Preclinical and Clinical Studies of Gamma Secretase Inhibitors with Docetaxel on Human Breast Tumors

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Abstract

Purpose: Accumulating evidence supports the existence of breast cancer stem cells (BCSC), which are characterized by their capacity to self-renew and divide indefinitely and resistance to conventional therapies. The Notch pathway is important for stem cell renewal and is a potential target for BCSC-directed therapy.

Experimental Design: Using human breast tumorgraft studies, we evaluated the impact of gamma secretase inhibitors (GSI) on the BCSC population and the efficacy of combining GSI with docetaxel treatment. The mouse experimental therapy paralleled a concurrent clinical trial in patients with advanced breast cancer, designed to determine the maximum-tolerated dose of the GSI, MK-0752, administered sequentially with docetaxel, and to evaluate BCSC markers in serial tumor biopsies.

Results: Treatment with GSI reduced BCSCs in MC1 and BCM-2147 tumorgrafts by inhibition of the Notch pathway. GSI enhanced the efficacy of docetaxel in preclinical studies. In the clinical trial, 30 patients with advanced breast cancer were treated with escalating doses of MK-0752 plus docetaxel. Clinically, meaningful doses of both drugs were possible with manageable toxicity and preliminary evidence of efficacy. A decrease in CD44+/CD24−, ALDH+; and mammosphere-forming efficiency were observed in tumors of patients undergoing serial biopsies.

Conclusions: These preclinical data show that pharmacologic inhibition of the Notch pathway can reduce BCSCs in breast tumorgraft models. The clinical trial shows feasibility of combination GSI and chemotherapy, and together these results encourage further study of Notch pathway inhibitors in combination with chemotherapy in breast cancer. Clin Cancer Res; 19(6); 1512–24. ©2012 AACR.

Introduction

Current systemic therapies for breast cancer, such as chemotherapy and hormonal therapy, are partially effective in killing cancer cells and controlling tumor growth. Yet, nearly all patients with metastatic breast cancer, and a quarter of those with early disease, will relapse despite initial response. In part, this may be due to inherent limitations in existing therapies that were selected for clinical development based on their effects on proliferative and apoptotic pathways, resulting in temporary therapy-induced shrinkage of cell lines, xenografts, and human breast cancers. Accumulating evidence supports the existence of breast cancer stem cells (BCSC), which are characterized by their capacity to self-renew and divide indefinitely and resistance to conventional therapies.

BCSCs would do little in the short term to reduce tumor burden and preserve organ function. Combinations of conventional, tumor-shrinking cytotoxics and BCSC-directed therapies have the potential to both treat patient symptoms and prevent future relapses of breast cancer.

We and others have hypothesized that Notch inhibition will result in control of advanced breast cancer through the elimination of BCSCs (3, 4). Preclinical data indicate that the Notch pathway is dysregulated in a variety of cancers including T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia/lymphoma (T-ALL; ref. 5), breast cancer (6), colon cancer (7), and several other cancers. The inappropriate activation of Notch signaling results in signals that stimulate proliferation, restrict differentiation, and prevent apoptosis in cancer cells (recently reviewed in ref. 8). In normal tissues, activation of the Notch pathway results in changes in cell fate, including self-renewal of stem cells or differentiation along a
particular lineage (9). Specific to the breast, the Notch pathway was shown to be involved in the normal development of the mammary gland and in carcinogenesis (10, 11). Notch and other highly preserved developmental pathways, including Wnt and Hedgehog, have been hypothesized to be central for the maintenance of BCSCs (12). For example, gene expression analysis of tumorigenic, mammosphere-forming human BCSCs versus nontumorigenic cells implicated the Notch, phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K), and Hedgehog signaling pathways in regulating BCSC (13, 14).

MK-0752 is an experimental oral pharmaceutical under development for the treatment of solid tumor malignancies. In vitro, MK-0752 significantly inhibits gamma secretase, an aspartic protease required for activation of the Notch receptor (15). Cleavage of the Notch receptor by gamma secretase is required to release the Notch intracellular domain (NICD), which then translocates to the nucleus, turning on genes involved in cell differentiation and proliferation (9, 15). Thus, gamma secretase inhibition results in a loss of Notch function in cells (16). MK-0752 has been evaluated in solid tumor malignancies including refractory pediatric central nervous system (CNS) tumors and various adult solid tumors (17, 18). The recommended phase II dose from the pediatric trial was 260 mg/m²/dose once daily using a 3 days on followed by 4 days off schedule (17). The adult trial saw pharmacodynamic and clinical activity limited to CNS gliomas at a dose of 1,800 mg weekly (18).

