* pathway in the myofibroblasts.

Recently, *rfz2* has been shown to stimulate Ca^{2+} fluxes in a G_i -protein dependent pathway when overexpressed in zebrafish embryos¹¹⁸. Furthermore, *rfz2* RNA injection in *Xenopus* embryos stimulated the activity of PKC in a G_i -protein dependent pathway²⁴⁹. The different vertebrate *fz* receptors have been classified into groups that preferentially activate the Ca^{2+} or the β -catenin pathway¹¹⁷. *Rfz2* has been classified as a receptor that preferentially activates the Ca^{2+} -mediated pathway¹¹⁷, and not the β -catenin pathway, which is in agreement with the lack of β -catenin observed in this study. It remains to be established if *fz2* in the myofibroblasts after MI in rats signals through the Ca^{2+} -mediated pathway. The

planar polarity in *Drosophila* is mediated by a pathway involving JNK and RhoA^{130, 131}. So far, it has not been clarified if the Ca²⁺-mediated pathway in vertebrates has a similar function, but this would fit in the hypothesis that fz2 in the myofibroblasts is involved in the polarity or alignment of those cells.

In conclusion, the co-localization of fz2 and dvl1 expression in the myofibroblasts after MI suggests that a wnt-fz signal transduction pathway is activated during the migration phase of these cells into the infarct area. This suggests a role for the cascade in architectural control of the wound healing process. We were unable to demonstrate cytoplasmatic β -catenin, cdc42 or P-JNK in the myofibroblasts, suggesting that another signaling route, possibly G-protein/Ca²⁺-mediated may participate in the signal transduction.

Chapter 6

OVEREXPRESSION OF COMPONENTS OF THE WNT-FRIZZLED CASCADE RESULTS IN APOPTOTIC CELL DEATH, MEDIATED BY β -CATENIN.

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Adapted from Experimental Cell Research 2001; 264: 1-8

Abstract

Frizzled (fz) functions as a 7-transmembrane receptor in the wnt-fz signal transduction cascade. It is involved in architectural control of development in species as divergent as *Drosophila* and vertebrates. Regulation of multicellular architecture requires control of cell alignment, but also involves an equilibrium between cell proliferation, differentiation and apoptosis. Recently, modulation of the wnt-fz cascade has been related to apoptosis. However, the role of β -catenin, a second messenger in the wnt-fz cascade, in programmed cell death is a matter of debate. To elucidate the role of this cascade in apoptosis, we studied the effect of overexpression of fz1, fz2, dvl1 and β -catenin. The signal transduction pathway and the involvement of β -catenin were further investigated by using different inhibitors. These experiments were performed in different cell types: COS7, 293 and PC12. Overexpression of fz1, fz2 and dvl1 induced apoptosis in COS7 and 293 cells. β -Catenin appears to be the mediator for this process since β -catenin overexpression as well as lithium and valproate induced apoptosis. In contrast, lithium treatment did not result in apoptosis in PC12 cells. We conclude that different components of the wnt-fz cascade can induce apoptosis, but that this effect is dependent on the cell type.

Introduction

The family of frizzled genes encodes seven transmembrane receptor proteins⁴⁰. In *Drosophila* these proteins have been found to be involved in the architectural control of wing hair growth by translating polarity signals²⁵⁰. Recently a similar role has been proposed for these proteins during vertebrate development⁵⁸. The ligands for these receptors are secreted glycoproteins from the wnt family⁴⁹. Wnts are involved in processes as diverse as growth regulation, cell fate determination and oncogenesis in vertebrate embryos and in adult tissue^{62, 204, 251}. One of the best described functions of wnt is stabilization of β -catenin, a protein implicated in uncontrolled cell proliferation and migration in malignancies^{183, 224, 225}. In the absence of wnt signaling, GSK3- β phosphorylates β -catenin, which then forms a complex with the APC protein, axin and other proteins, targeting β -catenin for degradation by the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway²⁵². Wnt signaling via fz activates dishevelled (dvl), which inhibits GSK3- β activity, thereby promoting the elevation of intracellular β -catenin levels and accumulation of β -catenin in the nucleus. In the nucleus β -catenin interacts with HMG-box transcription factors such as lymphoid-enhancer factor/T-cell factor (LEF/TCF) to regulate gene expression that mediates the downstream effect of wnt²²⁰.

Originally, Frizzled was considered to control tissue architecture by regulating cell alignment²⁵⁰. However, modulation of the wnt-fz pathway has recently been associated with apoptosis^{104, 253, 254}. Apoptosis or programmed cell death is of fundamental importance to biological processes ranging from embryogenesis to

maintenance of tissue homeostasis^{255,258}. Fz2 is expressed in the heart during cardiac development, and in a previous study we have demonstrated that its expression was co-localized with TUNEL staining, suggesting a link between fz2 expression and apoptosis²⁵⁹. Recently, overexpression of dvl genes has been found to induce apoptosis in COS-1 cells²⁵¹. Furthermore, secreted analogues of fz, like secreted apoptosis related protein (SARP) and human secreted Frizzled Related Protein (hsFRLP), have been shown to modulate the β -catenin levels and influence the sensitivity to apoptosis^{104, 253}. Stimuli for apoptosis, like serum deprivation, have been shown to induce hsFRLP expression and also to lower β -catenin levels in HBL-100 cells²⁵³. However, there is no consensus regarding the role of β -catenin in apoptosis. Overexpression or stabilization of β -catenin has been described to protect some cells from apoptosis²⁶⁰, but to induce apoptosis in other cell types^{260, 261}. Moreover, it is unknown whether modulation of β -catenin-through fz affects apoptosis.

To elucidate the possible role for the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway in apoptosis, we studied the effect of overexpression of fz1, fz2, dvl1 and β -catenin on the fraction of apoptotic cells. Because of the discrepancies regarding the pro- or anti-apoptotic role of elevated β -catenin levels, reported in the literature, we studied the effects of overexpression in different cell types: COS7 and 293 cells. Moreover, the effect of inhibitors that act at different levels of the wnt-fz cascade, was investigated in COS7 and PC12 cells.

Materials and methods

Culture conditions

COS7 and HEK 293 cells were grown in Dulbecco's modified Eagle medium (DMEM) (Bio Whittaker Europe, Verviers, Belgium) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine, 1% glutamine, 100U/ml penicillin and streptomycin (Life technologies, Gaithersburg MD, USA). PC12 cells were grown in DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 5% horse serum, 1% glutamine, 100U/ml penicillin and streptomycin (Life technologies). Cells were incubated at 37°C and 5% CO₂.

Characterization of the wnt-frizzled signaling cascade

The inhibitors were added together with the growth medium after transfection. The final concentrations were 0.6 mM lithium chloride (JT Baker, Inc, Phillipsburg NJ, USA), 1mM sodium valproate (Research Biomedicals International, Natick MA, USA), 100 ng/ml pertussis toxin (Janssen Biochimica, Beerse, Belgium), 20 μ M LY294002 (Sigma, St Louis MO, USA), 100 μ M Wortmannin (Sigma), 100 μ g/ml IDN 1965 and 40 μ g/ml zVAD (IDUN Pharmaceuticals, La Jolla, CA, USA).

Transfection

The cells were transfected using the Lipofectamine plus reagent (Life technologies) according to manufacturers instructions. The COS7 and the 293 cells were plated on 37 mm culture wells (Greiner Labortechnik, Solingen, Germany). One μg of each plasmide was used for each transfection. The β -catenin plasmide was a gift from Dr S. Byers (Georgetown Univ. Medical Center, Washington DC, USA), the Frizzled plasmids were a gift from Dr R Nissenson (UCSF, San Francisco CA, USA) and the dvl-1 plasmid was a gift from Dr D. Sussman (University of Maryland, Baltimore MD, USA). The transfection efficiency was determined by β -gal transfection in parallel cell culture wells and averaged 30%.

Apoptosis (TUNEL)

Cells were fixed in 2% paraformaldehyde for 30 minutes. After rinsing twice with PBS the cells were permeabilized with 0.1% TritonX100 / 0.1% sodium citrate for 15 minutes. Then the cells were rinsed twice in PBS and immersed for 20 minutes in 0.5 % H_2O_2 in PBS, pH 7.4 to inhibit endogenous peroxidase activity. Then the cells were immersed for 10 minutes in equilibration buffer (0.2 M sodiumcacodylate, 25 mM Tris-HCl, 0.25 mg/ml BSA, 0.03 mM CoCl_2). The TUNEL reaction was performed at 37°C for 60 minutes (Boehringer, Mannheim, Germany). Per well, 0.15 μl TdT (25U/ μl), 0.6 μl dig-dUTP (1mM), 1.5 μl CoCl_2 (25mM), 5 μl equilibration buffer and 17.75 μl H_2O were added. The reaction was stopped by incubating the cells for 30 minutes at 37 °C in a stop buffer containing 300 mM sodium chloride and 30 mM sodium citrate. After rinsing three times with PBS, the sections were incubated with anti-dioxigenin-peroxidase-FAB fragments (Boehringer) for 30 minutes. Subsequently, the cells were rinsed three times with PBS. The staining reaction was performed by exposing the cells for 10 minutes to diaminobenzidine diluted in 0.05% Tris pH8, to which 0.005% H_2O_2 was added, followed by rinsing with water. Finally, the sections were counterstained with Mayer's hematoxylin, dehydrated, and embedded in immuno-mount (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany).

DNA laddering assay

For the DNA laddering assay the ApoAlert LM-PCR ladder assay kit (Clontech Laboratories Inc, Palo Alto, CA, USA) was used. The cells were treated according to the manufacturers instructions.

Statistics

To determine the percentage of TUNEL-positive cells, 1500 cells per transfection were counted. The results were compared with empty vector-transfected cells. The Mann-Whitney test was performed to determine whether differences were statistically significant. Significance was accepted at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 1. TUNEL positive cells after fz1 and fz2 transfection of COS7 and 293 cells, (A) Transfecting COS7 and 293 cells with fz1 and fz2 resulted in a significantly higher percentage of apoptotic cell death, compared with empty vector transfected cells, as demonstrated by TUNEL ($n=11$). * $p=0.001$, ** $p=0.0001$, (B) Representative images of the transfected cell cultures: in A, B, and C COS7 cells are shown, transfected with empty vector, fz1 and fz2, respectively. In D, E and F COS7 cells, transfected with empty vector, fz1 and fz2, respectively, are depicted. **Arrows** indicate TUNEL-positive cells.

Results

Frizzled overexpression resulted in apoptosis

In fig. 1, the effect of overexpression of fz1 and fz2 on the percentage of TUNEL positive cells is shown. Our data indicated that transfecting COS7 and 293 cells with fz1-containing plasmid resulted in a significantly higher percentage of TUNEL-positive cells than the empty pcDNA3 vector alone. Fz2-transfected cells also exhibited significantly more TUNEL positive cells than the negative control, although the effect was less pronounced than after fz1 overexpression.

Apart from the apoptotic marker TUNEL, a PCR based DNA laddering assay also was used to demonstrate apoptosis. Fig. 2 shows the non-transfected COS7

Figure 2. DNA laddering of transfected COS7 cells. Transfection of COS7 cells with fz1 resulted in detectable DNA laddering after 16 and 18 PCR cycles. This laddering was not observed in untransfected COS7 cells(0).

Figure 3. TUNEL-positive cells after transfection with members of the Frizzled cascade. Apart from fz1 (n=11) and fz2 (n=11), dvl1 (n=4) and β -catenin (n=4) showed a significantly higher percentage of TUNEL-positive cells than the control vector, pcDNA3. Overexpression of β -catenin induced a similar percentage of TUNEL-positive cells as fz1 overexpression.
* p=0.01, ** p=0.001 *** p=0.0001

cells and the fz1 transfected cells. At 16 and 18 cycles no laddering could be detected in the control, but in the fz1 transfected cells a clear laddering was visible. Finally, the caspase inhibitor IDN 1965 and zVAD lowered the percentage TUNEL-positive cells, providing a third line of evidence that frizzled tranfected cells died due to apoptosis (fig. 4).

Overexpression of dvl and β -Catenin-induced apoptosis

To elucidate the signal transduction for the apoptosis induced by fz, COS7 cells were transfected with downstream components of the wnt-fz cascade (fig. 3). Apart from fz1 and fz2, dvl1 and β -catenin were transfected. All 4 induced a significantly higher percentage of TUNEL-positive cells than the control plasmid. The β -catenin plasmid induced a similar percentage of TUNEL-positive cells as the fz1 plasmid.

Modulation of the apoptotic signal transduction with different inhibitors

To further elucidate the fz-mediated apoptotic pathway, we added different inhibitors of the wnt-fz cascade to the culture medium after the transfection of cells (fig. 4). The GSK-3 β inhibitor lithium significantly augmented the percentage TUNEL-positive cells to a level of approximately 13%, regardless of the nature of the transfected plasmid. Valproate had a similar though less pronounced effect on the percentage of TUNEL-positive cells. This suggests that β -catenin is an

Figure 4. Influence of inhibitors on the percentage of TUNEL-positive cells after transfection. Inhibitors were added to the medium after the cells were transfected (Figure 4). 48 Hours later the TUNEL reaction was performed. The GSK-3 β inhibitors lithium (L) (n=4) and valproate (V) (n=2) augmented the percentage TUNEL-positive cells, both in frizzled-transfected as well as in empty vector-transfected cells. Pertussis toxin (PT) (n=4), a Gi-protein inhibitor has an inhibitory effect on the apoptosis induced by the

Frizzleds, indicating an involvement of G-proteins in the process. LY294002 (LY) (n=4) and wortmannin (W) (n=2), both inhibitors of PI3-kinase, are also inhibitors of the apoptotic process. The caspase inhibitor zVAD (n=3) inhibited the apoptosis but was less potent than IDN 1965. *p=0.05, **p=0.01

important mediator in the apoptotic process.

Pertussis toxin, an inhibitor of Gi-proteins, had an inhibitory effect on the apoptosis induced by fz overexpression. For fz1 this effect was significant, indicating an involvement of Gi-proteins in the process. LY294002 and wortmannin, both inhibitors of PI3-kinase, turned out to inhibit the apoptotic process too in fz1-transfected cells; for LY294002 the effect reached statistical significance.

Comparison of apoptosis induction between different cell types

To study whether β -catenin was the mediator in the apoptotic process in other cell types as well, we added lithium to COS7 and PC12 cells and performed a TUNEL assay (fig. 5). In PC12 cells we observed almost no TUNEL-positive cells, whereas in COS7 cells lithium induced TUNEL-positivity in more than 9% of the cells. In a preliminary experiment, addition of the caspase inhibitor IDN 1965 resulted in a reduction in the amount of TUNEL-positive cells to control levels, confirming that lithium induced cell death through apoptosis.

