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INACTIVATION OF THE DNA-REPAIR GENE *MGMT* AND THE CLINICAL RESPONSE OF GLIOMAS TO ALKYLATING AGENTS

MANEL ESTELLER, M.D., PH.D., JESUS GARCIA-FONCILLAS, M.D., PH.D., ESTHER ANDION, B.Sc.,
STEVEN N. GOODMAN, M.D., PH.D., OSCAR F. HIDALGO, M.D., VICENTE VANACLOCHA, M.D., STEPHEN B. BAYLIN, M.D.,
AND JAMES G. HERMAN, M.D.

ABSTRACT

Background The DNA-repair enzyme O⁶-methylguanine-DNA methyltransferase (*MGMT*) inhibits the killing of tumor cells by alkylating agents. *MGMT* activity is controlled by a promoter; methylation of the promoter silences the gene in cancer, and the cells no longer produce *MGMT*. We examined gliomas to determine whether methylation of the *MGMT* promoter is related to the responsiveness of the tumor to alkylating agents.

Methods We analyzed the *MGMT* promoter in tumor DNA by a methylation-specific polymerase-chain-reaction assay. The gliomas were obtained from patients who had been treated with carmustine (1,3-bis(2-chloroethyl)-1-nitrosourea, or BCNU). The molecular data were correlated with the clinical outcome.

Results The *MGMT* promoter was methylated in gliomas from 19 of 47 patients (40 percent). This finding was associated with regression of the tumor and prolonged overall and disease-free survival. It was an independent and stronger prognostic factor than age, stage, tumor grade, or performance status.

Conclusions Methylation of the *MGMT* promoter in gliomas is a useful predictor of the responsiveness of the tumors to alkylating agents. (N Engl J Med 2000; 343:1350-4.)

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ALKYLATING agents are highly reactive molecules that cause cell death by binding to DNA.^{1,2} The most frequent site of alkylation in DNA is the O⁶ position of guanine. Alkylation here forms cross-links between adjacent strands of DNA,¹ which explains how the nitrosoureas, tetrazines, and procarbazine kill cells. The cross-linking of double-stranded DNA by alkylating agents is inhibited by the cellular DNA-repair protein O⁶-methylguanine-DNA methyltransferase

(*MGMT*), also known as O⁶-alkylguanine-DNA alkyltransferase. The *MGMT* protein rapidly reverses alkylation at the O⁶ position of guanine,^{3,4} thereby averting the formation of lethal cross-links. Through this mechanism, *MGMT* causes resistance to alkylating drugs.^{3,4}

The level of *MGMT* varies widely according to the type of tumor, and even varies among tumors of the same type. For example, approximately 30 percent of gliomas lack *MGMT*.^{5,6} This deficiency of the enzyme may increase the sensitivity of brain tumors to alkylating agents.⁷⁻⁹ Because the *MGMT* gene is not commonly mutated or deleted, a lack of *MGMT* may be caused by changes that do not alter the genetic information of the cell. Methylation of DNA is the main type of such epigenetic modifications in humans,¹⁰ and it plays an important part in tumorigenesis. In particular, methylation of normally unmethylated sites, known as CpG (cytidine phosphate guanosine) islands, in the promoter regions of tumor-suppressor and DNA-repair genes is correlated with loss of expression of these genes in cancer cell lines and primary tumors.¹⁰ Methylation of the CpG island in the *MGMT* gene prevents transcription of the gene, and in cell lines that cannot repair alkylation of O⁶-methylguanine, the promoter of *MGMT* is methylated.¹¹⁻¹⁴ Furthermore, in vitro treatment with demethylating drugs restores the expression of the *MGMT* gene in such cells (Fig. 1).^{11,15}

We performed a study to determine whether methylation of the promoter region of the *MGMT* gene could be used to identify gliomas that were responsive to alkylating drugs.

From the Divisions of Cancer Biology (M.E., S.B.B., J.G.H.) and Biostatistics (S.N.G.), Johns Hopkins Oncology Center, Baltimore; and the Biotechnology Laboratory, Cell Therapy Area, Department of Oncology, Clinica Universitaria, Pamplona, Spain (J.G.-F., E.A., O.F.H., V.V.). Address reprint requests to Dr. Herman at the Johns Hopkins Oncology Center, 1650 Orleans, Baltimore, MD 21231, or at hermanji@jhmi.edu.