We hypothesized on the basis of preclinical data implicating Notch signaling in BCSC that a combination of cytotoxic chemotherapy to address the proliferating, non-BCSC proportion of the breast tumors, together with a gamma secretase inhibitor (GSI), would result in better disease control than either therapy alone. Because combination chemotherapy and GSI therapy had never been attempted in humans before, we planned a phase I trial to determine a tolerable dose and schedule. Concurrent with the phase I trial, we conducted human breast tumorgraft studies to evaluate the impact of GSI on the BCSC population and the efficacy of combining GSI with docetaxel treatment. Targeted anticancer therapies are best developed in conjunction with biomarkers that can identify patients with a higher chance of benefit from the treatment and/or measure treatment efficacy. The ideal biomarker for pharmacodynamic evaluation of cancer stem cell therapies would be able to accurately measure the proportion of stem cells within the tumor, so as to select patients with a high proportion of stem cells for treatment and to determine on pre- and posttherapy specimens whether the proportion of stem cells within the tumor decreased with the therapy. The proof of “stem cell-ness” requires that the cell population exhibit the archetypal stem cell properties of self-renewal and generation of differentiated progeny (19–21). These properties are evaluated in vitro by determining the ability of a single cell to generate a differentiated tissue (13). In breast cancer models, BCSCs can be identified by their ability to form nonadherent mammospheres in serum-free media and to initiate tumors upon retransplantation. Although the mammospheres and retransplantation approaches to stem cell identification are possible to execute in a preclinical setting, these are impractical to carry out in most clinical situations. BCSCs have been characterized by the cell surface marker phenotype (CD44+/CD24−/low, ref. 22) and aldehyde dehydrogenase activity (ALDH1; refs. 23, 24), which identifies these assays as potential surrogate biomarkers for BCSC-directed therapies in clinical applications.

In summary, although previous studies have examined the effect of GSI on BCSCs in vitro and in cell lines, none have translated this work to clinical studies. In the studies reported herein, we conducted a phase I clinical trial to establish a safe and potentially efficacious combination of a GSI in combination with docetaxel chemotherapy in patients with advanced breast cancer. We tested GSI, docetaxel, and combination therapy modeled after the clinical trial regimen on mice bearing human tumorgrafts to evaluate the effects of treatment on tumor volume and/or BCSCs as determined by mammosphere-forming efficiency (MSFE), retransplantation, and the surrogate markers ALDH1 and CD44+/CD24−. In addition, we obtained serial biopsies on a subset of clinical trial participants to preliminarily evaluate the effect of GSI plus docetaxel therapy on BCSCs using ALDH1 and CD44+/CD24− in clinical samples.

Materials and Methods

Preclinical studies

For preclinical evaluation of BCSC inhibitors, breast cancer-in-mice xenograft models were developed by transplanting human breast cancer tumor biopsies into the mammary gland fat-pad of immune-deficient mice (herein referred to as tumorgrafts). To evaluate the effectiveness of
stem cell–targeted agents in altering the tumorigenic BCSC population, the mice are treated with the agents and the tumor subsequently excised for rigorous evaluation in BCSC assays. These BCSC assays include: (i) flow-cytometric analysis of BCSC cell-surface markers and ALDH activity (CD44+/CD24− and ALDH1+, respectively); (ii) MSFE; and (iii) retransplantation to measure the presence of tumor-initiating cells (TIC).

Preparation of tumorgrafts

All animal protocols were reviewed and approved by the Animal Protocol Review Committee at Baylor College of Medicine (Houston, TX) or The Methodist Hospital Research Institute (Houston, TX). Tumorgrafts were initially generated by transplantation of patient breast cancer tumor biopsies or a fragment of surgical specimens into the cleared fat-pad of SCID/Beige mice (Harlan Laboratories), as previously described (20, 21, 25). As previously described, MC1 human tumors were originally derived from a pleural effusion and are estrogen- and progesterone receptor–negative and HER-2–negative (22, 24). BCM-2147 breast tumorgrafts were generated by transplantation of estrogen- and progesterone receptor–negative and HER-2–negative human breast tumor biopsy tissue into the cleared fat-pad of SCID/Beige mice. Xenografted tumors were maintained as tumor lines by serial passage of tumor tissue into the cleared fat-pad of SCID/Beige mice, without intervening culture. Currently, 38 stable tumor lines representing 28 independent patients have been generated and rigorously characterized for quality control, including short tandem repeat (STR) analysis to document retention of original human tumor tissue across multiple generations. These tumors consistently retain the biomarker status and morphology of the original patient tumor over multiple generations. In addition, gene expression is consistent across multiple generations as confirmed by Affymetrix microarray, Reverse Phase Protein Assay, and Sequenome analysis (Manuscript submitted). These tumor lines serve as a highly quality controlled source of human breast tumors for preclinical evaluation of novel treatment regimens. During the clinical trial, the procedures for developing primary tumorgrafts were applied to primary breast tumors samples from trial participants.

