

## LYMPHOID NEOPLASIA

New *MLLT10* gene recombinations in pediatric T-acute lymphoblastic leukemia

Lucia Brandimarte,<sup>1</sup> Valentina Pierini,<sup>1</sup> Danika Di Giacomo,<sup>1</sup> Chiara Borga,<sup>2</sup> Filomena Nozza,<sup>1</sup> Paolo Gorello,<sup>1</sup> Marco Giordan,<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Cazzaniga,<sup>3</sup> Geertruy te Kronnie,<sup>2</sup> Roberta La Starza,<sup>1</sup> and Cristina Mecucci<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hematology and Bone Marrow Transplantation Unit, University of Perugia, Perugia, Italy; <sup>2</sup>Department of Women's and Children's Health, University of Padova, Padova, Italy; and <sup>3</sup>Centro Ricerca Tettamanti, Clinica Pediatrica, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Ospedale S. Gerardo, Monza, Italy

## Key Points

- In pediatric T-ALL, *MLLT10* emerged as a promiscuous gene, maintaining the critical leukemogenic OM-LZ domain in all fusions.
- *MLLT10* gene fusions were associated with a specific expression profile within the *HOXA* subgroup of pediatric T-ALL.

The *MLLT10* gene, located at 10p13, is a known partner of *MLL* and *PICALM* in specific leukemic fusions generated from recurrent 11q23 and 11q14 chromosome translocations. Deep sequencing recently identified *NAP1L1/12q21* as another *MLLT10* partner in T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (T-ALL). In pediatric T-ALL, we have identified 2 RNA processing genes, that is, *HNRNPH1/5q35* and *DDX3X/Xp11.3* as new *MLLT10* fusion partners. Gene expression profile signatures of the *HNRNPH1*- and *DDX3X-MLLT10* fusions placed them in the *HOXA* subgroup. Remarkably, they were highly similar only to *PICALM-MLLT10*-positive cases. The present study showed *MLLT10* promiscuity in pediatric T-ALL and identified a specific *MLLT10* signature within the *HOXA* subgroup. (*Blood*. 2013;121(25):5064-5067)

## Introduction

New genomic technologies, including whole-genome analysis and gene expression profiling (GEP), dramatically improved cytogenetic-molecular classification of T-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia (T-ALL) which affects ~15% of children with ALL.<sup>1</sup> At least 6 main genetic categories (ie, *TALLMO*, *TLX1*, *TLX3*, *NKX2-1/NKX2-2*, *MEF2C*, and *HOXA*) have been identified. The *HOXA* group includes cases with *TCRB-HOXA*, *SET-NUP214*, *MLL* translocations, and *PICALM-MLLT10*.<sup>1,2</sup> In a case of early T-cell precursor-ALL (ETP-ALL), the *NAP1L1/12q21* gene, a member of the nucleosome assembly protein family, was recently identified as another *MLLT10* partner.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, *PICALM-MLLT10*, *MLL-MLLT10*, and *NAP1L1-MLLT10* fusions all retained the OM-LZ domain at their C terminus.<sup>3-5</sup> It exerts a leukemogenic effect by interacting with chromatin modifying proteins such as the H3K79 methyltransferase hDOT1L.<sup>6,7</sup>

The present study focuses on 2 new *MLLT10* fusion genes in pediatric T-ALL, placing them within the *HOXA* subgroup.

## Study design

A combined interphase (CI) fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) test (supplemental Table 1, available on the *Blood* website) was applied in 42

pediatric T-ALL patients enrolled in the Associazione Italiana Ematologia Oncologia Pediatrica (AIEOP) ALL protocol. Informed consent of our work was obtained from the Bioethic Committee, University of Perugia (Prot. I. X.2011). Informed consent statements were provided according to the Declaration of Helsinki (AIEOP ALL protocol number NCT 00613457). To identify the new *MLLT10* fusions, we used a 5'-rapid amplification of cDNA ends-polymerase chain reaction (5'-RACE-PCR) (Invitrogen) and ThermoScript reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR) system (Invitrogen) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Primers are listed in supplemental Table 2. PCR products were subcloned into pGEM-T easy vector (Promega) and sequenced with the AB3500 Genetic analyzer (Applied Biosystems). Single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) analysis was performed using the whole-genome cytogenetic 2.7M array (Affymetrix).

