

## **Molecular and cellular biomarkers for field cancerization and multistep process in head and neck tumorigenesis**

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### **Summary**

One way to explain the development of head and neck cancer is through the theories of field cancerization, i.e., the exposure of an entire field of tissue to repeated carcinogenic insult, and multistep process, i.e., development of multiple cancers in a predisposed field through a series of recognizable stages. Recent molecular genetic studies of histologically normal and premalignant epithelia of high-risk subjects and studies of malignant tumors in aerodigestive tract epithelia have identified a continuum of accumulated specific genetic alterations that possibly occur during the clonal evolution of tumors, namely, during the multistep process. Second primary or multiple primary tumors arise in the same fields as independent clones, with similar but unique molecular genetic and/or cellular alterations. Consequently, the assessment of these genetic and phenotypic alterations has been integrated into clinical chemoprevention trials in an effort to identify biomarkers that are also risk predictors and intermediate end points. This review covers candidate biomarkers of the processes of field cancerization and multistep tumor development in aerodigestive tract epithelia, including general and specific genetic markers, proliferation markers, and squamous differentiation markers.

### **Introduction**

Head and neck cancers account for an estimated 42,000 new cases of cancer and 12,000 deaths per year in the United States, roughly 4% of all new cancer cases and 2% of cancer deaths annually [1]. The worldwide incidence of this malignancy, approximately 500,000 cases per year, has remained unchanged for over two decades [2, 3].

Over the last 20 years, diagnosis and management have improved through combined efforts in surgery, radiotherapy, and chemotherapy and through tobacco cessation programs, but long-term survival rates have improved only marginally and are among the lowest of the major cancers [4, 5]. In addition, the residual cosmetic and functional ef-

fects of definitive local therapy often debilitate and reduce the quality of life of these patients.

New strategies are clearly needed to help control head and neck cancer. One of the most important approaches under investigation is chemoprevention, the use of specific natural or synthetic agents to suppress, reverse, or prevent carcinogenesis [6–9]. This approach can be used in the general population, in subjects with increased cancer risk due to inherited or acquired factors, and in patients cured of primary tumors but at risk for second primary tumors [10–15]. The major obstacle, however, in designing trials for such interventions is the extremely distant end point, namely cancer incidence. Reaching that end point is expensive and requires many subjects, and long-term follow-up. One obvious so-

lution is to identify intermediate end points using biomarkers associated with specific stages of the carcinogenic process [16–18].

Research so far into head and neck tumorigenesis has been based on two theories: field cancerization and multistep process. The phenomenon of field cancerization is demonstrated in tissue samples from different sites in the aerodigestive tract, a ‘field’ in which tissue is exposed to the same carcinogenic insult. The frequent presence of a variety of premalignant and malignant lesions at these sites reflects the multistep process of tumorigenesis. Research efforts have identified many potential cellular and molecular biomarkers [19–23] and set the stage for future clinical studies [24].

Strictly, these candidate biomarkers should be validated through clinical chemoprevention trials before being used as risk assessment or intermediate end points. Although this could take many years and require many subjects, promising currently available biomarker candidates should be incorporated into current and future chemoprevention trials. The most useful chemopreventive agents, a structurally heterogeneous and mechanistically diverse group, could be selected on the basis of modulation of biomarkers, with an eye to establishing combinations that effectively inhibit different phases of the carcinogenic process, as reflected in the biomarkers. Also, certain biomarkers might be used to select high-risk populations for chemoprevention trials. In the long term, panels of intermediate end point biomarkers may replace cancer incidence as the major end point of phase III chemoprevention trials.

### **Field cancerization**

The concept of field ‘cancerization’ was proposed in 1953 by Slaughter *et al.* [25], who hypothesized that the entire epithelial surface of the aerodigestive tract is exposed to common carcinogens and has an increased risk of cancer development. They also postulated that multiple primary epithelial cancers could arise independently within the aerodigestive tract following prolonged exposure to carcinogens. Patients with head and neck squamous

cell carcinoma, or those at high risk for the development of this cancer, commonly have a history of exposure to cigarette smoke and are likely to have multiple premalignant or malignant lesions clinically and histologically evident within the same epithelium of the aerodigestive tract. This theory is supported by clinical, histopathological, and recent molecular biological evidence.

### *Clinical evidence*

Head and neck squamous cell carcinomas usually occur in tissues heavily exposed to carcinogen. Epidemiologic and, more recently, molecular data show that tobacco products increase tumor risk in the exposed field. The tumors can occur throughout the aerodigestive tract, and the risk of tumor development correlates with the duration and extent of carcinogenic exposure. Moreover, concurrent exposure to other etiologic agents (e.g., alcohol) can further increase the risk within the exposed field.

Interestingly, a significant percentage of patients initially cured of their cancers go on to develop second primary tumors (SPTs). These SPTs, whether synchronous or metachronous, develop at a constant rate (4–7% of treated patients per year), usually in the field at risk: the head and neck, the upper two thirds of the esophagus, and/or the lung. Patients with early-stage disease are very prone to SPTs since their risk for metastatic disease and local relapse is greatly decreased by their definitive primary treatments [26–31]. There is much evidence to support this. A retrospective survey of 235 laryngeal cancer patients followed for a median of 10 years revealed that 21% developed SPTs [32]; most of the SPTs occurred in the aerodigestive tract, 18% occurred in the head and neck, and 4% occurred in the lung. Furthermore, the SPTs occurred most often in patients diagnosed with early-stage disease. Cooper and colleagues, in a report from the Radiation Therapy Oncology Group’s study of 928 patients who received radiotherapy for their primary tumors and were then followed for 8 years, observed that 25% developed SPTs. Nearly 60% of those SPTs occurred in the aerodigestive tract, mostly in patients with the earliest primary tumors. In analyz-

ing the incidence, anatomic distribution, and survival impact of SPTs of the aerodigestive tract with respect to specific head and neck cancer sites [33], Licciardello *et al.* found a 10–40% incidence of metachronous tumors and a 9–14% incidence of synchronous SPTs (mostly lung, head and neck, and esophageal). These SPTs unquestionably influenced subsequent survival and proved to be the major threat to long-term survival after successful therapy of early-stage head and neck cancer. Finally, Vikram found that the risk of SPTs at 4 years after initial treatment exceeds the risk of relapse [34].

#### *Histopathological evidence*

In addition to Slaughter's clinical observations in the late 1950's, Auerbach and colleagues extensively examined paraffin sections of lungs from over 100 dying patients with and without lung cancer [35]. They divided the tracheobronchial tree into 208 sections and histologically analyzed the paraffin sections. Some epithelial change was evident in 90–100% of sections derived from most of the light smokers, all of the heavy smokers, and all patients with lung cancer, ranging from loss of cilia and basal cell hyperplasia to carcinoma-*in-situ*. These changes were present throughout the lung field, and the degree of change correlated with the extent of tobacco exposure. Additional evidence comes from the mouse skin model, a good model for the progression of intraepithelial neoplasia [36]. In this model, uniform exposure of the entire epithelial surface to environmental carcinogens leads to multiple, typically monoclonal papillomas derived from a single stem cell of the epidermal proliferative unit. Two other examples of carcinogen exposure throughout the epithelium of an organ are exposure of the skin to sunlight and of the colon to fatty acids (in the colon, areas of the crypt epithelium develop hyperplastic and then dysplastic changes in the epithelium covering the adenomatous polyps). The result is diffuse injury and a higher than normal risk of multiple primary tumors [37, 38].

