

A polypharmacologic strategy to overcome adaptive therapy resistance in AML by targeting immune stress response pathways

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By

Katelyn Michelle Melgar

Dissertation Committee:

Daniel T. Starczynowski, PhD (Chair) H. Leighton Grimes, PhD Ashish Kumar, MD, PhD Chandrashekhar Pasare, DVM, PhD William Seibel, PhD

Abstract

Targeted inhibitors to oncogenic kinases demonstrate encouraging clinical responses early in the treatment course, however most patients will relapse due to target-dependent mechanisms that mitigate enzyme-inhibitor binding, or through target-independent mechanisms, such as alternate activation of survival and proliferation pathways, known as adaptive resistance. Here we describe mechanisms of adaptive resistance in FLT3 mutant acute myeloid leukemia (AML) by examining integrative in-cell kinase and gene regulatory network responses after oncogenic signaling blockade by FLT3 inhibitors (FLT3i). We identified activation of innate immune stress response pathways after treatment of FLT3-mutant AML cells with FLT3i and showed that innate immune pathway activation via the IRAK1/4 kinase complex contributes to adaptive resistance in FLT3-mutant AML cells. To overcome this acute adaptive resistance mechanism, we developed a small molecule that simultaneously inhibits FLT3 and IRAK1/4 kinases. The multi-kinase FLT3-IRAK1/4 inhibitor eliminated adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells in vitro and in vivo, and displayed superior efficacy as compared to current targeted FLT3 therapies. These findings uncover a polypharmacologic strategy for overcoming adaptive resistance to therapy in AML by targeting immune stress response pathways.

Preface

The work presented in this dissertation will be published in *Science Translational Medicine*

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Table of Contents

Chapter 4: Discussion, Implications, and Future Directions………………………………... 131

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 1: Background and Introduction

Acute myeloid leukemia

Overview and classification

Acute myeloid leukemia (AML) is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a disease of clonal expansion of myeloid blasts in the peripheral blood, bone marrow or other tissue with a blast percentage of at least 20% *(1)*. The worldwide incidence is 2.5 to 3 per 100,000 people per year and in the United States the incidence was reported to be 4.3 per 100,000 between 2011 and 2015 *(1, 2)*. The median age at diagnosis for AML is 65 years old and has a slight male predominance (1.4:1 male:female) *(1, 2)*. AMLs can arise de novo, as a transformation of a chronic hematopoietic disease such as Chronic Myeloid Leukemia (CML) or Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS), or can be a sequelae of previous therapy such as radiation or chemotherapy. AMLs are further classified by the WHO by various genetic and morphological abnormalities (**Table 1.1**). Genetic changes typically include both a mutation that blocks myeloid differentiation as well as a mutation that provides a survival and/or proliferative advantage *(1)*. The overall 5 year survival from 2008-2014 in the United States was 27.4%; however the survival rates between the various genetic subtypes are very variable *(2)*.

Another method of classifying AMLs is using the French-American-British (FAB) system which groups AMLs into eight classes (**Table 1.2**). This system is primarily based on cell morphology and flow cytometric markers. However, the simplicity of this system does not take into account prognostic factors thus the WHO classification system is more widely used.

Table 1.1: WHO Acute Myeloid Leukemia Subtypes *(3, 4)*.

Table 1.2: FAB AML Subtypes

Genetics

AMLs typically require two mutations: one that blocks a step of myeloid differentiation and one that provides a survival or proliferation advantage. In addition to determining the subtype of AML, the genetic profile of an AML plays a large role in the prognosis and therapeutic strategy. Chromosomal abnormalities are very common in AML, present in about 60% of AML patients at diagnosis *(5, 6)*. Additionally, the presence of one of following three chromosomal rearrangements alone is enough to make a diagnosis of AML even if the blast count is below 20%: t(15;17), t(8;21), or inv(16) *(1)*. These are the most commonly found chromosomal abnormalities in AML, with each found in 5-15% of AML cases *(5–7)*. In addition to chromosomal changes, mutations in individual genes also contribute to patient prognosis and direction of treatment.

Although many factors contribute to prognosis, including patient age and comorbidities, genetic changes are the strongest indicators of prognosis. Table 1.3 lists genetic alterations that are associated with a poor prognosis in AML patients and have a frequency of >5% in de novo AML cases.

Table 1.3: Genetic alterations in AML with an unfavorable prognosis and a frequency of greater than 5%. Adapted from *The 2016 revision to the World Health Organization classification of myeloid neoplasms and acute leukemia* (Blood 2016) and *The Cancer Genome Atlas Research Network: Genomic and epigenomic landscapes of adult de novo AML* (NEJM 2013) *(4, 8)*.

Treatment strategies

Induction Chemotherapy:

The traditional standard of care for AML is the " $7 + 3$ " induction regimen which consists of 7 days of continuous intravenous cytarabine (araC) at 100 or 200 mg/m² per day along with single i.v. infusions of daunorubicin at 60 mg/m² on days 1 through 3, though doses may vary between instititutions *(9, 10)*. Both compounds work to inhibit cell cycling: Cytarabine is a pyrimidine analog that inhibits DNA synthesis and daunorubicin is an anthracycline antibiotic that inhibits topoisomerase *(11, 12)*. More recently, an alternative standard of care has been growing in popularity which combines high-dose araC (HiDAC; $>$ 1000 mg/m²) with 2-3 nucleoside analogues *(13)*. The rational for this approach was that the efficacy of araC depends on its intracellular metabolism to ara-CTP. The presence of purine nucleoside analogues, such as cladrabine or fludarabine, inhibit ribonucleoside reductase, thus limiting dNTP production and increasing incorporation of ara-CTP *(13)*. Several clinical trials have shown an improved complete remission (CR) for patients receiving HiDAC with nucleoside doublets compared to the 7+3 regimen, however debate over the appropriate patient populations for each treatment regimen remains *(13–17)*. Many factors contribute to an individual's response to induction therapy, but overall the CR for induction therapy is 40-60%. Therefore, the main goal of induction therapy is to reduce the bulk leukemia population while physicians either wait for genetic profiling results which will direct more targeted therapy, or to prepare patients for allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT) *(10)*.

Targeted therapy:

All-trans retinoic acid/arsenic trioxide

One of the first and most effective examples of targeted therapy in AML is all-trans retinoic acid (ATRA) and arsenic trioxide (ATO) to treat t(15;17) acute promyelocytic leukemia (APML). The t(15;17) translocation creates a fusion protein of promyelocytic leukemia (PML) and the retinoic acid receptor α (RARα) which acts as a dominant negative block on differentiation *(18)*. APML patients treated with chemotherapy alone had a CR of 75-80% but the median remission was only 1-2 years and patients also suffered from chemotherapy-related morbidity and mortality *(19)*. ATRA/ATO act on the PML-ATRA fusion protein to lift the differentiation block. The introduction of these therapies into the clinic resulted in a dramatic increase in CR and 5-year disease free survival (both >90%) *(19)*. APML went from a fatal diagnosis to a very treatable disease because of this targeted treatment strategy.

Kinase Inhibitors

The amazing success of imatinib in treating BCR-ABL chronic myeloid leukemia (CML) has spawned a huge effort to develop targeted kinase inhibitors based on individualized patient genetics in many diseases. The more complicated genetic background of AMLs compared to CML has made finding an effective target in AML more complicated; however, significant advances have been made in the field in the last decade. FLT3 inhibitors are probably the class with the most progress in AML; they will be reviewed in detail in the next section.

Another target of interest is MAPK/ERK Kinase (MEK). Preclinical studies have shown activation of the mitogen activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathway in a variety of AMLs, particularly in those with aberrant RAS activation *(20, 21)*. Although MEK inhibitors have had efficacy in preclinical models, translation to clinical studies as single agents or in combination with chemotherapy has not matched expectations and several trials have been terminated due to lack of efficacy (NCT00957580, NCT01907815) *(22–26)*.

Another pathway of interest is the PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway, which, like the MAPK pathway, shows increased activation in many AMLs and is important for leukemic cell survival *(27, 28)*. Preclinical studies of PI3K/AKT/mTOR inhibitors are promising, showing significant induction of apoptosis in vitro and prolonged cell survival in murine xenograft models *(29–32)*.

Multiple clinical trials for various PI3K/AKT/mTOR inhibitors are on-going and results have not been posted yet for most (NCT00710528, NCT01396499, NCT01756118). Unfortunately, two studies have been terminated for lack of efficacy (NCT02438761 and NCT01253447) *(33)*.

Cyclin-dependent kinase (CDKs) inhibitors are another growing class of compounds. CDKs regulate cell cycle progression and gene transcription and can be dysregulated in AML *(34–36)*. A number of CDK inhibitors have been evaluated in preclinical and clinical studies with a focus on CDK4, 6 and 9 *(34, 37–41)*. Because CDKs have a highly conserved ATP-binding pocket, most CDK inhibitors are not very selective for individual CDKs, but they can have slight differences in IC50 between them *(41)*. As certain CDKs are involved in cell cycle and others are involved in transcription, CDK inhibitors can have different or multiple mechanisms of action for cell death depending on which CDKs they target *(41)*. There has been some progress in moving CDK inhibitors into the clinic. A phase 2 randomized clinical trial of flavopiradol in combination with Ara-C induction showed an increase in CR, though the study was not large enough to detect a difference in overall survival *(42)*. Phase 1/2 studies of other CDK inhibitors, palbociclib (CDK4/6) and AZD4573, in relapsed/refractory AML are ongoing (NCT02310243, NCT03844997, NCT03263637).

Unfortunately, a common theme between all the kinase inhibitors seems to be effective preclinical studies followed by underwhelming clinical results highlighting the complex nature of AML *in vivo*.

Epigenetic modulators

As noted in **Table 1.3**, several of the most commonly mutated genes with poor prognosis in AML have a functional role in epigenetic modification. Thus, in recent years, compounds that inhibit the proteins responsible for these aberrant epigenetic changes have been developed. Inhibitors of several methyltransferases, such as mixed lineage leukemia (MLL) fusion products,

G9A/KMT1C, EZH2, and DOT1L, have shown efficacy against AML in preclinical studies *(43– 49)*. EZH2 inhibitors are currently being studied in clinical trials of lymphoma but have yet to be applied to AML. The DOT1L inhibitor, pinometostat (EPZ-5676) has completed a phase I clinical trial in MLL-rearranged AML (NCT02141828, results not yet posted) and a phase 1b/2 study of pinometostat in combination with chemotherapy is currently enrolling (NCT03724084).

Alternatively, histone deacetaylases (HDAC) have been studied as therapeutic targets as well. In addition to inducing epigenetic modifications through their activity on histones, HDAC inhibitors also have antileukemic activity by preventing deacetylation of non-histone proteins such as HSP90 and by stimulating the immune reponse *(50–52)*. Vorinostat, romidepsin, and belinostat have been approved for T-cell lymphoma, and panabinostat has been approved for multiple myeloma. Belinostat, vorinostat, panobinostat, and entinostat are currently being investigated in multiple phase I and phase II clinical trials of AML, however the results that have been published so far have been underwhelming (NCT02381548, NCT00357032, NCT00878722, NCT01550224, NCT00656617, NCT01242774, NCT01463046, NCT00946647, NCT01305499, NCT01159301, NCT00015925).

A third approach to epigenetic modification is through IDH1/2 inhibitors in cancers with IDH1/2 mutations. IDH1/2 normally operate in the citric acid cycle to convert isocitrate to αketoglutarate (α-KG). Mutant IDH1/2 instead produce the oncometabolite 2-hydroxyglutarate (2- HG). TET2 is dependent on α-KG, therefore the accumulation of 2-HG inhibits TET2 demethylation activity and results in a differentiation block *(53, 54)*. Two IDH inhibitors were FDAapproved in recent years for relapsed/refractory AML. Enasidanib (AG-221), an IDH2 inhibitor, was FDA-approved in 2017 and several clinical studies are currently examining its use in newly diagnosed AML or other hematopoietic malignancies and in combination with various chemotherapy regimens (NCT01915498, NCT03173248, NCT02632708, NCT02677922, NCT02577406, NCT03839771) *(55)*. Similarly, ivosidenib (AG-120) is an IDH1 inhibitor that was

FDA-approved in 2018 for relapsed/refractory IDH1-mutant AML and several studies are ongoing to expand access to other patient populations and in combination with chemotherapy (NCT03245424, NCT02632708, NCT02677922, NCT03839771) *(56)*.

Pro-apoptotic agents

Another common class of genetic alterations in cancer in general is an imbalance between pro- and anti-apoptotic signaling that favors anti-apoptotic signals and thus maintains survival in cancer cells. B-cell lymphoma 2 (BCL-2) is an anti-apoptotic protein that is particularly important for normal hematopoietic cell survival and its overexpression has been implicated in chemoresistance in AML *(57, 58)*. Venetoclax (ABT-199) is an antagonist of BCL-2 and was FDAapproved in 2018 for AML in combination with low-dose chemotherapy in adults over 75 years old whose comorbidities preclude them from high-dose induction therapy *(59)*. This approval was partially based on the phase 1 clinical trial in which it was found that addition of venetoclax to induction therapy in older patients had a CR of 60%, which is a significant increase over previous studies which have shown a CR of 10-50% for older patients with azacytidine or decitabine monotherapy (NCT02203773) *(60)*.

Immune Therapies

Another treatment strategy to manipulate the immune system to direct an anti-tumor immune response. One method is monoclonal antibodies or bispecific T-cell engagers (BiTEs) against myeloid surface antigens such as CD33 and the interleukin-3 receptor alpha (CD123). AMLs have shown overexpression of CD33 and CD123 compared to normal hematopoietic progenitors, therefore they present targets that are relatively leukemia-specific *(61–63)*. The antibodies are conjugated to DNA-damaging agents such as an antibiotic or a DNA cross-linker resulting in cell death when the antibody is internalized *(64, 65)*. Gemtuzumab ozogamicin, a

CD33 antibody conjugated to the antibiotic calicheamicin, received FDA approval for relapsed/refractory AML in 2000 and then approval was expanded to newly diagnosed and pediatric patients (> 2 years old) in 2017. Gemtuzumab has seen the greatest benefit in patients who are not fit for chemotherapy: In several phase 2 trials of relapsed patients older than 60 years and ineligible for chemotherapy, there was a CR of about 30% and in a phase 2 trial of older patients ineligible for chemotherapy, there was a roughly 5 week improvement in overall survival compared to supportive care *(66–68)*. Multiple anti-CD123 antibodies are in development and a few phase I trials in AML are ongoing, however results have not been released yet *(69–71)*. In a variation on traditional antibodies, BiTEs consist of two variable domains from different monoclonal antibodies linked together: one side binds CD3 and the other binds the tumor antigen of choice *(72)*. The binding of a T-cell to a tumor cell in this manner activates a targeted antitumor t-cell response regardless of the T-cell's innate antigen specificity *(72)*. For applications to AML, BiTEs have been made with anti-CD33 (AMG-330) or anti-CD123 (XmAb14045 and JNJ-6309178) domains *(73–75)*. Phase I trials for each BiTE are ongoing in relapsed/refractory AML (NCT02520427, NCT02730312, NCT02715011) and preliminary results from the XmAb14045 trial showed a CR of 23% as of 2018 *(76)*.

An additional strategy to activate an anti-tumor T-cell response is through chimeric antigen receptor T cells (CARTs). CARTs are allogeneic or autologous T cells that have been genetically engineered to express a T-cell receptor (TCR) that recognizes a surface antigen of choice as well as costimulatory molecules to allow the CARTs to act independently of traditional immune activation mechanisms *(77)*. The CARTs are then adoptively transferred into the patient and are able to find and kill any cell expressing the target. CARTs using CD19 as a target have had great success in B-cell lymphoma and were recently FDA approved *(78)*. Because of the efficacy of the CARTs eradicating any cell expressing the target antigen, if the target antigen is expressed on normal cells they must be an expendable population. Therefore, applications to AML have been difficult because AML protein expression is largely shared by hematopoietic stem and progenitor

cells which are necessary for survival *(79)*. CD33 and CD123 are being investigated as potential targets, however they both come with significant risk for myeloablation as well as on-target/offtumor toxicity of endothelial cells (CD123) or hepatic cells (CD33) *(79–81)*. Despite these complications, several clinical trials are ongoing with CD123 and CD33 CARTs (NCT03126864, NCT03190278, NCT03473457). Additionally the search for better AML-specific targets is ongoing, including one clinical trial investigating FLT3 CARTs in FLT3-mutant AML (NCT03904069) *(82–85)*.

The immune system has many mechanisms in place to limit inappropriate immune activation to promote self-tolerance and attenuate collateral damage of surrounding tissue. Cancers often take advantage of these pathways to protect themselves from anti-tumor immune responses. Therefore, another approach to immunotherapy is to inhibit the immune tolerance mechanisms employed by the cancer. These therapies, labeled checkpoint inhibitors, have had a lot of success in solid tumors and are now being studied in the context of hematologic neoplasms. Two of the most widely studied mechanisms are programmed cell death protein 1 (PD-1) and cytotoxic T-lymphocyte antigen 4 (CTLA-4). It has been shown across many different types of cancers, including AML, that cancer cells upregulate PD-1 surface expression which binds to PD-L1 on T-cells resulting in inhibition of T-cell activation *(86–88)*. Therefore, blocking the PD-1/PD-L1 interaction has been of great interest in the cancer research community and several blocking antibodies have been developed. The PD-1 inhibitors pembrolizumab and nivolumab have received FDA approval for a variety of solid tumors including non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC), melanoma, renal cell carcinoma and lymphoma. Furthermore, pembrolizumab was recently designated as a first-line therapy in NSCLC. The application of these antibodies to AML are currently being investigated in multiple phase 1 and 2 clinical trials (NCT02845297, NCT02996474, NCT02708641, NCT02768792, NCT02532231, NCT02464657, NCT03417154, NCT02397720). CTLA-4 is expressed by T cells and inhibits T-cell activation by competing with

CD28 to bind the co-stimulator molecules CD80 and CD86 expressed by antigen presenting cells (APCs) *(89–91)*. While CD28:CD80/86 interaction promotes T-cell activation, CTLA-4:CD80/86 drives an inhibitory signal *(89–91)*. Ipilimumab, an anti-CTLA-4 antibody that blocks CTLA-4 from binding CD80/86, is FDA-approved for melanoma and is being tested in clinical trials for AML and other cancers (NCT01757639, NCT02890329). Although checkpoint inhibition seems to be a promising treatment strategy, there is a serious risk of potentially life-threatening autoimmunity against various organs because of the non-specific immune activation, particularly with CTLA-4 blockade more so than PD-1 blockade *(92, 93)*. Immune-related adverse events are very common, with rates usually around 25-50% but as high as 90% in some trials *(92)*. Therefore, patient fitness and ability of the medical team to manage autoimmune complications is an important consideration in deciding on checkpoint-inhibitor therapy.

