The effect of folate on the methotrexate/indomethacin interaction in a murine cancer cell line

S.J. Hollingsworth, E.M. Anderson & A. Bennett

Department of Surgery, King’s College School of Medicine & Dentistry, The Rayne Institute, 123 Coldharbour Lane, London, SE5 9NU

1 The effect of folate on the interaction between methotrexate (a folate analogue) and indomethacin has been examined in murine NC carcinoma cells.

2 Conditioning of NC cells to a physiological (20 nM) folate concentration after culture in a high folate concentration increased the response to methotrexate. The sensitivity of these conditioned cells to methotrexate-related cytotoxicity was increased to the folate concentration.

3 At 20 nM and 2 μM folate, indomethacin 1 μg ml⁻¹ potentiated the cytotoxicity of methotrexate 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ (both P<0.03).

4 When NC cells were incubated with [³H]-methotrexate at 20 nM and 2 μM folate, there was a trend for increased tritium accumulation with indomethacin 0.36 μg ml⁻¹ (1 μM; P<0.01).

5 We conclude that the folate concentration can affect the sensitivity of NC cells to methotrexate, although the degree of potentiation of cytotoxicity by indomethacin remains similar.

Keywords: Folate; indomethacin; methotrexate; murine cancer cells

Introduction

Increasing the effectiveness of cytotoxic drugs may enhance antinecancer therapy. Indomethacin (Indo) potentiates the cytotoxicity of the folate analogue methotrexate (MTX) to the murine NC carcinoma in vivo and in vitro (Gaffen et al., 1985; Bennett et al., 1987) and, of particular clinical relevance, to two human breast cancer cell lines (T47D and DU4475; Bennett et al., 1989). This may be due to increased MTX uptake and/or retention (Bennett et al., 1989; Bennett & Gaffen, 1989). Indo does not appear to potentiate MTX by blocking cyclo-oxygenase since the effect was not mimicked by the selective inhibitors flurbiprofen or piroxicam, or counteracted by adding prostaglandin E₂ (PGE₂) (Bennett et al., 1987; 1989). Displacement of MTX bound to serum proteins, or inhibition of cyclic AMP phosphodiesterase, similarly do not appear to be involved (Bennett et al., 1987; 1989). In contrast, Indo did not increase the killing of normal epithelial-like cells from human embryonic intestine, or their accumulation of tritium during incubation with [³H]-MTX (Bennett et al., 1987). We also have similar preliminary data showing no potentiation in two other epithelial-like cell lines from normal human gut (FHs 74 Int cells and HCMC cells; Bennett et al., 1989 and unpublished). However, all of these studies have used culture medium containing a greatly supraphysiological level of folate. Furthermore, in the earlier studies of Bennett et al. (1987), the enhancement by Indo of the early accumulation of tritium in NC cells incubated with [³H]-MTX occurred with a concentration of MTX at least 100 times greater than that required to kill NC cells during 4 days in culture (Bennett et al., 1987; Hollingsworth et al., 1992; Hollingsworth, 1993). We have now used a lower (physiological) folate level in studying both the MTX/Indo interaction in NC cells, and the effect of Indo on [³H] accumulation using therapeutic concentrations of MTX.

Methods

Cells and cell culture

The NC carcinoma arose spontaneously in the mammary region of a WHT/Ht mouse (Hewitt et al., 1976) and has been passaged subsequently in this inbred strain. Primary cultures of NC cells were obtained from the ascitic fluid of a female WHT/Ht mouse 10–14 days following intraperitoneal injection of disaggregated tumour. The medium used for NC cells, Eagle’s modification of Minimal Essential Medium (EMEM), contains 2 μM folic acid which is typical of the supraphysiological folate levels in standard culture media, and is 100 times that in normal blood (20 nM; Kamen & Capdevila, 1986). For the present studies we used standard medium containing 2 μM folic acid, and medium formulated without folic acid (Flow Laboratories) to which we subsequently added folic acid to a physiological level of 20 nM. NC cells were maintained as suspension cultures in EMEM containing either 2 μM or 20 nM folic acid, supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated newborn bovine serum (NBS), 1% non-essential amino acids (Flow Laboratories), 20 mM HEPES, 300 μg ml⁻¹ L-glutamine and 50 units ml⁻¹ each of penicillin and streptomycin (Gibco) in roller flasks (850 cm², 1 rev min⁻¹) at 37°C. The bulk cultures received additions of fresh medium (30–40% by volume) every 48–72 h, and cells in a 10 ml aliquot were counted daily. Experiments were performed on cells from cultures with 0.5 to 1 x 10⁶ cells ml⁻¹, in the logarithmic phase of growth and with >90% viability (Trypan Blue exclusion).

