Differential Organization of Desmin and Vimentin in Muscle Is Due to Differences in Their Head Domains

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Abstract. In most myogenic systems, synthesis of the intermediate filament (IF) protein vimentin precedes the synthesis of the muscle-specific IF protein desmin. In the dorsal myotome of the *Xenopus* embryo, however, there is no preexisting vimentin filament system and desmin's initial organization is quite different from that seen in vimentin-containing myocytes (Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994. Differentiation. In press.). To determine whether the organization of IFs in the *Xenopus* myotome reflects features unique to *Xenopus* or is due to specific properties of desmin, we used the injection of plasmid DNA to drive the synthesis of vimentin or desmin in myotomal cells. At low levels of accumulation, exogenous vimentin and desmin both enter into the endogenous desmin system of the myotomal cell. At higher levels exogenous vimentin forms longitudinal IF systems similar to those seen in vimentin-expressing myogenic systems and massive IF bundles. Exogenous desmin, on the other hand, formed a reticular IF meshwork and non-filamentous aggregates. In embryonic epithelial cells, both vimentin and desmin formed extended IF networks. Vimentin and desmin differ most dramatically in their NH₂-terminal "head" regions. To determine whether the head region was responsible for the differences in the behavior of these two proteins, we constructed plasmids encoding chimeric proteins in which the head of one was attached to the body of the other. In muscle, the vimentin head-desmin body (VDD) polypeptide formed longitudinal IFs and massive IF bundles like vimentin. The desmin head-vimentin body (DVV) polypeptide, on the other hand, formed IF meshworks and non-filamentous structures like desmin. In embryonic epithelial cells DVV formed a discrete filament network while VDD did not. Based on the behavior of these chimeric proteins, we conclude that the head domains of vimentin and desmin are structurally distinct and not interchangeable, and that the head domain of desmin is largely responsible for desmin's muscle-specific behaviors.

During embryonic development most non-epithelial cell types transiently express the intermediate filament (IF) protein vimentin before the synthesis of "terminal," cell-type specific IF proteins (Traub, 1985; van de Klundert et al., 1993). It seems likely that the differentiation-specific IF proteins, i.e., desmin, glial fibrillary acidic protein, peripherin, α-internexin, and the neurofilament proteins, are specialized for specific tasks in the cell or have properties compatible with the function of a particular cell type. For example, it is now clear that a specific role of the neurofilament proteins is to maintain axonal caliber in certain types of neurons (Hoffmann et al., 1985, 1988; Ohara et al., 1993; Eyer and Peterson, 1994). It also appears that the ectopic expression of IF proteins can lead to cellular defects (Capetanaki et al., 1989; Dunia et al., 1990; Blessing et al., 1993; Côté et al., 1993; Xu et al., 1993). Presumably different IF proteins have different affinities for intracellular structures or different mechanical properties that make a particular IF well suited for one cell type but poorly suited for another.

Muscle provides a striking example of how a change in composition of IFs correlates with changing cellular organization. In most vertebrate systems examined, muscle precursor cells initially synthesize vimentin. As myogenic differentiation begins, these cells initiate synthesis of the muscle-specific IF protein desmin (Bennett et al., 1979; Gard and Lazarides, 1980; Holtzer et al., 1982). Vimentin and desmin readily coassemble with one another both in vitro (Steinert et al., 1981) and in vivo (Quinlan and Franke, 1982; Tokuyasu et al., 1985). The newly synthesized desmin integrates into the preexisting vimentin filament network, thus desmin's initial distribution in the cell reflects that of vimentin. As myogenic differentiation proceeds, the relative levels of vimentin and desmin change: vimentin synthesis ceases and desmin becomes the major, and in most cases, the only IF protein in the mature muscle cell (Bennett el al.,
The reorganization of the muscle IF system occurs simultaneously with the change in IF composition. It is not clear whether vimentin and desmin differ with respect to either network formation or mechanical properties or whether the change in IF composition influences IF organization. One system that can be used to address these questions is the dorsal myotome of the Xenopus embryo. In this muscle, vimentin is never expressed (Dent et al., 1989; Hermann et al., 1989a) and the desmin filament system forms de novo (Bennett et al., 1989a) and the desmin filament system forms de novo (Lazarides, 1980).