Hematopoietic Stem Cell Transplantation (HSCT):

Ultimately, the treatment strategy with the best chance for preventing relapse is HSCT. HSCT involves conditioning the patient with cyclophosphamide and either busulfan or total body irradiation, followed by infusion of allogeneic HLA-matched donor HSCs, usually from a sibling *(94)*. In addition to replacing the diseased bone marrow, the donor graft also provides life-long anti-leukemic activity by surveilling for and killing remaining leukemic cells. However, there are limits to the availability and feasibility of HSCT in AML patients. For example, it can be difficult to find an HLA-matched donor. Additionally, because of the intensity of conditioning and the relatively high risk of treatment-related morbidities, such as graft-vs-host disease, HSCT is usually reserved for younger, fitter patients (<65 years old), although recent advancements in conditioning regimens have improved outcomes in older patients *(94–96)*. Furthermore, multiple studies have shown that HSCT provides a significant survival benefit for adverse and intermediate risk-groups, but not for patients with favorable cytogenetics (such as NPM1-mutant/FLT3-wild

type (WT)) *(97)*. Thus, development of alternative treatment strategies are needed for patients who would not benefit from HSCT.

FLT3-mutant Acute Myeloid Leukemia and Treatment Strategies

FLT3 Structure and Signaling

FLT3 is a transmembrane protein composed of an extracellular domain, a transmembrane helix, and an intracellular module. The intracellular module consists of the juxtamembranal domain, the kinase domain, and the C-terminal tail *(98)*. Glycosylation is required for targeting FLT3 to the extracellular membrane, where FLT3 ligand (FL) binds the extracellular domain of FLT3 *(99–101)*. Upon binding, the receptor dimerizes and the kinase domains autophosphorylate the JM segments, releasing the JM domain from its autoinhibitory conformation and stabilizing the active conformation *(98, 102)*. Once active, there is autophosphorylation of additional tyrosine residues which then serve to further stabilize the active conformation and also act as recruitment sites for downstream substrates, such as GRB2, SHC, and SHIP2 *(98, 102, 103)*. FLT3 activation plays a key role in normal hematopoietic development by promoting anti-apoptosis, pro-survival, and cell cycle pathways primarily via PI3K/AKT/mTOR, Ras, MAPK, and STAT pathways *(104)*.

FLT3 Mutations in AML

FLT3 mutations are one of the most common sites for mutation in AML and are associated with poor prognosis (**Table 1.3**). The most common type of FLT3 mutation is an internal tandem duplication (ITD) in the JM domain, occurring in roughly 25% of newly diagnosed adult AMLs and about 15% of pediatric AMLs *(8, 105–109)*. The ITDs in the JM domain prevent the protein from folding into its autoinhibitory conformation, resulting in constitutive activation *(98)*. The next most common class of FLT3 mutations are point mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain which occur in about 7% of AMLs *(105, 110, 111)*. These mutations typically occur at the D835 residue *(110,*

111). Rather than physically locking the protein in to its active state like the ITD mutations, these point mutations instead shift the equilibrium between active and inactive states toward the active state *(112)*.

In addition to an unregulated increase in normal FLT3 signaling (i.e. MAPK and PI3K/mTOR signaling), mutant FLT3 can aberrantly activate additional signaling pathways. Although wild-type and mutant FLT3 both result in STAT5 phosphorylation, only mutant FLT3 signaling induces phosphorylated STAT5 to bind to DNA *(113, 114)*. Furthermore, FLT3 overexpression can induce NFkB activity, providing an additional survival mechanism *(115, 116)*.

As FLT3 signaling promotes hematopoietic survival and proliferation, this mutation alone is not sufficient to induce leukemia, a second mutation blocking differentiation is required in combination, such as DNMT3a loss-of-function, or CEPBα, IDH1, or NPM1 mutations *(117–120)*.

Prognosis and Treatment of FLT3-mutant AML

In general, FLT3-ITD mutation confers a poor prognosis compared to wild-type FLT3. Multiple studies have demonstrated that FLT3-ITD AML patients have poorer CR, relapse rate (RR), and survival than FLT3-WT patients regardless of age: the overall survival ranges from 13- 32% in FLT3-ITD patients compared to 44-50% in FLT3-WT patients *(106, 108, 121, 122)*. In addition to the presence of an ITD having prognostic significance, the characteristics of the ITD have prognostic significance as well. For example, the size of the duplication is a prognostic indicator *(107, 123)*. The ITDs typically occur in exons 14 and 15 and can range in size from a few nucleotides up to over 200 *(106–108, 123, 124)*. One study looking at the ITD size in 151 AML patients found that those with ITDs larger than 40 nucleotides had poorer CR (37%) and estimated 5-year survival (5YS) (13%) than patients with smaller ITDs (1-30 nucleotides) (CR 67%; 5YS 26%) or ITD-negative (CR 52%; 5YS 21%) *(123)*. Additionally, allelic burden is a significant prognostic factor. AML patients with a high ratio of FLT3-ITD compared to FLT3-WT have a significantly worse 5YS, disease-free survival, and RR compared to those with a low ratio *(107)*. This effect is further exaggerated when expression of FLT3-WT completely lost, with the median disease-free survival reaching as low as 4 months in those patients *(109)*.

With the strong prognostic significance of FLT3-ITD, high incidence in AML, as well as its inherent druggability as a tyrosine kinase, FLT3 has been extensively studied as a therapeutic target. All FLT3 inhibitors developed so far have been small molecules that competitively bind in the ATP binding pocket of FLT3 which contains a conserved Asp-Phe-Gly (DFG motif) that is flipped in or out depending on the active state of the kinase *(125)*. ATP-competitive kinase inhibitors are separated into two classes: type 1 and type 2. Type 1 inhibitors bind to the DFG-IN conformation, therefore binding preferentially to the active kinase. Type 2 inhibitors are the opposite, they bind the DFG-OUT conformation found in the inactive form of the kinase *(126)*. Currently available FLT3 inhibitors are summarized in **Table 1.4** and selected compounds are described in detail below.

Table 1.4: Targets and clinical status of currently available FLT3 inhibitors.

Midostaurin

Midostaurin (PKC412), a staurosporine derivative, was originally developed as a protein kinase C (PKC) inhibitor for solid tumors *(135, 136)*. Midostaurin was later reported to have potent activity against FLT3 and subsequently showed activity against FLT3-mutant AML in preclinical models *(137–139)*. In early clinical studies, FLT3-mutant patients had no CR with midostaurin as a single agent, however they did have reduced peripheral blast counts indicating that midostuarin was having some biological effect *(140, 141)*. A later phase I study showed that midostaurin was well tolerated when combined with induction therapy *(142)*. A phase III study adding midostaurin to induction and consolidation regimens in over 700 newly-diagnosed FLT3-mutant AML patients showed a significant increase in 4-year OS in the midostaurin-treated group compared to chemotherapy alone (51.4% vs 44.3%) and an increase in median survival of 49.1 months *(143)*. The success of this trial led to FDA approval of midostaurin in combination with standard induction and consolidation chemotherapy in April 2017, making midostaurin the first approved drug for AML since 2000 *(138)*. The approval of midostaurin has been a great accomplishment for AML treatment; however, there is certainly room to improve CR, mitigate myelosuppression, and decrease relapse rates.

Quizartinib

Quizartinib (AC220) is one of several compounds that were specifically designed to inhibit FLT3 and improve selectivity compared to midostaurin and other first-generation FLT3 inhibitors *(144)*. Quizartinib was shown to have impressive efficacy against FLT3-mutant AML in multiple preclinical models including xenograft studies *(131, 145, 146)*. A phase I clinical study of relapse/refractory AML examining quizaritinib as a single agent showed an overall CR of 30%, with FLT3-mutant patients faring better than FLT3-WT patients (CR: 53% vs 14%) *(147)*. Next, a phase 2 study of quizartinib as monotherapy in relapsed/refractory AML showed a CR of 56% and 46% in two independent cohorts of FLT3-ITD positive patients *(148)*. A phase 2 study

comparing 30mg/day and 60mg/day quizartinib as a single agent in FLT3-mutant relapsed/refractory showed a CR of 47% in both groups and a median OS of 20.9 and 27.9 weeks respectively *(149)*. These lower doses had an improved safety profile (particularly QTprolongation) compared to previous studies using 90 – 135 mg/day with no difference in CR which supported using lower doses moving forward. A phase III trial (QuANTUM-R, NCT02039726) is ongoing comparing quizartinib as a monotherapy to salvage chemotherapy in relapsed/refractory FLT3-mutant AML.

Gilteritinib

Gilteritinib (ASP2215) is another second generation FLT3 inhibitor specifically designed to target FLT3. Importantly, gilteritinb also inhibits FLT3 with mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain that confer resistance to other FLT3 inhibitors including midostaurin and quizartinib. The significance of these mutations will be further explored in the next section. Preclinical studies showed gilteritinib is potently effective against FLT3-mutant AML cell lines, mouse models, and patient xenograft models *(150, 151)*. Additionally, gilteritinib has a higher IC50 against KIT than midostaurin or quizartinib, suggesting that gilteritinib may result in fewer myelosuppressive adverse events than other FLT3 inhibitors *(150)*. A multicenter phase I/II dose escalation and expansion study of gilteritinib in relapsed/refractory AML showed a CR of 37% and median OS of 30 weeks in FLT3-mutant patients *(152)*. This study, in part, resulted in FDA approval for gilteritinib in FLT3-mutant relapsed/refractory AML in late 2018 *(153)*. A phase III study (ADMIRAL; NCT02421939) is currently ongoing comparing gilteritinib to salvage chemotherapy in relapsed/refractory FLT3-mutant AML. Early analysis has reported a significant increase in median OS (9.3 months vs 5.6 months) and one-year survival rates (37.1% vs 16.7%) in the patients receiving gilteritinib compared to salvage chemotherapy *(154)*. Multiple clinical studies examining gilteritinib in combination with other therapies such as induction or other targeted inhibitors are ongoing (NCT02752035, NCT02310321, NCT03625505, NCT03730012).

Mechanisms of Resistance to FLT3 inhibitors in FLT3-mutant AML

Although some FLT3 inhibitors have had promising clinical effects in patients, there are still a large portion of FLT3-mutant patients that are not responsive. Furthermore, even among responders, the remissions typically last no more than a few months *(140, 141, 143, 148, 152, 155)*. Clonal heterogeneity can certainly play a role in these relapses *(156)*. In cases with low allelic burden of the FLT3-mutation, the FLT3-mutant dominant clone is eliminated by FLT3 inhibitor treatment followed by expansion of a FLT3-WT clone that is not dependent on FLT3 signaling and therefore not responsive to FLT3 inhibtion *(157)*. However, in cases with a higher allelic burden it is common to find that a relapsed AML has retained the FLT3 mutation but has become resistant to the FLT3 inhibitor *(157, 158)*. The breadth of potential mechanisms that contribute to resistance to FLT3 inhibitors is quite astounding and further study is warranted to detangle their intricacies.

One of the most common mechanisms of resistance to FLT3-inhibitors is the acquisition of a mutation in the tyrosine kinase domain, usually in or near the ATP pocket, that results in steric hinderance, preventing compounds from binding *(159, 160)*. For example, Smith et al. (2012) sequenced 8 patients who relapsed after treatment with quizartinib and found all 8 of them had new mutations in the TK domain that were not detected before treatment. As has been supported in many other studies, these mutations were either at the D835 or F691 residues *(112, 161–163)*. Typically, at D835, which resides in the activation loop, the hydrophilic asparagine is mutated for a hydrophobic side chain, such as tyrosine, phenylalanine or valine. F691 is known as the "gatekeeper" and resides within the ATP-binding pocket. It was shown that F691 is a critical point of interaction for most FLT3 inhibitors and so the F691L mutation disrupts this interaction and weakens binding *(102, 162)*. These types of mutations account for about 20-50% of relapsed patients after FLT3-inhibitor treatment and can provide cross-resistance between FLT3 inhibitors *(158, 160, 163)*.

Another way that leukemias evade FLT3-inhibitors is through increased expression of FLT3 ligand and/or expression of FLT3-WT. It has been shown that patients can have increased FLT3L levels after chemotherapy *(164)*. Mutant FLT3 can remain responsive to FLT3L despite constitutive activation, therefore FLT3L can provide extrinsic support for FLT3 signaling dampening the effective concentration of FLT3 inhibitors *(165)*. Furthermore, it appears that the resistance provided by FLT3L could be acting through a FLT3-WT allele as Chen et al (2016) showed that FLT3L provided a greater protective effect when FLT3-WT was present as compared to two mutant alleles *(166)*.

In cases where FLT3 does not acquire a resistant mutation, patients may relapse due to a process called adaptive resistance. In adaptive resistance, alternative signaling mechanisms that promote cell survival and proliferation are activated to compensate for the loss of FLT3 activation. In these cases, the on-target effects of FLT3-inhibitors are maintained, FLT3 is inactivated; however, the cell's dependence on FLT3 signaling has been lifted *(167, 168)*. A large effort to identify mechanisms of resistance is underway as these pathways represent potential new targets for combination therapy with FLT3 inhibitors.

Many of the adaptive resistance pathways that have been identified so far are signaling cascades known to be downstream of FLT3, such as PI3K/AKT/mTOR or MAPKs. Aberrant activation of the PI3K pathway has been shown to play a role in hematologic malignancies, independent of FLT3 mutation status *(169)*. Furthermore, Lindblad et al (2016) demonstrated that AML cell lines exposed to sorafenib for 90 days were still able to show decreased FLT3 phosphorylation when treated with FLT3 inhibitors and there was no difference in mutational profile between sensitive and resistant cells; however, there was increased phosphorylation of mediators of the PI3K pathway such as AKT and ribosomal protein S6 kinase (S6K) as well as an enrichment in the mTOR transcriptional profile in the resistant cells *(170)*. They then showed that the resistant cell lines were sensitive to a PI3K/mTOR inhibitor, suggesting that this signaling pathway was important for survival in these cells. Furthermore, other groups have shown synergy

between targeting FLT3 and PI3K/AKT/mTOR, either with the combination of selective inhibitors or through the use of dual FLT3/AKT inhibitors *(171–173)*. Unfortunately, efforts to translate this treatment combination to the clinic appear to be lagging as only one trial combining a FLT3 inhibitor (midostaurin) and an mTOR inhibitor (everolimus) is listed on clinicaltrial.gov and no results have been posted since the study began in 2009 (NCT00819546).

Another well-characterized resistance pathway is the MEK/ERK/MAPK pathway. Like PI3K/AKT/mTOR, the MAPK pathway is downstream of FLT3 but can also be activated by many other receptors and plays an important function in cell survival and proliferation *(21)*. Additionally, the MAPK pathway has been shown to be upregulated in many types of cancer, particularly those with aberrant RAS activation *(20, 22)*. Several studies have demonstrated that many of the mediators of MAPK signaling, such as ERK, p38, and JNK, show increased phosphorylation in FLT3-inhibitor-resistant cell lines or as a rebound response during FLT3-inhibitor treatment *(167, 168, 174, 175)*. Importantly, Bruner et al (2017) showed that primary blasts taken from patients that were treated with sorafenib showed increased pERK 24 hours after treatment, suggesting that this MAPK response seen *in vitro* can translate *in vivo (175)*. Several groups have shown that MEK/ERK inhibition sensitizes AML cells to FLT3 inhibitors in vitro, either as a combination of selective inhibitors or with a dual FLT3/MEK inhibitor *(175–177)*. Zhang et al. (2016) showed significant survival in mice with human AML xenografts treated with the dual FLT3/MEK inhibitor, E6201 *(177)*. E6201 was moved into a phase I/II clinical trial of FLT3-mutant AML, however it was terminated early due to lack of efficacy during the phase I portion (NCT02418000).

Additionally, Pim-1 kinase has been found to directly interact with FLT3 and can stabilize FLT3 activation *(178)*. Green et al. (2015) showed that (1) patients that relapsed on sorafenib had increased expression of Pim-1 and Pim-2, (2) AML cell lines overexpressing Pim-2 were less sensitive to FLT3 inhibition, and (3) Pim inhibition or knockdown resensitized FLT3-inhibitorresistance cells to quizartinib *(179)*. Several recent studies support these findings, showing

preclinical efficacy of combination of FLT3 and Pim inhibitors or novel dual FLT3/Pim inhibitors *(180–182)*.

Another potential contributor to FLT3-inhibitor resistance is Axl, a tyrosine kinase with a variety of functions including cell proliferation and survival. One study showed that Axl is required for FLT3 activation. The group later showed that Axl is upregulated in FLT3-inhibitor-resistant cells and that Axl inhibition resensitized those cells to FLT3 inhibitors *(183, 184)*. This was supported by a recent study which suggested that Axl expression may be induced by cytokines in the hematopoietic niche and/or hypoxia *(185)*. Axl is a known target of gilteritinib *(151)*. These findings may explain, in part, the clinical efficacy of gilteritinib in addition to its ability to inhibit FLT3-TK mutants.