In vivo drug treatment

GSI (MRK-003) was provided by Merck & Co, Inc.. Docetaxel was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. Antibodies were purchased from BD Biosciences, unless otherwise indicated later.

To generate enough cells for subsequent functional analysis, tumor fragments were transplanted into the cleared fat-pad (right abdominal) of 3- to 4-week-old SCID/Beige mice. Mice were equally distributed according to tumor size into 1 of 4 treatment groups including: (i) vehicle-control, (ii) chemotherapy-docetaxel (10 or 20 mg/kg), (iii) GSI (100 mg/kg), or (iv) combination (docetaxel plus GSI). The GSI and combination group received GSI by oral gavage on days 1 to 3. The chemotherapy and combination group received docetaxel by intraperitoneal injection on day 8. The control group received vehicle corresponding to the GSI and chemotherapy treatment schedule. Total body weight and tumor volume were measured twice weekly. Tumor volume (mm3) was calculated as length (m) × width (m) × depth (m) × 0.5.

Tumors were collected from the mice and dissociated, as described previously (21) with minor changes. Briefly, tumors were minced, dissociated with 200 to 250 units of type III collagenase (Worthington Biochemical Co.) per milliliter of media for 1 to 3 hours. After filtering cells through a 70-μm filter, red blood cells (RBC) were lysed by hypotonic shock and then tumor cells were washed with ice-cold Hanks-buffered saline solution (HBSS). Cells were maintained on ice for all subsequent procedures. For retransplantation assays, dissociated tumor cells were transplanted with Matrigel (1:1) into the fat-pad of SCID/Beige mice.

Flow cytometry (20, 21)

Dissociated tumor cells [1 million cells/0.1 mL HBSS-containing 2% FBS (HBSS±)] were labeled with fluorophore-conjugated antibodies (1:10 CD44-APC, 1:40 custom ordered CD24-PECY7 or 1:10 CD24-FITC, 1:40 H2kD-PE to remove mouse cells) for 15 minutes on ice or labeled according to manufacturers’ recommendation with the AldeFluor Kit for 45 minutes at 37°C (StemCell Technologies). After the 45-minute AldeFluor incubation, those cells were also labeled with H2kD-phycocerythrin (PE) for 15 minutes on ice in 0.1 mL HBSS+. After washing, propidium iodide (PI, 10 μg/mL) was added and cells were analyzed or sorted with a 4 laser FACS AriaII (BD Biosciences). Side scatter and forward scatter were used to eliminate debris and doublets and PI staining was evaluated to remove dead cells. The remaining tumor cells (H2kD-negative) were further analyzed for CD44 and CD24 expression or ALDH1+. Data analysis was conducted with FACS Diva (BD Biosciences). Patient samples were processed similarly with the following exceptions. To remove lineage cells, patient samples were labeled with a cocktail of PE-conjugated lineage antibodies. Cells were analyzed using Dako MoFlo flow cytometry and data analysis was conducted with Flowjo (Ashland).

Mammosphere assay

Dissociated tumor cells were filtered through 40-μm filter, counted with the Countess Automated Cell Counter (Invitrogen), and plated 60,000 cells/mL of mammosphere media in low-adherent 6- or 24-well plates (Corning Life Sciences). Mammosphere media (MEGM−) contained mammary epithelial growth medium (Lonza) supplemented with B27, basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF), and EGF (final concentration 20 ng/mL bFGF and 20 ng/mL EGF). Mammospheres were imaged and counted using GelCount imaging and software system (Oxford Optronix Ltd.). For secondary MSFE, mammospheres were collected, dissociated with trypsin (0.05%) for 5 minutes at 37°C,
filtered through a 40-μm filter, counted, and replated at 60,000 cells/mL MEGM™.

Quantitative reverse transcriptase PCR
RNA was extracted from snap-frozen tissue using Qiagen RNeasy Mini with DNase treatment on the column (Qiagen). cDNA was synthesized with iScript (Biorad). cDNA from flow-sorted cells was isolated with WT-Ovation One-Direct RNA Amplification System (Nugen Technologies). Real-time PCR was conducted on Applied Biosystem 7900HT Fast Instrument with Applied Biosystems Primers sets, TaqMan Probes and TaqMan Fast Universal PCR master mix according to the manufacturer’s protocols (Applied Biosystems). Data were evaluated using ABI Prism RQ Manager 1.2 (Applied Biosystems). The following adjustable analysis settings were used: automatic threshold (Ct), automatic outlier removal, and relative quantification (RQ) min/max confidence 99%. All data were calibrated to pooled cDNA and each sample was normalized to 18S rRNA endogenous control. At least 3 independent tissue samples were evaluated per experimental group.