Figure 5. PC12 and COS7 cells treated with lithium Lithium (0.6mM) was added to COS7 and PC12 cells (n=2). PC12 cells demonstrated almost no TUNEL-positive cells, whereas in COS7 cells lithium induced more than 9% TUNEL-positive cells. By adding caspase inhibitor IDN 1965 the amount of TUNEL positive cells is lowered to control levels (n=1).

Discussion

Frizzled overexpression results in apoptosis

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of activation of the wnt-fz cascade on apoptosis. Because of the recent debate about the specificity of the TUNEL assay²⁶², we have used three different techniques to detect apoptosis, the TUNEL assay, DNA laddering and caspase inhibition. Thus, we have generated three independent lines of evidence demonstrating that overexpression of fz results in apoptosis in COS7 cells. We also studied this apoptotic pathway by overexpressing downstream members of the cascade, and observed that *dvl1* and β -catenin overexpression also induced apoptosis. Lithium and valproate have been known to mimic wnt signaling by inhibiting GSK3 β , thereby stabilizing β -catenin¹⁶⁵. In our study, exposing COS7 cells to lithium or valproate induced apoptosis. Treatment of the cells with lithium resulted in an even higher percentage of apoptosis than transfecting them with β -catenin. This could be explained by the transfection efficiency, which was only 30%, whereas lithium treatment affected all cells. Although an effect of lithium treatment on other apoptosis-related pathways, like the JNK signaling pathway²⁶³, cannot be ruled out, the apoptosis detected after direct transfection with β -catenin shows that the β -catenin pathway can induce apoptosis by itself, and therefore can be considered to be an important factor in the apoptosis observed with lithium and valproate treatment.

During embryonic development, apoptosis plays an important role in the formation of organs and tissues^{255, 258}. Fz2 is expressed in the heart during cardiac development, and we have demonstrated in a previous study that its expression was co-localized by TUNEL positivity²⁵⁹. This suggests that the wnt-fz cascade might be involved in the apoptotic process during development.

Cell type specificity of apoptosis induction by lithium

In the present study, it was shown that lithium does not induce apoptosis in all cell types: the PC12 cells did not show any lithium-induced increase in the number of TUNEL-positive cells. The effect of lithium on apoptosis has been reported to be controversial; it has been found that lithium protects against cell death of mature cerebellar neurons but that it has an apoptotic effect on immature cerebellar granule cells²⁶⁰. HL-60 cells also undergo apoptosis when exposed to lithium²⁶¹. In these cells, the apoptotic process was found to start after 48 hours of lithium treatment, which is why the present study quantified the fraction of apoptotic cells at this specific time point. Interestingly, the apoptotic percentages reported in that study were in the same range as those observed in the present study. Recently, two novel nuclear proteins have been described in *Xenopus*, which inhibit β -catenin-TCF interaction; Duplin²⁶⁴ and ICAT²⁶⁵. The expression of these proteins might differ between cell types, explaining the diverse effects of stabilizing β -catenin on apoptosis induction.

Alternative signal transduction pathways for frizzled-mediated apoptosis

Apart from β -catenin, alternative signal transduction pathways have been described for fz. Several studies have demonstrated that pertussis toxin-sensitive G-proteins are involved in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway^{118, 119, 266}. Pertussis toxin has been shown to block the stimulation of calcium transients mediated by the fz2 receptor in response to wnt5a, but not Xwnt8¹¹⁸. Pertussis toxin also blocks the formation of primitive endoderm in F9 stem cells by Xwnt8¹¹⁹. In our study pertussis toxin induced a partial inhibition of apoptosis resulting from fz overexpression. Signal transduction by G-protein coupled receptors can involve PI3-kinases²⁶⁷. To further elucidate this pathway, we also studied the effect of the PI3-kinase inhibitor LY294002 and wortmannin and found that it inhibited the fz-induced apoptosis. PI3-kinases have several functions, including anti-apoptotic signal transduction by activation of Akt^{267, 268}. Thus, the inhibitory effect of PI3-kinase inhibition on apoptosis was unexpected. However, besides being an apoptosis inhibitor, Akt can also inhibit GSK-3 β ²⁶⁷, so inhibiting Akt results in more active GSK-3 β . This leads to a higher level of β -catenin degradation, which could explain the inhibitory effect of pertussis toxin, LY294002 and wortmannin on apoptosis that we have observed. Recently, GSK-3 β deficiency has been associated with apoptosis²⁶⁹. GSK-3 β deficient mice die between days 13.5 and 14.5 due to hepatocyte apoptosis. Embryonic fibroblasts from these mice are sensitive to TNF- α -mediated apoptosis, but not to other apoptotic stimuli.

A third signal transduction pathway has been described for fz, which also makes use of dvl as a signal transduction molecule¹²¹⁻¹²³. In this pathway, dvl stimulates c-Jun-dependent transcription and the kinase activity of the JNK when overexpressed in COS7 cells^{131, 132}. Dvl proteins contain several functional domains that are also present in other signaling molecules²⁷⁰: an amino-terminal DIX domain, a central region containing a PDZ domain, and a DEP domain upstream of the carboxyl terminus¹³¹. The DEP domain is essential for JNK activation, whereas all domains of dvl are necessary for the upregulation of β -catenin¹³¹. Recently a study has been published in which dvl overexpression in COS1 cells led to apoptosis²⁵⁴. Unlike what has been found for activating JNK, this study found all three domains of dvl to be necessary for the signal transduction of the apoptotic effect²⁵⁴. Overexpression of axin, a member of the β -catenin degradation complex, can also cause apoptosis¹⁷¹. This Axin induced apoptosis required JNK activation¹⁷¹. Coexpression of dvl or axin with the protein phosphatase 2C α (PP2C α) reduced the percentage apoptotic cells^{171, 254}. PP2C has been shown to be able to dephosphorylate axin, to activate LEF-1 dependent transcription and to inhibit the JNK cascade^{271, 272}. Although these findings point to a role for the JNK pathway in the apoptotic process, our results show clearly that β -catenin is an important mediator in the apoptotic process as well. The experiments of the present study do not provide evidence regarding the involvement of the JNK pathway.

In Chinese Hamster Ovary Cells (CHO) cells the axin induced apoptosis could be attenuated by the coexpression of β -catenin¹⁷¹, which seems contradictory to the results of the present study. Axin can, however, act as a scavenger molecule for β -catenin²⁷³. If axin and β -catenin induce apoptosis by separate mechanisms, coexpression could result in axin binding β -catenin and thereby, possibly, failure of activation of the signaling leading to apoptosis.

β -catenin and apoptosis

In *Drosophila*, overexpression of Armadillo, the homologue of β -catenin, promotes apoptosis during retinal development²⁷⁴, anticipating a similar role for β -catenin in vertebrates. A mechanism by which β -catenin, a protein originally described to be involved in cell proliferation, induces apoptosis has recently been proposed. In the nucleus, β -catenin interacts with HMG-box transcription factors such as lymphoid enhancer factor/T-cell factor (LEF/TCF) to regulate gene expression²²⁰. A role for the β -catenin-TCF signaling in apoptosis has recently been described: butyrate, sulindac and trichostatin A upregulate TCF activity, which is reflected by an increase in β -catenin-TCF formation in the SW620 cell line, and induce apoptosis in these cells²⁷⁵. Moreover, β -catenin has been found to activate c-myc and cyclin D1 gene expression, genes involved in cell proliferation²²⁰. Intriguingly, c-myc can also act as a potent inducer of apoptosis²⁵⁶. Myc-induced apoptosis is dependent upon the level at which myc is expressed and is presumably induced by modulation of target genes²⁵⁶. Another possibility could be that the increase in β -catenin-TCF complex influences the NF- κ B signaling, which is implicated in cell survival and which has been shown to be decreased by GSK-3 β inhibition²⁶⁹. However, β -catenin transfection in 3T3 fibroblasts induces apoptosis independent of its transactivation function with LEF-1²⁷⁶, suggesting that LEF is not involved in the apoptosis induced by β -catenin overexpression. Further work will be needed to discover what the mechanism is by which β -catenin influences apoptosis.

Extracellular modulation of the frizzled cascade and apoptosis

Extracellular modulation of the wnt-fz pathway has been associated with apoptosis^{104, 253}. Secreted analogues of fz act as scavengers for wnts. These secreted homologues, like SARP and hsFRP, can modulate the β -catenin levels, thereby influencing the sensitivity to apoptosis^{104, 253}. Overexpression of SARP 1 has been shown to make cells more resistant to apoptosis, but overexpression of SARP 2 has been found to lower the β -catenin levels and to make cells more vulnerable to apoptosis¹⁰⁴. Stimulators of apoptosis induced hsFRP expression and lowered β -catenin levels in HBL-100 cells²⁵³. β -Catenin therefore seems to be an important modulator in apoptosis, which is in agreement with our results.

Potential roles for frizzled during wound healing

In a previous study we have shown that a member of the frizzled family, fz2, was expressed in the infarcted area of the rat heart after myocardial infarction³⁸. The expression signal co-migrated with the myofibroblasts into the granulation tissue. In that report, fz2 was proposed to play a role in the spatial control of myofibroblast alignment, which exhibits a high degree of organization to prevent the scar from dilatation³⁸. However, it is well known that myofibroblasts in the healing heart undergo apoptosis³⁹. Therefore the function of the fz2 on the myofibroblasts in an infarcted heart may be expanded to a regulation of apoptosis in these cells.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fz overexpression can result in apoptosis, and β -catenin appears to be the mediator for this process since β -catenin overexpression itself as well as lithium and valproate treatment were found to induce apoptosis. Pertussis toxin and LY294002 have an inhibitory effect on the induced apoptosis suggesting that G-proteins and PI3 kinases are also involved in the process, and pointing to an important role for GSK-3 β . Finally, we have shown that increased β -catenin levels can have a stimulatory effect on apoptosis in COS7 cells. This effect appeared to be cell-type dependent because lithium treatment induced apoptosis in COS7 cells, but not in PC12 cells. Further research will be necessary to determine the physiological implications of this effect, but it can be speculated that the Frizzled-mediated apoptosis is implicated in the role for the wnt-fz cascade in architectural control during embryogenesis and pathological remodeling processes.

Chapter 7

FIBROBLAST ALIGNMENT IN VITRO, IS THERE A ROLE FOR FRIZZLED?

M.E. van Gijn, J.F.M. Smits, W.M. Blankesteyn

Abstract

Myofibroblasts are proposed to play an important role during wound healing after MI. In the scar tissue they can be found aligned in parallel with the epi- and endocardium. This alignment is likely to contribute to the development of a strong scar. So far, little attention has been given to the alignment process. Based on their role in the control of tissue polarity in *Drosophila*, fz proteins could be involved in this process. Fz encodes a receptor first identified in *Drosophila* where this gene coordinates cell alignment. A fz homologue is expressed in myofibroblasts during their migration and alignment in the granulation/scar tissue formed in the infarct area after MI. In the present in vitro study, where fibroblasts align in a similar way as is seen in the myofibroblasts after MI, the role for the fz signal transduction pathway in the alignment process was investigated. The fzs, upregulated in the area of infarction after MI, were also expressed in the fibroblasts in the alignment assay. Secreted FRPs were purified in order to study the role of the wnt-fz cascade in fibroblast alignment in another way. By adding several inhibitors it was shown that two of the proposed signal transduction pathways for fz, GSK-3 β and G $_i$ -proteins, were most likely not involved in the alignment process. The results obtained in the present study do neither confirm nor exclude an involvement for the fz cascade in the fibroblast alignment.

Introduction

Myofibroblasts play an important role during MI healing. Four days after infarction fibroblasts start to proliferate, transform into myofibroblasts and migrate into the infarct area. Myofibroblasts have characteristics of both fibroblasts and smooth muscle cells in that they synthesize extracellular matrix proteins but also have contractile properties. These cells have been shown to be predominantly responsible for the collagen formation at the infarct site in the rat heart¹⁸. Apart from synthesis of the extracellular matrix, myofibroblasts play another important role in the preservation of the myocardial architecture: their contractile properties likely prevent the scar from dilatation^{19, 20}. Myofibroblasts in the granulation tissue are orientated parallel with the epi- and endocardium. Little attention has been given so far to factors that control their proper orientation in the tissue. In order to cope effectively with the strain, these cells should be oriented perpendicular to the force that the scar is subjected to. Based on this hypothesis, myofibroblasts, aligned in the proper orientation, can be anticipated to contribute to the tensile strength of the scar.

Little is known about genes involved in myofibroblast alignment after MI. Cell alignment or polarity in general implicates several molecular components such as adhesion receptors, cytoskeletal linking proteins and extracellular matrix ligands. In a previous study, our group has found that during the alignment and migration of myofibroblasts after MI, the expression of a member of the fz tissue polarity gene family, fz2, was upregulated³⁸. The fz genes are named after the *Drosophila* tissue

polarity gene *fz*, which encodes a seven -transmembrane receptor. In *Drosophila*, *fz* coordinates cell alignment^{41, 250}. It is required to coordinate the local orientation of cells with respect to their neighbors during the formation of wing-hair polarity^{41, 250}.

In the present study with neonatal cardiac fibroblast cell culture experiments we observed that a protein extract of heart tissue added to the coating of the culture wells resulted in fibroblasts alignment similar to the myofibroblast alignment in the granulation tissue after MI. When no heart protein was added to the wells no alignment took place. The heart tissue therefore probably contains a signaling protein for cell alignment. The expression of *fz2*, as previously found by us in the myofibroblasts after MI, made us hypothesize that this signaling protein could be a ligand for the receptor *fz*. The ligands for *fz* have been described to be a family of secreted glycoproteins, the wnts⁴⁹. So far no reports of successful purification of wnt proteins have been published. Moreover, the wnt family consists of a family of at least 15 members and the specificity of its interaction with *fz* has not been clarified yet. In order to investigate whether the *fz* receptors and wnt signaling are involved in the alignment of neonatal fibroblasts, we have first studied the expression of *fz* receptors in these cells, with emphasis on the receptors of which the expression is upregulated after MI. Furthermore, we have tried to influence the alignment with inhibitors that act at different levels of the *fz* signal transduction pathway. The FRPs are known to antagonize wnt function^{54, 100, 102, 108}, although the specificity and selectivity of FRP-wnt interaction is not clarified yet. By expressing and purifying FRPs that are upregulated after MI, and adding them to the alignment assay we have studied their influence on the alignment of fibroblasts.