#### *Molecular biological evidence*

More proof for the notion of field cancerization comes from molecular biology and the characterization of molecular events occurring in tumor fields. Studies by Sozzi *et al.* [39] and Lee *et al.* [40] of short-term cultures of normal lung cells from patients with lung tumors revealed multiple chromosomal changes including rearrangements, aneusomy (e.g., trisomy 7), and deletions (e.g., 3p and 17p deletions). The frequency of the changes were significantly higher in patients with multiple primary tumors of the aerodigestive tract. Our group has also characterized the molecular events in lung tumor fields, using the technique of premature chromosome condensation to visualize interphase chromosomes of cytologically normal lung cells obtained at pneumonectomy for lung tumors [41, 42]. The lung cells away from the tumor site harbored genetic changes, including varying numbers of chromosomes per cell (suggesting genomic instability) and karyotypic structural changes. In some cases, these changes were shared by the tumor, suggesting that specific genetic changes might enhance the survival of damaged cells or that the tumor and the cells from normal tissue harboring the same changes have a common clonal origin. In other cells, distinct changes were noted, suggesting that genetic damage continues to accumulate in the normal tissue, increasing the risk that important genetic loci will be altered and that multiple clones and multiple primaries will develop [42]. Furthermore, using non-isotopic *in situ* hybridization, specific chromosome probes were applied in paraffin-embedded head and neck tissue sections containing the whole spectrum of premalignant and malignant lesions that all showed chromosomal abnormalities and will be discussed in detail later in this chapter [43].

Probes for specific genetic changes involving oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes in aerodigestive tract tumors have also been used to characterize the rest of the genetic changes in the field. For instance, Rabbits and colleagues reported the same molecular changes in regions of bronchial dysplasia and adjacent invasive carcinoma of the lung [44]. Gazdar *et al.*, using polymerase chain reaction methodologies and microsatellite primers and

probes, revealed a variety of clonal changes including *ras* mutations and allelic losses of chromosomes 9p and 3p in premalignant epithelial regions from lung tissues of cancer patients [45–47].

Finally, the observation that specific molecular events (i.e., *p53* mutations, deletion associated with loss of heterozygosity) usually differ between multiple primary tumors [48] and between different premalignant foci supports the notion that genetic changes occur independently throughout the aerodigestive tract, leading to multifocal tumor formation.

### **Multistep tumorigenesis**

In multistep tumorigenesis, the accumulation of genetic damage results in phenotypic changes, i.e., dysfunctional regulatory processes, that affect cell growth, differentiation, cell loss, and function. This theory dovetails with the increasingly apparent notion that cancer develops in a stepwise process involving genetically altered cell populations. Some of the altered cell populations may spawn ‘new’ genetically altered cells that are more likely to evolve into different neoplastic foci. Indeed, the carcinogenic process seems to be one of cellular evolution based upon the repeated selection of genetically altered cells whose chances of becoming cancerous increase as the system evolves through the precancerous stage and clonal expansion [49].

Early genetic lesions may be present in this affected field and be targets of further complex and multiple genetic changes during the pathogenesis of aerodigestive tract tumors. Although the earliest genetic changes may involve both altered differentiation and proliferation, continuing genetic changes are likely to accompany the proliferative changes as carcinogenesis progresses. The accumulation of genetic damage in the exposed tissue, which may drive carcinogenesis, culminates in the events necessary for cell proliferation and transformation of the cells from genetically altered but histologically normal to frankly malignant. The rate of accumulation of genetic damage reflects the degree of carcinogen exposure, the inherent sensitivity of the individual, and the degree of tissue damage. How-

ever, although the whole field presumably accumulates genetic damage, only a few malignant foci eventually develop into carcinomas. One theory is that only those cells that take the right genetic ‘hits’ at the premalignant stages can become malignant. These ‘hits’ may be activation of proto-oncogenes and inactivation of tumor suppressor genes. Indeed, their correlation with histopathologic progression has led to the colorectal cancer model of molecular progression [50]. In this model, the progression from colorectal adenoma to carcinoma involves *ras* oncogene mutations and the loss of tumor suppressor genes on 5q, 17p, and 18q, with each genetic alteration being followed by clonal expansion. A similar but unique molecular genetic model is emerging for head and neck tumorigenesis.

### *Clinical and histological evidence*

From a clinical point of view, tumors of the aerodigestive tract often follow, but do not necessarily originate from abnormal premalignant lesions in the field at risk (i.e., oral leukoplakia/erythroplakia). Indeed, the presence of such lesions often implies a higher tumor risk somewhere in the field. Premalignant oral lesions occur in up to 30% of oral squamous cell carcinoma cases [51, 52]. These premalignant lesions often have hyperplastic and dysplastic phenotypes, both of which can progress to invasive cancer [38, 53–54]. For instance, a study that followed 257 oral leukoplakia patients for 7.2 years saw the development of squamous cell carcinoma in 17.5% of cases. It also revealed that dysplastic lesions had a ten-fold higher transformation and a ten-fold lower spontaneous regression rates than hyperplastic lesions [55]. Other clinical examples of the multistep process are the development of esophageal cancer from Barrett’s esophagus, of lung cancer from bronchial metaplasia, and of invasive transitional cell carcinoma in the bladder from intraepithelial neoplasia outside the aerodigestive tract areas.

Thanks to the identification of specific genetic changes that drive the neoplastic process, a model for head and neck squamous cell carcinoma tumorigenesis is now evolving that should be useful in

early detection, intervention, and prognosis. These genetic changes and their relevance to both field cancerization and multistep tumorigenesis will be described in detail in the following biomarker section.

## Biomarkers

Recent technical advances, wide applications of molecular biology, and increasing emphasis on translational research have revealed much about the determinants of malignant progression. A panel of potential biomarkers identified to date will be assessed individually and details are presented by specific category in Table 1.

Table 1. Biomarker candidates

General genomic markers	
Nuclear aberrations (micronuclei)	
Chromosomal alterations	
Specific genomic markers	
Proto-oncogene alterations	Ras (H-, K-, N-ras) ErbB1/EGFR PRAD-1/Cyclin D1
Tumor suppressor genes	
	p53 p21 (WAF1/CIP1) retinoblastoma gene (rb) MTS-1 (p16) 3p (unidentified)
Proliferation markers	
Nuclear antigens (PCNA, Ki67)	
Thymidine labeling index	
Squamous differentiation markers	
Cytokeratins	
Transglutaminase type I	
Involucrin	
Nuclear retinoid receptors	
Retinoic acid receptors (RARs)	
Retinoid X receptors (RXRs)	

## General genomic markers

### Micronuclei

Micronuclei are chromosome or chromatid fragments formed in proliferating cells during cell division from chromosome nondisjunction resulting from carcinogen-induced DNA damage. They have been studied as markers of clastogen exposure. Their frequency was widely studied in earlier human chemoprevention trials [56–58], and they are still widely studied because they are easy to find and quantify. In the aerodigestive tract epithelium, they form in the proliferating basal cell layer, which gives rise to suprabasal cells that migrate to the epithelial surface, and they can be detected at relatively high frequencies in exfoliated cells of the aerodigestive tract of tobacco-exposed individuals.

