

## Brief report

Overexpression of *CEBPA* resulting from the translocation t(14;19)(q32;q13) of human precursor B acute lymphoblastic leukemia

Elise Chapiro, Lisa Russell, Isabelle Radford-Weiss, Christian Bastard, Michel Lessard, Stephanie Struski, Helene Cave, Sandra Fert-Ferrer, Carole Barin, Odile Maarek, Veronique Della-Valle, Jonathan C. Strefford, Roland Berger, Christine J. Harrison, Olivier A. Bernard, and Florence Nguyen-Khac, for the Groupe Francophone de Cytogénétique Hématologique

**Subtle variation in the expression or function of a small group of transcription factors can drive leukemogenesis. The *CEBPA* protein is known to regulate the balance between cell proliferation and differentiation during early hematopoietic development and myeloid differentiation. In human myeloid leukemia, *CEBPA* is frequently inactivated by mutation and**

**indirect and posttranslational mechanisms, in keeping with tumor suppressor properties. We report that *CEBPA* is activated by juxtaposition to the immunoglobulin gene enhancer upon its rearrangement with the immunoglobulin heavy-chain locus in precursor B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia harboring t(14;19)(q32;q13). Overexpression of ap-**

**parently normal *CEBPA* RNA or protein was observed in 6 patients. These data indicate that *CEBPA* may exhibit oncogenic as well as tumor suppressor properties in human leukemogenesis. (Blood. 2006;108:3560-3563)**

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## Introduction

The CCAAT/enhancer-binding protein (CEBP) belongs to a subfamily of transcription factors sharing a basic region-leucine zipper (bZIP) motif within their carboxy terminal end. They can homo- and heterodimerize through the bZIP motif. Alternative splicing and multiple translational initiation sites add further complexity to the family picture.<sup>1</sup>

*CEBPA*, the founder member of the family, is encoded from a gene composed of a single exon localized to the chromosomal band 19q13. Expression studies and knock-out experiments have demonstrated its essential role in the control of balance between proliferation and differentiation in a range of tissues, including hematopoietic stem cells and different stages of myeloid differentiation.<sup>2-4</sup> *CEBPA* controls the expression of myeloid genes and interacts with many protein partners such as CDK2, CDK4, CDKN1A/p21, E2F, and the SPI1/PU.1 transcription factor. The interaction with E2F is essential for the repression of *MYC* expression and induction of granulocytic differentiation. Besides the full-length 42-kDa protein, an internal translational initiation site leads to the synthesis of

a smaller 30-kDa product. This product fails to inhibit E2F and to down-regulate *MYC* and acts as a dominant-negative form.<sup>5,6</sup>

In line with its essential role in myeloid differentiation, inactivation of *CEBPA* is observed in human myeloid leukemic samples.<sup>1</sup> Mutations of *CEBPA* are observed in about 8% of acute myeloid leukemia (AML). They comprise 2 classes: mutations within the carboxyterminal part of the protein, resulting in the functional inactivation of the transcription factor; and mutations that occur within the 5' part of the gene, allowing the synthesis of only the short, dominant-negative 30-kDa *CEBPA* protein. The latter situation is also observed in rare constitutive mutations of *CEBPA*, which are associated with the occurrence of familial AML. Both constitutive and somatic mutations are frequently associated with mutation or loss of the second copy of the *CEBPA* gene, related to progression of the oncogenic process.<sup>7,8</sup>

More frequently, *CEBPA* is indirectly inactivated in AML.<sup>1</sup> Patients with t(8;21)(q22;q22) express the RUNX1-ETO fusion protein, which disrupts the positive autoregulation of the *CEBPA*

From the Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris (AP-HP) Service d'Hématologie Biologique, Hôpital Pitié-Salpêtrière, Paris, France; Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM), E0210, Paris, France; University Paris VI, Paris, France; Leukaemia Research Cytogenetics Group, Cancer Sciences Division, University of Southampton, United Kingdom; University René Descartes, Paris, France; AP-HP, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris, France; Laboratoire de Génétique oncologique, Rouen, France; Laboratoire d'Hématologie, Hôpital Hauteypierre, Strasbourg, France; AP-HP, Laboratoire de Biochimie Génétique, Hôpital Robert Debré, Paris, France; Laboratoire de Génétique, Chambéry, France; Laboratoire de Génétique, Tours, France; and AP-HP, Laboratoire d'Hématologie, Hôpital Saint-Louis, Paris, France.