Additionally, other pathways that are not associated with normal FLT3 signaling have been found to play a role in adaptive resistance to FLT3-inhibitors. For example, some studies have characterized metabolic changes in FLT3-inhibitor resistant cell lines. In a shRNA screen of a FLT3-ITD AML cell line, ataxia telangiectasia mutated (ATM) and glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) were found to be synthetic lethal with the early FLT3-inhibitor lestaurtinib *(186)*. These proteins are involved in responding to oxidative stress. Another study found that sorafenib-resistant FLT3-ITD cells had gene expression profiles consistent with mitochondrial dysfunction and displayed an increased dependence on glycolysis *(187)*. Furthermore, the resistant cells were more sensitive to glycolytic inhibitors than sorafenib-sensitive cells *(187)*. Metabolic proteins may present novel targets for combination with FLT3-inhibition.

Furthermore, a single study has suggested that runt related transcription factor 1 (RUNX1) may contribute to FLT3-inhibitor resistance *(188)*. Hirade et al. (2016) found that RUNX1 is upregulated in FLT3-ITD AML cells compared to FLT3-WT cells and was further induced in quizartinib-resistant cells compared to the parental sensitive cells in the absence of any mutational changes between the groups. Finally, they showed that shRNA knockdown of RUNX1 abrogated proliferation and tumor progression in *in vitro* and *in vivo* models.

Combination therapies may provide clues to other resistance mechanisms. One example is a few dual FLT3/cyclin dependent kinase (CDK) inhibitors have been shown to be effective in preclinical models of AML, however, no studies have specifically identified CDKs or other cell cycle regulators as mediators of adaptive resistance *(189–191)*. Although, there is some evidence that CDK6 is required for transformation in FLT3-ITD cells *(192)*. Another example is the dual FLT3/inhibitor of kappa B kinase (IKK) inhibitor, AS602868 *(193, 194)*. Again, no direct evidence of IKK or NFkB playing a role in FLT3-inhibitor resistance has been published yet.

It is important to note that the various resistance mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and can occur simultaneously within a single patient. As discussed above, Smith et al (2012) showed that 8 out of 8 patients that relapsed after quizartinib treatment had FLT3-TK mutations *(158)*. This group later performed single-cell RNA sequencing on these same samples and found that the TK mutations were only found in 20-50% of the cells within each patient, suggesting that the remaining 50-80% of cells without the mutations were surviving through some other resistance mechanism *(195)*.

Innate Immune Signaling in Hematopoietic Neoplasms

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Innate Immune Signaling

The innate immune system recognizes foreign pathogens by cell surface pattern recognition receptors (PRRs). These receptors recognize foreign pathogen components, termed pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs), as well as host cellular by-products, referred to as damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPS). Among the first PRRs to be identified were Toll-like Receptors (TLRs). TLRs, together with the Interleukin-1 receptor (IL1R), form the interleukin-1 receptor/toll-like receptor (TIR) superfamily. All members of this family have in common a TIR domain. TLRs consist of a single-pass transmembrane protein with a leucine-rich ectodomain. There are currently 10 known human TLRs and 12 murine TLRs. The TLRs can be divided into two main groups based on subcellular location - extracellular (TLR1, TLR2, TLR4, TLR5, TLR6, and TLR11) and intracellular, or endosomal (TLR3, TLR7, TLR8, and TLR9). The location of the receptors, in turn, relates to their specific ligands. The intracellular receptors bind to features of pathogen nucleic acids - such as dsRNA, and CpG DNA; whereas the extracellular receptors bind to pathogen membrane components, the best characterized being TLR4 binding to lipopolysaccharide (LPS) of gram-negative bacteria.

Binding of a TLR to its ligand results in recruitment of a TIR domain-containing adaptor protein. There are two main TLR adaptor proteins which induce the activation of separate innate immune signaling pathways, MyD88 and TRIF. TLR3 is the only TLR that does not use MyD88 and exclusively recruits TRIF. Signaling through TRIF results in activation of IRF3 and MyD88 independent activation of NF-κB, leading to transcription of the same pro-inflammatory cytokines as the MyD88 pathway with the addition of type 1 interferons. TLR4 is the only receptor that utilizes both MyD88 and TRIF *(203–205)*. All of the TLRs, with the exception of TLR3, use MyD88. MyD88 forms a large multi-unit complex with interleukin-1-receptor-associated-kinase-4 (IRAK4) via Death Domain (DD) interactions; this complex is called the myddosome *(196, 197)*. The myddosome recruits and phosphorylates additional proteins in the TLR/IL-1R signaling pathway, such as IRAK1 and IRAK2. Following IRAK4 activation, IRAK4 phosphorylates IRAK1, which allows IRAK1 to interact with TRAF6. TRAF6 subsequently K63 ubiquitinates IRAK1, producing a scaffold for interactions with additional downstream proteins *(198)*. Ultimately, the signal results in the activation of NF-κB and MAPK pathways, leading to transcription of pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as tumor necrosis factor alpha (TNF-α), interleukine-1 (IL-1) and IL-6. In addition to activating IRAK1, phosphorylation of IRAK1 by IRAK4 has been shown to induce degradation of IRAK1, providing a negative feedback mechanism for TLR signaling *(199)*. Originally it was thought that both IRAK2 and IRAK-M (or IRAK3) lacked kinase activity; however later studies have shown that IRAK2 can act as a kinase and plays a major role in TLR-induced NF-κB activation, particularly from TLR3, TLR4 and TLR8 *(200)*. IRAK-M is thought to be a negative regulator by competing with IRAK1 or IRAK2 for access to the myddosome; additionally, it has been proposed that that IRAK-M may have kinase-independent activity regulating alternative NFκB activation *(201, 202)*.

Much of the early work to determine the function of IRAKs was done using knockout mice. IRAK knockout mice for each of the four IRAK family members have been generated. The knockout lines for IRAK1, 2, and 4 show poor response to both viral and bacterial infections, emphasizing their important role in immunity *(206–209)*. Alternatively, the IRAK-M knockout mice exhibit increased TLR-induced NF-κB and MAPK activity, highlighting the regulatory role of IRAK-M *(210)*. IRAK4 deficiency is the only IRAK family deficiency identified in humans at this time. Patients with IRAK4 deficiency show recurrent infections and poor inflammatory response *(211)*. Interestingly, the rate of infection decreases with age, presumably due to intact adaptive memory
responses, though further investigation is needed to determine an exact mechanism. Remarkably, there was recently a case study of one infant with loss of IRAK1 as part of a larger chromosomal deletion. This patient's peripheral blood mononuclear cells responded normally to TLR and IL1R stimulation *(212)*. However, interpretations of the role of IRAK1 in this context are complicated by the potential other genetic abnormalities in the chromosome deletion and the fact that this is a single patient.

Dysregulation and Targeting of Innate Immune Signaling in Hematopoietic Neoplasms

Dysregulation at multiple points along the innate immune signaling pathway have been implicated in disease pathogenesis of many disorders including autoinflammatory conditions as well as hematopoietic neoplasms, such as myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS) and AML. This pathway has been better described in MDS, which can transform to AML at a rate as high as 50% in some genetic subtypes *(213)*, therefore we will focus on both diseases in the following review.

TLR expression has been implicated in hematopoietic stem cell (HSC) development, suggesting that changes in TLR expression could lead to deregulated hematopoiesis *(214, 215)*. Several mouse studies have shown that chronic administration of low levels of LPS in vivo, meant to model chronic infection, result in loss of HSC quiescence, increased HSC numbers, myeloid skewing and decreased progenitor capacity *(216–218)*. Taken together, chronic TLR signaling impairs HSC function and alters normal hematopoiesis, which suggests a causal role in MDS and potential contribution to pro-leukemic conditions.

Indeed, overexpression or gain-of-function mutations in a subset of TLR have been described in this context. TLR4 was shown to be overexpressed at both the mRNA and protein levels in the CD34+ cells isolated from the bone marrow (BM) of MDS patients *(219)*. The overexpressed TLR4 exhibited normal functional capacity as assessed by ICAM-1 expression after LPS stimulation. TNF-α was shown to increase TLR4 expression in a dose-dependent manner and depletion of TNF with anti-TNF antibody treatment of MDS bone marrow cells

31

resulted in decreased TLR4 expression, suggesting that the TLR4 expression was TNF-α dependent. Additionally, Maratheftis et al. (2007) found a significant correlation between TLR4 expression and apoptosis in CD34+ MDS cells, providing evidence for a mechanism for TLR4 expression and development of MDS *(219)*. However, TLR4 expression within the total BM population did not differ from normal controls, nor was there correlation between TNF-α levels and TLR4 expression. Kuninaka et al. (2010) described TLR9 overexpression in MDS BM cells. TLR9 expression positively correlated with TNF-α levels *(220)*. Interestingly, TLR9 expression decreased once the MDS transformed to leukemia in these patients, further supporting the link between TLR expression and apoptosis in MDS, though through a TLR9 dependent pathway rather than TLR4 dependent. Both of these studies found evidence for TLR2 overexpression in MDS and through deep sequencing analysis, a later study found a TLR2-F217S gain-of-function variant in the CD34+ bone marrow cells of 11% of 149 MDS patients *(221)*. Additionally, in a study of 103 AML patients, TLR2, TLR4, and TLR9 mRNA expression was correlated with resistance to chemotherapy and shorter overall survival *(222)*.

Other mediators of the innate immune signaling pathway that show dysregulation in hematopoietic neoplasms are IRAK1 and IRAK4. Using gene expression data from two separate cohorts of MDS patient bone marrow *(223, 224)*, IRAK1 was found to be overexpressed in MDS patient samples compared with normal CD34+ bone marrow *(225, 226)*. This pattern of overexpression was also seen at the protein level, both in primary MDS patient samples and several MDS and AML cell lines *(225, 226)*. Not only was IRAK1 protein level increased, but phosphorylation of IRAK1 was also increased. IRAK1 inhibition, either through shIRAK1 knockdown or through the use of an IRAK1/4 inhibitor, resulted in delayed MDS-like disease and delayed mortality in a xenograft model of MDS *(225)*. Additionally, Smith et al (2019) recently showed that MDS and AML cell lines and patient samples preferentially expressed a longer isoform of IRAK4 compared to the short isoform expressed by normal hematopoietic stem cells *(227)*. Furthermore, they found that the long isoform was more efficient at conducting innate

32

immune signaling and that the long isoform-expressing cells were more sensitive to IRAK4 inhibition *(227)*.

These results suggest that IRAK inhibition could present a useful therapeutic target in the treatment of MDS and AML. As mentioned earlier, there is some evidence showing efficacy of targeting IKK, a downstream mediator of IRAK signaling, in combination with FLT3, suggesting a potential benefit of targeting this pathway in AML *(193, 194)*. Many IRAK4 and/or IRAK1 small molecule inhibitors are in development for the treatment of hematologic malignancies, particularly those with MyD88 gain-of-function mutations and a few examples in T-cell acute lymphocytic leukemia (T-ALL), however AML studies are lacking with newer compounds (**Table 1.5**) *(228– 230)*. Furthermore, it has been reported that pacritinib has activity against IRAK1. Originally developed as a JAK inhibitor, Hosseini et al. (2018) showed that pacritinib can inhibit IRAK1 and that this activity may contribute to its anti-leukemic activity *(231)*. Together these studies present an exciting prospect for targeting innate immune signaling in the treatment of hematologic malignancies in the future.

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Chapter 2: Innate immune stress response pathways

contribute to adaptive resistance in AML

The work in Chapters 2 and 3 will be published in *Science Translation Medicine*:

Overcoming adaptive therapy resistance in AML by targeting immune response pathways

Authors:

Katelyn Melgar^{1,2}, MacKenzie Walker³, LaQuita M. Jones⁴, Lyndsey C. Bolanos¹, Kathleen Hueneman¹, Mark Wunderlich¹, Jiang-Kang Jiang³, Kelli Wilson³, Xiaohu Zhang³, Patrick Sutter³, Amy Wang³, Xin Xu³. Kwangmin Choi¹, Gregory Tawa³, Donald Lorimer⁴, Jan Abendroth⁴, Eric O'Brien⁵, Scott B. Hoyt³, Ellin Berman⁶, Christopher A. Famulare⁷, James C. Mulloy¹, Ross L. Levine^{6,7,8}, John P. Perentesis⁵, Craig J. Thomas*^{3,9}, and Daniel T. Starczynowski*^{1,10}.

Affiliations:

1. Division of Experimental Hematology and Cancer Biology, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH 45229

2. Immunology Graduate Program, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Cincinnati, OH 45229

3. Division of Preclinical Innovation, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892

4. UCB Bainbridge, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110

5. Division of Oncology, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH 45229

6. Leukemia Service, Department of Medicine, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY

7. Center for Hematologic Malignancies, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY 10065

8. Human Oncology and Pathogenesis Program, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York, NY 10065

9. Lymphoid Malignancies Branch, Center for Cancer Research, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20829

10. Department of Cancer Biology, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Cincinnati, OH 45267

***Correspondence:**

Craig J. Thomas Division of Preclinical Innovation, NIH Chemical Genomics Center, National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, Bethesda, MD, USA 301-827-1798 craigt@mail.nih.gov

Daniel T. Starczynowski Division of Experimental Hematology and Cancer Biology, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH, USA 513-803-5317 Daniel.Starczynowski@cchmc.org

Abstract

Targeted inhibitors to oncogenic kinases demonstrate encouraging clinical responses early in the treatment course, however most patients will relapse due to target-dependent mechanisms that mitigate enzyme-inhibitor binding, or through target-independent mechanisms, such as alternate activation of survival and proliferation pathways, known as adaptive resistance. Here we describe mechanisms of adaptive resistance in FLT3 mutant acute myeloid leukemia (AML) by examining integrative in-cell kinase and gene regulatory network responses after oncogenic signaling blockade by FLT3 inhibitors (FLT3i). We identified activation of innate immune stress response pathways after treatment of FLT3-mutant AML cells with FLT3i and showed that innate immune pathway activation via the IRAK1/4 kinase complex contributes to adaptive resistance in FLT3 mutant AML cells.

Introduction

The identification of oncogenic kinases and small molecules designed to target active, functionally relevant kinases have revolutionized cancer treatment. Frustratingly, although many of these targeted inhibitors initially demonstrate encouraging clinical responses, most patients relapse as a result of primary or acquired resistance. Therapy resistance occurs through targetdependent mechanisms resulting from point mutations in the kinase domain that mitigate enzymeinhibitor binding or through target-independent mechanisms, such as alternate activation of survival and proliferation pathways (*1, 2*). One example involves the FMS-like receptor tyrosine kinase (FLT3). Activating mutations of FLT3 result in its autophosphorylation and initiation of intracellular signaling pathways, which induce abnormal survival and proliferation of leukemic cells (*3-6*). One of the most common mutations in acute myeloid leukemia (AML) involves the internal tandem duplication (ITD) of FLT3, which occurs in ~25% of all cases of newly diagnosed AML and confers a particularly poor prognosis (*4, 7-10*). FLT3 inhibitors (FLT3i) evaluated in clinical studies as monotherapy and combination therapies have shown good initial response rates; however, patients eventually relapse with FLT3i-resistant disease (*11-20*). The absence of durable remission in patients treated with potent and selective FLT3i highlights the need to identify resistance mechanisms and develop additional treatment strategies. Several mechanisms contribute to resistance to selective FLT3i, including mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain of FLT3 (20–50%) or activation of parallel signaling mechanisms that bypass FLT3 signaling, referred to as adaptive resistance (30–50%) (*21-23*). Furthermore, it is possible for both mechanisms to simultaneously occur in different leukemic populations within a single patient (*23*). Adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML cells to FLT3i had been attributed to alternate activation of survival and proliferation pathways (*1, 24-30*). However, combined inhibition of Ras/MAPK or PI3K signaling alongside FLT3 signaling blockade has not been sufficiently effective at eliminating resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells, implicating additional and/or broader mechanisms of adaptive resistance (*31-42*). Moreover, multi-drug combination regimens present challenges, including

53

synchronized drug exposure and/or cumulative toxicity, which often prevents dosing to therapeutically-optimal exposures (*43*). Therefore, identification of adaptive resistance mechanisms and development of therapies that concomitantly target the primary oncogenic signaling pathway and the relevant adaptive resistance mechanism will likely yield the best clinical outcomes.

Results

FLT3 inhibitors induce adaptive resistance in FLT3-ITD AML.

