The BPAG1 locus: alternative splicing produces multiple isoforms with distinct cytoskeletal linker domains, including predominant isoforms in neurons and muscles

Conrad L. Leung,1 Min Zheng,1 Susan M. Prater,1 and Ronald K.H. Liem1,2

1Department of Pathology, and 2Department of Anatomy Cell Biology, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, NY 10032

Bullous pemphigoid antigen 1 (BPAG1)* is a member of the plakin family with cytoskeletal linker properties. Mutations in BPAG1 cause sensory neuron degeneration and skin fragility in mice. We have analyzed the BPAG1 locus in detail and found that it encodes different interaction domains that are combined in tissue-specific manners. These domains include an actin-binding domain (ABD), a plakin domain, a coiled coil (CC) rod domain, two different potential intermediate filament–binding domains (IFBDs), a spectrin repeat (SR)-containing rod domain, and a microtubule-binding domain (MTBD). There are at least three major forms of BPAG1: BPAG1-e (302 kD), BPAG1-a (615 kD), and BPAG1-b (834 kD). BPAG1-e has been described previously and consists of the plakin domain, the CC rod domain, and the first IFBD. It is the primary epidermal BPAG1 isoform, and its absence that is the likely cause of skin fragility in mutant mice. BPAG1-a is the major isoform in the nervous system and a homologue of the microtubule actin cross-linking factor, MACF. BPAG1-a is composed of the ABD, the plakin domain, the SR-containing rod domain, and the MTBD. The absence of BPAG1-a is the likely cause of sensory neurodegeneration in mutant mice. BPAG1-b is highly expressed in muscles, and has extra exons encoding a second IFBD between the plakin and SR-containing rod domains of BPAG1-a.

Introduction
Bullous pemphigoid antigen 1 (BPAG1)* is a member of the plakin family with cytoskeletal linker properties (Ruhrberg and Watt, 1997). The epidermal isoform of BPAG1 (BPAG1-e) is made up of a coiled coil (CC) rod domain flanked by globular NH2-terminal head and COOH-terminal tail domains. The NH2-terminal head domain is homologous to that of other plakin family members and is called the plakin domain. The COOH terminus consists of two homologous repeats and has been proposed to be an intermediate filament (IF)-binding domain (IFBD). BPAG1-e links hemidesmosomes to keratin filaments. Interestingly, mutations of the BPAG1 gene result in sensory neuron degeneration in the mutant mouse, dystonia musculorum (dt) (Brown et al., 1995). Three neuronal isoforms of BPAG1 (BPAG1-n or dystonin) with different NH2-terminal sequences have been reported (Brown et al., 1995; Guo et al., 1995; Yang et al., 1999). These neuronal isoforms consist of an actin-binding domain (ABD) that is made up of one or two calponin homology subdomains, a plakin domain, a CC rod domain, and an IFBD. The IFBD can interact with neuronal IFs (Yang et al., 1996; Leung et al., 1999a).

Microtubule (MT) actin cross-linking factor (MACF) is a divergent member of the plakin family (Leung et al., 1999b). At its NH2 terminus, MACF exhibits high homology to the NH2 terminus of BPAG1-n, including the ABD and the...
plakin domain. However, MACF does not contain a CC rod domain or an IFBD. Instead, MACF bears a 23 spectrin repeat (SR)-containing rod domain and a novel COOH-terminal MT-binding domain (MTBD). Recently, we characterized the COOH-terminal portion of a protein (MACF2) that is highly homologous to the MTBD of MACF (Sun et al., 2001). In this report, we describe a detailed characterization of the BPAG1 locus and the alternatively spliced isoforms of BPAG1 in mice. We found that MACF2 is structurally similar to MACF, and that it is an alternatively spliced form of the BPAG1 gene; hence, we renamed it BPAG1-a. BPAG1-a appears to be the predominant form of BPAG1 expressed in the nervous system. In striated muscle we discovered another BPAG1 isoform that possesses a putative novel IFBD in the center of the molecule, and we named this isoform BPAG1-b.

**Results and discussion**

**Molecular cloning of BPAG1 isoforms**

We cloned cDNAs of MACF2 by nested PCR. By sequentially performing PCR on a mouse brain cDNA library with primers specific for four EST clones (GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ accession no. AI526522, AA668029, AA765549, and AI058268) and for the end sequences of the previously amplified PCR products, we obtained three consecutively overlapping cDNAs that spanned ~9.7 kb of the 3’ coding region of mouse MACF2. The 5’ portion of this composite MACF2 cDNA displayed significant sequence homology to a human genomic bacterial artificial chromosome clone, RP1-61B2 (GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ accession no. AL096710). This bacterial artificial chromosome clone was arbitrarily divided into three segments: the first segment in-
polyadenylation signal, the proximity of the predicted exon of BPAG1 contained an in-frame stop codon and a downstream of the "last" exon of mouse BPAG1, and ~3 kb upstream of a predicted exon of MACF2. Although the last exon of BPAG1 contained an in-frame stop codon and a polyadenylation signal, the proximity of the predicted ~5-kb ORF-containing exon and the lack of an in-frame translation start codon common to humans and mice indicated that MACF2 was an alternatively spliced product of the BPAG1 gene. To dissect the potential alternatively spliced transcripts we performed Northern blots with probes against different domains of BPAG1 and MACF2 (described in a later section). We found that MACF2 was an alternatively spliced isoform of BPAG1, hence, we renamed it BPAG1-a. Using these Northern blot results we performed PCR on cDNAs prepared from appropriate tissues and identified three major transcripts of BPAG1: BPAG1-e, BPAG1-a, and BPAG1-b (Fig. 1 B).