Protein extraction and western blot analysis
Whole-cell lysates were isolated with Cell Signaling Technologies (CST) Lysis Buffer (20 mmol/L Tris–Cl (pH 7.5), 150 mmol/L NaCl, 1 mmol/L Na2EDTA, 1 mmol/L EGTA, 1% Triton, 25 mmol/L sodium pyrophosphate, 1 mmol/L β-glycerophosphate, 1 mmol/L Na3VO4 and 1 μg/mL leupeptin, using Qiagen TissueLyser. Twenty micrograms of protein were loaded on 3% to 8% NuPage Novex Mini Gels (Invitrogen) and transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane. Membranes were then blocked with 5% nonfat milk solution in TBS with Tween-20 (0.05%, TBST) at room temperature for 1 hour, followed by 4°C overnight incubation with primary antibodies 1:1,000 dilutions in 5% bovine serum albumin (BSA; Notch1 clone D1E11, CST#3608; β-actin clone AC-15, CST#4967). After washing with TBST, secondary horseradish peroxidase (HRP)–conjugated antibodies were incubated for 1 hour in 5% BSA solution (CST 1:2,000 dilution) Luminata Classico Western HRP substrate (Millipore) was used for chemiluminescent detection using Image Quant LAS 4000 (GE Healthcare) hardware and software, according to manufacturer’s instructions. Quantification of bands intensity was measured using Image Quant TL (GE Healthcare) software; it determined a parameter called volume, resulting from multiply the size of the band by the light intensity. Statistical comparison and graphics were made with GraphPad Prism 5 software by one-side ANOVA and Bonferroni method.

Statistical analysis—preclinical
Comparison of categorical data, that is, numbers of TICS among vehicle- and GSI-treated mice was done by Fischer exact test or χ² test. A one-way ANOVA was used for significant differences among treatment groups in mammosphere assays with Bonferroni multiple comparison posttest for comparison of 2 specific groups. Generalized estimating equations (GEE) models from longitudinal data analysis were used to model the treatment and time effects on tumor volume. Interactions terms between treatment and time were tested; however, it was not statistically significant. Variables that did not follow a normal distribution were transformed appropriately. All preclinical statistical analyses were conducted using STATA (Version 11).

Clinical trial design and statistical methods

Patient population. Eligible subjects included men or women with metastatic (stage IV) breast cancer or with locally advanced breast cancer (stages IIIA > 10 cm, or stages IIIB and IIIC) that did not respond to first-line anthracycline-based chemotherapy. Participants could have received any number of prior antineoplastic regimens, including prior taxanes in the adjuvant or metastatic setting but could not have disease that progressed on a taxane, and there must have been at least a 6-month interval since prior taxane therapy. Subjects had measurable or evaluable disease by Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (RECIST) 1.0. Participants were required to have a Zubrod Performance Status of 0 to 1 with at least a 3-month life expectancy and normal hepatic, renal, and hematologic laboratory studies. Baseline peripheral neuropathy could not exceed grade 1 and participants could not have clinically significant cardiac disease. The clinical management of the patient could not include any concurrent antineoplastic therapy for breast cancer while on study. Subjects had to be capable of taking oral medications. Pregnant or nursing women were not allowed to participate in this trial because of the increased risk of fetal harm including fetal death from the chemotherapeutic agents. Subjects were informed of the investigational nature of this study and were required to provide written informed consent. The trial was approved by each local Institutional Review Board and was conducted in accordance with all institutional and federal guidelines.

Study treatment. The study drug was MK-0752, chemical cis-4-[(4-chlorophenyl)sulfonyl]-4-(2,5-difluoro-phenyl) cyclohexanepropanoic acid sodium salt, provided by Merck, Sharp, and Dohme Corporation. The Investigational New Drug (IND) application for this trial was held by the principal investigator (A.F. Schott), IND #100944. At the time of development of the clinical trial, the weekly dosing of MK-0752 had not yet been evaluated, but preliminary clinical data using the 3 days on, 4 days off schedule was available. Therefore, the phase I study used a regimen of GSI (MK-0752) on days 1 to 3 in a dose determined by the dose-escalation schema, followed by docetaxel on day 8 of each 21-day cycle. Docetaxel was administered in the standard 21-day dosing schedule, as a weekly docetaxel schedule would not allow sufficient time between docetaxel and MK-0752 to avoid the toxicity observed in the mice. Dose level assignment was done by the coordinating statistician (K.A. Griffith) at the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, MI), after subject registration and confirmation of eligibility. Dose levels were: level 1, 300 mg MK-0752 by mouth days 1 to 3; level 2, 450 mg MK-0752 by
mouth days 1 to 3; level 3, 600 mg MK-0752 by mouth days 1 to 3; level 4, 800 mg MK-0752 by mouth days 1 to 3. Docetaxel 80 mg/m² i.v. was administered over 1 hour on day 8 of each cycle of therapy. Standard dexamethasone premedication was given at 8 mg every 12 hours for 3 doses beginning on the evening of day 7. Peg-filgrastim was administered on day 9, approximately 24 hours after docetaxel, to all participants. A cycle was defined as 21 days. Treatment was continued until disease progression, unacceptable toxicity, or symptomatic deterioration if deemed to be necessary by the patient or physician. If the patient went on to radiation or surgery of a target lesion, treatment was discontinued. The participant could decide to discontinue treatment at any time for any reason.