Statistical methods for microarray data (Affymetrix hgu 133 plus 2 arrays) were analyzed using the Bioconductor package for R (version 2.14.1). Data were deposited at GEO repository (series accession number GSE42765; <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/>). Heatmaps were created using the Ward method and Euclidean distance. The heatmap for the unsupervised analysis was created using the probe sets with the highest variances (threshold 90%), while the heatmap for the supervised analysis was created with differentially expressed probe sets. Arrays were normalized using robust multiple-array average.<sup>8</sup> Batch effects were removed using ComBat.<sup>9</sup> Differentially expressed genes were identified by the shrinkage T-statistic.<sup>10</sup> False-positive findings were prevented by the local false discovery rate (IFDR). Probe sets with IFDR below 0.05 were considered significant.<sup>11,12</sup>

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## Results and discussion

CI-FISH identified *MLLT10* rearrangements in 6 of 42 (14.3%) patients. Four of the total cohort (9.5%) showed the *PICALM-MLLT10* fusion and 2 (4.8%) *MLLT10* translocations to unknown partner(s). Clinical, hematologic, cytogenetic, and molecular data of these 2 patients are shown in Table 1. The *MLLT10* FISH probe gave 3 signals in 55% of nuclei in case 1 and in 60% in case 2. In case 1, metaphase-FISH confirmed the split between the short and the long arms of 1 chromosome 10, resulting in the der(10)inv(10)(p12q25) seen at karyotype. The 10q breakpoint localized to band 25.3 in an ~12-kb region without genes (supplemental Figure 1A).

The *MLLT10* gene breakpoint was narrowed to between exons 14 and 15 in patient 1 and between exons 1 and 3 in patient 2 (supplemental Figure 1B-C). 5' RACE-PCR and sequencing showed an *HNRNPH1-MLLT10* in-frame transcript in the first case and a *DDX3X-MLLT10* fusion transcript in the second (Figure 1A,C). These results were confirmed by RT-PCR, cloning, and sequencing. Subsequently, a diagnostic double-color double-fusion (DCDF) test was developed in both cases (Figure 1B,D). The only common additional genetic lesion was a mutated *NOTCH1* gene (Table 1).

*HNRNPH1* and *DDX3X* are involved in RNA processing. *HNRNPH1* encodes for a member of the ubiquitous heterogeneous nuclear ribonucleoprotein subfamily (hnRNPs). It is an RNA binding protein that is involved in pre-mRNA processing, and mRNA metabolism and transport.<sup>13</sup> A *HNRNPH1* frameshift mutation was previously described in gastric cancer<sup>14</sup> and a *HNRNPH1* splice variant with protein truncation was identified in murine breast cancer cells.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, a variant *HNRNPH1* protein, covalently modified by O-linked acetyl hexosamine (GlcNAc), was isolated in acute leukemia with 11q23 cytogenetic changes.<sup>16</sup>

*DDX3X* is a member of the large family of RNA helicases with a DEAD box domain (Asp-Glu-Ala-Asp) that is involved in RNA transcription, splicing, mRNA transport, translation initiation, and cell-cycle regulation.<sup>17</sup> DEAD box RNA helicases were implicated in diverse forms of leukemia.<sup>18,19</sup> Recently, mutations inside and outside the DEAD box domain were detected in ~3% of patients with chronic lymphocytic leukemia.<sup>20</sup>

Structural analysis of *HNRNPH1-MLLT10* and *DDX3X-MLLT10* fusions showed *HNRNPH1* maintained 3 RNA recognition motifs while *DDX3X* lost the DEAD box domain, at the N terminus. At the C terminus, *MLLT10* lost 2 of 3 NLS domains in patient 1 but maintained all 3 in patient 2 (Figure 1A,C). As in other *MLLT10* fusions,<sup>3-5</sup> both cases retained the OM-LZ domain, which is needed to induce acute myeloid leukemia in mice bearing *PICALM-MLLT10* or *MLL-MLLT10*.<sup>6,7</sup> Interestingly, DOT1L inhibitors binding the OM-LZ domain were successful in controlling *MLL-MLLT10* and *PICALM-MLLT10* murine leukemias.<sup>21</sup>