The differences between the Xenopus dorsal myotome and other myogenic systems suggests that vimentin and desmin differ significantly in the types of IF networks they form. To study this question further, we have examined the behavior of epitope-tagged exogenous vimentin and desmin proteins in embryonic cells. Myocytes expressing the exogenous vimentin contained longitudinal IF systems. On the other hand, expression of an identically tagged form of desmin failed to form the longitudinal IF system characteristic of vimentin-containing myotubes. Rather, it is initially concentrated at the intersomite junction and the lateral sarcosome. As myogenic differentiation proceeds, a reticular network of desmin filaments appears followed by the association of desmin with Z-lines.

The differences between the Xenopus dorsal myotome and other myogenic systems suggest that vimentin and desmin differ significantly in the types of IF networks they form in vivo. To study this question further, we have examined the behavior of epitope-tagged exogenous vimentin and desmin proteins in embryonic cells. Myocytes expressing the exogenous vimentin contained longitudinal IF systems. On the other hand, expression of an identically tagged form of desmin failed to form the longitudinal IF system characteristic of vimentin-containing myotubes. Rather, it is initially concentrated at the intersomite junction and the lateral sarcosome. As myogenic differentiation proceeds, a reticular network of desmin filaments appears followed by the association of desmin with Z-lines.

**Materials and Methods**

**Construction of Epitope-tagged Vimentin and Desmin Expression Plasmids**

cDNAs encoding either the X. laevis vimentin-1 (Dent et al., 1992) or desmin (Hermann et al., 1989b) proteins were amplified by PCR (95°C for 3; 5 cycles of 95°C for 2; 37°C for 2; 72°C for 2 followed by two cycles of 95°C for 2; 72°C for 2’ and then 72°C for 8’) to add restriction sites. PCR products were subcloned into the pSK::tag plasmid (Dent et al., 1992) using Nde I and Xba I. This adds the SDRSTM*EQKLISEEDL*ATN encodind sequence, recognized by the monoclonal antibody 9E10, to a-frame to the COOH terminus of the inserted protein coding sequence (Fig. 1 A). To express the proteins in Xenopus embryos, the tagged IF protein coding sequences were subcloned into pCskAct (Fig. 1 B). pCskAct, provided by Richard Harland (UC Berkeley), contains the X. borealis cytoskeletal actin promoter and the SV40polyadenylation signal (Cross et al., 1988; Smith and Harland, 1991). The vimentin-tag and desmin-tag sequences were also subcloned into the mammalian expression vector pSRS (Takebe et al., 1988).

**Construction of Head/Body Chimeras**

Oligonucleotide primers were designed to generate "stemless" fusions between the desmin head and vimentin-rod/tail (DVV) and the vimentin head and desmin-rod/tail (VDD) (Fig. 1 C). The upstream primer used to amplify the desmin head added an Nde I site (5’ CCCCATATGGCCATGTCCTATCTCAAG3') to the 5’ end of the coding sequence while the downstream primer added Xho I (donor underline) and Xba I (solid underline) sites (5’ CCTCTGAAGAGCAATCTGCTCCATGTC 3’). The vimentin body was amplified using an upstream primer which added Nde I (solid underline) and Sal I (donor underline) sites (5’ CCCCATAGTGCTCAGCTCCTGCGAGTGCC 3’) and a downstream primer that added an Xba I site (5’ CCTCTGACCTCGAAGATCTGCGG 3’) while adding the Sal I (underlined) site to the vimentin head (5’ CCTCTGACCAAGATCTGCGG 3’). The final products were sequenced to confirm the junction between the two regions. In the original construction of the vimentin head, desmin body chimera a single amino acid was changed from Asp to Glu. To construct VDD we used a similar strategy but placed the Xho I (underlined) site on the desmin body (5’ CCCCATATGGCTCAAGCTCCTGCGAGTGCAAGATCTGCGG 3’) while adding the Sal I (underlined) site to the vimentin head (5’ CCTCTGACCAAGATCTGCGG 3’). PCR products were subcloned independently into a Xho I free version of pSRS.tag and Sal I free version of pCsk::Act.