Sequence analysis of BPAG1 isoforms

The composite BPAG1-a cDNA is ~17.2 kb (GenBank/EMBL/DDBJ accession no. AF396878) and encodes a 615-kD protein (Fig. S1 A). The domain structure of BPAG1-a is similar to that of MACF (Fig. 1 B). The ABD and plakin domains of BPAG1-a are identical to those reported for BPAG1-n (Yang et al., 1996). However, the rod domain of BPAG1-a is made up of 23 SRs (Fig. 1 B). BPAG1-a contains two EF-hand motifs and an MTBD at its COOH-terminus (Sun et al., 2001). The primary sequences of MACF and BPAG1-a share a 52% identity and a 70% homology, suggesting that they originated from the same ancestral gene.

In contrast to MACF (Fig. 1 B), we obtained signals only from the skin, indicating that BPAG1-n could not be detected in the brain and the heart by RPA. In contrast, the IFBD2 riboprobe detected high levels of BPAG1-b mRNAs in the heart and low levels in the brain. The SR rod domain riboprobe, which does not distinguish BPAG1-a from BPAG1-b, detected strong signals from the brain and the heart, and a weak signal from the skin. The major structural differences between BPAG1-a, BPAG1-b, and BPAG1-e (or BPAG1-n) are in the regions following the plakin domain: BPAG1-a contains the SR rod domain, BPAG1-b contains IFBD2, and BPAG1-e (and BPAG1-n) contains the CC rod domain (Fig. 1 B). We used three sets of PCR primers to distinguish these isoforms. The forward primers were designed against the plakin domain,
and the reverse primers were specific for the SR rod domain, IFBD2, and CC rod domain (Fig. 3 A). All PCR products, including the β-actin control, were ~500 bp in length. As shown in Fig. 3 D, BPAG1-a was the most abundant isoform in the brain, although BPAG1-b was also present. In contrast, the heart contained higher amounts of BPAG1-b than BPAG1-a. In the heart and brain, no BPAG1-n (or BPAG1-e) mRNA was detected under these PCR conditions. High levels of BPAG1-e mRNA were found in the skin, where BPAG1-a and BPAG1-b mRNAs were also present in lower amounts. In an attempt to detect trace amounts of BPAG1-n mRNA in the brain, we performed 35 cycles of PCR using the BPAG1-e/n primer set and obtained a weak signal (unpublished data), implying that small amounts of BPAG1-n (or BPAG1-e) are present in the brain.

To extend our studies on the distribution of BPAG1 isoforms during development, we used probes corresponding to various domains of BPAG1 for in situ hybridization analysis on mouse embryonic day E14.5 embryos. The hybridization patterns of probes against the CC rod domain and IFBD1 were identical, as both labeled the epidermis and mucosal epithelia along the digestive tract (Fig. 4 A and unpublished data). These probes gave no signal in the nervous system, confirming that the BPAG1-n isoforms were not expressed in detectable quantities. The IFBD2 probe specifically labeled BPAG1-b mRNA in myocardium, skeletal muscle masses, vertebrae cartilage, and epithelia of the tongue (Fig. 4 B). More ubiquitous labeling patterns were observed with probes prepared for the ABD, plakin domain, SR-containing rod domain, and MTBD that would label BPAG1-a and BPAG1-b (Fig. 4 C and unpublished data). Strong signals were found with these probes in nervous tissues, especially at the pituitary primordium, the cranial ganglia, and the dorsal root ganglia (DRG). To determine the major form of BPAG1 expressed in the DRG, we hybridized a series of adjacent transverse sections with probes against various domains. Hybridization signals were obtained only with probes against the ABD, plakin domain, SR-containing rod domain, and MTBD, but not with the CC rod domain, IFBD1, and IFBD2 probes. These results demonstrated that BPAG1-e, BPAG1-n, and BPAG1-b are not expressed in high quantities in the DRG, and that the major form there is BPAG1-a (Fig. 4, D–F, and unpublished data).