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A complete list of the members of the Groupe Francophone de Cytogénétique Hématologique appears in "Appendix."

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E.C. and L.R. contributed equally to this work.

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**Reprints:** Florence Nguyen-Khac, Service d'Hématologie Biologique, Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière, 47-83 Bd de l'Hôpital, 75013 Paris, France; e-mail: florence.nguyen@psl.aphp.fr.

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**Table 1. Hematologic, individual, and cytogenetic data of patients with t(14;19)(q32;q13)**

Patient no.	Sex	Age, y	WBC count, × 10 <sup>9</sup> /L (% blasts)	Hb level, g/L	Platelet count, × 10 <sup>9</sup> /L	Survival	Immunophenotype	Karyotype*
P1	F	7	13.4 (92)	75	167	12 y	Early pre-B/pre-B?†	46,XX,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[2]/45,idem,der(16)t(16;17)(q11;q11),-17[14]
P2	F	26	4.5 (55)	100	50	Unknown	Early pre-B/pre-B?†	46,XX,dup(1)(q21q31),t(14;19)(q32;q13)[2]
P3	M	22	6.8 (26)	53	17	5 mo (d)	Early pre-B (CD10 <sup>+</sup> , Igc <sup>-</sup> )	46,XY,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[9]
P4	M	40	4.9 (67)	55	27	5 mo (d)	Pro-B (CD10 <sup>-</sup> , Igc <sup>-</sup> )	46,XY,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[12]/46,idem,idelic(8)(p11)[6]
P5	F	38	16.2 (72)	104	37	3 mo	Early pre-B (CD10 <sup>+</sup> , Igc <sup>-</sup> )‡	46,XX,del(7)(p?15),t(14;19)(q32;q13)[20]
P6	M	76	11 (77)	126	57	5 mo (d)	Pre-B (CD10 <sup>-</sup> , Igc <sup>+</sup> )	46,XY,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[7]
P7	F	38	94 (46)	120	168	22 d (d)	Early pre-B (CD10 <sup>+</sup> , Igc <sup>-</sup> )§	46,XX,t(9;22)(q34;q11)[9]/46,idem,i(7)(p10)[2]/47,idem,+8,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[8]/48,idem,+6,t(8;9)(q?;q11),+der(22)t(9;22)[21]§
P8	F	41	1.5 (16)	82	145	9 mo	Early pre-B/pre-B?†	46,XX,t(14;19)(q32;q13)[10]

WBC indicates white blood cell; Hb, hemoglobin; (d), dead; and Igc, cytoplasmic IgM.

\*Normal population omitted from the karyotype.

†CD10<sup>+</sup>, Igc not done.

‡All analyzed myeloid markers (myeloperoxidase, CD13, CD33, CD117, CD65) were negative for all patients, except for P5 (CD13<sup>+</sup>).

§All karyotypes were analyzed from bone marrow, except for P7 (peripheral blood).

promoter, suppressing *CEBPA* protein expression. The *RUNX1-MDS1-EV11* fusion oncoprotein, expressed in patients with t(3;21)(q26;q22), and the *CBFB-MYH11* fusion protein, expressed as a result of inv(16)(p13q22), indirectly suppress *CEBPA* protein expression through translational inhibition of the *CEBPA* mRNA and loss of *CEBPA* protein.<sup>1</sup> A comparable mechanism is observed in chronic myelogenous leukemia, in which the expression of heterogeneous nuclear RNPE2 (hnRNPE2) is responsible for the translational inhibition of *CEBPA* in blast crisis. More recently, functional inactivation of the *CEBPA* protein has been described in association with *FLT3* internal tandem duplication.<sup>9</sup> Together, these data support a tumor suppressor role for the *CEBPA* gene in myeloid malignancies.