**DNA Injection into Embryos**

To synthesize proteins in cultured cells, supercoiled plasmid DNA was injected into nuclei of either human SW13 clone 2 cells (Sarria et al., 1990) or Xenopus A6 cells (obtained from Amer. Type Culture Collection, Rockville, MD) using a simple manual pressure-driven injection system (Klymkowsky, 1981). SW13 clone 2 cells were cultured in 10% FCS, 50 μg/ml gentamycin in minimal Eagle’s medium; A6 cells were cultured in Leibowit L-15 media supplemented with 10% FCS and gentamycin at 16°C. Injected cells were fixed 2–20 h after injection with 100% methanol and stained with the 9E10 antibody (5–10 ng/ml) (Dent et al., 1992). The linearized DNA was isolated from a 1% agarose gel, purified using glass beads (Vogelstein and Gillespie, 1979) and eluted in water; it was injected at a concentration of ~50 μg/ml. Each egg received ~10 nl of DNA solution. In this study, injected embryos were harvested for whole-mount immunocytochemistry at stage 38. Myocytes were identified based on their distinctive morphology and position within the embryo.

**Whole-mount Immunocytochemistry**

To visualize the distribution of exogenous proteins, plasmid DNA-injected embryos were fixed, bleached, and stained in whole-mount (Dent et al., 1989; Klymkowsky and Hanken, 1991) using the 9E10 antibody (5–10 μg/ml). Bound antibody was visualized by staining with either horseradish peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-mouse immunoglobulin antibody (anti-MlgG) (Sigma Chem. Co., St. Louis, MO) to visualize the exogenous proteins. The 9E10 hybridoma line can be obtained from the American Type Culture Collection.
Light and Electron Microscopic Section Analyses

For immunoelectron microscopy embryos were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde, 0.1% glutaraldehyde, 10 mM MgCl₂, 10 mM CaCl₂ 150 mM sodium cacodylate (pH 7.4) overnight at 4°C. They were then rinsed for 30 min in 150 mM glycine, 150 mM sodium cacodylate (pH 7.4) at room temperature, and then dehydrated in an ethanol series. Dehydrated embryos were infiltrated with LR White resin (20% resin for 1 h; 50% resin for 2 h; 66% resin for 4 h; and then 100% resin overnight at 4°C). The next day the resin was replaced and the embryos were rocked at room temperature for 6 h; again the resin was replaced and the embryos were transferred to gelatin capsules and placed in a vacuum oven for 36 h at 58°C. After polymerization blocks were trimmed and sections were cut on a dry glass knife; the 2.5 μm thick sections were transferred to a drop of water on a polylysine-coated coverslip warmed to 48°C. Dried sections were then stained with 10 nm gold-conjugated anti-mouse antibody (Amersham Corp.) diluted 1:10 in blocking solution (blocking solution: phosphate-buffered saline containing 0.8% BSA, 0.02% Tween-80 and 0.1% fish gelatin [Amersham Corp., Arlington Heights, IL]). Sections were mounted and examined; those sections that contained 9E10-stained cells were photographed and transferred to coverslips then imbedded in Epon blocks using cyanoacrylate-based glue. Blocks were trimmed and sectioned; the 70-80 nm thin sections were placed on formvar-coated nickel slot grids. For immunogold staining, grids were placed in blocking solution for 15 min to reduce nonspecific antibody binding, and then in 2 μg/ml 9E10 antibody in blocking solution. Grids were rinsed briefly in blocking solution, and then incubated with 10 nm gold-conjugated anti-mouse antibody (Amersham Corp.) diluted 1:10 in blocking solution. All incubation were carried out in a humid chamber at room temperature for 1 h. After rinsing in PBS grids were fixed in 1% glutaraldehyde in PBS, rinsed in distilled water and counter stained with heavy metals; 2% uranyl acetate for 8 min followed by Reynold's lead citrate for 3 min.