We also compared the tissue distributions of MACF and BPAG1-a by in situ hybridization. Adjacent transverse sec-
tions of E14.5 embryos were hybridized with the MTBD probes from MACF and BPAG1-a (note that this BPAG1-a probe will not distinguish between BPAG1-a and BPAG1-b). The expression of BPAG1-a in the spinal cord was in a gradient with higher levels in the ventral horn, as compared with the homogenous expression pattern of MACF (Fig. 5, A and B). Of note is the observation that BPAG1-a was expressed in much higher quantities than MACF in the DRG. In the vertebrae, BPAG1-a and/or BPAG1-b mRNAs were detected in developing bone cartilage, whereas MACF expression appeared to be more confined in the surrounding mesenchymal tissues (Fig. 5, C and D). Inside the thoracic cage, higher expression levels of BPAG1-b were detected in the heart, whereas MACF was more dominant in the lung.

Putative functions of BPAG1 isoforms

BPAG1-a is the primary isoform of BPAG1 expressed in the nervous system, including the DRGs that are severely degenerated in dt mice. The dt DRG sensory neurons display abnormal accumulations of neuronal IFs and perturbed MTs (Dalpe et al., 1998; Yang et al., 1999). The disruption of the cytoskeleton network in these defective sensory neurons cannot be rescued by the removal of neurofilaments, suggesting that axonal swellings packed with neurofilaments are the result instead of the cause of the sensory neuron degeneration in dt mice (Yang et al., 1999). As BPAG1-a possesses a well-defined MTBD and is the predominant form of BPAG1 expressed in the nervous system, it is likely that the disorganization of the MT network in dt neurons is due to the absence of BPAG1-a.

Like MACF, BPAG1-a is a mammalian homologue of the Drosophila protein kakapo/short stop. Mutations in the short stop/kakapo gene result in defects in axonal outgrowth, as well as in the local development of dendritic processes (Prokop et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2000). During early development, the growth cones of both sensory and motor neurons fail to continue advancing after formation of the normal trajectory. By analogy, the neuropathology of dt mice could be the result of defects in axonal outgrowth and/or dendritic sprouting in sensory neurons. However, even
though BPAG1-a is expressed broadly in the nervous system, only sensory neurons of the DRG degenerated in the dt mice. A possible explanation is that MACF can carry out the same functions as BPAG1-a. As DRG neurons express less MACF, there is less compensation from MACF for the loss of BPAG1-a, thus resulting in degeneration.

BPAG1-b is structurally similar to BPAG1-a, except that it has an additional putative IFBD in the middle of the molecule. Hence, BPAG1-b could potentially associate with microfilaments, IFs, and MTs; however, this remains to be shown. BPAG1-b is more confined to muscles, and its absence may be responsible for the muscle weakness observed in dt mice (Dalpe et al., 1999). The transcripts for the epitelial-specific BPAG1-e can be detected in the epidermis and mucosal epithelia of the digestive tracts (Fig. 4 A). BPAG1-e anchors keratin filaments to hemidesmosomes and the skin of BPAG1-null mice is more fragile in its absence (Guo et al., 1995).

We did not detect mRNAs of the proposed BPAG1-n isoforms in the central nervous system by Northern blot analysis, RPA, and in situ hybridization. However, when we performed 35 cycles of RT-PCR, we detected trace amounts of BPAG1 transcripts that have the plakin domain connected to the CC rod domain, presumably the BPAG1-n isoforms. Previously, independent studies have reported that BPAG1-n is widely expressed in the nervous system. However, the probes and antibodies used in these studies recognize not only BPAG1-n, but also BPAG1-a and BPAG1-b (Bernier et al., 1995b; Dowling et al., 1997; Dalpe et al., 1998; Yang et al., 1999). In conclusion, we propose that BPAG1-a is the primary form of BPAG1 expressed in the nervous system, and that its deficiency could account for the neurological phenotype observed in dt mice.

Materials and methods

Molecular cloning

cDNAs of BPAG1-a and BPAG1-b were obtained from QUICK-Clone™ cDNA (CLONTECH Laboratories, Inc.) by PCR using Advantage 2 polymerase (CLONTECH Laboratories, Inc.) or Pfu polymerase (Stratagene). To isolate cDNAs of BPAG1-e, RT-PCR was carried out on purified mouse skin total RNA using OneStep RT-PCR kit (Qiagen). All procedures were conducted according to manufacturers’ protocols. Genomic PCR was performed on purified mouse 129svj genomic DNA using Pfu polymerase (Stratagene). All PCR products were cloned into pCR2.1-TOPO vector (Invitrogen) for sequencing. Mouse 129svJTacBR lambda phage genomic library (Stratagene) was screened with a human cDNA probe that encoded mouse BPAG1 described in this paper, BAG1-a, BAG1-b, and BAG1-e, as described previously (Zhang et al., 1998). Hybridization with sense control probes yielded low background staining in all cases.

Online supplemental material

The primary deduced amino acid sequences of the three major isoforms of mouse BPAG1 described in this paper, BAG1-a, BAG1-b, and BAG1-e, are available online as Fig. S1 at http://www.jcb.org/cgi/content/full/20012098.

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References


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