A series of pilot trials has shown that micronuclei frequency correlates with target-tissue cancer risk in smokers, who are at high risk for head and neck, lung, esophagus, and bladder carcinomas [57, 58]. In studies of high-risk betel users from India and the Philippines, Stich *et al.* found that both retinol and beta-carotene suppressed micronuclei frequency in more than 90% of the lesions after treatment but that rates of clinical response and suppression of new lesions differed greatly [57, 59, 60]. A large placebo-controlled chemoprevention trial in China revealed significant site-specific suppression of micronuclei (esophageal, not buccal) in subjects receiving retinol, riboflavin, and zinc, but no significant reduction in the number of premalignant esophageal lesions after 1 year of chemopreventive intervention [61]. Data from our group [62, 63] suggest that, over time, retinoids can effectively and steadily suppress micronuclei, although we could not consistently correlate this with clinical and histologic remission [63]. Thus, the presence and frequency of micronuclei seem to quantitatively reflect ongoing DNA damage and genetic instability. However, simple measurements of micronuclei cannot accurately summarize the effects of long-term carcinogen exposure and cumulative effects of genetic change throughout the field.

### Chromosome abnormalities

The chromosomal and DNA abnormalities seen in

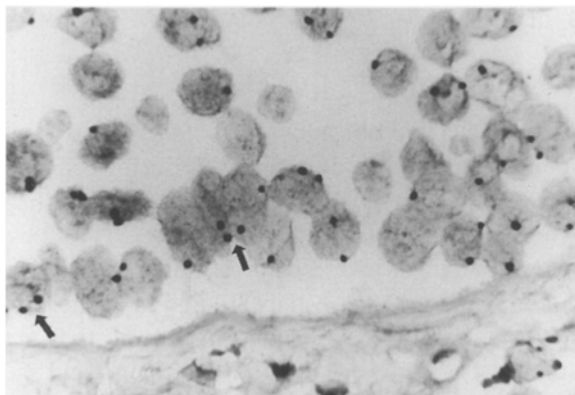


Fig. 1. Evidence of chromosome polysomy (i.e., chromosome 9) in dysplastic head and neck epithelium. The arrows are pointing to cells with three chromosome copies indicating genomic instability.

established tumors of the head and neck [64–66] reflect multiple genetic events. Up to now, most studies of these abnormalities have been done in cell lines derived from tumors or subjected to short-term culture. Unfortunately, this method of study subjects the results to the influence of cell culture conditions, particularly through the preferential outgrowth of certain cellular clones and the acquisition of *ex vivo* chromosomal changes [67]. Furthermore, solid-tumor cytogenetic studies have been hampered by the low frequency of mitotic figures from direct preparation, the suboptimal quality of chromosome preparation techniques, and the significant complexity of cytogenetic changes [68].

Nevertheless, short-term cultures have been useful in analyzing complex abnormalities such as rearrangements, translocations, amplifications, and deletions. In fact, several nonrandom chromosomal alterations have been identified in this way: loss on chromosomes 3p, 5q, 8p, 9p, 18q, and 21q [67, 69, 70]; gain or amplification at 3q, 5p, 7p, 8q, and 11q13 [67, 63–71]; and breakpoints at 1p36, 3q21, 5p14, 7p13, 9q32, and 1q13 [71]. However, few karyotypic changes in premalignant tissues of the aerodigestive tract have been identified [72, 73].

This is changing, thanks to ISH and comparative genomic hybridization (CGH). Recently, ISH techniques have allowed the direct visualization of chromosomal abnormalities in interphase cells [74, 75]. They have also been applied to many tumor cell

lines and dissected tumor material [76], as well as paraffin-embedded tissue sections, in combination with chromosome-specific DNA probes, and enzyme-mediated immunohistochemical procedures [43, 77–79].

As noted above, we have already used ISH to study head and neck tumor samples containing adjacent normal and premalignant epithelium. In brief, we subjected samples to nonisotopic ISH with specific centromeric DNA probes for chromosomes 7 and 17 to determine (a) the stage of the multistep tumorigenic process at which the specific numerical chromosome changes can be detected and (b) whether histologic progression is accompanied by accumulation of genetic alterations [43]. Polysomy was defined as the presence of 3 or more copies of a chromosome/cell (Fig. 1). We found that polysomy increased from 35% to 90% of the cases as tissue moved from normal epithelium adjacent to tumor through premalignant lesions to squamous carcinoma. These results strongly support the multistep tumorigenesis theory and make polysomy a useful genetic biomarker of accumulated genetic damage or instability and ongoing genetic damage. We have subsequently shown that in individuals with leukoplakia or erythroplakia, increased degree of chromosome abnormalities in the lesions have a higher risk of developing oral cancers [80]. Interestingly, half of these tumors occurred away from the initial biopsy site, further proof of field cancerization and that genomic instability in one part of a field increases risk for the rest of the field.

Together, ISH and CGH have revealed much about chromosomal abnormalities as biomarkers. Both techniques yield specific information regarding chromosome amplification and have the advantage of application in primary tumor materials. CGH allows differentially labeled tumor DNA and normal reference DNA to be hybridized simultaneously with normal metaphase spreads. Deletions or amplifications are seen as changes in the ratio of the intensities of the two fluorochromes along the target chromosomes [81]. CGH analysis of 13 head and neck tumors identified deletions in the consensus regions of chromosomes 3p, 5q, and 19, whereas frequently occurring overpresentations were observed in 3q and 5p. Moreover, three tumors had high

levels of amplification that were mapped to 3q26→qter and four demonstrated a relative overpresentation of 11q13, the region that harbors the *PRAD1/cyclin D1* gene [82].

Besides ISH and CGH, new polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based techniques have allowed specific analysis of DNA from even minute specimens and identification of allelic losses or deletions that mark the inactivation of certain tumor suppressor genes. This is especially useful in studying the inactivation of recessive oncogenes. Such inactivation is thought to be a two-step process frequently involving a point or small mutation in one allele and loss of genetic material through rearrangement or deletion of the other [83]. Restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) and, more recently, microsatellite markers (small highly polymorphic DNA repeated units that occur throughout the human genome) have greatly facilitated allelotyping [84]. By identifying regions of loss of heterozygosity (LOH) at 3p, 5q, 9p, 11q, 13q, and 17p, Ah-See *et al.* [85] and Nawroz *et al.* [86] have comprehensively allelotyped primary head and neck squamous cell carcinoma.

LOH on 3p has been inferred from statistical analyses of RFLP [87, 88], and LOH and deletions of 3p have been implicated in different types of lung cancer [89–91]. Yet, despite the existence of several candidate genes [92], there is still no definitive evidence of a tumor suppressor gene on 3p. Several studies have suggested that this region of loss is more complex because of the possible overlap of three distinct but juxtaposed suppressor regions [93, 94]. Chromosome 5q, near the *APC/MCC* locus, which is involved in colorectal carcinoma, esophageal, and breast cancer [97], contains the most common region of loss in head and neck squamous carcinoma. Though this implies a much broader role for this locus in the development of squamous carcinoma as well as adenocarcinoma, mutation analysis of candidate genes on 5q is needed. The striking finding of LOH on chromosome 9p21–22 in human tumors is consistent with previous reports of a putative suppressor gene near the interferon locus [98]. Furthermore, homozygous deletion of this region has been previously implicated in the progression of many human neoplasms,

including brain tumors [99], melanoma [100], bladder cancer [101], and lung cancer [102]. Contained within this region is a cell-cycle gene called *p16* (*MTS-1* or *CDKN-2*).