Chromosomal translocations are frequently observed in hematologic malignancies, representing an important step in the leukemic transformation process. A number of chromosomal translocations, particularly in lymphoid malignancies, result in ectopic or enhanced expression of genes located within the vicinity of the chromosomal breakpoints.<sup>10</sup> This leads to overexpression of a protein, usually of normal sequence, although functionally significant mutations have been reported.<sup>11</sup>

In human precursor-B acute lymphoblastic leukemia (BCP-ALL), translocations involving the immunoglobulin heavy-chain locus (*IGH*) at chromosomal band 14q32 is a rare but recurrent event. One such translocation, t(14;19)(q32;q13), has been previously described in 6 patients with BCP-ALL, in which the breakpoint on chromosome 19 differs from the t(14;19)(q32;q13) identified in mature B-cell malignancies.<sup>12</sup> The Groupe Francophone de Cytogénétique Hématologique (GFCH) has collected 8 additional patients for hematologic, cytogenetic, and molecular studies. Here we report that this translocation involves the *CEBPA* gene on chromosome 19, resulting in a marked up-regulation of its expression and the production of an apparently normal *CEBPA* protein.

## Study design

Patient details are shown in Table 1. Samples were obtained after patients provided informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Fluorescence in situ hybridization (FISH) analysis was performed as previously described,<sup>13</sup> using either bacterial artificial chromosomes (BACs) or commercially available *IGH* probes (LSI *IGH*; Abbott Diagnostics, Rungis, France).<sup>14</sup> Immunologic, molecular, and quantitative polymerase

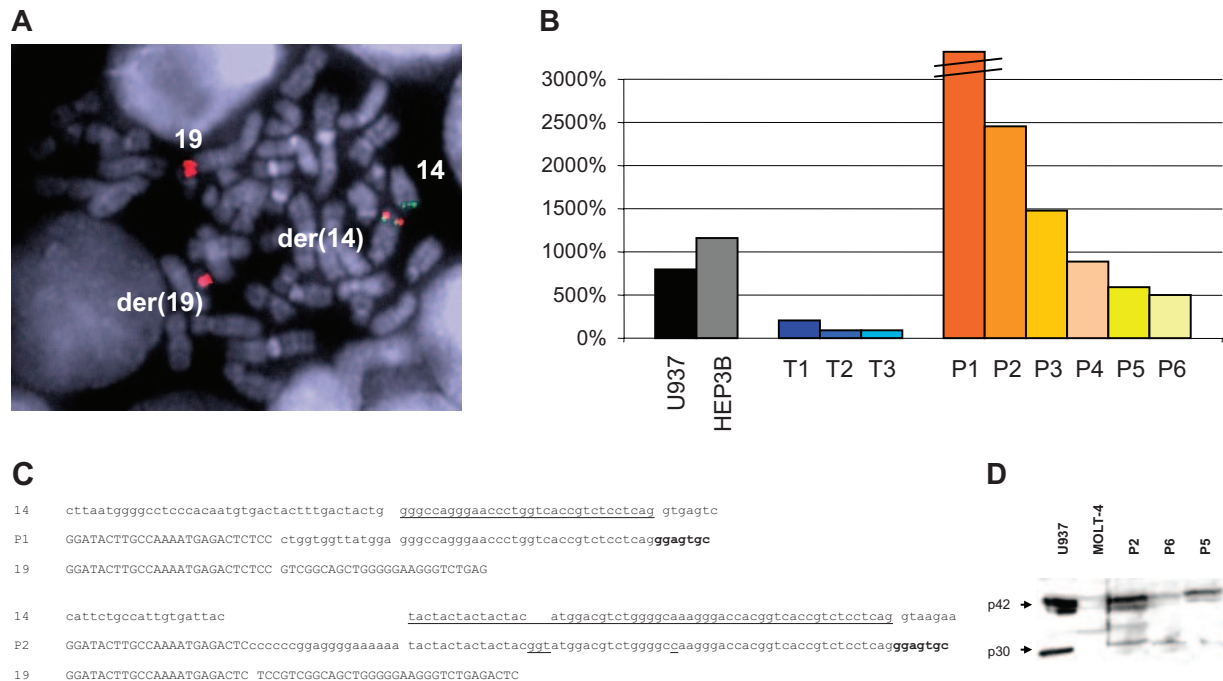
chain reaction (PCR) analyses were performed as previously described.<sup>15,16</sup> The fusion *CEBPA-Cmu* transcript was amplified using standard reverse transcription (RT)-PCR techniques with the primers *CEBPA3* (AGGGTGGAAACATAGGGACTT) and *C1* (CCAACGGCCACGCTGCTC).