Material and methods

Cell culture

Hearts were removed from decapitated 1-3 day old Wistar-Kyoto rats. Atria were trimmed off and ventricular tissue was cut into pieces, transferred to a spinner flask, and digested to single cells with collagenase type I (Gibco, Gaithersburg, MD) and pancreatin (Gibco) in Ads-buffer (pH 7.35) consisting of 116 mM NaCl, 20mM HEPES, 0.9 mM Na H₂PO₄, 5mM glucose, 5.4 mM KCl and 0.8 mM MgSO₄. The cell suspension was loaded on a discontinuous gradient of Percoll (Sigma Chemical Co. St Louis, MO) with two different densities (1.059 and 1.082 g/ml) to separate the fibroblasts from the cardiomyocytes. To further purify the fibroblasts, they were plated and allowed to adhere in tissue culture dishes (75 cm²) for 30 minutes. The medium containing the non-adhered cells, mostly cardiomyocytes, was removed. Fresh DMEM (Bio Whittaker Europe, Verviers, Belgium) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine, 1% glutamine, 100U/ml penicillin and streptomycin (Life technologies, Gaithersburg MD, USA) was added. Cells were incubated at 37°C and 5% CO₂. Cells were used in the alignment experiment when 95% confluence was reached.

Alignment assay

Twelve well dishes were coated with collagen (Vitrogen 100, Cohesion, Palo Alto CA, USA) to which 0, 33, 66 or 100 μ l heart tissue homogenate (100mg/ml w.w.) per ml collagen was added. The heart tissue homogenate was obtained by adding 1 ml of PBS per 100 mg heart tissue, and homogenize twice for 30 seconds with an Ultra-Turrax. Then the protein mixture was placed for 15 minutes at -80°C , followed by thawing and centrifuging at 4000 rpm for 5 minutes. The supernatant was added to the coating. The coated wells were placed at 37°C for at least 3 hours before being used in the experiment.

Neonatal cardiac fibroblasts of a 95% confluent 75 cm^2 tissue culture dish were trypsinized, followed by centrifugation at 1280 rpm for 5 minutes and resuspended in 30 ml DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 1% glutamine, 100U/ml penicillin and streptomycin. Per well 1 ml of suspension was added. Cells were incubated overnight at 37°C and 5% CO_2 . The next morning the wells were analyzed for cell alignment using an inverted microscope (Nikon, Nippon Kogaku K.K., Tokyo, Japan) at phase contrast illumination.

RNA isolation and amplification

Cultured fibroblasts of different passages and the fibroblasts in the collagen coated wells in the alignment experiment were used for RNA isolation. Trizol reagent (Gibco) was used to isolate the RNA following the manufacturers' protocol.

The RT-PCR was performed using Ready-to-Go You-prime-first-strand-beads (Pharmacia Biotech, Uppsala, Sweden), followed by a PCR reaction with primers specific for rfz1, rfz2 and mfz7 as described in chapter 2.

Inhibitors

Lithium chloride, 1mM and 2mM (JT Baker, Inc, Phillipsburg NJ, USA), Genistein, 10 and 20 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ (Research Biomedical International, Natick MA, USA) and Pertussis Toxin, 50 ng/ml (Janssen Biochimica, Beerse, Belgium) were added to the fibroblast suspension in the wells before the overnight incubation. These concentrations have proven to work in other in vitro assays^{165, 277-279}.

FRPs:

Plasmids with myc-tagged FRP-1, 2 and 3 (kind gifts from Dr A. Rattner, John Hopkins University school of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA) were transfected in 293 cells using the Lipofectamine plus reagent (Life technologies) according to manufacturers' instructions. After 48 hours the medium of the transfected cells was analysed for secreted FRPs with Western blotting and antibodies directed against c-myc (BabCO, Richmond CA, USA) and SFRP1 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA USA). If secreted FRPs were present in the media they were purified with a c-myc antibody (BabCO) coupled sepharose (CnBr4B) column (Pharmacia) as previously described²⁸⁰. The purified FRPs were added to the alignment assay.

Results

Alignment

The first 10 alignment experiments (total $n=30$) were done with thick, gel-like collagen coatings. After the observation that the alignment behavior of the fibroblasts was not dependent on the thickness of the coating, the later experiments were done with thin, film-like coatings. Neonatal fibroblasts cultured in pure collagen-coated culture wells did not demonstrate alignment as can be seen in fig. 1a and c. After adding 33 μl heart tissue homogenate per ml collagen some alignment could be observed, but the best cell alignment could be observed after adding 66 μl heart tissue homogenate per ml collagen to the coating (see fig. 1b and 1d). When the wells were coated with 100 μl heart tissue homogenate per ml collagen, similar or even less alignment was observed as seen in wells coated with 66 μl heart tissue homogenate per ml collagen (not shown). The heart tissue homogenate had to be prepared fresh before each experiment because the protein extract lost its activity after repeated freezing and thawing.

Figure 1. (A and C) are representative images of the fibroblasts in the alignment experiments ($n=30$), when no heart homogenate was added to the collagen coating. (B and D) are representative images for the fibroblasts in the alignment experiments, when 66 $\mu\text{l}/\text{ml}$ heart homogenate was added to the collagen coating. Addition of the inhibitors pertussis toxin, lithium, genestein or FRPs resulted in similar images as shown in A/C and B/D. (A and B) show images of low cell density and (C and D) of high cell density. Note the relatively lower cell density in the areas near the aligned fibroblast bundle. (B and D) (magnification $\times 200$).

Cell density did not influence the alignment process as low cell density (fig. 1a and 1b) and high cell density (fig. 1c and 1d) gave similar results. In fig. 1b and 1d it can be observed that the cell density in the area close to the aligned fibroblast bundle is lower than in areas further away from the bundle, which suggests that cells aligned into the bundle through migration from the direct periphery.

Frizzled expression

Fz2, the receptor that was upregulated in (myo)fibroblasts after MI³⁸ was expressed in the neonatal fibroblasts in culture and the alignment experiment (fig. 2a). Furthermore, the fibroblasts in the alignment experiment expressed fz1 (fig. 2b). In mice, more fz receptors have been described than in rats, where only 2 receptors have been cloned⁴⁶. As the receptors in rats and mice probably are very similar, the expression of fz7, a homologue that is also upregulated after MI in mice, was studied with primers specific for Mfz7 and was found to be expressed (fig. 2b).

Figure 2. (A) Fz2 expression in fibroblasts in the alignment experiments cultured on collagen matrix (cp1) and normal cultured fibroblasts of passage 1 (p1), 2 (p2) and 3 (p3). (B) Fz1 and 7 expression in fibroblasts in the alignment experiment.

Inhibitors and FRPs

Using inhibitors that act at different levels of the signal transduction pathway of the fz receptors we tried to intervene in the alignment process. The GSK-3 β inhibitor lithium chloride, in concentrations of 1 mM and 2 mM, had no effect on the alignment (n=2). The G_i-protein inhibitor pertussis toxin (50 ng/ml, n=3) and the tyrosine kinase inhibitor genistein (10 and 20 μ g/ml, n=2) neither affected the alignment (fig. 1).

The expression of FRPs in 293 cells resulted in secreted FRPs in the media (fig. 3). Purified FRP2 (20 and 40 μ g/ml, n=2) and FRP3 (4 and 8 μ g/ml, n=2) did not have any influence on the alignment of the neonatal cardiac fibroblasts (fig. 1). For FRP1 the purification was not successful.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate, in an in vitro model, whether the wnt-fz cascade is involved in fibroblast alignment. The neonatal cardiac

Figure 3. Western blot of FRP expressed in 293 cells. In lane 1, 3 and 5 the culture media of the FRP-expressing cells (mFRP) are shown and in lane 2, 4 and 6 protein extracts of the 293 cells expressing the myc-tagged FRPs (cFRP) are shown. Furthermore, in the cell homogenates the endogenous c-myc protein is depicted. FRP1=35,5kD, FRP2=33,5kD and FRP3=36kD.

fibroblasts in the alignment assay demonstrated a similar alignment as was observed for myofibroblasts in the infarct area after MI. In a previous study we have demonstrated the overexpression of *fz2* in myofibroblasts after MI³⁸. The alignment assay could thus be a tool to study in vitro whether the *fz* cascade is involved in the alignment of fibroblasts. However, several difficulties arise for studying the *fz* cascade in vivo and in vitro. The number of antibodies available to study *fzs*, *wnts* and most of the other members of the signal transduction route is limited. In the mean time we have developed an antibody against *fz2* (chapter 3) that can be used to study the function of *fz2* protein in fibroblast alignment in the future. Furthermore, the specificity and the selectivity of the *fz*-*wnt* interaction and the signal transduction pathways for the *fzs* are not completely clear yet. A final problem is that neonatal cardiac fibroblasts are very difficult to transfect; therefore it is not possible to study the effect of overexpression of members of the *fz* cascade via plasmid transfection.

The relatively low cell densities close to the aligned fibroblast bundles suggest that the alignment process involves cell migration rather than cell proliferation. We have attempted to investigate fibroblast proliferation by BrdU incorporation, which failed due to technical reasons. Alternative methods like PCNA, ³H-thymidine incorporation and time-lapse video could be used to study the mechanism by which fibroblasts align.

The first step that was taken to investigate the hypothesis that *fz* receptors are involved in the fibroblast alignment was to study whether *fz2*, which is upregulated in the myofibroblasts in the heart after MI, was expressed in the neonatal cardiac fibroblasts as well. The *fz* family of genes is large⁴⁰, therefore other *fzs* apart from *fz2* could be involved in the alignment as well. For this reason we have also studied the expression of *fz1* and 7, which are also upregulated in the heart after MI in mice (see chapter 2). *Fz2* was expressed in the fibroblasts in culture from the first passage on and in the fibroblasts in the alignment assay. Furthermore the expression of *fz1* and 7 was demonstrated in the neonatal fibroblasts in the alignment assay. These findings are in agreement with the hypothesis that the *fz* cascade is involved in the fibroblast alignment.

In a pilot study we tried to separate the non-aligned and aligned fibroblasts in order to investigate whether there was a difference in *fz* expression, but no difference in expression pattern were observed. An explanation could be that the population of aligned fibroblasts contained still too many non-aligned fibroblasts to observe a difference.

To further investigate if fz is involved in fibroblast alignment, three different inhibitors were used that act at putative sites in the fz cascade. There is increasing evidence that G_i-proteins are involved in the signal transduction pathway of fz. Rfz2, when overexpressed in zebrafish or *Xenopus* embryos, activates a G_i-protein dependent pathway^{118, 249}. Furthermore, rfz1- mediated endoderm differentiation of mouse F9 teratocarcinoma cells requires G_i-proteins¹¹⁹. The G_i-protein inhibitor pertussis toxin, however, did not exert any effect on cell alignment in the alignment assay.

Fz has sequence similarities with several receptor tyrosine kinases, which might indicate a similar working mechanism²⁸¹. Furthermore, GSK-3 β can be activated by tyrosine kinases²⁸². GSK-3 β is an important phosphatase in the wnt-fz signal transduction route, as it is involved in β -catenin degradation¹³³. Neither the tyrosine kinase inhibitor Genistein, nor the GSK-3 β inhibitor lithium had any effect on fibroblast alignment in the assay. These findings are in agreement with our observations in chapter 5, where no involvement of β -catenin in the myofibroblast alignment after MI could be demonstrated. The findings are in conflict with the hypothesized role for a signaling route involving GSK-3 β or G_i-proteins. Apart from the inhibition of GSK-3 β other signal transduction mechanisms, like the JNK, have been described for wnt signaling and fzs¹³⁰⁻¹³². JNK, however, can be activated by other mechanisms as well. Additional experiments should further explore these pathways.

Recently a family of secreted proteins similar to the extracellular ligand binding domain of fz has been identified in vertebrates^{54, 98-102}. These FRPs can bind wnts directly and the FRPs are proposed to scavenge the wnts^{54, 100, 102, 108}. In a previous study we have found that the expression of FRP-1, 2 and 3 is upregulated in the heart after MI (see chapter 2). Therefore, the influence of these proteins on fibroblast alignment was investigated. Purified FRP-2 and 3 exerted no effect on the alignment process. Our experiments do, however, not definitely exclude a role for FRPs on fzs in fibroblast alignment. Nothing is known about the dynamics of wnt-FRP interaction. Therefore the concentration used could be too low to obtain an effect. Furthermore, since a denaturation step was used in the purification procedure, it is possible that the proteins were no longer in the active conformation when added to the assay, which would hamper the wnt binding.

Another approach, which may be followed in the future to overcome the purification and the secretion problem, is to use adenoviruses containing FRPs to infect the fibroblasts directly. In contrast to plasmids, these viruses are able to infect fibroblasts with high efficiency. This approach could also be used for other members of the fz signal transduction pathway.

In conclusion, the alignment similarity between fibroblasts in the granulation tissue in the heart after MI and the fibroblasts in the alignment assay could make this assay a tool to study fibroblast alignment *in vitro*. Although we have found that different fzs were expressed in the fibroblasts *in vitro* we have not obtained conclusive evidence regarding an involvement for the fz cascade in the fibroblast alignment. However, alternative signal transduction pathways for fz could be

present, so a role for fz in the alignment process can not be ruled out. The experiments with the FRPs were inconclusive and more experiments have to be performed in order to determine if FRPs are able to influence the alignment process. The results with pertussis toxin, genistein and lithium suggest the lack of a role for G_i -proteins or GSK3 β inhibition in the alignment process.

Chapter 8

BETA-CATENIN, AN INDUCER OF UNCONTROLLED CELL PROLIFERATION AND MIGRATION IN MALIGNANCIES, IS LOCALIZED IN THE CYTOPLASM OF VASCULAR ENDOTHELIUM DURING NEOVASCULARIZATION AFTER MYOCARDIAL INFARCTION.

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Adapted from American Journal of Pathology 2000; 157: 877-883

Abstract

Beta-catenin is a protein involved in cell-cell adhesion and proliferation. In neoplastic diseases, defects in the regulation of the cellular β -catenin content and cytoplasmic accumulation of the protein contribute to the uncontrolled cell proliferation and migration. Whether β -catenin plays a role in the controlled proliferative and migratory responses to injury, e.g. of vascular endothelial cells during neovascularization after MI, is not known. In the present study, we examined the localization of β -catenin in the infarcted rat heart at different time points after MI. Cytoplasmic β -catenin was observed in the endothelial cells of the newly formed and preexisting blood vessels in the infarct area in the first week after MI, but not in the uninjured parts of the heart and not at later time points. APC protein was also detected; interaction of APC with β -catenin has been reported to be critical in epithelial tube formation in vitro. Moreover, the expression of dishevelled 1 (dvl1), an upstream regulatory molecule of the cellular β -catenin content, was observed in vascular endothelial cells in the infarct area. These findings suggest a role for the β -catenin-APC complex in the proliferation and migration of vascular endothelial cells during neovascularization of the infarct area.

