

# A novel recurrent EP300 ZNF384 gene fusion in B-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukemia

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CT designed the research, analyzed the data and wrote the paper; IS supervised the work; PVR, SC, RP and CDB performed experiments; GZ provided AML cell lines, reagents and analyzed the data; SC and DB commented on the paper. SC and RF provided AML samples. AA provided T-ALL samples. CT, PVR, SC assembled the figures.

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<sup>7</sup>Dedicated to the cherished memory of Alberto Gulino.

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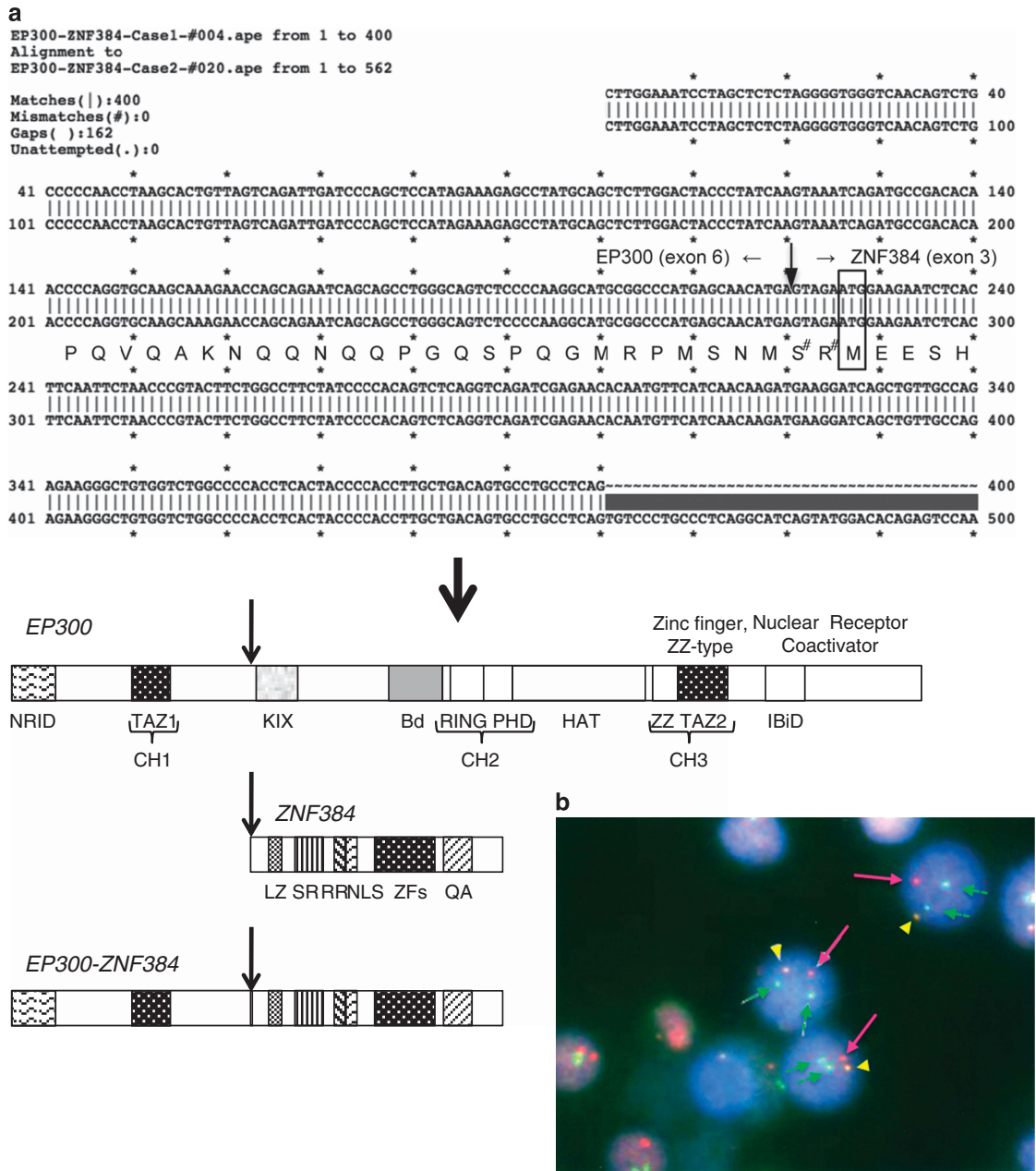
## A novel recurrent *EP300–ZNF384* gene fusion in B-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukemia

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In pediatric patients with B-cell precursor acute lymphoblastic leukemia (BCP-ALL), approximately three-quarters harbor well-characterized, clinically relevant chromosomal alterations, including hyperdiploidy, hypodiploidy, t(12;21) *ETV6/RUNX1*, t(1;19) *E2A/PBX1*, t(9;22) *BCR/ABL1* and the rearrangement of *MLL* at 11q23, and they can facilitate diagnosis, risk stratification and targeted therapy.<sup>1,2</sup> In the remaining patients, however, major pathogenic or driver gene abnormalities and their association with the clinical outcome have yet to be fully clarified. As recent advanced genomic studies using next-generation sequencing have identified a number of novel fusion genes and stratified a high-risk subtype in BCP-ALL,<sup>3–5</sup> unknown genetic alterations that constitute characteristic subgroups may still exist in the remaining patients. We therefore intended to investigate unknown fusion genes in BCP-ALL by using next-generation sequencing.

As a consequence of whole transcriptome sequencing performed on complementary DNA from 55 selected samples of pediatric BCP-ALL patients without conventional genetic abnormalities (Supplementary Information), an *EP300–ZNF384* fusion gene was identified in two patients (Cases 1 and 2) as a repeatable and plausible candidate fusion gene (Figure 1a). The 372-bp fragment of the *EP300–ZNF384* fusion cDNA was amplified by RT-PCR using a pair of specific primers, and Sanger sequencing of the PCR products revealed a sequence of the products identical to that obtained by whole transcriptome sequencing (Supplementary Figure 1). The presence of *EP300–ZNF384* fusion in Case 1 was further confirmed by FISH using a combination of appropriate probes for *EP300* and *ZNF384*, respectively (Figure 1b). We screened a further 346 of pediatric ALL cases by RT-PCR, and identified 4 additional patients with *EP300–ZNF384* fusion (Cases 3–6, Supplementary Figure 1). All six patients were BCP-ALL without conventional cytogenetic abnormalities. Our RNA samples

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**Figure 1.** Detection of the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene. **(a)** Two split sequences of *EP300-ZNF384* obtained from two individual patients by whole transcriptome sequencing were aligned. Complementary DNA showing fusion of the intron following *EP300* exon 6 and the intron preceding the first coding exon (exon 3) of *ZNF384*. Amino-acid sequences of the predicted *EP300-ZNF384* fusion protein are presented. Arrows indicate the fusion points. The box indicates the initiation codon of *ZNF384*. #, inserted amino acids originating from the 5' untranslated 5-bp sequence of *ZNF384*. The predicted *EP300-ZNF384* protein is schematically indicated. NRID, nuclear receptor interaction domain; TAZ1, transcriptional adaptor zinc-finger domain 1 (also known as the cysteine-histidine-rich (CH) region (CH1)); KIX, kinase-inducible domain of CREB-interacting domain; Bd, bromodomain; RING, 'really interesting new gene' domain; PHD, plant homeodomain; HAT, histone acetyltransferase domain; ZZ, ZZ-type zinc-finger domain; TAZ2, transcriptional-adaptor zinc-finger domain 2 (the RING-PHD segment is also known as the CH2 region, and the ZZ-TAZ2 domain as the CH3 region); IBiD, IRF3-binding domain; LZ, leucine-rich domain; SR, serine-rich domain; PR, proline-rich domain; NLS, nuclear localization signal; ZFs, Kruppel-type C2H2 zinc-finger domains; QA, Gln-Ala repeat. **(b)** The results of FISH using the *EP300* probe (green) and *ZNF384* probe (red) are indicated. The fusion signals are indicated by yellow arrowheads.

used in this study were obtained from the patients consisted of an uncontinuous series of 68 BCP-ALL without conventional cytogenetic abnormalities and a continuous series of 333 ALL patients, including 291 BCP-ALL patients (133 patients without conventional cytogenetic abnormalities, Supplementary Information). As three out of six cases of *EP300-ZNF384*+ BCP-ALL (Cases 2-4) belong to later group, the frequency of *EP300-ZNF384* expression in BCP-ALL was estimated as 1.03% (0.90% in total ALL, 2.26% in

BCP-ALL without conventional cytogenetic abnormalities) in our cohort.