## Results and discussion

Conventional chromosomal analysis identified 8 patients with t(14;19)(q32;q13). Apart from 1 child, the patients were adults (median, 38 years; range, 22-76 years) with ALL, ranging from pro-B to pre-B immunophenotype. Myeloid markers tested were essentially negative (Table S1, available at the *Blood* website; see the Supplemental Materials link at the top of the online article). Data from the Leukaemia Research Acute Leukemia Cytogenetics Database has shown an incidence of less than 0.5% and approximately 2% for this translocation in B-lineage childhood and adult ALL, respectively. The involvement of the *IGH* locus was confirmed by FISH (data not shown). Extensive FISH mapping identified a single BAC (RP11-270113) containing sequences that encompassed the breakpoint within 19q13. Figure 1A shows a representative image from patient P5, which was similar in all 8 patients. No material was available for further study of patients P7 and P8. The clustering of the chromosome 19 breakpoints within the sequences covered by a single BAC indicated the recurrent targeting of an individual gene.

To investigate the potential partner gene, we evaluated the expression by quantitative PCR of 4 genes located in this region of chromosome 19: *LRP3*, *CEBPA*, *CEBPG*, and *PEPD*. The expression levels were normalized against *ABL* and compared with the human cell line U937. The candidate oncogene was *CEBPA*. Its level of expression was at least 2.5 times higher in t(14;19) than control BCP-ALL samples, with a number of t(14;19) patients expressing extremely high levels of *CEBPA* mRNA (Figure 1B; Figure S2 for the 3 other genes).

Recent data<sup>17</sup> have indicated that the t(14;19) translocation breakpoint may be located within the 3' untranslated region (UTR) of *CEBPA*, suggesting a fusion transcript between *CEBPA* and the *IGH* constant region. RT-PCR analysis of 6 patients (P1 to P6) with primers from *Cmu* and *CEBPA* allowed specific amplification of material from patients P1 and P2 only. Direct sequencing demonstrated the fusion of *Cmu-JH* to the 3' UTR of *CEBPA*, establishing