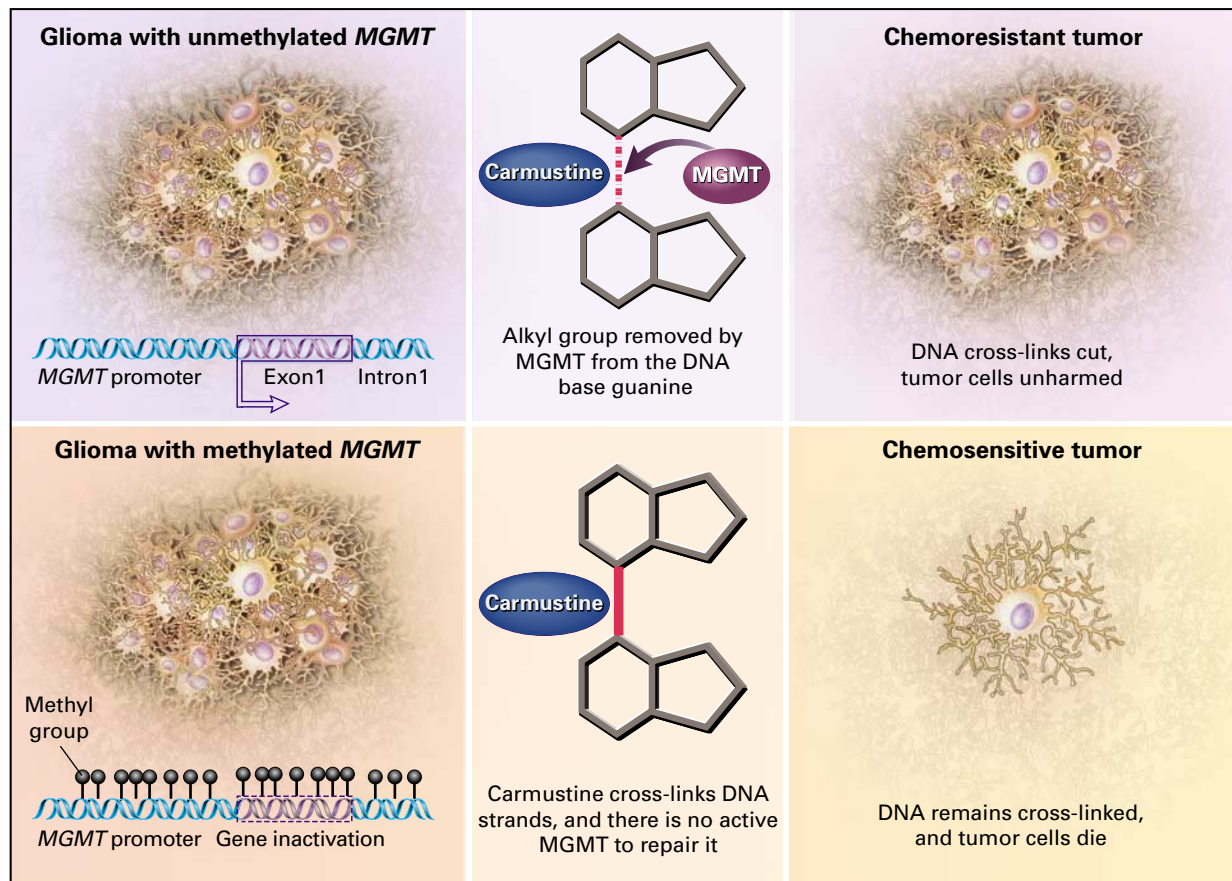


Figure 1. Mechanism of Enhanced Chemosensitivity Resulting from Epigenetic Inactivation of the DNA Repair-Gene *MGMT*. Gliomas with a methylated *MGMT* promoter and exon 1 region (circles) have transcriptional silencing of *MGMT*, leading to the loss of MGMT protein. DNA adducts produced by carmustine in these tumors are not efficiently removed, leading to tumor-cell death and drug toxicity. In contrast, gliomas with an unmethylated *MGMT* promoter and exon 1 region express MGMT protein, which removes guanine adducts from the DNA produced by the administration of carmustine (BCNU), resulting in resistance to the tumorocidal and toxic effects drug.