**Toxicity monitoring.** This study used the National Cancer Institute Common Terminology Criteria for Adverse Events (NCI CTCAE) Version 3.0 for toxicity and serious adverse event reporting. Toxicity monitoring occurred at a clinic visit on day 1 of each cycle or more often as clinically indicated. Monitoring of hematologic values and liver function tests was required on days 1 and 8 of every cycle and on day 15 of cycle 1.

MK-0752 doses were reduced by 1 dose level at a time in individual patients, for any grade 3 or 4 nonhematologic toxicity that was possibly, probably, or definitely attributable to study drug, or for recurrent grade 2 toxicities attributable to study drug. If the dose would be reduced less than 300 mg, the patient was required to come off study. Docetaxel dose reduction of 20% was mandated for emergence of abnormal liver function tests, grade 2 neuropathy, and grade 3 and 4 nonhematologic toxicities. For grade 3 or higher neuropathy, the patient was required to come off study. Once a dose of MK-0752 or docetaxel was reduced, it was not reescalated.

**Efficacy monitoring.** Patients were required to have baseline physical examination, X rays, and computed tomography (CT) scans as necessary to assess measurable and evaluable disease. Radiologic imaging and physical examination for tumor response was repeated every odd cycle until the time of disease progression or treatment discontinuation, whichever came first. Response was assessed using RECIST 1.0 criteria. Study patients with tumors amenable to biopsy had optional research core biopsies obtained before beginning study drug, after 1 cycle of therapy, after 3 cycles of therapy, and at the time of treatment discontinuation or completion of 6 cycles of therapy (whichever came first). For those patients with intact primary disease who proceeded to breast surgery, tissue was obtained at the time of surgery. Fresh tissue was used for fluorescence-activated flow cytometry to determine the CD44+/CD24− population and the ALDH1 population, for mouse tumorgraft transplantation, and for mammosphere studies.

**Statistical methods.** The trial was monitored using a modification of the Continual Reassessment Method (CRM), called Time-to-Event CRM or TITE-CRM. The TITE-CRM method assumes a model for the time to occurrence of toxic response as a function of dose, and allows information from all patients enrolled in the trial to be used when allocating a new patient to a dose level. Because this method is flexible in terms of the number of patients treated at each dose, subjects could be continuously recruited throughout the trial, without recruitment pauses, as long as patients were treated at a dose consistent with the current safety profile.

Dose-limiting toxicities (DLT) was defined on toxicities possibly, probably, or definitely related to the study drug observed during the first cycle (first 21 days) as follows:

1. Nonhematologic toxicity grade ≥3 by the NCI CTCAE version 3.0.
2. Absolute neutrophil count <1,000 for more than 7 days despite use of pegfilgrastim.
3. Platelet count <25,000 for more than 7 days, or associated with bleeding, or less than 10,000 at any time.

The target rate of acute toxicity for this trial was 20%, and this target rate defined the maximum-tolerated dose (MTD) of MK-0752 with 80 mg/m² docetaxel. Expected rates of acute toxicity were estimated on the basis of previous treatment and clinical trial experience with docetaxel and clinical experience with the MK-0752 in healthy volunteer populations and limited cancer populations. The a priori estimates for dose levels 1 to 4 were 10%, 15%, 20%, and 30%, respectively. These rates were reevaluated throughout the conduct of this trial as treatment experience accrued. Implementation of the design was carried out using SAS Version 9.2 software (SAS Institute) with statistical code and documentation written by the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center (UMC). Biot-statistical Unit and made publicly available at [http://roadrunner.cancer.med.umich.edu/wiki/index.php/TITE-CRM](http://roadrunner.cancer.med.umich.edu/wiki/index.php/TITE-CRM).

Thirty patients were planned for estimation of the dose-toxicity function. During the treatment of the first 18 patients, accrual was limited to a maximum of 3 patients per calendar month to allow sufficient time for observation of toxicity. Following the completion of the acute toxicity observation period for the 18th subject, patients were then accrued at the natural rate possible for the 3 sites, until 30 patients were accrued and treated on protocol.

Final estimates for the probability of DLT and 95% Bayesian confidence (credible) intervals (CI) for each dose level were calculated using Markov Chain Monte Carlo methods for those cases (N = 29) that either completed the acute observation period (first 21-day cycle) without DLT or that experienced a DLT during that period.