To investigate adaptive resistance to FLT3i in FLT3-ITD AML, we cultured an engineered primary CD34⁺ human cell line expressing MLL-AF9 and FLT3-ITD (MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD) and a FLT3-ITD AML cell line (MV4;11) in the presence of cytokines overexpressed in AML patient bone marrow (BM), including interleukin 3 (IL-3), interleukin 6 (IL-6), stem cell factor (SCF), thrombopoietin (TPO), and FLT3 ligand (FL) (*44-53*). This experimental design explored primary adaptive resistance mechanisms occurring immediately after FLT3i treatment. This approach avoids the possibility of subclones acquiring on-target mutations in FLT3, as observed after chronic exposure to FLT3i (*54-56*). The FLT3-ITD AML cell lines were treated with increasing concentrations of AC220 (quizartinib), a selective inhibitor of FLT3 currently in phase 3 clinical evaluation (NCT02668653), for 72 hours and then examined for leukemic cell recovery (**Fig. 2.1A**). Quizartinib treatment at the indicated doses decreased the viability of FLT3-ITD AML cell lines relative to control-treated (DMSO) cells as measured by AnnexinV staining (**Fig. 2.1B**). Although the FLT3-ITD AML cell lines were initially sensitive to quizartinib, FLT3-ITD AML cell lines rapidly proliferated after 3 days of quizartinib treatment (**Fig. 2.1B**). To determine whether the leukemic potential of the resistant FLT3-ITD AML cell lines is affected by quizartinib treatment, we examined leukemic progenitor function in vitro and leukemia in vivo. Adaptively resistant FLT3- ITD AML cell lines recovered 10 days after quizartinib exposure, as demonstrated by formation of leukemic cell colonies in methylcellulose (**Fig. 2.1C**). At the highest dose of quizartinib, the leukemic progenitor function was decreased, which is likely the result of more robust on-target inhibition of FLT3 as well as potential off-target effects of quizartinib. Furthermore, resistant MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells that recovered after 30 days of repeated quizartinib exposure rapidly developed leukemia in xenografted NOD.*Rag1^{-|-}*;[[]C^{null} (NRG) mice expressing human IL-3, granulocyte/macrophage-stimulating factor (GM-CSF), and steel factor (SF) (NRGS) at a comparable rate to parental MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (**fig. S2.1A**). Repeated exposure of the FLT3-ITD AML cell lines to quizartinib for 30 days revealed a diminished sensitivity to FLT3 inhibition at concentrations sufficient to induce cell death of parental cells (**fig. S2.1B**). FLT3 and NRAS resequencing confirmed the absence of second-site mutations (F691 and D835) in FLT3 or activating mutations (G12 and G13) in NRAS in the FLT3-ITD AML cell lines resistant to quizartinib treatment, indicating that these cell populations were relying on adaptive signaling resistance mechanisms, rather than acquired mutations (**fig. S2.1C**). Parallel studies in FLT3- ITD AML cell lines cultured under standard conditions exhibited a similar outgrowth and leukemic potential, suggesting that the presence of cytokines was not the sole mediator of the adaptive resistance (**figs. S2.1D,E**). FLT3-ITD AML cell lines cultured under standard conditions or in the presence of cytokines remained sensitive to blockade of FLT3 signaling after treatment with quizartinib (**fig. S2.1F**), suggesting that the cellular basis of adaptive resistance to FLT3 inhibitors is mediated by an alternate (non-FLT3-mediated) cell-intrinsic mechanism. Exposure of FLT3-ITD AML cells to the next generation FLT3i gilteritinib also resulted in cells with competent outgrowth potential, indicating that adaptive resistance is not specific to quizartinib (**fig. S2.1G**). These findings are consistent with eventual failure of FLT3 inhibitors in the clinic without evidence of acquired FLT3 mutations.

FLT3 inhibitors induce compensatory innate immune stress responses in FLT3-ITD AML.

Resistance of FLT3-ITD AML cells to FLT3i has been attributed to point mutations at or near the ATP-binding domain of FLT3 and to alternate activation of survival and proliferation

pathways (*1, 2, 22-27, 29, 30*). However, global approaches to delineate the alternate pathways contributing to adaptive resistance in FLT3-ITD AML are lacking. To define mechanisms of adaptive resistance, we examined in-cell kinase activity and gene regulatory networks in adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells (**Fig. 2.1A**). To identify active signaling cascades in adaptively resistant cells, we subjected protein lysates from MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib (IC₁₀; 0.3 nM) for 6 and 12 hours in biological duplicates to peptide phosphorylation profiling using commercially available serine/threonine kinase PamChip arrays. This concentration of quizartinib was selected because it blocks FLT3-ITD signaling and results in adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells without evidence of cell death, permitting analysis of adaptive responses to FLT3 signaling blockade in the absence of detectable cytotoxic effects. The PamChip arrays generate a dataset of relative phosphorylation propensity of synthetic peptides containing known substrate recognition sites of serine/threonine kinases in the presence and absence of inhibitor. Unsupervised hierarchical clustering analysis using these data identified two major signaling profiles based upon the identification of peptides with a relative decrease or increase in phosphorylation after quizartinib treatment for 6 and 12 hours in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells (**Fig. 2.1D, fig. S2.2A**). The in-cell active kinases were inferred based on the combination of distinct phosphorylated peptides using the database of serine/threonine kinasesubstrate pairs from PhosphoNet (https://www.phosphonet.ca) (**table S2.1**). Using a cut-off (τ > 3 x 10⁻³), forty-six kinases were activated in both FLT3-mutant AML cell lines after 6 and 12 hours of quizartinib exposure (**Fig. 2.1E, table S2.2**). To identify the compensatory signaling networks associated with adaptive resistance to FLT3i, we performed functional annotation of the inferred active kinases common to both FLT3-mutant AML cell lines after 6 and 12 hours of quizartinib exposure (**table S2.2**). Using Panther, we identified known compensatory and stress signaling pathways, such as MAPK signaling and dopamine signaling, and several other signaling pathways, including Toll-like receptor activation ("innate immune signaling"), that have not

previously been implicated in FLT3i adaptive resistance mechanisms to therapy (**Fig. 2.1F**) (*25, 26, 57*).

In parallel, we performed RNA sequencing on MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib (IC_{10} ; 0.3 nM) for 6 and 12 hours. The compensatory transcriptional response involved sets of genes that increased in relative expression after quizartinib treatment for 6 hours ($n =$ 1286; LogFC > 2, P < 0.05) and 12 hours (n = 1281; LogFC > 2, P < 0.05) in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (**table S2.3**). The differentially overexpressed genes at 12 hours were enriched in Gene Ontology (GO) pathways related to innate immune signaling **(Fig. 2.1G)**, suggesting that compensatory activation of innate immune stress pathways provides a cytoprotective role after FLT3i treatment in FLT3-mutant AML.

Among the critical signaling elements within the innate immune pathway are the IL-1 receptor associated kinase 1 (IRAK1) and IRAK4, which are upstream of all signaling effectors within the innate immune pathway and are amenable to therapeutic inhibition (*58-69*). A more granular examination of the STK array outcomes highlights that MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib have increased phosphorylation of IRAK1/4-specific peptides (**Fig. 2.2A**). Orthogonal validation via immunoblotting confirmed increased phosphorylation of IRAK4 at threonine-345/serine-346 after inhibition of FLT3-ITD in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD or MV4;11 cells by quizartinib (**Fig. 2.2B and C**). Phosphorylation of IRAK4 was also observed after treatment with the next generation FLT3i, gilteritinib, in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (**Fig. 2.2D**). In these experiments, although the majority of FLT3 signaling is inhibited (as indicated by reduced pFLT3 and pSTAT5)(**Fig. 2.2B, fig. S2.1F**), >95% of quizartinib-treated FLT3-ITD AML cells remained viable (AnnexinV-negative), strongly suggesting that IRAK1/4 activation is an adaptive survival mechanism. The activation state of IRAK1/4 is durable, and we observed phosphorylated IRAK4 after 72 hours of quizartinib treatment in MV4;11 cells (**fig. S2.2B**). To determine whether this is an adaptive response based primarily on FLT3 blockade, the isogenic AML cell line MLL-AF9;NRAS^{G12D}, which does not depend on FLT3-ITD oncogenic signaling, was treated with

57

quizartinib at the same dose and time points as the FLT3-ITD line. The NRAS-mutant cells did not exhibit phosphorylation of IRAK4 when treated with quizartinib, suggesting that a dependence on FLT3 signaling is needed to elicit this adaptive response (**fig. S2.2C**). These observations were extended to FLT3-ITD AML patients enrolled in a study evaluating the efficacy of gilteritinib (Study ID: 2215-CL-9100; **table S2.4**). As compared to peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) obtained at diagnosis, PMBCs from two patients treated with gilteritinib for 27 and 39 days exhibited increased phosphorylated and total IRAK4 protein at comparable amounts to gilteritinib-treated cells in vitro (**Fig. 2.2D**). As an indication of active IRAK4 signaling, we observed phosphorylated IRAK1 in MV4;11 cells after treatment with quizartinib (**fig. S2.2D**), a patient after gilteritinib treatment (**fig. S2.2E**), and BaF3 cells transduced with FLT3-ITD and treated with quizartinib (**fig. S2.2F**). These findings strongly suggest that FLT3i induce compensatory IRAK1/4 activation in FLT3-ITD AML cells in vitro and in vivo.

To explore a potential mechanism of IRAK1/4 activation in FLT3i-treated FLT3-ITD AML cells, we examined RNA expression after quizartinib treatment of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (**Fig. 2.1G**). Because IRAK1/4 is downstream of the TLR superfamily, we compared the expression of all TLRs before and after 6-hour quizartinib treatment. Although 6 of 8 TLRs exhibited increased expression in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells after quizartinib treatment, only TLR9 was significantly overexpressed at 6 hours and remained elevated at 12 hours (P = 0.019, adjusted)(**fig. S2.3A,B**). Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib revealed that inhibition of FLT3-ITD increases the expression of cleaved TLR9, which has been associated with its active state (**fig. S2.3C**)(*70, 71*). To establish whether increased TLR9 expression and activation in quizartinib-treated FLT3-ITD AML cells results in IRAK1/4 activation, we treated MLL-AF9;FLT3- ITD simultaneously with quizartinib and a TLR9 antagonist (30 nM; ODN-INH-18). In the presence of the TLR9 antagonist, quizartinib-mediated activation of IRAK4 was suppressed as compared to MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated only with quizartinib (**fig. S2.3D**). Increased expression of

TLRs, such as TLR9, on FLT3i-treated AML cells may account for the activation of innate immune pathways in adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells.

Innate immune signaling via IRAK1/4 is required for adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML to FLT3i.

We next investigated whether IRAK1/4 activation is a functionally required element of adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML to FLT3i. Several published inhibitors of IRAK1/4 exist, providing key tools to assess the role of IRAK1/4 in adaptive diseases (*69, 72, 73*). We first evaluated a pairwise matrix combination of quizartinib and a commercially-available IRAK1/4 inhibitor (IRAK-Inh) in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (*74*). This experiment used a 48-hour CellTiter-Glo assay format to demonstrate that the combination of quizartinib and IRAK-Inh is synergistically cytotoxic in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (**Fig. 2.2E**). Even at low doses of quizartinib (0.3 nM or 0.4 nM), inhibition of IRAK1/4 decreased MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cell viability more than would be expected as an additive response (**Fig. 2.2E, fig. S2.4A**). To further confirm that inhibition of IRAK1/4 can suppress adaptive resistance to FLT3i in FLT3-ITD AML cells, we used AnnexinV staining in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib (0.5 µM), IRAK-Inh (10 µM), or the combination of quizartinib and IRAK-Inh. These studies show that the combination-treated cells had significantly suppressed outgrowth of adaptively resistant FLT3- ITD AML cells as compared to quizartinib or IRAK-Inh treatment alone (2.1% vs 71.8% or 75.3% AnnexinV-negative cells; P = 0.003)(**Fig. 2.2F, fig. S2.4B**). MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells recovered 10 days after inhibitor exposure were also plated in methylcellulose to assess leukemic cell potential. Adaptively resistant MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib or IRAK-Inh alone formed significantly more leukemic colonies as compared to parental cells (P < 0.0001)(**Fig. 2.2G**). In contrast, the MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells recovered after treatment with quizartinib and IRAK-Inh did not form leukemic colonies (**Fig. 2.2G**). Inhibition of IRAK1/4 with IRAK-Inh or a potent IRAK4 inhibitor (PF-066) alone did not affect the leukemic cell viability, leukemic progenitor activity in methylcellulose, or outgrowth of leukemic cells in liquid culture (**fig. S2.4B-E**), indicating that targeting IRAK1/4 alone does not confer cytotoxicity in FLT3-mutant AML. To reinforce that these outcomes implicate IRAK1/4 signaling as the primary driver of adaptive resistance, we expressed shRNA targeting IRAK4 (shIRAK4-MV4;11) or a non-targeting control shRNA (shControl-MV4;11) in MV4;11 cells (**Fig. 2.2H**, right panel). After treatment with quizartinib (1 nM and 50 nM), the proportion of shIRAK4-MV4;11 cells was significantly reduced relative to DMSOtreated shIRAK4-MV4;11 cells (1 nM: $P = 0.0035$; 50 nM: $P = 0.0169$) or quizartinib-treated shControl-MV4;11 cells (1 nM: P = 0.0002, 50 nM: P < 0.0143)(**Fig. 2.2H,** left panel). Conversely, we also examined the consequences of IRAK4 overexpression on mediating adaptive resistance of MV4;11 cells to FLT3i (**Fig. 2.2I,** right panel). After treatment with quizartinib (1 nM and 50 nM), the relative proportion of IRAK4-overexpressing MV4;11 cells was significantly increased relative to DMSO-treated IRAK4-overexpressing MV4;11 cells (50 nM: P = 0.029) or quizartinib-treated control MV4;11 cells (empty vector)(50 nM: P = 0.029)(**Fig. 2.2I,** left panel). Taken together, these studies suggest that IRAK1/4 signaling is required for adaptive resistance in FLT3-mutant AML immediately after inhibition of FLT3 and that inhibition of IRAK1/4 signaling creates a synthetic lethality when combined with FLT3i.

Discussion

Targeted inhibitors to oncogenic kinases initially demonstrate encouraging clinical responses, however, most patients relapse due to target-dependent and target-independent mechanisms. Monotherapy and combination therapies have shown good initial response rates to FLT3 inhibitors in clinical studies for FLT3-mutant leukemia; however, patients eventually relapse with FLT3i-resistant clones (*11-20*). The absence of durable remission in FLT3-mutant leukemia patients treated with potent and selective FLT3i establishes the need to identify resistance mechanisms and develop additional treatment strategies. Here we identified mechanisms of adaptive resistance to targeted inhibitors in AML associated with activating FLT3 mutations. Our

60

results suggest that FLT3i adaptive resistance occurs through compensatory activation of innate immune stress pathways in FLT3-mutant AML and that inhibition of IRAK1/4 with FLT3i targets the emergence of adaptively resistant mutant clones. Specifically, activation of IRAK1/4 in FLT3itreated AML restored Ras/MAPK signaling along with NF-κB, which represents a major mechanism of resistance after tyrosine kinase inhibition (*1, 24-26, 78*).

Cellular stress responses are survival mechanisms activated by cells. Although stress pathways have been extensively characterized, recent studies have shown that proteins in cellular stress responses interact with and regulate signaling intermediates involved in the activation of immune-related pathways (*79*). Although we report that FLT3i treatment resulted in TLR9 overexpression and IRAK1/4 activation, the precise mechanism of innate immune signaling and specifically IRAK1/4 activation after targeted therapy is not resolved and may involve various cellular stress response pathways. Cellular stresses associated with FLT3i treatment, such as oxidative stress, heat shock, unfolded protein, and DNA damage responses have been independently shown to activate innate immune signaling, albeit by distinct mechanisms (*67, 80- 87*). In addition to overexpression of certain TLRs, gene expression analysis of FLT3i-treated cells also revealed overexpression of TLR ligands and inflammatory cytokines. In such conditions, fractional cell death and/or cellular stress after FLT3i treatment can result in the release of inflammatory mediators that subsequently induce innate immune signaling and IRAK1/4 activation, such as via TLR9. Therefore, one potential mechanism of compensatory activation of the innate immune stress pathway in FLT3i-resistant AML subclones is through paracrine and autocrine activation of IRAK1/4. We also observed a modest, yet consistent, increase in IRAK4 expression after prolonged FLT3i treatment of FLT3-mutant AML cells in vitro and in vivo. Consistent with the idea that increased IRAK4 expression correlates with adaptive resistance, retroviral overexpression of IRAK4 decreased the sensitivity of FLT3-ITD AML cells to FLT3i. Thus, another potential mechanism of compensatory activation of the innate immune stress pathway in FLT3i-resistant AML subclones may occur as a result of IRAK1/4 overexpression.

61

There are ongoing efforts to suppress activation of parallel signaling pathways, such as MEK and ERK, after prolonged exposure to targeted therapies (*31-33, 36, 37, 42, 88*). Ras/MAPK signaling is responsible for adaptively resistant FLT3-mutant AML, however, targeting only a single arm of the signaling cascade has yielded limited clinical benefit (NCT02418000). Because IRAK1/4 complex is upstream of Ras/MAPK and NF- $\Box B$ (58), we posit that targeting IRAK1/4 will yield more durable inhibition of bypass signaling cascades, prevent adaptive resistance, and result in improved therapeutic efficacy in FLT3-mutant AML. Although IRAK1 or IRAK4 inhibition has been explored in myelodysplastic syndrome, AML, T-ALL, and lymphoma, albeit with limited efficacy, we present evidence that innate immune pathway activation via IRAK1 and IRAK4 is essential for adaptive resistance to therapy (*64, 66, 69, 73, 89, 90*).

Figures

Figure 2.1. FLT3-ITD AML develop adaptive resistance and activate innate immune pathways after FLT3i treatment. (A) Overview of experimental design to evaluate adaptive resistance. **(B)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells or MV4;11 cells were cultured with quizartinib for 3 days, re-plated in fresh medium, and then cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining (n = 2 per group). **(C)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel B), the remaining viable cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 7 days ($n = 4$ per condition). Values are expressed as means $+/-$ s.e.m. from 3 biological replicates. $*$, $P < 0.05$ (unpaired two-tailed ttest). **(D)** Serine-Threonine Kinase (STK) PamChip analysis was performed on protein lysates isolated from MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib (0.3 nM) for 6 and 12

hours. Hierarchical clustering analysis was performed on differentially phosphorylated peptides in the indicated groups relative to DMSO (2 biological replicates) (PamGene, Kwangmin Choi) **(E)** In-cell active kinases inferred from the phosphorylated peptides (STK PamChip) are shown for each of the indicated conditions. **(F)** Pathway enrichment of differential in-cell kinase activity in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib for 6 and 12 hours was determined using Panther. **(G)** Pathway enrichment of differentially expressed genes (>2-fold; P < 0.05) in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib for 12 hours was determined using Toppgene (n $=$ 3 per group). $*$, P < 0.05 (unpaired two-tailed t-test).