Chromosome 11q is implicated in head and neck squamous cell carcinomas because of the putative involvement of the *cyclin D1* gene, and LOH on 11q may in fact represent amplification [103–105]. LOH on 13q occurs in more than 50% of these tumors and is commonly associated with inactivation of the retinoblastoma gene (*Rb*). However, immunohistochemical analysis has revealed *Rb* inactivation in only a small percentage of tumors with loss of 13q [106], suggesting that further mapping may reveal a second tumor suppressor gene nearby.

Clearly, some tumor suppressor genes have been localized on affected chromosomes, but many others have not. Thus, the fine mapping of allelic losses may lead to the characterization of these unknown tumor suppressor genes. If so, then this will reveal more about the multistep process as well as the biological and clinical behavior of these neoplasms.

## Specific genetic markers

### *Proto-oncogenes*

#### *Ras*

The *ras* genes [*H-ras*, *K-ras*, and *N-ras*] encode 21-kDa guanosine-triphosphate (GTP)-binding proteins (p21<sup>ras</sup>) that attach to the inside of the cell membrane and transduce molecular signals to the nucleus. The p21 proteins have intrinsic GTPase activity that eventually leads to their own inactivation. This inactivation is greatly enhanced by the GTPase-activating protein, which binds to the *ras* gene transductional domain (or effector domain of p21) [107].

Nearly all relevant *ras* mutations occur in codons 12, 13, or 61 [108], and 10–15% of all human cancers harbor such mutations. *H-ras* mutations mainly occur, though at low frequency, in thyroid and bladder cancer [109, 110]. *N-ras* mutations mainly occur in malignancies of the hematopoietic system [108]. *K-ras* mutations are mainly found in adenocarcino-

mas, i.e., pancreatic cancer [111], colorectal cancer [112], and lung adenocarcinomas [113] (their incidence in other histologic types of lung cancer is low [114]). Almost all of these mutations in lung adenocarcinomas occur in smokers and imply a worse prognosis. The majority of mutations at codon 12 *K-ras* is guanine to thymine transversion resulting possibly from the nature of the carcinogens [113].

Few *ras* mutations have been identified in primary head and neck tumors [115–117]. Furthermore, they are rare in oral squamous cell carcinomas in whites. Interestingly, however, *ras* (*H-ras*) mutations were frequent in oral carcinomas in an Indian population of tobacco (quid) chewers. This discrepancy is difficult to explain, assuming the common carcinogen. Perhaps it is due to the longer exposure of mucosa to concentrated levels of carcinogens in chewers versus smokers or to the different strains or species of tobacco used [118]. In addition, the discrepancy in incidence of *ras* mutations between head and neck and lung cancer may be partially due to the predilection of *K-ras* mutations for adenocarcinomas. Kuo *et al.*'s comparative study of p21<sup>ras</sup> expression in adjacent sections of oral squamous cell carcinomas, epithelial dysplasias, hyperkeratoses, and normal oral mucosae revealed positive staining in 16.7% of mucosae; this progressively increased to 92.2% of squamous cell carcinomas [119]. Furthermore, Kuo *et al.* found that p21 *ras* expression was significantly associated with smoking habits and daily or total betel quid consumption [119].

#### Epidermal Growth Factor Receptor (*EGFR*)

Epidermal growth factor (EGF) is a potent mitogenic polypeptide that stimulates proliferation of target cells through interaction with its surface receptor, *EGFR*, a 170-kDa transmembrane glycosylated phosphoprotein with tyrosine kinase activity encoded by the *ErbB1* oncogene of the avian erythroblastosis virus [120]. *EGFR* also mediates signal transduction for transforming growth factor- $\alpha$  (TGF- $\alpha$ ) [121]. Activation of the *EGFR* kinase results in both autophosphorylation and phosphorylation of tyrosine residues of several proteins *in vitro* [122–124].

Evidence for the role of *EGFR* in tumorigenesis is provided by the observation that, when it or one

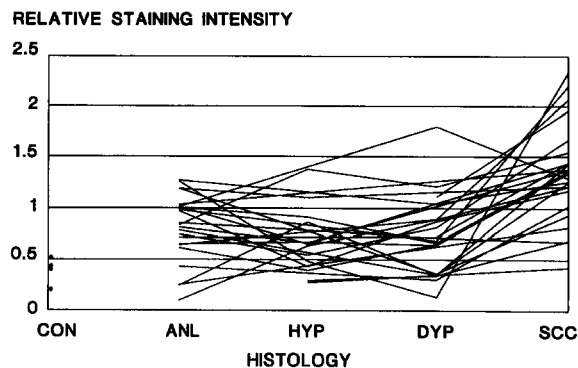


Fig. 2. Quantitation of *EGFR* expression during tumorigenesis. Note that each line represents each sample's relative staining intensity of *EGFR* expression in different histologies. Overall sample numbers were 4 control epithelia, 28 normal epithelia adjacent to tumor (ANL), 15 hyperplasia (HYP), 24 dysplasia (DYP), and/or 36 squamous cell carcinomas (SCC). Note also that two samples of SCC show lower *EGFR* expression than their premalignant counterparts (from Shin DM, *et al.*: *Cancer Res* 54: 3153–3159, 1994).

of its ligands *EGF* or *TGF- $\alpha$*  is overexpressed in transfected cells, it results in malignant transformation [125]. *EGFR* gene amplification and/or overexpression has been found in head and neck squamous cell carcinomas and their cell lines [126–129] some of which also produce TGF- $\alpha$  [127]. In a hamster model of oral carcinogenesis the development of tumors is associated with increased *EGFR* expression [130].

Now, there is even further evidence that *EGFR* overexpression is one of the early events in the multistep process that leads to head and neck carcinomas [131, 132]. In particular, Grands and Tweardy [131] have measured the frequency of increased TGF- $\alpha$  and *EGFR* mRNA production in normal-appearing mucosae from head and neck cancer patients versus normal mucosae from controls. They found that *EGFR* expression increased an average 29-fold in most normal-appearing mucosae (91% of samples) of head and neck cancer patients and an average 69-fold in most tumor specimens (92% of the samples) compared with the normal mucosa of nonsmokers. Our own group examined tissue specimens from head and neck cancer patients containing adjacent normal-appearing mucosae and/or premalignant lesions, using anti-*EGFR* monoclonal antibody by immunostaining and computerized



microscopic image analysis [132]. The relative staining intensity to *EGFR* was two fold higher in histologically normal epithelium adjacent to the tumors than in normal control epithelium from non-smokers. Furthermore, *EGFR* expression increased with histologic progression, particularly, between dysplasia and squamous cell carcinoma, suggesting that upregulation of *EGFR* expression was involved in the multistep process of tumorigenesis (Fig. 2).