Introduction

Beta-catenin is an intracellular protein, which can interact with different cellular targets. It was originally described as a component of adherens junctions. Recently, however, it has also been identified as an activator of gene expression. In cell adhesion, it functions in a complex of proteins that links cadherins, a family of transmembrane cell-cell adhesion receptors, to the actin cytoskeleton²⁸³⁻²⁸⁵. Modulation of gene expression by β -catenin is mediated through its interaction with transcription factors of the TCF/LEF family in the nucleus^{58, 181, 286, 287}.

Beta-catenin has recently received considerable attention in cancer research^{288, 289}. Elevated levels of β -catenin and a translocation of this protein to the cytoplasm have been associated with the development of colon carcinoma as well as a rapidly increasing number of other neoplastic diseases^{181, 183, 286}. These elevated levels of β -catenin can be caused by mutations in the protein itself, but are more frequently the result of mutations in the APC protein, which regulates the degradation of β -catenin²²⁵. Mice lacking the β -catenin gene show lethal organizational defects early during development²⁹⁰, underscoring the crucial role for this protein in embryogenesis. This is further supported by studies, which report a role for β -catenin during normal development^{133, 139, 291}.

Taken together, the abovementioned studies clearly define a role for β -catenin in the proliferative and migratory responses of cells during embryogenesis and in neoplastic disease. In contrast, little is known about a potential role for β -catenin in normal, controlled cell proliferation and migration during repair processes after

injury, e.g. of vascular endothelial cells during neovascularization of the infarct area following MI in adult animals^{27, 292}. In vitro studies, however, have identified the cadherin-catenin complex as a crucial component of endothelial cell-cell junctions, which has to be dissociated and reorganized during angiogenesis²⁹³. In several reports, a decrease of membrane-bound and a concomitant increase in cytoplasmic β -catenin during the migration of human umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVECs)^{294, 295} and epithelial cells²⁹⁶ has been described, underscoring the importance of the dissociation of the cadherin-catenin complex during angiogenesis.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the potential role of β -catenin in the neovascularization, which occurs in vivo during infarct healing after MI. To this end, infarcted rat hearts were obtained at different time points (2-21 days) after MI and the β -catenin contents of the vascular endothelial cells around the infarct area and in the uninjured myocardium were compared. Since β -catenin-APC interactions have been shown to be critical for epithelial tubule formation in vitro²⁹⁷, we have performed immunohistochemical staining for APC as well. Moreover, β -catenin recently has been identified as a second messenger molecule in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway^{133, 173}. In this pathway, genes from the dvl family are known to regulate the degradation of β -catenin by controlling its phosphorylation by GSK-3 β ³⁸. Therefore we have studied the expression of the three murine dishevelled (dvl) genes¹²¹⁻¹²³ in the infarcted rat heart by in situ hybridization.

Materials and Methods

Animals and surgery

Adult male Wistar rats (250-300 gr., Winkelmann, Borcheln, Germany) were used in this study. They were housed in groups of 3-4 (rats) with free access to food and tap water. MI was induced as described previously²⁹⁸.

In situ hybridization for dvl-homologues

The expression of the three dvl genes was studied by in situ hybridization. These experiments were performed on paraffin sections (4 μ m) from formalin-fixed infarcted rat hearts. The in situ hybridizations were performed as described previously³⁸. Briefly, radiolabeled riboprobes were transcribed from PCR products of dvl1, 2 and 3, obtained by amplification of reverse-transcribed RNA isolated from rat heart as previously described²¹⁸ and cloned into a pGEM-T cloning vector (Promega, Madison WI, USA). the sections were dehydrated, dried, dipped in photographic emulsion (Kodak NTB2, Technorama, Zürich, Switzerland) and exposed for 1-2 weeks in the dark at 4 C. After development, the sections were briefly stained with hematoxylin.

Figure 1. Time course of cytoplasmic β -catenin localization in small blood vessels in the area of infarction in sections of infarcted rat hearts. **Arrowheads** indicate the vascular endothelial cell layer whereas **arrows** indicate the intercalated disks of cardiomyocytes. **(A)** 2 days after MI neovascularization has not yet started. The small vessels in the infarct area do not show β -catenin staining, probably because these vessels are remnants of the vasculature

present before infarction. The borderzone of the infarct consists of inflammatory tissue (IT). Bar represents 100 μ m. **(B)** 4 days after MI many newly formed small vessels were present in the border zone of the infarct area. In the cytoplasm of the endothelial cells β -catenin staining was observed (see high power magnification in **inset**). In contrast, the granulation tissue (GT), which is formed in the border zone of the infarct, did not show detectable β -catenin staining. **(C)** 7 days after MI, the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells of small vessels in the infarct area was still positively staining for β -catenin (**inset** shows high power magnification). The granulation tissue again was negative. **(D)** 21 days after MI, no β -catenin staining could be detected in most of the vascular endothelial cells of the small vessels. The intercalated disks of the cardiomyocytes (My) stained positively for β -catenin. **(E)** shows a small vessel in a non-infarcted area of the heart, 4 days after MI. No β -catenin staining of the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells could be observed. The intercalated disks of the myocytes were positively staining for β -catenin. **(F)** small vessel in a non-infarcted part of the heart, 7 days after MI. Again no positive staining of vascular endothelial cells was observed.

Figure 2. **(A)** β -catenin staining of endothelial cells of a larger, preexisting artery in the area of infarction, 4 days after MI. Around the artery a thin layer of surviving cardiomyocytes (My) was present, confirming that the artery was present before infarction. Bar represents 100 μ m. **(B)** Immunohistochemistry for α -smooth muscle actin (ASMA) shows staining of the vascular smooth muscle cells in the media of the same artery, but not of the

endothelial cell layer or the cardiomyocytes. **(C)** Dark field image of an in situ hybridization with a dv11 probe of a section of rat heart, 4 days after MI. The photographic grains are represented as white spots. Note that grains are localized over the vascular endothelium (**arrowhead**), whereas the amount of grains over the cardiomyocytes (My) is lower. A high density of grains was observed over the granulation tissue (GT) in the border zone of the infarct. **(D and E)** muscular arteries in the non-infarcted parts of the myocardium did not show endothelial β -catenin staining, but the vascular smooth muscle cells stained positively for (ASMA). **(F)** No dv11 expression was observed in muscular arteries in the non-infarcted areas of the heart.

Figure 3. Confocal microscopy of a small vessel in the infarct area of a rat heart, 7 days after MI. β -catenin staining is depicted in green and the nuclear counterstain (propidium iodide) is depicted in red. Note that the β -catenin staining is present in the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells, whereas β -catenin staining in the nuclei could not be detected.

Figure 4. Localization of the APC protein in vascular endothelium during infarct healing in the rat. APC staining was observed in the endothelial cells of newly formed vessels around the infarct area at 7 days after MI (A). In contrast to the β -catenin staining, APC staining was still observed in these cells 21 days after MI (B).

Figure 5. High power magnification of immunohistochemistry for BrdU and β -catenin in a small vessel and capillaries in the infarct area of a rat heart, 4 days after MI. BrdU-positive nuclei of proliferating cells are depicted in red, and β -catenin is shown in brown. Some of the vascular endothelial cells that contain β -catenin in their cytoplasm have a BrdU-positive nucleus (arrows), but β -catenin-positive cells without nuclear BrdU incorporation were also observed (arrowhead).

Table 1. Primer sets for the fz PCR reactions

Gene	Upper primer	Lower primer
dvl1	CAGGGCACTGACAGCCAC	CAGTAGATGCACTGTCTGGAGG
dvl2	AAGAGCGTTTTGCAGCGG	GACACAAGCCAGGAGACAAC
dvl3	CCCCTTTCTGTGCTGACAAC	GCTCAATCCGGGAGACCTT

Immunohistochemistry

Immunohistochemistry was performed according to routine procedures. Paraffin sections were mounted on aminopropyltriethoxysilane (APTS) coated slides. A monoclonal antibody for β -catenin was obtained from Transduction Labs, Lexington KY, USA. After blocking the endogenous peroxidase, sections were boiled twice for 5 min in 10 mmol/l citrate buffer (pH 6.0) and incubated with the primary antibody in a 1:500 dilution overnight at room temperature. Immunohistochemistry for APC was performed using the N-15 monoclonal antibody obtained from Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz CA, USA in a 1:2000 dilution and incubating for 1 hr at room temperature. Sections were pretreated with 1 mg/ml pepsin (Boehringer, Mannheim, Germany). Biotinylated multilink Swine-anti-goat, -mouse and -rabbit secondary antibody (dilution 1:100, DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) and The Vectastain ABC kit (Vector, Burlingame CA, USA) were used according to the manufacturers instructions to visualize the binding of both primary antibodies. Sections were briefly counterstained with hematoxylin and mounted with Entellan (Merck, Darmstad, Germany). The identity of vascular smooth muscle cells and myofibroblasts was determined using an antibody against α -smooth muscle actin (dilution 1:500, DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark).

Confocal microscopy

Confocal microscopy was performed using a BioRad MRC600 confocal scanning laser microscope (BioRad, Hempel Hemstead, UK) as previously described²⁹⁹. Immunohistochemistry for β -catenin was performed as described above with FITC-labeled Rat-anti-Mouse (DAKO, dilution 1:100) as secondary antibody. The nuclei were counterstained using propidium iodide.

BrdU incorporation

BrdU (Serva, Heidelberg, Germany) was continuously infused using osmotic minipumps (Alzet model 2002, Alza Corp., Palo Alto CA) implanted subcutaneously between the shoulder blades. BrdU was dissolved in 0.9% NaCl (10 mg/ml) and infused at a rate of 240 ng/kg/min. The pumps were implanted at the time of MI induction; animals were sacrificed 4 and 7 days after MI. The cumulative labeling of BrdU in the infarct area was determined using a monoclonal antibody directed against BrdU according to previously published methods³⁰⁰.

Results

Time course of the β -catenin expression in newly formed vessels around the infarct area

The expression of β -catenin in the infarcted part of the left ventricle of the rat at different time points after MI is shown in fig. 1. Two days after infarction, no staining for β -catenin was observed around the area of infarction (fig. 1A). In this phase of the wound healing no neovascularization or formation of granulation tissue has yet occurred in the infarct area. At 4 days after MI, however, many small blood vessels have emerged in the border zone around the area of infarction. Interestingly, the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells stained positively for β -catenin (fig. 1B). This staining was not observed in vascular endothelial cells in the non-injured myocardium (fig. 1E) and in vascular endothelial cells of sham-operated animals (not shown). Beta-catenin staining of vascular endothelial cells was also observed 7 days after infarction (fig. 1C). In contrast, the myofibroblasts present in the granulation tissue around the area of infarction did not show any β -catenin staining, and vascular endothelial cells in non-infarcted parts did not show cytoplasmic β -catenin staining (fig. 1F). At 14 (not shown), 21 (fig. 1D) and 90 days (not shown) after MI, most of the vascular endothelial cells in the areas of newly formed blood vessels around the infarct did not show β -catenin staining. Again, the myofibroblasts did not show any staining for β -catenin. The intercalated disks between the uninjured cardiomyocytes were positive for β -catenin (fig. 1D-F) at all time points as previously reported³⁰¹.

β -catenin expression in larger, muscular arteries in the infarct area

Cytoplasmic β -catenin staining of the vascular endothelium was not confined to the newly formed small vessels around the infarct area, but could also be observed in larger arteries in the injured parts of the heart (fig. 2A). These arteries most likely were already present in the area before the infarction, because a fully developed media containing vascular smooth muscle cells (fig. 2B) and a layer of surviving cardiomyocytes around these arteries was observed around them. In contrast, arteries of similar diameter in the uninjured parts of the heart (fig. 2D, E) or in sham-operated animals (not shown) did not show endothelial β -catenin staining.

Because β -catenin is known to act as a second messenger in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway, we performed in situ hybridization for the three known murine dvl (dvl) homologues. As shown in fig. 2C, silver grains were observed over the endothelial cells of the larger arteries in the infarct area when the dvl1 probe was used. In contrast, neither with the dvl-2 nor the dvl-3 probe a labeling above background levels could be detected in these cells (not shown). Muscular arteries in the uninfarcted parts of the heart did not show signal above background levels with the dvl1 probe (fig. 2F). Abundant labeling with the dvl1 probe was also observed in the granulation tissue around the infarct area, which is rich in (myo)fibroblasts and monocytes (fig. 2C). This abundant labeling obscured the unambiguous detection of dvl1 signal in endothelial cells of the small, newly formed vessels,

although in the dvl1 autoradiograms the density of silver grains in areas with many newly formed blood vessels was above background levels.

Confocal microscopy of β -catenin

To determine the intracellular localization of β -catenin in more detail, confocal microscopy was performed on sections of infarcted rat heart, 4 and 7 days after MI. As shown in fig. 3, immunofluorescence was observed in the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells around the infarct area but not in the nuclei, as observed with immunohistochemistry.

Localization of APC protein in the infarcted rat heart

The expression of the APC protein, involved in the degradation of β -catenin, was studied in infarcted rat tissue after MI. Seven days after MI, some staining for APC protein was observed in the endothelial cells of the newly formed vessels around the infarct area (fig. 4A). A similar pattern of staining, though of considerably higher intensity, was observed 21 days after MI (fig. 4B), and positive vascular endothelial cells could still be detected at 90 days after MI (not shown). Surviving cardiomyocytes close to the area of infarction showed a diffuse staining for APC protein (fig. 4A), which was not observed in cardiomyocytes in the uninjured parts of the heart. APC staining was also observed in vascular smooth muscle cells at all time points studied.

Double staining for β -catenin and BrdU

Since cytosolic β -catenin accumulation has been associated with cell proliferation in a number of neoplastic diseases, we performed immunohistochemical double staining for β -catenin and BrdU, a nucleotide analogue, which is incorporated in the DNA during cell proliferation. As shown in fig. 5, positive nuclei were observed in some, but not all of the vascular endothelial cells that stained positive for β -catenin. Because BrdU incorporation was not a generalized phenomenon in β -catenin-positive vascular endothelial cells, this suggests that the cytoplasmic β -catenin in these cells is not a direct inducer of cell proliferation.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to disclose a potential link between the presence of β -catenin in the cytoplasm of the vascular endothelial cells and their proliferation and migration during the process of neovascularization in infarct healing. To this end, we have studied the localization of β -catenin, its regulatory protein APC and the expression of the dvl genes, located upstream in the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway, in infarcted rat hearts at different time points. Because the neovascularization which takes place after MI consists of angiogenesis as well as the remodeling of preexisting arteries²⁷, processes which are both dependent on endothelial cell proliferation and migration²⁹², this model appears to be very

suitable to study a link between β -catenin expression and the proliferation and migration of endothelial cells *in vivo*.