Figure 2.2. Innate immune signaling via IRAK1/4 mediates adaptive resistance to FLT3i. (A) IRAK1 and IRAK4 in-cell activity in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib for 6 and 12 hours is shown based on the relative phosphorylation of the indicated peptides on the STK PamChip array (summary of 4 or 3 independent peptides, respectively, from 2 biological replicates). **(B)** Immunoblotting of pFLT3 and pIRAK4 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib for the indicated times. **(C)** Immunoblotting of pFLT3 and pIRAK4 in MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib for the indicated times. **(D)** Immunoblotting of pIRAK4 and total IRAK4 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated in vitro with gilteritinib (10 nM), or from the peripheral blood of FLT3-ITD AML patients treated with gilteritinib for the indicated number of days. **(E)** Delta Bliss

score of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with the indicated concentrations of quizartinib and IRAK-Inh for 48 hours based on the cellular metabolic activity using CellTiter-Glo (Thomas Lab). **(F)** Viability of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated for 3 days with DMSO (vehicle control), quizartinib $(0.5 \mu M)$, IRAK-Inh (10 μ M), or quizartinib and IRAK-Inh. Values are expressed as means $+/-$ s.d. from 3 biological replicates. **(G)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel F), the remaining viable cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 7 days. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m from 4 biological replicates. **(H)** MV4;11 cells expressing control shRNA (shControl-GFP) or shRNAs targeting IRAK4 (shIRAK4-GFP) were treated with DMSO or quizartinib (1 nM or 50 nM) for 3 days. The proportion of GFP+ cells over 10 days in culture is shown relative to Day 0. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 2 biological replicates. **(I)** MV4;11 cells expressing an empty GFP vector (vector) or a GFP vector with IRAK4 (IRAK4) were treated with DMSO or quizartinib (1 nM or 50 nM) for 3 days. The proportion of GFP+ cells over 10 days in culture is shown relative to Day 0. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 4 biological replicates. *, P = 0.029 Mann-Whitney.

Supplemental Figure 2.1. FLT3+AML develop adaptive resistance to FLT3i. (A) Quizartinibrecovered MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (from panel B) or parental MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (n = 5 mice per group) were transplanted into NRGS mice (n = 5 mice per group). Disease free survival shown via Kaplan-Meier curve. P = 0.32, Mantel-Cox test. **(B)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were cultured with quizartinib (5 µM) for 3 days and re-plated in fresh medium. After 7 days, cells were treated with quizartinib (5 µM) for 3 days and re-plated in fresh medium. AnnexinV staining was used to measure cell viability. **(C)** Genomic DNA from quizartinib-recovered MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells (from panel B) was sequenced at the FLT3 F691 and D835 loci and NRAS G12 and G13 loci. **(D)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells or MV4;11 cells were cultured in standard medium without cytokines and then treated with quizartinib for 3 days, re-plated in fresh medium, and then cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. **(E)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel D),

the remaining viable cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 7 days (n = 2 per condition). Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from biological replicates. **(F)** Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells grown with and without IL-3, IL-6, SCF, TPO, and FL (10 ng/mL) and treated with quizartinib for 24 hours. **(G)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells or MV4;11 cells were cultured with gilteritinib for 3 days, re-plated in fresh medium, and then cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m from 2 biological replicates.

Supplemental Figure 2.2. Adaptively resistant FLT3+AML exhibit increased IRAK1/4 activation. (A) MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD or MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib showed two distinct patterns of peptide phosphorylation in the STK PamChip. Red line indicates the average phosphorylation within each group. **(B)** Immunoblotting of MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib for 72 hours. **(C)** Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9;NRASG12D cells treated with quizartinib (50 nM). **(D)** Immunoblotting of the indicated proteins in MV4;11 cells treated with quizartinib (0.3 nM) for the indicated times. **(E)** Immunoblotting of pIRAK1 and GAPDH from the peripheral blood of a FLT3- ITD AML patient treated with quizartinib (50 nM) for the indicated times.

Supplemental Figure 2.3. Quizartinib induces TLR9-mediated activation of IRAK4. (A) RNA expression of the indicated TLRs in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells following 6 hour treatment with quizartinib. **(B)** RNA expression of TLR9 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells following treatment with 0.3 nM quizartinib for 6 hours. **(C)** Immunoblotting of TLR9 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells following treatment with 10 nM quizartinib for the indicated time points. **(D)** Immunoblotting of the indicated proteins in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells after treatment with 10 nM quizartinib and 30 nM of the TLR9 antagonist (ODN-INH-18) for the indicated time points.

Supplemental Figure 2.4. Inhibition of IRAK1/4 sensitizes FLT3+ AML to quizartinib. (A) CellTiter-Glo was used to measure metabolic activity of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with IRAK-Inh alone or with IRAK-Inh and quizartinib (0.4 nM). **(B)** MV4;11 cells were treated with DMSO, quizartinib (0.5 µM), IRAK-Inh (10 µM), or quizartinib and IRAK-Inh for 3 days, and then viability was evaluated every 2 days by AnnexinV staining. **(C)** MV4;11 cells were treated with DMSO, quizartinib (0.5 µM), PF06650833 (PF066) (10 µM), or quizartinib and PF066 for 3 days, and then viability was evaluated every 2 days by AnnexinV staining. **(D)** MV4;11 cells were treated with IRAK-Inh or PF066 in methylcellulose and then colonies were evaluated after 10 days. **(E)** CellTiter-Glo was used to measure metabolic activity of the indicated cell lines treated with 10 doses of the IRAK4 inhibitor, PF066 (Thomas Lab).

Supplemental Tables Supplemental Table 2.1. Peptide phosphorylation in the PamChip Serine/Threonine incell kinase array

Supplemental Table 2.2. Top active kinases inferred from the PamChip in-cell kinase array.

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Supplemental Table 2.3. Gene expression analysis of FLT3-ITD AML-treated with FLT3i.

Supplemental Table 2.4. AML patients treated with gilteritinib in Study ID: 2215-CL-910

Chapter 3: Targeting innate immune pathways to overcome adaptive resistance in AML using a novel polypharmacologic inhibitor

The work in Chapters 2 and 3 will be published in *Science Translation Medicine.*

Abstract

To overcome the innate immune adaptive resistance mechanism described in Chapter 2, we developed a small molecule that simultaneously inhibits FLT3 and IRAK1/4 kinases. The multikinase FLT3-IRAK1/4 inhibitor, NCGC1481, eliminated adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells in vitro and in vivo, and displayed superior efficacy as compared to current targeted FLT3 therapies. These findings uncover a polypharmacologic strategy for overcoming adaptive resistance to therapy in AML by targeting immune stress response pathways.

Results

Small-molecule inhibitors were generated to simultaneously target IRAK1/4 and FLT3.

The immediate nature of IRAK1/4 activation in adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells requires concomitant inhibition of these targets to avoid compensatory signaling and cell survival. Achieving optimal multi-drug combination regimens that yield extended overlapping exposure while avoiding unwanted toxicities is challenging. Therefore, we desired a small molecule inhibitor that simultaneously targeted the FLT3 and IRAK1/4 kinases to eradicate adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML. Inhibition of FLT3 is a common 'off-target' pharmacology for many advanced kinases inhibitors (e.g. cabozantinib, sorafenib and ponatinib). We therefore considered previously reported IRAK1/4 inhibitors as potential starting points for the optimization of a dual FLT3/IRAK inhibitor. Among the more promising candidates were a series of 3-(pyridin-2 yl)imidazo[1,2-a]pyridines that were previously reported as selective IRAK4 inhibitors and appeared to be attractive chemical starting points for optimization as dual FLT3/IRAK inhibitors (*72*). Structure activity relationship exploration around this core scaffold yielded a series of small molecules that potently targeted IRAK1, IRAK4, and FLT3. In a functional biochemical assay, three of these agents (NCGC2376, NCGC2327, and NCGC1410) inhibited FLT3 at subnanomolar concentrations (IC⁵⁰ < 0.5 nM), and IRAK1 and IRAK4 at low nanomolar concentrations (**Fig. 3.1A,B**). Whereas the three compounds were equipotent FLT3 inhibitors (IC_{50} < 0.5 nM), their relative efficacies at inhibiting FLT3-ITD AML cell viability correlated with their IRAK1/4 inhibitory potencies (**Fig. 3.1B,C**). Thus, the most potent IRAK1/4 inhibitor NCGC2327 (IRAK1 IC₅₀ = 1.6 nM, IRAK4 IC $_{50}$ <0.5 nM) was the most efficacious at inhibiting MLL-AF9; FLT3-ITD cell growth, and the weakest IRAK1/4 inhibitor NCGC1410 (IRAK1 IC $_{50}$ = 636 nM, IRAK4 IC $_{50}$ 8.7 nM) was correspondingly less efficacious (**Fig. 3.1C**). Moreover, NCGC2327 and NCGC2376 were more effective at suppressing MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD leukemic cell recovery relative to NCGC1410, as measured by AnnexinV staining (**Fig. 3.1D**), suggesting that potency against IRAK1/4 is a driving element for suppressing adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells. Given that NCGC1410 retained

potency against IRAK4, yet was less effective at suppressing MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD AML cells than NCGC2376, which inhibits IRAK1 and IRAK4, argues that targeting both kinases is necessary to achieve optimal suppression of FLT3-mutant AML. NCGC2327 also effectively suppressed FLT3- ITD signaling and compensatory activation of IRAK4 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells and was more effective at preventing compensatory activation of IRAK4 as compared to simultaneously inhibiting FLT3 and IRAK1/4 with a combination of quizartinib and IRAK-Inh (**Fig. 3.1E**). These findings indicate that the efficacy of suppressing FLT3-ITD AML with a FLT3i correlates with concomitant targeting of IRAK1 and IRAK4.

Continued optimization of these agents led to the identification of NCGC1481, which retained strong biochemical potency versus FLT3, IRAK1, and IRAK4 while also displaying acceptable pharmacokinetic properties in mice (**Fig. 3.2A, fig. S3.1**). NCGC1481 exhibited potent binding affinity for IRAK1 (K_D = 2.9 nM), IRAK4 (K_D = 0.3 nM), and FLT3 (K_D = 0.3 nM), as well as potent functional inhibition of IRAK1 (IC₅₀ = 22.6 nM), IRAK4 (IC₅₀ = 0.8 nM), and FLT3 (IC₅₀ = <0.5 nM)(**Fig. 3.2A**). To gain insight into the structure-activity relationship of this agent, we obtained a high-resolution (2.1 Å) crystal structure of the NCGC1481-IRAK4 complex (PDB: 6MOM, **Fig. 3.2B**), which demonstrates that NCGC1481 binds as a type I inhibitor (ATPcompetitive binding to the active state) with excellent shape complementarity at the ATP-binding pocket. Key hydrogen bonds are established between the NCGC1481 imidazole nitrogen and a hinge domain (Met265) amide and the NCGC1481 pyrrolidine and Asp329 and Ala315 (**Fig. 3.2B**). Consistent with our data that NCGC1481 also inhibits FLT3, we have obtained a crystal structure of the NCGC1481-FLT3 complex (PDB: 6IL3). Sequence alignment and two dimensional (2D) interaction diagrams derived from these structures highlight conserved binding elements between IRAK4 and FLT3, and that the FLT3 ATP-binding domain is relatively more permissive, which is consistent with the fact that FLT3 is routinely found as an 'off-target' pharmacology for multiple kinase inhibitors (**fig. S3.2**). When profiled against 369 kinases using Reaction Biology biochemical inhibition assays, NCGC1481 demonstrated modest selectivity (10-

fold or greater selectivity versus more than 80% of tested kinases relative to IRAK1, IRAK4, and FLT3) with strong activity noted versus Src-family kinases and selected classes of receptor tyrosine kinases (**Fig. 3.2C, table S3.1**). Given the known caveats of relying on biochemical assays to decipher kinome selectivity, we felt it was critical to establish the in situ kinome selectivity for this class of agents in relevant cells (*75*). We therefore submitted NCGC1481 to the KiNativ in situ kinase profiling platform. Examination of NCGC1481 in MV4;11 revealed a higher kinase selectivity in situ relative to the selectivity observed in biochemical assays using purified, active proteins (**Fig. 3.2D,E, table S3.2**). Of the 259 expressed and active kinases in MV4;11 cells, only 12 were inhibited with an IC₅₀ value of less than 250 nM (Fig. 3.2E). We next sought to delineate which of these kinase targets contribute to the cytotoxicity of NCGC1481. For this we generated a series of analogs of NCGC1481 with varying potency against the 12 top kinase targets based on biochemical inhibition assays and then evaluated each analog's cytotoxicity in MV4;11 cells (**Fig. 3.2F**). Based on this analysis, the more highly correlated contributing targets to the cytotoxicity of MV4;11 cells are FLT3 ($R^2 = 0.79$), IRAK4 ($R^2 = 0.70$), and LYN ($R^2 = 0.87$). IRAK1 also shows correlation between potency and cytotoxicity, but the potency decline between NCGC2376 and NCGC1410 is ~35-fold, whereas the cytotoxicity decline between these two analogs is only 2-fold. Although LYN was inhibited by NCGC1481 in the biochemical assays, NCGC1481 exhibited only moderate effects on the phosphorylation status of LYN at the doses at which FLT3 and IRAK1/4 were inhibited in MV4;11 cells (**fig. S3.3A**), suggesting that inhibition of FLT3 and IRAK4 primarily contributes to the cytotoxicity of NCGC1481. Notwithstanding, most small molecule kinase inhibitors target more than one kinase and it is often the collective inhibition of multiple signaling nodes that contributes to the broad biological effects of a kinase inhibitor. Additional assays further demonstrated that NCGC1481 inhibited phosphorylation of FLT3 and IRAK4 and IRAK1/4-mediated NF-_{KB} transcriptional activation in a time- and dose-dependent manner (**fig. S3.3B,C**). Moreover, NCGC1481 exhibits attractive physical properties, including

good aqueous solubility, cell permeability, metabolic stability, and low activity in selected in vitrobased toxicity-associated target assay (**fig. S3.1A,B**).

To demonstrate that NCGC1481 is selective for AML cells dependent on FLT3 signaling, we measured proliferation of isogenic AML cells lines derived from primary CD34⁺ human cord blood cells transduced with MLL-AF9 and then transduced with NRAS^{G12D} or FLT3-ITD (45). MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were highly sensitive to NCGC1481 ($IC_{50} = 0.1$ nM), whereas MLL-AF9;NRAS^{G12D} cells were less responsive to NCGC1481 (IC₅₀ = 573 nM)(**Fig. 3.2G**). The parental MLL-AF9 cells exhibited an intermediate sensitivity to NCGC1481 (IC_{50} = 4.9 nM) because these cells are dependent on wild-type FLT3 signaling (**Fig. 3.2G**)(*45*). As expected, NCGC1481 suppressed the short-term proliferation of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, MV4;11, and MOLM13 cells (**fig. S3.3D**). In a panel of 13 primary AML patient samples, NCGC1481 was primarily effective against FLT3-mutant AML, while exhibiting minimal activity against FLT3-wild type AML (**Fig. 3.2H, table S3.3**). Collectively these data demonstrate 1) the importance of concomitant in vitro and in situ kinase target profiling; 2) that NCGC1481 is highly effective at targeting FLT3, IRAK1, and IRAK4 in FLT3-ITD mutant AML cells; and 3) that inhibition of these targets correlates with the cytotoxicity of NCGC1481.

NCGC1481 inhibits IRAK1/4 and compensatory innate immune signaling in FLT3-ITD AML cells.

The systems-level differences associated with simultaneous IRAK1/4 and FLT3 inhibition versus selective inhibition of FLT3 were next examined in FLT3-ITD AML cells. We first confirmed, via immunoblotting for pIRAK4 and pFLT3, that NCGC1481 simultaneously inhibited IRAK4 and FLT3, whereas quizartinib induced activation of IRAK4 upon inhibition of FLT3 in the appropriate cell models (MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11)(**Fig. 3.3A, fig. S3.3B**). We thereafter collected protein lysates from MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with NCGC1481 (0.1 nM; IC_{10}) for 6 and 12 hours and subjected these samples to PamChip peptide phosphorylation profiling.

Our ability to contrast these outcomes with the data generated in the same cells after quizartinib treatment (**Fig. 2.1**) offered insight into the divergent cellular response to these agents (**table S3.4**). Notably, the set of peptides with increased phosphorylation intensity after 12 hours of quizartinib treatment showed decreased phosphorylation in NCGC1481-treated MLL-AF9;FLT3- ITD and MV4;11 cells (**Fig. 3.3B**). Inspection of the IRAK1/4-specific peptides revealed that IRAK1 and IRAK4 activation was also inhibited after 6 and 12 hours of NCGC1481 treatment as compared to quizartinib (**Fig. 3.3C**). We next compared the effects of NCGC1481 and quizartinib on global gene expression in FLT3-ITD AML cells at 6 and 12 hours (**Fig. 3.3D, tables S2.3 and S3.5**). Gene expression profiling by RNA-sequencing in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with NCGC1481 (0.1 nM), quizartinib (0.3 nM), or DMSO showed that genes upregulated by quizartinib, but not NCGC1481, at 12 hours were enriched for interleukin ($P = 0.0021$) and inflammation signaling (P = 0.030) by ToppGene analysis (**Fig. 3.3E**). Because quizartinib induced genes and kinases associated with immune signaling pathway activation, we determined whether MAPKs, which are implicated as compensatory pathways in FLT3i-treated AML cells, are regulated by IRAK1/4. Based on the in-cell kinase analysis, quizartinib-treated MLL-AF9;FLT3- ITD cells exhibited compensatory activation of Ras/MAPK as well as PI3K/AKT pathways (**Fig. 3.3F**). In contrast, NCGC1481-treated MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells did not reactivate these kinases (**Fig. 3.3F**). To confirm these downstream signaling consequences, we used immunoblotting to show that quizartinib treatment resulted in increased phosphorylation of JNK and p38 at 12 hours in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells. This is approximately the same time point at which phosphorylation of IRAK4 is detected (**Fig. 2.2B, Fig. 3.3A**). In contrast, NCGC1481-treated FLT3-ITD AML cells did not exhibit phosphorylated JNK and p38 (**Fig. 3.3G**), suggesting that IRAK1/4 activation mediates immune signaling in part via MAPKs after FLT3i treatment of FLT3-ITD AML cells. Collectively these findings confirm that NCGC1481 inhibits compensatory IRAK1/4 activation and downstream immune pathways in FLT3-ITD AML.