Although the abnormal expression of *EGFR* in carcinogen-exposed epithelium may be part of a regenerative process, there is evidence that it coexists with or results from abnormal genotypic changes (i.e., genomic instability). The proof lies in the similar patterns of increased chromosome 7 and 17 polysomy during histologic progression [43]. Therefore, the stepwise increase of *EGFR* expression, in concert with genomic instability, may interfere with normal growth regulation and thus play a role in head and neck tumorigenesis.

#### PRAD-1 (CCND1)

Cytogenetic analysis of head and neck squamous cell carcinomas has identified frequent abnormalities at 11q13, including rearrangements and the presence of homogeneously staining regions [65]. Interestingly, molecular studies have shown that some genes in this region (*int-2*, *hst-1*, *gst- $\pi$* , and *bcl-1*) are amplified in 30–50% of head and neck cancers [103, 104, 133]; thus, these genes may take part in the development and/or progression of these tumors. However, in spite of their amplifications, no mRNA expression of *int-2*, *hst-1*, or *bcl-1* genes have been consistently demonstrated in fresh head and neck tumors or cell lines [96, 134]. The *int-2* and *hst-1* genes encode fibroblast growth factors [135], while *bcl-1* gene is activated by the t(11;14) translocation in some B-cell lymphomas/leukemias [135].

*PRAD-1*, a gene on 11q13, originally isolated as a gene overexpressed by juxtaposition to the parathyroid hormone gene on 11p15 in parathyroid adenomas [136], lies between the *bcl-1* gene (telomeric) and *hst-1* and *int-2* genes (centromeric) [105]. Together, these four genes form an amplicon implicated in the pathogenesis of different human carcinomas [136, 137]. *PRAD-1* encodes *cyclin D1*, which is

committed to controlling the cell cycle at the G<sub>1</sub>-S transition by interacting with the *Rb* gene product [139, 140, 141] and by binding and activating cdk-4 and cdk-6 kinases [136, 142]. *pRb* and *cyclin D1* seem to be two components of the same pathway since cells whose *pRb* has been inactivated through mutations or complexing to DNA virus oncoproteins no longer require *cyclin D1* expression to progress through the cell cycle [143, 152]. Cells that overexpress *cyclin D1* proliferate abnormally, have a shorter G<sub>1</sub> phase, and depend less on growth factors [140, 144]. Transfection studies have shown that *PRAD-1* may also function as an oncogene in cooperating with other oncogenes in cellular transformation: though it might not help initially transform squamous cells, it may confer some growth advantage to cells already transformed [145].

*PRAD-1* is amplified and overexpressed in breast and squamous cell carcinomas [105, 134] and amplified in approximately 30–50% of primary head and neck cancers [139, 146]. Its amplification has been correlated with high cytologic grade, infiltrative growth pattern, hypopharyngeal site, and lymph node involvement in recent studies [139, 146, 147]. Its overexpression has been associated with a more rapid and frequent recurrence of head and neck squamous cell carcinomas, resulting in shortened disease-free and overall survival in operable patients [147]. The same study showed a high correlation between amplification and overexpression of the gene, indicating that amplification might be the main mechanism of gene activation in these tumors. However, other studies suggest alternative mechanisms such as translocations, mutations in the gene regulatory regions, or mRNA stabilization [136, 138, 149].

To identify the region amplified, we studied head and neck squamous cell lines and the tissue sections from which they were established using ISH, a cosmid probe for the *int-2* gene, and a total chromosome 11 painting probe. One line showed no amplification, but three did: on chromosome 11 distal to the single copy gene in two and on another chromosome in the third. *Int-2* probing of paraffin sections containing adjacent premalignant lesions revealed two cases of amplification in dysplastic lesions and one case of amplification at the hyperplasia-to-dys-

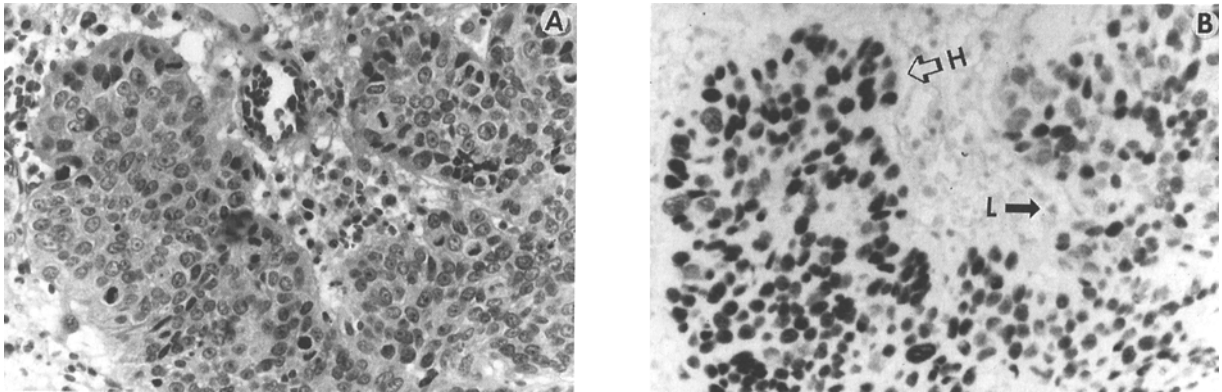


Fig. 3. (A) Squamous carcinoma of the head and neck. (B) Heterogeneous expression of p53 protein in the same tumor specimen. (H indicates high p53 and L shows low p53 expression.)

plasia transition. Together, these results suggest that *int-2* can be amplified in premalignant lesions before tumor development [150]. But the implications for head and neck tumorigenesis need to be further investigated.

#### Tumor suppressor genes

##### *p53*

The *p53* gene, which maps to the short arm of chromosome 17(17p13), encodes a nuclear protein. This protein induces cell-cycle arrest at the G<sub>1</sub> checkpoint, allowing DNA repair or induction of cell apoptosis in response to genotoxic damage. It also functions as a 'guardian of the genome' [151].

Many types of *p53* alterations (rearrangements, deletions, insertions, and point mutations) have been observed in a wide variety of cell lines and tumors, the most frequent being point mutations primarily in exons 5–8. Consequently, *p53* mutation patterns have been analyzed to identify specific changes associated with particular carcinogens [152]. So far, investigators have found frequent *p53* inactivation in head and neck squamous cell carcinomas [153–155], slightly less frequent inactivation in dysplasias [156], and more frequent mutation in smokers and drinkers, versus nonsmokers and nondrinkers [157]. Moreover, CpG mutations (endogenous mutation site) have proved rare in smokers and drinkers, while they constituted all of the mutations found in nonsmokers and nondrinkers. Final-

ly, cigarette smoking has been linked to *p53* mutations at nonendogenous sites (most commonly GC–TA and CG–AT), thus providing molecular evidence for the well-known epidemiologic association between smoking and head and neck cancer.

Stabilization of the mutant *p53* protein allows its immunohistochemical analysis in tissues, while wild-type *p53* protein is usually undetectable or low (Fig. 3). Immunocytochemistry has detected abnormal *p53* in approximately half of head and neck cancer specimens examined. Interestingly, *p53* is often abnormally expressed in histologically normal epithelium (adjacent to tumors) (25% of cases) more frequently in dysplastic epithelium adjacent to tumors (45%) [158]. This gradual increase of *p53* expression from normal tissue to squamous cell carcinomas supports the hypothesis of multistep tumorigenesis (Fig. 4).