Results

In X. laevis vimentin is not normally present in the cells of the dorsal myotome. To determine whether exogenous vimentin behaves like the intersomite junction/plasma membrane-associated endogenous desmin system (Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994), or more like the longitudinal vimentin filaments characteristic of other myogenic systems (Bennett et al., 1989). The sequence of the head/rod junctions of junctions of DVV and VDD are shown here. Junctions are "seam-less" in that no amino acids have been introduced or deleted from either parent molecule.
et al., 1979; Granger and Lazarides, 1979; Gard and Lazarides, 1980; Holtzer et al., 1982), we subcloned the X. laevis vimentin-1 and desmin coding sequences into the Xenopus expression vector pCskAct or the mammalian cell expression vector pSRα (Fig. 1 b). To distinguish the exogenous proteins from the endogenous forms both vimentin-1 and desmin coding sequences were modified to place an epitope-tag at the COOH terminus of the encoded protein (Fig. 1 a). The tagging sequence, derived from the human c-myc protein, is recognized by the monoclonal antibody 9E10 and appears to have little if any effect on the ability of tagged IF proteins to form filaments in vivo (Christian et al., 1990; Gill et al., 1990; Wong and Cleveland, 1990; Dent et al., 1992; Bachant, 1993).

In our experiments, supercoiled pSRα DNA was injected into the nucleus of cultured cells; this led to the appearance of encoded polypeptide in a high percentage of the cells within 1–4 h of injection. Linearized pCskAct DNA was injected into fertilized Xenopus eggs; this leads to the expression of the encoded protein in a wide-range of cell types in the later stage embryo (Vice et al., 1991). In embryonic cells, the level to which exogenous polypeptides accumulate can vary dramatically. The reason(s) for these differences are unclear. It is relatively straightforward, however, to quantify the level of accumulated protein (low, moderate, or high) because each of the proteins used in this study carried the same epitope at the same position in the polypeptide (Fig. 1 a). Since all polypeptides were visualized using the same primary and secondary antibodies, the expression levels could be compared between cells and embryos by keeping laser power, photomultiplier tube voltage, and dark level settings constant; similarly, for peroxidase-stained whole-mounds, the time of the DAB-reaction was also kept constant.

We first examined the ability of the myc-tagged forms of vimentin-1 and desmin to form filament networks in both the IF-minus human cell line SW13 clone 2 (Sarria et al., 1990, 1992) and in embryonic epithelial cells (Fig. 2, c and d), which express only keratin-type IF proteins (Dent et al., 1989; Herrmann et al. 1989a,b). In both cases, the myc-tagged vimentin and desmin proteins formed IF networks. There is a difference, however, between the quality of these networks in the two systems. In SW13 clone 2 cells both proteins formed fine, discrete filament networks (Fig. 2, a and b), whereas in embryonic epithelial cells (Fig. 2, c and d) large filament cables were formed. This difference could reflect temperature effects (Herrmann et al., 1993), since Xenopus embryos are maintained at 16°C whereas SW13 cells are maintained at 37°C. Alternatively, cellular factors could be influencing IF organization (see Dent et al., 1992).

**Behavior of Exogenous Vimentin and Desmin in the Myotome**

In myotomal myocytes of the stage 38–40 tadpole endogenous desmin forms a sparse, reticular meshwork that is associated with the sarcolemma and the newly forming Z-discs (Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994). Some myocytes also display desmin aggregates (Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994). The be-
Figure 3. Behavior of exogenous desmin and vimentin-1 in muscle. Fertilized eggs were injected with linear pCskAct.desmin.tag or pCskAct.vimentin-1.tag DNA and fixed at stage 38/40. Embryos were stained in whole-mount using 9E10 and fluorescein-conjugated secondary antibody. At moderate levels of accumulation the exogenous desmin associated with the sarcolemma (curved arrow in a), Z-lines and formed both a fine filament meshwork (small arrow) and non-filamentous aggregates (large arrow). The aggregates are a prominent component of the sarcoplasm in cells accumulating higher levels of the protein (straight arrow, b); meshwork, sarcolemmal, and Z-line staining are also present in such cells but fall out of the plane optical section shown. At low levels of desmin accumulation the protein is associated with Z-lines (curved arrows, b) and the sarcolemma (not shown). Myocytes accumulating moderate levels of exogenous vimentin contain longitudinal filaments and filament bundles (arrows in c) containing the exogenous protein. At higher levels of accumulation the exogenous vimentin forms massive inclusions that often occupy large portions of the sarcoplasm (d). To visualize the overall morphology of cells, embryos were stained in whole-mount with 9E10 and peroxidase-conjugated secondary. Myocytes accumulating low to moderate levels of exogenous desmin (e) or vimentin (not shown) had a normal rectangular morphology. Accumulation of high levels of exogenous desmin was commonly associated with a crumpled or wrinkled appearance (f). High level accumulation of exogenous vimentin-1 appears to distort cell shape (g and h). Bar in a marks 10 μm for a-d. Bar in e marks 30 μm for e-h.