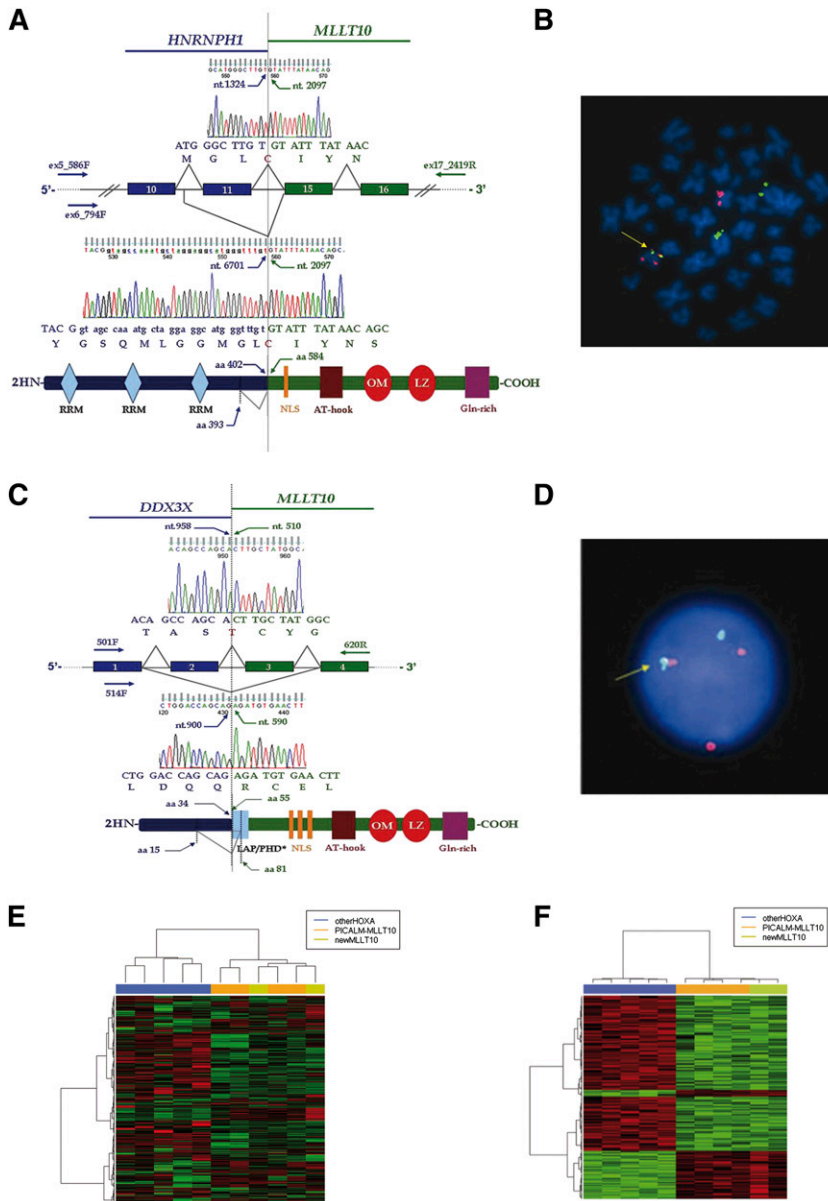
Whether these rare *MLLT10* partners are part of a functional complex or share a common regulation pathway remains to be investigated. The Net View Tools software ([http://netview.tigem.it/netview\\_project/netview\\_tools.html](http://netview.tigem.it/netview_project/netview_tools.html))<sup>22</sup> showed *DDX3X* was significantly coexpressed and directly linked (mutual information >0.1) to *HNRNPH1*, *PICALM*, and *NAPILI* (supplemental Table 3).

