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Description of a novel subtype of acute myeloid leukemia defined by recurrent CBFB insertions

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Abstract:

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Molecular analysis of pediatric and adult acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is routinely used to identify subtype-defining driver structural variants and mutations which may provide important information for risk stratification. For example, the core-binding factor (CBF) AML subgroup defined by t(8;21) *RUNX1::RUNX1T1* or inv(16)/t(16;16) *CBFB::MYH11* are associated with favorable outcomes^{1,2}. Despite the extensive genomic characterization of pediatric and adult AML, there still remains an important proportion of previously unclassified cases where new driver lesions are still being identified, including those that can influence patient management due to their association with outcomes. This includes the recent identification of tandem duplications in *UBTF* in pediatric AML^{3,4} and structural variants that dysregulate *BCL11B* in lineage ambiguous acute leukemia⁵. Herein we describe an additional new subtype of AML characterized by a recurrent insertion mutation in *CBFB*.

We initially re-analyzed a cohort of 553 pediatric AML transcriptomes from our previous study³ and identified two patients (PARANT:SJAML040573, PARUTH:SJAML040605) with similar gene expression profiles to *CBFB::MYH11* AML but without a *CBFB::MYH11* fusion or other known leukemic driver by conventional testing, and without finding a *CBFB::MYH11* fusion by manual inspection of RNA sequence data (Supplemental Figure 1, Table 1). However, in both of these patients, we identified a somatic nine base-pair insertion in exon 3 of *CBFB* (NM_022845.3). The core-binding factor β (CBF β) protein encoded by *CBFB* forms the non-DNA binding regulatory subunit of a heterodimeric transcription factor complex with a DNA-binding CBF α subunit (RUNX1, RUNX2, or RUNX3). Interestingly, both *CBFB* mutations were predicted to lead to the same amino acid change, substituting aspartic acid at position 87 (D87) for glycine, aspartic acid, serine, and tyrosine [p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr); GDSY] within the N-terminal RUNX-binding domain⁶ (Figure 1A).

Given these findings, we hypothesized that *CBFB* mutations may be recurrent in AML and a defining feature of a novel subtype. Through a combination of published data, clinical sequencing, and screening driver-negative AML cohorts from independent sources (see Supplemental Methods), we identified an additional 16 cases with *CBFB* insertions involving D87, including 15 AML and one B/myeloid mixed phenotype acute leukemia (MPAL), for a total of 18 cases (Table 1). These additional cases also lacked a *CBFB::MYH11* fusion or other known leukemic driver alterations (Supplemental Table 1). *CBFB* mutations were confirmed in both DNA and RNA sequencing when available, or Sanger sequencing, and were confirmed to be somatic in 11 of 11 cases where matched germline data was available (Supplemental Table 1, Supplemental Methods, Supplemental Figure 2). Remarkably, we identified ten different nucleotide insertions at codon 87 in these 18 cases; nine out of ten were predicted to encode for the same in-frame GDSY amino acid change (p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)), with the other nucleotide insertion leading to a GDTY amino acid change (p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspThrTyr)) (Figure 1A). This highly stereotyped change at the protein level (i.e. GDXY) strongly implies a functional relevance.

We next integrated eight of these additional cases into our transcriptome cohort and observed a tight cluster of cases with *CBFB* insertions adjacent to the *CBFB::MYH11* cluster (Figure 1B). Gene set enrichment analysis (GSEA) confirmed broad similarities between AML with *CBFB* insertions and CBF AMLs (Figure 1C, Supplemental Figure 3, Supplemental Table 2). However, *CBFB* insertion

cases showed uniquely high expression of *BCL2L14*, *MEIS1*, and *HOXA* cluster genes, demonstrating a more stem-like signature compared to *CBFB::MYH11* AML.

We also examined the cooperating mutations in ten *CBFB* insertion cases from RNA sequencing data and integrated these findings with mutational information from other studies (Figure 1D, Supplemental Table 1, Supplemental Table 3). Recurrent mutations were detected in *BCORL1* (7/18, 39%), *FLT3* (7/18, 39%), *NRAS* (6/18, 33%), *ETV6* (5/18, 28%), *KDM6A* (4/18, 22%) and *NF1* (2/18 11%). *FLT3* tyrosine kinase domain (TKD) mutations were most common although internal tandem duplications and mutations outside the TKD were also observed. Overall, these mutations are different from the mutational spectrum previously reported for CBF leukemias⁷, most notably the absence of *KIT* mutations and a higher frequency of *FLT3*-TKD and *BCORL1* mutations. Recurrent chromosomal alterations in the *CBFB* insertion group included trisomy 6 and trisomy 22, whereas trisomy 8 was not observed (Figure 1D, Supplemental Table 1). Additionally, the *CBFB* mutation was conserved at both diagnosis and relapse in two cases profiled at both time points (AML075 and 115225). Collectively these data suggest that *CBFB* insertions are a subtype-defining lesion, and we have provisionally termed this group *CBFB*-GDXY.