Adaptation to physiological folate

The NC cells were adapted to the physiological folate concentration in one of two ways: (1) NC cells originating from primary cultures (ascitic fluid directly ex vivo) were subcultured in medium containing the standard folic acid concentration (2 μM), pelleted (200 g, 10 min), washed with phosphate buffered saline pH 7.4 (PBS), disaggregated (trypsin/EDTA, 0.05:0.02% w/v) and counted (Coulter counter). Cells were resuspended at a density of 0.1 to 0.3 x 10⁶ cells ml⁻¹ in medium containing the physiological 20 nM folate level, seeded directly into 850 cm² roller culture bottles (Falcon), and incubated at 37°C. Culture growth was determined daily.
(Coulter counter). Initially the cells went through a lag phase (4–5 days) whilst adapting to the physiological 20 nM folate medium, after which they entered logarithmic growth. Cultures were maintained as described above and used only when they had undergone at least 15–20 cell cycles. (2) In the second method, cells from peritoneal fluid were washed with PBS to remove erythrocytes, resuspended in medium containing 20 nM folic acid, seeded directly into 850 cm² roller culture bottles as a primary culture, incubated at 37°C, and maintained as described above.

**Determination of cell growth**

Cell growth was determined by microturbidimetry (Gaffen et al., 1985), by measuring the transmission of 600 nm light through the cell cultures (recorded as absorption units with a spectrophotofluorimetry method, cells from peritoneal fluid were washed with PBS to remove erythrocytes, resuspended in fresh medium to

\[ [\text{3H}] - \text{MTX} \]

Triplicate 30 ml universal vials were placed on ice for 10 min, and then 5 x 10^4 cells in suspension (as above), 6 ml [3H]-MTX (2.73 ng ml⁻¹; 500,000 d.p.m.), and non-radioactive MTX to final MTX concentrations of 0.45–13.6 μg ml⁻¹ (1–30 μM) and Indo 0.36 μg ml⁻¹ (1 μM) were added in a final volume of 1.1 ml. They were incubated for 30 min at 37°C in a shaking water bath for total counts, with triplicate containers on ice for blank controls. The reaction in the test samples was stopped by placing the tubes on ice for 10 min prior to centrifugation (600 g, 5 min). The cell pellets were resuspended in 25 ml ice-cold PBS, centrifuged, transferred to scintillation vials by 3 aliquots of 200 μl twice-distilled water, and 3 ml of scintillation cocktail were added (Packard Ultima Gold). Accumulated tritium was determined by standard spectrophotofluorimetry using a Packard Tri-Carb 2200CA scintillation counter (3H counting efficiency ~50%), and the difference between total and blank taken as specific accumulation.

**Cell conditioning and the response to methotrexate**

Concentration-response curves for MTX 0.1–16 ng ml⁻¹ were constructed for NC ascites cells cultured in EMEM as follows: (i) with 2 μM folate (2 μM NC cells), (ii) with 20 nM folate directly from in vivo (20 nM folate cells), and (iii) with 2 μM folate followed by adaptation to 20 nM folate (conditioned NC cells).

**Drugs and solvents**

Sodium indomethacin trihydrate (Merck Sharp & Dohme) and methotrexate were made up in 154 mM NaCl, adjusted to pH 7.4 with 0.1 M NaOH, filter-sterilised and stored at −20°C. [L-glutamyl-3,4-3H]-MTX, 41.0 Ci mmol⁻¹ (DuPont, U.K.) was diluted 1:9 in sterile double-glass-distilled water and stored at −20°C as a stock solution of 60 nM (~30 ng ml⁻¹).

**Calculations**

The results are expressed as means ± S.E. and analysed by Student's t test for paired or unpaired data as appropriate (all tests 2-tailed).