Effects of Overexpressing Exogenous Proteins on the Myocyte

Comparing the signals from whole-mount in situ hybridization analysis of endogenous desmin to those of exogenous desmin and vimentin, it is clear that the level of expression of the exogenous DNA can be many times greater than that of the endogenous gene (data not shown). In myocytes accumulating such high levels of exogenous vimentin or desmin, the normal roughly rectangular morphology of the myocytes was severely effected (Fig. 3, f-h). Cells expressing high levels of vimentin-1 commonly appeared spindle (Fig. 3 g) or club shaped (Fig. 3 h) while cells accumulating large amounts of exogenous desmin appeared wrinkled (Fig. 3 f) and sometimes detached from the intersomite junction (myo-
Figure 4. The longitudinal system formed by vimentin and VDD. Myocytes expressing exogenous vimentin (a) or VDD (b–d) were stained in whole-mount using 9E10 and fluorescein-conjugated secondary antibody and examined using confocal microscopy. (a) A longitudinal filament system (marked by white arrows) is present in this cell, which has accumulated a moderate level of exogenous vimentin. In this same cell are dense accumulations of vimentin (black on white arrows). In a neighboring cell expressing exogenous vimentin at low level (marked by curved, open arrow), the vimentin is associated exclusively with Z-lines. (b) At low power, a cell expressing moderate levels of VDD protein shows a longitudinal filament system associated with the ends of the myocyte. c and d show the two ends of this cell at higher magnification. Longitudinal filaments are pointed out by white arrows. Bar in a marks 5 μm for a, c, and d; Bar in b marks 10 μm.

septum) (not shown). In cells expressing lower levels of exogenous vimentin or desmin, cellular morphology appeared normal (Fig. 3 e).

**Why Do Vimentin and Desmin Behave Differently?**

Sequence comparison indicates that the *X. laevis* vimentin-1 and desmin proteins differ primarily in their NH2-terminal head domains (Fig. 6). To test whether the difference in the behavior of vimentin and desmin was due to differences in their head domains, we constructed plasmids encoding chimeric proteins in which the head of one protein was fused to the body (rod and tail) of the other in a “seam-less” manner, i.e., without the deletion or addition of amino acids (Fig. 1 C). We chose the site of the junction to be the first highly conserved amino acid of the rod domain, Asp78 (in both proteins). The vimentin head/desmin rod and tail construct is referred to as VDD, similarly the complementary chimera composed of the desmin head/vimentin rod and tail domains is referred to as DVV. The coding regions of the chimeric proteins were subcloned into pSK.tag to add the c-myc based tagging sequence, and then subcloned into the pCskAct plasmid for expression in *Xenopus* embryos and cultured cells (Fig. 1, B and C).

In A6 cells both DVV and VDD proteins accumulated and incorporated into the endogenous vimentin filament system without apparent effects on vimentin filament organization (data not shown). When synthesized in embryonic epithelia cells, however, the two chimeric proteins behaved very differently. In epithelia cells expressing DVV, the protein formed discrete filament networks in the majority of cells examined (Fig. 7 a). VDD, on the other hand, formed few discernible filaments. The majority of the exogenous VDD protein was confined to large inclusions (Fig. 7 b). In stage 38 embryonic myocytes DVV formed a subsarcolemmal system, filament meshworks and cytoplasmic aggregates (Fig. 7, c and d), indistinguishable from those formed by exoge-
nous desmin (see above – Fig. 3, a and b). In contrast, VDD’s behavior in myocytes was identical to that of exogenous vimentin-1. Myocytes synthesizing VDD contained longitudinal filaments (Figs. 4, b–d and 7 e) and large inclusions (Fig. 7 f). Ultrastructural examination of VDD and DVV-containing myocytes revealed that the DVV aggregates (Fig. 8 a) were similar to the non-filamentous aggregates seen in cells expressing exogenous desmin (Fig. 5 b), whereas the VDD inclusions were composed of discrete 10-nm filaments (Fig. 8 b), identical to the filaments seen in vimentin-expressing myocytes (Fig. 5 d). Based on these observations it seems that the head domains of vimentin and desmin are not interchangeable and that it is these head domains that largely determine the organizational behavior of the proteins in vivo. The behavior of the chimeras also indicates that the tagging epitope does not significantly influence the differential behavior of vimentin and desmin.