METHODS

Patients and Tumor Specimens

We studied specimens of brain tumors from 47 consecutive patients referred to the University Hospital of Navarre, in Pamplona, Spain, between April 1993 and November 1998. All the patients provided written informed consent. All had histologically verified tumors: 18 had an anaplastic astrocytoma, and 29 had a glioblastoma multiforme. Patients were 38 to 70 years old (median age at diagnosis, 55 years); 30 were men, and 17 were women. Tumor specimens were obtained by resection or biopsy performed before the initiation of treatment with radiation and chemotherapy and were immediately frozen and stored at -80°C . All patients were treated with intraarterial cisplatin (50 mg per square meter of body-surface area), whole-brain radiotherapy, and a median of three courses of intravenous carmustine (1,3-bis(2-chloroethyl)-1-nitrosourea, or BCNU; 100 mg per square meter) given at four-week intervals. Fifteen of the patients also underwent autologous bone marrow transplantation plus high-dose chemotherapy treatment with three doses of intravenous carmustine (300 mg per square meter) per day and one dose of intraarterial cisplatin (100 mg).

The response to treatment was evaluated after the patients had

completed therapy. A complete response was defined as the absence of any evidence of the tumor on computed tomographic (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, with no need for steroid treatment and an improvement in the patient's general condition. Patients with persistent CT abnormalities but with more than a 50 percent reduction in both the diameter and the volume of the tumor, a reduced need for steroid treatment, and a stabilized neurologic condition were considered to have a partial response. The disease was considered to have progressed if both the diameter and volume of the tumor increased by 25 percent or more of the initial measurements, if a new lesion was evident on CT or MRI scans, or if the patient's neurologic condition worsened and required an increased dose of steroids.

Analysis of Methylation

DNA was extracted according to standard protocols. Methylation patterns in the CpG island of *MGMT* were determined by chemical modification of unmethylated, but not methylated, cytosines to uracil. Methylation-specific polymerase chain reaction (PCR) was performed with primers specific for either methylated or the modified unmethylated DNA, as previously described.^{13,16} DNA (1 μg) was denatured with sodium hydroxide and modified

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF PATIENTS WITH GLIOMAS, ACCORDING TO THE METHYLATION STATUS OF THE *MGMT* PROMOTER.

CHARACTERISTIC	UNMETHYLATED (N=28)	METHYLATED (N=19)
	no. of patients (%)	
Age		
≤50 yr	8 (29)	8 (42)
>50 yr	20 (71)	11 (58)
Sex		
Male	14 (50)	16 (84)
Female	14 (50)	3 (16)
Karnofsky score		
≤80	18 (64)	13 (68)
>80	10 (36)	6 (32)
Type of tumor		
Anaplastic astrocytoma	11 (39)	7 (37)
Glioblastoma multiforme	17 (61)	12 (63)

with sodium bisulfite. DNA samples were then purified with the Wizard DNA purification resin (Promega, Madison, Wis.), again treated with sodium hydroxide, precipitated with ethanol, and resuspended in water. Primer sequences for the unmethylated reaction were 5'TTTGTGTTTGTATGTTTGTAGGTTTGT3' (forward primer) and 5'AACTCCACACTCTTCCAAAAACAAAACA3' (reverse primer), and for the methylated reaction they were 5'TTTCGACGTTCTAGGTTTTCGC3' (forward primer) and 5'GCACTCTTCCGAAAACGAAACG3' (reverse primer). The annealing temperature was 59°C. Placental DNA treated in vitro with *Sss*I methyltransferase (New England Biolabs, Beverly, Mass.) was used as a positive control for methylated alleles of *MGMT*, and DNA from normal lymphocytes was used as a negative control. Controls without DNA were used for each set of methylation-specific PCR assays. Ten microliters of each 50-μl methylation-specific PCR product was loaded directly onto nondenaturing 6 percent polyacrylamide gels, stained with ethidium bromide, and examined under ultraviolet illumination.