Beta-catenin was observed in the cytoplasm of the endothelial cells of newly formed vessels around the area of infarction, 4 and 7 days after MI. In contrast, vascular endothelial cells in the non-infarcted part of the heart showed no detectable β -catenin levels in their cytoplasm. Because remodeling of existing capillaries as well de novo generation of capillaries take place in the first week after MI^{4, 292, 302}, the time frame of the appearance of cytoplasmic β -catenin matches with that of the neovascularization. Based on *in vitro* data in which the appearance of β -catenin in the cytoplasm was observed during HUVEC migration^{294, 295}, our observations suggest a similar translocation phenomenon in endothelial cell proliferation and migration *in vivo*. These observations are also in accordance with *in vitro* studies in which the VE-cadherin-catenin complex was found to be essential for de novo capillary formation³⁰³ and in which VEGF-induced phosphorylation of the cadherin-catenin complex was found to be essential for the loosening of endothelial cell-cell contacts, a first step in angiogenesis³⁰⁴. Moreover, in a recent study by Carmeliet and coworkers³⁰⁵ it was shown that the VE-cadherin/ β -catenin complex is essential for endothelial cell remodeling and maturation during gestation in mice, and that targeted disruption of the intracellular part of the VE-cadherin gene leads to abnormal vascular development, underscoring the importance of these molecules in the formation and remodeling of blood vessels. Moreover, β -catenin translocation to the cytoplasm was observed in endothelial cells in culture during their remodeling in response to shear stress, suggesting that this is likely to be a normal phenomenon during rearrangement of endothelial cells.

An abundant presence of APC protein was observed in vascular endothelium and myocytes around the infarct area as well as in vascular smooth muscle cells. In a recent study by Pollack et al.²⁹⁷, a functional interaction between β -catenin and APC has been shown to be necessary for tubule formation of MDCK cells *in vitro*. Moreover, there is increasing evidence that APC itself is involved in the formation of stable membrane extrusions during active cell migration³⁰⁶. It is tempting to speculate that the co-expression of β -catenin and APC in the area of neovascularization around the infarct area promotes vascular endothelial cell proliferation and migration in both angiogenesis and remodeling of pre-existing vessels. On the other hand, the rise in APC protein content which coincides with the decrease in β -catenin content of the vascular endothelial cells may suggest that the APC protein contributes to the β -catenin degradation in these cells. The role for APC in vascular smooth muscle cells and cardiomyocytes, however, is unclear.

Recently, β -catenin has been identified as a second messenger in the signal transduction cascade of wnt proteins, which are involved in control of tissue polarity^{133, 173}. In the original description of this signal transduction system in *Drosophila*, the dvl protein was shown to act directly downstream of frizzled (fz), now recognized as the receptor for proteins from the wnt family¹³⁰. In the mean

time, three mammalian dvl homologues have been identified in the mouse¹²¹⁻¹²³. Using these mouse sequences, we have designed primer sets, which allowed PCR-amplification of three fragments from rat DNA. Partial sequencing of these fragments revealed homologies of over 90% with the published mouse sequences, confirming the identity of these fragments as rat homologues of mouse dvl1-3. The three PCR fragments were subsequently used for in situ hybridization. In sections of infarcted rat hearts, 7 days after MI, expression of dvl1 was detected in vascular endothelial cells of the larger vessels around the infarct area, but not in uninfarcted areas of the heart. Areas rich in newly formed capillaries around the infarct area also showed signal for dvl1 above background levels, but since the resolution of the radioactive in situ technique is not high enough to allow precise cellular localization, the interpretation of these data is difficult. This problem is further aggravated by the high levels of dvl1 expression in the myofibroblasts, which are abundant around the area of infarction^{4, 38}. However, from the data obtained with the larger arteries we can conclude that a key upstream component of the wnt-fz cascade is present in the vascular endothelial cells during neovascularization of the infarct area, which may suggest a role for this pathway in the control of proliferation and/or migration of these cells. This concept is supported by a recent study of Dupla et al.²¹⁴ in which a relation between the level of expression of FrzA, a scavenger for wnt proteins which is structurally related to fz receptors, and endothelial cell proliferation in vitro was demonstrated. Moreover, recently the presence of a wnt-fz signal transduction system which, when activated, increases the cytoplasmic β -catenin content has been described in vascular endothelial cells in primary culture²¹², providing additional evidence that wnt-fz activation may be involved in the β -catenin translocation observed in the present study.

In conclusion, the present study shows the presence of cytoplasmic β -catenin and APC protein in vascular endothelial cells during neovascularization after MI. Since β -catenin is known to be a key regulator of both cell proliferation and migration, a role for this protein in angiogenesis and vascular remodeling can be anticipated. This is further substantiated by data from in vitro studies in which translocation of β -catenin to the cytoplasm has been linked to angiogenesis. Moreover, the expression of dvl1 in these cells suggests an involvement of the wnt-fz cascade in this process. These findings underscore that β -catenin is not only a crucial factor during development and in neoplastic disease, but can also play a role in the vascular endothelial cell proliferation and migration during neovascularization after MI.

Chapter 9

ABSENCE OF β -CATENIN IN INTERCALATED DISKS BETWEEN CARDIOMYOCYTES IS ASSOCIATED WITH INFARCT RUPTURE IN DISHEVELLED-1 KNOCKOUT MICE

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Submitted

Abstract

Infarct rupture is a usually fatal complication of MI in humans, for which no molecular mechanism has been defined. In an experimental model of MI, infarct rupture was observed in 75% of the mice harboring a disrupted *dvl1* gene. In contrast, rupture occurred in only 1 out of 11 wildtype animals. Rupture was associated with large spaces between the necrotic myocytes in the infarct area of the *dvl1*^{-/-} mice, allowing the leakage of blood cells through the ventricular wall. This suggests that the lack of the *dvl1* gene results in diminished myocyte-myocyte interaction. Dvl proteins are a central component of the signal transduction pathway of polarity genes from the “frizzled”(fz) family. Activation of this pathway leads to an increase in the intracellular β -catenin content, a protein involved in cell-cell adhesion present in the intercalated disks between the cardiomyocytes. Immunohistochemical staining showed that β -catenin was undetectable in the intercalated disks in all ruptured hearts. In contrast, most of the control mice showed high levels of β -catenin staining. These findings point to a key role for the cadherin-catenin complex in the integrity of the infarct area after infarction.

Introduction

MI is one of the most frequent cardiovascular events in the Western world, associated with a high morbidity and mortality³⁰⁷. Improvement of the pharmacological treatment of arrhythmias has shifted the major causes of in-hospital mortality in the first days after MI to acute pump failure and infarct rupture³⁰⁸. Rupture is most frequent when the infarct is located in the ventricular free wall³⁰⁹, and nearly always results in sudden death from massive blood loss into the pericardium causing compression of the heart, a phenomenon known as cardiac tamponade^{307, 310}. Little is known about the cause of infarct rupture, and the diagnostic tools that are available to identify patients prone to rupture after MI are of poor quality³¹¹. Although environmental as well as genetic risk factors have been described for MI itself^{307, 312}, no genetic predisposition for infarct rupture has been identified so far. Identification of genes that are associated with infarct rupture would therefore not only be very helpful for a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms that lead to this complication of MI, but also as a diagnostic tool to identify the patients that are prone to rupture.

In previous work, we have focused on genes that are involved in the control of the architecture of the heart during the adaptation to an increased work load or in response to injury. In these experiments the increased expression of *fz2*, a mammalian homologue of the *Drosophila* “frizzled” protein, was observed during cardiac adaptation and repair^{38, 218}. In *Drosophila*, this protein is involved in the transduction and translation of cellular polarity signals. In the mean time, the *fz* gene product has been identified as a receptor protein with 7 membrane-spanning domains, and multiple mammalian family members have been cloned⁴⁰. Frizzled proteins act as receptors for wnt proteins, homologues of *Drosophila* “wingless”.

These genes typically are expressed during fetal development and show lower levels of expression after birth⁵⁸. In this report we will focus on a downstream protein of the fz receptors, dvl, which has been shown to play a crucial role in the wnt-fz signal transduction¹³⁰. In the mouse, three dvl homologues have been identified¹²¹⁻¹²³. They act as coupling molecules between the frizzled receptors and their signal transduction cascade. Recently, β -catenin has been identified as a second messenger molecule for fz receptors^{286, 313}. In this pathway, dvl proteins inhibit GSK3 β , the enzyme responsible for the phosphorylation of β -catenin which is the first step in the degradation of this protein. By this mechanism, stimulation of frizzled receptors leads to an increase in intracellular β -catenin.

In the present paper we report the sudden death of dvl1-/- mice in the first week after MI, due to infarct rupture. In these mice abnormalities in social interaction and sensorimotor gating have been reported, but they do not display illnesses, histological abnormalities or a reduced life span when compared to wildtype animals with the same genetic background³¹⁴. To investigate the underlying causes for the infarct rupture, we have compared the histology of the infarct area of dvl1-/- and wildtype mice. Moreover, we have performed immunohistochemistry for β -catenin to investigate whether the infarct rupture, observed in these mice, can be linked to a defective wnt-fz pathway.

Methods

Animals and surgery

The male dvl1-/- mice, used in this study, were completely inbred (>10 generations) into a 129/SvEv background³¹⁴. Age-matched wildtype 129/SvEv mice were obtained from Taconic Farms, Germantown NY. They were housed in groups of 3-5 with free access to food and tap water. MI was induced at the age of 10-12 weeks as described previously¹⁷. Briefly, after intraperitoneal injection of sodium pentobarbital (100 mg/kg) positive pressure respiration was started through an endotracheal tube. The thorax was opened at the left fourth intercostal space, and the left anterior descending (LAD) coronary artery was ligated, just proximal to its main bifurcation, using a 6-0 prolene ligature. After closing of the chest in layers and recovery from anesthesia, the animals were returned to their home-cages. Animals that did not develop infarct rupture were sacrificed at day 9 after MI and perfusion-fixed according to a previously published protocol¹⁷.

Immunohistochemistry

A previously described immunohistochemistry protocol³⁸ was used with the following modifications. Paraffin sections were mounted on 3-aminopropyltriethoxysilane (APTS, Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis MO, USA) coated glass slides. After deparaffination and the inhibition of endogenous peroxidase, sections were boiled twice for 5 min in 10 mmol/l citrate buffer (pH 6.0). Immunohistochemistry for β -catenin was performed using a monoclonal antibody (Transduction Labs., Lexington KY, USA) in a 1:500 dilution and an overnight incubation at room

temperature. Immunohistochemistry for cardiac cadherin was performed using a monoclonal antibody (1:100 dilution, Sigma-Aldrich) raised against the C-terminal cadherin sequence which is common in many cadherins including N-cadherin, the main cardiac form. The experiments were performed as described above. Biotinylated multilink Swine-anti-goat, -mouse and -rabbit secondary antibody (dilution 1:100, DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark) and The Vectastain ABC kit (Vector, Burlingame CA, USA) were used according to the manufacturers instructions to visualize the binding of the primary antibody. Sections were briefly counterstained with hematoxylin and mounted with Entellan (Merck, Darmstadt, Germany).

RT-PCR and in situ hybridization for dvl1

Reverse transcription was performed on RNA, isolated from mouse hearts with the Ultraspec II RNA isolation system (Biotecx Laboratories, Houston TX) and treated with RQ1 DNase (Promega, Madison WI), using a first strand cDNA synthesis kit (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden) according to the manufacturers instructions. PCR amplification of the dvl-1 fragment was performed using CAGGGCACTGACAGCCAC and CAGTAGATGCACTGTCTGGAGG as upper and lower primers, respectively. The resulting PCR fragment was cloned into the pGEM-T vector (Promega). An RNA transcript of this PCR fragment, generated with T7 RNA polymerase in the presence of radiolabeled ribonucleotides, was used as a probe for the in situ hybridization experiments which were performed as described previously³⁸.

Results

Infarct rupture in dvl1-/- mice

MI was induced in a total of 8 male dvl1-/- mice and 11 male wildtype mice with the same genetic background. As shown in the survival curve (fig. 1), this resulted in the sudden death of 75% of the dvl1-/- mice, 3-7 days after the induction of MI. In contrast, only 1 out of 11 control mice died suddenly, 4 days after MI. Autopsy revealed that the thorax of all the mice that had suddenly died was filled with blood, suggestive for a rupture of ventricular free wall. Cardiac tamponade was not

Figure 1. Survival curves of the dvl1 knockout (Dvl1-/-, solid line) and wildtype (dashed line) mice after myocardial infarction (MI). In the Dvl1-/- group, 75% of the mice died within one week after MI, whereas the mortality in the wildtype group was below 10%.

observed in these animals because the pericardium had been opened for the induction of MI, resulting in direct bleeding into the thoracic cavity.

Histological examination of the ruptured left ventricles

To investigate the histology of the ruptured ventricles, tissue sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin (HE) and AZAN. In an overview of the ruptured left ventricle, stained with HE, blood-filled spaces were observed (fig. 2A) through which the blood had flown from the ventricle into the thoracic cavity. Detailed analysis of AZAN-stained sections showed large intercellular spaces between the necrotic myocytes in the infarct area (fig. 2B) which were not observed in wildtype animals. This finding suggests a diminished myocyte-myocyte interaction as the cause for the infarct rupture.

Table 1. β -catenin content of the intercalated disks in section from dvl1^{-/-} and wildtype mice.

	β -catenin staining			Total
	High	Low	Undetectable	
dvl1 ^{-/-}	0	2 ^a	6	8
wildtype	8	1	2 ^b	11

^a: These dvl1^{-/-} animals did not show infarct rupture

^b: One of these control animals suffered from infarct rupture

Immunohistochemistry for β -catenin

Sections of the hearts of all 8 dvl1^{-/-} and 11 wildtype mice, included in this study, were analyzed for their β -catenin content by immunohistochemistry. In fig. 3A, a typical example of the absence of β -catenin staining in the cardiomyocytes of a dvl1^{-/-} mouse that died from infarct rupture is shown. In contrast, strong staining was observed in the intercalated disks in wildtype mice (fig. 3B). The sections were analyzed by two independent observers (WB and MD) in a blind way and included into one of three categories: strong β -catenin staining in many intercalated disks; few β -catenin-positive intercalated disks and weak staining; no detectable staining of the intercalated disks (table 1). Interestingly, in all ruptured dvl1^{-/-} mice the β -catenin staining in the intercalated disks of the myocytes in the viable parts of the heart was undetectable, whereas the two dvl1^{-/-} animals that survived showed weak but detectable staining in some of the intercalated disks. In contrast, most of the wildtype mice showed intense staining of the intercalated disks with the β -catenin antibody whereas 2 showed no detectable staining of the intercalated disks, one of which died from infarct rupture. Unlike β -catenin, immunohistochemistry for N-cadherin, another component of the cadherin-catenin complex, showed staining in both dvl1^{-/-} and wildtype hearts (not shown), suggesting that the alterations in the cadherin-catenin complex of the dvl1^{-/-} mice is confined to β -catenin and does not comprise other components of this complex.

