Molecular Portrait of High Alpha-Fetoprotein in Hepatocellular Carcinoma:  
Implications for Biomarker-Driven Clinical Trials

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Abstract

The clinical utility of serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) in patients with hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is widely recognized. However, a clear understanding of the mechanisms of AFP overexpression and the molecular traits of patients with AFP-high tumors are not known. We assessed transcriptome data, whole-exome sequencing data and DNA methylome profiling of 520 HCC patients from two independent cohorts to identify distinct molecular traits of patients with AFP-high tumors (serum concentration >400 ng/ml), which represents an accepted prognostic cut-off and predictor of response to ramucirumab. Those AFP-high tumors (18% of resected cases) were characterized by significantly lower AFP promoter methylation (p<0.001), significant enrichment of progenitor-cell features (CK19, EPCAM), higher incidence of BAP1 oncogene mutations (8.5% vs 1.6%) and lower mutational rates of CTNNB1 (14% vs 30%). Specifically, AFP-high tumors displayed significant activation of VEGF signaling (p<0.001) which might provide the rationale for the reported benefit of ramucirumab in this subgroup of patients.
Introduction

The global disease burden of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is increasing worldwide, with an estimated 50% of cases receiving systemic treatments for advanced stage\textsuperscript{1,2}. In the last two years, several compounds have shown clinical efficacy in the first- (lenvatinib) or second-line (regorafenib, cabozantinib) setting and joined the standard of care, sorafenib, ultimately leading to a median survival of two years with sequential therapies\textsuperscript{1}. Ramucirumab, a monoclonal antibody against VEGFR2, is the first drug to demonstrate efficacy in a biomarker-driven phase III trial in HCC, showing a survival benefit as second-line treatment in those patients with alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) serum levels higher than 400ng/ml\textsuperscript{3}. Nevertheless, the rationale behind the use of AFP as predictive biomarker is not fully understood.

AFP is a protein transcribed from the albuminoid genes located on chromosome 4 with a known multi-functionality (i.e. binding of hydrophobic ligands, regulation of proliferation and immunomodulation) provided by its multi-modular structure\textsuperscript{4}. AFP is considered an oncofetal protein due to its presence during fetal development and its association with some tumor types such as liver, testes and ovary\textsuperscript{4}. In HCC, AFP serum concentration may vary from normal (<10ng/ml) to extremely high (>100000ng/ml)\textsuperscript{2,4}. For this reason, AFP has been extensively explored as a biomarker. For surveillance and diagnostic purposes, AFP sensitivity and specificity depend on the established cut-off, with a global accuracy that is suboptimal for routine clinical practice\textsuperscript{2}. As a prognostic factor, it has been clearly demonstrated that patients with AFP >400ng/ml have poor outcomes\textsuperscript{2}.

Considering the prognostic and predictive capabilities of AFP in HCC, our hypothesis is that the molecular profile of high AFP tumors differs from those with low AFP and might be associated to VEGF signaling. Herein, we describe the biological traits of HCC with high serum AFP levels through a comprehensive molecular analysis that may provide the rationale for the design of future biomarker-driven clinical trials.
**Methods**

For the purpose of the study, we analyzed the molecular profiles of 520 HCC human samples with available baseline AFP serum concentrations, including an internal cohort of 244 surgically resected fresh frozen samples (HEPTROMIC dataset)\(^5\), and an external publicly available cohort of 276 primary HCC from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA dataset)\(^6\) (Supplementary Figure 1). Differential molecular patterns of HCC patients based on serum AFP levels were obtained from whole-genome expression, DNA methylome profiling and whole-exome sequencing as described in Supplementary Methods.

**Results**

AFP serum concentrations followed a logarithmic distribution in our internal HEPTROMIC cohort, with values ranging from 0 to 71770ng/ml (Supplementary Figure 2A). According to the well-established 400ng/ml cut-off\(^2\), only 12% (29/244) of patients with early HCC presented high serum levels of AFP, which was accompanied by aberrant overexpression of the gene in the tumor (FC=40; p<0.001) compared to adjacent non-tumoral tissue (Supplementary Figure 2B). In accordance with previous reports\(^2\), high AFP serum concentration was found significantly associated with aggressive clinical-pathological features, poor differentiation (Supplementary Table 1-2) and poor overall survival (Supplementary Figure 2C).