Like CBF AML, AMLs with *CBFB*-GDXY mutations were observed in both children and adults but were enriched in adolescent and young adult age groups (median age 16.5 years, range 9 - 27). Overall, this mutation in AML cohorts was rare, including 3/188 in the TARGET pediatric AML cohort, 5/1048 in the pediatric AAML1031 cohort and 1/350 in the Clinseq-AML Swedish adult cohort, while more than 2000 cases from multiple large cohorts comprised primarily of adult AMLs did not harbor a *CBFB* insertion (see Supplemental Data for a description of cohorts screened). Additionally, unlike the typical myelomonocytic morphology with abnormal eosinophils (FAB M4 Eo) observed for *CBFB::MYH11* AML, *CBFB*-GDXY AML had less mature morphologies (FAB M0: n=1, FAB M1: n=4, or FAB M2: n=4), consistent with the stem-related expression profiles, where morphologic reports were available. However, an increase in eosinophils was still observed (Figure 1E). Like *RUNX1::RUNX1T1* AML⁸, we noted that *CBFB*-GDXY AML may express *CD19* (Supplemental Figure 4, Supplemental Table 1). Further supporting this observation is the identification of the GDXY insertion in one case of B/myeloid mixed phenotype acute leukemia.

This cohort is small and collected from different sources with varied treatment protocols, precluding a definitive assessment of the impact of this mutation on outcomes. However, 8 out of 17 patients (where data was available) had either relapsed or refractory disease after initial treatment, whereas patients with *RUNX1::RUNX1T1* or *CBFB::MYH11* AMLs commonly have a good outcome and these AMLs are considered favorable risk. To investigate the treatment response in one patient, we designed a *CBFB* mutation-specific ultra-deep NGS assay (see Supplemental Methods) for longitudinal tracking of measurable residual disease (MRD). This 25-year-old patient (SBJ00860) was treated with cytarabine and idarubicin induction (7+3), followed by high-dose cytarabine consolidation. MRD assessment after each cycle of chemotherapy showed detectable but decreasing *CBFB* insertion variant allele frequency, becoming undetectable after the last cycle of therapy and remaining undetectable at nine months of follow-up (Figure 1F).

In summary, we have reported a novel subtype of AML characterized by recurrent in-frame insertion mutations in *CBFB* leading to a GDXY amino acid sequence change at position D87. Molecular characterization demonstrated transcriptional similarity to CBF AML, while also highlighting an enrichment of *FLT3*-TKD mutations, lack of *KIT* mutations, and stemness-related gene expression signature. Recognition of this subtype and further study in clinical trials, as well as investigation of the underlying leukemogenic mechanism of the *CBFB* insertion, will be important to understand the full clinical relevance of this novel entity.

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Contribution:

G.R., M.U., P.B., and J.M.K. conceived of the project; G.R., M.U., L.H., S.L., M.K.H., J.M., M.K., J.E.R., H.J.K., P.G.E., H.G., I.S.T., S.M.G., C.H., R.B.D., T.J.L., S.M., X.M., P.B., and J.M.K. identified cases, and provided genomic data and clinical information; G.R., M.U., J.M., and X.M. analyzed genomic data and collated clinical information; G.R., M.U., P.B., and J.M.K. wrote the first version of the manuscript; all authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Figures

Figure 1. A novel subtype of AML characterized by CBFB-GDXY mutations.

- (A) Graphical representation of *CBFB* exons 1-6 (NM_022845.3) showing the location (arrowhead) and sequence of the 9 bp insertion mutations (highlighted in red) relative to the wild type complementary DNA sequence. The number of patients with each mutation is shown in the circles. The predicted protein sequence of the *CBFB* mutations is also shown in red.
- (B) Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP) of expression profiles of the pediatric AML cohort (AML, n=561; cord blood CD34+ control, n=5) performed with the top 133 most variably expressed genes. Dots are colored by the molecular feature of the sample.
- (C) Gene Set Enrichment Analysis (GSEA) between AML with *CBFB* insertions and non-CBF AML (left) using gene sets derived from differentially expressed genes in *CBFB::MYH11* AML or *RUNX1::RUNX1T1* AML against non-CBF AML. Volcano plots (right) of genes differentially expressed between AML with *CBFB* insertions and *CBFB::MYH11* or *RUNX1::RUNX1T1*.
- (D) Mutational landscape of *CBFB*-GDXY AML (n=18) in this study (mutations detected at diagnosis are shown) and *CBFB::MYH11* AML (n=65) collected in the previous study³. Pre-selected 75 genes frequently mutated in AML were subjected to mutation calling from RNAseq data. Eight *FLT3* mutations were detected in seven patients and are categorized as internal tandem duplications (ITD), mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain (TKD), or mutations outside the TKD (other domains).
- (E) (i) Giemsa stained peripheral blood showed blasts with myeloid and monoblastic features; arrowhead marks single slender Auer rod (original x1000 magnification). (ii) Giemsa stained bone marrow aspirate smears showed immature myeloid elements with granules, blasts, and eosinophils (original x1000 magnification); arrowhead marks salmon-colored granules in the cytoplasm of the myeloid cell (inset). (iii) Hematoxylin and eosin-stained bone marrow biopsy (original magnification x500) showed a hypercellular marrow almost completely replaced by a diffuse infiltrate of medium-sized blasts with increased eosinophils in the background.
- (F) Measurable residual disease assessment of the *CBFB* c.259_260insGGGACTCCT mutation by ultra-deep next generation sequencing in SBJ00860.