The pathophysiological consequences of losing *p53* function are not well understood. For example, such a loss in sun-exposed skin can lead to the outgrowth of cell clones that resist damage-induced apoptosis [159]. This means that genetically altered cells accumulate more rapidly with continued exposure to carcinogens and explains the recent finding that *p53*-positive premalignant lesions adjacent to tumors have higher levels of chromosome polysomies than *p53*-negative lesions [160].

Two recent studies of *p53* mutation strongly argue for a multifocal, polyclonal process of tumorigenesis. One found frequent *p53* mutations in initial head and neck cancers and second primary tumors

of the aerodigestive tract [161], in all cases, the mutation sites differed between initial and second primary tumors, strongly suggesting a different clonal origin for the initial and second primary tumors. This confirmed an earlier study finding of distinct, multifocal cells expressing aberrant *p53* in distal epithelia of head and neck cancer patients [162].

Obviously, *p53* mutations are promising biomarkers. To determine how *p53* alterations in at-risk tissue might affect clinical outcome, we prospectively assessed cancer-free patients with premalignant oral lesions for *p53* protein accumulation and evaluated the response to 13-*cis* retinoic acid (13cRA) [163, 164]. Retinoids can apparently modulate *p53* mRNA and protein levels associated with carcinogenesis in certain *in vitro* systems [165]. We found that 89% of premalignant lesions expressed *p53*, while 8 controls from healthy nonsmokers did not. Levels of *p53* protein accumulation increased with histological progression. A significant correlation between levels of *p53* protein accumulation and lesion resistance to 13cRA therapy was found. This finding is possibly explained by the fact that cells that have lost wild-type *p53* function may not undergo apoptosis with 13-cRA therapy. However, there was no modulation of *p53* protein expression by 13-cRA therapy. *P53* alterations may be a valuable marker for identification of individuals at high risk of developing resistance in chemoprevention. We also found that patients with *p53*-positive tumors had shorter survival than those with *p53*-negative tumors, mainly due to the earlier and more frequent development of second primary tumors [166]. Additionally, *p53* alterations may help possibly target patients for gene therapy [167].

*p53* and *cyclin D1* represent mechanistically independent growth regulatory systems in head and neck cancer, which when altered, both abrogate  $G_1$  regulatory events [168]. The existence of a subset  $G_1$  of tumors with alteration of both genes supports the notion that concomitant inactivation of both regulatory pathway selectively enhances tumor growth [169]. The *cyclin D1/pRb* pathway includes at least two tumor suppressor genes (*pRb* and *p16/CDKN2*) and at least one proto-oncogene (*cyclin D1*) and may turn out to be as important as the *p53/p21* pathway in carcinogenesis. Ongoing research is

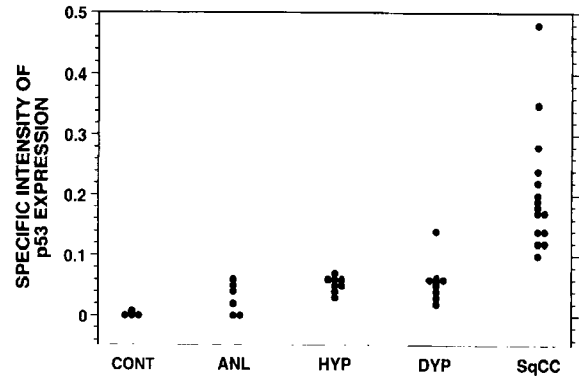


Fig. 4. Quantitation of *p53* expression in positively *p53* expressed samples during head and neck tumorigenesis. Note that the normal epithelium adjacent to tumor (ANL) showed higher *p53* expression than normal control epithelium (CONT) ( $P = 0.053$ ) and increased further to hyperplasia (HYP) ( $P = 0.038$ ) and dysplasia (DYP). From dysplasia to squamous cell carcinoma (SqCC), *p53* increased dramatically ( $P < 0.001$ ) (from Shin DM, *et al.*: *Cancer Res* 54: 321–326, 1994).

addressing the role of these complex genetic events that might complement the effects of *p53* providing the ultimate selective growth advantage to cells.

#### *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup>

The ability of *p53* to activate transcription of specific sequences suggests that the genes it induces may mediate its biological role as tumor suppressor. One such highly induced gene is *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup> (so named for the simultaneously but separately cloned wild-type *p53*-activated fragment-1 [WAF1] and cdk-interacting protein-1 (CIP-1)) [170, 171]. *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup> is directly regulated by *p53* and can itself suppress tumor cell growth in culture by inhibiting cyclin-dependent kinases and inducing  $G_1$  arrest or apoptosis. However, expression of the gene product can also occur independently of *p53*, such as during the Myo-dependent formation of myotubes from myoblasts [172–174]. *P53* independent induction of *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup> occurred also in breast carcinoma and prostatic carcinoma cell lines treated with lovastatin [175] and in human prostate carcinoma cell lines treated with all-*trans* retinoic acid (aTRA) and 9cRA [176] among others. Transfected *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup> inhibits growth of both human tumor cell lines [170] and normal diploid fibroblasts [171]. *In vitro*, *p21*<sup>WAF1/CIP1</sup> complexed with the proliferat-

ing call nuclear antigen (PCNA) can inhibit DNA replication [177].

Mutations within the coding portion of the *WAF1* gene were undetectable in a large series of human tumors, suggesting that *WAF1* mutations *per se* may not play an important role in the onset or progression of these malignancies [178]. The expression of  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  in adult human tissues has been examined in a variety of tissues [179]. In colonic epithelium there was a topological correlation in  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  immunostaining, with staining observed in the upper half of the colonic crypts, located thus  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  expression in the post-proliferative compartment [180, 181]. The same team of investigators extended their observations with study of  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  expression in colorectal adenomas and carcinomas, and found a global decrease and loss of the distinct compartmentalization of this protein. The results suggest that  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  alterations seem to be a relatively early event in the neoplastic process in this tumor. In head and neck squamous carcinomas there has been little evidence for implication of  $p21^{WAF1/CIP1}$  in the tumorigenesis process, but research in relation to other relevant genes in this tumor is currently ongoing in our laboratory and others.

### *MTS1*

Within the 9p21 region lies a putative tumor suppressor gene, *p16/MTS1/CDKN2*, that encodes a cell-cycle regulator protein p16. This protein negatively controls cell proliferation by binding to cdk4 and thus inhibiting the interaction of the cyclin D-cdk4 complex with *pRb* [182, 183]. This links *cyclin D-cdk4* and *pRb* in a common pathway, where loss of p16 may lead to uncontrolled cell growth and accelerate the carcinogenic process.

Interestingly, several recent studies have demonstrated homozygous deletion of the 9p21 region in a variety of neoplasms including leukemia, bladder cancer, glioma, melanoma, and lung cancer [100, 101, 184]. Allelic losses at the 9p21–22 locus also occur frequently in head and neck squamous cell carcinomas and just as frequently in early preinvasive lesions (including dysplasia and carcinoma *in situ*) [185]. This provides strong molecular evidence for the early inactivation of a putative tumor suppressor

gene on 9p leading to initiation or early progression of head and neck cancers. Sequence analysis of the *p16* gene in primary head and neck cancers that have lost chromosome 9p has revealed very rare point mutations [186–188]. This suggests that some mutations might escape detection, an alternative mechanism for inactivation of this gene, or that a second suppressor locus resides within the critical region of 9p21 in head and neck cancers. Several factors may contribute to the apparent discrepancy between homozygous deletions and loss of expression of the p16 gene [188]. First, *MTS1* may be a co-dominant tumor suppressor, with loss of one copy contributing to deregulated cell proliferation. Second, hypermethylation of a 5' CpG island of p16 may transcriptionally silence the full-length p16, as seen in lung and head and neck cancers, glioma cell lines, and fresh tumors without deletions or mutations [189]. The potential mechanism(s) for inactivation of the gene function as well as the exact role of the gene in the multistep head and neck tumorigenesis process need to be further studied.