A possible interaction between MTX and Indo was examined by subtracting the sum of the separate mean percentage decreases in NC cell growth obtained with MTX and Indo alone, from the mean percentage decrease with the drugs in combination (Hollingsworth, 1993). This can be summarised as follows:

\[
\% \text{ interaction} = \frac{\% \text{ mean effect obtained with MTX + Indo} - (\% \text{ MTX} - \% \text{ Indo})}{\% \text{ mean effect obtained with MTX + Indo}}
\]

A value above zero indicates potentiation, whilst a negative value indicates antagonism. The raw results were analysed statistically.

**Results**

**Cell conditioning and the response to methotrexate**

In all cases MTX 0.1–16 ng ml⁻¹ reduced NC cell growth in a concentration-dependent manner (Figure 1). Sensitivity to MTX was inversely related to the folate concentration; overall reduction of growth by MTX in conditioned cells was (i) 22.4 ± 4.6% greater than in 20 nM cells (<P < 0.002), and (ii) 24.3 ± 4.8% greater than in 2 μM cells (<P < 0.001).

**Methotrexate/indomethacin interaction at 2 μM folate**

MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ alone reduced NC cell growth by 24.0 ± 5.1% and 56.7 ± 2.2% respectively compared to vehicle controls (<P < 0.001).

With Indo 1 μg ml⁻¹ alone there was a trend for more NC cell growth (12.1 ± 3.3% compared to controls, <P < 0.1), and the cytotoxicity of MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ was potentiated by 33 ± 4.0% and 15.2 ± 5.6% respectively (calculated as described in Methods, both <P < 0.03, Figure 2). With Indo 2 μg ml⁻¹ there was a greater mean cytotoxicity of MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ (by 19.7 ± 4.8% and 11.1 ± 4.2% respectively, both <P < 0.1, Figure 2).
Methotrexate/indomethacin interaction at 20 nm folate (cells grown directly from in vivo)

Indo 1 or 2 μg ml⁻¹ alone had no significant effect on NC cell growth (respectively 10.9 ± 5.2% higher and 6.2 ± 5.8% lower than the vehicle controls, both P < 0.2).

The reductions in growth by MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ alone (35.1 ± 4.1 and 68.8 ± 3.4% respectively, both P < 0.001) were greater than at 2 μM folate (by 130 and 21.5%, P < 0.0001 and >0.0003 respectively).

As in 2 μM folate, Indo 1 μg ml⁻¹ potentiated the cytotoxicity of MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ (by 25.8 ± 4.8 and 22.6 ± 5.5% respectively, both P < 0.03, Figure 3). However, with Indo 2 μg ml⁻¹ there was only a trend for increased MTX cytotoxicity (14.6 ± 6.4% and 5.2 ± 6.5% respectively for MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹, both P < 0.1, Figure 3).

**Figure 1** The effect of conditioning NC cells on their response to methotrexate (MTX). Cytostasis (also when growth = death) is marked by dashed lines as the mean optical density ± S.E. of cells seeded at time zero; (C) cells cultured in medium containing 2 μM folate; (O) cells cultured directly from in vivo in medium containing 20 μM folate; ( ), cells cultured first in medium containing 2 μM folate and then conditioned to 20 μM folate. Each point is the mean ± S.E. of the separate means of 4–18 experiments each with 4–16 replicates. *P < 0.01 MTX vs vehicle controls, Student's t test for paired data on the raw results. Veh = vehicle.

**Figure 2** The change caused by indomethacin (Indo) 1 and 2 μg ml⁻¹ (open and hatched columns respectively) on the cytotoxicity of methotrexate (a) 4 and (b) 8 ng ml⁻¹ to NC adenocarcinoma cells at 2 μM folate. Each column represents the percentage effect of Indo (calculated as described in Methods) expressed as means ± S.E. from 12 experiments each with 8–16 replicates. *P < 0.05, Student's t test for paired data compared to vehicle controls.

**Figure 3** The change caused by indomethacin (Indo) 1 and 2 μg ml⁻¹ (open and hatched columns respectively) on the cytotoxicity of methotrexate (a) 4 and (b) 8 ng ml⁻¹ to NC cells at 20 μM folate. Each column represents the percentage effect of Indo expressed as means ± S.E. from 12 experiments each with 8–16 replicates. *P < 0.05, Student's t test for paired data compared to vehicle controls.