NCGC1481 prevents adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML in vitro.

We next investigated whether NCGC1481 can suppress adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML in vitro. NCGC1481 treatment of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, MV4;11, or FLT3-ITD AML patientderived cells abolished the outgrowth of adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells as compared to quizartinib (**Fig. 3.4A**). NCGC1481 treatment did not inhibit the viability and progenitor function of normal CD34⁺ BM cells after 72 hours of treatment and seven days of recovery (**Fig. 3.4B,C**). MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells recovered 10 days after inhibitor exposure were plated in methylcellulose to assess leukemic cell potential. The recovered MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with NCGC1481 did not form any leukemic colonies, whereas quizartinib-treated recovered cells maintained their leukemic potential (**Fig. 3.4D**). In a direct comparison to gilteritinib, NCGC1481 was more effective at suppressing adaptively resistant MV4;11 cells (**fig. S3.4A,B**). We also noted that the leukemic cell potential of parental FLT3-ITD AML cells was diminished by NCGC1481 relative to quizartinib or DMSO (**fig. S3.4C**), which coincided with drugstimulated induction of apoptosis (**fig. S3.4D**). NCGC1481 did not affect colony formation of healthy cord blood (CB) CD34⁺ cells or adult CD34⁺ BM cells at equivalent or even higher concentrations (**fig. S3.4E**).

Given the efficacy of NCGC1481 in suppressing adaptive resistance in naïve FLT3-ITD AML cells, we asked whether NCGC1481 remained effective at inhibiting adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells after treatment with quizartinib. Prior exposure of MV4;11 cells to quizartinib for 3 days followed by 7 days of recovery in fresh medium resulted in diminished sensitivity to reexposure with quizartinib even at increased concentrations (IC₅₀ = not achieved) (Fig. 3.4E). In contrast, NCGC1481 remained effective at eliminating adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells after primary exposure to quizartinib $(IC_{50} = 230 \text{ nM})$ (Fig. 3.4E). This effect was mediated by inhibition of FLT3 and IRAK1/4, and the IRAK-Inh alone was insufficient for suppressing the viability of adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML (**Fig. 3.4E**). As an orthogonal approach, after three

days of exposure to quizartinib (5 µM) followed by seven days of recovery, MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were either exposed to quizartinib (5 μ M) or NCGC1481 (5 μ M). After 10 days, the recovered MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were treated again with quizartinib or with NCGC1481. Although repeated exposure of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells to quizartinib resulted in diminished sensitivity to quizartinib at concentrations sufficient to induce cell death of parental cells, NCGC1481 remained effective at eliminating adaptively resistant FLT3-ITD AML cells in culture after the primary or secondary exposure to quizartinib (**Fig. 3.4F**). To assess if a similar effect of NCGC1481 was observed in FLT3-ITD AML patient-derived cells, we treated primary FLT3-ITD AML cells with quizartinib (5 µM), which resulted in an acute drop in viable cells that began to recover after day three. After seven days, the recovered FLT3-ITD AML cells were treated again with quizartinib (5 µM) or with NCGC1481 (5 µM). In this setting, primary FLT3-ITD AML cells were moderately sensitive (relative to vehicle-treated cells) to quizartinib re-treatment, whereas treatment with NCGC1481 significantly reduced the number of viable FLT3-ITD AML cells (P = 0.027)(**Fig. 3.4G**).

NCGC1481 effectively targets resistant FLT3-ITD AML xenografts.

Finally, we assessed the in vivo anti-leukemic activity of NCGC1481. NCGC1481 exhibits suitable pharmacokinetic properties in mice for once-daily intraperitoneal (IP) dosing and does not result in hematologic toxicity (**fig. S31C-E**). The anti-leukemic activity of NCGC1481 was initially assessed on parental and quizartinib-refractory MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells intravenously (i.v.) injected into NRGS mice, which develop aggressive disseminated AML (**Fig. 3.4H**) (*76, 77*). After 48 hours, phosphorylated IRAK4 and FLT3 were lower in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells isolated from mice treated with NCGC1481 (30 mg/kg/d) as compared to mice receiving vehicle (**Fig. 3.4I**). At the same dose, NCGC1481 administration significantly extended the overall median survival of mice xenografted with parental MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells from 40 days to 49 days ($P =$ 0.0026)(**Fig. 3.4J**). NCGC1481 also significantly extended the overall median survival of mice xenografted with quizartinib-recovered MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells from 34 days to 53 days (P =

0.0068)(**Fig. 3.4J**). Mice were sacrificed when they exhibited physical symptoms of leukemia such as reduced motility, rough coat, and hunched posture. At the time of sacrifice, leukemic burden (percent GFP) in the BM (88.4 \pm 5.7% versus 70.1 \pm 12.8%) and spleen (79.3 \pm 8.2% versus 51.4 ± 19%) was reduced after treatment with NCGC1481 as compared to vehicle-treated mice (**fig. S3.5A**). In a second approach, we compared the anti-leukemic effects of NCGC1481 and quizartinib using FLT3-mutant AML cells from patients with refractory leukemia (AML-174 and AML-019). NSGS mice were i.v. xenografted with AML-174 or AML-019 cells, then dosed with NCGC1481 (30 mg/kg/d), quizartinib (15 mg/kg/d), or vehicle (**Fig. 3.4K**). These doses were chosen to correct for the disparity in exposure concentration and half-life (NCGC1481: AUClast = 6750 hr*ng/mL, $T_{1/2}$ = 4.2 hr; quizartinib: AUClast = 155 hr*µg/mL, $T_{1/2}$ = 5.7 hr; **fig. S3.1C**). After confirming engraftment of AML-174 cells (day 0) and then after 14 days of treatment, NCGC1481 afforded a 38% and 48% reduction in leukemic burden in the BM as compared to mice receiving vehicle or quizartinib, respectively (**Fig. 3.4L**). After 28 days of treatment, mice that were treated with NCGC1481 exhibited a 66% and 50% reduction in leukemic burden in the BM as compared to mice receiving vehicle or quizartinib, respectively (**Fig. 3.4L**). Moreover, the frequency of CD34⁺ AML cells in the BM ($P = 0.0011$) and spleen ($P = 0.00016$) was significantly reduced after NCGC1481 administration as compared to control mice (**fig. S3.5B**), indicating that NCGC1481 has an effect on disease-propagating AML cells. In this model, NCGC1481 significantly extended the overall median survival to 90 days compared to 66.5 days for mice receiving vehicle ($P =$ 0.0016) or to 76 days for mice receiving quizartinib (P = 0.0097)(**Fig. 3.4M**). For mice xenografted with AML-019 cells, NCGC1481 administration also significantly extended the overall median survival of mice (P = 0.0021)(**Fig. 3.4N**). As compared to vehicle (median survival = 57 d) or quizartinib (median survival = 64 d), most of the mice treated with NCGC1481 did not succumb to leukemia beyond 94 days of treatment, at which time the experiment was terminated (**Fig. 3.4N**). Lastly, we wanted to determine whether NCGC1481 can reduce the leukemic burden of mice treated with quizartinib. NSGS mice were i.v. xenografted with AML-174 cells then dosed

with quizartinib (15 mg/kg/d) for 43 days and then either continued on quizartinib or switched to NCGC1481 for an additional 14 days (**fig. S3.6A**). After 43 days of quizartinib treatment, the leukemic burden in the mice was approximately 18% (**fig. S3.6B**). For the mice that continued on quizartinib treatment, the leukemic burden in the BM increased from 18% to 54% (**fig. S3.6B**), whereas for the mice that were switched to NCGC1481, the leukemic burden increased only from 17% to 43% (**fig. S3.6B**). The mice that were switched to NCGC1481 also exhibited a decrease in the CD34⁺ leukemic stem cell population as compared to mice that continued on quizartinib treatment (P = 0.12)(**fig. S3.6C**).

Discussion

To overcome the current limitations of FLT3 inhibitors, we report a polypharmacologic strategy and a multi-target small molecule with potent activity against the IRAK1/4 complex and FLT3, which suppresses adaptive resistance to therapy in FLT3-mutant AML by targeting inflammatory stress response pathways.

Given the restrictions of using patient-derived samples for functional studies, it was necessary to confirm the adaptive resistance mechanism via innate immune pathway activation and validate NCGC1481 in independent FLT3-mutant AML cell lines. However, cell lines may not accurately represent the complexity of adaptive resistance mechanisms to FLT3i in patients, arguing for cautious interpretation of these data. Further, the current experimental design is limited to adaptive resistance mechanisms occurring immediately after FLT3i treatment, and it should be noted that adaptive resistance mechanisms after prolonged FLT3i treatment may differ.

Here, we identified activation of innate immune stress response pathways after treatment of FLT3-mutant AML cells with FLT3i. Although further studies are needed, our study demonstrates that therapies that simultaneously inhibit FLT3 signaling and compensatory IRAK1/4 activation have the potential to improve the therapeutic efficacy in patients with FLT3 mutant AML. We demonstrate that inflammatory stress response pathways contribute to adaptive

resistance in FLT3-mutant AML and propose that this mechanism may extend to other malignant cells undergoing a stress-induced response to therapy.

Figures

Figure 3.1. Structure activity relationship of small molecule inhibitors reveals the importance of targeting IRAK1/4 and FLT3 in FLT3+AML. (A) Chemical structures of NCGC1410, NCGC2376, and NCGC2327 (Thomas Lab). **(B)** The half maximal inhibitory concentration (IC50) for NCGC1410, NCGC2376, and NCGC2327 on IRAK1, IRAK4, and FLT3 activity (Reaction Biology). **(C)** Metabolic activity of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with NCGC1410, NCGC2376, and NCGC2327 for 72 hours as measured by CellTiter-Glo. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 3 biological replicates. **(D)** Viability of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated for 3 days with DMSO (vehicle control), NCGC1410, NCGC2376, or NCGC2327. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 2 biological replicates. **(E)** Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9; FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib (50 nM), quizartinib and IRAK-Inh (10 μ M), NCGC2327 (50 nM), or IRAK-Inh.

Figure 3.2. NCGC1481 is a potent of small molecule inhibitor of FLT3 and IRAK1/4. (A) Chemical structure of NCGC1481 (1481). The half maximal inhibitory concentration (IC_{50}) and equilibrium dissociation constant (K_d) for NCGC1481 with IRAK1, IRAK4, and FLT3 is shown

below the structure (Thomas Lab). **(B)** NCGC1481-binding pocket of IRAK4 from NCGC1481- IRAK4 crystal structure. IRAK4 is shown as a ribbon structure along with contact residues. NCGC1481 is shown in green and blue (Beryllium Discovery). **(C)** Reaction Biology kinome map showing selectivity of NCGC1481 across 369 purified and active kinases (Reaction Biology; Thomas Lab). **(D)** KiNative in situ kinome profile of NCGC1481 in MV4;11 cells showing the expressed and active kinases (left dendrogram) and these inhibited by NCGC1481 (right dendrogram) (KiNative; Thomas Lab). **(E)** Top kinases (listed in alphabetical order) inhibited by NCGC1481 as determined by the KiNative in situ kinome profile and the corresponding IC_{50} value for NCGC1481 as determined versus purified, active kinases at Reaction Biology (KiNative; Reaction Biology; Thomas Lab). **(F)** Table of kinase inhibitory activity (Reaction Biology, IC50 values) for top kinase targets for selected NCGC1481 analogs with variable cytotoxicity (far right column) versus MV4;11 cells (Reaction Biology; Thomas Lab). **(G)** Proliferation of MLL-AF9, MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, and MLL-AF9;NRAS cells treated with the indicated concentration of NCGC1481 for 72 hours. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 3 biological replicates. **(H)** Viability of primary AML cells from 13 patients was determined in the presence of NCGC1481 for 48 hours by Trypan blue exclusion. The FLT3-ITD status of the patients is indicated below the heatmap (**table S3.3**) (Eric O'Brien).

Figure 3.3. NCGC1481 inhibits compensatory IRAK1/4 signaling in FLT3-ITD AML cells. (A) Immunoblotting of pFLT3 and pIRAK4 in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with IC_{10} of quizartinib or NCGC1481 for 6 and 12 hours. **(B)** STK PamChip analysis was performed on protein lysates isolated from MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with IC_{10} of quizartinib or NCGC1481 for 12 hours (PamGene, Kwangmin Choi). **(C)** IRAK1 and IRAK4 in-cell activity in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4;11 cells treated with IC_{10} of quizartinib or NCGC1481 for 12 hours. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 2 biological duplicate samples using 4 or 3 independent peptides, respectively. **(D)** Differential gene expression of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD treated with IC₁₀ of quizartinib or NCGC1481 for 12 hours. Summary from biological triplicate samples (Kwangmin Choi). **(E)** Pathway enrichment of differential gene expression (RNA- sequencing) in MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib for 12 hours was determined using Toppgene. **(F)** Network map of in-cell active kinases in MLL-AF9-FLT3-ITD cells treated with quizartinib for 12 hours. Tau (τ) scores indicate activity inferred from the phosphorylated peptides (STK PamChip). The left half of the circle represents data from quizartinib-treated cells. The right half of the circle represents data from NCGC1481-treated cells. **(G)** Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with 1 nM quizartinib or NCGC1481 for the indicated times.

Figure 3.4. NCGC1481 prevents adaptive resistance in FLT3-ITD AML cells in vitro and prolongs survival in vivo. (A) MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, MV4;11, or FLT3-ITD AML patient-derived cells were cultured with quizartinib or NCGC1481 for 3 days, re-plated in fresh media, and then

cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 4 biological replicates for cell lines and 2 replicates for the patient sample. *, P < 0.05 (unpaired two-tailed t-test). **(B)** Healthy human CD34+ umbilical cord blood cells were treated with 1481 (1 µM or 5 µM) for 3 days and re-plated in fresh media. Cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from biological duplicates. **(C)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel B), the remaining viable CD34+ cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 14 days. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 4 biological replicates. **(D)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel A), the remaining viable cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 7 days. Values are expressed as means $+/-$ s.e.m. from 4 biological replicates. \star , $P < 0.05$ (unpaired two-tailed ttest). **(E)** MV4;11 cells were cultured with quizartinib (5 µM) for 3 days, plated in fresh media and then cell proliferation was determined after treatment with the indicated concentration of NCGC1481 or quizartinib (Qztnb) for 72 hours. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from a representative experiment from 2 independent experiments each done in technical triplicate. **(F)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were cultured with quizartinib (5 μ M) for 3 days, plated in fresh media (Day 0 and 7) and then re-plated in media containing quizartinib (Qztnb; 5 µM) or NCGC1481 (5 µM) at days 7 and 17. Cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 2 biological replicates. **(G)** FLT3-ITD AML patient-derived cells were cultured with quizartinib (Qztnb; $5 \mu M$) for 3 days, plated in fresh media and then re-plated in media containing DMSO, quizartinib (Qztnb; 5μ M), or NCGC1481 (5μ M) at day 7. Cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as means +/- s.d. from 2 technical replicates from the same donor cells. **(H)** Overview of experimental design of xenograft studies. Parental or quizartinib -refractory (from panel E) MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells were i.v. injected in NRGS mice. On Day 10 post-transplant, the mice were treated i.p. with NCGC1481 (30 mg/kg) or vehicle control daily (n = 5 mice per condition). **(I)** After 48 hours of treatment with NCGC1481,

MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD (GFP+) cells were isolated from the BM for immunoblot analysis. **(J)** Diseasefree survival of NRGS mice xenografted with parental or quizartinib-refractory MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells and treated with NCGC1481 or vehicle ($n = 5$ mice per condition). $*$, $P < 0.05$; $**$, $P < 0.01$ (Mantel-Cox test). **(K)** Overview of experimental design of xenograft studies using FLT3-ITD AML cells obtained from a patient (FLT3+AML-174). FLT3-ITD AML cells were i.v. injected into NSGS mice. Two weeks post-transplant, mice were treated with vehicle control, quizartinib (15 mg/kg), or NCGC1481 (30 mg/kg) i.p. daily. **(L)** Bone marrow aspirates were analyzed for leukemic burden on days 0, 14, and 28 post-treatment (n = 6 mice per condition). Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from individual mice. *, P < 0.05 (unpaired two-tailed t-test) (Mark Wunderlich). **(M)** Leukemia-free survival of NRGS mice xenografted with AML-174 patient cells and treated with quizartinib, NCGC1481, or vehicle ($n = 6$ mice per group). **, $P < 0.005$ (Mantel-Cox test) (Mark Wunderlich). **(N)** Leukemia-free survival of NRGS mice xenografted with AML-019 patient cells and treated with quizartinib, NCGC1481, or vehicle ($n = 4-5$ mice per group). **, $P < 0.005$ (Mantel-Cox test) (LaQuita Jones, Katie Hueneman).