Figure 2. Representative view of the histology of a ruptured infarct area of a *dv11*^{-/-} mouse. (A) Hematoxylin-eosin stained section at 400x magnification. Note the blood-filled spaces in the tissue (arrow) which allowed the blood to flow from the ventricle into the thoracic cavity. (B) High power (1000x) magnification of the infarct area, stained with AZAN. Large blood-filled spaces (red) can be observed between the myocytes (blue), suggesting an attenuated myocyte-myocyte inter-action as the cause of infarct rupture.

Figure 3. Immunohistochemical staining of sections of hearts obtained from a *dv11*^{-/-} (A) and wildtype (B) animal with anti- β -catenin antibodies. Magnification: 600x. Abundant staining of intercalated disks between cardiomyocytes was observed in wildtype hearts (arrowheads), whereas this staining was completely absent in hearts obtained from the *dv11*^{-/-} that died from infarct rupture.

*β -catenin staining in *dv11*^{-/-} and wildtype hearts, 48 hrs after MI*

A trivial explanation for the absence of β -catenin staining in the ruptured hearts is that these animals died spontaneously whereas the non-ruptured animals were sacrificed. We therefore analyzed the β -catenin content of the intercalated disks of hearts from 3 *dv11*^{-/-} mice and 3 wildtype controls that were sacrificed after 48 hrs, so before infarct rupture had occurred. Again, we observed no detectable β -catenin staining in all 3 *dv11*^{-/-} hearts, whereas all 3 control hearts had high levels of β -catenin staining in the intercalated disks. This shows that the genotype of the *dv11*^{-/-} mice, rather than the spontaneous death of these animals, is responsible for the lack of β -catenin staining.

Dvl1 expression in normal heart

To address the question whether the *dvl1* gene is expressed in adult, uninfarcted cardiac tissue, we performed a RT-PCR on RNA isolated from wildtype and *dvl1*^{-/-} hearts. As shown in fig. 4A, a positive signal was detected when wildtype RNA was used whereas RNA obtained from *dvl1*^{-/-}, as expected, did not yield any PCR product. To establish the cell type(s) that express the *dvl1* gene in wildtype heart, we performed in situ hybridization with a *dvl1*^{-/-} probe. The highest density of photographic grains was detected over the cardiomyocytes. The grain density over blood vessels and other structures that do not contain cardiomyocytes was similar to background levels. This indicates that the *dvl1* gene expression is localized in cardiomyocytes (fig. 4B).

Figure 4. Expression of the dishevelled-I gene in normal mouse heart. **(A)** Reverse Transcriptase-Polymerase Chain Reaction with RNA isolated from a wildtype and a *dvl1* knockout mouse heart. The *dvl1* gene was expressed at a low level in the normal heart but not in the heart obtained from the *dvl1*^{-/-} mouse, whereas the expression of the "house keeping gene" Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) was similar in the two hearts. **(B)** Dark field image of an in situ hybridization (magnification 400x). The white spots represent the photographic grains, which indicate the sites of *dvl1* expression. Note that the *dvl1* expression is localized over the cardiac myocytes, some of which are indicated by the arrows. The density of photographic grains over the blood vessel (BV) resembles the background level.

Discussion

In the last decade, early mortality from arrhythmias after MI has decreased due to successful anti-arrhythmic therapy. Consequently, other early complications of MI, like e.g. infarct rupture, have become increasingly important to further reduce the mortality in the first weeks after MI. However, the mechanism(s) that lead to infarct rupture in humans are unknown which hampers the development of specific diagnostic tools and preventive therapeutic strategies. The present study shows that MI in the *dvl1*^{-/-} mouse results in rupture of the infarct area with a time course and histological findings that are similar to those observed in humans. Thus, our

data indicate that infarct rupture can be caused by a defect in a single gene, the *dvl1* gene, and that the lack of this gene can induce alterations in the composition of the cadherin-catenin complex in the intercalated disks of the cardiomyocytes.

The *dvl* genes form a family consisting of three members in the mouse¹²¹⁻¹²³ with corresponding human orthologues. The genes are well conserved, with >95% homology at the amino acid level between mice and humans³¹⁵. Originally, the *dvl* gene was identified in *Drosophila* as a critical component of the wingless signal transduction cascade, involved in the specification of cell fate and polarity in the segmental units of the *Drosophila* embryo³¹⁶. In the mean time, *fz* proteins have been identified as receptors for wingless proteins and a direct coupling between *fz* and *dvl* has been described¹³³. Recently, *dvl* proteins were shown to be active in two distinct frizzled signal transduction cascades, the armadillo/ β -catenin pathway and the JNK/SAPK pathway, involved in segmental and planar polarity, respectively^{131, 132}. These results suggest a central role for the *dvl* proteins in polarity control in species as diverse as *Drosophila* and humans.

Dvl1 is expressed at low levels in the myocytes of adult cardiac tissue of wildtype mice, as shown in the present study. In other studies, we have observed a similar low-level expression of members of the *fz* family in adult mouse hearts (W.M. Blankesteyn, unpublished observation) which may point to a function for the wnt-*fz* signal transduction cascade in the normal heart. Moreover, the *dvl1* protein appears to play a crucial role in infarct healing after MI, which can not be compensated for by other *dvl* family members, since a lack of the *dvl1* gene leads to infarct rupture in mice. This finding does not support the original idea that the different members of the dishevelled family are redundant, based on the lack of a physiological phenotype of the *dvl1*^{-/-} mice^{58, 314}.

The results of the present study point to a link between *dvl1* and the cellular β -catenin content as the cause for the infarct rupture in the *dvl1*^{-/-} mice. *Dvl* proteins can inhibit GSK3 β , an enzyme that can phosphorylate β -catenin, which is the first step in the degradation of this protein^{167, 317}. β -Catenin is a protein which can modulate cell-cell adhesion, but also can affect expression of High Mobility Group genes by activating the TCF/LEF family of transcription factors⁵⁸. With respect to the latter function, β -catenin has received ample attention in cancer research, because it can contribute to the development of different kinds of malignancies^{286, 289, 291}. However, for the outcomes of the present study the association of β -catenin with cadherins probably is the most important.

Cadherins constitute a family of transmembranous adhesion proteins, which, in a complex with catenins, link actin filaments of the cytoskeleton to the plasma membrane. In cardiac myocytes, β -catenin can be found in high concentrations in intercalated disks, where it is associated with cadherins in adherens junctions^{139, 283-285}. In *dvl1*^{-/-} mice the inhibitory action of *dvl* on GSK-3 β is lacking, resulting in an increased degradation of β -catenin, which can serve as an explanation for the absence of β -catenin in the intercalated disks of the cardiomyocytes, observed in this study. This most likely results in a weakening of

the complex between cadherins, catenins and the cytoskeleton, leading to the attenuated myocyte-myocyte interaction observed in this study. This apparently does not cause problems under normal physiological circumstances. However, when the heart is severely challenged, for instance by myocardial infarction, the myocyte-myocyte interactions in the *dvl1*^{-/-} mice are apparently not sufficiently strong to maintain the integrity of the ventricular wall. This results in infarct rupture as observed in the present study.

An intriguing consequence of the outcomes of the present study is that myocyte-myocyte adhesion seems to be crucial for the integrity of the infarcted ventricular wall, despite the fact that the vast majority of these cells is necrotic when infarct rupture occurs. This suggests that in the wildtype animals the necrotic myocytes can still form a barrier against blood cells, thereby preventing the leakage of blood into the pericardial space, a mechanism which is hampered in the *dvl1*^{-/-} mice. At later time points, this function is probably taken over by the granulation tissue, which is beginning to be formed around the necrotic area approximately 5 days after MI⁴. Therefore this study predicts a functional role for the adhesion of necrotic myocytes during the first week of infarct healing.

In conclusion, alterations in the cadherin-catenin complex are associated with infarct rupture, suggesting that this complex is a key determinant of the integrity of the ventricular wall after MI. The *dvl1*^{-/-} mouse is the first animal model in which infarct rupture, with similar time course and histological changes as seen in humans, can be explained by a single molecular defect. Moreover, in preliminary experiments with samples of human cardiac tissue, obtained from MI patients, we have observed an association between alterations in the composition of the cadherin-catenin complex of cardiomyocytes and infarct rupture as well. Therefore these results call for a detailed analysis of the cadherin-catenin complex in cardiomyocytes to better understand, and eventually prevent, this devastating complication of MI.

Chapter 10

GENERAL DISCUSSION

SUMMARY

SAMENVATTING

REFERENCES

General Discussion

The architecture of the heart is important for its function. MI has major implications for the architecture of the heart; usually, after MI, infarct thinning and dilatation of the ventricle occur. Genes or signal transduction process involved in the architectural control have hardly been studied in the heart. In *Drosophila* the tissue polarity genes that are part of the wnt-fz cascade are involved in the architectural control of epithelial structures such as wing hair^{41, 42} and are required for heart development¹⁹⁷.

In this thesis we have investigated the role for the wnt-fz cascade in cardiac development and in the repair process after MI. We have done three major findings. In chapter 4 we have described that the expression pattern for fz2 was similar to the pattern of neural crest cells during development of the heart. This suggests an involvement for fz2 in the migration and patterning of neural crest cells to the heart. Furthermore, the wnt-fz cascade has a role early in the infarct healing by maintaining the structural integrity, as evidenced by the cardiac ruptures after MI in *dvl1* knock-out mice (chapter 9). Finally, we have found elevated levels of β -catenin and *dvl1* expression in the vascular endothelial cells after MI suggesting a role of the wnt-fz cascade in neovascularization (chapter 8).

Wnt-fz cascade and development

In chapter 4 we demonstrated that fz2 is expressed during the development of the heart. We suggested that fz2 is involved in the migration and patterning of cardiac neural crest cells. The involvement of the wnt-fz cascade in neural crest patterning has also been suggested in other studies: *wnt1* and *wnt3a* null mutant mice have neural crest defects and fz4 is expressed in neural crest-derived regions^{153, 200, 204, 205, 240}.

In *Drosophila* the wnt-fz cascade is involved in initiating cardiac development¹⁹⁷. Recently, studies in chicken and *Xenopus* have demonstrated a difference between heart formation in flies and vertebrates^{318, 319}, as cardiogenesis in vertebrates was induced by inhibiting *wnt3a* and *wnt8c*. The role for the wnt-fz cascade in initiating cardiac development in vertebrates, however, remains complex as *wnt 11* was expressed in precardiac mesoderm, and was able to induce cardiac differentiation in noncardiac tissue¹⁹⁹.

Neural crest cells contribute importantly to morphogenesis of the heart. Septation of the pulmonary and systemic outflow tracts depends on the contribution of neural crest cells^{201, 237}. This suggests that the wnt-fz cascade is functionally involved in the control of cardiac morphology during development.

The neural crest-related syndromes like DiGeorge and Velo Cardio Facial syndrome are associated with a deletion on chromosome 22q11^{236, 239}. So far only one member of the wnt-fz cascade, a homologue of β -catenin, has been localized to that region²³⁶. In chapter 4 we have suggested that also human *dvl2* was located in this region²³⁵. However, Greco and coworkers³²⁰ have later shown that human *dvl2* is actually located on chromosome 17. Human fz7 has been localized to the

chromosomal region on 7q11.23, which is associated with the Williams syndrome. Although not a typical neural crest disorder, the Williams syndrome is associated with a high incidence of stenosis, located predominantly in neural crest derived arteries⁵⁴. These findings are in agreement with the hypothesis that the wnt-fz cascade plays a role in cardiac neural crest patterning during development in the mouse.

Gene knock-out models in mice could be useful tools to study the role of fz receptors in neural crest patterning. Fz consists of a family of multiple members with overlapping expression patterns⁴⁰. So far, only for fz5 a knock-out model has been described²²⁸. The fz5 null mutant mice die in utero around 10.75 days post coitum, due to defects in yolk sac angiogenesis. Cardiac development seemed normal in these mice, but at day 10 of gestational age the neural crest cells have not yet migrated into the heart^{201, 228, 237}. Studies in fz2 null mutant mice could demonstrate if fz2 is essential for cardiac neural crest cell patterning.

In a previous study the fz2 expression was linked to the proliferation and migration of myofibroblasts after MI³⁸. In chapter 4 we showed that the fz2 expression during heart development was also linked to the proliferation and migration of cells. This is in agreement with the finding that genes with a role during the development of the heart can be re-expressed in the heart in pathological conditions¹⁹⁴.

Wnt-fz cascade in cardiomyocyte cell adhesion

An important early complication after MI is left ventricular free wall rupture. This complication occurs in 2-4% of patients with acute myocardial infarction, and accounts for 5-24% of all in hospital deaths related to acute myocardial infarction³²¹.

So far, the molecular mechanism behind infarct rupture has not been clarified. Theoretically infarct rupture could be due to a defect in the extracellular matrix, cell-extracellular matrix interactions and cell-cell interactions. Extracellular matrix degradation has been associated with infarct ruptures as inhibition of plasminogen activators or MMPs has been shown to prevent cardiac rupture³⁵.

In chapter 9 we have demonstrated that MI in *dv11* knockout mice results in cardiac rupture, associated with defects in cell-cell interactions. The cardiac ruptures in the *dv11* knockout mice were associated with non-detectable β -catenin in the adherens junctions of the cardiomyocytes. This finding demonstrates that the wnt-fz cascade affects not only cytoplasmic β -catenin, involved in gene transcription-regulation, but also the β -catenin in the adherens junctions. In the future, interventions in the wnt-fz cascade of the *dv11* knock-out mice could be tested to augment β -catenin levels in the adherens junctions in order to prohibit cardiac rupture in this model.

Our findings may have implications for cardiac rupture in humans. It would be very helpful to be able to identify the patients at risk for cardiac rupture. If dysfunctional adherens junctions are a cause of human cardiac rupture, mutation analysis for the different components of adherens junctions or the wnt-fz cascade

could identify patients that are prone to cardiac rupture after MI. Such patients could then get a more aggressive therapy to prevent MI, or, in the future, receive a therapy that enhances the cell-cell adhesion in myocytes possibly by interfering in the wnt-fz cascade.