Discussion

Skeletal muscle development presents a dramatic example of IF network reorganization. In mammalian and avian muscle, myoblasts contain vimentin-type IFs. These myoblasts fuse with one another to form the syncytial myotube. Upon syn-
thesis, desmin integrates into the myotube's preexisting vimentin filament system. Vimentin therefore acts as a scaffold for the organization of desmin during the early phase of myogenesis. As myogenesis progresses, the initially longitudinal array of vimentin/desmin filaments is transformed into a transverse system that associates with the sarcolemma and the Z-discs of myofibrils. Concurrent with this change in IF organization there is a change in the composition of the IF system from a vimentin-dominated network to a system composed predominantly of desmin. Other changes to the cell's IF system also occur during this period, e.g., the intermediate filament-associated protein IFAPa-400 disappears and K, D and E; S, T, and Y; S and A; Y and F; V, I, L, A, and M; and N and Q. Spaces introduced into the sequence for the purpose of alignment are indicated by a "-". Amino acid 78, the site at which head and body domains are swapped in the chimera proteins, is indicated.

One could argue that the difference in IF organization in Xenopus myotomal muscle, compared to that seen in other myogenic systems, was due to Xenopus-specific factors. To examine this possibility, we forced the ectopic expression of vimentin in cells of the developing myotome. Although it is difficult to precisely quantify the level of exogenous protein in each cell, it is possible to accurately distinguish between cells expressing low, medium, and high levels of the exogenous proteins. There does not appear to be any significant difference in the levels to which exogenous vimentin, desmin, DVV, or VDD polypeptides accumulate within myotomal myocytes. Cells containing low, medium, or high levels of exogenous polypeptide were found for all four constructs. Because all four constructs are tagged in the same manner and recognized using the same antibodies, it appears likely that their levels of accumulation in myotomal myocytes are similar.

At low levels of accumulation both exogenous desmin and vimentin integrated into the endogenous desmin system (Figs. 3 b and 4 a). At moderate levels of expression, exogenous vimentin was found to form longitudinal filaments in myotomal myocytes (Figs. 3 c and 4 a); these longitudinal filaments are quite different from the filaments formed by the endogenous desmin system (Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994) or by exogenous desmin (Fig. 3, a and b). At higher levels exogenous vimentin formed large inclusions (Figs. 3 d, 4 a, and 5 c), which electron microscopy revealed to be composed of IFs (Fig. 5 d). The level of vimentin accumulation can be very high, and the cell can become essentially packed full of vimentin filaments (Fig. 5 c). Exogenous desmin, in contrast, behaved very much like endogenous desmin, i.e., it was associated primarily with the sarcolemma and formed a fine cytoplasmic meshwork (Fig. 3 a). At moderate and
Figure 7. Chimeras in embryonic epithelia and myocytes. Fertilized eggs were injected with linear pCskAct.DVV or pCskAct.VDD DNA, fixed at stage 38/40 and stained in whole-mount with 9El10 and fluorescein-conjugated secondary antibody. Embryonic epithelial cells accumulating DVV formed discrete IF networks (a) whereas VDD (b) formed large densely staining inclusion bodies. At moderate levels in myotomal myocytes, DVV formed fine filament meshworks (curved arrow in c), aggregates (**) and associated with the sarcolemma (arrows) and Z-lines (c). At higher levels of accumulation the distribution of DVV was much the same though aggregates were somewhat more prominent (arrows in d). At moderate levels of accumulation VDD formed longitudinal filaments (arrow in e) and associated with the Z-lines. At high accumulation levels VDD formed large inclusion bodies (arrow in f). Bar in a marks 10 μm for a-f.

high levels of accumulation, cells also contained discrete aggregates (Fig. 3 b). These aggregates were not unlike those formed by endogenous desmin in some late stage tadpole myocytes (see Cary and Klymkowsky, 1994). Immunoelectron microscopy reveals that these aggregates are composed largely of desmin in a non-filamentous form (Fig. 5, a and b).