Statistical Analysis

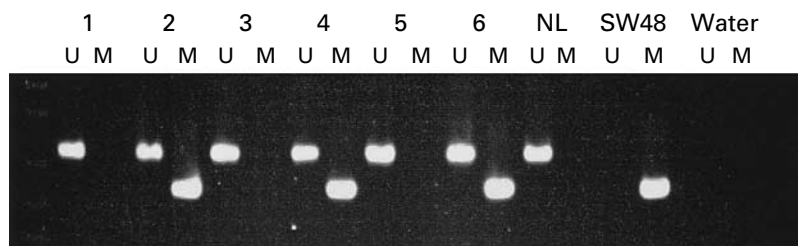
Continuous variables were compared with the use of Student's t-test. Contingency tables were analyzed by Fisher's exact test. Dis-

ease-free and overall survival curves were estimated by the Kaplan–Meier method and were compared with the use of the log-rank test. Multivariate survival analyses were performed with the Cox proportional-hazards model, and proportional-hazards assumptions were checked with the use of Schoenfeld residuals and graphic methods. Descriptive or stratified analyses always preceded parametric modeling in order to confirm that the assumptions underlying the models were met. The results are reported as two-sided P values with 95 percent confidence intervals. Analyses were performed with the use of JMP software (version 3.1, SAS Institute, Cary, N.C.) and Stata software (version 6.0, Stata, College Station, Tex.).

RESULTS

We analyzed 47 newly diagnosed grade III or IV gliomas (classified as anaplastic astrocytoma in 18 patients and as glioblastoma multiforme in 29). The characteristics of the patients are shown in Table 1. Methylation of the *MGMT* promoter was found in 19 of the 47 tumors (40 percent) (Fig. 2), a frequency similar to that found in our previous study¹³ and consistent with that in other reports.^{5,6} Methylation was not associated with the patient's age, the Karnofsky score for performance status, or the grade of the tumor ($P>0.3$ for each comparison).

In univariate analyses, methylation of the promoter was positively correlated with the clinical response and with overall and disease-free survival. Twelve of the 19 patients with methylated tumors (63 percent) had a partial or complete response to carmustine, as compared with 1 of the 28 patients with unmethylated tumors (4 percent, $P<0.001$) (Table 2). The lack of methylation was associated with a much higher risk of death (hazard ratio, 9.5; 95 percent confidence interval, 3.0 to 42.7; $P<0.001$) (Fig. 3A). In univariate analysis, no other factor had a statistically significant relation with survival. The median time to the progression of disease was 21 months for methylated gliomas and 8 months for unmethylated gliomas ($P<0.001$), and the hazard ratio associated with nonmethylation was 10.8 (95 percent confidence interval, 4.4 to 30.8) (Fig. 3B). The small number of

**Figure 2.** Methylation Status of the *MGMT* Promoter in Six Glioma Samples.

A methylation-specific PCR assay was used, with the SW48 cancer cell line as a positive control for methylation, normal lymphocytes (NL) as a negative control for methylation, and water as a negative PCR control. PBR322/Msp digest was used as the molecular-weight marker. U denotes the presence of unmethylated genes, and M the presence of methylated genes. Three glioma samples (2, 4, and 6) show methylation, and three samples (1, 3, and 5) are unmethylated.

TABLE 2. CLINICAL RESPONSE ACCORDING TO THE METHYLATION STATUS OF THE *MGMT* PROMOTER.*

RESPONSE	UNMETHYLATED (N=28)		METHYLATED (N=19)	
	no.	% (95% CI)	no.	% (95% CI)
Complete	0	0 (0–12)	2	11 (1–33)
Partial	1	4 (0–18)	10	53 (29–76)
No change	4	14 (4–33)	3	16 (3–38)
Progression of disease	23	82 (63–94)	4	21 (6–44)

*CI denotes confidence interval.

deaths among patients with gliomas containing a methylated promoter (four deaths) made multivariate analyses unreliable. The hazard ratio associated with a nonmethylated glioma was either unchanged or increased when other predictors were added individually to the model.