Frizzled cascade in granulation tissue formation

Neovascularization

Restoring the blood supply to the infarct area is an important process in infarct healing. From human and animal data it is known that late reperfusion after MI, even beyond the time of cardiomyocyte salvage, is associated with improved outcome^{322, 323}. The beneficial effect of late reperfusion can be attributed to several factors, one of which is the acceleration of scar formation, which can attenuate ventricular remodeling. It can be anticipated that neovascularization after MI also contributes to an accelerated infarct healing.

In chapter 8 we have described β -catenin expression in vascular endothelial cells after MI, which suggests a role for the wnt-fz cascade in neovascularization after MI. Neovascularization can be divided in angiogenesis and arteriogenesis (fig. 1)³²⁴. Angiogenesis involves the formation of new capillaries, which, at a later time point, can be muscularized. Arteriogenesis is the remodeling of pre-existing collaterals after occlusion of a supplying artery³²⁴. β -Catenin has been observed in endothelial cells of both newly formed capillaries and pre-existing vessels. Therefore, we propose that β -catenin in endothelial cells is involved in angiogenesis as well as arteriogenesis.

Our findings have implications for angiogenic therapy after MI and in other ischemic diseases, where neovascularization could be beneficial. Experimentally induced angiogenesis with VEGF can result in non-functional leaking vessels³²⁵, which could be due to the lack of formation of adherens junctions. Cell culture

Angiogenesis

Arteriogenesis

Figure 1. Angiogenesis in adult life describes the process of new formation of capillaries, by recruiting smooth muscle cells the capillaries develop into arterioles and arteries. Arteriogenesis describes the process in which pre-existing collaterals develop into arterioles or arteries.

experiments¹⁵⁹ and the study described in chapter 9 of this thesis demonstrated that the wnt-fz cascade can stabilize β -catenin in the adherens junctions. Furthermore, wnt signaling is able to induce endothelial cell proliferation *in vitro*²¹². Recently, fz5 has been found to be involved in yolk sac angiogenesis²²⁸, supporting our hypothesis that the wnt-fz signaling is involved in neovascularization. In fz5 null mutant mice, however, it was shown that fz5 signaling supports endothelial growth rather than initiating angiogenesis, since the capillary plexus, although formed, was disorganized compared to heterozygous littermates²²⁸. This suggests that an angiogenic therapy involving the wnt-fz cascade should include an angiogenic initiator. Furthermore the role for the wnt-fz cascade in pericytes or smooth muscle cells, which are also important in the formation of arteries, has to be further explored.

Myofibroblasts alignment/migration

We have tried to characterize the signal transduction route activated by fz2 in the myofibroblasts after MI in chapter 5. An association was found between fz2 and dv11 expression in the proliferating and migrating myofibroblasts. In chapter 3 we also described an association between fz2 expression and the migrating intestinal epithelial cells, which suggests the fz2 expression in migrating cells to be a more generalized phenomenon. Studies with fz2 in other species point to a role for fz2 in planar polarity (cell alignment) rather than in the regulation of β -catenin induced gene transcription^{117, 249}, which is in agreement with our inability to demonstrate cytoplasmatic β -catenin in the myofibroblasts after MI. Our experiments, however, did not allow us to establish a causal relationship between fz expression and the migration and proliferation of myofibroblasts. Because of the lack of availability of specific agonists and antagonists such causality was difficult to study.

Wnt-fz cascade and apoptosis

The effect of the wnt-fz cascade and its second messenger β -catenin on cell growth, as reported in this thesis may seem paradoxial. In chapter 8, β -catenin in the vascular endothelial cells was suggested to be related to the proliferation of these cells, whereas β -catenin overexpression in the COS7 and 239 cells in chapter 6 was shown to result in apoptosis.

For a long time it was thought that the upregulation of β -catenin results in cell proliferation, as mutations in APC and β -catenin that prohibit β -catenin degradation plays a key role in the development of uncontrolled cell proliferation¹⁸¹⁻¹⁸³. It was thought that a downregulation of β -catenin, due to extracellular modulation of the wnt-fz cascade, results in apoptosis^{104, 253}. Recently, however, two studies have been published in which β -catenin transfection or upregulation of β -catenin resulted in apoptosis^{254, 276}. One could argue that, since these two studies as well as our results in chapter 6, used overexpression in cultured cell lines, which might not represent a physiological situation. However, also in an *in vivo* study, GSK-3 β inhibition has been associated with apoptosis²⁶⁹. GSK-3 β deficient mice

die between days 13.5 and 14.5 due to hepatocyte apoptosis and embryonic fibroblasts from these mice are sensitive to TNF- α -mediated apoptosis²⁶⁹. Apparently, the apoptotic effect of members of the wnt-fz cascade depends on cell type (chapter 6), differentiation state²⁶⁰ and the co-expression of other proteins^{171, 254}.

We suggest that the apoptosis induced by the wnt-fz cascade is a physiologically relevant process, which could also play a role in apoptosis after MI. In the first days after MI, myocytes in the infarct area die due to necrosis and apoptosis⁹⁻¹¹. Furthermore, apoptosis is involved in the disappearance of monocytes and fibroblasts in the granulation tissue after MI¹³. In the myofibroblasts after MI, the fz2 expression could be observed in a period where apoptosis occurs in these cells. Fourteen days after MI, the number of myofibroblasts has decreased compared to seven days after MI³⁵. However, fz2 expression was already upregulated 4 days after MI³⁸, a time point at which the myofibroblasts proliferate and migrate rather than undergo apoptosis. Although we can not exclude an active role for fz2 in myofibroblast apoptosis-induction after MI, we suggest that this is unlikely. Further research is necessary to investigate the role of the wnt-fz cascade in apoptosis after MI.

Concluding remarks and outlook

We have demonstrated the expression of different members of the wnt-frizzled cascade during various processes that contribute to the infarct healing, which suggests a role for this cascade in cardiac wound healing after MI. Furthermore, we

Figure 2. Time course of the wound healing response after myocardial infarction in the rat. (A) normal heart tissue. (B) After 12-18 hours myocytes die due to necrosis or apoptosis. (C) About 24 hours after the onset of the infarct, polymorphonuclear neutrophils infiltrate around the necrotic myocytes. (D) After 1-2 weeks the infarct contains granulation tissue with prominent capillaries, myofibroblasts and macrophages. The necrotic debris has been largely removed and a small amount of collagen has been deposited. In this phase the endothelial cells express *dvl1* and stain positive for β -catenin. Furthermore the myofibroblasts express *fz2* and *dvl1*. (E) After approximately 3 weeks or more the granulation tissue in the infarct region matures into scar tissue. The hearts of *dvl1*^{-/-} mice often rupture in the first week after MI.

demonstrated that the wnt-fz cascade is necessary to maintain the structural integrity of the heart. Fz genes encode seven- transmembrane receptors, which makes them potential targets for pharmacological agents to interfere with the signal transduction in vivo, and possibly stimulate the healing process after MI.

This thesis has focussed on the wnt-fz signal transduction pathway after MI, but the wnt-fz cascade also has a potential role in other cardiovascular pathologies. The cascade has been associated with neointima formation after balloon denudation in rats³²⁶. Furthermore, GSK-3 β has been found to be a negative regulator of cardiomyocyte hypertrophy³²⁷, and in cardiac hypertrophy in the rat, fz2 expression is upregulated²¹⁸. This suggests that the wnt-fz cascade modulates the development of cardiac hypertrophy. Moreover, the expression levels of FRP3 and 4 have been reported to be elevated in hearts of patients with dilated cardiomyopathy and coronary heart disease, compared to non-failing donor hearts¹¹⁰. β -Catenin levels tended to be decreased in myocardial samples with high FRP3 and 4 expression levels, suggesting an active role for the frizzled cascade in failing myocardium¹¹⁰.

In conclusion we have found evidence for involvement of the wnt-fz cascade in infarct healing after MI. This cascade has also been implicated in other cardiovascular diseases. Therefore novel intervention strategies could be designed that target components of the wnt-fz cascade, which may lead to new therapeutic interventions in cardiovascular disease.

Summary

The wnt-fz cascade is known to be involved in architectural control during development in *Drosophila*. In mammals the cascade plays an important role in several developmental and pathological processes diverging from organogenesis to cancer and Alzheimer's disease. In this thesis we have focussed on the role for the wnt-fz cascade in cardiac development and wound healing after MI, processes that require architectural control.

In the **first chapter** the wound healing process after MI was explained and the wnt-fz cascade was introduced. Furthermore, the role of the cascade in cardiac development and after MI was reviewed.

In a previous study we have demonstrated that fz2 expression was upregulated in the myofibroblasts during their migration and proliferation into the infarct area. In **chapter 2** we studied the expression of the different members of the fz receptor and FRP families. We demonstrated the upregulation of the fz1, 2 and 7 and the FRP1, 2 and 3 gene expression seven days after MI in mice. Furthermore, we demonstrated that, like in rats, the fz2 expression in mice was localized to the borderzone of the infarct area 7 days after MI.

In **chapter 3** we studied if the family of frizzled receptors, apart from during the migration and proliferation of myofibroblasts after MI, was also expressed in another highly organized proliferation/migration process, such as the proliferation and migration of epithelial cells in the crypt-villus units of rat and mouse intestine. We demonstrated that in the mouse intestine fz1-7 were expressed and that the expression of fz2 was predominantly localized in the crypts. Furthermore, an antibody was produced against the third extracellular loop of fz2 in order to study the receptor at the protein level. The fz2 protein was localized at the membrane of the villus epithelial cells. The presence of fz2 expression in this highly organized cellular proliferation and migration model suggests that fz2 expression is not unique for migrating cardiac myofibroblasts, but is a more general phenomenon in proliferating and migrating cells.

Genes that have a role during cardiac development often are re-expressed in the heart after MI. Furthermore, the wnt-fz cascade has been associated with neural crest cell proliferation and early migration during development in mammals. To investigate whether fz2 can be associated with the process of cardiac morphogenesis, we studied its expression in the thoracic arterial system and heart of mouse embryos of 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 days after conception by means of in situ hybridization (**chapter 4**). At day 10 after conception, fz2 was expressed in the pharyngeal arches and arch arteries. The outflow tract, the ascending aorta and the pulmonary trunk were positive for fz2 from day 12 on. This expression decreased over time and at day 18 only some signal could be detected in the aorta and pulmonary trunk. In contrast, in coronary and pulmonary arteries no expression was observed at any time point. Our results indicate that there is transient expression of fz2 in areas that are invaded by neural crest cells. This expression is downregulated upon neural crest cell differentiation. The fz2 expression supports a role for the wnt-fz pathway in neural crest cell migration.

In **chapter 5** the possible signal transduction pathways for fz2 in the myofibroblasts were investigated. Several signal transduction pathways for these receptors have been described, although the picture is still far from complete. The expression of several possible signal transduction molecules for the fz2 receptor, like dvl, β -catenin, cdc42, and P-JNK were studied by immunohistochemistry and in situ hybridization. We were not able to demonstrate β -catenin, P-JNK or cdc42 in the myofibroblasts after MI. However, dvl1 expression could be demonstrated in the myofibroblasts. The co-expression of dvl1 and fz2 in the myofibroblasts during their migration into the infarct area suggests that a wnt-fz signal transduction route is activated.

Recently, modulation of the wnt-fz cascade has been related to apoptosis. To elucidate the role of this cascade in apoptosis, we studied the effects of overexpression of fz1, fz2, dvl1 and β -catenin (**chapter 6**). The signal transduction pathway and the involvement of β -catenin were further investigated by using different inhibitors of the wnt-fz pathway. Overexpression of fz1, fz2 and dvl1 induced apoptosis in COS7 and 293 cells. β -Catenin appears to be the mediator for this process since β -catenin overexpression as well as lithium and valproate, which inhibit β -catenin degradation, induced apoptosis. In contrast, lithium treatment did not result in apoptosis in PC12 cells. We conclude that different components of the wnt-fz cascade can induce apoptosis, but that this effect is dependent on the cell type.

In **chapter 7** we studied a possible model for the involvement of the wnt-fz cascade in cell alignment. Fz2 is expressed in myofibroblasts during their migration and alignment in the granulation tissue formed in the infarct area after MI. Myofibroblasts can be found in the granulation tissue aligned in parallel with the epi- and endocardium. This alignment is likely to contribute to the development of a strong scar. So far, little attention has been given to the alignment process. In an in vitro study, where fibroblasts align in a similar way as is observed in the myofibroblasts after MI, the role for the fz signal transduction pathway in the alignment process was investigated. The fzs that are upregulated in the area of infarction after MI were also expressed in the fibroblasts in the alignment assay. By adding several inhibitors it was shown that two of the proposed signal transduction pathways for fz, GSK-3 β and G $_i$ -proteins, were most likely not involved in the alignment process. The results obtained in this study are not conclusive for an involvement of the wnt-fz cascade in the fibroblast alignment.

Neovascularization is an important process after MI, to restore the blood supply to the infarct area. In **chapter 8**, we demonstrated an upregulation of β -catenin in the vascular endothelial cells at 4 and 7 days after MI, whereas at later time points only few cells were positive. In contrast, vessels in the surviving myocardium did not express β -catenin at any time point. Dvl1 was also expressed in endothelial cells of remodeling vessels around the infarct. The β -catenin and dvl1 co-expression in the endothelial cells suggests that a wnt-fz signal transduction pathway is functional during their migration and proliferation. This observation

suggests a link between β -catenin and neovascularization.

In **chapter 9** we investigated the role for *dv11* in the wound healing process after MI, by inducing MI in mice lacking the *dv11* gene. The hearts of most *dv11*^{-/-} mutant mice ruptured during the first week after MI. There was a negative association between the cardiac ruptures and β -catenin levels in the intercalated disc between the cardiomyocytes. This finding demonstrated that MI in the *dv11* knockout mice provides a model for cardiac rupture, associated with defects in cell-cell interactions. Furthermore, we demonstrated that the wnt-fz cascade does not only regulate cytoplasmic β -catenin, involved in gene transcription regulation, but also the β -catenin in the adherens junctions.

In **chapter 10** the experimental chapters are discussed and put into a broader context. We conclude that we have found evidence that the wnt-fz cascade is involved in infarct healing after MI. This cascade has also been implicated in other cardiovascular diseases. Therefore novel intervention strategies could be designed that target components of the wnt-fz cascade and that lead to new therapeutic agents to treat cardiovascular disease.