Methotrexate accumulation studies

In earlier studies using NC cells at 2 μM folate, Bennett et al. (1987) found that Indo 1 μg ml⁻¹ increased the active accumulation of tritium by cells incubated for 1 h with [³H]-MTX (P < 0.001). However, the specific radioactivity of the [³H]-MTX was rather low, and the amount needed (2 μM; 909 ng ml⁻¹) to obtain adequate label accumulation was at least 100 times the amount required to kill NC cells cultured for 4 days (Hollingsworth, 1993). We have now examined this accumulation using concentrations of labelled MTX similar to the lowest amount required to kill NC cells in culture, and NC cells adapted to 20 nM folate.

Active accumulation of label (2.73 ng ml⁻¹ [³H]-MTX) at 37°C was linear with increasing cell density and with time, whereas the readings in the 0°C blanks remained constantly low.

The concentration-dependent increase in [³H] accumulation obtained in the presence and absence of 0.36 μg ml⁻¹ (1 μM) Indo (Figure 4a) did not appear to be maximal with the highest concentration of MTX examined (13.6 μg ml⁻¹; 30 μM). Results, expressed as log₁₀ pmol [³H] accumulated, gave a linear relationship that facilitated a statistical evaluation of the Indo effect (Figure 4b). Linear regression analysis was performed and the slopes of the lines (m) and y-intercept (c) values in the control and Indo-treated groups were compared by Student's t test for paired data.

With Indo 0.36 μg ml⁻¹ there was no significant effect on the slope of the line (P > 0.04), but there was a trend for a greater y-intercept (P < 0.1), indicating more [³H] accumulation at all concentrations of MTX examined (by 23.68 ± 5.49, 30.48 ± 6.25, 29.70 ± 7.20, 14.46 ± 5.37 and 24.68 ± 5.80% respectively for MTX 1, 3, 5, 10 and 30 μM [0.45, 1.36, 2.27, 4.55 and 13.6 μg ml⁻¹]).

Discussion

Both folate levels produced a concentration-dependent reduction by MTX in NC cell growth, as seen previously with 2 μM folate (Gaffen, 1988; Hollingsworth et al., 1992; Hollingsworth, 1993). Conditioning of NC cells from 2 μM folate to 20 μM folate increased the sensitivity to MTX, as in human epidermoid carcinoma KB cells (Kane et al., 1986) and the
CEM-7A variant of CCRF-CEM human leukemia cells (Jansen et al., 1990). This may be due to reduced competition between folate and MTX for dihydrofolate reductase (DHFR). Up-regulation of reduced folate/MTX receptors at low intracellular folate concentrations facilitates MTX influx (Sirotnak et al., 1984; Yang et al., 1988; Jansen et al., 1990), and subsequent polyglutamation would further increase the total intracellular MTX. Cells grown ex vivo in 20 μM folate were less sensitive than conditioned NC cells to MTX, perhaps because they use predominantly folate acid uptake sites (Sirotnak, 1985) or salvage pathways for preformed purines and pyrimidines (relatively insensitive to MTX) rather than the normal reduced folate uptake sites (sensitive to MTX). Altered responses of NC cells to MTX at different folate concentrations might reflect changed folate uptake or metabolism. However, at both folate concentrations NC cells showed mainly similar growth characteristics over 5 days (1 day more than the assay incubation period).

MTX and reduced folates enter mammalian cells via the same simple ion-exchange transport system (Huennekens et al., 1978). Cells possess high-affinity folate receptors which are very specific for MTX and 5-methyltetrahydrofolate (5-MTHF). In a monkey kidney cell line (MA104) adapted for growth in low folate medium, binding of tritiated 5-MTHF depended on the cellular folate level (Kamen & Capdevila, 1986). Furthermore, the length of exposure to folate seemed to regulate the receptor number and binding of 5-MTHF. Cells adapted to low folate over-produce the carrier protein for reduced folates and MTX (Sirotnak et al., 1984; Yang et al., 1988; Jansen et al., 1990). However, there is a separate uptake system for folate acid (present in culture media, unlike reduced folates). Various investigators have identified a further carrier-mediated transport system for the influx of MTX and reduced folates distinct from the 'classical' system, which depends strongly on pH and can be inhibited by micromolar folate concentrations (Sirotnak et al., 1987; Henderson & Strauss, 1990). The folate status of the cell may also regulate MTX polyglutamation (Galivan et al., 1983; Nimec & Galivan, 1983). Folate deficiency increases MTX polyglutamation (H35 cells, Galivan et al., 1983; KB cells, Kane et al., 1986), perhaps by altering folypolyglutamyl synthase activity (Johnson et al., 1968).