The NH$_2$-terminal Head Domains Determine Vimentin/Desmin Behavior

The amino acid sequence of vimentin and desmin differ most dramatically in the NH$_2$-terminal head region (Fig. 6). To determine whether these differences in sequence produced the differences in vimentin and desmin organization seen in both epithelial and muscle cells, we took the head of one protein and fused it to the body of the other. These are seam-less fusions with no added to altered amino acids; moreover the “cross-over” point was selected to be in a region of high homology (Figs. 1 c and 6). The behaviors of the two chimeric proteins were examined in epithelia and muscle. In embryonic epithelial cells, DVV formed a network of dis-
Ultrastructural analysis of myocytes expressing chimeric proteins. Electron microscopic analysis of myocytes expressing moderate to high levels of DVV reveals the presence of 9E10-reactive aggregates composed of granular, non-filamentous material (a). VDD, on the other hand, forms inclusion bodies composed of densely packed IFs (b). Bar in a marks 100 nm in a and b.

Figure 8. Ultrastructural analysis of myocytes expressing chimeric proteins. Electron microscopic analysis of myocytes expressing moderate to high levels of DVV reveals the presence of 9E10-reactive aggregates composed of granular, non-filamentous material (a). VDD, on the other hand, forms inclusion bodies composed of densely packed IFs (b). Bar in a marks 100 nm in a and b.

crete filaments (Fig. 7, a), while VDD formed large aggregates that appeared, at the light microscopic level, identical to the aggregates of exogenous vimentin seen in myocytes (compare Figs. 3 d–7 b). In muscle, the chimeric proteins behaved like the protein from which their head domains were derived. DVV expressing myocytes formed reticular filament meshworks and discrete, punctate aggregates similar to those observed for endogenous and exogenous desmin (Fig. 7, c and d). VDD, on the other hand, formed longitudinal IF arrays and massive inclusions like those seen in vimentin-expressing myocytes (Figs. 4, b and c and 7, e and f). The similarity of DVV to endogenous and exogenous desmin and the similarity of VDD to exogenous vimentin extended to the ultrastructural level: DVV formed aggregates composed of finer structures, perhaps protofilaments (Fig. 8 a) whereas VDD formed massive bundles of 10-nm filaments (Fig. 8 b). These results point to the head domains as the primary determinant of vimentin/desmin behavior in muscle. In addition, it is clear from the differential organization of VDD and DVV in embryonic epithelial cells (Fig. 7, a and b), that the two head domains are not structurally equivalent.

The behavior of the chimeric proteins is also significant in terms of ruling out possible effects of the tagging epitope on the differential behavior of the exogenous vimentin and desmin proteins. In VDD, the tail-tagging region is identical to that in the epitope tagged desmin (Fig. 1), yet the polypeptide behaves like vimentin. Similarly, in DVV the tail-tagging region is identical to that of epitope-tagged vimentin, yet the polypeptide behaves like desmin. Moreover, both tagged vimentin and desmin are capable of de novo IF assembly in both IF-free mammalian cells (Fig. 2, a and b) and embryonic epithelia (Fig. 2, c and d), which contain only a keratin-type IF system.