Based on the oncofetal nature of AFP, we next analyzed its DNA methylation status. The AFP promoter is a low density CpG region that was found hypermethylated in the non-tumor adjacent tissues and in low AFP tumors, but hypomethylated in AFP-high tumors (p<0.001) (Supplementary Figure 2D). The inverse correlation observed between AFP promoter methylation and AFP expression (HEPTROMIC/TCGA: R=-0.56/-0.49; p<0.001/<0.001) suggests that this mechanism may play a key role in the aberrant overexpression of AFP in HCC. Indeed, \textit{TET1}, an enzyme able to reverse the DNA methylation status\(^7\), was one of the
top genes whose expression was found significantly associated with hypomethylation of the AFP promoter (Supplementary Table 3). Whether this correlation means causation is to be determined.

In order to determine unique somatic derangements associated with AFP-high tumors, HCC samples were analyzed by whole-exome sequencing (Figure 1A, Supplementary Figure 3A, Supplementary Table 4). AFP-high tumors had fewer non-silent CTNNB1 mutations (high=14.1%, low=29.9%; p=0.009), a feature that has been associated with T-cell priming failure\(^8\) and resistance to immune checkpoint inhibitors\(^9\). The lower rate of CTNNB1 mutations is in line with the observation that AFP-high tumors fall outside of the recently described Immune Exclusion class of HCC\(^8\). Mutations statistically more prevalent in the AFP-high group included the driver gene BAP1 (high=8.5%, low=1.6%; p=0.009), a member of the polycomb-group proteins, required for long-term silencing of genes that regulate the cell cycle and cellular differentiation\(^10\).

Aiming to explore the putative link between high AFP levels and targetable phenotypic traits, we evaluated the enrichment of signaling pathways and previously reported molecular classes of HCCs\(^1\) (Figure 1A, Supplementary Figure 3A). High AFP tumors were particularly associated with the proliferation and the S2 classes, with a consistent enrichment of gene signatures defining progenitor features and overexpression of the known epidriver IGF2\(^11\) (Supplementary Table 5) when compared with AFP-low tumors. Moreover, the targetable signaling pathways IGF1R, NOTCH, and mTOR were upregulated in AFP-high tumors. On the other hand, the RB1 loss of function signature (designed to predict absence of benefit to CDK4/6 inhibitors) was also a key characteristic of AFP-high tumors. Finally, we identified VEGF pathway enrichment in AFP-high tumors (Figure 1B, Supplementary Figure 3B). While analyzing the RNA expression of VEGF receptor ligands, we observed overexpression of VEGFB and PGF, but not VEGFA. As previously reported\(^12,13\), VEGFB and PGF compete with VEGFA for the binding of VEGFR1.
**Discussion**

In the present study, we confirm the aberrant tumor overexpression of *AFP* in those patients with serum concentrations above 400ng/ml and propose DNA methylation of its promoter as the driving mechanism of such overexpression. AFP-high tumors show a distinct phenotype characterized by poor differentiation, enrichment of progenitor features and enhanced proliferation. All these aggressive characteristics are in-line with its known prognostic capacity and explain why the percentage of AFP >400ng/ml tumors increases with disease progression (from 9% in BCLC-A to 42% in BCLC-C) ([Supplementary Table 1](#)). This is relevant since patients at advanced stages are the ones treated with systemic therapies. In this regard, the inclusion in the present study of mostly early-stage HCCs treated with surgical resection may partially hamper to understand the complex biological properties of advanced HCC. Nevertheless, we propose the VEGF ligands/receptors interplay \(^{12,13}\) (unbalanced in AFP-high tumors due to VEGFB/PGF overexpression) as rationale for the enhanced activation of VEGF pathway and thus the efficacy of ramucirumab in AFP-high HCC\(^3\) ([Figure 1C](#)). Other signaling pathways significantly deregulated in AFP-high tumors and worthy of further analysis include IGF2-IGFR, mTOR, NOTCH and BAP1.

In conclusion, the aberrant over-expression of targetable molecular signaling pathways in HCC patients with high AFP suggests that the measurement of its serum level might serve as a non-invasive predictive tool for biomarker-based clinical trials with targeted therapies.
**Additional information**

**Supplementary information** is available at the British Journal of Cancer’s website.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The institutional review boards of the participating centers (IRCCS Istituto Nazionale Tumori [Milan] and Hospital Clinic [Barcelona]) approved the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the International Standards of Good Clinical Practice.