Samenvatting

Frizzled genen en de wnt-fz cascade hebben in de fruitvlieg een belangrijke rol in de rangschikking van cellen, hetgeen ook wel architectuurcontrole genoemd wordt. Gebleken is dat de wnt-fz cascade in zoogdieren geconserveerd is en een belangrijke rol heeft in de embryonale ontwikkeling en verschillende pathologische processen, zoals kanker en de ziekte van Alzheimer. Architectuur is ook belangrijk voor de functie van het hart. Door een hartinfarct wordt de architectuur van het hart aangetast, wat gevolgen heeft voor de hartfunctie. Als gevolg van een hartinfarct kan namelijk dilatatie van het ventrikel plaatsvinden, hetgeen in veel gevallen leidt tot hartfalen. Er is weinig bekend over genen die betrokken zijn bij de controle van de ventrikelarchitectuur. Het onderzoek beschreven in dit proefschrift heeft zich voornamelijk gericht op de rol van de wnt-fz cascade in de ontwikkeling van het hart en in de wondgenezing van het hart na een hartinfarct.

In het **eerste hoofdstuk** wordt het wondgenezingsproces in het hart na een hartinfarct beschreven. Voorts wordt de wnt-fz cascade geïntroduceerd en wordt beschreven wat tot nu toe bekend is over de rol van deze cascade in hartontwikkeling en hart- en vaatziekten.

In een voorgaande studie in ratten werd reeds een verhoogde expressie van fz2 in de myofibroblasten aangetoond gedurende hun proliferatie en migratie naar het infarctgebied. Nadat de cellen waren aangekomen in het infarctgebied en parallel aan het epi- en endocard gerangschikt waren, nam de fz2 expressie weer af.

In het **tweede hoofdstuk** van dit proefschrift werd, in de muis, bestudeerd welke frizzleds en aan frizzled gerelateerde eiwitten (FRPs) tot expressie komen in het hart na een hartinfarct. Uit de resultaten bleek dat 7 dagen na het hartinfarct de expressie van fz1, fz2, fz7, FRP1, FRP2 en FRP3 verhoogd was. Verder werd aangetoond dat de expressie van fz2 in muizen, net als in ratten, was gelokaliseerd in het randgebied van het infarct.

In het onderzoek dat in **hoofdstuk 3** beschreven wordt, werd bestudeerd of fz2, behalve bij migrerende myofibroblasten, ook bij andere georganiseerde celmigratie-processen is betrokken. De migratie van epitheelcellen in de dunne darm vanuit de crypten naar de top van de darmvlokken is een dergelijk georganiseerd proces. Daarom hebben we de expressie van verschillende leden van de frizzled familie bestudeerd in de dunne darm van de muis. Uit deze studie bleek dat fz1 tot en met fz7 tot expressie komen in de dunne darm van de muis. De expressie van fz2 was voornamelijk waar te nemen in de epitheelcellen in de crypten van de dunne darm. Vervolgens werd met behulp van een polyclonaal antilichaam, gericht tegen een deel van de fz2 receptor, de lokalisatie van de receptor zelf aangetoond in de epitheelcellen van de darmvlokken. Uit bovenstaande experimenten concludeerden we dat fz2 in twee modellen van georganiseerde celmigratie tot expressie komt. Hieruit blijkt dat de associatie tussen fz2 en celmigratie niet beperkt blijft tot myofibroblasten, maar een meer algemeen fenomeen is voor migrerende cellen.

Genen die een rol hebben tijdens de ontwikkeling van het hart komen vaak opnieuw tot expressie in het hart na een hartinfarct. Verder wordt de wnt-fz

cascade geassocieerd met de migratie en proliferatie van neuraallijstcellen gedurende de embryonale ontwikkeling in zoogdieren. Neuraallijstcellen zijn belangrijk voor de hartontwikkeling. Om te onderzoeken of fz2 geassocieerd mag worden met de ontwikkeling van het hart is, in **hoofdstuk 4**, de expressie van fz2 bestudeerd in het hart en het arteriële systeem in de thorax tijdens de embryonale ontwikkeling van de muis met behulp van in situ hybridisatie. Tien dagen na conceptie werd signaal gezien in de kieuwbogen en kieuwboogarteriën. Het uitstroomgebied van het hart, het stijgende gedeelte van de aorta en de stam van de longslagader waren vanaf dag 12 positief voor fz2 expressie. Deze expressie nam af met de tijd en 18 dagen na de conceptie werd alleen nog signaal in de aorta en de stam van de longslagader waargenomen. Daarentegen werd op geen enkel tijdstip expressie waargenomen in de longslagaders zelf en in de kransslagaders. Deze resultaten geven aan dat er een tijdelijke expressie van fz2 is in gebieden waar neuraallijstcellen voorkomen. Als de neuraallijstcellen differentiëren neemt de fz2 expressie weer af. Dit expressie-patroon voor fz2 is in overeenstemming met de hypothese dat de wnt-fz cascade een rol speelt in neuraallijstcel migratie en fz2 betrokken is bij de hartontwikkeling.

Er zijn meerdere signaaltransductie routes voor fz2 beschreven. Er zijn echter nog steeds veel onduidelijkheden. In **hoofdstuk 5** werden een aantal van de mogelijke signaaltransductie routes voor de receptor fz2 in de myofibroblasten onderzocht. In deze studie werd de expressie van mogelijke signaaltransductie moleculen zoals dvl, β -catenine, cdc42, en gefosforyleerde JNK (P-JNK) onderzocht met behulp van immunohistochemie en in situ hybridisatie. Er werd in de myofibroblasten geen β -catenine, P-JNK of cdc42 aangetoond. Daarentegen werd wel expressie van dvl1 gevonden. De co-expressie van dvl1 en fz2 in myofibroblastrijke gebieden suggereert dat er een wnt-fz route actief is.

Recentelijk is de wnt-fz cascade gerelateerd aan apoptose (geprogrammeerde celdood). Om dit verband verder op te helderen werden in **hoofdstuk 6** de genen die coderen voor fz1, fz2, dvl1 en β -catenine getransfecteerd in gekweekte cellen om het effect van expressie op apoptose te onderzoeken. Daarnaast is de betrokkenheid van β -catenine verder onderzocht met behulp van verschillende farmacologische remmers. In deze studie werd aangetoond dat verhoogde expressie van fz1, fz2 en dvl1 tot apoptose leidde in COS7 en 293 cellen. Vervolgens leek β -catenine betrokken te zijn bij apoptose omdat zowel expressie van β -catenine zelf, als het remmen van de afbraak van β -catenine tot apoptose leidde. Het remmen van de afbraak van β -catenine had daarentegen geen effect op PC12 cellen. Uit deze experimenten concluderen we dat verschillende leden van de wnt-fz cascade apoptose kunnen bewerkstelligen maar dat het effect afhankelijk is van het type cel.

Vervolgend werd in **hoofdstuk 7** een andere mogelijke functie van de wnt-fz cascade bestudeerd. Zoals bovenstaand beschreven komt fz2 tot expressie in myofibroblasten tijdens hun migratie in het infarctgebied. Als deze cellen parallel liggen met het epi- en endocard neemt de expressie weer af. Gedacht wordt dat de rangschikking van myofibroblasten bijdraagt aan de ontwikkeling van een sterk

litteken. De mogelijke rol van de wnt-fz cascade in de fibroblast-rangschikking werd bestudeerd in een celcultuurstudie, waarin fibroblasten zich op een zelfde manier rangschikken als in het litteken na een hartinfarct. In de fibroblasten in celweek kwamen verschillende frizzleds tot expressie. Remming van twee mogelijke signaal transductie routes van frizzled had echter geen invloed op de rangschikking van de cellen. Uit deze resultaten kunnen we geen conclusies trekken met betrekking tot de betrokkenheid van de wnt-fz cascade in de rangschikking van de fibroblasten.

Neovascularisatie is een belangrijk proces in een helend infarct. Het zorgt ervoor dat de bloedvoorziening naar het weefsel hersteld wordt. In **hoofdstuk 8** hebben we aangetoond dat β -catenine, op 4 en 7 dagen na het hartinfarct, aanwezig is in de vasculaire endotheelcellen in het infarct gebied. In vaatjes in het gezonde hartweefsel werd geen β -catenine waargenomen. In de vasculaire endotheelcellen in het infarctgebied bleek verder ook dvl1 tot expressie te komen. Deze co-expressie van β -catenine en dvl1 in endotheelcellen suggereert een rol voor de wnt-fz cascade in de proliferatie en migratie van deze cellen. Verder wijzen deze resultaten op een associatie tussen β -catenine en neovascularisatie.

In **hoofdstuk 9** werd de rol van dvl1 in het wondgenezingsproces in het hart na een hartinfarct onderzocht. Daarvoor hebben we muizen gebruikt, die het gen dat codeert voor dvl1 missen. De harten de meeste van deze muizen ruptuureerden in de eerste week na het hartinfarct, hetgeen geassocieerd bleek te zijn met de afwezigheid van detecteerbaar β -catenine in de intercallair schijven tussen de levende hartspiercellen. Deze gegevens tonen aan dat dit hartruptuur model is geassocieerd met een defect in celinteracties. Verder tonen deze gegevens aan dat de wnt-fz cascade niet alleen het β -catenine in het cytoplasma reguleert, dat betrokken is bij de regulatie van gentranscriptie, maar ook het β -catenine aan de plasmamembraan.

Tenslotte zijn in **hoofdstuk 10** de experimentele data bediscussieerd en in een bredere context geplaatst. We concluderen dat met het onderzoek, beschreven in dit proefschrift, aanwijzingen gevonden zijn voor een relevante rol van de wnt-fz cascade in de cardiale wondgenezing. In de toekomst zal met behulp van selectieve interventies, die ingrijpen op de wnt-fz cascade, dit mechanisme verder ontrafeld kunnen worden. Aangezien deze cascade ook betrokken is bij andere hart- en vaatziekten zouden interventies gericht op de wnt-fz cascade tot nieuwe therapieën voor hart-en vaatziekten kunnen leiden.

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Dankwoord

Toen ik vier en een half jaar geleden aan dit onderzoek begon, wist ik niets van frizzled, nu een aantal jaren verder, na een breed scala van experimenten en de hulp van heel veel mensen, een beetje meer. Ik wil bij deze iedereen die in meer of mindere mate aan de inhoud van dit proefschrift heeft bijgedragen bedanken!!! Enkele mensen wil ik er toch even uitlichten...

Allereerst natuurlijk mijn promotor en copromotor. Jos, bedankt voor alle adviezen, discussies en hulp bij het schrijven van dit proefschrift. Al had je het vaak druk, als ik je nodig had, was je er. Matthijs, in de vier jaar dat ik een kamer met je heb gedeeld, heb ik gemerkt dat achter de toch wat luide persoonlijkheid iemand zit met een groot gevoel voor humor, die de gave heeft goed te kunnen uitleggen en overtuigen. Op wetenschappelijk en op schrijfgebied heb ik heel wat van je kunnen leren, bedankt. Yvonne, jij hebt me vooral in het begin aardig wat technieken bijgebracht. Veel immuno's en in situ's in dit proefschrift zijn van jouw hand. Christel, jij kwam pas toen ik eigenlijk al aan het schrijven was, maar het was gewoon leuk jou het één en ander op het lab te leren. Bedankt voor die laatste proeven die toch altijd nog gedaan moeten worden. Ook dank aan alle studenten die het lab gepasseerd zijn, maar vooral Frans voor alle TUNELs en Bart, de eerste student, die ook het meeste indruk achterliet. Rob, dank voor je altijd goede raad bij het eiwitwerk. Jacque, Peter en Nicole van het dierenlab, het respect dat jullie voor dieren tonen, zou iedereen moeten hebben die met proefdieren werkt, bedankt voor alle operaties. Gregorio, ondanks het feit dat je niet echt bij mijn onderzoek betrokken was, werd je als collega erg gewaardeerd, al mijn onzinverhalen die ik altijd aan je kwijt kon, je bereidwilligheid mij te helpen als ik weer eens ruzie had met de computer of aanverwante apparatuur, maar het meest zal ik toch je danscapriolen missen. Verder wil ik Ewald, Jos, Susanne, Wendy, Marijke, Liesje en alle andere AIO's en postdocs bedanken voor de prof-analyses, steun in slechte tijden maar vooral voor de gezelligheid. Alle andere collega's binnen de vakgroep farmacologie, bedankt voor de plezierige werksfeer.

De cardio's van pathologie onder leiding van Mat kunnen in dit dankwoord natuurlijk niet ontbreken, de nauwe samenwerking die er tussen de pathologie en farmacologie bestaat levert niet alleen goede experimentele resultaten op, tevens houdt het je op een plezierige manier geïnformeerd over zaken die slechts indirect met werk te maken hebben.

Uiteraard wil ik ook diegenen met wie ik buiten Maastricht heb samengewerkt bedanken. Ik heb goede herinneringen aan mijn verblijf in Leiden bij de groep van Prof. Dr. Gittenberger de Groot. Adri, bedankt voor de leerzame discussies, jouw enthousiasme voor het onderzoek werkt heel motiverend! Verder natuurlijk dank aan alle medewerkers die me daar met de experimenten geholpen hebben. I would like to thank Dr. Eftekhari and Prof. Dr. Hoebeke from Strasbourg for their work on the frizzled 2 antibody and their hospitality during our short stay in France (still missing the room service).

Tevens wil ik de diegenen bedanken die ervoor gezorgd hebben dat het proefschrift eruit ziet zoals het hier ligt, Ine bedankt voor de lay-out en oma bedankt voor zoveel meer dan het ontwerp van de kaft.

Mijn paranimfen, niet voor niets uitgekozen: Esther, zonder jou had ik niet eens over het bestaan van deze AIO baan geweten, een vriendin die inhoudelijk ook nog weet waar ik mee bezig ben en de mensen op het werk kent, is heel handig, maar je bent en blijft een vriendin omdat je de dingen op z'n Esthers doet en zegt. Karin, mijn andere paranimf, het aantal keren dat ik de afgelopen jaren op jou kon terugvallen, is ontelbaar. Ik ben blij dat je terug naar Maastricht bent gekomen, toen ik hier AIO werd! Gijs, jou wilde ik toch ook nog even apart noemen, als je aan het promoveren bent is het heel verhelderend iemand in je naaste omgeving te hebben die niets met onderzoek te maken heeft en de dingen met een nuchtere blik kan bekijken. Bedankt dat jullie deur altijd open staat!! Catalina, admiration for the warm and strong person you are, thanks for your support!!!

Tenslotte wil ik mijn ouders bedanken voor de vanzelfsprekendheid waarmee ze altijd weer klaar staan en hun onvoorwaardelijke steun bij alles wat ik doe.

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