The conclusion of our studies is that vimentin and desmin clearly differ in the types of structures they form in both muscle and non-muscle cells and that these differences are due primarily to the sequence of the NH2-terminal head domain. Exactly what these differences are, however, is not clear. Considering the observation that the neurofilament protein NFL, which can be assembled into 10-nm filaments in vitro fails to form extended IF networks by itself in vivo (Ching and Liem, 1993; Lee et al., 1993), it is clear that the simple fact that purified desmin can be assembled into 10-nm filaments in vitro does not imply that it will be able to assemble into IFs under various in vivo conditions. We have previously found evidence that the head domain of vimentin interacts with factors in the animal hemisphere of the Xenopus oocyte that influence the ability of vimentin to form extended filaments (Dent et al., 1992). It is possible that the head domains of vimentin and desmin differ in their ability to interact with cytoplasmic factors present in embryonic epithelia and muscle and that these interactions modify the type of IF networks they form. It is also known that phosphorylation can play a role in determining the assembly properties of IF proteins, including desmin (see Geisler and Weber, 1988). The majority of vimentin's and desmin's phosphorylated residues occur in the head domain (Evans, 1988; Geisler and Weber, 1988; Geisler et al., 1989; Christian et al., 1990; Dent et al., 1992) and it is possible that differences in the head domains of vimentin and desmin lead to differences in the pattern of phosphorylation. In the myocyte, phosphorylation could affect desmin's ability to form extended filaments, alternatively the modified desmin might require a host cell factor to assemble filaments. Once the level of desmin accumulates above some threshold, the factor required for IF formation may become limiting, leading to the formation of desmin aggregates rather than filaments.
**Defects in Muscle Structure Due to Overexpression of IF Proteins**

The defects in muscle structure induced by the overexpression of desmin and the ectopic expression of vimentin are not unexpected given the work of Dunia et al. (1990). They found that ectopically expressed hamster desmin in the mouse lens induced defects in membrane and cellular structure (see also Capetanaki et al., 1989). We see distinct morphological abnormalities associated with the overexpression of desmin and with the ectopic expression of vimentin. Desmin overexpression often results in a wrinkling of the cell. The wrinkled appearance may be indicative of membrane defects resulting from the overaccumulation of desmin in the subsarcolemmal region. This defect may also be a by-product of aberrant mechanical coupling of the myofibrils to the sarclemma. In any case, the defect is distinct from that observed in cells accumulating large amounts of exogenous vimentin. These cells typically display a swelling that corresponds to the morphology and location of the vimentin inclusion. Commonly, vimentin inclusion bodies localized to the central region of the cell appear to produce spindle-shaped myocytes, whereas inclusions localized to one end of the cell produce “club”-shaped myocytes. It seems likely that the presence of large vimentin inclusions physically distorts the cell. High levels of vimentin or desmin accumulation can lead to the detachment of the myocyte from the intersomite junction or myoseptum.

**A Prediction Concerning Myopathies**

Although the levels of exogenous proteins generated in these studies are not likely to reflect common pathological conditions, one potentially important observation does arise from this work. A number of myopathies and cardiomyopathies have been characterized by the presence of IF inclusions (Sakakibara et al., 1970; Shafig et al., 1974; Edstrom et al., 1980; Porte et al., 1980; Fidzianska et al., 1983; Pellissier et al., 1989; Sarnat, 1990, 1991, 1992; Halbig et al., 1991; Teleman et al., 1991; D’Amati et al., 1992; for review see Goebel and Bornemann, 1993). Ultrastructural analysis of these inclusions reveals a range of appearances from granular to filamentous. Unfortunately, reports that examine both the ultrastructure and the composition of such inclusions (i.e., whether they contain desmin, vimentin, or both proteins) are scarce. Although vimentin is not normally present in adult skeletal or cardiac muscle, vimentin has been found in a number of myopathies (Sarnat, 1991, 1992). Based on the differential behavior of vimentin and desmin in the Xenopus myotome, we predict that myopathies characterized by the overexpression of these proteins will lead to distinct defects in the muscle cell.

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**References**


Fidzianska, A., H. H. Goebel, M. Osborn, H. G. Lenard, G. Osse, and U. Langenbeck. 1983. Mallory body-like inclusions in a hereditary congenital neuropathy with characteristic sarcoplasmic bodies and intermediate filaments in the absence of vimentin, would result in nonfilamentous inclusions, similar to those seen when exogenous desmin is synthesized in Xenopus muscle (Fig. 5, a and b). Given the distinctive differences in the cellular morphologies of myocytes overexpressing vimentin or desmin (Fig. 3, f and g) it seems likely that the overexpression of these proteins will lead to distinct defects in the muscle cell.