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Investigating the role of estrogen receptor beta (ER β) and estrogen-related receptor alpha (ERR α) in combinatorial drug treatment of triple-negative breast cancer

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Triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC) lacks expression of estrogen receptor alpha (ER α), progesterone receptor (PgR) and HER2, accounts for ~15% of breast cancer cases, is treated with chemotherapy, has poor prognosis, and is considered non-responsive to targeted hormonal therapy with tamoxifen. Recent studies have shown, however, that TNBC expresses three isoforms of ER β , the hormone-binding ER β 1 and the orphan ER β 2 and ER β 5 as well as estrogen-related receptor alpha (ERR α); and that tamoxifen treatment of ER β 1-expressing TNBC is associated with better disease outcome.¹ Tissue microarray IHC assessment of 306 invasive and 40 non-invasive TNBC cases along with 91 samples of normal breast for levels of expression of 5 biomarkers of potential therapeutic response, namely total ER β , ER β 1, ER β 2, p65NFkB and pcJun, revealed association of ER β 2 with ER β 1 and pcJun in invasive TNBC on top of the normal association of ER β 1 with p65NFkB and pcJun. The therapeutic implications for ER β 1-positive TNBC are discussed.

TNBC-derived cell line MDA-MB-231 (ER α -/PgR-/HER2-/EGFR+) was found to express ER β 2, ER β 5 and ERR α but not ER β 1 and therefore is a model of ER β 1-negative TNBC. Hence, it was used to investigate the role of ER β 2/5 and ERR α in the ability of hydroxy-tamoxifen (OHT), potential low-affinity ligand of both ER β 2/5 and ERR α , to act synergistically with other targeted drugs in repressing cancer cell growth. Gefitinib (GEF), an EGFR inhibitor, Genistein (GEN) and Trichostatin A (TSA), HDAC inhibitors reportedly restorative of ER α expression, and XCT790, an ERR α inverse agonist, were tested for synergy with OHT against MDA-MB-231 cells. GEN and TSA failed to restore ER α or ER β 1 expression. Interestingly, GEF(10 μ M) and XCT790(10 μ M) displayed synergy with OHT(1 μ M). An ER β 2/5 knock-down mutant of MDA-MB-231 cells exhibited higher sensitivity to OHT alone or in combination with GEF compared to the mock knock-down mutant, suggesting that ER β 2/5 is not the target of OHT. Similarly, the ERR α shRNA knock-down mutant displayed higher sensitivity to GEF and OHT compared to the mock knock-down cells, suggesting that ERR α is also not the target of OHT. Effective synergy of OHT with either of GEF and XCT790 was observed at 7 μ M OHT, consistent with off-target effect(s) of OHT. Microarray gene expression analysis of MDA-MB-231 cells treated with GEF(10 μ M) and/or OHT(1 μ M) provided an insight into the molecular determinants of sensitivity of MDA-MB-231 cells to OHT and GEF when acting alone and in combination.

¹ Honma et al. (2008) *J Clin Oncol* 26: 3727-34

*This research has been co-financed by the European Union (European Social Fund – ESF) and Greek national funds through the Operational Program "Education and Lifelong Learning" of the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) - Research Funding Program: **THALES (Project 85355 "TNBC", code MIS 380136)**: Investing in knowledge society through the European Social Fund.*