**Availability of data and material**

Data from the internal HEPTROMIC cohort is stored in the Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) repository (GSE63898) and (GSE56588).

**Conflict of Interest**

Josep M Llovet is receiving research support from Bayer HealthCare Pharmaceuticals, Eisai Inc, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Ipsen, and consulting fees from Bayer HealthCare Pharmaceuticals, Eli Lilly, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Eisai Inc, Celsion Corporation, Exelixis, Merck, Ipsen, Glycotest, Navigant, Leerink Swann LLC, Midatech Ltd, Fortress Biotech, Sprink Pharmaceuticals and Nucleix. Manel Esteller reports grants from Ferrer International SA and Quimatriyx. Augusto Villanueva reports personal fees from Exelixis, Health Advances LLC, GroupH, Gerson Lehrman Group and Exact Sciences.

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Author’s Contributions

Study concept and design: RM, RP, DS, JML.

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: RM, CAO, LB, REF, SM, CM, AM, RP, JP, LC, AV, DS.

Drafting of the manuscript: RM, CAO, LB, REF, AM, RP, DS.
Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: RP, DS, VM, ME, JML.

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References


**Figure legends**

**Figure 1. AFP high HCCs show a distinct molecular profile.**

A) Heatmap representation of the most relevant molecular features of AFP high tumors (>400ng/ml) in comparison to AFP low tumors in the TCGA cohort. AFP high HCCs show higher AFP RNA expression and AFP promoter (TSS1500) hypomethylation. In terms of somatic alterations, AFP high tumors are associated with less CTNNB1
mutations and higher rate of BAP1 mutations. High AFP tumors are predicted to belong to the proliferation (Chiang) and S2 (Hoshida) classes and show a significant enrichment of signatures of HCC with progenitor features (G1 Boyault, Hepatoblastoma Cairo, CK19 Villanueva and EPCAM Villanueva). Finally, AFP high tumors do not present the immune excluded phenotype (Sia) and present overexpression of HCC signaling pathways (IGF1R Tovar, RB1 loss of function Bollard, NOTCH Villanueva and mTOR Villanueva). Continuous variables (AFP RNA expression and AFP promoter methylation) and categorical variables (the rest) were analyzed by T-Test and Fisher’s exact test, respectively.

B) Heatmap representation of the VEGF KEGG pathway activation (inferred by single sample Gene Set Enrichment Analysis) and VEGF ligands RNA expression according to AFP serum concentration in the TCGA cohort. AFP high tumors show higher enrichment of VEGF signaling and overexpression of VEGFB and PGF. The mean values of each phenotype (AFP high and low) have been normalized and represented as Z score.

C) Schematic representation of VEGF pathway in HCC according to AFP serum concentration. The overexpression of VEGFB and PGF ligands observed in AFP high tumors might result in an enhanced activation of VEGFR1 and, at the same time, prevent VEGFA from binding VEGFR1. The competition of VEGFA with the other ligands could favor its binding to VEGFR2 ultimately leading to its subsequent activation and release of pro-angiogenic signals. The administration of ramucirumab (monoclonal antibody against VEGFR2) might misbalance VEGFA signaling towards a preferential binding of VEGFR1, where it has limited biological activity. Purple and orange lines represent VEGFB/PGF and VEGFA signaling, respectively.
### A

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<th>Molecular classes (Chiang)</th>
<th>Somatic alterations</th>
<th>Progenitor features</th>
<th>Signaling pathways</th>
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<td>CTNNB1 mutation</td>
<td>G1 class (Boyault)</td>
<td>IGF1R (Tovar)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFP RNA expression</td>
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<td>Hepatoblastoma (Cairo)</td>
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<td>mTOR (Villanueva)</td>
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### B

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<th>VEGF KEGG pathway (ssGSEA)</th>
<th>VEGFA RNA expression</th>
<th>VEGFB RNA expression</th>
<th>VEGFC RNA expression</th>
<th>VEGFD RNA expression</th>
<th>PGF RNA expression</th>
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<td>p=0.445</td>
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### C

- **VEGFB**: Low activity for survival, no activity for angiogenesis.
- **VEGF**: Low activity for survival, high activity for angiogenesis.
- **PGF**: Low activity for survival, high activity for angiogenesis.
- **Ramucirumab** inhibits VEGFR2, promoting survival and angiogenesis.