**Figure 1. The *CEBPA* gene is targeted by the t(14;19) translocation.** (A) A representative FISH image of the t(14;19)(q32;q13) in patient P5. The RP11-270I13 probe produces a red signal on the normal chromosome 19 and a split signal between der(14) and der(19). A green signal from the *IGH* constant region-specific probe<sup>14</sup> identifies chromosomes 14 and der(14). Images were visualized under a Leica DM RXA microscope equipped with a fluorescence epi-illumination 100×/130-0.60 oil-immersion objective lens (Leica, Rueil-Malmaison, France). Leica QFISH software was used to digitally acquire images after capturing them with a Photometrics Sensys camera (Roper Scientific, Evry, France). (B) Quantitative RT-PCR analysis of *CEBPA* expression in t(14;19) patients (P1-P6), 3 control patients with BCP-ALL and the human cell lines U937 (AML) and HEP3B (hepatocellular carcinoma) using gene expression assay no. Hs.00263372\_s1 (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). Data are presented as percentage of *ABL* expression. Note that for patient 1 the bar graph is not drawn to scale: the real value is 6672%. Comparable results were obtained when the *GUS* gene was used as a reference. Because *CEBPA* is composed of a single exon, control experiments were performed with omission of the reverse transcriptase from the reaction. The observed Ct values in control experiments were always several cycles higher than in the test experiments. Quantitative RT-PCR analyses of the neighboring genes (*CEBPG*, *PEPD*, and *LPR3*) are shown in Figure S1. P1-P6 indicates t(14;19) samples; T1-T3, control BCP-ALL samples without a chromosome 19 abnormality. (C) Nucleotide sequence alignments of fusion *CEBPA-Cmu* transcripts isolated from patients P1 and P2: chromosome 19 sequences are indicated in uppercase; chromosome 14 sequences, lowercase. The JH segment is underlined on the germline chromosome 14 sequences and was identified as JH4 for P1 and JH6 for P2. The first exon of *IGH* constant (*Cmu*) gene is indicated in bold. Nucleotides underlined in P2 sequences differ from the genomic germline sequences used for comparison. (D) Western blot analyses of 200 μg protein extracted from blast cells of patients P2, P5, and P6. Proteins were separated on a 12% denaturing acrylamide gel, and transferred onto a nylon membrane. Proteins were detected using a goat anti-*CEBPA* immunoserum (sc 9314; Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA). U937 and MOLT-4 (T-ALL cell line) extracts were used as positive and negative controls, respectively. Arrows indicate the p42 and p30 *CEBPA* protein species.

unequivocally that *CEBPA* was the gene involved in the t(14;19) (Figure 1C).

To confirm the expression of *CEBPA* at the protein level, whole-cell extracts were analyzed by Western blotting. The *CEBPA* protein was present as the 2 usual species, p42 and p30, of similar size to the U937 positive control (Figure 1D; Figure S3). Thus, apparently normal *CEBPA* proteins are expressed in patients with t(14;19). This was expected, as no mutation of the *CEBPA* gene was observed in patients (data not shown).

Our results indicate that *CEBPA* may act as an oncogene in lymphoid malignancies, in contrast to its role as a tumor suppressor in myeloid leukemia. A preliminary report has indicated that additional members of the *CEBP* family are involved in translocations with *IGH* in BCP-ALL, which may also exhibit oncogenic properties.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, our patients with *CEBPA* overexpression did not express myeloid markers, such as CD13 or myeloperoxidase (MPO), suggesting that only a subset of the known *CEBPA* target genes, mainly defined in a myeloid context, would be activated in a lymphoid context. Their identification would be of great interest. Another possibility is that *CEBPA* exerts its effect through its interaction with other transcription factors, thereby deregulating a different set of genes. This example from *CEBPA* strongly supports the emerging paradigm that both an increase or decrease in gene dosage may contribute to the pathogenesis of leukemia.<sup>4</sup>

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## Appendix

Members of the Groupe Francophone de Cytogénétique Hématologique are as follows (unless otherwise indicated, institutions are located in France): Joris Andrieux, Laboratoire de Génétique Médicale, Hôpital Jeanne de Flandre, Lille; Nathalie Auger, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Département de biologie et de pathologie médicales, Institut Gustave Roussy, Villejuif; Hervé Avet-Loiseau, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Hématologique, Plateau technique, Hôtel Dieu, Nantes; Laurence Baranger, Laboratoire de Génétique, Centre Hospitalier Régional Universitaire, Angers; Carole Barin, Unité de Génétique, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Bretonneau, Tours; Christian Bastard, Département de Génétique, Centre Henri Becquerel, Rouen; Martine Becker, Service de Cytogénétique, Laboratoire Mérieux, Lyon; Laurence Benattar, Service de Biologie du Développement, Hôpital Robert Debré, Paris; Roland Berger, Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM) EMI 02 10, Tour Pasteur Hôpital Necker, Paris; Alain Bernheim, Laboratoire de Génomique Cellulaire des Cancers, Unité mixte de recherche (UMR) Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) 8125, Institut Gustave Roussy, Villejuif; Chrystèle Bilhou-Nabera, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Service d'Hématologie, Hôpital Bicêtre,