### *Proliferation markers*

Proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA), a cofactor of DNA polymerase  $\delta$ , plays a critical role in the initiation of cell proliferation [190, 191]. It is one of the cell-cycle-regulated proteins in the DNA replication complex whose expression is associated with the late  $G_1$ -S and early  $G_2$  phases [192]. Since proliferation is thought to be an early marker of disordered cell growth, it has been hypothesized that proliferation increases as premalignant lesions become more advanced and that the distribution of proliferating cells in tissue may reveal the regulatory mechanisms that function abnormally during the multistep process.

PCNA seems to be a useful biomarker in the multistep tumorigenesis process. Using immunohistochemical staining we assessed the proliferative changes during tumor development in a series of head and neck cancer samples containing the whole spectrum of premalignant lesions [193]. Our chief finding was a fourfold increase in PCNA expression in the basal layer, extending to the suprabasal layer

in normal epithelium adjacent to cancers, versus low expression confined to the basal layer in the normal control epithelium of nonsmokers (Table 2). PCNA expression and thus dysregulation of proliferation increased as tissue progressed from adjacent normal epithelium to squamous carcinoma. Huang *et al.* studied PCNA expression in 169 oral epithelial lesions, including carcinoma *in situ*, dysplasia, epithelial atypia and hyperplasia [194]. They found a significant predilection for basal or suprabasal staining in premalignant or malignant lesions versus strictly basal staining in normal epithelium. Other studies by Gorgoulis *et al.* and Girod *et al.* have found a positive correlation between immunohistochemical *p53* expression and PCNA expression in premalignant and malignant lesions [195, 196].

#### Squamous cell differentiation markers

Unlike skin epithelium, the aerodigestive tract does not undergo squamous differentiation under normal physiologic conditions. However, it does differentiate along the squamous pathway during carcinogenesis [197]. In fact, over 90% of oral cavity tumors are squamous cell carcinomas [5]. Consequently, some preclinical and clinical studies have focused on markers of differentiation in the oral cavity, especially cytokeratins, involucrin, and transglutaminase I.

#### Cytokeratins

The cytokeratins, a family of at least 19 intermedi-

ate-size filaments, are good squamous differentiation markers because (a) they are expressed in different combinations in various human epithelial tissues and (b) their pattern of expression correlates with distinct types of epithelial differentiation [198]. Their expression patterns are greatly altered *in vitro* and *in vivo* during vitamin A deficiency, cigarette-smoke exposure, and carcinogenesis [199, 200]. The most useful markers seem to be keratin 1 (K1) and keratin 19 (K19): K1 because it marks carcinogenic changes in oral epithelia except in the gingiva, where it occurs normally, and K19 because its expression is increased and extends to suprabasal layers of epithelium in premalignant and malignant lesions [201].

Gimenez-Conti *et al.*, in studies with a monospecific antibody for K1, found that K1 expression increased during 7,12-dimethyl-benz(a)anthracene (DMBA)-induced oral carcinogenesis in the hamster cheek pouch *in vivo* [202]. The normal hamster cheek pouch epithelium, like human buccal mucosa, does not express K1, whose expression seems to be limited to hyperplastic cells in this model. Copper *et al.* [203], attempting to define markers of subsequent invasive squamous cell carcinoma, investigated different cytokeratin profiles using monoclonal antibodies to cytokeratins 8, 10, 13, and 19 and other monoclonal antibodies designated K931, K984, E46, Ki67, and UMA9. (Except for Ki67 all these monoclonal antibodies recognize epithelial differentiation antigens.) They found that K19 expression increased more than 3-fold in normal-appearing exfoliated mucosa versus controls. K19 is normally present in small amounts in the basal layer

Table 2. Labeling index of PCNA expression

Histology*	Labeling index, mean $\pm$ SE**			
	Basal layer	Parabasal layer	Superficial layer	Overall
NC (N = 6)	0.06 $\pm$ 0.01	0.07 $\pm$ 0.02	0	0.04 $\pm$ 0.01
ANL (N = 25)	0.11 $\pm$ 0.01	0.22 $\pm$ 0.02	0.06 $\pm$ 0.01	0.13 $\pm$ 0.01
HP (N = 13)	0.29 $\pm$ 0.04	0.54 $\pm$ 0.04	0.12 $\pm$ 0.02	0.32 $\pm$ 0.03
DP (N = 22)	0.55 $\pm$ 0.04	0.68 $\pm$ 0.03	0.22 $\pm$ 0.02	0.48 $\pm$ 0.03
SCC (N = 33)	NA	NA	NA	0.76 $\pm$ 0.02

\* NC = normal control; ANL = normal epithelium adjacent to tumor cells; HP = hyperplasia; DP = dysplasia; SCC = squamous cell carcinoma.

\*\* NA = not applicable. (From Shin DM: J Natl Cancer Inst 85: 971-798, 1993.)

of noncornifying regions of oral epithelia, but in premalignant lesions as well as squamous cell carcinomas, its expression is increased and extends to suprabasal layers [201]. Cooper's study extends this observation to normal-appearing 'condemned' mucosa. The high level of K19 expression might reflect a failure of maturation since there is an inverse relationship between the cellular levels of the terminal differentiation marker, involucrin [201], and K19.

#### *Involucrin and transglutaminase I*

Involucrin is produced during squamous differentiation in epidermis *in vivo* and in cultured keratinocytes and tracheal cells. Because it cross-links extensively with the membrane-associated enzyme type I transglutaminase, involucrin and transglutaminase I levels both increase during squamous differentiation [204, 205]. As immunohistochemical staining has shown, involucrin is expressed in the superficial layer of normal and hyperplastic oral and laryngeal epithelia, but throughout the thickness of the epithelium (including the basal and suprabasal layers) in dysplasias and squamous cell carcinomas in irregular and focal fashion [206, 207]. Furthermore, while involucrin staining is consistently strong in human premalignant oral lesions *in vitro*, immunoreactivity for transglutaminase I inversely correlates with the degree of dysplasia suggesting uncoupling of the keratinocyte programming [207].

Because aerodigestive tract epithelia differentiate along the squamous pathway in carcinogenesis and because retinoids inhibit this abnormal differentiation *in vitro* [207, 208], the effect of retinoids on the markers K1, involucrin, and transglutaminase I has been studied. Lippman *et al.* studied the effect of retinoids on marker expression and modulation as part of a two-phase trial of 13-cRA treatment in these oral leukoplakia [209]. They found that the pattern of staining was homogeneous in suprabasal layers at early stages (hyperplasia) but heterogeneous with basal layer extension at later stages (dysplasia) of carcinogenesis. Early results suggest that 13cRA may suppress the abnormal expression of squamous markers in as many as one third of lesions [209].