Supplemental Figures

Supplemental Figure 3.1. NCGC1481 exhibits promising physicochemical, selected ADME, and in vivo pharmacokinetic properties. (A) Molecular weight, tPSA, cLogP for NCGC1481 (Thomas Lab). **(B)** Microsomal stability (rat, mouse, human), aqueous solubility, CYP inhibition (3A4, 2C9, 2D6), ion channel inhibition (nERG, Nav1.5, Cav2.2) for NCGC1481. All assays measured at a 10 µM concentration NCGC1481 (Thomas Lab). **(C)** Plasma levels of quizartinib and NCGC1481 in mice measured at the indicated time points over 24 hours. Three mice per time point were evaluated (Thomas lab). **(D)** Blood counts performed at the indicated time points on mice treated daily with 30 mg/kg IP of NCGC1481 (Lyndsey Bolanos). **(E)** Body weight

measurements of NRGS mice treated with 30 or 60 mg/kg of NCGC1481 for the indicated number of days. Data shown as s.d. (n=2 mice per time point) (Katie Hueneman, Katelyn Melgar).

Supplemental Figure 3.2. 2-dementional interaction diagrams for NCGC1491 bound to IRAK4 and FLT3. (A) The crystal structure coordinates of the NCGC1481-IRAK4 complext (left) and the NCGC1481-FLT3 complex (right) are shown as a 2-dimentional interaction diagram. The elements of the 2-dimentional image are illustrated in the legend below (Thomas Lab). **(B)** Alignment of IRAK4 and FLT3 amino acid sequences and associated sequence annotation (Thomas Lab).

Supplemental Figure 3.3. NCGC1481 inhibits compensatory IRAK1/4 activation and adaptive resistance to FLT3-ITD AML. (A) Immunoblotting of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells treated with 10 nM NCGC1481 for the indicated hours. **(B)** Immunoblotting of MV4;11 cells treated with NCGC1481 for 24 hours. **(C)** Relative NF-κB activity in Pam3CSK4-stimulated THP1-NF-κB reporter cells treated with NCGC1481, IKK7, or IRAK-Inh for 24 hours was measured via QuantiBlue Reagent. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 3 biological replicate samples. **(D)** Proliferation of MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, MV4;11, and MOLM13 cells treated with NCGC1481 for 72 hours as measured by CellTiter-Glo. Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from 3 biological replicates.

Supplemental Figure 3.4. NCGC1481 prevents adaptive resistance of FLT3-ITD AML in vitro and has minimal effects on normal hematopoietic cells. (A) MV4;11 cells were cultured with
gilteritinib or NCGC1481 for 3 days, re-plated in fresh medium and then cell viability was measured by AnnexinV staining. Values are expressed as measns +/- s.d. from 2 biological replicates. **(B)** After 10 days in liquid culture (from panel A), the remaining viable cells were plated in methylcellulose and colony formation was determined after 7 days ($n = 4$ per condition). \star , $P \leq$ 0.05 (unapired, two-tailed t-test). **(C)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD, MV4;11, and MOLM13 cells were plated in methylcellulose and treated with DMSO, quizartinib, or NCGC1481 at the indicated concentrations. Colony formation was determined after 7 days ($n = 3$ per condition). \dot{r} , $P < 0.05$ (unpaired, two-tailed t-test). **(D)** MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD (n = 4), MV4;11 (n = 2), and MOLM13 (n = 2) cells were treated with DMSO, quizartinib, or 1481 for 3 days and cell death was measured using AnnexinV. *, P < 0.05. **(E)** Normal human CD34+ cord blood (CB) cells or normal human CD34+ bone marrow (BM) cells were plated in methylcellulose with the indicated concentrations of NCGC1481. Colony formation was determined after 12 days (n = 3 per condition). Values are expressed as means +/- s.e.m. from biological replicates.

Supplemental figure 3.5. NCGC1481 reduces leukemic burden of FLT3-ITD AML. (A) Leukemic burden (%GFP+) in bone marrow (BM) and spleen at time of sacrifice in NRGS mice transplanted with MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD cells and treated with PBS or 1481 (30 mg/kg), i.p., daily. **(B)** Leukemic burden (%CD34+) in BM and spleen at time of sacrifice in NSGS mice transplanted with FLT3+AML-174 and treated with PBS or 1481 (30 mg/kg), i.p., daily. $*$, $P < 0.05$. (Mark Wunderlich).

Supplemental Figure 3.6. NCGC1481 reduces the leukemic burden of FLT3-ITD AML after quizartinib treatment. (A) Overview of experimental design of xenograft studies using patient derived FLT3-ITD AML cells (AML-174). AML cells were i.v. injected into NSGS mice. Two weeks post-transplant, mice were treated with quizartinib (15 mg/kg) i.p. daily. On day 43 (after leukemic burden has been established), half of the mice were switched to daily NCGC1481 (30 mg/kg) and the other half remained on quizartinib (n = 5 mice per group). (Mark Wunderlich). **(B)** Leukemic burden (% human CD45+) in the bone marrow (BM) was determined on days 43 and 57. (Mark Wunderlich). **(C)** Leukemic stem cell burden (% human CD34+) in the BM was determined on day 57. (Mark Wunderlich)

Supplemental Tables

Supplemental Table 3.1. Reaction Biology profile of NCGC1481.

Compound was tested in 10-dose IC50 mode with 3-fold serial dilution starting at 10 µM
Control Compound, Staurosporine, was tested in 10-dose IC50 mode with 4-fold serial dilution starting at 20 µM or 100 µM
Allemale Contr

Data pages include raw data, % Enzyme activity (relative to DMSO controls) , and curve fits.
"Curve fits were performed where the enzyme activities at the highest concentration of compounds were less than 65%.
"An IC50 val

* Empty cells indicate no inhibition or compound activity that could not be fit to an IC50 curve

Supplemental Table 3.2. KiNativ profile of NCGC1481 in MV4;11 lysate.

Supplemental Table 3.3. AML patient characteristics.

Supplemental Table 3.4. Peptide phosphorylation in the PamChip Serine/Threonine in-cell kinase array with NCGC1481 treatment.

Supplemental Table 3.5. Gene expression analysis of FLT3-ITD AML treated with NCGC1481.

Materials and Methods

Study design

The first objective of this study was to find target-independent mechanisms of resistance, such as alternate activation of survival and proliferation pathways (adaptive resistance), to FLT3 inhibition in FLT3-mutant AML by performing an integrative in-cell kinase (PamChip kinase array) and gene regulatory network (RNA-seq) analysis. The second objective was to identify an inhibitor with the potential of suppressing FLT3-ITD as well the pathway contributing to adaptive resistance in FLT3-mutant AML. To overcome adaptive resistance to FLT3 inhibition, we synthesized a series of small molecules to inhibit the compensatory pathway activation contributing to adaptive resistance (via IRAK1/4) and FLT3 in FLT3-mutant AML. The chemical starting points for optimization of IRAK1/4 and FLT3 small molecule inhibitors was based on the 3-(pyridin-2 yl)imidazo[1,2-a]pyridines that were previously reported as selective IRAK4 inhibitors. The potency and selectivity of the inhibitors was determined by biochemical binding and inhibitory assays, and in situ kinase profiling. The optimized small molecule inhibitor (NCGC1481) was confirmed by co-crystallography to bind IRAK4 in an inactive confirmation. In-cell kinase (PamChip kinase array) assays, immunoblotting, and gene expression profiling confirmed that NCGC1481 simultaneously suppresses FLT3 and IRAK1/4 in FLT3-mutant AML. The therapeutic benefit of targeting IRAK1/4 and FLT3 in FLT3-mutant AML with NCGC1481 as compared to a selective FLT3 inhibitor was confirmed in human cell lines and patient-derived samples in vitro and in vivo. All normal human derived samples were obtained from the Translational Research Development Support Laboratory of CCHMC under an approved Institutional Review Board protocol. AML primary patient samples were obtained with written informed consent and approved by the institutional review board of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. These samples had been obtained within the framework of routine diagnostic BM aspirations after written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Existing de-identified cryopreserved samples were used for the study without age or gender preferences. Investigators

and data analyzers were blinded for the evaluation of NCGC1481 in primary patient-derived AML samples in vitro. Mouse experiments have been planned in an effort to provide 60%-80% power for a target effect size of 1.2-1.5 (effect size=|mean difference|/SD). All mice were randomly allocated into experimental groups. For all other experiments, at least 2 independent biological replicates were performed/utilized in the sample calculation. No data was excluded from the studies. STR loci analysis was performed on all cell lines when received and after experimentation was complete. All cell lines are routinely tested and are confirmed to be negative for mycoplasma.

Cell lines, patient samples, and culture conditions

MLL-AF9 FLT3-ITD and MLL-AF9 NRAS^{G12D} cell lines, provided by Dr. James Mulloy (Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH) were cultured in Isocov's DMEM medium (Corning Cell Grow, Cat#10-016-CV) with 20% Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS) (Atlanta Biologicals, Cat#S11550) and 1% penicillin-streptomycin (P/S) (HyClone, Cat#SV30010) (*45*). MV4;11 cell line was provided by Dr. Lee Grimes (CCHMC, Cincinnati, OH) and purchased from ATCC (Cat#CRL-9591). They were cultured in RPMI 1640 medium with 10% FBS and 1% (P/S). MOLM13 cell line, purchased from AddexBio (Cat#C0003003), was cultured in RPMI 1640 medium (HyClone, Cat#SH30027.01) with 20% FBS and 1% P/S. THP1-Blue™ NF-KB were obtained from InvivoGen (Cat#thp-nfkb) and grown according to manufacturer instructions. BaF3 cells were provided by Dr. Mohammed Azam (CCHMC, Cincinnati, OH) and purchased from ATCC (Cat#HB-283). They were cultured in RMPI 1640 medium with 10% FBS, 1% P/S, and recombinant murine interleukin-3 at 10 ng/mL (PeproTech, Cat#213-12-50UG). Human CD34+ umbilical cord blood, human CD34+ bone marrow, and human normal whole bone marrow were obtained from the Translational Research Development Support Laboratory of Cincinnati Children's Hospital under an approved Institutional Review Board protocol. These cells were maintained in StemSpan Serum-Free Expansion Media (Stemcell Techologies, Cat#09650) supplemented with 10 ng/mL of recombinant human stem cell factor (SCF) (PeproTech, Cat#300-

07-50UG), recombinant human thrombopoietin (TPO) (PeproTech, Cat#300-18-50UG), recombinant human FLT3 ligand (FLT3L) (PeproTech, Cat#300-19-50UG), recombinant human interleukin-3 (IL-3) (PeproTech, Cat#200-03-50UG), and recombinant human interleukin-6 (IL-6) (PeproTech, Cat#200-06-50UG). AML primary patient samples were obtained with written informed consent and approved by the institutional review board of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. These samples had been obtained within the framework of routine diagnostic BM aspirations after written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. AML-019 was purchased from the Public Repository of Xenografts (PRoXe) (Cat#DFAM-16835-V1).

Reagents

IRAK1/4 inhibitor (Amgen Inc.) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Cat#I5409). Quizartinib was purchased from Selleckchem (Cat#S1526). IKK7 was purchased from Selleckchem (Cat#S2882). Gilteritinib was purchased from Chemietik (Cat#CT-GILT). ODN-INH-18 was purchased from invivogen (Cat#tlrl-inh18). PF06650833 (PF066) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (PZ0327- 5MG). The TLR9 antagonist, ODN-INH-18 was purchased from InvivoGen (Cat#tlrl-inh18).

Immunoblotting

Protein lysates were made by lysing cells in cold RIPA lysis buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl, 150 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 1% Titon X-100, and 0.1% SDS), in the presence of sodium orthovanadate, PMSF, and protease and phosphatase inhibitors. Protein concentration was quantified using BCA assay (Pierce, Cat#23225). Protein lysates were separated by SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (BIO-RAD), transferred to nitrocellulose membranes (BIO-RAD, Cat#1620112), and immunoblotted. The following antibodies were used for western blot analysis: GAPDH (Cell Signaling, Cat#D16H11, 1:1000 milk), FLT3 (Cell Signaling, Cat#3462, 1:500 BSA), phospho-FLT3 (Tyr591) (Cell Signaling, Cat#3461, 1:500 BSA), IRAK4 (Cell Signaling, Cat#4363, 1:1000 BSA), phospho-IRAK4 (Thr345/Ser346) (Cell Signaling, Cat#11927, 1:500 BSA), IRAK1 (H-273) (Santa Cruz, Cat#sc-7883, 1:1000 milk), phospho-IRAK1 (T209) (Assay Biotech, Cat#A1074, 1:500 BSA), JNK2 (Cell Signaling, Cat#9258, 1:1000 BSA), phospho-SAPK/JNK (Thr183/Tyr185)

(Cell Signaling, Cat#4668, 1:500 BSA), p38 MAPK (Cell Signaling, Cat#9212, 1:1000 BSA), phospho-p38 MAPK (Thr180/Tyr182) (Cell Signaling, Cat#4631, 1:500 BSA), STAT5 (Cell Signaling, Cat#9363, 1:1000 BSA), phospho-STAT5 (Cell Signaling, Cat#9351, 1:1000 BSA), phospho-Src Family (Tyr416) (Cell Signaling, Cat#2101, 1:1000 BSA), Src (Cell Signaling, Cat#2108, 1:1000 BSA), TLR9 (Cell Signaling, Cat#2254, 1:1000 BSA), peroxidase-conjugated AffiniPure Goat Anti-rabbit IgG (Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories, Inc., Cat#111-035-003, 1:10000 milk). Blots were visualized using ECL Western Blotting Substrate (Pierce, Cat#32106) and imaged on autoradiography film (HyBlot CL) or BIO-RAD ChemiDoc Touch Imaging system.

DNA sequencing

To isolate whole genomic DNA, cell pellets were resuspended in NaOH (50 mM) and incubated at 95° C for 1 hour. Samples were spun down and the supernatant pH was neutralized with Tris-HCl (1 M). The FLT3 kinase domain was amplified by PCR from whole genomic DNA using GeneAmp Fast PCR Mastermix (Applied Biosystems, Cat#28796). The PCR product was extracted using QIAquick Gel Extraction Kit (Qiagen, Cat#28706). For amplification and bidirectional sequencing of the F691 locus, the following primers were used: Forward - 5'- GAGAGGCACTCATGTCAGAACTCA-3', reverse - 5'-AGTCCTCCTCTTCTTCCAGCCTTT-3' (*21*). For the D835 locus, the following primers were used: Forward - 5'- TGTGTTCACAGAGACCTGGC-3', reverse - 5'-TTTACAGGCAGACGGGCATT-3'. For the NRAS G12/13 locus, the following primers were used: Forward – 5'- ATTAATCCGGTGTTTTTGCGTTCT-3', reverse – 5'- CATCTCTGAATCCTTTATCTCCAT-3' (*82*).

In vitro cellular studies

For colony formation, cells were suspended at 1000 cells/mL in methylcellulose (MethylCult H4434 Classic, Cat#04434). Colonies were counted 7-10 days after plating. AnnexinV viability staining was carried out according to manufacture instructions (AnnexinV Binding Buffer:

Invitrogen, Cat#00-0055-56; AnnexinV-APC conjugated antibody: 1:100, eBioscience, Cat#88- 8007). Analysis was performed using BD FACSCanto flow cytometer with Diva software. Trypan Blue (Invitrogen, Cat#T10282) exclusion was done using an automated cell counter (BioRad TC10). CellTiter Glo Luminescent Viability Assay (Promega, Cat#G7572) was performed according to manufacturer protocol. Analysis was performed using GloMax 96 microplate Luminometer (Promega) with GloMax Software.

Lenti- and retroviral Infections

The pLKO.1 (OpenBiosystems) constructs were obtained from the Viral Vector Core at CCHMC and used to express shCTL, and shIRAK4 (TRCN0000002065). Puromycin resistance gene was replaced by green fluorescent protein (GFP). The pGreenFire1-NF- κ B (EF1 α -puro) lentivector was purchased from System Biosciences (Cat#TR012VA-P). Flag-IRAK4 in pMSCV-pGK-GFP was designed as previously described (*81*). Cells were transduced as previously described (*83*).

NF-B activation reporter

THP1-Blue NF-KB SEAP reporter cells were grown in a 96 well plate in triplicate with the indicated inhibitor for 24 hours. In a new 96 well plate, 20 µL of cell supernatant was added to 180 µL of warmed QuantiBlue Reagent (Invivogen, Cat#rep-qbs2) and incubated at 37 °C for 30 minutes. Absorbance was read at 630 nm.