We applied GEP to determine whether *HNRNPH1-MLLT10* and *DDX3X-MLLT10* shared leukemogenic properties with other *MLLT10* recombinations within the *HOXA* category of T-ALL.<sup>23-24</sup> In an unsupervised analysis of 11 T-ALL samples with the *HOXA* signature, the 6 cases with *MLLT10* rearrangements (4 *PICALM-MLLT10*, 1 *HNRNPH1-MLLT10*, and 1 *DDX3X-MLLT10*) clustered

**Table 1. Clinical, immunophenotypic, hematologic, molecular, and cytogenetic data**

Patient	Sex/age, y	Diagnosis	WBC, ×10 <sup>9</sup> /L	<i>PICALM</i>	<i>MLLT10</i>	<i>MLL-ENL</i>	<i>MLL-AF4</i>	<i>SIL-TAL1</i>	<i>NOTCH1</i>	<i>FLT3</i>	Karyotype	CI-FISH	SNPs	MRD +33/+78	Chemotherapy*	Follow-up, mo
1 (UPN 1036616)	F/7	ETP-ALL	10.55	na	na	na	neg	neg	mutt	neg	46,XX,inv(10)(p12q25)[2]/46,XX[17]	Split: <i>MLLT10</i> /10p12 (55%) Loss: <i>IKZF1</i> /7p12 (10%)	Normal	+/+	High risk, no transplant donor	33+
2 (UPN 1023865)	M/11	Cortical T-ALL	152.8	neg	neg	n.a.	neg	neg	mutt	neg	Failed	Split: <i>MLLT10</i> /10p12 Loss: <i>PAX5</i> , <i>CDKN2A/B</i> , <i>JAK2</i> /9p13-24 Gain: <i>RP11-501C14</i> /17q21.31	Loss: 9p24.3-p11.2: from 0 to 47 508 608 bp Gain: 17q21.32-q25.3: from 45 273 751 to 78 786 769 bp	+/-	Standard risk	73+

y, years; m, months; F, female; M, male; MRD, minimal residual disease; mut, mutated; n.a., data not available; neg., negative; UPN, unique patient number; WBC, white blood cell; [], number of cells analyzed.  
\*AIEOP LLA 2000 (supplemental reference 1).  
†c.4766\_4767insAGCAGACCGGAGCAGCTGCGCAACAGCTC; p.S1589\_F1590insAEPEQLRNS.  
‡c.G4793C; p.R1598P; *NOTCH1* mutation numbers refer to CCDS 43905.1 and NP\_060087.3.