*EP300* encodes the E1A-binding protein p300 (EP300), a transcriptional co-activator closely related to CREB-binding protein (CBP) and with the ability to interact with a wide spectrum of transcription factors and histone acetyltransferase activity.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the *zinc-finger protein 384* (*ZNF384*) gene encodes a transcription factor that regulates promoters of the extracellular

**Table 1.** Clinical findings of patients

|                                 | Case 1                        | Case 2          | Case 3          | Case 4          | Case 5          | Case 6          |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Age at initial diagnosis        | 7                             | 13              | 7               | 10              | 17              | 15              |
| Gender                          | M                             | M               | M               | F               | M               | F               |
| Methods                         | RNAseq, PCR, FISH             | RNAseq, PCR     | PCR             | PCR             | PCR             | PCR             |
| Samples obtained at:            | Second and third relapse      | Newly diagnosed | Newly diagnosed | Newly diagnosed | Newly diagnosed | Newly diagnosed |
| Current status                  | In fourth CR                  | In first CR     | In first CR     | In first CR     | In first CR     | In first CR     |
| Duration of event-free survival | 4y 4m                         | 8y 6m+          | 10y 1m+         | 9y 5m+          | 2y 1m+          | 4y 2m+          |
| Duration of overall survival    | 10y 11m+                      | Same as above   | Same as above   | Same as above   | Same as above   | Same as above   |
| Study                           | Others                        | L0416/0616      | L0416/0616      | L0416/0616      | Others          | Others          |
| Initial WBC                     | 17 380                        | 10 500          | 14 600          | 2600            | 2300            | 5000            |
| Day 8 blasts (per ml)           | 66                            | 162             | 80              | 0               | 0               | 0               |
| CNS involvement                 | No                            | No              | No              | No              | No              | No              |
| Risk classification             | IR                            | IR              | IR              | IR              | IR              | IR              |
| Cytogenetics                    | 46,XY, t(9;10)(p13;p13) 20/20 | 46,XY (20/20)   | 46,XY (20/20)   | 46,XX (20/20)   | 46XY (10/10)    | 46XX (20/20)    |

Abbreviations: CNS, central nervous system; CR, complete remission; F, female; FISH, fluorescence *in situ* hybridization; IR, intermediate risk group; M, male; m, months; WBC, white blood cell; y, years. Clinical findings of patients with the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene are summarized.

matrix genes.<sup>7</sup> Chromosomal translocations involving *EP300* fused to either *Monocytic leukemia zinc-finger protein (MOZ)* or *Mixed lineage leukemia (MLL)* genes are associated with acute myeloid leukemia.<sup>8,9</sup> *ZNF384* is known to be involved in ALL through fusion with the *TET* family gene, such as the *Ewing sarcoma breakpoint region 1 (EWSR1)* gene, *TATA box binding protein-associated factor (TAF15)* and *transcription factor 3 (TCF3 or E2A)*.<sup>10,11</sup> Although the mutations of both *EP300* and *ZNF384* are known to be involved in the development of leukemia, this is the first report on the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene.

The resulting sequence of the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene (Figure 1a) revealed that exon 6 of *EP300* was fused to exon 3 (the first coding exon) of *ZNF384*. The fusion point of *ZNF384* is the same as those of previously reported *ZNF384*-related fusion genes between *TAF15* and *E2A* genes.<sup>10,11</sup> The 5-bp sequence upstream of the initiation codon in *ZNF384* is included, while the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion transcripts were predicted to encode a fusion protein with in-frame joining between the N-terminal portion of *EP300* and the entire *ZNF384* protein. A schematic representation of the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion protein predicted to encode a 110-kDa protein with 1027 amino acids<sup>10,12</sup> is shown in Figure 1a. The *EP300-ZNF384* fusion protein retains the transcriptional adapter zinc-finger 1 (TAZ1) domain in the cysteine-histidine-rich region 1 (CH1) of *EP300*, but it lacks the other domains such as the histone acetyltransferase (HAT) domain to be included in *EP300*. On the other hand, the complete *ZNF384* protein is retained in the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion.