**Results**

**Treatment with GSI reduced the BCSC population in patient-derived breast tumorgrafts**

To evaluate the ability of GSI to target BCSCs, we conducted a series of preclinical studies with mice bearing...
human breast tumorgrafts. Similar to the inclusion criteria for the clinical trial, these tumorgrafts were derived from advanced and/or chemotherapy-resistant breast cancer. MC1 was derived from metastatic breast tumor cells in pleural effusate and is docetaxel sensitive (22, 24, 26), whereas BCM-2147 was derived from docetaxel-resistant triple-negative invasive breast cancer. To retain the characteristics of the original patient tumors, these tumors were maintained by passage in mice and never under cell culture conditions. Maintenance of patient biomarkers and histopathology was confirmed by immunohistochemical analysis, and genetic stability across multiple transplant generations was confirmed as measured by Affymetrix gene expression, Reverse Phase Protein Assay, and Sequenome analysis (Manuscript submitted).

Our treatment approach was to target BCSCs with GSI, while reducing tumor bulk with a standard chemotherapy. We carried out short-term studies to determine the immediate effects of GSI treatment on BCSCs (Fig. 1). Mice with MC1 or BCM-2147 tumorgrafts were stratified to equally distribute tumor size among 2 treatment groups and treated as follows: (i) the vehicle control group received GSI vehicle at corresponding treatment time points; (ii) the GSI group received GSI [100 mg/kg] by oral gavage for 3 days. To allow for turnover of tumor cells in response to treatment in vivo, the tumors were collected 72 hours after the final treatment, dissociated to single cell suspensions for BCSC assays including flow-cytometric analysis for BCSC markers, MSFE, and tumor-initiation in mice.

Consistent with decreased BCSCs, primary and secondary MSFE were significantly decreased in GSI-treated tumors compared with vehicle-treated tumors (Fig. 1A). In MC1 tumorgrafts, treatment with GSI reduced the CD44+/CD24− and ALDH+ subpopulations 72 hours posttreatment as measured by flow cytometry (Fig. 1B and C). With BCM-2147, GSI treatment reduced the ALDH+ population compared with vehicle (Fig. 1B). BCM-2147 does not have a CD44+ population for evaluation, therefore only ALDH was evaluated by flow cytometry. To determine whether treatment had reduced BCSCs, we retransplanted the MC1 tumor cells from each group into mice and monitored tumor development (Table 1). The vehicle-treated tumor cells generated tumors with 50% to 55% tumor incidence. Importantly, there were no regenerated tumors in the GSI-treated group (P < 0.011), indicating GSI reduced tumor cells capable of tumor initiation.

**GSI inhibited the Notch pathway**

To ensure that GSI was inhibiting the Notch pathway in our tumorgrafts, we evaluated expression of the NICD and downstream targets of the Notch pathway in response to GSI treatment in MC1 and BCM-2147 tumors (Fig. 2). Quantification of Western blot analysis data confirmed downregulation of NICD with GSI treatment in MC1 and BCM-2147 tumors (Fig. 2A). In MC1 tumors, Hes1, Hey1, Hes5, and myc were reduced to 40%, 50%, 25%, and 40%, respectively, in the GSI-treated tumors relative to controls (Fig. 2B). In BCM-2147 tumors, Hes1 and other Notch targets were not significantly decreased in the whole tumor (Fig. 2B and data not shown); thus, we collected treated tumors and flow sorted for the ALDH+ BCSC population. Hes1 expression was markedly reduced to less than 5% of control within the ALDH+ population, further supporting the role of the Notch pathway in BCSCs. Because the ALDH+ population is less than 2% of the whole tumor, the change in expression was undetectable in the whole tumor. Collectively, these data indicate that GSI inhibited activation of NICD and reduced Notch pathway targets.

**Treatment with GSI enhanced efficacy of docetaxel and reduced BCSCs**

To evaluate in a preclinical setting the GSI and docetaxel treatment regimen used in the phase I clinical trial, mice bearing MC1 or BCM-2147 tumors were stratified by tumor size to treatment groups: docetaxel [10 mg/kg], GSI [100 mg/kg], or a combination of both and compared with animals treated with vehicle alone. The doses were chosen on the basis of toxicity and efficacy in our animal model. Single agent treatment with either GSI or docetaxel delayed MC1 tumor progression, but eventually, after treatment was stopped, tumors reached sizes equivalent to control mice (Fig. 3A). As expected, treatment with docetaxel did not significantly reduce tumor volume in docetaxel-resistant BCM-2147, whereas GSI alone and GSI with docetaxel reduced tumor growth compared with vehicle (Fig. 3B). GSI alone also reduced MSFE compared with vehicle- and docetaxel-treated tumors (Fig. 3B). The combination of GSI and docetaxel decreased tumor size more than the single agents in both MC1 and BCM-2147 tumors (Fig. 3). Regimens proposed to be used in human patients were used to assess efficacy of treatment. The difference in tumor growth between mice treated with docetaxel alone and combination of GSI and docetaxel at either 3- or 5-day intervals is significant (Fig. 3C; P < 0.01 and 0.05, respectively). GSI alone slows tumor growth significantly compared with control (P < 0.03). There was no significant difference between administration of docetaxel 3 days after GSI compared with 5 days after GSI (P < 0.09). Administration of docetaxel earlier than 3 days post-GSI or concomitant administration of docetaxel and GSI showed significant toxicity in mice, consisting of diarrhea, dehydration and severe weight loss. In summary, GSI treatment reduced BCSC and enhanced the efficacy of docetaxel.