Tables

Table 1. Clinical characteristics of the patients with acute leukemia harboring a *CBFB*-GDXY mutation.

Identifier	CBFB-GDXY mutation	Age/Sex	Diagnosis	FAB category	Karyotype	Cooperating gene	Risk group	Treatment protocol	Outcome	Reference
	(CBFB NM_022845.3)			,		mutations				
PARANT:SJAML040573	c.259_260insGAGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	17M	AML	M2	46,XY	ETV6, KRAS, NF1	Standard	AAML0531	Alive/CR	9,10
PARCEC	c.259_260insGAGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	23F	AML	Unknown	46,XX	NRAS	Standard	AAML0531	Refractory/Dead	9,10
PARUTH:SJAML040605	c.259_260insGGGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	9M	AML	Unknown	46,XY.nuc ish CBFBx3	FLT3, NRAS, BCORL1	Standard	AAML0531	Relapse/Dead	9
PAVLBB	c.259_260insGTGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	15M	AML	Unknown	46,XY		Standard	AAML1031	Refractory/Dead	Unpublished
PAWIHN	c.259_260insGGGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	17F	AML	Unknown	46,XX,i(7)(p10)	KDM6A	Standard	AAML1031	Alive/CR	Unpublished
PAWZIX	c.259_260insGGGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	13F	AML	Unknown	46,XX	ETV6, NRAS	Standard	AAML1031	Relapse/Alive/CR2	Unpublished
PAXCCW	c.259_260insGGGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	12F	AML	Unknown	47,XX,+6	NRAS	Standard	AAML1031	Alive/CR	Unpublished
PAXDVZ	c.259_260insGGGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	20M	AML	Unknown	46,XY	BCORL1, KDM6A, NRAS	Standard	AAML1031	Refractory/Dead	Unpublished
SJMPAL017975	c.259_260insGAGACAGTT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	18M	B/M MPAL	Unknown	51,XY,+Y,+4,+6,+13,+22	FLT3, ASXL1, BCORL1	Unknown	Unknown	Alive/CR	11
SJAML016545	c.259_260insGAGACTCGT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	16M	AML	M2	47,XY,+22	FLT3	Intermediate	AML02	Alive/CR	12
SJAML031769	c.259_260insGGGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	12M	AML	M2	47,XY,+6	NRAS, FLT3	Intermediate	AML16	Alive/CR	Unpublished
SJAML033048	c.259_260insGGGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	14F	AML	M2	46,XX	BCORL1	Intermediate	AML16	Alive/CR	Unpublished
SBJ00860	c.259_260insGGGACTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	25M	AML	M1		BCORL1, ETV6, KMT2D	Intermediate	Induction: 7 + 3 Cytarabine / idarubicin Consolidation: HiDAC x3 cycles	Alive/CR	Unpublished
AML075	c.259_260insGGGATTCGT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	10M	AML	M0-NOS	46,XY,inv(9)(q11q12)	NF1, KDM6A, WT1	Intermediate	NOPHO-AML-93	Relapse/Dead	4,13
AMLNOS004	c.259_260insGCGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	15M	AML	M1	47,XY,+6	FLT3, BCORL1, KDM6A	Standard	NOPHO AML 2004	Alive/CR	Unpublished
ALG201115	c.259_260insGAGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	27M	AML	M1	46,XY		Intermediate	VP2010-2012	Relapse/Alive/CR2	Unpublished
MLL_75644	c.259_260insGGGATTCCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspSerTyr)	17M	AML	M1	46,XY	FLT3, BCORL1, ETV6	Intermediate	Unknown	Unknown	Unpublished
115225	c.259_260insGAGATACCT p.(Asp87delinsGlyAspThrTyr)	22M	AML	Indeterminate	46,XY	FLT3, ETV6, WT1, DNMT3A	Unknown	Induction: 7 + 3 Cytarabine / daunorubicin, with concurrent midostaurin (vs. placebo) Consolidation: high dose	Relapse/Alive/CR2	14

cytarabine x3
cycles with
concurrent
midostaurin (vs
placebo) + 12
mth
maintenance
midostaurin (vs
placebo)

Full information is found in Supplemental Table 1.

Figure 1