Le Kremlin-Bicêtre; Marc De Braekeleer, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Faculté de Médecine et des Sciences de la Santé, Brest; Françoise Brizard, Laboratoire d'Hématologie, CHR la Milétrie, Poitiers; Christine Cabrol, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Hématologie, Hôpital Cantonal Universitaire, Geneva, Switzerland; Evelyne Callet-Bauchu, Laboratoire Central d'Hématologie, Centre Hospitalier Lyon Sud, Pierre Benite; Hélène Cannoni, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Oncologique, Hôpital Timone Enfants, Marseille; Elise Chapiro, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Hématologique, Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière, Paris; Jean Chiesa, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Oncologique et Prénatale, Hôpital Gaston Doumergues, Nîmes; Marie-Agnès Collonge-Rame, Service de Génétique-Histologie, Biologie de la Reproduction, Besançon; Pascale Cornillet-Lefebvre, Laboratoire Central d'Hématologie, Hôpital Robert Debré, Reims; Nicole Dastuge, Génétique des Hémapathies, Pav. Lefebvre, Hôpital Purpan, Toulouse; Agnès Daudignon, Département d'Hématologie-Immunologie-Cytogénétique, Centre hospitalier de Valenciennes; François Desangles, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Service de Biologie Clinique, Hôpital (HIA) Val de Grâce, Paris; Virginie Eclache-Saudreau, Laboratoire d'hématologie, Hôpital Avicenne, Bobigny; Sandra Fert-Ferrer, Laboratoire de Biologie Médicale, Centre Hospitalier, Chamberry; Carine Gervais, Laboratoire d'Hématologie Cellulaire et de Cytogénétique Onco-Hématologique, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire (CHU) de Haute Pierre, Strasbourg; Michel Giollant, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Faculté de Médecine Clermont-Ferrand; Carlos Graux, Cliniques Universitaires St-Luc, Centre de Génétique, Secteur Hématologique, Brussels, Belgium; Marie-José Gregoire, Laboratoire de Génétique, CHU de Nancy-Brabois, Vandoeuvre-Les-Nancy; Anne Hagemeyer, Center of Human Genetics, Leuven, Belgium; Pierre Heimann, Service de Génétique Médicale-Bâtiment C, IRIBHM, Hôpital Universitaire Erasme, Brussels, Belgium; Christian Herens, Université de Liège, Tour de Pathologie, Liège; Catherine Henry, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, CHU Pontchaillou, Rennes; Jean-Loup Huret, Génétique, Département d'Information Médicale, CHR la Milétrie, Poitiers; Eric Jeandier, Service de Génétique, Mulhouse; Philippe Jonveaux, Laboratoire de Génétique, CHU de Nancy-Brabois, Vandoeuvre-Les-Nancy; Martine Jotterand, Service de Génétique Médicale, Unité de Cytogénétique du Cancer, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois, Lausanne, Switzerland; Marina Lafage-Pochitaloff, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Hématologique et Moléculaire, Département de Biopathologie, Institut Paoli Calmettes, Marseille; Jean-Luc Lai, Laboratoire de Génétique Médicale, Hôpital Jeanne de Flandre, Lille; Christine Lefebvre, Laboratoire de Génétique Onco-Hématologique, CHU Grenoble; Franseza Le Mee, Laboratoire de Génétique et Biologie Cellulaire, CHRU Pontchaillou, Rennes; Dominique Leroux, Laboratoire de Génétique Onco-Hématologique, CHU Grenoble; Michel Lessard, Laboratoire d'Hématologie, Hôpital Haute Pierre, Strasbourg; James Lespinasse, Laboratoire de Génétique Chromosomique, Chamberry; Eric Lipfert, Laboratoire d'Hématologie, Cytogénétique, Hôpital Haut-Lévêque, Pessac; Isabelle Luquet, Laboratoire Central d'Hématologie, Hôpital Robert Debré, Reims; Odile Maarek, Laboratoire Central d'Hématologie, Hôpital Saint-Louis,