**Phase I B clinical trial of the GSI, MK-0752, with docetaxel**

The clinical trial was designed with the overall goals of determining a safe and potentially efficacious dose and schedule of combination MK0752 with docetaxel in patients with locally advanced or metastatic breast cancer, and to explore for an effect on BCSCs. At the time of study initiation, MK-0752 was in clinical development for the treatment of Alzheimer’s disease and other conditions, and therefore its toxicology and DLIs in a noncancer patient...
The trial was initiated and sponsored by the investigators and supported financially and with drug supply by Merck, Sharp, and Dohme. Patients were recruited from 3 institutions: the University of Michigan, Baylor College of Medicine, and the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute (Boston, MA) and its affiliate hospitals.

The primary objective of this phase Ib clinical trial was to determine the MTD of MK-0752 administered in a sequential combination regimen with fixed dose docetaxel.
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Table 1. Retransplantation of treated MC1 tumor cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>15,000 Cells</th>
<th>Tumor incidence decreased</th>
<th>45,000 Cells</th>
<th>Tumor incidence decreased</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Vehicle</td>
<td>7/14 (50%)</td>
<td>5/9 (55%)</td>
<td>12/23 (62%)</td>
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<td>GSI</td>
<td>0/14 (0%)</td>
<td>P &lt; 0.006</td>
<td>0/10 (0%)</td>
<td>P &lt; 0.011</td>
<td>0/24 (0%)</td>
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NOTE: MC1 tumors from vehicle- and GSI-treated mice were dissociated and pooled. A total of 15,000 or 45,000 cells from each group were transplanted into the mammary gland fat-pad of 4- to 6-week-old mice. Tumor incidence is reported at 10 weeks posttransplantation. Data were analyzed by pairwise comparisons with Fischer exact test.

Discussion

Our preclinical data show that pharmacologic inhibition of the Notch signaling pathway can reduce human BCSCs in breast tumorgraft models and enhance the efficacy of...
docetaxel. The effects of GSI treatment were evident in multiple measures of BCSC capacity including: (i) reduction of the cell populations with CD44+/CD24−/CD105− phenotype and/or ALDH+, (ii) reduction of MSFE, and (iii) absence of tumor regeneration according to retransplantation studies. On the basis of the controversies surrounding the various CSC markers and assays, our approach has been to carry out as many of the analyses as possible within the confines of limited tumor cell number from patient biopsies. The reduction of BCSC capacity in the samples from patients in the phase 1b clinical trial warrants expansion to a larger cohort of patients to confirm this effect, and to identify the patient population that will receive the most benefit from BCSC-targeted therapies.

Our data indicate that using traditional chemotherapy to reduce the tumor bulk in combination with BCSC-targeted therapy is a viable treatment strategy (3, 6). Our current approach used Notch pathway inhibition to target BCSCs. Emerging evidence further supports the hypothesis that Notch pathway inhibition reduces BCSC capacity in breast tumors. Both DAPT (N-[N-(3,5-difluorophenacetyl-L-alanyl)]S-phenylglycine t-butyl ester, another GSI) and Notch 4-neutralizing antibody reduce MSFE in ductal carcinoma in situ (3, 11). In UM-PE13 metastatic breast
tumorgraft from pleural effusate, an antibody targeting the Notch ligand, Dll4 (D-like ligand) in combination with high-dose paclitaxel reduces cancer stem cell frequency (27). Notch inhibition reduces BCSC capacity of MCF7 and MDA-MB-231 cell lines (28). Finally, the data presented here provide robust collaborative evidence that pharmacologic inhibition of Notch signaling in both primary human and clinical samples reduces BCSCs.