#### *Genetic susceptibility markers*

Since only a fraction of individuals exposed to tobacco develops smoking-related cancers, genetic predisposition might play an important role in tumor formation [210]. Indeed, as Sellers *et al.* and Harris have shown, almost every phase of the multistage process of carcinogenesis can be modified by genetically determined or acquired differences in modulation of carcinogenic exposures [210, 211]. One of the factors that determine an individual's risk is how their cells interact with carcinogens (e.g., activate procarcinogens), including how they repair carcinogen-induced DNA damage and how fast these cells accumulate genetic abnormalities.

Cytogenetic assays in peripheral blood lymphocytes have been extensively used to survey exposure and response of humans to genotoxic agents because it is thought that genetic changes observed in lymphocytes reflect critical events in the carcinogenesis in the affected tissues [212]. One such assay measures the frequency and number of *in vitro* bleomycin-induced breaks to gauge mutagen sensitivity [213]. As demonstrated in two case-control studies by Spitz *et al.*, *in vitro* bleomycin-induced sensitivity (defined as > 0.8 chromosome breaks/cell) and hypersensitivity (> 1.0 breaks/cell) are independent risk factors for head and neck cancers, after adjustment for tobacco and alcohol use [214, 215]. The second study also found that mutagen sensitivity entails a smoking-adjusted odds ratio of 2.9 (95% confidence limits 1.5–5.4) [215]. Further analysis suggests that (a) cigarette smoking combined with mutagen sensitivity multiplies effect and (b) individuals prone to develop second primaries have the highest degrees of mutagen sensitivity [216, 217]. Interestingly, bleomycin-induced breaks are not randomly distributed in patients with head and neck cancer but occur most often in chromosomes 3 (3p21, 3q21) and 7 (7q22, 7q32), chromosomal sites thought to harbor genes important for tumor development [218]. These same allelic losses have been detected in different regions of the tumor field, raising the possibility that inherent sensitivity also involves the predisposition of relevant genetic loci to instability. A multicenter phase III randomized chemoprevention trial to prevent SPTs involving

more than 1000 patients is ongoing through M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and its affiliated Community Clinical Oncology Group (CCOG) and the Radiation Therapy Oncology Group (RTOG). This study should establish the definite role of mutagen sensitivity and other biomarkers studied in this setting.

Eventually, many biomarkers used in combination will be needed to predict the risk of tumor development. These include genes involved directly in tumorigenesis (oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes), susceptibility genes that control DNA repair and, phase I and II metabolic enzyme activity (CYP2D6, CYP1A1, GSTM1, epoxide hydrolase, N-acetyl-transferase), and genes that influence rates of cellular proliferation [219].

#### *Retinoid mechanisms in chemoprevention*

Retinoids are by far the most studied and most active agents in head and neck cancer chemoprevention [7, 21, 24, 26, 220]. Vast data from epidemiologic, *in vitro*, animal, and human studies indicate that these agents are effective inhibitors of early stages of carcinogenesis in a number of target tissues [7, 220–222]. Clinical retinoid trials show that retinoids have significant chemopreventive activity in the head and neck, lung, bladder, skin, cervix, and ovary [7, 12, 21, 222–225], presumably due to their known regulatory effects on cell differentiation, cell proliferation, and apoptosis [226, 227]. Retinoids are physiologic regulators of tissue differentiation and restore regulation of growth and differentiation in certain premalignant and malignant cells *in vitro* and *in vivo* [226]. However, in cultured keratinocytes and squamous cell carcinomas, retinoids inhibit abnormal squamous differentiation [228] and reverse keratinization by restoring the ability to respond to normal growth control mechanisms. Retinoids enhance cellular interactions by restoring anchorage dependence, enhancing gap junctional communication, and inducing of integrin expression [227]. This enhancement of the interactions between cells may be important for expression of tissue-specific genes and may block the tumorigenesis pathway.

Their ability to regulate gene expression and intervene in signal transduction is the most plausible mechanism by which retinoids can modulate differentiation and growth of malignant cells and suppress progression of premalignant lesions. Such modulation has been seen in proto-oncogenes, tumor suppressor genes, and cell-regulatory kinases [227], as well as in many cell-surface receptors for cytokines and growth factors, with the sum effect of subverting growth-stimulatory signals mediated by different receptors. They can additionally intervene in intracellular signaling via second messengers [227]. To regulate gene expression, they transmit signals to the cell nucleus. To do so, they bind and activate specific nuclear receptors that then bind to DNA.

The nuclear retinoid receptors play a major role as ligand-activated DNA-binding proteins in a series of events that culminates in the modulation of nuclear gene transcription by interaction with response elements in the promoter region of specific genes. Two major types of retinoid nuclear receptors have been identified: RARs and RXRs. Each in turn has at least three subtypes:  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ ,  $\gamma$ . The ongoing study of nuclear retinoid receptors has revealed clear distinctions among the classes and subclasses of receptors in respect to their biologic functions, ligand affinities, and tissue distribution [229]. It seems that the two receptor classes represent distinctly different retinoid response pathways. The involvement of RAR- $\alpha$  in acute promyelocytic leukemia [230], RAR- $\gamma$  in teratocarcinoma [231], and RAR- $\beta$  in oral carcinogenesis [232] suggests a critical role for nuclear retinoid receptors in mediating retinoid activity in human neoplastic processes. The next step is to assume that abrogation of their function or expression results in cancer development.

Of the retinoid nuclear receptors, RAR- $\beta$  seems to play a major role in aerodigestive tract carcinogenesis [233–235]. One clue is its notable absence in a considerable number of head and neck carcinomas and lung carcinoma cell lines [235, 236]. Another clue is the ability of transfected RAR- $\beta$  to suppress the tumorigenicity of a human lung cancer cell line, thus supporting the hypothesis that links its reduction to cancer development [234]. A third clue is the progressive and selective loss of RAR- $\beta$  expression

at the mRNA level associated with head and neck and lung carcinogenic progression [235, 237]. Finally, a fourth clue is the absence of RAR- $\beta$  expression in approximately two thirds of oral premalignant lesions, its significant upregulation by isotretinoin treatment from 40% to 90% of the cases with correlation between increased RAR- $\beta$  expression and clinical response [237]. Thus, RAR- $\beta$  seems to be the best indicator to date of retinoid chemopreventive efficacy in humans and thus an excellent biomarker candidate.

The biomarkers presented here are all associated with molecular genetic events and the phenotypic changes that characterize field cancerization and multistep tumorigenesis in head and neck cancers. However, before they can be used as definitive risk predictors and intermediate and possibly final endpoints for trials in the near future, they must first be validated through large phase III randomized prevention trials.

## Conclusion

There is strong cellular and molecular evidence that head and neck tumorigenesis involves field cancerization and a multistep process. The future success of cancer chemoprevention will require studies that assess risk and define biomarkers as intermediate end points. Biomarker studies may then be used to help select patients, evaluate the biologic predictive capabilities of biomarkers, and develop novel chemopreventive strategies. At present, important clinical chemoprevention studies are ongoing in conjunction with biomarker studies in the United States and Europe. When these studies are done, they should clarify the biological role of chemopreventive therapy and shed new light on cancer prevention and control.

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