**Figure 1. Molecular characterization of the two new *MLLT10* fusions.** (A) Two *HNRNPH1-MLLT10* splicing isoforms were identified in patient 1. (Top) Direct sequencing showed an in-frame *HNRNPH1-MLLT10* isoform joining nucleotide 1324 (*HNRNPH1* exon 11) to nucleotide 2097 (*MLLT10* exon 15). (Bottom) Cloning and sequencing showed nucleotide 6701 (*HNRNPH1* intron 10) fused in-frame with nucleotide 2097 (*MLLT10* exon 15). Hypothetical fusion protein was shown in which *HNRNPH1* maintained all 3 RRM at the N terminus and *MLLT10* lost 2 of 3 NLS. *MLLT10* maintained the critical OM-LZ domain at the C terminus. Primer and sequence numbers refer to GenBank accession NC\_000005.9, NM\_005520.2, NP\_005511.1 for *HNRNPH1* and NM\_004641.3, NP\_004632.1 for *MLLT10*. (B) DCDF test: Probes for *MLLT10* (RP11-418C1 and RP11-249M6) in orange and for *HNRNPH1* (CTD-3223H16 and RP11-410B18) in green showed 1 fusion signal on der(10) (arrow). (C) Two *DDX3X-MLLT10* splicing isoforms were identified in patient 2. (Top) Sequencing showed an in-frame *DDX3X-MLLT10* isoform joining nucleotide 958 (*DDX3X* exon 2) to nucleotide 510 (*MLLT10* exon 3). (Bottom) Cloning and sequencing showed an in-frame isoform with nucleotide 900 (*DDX3X* exon 1) fused with nucleotide 590 (*MLLT10* exon 4). The hypothetical fusion protein lost the *DDX3X* DEAD box domain at the N terminus and maintained part of the PHD, all 3 NLS and the OM-LZ domain at the C terminus. Primer and sequence numbers refer to GenBank accession NM\_001356.3, NP\_001347.3 for *DDX3X* and NM\_004641.3, NP\_004632.1 for *MLLT10*. (D) DCDF-FISH with probes for *DDX3X* in green (RP11-1058N11, flanking 5', and RP11-10K13, flanking 3') and *MLLT10* in red (RP11-418C1 and RP11-249M6), showed 1 fusion signal (arrow). (E) Unsupervised analysis of 11 T-ALL *HOXA* patients. In such unsupervised analysis, patients bearing *MLLT10* rearrangements and those without *MLLT10* rearrangements (1 *MLL-ENL*, 1 *MLL-AF6*, 2 *TCRB-HOXA*, and 1 *SET-NUP214*) are naturally clustered in 2 distinct groups. *PICALM-MLLT10* patients are indicated in orange; patient 1 and patient 2 (*HNRNPH1-MLLT10*, *DDX3X-MLLT10*) in green and patients without *MLLT10* rearrangements in blue. (F) Supervised analysis was created using the significant probe sets from the comparison of the *HOXA* patients with *MLLT10* rearrangements (4 with *PICALM-MLLT10* and the 2 new cases with *HNRNPH1-MLLT10*, *DDX3X-MLLT10*) vs patients without *MLLT10* rearrangements (1 *MLL-ENL*, 1 *MLL-AF6*, 2 *TCRB-HOXA*, and 1 *SET-NUP214*). Patients bearing *MLLT10* recombinations are indicated in orange or green while patients without *MLLT10* rearrangements are indicated in blue. DCDF, double-color double-fusion; LAP, Leukemia Associated Protein; NLS, nuclear localization signal; PHD, plant homeo domain; RRM, RNA recognition motif.

separately from the other 5 cases (1 *MLL-ENL*, 1 *MLL-AF6*, 2 *TCRB-HOXA*, and 1 *SET-NUP214*) (Figure 1E). *t* test analysis revealed significant (IFDR < 0.05) differences in expression of 280 probe sets (supplemental Table 4). Supervised analysis with these probe sets confirmed 2 subgroups (Figure 1F). In the *HOXA* patients with *MLLT10* rearrangements, *HHEX* gene expression was higher (>1.5 fold-change) than in those without. *HHEX* is highly expressed in normal hematopoietic stem cells and downregulated during normal T-cell development.<sup>25</sup> *HHEX* overexpression was found in ETP-ALL (as seen in our case no. 1) and linked to upregulation of *MEF2C* which directly binds the *HHEX* promoter.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, *HHEX* is a member of the Nirenberg and Kim-like family of class II homeobox genes. In the other subgroup of 5 patients without *MLLT10* rearrangements, gene set enrichment analysis showed enrichment of *HOXA* class I homeobox genes and target genes (supplemental Figure 2). Although these findings need to be confirmed in a larger series of T-ALL, the present results suggest that *MLLT10* recombinations underlie a specific signature, within the *HOXA* category of T-ALL.

The present study provides insights into the biological pathways involved in *MLLT10* recombinations in pediatric T-ALL. Finding 2 new *MLLT10* fusion genes, involving *HNRNPH1* and *DDX3X*, highlights the role of the *MLLT10* gene, and particularly of its OM-LZ domain in this type of leukemia.

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## Authorship

Contribution: F.N. and V.P. performed karyotype analysis; V.P. selected DNA clones and performed FISH experiments; R.L.S.

supervised FISH experiments and drafted the paper; L.B. designed and performed molecular experiments and drafted the paper; D.D.G. and P.G. were involved in cloning and sequencing; C.B., M.G., and G.t.K. performed GEP studies; G.C. performed SNP analysis; and C.M. was responsible for the conception of the study, supervision, and manuscript preparation.

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Correspondence: Cristina Mecucci, Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplantation Unit, University Hospital, 06132 Perugia, Italy; e-mail: crimecux@unipg.it.

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