Figure 3. Treatment with GSI enhanced efficacy of docetaxel (Doc) and reduced BCSCs. Mice bearing MC1 or BCM-2147 tumors were stratified by tumor size to treatment groups: docetaxel (10 mg/kg, gray arrows), GSI (100 mg/kg, black arrows), or a combination of both and compared with animals treated with vehicle alone. The tumor growth in different groups of treatment (5 mice per group in A, 6 to 8 mice per group in B, and 8 mice per group in C) is shown as tumor weight in grams over time or tumor volume fold change. A, the combination of GSI and docetaxel prevented tumor growth more than the single agents. B, GSI alone and with docetaxel reduced tumor growth compared with vehicle [$P < 0.030$ (coefficient $= -0.132$; 95% CI, $-0.252$ to $-0.012$); $P < 0.008$ (coefficient $= -0.287$; 95% CI, $-0.498$ to $-0.075$, respectively)]. **, statistical differences compared with vehicle. Bottom, GSI alone reduced MSFE compared with vehicle- and docetaxel-treated tumors. Tumors were treated in vivo and subsequently plated under mammosphere conditions. Each symbol represents a well of mammosphere. Square root transformed data were analyzed by with one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni multiple comparison posttest ($P < 0.05$). C, regimens proposed to be used in human patients were used to assess efficacy of treatment. The difference in tumor growth between mice treated with docetaxel alone and combination of GSI and docetaxel at 3 or 5 days interval is significant ($P < 0.01$ and 0.05, respectively). GSI alone slows tumor growth significantly compared with control ($P < 0.03$). There was no significant difference between administration of docetaxel 3 days after GSI compared with 5 days after GSI ($P < 0.09$).
remains unaffected by inhibition of the Notch signaling pathway in most tumors in our tumorgraft studies, mandating the use of additional BCSC-targeted inhibitors to eradicate breast tumors. Molecular analysis of the BCSCs that remain after GSI treatment should identify pathways of treatment resistance, pinpointing additional pathways that regulate BCSCs and potential mechanisms for therapeutic intervention. Targeting additional signaling pathways with a "cocktail" of BCSC inhibitors may improve treatment by inhibiting survival and self-renewal of all BCSC populations, ultimately preventing tumor recurrence and metastasis, and thus eradicating the disease.

The clinical trial described here is the first of its kind combining a GSI with chemotherapy. We hypothesized that a successful BCSC-directed therapy in the advanced disease setting would require both cytotoxic therapy to shrink the tumor, as well as BCSC-directed therapy to deplete the BCSC component and reduce subsequent repopulation of the tumor mass. The first step in the development of such a strategy is to define a safe combination for further testing. The tested clinical regimen showed a favorable safety profile with positive preliminary clinical outcomes. Full dosing of docetaxel was possible, and doses of MK0752 associated with pharmacodynamic effect were possible. The response rate was good (though confounded by expected effect of docetaxel), but perhaps more interestingly, some patients experienced very long disease stabilization (Supplementary Table S1). Pharmacodynamic studies of tumor biopsies in a subset of participants suggested an effect of combined therapy on the tumor stem cell component in the breast tumors.

Where do we go from here? At the current time, patients who achieve excellent tumor regressions with chemotherapy in the metastatic setting are often continued on the chemotherapy, with all of its inherent toxicities, until the chemotherapy fails to control their disease any longer. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis found that longer treatment results in significantly better progression-free survival, and marginally better overall survival (29). Alternatively, patients and/or their doctors may advocate for a chemotherapy "holiday" to avoid the toxicity of therapy for some number of weeks or months before their disease.

### Table 2. Patient characteristics (N = 30)

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<tr>
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<th>No. of patients</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number eligible</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, y</td>
<td>34–49</td>
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<tr>
<td>50–64</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–88</td>
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<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Metastatic sites (multiple sites possible)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bone</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lung/Pleura</td>
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<td>62%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liver</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lymph nodes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skin</td>
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<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of metastatic sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tumor hormone receptor status</td>
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<tr>
<td>ER-positive and/or PgR-positive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60%</td>
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<tr>
<td>ER-negative and PgR-negative</td>
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<td>HER-2/neu status</td>
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<td>Negative</td>
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<td>Prior therapy for metastatic disease (N = 26)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTX</td>
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<tr>
<td>HT</td>
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<td>CTX/HT</td>
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<td>Number of prior metastatic CT regimens (N = 26)</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>81%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>66</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
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*The single observed grade 5 pulmonary toxicity was seen in a patient who also had progressive lymphangitic spread of cancer. It was coded "possibly related" to study therapy by the treating investigator.
progresses again. If stem cell targeted therapies are effective in reducing the TIC population, then the addition of such therapies to standard chemotherapy has the potential to delay or prevent disease progression after chemotherapy is stopped, with low toxicity. This hypothesis requires further testing in the clinic in a randomized clinical trial. We propose that a randomized phase II trial of GSIs in combination with docetaxel, to include both efficacy and pharmacodynamic endpoints, is warranted to test this hypothesis.
Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

L.E. Dobrolecki is employed as Project Manager in StemMed, Ltd. M.T. Lewis has ownership interest (including patents) in StemMed, Ltd. No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the other authors.

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Analysis and interpretation of data (e.g., statistical analysis, biosistics, computational analysis): A.F. Schott, G. Dontu, K.A. Griffith, L.E. Dobrolecki, M.T. Lewis, J. Paranilam, M.S. Wicha, J.C. Chang

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References


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