The clinical findings of *EP300-ZNF384* fusion-positive patients are summarized in Table 1. The patients were aged between 7 and 17 years (mean: 11.5 ± 3.8), comprised four males and two females, and were all classified into an intermediate risk group at the initial diagnosis based on an advanced age.<sup>13</sup> Their initial white blood cell count ranged from 2300 to 17 330 (mean: 8730 ± 5849). All patients showed a good response to steroid monotherapy, using the cutoff of 1000/μl for the blast count in peripheral blood on day 8.<sup>13</sup> All six patients achieved complete hematological remission after induction therapy. Four patients (Cases 2, 3, 4 and 6) completed the entire protocol and maintained complete remission for 4–10 years. One patient (Case 5) received maintenance therapy and was in complete remission for 2 years and 1 month. The remaining patient (Case 1) also completed the initial therapy, but he relapsed in the off-therapy period, and he is now in his fourth complete remission after a second bone marrow transplantation.

Importantly, the predicted chromosomal translocation t(12;22)(p13;q13) was not detected in all six cases by conventional G-banding, and five patients (Cases 2–6) showed a normal karyotype on cytogenetic analysis. The remaining patient (Case 1), who had relapsed three times, consistently showed 46,XY, t

(9;10)(p13;p13) from the initial diagnosis through to the third relapse, whereas corresponding gene fusion was not identified by whole transcriptome sequencing. As FISH confirmed the presence of *EP300-ZNF384* translocation in Case 1 and 954 among 1000 cells showed positive fusion signals, it is suggested that translocation leading to *EP300-ZNF384* is difficult to detect with conventional G-banding.

All six *EP300-ZNF384*+ cases revealed dull or negative expression of CD10 based on immunophenotypic examination (Supplementary Figure 2, Supplementary Table). They also exhibited negative expression of cytoplasmic  $\mu$  chain. In addition, each case aberrantly expressed one or more myeloid antigen(s), including CD13 and CD33. Therefore, most BCP-ALL patients carrying the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene may be predictable based on their characteristic immunophenotype.

The *EP300-ZNF384* fusion and conventional cytogenetic abnormalities are mutually exclusive. FISH analysis revealed that a vast majority of leukemic blasts express the fusion. The above data suggest the involvement of this fusion gene in the development of BCP-ALL, whereas the functional role of this fusion gene is not yet known. As we present in Figure 1a, the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion protein is predicted to lack the HAT domain of *EP300*. It has been suggested that the deregulation of acetylation could lead to a disruption in the balance between proliferation and differentiation during hematopoiesis and *in vivo* structure–function analysis of *EP300* by others demonstrated that the loss of HAT activity results in an increase in the numbers and proliferative potential of hematopoietic progenitors and stem cells.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it has been reported that some B-cell lymphoma harbor frequent structural alterations inactivating CREBBP or *EP300* as a major pathogenetic mechanism, reading to specific defects in acetylation-mediated inactivation of the BCL6 oncoprotein and activation of the p53 tumor suppressor.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the N-terminal portion of *EP300* without the HAT domains in the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion may be involved in the development of ALL by deregulating acetylation, but further functional evaluation is necessary.

In contrast, the complete *ZNF384* sequence is retained in the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion, being the same as in cases of other *ZNF384*-related recurrent fusions observed in acute leukemia.<sup>10,11</sup> Both *EWSR1-ZNF384* and *TAF15-ZNF384* have transforming properties in NIH3T3 cells, but do not alter expressions of known *ZNF384* target genes.<sup>10</sup> The functions of the *ZNF384* gene in these fusion genes remain unclear and should also be investigated in the future.

In conclusion, we identified a novel recurrent fusion gene between the *EP300* and *ZNF384* genes in children with BCP-ALL. Further studies involving a large series of patients should be conducted to elucidate the oncogenic properties of *EP300-ZNF384*



and confirm the clinical and biological features of patients with BCP-ALL harboring the *EP300-ZNF384* fusion gene.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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