RNA-Sequencing

RNA was isolated using Quick-RNA MiniPrep (Zymo Research, Cat#R1055) from MLL-AF9;FLT-ITD cells treated with DMSO, quizartinib (0.3 nM), or NCGC1481 (0.1 nM) for 6 and 12 hours in biological triplicates. RNA libraries were prepared according to the Illumina TruSeq Stranded mRNA (polyA capture) library protocol by the DNA Sequencing and Genotyping Core at CCHMC. The data discussed in this publication have been deposited in NCBI's Gene Expression Omnibus and are accessible through GEO Series accession number GSE121272. (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE121272)

Chemical characterization

NCGC1481: 6-(7-methoxy-6-(1-methyl-1H-pyrazol-4-yl)imidazo[1,2-a]pyridin-3-yl)-N-(pyrrolidin-3-yl)pyridin-2-amine: ¹H NMR (400 MHz, DMSO-*d*6) δ 9.88 (s, 1H), 8.90 (br.s, 1H), 8.78 (br.s, 1H), 8.44 (s, 1H), 8.22 (s, 1H), 7.90 (d, *J* = 0.8 Hz, 1H), 7.62 (dd, *J* = 8.4, 7.4 Hz, 1H), 7.36 (s, 1H), 7.22 – 7.17 (m, 2H), 6.56 (d, *J* = 8.3 Hz, 1H), 4.59 – 4.55 (m, 1H), 4.08 (s, 3H), 3.91 (s, 3H), 3.25 – 3.17 (m, 2H), 2.20 – 2.11 (m, 1H), 2.08 – 1.99 (m, 1H). HRMS: *m/z* (M+H)⁺ = 389.1964 (Calculated for $C_{21}H_{23}N_7O = 389.1964$).

qHTS Drug Screening

MLL-AF9.3 cells were grown in Iscove's Modified Dulbecco's Medium (IMDM) (ThermoFisher Scientific #12440-061) supplemented with 20% FBS (StemCell Technologies #06100), 1% penicillin/streptomycin (ThermoFisher Scientific #15140122) 10ng/mL of the following human growth factors: recombinant human stem cell factor (SCF) (PeproTech, Cat#300-07-50UG), recombinant human thrombopoietin (TPO) (PeproTech, Cat#300-18-50UG), recombinant human FLT3 ligand (FLT3L) (PeproTech, Cat#300-19-50UG), recombinant human interleukin-3 (IL-3) (PeproTech, Cat#200-03-50UG), and recombinant human interleukin-6 (IL-6) (PeproTech, Cat#200-06-50UG). MLL-AF9.3-FLT3ITD cells were maintained in IMDM supplemented with 20% FBS and no growth factors. Cells were plated at a density of 500 cells/well in 5µL of complete growth media in 1536 well white tissue cultured assay plates (Greiner). 23nL of compounds were then added to each assay plate using a Pintool dispenser (Kalypsys). Plates were then covered with a stainless steel gasketed lid and placed into an incubator with standard humidity, temperature, $CO₂$ settings for 48 hours. After this incubation, $3\mu L$ of CellTiter-Glo reagent was added to each well then incubated for 15 minutes at room temperature. Luminescence readings were taken using a ViewLux (PerkinElmer) with clear filter and a 2 second exposure time. Curve fitting was done using a 4-parameter Hill slope equation.

IRAK4 crystalography

We expressed IRAK4₁₆₀₋₄₆₀ with the addition of a TEV-cleavable octa-histidine tag at the Nterminus in Sf9 insect cells. The protein was purified by nickel affinity chromatography then the histidine tag was removed by cleavage with TEV protease and the protein was subjected to a second nickel affinity chromatography step. The flow-through from the second Ni affinity step was further purified by size-exclusion chromatography in 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 1 mM DTT. The protein was concentrated to 9.5 mg/ml for crystallization. Crystals were grown in the MCSG1 screen, condition E10: 0.2 M Ammonium Tartrate Dibasic, 20% (*w/v*) PEG3350 with 1 mM NCGC00371481 and cryopreserved in 20% (*v/v*) ethylene glycol with 1 mM NCGC00371481. The crystals grew in 13 days at 14° C. The IRAK4-NCGC00371481 structure crystallized in the C2 space group, with unit cell dimensions a=138.29 Å, b=141.91 Å, c= 87.89 Å, β = 126.22°. We collected X-ray data in-house at Beryllium using a Rigaku SuperBright FR-E+ X-ray generator with Osmic VariMax HF optics and a Saturn 944+ CCD detector.

Synergy matrix analysis

The compound synergy analysis and calculations have been previously described (*84*). Briefly, MA9 FLT3-ITD cells were treated with 10 doses of quizaritinib and 10 doses of IRAK-Inh in a 10 x 10 combination matrix for 48 hours. Viability was assessed using CellTiter-Glo and then a delta Bliss score was calculated for each drug combination using the Bliss independence model.

Serine-threonine kinase array and analysis

MLL-AF9 FLT3-ITD or MV4-11 cells were treated for 6 or 12 hours with quizartinib (0.3 nM), NCGC-1481 (0.1 nM), or DMSO. Whole cell lysates were prepared according to PamGene instructions (Protocol 1160). PamChip serine-threonine kinase array was performed by PamGene. From 144 non-redundant peptides, individual peptide phosphorylation intensities were normalized to DMSO control and log-transformed. Peptides determined to have significant increased or decreased phosphorylation (P<0.05) were used to infer active serine/threonine kinases (STK). The database of potential upstream STKs was downloaded from PhosphoNet

(https://www.phosphonet.ca). A given STK-substrate pair was considered highly probable if its Kinexus predictor score (v2) was greater than 300. The PamChip peptide data was integrated with the PhosphoNet kinase-substrate network to calculate kinase specificity scores (using 2000 permutations across target peptides) and the kinase significance scores (using 2000 permutations across sample labels). The kinases were then prioritized based on the sum of the two scores. Pathway and network analyses: Of the inferred kinases showing increased activity in the PamGene assay in AC200 relative to DMSO, 46 were found to be common to both the MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD and MV4-11 cells lines at both 6 and 12 hours. These kinases were analyzed using ToppFun in the ToppGene Suite (toppgene.cchmc.org) to determine enriched signaling pathways. ClueGo $(v2.5.1)$ was used to create the network map (Ontology = GO Biological Processes, P<0.05, Network Specificity = medium).

Quantitative analysis of quizartinib and NCGC1481 in mouse plasma

Ultra-performance liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry (UPLC-MS/MS) methods were developed to determine quizartinib and NCGC1481 concentrations in mouse plasma samples. Mass spectrometric analysis was performed on a Waters Xevo TQ-S triple quadrupole instrument using electrospray ionization in positive mode with the selected reaction monitoring. The separation of test compounds from endogenous components was performed on an Acquity BEH C18 column (50 x 2.1 mm, 1.7 μ) using a Waters Acquity UPLC system with 0.6 mL/min flow rate and gradient elution. The mobile phases were 0.1%formic acid in water and 0.1% formic acid in acetonitrile. The calibration standards and quality control samples were prepared in the blank mouse plasma. Aliquots of 10 µL plasma samples were mixed with 200 µL internal standard in acetonitrile to precipitate proteins in a 96-well plate. 0.5 µL supernatant was injected for the UPLC-MS/MS analysis. Data were analyzed using MassLynx V4.1 (Waters Corp., Milford, MA). Adult male NRG/NRGS mice (n=3/sampling time point) were obtained from Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME). All experimental procedures were approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee (ACUC) of the NIH Division of Veterinary Resources (DVR). A single dose of 30 mg/kg was administered through intraperitoneal (IP) route of administration. Dosing solutions were freshly prepared on the day of administration in saline. The blood samples $($ \sim 80 μ L) were collected in K2EDTA tubes at 0.083, 0.25, 0.5, 1, 2, 4, 7 and 24 hr after drug administration, and plasma (~ 30 µL) was harvested after centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 10 min. All plasma samples were stored at -80°C until analysis. The pharmacokinetic parameters were calculated using the non-compartmental approach (Model 200) of the pharmacokinetic software Phoenix WinNonlin, version 6.2 (Certara, St. Louis, MO). The area under the plasma concentration versus time curve (AUC) was calculated using the linear trapezoidal method. The slope of the apparent terminal phase was estimated by log linear regression using at least 3 data points and the terminal rate constant (λ) was derived from the slope. AUC_{0- ∞} was estimated as the sum of the AUC_{0-t} (where t is the time of the last measurable concentration) and Ct/λ . The apparent terminal half-life (t₂₂) was calculated as 0.693/λ.

Kinome screens

Dissociation constants (Kd) were measured at DiscoverX using the KINOME*scan*TM Profiling Service. Kinase inhibition (IC50s) was measured at Reaction Biology using the Kinase Assay service.

Xenografts

NRGS (NOD.Rag^{-/-};yc^{null}; hIL-3, hGM-CSF, hSF) mice were provided by Dr. James Mulloy (Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Cincinnati, OH) (*85*). NSGS mice were purchased from the CCHMC Comprehensive Mouse and Cancer Core. For xenotransplantation, MLL-AF9;FLT3-ITD CD34+ cells $(2x10^5$ per mouse) or AML patient cells $(2x10^6$ per mouse) were intravenously injected into the tail veins of NRGS or NSGS animals. Mice were monitored by BM aspirate and physical attributes of disease, such as limb paralysis, fatigue, and rough fur. NCGC-1481 and quizartinib were prepared in DMSO and further dissolved in sterile phosphate buffered saline (PBS). Animals were injected i.p. with 30 mg/kg NCGC-1481 or 15 mg/kg quizartinib 5x

weekly. All mice were bred, housed and handled in the Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care-accredited animal facility of Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. The study is compliant with all relevant ethical regulations regarding animal research.

Statistical Analysis

The number of animals, cells, and experimental replicates can be found in the figure legends. Differences among multiple groups were assessed by one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's multiple comparison post test for all possible comparisons. Comparison of two groups was performed using an unpaired Student's *t* test (unpaired, two-tailed) or Mann-Whitney when sample size allowed. Significance was set at *P* < 0.05. Unless otherwise specified, results are depicted as the mean ± SEM. For Kaplan-Meier analysis, Mantel-Cox test was used. Data were analyzed and plotted using GraphPad Prism 7 software.

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Author Contributions

C.J.T. and D.T.S. conceived and joint-supervised the study. K.M., C.J.T., and D.T.S. conceived the experiments and wrote the manuscript. K.M., L.M.W., L.C.B., M.W., K.W., X.Z., E.O., and K.H. performed experiments and analyzed data related to the in vitro AML studies. M.W., J.C.M., and K.H. performed experiments and analyzed data related to the animal studies. K.C. contributed to the RNA-seq and Pamgene kinase data processing, quality check, expression analysis, and generation of figures and tables. M.W., J-K. J., S.B.H., P.S., performed experiments and analyzed data related to the chemical synthesis of the compounds. A.W. and X.X. performed pharmacokinetic analyses. D.L and J.A. performed experiments and analysis of NCGC-1481/IRAK4 co-crystal structures. G.T. performed analyses of the NCGC-1481/IRAK4 co-crystal structure. J.P.P. provided patient-derived samples and helped interpret data. R.L.L., C.F., and E.B., conducted the gilternitib clinical trial, provided samples, and analyzed data.

Competing interests

C.J.T., K.M., M.W., J-K. J. and D.T.S. are inventors of the following patent: PCT/US2017/047088. D.T.S. has received support from Celegene, and honoraria from Curis Inc. R.L.L. is on the supervisory board of Qiagen and is a scientific advisor to Loxo, Imago, C4 Therapeutics and Isoplexis, which each include an equity interest. He receives research support from and consulted for Celgene and Roche, he has received research support from Prelude Therapeutics, and he has consulted for Incyte, Novartis, Morphosys and Janssen. He has received honoraria from Lilly and Amgen for invited lectures and from Gilead for grant reviews.

Data and materials availability

All data associated with this study are present in the paper or supplementary materials. The RNAsequencing data discussed in this publication have been deposited in NCBI's Gene Expression Omnibus and are accessible through GEO Series accession number GSE121272. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/query/acc.cgi?acc=GSE121272>). NCGC1481 is available upon request from the corresponding authors.

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Chapter 4: Discussion, Implications, and Future Directions

Summary

Development of targeted therapies presents an attractive treatment strategy in AML to overcome the high rate of relapse and adverse events associated with chemotherapy and radiation. However, it is often difficult find a selective target for AML cells that spares healthy hematopoietic cells and also is amenable to small-molecule inhibition. With the high incidence of FLT3 mutations in AML as well as being a druggable tyrosine kinase, FLT3 is a prime candidate for targeted inhibition. Indeed, many FLT3 inhibitors have been developed in the last decade and two, midostaurin and gilteritinib, have been recently FDA approved in AML. Although these compounds have been able to extend survival for a few months, which is certainly a meaningful amount of time for a patient and their family, FLT3 inhibition has not proven to be a curative therapy. A variety of resistance mechanisms have been identified that contribute to relapse, the most common being acquired TK mutations and activation of parallel signaling pathways (adaptive resistance). Several candidates for players in adaptive resistance have been suggested, such as PI3K signaling and MAPK signaling; however, although these pathways are downstream of FLT3, they can also be activated by many other receptors and a broader look a what other upstream signaling changes occur in FLT3-inhibitor-treated cells has not been published. In Chapter 2, we showed, using RNA-sequencing and kinome profiling, that innate immune pathways were upregulated upon FLT3-inhibitor treatment. Furthermore, we showed that targeting innate immune signaling through genetic or pharmacologic inhibition of IRAK1/4 sensitized cells to FLT3-inhibition and reduced capacity for resistance. These results led to the development of a novel series of FLT3-IRAK1/4 inhibitors, with lead compound NCGC1481. In Chapter 3, we showed that although these compounds are able to inhibit multiple kinases, SAR analysis revealed that IRAK1/4 inhibition was correlated with cytotoxicity in FLT3-mutant cell lines. Furthermore, we showed that NCGC1481 prevented the upregulation of innate immune

pathways seen with FLT3 inhibitors. Importantly, NCGC1481 was well tolerated by mice and had minimal effects in vitro on normal human hematopoietic cells suggesting that NCGC1481 has potential for a therapeutic window in humans. Additionally, NCGC1481 reduced survival in quizartinib-resistant cell lines and patient samples in vitro and significantly extended survival in mouse xenografts of AML patient samples. Taken together, these data support the hypothesis that innate immune signaling provides an adaptive resistance mechanism to FLT3-inhibition in AML and that our FLT3-IRAK1/4 inhibitor, NCGC1481, represents a novel class of inhibitors that has the potential to make a significant impact in the treatment of FLT3-mutant AML.

Polypharmacology

There is an ongoing effort to make drugs that are more and more selective in order to mitigate off-target effects and toxicity. However, there can also be value in embracing pharmacologic promiscuity. Often, cancers harbor more than one driving mutation and they also have the potential to activate resistance mechanisms as discussed earlier. Therefore, the ability to target more than one pathway would be a useful strategy in overcoming resistance. Inhibiting multiple pathways through the combination of selective inhibitors is one way to approach this. A few drug "cocktails" have been approved for use and have shown promising results *(1)*. However, there are many disadvantages in using multiple compounds such as increased costs, the potential for drug-drug interactions, and the combination and potential amplification of toxicity. There is also the issue of optimizing timing and doses of multiple drugs to make sure that each drug gets to the appropriate tissue at the right time. Furthermore, there is the added obstacle of decreased patient compliance when treatment schedules get too complicated.

These issues can be alleviated by polypharmacology, i.e. using a single compound to hit multiple targets. So far, there are few rationally designed polypharmacologic inhibitors; what is more common is repurposing "off-target" effects of already published inhibitors. One example of this is midostaurin. As discussed earlier, midostaurin was recently approved as a FLT3-inhibitor

in FLT3-mutant AML. However, midostaurin was originally developed as a protein kinase C (PKC) inhibitor and was also found to inhibit a wide range of other kinases such as vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and KIT. Midostaurin's ability to inhibit multiple kinases likely contributes to its efficacy in FLT3-mutant AML. Additionally, the FLT3-inhibitor gilteritinib can also inhibit AXL which has been implicated as a driver in AML as well as FLT3-inhibitor resistance *(2, 3)*. Like midostaurin, gilteritinib's affinity for multiple key kinases likely contribute to its clinical efficacy and recent FDA approval.

Of course, polypharmacology is not without its limitations. It may be physically or chemically impossible to hit certain targets with a single compound. Alternatively, it may be impossible to hit a target-of-interest without also hitting a homologous protein that would be detrimental to inhibit. Additionally, with the complexity of cancer genetics, using multiple selective agents allows physicians to "mix-and-match" based on a patient's individual genetic profile rather than depending on finding a single drug that fits the patient's individual needs. Despite these limitations, further investigation of potential new polypharmacologic targets presents an exciting prospect for future cancer therapy.

Our novel FLT3-IRAK1/4 inhibitor, NCGC1481 takes advantage of these principles of polypharmacology to inhibit both a driver of AML (FLT3) as well as a resistance mechanism (innate immune signaling) to provide a novel strategy for overcoming inhibitor resistance.

Future directions

One question that begs to be answered is why does FLT3 inhibition cause increased innate immune signaling? We posit in the end of Chapter 2 that the innate immune response may be activated as a result of cellular stress. TLRs and inflammatory cytokines were shown to have increased gene expression in our RNA-seq analysis of FLT3-inhibitor-treated cells. One hypothesis is that FLT3-inhibition causes intrinsic cell stress, in addition to cell death of sensitive

cells, which results in release of inflammatory cytokines and TLR ligands. These then can induce innate immune activation through paracrine and/or autocrine signaling.

This hypothesis also opens up the possibility of innate immune signaling playing a role in resistance to other anti-cancer agents and other cancers beyond AML or hematopoietic malignancies. A handful of studies have shown that IRAK1 and/or IRAK4 have increased expression in a variety other cancers, including breast, head and neck, and pancreatic cancer *(4–6)*. Furthermore, IRAK1/4 activity has been shown to play a role in chemoresistance or radioresistance in some cancers. Zhang et al (2017) found that in pancreatic ductal carcinoma patient samples, increased phosphorylation of IRAK4 was correlated with poorer response to chemotherapy and worse overall survival *(6)*. Furthermore, they showed that genetic or pharmacologic inhibition of IRAK4 sensitized the cells to chemotherapy in vitro, suggesting that innate immune signaling may play a role in chemoresistance. Most of these studies have looked at baseline IRAK1/4 activity rather than induction of innate of signaling after exposure to therapy. Interestingly, Wee et al (2015) found that IRAK1 phosphorylation was induced by paclitaxel treatment in breast cancer cells and that IRAK1 inhibition sensitized the cells to paclitaxel *(4)*. Additionally, a recent paper found that radiation induced IRAK1 signaling in a zebrafish tumor model *(7)*. These studies echo our findings in which baseline innate immune signaling is somewhat dispensable, i.e. the cancer cells are not sensitive to IRAK1/4 inhibition alone, but this pathway becomes crucial for survival upon cell stress. One potential implication for these findings is the widespread use of IRAK1/4 inhibitors in combination with chemotherapy or targeted agents in potentially any cancer. Inhibiting innate immune signaling could become the next broadly used treatment strategy in cancer.

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