Paris; Lucienne Michaux, Jeanne-Marie Libouton, Geneviève Ameys, Centre de génétique (UCL), Brussels, Belgium; Hossain Mossafa, Laboratoire Pasteur-CERBA, Département de Génétique Humaine, Val d'Oise; Marie-Joelle Mozziconacci, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Hématologique et Moléculaire, Département de Biopathologie, Institut Paoli Calmettes, Marseille; Dominique Muehlematter, Unité de cytogénétique du cancer, Service de génétique médicale, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Vaudois, Lausanne, Switzerland; Francine Mugneret, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, CHU Le Bocage, Dijon; Nathalie Nadal, Laboratoire d'hématologie - Pavillon de Biologie (niveau 1), CHU Hôpital Nord, St Etienne; Florence Nguyen-Khac, Service d'Hématologie Biologique, Pr Merle-Beral, Pav Laveran, Groupe Hospitalier Pitié-Salpêtrière, Paris; Marie-Pierre Pages, Laboratoire d'Hématologie et de Cytogénétique-Hôpital Debrousse, Lyon; Dominique Penther, Laboratoire de Génétique Oncologique, centre de lutte contre le cancer Henri Becquerel, Rouen; Bernard Perissel, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Faculté de Médecine, Clermont-Ferrand; Christine Perot, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Hôpital Saint Antoine, Paris; Ghislaine Plessis, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Postnatal, CHU Clémenceau, Caen; Hélène Poirrel, Cliniques Universitaires St-Luc, Centre de Génétique, Secteur Hématologie, Brussels, Belgium; Bruce Poppe, Center for Medical Genetics, Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium; Benoît Quilichini, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, CHU La Timone, Marseille; Katrina Rack, Institut de Pathologie et de Génétique, Gerpines, Belgium; Isabelle Radford-Weiss, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris; Sylvie Ramond, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Service d'Hématologie Biologique, Hôtel Dieu de Paris; Jean-Philippe Rault, Laboratoire de Biologie, Hôpital Legouest, Metz; Sophie Raynaud, Laboratoire de Génétique (niveau 3), Hôpital de l'Archet, Nice; Aline Receveur, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Amiens, Paris; Serge Romana, Service de Génétique et Cytogénétique, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris; Annick Rossi, CRTS, Bois Guillaume; Michèle Schoenwald, Service d'Oncologie Médicale, Centre Hospitalier Régional Orléans La Source, Orléans; Frank Speleman, Center for Medical Genetics, Ghent University Hospital, Ghent, Belgium; Claude Stoll, Laboratoire de Génétique Médicale, Faculté de Médecine, Strasbourg; Stéphanie Struski, Laboratoire d'Hématologie, Hôpital de Haute Pierre, Strasbourg; Pascaline Talmant, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique Hématologique, Plateau technique, Hôtel Dieu, Nantes; Sylvie Taviaux, Laboratoire de Génétique Moléculaire et Chromosomique, Hôpital Arnaud de Villeneuve, Montpellier; Christine Terré, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Centre de Transfusion Sanguine, Le Chesnay; Isabelle Tigaud, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Centre Hospitalier Lyon Sud, Pierre Benite; Jacqueline Van Den Akker, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Hôpital Saint Antoine, Paris; Michel Vekemans, Service de Génétique, Hôpital Necker-Enfants Malades, Paris; Christine Verellen, Centre de génétique UCL, Brussels, Belgium; and Franck Viguie, Laboratoire de Cytogénétique, Service d'Hématologie Biologique, Hôtel Dieu de Paris.

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