Even though with Indo 1 μg ml⁻¹ alone there was a trend for increased NC cell growth, it potentiated the cytotoxicity of MTX 4 and 8 ng ml⁻¹ to similar extents at both folate concentrations (Figures 2 and 3). Our findings confirm those of Gaff en (1988) using 2 μM folate. Indo increased the cytotoxicity of MTX in murine Lewis lung carcinoma cells, and of etoposide in various cultured murine and human tumour cells (Maca, 1991), including CCRF-CEM and YAC-1 cells in which production of eicosanoids (Goldyne, 1988) was below the limit of detection. As with the potentiation of tritium accumulation by NC cells incubated with Indo/[³H]-MTX (Bennett et al., 1987), exogenous prostanoids did not change the effect of Indo. Increased formation by Indo of 5-lipoxygenase arachidonate products (Docherty & Wilson, 1991), or inhibition of cyclic AMP-dependent protein kineses (Kantor & Hampton, 1978) do not seem to explain the potentiation by Indo (Maca, 1991).

CEM-7A cells, produced by step-wise adaptation of the human CCRF-CEM leukaemia cell line to decreasing concentrations of 5-formyltetrahydrofolate, over-produced the reduced folate/MTX carrier protein, showed 5 fold greater sensitivity to MTX than the parent cells, and exhibited a 95 fold greater V_{max} for [³H]-MTX influx with an approximately 30 fold greater level of carrier protein (Jansen et al., 1990). However, the percentage potentiation of MTX cytotoxicity to NC cells by Indo was mainly similar at both folate concentrations, despite the greater sensitivity to MTX at 20 nM folate.

The fatty acid composition affects membrane viscosity, and this can affect MTX transport (Burns et al., 1979; Clarke et al., 1990). Indo can increase membrane viscosity (Abramson et al., 1990), but it potentiated the changes induced by MTX in NC cell membrane fatty acids only after incubation for 48 h; no effect was seen within 1–3 h (Yazici et al., 1992; Hollingsworth, 1993). The lack of an early effect argues against alteration of membrane structure and fluidity in the potentiation of tritium accumulation during Indo/[³H]-MTX incubation for up to 1 h (Yazici et al., 1992; Hollingsworth, 1993). The importance of an initial increase of MTX accumulation by Indo in long-term cytotoxicity is unclear.

Reduced cellular efflux of MTX and/or its metabolites might be involved. MTX, like natural folates, is extensively polyglutamated intracellularly (Baugh et al., 1973). These polyglutamates inhibit DHFR more than does the parent compound (Kumar et al., 1986) and are retained to cause prolonged cytotoxicity (Rosenblatt et al., 1978; Pizzorno et al., 1989; Mini et al., 1991). Vincristine and the epipodophyllotoxins increase MTX polyglutamation and cytotoxicity by inhibiting its efflux (Fry et al., 1982a, b), as does insulin (human breast cancer cell line MDA.MB.436; Kennedy et al., 1983) and probenecid (L1210 murine leukaemia cells; Sirotnak et al., 1981; Henderson &

MTX X polyglutamates were up to 500 fold more potent than MTX as inhibitors of thymidylate synthase (TS) (Allegro et al., 1985), and this might help to explain the potentiation of MTX by Indo. α- and γ-interferon enhanced MTX cytotoxicity against the human promyelocytic cell line HL-60 by lowering intracellular thymidine levels (Sur et al., 1991). Azidothymidine (AZT), which competitively inhibits thymidine kinase, synergized with MTX (Webet et al., 1990; 1991). Inhibition of nucleoside transport by dipipyridamole (Jarvis, 1986) might help to explain the potentiation of MTX (see Hollingsworth, 1993).

The MTX/Indo interaction may therefore involve various pathways. Regardless of the mechanism, if Indo selectively potentiates the cytotoxicity of MTX to human malignant cells in vivo this could increase the effectiveness of cytotoxic chemotherapy in cancer.

We thank the Joint Research Committee of King's College London and the Association for International Cancer Research for financial support.

References