DISCUSSION

The DNA-repair enzyme *MGMT* is a key factor in resistance to alkylating agents, because the transfer of alkyl groups to *MGMT* prevents the formation of lethal cross-links in DNA.^{3,4} It has been reported that lack of *MGMT* in gliomas from patients who were treated with chloroethylnitrosoureas had only a moderate effect on overall survival, and the time to progression of disease was affected minimally or not at all.⁷⁻⁹ Using a different method to evaluate the status of the *MGMT* gene, we found a much stronger influence of the presence or absence of the enzyme. The accumulation of normal cells in the tumor, including infiltrating lymphocytes, may complicate accurate assessment of *MGMT*. The mixture of normal cells may explain, in part, the difference between the biochemical activity measured in tumor homogenates⁹ and the results of direct immunohistochemical examination of *MGMT* in tumor cells.^{7,8} The use of methylation-specific PCR permits an assessment of methylation of the *MGMT* promoter. Methylation status is an indicator of the transcriptional activity of the gene in glioma cells, and thus the presence or absence of the DNA-repair enzyme.

In our study, methylation of the *MGMT* promoter was associated with responsiveness to carmustine and an increase in overall survival and the time to progression of disease. Moreover, the methylation status of the promoter was more predictive of the outcome of carmustine treatment than the grade of the tumor, the Karnofsky performance status, or the patient's age. If further study confirms that methylation of the *MGMT* promoter predicts responsiveness to carmustine, the use of this alkylating agent might be reserved

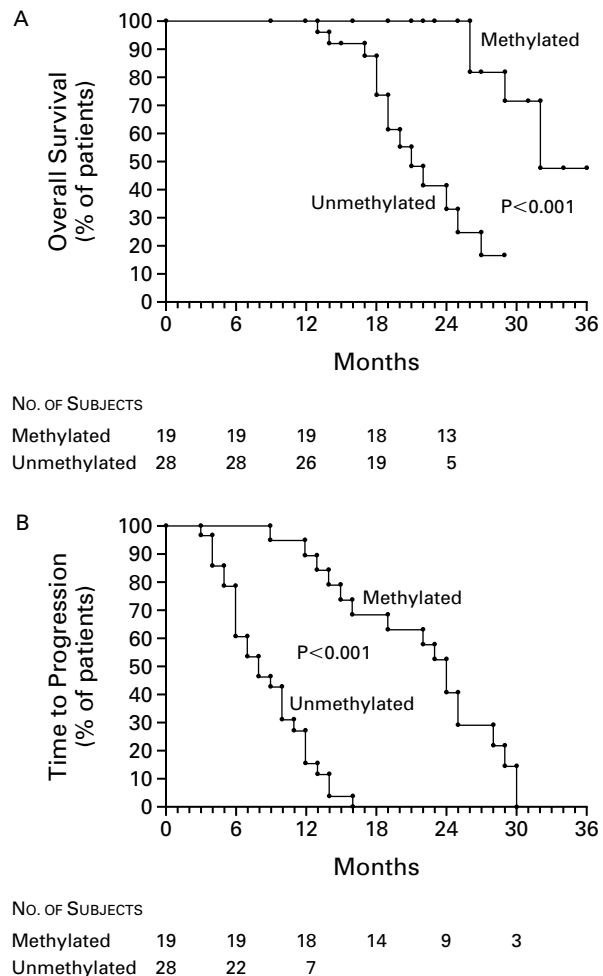


Figure 3. Overall Survival (Panel A) and Time to the Progression of Disease (Panel B) among Patients with Gliomas Treated with Carmustine, According to the Methylation Status of the *MGMT* Promoter.

Both overall survival and the time to the progression of disease were significantly greater in the group of patients with methylation of the *MGMT* promoter than in the group without methylation. The association was independent of the type of tumor, the patient's age, and the Karnofsky score for performance status.

for patients with gliomas in which the promoter is methylated. Moreover, it might be possible to increase the sensitivity of resistant tumors (those without methylation) with the use of agents that inhibit the *MGMT* enzyme. One such inhibitor, O⁶-benzylguanine,^{17,18} is being investigated for this purpose. It is a substrate for *MGMT* that inactivates the enzyme. O⁶-benzylguanine has been shown to enhance the response to alkyl nitrosoureas in vitro and in vivo.^{17,19} The use of such an agent to increase the sensitivity of gliomas to carmustine only in cases of resistant tumors might prevent the toxic effects of the combination of these drugs on normal tissues in patients who are already sensitive to carmustine.

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